Immediately following the Brown decision, Robert B. Patterson, a plantation manager and former paratroop major during the war, convened a meeting in a private home in the Mississippi Delta’s Sunflower County. The fourteen white men who attended Patterson's meeting, all middle-class pillars of their community, founded the first White Citizens’ Council. Blacks comprised 68 percent of the population of the county at the time, but only 0.03 percent of them were registered voters. By 1955 there were more than 160 Citizens’ Councils throughout the South; the group had even created its own regular fifteen-minute program, *Citizens’ Council Forum*, to distribute to TV and radio stations in the region, and an estimated 300 stations were said to broadcast the show. As part of its campaign to maintain segregation, the Mississippi Sovereignty Commission helped finance the television and radio programs of the White Citizens’ Councils.

In Jackson, the Hederman family—one of the South’s most powerful media families, emerged as a major supporter of the Citizens’ Councils. The Hedermans owned both the Jackson *Daily News* and *Clarion-Ledger*, and they controlled WJTV, the first TV station in Mississippi, as well as a radio station. In addition, they owned considerable real estate and sat on the boards of banks and the local power company. Both Hederman newspapers joined that effort, often spiking stories on integration that were deemed too controversial by the Sovereignty Commission.

The year 1955 was especially perilous for Civil Rights leaders in Mississippi. On the night of May 7th, Rev. George Washington Lee, one of the few blacks since Reconstruction to register to vote in Humphreys County, was driving through the small delta town of Belzoni, a place so infamous for its lynching of blacks that it was nicknamed Bloody Belzoni, when a fatal shotgun blast from a passing motorist blew off most of his face. The Jackson *Clarion-Ledger*, in an article headlined “Negro Leader Dies in Odd Accident,” dutifully reported the sheriff’s conclusion that there had been no foul play involved.

The same fate befell Lamar Smith, a black farmer and World War II veteran, a few months later. Smith had been urging fellow black residents to register
to vote in statewide elections by absentee ballot. One Saturday afternoon, as he was walking in broad daylight on the lawn of the Lincoln County courthouse in the town of Brookhaven, he was surrounded by a group of white men and shot to death. The story on the murder in the combined Sunday edition of the Clarion-Ledger and Daily News was headlined, “Links Shooting of Negro with Vote Irregularities.” Without bothering to interview any friends or associates of the dead man, the reporter quoted law-enforcement officials as saying Smith had been “linked to voting irregularities.” Even though the murder occurred in front of numerous bystanders, a grand jury heard from no witnesses who could identify the assailants, and no one was ever prosecuted.32

Given the First Amendment’s protection for the press, blacks leaders could do nothing about the systemic bias exhibited by Mississippi newspapers. But local broadcasters were another matter. In 1955, the local NAACP wrote the FCC to lodge complaints about racially discriminatory programming by Jackson television station WLBT Channel 3, the local NBC affiliate, and against radio station WJDX, both owned by the Lamar Life Insurance Company. The civil rights organization urged the commission to consider revoking the stations’ licenses. Fred Beard, the station manager of WLBT, also happened to be a board member of the Jackson White Citizens’ Council. Beard boasted in a newspaper article that he had knocked off the air a network program featuring NAACP lawyer Thurgood Marshall and replaced it with a “Sorry, Cable Trouble” sign. In September 1957, after President Eisenhower appeared on an NBC broadcast to discuss the school integration crisis in Little Rock, Arkansas, WLBT aired a Citizens’ Council ad urging, “Don’t let this happen in Mississippi.”33 During the Little Rock integration battle the station featured a panel of segregationist leaders, but it denied Medgar Evers’ request to be included on the panel. Evers promptly filed a complaint with the FCC, demanding “equal time.” The agency responded that its equal-time provisions only covered candidates for political office, not controversial issues.34

Despite all the examples provided by the NAACP, the commission renewed WLBT’s license in 1959, calling the incidents “isolated” and “honest” mistakes. Meanwhile, the Hederman-owned Jackson Daily News said of Dr. A. H. McCoy, state president of the NAACP, “the fanatical mouthings of McCoy have reached the limit. If not suppressed by his own race, he will become the white man’s problem.”