

**High-Interactivity Radio:
Using the Internet to Enhance Community Among Radio Listeners**

by

Joellen Easton

Submitted to the Department of Comparative Media Studies
on July 22, 2005 in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of Master of Science in
Comparative Media Studies

Abstract

This thesis examines the evidence of community among listeners to three radio programs, who gather online to discuss radio programming in blogs, message boards and discussion forums provided by those programs. The three programs of focus are Air America Radio's *The Majority Report*, ABC Radio Networks' *Sean Hannity Show*, and National Public Radio's *Talk of the Nation*. The shows are analyzed in terms of how they perform by a new standard of interactive radio, whose benchmark has been established by *The Majority Report*. First identified in this thesis, the concept of high-interactivity radio brings together both vertical (between audience and broadcaster) and horizontal (intra-audience) interactivities. The relative success of high-interactivity radio is judged by a comparative analysis of the evidence of community in radio-online discussion areas, and the use of these online spaces by show producers as a vehicle for listener feedback, interaction, and content generation. The observations made in these three radio-online discussion areas can be practically applied to the work of broadcasters. Toward this end, the thesis closes with a brief ethnographic description of *Open Source*, a new public radio program currently attempting to develop its own version of high-interactivity radio.

Thesis Supervisor: William Uricchio

Title: Professor and Co-Director, Comparative Media Studies

Table of Contents

Biographical Note	05
Acknowledgements	07
Introduction	09
So...what's a blog?	12
Audiences and publics	21
Key questions	25
Relevance	27
Structure	29
Chapter 1: Modes of Discussion Area Inquiry	33
Methods of engagement: arriving at discussion area field sites	35
Modes of inquiry: everything is in the blog ... nothing is in the blog	41
Chapter 2: Active Audiences Shaping Community	49
An active audience is ... a public?	51
On community	62
Acceptable discourse: community and values?	69
Chapter 3: Structures of Community	77
Defining community	79
Engaging community	82
Institutionally-imposed structures	84
Branding discussion areas	85
Moderating discussion areas	89
Intra-group social dynamics	94
Rules and hierarchy	94
Shared values	98
Local language	102
Relationships and expectations	103
Chapter 4: Feedback and Performance	107
Blogging at <i>The Majority Report</i> : where listeners produce and producers listen	114
Defining values through performance	120
Disappointment and nostalgia in the “discussion ghetto”	124
Positioning three interactive styles	129

Chapter 5: Conclusion: looking ahead to new interactivities	135
Creating high-interactivity radio: the case of <i>Open Source</i>	140
What role do radio-online discussion areas have in audience public-making?	145
In what ways do these online forums enable a sense of community?	146
How does high-interactivity radio enable new listener experiences and relationships between producers and listeners?	147
Looking ahead	149
References	153

Biographical Note

Joellen Easton has six years of experience producing programming for national, local and international public radio organizations. National productions include PRI's *Sound & Spirit*, NPR's *All Things Considered* and *Morning Edition*, and PRI/BBC's *The World* and *The Changing World*. She has contributed to WGBH Radio Boston's local efforts as a cultural reporter, board operator, producer, and youth-radio coach. She also freelances as a radio producer and consultant for various radio and educational entities.

Joellen came to Comparative Media Studies at MIT to broaden her understanding of radio's role in the new media environment, with emphases on digital distribution, new and accessible modes of production, and changing interactivities for consumers and citizens.

Acknowledgements

There are many people to whom I owe my most sincere thanks for assisting me in this academic endeavor. My advisor, William Uricchio, consistently and gently leaned on me to ensure I was meeting deadlines, and provided incisive comments on my research and writing as it progressed. Each and every time we met to discuss this thesis, he devoted all his energy, regardless of how many other things he needed to attend to. The critical and thoughtful input of my committee members Hugh Gusterson, Alex Jones and David Thorburn was invaluable, and I thank them for making an investment in me and helping me see this project through.

For guidance, interviews, encouragement and mentorship, I also wish to thank Henry Jenkins, Chris Pomiecko and Susan Stapleton, David Liroff, Jeffrey Dvorkin, Christopher Lydon, Mary McGrath, Brendan Greeley, Jill Kaufman, Ellen Kushner, Mimi Panitch, Jon Solins, Kahlil Byrd, Pablo Bozckowski, Karen Strassler, Chappell Lawson, Susan Lee, Josh Orton, Sam Seder, Phil Boyce, Michael Horn, Maria Thomas, Melvin McLeod, and the staff of *The World* at WGBH.

Although I cannot name them all here, I am deeply grateful to the bloggers and discussion board participants who enthusiastically engaged with my questions about why they do what they do and what they think it all *means*.

I am indebted to my classmates in the Comparative Media Studies department for their consistent support and critical eyes: Lisa Bidlingmeyer, Brett Camper, Brian Jacobson, Andrea McCarty, Rekha Murthy, Karen Schrier, and Parmesh Shahani. Our Monday morning Thesis Support Group meetings helped get me through some tough crises of confidence at the end of winter.

My parents, Thomas Easton and Betsy Easton (as well as my entire extended family), never doubted that I would succeed, and I thank them immeasurably for their unending faith and confidence in everything that I do. Jan, Judy and Lynn Gåseidnes made a faithful and much-appreciated cheering squad. Finally, Geir Gåseidnes always believed in me, made me cover the living room floor with index cards, edited my drafts, kept me grounded, and was always there to back me up.

This thesis is the product of the combined support and generosity of family, friends, colleagues, classmates, and mentors. Any errors in the text are mine alone.

Introduction

Before arriving at MIT, I worked in public radio for five years. At WGBH Radio in Boston, I contributed to the station's local efforts as well as several nationally distributed programs that it produced or co-produced. Whether my job was to support and respond to listeners or to produce the radio they were hearing, I tried to take as well-rounded a view as possible – how were our listeners hearing us? What did the radio program mean to them? When listeners would contact us in response to the broadcast content, I wanted to understand the social and personal context in which they formed their opinions. In meetings with my colleagues, it was often clear that our sense of how our listeners related to what they heard on the radio was imperfect at best. Our tools were letters, emails, phone calls, quarterly Arbitron¹ reports and the occasional focus group.

Letters, emails and phone calls were largely regarded in aggregate in an attempt to gauge the general tenor of the listenership. In general one positive or negative communication would not hold sway over programming decisions, but at times particularly passionate listeners would write or call in, and they would be accorded high degrees of attention or focus on the subjects of their complaints, suggestions or requests. Focus groups were generally used to gauge audience support for particular programs that were being evaluated for creation, change or elimination. Quarterly Arbitron reports were good

¹ Arbitron, founded in 1949 as the American Research Bureau, is a ratings service for radio and television that obtains its results using methods similar to Nielsen, distributing diaries to a specified number of 'families.' These 'families' note their listening habits in the diaries and then send them back to the company. Arbitron then collates the data and releases results to their clients once per quarter. Rankings of stations within their markets as well as the attractiveness of particular programs to advertisers are based largely on Arbitron ratings.

indicators of the success of one program relative to its competitors in genre, time slot or market – time spent listening (TSL), the total number of listeners who listen to a show for at least five minutes (cume), the average number of listeners tuned in at any given quarter hour (AQH), and audience size of one program compared to others on the same station were all important measures of the success, or lack thereof, of a program. The executive producer of one program I worked for emphasized that individual Arbitron reports – or any market research data in isolation from other evaluative measures – should never be used to guide programming of a show or of a station, but nevertheless when the quarterly reports arrived we pored over the booklet.

My curiosity about listeners was never quite satisfied: I routinely found myself in situations trying to engage with listeners beyond what was necessary or helpful. My desire to understand listeners' perspectives could at times be problematic, especially when I felt compelled to respond to irate listeners and try to have a reasonable conversation. Often this just wasn't possible – a listener might have no interest in engaging in dialogue – he was ready to rant, and that's what he was going to do. At other times, though, listeners would share very personal experiences that led them to relate to the broadcast content in a particular way – a man had recently lost his father, and so a program on mourning meant a great deal to him; a young girl was learning how to weave and so she wanted to hear a story about a weaver again; a WWII veteran wrote to say how he wept when he heard my commentary on playing Taps at military funerals; a teacher called to ask how she could help a young man in need she heard about in the newscast; a woman emailed an objection to the treatment of Middle East issues on the

program. These personal stories and reactions inform my interest in new interactivities for radio listeners and producers.

As computer-mediated communication has become a standard component of every media organization's work over the last five to ten years, broadcasters that hope to be responsive to their audiences have had to wrestle with questions of whether and how to invite their audiences to participate. The answers to these questions offer benefits for both the consumers and producers of media content, and today it is generally considered good business sense to invite media consumers to participate either with each other or with the broadcaster itself through various interactive mechanisms. As I prepared to undertake this thesis research I asked David Liroff, Vice President and Chief Technology Officer at WGBH, if he has noticed changes in WGBH's audience relationships over the years. He replied that today broadcasters are thinking in new ways, but that attitudes change slowly:

DL: There's still a mindset which pulls up the drawbridges to keep the 'great unwashed' on the other side of the moat; this is what's so radical about all this – this whole notion of a participatory relationship with the audience is still somewhat foreign here, although you're starting to see little sparks ... where people [from the audience] are invited to talk about it. But as recently as two or three years ago I remember open expressions of resistance to the idea of having unmoderated forums.

JE: Yeah, oh, I remember that discussion! People were not comfortable with it.

DL: Oh boy. 'That's what they make drawbridges for,' one of my former colleagues said. So I think that there is certainly a specific generational difference in attitude here. The older generation of program-makers not

only resist but actually *resent* the notion that there's any kind of participation in the work they're doing. (in-person interview, 2/25/05)²

Liroff sees the new interactivities enabled by weblogs and other online discussion forums as the most effective producer-audience interactivity currently deployed. In order to ground this thesis in an understanding of blogs and other online forums, changes in the radio medium, conceptions of the audience and new interactivities, I am going to take a few pages here to sketch out these basic concepts.

So...what's a blog?

The word 'blog' is a shortening of 'weblog,' a "web application which contains periodic posts on a common webpage. These posts are often but not necessarily in reverse chronological order. Such a Web site would typically be accessible to any Internet user" (Wikipedia entry on "blog," 1/13/05).³ The weblog was introduced as a web authoring tool in 1997, and in 1999 new easy-to-use blogging software was released for download. The term "blog" was coined in 1999, and by 2002 blogging had reached its tipping point (Gladwell 2000)⁴. Thanks in large part to blogs, opportunities for media consumers to

² Liroff's insights could be construed as an elitist perspective arguably typical of public broadcasters, but I see no indication that this point of view is found only among public broadcasting institutions.

³ Wikipedia is a collaboratively edited online encyclopedia. On the main English language screen of www.wikipedia.org, it is called "the free-content encyclopedia that anyone can edit," 4/10/05. The content of each entry may change over time, and entries' editing histories are accessible by date. Each time Wikipedia is referenced, I will note the date on which the entry was accessed. I have chosen to use the Wikipedia as a definitional and contextual resource as a statement of my own philosophic investment in iterative, community-based content creation.

⁴ 'Tipping point' here is used to refer to the point when the adoption of a technology or a trend reaches a sufficient level to be commonly understood and recognized. With blogs, this meant that blog authors were no longer only the technical elite, but also among the general public.

talk back – to participate widely in political and social discourse – had dramatically increased, thereby creating a new feedback mechanism into the mainstream media. Bloggers today can see their observations and insights harvested by others in the media, first by media outlets like the Drudge Report, talk radio and cable news, and quickly followed by broadcast news and major print media. Through these amplified channels blog content gains visibility with the larger public. For example, in December 2002, the political blogging community was

instrumental in the removal of Trent Lott from his position as Senate Majority Leader by responding in force to Lott’s arguably racist comments at Strom Thurmond’s 100th birthday party⁵ (Scott 2004). This blogger *coup d’état* was cited in the mainstream press as an example of the Internet’s maturation. In the two ensuing years, blogs have gained fame for their role in the development and

The growth of weblogs

- Every day, about 12,000 new blogs are created.
- At the end of 2004, there were about 4.8 million blogs online.
- Blog readership increased 58% in 2004.
- 50 million people, or about 11% of Internet users, regularly read blogs.
- About a third of those participate by posting comments to their own or others’ blogs.
- 48% of blog creators are under 30 years of age.
- 57% of blog creators are male.

(BusinessWeek online 12/13/04
and Pew Research Center 1/2/05)

staying power of a number of other news stories: in particular Howard Dean’s 2003 presidential campaign, controversies surrounding the Iraq war and President Bush’s policies, the beheading of Nicholas Berg in May 2004, the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth’s anti-John Kerry campaign, and CBS’ mistaken reliance on falsified documents

⁵ The comment in question, made on December 5, 2002: “I want to say this about my state: When Strom Thurmond ran for president, we voted for him. We’re proud of it. And if the rest of the country had followed our lead, we wouldn’t have had all these problems over all these years, either.”

regarding Bush's national guard service in September 2004. Another sign of the maturation of the blogosphere may be the increasing efforts of corporations to hire bloggers to blog about the corporation's products and lifestyle issues related to those products.⁶

The term 'blog' is used most frequently to refer to personal opinion-oriented sites where an individual chronicles his or her point of view through links to articles and other content found online, personal observations, and descriptions of daily routine. But a blog can be so much more than that. It can have one author, a set grouping of authors, or be open to all contributors. Blogs are authored by private individuals, soldiers, political campaigns, staffers, media entities, and journalists acting independently. Most blogs are open for all to read, though some are password-protected. Some blogs are read by only a few people, such as a small group of family, friends or likeminded people; others are followed by hundreds of thousands of readers.⁷ Many blogs have one main thread (or set of threads) of content, and have features that allow visitors to the site to post their comments. Blogs that enable visitors to post comments often become a gathering point for a community of readers and creators of content.

My interest here is in looking at this last category of blogs – community blogs – and in noting the commonalities between community blogs, community message boards and

⁶ One of the first examples of this was the "teamup" between Nike and early blogger Nick Denton's company Gawker Media. Together, they created the now-defunct blog "The Art of Speed."

⁷ In 2003, the blog www.andrewsullivan.com reported 2.7 million unique visitors (<http://www.andrewsullivan.com/info.php?artnum=000stats>). Another blog, Joshua Mica Marshall's Talking Points Memo, claims on its advertising information page that it has a "monthly readership of over a half million individuals. In our most recent month recorded, April 2005, the site logged 577,386 unique visitors, 3,331,252 visits and 5,050,740 page views" (<http://www.talkingpointsmemo.com/advertise.html>).

discussion forums as they relate to radio programming. The *community blogs* of focus here are the kind with multiple creators, where any participant can create a topic thread and post to it. *Message boards* and *discussion forums* are terms for the most part employed interchangeably, and are descended from text-based forums on bulletin board systems (BBS), first deployed in the late 1970s. Generally speaking, these forums are all web applications that provide for some sort of text-based and chronological online discussion. Today, message boards and discussion forums are generally hosted on websites and anyone (or, if password-protected, members only) may create new topics or threads, add comments to existing threads, and generally engage in discussion with other participants (Wikipedia entry on “message board,” 4/9/05). The aesthetic appearance of message boards and discussion forums is usually very different from weblogs, with the blogs embodying a more unified aesthetic and the boards/forums being more of a *bricolage* of many personalities and personal aesthetics. This difference is due to two main factors: 1) that blogs are generally managed by one person who makes all the aesthetic choices, while boards/forums allow for participants to include personal signature and image files with each posting; and 2) that there are essential differences in the software used to power blogs and boards. Blogs allow their creators access to easily-customizable templates, whereas message boards do not. The boundaries between online message boards/discussion forums and weblogs blur, however, especially when discussing community blogs. Community blogs incorporate some of the personality-driven haphazardness of boards and forums, and allow multiple individuals to generate content on the site. This blurring of boundaries could easily be problematic; however, the site-specific online spaces that I will be examining are named by the radio programmers

themselves as variously blogs, boards or forums. While these terms are somewhat interchangeable and there are many points of overlap, I will use the “native” terminologies and refer to each blog, board or forum as its institution has named it. When referring to them generically, though, I will call them *discussion areas*. I did not choose this construction arbitrarily, but rather to remain true to the institutional naming practices.⁸

Despite the differences of technology between boards, forums and blogs, the two earlier formats are influenced by the current do-it-yourself (DIY) web culture of blogs. Online culture is increasingly affected by the growing influence of blogs, and people participate in boards and forums in ways influenced by the newer format: users link off-site to blogs, are informed by content they read in blogs, and send readers to their own sites and weblogs elsewhere on the web. Additionally, the widening availability of greater bandwidth means that increasing numbers of people are able to multitask online, surf quickly, and move large files around with ease. From the Internet provider’s perspective, memory and storage space are cheap, and processor speeds are ever-increasing. This allows parties hosting blogs, boards and forums to support communities with tens of

⁸ The generic construction “discussion area” is vague and dissatisfying, especially when the term ‘blog’ could be used instead to refer to these formats. This is partly because ‘blog’ is the most elegant of the three terms, but mainly because blogging, bloggers and blog-facilitated DIY culture is a current force behind mainstream media’s increasing acceptance and comfort with consumer involvement. Even if message boards and discussion boards do not call themselves blogs, they benefit from/are affected by the trend to embrace digital DIY-culture.

thousands of users and readers,⁹ and archive old threads in searchable and accessible ways.¹⁰

Blogs, as just described, are in many ways seemingly antithetical to the production process and format of broadcast radio. Blogs generate content via open, multichannel and decentralized means. Radio, on the other hand, generates content through closed, one-way and hierarchical institutional practices. As mentioned above, though, talk radio programs are now beginning to utilize the unique properties of blogs – and bloggers, the people who create blogs or who post comments in community blogs – in their radio programming.¹¹ Blogs are a new enough phenomenon that they still have “interpretive flexibility” (Bijker 1995, Bijker, Hughes and Pinch 1987)¹² and a general consensus has not yet been reached on the social use and purpose of blogs. Bijker’s term “interpretive flexibility” comes from an approach to understanding the development of technology called the “social construction of technology,” or SCOT. This approach holds that the final form of acceptance of technological artifacts¹³ is not predetermined, and instead has everything to do with people’s uses, perceptions and politics surrounding the artifacts.

An artifact has interpretive flexibility until a consensus is reached as to its use and form;

⁹ To provide just two examples of many, Sean Hannity Forums reported 46,485 members on June 7, 2005 (<http://www.hannity.com/forum/>). Craigslist, a community classifieds and forums site, claims that about 8 million people use its local sites each month (<http://boston.craigslist.org/about/pr/factsheet.html>).

¹⁰ Blogs also allow for a number of additional ways to access information, such as indexing, keyword and category tags, trackbacks, and permalinks.

¹¹ Historically, talk radio has been the most interactive incarnation of the radio medium. Through the act of calling in, hearing themselves on air, and of hearing fellow listeners’ calls, listeners are able to view themselves as part of a dispersed community engaging with similar broadcast content. Blogs and other mechanisms for audience interaction make sense as an outgrowth of this particular kind of radio, for talk radio has an audience ready and willing to talk or write on any number of issues.

¹² Bijker names this concept as “interpretative flexibility,” following the British spelling of the word “interpretative,” which is recast in American English as “interpretive.” I will use the American spelling.

¹³ With respect to computers and the Internet, software and Internet applications such as weblogs and message boards are artifacts.

after this consensus is reached, the artifact's interpretive flexibility is diminished and is said instead to have reached "closure."

Such a closure is not gratuitous, but has far-reaching consequences: it restructures the participants' world. History is rewritten after such a closure, and it is difficult to recapture the factual flexibility as it existed prior to the ending of the controversy. (Bijker 1995: 85)

Weblogs and the activity of blogging currently enjoy a high degree of interpretive flexibility – as consumers and producers of media in 2005, we are in the midst of a transitional media moment. The relative influences of traditional media consumers versus that of individuals using new media in new ways such as blogging, podcasting, Tivo, video on demand, collaborative editing tools like wikis, etc, conspire to create an environment in which Internet, television, radio, and print are all re-proliferating in a number of formats and applications: the Internet is unsurprisingly not yet stable in its use and form, but technologies long-held to be stable can also find themselves newly flexible. The interpretive flexibility model does not apply only to the relevant Internet-based media technologies here: radio may seem to have been operating in a state of closure for decades, but in truth radio has for most of its life been changing form (or format) in one way or another.¹⁴

Bijker (1992) applies the concept of "relevant social groups" to delineate the actors using and influencing the course of technologies. "Technical artifacts do not exist without the social interactions within and among social groups. The design details of artifacts are described by focusing on the *problems and solutions* that those relevant social groups

¹⁴ Internet-based technological artifacts of note that bear on the case of radio and interactivity are streaming, blogs, high speed or broadband Internet access, podcasting, mp3 and other audio file formats, etc.

have with respect to the artifact” (76). In her book *Inventing American Broadcasting 1899-1922*, Susan Douglas demonstrates the many ways in which radio was constructed through various social mechanisms and relevant social groups from 1899 to 1922: early on, radio was a two-way medium dominated by amateur operators, and through regulation and the influence of the press, advertisers, radio set manufacturers and other associated technologies became broadcast-centered and hierarchical.

Radio apparatus, and what all that apparatus meant to a particular society at a particular time, had to be elaborately constructed. Just as individuals and institutions worked, over time, to refine the invention, so did these inventors and institutions, as well as the press and the public, all interact to spin a fabric of meanings within which this technology would be wrapped.
(xvii)

Today, many audiences experience radio as something entirely unlike the hierarchical broadcast model that by the end of Douglas’ timeframe was largely fixed. Instead, radio for many is a collaborative medium that can be engaged with online: a new 21st-century radio that coexists with the traditional hierarchical broadcast model. In the case of today’s radio-online interactivities, I would identify the relevant social groups as radio producers, broadcast organizations, regulatory agencies, radio listeners, and discussion area participants. The relative excitement or indifference with which members of these groups approach radio-online interactivities bears directly on the reopening of the case of radio. New digital distribution technologies (Internet, satellite, podcasting), new interactivities such as radio listener blogs, and ever-increasing competition for media consumers’ attention are all affecting how people relate to radio as both a technology and a source of information, entertainment, and community. I look forward to seeing where radio will be in ten years.

This thesis will study one particular enactment of blogs and blog-like online spaces, as interpreted through radio-based communities. I will examine what I call the “listener-bloggers” of three talk radio programs at three distinct points on the contemporary American ideological spectrum: Air America Radio’s *The Majority Report*, National Public Radio’s *Talk of the Nation*, and ABC Radio’s *The Sean Hannity Show*.¹⁵ My interest is in examining differences among the three audiences’ enactment as communities, differences that may or may not be ideologically-derived. *The Majority Report* hosts two blogs on its webpage, both accessible to anyone who wishes to participate. One is structured so as to encourage participation in the blog, on topics dealt with in the program, while the show is on the air. The other is designed to solicit research and insight from listeners on specific topics that are relevant to the program’s ongoing content requirements. *Talk of the Nation* offers its listeners a message board via NPR’s “Discussions” section of its website. Participants need to register with NPR’s “Your Turn Discussions” with a valid email address before they can use the boards. Most of the listener participation in the *Talk of the Nation (TOTN)* board takes place after the daily broadcast has ended. Discussion threads are organized by topic, not by day or show; most of the thread topics do, however, align neatly with the topics covered on the day’s show. *The Sean Hannity Show* has many services for listeners on its website; one may subscribe to the site for \$5.95 per month and gain access to high-quality archived and commercial-free downloads of the show. One need not do this, however, to gain

¹⁵ I am only examining online forums/blogs/message boards that are sponsored by broadcaster websites themselves. There are any number of online communities scattered throughout the web that deal with digesting and debating broadcast media content and context. These communities host fascinating conversations and are as interesting a media phenomenon as anything discussed here. However, for the purposes of this study, I found it helpful to focus instead on the duality of specific broadcaster/blog interactions.

access to the site's discussion forum. All one must do, as with NPR, is register with a valid email address. The Hannity Forums feature hundreds of distinct discussion threads, each organized by topic and then grouped thematically by meta-topic such as "America at War," "Washington Politics," "Hannity Insider Feedback," etc., with some of the discussion generated while the show is on the air but most of it taking place outside the broadcast.

These three radio programs have very different approaches to the above registration and participation features. Whether these listener forums are called message boards, blogs or discussion boards, the services they provide to listeners are very similar: they extend the broadcast, they give the listener voice, they provide a new way for the program producers to receive listener feedback, and they give listeners an opportunity to get to know one another as individuals and to form community. Of course, it should not be ignored that "giving the listener voice" confers both participatory benefits to listeners as well as business benefits to broadcasters.

Audiences and publics

As I have outlined above, broadcasters and other mainstream media entities have traditionally employed arguably imperfect systems for understanding their audiences. Phone calls, letters, and emails have been direct conduits for audience feedback. More institutionally-oriented forms of feedback have included audience metrics research provided by companies such as Arbitron and Nielsen, and focus group-driven qualitative

research. Sonia Livingstone (2005) notes that audiences are conceived of as “aggregates of individuals” (21), and are not considered to be socially significant in any way other than as a construction created by media marketers and researchers. Media consumers do not tend to identify themselves as “audience” – it is a label typically imposed from without. For the purposes of marketers, researchers and broadcast media ratings evaluators, we are all numbers in a vast sea of consumers. Whether white or blue collar workers, students, working mothers, or Hollywood A-list actors, we all have varying – and limited – access to the media and political power structures at work in our lives. “Although ordinary people may make use of the news media, they generally have no direct influence on news content, nor are they usually the major actors of news reports” (van Dijk 1995: 12). These ‘ordinary people’ are the individuals who constitute mass communications research’s traditional audience(s).

This construction of the ‘audience’ is opaque in that audience members are not identifiable as individuals: they have little agency and are not aware of fellow members other than as an ‘imagined community’ (Anderson 1991) of fellow listeners/viewers/readers. Radio programs variously feature call-ins, studio audiences, and letters read on-air, all features that help to represent the audience to itself – to make the imagined real – but the act of seeing oneself as a part of a larger whole is work still largely done on one’s own, with the radio at one’s side. David Ryfe (2001) writes about an early example of the opacity of an audience becoming more transparent – he analyzed several hundred letters written to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt in response to his ‘fireside chats’ over the course of 12 years.

Letter-writers expressed their representation of public opinion in two ways. On the one hand, they conceived of their letters as adding to the sum total of the actual opinions of many individuals: ‘I feel I must add my voice to the chorus of praises...’, ‘I wish to add my appreciation to the many like expressions...’, ‘May I add a word of appreciation and congratulation to those of the other hundreds of thousands...’ The rhetorical basis of such letters is their empirical accumulation. Alone, a single congratulation for a radio message is not likely to be very meaningful. Included with the praise of thousands, however, such letters gain rhetorical force. *They are powerful precisely because they are part of a mass opinion* (777). (emphasis mine.)

Ryfe has here located an audience acting together, not just being labeled together. Each person wrote about their individual and unique response to Roosevelt’s chats, but in so doing added their “voice to the chorus.” By forming a self-motivated chorus of response, the audience acted as something else: a public. Daniel Dayan (2005) locates the difference between an audience and a public as being “not a matter of numbers. A public is not simply a spectator in the plural, a sum of spectators, an addition. It is a coherent entity whose nature is collective; an *ensemble* characterised by shared sociability, shared identity and a sense of that identity” (42). Additionally, the subtlety here is that public-making is found not only in the writing of the letters, but in the conscious act of listening intentionally: on purpose, with a purpose. Whether or not listeners sat down to write a letter to FDR, they were touched in a meaningful way by his broadcasts and took part in a conscious and public act of listening.

More than half a century later, we can explore how interactivities enabled by the Internet are facilitating audiences’ continuing individuation, whereby individuals’ voices can be heard uniquely. In so doing, audience members reconstitute themselves as a public(s). This may often result in squandered potential on the part of the broadcaster (see chapter

4), as broadcasters' uses of Internet technologies do not necessarily progress as quickly as listener uses. In the context of this research it is fair to say that a group of people listening to radio comprise an audience – they are a collection of listeners. But a group of people listening to radio and also expressing their response in a program's discussion area comprise a public – they are a collective of listeners, using a community experience to transform from 'mere' audience to public.¹⁶ Livingstone (2005) asks the important definitional question “when is an audience acting so as to participate in, or to constitute, a public” (7)? She is asking about the audience as collectivity rather than as aggregate, and about an engagement with media texts beyond the moment of reception. I will attempt to address her question through this exploration of online communication between members of media audiences and the producers of the media they consume.

In this thesis I will argue that specific cultural differences among the three largely separate communities of listeners and producers associated with and built around *The Majority Report's* blogs, *Talk of the Nation's* discussion boards, and *The Sean Hannity Show's* discussion forums, create three distinct modes of discourse and behavior. The ideological differences between the programs' perspectives is clear in the programming, and this may attract a similar emphasis of viewpoint in their respective discussion areas. However, there are certain non-ideologically (at least explicitly so) derived themes that arise similarly from all three online spaces: participants experience their interactions with

¹⁶ At the core of every audience is the media *consumer* – and broadcaster decisions to provide interactive options to those consumers are not only derived from an interest in serving the audience well, but in fostering brand identity and loyalty. While the actualization of audiences into publics may provide individuals with greater unique and collective voices, it cannot be ignored that these individuals persist as consumers as well, and continue to interact with broadcasters that remain as providers of services to be consumed.

others in the discussion areas as the actions of community members, each community has implicit and explicit rules regarding behavior, and participation in these discussion areas is performative.

Key questions

New radio-online discussion area interactivities are changing how radio producers view their audiences, how audiences view themselves, and how audiences view broadcasters. In this study I seek to discover whether (and how) new interactivities are enabling the strengthening of community and individuals' sense of community values. Three principal sets of questions arise from this inquiry: A key feature of radio-online discussion areas that affects the above outcomes is that the discussions are held *in public*. And so first it is important to understand what the word 'public' means, as adjective, in an Internet context, and how the very public-ness of discussion areas effectively reconstructs an audience as – noun, here – *a public*. How are these discussion areas public spaces? Do they, as Kendall (2002) writes, “provide a particularly vivid sense of ‘place’ and of gathering together with other people” and do “many people feel that when they connect to an online forum, they in some sense enter a social, if not a physical, space...” (6)? How does the public-ness of participation therein turn what was once an opaque audience into a transparent public? Sonia Livingstone notes in her 2005 book *Audiences and Publics* that “‘public’ refers to a common understanding of the world, a shared identity, a claim to inclusiveness, a consensus regarding the collective interest. It also implies a visible and open forum of some kind in which the population participates

in order that such understandings, identities, values and interests are recognised, contested, regulated” (5). In order for an audience to become a public its members must communicate with each other to determine the weight and direction of their opinion. Only once they know what they think are they able to speak or act as a public. This ‘speaking’ together does not imply a unified voice, however. When disagreements arise they take place within certain bounds that cannot be transgressed – and those boundaries work together to define the parameters of the public.¹⁷

Secondly, I am calling the phenomenon that arises among the participants of these discussion areas *community*. In what ways do these forums enable a sense of community? Howard Rheingold, popular chronicler of the 20-year old virtual community *The WELL*, claimed that *The WELL* “felt like an authentic community to me from the start” (2000: *xvi*). Rheingold is not alone – researchers, journalists and Internet hobbyists have collected testimonial upon testimonial attesting to how interactions with other people online feel real, grounded in reality, not *just* virtual. (Turkle 1997, Campbell 2004) In the scope of this study, what markers am I using to determine what is and what is not community? And perhaps most importantly, how do the users of the spaces themselves interpret the ‘community’ there? My preferred definition for community, whether physical or virtual, is *a group of mutual association in which individuals have an interest in addressing interpersonal matters in a manner consistent with the norms of the group*.

¹⁷ Foucault (1978) offers an answer here: disagreement within the community is in fact a sign that it is a robust public space – if everyone in a given community of discourse agreed there would be no discussion.

The final question, and the one most directly applicable to professional media environments, is: how does this recent and evolving interactivity enable new listener experiences, and particularly new relationships between producers and listeners? The possible development and diffusion of increasingly sophisticated radio-online interactivities has the potential to fundamentally alter the radio listening experience.

Relevance

Many mainstream media professionals are today trying to ensure that they won't lose their jobs next year, whether that mainstream medium is television, radio or print: Internet, collaborative and mobile technologies and many of their uses are disruptive to traditional media business models. To try to stay ahead (or perhaps to keep from falling behind) mainstream media entities are experimenting with how to increase interactive aspects of their broadcast or print product – but it is not always a graceful transition. Organizational and new media scholar Pablo Boczkowski has studied newsrooms' development, adoption and integration of digital technologies in the newsroom. In his study of the *New York Times*' CyberTimes (later Technology) online-only section in the late 1990s, Boczkowski (2004) notes that even reporters working for this new and experimental section of the paper rarely incorporated into their work a feature unique to their domain: online forums offered as parallel “content” to reporting: “There was no fixed member of the CyberTimes desk in charge of the section's forums. In addition, neither editors nor reporters paid much attention to them. Forums were viewed as something for users, a communication space separated from their editorial activities.

They almost never posted messages to the forums, and consulted them only sporadically, if at all” (93-94). He cites one reporter who quipped, “I never look at the forums...[I] don’t have the patience for the low signal to noise ratio anymore” (94). In an era of increasing audience participation in discussing, critiquing and producing news, journalists’ lack of interest in the technological and journalistic possibilities opened up by collaborative news creation is a stark reminder that the full potential of new media technologies is only rarely realized, especially if that potential is seen as obstructing existing job functions.

Half a decade after Boczowski’s study, the *New York Times*’ website boasts interactive features such as readers’ opinion forums and a hyperlinked list of “Most E-Mailed” articles; MSNBC is experimenting with show-run blogs on programming decisions and other items relevant to their shows; the CNN homepage offers readers the opportunity to “tell us what you think” on high-news value stories. Radio programs, though – particularly talk radio programs – are frequently at the leading edge of online broadcaster interactivities. This may be due in part to audio’s smaller file sizes relative to video – audio streams have consistently been of better quality than video streams due to bandwidth and memory constraints. This is in the process of changing, and video will catch up, but for now audio retains the advantage. I also suggest that radio has benefited from its greater flexibility as a medium; ‘the death of radio’ has been proclaimed many times – and the doomsayers have been wrong each time.¹⁸

¹⁸ The radio medium has a track record of adaptability, which has enabled it to survive competition from television, cable, shifting public attitudes, new distribution technologies, regulatory pressures, and new broadcast formats. More recently, the wide availability of audio content via the Internet and the attractiveness of commercial-free satellite radio were at first threats to radio. But today broadcasters

The new ways in which audiences are beginning to view broadcasters, how broadcasters are viewing their audiences, and how audiences are viewing themselves are well illustrated by one of the three programs of focus here: Air America's show *The Majority Report* is currently at the forefront of this redefinition. Learning how *Majority Report* listeners and producers think about their new uses of Internet-enabled interactivity, and situating their practices within what other programs are doing with similar technologies, will lead to a deeper understanding of potential directions for radio. It may even be possible to generalize from radio to other broadcast media that have access to Internet technologies – which is to say all other broadcast media.¹⁹

Structure

In the upcoming chapters, I explore the new interactivities among radio programs and their listeners, as enabled by message board and weblog Internet applications.

Participants in radio program discussion areas generally listen to the associated radio programs (though some participants do not listen at all or very much), and come to the

distribute content over the web and even offer their own web-only channels, and FM and AM radio broadcasters are beginning to see satellite radio as an opportunity to expand their audiences rather than a threat to their medium (see ESPN, Bob Edwards, Howard Stern, etc). XM and Sirius, the two commercial satellite radio companies in the United States, will redefine radio just as Marconi, RCA, General Electric, and Westinghouse did in the early 1920s.

¹⁹ The radio listeners participating in discussion areas are more likely than the average listener to be listening to the program via streaming audio on the web. This introduces questions of convergence: does it matter – does it change the meaning or relevance of my conclusions – that the people I'm studying are (often) listening and posting concurrently, such that their 'radio' experience occurs in a manner entirely unlike traditional radio listening? The varying interactive experiences of listeners engaging with broadcast content in different ways would be a fruitful avenue of inquiry. Marketers, academics and broadcasters would all be interested in knowing whether radio-discussion area convergence is generated by people accessing both via their computers or if, conversely, the trend is to engage with the radio and the blog simultaneously but separately.

online forums to discuss issues addressed in the shows. In these online spaces they find others looking for similar conversation, and engage in various forms of affirmation, debate, and conversation. The three discussion areas I look at occupy distinct locations on the ideological spectrum: most participants in Air America Radio discussion areas espouse liberal/progressive values; contributors to the message boards on the *Sean Hannity Show* website tend to self-identify as conservative; and participants in National Public Radio's online discussion boards ideologically sit in between the two, though they lean more left than right.

In chapter 1, I introduce the methods I employed in this research through a description of my arrival at my 'field site.' Here I outline the key questions of this study and its projected uses, and also examine the methods of inquiry: is online research textual analysis or ethnography – and does the distinction matter? This question is central to the experience of both discussion area users and radio producers and listeners as they make use of the new directions of communication enabled by discussion area activity.

This exploratory study bridges dissimilar media, and to do so requires that some definitional groundwork be laid. Chapter 2 identifies the key concepts I am using to understand the media communities that produce radio, listen to radio, and participate in radio-online communities. Here I explore the bounds of the concept of the opaque audience, and contemplate the implications of active audiences. As audiences become more active and hence individual members of those audiences become more aware of each other, the boundary between the concept of audience and a related but separate

concept – the public – begins to blur. I locate community as the determining factor: as the experience or group expression that transforms audience (passive) into public (active). The unique feature of communities in terms of this complex transition is found in their ability to create a sense of values and identity in their members.

The next two chapters are the ethnographic and discursive core of this thesis. Chapter 3 unpacks the community structures of the blogs and message boards of Air America's program *The Majority Report*, NPR's *Talk of the Nation (TOTN)*, and ABC's *Sean Hannity Show*. To help the reader better understand what transpires in these online spaces, I identify a set of structures that have an impact on how listener-bloggers interact with one another and with their respective radio programs. Understanding the implicit and explicit structures, mechanics and rules of these discussion areas enables us to better see how these communities function.

Chapter 4 deals with the complexities of the multidirectional interactivities and behaviors evidenced in radio program blogs and message boards. *The Majority Report* and *TOTN* are the primary contrasting examples in this chapter, with *The Majority Report* serving as the more advanced case study and *TOTN* as an example of radio-online interactivity stuck in a ca. 1998 model, with its listener-bloggers stuck in a "discussion ghetto." This chapter explains the particularities of *high-interactivity radio*, which involves both the intra-discussion area, or 'horizontal,' interactivities as well as the interaction between discussion areas and the radio programs themselves, or what could be called 'vertical' interactivity. Blogs and message boards provide new opportunities for listener feedback

to the radio programs' producers – but they are not always utilized in this way. I then explore the evolving lines of communication between listeners and program producers. This chapter employs a performative lens, exploring the spectrum of radio audiences and radio publics – how individuals comprising a listening audience restyle themselves as members of a public by coming together to engage and perform as a community.

Finally, chapter 5 takes a step back and touches on new developments in broadcast/web-based interactivities and attempts to chart the territory ahead. In the interest of noting new developments that take the trends outlined here a step further, I point to one new nationally-distributed public radio program from Public Radio International called *Open Source*. I participated in the production of the program during its first week on the air, and had a chance to observe the producers, the show and their blog as they began their process of self-definition all at the same time. The challenges this program faces as it develops its on-air and online voice are illustrative of the complexities of new hybrids of radio and online media.

My hope is that this research will be useful to radio producers who are thinking about how to further expand their online program presence in ways that go well beyond promotional and low-interactivity feedback mechanisms. There is great potential for both broadcasters and audiences in high-interactivity radio, whereby the future direction of radio, online, and their hybrid media may be shaped.

Chapter 1. *Modes of Discussion Area Inquiry*

The Majority Report is Air America Radio's weekday primetime program. Janeane Garofalo and her longtime friend and fellow comic Sam Seder host this left-leaning political talk show. Listeners can hear the program on a local station in about 50 radio markets across the United States, or via streaming audio on the Internet from anywhere in the world. A subset of the show's listeners do more than just listen – or even listen and call in to get on the air: they listen and they blog. On the *Majority Report* that aired Monday, January 3 of this year, the hosts, guests and bloggers had plenty to talk about: just a few days prior, a tsunami had devastated Indonesia, India and Sri Lanka, and the U.S. president had committed only 3.5 million dollars in aid.... Janeane had just returned from a vacation...it was a Monday and the most regular bloggers hadn't 'seen' each other in three days...and it was the first weekday of a new year.

At 7:00pm, the show went live – and listeners went to the blog. They greeted one another, welcomed Janeane back, engaged in small-talk, criticized one another, debated the issues discussed on the show, and pursued tangents when particular items caught their attention. They praised the guests. They dressed down the guests. They were clearly having a good time:

I just love it when Sam says, "The blog is going crazy..." -- it feels so inclusive! (on-blog post, 1/3/05)²⁰

²⁰ N.B.: Out of respect for discussion area posters' privacy while also acknowledging the public nature of the texts they generate, when quoting in-discussion area posts from individuals who did not agree or were

[Y]es... but sometimes when he says it the blog is actually relatively sane (for a blog). It is more evidence that he does not read it often anymore... which is fine. (on-blog post, 1/3/05)

A few minutes later host Sam Seder said on the air:

I want to give a shout out to our blog. Congrats on looking so good these days, blog. I don't know if you've been to the *Majority Report Radio* blog site. However the blog is looking pretty sexy.

(up-tempo music played for a moment)

Good new look for the blog in 2005. When we come back we'll be talking to Michael Newman. You're listening to *Majority Report Radio*.

The music came up and the show cut to commercial. The blog went wild – with self-congratulation, praise of the show, and one blogger cracked, “thanks for noticing.”

This vital interaction between listeners and hosts is but one small example of a direction in which talk radio may be heading, if producers recognize an active audience as a valuable asset to cultivate. As of early 2005, I am aware of no other nationally distributed talk radio program that currently makes active use of message boards and blogs to the extent of *The Majority Report*, though there are some that provide discussion areas for their listeners without integrating their content into the shows. Message boards are not novel online applications; people have been using message boards since the pre-Internet days of Usenet, BBS²¹ and 300-baud modems. Blogging, on the other hand, is a recent expression of the Internet-enabled idea that everyone, whether a media producer or a consumer of media products, should have a voice. This shift to a more do it yourself

not approached for interviews, I have opted to refrain from using screen names or any identifiers other than the text itself. Since blog and discussion board threads are deeply archived, some of these quotes may be traceable back to the author even though they lack any identifier.

²¹ bulletin board system

(DIY) culture is in large part responsible for mainstream media organizations opening their doors to their listeners, viewers and readers through new interactivities, and conversely for listeners/viewers/readers to become producers of content themselves.

Methods of engagement: arriving at discussion area field sites

Ethnographic studies have traditionally involved travel to a location, and as such usually include a section of description of the ethnographer's arrival at the field site. While virtual ethnographers do not generally have analogous stories (Hine 2000: 45), they can describe the discovery of their chosen online spaces as field sites. How did they come to recognize the questions to be asked of the space and its residents? How did they decide on the site in the first place? In offering my own such account, I will focus on my arrival at my principal 'field site,' the website of *The Majority Report*. My involvement with the Hannity and NPR sites has been less in-depth, and so I will touch on them briefly only to anchor the research.

In November 2004 I first began to explore *The Majority Report's* blogspace, expecting to find a free-for-all. I was surprised to discover that while the blog had its chaotic elements, it was in fact an ordered space. This blog was particularly interesting to me because it was immediately clear that *The Majority Report* was taking the most innovative approach to program blogging and listener participation of any radio program I had encountered. The show has a main "show blog" as well as a secondary "side blog" called "Majority Reporters 24/7", which is essentially a reporting blog. This alone is evidence of a new approach to program research, news making and listener feedback.

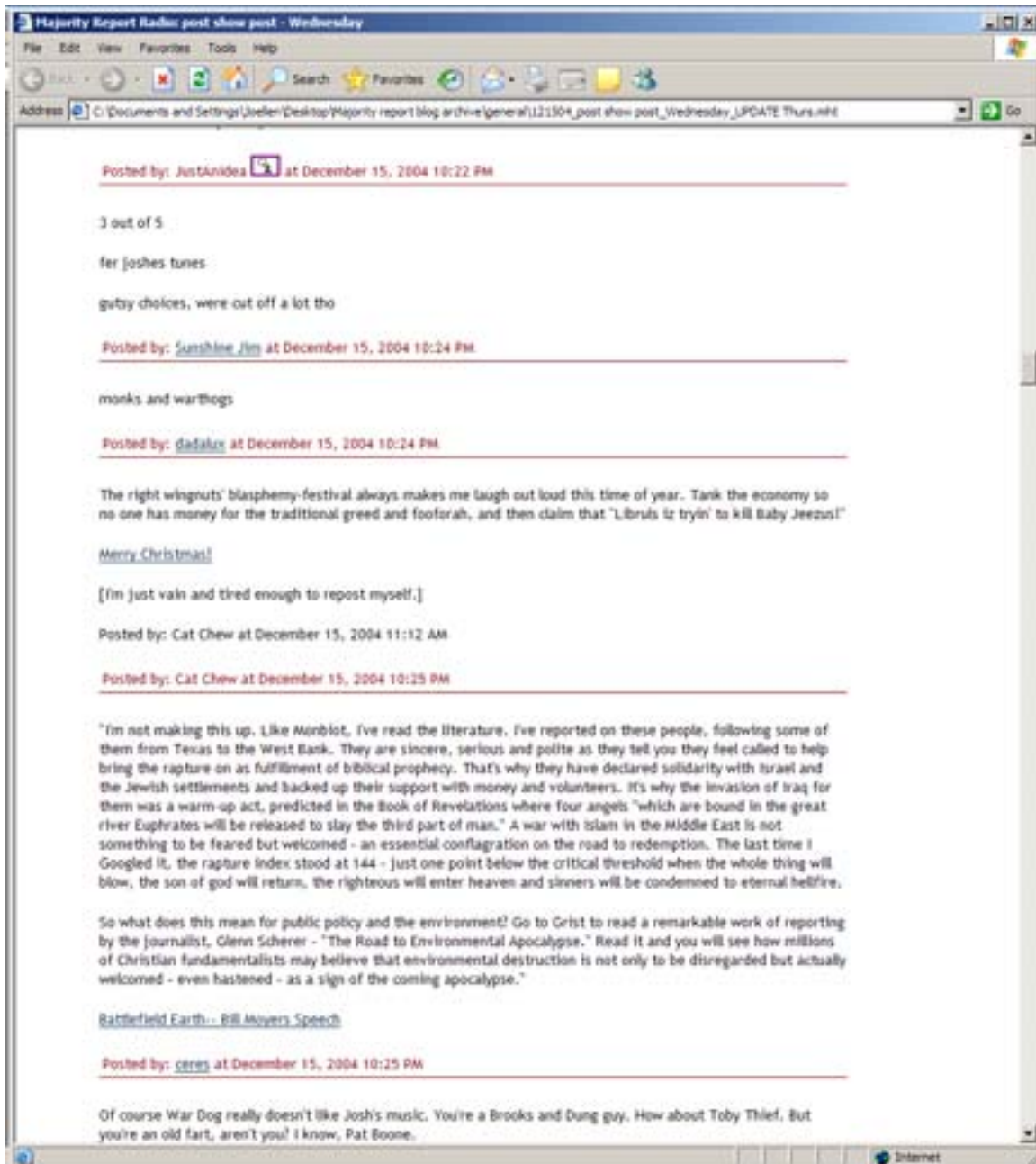


Figure 1.1: Screenshot of Majority Report Show blog, mid-thread, December 16, 2004.

The Show Blog (fig. 1.1) is organized first by day and then by day part: Monday through Friday there are five threads initiated by the program producers each day: a pre-show post, hour one, hour two, hour three, and a post-show post. The pre-show thread tends to be posted sometime in the afternoon before the show. Listeners discuss what their

expectations are for the upcoming program, how they feel about that evening's guests, what they want to talk about that night, and occasionally re-hash some of what took place the night before. The thread is closed just a few minutes prior to the beginning of the show, at 7pm. The hour one, two and three posts are all initiated before their respective hours begin, and are closed at the end of the hour.²² Bloggers who had been participating in one thread will jump to the next sequential thread as soon as it is open for posting. The post-show post opens as soon as the show is over, and it seems that the most devoted bloggers are the ones that tend to linger, posting until well after the show has concluded. They debrief what happened on the air and on the blog, comment on the *Mike Malloy Show*, which follows *The Majority Report* at 10pm, and send each other links for further exploration on the topics covered.

The Majority Reporters 24/7 blog (fig. 1.2) is organized reverse-chronologically by topics posted by the program producers. If the producers want specific information or contributions on a particular topic, they make their request here. Once one clicks on a specific thread of the Majority Reporters 24/7 blog, a subtitle to the blog sets the tone of discourse: "Info trading with Majority Reporters and Guest Posters." The emphasis of this sub-blog is for posters to provide data and research for the program on specific topics put forth by the program producers. This is an interesting new approach in harvesting data from program listeners.²³ The threads do not close in the same way the Show Blog

²² Online, the program is available in real time via the Air America live stream, the audio is not archived for later download (though there is an "official fan site" that does: www.airamericaplace.com), and so the emphasis of the three in-show threads on the blog is on live engagement with the show in its primetime slot.

²³ See also a description of another instance of collaborative news creation in Anita Chan's CMS thesis *Collaborative News Networks: Distributed Editing, Collective Action, and the Construction of Online News*



Figure 1.2: Screenshot of Majority Reporters 24/7 sub-blog, top of thread, January 3, 2005.

threads do; as these are subject-bound instead of time-bound, keeping the post form available for use as long as the thread is available means that infrequent visitors can contribute even if they are not following the show daily. It also, though, means that these

on *Slashdot.org*, where she describes the community and content generative aspects of *Slashdot*, the “news for nerds” website.

blog threads are open to marketers and spammers who manipulate open threads to hawk mortgages, erectile dysfunction pills and antidepressants.

The greatest volume of activity on *The Majority Report's* site is on the general show blog, and I will focus on participant activities there. When there are specific comments made about the 24/7 blog, I will highlight them, but generally speaking *Majority Report* bloggers post on both the blogs or just the general show blog and so most observations apply most aptly to the general blog. My principal engagement with the two *Majority Report* blogs was through lurking, reading the show blog and listening simultaneously, and only occasionally posting. I identified 19 frequent posters²⁴ to contact for interviews, received responses from ten, and engaged seven in email interviews. I also pursued in-person, telephone and email interviews with two program staff members.

My arrivals at the *Talk of the Nation* and the *Sean Hannity* discussion boards were similar, in that I also lurked and did not directly engage participants in the online spaces. I began to explore both discussion areas in January 2005, after the intense political heat of the 2004 presidential election that had filled *The Majority Report's* blogs in the fall had quieted down. The *TOTN* boards featured one thread per topic, organized on one main page in reverse-chronological order. Each topic was anchored in a subject featured on the program, and thread volume ranged from under 100 entries to more than 500. I registered as a user of the NPR boards in February 2005, and continued to lurk but not post. As I became more familiar with the boards, I noticed not only that there were

²⁴ "Frequent poster" is here defined as an individual who has posted on two or more threads.

regular posters who engaged on virtually every topic, but that there were regular posters of a lower engagement level who occasionally posted, but kept coming back. I identified 15 regular participants to contact, and I sent out inquiry emails. I received eight responses and then proceeded with five interviews over email. I also found one manager of NPR's discussion boards who was willing to speak with me about his experiences.

At the *Hannity* boards I also hung back and observed. After lurking for about two months, in March 2005 I became a paying subscriber to the "Hannity Insider," a service that, for \$5.95 a month, granted me commercial-free downloads of the program. In March 2005, an Insider membership also provided a moderated chatroom and the exclusive "Hannity Messenger" service, that could integrate with existing instant messenger programs, and provided a channel for "Instant Access, that will allow users to send direct feedback to the studio during the show." The Hannity Messenger information page declared "so keep listening: your comments or questions could be mentioned on-air!" This service offered listeners a much more direct line of communication with the show. It also, however, effectively diverted listeners from the discussion area community of other listeners, so I decided not to delve into its functionalities. By June 2005, the Hannity Messenger and chatroom seemed to have been removed, and a new service had been added in their stead: the Hanniblog, "a place for Insiders to submit relevant news items as links and for other Insiders to rate these stories by awarding or deducting points." It is unclear at this point whether or not the Hanniblog will succeed in involving Hannity listeners in the production of the show in ways the Hannity Forums have not yet achieved. I didn't need to be an 'Insider' to post on the boards, but I wanted to gain as

much access as I could to the site. I registered to post on the forums, so I could log in as “joellen” and not just as a guest. I continued to lurk, but thought perhaps I would post – try it out in this one space and see how it goes. I found one characteristic of the Hannity Forums to be frequent antagonism toward non-conservative viewpoints – established not only through the text of postings, but also through members’ personal signature files²⁵ – that could be experienced as aggressive or threatening by some liberals. In the end I decided not to engage in topical discussion, but to post a request for interviews on the site. This yielded me two individuals willing to be interviewed, of which only one was able to participate in an email interview. I also interviewed the show’s program director and with his assistance initiated contact with two of the boards’ volunteer moderators. One of these moderators engaged in an extended email interview with me. Due to the small group of individuals interested in participating in this research project directly, my analysis of the Hannity Forums is generated more through discourse and textual analysis, and less through direct interaction with participants.

Modes of inquiry: everything is in the blog ... nothing is in the blog

This thesis builds upon a smaller study conducted in 2004 in which I focused solely on the listener-bloggers of *The Majority Report*. The methods I employ in this expanded project have been shaped by my experiences with *The Majority Report*’s blog and listener-bloggers. I find compelling the problematization of the relationship between

²⁵ The style and tone of Hannity Forum users’ signature files vary greatly. Many express a non-political point of view, such as a website, group affiliation or a favorite quote. Others feature personal descriptions, images, quotes from the Bible, or religious or patriotic iconography. Still others feature phrases that are aggressive in tone, seemingly directed at individuals with different viewpoints. IE, to illustrate the impression that contributed to my hesitancy: “Liberalism is a mental disease!,” “Ann Coulter is my hero,” “the main character traits of the liberal: Narcissistic, Sociopathic, Bald Faced Liar, Hypocritical.”

action and text in online ethnographic research. As I lurked in *The Majority Report's* blogs, I struggled with questions of how far to extend myself into the lived experiences of the bloggers whose thoughts and interactions to which I was gaining access. I wondered if it was a mistake to evaluate the community through texts (instead of actions) if the only actions I could observe were online. I was uncomfortable with calling what I was doing ethnography or participant observation when it felt more akin to textual analysis. Yes, I was reading a text, in its strictest sense. But perhaps the very idea of a text becomes fragmented when that text is a complex transcript of various monologues, conversations and interactions on particular topics in a particular space, unfolding in a specific linear time. Perhaps a blog or a message board is less text and more a map through that text. Rene Lysloff (2003), in an ethnography of an online musical community, argues “the realization that communities are based on a shared sense of belonging is perhaps not in itself new (see, e.g., Anderson 1983). What is of interest is how the Internet as a technology makes possible communities and new social practices that may have been unimaginable before (236).” Lysloff could easily have been writing about blogs and boards. The problem of the ethnographer using texts as research objects converges here with the indisputable reality that listener-bloggers have meaningful experiences through texts – and this convergence of theory and practice make this methodological reflection pertinent to the larger project.

The text/transcript of a blogged interaction – the record of it left behind on a blog or board archive after the temporally-bound event has passed – is not just a residue, it is the conversation itself, complete with grammatical errors and time stamps. On the other

hand, the physical conditions of the contributors while they were writing is not included in that text – it is unclear if a poster was typing angrily when writing a particular diatribe, or how idly an individual may contribute. There is little information available to help a researcher discern whether blog or board participants posted in between other tasks at home, or if they were hunched over their computers listening to the program’s audio stream. This lack of knowledge, and lack of embodied engagement with the subjects of the study, lends weight to the argument that online texts are merely residues of the events themselves and that the study is not ethnographic in form. However, the map – or transcript – of a blog or board can convey more about a conversation than may be immediately apparent. Turkle (1997) describes the experience of one man who had developed an infatuation with a woman he met in an online community called a MUD²⁶:

Since it is not unusual for players to keep logs of their MUD sessions with significant others, Peter had something that participants in real-life relationships never have: a record of every interaction with Beatrice. When he read over his logs, he remarked that he could not find their relationship in them. Where was the warmth? The sense of complicity and empathy?

When everything is in the log and nothing is in the log, people are confronted with the degree to which they construct relationships in their own minds. (207)

Kendall (2002) has made similar observations regarding the differences between reading logs of online interactions as texts versus as events in real-time: “when read after the fact as logs, these dialogues become flat. The reader has no investment in their direction or continuation and does not share participants’ knowledge of the dense history of associations attached to particular phrases and habits of speech” (233). If it is truly that

²⁶ MUD is short for “multi-user dungeon,” a text-based online multi-player role playing game.

easy to read a transcript dispassionately, then *it is absolutely necessary to read online interactions as both text and event, through both ethnographic and discursive lenses.*

Bloggers and board participants use any number of shorthand phrasings to connote emotion, derision, respect, humor, sarcasm, curiosity, haste, and other subtleties of conversation. For instance, after visiting *The Majority Report's* blogs regularly for a couple of weeks, I became accustomed to individuals' styles, the blog gained dimensionality, and it became more than a transcript. This is hardly a simple text, and reading it critically is hardly an unambiguous act of textual analysis. What takes place on *The Majority Report's* blogs is a complex social interaction, and individuals who participate firmly acknowledge this. However, it is only through the interviews I conducted that I was able to gain a sense of how the bloggers reflect on their practice and subsequent roles in *The Majority Report's* community/public of listeners. Lacking interviews, online participant observation rests uncomfortably on the line between ethnography and textual analysis. Kendall's 2002 description of her online ethnographic approach is helpful to my task here as an ethnographer-journalist: to "bridge the gap between participant and reader understandings" (234) of the text that remains after the participants have all turned off their computers for the evening.

My approach can be described as an ethnography drawing upon a "portfolio of methodologies" (Gusterson, personal conversation, 4/12/05), pursuing what Gusterson (1997) calls "polymorphous engagement," in which I interact "with informants across a number of dispersed sites, not just in local communities, and sometimes in virtual form;

and it means collecting data eclectically from a disparate array of sources in many different ways” (116). I am influenced by the practice of journalism, a social construction of technology (SCOT) theoretical vantage point, and textual analytic, discourse analytic, and ethnographic methodological approaches. In particular, the SCOT perspective is illuminating to the task at hand: I pursue ethnographically-informed encounters with discussion area participants to understand their motivations and perspectives, and how these communities are *socially shaping* (Bijker 1995, Williams & Edge 1996, Hine 2000, Boczkowski 2004) the technologies as they use them.²⁷ I engaged directly with participants and producers through telephone and in-person interviews as well as through email exchanges. I followed the development of discussion area interactions in the *Majority Report* blog from November 2004 through April 2005, and similarly attended to the *TOTN* and *Hannity* discussion areas for portions of that time. As most of my textual and ethnographic research was pursued online, I have drawn heavily upon virtual ethnographic strategies (Turkle 1997, Baym 2000, Ortner 1999, Hine 2000, Kendall 2002, Lysloff 2003, Campbell 2004),²⁸ and my methodological approach is aligned most closely with Hine’s (2000) discourse analytic/ethnographic hybrid approach (53-54), rooted in both my background in media/journalism and my preference for interviews as a method of engagement. The ethnographic elements of this study are interwoven with discursive readings of in-discussion area characteristics and interactions. Discourse analysis is a mode of inquiry most often applied in media studies to structures

²⁷ *Social shaping* is a concept first detailed in the mid-eighties in language that avoids the constructivist/determinist divide and instead focuses on the complex processes of technological development. For more on social shaping, see Williams and Edge’s article “The Social Shaping of Technology,” available online at <http://www.rcss.ed.ac.uk/technology/SSTRP.html>

²⁸ In addition to this primary research strategy, I followed the development of *The Majority Report* and *Air America* through reports and editorials, I interned as a researcher for *The Majority Report* to learn about how the producers create the program, and I followed the media discourse on blogs and their social effect.

of power and language in broadcast media products. But van Dijk (1995) offers a broader definition, which I will employ here: discourse analysis is “a domain of study in the humanities and social sciences that systematically examines the structures and functions of text and talk in their social, political, and cultural contexts” (10). Here I use this approach to look for themes that arise in the written text left behind by listener-blogger participants in radio program discussion areas, and to “maintain a skeptical, stranger perspective toward the observed features of text” (Hine 2000: 143). The discussion area texts are then *both* transcript and text; these spaces provide an ideal setting for a hybrid inquiry because blogs and discussion boards exist at the crossroads between interaction-driven and information-driven online communities (Hine 2000: 19).

Hine (2000) also offers some names for how one might characterize online ethnography that draw from other methodologies – she offers *mobile*, *interstitial*, *partial*, and *adaptive* ethnographies (65). These names all attempt to get at the betwixt-and-between-ness of online ethnography: not only can it be conducted from one’s own desk in between other tasks, it is necessarily not holistic – it must adapt to the requirements of the topics and communities at hand. I would add to Hine’s list *para-ethnography* (Marcus and Holmes 2006), which adapts to the local and specialized expertises of the community being studied. Often deployed when conducting corporate ethnographies, it applies as well to online efforts; the reflexive nature of online participation encourages participants to be ‘experts’ in their use of online communication.

To include local perspectives the ethnographer extends the critical/skeptical eye into the community (Hine 2000: 55-56). Anthropological work for the greater part of the 20th century maintained a privileged view of the ethnographer, preserving the ethnographer's right to authoritatively comment on what he or she observed. James Clifford (1986) argues that "the historical predicament of ethnography [is] that it is always caught up in the invention, not the representation, of cultures" (2). However, in the 1980s new philosophies were introduced and elaborated by anthropologists who took it as their task to problematize and recast ethnographic writing. Key texts such as Clifford's *Writing Culture* (1986) and *The Predicament of Culture* (1988), and Marcus and Fischer's *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* (1986) contributed to the now widespread influence of reflexive approaches to ethnography that made it more acceptable to include the critical and analytic voices of members of examined communities. Clifford (1986) notes in his introduction to *Writing Culture* that "polyvocality was restrained and orchestrated in traditional ethnographies by giving to one voice a pervasive authorial function and to others the role of sources, 'informants,' to be quoted or paraphrased" (15). Due in part to the reflexive nature of many online experiences and environments, many of the individuals interviewed were willing and able to engage in exploration of their senses of the online-radio communities in which they participate. I have attempted to honor participants' voices by following lines of inquiry suggested by their insights.

Chapter 2. Active Audiences Shaping Community

We know now that the telephone is not just a device. It is a network... As the network spreads, it is fostering both the universality and the individuality of human discourse. The Net itself, the world's fastest-spreading communications medium, is the telephone network in its most liberating, unruly, and fertile new guise.

Thus Bell's child is freeing our understanding of the possibilities that lie in ancient words: neighborhood and meeting and information and news. It is global; it is democratic; it is the central agent of change in our sense of community. It is how, and why, we are wired.

-James Gleick in *WIRED* magazine, December 1993

WIRED Magazine's familiarly high ideals and techno-deterministic approach to technology and culture are nothing new. In fact, it is a perspective frequently espoused in the popular press. Publications like *WIRED* and *Technology Review* celebrate pioneering individuals and shrewd business players at the same time as they strongly assert the deterministic effects of technology. *WIRED* in particular plays both sides of this coin in claiming, as McLuhan did, that the medium is more to the point than the message itself – that technologies are more influential than what we *do* with those technologies. Running parallel to this discourse, these publications lionize heroic individuals possessing of great ideas who make decisions that affect an entire industry or segment of society. The overall thrust of this discourse is techno-deterministic, but what's actually happening is an excited (if not reflective) charting of the social construction of technologies: those individuals in positions to mobilize resources make decisions to change the way they produce or use a technology, and this enables a shift. Individual end users of media and communications technologies integrate new functionalities into already established habits

and patterns of use; in so doing technologies are often used in not quite the same manner as the manufacturer intended.

The middle ground between techno-deterministic and socio-deterministic rhetoric is large, and I am placing emphasis on the social rather than the technological. Arguments leaning to the technological side are exemplified by Langdon Winner's 1986 essay "Do Artifacts Have Politics?," where he points out that technologies have inherent qualities, despite their creation and determination by humans. "A necessary complement to, rather than a replacement for, theories of the social determination of technology, [the theory of technological politics] approach identifies certain technologies as political phenomena in their own right" (22). Technologies do have embedded characteristics, but those characteristics are always designed by humans for specific reasons; culture is not determined by technology, but technology *and* culture are determined by human use, interaction and choice. There are always alternative directions for uses of technology: there are always paths not taken, and the paths chosen are selected not necessarily because of something intrinsic to the technology, but because groups of people made choices for reasons rooted in culture, personal preferences, politics, or technology use (Douglas 1987, Bijker, Hughes and Pinch 1987, Williams and Edge 1996).

The actions (thereby meaning the habits, decisions, listening and web-use practices) of individual members of listening audiences, taken collectively and in combination with the media producers with whom they interact, are where we apply this general discussion of technologies and how they are socially constructed. Through a combination of the

actions of individual audience members and the design decisions of the producers of the discussion areas, the implementation of the discussion area technology is shaped. Both form and use of discussion areas are socially shaped: program changes to the structures of discussion areas are often made in response to how listeners use the areas. Likewise, as we will see in chapter three, listener uses are not easily predicted, and vary across spaces.

An active audience is ... a public?

An audience is a body of media consumers labeled as such by a research, marketing or media entity interested in knowing the extent of the media product's reach, and membership is not necessarily acknowledged by its members. Audience membership, however, in no way precludes awareness of participation – but it is through this awareness that audiences can begin to become publics. David Michael Ryfe's study of letters written by listeners to Franklin Delano Roosevelt in response to his fireside chats charts the development of an audience in the process of becoming self-aware. Ryfe (2001) calls this self-awareness of the audience *collective reflexivity*, which “involves the development of a common language through which one may identify oneself (and be recognized) as a legitimate participant in a discussion” (768). Each respondent wrote his or her letter to the President in response to a broadcast that he or she knew had been heard (and felt) by millions of other Americans. In so doing they had a strong sense of participating along with their fellow countrymen in their support, disagreement, inspiration or hopefulness. Ryfe locates Roosevelt's method for engaging his listeners as an exhortation for his audience to become a public: to act as individuals in consort with

each other, working toward improving the nation's – and their own – fortunes.

Nevertheless, FDR's listeners are routinely labeled as an audience, not as a public.

Knowing this, when does an audience become more than mere mass – what does it (what do its members) have to do to become a public? Livingstone points out that audiences are people in aggregate, but once those people begin to actualize as a public, they become instead collectivities of individuals. I would fuse Livingstone's and Ryfe's arguments to suggest that once an audience develops a sense of collective reflexivity, it can move toward becoming, at least in part, a public. Members of such a collectively reflexive audience embrace a level of engagement that takes their relationship with media texts past the initial moment of reading, listening or viewing, and into creative expression and communication with others.

'Public' refers to a common understanding of the world, a shared identity, a claim to inclusiveness, a consensus regarding the collective interest. It also implies a visible and open forum of some kind in which the population participates in order that such understandings, identities, values and interests are recognised, contested, regulated. (Livingstone 2005: 5)

Social theorist Jürgen Habermas defined the *public sphere* as “first of all a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens. A portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body” (1984: p.49). Habermas saw the public sphere as a space for engagement with other citizens where issues could be discussed in an open and accessible forum. This is where public opinion was approached. On the one hand, this public sphere encompasses traditional ideals of community building and participation in civic organizations. But if, as Habermas

specifies, “a portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body” (49), many more fora constitute public spheres than just those that are accessible to all citizens.

Twentieth century broadcast media took these 19th century publics²⁹ as described by Habermas and turned them into 20th century audiences by beaming content at them, and in so doing they made it possible for the scope of public discussion, which had formerly been mainly local, to include both localized and national media events. When OJ Simpson was tried in 1995 for the murders of his wife Nicole and her friend Ron Goldman, an American *audience* was glued to its various media, reading over breakfast, listening on the drive home from work, watching during dinner. But the American *public* debated important questions of race, gender, justice and celebrity. Americans cared about these issues, and discussed them actively. When the United States invaded Iraq in March of 2003, cable news and the broadcast network news programs were geared up to serve a national audience hungry for information. 69 million viewers tuned in for breaking news coverage on broadcast and cable news networks.³⁰ Whether it was in

²⁹ By now it should be clear that there are a number of definitions of *public* as used in the sense of *a* public and not *in* public. For clarification, I turn to Daniel Dayan, who takes particular care to parse the term as he is writing in French, where the definitions of “audience” and “public” are inverted in part if not entirely from the English. Dayan, drawing from the work of Pierre Sorlin and Michael Baxandall, identifies six characteristics of a public as connoted by the English word “public”: “(1) a public consists of a milieu; it offers its members a certain type of ‘sociability’ and displays some amount of stability (Sorlin, 1992); (2) it is committed to, and emerges from, the practice of internal debate; (3) it is endowed with a capacity for ‘performance’ that manifests itself through self-presentation vis-à-vis other publics; (4) these self-presentations commit their authors: a public is characterized by the loyalty expressed to certain values with reference to a perceived common good or a shared symbolic world-view; (5) a public is capable of transforming its tastes into ‘demands’, thus taking over the role of the ancient sponsors of the arts (Baxandall, 1999); (6) finally, a public can only exist in reflexive manner – its existence can only arise through a capacity for self-representation, through a capacity of shared imagination, through criteria establishing who belongs.” (2001: 746)

³⁰ Networks cited are, in order of audience size (largest to smallest): NBC, CBS, ABC, Fox News, Fox (broadcast), CNN, MSNBC.

response to the subject of the news (war) or to the effects of the financial investment in its coverage (and these two factors are arguably inseparable), audience numbers increased. Prime time cable news audience grew from 2.4 million viewers in 2002 to 3.2 million in 2003, a gain (32%) surpassed in recent memory only by the 52% jump in viewership in 2001, attributable in large part to the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks.³¹ As members of a national *audience*, Americans delighted networks by showing that despite years of attrition, they would still tune in if the news was big enough. But as members of an American *public*, they debated the war and the government's policies at home, in public, and at the ballot box.

Each localized discussion, spurred by national media content, happened in one place at one time – but it happened concurrently with hundreds of thousands of other discussions. The act of discussing the news – or even contemplating it seriously on one's own – transformed audience members into participants in a public. Membership in a media audience is today an essential requirement for having the information necessary to take part in public life. In our hyper-mediated world, “anything not on the media stage is marginalised, rendered invisible” (Livingstone 2005: 17), and the public is similarly affected by these forces:

...The understandings, values and identities of the public (or publics), together with the fora in which these are expressed, are increasingly mediated – technologically, materially, symbolically, discursively. Moreover, the forms of mediation are themselves changing, with the public being mediated by ever more diversified, pervasive and subtle forms of mass and, recently, interactive communication. (Livingstone 2005: 5)

³¹ Statistics gathered from The Project for Excellence in Journalism's “The State of the News Media 2004” and “The State of the News Media 2005,” available at www.stateofthemediamedia.org. 4/15/05.

In order for those localized discussions to take place, for members of a public to receive the information they need to engage with that public's discourse (at least if the topic has resonance beyond the immediate and the local), they must also be members of audiences. Without the existence of media audiences, the public as configured today cannot exist. Likewise, without publics, audiences have no social meaning beyond the needs of marketers and media researchers. Internet-based communication makes it more possible than ever before for audiences to actualize: on the Internet, publics are emerging as audience members seek each other out through online gathering spaces, and take the opportunity to create communities through which they can act (read: cogitation through mobilization) collectively, as publics.

In the networked spaces of the Internet, individuals can with relative ease find others who wish to engage on various topics. Online they can converse, organize and take action across great distances. Dayan (2005) notes that in order for such geographically dispersed groups to conceive of themselves as an entity they must actively go through a "process of imagination, an imagining of community, a map of belonging" (45). The ways in which publics are born is as important as their subsequent lives and their ultimate deaths. He sees an important distinction between publics, formed to last a while, and crowds, which exist for only a short time. If "crowds gather, then disperse" and "publics exist without gathering and...survive dispersion" (45), then what is a community weblog? A crowd or a public? Members of well-established blog and virtual communities like Metafilter, Fark, Slashdot, and the WELL would likely argue that their community is more public than crowd; all four have survived multiple iterations and

crises, and continue to thrive today. Established in 1985, the WELL is the oldest of the group. Online community chronicler Howard Rheingold (2000) notes that the WELL fit into his everyday physical routines, and it “felt like an authentic community to me from the start” (xvi). It was the human compassion and interaction, grounded in real-life events like death and marriage that he cites as evidence for the realness of the community. The WELL’s ownership and governing rules have changed several times over the years, and members of the WELL have come together as a public in response each time. Numerous smaller publics have also emerged from the WELL’s larger community, and have mobilized for political action and other causes. As such, it would be difficult to argue that the WELL is not a public, in the sense of the word I am using here. The three discussion areas of focus in this paper, though, have existed for varying lengths of time: the NPR discussion forums launched in 1998, the Hannity Forums were introduced in 2002, and *The Majority Report*’s blog launched in 2004. The main difference among the three from a creation standpoint is that *The Majority Report*’s blog was born on the same day the show itself first went on air.

It would be unfair to have this discussion without acknowledging that some see the development of Internet-based communities, and the fracturing of a national media audience, as the passing of something that was once great.³² Prominent communications scholar Elihu Katz laments the decline of the national audience in the late 20th century, and he is correct that something fundamental has changed: we no longer all gather

³² An ideal of a national media audience is arguably an ideal conferred by hindsight. Even in the 20th century’s “golden age” of broadcasting, multiple channels of communication persisted: human interaction, print, and casual tuning in and tuning out of channels all break with the ideal of a consistent and unified national audience. It could be argued that the idea of one national audience is conveniently constructed for the purposes of a nostalgic argument.

around a TV or radio set, tuned in to “contests, conquests, and coronations” as described by Dayan and Katz (1992: 1). In order for us to have a similarly mediated experience, the event must be huge: the election of a president, the terrorist attacks of 9/11/01, the death of a pope. But even then, we do not all gather around the same media: we have dozens if not hundreds of channels to choose from on both television and radio, and innumerable online information destinations. Yet in our fractured media consumption we converge again, through the common experience of (at least the impression of) information diversity and multiplicity. Could the ‘national audience’ traditionalists deny the staying power of the national mediated conversation – whether spurred by newscasts and talk shows on one network or on twenty, or via Internet-based information sources from a multiplicity of vantage points?³³

The public’s experience of what constitutes a public sphere has evolved. As the technologies and media forms available through which to receive and digest information have evolved, so has how we think of the idea of ‘public’ as an adjective. The television and radio talk show fit with Habermas’ description of what constitutes a ‘public sphere,’ but this is not necessarily so far removed from what Katz et al desire. What is more challenging is the idea that online forums for discussion are just as – if not more – valid as an element of the public sphere. The Internet’s most direct contributions to mediated (or at the very least media-inspired) public space are the community weblog, message

³³ Many online news sources use content generated by wire services such as AP, Reuters and AFP, and as such their content and news agendas are very similar. Nevertheless, news consumers online can glean information from local, national and international news sources, blogs ranging from the personal to the political and the eye-witness to the editorial, and other collaborative information-rich sites such as Flickr, Plastic, Indymedia, etc. As an digression from this point, I must also ask: is it possible that the fractured mediascape (despite its diversity) may encourage people to seek out others of like minds via that very mediascape as a response to its fractiousness?

board and discussion forum. Jenkins and Thorburn (2003), in their introduction to *Democracy and New Media*, argue that not only is the ‘national’ conversation, or ‘consensus’ model of media participation outdated, the ‘diversified’ conversation may be more well-suited to a 21st century democracy. And new media, particularly new media that make use of the Internet, provide a rich place to find those diverse voices and conversations. “Networked computing operates according to principles fundamentally different from those of broadcast media: access, participation, reciprocity, and many-to-many rather than one-to-many communication” (2). The conjunction of broadcast media and networked media, as evidenced in discussion areas provided by talk radio programs, is a new phenomenon not without its contradictions. How can the one-to-many format of the radio talk show integrate in a graceful way with the many-to-many format of online discussion areas? Don’t the access and reciprocity assumed in online communication subvert the producer-audience hierarchies imposed by 80 years of broadcasting tradition? The answers can be found by looking at these discussion areas as publics, and in following Dayan’s observation that integral to the idea of a public is the idea of performance. “A public always strikes some sort of pose. A public both knows itself to be – and wishes to be – seen” (2001: 744). Publics engaging in discussion (and performance) in radio program discussion areas wish to be seen by the program as well as by virtual passersby, and individual members of that public wish to be seen by both the program hosts and by their fellow public members. “Publics display their identity by ostensibly differentiating themselves from other publics. In other words, a public is not simply a group, but one characterized by a style of performance” (2001: 744). At first glance these desires may be seen to subvert the traditional broadcaster-audience hierarchy

as well as create awkward relationships but in fact this need not be so, as particularly in the case of talk programs, listener involvement has been long-established through the integration of listener on-air phone calls. Integrating a conversation in an online discussion area with a broadcast may be new, but it is not without precedent.

The idea that active and engaged broadcast audiences can become publics maps onto radio programs' online discussion areas increasingly well, especially as programs begin to integrate discussion area content into broadcast content. Following Habermas, Sonia Livingstone (2005) argues that the public is dependent on the private, and asks:

What does it take for people to participate in public, what does the public require, what are its preconditions? We need an account of the formation of public opinion and of citizens – early expressions of interest, exploration of experience, tentative trying out of viewpoints. This may not happen in the public sphere but the public sphere depends on its happening. (25-26)

Livingstone's point is observable today in radio-online discussion areas. A discussion area community, that of *The Majority Report* for example, is an example of this opinion formulation happening in an ambiguously public space that confers both public-ness and private-ness. Many people (myself included) formulate political and other opinions by trying them out through conversation. Granted, much of the time topical discussion in these spaces is devoted to hardened opinions doing battle with other hardened opinions, but several of the participants I interviewed claimed they try out new opinions and ideas in the discussion areas. When listeners participate in *The Majority Report*, *Hannity* or *Talk of the Nation* discussion areas they can test their own ideas in much the same way as Livingstone outlined, but online instead of in face-to-face communication.

The blog is a relatively safe space to shape one's ideas, due in part to the strong sense of community generated through relationships.³⁴ The high number of regular contributors gives the blog a sense of consistency and permanence, possibly also contributing to a sense of safety for contributors. In this instance is the blog serving as a public or a private forum? It is serving a social function typically served by private settings, and may indeed feel private to the participants. However, as the conversation unfolds it is viewable to anyone who goes to the blog page – no password or site registration required. Also, the transcript of the discussion remains online after the real-time conversation has ended and is archived on *The Majority Report's* website for months (perhaps years?)³⁵ to come. What remains after the real-time conversation is a record; and because it is freely available to anyone it is a *public* record. So did the conversation take place in public or in private? Would all the participants agree?

The answer, perhaps unsurprisingly, is “it depends.” Participants in the three discussion areas I am examining have varying opinions on this question, arguably due in large part to the presentation of the space itself; the private-ness or public-ness of the spaces is also not necessarily obvious or generally agreed upon by its users.

Participants in the *Hannity* discussion boards tend to view their space as more private than either *Talk of the Nation* or *Majority Report* discussion area participants. The *Hannity* boards are owned and operated by a private business possessing of the right to

³⁴ Other characteristics of blogs that help make them safe spaces for idea testing run parallel to characteristics of online interaction often viewed as negative elements: anonymity, non-physical proximity, and no direct social censure for misbehavior.

³⁵ As of this writing, *The Majority Report* is only 16 months old, so it is impossible to say how far the program's archives will extend.

shut down discussions it does not see fit to permit on its server. One respondent noted that “the Sean Hannity Forum is a soapbox, a very good one which attracts an audience, but it remains his soapbox even as its lent to others. It’s a private space with an open invitation” (*Gene*, email interview, 4/21/05). Hannity Forum members are well aware that their contributions are monitored by moderators and that members are subject to removal or censure if they transgress the board’s rules (more on this in chapter 3). This attitude is reinforced by implied and written regulations enforced by moderators on the boards. The NPR boards, however, seem to breed a very different sense of public-ness. Participants in *Talk of the Nation*’s boards know that NPR receives public funding, underwriting revenue, and charitable contributions from listeners, and so they tend to see their space as necessarily public. One respondent aptly described the NPR boards as “a public place that some folks seem to think is their territory, much like a gang may claim a public sidewalk” (*Anonymous*, email interview, 4/17/05). Another interviewee chose a similar metaphor for his experiences in the NPR discussion area: “I see us as being something midway from Hyde Park Corner to the guys sitting around on boxes in front of a mercantile store” (*Harry*, email interview, 4/17/05). He knows his online conversations take place in public view, but his membership in an ‘us’ gives him a private and exclusive claim on a segment of that public space. *The Majority Report*’s bloggers ascribe to a similar sense of a publicly-viewed ‘us’ or ‘we,’ and fully expect their postings to be read by each other, the program (they hope), and interested parties who are just passing through. Nancy Baym’s research on community in Usenet supports these observations, in that “because anyone can read or participate, all Usenet interaction is fundamentally multiparty and public. People never know who all the readers of their

messages are” (1995: 145). One *Majority Report* blogger agrees that she is viewed anonymously, but nevertheless sees the blog as private, too:

Of course it is a public space... but I understand the sense of private space that you might be suggesting. The blog feels intimate and private in this sense. I am not sure how to expand upon this but it has something to do with the way in which bloggers 'know' each other from the blog.... (*Cate*, email interview, 4/20/05)

Another interviewee noted the “blog’s policy of freedom of expression” which allows for foul language and more leeway in criticizing public figures (and the program hosts) than the *Hannity* boards permit.

These differences in opinion on whether or not a discussion area is a public or a private space are due in part to institutional practices of regulation and accessibility as well as the general tone of the community’s interactions. However, it would be negligent to not point out that the more open, or publicly-toned discussion areas are those of *The Majority Report* and *TOTN*, strongly Liberal and centrist organizations, respectively. The more closed, or privately-toned discussion area is the *Sean Hannity* Forums site, which is for all intents and purposes a Conservative webspace.

On community

Popular expressions of community ideals are largely derived from a constructed nostalgic and pastoral idea of what community was once, but is no longer. First articulated by Ferdinand Tönnies in 1887, this ideal of community calls to mind small isolated groups of people who depend upon each other for resources, know each other well, and provide mutual support (Wellman and Gulia 1999, Smith 2005). While this archetype may in fact

have never been typical, social theorist Emile Durkheim nevertheless deployed it at the turn of the last century in a new understanding of increasingly complex societies when he argued that new social groups, or communities, become necessary when territorial proximity no longer governs the primary means of human association (1964). What people have in common with each other thereby becomes an important way of expressing individual and collective identity – and identification with a community is the social form that expression takes. “Communities are about relationships” (Wellman 1999: *xii*), and these relationships can be based upon common affiliation (Fischer 1982, Putnam 2000), interest (Anderson 1991), or competence (Wenger 1998). Such communities are held together often locally, but just as often at a distance. This observation began to be explored in depth via social network analysis in the 1970s. Wellman (1999) notes that the social network approach allows researchers to determine that, contrary to what Putnam (2000) and others may put forth, “community has not disappeared. Instead, community has moved out of the traditional neighborhood base as the constraints of space weakened” (18). Messengers and letters have facilitated distance community relationships for centuries, and in the 19th and 20th centuries telegraphy made it possible to communicate directly across great distances, thereby increasing the ability of community members to experience each other ‘virtually.’ The Internet and its associated technologies (email, BBS, message boards, blogs, videoconferencing, etc) only further this ability to engage in community across great distances. The knowledge that communities are commonly and successfully facilitated by technology is at the core of how I define community.

Radio broadcasters have traditionally had only limited feedback from their audiences.³⁶ They gathered reactions to and opinions on programming via letters and phone calls, Arbitron and other ratings systems, and more recently emails. These methods of receiving feedback, however, all necessarily distance the producer from the receiver of content; today (and increasingly since the late 1990s) listeners can respond to a broadcast with all of the older response tools, but they also have a new tool in their arsenal: they can blog their response. They can post their comments in response and reaction to broadcast media content in online forums, message boards, and weblogs. Other individuals can respond immediately, and listeners who were once isolated and members of opaque “imagined communities” (Anderson 1991) become instead members of real-time communities where the inclusion and participation of one’s fellows is transparent. Current data on whether or not discussion area participants reflect the same demographics as the general radio listening audience is not available, though the volume of participants in discussion areas does suggest at least somewhat broad participation: The *Sean Hannity Show* reports 2.2 million over-the-air listeners, 63,000 unique online stream listeners in June 2005,³⁷ and the Hannity Forums have more than 47,000 members. *The Majority Report* has 370,500 over-the-air listeners,³⁸ 223,000 unique online stream listeners in March 2005,³⁹ and an unknown number of blog participants (as no registration is required). However, the 1.2 million unique page views since 8/20/04 indicate a high

³⁶ This statement of course does not include amateur or shortwave radio operators, who use their broadcast capabilities for person-to-person communication as well as one-to-many.

³⁷ Per ABC Radio Networks’ sales department, 7/20/05.

³⁸ Per Air America’s research department, as of June 2005.

³⁹ Per Ando Media’s monthly Internet Radio Top 20. Online at <http://wmetrics.andomedia.com/index7R12.html>.

level of blog participation.⁴⁰ National Public Radio reports 26 million listeners per week,⁴¹ and its discussion forums have 100,000 registered users, though only 10,000 of those have been active in 2005.

Radio/online interactivities are not novel, but they are new in that broadcast entities have only recently begun to substantively fold virtual community into their own products and consumer relationships. I would not pretend to know how increasingly sophisticated interactivity and the communities and subcultures that grow up around it will affect how we think and act as technologized humans in the 21st century; I can say, however, that what I have observed in these online/radio communities does point toward new interactivities and arrangements of audiences evidenced through individuals' participation in radio program forums. I would suggest that what is happening among these forums and their participants' relationships to broadcast media is something entirely new. Audiences members may be becoming co-producers of meaning, forming newly influential critical communities that engage in public digestion of broadcast content and in so doing create a new kind of audience and a new iteration of the public wherein an audience subset becomes a new entity that may claim its own definitions and identities. This newly-styled audience is dependent upon both actualization as a public (or publics) and the development of dispersed communities as well. What is clear is that this emerging high-interactivity hybrid medium is making possible new forms of discourse.

⁴⁰ Per *Majority Report* senior producer, as of 7/25/05.

⁴¹ This number reflects on-air listening – online analyst Michael Horn (7/13/05) says he cannot release streaming numbers, but assures me they are but a “tiny, tiny fraction of the broadcast audience.”

In the interest of narrowing the very general phrase *communities built around media* to something more particular, I have chosen the three programs and their discussion areas as laid out in the previous chapter: Air America Radio's *The Majority Report* and its Majority Report Radio blog, National Public Radio's *Talk of the Nation* and its Your Turn Discussions discussion boards, and ABC Radio's *The Sean Hannity Show* and its Hannity Forum message boards. How do these communities arrive at collectively negotiated ideas of values and acceptable discourse? Do the participants in NPR's message boards behave in fundamentally different ways than Sean Hannity's listeners who post on his show's boards? Do the *Majority Report* bloggers behave more like Hannity's or like NPR's discussion area participants? Can we learn anything about differences in values between the two broadcasters by observing the social norms, patterns of access, and structures of horizontal and vertical interactions of their respective discussion areas?

Individuals arrive at a radio program's discussion area with a particular set of beliefs, values and opinions. They then engage with others who may or may not share their core values. Through discussions online, though, embedded complexities emerge. Phil Boyce, Program Director of the *Sean Hannity Show*, says that liberals often visit the *Hannity* boards – sometimes they behave badly and try to provoke the board's other participants, but most of the time, “the liberals show up to engage in debate – some are very good and make friendships there” (telephone interview, 4/1/05). Michael Horn, online analyst at NPR, echoes Boyce's observations:

The people on the boards probably lean a little to the left. Listening profiles skew to the left, but the plurality of NPR listeners are considered

to be moderate. If you look at a litmus test issue, especially on issues without clear ideological lines, there is genuine discussion both online and on the air. NPR would say ‘we’re not here to tell the listeners what to think – we’re here to inspire them to think.’ Maybe that’s why we never see flame wars [on the boards] – we see heated disputes, but not things that get personal. (telephone interview, 3/18/05)

The key assumption I am operating with here is that media producers and consumers are participants in the same community -- and it is this community that collectively negotiates what I am calling *acceptable discourse*. Outsiders may actively participate in the community, but what role do these voices of difference play? Do they contribute to the construction of acceptable discourse, or do they play a mirroring role, reflecting the community’s values back at it?

While the merits of online, or virtual, community have been well established for well over a decade, there are nevertheless detractors. Their arguments are varied, but tend to include discussion of whether non face-to-face community can even be community, and claims that virtual communities undermine *real* communities, that people are poorly socialized online, and that time spent online distracts people from their real world obligations and activities. (Rheingold 2000, Jones 1995, Putnam 2000) I am skeptical of these arguments, but do not discount the observations that geography is becoming less privileged, that people when online are often greedy and unkind to each other, and that time spent online may take away from time otherwise spent engaging in person with neighbors, family and friends. However, communicating online and taking part in virtual community enables people to learn new ways to communicate and interact, thereby increasing potential channels of communication as well as creating new community institutions that begin online and may stay there or may move into the physical

interactive space as well. Howard Dean's *Dean for America* movement speaks well to this point. What first began as an online fundraising tool in advance of the 2004 Democratic primaries became a base of operations for people across the country to coordinate when, how and where they would meet in a localized space to discuss local and national political issues. At these meetups, people made friends, spurred colleagues to political action, raised money, and gained confidence in the democratic system of the United States. After their candidate failed to win the nomination – and the subsequent Democratic candidate for president, John Kerry, failed to win the presidency – *Democracy for America*⁴² continued as an online space for facilitating both online and offline communication, action, and community building.

Political online spaces are public forums in which anyone may take part, but because of their partisan nature they are public forums that not all people would be interested in attending. Likewise, online communities built around radio broadcasts are public spaces that are open to all, but are not explored by all. In so far as these are communities created around political ideologies and topics they are indeed public fora, and online communities of listeners, bloggers and producers may constitute publics. However, these online communities built around radio broadcasts and online streams are at times insular, exclusionary, and password-protected. They are not public spaces in the same way that a city plaza is a public space – in a city plaza, any citizen may stroll through casually and unencumbered, perhaps without even realizing they are in a space designated as 'public.' However, as new media technologies make new ways of gathering together possible, I

⁴² <http://www.democracyforamerica.com/>

would not deny the possibility that these online community spaces are indeed public spaces. Daniel Dayan (2005) notes that *performance* “links the notion of public to that of a public sphere. A public not only offers attention, it calls for attention” (49). It is the community’s knowledge that it is publicly visible that enables it to perform its identity to anyone who will watch, and in particular anyone who provides a counterpoint. “A public can only exist in *reflexive* form. Either it knows it exists or it does not exist. A public is a collective subject that emerges in response to mirror images of itself” (49). In these public spaces individual participants come together to form both audiences and publics. As audience, they listen to the radio broadcast via their radios or their media players. As public, they react, and seek to engage in dialogue with their fellow audience members as well as the producers of the radio show: they seek to engage on both sides of the media producer/media consumer divide. Their varying levels of success in this attempt at engagement, depending on the interactive capacities offered by the show producers and the blog managers, impact individuals’ abilities to participate in a public space as well as an audience space.

Acceptable discourse: community and values?

This complex interaction of broadcasters and their audiences, and the audience members among themselves, takes place against a backdrop of fast-paced technological and media change as well as rapidly evolving ideas about the role of media (particularly the mainstream media) in society. Digital technologies have enabled ordinary people to become producers of content, and Internet-based distribution methods have made that

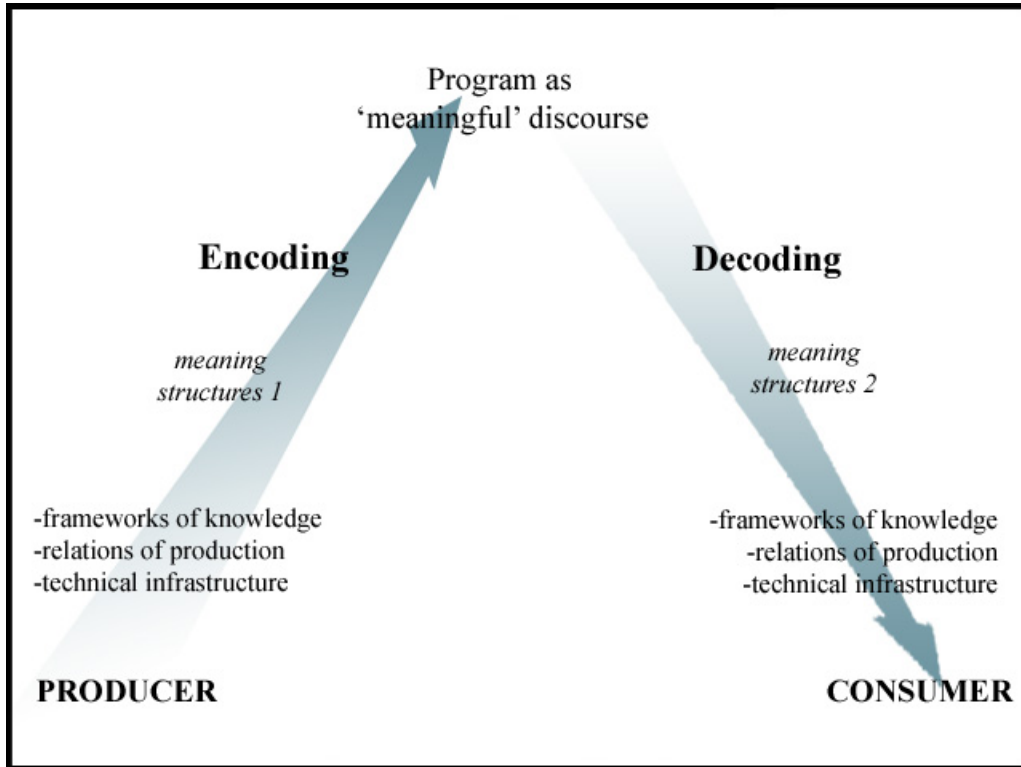
content easy to both disseminate and access. The advent of the weblog in particular seems to have solidified the DIY aesthetic of media production in the early 21st century. Amateur media producers have embraced these new capacities, and as a group (a public?), have put pressure on mainstream media to engage with them and adopt their values and aesthetics – as well as the converse, where blogs adopt the trappings of the mainstream media in terms of production values, respect, pay, and access. This rapidly evolving mediascape interacts with a political-social environment that is highly charged, and in which the news media are no longer trusted as they were in the past.⁴³

Emergent from this socio-political brew are frequent accusations of media bias. Activists accuse mainstream media organizations of supporting liberal or conservative views to the exclusion of fair reporting, and ‘liberal’ and ‘conservative’ are increasingly used as ad hominem slurs. Countless books and websites paint the *New York Times*, a vanguard of the “mainstream media,” as fraudulent, aristocratic, and all but an arm of the Democratic Party. Conversely, the relatively young Fox News Channel makes claims to straight, “fair and balanced” reporting, but most Democrats would see it as taking orders from the Republican Party. I do not have the privilege of delving deeply into this complex scene in this thesis; instead, I sketch it out briefly to provide a starting point for thinking about how values are formed through media communities.

⁴³ A recent ABC News/Washington Post poll announced that, while public trust in the news media has increased since a 2004 Gallup poll showed a significant decline from the year before, public faith in the news media has nonetheless declined overall since the highpoints of the 1970’s after the Watergate scandal. (“Poll: Most Trust Media,” by Dalia Sussman, ABCNews, 5/31/05. Online at <http://abcnews.go.com/US/PollVault/story?id=805522&page=1&CMP=OTC-RSSFeeds0312>. 6/8/05.)

Taken in this environment, accusations of bias are less about targeted suggestions for creating better and more truthful reporting and more about attempting to frame discourse. ‘Bias’ in itself is not a helpful concept: it is an overly simplistic way to address truth and accuracy in reporting the news. To say a report or an organization is ‘biased’ is meaningless without knowledge of what it is biased for or against, and a deep understanding of all that goes into the creation and the understanding of the media message(s). A more accurate and helpful approach would be to talk instead about ‘acceptable discourse,’ or the collection of values and cultural articulations that a group adopts as the dominant way to express ideas. Daniel Dayan (2005) argues that reflexivity is a necessary component of a public. “Either it knows it exists or it does not exist. A public is a collective subject that emerges in response to mirror images of itself” (49). A public, in knowing it exists, says “this is what we are.” In so doing, it also says “this is what we are not.” Accusations of media bias by politically interested groups are efforts to exert control over discourse – to make the dominant discourse that which is acceptable to them by marginalizing and labeling ‘the other.’ When a group with a political agenda accuses a news organization of inappropriately representing the opposing perspectives in its programming, it is attempting to frame issues and ideas in its own terms.

The collective sense of identity embraced by a public is derived in large part from its shared consensual values, and it is through the cultural lens endowed by those values that media messages are read. Whether messages come from a broadcaster or from other community members within discussion areas, values come into play as each individual interprets the content. The encoding/decoding concept (fig. 2.1), first articulated by



(Figure 2.1: reproduced from 'Encoding/decoding,' Hall 1992: 130.
I added the PRODUCER/CONSUMER clarification.)

Stuart Hall in 1973, is helpful here. The producer of a media message 'encodes' that message with meaning, through institutional and cultural frameworks of knowledge, relations of production, and the technological infrastructures available. Likewise, upon receipt of that media message, the consumer 'decodes' it through similar processes. The encoding and decoding processes are entirely dependent upon specific and often very personal cultural and social mores and modes of interpretation. Marina Camargo Heck (1980) notes that the interpretation of a media message depends not only upon the content of the message but the entire socio-cultural setting. "When a message is emitted it is not only what is *said* that has a significance but also the *way* it is said, and what is *not said but could be said*" (124). And so, if the receiver of a media message interprets the

message differently from how it was intended (or what the socially ‘dominant reading’ of it would be), then that individual has engaged in ‘aberrant decoding.’ David Morley (1980) points out that “the meaning(s) of a text will also be constructed differently depending on the discourses (knowledges, prejudices, resistances) *brought to bear on the text by the reader*” (171, italics in the original). This applies to the concepts of broadcast audience, public and online community that we are engaging with here in the online digestion of broadcast content. As discussion area communities collectively reflect on the issues addressed on their respective radio programs, they apply implicit (and often explicit) normative values that shape the direction (and frequent transgression) of conversation. Over time, a sense of what is acceptable discourse is settled upon. What is considered acceptable can change over time, such as in the NPR discussion boards where the style of discourse has changed from its initial and closely moderated incarnation to its current, seldom monitored, existence. In the discussion areas built around *The Majority Report*, *Talk of the Nation* and the *Sean Hannity Show*, audience members interpret the program’s content through the lens of what they have collectively decided is appropriate discourse. What is considered appropriate, though, is not determined solely by the audience community. Structures imposed on discussion areas from the program producers or webmasters can have a strong effect on the style and tone of discourse in the online space. As might be expected, not all participants in these discussion areas agree with their respective program’s ‘encoding’ of messages, and such aberrant decoding results in some of the more heated exchanges. This is an example of how media communities encompassing both audiences and producers collectively negotiate meaning.

This thesis does not seek to make generalizable claims about the distinct values of these three programs' communities, but it is important to have a broad sense of the dominant values of specific discussion areas. Participants in the Hannity Forums tend to embrace a sense of order and regulation, and respect the right of the moderators to enforce board policy. They tend to lean toward the right politically, but are also often open to discussing their ideas and opinions with those who disagree. The message board form of this discussion area allows members to include graphics and signatures in their messages, and these personal touches reveal the general mood of patriotism, love of country, pro-military and religious (primarily Christian) faith. They do not tolerate vulgar speech or criticism of Sean Hannity. They tend to think their online space is unique and that Liberal sites are more contentious and less tolerant.

Majority Report bloggers are in many ways the inverse of the Hannity board participants. They lean to the left, embrace a mood of freedom of speech on the blog, and enjoy that the producers have a light touch with respect to the blog. They are skeptical of patriotism, the military, and religion. Vulgarities are common on the blog and the hosts are openly criticized, but neither result in censure. *The Majority Report's* bloggers do share several key qualities with the Hannity board participants, though: they enjoy discussing their ideas with others, and often welcome contrary views. Both discussion areas share the prejudice that if someone has a contrary opinion or represents an opposing political view they must be twice the logician and twice as convincing as anyone with whom they agree. *Majority Report* bloggers also generally believe their online space to

be unique in how open it is to diverse viewpoints and do not believe a right-leaning online space could possibly be as welcoming.

Members of the *Talk of the Nation* discussion board share characteristics with both the *Hannity* board and *The Majority Report's* blog: they look forward to an exchange of ideas and they believe their discussion area is unique (in *TOTN's* case, this means the participants believe the discussion area is relatively free from trolls and flammers, and that reasoned debate is possible that would be impossible in more ideologically aligned online spaces). *TOTN* board members tend to anchor their discussion strongly in the broadcast content. They value a well-argued point, and tend to engage in aggressive debate.

Women are very poorly represented on the board, and several of the men I interviewed suggested they may have been chased away by the style of conversation and periodic misogynist comments. I was only able to interview male-presenting (Turkle 1997) participants, and several indicated that they also had observed the meager female participation and wondered about its cause.

These value assessments are of course made with a broad brush and there are many exceptions, but in general the above describes how the discussion area communities distinguish themselves. The key commonality among the three spaces, though, is that people come together to form community, and make available their individual and collective opinions and reactions to program topics. It is in these parallel expressions that audience members act as members of publics – at times effecting influence on programming or coming together in agreement on certain issues dealt with in the

broadcast, at other times simply listening with intent and engaging consciously with the broadcast content.

Chapter 3. *Structures of Community*

Where can we go these days to engage in social and political discourse in safety? If you join a political movement you will find only people who share your views. If you choose to discuss politics freely in your place of work, you may regret it. Someone like myself, a holder of views not common to many in my part of Virginia, could get into arguments that way. (“Chris,” email interview, 4/22/05)

The social functions of audiences, publics and communities are now established as a foundation upon which we can build an understanding of what happens in everyday interaction in radio-online discussion areas. In order to realize itself as a public, an interactive and self-aware audience depends on its actualization as a community, or as a group of communities. It would be presumptuous to take for granted, though, that online discussion areas where radio audiences gather to discuss broadcast content are, in fact, communities. How do we tell what is, and what is not, a community? What makes community is as fluid as the identities and memberships of those communities themselves. Building upon the development of the modern concept of community, contemporary scholars broadly acknowledge that it is possible to maintain community across distances, using technologies such as letters, telegraph, telephone, and most recently computer-mediated communication. Community ethnographer Lee Komito draws upon Anderson’s ‘imagined community’ of the nation (1991) to argue that community found in online spaces is not atypical:

There is no necessary reason to suppose that electronic communication, as a mode of communication, is less capable of supporting relations of reciprocity, common commitment and trust than any other mode of communication; this depends on external factors rather than intrinsic differences between face-to-face and electronic communication. ... The

mode of communication does not determine the type of community that emerges. (1999)

Following this assertion, I define community as *a group of mutual association in which individuals have an interest in addressing interpersonal matters in a manner consistent with the norms of the group*. Radio-online discussion areas demonstrate that it is this very sense of community that engenders the loyalty of many participants:

After awhile, some people become Blog friends and meet up on the Blog to talk about what is going on in the news as well as a whole bunch of different topics. It's really anything goes, and that seems to be the unique and interesting thing about the Majority Report Blog, and that's basically why I keep participating. (*LeeP*, email interview, 1/12/05)

LeeP is describing an experience online that he finds rewarding – it keeps him coming back, invested, and interested. This is only one example, though, and an easy one to point to. Markers of community are at times obvious, as in the above testimony, but can also be implicit and require teasing out. To determine whether discussion area groups meet the above description of community, I will use latent characteristics derived from the groups themselves and from interviews with participants to determine the existence and strength of the bonds that hold together these online spaces.

Discussion area communities are created by producers, webmasters and a subset of listeners (as well as some non-listeners). They are open to the public and leave public texts behind as the traces of the events that happened in real time, and so their communal interpretations of radio texts (and of current events) are the actions of an interpretive community engaging in collective reflexivity. Their collectively reflexive behaviors are shaped in large part by the structures embedded in the discussion area spaces. In this chapter I will define the elements of community in online settings, describe the structures

imposed by the program producers and webmasters, and discuss community structures that emerge from the users themselves.

Defining community

Online discussion areas are spaces created by institutions or individuals where participants can gather. The act of gathering itself does not create a sense of community, though as Kendall (2002) describes, online interactive spaces enable a sense of contact with other participants that isn't possible in the same way via broadcast media or with less interactive online media. These spaces allow for geographically remote people to “interact and respond to each other.”

Of these, “synchronous” forums – those that allow for near-instantaneous response (including the various chat programs and muds but not including e-mail lists and newsgroups) – can provide a particularly vivid sense of “place” and of gathering together with other people. ... [M]any people feel that when they connect to an online forum, they in some sense enter a social, if not a physical, space. (6)

By entering a space with a suggested expectation of social involvement, participants implicitly enter into a contract: there is something expected of them by their presence. Upon entering a space, an individual must assess whether, and how, to engage. In online spaces, discussants do not have as much information about their potential audience as they might have if they were to speak in person.⁴⁴ Conversely, though, simply by virtue of attendance in an online space tailored to a particular interest one is guaranteed an aware – if not interested – audience. The specialized content in these spaces does not

⁴⁴ Discussion areas are frequently archived, and this gives discussants more information about one another than members of other communities mediated across distances such as ham radio operators, for example. This still falls short, though, of the verbal and non-verbal cues one receives in real-time face-to-face engagement.

equate, though, to audience members that comprise a specific demographic slice. One may have a sense of general characteristics of participants in the space, but affinity alone yields few details of personality or circumstance. (Kendall 2002: 126). Shared interest in a particular topic is enough to get people to gather together to discuss or learn about that topic, but it does not necessarily indicate anything more about that group than that its individual members share an affinity.

While affinity alone does not create a community, it is certainly a good start. Online gatherings confer on their participants, or audiences if you will, a certain specificity that enables affinity groups. Individual members of these groups are likely to have never met before, but through engagement in the online space they often discover that they have more in common than the interest that brought them there. From this point of engagement forward, the participants form various connections with others sharing the space. Komito (1998) identifies four kinds of community, creating a typology that is useful for understanding the communal characteristics of online communities. He identifies *moral communities*, in which members share common values; *normative communities*, in which members share rules of behavior; *proximate communities*, in which members are known to other members as individuals; and *fluid or foraging communities*, which are variously temporary and through which their members pass in and out. Any one (or several) of these types can map onto online communities; the three online/radio communities I am examining each represent these four types to varying degrees. They are all communities built around shared ideology or at least an interest in engaging in topical discussion with others. They all have their respective sense of

normative behaviors that are considered appropriate, and are variously enforced. In each discussion area there are some regular participants, whom the more infrequent participants may expect to find active when they arrive. Just as the spaces have their regulars they also have many casual visitors⁴⁵ who are lurking or only posting sporadically. It is important to note that none of Komito's four types of community assign geographical proximity as a necessary condition: physical location is an important element of many communities, but it is rarely the primary motivation for the gathering. Physical proximity is instead an enabling condition, similar to being online, whereby individuals may concurrently view the same discussion area: it is the thing that allows individuals to come together. Just as individuals in physical proximity to one another may decide to or not to engage each other, online proximate individuals may decide for or against engagement.⁴⁶

A wide diversity of interactions is possible between individuals in both physical and online paces. What is the practical difference between a local skateboard park and an online multiple player gaming site? Or between a small-town political advocacy group and a web-based political organization that organizes periodic offline meet ups? The key difference is in the physicality, but not in the potential for conversation, validation, fun, companionship, argument, or any other psychological elements of socializing with other humans.⁴⁷ Komito's remaining three types of community (moral, normative, and

⁴⁵ These people who are 'just passing through' are difficult to quantify, but are considered in many online communities to represent a far greater number than the regulars.

⁴⁶ Of course, a key difference between the two is that it is nigh impossible to view all one's online companions, though some discussion areas offer features that enhance this aspect of participation.

⁴⁷ The physical aspects of online engagement are intrinsically a part of each individual's experience. Online interactions take place as events in a virtual space, but the actors are enacting those events while

fluid/foraging) are all aspects of the discussion areas of study, expressed differently and to varying degrees.

Engaging community

There are directly observable and structural requirements of entrance to online communities that assist in orientation and regulation of participants. These structures can be used to characterize a community as unique and identifiable. One strategy for observing these embedded structures at work is to enter a discussion area as a new member and begin to get oriented. Each space has slightly different methods of registration and validation; on the open and lenient end of the registration spectrum, some spaces allow anyone to post anonymously. On the other end one finds spaces that require submission of personal identifying information and a valid email address, and the first post may be made only after validation of email address has been confirmed. Such validation procedures are structures imposed ‘from above’ and represent a gate through which all active participants must pass. The difficulty of passing through is immaterial;

grounded in their own physical spaces. Listeners of radio and participants in radio discussion areas could be sitting at desks in houses across town from each other, sitting on beds with laptops in adjacent dormitory rooms, or in countries thousands of miles apart. I would encourage future research on radio-online interactions to pursue an ethnographic examination of how, when, where or why people listen to these programs or how, when, where or why they participate in the programs’ online spaces. Early studies of identity and community online focused to one degree or another on the disembodiment of online experiences (see Turkle 1997 and Hayles 1997). It turns out that this was merely a step along the way to a more comprehensive understanding of online experiences. Scholars increasingly acknowledge the embodied and physically grounded experiences of online activity (see Nguyen 2001, Kendall 2002, and Campbell 2004). The Internet ceases to be a separate space – or at least there is new resistance to that concept. Nguyen doesn’t “believe I belong in the intangible *there*-ness (as in, distanced from wherever I am) of the Net; it doesn’t make me feel at home” (2001: 186), but she engages in regular online activity. Instead of making a special voyage to the Internet, it is an accepted part of everyday life. The computer (and, increasingly also PDAs and cell phones) becomes a point of access to a normal sort of activity. Just as we may say things like “it transported me,” we don’t actually conceive of the practice of watching television or listening to radio as physically moving ourselves to a new location.

what matters is that by engaging with the requisite structures the participant gains a sense of tone and permissibility specific to the space. On the other hand, one can also observe structures generated organically through intra-group (horizontal) dynamics.

In her ethnography of the online BlueSky MUD community, Lori Kendall (2002) discusses the behavior of the community's regular participants toward both guests and newcomers. The regular members tended to exhibit a measure of hostility toward new participants, reinforcing the community's hierarchy, rules and expectations for behavior. Kendall would rightly term this sometimes good-natured, sometimes hostile abuse of newcomers a form of hazing. "Hazing provides a ritual barrier. People have to make it through the initial harassment in order to become part of the group" (134). She notes, however, that hazing isn't directed only at newcomers; regulars treat each other similarly, and as such it provides clues to what the community's standards of behavior are. "Thus hazing presents a message to newcomers that they must be able to tolerate a certain level of grossness, obnoxiousness, and aggressiveness" (134). Translated into the ideologically-charged discussion space of *The Majority Report* and the *Sean Hannity Show*, belligerence and political rants take the place of "grossness and obnoxiousness," but both spaces cultivate a certain degree of aggression, as well as schooling in the values and norms of the community. The *Talk of the Nation* discussion boards tend to treat newcomers more benignly, either ignoring them or responding topically.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ These dynamics on the *Talk of the Nation* discussion boards would be worthy of further study, particularly in terms of women who attempt to join the boards.

Dissent and conflict are arguably *necessary* components of community (Foucault 1978), and offline communities possess these characteristics as well. “There is conflict and conflict resolution, issues of who knows what, how people feel about each other, and all the other ways in which people, stuck in the same location, get on with their lives” (Komito 1998: 100). There is ample opportunity for hostility and disrespect in both online and offline interaction. How new entrants to a discussion area are treated depends not only on the overarching attitude of the space, but also on the immediate context: the current tone of conversation and mood of the participants, who is presently online, and how the newcomers conduct themselves upon announcing their presence.

To understand what governs how listener-bloggers interact with one another and with the radio program, and how these interactions comprise community, I will look for evidence of institutionally-imposed structures (branding, moderation and monitoring) as well as those derived from intra-group social dynamics (rules, hierarchy, shared values, local language, and relationships and expectations). I will draw from both the text left behind by discussion area interactions (the transcript of the event) as well as interviews conducted with participants, moderators, and program producers.

Institutionally-imposed structures

The discussion areas of *The Majority Report*, *Talk of the Nation*, and the *Sean Hannity Show* have latent characteristics of composition and user experience that give clues to the existence and strength of the communities that form in these spaces. The three discussion



Figure 3.1: *Talk of the Nation's* main page on www.npr.org, April 15, 2005.

areas' visual and stylistic structures are imposed and interpreted in unique ways, and these different applications of content, technology and style all affect the overall atmosphere of each space. In this section I will use screen shots from the three radio online spaces and their respective discussion areas to illustrate how the structures imposed by the producers affect the style of interactions in the spaces themselves. First, let's look at how the three programs create an initial sense of online brand.

Branding discussion areas

The *Talk of the Nation* main page on the NPR site (fig. 3.1) is branded much more strongly as an NPR page than as a *TOTN* page. While it is important for the user to know they are in an online space with *TOTN*-specific content, the dominant branding message is that the content is coming from National Public Radio. Likewise, on the main *TOTN*

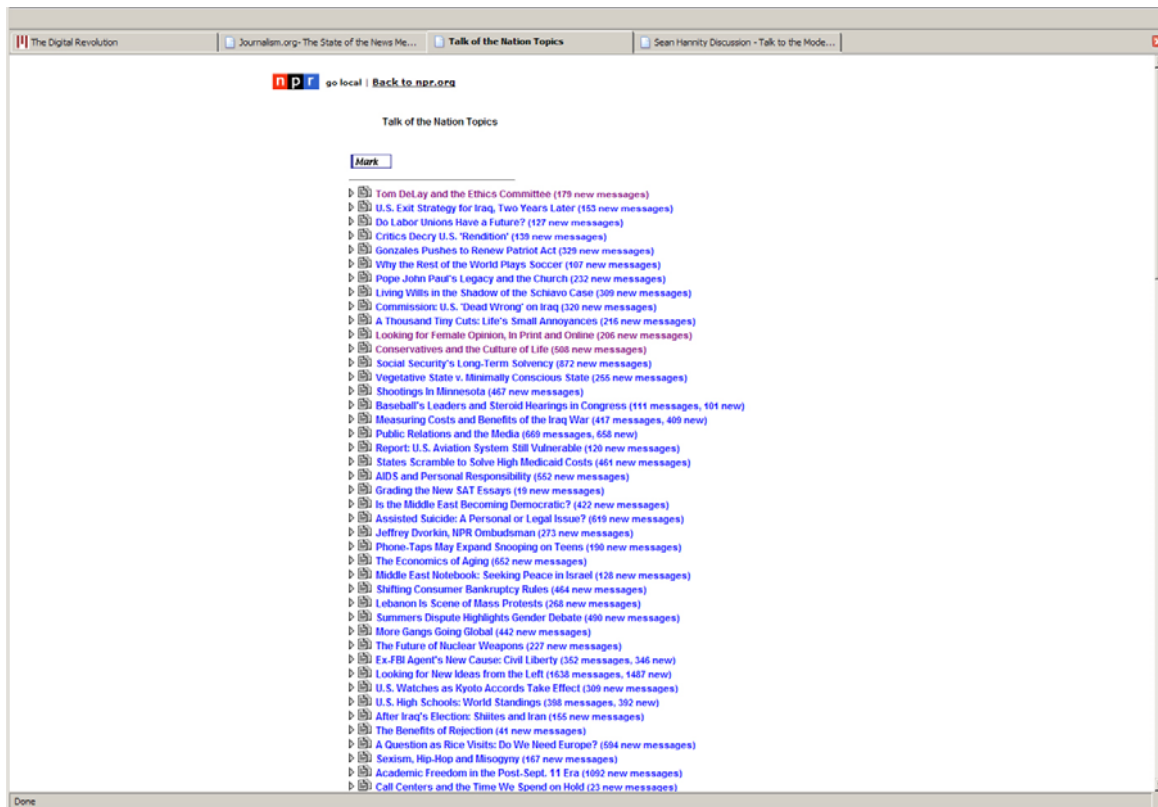


Figure 3.2: Talk of the Nation's main thread page on yourturn.npr.org, April 18, 2005.

thread page in NPR's discussion boards (fig. 3.2), the NPR logo stands out more sharply than the "Talk of the Nation Topics" title. Further, once a participant enters a thread, the *TOTN* branding disappears entirely and all that remains is an NPR logo and navigation at the top of the page and a "copyright 2005 NPR" notice at the bottom. This NPR-focused branding is intended by the website producers to create a sense of participating in an NPR community, and not just a community of *Talk of the Nation* listeners. NPR Online Analyst Michael Horn points out that many NPR listeners who do not tend to listen to *TOTN* nevertheless enjoy engaging in the boards – if the *TOTN* boards are the only NPR boards where a particular topic is being discussed, that is where people will engage. Horn says NPR's listeners are "lifelong learners," and they come to the discussion area



Figure 3.3: the Sean Hannity Show's main page on www.hannity.com, May 1, 2005.

“to learn and to engage their minds” (telephone interview, 3/18/05), regardless of what program introduced a topic on-air. The homepage of the *Sean Hannity Show* also imparts a strong sense of brand, though here it is a show-specific brand and not the ABC Radio Network, of which the *Sean Hannity Show* is a part. The banner at the top of the page is a constant, so wherever one is in the forums, the image of Hannity as authoritative

thinker, broadcaster and interviewer is front and center. One arrives at the Hannity Forums by clicking on “Message Board” on the main page. The main page of the Hannity Forums (fig. 3.3) is laid out in a familiar message board format, with two “Announcements” threads at the top of the page, macro “Discussion Topics” (which then drill down deeper with more detailed threads once clicked-though) below, and then near the bottom of the screen a section called “What’s Going On?” This final feature allows the user to check who else is viewing the forums currently, statistics on the site including how many members and the user name of the newest member, and a list of which members have birthdays on the current date. This message board format allows users to have much more information about other users than the *TOTN* boards or *The Majority Report* blog.⁴⁹

The main page of *The Majority Report’s* site (fig. 3.4) gives the program primacy over the network, with the most visible mention of Air America buried in the left-hand navigation. Upon arriving at the site, there is no question as to where one is – the name of the program is listed no fewer than four times in the opening page view. Just underneath the banner at the top of the page featuring hosts Janeane Garofalo and Sam Seder’s images (a banner that is only on this first page and is not continued on thread pages), an advertisement in a blue box for “Tonight on *The Majority Report*” previews guests and topics of conversation for the upcoming show. Both of the program’s blogs have high visibility on the page: the Show Blog begins directly beneath the promo, and to the right, in a red box, is the Majority Reporters 24/7 blog. On the far left of the page is a

⁴⁹ Additionally, within threads certain information (if volunteered by members when they signed up with Hannity Forums) such as join date, location, and how many posts the user has made is visible above each post.



Figure 3.4: main page at www.majorityreportradio.com, January 3, 2005.

collection of links to the show’s store, favorite sites, daily reads, blog archives, RSS links and a search window.

Moderating discussion areas

NPR takes a relatively hands-off approach to monitoring its discussion boards; in 2004, only four individuals were banned from participation (two for “objectionable images,” two for gay bashing). The registration procedure requires only a valid email address in

order to post, so one might expect a higher level of behavior considered unacceptable than on sites where posters are required to link to their email addresses in their posts and therefore be more accountable for the things they write. The strong reinforcement of NPR branding before one arrives at the *TOTN* boards underlines a sense of being in an institutionally-specific (and sacred?) space, instead of a space affiliated primarily with a specific program. NPR Online Analyst Michael Horn points out that “we’re here to inspire [listeners] to think. Maybe that’s why we never see flame wars – we see heated disputes, but not things that get personal” (telephone interview, 3/18/05).

If Horn’s estimation is correct, this institutionally-imposed structure encourages an atmosphere of respect for discourse and the exchange of ideas. Even as the *TOTN* boards tend to maintain a more polite atmosphere than Hannity Forums or the *Majority Report* blog, this is not a uniform experience. One anonymous interviewee pointed out:

There are lots of strident opinions, lots of pointless partisan jabs, and a few thoughtful posts. To me, the thoughtful posts are worth flipping through the noise, especially when my own views are challenged.
(*Anonymous*, email interview, 4/20/05)

This interviewee acknowledged the liveliness of the boards while maintaining a view in the importance of the engagement of ideas. However, *Clifford*, another participant in the *TOTN* boards, finds them to create “a Darwinian environment” (email interview, 4/18/05), and fellow contributor *Chris* describes them as “pretty much a free-for-all” (email interview, 4/22/05).

Producer-imposed features of the Hannity Forums automatically censor prohibited vocabulary (obscenity, profanity, racism, anti-Semitism, etc.) in posts, allow users to

ignore members whose posts they do not wish to read, and facilitate interaction with forum moderators about issues on the boards. These structures set the tone for appropriate conduct within the discussion area, though some users subvert the top-down structures by finding loopholes. *Stuart*, a regular participant in the Hannity boards who listens to the program occasionally, notes that “the Mods are pretty good about keeping the boards clean of spamming and advertising and the language filter keeps out the ‘dirty words’...” (email interview, 4/17/05). Most structures on the Hannity Forums are imposed by the website’s producers; however, users find ways to subvert them. “People do try to bypass the [language] filter by spelling words one letter off or adding asterisks to replace letters in a word” (email interview, 4/17/05). The message board format of the Forums includes certain personalization options that allow users to include “avatar” images next to and “custom user titles” beneath the user name as well as signature files at the end of each post. Those members in good standing who maintain a high volume of posts may include images in signature files. One poster whose custom user title is “Conservative American Mom” has a signature that reads “Apoyo el Minutemen. ¡No más de inmigración ilegal! ¡Illegals va a casa!/ I support the Minutemen. No more illegal immigration. Illegals go home!”⁵⁰ Her avatar is an image of, presumably, her face, but other users’ avatars range from patriotic or memorial imagery to political and military insignia, humorous comic images, small animations, and images of animals or celebrities. Signature images cover similar ground, but are more likely to make a political statement than the avatars. The visual personalization of posts that these features confer on

⁵⁰ ‘Minutemen’ is short for the Minuteman Civil Defense Corps, a group of US citizens who patrol the US-Mexico border in protest of current US border and immigration policy. Online at <http://www.minutemanhq.com/hq/>.

Post a comment

If you have a TypeKey identity, you can [sign in](#) to use it here.

Name:

Email Address:

URL:
 Remember Me? Yes No

Comments: (you may use italics, paragraph breaks, and make external links using HTML - everything else is disabled)

Figure 3.5: post field on *The Majority Report's Show Blog*, www.majorityreportradio.com, April 17, 2005

members allows for quick scans of threads to see if familiar users have contributed, and for members to have ‘faces.’

The Majority Report's blog offers a strong contrast to the Hannity Forums. In order to post on the blog, all one must do is fill out a posting form (fig. 3.5) at the end of a thread. No personal identification information is required, such as email address, name or website, but there are fields provided for that information if one wishes to disclose it. This anonymity can give bloggers a greater sense of freedom to say what they think than they might have if they were required to disclose personal information, but it also allows for a greater amount of irresponsible behavior than would be likely if contact information

was always attached to posts. One interviewee allowed that “the anonymity factor lets one get away with being a moron,” and that the blog sometimes feels anarchic and anti-community “because it allows anonymous postings which can screw with the sense of community by making recognition harder” (*Yentz*, email interview, 12/17/04). *The Majority Report’s* blog does have at least one safeguard built into the blogging application, though. If one tries to post twice in quick succession, this message appears:

“In an effort to curb malicious comment posting by abusive users, I’ve enabled a feature that requires a weblog commenter to wait a short amount of time before being able to post again. Please try to post your comment again in a short while. Thanks for your patience.”⁵¹

The best safeguard against inappropriate posting, though, seems to be the community itself. Participants on the blog are urged by the program producers and by fellow bloggers to ignore trolls and flammers. Likewise, if the conversation veers too far away from the show’s topic or another important news item, someone will usually call attention to it. For example, in the pre-show blog before the January 3rd show, a domestic U.S. political topic was posted by the producers (posting under the screen name “not sam”) to begin the thread, and bloggers were engaging in customary thread-opening banter. One blogger, though, thought both the topic and the banter were wholly inappropriate:

You should all be ashamed of yourselves. The *ONLY* thing that should be discussed in this blog at the moment is how to best get relief and help the SouthEast Asia and the tsunami victims. To politicize the relief effort is a disgrace on your part. Get with the program or get out. (on-blog post, 1/3/05)

While other bloggers on the thread agreed with the sentiment behind the indictment, they thought this poster was being a bit excessive. Several well-respected regulars quickly shot back reasons for expanding the discussion beyond tsunami relief, and the protest

⁵¹ It is unclear who the “I” of this message is, though it is likely a blog or website administrator who added the feature in response to inappropriate behavior on the blog.

stopped. There may not be formal hierarchy on this blog imposed by the webmaster (such as in the Hannity Forums, where users who participate at higher levels obtain the ability to post larger images and files to the boards than may standard users), but there are definite strata of engagement and respect.

Intra-group social dynamics

While the institutionally-imposed characteristics of radio-online discussion areas may at the outset shape the development of community in those spaces, intra-group social dynamics quickly become a factor in that development. Rules, hierarchy, shared values, local languages, and relationships and expectations of fellow participants are all derived in large part from horizontal interaction. While these horizontal structures of community cannot be separated from the vertical relationship the audience community (and its individual members) has with the broadcast program and its staff, they can nevertheless be identified and described independently.

Rules and hierarchy

Hierarchies are observable not only in *The Majority Report's* blogs, but also in the Hannity Forums and in the *Talk of the Nation* discussion boards. Regulars who bring insightful content and analysis, and who articulate subtleties of opinion, command the most respect from fellow participants. Often in the role of 'seconding' and affirming the points of view from this first tier, one finds regulars who are in line with the program's and the discussion area's discourse but who do not regularly introduce new or insightful

material into the conversation. Below this group are regulars whose points of view are not in line with the program's or the blog's discourse, but who articulate their opinions well and hold their own in debate. Occasional contributors whose points of view are of no particular note occupy a relatively neutral position. These are followed by anonymous posters and then, at the bottom of the heap, by regulars who tend to disagree with the general discourse but who cannot articulate their opinions well. Posters in this group are often accused of being trolls, and so the fact that they are known personalities in a discussion area does not reliably distinguish them from the ranks of trolls and flammers who just drop in to be provocative.

While this typology is observable, because it is informal it does not necessarily translate into a 'pecking order' as such; after a blogger has been reprimanded he or she will frequently make a final attempt to speak, to try to get the last word. For example, *HYDRA*⁵² is a contributor to *The Majority Report's* blog who has a reputation on the blog for leaning too far to the right for the tastes of the group. S/he revels when Air America receives bad ratings, argues against anti-war protesters, makes repeated misogynistic comments, and in general behaves in a contrary manner. *HYDRA* occasionally gets branded a Fascist or a Nazi, and, not surprisingly, balks at the label:

A standard technique used by some of the more 'tolerant' bloggers is to marginalize anyone with an opinion that's even a hair to the right of the blog's groupthink by calling him/her a Nazi. (on-blog post, 1/11/05)

When *Majority Report* bloggers get worked up by an antagonist such as *HYDRA*, they sometimes need to be talked down by others:

⁵² This individual's screen name has been changed to protect identity. Wherever names have been changed, an attempt has been made to use a name either requested by the individual, or judged to be similar in tone yet different enough as to be unrecognizable.

Ok, really, no need to sink to that level. HYDRA is bugging me too, but come on, are we not all adults here? (on-blog post, 2/25/05)

But the palliative comments are not always entirely sincere:

Tell it like it is, don't be too harsh on HYDRA. He's here for reasons other than just being a pest. He is here for help and he knows there is no other place he can find it. He's just working out his own personal demons. Compassion will disarm him more quickly than vitriol. (on-blog post, 2/25/05)

Regardless of blog participants' ready dislike for *HYDRA*, they continue to engage with him/her and recognize *HYDRA* as a part of the community. The *Majority Report* bloggers that I interviewed largely seemed to feel that there is a lot of room for different opinions on the blog, citing the many different political, religious and philosophical affiliations of their fellow bloggers. Even as a belief in the blog's openness is commonly held, there is also an awareness of the potential to be reprimanded by one's fellows:

If someone says something that is just way "out-of-line," then usually enough people will post messages saying how so-and-so is way off the mark, or they will insult the person who made the comment, and/or perhaps some people will try to give examples and show links to documented proof as to why the person is wrong for saying what they said. (*LeeP*, email interview, 1/13/05)

Majority Report co-host Sam Seder points out that the program producers do not police the blog for content, and only occasionally ban contributors "who we feel are being such jerks that it is interfering with the community, but that is rare and somewhat arbitrary." Banning on *The Majority Report* blog, as well as on the Hannity Forums, is accomplished simply by blocking a user's IP address. *The Majority Report's* senior producer characterized the show's blog as having "very few if any content restrictions. We've come pretty close to banning some posters for posting huge amounts of aggressive text and refusing to stop. We interpreted this as walking into a public square, blasting music

without a permit, then refusing to leave after being asked nicely” (email interview, 5/13/05).

As one might expect based on the contrasting levels of imposed structure in the Hannity Forums and *The Majority Report* blog, rules are interpreted and enforced quite differently in the Hannity discussion area. The Forum’s FAQ provides some guidelines on what is allowed and what is not:

[Actions that will result in a user being banned instantly] include (but are not limited to) bypassing the language filters, personal threats, obscene/pornographic pictures, anti-semitism, multiple usernames, contempt for ABC Radio Network Hosts (Sean Hannity) or Affiliates and racial slurs.⁵³

Gene is a volunteer moderator on the Hannity boards, and says that his role is to help participants use the discussion space, just as he did before he was a moderator, when he was a regular user of the boards.

In the month of February, I made a total of 27 bans for reasons ranging from Antisemitism to Profanity or Vulgar/Obscene images. Other things like threats and bypassing a ban by re-registering under another alias are also bans. ... With the "Talk to the Moderator" forum, the board does do quite a lot of self-policing. The rules are applied often enough and consistently enough that the users help keep the newer posters from making any major mistakes. For example, many boards allow cursing, and this one does not. If a person catches themselves before a moderator has to step in then it's usually forgiven. If not, then depending on how bad it was a warning or a ban is made. The F-bomb is always a ban, no questions about it. (email interview, 4/8/05)

The Forum rules as laid out by the site and by the moderators seem impartial and sensible. Nevertheless, a recent moderator intervention on the Hannity boards involved

⁵³ www.hannity.com/forum

the banning of a participant for saying something strongly negative about Sean Hannity.⁵⁴

The discussion that arose around this ban focused on whether or not the discussion area was a private or a public space; the consensus was that it is a private space and Sean “has the right” to police it, and it would be inappropriate to insult Sean “in his house.”

Meanwhile, in the *Talk of the Nation* discussion boards, participants insult NPR, *TOTN*, and host Neal Conan without reprimand. Likewise, on the *Majority Report* site bloggers make crude remarks about Janeane Garofalo (offers of sperm donations, comments on her weight, etc.) and compare she and co-host Sam Seder to other Air America hosts as well as Sean Hannity, with no retribution from the blog management. Nevertheless, Hannity moderator *Gene* is confident that:

In welcoming opposing viewpoints, the Sean Hannity Board is very unique and it does attract liberals as well as it does conservatives. Other boards tend to squelch debate, as it does tend to get heated but the Hannity Board manages to pull it off very well. (email interview, 4/8/05)

Members and producers of each discussion area studied are confident that their space is unique in its interest in fostering discussion between people with opposing viewpoints. This may be an ill-informed belief, but what intrigues me about the assertion is that it indicates a certain passion and commitment to the space and its members – yet further evidence of communities that share values and loyalties.

Shared values

At the beginning of each episode of *The Sean Hannity Show*, Sean Hannity promises to provide his listeners with the “best and the most comprehensive news and information

⁵⁴ The comment in question was: “Hannity can not [*sic*] even carry [Air America host Mike] Malloy’s jockstrap.”

program that is available on your radio dial.” Yet his program is not a news show – it is a talk show, heavily laden with polemical viewpoints. On a recent episode of *The Majority Report*, co-host Sam Seder called the program “your last refuge for truth, sanity, reality and ethics,” yet Seder and co-host Janeane Garofalo often distort and offend in a manner similar to Hannity and other conservative talk radio hosts. *Talk of the Nation*’s mission is to engage in a “productive exchange of ideas and opinions on the issues that dominate the news landscape,”⁵⁵ but as with every talk show, some voices make it on the air and others do not. The programs’ listeners live with these contradictions but continue listening because they find the programs entertaining and informative. Even the most cynical analysis would place the discussion areas as extensions of the broadcast, and as places for interested listeners to congregate. Komito (1998) describes moral communities as “community as moral solidarity. Such a group involves like-minded individuals, with a common purpose or moral commitment to each other, who trust one another, regardless of the merits of the common goal” (98). This characterization is widely supported by intra-discussion area interaction (despite the existence of participants with contrary viewpoints) as well as by my correspondence and interviews with participants and producers.

Community members of the three discussion areas emphasized the importance of shared values in our correspondence. NPR listener *Chris* participates in the *Talk of the Nation* boards though he doesn’t listen to the show very often because it isn’t aired on his local

⁵⁵ From “Talk of the Nation: About the Program,” at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5>. 4/30/05.

public radio station. He points out that the people who use the *TOTN* share values based on a desire to debate people with opposing views, and to think through important issues:

When it truly fulfills its potential (and this is perhaps not very often) it is when persons with differing viewpoints exchange information or logical argumentation and someone is convinced of something. (email interview, 4/22/05)

Chris experiences the *TOTN* discussion boards as a moral community in which the core value is discussion. Hannity Forums volunteer moderator *Gene* also notes that the values that bind the Hannity discussion area are centered on the discussing of ideas:

There's a common interest, a common ground, namely Sean Hannity, but also an above-average interest and participation in politics. And an above-average knowledge of civics to boot. Common interests are the foundation of any community. (email interview, 4/7/05)

When I suggested that another common interest binding the Hannity Forums community may be ideological values, *Gene* argued

Your key assumption is going to find a rocky ride through the Sean Hannity Forums because the boards attract admitted liberals and many of them are long-term regulars of the forums. We don't have rules about the ideology of the content, but only about keeping the discourse relatively civil and free of vulgarity or personal attacks. We do talk politics, which is probably the common ground, but the Hannity Forums are only right-leaning, and not right-exclusive. (personal communication, 4/3/05)

Participants in all three discussion areas claim explicit commitment to the value of debate and discussion. But *The Majority Report* is the only program whose discussion area participants frequently and explicitly embraced the ideological values of their program and the blog. I would suggest this is due in part to the Air America Radio network's genesis as a counter to the mature field of conservative talk radio. As an example, the January 3, 2005 show was Janeane Garofalo's first evening back on the air after her holiday vacation. The bloggers were happy to hear her, and many cheered her return.

The most effusive type-screamed: “HI JANEANE!!!! HI SAM!!!! YAY!!!! I've been soooooo lost without you!!! YAYYYYYY!!!!!!” (on-blog post, 1/3/05). Most were slightly less extreme, but Janeane had a hearty “welcome back” from many of the bloggers. One regular contributor frequently raps his comments, and his welcome was true to form:

majority report as they say
has dreams of a new liberal way
sam does his part
and jeaneane is so smart
and bloggers are mixed in the fray (on-blog post, 1/3/05)

This show wasn't just Janeane's first day back on the air; it was also the first show of 2005, and the bloggers rapidly exchanged New Year's greetings, wishing each other well and expressing hopes that they had all had good holidays. Reading these exchanges provided me with some of my first clues that what I was witnessing was a community gathering. While not ignoring the many anonymous or non-contact-linked postings, it was clear that this was an online community of individuals who know each other, expect to find each other on the blog regularly, and care about one another. Bloggers who I interviewed supported this observation:

We're kind've "on-line" friends in a way, I mean, given the circumstances of these times, I think we branded "liberals" need to stick together more than ever now and keep discussing all sorts of things. (*LeeP*, email interview, 1/12/04)

I find it really appealing that there is a "community" of sorts, where all these individuals are constantly appraising what each other are saying. (*Yentz*, email interview, 12/16/04)

This sense of community, driven by values and common mission, gives *The Majority Report's* blog a tone that is distinct from both the Hannity Forums and the *TOTN* discussion boards.

Local language

Of the three communities studied, I had the greatest opportunity to observe the use of local language in *The Majority Report's* Show Blog. By local language I mean phrases and expressions that discussion area regulars understand, but would not be an intuitive mode of expression for an outsider. These expressions can be found in rituals of greeting and goodbye, as well as ways of referring to the show and its hosts, agreeing or disagreeing with the hosts or guests on the show, and in joking around.

At the opening of each time-bound thread on *The Majority Report's* blog, the regular bloggers pile on to the front of the blog, racing to author the first post. These posts often consist of just one word: "First?" Usually phrased as questions and not statements, a blogger cannot know if he or she was indeed the first until refreshing the browser after posting. Variants on the expression are "Frost!," "Frist," "1st," and even just "!!!". This is a competition bound by the isolation of its participants as well as by the technology they are using to communicate. If a blogger discovers they were indeed first they may make a show of it, taunting the other contenders. Likewise, when bloggers (frequently) discover they've been beaten to the open of the thread, they may make a similarly public showing of dismay. These competitive exchanges set the initial tone for a thread, and are reflective of the general level of banter and chit-chat that takes place amidst substantive talk and reaction to the program as it airs. Likewise, as the blog threads close, bloggers say goodbye to each other – but only on the threads at the end of the evening. Bloggers rarely post closing statements at the end of the pre-show, hour one and hour two threads.

At the end of hour three, when listeners hear the closing music⁵⁶ they respond to it: “Peaches!”⁵⁷ – and then the bloggers chat about whether or not it has been a good show. The post-show thread is where most of the goodbyes are made – as bloggers sign off for the night at various times, conversation is interspersed with valedictions, one-by-one, until the traffic on the blog slows to a trickle for the night.

Relationships and expectations

The markers of community described earlier in this chapter can all be found in loose-knit, or as Komito might say, “fluid and foraging,” communities. I have saved for last the community marker that depends most on individuals coming to know one another – on the development of a proximate community. *Majority Report* co-host Sam Seder acknowledges that his program’s blog space is an important community for many of the site’s regular bloggers “and they have developed genuine relationships with regulars there” (email interview, 4/11/05). The best evidence to support this observation can be found in the comments of the participants themselves:

Common recognition through interaction is the key to a community. To be honest, the MR blog has a more anti-community feel to it, it is far more anarchic, because it allows anonymous postings which can screw with the sense of community by making recognition harder. (*Yentz*, email interview, 12/17/04)

It feels different/weird when [the regulars] are not there. I am more likely to leave the blog and thus maybe even stop listening if these regulars aren't there. (*Cate*, email interview, 1/14/05)

⁵⁶ The music used to close the show is by a musician named Peaches, who appeared on the show for an interview in the spring of 2004. The interview was so bad it became an inside joke, and the hosts now play her music to end the show.

⁵⁷ There are a number of variations on the “Peaches!” valediction as well, including “pears” “Sneetches,” “porches,” “peachers,” and “cling peaches in heavy syrup.”

People also provide support for others in discussion areas. *Majority Report* blogger *Cate* relayed this anecdote:

I wanted to buy the Majority Report vs. the [Republican National Convention] dvd but it only delivered to US and Canada and more than one blogger offered to help me out with ordering and delivering it back to me directly. I certainly did not expect this but it is an example of the sense of community that forms around the blog. (email interview, 1/14/05)

The Majority Report may host the discussion area that is most active while the show is on the air, but it is not the only space where members recognize and support one another.

Talk of the Nation discussion area participants value the collection of regular posters they have come to expect on the boards:

I...have come to feel like part of a largely dysfunctional family, but to still feel like it's MY family, warts and all, just from familiarity (and the occasional exchange that breaks through our ideological boundaries). (*Anonymous*, email interview, 4/17/05)

Clearly some of the participants become familiar with other participants as time passes. They seem to think of each other as neighbors of a sort, though separated by physical distance and political or social opinions. (*Chris*, email interview, 4/22/05)

Likewise, *Hannity Forum* members enjoy getting to know other participants: "It is a community in the sense that most posters have been there for a while and know each other's views on issues and are treated with respect" (*Stuart*, email interview, 4/17/05).

Cate, the *Majority Report* listener from Australia, describes her listening and blogging routines as a holistic experience:

The first hour is often my most enjoyable because all the bloggers are saying hi to one another and the show itself is just getting started. ... I will see who is on the show, if there is someone who I KNOW I want to listen to I'll make sure I hang around but if nothing is really holding my interest I'll leave the show streaming and wander around the house. I make sure I come back for the last half hour usually - similar to the first hour, it will either climax in its dramatics or come down softly/humorously. I like to say peaches to the blog also. (email interview, 4/20/05)

Cate's experience of streaming the show and attending to the show blog simultaneously indicate a possible shift in listening habits: for her the radio show is more than just a show – it is a discussion and an event. The blog also is more than just a blog – it is a community and a social event. Her experience echoes the methodological reflections of Chapter One, illustrating the point that questions of discussion area text-as-transcript versus text-as-event are indeed relevant to participants, and not just to researchers.

As community, discussion areas enable digestion and affirmation of ideas through the interactions of familiar characters as well as occasional participants. They allow for the testing of one's opinions in a court of peers who, if they do not hold the same beliefs, at least they largely hold the value of the importance of discussion and debate. Discussion areas breed local language understandable by the (local) community but that require translation for outsiders. The producers of these online spaces also impose structures on the community that regulate the use of the space and how people may engage with topics as well as with each other. Rules and protocols established by more top-down spaces such as the Hannity Forums have strict rules that, if breached, result in the offending party being banned from the board. Other discussion areas like *The Majority Report* and *Talk of the Nation* feature more grassroots rule systems whereby the community regulates itself by enforcement of implicit codes of conduct. The three spaces all have implicit hierarchies of participation, designating who receives respect in the discussion areas: who is listened to, who is tolerated, who is argued with, and who is ignored. The regularly attending participants in these discussion areas form relationships with other members, and experience various degrees of interpersonal support. These markers all indicate that

radio-online discussion areas represent the enablement of listening communities, and in so doing provide new outlets for active audiences.

Chapter 4. *Feedback and Performance*

Ever since the shift from two-way to broadcast radio in 1922, listeners have found ways to respond to producers of broadcast content. Word of mouth, print media coverage, and local trends in purchases of new radio sets provided early means of feedback on programming (Douglas 1987). Listeners' tools for responding to broadcasts are obviously much more sophisticated today. In this chapter I will position the feedback and performance that take place in radio-online discussion areas in terms of audience engagement and the active provision of feedback to broadcasters.

Radio broadcasters have long relied on *low-interactivity* methods of receiving listener feedback. Letters have traditionally allowed individuals to write to a program, station or network and share their thoughts on programming. Through my own experiences working in radio, I have observed that some broadcasters take letters as helpful audience gauges, while others figure only the very passionate would bother to write and so letters are not seen as good indicators of a program's reception by its audience. Listeners also have been able to telephone local broadcasters to react to programming, participate in talk shows, chat with hosts, enter contests, or request songs. Market research has also offered various tools for broadcasters to use to learn more about their audiences.⁵⁸ Since the 1940s, Arbitron and other research organizations have been providing valuable data on audience numbers and market share for client broadcasters. Their diary and survey-based

⁵⁸ The Office of Radio Research at Princeton University in 1937 commenced a landmark study of the effects of radio on American society. Viennese sociologist Paul Lazarsfeld headed the project, which laid important market research groundwork for the increasing commercialization of radio.

research methodologies yield audience information in aggregate, and provide significant data on broad audience trends.⁵⁹ Programmers also use focus groups to learn about attitudes toward programs, or to test potential changes to specific shows. The qualitative research methodologies employed by focus groups provide intimate settings that can yield rich descriptive data, but also create a somewhat false listening environment. The most recent addition to the suite of low interactivity feedback methods is email, which allows listeners to respond more quickly than a letter. What conclusions can we draw from this list? I would suggest it indicates that broadcasters are typically accustomed to uncomplicated communication with their audiences: broadcast product goes out, trickle of opinion comes back in. Broadcasters' methods of interacting with their audiences are, generally speaking, entrenched: broadcasters have their methods for reaching out and gathering information on audiences through demographic profiling, surveying, conducting focus groups, and through research organizations like Arbitron. Audiences, on the other hand, initiate their own points of contact with broadcasters through letter and email writing, phone calls, and other forms of local engagement with content.

In the 1980s, the modes of feedback available to listeners first began to make the move toward higher interactivity. The Telecommunications Act of 1986 and the 1987 suspension of the Fairness Doctrine together enabled the deregulation of radio station ownership and the creation of stations airing one main political point of view (usually

⁵⁹ NB: Arbitron's methodology is currently in flux. In 2003 Arbitron, in collaboration with Nielsen Media Research, introduced the Portable People Meter, a new audience measurement device that an individual carries with them at all waking times and measures all media exposure, not just what the individual can remember to log in a diary. (Source: www.arbitron.com/portable_people_meters/) This innovation will make it possible for researchers to track audience trends among much smaller audience demographics than has been possible in the past.

conservative). Combined with the advent of national 1-800 numbers (Munson 1993), these regulatory changes enabled the proliferation of national talk radio. Talk radio, in forms at least somewhat suggestive of what ‘talk radio’ means today, has been around since the 1930s. Talk radio as a programming format first became familiar in some major radio markets in the 1960s;⁶⁰ new 1-800 numbers provided radio listeners with a free way to contact programs, and more and more frequently they were offering their feedback and voices on the air to organizations based well outside their local area and their state. Munson (1993) calls the talk show a “readily available barometer of public opinion, an imaginary and highly discursive space where topical issues ‘sizzle’...” (4). In terms of listener contributions to broadcast product, the talk show is a fusion of programmatic on-air feedback with listener performance in a public space.

The introduction of new digital modes of communication did not immediately add new dimensions to listener on-air participation. Email’s popularity increased quickly in the early 1990s,⁶¹ and broadcast stations by the late 90s were largely equipped to receive communications from audiences through their email addresses. This transition to digital communication between producers and audiences took place in all mainstream media formats, and has enabled shifts in all sectors of media, not just radio. One of the earliest interactive additions to broadcasters’ websites, beyond simple information about programming, was the email link. When NPR’s website launched in 1997, it offered only an email address for the webmaster, and not for specific programs. WGBH, Boston’s public radio and television station, in 1997 offered email addresses for its most prominent

⁶⁰ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk_radio. 5/5/05.

⁶¹ <http://livinginternet.com/e/ei.htm>. 6/20/05.

national shows, but not for any local programs. WHDH, Boston's NBC affiliate television station, in 1996 offered email addresses for ten programming and administrative departments via a form on their website. WBZ, another commercial Boston radio and television station, in 1997 advertised only their postal address and phone number as means of contact for the TV station, but WBZ Radio offered email addresses for on-air personalities, managers, and programming departments.⁶² Media organizations then began to include online email response links and forms, message boards and online chats as online support to broadcast programming, but not yet as a way for audiences to participate substantively in creation and critique of programming. Boczkowski (2004) observes "...new media emerge by merging existing social and material infrastructures with novel technical capabilities, a process that also unfolds in relation to broader contextual trends" (4). Broadcasters first placed interactive components on their websites so listeners/viewers could talk amongst themselves or provide feedback (complaints, praise, suggestions) similar to how they would do via phone, letters or emails, but rarely so they could interact *with* the broadcaster.

No matter how much broadcasters adopted the look of interactivity, they were still, for the most part, addressing their audiences as collections of anonymous individuals who were not expected to participate actively in the broadcasting experience. This phenomenon can be explained within the theoretical context of the SCOT approach, as the adoption and integration of technologies and their various uses represent an "ongoing process:"

⁶² These snapshots of broadcaster interactivities in the mid-90s were obtained via the Internet Archive: www.archive.org.

The shaping of an artifact does not stop after the emergence of a dominant design, and the conditions for the cultural consequences of its use start being created long before its initial deployment. Moreover, in this continuous process, partial outcomes at an earlier stage influence events at a late phase. (Boczkowski 2004: 10)

In the case of broadcaster websites, the ongoing process of developing interactivity with audiences began in the mid-1990s with broadcaster websites that were primarily promotional ‘brochureware,’ providing only very basic information about programming, and secondarily a place where listeners/viewers could offer feedback (Seybold 1998: 46-47). Out of the email link grew email forms, which were an advance in service and enabled emails to be better channeled to the appropriate office, but could at times feel constrictive to the user. Polls, contests and signup forms for email lists soon followed. Simple discussion and message boards began to appear on broadcaster websites in the late 1990s. Sometimes these bulletin-board style spaces were monitored closely, but sometimes not. NPR, for example, monitored its boards closely for a year or two after their launch in the spring of 1998, but in recent years NPR has taken a *laissez-faire* attitude toward the boards, making little investment in their maintenance, and not engaging with listeners in the online space (Michael Horn, phone interview, 3/18/05). The *Sean Hannity Show* initiated its discussion boards service in 2002, and since then its membership has grown to more than 45,000 registered users. Following message boards in both audience use and utility to broadcasters, the most recent addition to the suite of interactive options available to broadcast listeners and viewers is the weblog.

The two main types of blog together influence discussion area aesthetics and implementations on broadcaster websites: *Individual blogs* are generally maintained by a

single author, and the narrative unfolds in a diary-like style, often including visitor comments on post threads. Several such blogs are Americablog,⁶³ Instapundit,⁶⁴ Andrew Sullivan,⁶⁵ and Talking Points Memo.⁶⁶ *Community blogs* are somewhat different: they take a similar form but the main thread entries are posted by a number of people. These blogs do not necessarily allow anyone to post, but they involve multiple authors. Blogs in this category include Metafilter,⁶⁷ Little Green Footballs,⁶⁸ and Fark.⁶⁹ Neither of these kinds of blog give a direct line of feedback to media outlets, but instead many such blogs are read regularly by reporters and producers to keep their fingers ‘on the pulse.’

The groundswell of these blogs has motivated broadcasters to respond. Today broadcasters are not only keeping an eye on what’s happening in the blogosphere and feeding that into the news agenda, they are creating their own institutionally-grounded blogs and discussion areas. MSNBC is an industry leader in this respect, and hosts at least ten diary-style blogs.⁷⁰ Most of Air America Radio’s programs also offer either individual or community-style blogs, or message boards. The *Talk of the Nation* discussion boards at NPR⁷¹ embody an aesthetic hybrid of boards and blogs,⁷² and the discussion boards at the *Sean Hannity Show* offer a style more consistent with the

⁶³ <http://americablog.blogspot.com>

⁶⁴ www.instapundit.com

⁶⁵ www.andrewsullivan.com

⁶⁶ www.talkingpointsmemo.com

⁶⁷ www.metafilter.com

⁶⁸ <http://littlegreenfootballs.com/weblog/>

⁶⁹ www.fark.com

⁷⁰ Online at <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/3032105/>. 5/3/05.

⁷¹ <http://www.npr.org/yourturn>

⁷² By aesthetic hybrid, I refer to NPR’s boards as having a cleaner look than most message boards, without using blog technologies to achieve that look. Note that this hybrid is hybrid in hindsight only: the aesthetics and structure of the NPR discussion boards were deployed in 1998, before weblog authoring tools shaped blog aesthetics and enabled them to be more widely recognized.

message board format but have been nevertheless influenced by the blogosphere in terms of how its participants talk about the texts they are creating.

Institutionally-provided discussion areas afford the broadcaster three benefits: 1) to extend the broadcast and engender a more loyal audience, 2) to gauge listener opinions, while acknowledging that discussion area participants represent a subset (discussion area participants) of a subset (Internet users) of the general audience, and 3), this being much less common, harvest content generated by listeners in the discussion area to be included in the program itself.⁷³ When a discussion area and its relationship with the broadcast entity sponsoring it yield these three benefits in addition to enabling intra-audience engagement that is experienced as community by its participants, this creates *high interactivity radio*; the potentials inherent in high-interactivity radio, though, are only beginning to be realized by broadcasters. Writing on audience adaptations to new technologies, Kirsten Drotner (2005) comments on the frequently unmet potential in how broadcasters conceive of their audiences. Broadcaster conceptions of audiences as “physically bounded and stable communities” amplify this dissonance:

The intensified audience interactions with broadcasters through email, sms or phone calls serve to highlight the reciprocity of communication between producers and audiences, whose engagement is called upon. However, these forms of interaction are still directed to institutional locations, defining the issues of interaction, and gatekeeping who gets a call through, an email cited, an icon displayed during a show. (192)

What Drotner identifies here is precisely what I am concerned with in this thesis. She contrasts the traditional broadcast media producer-audience relationship with the

⁷³ These discussion areas also host some participants who do not listen to the associated radio program regularly, if at all. This should not be overlooked as a benefit to the program, as it allows non-listeners an opportunity to experience an institutionally-branded space, thereby enhancing the program and host recognition and value among a broader segment of the population.

experiences of mobile phone users, an audience group that functions significantly differently from the traditionally-conceived opaque audience. Drotner acknowledges the established relationship between producers and audiences, and suggests that any new communication technologies introduced by the market that enable the consumer to interact more easily, more quickly and in more depth with the producer fundamentally change that relationship. Mobile-to-mobile communications are performed in consumer-to-consumer relationships, where both parties are both producer *and* audience. Drotner charts new horizontal relationships, enabled by new mobile-to-mobile technologies, but fails to note the consumer (audience)-to-producer directionality. Figure 4.1 illustrates high-interactivity radio, playing on some of the same directionalities as Stuart Hall's familiar encoding/decoding graphic (Hall 1992: 130). Here, the arrows represent directions of *performance* as well as directions of communication and reception. To explore in more detail how this feedback-as-performance interactivity plays out in real discussion areas, the rest of this chapter will explore the experiences of producers and participants of *The Majority Report* blog, followed by a discussion of points of contrast and alignment with the *TOTN* discussion boards and the Sean Hannity Forums.

Blogging at The Majority Report: where listeners produce and producers listen

In its first three days on the air, Air America Radio was streamed online by two million listeners. *The Majority Report's* producers promptly shared this news with the show's listeners on the brand new show's brand new blog and thanked them for their participation: "You are ensuring the left will be heard!" (on-blog post, 4/8/04). Roughly

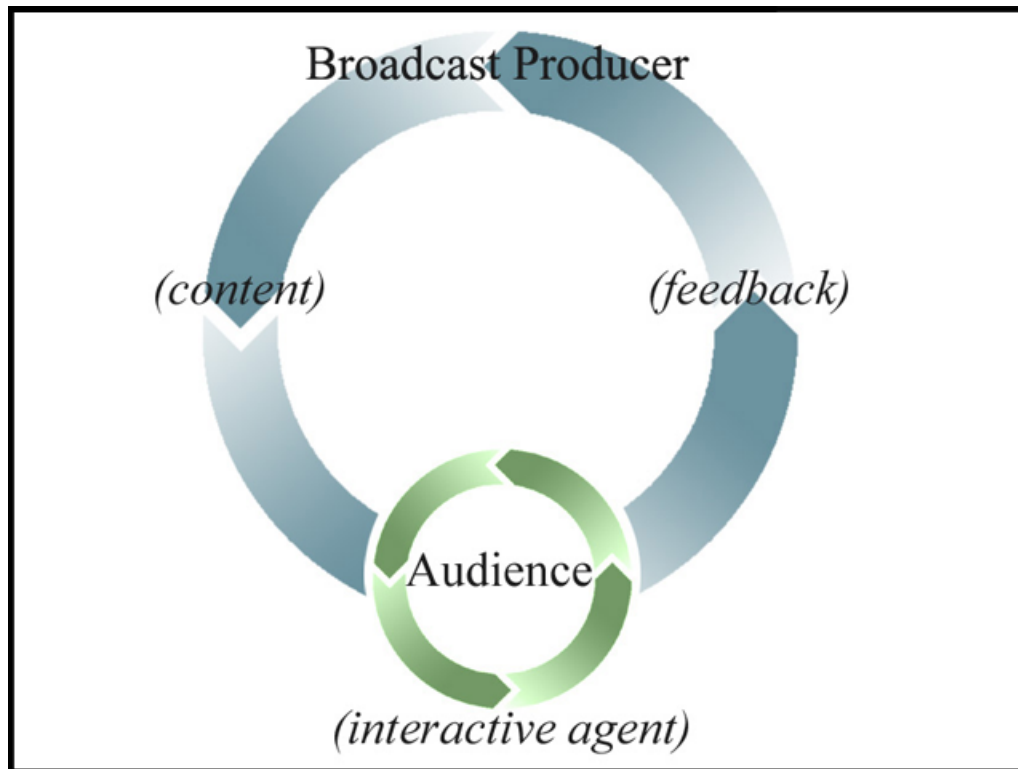


Figure 4.1: new interactive directionalities in high-interactivity radio.

a year after this excited announcement, *The Majority Report's* blog has become a regular way for the show to gather listener feedback, an extension of the broadcast, as well as what co-host Sam Seder calls "another character" (email interview, 4/11/05) in the show. The program receives listener input through all the traditional channels (email, regular mail, phone calls, voicemail messages), but is greatly enhanced by the many functionalities afforded the program by the active community engaging with content and with each other in the program's blogspace. The blog is a powerful tool for the show:

[G]enerally the suggestions from the bloggers that I take have ranged from pulling a pre-recorded interview in mid-interview in part because the blog reacted so poorly to it; I will ask questions of guests based on blog suggestions, sometimes I will change my tone based upon the way I see the blog reacting etc. (Sam Seder, email interview, 4/22/05)

The blogs help the producers generate ideas, build a sense of community around the show, extend the broadcast by giving the audience a place to go while the show isn't on the air that is still *Majority Report*-branded space, and provide a place where producers can announce show developments (e.g., upcoming guests, etc). The show blog also provides the producers with another medium of expression for which they can provide content that might not work on the radio, such as photographs, visual gags, links, etc.⁷⁴

Describing how he uses the blogs while *The Majority Report* is on the air, Seder said “sometimes – on air – I will follow links to stories that I will use moments later. I will often pull guest questions from the blog” (email interview, 4/11/05). The senior producer of the show adds:

During the show, blog comments provide corrections to things said on the radio or suggestions of materials supplementary to topics covered on-air. On the 24/7 section, if we ask people to do something like write letters-to-the-editor on a specific topic and post them, we try to congratulate and acknowledge on-air those who participated. (email interview, 5/13/05)

Sam Seder points out that his program was the first to engage with its blog on this level, and now some of Air America's other programs have begun to follow *The Majority Report's* lead. As far as he knows, what *The Majority Report* began with its blog in April 2004 was unique in the radio field:

I think it makes the show different but not in ways that are easy to quantify- the blog becomes another character on the show – not unlike a producer who chimes in; however, we have the ability to control when the blog "speaks" on air anyway. But there are times when I change my approach to an interview or topic based on blog reactions. (email interview, 4/11/05)

⁷⁴ One element of the blog that I find surprising, given that Air America Radio is a commercial network, is that the *Majority Report's* blog, unlike the Hannity Forums, does not carry advertisements. It would seem to this observer an ideal space to capitalize on the unique properties of an active audience.

For Seder, the blog is at once location, technology, and personified entity – this allows him to refer to it similarly as a place to go, as a technology that has been refined over time, and also as an individual with an opinion or a reaction. “The blog,” when talking about interaction, is blog as character and singular entity, of course not forgetting that “the blog” is comprised of many bloggers. *The Majority Report’s* producers have made changes to the blog structure based on feedback from the blog, and also have made changes to the show itself based on the blog’s reaction to content, style and delivery. For example, in 2004 the show’s bloggers suggested finding ways to block spammers from filling the blog with advertising and marketing junk. The producers responded by adding a character number limit for each post, which then prevented at least lengthy spam attacks. Also at blog prompting, the show adopted the Typekey weblog service⁷⁵ so individual posters could prevent others from using the screen name they had chosen for themselves, thereby allowing regular posters to maintain unique identities even if they do not have to register with *Majority Report* to post on the site. The hosts and producers have made numerous adjustments to the live show in response to the blog, and the hosts use it as a virtual studio audience:

Often the blog functions like an audience for me (analogous to when I've performed live) – the danger is to balance the blog's reaction (knowable) with the broader, significantly larger audience's reaction (unknowable) – I can't tell you how I find that balance – it is a mixture of a lot of things that inform me as an actor, performer and filmmaker. (Sam Seder, email interview, 4/22/05)

In short, *The Majority Report’s* blog adds a dimensionality that is novel for a radio program. High-interactivity radio is a new phenomenon, and it even takes listeners hungry for interaction some time to get accustomed to it:

⁷⁵ <http://www.sixapart.com/typekey/>

I used to wish Janeane and Sam would take more phone calls during the show and not depend on the blog for listener contributions. After some time I concluded that, although some more listener calls might be nice, the blog is an exceptional tool because it accommodates anyone who might not want to talk on live radio, might think what he or she states is not very original but wants to state it anyway, or wants to dialogue with other liberals. (*Joseph*, email interview, 12/17/04)

This *Majority Report* blogger would agree with Sam that the blog becomes a character in the program, but he is a listener, not a host – and so his perspective is different:

I view the blog as a more instantaneous and involved message board of posters listening to the show all sharing the experience of hearing the on-air content being broadcast live. The MRR crew is sort of in the background; the MRR staff is reading at least a majority of the content, but *the blog is the show's inverse with the bloggers/listeners in the foreground and the radio personalities in the background.* (*Joseph*, email interview, 12/17/04) (my emphasis)

The regular bloggers are hooked, and even when they complain about the level of attention paid to the blog by the show, they express continued commitment to their participation in the show's blog. They are more likely to sense the hosts' awareness of "the blog" as an entity, rather than their own individual identity, and this does not curtail or dampen their participation. Nevertheless, they love individual attention:

Sam sometimes is aware of what people are saying in the discussion area but no, I do not feel that I myself am known to either Sam or Janeane. But I do LOVE it when they mention a blogger by name. (*Cate*, email interview, 4/20/05)

Excitement was generated on the blog in the honor of one blogger in particular (who was interviewed for this thesis), when the hosts mentioned his name on the air. It was his birthday, and they made his day. He even posted a tribute to the moment on his website.⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Online at <http://www.angelfire.com/oh5/southeastohio/LeePbirthday1.6.2005.html>. 5/4/05.

To avoid painting too rosy a picture of innovation, though, I must point out that blog participants do indeed complain, and that the issues they raise are relatively consistent. While both the show blog and the 24/7 blog make explicit and implied promises that bloggers' comments may be used in the show, only a small fraction of postings are ever used by the show's hosts. As a consequence, blog participants who don't find their material drawn upon for the show can get frustrated by what feels like inattention. In a November 13, 2004 24/7 thread on voter apathy and alleged voter fraud in the 2004 elections, several bloggers accused the hosts of not paying enough attention to evidence of election abuses:

This show is missing out on THE story. I guess it's not good enough food for the ego- driven rants of the hosts. Here's the site to see: [linked from post]... Sam, go back to directing trash. Janeane, get off of your slim ass and take the reigns [*sic*]. (on-blog post, 11/13/04)

Another blogger immediately affirmed the first blogger's position:

...We cannot count on the media to spread this message, not even Janeane and Sam and the good folks at Air America. We've got to take it upon ourselves. (on-blog post, 11/13/04)

These comments did not receive any direct response from the show or its hosts.

However, more substantive and well-articulated protests that are on-topic and specific often do receive responses. In a December 13, 2004 24/7 thread on Social Security, one blogger protested that host Sam Seder had not treated one of that evening's guests with appropriate measures of respect:

Re: Lack of respect shown by Sam towards the hugely courageous Sibel Edmonds. I await the day when even progressive males will give due respect to women deserving of such. Specifically: After your interview with Ms. Edmonds was over and you came back from the break, you and the other male co-host began to talk about tomorrow's guests, including the author of Economic Hit Man, and Sam was 'all gahgah' over this guy, just because he admitted his crimes against millions of innocent people,

after decades of perpetuating them!!! When you should have been extolling the virtues of Ms. Edmonds as a superior human being who is making hugely brave and important contributions towards democracy. Progressive males need to wake up and smell the coffee, not much has changed with their boring sexist attitudes during the last 40 years. I will no longer listen to your show. (on-blog post, 12/13/04)

Forty minutes later and almost two hours after the program had ended, host Sam Seder responded:

Sorry you won't be listening to the show anymore. I'll admit that perhaps I didn't extol Sibell's [*sic*] virtues enough, however, I can assure you it had nothing to do with her gender. Nor mine. PS your post would be better served posted in the other blog... this one is specifically for the media action project. (on-blog post, 12/13/04)

The end of Seder's response, redirecting the listener to the general blog, is indicative of the style of 24/7 blog management that is necessary on the part of the program hosts and staff. While bloggers who post in the 24/7 blog acknowledge that the program expects their posts to be relevant to the topic at hand and well-researched, they often lapse into general comments, of the sort found in the general show blog. IE, comments such as "this isn't relevant to the election at all but I really like Janeane's ass" (on-blog post, 11/10/04) and flames like "[the] election is over you liberal dim-wits" (on-blog-post, 11/15/04) are not unexpected even in the 24/7 blog.

Defining values through performance

Interspersed with the topical commentary, news links, articles, and local language exchanges as described earlier, another common element of the blog is the praises that bloggers sing of the show. It sometimes seems like they just can't resist praising the show, the hosts, and Air America Radio in general:

Where would we be without Janeane or Sam. This is the only place I get political analysis that doesn't actually p*ss me off!! (on-blog post, 1/03/05)

Janeane's analysis is absolutely right-on. Why doesn't the journalist she's interviewing see what she's talking about? He needs to research more. (on-blog post, 1/03/05)

Perhaps this devotion to *The Majority Report* is fueled by its freshness as a liberal voice that was until recently largely absent from the talk radio medium. Or perhaps the blog itself, and the community that it has enabled, is what encourages the passion.

The modern community, whether viewed by its members as primarily based in physical or online space, is at least in part mediated by technology – and therefore requires the act of imagining the community in one's mind. Anderson (1991) writes about the daily ritual of newspaper reading as a private ritual, performed individually. “Yet each communicant is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion” (35). Indeed, one blogger who participates mainly in the 24/7 blog responded: “whenever I write, I have the picture of someone like me on the other end -- willing to pick up on an interesting idea and run with it, or someone who shares an idea, or disagrees with it, or just wants a laugh” (*Ben*, email interview, 12/17/04).

Reading newspapers, talking with coworkers and friends about the day's news, watching television, yelling at the TV screen – these are all activities most Americans engage in fairly regularly, if not daily. They comprise a shared experience that is familiar to young and old alike. But, as Elihu Katz of the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School

would argue, the shared “situation of contact” on television has diminished as new channels have proliferated.⁷⁷ The large number of channels available today on television creates smaller communities of viewers, and therefore smaller communities available to discuss what was seen there – this “nichification” applies to how we use the Internet as well. Mainstream papers, independent journals and magazines, personal and political blogs, and any number of other genres of writing, audio and video are available online; the communities of individuals who participate in these sites, either actively or relatively passively, vary from tiny niches to what even in today’s dispersed media environment can still be called a mass audience.

Rene Lysloff (2003) brings together online engagement with the concept of the imagined community: “The concept of community could thus be considered the unique manner in which a network of relationships is conceived by its members and represented to the wider world as the group’s identity. That is, we might understand community as a collective and ongoing performative practice of group representation (to itself and to others)” (256). The bloggers of *The Majority Report* undoubtedly are performing as they blog: they’re taking part in the creation of high-interactivity radio, and their audience is alternately each other, observers, and the program hosts. David Ryfe’s *collective reflexivity* is also useful here as a synonym for Lysloff’s performative practice of *group representation* – two different ways to describe the means through which an audience uses community experiences to become a public.

⁷⁷ Katz’s comments at the MIT Communications Forum, 10/30/03. Online at http://mit.edu/comm-forum/forums/television_obsolete.html.

The success of *Majority Report* bloggers in the attention paid to their performances should not suggest, however, that integral to the performance itself is recognition by the program hosts and producers. Participants in the Hannity Forums perform similarly, though perhaps without an expectation of being acknowledged by Sean Hannity himself. Volunteer moderator *Gene* doesn't seem to think Sean Hannity owes the listeners in the Forums any special attention:

Sean Hannity is not one to stick his thumb in the air to tell which way the wind blows. He's got his opinions and they are not influenced by the people who listen to his show. He pleases crowds, but he doesn't pander to them. Have you ever tried to get, say, four people to agree on pizza toppings? It won't happen unless someone takes the lead and actually orders the pizza. ... The show doesn't need the board. It's not a crutch. (email interview, 4/8/05)

He continues, though, to note that “the boards provide a two-way discussion for a one-way show.” When he says “two-way discussion,” *Gene* is ignoring the arguably two-way conversations Hannity has with his guests and callers, and he is not suggesting the multi-directionality of interaction depicted in figure 4.1; instead he is referring to audience-to-audience interaction, whereby “the board allows for the overflow” of listeners who didn't make it onto the air and intend their performance more for their fellow listeners than for Hannity himself. “On the occasions that Sean Hannity mentions his message board there are usually several topics about it and how the board relates to the show...” (email interview, 4/8/05). Hannity's program director Phil Boyce affirms this view. He calls the boards his “little ant farm,” and says they allow “listeners of the show to have a community of like-minded people who want to extend the discussion beyond the show” (phone interview, 4/1/05). While Sean Hannity does not draw directly on Hannity Forums' content for his show, the program's producers monitor the boards during the

show to get a sense of what listeners are most interested in. With more than 47,000 registered users and a record logged-on population of 606 participants,⁷⁸ the boards provide a service to listeners that is not bounded in terms of listeners' desire for interactivity with the program – interactivity with fellow audience members is enough to draw hundreds of people at a time to the Hannity Forums. Boyce points out that “the people that participate in the boards feel more connected to the show and that it’s a big deal and they have a place to air their opinion” (phone interview, 4/1/05).⁷⁹ The Hannity Forums allow for intra-audience interactivity and an extension of the broadcast, and are used moderately by the program producers to gauge listener sentiment, but are not drawn upon in a substantive way. Thus Hannity’s discussion boards do not qualify as high- interactivity radio: instead they are an active and vibrant example of more established radio-online interactivities. The *Talk of the Nation* discussion boards in their current state, though, slip further down the high-to-low spectrum, leaving its participants often frustrated with their unmet potential.

Disappointment and nostalgia in the “discussion ghetto”

In my attempts to solicit interviews with participants in the *Talk of the Nation* discussion boards, I first located a group of posters who had participated in at least two topic threads. Then I looked at, of those, which individuals offered a link to their email

⁷⁸ Record set on 5/9/05.

⁷⁹ This observation may point to what may seem to be a truism, but is nonetheless an important aspect of talk radio audiences – that those members of the audiences who call in (or who want to) are hungry to air their ideas and opinions. This is a characteristic – again obviously – typically found among online discussion area participants as well. This kind of radio audience may have a unique potential for becoming a public.

addresses from their names when posted. Of these, I contacted 15 individuals. At this point I observed that the great majority of these individuals were male, or at least male-presenting (Turkle 1997). I noted that of the few female-presenting participants who posted on two or more threads, most of them had not chosen to display their email addresses. Of the eight individuals who responded to my solicitation, none identified themselves as women. This is likely indicative of the small female representation in NPR's discussion areas. This dearth of female attendance is not reflective of NPR's listening demographics,⁸⁰ Internet use,⁸¹ or even of participants in the other discussion areas I have examined here. *Hannity* and *Majority Report* discussion areas both seem to host more men than women, but the disparity is not so great as it is at *Talk of the Nation*.

Participation in discussion areas among program listeners is determined by any number of factors that also affect online demographics. Briefly, these include profession, age, gender, income, broadband access, facility with technology, interest in virtual communication, and education. Interplay among these characteristics surely affect the demographics of the people who participate in *The Majority Report*, *The Sean Hannity Show*, and *Talk of the Nation* discussion areas. However, the lack of apparent diversity in *TOTN* discussion boards was startling. Michael Horn, online analyst at National Public Radio says that participants in the NPR discussion boards are "whiter, better educated and higher income than we would like" (phone interview 3/18/05). NPR struggles with

⁸⁰ The gender breakdown of NPR listenership is 54% male, 46% female. Source:

http://www.wskg.org/howtounderwrite_demo.htm, data provided by Mediamark Research, Inc.

⁸¹ As of August 2003, 61% of American women used the Internet versus 65% of American men. Source: Mary Madden. *America's Online Pursuits: The changing picture of who's online and what they do*. Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2003. Online at

http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_Online_Pursuits_Final.PDF.

its image as a genteel and elitist broadcaster, and wants to use its website, discussion boards included, to attempt to attract a more diverse audience. Horn argues that “real discussion requires people from different backgrounds,” and that he would expect the quality and dynamics of NPR’s online discourse to only increase as the audience – and, by extension the online participants – become more diverse. NPR plans to eventually launch a new incarnation of their discussion forums, which will be designed to foster a sense of community and intra-audience engagement. It is at the present time unclear whether or not the as-of-yet unscheduled re-launch of the discussion boards will enable new interactivities between NPR and its audience.

Currently, the *Talk of the Nation* discussion area is primarily a space for intra-audience discussion, prompted in large part by topics covered by *Talk of the Nation* and NPR generally, but drawing heavily on the experiences and often contrary viewpoints of NPR listeners. One *Talk of the Nation* listener affirms that the discussion area is more conducive to horizontal rather than vertical interaction:

Several posters have commented that NPR seems to take no notice of us folks, other than to provide the cyberspace. That's fine with me. I appreciate the outlet and opportunity for free discussion without their control. (*Harry*, email interview, 4/17/05)

Another listener similarly notes NPR’s inattention to the boards, but feels it is more systemic than just in the discussion area:

I feel that there is no reliable way to communicate with TOTN/NPR about content. None. The only person who will respond meaningfully is the Webmaster. The ombudsperson may respond, but in bureaucraticeese. I could send e-mail to totn@npr.org, or morning@npr.org, etc, but will not

bother, as I will simply get an auto-response. BTDT. (*Anonymous*, email interview, 4/17/05)⁸²

He goes on to note that in his experience, some board posters think the discussion area is monitored to keep an eye out for particularly out-of-line postings, but that most just think no one at NPR reads the boards: “Goodness knows why they're maintained, I wish I knew.” *Talk of the Nation* listeners seem to have given up on using the boards to communicate in any meaningful way with *Talk of the Nation* or NPR staff. Instead, as one listener put it, “I think of it as a conversation that I am having with the other people visiting the boards, rather than a conversation with *TOTN*” (*Chris*, email interview, 4/22/05). NPR Online Analyst Michael Horn agrees, and notes that in the past the discussion boards were used as a source of program feedback, but that today attendance has diminished to such a level (only 15,000 unique visitors per month as opposed to 25,000 to 35,000 in 2003) that Horn calls the boards a “discussion ghetto” – a place where listeners can gather to talk, but NPR doesn’t pay much attention. That said, the *Talk of the Nation* boards are the most active of NPR’s boards, but as a proportion of total *TOTN* listenership (2.76 million listeners per week), attendance is nevertheless low. NPR continues to focus on inbound email as a primary method of receiving listener feedback because gathering information and feedback from the boards would “require active intervention” and email “catches your attention” better than the discussion boards (Michael Horn, 3/18/05 & 7/13/05).

While *Talk of the Nation* discussion board participants seem resigned to their relegation to the ‘discussion ghetto,’ they take care to point out that it hasn’t always been this way.

⁸² “BTDT” is shorthand for “been there, done that.”

Ray Suarez hosted the program from 1993-1999, and listeners nostalgically recall a different sense of listener involvement during the Suarez era:

[T]he only NPR staff who ever read the boards any more is the Webmaster.... Former TOTN host Ray Suarez did read ALL of the posts, so far as I know, and actually responded frequently. (*Anonymous*, email interview, 4/20/05)

Another listener agrees:

Back when it started Ray Suarez would post. Now they don't bother, probably because it's not worth the time. Signal/noise ratio is low. (*Anonymous*, email interview, 4/17/05)

He is not confident in his sense of causality, but the second listener has a hunch that *TOTN* ceased to pay close attention to the boards due to a diminishing quality of discourse in the discussion area. I would suggest that this listener's observation hints at a larger belief in the grassroots power of such online discussion areas: participants have a sense of ownership of and allegiance to their community, and perceived failings of that community may be felt as emergent from the community itself and not from the institution that imposes structures upon that community. Whatever lines of program feedback are available to *TOTN* listeners, the boards are neither seen as nor used as an active feedback mechanism. *TOTN* listeners seem to have low expectations for interaction with the program through the discussion boards, but nevertheless there is incentive to participate. Perhaps *because* of NPR's inattention to the boards, *TOTN* discussion area participants do not seem to hunger for interaction with the show or with NPR generally – they are resigned to their relegation to the 'discussion ghetto.' If they want to communicate directly with NPR or *TOTN*, they will use other means of communication, such as email or telephone. I would suggest that the hunger for high-interactivity may develop only once listeners discover that the greater level of

interactivity is possible. Lacking a high-interactivity radio experience (and a cult of personality around the program's host), *TOTN* discussion board participants perform largely for each other – they are aware that lurkers may well be reading their posts, but they suspect the program itself is largely unaware of them.

Talk of the Nation's active audience has used the tools provided it to create an interactive community, but the members of this online community are not viewed by NPR, nor do they seem to view themselves, as a public ready to be viewed. In order for an audience to become a public through its development of community, it must be viewed from without as at least a somewhat unified entity, and the *TOTN* boards do not satisfy this requirement. The lack of ideological focus in NPR's boards as well as the hands-off approach of the institution towards its discussion area combine to create an online community that has not had the opportunity yet to fully realize itself as a public. The online communities at Hannity Forums and *The Majority Report*, on the other hand, tend to cluster around a sense of passion and mission aligned with the stated or implied mission of the radio program from which they are derived. These are examples of active audiences using online communities as focal points for their development into publics.

Positioning three interactive styles

The starting point for this exploration of feedback and performance was thinking about traditional vertical lines of communication between broadcasters and their audiences.

When Stuart Hall conceived his encoding/decoding model, this was the principal line of

interactivity possible except in hyper-local scenarios. The influence of computer-mediated communication in the 1990s began to make possible new non-local and high-volume horizontal directionalities of interaction, audience member to audience member. If graphed, the three programs under investigation here would occupy distinct positions on horizontal/vertical axes, one indicating low-volume to high-volume horizontal interactivity, the other similarly indicating vertical interactivity; this creates a gradient from more traditional to more progressive forms. There are only three shows and their online spaces to plot here, but this positioning may provide a helpful model for understanding the development of other radio-online interactive relationships. *Talk of the Nation* exhibits very low-vertical and medium-horizontal interactivity in its insular discussions, by both regular and occasional participants, that are paid little attention by NPR producers and web managers. The *Sean Hannity Show* and its message boards, on the other hand, are an example of low-vertical and high-horizontal interactivity. Hannity and his producers pay the message board only moderate attention, seeing it as an “ant farm” and leaving the maintenance of the board in large part to unpaid volunteer moderators. The participants in the Hannity Forums exhibit a high degree of shared values, local language and familiarity with each other, especially among the more frequent participants. With hundreds of threads active at any one time, there is always a conversation to join – or at least check in on – if one pops over to the board to see what’s happening. Finally, *The Majority Report* and its blog reveal both high-vertical and high-horizontal interactivity. Bloggers openly participate both to engage with one another and to engage with the hosts of the radio program. They share their joy with each other when the hosts explicitly fold the blog into the show, and gripe when they do not. They display

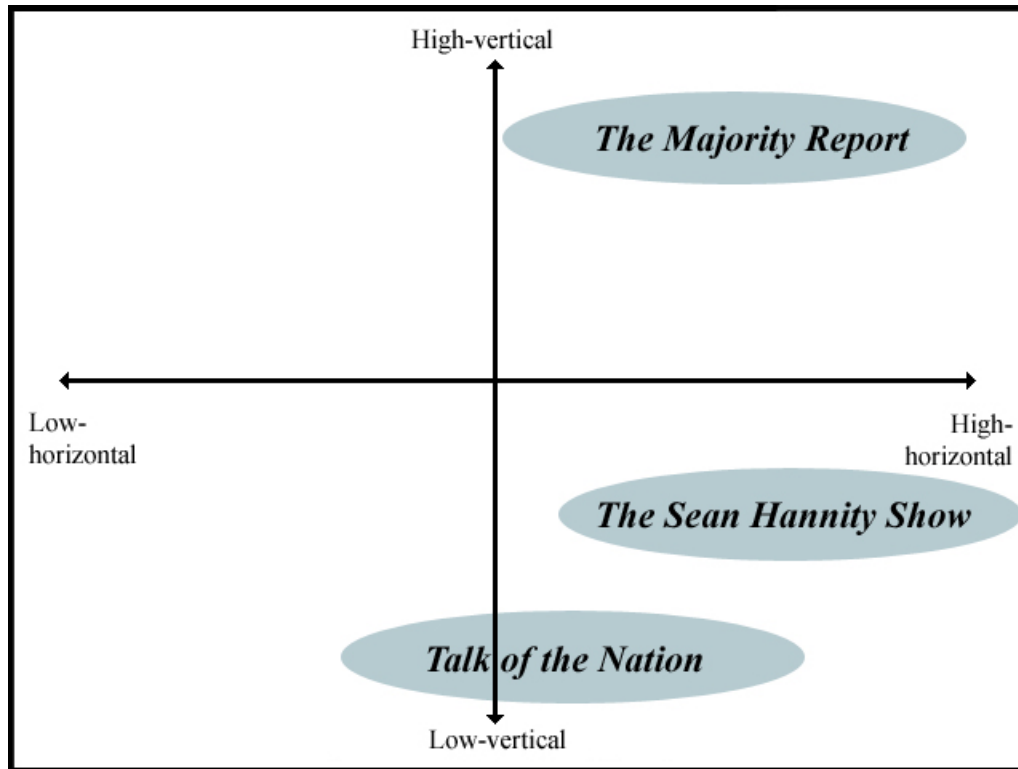


Figure 4.2: a Vertical-Horizontal model of radio-online interactivities

local language, shared values, hierarchy, and grassroots enforcement of norms of community conduct.

Are there particular characteristics of these programs and their online spaces that encourage the development of particular styles of producer-audience interactivity? And if there are such characteristics, are they rooted in business/institutional, political/ideological, or technological causes? I would suggest that features outlined in this chapter and in chapter 3 do indeed have an impact on the interactive potential of discussion areas, and these features are derived from all three of the above influences. Structures imposed by producers such as registration requirements, automatic censoring of certain vocabulary, protocols for banning participants, temporal connection of

discussion area participation to the respective program, and explicit producer participation in the space all affect how users interact with that space, and they are chosen for complex and not necessarily easily predictable reasons. For example, NPR imposes strong registration requirements on the *Talk of the Nation* discussion area, while *The Majority Report* does not. This may affect the liveliness and spontaneity of user participation. When NPR instituted its discussion boards in 1998, it had a long-established reputation to guard, and the effects of opening up access to the audience were at that point unknown. Given this context, registration requirements made a good deal of sense. *The Majority Report*, on the other hand, made both its inaugural broadcast and blog post on the same day: March 31, 2004. In this case, blog and broadcast were brand new and fundamentally interlinked, with no reputation to safeguard. The ability to post without registering to do so allowed anyone who was so inclined to participate instantly, resulting in 279 posts on the blog in response to the first show.⁸³

Discussion area rules and regulations may have been chosen for similar business reasons as registration procedures, but then, one might also interpret the varying discourse styles among the three sites as reason enough for the varying approaches to behavior regulation. On the other hand, one could argue that the regulations themselves encourage specific behaviors. The Hannity Forums impose very clear and strict behavioral guidelines that participants must follow, lest they be banned from the site; the NPR boards similarly post detailed rules but do not tend (do not need?) to enforce them; and the *Majority Report*

⁸³ Thread online at: <http://www.majorityreportradio.com/weblog/archives/000002.php#comments>. NB: Many of these opening posts were congratulatory and celebratory of Air America's and *The Majority Report's* explicitly political mission, and so some of the traffic on the blog could be attributed to the associated fervor.

blog, however, does not make explicit the guidelines for behavior that must be followed. *The Majority Report* and NPR have only occasionally banned individuals, whereas Hannity moderators ban participants regularly. These several differences all affect users' experiences on the sites, and their root causes are certainly complex.

The amount of participation in the online spaces by program hosts and producers also plays a role in setting standards of interactivity. *Majority Report* co-host Sam Seder has a visible, if occasional, presence on the program's blog, while neither Sean Hannity nor Noah Adams (the *TOTN* host) are participants in their respective discussion areas. This most certainly has an impact on the performative and vertical-interactive expectations of discussion area participants. These decisions could be interpreted as expressing open/collaborative media values on the part of *The Majority Report*, and closed media values by *Hannity* and NPR. On the other hand, it could instead be rooted in producers' and hosts' senses of what was possible given the technologies available to them at the time when they made decisions about audience engagement. In the following chapter I will further explore the implications of these factors in establishing a future for high-interactivity radio.

Chapter 5. Conclusion: looking ahead to new interactivities

This thesis has considered the implementation of radio-online discussion areas across three radio programs. Of the three, only one was found to be appreciably advancing the development of vertical interactivities between radio and online. I anticipated that my selection of three ideologically distinct radio programs and their associated online discussion areas would yield markedly different listener and producer experiences with respect to radio-online interactivities. I suspected that these differences might be embedded in political ideology, or values. This research has not yielded sufficient evidence to determine whether the differences in how listeners use discussion areas and how producers make use of those discussion areas in their programs are due primarily to differences in ideologically-derived values among the producers or their organizations. However, while I feel that strong conclusions about ideology and discussion area community cannot be drawn from this study's observations, the indications are nevertheless inescapable.

The *Majority Report* has made great strides toward embracing its audience and has discovered it to be in fact a public, ready to take part in program authorship and critique. The *Majority Report's* blog administration practices create an open atmosphere that allows anyone to speak, and to do so freely. The program is branded as Liberal, and these characteristics could be associated with liberal values. The *Sean Hannity Show*, on the other hand, engages in a cult of personality with its host, a practice in which its discussion area participants are ready to participate. Hannity's relative indifference to his

'listener-bloggers' is met with acceptance, if not understanding. Elements of control exercised in the Hannity Forums create a restricted atmosphere, and include strong moderator supervision, censorship, and banning. The program is branded as Conservative, and these characteristics could be associated with conservative values. National Public Radio's discussion area sits in between *Hannity* and *Majority Report* on all of the above characteristics: there is a registration requirement but it is not as stringent as Hannity's. There is the potential to be censored or banned but it rarely happens. Participants seem to want to engage with *Talk of the Nation* and NPR more widely through the discussion area, and are disappointed that they cannot. The *TOTN* discussion area space does not possess the ideological fervor of the *Majority Report* or *Hannity Show* spaces, which may also contribute to these factors. In addition to these ideologically-derived factors, I am confident that differences of presentation and interaction in discussion areas are derived from, the tone of the associated programs, institutional practices, and attitudes toward audiences and technology. On the other hand, the ways in which participants make use of the spaces offered to them is rooted in their pre-existing attitudes toward technology, community and what they seek to gain from online interactions.

Further research attending to similar broadcast-online interactivities would do well to take into account institutional practices and community. This avenue of exploration will illuminate how broadcast media are adapting and making use of online applications and how various forms of community are bringing new attitudes to bear on media production. A more sophisticated appreciation for these relationships could contribute in a

meaningful way to broadcasters and other media producers who seek to better understand their audiences and their own role as providers of information and entertainment.

Thinking ahead to such a next step in this research, first I would want to know in more detail how participants experience the discussion areas they engage in as public space, private space, and community. This analysis has elaborated upon the idea that when audience members engage with one another through community, their voices can come together as a public, and are thereby amplified – but this insight could be exposed as merely an academic overlay if the audience members themselves do not agree. A vernacular and ethnographic analysis could yield greater insight into the structures and functions of discussion area communities. Secondly, what are individuals' motivations for their participation in discussion areas? Interviewees for this study have cited a desire to air or test opinions, to rant, to hone an argument, and to talk with others who share their worldview; media producers have yet to figure out how to capitalize on these motivations to make both their audience relationships and their products stronger. A third important question is whether the differences between discussion area styles and formats are rooted in ideological, technological, or institutional causes. Finally, further research should address how these new interactivities may influence the future of radio. Is *high-interactivity radio* a fluke, or the beginning of something larger?

As both radio producer and academic observer, I will attempt to address the last of these questions – though I make no claims to prognosticate. At the outset of this study in November 2004, *The Majority Report* offered the most successful and innovative use of a

discussion area by a broadcaster that I had witnessed. However, things change quickly and in the roughly half-year since I began, other broadcasters have begun to make movement in the direction of heightened interactivity as well.

National Public Radio plans to introduce a new version of its discussion boards at some future point, though for the time being they have suspended the development of new “community functions” until new staff are available to manage it, and have ceased promotion of the discussion area on the main NPR page (Michael Horn, personal email, 7/13/05). It remains to be seen what approach they will take when they do resume the development of their discussion area: will NPR advance the integration of their discussion boards into specific programs and their production, or will the changes further separate the broadcast and discussion experiences? In this transitional moment for NPR’s online services, the organization must seriously consider the job functions of producers and reporters; is it possible to mandate their participation in the discussion boards and their direct engagement with their listeners, or would that be seen within the institution as a breach of the separation between professional broadcasters/journalists and their audience? The answer to this last question will surely guide NPR as it navigates decisions about its discussion area.⁸⁴

On June 9, only a few weeks after the core interviews for this thesis were concluded, ABC Radio Networks announced a new service for subscribers to the Hannity Insider

⁸⁴ Further, National Public Radio faces important questions about its relationship with its member stations in terms of the development of community. Community is one of the strongest assets public broadcasters have – and local stations may not want their national entity to bleed community involvement – and by extension, funding – away from the local sites. This is an important question NPR will have to answer eventually.

service: the Hanniblog, which promises to enable “subscribers to exchange news and opinions directly with Sean Hannity and other listeners in the form of an Internet blog.”⁸⁵ Upon inspection of the Hanniblog⁸⁶ two weeks after its launch, it appears to function primarily as an article sorting and ranking service where Hannity Insider members can vote for stories that they feel should capture the host’s attention. An informational paragraph at the top of the Hanniblog page explains, “if you see a story that you think Sean should read, vote for it and once it receives enough points, it will appear on the home page (and Sean may read it over the air).” This is an example of an attempt at a much more directed and controlled interactivity than has been pursued in the *Hannity*, *Majority Report* or *TOTN* discussion areas. The number of paying subscribers to the Hannity Insider service that confers access to the Hanniblog is likely much smaller⁸⁷ than the 47,000 members of the free Hannity Forums, and it remains to be seen whether or not Sean Hannity’s listeners will participate in this interactive feature as enthusiastically as in the Hannity Forums.

As was illustrated by the concurrent development of *The Majority Report’s* radio program and blog, I would make the somewhat obvious assertion that the most progressive radio-online innovation is likely to occur within broadcast organizations that are poised to take risks and try something new. The *Sean Hannity Show’s* attempt to tightly control avenues of interaction and behavior among its online community members indicates it is not inclined to take large risks with its audience or to allow it to manage

⁸⁵ Announcement online at <http://www.radioink.com/HeadlineEntry.asp?hid=129121&pt=todaysnews>.

⁸⁶ In order to view the Hanniblog (<http://www.hannity.com/index/headlines-app>), one must be registered as a Hannity Insider.

⁸⁷ ABC Radio Networks was unable to disclose information on subscriber numbers for the Hannity Insider service.

itself. Similarly, National Public Radio has made little effort to integrate its discussion boards into programming and production, or to utilize its boards as a mechanism for listener feedback. To look at the future of radio-online interactivity with a critical eye, it is necessary to observe the processes by which broadcasters decide whether and how to invite their listeners into the studio. Among the new approaches to high-interactivity radio being undertaken by broadcasters in mid 2005, a new public radio program seeks to make blog radio, and to make radio blog.

Creating high-interactivity radio: the case of Open Source

In late May and early June 2005, I had the opportunity to sit in on story meetings and take part in the first week of production of a brand new public radio talk show called *Open Source*. Hosted by veteran Boston public radio host Christopher Lydon, the program is in a sense a revival of his popular former show, *The Connection* (1994-2001).⁸⁸ What purports to make *Open Source* unique, though, is its interaction with and active use of the blogosphere, as well as the use of its own blog as a voice in the show. A press release issued in spring 2005 outlined in optimistic terms a vision for true high-interactivity radio:

We expect to create a community online that can take part in the production process before during and after the program, helping us to surface new views and new voices. You could say that the radio program is just one broadcast hour from a mini network that is live 24/7. Open Source will also be a destination for bloggers and for people wanting just one place to go on the web to discover the best of the daily blogosphere.

⁸⁸ Since Lydon's departure from the program and station WBUR in 2001, *The Connection* has been hosted by Dick Gordon. In July 2005, though, WBUR announced that *The Connection* will cease broadcasting on August 5, 2005. Online at <http://www.wbur.org/inside/about/pressrelease050715.asp>.

Open Source will also be a blog of blogs, a “best of the Web” as well as a blog itself. (Lydon 2005)

The on-air show follows a classic talk format, in which there are one or two main guests who stay on the air for most if not all of the program, another one or two “call-outs,” or people pre-interviewed by the show’s producers who have points to contrast or support the main guests, and then as many phone calls from listeners as there is time for. What makes the hour-long show unique is that a core element of the program is to loop the program’s blog, found online at www.radioopensource.org, into every evening’s broadcast. This blog is *intended* as a production document, a transcript of comments made before, during and after broadcasts, and a source of conversation and insight to fold into the show. It is *hoped* to become a community.

At this writing, the *Open Source* blog is in its second incarnation, slightly more readable than its initial form as a WordPress blog ill-suited for the program’s goals. Through a partnership with Public Interactive, a Boston company that specializes in radio program websites, *Open Source* seeks to make the fusion of radio show website and radio blog feel intuitive to its listeners, bloggers, and casual visitors. In practice, the show has approached the press release’s goals but has been inconsistent in its methods. My fieldnotes from my week at *Open Source* are peppered with references to disagreements about the privileging of phone calls over blog comments for inclusion in the show as well as debates over how best to make use of the blogosphere for the purposes of the radio broadcast: one day the consensus was to each day telephone four bloggers after the morning story meeting to let them know about in-process program topics, and then see what the bloggers might have to add. The emphasis of *Open Source*’s blog surveying

would be on blogger-diarists, not high-profile bloggers like Daily Kos (Markos Moulitsas Zúniga) or Wonkette (Ana Marie Cox). On another day, when the team was scrambling for show ideas for the following week, the emphasis was on how blogs would distinguish the show: research was to be conducted making full use of blogs and podcasts; the show would sound different from any other show on public radio, and would not fall into the easy habit of routinely interviewing authors on book tours who would also be featured on programs like *All Things Considered*, *Morning Edition*, and *Fresh Air*. Instead, *Open Source* would seek to find people with compelling insights and stories who share them on their blogs, regardless of their off-blog activities and publications. Later in the week, though, the production emphasis moved away from finding bloggers who could be guests on the show. The right conversational niche for the program must be filled; if bloggers couldn't do it, non-bloggers would suffice, but it would still be preferable if they were found in research conducted on blogs.

Once the production team is in the studio, though, the emphasis changed from the blogosphere at large to the show's own blog, which ideally has helped the producers prepare for that evening's show through helpful comments made by *Open Source* bloggers in the days and hours preceding the broadcast. During my week with the show, the team decided how to categorize shows in production on the blog. "Warming up," "On deck," and "Aired" were selected to identify each show's current stage of development. As a show matures from raw idea to a fleshed-out plan for an hour's conversation, to a booked and scheduled show through its post-broadcast life, the category it is assigned to changes. The driving force behind the development of a show

idea is expected to be the producers and Lydon himself, but in an ideal scenario, *Open Source* bloggers as well as bloggers off-site will take the idea and develop it through editorializing, online discussion, and offering new resources to the producers. In this ideal scenario, the on-air one hour broadcast would be created through a collaborative process, bringing together traditional program development patterns and the participatory aesthetic of the web. Thus far this ideal has been partially realized; listeners are taking part in the *Open Source* blog and chiming in with their ideas before shows air, but the traffic is strikingly low. The program's "blogger-in-chief" Brendan Greeley pointed out to me that activity on the blog for a given show only picks up at a half hour into the show's broadcast – and not in the first half hour or before the show airs. Greeley's job is to provide the care and feeding of the blog – before, during and after each show. He provides the on-air voice of the blog: Lydon checks in for 'a report from the blog' once or twice each night, at which point Greeley, via a sportscaster's headset, quotes an insightful or provocative post, or synthesizes the general mood of the blog. Pickings so far are slim, though, as program comment threads average only a little more than 20 posts each:

Because we make it clear that we put blog comments on the air, I think people are just posting their best quotable stuff. I'm not sure what to do about this; I'm guessing I have to weigh in earlier and more often on the thread itself, during the show, to tease out a conversation. (Brendan Greeley, personal email, 6/27/05)

Listeners thus far have been alternately appreciative of the opportunity to participate in the development of the program, excited to contribute, confused by what they are asked to do, and skeptical of the overall concept. One listener vented frustrations on the blog:

I'm not sure I get the whole point of "open source" as a radio program. OK, you can send ideas and comments about the show. Yes, they weblog the show...and you can download it as an MP3 file podcast. But, in the end, it HAS to be a decent radio show! ... somehow Chris seems to have discovered cyberspace...and is now forcing it on everyone. I think the "open source" idea is good...but it can't overwhelm the entire process of a 'radio show.' (on-blog post, 6/1/05)

In the excitement of the first days, though, the mood in the studio and control room was much more sanguine. As early as the second evening on air, the potential for that "true high-interactivity radio" peeked through the logistical confusion and opaqueness of the blog: 45 seconds before air, the program's director checked out the activity on the blog and exclaimed, surprised, "the blog is actually getting people to log in and post comments that will get used and change the shape of the show!" A quarter hour into the broadcast, Lydon directly mentioned a blogger for the first time. At the half hour mark, Greeley issued a 'report from the blog,' and 15 minutes later the blogger whose question had been posed on the air complained on-blog that the guests didn't respond properly to his question. Another show that week featured Gordon Atkinson, AKA 'Real Live Preacher,' a minister who maintains an influential blog on his life as a preacher. In this show, the blog comments seemed to feed into the program with more ease, and Atkinson noticed. Four minutes after the end of the broadcast, he wrote on the blog, "thanks for having me. It was a wonderful experience. What a great idea to have the comments working like this during the show" (on-blog post, 6/1/05).

Even at such an early stage of this program's development, what we see here is a clear example of high-interactivity radio, though it is still in the process of defining itself, and is confronted by inherent tensions between the traditional centralized organization and

production of a radio show and the decentralized nature of contributions to blogs. It is also unclear at this point whether the editorial and audience investment benefits conferred by high-interactivity radio will be compelling enough for broadcasting institutions to continue to support it beyond the experimental stage. It is costly to pay producers to contribute to and monitor a program's discussion area – a duty that some broadcasters as well as listeners may still view as a distraction from the core job function of making a good radio program. The challenges *Open Source* will face as it continues to develop its on-air and online voice are illustrative of the complexities of hybridized radio and online media. This example of nascent high-interactivity radio can help focus the core questions of this research: 1) what role do radio-online discussion areas have in audience public-making, 2) in what ways do these online forums enable a sense of community, and 3) how does high-interactivity radio enable new listener experiences and relationships between producers and listeners?

What role do radio-online discussion areas have in audience public-making?

It is too early to know how many people tune in and log on to hear *Open Source*. These unknown numbers of people comprise the program's audience – when they call in, contribute to the blog, or even simply consider doing so because they have something to add to the conversation, they are taking a step toward becoming a public. Those listeners who participate in the program's burgeoning blog – even those listeners who just read the blog but do not post to it – are engaging in a community activity, acting as part of a group. As Daniel Dayan (2001) notes, “the idea of a public conveys not only the act of seeing but of being seen. Publics display their identity by ostensibly differentiating

themselves from other publics” (744). Participants in the *Open Source* blog, then, may or may not yet constitute a public – but as they become increasingly a discernable group with its own character, language, and normative values, they become more and more so. As of June 27, 2005, there are 575 people registered to post, and more than 660 posts on 89 threads. The proximity of these numbers of registered people and the number of posts indicates that there are likely a few people who post frequently, but many more who have registered but posted seldomly or not at all. A blog community has not sprung forth at *Open Source* as quickly as it did at *The Majority Report*, but *Open Source*’s launch was heralded with much less fanfare and is carried on fewer radio stations than *The Majority Report* was at its launch. I would suggest that another contributing factor is that *Open Source* requires participants to register and submit personal information before they can post, while *The Majority Report* does not.

In what ways do these online forums enable a sense of community?

The first broadcast of *Open Source* ran parallel to a thread on the blog, populated mostly by former Christopher Lydon listeners who were delighted he was back on the air. Some of them knew each other from off-line life, from calls to *The Connection*, or from the message boards on Lydon’s website, where many exiled Lydon listeners found refuge after he left *The Connection* in 2001. Blog manager Brendan Greeley notes “a conversation hasn’t yet emerged” (personal email, 6/27/05) on the *Open Source* blog, which would seem to indicate that there is not yet a sense of community developed through use of the blog as a forum for intra-audience engagement. *Open Source*’s focus on getting the show’s bloggers to post to the blog during such a short window (one hour)

may in the end hamstring their efforts to foster a community there. Instead, the trend that seems to be developing is one of more dispersed community: the show's bloggers sustain a low level of activity in the second half of the show, and after the broadcast has ended and the podcast and textual show summary have been posted, the blogosphere takes the show and runs with it. Greeley cautiously observed:

A couple of bloggers have started copying and pasting our pre-digested quotes from the shows. ... People are more likely to blog about something they can quote from, and more likely to quote if the quotes are provided for them, right there on the page. (personal email, 6/27/05)

If this trend continues, the *Open Source* blog may serve more as a launchpad to the greater blogosphere than as a collaborative pre-production forum or as a community itself – the show's blog may play a part in getting *Open Source* content out into the world, to be then digested by the wider blogosphere. Perhaps bloggers just don't want to be channeled.

How does high-interactivity radio enable new listener experiences and relationships between producers and listeners?

The phenomenon of being asked to participate in the production process, and evidently even the broadcast itself, remains novel enough that bloggers whose material and/or voice gets used in the *Open Source* broadcast are giddy from the experience. One blogger listening to the June 1st show called in as well as posted to the blog several times. After he finished his call, he posted breathlessly, “wow, so much for my radio background... I think I just about passed out...” (on-blog post, 6/1/05). Chapter four examined the various attitudes listeners in *The Majority Report's*, the *Sean Hannity Show's*, and *Talk of the Nation's* discussion areas had towards interacting with their

respective radio program. The marked contrast among the three groups would seem to indicate that such differences are in part derived from the online space itself. If this is indeed the case, *Open Source*'s blog should similarly enable a specific set of experiences for its users. Given the low number (about 20) of average posts per thread, the chances of one's comments being read on air are high, and so the incentive to create insightful posts is high. One recurrent theme on *Open Source*'s blog threads has been that of improvement of the blog itself; the blog is unclear and poorly formatted, and its users know it. They make suggestions for improvements graciously, correctly acknowledging that the *Open Source* crew is probably in the midst of planning a redesign. It is too early in this program's development to observe the new styles of relationships the blog will enable between its listeners and producers, but thus far this online space hosts courteous and substantive discussion and interaction among both listeners and producers – each producer of the show participates in the blog, though not every day, and they address specifically the suggestions and ideas offered by listeners. For example, after several bloggers had made suggestions for improvements to the blog, producer Katherine Bidwell responded, describing what the new version of the site would offer:

I think you'll find that most of your good suggestions will have been addressed, and if not, there will be a clear place to post ongoing recommendations. The new site will indeed be a kind of "portal" that will make navigation much more straightforward; but it will retain lots of the best elements of the blog. Let us know what you think once the new site is up. ("Katherine," on-blog post, 6/24/05)

It is possible – I might even suggest likely – that the courteous discussions found on the *Open Source* blog are tied to the registration procedures, the low attendance, and also to the courteous audience inherited from *The Connection*. If the number of active participants in each thread were to increase, it is likely that the quality of the conversation

would diminish. Additionally, as more people post to the *Open Source* blog, the opportunity for audience-to-audience interaction will increase. With more opportunity to talk with one another and less emphasis on vertical interaction, this may lead to a decreased sense of a need for civility and content-rich posts. As *Open Source*'s producers try to find the most effective balance between blog management and the encouragement of a vibrant community, it will be illuminating to see if the patterns found in the *Majority Report*, *Sean Hannity Show*, and *Talk of the Nation* discussion areas are repeated. I invite readers to visit the online spaces of the three above programs as well as that of *Open Source*,⁸⁹ explore the discussion areas and see if what has been noted in this thesis still holds or if it has changed. As with all things Internet, statements of a status quo hold true for only a few months, if not weeks or days.

Looking ahead

My desires for the impact of this study are two-fold. First, that this exploration of radio-online interactivities among radio listeners and broadcasters proves helpful to radio listeners in thinking in new ways about their listening practices; and second, that it assists radio broadcasters as they develop new and innovative ways to engage their audiences that take advantage of interactivities enabled by the Internet. I hope that the comparison of three programs from three different ideological points of view as well as three distinct

⁸⁹ *The Majority Report*: www.majorityreportradio.com
Sean Hannity Show: www.hannity.com/
Hannity Forums: www.hannity.com/forum/
Talk of the Nation: www.npr.org/templates/rundowns/rundown.php?prgId=5
NPR's Your Turn Discussions: www.npr.org/yourturn/
Open Source: www.radioopensource.org

sectors of the radio market is not lost on the readers of this thesis, especially those who work in broadcasting. Too often we do not look beyond our immediate colleagues and industry sectors – public broadcasters look to see what other public broadcasters are doing, and AM talk radio professionals compare themselves to others in AM talk radio – where instead, especially at such a moment of technological experimentation, we should be looking beyond our immediate professional surroundings to find out who the innovators are in the larger field. I am concerned that such a lack of curiosity will hamper innovation, or at least result in the proverbial reinvention of the wheel, many times over. For example, when I first met with the producers of *Open Source*, none of the producers knew about the innovations undertaken by *The Majority Report* on its blog. As radio broadcasters think about how to enhance their online presence in meaningful ways that not only support the broadcast or provide an extension of it, but instead offer unique and parallel experiences, they can learn from the experiences of others.

Examples of radio-online interactivities employed in this research have varied from early broadcaster brochureware through current and innovative high-interactivity radio; each case is nevertheless the most forward-thinking implementation its organization had yet employed at the time of its launch, and so is therefore progressive within the contexts of their respective broadcasting institutions. High-interactivity radio's potential for both broadcasters and audiences/publics is great, and it is in this hybridization of media that I believe the future direction of talk radio may be found. The inescapable reality is that radio-online discussion area interactivities are changing how radio producers view their

audiences, how audiences view broadcasters, and, perhaps most importantly and with the greatest impact on the future of these media, how audiences view themselves.

References

- Anderson, Benedict. (1991) *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Revised and extended edition. London: Verso.
- Appadurai, Arjun. (1996) *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Askew, Kelly & Richard R. Wilk, eds. (2002) *The Anthropology of Media*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Baxandall, Michael. (1999) "Des problèmes de reception," in Gervereau, Laurent (ed.), *Peut-on apprendre à voir?* Paris: École Nationale Supérieure des beaux Arts, as cited in Dayan, Daniel. (2001). "The peculiar public of television," in *Media, Culture & Society*, 23: pp. 751-773.
- Baym, Nancy K. (1995) "The Emergence of Community in Computer-Mediated Communication," in Jones, Steven G., ed. (1995) *Cybersociety: Computer-Mediated Communication and Community*, pp. 138-163. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Baym, Nancy K. (2000) *Tune In, Log On: Soaps, Fandom, and Online Community*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Bijker, Wiebe E. (1995) *Of Bicycles, Bakelites and Bulbs: Toward a Theory of Sociotechnical Change*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Bijker, Wiebe E. & John Law, eds. (1992) *Shaping Technology/Building Society: Studies in Sociotechnical Change*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Bijker, Wiebe E., Thomas P. Hughes, & Trevor J. Pinch, eds. (1987) *The Social Construction of Technological Systems: New Directions in the Sociology and History of Technology*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Boczkowski, Pablo J. (2002) "The Development and Use of Online Newspapers: What Research Tells Us and What We Might Want to Know," in *The Handbook of New Media: Social Shaping and Consequences of ICTs*, pp. 270-286. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.
- Boczkowski, Pablo J. (2004) *Digitizing the News: Innovation in Online Newspapers*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- Campbell, John. (2004) *Getting It On Online: Cyberspace, Gay Male Sexuality, and Embodied Identity*. Binghamton, NY: The Harrington Park Press.

- Chan, Anita J. (2002) *Collaborative News Networks: Distributed Editing, Collective Action, and the Construction of Online News on Slashdot.org*. Cambridge, MA: unpublished thesis.
- Clifford, James. (1986) *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Clifford, James, & George E. Marcus, eds. (1986) *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Berkeley, CA: The University of California Press.
- D., Michael. (2004) "Air America Pulls HUGE Ratings: NYC, Portland, More," *Daily Koz*. Posted on May 26, 2004 to <http://www.dailykos.com/story/2004/5/26/20140/1831>.
- Dayan, Daniel. (2001) "The peculiar public of television," in *Media, Culture & Society*, 23: pp. 751-773.
- Dayan, Daniel. (2005) "Mothers, Midwives and Abortionists: Genealogy, Obstetrics, Audiences & Publics," in Livingstone, Sonia (ed.), *Audiences and Publics: When cultural engagement matters for the public sphere*, pp. 39-72. Portland, OR: Intellect Books (pre-publication galley).
- Dayan, Daniel & Elihu Katz. (1992) *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Delanty, Gerard. (2002) "Two Conceptions of Cultural Citizenship: A Review of Recent Literature on Culture and Citizenship," in *The Global Review of Ethnopolitics*, 1(3): pp. 60-66.
- Douglas, Susan J. (1987) *Inventing American Broadcasting 1899-1922*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Douglas, Susan J. (2004) *Listening In: Radio and the American Imagination*. New York: Times Books.
- Drotner, Kirsten. (2005) "Media On the Move: Personalised Media and the Transformation of Publicness," in Livingstone, Sonia (ed.), *Audiences and Publics: When cultural engagement matters for the public sphere*, pp. 183-208. Portland, OR: Intellect Books (pre-publication galley).
- Durkheim, Emile. (1964) *The Division of Labor In Society*. New York: The Free Press.
- Fischer, Claude S. (1982) *To Dwell Among Friends: Personal Networks in Town and City*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- Foucault, Michel. (1978) *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Gard, Lauren. (2004) "The Business of Blogging," *BusinessWeek online*. December 13, 2004. Online at http://businessweek.com/magazine/content/04_50/b3912115_mz016.htm.
- Gauntlett, David, ed. (2000) *Web.Studies: Rewiring Media Studies for the Digital Age*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Ginsburg, Faye D., Lila Abu-Lughod, & Brian Larkin, eds. (2002) *Media Worlds: anthropology on new terrain*. Los Angeles: University of California Press
- Gladwell, Malcolm. (2000) *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company.
- Greenwald, Jeff. (1993) "WIRED Wonders," *WIRED*. December, 1993, 1(6). Online at <http://wired-vig.wired.com/wired/archive/1.06/>.
- Gusterson, Hugh. (1997) "Studying Up Revisited," in *Political and Legal Anthropology Review*, 20(1): pp. 114-119.
- Habermas, Jürgen. (1989) *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Hall, Stuart. (1992) "Encoding/decoding," in Hall, Stuart, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe and Paul Willis (eds.), *Culture, Media, Language*, pp. 128-138. New York: Routledge.
- Hall, Stuart, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe & Paul Willis, eds. (1992) *Culture, Media, Language*. New York: Routledge.
- Hartley, John. (2002) *Communication, Cultural and Media Studies: The Key Concepts* (3rd ed.). New York: Routledge.
- Hayles, N. Katherine. (1997) "The Condition of Virtuality," in Masten, Jeffrey, Peter Stallybrass & Nancy J. Vickers (eds.), *Language Machines: Technologies of Literary and Cultural Production*. New York: Routledge.
- Hazen, Don. (2005) "Tune In," *Alternet*. March 31, 2005. Online at <http://www.alternet.org/mediaculture/21642/>.
- Heck, Marina Camargo. (1992) "The ideological dimension of media messages," in Hall, Stuart, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe and Paul Willis (eds.), *Culture, Media, Language*, pp. 122-127. New York: Routledge.
- Hine, Christine. (2000) *Virtual Ethnography*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

- Ho, A. Kitman (producer), Pressman, Edward R. (producer) & Stone, Oliver (director). (1988) *Talk Radio* [motion picture]. United States: Universal Pictures.
- Holmes, Douglas R. & George E. Marcus. (2006) "Fast Capitalism: Para-Ethnography and the rise of the Symbolic Analyst," in Fisher, Melissa and Gary Downey (eds.), *New Frontiers of Capital*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Jenkins, Henry & David Thorburn, eds. (2003) *Democracy and New Media*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Jones, Steven G., ed. (1995) *Cybersociety: Computer-Mediated Communication and Community*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Jones, Steven G. (1995) "Introduction: From Where to Who Knows?," in Jones, Steven G. (ed.) *Cybersociety: Computer-Mediated Communication and Community*, pp. 1-9. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Kendall, Lori. (2002) *Hanging Out In the Virtual Pub: Masculinities and Relationships Online*. Berkeley, CA: Regents of the University of California.
- Kolko, Beth E., ed. (2003) *Virtual Publics: Policy and Community in an Electronic Age*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Komito, Lee. (1998) "The Net as a Foraging Society: Flexible Communities," in *The Information Society*, 14: pp. 97-106.
- Komito, Lee. (1999) "Virtual Communities: paradise or mirage?" Paper presented at Washington, DC: Communitarian Summit, February 27-28, 1999.
- Kovach, Bill & Tom Rosenstiel. (2001) *The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect*. New York: Crown Publishers.
- Livingstone, Sonia. (2005) "On the relation between audiences and publics," in Livingstone, Sonia (ed.), *Audiences and Publics: When cultural engagement matters for the public sphere*, pp. 13-38. Portland, OR: Intellect Books (pre-publication galley).
- Livingstone, Sonia, ed. (2005) *Audiences and Publics: When cultural engagement matters for the public sphere*. Portland, OR: Intellect Books (pre-publication galley).
- Lydon, Christopher. (2005) "OS in brief." Cambridge, MA: Press release.
- Lysloff, Rene T. A. (2003) "Musical Community on the Internet: An On-Line Ethnography," in *Cultural Anthropology*, 18(2): pp. 233-263.

- Marcus, George E. & Michael M. J. Fischer (1986) *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Miller, Daniel & Don Slater. (2002) "Relationships," in Kelly Askew & Richard R. Wilk (eds.), *The Anthropology of Media*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, pp. 187-209.
- Mindich, David T.Z. (1998) *Just the Facts: How "Objectivity" Came to Define American Journalism*. New York: New York University Press.
- Morley, David. (1992) "Texts, readers, subjects," in Hall, Stuart, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe & Paul Willis (eds.), *Culture, Media, Language*, pp. 162-173. New York: Routledge.
- Munson, Wayne. (1993) *All Talk: the Talkshow in Media Culture*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Nelson, Alondra & Thuy Linh N. Tu, eds. (2001) *Technicolor: Race, Technology and Everyday Life*. New York: New York University Press.
- Nguyen, Mimi. (2001) "Tales of an Asiatic Geek Girl: *Slant* from Paper to Pixels," in Nelson, Alondra & Thuy Linh N. Tu (eds.), *Technicolor: Race, Technology and Everyday Life*, pp. 177-190. New York: New York University Press.
- Ortner, Sherry B. (1999) "Generation X: Anthropology in a Media Saturated World," in Marcus, George E. (ed.), *Critical Anthropology Now: Unexpected Contexts, Shifting Constituencies, Changing Agendas*. Santa Fe: School of American Research Press.
- Putnam, Robert D. (2000) *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Rahner, Mark. (2004) "Liberal Radio Joins the Bray," *Seattle Times* 12/16/04. Online at http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/html/artsentertainment/2002120799_liberalradio16.html.
- Rainie, Lee. (2005) "The State of Blogging," a Technology & Media Use Report by the Pew Internet & American Life Project. Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, January 5, 2005. Online at http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_blogging_data.pdf.
- Rheingold, Howard. (2000) *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

- Rybak, Deborah Caulfield. (2004) "A bumpy takeoff for Air America liberal radio network," *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, May 15 2004.
- Ryfe, David Michael. (2001) "From media audience to media public: a study of letters written in reaction to FDR's fireside chats," in *Media, Culture & Society*, 23: pp. 767-781.
- Scott, Esther. (2004) "*Big Media*" Meets the "Bloggers": Coverage of Trent Lott's Remarks at Strom Thurmond's Birthday Party. Cambridge, MA: The Presidents and Fellows of Harvard College.
- Seybold, Patricia B. with Ronni T. Marshak. (1998) *Customers.com: How to Create a Profitable Business Strategy for the Internet and Beyond*. New York: Times Books/Patricia Seybold Group.
- Silver, David. (2000) "Looking Backwards, Looking Forward, Cyberculture Studies 1990-2000," in David Gauntlett (ed.), *Web.Studies: Rewiring Media Studies for the Digital Age*, pp.19-30. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Silver, David. (2004) "Internet/Cyberculture/Digital Culture/New Media/Fill-in-the-Blank Studies," in *New Media and Society*, 6(1): pp. 55-64.
- Smith, Marc A. & Peter Kollock, eds. (1999) *Communities in Cyberspace*. New York: Routledge.
- Smith, Mark K. (2001) "Community – a review of the theory," in the *Encyclopedia of Informal Education*. Last updated January 28, 2005. Online at <http://www.infed.org/community/community.htm>.
- Sorlin, Pierre. (1992) "Le Mirage du public," in *Revue d'Histoire Moderne et Contemporaine* 39: pp. 86-102, as cited in Dayan, Daniel. (2001). "The peculiar public of television," in *Media, Culture & Society*, 23: pp. 751-773.
- Talkers Magazine. (2004) "The Talk Radio Research Project." Springfield, MA: Focus Communications, Inc., 2004. Online at <http://www.talkers.com/talkaud.html>.
- Tönnies, Ferdinand (1955). *Community and Organization*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul. (Original work published 1887)
- Tocqueville, Alexis de. (1956) *Democracy in America*. Richard D. Heffner, ed. New York: Penguin. (Original work published 1835)
- Tucker, Ken. (2004) "Air Head," *Billboard Radio Monitor*, December 10, 2004.
- Turkle, Sherry. (1997) *Life On the Screen – Identity in the Age of the Internet*. New York: Touchstone.

- van Dijk, Teun A. (1985) "Structures of news in the press," in van Dijk (ed.), *Discourse and Communication: New Approaches to the Analyses of Mass Media Discourse and Communication*, pp. 69-93. New York: Walter de Gruyter.
- van Dijk, Teun A. (1995) "Power and the News Media," in D. Paletz (ed.), *Political Communication and Action*, pp. 9-36. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Wellman, Barry, ed. (1999) *Networks in the Global Village: Life in Contemporary Communities*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Wellman, Barry. (2004) "The three ages of internet studies: ten, five and zero years ago," in *New Media and Society*, 6(1): pp. 123-129.
- Wellman, Barry & Milena Gulia. (1999) "Virtual communities as communities – Net surfers don't ride alone," in Smith, Marc A. and Peter Kollock, (eds.), *Communities in Cyberspace*. New York: Routledge.
- Wenger, Etienne. (1998) *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Williams, Robin & David Edge. (1996) "The Social Shaping of Technology," in *Research Policy*, 25: pp. 856-899.
- Winner, Langdon. (1986) *The Whale and the Reactor: A Search for Limits in an Age of High Technology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.