

# Mass Media and Cultural Homogenization: Broadcasting the American Dream on the Radio\*

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## Abstract

Does media build nations? I leverage the expansion of radio networks in the United States to estimate the impact of access to mass media on cultural homogenization and nation building. To do so, I link data on radio coverage during the interwar period to the US full count census. I construct radio network access by developing a novel signal propagation model suitable to AM radio, the only radio technology at the time. I feed this model with newly digitized data on the universe of transmitting stations during the interwar period to compute what radio channels were available to American households. I combine radio network coverage with several measures of cultural trends based on naming patterns for children. Exploiting exogenous variation in radio signal reception induced by soil characteristics and stations' tower growth over time, I find that network access homogenized American culture. Homogenization happened through the assimilation of white, black and immigrant households towards white native names representative of birth cohorts prior to radio expansion.

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