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THE INTERACTIVE AUDIENCE: A RADIO EXPERIMENT IN COMMUNITY-BUILDING

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Abstract

The internet has provided us with a global laboratory to watch community-building in action. However, its role in the virtual universe is one that the more humble radio has had at the local community level since its inception. As soon as one-to-one communication gave way to one-to-many broadcasting, community-building began, based on the shared listening experience — ranging from families gathering around the wireless to local or national audiences tuning in simultaneously. Talkback made radio interactive by bringing the listener into the program, but it also gave program-makers the chance to gain first-hand experience of who was actually out there. This paper describes a radio talkback experiment which unexpectedly exposed the power of the relationship audiences can build with radio. Based on a ‘can you help’ formula, the program found passionate drivers within its audience members to belong, to bond, and to do good works that contribute to the social good.

The interactive audience: a radio experiment in community- building

In the hustle and bustle of the internet age, people are being transfixed by the razzle and dazzle of new media and communication technologies and by the amazing global networking powers of the web. The hectic building of online communities is progressing faster than anyone can keep up with, and the older media are waiting on the sidelines wondering what the future holds for them. Radio, without the glamour of moving images and the durability of print, has always been the least obtrusive medium, while firmly and insidiously hooked into the pattern of our daily lives (Lewis, 2000: 161). However, it was the broadcast medium which invented audience interactivity when telephony was joined with broadcasting technology and the first talkback caller was put to air — as early as 1925 in Australia (Gould, 2004: 3) though, according to Ward (2002: 22), the authorised broadcasting of talkback dates from 1967.

Talkback opened up a new format for radio, allowing it to forge direct links with what had otherwise been an assumed and voiceless community of listeners. The interactive model added ‘pull’ to ‘push’, allowing stations to hear from the listeners they were actually succeeding in attracting. Even given the fact that it takes a certain type of person to call in, thereby skewing the sample somewhat, the presence of real living people gave program-makers some substance on which to base the notorious and non-specific ‘gut feeling’ on which their programming decisions were based (see Tebbutt, 2006: 97). They could pick up cues and clues about what made the audience tick from the responses they received when they opened the lines. This would inevitably feed back into future program ideas.

It was this sort of process that led to an audience experiment on Perth local ABC radio in the mid-1990s. Program-makers noticed how eager listeners were whenever they were asked for information. Any open-ended question, whether it be on the correct use of grammar, or the name of the star of a particular film, or the title of a favourite children's book from long ago, made the lines run hot with listeners eager to proffer the information. The response was particularly strong if they were asked for their help — with news about any trouble on the roads, the search for a lost pet, or their memories of a long-forgotten piece of local history. The producers noticed that the listeners who called in appeared to derive a sense of personal satisfaction from providing a service to the community. It seemed from the response that the program might be not just a purveyor of content but a focal point for a listener network. What would happen if a station tried to activate this network? What kind of community would emerge and how far would its tentacles reach? An experiment that would actively test radio's community building and networking powers — through a kind of radio Chinese whispers — could offer a tantalising opportunity to test the station's range and reach in a qualitative way. Hence the idea of *Grapevine* was born.

Grapevine started off as a half-hour talkback segment in the afternoon program — it was later increased to an hour as a result of audience pressure. It was built around the idea of listeners' requests for help and, while the agenda was left open, there was one firm ground rule: no money would change hands. The segment ran for four years from 1995 to 1998. The rest of this paper examines the program from a range of perspectives drawing on the archive of listeners' letters and interviews with the program team.¹

The radio listener

Radio listening is perceived as an essentially private pastime. While it certainly started out in the early days of radio as a form of group entertainment for the family whose members gathered around the wireless in the living room, it has become more of an individual activity as the technology has become smaller and more portable (see Moores, 1993: 82–88). While the audience may be perceived as a mass entity, it comprises individual listeners who are experiencing the program on their own. Each accesses the program according to their daily routine and relates to both program and presenter in their own unique way. In the words of Adams and Burton: 'People use radio to regulate their lives. They literally set their clocks by it, use it to pace their day. So familiar voices become as comfortable as old slippers.' (1997: 15) The advent of talkback changed the dynamics of the radio program since it enabled listeners to be brought into the program and become performers themselves. Instead of being an anonymous mass of silent eavesdroppers, they were shown to have real voices and personalities.

The power of the telephone

We take the telephone almost as much for granted as we do the radio, and it is easy to overlook just how we communicate with each other when we use it. Studies done in the early 1990s on the use of the telephone found that men and women tended to use it differently (Moyal 1989, 1992; Cox and Leonard, 1993). What for men was largely a business tool was for women a powerful instrument for relationship-building. Part of the appeal of the telephone for women was that it was easily accessible, even when the speaker was confined to one particular place. Also as a voice-only medium, it uniquely blended intimacy and anonymity (Cox and Leonard, 1993: 20).

Once radio appropriated the telephone through the talkback format, it also appropriated some of the characteristics of that medium. It makes the radio program accessible: anyone can pick up their phone

and dial straight in to the station. Like the private conversation, the on-air conversation replicates the intimacy of one-on-one communication, even while being ‘designed to be heard by absent audiences’ (Scannell, 1991: 1). Talkback uses the same patterns and conventions of everyday talk to recreate ‘the norms of social, sociable daily life’ in a public sphere from which many of the callers may feel they are usually excluded (Scannell, 1996: 172) — exemplifying what Scannell calls radio’s ‘*sociable dimension*’ (1996: 4). For Scannell, sociability is the lure to get the audience in, and talkback radio does have particular appeal for those who are ‘less socially interactive and less mobile’ (Armstrong and Rubin, 1989: 91).

The telephone also has a community-building role. Cox and Leonard (1993) describe the networks formed through the telephone as ‘a peer support self help model’ where the connections via telephone are ‘contact points for people sharing problems or situations which give those connected a sense of community, and therefore reduce isolation’ (1993: 20). Talkback, through the telephone, also builds a community — in this case, a community of listeners who share an experience based on a common attraction to the program content, one of Moores’ ‘ritual practices which enable us to imagine ourselves as part of a social collectivity that shares in the same anonymous, simultaneous activity’ (Moores, 1993: 87).

The two dimensions of talkback — sociability and community-building — put audiences in different relationships with the program-makers. Talkback callers are a special breed of listeners who are prepared to shift from ‘passive involvement’ to ‘active participation’ (Armstrong and Rubin, 1989: 91). This makes them captive to the program producers. By becoming participants, they have to behave in accordance with the program’s conventions: ‘Access to the public culture of the studio is open to all and voluntary. But once that domain is entered audience members must measure up to institutional expectations.’ (Scannell, 1996:141)

The price of access for the listeners is an acceptance that they will be used to underscore and reinforce the program format. However, as Scannell notes (1996: 23), in reality broadcasters have no control over their audiences, and this becomes evident once audiences perceive themselves as a community. They now identify with each other through the program and evolve from non-specified ‘regular listeners’ into a concrete fan-base. The most extreme example is the network of ‘dittoheads’ who follow the radio program of American radio shock jock Russ Limbaugh. The ‘dittoheads’ get their name from their passionate adherence to the views of the presenter (Laufer, 1995: 58). Becoming a fan is an act of empowerment in itself (see Grossberg, 1992) and once the audience becomes conscious of its program-linked identity, it is a short step for it to turn itself into what Fiske calls ‘a productive community’ which ‘turns the text into an event’ (Fiske, 1992: 40). Abrahamson’s (1966) description of the process of community-building applies very well to this situation. He describes the different stages of community building as:

- 1 *socialisation*: ‘the development of a self-concept as a group member’ (1992: 89–90);
- 2 *initiation*: ‘some kind of formal ritual associated with the acceptance of an individual into the group’ (1992: 112);
- 3 the process by which members “learn the ways” of the group and come to transfer their identities to the group’ (1992: 116);
- 4 definition of the boundaries of the group through the identification of what represents deviant behaviour (1992: 132).

Abrahamson sees community-building as driven by what he terms the ‘sociability drive’ (1992: 143) — the desire to link with others as an alternative to being alone. As Turner et al. (2006) note, talkback appears to bring similar social benefits:

in most cases callers are not participating in order to present a political position. Rather ... they are more likely to be calling in order to provide information from their own experience as a contribution to a conversation which is itself the public good they wish to support. (2006: 117)

Grapevine was totally dependent on listener-generated content and the telephone was essential for audience involvement. However, the capturing of the audience would be the result of a self-conscious production process that covered all aspects of the program including on-air style and content selection.

On-air style

As already mentioned, the *Grapevine* format was deliberately chosen by the station as a means of testing the limits of its audience. It was therefore an interactive live talkback self-help segment that encouraged listeners to interact not only with the program but also with each other as they exchanged goods and information. Audience capture is not just about format: it is also about the mode of interpersonal communication that prompts an audience reaction — what Tebbutt calls the ‘affect’ which makes the program a ‘galvanic apparatus’ (2006: 98). While Tebbutt’s focus is on the polarising political talkback of the shock jocks, the techniques of audience galvanisation are deployed no less deliberately in more benign formats. For the *Grapevine* concept to succeed, it was up to the program team to create the right environment and for this the selection of the presenter was key. As Ytreberg (2004) notes: ‘The host in many ways is the format. He or she embodies the format’s norms of performance and interaction.’ (2004: 685) The on-air team consisted of the regular afternoon show host who was joined for this segment by a co-presenter. The co-presenter was, in fact, the associate producer who administered *Grapevine* off-air, managing the database, answering listeners’ letters and telephone messages, and being the main point of contact for the public. The male afternoon show host was well known as a radio and television newsreader, but the afternoon program had shown him in a different guise — exploiting his warm and laidback style. In this, he went against type in a genre dominated by what Lewis has described as ‘aggressive masculinity’ (1992: 85; see also Ward, 2002). There were two co-presenters during the life of the segment, both of them women who were confident and mature, acting as a foil for the main presenter and becoming personalities themselves through their direct exposure to the audience. In fact, listener familiarity was all the greater because the co-presenters were the ones they dealt with directly off air.

The on-air style was relaxed, conversational and spontaneous, with a lot of humorous banter. As Scannell notes, in talkback the producers are ‘an unobtrusive institutional organizing presence’ (1996: 18), whose job it is to control and manage the talkback event. The callers, on the other hand, ‘dial into a public discourse and taking part requires that they adapt to its requirements and conventions’ (1996: 140). The presenters’ aim was to create a welcoming, non-threatening environment which would encourage anyone else to join in, and in their on-air behaviour they mimicked the type, tone and tenor of the exchanges they hoped to elicit from the listeners.

The response surprised the program team and presented them with particular challenges. They found they were often dealing with human emotions which they somehow had to manage on air, treading the fine line between professional detachment and engagement:

Presenter: At first I was very cautious and scared by too much display of emotion and I was thinking this could be cringe-making, this could be really embarrassing — and then you'd have to go with it, you can't shut people up. But after a while you'd realise, no, it's OK, your comfort zone, your safety zone would expand and as it did so the audience would feel more confident about talking more openly about what was happening.

The presenter was aware of the skills he needed to employ to avoid the program becoming too saccharine or sentimental:

Presenter: In the wrong hands with the wrong sort of presenter it could get very icky very quickly — you had to keep it bright and light and move quickly through sentimental stuff, acknowledge it, but not get hung up on it.

Content selection

The program content was built around the listeners' calls and letters. Talkback is not the low-maintenance format it would appear to be — in order to work, it requires careful management (Phillips and Lindgren, 2006: 130–31). Call-vetting is essential in ensuring the right topic mix and tone. As Munson notes:

One radio industry consultant considers each call-in the equivalent of a record on a music station's playlist: like a record, it must be carefully selected so as not to 'turn off' the listeners. The caller thus becomes a commodity, a product that must suit listeners and the station defines them. (1993: 47)

Thus the 'unobtrusive institutional organising presence' was in evidence here as well, as an editorial selection process determined what would be put to air.

Producer: That's why we didn't do things like crockery, your dinner service, because there were no stories attached to that — six of your dinner plates have been broken and you want to replace them — that's not interesting, whereas trying to get some outlandish thing that people did want [was of interest].

Also there had to be a protocol for who would be put to air — for example dealing with 'regulars':

Producer: Because of this community, this *Grapevine* network, you had to be careful not to have the same old voices on every day to make it embracing. It's not an exclusive community.

Presenter: You had to be very strict with some people and say, look, you are not coming on today, in fact you are not coming on again this week, go away and keep listening. Most of them appreciated and accepted that.

The letters to be read out were those that had the most interesting, entertaining or intriguing stories attached to them. Likewise, the live callers who were put to air were vetted to ensure their requests were a varied mix.

In addition to the subtle protocols governing the nature of the on-air discourse, there were quite explicit rules about the operation of the *Grapevine* itself. It was first and foremost a non-commercial, not-for-profit volunteer venture. The aim was to activate a self-help network in which no money would change hands. This restriction gave the program an implied set of values built around the concept of social benefit. The idea of doing a good turn was a strong driver for the audience:

Producer: We had people giving away fully functioning cars that had become superfluous to their actual needs, and more than wishing to get some hundreds of dollars for them it was more important to them to feel it was placed and valued and appropriate to somebody in need, and almost always the rider would be: ‘Yes I could sell it through the small ads but I’d like it to go to somebody who really needs it.’

The requests often promoted further community participation:

Producer: It was lovely to see different levels. If someone desperately needed a fridge, summer coming on, and they’re in a small unit with a baby and they needed to keep food fresh, someone a million suburbs away has a fridge they could spare and a third person will say I’ll transport it for you — and that generosity — you could say with utter confidence it doesn’t matter if you’re in Mandurah and the fridge is in Wanneroo, somebody will do it for you, somebody will bring it, and that somebody always came through — generally with more offers of help than were needed.

More than anything, the program provided unexpected insights into people’s lives:

Presenter: While you were doing concrete goods-swapping with the stories attached, then somebody would come on trying to track down a family member who they hadn’t seen for 50 years and what had happened to that family and you would just move on to another plane of human connection and human feeling.

The program-makers noticed the impact on listeners. For some, it reduced their sense of isolation:

Presenter: Some people found meaning in their lives from the *Grapevine*, people isolated in their homes. I think it gave them a sense of purpose.

It gave others a public voice:

Presenter: Some of the most interesting moments we had were with children — tiny little kids sometimes, or people who were old or possibly with reduced intellectual capacities of one sort or another, or people with English as a second language — that range of people who you don’t think of as being good radio talent — and they were the people who gave us the most moving experiences for everyone concerned.

From ‘listener’ to ‘community’

Despite a conscious production process being employed, the producers soon found themselves in charge of an operation that was not totally under their control. The response to the program soon overwhelmed them. The job of administering the network, which was initially conceived of as a part-time production role, soon expanded into a full-time role to cope with the listener response. Letters and phone messages had to be answered. Incoming requests needed to be filed and tracked. Requests suitable for inclusion in the program had to be extracted.

In addition to the administrative load, the presenters found themselves at the centre of a fan club which demonstrated all the characteristics of Abrahamson’s community noted above. The listeners developed a sense of themselves as members of a group, referring to themselves as ‘grapiers’. Their initiation happened with their first call to the program when they announced themselves as new members. Once initiated, they were expected to observe the rules, and transgressors were soon hauled into line

Presenter: People reacted very positively and they understood quickly when we said: ‘No, we’re not going to sell anything — what you do off air is your own business, but we’re not here to sell and we’re not here to make a profit, we’re here to help each other.’

The ‘sociability drive’ was so powerful that the program found itself acting as a community switchboard, with listeners using it as an intermediary to get in touch with each other — even months after the program actually finished on air.

Presenter: People are still ringing up now, ringing me at home, months after the program’s finished, last Sunday, half past eight at night, I got a woman ringing me up wanting the phone number of Reg so that she could get rid of some computer.

Some listeners turned an initial contact into a more enduring friendship:

Producer: There’ll be lots of stories of people looking for obscure parts of sewing machines and what have you, getting what they wanted and finding that it came from the person three doors down and they had been living in the same street for 20 years and had never spoken. And they would report to us that they now had a friendship. That it would continue from that, and because geography allowed it, it then became the basis of a real relationship

Who were the grapiers?

The people who joined the *Grapevine* on air were many and varied, but the only lasting evidence is the letters archive, which was maintained throughout the life of the program (ABC, 1995–98). It reveals a rich tapestry of lives and experiences made all the more vivid by the photographs, paintings, drawings, poems and personal stories that are often attached. The program appeared to open up a wellspring, and listeners exploited the line of communication even to the extent of sending in postcards when they were on holiday in various parts of the world. As powerfully as the voice, the writing style and penmanship reveal much about the letter-writers. Many are elderly and writing less on behalf of themselves than on behalf of their extended families of children and grandchildren. Women adopt a different style to men. Just as men tend to be more businesslike on the phone, so their letters are shorter and more to the point. Women writers, on the other hand, are more discursive and often tell the whole story of what lies behind their request (also noted by Bird, 2003: 11). For some, the capacity to write into the program gives them a less threatening alternative to what they see as the nerve-wracking ordeal of going live to air. Single parents, disabled people, economically disadvantaged people are all represented, as are the charities and community groups which perform different sorts of public services. In many ways, they conform to the profile of the group defined by a 1999 report to the Productivity Commission on media use as those who use media to while away the time without spending much money: older lower income groups, the retired and the unemployed (BDA, 1999; see also ABA, 1996 which confirms skew to the 40+ demographic for the Perth local ABC station at this period). Their use of the program conforms with Turner et al.’s (2006) ‘backyard fence’ model where talkback repairs ‘a gap in regrettably attenuated community relations by providing a public space where their voice might be heard’ (2006: 109).

Some listeners are looking for information (forgotten song lyrics, recipes). Others are interested in swaps (computer training in exchange for piano lessons; a limo for a Falcon ute; a typewriter for a rocking chair). Some want to give away unwanted items to a good home (old pianola rolls, a washing machine). Others are looking for company (a phone-pal, a respite carer for a child with cerebral palsy, a host family for a Japanese exchange student). The requests range from the quirky (a small trampoline for a cat; a mate for a male Chinese gander) to the downright odd (a listener with feet of

two different sizes seeking someone with the opposite problem so they could share pairs of shoes; another listener wanting advice on the correct way to crack pecan nuts). *Grapevine* helped people set up recycling networks: one listener collected old computers that he restored and gave to the elderly. Another collected toys to send to children in Indonesia. A third collected old cars and bicycles that he reconditioned and gave to those who needed them. A fourth kept a children's home in Zimbabwe supplied with sewing machines that were used to make clothes for the children. Other listeners used *Grapevine* to look for lost things (a minister was looking for his lost sermon notes), but more importantly they used it to look for lost people — old school friends, fellow war veterans, long-lost relatives. These latter cases demonstrated the range and power of the *Grapevine* network most vividly. A Seattle resident put in a request through her sister who lived in Perth to track down 'Joyce', her bridesmaid from 50 years ago. Within minutes of the request going to air, Joyce's cousin who lived in Perth rang up and was able to give the contact details for Joyce who now lived in Sydney. As the listener commented: 'Seattle to Sydney, a small world?'

The value of the network went beyond the exchange of goods and information. People also valued the contacts they made along the way. One listener wrote:

I want to say thank you so much. I met seven delightful people, via telephone, one as far away as Moore River and you performed a miracle.

Feedback from listeners often referred to the values underpinning the program:

I adore your show and the 'grapes' do human kindness and generosity proud. Keep up the good work.

I only catch the program intermittently but always listen intently. It's a wonderful idea! Helping those who really need it and *re-using* rather than discarding or buying new.

Firstly let me tell you how much your show is valued by so many people. It reminds us that there is hope for human fellowship as is obviously alive here in Perth. It is evident from the calls that you receive that the majority of folk are in fact good and kind and that is a comfort in these strange times of violence and distrust. Put simply, your show is a conduit for kindness and for that I am grateful.

I've had this idea about the GV for some time, that it is a catalyst for doing good — people who, simply from not thinking about it, never do anything to help the other bloke, are activated simply by listening to you ... and the grapiers themselves, the come-by-chance sort and the phalanx of helpers and menders and makers who seem to have made it a permanent job. I never cease to wonder at it.

Ytreburg (2004) talks about the difficulties producers face in maintaining the boundaries between themselves and the listeners:

Participants' understanding of what participation is gets shaped through personal relations with the production team both backstage and on-air. However the production team, for its part, can never afford to let personal relations with the participant dictate proceedings. (2004: 688)

He cites one program team member's comment: 'I mean it's not like they're really friends of ours, they're friends of the program. That's different.' (2004: 688)

However, in the case of *Grapevine*, the desire to progress from the virtual to the real was so powerful that the program took up the listeners' suggestion to hold a *Grapevine* coffee morning at the ABC studios. Listeners brought their homemade jams, cakes, secondhand clothing and other goods for the on-air swapmeet, but the real pleasure they derived was from being able to meet the presenters and to chat with each other over coffee and biscuits. The listeners also contributed to a *Grapevine* recipe book which the ABC published with proceeds going to Canteen, the children's cancer support group. *Grapevine* had conjured up a community that had a life outside and beyond the reach of the radio program itself.

Conclusion

As famously noted by Dallas Smythe (1981: 4), the real business of radio is not about delivering information to audiences but about delivering audience numbers to the companies that want to target them as customers. Even in public broadcasting, audience numbers are no less a measure of success, so programming there too is about, in Tebbutt's (2006) words, 'capturing an imagined demographic' (2006: 98). In this commercial model, the audience is a commodity, but the assumption that it is passively there for the taking is belied by the sophisticated methods needed to attract it. In reality, audiences are fickle and elusive and a failsafe formula for guaranteed capture continues to be the holy grail for programmers everywhere (Phillips and Balnaves, 2002). *Grapevine* went against the commercial broadcasting model not just because it aimed to create a commerce-free zone, but also because it sought to activate the audience for the audience's own potential benefit.

As far as the radio station was concerned, the *Grapevine* experiment certainly succeeded in illustrating the power and reach of its listener network. The 'six degrees of separation' effect was continually on show as listeners activated their personal networks to extend way beyond the program's actual reach and beyond city, state and even national borders. The radio experiment showed how, well before the additional enhancements of websites, email and sms, the old-fashioned analogue media (radio, telephone, letters and faxes) were effective instruments for active networking. Whatever the program-makers' original agenda, the listeners found the desire to communicate irresistible and in the end they made the program their own:

Producer: It was not the program that was wonderful, it was the people. It just allowed access to uncover people's small and large deeds of kindness and we reported the fact. Listeners used the phrase 'spirit of the GV' much more than we did — it belonged to them and they believed the ethos that had come up.

Note

- 1 At the time the segment began in 1995, I was the station manager of 720 6WF in Perth. I kept in touch with the program team after I left the station in 1996 and interviewed the producer and the presenter in 1998. When the program finished in 1998, I was given access to the letter archives to use as a resource for a future article. My thanks go to the ABC staff and to Jo Morrison who helped with the analysis of the content of the letters.

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Interviews

The *Grapevine* producer and presenter were interviewed jointly on 4 December 1998.

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