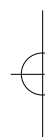
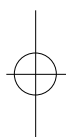
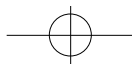


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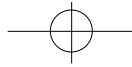
# Radio & PUBLIC DELIBERATION



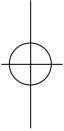
BY  
BRET DAVIDSON



AN OCCASIONAL PAPER OF THE  
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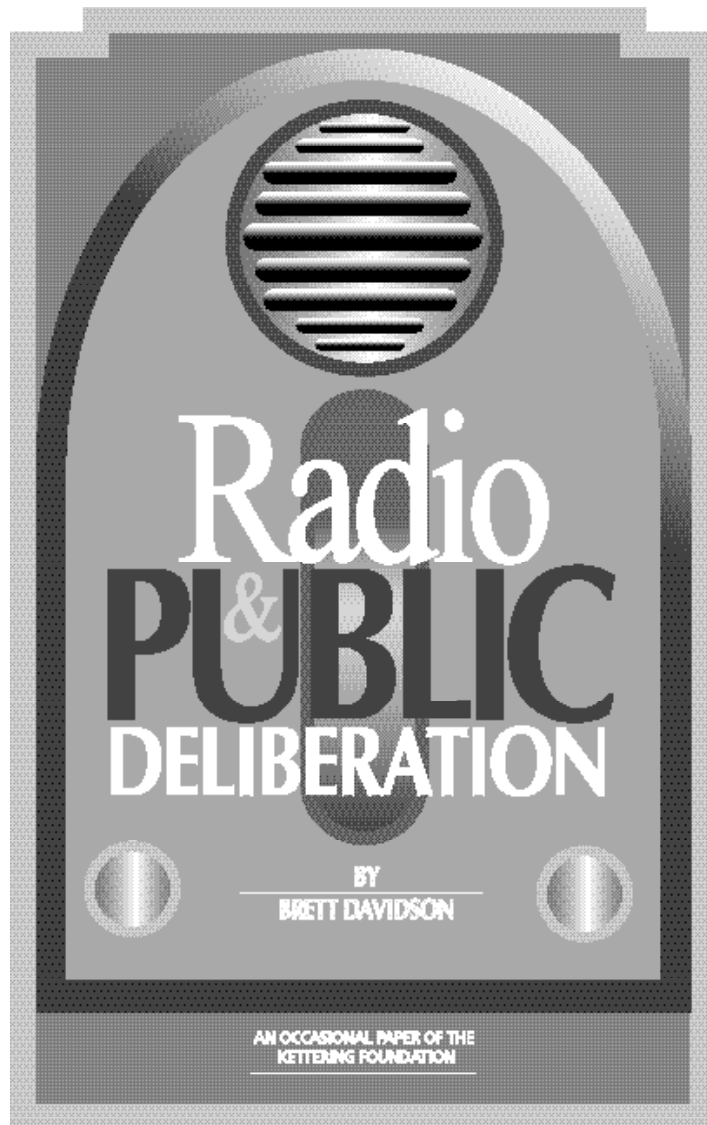
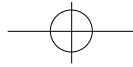
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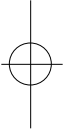
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## FOREWORD

*Not only does radio inform us politically and help shape or frame issues, it has also supported public talk and has the potential to provide space for public deliberation.*

*Julie Fisher is a program officer at the Kettering Foundation.*

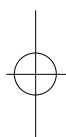
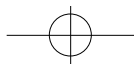
By sorting out the possible ways to think about radio in relation to public politics, Brett Davidson has given voice to some thought-provoking ideas. His comparative overview of radio in the United States and South Africa suggests that there is much more going on in the world of radio than we might have imagined. Not only does radio inform us politically and help shape or frame issues, it has also supported public talk and has the potential to provide space for public deliberation.

As students of public deliberation, we at the Kettering Foundation worry that the face-to-face interactions among citizens that characterize forums in local communities will be lost as deliberation moves to the Internet or other media. This concern has to do with more than the “feel-good” aspect of meeting person-to-person. Research shows that interpersonal communication is by far the strongest motivator of political participation.

Brett Davidson makes a convincing case for radio being the most hospitable media environment for retaining the human characteristics of public deliberation. In South Africa, for example, radio reaches far more people in their own languages than other media do. Moreover, radio can broadcast live, “allowing hundreds, perhaps thousands, more citizens to listen in.” Although television has the same theoretical advantage, in some countries channels may be limited to those supported by the government. Radio is also cheaper and more pervasive than television, particularly in poor countries.

Brett Davidson did not find countless examples of radio being used as a space for public deliberation. What he did find, however, were examples of radio playing a role in strengthening civil society by hosting other forms of public talk. From there, it is comparatively easy to add deliberative fora to the roster of other events such as panel discussions or public hearings. Just as a “sense of possibility” can emerge among citizens deliberating in a forum, this paper has the potential to spark that same sense among radio journalists.

Julie Fisher



## INTRODUCTION

By Brett Davidson

Brett Davidson wrote this paper during the six months he spent at the Kettering Foundation in Dayton, Ohio, U.S.A., as the Katherine Fanning Fellow for Journalism and Democracy. He lives in Cape Town, South Africa, where he manages the Democracy Radio Project at Idasa, the Institute for Democracy in South Africa. The project works closely with community radio stations across South Africa, producing and distributing programs on democracy, training radio producers in community journalism skills, and helping stations explore ways to foster more widespread political participation. Before joining Idasa, Brett worked for several years as a radio presenter and producer at the South African Broadcasting Corporation.

The power of radio was demonstrated on October 30, 1938. Orson Welles' dramatic radio production of "War of the Worlds" proved so convincing that millions of American listeners began to panic, believing they were in danger of being killed by Martian death rays, and many started packing their bags to flee the alien invaders (Matelski, 1993). Since then, there have been many other examples of radio's power and influence. It was used as a powerful propaganda tool in Nazi Germany and the former Yugoslavia and, in the U.S., President Roosevelt regularly entered Americans' homes with his fireside chats. More recently, the power of radio was confirmed in a much darker and more alarming manner. In 1994, Radio Mille Collines in Rwanda played a central role in inciting and fueling the genocide in that country, as announcers encouraged Hutus to kill Tutsis, at times even broadcasting names and car registration numbers of people to be attacked.

Today, American society is saturated with media, and the events of October 1938 seem to mark the heyday of a medium now long past its prime. Radio seems almost an afterthought in an environment permeated by television, the Internet, and DVDs. Even before Internet use became widespread, the scholarly publication the *Media Studies Journal* entitled its Summer 1993 edition "Radio, the Forgotten Medium." And yet most Americans own at least one, and most probably multiple, radio receivers and listen to radio in their cars, living rooms, and kitchens, as well as at work and during countless recreational activities (*Media Studies Journal*, 1993). According to the media research firm Arbitron, over the course of a week, radio reaches 95 percent of all Americans age 12 and up (2002).



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This omnipresence cannot be dismissed as mere background noise or nothing but hit music. Listeners write in to public radio stations to comment on news items and features and call in by the thousands to talk shows. A recent outpouring of protest and letters to the local newspaper after programming changes at WYSO (FM 91.3) in Yellow Springs, Ohio, attests to listeners' often intense involvement with this medium. Far from being wiped out by the Internet, radio seems to have been given new life by the Web. There has been a proliferation of Internet radio stations, broadcast stations have an Internet presence allowing them to reach listeners far beyond the limits of their signal, and E-mail and Web pages allow stations to interact with their listeners in new ways.

Radio is even more important in Africa. Millions of households have access to television, and Internet use is small but growing, but these media are often beyond the means of everyday people. Newspapers and magazines are more affordable but often incomprehensible, either because of widespread illiteracy or because they are not published in people's mother tongue.

In South Africa, radio is by far the most accessible source of news, with 90 percent of the population getting their news from this medium, as opposed to 60 percent for TV and even less for print (Mattes, et al. 2000, Jacobs, et al. 2001). In addition, radio is far more likely to be accessed in citizens' home language. The public broadcaster, the SABC, operates radio stations in each of the country's 11 official languages, and an increasing number of community radio stations are serving local interests in cities, small towns, and villages. In contrast, television broadcasts are mainly in English, although there are a few news bulletins and other programs in three or four of the most widespread languages. There is only a handful of publications using indigenous African languages. Furthermore, radio receivers are far more affordable than TV sets, and while a single copy of a newspaper or magazine may be inexpensive, daily or weekly subscription rates are far beyond the means of most South Africans — not to mention the fact that some six to eight million adults are illiterate.

Radio therefore deserves serious attention as a medium with a vital role to play in democracy, in civic participation, and in public deliberation. It thus makes sense to examine and weigh the contribution that radio already makes to the process of public deliberation, and also to consider the possibilities for radio that have not yet been realized. This paper is an initial attempt to do that, with the aid of examples from the U.S.A. and South Africa, two countries in which I have had the opportunity to visit and/or work with stations and talk to station staff and volunteers.

## The media and deliberation

In recent years, a good deal has been written about the benefits of participatory democracy as an adjunct to representative democracy, which is seen as having led to widespread public cynicism, apathy, and disconnection from political life. Central to a participatory democracy is the process of public deliberation. Broadly, this can be defined as “an open process designed to bring together diverse stakeholders for the careful consideration of relevant information and diverse viewpoints on important public issues” (Gastil and Kershaw, 2002), or as a form of talk that “will construe issues in public terms; will create relationships or rights, obligations and duties between participants; and, will coordinate individuals to reflect on possible forms of collective action” (Ryfe, 2002). More specifically, it is seen as a process by which people work together to solve common problems by coming together to name and frame issues in public terms; weigh costs, consequences, and tradeoffs inherent in various approaches to the problem; and in the process, build common ground for action (Mathews, 1999, Mathews and McAfee, 2002). This latter definition is the one preferred by the Kettering Foundation, an Ohio-based research organisation that studies how to make democracy work as it should.

A question that has plagued many theorists of deliberation concerns where this kind of public discussion is to take place

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in contemporary democracies. Given the limits of time and space, which prevent all citizens from coming together physically to deliberate, attention has turned to the role of the mass media. Many theorists argue that in contemporary democracies, the mass media form the public space in which deliberation takes place. The question is whether the mass media are up to the task.

In his work on the public sphere, Jürgen Habermas (1991, 1992) expresses pessimism about the ability of modern mass media to form a genuine public sphere in which critical deliberation can take place. He sees the mass media as allowing manipulation of the public by the powerful, in order to bring about conformity, loyalty, or specific consumer behavior. He believes even the presence of the media distorts actual deliberations, arguing that the introduction of the radio microphone and TV camera into parliamentary chambers has turned the institution from a deliberative forum into a place where parties merely state their positions for public effect (1991). This pessimism is shared by other scholars, such as sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1998), who is deeply critical of the role of television, and of journalism in general, in public life.

However, there are others who believe that in certain cases, and with deliberate effort, it may be possible for the mass media to play a constructive and democratizing role. Writers such as Robert McChesney (1998) have proposed changes in media regulation and ownership, while theorists and practitioners of public journalism have explored ways of getting the news media to contribute more constructively to public life. Writers such as Benjamin Page (1996) have examined in detail the process of mediated public deliberation, finding that the process tends to be dominated and distorted by elite groups, but that at times, the voices of ordinary citizens can break through and find expression on talk radio, in small journals and “zines,” and on the Internet. Similarly, John Downing (2001) offers examples of the role of radical media in counter-acting mass manipulation.

Like some of these writers, I believe that it may be possible to create spaces in the mass media — and on radio in particu-

lar — where a more careful and balanced process of public deliberation can occur. In considering how this might happen, it is helpful to examine the various roles mass media play in a deliberative democracy. These roles can be grouped into four broad categories.<sup>1</sup>

In the broadest sense, the media simply convey the information and opinions the public uses to make informed choices. Martin Linsky, for example, says “the press is the vehicle for much of the discussion that now takes place around public issues” (1988). There is a two-step process — citizens read newspapers, watch TV or listen to the radio, and on the basis of information and opinion gained, then deliberate among (or within) themselves. Some studies also examine the links between media exposure and general political participation. An example is a study of talk-radio audiences in San Diego, which found that in stark contrast with negative stereotypes associated with talk radio, frequent listeners to political talk radio were more interested in politics, more likely to vote, and participated more than others in a variety of political activities (Hofstetter, et al. 1994).<sup>2</sup>

Some see the media as facilitator of a deliberative process that takes place mostly, or exclusively, within the media itself. In this case, public deliberation does not occur primarily among citizens meeting face-to-face or talking to one another directly, but through the editorial, op-ed, and letterspages of newspapers or through radio talk shows and televised panel discussions. Through columns and letters, citizens argue, put forward perspectives, and convey their opinions, and authorities take these into account when making decisions or framing policies. Benjamin Page, in his book *Who Deliberates? Mass Media in Modern Democracy*, examines this role. He looks at a series of cases of mediated deliberation (for example, the role of the op-ed and letterspages of *The New York Times* in the period preceding the Gulf War) and examines the role of journalists, elite media, officeholders, and professional communicators in shaping the discussion.

The media can also play a role in relation to organizations that convene community-based deliberative forums. These are public meetings in town halls, libraries, or other public spaces

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where members of a community meet face-to-face to deliberate on matters of common concern. Organisations that promote such forums include the National Issues Forums (NIF) in the U.S. and a host of groups around the world familiar with the work of the Kettering Foundation and the National Issues Forums network.<sup>3</sup>

In some cases, the media play a purely supportive role — newspapers, radio, and TV are simply used to publicize meetings of forums or for reporting on forums already held. So, for example, newspapers in Charleston, West Virginia, have provided space for the West Virginia Institute for Civic Life to print outlines of its current discussion guide, along with the dates, venues, and times of upcoming forums. Short news articles have appeared in the paper subsequent to the forums, outlining the major themes emerging from the discussions. The deliberation in this case is exclusively face-to-face, but publicized via the media.

In other cases, the media are actively involved in the process of convening and encouraging deliberative forums. *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, for example, has helped sponsor “Neighbor to Neighbor” forums in Cincinnati, Ohio, and the surrounding area to discuss racial tensions. It has helped coordinate the process, recruit facilitators, and collate and compile reports. It also has published in the newspaper a summary of each neighborhood’s discussion. PBS sponsors the annual television program “A Public Voice,” which integrates recordings of actual forums with discussion and commentary by journalists, officeholders, and other prominent public figures. In this case, the deliberation is both mediated and face-to-face. The primary deliberation happens among citizens meeting together, but the program plays a central role in bringing a larger public into contact with the actual deliberative forums. In the process, aspects of the forum are reported on, edited, or adapted to fit media constraints such as space and time limitations.

I will look more closely at the specific role of radio in the process of public deliberation in all four categories, in each instance incorporating theoretical insight and discussion, evidence from empirical studies, and case studies that illustrate

the various roles of radio in practice.<sup>4</sup> First, however, I will provide an overview of the radio sector in South Africa and the United States.

## The radio scene

### South Africa

In South Africa, the radio sector is divided into three tiers. First, there is the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), a national public broadcaster funded through TV license fees, advertising, and sponsorship revenue, and other business services. The SABC gets about 1 percent of its funding directly from government. It is under the control of a board that is selected through public hearings and appointed by the president. Under the 1999 Broadcasting Act, the SABC is to become a limited liability company, with the state as 100 percent shareholder, and will be restructured into two arms — commercial and public service.

Until 1995, the SABC monopolized the country's airwaves, with the exception of a handful of small independent stations based in the so-called "homelands." The broadcast sector was restructured following the democratic elections in 1994, and the Independent Broadcasting Authority directed the SABC to sell its six regional stations to private companies. At present, the SABC operates six commercial music-based channels, the biggest being the national stations 5fm and Metro FM.

In addition to these, the SABC operates a range of public service radio stations, catering to various communities and languages. For example, SAfm broadcasts in English, RSG in Afrikaans, and Thobela FM in Sepedi. Lotus FM broadcasts in English, serving the Indian community. The stations with the largest audience are Ukhozi FM (isiZulu), Lesedi FM (Sesotho), and Umhlobo Wenene (isiXhosa). Together these three stations have an average daily audience of more than 9.5 million — almost a quarter of the entire population of some 40 million.

*In general, community programming in South Africa must “promote the development of a sense of common purpose with democracy and improve quality of life.”*

The SABC’s public service or “full spectrum” stations offer a mix of music, current affairs, drama, and call-in programming. Music makes up 50 percent of the schedule on these stations, 20 percent of the time is allocated to current affairs, talk shows, magazines, and documentaries, and 12 percent to news and news-related programs. The rest of the time is allocated to formal educational, sports, and religious programming (SABC, 2002).

The private commercial radio sector is made up of a range of regional and local stations, and the majority of these operate a music format for niche audiences, much like the U.S. model. Exceptions are 702 and Cape Talk, both on AM, which have a talk format. Yfm in Gauteng province caters to youth and is mostly a music station, though it does include talk and discussion programs.

Besides the public service and commercial tiers, there is also a community radio sector. At present, there are some 65 on-air licensed community radio stations in South Africa. According to legislation, a community radio station must be controlled by a democratically elected board that includes members of the relevant community.<sup>5</sup> The station’s programming must reflect the cultural, religious, language, and demographic needs of the community and must highlight grassroots community issues, such as development, health care, general education, and local culture. In general, community programming must “promote the development of a sense of common purpose with democracy and improve quality of life” (Broadcasting Act, 1999). Most community stations play a good deal of music (generally much more South African music than other stations), broadcast educational programming on topics such as health, agriculture, and democracy, and host talk-back shows on issues of community concern (often featuring guests such as district nurses, local government officials, or community policing officers). There tends to be little local content in news bulletins, since stations often subscribe to national radio news services.

## U.S.A.

The U.S.A. does not have a public broadcasting service like the South African or British BBC models. According to the Federal Communications Commission, it licenses radio stations to be either commercial or noncommercial/educational. Commercial stations support themselves through advertising, while noncommercial stations rely on listener contributions, limited government funding, and contributions from nonprofit as well as for-profit entities. Public stations cannot run advertisements but can make announcements acknowledging contributions. Whether they are commercial or not, the FCC cannot dictate to broadcasters what content to air: "Individual radio and TV stations are responsible for selecting everything they broadcast and for determining how they can best serve their communities" (FCC, 1999).

Local noncommercial stations can offer primarily musical programming (as in WDPR in Dayton, Ohio, which focuses on classical music and the arts), or a mix of music, news, talk, and information. WYSO in Yellow Springs, Ohio, is an example of this type of station. It carries news and current affairs from National Public Radio (NPR) and Public Radio International (PRI) as well as music, local interviews, and other programming.

There is wide variation in the community focus of the noncommercial stations. Many public radio stations show very little local flavor, with most programs and news bulletins nationally or internationally syndicated by NPR or PRI. A few stations can be called truly community stations. A good example is WMMT in Whitesburg, Kentucky, which carries little syndicated programming, provides local and regional news, hosts discussions on issues of community concern, and broadcasts and promotes local bluegrass and traditional music from the Appalachian region.<sup>6</sup> Stations affiliated with the small left-wing network Pacifica carry some syndicated Pacifica programming but also provide space for programs representing a wide range of local voices and interests. However, Pacifica is battling to recover from two years of conflict over control of the station, and there are strong differ-

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ences of opinion about the network's future direction (Douglas, 2002). Generally, community-based programming seems to be at risk as stations opt for wider audiences and more financial security by carrying more syndicated programming that is typically more polished and technically sophisticated than locally produced programming.

Discussion of political and community issues does occur on commercial talk-based stations, but these shows are often seen as a negative force in American political life, as being divisive, sensationalistic, and politically slanted toward extremes. The right-wing talk show host Rush Limbaugh is often cited as the prime example (Lewis, 1993). However, some empirical studies in recent years have indicated that the case against talk radio may not be so clear-cut and that its role in a deliberative democracy is worth more careful appraisal.

## Four roles for radio

### **One: Informing the public and affecting political participation**

Like other media, radio plays a role in informing and educating citizens so they can make intelligent choices and so their deliberations and discussions in other contexts will be better informed. One example of this process comes from the British political theorist James Bryce (Kim, et al. 1999), who describes four stages of the public opinion formation process: exposure to news media; political conversation; opinion formation; and participatory activities. Writing in the nineteenth century, Bryce referred to newspaper reading, not media in general, but since then, things have changed dramatically and there has been extensive research on the role television, radio, and the Internet play in the process of political opinion formation. In some ways, print may still be best suited to the task of informing citizens — it can go into far more detail, offer more stories, and act as a permanent record that can be referred to again and again. However, print has other limitations. It does not reach as many people as other media, and it is not as interactive (although limited exchanges

are possible on letters and op-ed pages, subject to time delays). Television reaches more people than print, is more immediate, and more dramatic (there's no better example of this than the way the world experienced September 11 live on CNN and many other television networks).

Radio's role is far less researched, and while there are a number of studies focusing on talk shows, radio coverage of news and current affairs is generally ignored (a good example of this oversight is the McLeod, et al. 1999 study of the role of mass media in local political participation, which focuses only on TV and newspaper hard news). It is unclear why radio is so overlooked. As stated earlier, it is strongly present in daily life. While it is just as immediate as TV, radio news bulletins are far more frequent than those on broadcast TV, and more integrated into daily routine.<sup>7</sup> Radio is often more accessible; as I mentioned in the introduction, more South Africans rely on radio as a source of news than on any other medium. Radio current-affairs shows tend to be many times longer than similar shows on TV, which translates into more stories on radio and more detailed reports. Current affairs shows such as "Morning Edition" on NPR in the U.S. or "AM Live" on SAfm in South Africa run for two or more hours, while broadcast TV news bulletins are 30 minutes at most.

Radio can also allow listeners to interact with newsmakers. Radio stations such as Zibonele in Cape Town or KILI on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota regularly invite local officials or leaders into the studio and allow listeners to phone in and ask questions. Some listeners call in to offer criticism, but many simply want information; they ask officials to clarify their positions, for example, or explain the voter registration process once again. In this way, listeners can actively seek and receive information that is of direct concern to them and get the speaker's actual words, unaltered by reporters.

This serves an additional function — leaders and officials get to hear listeners' voices as well as their concerns. They can discover what people understand and what they don't.

Aside from simply providing information and insight, radio can play a broader role by either encouraging or discour-

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*With its focus on niche audiences and prime aim of selling audiences to advertisers, commercial radio tends to treat and address listeners as a collection of individual and isolated consumers, while public or community radio can operate more inclusively and address listeners as members of a community.*

aging political or civic participation. The first way it can do this is through the process of shaping a public identity. One of the key elements of public deliberation is that it is “public.” In weighing perspectives and making choices, people think of themselves as citizens. Public deliberation is done by self-conscious members of a public, as opposed to a collection of isolated individuals, each privately deliberating about personal preferences. Radio stations can either encourage or discourage citizens in thinking of themselves as members of a public. With its focus on niche audiences and prime aim of selling audiences to advertisers, commercial radio tends to treat and address listeners as a collection of individual and isolated consumers, while public or community radio can operate more inclusively and address listeners as members of a community. Commercial radio, of course, does not always play a negative role, as individual broadcasters can consciously encourage listeners to identify with community needs. Generally, however, nonprofit radio is in a better position to encourage listeners to identify with a broader public. Even so, commercial pressures on public and community radio are increasing, and there is a tendency to treat listeners as consumers in order to survive.

While much less research has been done on radio than on TV, there are some studies that provide additional insights into radio's link with political participation. In the U.S., a study by Hofstetter in San Diego found that involvement with political talk radio was associated with political involvement and activity — in short, with the “qualities often identified with good citizenship” (1998).<sup>8</sup> Hofstetter found not only that active exposure to political talk radio was associated with high levels of political participation, but also that there were only small associations between exposure to ideological talk-show hosts and ideological self-identification and partisanship. Various other studies seem to support these conclusions (Barker, 1998). Pan and Kosicki (1997) found that exposure to call-in talk shows constitutes a form of political mobilization and was associated with a greater likelihood of forming political affiliations with organizations other than the two main political parties. They also cite studies showing that this

political energization is more effective on the right of the political spectrum, and they speculate that this may contribute to ideological narrowness in the broader public discourse.

There are some interesting questions raised by a study that McLeod, et al. (1999) conducted of the role of communication in motivating political participation. They found that hard news on television played no direct role in motivating participation, but that newspapers did have some motivational role (TV played an indirect role; it sometimes stimulated viewers to seek more information in newspapers, which, in turn, stimulated participation). More interestingly, though, the researchers found that interpersonal communication was by far the biggest motivator of political participation. Although the study did not include radio at all, I would argue that the conversations on call-in radio can be considered interpersonal communication (and that even noncalling listeners experience it this way).<sup>9</sup> In relation to this, it would be interesting to examine anecdotal evidence that talk radio played a big role in mobilizing African Americans to vote in the last U.S. presidential election.

Ross (2001) studied participation in political call-in shows in Britain during which audience members were able to directly question party leaders. She found that participants did not expect to influence party policies or even get meaningful answers from the politicians. They participated because they wanted to raise issues important to them that had been ignored by the campaign platforms. (The candidates and media tended to focus on Britain's relationship with Europe, while voters were more concerned about such things as health care and education.) Participants reported that being able to ask their question made them feel a little less disconnected from the political process.

While studies such as these provide empirical evidence about the role of talk shows, case studies are more helpful in bringing to life the many practical ways in which radio stations and talk shows inform the public, encourage listeners to think of themselves as citizens, and contribute to political participation. Following are several examples of radio stations that fulfill these roles.

*WMMT: The Voice of the **Hillbilly** Nation*

Appalachia is a region of wooded mountains and hills spanning large areas of five states: West Virginia, Virginia, North Carolina, Kentucky, and Tennessee. It is an area of beauty but also of poverty and social struggle. For decades, the people of Appalachia depended on coal mining for jobs but at the same time waged battles against the mines for destroying their health, ruining their environment, and taking their land. As part of the federal War on Poverty in the region, a community arts center, Appalshop, was created in 1969, in Whitesburg, Kentucky. Its mission was to provide young people with the skills needed for jobs in the urban film and TV industry. Since then, Appalshop has consistently played an activist role as a community arts center.

The radio station WMMT (FM 88.7) was established on November 24, 1985, to help carry out Appalshop's work. Reflecting its mission, the first voice heard on the station was that of a retired coal miner. The station calls itself the "Voice of the Hillbilly Nation" and says its mission is to "be a 24-hour voice of mountain people's music, culture, and social issues; to provide broadcast space for creative expression and community involvement in making radio; and to be an active participant in discussions of public policy that will benefit our coalfield communities and the Appalachian region as a whole."

WMMT has a small, full-time staff and about 50 community volunteers. The station plays, promotes, and supports traditional and bluegrass music, much of which originates in its broadcast area. Staff members produce the station's news and community affairs programming, which covers a broad range of economic, social, and cultural issues. Staff members consciously try to air voices and issues that would not normally enjoy media coverage. The station cooperated with several other community groups to organize and broadcast candidate forums before the local and state elections in 2002. In 1999, the East Kentucky Leadership Foundation gave WMMT its Media Award for Outstanding Public Service.

*“Expressions”: Constructive commercial talk radio*

The organization Parity, Inc. calls itself a “program of citizen participation to address issues and problems of fairness and equity in the black community.” Each year, the organization showcases ten African American males as positive role models. In February 2002, Parity chose radio host and program director Michael E. Ecton as one of its positive role models. In addition to his job as program director for the commercial talk-radio station WDAO in Dayton, Ohio, Ecton serves on the committees of several organizations committed to AIDS prevention.

His social commitment is evident on the talk show “Expressions,” which he hosts each day. It is noticeably different from the many provocative, partisan talk shows one can hear on the AM spectrum in the U.S. Ecton encourages listeners to think of themselves as citizens when he asks callers to offer suggestions about how they can solve problems in the nation and in their community. For example, one caller begins, “I think the problem is . . .” and Ecton interrupts, “I’m not looking for a problem, I want to know what can we do?”<sup>10</sup> Another caller comments: “We don’t talk anymore. We used to know one another.”

*KILI: The Voice of the Lakota Nation*

The radio station KILI, on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, broadcasts in English and Lakota to three Native American reservations as well as in Rapid City, a coverage area of around 10,000 square miles. Each year, fewer and fewer young people grow up speaking Lakota, and KILI plays an important role in keeping the language alive. Staffers see it as “a vital force of preservation for Lakota people and our culture,” as well as a “ray of hope” for the community, which battles to overcome widespread unemployment, poverty, and other social problems.”

KILI provides a space for people to discuss issues important to the community, and this takes place on a local as well as national level. The station broadcasts “Native America Calling,” a national call-in show on Native American issues,

as well as “National Native News.” Broadcasts in Lakota are also seen as enabling the community to discuss issues privately in a sense, as nonspeakers cannot understand the discussion. KILI also covers tribal, state, and federal elections, airing live debates and in-depth reviews, and broadcasts live public hearings on important issues, using Lakota interpreters so the programs are widely accessible.

Producer Eileen Ironcloud sees the station playing an important role in making sure people’s voices are heard, in getting people’s perspectives aired as well as the views of officials. The station was started for this very reason, following a showdown in 1973 at nearby Wounded Knee between federal forces and activists from the American Indian Movement.

*Greater Lebowakgomo Community Radio:  
A Challenge to the Listeners*

Delivery is a catchword in post-1994 South Africa. After the struggle for democracy was won, and the first democratically elected president, Nelson Mandela, succeeded in creating an atmosphere of reconciliation, people began looking to the government for help to eradicate or alleviate their poverty and poor living conditions. In 1999, Thabo Mbeki was elected president and got the nickname “Mr. Delivery” for his promises to ensure that South Africans would get access to clean water, health services, and safe, secure communities. As part of this approach, many officials in national, provincial, and local government have started looking at citizens as consumers who expect good service. In many cases, the delivery of promised services has been far slower than expected, and the cries for faster delivery have been growing louder.

Greater Lebowakgomo Community Radio (GLCR) is a community radio station in a rural area near Pietersburg, in South Africa’s Northern Province. As part of a training workshop run by the Democracy Radio Project of the Institute for Democracy in South Africa (Idasa), producers at GLCR decided to make two programs looking at delivery of services, but from a different angle. One program was entitled

“What Is Delivery?” and the second, “Who’s Got the Power?” The idea was that instead of the usual grilling of government officials about the lack of delivery, the producers would find out what members of the community and what local and provincial politicians meant when they talked about delivery. They discovered that while politicians pointed to successful projects such as a new library and better roads, the citizens wondered why they needed a library when many of them couldn’t even read, there was no money for books, and there was an existing library building that had fallen into disrepair. They had also seen potholes appear in the new roads because of inferior materials. In general, they felt they hadn’t been consulted. In the second program, the producers interviewed community leaders, who noted that it was pointless for citizens to wait around for government to act while they themselves did nothing. They presented examples of successful community projects that were creating jobs, teaching useful skills, and educating people about AIDS.

The programs represented a small but important step toward encouraging public dialogue about local issues, and the producers remain convinced that they need to continue encouraging residents to think of themselves as actors, rather than passive recipients who wait for delivery.

## Two: A public sphere in which deliberation can occur

Aside from its important role in informing citizens and their deliberations and motivating people to participate in politics, radio can in itself form a public sphere or public space in which deliberation takes place. Barker (1998) and Downing (2001) are just two of many scholars who have considered this aspect of radio and of the media. When researchers consider radio as public space, the format that logically comes to mind is talk radio. Unfortunately, the utterance of those two words is often immediately followed by dismissal of radio as a serious deliberative forum.

In the United States, the words “talk radio” conjure up images of radio hosts who make a career (and millions of

*The programs represented a small but important step toward encouraging public dialogue about local issues, and the producers remain convinced that they need to continue encouraging residents to think of themselves as actors, rather than passive recipients who wait for delivery.*



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dollars) by stoking emotions or making increasingly outrageous comments. Tom Lewis (1993) recalls a long trail of sensational radio personalities from the political fringes who used the radio to gain large followings and, in some cases, used their radio popularity as a route to elected office. They include Dr. John Romulus Brinkley, who touted the health benefits of goat glands, the fascist-leaning priest Father Charles Coughlin, and more recently, Rush Limbaugh. Sometimes, talk radio is simply sensational and trivial, but it can exert undue influence on political life. Lewis notes that when President Bill Clinton tried to lift the ban on homosexuals in the military, talk-show hosts deliberately incited audiences, prompting listeners to flood the White House switchboard with calls of protest. Benjamin Page (1996) cites examples of cases in which talk-show hosts may have succeeded in “spreading false or misleading information to the public or a faction of it, creating pseudopopulistic revolts and ‘firestorms’ of phone calls and faxes to Congress that actually work against most citizens’ interests.”

However, the talk and call-in format should not be condemned because of its shortcomings. Many talk-show hosts in South Africa and the U.S. do strive for balance and to accommodate as many views as possible, and empirical studies seem to show that even deliberately partisan talk shows may not have the overwhelmingly negative influence attributed to them. In South Africa, national talk shows have played a huge role in getting citizens from different races, political convictions and socioeconomic backgrounds talking to one another. Community radio stations make extensive use of talk shows to enable listeners to question local politicians or air their views on important community issues. They see this as part of their duty to let people’s voices be heard.

In the United States, WDAO’s Michael Ecton is just one example of a talk-show host trying to play a constructive role. Another example is NPR’s Diane Rehm, who has been hosting a daily call-in show from Washington, D.C., for more than two decades. She says her show attracts listeners and callers from across the spectrum of American society — from the right wing to the left wing and people in-between, and

from all professions and walks of life. People share opinions, discuss topics, and present arguments on a range of issues, from air strikes in Bosnia to new theories on mother-infant bonding.

Both Rehm (1993) and Page (1996) cite the Zoë Baird case as an excellent example of how talk radio allowed an authentic public voice to be heard. Baird was nominated by President Bill Clinton to be his new attorney general. She revealed that she had employed an illegal alien and hadn't paid Social Security taxes. Political analysts, newspaper columnists, and even Republican party politicians believed this was something minor that wouldn't stand in the way of Baird's confirmation. But on Rehm's show, and on others around the country, listeners flooded the switchboards expressing their outrage. In this case, it was not an orchestrated campaign opposing Baird's nomination, but a spontaneous occurrence that illustrated how out of touch the political elites were with ordinary people. The tide of popular opinion changed the political climate and led to Baird withdrawing her nomination two days later.

This case may not meet the ideal criteria for public deliberation — people did not weigh carefully Baird's talents against her transgression, nor did they go on to consider broader issues around qualification for public office — and Page calls this kind of “populistic deliberation” a rather “blunt instrument” (1996). The example does show, however, that talk shows can create the space for a genuine public voice to be heard (after all, people were outraged for justifiable public reasons), and it opens the possibility that with a little more thought and structure, talk shows could become more carefully deliberative. In fact, Rehm does cite other examples that illustrate how her shows turned into forums for listeners to hear and weigh different sides and ideas on an issue. She calls this kind of radio “America's electronic backyard fence” (1993).

A number of the empirical studies of talk radio look at the format as a variable in influencing political activity, and these have been discussed in the previous section. Fewer studies examine talk radio itself as a form of political activity. In their

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study of radio and TV talk shows, Pan and Kosicki (1997) note that call-in shows may contribute to public discourse that is ideologically narrow because they tend to be more effective in mobilizing those on the right of the political spectrum. However, these researchers also believe that talk shows form an important arena in the public sphere, a place where exchange of opinions and deliberation can occur. Talk shows make it possible for ordinary people to talk to one another, as well as to political figures, on a more or less equal basis, and despite the shortcomings of many actual talk-show programs, Pan and Kosicki cite the potential of call-in talk shows to facilitate quality public discourse (1997). Like many others, Kim, et al. (1999) ignore radio altogether when considering the relationship of news-media use to political conversation. Interestingly, however, they list calling in to a radio or TV talk show as one of their measures of political participation — being part of a talk show is in *itself* seen as political activity.

It may take more than theories to convince the skeptics of the deliberative potential of radio talk shows, since in the U.S. the term “talk radio” has become almost synonymous with the kind of partisan raving that many people deplore. The argument does not rest merely on theories, however. There are existing examples of talk shows that do take a more deliberative approach. While they may not meet all the criteria for ideal deliberation, the following are examples of shows that are clearly headed in the right direction.

***“The Tim Modise Show”: Promoting reconciliation***

Each weekday morning, from 8:30-10:00 a.m., the “Tim Modise Show,” a call-in program, airs on the national English radio station in South Africa, SAfm. For the first half-hour, Modise reads out headlines from the country’s major papers and asks listeners to talk about anything on their minds. For the following hour, he usually invites a studio guest to talk about a specific topic, and listeners call in to ask questions or to add their comments or arguments. There are some regular themes. Each Thursday, for example, Modise focuses on tourism, and he, his guests, and his callers discuss ways to boost tourism in South Africa as a means of promoting

economic growth and creating jobs. For other shows, he might invite the Minister of Safety and Security to discuss crime or an author to talk about a new and interesting book dealing with an issue of public interest.

SAfm's audience is generally an elite one — listeners are middle- to upper-income earners, often managers or decision makers, between 30 and 60 years old, and mostly white. And yet the callers to the “Tim Modise Show” display a surprising diversity. Most are once-off callers, but there are also a few regulars. There's the white Afrikaans- and Sesotho-speaking farmer from Free State province who thinks apartheid was a good idea that went bad but who is determined to help make the country work because it's the only home he has. There's Hope, a young black man who works in local government. There's Hassan, the left-wing trade unionist, and so on.

Callers often disagree, and often the views are predictable, depending on race. At times, Modise cuts off those who beat about the bush or who are overly offensive, but generally he is calm, often amused. He probes, he jokes, he asks people to consider another point of view. It's not uncommon to hear a white housewife call in and begin, “I'm not a racist, but . . .” and go on to prove her earlier denial false. Instead of attacking her, Modise will offer a different point of view or probe to expose inconsistencies in her thinking.

This is not formal deliberation, but South Africans from across the social spectrum are learning to listen to one another's views, hearing how the other half thinks, and learning to think of one another as fellow South Africans, in no small part due to Modise's skills as a host. On March 8, 2002, the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation recognized Modise's efforts by naming him the recipient of its first Annual Reconciliation Award for his “outstanding efforts in promoting justice reconciliation in South Africa.”

***“Platform for the People”: A different kind of election coverage***

In 1999, each Sunday for the two months preceding South Africa's second democratic general elections I hosted a program called “Platform for the People.” Each week, we invited into the studio three or four ordinary citizens and

*This is not formal deliberation, but South Africans from across the social spectrum are learning to listen to one another's views, hearing how the other half thinks, and learning to think of one another as fellow South Africans.*

three or four politicians from different parties. Each week had a theme: One week it was health care, another education, and so forth. I acted as the host/moderator as the citizens questioned politicians on the issue.

It often took a lot of work, as citizens were sometimes intimidated, or the politicians got into an argument among themselves. I also hadn't yet been introduced to more productive methods for moderating deliberation. On a Sunday afternoon, most potential listeners were probably watching sports, but those who did listen said they found the programs interesting and stimulating. There is no reason such a project could not be attempted again, using the insights from National Issues Forums and similar groups to facilitate more productive discussion.

*Marla Crockett: "The People's Agenda"*

Marla Crockett is the presenter of a program entitled "The People's Agenda" on the public radio station KERA (FM 90.1) in Dallas, Texas. She provides an excellent example of the potential of radio to provide or facilitate public deliberation. Crockett is well aware of the work of the Kettering Foundation and NIF, and she often incorporates their materials into her programs.

KERA is a public radio affiliate, and that fact guides its mission, which according to Crockett, is to educate and inform. This mission comes first, ahead of commercial considerations. According to Crockett, this gives station staffers room to really think about the role journalists should be playing in the community, and then to live up to that ideal. "The show I do tries to carry that out in specific ways, by dealing with issues the public says they're most concerned about," she said. "In politics, it all comes down to 'he said, she said,' and it often loses the point of what the public says it is concerned about."

The day I spoke to Crockett, her program had focused on a new standardized test that was set to go into effect in Texas public schools. People were up in arms about the issue. Crockett said during the program, she tried to provide a preview of the test, help people understand it, and give them a

voice. Crockett says she consciously tries to bring out the complexities of an issue. “I present different stakeholder opinions and try not to have everything in black and white terms. I try to identify tension points where people are trying to ‘work through’ aspects of an issue. The whole role of tests in general — people are having a tough time with that. I’m not sure today’s program was able to deal with that so well, as people had all sorts of agendas, but a show like this can help get into an issue.”

In choosing program topics, how does she determine what people are most concerned about?

“I try not to rely on my own opinion of what the public is concerned about,” she said. “I read a lot, and look at polling information. Often the political agendas for legislators influence what the public is concerned about. Things like education and health. The reporters at the station gather information on what people in the community are concerned about. There is also a lot of poll data out there that I look for and rely on. For example, Public Agenda in New York is an excellent resource. I go to their Web site quite a bit. For example, last week, they came out with some research about the rise of rudeness in America, and I did my program on that. They also have well-done analyses of public opinion in general on important topics, and they analyze where the public is on an issue.”

How does she see her role — as a moderator, or as someone who should try to stir controversy?

Part of her role, she believes, is to press people to perhaps get them to consider alternative aspects of an issue. For example, she said, “Today I was armed with information from Public Agenda about testing. They came out with research showing that the students themselves don’t consider tests to be particularly burdensome, so if I’d had a caller who had brought up that point about teenagers and kids and how awful it is, I would have pulled that out. So I do look for opportunities like that. Otherwise, I do consider myself a moderator. I try to present as many different opinions as possible for people to consider. Today I had lots of opinions that were very negative about testing, so I brought in an

*“I present different stakeholder opinions and try not to have everything in black and white terms. I try to identify tension points where people are trying to ‘work through’ aspects of an issue.”*

*Crockett also used the pros and cons and tradeoffs presented in the issue book in order to challenge callers when they associated with a certain perspective. She has even used her program as part of the issue-framing process.*

E-mail from someone that was very positive toward testing. I look for points that are not coming out and raise them.”

Crockett has used NIF issue books several times. These are designed to stimulate public deliberation on issues common to people across the country. Each book explores an issue from three or four different perspectives, including possible courses of action as well as the benefits and consequences inherent in each approach. Recent issues covered by these books have included money and politics, alcohol abuse, terrorism, and racial and ethnic tensions. One time, Crockett hosted a program based on the issue book on international affairs.

“I had people in the studio presenting each perspective,” she said. “Other times I just open the lines. I also used the one on gambling. I laid out the different choices, read right from the book — I had different staff members read each point of view. I then asked callers: ‘Which point of view do you most identify with?’ It’s a wonderful way of getting people to consider different points of view.”

Crockett also used the pros and cons and tradeoffs presented in the issue book in order to challenge callers when they associated with a certain perspective. She has even used her program as part of the issue-framing process. “One time I had somebody on from Public Agenda. They were in the process of developing an issue book, so I solicited opinions about that book. The audience responded well to it.”

Crockett believes it is possible to use radio as an effective deliberative forum. All it takes is imagination and being open to the possibilities. One slight drawback is the audience, which she says tends to be older, well educated, and middle to upper class.<sup>11</sup> This can limit the diversity of views heard. However, Crockett says she has a good gender balance and, at times she does hear from the very young and the very old. She says although her audience is largely white, a large number of immigrants listen to public radio. Her callers also represent a range of occupations, from cab drivers to school superintendents. Crockett says Dallas tends to be individualistic, libertarian, and conservative. People generally believe government should be kept small. She feels that it is sometimes a

challenge to find middle-of-the-road views to include in the program.

Crockett also provides an example of how radio is adapting to the Internet age. In her programs, she constantly works in E-mails from listeners, in addition to calls. "The engineer will bring E-mails to me, and I'll scan through them, and work some in when I get to a certain point. A caller today brought up the whole issue of teachers having to teach to the test. I followed-up that caller with an E-mail on that same point, which advanced that point a little bit. It was about a teacher who left the system because of such a focus on tests. So I asked my guest from the state department of education whether there is a danger of losing teachers. I try to introduce the E-mails seamlessly."

Crockett's program is an offshoot of a democracy project in 1996, through which she met people from the Kettering Foundation (KF) and KF associates such as Richard Harwood of the Harwood Institute for Public Innovation. "We do politics a lot," she said. "This is a big political year, and we try to stay away from the horse-race aspects. We try to focus on candidates' issues, how accountable they are, how they're conducting themselves, and how citizens are conducting themselves." She also worked with Harwood in 2000 on a political-conduct project. "They did research with groups all across the country about their aspirations for politics. All that information is out there. Harwood has a list of things the public hopes all the different actors will do. It's a wonderful tool to compare what's actually happening with what the public's aspirations are." Several years ago the station ran a citizen advertising campaign for which citizens were allowed to craft their own ads, focusing on what they wanted to say about the races, the issues, and how they wanted candidates to act.

Crockett feels public radio has a unique role to play. "Commercial broadcasting is so focused on the bottom line, and TV is so interested in fluffy stuff and what their consultants say will work," she said. She is not certain whether her kind of program will have any spin-off effect on other media, but she says that those who work in media listen to NPR



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themselves, so it may be possible to have some impact in that way. "We get heard by people who are influential," said Crockett.

### Three: Publicizing deliberation

Radio can also play a role not so much as an integral part of the deliberative process, but simply as one of the channels through which forum organizers can make people aware of civic forums, encourage people to attend, and even provide feedback to the broader public on what was discussed and decided. Community groups commonly make use of the media in this way, but there are some points worth highlighting, specifically in relation to radio and deliberative forums.

First, in their study of links between communication and participation, McLeod, et al. (1999) concluded that while newspaper use and exposure to television news may directly and indirectly stimulate various forms of political participation, these do not include participation in a civic forum. They found that only interpersonal discussion had a significant impact on motivating people to participate in an actual forum. If one thinks of talk or call-in radio as a form of (mediated) interpersonal discussion, then this format is worth serious consideration as a means of motivating people to participate in deliberation. It would require members of the group organizing the forum to approach a radio station to suggest that some time be devoted to on-air discussion of deliberation as a practice, with callers (and, by extension, listeners) being invited to participate in an upcoming forum.

Second, if local radio stations are interested in covering the forum process as part of their current affairs or documentary programming, organizers' experience with other media has shown that it is crucial to explain in detail the principles and process behind the deliberative forum before the actual forum takes place. For example, in working with local public television, the West Virginia Center for Civic Life found that program hosts who had not been properly briefed focused on questions that placed politicians, instead of citizens, at the center of the process.

Third, like television or video, radio reporting or audio is ideal for conveying the emotional tenor of a forum, in a manner that is difficult to achieve in print. At the same time, radio production is far cheaper than television, and it may be easier to get time on local radio dedicated to forum-related programming than it would be to get similarly dedicated time on television. Certainly this is true in South Africa, where television is a national medium, while there are a number of local community radio stations with a specific mandate to facilitate citizen political involvement.

#### Four: Bringing about actual deliberative forums

A radio station is a social institution, and noncommercial stations at least could be considered a vital and active element of civil society. Many listeners tune in to these stations because they are civic-minded and want more in-depth news about social and political developments. Some of them demonstrate their commitment to public broadcasting by donating money to keep these stations on the air.

Just as *The Cincinnati Enquirer* initiated a series of neighborhood forums on race in 2001-2002 and then reported on the process in the pages of the newspaper, there is no reason why radio stations cannot play a role in organizing public deliberative forums. They have an advantage over newspapers: they can broadcast the forum live, thus allowing hundreds, perhaps thousands more citizens to listen in, follow the development, hear the various approaches and resolutions, and perhaps even call in to contribute to the discussion.

There are some examples of radio stations playing a role in organizing actual community forums. In the two brief cases presented below, the forums under discussion were not deliberative in the NIF sense. However, these examples do demonstrate that as institutions, some stations are already organizing public meetings in which citizens and politicians come together for various forms of public talk. Clearly, the potential for deliberative forums is there. These examples also illustrate how functions overlap. At the same time as holding actual public forums, these stations have broadcast the

*There is no reason why radio stations cannot play a role in organizing public deliberative forums.*

proceedings live, on air. The public sphere of the forum is thus nested in the broader public sphere of the radio audience.

#### *Appalshop and WMMT: A Public Space*

Appalshop and its radio station, WMMT, were discussed earlier but are worth mentioning in this context, too. The station has organized a series of candidate forums preceding local and state elections. WMMT's studios are in the Appalshop building in downtown Whitesburg. Around the corner from the studio there is an auditorium with seating for a couple of hundred people. Reportedly the largest such public space in the town, it is an ideal place for holding community forums. With the mere flick of a switch, they can be broadcast live on the station, which has a signal reaching a large part of the Appalachian region.

#### *Idasa and Cape Talk*

Prior to the South African local-government elections in 2000, Pieter Marais and Lynne Brown, the two candidates for mayor in Cape Town, participated in a public debate in the foyer of the Cape Town Democracy Centre, the offices of Idasa. The candidates answered questions from members of a panel and from the audience, and the entire debate was broadcast live on the radio station Cape Talk. The debate was vigorous and the audience at times threatened to get out of control, but the politicians did get to provide detailed answers to a range of questions. After the public forum was over, Cape Talk listeners called in to discuss the candidates and issues for hours afterward.

It was the first and only time the two candidates had agreed to join a debate and, probably more than any other event, it gave the citizens of Cape Town detailed insight into the candidates' thinking. Again, it was not a deliberative forum. The politicians were the focus of attention and the audience was partisan, but after the end of the actual forum, detailed discussion of the issues continued on air, and the station's switchboard was jammed for hours, as listeners called

in to air their views. It is an example of a program that opens the door to a similar, more deliberative forum in the future.

## The characteristics of radio

In considering the role of radio in the process of public deliberation, it is worth taking a closer look at some of radio's qualities to assess how these correspond with the requirements of deliberation.

*Immediate:* Radio offers an immediacy that has only recently been paralleled by television and the Internet. A radio producer can get someone on the air in seconds via telephone, high-speed ISDN lines, or other means, and can get access to news and opinions from down the street to across the world. With regard to deliberation, it means that unlike print, radio can offer an immediate, real-time, back-and-forth exchange of ideas. As illustrated by Marla Crockett, other kinds of input, such as E-mails, can be brought into the discussion as soon as it is available. Similarly, it would be possible for a producer to call someone for a specific viewpoint or for background information should that be needed, and put that person's voice on-air immediately.

*Inexpensive:* Radio is one of the cheapest media to produce. Unlike print, in which each extra copy bears a cost, broadcast within a given region costs the producer the same, whether one person or one million people tune in. Audience members pay only once for their receivers — and radio receivers are within the means of almost everyone. The equipment needed for radio recording and broadcast is much cheaper than for TV, and most studio work can be done using a normal desktop PC with free or inexpensive editing software. Whereas the annual NIF television program on deliberations, “A Public Voice,” is Washington-based, with extensive production requirements and costs, radio deliberation projects can be started up at the local level, at small stations and in small communities as well as in bigger ones, such as KERA in Dallas. Deliberation on radio can be local, limited to a specific station and looking at local issues, or it can be national in

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***“There is no medium more ubiquitous than radio, no source of information, entertainment, music, sports, weather, and business news more pervasive in people’s lives.”***

scope, done through large organizations such as NPR.

*Accessible:* This is related to the inexpensive nature of radio — the low cost of receivers makes radio widely accessible to rich and poor. In addition, there is no literacy barrier to overcome. The local nature of radio means that people can be reached in their own local languages and dialects.

*Pervasive:* As Marilyn J. Matelski puts it, “There is no medium more ubiquitous than radio, no source of information, entertainment, music, sports, weather, and business news more pervasive in people’s lives” (1993). People can listen to radio while they are cooking, cleaning, typing, or driving. There is no need to take time out specifically to devote attention to it the way one must do to watch TV. People often listen to radio with half an ear, and attention comes and goes in waves, although this may be more true when listening to music than to talk.

*Fleeting:* Radio broadcasts are fleeting in nature. Listeners have to be able to understand something the first time, as there is no opportunity to go back to figure things out. Once programs are aired, they are gone. They can, of course, be recorded, but this is not nearly as common as it is with TV programs, which can be taped by VCRs.

*Theatre of the Mind:* Radio engages the imagination in a way that TV does not. Marshall McLuhan (1964) called it a hot medium, which arouses emotion and attachment in the listener, as opposed to TV, which is cool, bringing about passivity and detachment in the viewer. TV hands everything to the viewer, encouraging both mental and physical passivity, while one must engage with radio, create mental pictures. At the same time, it conveys mood and emotion and a sense of place in a way print cannot. This makes it an excellent medium for getting people to imagine themselves in others’ shoes. Just as in deliberation, during which people must imagine and weigh scenarios in their heads, radio stimulates mental pictures and activates the imagination, rather than feeding audience members prepared images in the way TV does.

The fleeting nature of radio, and the fact that it is often present in the background, means that it is easy to miss

specific programming. It is important to make sure publicity strategies take this into account and ensure that scripting and presentation convey concepts simply and build in a degree of repetition.

An additional disadvantage of radio is that commercial stations, particularly in the U.S., cater to fairly narrow audience niches. This means that a talk show or discussion program on one station will generally reach only a narrow segment of a community, and this limits the extent to which a call-in show can be called a truly public space. This is less true of public or community radio stations, which by their nature attempt to be as inclusive as possible, and in many instances command high loyalty from community members.

Radio offers some specific advantages, however. Talk or call-in shows may be accessible to more citizens than physical public forums. In many cases, people need not take time out from domestic demands or office chores in order to listen. Transport to a venue is also no problem, as people can listen and participate from their homes. In some areas of countries like South Africa, active participation may be limited because of lack of access to a telephone, but this is changing and cell phone use is increasingly widespread.

Some studies have raised the concern that radio talk-show hosts ridicule some participants, favor white males and distort participation in other ways, but once again, this is not inherent in the medium and can be countered by sensitive moderation. Ross (2001), for example, found that producers of the political call-in shows she studied performed well in balancing gender participation.

While, in general, white males may participate more in talk radio, there are specific instances in which radio may be particularly well-suited for reaching and involving women and marginalized sections of society. Immigrant communities, or those whose culture and language is under threat (such as the residents of Pine Ridge), may rely intensely on a radio station as a means of building or fortifying their identity and linking the community. Again, participation in radio demands far fewer commitments of time and money than other activities or media do. For women who are homebound, radio can be

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an important and easily accessible link with the wider community. Radio can play the same role during the day for those who work at jobs where thought-provoking programs may provide valuable mental stimulation.

A further advantage of radio is its ability to serve as a vehicle for political action. Kim, et al. (1999) categorize calling in to a talk show as political participation in and of itself. An example of this is Page's (1996) study of the Zoë Baird case, which was discussed earlier. Page shows that elite attitudes about Zoë Baird's nomination for attorney general changed from positive to negative in direct response to the overwhelmingly anti-Baird public opinion that was being expressed on talk radio. In South Africa, community radio is supposed to act as an important channel for popular participation in democracy by allowing the people's voices to be heard. Call-in or talk shows are a central means for bringing this about.

## **A scenario: Adapting the radio talk-show format for deliberation**

It may be useful to experiment with the use of radio in the public deliberation process, and a model that combines the actual civic forum with a broadcast context may be the most fruitful one. The presence of an actual group of forum participants in a studio or other space may make moderation easier, while modeling the process for listeners, who will be able to participate by calling in. This is not simply a forum that happens to be broadcast live — elements of the forum are adapted to include the listener as an integral part of the event, not simply as an electronic fly on the wall. Here is my initial suggestion of how such a program might proceed.

*The preparation:* The forum has been discussed and publicized in the usual manner, with extensive discussion about it on the radio station during the preceding week. Listeners have been told they can download guides (issue books) off the Internet, pick them up from the station, or request them by post. Summaries have perhaps been published in cooperative local papers.

*The setting and procedure:* A small group of participants have gathered (15-20 may be a convenient upper limit) in the studio of the radio station. They sit in a circle, with microphones prepositioned to pick up what is being said from any part of the circle. The host/moderator welcomes attendees and listeners to the forum and explains the ground rules, which include mutual respect, a search for choices based on the common good, and equality — the usual procedure that is followed in a deliberative forum. In addition, it is made clear that both attendees and listeners are full participants, and listeners will be able to participate by calling in to make their points. A production staffer is available to take calls and provide some basic screening.

One person in the circle has been designated the listeners' representative. This person will be alerted by headphone when a caller is waiting to talk. She/he will raise her/his hand, as anyone else present might do, but when acknowledged by the moderator, this person will remain silent. The caller will then be welcomed and asked to speak.

*The forum:* Short audio packages have been prepared that present each of the three or four deliberative approaches. Each package is around three minutes long, and uses all the techniques available to radio, such as music, narrative, interviews, and sound effects to present a perspective. In addition, one person in the studio has been chosen to repeat the three main points associated with each approach — the advantages and disadvantages and the tradeoffs.

As with a forum, discussion proceeds to each perspective in turn, and finally to the action steps. At 15-minute intervals, the recorder offers a short recap of the process and the proceedings so far. Those in the studio participate as they would in a normal forum, while listeners make points by calling in, and like the others, spend the rest of the time listening. At the end, the forum is wrapped up in the usual manner, with the recorder reporting back on the proceedings and confirming the forum participants' choices and decisions.

*The follow up:* Because the entire forum has been on microphone, it is a simple matter to record it. After the event, producers could put together a condensed version for rebroad-



cast and a five-minute audio summary to be played at intervals over the following week. If the station has a Web site, listeners could be encouraged to send in further comments and ideas via E-mail (and may be able to listen to parts of the proceedings, read the issue book, and so forth on-line) before a final report is compiled. In addition to a written element, the final report would contain audio extracts from the forum to convey aspects such as mood, emotion, and intensity.

A forum conducted in this manner may lose some of the desired qualities of nonbroadcast forums. Being on-air may inhibit discussion, and the fact that not all participants are physically present may change the dynamics or atmosphere in the room. However, the static position of microphones should limit the feeling of intrusion, while participants have come to the studio knowing they are to be part of a live broadcast. In addition, there are possible benefits to be gained. Participation in the forum is potentially widened considerably. Even listeners who do not call in gain the benefit of hearing the proceedings and following the deliberation. Officeholders and decision makers also may follow the forum, without the potential to distort the focus of the discussion by being in the room. I believe it is certainly something worth trying.

## Conclusion

*... by ignoring radio, those who believe in public deliberation are missing out on an extremely useful and adaptable vehicle for bringing about increased public participation in democracy.*

I have discussed four ways in which mass media can play a role in deliberative democracy. In the United States, the greater attention paid to TV and print and the widespread view of talk radio as irredeemably divisive and sensationalist have led to radio's constructive potential being overlooked. I believe that the research and case studies I have discussed show that radio deserves more serious consideration and that by ignoring radio, those who believe in public deliberation are missing out on an extremely useful and adaptable vehicle for bringing about increased public participation in democracy. I have highlighted the qualities of radio, which should be taken into account when considering its role in the deliberative process. Finally, I have presented an example of how a radio program might be constructed in order to hold an on-air deliberative forum similar to NIF forums.

The scenario is intended as a "high-end" deliberative scenario. There is no guarantee that this will work, or that it will be possible in many radio situations. However, I hope my paper has helped show that radio can play a role in deliberation, even given a wide range in financial, resource, and programming restrictions. It may be that those wanting to introduce a more deliberative stance on radio will have to start in small ways. The specific model is not important. What is important is that it embrace the central elements of deliberation: it should be 1) a public process that 2) conceives of and addresses listeners as public citizens and 3) involves genuine grappling with choices.

Ultimately, I believe the argument for more active consideration of radio is a strong one, because what is central to deliberation is central to radio more than to any other mass medium — public talk.

## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> These categories may not be exhaustive and are certainly not intended to be mutually exclusive. Radio and the media, in general, may perform two or more of these roles simultaneously. There may be other roles I have overlooked or not considered. I group my discussion into these categories merely as a matter of convenience.
- <sup>2</sup> It should be borne in mind that paths of causality in this and other studies cited later are often unclear, although Hofstetter and other scholars (see for example, Pan and Kosicki, 1997) do suggest that talk shows may indeed have some mobilizing influence.
- <sup>3</sup> There are also several other organisations in the U.S. engaged in similar processes that are not specifically linked with the Kettering Foundation or NIF. Study Circles Resource Center of Pomfret, CT, is one example.
- <sup>4</sup> Some readers of this paper might argue that the case studies I present do not illustrate the practice of deliberation as defined by the National Issues Forums Institute (NIFI) or the Kettering Foundation. I would remind these readers of the intent of this paper, as stated in my introduction — to show the potential of radio as a medium in which such deliberation might take place. I believe that if the examples of public talk I include do not illustrate deliberation in the strict sense, they certainly show that the potential for such deliberation is there. I would also remind these readers that some researchers have argued that deliberation using the NIF model very often fails to happen even in actual forums specifically set up for this purpose (See Ryfe, 2002, for example). This observation has not led to the abandonment of such forums, but to efforts to improve them. Similarly, I argue that if the media, and radio in particular, fail to create a space for deliberation this simply means more work remains to be done.
- <sup>5</sup> Initially, stations could be licensed to serve either geographical communities or communities of interest. The licensing authority has stated it will no longer issue licenses to communities of interest. In general, community-of-interest licenses have gone to religious groups, and such stations tend to serve white, urban listeners. In contrast, most stations serving geographical communities cater to African listeners in disadvantaged areas, both urban and rural.

- <sup>6</sup> Another example of a true community station is KILI, on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. KILI and WMMT are discussed in more detail in the case studies that follow.
- <sup>7</sup> It is interesting to note that while Americans overwhelmingly relied on television as their primary source of information on September 11, radio's strength was seen as aiding the healing process and promotion of community (Arbitron, 2002). One can only speculate about how many people were first alerted to the events of September 11 by radio, before rushing to find a TV.
- <sup>8</sup> See also Hofstetter, et al. 1994.
- <sup>9</sup> An example in support of this view is Armstrong and Rubin's 1989 study of talk radio as interpersonal communication.
- <sup>10</sup> It could be argued that in this case, Ecton is obstructing deliberation, since discussion of the nature of problems is a key part of deliberation in the NIF model. However, the point of this example is not to show deliberation in action, but to illustrate that even commercial talk radio offers space for getting listeners and callers to think about the common good. At least Ecton, in contrast to many of his counterparts, is trying to get callers to talk as citizens, to offer solutions rather than merely complain about problems.
- <sup>11</sup> According to Arbitron, the audience for news, talk, and information radio formats in general tends to be over 40 years of age, with preference for this format rising with age (2001). Figures from NPR indicate that their listeners tend to be college graduates or postgraduates, age 35-64, with annual household incomes above \$75,000 (Duncan, 2002).

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