On August 11, 1967, Dr. Martin Luther King delivered the keynote address to the annual convention of the National Association of Television and Radio Announcers (NATRA). This organization, which originated as a social club for black radio personalities, by the mid-1960s had become an organization dedicated to asserting greater black influence in the radio industry. In opening this speech, which he entitled “Transforming Neighborhoods into Brotherhoods,” King praised the assembled African American radio personalities for their important roles as civic leaders. “For better or worse, you are the opinion makers in the community…[even though the establishment] has not been ready to acknowledge all of the positive features which grow out of your contributions to the community.” He also credited black radio for creating a powerful cultural bridge between black and white youth through music and dance. “You introduced youth to the music and created the language of soul.”

The historiography of the Civil Rights Movement traditionally has emphasized the role that television played in the struggle. Obviously, the emergence of television was a catalyst for energizing popular and political support for the struggle. However, even as the mainstream came to increasingly rely on television for information that shaped new political and social agendas, the black community became increasingly dependent on radio as its primary source of information. Well into the 1960s, most African American families in the South did not own a television, but over 90 percent owned a radio. While in the North, more families owned televisions, in both regions black orientated radio was the main source of news and
entertainment. As Dr. King stated in his NATRA speech, African Americans were “almost totally dependent on radio as their means of relating to society at large. They do not read newspapers…. Television speaks not to their needs but to upper-middle class America.”3 Black disc jockeys such as Jack the Rapper of WERD in Atlanta, Paul White of WEDR in Birmingham; Georgie Woods and Mary Mason of WHAT in Philadelphia; Larry Dean Faulkner and Martha “Jean the Queen” Steinberg of WHBC in Detroit; Pervis Spann, Herb Kent, and Wesley South of WVON in Chicago and the Magnificent Montague of KGFJ in Los Angeles were not just spinning the latest soul and R&B hits; they were civil rights activists who helped organize fund raisers and voter education projects, broadcasted key information about the marches and protests, and then joined in when they were off the air. These radio personalities were extremely important influences on the Civil Rights Movement as a whole, and I think their contributions have not been paid the attention that they deserve.

I came to this NEH Institute having just read Brian Ward’s *Radio and the Struggle for Civil Rights in the South*—a book that explores the connections between radio, race relations, civil rights, and black power movements in the South. As a Chicago-area teacher and student of the Civil Rights Movement, for a long time I have been interested in the freedom struggles that took place in northern cities during the 1960s. I therefore viewed this NEH Institute as a great opportunity to explore how black radio and disc jockeys shaped the northern movement. So as the thirty of us studied how African Americans transformed popular music and popular culture between 1959 and 1975, I focused my research on how black stations emerged as the grapevine that not only broadcasted the songs and the latest news, but also transmitted the many ideological forces that shaped the Civil Rights Movement. As I investigated the parallels between the evolution of black-orientated radio during the 1960s and early 1970s and the trajectory of the
movement itself, I came to see this medium as the core institution of the African American community.

In this role, black orientated radio was also the arena where many of the ideological tensions and conflicts within the movement played out. Dr. King, for example, arrived at the NATRA conference at a time when a battle was brewing between those who continued to support integrationist efforts in the industry and those who embraced the emerging ideology of black power and called for reparations for past exploitation. The very next year at the conference, violence broke out as black power militants and thugs associated with organized crime and the nightclub scene attacked NATRA leaders and white record executives who had earlier in the year made a deal to establish a black school of broadcasting. Black ownership was naturally a major issue for the organization. While the number of stations that aimed all of their programming at the African American audience had expanded from one in 1947 to 528 by 1969, by the end of the decade only a handful of the nation’s 7,500 radio stations were black owned.⁴ Although the situation did improve moderately during the 1970s, by the end of the decade, African Americans still owned fewer than 2 percent of the nation’s radio stations.⁵

Since the number of outlets for African American programming was limited, those that did emerge in the 1960s were extremely influential. This power can obviously be analyzed in economic terms. In the late 1950s, the advertising industry finally began to tap into the African American market primarily through radio. By 1970, it was expected that the nation’s 22 million African Americans would be spending $45 billion annually.⁶ As Kathy M. Newman argues, “black radio, though it was a part of corporate America’s exploitation of the black consumer, had some positive effects within black culture and black consciousness.”⁷ Radio advertising empowered African Americans to believe they had the right and the means to achieve the
American dream. The space that was created through this marketplace, therefore, inspired blacks to change segregation into congregation. This segregation/congregation dialectic was introduced by historian Earl Lewis as a way to distinguish between making choices (free will) and the imposition of another’s will. By titling his NATRA speech “Changing Neighborhoods into Brotherhoods,” King seems to be tapping into that same dialectic. But even before King’s name became a household word, radio had inspired activists to think about using the marketplace as a realm of protest. Still, this congregation was not a homogeneous one. Many middle class African Americans were alienated by the increasing programming and advertising attention directed toward the working class. The urban slang of the black disc jockey also offended many listeners as well.

Black orientated radio nevertheless flourished in the 1960s largely because it tapped the newly “discovered” African American market. The growth of television, which targeted middle class white audiences, and the decline of network radio also provided the space for black-orientated radio to grow, according to Ward. The sources that I encountered through my research revealed the connections between these social and economic forces. However, the one issue I found to be the most intriguing was the role of the black disc jockey, whose numbers exceeded 1000 even by 1960. As fundraisers, promoters, organizers, and in effect, community griots, they were the vital links that connected the grassroots elements of the Civil Rights Movement. The songs they spun and the coded and editorial messages they relayed between those songs inspired and rallied their listeners. King might have been exaggerating when he told the NATRA disc jockeys that they had performed a cultural conquest that “surpasses even Alexander the Great and the culture of classical Greece,” but his sentiment was surely genuine as he reflected upon the cultural changes he was witnessing.
In his time, King obviously understood the importance of the black disc jockeys to the Civil Rights Movement, but today their legacy has largely been neglected. Recent memoirs have told some great stories, like that of the Magnificent Montague who was scapegoated and eventually lost his job at KGFJ after his “Burn Baby, Burn” mantra, which he used to drum up enthusiasm for the latest soul record, was co-opted by the Watts rioters in 1965 even as he tried to urge peace and restraint over the airwaves. However, I haven’t encountered enough historical treatments of their complex roles in the freedom struggles that took place in northern cities. The one comprehensive history I did come across, William Barlow’s *Voice Over: The Making of Black Radio*, focuses on the disc jockeys of the 1950s.\(^\text{12}\) Maybe this neglect can be attributed to television’s emergence as the preeminent medium for cultural transmission. But the impact of radio should not be overshadowed, especially since radio still plays an integral role in black communities across the nation. While it might be very difficult for historians to literally release the voices and broadcasts of these disc jockeys from the dusty archives in the same way producers have re-mastered and re-released the jazz and soul music of the era, we still need to find ways to revisit and disseminate their impact. The careers of these radio personalities have often spanned decades, and their political and social influence continues to shape their respective communities. This is particularly true in Chicago, where WVON has become the city’s primary black-orientated radio station and veteran disc jockeys like Pervis Spann and Herb Kent are still broadcasting and are still active in Chicago’s African American community.

So in the coming months, I plan to focus my research on the role that black radio played in the Chicago Freedom Movement (CFM) of the mid-1960s and the election of Harold Washington as Chicago’s first African American mayor in 1983. This topic seems to offer some very fertile ground for research, writing, and curriculum development, and there are nearby
resources to tap into. Back in the mid-1990s, the Smithsonian Institution produced *Black Radio: Telling It Like It Was*, a thirteen-part series about the role of radio in transforming the black community in the twentieth century. This collection, which contains hundreds of hours of interviews with 150 disc jockeys, is currently being housed at Indiana University. This fall I plan to make the journey down to Bloomington to dive into these archives. I also hope to contact and interview Spann and Kent and the veterans of the CFM and the Washington campaign.

This NEH Institute has focused on how jazz and black dance music between 1959 and 1975 transformed American popular culture. The issues and questions that we engaged with have led me into the world of black radio of the 1960s. I hope my immersion in this world will continue to be as rewarding and fruitful as what I experienced this summer.

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3 King, “Transforming Neighborhoods into Brotherhoods.”


7 Newman, 117.


9 Ward, 8.

10 Newman, 127.

11 King, “Transforming Neighborhoods into Brotherhoods.”