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Feb 11, 1960:

The Payola scandal heats up

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PREV DAY

February 11



NEXT DAY

The Payola scandal reaches a new level of public prominence and legal gravity on this day in 1960, when President Eisenhower called it an issue of public morality and the FCC proposed a new law making involvement in Payola a criminal act.

What exactly was Payola? During the hearings conducted by Congressman Oren Harris (D-Arkansas) and his powerful Subcommittee on Legislative Oversight—fresh off its inquiry into quiz-show rigging—the term was sometimes used as a blanket reference to a range of corrupt practices in the radio and recording industries. But within the music business, Payola referred specifically to a practice that was nearly as old as the industry itself: manufacturing a popular hit by paying for radio play.

As the Payola hearings got under way in February 1960, the public was treated to tales of a lavish disk-jockey convention in Miami bought and paid for by various record companies. One disk jockey, Wesley Hopkins of KYW in Cleveland, admitted to receiving over the course of 1958 and 1959 \$12,000 in "listening fees" from record companies for "evaluating the commercial possibilities" of records. Another DJ named Stan Richard, from station WILD in Boston, also admitted to receiving thousands of dollars from various record promoters, and though like Hopkins he denied letting such fees affect his choice of which records to play on the air, he also offered a vigorous defense of Payola, comparing it to "going to school and giving the teacher a better gift than the fellow at the next desk." He practically likened it to Motherhood and Apple Pie: "This seems to be the American way of life, which is a wonderful way of life. It's primarily built on romance—I'll do for you, what will you do for me?" It was this comment that prompted President Eisenhower to weigh in on February 11, 1960, with his condemnation of Payola.

But what explains the involvement of Congress in this issue? Technically, the concern of the Harris Committee was abuse of public trust, since the airwaves over which radio stations broadcast their signals are property of the people of the [United States](#). However, 1960 was also an election year, and Rep. Harris and his colleagues on the Subcommittee were eager to be seen on the right side of a highly visible "moral" issue. Though it is widely agreed that the famous 1960 hearings on Payola merely reorganized the practice rather than eradicating it, those hearings did accomplish two very concrete things that year: they threatened the career of *American Bandstand's* Dick Clark and they destroyed the man who gave rock and roll its name, the legendary Cleveland disk jockey Alan Freed.

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