# WVON Radio and the Black Public Sphere

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WVON Radio. The Voice Of the Negro…and later The Voice Of The Nation, is an iconic Chicago radio station located at 1690 kHz on the farthest right side of the AM dial. For over 50 years, WVON's mission to the African American community has often been on the far left, politically. This little radio station that could (and still can) deliver a daytime power punch of 10K watts and 1K watts at night, is effective in reaching its core audience of African Americans located on Chicago's south and west sides. Its lasting impact is to provide an outlet for African Americans in Chicago's Black public sphere to voice their opinions and, in turn, infuse them with strength through Black empowerment, Black social awareness, and Black political advocacy.

Throughout its history, WVON has been a critical influencer of Chicago's (and in some cases, national) Black public sphere. WVON's place in Chicago urban radio media is unrivaled because a) it has demonstrated a nimble ability to adapt to an ever-evolving Black public sphere and b) it has bestowed national prominence toward key individuals seeking to affect social, economic and political change for African Americans. Even with changes in its broadcasting format, WVON is still an active vehicle for Chicago African Americans to engage in critical discourse about issues affecting the community. WVON's foray into internet streaming is helping the station spread its message to Blacks throughout the United States and the world.

To fully understand WVON's impact on Chicago's Black public sphere, an examination must be conducted about what constitutes a public sphere. Jürgen Habermas' landmark essay, "Transformation of the Public Sphere" argued that the public sphere consists of citizens who "behave as a public body where they confer in an unrestricted fashion" (Habermas, 1964, p. 49). Within this body, a certain democracy is engaged when, in theory, those participating would shed their former class positions and engage in critical discourse.

This became apparent as the bourgeois (middle class) began expressing its ideas to affect change towards those in power, mainly, government and state run institutions.

Many sociologists have argued against Habermas' traditional definition of the public sphere. They indicate that the societally marginalized are seldom included in the public sphere. Such groups have created their own public spheres to address the issues that happen to be important to them. Sociologist Nancy Fraser defines these spheres as the *subaltern counterpublic* where:

> …subordinated social groups—women, workers, peoples of color and gays and lesbians—have repeatedly found it advantageous to constitute alternative publics…[such groups] invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs. (Fraser, 1992, p. 67)

For example, one could take the Habermas model and break it into separate public spheres depending on the given audience. "People of color" could be one sphere that can eventually be fractured into subcategories, e.g. a separate sphere for African Americans, one for Latinos, and so on. Of course, within such spheres, there would also be groups with even more distinct interests for critical discourse, e.g., African Americans in the LGBT space.

The Black public sphere can be described as a subset or outgrowth of Jürgen Habermas' public sphere analysis, where he suggested that a single public sphere can exist once each participant sheds his/her "bourgeoisie" status and engage into a cultural discourse (Squires, 2000, p. 75). The problem inherent with developing such a sphere is that groups commonly marginalized a given society will not be granted the opportunity to participate in the discourse. For example, as the bourgeoisie rose in Europe:

> [its growth in the public sphere] coincided with the rise of the African slave trade and the dehumanization and conquest of peoples of color by European and White American

> bourgeoisie. Slavery and new racial ideologies kept people of color from participating as citizens even as Enlightenment theories supported equality and democracy. (Squires, 2002, p. 449)

For over four centuries, African Americans have been systematically denied the fruits of freedom afforded to other US citizens and thus, had to develop alternative means to push their agenda to the forefront of national consciousness. Early on, the Black public sphere relied on long-standing, traditional outlets to provide cohesion within the community:

> The Black public sphere [is]…a set of institutions, communication networks and practices which facilitate debate of causes and remedies to the current combinations of political setbacks and economic devastation facing major segments of the Black community, and which facilitate the creation of oppositional formations and sites. (Squires, p. 75)

Such institutions helped guide Africans Americans in northern cities such as Chicago where millions came during the Great Migration at the turn of the 20th century. The Black press, churches and later radio were instrumental in strengthening the resolve of African Americans to fend for themselves against a hostile "majority" public who saw this group as a threat to their established livelihoods.

Carolyn Squires' "Rethinking the Black Public Sphere: An Alternative Vocabulary for Multiple Public Spheres", takes Fraser's concept and assigns "identifiers" for subalterns inside the Black public sphere. For example, Squires identifies the Civil Rights movement as a "counterpublic" to the limited resources of discourse for Blacks in the Jim Crow South. African Americans used protest marches, non-violent demonstrations and music as a visual and aural means to affect change. Throughout this analysis, examples of such identifiers will be highlighted in relation to WVON's history.

Black radio, specifically Black talk radio, became active in the black public sphere whereby "oppressed and or marginalized groups [are given] arenas for deliberation outside the surveillance of the dominant group" (Squires, p. 75). WVON Radio, a station born from the Black music staples of blues, jazz and gospel, soon became a subaltern counterpublic for Chicago African Americans. WVON already inhabited this sphere when it began broadcasting in 1963, becoming a lightning rod for the Civil Rights movement in Chicago. Over the next 50 years, politicians realized WVON held sway over its listeners in this "public space." Its disk jockeys played popular songs of the day, and also doubled as warriors on the front line of the Civil Rights movement; certainly no easy task for those trying to make a living in the broadcasting industry. What makes WVON notable in the Black public sphere is those individuals who were tasked to run the station knew that WVON had a responsibility to serve the Black community.

### *Genesis of Chicago's Black Public Sphere*

The genesis of WVON Radio can be traced back before the advent of commercial radio in the 1920's. Starting in 1910, paltry economic circumstances and oppressive racial covenants in the South led millions of Blacks to leave the region and seek relief in the North (Eichenlaub, Tolmay & Alexander, 2010, p. 101). One northern city in particular, Chicago, saw massive growth in the African American population beginning in 1915:

> Through the war years [World War I], rail cars daily disgorged Black southerners into the chaotic bustle of Chicago's Illinois Central Depot. From 1910 to 1920, Chicago's Black population soared from 44,103 to 109,458—an increase of 142.2 percent, the largest rate of increase of any ethnic group in the city. (McWhirter, 2011, p. 118)

A multitude of industrial jobs awaited the new Black wave in Chicago. Specifically, the slaughterhouses where Chicago was thusly named "hog butcher for the world" by famed poet Carl Sandburg, had once employed 1,000 African Americans in 1915—the number had jumped to 10,000 by 1919 (McWhirter, p. 118).

A negative outcome of the migration was racial unrest as African Americans settled into a new world and a new life. Whites in northern cities disliked the new émigrés coming into their neighborhoods to compete for jobs and other key resources. An ugly and tragic event brought the city of Chicago to its knees on July 27th, 1919 when a group of African American teenagers were swimming and ended up drifting into a designated "White beach" on the south side (Chicago Commission on Race Relations, 1922, p. 4). A White man had thrown a rock at one of the teenagers, hitting him in the head. The boy subsequently drowned; the furor over the incident created a devastating race riot where "[t]hirty eight people—23 Blacks and 15 Whites—were killed. At least 537 were seriously wounded—342 Blacks, 178 Whites, and 17 whose race was unknown" (McWhirter, p. 147). It is critical to note this tragedy because the dominant media at the time—newspapers, played a key role in polarizing both warring factions. Newspapers with a predominately White circulation stoked the anger of their readers as Blacks were seen as the cause of the uprising. The *Chicago Herald Examiner* bleated unfounded rumors in their headlines that "'Negroes Have Arms'… and quoted an anonymous source asserting that Blacks had collected more than 2,000 Springfield rifles and a supply of soft nosed bullets in preparation for an attack on White neighborhoods" (McWhirter, p. 151). Speaking for the other side, the African American newspaper *Chicago Defender* was a proponent of Black empowerment, and gave rise to Black awareness through journalism or specifically "to cover news that wasn't covered" in non-Black newspapers. The *Defender* promoted the bounties of the

north and convinced many to migrate from the south where "by 1919, the newspaper [with] its 130,000 circulation in the south…urged Blacks to move north especially to Chicago" (McWhirter, p. 118). Its editorial about the riots warned White Chicagoans and those nationwide that:

> America is known the world over as the land of the lyncher and of the mobocrat. For years, she has been sowing the wind and now she is reaping the whirlwind. The Black worm has turned. A race that has furnished hundreds of thousands of the best soldiers that the world has ever seen is no longer content to turn the left cheek when smitten upon the right. (as quoted in the *Chicago Defender*, McWhirter, p. 147)

Thus, the clarion call for African Americans to fight back was there in black and white. Later, similar messages would be emitted via amplitude modulation on the new medium of radio.

***Chicago's Black Public Sphere-Enclaved Public***

As African Americans settled into Chicago during the first third of the 20th century, they faced indignities that made life difficult in their new surroundings. One problem was housing. Real estate agents employed discriminatory housing covenants, which prevented Blacks from moving into areas occupied by Whites:

> Throughout the late 1910s and 1920s, White organizations such as the Hyde Park-Kenwood Property Owners Association fought any Black residential expansion, regardless of class, into the better established White neighborhoods east of Cottage Grove Avenue. Essentially, African Americans faced a continuation of the same restrictions on their economic and social freedoms that they had experienced in the South. (Searcy, 2012, p. 37)

These restrictions relegated African Americans to the south (specifically the Bronzeville area) and west sides of Chicago. By 1940, African Americans made up 8% of the population in

Chicago, growing to more than 23% in 1960 (Williams, 1998, p. 7). Other northern cities such as Detroit and Philadelphia experienced similar growth trends in their African American populations (Williams, p. 8). The Chicago Black public sphere during this period is what Catherine Squires would call an "enclaved public." These spaces are created when "marginalized groups are commonly denied public voice or entrance into public spaces by dominant groups and thus forced into enclaves" (Squires, p. 458). Bronzeville proved to be an area teeming with new Black capitalists who were "fueled by higher wages that translated into greater disposable income, businesses that catered to all aspects of African American lives boomed in Bronzeville" (Searcy, 2012, p. 39).

Bronzeville's prosperity gave Blacks an opportunity to enjoy the fruits of their labor through entertainment and is an example that African Americans could experience:

> [an] independent Black media, Black artists' collectives, Black fraternal organizations, and other 'Black-only' spaces and media fulfill functions for Black collectives that mainstream public arenas, institutions, and media have not. (Squires, p. 459)

Blues and jazz clubs thrived and provided an opportunity for musicians to be spotlighted on the new medium of radio. Disk jockeys obliged their listening public by playing music that was often heard in the clubs. Al Benson, who started his career in 1943 at WGES in Chicago, was a successful disk jockey who catered specifically to an African American audience (Williams, 1998, p. 13). Because Benson was from Mississippi, the "new" Chicagoans from the South felt at home whenever he was on the air (Ward, 2004, p. 81-82). Benson was also noted for fighting against racial discrimination on-air and by integrating nightclubs that did not serve Black patrons (Williams, p. 13).

Ironically, the seeds of WVON Radio were germinated by two brothers who owned a record company; White men who saw the value of owning a radio station which would, a) provide an outlet to promote their acts on air and b) specifically serve the Black community's needs (Searcy, p. 64-65). Leonard and Phil Chess' Chess Records was a successful record company which had hit makers such as Chuck Berry, Bo Diddley and Etta James on their label. The brothers were popular among African Americans (their main clientele) because they had "a real affinity and sensitivity to Black people…in some ways all the Chesses were Blacks in White bodies" (Searcy, p. 67). Leonard Chess also believed in actively participating in the Black community—he became involved with the National Urban League and other Black organizations (Searcy, p. 67).

WVON Radio began broadcasting on April 1st, 1963. The station's format at the time was designed to attract a wide demographic audience within Chicago's African American population. The music played on the station ranged from gospel, blues, Motown, doo wop, rhythm and blues, new soul, and deep southern blues (Searcy, p. 81-82)—diverse forms of Black creative expression which served varying tastes of those inside the Black public sphere. The formula proved successful as WVON trounced competing Black stations in the ratings by capturing "somewhere between 44% to 48% of Black listeners daily," and three years later, "40% of African American households selected WVON as a station they listen to weekly" (Searcy, p. 88). A major contributor to the station's early success was its commitment to highlighting issues that concerned African Americans. Herb Kent, a legendary Chicago on-air personality, thrived during the nascent stages of WVON by playing music and keeping his eye on serving the community:

> We were the epitome of a community station…my main thing was encouraging all the kids to stay in school and avoid gangs. In fact, I did a fifteen-minute spot everyday telling the kids to stay in school. (as quoted in Kent and Smallwood, 2009, p. 85)

This early commitment towards community soon launched WVON into the Civil Rights movement.

### *WVON and Motown: Transition from Enclave Public to the Civil Rights Counterpublic*

A closer look reveals that WVON's influence during the last strains of the enclave public era in Chicago and most notably, the nation, is significant because of its symbiotic relationship with Motown Records. An important factor contributing to the early success of AM was based on the radio industry's "hardware" of choice—the 45 RPM disk. The disks were formatted only to hold about three minutes of recorded music (Barlow, 1999, p. 226). Record producers adhered to the physicality of the "45s" so that songs could be played on AM radio. Motown mogul Barry Gordy tailored his musical acts to fit the format and balladeer/composer Smokey Robinson of Motown knew how to craft a hit record:

> I've just geared myself to radio time. The shorter a record is nowadays, the more it's gonna be played. This is the key thing in radio time, you dig? If you have a record that's 2:15 long it's definitely gonna get more play than one that's 3:15 at first, which is very important. (as quoted in Barlow, 1999, p. 201)

Motown's producers were also cognizant of the sonic properties of the AM signal whereby they engineered songs that utilized voices and instruments in the high frequency range so they can be detected easily on the radio (Barlow, 1999, p. 201). Incidentally, WVON was known as the station that introduced Motown to America:

> Gordy…had a special arrangement with WVON that every song he produced would be sent immediately to WVON before any other station. Rotation on WVON was so powerful that it influenced airplay in other markets, which impacted the overall sales and success of the project. (www.facebook.com/WVON1690)

To be sure, WVON benefitted from Motown's music—more listeners tuned into the station, which subsequently attracted advertisers. However, WVON's influence in Chicago's Black public sphere helped Motown reveal African American self-empowerment to not only Blacks, but also to the *mainstream* public sphere:

> Motown's [style] corresponded to the early [Civil Rights] movement's unspoken "best-foot-forward" strategy to reassure whites that blacks aspiring to full citizenship were "just like everyone else"…Motown and the movement framed this simplification for the public sphere…[that] black Americans needed a fuller acceptance than mere "civil rights" suggested and sought to create a new African American sense of self, too. (Werner, 2010, p. 472)

WVON's birth and subsequent ascent into Chicago's Black public sphere occurred during the Civil Rights movement. Carolyn Squires identified the movement as a counterpublic:

> The counterpublic is exemplified by the Black public spheres that generated the Civil Rights movement of the mid-twentieth century. In the 1950s and 1960s, mass public protests—sit-ins, marches, boycotts, voter registration drives, as well as the revaluation of African and Afrocentric arts, physical characteristics and speech—were all central elements of daily life for a large number of African Americans. (Squires, 2002, p. 460)

WVON station personalities were actively involved in implementing strategies and tactics to participate in the struggle for equality. WVON disc jockey (and future station owner), Pervis Spann was recognized for his impact and influence towards African Americans during the Civil

Rights movement. Seizing the opportunity to utilize WVON as a media vehicle to support the movement, Spann "was involved in raising money and recruiting volunteers for the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Summer project" and led the delegation of Chicago mourners in attendance at the funerals of three young Civil Rights workers murdered in Mississippi (Barlow, p. 211). In addition to African American community affairs, WVON was front and center in issues relating to the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. Spann remarked, "that when there was a march in Virginia, Mississippi or Alabama, wherever…we were there" (as quoted in Searcy, p. 132).

A program that highlighted the struggle and successes of Chicago African Americans during the Civil Rights era was *Hotline*, an hour-long nighttime talk show hosted by journalist, Wesley South. Hotline "[presented] a more in depth look at the current issues to Chicago's Black community" (Searcy, p. 134). South was a key figure in bringing the movement to the fore:

> [South] more than anyone was responsible for giving Martin Luther King Jr. a platform on WVON…*Hotline* focused almost exclusively on local and national Civil Rights issues. (Barlow, 1999, p. 211).

A budding Civil Rights activist, Reverend Jesse Jackson also began his crusade at WVON during the mid-1960s by encouraging Black consumers to boycott Chicago's White owned businesses that would not hire Blacks for available positions (Searcy, p. 144). Jackson realized that WVON's access and influence to Chicago's Black public sphere would help him support the Black community and, as an added benefit, elevate his national exposure. Though AM radio, with its monaural fidelity characteristics, thrived greatly during the 1960s with tight top 40 music formats and solid revenue growth, storm clouds began forming toward the end of the decade as FM radio's superior stereo sound—ideal for music, cast a pall throughout the AM radio

landscape. Black stations throughout the country such as WVON had to reinvent themselves while keeping its mission to serve their African American communities.

***FM forces WVON Radio to change course***

FM, once dismissed by radio's elite, had emerged from the shadows thanks to artists who began recording "thematic" long-playing albums on 33-1/3 RPM, leading consumers to prefer longer tracks in excess of the 3-minute music selections allotted for 45 RPM disks. Also, FM "provided listeners with better sounding music and, with the advent of stereo, the capacity to broadcast in stereo" (Searcy, p. 292). In the 1970s, Chicago was the nation's second largest media market and AM Top 40 radio, which featured popular songs that were at or near three minutes in duration and was still a profitable format (Barlow, p. 226). WVON's decline actually began a little before FM's dominance in the radio marketplace. It can be traced back to 1969 after the death of owner Leonard Chess. The Chess family sold the station for $9 million to Globetrotter Communications (Benton, 2007). Globetrotter moved WVON's 1450 frequency down to the dormant 5,000 watt signal of 1390 AM, which increased the station's reach in the Chicagoland area (Benton, 2007). Like the Chess family previously, Globetrotter Communications was a White owned and operated entity, but unlike the Chess family, Globetrotter did not have the listeners, and on a broader scale, the community's interests in mind. A rift between management and on-air talent began when it was mandated that the station would decrease its community service programs and lower the amount of songs played per hour to accommodate more commercials (Searcy, p. 289). WVON's popular public affairs program, *Hotline*, was shortened to three shows a week from five a week (Searcy, p. 289, 291). The station's golden age was officially extinguished in 1977 when Globetrotter fired the on-air staff. Herb Kent described what happened:

> So our ratings continued to slide. We were in the throes of an FM revolution. [Radio station WBMX] was coming on with records we didn't play, and they just took over…[our] group of announcers were too old…they got new jocks, but that really wasn't the answer either. FM just made it a new day; AM radio was down in the dumps and it's never really come back up. (as quoted in Kent and Smallwood, p. 228-229)

Globetrotter then sold WVON to publishing giant, Gannett Company (Benton, 2007). It was not until the end of the decade that WVON was spared from a seemingly ignominious fate by two saviors from the station's past.

In 1979, Pervis Spann along with fellow WVON personality Wesley South formed Midway Broadcasting Company and purchased the 1450 AM frequency and launched WXOL Radio (Reich, 2013). Gannett Company, the original owners of the WVON call letters, dropped them and released back to the FCC. Midway successfully reclaimed the heritage WVON call letters (Benton, 2007) and assigned them to the 1450 AM frequency. In 1986, Midway dropped the music format from WVON and switched the station over to an all talk format where it resides today (Benton, 2007).

WVON is currently helmed by Spann's daughter, Melody Spann-Cooper. She has been tasked to make the station relevant among an increasingly fragmented media landscape that vies for the attention of a diverse Black audience. As a Black owned "legacy" radio station, WVON was hampered by a relatively weak AM signal that could not reach many Chicago neighborhoods. All that changed in 2006 when WVON entered into an agreement with corporate radio broadcasting giant, Clear Channel (now iHeart Media, Inc.) to lease the 1690 AM frequency. The agreement allowed the station to expand "its signal reach to the south

suburbs where many African Americans have moved over the years" (Target Market News). Spann-Cooper noted that she had to find a creative way to expand her listener base:

> Before, my signal was one thousand watts…there are now as many African Americans living in the suburbs as there are in the city, but I couldn't reach them on my former signal…It was a decision I had to make because of the changing demographics of Chicago. (Zook, p. 139)

WVON took a further step into the future when in 2012, it became the first urban talk radio station to become part of iHeartRadio, an online streaming platform where users can access radio stations of various formats from across the United States (iHeartRadio.com). The station credits the platform for increasing its listenership worldwide (Chicago Tonight).

### *WVON and the Drivers of the Black Public Sphere*

In order to fully understand what drives critical discourse in the Black public sphere, attention must be focused on some core elements that can ignite and mobilize African Americans into action. These core elements (drivers) can be characterized as economic empowerment, political empowerment and social empowerment.

#### *Economic Empowerment*

The struggles of African Americans in the economic space are well documented. In February 2015, the national Black unemployment rate was more than double that of Whites, 10.4 percent vs. 4.7 percent (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics). Since then, the Black unemployment had dropped to a pre COVID-19 rate of 5.8 percent in February 2020 while Whites experienced a slight dip at 3.1 percent. The coronavirus pandemic has created chaos as workers are being laid off from their jobs contributing to double digit unemployment rates for both Blacks and Whites, 16.7 percent and 14.2 percent, respectively (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics). Yet in Chicago, there are more Blacks living below the poverty line than any other race. As of 2018, 30.69 percent of Black Chicagoans lived below the poverty line (World Population Review). Political

scholar, Michael Dawson blames the city's segregation of races as a key factor in contributing to Black poverty because many residents of the predominantly Black south and west sides are deprived of public transit and job networks. "The way people get hired is through networks"…and people's social networks are predominantly within their own race, [Dawson] said (Chicago Reporter).

The need for Blacks to congregate and leverage their economic power—a buying power that was measured at $1.3 trillion in September 2019 (Inside Radio), is vital to turnaround this disturbing trend. Regina Austin, professor of law at University of Pennsylvania Law School notes that the Blacks participating in the Black public sphere need to recognize their economic worth in society:

> Blacks must develop outlets, both audiences and markets, for the products of their labor and creative genius. Black people need jobs. They need institutions and business concerns that Black people control. They need the protection of an ethic that discourages exploitation in commercial and personal relationships. All this requires that Blacks come together to defy the system that has almost entirely foreclosed them from the realm of production and commerce. (Austin, 1994, p. 2120)

Historically, WVON was and still is an active participant in matters involving Black economic empowerment. Today, WVON features a program that provides African Americans information about business and economic empowerment in the community. The Urban Business Roundtable (UBR) is aired three times weekly on WVON's broadcast platform and available via podcast on the station's website and on Facebook Live. The program's content features discussions with successful African American business people in various industries. The UBR

also promotes dialogue and debate about business and economic trends that affect Blacks in Chicago and nationwide (wvon.com).

### *Political Empowerment*

Another driver in the Black public sphere is political empowerment. History has consistently revealed that African Americans are often either shut out of the political process or at best, marginalized. This is evident in the racial make-up of Congress. Currently there are only three Blacks in the Senate and while the numbers of Blacks in the House of Representatives have made slight gains since 1968; African Americans make up only 7.6 percent or 57 members in the House (U.S. Congressional Research Service).

Phylis Johnson, professor of Radio, Television and Digital Media at Southern Illinois University-Carbondale, states that urban radio has a responsibility to convey the importance of Black participation in the political space:

> African American radio's partnership with the community is based upon an understanding of the urban family and culture, and its desire to succeed through education, and civic and political empowerment…by recognizing the motivation of African American radio owners and operators, those who wish to participate with these extremely powerful and influential media outlets in dealing with issues vital to the African American community should find open cooperation and ultimate success in their endeavors. (Johnson, p. 46)

WVON enlisted its "radio owners and operators" to launch a successful campaign to elect Chicago's first African American mayor—an election that is considered one of the most contentious in recent history.

#### *Harold Washington*

In 1983, a Black politician from Illinois' 1st congressional district announced he would be running for mayor of Chicago. This announcement created a seismic shift of epic proportions in

the city's political landscape. The election pitted Blacks against Whites and Democrats vs. Democrats; at the time Chicago hadn't seen a Republican mayor since 1927. The atmosphere was extremely toxic during the election process as Blacks around the city began believing that Washington may have a shot at winning the election. Backed by this momentum, Washington demonstrated his confidence in one of his campaign speeches:

> We've been pushed around, shoved around, beat, murdered, emasculated, destroyed…There's been an unfair distribution of all the goodies. No system works for us. We influence no institutions in this country except our own. We have no power. We have no land…We've been giving the White candidates our vote for years and years unstintingly hoping that they would include us in the process. Now it's come to the point where we say, 'Well, it's our turn. It's our turn!' (Rivlin, 1992, p. 147)

The dominant media took Washington's words "It's our turn" and used it as fodder to create rampant fear and mistrust among Chicago's White population (Rivlin, p. 148).

Washington proved victorious in the mayoral Democratic primary. He overcame formidable odds against the incumbent, Mayor Jane Byrne and challenger, Richard M. Daley, scion of the political regime once dominated by his father, former Mayor Richard J. Daley. For the general election, many Chicago Whites who voted Democrat in the past, switched their allegiance to the Republican candidate, Bernard Epton. Washington ended up winning the election by a close percentage (51%). What helped him overtake Epton was an unprecedented turnout by Black voters—85% had visited the polls on Election Day to vote for Washington (Rivlin, p. 196).

How did WVON factor into Harold Washington's victory? Although the station featured an all music format in 1983, it put itself in the forefront of the political scene by "hosting spontaneous call-in shows and more politically oriented talk shows to respond to listeners desires

to talk about the historic, and racially charged election" (Squires, 2009, p. 184). WVON also used its influence by inducing African Americans to participate in the voting process. The station also ran voter registration commercials and public service announcements to aid in Washington's campaign drive (Johnson, p. 511). WVON's strong influence within the Chicago Black public sphere [or in this case, polity] resulted in anointing an African American as mayor in one of the United States largest cities. Pervis Spann opined:

> The Black political movement has been alive and well right here at this station…We had a little victory here and there, but we hit it big with Harold Washington. (Means, 2013, p. 55)

Echoes of Washington's historic victory were prevalent in 2019 when two African American women, Lori Lightfoot and Toni Preckwinkle ran campaigns to be the next mayor of Chicago; a contest that Lightfoot won handily. Both candidates regularly appeared on WVON to unveil the platforms and field questions and concerns from the audience.

*Barack Obama*

Barack Obama made his run for the US Senate in 2004; he realized he need strong backing from the Black community. The issue for Obama was many in the Black political sphere did not think that he could relate to working class Blacks. Laura Washington, a journalist for the *Chicago Sun-Times* wrote that her uncle called Obama "an elitist who visits a housing project in a thousand dollar coat" (McClelland, 2010, p. 214). Obama attempted to win over skeptical Blacks by appearing on WVON Radio as a guest host. In his book, "The Audacity of Hope", Obama credited WVON as the station that first made note of its US senatorial campaign (Obama, 2006, p. 376). Also, according to Spann-Cooper, President Obama "grew his brand at [WVON] as a community activist and as a state senator, and on to (being) a U.S. senator, and look at him now. Who has that depth and breadth?" (Reich, 2013). Like Harold Washington, Barack Obama

benefited from WVON's deep connection Chicago's Black public sphere which was later parlayed into his successful run for the U.S. presidency.

*Chicago Mayoral Race 2015*

WVON touted its mayoral "interview series" on the social media platforms on Facebook, wvon.com, iheartradio.com and twitter. Listeners were asked to post questions to the candidates via WVON's twitter pages #WVON1690 and #TalkofChi. As a sign of the station's growing reliance on the internet platform, there was no mention of listeners needing to tune into the AM dial.

***Black Social Self-Empowerment***

The Nation of Islam (NOI), a religious organization founded in 1930, has been integral in fortifying Blacks with messages of self-respect and self-determination. Its founder, Wallace D. Fard Mohammed had envisioned a positive means for African Americans to achieve this goal:

> Teach the downtrodden and defenseless Black people a thorough Knowledge of God and of themselves and to put them on the road to self-independence with a superior culture and higher civilization than they had previously experienced. (noi.org)

Over the past 80 years, the NOI has preached to Blacks that any hope of being treated fairly by their White counterparts is virtually impossible. Mohammed's successor, the Honorable Elijah Muhammad stated that "[any] offer of integration is hypocritical and is made by those who are trying to deceive the Black peoples into believing that their 400-year old open enemies of freedom, justice and equality are, all of a sudden, their "friends" (noi.org). Squires sees the NOI as a "satellite sphere" which is the opposite of the enclave public mentioned earlier:

> Satellite public spheres aim to maintain a solid group identity and build independent institutions…[they] enter into wider public debates where there is a clear convergence of their

> interest with those of other publics or where their particular institutions or practices cause friction or controversies within wider publics. (Squires, p. 463)

An example of such friction among the publics in relation to the NOI is can be attributed to controversial statements made by Minister Louis Farrakhan against the Jewish community and their relationship to the United States (splcenter.org). Farrakhan has been credited for organizing the 1995 Million Man March which "capitalized on the controversial statements many had about the worsening political, economic, and social conditions of Blacks," (Alexander-Floyd, 2003, p. 193).

While the NOI was often at odds with the purpose and goals of the Civil Rights movement (which WVON often embraced), WVON was never shy in offering its station as a platform for the NOI to share its viewpoints with the Black community. On the *Hotline* talk show, the Honorable Elijah Muhammad encouraged listeners to think differently about Black self-reliance:

> It will work here! We can start here on the South Side where there is nearly a million people of our kind…that if we work and save twenty five cents a week, a dollar a week, whatever we can save and fill up and build homes for our people here instead of waiting for the government to build them up to pay high rent for [them]…we can do these things ourselves…instead of trying to have the White man from the North Side come down to the South Side and build all of our businesses for us and take the profit back to the North Side and live like a king. (Searcy, p. 149)

WVON invited Minister Farrakhan to spend time with former evening drive-time host, Cliff Kelley, on its internet platform wvon.com. There, Farrakhan reiterated the same NOI economic message as it was in the 1960s. He implored Blacks to "hold your nickels, your dimes, because

it's going to start just like Elijah Muhammad said, '5 cents a day, 25 cents a week, $1 a month,'"(finalcall.com).

***Marginalizing those Marginalized***

It has been noted throughout this analysis, that Black radio's main function is to serve the community it represents through polity, economics and self-empowerment in the Black public sphere. To be sure, the African American community should have an expectation of solidarity amongst its members in their "specialized" public sphere. Blacks have been subject to the evils of "two hundred fifty years of slavery, ninety years of Jim Crow, sixty years of separate but equal [and] thirty-five years of racist housing policy" (Coates, 2014, p.1). The argument for unconditional solidarity is understandable given the challenges African Americans have experienced in the United States. However, what happens when the subaltern counterpublic is guilty of marginalizing those participants in the sphere who have dissenting views? There can be instances where viewpoints that run counter to what is deemed "acceptable" within the sphere are dismissed. For instance, a Black listener may call into a Black talk radio station to voice his/her support for a White candidate against one who is of color. Regardless of the arguments provided, they will likely be vilified by the host and other listeners. Catherine Squires cites an instance where a similar situation occurred on air at WVON. She opines:

> How can a Black political discourse (or any minority discourse) be constructed without stifling differences under oppressive, convenient essentialisms and "race traitor" accusations?...in a pluralist society, one will eventually have to deal with one's adversaries, as well as one's allies who have healthy disagreements with one's position." (Squires, p. 90)

Squires reveals a valid point. Habermas' "rational critical discourse", should also apply to the subaltern counterpublic (where Black talk radio resides). It can be argued that despite the

injustices, African Americans should not be seen as a monolithic group devoid of diverse thinking from within. The combination of differing viewpoints could conceivably lead to establishing common ground and thus provide solutions to long-standing problems in the community.

### *WVON in the Digital Age*

As mentioned throughout this analysis, WVON has utilized social media platforms to engage and connect with its African American audience. The station streams its broadcast content daily on Facebook Live and with good reason. Seventy percent of African Americans use the Facebook platform for news and entertainment (Pew Research Center). Spann-Cooper understands that WVON has to stay relevant to audiences who rely on different media to get their information:

> I refer to radio as the original social media, so these two media are the perfect accompaniment. Social media has been incredibly useful in helping us grow a younger demographic, which now finds 34% of our listeners between 25-49 years old. In addition to growing audience share, clients are making it a necessary component to their buys. You cannot be in radio today concentrating solely on listeners. You have to deal in "audience share," which encompasses social, digital, and radio. (Radio World)

A prime example of WVON's continuing efforts to inform Chicago's African American community recently occurred during the onset of the coronavirus pandemic. As COVID-19 crippled the nation's industries and put its citizens out of work, Congress and the Trump administration agreed to a $2 trillion economic stabilization package, which was designed to "provide direct payments and jobless benefits for individuals, money for states and a huge bailout fund for businesses" (New York Times). WVON hosted a special Facebook Live

program, *Stimulus 2020, What's in it For Us?* hosted by mid-day personality Perri Small and former Chicago city treasurer, Kurt Summers. The Facebook Live program sought to provide information about the stimulus package and field questions from viewers about how to apply for help. During the introduction, Summers emphasized why it was important for African Americans to take advantage of the stimulus package during this difficult period:

> It's such an important conversation because too often, folks in our community get left out of the conversation and you know the saying that 'if you're not at the table, you're on the menu'. This is our opportunity to make sure our folks are not on the menu and a lot of these things are moving quickly and they are first come, first serve. (Small)

Summers opening statement was impactful because he made the stimulus package both personal and relatable to the Black community. It was a plea to WVON viewers to take action and not be left behind as they have been so many times in the country's history.

WVON also utilized both Twitter and Facebook Live to keep its audience abreast of an issue of interest in the African American community---reparations. In 1989, US Representative John Conyers III introduced *H.R. 40: Commission to Study and Develop Reparations for African-Americans Act*. The bill seeks to create a commission that would:

> …examine slavery and discrimination in the colonies and the United States from 1619 to the present and recommend appropriate remedies. Among other requirements, the commission shall identify (1) the role of federal and state governments in supporting the institution of slavery, (2) forms of discrimination in the public and private sectors against freed slaves and their descendants, and (3) lingering negative effects of slavery on living African-Americans and society. (Govtrack)

Conyers' bill has been languishing in the House of Representatives for over thirty years, yet recently, there have been indications that the bill's existence is making headway among local governments. In 2019, WVON featured a program on both Facebook Live and Twitter featuring a panel of local political and community leaders who discussed how restitution can be applied to "community control of police, employability and improved health care rehabilitation in the African American community" (WVON Facebook Live). Panel members also cited how Evanston, Illinois was one of the first US municipalities to create a reparations plan for African Americans. Relief will come from city taxes levied on businesses selling cannabis to the public to make amends for Blacks who were disproportionally arrested and charged more than Whites for cannabis possession (City of Evanston).

While WVON still prides itself as an important voice of the African American community, there are challenges the station must face for the future. In 2019, the Federal Communications Commission hosted a panel featuring radio industry leaders to explore the current state of the radio industry. AM radio is quickly becoming a relic of the past, encumbered by "a subpar listening experience, declining ratings, and nearly zero interest in the purchase or sale of AM stations in the brokerage community" (Jacobs). Panelist Alfred Liggins III, president and CEO of Radio One expressed resignation about AM radio's future:

> I think it's done, it's just a matter of time. The fact of the matter is that AM content is already moving to the FM band, either on full-power FM stations or FM translators. *Young people don't know what the AM band is* [emphasis added]. It's just a poor listening experience. (Jacobs)

Regarding WVON, messages of equality borne from the Civil Rights era are echoed on the station's terrestrial signal and on its website, however in reviewing the wvon.com site, Twitter

feeds and Facebook, there doesn't appear to be an indication that a younger demographic is participating in the discourse. Most posts are from an older audience responding to WVON's daily program content (wvon.com, @wvon1690, facebook.com/WVON 1690). Therefore, it could be argued that WVON may be "stuck" in the Civil Rights counterpublic because station management feels it must continue serving its listener base; the average Black talk radio listener is between 45-64 years old, with the highest percentage resting between 65+, which includes many who had lived through and participated in the Civil Rights movement. Black talk radio is keen to attracting this specific demographic by offering programing that speaks to their maturity and insight, and "at their best, the programs have an ability to penetrate Black neighborhoods and elicit instant response in a way that evokes comparisons with the historic role of the Black church as a kind of communications switchboard and forum for community action" (Schmidt, 1989).

The challenge for WVON may be to create a "new" counterpublic for younger listeners. That audience is typically listening to what is called *Rhythmic Contemporary Hit Radio* format where 44% of its listeners are 18-34 years old. According to Arbitron, this audience are heavy internet users and are also "big social networking and text messaging practitioners" (Arbitron). WVON does not play music or offer comedic morning drive patter that is typically found on urban FM radio stations. WVON's afternoon personality, Matt McGill cites the difficulty for WVON to reach this particular demographic:

> Our competition level is a little different. Our challenge is to…compete against music radio stations, [and] the internet—a whole wave of [the] way people communicate and get their information and news. We're competing with them (Chicago Tonight).

Another challenge for WVON to stay relevant in the African American enclave is competing against "do-it-yourself" radio, or podcasting. Podcasting exploded on the scene during the early 2000s whereby anyone with a microphone and a laptop could create and produce content for anyone to hear. In 2018, there were over 75 million Americans listening to podcasts and the number is projected to more than double by 2024. Plus, there are more than 555,000 active podcasts on Apple's platform from which to choose (Heater). Twenty seven percent of regular monthly podcast listeners are African American, with most residing in the 18-29 demographic (Edison Research). Unlike their government-regulated counterparts, podcasters affords their audiences new and diverse voices to the discourse. Specifically, African American podcasters can freely speak about the Black experience:

> These podcasters largely eschew the "polished" and tightly formatted character of most mainstream corporate media, opting instead for an informal, flexible approach that allows for free-form conversation and embraces a range of Black vernaculars and regional accents. The conversational nature of the podcasts involves heavy use of Black American cultural commonplaces, which has led both listeners and podcasters to compare shows to historically significant Black social spaces like barber/beauty shops and churches. (Florini)

These new voices may eventually replace traditional urban talk radio stations such as WVON. Digital media platforms are so bountiful and so influential; it may prove difficult for WVON to catch the ear and thus exact community participation from younger listeners in the future.

***Conclusion***

Ethnic based radio serves the community it represents. It is an outlet where listeners can share their positive and negative experiences with people who are "like" themselves. Issues are communicated in a vacuum where outsiders, though not wholly excluded, are not necessarily

privy to the issues and concerns inside that community. The WVON of the Civil Rights era (and Black radio stations throughout the United States) serve to entertain (through music and creative on-air talent) and inform (by being active participants of the movement). Black radio continues to follow the tenets of that era to provide an outlet for African Americans to voice their opinions and work toward solutions in a world that can be hostile against them at any given moment. The importance of Black radio is to foster a community connection, an ideal that is tantamount not only for a station's survival but for the community's survival as well:

> As demonstrated through its community service projects (such as unity and family fun days, locally produced public affairs shows about Black history, civic pride, and urban problems, and newscasts styled to attract teens), Black/urban radio is distinct in its commitment to the inner city; urban radio is truly a medium of shared cultural experiences. (Johnson, 1992, p. 510)

Black radio serves to disseminate issues and concerns affecting African Americans and create a space for such concerns to be contemplated and acted upon.

The American media has become schizophrenic; it contracts and constricts. Media companies are consolidating, and at the same time, new digital communication platforms (podcasts) are being developed by entrepreneurs on a daily basis. In between this frenzied activity, sits a Black-owned radio station, which still gilds the edges of a dying analog world, while trying to make a lasting imprint on a digital one. Unlike media, which serves a dominant and mainstream audience, WVON is a radio property that has a taxing responsibility to help uplift a nation of people who have, for so long, been marginalized in the United States.

Throughout its history, WVON has been quite nimble in its participation inside the Black public sphere—even as the sphere continues to fragment itself over time. The station, with its

dedication to the Civil Rights movement, used its *voice to counter* those institutions that served (and continue to serve) as a barrier against any substantial gains for Blacks. The station's voice, undeterred, freed Chicago African Americans from their "enclaved publics" and granted them the power to fight against such barriers. WVON also provided a voice to those with "radical" viewpoints—satellite spheres, to give listeners alternative ideas and visions from which to choose.

It remains to be seen how and when WVON will fully engage the Black community in the digital sphere. The station's iHeartRadio streaming platform does allow Black Chicagoans and Black Americans nationwide to keep abreast of issues affecting the community. The challenge for WVON is to figure out how to attract African American youth to WVON's internet programming and sustain their interest. It may mean that a separate internet "channel" needs to be created with programming that is specifically designed for this particular demographic. Local NPR radio station WBEZ, offers a radio and internet platform called *Vocalo*, which features music and social issues that are geared toward today's youth, specifically those of color (vocalo.org). WVON could do the same and reach a new "sub-sphere" of young Black listeners. Doing so could help grow its listener base and create loyalty to carry WVON through its next 50 years.

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