

Abstract

- The Radio Act of 1927, and its creation of the FRC, and the Communications Act of 1934 establishing the FCC, gave federal agencies the power to censor and penalize broadcasters for obscene, indecent, or profane language.
- Sexual innuendos, profanity, lyrics and tone perceived as indecent, controversial topics of time, and broadcasts deemed "immoral" were regulated by the federal agencies and by broadcasters and private groups who invoked the laws for the purpose of censorship.
- The desire for "cleanness" and to appeal to the widest audience pushed radio broadcasting to become highly restricted. This included erasure of black and/or queer voices on the radio.

Keywords & Definitions



Fig. 1: Federal Communications Commission current official seal. This seal was adopted by the agency in 2020.



Fig. 2: Federal Radio Commission official seal. This seal was in use from 1927 to 1934.

Federal Radio Commission (FRC): A government agency created in by the Radio Act of 1927 to organize and regulate the radio industry.

Federal Communications Commission (FCC): The current government agency responsible for organizing and regulating radio, television, wire, cable, and satellite communications. The agency transitioned from the FRC to the FCC following the Communications Act of 1934

Dirty Blues: A type of Blues music which featured taboo topics and sexually explicit lyrics.

Hegemony: The near total domination of one social group or concept. In this case the dominant group/concept was the white middle class over all other racial minorities, but especially Black Americans.

Censorship: The restriction of language done by an institution or individual in response to external pressures and internal filters.

Editing vs. Re-recording: Editing is the process of altering the content of a song while Re-recording is changing the singer of the song but not the content.

Methods

- Relied on EWU JFK library resources such as the main collection, Inter-Library Loans, and the Summit System, and ILL program between participating academic universities of the Pacific Northwest.
- Compiled secondary research articles and books from EWU JFK library research databases such as JSTOR, ProQuest books, and the EWU catalog.
- Used the internet to find webpages and Open Access articles related to Queer artists, dirty blues, and censorship in the 1920s-1930s.
- Used online databases such as Newspapers.com, Chronicling America, The Internet Archive, U.S. Congressional Record and the World Radio History Archive to gather primary source information.
- Attempted to gain further information on the FRC/FCC by filing a Freedom of Information Act request, but the request was not answered.

Results

The FRC, policies and practice

§ *The Radio Act of 1927:* The newly created FRC was given the power to prosecute radio stations for any language found to be "Indecent, obscene or profane." Stations found to be in violation of this language could have their licenses revoked.

§ *Practices, Unfounded censorship:* The FRC revoked licenses of "offending" broadcasters with little exception, stating they would silence radio stations based on a single broadcast. The FRC claimed that they had the authority to revoke licenses of stations which were not interesting, educational, or for the public good.

§ In one case, this led to the six-month imprisonment of Robert "Wildcat" Duncan, for the use of profane and indecent language.

The FCC's new policy enactments

§ The Communications Act transitioned the FRC to the FCC with its inclusion of other forms of communication such as television. The act also expanded the punishments for violations of the act. Between 1934 and 1939, the FCC rarely acted against radio stations and did not invoke the full extent of their powers. Nevertheless, private groups pressed the FCC to act, and broadcasters, who feared penalization and wanted to control their content, censored themselves.

Decency Organizations

§ Catholic decency organizations occasionally called out radio for innuendos, double-entendres, and perceived indecency.



Fig. 3: Advertisement for "Prove it on me Blues" by Ma Rainey. There is no indication that the song played on the radio, which is unsurprising considering the lyrics and advertisement heavily imply homosexual behavior from Ma Rainey.

- On December 17th, 1937, Mae West appeared as a guest on the *Chase & Sanborn Hour* and portrayed sexually independent Eve in a skit about the bible story of Adam and Eve. The backlash to the program from Catholic leaders such as Reverend Dr. Maurice Sheehy and organizations like the Legion of Decency, The National Council of Catholic Women, the League of Decency and others pushed the FCC to respond through censorship.

Attempts to use the FCC

- Many who perceived the FCC's regulatory policies how they wished attempted to force the FCC to act then pushed regulations when the FCC did not act as a tool for censorship.
- *House Representative William P. Connery*
 - On January 15th, 1936, Representative Connery submitted the letters and evidence he exchanged with the FCC regarding the March 21st broadcast on the WJZ radio station. The program was sponsored by the Mexican Government and included "En Elogio de Silves", a Spanish song with references to nudity. Connery failed to make the FCC act, so he brought his protest to the government in an unsuccessful attempt to start an investigation into the FCC.
- *Senator Clyde L. Herring:*
 - In 1938 Senator Herring of Iowa petitioned to "clean up radio" with the instatement of a federal censorship. Radio had become a political issue by the time Senator Herring made this claim, but support quickly dwindled. He dropped the idea by 1939, and he was not elected for a second term.

Broadcaster Censorship

§ Broadcaster motivations:

1. To avoid penalization from the federal government.
2. To appeal to the largest audience possible which they believed to be the middle class and Whites.
3. To dodge criticism from decency activists.

§ The "Bleep" sound effect originated from radio with the first known version of this type of censorship being created in 1921 following the "Olga Petrova Incident".

§ Black voices were kept off the air in many ways including: not broadcasting their music, using a white artist in place of a black artist, or portraying Black Americans through blackface performances. (ex. "Amos N' Andy").

§ Minority voices like Bessie Smith and genres like Dirty Blues were rare on the radio due to racist hegemony and the explicit nature of dirty blues. Nevertheless, non-white and queer artists as well as songs from the genre persisted.

§ "Hesitation Blues" is a song from the early 20th century that, depending on the singer, had very explicit lyrics and insinuations. "Hesitation Blues" did play on the radio, but the versions that received radio time would have been heavily edited to pass censors.

§ Toni Jackson, a renowned pianist and singer/songwriter in the 1910s and 1920s, wrote "Pretty Baby" a song about his male lover. Gus Kahn, partnered with Jackson to record the song, but fundamentally altered the song to remove any references to homosexuality.

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