WORDS FORMED BY RADIO CALL LETTERS

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Call letters are assigned to AM radio stations by the Federal Communications Commission: four letters beginning with W in the eastern US, four letters beginning with K in the western US. (In the early days of radio, three letters were also assigned, and a few radio stations of this kind can still be found.) It is interesting to ask whether or not AM radio station owners have a preference for call letters which form common English words. According to the 1979 Broadcasting Yearbook, an industry source on broadcasting data put out by Broadcasting Publications, Inc. of Washington, D.C., there are 4547 commercial AM stations operating in the US (as of December 1978). Of these, the following 72 stations have call letters which form four-letter words found in boldface type in the Merriam-Webster Pocket Dictionary:

KALE Richland WA
KEEL Shreveport LA
KEEN San Jose CA
KEEP Twin Falls ID
KELP El Paso TX
KICK Springfield MO
KILT Houston TX
KINE Kingsville TX
KING Seattle WA
KITE Terrell Hills TX
KNEW Oakland CA
KNOT Prescott AZ
KNOW Austin TX
KOOK Billings MT
WAGE Leesburg VA
WAIL Baton Rouge LA
WAIN Columbia KY
WAIT Chicago IL
WAKE Valparaiso IN
WALK Patchogue NY
WALL Middletown NY
WANT Richmond VA
WARD Pittston PA
WARE Ware MA
WARM Scranton PA
WASP Brownsville PA
WATT Cadillac MI
WAVE Louisville KY
WEAL Greensboro NC
WEAN Providence RI
WEED Rocky Mount NC
WEEN Lafayette TN
WEEN Pittsburgh PA
WEIR Weirton WV
WELD Fisher WV
WEND Ebensburg PA
WENT Gloversville NY
WERE Cleveland OH
WEST Easton PA
WHEN Syracuse NY
WHET Waltham MA
WHIM Providence RI
WHIP Mooresville NC
WHIR Danville KY
WHIT New Bern NC
WHIZ Zanesville OH
WICK Scranton PA
WIDE Biddeford ME
WIFE Indianapolis IN
WILD Boston MA
WILE Cambridge OH
WILL Urbana IL
WILY Centralia IL
WIND Chicago IL
WINE Brookfield CT
WING Dayton OH
WINK Fort Myers FL
WIRE Indianapolis IN
In addition, WAYS Charlotte NC, WIGS Gouverneur NY, WINS New York NY and WITS Boston MA are plurals of common three-letter words, and WHAM Rochester NY, WHEE Martinsville VA and WHOP Hopkinsville KY are slang words not in the Pocket Dictionary.

Does this demonstrate a bias in favor of common words? There are 17576 = 26x26x26 possible combinations of four letters beginning with W, and a similar number beginning with K; AM radio stations have used 4547/2(17576) = 0.13 of the total. On the other hand, the 72 words listed above form 0.55 of the 130 four-letter boldface words beginning with K or W in the Pocket Dictionary, a significantly greater fraction.

The reason behind the choice of a particular word for a radio station is occasionally obvious. Four appropriate choices are WIND for Chicago (the Windy City), WING for Dayton (the home of Wright-Patterson AFB and the Air Force Museum, as well as the birthplace of Orville and Wilbur Wright), WOOD for Grand Rapids (home of many furniture manufacturers), and WEST for Easton (the opposite of East).

On the other hand, some words were selected accidentally, as a by-product of other considerations. WARE is in the town of Ware, and KING is in King County, Washington; WEIR is in Weirton, and WALL is in Middletown, in the Wallkill valley.

Finally, it is worth asking why certain common words do not appear in the above list. KEPT, KILO, KIND, KINK, KISS, KNIT, KNOB, WARP, WART, WARY, WASH, WHOM, WIVE, WONT and WORK have been assigned to FM radio stations. Call letters not currently assigned to either AM or FM forming common words are listed below; the number is the count of occurrences in the Kucera and Francis list of one million words sampled from English-language printed sources of 1961 (see the August 1978 Word Ways).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>well</td>
<td>897</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>week</td>
<td>275</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wish</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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It seems unlikely that KILL, WEAK or WARS will ever be used, and WEAR, WORE, WORN and WIPE have negative connotations as well.

The affinity of radio stations for extremely common words is striking: the five commonest words (with, were, when, will, what) are all used, and only five of the top 37 words are not represented on either AM or FM.