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# MEDIA AND MOBILIZATION: THE CASE OF RADIO AND SOUTHERN TEXTILE WORKER INSURGENCY, 1929 TO 1934

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*Collective action rests, in part, on group identity and political opportunity. Just how group identity is manifested and perceptions of political opportunity are altered, however, remain unclear, particularly in the case of a geographically dispersed population. An often overlooked mechanism is media technology. This article analyzes an important yet underexamined instance of worker mobilization in the United States: the southern textile strike campaigns of 1929 to 1934 during which more than 400,000 workers walked off their jobs. Using historical data on textile manufacturing concentration and strike activity, FCC data on radio station foundings, and analyses of political content and song lyrics, the authors show that the geographic proximity of radio stations to the “textile belt” and the messages aired shaped workers’ sense of collective experience and political opportunity: Walk-outs and strike spillover across mill towns resulted. The implications of the analyses for social movement theory generally, and for the understanding of how media can enable or constrain collective struggle, are discussed.*

**B**ETWEEN 1929 and 1934, the U.S. South experienced a truly remarkable moment in labor history. Estimates suggest that approximately half a million southern textile mill workers walked off the job during this period, culminating in the General Textile Workers Strike of 1934. Interestingly, this mobilization occurred with little organization by labor unions and in the face of coercive paternalistic practices and state-

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sponsored violence (Griffith 1988; Hall et al. 1987; McLaurin 1971).

A pivotal moment in U.S. labor history, the movement’s eventual defeat has had consequences for labor practices, organizing efforts, economic development, and persistent poverty and inequality in the U.S. South up to the current day (Roscigno and Kimble 1995). Yet, little sociological attention has been devoted to this instance of southern worker unrest. Indeed, much of the research on worker insurgency overlooks the South or treats it as a union-resistant region (Cornfield and Leners 1989). How is it that nearly

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half a million workers, most of whom were geographically isolated in rural mill towns, collectively mobilized in the face of local elite repression? Were collective identity and political opportunity—prerequisites to collective action according to social movement theorists—achieved and, if so, through what mechanism? What networking resource was at the disposal of workers that fostered strike spillover from one mill town to the next?

We extend the literature on collective behavior and social movements, labor insurgency, and class consciousness by addressing these questions. We first embed our analysis in the historical specifics, and then in collective identity (e.g., Melluci 1985; Taylor and Whittier 1992) and political opportunity (e.g., Jenkins 1985; McAdam 1983) frameworks of collective action. We argue that insights from these literatures can be effectively integrated by focusing on a unique and key historical event—the advent of radio.

### **BACKGROUND: SOUTHERN TEXTILE WORKER INSURGENCY, 1929 TO 1934**

In 1921, southern cotton-producing states produced 54 percent of the nation's total yardage of woven cotton goods. This yield increased to 67 percent by 1927, partly the result of the relocation of textile manufacturing operations from the North to the South. This regional shift occurred because cheap labor was abundant in the South and union activity was virtually nonexistent: Southern Chambers of Commerce focused on these facts when enticing northern mill owners to move south. Indeed, wages in southern mills were approximately one-third of those in the North, even after controlling for the cost of living. In addition, southern mill workers worked longer hours (Yellen 1936).

Workers typically lived in villages under the control of mill owners. Whole families labored together for the sake of subsistence, yet housing, food, and medical care remained substandard in many instances (Gellhorn 1933; Hall et al. 1987). Some mill owners, employing paternalistic policies to stabilize their workforces, offered company-sponsored social programs, housing, medical services, credit at the company store, and

religious services to workers. These company programs failed, however, to offset low wages and instead came to be seen as an important mechanism of labor control and coercion (Leiter, Schulman, and Zingraff 1991). Exorbitant interest rates were charged at mill stores, ministers and doctors were on the company payroll, and workers who were not performing to the company standard or who got out of line risked losing their homes (Cornfield and Leners 1989; Griffith 1988; McLaurin 1971; Pope 1942). Given such conditions, worker resistance eventually emerged.

Strikes broke out in large numbers in 1929; the main grievances were working conditions, wages, and hours. On March 12, 1929, 500 women walked out of the inspection department at the American Ganzstoff Corporation in Elizabethton, Tennessee. The following day, 3,000 more workers walked out demanding higher pay. Later that week, 2,000 workers walked out of the neighboring Bemberg plant in Gastonia, North Carolina making the same demands. Strikes not immediately related to those in Gastonia and Elizabethton occurred soon afterward in South Carolina: In late March, 800 workers walked out at Ware Shoals Manufacturing Company, and 1,250 workers walked out of the New England Southern plant in Pelzer. Within three weeks, 8,000 workers had walked out of 15 plants in the Piedmont area of South Carolina. Strikes followed shortly thereafter in the North Carolina towns of Pineville, Forest City, Lexington, Bessemer City, Draper, and Charlotte (Hall et al. 1987; Yellen 1936).

Local newspapers tended to be connected to traditional economic interests, such as textiles, and thus took a vehement and aggressive stance against this early wave of worker protest. Indeed, mill owners and local newspapers often worked hand in hand to sway public opinion away from strikers by appealing to anti-Communist sentiments, despite the fact that few workers had such affiliations. Most, in fact, were simply protesting unfair conditions rather than defending or fighting for a broader ideological stance (Salmond 1995). Perhaps most well-known in this regard were the editorials published in the *Gastonia Daily Gazette* entitled "A Deep Laid Scheme" and "Red

Russianism Lifts its Gory Hands Right Here in Gastonia," both of which were published during the infamous Loray Mill Strike of 1929. Such editorials and the red-scare rhetoric they espoused, which continued through the mid-1930s, created public anger toward strikers, caused workers to question their own national and religious loyalties, and had long-term consequences for southern attitudes toward organized labor (Billings 1990; Nolan and Jones 1976; Salmond 1995; Simon 1998).<sup>1</sup> Yet poor conditions persisted into the 1930s, and strikes again emerged.

By June of 1933, newly elected President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed a bill intended to alleviate the plight of overworked millhands—the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA). This bill seemingly gave mill workers the right to push for decent hours and working conditions through collective bargaining. Section 7a of the Textile Code called for a minimum wage, a 40-hour work week, and prohibited child labor. This effort was part of the newly formed National Recovery Administration (NRA). Both

Roosevelt and the head of the NRA, Hugh S. Johnson, were opposed to strikes as a means of solving disputes between workers and mill owners. Instead, they favored controlling work hours and child labor in an effort to limit production, drive up profits for mill owners, and improve economic conditions for workers through the "trickle-down" of profits (Hall et al. 1987; Hodges 1986).

Prices, sales, and employment increased to the highest level in five years by late summer, 1933, but by fall this prosperity soured. The Depression reached its worst period in the winter of 1933–1934, and mill owners, while seemingly supportive of the cooperative message in Section 7a, began to practice old strategies of oppression or in some cases instituted new ones. The "stretch-out," for instance, was used to circumvent laws limiting working hours. This was the workers' term for the cumulative changes that "set them tending machines 'by the acre,' filled every pore in the working day, and robbed them of control over the pace and method of production" (Hall et al. 1987: 211). Spinners, mostly women, were often stretched from 24 to 48 looms, and then from 48 to 96, "without a commensurate increase in pay, often with no increase whatsoever, or even an actual decrease" (Yellen 1936:299).<sup>2</sup> Thus, workers found themselves working as much in the new eight-hour shift as they had in shifts lasting two to four hours longer. Further, by enabling industry to curtail production when mills were producing sufficient product through "short time," the NIRA Textile Code inadvertently led to a surplus of goods and higher rates of unemployment (Tullos 1989). In short, mill owners saw the laws enacted under the NIRA as bothersome but easy to manipulate (Wood 1986).

Unions in the coal mining industry jumped at the chance to take advantage of the NIRA. Yet, in the textile industry, the United Textile Workers (UTW) did not institute a unionization drive (Tippett 1931). Indeed, it

<sup>1</sup> Other print communications, such as pamphlets, labor-oriented newspapers, and underground newspapers did little to foster these strikes. In a few cases, National Textile Workers Union (NTWU) pamphlets were distributed, but only after the strike had already begun; and they reduced strike support among workers because of their emphasis on promoting racial and gender equality in wages. Similarly, certain strikes, such as those in Gastonia in 1929, received coverage in the *Communist Daily Worker*, despite little if any striker affiliation with the Communist Party. This coverage, rather than fostering greater movement cohesion or participation, was used by local papers to criticize strikers and had the effect of reducing support (Salmond 1995). One exception to this generally negative impact of print media was the *Augusta Labor Review*, a small pro-labor paper in the somewhat isolated Horse Creek Valley of South Carolina. This newspaper seems to have had a positive impact on strikes in that area, perhaps because its founder and editor, Paul W. Fuller, a Methodist Episcopal minister, integrated Christian and patriotic discourse and symbolism into the presentation of worker grievances. Thus, the newspaper's message and related worker actions were less easily interpreted or attacked as being Communist-oriented by the local power structure (Simon 1998).

<sup>2</sup> A 1929 South Carolina House of Representatives committee found that in one South Carolina mill, a force of five men, each paid \$23 per week, was reduced to three men at \$20.23 per week; at another mill, a weaver who had operated 24 looms at \$18.91 per week was stretched to 100 looms for \$24 a week (Yellen 1936).

had fewer than 10 paid organizers in the South at that time and represented only a small fraction of the entire mill work force (Hodges 1986). According to historical accounts, this was mostly due to a lack of organizational resources and a vast, hard-to-cover rural area. Nonetheless, southern mill workers walked off their jobs, formed local unions, and organized against unfair labor practices. According to Hall et. al (1987):

[The UTW] launched no Piedmont organizing campaign. Agents did not throng to the southern field. Yet within less than a month after passage of the act, union locals had reportedly sprung to life in 75 percent of South Carolina's mills. From an estimated 40,000 in September 1933, UTW Membership leaped to 279,000 by August 1934. To the shock of labor leaders, government officials, and businessmen alike, southern workers began "organizing just as fast as we can." (P. 304)

Strike activity intensified throughout the South in 1934. On February 12, 1934, a strike broke out at K. S. Tanners Stonecutter Mills in Spindale, North Carolina. Five months later, on July 14, a strike occurred in Guntersville, Alabama, and wildcat strikes soon rolled across that state involving 20,000 workers. On Labor Day, many workers in North Carolina and South Carolina, states that did not observe the holiday, refused to come to work. Newspapers reported 400,000 workers on strike by September 14—the largest strike in American history. What prompted workers across dispersed mill villages to strike despite the lack of clear-cut union support or organization?

### **COLLECTIVE IDENTITY AND POLITICAL OPPORTUNITY FRAMEWORKS**

Collective identity and political opportunity perspectives offer a starting point for explaining how collective behavior was manifested in the case of southern textiles. While both perspectives deal with the development of collective action and the preconditions for insurgency, their foci differ.

*Collective identity theorists* emphasize ideological, normative, and cultural processes that induce individual participation in collective action and ensure social solidarity,

even in the face of harsh countermobilization. These researchers also argue that alternative belief structures provide movement participants with a structure of nonmaterial rewards, not necessarily tied to movement success (Epstein 1990; J. Gamson 1995; W. Gamson 1992a; Melucci 1985; Taylor and Whittier 1992). An alternative belief structure and collective identity have been important in a variety of struggles, including those promoting racial justice (Morris 1984; Nagel 1994; Stotik, Shriner, and Cable 1994), women's rights (Mathews 1982; Meyer and Whittier 1994; Taylor and Whittier 1992), and class-based politics (Fantasia 1988; Hodson, Ziegler, and Bump 1987). Fantasia (1988) makes this focus explicit in relation to working-class politics and highlights the importance of "cultures of solidarity," defining them as "cultural formations that arise in conflict, creating and sustaining solidarity in opposition to the dominant structure" (p. 19).

Discussions of collective identity resonate with classical and contemporary theoretical ideas pertaining to "class consciousness" and when it may emerge. Indeed, "the most important blank spots in the theory of class concern the processes whereby 'economic classes' become 'social classes'" (Giddens 1982:157). Mann (1973) conceives of class consciousness as a complex process, occurring in stages, that is often curbed by dominant ideologies, class ambiguities, concessions by elites, or outright defeat. Mann's stages include (1) class identity, whereby one defines oneself as working class; (2) class opposition, whereby one perceives capitalists and their agents as opponents; (3) class totality, whereby class identity and opposition define the total of one's social situation and society as a whole; and (4) conceiving of an alternative. During this final stage, Mann continues, an "explosive potential" may emerge and create either a "conflict consciousness," which aims to alleviate the immediate problem, or a more "revolutionary consciousness," wherein the needed change involves overall systemic reorganization (also see Giddens 1982).<sup>3</sup> Given the

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<sup>3</sup> Many factors can influence the progression of class consciousness through the stages described by Mann (1973), including mobility closure, the division of labor within economic en-

correct progression, the delegitimization of existing ideology, and the existence of an alternative interpretational frame, class consciousness will emerge (Della Fave 1980, 1986; Oliver and Johnston 1999).

In contrast to identity theorists and those dealing explicitly with class consciousness, *political opportunity theorists* focus on the political context in which groups are embedded and the shifting levels of opportunity that emerge across time and place. The likelihood of mobilization and the degree of leverage exerted by insurgents, it is argued, will be heightened in situations in which elites are divided in their defense of the existing order (Gamson and Meyer 1992; Jenkins 1985; Jenkins and Perrow 1977; McAdam 1982; Pichardo 1995; Tilly 1976). When elites are coordinated, in contrast, the reproduction of dominant relations is more likely, as is countermobilization against those engaging in insurgent action (Lachmann 1990; Tomaskovic-Devey and Roscigno 1996). McAdam (1983) emphasizes such countermobilization in his analysis of elite response to tactics implemented by civil rights activists during the 1960s. Barkan (1984) and James (1988) highlight the role of other actors in the civil rights struggle—namely the southern racial state, which constrained movement participants, and the federal government, which eventually intervened on behalf of participants.

Griffin, Wallace, and Rubin (1986) and Montgomery (1987) stress themes of elite response to labor organization in their analyses of capitalist countermobilization during the 1930s and 1940s. Coercion and control through paternalism proved effective as a preventive strategy (Leiter et al. 1991; McLaurin 1971). More obvious were efforts of capital to divide workers racially, to curtail working-class mobilization with subversive activities and violence, and to control labor organization and labor practices through manipulation of the state and state policy (see C. Brown and Boswell 1995; Brueggeman and Boswell 1998; Kimeldorf 1999; Roscigno and Kimble 1995; Wood 1986).

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terprises, authority relationships, patterns of resource distribution, geographic dispersion, and patterns of institutional power (see Blau 1977; Dahrendorf 1959; Giddens 1982; Parkin 1979).

For collective identity theorists then, the central task is to explain how interpretation is altered, collective identity manifested, and solidarity maintained. For political opportunity theorists, the focus is on the degree of elite unity, elite countermobilization, and the extent to which these dimensions of political opportunity enable or constrain the collective expression of grievances in a given historical context. Each perspective, however, has problems when applied to Southern textile worker mobilization. How would collective identity theory explain the manifestation of solidarity across this geographically dispersed textile mill population? What was the mechanism through which structural political opportunity, if it existed, translated into and shaped political perceptions and the degree of efficacy among mill workers? We believe that media technology offers a bridge between these two perspectives.

## MEDIA AND MOBILIZATION

How were mill worker identity and sense of political opportunity manifested in the 1920s and 1930s despite the geographically dispersed nature of mill towns? This question is integral to those interested in the diffusion of collective action (Oliver 1989; Olzak 1992; Rogers 1995; Soule 1997; Soule and Zylan 1997). Such spatial “spillover” requires some form of network structure through which information is communicated and shared (Fantasia 1988; Morris 1984; Oberschall 1989). Assuming nonparticipants have the same structural relation to the network as social movement participants, non-participants become potential adopters (Myers 1998; Strang and Meyer 1993).

While information networks may include family, friendship, or transportation ties, the media may be particularly important for information flow across geographically dispersed populations (W. Gamson 1995; Kahan 1999; Oberschall 1989; Spilerman 1970). Myers (1998, 2000), in his analyses of racial rioting, 1964–1971, characterizes this potential influence as a concentric area around the network origin defined by the range of the medium’s distribution, rather than as lines connecting individuals. This is an important theoretical extension of previ-

ous perspectives because it offers a potential mechanism through which group consciousness and perceptions of opportunity may be altered across geographic space.

To assert the media's influence requires specifying the structural and instrumental ways in which it can shape collective action across a dispersed population. On the structural end, the introduction of new media may provide opportunities not directly associated with collective action, but which alter the leverage and/or autonomy of subgroups. This appears to be true in the case of radio station foundings in the South, which had the unintended consequence of creating a relatively autonomous community of musicians, many of whom were ex-mill workers, who traveled from mill town to mill town and radio station to radio station. This group alone, we suggest, represented an important conduit for information flow among mill towns.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, indirect network ties may be as important to social movement diffusion as direct links (Soule 1997).

Media, including the radio, can be more directly influential when it shapes prospective movement participants' perceptions of political opportunity. It is here—in drawing a distinction between political opportunity at a structural level and perceived political opportunity among potential insurgents, and specifying the mechanism(s) through which perceived opportunity may be altered—that political opportunity theory has been limited (Kurzman 1996; McAdam 1982; Tarrow 1988). By disseminating information geographically, media can mold the political perceptions of a dispersed population (Kahan 1999). This was the case with radio and its establishment in the U.S. South. For the first time in U.S. history, a president spoke over this medium to southern workers in the format of "fireside chats," during which a national political commitment to the plight of workers and workers' right to collectively organize was communicated despite local elite repression (R. Brown 1998; Hall et al. 1987).

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<sup>4</sup>This resonates with Gurlach's (1999) discussion of "traveling evangelists." By carrying messages, spreading ideology, and building personal relationships across the network, they play a role in social movement links and spatial diffusion.

Media can also be instrumental by altering workers' sense of collective experience and solidarity. Historically, one of the most obvious means through which group identity has been manifested and shared is through language generally, and music specifically (Eyerman and Jamison 1998). Language and vocabularies of motive, of which music lyrics are no exception, are important facts in social action not reducible to individual social psychology. Rather, verbalization, through speech or song, is always conversational and dynamic, often political, and potentially consciousness-altering (Flacks 1999; W. Gamson 1992b; Goffman 1981; Licherman 1999; Mills 1939, 1940). As such, "the language of situations as given must be considered a valuable portion of the data to be interpreted and related to their conditions" (Mills 1940:913).

Although consistent with classical theory's interest in culture and more recent efforts to develop social movement theory's emphasis on cultural processes (Melucci 1985; Taylor and Whittier 1992), it is notable that so few analyses systematically consider music as a component of the collective action repertoire or as a form of discourse through which collective identity is fostered and movement solidarity is achieved. In a study of American left-wing music, Denisoff (1972) distinguishes between songs that are rhetorical, highlighting discontent, and songs that aimed at recruitment and solidarity maintenance during active, collective protest (also see Flacks 1999; McLaurin and Peterson 1992). Eyerman and Jamison (1998) concur and suggest that the articulation of identity through music is central to movement formation. Indeed, music not only adds an authentic air to the plea for social action because of its emotional appeal (Pratt 1990), but it also builds and reinforces identity and group commitment through ritual and the act of singing collectively (Flacks 1999).<sup>5</sup> In the southern case, the folk

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<sup>5</sup>Drawing from symbolic interactionism, Flacks (1999) suggests that singing is a form of role playing, requiring one to take the identity articulated in the song, at least momentarily. This process may be further reinforced by collective singing, a symbolic gesture whereby participants demonstrate membership in, and commitment to, the group.

tradition of storytelling through music has a long and important history (Malone 1979).<sup>6</sup> Thus, we expect to find that music, and its dissemination via radio and ex-mill worker musicians, was an influential part of the social movement repertoire for southern textile workers.

## DATA

We draw our data from a number of sources. Data on radio station foundings in the South prior to 1935 were gathered from the archives of the Federal Communication Commission (FCC). These records provide the day, month, and year of each radio station founding, along with the radio station name, ownership, and the city in which it operated. Coupling FCC data with data on textile mill concentration, derived from Clark's Directory of Southern Textile Mills (1929) and Davidson's Textile Blue Book (1935), and data on strike activity drawn from various sources,<sup>7</sup> allows us to address the most important empirical question—was radio spatially proximate enough to textile mills to have played a part in the insurgency that occurred? This data is supplemented with historical evidence on radio ownership among mill workers.

<sup>6</sup> Of course, music has been important for other labor insurgencies in the United States, back to the classical industrial ballads by Joe Hill. Unfortunately, and despite the existence of collections of songs of insurgency across a variety of industries (see Greenway 1956; Hille 1948; Lieberman 1989; Lomax 1960; Lomax, Guthrie, and Seeger 1967), the link between music, social processes, and mobilization has, with few exceptions (e.g., McLaurin and Peterson 1992), received little systematic attention among sociologists.

<sup>7</sup> Complete strike data for the U.S. South during the early 1930s is difficult to find, as no systematic records for the region were kept. We did, however, compile a relatively extensive list of strike activity drawing from Hall et al. (1987), Nolan and Jones (1976), Salmond (1995), Simon (1998), and Yellen (1936). While our list and the resulting map of strike activity that follow undoubtedly capture the general concentration of strike events and the largest, most pronounced strikes in the region between 1929 and 1934, we suspect that some small, less visible strikes may be missing from our data.

Along with establishing the spatial link between mill concentration, radio station foundings, and strike activity is the need to specify and analyze *how radio was influential*. Here, we rely on historical data pertaining to the impact of politically oriented broadcasts, archival and interview data on ex-mill worker musicians during the period in question, and on content analyses of music lyrics. Political data are drawn from historical accounts and the archives of the New Deal Network Library and Franklin D. Roosevelt Library. We gathered information on musicians and songs dealing with southern textile mills, textile mill town life, and textile worker insurgency from 1929 to 1934 from the Archie Green Papers of the Southern Folk Life Collection at the University of North Carolina Archives and a variety of other sources.<sup>8</sup> The resulting collection of 35 songs represents the most comprehensive compilation of Southern textile songs of which we are aware.<sup>9</sup>

## ANALYTIC STRATEGY AND RESULTS

We first examine radio station foundings in the South and the proximity of these stations

<sup>8</sup> These sources include, but are not limited to, *American Folksongs of Protest* (Greenway 1953), *The People's Song Book* (Hille 1948), *Folk Songs of North America* (Lomax 1960), *Hard Hitting Songs for Hard-Hit People* (Lomax et al. 1967), *American Industrial Ballads* (Seeger 1992), *Babies in the Mill* (Dixon 1998), and interviews undertaken by the authors.

<sup>9</sup> We limited our sample of songs to those emanating from the South that were recorded, sung, played, or transcribed prior to 1935. Ideally, we would also have radio "play lists" for the time period in question. Unfortunately, given the newness of radio at the time, such records were not kept. What we do know, given the historical literature and interviews we undertook with surviving mill musicians and mill workers, is that many of the musicians who wrote and sang mill-related songs traveled from radio station to radio station to play, sang some of these songs during live radio shows, and spent significant time with those residing in the mill towns (Malone 1968; Wiggins 1987). This suggests that the impact of radio on collective identity may have been direct through the playing of mill songs, or indirect through the creation of this autonomous group of

to textile mills and mill towns where the most pronounced strikes of 1929–1934 occurred. Spatial patterns are analyzed by geographical mapping. These visual representations show whether radio was a viable mechanism through which perceptions of political opportunity could have been altered and collective identity manifested. Supplementary quantitative analyses of the population of Southern mill towns ( $N = 542$ ), whether a strike occurred, and whether there was a radio station within the city limits or near to the city, help us further establish the link between radio stations and actual strike events.

The analysis then focuses on transmission content, directly or indirectly via radio, and its implications for perceptions of political opportunity and collective identity. For analyses of political content, we outline a major shift in political structure and opportunity during the time period in question—that is, Roosevelt's New Deal. We then draw from archival sources to describe the role radio played in communicating this new context to southern mill workers, magnifying their perceptions of opportunity and offering legitimacy to their experiences and claims of injustice at the hands of mill owners.

Consistent with Hodson's (1999) recommendation for systematically analyzing qualitative content data and converting it into quantitative and descriptive summary statistics, we created a coding scheme for analyzing music lyrics. Both authors coded each of the 35 songs along various dimensions, reported in Tables 2, 3, and 4. Inter-coder reliability was approximately 91 percent. In cases of disagreement, we went back to the original source to rectify the difference. Our analysis of music lyrics employs a dichotomy similar to Denisoff's (1972), distinguishing between songs focusing on discontent and collective experience ( $N = 21$ ) and songs dealing with protest ( $N = 14$ ).<sup>10</sup> For songs of

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musicians who drew some of their songs from workers and shared these songs across communities.

<sup>10</sup> Music probably serves a different function in each context. Prior to mobilization, music shapes collective experience, group-building, and interpretive understanding. Thereafter, the goal is solidarity maintenance and description of potential countermobilization in the face of active protest (Flacks 1999).

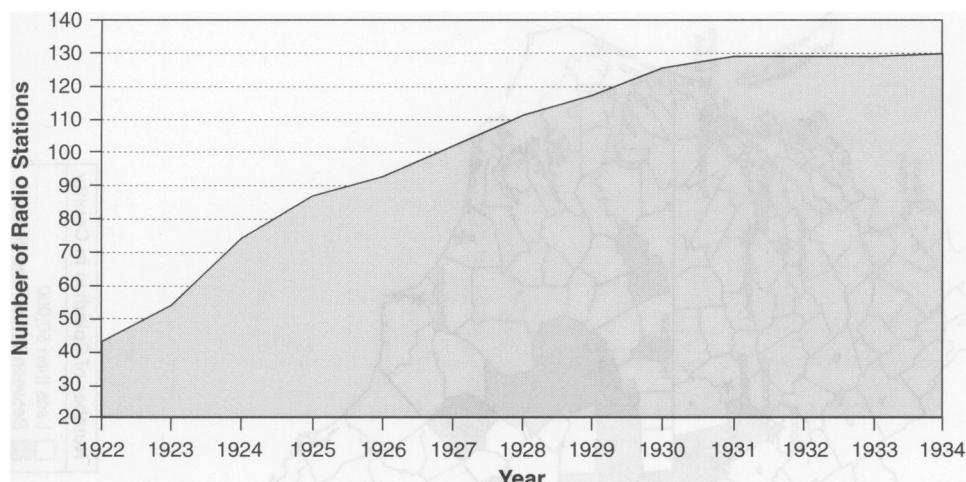
discontent, we report frequency breakdowns of the problems workers faced and the interpretation of causes. For songs of protest, we also use frequency breakdowns but focus on the primary intent of the song and the type of elite countermobilization described, if any. We supplement these summary statistics throughout with discussion of the musicians and illustrative lyrics.

#### **RADIO STATION FOUNDINGS, PROXIMITY TO TEXTILE MILLS, AND STRIKE ACTIVITY**

Radio quickly found its way into the U.S. South in 1922, when on February 3, the first license was granted to WGH in Montgomery, Alabama. Within one month, stations were founded in Charlotte, Memphis, Atlanta, Charleston, Richmond, and Morganton. Interest in this new medium was intense, to say the least, as 43 operating licenses were granted to various stations across the South by the end of that year.

Early ownership patterns in the South mirrored those in the country as a whole, with heavy reliance on department stores, insurance companies, universities, amateurs, and major electronics manufacturers (e.g., General Electric, Westinghouse, etc.) who had links to the newly emerging recording industry (e.g., RCA/Victor) (Garafalo 1997). Our examination of FCC archival records indicates that traditional industries in the South (e.g., agriculture and textiles) played little or no role, while colleges, music companies, battery companies, and relatively new industries, such as automobile and insurance dealers, did. Take, for example, station WBT in Charlotte and station WRBU in Gastonia, North Carolina. Although located near textile mills, mill owners apparently had no involvement or control in either station. Rather, WBT was owned by C. C. Coddington, an entrepreneur and Buick dealer, while WRBU was owned by A. J. Kirby Music Company.

Two important political issues emerged during the early years of radio. The first had to do with the nature of broadcasts, and debates over public versus commercial interests. Despite considerable discussion, little federal intervention occurred until the mid to late 1930s, when the Communications Act of 1934 created the FCC. Even then, however, regulation and oversight lagged behind



**Figure 1. Number of Radio Stations in the Southern States of Alabama, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia, 1922 to 1934**

Source: FCC Archives.

the new, developing technology (Bittner 1982; Garafalo 1997). Thus, stations were relatively free to broadcast what they wanted. Most stations depended on the programming of NBC and CBS, while allocating between one and three hours a day to programming and live shows that catered to the specific interests of local populations (Summers 1958). In the South, for instance, “depending on the location, one could usually begin the day or spend the noon hour listening to a program of hillbilly, Cajun, blues, or gospel music” (Malone 1979:71).

The other issue had to do with transmission range. This concern was addressed by the Radio Act of 1927, which limited the power of most stations in order to reduce interference among stations sharing the same frequency (Hogan [1930] 1971). Although initially a problem in the South, given its few stations and the inability of broadcasts to reach rural populations, this was partially remedied by the increase in foundings in the late 1920s and into the 1930s. Figure 1 displays the increase in number of stations during this time period. The increase between 1922 and 1930 was significant, and large Southern cities like Atlanta, Memphis, and Nashville boasted as many as five stations. Small stations were also established, and they found a niche in rural towns with respectable population concentrations (Hall et al. 1987). By 1931, foundings tapered off

because of increased competition and market saturation.

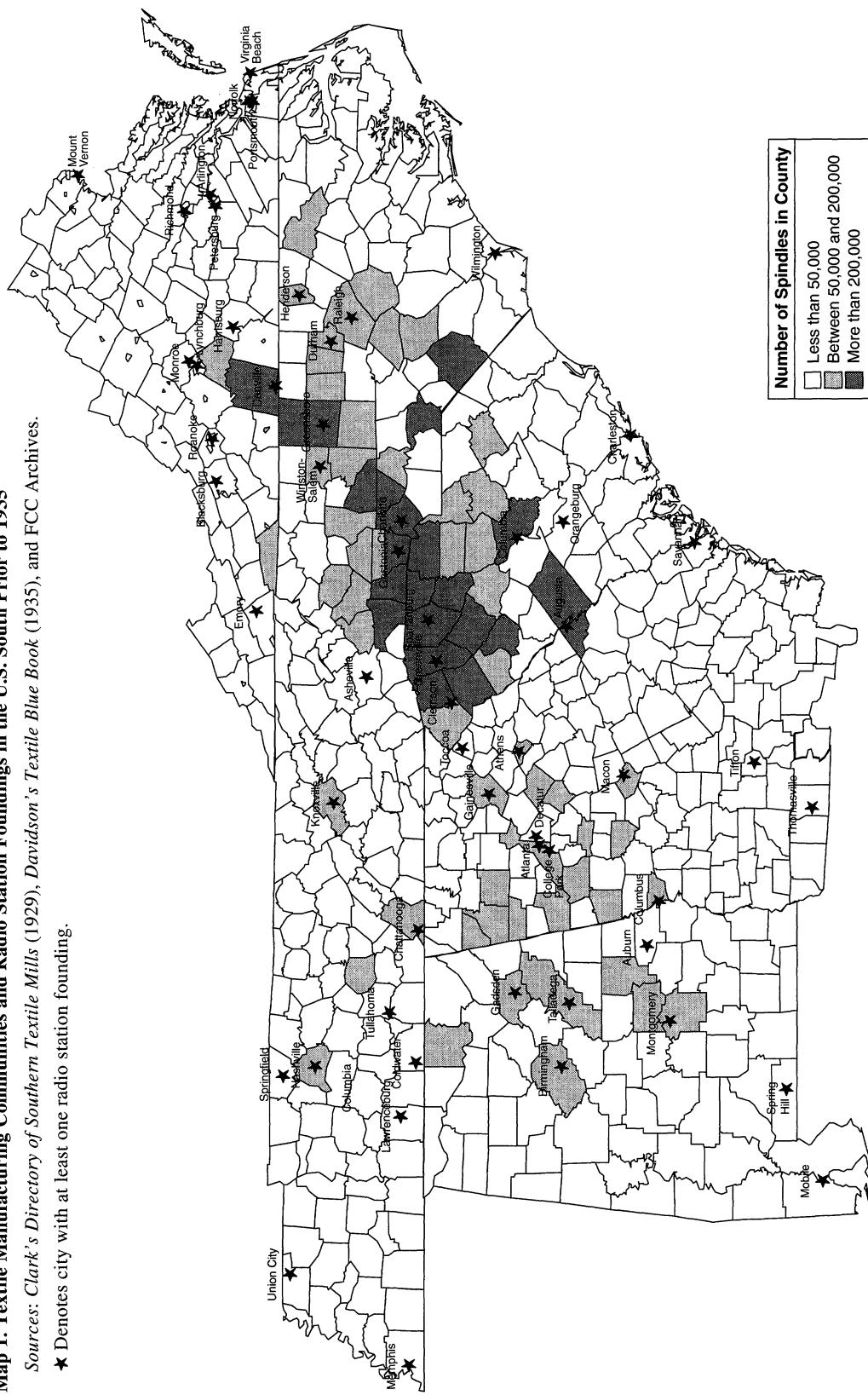
Radio station transmissions in the large Southern cities were not strong enough to reach the high textile concentration counties of western North Carolina and northwestern South Carolina, where worker mobilization occurred between 1929 and 1934. Thus, if radio was central to information flow, and to perceptions of political opportunity and collective identity for mill workers specifically, some stations needed to have been established in areas geographically proximate to mill concentration. Map 1 overlays the concentration of textile mill manufacturing with city-specific radio station foundings prior to 1935 in an effort to assess whether this was the case.

Map 1 shows a clear “radio belt” cutting through the center of the densest textile concentration—an area where the most pronounced strike activity and the largest strikes of the late 1920s and mid 1930s occurred (Map 2). This link between radio station foundings and strike activity is further confirmed in associational analyses. Table 1 shows that strikes were significantly more likely to occur in southern mill towns that had a radio station. Because transmissions extended beyond the limits of a particular city (i.e., 25 to 40 miles, on average), we also examine the impact of having a radio station near the city—that is, not in the city,

**Map 1. Textile Manufacturing Communities and Radio Station Foundations in the U.S. South Prior to 1935**

Sources: Clark's *Directory of Southern Textile Mills* (1929), Davidson's *Textile Blue Book* (1935), and FCC Archives.

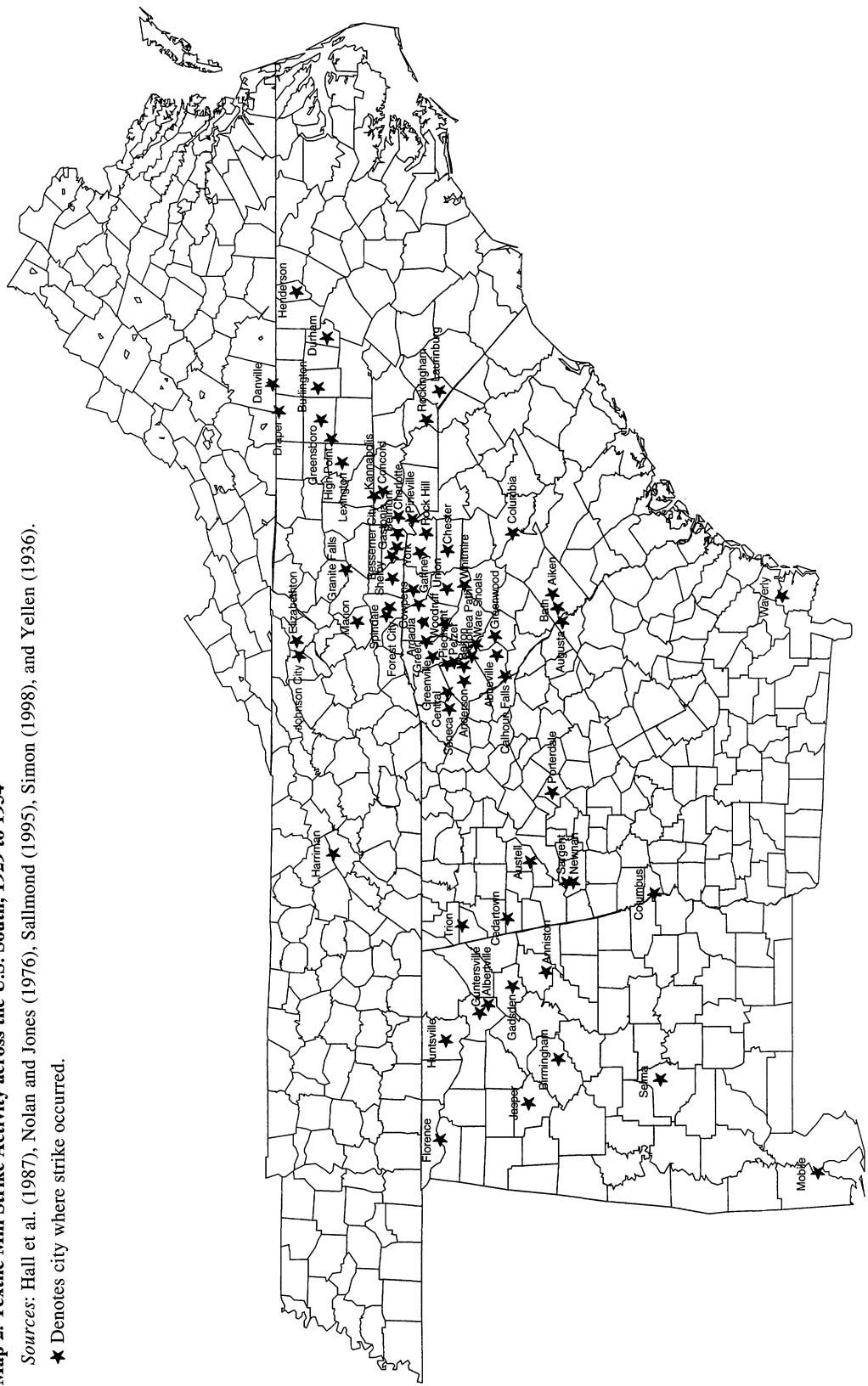
\* Denotes city with at least one radio station founding.



**Map 2. Textile Mill Strike Activity across the U.S. South, 1929 to 1934**

**Sources:** Hall et al. (1987), Nolan and Jones (1976), Sallmond (1995), Simon (1998), and Yellen (1993).

★ Denotes city where strike occurred.



**Table 1. Association between Strike Occurrence and the Geographic Location of Radio Stations Relative to Southern Mill Towns, 1929 to 1934**

Proximity of Radio Station to Town	Strike Occurred	
	No	Yes
<i>In the Town</i>		
No	456	50
Yes	22	14
$\chi^2$ (d.f. = 1)		27.2***
<i>Near the Town<sup>a</sup></i>		
No	263	24
Yes	215	40
$\chi^2$ (d.f. = 1)		7.0**

Note: Number of mill towns = 542.

<sup>a</sup> Station not located in the town, but in the county or in an adjoining county.

\*\* $p < .01$    \*\*\* $p < .001$  (one-tailed tests)

but in the county or in an adjoining county. This association, albeit weaker, is also significant.<sup>11</sup> It is clear, given these patterns, that many southern mill workers lived and worked within the concentric rings of radio transmission and that this may have shaped the insurgency that unfolded.

But did workers have access to radios? Radio ownership among mill workers was surprisingly high given their low economic status. Hampton's (1935) analysis of leisure-time activities among 122 mill workers across three mill villages during this period suggests that up to 70 percent had radios in their homes. Furthermore, when asked to rank 46 leisure-time activities, listening to music on the radio was ranked highest. "The radio is kept going all the time there ain't no static" (woman, quoted in Hampton 1935: 61). While music programs were most popu-

<sup>11</sup> We also ran logistic regression models predicting the likelihood of a strike that included both radio indicators along with controls for the state and textile mill density in the city. These findings (available from the authors upon request) are consistent with the analyses reported. They suggest that a strike was greater than three times more likely to occur if the mill town had a radio station, and between one and one-half and two times more likely if there was a radio station in the county or in an adjoining county.

lar, others opted for "preaching and talks on the government" (elderly man, quoted in Hampton 1935:61).

## RADIO AND POLITICAL OPPORTUNITY

Media may influence collective action by altering actors' perceptions of political opportunity. Pratt (1990) notes that the rapid diffusion of information to more people through media was intensified with the advent of radio. The South was no exception, particularly when it came to political information. For the first time, southern workers felt as if they had a direct line to the president, as Franklin Roosevelt took to the airwaves and entered their homes. Roosevelt used the new medium of radio to move beyond traditional means of political discourse and to "reach over and around the networks of state and local party structures and political personalities" (Kahan 1999:185). Roosevelt, in fact, created "a new political context" through radio, utilizing its directness and its potential to circumvent local power bases.

With respect to the rights and grievances of workers, Roosevelt used weekly "fireside radio chats" to signify his support. The third of these broadcasts, which was titled "On the Purposes and Foundations of the Recovery Program" and aired on July 24, 1933, dealt explicitly with the need for industrial reform and better working conditions. This left workers, including those in the South who traditionally felt isolated from national bases of power, with the impression that they could count on "the intervention of the federal government as a lever against local elites and guarantor of workers' rights" (Hall et al. 1987:292). Roosevelt also urged workers to write him—and they did, in unprecedented numbers (Sussman 1963).

Many southerners took part in the write-in campaign to the president (McElvaine 1983; Sussman 1963). Those who felt excluded from the political process, most notably women, now felt empowered to share their grievances, discussed the need and desire to organize collectively and, through their detailed letters, encouraged the powerful to consider the mill workers' plight. Many of these letters also made clear that southern workers believed there would be federal in-

tervention (Hall et al. 1987). The following letter, sent to the president during the 1934 strike, describes the consequences of the walkout and includes a “personal” appeal to F.D.R. to get involved.

Dear President Roosevelt,

I hope you can spare the time for a few words from a cotton mill family, *out of work* and almost out of heart and in just a short while out of a house in which to live. You know of course that the realtors are putting the people out when they cannot pay the rent promptly. and how are we to pay the rent so long as the mills refuse us work, merely because we had the nerve to ask or “demand,” better working conditions.

I realize and appreciate the aid and food which the government is giving to the poor people out of work *Thanks to you.*

but is it even partly right for us to be thrown out of our homes, when we have no chance whatever of paying, so long as the big corporations refuse of work. I for one am very disheartened and disappointed guess my notice to move will come next.

what are we to do. Wont you try to help us wont you appeal, “for us all,” to the real estate people and the factories

hoping you’ll excuse this, but I’ve always thought of F.D.R. as my personal friend.

C.L.F. (Columbus, Ga.)

(Henry Morgenthau Jr. Collection 1934, emphasis and punctuation as in original)

The impact of Roosevelt’s radio transmissions on the consciousness of southern textile workers was witnessed firsthand in 1933 by Martha Gellhorn, a reporter hired by Federal Emergency Relief Administration director Harry Hopkins to investigate social and economic conditions in the South. In her report to Hopkins on the conditions in Gaston County, North Carolina, Gellhorn describes poor health conditions along with unfair mill owner practices, while also noting:

All during this trip I have been thinking to myself about that curious phrase “red menace,” and wondering where said menace hid itself. Every house I visited—mill worker or unemployed—had a picture of the President. These ranged from newspaper clippings (in destitute homes) to large colored prints,

framed in gilt cardboard. The portrait holds the place of honour over the mantel; I can only compare this to the Italian peasant’s Madonna. And the feeling of these people for the president is one of the most remarkable emotional phenomena I have ever met. He is at once God and their intimate friend; he knows them all by name, knows their little town and mill, their little lives and problems. And, though everything else fails, he is there, and will not let them down. (Gellhorn 1933)

Workers also spoke directly with Gellhorn about Roosevelt, sharing their confidence that the president was on their side.

You heard him talk over the radio, ain’t you? He’s the only president who ever said anything about the forgotten man. We know he’s going to stand by us.

He’s a man of his word and he promised us; we aren’t worrying as long as we got him.

The president won’t let these awful conditions go on.

The president wanted the Code [NIRA, Section 7a, of the Textile Code]. The president knows why we struck.

(Gellhorn 1933)

The initial local political autonomy of radio also enabled local organizers to gain access to the southern airwaves. At the outbreak of the massive strike of 1934, for instance, UTW vice-president Frances Gorman

. . . took his cue from the rising generation of Millhands. He went on the radio, gaining hours of air time at no expense. He encouraged “flying squadrons” of cars and trucks to speed through the countryside—and they did, closing mills so rapidly that “tabulators almost lost check.” (Hall et al. 1987:329)

Consequently, the airways became an arena in which political battles over the right of workers to collectively organize were fought when George Sloan, head of the Cotton Textile Institute, went on the airwaves to express the position of mill owners (Hall et al. 1987).

Use of the airwaves by local organizers and a progressive president intent on addressing work-related issues was important for mill worker perceptions of political opportunity.



**Photograph 1. The Dixon Brothers Performing Live on the Radio in Charlotte, North Carolina**

*Source:* John Edwards Memorial Collection, Southern Folklife Collection, University of North Carolina Archives.

The initial autonomy of radio stations, mostly a function of ownership patterns and a lack of local elite control, allowed the expression of grievances by local organizers and the use of radio as a networking resource. Roosevelt's "fireside chats" communicated a national political commitment to these workers along with an explicit recognition of their right to organize. Write-in campaigns by southern mill workers showed that they recognized a political opening and were listening. What remained unclear was the degree to which federal intervention on their behalf would actually occur.

#### **MUSIC, COLLECTIVE EXPERIENCE, AND DISCONTENT**

Beyond explicitly political broadcasts, radio had a direct and indirect impact on the cultural life of mill towns by creating a niche for musicians, many of whom were ex-mill workers. These musicians knew mill life, and the songs they wrote showed they were still wedded to their mill experiences. They also made it a point to visit mill towns when traveling from radio station to radio station to perform (Malone 1968; Wiggins 1987). Ex-mill workers, like Charlie Poole and his

North Carolina Ramblers, for instance, were able to play music full-time after landing a recording contract in 1925. Poole's band was extremely popular throughout the mill towns of the Southeast, playing popular tunes and songs that spoke to the lives of mill workers. In fact, the bulk of the music that mill workers listened to reflected not only mill work but the whole existence of mill life (Hall et al. 1987).

The Dixon Brothers, former mill workers, recorded "Weave Room Blues," "Weaver's Life," "Factory Girl," and "Hard Times in Here," while also performing traditional southern folk tunes and mill-related songs live on the airwaves (Photograph 1). Lesser known singers also recorded cotton-mill songs. Frank Welling and John McGee, also known as the Martin Brothers, recorded "The Marion Massacre" for Paramount, while David McCarn recorded "Cotton Mill Colic" and "Serves Them Fine" for Victor, the latter song chiding textile workers for leaving their mountain homes for the cotton mills (Malone 1968; Peterson 1992).

Record sales dropped during the Depression, and live broadcasts of music became even more important for these musicians. Sometimes, during live "barn dance" broad-

**Table 2.** Frequency Distribution of Textile Workers' Concerns as Expressed in Songs about the Textile Worker Experience

Song Title	Family Well-Being			Worker Well-Being		
	Family Subsistence	Children Working	Future and Children	Low Wages	Physical Well-Being	Mental Well-Being
The Big Fat Boss and the Worker				×		
Brown Lung Blues	×				×	
Cotton Mill Blues		×				
Cotton Mill Colic	×				×	
Cotton Mill Girl		×				
Cotton Mill Man			×	×	×	
Factory Girl					×	
Hard Times Cotton Mill Girls				×		
Hard Times in Here		×				
Hard Times in the Mill					×	
Let Them Wear Their Watches Fine			×	×	×	
Ma and Pa	×					
Mill Mother's Lament	×				×	
No More Shall I Work in the Factory					×	
Ol' Man Craft						
Rich Man/Poor Man				×		
Serves Then Fine				×		
Shirt Factory Blues						
Weave Room Blues	×					×
Weaver's Life					×	
Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues					×	
Total	5	3	2	7	6	2

casts, like J. W. Fincher's Crazy Waters Crystals Saturday Night Jamboree broadcast on WBT in Charlotte, these musicians and groups would play together and share mill-related songs (Green 1963a; Malone 1968). Their sharing of popular tunes and their ability to travel "paved the way for some of the first hillbilly bands to earn their livings performing at a Spartanburg high school auditorium one night, at a Gastonia mill recreation center the next evening, and on a Charlotte radio station the following morning" (Tullos 1989:2).

Woody Dewey, a radio archivist associated with the John Rivers Communications

Museum at the College of Charleston, in Charleston, South Carolina, remembers hearing musicians such as Bill and Charlie Monroe, Bill Carlisle, and others sing songs of interest to mill workers. He also recalls listening to specific broadcasts in the early 1930s as a 10-year-old while visiting his uncle:

They listened to a program each day from WIS, I think that's right, in Columbia. Anyway, they listened to a program called the Aristocratic Pigs. . . . Fisher Hendley was the head pig, I suppose [laughs]. His signature song was "Weave Room Blues," and he played the banjo, and he would play it

[Weave Room Blues] every once in a while. He came to Lancaster with the Aristocratic Pigs . . . of course, we all had to go up and see them at the high school there in Lancaster. We all enjoyed it. Back then, ya know, there weren't no TV . . . ya didn't know what they looked like and in order to see them and get a glimpse of what they looked like, you go out when they played those personal appearances. They did that two or three times a week all around the state. (Dewey 1999)

Homer "Pappy" Sherrill, himself a legendary bluegrass fiddle player who began playing on Gastonia, North Carolina, radio station WSOC in 1929 as a 13-year-old, similarly recalls hearing the Dixon Brothers play "Weave Room Blues" and other mill-related songs over the airwaves:

I've heard'em play it. They were on WBT [Charlotte] when we were up there. They were connected to Fisher Hendley. It was in the early thirties. [Starts singing Weave Room Blues during interview]. "Eleven cents of cotton, 40 cents of meat, how in the world can a poor man eat, I got them lonesome weave room blues. (Sherrill 1999)

Thus, radio transmission was directly influential for the cultural life of mill towns. More indirectly, radio created a network of ex-mill workers (i.e., musicians) who traveled between towns, drawing from and contributing to the cultural life and experiences of those still working in the mills. The music and the emergence of radio "put millhands across the region in touch with each other, allowing those who missed the traveling musicians' performances to hear and enjoy the same music," thus fostering a strong sense of group identity (Hall et al. 1987: 261). Mill owners, on the other hand, periodically saw the emerging music and its consciousness-altering potential as a threat. For example, in Danville, Virginia in 1930, local authorities and mill owners attempted to forbid workers from singing Dave McCarn's recently released "Cotton Mill Colic" (Rorrer 1982).

Songs pertaining to mill life often employed a collective sense of experience, using the words "we," "us," and "our," and communicated anxieties specific to the experiences of most mill workers. Table 2 (on

p. 35) shows these songs ( $N = 21$ ), categorized by the concerns they address, specifically family well-being and/or the worker her or himself. This table illustrates the richness of these songs, the multiplicity of concerns they touch on, and the fact that the issues addressed could vary by verse. Recognizing the overlap in themes highlights the complexity of these songs and their lyrics.

Ten of the 21 songs dealing with mill work generally relate concerns for family, while fifteen, or seventy-one percent, denote problems faced by workers. Among concerns for family well-being, children are often mentioned, something that undoubtedly evoked a broader concern and universal appeal among listeners.<sup>12</sup> Five of these deal with family subsistence—the ability to provide for one's family's basic needs. This concern is most obvious in some of the lyrics to a song aptly titled *Mill Mother's Lament*:

And when we draw our money,  
Our grocery bills to pay,  
Not a cent to spend for clothing,  
Not a cent to lay away.

And on that very evening  
Our little son will say:  
"I need some shoes, mother,  
And so does sister May."

How it grieves the heart of a mother,  
You every one must know;  
But we can't buy for our children,  
Our wages are too low.

Another song, *Cotton Mill Man*, reflects the grieving heart of a mill worker and his fear that his son may also end up working in the mill:

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<sup>12</sup> The following quoted lyrics for *Mill Mothers Lament*, *Let Them Wear Their Watches Fine*, *Weave Room Blues*, *Big Fat Boss Man and the Worker*, and *The Marion Strike* were obtained from Greenway (1953). Lyrics for *Cotton Mill Man*, *Winsboro Cotton Mill Blues*, *Union Special*, *Here We Rest*, and *On a Summer Eve* were gathered from Green (1963b).

I watched my woman cry when  
our baby daughter died.  
I couldn't make her understand  
why the doctor never came,  
The lack of money was to blame.  
I cussed the day that I became a  
cottonmill man.  
Lord, don't let my son grow up  
to be a sweaty cottonmill man.

While these lyrics reflect the collective experiences of mill life and their consequences for family sustenance and the well-being of children, over half of these songs (15) describe the toll mill work takes on the worker her or himself. Seven of these songs deal with the low economic return for the amount of work put in. In four verses of *Let Them Wear Their Watches Fine*, this grievance is coupled with a discussion of the social status consequences of mill work.

We work from week end to week end,  
And never miss a day,  
And when that awful pay day comes  
We draw our little pay.  
  
On pay day night we go back home  
And set down in a chair.  
The merchant knocks upon our door  
He's come to get his share. . . .  
  
Those fancy folks that dress so fine  
And spend their money free,  
They don't have time for a factory hand  
That dresses like you and me.

As we go walking down the street  
All dressed in lint and strings,  
They call us fools and factory trash  
And other low down things.

Many of the 21 songs dealing with the general experiences of southern mill workers in the 1920s and 1930s also specify the cause(s) of the problems they face. Table 3 shows the coding according to the cause(s)

specified—the work process and/or the negative impact of human agents (i.e., bosses, managers, and/or scabs). Given our focus on the manifestation of collective identity, class consciousness, and insurgency through music, the distinction between cause and effect is important. If lyrics do not address a cause, then consciousness relating to where grievances should be aimed will remain unclear. This interpretational link between cause and effect is indeed crucial if social movement discourse and framing processes are to be effective (W. Gamson 1995; Snow and Benford 1992; Taylor and Whittier 1995). It is noteworthy that a cause is specified in more than three-quarters of these songs. Sixteen of the 21 associate discontent with the work process, while the same number specify a human culprit.

Lyrics pointing to the work process fall into three principal categories: general work conditions, the length of the work day, and the introduction of scientific management. Twelve of the 21 songs place the blame for mill worker problems on general work conditions, including the speed, cleanliness, and noise associated with mill work. One verse of *Weave Room Blues* provides a vivid image of these conditions:

Slam out, break out, makeouts  
by the score,  
Cloth all rolled back and  
piled up on the floor.  
The bats are running into strings,  
they're hanging to your shoes,  
I'm simply dying with them  
weave room blues.

Notably, much of the worker complaint is directed specifically at employers and managers rather than being seen as a consequence of mill work. Vallas's (1987) analysis of the labor process and the social and organizational aspects of work suggests that a focus on managers and owners, rather than the labor process generally, has stronger ramifications for class consciousness (Billings 1990; Della Fave 1980). W. Gamson (1995) concurs and suggests that an injustice frame will be more effective at recruiting and mobilizing if the target is a concrete

**Table 3. Frequency Distribution of Causes of Textile Workers' Concerns as Expressed in Songs about the Textile Worker Experience**

Song Title	Work Process			Bosses, Managers, Scabs		
	General Work Conditions	Length of Work Day	Scientific Management	Exploitation by Owner	Managerial Control	Presence of Scabs
The Big Fat Boss and the Worker					×	
Brown Lung Blues	×					
Cotton Mill Blues	×			×		
Cotton Mill Colic	×				×	
Cotton Mill Girl	×					×
Cotton Mill Man	×				×	
Factory Girl	×				×	
Hard Times Cotton Mill Girls	×					
Hard Times in Here	×					×
Hard Times in the Mill		×				
Let Them Wear Their Watches Fine		×				
Ma and Pa						×
Mill Mother's Lament					×	
No More Shall I Work in the Factory	×					×
Ol' Man Craft				×	×	
Rich Man/Poor Man					×	
Serves Then Fine					×	
Shirt Factory Blues		×				×
Weave Room Blues	×					×
Weaver's Life	×					
Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues	×					×
Total	12	3	1	8	7	1

actor, preferably a person or corporation presented as malicious, selfish, or greedy. *The Big Fat Boss and the Worker*—a song penned by Ella May Wiggins, a mill worker and local organizer who was killed in an ambush during the Gastonia uprisings—conveys such specificity and resulting polarization by straightforwardly attributing worker problems to mill owner exploitation. Two verses in particular stand out:

The boss man hates the workers,  
the workers hates the boss.

The boss man rides in a big fine car  
and the workers has to walk.

The boss man sleeps on a big fine bed  
and dreams of his silver and gold.

The workers sleeps in an old straw bed  
and shivers from the cold.

Some of this exploitation, as workers recognized, took the form of paternalistic practices, as related in the following two verses of *Cotton Mill Man*:

The company taught us all the rules  
on how to work the spinning spools,  
So the boss's son could drive a  
big black sedan.

The company owned the houses and the  
company owned the grammar school,

You'll never see an educated  
cottonmill man.

They figure you don't need to learn  
anything but how to earn

The money that you paid upon demand  
To the general store they owned or else  
they'd take away your home

And give it to some other homeless  
cottonmill man.

Managers also are blamed for problems experienced by workers. In this verse from *Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues*, the cause of worker duress is clearly managerial oversight and greed:

Old man Sargent sitting at the desk,  
The damned old fool won't give us no rest.  
He'd take the nickels off a dead man's eyes,  
To buy a Coca Cola and a Eskimo pie.

Clearly, songs of mill worker experience and discontent have a general appeal—an appeal that transcends the specifics of a particular mill town and that reverberates with the day-to-day realities of mill life in the South. Not only do these songs appeal to collective understanding and concerns relating to family subsistence, the well-being and future of children, and specific problems affecting workers, but they also provide a framework through which such concerns are interpreted in a causal fashion. This is crucial if the framing aspect of social movement culture is to invoke focused collective action (W. Gamson 1995; Snow and Benford 1992; Snow et al. 1986; Taylor and Whittier 1995). Put simply, songs afforded workers a framework through which the similarity of their plight became increasingly obvious; they also shifted accountability away from the workers and toward the labor process and its beneficiaries.

#### **SONGS OF PROTEST**

Music is influential not only in its impact on collective experience and group identity but

also because it serves as a unifying force during mobilization. As Morris (1984) notes in his analysis of the southern civil rights movement, this is particularly important when countermobilization is fierce (Denisoff 1972; Flacks 1999). Symbolism, ritual, and discourse through music are crucial for maintaining solidarity among participants and for shaping the consciousness of nonparticipants so that they become sympathetic to, or are actually recruited into, the movement.

In the case of southern textiles, songs that emerged out of earlier strikes became songs of unification across mill towns during later strikes (Denisoff 1971; Huber 1998; Malone 1979). The Gastonia Strike of 1929 stands out as one of the first labor conflicts in the South to create a repertoire of protest songs outlining the plight of workers as well as touching on strike issues and elite counter-mobilization strategies. The importance of song during an active protest is evident in Photograph 2. It shows the Four Tobacco Tags (foreground), a popular recording and radio group during the era, playing and singing at a 1934 strike near Austell, Georgia, while striking workers danced in order to block the doorways to the Clark Threadmill.

Table 4 classifies these 14 textile protest songs by their primary intent. Unlike the songs of general mill worker experience described previously, these songs are more direct in their goal and thus were easier to code. Most (9) have as their main aim solidarity maintenance and recruitment during a strike period. Like the general songs of mill life summarized previously, language is largely inclusive, referring to "we," "our," and "fellow workers." Some lyrics, such as these from *Here We Rest*, attempt to maintain solidarity in the face of strike-breaking by scabs:

We are standing on guard  
Both night and day,  
We are doing our best  
To keep scabs away.

We are 1200 strong  
And the strike still is on,  
And the scabs still are standing  
But they won't scab for long.



**Photograph 2. Musicians Furnish Music to Dancing Strikers Blocking the Entrance of the Clark Threadmill Near Austell, Georgia, 1934**

*Source:* Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

Some lyrics appeal to the worker's broad sense of commitment to his/her fellow workers, as exemplified in this verse from *On a Summer Eve*:

If we love our brothers as we  
all should do,  
We'll join this union help fight it through.  
We all know the boss don't care  
if we live or die,  
He'd rather see us hang on the  
gallows high.

Table 4 also reports the type of counter-mobilization described, if any. Interestingly, 13 of the 14 songs describe some form of countermobilization, and in more than half of these, the countermobilization entails coercion of employees and employer manipulation of the legal-political system. Elite countermobilization is obvious in the lyrics to *The Marion Strike*. In this well-known song used in subsequent strikes, the performer provides the listener with a detailed account of both corporate influence over the local police and the interactive nature of the struggle that occurred:

The sheriff came down there to the factory,  
And brought all of his men along,  
And he says to the mill strikers,  
"Now boys, you all know this is wrong."

"But sheriff, we just can't work for nothing,  
For we've got a family to feed,  
And they've got to pay us more money  
To buy food and clothes that we need.

You've heard of the stretchout system,  
A-goin through the country today,  
They put us on two men's jobs,  
And just give us half enough pay.

You know we helped give you your office,  
And we helped to give you your pay,  
And you want us to work for nothing,  
That's why we are down here today."

So one word just brought on another,  
And the bullets they started to flying,  
And after the battle was over,  
Six men lay on the ground a-dying.

Table 4. Frequency Distribution of Characteristics of Textile Workers Protest Songs

Song Title	Primary Intent			Countermobilization		
	Maintenance of Solidarity	Description of Strike Activity	Hostility toward Scabs	Employee Coercion	Incarceration of Leaders	Hiring of Scabs
All Around the Jailhouse	X				X	
Ballad of the Blue Bell Jail	X				X	
Chief Aderholt		X			X	
Come On You Scabs If You Want to Hear			X		X	
Here We Rest	X					X
Let Me Sleep In Your Tent Tonight, Beal	X					
The Marion Strike	X				X	
The Marion Massacre	X				X	
On A Summer Eve	X					X
Roane County Strike at Harriman	X				X	
The Speakers Didn't Mind	X				X	
Song Ballet by Ella May	X					X
Up in Old Loray Waiting for a Trial	X				X	
Union Special	X					X
Total	9	4	1	7	5	1

Note that despite the coercion and legal-political manipulation described, these songs of protest have an optimistic underpinning throughout—that positive change will happen, albeit through struggle. The last verse of *Union Special* couples worker optimism with the recognition that powerful forces stand in their way:

The city officials are against us,  
And the big men of the town.  
But they will see in the future  
That their playhouse will come down.

These illustrative lyrics demonstrate the complex nature and substance of these protest songs. They were an important tool in the protest repertoire, appealing to workers' sense of commitment and similarity of experience, to their own economic well-being and future, and to social justice, broadly defined. Thus, these songs offered a valuable tool with which to recruit and maintain solidarity. Further, they offered the listener,

whether protest participant or not, a justification of the mobilization that was unfolding by specifying corporate abuses of economic, legal, and political power. The sharing of these themes, directly and indirectly via radio, for the first time offered southern mill workers sense of unity and solidarity that extended beyond the particulars of their specific mill town.

## CONCLUSIONS

The establishment of radio stations in the South and the high concentration textile manufacturing areas of North Carolina and South Carolina was influential for the worker insurgency that unfolded in the 1920s and 1930s. Local organizers used the airwaves to express grievances and to coordinate action. Presidential "fireside chats" altered southern mill workers' perceptions of political opportunity, leading to the belief that national political power was now on their side and that the federal government would intervene to counter local elite repres-

sion. A new collective identity and movement solidarity was formed through music played on the radio and spread by local musicians traveling from mill town to mill town. Unfortunately for mill workers, little federal intervention occurred, and the strike campaigns were largely defeated through state-sponsored violence and legal-political control. Southern businessmen also helped lobby for, and eventually pushed through, the Taft-Hartley Act, which banned the closed shop, allowed states to instigate “right to work” laws, and resulted in a drastic reduction in worker petitions for union elections (Minchin 1997; Roscigno and Kimble 1995; Wood 1996).

Our explication of radio’s role in this instance of mobilization extends on collective identity and political opportunity frameworks. Collective identity theory, as we have noted, is useful for establishing the importance of interpretational, identity, and solidarity processes for subordinate-group challenge, in a manner consistent with traditional emphases on class consciousness. What is often lacking, though, is elaboration on how media can play a fundamental part in these processes and, indeed, shape the collective experience and feelings of “groupness” across a geographically dispersed population. Furthermore, little systematic attention among collective identity theorists has been devoted to examining the role of music as an important element of the social movement repertoire—a role that not only provides a basis through which collective identity may be realized but also one in which an interpretational frame of cause and effect is offered to the listener. In the case of mill-related music, this consciousness-altering potential was evident during the 1920s and 1930s and persisted even into the mid-1960s when, for example, a recording of “Cotton Mill Man” was considered “too provocative” to be played on many radio stations in southern mill towns (Peterson 1992). Following previous work on culture and framing processes (W. Gamson 1995; Snow and Benford 1992; Snow et al. 1986; Taylor and Whittier 1995), we believe that music and the interpretational frame it can provide is fundamental if collective identity is to be transformed into coordinated collective action.

We do not believe that the importance of music is limited to textile workers or to one particular era of worker unrest. In fact, we found during our data collection a significant amount of material highlighting the importance of music for a number of historical struggles pertaining to class, race, and gender, and across a number of industries and geographic locations. Many movements have had a well-developed repertoire of songs, used before and during collective protest. Women’s workplace issues, for instance, have received attention in songs pertaining to the coal mining industry, among others, throughout this century. Music is clearly an important part of the African American experience, from slave gospels, to blues lyrics, to jazz, to contemporary societal critiques embedded in rap music. Song also has been central to other working class movements—including striking longshoremen, lumberers, steel workers, and automobile workers—and for as long as we can tell (e.g., see Greenway 1953; Lomax, Guthrie and Seeger 1967; Pratt 1990). What is lacking, despite archival collections and some historical accounts, are systematic analyses and substantive sociological interpretations of these lyrics—if and when they are important and how they are tied to stratification processes and efforts to remedy inequality.<sup>13</sup>

Political opportunity theory has specified the importance of leverage and its historically contingent nature. However, an explication of the mechanism(s) through which potential movement participants’ perceptions of opportunity may be altered is often lacking. Media, whether in an earlier historical era or the contemporary day, are important in this process (Brown 1998; Calhoun 1998; Kahan 1999). It is also the case that

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<sup>13</sup> In general, music allows oppositional culture to exist, persist, and possibly spread, not only during pivotal moments when the political structure is ideal but also during relatively calm periods with little active or visible protest. Such oppositional culture can foster discontent and the seeds of protest, and may become more explicit and goal-directed at key historical moments (Denisoff 1972). It is also important to note that music can have a conservative influence by resigning the listener to his or her plight instead of encouraging action aimed at changing one’s situation (Peterson 1992).

*structural* political opportunity must be disentangled from *perceptions* of opportunity, particularly when the analytic focus is on movement success and the forces that persuade or dissuade social movement participation (Kurzman 1996; McAdam 1982; Tarrow 1988). Where there is a disjuncture between the two, insurgency may result, but will probably be curtailed by countermobilization. Southern mill workers' perceptions of political opportunity were altered via radio, creating a belief that F.D.R. was on their side, that they had (federal) justification for their actions, and that the federal government would intervene when the pivotal moment came. Little intervention, however, actually occurred.

Our focus on media technology helps bridge the divide between collective identity and political opportunity perspectives by addressing the question of how processes relevant to social movement formation are manifested across space. However, the study of media and social movement dynamics must be supplemented further by theory that explicitly incorporates aspects of both identity and opportunity into a single framework (Meyer and Staggenborg 1996; Oliver and Johnston 1999). One of the most promising contemporary lines of work that undertakes this task is that dealing with social movement culture.

Social movement culture, rather than an ambiguous construct, is an influential and clearly defined component of the social movement dynamic comprising normative guidelines and practices that create and reinforce (1) a sense of group identity, (2) an alternative interpretational frame of cause and effect, and (3) a sense of political efficacy (W. Gamson 1995; Taylor and Whittier 1995). Such a conceptual frame is well-suited for analyzing the influential nature of music in the social movement repertoire, and we suspect that extending the focus to other forms of creative, linguistic, and/or performance expression conducive to consciousness-raising, group-building, and solidarity maintenance, would be worthwhile.<sup>14</sup> In our

view, the melding of these two foci—social movement culture and the media—offers researchers the most useful set of theoretical tools for understanding the complex and dynamic character of historical, contemporary, and future movement formation across space (J. Gamson 1998; W. Gamson 1995; Gamson and Wolfsfeld 1993; Taylor 1996).

Our analyses also contribute to the growing body of research on media, communication technology, and community (Calhoun 1998; Cerulo and Ruane 1998; Purcell 1997). While much of this work focuses on the contemporary era, specifically on television and the Internet, many similar themes emerge. Do media and new communication technologies enhance social integration? Do they produce collective identity? Does such collective identity facilitate group action? What tends to be overlooked in this literature, however, is the historical context in which new information media unfold and the consequences for social groups. "We need to set our discussions of electronic media in a bit deeper historical context—not just of technology but of the spatial organization of power and movements challenging that power" (Calhoun 1998:375).

While our analyses highlight the power of radio to transform consciousness and to instigate challenges to existing structures of inequality, we also acknowledge radio's limitations. Our analyses reveal lessons that may be applicable to understanding the potential influence of television or the Internet on collective action. These newer technologies enhance collective experience through the maintenance of dispersed networks, the encouragement of "socio-spatial" enclaves, and the facilitation of group activities (Calhoun 1998; Cerulo and Ruane 1998). Like radio, however, the influence of newer media and communication technologies on these social processes may vary, depending on the level of political autonomy and the degree to which the information transmitted appeals to the unique experiences of individuals and specific social groups (W. Gamson et al. 1992).

In the case of radio, the autonomy of local stations was curbed by the FCC in the mid-

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<sup>14</sup> Like Pattillo-McCoy (1998), who analyzes church culture and action in the black community, we find Swidler's (1986) discussion of "culture as a tool kit" from which actors can draw to

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be a useful way of conceiving of the cultural repertoire available to social movement participants.

to late 1930s when small owners and universities, advocating radio in the “public interest” and greater flexibility in what was aired, lost out to “commercial interests.” More stringent guidelines for broadcasts that could be interpreted as “political” or “propaganda” were put in place, and radio operators who violated the new policies risked losing their operating licenses (Federal Radio Commission 1929; McChesney 1993). The success of the recording industry and its links to the big corporate broadcast networks also nationalized music played over the airwaves, leaving little room or market for music dealing with worker grievances and the concerns of local populations (Cantril and Allport [1935] 1971; Malone 1979). Thus, while the decline in local radio station autonomy and transmission specificity was in part a function of institutional bureaucratic tendencies, it was also a political process—one whose trajectory leaned toward, although was not completely determined by, corporate-political hegemony.

These issues of limited autonomy and an overly-generalized appeal apply most straightforwardly to television, suggesting a limited impact on collective experience and collective action.<sup>15</sup> However, the internet is a medium of multidirectional information flow—and it exists in a multinational context. Thus, it affords its users freedom from political controls and specificity of group interest, at least at the present time, and it will therefore probably have strong consequences for group-specific identities and the coordination of collective action. Like textile workers and radio in the 1920s and 1930s, however, such relations are tenuous at best, as they require “connection maintenance” (Cerulo and Ruane 1998)—something that is difficult to nurture and preserve over time and on a wide geographic and socio-political scale. Furthermore, like radio, the potential impact of the Internet may very well be curbed by regulations and political oversight, particularly if its use runs counter to dominant ideological positions and stratification structures.

<sup>15</sup> The impact of media is often conservative and supportive of the status quo. For elaboration of the conservative versus critical potential of media, see W. Gamson (1992b, 1995).

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