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Department of History

Black-Oriented Radio and the Campaign for Civil Rights in the United States, 1945-1975

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A Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Stephen Roy James Walsh

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CONTENTS

Abstract

Acknowledgements

Introduction		5
Chapter One:	Purpose of the Study	11
Chapter Two:	Black-Oriented Radio and the Nascent Civil Rights Movement, 1945-1954	48
Chapter Three:	Black-Oriented Radio and the Zenith of the Civil Rights Movement, 1955-1965	93
Chapter Four:	Black-Oriented Radio in the Black Power Era, 1966-1975	150
Chapter Five:	Black-Oriented Radio and the Civil Rights Movement: A Case Study of Washington, D.C., 1945-1975	212
Chapter Six:	Conclusion	286
Bibliography		303

ABSTRACT

This thesis offers a detailed examination of the relationship between black-oriented radio and the African-American campaign for civil rights in the United States between 1945 and 1975.

The thesis begins by establishing the central role that black-oriented radio has historically enjoyed in the lives of millions of African-Americans. Arguing that the medium assumed a particular significance in many African-American communities in the post-war era, the study contends that black radio at least enjoyed considerable potential to become an effective vehicle for the articulation of African-American aspirations and grievances. The remainder of the study assesses both the extent, and the ways, in which that potential was harnessed to the black freedom struggle.

By charting the evolution of the relationship between the medium and the Movement in three different eras - 1945 to 1954; 1955 to 1965; and 1966 to 1975 - the thesis concludes that black-oriented radio enjoyed a significant, but complex and frequently ambiguous, relationship with the freedom struggle. While most stations eventually adopted a supportive posture towards the issue of civil rights, only a small - if influential - minority undertook a more active commitment to become a genuine force for community mobilisation. Considerable attention is therefore devoted to the personal, social, economic and legal factors which shaped this relationship.

In the final part of the study, the main themes of the dissertation are drawn together in a detailed case study, which explores the role of black-oriented radio in the struggles of the African-American community of Washington, D.C.

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SW

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INTRODUCTION

I

It was a modest beginning. On a Sunday evening in November 1929, local journalist and entertainer Jack L. Cooper took to the airwaves at radio station WSBC to present his Chicago audience with "The All-Negro Hour" - a 60 minute music and comedy variety show. Thus was black-oriented radio born.¹

It had been a long, sometimes painful, labour. Almost from the start of commercial radio's history at the beginning of the decade, programmes *with* or *about* African-Americans had existed. Although by no means a common occurrence, black performers - usually musicians or preachers - appeared on the airwaves from as early as 1922. Jack Cooper's first radio broadcast was actually in 1925, over WCAP-Washington, D.C. In 1929, the enormously popular "Amos 'n' Andy" show made its NBC network première. With its comic but grossly stereotyped portrayals of black life, the programme amused and repulsed African-American listeners in almost equal measure. However, "The All Negro Hour" was the first direct attempt undertaken to cater specifically *for* the black community.²

Although the show met with significant success and helped to establish the legitimacy and profitability of black-oriented radio, it was not until the end of the

¹ Mark Newman, Entrepreneurs of Profits and Pride: From Black Appeal to Soul Radio (New York: Praeger, 1988), pp. 55-65.

Throughout this thesis, the terms black and African-American are used interchangeably. Likewise with black radio, black-oriented radio, and black-appeal radio - all of which are taken to mean commercial radio stations that devoted at least part of their programming towards an African-American audience. When it is of significance to this study, black-owned stations are referred to separately.

² *ibid.*; Melvin Patrick Ely, The Adventures of Amos 'n' Andy: A Social History of an American Phenomenon (New York: Free Press, 1991), p. 4.

Second World War that the growing interest in the concept flourished into a mass phenomenon. Beginning in 1947, stations such as WDIA-Memphis and WOOK-Washington, D.C., led the way, pioneering the move towards the adoption of a completely black-oriented format. They were soon accompanied by others such as WERD-Atlanta, which had the distinction of becoming the first black-owned radio station in the country upon its purchase by Jesse Blayton in 1949.

Most stations adopted a measure of black-oriented programming as but one segment of their overall schedules. By 1954 - the year of the Supreme Court's landmark *Brown* decision which declared segregated public schooling to be unconstitutional - the broadcasting industry magazine Sponsor calculated that almost 400 such stations existed in the United States. Even at this relatively early stage in the medium's development 22 stations, mostly in the South, were 100 percent black-oriented. Two years later, the figure had risen to 43 out of a total of over 700 stations with some measure of black-appeal programming. By 1968, there were 108 completely black-oriented radio stations around the country.³

As Mark Newman has convincingly demonstrated, the dominant impulse behind the huge upsurge in radio programming directed towards the black community from the late 1940s onwards was entrepreneurial capitalism. All over the country radio station owners, faced with increasing monopolisation of mainstream home entertainment by television, were forced into seeking new

³ "Negro Radio Comes of Age," Sponsor, 20 September 1954, p. 48; "Negro Radio," Sponsor, 9 July 1956, Section 2, p. 192; New York Times, 11 November 1968, Clippings File: "Radio," Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York.

market niches for their economic survival.⁴ In the South and many areas of the North, the increasingly urbanised African-American population proved to be one of the most lucrative to target. With a total annual market value of \$3,000,000,000 in 1940, the figure rose dramatically to \$11,000,000,000 by 1950, and \$20,000,000,000 ten years later.⁵ Of course, such statistics could not obscure the abject poverty that continued to curse sections of the population, nor the significant discrepancies in black and white income levels. Whereas in 1950 the medium income for whites was \$3,135, for African-Americans it stood at only \$1,569. Nevertheless, the rate of black progress was higher, with a median increase in income of 192 percent between 1940 and 1950, compared to 146 percent for whites.⁶

This rapidly increasing black consumer strength, and the fact that it was able to sustain a mass electronic medium, were just two highly-visible indices of a wider progress and prosperity that were enjoyed by African-Americans in the post-war era. Most notably, the physical and psychological empowerment engendered by rising prosperity, coupled with a renewed commitment to fight racism at home after war had been waged against fascism abroad, fostered a determined assault upon legalised and institutionalised segregation in the United States. Although

⁴ Newman, Entrepreneurs of Profits and Pride.

The switch to black-oriented programming was just one example of the way in which radio stations redefined themselves. Others, for example, targeted a variety of ethnic groups with foreign-language programming, or adopted specialised musical formats such as a 100 percent country or Middle of the Road approach. See Charles Ganzert, "Platter Chatter and the Pancake Impresarios: The Re-Invention of Radio in the Age of Television, 1946-1959," PhD Thesis, Ohio University, 1992.

⁵ "Is There a U.S. Negro Market?" Sponsor, 17 August 1964, p. 32.

⁶ "The Negro Market: \$15,000,000,000 to Spend," Sponsor, 28 July 1952, p. 72.

African-American resistance to racism was nothing new, the post-war civil rights movement marked a more concerted and - in some ways - successful challenge. Black radio and the African-American freedom struggle were, then, at least contemporaries. This thesis is an attempt to explore how mutually well-acquainted they really were.

II

The history of radio specifically directed towards the African-American community is rich and varied. Some aspects are more portentous than others, but most are noteworthy. Black-oriented radio offered an unprecedented opportunity for the widespread dissemination and celebration of African-American cultural forms, particularly music and religion. It created an abundance of flamboyant disc jockeys who became household names and powerful icons in the communities to which they broadcast. It taught the young Elvis Presley how to "sound" black. It certainly made a lot of money for a lot of white entrepreneurs. It remains to be seen whether the rendering of a significant contribution to the civil rights movement can be added to the list of achievements.

Chapter One outlines the purpose of the study. It offers an account of the major themes which have characterised the historiography of black-oriented radio and establishes the theoretical framework upon which the remainder of the thesis is based.

Chapters Two, Three and Four chart the evolution of the medium's relationship with the Movement from 1945 to 1975. The account is divided into three main periods, which roughly correspond with three broad phases in the African-American freedom struggle: the emergence of a nascent civil rights movement after the Second World War which culminated in the Supreme Court's

Brown ruling in May 1954; the period that has traditionally been regarded as the zenith of the civil rights movement from 1955 to 1965; and the era that witnessed the rise (and, in some ways, fall) of black power between 1966 and 1975.

It must be emphasised that these divisions are in many ways artificial. As many Movement historians have insisted, there are no clear dividing lines in the black freedom struggle; it cannot be neatly divided into little parcels of protest. Thus, a major aim of this work is to demonstrate the continuities, as well as changes, in black-oriented radio's relationship with the fight against racism. However, although the three different eras were not - at least in terms of the freedom struggle - entirely separate entities, they each still gave rise to different themes, issues, priorities and personalities. One of the fundamental premises of this thesis is the concept that the changing currents of the African-American protest movement had a significant impact upon the programming and public service activities of many black-oriented radio stations. Thus, examining the three eras in turn offers a profitable means of assessing the evolution of the symbiotic relationship between the medium and the Movement.

With the rise of several hundred black-oriented radio stations throughout the United States, it is simply impractical to examine all, or even most, of them with anything resembling comprehensiveness. Consequently, while allowing for variations, the main priority of Chapters Two, Three and Four is to identify the most salient trends which characterised black radio's contribution (or lack of it) to the freedom struggle. However, in order to provide a more detailed assessment of the medium's performance, Chapter Five applies the findings of the previous three chapters to a case study of radio's involvement in the struggles of the African-American community of Washington, D.C.

The concluding chapter considers the changes that were engendered by increased black ownership of the medium during the 1970s, and uses the findings

to provide an overall summation of black radio's historical role in the African-American struggle for civil rights.

CHAPTER ONE

Purpose of the Study

I

Ever since Jack Cooper's pioneering black-oriented show debuted on station WSBC-Chicago in November 1929, and particularly since the "boom" period of black-oriented broadcasting after the Second World War, radio has assumed a significance and influence unique among the mass media for African-Americans. Consequently, the fact that historians of the black freedom struggle, often so quick to highlight the impact of television, have largely neglected black-oriented radio is particularly surprising. Despite the central role that the medium enjoyed in the daily lives of millions of African-Americans, most studies of black radio have been left to the domain of historians of popular culture and mass communications, sociologists, and media analysts. By examining such topics as the quality of community service broadcasting and station ownership patterns, these writers have undoubtedly provided valuable insights into radio's potential for advancing the civil rights cause. However, numerous avenues of research in this area remain unexplored, and there exists ample justification for a greater emphasis upon the role of radio in the freedom struggle than has been the case thus far.

With the notable exception of the publication in 1954 of Estelle Edmerson's thesis examining African-American participation in the early decades of the radio industry, the subject of black-oriented radio, in large part, failed to attract the attention of scholars until the mid-1960s. However, since that time, there has been

a growing recognition that the medium constitutes an important subject for academic inquiry.¹

The research that has taken place into black-oriented radio has usually focused upon a narrow range of themes. The first, and most enduring, of these has been the widespread recognition of the medium's popularity with the black community. Although black-appeal radio has had both its supporters and critics, few have ever questioned the centrality that the medium possessed in the lives of millions of black Americans. Trade and industry magazines, rather than scholars, led the way in emphasising the fact. As early as 1949, publications such as advertising journal Sponsor drew attention to the value of utilising black-oriented radio as an effective means of reaching the African-American consumer market.²

By the 1960s and 1970s, the growing interest of advertisers and sociologists in the medium resulted in the publication of a number of studies which confirmed the enthusiasm with which black listeners responded to radio programming aimed specifically at them. In 1962, for example, the Center for Research in Marketing found that, of the approximately 78 percent of the African-American population who enjoyed access to black-oriented radio, 90 percent listened to it at least occasionally. Thomas Allen's 1968 study of mass media usage by black residents in Pittsburgh found that the average household listened to radio for five and a half hours a day. Others such as Raymond Oladipupo, Gerald Glasser and Gale Metzger examined how black listening patterns differed from

¹Estelle Edmerson, "A Descriptive Study of the American Negro in the United States Professional Radio," MA Thesis, University of California, Los Angeles, 1954.

² See, for example, "The Forgotten 15,000,000," Sponsor, 10 October 1949, pp. 24-25, 54-55.

those of white audiences, and discovered that blacks listening to black-oriented radio did so for longer periods of time, and more attentively.³

In 1972, a survey prepared for Ebony magazine sought to compare the attitudes of African-Americans towards five different elements of the mass media: black radio, television, black newspapers, Ebony, and magazines such as Reader's Digest. Black radio was ranked highest (presumably to the dismay of the study's commissioners) in the categories of empathy, honesty and objectivity, and entertainment, and second only to Ebony in all other categories: quality, modernity, and attention to advertising. Two years later, a survey by J. Walter Thompson found 90 percent of African-Americans to be regular consumers of black-oriented radio.⁴

While such studies were virtually unanimous in testifying to black radio's popularity, opinion concerning the medium's service to the community was considerably less favourable. From the late 1960s and early 1970s, a whole host of commentators roundly condemned black-oriented stations for inadequate programming, dearth of public service, and abstention from civil rights activity. This criticism was very much a product of its times. The emergence of the first

³ A Study of the Dynamics of Purchase Behavior in the Negro Market: Negro Radio Stations, vol. 2 (New York: The Center for Research in Marketing, Inc., 1962), cited in R. Dwight Bachman, Dynamics of Black Radio: A Research Report (Washington, D.C.: Creative Universal Products, Inc., 1977), pp. 50-51; Thomas H. Allen, "Mass Media Use Patterns in a Negro Ghetto," Journalism Quarterly, 45 (Spring 1968), 525-27; Raymond Oladipupo, "Black-Oriented Radio: The Problems and Possibilities," Broadcasting, 22 June 1970, p.18; Gerald J. Glasser and Gale D. Metzger, "Radio Usage by Blacks," Journal of Advertising Research, 15, No. 5 (October 1975), 39-45.

⁴ Daniel Yankelovich, Inc., An Insight into the Black Community: A Study Prepared for Ebony Magazine (Chicago: Johnson, 1972), pp. 28-32; J. Walter Thompson, Advertising and Black America, Media Report, cited in Bachman, Dynamics of Black Radio, p. 51.

major wave of academic interest in the medium coincided with a remarkable upsurge in black community protest against radio stations purporting to serve African-Americans. In an era of station boycotts and petitions to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), most observers naturally tended to accentuate the negative aspects of black radio.

The most common accusations levelled against black-oriented stations focused upon deficiencies in the fields of news and public affairs programming, and an over-reliance upon soul and gospel music. The pattern was established from as early as 1966, when David Berkman argued in the pages of the Columbia Journalism Review that such programming perpetuated negative racial stereotypes of African-Americans. Similarly, in 1970, Bernard Garnett railed against the superficiality of much of black-oriented radio's output in a study that paid particular attention to the medium's inadequacies in the field of news operations.⁵

The following year, much of Anthony Meyer's report on soul stations was devoted to exposing an array of programming deficiencies. Meyer's conclusions - that stations devoted too much airtime to soul music; that public service programming was underfunded; and that most stations were more concerned with using public service activities as a means of self-promotion than as a way of assisting the black community - marked an unqualified denunciation of the programming schedules of a majority of stations. However, Meyer reserved his most damning criticism for the shortcomings in news coverage, suggesting that, "Newscasting on black oriented radio remains its most serious failure."⁶

⁵ David Berkman, "The Segregated Medium," Columbia Journalism Review 5, No. 30 (Fall 1966), 29-32; Bernard Garnett, How Soulful Is 'Soul' Radio? (Nashville: Race Relations Information Center, 1970).

⁶ Anthony J. Meyer, Black Voices and Format Regulations: A Case Study in Black-Oriented Radio (Stanford: Eric Clearinghouse, 1971) (quote on p. 10).

By 1973, Douglas O'Connor and Gayla Cook had found no improvement in the situation as they too lamented, "the almost tragic state of news reporting in black radio." Further support for this negative view was provided by Stuart Surlin, who embarked upon a series of studies aimed at determining the quality of the medium's service. Surlin found that, on most stations, soul and gospel music greatly dominated airtime (approximately 75 percent), while conspicuously small amounts of time were allocated to educational, news and public affairs programming, and that (especially white) owners of black-oriented radio stations consistently failed to ascertain adequately the needs of the communities they professed to serve. Janet Florence's 1978 MA thesis examining programming policies at 79 black-oriented stations painted a similar picture, with news and public affairs kept to a bare minimum at most outlets.⁷

Ironically, it was often the most outspoken critics who also most strongly emphasised the medium's popularity. Meyer, for example, while berating stations for failing to meet their responsibilities to the black community, conceded that black radio, "may well be the single most powerful mass medium for reaching the black population of this country." Likewise, O'Connor and Cook insisted that, "Black radio ... has more potential to be a liberating, educational, and socially responsible medium, in relation to its special audience, than virtually any other

⁷ Douglas O'Connor and Gayla Cook, "Black Radio: The 'Soul' Sellout," The Progressive, August 1973, rpt. in Issues and Trends in Afro-American Journalism, ed. James S. Tinney and Justine R. Rector (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1980), pp. 233-46 (quote on p. 238); Stuart Surlin, "Black-Oriented Radio: Programming to a Perceived Audience," Journal of Broadcasting, 16 (Summer 1972), 289-98, "Black-Oriented Radio's Service to the Community," Journalism Quarterly, 50 (Autumn 1973), 556-60, and "Broadcasters' Misperceptions of Black Community Needs," Journal of Black Studies, 4, No. 2 (December 1973), 185-93; Janet Florence, "News and Public Affairs Programming on Black-Oriented Radio Stations: An Exploratory Study," MA Thesis, University of Maryland, 1978.

among the mass media."⁸ Herein surely lies much of the explanation behind the vehemence of their objections. The sense of frustration that these writers expressed at what they perceived to be black radio's abrogation of its responsibilities was rooted in their very awareness of the positive influence that the medium *could* have - in other words, in the recognition that, "The chasm between potential and performance," was, "deplorable."⁹

To explain black-oriented radio's defects, this early generation of critics often highlighted the detrimental effects of the medium's overwhelmingly white ownership as the primary causal factor. In one of the earliest historical assessments of black radio, Richard Kahlenberg indirectly drew attention to this trend, observing that, at the time of writing in 1966, only five stations were actually both black-oriented and black-owned. Admittedly, having highlighted this pattern of ownership, Kahlenberg failed to appreciate its true significance, being content to conclude favourably that, "White ownership and Negro management seems to be a good combination even though it is an accidental one."¹⁰

However, subsequent writers, who examined the issue of ownership in greater detail, were much quicker to stress the negative repercussions of predominantly white control. In 1970, for example, Fred Ferretti wrote scathingly of, "The White Captivity of Black Radio." Calculating that only 16 out of 310 stations which carried black programming were actually black owned, Ferretti roundly condemned the medium's deficiencies in such areas as news reporting,

⁸ Meyer, Black Voices and Format Regulations, p. 3; O'Connor and Cook, "Black Radio: The 'Soul' Sellout," p. 242.

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 241.

¹⁰ Richard S. Kahlenberg, "Negro Radio," The Negro History Bulletin, 29 (March 1966), 142.

public service, and minority employment: "on the whole, broadcasting stations oriented towards America's black citizenry remind one of nothing so much as Newton Minow's historic description of American commercial television - 'a vast wasteland.'" Justifying his claim that white ownership lay at the root of all of the medium's evils, Ferretti compared the performance of black radio unfavourably with that of the black press, which has traditionally been under African-American control. According to Ferretti, the only means by which more responsive black radio could be achieved was through increased black ownership.¹¹

A similar argument was advanced by G. K. Osei with the publication of his brief volume, The Story of the Black Man in Radio (WLIB). Despite the book's title, Osei devoted less attention to the New York station than to chronicling the efforts of African-Americans to gain access into the radio industry. Although at times the stridently nationalistic tone adopted by Osei tended to detract from his narrative, nevertheless, the picture that emerged was one of an industry that had consistently excluded African-Americans from positions of influence. Tracing the efforts made by black Americans to gain control of a radio station as far back as the 1920s, Osei emphasised the importance of black ownership if radio was ever going to play a truly positive role in the black community:

African-Americans must own and operate radio stations if they are to shape the destiny of their people ...

Through a Black owned station, the African-American can effectively reach the ear of the Americans with their own story.

¹¹ Fred Ferretti, "The White Captivity of Black Radio," Columbia Journalism Review (Summer 1970), rpt. in Our Troubled Press: Ten Years of the Columbia Journalism Review, ed. Alfred Balk and James Boylan (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1971), pp. 87-97 (quote on p. 88).

When one listens to the white stations one does not hear any useful thing said about the African. They consider the African-American still to be a slave.¹²

At the heart of such protestations was the not unreasonable assumption that most white owners of black-oriented radio stations entered into the business because of financial motivations, rather than out of any great altruistic desire to help the black cause. However, the issue of ownership was rendered more complex by the treatment that has been afforded to those few African-American entrepreneurs who did manage to gain entry into the industry.

Several writers adopted a markedly sympathetic tone towards black station owners. While rarely denying the fact that black-owned outlets shared many, if not all, of the limitations of their white-owned rivals, these works tended to emphasise the burdens and problems faced by African-American broadcasters. In her 1970 PhD thesis examining black-owned media in Atlanta, Gloria Blackwell devoted considerable attention to the career of Jesse Blayton, who had the distinction of becoming the first African-American to own a radio station when he purchased WERD in 1949. Drawing heavily upon oral history interviews, Blackwell offered a favourable portrait of one of the true pioneers of black-oriented radio. Central to Blackwell's thesis was the notion that, while WERD (in addition to the other black-owned media in Atlanta) enjoyed considerable moral support among Atlanta's black population, it lacked the financial backing to be truly self-sufficient. Thus, the survival of these media was often dependent upon the actions of a few key individuals - namely, the owners. To support her claim, Blackwell revealed

¹² G. K. Osei, *The Story of the Black Man in Radio* (London: The Afrikan Publication Society, 1976) (quote on p. 15).

how Blayton was often required to support the station out of his own pocket. Thus, the picture that emerged was of a businessman who continually strove to negotiate a fine line between utilising the station to advance the cause of racial progress, and the desire to run a profitable enterprise.¹³

R. Dwight Bachman applied a similar approach to the medium as a whole. While acknowledging deficiencies at black-owned outlets, Bachman argued that much of the criticism that had been levied against them was too severe, and based upon too narrow a view of the broadcasting industry. Bachman sought to place the problems confronting black broadcasters in a wider context. He identified several key areas in which black station owners experienced greater difficulties than their white counterparts - for example, in obtaining financing, distorted ratings services which underestimated the size of the minority audience, limited social opportunities through which relationships with potential advertisers could be cultivated, and the historic exclusion of African-Americans from most managerial positions. All of these placed the kind of financial strain upon a station which forced the ownership to seek to maximise profits by increasing entertainment programming at the expense of news and public service. Thus, in Bachman's view, it was the combination of these factors conspiring against black entrepreneurs, rather than any absence of community spirit on the part of the owners themselves, that was at the crux of the issue. As he concluded: "Programming insults can be contained, not by vehemently ridiculing black broadcasters, but by assisting them in overcoming the myriad of problems they face."¹⁴

¹³ Gloria Blackwell, "Black-Controlled Media in Atlanta, 1960-1970: The Burden of the Message and the Struggle for Survival," PhD Thesis, Emory University, 1973, pp. 121-158.

¹⁴ Bachman, Dynamics of Black Radio (quote on pp. 75-6).

In a similar manner, Cora Selman-Earnest focused attention upon some of the problems facing black entrepreneurs in a narrative that concentrated in large part upon the financing of African-American broadcasting ventures. However, after surveying 74 black-owned radio stations, Selman-Earnest had to acknowledge that increased black ownership had brought with it few concrete improvements to the medium in such respects as news and public affairs.¹⁵

In 1981, James Jeter provided more quantitative data on this issue by performing a content analysis of the programming practices of 45 black-owned black-oriented stations and 100 white-owned, black-oriented stations. By categorising the results according to race, Jeter sought to examine whether a correlation existed between black ownership and the extent to which a station was responsive to the needs of the African-American community. His results suggested no significant difference between white-owned and black-owned outlets in terms of public service and news programming, but noted that the black-owned carried far less stereotyped entertainment programming - specifically, soul and gospel music - than their white-owned counterparts. Consequently, Jeter concluded that increased black ownership of radio was indeed a positive factor.¹⁶

However, such sympathetic assessments of the performance of African-American broadcasters have generally been outweighed by criticism. Many of the writers already mentioned denounced the majority of black radio station owners for not doing enough to advance the cause of their race. Meyer, for example,

¹⁵ Cora Selman-Earnest, "Black Owned Radio and Television Stations in the United States from 1950-1982: A Descriptive Study," PhD Thesis, Wayne State University, 1985.

¹⁶ James Philip Jeter, "A Comparative Analysis of the Programming Practices of Black-Owned Black-Oriented Radio Stations and White-Owned Black-Oriented Radio Stations," PhD Thesis, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1981.

rejected the notion that increased ownership of stations by African-American entrepreneurs would be an effective cure for the medium's ills. While acknowledging the theoretical desirability of the measure, he concluded that, in reality, such proprietors did little more for their communities than the majority of whites. Instead, Meyer advocated the take-over of stations by non-profit black community organisations, as well as more stringent FCC licensing controls, as the most reliable means to attain more responsive black radio programming.¹⁷

Douglas O'Connor and Gayla Cook were even more damning in their criticism. As the title of their article, "Black Radio: The 'Soul' Sellout," suggests, they took an extremely harsh view of black owners. "White ownership has set a low standard," they complained, "but must black owners follow the bouncing ball? With pitifully few exceptions they have been as cruelly exploitative and as unstinting in their misconceptions as their white brethern."¹⁸

This view of black station owners has continued to hold currency in more recent historical treatments of black radio. One of the most thorough expositions of this particular argument was provided with the publication of Nelson George's The Death of Rhythm and Blues in 1988. Tracing the whole history of black-oriented radio, and placing it within the wider context of the black music industry, George's account portrayed the medium in terms of a classic "assimilation versus self-sufficiency" dilemma. According to George, in the immediate post-Second World War period, black radio evolved within the context of segregation, and thus had an important role in promoting a separate sense of racial pride, despite being almost universally white-owned. However, following the civil rights protests of the 1960s, many stations began to target the new, upwardly mobile, assimilated black

¹⁷ Meyer, Black Voices and Format Regulations, pp. 19-22.

¹⁸ O'Connor and Cook, "Black Radio: The 'Soul' Sellout," p. 233.

audiences, and ultimately white listeners as well. This process culminated, at a time of increasing black ownership in the 1970s, with many stations abandoning the format "black-oriented" in favour of "urban contemporary." Consequently, George was highly critical of the way in which, as he perceived the matter, owners of stations abandoned their roots and their commitment to the African-American community.¹⁹

A similar argument was advanced by William Barlow in 1990. While acknowledging that increased black ownership was in many ways a positive step, Barlow stressed that it did not always lead to better service. Like George, he offered two prominent case studies, WLIB-New York and WHUR-Washington, D.C., as examples of black-owned outlets which in the 1970s abandoned part of their commitment to the black community in their quest for greater profits. As an antidote to, "the cultural vacuum created by black commercial radio's preoccupation with profits and the rating system," Barlow concluded that noncommercial black radio - both college and non-profit community stations - had emerged to provide a more sophisticated, if less popular, outlet for black community expression.²⁰

Two other accounts have offered a slightly different perspective on the ownership issue. The most comprehensive examination of the business aspects of black-oriented radio to date was provided in Mark Newman's Entrepreneurs of Profits and Pride. Newman's central thesis was the suggestion that, for whites and blacks alike, the development of the medium was always primarily an

¹⁹ Nelson George, The Death of Rhythm and Blues (New York: Plume, 1988).

²⁰ William Barlow, "Commercial and Noncommercial Radio," in Split Image: African-Americans in the Mass Media, ed. Jannette L. Dates and William Barlow (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1990), pp. 175-250 (quote on p. 232).

entrepreneurial activity. While taking care not to neglect the influence of racial awareness upon those African-Americans involved in the business, Newman stressed that, above all, they entered into black-appeal radio because of financial motivations. Tracing the development of black-appeal in several different environments - a small town (Helena, Arkansas), a medium sized city (Memphis), and a large metropolis (Chicago) - Newman discovered entrepreneurship to be the dominant impulse behind each.²¹

Brian Ward and Jenny Walker reached essentially the same conclusion. Countering the arguments of writers such as George, they suggested that black owners of radio stations could not be criticised for abandoning their role as leaders in the black community, because such a role had at no time been part of their agenda. Rather, they asserted that throughout the history of black station ownership, "specifically racial agendas were often subordinated to, if rarely eradicated by, the eager pursuit of maximum economic rewards."²²

By examining black owners of radio stations within the wider context of black capitalism as a whole, Newman, Ward and Walker raised issues which have serious implications for any assessment of the medium's potential for assisting the cause of civil rights. The concern for profits, the cultivation of sponsorship from white businesses, and the need to secure the FCC's licence renewal every three

²¹ Mark Newman, Entrepreneurs of Profits and Pride: From Black Appeal to Soul Radio (New York: Praeger, 1988).

²² Brian Ward and Jenny Walker, "'Bringing the Races Closer?': Black-Oriented Radio in the South and the Civil Rights Movement," in Dixie Debates: Perspectives on Southern Cultures, ed. Richard H. King and Helen Taylor (London: Pluto, 1996), pp. 130-49 (quote on p. 144). See also Brian Ward, "Race Relations, Civil Rights and the Transformation from Rhythm and Blues to Soul, 1954-1965," PhD Thesis, University of Cambridge, 1995, pp. 351-3, 363-7.

years all exerted a powerful influence upon African-American radio station owners.

In addition, neither account portrayed the options facing black broadcasters as a simple dichotomy between championing the black struggle or race treachery. Rather, they emphasised the complex interaction between "profits and pride" that was at the heart of black-oriented radio. In this way, they recognised that the medium could, at least potentially, have rendered a meaningful service to the civil rights struggle, but only if such activities did not impinge upon the economic interests of the entrepreneurs involved.

In addition to programming and ownership, another major focus of interest for scholars of black-oriented radio has been the role of the FCC, and the efficacy (or lack thereof) of its policies in helping African-Americans achieve better representation in the broadcasting industry. Almost without exception, any examination of the FCC's record on minority affairs has been critical in nature. Many of the works already cited helped to establish the trend. Meyer, for example, roundly condemned the FCC for its inactivity, asserting that, "The FCC has been content for years to be told by the broadcasting industry exactly how far it can push." Douglas O' Connor and Gayla Cook also reached essentially the same conclusion.²³

In the early 1970s, Ernest Phelps and Bishetta Merritt provided institutional histories of two of the most influential organisations that emerged from the broadcasting citizens' group activity of the 1960s and 1970s. Phelps' study of the Office of Communication of the United Church of Christ (UCC), and Merritt's analysis of Black Efforts for Soul in Television (BEST), both ably

²³ Meyer, *Black Voices and Format Regulations*, p.19; O'Connor and Cook, "Black Radio: The 'Soul' Sellout," pp. 234, 246.

demonstrated how the FCC became an important target of resentment for a wide variety of black interest groups, and chronicled the efforts that were undertaken by these organisations to force the Commission to be more responsive to African-American needs and interests.²⁴

Donald Guimary placed the activities of groups such as the UCC and BEST in a wider context in Citizens' Groups and Broadcasting, published in 1975. Guimary traced the history of citizens' groups back to the 1930s, when radio listeners' councils were established amid worries over the effect of radio programming upon children. According to Guimary, such pioneer groups enjoyed the support of both the broadcasting industry and the FCC. In comparison, the kind of organisation (representing not only ethnic minorities, but others such as feminist groups, and parents concerned about violent programming) which emerged in the 1960s and 1970s faced open hostility from the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB), and only limited support from the FCC. Throughout his analysis, Guimary depicted the FCC as an agency that had much stronger ties with the broadcasting industry than it ever had with the public in whose interests it was supposed to regulate.²⁵

A similar argument was advanced by Barry Cole and Mal Oettinger in Reluctant Regulators: The FCC and the Broadcast Audience. Drawing upon Cole's experience as a consultant to the FCC between 1970 and 1975, and Oettinger's years as a writer for the broadcast industry's trade press, the authors were in an

²⁴ Ernest Edward Phelps, "The Office of Communication: The Participant Advocate - Its Function as a Broadcast Citizen Group March 1964 to March 1971," PhD Thesis, Ohio State University, 1971; Bishetta Dionne Merritt, "A Historical-Critical Study of a Pressure Group in Broadcasting - Black Efforts for Soul in Television," PhD Thesis, Ohio State University, 1974.

²⁵ Donald L. Guimary, Citizens' Groups and Broadcasting (New York: Praeger, 1975).

excellent position to be able to comment upon the FCC from close range. By examining such factors as the widespread exchange of personnel between the broadcast industry and the Commission, and the vastly superior resources enjoyed by broadcasters in comparison to citizens' groups for lobbying purposes, Cole and Oettinger convincingly demonstrated how the majority of commissioners were naturally more predisposed to favour the industry over the protesters. The authors also thoroughly reviewed the broadcast license renewal process administered by the FCC, and comprehensively exposed its deficiencies. Overall, as the title of their work implied, the book was a damning indictment of the *laissez-faire* attitude which characterised much of the Commission's work.²⁶

Further credence was given to the criticisms levelled at the FCC with the publication in 1978 of a report by Lawrence Soley and George Hough III, which assessed the effectiveness of the latest Commission policies aimed at increasing minority ownership of radio stations. The study found that, in real terms, the percentage of black ownership was actually decreasing.²⁷

In 1984, Marilyn Fife offered a slightly different approach to the FCC, but reached many of the same conclusions. According to Fife, it was a mistake to view the Commission as an independent and rational agency, as, in reality, its actions were often constrained by a regulatory "system." In the "systems analysis" approach adopted by Fife, she considered the multiple influences at work upon that system. Fife emphasised the importance of a variety of factors - such as inadequate funding of the Commission; congressional activity in support of broadcasters; and

²⁶ Barry Cole and Mal Oettinger, Reluctant Regulators: The FCC and the Broadcast Audience (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1978).

²⁷ Lawrence Soley and George Hough III, "Black Ownership of Commercial Radio Stations: An Economic Evaluation," Journal of Broadcasting, 22 (Fall 1978), 455-67.

the fact that the FCC is answerable to Congress rather than to the general public - which impinged upon the Commission's ability and inclination to act effectively in the public interest. On a more positive note, she also chronicled the achievements of citizens' groups in successfully establishing themselves as effective "inputs" into the broadcast policy making system.²⁸

The most recent examinations of the FCC have done nothing to dispel the overwhelmingly negative impression left by earlier works. Assessing the overall effectiveness of the Commission's policies aimed at increasing minority representation in the broadcasting industry throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Adeno Addis concluded that, "their impact on the diversification of the communication industry has been mixed and very modest." Similarly, in 1995 Sharon Albert-Honore charted the failure of the FCC's affirmative action and minority ownership policies to increase significantly African-American participation in broadcasting. Thus, she argued, the emergence of "alternative" black radio - including non-profit community operations and pirate stations - was a particularly important development in helping to redress the balance.²⁹

Although much of the recent black radio historiography has maintained the generally negative tone established by the first generation of critics, nevertheless, an attempt has been made to portray the medium in a more favourable light. Especially since the 1980s, writers, including several of those already mentioned, have highlighted positive aspects of black radio's historical role in the African-

²⁸ Marilyn Diane Fife, "FCC Policy on Minority Ownership in Broadcasting: A Political Systems Analysis of Regulatory Policymaking," PhD Thesis, Stanford University, 1984.

²⁹ Adeno Addis, "'Hell Man, They Did Invent Us:' The Mass Media, Law, and African Americans," *Buffalo Law Review*, 41 (1993), 523-626 (quote on p. 580); Sharon Albert-Honore, "Empowered Voices: Freedom of Expression and African-American Community Radio," PhD Thesis, University of Iowa, 1995.

American community. Most frequently, they have testified to the medium's ability, through its celebration of black culture, to act as a potent force for the promotion of racial pride and consciousness. Some have even identified individual occasions on which radio rendered a useful service to civil rights activists. However, it is important to note that such recent assessments have continued to assert that radio's direct involvement in the African-American struggle for equality remained, at best, sporadic.

The potency of black radio as an expression of racial consciousness was addressed by Kathryn Alexander in 1982. In her narrative of the development of the medium, she sought to identify exactly what it was that made black-oriented radio so influential. According to Alexander, the explanation lay in the empathetic relationship that existed between the medium and its audience:

The bond of unity between Blacks and black-oriented radio is called "empathy" and is engendered by the special attention given by black stations to the needs and interests of the black communities they serve ... black radio created an empathetic media environment which made the difference between carrying and conveying a message, and made Blacks feel they had a direct and personal invitation from black radio.³⁰

In The Death of Rhythm and Blues, Nelson George emphasised the cultural significance of black-oriented radio, at least in the post-war decades before the medium lost much of its essential sense of "blackness" in the 1970s. Paying

³⁰ Kathryn Laurie Alexander, "The Status of Contemporary Black-Oriented Radio in the United States," PhD Thesis, New York University, 1982 (quote on pp. 123-24).

particular attention to the role of disc jockeys as powerful icons to the black masses, George insisted that black radio, and the black music industry in general, was a crucial force in helping to nurture, "a sense of black community and pride that would be essential to the civil rights movement."³¹

Gilbert Williams also examined the role of the deejay in a brief essay published in 1990. Seeking to explain why more recent generations of black disc jockeys no longer possessed the prestige and status enjoyed by their predecessors in the 1940s and 1950s, he pinpointed exactly why the pioneers had been so influential: "These early black disc jockeys were considered role models and heroes because their audiences identified with them; they gave them a sense of identity, and expressed the joy and pain of the black experience through the music they played, the words they spoke, and the actions they took."³²

Mark Newman dealt with the issue of black radio's impact upon African-American consciousness at considerable length. In keeping with his "profits and pride" formula, he argued convincingly that economic imperatives compelled black-oriented broadcasters and advertisers to treat their listeners with dignity and respect, cultivate a sense of racial pride, and forge close bonds with the communities they served. In this way, radio became a key force in the emergence of "soul" consciousness in the 1950s and 1960s. As Newman concludes: "Radio bound the changing, disparate, and increasingly atomized black community

³¹ George, The Death of Rhythm and Blues, p. 16.

³² Gilbert A. Williams, "The Black Disc Jockey as a Cultural Hero," in Perspectives of Black Popular Culture, ed. Harry Shaw (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1990), pp. 109-119 (quote on pp. 110-11).

together by providing a unified mass medium that reached virtually everybody with the same messages of progress, pride, solidarity and racial positivity."³³

Perhaps nowhere was this more true than at WDIA-Memphis, traditionally regarded as the first radio station in the United States to adopt an all-black format and the one which set the standards, in terms of popularity and public service, for all others to follow. For almost as long as academics have expressed an interest in black-oriented radio, WDIA's role has garnered widespread praise. In 1970, for example, Billy Trapp Lindsey undertook a study of 100 of the station's listeners in Oxford, Mississippi, in order to ascertain the extent to which the station influenced their attitudes and values. The results showed that, through such means as its editorial policy and news service, the station had an enormously positive impact: "It was found that WDIA was doing a great job as an ethnic-appeal radio station. This station was doing a great service to its listening audience."³⁴ A whole host of subsequent writers, including Newman, George, Barlow, Ward and Walker made reference to WDIA's public service broadcasting, examining the station's involvement in everything from announcing job opportunities and helping to trace missing persons, to publicising local charities and sponsoring children's baseball teams.³⁵

However, it was not until the publication of Louis Cantor's excellent Wheelin' on Beale in 1992 that a full-scale examination of WDIA was provided.

³³ Newman, Entrepreneurs of Profits and Pride (quote on p. 164).

³⁴ Billy Trapp Lindsey, "The Impact and Influence of Ethnic-Appeal Radio upon its Listeners: A Case Study of WDIA (Memphis, Tennessee)," MA Thesis, University of Mississippi, 1970 (quote on p. 82).

³⁵ Newman, Entrepreneurs of Profits and Pride, pp. 115-20; George, The Death of Rhythm and Blues, p. 51; Barlow, "Commercial and Noncommercial Radio," pp. 211-12; Ward and Walker, "Bringing the Races Closer?" pp. 140-41.

Concentrating primarily upon the period between 1948 and 1957, Cantor skilfully traced the history of the station and its impact upon black Memphis. In so doing, he afforded a crucial role to the public service performed by WDIA, and to the part it played in cementing the station's ties with the local community: "From the start, the station planted its roots deep in the black community - its institutions and charitable organizations - and entrenched itself so firmly in the hearts and minds of local black citizens with its unprecedented public service that no-one ever dislodged it."³⁶

At the same time, Cantor astutely acknowledged that there was more than pure altruism at work. Rather, he demonstrated how much of the motivation behind WDIA's public service (and, indeed, in its very adoption of a black-oriented format) lay in the station's white owners' recognition of the shrewd business sense behind such a move. However, the over-riding impression of WDIA presented by Cantor is of a station which had an enormous, positive impact upon the lives of thousands of African-Americans living in Memphis.³⁷

Nevertheless, for all WDIA's genuine achievements, the political involvement of the station was virtually non-existent. According to Cantor, the station's contribution to the civil rights movement consisted not so much of open activity, but in its showcasing of black achievement on air, and the promotion of racial pride among African-Americans that this brought with it. Thus, throughout the book, a careful distinction is drawn between public service and overt civil rights agitation.³⁸

³⁶ Louis Cantor, Wheelin' on Beale: How WDIA - Memphis Became the Nation's First All-Black Radio Station and Created the Sound that Changed America (New York: Pharos, 1992) (quote on p. 163).

³⁷ *ibid.*

³⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 2-4.

However, it should be noted that, save for a brief concluding chapter, Wheelin' on Beale focused only upon the period until the sale of the station to Egmont Sonderling in 1957. To a large extent, the history of this groundbreaking station during the era that has traditionally been regarded as the zenith of the African-American freedom struggle remains to be told.

The most recent, and overt, attempt to tie black radio's promotion of racial consciousness to the civil rights movement was undertaken by Brian Ward and Jenny Walker. While acknowledging that some direct assistance to civil rights activists did occur, they argued that it was radio's fostering of black pride - essentially a fortuitous by-product of broadcasters' economic activities - rather than any deliberate engagement in the freedom struggle that characterised the medium's most important contribution to the Movement:

black-oriented radio helped to promote the sense of solidarity and common consciousness which was a necessary prerequisite for the effective political mobilisation of black southerners in the 1950s and 1960s. It was, however, probably beyond the medium's functional capacity, let alone agenda, to transform such feelings of cultural cohesion and pride into effective political action.³⁹

While such works offer new approaches through which the relationship between black radio and the civil rights movement can be explored, specific details concerning the medium's actual involvement in the freedom struggle remain few and far between. It is not without irony that, while many historians of the civil rights movement now seek to shift the emphasis away from the traditional

³⁹ Ward and Walker, "Bringing the Races Closer?" p. 145.

"Montgomery to Selma" approach by tracing the origins of the movement ever further back into the heart of the Jim Crow era, those few historians of radio who have explicitly referred to the civil rights issue have tended to focus primarily upon the progress and protests that occurred in the years before 1955. J. Fred MacDonald and William Barlow both exemplify this trend. In Don't Touch That Dial, MacDonald's analysis of the radio industry between 1920 and 1960 revealed an ambiguous relationship with the African-American community. While recognising the negative racial stereotypes promulgated by black characters such as "Amos 'n' Andy" and "Rochester," MacDonald was keen to emphasise the more positive role played by radio, especially from the war years onwards. Consequently, he focused considerable attention upon the airing of network shows such as "An Open Letter on Race Hatred" in 1943 and "Is the South Solving its Race Problem?" in 1944 - shows which dealt specifically with the issue of racism and urged tolerance. Similarly, he described how other programmes, such as the "Destination Freedom" series of plays by black writer Richard Durham, which aired between 1948 and 1950, celebrated the achievements of famous black historical figures and highlighted the African-American contribution towards American life and society. Although stressing that such signs of progress were still only modest, MacDonald reiterated their significance in the fight against discrimination: "It was a first step, and it shifted the black social cause to a new plateau upon which later civil libertarians and reformers could build."⁴⁰

William Barlow's analysis of radio during this period reached essentially the same conclusions as MacDonald's, in recognising both the negative and positive roles played by the medium. If anything, Barlow made the case for the progressive

⁴⁰ J. Fred MacDonald, Don't Touch That Dial: Radio Programming in American Life from 1920 to 1960 (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1979), pp. 327-70 (quote on p. 356).

elements within the industry in even stronger terms than MacDonald, for example, in his assessment of the work of Richard Durham: "Long before either civil rights or women's rights were placed on the postwar national agenda, Durham was agitating for both in his scripts."⁴¹

Detailed information concerning black radio's involvement in post-1955 struggles against racism remains much scarcer. However, two important case studies do offer at least some clues into the genuine role that the medium could play in the promotion of civil rights. The first was provided by Norman Spaulding. Spaulding sought to evaluate the medium's role among the black population of Chicago, demonstrating how it became a major force in the changing cultural life of black Chicagoans between 1929 and 1963. Significantly, he attached great importance to radio's role in helping to acquaint new migrants to the city, acting as an important news service, and publicising the activities of civil rights campaigners.⁴²

The second study came with the publication of James Spady's biography of Philadelphia disc jockey Georgie Woods in 1992. Spady offered little analysis of Woods' life, preferring instead to rely heavily upon a sometimes confusing array of oral history interviews. Nevertheless, a number of salient features of Woods' career are covered in the book, including his fund-raising for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), participation in civil rights marches, and high-profile friendship with Martin Luther King. In short, both Spaulding and Spady demonstrated how, at least in the North, some black-oriented

⁴¹ Barlow, "Commercial and Noncommercial Radio," p. 203.

⁴² Norman Spaulding, "History of Black-Oriented Radio in Chicago, 1929-1963," PhD Thesis, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1981.

radio stations could, and did, take an active interest in civil rights affairs. It remains to be seen how many others followed suit.⁴³

This examination of the current historiography of the relationship between black-oriented radio and the African-American fight for equality would indicate that there are still as many questions left unresolved as answered. Undoubtedly, existing works have offered valuable insights into the role of black radio in the African-American community. However, many fundamental issues concerning radio's involvement in the black struggle remain unexplored. To date, no comprehensive attempt has been made to analyse either the extent, or the nature, of the medium's participation in the Movement. If this issue has been marginalised in works dealing specifically with black-oriented radio, it is virtually non-existent in the conventional civil rights historiography. This thesis seeks to begin the process of filling both gaps.

II

The account that follows is based upon a number of key propositions, which should be explained at the outset. First, and most important, is the notion that black-oriented radio at least possessed enormous potential to render a meaningful contribution to the African-American struggle against discrimination. The medium's very popularity - recognised by critic and admirer alike - endowed black radio with the ability to disseminate its message to a large and receptive audience.

Of course, African-Americans were consumers of, and influenced by, many forms of the mass media, including television and the black press. However, black-

⁴³ James G. Spady, Georgie Woods: I'm Only a Man: The Life Story of a Mass Communicator, Promoter, Civil Rights Activist (Philadelphia: Snack-Pac, 1992).

oriented radio's significance was, in several ways, unique. In part, this can be explained in purely numerical terms. The phenomenal rise of television in the post-war era should not obscure the fact that, although neither medium was ubiquitous, radio still reached into substantially more African-American homes than its rival throughout much of this period. For example, according to statistics provided by Sponsor, by the mid 1950s, 60.3 percent of black southerners over the age of 12 tuned in to radio at some time during an average day. For television, the figure was only 32.4 percent. By 1960, 72.6 percent of non-white households in the United States owned a television, compared to a minimum of 83.5 percent for radio. In the South, the discrepancy was considerably greater. Ownership rates in Arkansas stood at 53 percent for television, 72.9 percent for radio; 54.5 percent and 80.4 percent in Alabama; and 59.3 percent and 78.2 percent in Georgia. Region-wide, only 63.1 percent of non-white homes possessed a television, in comparison to at least 78.9 percent for radio.⁴⁴

Black radio's rise to nation-wide prominence in the 1950s also coincided with a marked decline in popularity for many of the country's most renowned black

⁴⁴ "Negro Audience Basics," Sponsor, 20 September 1958, p. 16; ownership statistics calculated from U.S. Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, U.S. Census of Housing (Washington, D.C: GPO, 1960) vol. 1, part 1, Table 26.

It is very probable that the rates of African-American radio ownership were in reality significantly higher than the figures given here, especially considering that surveys from the early 1950s suggested levels of 75 to 85 percent in the South, and 90 percent nationally. See "Negro Radio: 200-Plus Specialist Stations - More Coming," Sponsor, 28 July 1952, p. 78; "8 Key Facts to Remember About the U.S. Negro Market," Sponsor, 24 August 1953, p. 66. The discrepancy can be explained by two factors. The 1960 study of household appliances does not take into account the popularity of radio listenership in cars and, via portable sets, in places of work - neither of which was possible with television. Secondly, the category in the 1960 census was for non-white, rather than black, households. With the enormous rise in the number of radio stations specifically catering to a black audience over the preceding 12 years, African-Americans had even more incentive than most minority groups to invest in a radio set.

newspapers. For example, between 1950 and 1960, the circulation of the Pittsburgh Courier fell from 274,329 to 126,444; the national edition of the Afro-American from 61,067 to 32,788; the New York Amsterdam News from 64,797 to 44,492; the Kansas City Call from 40,231 to 21,616. On an individual market basis, differences between African-American radio and newspaper consumption were frequently extreme. For example, in 1950, Atlanta University discovered that the city's black population (of approximately 121,000) possessed, on average, 1.8 radio sets per household. The same year's weekly circulation of the Atlanta World was 29,000. In Memphis, where the 1950 circulation of the World was little over 16,000 per week, a survey conducted in 1953 discovered that virtually 70 percent of African-American homes in the city (housing a population of approximately 103,000) tuned in to WDIA on an average day.⁴⁵

Another important source of radio's popularity vis-à-vis the press was that it transcended any barriers of literacy. Illiteracy rates declined sharply in the post-war era, but still accounted for as much as 7.5 percent of the total non-white population by 1959. Moreover, the figure was significantly greater in the South (11 percent), and even higher in poorer rural areas of the region.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ All newspaper statistics taken from Ayer's Directory of Newspapers and Periodicals 1950 (Philadelphia: N. W. Ayer and Son, 1950), and Ayer's Directory of Newspapers and Periodicals 1960 (Philadelphia: N. W. Ayer and Son, 1960). Population statistics drawn from U.S. Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, County and City Data Book 1956 (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1957). For the Atlanta and Memphis surveys, see "Negro Radio: 200-Plus Specialist Stations," p. 78; "Negro Radio Stations: Keystone of Community Life," Sponsor, 24 August 1953, p. 68; Cantor, Wheelin' on Beale, p. 147.

⁴⁶ U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Series P-20, No. 217, "Illiteracy in the United States: November 1969" (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 10 March 1971), Table A; "Negro Marketing Basics," Sponsor, 26 September 1960, Part 2, p. 22.

The sheer scale of black radio's presence in the African-American community was only one aspect of the medium's potential to the civil rights movement. Its empathetic relationship with its audience was the other. The very foundation upon which black radio was built was the predisposition of a minority group, faced with discrimination and exclusion from the mainstream, to respond with great enthusiasm to its own forms of entertainment and cultural expression. For example, in 1961, research showed that New Orleans' two black stations enjoyed an average weekly share of over 60 percent of the total African-American listenership, with the remainder divided among eight other stations. In both Mobile, Alabama, and Houston, Texas, two stations garnered over 64 percent of the black audience. A single black-oriented outlet in markets such as Miami, Baton Rouge, and Columbus, Georgia, accounted for more than half of all African-Americans who tuned into radio. All over the country, a similar pattern developed: while black Americans certainly continued to listen to general-appeal radio stations, they invariably turned to black-oriented outlets more frequently.⁴⁷

Due to the fact that listeners identified with the medium so closely, black radio's message carried a particular resonance in the community. Again, this helped to distinguish it from television and even, to some degree, the black press. Without doubt, black Americans were as susceptible as the rest of the nation to television's appeal. However, it will be argued here that, for all its popularity, time and again African-American viewers expressed a sense of alienation with television - a genuine frustration at the way in which it continually presented the world through white men's eyes.

⁴⁷ "Negro Stations' Share of Negro Audience," Sponsor, 9 October 1961, Part 2, p. 20.

Of course, black newspapers also targeted an African-American market, but unlike radio, their orientation was primarily towards a middle-class readership. This thesis contends that, much more than the press, black radio offered an effective outlet for addressing the African-American working classes. Apart from at the very infancy of the medium, the style and programming format adopted at most stations firmly established black radio's mass-based appeal. Indeed, before the upsurge in citizen protest against stations in the late 1960s, the medium's few outspoken critics were often middle-class African-Americans who resented the neglect of their own tastes and preferences in the fare offered by the majority of stations. What such detractors harshly characterised as "programming down" to the lowest common denominator was in actuality the widespread celebration, on a level unparalleled in the mass media, of the culture and interests of the black masses.⁴⁸

None of these points are intended to suggest that other forms of the mass media did not have a significant, sometimes crucial, role to play in the fight against racism. What they do underline is that black-oriented radio was, in many ways, the most important mass medium for the majority of African-Americans. One only has to note the abundance of advertising success stories contained in the pages of

⁴⁸ In 1966, for example, Broadcasting magazine identified, "a growing group of Negroes in the middle and upper classes who look on the Negro-programed radio station as an example of class distinction." The same article also paid a generous tribute to the medium's service to its main target audience: "it is hard to find stations of any format that try harder to serve the needs of the population they aim for ... it is up to the Negro station to tell what's happening in the city's Negro districts, the Negro schools and among the Negro citizenry." "Radio A Leading Force in Negro Progress," Broadcasting, 7 November 1966, p. 71.

publications such as Sponsor and Broadcasting to gain an impression of black radio's particular ability to influence and motivate its target audience.⁴⁹

The second major proposition of this thesis concerns the diversity of black-oriented radio and its relationship to the African-American freedom struggle. It has to be emphasised that there was a variety of ways in which radio could render a meaningful service to the Movement. Too often, critics have dismissed the medium on the grounds that, despite its integral position in the community, it failed to assume the role of vanguard in the fight against racism. While it is true that black-oriented radio rarely became the catalyst around which African-American protest movements were built, this did not necessarily mean that it failed to provide valuable assistance.

The nature of black radio's relationship to the freedom struggle requires a more nuanced analysis. This study will seek to demonstrate that, although the medium's contribution potentially assumed many forms, it could basically be categorised into either "active" or "supportive" participation. In other words, on occasion a station might directly involve itself with the Movement, seeking to instigate and stimulate civil rights activity through its own efforts. This could, for example, take the form of a station mounting its own voter registration drives, engaging in fund-raising, or waging strong editorial campaigns in an attempt to mobilise public opinion. At other times, a station would simply place its facilities at

⁴⁹ See, for example, "Negro Results: Rich Yield for All Types of Clients," Sponsor, 28 July 1952, pp. 39-39, 84-86; "Success Stories Many and Varied," Broadcasting, 7 November 1966, pp. 89-90.

The amount of money invested in black-oriented radio by advertisers was one of the surest indications of the extent of the medium's influence with the African-American population. By 1966, annual advertising expenditure for black radio was estimated at \$28,000,000, compared to approximately \$5,000,000 for the black press, and \$8,000,000 for magazines such as Ebony. *ibid.*, p. 76.

the disposal of outside agencies, offering them a mouthpiece through which they could reach wide sectors of the city's black population. Both through regular news coverage and the provision of air-time as a public service to civil rights organisations, stations were able to render a valuable service to the Movement while maintaining at least a veneer of objectivity. The two approaches clearly involved differing degrees of personal, emotional commitment to the civil rights issue on the part of broadcasters. Ultimately, however, they could both be equally effective in their own ways.

In truth, the distinctions between "active" and "supportive" participation are not always easily drawn. For example, if a station raised funds or editorialised on behalf of groups such as the NAACP or Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), it clearly involved an element of both approaches. Nevertheless, this model offers a useful general guide for interpreting black radio's relationship with the civil rights movement. If active engagement in the struggle is regarded as the sole criteria for assessing the medium's contribution, then it would indeed be true that only a minimal number of stations participated. However, by taking into account the full range of possibilities that were available for assisting the cause, it becomes apparent that substantially more stations became involved.

This need to refrain from considering public service activities as a monolithic whole is something that must be extended to black-oriented radio in general. To analyse the history of the medium's performance fairly, several key variables have to be taken into consideration. One such factor was ownership. With so few black-owned black-oriented stations until the 1970s, it could be argued that the question of whether they were more receptive to the civil rights struggle than their white-owned counterparts was more hypothetical than genuine. Nevertheless, this study will seek to determine the extent to which the racial co-

ordinates of station ownership were decisive in influencing the level of commitment to the Movement.

Similarly, this analysis has to be sensitive to the impact of geography. Certainly, neither racism, nor the struggle against it, were the preserve of the South. However, broadcasters in that region did, to a considerable extent, have to operate within a context of greater sensitivity to the race issue than their colleagues elsewhere in the country. As a result, incidents of southern black-oriented stations engaging in civil rights activity were less frequent, if perhaps more noteworthy, than in the North. Nevertheless, although the majority of the most "involved" stations were situated in major metropolitan areas of the North, they still had a significant role to play in the African-American fight for civil rights, by helping to nationalise awareness of the latest developments in the southern movement, as well as focusing attention upon local protest campaigns.

If the discussion on black radio's performance has to take into account variations according to location, it must do likewise with variations according to chronology. It cannot be assumed that black-oriented radio's involvement with the freedom struggle - or lack of it - remained constant throughout the period 1945 to 1975. Thus, an important concern of this thesis is to examine the fluctuations in the relationship between the medium and the Movement over time, and in the context of an ongoing and evolving struggle for freedom and equality in America.

This brings us on to the third key proposition - namely, the idea that black-oriented radio's relationship with the civil rights movement was essentially symbiotic in nature. The medium not only helped to shape, but was itself shaped by, the African-American fight for equality. Throughout the period from 1945 to 1975, the changing contours of black protest had a profound influence in moulding the context within which black-oriented radio stations operated. Thus, while some stations consistently allied themselves with the Movement throughout their

existence, and others never offered much help at all, the majority were prone to vacillate somewhere between these two extremes. For example, especially in the South, the convergence of white segregationist forces into the phenomenon of Massive Resistance in the mid- to late-1950s rendered the issue of racial integration even more of a taboo subject than it had already been for most broadcasters. Conversely, the success with which the civil rights movement portrayed its struggle as a moral crusade in the 1960s considerably accelerated the process by which many black-oriented stations embraced the fight against racism as a "legitimate" cause. Just as it became widespread, if not the norm, for black-oriented stations to lend their support to the Movement, the rise to prominence of black power in the late 1960s at the partial expense of the earlier generation of integrationists created a whole new set of issues, which many black-oriented stations struggled to deal with. In all of these ways, the content and tenor of black-oriented broadcasting was profoundly influenced by events unfurling in the political sphere.

The final key proposition concerns the dynamics at work in influencing what was broadcast over the air. As has been seen, the ownership issue has justifiably dominated much of the black radio historiography. However, too often the focus upon the medium's predominantly white ownership has been accompanied by the assumption that white-owned, black-oriented stations were somehow intrinsically disengaged from the black struggle against racism. While there is much to substantiate this view in general, it must not be applied too indiscriminately. For reasons which this thesis will explore, many of the stations that rendered the most deliberate, significant, and lasting service to the civil rights movement were white-owned.

Furthermore, it will be argued here that ownership was never the sole factor, nor even always the most important one, in determining the nature of black-

oriented radio's public service. In no small part, this was precisely due to broadcasters' economic imperatives. Stations which projected themselves as the voice of the African-American community could rarely afford to ignore for long the pressing concerns of their audience if their credibility - and therefore profits - were to survive intact. In addition, some individual employees enjoyed at least a degree of autonomy in defining their own agenda at various black-oriented stations. In short, this thesis contends that it was at least possible for black-oriented radio stations to become involved in the struggle for civil rights in spite of, rather than because of, the personal agendas and beliefs of their white owners.

III

These four propositions not only form the theoretical framework for this thesis, they also help to explain the choice of sources upon which the work draws. In addition to secondary accounts, newspapers, periodicals, and oral history interviews, two key groups of primary written sources were relied upon most heavily for this study.

The first consists of the records of the FCC, in particular the license renewal applications that each station had to submit every three years throughout the period upon which this thesis focuses. Such renewal applications varied considerably in both quantity and quality. Whereas some broadcasters paid the briefest of lip-service to the Commission's rules and regulations, others submitted whole volumes of supporting documentation. Both types, much to the dismay of the FCC's detractors, appeared to be "rubber-stamped" with approval with equal regularity. Nevertheless, much of the information that was required by the Commission as part of the license renewal process proved to be valuable for this work - such as the average programming schedules during a "composite week" of

seven days drawn at random from the license period; statements of programming policies submitted by the licensees; and details of public service activities.

Clearly, because of their subjectivity, these documents must be used with caution. In their attempts to convince the FCC that they were worthy custodians of the public airwaves who could be trusted for another three years, broadcasters undoubtedly had a vested interest in making the most of any community service that they undertook. In some instances, it is difficult to determine whether they were applying for broadcast license renewal, or canonisation.

Despite this caveat, the information contained within the FCC's license renewal files is useful for several reasons. At a basic level, outright lies were few and far between. Wilful misrepresentation of information to the Commission has often been treated as a more serious misdemeanour than lack of attention to the public interest in the first place. As Commissioner James Quello warned a gathering of Virginia broadcasters in August 1974: "Don't let your zeal for public service at renewal time exceed your ability or desire to perform after the renewal has been granted." With the FCC's regulations stipulating that copies of renewal applications had to be made available for public inspection, broadcasters ran the risk that any major distortion of the truth could be brought to the Commission's attention. Such a danger became even more acute during the upsurge of citizens' group activism that engulfed the broadcasting industry in the late 1960s and 1970s.⁵⁰

Secondly, many license renewal applications included as much third-party testimony as possible to corroborate broadcasters' assertions of community

⁵⁰ James Quello, quoted in, Cole and Oettinger, Reluctant Regulators, p. 150. The authors also note that at least one media report suggested that Quello's actual comments were even blunter: "the best way to avoid the problem of meeting their [broadcaster's] promises was just not to promise anything at renewal time."

service. Often, such evidence took the form of letters of appreciation from a diverse array of sources, ranging from innumerable charities such as the Red Cross and Heart Foundation, to local politicians and police chiefs, and, in some cases, civil rights activists.

Finally, FCC records offer an important clue as to how much significance black-oriented broadcasters attached to the race issue. Although the Commission periodically reminded licensees of their obligation to ascertain and cater to the needs of their audience, at no time did it formally extend this mandate to require work on behalf of black civil rights agitation. As will be seen, there were many other avenues for positive community service, such as charity fund-raising, to satisfy the Commission without the need for overt political activism. Consequently, when broadcasters, particularly in the South, submitted details of any assistance rendered to civil rights activists, and thus ran the risk of attracting the attention of hostile whites, it was not a measure to be taken lightly. In this way, license renewals shed considerable light upon the chronology and symbiotic nature of black radio's relationship to the freedom struggle. Not only do they help to reveal exactly when licensees began to get involved in the issue, but also when this practice began to be widely accepted as a "legitimate" activity which could be publicly boasted of to the FCC.

The second important group of primary sources comprises the papers of major civil rights organisations, particularly the NAACP, National Urban League (NUL), Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), SCLC, and Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Such records are crucial to a full understanding of the symbiotic relationship between the medium and the Movement. Too often, black radio's involvement in the freedom struggle has been assessed solely in terms of the agendas of the stations themselves. However, the medium did not operate in a vacuum. Due consideration must also be given to the attitudes of the civil rights

groups, to the extent to which they recognised the potential of black-oriented radio for reaching large masses of African-Americans, and to the efforts that they undertook to make full use of any opportunities that were afforded to them.

What these sources reveal is that when civil rights activists themselves took the initiative in seeking to work through a local black-oriented radio station, they were accommodated on a far greater scale than has hitherto been recognised. To be sure, the medium's participation in the Movement must be kept in perspective. At times, the limitations of its contribution were all too evident; at others, the nature of its assistance was more accidental than deliberate. Similarly, by no means all stations became involved. Nevertheless, the evidence suggests that enough stations, in enough locations, did render a sufficiently valuable service to warrant a thorough examination of black-oriented radio's diverse role in the African-American fight for equality.

CHAPTER TWO

Black-Oriented Radio and the Nascent Civil Rights Movement

1945-1954

I

In August 1945, the NAACP's publicity director Consuelo Young wrote to New York broadcaster Morris Novik asking for a list of local contacts in the radio industry. By way of explanation for the request, Young described how, "more and more occasions are arising for which the NAACP should have access to radio coverage on important current issues and problems." Writing the day before the second atomic bomb destroyed the city of Nagasaki, Young astutely recognised, not only the way in which the fight for equality would feature with increasing prominence in the post-war era, but also the important contribution that radio could make in informing the American people of the Association's work.¹

However, in one key respect, neither Consuelo Young nor any contemporary observer could have truly foreseen how radio's relationship with the civil rights struggle would evolve in the following decades. In 1945, any evaluation of radio's potential value to the black cause was based upon its status as the most popular general-appeal mass medium of the day. However, as television rapidly usurped that position and stimulated the explosion in the number of radio stations re-defining themselves in search of a "niche" market, organisations such as the NAACP were increasingly faced with the

¹ Consuelo C. Young, letter to Morris Novik, 8 August 1945, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Papers, II-A-158, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (hereafter, NAACP Papers).

opportunities and challenges of working with the burgeoning phenomenon of black-oriented radio.

The widespread emergence of black radio in the first decade after the war offered unique possibilities to civil rights groups. Certainly, the use of mainstream radio and, increasingly, television stations continued as an integral part of the publicity campaigns waged by activists, reflecting their need to reach white as well as black Americans with their calls for racial equality. However, through black radio's astounding popularity with its target audience, leaders in the freedom struggle had the opportunity to employ the mass media to address unprecedented numbers of African-Americans directly. If stations could be enjoined to support the efforts of civil rights campaigners by making their facilities available to them, and by providing regular news coverage of their activities, black radio had considerable potential to become an effective educational and motivational tool in the fight against discrimination.

II

Ironically, the one element of black-oriented radio's supportive function in the civil rights movement which has received the most attention was actually almost accidental. As several commentators have suggested, one of the medium's most significant effects in the African-American community was its psychological impact upon listeners. Without necessarily following a deliberate political agenda, radio stations around the country assumed a positive role in fostering black racial pride and identity. Simply by doing what it did best, as a mass entertainment medium, black-oriented radio became one of the most important vehicles of the age for publicising and sharing distinctly African-

American cultural achievements, experiences, opinions and problems.²

No-one exemplified the medium's ability to reflect and shape the consciousness of the black community more than the disc jockey. Responsible for selecting and airing recordings of blues, gospel, and - to a lesser extent - jazz artists, air personalities became a central focus for the celebration of African-American musical forms and talent. Ever since Jack Cooper pioneered the disc jockey format at WSBC-Chicago in 1931, the handful of African-Americans who followed his lead became prominent symbols of racial progress. By December 1947, Ebony reported that there were 16 such "sepiä spielers," performing on a total of 21 stations. Significantly, the magazine stressed the importance of the fact that the majority of these early black deejays - mostly middle-class and college educated - sounded no different to their white counterparts: "Few can be identified as Negro on the air, even get anti-Negro notes assuming them to be white. Discovery that a voice has no color has opened new vistas to Negroes in radio, where disc jockeys have demonstrated once again that race is only skin deep."³

² Mark Newman, Entrepreneurs of Profits and Pride: From Black Appeal to Soul Radio (New York: Praeger, 1988); Nelson George, The Death of Rhythm and Blues (New York: Plume, 1988), pp. 39-57; Louis Cantor, Wheelin' on Beale: How WDIA-Memphis Became the Nation's First All-Black Radio Station and Created the Sound that Changed America (New York: Pharos, 1992); Brian Ward, "Race Relations, Civil Rights and the Transformation from Rhythm and Blues to Soul, 1954-1965," PhD Thesis, University of Cambridge, 1995, pp. 83-120; Brian Ward and Jenny Walker, "Bringing the Races Closer?": Black-Oriented Radio in the South and the Civil Rights Movement," in Dixie Debates: Perspectives on Southern Cultures, ed. Richard H. King and Helen Taylor (London: Pluto, 1996), pp. 133-46.

³ "Disc Jockeys," Ebony, December 1947, p. 44.

The following account of the cultural significance of the disc jockey is drawn primarily from George, The Death of Rhythm and Blues, pp. 39-57; Newman, Entrepreneurs of Profits and Pride, pp. 82-91; William Barlow, "Commercial and Noncommercial Radio," in Split Image: African-Americans in the Mass Media, ed. Jannette L. Dates and William Barlow (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1990), pp. 215-18; Ward, "Race Relations," pp. 96-98.

However, this image of the black disc jockey was radically altered in the post-war era with the emergence of a new type of performer, pioneered by Al Benson in Chicago, who took to the airwaves in 1945 with a style that has led Nelson George to describe him with approval as, "just the sort of character any self-respecting upwardly mobile black would view as a discredit to the race."⁴ Benson drew fully and unapologetically upon the vernacular, culture, and humour of lower-class African-Americans, earning himself a mass and loyal audience in the process. "He wasn't pretending to be white," explained Eddie O' Jay, himself a disc jockey in the early 1950s. "He sounded black. They knew he was and most of us were proud of the fact. 'Here's a black voice coming out of my little radio and we know it's him.'"⁵

In the wake of Benson's success, deejays with a similar approach flourished at stations around the country. With a personality to match the flamboyance of their names, many of them - such as "Jockey" Jack Gibson in Atlanta (later Louisville and St. Louis), Maurice "Hot Rod" Hulbert in Memphis, and Vernon "Poppa Stoppa" Winslow in New Orleans - became heroes in their own right, as popular in their local community as the artists whose records they played. In this way, radio created a new, unmistakably and unashamedly black role model for African-American listeners.

Consequently, there was an important shift in the symbolic value of the deejay as a racial hero. Personalities such as Jack Cooper had earned the respect and appreciation of black listeners by proving that an African-American on the air could perform the same tasks as a white broadcaster in an equally competent fashion. However, with the emergence of the new breed of disc jockey, such feelings were superseded by a justified pride in the kind of performer who made the celebration of "blackness" a positive virtue in itself.

⁴ George, *The Death of Rhythm and Blues*, p. 41.

⁵ Eddie O' Jay, quoted in, *ibid.*

Vernon Winslow, New Orleans' veteran disc jockey who first appeared on air over WVEZ in 1949, neatly summarised his own, and his colleagues', significance: "The language was for insiders, most white folks couldn't understand it so it became a unique identity and people were proud of it as a way to show solidarity and brotherhood."⁶

While the disc jockeys and the music that they played became the cornerstones of black-oriented radio's popularity in the African-American community, a variety of other programming practices further cemented the ties between the medium and its audience. Regular news broadcasts and public service announcements, for example, kept listeners continually apprised of the activities of local social, charitable, and community organisations.⁷

Similarly, talk shows offered a valuable outlet for the expression of black community opinion on the latest issues of the day, including, in some cases, the problems of racism. Jack Cooper pioneered the concept in 1946, with the inauguration of "Listen Chicago" at station WAAF. By 1948, the show's guest panel regularly debated such topics as "Democracy and Education," "Civil Rights - and Wrongs," and "Erasing the Color Line."⁸

In September 1949, WDIA-Memphis extended the idea into the South with "Brown America Speaks," a weekly show moderated by Nat Williams. By occasionally discussing issues such as school desegregation, black protest

⁶ Vernon Winslow, quoted in, Barlow, "Commercial and Noncommercial Radio," p. 218; Rick Coleman, "At 78, 'Daddy-O' Looks Back," Billboard, 17 June 1989, pp. 21, 28.

⁷ As with so much in the history of black radio, WDIA-Memphis played a key role in pioneering this common feature of the medium's programming with its "Goodwill Announcements." By the 1960s, the station was estimated to broadcast over 15,000 such announcements each year. Cantor, Wheelin' on Beale, p. 199.

⁸ Newman, Entrepreneurs of Profits and Pride, pp. 68-69; "Commercial Community Service," Sponsor, March 1948, p. 94.

strategies, and police brutality, "Brown America Speaks," as Louis Cantor has argued, was the closest that the station came to identifying itself with the civil rights question in the early 1950s.⁹

Underwriting all of these programming efforts were the advertising revenues upon which stations relied for their economic survival. Such advertising was itself an essential component of the medium's capacity to serve as a symbol of racial progress. Trade industry publications, particularly Sponsor, repeatedly urged upon broadcasters the importance of treating their African-American listeners with respect. "Selling to Negroes: Don't Talk Down," as one such article explained in July 1952, remained the cardinal rule. Although most advertisers heeded this advice, the message did not reach all. To reiterate its point, the pages of Sponsor offered numerous examples of failed advertising campaigns which, with their stereotyped portrayals of African-Americans, had fallen foul of their intended market.¹⁰

In their fear of alienating listeners, many black-oriented stations steered clear of advertisements for the kinds of sensitive cosmetics, such as hair straighteners and skin bleachers, which could be found so readily in the black press at this time. Admittedly, there were exceptions, such as at WDXB-Chattanooga, Tennessee, where deejay Ted Bryant numbered Silky Strait hairdressing among his sponsors. However, most stations adopted the opposite approach, leading Sponsor to observe in October 1949 that, "on programs aimed directly at Negro audiences by local stations there is virtually no

⁹ Cantor, Wheelin' on Beale, pp. 62-64.

As will be discussed in Chapters Three and Four, from these beginnings the talk show became an integral feature of the black radio format, and a significant mouthpiece for the articulation of African-American grievances in the 1960s.

¹⁰ "Selling to Negroes: Don't Talk Down," Sponsor, 28 July 1952, pp. 36-37, 86-87; Newman, Entrepreneurs of Profits and Pride, pp. 133-36.

advertising of hair-straightening or skin-blanching products, despite the tremendous sale of such products to Negroes."¹¹

Some advertisements were simply too crass, almost wilfully designed to alienate the African-American audience. The company that sought to promote its hair product with the slogan, "Attention Negro women! Now you can have hair that's just as attractive as that of white women," received the kind of negative response from stations that it thoroughly deserved.¹² At a deeper level, however, the reluctance to air such advertisements had more complex psychological roots. Unlike the black press, black-oriented radio often attracted a substantial number of white consumers. Not only could any listener stray upon a black station simply by turning the radio dial, but many whites, particularly the young, deliberately tuned to such stations to satisfy their penchant for black music. In such circumstances, the desire to avoid publicising African-Americans' use of such cosmetics was understandable. As Sponsor explained:

Negroes are sensitive about their use of this kind of 'beauty' aid, and while mention of skin-whiteners and hair-straighteners is all right in printed media seen only by members of the colored race, Negroes would be embarrassed to think that whites might also be listening to a radio program plugging them.¹³

¹¹ "The Negro DJ Strikes it Rich," Sponsor, 14 August 1950, p. 51; "The Forgotten 15,000,000," Sponsor, 10 October 1949, p. 54.

¹² "Selling to Negroes: Don't Talk Down," p. 37. According to the article, no station carried the advertisement.

¹³ "The Forgotten 15,000,000," p. 54.

Therefore, in both programming and advertising, the common denominator for successful black-oriented radio ventures was the recognition that stations had to treat their target audience with equality and respect. In the racial climate of the late 1940s and early 1950s, and particularly in the South, this earned radio a particular significance in the African-American community. The recollection of Memphis' civil rights veteran Ben Hooks concerning WDIA can be applied to many such stations:

For the first time in the lifetime of black Memphians we were called "Mr" or "Mrs," "doctor," "lawyer," whatever, and news - good news - was portrayed ... You could tell that the voices were Negroid ... and never in the history of Memphis had black folk ... [been so] treated to respectful treatment.¹⁴

At least one station, black-owned WERD in Atlanta, deliberately incorporated this idea into its promotional material, with a campaign that coupled an appeal to black racial pride with a sly critique of the white South's racial mores. With the aim of drawing attention to a recent ratings survey which had placed the station in joint first place in the Atlanta area, advertisements placed in the industry press in 1951 suggested that here was a genuine case of, "Separate but equal" - that famous phrase heard but seldom seen."¹⁵

However, black radio's celebration of a distinct African-American cultural identity reflected neither a moral acceptance of Jim Crow, nor an adherence to any kind of militant black separatism. On the contrary, numerous

¹⁴ Ben Hooks, interview with Stephen Walsh, 3 August 1995, University of Newcastle Upon Tyne Oral History Collection (hereafter, UNOHC).

¹⁵ Sponsor, 13 August 1951, p. 75.

observers, particularly in the South, regarded black-oriented stations (including WERD itself) as rare symbols of interracial co-operation which directly benefited the African-American community.¹⁶

For all its psychological value to black listeners, the medium's promotion of racial pride arose more from commercial rather than altruistic or political considerations. Most of the entrepreneurs, white and black, who entered into black-oriented broadcasting were more concerned with the profits to be made from the venture than in using their stations as a means of advancing the African-American race. "They don't necessarily love Negroes. They make that clear," observed WDIA's pioneering disc jockey Nat Williams of the station's owners Bert Ferguson and John Pepper in 1948.¹⁷ Also typical of this type of entrepreneur was Egmont Sonderling, who first entered into the black-oriented radio field when he changed the format of his classical music station WOPA-Oak Park, Illinois, in 1950, before proceeding to acquire a chain of similar outlets around the country. "I used to have a station I enjoyed listening to but it was going broke," recalled Sonderling later in his career. "Now I have six stations I can't listen to but I make a lot of money." Nevertheless, precisely because of the predominantly economic agenda of such owners, the majority of them were shrewd enough to realise that to fail to treat their African-American listeners with respect was to commit commercial suicide.¹⁸

¹⁶ Paul E. X. Brown, interview with Hal Lamar (n.d.), WERD Audiocassette Tape Collection, Tape 2, Atlanta-Fulton Public Library System - Research Library, Atlanta.

¹⁷ Nat Williams, quoted in, Memphis World, 23 November 1948, cited in Cantor, Wheelin' on Beale, p. 46.

¹⁸ Egmont Sonderling, quoted in, Carl Bernstein, "Washington's Soul Radio," Washington Post, 7 May 1967, Potomac Magazine, p. 25.

Ultimately, however, the economic motivations that lay behind black radio programming were probably less significant than the effects of that programming upon its black audience. With its emphasis upon black pride and self-respect, the medium became an integral factor in the rise of the "soul consciousness" identified by Mark Newman. Without necessarily seeking to channel this growing racial consciousness into civil rights protest themselves, stations undoubtedly facilitated the work of those activists who did. In this almost inadvertent way, black-oriented radio helped to promote and reinforce the psychological empowerment of the African-American community, which was a vital prerequisite for the battles to achieve social, political, and economic empowerment that lay ahead.¹⁹

III

Of the various forms of black cultural expression that were afforded widespread exposure by black-oriented radio, religion featured particularly heavily. The medium that emerged in the 1940s and 1950s, particularly in the South, owed much of its success to its ability to tap into the strength of the bonds that existed between church and congregation in many African-American communities. With most stations adopting a "bible and the blues" format, religious broadcasting - incorporating gospel music and church services - remained a cornerstone of their schedules. Even by the late 1950s and early 1960s, such programming accounted for as much as between 26 to 46 percent of the average weekly output of stations such as WERD and WAOK in

¹⁹ Newman, Entrepreneurs of Profits and Pride, p. 164; Ward and Walker, "Bringing the Races Closer?" p. 134.

Atlanta, WENN-Birmingham, and WEUP-Huntsville, Alabama.²⁰

The relationship that developed between black radio and the church was mutually advantageous. Broadcasts of Sunday services and announcements of church activities - standard programming features on most stations - attracted a substantial audience, while reaffirming the pivotal role of the black church in the spiritual and social affairs of the African-American community. Through radio, black clergymen around the country often addressed more listeners in one broadcast than would otherwise have been possible, quite literally, in a month of Sundays. By 1949, Ebony magazine, calculating that black radio preachers enjoyed an average audience of approximately 7,000,000 listeners every week, informed its readers that, "They reach more Americans of both races than any other group of Negroes in any communications medium."²¹

Audience figures for individual clergymen reiterated the point. For example, in Little Rock, Reverend T. M. Chambers' broadcasts over KXLR were heard by approximately 150,000 listeners each week. An estimated 200,000 tuned in to hear Kansas City's Reverend Singleton Robert Chambers, and 750,000 to Birmingham's Reverend John Goodgame. According to Ebony,

²⁰ See Section IV, Question 2 (a) of the following: WERD Application for Renewal of Broadcast Station License, 27 December 1957, FCC License Renewal Files, Box 121, National Archives, Suitland, Maryland (hereafter, FCC License Renewal Files); WAOK Application for Renewal of Broadcast Station License, 31 December 1960, FCC License Renewal Files, Box 135; WENN Application for Renewal of Broadcast Station License, 7 January 1961, FCC License Renewal Files, Box 121; WEUP Application for Renewal of Broadcast Station License, 30 December 1963, FCC License Renewal Files, Box 183.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to undertake a fully accurate comparative analysis of the level of religious programming on different stations due to the vagaries of the FCC's license renewal requirements at the time, which obliged broadcasters to divide their weekly schedule into the following categories: entertainment, religious, agricultural, educational, news, discussion, talk, and other. While some licensees regarded the airing of gospel music as religious broadcasting, others classified it as entertainment.

²¹ "Top Radio Ministers," Ebony, March 1949, pp. 56-61 (quote on p. 56).

the Reverend Clarence Cobb was the most popular radio minister of the day, with an audience of over 1,000,000 for his broadcasts on WIND in Chicago.²²

The widespread exposure offered to black radio preachers not only assisted them in increasing their own personal influence, it also facilitated the efforts of those ministers who took an active concern in the issue of race relations. One aspect of this trend that has been highlighted by Jenny Walker is the idea that radio broadcasts helped to lay the foundations for the mass southern black adherence to the tactic of non-violent direct action during the 1950s and 1960s.²³

At the heart of this argument lies the recognition that, while for most African-Americans the adoption of non-violence as a weapon for fighting racial injustice crucially depended on its efficacy, that tactical preference was also deeply rooted in their own religious experiences. While a select black elite was responsive to, and influenced by, Gandhian philosophies of passive resistance, traditional Christian concepts such as loving one's enemy and forgiveness played a much greater role in predisposing the mass of southern blacks towards accepting non-violent techniques.²⁴ By conveying church services, and especially sermons, to a wider audience, radio broadcasts accentuated this trend considerably. Ministers' discourses upon Christianity reached the homes of churchgoer and non-churchgoer alike. Thus, as Walker contends: "These

²² *ibid.*

²³ Jenny Walker, "Black-Oriented Radio, Non-Violent Direct Action and the Origins of the Southern Civil Rights Movement, 1940-1955," Unpublished Paper, Southern Historical Association Conference, New Orleans, 9 November 1995. A brief summary of the arguments presented in this paper is available in Ward and Walker, "Bringing the Races Closer?" pp. 134-35.

²⁴ For example, for the primary importance of the influence of the black church upon the rhetoric and philosophy of Martin Luther King, see Keith Miller, Voice of Deliverance: The Language of Martin Luther King, Jr., and its Sources (New York: The Free Press, 1992).

religious broadcasts ... fused with the African-American Christianity of the pulpits and the many other traditionally recognised sources of non-violent influence to help lay the ideological and tactical foundations for the mass southern movement of the 1950s and 1960s."²⁵

In this respect, radio preachers rendered a valuable contribution to the struggle against discrimination, even without necessarily addressing the actual issue of race. However, a significant proportion did articulate their demands for equality over the airwaves. As Ebony observed as early as 1949: "Militancy is often the theme of many Negro radio ministers who use their air time to blast racial intolerance."²⁶

For example, the Reverend Clayton Donovan Russell regularly raised the civil rights issue on his programmes aired over KFOX in Los Angeles. In one such broadcast, at the time of the Democratic Party convention in 1948, listeners to the show heard Russell insist that, "If any American walks out on civil rights, which are fundamentally human rights, there's no place in our democracy for him."²⁷ In Kansas City, Robert Chambers' outspoken denunciations of racism earned him the opprobrium of, and several threats from, sections of the local white community. In Chicago in the 1950s, regular radio exposure played a key role in the rise of at least two young ministers - the Reverends Clay Evans and Jesse Jackson - who would become major civil rights leaders in the city over the following decade.²⁸

²⁵ Walker, "Black-Oriented Radio," pp. 11-12.

²⁶ "Top Radio Ministers," p. 58.

²⁷ Clayton Donovan Russell, quoted in, *ibid.*

²⁸ *ibid.* p. 59; Norman Spaulding, "History of Black-Oriented Radio in Chicago, 1929-1963," PhD Thesis, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1981, pp. 105-108.

Perhaps of even greater significance were the opportunities for raising the race issue that were extended to radio preachers at a number of stations in the heart of the Deep South. In Atlanta, an activist minister such as Wheat Street Baptist Church's William Holmes Borders enjoyed frequent access to the airwaves throughout the 1940s. Even before he became a regular fixture on black-owned WERD following its switch to a black-oriented format in October 1949, stations WAGA and WGST had carried Borders' sermons to the Atlanta community. The minister took regular advantage of the opportunity to convey his personal protests against discrimination to a wider audience. A typical example was his "All Blood is Red" sermon, in which Borders assured his listeners that, "the rugged fact that 'All Blood is Red' blows asunder the position of racial or national superiority."²⁹

Also at WERD, the newly black-oriented station gave weekly air-time to the services held by Reverend Bearden, direct from his pastorate at Big Bethel Baptist Church on Auburn Avenue. A popular radio preacher, Bearden attracted considerable attention with his sermons, many of which were notable for his outspoken attacks against racism and the vehemence of his criticism of Georgia's white power structure. However, not all of the attention was favourable. On at least one occasion, following a particularly forthright censure of arch-segregationist Governor Marvin Griffin, Bearden's sermon provoked a visit to the station by two Georgia state troopers, who unsuccessfully demanded a tape recording of the broadcast.³⁰

In Montgomery, Alabama, the recently arrived Martin Luther King wasted little time in gaining access to the black radio audience following his

²⁹ Ward and Walker, "Bringing the Races Closer?" pp. 134-35; William Holmes Borders, "All Blood Is Red," in Seven Minutes at the 'Mike' in the Deep South, cited in *ibid.*, p. 135.

³⁰ Paul E. X. Brown, interview with Stephen Walsh, 16 March 1995, UNOHC.

appointment as pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in the summer of 1954. For at least one local Alabamian, King's radio preaching was a significant factor in accelerating a growing interest in the issue of civil rights. John Lewis, later to become the head of SNCC, recalled how radio gave him his first exposure to the name, and philosophies, of Martin Luther King: "I'd heard Dr. King even before the Montgomery Bus Boycott. There's a local radio station in Montgomery ... a soul station ... and Dr. King had a sermon. It was called 'Paul's Letter to the American Christians,' and some of the things he said sorta stuck with me."³¹

The text of that sermon, as preserved in King's Strength to Love, illustrates exactly why a listener such as Lewis would have found the broadcast so memorable. Taking the form of an imaginary letter from the Apostle Paul, in which he meditates upon contemporary America, King brought to bear the full weight of his moral opposition to racial discrimination:

So, Americans, I must urge you to be rid of every aspect of segregation. Segregation is a blatant denial of the unity which we have in Christ ... It scars the soul and degrades the personality. It inflicts the segregated with a false sense of inferiority, while confirming the segregator in a false estimate of his own superiority. It destroys community and makes brotherhood impossible. The underlying philosophy of Christianity is diametrically opposed to the underlying

³¹ John Lewis, quoted in, Howell Raines, My Soul Is Rested: Movement Days in the Deep South Remembered (1977; rpt. New York: Penguin, 1983), p. 73.

Montgomery's black-oriented station of the time was WRMA, which had been on the air since 1952. A profile of the station in the December 1953 edition of Color magazine suggested that it was one of the leading forces for progress in the local black community. "Station WRMA Spurs New Life in Ole Confederacy," Color, December 1953, p. 49.

philosophy of racial segregation.³²

From this early foray into the realm of black-oriented broadcasting, King embarked upon a relationship with the medium which would continue to strengthen alongside his growing involvement with the civil rights movement over the ensuing years.³³

The rise of the black radio preacher had significant implications for the freedom struggle in the United States. In purely numerical terms, the audience figures earned by many of them offered tremendous possibilities for the dissemination of an "engaged" message. For those ministers infused with a sufficient degree of social activism, black radio provided them with an opportunity to address African-American listeners on a scale that otherwise would simply not have been possible. This was especially noteworthy given the post-war decline in black church attendance - especially among the young who would be in the vanguard of the Movement as it reached its zenith. In this way, the mass medium of black radio crucially augmented the mass meeting of the black congregation.³⁴

Furthermore, due to the popularity of the medium, radio helped those black clergymen who appeared on air to increase their own influence as religious and community leaders. In some cases, this enhanced reputation, earned through radio preaching, was one important element in the combination

³² Martin Luther King, Jr., "Paul's Letter to American Christians," in Strength To Love, 17th ed. (New York, 1963; rpt. Glasgow: Fount, 1986), p. 142.

With the fluidity with which the African-American church tradition, including King, adapted and modified sermons, there is no absolute guarantee that the version of this speech that was heard by Lewis is exactly the same as the one that made it into print. Nevertheless, Lewis' testimony concerning the content of the sermon, and its impact upon him, suggests that any differences were not substantial.

³³ See Chapters Three and Four.

³⁴ Ward, "Race Relations," pp. 224-28.

of factors that helped to propel several ministers towards the forefront of local civil rights battles. Certainly, this appears to have been the case in Chicago, where, as historian Norman Spaulding has suggested, radio preachers were in the vanguard of protest leadership in the city. According to Spaulding, Chicago's movement was, "spearheaded by young pastors who gained their popularity from radio broadcasts ... The young Black radio preachers of the 1940s to the 1960s were the most radical and consistent protesters against civil and political injustices."³⁵

Similarly, the experience of hearing Martin Luther King preach over Montgomery's black-oriented station ensured that, once the local black population came into dispute with the city's bus company in December 1955, listeners such as John Lewis were naturally inclined to look towards King as a civil rights advocate. "I'd never heard anything about him [before the radio broadcast]," explained Lewis. "Now this was *before* - before the Montgomery Bus Boycott - when he first came to Montgomery and they would have different ministers preaching. And when he emerged during the bus boycott, I took some particular note."³⁶

Admittedly, it would be erroneous to isolate the role of black radio as the sole causal factor in the emergence of any civil rights leader. On the contrary, a whole host of personal and public factors were frequently

³⁵ Spaulding, "History of Black-Oriented Radio in Chicago," pp. 169, 181.

³⁶ John Lewis, quoted in, Raines, My Soul is Rested, p. 73.

involved.³⁷ Similarly, in no way should it be assumed that all religious broadcasts aired over black-oriented radio carried a political dimension. Just as not all African-American religious leaders became involved in the civil rights struggle, nor did every black radio preacher take to the airwaves as a means of directing or promoting the fight against discrimination. Nevertheless, the significance of black radio's contribution in this respect should not be underestimated. For a preacher with a reputation as a "race" man, the medium offered one of the most effective means of extending that reputation beyond his own congregation and into the black community at large.

Particularly in the first decade after the end of the Second World War, the provision of air-time to an activist radio minister frequently marked the first real association of a black-oriented radio station with the civil rights issue. Such involvement was characterised by its essentially supportive nature. In other words, religious broadcasts offered an effective vehicle for conveying a particular message, but the initiative and responsibility for creating that message remained with the individual clergyman.

To be sure, it was a rare radio station owner who consciously gave air-time to a preacher who held wildly conflicting opinions, particularly on the sensitive issue of race, to his or her own. Equally uncommon, however, was the

³⁷ In King's case, for example, the presidency of the Montgomery Improvement Association was virtually thrust upon him, with his nomination by parishioner Rufus Lewis taking the minister completely by surprise. Among the numerous explanations for King's emergence as leader of the Montgomery movement that have been suggested include: the preacher's oratorical skills; the timidity of the rest of the city's black clergy; the fact that King had not been in Montgomery long enough to become embroiled in the factious disputes of the city's black civic leadership; and even the convenience of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church's downtown location. See Adam Fairclough, To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987), pp. 17, 26-27; David Garrow, Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (1986; rpt. New York: Random House 1988), pp. 20-23; E. D. Nixon, quoted in, Raines, My Soul is Rested, p. 38.

broadcaster who, having arranged to carry a church service, could truly dictate the contents of a minister's sermon to his congregation. Unlike the disc jockey, most radio preachers were not employed by the station on which they appeared, and were certainly not reliant upon broadcasting for their livelihood. Indeed, a number of stations required them to pay for their air-time.³⁸ Whether buying an airway to Heaven, or using a station's facilities free of charge, radio preachers enjoyed a degree of autonomy that rendered them more at liberty than most to be outspoken over the air.

IV

Through both its psychological impact upon African-American listeners, and the exposure it afforded to religious leaders, black-oriented radio's contribution towards the embryonic civil rights movement was either largely accidental or, at best, indirect. However, the decade after the war also marked the beginning of a more overt relationship between the medium and the freedom struggle, with a small, but increasing, number of stations offering air-time to organisations which were directly involved in fighting racial discrimination. Such a relationship was still essentially supportive in nature, in that the stations rarely sought to assume responsibility for active community mobilisation themselves. Rather, they placed their facilities at the disposal of established civil rights agencies.

In the decade after the war, the NAACP led the way in both agitating for civil rights, and in carrying that campaign over the airwaves. Although the

³⁸ At WUST in Washington, D.C., for example, Sunday preachers were the only group who were required to purchase their time on air. The rationale for this policy was based upon the fact that these programmes were by far the most popular of the station's weekly schedule, and thus the greatest source of potential revenue. Perry Walders, interview with Stephen Walsh, 28 January 1995, UNOHC.

Association had long taken an interest in the broadcasting industry, it was not until the end of the Second World War that its national office began to formulate strategies to utilise the medium on a large-scale and co-ordinated basis.³⁹ In September 1945, an influential report circulated by the Association's Publicity Committee reviewed the effectiveness of the organisation's public relations activities, and made several recommendations for future improvement. At the top of the list of priorities, the report insisted that the NAACP had to increase its radio output:

It is a crying shame that the leading organization fighting for Negro rights is so far behind the times in this respect ...

To do less than these things which we have suggested, especially the buying of radio time and the competent preparation of radio scripts, is to neglect our opportunities completely. It means we are plodding along at a horse and buggy pace in an airplane age so far as publicity techniques are concerned.⁴⁰

Spurred by the deficiencies highlighted in the report, a committee consisting of the Association's executive secretary Walter White and president Arthur Spingarn was rapidly established to examine the most effective ways of

³⁹ Among its earlier attempts to utilise radio, the Association prepared numerous spot announcements to publicise its national membership drives during the war. See, for example, "For Radio Release," 24 April 1944, NAACP Papers, II-A-156.

⁴⁰ NAACP Publicity Committee, "Recommendations for Improving the Publicity and Public Relations Work of the NAACP," (n.d.), pp. 2, 7-8, NAACP Papers, II-A-129.

increasing the NAACP's deployment of radio.⁴¹ It must be emphasised that many of the tactics subsequently adopted were directed towards the general, rather than the specifically black-oriented, radio industry. Thus, for example, a radio conference staged in December 1946 under the auspices of the public relations department gathered representatives from a broad umbrella of civic, religious, and labour organisations to discuss plans for a network show that could reach, "'those listeners not already convinced' on minority problems."⁴² A similar meeting 15 months later discussed how racially stereotyped programming should be attacked, and how, at a local level, individual radio stations could be encouraged to support the membership drives of NAACP branches.⁴³

In order to reach the widest possible audience, strenuous efforts were made to secure network radio coverage of major events such as the Association's annual conventions. On particularly prestigious occasions, such as the address made by President Truman at the conclusion of the 38th convention in June 1947, the Association mobilised the full weight of its organisational strength to co-ordinate special "listening-in" meetings around the country. With Truman's speech conveyed over all four networks and numerous independent stations, a total of 125 of these special gatherings heard the President proclaim

⁴¹ "Memorandum Re Action of the Committee on Administration on the Recommendations from the Publicity Committee for Improving the Publicity and Public Relations Work of the NAACP - September 24, 1945," 27 September 1945, NAACP Papers, II-A-129.

⁴² Hope Spingarn, memorandum to Walter White, 12 November 1946, NAACP Papers, II-A-157. See also Hope Spingarn, memorandum to Walter White, 10 December 1946, NAACP Papers, II-A-128.

⁴³ "Summary of Meeting with Radio Group," 16 March 1948, NAACP Papers, II-A-128.

that, "There is no justifiable reason for discrimination because of ancestry, or religion, or race, or color."⁴⁴

Drama shows produced under the auspices of the Association provided a less formal, but equally effective, means of getting the NAACP's message to a network audience. Some programmes, such as "The Trial of Sergeant Dunbar" - a play by Alvin Yudkoff dramatising the black experience in the Korean War - proved to be great successes. After the production was aired over the NBC network on 10 February 1951, the Association's national office in New York was inundated with letters from listeners, many in the South, requesting transcripts of the play and other NAACP literature. Listeners' comments readily testified to the effectiveness of such shows as a propaganda technique. Not uncommon was Sidney Philips from Chicago, who enthused how, "So long as we can hurl something as strong and electrifying as that program against the stubborn wall of discrimination it is bound to break."⁴⁵

Within this pattern of increased radio production, one of the developments which was of particular significance to the NAACP was the relationship that its head office cultivated with black-oriented WLIB in New York. Indeed, the association between the two was arguably the most outstanding example of consistent collaboration between the medium of black radio and the nascent civil rights struggle.

⁴⁴ Press Release, 20 June 1947, p. 2, NAACP Papers, II-A-33; President Harry Truman, quoted in, Washington Evening Star, 30 June 1947, p. A5.

⁴⁵ Sidney Philips, letter to NAACP, 12 February 1950 [the letter is incorrectly dated as the show was actually aired in 1951], NAACP Papers, II-A-159. In the same file can be found much of the favourable correspondence concerning the play that the NAACP received. Among the letters which demonstrate the extent of the show's penetration into the South include ones addressed from locations such as Baton Rouge and New Orleans in Louisiana; Knoxville and Maryville in Tennessee; Clinton and Winston-Salem in North Carolina; Charleston, South Carolina; Salem, Virginia; and Atlanta, Georgia.

For most of the 1940s, WLIB's black-oriented programming remained modest, limited to occasional musical offerings such as "The Negro Sings."⁴⁶ Not until its owner Dorothy Thackrey (also proprietor of the New York Post) sold the station for \$150,000 in 1949 did WLIB undertake a concerted effort to appeal to New York's African-American population.⁴⁷ Within a year, the new owners - a group headed by brothers Harry and Morris Novik - opened new studios in the Hotel Theresa, situated in the heart of Harlem. The move not only symbolised the new programming direction that WLIB was taking, but also firmly established the station as a visible, as well as audible, institution in the lives of thousands of Harlemites.⁴⁸

While an increase in black-oriented musical programming was the most obvious manifestation of WLIB's changing format, news and public service activities also featured prominently in the station's attempt to endear itself to its African-American audience. The NAACP was only one among many organisations which benefited from the resultant publicity - but it was one of the chief recipients. For example, news broadcasts kept listeners continually

⁴⁶ WLIB Application for Renewal of Broadcast Station License, 5 March 1948, Exhibit IV, FCC License Renewal Files, Box 207.

⁴⁷ The basic cost of the sale was subject to increase or decrease according to the final value of the station's net current assets. WLIB Application for Consent to Assignment of Radio Broadcast Station Construction Permit or License, 21 June 1949, Part 1, Question 11 (c), FCC License Renewal Files, Box 207.

⁴⁸ Roy Wilkins, "WLIB - tape for April 29, 1950," NAACP Papers, II-A-564; "Penetrating the Barriers of Harlem's Ghetto," Broadcasting, 22 May 1967, p. 87.

In gradually transforming from an ethnic-appeal to a specifically black-oriented station, WLIB followed a definite pattern, common to many urban, northern black-oriented stations of that era. Newman, Entrepreneurs of Profits and Pride, pp. 85-87. However, despite adopting an overwhelmingly black-oriented format, WLIB did not entirely abandon its other ethnic listeners. As late as 1969, foreign language programming still accounted for approximately ten percent of the station's broadcast time. WLIB Application for Renewal of Broadcast Station License, 27 February 1969, Exhibit A, p. 13, FCC License Renewal Files, Box 9.

abreast of the latest NAACP activity around the country. Typical of such shows was "You and the News," a weekly round-up presented by Estelle Sternberger that had been a mainstay of the station's programme schedule since before the take-over. By the early 1950s, Sternberger frequently devoted her discussions to the issue of race relations, often paying particular attention to the NAACP's school desegregation campaign.⁴⁹

In addition, WLIB could be relied upon to undertake a concerted effort to promote special events staged by the NAACP. For example, when the Association hosted a major fund-raising benefit in New York - such as the "NAACP Great Night" celebrity gala inaugurated in 1952 - the station not only co-operated closely in offering advance publicity, but also provided extensive coverage of the event itself. Similarly, at least by the time of its assembly in 1953, the Association's annual conventions were afforded widespread exposure by the station. Daily reports combined news summaries with excerpts from the most notable speeches, thereby enabling listeners in New York to remain continually apprised of events that were unfurling at the convention site in St. Louis.⁵⁰

WLIB also offered considerable assistance to the NAACP in its membership drives. For example, on 17 May 1955, the station celebrated the first anniversary of the Supreme Court's *Brown* school desegregation ruling by staging its own recruitment campaign. Throughout the day, appeals broadcast by the likes of Eleanor Roosevelt, Channing Tobias, Lena Horne and Thurgood

⁴⁹ See, for example, Estelle Sternberger, "WLIB - You and the News," 10 February 1952, and 11 May 1953, both in NAACP Papers, II-A-158.

⁵⁰ Henry Lee Moon, letter to Harry Novik, 27 February 1953, NAACP Papers, II-A-544; Estelle Sternberger, "WLIB - You and the News," 15 June 1953, NAACP Papers, II-A-158.

Marshall extolled the virtues of the NAACP, while listeners were repeatedly urged to contact the station to register their membership.⁵¹

Experience quickly demonstrated to NAACP activists the value of the service rendered by WLIB. The medium's popularity and daily penetration into New York's black community ensured that it remained one of the most effective, and in some cases the only, means of addressing a significant number of Harlemites. Certainly, the Association's publicity director, Henry Lee Moon, readily acknowledged this fact. "It was most generous of station WLIB to grant us weekly time during the month of February," Moon wrote appreciatively to Harry Novik after the station's assistance in a 1953 membership drive. "This enabled us to get the NAACP message to thousands of your listeners many of whom we may have otherwise been unable to reach."⁵²

The following year, the Association expressed its appreciation more formally with the presentation of a special award to Novik. The citation specifically drew attention to WLIB's, "development of interracial understanding," as well as its, "consistent support of the program of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People through generous reporting of the Association's activities."⁵³ As the first ever such honour bestowed upon a radio station, the award reflected, not only the significance of WLIB's public service, but also the unique relationship that had emerged between the NAACP and Harlem's black-oriented radio station.⁵⁴

⁵¹ WLIB Application for Renewal of Broadcast Station License, 25 February 1957, Exhibit 5, FCC License Renewal Files, Box 157.

⁵² Moon, letter to Novik, 27 February 1953.

⁵³ "Scroll," 24 February 1954, NAACP Papers, II-A-544.

⁵⁴ Pittsburgh Courier, 27 March 1954, clipping in NAACP Papers, II-A-544.

By this stage, WLIB's reputation for community involvement earned national, as well as local, recognition. Variety magazine led the way with a glowing tribute published in April 1954. Describing the station's, "deep-seated sense of community conscience and responsibility," the article was full of praise for the way in which this had:

projected WLIB into the role of a leading and influential member of New York's Negro community. The station has taken the lead in initiating and participating in Harlem projects - civic, charitable, public service, welfare and religious. Without cynicism or hypocrisy it has made itself an integral part of the Negro community.⁵⁵

The kinds of public service activity outlined here were characterised by their essentially ad hoc nature, with the station making its facilities available to the Association whenever the need arose. However, in June 1952 the relationship between the two was formalised with the inauguration of the NAACP's own weekly programme. Significantly, the prime movers behind the idea were the Novik brothers - an indication of their genuine interest in the civil rights issue. "Just carrying music, even if it's good music, is not enough," explained Harry Novik to Walter White in January 1951. "We would like to have a weekly forum program, and the NAACP is number one on our list!" Novik's brother Morris, a personal friend of White's for over twenty years, played a key role in convincing the NAACP's executive secretary that the idea was a worthy one.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ "Responsibility to Community," Variety, 21 April 1954, clipping in NAACP Papers, II-A-544.

⁵⁶ Harry Novik, letter to Walter White, 10 January 1951, NAACP Papers, II-A-157; Walter White, letter to Eugene Martin, 3 June 1952, NAACP Papers, II-A-544.

After some delay, "The Walter White Show" finally debuted on 2 June 1952. Until the time of White's death in 1955, the 15-minute programme remained a regular feature of WLIB's schedule. Each week, White took to the airwaves to offer his own analysis of current affairs, as well as to discuss the issue of human rights with a prominent guest. With a wide agenda, White often used the show as a means of raising awareness of civil rights violations throughout the world, including the Soviet Union, South Africa, and Asia. Inevitably, however, the primary focus was firmly set upon racial problems in the United States. Indeed, the list of guests who participated in the show often read like a veritable "Who's Who" of the civil rights struggle of that time, including such notable spokespersons as A. Philip Randolph, Eleanor Roosevelt, Chester Bowles, Clarence Mitchell, and Ralph Bunche.⁵⁷

Given the programme's host, and the era in which he appeared on air, it is no surprise that one of the most recurrent themes of "The Walter White Show" was that of school desegregation. White's tenure at WLIB coincided propitiously with the climax of the NAACP's lengthy legal battle against segregated education, with the first hearings in the *Brown* case taking place before the Supreme Court only six months after the show commenced. Within this context, White's broadcasts essentially served a dual function. On a purely educational level, they kept listeners informed of the progress of the case. However, perhaps more importantly, they were also deliberately used to cultivate a favourable climate of public opinion for the issue of desegregation, by discussing the case in strongly moral terms, and by projecting an air of inevitability about a successful outcome. In this way, the show rapidly became

⁵⁷ Transcripts of various episodes of "The Walter White Show," as well as a list of "Persons Who have Appeared on the Walter White Show - WLIB and Affiliated Stations 1952-1954" (n.d.), can be found in NAACP Papers, II-A-545.

an effective means of broadcasting propaganda disguised - at least superficially - as objective news reports and interviews.

A particularly revealing example was provided in the broadcast of 10 December 1953, which reviewed the four days of testimony in the *Brown* case that had just been presented to the Supreme Court. Although White analysed the arguments advanced by both sides, his careful choice of vocabulary deliberately left little scope for impartiality. Thus, the "shocking statement[s]" and "questionable taste" of the segregationists stood in stark contrast to the "immense amount of preparation" and "unequivocal argument" of NAACP counsel Thurgood Marshall and his colleagues. Likewise, the contention that the passage of time had legitimised the concept of "separate but equal" was rebutted in the clearest of terms, dismissed as, "the same to say that because a man has been suffering from tuberculosis or cancer for many years nothing should be done to rid him of those maladies."⁵⁸

Many of the interviews conducted by White on his show were of a similar nature. Discussions with guests such as Judge Delaney of the Domestic Relations Court of New York, and education expert Dr. Fredric Wertham were little more than an opportunity to lend another authoritative voice to the NAACP's crusade. Certainly, by the time of the *Brown* ruling in May 1954, regular listeners to "The Walter White Show" were well acquainted with the whole gamut of the Association's moral, psychological, educational, economic and constitutional justifications for ending segregation in public schools.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Walter White, "WLIB News," 10 December 1953, NAACP Papers, II-A-545.

⁵⁹ "Walter White Judge Delaney Interview," 5 December 1952, NAACP Papers, II-A-544; "Broadcast with Dr. Fredric Wertham," 2 May [no year], and "Transcript of Walter White - Channing H. Tobias Interview," 7 February 1953, both in NAACP Papers, II-A-545.

A key aspect of White's attempt to use his air-time to promote favourable public opinion towards school desegregation was his insistence that the measure was not only just, but inevitable. A recurrent theme of the show was the assertion that most white southerners already accepted desegregation as a virtual *fait accompli*. In particular, White and his guests went to considerable lengths to play down the suggestion that a favourable Supreme Court ruling would be met with violent resistance. As White explained in one such broadcast in December 1952:

It looks as though all except the professional peddlers of prejudice are conditioning themselves to a Supreme Court decision abolishing segregation. This is not to say that there will be no protests nor utilization of every possible means of postponing the inevitable. But there does seem to be a growing willingness of enlightened Southerners of both races to accept peacefully the inevitable democratization of public education.⁶⁰

In many ways, "The Walter White Show" was a landmark in the relationship between one particular black-oriented radio station and the African-American freedom struggle. However, the programme also established an important precedent of a major civil rights organisation creating its own long-standing, regular radio show for national syndication. From the outset,

⁶⁰ Walter White, "News WLIB and Affiliated Stations," 18 December 1952, NAACP Papers, II-A-545.

A similar viewpoint was articulated by many of White's guests. Channing Tobias, for example, expressed his belief that, "Nothing would happen if the Supreme Court were to open the public schools to all of the children of the South," while Judge Delaney asserted that, "I don't believe anything more is going to happen than when they ordered graduate students admitted to the Universities of Texas, Oklahoma, West Virginia and other places." "Transcript of Walter White - Channing H. Tobias Interview"; "Walter White Judge Delaney Interview."

and with the full co-operation of WLIB, the aim was to broadcast the show over as many stations around the country that would accept it.

Although many of the stations that aired the series were in locations with a sizeable African-American population, White never intended to limit syndication solely to black-oriented outlets. Indeed, he openly objected to advertisements which suggested that this was the programme's expressed purpose, on the grounds that they unnecessarily risked alienating white listeners who might otherwise have tuned in.⁶¹

Certainly, there was much to commend such an open policy. In one respect, any source of publicity was a useful one, and the NAACP undoubtedly had a vested interest in getting its message of racial equality to as many white, as well as black, Americans as possible. On the other hand, this resulted in the show often being broadcast over general-market stations with the kind of audience where many listeners did not have an inherent interest in the civil rights issue. Consequently, the public response was frequently disappointing. On more than one occasion, White was forced to write to local NAACP branches in cities where the programme was aired in an attempt to generate more publicity and higher audience ratings.⁶²

Despite failing to garner the kind of listenership levels that had been anticipated, the significance of the syndication of "The Walter White Show" should not be underestimated. In the absence of a regular schedule on any of the major networks, the programme still provided the NAACP with a systematic opportunity to be heard in numerous key metropolitan areas. For example, in addition to WLIB-New York, the inaugural broadcast of 2 June

⁶¹ Walter White, letter to Morris Novik, 11 June 1952, NAACP Papers, II-A-544.

⁶² See, for example, Walter White, letter to Lionel Lindsay, 20 February 1953 and letter to Clarence Mitchell, 20 February 1953, both in NAACP Papers, II-A-544.

1952 was also heard in Chicago (over WCHL), Washington, D.C. (WWDC), and Boston (WBMS). By August, the list had extended to include Los Angeles (KFWB), Philadelphia (WIP), and St. Louis (KWK).⁶³ Furthermore, White's lengthy association with the show clearly testified to his own belief in its value as an educational and promotional tool. Finally, as an innovation in publicising the latest news and the rhetoric of the freedom struggle, the programme created a model - albeit one which was modified to target specifically black-oriented stations - that was subsequently adopted by other civil rights organisations in the 1960s.⁶⁴

V

Although "The Walter White Show" was the most notable example of collaboration between civil rights activists and black-oriented radio in the decade after the Second World War, it merely reflected a trend that was already emerging at a local level. For example, in several cities, individual chapters of the NAACP secured air-time on their local station, whether it be on an ad hoc or more regular, often weekly, basis. In Philadelphia, WHAT's relationship with the local branch of the Association began as early as 1946, when it was the only radio station in the city to afford air-time to the organisation's annual membership drive. As the station's black-oriented programming increased under the management of William and Dolly Banks, its ties with the NAACP strengthened. By 1952, with its own discussion shows such as "NAACP Forum," the Association enjoyed regular and widespread access to Philadelphia's African-American community. The same was true in

⁶³ White, letter to Martin, 3 June 1952; Sylvia [surname illegible], letter to Mrs. Freeman [no first name given], 27 June 1952, NAACP Papers, II-A-544.

⁶⁴ See Chapters Three and Four.

Cincinnati, where the city's new black-oriented station, WCIN, inaugurated a weekly series in conjunction with the local NAACP late in 1953. Meanwhile at KGFI-Los Angeles, (white) disc jockey Hunter Hancock's services to the cause earned him a special NAACP Merit Award.⁶⁵

In New York, the NAACP found a willing ally in Alma Vessels John at WWRL. Having first been given air-time by the NBC network in 1946 in her capacity as the executive secretary of the National Association of Colored Graduate Nurses, John finally secured her own regular programme on WWRL in 1952. "Alma John Homemaker's Club" was the real launchpad for a broadcasting career that spanned several decades, and firmly established its presenter as a cherished figure to thousands of black New Yorkers. The show constituted WWRL's attempt to appeal to a daytime, female audience, with a mixture of household hints, special guests, and discussion of social and community affairs. Among the latter, the activities of the NAACP featured regularly - as the Association's publicity director gratefully acknowledged.⁶⁶

Although the NAACP was perhaps the most conspicuous example of a civil rights organisation that increasingly sought to use the airwaves as a weapon in the fight against prejudice, it was certainly not unique. For example, several chapters of the Urban League gained access to the facilities of a local station. Although not a specifically black-oriented outlet, KWK- St. Louis, Missouri, made time available for the local branch of the League to present its own "Let's Talk it Over" show. In one such broadcast in December 1946,

⁶⁵ FCC, "Decision," 28 September 1949, p.18, FCC License Renewal Files, Box 165; WHAT Application for Renewal of Broadcast Station License, 3 November 1952, Exhibit 4, FCC License Renewal Files, Box 125; Donald Jones, letter to Gloster Current, 29 October 1953, NAACP Papers, II-A-158; "Negro Radio's Talent," *Sponsor*, 20 September 1954, p. 137.

⁶⁶ "The World of Alma John," (n.d.), Alma John Papers, Box 1, Folder 1, Archive Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York; Henry Lee Moon, letter to Alma Vessels John, 23 September 1953, NAACP Papers, II-A-158.

listeners heard J. Hutton Hyde (the League's public relations committee chairman), insist that America shoulder its responsibility for the legacies of slavery. Calling for increased U.S. aid to Africa, Hyde explained his position:

it is my impression that the story of our dealings with Africa is such a record of guilt on our part that we can never make full atonement for the wrongs we have done. Partial atonement is always possible, however - as by partial restitution. Penitence and tears and regrets are of no avail if possible restitutions are never made.⁶⁷

The following year, the Minneapolis Urban League was just one of several civic agencies that co-operated in the production of the "Neither Free Nor Equal" series broadcast by the city's CBS affiliate, WCCO.⁶⁸ Written by Ralph Andrist and Ralph Backlund, the six shows attracted considerable local, national, and even international interest due to the ferocity of their assault upon discrimination against all racial and ethnic minorities in the North-West. Among the show's many admirers was Carl Murphy, president of the Afro-American newspapers, who enthused: "I have just read the June 25 script, 'Neither Free Nor Equal', and had to take time from my dictation to read also the July 2 script. I haven't seen anything like them. You deserve the commendation of minority groups everywhere."⁶⁹

⁶⁷ J. Hutton Hyde, "Let's Talk it Over," 1 December 1946, p. 3, NAACP Papers, II-A-157.

⁶⁸ The other participating organisations were the Governor's Interracial Commission, the Minneapolis Community Self-Survey, the Minnesota Jewish Council, the St. Paul Council of Human Relations, the Minneapolis Mayor's Council on Human Relations, and the National Conference of Christians and Jews. WCCO, "Neither Free Nor Equal," promotional booklet (n.d.), NAACP Papers, II-A-160.

⁶⁹ "Press Comment," in, *ibid.*, pp. 1-5 (Murphy quote on p. 4).

Similar projects were undertaken by organisations such as the Society for Ethical Culture in the City of New York, which, working in conjunction with the NAACP, inaugurated its "Equal Justice Under Law" discussion show over WMCA-New York in late 1951. "Good Human Relations," prepared by the National Conference of Christians and Jews, chronicled the efforts of a wide variety of agencies that were active in the field of race relations, including the NAACP, NUL, American Federation of Labor (AFL) and Congress of Industrial Organisations (CIO). Unusually, the syndicated show was heard in 22 states and the District of Columbia, including outlets in such southern cities as Birmingham, Atlanta, New Orleans, Charlotte, and Memphis.⁷⁰

More frequently, the catchment area for the vast majority of these programmes was confined to the North and the West Coast. Despite his best efforts, Walter White, for example, never managed to secure an outlet for his programme in the South. Negotiations were entered into with Jesse Blayton, proprietor of WERD-Atlanta, but White failed to convince Blayton to carry the show free of charge as a "sustaining" feature once hoped-for sponsorship from the Atlanta Life Insurance Company failed to materialise.⁷¹

⁷⁰ Algernon Black, letter to Henry Lee Moon, 6 November 1951, NAACP Papers, II-A-158; National Conference of Christians and Jews, "Participating Organizations in Radio Series on Good Human Relations, 1950-1951," and "Stations Carrying Good Human Relations Series, 1950-1951," both attached to, Everett Clinchy, letter to Walter White, 1 March 1951, NAACP Papers, II-A-157.

⁷¹ Morris Novik, letter to Jesse Blayton, 18 June 1952, NAACP Papers, II-A-544.

Although it is impossible to state with certainty Blayton's motives for this decision, the evidence strongly suggests that it arose more from a reluctance to incur the costs of broadcasting the show rather than from a fear of associating his station with the issue of civil rights. As will be discussed later, Blayton had already made WERD's facilities available to the local chapter of the NAACP by this stage, even to the extent of employing the head of the Georgia State branch to serve as the station's news analyst.

If Blayton's actions reflected his primarily economic agenda, the more general failure to secure coverage for the weekly NAACP show was indicative of a widespread reluctance on the part of broadcasters in the South to become embroiled in the sensitive issue of race. Even those who evinced an interest in catering to African-American listeners usually fought well shy of addressing the question of civil rights. For example, when South Carolina businessman J. Edward Reynolds established WEDR in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1949, he was quick to declare his intention, "to stay completely out of politics." Similarly, in January 1953, at the request of the local black Howard High School, Frank Hubbs of WDOD-Chattanooga, Tennessee, invited Walter White to provide a speech for broadcast. However, the generous promise that the NAACP's executive secretary could discuss, "any subject you wish," was tempered by one, somewhat restrictive, caveat: namely, that he could not speak of, "intolerance, religious strife, or racial prejudice."⁷²

The reluctance of many broadcasters in the South to be identified with the freedom struggle arose from a combination of personal and external factors. To a large extent, civil rights was simply not a part of the agenda. Entrepreneurs, white and black, who entered into black radio did so as a business venture, not as a personal crusade to advance the cause of African-American equality. Consequently, they were unlikely to risk public censure, and possibly personal harm, by flaunting the racial mores of the white South. Admittedly, there were always some members of the white community for whom the mere concept of African-Americans being provided with access to the airwaves was sufficient to arouse their ire. Thus, WEDR's broadcasting tower was vandalised two weeks before the station signed on air. At WDIA, the first black-oriented show attracted several bomb threats and numerous

⁷² J. Edward Reynolds, quoted in, "Dream Radio Station," Newsweek, 12 September 1949, rpt. in Negro Digest, January 1950, p. 24; Frank Hubbs, letter to Walter White, 26 January 1953, NAACP Papers, II-A-158.

complaints - although not on the scale that the station's staff had initially feared - and disc jockey Nat Williams continued to be a target of hate mail from certain quarters. However, such overt acts of resistance remained exceptions to the general rule of peaceful acceptance of the emergence of black radio, so long as it was perceived to be an entertainment, and not a political, medium.⁷³

The mere threat of reprisals was usually sufficient to dissuade southern broadcasters, even if they had been so inclined, from using their facilities as a vehicle for the discussion of race relations. At station WDSU-New Orleans, for example, the management expressed its support for Morris Novik's suggestion of a weekly round-up of developments in Washington that directly affected African-Americans, but declined to air the show. "While the station's views may be in accord with those expressed in those interviews, " explained WDSU's William Ellwell, "the subject of the Fair Employment Practice law and segregation is so controversial, even in New Orleans, that we feel that the issues created by broadcasting such a program would arouse antagonism."⁷⁴

However, even despite the general belief that the issue of race relations was one that was better left untouched, a handful of broadcasters in the South were at least prepared to risk granting civil rights organisations the use of their facilities. Such was the case in Columbia, South Carolina, where station WCSC co-operated with the local black YWCA in 1953 to air a series of shows that were designed to prepare the South for school desegregation.⁷⁵

Unlike Columbia, most other instances of "engaged" broadcasting tended to occur in those pockets of the South which, if hardly bastions of racial

⁷³ "Dream Radio Station," p. 23; Cantor, Wheelin' on Beale, pp. 48-9, 62-4; Barlow, "Commercial and Noncommercial Radio," p. 212.

⁷⁴ William Ellwell, letter to Morris Novik, 29 April 1952, NAACP Papers, II-A-159.

⁷⁵ Ward and Walker, "Bringing the Races Closer?" p. 137.

liberalism, at least enjoyed a more progressive reputation than much of the region. One of the most interesting examples in this respect was the situation in Atlanta, the self-professed city that was "too busy to hate." Here, the situation was somewhat unusual due to the existence of WERD, the first black-owned radio station in the country following its purchase by Jesse Blayton in 1949. As several commentators have observed, Blayton's career was based upon a complex interaction of self-interest and racial pride, with the latter subordinate to, but never fully consumed by, the former. Georgia's first African-American certified public accountant, and a successful entrepreneur, Blayton was representative of the type of influential southern black businessman who, while by no means supporting Jim Crow, was reluctant to jeopardise the gains that he had made by spearheading the fight against it.⁷⁶

Nevertheless, even if Blayton himself was rarely in the vanguard of Atlanta's freedom struggle, it is undoubtedly true that, from the outset, WERD was readily available to civil rights advocates. Shortly after the take-over, Blayton employed Dr. William Boyd, head of the Political Science Department at Atlanta University and president of the Georgia State branch of the NAACP, as the station's news analyst. From 1950 until shortly before his untimely death from leukaemia in 1956, Boyd took to the airwaves three times a week, often

⁷⁶ Brian Ward, for example, argues that Blayton was in many ways a classic entrepreneur who, while never averse to assisting the freedom struggle when he could, would not do so at the expense of his own economic interests. Writing of both Blayton and African-American entrepreneurs more generally, Ward discerns, "an understandable caution on matters of civil rights activism on the part of the black professional and entrepreneurial elite. While generally sympathetic to the call of race advancement, they feared that untoward agitation would bring down the wrath of the white South and destroy their hard won, if segregated, social and business position." Ward, "Race Relations," pp. 363-66 (quote on p. 364). See also Taylor Branch's assessment of Blayton's work as an accountant for Martin Luther King and the SCLC in Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63 (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), pp. 287-88.

taking full advantage of the opportunity to denounce racism and impress upon black Atlantans the importance of registering to vote.⁷⁷

Along with the NAACP, WERD also regularly afforded publicity to the Urban League and the Atlanta Negro Voters League. On one notable occasion in May 1953, the station was accredited with playing a key role in ensuring that the latter's efforts did not fall into total disarray. On the eve of the city's mayoral elections, League officials discovered that the organisation's literature recommending how African-Americans should vote had been forged in favour of another candidate. Only through WERD's persistent announcement of this fact on the morning of the election was the forgery foiled.⁷⁸

The station also played an important role in the development of another Atlanta institution, the weekly "Hungry Club" broadcasts from the Butler Street YMCA. Every Wednesday, in the months of September through to May, WERD aired the proceedings of the informal luncheon forums that gathered to listen to visiting speakers and to debate the issues of the day. The meetings were integrated and avowedly non-partisan - "the only interracial thing on the air at that time in this area," according to WERD's Paul E. X. Brown - and frequently raised the questions of segregation and voting rights. As a long-standing feature of WERD's schedule, the show was a stimulating educational tool, bringing the debate into the homes of many Atlantans who did not attend the meetings personally. It was also not devoid of a certain propaganda value, with the station making a special effort to provide advance publicity for a

⁷⁷ New York Times, 12 March 1956, clipping in NAACP Papers, III-C-27; Brown, interview with Walsh.

⁷⁸ J. H. Calhoun, "WERD - A Voter Educational Facility," The Printed WERD, October 1964, p. 1, Vertical Files: "WERD Atlanta Radio Station," Atlanta History Files, Archives and Special Collections, Atlanta University Center Woodruff Library, Atlanta.

forthcoming broadcast whenever it was known that a speaker intended to address such issues as voter registration.⁷⁹

Similarly, in North Carolina - traditionally regarded as the most liberal of the southern states - the conscious and subconscious deterrents to broadcasts dealing with the race issue appear to have been less constrictive than elsewhere in the South. For example, even before the end of the war, WBT-Charlotte inaugurated programming such as Dr. J. S. Nathaniel Tross' "Community Crusaders," which offered an effective tool for various campaigns to improve facilities for the city's black community. In the 1950s, rival outlet WGIV, complete with station logo of a white and black hand clasped in a handshake, likewise assumed a particular significance as a symbol of interracial understanding.⁸⁰

However, as significant as these instances were on an individual level, they should not obscure the fact that such overt co-operation between southern black-oriented radio stations and civil rights organisations remained very much the exception in the period from 1945 to 1954. Even in those cases where collaboration did occur, the ties that bound the medium and the nascent movement could easily be broken. Nowhere was this fragility more readily exposed than in the controversy that enveloped station WSOK-Nashville in 1952.

As one of the rare southern stations in the early 1950s that offered the local chapter of the NAACP its own weekly show, WSOK was, at least

⁷⁹ Brown, interview with Walsh; WERD Application for Renewal, 27 December 1957, Exhibit IV, p. 13.

⁸⁰ John S. Lash, "The Negro and Radio," Opportunity, October 1943, rpt. in Issues and Trends in Afro-American Journalism, ed. James S. Tinney and Justine R. Rector (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1980), pp. 167-81; Albert Abarbanel and Alex Haley, "A New Audience for Radio," Harper's Magazine, February 1956, p. 59; Ward, "Race Relations," pp. 99-100, 107-08, 120; Ward and Walker, "Bringing the Races Closer?" pp. 135-36.

superficially, a visible symbol of racial progress. However, the station's principal owner, H. Calvin Young, Jr., consistently took great care to distinguish between allowing the NAACP - as an external agency - access to the airwaves, and having WSOK itself actively endorse the Association's platform. As a result, the spirit of co-operation that existed between the two organisations rapidly disappeared amid a series of disputes and mutual recriminations.

For example, even while broadcasting a weekly NAACP show, Young refused to allow his own staff to speak out against segregation on the air. In December 1952, popular announcer Ed Cook was sacked for just such a transgression. Cook's tenure at the station was always in danger once he had urged his audience to boycott a segregated performance of the Passion Play, that was scheduled for the city's Ryman Auditorium, with the declaration: "Christianity didn't and doesn't segregate, so I'm asking my listeners not to attend this Passion Play." When he compounded his crime by ironically adding the words "America is a democracy" at the end of a news broadcast which discussed the ban on African-Americans from Nashville's municipal golf courses, he was promptly fired - although the Baltimore Afro-American cryptically suggested that it was the pressure exerted upon Young from, "white supremacists and southern apologists," that prompted Cook's dismissal. Similarly, another bone of contention for the NAACP was the fact that it was the only show before which WSOK's management formally denied any

responsibility for the views that were about to be expressed.⁸¹

Citing both of these factors, as well as Young's refusal to allow his staff to unionise and the generally poor quality of WSOK's public service broadcasting, the Nashville NAACP voluntarily sacrificed the publicity afforded to it by the station, rather than prolong its relationship with Young. Thus, in January 1953, the Association discontinued its own show and, in one of the first such cases involving black-oriented radio, sent a formal protest about the station to the FCC.⁸²

The repercussions of the dispute soon reached beyond Nashville. Significantly, several black-oriented newspapers seized upon the story, almost gleefully relating it to their readers in a manner which suggested a fair degree of resentment at black radio's burgeoning popularity. The Cleveland Call and Post, for example, used the occasion to launch a thorough condemnation of the whole medium, declaring that, "Throughout this nation, North and South, East and West, Negroes have spent thousands of dollars with radio stations, just to cater to their ego. The novelty of being on the air has outweighed all sane

⁸¹ Ed Cook, quoted in, Baltimore Afro-American, 13 December 1952, p. 5; M. W. Day and C. L. Dinkins, letter to H. Calvin Young, 16 January 1953, NAACP Papers, II-A-499. In addition to Cook, the incident also cost WSOK its programme director, Larry Faulkner, who resigned in protest.

Cook's dismissal, with two weeks' pay, was indicative of the precarious job security that has been a way of life for most personalities throughout the history of black radio. Even in the 1970s, the National Association of Television and Radio Announcers (NATRA) - the foremost organisation of black disc jockeys - was split over the issue. Led by WAPX-Montgomery deejay Alvin Dixon, southern members of NATRA broke away in 1972 to form their own organisation, Broadcast and Musical Arts (BAMA). According to Dixon, a key factor behind the split was NATRA's inability to secure greater job security: "when Black disc jockeys are fired, they have no recourse. There's no organization that will fight for them to get their jobs back." Alvin Dixon, quoted in, Jet, 5 October 1972, p. 20.

⁸² Day and Dinkins, letter to Young, 16 January 1953; M. W. Day and C. L. Dinkins, letter to the Federal Communications Commission, 4 February 1953, NAACP Papers, II-A-499.

considerations of what they were getting for their money."⁸³ Such unfavourable accounts were forwarded to the NAACP's head office by Joseph LaCour, general manager of the Associated Publishers, Inc. LaCour's honesty, if not his motives, were admirable. "As you know, these boys are making me unhappy," he explained to Roy Wilkins, enclosing Sponsor magazine's latest list of black-oriented stations. "If there is anything more in the way of a little 'hatchet work' the NAACP can do, I shall be grateful."⁸⁴

Not surprisingly, Wilkins rebuffed such disingenuous overtures. While praising the actions of the Nashville branch in this particular episode, he refused to be drawn into a general denunciation of black-oriented radio, and was fully cognisant of LaCour's self-interest: "Of course, you ... are interested also in another angle, that of the diversion of advertising revenue that might go into the Negro press."⁸⁵

Nevertheless, the WSOK affair raised the ideological debate among the NAACP's leadership of the propriety of employing the medium of black-oriented radio. Among the most vocal critics was Clarence Mitchell, director of the Association's Washington Bureau. Emphasising the irony of a civil rights organisation enlisting the support of an essentially "segregated" medium in the fight for integration, Mitchell articulated his dissatisfaction to Walter White. "We certainly do not want to even appear to support the idea of a station 'serving the Negro community,'" he insisted, while urging the NAACP to protest to the FCC against the continued existence of such stations.⁸⁶

⁸³ Cleveland Call and Post, 7 March 1953, and Memphis Tri-State Defender, 14 March 1953, both clippings in NAACP Papers, II-A-499.

⁸⁴ Joseph LaCour, letter to Roy Wilkins, 19 March 1953, NAACP Papers, II-A-499.

⁸⁵ Roy Wilkins, letter to Joseph LaCour, 20 March 1953, NAACP Papers, II-A-499.

⁸⁶ Clarence Mitchell, letter to Walter White, 17 February 1953, NAACP Papers, II-A-499.

However, Mitchell's objections were outweighed by the continued, if not unqualified, support for the medium evinced by such key figures in the NAACP hierarchy as Wilkins and Walter White. For example, in 1950 Wilkins expressed his appreciation for the service rendered by stations such as WLIB, paying particular attention to the manner in which such independent operations were often more willing than the major networks to carry the Association's message.⁸⁷ Similarly, as mentioned above, White's objection to the notion of "The Walter White Show" being advertised as a specifically black-oriented programme was based solely on the desire not to limit his audience unnecessarily. As his long-standing relationship with WLIB in New York and the attempt to secure broadcast time on WERD-Atlanta clearly demonstrate, White certainly suffered no ideological misgivings about the concept of black-oriented radio *per se*. Consequently, dissenting voices such as Mitchell's remained very much in the minority, and the Association continued to cultivate links with as many black-oriented stations as possible over the years that followed.

VI

In June 1954, a memorandum sent to Walter White from the Anchor Productions company in New York outlined ambitious plans for the creation of a non-profit foundation which, in close liaison with the NAACP, would produce and distribute top quality entertainment and educational programmes

⁸⁷ "For many years the Negro minority in this country has been fighting an uphill battle to get its story on the radio; and to get misrepresentations, distortions, and stereotypes about it off the radio ... The reaching of great radio chains presents difficulties which cannot always be overcome. Thus the smaller stations, which play such a part in community living and community thought, offer a chance for minority groups to tell their story to their fellow citizens." Roy Wilkins, "WLIB - tape for April 29, 1950."

to black-oriented radio stations around the country. Seeking advice about the proposal, White was informed by his broadcaster friend Morris Novik that, although in theory the plan had great potential, the reality was somewhat more discouraging:

I can't help but feel that they are ... over-optimistic as to the possibilities of "such good programs" being accepted by all or most of the stations now programming to Negro audiences ... Most of the stations are in the market because of the opportunities to make a fast buck or because every other segment of the population has been exploited. The most successful stations are those using the highly exploited disc jockey programs.⁸⁸

Although Novik may have underestimated the important role that the disc jockeys themselves could play as a positive force in the African-American community, the exchange between the two friends neatly illustrated the nature of the relationship between black-oriented radio and the blossoming African-American freedom struggle in the decade after the end of the Second World War. With honourable exceptions, it was an association characterised more by promise than performance.

As with broadcasters and advertisers, it was during this period that many civil rights activists were alerted to the enormous potential inherent in the medium's ability to reach thousands of African-Americans simultaneously. Moreover, pioneering stations such as WLIB and WERD had demonstrated

⁸⁸ David D. Osborn, letter to Walter White, 24 June 1954, and Morris Novik, letter to Walter White, 7 July 1954, both in NAACP Papers, II-A-158.

Despite White's apparent interest in the proposal, there is no indication that it actually ever came to fruition.

exactly what could be achieved if that potential was properly harnessed to the civil rights struggle. However, such instances of overt co-operation were conspicuous by their rarity, especially in the South.⁸⁹ For the most part, any civil rights agitation that was conducted over the air was - as with the case of radio preachers - undertaken in spite of, rather than because of, the agendas of individual station owners. Yet, for all that black radio's promise remained largely untapped, promise there undoubtedly was, and in the decade that followed there would be many more opportunities for the medium to render a more meaningful service to the struggle for black equality.

⁸⁹ For example, the same Variety article that so lauded WLIB's public service in 1954 expressly made the point that the station's activities were so praiseworthy because they were so untypical of black radio's performance as a whole. "Responsibility to Community."

CHAPTER THREE

Black-Oriented Radio and the Zenith of the Civil Rights Movement

1955 - 1965

I

Thanks to the efforts of a generation of scholars, the civil rights movement is rarely now depicted as a series of events set in motion in 1955 with Rosa Parks' refusal to give up her bus seat in Montgomery, Alabama, and culminating in the Selma campaign and Voting Rights Act of 1965. On the contrary, a whole host of precursors and continuities with earlier generations of protest have been identified. Nevertheless, as historians such as Richard King and Adam Fairclough have reminded us, in the quest to discover the "origins" of the civil rights movement, we should not lose sight of what was genuinely innovative and unique about the freedom struggle as it reached its zenith in the late-1950s and early-1960s.¹

Certainly, the emergence of a mass civil rights campaign during this period had a profound and very distinct impact upon black-oriented radio - an impact that reflected the essentially symbiotic relationship between the medium and the Movement. On the one hand, the medium continued to offer a potentially valuable outlet for activists who were engaged in the freedom struggle to publicise their goals, philosophies, and strategies for action. Simultaneously, however, the events of the era 1955 to 1965 radically altered the context within which black-oriented

¹ Richard H. King, "Citizenship and Self-Respect: The Experience of Politics in the Civil Rights Movement," *Journal of American Studies*, 22, No. 1 (1988), 7-8; Adam Fairclough, "State of the Art: Historians and the Civil Rights Movement," *Journal of American Studies*, 24, No. 3 (1990), 387-88.

radio stations operated. In particular, the expanding, increasingly vocal and versatile protest movement gradually succeeded in placing its cause so firmly on the national agenda that the issue of civil rights became ever more difficult to ignore, particularly for broadcasters who professed to serve the African-American community. Furthermore, the resultant mobilisation of the forces of white resistance, especially in the South, subjected many stations to intensified scrutiny and occasionally acts of overt hostility from segregationists.

The responses of black-oriented radio stations to such conflicting pressures essentially fell into three basic categories. One approach to the problem was to ignore it completely and steadfastly refuse to address the civil rights issue at all. The second option, taken by some of the pioneering stations identified in the previous chapter, was to co-operate closely with the organised freedom struggle as it gathered momentum. However, this chapter will contend that the majority of stations pursued a third approach somewhere between the two extremes, whereby they gradually adopted a supportive posture towards civil rights, but only once the Movement itself had succeeded in establishing the issue as a legitimate and respectable one in the eyes of the nation at large.

II

Ironically, the most immediate impact of the post-*Brown* era civil rights struggle upon black-oriented radio was shaped by the reactions of the white, rather than the African-American, community. The mobilisation of southern white segregationists into a Massive Resistance movement in the aftermath of the Supreme Court's ruling - although neither as instantaneous nor as monolithic as it was once portrayed - had a profound impact upon the black radio industry in the South. For broadcasters all throughout the region, the majority of whom had been reluctant to

discuss civil rights even before the *Brown* decision, the intensified debate and heightened sensitivity surrounding the race issue gave rise to an even more studied reticence.²

To compound its problems, black radio was also closely associated with another of the great bugbears of the segregationist South - namely, the craze for rock and roll music that swept the nation's teenagers during the 1950s. As Brian Ward has demonstrated, the campaigns against desegregation and against rock and roll were inextricably linked, often involving the same individuals, and both essentially racist in motivation. To apologists of the Jim Crow South, especially of an older generation, the image of the moody, overtly sexual Elvis Presley offered a stark warning of what could happen to a good white country boy who, via radio stations such as WDIA-Memphis, had been exposed to too much black music.³

Operating under the gaze of suspicious and potentially dangerous elements of the white community, it was no surprise that the majority of radio stations in the South recoiled from openly discussing, let alone embracing, the fight for civil rights. In the tense racial climate of the late 1950s, there was a very real danger that an overt association with the freedom struggle could result in serious reprisals. In May 1958, for example, even a station with such an avowedly apolitical stance as WEDR-

² For a corrective to the view that Massive Resistance was a uniform phenomenon which emerged as an immediate response to the Supreme Court's ruling, see Tony Badger, "Fatalism, Not Gradualism: The Crisis of Southern Liberalism, 1945-65," in The Making of Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement, ed. Brian Ward and Tony Badger (London: Macmillan, 1996), pp. 67-95.

³ Brian Ward, "Race Relations, Civil Rights and the Transformation from Rhythm and Blues to Soul, 1954-1965," PhD Thesis, University of Cambridge, 1995, pp. 47-83. For the relationship between Elvis and WDIA, see Louis Cantor, Wheelin' on Beale: How WDIA-Memphis Became the Nation's First All-Black Radio Station and Created the Sound that Changed America (New York: Pharos, 1992), pp. 189-96; Albert Goldman, Elvis (1981; rpt. New York: Avon, 1982), pp. 117-123.

Birmingham came under attack from white segregationists, with its transmission tower attacked and studio vandalised and daubed with Ku Klux Klan graffiti. The following year in Manning, South Carolina, WFIG's broadcast was mysteriously jammed just as the station was about to commence airing a speech by the NAACP's Roy Wilkins.⁴

Perhaps even more significantly, any programming that risked the opprobrium of white society was in danger of seriously jeopardising a broadcaster's fundamental economic interests. As Sponsor magazine informed - indeed reassured - its readers in 1959, "Real controversy is usually avoided, primarily because station operators don't want to frighten off advertisers - assuming they have a crusading zeal in the first place."⁵

This is not to suggest that the majority of southern black-oriented stations in the 1950s completely disregarded the needs of the communities they catered to. Rather, the public service activities that they engaged in were characteristically "safe" - acceptable to black and white alike. In this, as in so much of the medium's history, the example was established by WDIA in Memphis. Under the direction of owners John Pepper and Bert Ferguson, the station's service to black Memphians - ranging from assisting listeners in locating their misplaced false teeth, to raising hundreds of thousands of dollars for local charities - became the stuff of legend. Yet, there was a crucial distinction between community service, at which WDIA excelled, and civil rights crusading, which the station's white owners firmly eschewed. As Ferguson

⁴ Shelley Stewart, interview with Brian Ward, 26 October 1995, University of Newcastle Upon Tyne Oral History Collection (hereafter, UNOHC); New York Times, 30 May 1958, Clippings File: "Radio," Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York (hereafter, S-C "Radio" File); Baltimore Afro-American, 5 December 1959, pp. 1-2.

⁵ "Negro-Appeal Radio's Getting the Business," Sponsor, 26 September 1959, Part 2, p. 48.

explained his position in the aftermath of the *Brown* decision: "We think we're doing enough, and we'd rather move ahead as we've been moving in race relations than get involved in that, where we couldn't do anything anyway."⁶

While few stations emulated the sheer extent of WDIA's public service, many followed its basic premise. Activities such as sponsorship of little league baseball teams, blood donor drives, and missing persons and job announcements, rather than political agitation, lay at the heart of southern black radio's attempt to endear itself to the African-American community. Moreover, this intense pressure to avoid the race issue could be felt even beyond the Deep South. In St. Louis, for example, KPRS (despite being one of only four black-owned stations in the country at the time), was one of those which followed an avowed policy of restraint. As the station's management explained to the FCC: "we must avoid airing any controversial discussions which might lead to difficulties which are extant in our adjacent state to the south."⁷ However, in an admirable piece of opportunism, KPRS also covertly sought to claim much of the credit for St. Louis' housing integration, through the cunning device of a lawn beautification competition: "Without our saying as much, what we were really doing was preparing our listeners to move into better-kept integrated neighborhoods. We were giving them an awareness of the importance of a well-kept lawn and beautiful flowers." Preceding the Summer of Love by a full eight years, KPRS had evidently uncovered the value of "flower power" as the key to human tolerance and understanding.⁸

⁶ Bert Ferguson, quoted in, Cantor, Wheelin' on Beale, p. 3.

⁷ KPRS Supplementary Statement of Policy, 26 January 1959, p. 1, FCC License Renewal Files, Box 59, National Archives, Suitland, Maryland (hereafter, FCC License Renewal Files).

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 2.

Admittedly, a few notable southern stations continued, undeterred, to promote civil rights in a somewhat more meaningful way. In Atlanta, WERD maintained its close relationship with the city's chapter of the NAACP by broadcasting appeals for civil rights legislation and offering air-time for membership drives. Thanking the station after one such campaign in the Summer of 1957, branch president John Calhoun paid particular tribute to WERD's potency and long-standing assistance:

The "Fight for Freedom" campaign being inducted by the NAACP is greatly enhanced by the use of communications media of such effectiveness as yours.

WERD has always been one of our chief supporters and we want you to know how much we appreciate this continued interest in the Association's work.⁹

Furthermore, once the SCLC was established in Atlanta in 1957, WERD was in a unique position to be able to assist that organisation by virtue of the fact that they both shared the same office building on Auburn Avenue. According to disc jockey Jack Gibson, whenever there was an important announcement to be made, he would simply lower his microphone out of the window down to Dr. King below, thereby providing King with instant access to Atlanta's African-American community.¹⁰

⁹ John Calhoun, letter to Preston Mobley, 13 August 1957, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Papers, III-C-27, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (hereafter, NAACP Papers).

¹⁰ Nelson George, *The Death of Rhythm and Blues* (New York: Plume, 1988), p. 46.

Whether such a tale is apocryphal or not, it was certainly in keeping with the station's policy of providing air-time to prominent African-American and white liberal spokespersons. For example, on any given week during the "Hungry Club" broadcasts of 1957, listeners could hear Dr. Robert Williams of Morris Brown College discuss the "Psychological Implications of Segregation," Southern Regional Council director Harold Flemings explain the "Moral Dilemmas Facing Today's South," or Atlanta University's Dr. Horace Mann Bond expound upon the issue of "Black Power."¹¹

In Charlotte, North Carolina, station WBT vividly demonstrated the role that radio could play in raising the level of debate on the issue of segregation. In particular, one broadcast in the Winter of 1959 attracted intense public reaction. On that occasion, the station devoted its "Project 60" roundtable discussion show to the subject of "Integration vs. Segregation." Author Harry Golden and Charles Morris, professor of English at Benedict College in Columbia, South Carolina, spoke for the integrationists, in opposition to North Carolina's former assistant attorney general I. Beverly Lake, and Thomas Waring, editor of the Charleston, South Carolina, News and Courier. Adopting an avowedly neutral stance during the discussion, WBT's management confessed that its aim was to afford an opportunity for the presentation of both sides of the argument, in contrast to the way in which genuine public debate had usually been stymied by the forces of white resistance.¹²

The results were electrifying. So much so that, in an impromptu move stimulated by popular demand, the show was hastily extended from one to two

¹¹ WERD Application for Renewal of Broadcast Station License, 27 December 1957, Exhibit IV, pp. 14-17, FCC License Renewal Files, Box 121.

¹² Pittsburgh Courier, 21 November 1959, Section 2, p. 4.

hours. By the time that the broadcast ended, an estimated 54 percent of all of the city's radio listeners were tuned in. Charles Morris, in particular, drew widespread acclaim for his eloquent denunciation of racism, to the extent that thousands of listeners subsequently requested transcripts of his speech. The Pittsburgh Courier promptly added Morris' name to the pantheon of the South's civil rights champions, and paid warm tribute to WBT, "for having the courage to sponsor the program, with free speech unfettered."¹³

Yet as courageous as such activities were, they remained conspicuous exceptions to the general pattern of southern broadcasters avoiding the race issue during the height of the Massive Resistance era. However, a markedly different trend emerged in the larger urban centres of the North and the West Coast, where racism was still very much alive, if not kicking quite so publicly. Even so, an overt association with the cause of racial equality was not without its dangers. Thus, for example, Marty Faye, a white deejay at black-oriented WAAF-Chicago whose on-air condemnations of discrimination were well publicised throughout the decade, attracted numerous threats against his person and property.¹⁴

For the most part, however, the issue of civil rights was never a taboo subject for black-oriented stations in the North to the same extent that it was for many of their counterparts further south. On the contrary, a number of influential stations picked up on the story of the evolving freedom struggle at an early stage, and throughout the late 1950s acted as key agents through which northern African-American communities learned of the events unfurling in the South.

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ Norman Spaulding, "History of Black-Oriented Radio in Chicago, 1929-1963," PhD Thesis, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1981, pp. 98-99; "Integration on the Air," Ebony, February 1959, p. 135.

In New York, WLIB continued to lead the way as a black-oriented source of news and information for the city's African-American population. In addition to the on-going publicity afforded to the NAACP, by 1957 many other groups with a civil rights agenda - such as the New York chapter of the Urban League, the State Committee Against Discrimination, and the Committee on Civil Rights in East Manhattan - had been added to the growing roster of organisations which enjoyed regular access to the airwaves. Special documentaries produced by the station, such as "Human Rights, 1959," which won an Ohio State Institute for Education by Radio award, dealt extensively with freedom struggles in the United States and, in some cases, in Africa.¹⁵

Furthermore, at least from the mid-1950s onwards, WLIB offered on-the-spot news coverage direct from many of the major civil rights battlegrounds in the South, ranging from the Montgomery bus boycott, to the site of the lynching of Mack Parker in Poplarville, Mississippi, in 1959. A typical example involved Autherine Lucy's attempt to integrate the University of Alabama in 1956, during which Pittsburgh Courier reporter Jimmy Hicks provided the station with regular updates and an interview with Lucy, direct from Tuscaloosa.¹⁶

Although WLIB was in many ways remarkable for the extent, variety and quality of its public service, it was certainly not alone in expressing an interest in the race issue. The number of outlets providing air-time to civil rights organisations continued to grow, as long-established stations were joined by

¹⁵ WLIB Application for Renewal of Broadcast Station License, 25 February 1957, Exhibit 5, pp. 1-2, FCC License Renewal Files, Box 157; WLIB Application for Renewal of Broadcast Station License, 2 March 1960, Exhibit 5, FCC License Renewal Files, Box 248.

¹⁶ "The Truth About Harlem," WLIB Application for Renewal, 2 March 1960, Exhibit 5f, Variety, 15 February 1956, clipping in S-C "Radio" File.

newcomers such as WCHB-Inkster, Michigan (which also reached into neighbouring Detroit). Under the ownership of local African-American dentists Haley Bell and Wendell Cox, WCHB became the first purpose-built black-oriented station in the country when it commenced operation in 1957. From the outset, the station identified closely with the issue of civil rights, offering weekly shows to the local chapters of both the NAACP and the Urban League, as well as undertaking fund-raising drives for causes such as the high school in Clinton, Tennessee, that had been subjected to a bomb attack in 1956.¹⁷

The greater readiness to cover civil rights issues evidenced by northern stations was vividly demonstrated at the time of the school integration crisis that erupted in Little Rock in 1957. For example, at the height of the struggle to integrate the city's Central High School, WLIB's "Reports From Little Rock" were broadcast as frequently as every hour. Some stations even moved beyond a straightforward educational approach, to engage in a tentative form of community mobilisation. Thus, KSAN-San Francisco orchestrated a telegram campaign that registered over 5,000 protests against the white segregationist violence in Arkansas. In Philadelphia, WDAS also extensively covered the Little Rock situation, sending newsman Art Peters to the city for a two-week period in September 1958. Not only did Peter's mission provide listeners with a daily update of the latest developments direct from Little Rock, but upon his return to Philadelphia, he also offered a first-hand account of his experiences in a series of specially arranged speaking engagements held in African-American churches

¹⁷ "New Radio Station," *Ebony*, April 1957, p. 110; "Negro-Appeal Radio's Getting the Business," p. 48.

throughout the city.¹⁸

III

Despite the fact that by the end of the 1950s a growing number of northern stations were prepared to cover the story of the latest civil rights struggles in the South, the irony was that there was not always much of a story to tell. At the close of the decade, the era of direct southern black action against Jim Crow - which had been most vividly symbolised, if not begun, by the Montgomery bus boycott - had reached something of an impasse. To be sure, the freedom struggle had a new organisation in the form of the SCLC to complement (and rival) the existing civil rights groups; and in Martin Luther King had a charismatic spokesperson with a rapidly expanding public profile. Nevertheless, with the partial exception of its largely unimpressive "Crusade for Citizenship" voter registration drive, the SCLC

¹⁸ WLIB Application for Renewal, 25 February 1957, Exhibit 5, p. 5; "Negro-Appeal Radio's Getting the Business," p. 48; "Community Programming By Station WDAS," Exhibit 3, attached to Robert Klein, letter to FCC, 24 January 1961, FCC License Renewal Files, Box 167.

Such activities contrasted noticeably with Little Rock's own black-oriented outlet, KOKY, which was one of those stations which consistently shied away from the civil rights issue. As late as 1964, station manager Eddie Phelan continued to defend this position: "by serving the black community as an entertainment and news medium and not committing ourselves in the controversial problems, we can serve best. When you choose one side you alienate people." Eddie Phelan, quoted in Arkansas Gazette, 14 June 1964, cited in Brian Ward and Jenny Walker, "Bringing the Races Closer?": Black-Oriented Radio in the South and the Civil Rights Movement," in Dixie Debates: Perspectives on Southern Cultures, ed. Richard H. King and Helen Taylor (London: Pluto, 1996), p. 141.

had by the turn of the decade offered little in the way of alternatives to the legalistic approach towards integration pursued by the NAACP.¹⁹

Not until the wave of sit-ins which swept across the South in the wake of the protest staged on 1 February 1960 by four students in Greensboro, North Carolina, was the civil rights movement injected with fresh life and vigour. Events like the Youth Marches for Integrated Schools, staged in Washington in 1958 and 1959, as well as isolated protests such as those held in Kansas and Oklahoma in 1958, and Nashville in 1959, had offered some indication of a rising black student activism in the 1950s. However, the 1960 sit-ins transformed the process from individual pockets of rather isolated local protest into a truly mass phenomenon, involving an estimated 70,000 black participants (as well as a significant number of whites), in at least 112 cities throughout the South.²⁰

In the mushrooming direct action challenge to Jim Crow of the early 1960s, the city of Atlanta, Georgia, played a particularly significant role. As the location of the headquarters of both the newly established SNCC and the revitalised SCLC, the city was a key centre for the organisational and communications efforts of the southern civil rights movement. Consequently, any evaluation of black radio's relationship with the freedom struggle has to pay particular attention to the service rendered by the medium in Martin Luther King's home town.

As was seen in Chapter Two, WERD had a long tradition of offering its facilities to civil rights activists in Atlanta, dating back to the time of its purchase

¹⁹ Adam Fairclough, To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987), pp. 37-55.

²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 59; Clayborne Carson, In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s, 2nd ed. (1981; rpt. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 9-18; Juan Williams, Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years, 1954-1965 (New York: Viking Penguin, 1987), p. 140.

by Jesse Blayton in 1949. However, in March 1954, WERD's status as the only completely black-oriented station in the city was challenged when station WAOK signed on air. The key figure in developing the new station's format was Zenas "Big Daddy" Sears, a white deejay who had first acquired an interest in black music while broadcasting to a largely African-American audience for the Armed Forces Radio Service in India during the Second World War, before returning to Atlanta to host popular black music segments at stations WATL and WGST. As programme director and - following his purchase of the station in 1956 with business partners Stan Raymond and Dorothy Lester, co-owner - Sears firmly established WAOK as an integral and enduring institution in black Atlanta.²¹

However, despite occasionally supporting such causes as voter registration, WAOK never openly embraced the campaign for civil rights on a regular basis before 1960. "Until that time," explained the station's management, somewhat condescendingly, "... [we] felt that little or nothing could be gained by a discussion of public affairs with our listeners, since, for the most part, our listeners had little knowledge or interest in affairs of national or state-wide importance."²²

Crucially, the catalyst for change in the station's outlook was provided by the onset of the student protest movement in the city, and the upsurge in interest in civil rights that was generated by it:

following the first student sit-in demonstrations in the Atlanta area
and the sudden increase in the manifestation of the Negro's desire

²¹ WAOK Application for Renewal of Broadcast Station License, 31 December 1960, Exhibit F, Part 1, pp. 1-4, FCC License Renewal Files, Box 135; Atlanta Constitution, 14 March 1984, pp. 1B, 5B.

²² WAOK Application for Renewal, 31 December 1960, Exhibit F, Part 1, p. 27.

for speedy removal of legal segregation, we have felt that frank and open discussion of the problems involved would not only be of interest to the majority of our audience but of value in the preservation of a peaceful atmosphere within the community.

Faced with a situation that might possibly lend itself to violence caused by exaggerated rumors, we feel that a great deal has been accomplished by the discussion of racial problems using the voices of those most concerned with the situation.²³

At no time was the assistance offered to the Atlanta students by both WAOK and WERD more valuable than in the earliest days of their protests. Even before SNCC was established as a fully-fledged, permanent civil rights organisation, both stations carried "The Student Movement and You," a weekly half-hour show presented by the Committee on Appeal for Human Rights. According to student leader Julian Bond, the show made an invaluable contribution in initially promoting the activities and goals of the fledgling student movement among a wider audience in the city:

For the Atlanta student movement these two radio stations played an immensely helpful role ... the show "The Student Movement and You" and the ability to get on the air quickly just made all the difference. I wouldn't say that we couldn't have done it without them, but they certainly made it easier to do what we were doing.²⁴

²³ *ibid.*, pp. 27-28.

²⁴ Julian Bond, interview with Stephen Walsh, 17 August 1995, UNOHC.

Having offered their assistance almost from the very outset of the student movement, both WERD and WAOK continued to co-operate closely with SNCC - as well as with more established organisations such as the SCLC, NAACP, and Urban League - in a wide variety of ways. News broadcasts, for example, regularly publicised the latest activities - including conventions, demonstrations, and voter registration drives - of each group. Certainly, Mary King, SNCC's assistant communications director, recalled with affection the "fraternal" relationship that existed between her organisation and the two stations: "They would take anything we had to give them ... the Atlanta black radio stations were almost like a part of our office."²⁵

Similarly, discussion programmes such as WAOK's "For Your Information" - a show which, "serves a very important function in creating an educational opportunity for a large segment of Atlantans," according to the SCLC - regularly provided local civil rights leaders with an opportunity to address the radio listening audience.²⁶ One such broadcast shortly before the 1960 presidential election, in which Martin Luther King expressed his belief that Senator Kennedy would take a, "forthright position about segregation," while bemoaning the, "double talk," of the Republicans, attracted widespread attention. As the United Press International reported, the comment, "was the closest he (King) has come to

²⁵ Mary King, interview with Stephen Walsh, 17 April 1995, UNOHC; also Bond interview; Paul E. X. Brown, interview with Stephen Walsh, 16 March 1995, UNOHC.

²⁶ James Wood, letter to Zenas Sears, 1 December 1960, WAOK Application for Renewal, 31 December 1960, Exhibit XVII.

an outright endorsement of Kennedy for President."²⁷

Interestingly, for all that WAOK made its facilities available to activists engaged in the freedom struggle during the early 1960s, the station's management initially displayed a marked reluctance to undertake a strong editorial campaign on the issue of racial equality. This decision was defended to the FCC at the end of 1960, on the grounds of both inexperience and expedience:

The management of WAOK, realizing that their community is involved in tremendous social change, does not feel that we are wise enough to make editorial comment at this time ... Putting to one side our ability as editorial thinkers, there is always the

²⁷ WAOK Application for Renewal, 31 December 1960, Exhibit XV. Despite such remarks, King never did formally endorse Kennedy's candidature. Nevertheless, the Kennedy campaign undoubtedly benefited from King's (and his father's) favourable comments, especially those made in the wake of Kennedy's phone call to Coretta King after her husband's imprisonment in October 1960. See David Garrow, Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (1986; rpt. New York: Vintage, 1988), pp. 145-49.

As well as King's comments over WAOK, Kennedy also benefited from other sections of the black radio industry. For example, the Kennedy campaign secured the assistance of Odis Von Blasingame of the United Broadcasting chain of stations - which included black-oriented outlets in major markets such as Washington, D.C. (WOOK), Richmond (WANT), Baltimore (WSID), Cleveland (WJMO), and Norfolk (WYOU). Writing to Kennedy shortly after the senator announced his candidacy for the presidency, Blasingame enthused: "I am very happy to say that you have my full support and I look forward to the opportunity to meet you and to discuss some of the issues and to determine the part I can play to help you to achieve your goal." In one of the closest presidential elections in history, where Kennedy's African-American support is often cited as a key factor in determining the outcome, black radio may well have played a more influential role than has hitherto been recognised. Odis Von Blasingame, letter to John Kennedy, 6 January 1960, John F. Kennedy Pre-Presidential Papers, 1960 Campaign Files, Press Secretary's State File, District of Columbia, Jan 15 1959 - March 22 1960, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, Boston.

possibility that a strong stance on such matters as integration, might possibly have the effect of causing trouble in a community that is desperately trying to remain calm during a period of change.²⁸

As will be seen later in this chapter, it was certainly not unusual for black-oriented radio stations to offer air-time to external civil rights agencies while simultaneously eschewing those kinds of activities, such as editorialising, which implied a more overt, concrete identification with the freedom struggle. However, given the scale of WAOK's co-operation with local activists, often at the instigation of Zenas Sears himself, as well as the fact that the SCLC's former publicity director Jim Wood was hired in the Summer of 1962 specifically to serve as the station's news analyst and editorialist, there seems little reason to believe that WAOK fell into this category.²⁹

Without doubt, much of the impetus for the strengthening of ties between WAOK and Atlanta's civil rights groups came at the direct behest of Zenas Sears, who went out of his way to contact organisations with the offer of free air-time. Employees who worked for both stations, as well as civil rights activists, testify to the fact that, once WAOK became involved with the freedom struggle, its public service broadcasting and civil rights coverage were, at the very least, as comprehensive as those provided by its black-owned competitor.³⁰

²⁸ WAOK Application for Renewal, 31 December 1960, Exhibit F, Part 1, p. 29.

²⁹ WAOK Application for Renewal of Broadcast Station License, 29 December 1963, Exhibit 7, p. 23, FCC License Renewal Files, Box 415.

³⁰ Zenas Sears, letter to SNCC, 7 February 1964, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Papers, A-VII-1, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (hereafter, SNCC Papers); Zenas Sears, letter to Randolph Blackwell, 24 December 1964, Southern Christian Leadership Conference Papers, Part 4, Series 2, Reel 6, Microfilm Collection, Alderman Library, University of Virginia, Charlottesville; Brown interview; Bond interview.

Ironically, this was in large part precisely because of WAOK's white ownership. Under Sears' skilful direction, albeit greatly assisted by the fact that the station enjoyed a more powerful transmission and the ability to broadcast 24 hours a day (unlike its rival), WAOK rapidly surpassed WERD in terms of popularity. Nevertheless, Jesse Blayton's station still retained a special, almost mythical, stature in the eyes of many black Atlantans, by virtue of its legendary position as the country's first black-owned radio station. To compensate, Sears had to find other ways of establishing WAOK's credentials as the "voice" of Atlanta's African-American population - one of the most effective of which was to identify the station with the community's rising aspirations on the issue of civil rights. As SNCC's director of communications Julian Bond explained, WAOK, "probably made an extra effort to be community-oriented because of its white ownership, and didn't want to be accused of ... exploiting the community."³¹

IV

To a considerable degree, the Atlanta example reflected broader trends which occurred in the black radio industry at large. In particular, as with WAOK, it was during the crucial period from 1960 to 1965 that many stations, both north and south, first expressed a real interest in the African-American struggle for equality. However, as the number of black-oriented outlets co-operating with civil rights activists increased, the fundamental distinction between supportive and active assistance remained as a defining feature of the relationship between the medium and the Movement.

³¹ *ibid.*

By far the most common approach was the essentially supportive role. At a local level, this was demonstrated by the way in which an increasing number of individual protest movements and organisations drew upon the facilities of the black-oriented stations in their region. In the South and rim South, this included such stations as WYLD-New Orleans, which was involved in publicising the membership drives of the local chapter of the Urban League from at least as early as 1961. Two years later, WSOK in Savannah, Georgia, provided both the local NAACP and the Chatham County Crusade for Voters with a means of addressing the local black population through their own half-hour weekly shows. Movements in Danville, Virginia - where, "we used the black radio stations all the time for voter registration activities," according to SNCC's Mary King - and Cambridge, Maryland, both benefited directly from the publicity afforded to them by black-oriented radio.³²

In northern cities, it became common practice for large-scale civil rights rallies and conventions to receive extensive publicity from local black-oriented stations. In Philadelphia, for example, the proceedings of the NAACP's annual convention, held in the city in 1961, were afforded exhaustive coverage by WHAT. Local NAACP members were duly appreciative. "Only through honest and sincere reporting was the seriousness of the deliberations of the convention conveyed to our community. This was possible because you did a very excellent job in creating a new image of the NAACP in Philadelphia," commended Gertrude Barnes and Harry Greene, while branch president A. Leon Higginbotham, Jr., enthused that, "Your station serves a most valuable function on the educational and motivation

³² Sponsor, 9 October 1961, Part 2, p. 12; WSOK Application for Renewal of Broadcast Station License, 13 December 1963, Exhibit 7, p. 8, FCC License Renewal Files, Box 309; King interview; Gloria Richardson, interview with Jenny Walker, 11 March 1996, UNOHC.

factors for the entire community and particularly for the Negro community."

Likewise, the executive director of the Philadelphia Urban League readily acknowledged the importance of the publicity given to his organisation by the city's other black-oriented station, WDAS: "We know that much of the support the Urban League receives is a direct result of the image projected over Station WDAS."³³

At WCHB-Inkster, similarly comprehensive treatment was afforded to the huge and triumphal Freedom Walk staged in nearby Detroit on 23 June 1963, during which Martin Luther King first spoke to a mass audience of his "dream" of racial equality. The station's subsequent trumpeting of this fact in its promotional literature serves as a reminder that, behind any public service activity, broadcasters' economic interests were never far away. Advertisements placed in the trade press boldly asserted that, "250,000 Negroes + WCHB = HISTORY," while making great play of the fact that WCHB was the only organisation allowed to use a motor vehicle at the event.³⁴ In Chicago, WAAF not only broadcast the entire three hours of the civil rights rally staged at the city's Soldier Field stadium in June 1964, but also provided two of the event's comperes, deejays Daddy-O Daylie and Lou House.³⁵

³³ Gertrude Barnes and Harry Greene, letter to Joe Grady, 1 August 1961, and A. Leon Higginbotham, Jr., letter to Dolly Banks, 1 August 1961, both in WHAT Application for Renewal of Broadcast Station License, 2 May 1960 [sic], Exhibit 5, FCC License Renewal Files, Box 202; Andrew Freeman, letter to Joseph Rainey, 15 April 1963, WDAS Application for Renewal of Broadcast Station License, 16 April 1963, Exhibit 8, Appendix K, FCC License Renewal Files, Box 167.

³⁴ Sponsor, 26 August 1963, Part 2, p. 5.

³⁵ WAAF Application for Renewal of Broadcast Station License, 21 August 1964, Exhibit 7, FCC License Renewal Files, Box 199.

On a more general level, as civil rights organisations became adept in the art of stage-managing high profile events, black-oriented radio stations, along with the rest of the nation's media, conveyed and interpreted national news stories to their own local audience. The 1963 March on Washington, for example, is often portrayed as a highlight in the relationship between the media and the civil rights movement - an occasion which has left a uniquely evocative image in the collective memory of the American people.³⁶

Although this description is usually applied in reference to the role of television, it is equally relevant to black-oriented radio. Several major stations, including WLIB and WWRL in New York and WVON-Chicago, all sent their own personnel to the capital to cover the occasion. Moreover, black-oriented stations did more than simply report on the march. The medium's particular empathy with the African-American community infused its coverage of the event with a spirit that the general-market media, for all its importance on the day, could not match. For example, few television stations offered anything comparable to the involvement of WAAF-Chicago, where news staff became an integral part of the train journey to Washington and of the march itself. The station was subsequently awarded the 1963 American College of Radio award for the finest coverage of a single news event by a Chicago radio station. Meanwhile, at WDAS-Philadelphia, deejay Georgie Woods personally arranged and paid for nine coach loads of listeners to be transported to the capital. In New York, WLIB even appropriated

³⁶ For accounts of the significance of television coverage of the March on Washington, see Taylor Branch, Parting the Waters: America in the King Years (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), pp. 876-883; Fairclough, To Redeem the Soul, pp. 152-55.

part of Martin Luther King's famous "I Have A Dream" speech to acquire a new station identification: "'Let freedom ring' - this is the voice of liberty, WLIB."³⁷

Indeed, WLIB continued to merit particular recognition for its pioneering and innovative approaches to public service broadcasting, whether it be airing long-distance telephone interviews with Freedom Riders direct from Alabama in 1961, or inaugurating a weekly 30-minute "Africa Speaks" show to keep Harlemites informed of the latest developments in the emerging independent African nations. However, the difference compared to earlier years was that, while WLIB continued to set the standards for black-oriented radio involvement in the civil rights movement, during the period 1960 to 1965 an increasing number of other stations began to follow in its wake.³⁸

The trend towards greater black radio coverage of the freedom struggle in the early 1960s was undoubtedly accelerated by the fact that many civil rights activists and organisations increasingly recognised the medium's potential as a publicity tool, and took positive steps to harness that potential to their cause. In January 1960, for example, NAACP publicity director Henry Lee Moon, informing local leaders that, "Radio can offer your branch an excellent outlet for telling its story," began to prepare special tape recordings for distribution to local chapters of the Association around the country. According to Moon, radio broadcasts offered three key advantages to the NAACP: enhanced prestige; valuable publicity for

³⁷ "Radio-TV Get Set for Aug. 28 Rights March," Broadcasting, 19 August 1963, p. 60; "Radio-TV Plans D.C. March Coverage," Broadcasting, 26 August 1963, p. 57; WAAF Application for Renewal, 21 August 1964, Exhibit 7; Philadelphia Branch NAACP, "Press Release" (n.d.), NAACP Papers, III-A-229; "Big March, Big Coverage," Broadcasting, 2 September 1963, p. 48.

³⁸ New York Times, 27 May 1961, S-C "Radio" File; WLIB Application for Renewal of Broadcast Station License, 11 March 1963, Exhibit 4, p. 3, FCC License Renewal Files, Box 248.

membership drives; and an opportunity to rebut anti-NAACP propaganda - and he urged branch presidents to contact their local black-oriented (as well as other) radio stations to secure these benefits as quickly as possible. The results of an NAACP national survey four years later underlined the extent to which the radio industry had been receptive to the Association's advances. Of all the organisation's branches that had sought air-time on a local station, fully 95 percent had been accommodated.³⁹

Similarly, broadcasters such as Mary Mason, a gospel deejay at WHAT-Philadelphia in the early 1960s who frequently interviewed Martin Luther King for the station, certainly believed that the SCLC leader had a keen appreciation of the power of black radio:

He knew that the black community and black people were his strength and he knew that he could get his message across through black radio ... He used it effectively and he used it often ... he would call from other cities and give me the information as to what he wanted done in preparation for his visit.⁴⁰

Over the first half of the 1960s, SNCC also increasingly recognised the importance of radio, and shaped its publicity campaigns accordingly. The organisation's use of the medium on a nation-wide scale was greatly enhanced by

³⁹ Henry Lee Moon, letter to Branch Presidents, 26 January 1960, NAACP Papers, III-A-252; "Publicity Handbook for Branches" (n.d.), attached to Henry Lee Moon, memorandum to Roy Wilkins, 24 February 1964, NAACP Papers, III-A-311.

⁴⁰ Mary Mason, quoted in, James G. Spady, Georgie Woods: I'm Only a Man: The Life Story of a Mass Communicator, Promoter, Civil Rights Activist (Philadelphia: Snack-Pac, 1992), p. 183.

the installation of a Wide Area Telephone Service (WATS) system at the Atlanta headquarters in 1963. Offering unlimited long-distance telephone calls for the payment of a set monthly fee, the WATS line enabled SNCC's communications department to contact hundreds of radio stations on a daily basis with the offer of specially recorded news "actualities". As a result, the WATS report became an integral feature of SNCC's use of the mass media as a means of publicising its struggles.⁴¹

With an overriding emphasis upon accuracy and straightforward news reporting, the broadcasts shunned rhetoric in favour of a candid presentation of the facts. They were no less powerful for that. For example, typical newscasts in July and August 1965 dealt with a wide range of ongoing civil rights struggles and violations in the South - including church burnings and police dispersal of voter registration gatherings in Greensboro, Alabama; police harassment of civil rights workers in Brownsville, Tennessee; and the murder of SNCC volunteer Jonathan Daniels in Lowndes County, Alabama. Yet, the news broadcasts were also designed to inspire as well as inform, by recounting the successes as well as the setbacks of the freedom struggle. Thus, the report of 7 August 1965 enthusiastically related the news that during the previous week over 300 African-Americans had successfully registered to vote in Americus, Georgia.⁴²

Away from Atlanta, SNCC staffers were encouraged to use the WATS line to send to headquarters any items which might be of use for radio broadcast. For example, a communications manual prepared for the benefit of volunteers

⁴¹ Mary King, Freedom Song: A Personal History of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement (New York: Quill, 1987), pp. 164, 215-16; Bond interview; King interview.

⁴² *ibid.*; for transcripts of the WATS reports, see SNCC Papers, A-VII-4.

participating in the Mississippi Freedom Summer of 1964 expressly instructed readers to be on constant alert for news that could be used by radio stations. Explaining how such broadcasts helped, "to get out the story of the Southern movement in more dramatic form than press releases," the manual offered specific advice on how field workers should tailor their reports to render them as suitable as possible for radio. Speakers were to emphasise the present tense in their accounts, give their name and location at the end of any statement, and, crucially, speak in a "normal" voice. Similarly, during SNCC campaigns such as those that took place in 1965 in Selma and Marion, Alabama, northern Friends of SNCC groups were urged to arrange the widest possible media coverage of the protests in their own towns. Newspapers, "and particularly radio stations," were to be encouraged to contact the Atlanta headquarters for the latest news.⁴³

Admittedly, much of SNCC's strategy during the first half of the 1960s was not directed solely towards black-oriented radio. Rather, it was based upon the premise of simply generating as much publicity as possible, regardless of the target audience. In the battle against prejudice, SNCC did not discriminate in its use of the media. Indeed, many of its most supportive and consistent allies in the broadcasting industry, such as the listener-funded Pacifica chain, could be found at general-market, rather than specifically black-oriented, radio stations.⁴⁴

Nevertheless, without necessarily making a conscious distinction between the different forms of mass media, simple day-to-day experience left a strong

⁴³ SNCC, "Communications Manual," (n.d.), p. 9, SNCC Papers, A-VII-4; Betty Garman, memorandum to Friends of SNCC, 5 February 1965, SNCC Papers, C-I-1.

⁴⁴ Bond interview; King interview.

impression of black-oriented radio's particular strengths. Mary King, for example, recalled how she learned almost subconsciously that:

black radio would be effective because it was not censored, because it was not ideologically bound to racism, because it was a fundamental pillar in black communities, because it was cheaper than television, and therefore more people had it ... We could be running and tell that ... but there were no systematic attempts to assess anything.⁴⁵

In 1964, the first real effort was made to utilise black radio's potential on a more deliberate and co-ordinated basis. Under the aegis of Chicagoan Robert McNamara III, the Civil Rights Information Service (CRIS) was conceived as, "a central clearing house for news of the civil rights movement in the United States."⁴⁶ With financial backing from a number of civic and religious groups - including CORE, SNCC, the National Council of Churches and the Gandhi Society

⁴⁵ King interview.

Although the principle of maximum publicity was the general rule for civil rights organisations seeking to effect fundamental changes in the consciousness of the nation at large, there were exceptions. For example, when the NUL launched its "March to the Ballot Box" voter education project in August 1964, League officials were advised by representatives of the AFL-CIO that, in order to avoid alerting and mobilising the forces of resistance, publicity for the project should be concentrated in the black press and black-oriented radio. This advice was promptly acted upon by the League's assistant public relations director Sherwood Ross. Sherwood Ross, memorandum to Guichard Parris, 28 August 1964, National Urban League Papers, II-V-23, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (hereafter, NUL Papers).

⁴⁶ Robert McNamara III, letter to "Dear Friend," (n.d.), Southern Christian Leadership Conference Papers, D-IV-2, Martin Luther King Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Atlanta (hereafter, SCLC Papers).

- and with office space donated by the Church Federation of Greater Chicago, the organisation was dedicated to improving all aspects of news coverage of the freedom struggle. Consequently, a wide array of projects, including the publication of a weekly newsletter, the creation of a civil rights "Information Bureau," and the maintenance of a film library were touted as potential undertakings for the CRIS.⁴⁷

However, McNamara emphasised that the highest priority was the need to realise the full potential of black-oriented radio. Acutely aware of the medium's influence in the African-American community, McNamara insisted that any further attempt to educate the masses of black Americans about the struggle for equality could be achieved most effectively via radio. "Presently the gravest need for regular information is among negroes," explained McNamara. "As a generally semi-illiterate group their only regular communication medium contact is with radio."⁴⁸

Early in 1964, the "Civil Rights Network" was established as a first step towards achieving McNamara's goal. Drawing its information predominantly from Movement activists and stringers working in the South, CRIS' central office in Chicago immediately relayed tape recordings of newsworthy items via conference call to its own network of radio stations, as well as providing a more analytical weekend round-up of the previous week's top stories. By 20 May, CRIS could

⁴⁷ "Civil Rights Information Service Financial Statement," and "Gifts Committed to Civil Rights Information Service," both attached to Robert McNamara III, letter to Edward Clayton (n.d.), and "Statement of Goals," in Robert McNamara III, "Proposal, Civil Rights Information Service" (n.d.), all in SCLC Papers, D-IV-2.

⁴⁸ "The Present Status of Civil Rights Information Service," attached to McNamara, letter to Clayton (n.d.).

boast of the fact that 21 black-oriented stations in 18 different cities had subscribed to its service, including such prestigious outlets as WAOK in Atlanta.⁴⁹

The experience of the "Civil Rights Network" underlined the fact that, by the mid-1960s, there was no shortage of stations which were willing to support the efforts of civil rights campaigners by providing air-time for news of the latest Movement activities. The point was demonstrated even more comprehensively the following year, when the NUL inaugurated two new weekly radio programmes which were specifically designed for syndication to as many black-oriented stations as possible.

The shows appear to have been inspired partly by the CRIS' example in Chicago, partly from the culmination of the League's own long-term plans. Certainly, upon receipt of McNamara's prospectus and request for funding, the NUL's public relations director Guichard Parris acknowledged the many merits of the proposed service. However, he also maintained his conviction that any such project should remain firmly under the auspices of the League.⁵⁰

At the same time, the national office of the NUL had been steadily increasing its black radio output since at least the Spring of 1963, when Julius Thomas first suggested, "a nation-wide series addressed to the Negro community through a selected group of radio stations that beam their programs to the Negro consumer." At a meeting of the public relations committee on 26 March of that year, Thomas' proposal was warmly endorsed by Henry Talbert, the League's western regional director, who enthused about the service that had been rendered

⁴⁹ "The Present State of CRIS May 20 1964," attached to Robert McNamara III, letter to Edward Clayton, 20 May 1964, SCLC Papers, D-IV-2.

⁵⁰ Guichard Parris, memorandum to Whitney Young, Jr., 26 February 1964, NUL Papers, II-V-4.

by black-oriented radio in Los Angeles. If Talbert's explanation that, "through this medium, we are able to reach many persons who would not ordinarily listen to the sophisticated types of programs," betrayed a somewhat condescending attitude towards the cultural preferences of the majority of black Americans, it nevertheless astutely highlighted the possibilities inherent in black radio's mass appeal.⁵¹

However, it was not until 1965 that such plans finally reached fruition under the direction of Sherwood Ross. In his capacity as assistant public relations director of the NUL, and later as newsman at WOL-Washington, D.C., Ross was a key figure in strengthening the ties between the freedom struggle and black radio. Not only did he revive interest in Julius Thomas' idea of a regular, national Urban League programme, he actually arranged and publicised two 15-minute weekly shows, wrote one of them, and presented the other.

Both "The Leaders Speak" and "Civil Rights Roundup" debuted in May 1965. According to Ross, the shows had three specific aims: to improve the image of the NUL; to inform and educate the African-American community; and to assist the League's local branches in their membership drives. "The Leaders Speak," an interview programme hosted by Ross, each week offered a different civil rights campaigner a platform from which they could address the black radio audience. Numerous prominent spokespersons, including Whitney Young, Jr., Roy Wilkins, Bayard Rustin, Cleveland Robinson of the Negro American Labor Council, and Mathew Ahmann of the Catholic Conference for Social Justice, availed themselves

⁵¹ Julius Thomas, quoted in, Guichard Parris, memorandum to PR Advisory Committee, 25 March 1963, and "Minutes of Meeting Public Relations Committee," 26 March 1963, p. 3, both in NUL Papers, II-V-22.

of the opportunity.⁵²

"Civil Rights Roundup," written by Ross but presented by announcer Pat Connell of WCBS-New York, provided a weekly digest of the latest activities of the freedom struggle. Similar in tone to, but longer in duration than SNCC's WATS reports, Ross took great care not to diminish the effectiveness of his broadcasts by employing overly emotive language. Typically, each show offered straightforward coverage of a diverse array of civil rights stories, ranging from national politics to local struggles. Thus, for example, the script for 8 June 1965 included reports on Lyndon Johnson's civil rights speech at Howard University, in which the president had declared that the battle for true equality was only just beginning; the newly created federal commission on equal employment; the activities of the Deacons for Defense in the South; and a strike by black cotton workers at a plantation in Leland, Mississippi. In addition, particular attention was often devoted to the latest examples of continuing white violence in the South, such as the murders of black sheriff's deputy Oneal Moore in Bogalusa, Louisiana, and Willie Brewster in Anniston, Alabama, as well as the beating of civil rights workers in Jackson, Mississippi.⁵³

Very occasionally, Ross' broadcasts did abandon the strictly factual approach in favour of something more akin to editorialising. Such was the case with the report of 15 June 1965 which described a recent speech made by German scientist Dr. Wernher von Braun, one of the architects of America's space

⁵² Sherwood Ross, memorandum to Regional Directors, Local League Executive Directors, 19 April 1965, NUL Papers, II-V-17; Sherwood Ross, memorandum to Station Managers, 25 May 1965, and memorandum to Regional Directors and Local League Executive Directors, 30 June 1965, both in NUL Papers, II-V-15.

⁵³ See the scripts for "Civil Rights News Roundup" for 8 June, 15 June, 29 June, and 20 July 1965, all in NUL Papers, II-V-46.

programme. In front of an Alabama audience that included Governor George Wallace, Braun had warned of the threat posed to the existence of the Huntsville Rocket Center by the continued obstructionism displayed by many of the state's politicians to federal initiatives against racial discrimination. Ross took advantage of the opportunity to launch his own verbal rocket against Alabama's racists:

Apparently, Dr. von Braun has learned much from his experience in Germany during the Second World War - not only about sending rockets into far space but in the need for respecting the dignity of the individual down on earth.

Said Dr. von Braun, "Our agency has had a problem attracting good scientists because of the racial climate in Alabama."

Well, Gov. Wallace was listening - and rights leaders in Alabama are hoping that the words sunk in.⁵⁴

For all Ross' efforts, both "The Leaders Speak" and "Civil Rights Roundup" ended in September 1965, amid considerable administrative confusion and disputes over production costs.⁵⁵ However, the significance of the broadcasts lies less in their longevity, than in what they reveal about the evolving relationship between black-oriented radio and the freedom struggle. Not only did a major civil rights organisation, for the first time, create its own programmes for the express purpose of nation-wide syndication to black-oriented outlets, but the Movement's interest in the medium was more than reciprocated by stations. Audiences could

⁵⁴ "Civil Rights News Roundup," 15 June 1965.

⁵⁵ Vince Mallardi, letter to Guichard Parris, 27 September 1965, and Guichard Parris, letter to Vince Mallardi, 1 October 1965, both in NUL Papers, II-V-17.

hear the shows in virtually every major metropolis in the nation, and over stations throughout the rim and Deep South. By June 1965, over 70 stations around the country had agreed to air the shows - an unprecedented degree of co-operation in the history of the relationship between black radio and the African-American struggle for equality.⁵⁶

V

The kinds of activities outlined above represented an important, if often cautious, contribution on the part of black radio to the African-American fight against discrimination. By providing air-time to those news stories and external organisations which were so clearly of concern to the African-American community, broadcasters were able to maintain a fine balance between legitimately catering to the interests of their target audience, while avoiding a more personal, emotional, and potentially dangerous commitment to the civil rights issue.

In this way, many stations certainly informed, even inspired, their listeners, but rarely instigated civil rights protests of their own. While it became commonplace for stations to adopt a supportive posture in the early 1960s, only a

⁵⁶ Among the stations that aired the NUL shows were the following: WLIB, WWRL, and WRVR (New York), WVON, WAAF, WBEE (Chicago), KGFJ-Los Angeles, WDAS and WHAT (Philadelphia), WAMO-Pittsburgh, WILD-Boston, WEBB-Baltimore, KSOL-San Francisco, WJLB-Detroit, WABQ and WJMO (Cleveland).

In the South, WERD and WAOK-Atlanta, and WAUG in Augusta all accommodated the NUL in Georgia; as did WENN-Birmingham, WGOK-Mobile, and WRMA-Montgomery in Alabama; WOKJ in Jackson, Mississippi; WBOK and WYLD in New Orleans; WILA-Danville, and WHIH and WRAP in Norfolk, Virginia; WSRC-Durham, North Carolina; WDIX-Orangeburg, South Carolina; and WLOK-Memphis and WVOL-Nashville in Tennessee.

This list of stations, which is not exhaustive, is drawn from Ross, memorandum to Regional Directors and Local League Executive Directors, 30 June 1965.

relative few were willing to assume a more active role in the battle against Jim Crow. Nevertheless, through a variety of methods, such as the waging of strong editorial campaigns, fund-raising, and even - very occasionally - direct involvement in organising and mobilising protest campaigns, several stations did indeed consciously engage in more overt civil rights agitation.

Probably the most common form of such "active" participation in the freedom struggle was the airing of favourable editorials. Ever since the FCC lifted its ban on the practice in June 1949, broadcasters were allowed to editorialise upon the latest issues of the day - with the important caveat of the Commission's "Fairness Doctrine," which stipulated that equal time had to at least be offered for contrasting viewpoints on controversial subjects. In the 1960s, an increasing number of black-oriented radio stations availed themselves of the opportunity to editorialise. By 1966, the results of a survey conducted by Broadcasting magazine revealed that 55 percent of black stations did so on a regular basis.⁵⁷

Significantly, even when highlighting the problems that confronted the African-American community, a recurrent theme in many editorials was a strong emphasis upon positivity and patriotism. For example, in May 1961, WLIB was quick to condemn the "disgraceful" and "pitiful" actions of hecklers who disrupted an NAACP rally in Harlem and, "even booed the National Anthem." In the midst of the Cuban Missile Crisis the following year, WDAS entreated its listeners to, "proudly tell the world that we love this Nation as a mother loves her first born child," by raising "Old Glory" every day.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Edward Bliss, Jr., Now the News: The Story of Broadcast Journalism (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), pp. 425-26; "Radio a Leading Force in Negro Progress," Broadcasting, 7 November 1966, p. 72.

⁵⁸ WLIB Editorial, 18 May 1961, NAACP Papers, III-A-252; WDAS Editorial, 26 October 1962, WDAS Application for Renewal, 16 April 1963, Exhibit 8, Appendix D.

The sentiments expressed in such editorials are strongly reminiscent of the way in which many civil rights organisations and activists themselves sought to gain support and respectability in the nation at large by constantly evoking the Constitution and the American way of life. Nowhere was this more evident than in one broadcast made by the NAACP over WAOK-Atlanta:

FBI director J. Edgar Hoover writing in his book the Masters of Deceit [sic] told of success the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People had in keeping communists out of the organization. More than any other civil rights group the NAACP has been the butt of smears by the communists in their attempts to discredit the association. Roy Wilkins, Executive Secretary has said many times in public statements that the NAACP has no other belief that [sic] those set forth in the Bill of Rights and the Constitution.⁵⁹

Similarly, editorials often placed great emphasis upon promoting a "bootstrap" approach to black racial progress. Titles such as "There's No Substitute for Preparation" and "Planning the Use of One's Time" could have made the author of even the most hackneyed mail-order self-help manual blush. A typical example could be found in WDAS' celebration of the career of Jackie Robinson:

Jackie Robinson is, along with countless other Negroes who have risen to great heights in many fields of endeavor, a shining example

⁵⁹ "NAACP Information Series," attached to Ruby Hurley, memorandum to L. Black and Gloster Current, 27 May 1965, NAACP Papers, III-A-265.

of the miracle that is America ... what happened to Jackie Robinson could happen to every youth in our audience. But as Jackie said ... "You just have to work hard."⁶⁰

As laudable as such sentiments were, the implication that the key to increased black integration into the mainstream was simply for African-Americans to make a greater effort was, at best, a gross oversimplification which downplayed the underlying legal, structural, economic, and terroristic impediments to racial progress.

Nevertheless, it would be erroneous to suggest that the fundamental problems of white racism were never boldly addressed in editorials aired over black-oriented radio stations. In New York, for example, WLIB had a long-established editorial policy which regularly expounded upon the issue of racial discrimination, both on a local and national level. Thus, calls for speedier school integration and vehement denunciations of the "monstrously evil" whites-only policy of the New York Athletic Club were combined with biting comment on the latest civil rights abuses in the South. In 1962, amid the crisis that accompanied James Meredith's attempt to integrate the University of Mississippi, the station reserved much of its strongest criticism for that state's governor, Ross Barnett. Editorials such as "Governor Barnett's Folly" and "Mississippi is Asking for it" left little room for doubt as to WLIB's stance, as the station called for greater federal

⁶⁰ "Advice to Today's Youth: There's No Substitute for Preparation," WOL Editorial, 21 October 1965, and "Planning the Use of One's Time," WOL Editorial, 6 November 1965, both in WOL Exhibit 11, FCC Docketed Case Files #16533, vol 4, Box 166, National Archives II, College Park, Maryland (hereafter, FCC Docketed Case Files); "Editor Speaks," WDAS Editorial, 24 January 1962, WDAS Application for Renewal, 16 April 1963, Exhibit 8, Appendix D.

intervention in the South and urged the Department of Justice to initiate proceedings to remove Barnett from office.⁶¹

The same year, WDAS-Philadelphia used its editorials as a means of launching a community-wide protest against the incarceration of civil rights campaigners, including Martin Luther King, in Albany, Georgia. On 11 July, the station summarised the situation for its listeners:

On Tuesday, Justice was murdered, Democracy and Truth crucified in the name of Bigotry in Albany, Georgia. A Judge, apparently blinded by intolerance and race hatred, sentenced the Reverend King and other integration leaders for attempting to obtain the rights granted all Americans under the Constitution. WDAS joins the Negroes of Georgia in mourning the death of Justice, and is offering free mourning buttons to our listeners to be worn until these fighters are released. We are calling upon all clergymen to designate Sunday, July 22nd "MOURN THE DEATH OF FREEDOM DAY" in Philadelphia.⁶²

⁶¹ "School Integration in New York City," WLIB Editorial, 20 December 1962, "New York Athletic Club Take Notice!" WLIB Editorial, 13 December 1962, "Governor Barnett's Folly," WLIB Editorial (n.d.), "Mississippi Is Asking For It," WLIB Editorial, 14 September 1962, and "Unfinished Business with Governor Barnett," WLIB Editorial, 5 October 1962, all in WLIB Application for Renewal, 11 March 1963, Exhibit 4.

WLIB's strong stance attracted considerable attention within New York's African-American community. Even the Amsterdam News warmly commended the station for, "its coming of age in the field of radio editorializing." Amsterdam News, 29 December 1962, clipping in *ibid*.

⁶² WDAS Editorial, 11 July 1962, WDAS Application for Renewal, 16 April 1963, Exhibit 8, Appendix B.

The city's Mayor Tate duly acceded to the demand and, with the assistance of local churches and the NAACP, WDAS secured over 10,000 signatures for a petition in support of the Albany movement.⁶³

To be sure, not every black radio station that editorialised did so with the vigour of WLIB or WDAS, but there was undoubtedly a discernible increase in the number of stations that were at least prepared to broach the question of racial discrimination. In June 1961, even WDIA in Memphis, which had previously studiously avoided such matters, entered the fray with its own editorial programme. Of all the stations that Broadcasting found to be regularly editorialising in 1966, fully 89 percent claimed to deal specifically with issues of race.⁶⁴

A second method through which black-oriented stations overtly assisted the Movement was through fund-raising. In many ways, the medium's integral role in the lives of millions of African-Americans rendered it particularly suitable for such activities, so long as the stations themselves were amenable to the idea of being used in this way. Although never as common a practice as the provision of news coverage and air-time to civil rights groups, a number of stations did make a direct financial contribution to the freedom struggle.

Admittedly, the sums of money involved were usually modest. In no way could black radio be said to have bankrolled the civil rights movement. For example, WLIB's donation to the March on Washington movement in 1963 was for \$230. In Detroit, WCHB's "Dollars for Democracy" radiothon in 1961 on

⁶³ "News Merchandising ... the Editorial!" WDAS Application for Renewal, 16 April 1963, Exhibit 8, Appendix B.

⁶⁴ WDIA Application for Renewal of Broadcast Station License, 18 May 1964, Exhibit E, FCC License Renewal Files, Box 170; "Radio a Leading Force in Negro Progress," p. 72.

behalf of black sharecroppers in Tennessee raised just over \$1,000. A charity golf tournament arranged by WHAT in 1961 for the Philadelphia branch of the NAACP netted a similar total - although later in the decade the same station was credited by Broadcasting magazine with generating up to \$20,000 for Martin Luther King.⁶⁵

While most such fund-raising efforts may not have radically improved the finances of civil rights organisations, they did offer a potent example of black radio's overt participation in the freedom struggle. Clearly, it was often only a fine distinction between these activities and the more common practice of offering air-time to civil rights groups to enable them to conduct their own membership and fund-raising campaigns. The difference lay in the extent of the direct involvement of each individual station.

Particularly for stations in the North, the staging of their own fund-raising drives, as opposed to simply publicising the efforts of others, offered one of the most practical and visible ways in which they could demonstrate their commitment to, and solidarity with, the freedom struggle. Thus, whether it be KATZ-St. Louis co-ordinating efforts to obtain food and money for the black population of Greenwood, Mississippi, WWRL-New York seeking to provide for the bereaved family of William Moore after his murder in Alabama in 1963, or Purvis Spann at WVON-Chicago raising funds for the Mississippi Freedom Summer, such drives were often staged with the express intention of assisting the southern Movement.

⁶⁵ "March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom Statement of Income and Expenditures" (n.d.), p. 5, NAACP Papers, III-A-229; Sponsor, 13 March 1961, p. 81; "Their Community Roots are Spreading," Sponsor, 9 October 1961, Part 2, p. 14; "Radio a Leading Force in Negro Progress," p. 73.

In this way, radio provided northern African-American audiences with their own opportunities to identify with the struggles of the South.⁶⁶

The third, and least common, aspect to black radio's active involvement with the Movement comprised those rare occasions when a station actually assumed a key role in mobilising a community for participation in civil rights protest. Perhaps the most dramatic illustration of this particular element of black radio's relationship with the freedom struggle was provided during the Birmingham, Alabama, campaign of 1963. When the momentous decision was taken by SCLC leaders to employ Birmingham's schoolchildren in non-violent demonstrations in May of that year, the local black-oriented station, WENN, was an ideal vehicle for getting word of the protests to the city's youth. Disc jockeys Shelley "The Playboy" Stewart and "Tall" Paul White - a popular air personality who, as part of the station's public service activities, often liaised with local schools - repeatedly broadcast coded announcements concerning a "big party" to be held in the city's Kelly Ingram Park. Their exhortations played a key role in helping to publicise the protests; according to Taylor Branch, "Nearly every Negro kid in Birmingham knew what he [White] meant."⁶⁷ Certainly, Larry Russell, a 16 year-old high school student in 1963, was no exception:

We knew about them [the mass meetings] from two radio disc jockeys, Shelley Stewart and Paul White. Paul White used to call the meetings "a party." On the broadcast he'd say, "There's going to

⁶⁶ Sponsor, 22 April 1963, pp. 62-63, and 6 May 1963, p. 62; Martin Luther King, Jr., "Transforming a Neighborhood into a Brotherhood," Speech to the NATRA convention, Atlanta, 11 August 1967, Jack the Rapper, January 1989, p.1.

⁶⁷ Branch, Parting the Waters, p. 755.

be a party Monday night at six at Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, and everybody's invited." We good old Baptists knew there wasn't going to be any dance.

With Shelley back then there was no telling what he'd say. You knew it was coded for the protection of their jobs. The morning *after* a meeting he'd get on the broadcast and he'd say, "Last night there was a mass meeting over at Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, and it appears there were sixteen hundred people there." Then it's news, and he's covered himself. He might add something in a real quick and sly way - "I wonder how many are going to be there Wednesday night?" and then he'd go into a rap.⁶⁸

Clearly, WENN's broadcasts were of great value to the Movement in Birmingham, yet the episode also offers a vivid reminder of the context within which such stations had to operate. The evidence suggests that White and Stewart enjoyed at least the tacit backing of WENN's white station manager Joe Lackey, who has long been respected by many of Birmingham's African-Americans for his own role in establishing the station as an integral part of the community. Even so, the fear of attracting the attention of hostile whites (and losing the support of lucrative white sponsors) forced the station's air personalities to assist civil rights activists in a covert, secretive fashion.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Larry Russell, quoted in, Ellen Levine, Freedom's Children: Young Civil Rights Activists Tell Their Own Stories (New York: Avon Books, 1993), p. 101.

⁶⁹ For Lackey's popularity, see Birmingham Post-Herald, 14 February 1976, and 18 February 1976, and Birmingham News, 20 March 1976, Clippings File: "Radio Broadcasting - Birmingham," Birmingham Public Library Archives, Birmingham.

Similarly, at the end of 1963, WENN's application to the FCC for the renewal of its license - a copy of which had to be available for inspection to members of the public - made no mention of its participation in the May protests. The omission spoke volumes. The license renewal procedure was the one occasion above all others when stations, in an attempt to persuade the FCC that they were worthy of being allowed to continue operation, made the most of any public service activities that they had been involved in. Yet, just a few months after making a valuable contribution to the demonstrations which were often regarded as instigating a fundamental shift of opinion in America in favour of the civil rights movement, WENN maintained a firm silence about its own role.⁷⁰

Nevertheless, despite such reticence, those who were aware of WENN's participation fully appreciated its significance. For example, even several years later, Martin Luther King continued to acknowledge publicly his debt to Tall Paul for his contribution towards the success of the Birmingham campaign.⁷¹

Other concrete examples of such active (if sometimes covert) community mobilisation by black radio are difficult to find, although they were not uncommon in Philadelphia, where the situation was exceptional due to the presence of deejay Georgie "The Man with the Goods" Woods at WDAS. A personal friend of Martin Luther King and close associate of Philadelphia NAACP leader Cecil Moore, Woods ably demonstrated the extent to which a socially conscious deejay could use his position of influence in the African-American community to great effect. Certainly, through radio, Woods was provided with a regular opportunity to encourage listeners to participate in civil rights activity. "I didn't have to have a

⁷⁰ WENN Application for Renewal of Broadcast Station License, 11 December 1963, FCC License Renewal Files, Box 180.

⁷¹ King, "Transforming a Neighborhood into a Brotherhood."

press conference to reach nobody, 'cause I talked to them everyday," he later explained. "They knew exactly how I felt."⁷²

Whether it be through publicising local protests, such as those which occurred at Philadelphia's Girard College, providing coaches to transport listeners to the March on Washington, or personally participating in the Selma, Alabama, demonstrations of 1965, Woods' example was an inspiration to many. "I wanted to go on the march [on Washington] because of him," recalled listener Merv Caruth. "... I don't know what it is but I just took a liking to the man."⁷³ Similarly, music business veteran Kenny Gamble willingly accords Woods a unique position in the history of black radio's relationship to the freedom struggle:

I saw George when he was with Martin Luther King, and saw how active he was. Now he wasn't just a disc jockey, he wasn't just Georgie Woods at the Uptown, he was different from everybody on the radio ... I've been in the music business most of my life. I don't know nobody else in the industry that was as active and as vocal and as loyal to Black people as Georgie Woods.⁷⁴

VI

As significant as such incidents of active community mobilisation were to local struggles on an individual basis, they were hardly typical of black radio's

⁷² Georgie Woods, quoted in, Spady, Georgie Woods, p. 178.

⁷³ Merv Caruth, quoted in, *ibid.*, p. 173.

⁷⁴ Kenny Gamble, Foreword, *ibid.*, p. iv.

relationship with the civil rights movement in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Thus, any general assessment of the medium's performance has to be based upon those activities which were more characteristic of a greater number of stations.

In providing a vehicle for the dissemination of news, information, and editorial opinion concerning the freedom struggle, black-oriented radio was by no means unique among the mass media. On the contrary, numerous commentators have observed how many sections of both the print and electronic media rendered an invaluable service to the Movement.⁷⁵ However, within this general trend, there were several salient features, both positive and negative, which particularly characterised black radio's contribution.

With good reason, much of the attention that has been focused upon the relationship between the media and the Movement has considered the crucial impact of television. With its dramatic scenes of white racist violence and police brutality, television's visual portrayal of events carried a uniquely emotive impact. In the words of NBC's William Monroe:

Television conveyed the emotional values of a basically emotional contest with a richness and fidelity never before achieved in mass communications. When you *see* and *hear* a wildly angry man talking, whether he is a segregationist or integrationist, you can understand the man's anger, you can feel it - the depth of it, the power of it, the suffering in it. But if you *read* a description of what

⁷⁵ See, for example, David Garrow, Protest at Selma: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), pp. 161-78; Bliss, Now The News, pp. 320-26.

the man said, you find that, by comparison, the words are dried-up little symbols through which only a fraction of the story comes.⁷⁶

Indeed, in many ways, the very genius of the Movement lay in its ability to generate, through the calculated deployment of non-violent direct action, the kinds of images seen at Birmingham and Selma that were beamed into homes throughout the land and which helped to prick the conscience of a nation. By creating a sufficiently strong sense of moral outrage in the country at large, civil rights activists succeeded in forcing federal intervention on their behalf.

What is telling, however, was the very need to create these sensational images in order to secure television coverage. The medium in the 1960s, as Martin Luther King observed, was still directed overwhelmingly towards white, middle-class Americans. While it covered the most dramatic moments of the freedom struggle to great effect, it was not involved as an integral part of the black community on a day-to-day basis.⁷⁷

Black radio, on the other hand, often served as a veritable bulletin board of community affairs, and was able to devote significantly greater attention to the kinds of local meetings and voter registration campaigns which, if somewhat more mundane, were equally vital for the Movement's overall prospects of success. Certainly, Ben Hooks, aide to Dr. King in Memphis (and later the first African-American commissioner on the Federal Communications Commission and executive director of the NAACP), was appreciative of this fact:

⁷⁶ William Monroe, cited in Garrow, Protest at Selma, pp. 165-66.

⁷⁷ King, "Transforming a Neighborhood into a Brotherhood."

the black-oriented stations always covered. If I'd go into town with Dr. King, if there was nothing dramatic going on, after the press conference there'd be no coverage, but the black-oriented stations would always be there ... the fact of the matter is that they did a tremendous job ... and while the white television stations covered it and some white radio stations came, the flow of news, when it was slow and when it was up, would always be on the black-oriented stations.⁷⁸

Obviously, television images of civil rights protests reached, and moved, a black as well as a white audience. However, because of the significant contrasts between the ways in which television and radio coverage were consumed by the black community, radio still enjoyed a special influence. Without even one African-American newsman on a major network until the appointment of Mal Goode by ABC in 1962, television could speak *to* and *about* the black community, but rarely as *part* of it. Thus, a broadcaster such as WLIB's Harry Novik readily acknowledged the importance of television's coverage of the Movement, but still remained confident that his own station retained a particular significance as a news source to black New Yorkers. As he explained to Sponsor in November 1963: "we feel equally certain that they now turn in even greater numbers than before to the local Negro-programed station wherever possible to get the Negro thoughts and attitudes that the general broadcaster just cannot supply."⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Ben Hooks, interview with Stephen Walsh, 3 August 1995, UNOHC.

⁷⁹ Harry Novik, quoted in, "Radio/TV Coverage of Negroes Changing Audience Make-Up," Sponsor, 4 November 1963, p. 48.

As a specifically black-oriented source of news, radio possessed both advantages and disadvantages in comparison to black newspapers. Unlike the press, radio's traditional primary concern with entertainment usually resulted in the relegation of news reporting to a subsidiary role. Even at the most well-respected black-oriented stations, news broadcasts occupied only a small fraction of the total air-time. For example, by their own admission, in the early 1960s such programming accounted for 7.3 percent of the weekly schedule at WAOK-Atlanta; 4.4 percent at WDAS and 5.3 percent at WHAT in Philadelphia; 6.9 percent at WAAF-Chicago; and only 3.8 percent at WENN-Birmingham. Certainly, a typical news round-up - usually of a few minutes duration every hour - was rarely able to match the depth of coverage and level of analysis offered by a newspaper.⁸⁰

On the other hand, it was precisely because of radio's pre-eminence as an entertainment medium that the news and civil rights coverage that were provided were particularly effective. The general preference for the electronic over the print media, as well as radio's deliberate targeting of a black audience, and its ability to tap successfully into the strong oral tradition that has always been an integral part of African-American culture, combined to make black-oriented radio truly the medium of the mass of black Americans.

Certainly, numerous civil rights stalwarts expressed a keen awareness of this fact. In a 1967 speech to a convention of disc jockeys, Martin Luther King readily testified to black radio's influence:

⁸⁰ See Section IV, Question 2 (a), of the following: WAOK Application for Renewal, 29 December 1963; WDAS Application for Renewal, 16 April 1963; WHAT Application for Renewal of Broadcast Station License, 29 April 1963, FCC License Renewal Files, Box 202; WAAF Application for Renewal of Broadcast Station License, 21 August 1961, FCC License Renewal Files, Box 199; WENN Application for Renewal, 11 December 1963.

Obviously, radio's historical emphasis upon entertainment is equally true of general-market, as well as black-oriented, outlets.

I valued a special opportunity to address you this evening for in my years of struggle, both north and south, I have come to appreciate the role which the radio announcer plays in the life of our people, for better or for worse, you are opinion makers in the community. And it is important that you remain aware of the power which is potential in your vocation. The masses of Americans who have been denied and deprived educational and economic opportunity are almost totally dependent on radio as their means of relating to the society at large. They do not read newspapers, though they may occasionally thumb through *Jet*. Television speaks not to their needs but to upper middle class America ... Tonight I want to say thank you ... to all of you who have given leadership to our people in thousands of unknown and unsung ways.⁸¹

SNCC's Julian Bond reiterated this point, suggesting that, when he and Mary King wanted to reach the black middle-classes, they would use the print media, but if they wanted to reach the masses, they turned to radio: "If you wanted to get to the large mass of people, you had to go to radio. Radio was what they listened to and radio was where they got their information."⁸²

In addition to the medium's popularity, black radio's value as a disseminator of civil rights news was further enhanced by its immediacy. Broadcasting seven days a week, often 24 hours a day, radio was able to keep its audience continuously updated with the latest news as it happened. In this way, the medium

⁸¹ King, "Transforming a Neighborhood into a Brotherhood."

⁸² Bond interview.

clearly enjoyed a major advantage over the majority of black newspapers, which, with the important exceptions of the Atlanta World and the Chicago Defender, were usually only weekly publications. For Julian Bond, this was perhaps black radio's greatest significance: "It's most immediate value is immediacy ... almost all the black press is weekly, so you've got to wait until Friday or Thursday to see the results of anything you've done. But with the radio, you're right there, right today - five minutes from now, you're on the air."⁸³

At times, such flexibility was harnessed to truly remarkable effect. In her autobiography Freedom Song, SNCC's assistant communications director Mary King argued that the media not only educated people about the Movement; it also had a vital - if often overlooked - role in helping to save lives. According to King, the effective use of the media was crucial in providing some semblance of protection for arrested civil rights activists:

The presence of a reporter at a jail or a telephone inquiry from a newspaper was often the only step that let a local sheriff know he was being watched. Our job, in mobilizing the press, was to make local law officers feel that they were under scrutiny, thereby providing a measure of safety for civil rights workers.⁸⁴

One of the most celebrated examples of such activity involved WLIB-New York at the time of the arrest of CORE's James Farmer during the Freedom Rides of May 1961. Upon his imprisonment in a Jackson, Mississippi, jail, staff at the

⁸³ *ibid.*

⁸⁴ King, Freedom Song, p. 215.

station not only succeeded in contacting Farmer; they also managed to conduct a full-scale interview with him over the air.⁸⁵

Finally, the significance of the news service offered by black radio stations cannot be assessed solely in terms of its educational function. It also assumed an important psychological role. Civil rights campaigners battling against Jim Crow drew great support and encouragement from the news of the struggles and successes of like-minded groups throughout the South, and the continuous news updates provided by radio was one of the most important means through which this could be accomplished. Activists adept in utilising the mass media, such as Mary King, evaluated black-oriented radio's particular contribution along these lines:

It had quite a different and specific mobilisation purpose which was different from all of the other uses of the radio ... As far as the local black stations were concerned, it was really more of a rallying ... an ongoing verbal "pep" rally of letting them know that there were people who were active ... The whole thing just built solidarity, and built a conviction that there was something big, much bigger than any one town or city.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ "We just called up the prison and asked for him," recalled Harry Novik with some amusement. "They said they'd have to go three flights up to get him. We waited." Harry Novik, quoted in, New York Times, 27 May 1961.

⁸⁶ King interview.

VII

The comments of activists such as Mary King underline the way in which the period 1955 to 1965 witnessed fundamental changes in the relationship between black-oriented radio and the African-American struggle for civil rights. To be sure, some stations may have nodded in acquaintance, rather than warmly embraced, the freedom struggle, but by the mid-1960s most of them at least recognised its existence.

Paradoxically, given the overwhelmingly white ownership of the medium, the change resulted primarily from impulses emanating from within the black community itself. Certainly, with at most only 16 stations actually owned by African-Americans by the end of the decade, the increase of black radio support for the Movement cannot be attributed to a significant expansion of black ownership of the medium in the 1960s.⁸⁷

Crucially, however, the simple fact of white ownership was itself not an automatic bar to black radio's involvement in the freedom struggle. This is not to suggest that white owners of black-oriented stations, any more than their African-American counterparts, were crusading integrationists - although some, such as Harry Novik at WLIB, Zenas Sears at WAOK, and Dolly Banks at WHAT expressed an interest in the Movement that was more than perfunctory. What it does mean is that civil rights and other black interest groups were eventually able

⁸⁷ Fred Ferretti, "The White Captivity of Black Radio," Columbia Journalism Review, (Summer 1990), rpt. in Our Troubled Press: Ten Years of the Columbia Journalism Review, ed. Alfred Balk and James Boylan (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1971) p. 87.

Furthermore, as Chapter Four will demonstrate, black ownership was in itself no guarantee of superior community service or increased political activism at a radio station.

to secure air-time and coverage of their activities on black-oriented radio in spite of, rather than because of, the political agenda of individual owners.

This point can be illustrated by the fact that even an organisation with such a militant stance towards white America as the Nation of Islam was accommodated by numerous stations. Every week, the "Muhammad Speaks" radio show brought the message of the Nation's leader Elijah Muhammad to radio listeners around the country. Much of the show's coverage was attributable to the fact that it was broadcast by the giant 250,000 watt outlet XERF, located in Villacuna, Mexico. However, the programme was also conveyed by several regular white-owned, black-oriented outlets. By 1963, advertisements in the Muhammad Speaks newspaper informed readers that the show could be heard over such stations as WAUG-Augusta, WSID-Baltimore, WNOO-Chattanooga, WWRL-New York, WANT-Richmond, and KSAN-San Francisco.⁸⁸

Similarly, in New York, WLIB regularly offered air-time to Malcolm X, and even tried to claim much of the credit for his rise to prominence, while still distancing itself from his views. The station editorial at the time of Malcolm's assassination in February 1965 was indicative of this precarious balancing act:

We are sure that WLIB can lay undisputed claim to having afforded the late Malcolm X his initial springboard in New York and eventually throughout the nation for airing the tenets of the Black Muslim faith and forging the impact of his personality on the listening public. We were presenting him on "The Editors Speak" when no other communications medium seemed interested. And we are happy that we did because it gave us an opportunity to know

⁸⁸ Muhammad Speaks, 30 December 1962, p. 2, and 4 February 1963, p. 23.

Malcolm X personally, and to know him as both a Black Muslim and a Nationalist leader.

As likeable and charming as Malcolm X could be as an individual, as a Black Muslim and Nationalist he was a bitter, uncompromising fanatic about race.⁸⁹

Admittedly, many different elements of the mass media covered Malcolm X's career extensively. However, there was a crucial contextual difference between, for example, a television show such as "The Hate that Hate Produced," which was essentially designed to shock - even titillate - a white audience, and Malcolm's appearances on a specifically black-oriented medium, which enabled him to address the African-American community directly.

Given that a substantial number of white owners of black-oriented stations, despite not having a crusading zeal themselves, nevertheless extended the use of their facilities to a variety of black protest organisations, the question remains as to how they were persuaded to do so. Certainly, this trend could not be attributed to direct pressure from the FCC. Occasionally in its history, such as with its 1960 Programming Policy Statement, the Commission did reiterate the obligation of broadcasters to ascertain, and cater for, the needs of the communities they served. However, there were many other, "safer" forms of public service, such as charity fund-raising, to satisfy the Commission's requirements without the need for political activity. Moreover, the Commission's handling of the long-running controversy surrounding television station WLBT-Jackson, Mississippi, whereby the FCC repeatedly sought to renew the station's license despite compelling

⁸⁹ "A Contorted Personality," WLIB Editorial, 27 February 1965, WLIB Application for Renewal of Broadcast Station License, 28 February 1966, Exhibit 4, FCC License Renewal Files, Box 248.

evidence of racial discrimination, hardly sent out a signal to broadcasters that civil rights was the top priority.⁹⁰

Rather, the real force for increasing black radio's involvement with the freedom struggle came directly from the black community itself. At an individual station level, this could take place through various "tricks of the trade" employed by station personnel. Especially in an era of personality radio, when many black deejays were encouraged to develop elaborate and spontaneous "raps" on air, a civil rights message could easily be incorporated without management even realising. "We couldn't editorialize," recalled Chicago deejay Lucky Cordell of the situation in the 1950s, "but we could promote organizations that were about us more than any other medium. I would slip in little comments about certain meetings [of militant Black organizations] because they concerned all of us." Certainly, on those rare occasions when black radio actively engaged in community mobilisation - such as in Birmingham and Philadelphia - the impetus came more from individual deejays utilising the force of their own personality, rather than from deliberate station policy.⁹¹

Similarly, even though news staff often had to work within serious restrictions of time and resources, they still had an important bearing in presenting a favourable image of civil rights activities to listeners. In Memphis, for example, Ben Hooks suggested that, for all their efforts at impartiality, news reporters at the city's black-oriented stations rarely failed to be supportive: "no matter how you

⁹⁰ Donald Guimary, Citizens' Groups and Broadcasting (New York: Praeger, 1975), p. 83.

The circumstances surrounding the WLBT affair are dealt with at length in the following chapter.

⁹¹ Lucky Cordell, quoted in, Spaulding, "History of Black-Oriented Radio in Chicago," p. 90.

spell it, the black men and women who were reporters or deejays were sympathetic to the Movement. The kinds of questions they asked had impact." NAACP stalwart Maxine Smith agreed, recalling with particular affection the approach favoured by WDIA newsman Ford Nelson: "Ford would just ask a question - an open-end question - and let you say everything you want! Those are the kind of tricks of the trade."⁹²

On a more general level, much of the change in black radio can be directly attributed to the civil rights movement itself. Reinforcing black radio's symbiotic relationship with the freedom struggle, the marches, sit-ins, boycotts, demonstrations and voter registration campaigns which characterised the fight for civil rights in the period up to 1965 had their own profound impact upon the black radio industry.

First, they effectively "legitimised" the issue of civil rights in the eyes of many American citizens, making it a respectable, indeed fashionable, cause to become involved with. An integral motivation behind the deployment of tactics such as non-violent direct action was the need to appeal to liberal white America as much as to African-Americans, to persuade as much of the country as possible of the moral rectitude of the cause. In such a climate, numerous stations were more at liberty to address the issue of civil rights overtly.

Second, the Movement succeeded in heightening the political awareness and aspirations of large sectors of the country's African-American population. Either through direct participation, or through the mass media, increasing numbers of African-Americans were exposed to the messages of civil rights activists. At least from the time of the Birmingham, Alabama, protests in May 1963, and

⁹² Hooks interview; Maxine Smith, interview with Stephen Walsh, 3 August 1995, UNOHC.

President Kennedy's subsequent embracing of civil rights as a "moral" cause on 11 June, the issue was established as the most pressing domestic concern of the day.⁹³

In this way, the subject of race relations became so entrenched in the national psyche that any radio station which seriously purported to act as the mouthpiece of the black community could scarcely afford to ignore it. Thus, stations such as WDIA-Memphis, which had consistently shunned controversy in the 1950s, gradually became more involved in the struggle for racial equality as the 1960s progressed. As the city's veteran newscaster Rick Taylor recalled:

WDIA did eventually reach a plateau, a posture where it began to actively advocate integration ... but it would not be correct to say that it also had forged ahead in that area as a pioneer ... [but] once WDIA saw what other stations were doing across the nation ... I think it sort of deemed that it was more or less safe to dive off those waters that before had been rather taboo. But it did. And once it did, it did it like no other station in Memphis.⁹⁴

The same pattern was repeated around the country, as from KDIA-Oakland to WHIH-Portsmouth, Virginia; WAMM-Flint, Michigan to WSRC-Durham, North Carolina, station managers and owners readily confessed that the

⁹³ Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, pp. 264-69; Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul*, pp. 134-39.

⁹⁴ Rick Taylor, interview with Stephen Walsh, 5 August 1995, UNOHC.

civil rights movement was the crucial catalyst in encouraging greater coverage of racial issues.⁹⁵

VIII

In many ways, the very fact that by 1965 white-owned, black-oriented radio stations in the heart of the Deep South regularly broadcast news of the latest civil rights activities was in itself a remarkable symbol of what the Movement had achieved. Even if many stations addressed the civil rights issue only after it had already been "legitimised," and even then only worked with the more moderate civil rights organisations such as the NUL and NAACP, the significance of such co-operation should not be underestimated. By the mid-1960s, although the racial climate may have been changing, progress was still at best sluggish. Within the 12 months after the Urban League debuted its two black-oriented radio shows in 1965, the bereaved relatives and friends of Oneal Moore, Willie Brewster, Jonathan Daniels, Samuel Younge, Jr., and Vernon Dahmer would all have reason to grieve the fact that, in some parts of the South, any kind of civil rights agitation still carried potentially deadly risks.

⁹⁵ "Stations Identify with their Audience," Broadcasting, 7 November 1966, pp. 84-89.

Although the civil rights movement was a major factor in increasing black radio's sensitivity to race in the early 1960s, it was not the only one. On a more general level, the changing commercial environment of the radio industry in the 1960s had a significant impact. As many general market stations cornered the white youth market by adopting a Top 40 chart-oriented format in the wake of the 1960 payola scandals, black-oriented stations were therefore free - or forced - to pursue a more conspicuously "black" approach. For the increasing of black-white musical segregation by the mid-1960s, see Ward, "Race Relations," pp. 202-09, 210-12, 266-71.

Moreover, the genuine successes of the freedom struggle by the mid-1960s by no means rendered further civil rights agitation unnecessary. The legislative equality for African-Americans enshrined in the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965 did not automatically ensure *de facto* equality. As the attention of civil rights activists shifted in the post-1965 era towards a greater concentration on economic and institutionalised racism, the real battle against discrimination was, in many ways, only just beginning.

CHAPTER FOUR

Black-Oriented Radio in the Black Power Era

1966-1975

I

In late June 1966, to mark the conclusion of James Meredith's turbulent "March Against Fear" through Mississippi, black-oriented radio station WOKJ-Jackson provided its listeners with extensive live coverage of a four hour freedom rally staged at nearby Tougaloo College. In itself, the event was a striking example of the progress that had been made in the relationship between the civil rights movement and black-oriented radio since the beginning of the decade. However, it is for other reasons that the Mississippi march has usually been discussed by historians: the shooting of Meredith by Aubrey James Norvell; the increasing tensions among civil rights organisations; and, in particular, the popularisation of the slogan "black power" by Stokely Carmichael and Willie Ricks at a mass meeting in Greenwood on 16 June.¹

Although the two SNCC activists did not invent the term, nor the nationalistic sentiment that it encapsulated, the rapidity with which "black power" entered into the lexicon of black protest and popular consciousness following the Greenwood rally appeared to signal an important shift in the African-American fight for equality, even though many established civil rights organisations continued to battle assiduously against discrimination and, at least so far as their relationship with black-oriented radio is concerned, increased rather than decreased their effectiveness.

¹ WOKJ Application for Renewal of Broadcast Station License, 27 February 1967, Exhibit B, Part 5, FCC License Renewal Files, Box 30, National Archives, Suitland, Maryland (hereafter, FCC License Renewal Files).

The enthusiasm for black power undoubtedly reflected an increased sense of disillusionment and militancy among many African-Americans that had been gaining momentum over the previous two years. In 1964, for example, the inter-racial tensions of the Mississippi Freedom Summer and the failure of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) to be seated at the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City had undermined the faith of many African-Americans in white America's commitment to their cause. In August 1965, the signing of the Voting Rights Act marked the fulfilment of many white racial liberals' agenda on the civil rights issue. A few days later, the Watts riot demonstrated in the most explosive manner possible that the problems of the ghetto remained far from cured, while the extent of white resistance to Martin Luther King's 1966 housing desegregation campaign in Chicago suggested that the solution of such problems was by no means imminent.²

Coming to prominence in such circumstances, black power was a profoundly ambiguous term which covered a diverse, sometimes contradictory, array of strategies for African-American liberation. Black separatism - physical, psychological, political, cultural and economic; socialist revolution; and black capitalism all found a niche within the black power spectrum.³

Given that the actual advocates of the slogan often differed in their interpretations of it, it was only to be expected that most black-oriented radio stations struggled to come to terms with all of the various elements of the black power impulse. Despite recognising the need to be sensitive to the enthusiasm

² Clayborne Carson, In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s, 2nd ed. (1981; rpt. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 111-228; Robert Weisbrot, Freedom Bound: A History of America's Civil Rights Movement (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1990), pp. 154-221; William L. Van Deburg, New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965-1975 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 29-62.

³ For one of the most thorough dissections of the various "strands" of black power, see Van Deburg, New Day in Babylon, pp. 112-91.

for black power, the whole process was fraught with difficulties for station owners and management. The issue of co-operation with well-established civil rights organisations such as the NAACP, NUL, and SCLC, which continued to pursue their integrationist goals and nonviolent tactics, was relatively straightforward. Black power, on the other hand, offered a Pandora's Box of potential problems. The very concept of white-owned, but black-oriented radio stations was anathema to one of the central tenets of black power ideology, which called for black control of the institutions that shaped and affected black life.⁴ Similarly, even the remotest hint of support for the violent rhetoric that was espoused by some activists would almost inevitably have incurred the opprobrium of advertisers and the FCC alike. Thus, over the latter half of the 1960s and early 1970s, black radio maintained a nebulous relationship with the black power movement, as it tentatively sought to negotiate a safe path through the maze of differing ideologies.

II

Although black power radically altered the political context within which black-oriented radio stations operated, it is important to recognise the continuities, as well as the changes, in the medium's relationship with the African-American freedom struggle. Despite - or more accurately, because of - the rise to prominence of militant expressions of black protest, many stations responded by strengthening their ties with existing, moderate civil rights organisations.

⁴ According to Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton, "The point is obvious: black people must lead and run their own organizations. Only black people can convey the revolutionary idea - and it is a revolutionary idea - that black people are able to do things themselves. Only they can help create in the community an aroused and continuing black consciousness that will provide the basis for political strength." Kwame Ture (formerly known as Stokely Carmichael) and Charles V. Hamilton, Black Power: The Politics of Liberation (1967; rpt. New York: Vintage, 1992), p. 46.

In some instances, stations with only minimal previous experience in assisting the freedom struggle suddenly expressed considerably greater enthusiasm. In the case of WLOK-Memphis, for example, it was not until early 1967 that the station finally provided the local chapter of the NAACP with its own weekly programme. Certainly, by the late 1960s, the provision of air-time to a local branch of the Association continued to be one of the most common ways for stations to become involved in the civil rights issue. Similarly, there was no shortage of stations willing to accommodate the NUL as it drew upon the experience of its earlier syndicated radio shows to broadcast the message of executive director Whitney Young in the weekly "To Be Equal" series. By the beginning of 1968, the programme was carried on over 30 stations around the country.⁵

Other stations, with longer traditions of assistance to the freedom struggle, found new ways to promote the cause. One of the most interesting examples was provided by WLIB-New York, which, unusually, undertook a deliberate attempt to cultivate the political potential of the black church. Hosted by former SCLC executive director Wyatt Tee Walker, "Religion and Revolution" offered a weekly 30-minute discussion of the church's role and responsibilities in the secular struggles of black America. As the station's management explained to the FCC:

From the Negro pulpit today, one hears not alone the word of God. The subjects of bread and the dignity of man are perhaps as evident, for the Negro ministry is an aroused ministry

⁵ WLOK Application for Renewal of Broadcast Station License, 24 April 1967, Exhibit 5, FCC License Renewal Files, Box 12; St. Clair Clement, letter to Sam Chase, 6 January 1968, WLIB Application for Renewal of Broadcast Station License, 27 February 1969, Exhibit A, Appendix 2, FCC License Renewal Files, Box 9.

aware of its people's heartaches and of its obligations to its flock.

This ministry aroused can be a powerful force. "Religion and Revolution" was, in essence, the pinpointing of some of these dissatisfactions.⁶

In Chicago, WVON played a valuable role in publicising the work of "Operation Breadbasket" - the local branch of the SCLC's programme to improve black employment opportunities by the selective patronage of companies - which was established in the city in 1966 under the direction of Jesse Jackson. Jackson, no stranger to black radio himself, quickly secured extensive coverage of the movement's activities on the station, including 90 minutes devoted to the regular Saturday morning meetings which became a trademark of the campaign. In this way, WVON conveyed the already well-attended gatherings to a much larger audience. By 1971, even Anthony Meyer - one of the fiercest critics of black radio's supposed lack of public service - lauded WVON's "Operation Breadbasket" broadcasts as a striking example of what the medium could achieve.⁷

As many black-oriented stations steadily increased their co-operation with mainstream civil rights groups, the SCLC in particular made important strides in its relationship with the medium. As the previous chapter explained, the organisation had previously used black radio to good effect, but mainly on a piecemeal, local basis. Certainly, there was still ample scope for the SCLC to

⁶ WLIB Application for Renewal of Broadcast Station License, 28 February 1966, Exhibit 4, p. 2, FCC License Renewal Files, Box 248.

⁷ James R. Ralph, Jr., Northern Protest: Martin Luther King, Jr., Chicago, and the Civil Rights Movement (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 137; Anthony Meyer, Black Voices and Format Regulations: A Study in Black-Oriented Radio (Stanford: ERIC Clearinghouse, 1971), pp. 16-17.

improve, increase and co-ordinate its use of black radio. A strong push in this direction was provided in December 1964, when Zenas Sears of WAOK-Atlanta chided the SCLC for its failure to appreciate the medium's full potential:

Most Negro programmed stations are becoming more and more concerned with the problem of joining the community. They are anxious to assist in the Civil Rights cause ...

... most Civil Rights organizations have neglected the dimes and quarters that they should be receiving from the mass of Negro listeners who want to be a part of the drive for equality but have never been told how to contribute.

As one possible remedy to the situation, Sears suggested a weekly Sunday broadcast of the sermons of Martin Luther King, to be aired on black-oriented stations around the country.⁸

In 1967, a variant of Sears' plan finally reached fruition with the commencement of "Martin Luther King Speaks." Featuring both sermons and speeches made by the SCLC leader, the weekly show was a landmark in the organisation's use of black radio on a regular and systematic basis. This was especially significant given the SCLC's shift in emphasis away from the battle against legalised segregation in the South, and towards the problems of economic discrimination highlighted by protests such as those in Chicago in 1966, and the Poor People's Campaign of 1968. Publicity director Tom Offenburger readily acknowledged that, of the various forms of mass media, black radio had a particularly crucial role to play in addressing the inhabitants

⁸ Zenas Sears, letter to Randolph Blackwell, 24 December 1964, Southern Christian Leadership Conference Papers, Part 4, Series 2, Reel 6, Microfilm Collection, Alderman Library, University of Virginia, Charlottesville.

and the problems of the inner-city ghetto. A 1968 memorandum explained his position:

- 1) About two-thirds of Negro homes in the slums have TV sets (but TV stations often do not broadcast meaningful news about the movement.)
- 2) Only 14 per cent of Negro homes in the slums receive a newspaper.
- 3) Almost all Negro homes in the slums have radios, and we know what people in the ghetto listen to: the "soul" stations.⁹

Certainly, in seeking outlets to carry the programme, a conscious effort was made to target those stations which broadcast to a substantial urban black audience. By the beginning of 1968, 11 of the 15 largest African-American markets in the country were catered for.¹⁰

Produced in New York by William Stein, "Martin Luther King Speaks" was designed to serve a dual function, as both a fund-raising and an educational tool. Unfortunately for the SCLC, the show never generated the kind of revenue that the project's architects had initially anticipated. Although numerous black-oriented radio stations were willing to air the programme, potential sponsors - who would pay the SCLC to be associated with the show - were less forthcoming. According to Stein, such reticence was due, at least in

⁹ Tom Offenburger, memorandum to Steering Committee, Executive Staff Committee, Field Staff, 2 February 1968, Southern Christian Leadership Conference Papers, B-IV-3, Martin Luther King Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Atlanta (hereafter, SCLC Papers).

¹⁰ "Radio Stations Regularly Scheduling 'Martin Luther King Speaks' January 1, 1968," attached to *ibid.* The participating stations were WWRL-New York, WVON-Chicago, WDAS-Philadelphia, WCHB-Detroit, KGFJ-Los Angeles, WOL-Washington, D.C., WEBB-Baltimore, WABQ-Cleveland, KDIA-San Francisco, WAOK-Atlanta, and WDIA-Memphis.

part, to King's increasingly outspoken and controversial denunciations of American military involvement in Vietnam.¹¹

However, although "Martin Luther King Speaks" was never a significant source of income for the SCLC, the show undoubtedly offered a valuable means of disseminating civil rights news and information to a national black audience. By the mid- to late-1960s, activists were fully aware that there were many black-oriented radio stations that were willing to assist organisations such as the SCLC. "Soul stations are an excellent means of publicising our work," enthused Tom Offenburger. "... Almost all 'soul' stations are always interested in news from the movement."¹²

To increase the programme's effectiveness still further, the SCLC established rigorous guidelines for stations that carried "Martin Luther King Speaks." The show was only to be broadcast on a Sunday, and only during certain times of the day. Each station had to air the programme at the same time each week, thus avoiding the kind of "play when available" arrangement that could confuse and lose listeners.¹³

Audience statistics testified to black radio's success in getting the SCLC message to the African-American community. By early 1968, "Martin Luther King Speaks" enjoyed a weekly listenership of approximately 2,000,000. In individual cities, audiences far outnumbered the readership of the local black press. For example, an estimated 100,000 Washingtonians and 175,000

¹¹ William Stein, telephone conversation with Stanley Levison, 16 May 1967, Martin Luther King, Jr., FBI File: Part II, King-Levison File, Reel 7, Microfilm Collection, Alderman Library, University of Virginia, Charlottesville (hereafter, MLK FBI File: K-L File).

¹² Offenburger, memorandum to Steering Committee, Executive Staff Committee, Field Staff, 2 February 1968.

¹³ William Stein, memorandum to Executive Director, Steering Committee, Executive Staff, Director of Information, 12 March 1968, p. 1, SCLC Papers, B-IV-3.

Memphians heard the show, at a time when the circulation of the Washington Afro-American and the Memphis Tri-State Defender stood at little over 8,000 and 15,000 respectively. Personal experience further reinforced the appreciation of black radio's value. "I have talked to so many persons who s[a]id they heard me on the Radio," revealed Martin Luther King to his adviser Stanley Levison in 1968, "and although we can't get the TV we can [get] the radio and that is something."¹⁴

Following King's assassination in April 1968, "Martin Luther King Speaks" became a tribute as much as a tactic - an effective medium for preserving and celebrating the memory of the slain civil rights leader. In addition to continuing with broadcasts of King's speeches, the show was used as a vehicle by the SCLC to orchestrate a national campaign in support of Congressman John Conyers, Jr.'s proposal that King's birthday be declared a national holiday. The response of over 500,000 letters was a vivid demonstration of black radio's ability to reach, and motivate, African-Americans at a grass roots level. "The impressive thing is not just the amount of mail," explained Conyers, "but the fact that much of it has come from persons who, seldom, if ever, write to Congressmen."¹⁵

Nevertheless, even within SCLC circles, the programme still had its detractors. Stanley Levison, in particular, objected to Stein's handling of the venture, and expressed his fear that, far from increasing revenues, the show

¹⁴ "Martin Luther King Speaks" statistics taken from, "Radio Stations Regularly Scheduling 'Martin Luther King Speaks' January 1, 1968"; newspaper statistics taken from Ayer's Directory of Newspapers and Periodicals 1968 (Philadelphia: N. W. Ayer and Sons, 1968); Martin Luther King, telephone conversation with Stanley Levison, 12 January 1968, MLK FBI File: K-L File, Reel 8.

¹⁵ John Conyers, Jr., "For Release," 25 February 1969, SCLC Papers, B-IV-3. For all the response in support of Conyers' proposal, it was not until 1983, under the Reagan administration, that King's birthday was finally declared as a national holiday.

could actually cost the SCLC as much as \$60,000 a year. However, such criticisms were directed towards the existing administration of the project, rather than at the use of black radio *per se*. Levison himself continued to recognise the medium's importance as a publicity tool in the ongoing struggle against racism, agreeing emphatically with Bill Rutherford that, "We have to get to the black community through the radio."¹⁶

At the heart of such examples of co-operation between the medium and the Movement was the continued espousal of the notion that interracial understanding was the key to black progress. Even while championing distinctly African-American interests and cultural achievements, black radio rarely lost sight of integrationist ideals. Thus, CORE's national director Floyd McKissick (himself a prominent black power advocate) praised Harlem's radio station in 1967: "WLIB serves the ghetto extraordinarily well ... it works to create a dialogue across the ghetto walls, enabling white men and black men to see both sides of problems, and by sharing a common understanding, hopefully, to resolve them." Similarly, as the management of WLOK explained its philosophy to the FCC in 1968:

¹⁶ According to Levison, the problems with the show stemmed from the fact that, "STEIN can't work in a modest way that we can afford." Bill Rutherford, telephone conversation with Stanley Levison, 10 May 1968, MLK FBI File: K-L File, Reel 8.

It would appear that disagreements between Levison and Stein over the handling of "Martin Luther King Speaks" dated from the very outset of the project. Stein recalled an early dispute, concerning the selection of programme material, to David Garrow: "When he heard some of the tapes that I was going to use, which was Martin preaching in a black church, for instance, he didn't want that to go on for all the public to hear, so I said 'why?' And he said, 'That's the black idiom' ... [to which I responded] 'Yeah, that's Martin Luther King.'" William Stein, quoted in, David Garrow, Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (1986; rpt. New York: Vintage, 1988), p. 707n11.

the larger part of the black community not merely is outside of the mainstream of American prosperity but generally is outside, if not estranged, from society itself. Radio, as a mass medium, is a unique tool for serving the particular needs of the black segment of our society and for integrating the black and white communities.¹⁷

In this way, co-operation with civil rights organisations was only one element of black radio's wider emphasis upon the positive aspects of American life. For instance, as the nation's involvement in Vietnam escalated, several stations strove to foster patriotic sentiment among their black listeners. In 1966, WOL-Washington, D.C., railed against those who suggested that black soldiers were disproportionately endangered in the conflict:

We have all heard the story of the little boy who cried wolf so often that when the real wolf appeared nobody came to his rescue.

The story illustrates how dangerous it is to indulge in fake charges - and we must include fake charges of racial bias.

Just the other day, it was charged that Negro troops in Vietnam are being overexposed to the fighting because of their color.

In our opinion, this charge is sheer tommyrot - and it does great damage to the Negro struggle here at home.

¹⁷ Floyd McKissick, quoted in, "Penetrating the Barriers of Harlem's Ghetto," Broadcasting, 22 May 1967, p. 87; WLOK Application for Consent to Assignment of Broadcast Station Construction Permit or License, 6 November 1968, Part II, Exhibit H2, p. 1, FCC License Renewal Files, Box 12.

In a similar vein, the management at WDIA, "Mindful of the fact that the National Anthem is heard too infrequently by the majority of Americans," began in play it four times a day, along with messages of support for troops serving in the conflict abroad.¹⁸

Another common aspect of black radio's public service activities was some variation of the "stay in school" theme, whereby station personalities or other famous celebrities impressed upon young listeners the message that a good education was the ticket to the American Dream. As the management of WLIB explained the rationale behind one such show in 1966: "it is the station's belief that programs such as 'The Pursuit of Excellence' lend hope to ... a more positive faith that the doors do open and will continue to open even farther for the man who is ready - regardless of color." In August 1967, this practice even gained official recognition and encouragement from the federal administration, as Hubert Humphrey urged black deejays to continue their efforts. "More people listen to you and to the music you play than listen to me and the words I speak," admitted the vice president to NATRA's annual convention in Atlanta.¹⁹

¹⁸ "Vietnam Fakery," WOL Editorial (n.d.), WOL Exhibit 11, Part V, FCC Docketed Case Files #16533, vol. 4, Box 166, National Archives II, College Park, Maryland (hereafter, FCC Docketed Case Files); WDIA Application for Renewal of Broadcast Station License, 22 April 1967, Exhibit 1-G, FCC License Renewal Files, Box 449.

¹⁹ WLIB Application for Renewal, 28 February 1966, Exhibit 4, p. 4; Hubert Humphrey, quoted in, "HHH asks DJs Help," *Broadcasting*, 14 August 1967, p. 10.

As socially constructive as such activities were, they did not satisfy all of the medium's detractors. David Berkman, in particular, accused the majority of black-oriented stations of only engaging in "safe" and superficial public service: "race stations will run campaigns urging Negro kids to stay in school, but they will do little to lead and organize movements to correct the underlying conditions that cause the kids to fall behind and quit." David Berkman, "The Segregated Medium," *Columbia Journalism Review*, 5, No. 30 (Fall 1966), 32.

Such activities demonstrate the way in which, as the philosophies of black power came to the fore, most black-oriented radio stations strengthened, rather than abandoned, their co-operation with established civil rights groups. To critics of the medium, such a policy could be interpreted as a conservative move in which stations failed to recognise, or ignored, fundamental changes in the political consciousness of the African-American community. In other words, it was little more than a belated and futile gesture to keep the lid on rising black militancy after the black power genie had already escaped.

Certainly, there is some validity to such an argument. Whether it was expressed in the polemic of Stokeley Carmichael, the upsurge of popular interest in the late Malcolm X, or the biting lyrics of singer Gil Scott-Heron, traditionally moderate civil rights campaigners such as Roy Wilkins, Whitney Young, and Martin Luther King undoubtedly lost some of their appeal to many African-Americans - particularly of the younger generation - during the late 1960s. However, it would be erroneous to portray black radio's enduring co-operation with these mainstream activists as purely anachronistic. For all black power's publicity and genuine significance, the civil rights establishment became neither obsolete nor irrelevant to the ongoing black struggle. As a multitude of public opinion surveys testified, the majority of African-Americans continued to seek integration rather than separation as a political solution to their problems, and repeatedly reaffirmed their preference for leaders such as King and Wilkins over the more militant proponents of black power.²⁰

Furthermore, it must not be forgotten that the old-guard civil rights leadership itself was not immune to the changing political currents of late-1960s America. King, in particular, publicly assumed a markedly more radical position in the last years of his life, with his increasingly controversial stance against economic inequality and the war in Vietnam. Thus, through black radio,

²⁰ Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon*, pp. 15-17.

a show such as "Martin Luther King Speaks" was especially significant in providing the SCLC leader with a mouthpiece to the black community at the same time that many sections of the mass media began to display considerably greater hostility than had been the case during the zenith of the non-violent movement earlier in the decade.²¹

III

For all that black-oriented radio in the late 1960s continued to promote the efforts of traditional integrationist civil rights organisations, the rise of black power nevertheless significantly altered the context within which the African-American struggle against racism was conducted, and could not simply be ignored. The medium's response to black power was never monolithic - some stations displayed a discernibly greater interest than others in raising the subject. However, they were invariably guided by the same concern for legality and constitutionality that characterised their other public service endeavours. Even those stations that were most openly sympathetic to black power only were so according to their own definition of the phrase - a definition that was usually based upon what liberal whites could accept as "constructive" black power, incorporating such concepts as increased black ownership and a larger number of African-American elected officials. In other words, the extension to black America of a greater share of the capitalistic American Dream. Simultaneously, however, the same stations eschewed the more radical and revolutionary elements of the black power impulse, and, in particular, totally distanced themselves from any connection with violence.

²¹ For a valuable account of King's portrayal in one particular element of the mass media, see Richard Lentz, Symbols, the News Magazines, and Martin Luther King (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990).

A very early indication of black-oriented radio's potential significance to black power was provided by SNCC, the civil rights organisation that was most instrumental in the rise of the movement. Less than two months after the term first came to prominence in Mississippi, SNCC's communications division in Atlanta circulated an internal memorandum which highlighted the need for a major re-evaluation of the organisation's dealings with the media. With the intention of focusing its appeal more exclusively towards the black community, the report called for, "a philosophy of communications for SNCC ... acceptance that the handling of the press is a political act and requires that we accept a certain posture."²²

In essence, the memorandum combined expressions of disillusionment with the mainstream media with practical suggestions for achieving more conspicuously "black" representation. Among the proposals advanced included a greater insistence that press conferences actually be staged in the black community, the cultivation of closer ties with the African media, and fewer appearances by SNCC chairman Stokely Carmichael in the general press. Significantly, the report's contention that SNCC should continue to work with the black press, "despite its shortcomings," was based as much upon the grounds of, "the sake of image," as any practical consideration. However, in contrast, the crucial importance of radio was fully emphasised: "[We have to recognise] That the radio be seen as vital if we talk about speaking to the Black Community."²³

It was ironic, but also perceptive, that in its politically motivated decision to pursue a tangibly more "black" approach to the media, SNCC

²² "Report of the Communications Section of the Atlanta Office," 1 August 1966, p. 2, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Papers, A-VII-4, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (hereafter, SNCC Papers).

²³ *ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

stressed the necessity of utilising black-oriented radio, despite the medium's overwhelmingly white ownership. Not only did this testify to radio's significance as a news source in the African-American community, but also to the fact that it remained the most important mass medium for reflecting the interests of the masses of African-Americans. Put simply, no other medium could rival black radio's central role in articulating and celebrating what it meant to be black.

Certainly, this was nothing new. The medium had always owed its popularity, and indeed its very existence, to its capacity to promote distinctly African-American culture on a mass scale. Furthermore, as Chapter Two demonstrated, this ability had, throughout black radio's history, infused the medium with the potential to render an important - but indirect - service to the freedom struggle through its promotion of racial pride and solidarity.

However, in the context of the late 1960s, these same activities assumed more overtly political implications. As William Van Deburg has convincingly argued, culture was integral to the black power movement, in all of its various guises. Clearly, it was most evident in the agenda of self-styled cultural nationalists, as exemplified by Maulana Ron Karenga's US Organisation. Insisting that psychological liberation from dominant white values was the vital prerequisite to any successful campaign for social, political, and economic liberation, the primary goal of such activists was the promotion of black cultural forms as the key to African-American self-expression and awareness.

However, the cultural nationalists were not alone in their appreciation of the value of culture in fostering a heightened sense of racial cohesion and black group identity. Even their most bitter, sometimes deadly, rivals in the black power movement, including revolutionary nationalist groups such as the Black Panthers, were not averse to deploying cultural expression and events as

a means of attracting support for their own agendas. Thus, as Van Deburg concludes:

much of the cultural nationalist coda was utilized and accepted as valid by a remarkably broad cross section of black activists. All that most required was that it be tintured with their own essence...

Often pigeonholed as one of the more esoteric, even aberrant expressions of the black liberation ethic, cultural nationalism actually provided much of its thrust and dynamic.²⁴

It is not surprising that black radio's relationship with the various strands of black power was strongest in the realm of cultural nationalism. Simply doing what they had always done best - in terms of showcasing black talent and cultural achievements - provided both the easiest and least controversial way in which stations could identify with the cause. Usually, this was most evident in the airing of soul music, the staple feature of many black stations' programme schedules which regularly accounted for upwards of 70 percent of weekly air-time. Positive and confident, even if rarely overtly political, soul was an ideal accompaniment to black power's emphasis upon self-respect. Perhaps the significance of soul music was best summarised in James Brown's immortal invocation of racial solidarity: "Say it Loud - I'm

²⁴ Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon*, pp. 112-191 (quote on p. 176). See also Brian Ward, "Race Relations, Civil Rights and the Transformation from Rhythm and Blues to Soul, 1954-1965," PhD Thesis, University of Cambridge, 1995, pp. 341-45.

Black and I'm Proud."²⁵

In this way, soul music, and the kind of mild cultural nationalism that it typified, made it easier for disc jockeys to show genuine solidarity with the black struggle in a way that was still acceptable to white station owners and advertisers alike. However, the point must not be over-exaggerated. Few deejays (and even fewer station owners and managers) engaged in an overt political act every time that they played the latest James Brown or Aretha Franklin release. Rather, as ever, the desire to remain hip to the tastes of their target audience stemmed more from commercial than community considerations; from a concern for profits rather than politics. "As broadcasters, we don't dictate taste, our listeners do," explained the Sonderling chain's vice-president Alan Henry. "'Soul' music is what our listeners have shown they prefer, by and large, to other types."²⁶

Nevertheless, in many ways, the causes of black radio's programming policies were less significant than the effects. In an era when the wearing of a dashiki or cultivation of a "natural" hairstyle assumed definite political connotations, black radio's almost constant barrage of soul played a key role in accelerating the development of large-scale African-American self-awareness

²⁵ For studies detailing the percentage of black radio air-time devoted to soul, see Meyer, Black Voices and Format Regulations, p. 5; Stuart Surlin, "Black-Oriented Radio: Programming to a Perceived Audience," Journal of Broadcasting, 16 (Summer 1972), 293-95.

Soul's emphasis upon racial solidarity was only one, albeit one of the most obvious, cultural expressions of the politics of the black power era. Elsewhere, it was manifest in such themes as the reassertion of black manhood and the macho ethic. Although this is not the place for an in-depth analysis of the lyrical content and "meaning" of soul music, such issues, including sexual politics, are discussed at length in, Ward, "Race Relations," pp. 323-74. See also, Van Deburg, New Day in Babylon, pp. 204-16.

²⁶ Alan Henry, quoted in, Fred Ferretti, "The White Captivity of Black Radio," Columbia Journalism Review (Summer 1970), rpt. in Our Troubled Press: Ten Years of the Columbia Journalism Review, ed. Alfred Balk and James Boylan (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1971), p. 93.

and pride. As the New York Times observed: "Black Radio Stations Send Soul and Service to Millions." If soul music was integral to the growth of black assertiveness and militancy in the late 1960s, black radio was equally important for being the medium that disseminated it.²⁷

In addition to music, a variety of other programming features further reinforced black radio's ability to promote a sense of African-American cultural solidarity. Of these, perhaps the most significant was the talk show. Such shows had been a notable feature of black-oriented radio ever since Jack Cooper's pioneering efforts in Chicago. However, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the concept really came into its own. Around the country, call-in programmes urged listeners to, "Tell it Like it is," inviting them to share their thoughts and observations, problems and grievances, jokes and anecdotes.²⁸ In so doing, radio provided an outlet for regular black community self-expression to an extent that was simply not available in the mainstream mass media, particularly television. Certainly, the comments made by New York State Senator Basil Paterson concerning WLIB in 1968 could have applied to many black-oriented stations:

Radio Station WLIB has for years, and certainly in the past year, afforded the Harlem community an outlet for the views of

²⁷ New York Times, 11 November 1968, Clippings File: "Radio," Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York (hereafter, S-C "Radio," File).

²⁸ Typical examples of such shows included WLIB's "Community Opinion," WWRL's "Tell it Like it is," WABQ-Cleveland's "Ring-a-Ding," WCHB's "Community Contact," and WDIA's "Speak Up." See New York Times, 11 November 1968; Meyer, Black Voices and Format Regulations, p.17; WCHB Application for Renewal of Broadcast Station License, 1 June 1970, Exhibit 3c, p. 2, FCC License Renewal Files, Box 436; WDIA Application for Renewal of Broadcast Station License, 22 April 1970, Exhibit IV-A-8, p. 2, FCC License Renewal Files, Box 449.

its citizens. A complaint commonly heard in the Black communities of New York City is that the news media, radio, television and the press, utterly disregard the perspective of the Black residents. There have been attempts by many of the media to do something about this failing, but it has been sporadic. On the other hand, WLIB presents a constant flow of news, conversation and commentary on the gut news of the day.²⁹

Inevitably, one of the major topics of discussion on such talk shows was black power itself. Thus, for example, on any given programme during 1969, callers to WDIA's "Speak Up" show might debate such issues as "Is Black Militancy a Help or Hindrance to Black Progress," "Is an NAACP Membership Today a Sign of Lack of Militancy," or "Is Self-Help an Answer to the Need to Improve Ghetto and Slum Areas." In this way, black-oriented radio became an important forum for the dissemination of ideas and information concerning black power.³⁰

However, while talk shows helped to raise public awareness and debate on the issues of black power, their fundamental purpose remained essentially moderate. Such programmes provided a valuable psychological release for listeners, particularly in the increasingly turbulent inner-cities. By allowing callers to give vent to their frustrations over the airwaves, it was hoped that they would be less inclined to do so in more socially destructive ways. Perhaps the most notable example of this rationale was provided by WLIB's "Community Opinion." Moderated by the station's program director Leon Lewis, the evening show played a key role in enabling Harlemites to articulate

²⁹ Basil A. Paterson, letter to Harry Novik, 28 October 1968, WLIB Application for Renewal, 27 February 1969, Exhibit A, Appendix 2.

³⁰ WDIA Application for Renewal, 22 April 1970, Exhibit IV-A-8, p. 2.

their own grievances. "Often there's nothing we can do directly to help a caller," explained Lewis, "but sometimes it makes them feel good just to be able to talk to someone who listens sympathetically." Significantly, Lewis' primary aim was to defuse racial tensions by encouraging listeners to seek redress of their grievances within the existing system: "Negroes think that most of the things that happen to them happen because they're Negroes; I think many of their problems are *human* problems, and that the tools to solve them are available if they just know where to look." In April 1967, Lewis' contribution in helping to prevent major disturbances in Harlem over the previous summer was recognised with the presentation of one of the broadcasting industry's prestigious Peabody Awards - the first occasion on which a black-oriented station was so honoured.³¹

Another significant and more deliberate development in black radio's relationship with cultural nationalism was the widespread popularisation of the black history series. Whether it was manifested in demands for black history curricula in universities, or the emergence of Afrocentric modes of historical enquiry, a major concern of many cultural nationalists was the creation of a "usable past" - the re-evaluation and glorification of African-American history as a means of promoting racial pride. In the world of black-oriented radio, this trend resulted in the proliferation of shows such as WAOK's "American Heritage," KDIA's "Profiles in Black," and WERD's "Our Noble Black Heritage." Usually, such programmes took the form of brief historical profiles, often of one or two minutes duration. This approach undoubtedly had serious limitations - a two-minute biographical sketch rarely did little more than the most cursory justice to the achievements of the pantheon of African-American historical heroes. Nevertheless, they did help to cater for the growing interest in

³¹ Leon Lewis, quoted in, New York Times, 18 June 1967, p. D19; "Penetrating the Barriers of Harlem's Ghetto"; WLIB Application for Renewal, 27 February 1969, Exhibit C.

black history at a time when few other outlets did. Furthermore, some stations did offer more in-depth treatment, such as WVON's weekly 30-minute "Black History" series.³²

As practised by black-oriented radio, whether inadvertently or deliberately, cultural nationalism remained an effective, but essentially moderate, concept. Most stations' approach to the ideology emphasised the importance of encouraging African-Americans to take pride in their own cultural achievements and history, while eschewing the incendiary and bitter rejection of white values espoused by more controversial cultural nationalists such as Karenga, Imamu Amiri Baraka, and Nikki Giovanni. Thus, there was little, if anything, in the medium's stance to alienate the sensibilities of liberal white America, and white advertisers.

An even more cautious attitude characterised black-oriented radio's relationship with what has been termed revolutionary nationalism. Armed with Marxist-Leninist polemic, guns, and not a little style, groups such as the Black Panthers presented a powerful but troubling image to mainstream white America. Unsurprisingly, few of the (still almost exclusively white) capitalist entrepreneurs who owned black-oriented radio stations rushed to embrace their platform.

Nevertheless, it would be misleading to suggest that black radio offered no assistance to organisations such as the Panthers. For example, news reports frequently provided extensive coverage of their activities and pronouncements. To be sure, in this way black radio was little different to much of the nation's mass media. Black groups with the philosophies and charisma of the Panthers were eminently newsworthy in late 1960s America. Moreover, black radio was

³² WAOK Application for Renewal of Broadcast Station License, 12 December 1966, Exhibit 5, p. 1, FCC License Renewal Files, Box 415; Rocco Famighetti, "Black Radio: On a High Wire with No Net," Broadcasting, 31 August 1970, pp. 44-50; New York Times, 11 November 1968.

certainly not immune from engaging in sensationalistic coverage of the militants. The NAACP's executive secretary Roy Wilkins, for one, had reason to bemoan the tendency of many stations to concentrate primarily upon the, "outspoken, radical elements of the society they seek to serve."³³

However, there was still a fundamental difference between the treatment afforded to such activists by the general electronic and print media, and that of black-oriented radio stations - a difference in the *mode* of communication. Through its news coverage, radio provided militants with the opportunity to employ a specifically black-oriented medium - the most popular and influential black-oriented medium of the day - through which the African-American community could be appealed to directly. With black radio's particular empathy with its listeners, this lent a unique legitimacy and force to such activists' messages.

Another possible source of black radio's involvement with radical politics was through the actions of individual deejays. Throughout the decade there had been some, albeit strictly limited, scope for those air personalities with a sufficiently strong sense of community involvement to engage in protest, regardless of the agenda of station owners and management. In the second half of the 1960s, such opportunities were even more severely curtailed. The period witnessed the beginning of the end of the era of personality radio, as black-oriented stations around the country began to follow the lead of their white rock counterparts in minimising disc jockey talk in favour of a "tighter" chart-dominated format. According to some air personalities such as WWRL's Gary Byrd, the consequences of this change for the status of the deejay were far from unintentional:

³³ Roy Wilkins, letter to Harry Novik, 11 December 1968, WLIB Application for Renewal, 27 February 1969, Exhibit A.

It was a plantation mentality we're talking about. What black radio had along this time was powerful personalities who were built through rapping and an ability to relate to the community and then became very popular. Well, again, the station managers were white. They didn't want to see a black jock become bigger than the station.³⁴

Nevertheless, it was still possible for politically active deejays to identify with the cause of black power. Between 1965 and 1969, a coterie of young militant personalities, under the direction of WDAS' (and later WLIB's) Del Shields, exemplified a "new breed" of black disc jockey who personally advocated black power and enjoyed high-profile friendships with activists such as SNCC's H. Rap Brown. Moreover, after assuming control of the National Association of Radio Announcers, they launched a bold, if ultimately unsuccessful, attempt to use the association as a force for establishing fundamental changes in the power structure, ownership, and employment patterns of the black radio industry.³⁵

A good example of this type of socially conscious disc jockey was WDIA's Chris Turner. In many ways a maverick figure, Turner personified the kind of character for whom rules were meant to be broken. Whether it was through his involvement with local militant organisation the Black Knights, expressing his opinions on Mayor Henry Loeb by broadcasting a minute of total silence, or calling for his own radio station to become black-owned,

³⁴ Nelson George, The Death of Rhythm and Blues, (New York: Plume, 1988), pp. 117-19 (Byrd quote on p. 118).

³⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 111-15. See also Ward, "Race Relations," pp. 347-51; William Barlow, "Commercial and Noncommercial Radio," in Split Image: African-Americans in the Mass Media, ed. Jannette L. Dates and William Barlow (Washington, D. C.: Howard University Press, 1990), pp. 225-26.

Turner was no stranger to controversy. Yet, through the force of his own personality, he had the ability to persuade as well as surprise. As Turner's colleague Rick Taylor recalled:

He had the reputation, at least inside the station, to be a very militant announcer, perhaps even a troublemaker. They thought that he stirred things up unnecessarily, and that he ... incited people in the community with his rhetoric on the air. Who knows, perhaps he did ... I used to listen to him before I went to work over there, and I used to think that he was off his rocker ... but once I got to WDIA and got to know him ... I found myself being more in agreement with the positions that he espoused ... I think in more ways than one he probably made most of us ... feel maybe a little ashamed of ourselves that we were not doing as much as we could have done.³⁶

While personalities such as Turner ably demonstrated how the constraints upon deejays could still be stretched, they were very much exceptions to the general rule. At WDIA, it was Turner's own popularity with listeners that provided him with a greater latitude than that enjoyed by any of his colleagues. Thus, once again, black radio's involvement with African-American protest was closely tied to the economic interests of a station's ownership. For all the headaches that Turner created, his standing in the community made him worth persevering with. "You could say more or less that Chris Turner created his own agenda," explained Rick Taylor, "... because he was a tremendously popular air personality. He got consistently high ratings.

³⁶ Rick Taylor, interview with Stephen Walsh, 5 August 1995, University of Newcastle Upon Tyne Oral History Collection (hereafter, UNOHC); New York Times, 11 November 1968.

Now again, this is the bottom line - it's all about profit, it's all about dollars, it's all about money. The bottom line is the balance sheet."³⁷

As well as news coverage and the activities of deejays, black radio did, on occasion, play a more deliberate role in publicising the activities of black power advocates. In Memphis, for example, the group of young militants known as the Invaders was provided with widespread exposure through appearances on WDIA talk shows. In Washington, D.C., the local chapter of SNCC took advantage of WOL's facilities to publicise fund-raising events such as dances and cabarets. In one such broadcast in November 1966, male listeners were invited to express their solidarity with the liberation struggle by dancing the "panther prowler," while enjoying the company of SNCC's very own "jungle bunnies."³⁸

However, unlike the situation with major civil rights organisations, the number of black-oriented stations that offered air-time to militant protest groups on a regular basis was minimal. Even those few that did usually went to considerable lengths to distance themselves from the political platform of the activists involved. For example, when WLIB provided a weekly 30-minute show to Charles Kenyatta of the Harlem Mau Mau Society, the station's management readily admitted to the FCC that its intention was to provide an outlet for the expression of militant sentiment in Harlem. However, to vindicate its choice of moderator, particular emphasis was placed upon the role that Kenyatta had previously played in maintaining community calm during times of crisis, and his anti-drugs crusades. Similarly, while inaugurating its weekly "The Activist" series, WLOK-Memphis was at pains to impress upon the FCC its own essential moderation. As the station's 1970 license renewal application

³⁷ Taylor interview.

³⁸ *ibid.*; Ethel Woodfork, letter to Ron Pinckney [sic], 7 November 1966, SNCC Papers, C-I-94.

asserted: "WLOK in this instance serves to help bring those, who often feel they can function only outside the system, into the system in a meaningful way. WLOK is in no way endorsing the views expressed by the guests by allowing them access to the airwaves."³⁹

Such examples serve as a reminder of the fact that not all of the political organisations which secured air-time on black-oriented radio necessarily shared the political agenda of the owners on whose outlets they appeared. In much the same way that, earlier in the decade, many stations offered air-time to civil rights agencies without actively endorsing their programmes, so it was possible for at least some outlets to cater for the genuine interest of their listeners in black power, without becoming overtly associated with the movement themselves.

However, the limits of black-oriented radio's relationship with the black power movement were definitely exposed when it came to the issue of violence. In many ways, this was the aspect of black power that was most exaggerated in the media. Many observers focused upon the rhetoric of violence employed by organisations like the Panthers, while neglecting the fact that the emphasis of such groups was strictly upon (armed) self-defence. Nevertheless, the role of violence was undoubtedly a genuine issue. The rhetoric of the gun, combined with a series of inner-city riots over a succession of "long hot summers," and exacerbated by the mass media's frequently sensationalistic coverage, created a popular image of the late 1960s as a time of black disorder and violence that stood in stark contrast to the supposedly non-violent era that preceded it. This impression, whether justified or not, was in itself a key factor in shaping the context within which black-oriented radio had to operate. As usual, the medium's response was characterised by its overriding

³⁹ WLIB Application for Renewal, 27 February 1969, Exhibit C; WLOK Application for Renewal of Broadcast Station License, 24 April 1970, Exhibit 7, p. 2, FCC License Renewal Files, Box 12.

concern for the preservation of law and order. All stations consistently eschewed any advocacy of violence, with many waging positive campaigns to appeal for calm during times of crisis.

In view of this fact, it is especially ironic that the first occasion on which black-oriented radio's relationship with ghetto uprisings received widespread publicity was one which led many commentators to accuse the medium of inciting, rather than pacifying, trouble. At KGfJ-Los Angeles, popular deejay Nathaniel "Magnificent" Montague developed the practice of introducing the latest "hot" records to listeners with what became his trademark slogan, "Burn, baby, burn." In the Summer of 1965, Montague hit the headlines as the phrase was adopted as the unofficial battle-cry of the Watts rebellion which exploded in the city in August, causing 34 deaths and an estimated \$35,000,000 of damage.⁴⁰

In itself, the episode offered a revealing illustration of the African-American disc jockey's ability to penetrate - deliberately or otherwise - into the mass black consciousness. It also left an unfortunate legacy for Montague in being somehow implicated in exacerbating racial tensions and encouraging the destruction of the riots. Moreover, it is a legacy that has endured. In the most recent account of the Watts rebellion, Gerald Horne suggests that Montague was at least guilty of gross irresponsibility in giving rise to such a politically charged slogan. However, such accusations appear to be unduly harsh. Not only has Montague always emphatically denied any involvement in incitement to riot, but his protestations were supported by such influential contemporaries as Martin Luther King, who publicly defended Montague against all such charges, and the Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil

⁴⁰ Gerald Horne, Fire This Time: The Watts Uprising and the 1960s (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995), p. 327; John Hope Franklin and Alfred Moss, Jr., From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African-Americans, 7th ed. (1947; rpt. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), p. 514.

Disorders (dubbed the Kerner Commission after its chairman, Otto Kerner), published in March 1968, which conceded that the deejay's role was "inadvertent."⁴¹

Although the involvement of Montague in the Watts rebellion has been open to considerable misinterpretation, the incident has few parallels. For the most part, black-oriented radio stations clearly, emphatically, and consistently strove to defuse or limit any signs of disorder whenever the need arose. By the late 1960s, there was considerable need. In the Summer of 1967 alone, the frustrations of ghetto residents finally exploded into almost 150 urban disorders, including major conflagrations in Newark and Detroit.⁴²

As white America struggled to make sense of it all, the growing awareness of black radio's importance during riot situations was further enhanced with the publication of the Kerner Commission's report. While emphasising black radio's primary function of entertainment, the report stressed that the medium had a significant role to play in the coverage of urban unrest: "the fact that radio is such a constant background accompaniment can make it an important influence on people's attitudes, and perhaps on their actions once trouble develops."⁴³

Significantly, the Commission implied that such influence could be employed for better or for worse. In particular, the report warned how stations

⁴¹ While acknowledging that Montague did not intend his slogan to have political connotations, Horne concludes: "In LA fire was a constant menace, arson was becoming ever more popular, and many of the blacks came from a region where fire and arson were favored tactics during slave rebellions; the popularity of the phrase 'Burn, baby, burn!' was difficult to separate from this context." *ibid.*; Martin Luther King, Jr., "Transforming a Neighborhood into a Brotherhood," Speech to the NATRA convention, Atlanta, 11 August 1967, *Jack the Rapper*, January 1989, p. 1; Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (New York: Bantam, 1968), p. 376.

⁴² *ibid.*, pp. 31-108.

⁴³ *ibid.*, p. 376.

could inadvertently exacerbate an already volatile situation by broadcasting the precise location of trouble-spots, thereby, "inform[ing] transistor radio-carrying young people where the action is." However, at no time did the report suggest that any black-oriented radio station, nor any of the medium's personnel, had deliberately encouraged disorder or espoused violence in any way.⁴⁴

On the contrary, the Commission paid tribute to the contribution of many deejays and talk show hosts in helping to discourage violence. Citing particular examples in Detroit (where Martha Jean "The Queen" Steinberg at WJLB - "the first lady of r+b radio" according to Billboard - was particularly influential in appealing for calm), as well as Milwaukee and New Brunswick, the report highlighted black-oriented radio's value in helping to defuse riot situations. In concluding, the Commission emphasised the need to include radio personalities in any discussions on the development of guidelines for media coverage of future disturbances.⁴⁵

The nation did not have long to wait. The month after the publication of the Kerner Commission's report, the murder of Martin Luther King in Memphis triggered a major crisis, with the potent combination of grief and anger propelling African-Americans onto the streets in over 100 towns and cities.⁴⁶

Inevitably, in the immediate aftermath of King's assassination, the country's eyes turned towards events unfurling in Memphis. The city's most influential black-oriented radio station, WDIA, immediately changed its format upon receipt of the news of King's death. As a mark of respect for the slain leader, and to avoid inflaming listeners' passions still further, all commercials were dropped for a 15 hour period, and only religious music was played.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*

⁴⁵ *ibid.*; Billboard, 26 August 1967, p. 30.

⁴⁶ Franklin and Moss, From Slavery to Freedom, p. 518.

Messages aired by local community leaders urged listeners to refrain from violence and insisted that King's murderer would be captured. Late in the evening, the first of a series of special editorials prepared by station manager Bert Ferguson couched the appeal for calm in strongly religious terms:

Nowhere in the training of our religious institutions ... not once in the teachings of Christ are we told to fight fire with fire ... to trade blow for blow or shot for shot. This is not a silly, weak philosophy. It is based on the wisdom of the ages ... the divine authority of Christ and originated with God himself. There is no possible answer but to pray and to wait.

I implore you ... pray and wait. Restrain with any power you may possess your own emotions and those of anyone you may influence. We must hold to reason. We must remember that the great majority of Memphians deplore violence in any form. We must know that the great mass of Memphis people did not want Martin Luther King to die.⁴⁷

That first editorial established two central themes that were continually repeated over the subsequent few days. First, Ferguson's editorials ceaselessly enjoined listeners to refrain from violence. The strong moral tones of the first broadcast were rapidly augmented with more pragmatic arguments which outlined the detrimental effects that images of black violence had upon the

⁴⁷ Bert Ferguson, letter to Hubert Humphrey, 23 April 1968, and WDIA Editorial, 4 April 1968, both in WDIA Application for Renewal, 22 April 1970, Exhibit IV-A-8; see also Louis Cantor, Wheelin' on Beale: How WDIA-Memphis Became the Nation's First All-Black Radio Station and Created the Sound that Changed America (New York: Pharos, 1992), p. 227.

African-American freedom struggle. As the editorial on the day of King's funeral on 9 April insisted:

Only those who are roaming the streets at night - to loot, or burn, or kill - can murder Martin Luther King a second time. It is clear that moral right is on the side of the Negro, who seeks only equal opportunity in this country. Don't give officials in our cities, or powerful men in Congress the opportunity to look past the slaying of Dr. King, crying out only at the wholesale disorders and destruction.⁴⁸

Second, WDIA repeatedly strove to convince listeners of the goodwill of the vast majority of white Memphians, and white Americans as a whole. "Perhaps in dark corners there are those bigots, racists, sulking haters of humanity who find something less than tragedy in this senseless killing," admitted Ferguson. "But, it is my firm conviction ... even more, my certain knowledge ... that the vast majority of Memphians of every race, creed, color are deeply saddened by the death of Martin Luther King." By the end of 5 April, Ferguson bravely tried to sound a more positive note with the suggestion that, out of the tragedy, a new dawn of interracialism and genuine equality could arrive: "You give your white friends a chance. I will stand by my Negro friends and together ... but only if we stay together ... we will emerge into a new day."⁴⁹

⁴⁸ "Don't Kill Dr. Martin Luther King Twice," WDIA Editorial, 9 April 1968, WDIA Application for Renewal, 22 April 1970, Exhibit IV-A-8.

⁴⁹ "Special Editorial for Friday," WDIA Editorial, 5 April 1968, and "Special Editorial for Friday #2," WDIA Editorial, 5 April 1968, both in WDIA Application for Renewal, 22 April 1970, Exhibit IV-A-8.

A similar approach was adopted by black-oriented radio stations around the country. In New York, both WWRL and WLIB also abandoned their usual programming formats, dropped commercials, and urged restraint. In an impromptu move, WLIB - a daytime only station - stayed on air until midnight at the request of Manhattan Borough President Percy Sutton and New York Mayor John Lindsay.⁵⁰

Both men, particularly Sutton, also spent hours manning special "hot line" programmes. Working on the same basic principles as call-in shows like the station's own "Community Opinion," the hot-lines were intended to provide an outlet through which listeners could express their grief and anger. In his efforts to preserve the peace, Sutton had to contend, not only with the fury of irate African-American listeners, but also with some of the misguided - if well-intentioned - white New Yorkers who contacted the station in unprecedentedly high numbers. One white woman who expressed her desire to kill King's assassin was rebuked: "I don't think that would please the Prince of Peace. Violence begets violence, so we should have no violence." Another, who suggested that large numbers of whites should descend *en masse* upon Harlem

⁵⁰ New York Times, 6 April 1968, p. 79; WLIB Application for Renewal, 27 February 1969, Exhibit A, p. 12.

The source of WLIB's decision to remain on air is something of a point of contention. Disc jockey Del Shields was in no doubt that the initiative was taken by the station's air personalities. As he told Nelson George: "The oddity was that we, the black disc jockeys, made the decision to stay on. As a result, the station got the Peabody Award. The owner himself had called and told me I had no right to do that, but I told him I didn't have time to talk to him." The assertion that the request originated with Percy Sutton and John Lindsay was made by WLIB's ownership to the FCC by way of explanation for contravening the Commission's rules. Certainly, at least for 5 April there was documentary evidence - in the form of a telegram from Lindsay to the FCC - to support this claim. See Del Shields, quoted in, George, The Death of Rhythm and Blues, p. 112; John Lindsay, telegram to Rosel H. Hyde, 5 April 1968, FCC License Renewal Files, Box 9.

in a display of sympathy, was politely, but firmly, informed that such a gesture might not meet with the reception that she expected.⁵¹

Once the most pressing danger subsided, WLIB received acclaim from many quarters for its contribution towards ensuring that New York had remained relatively trouble free. Newspapers such as the New York Times, as well as trade publications Billboard and Broadcasting, were quick to highlight the station's role. A special award from the New York State Associated Press Broadcasters Association was soon forthcoming. William Booth, chairman of the City Commission on Human Rights, perhaps best expressed the general consensus when he wrote with gratitude:

By performing such a service your station played a vital role in helping to spread the message of calm and sanity and undeniably helped keep New York the least affected of major cities by racial disturbances. This is in the best spirit of responsibility of the communications media to the public welfare.⁵²

All over the country, black radio conducted itself with a similar "spirit of responsibility." Major stations such as WVON and WGRT-Chicago, KPRS-St. Louis, and KGFJ-Los Angeles, likewise adopted a "soft" programming format. The Sonderling chain of stations (including KDIA-Oakland, WDIA, WWRL and WOL-Washington, D.C.), promptly announced the creation of two

⁵¹ WLIB Application for Renewal, 27 February 1969, Exhibit A, p. 12; Percy Sutton, quoted in New York Times, 6 April 1968, p. 26.

⁵² *ibid.*; New York Times, 7 April 1968, p. 64; Billboard, 20 April 1968, p. 74; "Crisis Proves TV-Radio Maturity," Broadcasting, 15 April 1968, p. 26; "WLIB Honored by New York State Associated Press Broadcasters" (n.d.), WLIB Application for Renewal, 27 February 1969, Exhibit C; William H. Booth, letter to WLIB, 8 April 1968, WLIB Application for Renewal, 27 February 1969, Exhibit A.

\$4,000 Martin Luther King, Jr., memorial scholarships. As Broadcasting magazine noted, because of the nature of their audience, the onus was particularly heavy upon black-oriented stations to avoid further upsetting grieving listeners:

For the Negro-programed radio stations the switch from pounding soul music or roaring rhythm and blues to sacreds, gospel, religious music and in some cases recordings of Dr. King's speeches was a natural move. It was on those stations that the commercials were dropped like hot potatoes from Thursday night through Sunday.⁵³

On so dark a day in America's history as 4 April 1968, silver linings, however faint, were few and far between. Nevertheless, the occasion was a significant, if tragic, landmark in the history of black-oriented radio. The magnitude of the crisis generated by King's assassination not only fostered an increased sense of maturity, but also a greater spirit of co-operation throughout the medium. As King was laid to rest on 9 April in his home town of Atlanta, black-oriented stations combined extensive coverage of the funeral service with renewed calls for peace. Three of Atlanta's stations - WAOK, WERD, and WIGO - and staff from several out-of-town outlets collaborated to serve the American Freedom Network (AFN), an affiliation of approximately 60 black-oriented radio stations that was established to provide over five and a half hours of uninterrupted coverage of the funeral and other commemorative services in the city. The AFN was uniquely suited to offer such a comprehensive service to its listeners, being the only broadcast outlet that was

⁵³ "Negro Stations Shift Programing for Weekend," Broadcasting, 8 April 1968, p. 9; Billboard, 20 April 1968; Variety, 17 April 1968, pp. 33, 35; "Crisis Proves TV-Radio Maturity," p. 25.

allowed an audio line direct into King's Ebenezer Baptist Church, and to be permitted access to the home of Coretta King.⁵⁴

Later that same evening, another hastily arranged "network" show, originating with WLIB and WRVR in New York, renewed the appeal for calm by urging its audience to "Dial in for Non-Violence." Broadcasting to a total of more than 20 stations, the programme encouraged listeners around the country to call in to speak to a specially assembled panel of civil rights activists, including such notable guests as James Farmer and James Meredith.⁵⁵

On occasion, black radio's overriding concern for "responsible" coverage of the crisis gave rise to the thornier issue of censorship. Several stations carefully moderated their news reporting of urban disorders, either by refusing to give any coverage to riot situations while they were taking place, or by deliberately omitting the specific locations of trouble-spots. "The news policy of this station is not to report violence of any kind while it is going on," explained a spokesman for WERD, before adding, "... I do not consider this censorship." Others, such as KCOH-Houston's president Robert Meeker, were less defensive: "Our news is screened so that when an individual with treasonous motives says 'go out in the street and kill and burn,' we do not report this."⁵⁶

Although such comments underline the way in which some black-oriented stations readily sacrificed a degree of journalistic objectivity for the sake of other priorities, they should not be judged too severely. Certainly, it

⁵⁴ WOL Application for Renewal of Broadcast Station License, 1 July 1969, Exhibit 16B, p. 16, FCC License Renewal Files, Box 36; "Network from Atlanta," Broadcasting, 15 April 1968, p. 26; "King Funeral Coverage was Cooperative Effort," Broadcasting, 22 April 1968, p. 50.

⁵⁵ WOL Application for Renewal, 1 July 1969, Exhibit 16B, p. 17.

⁵⁶ Wieland [no first name given], and Robert Meeker, quoted in, New York Times, 11 November 1968.

would be unfair to suggest that a station such as WERD, with its lengthy history of assistance to the black cause, suddenly abrogated its responsibilities to the African-American community that it professed to serve.

The decision to censor news coverage has to be considered within the context of the pressures that were placed upon stations from both without and within the broadcasting industry. Not only had the Kerner Commission specifically drawn attention to black radio's capacity to exacerbate urban disorders through over-detailed news reporting, but broadcasting industry publications were quick to censure those few stations and individuals that ignored the Commission's warning. For example, WABC-New York, which provided a platform to the views of militant Harlemites on the night of King's murder, was roundly condemned by Variety for, "pour[ing] fuel on the fires of racial antagonism at precisely the moment when the opposite was called for." Similarly, CBS News president Richard Salant subsequently admitted to "bawling the hell out of" newsman Walter Cronkite and executive producer Leslie Midgely after they had aired an interview with a black arsonist in Baltimore. In such circumstances, it is understandable how, far from apologising for regulating their news coverage, those black-oriented radio stations that engaged in the practice often deliberately acknowledged it, in order to publicise their adherence to widely accepted industry guidelines.⁵⁷

Black radio's concern for responsible broadcasting was also, as ever, inspired by a definite sense of self-interest. There is little reason to doubt the sincerity of black-oriented broadcasters' desire to minimise the destruction of ghetto uprisings. However, their own economic imperatives were always a consideration. John Jay, general manager of WABQ-Cleveland, could not have

⁵⁷ Variety, 17 April 1968, pp. 39, 53; Richard Salant, quoted in, "Negroes Problems Set for Heavy Coverage," Broadcasting, 22 April 1968, p. 10.

summarised the point more concisely: "If a guy's store is destroyed he's not going to be advertising with us any more."⁵⁸

Overall, black-oriented radio emerged from the crisis that engulfed America's inner cities following the murder of Martin Luther King with much credit. The vast majority of stations had done their utmost to limit trouble and preserve law and order, and those establishment figures who knew, or cared, about the medium's role were suitably appreciative. Admittedly, the medium of black radio was not unique in this respect - most radio and television stations received generous praise. As one Variety editorial proclaimed: "The performance of the broadcast media in the wake of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination has, with a few lapses, ranged from outstanding to near-heroic."⁵⁹

However, the events of April 1968 revealed the weaknesses as well as the strengths of all the mass media, including black-oriented radio. The very fact that so many cities experienced racial unrest exposed the serious limitations upon black radio's ability to preserve law and order during times of acute crisis. Nevertheless, it would be unrealistic to expect what was still essentially an entertainment medium to succeed in maintaining peace when the police, politicians, civil rights organisations, and any number of community leaders so conspicuously failed to do so. Ultimately, nothing was able to check the combination of long-term resentments, coupled with intense grief and anger at the murder of Martin Luther King, from exploding onto the streets.

Given these circumstances, it is difficult to imagine what more black-oriented radio stations could have done. As WLIB disc jockey Del Shields - himself one of the medium's most vociferous critics in the late 1960s - recalled:

⁵⁸ John Jay, quoted in, "Black Radio Tells it Like it is," Business Week, 7 September 1968, p. 76.

⁵⁹ Variety, 10 April 1968, p. 30.

Black radio came of age the night Dr. King was killed. Up until that time, black radio had never been tested nationally. No one ever knew its power ... But on the night Dr. King was killed, all across America every black station was tested and everybody who was on the air at that time, including myself, told people to cool it. We tried to do everything possible to keep the black people from just exploding even more than what they were ...

If, in every major city, a black disc jockey had said, 'Rise up,' there would have been pandemonium."⁶⁰

Shields' assertion was supported by many of the law enforcement and civic agencies that had to deal with the sharp end of the problem. In Denver, for example, police chief George Seaton warmly thanked the personnel of KDKO: "The sound judgement and counselling that was broadcast by your staff is to be commended. I am sure that it was only by the tremendous cooperative efforts of each and every person taking part that Denver remained peaceful." Similarly, in Los Angeles, a city council resolution paid tribute to KGFJ's, "helpful informative approach to assist in easing tensions when any trouble did have an opportunity to blossom." In the light of such comments, the real question seems to be, not why did black radio fail to prevent urban unrest in the late 1960s, but how much worse would things have been had the medium not acted as responsibly as it did.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Del Shields, quoted in George, The Death of Rhythm and Blues, pp. 111-12.

⁶¹ George Seaton, and Los Angeles city council resolution, quoted in, New York Times, 11 November 1968.

IV

In one of the more acute ironies surrounding the history of black-oriented radio, the plaudits that were bestowed upon stations by establishment figures in the late 1960s coincided with the rise of a community protest movement which saw the medium increasingly under attack from the very population that it professed to serve. Either through direct action protest against individual stations, or by petition to the FCC, a diverse coalition of black interest groups expressed a growing dissatisfaction with the performance of many broadcasters. In particular, the movement for reform drew upon the resources of religious and legal institutions such as the Office of Communications of the United Church of Christ, the Citizens Communications Center, the Media Access Project and the Stern Law Fund; a broad spectrum of civil rights organisations including the NAACP, SCLC, SNCC, CORE, NUL and Black Panthers; and specialised media groups such as Black Efforts for Soul in Television and the National Black Media Coalition. The actual story of this movement has been examined at length elsewhere; its particular relevance to this study concerns its place in, and relationship to, the wider African-American

struggle against racism.⁶²

Although the sheer scale of the broadcast protest movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s far surpassed anything that had preceded it, there was nothing new about black interest groups taking an active involvement in broadcasting. For as long as racism had existed in the industry, civil rights campaigners had protested against it. In other words, they had done so virtually from the outset. In 1931, for example, several local chapters of the NAACP supported the petition of over 740,000 signatories that was co-ordinated by the Pittsburgh Courier and presented to the Federal Radio Commission in a major, but unsuccessful, campaign against the racial stereotypes that were promulgated in the hugely popular "Amos 'n' Andy" show.⁶³

Over the years that followed, the NAACP continued to attempt to utilise the FCC in its efforts to secure more responsive broadcasting. With the proliferation of new stations in the aftermath of the Second World War, the

⁶² For existing treatments of this subject, see Robert Heiss, "The Texarkana Agreement as a Model Strategy for Citizen Participation in FCC License Renewals," Harvard Journal on Legislation, 7 (May 1970), 627-43; Donald Guimary, Citizens' Groups and Broadcasting (New York: Praeger, 1975); Milan Meeske, "Black Ownership of Broadcasting Stations: An FCC Licensing Problem," Journal of Broadcasting, 20 (Spring 1976), 261-69; Barry Cole and Mal Oettinger, Reluctant Regulators: The FCC and the Broadcast Audience (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1978); Marilyn Diane Fife, "FCC Policy on Minority Ownership in Broadcasting: A Political Systems Analysis of Regulatory Policymaking," PhD Thesis, Stanford University, 1984; Ernest Edward Phelps, "The Office of Communication: The Participant Advocate - Its Function as a Broadcast Citizen Group March 1964 to March 1971," PhD Thesis, Ohio State University, 1971; Bishetta Dionne Merritt, "A Historical-Critical Study of a Pressure Group in Broadcasting - Black Efforts for Soul in Television," PhD Thesis, Ohio State University, 1974.

⁶³ Melvin Patrick Ely, The Adventures of Amos 'n' Andy: A Social History of an American Phenomenon (New York: Free Press, 1991), pp. 160-193.

According to Ely, only some of the Association's branches supported the protest, while others saw no grounds for complaint. Not until 1951, when the television version of the programme made its debut, did the NAACP launch a concerted assault upon "Amos 'n' Andy." *ibid.*, pp. 213-44.

Association investigated the possibility of participating in the Commission's hearings on new license applicants.⁶⁴ Formal protests were lodged against stations such as WFOR-Hattiesburg, Mississippi, which deliberately refused to broadcast network programmes that dealt with the issue of civil rights, and support was provided to other organisations such as the American Jewish Congress, which waged its own legal campaign against allegedly racist and anti-Semitic programming at stations in Los Angeles, Detroit and Cleveland.⁶⁵

By 1951, the NAACP's fight against discriminatory broadcasting was codified into a formal resolution that was adopted at the Association's 42nd annual convention. Paying particular attention to the "Amos 'n' Andy" and "Beulah" shows, the convention condemned the way in which such programmes, "tend to strengthen the conclusion among un-informed or prejudiced peoples that Negroes and other minorities are inferior, lazy, dumb and dishonest," and warned broadcasters that the Association would, "utilize

⁶⁴ "Minutes of the Meeting of the Board of Directors," 11 February 1946, p. 7, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Papers, II-A-135, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (hereafter, NAACP Papers); Leslie Perry, memorandum to Walter White, 7 March 1946, NAACP Papers, II-A-158.

⁶⁵ The incident that led to the complaint against WFOR centred around an NBC roundtable discussion programme on the issue of "Our Civil Rights - Are They In Danger?" which was broadcast in December 1947. Shortly into the discussion, the show was suddenly cut. According to WFOR's manager, C. J. Wright, Jr., the explanation was straightforward: "We are down in the Deep South and you got off on the racial question." See "Mississippi Radio Station Cuts Civil Rights Program," 26 December 1947, NAACP Papers, II-A-157.

The NAACP's Thurgood Marshall was just one of the prominent supporters of the American Jewish Congress' long-running battle to persuade the FCC to order an investigation into the programming at KMPC-Los Angeles, WJR-Detroit and WGAR-Cleveland. See "Motion and Memorandum in Support of Exceptions to Initial Decision by Trial Examiner," 29 August 1951, NAACP Papers, II-A-157.

every means at its disposal," including boycotts of stations and their advertised products, to register its protest.⁶⁶

As the freedom struggle gathered momentum in the early 1960s, a variety of civil rights organisations continued the battle for fairer broadcasting for African-Americans. For example, by 1963, SNCC had developed detailed plans to employ the FCC's Fairness Doctrine as a means of forcing southern stations to afford greater coverage to the civil rights struggle. Similarly, in a widely publicised case in Los Angeles the following year, picketing by CORE and the NAACP persuaded one of the city's most popular stations, KFWB, to hire Larry McCormick as its first full-time black announcer.⁶⁷

By far the most significant of these earlier protests was the lengthy, and ultimately successful, campaign against television station WLBT-Jackson, Mississippi. This *cause celebre*, which eventually resulted in the station's loss of its license in 1969, was in many ways the catalyst which revolutionised the nature of citizen participation in broadcasting affairs.

Significantly, the origins of the WLBT dispute centred upon the station's coverage (or lack thereof) of civil rights issues. From as early as October 1955, the NAACP complained to the FCC about the station's refusal to air network programmes which discussed the issue of integration. In particular, the Association's objections focused upon WLBT station manager Fred Beard, who readily acknowledged his membership in the local White Citizens' Council.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ "Resolution Adopted at 42nd Annual Convention of NAACP Re Racial Tension," (n.d.), NAACP Papers, II-A-499.

⁶⁷ SNCC, "Radio and Television Programming and Editorializing" (n.d.), SNCC Papers, A-VII-1; "KFWB Faces a CORE 'Sing-In,'" *Broadcasting*, 30 March 1964, p. 132; "The Negro DJ and Civil Rights," *Broadcasting*, 31 August 1964, p. 61.

⁶⁸ George McConnaughey, letter to NAACP, 13 January 1956, and Fred Beard, letter to Mary Jane Morris, 8 December 1955, both in NAACP Papers, III-A-265.

By 1964, the long-running saga entered a new phase when a coalition of four petitioners formally requested permission from the FCC to intervene in the station's license renewal application. With much justification, the defining role in shaping and co-ordinating the protest has been attributed to the Office of Communications of the United Church of Christ, headed by Reverend Everett Parker in New York. However, partly for tactical reasons, the campaigners emphasised their strong ties with local civil rights organisations. Thus, the petition was co-signed by Aaron Henry and Reverend Robert Smith, two prominent Mississippi NAACP leaders, as well as the Jackson branch of the United Church of Christ.⁶⁹

Repeating the charge of continual discrimination in programming and employment, the request for permission to intervene was made to challenge the FCC's regulations which permitted legal "standing" in license renewal proceedings only to those with a vested economic or technical interest in the outcome. Following the FCC's expected refusal to accommodate the petitioners, Parker's aim of establishing a precedent for citizen group involvement was fulfilled when the Commission's ruling was overturned by the Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia in 1966. As Judge Warren Burger explained the decision: "Since the concept of standing is a practical and functional one designed to insure that only those with a genuine and legitimate interest can participate in the proceeding, we can see no reason to exclude those with such an obvious and acute concern as the listening audience." It was this grant of legal standing that opened the door for the slew of license renewal challenges which swept the country and ruined many a broadcaster's night's

⁶⁹ Phelps, "The Office of Communication," pp. 59-60.

sleep in the ensuing years.⁷⁰

As these examples clearly demonstrate, by the late 1960s there was a long tradition of civil rights activism within the broadcasting industry for reformers to draw upon. However, the campaign that emerged late in the black power era differed from these earlier generations of protest in several key ways. Most importantly, the sheer scale of the citizens' protest movement that engulfed the industry, especially in the early 1970s, was without precedent. According to Barry Cole and Mal Oettinger, as late as the 12 months from July 1968 to June 1969, only two stations' licenses were challenged. Three years later, 108 stations were threatened. In the entire period from July 1968 to May 1977, 360 petitions to deny were directed at well over 600 stations.⁷¹

The citizens' groups' protests were also notable for the breadth, as well as the size, of their targets. For example, in Atlanta in 1970 the Community Coalition on Broadcasting established a notable precedent in mounting a blanket challenge against every station in the city, rather than attacking individual offenders. In so doing, it accelerated the process by which black-oriented, in addition to general-market, outlets increasingly came under threat. In earlier decades, almost without exception, the main thrust of African-American protest against the broadcasting industry was directed towards

⁷⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 43-80; Fife, "FCC Policy on Minority Ownership in Broadcasting," pp. 108-24; Cole and Oettinger, *Reluctant Regulators*, pp. 65, 204-05 (Burger quote on p. 204).

The WLBT case was far from over with the award of standing to the four petitioners. Having been ordered by the court to conduct a hearing into the station's application, the FCC again found no apparent reason to deny WLBT's license renewal. Only in 1969, when the Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia again overturned the Commission's ruling - with Judge Burger's scathing criticism that, "The administrative conduct reflected in this record is beyond repair" - was WLBT's license finally revoked. Warren Burger, quoted in, Cole and Oettinger, *Reluctant Regulators*, p. 206.

⁷¹ *ibid.*, p. 205.

discriminatory practices in the general-appeal media. Black-oriented radio, although never without its critics, was very rarely subjected to similar formal complaint. In the wave of protests that swept the country in the late 1960s and early 1970s, mainstream stations undoubtedly continued to bear the brunt of the assault. However, black-oriented outlets also came under much greater scrutiny and, in numerous cases, attack.⁷²

Consequently, although the civil rights activism against broadcasters which rapidly gathered momentum at the turn of the decade was part of a much longer tradition of protest, it was not simply the latest manifestation of an on-going process. It was also a phenomenon that was firmly rooted in, and appropriate to, its own times. In particular, three major contemporary social forces converged to inspire the large-scale African-American struggle for more responsive broadcasting.

First, the civil rights movement itself provided a crucial impetus. In many ways, the upsurge of protest against radio and television stations was the extension of the freedom struggle into the broadcasting industry. That such a widespread black challenge against the industry's structural inequalities was possible at all was greatly facilitated by the way in which the civil rights movement had stimulated the latent political consciousness and activism in many African-American individuals and communities. All of the major civil rights organisations invested time and resources in the campaign for broadcast reform - a campaign that was largely dedicated towards eradicating the many barriers to more meaningful black participation in the industry. Thus, it will be seen that a particularly recurrent theme in many of the protests was the demand for equal employment opportunity, legislation, and enforcement.

⁷² "Atlanta Stations Face Bias Charge," Broadcasting, 12 January 1970, p. 44.

As discussed in Chapter Two, one important exception to the general reluctance of black groups to protest formally against black-oriented stations in earlier decades was the controversy that enveloped WSOK-Nashville in 1953.

Second, the campaign can be interpreted as one element of the larger consumer movement which gained widespread currency in the mid-to-late 1960s. As most vividly exemplified by Ralph Nader - darling of the citizens' advocate and scourge of the automobile manufacturer - the era witnessed a remarkable upsurge of interest in the protection of consumer rights in all walks of American life. Nader's own involvement in broadcasting affairs may have been limited, although he directly encouraged the involvement of at least one major participant in the movement - Citizen Communication Center's Albert Kramer.⁷³

However, the doctrine of consumer activism that Nader popularised undoubtedly contributed towards the increased enthusiasm for broadcast reform. Certainly, the movement was never solely a racial phenomenon, even if it gained much of its initial impetus from, and continued to be dominated by, black interest groups.⁷⁴ The point was demonstrated by the way in which a wide array of organisations, with agendas as diverse as feminism, children's programming, anti-smoking, and gun control, strove to exercise their consumer rights to make radio and television more responsive to their own particular concerns. This point has particular relevance for those challenges that were mounted against specifically black-oriented stations. In such cases, African-American protesters acted as consumers as much as civil rights activists, seeking to improve the programming and public service of stations that already served their community, rather than objecting to the neglect of those that did not.⁷⁵

⁷³ Cole and Oettinger, Reluctant Regulators, p. 66.

⁷⁴ According to the then head of the FCC's Renewal and Transfer Division, Richard Shiben, approximately 80 percent of all the petitions to deny license renewal that had been filed by September 1975 had been submitted by black interest groups. *ibid.*, pp. 205-06.

⁷⁵ *ibid.*; Guimary, Citizens' Groups and Broadcasting, pp. 117-40.

Third, and perhaps most important, the African-American campaign against the broadcasting industry cannot be divorced from the rise of black power. For all its conflicting agendas, black power did consistently focus attention upon the need for greater black involvement in, and control of, the institutions that shaped black life. With so few stations actually in black hands by 1970, radio ownership provided compelling evidence for the activists' demands.

Thus, paradoxically, the one element of the black power impulse that was most acceptable to much of white America was that which posed the greatest potential threat to white operators of black-oriented radio stations. Indeed, in many ways, such entrepreneurs were victims of their own success. Precisely because of black radio's integral role in the daily lives of millions of African-Americans, the medium was a particularly high-profile symbol of continued white economic exploitation of the black community. Around the country, the question was raised: "How can white owners know what a black man needs?"⁷⁶

An early demonstration of this complex diffusion of social protest was provided with the campaign that was waged against WAOK-Atlanta in May 1967. Initially, the controversy arose out of the station's appointment of a white deejay, Jay Dunn, to the position of production manager. Both the SCLC and SNCC formally protested the decision, and the neglect of suitable African-American candidates for the vacancy. Thus, for example, the SCLC's Hosea Williams took advantage of his column in the Atlanta Voice to bemoan the lack of black management at the station: "WAOK's Zenas Sears is a perfect example of the 'white Jesus' who still believes in the worn-out and false fairy tale that

⁷⁶ Del Shields, quoted in, "The Negro DJ and Civil Rights," p. 62.

Although Shields raised the question in 1964, it was in the second half of the decade that the issue assumed a wider currency.

Negroes won't follow Negroes - that white is right and black must and will get back."⁷⁷

SNCC's Stokely Carmichael and H. Rap Brown reiterated the theme in an exchange of letters with Sears. On 12 May, a meeting between the two sides did result in some agreement concerning WAOK's future policies on music selection. However, the dispute rapidly transcended concerns over employment and programming, to focus upon the more fundamental issue of ownership. As the conflict intensified with a picket of the station which commenced on 24 May, SNCC's description of the situation was couched in classic black power phraseology:

In this case, it is a clear example of whites controlling the orientation of news and radio programs supposedly geared to the black community. White owners of the station, Zenas Sears and Stan Raymond ... have seriously under-estimated the mood of the black community, which now demands that black people control their communities and all enterprises which benefit from and make profit off of our people. The issue, we feel, is no longer just an isolated issue of Jay Dunn or one or two white boys in controlling positions at WAOK. But rather, the issue is one of white bossism, not only here in Atlanta's WAOK, but in white owned, black-oriented radio stations across the country.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ "Hosea Williams Says," Atlanta Voice, 7 May 1967, clipping in SNCC Papers, C-I-143.

⁷⁸ Zenas Sears, letter to Stokely Carmichael, 5 May 1967, and letter to H. Rap Brown, 18 May 1967; SNCC news release, 24 May 1967, all in SNCC Papers C-I-143.

The WAOK affair reflected several broad trends which characterised African-American community protest against black-oriented radio in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In particular, as with Sears' station, the spark that ignited a dispute usually concerned some element of a station's employment or programming policies, rather than the mere fact of its white ownership.

In some instances, protests against a black-oriented station arose at the direct instigation of station staff, who sought to gain public support for their own labour disputes. In Detroit, WJLB deejays and other workers went on strike in 1970 in protest at new station manager Gary Arnold's widespread changes in personnel. Seeking backing from the community at large, personalities such as Martha Jean Steinberg emphasised the wider implications of the affair: "We're supposed to be the voice of the Black community and if we don't stand for our rights, what kind of an example will we be setting for Black kids of the community?"⁷⁹

Two years later, a similar controversy enveloped KWKI-Kansas City, when ten African-American and one white member of staff walked off their jobs in June 1972. Organising themselves as the People's Communications Commission, the strikers launched a widespread community campaign to publicise their grievances, and registered their complaints with newly-appointed African-American FCC commissioner Ben Hooks. Again, the campaign focused firmly upon employment issues, with the protesters demanding the appointment of African-American station, programme, and sales managers, and improved pay and promotion prospects - as well as greater station public service.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Martha Jean Steinberg, quoted in, "Blacks Seek Top Jobs; Strike Detroit Station," *Jet*, 31 December 1970, p. 18.

⁸⁰ Tony Johnson, letter to Benjamin Hooks, 19 September 1972, and "The Peoples Struggle at KWKI" (n.d.), p. 3, both in Ben Hooks Papers, Box 2, File 7, Manuscripts Collection, Amistad Research Center, New Orleans (hereafter, Hooks Papers).

On other occasions, the campaigns were initiated by one or more community organisation. In Atlanta in 1970, the Community Coalition on Broadcasting - comprising over 20 local groups including chapters of the NAACP and SCLC - targeted black-oriented WERD, WAOK and WIGO as part of its blanket protest against the "gross discrimination" practised by all of the city's radio and television stations. Later that year in Oklahoma City, KBYE-AM and KFJL-FM were taken over for several hours by a group of African-American protesters objecting to plans by owners Tom and D. J. Lynch to fire the FM outlet's black station manager. Other employment-related disputes included those that arose against black-oriented stations WOIC-Columbus, South Carolina, WVOL-Nashville, and WJMO-Cleveland - where the SCLC protested against the absence of African-Americans in management positions.⁸¹

Elsewhere, programming issues were the main cause of complaint. In Philadelphia in 1972, a group known as Concerned Communicators filed petitions to deny license renewal against black-oriented WDAS-AM-FM and WHAT on the grounds that the stations' programming failed to satisfy the needs of the community. The following year in New Orleans, the Southern Media Coalition included the city's black-oriented stations in its blanket petition to the FCC, requesting a hearing into whether the city's stations had

⁸¹ "Atlanta Stations Face Bias Charge," p. 44; "Rapprochement in Atlanta Renewals," *Broadcasting*, 6 April 1970, pp. 66, 68; "Blacks Again Trouble Lynch Stations," *Broadcasting*, 25 June 1973, p. 52; Ferretti, "The White Captivity of Black Radio," p. 95.

exacerbated a potential riot situation.⁸² Again at KFJL-Oklahoma City, the station was briefly knocked off air in June 1973 after it was overrun by a group of Black Muslims angered at the stations failure to broadcast the regular "Muhammad Speaks" show.⁸³

However, for all the emphasis upon employment and programming deficiencies, the underlying assumption behind the upsurge of protests was the notion that these abuses would be remedied only when black-oriented radio actually became black-owned radio. Not untypical was the complaint of BEST's William Wright:

Do we need twenty-four hours of James Brown? No we don't.

If we're going to talk about freedom and self-determination, we need to hear our black heroes performing in other art forms. We need to hear about drug addiction, about slum landlords, about jobs, about education. But the white man gives us twenty-four

⁸² "Philadelphia Said to Have Very Little Brotherly Love," Broadcasting, 10 July 1972, pp. 21-22; "Blacks are Back Against Miss., La. Stations," Broadcasting, 7 May 1973, p. 34.

The controversy in New Orleans surrounded a shoot-out between police and, according to Broadcasting, "Black militant" Mark Essex on 7 January 1973. Southern Media Coalition's call for an inquiry was based on the need to discover which stations had broadcast an appeal for marksmen to go to the scene of the incident to assist police. According to the petitioners, "many law enforcement officials and civilians showed up armed and many of them illegally participated in the event, causing utter confusion and chaos," during which nine people were killed.

⁸³ "Blacks Again Trouble Lynch Stations." According to station co-owner Tom Lynch, the failure to broadcast the show, which had been aired by the station for approximately a year, was due purely to technical difficulties. Black Muslim leader Theodore G. X. countered that the decision was deliberate. Either way, the programme was promptly dropped from KFJL's schedule after the incident.

hours of 'soul' because it pads his already stuffed pockets and keeps black people ignorant.⁸⁴

This emphasis upon the importance of black ownership was clearly evident in several of the protest campaigns outlined above. For example, in its dealings with Atlanta stations in 1970, the Community Coalition on Broadcasting persuaded both WAOK and WERD to promise to appoint an African-American to their boards of directors. WERD, which had ceased to be a black-owned outlet (much to the consternation of many sections of the African-American community) upon Jesse Blayton's sale of the station in 1969, also filed a policy statement that paid due deference to black power concerns:

WERD understands that, in deciding what constitutes the tastes, needs, desire and interests of the black community, the views, opinion and leaders which are representative of its members and the authenticity of portrayals of black life, culture and values, the best judge is the black community itself.⁸⁵

Similarly, the striking employees of KWKI focused particular attention upon the issue of the station's white ownership:

The grievances are simple. KWKI is a WHITE OWNED, BLACK ORIENTED radio station ... Why should the

⁸⁴ William Wright, quoted in Ferretti, "The White Captivity of Black Radio," pp. 93-94.

⁸⁵ "Rapprochement in Atlanta Renewals." For community reaction to Blayton's sale of WERD, see Gloria Blackwell, "Black-Controlled Media in Atlanta, 1960-1970: The Burden of the Message and the Struggle for Survival," PhD Thesis, Emory University, 1973, pp. 149-58; Ward, "Race Relations," pp. 365-6; Paul E. X. Brown, interview with Stephen Walsh, 16 March 1995, UNOHC.

BLACK community allow KWKI to take from its people
without making any contribution of its own ...

Any media that is geared to the Black Community
should be responsible to the BLACK COMMUNITY in it's [sic]
operation and programming.

KWKI HAS CLEARLY FAILED!⁸⁶

This is not to suggest that the majority of citizens' campaigns against the broadcasting industry were directly aimed at toppling the existing regime at a station. Even in the landmark WLBT case, Everett Parker's initial intention was to secure legal standing in license renewal proceedings for citizens' groups, and to end specific abuses at the station, not to force a change of ownership. Similarly, the precedent set by the Texarkana agreement in 1969 heralded the common practice of citizens' groups withdrawing their petitions to deny renewal of a broadcaster's license once particular grievances had been met.⁸⁷

Nevertheless, there was widespread agreement among many civil rights and other civic organisations that increased black ownership of broadcast facilities would be enormously beneficial - indeed crucial - to racial progress. From traditionally integrationist groups to the most ardent proponents of black power, the campaign for greater African-American representation in the

⁸⁶ "Why Did Ten People 'Walk Off' Their Jobs Twice at KWKI Radio?" in, "The Peoples Struggle at KWKI."

⁸⁷ In the Texarkana agreement, petitioners (including the Office of Communications of the United Church of Christ and local chapter of the NAACP) entered into a private settlement with the licensee of television station KTAL-Texarkana. In return for concrete promises on increased employment and programming for the African-American community, the activists withdrew their petition to deny license renewal from the FCC. Once the FCC gave its blessing, the Texarkana agreement became the model for a host of subsequent licensee-citizen negotiations. See Heiss, "The Texarkana Agreement"; Cole and Oettinger, Reluctant Regulators, pp. 228-41.

electronic media provided an important focal point around which a broad spectrum of black protest organisations could unite. In Memphis, for example, NAACP leader Maxine Smith was at the forefront of calls for black control at WDIA. "Bert Ferguson wasn't a bad person," she recalled, "I just didn't think that we needed a white boss."⁸⁸ Indeed, according to Broadcasting, precisely because of the rise of black power the NAACP had a vested interest in taking an active stance in such a prominent campaign as broadcast reform. As one editorial somewhat unfairly suggested in 1970: "The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People is in need of a high-visibility cause to rid itself of the Uncle Tom image it has acquired among militants."⁸⁹

In Houston, it was from among the ranks of the local Operation Breadbasket that Pluria Marshall emerged to spearhead the campaign against the broadcast industry - first locally, then on a national scale after assuming the leadership of the National Black Media Coalition in 1973. According to Marshall, his formative experiences with the SCLC programme were crucial in informing his subsequent activities in the broadcasting industry. As he later recalled to Black Radio Exclusive in 1987: "All the experience and knowledge I have about how to make the system work for Black people came out of Operation Breadbasket." The crusade for increased black ownership also received the full backing of Operation Breadbasket's national director Jesse Jackson, who railed against the paucity of black ownership as, "a shame against

⁸⁸ Maxine Smith, interview with Stephen Walsh, 3 August 1995, UNOHC. Bert Ferguson had actually ceased to be owner of WDIA upon the station's sale to Egmont Sonderling in 1957. However, by continuing at the station as general manager, Ferguson continued to be the figure that most people associated with WDIA's white ownership.

⁸⁹ "Overload," Broadcasting, 9 March 1970, p. 82.

God and man."⁹⁰

At the more radical end of the spectrum, prominent black power advocates such as Harold Cruse, James Forman and the Congress of Afrikan Peoples lent their voices to the call for increased black control of the mass media. Charles Hamilton - co-author of the Black Power manifesto with Stokely Carmichael - went so far as to suggest that African-American control of a major radio and television network would constitute, "the most important single breakthrough in the black struggle, and would justify every bit of time, talent and resources expended towards its achievement."⁹¹

Of course, the African-American community was never monolithic, and the campaign for reform of the broadcasting industry was no exception. Certainly, it was not immune from the inter-group differences and rivalries that characterised much of the history of the freedom struggle. In Houston, for example, the NAACP refused to participate in the protest against the city's broadcasters that was launched by a coalition of local community organisations. Similarly, Everett Parker reflected on the tensions that existed between the Office of Communications and more specifically black groups such as BEST: "It's our rationale when you get up against something like this fellow Wright [Director of BEST] why they just hate us because we won't come along and do

⁹⁰ Pluria Marshall, quoted in, "Pluria Marshall: A Man with a Mission," Black Radio Exclusive, 6 November 1987, p. 9; Merritt, "A Historical-Critical Study of a Pressure Group in Broadcasting," pp. 56-58; Jesse Jackson, Speech to the General Assembly of the National Association of Broadcasters 53rd Annual Convention, 9 April 1975, Hooks Papers, Box 6, File 2.

⁹¹ Ward, "Race Relations," p. 348n34; Charles Hamilton, "Blacks and Mass Media," The Columbia Forum (Winter 1971), rpt. in Issues and Trends in Afro-American Journalism, ed. James S. Tinney and Justine R. Rector (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1980), p. 231.

what they want. But we don't ask them to come along and do what we want either."⁹²

In addition, some organisations were undoubtedly more involved than others in the issue. The specialist agencies, such as the Office of Communications, BEST, and Citizens Communications Center, usually spearheaded the campaigns and undertook much of the legal spadework. Nevertheless, at various times, most of the major civil rights and other black organisations lent time and resources, and played a key role in helping to extend the protest into the wider black community.⁹³ Thus, while differences could, and did, occur, the struggle for more responsive black-oriented broadcasting provided an important unifying cause for a remarkable cross-section of the African-American population.

The protests of the late 1960s and 1970s not only underlined civil rights activists' growing involvement in the electronic media. By necessity, they also focused attention upon the performance of the FCC. Charged with the responsibility of regulating the airwaves according to the "public interest, convenience and necessity," the seven-person Commission possessed considerable potential to either help or hinder the campaign for more responsive black-oriented broadcasting.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, despite its inertia over the WLBT affair, the FCC did offer enough signals to warrant a cautious optimism on the part of the activists. Most importantly, in response to petitioning by the United

⁹² Phelps, "The Office of Communication," p. 156; Everett Parker, quoted in, *ibid.*, p. 174.

⁹³ This point was vividly demonstrated in the Atlanta campaign of 1970. The Office of Communication had actually sought to co-ordinate local group action since 1968, with little success. Only when the Atlanta chapter of the NAACP, under the directorship of Lonnie King, became involved was a large-scale movement possible. See Phelps, "The Office of Communication," pp. 111-15, 189-90.

Church of Christ, in May 1970 the Commission became the first regulatory agency in the country to require its licensees to adopt Equal Employment Opportunity provisions.⁹⁴

Moreover, some individual members of the FCC expressed considerable sympathy with the reformers' goals. In particular, throughout the duration of his tenure from 1966 to 1973, Nicholas Johnson brought a crusading zeal and activist spirit to the Commission that has rarely been equalled before or since. Through publications, speeches, and his decisions in FCC rulings, Johnson went out of his way to urge and advise citizen activity - much to the dismay and resentment of most broadcasters.⁹⁵

Black-oriented radio featured heavily on Johnson's agenda. More than anyone else at the FCC at that time, he was acutely aware of both the medium's integral role in the African-American community and its potential value to race relations in the United States. As he informed a special conference on radio and the urban crisis, held in New York in May 1968:

No institution in our land, inside or outside of government, can match the power of minority radio stations to administer day-in, day-out therapy to the root cause of the worsening malaise of our cities. No institution can do as much to banish the habit of despair and replace it with the habit of democracy ...

The angry voices of the ghetto will be heard. The only questions are when and how. If they and the problems which beset them are heard now, with your microphones, then they

⁹⁴ Cole and Oettinger, Reluctant Regulators, p. 166.

⁹⁵ See, for example, Nicholas Johnson, How to Talk Back to Your Television Set (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1970).

will not have to seek expression later, in violence, rebellion and terror.⁹⁶

Not only did Johnson recognise the medium's power, he also became one of the most articulate voices in encouraging the movement for more responsive black-oriented radio. For example, his address to the 1968 NATRA convention in Miami was a model of constructive criticism. While recognising the problems inherent in the overwhelmingly white ownership of the medium ("Of course, it's disgraceful that no more than a handful of the 7,500 radio and television stations in this country are owned by blacks"), Johnson urged the assembly of black deejays to renew their own efforts to improve station programming. Among his many specific suggestions, Johnson argued that black radio could provide more black history, language courses in Swahili, a greater diversity of music, and increased news and community activity.⁹⁷

Not all of Johnson's audience responded with the enthusiasm that might have been expected. The Miami convention has traditionally been regarded as the high-water mark of NATRA's militancy, and certainly some participants were not prepared to listen to a white FCC commissioner - even if he was the most sympathetic of the seven - lay part of the responsibility for improving black radio's service to the community at their feet. "I detest this whole program ... He should have made this talk to the station owners," protested

⁹⁶ Nicholas Johnson, "A Little Respect: Radio Power and the Public Interest," Speech to the Negro and Spanish Speaking Radio and Today's Urban Crisis Conference, New York, 16 May 1968, p. 2 (copy in possession of the author).

⁹⁷ Nicholas Johnson, "Soul Music is Not Enough," Speech to the Annual Convention of the National Association of Television and Radio Announcers, Miami, 17 August 1968 (quote on p. 2) (copy in possession of the author).

Carleton Coleman. "We are announcers and we have no control over programming."⁹⁸

Such comments were just one expression of a growing sentiment that the FCC itself was out of touch with the interests of the black community. By 1970, this had crystallised into a concerted campaign, led by BEST's William Wright, for an African-American to be appointed as commissioner. When President Nixon finally acceded to the demand, Memphis civil rights stalwart Ben Hooks was appointed to the Commission in 1972.⁹⁹

Immediately, Hooks served as another key focal point for those activists seeking to secure greater black access to the broadcasting industry. Taking a special responsibility for minority affairs, Hooks oversaw such significant landmarks in the Commission's history as the creation of its own equal employment opportunity office, and the beginning of a direct attempt to increase minority ownership of broadcasting facilities. Equally significant, if less quantifiable, was Hooks' effect in sensitising the FCC and the industry as a whole to African-American interests and concerns. "He heightened the awareness of us all," recalled FCC Chairman Richard Wiley. Thus, by the time of Hook's departure from the FCC to assume the leadership of the NAACP in 1977, black media activists heartily endorsed the commissioner's record. "We didn't have access before," explained Pluria Marshall. "It was a big step in the right direction having our own person there. We could always call on Ben to discuss things. We're very proud of his service."¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ Carleton Coleman, quoted in, "A Swing to Negro Activism," Broadcasting, 26 August 1968, p. 31.

⁹⁹ Merritt, "A Historical-Critical Study of a Pressure Group in Broadcasting," pp. 109-113; Fife, "FCC Policy on Minority Ownership in Broadcasting," pp. 149-52.

¹⁰⁰ Richard Wiley, and Pluria Marshall, quoted in, "High Marks for Hooks Heritage," Broadcasting, 25 July 1977, p. 24.

As encouraging as such achievements were, there were stark limits to what Hooks, and Johnson before him, could accomplish. All too often, theirs were dissenting voices from the Commission's majority opinions. Astute observers of the Commission's policies recognised the difference between promise and reality. In 1974, for example, the FCC was roundly chastised by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, which emphasised the extent to which the FCC's anti-discrimination policies went unenforced. Such criticisms were lent further credence four years later, when Barry Cole published his expose of the FCC's failings after having spent the period from 1970 to 1975 as an advisor to the Commission on its license renewal process. The over-riding impression of the FCC offered by Cole and co-author Mal Oettinger was of an agency that would, "hear no evil, see no evil." The statistics told their own story: despite the FCC's regulations, not one station had been deprived of its license solely on the grounds of community ascertainment or Equal Employment Opportunity deficiencies.¹⁰¹

V

Despite its mixed fortunes, the African-American campaign for greater inclusion in the broadcasting industry left an enduring legacy within the electronic media in general, and black-oriented radio in particular. If nothing else, it vividly dramatised black dissatisfaction with the status quo, and firmly established issues - such as the need for increased minority ownership - that the FCC would at least attempt (albeit imperfectly) to address later in the 1970s.

However, the significance of the broadcasting protest movement, although considerable, must not be over-exaggerated. Certainly, the upsurge in

¹⁰¹ "Civil Rights Commission Hits FCC's EEO Policies," *Broadcasting*, 18 November 1974, pp. 51-52; Cole and Oettinger, *Reluctant Regulators*, p. 151.

criticism did not mean that black radio had suddenly abandoned all attempts at public service, nor that it had failed to render a meaningful contribution to the freedom struggle in previous years. The change that occurred in the latter half of the 1960s was not so much one in the service offered by black-oriented stations, but in how those stations were perceived in the African-American community. The ideologies of black power established new criteria and exposed genuine shortcomings - especially in the realms of employment and ownership - at many black-oriented stations, and forced a major reappraisal of the medium and its limitations. Whether, in the light of this reappraisal, fundamental changes and concrete improvements in black radio's performance could be achieved remained to be seen.

CHAPTER FIVE

Black-Oriented Radio and the Civil Rights Movement: A Case Study of Washington, D.C., 1945-1975

I

Ever since the late 1940s, the District of Columbia has been one of the true bastions of black-oriented radio. When Richard Eaton's WOOK signed on air with a black-oriented format in 1947, few could have foreseen the extent to which the move would revolutionise the broadcasting industry in the capital. "At the time, being in on the ground floor was a good idea," recalled WOOK stalwart Cliff Holland many years later, "but frankly, at the time we didn't know if the ground floor would hold up quite as well as it has." With admirable understatement, Holland's words testified to the medium's lasting significance in the daily lives of thousands of black Washingtonians, as not only WOOK, but also successors WUST, WOL, and WHUR each became much valued and cherished institutions within the capital's African-American community. By 1973, the Washington Post could report that the District possessed more fully black-oriented radio stations than any other city in the United States.¹

The strength of Washington's association with black-oriented radio resulted from a confluence of national and local forces. In particular, the economic impulses that lay behind the huge upsurge in black-oriented radio programming nation-wide were even more pronounced in the District than in many other locations in the country. The capital offered one of the most striking examples of the growing potential of the African-American market. By

¹ Cliff Holland, quoted in, Washington Star, 16 May 1980, p. C10; Washington Post, 28 January 1973, p. L1.

1950, the city's black population of 280,000 constituted the fifth largest in the country. Even more significantly, statistics underlined the dramatically increasing proportion of black to white in the city, with African-Americans accounting for 35.4 percent of the total population in 1950, 54.8 percent in 1960, and a huge 71 percent by 1970. The self-proclaimed "chocolate city" was indeed well-named.²

Market research underlined the economic strength, as well as the size, of the African-American market in Washington. Relatively high levels of federal employment offered opportunities for black residents rarely found in many other parts of the country.³ Furthermore, despite the capital's traditional image as a notoriously transient society, a report published by the Pulse organisation in 1960 emphasised the comparative stability of the city's black community, with two-thirds of the heads of African-American households having resided in the city for a minimum of 15 years. This, coupled with a marked preference for top quality, brand-name goods, led the report to conclude favourably that, "Results lend strong support to the acceptance of the Negro market as a good one for the advertiser ... earning power is good, and there is strong evidence that purchasing power exists and is applied." Thus, although sections of the District's African-American community continued to endure more than its share of poverty and hardship, the overall demographic trends in the post-war era

² U.S. Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, County and City Data Book 1956 (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1957), Table 4, County and City Data Book 1962 (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1963), Table 6, and County and City Data Book 1972 (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1973), Table 6. The percentages given for 1950 and 1960 were classified as "Non-white population," for 1970 as "Negro population."

³ In 1961, radio station WUST claimed that African-Americans accounted for 25 percent of all federal employment in the District, a figure that was subsequently repeated by the Washington Post. See "Past Decade Saw the Market Zoom," Sponsor, October 1961, Part 2, p. 37; Ben W. Gilbert and the Staff of The Washington Post, Ten Blocks From the White House: Anatomy of the Washington Riots of 1968 (New York: Praeger, 1968), p. 1.

were nevertheless sufficient first to promote, and then sustain a strong black-oriented radio industry in the nation's capital.⁴

The existence of an influential, widespread, and specifically black-oriented electronic medium was, potentially at least, of great benefit for civil rights campaigners in the city. Certainly, there were ample opportunities for black-oriented radio stations in the District to prove their worth to the freedom struggle. While most of the major battle grounds in the civil rights era may have been located further south, Washington was never far from the minds of those activists who saw federal intervention as an essential weapon in the fight for equality. Thus, not only was it important to educate Washingtonians about events taking place elsewhere in the country, it was also necessary to galvanise the local population into action whenever civil rights leaders sought to gain the nation's attention by staging large-scale demonstrations in the capital, such as the March on Washington in 1963, and the Poor People's Campaign five years later.

Moreover, on a local level, the African-American citizens of the District had their own indigenous battles to fight. In many ways, the city's civil rights situation mirrored its geographical location, straddling both the South and the North. Despite the clear gains for African-Americans in the capital that arose from wartime measures such as President Roosevelt's Executive Order 8802 barring discrimination in federal agencies in June 1941, post-war Washington still bore many of the classic hallmarks of a segregated southern city. The dual public school system remained firmly entrenched, providing legally sanctioned separate facilities for white and black children until desegregation was ordered in the wake of the first *Brown* decision. In June 1945, the District's Board of Recreation formally institutionalised segregation in all of the parks, playgrounds, and other facilities under its jurisdiction. That policy, too,

⁴ "Past Decade Saw the Market Zoom," p. 37.

remained intact until May 1954. Similarly, until the Supreme Court ruled such practices illegal in the capital in June 1953, many restaurants and other places of entertainment had excluded African-Americans.

At the same time, the rapid growth of the District as a major urban centre, particularly during and after the Second World War, had important repercussions for race relations in the city. Once most of the major legal battles for civil rights in Washington had been won by the mid-1950s, attention increasingly focused upon such issues as continued *de facto* housing and school segregation, and the persistence of economic discrimination against African-Americans, thus foreshadowing what would happen in the nation at large a decade later.⁵

However, in one crucial respect the struggle for civil rights in the District of Columbia was unique. The issue of home rule had been a long-standing fixture in the city's political agenda ever since Congress had abolished Washington's locally elected government and replaced it with three presidentially appointed commissioners in the 1870s. According to Constance Green, that decision stemmed more from a desire to re-establish some semblance of order to a financially embarrassed local government than from a deliberate attempt to disenfranchise the city's increasing black electorate.⁶

⁵ This account of the status of black civil rights in the District of Columbia during and after the Second World War is drawn primarily from Constance McLaughlin Green, The Secret City: A History of Race Relations in the Nation's Capital (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), pp. 250-337; David Brinkley, Washington Goes To War (1988; rpt. New York: Ballantine, 1989); Howard Gillette, Jr., Between Justice and Beauty: Race, Planning, and the Failure of Urban Policy in Washington, D.C. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995); Spencer R. Crew, "Melding the Old and the New: The Modern African-American Community, 1930-1960," in Urban Odyssey: A Multicultural History of Washington, D.C., ed. Francine Curro Cary (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996), pp. 208-27.

⁶ Green, The Secret City, pp. 116-18.

To many observers, however, the racial implications of the move were clear. Certainly, statements such as Alabama Senator John Tyler Morgan's notorious proclamation in 1890 that it had been necessary to, "burn down the barn to get rid of the rats ... the rats being the negro population and the barn being the government of the District of Columbia," did little to dispel that impression.⁷ Ever since disenfranchisement, and especially by the mid-Twentieth Century, the scale of the African-American presence in Washington ensured that the home rule and race issues remained closely intertwined, and became a recurrent theme throughout much of the post-war era.⁸

As a result of all of these factors, Washington, D.C., affords a particularly useful location for an in-depth assessment of black-oriented radio's relationship with the civil rights movement. The following case study explores in detail the general themes that have been raised in the preceding chapters.

⁷ John Tyler Morgan, quoted in, Harry S. Jaffe and Tom Sherwood, Dream City: Race, Power, and the Decline of Washington, D.C. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), p. 24.

⁸ This is not to suggest that many among the District's white population were not interested in securing local government as well. Indeed, most home rule campaigns before the middle of the century had been dominated by whites. Nevertheless, the issue of giving the vote to the city's black population was never far away. In December 1943, for example, when the Senate Judiciary Committee commenced hearings on a bill proposing a measure of home rule, Senator McCarran's request for a forthright discussion on citizens' attitudes towards black suffrage provoked a number of outspoken objections that eventually led to the bill being shelved. See Green, The Secret City, pp. 265-27. Not until 1975 did Washington once again experience a locally elected municipal government.

As a corollary to the home rule debate stood the fact that the Constitution denied the right to vote in presidential and congressional elections to residents of the District. The 23rd Amendment, ratified in March 1961, finally enabled Washingtonians to vote for president. However, at the time of writing, the most that has ever been conceded in terms of congressional representation is the city's right to elect a non-voting delegate.

II

Although Richard Eaton rightly deserves his place in Washington's folklore for his pioneering efforts in establishing the city's first all-black station, radio programming by or towards the District's African-American population was not an entirely new innovation when WOOK signed on air. Jack L. Cooper, for example, had gained his first broadcasting opportunity at Washington's WCAP, after having bluffed his way into the station's studios located at the Wardman Hotel in 1925. Shortly afterwards, local churchman Elder Solomon Lightfoot Michaux commenced his career, initially on WJSV, which led to him becoming the country's most prominent black radio preacher of his day.⁹

Over the latter half of the 1940s, at least two stations began to adopt some measure of popular music programming designed to appeal to Washington's black community. WINX employed Hal Jackson, the city's first prominent African-American deejay, who embarked upon a career which saw him become one of the true legends of black-oriented radio.¹⁰ Meanwhile on

⁹ Mark Newman, Entrepreneurs of Profits and Pride: From Black Appeal to Soul Radio (New York: Praeger, 1988), pp. 55-56; "Top Radio Ministers," Ebony, July 1949, p. 57. The author of the article took a mischievous pleasure in noting that Michaux's first broadcasting opportunity was offered to him by a station which was, allegedly, funded in part by the Ku Klux Klan.

¹⁰ The exact origins of Jackson's radio career are difficult to determine. His relationship with WINX was evidently well-established by March 1949, at which time Jeanetta Welch Brown, the executive director of the National Council of Negro Women, wrote on his behalf in a letter of reference that, "Mr. Jackson started with station WINX several years ago, and has really made great strides since he has been with the station." However, in December 1947, Ebony magazine suggested that Jackson's main affiliation was already with Richard Eaton's WOOK. Certainly, it was not unheard of for an air personality to work for more than one station at the same time. However this does lead to some problems in determining which station actually gave Jackson his first break. Jeanetta Welch Brown, letter to Walter White, 9 March 1949, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Papers, II-A-158, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (hereafter, NAACP Papers); "Disc Jockeys," Ebony, December 1947, p. 44.

WWDC, the "1450 Club" programme, hosted by the white Jack Lowe, was voted "most favorite show" by the District's African-American listeners.¹¹

Alongside such early forays into the realm of black-oriented programming came initial attempts by civil rights campaigners in the city to harness radio's influence for the promotion of their message. As with most other arenas of civil rights activity, these early efforts were characterised by an overwhelmingly inter-racial approach, with the emphasis as much upon the education of, and the breaking down of stereotypes held by, white listeners as upon the solicitation of support from African-Americans. The point was well illustrated when WINX offered a weekly Sunday evening broadcast to the District's branch of the NAACP in 1941. In the final broadcast of December, guest speaker Roy Wilkins used his air time to review the events of the year - especially the onset of war - and to assess their implications for African-Americans.

Throughout the speech, Wilkins sought to impress upon listeners the ties between the fights against racism at home and abroad. Thus, while reassuring his audience of black America's patriotism and loyalty to the war effort, he simultaneously chastised white America for its failure to live up to its professed democratic ideals:

Instantly, the Negro population, through its press and its leaders, pledged to our President its fullest support in the war effort. But coupled with these pledges of loyalty were expressions of hope, urgently worded, that the democracy which our country is fighting to save for the world might be extended in the fullest degree to all minorities within our own borders ...

¹¹ Ben Strouse, letter, Sponsor, 7 November 1949, p. 6.

in carrying on its present campaigns for full opportunity in our country's war effort, and in pushing for its great objective of equality and full citizenship rights for Negro Americans, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People is serving the highest ends of patriotism for America and for the new world which must come out of this war.¹²

Other early attempts to deal with racial issues over the radio in the capital similarly sought to speak to black and white alike. A broadcast sponsored by the CIO on WMAL in July 1945, for example, brought the focus upon the racial situation in Washington itself, roundly condemning the D.C. Board of Recreation's policy of segregation in many of the city's parks and recreational facilities. Listeners to the show heard the Organisation's spokesman, Henry Daniels, urge that the measure be reversed:

one of the first things we learned was the value of recreation in breaking down segregation and racial prejudices. When people learn to play together half the battle is won. Recreation does away with racial antagonism, games of skill and athletic ability smooth the rough water of prejudice because a man or woman is recognised by what he or she can do.¹³

By the end of the decade, such programming efforts had begun to attract the attention of a growing number of civic organisations, and praise for their contribution towards improving race relations in the city. For example,

¹² Roy Wilkins, "Radio Talk over Station WINX," 28 December 1941, pp. 5-6, NAACP Papers, II-A-564.

¹³ "Script of the CIO Broadcast on Action of the District of Columbia Recreation Board," 19 July 1945, pp. 2-3, NAACP Papers, II-A-157.

WINX's presentation of the weekly "Bright Tomorrow" drama show earned warm commendation from the Washington Council of the East and West Association in 1947 for its, "distinguished service in the field of education for interracial and international understanding." Similarly, the following year, WWDC was lauded by the National Conference of Christians and Jews for its, "outstanding contributions during the past year to mutual understanding and respect among peoples of diverse backgrounds through the powerful medium of radio."¹⁴

III

As significant as such programming developments were, an important distinction needs to be drawn between stations such as WINX and WWDC, which made an honest attempt to shape the racial attitudes of white listeners and include programming of specific interest to Washington's African-American community as one element of a more general schedule, and the emergence of stations such as WOOK. It was only in the case of the truly black-oriented radio station that the District's black population could fully embrace a station as "its" own, and accept it as an integral part of the community. Consequently, for the period between 1947 and 1965, the story of black-oriented radio in Washington, D.C., and its relationship to the civil rights movement, is essentially the tale of two stations: WOOK and WUST.

In many ways, there was little in Richard Eaton's background to suggest that he would become one of the architects of the black radio boom. Born in Chicago in 1899, Eaton spent most of his upbringing in France, save for his

¹⁴ Washington Post, 22 January 1947, Vertical File: "Radio and Television Stations: Radio WINX," Washingtoniana Division, Martin Luther King, Jr., Public Library, Washington, D.C. (hereafter, MLK-DC "WINX," File); Strouse, letter, Sponsor, 7 November 1949.

student days at Harvard. Having been a journalist in Europe, his career was disrupted by Hitler's invasion of France in 1940. A strong opponent of Nazism in his work, Eaton felt compelled to flee the country and return to the United States, where he first gained entry into the broadcasting industry as a news commentator for WINX. Within a few years, Eaton had acquired sufficient experience and capital to seek to enter into ownership. Following the acceptance of his application by the FCC, the construction of WOOK was completed by May 1947.¹⁵

The decision to orientate WOOK's programming towards Washington's African-American population was essentially an economic one, born out of the need to run a profitable station amid a welter of competition. As with all such entrepreneurial exercises, the move involved an element of risk, but the gamble paid off handsomely. Events soon confirmed the astonishing enthusiasm with which the District's black community responded to the station. Within a few weeks of signing on air, WOOK was forced to relocate its studios from the Hotel 2400, situated at 2400 16th Street, N.W., after complaints from the hotel management concerning the number of listeners arriving at the hotel wanting to see the station's personalities in action.¹⁶

By November 1951, the station's popularity had reached such a height that following his purchase of another local station, WINX, for \$95,000 from William and Dolly Banks earlier that year, Eaton switched the frequencies of his two stations. From that point, it was his black-oriented, rather than his

¹⁵ Washington Star, 16 May 1980, pp. C9-10; Richard Eaton, testimony to FCC, Official Report of Proceedings Before the FCC, 26 October 1965, pp. 694-704, Federal Communications Commission Docketed Case Files #15795, vol. 10, Box 238, National Archives II, College Park, Maryland (hereafter, FCC Docketed Case Files).

¹⁶ Washington Star, 16 May 1980. According to Eaton, the cause for the complaints stemmed more from the race, rather than the quantity, of the visitors.

general market outlet which operated on the clearer of the two frequencies, 1340 kilocycles, so as to ensure that it could reach the maximum possible number of listeners. By this stage, Eaton's United Broadcasting Company was already operating at a profit of over \$180,000, enabling him to expand his broadcasting interests in other markets around the country.¹⁷

Almost inevitably, the success enjoyed by WOOK spurred the emergence of a competitor. Under the presidency of Willard D. Egolf, the Broadcast Management, Inc., first established station WBCC in nearby Bethesda, Maryland, in February 1947. Hampered by a daytime-only license, and small output of only 250 watts, the station failed to make much impact upon the mainstream market with its standard fare of popular music, folk, and opera. Thus, in 1951, the decision was taken to change direction and become Washington's second all-black station. "U" Street, located in the heart of the African-American community in the North-West of the city, offered a new location and a new name. On 1 October 1951, WUST hit the airwaves.¹⁸

Over the next 14 years, WOOK and WUST were never seriously challenged as the most influential radio stations broadcasting to the capital's African-American community. To be sure, black Washingtonians listened to mainstream stations as well, but never to the same extent. In 1962, the two

¹⁷ WOOK Application for Consent to Assignment of Radio Broadcast Station Construction Permit or License, 20 July 1951, Part I, Exhibit 3, and Part II, Exhibit A, Federal Communications Commission License Renewal Files, Box 174, National Archives, Suitland, Maryland (hereafter, FCC License Renewal Files).

By the end of 1952, Eaton's other broadcasting outlets included WFAN (FM) in Washington, D.C., WARK-Hagerstown and WSIX-Essex in Maryland, WANT-Richmond, Virginia, and WJMO-Cleveland. WOOK Application for Renewal of Broadcast Station License, 18 November 1952, Exhibit 2, FCC License Renewal Files, Box 174.

¹⁸ WBCC Application for Standard Broadcast Station License, 7 February 1947, FCC License Renewal Files, Box 260; Carl J. Batter, letter to T. J. Slowie, 24 September 1951, FCC License Renewal Files, Box 202.

black-oriented stations were found to share 56.3 percent of the average weekly black audience, the remainder being divided among the city's seven other general stations.¹⁹ In addition, the local population's consumption of radio was significantly greater than that of the city's black press. In 1960, out of 111,190 homes in the District with a non-white head of household, over 89.9 percent possessed at least one radio set. Around the same time, the circulation of the most popular (weekend) edition of the Washington Afro-American averaged just over 13,000. Thus, throughout the period from the late 1940s to the mid 1960s, WOOK and WUST were arguably the most widespread mass media directed specifically towards the black citizens of Washington, D.C.²⁰

Of course, while such statistics testified to the weight of black radio's presence in Washington, they were certainly no guarantee that either station would throw that weight behind the fight for equality in the city. Nevertheless, both outlets enjoyed considerable potential to render a meaningful contribution - be it supportive, active, or both - to the campaign for civil rights.

Usually, both WOOK and WUST's involvement tended towards the supportive role. There were, however, some significant exceptions. The two stations offered much to vindicate the arguments of those who have maintained that black radio's particular strength lay in its ability to foster a greater sense of racial identity and pride in African-American communities. Across the city, WOOK and WUST gave rise to a host of new heroes for the black population to enjoy and admire. Disc jockeys such as John "Lord Fauntleroy" Bandy of WUST became powerful icons and role models, hugely popular in the local

¹⁹ "Negro Stations' Share of Negro Audience," Sponsor, 22 October 1962, Part 2, p. 20.

²⁰ U.S. Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, U.S. Census of Housing (Washington, D.C: GPO, 1960) vol. 1, part 1, Table 26. Newspaper statistics taken from Ayer's Directory of Newspapers and Periodicals 1961 (Philadelphia: N. W. Ayer and Son, 1961).

community. On "U" Street, large crowds would often gather outside Waxie Maxie's record store, eager to catch a glimpse of their favourite WOOK deejays in action whenever they would broadcast directly from the storefront.²¹

Similarly, a recurrent theme in much of the public service programming offered by the stations was the emphasis upon taking positive steps to uplift the local community. A whole range of shows, some under the auspices of a station itself, some prepared in conjunction with outside agencies, were designed to instil confidence and self-respect in listeners. Among the most prominent featured Richard Eaton's "Unity Viewpoint," a 15 minute show aired twice daily, through which WOOK's owner indulged his journalistic background to bring a "message of hope" to his audience. With the aim of, "better[ing] human understandings and human relationships," the accent of Eaton's broadcasts was very much upon the positive. "I try to say you are a master of your own mind at all times," he explained. "You may not control circumstances, but you can control your own reaction."²²

Similar efforts to promote such a "bootstrap" mentality included programmes with titles such as "You Can Make It," a collaborative effort between WOOK and the local chapter of the Urban League which, from its commencement in April 1962, sought to offer constructive advice on issues such as career opportunities and housing.²³

²¹ Cal Hackett, interview with Stephen Walsh, 8 February 1995, University of Newcastle Upon Tyne Oral History Collection (hereafter, UNOHC).

²² Richard Eaton, quoted in, Washington Star, 16 May 1980, p. C10; WOOK Application for Renewal of Broadcast Station License, 9 April 1962, Exhibit E, p. 11, FCC Docketed Case Files #15795, vol. 1, Box 237.

Somewhat optimistically, in the same license renewal application, Eaton also included among the station's public service activities the broadcasting of 15 minutes of live organ music after each "Unity Viewpoint," in order, "to provide background music for its listeners while they meditate on the message."

²³ WOOK Application for Renewal, 9 April 1962, Exhibit E, p. 9.

Frequently, such programming efforts specifically targeted the city's youth. As early as 1952, WOOK established a close association with Howard University, assisting students as well as faculty in promoting the University's role as a leading cultural force in the local community. According to Howard's director of public affairs, Otto McClarrin, the service rendered by WOOK was all the more valuable in light of the reluctance displayed by most of the city's general market stations to accommodate the historically black university:

We at Howard University have had difficulty getting free time on many of these stations for broadcasts of our cultural activities.

Radio Station WOOK has been a notable exception to this trend. We have been very well pleased over the amount of radio time which has been given to broadcasts of our chapel programs, banquets, speeches by the President of Howard University and student activities during the past year ...

Your splendid cooperation will help to enlist the support of citizens throughout the Washington area in making their University increasingly effective in the years to come.²⁴

It must be emphasised that the majority of such public service programming was not specifically geared towards the issue of civil rights. Its value to the cause lay more in the indirect results of its community building, rather than in any overt agitation. However, on occasion, an attempt was made to combine the two. Such was the case when the 12th Street branch of the YMCA commenced a series of shows over WOOK in 1960 with the intention

²⁴ Otto McClarrin, letter to Richard Eaton, 3 November 1952, WOOK Application for Renewal, 18 November 1952, Exhibit H.

of introducing the city's youth to people whom the Association regarded as particularly valuable role models. Introducing the first guest, ex-Olympic boxing champion turned educator Norvel Lee, the show's presenter took advantage of the opportunity to expound upon the importance of role models in a speech that dwelt considerably less upon Lee himself than it did upon commending the courage and selflessness of the student activists who had begun to stage sit-ins throughout the South earlier that same year.²⁵

The effectiveness of much of WOOK and WUST's community-oriented broadcasting was rarely matched by a similar commitment to news reporting. Although both stations were more than willing to include coverage of the latest civil rights activity, both in the South and in Washington itself, they continued to display many of the failings of their counterparts elsewhere in the country. With their emphasis firmly upon entertainment, neither realised its full potential as a major disseminator of news and information in the black community. Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, news broadcasts occupied a subordinate position on the average weekly programming schedules of both stations, accounting for approximately 10 percent of WOOK's weekly airtime in 1961, and 6 percent of WUST's. Yet, if they both shared the general weaknesses of black-oriented radio as a news medium, they also shared its strengths - in terms of reach, empathy, and frequency - which ensured that those news broadcasts that were provided still retained a particular significance.²⁶

Despite the value of WOOK and WUST's contribution in promoting community spirit, and, to a lesser extent, news coverage, such efforts hardly

²⁵ Transcript of YMCA Radio Broadcast (n.d.), WOOK Application for Renewal of Broadcast Station License, 13 July 1960, Exhibit E, FCC License Renewal Files, Box 174.

²⁶ Statistics for the percentage of airtime devoted to news taken from "Negro Station Profiles," *Sponsor*, 9 October 1961, Part 2, p. 22.

placed either outlet in the vanguard of the civil rights struggle in Washington. Rather, both fell into that category of stations whose contribution to the fight against discrimination was most notable for the way in which they regularly placed their facilities at the disposal of outside activists and organisations.

One seemingly obvious point of contact between the medium and the Movement might have been with the NAACP, especially given the Association's leading role in taking the freedom struggle to the airwaves throughout the country during the post-war era. However, Washington was somewhat unusual in the equivocal nature of the relationship that existed between its black-oriented radio stations and the NAACP.

Certainly, there were signs of co-operation from an early stage, such as Roy Wilkins' broadcast calling for fair employment practices legislation made over WOOK in January 1950.²⁷ However, at least in the early 1950s, the relationship failed to flourish to the extent that might have been expected. The Association's limited involvement with the city's black-oriented stations at this time can, in large part, be explained by the hostility with which the Washington Bureau's director Clarence Mitchell regarded the whole phenomenon of black-oriented radio programming. As seen in Chapter Two, Mitchell was at the forefront of those in the higher echelons of the NAACP who expressed particular resentment against the medium.

Such an attitude helps to explain the relative failure of "The Walter White Show" in Washington. Upon the programme's debut in 1952, rather than seek time on one of the two black-oriented stations which dominated African-American listenership, Mitchell arranged for the show to be aired, first on WWDC, and then on WOL.²⁸ Although this was in keeping with White's own

²⁷ Roy Wilkins, "Introductory Statement for Broadcast over WOOK," 15 January 1950, NAACP Papers, II-A-564.

²⁸ Not a black-oriented station until 1965.

desire not to discourage potential white listeners unnecessarily, it did prevent the show from being broadcast to its most receptive audience. Lack of interest ensured that, at both stations, the programme's run was a brief one. Within a year, it was discontinued altogether in the capital.²⁹

Despite such inauspicious beginnings, the situation improved markedly as the decade progressed. From at least as early as March 1954, arrangements were made with WUST for the broadcasting of interviews with Association personnel. By the turn of the decade, members of the local branch were among the guests appearing regularly upon WOOK's "Americans All" series. WOOK, in conjunction with Richard Eaton's Washington-based television station, also began to work with the Association in promoting the local branch's membership drives, with impressive results. As branch president Carl H. Moultrie enthused after one such campaign in 1965: "As a result of this special service the NAACP reached more homes and secured more comments concerning the drive then [sic] it ever had before. It also raised by telephone calls and persons coming to the station to turn in memberships, thousands of dollars."³⁰

²⁹ Walter White, letter to Clarence Mitchell, 20 February 1953, and George A. Bernstein, letter to Morris Novik, 1 June 1953, both in NAACP Papers, II-A-544.

Among those listeners who did take a keen interest in the show was none other than J. Edgar Hoover. Indeed, Walter White only learned of the programme's cancellation in Washington after a chance meeting with Hoover in a restaurant, during which the FBI director apparently expressed his regret that the show was no longer on air. Walter White, letter to James C. Evans, 17 December 1953, NAACP Papers, II-A-544.

³⁰ James C. Mason, letter to Harold E. Sheffers, 9 March 1954, WUST Application for Renewal of Broadcast Station License, July 1954, FCC License Renewal Files, Box 55; WOOK Application for Renewal, 9 April 1962, Exhibit E, p. 2; Carl H. Moultrie, letter to E. Carlton Myers, Jr., 19 August 1965, United Broadcasting Company Petition to Enlarge the Issues, 23 August 1965, FCC Docketed Case Files #15795, vol. 1, Box 237.

Evidently, the Washington NAACP had succeeded in establishing an effective rapport with the city's black-oriented radio stations by the mid-1960s. However, even by this stage, the relationship was characterised by its ad hoc nature. While WOOK and WUST appeared happy to afford air time to the organisation as the need arose, the Washington NAACP had still never enjoyed its own regular show on a black radio station in the capital.³¹

In the light of this absence, the burden fell upon other individuals and organisations to make a more concerted and comprehensive attempt to use the airwaves to advance the cause of civil rights in Washington. Two outstanding examples covered the entire period from the onset of black-oriented radio in the city until the mid-1960s and beyond: namely, Bishop Smallwood Williams and the Institute on Race Relations.

The career of Bishop Smallwood E. Williams was built upon the interaction of personal dynamism and the influence of the media. In themselves, the qualities of determination, self-belief, and charisma can be a formidable combination in a religious leader. Coupled with the opportunity to reach a mass audience via radio, and a preacher could reach for the skies in more ways than one. Arriving in Washington from Columbus, Ohio, in September 1927, the Lynchburg, Virginia-born minister embarked upon the creation of a ministry that would eventually take him from street preacher to one of the most important religious leaders in the District. Truly, it was a spectacular rise: from preaching in a second-hand tent, to the opening of a \$3,000,000 temple in 1981; from presiding over an initial congregation of 15, to founding and

³¹ In 1965, WOOK's programme director Cliff Holland testified that an agreement had been reached with the NAACP for the airing of a regular show, but that the Association had then failed to take up the offer of the free air-time. United Broadcasting Company Exhibit 34, FCC Docketed Case Files #15795, vol. 5, Box 241.

Not until WOL's switch to a black-oriented format in the same year did the Association finally obtain its own weekly programme.

leading the 100,000 strong Pentecostal Bible Way Church Worldwide; from arriving in the city with little over five dollars, to heading a church worth, in Washington alone, an estimated \$25,000,000 by the early 1980s.³²

However, Williams' career was notable for far more than the ability he demonstrated in assiduously building his own influence. As much as any religious leader in the city, he revealed himself to be a practitioner of the social gospel, involving himself in all facets of his community's problems. "Too often the churches would not speak out against the blatant evils of racism and injustice," the bishop recalled. "They did not get involved in the fight to change things." It was an accusation that few would levy at Williams himself. Evaluating Bible Way's long record of practical public service to the Washington community, as evidenced, for example, in the construction of apartment complexes for low income families near the church's base on New Jersey Avenue, The Washingtonian magazine concluded in 1981 that Williams, "may be Washington's most influential clergyman, evangelist, and practitioner of pulpit activism, social and economic."³³

An integral aspect of Williams' social concern was his stance against segregation in the capital. The bishop could lay an impressive claim to a lengthy personal history of local civil rights activism. For many in the city, the incident that first brought this fact to their attention occurred in March 1952, when, two years before the first *Brown* decision brought an end to the District's dual

³² Paul R. Hathaway, "God's Master of Ceremonies," The Washingtonian, September 1981, pp. 162-66; "The Life, Works and Contributions of Bishop Smallwood E. Williams," Pentecostal Apostolic Fellowship Journal, June 1989 (n. pag.); Bishop Smallwood Williams, This Is My Story: A Significant Life Story: The Autobiography of Smallwood Edmond Williams (Washington, D.C.: William Willoughby, 1981).

³³ Smallwood Williams, quoted in, Washington Post, 5 July 1991, Vertical File: "Biography: Williams, Smallwood," Washingtoniana Division, Martin Luther King, Jr., Public Library, Washington D.C. (hereafter, MLK-DC "Williams," File); Hathaway, "God's Master of Ceremonies," p. 163.

public school system, the preacher attempted without success to enrol his son at the all-white Wheatley School. Four years later, in the first meaningful election that Washington residents were able to participate in since disenfranchisement, Williams again hit the headlines by organising African-American voting strength at the local Democratic presidential primary.³⁴

By the time that the March on Washington brought the national civil rights spotlight upon the capital in 1963, Williams' position as one of the foremost civil rights advocates among the city's religious leaders was undisputed. As a result, when the District of Columbia Committee on the March on Washington was formed on 11 August 1963, he was the obvious candidate for the chairmanship of the new organisation's church sub-committee. Williams' commitment to the struggle continued throughout the remainder of his life, encouraging him to take a strong involvement in causes such as the campaign for home rule in the District. Thus, by the time of his death in 1991, friends were able to take a justified pride in the extent of the bishop's commitment to the struggle for equality. "Bishop Williams was my friend in civil rights for four decades, and he was my teacher," eulogised civil rights' veteran Joseph Rauh. "In the tradition of great black leaders, he helped turn [Washington] from a Southern segregated city into an integrated city from top to bottom."³⁵

It would be a great disservice to Bishop Williams' talents as a religious leader and administrator to suggest that his success can be explained solely in terms of his lengthy association with black-oriented radio. To do so would be

³⁴ Williams, *This is My Story*, pp. 97-150; Hathaway, "God's Master of Ceremonies," p. 164.

³⁵ Colin Cromwell, memorandum to Gloster Current, 12 August 1963, NAACP Papers, III-A-228; Hathaway, "God's Master Of Ceremonies," pp. 165-65; Joseph Rauh, quoted in, *Washington Post*, 7 July 1991, MLK-DC "Williams," File.

to ignore the genuine appeal of his message and personality, as well as the more obvious fact that he had been preaching in the District for 13 years before his radio career even began. Nevertheless, the weekly broadcasting of Williams' services - initially over WINX in 1941, and with WOOK from 1947 - undoubtedly played a key role in exposing large masses of black Washingtonians to his talents, effectively expanding his congregation to a size that no four walls of any church building could contain. In a poll organised by the Washington Afro-American in 1944, Williams was declared the city's most prominent minister by almost 34,000 votes. Within two years of beginning his association with WOOK in 1947, Ebony estimated that Williams' sermons enjoyed an audience of approximately 500,000 listeners every week.³⁶

In one sense, Williams' radio career would have assisted his civil rights activities, regardless of the actual content of his broadcasts. Simply by increasing his own popularity and influence in the city, Williams' long standing association with WOOK indirectly facilitated his struggle against the status quo. Nevertheless, to make maximum use of the opportunities available to him, the bishop frequently took to the airwaves to carry his fight for equality to as many people as possible. The issue of civil rights became a prominent theme of many of Williams' broadcasts almost from the outset of his tenure at WOOK, so much so that when, in 1950, the Virginia Theological Seminary and College awarded him an honorary doctorate of Divinity in recognition of his contribution to religious and civic life in Washington, specific attention was paid to the campaign that he had been waging on air for the elimination of segregation in the city.³⁷

³⁶ "The Life, Works and Contributions of Bishop Smallwood E. Williams"; "Top Radio Ministers," p. 58.

³⁷ Washington Afro-American, 28 October 1950, MLK-DC "Williams," File.

Williams' personal battle over school integration was a notable case in point. For example, at the height of his crusade, the bishop devoted one broadcast to a scathing attack upon District School Board member Robert Faulkner, in response to Faulkner's defence of the existing school system. In calling for Faulkner's resignation, Williams gave full vent to his indignation:

Mr. Faulkner has blatantly exposed a retrogressive and reactionary mind in the fact that he lacks an adequate concept and appreciation of the need of modern educational facilities and equipment ... He seems to be so very deficient in a sense of social justice which is so necessary in a just and fair administration of the Board of Education of our public schools of the District of Columbia. We doubt seriously that he has any contribution to make whatever to the total or permanent solution of the public school problem.³⁸

Certainly, not all of Williams' broadcasts were so specifically engaged. The preacher had the spiritual, as well as the temporal, needs of his flock to take care of. Nevertheless, racial matters were never far away. In essence, Williams' sermons sought to address the issue from two sides, as outspoken denunciations of racism were coupled with an attempt to infuse listeners with a sense of pride and confidence, born of religious conviction, through which they could be motivated to join the battle against Jim Crow. "I told them that their ship was sure to come in. It was a message of inspiration," recalled the bishop. "I told them not to worry about white segregationists because their arms were

³⁸ Williams, This is my Story, p. 147.

too short to box with God."³⁹

On occasion, however, the content of Williams' broadcasts was determined by something less than pure altruism. The bishop certainly employed his airtime to good effect in the fight for civil rights, but he used it most effectively of all when the rights being threatened were his own. The point was underlined in 1963 when plans were drawn up for the extension of Interstate 395 along a route which would have necessitated the demolition of the Bible Way church. Williams drew upon all of the resources available to him to oppose the scheme, not the least of which were weekly broadcasts carried over WOOK denouncing the "moral tragedy" being proposed. If the episode revealed a not unreasonable degree of self-interest on Williams' part, it also demonstrated the extent of his political influence. With the assistance of Senators Hubert Humphrey and Wayne Morse, the highway was re-routed.⁴⁰

For specific instances such as these, and on a more general level, Bishop Smallwood Williams had good reason to be grateful for the opportunities afforded to him by WOOK. In 1965, reflecting on a broadcasting career that had spanned virtually a quarter of a century, the bishop expressed a keen appreciation of how black-oriented radio had benefited both himself, and the African-American citizenry of Washington:

[The fact that] when I first sought broadcast time some twenty-five years ago, only WOOK was willing to provide broadcast time for our religious programs on a regular and full basis is indicative of the importance of a Radio Station which serves the

³⁹ Smallwood Williams, quoted in, Washington Post, 30 June 1991, Vertical File: "Churches, Pentecostal: Bible Way Church 1939-," Washingtoniana Division, Martin Luther King, Jr., Public Library, Washington, D.C. (hereafter, MLK-DC "Bible Way," File.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*; Hathaway, "God's Master of Ceremonies," pp. 164-65.

needs of the local Negro community. Religious life is the most important part of the life of American Negroes and what is true of the whole country is true of the Negro in the Washington, D.C. area. The churches have been a central point not only in developing and improving the status of the American Negro, but have also been a vital point in the fight for civil rights. The religious community needs an outlet through radio to reach the hundreds of thousands of American Negroes and Station WOOK fulfils that need in Washington.⁴¹

As with Bishop Williams, the Institute on Race Relations' "Americans All" show displayed a long-standing commitment to deal with the issue of civil rights. According to the Institute's director, Tomlinson D. Todd, the show was specifically, "dedicated to charity and the promotion of justice, education, harmony and understanding among all races and creeds in America."⁴²

"Americans All" had actually originated in March 1946, on WWDC. Under Todd's direction, the show's inter-racial panel of distinguished guests discussed a host of race-related issues, ranging from segregation and discrimination in the capital, to lynchings in the South. In the process, the show earned praise from sources such as the Pittsburgh Courier for its contribution towards improving race relations among the citizens of Washington. Such

⁴¹ Bishop Smallwood Williams, letter to E. Carlton Myers, Jr., 18 August 1965, United Broadcasting Company Petition to Enlarge the Issues, 23 August 1965.

Technically, Williams' was mistaken in asserting that his relationship with WOOK dated back 25 years, as the station did not commence operation until 1947. However, WINX, upon which Williams first appeared, effectively became WOOK when Richard Eaton swapped the frequencies of his two stations in 1951.

⁴² Tomlinson D. Todd, letter to Arnold Fort, 27 October 1952, WOOK Application for Renewal, 18 November 1952, Exhibit A.

critical acclaim, however, could not deter WWDC's management from making the decision to discontinue the show after only 18 months.⁴³

The willingness of WOOK's management to accommodate "Americans All" into its schedule in 1948 not only spared Tomlinson Todd from personal disappointment, it also ensured that the District's African-American community would be provided with one of its most consistent advocates of racial equality for many years to come.

Credit for the show's popularity lay partly with Todd's own efforts, partly in the variety and calibre of guest that he was able to attract to appear on the programme's discussion panels. In addition to offering valuable airtime for the promotion of a multitude of charitable causes, such as the Community Chest, Red Cross, and the Society for Crippled Children, "Americans All" continually strove to include spokespersons for local civil rights organisations. In so doing, speakers were invited, not only from the highest-profile groups such as the NAACP and the Urban League, but also from less well-known counterparts such as the pacifist American Friends Services Committee.⁴⁴

Throughout this period, there was little in the programming schedule offered by WUST to rival the shows featuring Bishop Williams and Tomlinson Todd for consistency of involvement with the civil rights issue. Nevertheless, WUST made its own significant contribution towards the fight for equality - a contribution which illustrates how a radio station's involvement with the Movement could transcend the simple matter of what was broadcast over the air.

⁴³ Pittsburgh Courier [Washington edition], 1947, Vertical File: "Radio and Television Stations: Radio WWDC," Washingtoniana Division, Martin Luther King, Jr., Public Library, Washington, D.C.

⁴⁴ Todd, letter to Fort, 27 October 1952; WOOK Application for Renewal, 9 April 1962, Exhibit E, p. 2.

In the case of WUST, the station's role in the freedom struggle was most conspicuous in its provision, at no cost, of a venue for assemblies and meetings. After local carpet retailers Milton, Jack, Daniel and Walter Diener acquired a controlling interest in the station for a total of \$190,000 in 1958, the WUST Radio Music Hall was established the following year. Located at 815 "V" Street, in the Shaw district of the city, the hall combined a new broadcasting studio for the station with an auditorium capable of accommodating over 1,000 people.⁴⁵

From its inception, the Diener brothers recognised the possibilities that the site offered to the local community. According to former station employees, the decision to open the Music Hall's doors to virtually any charity or civic group that needed it was made with the active encouragement of the station's new owners. Inevitably, there was a degree of self-interest involved - the Dieners were certainly not unaware of the public relations, and thus commercial, benefits to be reaped from such a noble gesture. However, there is little to suggest that they were not also motivated by a genuine desire to see the hall become a positive force for the benefit of Washington's African-American community. As disc jockey Cal Hackett explained, "They were really interested in letting it be known that there was a place, if needed ... a meeting place."⁴⁶

Civic groups hastened to avail themselves of the opportunity, attracted still further by the Dieners' policy of waiving any costs for the rental of the hall, so long as the organisation itself did not charge entrance fees for the activities

⁴⁵ WUST Application for Consent to Transfer of Control of Corporation Holding Radio Broadcast Station Construction Permit or License, 18 August 1958, Exhibit 3, FCC License Renewal Files, Box 325; "Radio Music Hall Days," Washington City Paper, 13-19 March 1987, Vertical File: "Radio and Television Stations: Radio WUST," Washingtoniana Division, Martin Luther King, Jr., Public Library, Washington, D.C. (hereafter, MLK-DC "WUST," File).

⁴⁶ Hackett interview; Perry Walders, interview with Stephen Walsh, 28 January 1995, UNOHC.

that they staged there. As a result, the WUST Radio Music Hall served as a base for an array of worthy community events and social causes, ranging from children's parties and dances to the collection of blood donations, and in the process firmly established itself as a much loved and valued institution situated in the very heart of black Washington.⁴⁷

Inevitably, the hall became a much sought-after location for civil rights campaigners. The venue's size, availability, and reputation in the community made it a key centre for black activists visiting the capital. Speakers at the hall reflected the broad spectrum of the black protest movement, including Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael, and H. Rap Brown.⁴⁸

Despite the plethora of distinguished visitors appearing at the Radio Music Hall, only rarely were their speeches actually broadcast by WUST. While the station would regularly run public service announcements to advertise a forthcoming event, the meeting itself usually went unheard by the District's radio listening public. Essentially, this situation arose from a matter of simple logistics. A daytime-only station, WUST had usually finished broadcasting by the time most of the meetings began at the hall. In exceptional cases, most notably including the visits of Dr. King, speeches were recorded for rebroadcast at a later date. Overall, however, given the station's position as host to many of the Movement's most outstanding personalities, the situation represented something of a missed opportunity. In this respect, WUST's role in the freedom struggle was organisational, rather than didactic.⁴⁹

In addition to serving as a venue for speakers, the willingness of WUST's ownership to donate the use of the hall so freely also made it an ideal location for the staging of a variety of other civil rights activities, such as voter

⁴⁷ *ibid.*

⁴⁸ Hackett interview; "Radio Music Hall Days."

⁴⁹ Hackett interview; Walders interview.

registration campaigns.⁵⁰ Most notable of all was the hall's role as headquarters for the District of Columbia Committee on the March on Washington in 1963. On 11 August, the Movement's planning committee in New York established a sub-division in the District to serve as a local centre of operations during the hectic prelude to the march. Requiring a base from which to operate, the new organisation immediately sought, and received, access to the facilities of the Radio Music Hall. Thus, in the days preceding one of the most historic events in the nation's capital, the venue served as a vital centre for all manner of necessary administrative tasks - including liaison with New York; publicity and media arrangements; and even the construction of the placards that marchers carried in their thousands on the day of the march.⁵¹

To complement its offer of the Music Hall, WUST also undertook a widespread on-air campaign to publicise the march and encourage the participation of its listeners. Taken together, these efforts marked the station's most comprehensive and rigorous involvement with the civil rights movement to that point, much to the satisfaction of the march's organisers.⁵²

The examples of Bishop Smallwood Williams, "Americans All," and the Radio Music Hall offer a revealing insight into the nature of WOOK and WUST's relationship with the freedom struggle. Both stations played a notable role in promoting the fight against discrimination in the capital, but the stance that they assumed was essentially supportive, rather than overtly active. Given

⁵⁰ Hackett interview.

⁵¹ Cromwell, memorandum to Current, 12 August 1963; Colin Cromwell, memorandum to Dr. Morsell and Gloster Current, 13 August 1963, NAACP Papers, III-A-228; Washington Evening Star, 20 August 1963, MLK-DC "WUST," File; Patrick Ellis, interview with Stephen Walsh, 8 February 1995, UNOHC.

⁵² William Parker, telegram to Bayard Rustin, 27 August 1963, Bayard T. Rustin Papers, Box 31, Folder 13, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

the stations' respective ownership, this was entirely understandable. Both Richard Eaton and the Diener brothers entered into black radio because they were entrepreneurs who recognised a potentially lucrative business opportunity, not because they were civil rights zealots. Nevertheless, in making their facilities available to those activists who were involved in the struggle for equality, both rendered a valuable service to the Movement's fortunes in the city. The trend continued throughout the 1960s as a number of civil rights and other black protest groups began to produce their own radio shows for national syndication. By 1963, for example, WOOK had joined a growing number of stations which aired the Nation of Islam's weekly "Muhammad Speaks" programme. Two years later, WUST subscribed to the NUL's "Civil Rights Roundup" and "The Leaders Speak" productions. In this respect, the role of WOOK and WUST in the civil rights movement remained more that of conveyor rather than instigator; of messenger rather than leader.⁵³

IV

In the Summer of 1965, the position that WOOK and WUST had established as essential listening for the District's African-American population was challenged by the emergence of a new competitor. The proposed sale of Henry Rau's WOL to broadcasting magnate Egmont Sonderling for \$1,250,000 caused shockwaves throughout Washington's black radio community even before the transaction was completed in July of that year. Acutely aware of the threat that a third, more powerful black-oriented station in the city would pose, the ownership of WUST petitioned the FCC, without success, to reject the

⁵³ Muhammad Speaks, 4 February 1963, p. 23; Sherwood Ross, memorandum to Guichard Parris, 14 June 1965, National Urban League Papers, II-V-23, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (hereafter, NUL Papers).

proposed transfer.⁵⁴

Events soon proved WUST's fears to be well-grounded, as the new station rapidly became the stuff of which every entrepreneur's dreams are made - an outstanding overnight sensation. WOL's rise was as dramatic as it was sudden. "The beauty of it was we never notified anybody that WOL was about to be changed from an easy listening format to soul," recalled deejay Jim Kelsey. "We just came on at noon, hollering and screaming. The reaction was instantaneous."⁵⁵ Audience surveys underlined the fact. Within a year, the once struggling station was established as the most listened-to in the Washington metropolitan area, with reports estimating that it had grossed \$1,500,000 in the first 12 months since its adoption of a black-oriented format. For the following decade, WOL's hegemony in the city's black radio industry continued unabated.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ WUST based its argument primarily upon suggestions that Sonderling had failed to ascertain adequately the needs of the local community, and had misled the FCC about the efforts that had been undertaken to do so. After protracted hearings, during which the new licensee was permitted to continue in operation, the case's hearing examiner Jay Kyle finally cleared WOL of all but one of the charges, and approved the transfer.

The exception consisted of the bizarre turn of events surrounding one of Sonderling's employees, Howard Sanders, who claimed to have met with local clergyman Reverend Everett Guiles. According to Guiles, not only had the meeting never taken place, but also, once he had testified to that effect, Sanders had telephoned him to plead, somewhat disingenuously, "Listen, Reverend, can't you be dishonest for a while to get me off the hook?" Evidently, the good reverend remained unimpressed. Even with the introduction of lie detector tests into the proceedings, neither party would change its story, with the result that the dispute was never settled conclusively.

"Affidavit of Reverend S. Everette [sic] Guiles," Atlantic Broadcasting Company Supplement to Petition for Reconsideration, 3 December 1965, FCC Docketed Case Files #16533, vol. 1, Box 163; Initial Decision of Hearing Examiner Jay A. Kyle, 26 October 1966, FCC Docketed Case Files #16533, vol. 6, Box 168.

⁵⁵ Jim Kelsey, quoted in, Washington Post, 2 December 1979, p. C5.

⁵⁶ Washington Star, 8 June 1966, clipping in WOL Exhibit 11, FCC Docketed Case Files #16533, vol. 4, Box 166; Washington Post, 28 January 1973, p. L3; Washington Post, 2 December 1979, p. C1.

At the heart of WOL's success lay the popularity of its dynamic new soul music format, coupled with an unparalleled involvement in the community affairs of black Washingtonians. Certainly, the music was the initial attraction for most listeners. The new station, personified by such flamboyant air personalities as Rudy "The Tall Tanned Texan" Runnels, "Sunny Jim" Kelsey, and especially Bob "Nighthawk" Terry, created just the right image - hip, ebullient, sassy - to establish itself as *the* place to hear the latest soul sounds. By December 1966, WOL's success was so great that WUST was forced to abandon its own rhythm and blues programming, replacing it with a softer, adult-oriented style, and later an all-gospel format, in an attempt to create its own distinctive niche that might ensure its economic survival. Thus, from that point, rhythm and blues aficionados in the city were faced with a steady diet of WOOK and WOL. WOOK persevered with its own popular music approach, but as the Washington Post candidly observed: "The difference is that WOL does it better."⁵⁷

However, WOL's success was as much a triumph of substance as style. From the outset, the station's public service and community involvement far surpassed anything that had been offered by its rivals. According to WOL's executive vice-president John Pace, this was the defining factor in the effort to establish WOL as the "voice" of Washington's black community:

Negroes hear you playing their music. They hear you reacting to the music like they do and they say 'That could be my station.' Then you begin talking their talk all the time, you let them know where you're at and they say 'That is my station.' Finally, now that you're really communicating, you add public affairs

⁵⁷ "Has 'Big Beat' Sound Lost Mass Audience Appeal?" MLK-DC "WUST," File; Washington Post, 28 January 1973, p. L3.

programming, you specialize in Negro news, you tell the listeners to call you with their problems, you use your resources to fight their battles. Then they say, 'Did you hear that program on THE STATION today?'⁵⁸

Pace's shrewd awareness of the crucial role of public service in encouraging listeners to identify with a station, although not shared to the same extent by all of his colleagues in the business, was nevertheless a measure of the way in which the civil rights movement changed the context within which black-oriented radio stations operated as the 1960s progressed. Egmont Sonderling himself brought a keen awareness of the need to identify with the Movement to his new venture:

A Negro radio station has to be involved in the struggle for integration. You cannot operate a radio station and not be involved. This is true of every city. It does not make any difference whether you operate in Washington, in New York, in Memphis, or in St. Louis, or in New Orleans. The same is true everywhere ... You must give a voice to the Negro, that is, to the civil rights organizations.⁵⁹

Ironically, alongside the growing recognition that many black radio stations needed to identify themselves more closely with the civil rights struggle, a body of opinion emerged simultaneously which argued that the very purpose of the

⁵⁸ John Pace, quoted in, Carl Bernstein, "Washington's Soul Radio," Washington Post, 7 May 1967, Potomac Magazine, p. 27.

⁵⁹ Egmont Sonderling, testimony to FCC, Official Report of Proceedings Before the Federal Communications Commission, 11 July 1966, p. 51, FCC Docketed Case Files #16533, vol. 2, Box 164.

Movement should be to render concepts such as specifically black-oriented broadcasting obsolete. With echoes of Clarence Mitchell's objections in the 1950s, commentators such as David Berkman insisted that black radio was inappropriate in an era when integrationist ideals had seemingly been placed so firmly on the national agenda.⁶⁰

In countering such objections, the justifications advanced by black-oriented broadcasters for their continued operation revealed a greater awareness of the true nature of America's racial problems than evidenced by their detractors. As early as August 1965, for example, WOOK's management astutely argued that, for all of the legislative achievements that had been enshrined in the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act of the previous two years, genuine equality was still far from becoming a reality for the mass of African-Americans:

It is, of course, our ideal aim to seek a society in which Negro oriented stations might be neither necessary nor desirable, and Station WOOK has always believed that it should devote its best efforts toward the creation of a truly integrated Washington community ... It is, however, clear that for the present, and at least for a generation to come, this ideal society does not and will not exist and that only by the use of enlightened intelligently served specialized programming will the day be hastened when the ideal state may come into being.⁶¹

⁶⁰ David Berkman, "The Segregated Medium," Columbia Journalism Review, 5, No. 30 (Fall 1966), 29-32.

⁶¹ United Broadcasting Company Petition to Enlarge the Issues, 23 August 1965, p. 7.

Concurring with the view that the effort to achieve integration was still far from complete, WOL immediately sought to include many of the major civil rights organisations into its programming schedule. Negotiations held in mid-May 1965 between Sonderling personnel and the Reverend Edward Hailes, Elizabeth Levy, Herbert Woods and Sterling Tucker resulted in the offer of regular air-time to the local chapters of the NAACP, SNCC, CORE and Urban League respectively. For the first time, each organisation was provided with its own weekly show through which it could address the local community over what quickly became the capital's most popular black-oriented radio station.⁶²

The result was a Sunday programming schedule which brought a wide range of civil rights activities, covering both national struggles and local issues, to the attention of listeners. For example, among the numerous subjects discussed during the initial 12 months on air, SNCC's "Perspective" show devoted considerable attention to the activities of the MFDP, bringing in guests such as Ruby Carroll and Fannie Lou Hamer to help explain and publicise the organisation. In December 1965 and January 1966, the Urban League turned over much of its "Under Discussion" programme towards exposing what it believed to be the fallacies and limitations in the recently published Moynihan Report on black family life. The discussion of local issues tended to focus upon such matters as home rule, particularly following the formation of the Free D.C. Movement in February 1966; police-community relations; and the potential for riots in the city - as well as somewhat less weighty matters such as the selection of that year's "Miss NAACP."⁶³

⁶² WOL Amendment to Application for Consent to Assignment of Radio Broadcast Station Construction Permit or License, 7 May 1965, Exhibit XXI, pp. 2-7, FCC Docketed Case Files #16533, vol. 1, Box 163.

⁶³ "Affidavit of John H. Pace," WOL Motion to Dismiss "Petition For Reconsideration, Request for Late Acceptance and Motion for Expedited Consideration," and "Supplement" to "Petition for Reconsideration," 9 December 1965, FCC Docketed Case Files #16533, vol. 1, Box 163; WOL Exhibit 11, Part II, pp. 52-148, FCC Docketed Case Files #16533.

Perhaps one of the most significant consequences of WOL's public affairs programming lay in the exposure it afforded to a newly arrived veteran of the southern civil rights movement, who would eventually come to dominate the local political scene in the District. Marion Barry arrived in the capital in June 1965, sent by James Forman to head SNCC's Washington operation. However, from an early stage, Barry developed a markedly greater interest in addressing the specific concerns and problems facing the city's poor black population than in dealing with the administrative and fund-raising tasks emanating from SNCC's headquarters in Atlanta; so much so that his formal resignation from the organisation was tendered in January 1967.⁶⁴

Historians of Barry's career have suggested that, upon first arriving in the city in the Summer of 1965, he was forced to contend with an image problem with the local black population. Many middle-class African-Americans, aware of Barry's protest background, feared that the new arrival might prove to be a trouble-causer in the community. Conversely, neither Barry's rural southern roots, nor his college education, were particularly useful in ingratiating him with the urban poor around whom he sought to build a mass movement in the District.⁶⁵

However, by shrewdly choosing the causes in which he became involved, Barry was able to allay much of that initial distrust. The first major protest that he organised in the city was a classic case in point. The staging of a one-day city bus boycott on 24 January 1966, in objection to the D.C. Transit company's fare increases, deliberately tapped into the resentments of those lower-income African-Americans who were forced to rely more than most

⁶⁴ Jonathan I. Z. Agronsky, Marion Barry: The Politics of Race (Latham, NY: British American, 1991), pp. 120, 131-32; Jaffe and Sherwood, Dream City, pp. 41, 44, 54-55.

⁶⁵ Agronsky, Marion Barry, p. 124; Jaffe and Sherwood, Dream City, pp. 34, 42, 55.

upon public transportation. The effort was also a notable success, with over 75,000 refusing to ride the city's buses. In a similar vein, the block parties held by Barry in the Summer of 1966, and the uncompromising stance which characterised his numerous confrontations with the D.C. police force, marked a conscious effort to identify himself with the interests, needs and attitudes of the city's ghetto youth.⁶⁶ The extent to which his efforts were successful was underlined in a poll conducted by the Washington Post just 16 months after his arrival in the city, which found that black Washingtonians already ranked him as high as fifth among those who had, "done the most for Negro people in the area."⁶⁷

However, the enthusiasm with which the District's poor black community responded to Barry's initiatives found little counterpart in the city's general-market media. Several influential commentators reacted with a mixture of distrust and outright hostility. In April 1966, for example, radio station WWDC took offence at the actions of six "misguided advocates" of the Free D.C. Party - which had been formed under Barry's leadership two months earlier - after they attempted to stage a sit-in at the annual Cherry Blossom Festival Ball held at the Sheraton Park Hotel. "Call us old fashioned, if you like. Outdated, naive, even middle class. WWDC might be all of these. But we still subscribe to the notion that it does make a difference how you play the game," the station's vice-president Ben Strouse informed his listeners. "That's why we've taken a dim view of tactics employed by the Free D.C. Movement." A 1966 Washington Post editorial made its point more forcibly, denouncing Barry for the manner in which he had supposedly, "deliberately flouted the law." The relationship was strained still further as a result of the suspicion with

⁶⁶ Agronsky, Marion Barry, pp. 123, 127-28; Jaffe and Sherwood, Dream City, pp. 31-33, 43-44.

⁶⁷ Agronsky, Marion Barry, p. 126.

which Barry himself viewed much of the city's media. According to the Post's Leon Dash: "He'd been hostile, almost sullen to reporters when he first came to town."⁶⁸

While much of Washington's media, at least initially, viewed the newcomer with scepticism, WOL effectively offered Barry his own weekly radio programme. As moderator of SNCC's Sunday discussion show, which commenced less than two months after his arrival in the city, Barry's chief task was to educate black Washingtonians as to the activities of his organisation, and of related groups such as the MFDP. In the process, however, he was also afforded his first widespread, personal exposure to many of the District's African-Americans. More than five months before the Washington bus boycott, listeners to WOL became well-acquainted with Marion Barry. Equally significant, the activist who was "hostile" and "sullen" to most of the media evidently experienced few reservations about co-operating with the city's most prominent black-oriented radio station - an indication of WOL's standing and influence in Washington's African-American community, and especially among the ghetto residents whom Barry regarded as his prime constituents.

As Barry's career progressed, his relationship with the media inevitably altered and fluctuated as he made the transition from community activist, to leader of a local black self-help economic organisation, to local politician and, ultimately, mayor of the city. A self-styled "situationist," Barry has long since prided himself upon, and can attribute much of his political longevity to, an almost chameleon-like ability to alter his tactics as circumstances dictated.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ "Capricious Leadership," WWDC Editorial, 20 April 1966, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Papers, C-I-56, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (hereafter, SNCC Papers); Washington Post editorial cited in Agronsky, Marion Barry, p. 151; Leon Dash, quoted in, Jaffe and Sherwood, Dream City, p. 64.

⁶⁹ Jaffe and Sherwood, Dream City, p. 98.

However, one trend that did remain constant was Barry's association with black-oriented radio, and especially WOL. Over the decades, the station was ideally suited to provide a valuable link through which he continued to address, and gauge the opinions of, the poor black population which remained his most solid foundation of support.

If one issue cemented the relationship between the man and the medium, it was a shared commitment to the cause of home rule for Washington. Even before Barry emerged as one of the most prominent advocates of the measure, WOL had begun to editorialise on the issue in unambiguous terms. One typical broadcast in October 1965 called for the very kind of organisation that the Free D.C. Movement was designed to be, and foreshadowed the arguments that Barry would himself adopt by depicting the absence of local government as an essentially racist measure:

Here in the capital of the greatest democracy in the world today, the people still do not enjoy full democracy! And there is developing in Washington a rising tide of indignation over the failure of Congress to pass a home rule bill before it adjourned ...

The basic decision on negro voting rights was made nearly 100 years ago. Yet, due primarily to the predominance of negro citizens in the District of Columbia, Washington residents are still being taxed without representation, and asked to assume the full responsibilities of citizenship without having the citizen's most important right: the right to vote.

WOL feels that something should be done about this now. When Congress opens its session next January, Washingtonians should be well organized to make congressmen

sensitive to the great impatience of our people to have the right to vote securely established for all citizens.⁷⁰

Following the formation of the Free D.C. Movement, WOL persevered with its support. Editorials continued to urge listeners to join the fight for home rule, and would also, on occasion, use the issue as an important criterion when evaluating the role and performance of local public figures. In addition, talk shows provided Barry with the opportunity to expound upon his ideas more fully. Inviting him to appear upon one such programme in June 1966, the show's host Sherwood Ross intimated that the activist would be given ample scope to plead his cause: "If you don't get any scratch or response to this it won't be our fault."⁷¹

Despite a considerable degree of success in increasing both the debate about home rule, and the profile of its leader, the Free D.C. Movement failed to have a significant impact where it was most needed - in Congress. As a result, Barry began to channel his energies elsewhere. With the aid of an initial grant of \$300,000 from the Department of Labor, Youth Pride, Inc., was established in August 1967 as a black self-help organisation aimed at putting the "hard core" of the city's unemployed black youth to work.⁷²

In his capacity as director of the new organisation, Barry continued to draw upon the services of WOL for both moral and practical support. On one notable occasion, the station played a key role in saving the whole operation

⁷⁰ WOL Editorial, 22-24 October 1965, WOL Exhibit 11, Part V, FCC Docketed Case Files #16533.

⁷¹ For editorials, see "The Glen Echo Riot," WOL Editorial (n.d.), and "On Sterling Tucker," WOL Editorial, 30 May-5 June 1966, both in WOL Exhibit 11, Part V, FCC Docketed Case Files #16533; Sherwood Ross, letter to Marion Barry, 21 June 1966, SNCC Papers, C-I-8.

⁷² Agronsky, Marion Barry, pp. 125, 135-48; Jaffe and Sherwood, Dream City, pp. 47-49, 52-66.

from bankruptcy. By the Winter of 1970, Pride's economic arm, Youth Pride Economic Enterprises, Inc., had amassed debts totalling over \$50,000 as a result of a series of injudicious investments. Following Barry's announcement of the creation of a survival fund to rescue the stricken organisation, WOL waged a fund-raising marathon for the appeal, urging listeners to send in their donations. The results accounted for a sizeable proportion of the total of \$76,000 that was raised by the following February. In a speech thanking the contributors, Barry singled out the station for having played a vital role in the cause. "It has been a long time since Washington responded to anything like Pride and WOL," he asserted. "We received money from every phase of the community."⁷³

The following year, WOL responded in a similar fashion when Pride undertook a major voter registration campaign in the city. Commencing on 25 August, the two organisations combined to stage a three day "radiothon" direct from Pride's offices located on "U" Street. Potentially eligible voters were urged to register, and provided with information on how they could obtain free transportation to do so, with the result that over 1,000 new voters were registered in the first day of the campaign alone.⁷⁴

If Marion Barry provided the most prominent example of the way in which WOL gave a helping hand in the rise of local activists, he certainly was not the only one. From clergyman to ex-convict, a host of community spokespersons were offered significant exposure by the station. The Reverend David Eaton, for example, was already well established in local community

⁷³ Agronsky, Marion Barry, p. 143; Marion Barry, quoted in, Washington Star, 13 February 1971, Vertical File: "Radio and Television Stations: Radio WOL," Washingtoniana Division, Martin Luther King, Jr., Public Library, Washington, D.C. (hereafter, MLK-DC "WOL," File).

⁷⁴ Washington Star, 25 August 1972, and 26 August 1972, MLK-DC "WOL," File.

work by the time that he commenced his association with WOL in the late 1960s. In his capacity as the Opportunities Industrialization Center's executive director, Eaton assumed responsibility for training and finding work for thousands of the city's unemployed.⁷⁵

However, after accepting the role of host of WOL's two-hour "Speak Up" discussion show, broadcast every Sunday night, he was also given the opportunity to address a much wider variety of community issues. As listeners called the programme to give vent to all manner of problems and complaints, Eaton ably demonstrated his gift for acting as a calming influence in the city. According to the Washington Post: "In that [radio] role, he was less the Unitarian clergyman and more the streetwise moderator of a range of expressions of black despair and anger phoned in from all over town." In this way, Eaton reinforced his image as one of the few local activists who could transcend the intensifying ideological differences that existed in the city's black protest movement by the end of the decade. As Stokely Carmichael, then residing in the city, admitted, Eaton was, "One of the few people who know the members of SNCC, who know me, and who know the folks at the Urban League." As the reverend stepped up his own civil rights activities following his appointment as the first black senior minister of the city's All Souls Church in 1969, he continued to keep his regular Sunday night appointment with his listeners. In all, "Speak Up" served as an important safety-valve in black Washington for approximately 15 years.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Washington Star, 10 October 1966, Vertical File: "Biography: Eaton, David H.," Washingtoniana Division, Martin Luther King, Jr., Public Library, Washington, D.C. (hereafter, MLK-DC "Eaton," File).

⁷⁶ Washington Post, 22 October 1992, MLK-DC "Eaton," File; Stokely Carmichael, quoted in, Washington Post, 22 April 1992, Vertical File: "Churches, Unitarian: All Souls 1979-," Washingtoniana Division, Martin Luther King, Jr., Public Library, Washington, D.C. (hereafter, MLK-DC "All Souls," File).

For Ralph "Petey" Greene, the road to a broadcasting career was a less auspicious one, involving an enforced detour via Lorton Prison after a youth spent involved with crime and drugs. Nevertheless, once given the chance to show what he could do, Greene successfully embarked upon a distinguished radio and television career which spanned almost twenty years and brought much critical acclaim - including two Emmys - and in the process firmly established him as one of the city's best-loved characters. As with many others, it was WOL that provided him with that first opportunity, with the offer of an hourly talk show. "Rapping With Petey Greene" hit the airwaves shortly after his release from prison in 1965, with a format which allowed the presenter to air his views on the latest issues of the day. Never afraid to speak his mind, Greene took full advantage of the opportunity to highlight the problems faced by his community, to criticise the city's politicians - white and black - whenever he saw injustice, and to conduct his own personal crusade to educate the city's youth about the dangers of drug abuse.⁷⁷

However, the true significance of "Rapping With Petey Greene" lay as much in the strength of Greene's personality as in what he had to say. A genuine "man of the people," Greene's warmth, wonderful way with an anecdote, and wealth of personal experience meant that he was particularly effective in influencing those who might remain unmoved by the efforts of more "establishment" activists. Young people, in particular, responded to his broadcasts with great enthusiasm, as the Washington Afro-American recalled at the time of his death in 1984:

⁷⁷ Washington Times, 14 November 1983, Washington Post, 17 January 1984, and Washington Afro-American, 21 January 1984, all in Vertical File: "Biography: Greene, Ralph W. (Petey)," Washingtoniana Division, Martin Luther King, Jr., Public Library, Washington, D.C.

There is no way to adequately measure the good Petey Greene did, but we feel assured that there are hundreds of youngsters in this city who may have gone the other way if Petey Greene had not steered him or her in a different path with his homespun, off-best [sic] philosophical radio and television talks. While only a few of them found it important to stop what they may have been doing to catch the higher rated talk shows; there are thousands in the city who never missed hearing Petey "rap" on the air.⁷⁸

In its provision of air-time to activists such as Marion Barry, David Eaton, and Petey Greene, WOL continued, albeit to a greater degree, the trend of supporting external civil rights agencies that had been pursued by its predecessors. What really set the station apart from its rivals were its innovations in actively involving itself in community affairs. For example, from as early as October 1965 the station commenced an editorial campaign which addressed the latest issues of the day. For the first five months, the broadcasts were prepared by Otto McClarrin - former public affairs director for Howard University and information officer for the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. As with many of his fellow editorialists, under McClarrin's direction the accent was as heavily upon positivity and the reaffirmation of the American way as it was upon politics. Thus, editorials dealing with issues such as civil rights and poverty were accompanied by others which extolled the virtues of hard work

⁷⁸ Washington Afro-American, 21 January 1984.

and obtaining an education.⁷⁹

However, it was the addition of Sherwood Ross to Sonderling's payroll in February 1966 that provided the station with its real driving force in community activism. Continuing where he left off as the NUL's assistant public relations director, Ross strove to strengthen the ties between black radio and the battle against discrimination. His new position as WOL's director of public affairs enabled him to combine a personal commitment to the civil rights struggle with a genuine flair for broadcast journalism. The point was most dramatically demonstrated four months after Ross joined the station, by his participation in James Meredith's "March Against Fear" in Mississippi. After having met with Meredith at the White House Conference on Civil Rights at the beginning of June, Ross undertook to join the activist for the duration of his journey from Memphis to Jackson. Marching alongside Meredith outside Hernando, Mississippi, on 6 June, Ross became a key eye-witness to the shooting of Meredith by Aubrey James Norvell. Within half an hour of the incident, WOL's listeners received Ross' first-hand account of the event, which also formed the basis for numerous subsequent reports in the city's press.⁸⁰

To observant analysts of Washington's media, the Meredith incident simply confirmed the extent to which WOL, and Ross in particular, had already aligned themselves with the District's African-American community. "Ross's

⁷⁹ WOL Exhibit 11, p. 158, FCC Docketed Case Files #16533. Examples of McClarrin's editorials can be found in the same exhibit. See, in particular, "What the Civil Rights Battles Are All About," 20-22 October 1965; "Advice To Today's Youth: There's No Substitute for Preparation," 21-23 October 1965; "Even Janitors Today Need High School Diplomas," 30 October-2 November 1965; "35 Million Poor Living in Wealthiest Country in the World," 4-6 November 1965.

⁸⁰ Washington Post, 7 June 1966, pp. A1, A6; Washington Star, 7 June 1966, and 8 June 1966, clippings in WOL Exhibit 11, Part VI, FCC Docketed Case Files, # 16533. The last account paid tribute to the accuracy of Ross' reporting, noting that, unlike most stations during the immediate aftermath of the shooting, WOL never reported that Meredith had been killed.

Presence Was No Accident," commended the Washington Star. Certainly, Ross set about the task of public affairs director with great determination. As the station's editorialist, his broadcasts repeatedly highlighted the problems faced by ghetto residents, focusing particular attention on such issues as employment discrimination, poverty, substandard housing, and inadequate funding of schools in predominantly black neighbourhoods such as Anacostia. In so doing, he articulated the concerns of those who were forced to endure life in, as one broadcast put it, "The other Washington - seldom seen by tourists - a monument to poverty, a tangle of slums, a city of sorrows."⁸¹

However, rather than simply publicise and complain about such injustices, Ross also exhorted the District's black residents to play their own part in striving to ameliorate them. One such editorial invoked the example of the voter registration efforts undertaken by the Southern Regional Council in the South to try and shame local residents into political activity:

Right here, right here, in our city, there are thousands of eligible negroes who haven't bothered to take the time to register. While Southern Negroes are risking their jobs, their homes, their farms, and even their lives to go to the polls - there are people listening to this broadcast now who wouldn't walk one solitary block to cast their ballot.

Well, maybe we need the Southern Regional Council to come up here to Washington to take those people by the hand and show them where to register.

⁸¹ Washington Star, 8 June 1966; "The Foodstream," WOL Editorial (n.d.), "The Cruellest Month," WOL Editorial (n.d.), "Anacostia," WOL Editorial, 23-25 May 1966, "Progress and Poverty," WOL Editorial, 26-29 May 1966, all in WOL Exhibit 11, Part V, FCC Docketed Case Files #16533.

This radio station hopes that this won't be necessary. For in every one of us there is a conscience - and this conscience should tell us that the vote is power - power to change our lives, and the lives of our children for the better - power to elect the men who care about equality and justice for black Americans, too.⁸²

In August 1966, the twin approach of highlighting abuses and spurring the local population into action to overcome them evolved into WOL's "War on Slums." One of the station's most popular and enduring achievements, the scheme called for local residents to contact Ross with any complaints they had concerning their accommodation. After the complaints had been handed over to the Department of License and Inspection of the District of Columbia, and investigated by housing inspectors for their validity, Ross obtained copies of any improvements ordered by the Department. Subsequently, any landlord who failed to execute the required changes in a reasonable space of time risked widespread exposure and censure over the air.

In addition to its effectiveness as a practical attempt to improve some of the worst housing conditions in the city, the War on Slums had an important psychological value for those who participated. The scheme was an excellent example of WOL's ability to reach and motivate many of those who were trapped at the lower end of the socio-economic scale. Ross was at pains to emphasise that the station could do little until residents helped themselves by making the conscious decision to stand up for their own rights. This they did in significant numbers. In the first 11 weeks of the programme, over 200 investigated complaints had uncovered more than 2,000 housing violations. Within nine months, the number of complaints exceeded 1,000, by which stage,

⁸² "Vote," WOL Editorial (n.d.), WOL Exhibit 11, Part V, FCC Docketed Case Files #16533.

the Washington Post reported, housing inspectors were having to be paid overtime because of their increased workload.⁸³

The War on Slums elevated Sherwood Ross to the status of cult figure in the District's African-American community. Ghetto residents became accustomed to the sight of him touring their neighbourhoods in his "slummobile," personally investigating alleged housing violations. To many, he was simply, "the only honest white man in town."⁸⁴ Even those among the District's African-American community who did enjoy adequate housing could not fail to be impressed by, and take a certain vicarious pleasure in, the ferocity of Ross' assault upon the vested interests of the city's slumlords. In October 1966, for example, one such offender, who came to Ross' attention after evicting a tenant who had complained about housing deficiencies, was brought to task in the strongest terms:

WOL pledges it will investigate every piece of slum property which this landlord owns. I want this landlord, whose initials are J.N., to know that every slum you own will be reported to District housing officials. Your tenants won't report it, Mr. N., I will ...

we will support every single family which is suffering because slum landlords have made their lives unbearable. So I have a message today for every slum landlord in Washington. Don't you ever, I repeat, don't you ever, ever try to evict any family which contacts this radio station ...

⁸³ Sherwood Ross, letter to Hubert Humphrey, 26 October 1966, WOL Application for Renewal of Broadcast Station License, 1 July 1969, Exhibit 16D, FCC License Renewal Files, Box 36; Bernstein, "Washington's Soul Radio," p. 23.

⁸⁴ *ibid.*, p. 28.

When you hear the sound of Soul Radio coming from their house you better keep your hands off of that family. Because that is the sound of Radio Free America. And the people who listen to it know their rights under the law. They know that they are free, free from fear of eviction by slum landlords like you. They know that if you try to pressure them or evict them that you are going to have the power of Washington's Number One Radio Station down on you so fast you won't know which slum to clean up first. When you hear the sound of Soul Music playing you are dealing with a family that's not gonna let you push them around.⁸⁵

As with all such public service broadcasting, Ross' words undoubtedly reflected a degree of self-promotion on the part of WOL. Clearly, an important motivation behind the invocation of the concept of the "soul family" was the attempt to encourage listeners to identify more closely with the station. However, by providing effective action to substantiate the rhetoric, the War on Slums demonstrated how a radio station with a genuine commitment to public service could act as a real catalyst for change in the lives of African-Americans.

To some astute observers, such activities did not merely reflect WOL's commitment to public service broadcasting; they were also an indication of the station's growing identification with the concepts of black power which were gaining a strong momentum in the city at that time. The point was not lost on one young Washington Post reporter with an eye for a good story, Carl Bernstein, who provided an in-depth examination of the station in May 1967. According to Bernstein, WOL was at the very forefront in the promotion of

⁸⁵ "Eviction Notice," War on Slums broadcast, 14 October 1966, WOL Application for Renewal, 1 July 1969, Exhibit 16D.

black pride in the city: "WOL is probably responsible for more 'black consciousness' among Washington's Negroes than Walter Fauntroy, the Washington Afro-American, the Free D.C. Movement, Washington SNCC, Julius Hobson and the LeDroit Ramblers all rolled into one." Simultaneously, however, his article took great care to emphasise that this potent vehicle of black expression remained very much under white ownership.⁸⁶

Bernstein recognised the central paradox that surrounded WOL. The station's rise to prominence in Washington coincided with black power's rise to prominence in the nation at large. Stokely Carmichael's and Willie Ricks' popularisation of the slogan in Mississippi came less than a year after WOL's switch to a black-oriented format.

Several unique factors combined to promote an especially keen interest in black power in the District of Columbia. The campaign for home rule was an important case in point. Admittedly, this crusade was decades old, and drew support from white as well as black residents of the city. However, in the context of the late 1960s, parallels between the home rule campaign and black power were easily drawn. With the historically racial overtones behind the disenfranchisement of District residents, coupled with the fact that demographic statistics underlined the extent to which the city had become a predominantly black city, it did not require a great leap of the imagination to regard the struggle for self-government as an attempt to establish a substantive measure of black power in the nation's capital. Certainly, a prominent home rule advocate such as Marion Barry, armed - at the very least - with dashiki, defiance, and demands for black economic self-help programmes, was not averse to employing the symbols and rhetoric of black power sentiment.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Bernstein, "Washington's Soul Radio," p. 23.

⁸⁷ Agronsky, Marion Barry, pp. 135-48; Jaffe and Sherwood, Dream City, pp. 52-66.

In addition, Stokely Carmichael's decision to establish Washington as his centre of operations in the mid-to-late 1960s ensured that, albeit for a relatively brief period, the District played host to the charismatic leadership of the co-author of the "Black Power" manifesto. Similarly, the city's ties with the movement were further strengthened with the re-emergence of Howard University as a major centre of black political activism. By the end of the decade, the University had become the focus for a whole cadre of young, articulate, militant black power advocates.⁸⁸

In such circumstances, a radio station such as WOL, which purported to act as the voice of the African-American community, could not ignore the growing interest of its listeners in black power ideologies. In many ways, the onus upon WOL was considerably greater than that upon its two rivals. As the newcomer on the market, WOL had self-consciously marketed itself as the more dynamic, hip alternative; the station that was in touch with the spirit of the times and the mood of Washington's black community.

WOL's initial attempt to address the subject of black power came just a few days after the Greenwood meeting where the slogan first gained widespread exposure. A station editorial sounded a note of cautious approval, while reflecting upon the ambiguity that surrounded the term:

If it means that negro citizens should have a voice and a vote, full opportunities and everything that goes with it, we are for "Black Power." Negroes must guide their own destinies just as other racial and ethnic groups have done in America.

⁸⁸ Jaffe and Sherwood, Dream City, p. 68; Gilbert, Ten Blocks From the White House, pp. 59-60. For Howard University, see the chapter of interviews with students included in Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer, Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s through the 1980s (New York: Bantam, 1990), pp. 425-48.

But if "Black Power" means a separate state without integration, or if it means the use of force violence [sic] and hatred WOL will stand with Dr. King.⁸⁹

To a large extent, the opinions advanced at this early stage remained the station's guiding philosophy on the subject. While generally taking a positive line, WOL repeatedly strove to channel black power sentiment into constitutional and "constructive" activities.

As with black radio in general, WOL's contribution to the black power movement was most significant for its fostering of racial pride through the celebration and dissemination of black cultural forms. In this respect, WOL functioned in much the same fashion as WOOK and WUST had done in the past, and would continue to do in the future. However, Sonderling's station deliberately cultivated this appeal to an unprecedented degree, with endless invocations of such images as WOL's "Soul Family" and the "Soulvation Army." Disc jockeys, in particular, enhanced the effect, infusing their "black is beautiful" message with their own irrepressible brand of humour. Bob "Nighthawk" Terry's observations upon the marriage of Lyndon Johnson's daughter Luci were a typical example: "They shoulda invited the Vandellas to LBJ's daughter's wedding - couldn't you see Lady Bird bugalooing down the aisle ... Myself, I woulda given Luci Bird an autographed picture of Bo Diddley for the wedding ... Ain't it great to be colored?"⁹⁰

In themselves, such comments were little more than irreverent, trivial asides. However, in helping to set the tone for the overall station image, they were an integral ingredient in the potent cocktail which established WOL as

⁸⁹ "Black Power," WOL Editorial, 25-30 June 1966, WOL Exhibit 11, Part V, FCC Docketed Case Files #16533.

⁹⁰ Bob Terry, quoted in, Bernstein, "Washington's Soul Radio," p. 23.

one of the most dynamic forces for the promotion of black pride in Washington.

In this capacity, the station transcended its role as a vehicle for the expression of African-American popular culture, to become an integral part of that culture itself. In his anthropological study of Washington's black ghetto community published in 1969, Ulf Hannerz emphasised this aspect of the medium's contribution to the rise of "soul" consciousness in the city. According to Hannerz: "Black radio, its programming and its personnel are not simply a faceless component of the ghetto cultural apparatus but a set of individuals and events which also take their place among the things ghetto dwellers know they have in common, the things which serve to define their community."⁹¹

It would be a gross distortion to suggest that WOL's rise as a forum for black cultural expression marked a deliberate effort by the station's management to adhere to the cultural nationalists' programme by promoting racial identity as a precursor to subsequent black power activism. Rather, the selection of musical programming that reflected the preferences of the majority of listeners, and the attempt to foster the image of WOL as the "people's" station, were above all effective marketing devices. Nevertheless, an important consequence of WOL's success as an entertainment medium lay in the assistance that it rendered to the station's more intentional public service activities. Precisely because of its huge popularity, and its achievement in encouraging listeners to identify with it as an integral part of the local community, any "engaged" broadcasting that WOL did undertake reached a widespread and receptive audience, often including people who remained unmoved by other forms of the mass media. The point was not lost upon civil rights stalwarts such as the Reverend Walter Fauntroy, long-time aide to

⁹¹ Ulf Hannerz, *Soulside: Inquiries into Ghetto Culture and Community* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), p. 156. See also pp. 151-55.

Martin Luther King in the SCLC. While not an ardent black power proponent himself, Fauntroy paid handsome tribute to the efficacy of WOL's work in this area:

there is at WOL this thing about - call them Negro cultural amenities - how you eat chicken, that sort of thing. The people identify with that. The station takes people at their threshold and it leads them to other areas of thought. The great appeal is the rhythm and blues music. People tune in to listen to the music and they hear these ... cultural amenities. They are listening and interested, then they hear about employment and slums and action. This is of tremendous value. We've never had anything like this in Washington before.⁹²

For the Washington branch of SNCC, this aspect of the station's role in the community was directly attributable to the activities of the African-American air personalities. "Their greatest 'sell' to the brothers in the community is the DJs ability to use the public media [sic] of radio to convey the intimate message of black men's feeling and experience from one soul brother to another," the organisation explained. "To the black community, WOL is the ice-slick croon of SOULFINGER, the belly-deep laughter of SUNNY JIM, or the sensuous groans and dead serious jokes about 'whitey' from the mighty NIGHTHAWK."⁹³

⁹² Walter Fauntroy, quoted in, Bernstein, "Washington's Soul Radio," pp. 26-27.

⁹³ "WOL RADIO," (n.d.), SNCC Papers, C-I-143. This unsigned document is either a draft of an article or text of a speech that was prepared in conjunction with a protest launched by Washington SNCC against Sonderling in the Summer of 1967.

Towards the end of the decade, WOL's loose association with cultural nationalism was strengthened as the station made a deliberate effort to accommodate what it considered to be some of the more acceptable aspects of the ideology. By the Summer of 1968, for example, a weekly book review programme had been inaugurated for the discussion of the latest publications by African-American authors. Political works featured heavily on the show, providing listeners with an opportunity to keep abreast of the growing number of tracts being penned by activists such as Eldridge Cleaver and Julius Lester.⁹⁴ Similarly, the intriguingly titled "Children's Hour" - a Sunday evening programme of 15 minutes' duration - employed the traditional children's story format to educate young listeners with tales of prominent events in black history. In recognition of the growing interest in pan-Africanism, the show even used Swahili to provide a rudimentary introduction to the language for the audience. WOL's pioneering efforts in this area soon influenced its rivals. WUST, for example, promptly initiated its own history programme, establishing the long-running "Black Silhouette" series of biographical vignettes, broadcast five times daily under the sponsorship of the Washington Gas Light Company.⁹⁵

As practised by WOL, whether inadvertently or deliberately, cultural nationalism remained a positive, but essentially moderate, concept. The same was true of the strand of black power ideology which stressed the necessity of increased black capitalism. As a formula for the advancement of the race, the extension of the perceived benefits of the existing American way of life to include a greater proportion of African-Americans was eminently acceptable to most citizens with an interest in addressing the race problem.

⁹⁴ WOL Application for Renewal, 1 July 1969, Exhibit 6.

⁹⁵ WOL Application for Renewal, 1 July 1969, Exhibit 3, p. 5; examples of "Black Silhouette" transcripts can be found in MLK-DC "WUST," File.

For a white-owned, black-oriented radio station, however, the situation was more complex, exposing Sonderling to possible accusations of hypocrisy and economic exploitation of the African-American community. Nevertheless, to its credit, WOL did not shirk the issue. Either in ignorance of the irony of its own situation, or in the hope that listeners would not make the connection, the station's management pursued an editorial policy which called for increased black ownership in unambiguous terms. In August 1968, for example, one such broadcast examined the proposals advanced by the Community Development Committee to Mayor Walter Washington for the remodelling of the city's ghettos in the aftermath of the riots which had devastated part of the city in April of that year. The generally positive tone was tempered by an insistence that the key issue of ownership must not be neglected. "WOL adds to that list [of planning proposals] by urging Black ownership in the ghettos," the editorial stressed. "It is a must before any real proposal can take shape to rebuild our city."⁹⁶

This demonstrable commitment to embrace "constructive" black power causes was at the heart of most other areas of WOL's public service programme. The station's approach to community organisation was firmly based upon an adherence to constitutional methods. The home rule issue, for example, while in many ways a potent symbol of the black power struggle, was still fundamentally a campaign to extend basic political rights to a disenfranchised populace. Similarly, the very essence of crusades such as the War on Slums was the attempt to reaffirm black listeners' faith in the ability of the existing system to redress their grievances, thereby reducing the temptation to resort to extra-legal activities. Sherwood Ross explained this outlook to

⁹⁶ WOL Editorial, 29 August-3 September 1968, WOL Application for Renewal, 1 July 1969, Exhibit 16C.

Hubert Humphrey in 1966, in response to the vice-president's request for information concerning the programme:

Often, they [listeners] were unable to get their landlords on the telephone for two or three years. Suddenly, they find repairs made. Since many tenants know landlords are violating the law by allowing deficiencies to exist, their confidence in their ability to bring change within the existing legal framework is improved.⁹⁷

At the other end of the black power spectrum, WOL's position was markedly less enthusiastic, but still not without value, to more radical activists. The station's relationship with Stokely Carmichael affords an illustrative example. While never really endorsing Carmichael's platform, WOL nevertheless provided him with an important outlet through which he could address the District's black population. News broadcasts afforded full coverage to his activities following his arrival in the city in 1968, often airing controversial statements prepared by the Black United Front (BUF) - the organisation whose leadership he assumed. On 4 July, for example, WOL broke the story of the Front's declaration that the recent fatal shooting of a white policeman as he tried to arrest two black suspected robbers in the city, was, in its view, to be regarded as "justifiable homicide." Indeed, WOL was the sole media outlet not to be barred from the Front's weekly meetings - a fact of which it was sufficiently proud to boast to the FCC. Indeed, the station deliberately publicised the BUF's meetings well in advance - rendering a service

⁹⁷ Ross, letter to Humphrey, 26 October 1966, p. 2.

which encouraged activist Chuck Stone to assert that, "WOL was the only accurate reporting media in the city."⁹⁸

Carmichael also benefited from his association with WOL in less formal ways. Most notably, he enjoyed a high-profile personal friendship with Nighthawk which worked to the mutual advantage of both individuals. While the disc jockey was able to present himself as being deeply involved in community affairs, the activist gained a substantial measure of kudos through the endorsement of one of Washington's most popular black entertainers, who exhorted his listeners to go to hear Carmichael speak whenever he was in town.⁹⁹

Of all the differing strands of the black power impulse, the one element that WOL invariably refused to countenance was any advocacy of violence. From its first editorial on the subject onwards, the station urged upon listeners the importance of adhering to non-violent tactics. Even when sporadic outbursts of violence occurred in the city which had no political overtones at all, the station was at pains to emphasise how they still undermined the black struggle. Such was the case in April 1966, when disturbances which broke out among the predominantly black crowd at a fairground in the city's Glen Echo Park caused several thousand dollars' worth of damage, and led to four arrests and eight hospitalisations. Although the park had been the location for racial incidents in the past, on this occasion the spark which ignited the trouble appeared to be simply one of overcrowding and the early closure of the park,

⁹⁸ WOL Application for Renewal, Exhibit 16B, pp. 14-15.

⁹⁹ Hannerz, *Soulside*, pp. 155-56; Bernstein, "Washington's Soul Radio," p. 23.

which forced many to miss the rides for which they had already paid.¹⁰⁰ Nevertheless, WOL's commentary upon the incident was shaped by fear of the repercussions that images of black violence would have for the freedom struggle. "The violence could not have come at a worse time," the station editorialised, insisting that the riot was, "certainly a body blow to every civil rights group urging non-violent protests and boycotts to help bring home rule to Washington."¹⁰¹

However, it would be a further two years before the District had a genuine, full-scale emergency situation to deal with. The three days of burning, looting and rioting which engulfed parts of the city following the assassination of Martin Luther King on 4 April shocked Washingtonians and outsiders alike; the sight of over 10,000 troops on the streets of the capital astounding many who had believed Washington to be a "riotproof" city.¹⁰²

In the midst of the efforts to cope with a crisis of such magnitude, the District's black-oriented radio stations assumed an important dual role, acting as both a calming influence, and as a trusted source of up-to-date information for the African-American community to turn to. All three stations had an important contribution to make. However, because of its pre-eminent position, most attention inevitably focused upon the performance of WOL.

Immediately upon receiving the news of King's murder on the evening of Thursday 4th, the primary concern for all of the station's personnel was to do nothing to exacerbate an already volatile situation. After the first

¹⁰⁰ Washington Post, 12 April 1966, pp. A1, A8; Washington Post, 13 April 1966, pp. A1, A18. In the Summer of 1960, the park had been the scene of a series of racial incidents as pickets demonstrated against owners Abram and Samuel Barker's policy of segregation. It was eventually desegregated the following year.

¹⁰¹ "The Glen Echo Riot," WOL Editorial.

¹⁰² For the most complete account of the disturbances, see Gilbert, Ten Blocks From the White House.

announcement that King had actually been killed, operations manager Ted Atkins instantly implemented the fundamental change in programming format that was adopted by most black-oriented stations around the country.¹⁰³

At the first sign of trouble breaking out in the city, urgent appeals for calm, from both station personnel and outside activists, began to be broadcast. Bob "Nighthawk" Terry, for example, entreated his audience to refrain from violence in a moving plea which was subsequently repeated and praised throughout the city's media. Drawing upon his own experiences of white racism, Terry implored that, "This is no time to hate, hate won't get you anywhere."¹⁰⁴

A similar appeal recorded by King's long-time ally Walter Fauntroy, which called upon the community to continue to act in the spirit of the slain leader, was aired twice an hour during that first tense evening. For the following three nights, special editions of David Eaton's "Speak Up" show were broadcast, including a mammoth nine hour session on Saturday 6th, during which listeners were repeatedly urged to express their grief and anger by calling the station rather than by taking to the streets.¹⁰⁵

One incident during the riots which has been well documented - namely, the visit of James Brown to the city at the request of President Johnson and Mayor Walter Washington - came about through the direct co-operation of

¹⁰³ "WOL's Coverage of Events Surrounding the Assassination of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.," WOL Application for Renewal, 1 July 1969, Exhibit 16B, pp. 1-3. The dropping of commercials, in particular, was both a sensitive and wise move, given the emotions running in the black community in the aftermath of the assassination. The first incidents of trouble in the city occurred as Stokely Carmichael led a crowd of people in trying to force local businesses along Fourteenth Street to close down as a mark of respect for King.

¹⁰⁴ Bob Terry, quoted in, Gilbert, Ten Blocks From the White House, p. 17; "WOL's Coverage," p. 5.

¹⁰⁵ "WOL's Coverage," pp. 3, 11-14.

WOL. The visit originated with a call on Friday 5 April from the White House, seeking the station's assistance in locating the singer. Station manager John Pace eventually tracked him down in New York and passed on the request. Brown appeared on Washington's television and radio stations the following day, urging his fans: "Don't terrorize. Organize. Don't burn. Give the kids a chance to learn." After this general appeal, Brown was transported directly to WOL's studios by public affairs director Dewey Hughes, where he again went on air to field calls from listeners and continued to call for calm.¹⁰⁶

WOL's second key function during the riots lay in its capacity as a news agency. As a source of information specifically tailored for the African-American community, black-oriented radio really came into its own in a protracted crisis such as the one which beset Washington in 1968. In a highly volatile situation where circumstances were in a constant state of flux, the city's black radio stations were able to keep listeners continuously updated in a way which was simply impossible for the press.¹⁰⁷ Not only was this true for events taking place in the District, but also, by virtue of Sonderling's ownership of station WDIA in Memphis, for those at the scene of the assassination. Within ten minutes of learning of the attack upon King, Sonderling's vice president of group operations, Alan Henry, had authorised co-operation between the two

¹⁰⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 8-9, 11, 18. Brown's own account differs slightly from WOL's on specific details, in that he suggests that the call from the station was made by Dewey Hughes on the Saturday morning, but is essentially the same in substance. Among the callers to the singer while he was at WOL numbered the wife and daughter of Lyndon Johnson, who congratulated him on his actions. As Brown commented wryly, "I think that was an audience the station didn't usually get." James Brown with Bruce Tucker, James Brown: The Godfather of Soul, (1986; rpt. Glasgow: Fontana/ Collins, 1988), pp. 188-89 (quote on p. 189).

¹⁰⁷ Gilbert, for example, describes the scene in the office of Washington SNCC shortly after the assassination. Almost inevitably, the staff members there were tuned to WOL for their information. Gilbert, Ten Blocks From the White House, p. 17.

stations, with the result that WDIA's news department continued to provide its Washington counterpart with direct reports from Memphis for the duration of the crisis.¹⁰⁸

For the most part, however, WOL's news coverage was directed towards keeping pace with the torrid events unfurling on its own doorstep. With newsman Alan King feeding reports directly from the city's trouble spots, WOL, by its own calculation, devoted approximately 50 percent of its airtime to news broadcasts on the first night of the riots, and continued with an average of 15 to 30 minutes per hour over the following two days. Understandably, much of the news content dwelt upon the disorders. However, as the weekend progressed, the station placed an increasing emphasis upon helping local residents come to terms with what was happening. From the afternoon of Friday 5th, the station effectively became the focal point for the dissemination of all manner of vital community information, ranging from the locations of emergency centres for the provision of food, clothing and shelter, to announcements concerning the closing of offices and businesses and the resultant cancellation of work shifts.¹⁰⁹

This dual thrust of WOL's riot coverage was not without its potential contradictions. The need to report on what was taking place on the streets of Washington was tempered by a concern that such broadcasts should avoid, if at

¹⁰⁸ "WOL's Coverage," pp. 1-2, 12.

¹⁰⁹ *ibid.*, pp. 3, 6-13.

Another important centre during the riots to which many people, either searching for information or striving to restore calm to the community, automatically gravitated was the WUST Radio Music Hall. Significantly, despite its proximity to some of the worst-hit areas, and the common knowledge of its white ownership, the hall remained undamaged during the riots - a sure mark of the respect in which the venue was held in the eyes of the local population. Hackett interview; "Radio Music Hall Days."

all possible, adding to the tension and panic in the city. As the station's management later explained its dilemma to the FCC:

We had a responsibility to the community to broadcast the news factually, to hold down as many rumors as possible, and to let our listeners know, for the most part, what was happening in the city of Washington and across the country. We had a responsibility to let listeners know of the troubled area in Washington, lest an uninformed person wander into the area and become a victim of circumstances.

At the same time, because of the highly volatile reaction to the news of King's death, we had to assume the role of 'guardian' and not add to the problems that began occurring in the District.¹¹⁰

For the most part, such an approach merely shaped the tone, rather than the content, of what was broadcast. For example, over the first night of the disturbances, the station deliberately played down the reports of violence, and shunned the use of the word "riot" until the following morning. Similarly, when referring to the troubled areas of the city, newsmen were instructed to refrain from mentioning exact locations, lest they should unwittingly enable more people to participate in the disorder.¹¹¹

However, on occasion, WOL's management clearly engaged in censorship. The most notable example involved the infamous press conference held by Stokely Carmichael the morning after King's assassination, during which Carmichael seemingly issued a call to arms to African-Americans:

¹¹⁰ "WOL's Coverage," pp. 4-5.

¹¹¹ *ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

When white America killed Dr. King last night, she declared war on us. We have to retaliate for the deaths of our leaders. The execution for those deaths will not be in the courtrooms. They're going to be in the streets of the United States of America ... Black people know that they have to get guns. White America will live to cry since she killed Dr. King last night.

WOL's representative at the conference, newsman Ron Pinkney, recorded the entire proceedings. However, Ted Atkins and John Pace judged that Carmichael's comments were simply too incendiary, ensuring that, at least over WOL, they were never heard.¹¹²

Once the smoke had, quite literally, cleared, WOL - as well as WOOK and WUST - garnered considerable praise for their coverage of the events of 4 to 8 April, with tributes paid by community leaders such as Mayor Walter Washington, as well as broadcast industry journals, for their restrained handling of the crisis.¹¹³ Ultimately, however, there was a clear limit to what the medium had been able to accomplish. Certainly, its best efforts had not spared the city from one of the most traumatic periods in its history. Statistics testified to the magnitude of the riots: 12 deaths, over 7,600 arrests, and property damage valued in the region of \$25,000,000.¹¹⁴

¹¹² Stokeley Carmichael, quoted in, Gilbert, Ten Blocks From the White House, pp. 60-61; "WOL's Coverage," p.7.

¹¹³ *ibid.*, p. 18; "Crisis Proves TV-Radio Maturity," Broadcasting, 15 April 1968, pp. 25-26.

¹¹⁴ Gilbert, Ten Blocks From the White House, p. 119.

In the tense atmosphere that prevailed in the city in the aftermath of the riots, WOL continued to press upon its listeners the importance of restraint and non-violence. The station - particularly news director Ron Pinkney - co-operated closely with the hastily arranged American Freedom Network which covered King's funeral in Atlanta, and participated in other special broadcasts such as the "Dial in for Nonviolence" show from New York.¹¹⁵

As if to provide substance for its continued support of the ideals of the slain leader, WOL also placed its resources at the disposal of those who strove to fulfil King's last plans for civil rights activism. Under the direction of Ralph Abernathy, the Poor People's Campaign finally began in earnest on 12 May, bringing impoverished demonstrators of all races from around the country to inhabit a "Resurrection City" shantytown located near the Lincoln Memorial. For the next 42 days, the makeshift city served as a highly visible reminder of the continued problems of poverty in the United States.¹¹⁶

As a protest strategy, the Poor People's Campaign was a bold, but ineffective, venture. By the time that Resurrection City was closed by police on 24 June, its inhabitants had long become mired in bored disillusionment, internal divisions, and not a little mud. Meanwhile Congress remained visibly unmoved by Abernathy's economic demands.¹¹⁷ However, the project's failure was certainly not for the lack of support from WOL. From the first day of the campaign, the station's news department brought daily coverage of events in Resurrection City to its audience. Continuing the spirit of co-operation forged in the crisis of King's death, the news reports were also fed to over 50 black-

¹¹⁵ "WOL's Coverage," pp. 16-17.

¹¹⁶ Ralph Abernathy, And The Walls Came Tumbling Down (New York: Harper Perennial, 1990) pp. 494-539; Gilbert, Ten Blocks From the White House, pp. 195-207.

¹¹⁷ Robert Weisbrot, Freedom Bound: A History of America's Civil Rights Movement (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1990), pp. 272-75.

oriented radio stations in other cities around the country. Many of the SCLC's top figures - including Abernathy, Coretta King, Jesse Jackson and Hosea Williams - were in regular contact with the station, recording appeals which urged listeners to participate in the campaign's meetings and demonstrations; or which asked for food and clothing donations on behalf of Resurrection City residents.¹¹⁸

The most concerted action undertaken by WOL for the Poor People's Campaign was in support of the Solidarity Day March of 19 June. Conceived as the set-piece occasion of the whole campaign, the aim of Solidarity Day was to stage a mass rally at the Lincoln Memorial in a manner designed to invoke the spirit of the March on Washington five years earlier. Among the impressive array of speakers included Abernathy, Coretta King, Roy Wilkins, Whitney Young, and Walter Reuther. Prior to the demonstration, WOL repeatedly urged local listeners to attend, airing pleas from public figures such as Abernathy and Coretta King, and from entertainers such as Marlon Brando, Paul Newman, Ossie Davis and Jerry Butler. The station's deejays made their own appeals, while full coverage in discussion shows such as "Speak Up" enabled more prolonged and thorough promotion of the upcoming event. Through such efforts, the station played no small part in making Solidarity Day a success. While never matching the halcyon day of 28 August 1963, the march still attracted a crowd of over 50,000 - with a turn-out that was notable for its high proportion of local residents - thus making it one of the rare bright spots in an otherwise disappointing campaign.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ WOL Application for Renewal, 1 July 1969, Exhibit 16B, pp. 11-12.

¹¹⁹ *ibid.*, pp. 13-14. For accounts of Solidarity Day, see Abernathy, And the Walls Came Tumbling Down, pp. 522-28; Gilbert, Ten Blocks From the White House, pp. 200-201.

V

For all its popularity as an entertainment medium, and genuine degree of public service, black-oriented radio was not without its critics in Washington's African-American community by the end of the 1960s. Indeed, as the decade drew to a close, an assortment of civil rights and other civic organisations were increasingly stringent in their evaluation of the performance of the city's stations. For one, WOOK, such scrutiny would eventually result in the station losing its license to operate.

The beginning of the end for WOOK came with the formation of the Washington Community Broadcasting Company (WCBC) on 19 August 1966. With 22 founding stockholders and an initial capitalisation of \$1,600,000 the company was established with the specific intention of challenging WOOK for the right to operate over that station's frequency. The enterprise was a strictly inter-racial affair, under the leadership of former D.C. Juvenile Court Judge Marjorie Lawson, newspaper columnist Drew Pearson, and the Washington Urban League's president William S. Thompson. Among the other notable local civil rights activists later included were Sterling Tucker, director of the Washington Urban League, and Carl H. Moultrie, president of the Washington NAACP.¹²⁰

Rather than become embroiled in such issues as ownership and employment practices, the company justified its challenge solely on the grounds of programming content. In opposing the station's 1966 license renewal application, WCBC argued that WOOK's predominantly popular music format forced black Washingtonians to endure programming that was, "far beneath their dignity and educational standards," and insisted that, if awarded the

¹²⁰ Washington Post, 1 September 1966, and 24 June 1969, both in Vertical File: "Radio and Television Stations: Radio WOOK," Washingtoniana Division, Martin Luther King, Jr., Public Library, Washington, D.C. (hereafter, MLK-DC "WOOK," File).

license, its own educational, cultural and public service shows would surpass anything that Richard Eaton had been able to offer.¹²¹

Having failed to convince the FCC of the merits of its claim, WCBC increased the stakes when WOOK's license again came up for renewal three years later. This time, the charge was that WOOK illegally engaged in the airing of lottery information and misleading advertising. In particular, it was alleged that preachers such as Reverend John Dow, "Reverend" James Belk and "Bishop" Robert Pryor broadcast gambling tips - ingeniously disguised as three-digit biblical references - to those members of their congregations who sought salvation in the numbers game. The accusations were serious enough for the FCC to instigate an inquiry into the affair. Protracted hearings culminated in the Commission's unanimous decision to revoke WOOK's license in 1975 - a ruling which finally came into effect when the Supreme Court rejected Eaton's appeal three years later.¹²²

Unlike the situation that befell WOOK, the protest that emerged against WOL had strong overtones of the black power struggle. Indeed, to a large extent, the station fell foul of the very ideologies which it had itself espoused - particularly in the realms of employment practices and ownership. From the time that the black-oriented WOL signed on air, the continued presence of white staff at the station, if thought of at all, had been little more than a source of amusement. Many enjoyed the joke as deejays held elections for the post of "honorary Negro," with the victors supposedly having to survive such initiation tests as a Friday night walk down Seventh Street with a \$20 bill hanging out of

¹²¹ Washington Post, 1 September 1966.

¹²² Washington Post, 24 June 1969; Washington Star, 12 September 1975, and 23 January 1978, both in MLK-DC "WOOK," File.

After losing his AM license, Eaton promptly switched WOOK's operation to his FM outlet in the city, until the FCC ruled in 1983 that that station as well should not have its license renewed. Washington Post, 29 August 1983, MLK-DC "WOOK," File.

their back pocket; or placing a burning watermelon - as opposed to a cross - outside the homes of local white racists. However, for some observers by the late 1960s, the continued presence of whites in positions of influence and responsibility at the radio station which claimed to be the voice of the District's black community was no laughing matter.¹²³

In the Summer of 1967, Washington SNCC briefly emerged as the most vocal critic of WOL. Taking his lead from the protest undertaken by SNCC headquarters against WAOK in Atlanta, the director of the Washington operation, Lester McKinnie, embarked upon a similar campaign in July. A letter to WOL's general manager John Pace that was co-signed by McKinnie and H. Rap Brown outlined their complaints:

Like an avalance [sic], WOL has swiftly engulfed the black community. However, we recognize the harsh reality that no black person is represented in the hierarchy of your organization, and we refuse to divorce ourselves from attempting to understand why this situation has persisted ...

We consider that your motives are unpatriotic and strictly not for the good of the D.C. community. This, of course, has been manifested by your inability to act in a positive fashion by placing black people in positions to control the destiny of their people. By your exercising unjust prejudices and biases, our thinking leads us to believe such practices to be an inconceivable horror of racism allotted to disrupt the black man's thinking and his faith in himself.¹²⁴

¹²³ Bernstein, "Washington's Soul Radio," p. 28; Hannerz, *Soulside*, p. 151.

¹²⁴ Lester McKinnie and H. Rap Brown, letter to John Pace, 3 July 1967, SNCC Papers, C-I-143.

Having served notice of its intentions, Washington SNCC investigated the operation of WOL in greater depth. A lengthy article, based upon its findings, identified two key areas in which it considered the station to be exploiting the black community. The first was economically, with the station offering an effective means for both Sonderling and corporate advertisers to reap profits from African-American listeners, "The buying public for WOL advertisements is BLACK, the public-sellers, the DJs are BLACK, but the management and owners of the station are WHITE, and of course the people producing the products are WHITE," emphasised SNCC. "As a result, major money is being pulled from the black community via WOL by black DJs to be used by the white power structure of WOL and the white power structure of business and advertisement for clear green power for itself and nothing for the people whom they get the money from."¹²⁵

The second main complaint advanced by SNCC was directed towards Sonderling's employment record. The monopolisation of management positions by whites was denounced as, "rampant white bossism and exploitation of its [WOL's] black announcers and listeners," with the air personalities - the key ingredient in the station's success - having, "absolutely no say in the entire operation of the radio station. They are dictated to by white boys, who tell them what to play, what commercials to read, how to read them."¹²⁶ Certainly, the statistics provided in the report suggested that WOL's professions of support for increased black control of black-oriented institutions were not being adhered to in its own employment practices. Of the 25 staff positions at the station, SNCC discovered only eight to be filled by African-Americans, five of whom were disc jockeys. By far the bulk of WOL's

¹²⁵ "WOL Radio," pp. 1-2.

¹²⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

operation, including all of the top-level management positions, remained in white hands.¹²⁷

In such circumstances, the decision to target WOL as a highly visible symbol of white exploitation of the District's African-American population is easily understood, particularly when the extent of the station's penetration into the black community is taken into account. However, in view of WOL's popularity as an entertainment medium, and the esteem in which its solid record of genuine public service was generally held, it was a campaign with little prospect of actual success. McKinnie was never able to muster sufficient public pressure to force substantial policy changes upon WOL. Rather, the station remained under Sonderling's proprietorship until it was sold to the Almic Corporation, headed by WOL's former public affairs director Dewey Hughes, in 1979; and the city's civil rights activists - including McKinnie himself - continued to avail themselves of its facilities whenever the opportunity arose.¹²⁸

Despite the failure to oust Sonderling from WOL, the interest in establishing a black-owned station in the District continued to mount. However, not until the Washington Post Company's donation of its WTOP-FM

¹²⁷ *ibid.*, p. 4.

¹²⁸ By November 1967, for example, McKinnie was making arrangements for James Forman to appear on David Eaton's "Speak Up" show. Lester McKinnie, letter to James Forman, 23 November 1967, SNCC Papers, C-I-56.

Despite remaining under Sonderling's control, allegations of racism at the station did resurface periodically. For example, after being fired from the station in June 1971 for refusing to adhere to WOL's new tighter music format, Nighthawk complained that the management had, "displayed a most racist attitude towards its employees and has deceived the black community into believing that it (WOL) has its interests at heart." Bob Terry, quoted in, Washington Evening Star, 25 June 1971, p. C6.

outlet to Howard University in the Winter of 1971 - a gift with an estimated market value of \$750,000 - did the wish actually turn into reality.¹²⁹

Immediately upon signing on air on 10 December 1971, the new station, WHUR, appeared to vindicate the arguments of those who had insisted that a black-controlled station would automatically display a greater commitment and sensitivity to the African-American community than its white-owned, black-oriented rivals. The station came into existence with a dual commitment: to serve as a training centre for African-American students seeking entry into the broadcasting industry; and as a successful commercial radio station which offered quality music and public service programming to the District's black residents.¹³⁰

WHUR's approach was personified by its first manager, Phil Watson. In his previous capacity as general manager of KPFK-Los Angeles - a West Coast outlet of the traditionally radical Pacifica chain - Watson had co-operated closely with black protest groups, even to the point of promising Stokely Carmichael that he would be on the air within three minutes whenever he wanted to use the station to address the Los Angeles population. The same spirit infused the new operation at Howard, with activists such as Angela Davies and Imamu Amiri Baraka - often considered to be too radical to appear on other stations - given access to WHUR's airwaves.¹³¹

¹²⁹ Washington Star, 26 March 1972, Vertical File: "Radio and Television Stations: Radio WHUR," Washingtoniana Division, Martin Luther King, Jr., Public Library, Washington, D.C. (hereafter, MLK-DC "WHUR," File).

¹³⁰ Washington Post, 11 December 1971, and 26 January 1975, both in MLK-DC "WHUR," File. See also George, The Death of Rhythm and Blues, pp. 131-35; William Barlow, "Commercial and Noncommercial Radio," in Split Image: African-Americans in the Mass Media, ed. Jannette L. Dates and William Barlow (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1990), pp. 229-31.

¹³¹ Phil Watson, letter to Stokely Carmichael, 12 April 1968, SNCC Papers, C-I-21; Ellis interview.

Similarly, programming innovations such as the "Daily Drum," a nightly, hour-long newscast, offered an unprecedented degree of local and African news, garnering much praise in the process. As Nelson George observed, "This radio-news style elevated the whole community-involvement aspect of black radio and would be imitated around the country." The station's music format, self-styled as "360 degrees of black music," drew heavily upon jazz, album tracks, and works by less well-known artists, thus providing a more sophisticated and balanced showcase for black musical talent than the standard fare of contemporary soul and gospel offered by its rivals.¹³²

However, the critical acclaim afforded to WHUR in the station's infancy could not arrest the emergence of damaging conflicts between its educational and commercial agendas. Following Watson's departure early in 1973, the station began to direct itself more overtly towards the marketplace, gradually adopting a slicker, but less innovative, approach in an attempt to entice listeners from its rivals. This approach was explained by new general manager Tom Jones, who expressed a not unusual desire to maximise station profits. "We're going to try to be No. 1 in town," boasted Jones in 1975, explaining how, "We felt that if we provided a much less collegiate sound on the air we could attract more people who normally listen to commercial stations." In practice, this resulted in more mainstream music programming; a certain toning down of news and public affairs broadcasts; and a greater reliance upon professional air personalities at the expense of students.¹³³

According to Jones, WHUR's new direction was little more than, "a small compromise to commercialism." For some observers, however, it was a fundamental breach of the station's founding principles. Angered at their lack of

¹³² George, *The Death of Rhythm and Blues*, p. 132.

¹³³ Tom Jones, quoted in, *Washington Post*, 26 January 1975; Barlow, "Commercial and Noncommercial Radio," pp. 229-30.

opportunities at the station, students at Howard's School of Communications began a protest campaign in the Autumn of 1974. Under the leadership of Fred Johnson, the students even went so far as to complain to the FCC that the station had failed to adhere to its license obligations. Eventually, a compromise was reached with the creation of a second, campus-only station, WHBC, which provided the students with the experience that they were demanding, while leaving WHUR free to pursue its more commercial goals.¹³⁴

Certainly, it would be unfair to suggest that WHUR wantonly abandoned its community service role. News and public affairs shows such as the "Daily Drum" continued to be aired. Moreover, the quality of new music programming such as "The Quiet Storm," an evening show of mellow music, was a notable success in its own right, setting the standards for many black-oriented stations around the country to follow. Nevertheless, the extent to which the station had strayed from its founding principles by 1975 was real enough. "Overall," as historian William Barlow concluded, "WHUR's educational mission was subsumed by its financial one."¹³⁵

VI

The experience of WHUR offered a sobering insight into the realities of the black radio industry. Even with the cultural, intellectual and financial resources of Howard University to draw upon, the station was forced to compromise its community-oriented activities in order to pursue its commercial agenda.

In this light, the public service efforts undertaken in earlier years by the white-owned, black-oriented stations in the District should not be judged too

¹³⁴ Jones, quoted in, Washington Post, 26 January 1975; George, The Death of Rhythm and Blues, p. 132.

¹³⁵ Barlow, "Commercial and Noncommercial Radio," p. 231; George, The Death of Rhythm and Blues, pp. 187-88.

unfavourably. All three of them had lent their support to the civil rights struggle, albeit to varying degrees and in different ways, and, in the case of WOL, the medium emerged as a genuinely potent tool for community mobilisation in the city.

Certainly, black-oriented radio in Washington, D.C. had never been without its faults. At times, the limitations upon what it could achieve were clearly visible. Yet it is equally clear that, had the medium never existed in the city, the fight for equality, and the District's African-American community as a whole, would have been so much the poorer.

CHAPTER SIX

Conclusion

I

On 16 May 1980, at the behest of Mayor Marion Barry, the residents of Washington, D.C., officially celebrated "Richard Eaton Day." As various tributes were bestowed upon WOOK's owner, civic leaders and prominent members of the local community gathered at a special dinner to commemorate the career of the man who had "Brought Black Radio to Town." Four years later, as Governor Joe Harris proclaimed, "WAOK Radio Station Day in Georgia," a similar banquet was held in Atlanta in honour of Zenas Sears. Among the assembled dignitaries, one of the most notable attendees was Hosea Williams - Sears' old adversary from the 1960s.¹

Both Eaton and Sears, who had been involved in black-oriented radio in their respective cities for over 30 years, could have been forgiven for regarding the ceremonies as something of a personal vindication. As has been seen, amid the particular intensity of the black protest movement of the 1960s and early 1970s, they had both been the focus for considerable black community resentment. However, viewed from the perspective of the 1980s, there existed a sincere appreciation for the historical role that black-oriented radio had played in the daily lives of thousands of black Washingtonians and Atlantans, and respect for the part that the two men had played in helping to create the medium.

¹ Washington Star, 16 May 1980, p. C9; Atlanta Constitution, 14 March 1984, p. 1B.

In many ways, these two events, and the careers of the white entrepreneurs that they were staged to celebrate, neatly symbolised the complexity that has characterised much of the history of black-oriented radio's relationship with its African-American audience. On one hand, there have always been genuine deficiencies; smouldering grievances which occasionally ignited into open protest, especially during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Yet, the limitations to which such protests drew attention were only part of the overall picture. When black-oriented radio's performance is analysed in its broader historical context, the positive impact that stations had upon listeners becomes as readily apparent as the medium's faults.

II

The plaudits that were bestowed upon Eaton and Sears were especially revealing given that they occurred during an era that witnessed an important, if modest, expansion of African-American radio station ownership. Whereas, at most, only 16 stations in the United States were black-owned in 1970, the figure had risen to 88 by 1980. In 1986, 150 stations were controlled by African-Americans.²

Several factors combined to spur this increase. In part, it resulted from a greater enthusiasm for the broadcasting industry on the part of black entrepreneurs. Encouraged by journals such as Black Enterprise, which published advice on "How to Buy a Radio Station," a growing number of African-American businessmen and women viewed the industry as a viable and lucrative avenue for investment.³ Among them numbered such prominent figures as Ebony publisher

² William Barlow, "Commercial and Noncommercial Radio," in Split Image: African-Americans in the Mass Media, ed. Jannette L. Dates and William Barlow (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1990), pp. 227, 231.

³ Black Enterprise, July 1978, p. 26.

John H. Johnson, who, after considerable difficulty in finding a station, finally entered into broadcasting with his purchase of WGRT-Chicago for \$2,000,000 in 1972.⁴

In addition to Johnson, several other publishers entered into broadcasting, including Milwaukee Courier proprietor Jerrel Jones, who purchased the city's WNOV for \$360,000 in 1973. Black Enterprise's Earl Graves followed his own advice by investing in KNOX-AM-FM-Fort Worth. Clarence Jones of the Amsterdam News was just one of 63 initial stakeholders in Inner City Broadcasting, a New York cartel headed by Manhattan Borough President Percy Sutton, which began by purchasing WLIB-AM in 1972, and had by the end of the decade expanded into several other major markets such as Detroit, Los Angeles and San Francisco. Other significant black-owned chain operations included the Pittsburgh-based Sheridan Broadcasting Corporation, and Broadcast Enterprises National. Headed by Philadelphia attorney Ragan Henry, the latter first acquired WAOK-Atlanta at a cost of \$3,500,000 in 1974, and within ten years had

⁴ In his autobiography, Johnson outlined the reason for his purchase of WGRT - an AM outlet - despite his preference for a more popular FM station. His explanation suggested that racism, deliberate or otherwise, was still a major barrier to African-Americans seeking to enter into the industry, "There was no need to draw a map or a diagram. I got the message. I wasn't going to get an opportunity to bid on a choice FM station ... I wasn't asking for affirmative action or a set-aside. All I wanted was an opportunity to compete by the same rules that applied to other entrepreneurs. But in this case, as in so many others, the rules were changed when I got to the one-yard line." John H. Johnson (with Lerone Bennett, Jr.), Succeeding Against the Odds: The Autobiography of a Great American Businessman (New York: Amistad, 1992), p. 332. Upon the purchase of WGRT, which became Chicago's first black-owned radio station, Johnson changed the outlet's call letters to WJPC.

expanded to include seven more stations around the country.⁵

Unsurprisingly, several of the entrepreneurs who were attracted towards black-oriented radio were drawn from the worlds of music and entertainment. Soul singer James Brown pioneered the trend with his purchase in the late 1960s and early 1970s of three stations, WEBB-Baltimore, WJBE-Knoxville, and WRDW-Augusta. Others who followed suit included former jazz musician Benjamin Tucker, who had the controlling share in the corporation that bought WSOK-Savannah, Georgia, for \$400,000 in 1972, and Stevie Wonder, who secured KJLH-Los Angeles at a cost of \$2,200,000 in 1979.⁶

Although not directly involved with station ownership, another conspicuous indication of black entrepreneurial activity within the broadcasting industry came with the formation of the National Black Network (NBN) in 1972. Under the presidency of Eugene Jackson (previously the director of the Major Industries Program for the Interracial Council for Business Opportunity), the project was financed with an initial investment of \$1,000,000, approximately half of which was provided with a loan from the Bank of America. From the outset, the NBN was conceived as a deliberate attempt to improve black-oriented radio's standards as a news source. In addition to the hourly five-minute newscasts which became the cornerstone of the network's service, the NBN provided documentaries, discussion, and commentary shows such as "One Black Man's Opinion," a well-acclaimed editorial series presented by former WVON news

⁵ Black Enterprise, September 1974, p. 19, and June 1982, p. 131; Nelson George, The Death of Rhythm and Blues (New York: Plume, 1988), p. 126; Barlow, "Commercial and Noncommercial Radio," p. 227; Atlanta Constitution, 22 March 1984, p. 2D.

⁶ Rocco Famighetti, "Black Radio: On a High Wire with No Net," Broadcasting, 31 August 1970, p. 50; Black Enterprise, September 1974, p. 19; Jet, 25 January 1979, p. 16.

analyst Roy Wood. By 1977, with the organisation operating at a profit of \$100,000, the NBN catered for a total of 83 black-oriented affiliates, covering approximately 70 percent of the African-American population.⁷

In addition to the activities of African-American entrepreneurs, the call for increased black ownership of broadcast facilities received considerable support in several influential quarters. The Congressional Black Caucus, for example, took an active interest in agitating for telecommunications policies designed to enhance minority representation. Similarly, a special conference organised by the National Association of Broadcasters in November 1972 was devoted towards the issue of minority ownership. By 1975, as Marilyn Fife concluded, "there was virtually no debate in the broadcast policymaking system over the legitimacy of minority group involvement in broadcasting as a matter of public interest."⁸

Most important of all, the Federal Communications Commission was increasingly amenable to the concept of greater minority ownership, and took positive steps to facilitate it. In no small part, this was directly due to the impact of

⁷ New York Post, 21 March 1972, Clippings File: "Radio," Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York (hereafter, S-C "Radio," File); "Profile," Broadcasting, 26 September 1977, p. 73; Hal Bennet and Lew Roberts, "National Black Network Black Radio's Big Brother," Black Enterprise, June 1977, rpt. in Issues and Trends in Afro-American Journalism, ed. James S. Tinney and Justine R. Rector (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1980), pp. 278-287; Barlow, "Commercial and Noncommercial Radio," p. 227.

The NBN was not the only new network that was established to cater to black-oriented radio. In 1972, the Mutual Broadcasting Network created its own subsidiary, the Mutual Black Network (MBN). By the end of the decade, the MBN also became a predominantly black-owned concern following its purchase by the Pittsburgh-based Sheridan Broadcasting cartel. See *ibid.*

⁸ Black Enterprise, July 1978, p. 7; Marilyn Diane Fife, "FCC Policy on Minority Ownership in Broadcasting: A Political Systems Analysis of Regulatory Policymaking," PhD Thesis, Stanford University, 1984, pp. 157-64 (quote on p. 164).

the appointment of Ben Hooks to the Commission in 1972. Hooks expressed a keen interest in the ownership issue from the outset of his tenure at the FCC, arguing in a 1972 ruling concerning a Florida television station that minority ownership was a positive factor that should be judged favourably whenever two or more rival applications competed for the same new broadcast license. His opinion was subsequently cited by the Supreme Court as part of its justification for overturning the FCC's previously held assertion that it had to remain "colour-blind" on such issues. From that point, although race was only one of several factors that had to be taken into consideration during such comparative proceedings, the issue of greater minority ownership was at least codified in the FCC's regulations as a positive goal.⁹

By the time that Hooks left the FCC to assume the post of executive director of the NAACP in July 1977, further steps had been taken along the road to increased minority control of broadcast facilities. A conference held by the Commission in April 1977 assembled approximately 200 delegates to consider ways of facilitating the entry of more minority entrepreneurs into the industry. The outgrowth of the conference was the FCC's 1978 Statement of Policy on Minority Ownership of Broadcasting Facilities, which established several strategies - including tax incentives and "distress" sales - to encourage existing station owners

⁹ "Hooks Starts Delivering on his Commitment to Blacks," Broadcasting, 9 October 1972, p. 31.

who were looking to sell to do so to minority entrepreneurs.¹⁰

As significant as such developments were, they must be kept in perspective. With much justification, critics of the FCC argued that its policies were insufficient; that African-American owners were still hugely under-represented in terms of their proportion to the overall population. Certainly, with in excess of 7,500 radio stations in the United States by 1978, the percentage that was actually black-owned remained minute.¹¹ Nevertheless, for the first time, African-American owners constituted a discernible and strengthening presence within the broadcasting industry. This development finally provided observers with the opportunity to evaluate the arguments of those who had insisted that increased black ownership would equate to more responsive black-oriented programming.

Events soon demonstrated that, in reality, no such equation existed. With notable exceptions, there was little to distinguish black-owned black-oriented radio stations from their white-owned counterparts. They each shared many of the same

¹⁰ Fife, "FCC Policy on Minority Ownership in Broadcasting," pp. 164-80.

"Distress sale" was the term used to describe the process whereby a broadcaster whose license was scheduled for a renewal or revocation hearing by the FCC could avoid the trouble and expense of the hearing process, and the danger of losing everything in the event of an unfavourable outcome, by selling their station at a reduced price to a minority buyer.

A notable example of this policy in action was provided with Egmont Sonderling's sale of WOL-Washington, D.C., which finally received FCC approval in 1980. From the mid-1970s, WOL came under intense scrutiny from the FCC as part of the commission's national payola investigations. Faced with the increasing likelihood of losing the station's license, Sonderling availed himself of the distress policy to sell the station to the black-owned Almic Corporation, headed by local broadcasters Dewey and Cathy Hughes. The cost of the transfer, at \$950,000, was estimated to be \$500,000 less than the actual market value of the outlet. See Washington Post, 2 December 1979, pp. C1, C5; Washington Star, 2 August 1980, Vertical File: "Radio and Television Stations: Radio WOL," Washingtoniana Division, Martin Luther King, Jr., Public Library, Washington, D.C.

¹¹ Black Enterprise, July 1978, p. 7.

strengths and weaknesses, and, as with white-owned outlets, black-owned facilities were liable to incur community protest whenever they were perceived to be neglecting their responsibilities to the African-American audience that they professed to serve.

Individual grievances against black broadcasters covered a surprising array of issues. One of the most extraordinary involved the dispute that engulfed WENN-Birmingham, Alabama, in February 1976. Following the station's purchase by the Booker T. Washington Broadcasting Service - headed by the city's most famous black businessman A. G. Gaston - at the end of 1975, WENN became the first black-owned radio station in Birmingham's history. Upon taking control of WENN, Gaston promptly fired long-term white station manager Joe Lackey in order to replace him with an African-American appointee. The move resulted in a walk-out by the rest of the station's staff, with support from the local chapter of the SCLC, amid accusations of racial discrimination. As one of the leaders of the protest, radio preacher Reverend Erskine Faush, explained, the protest was partly in recognition of the well-respected Lackey's own contribution during the civil rights struggles of the 1960s. According to Faush, Lackey had, "looked beyond this thing called color," in order to make the station, "a friend to the black community of Birmingham." Shortly after the walk-out, several of WENN's former employees, including deejays Shelley Stewart and "Tall" Paul White, left to establish their own black-oriented outlet at another of the city's radio stations, WATV.¹²

¹² See Birmingham News, 13 February 1976, Erskine Faush, quoted in Birmingham Post-Herald, 18 February 1976, and Birmingham News, 20 March 1976, all in Clippings File: "Radio Broadcasting - Birmingham," Birmingham Public Library Archives, Birmingham.

More frequently, criticism centred upon the issue of programming. With considerable regularity, African-American station owners revealed themselves to be as susceptible to the dictates of the marketplace as their white colleagues. Typical of such a broadcaster was Jerrel Jones at WNOV. For all his good intentions and desire for innovation, experience rapidly taught Jones the value of persevering with the tried and trusted formula that had served most black-oriented station owners so well over the years. "I thought we could use a more contemporary sound. A little less James Brown and a little more Hubert Laws," recalled Jones. "But the station lost about \$60,000 in revenues, so we went back to screaming and yelling and everything."¹³

Perhaps the most revealing example of the commercial priorities of African-American station owners was provided by WLIB in New York. According to Nelson George, by the early 1970s station proprietor Harry Novik came under considerable community pressure to sell his concern to black investors. That pressure succeeded when Novik sold his AM outlet to Inner City Broadcasting in 1972, and his FM station to the same group the following year, for a combined total of \$3,400,00.¹⁴

Immediately upon assuming control of the stations, Inner City's shareholders insisted that the fact that WLIB-AM-FM were now in black hands would redefine black radio's relationship with New York's African-American community. As one of the investors, Reverend H. Carl McCall declared:

¹³ Jerrel Jones, quoted in Black Enterprise, September 1974, p. 20.

¹⁴ George, The Death of Rhythm and Blues, p. 127; Black Enterprise, June 1982, p. 131.

The real thing that will make it different is the fact that it is a black-owned station. I think black people are going to have to be more sensitive to the needs of the black community and not exploit the community ...

Now, this doesn't mean that when black people get into industry that they are not going to be concerned about profit. But profit for us is not the major issue ... As blacks, we came to black-oriented radio as critics - as people who have been offended by it. Those offenses are still very evident to us and we have had time to think about methods of change.¹⁵

There is no reason to doubt McCall's genuine desire to effect widespread improvements in the black radio industry, nor the effectiveness of his emphasising black ownership as an appeal to the racial solidarity of potential listeners. Nevertheless, the implicit criticism of WLIB's previous community service appeared unduly harsh. Throughout this thesis, it has been argued that this station, under the direction of Harry Novik, was a notable example of what black-oriented radio *could* achieve, providing a consistent outlet for black community expression in Harlem.

Thus, it was especially ironic that Novik's sale of his stations to Inner City resulted in the eventual loss of much of WLIB's essential sense of "blackness." As the new proprietors moved both stations out of Harlem to a new downtown Manhattan studio location, the FM outlet (renamed WBLS) in particular became a *cause celebre* in industry circles. Under the influence of programme director

¹⁵ Reverend H. Carl McCall, quoted in, Douglas O'Connor and Gayla Cook, "Black Radio: The 'Soul' Sellout," *The Progressive*, August 1973, rpt. in *Issues and Trends in Afro-American Journalism*, ed. Tinney and Rector, p. 243.

Frankie "Hollywood" Crocker, WBLS pioneered a new level of sophistication and smoothness in black radio, winning many admirers along the way. By the mid-1970s, the station was the second most popular (behind WABC) in all of New York. However, around the same time, the station, in its quest for ever higher ratings, increasingly appealed to white, as well as black, listeners. By 1978, almost 50 percent of WBLS' audience was estimated to be white. In striving to cultivate this white audience, WBLS' self-professed mandate of acting as an authentic voice for New York's African-American community paled - in more ways than one - into relative insignificance. As white performers featured on WBLS's playlist with increasing regularity, leading figures in the Inner City organisation subtly sought to redefine their agenda. "We're not an ethnic station," insisted chairman Percy Sutton in 1978, "we're a people station. We want to be in the mainstream of radio." Likewise, vice-president Hal Jackson explained how, "We're a black-owned station but not black."¹⁶

To be sure, it would be a gross distortion to suggest that Inner City entirely abandoned its commitment to black New Yorkers. WLIR-AM, in particular, continued to serve as a valuable source of news and information for many African-Americans in the city. Similarly, by 1981, outspoken critics such as Village Voice contributor Joy Duckett, who expressed dismay at the preponderance of white artists on WBLS ("At least Andy Gibb is tolerable ... But I draw the line at Credence Clearwater Revival"), found some solace in the increased opportunity for

¹⁶ George, The Death of Rhythm and Blues, pp. 127-31, 158-59; Barlow, "Commercial and Noncommercial Radio," pp. 228-29; Black Enterprise, July 1978, pp. 20-21 (Sutton quote on p. 21); Hal Jackson, quoted in Joy Duckett, "Slow Fade from Black at BLS," Village Voice, 15-21 July 1981, p. 30.

black community expression afforded by WLIB's recent adoption of an all-talk format.¹⁷

In addition, some might argue that Inner City's crossover, indeed assimilationist, approach was to be admired rather than condemned - a commendable manifestation of the "melting pot" in action. Nevertheless, the fact remains that under black ownership WLIB lost much of the special resonance with New York's African-American community that it had enjoyed for the great part of its history. Moreover, it provided the model for stations around the country, eager to share in WLBS' success, to follow, thus spurring the trend by which an increasing number of outlets abandoned the title of "black-oriented" in favour of "urban contemporary." In this way, as Nelson George concluded, "Black radio - not everywhere, but in too many cities - became disco radio, just as not all but too many black artists made beige music."¹⁸

With many black-oriented stations remaining in white hands, even despite the increase of black ownership in the 1970s, the responsibility for this development clearly cannot be attributed solely to those African-American entrepreneurs who entered into the broadcasting industry. Nevertheless, as numerous commentators observed, many black stations owners were certainly not beyond reproach. One such critic was legendary Philadelphia disc jockey Georgie Woods. In 1972, Woods willingly lent his own voice to the growing clamour for black control of the medium that had provided him with his fame. As he informed the annual NATRA convention in Philadelphia: "If I had any one dream, it would

¹⁷ Barlow, "Commercial and Noncommercial Radio," p. 228; Duckett, "Slow Fade from Black."

¹⁸ George, The Death of Rhythm and Blues, pp. 158-61, (quote on p. 159).

be for more Black-owned radio and television stations."¹⁹ Yet by the 1990s, that dream had evidently turned a little sour, as Woods bemoaned the performance of those African-Americans who had succeeded in entering into broadcasting:

They (black station owners) got these stations through affirmative action. They were supposed to bring Black people into the broadcast industry. They have failed. They didn't do that. They went for themselves ... All they did was to go to the Bank [sic] themselves and go to Africa, and take African vacations, and Bermuda vacations, and buy mansions and stuff, at the expense of Black people who were suffering.²⁰

Even Ben Hooks, the architect of much of the increased black ownership of the 1970s, expressed misgivings about the performance of many of the African-American entrepreneurs who entered into the broadcasting industry. This is not to suggest that he wavered in his commitment to increased black ownership. On the contrary, in a 1995 interview he reiterated the moral and practical grounds for having supported the measure. Nevertheless, in the midst of his tenure at the FCC, Hooks could not conceal his exasperation at the way in which many of the African-American entrepreneurs who benefited from his efforts to open doors for them responded by performing in exactly the same ways that white station owners had always done. "I understand the bottom line is making money," Hooks explained to

¹⁹ Georgie Woods, quoted in, Jet, 14 September 1972, S-C "Radio," File.

²⁰ Georgie Woods, quoted in, James G. Spady, Georgie Woods: I'm Only a Man: The Life Story of a Mass Communicator, Promoter, Civil Rights Activist (Philadelphia: Snack-Pac, 1992), p. 201.

a special seminar of black station owners staged in Washington, D.C., in September 1976. "But if all you are going to do is give a chocolate coating to the old white plantation notion of blacks that we've had all along, frankly, the black community would be better off without you."²¹

In this context, even some of the most impressive and positive achievements of the black entrepreneurs who entered into broadcasting during the 1970s have to be slightly qualified. The National Black Network, for example, was undoubtedly a significant landmark in the history of black-oriented radio, taking the quality and quantity of the medium's news coverage to a new plateau. Significantly, however, according to NBN president Eugene Jackson, the primary aim of the network was to serve as a corrective to the continued distortion of the African-American community in the mainstream media:

My philosophy is that the rest of the news media is going to do an excellent job about reporting what's negative in the black community. At NBN, we have to bend over backwards, sometimes to the point of overkill, in order to present positive occurrences the black community should know about ...

In a depressed situation, you talk about what's positive. If you help people lift their heads and say [sic], 'Hey, we're not as bad as everybody else is saying we are,' at least when they go to the black radio station they can expect to be relieved in some way. It's kind of, 'This is mine, and I don't want and expect to hear how

²¹ Ben Hooks, interview with Stephen Walsh, 3 August 1995, University of Newcastle Upon Tyne Oral History Collection; Ben Hooks, quoted in, R. Dwight Bachman, Dynamics of Black Radio: A Research Report, (Washington, D.C.: Creative Universal Products, Inc., 1977), p. 65.

terrible I am. In fact, I expect to hear how good things are and will be for me.²²

Jackson's innovation lay in his attempt to achieve his aim by improving the quality of black-oriented radio's news service. However, his emphasis upon the positive aspects of black life, although admirable and much needed, was nothing new. It was precisely black radio's ability to make African-American listeners feel good about themselves that had always been at the heart of the medium's enduring popularity and success over the years.

Consequently, Jackson's approach differed markedly from that of black radio's critics such as William Wright, who insisted that the crux of the medium's problem was its reluctance to highlight such issues as slum landlords and drug addiction. Neither Jackson nor Wright were intrinsically misdirected. There was surely room for both approaches in a mature, well-balanced medium. Nevertheless, the dichotomy vividly demonstrated how even those individuals who were, in their own ways, at the forefront of efforts to improve black radio's service to the community could not always agree on the nature of the problem, let alone on how to find the solution.

III

None of these examples are intended to suggest that the question of ownership was a redundant one, nor to disagree with the assertion that the black community itself is the best judge of what constitutes "relevant" black-oriented programming.

²² Eugene Jackson, quoted in, Bennet and Roberts, "National Black Network," pp. 281, 287.

Nevertheless, they do suggest that, in a very real sense, the quality of black radio's public service was not simply attributable to the race of a station's owner.

The fact that the effort to increase black control of the medium during the 1970s failed to usher in the sweeping improvements that the proponents of the measure had anticipated was in actuality entirely predictable. The simple truth was that the medium never existed for the primary goal of advancing the African-American struggle against racism, and it was unrealistic to expect otherwise. Ultimately, black-oriented radio, like any other kind of radio, was an entrepreneurial endeavour that was operated for the benefit of those who owned it, black and white alike. African-American station owners were no less likely - and certainly no less entitled - than their white counterparts to seek to profit from their broadcasting investments in whatever way they saw fit. This thesis has focused upon commercial radio stations, and there is certainly scope for further research into the role of alternative non-commercial stations such as the Pacifica chain, and college radio. Nevertheless, for the majority of commercial black-oriented outlets, whatever the race of the owner, the operation of a primarily entertainment medium for essentially economic purposes was the main priority.

Yet, in their not unreasonable focus upon the medium's genuine limitations, historians of black-oriented radio should not ignore the real contribution that stations could, and did, make to the movement for civil rights. To varying degrees, black radio was a complex mixture of good and bad, enthusiasm and cynicism, inspiration and exploitation - a particularly well-scrambled curate's egg.

If black-oriented radio rarely served as a major catalyst in instigating civil rights activity, neither was it ever the entirely vacuous, disengaged, and purely exploitative agency that its detractors were prone to portray it as. Occasionally at the direct behest of owners, more frequently in spite of their personal agendas, black radio played an important informational and motivational role in many

African-American communities. Not everywhere, but on a sufficiently wide scale for the medium to have rendered a valuable service in sustaining the African-American fight for equality. Ultimately, for all its problems, the history of black-oriented radio in the period from 1945 to 1975 was marked with positive achievements, even if there clearly remained further progress to be made. In this respect, the medium was much like the black struggle as a whole.

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