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# Elites, Masses, and Media Blacklists: The Dixie Chicks Controversy<sup>\*</sup>

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## *Abstract*

*Several studies have shown the influence of ownership on media content in routine contexts, but none has quantitatively tested it in the context of a crisis. Recently the country musicians the Dixie Chicks were blacklisted from the radio for criticizing the president in wartime. I use this event to test the role of media ownership in a crisis. Through analyzing airplay from a national sample of radio stations, this paper finds that contrary to prominent allegations grounded in the political economy tradition of media sociology, this backlash did not come from owners of large chains. Rather, I find that opposition to the Dixie Chicks represents grassroots conservative sentiment, which may be exacerbated by the ideological connotations of country music or tempered by tolerance for dissent.*

The Dixie Chicks controversy has its roots on March 10, 2003, when the group performed at the London nightclub, Shepherd's Bush Empire. On March 12 the British newspaper *The Guardian* published a brief, three-star review of the concert, approvingly noting that in a "profoundly punk rock" moment, lead singer Natalie Maines told the audience, "Just so you know, we're ashamed the president of the United States is from Texas" (Clarke 2003). The remark reached American country music fans a few hours later with a post to the small Web site, *countrynation.com*, which had been following the European press coverage of the Dixie Chicks tour. That evening the article was copied in a post entitled "Dixie Chick Tea Party — dump Lipton tea for sponsoring anti-American Chicks!" to the internet discussion group *rec.music.country.western*.<sup>1</sup>

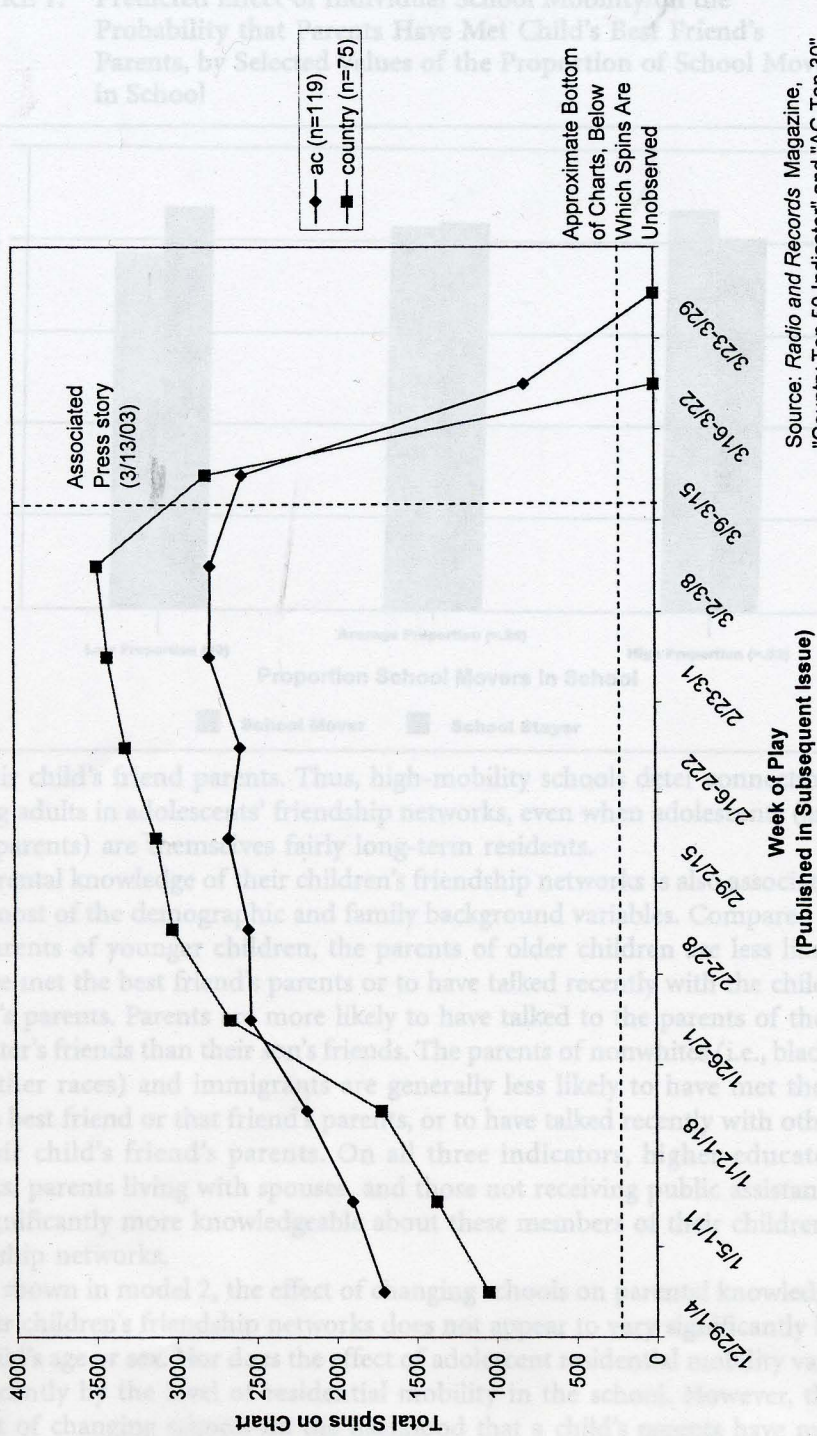
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On March 13, the day after the *Guardian* article and Internet discussion, the Associated Press published the first story in the major American media on the controversy, noting that “angry phone calls flooded Nashville radio station WKDF-FM on Thursday, some calling for a boycott of the Texas trio’s music” (Associated Press 2003). After the wire story, several newspapers carried stories on the subject and internet discussion bloomed, spreading to alt.fan.dixie-chicks and numerous political discussion groups. Much of the Internet discussion referred to the Dixie Chicks as “sluts” and associated them with other antiwar celebrities, evident in the insult “hillbilly Jane Fondas.” Some posters said they agreed with Maines or discussed the nature of dissent and rebuttals to it in a democracy at war, but many of the posts simply expressed contempt for the musicians. For instance, one post described the Chicks as “stupid anti-American sluts like Jane Fonda, Barbara Streisand [sic], Jeannie Garafalo [sic], Hillary Clinton, etc.” and (inaccurately) alleged that fans at the London concert burned an American flag. Other posts took offense at the foreign context of the remark. The Internet discussion was a microcosm of the discourse about Maines’s insult.

On March 14 the Associated Press reported that radio stations had begun dropping the Dixie Chicks from their playlists and engaging in such publicity stunts as providing “trash cans outside the radio station for people to throw their Dixie Chicks CDs away” (Heidgerd 2003). The week before the controversy began their songs were number one on the adult contemporary and country airplay charts as published in the trade journal, *Radio and Records*. During the week that the story broke, their numbers began to slip on the country chart but held steady for adult contemporary. Maines rapidly apologized for the disrespectful tone of her remarks, but maintained her right to oppose the war, to no avail. Within two weeks they had dropped from both charts entirely. As will be shown below, however, the drop was not spread evenly among radio stations, but varied by locale, format, and owner in both surprising and predictable ways.

In a *New York Times* essay that was widely circulated and quoted on the Internet and alternative print media, Princeton economist Paul Krugman (2003) accused the massive radio conglomerate Clear Channel of conspiring against the Dixie Chicks as a favor to the Bush administration because, among other reasons, “the Federal Communications Commission is considering further deregulation that would allow Clear Channel to expand even further, particularly into television” (March 25). Clear Channel is widely reviled because it is the largest radio chain and allegedly abuses its market power. The notion that Clear Channel is out to punish the Dixie Chicks for their political statement has become a small bit of received wisdom in some circles (e.g., Barrett 2003; Zacharek 2003). This fits into the familiar frame of the “corporate media” serving to legitimate conservative interests (e.g., Bagdikian 2000; McChesney 1999a).

FIGURE 1: Trends in Dixie Chicks Airplay



Source: Radio and Records Magazine, "Country Top 50 Indicator" and "AC Top 30"

Ironically, were Krugman correct about the chains' actions and motives, these actions would nonetheless be counter-productive. Although in the following months the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) continued with its long anticipated deregulation agenda, the Dixie Chicks blacklist was the subject of a Senate Commerce Committee hearing which contributed to a backlash against media concentration in Congress (Holland 2003; U.S. Senate 2003).

This article uses radio airplay data from *Radio and Records* to determine the source of the Dixie Chicks' blacklisting. I assess competing hypotheses of conglomerate media ownership and local sentiment.

## Theory

This article draws on three distinct literatures: the political economy of the mass media tradition, the social movements literature, and the sociology of culture. To the extent that cultural industry organizations shape cultural discourse, and to the extent that cultural discourse shapes our thoughts and actions, these organizations have a tremendous amount of power. Both assumptions of this syllogism are disputable, and the inquiry is the object of the political economy of the mass media.

Political economy theorists assume that cultural organizations derive their primary interests and political influences from ownership. Herman and McChesney (1997) assert that corporate ownership makes the media "missionaries" for global capitalism. Herman and Chomsky (1988) describe for-profit ownership as one of five "filters" that let the media distort reality and promote hegemony. Bagdikian (2000) has argued through six editions of his book that "ultra-conservative" managers skew media content.

There are numerous historical studies that establish the role of media ownership, especially in extreme circumstances. William Randolph Hearst routinely shaped coverage in his media properties to promote both his other financial interests and his political ambitions within the Democratic party (Nassaw 2000). Chomsky (1999) describes how the Sulzbergers stifled *New York Times* coverage of the Spanish Civil War. More recently, Rupert Murdoch gained favor with the Communist Chinese by canceling a book contract, dropping the BBC from his satellite network, and paying an above-market book advance to a member of the inner circle (Curtin 2000).

Those quantitative studies that most rigorously isolate the effect of ownership typically examine media bias in routine contexts (e.g., Williams 2002; Akhavan-Majid et al. 1991). However, much of the historical literature's interest lies in its exploration of the possibility that the greatest bias will be exhibited when class interests are most greatly threatened; during a political crisis of some

sort. Even if power is not regularly exercised, its potential for use in an extreme situation can dramatically restructure the dynamics of a system, as seen by the extreme example of the impact of nuclear stockpiles on conventional warfare (Van Creveld 1991).

Political economists have noted a large increase in the concentration of media ownership since World War II (Bagdikian 2000; McChesney 1999b). Particularly of note is the shift of media properties from wealthy families to publicly traded firms, the latter often called “the corporate media.” The managerial capitalism of corporations is theoretically and empirically distinct from heroic capitalism in its approach to media properties (Bagdikian 2000; Tift & Jones 1999).

For decades radio largely escaped the trend of conglomeration thanks to FCC regulations that limited firms to owning just a few dozen stations. The Telecommunications Act of 1996 effectively eliminated ownership restrictions, and within a few years the industry reached its current level of conglomeration, with Infinity/Viacom, Cumulus, and Citadel owning over one hundred stations each and Clear Channel with over one thousand.

Its large size has not made Clear Channel popular with political economists, activists, recording artists, record labels, or its radio rivals. The journalist Eric Boehlert is particularly critical of Clear Channel. His ongoing series in *Salon* magazine has accused the company of kickbacks for airplay, sexual harassment, and abuse of market power (Boehlert 2000-03). Indeed, Clear Channel is sometimes portrayed as the source of all evil, strife, and upheaval in the music industry. It was in this context of academic and political discourse about corporate media in general and Clear Channel in particular that Krugman (2003) and numerous other commentators accused the company of initiating the Dixie Chicks’ blacklisting. This provides the first hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 1:* Large chains, especially the industry leader, Clear Channel, reduced Dixie Chicks airplay more than independent stations and small chains.

It is useful, however, to appreciate how songs are actually chosen for radio airplay, as several trade publications and production of culture studies explain. Most commercial radio stations do not operate according to the romantic notion of a connoisseur disc jockey sharing his favorite records with the audience. Rather, at nearly all commercial radio stations there is a division of labor between the disc jockey, who plays the records and makes patter, and the program director, who chooses which records to play and when. The typical program director is a skilled professional who creates a “music schedule,” which is essentially a script for DJs to follow. At smaller stations the program director may also be a disc jockey or the general manager, but at large stations it is a distinct position, and at especially large stations there is a further division of labor between the program director and the music director. It is also common for a program director to program two or more radio stations owned by the

same chain. To create the schedule, the program director uses trade magazines, other radio stations' playlists, airplay and sales charts, systematic audience telephone surveys, audience phone calls and letters, information from record companies and their promoters, and the database software, Selector. Intuition and taste play some role, but it is a highly technical profession (Lynch & Gillespie 1998). Chain-owned radio stations are especially likely to employ this technical, research-driven method (Ahlkvist 2001), which has the consequence of promoting homogeneity in their playlists (Ahlkvist & Fisher 2000). This production of culture literature on the bureaucratic nature of large radio chains provides a counter-hypothesis to that provided by political economy:

*Hypothesis 1a:* Large chains will reduce Dixie Chicks airplay more slowly than independent stations and small chains.

The political economists Herman and Chomsky (1988) list flak from social movements and other aggrieved parties as a major source of media distortion, but their tradition largely abstains from systematic study of where flak comes from and what effect it has. Some media scholars have described the role of social movements in shaping the media and the political sociology of social movements provides a useful framework for studying the phenomenon.

Social movement organizations actively seek to influence the mass media and some, such as the American Family Association and Fairness and Accuracy In Reporting, have this as their sole purpose (Montgomery 1989; Suman & Rossman 2000). Alterman (2003) documents an aggressive effort by various elements of the conservative movement to influence the media. They claim to counter liberal bias, but Alterman considers them to be "working the refs."

The Dixie Chicks situation has parallels to the Hollywood blacklist, which is commonly, but inaccurately, imagined to have been a conspiracy between the studio owners and the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC). In fact, the blacklist is a striking example of the power that social movements can exert on the mass media. The 1952 *Miracle* decision put the studios in a very strong legal position from which to face Congress, but competition from television and the 1948 *Paramount* decision ending vertical integration put them in a very weak economic position from which to face a boycott.

Contemporary leftist accounts of the blacklist did not claim that the moguls acted from class interest, personal animus for Communists, or even fear of unfavorable legislation. Rather the leftist critique of the studios was that they were too "cowardly" to stand up to American Legion pickets (Anonymous 1952). Management and the unions together formed the Motion Picture Industry Council (MPIC) to fight the blacklist, although MPIC eventually adopted a strategy of appeasement. The blacklist and the related "clearance" system were effectively run by the American Legion and other right-wing so-

cial movement organizations that published lists of those who had been named by informers or were tied to front organizations (Navasky 1980). The Legion promised to mobilize their four million members and auxiliaries to picket any film involving these suspected Communists. Likewise, once exposed as a Communist, folk singer Pete Seeger was “banned from many mainstream venues either because there were outspoken anti-Communists to oppose him or because venues wished to avoid *potential* controversy” (Bromberg & Fine 2002:1144).

Even if social movement organizations have no proximate involvement in a political event, they can have an indirect effect through socializing their members to address a certain set of concerns with a certain repertoire of political tactics (Tilly 1983). Therefore, a collection of proximately spontaneous acts can meaningfully be considered a form of collective action and part of a social movement. Movements have taught their members that boycotts are an appropriate response to offensive cultural content (Montgomery 1989; Suman & Rossman 2000). This tactic is so practiced that it no longer necessarily requires central coordination.

Gamson (1992) found that in small-group discussions of political issues, Americans almost reflexively invoke the potential for grass-roots political action, particularly if they view themselves, or those with whom they sympathize, as having suffered an injustice. The links among public opinion, social movements, and spontaneous political action motivate the second major hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 2:* Stations in states and regions with conservative politics more greatly reduced Dixie Chicks airplay than stations in liberal areas.

Disagreement and distaste need not necessarily lead to protest. Even if one is offended by speech, a commitment to political tolerance may allow one to let the offense pass without censure. Evidence from survey experiments (Nelson, Clawson & Oxley 1997), ethnographic interviews (Chong 1993), and focus groups (Gamson 1992) shows that framing issues in terms of free speech makes people more willing to tolerate offensive speech. This should translate to the macro level. Areas where free speech is a popular value may see free speech invoked more often — and resonate more often — in cultural conflicts.

*Hypothesis 2a:* Expressed tolerance for critical speech suppresses the negative impact of conservative politics on Dixie Chicks airplay.

The sociology of culture literature on country music provides further perspective on the Dixie Chicks. The country music form originated with the folk music of Anglo-Saxons, Celts, and African Americans in the American South (Peterson 1997). In the 1920s a burgeoning commercial recording and broadcasting industry sought out new music beyond New York to feed a ravenous and diverse market. Anthropologists such as Alan Lomax and Tin Pan



Alley A & R men such as Ralph Peer recorded “hillbilly” and “race” records, and in the process split a fairly integrated roots music tradition into genres that would eventually become white “country” music and black “blues.” In the mid 1920s Henry Ford sponsored “old timey” musicians, such as Fiddlin’ John Carson as a way to promote a wholesome nationalism grounded in pastoralism and the identity of old white ethnic stocks. This music stood in contrast to the commercial jazz music of Tin Pan Alley, which was associated with blacks, Jews, sex, alcohol, and big cities. Beginning in the 1930s, the Communist Party used folk music in meetings and labor organizing (Denisoff 1969). In 1953, Congressional redhunters attacked the Communist folk group, the Weavers, splitting the genre further — not by race but by politics (Peterson 1997:199). Thenceforth, “folk” music was identified with the political left (Denisoff 1969), whereas “country” music was identified with the political right (DiMaggio, Peterson & Esco 1972; Lund 1972). By the 1970s country music had spread from a rural white audience to the urban white working class (Peterson & DiMaggio 1975). Ironically, as country reached a more urban audience, began to use electric instruments, and integrated into the commercial music industry, lyrics “loaded up on signifiers that unambiguously locate the song — and by inference the singer — squarely within the country music tradition” (Peterson 1997:227-8). As its various historical names (“hillbilly,” “country,” “country-western,” “folk,” and “old timey”) imply, country music has always been associated with pastoral white America and its values, such as independence, patriotism, and religion.

Like country music, the related concepts of “Texas” and “cowboy” have strong connotations. Shively (1992) found that uneducated, rural, white, and Indian men adore Western movies and consider “cowboy” a high compliment. This perspective is not universally shared; “cowboy” is a favorite epithet used by the left, both in America and abroad. Many caricatures of George W. Bush show him wearing a cowboy hat. (Indeed the popular cartoon strip *Doonesbury* has long portrayed the President as nothing but a hat.) Around the world antiwar protests not infrequently feature posters and t-shirts with variations on the slogan, “Bomb Texas” (Hanson 2003; Powell 2003). In Vienna protestors used an effigy of Bush dressed in a cowboy outfit. To the protestors and cartoonists, a “cowboy” is a self-righteous, violent rustic, and “Texas” represents all the same traits, as well as the oil industry.

Conservatives invert this caricature by embracing the image of the cowboy (Engeman 2003). For instance, they frequently use the 1952 western film, *High Noon*, as a metaphor for current events, with the cowardly townspeople representing the Europeans and the town marshal — who alone has the strength of character to fight the bandits — as the Americans and British (Woolsey 2002). This is merely a colorful metaphor for the neoconservatives’ general principle that a Hobbesian world can only be faced by a strong and

hard-headed Anglo-American alliance, with most of Europe being too weak and naïve to defend the West from barbarism (Kagan 2002). Thus one can see that the iconography of “cowboys” and “Texas” resonates with both sides of the debate as to whether world problems are best resolved by a forceful hegemon or through a balance of power and negotiations in international institutions — a debate that is at the core of the dispute over the second Gulf War.

The ideological connotations of country music and its related iconography provide my final hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 3:* Country stations reduced Dixie Chicks airplay more than adult contemporary stations.

## Data

The primary dataset is composed of all country and adult contemporary playlists posted to *Radio and Records*' Web site for the week ending March 22, 2002 — the first full week after the Maines' remarks. *Radio and Records* is the premiere trade magazine for the radio industry and largely consists of airplay charts and other data tables. The print edition used to publish playlists, but now these are only found on the Web site. These lists report what songs were played by specific stations in several different “formats,” or music genres.<sup>2</sup>

For each of the 224 country and 136 adult contemporary (AC) playlists, I measured how often the appropriate Dixie Chicks single was played from March 16 through March 22. Although Natalie Maines made her controversial remark about the President on March 10, this was not reported by any major American news organization until March 13, and few newspapers took note until March 15. Therefore the week ending on March 22 captures the initial reaction to her remark, a considerable drop in airplay. Comparing the two weeks will, if anything, underestimate the consequent drop in airplay, since for half of the earlier week, rumors had been circulating at a low level, and as the first two AP stories tell, some stations had already received phone calls.

In the previous week the Dixie Chicks had two singles on the charts from their quintuple-platinum album, *Home*. “Landslide,” written by Stevie Nicks about her father's death, was largely played on adult contemporary (soft rock) stations. Country stations played “Travelin' Soldier,” which tells the story of a young girl's love letters to and from a soldier who ultimately dies in Vietnam. Both songs are ballads about heartbreak that were written by other songwriters. Aside from being on different charts and “Landslide” being released first, the principle difference between the two songs is that the lyrics of “Travelin' Soldier” deal with military themes whereas “Landslide” is more abstract. Neither song is overtly critical of the U.S.

I am interested in the change in airplay the Dixie Chicks received.<sup>3</sup> If a song is currently on a station's playlist, the playlist provides the previous week's figures alongside the current information for that song, but if a song has dropped off a station's playlist, then the previous week's information is not reproduced. Unfortunately the website is not archived. Therefore, I only observe how many times a given station played the Dixie Chicks from March 9 to March 15 if that station continued to play them from March 16 to March 22. However, in the earlier week "Landslide" was number one on the adult contemporary chart, and "Travelin' Soldier" was number nine on the country chart. Checking against data on other singles shows that such preeminence ensures that nearly all stations will play a given song. To further test the validity of this assumption, I randomly drew a subsample of twenty-five AC and twenty-five country stations that did not play the Dixie Chicks from March 16 through March 22. By e-mail or telephone I asked their program directors, when available, and other personnel otherwise, if they had been playing the Dixie Chicks in early March, before the controversy. Thirty-four out of thirty-six respondents acknowledged that they had been playing the Chicks then. One even told me "[t]hey had a top charting record. I anticipate all country stations were playing the Chicks at or near the top of their playlists." Therefore, the most reasonable operational assumption is to impute that stations unobserved for the earlier week were in fact playing the Dixie Chicks then.

I summarize this change in airplay with airplay ratio: the number of plays in the week after the comment divided by the number of plays in the week of the comment. For my dependent variable, I log this ratio, first adding a small constant to allow values of zero to be transformed. A high score indicates that the Dixie Chicks were kept on at about the same rate as before Maines' comment. A low score indicates that they either were greatly reduced or dropped entirely.

$$r = \log \left( \frac{a}{b} + .01 \right)$$

where  $r$  = logged airplay ratio

$a$  = airplay 3/16 – 3/22/03

$b$  = airplay 3/9 – 3/15/03, imputed as positive value if unobserved

My independent variables fall into two categories: ownership and local political climate. To code ownership, I create a dummy set with flags for all eight chains that own at least five stations in the sample or subsample. The omitted category consists of small chains and independent stations.

I measure the local political climate through two variables at the state level and two variables at the regional level. For those radio stations in markets

TABLE 1: Summary of Variables

|   | Source                                   | Unit of Measurement | Range        |
|---|--|---------------------|--------------|
| Logged airplay ratio                            | <i>Radio and Records</i>                 | Station             | [−8.2, .15]  |
| Owner   | <i>Radio and Records</i>                 | Station             | 9 Categories |
| Country vs. AC format                           | <i>Radio and Records</i>                 | Station             | Binary       |
| Percent of population in military               | <i>Statistical Abstract of U.S. 2002</i> | State               | [0, 1.1]     |
| Percent of 2000 vote for Bush                   | <i>Statistical Abstract of U.S. 2002</i> | State               | [38.4, 60.3] |
| Percent favoring war in Iraq                    | ABC News Polls 8/02, 9/02                | Census Division     | [22.2, 45.2] |
| Percent favoring free speech for Communists     | <i>GSS 2000</i>                          | Census Division     | [55.8, 77.8] |
| Free Speech $\times$ Bush Vote Interaction Term | <i>Abstract and GSS</i>                  | State               | [5.9, 51.1]  |

defined by Arbitron as being evenly split between two states, I averaged the two states' traits, weighted by their population sizes. The first variable is the percentage of the state's 2000 popular vote going to George W. Bush (U.S. Census Bureau 2002). This is a fine-grained measure of support for Bush among the state's politically active population, which is relevant because Maines not only denigrated the war but also insulted him personally. The second state-level measure is the percentage of the state population composed of active-duty military personnel (U.S. Census Bureau 2002). This figure proxies not only the servicemen and women themselves, but their relatives and those who depend economically on local military bases. All three groups could be expected to be especially supportive of troops in the field and defensive of policies that put them there.

To measure public opinion towards the war per se, I pool two consecutive ABC News polls from August and September of 2002, with a joint sample size of 1,264 (ABC News 2002a, 2002b). Both polls asked, "Would you favor or oppose having U.S. forces take military action against Iraq to force Saddam Hussein from power?" I measure this variable at the level of the 9-category census division and attach it to each radio station within the appropriate division.<sup>4</sup>

Because the notions of free speech and tolerance for dissent figure prominently in popular debate over the Dixie Chicks, I tested the effect of regional levels of tolerance using a 2000 General Social Survey question (Davis, Smith & Marsden 2000): "Now, I should like to ask you some questions about a man who admits he is a Communist. Suppose this admitted Communist wanted to make a speech in your community. Should he be allowed to speak, or not?" The GSS question does not directly address the Dixie Chicks' situation

TABLE 2: OLS Regression of Logged Airplay Ratio

|   | Subsample          |                     |                  |
|---|--------------------|---------------------|------------------|
|   | All Stations       | Country             | A/C              |
| R <sup>2</sup>                              | .329               | .272                | .201             |
| MSE   | 3.025              | 3.177               | 2.628            |
| N   | 360                | 224                 | 136              |
|   | b                  | b                   | b                |
| Ownership dummies <sup>a</sup>              |                    |                     |                  |
| Brill                                       | -.76<br>(1.39)     | —                   | —                |
| Citadel                                     | 1.36*<br>(.62)     | 2.20**<br>(.83)     | -.22<br>(.87)    |
| Clear Channel                               | 2.28***<br>(.39)   | 2.78***<br>(.51)    | 1.13*<br>(.56)   |
| Cox   | .04<br>(1.19)      | -.39<br>(1.49)      | —                |
| Cumulus                                     | .11<br>(.81)       | .39<br>(.95)        | —                |
| Entercom                                    | 1.41<br>(1.00)     | —                   | .94<br>(1.07)    |
| Infinity                                    | .85<br>(.59)       | 1.87*<br>(.80)      | -.62<br>(.79)    |
| Regent                                      | -.09<br>(1.07)     | —                   | -.48<br>(1.25)   |
| Format: Adult contemporary <sup>a</sup>     | 2.46***<br>(.34)   | —                   | —                |
| Local politics                              |                    |                     |                  |
| Percent of population in military           | -.82*<br>(.34)     | -.95†<br>(.51)      | -.71†<br>(.42)   |
| Percent of 2000 vote for Bush               | -.73**<br>(.25)    | -1.09**<br>(.36)    | -.41<br>(.31)    |
| Percent favoring war in Iraq                | -.10*<br>(.04)     | -.13**<br>(.05)     | -.01<br>(.06)    |
| Tolerance for dissent                       |                    |                     |                  |
| Percent favoring free speech for Communists | -.46*<br>(.18)     | -.77**<br>(.26)     | -.14<br>(.22)    |
| Free speech × Bush vote interaction term    | .94*<br>(.37)      | 1.46**<br>(.52)     | .45<br>(.46)     |
| Constant                                    | 36.78**<br>(12.60) | 60.51***<br>(18.07) | 13.01<br>(15.58) |

<sup>a</sup> The reference category is composed of country stations owned by small chains or independent firms. Standard errors are in parentheses.

†  $p < .10$  \*  $p < .05$  \*\*  $p < .01$  \*\*\*  $p < .001$

both because they were not espousing Communism and because they are being repressed by private firms, not the state. Nonetheless, the question is a reasonable proxy for attitudes towards repression of this kind. First, pacifism and disrespect for a Republican president, like Communism, are disliked by people on the right. Second, although in principle it is completely consistent to oppose state repression of nonviolent political deviants while simultaneously favoring private boycotts against them, many people, both for and against private punishment of speech, lump it in with state repression under the rubric of “censorship.” Like the ABC data, I measure tolerance at the census division level. Since tolerance should not have an effect in and of itself, but rather should suppress the effects of conservative politics, I specify both tolerance itself and the interaction of the region’s tolerance with the state’s vote for Bush. So it will be on the same zero to 100 scale as the other opinion variables. I divide the interaction term by one hundred. The interaction is meaningful since at the state level, tolerance for leftist speech and Bush’s share of the vote have only a moderate correlation.

## Analysis

The analyses consist of OLS regressions of logged airplay ratio for stations on ownership, format, and local political climate. I specified the model in several different ways: OLS of the logged variable with several different constants, OLS of the untransformed variable, logistic regression of zero plays versus else, and logit event history analysis of mortality over the four weeks following the AP story. In each case the results were similar. These alternative specifications are available on request. I model the equation for country stations only, adult contemporary stations only, and all stations pooled together.

$$r = \alpha + \beta\omega_{1\dots k} + \beta\gamma + \beta\phi + e$$

Where:  $r$  = logged airplay ratio

$\omega_{1\dots k}$  = dummy variable set for chains 1 through  $k$

$\gamma$  = format

$\phi$  = local political climate

As the results for all three subsamples were largely consistent in direction, I will discuss them together.

The analyses show that most of the major chains either do not differ from independent firms or differ in the Dixie Chicks’ favor. Directly contrary to Krugman’s (2003) accusation and hypothesis 1, Clear Channel is actually the chain that most maintained the Chicks’ airplay. This may be because in addition to its radio interests, Clear Channel is a major concert promoter and promoted the Dixie Chicks’ then pending American tour. Clear Channel may face a conflict of interest — whether it skews its playlists to buy political favors

or does so to cross-promote its concert interests. In this case it appears that direct financial interest won decisively over enforcing hegemony.

Krueger (n.d.), however, found no relationship between the firm's concert and radio interests, so one should be cautious about assuming conflict-of-interest effects. Note that Infinity and Citadel country stations were also relatively forgiving of the Chicks. In general, the dummy set follows a trend that the larger the chain, the more it retains the Chicks on its stations' playlists. This is confirmed by replacing the dummy set with the log number of sister stations (Broadcasting and Cable 2001), which maintains the pattern, even if one excludes Clear Channel stations from the analysis (results available on request). This is congruent with the chains' greater dependence on research, which, whatever its merits, may be less effective at responding to unpredictable shocks (such as a scandal) than are less rationalized approaches to programming. Thus, we have tentative support for hypothesis 1A as the organizational inertia of large media firms may make it difficult for them to respond to political crises in the ways that the black-boxed assumptions of interest and outcome found in political economy theories would predict.

Hypothesis 2 is also supported, although the effects are weak for the adult contemporary sample. The greater proportion of the state population in military service, the greater the decline in Dixie Chicks airplay. But the effect is only marginally significant when the sample is split by format. This interpretation is supported by one program director who told me that his station's proximity to a military base factored into his decision to stop playing the Dixie Chicks. The magnitude of George W. Bush's showing in the 2000 presidential election strongly predicts a decline in Dixie Chicks airplay on country stations and the pooled sample. The percentage of the region favoring war with Iraq strongly predicts a decline, but only for country stations and the pooled sample. Although Bush's 2000 vote is statistically stronger than pro-war sentiment, the latter has a larger coefficient but more measurement error, being measured at the regional rather than state level and being a sample rather than census. Likewise, the tolerance interaction allows the main Bush effect to come through more clearly. Therefore, it may be that support for the war actually has a slightly stronger relationship with decline in the Dixie Chicks' airplay, but this is concealed by different levels of measurement error and the particulars of my interaction specification.

These variables were all intended to measure the level of disagreement with Maines' statement, but disagreement does not automatically yield censure. The interaction of tolerance for deviant leftist speech and the state's vote for Bush is large and positive, consistent with hypothesis 2A. This is partially cancelled by a negative effect of tolerance, which must be considered net of the interaction term and not by itself. Nonetheless, the overall impact shows that at the macro level the expression of tolerance for leftist dissent translates to the practice of tolerance for it. As with the other public opinion variables, adult

contemporary results are the same direction but of much less magnitude and significance than the country results.

Adult contemporary stations continued playing the Dixie Chicks at a much greater rate than country stations, supporting hypothesis 3. This may be, in part, because adult contemporary stations have slightly different audiences than country stations. For instance, both formats skew female, but country does less so (Arbitron 2002). More likely, though, is that listeners found the sentiment “we’re ashamed the president of the United States is from Texas” conflicted with the values expressed by country music, but not those in the less ideologically loaded genre of adult contemporary. It is noteworthy that contemporaneously with the Dixie Chicks controversy, the top single on the country charts was Darryl Worley’s “Have You Forgotten?” and several other staunchly prowar songs graced the country charts, whereas the adult contemporary charts largely avoided the issue, except for Fleetwood Mac’s antiwar song, “Peacekeeper.”

Not only does the pooled model show that country format stations more greatly reduce the Chicks’ airplay than adult contemporary stations, but comparing the two separate samples also shows that all public opinion variables have a stronger effect on country stations. Mathematically stated, country format not only has a significant negative additive effect on airplay, but also a significant negative interaction effect with measures of conservative public opinion. This is not a mere artifact of the fact that the adult contemporary subsample is two-thirds the size of my country subsample, since mathematically adjusting the standard error of the adult contemporary (AC) equation’s effects to levels commensurate with the size of the country sample fails to make the AC public opinion results nearly as significant as are the public opinion effects in the country equation. Thus, it seems that conservative public opinion affects both formats in similar ways, but the ideology of country music magnifies its impact.

Predicting and exponentiating the results, the three regression equations suggest that an independently owned adult contemporary station or a Clear Channel country station in liberal Massachusetts would likely maintain the Dixie Chicks’ airplay at about the same rate as before Maines’ comments, perhaps with a slight drop. The same station in moderate Florida would cut their airplay severely. In conservative Texas they would be dropped from play entirely. If the station were both adult contemporary format and owned by Clear Channel, the prediction does not change for Massachusetts or Texas, but the expected cut in Florida becomes less severe. Independently owned country stations are predicted to drop or severely cut the Dixie Chicks no matter how liberal the local political climate. Of course, the equation explains 33% of the pooled sample’s variance, which is strong by social science standards, but still allows for appreciable idiosyncrasy.



## Discussion

Many fans see country music as an oasis of tradition in a world where tradition is besieged by liberal elites. Many country songs “show that it is impossible to ‘go home’ because the old ways are being destroyed *everywhere*. Often, the federal government is seen as the agent of undesired change” (DiMaggio, Peterson & Esco 1972:47). Thus, when country musicians express the same values in the same patronizing tones as those liberal elites, it is not merely disagreeable, but a betrayal of their essential identity. The *Guardian* was right. The “Texas” incident was a punk rock moment, but unfortunately for the Dixie Chicks, they are not punk rock musicians with a punk rock audience. Pearl Jam, a punk-influenced rock band, made similar statements without serious consequences.

Much of the public was offended by statements against the war by Michael Moore, Martin Sheen, or Susan Sarandon. And some institutions, such as the Baseball Hall of Fame, the United Way, and the Motion Picture Academy, have sought to distance themselves from these antiwar celebrities. However, none of them suffered anything like the material consequences or vitriol leveled at the Dixie Chicks. About the same number of Americans bought the Dixie Chicks’ album *Home* as saw the theatrical release of Moore’s film *Bowling for Columbine*, but in all probability a majority, if not most, of the former favored war with Iraq, whereas almost certainly most of the latter opposed it.

My analysis has shown no evidence that corporate elites have taken vengeance against disloyalty. Boycotts and conflict are a source of instability that business seeks to avoid. The recording and radio industries thrive on star power and have no desire to destroy the viability of any of those relatively few acts who resonate with the public as powerfully as the Dixie Chicks did until March 2003.

Rather the data suggest that country music has a vengeful audience to whose wishes corporations responded with varying degrees of haste. Thus, the most important consequence of my analysis is that it turns the notions of “false consciousness” and “hegemony” on their heads. Rather than corporate interests punishing dissent and imposing conservative values on the citizenry, in this instance citizens imposed conservatism and punitiveness on corporations.

My findings suggest that, to use Herman and Chomsky’s (1988) theoretical framework, it is not ownership, but flak that was responsible for the hostile response to Maines’s insult. In fact, corporate ownership delayed censure. This may be disturbing to political economists, who tend to believe that if “corporate control” were only balanced by “democracy,” then the media would have been purged of any conservative bias. To the extent that the demos is to the right, then responsiveness to its voiced demands brings media content there as well.

## Notes

1. The search engine google.com shows no references on the world wide web to the incident predating the first Associated Press story. Its usenet archives contain the early references described here. In personal communication, Countrynation.com's editor confirmed how she discovered the story.
2. The *Radio and Records* website holds considerably more detail than the print edition did when it published the same information. It publishes playlists for twelve secular English formats, five religious formats, and six Spanish formats.
3. An alternate measure of the backlash is record sales, which also declined appreciably after the incident. This metric, unlike radio airplay, is essentially unmediated by gatekeepers. This lack of mediation has its interest but as my primary theoretical interest is the effect of ownership on gatekeeping this is for my purposes a defect. The best available data on record sales have considerably less detail than my radio airplay data. Indeed, the only one of my hypotheses that could be tested with record sales is regional politics, and that only at a crude level of aggregation. Finally, radio airplay is conceptually different from record sales in two ways. Airplay is a thing in of itself, but in some ways record sales are more appropriately conceived of as the rate of change in ownership and therefore are more sensitive to saturation. Likewise, record sales purely measure who likes an artist, not a weighted average of who likes and who hates an artist. Therefore if prior to a controversy the vast majority of people were indifferent to an artist, then both the numbers who like and who hate the artist could rise (for instance if the Chicks alienated their old audience but gained many new pacifist fans), concealing the effect of a backlash.
4. The census divisions are New England, Middle Atlantic, East North Central, West North Central, South Atlantic, East South Central, West South Central, Mountain, and Pacific.

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