'I entertain my friends': Talk radio callers' views on their role in entertaining the audience

Kate Ames,
Central Queensland University, Australia

Jacqui Ewart,
Griffith University, Australia

Abstract:
This article explores the views of talk radio audiences on their role as entertainers and their awareness of the rules of engagement when interacting with talk radio programmes. Data is drawn from focus group interviews involving 135 people representing the audiences of 12 different radio stations in Australia. Participants had self-categorised as active talk radio listeners of particular radio stations to which they were asked to make comment. However, it emerged that participants were highly literate about the talk radio format more generally, and saw themselves as having a role as contributors. As an empirical study, this article confirms conceptual theory by revealing the orientation to format rather than programme. It expands knowledge about talk radio audiences by revealing the way in which audience members acknowledge the commodification of the medium, and see themselves as adding value by helping hosts entertain a broader listening community.

Keywords:
Talkback radio, talk radio, radio audience, radio formats, listening community

Introduction

Radio has a reputation for connecting people. The voices that beam into lounge rooms, cars and over headphones talk to everyone as someone (Scannell, 1996), and provide some form of comfort or company to those who are isolated (Ewart, 2011; Tebbutt, 2007). Despite the onslaught of media options that potentially dilute radio audiences, the medium remains as

strong as ever and markets continue to grow (Lindgren & Phillips, 2014; 'Record numbers tune in to commercial radio in 2015', 2016). As a popular format of radio programming, talk radio in Australia, also known as talkback radio or radio phone-in, remains resilient in the face of challenge in a dynamic media environment.

Talk radio has been theorized and examined from a range of perspectives: mediatisation (Couldry, Livingstone, & Markham, 2007); interaction (Brand & Scannell, 1991; Gillman, 2007; Harris & Scannell, 1991; Hutchby, 1991, 1996, 2006; Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998; Thornborrow, 2002); performance (Ewart & Ames, 2016; O'Sullivan, 2005; Tebbutt, 2006a); political influence and engagement (Flew, 2000a; Turner, 2001, 2009); and historical development (Gould, 2009; Griffen-Foley, 2004; Tebbutt, 2006b). The 'talk radio community' has been previously explored empirically (Barker, 2002; O'Sullivan, 2005). We know that talk radio callers are aware of the role they play and are active participants in the mediated interaction that is a talk radio program (O'Sullivan, 2005). However, empirical studies done to determine the way in which talk radio listeners engage with radio programs have focused on specific programs – for example, Alan Jones in Australia (Crofts & Turner, 2007) and Gerry Ryan in Ireland (O'Sullivan, 2005). Croft and Turner's 2007 study of Alan Jones was based on broadcast recordings, but 42 participants were questioned in O'Sullivan's 2005 study about their specific experiences or participation in *The Gerry Ryan Show.* Further, Rubin and Step's study on the motivation of 235 talk radio listeners was quantitative and in seeking response from survey participants, asked them 'to focus on a favorite talk show host' (2000, p. 650).

We also know that talk radio is company for listeners (Rubin & Step, 2000), and that talk radio audiences are situated as commodified and many have theorized conceptually over its role (Flew, 2000b, 2004; Tebbutt, 2006a, 2006b). However empirical evidence in Australia about talk radio from a qualitative academic rather than quantitative commercial perspective is still rare. The focus of existing research has taken an individualistic approach – the relationship between *a listener* and *a radio program* rather than the relationship between listeners as a community, noting as exceptions Tebbutt's work on the historical development of talk radio audiences as a format audience (2006b); talk radio as a format for community connection (Ewart, 2011; Ewart & Ames, 2016); and the role of parasocial interaction on listener motivation (Rubin & Step, 2000). Fifty years after the first talk radio program commenced (in 1967), we believe it is worth reflecting on audience perspectives of the format.

This article is drawn from a large Australian project that examined the views of talkback listeners about the role talk radio played in their lives. This article focuses on a dominant theme that emerged, being 'audience as entertainer'. In exploring in detail the views of a community of listeners who are 'talk radio' audiences, the article takes a practice-based approach to examining a media audience (see Couldry, 2011). It builds on previous findings about the active nature of talk radio audiences to establish the way in which listeners demonstrate what we refer to as 'format literacy' and an explicit awareness of the value they bring to talkback programming. These findings, as empirical evidence, are unique and serve to support and challenge theoretical perspectives about how listeners are affected

by and use participatory media.

Data and Method

This data is drawn from focus group interviews with 135 (n=71 female; 64 male) people who self-identified as listeners of talk radio programs in Australia. Participants were drawn from audience groups of 12 talk radio programs, the programs being broadcast daily (breakfast, morning, drive and late night programs of two to four hours duration), and one weekly program (broadcast for one hour per week). Ten of the programs were metropolitan-based and two identified as regional programmes: 4BC Brisbane and ABC Brisbane in Queensland; 2UE Sydney, SBS Arabic Program and 2MFM Sydney, ABC Lismore (held in Byron Bay) and ABC Sydney in New South Wales; 5AA Adelaide, ABC Adelaide and ABC Renmark in South Australia; and 2CC ACT and ABC ACT in the Australian Capital Territory. Focus group participants were solicited by on-air announcement via the radio programs, and participants self-nominated by phoning a free-call number. No incentives aside from light refreshments were given to participants, and focus group sessions were held in hotel conference rooms and public meeting spaces. The sessions aimed to engage participants in semi-structured discussion, but time was allowed to ensure participants could raise their own issues. The nature of recruitment ensured that all participants, through self-nomination, were active listeners of talkback or interacted with the station regularly. This approach has been previously used in radio research in Australia (Meadows, Forde, Ewart, & Foxwell, 2007). Focus group interviews were transcribed and coded using inductive coding (Joffe and Yardley 2004) to categorize the data and identify the key themes using NVivo. All caller, host, and station information is de-identified for the purpose of anonymity in this article.

Data and Discussion

In this section of the article we focus on the two key themes that emerged from the data: study participants' familiarity with the requirements of talkback formats (format literacy) and the way in which audience members value-add to talkback programmes. This latter theme includes a focus on callers' contributions that are designed to entertain audiences.

Format literacy

Through self-identification and nomination, focus group participants were categorised as having a connection with the particular radio station about which they were contributing comment. Although listeners were recruited via specific stations, they demonstrated that they were not specifically aligned to one program. Further, discussions in focus groups revealed that the listeners a knowledge and awareness of rules of the genre generally (not just one programme), and a broad awareness of programmes and hosts. For example, they were able to comment about a range of hosts and their preferences:

> I think the difference between ((Station A)) and ((Station 2)) is that ((Station 1))

is more taking the middle of the road approach and some have some more, as I say. Host A is particularly enlightened. Host B's experience, although his political views are well known and people like Host C are adopting a middle of the road sort of mild position. Whereas all these Station 2 people are brow beat, there's a certain megalomania operating, people like Host A, Host D and Host E, which I find quite disturbing in public, it's just accepting that sort of holus bolus.

The above statement is an example to indicate that talk radio audiences are not necessarily 'rusted on to' one program or host (Salter, 2006). This speaker demonstrated an awareness of multiple hosts and was able to comment specifically about style and approach across a range of hosts. This type of comment was common, and participants in the focus groups routinely made comment about a broader range of hosts and callers, with another example being:

> P1: … you only have to listen to somebody like ((Host A firstname)), everyone knows, at ((station)).
>
> P2: ((Host A's surname, as correction to P1)).
>
> P1: ((Host A's full name)) at night who captures 25% of the listeners … I think everything ((another participant)) said, I would agree with. I am a listener across the channels. I love ((Station A)) as much as I love ((Station B)). There are some great presenters. I mean ((Host B)), let's face it, he was a huge presenter on ((Station A)) and moved across to ((Station B)) and I think the audience went with him because he is just so hugely popular. He's got a big share of the market and somebody like ((Host C)) who I really, sorry you're going to hate me, I really resent the term shock jock, I just don't think he's a shock jock. He has his point of view just like every other announcer has his point of view and I don't think he shocks at all, I think he presents the facts as he sees them as every other announcer does, and he's hugely popular. He's been popular for years. He captures a massive market, he beats ((Station C)) out of existence after ((Host D)) left the station and because I can't get through to stations, I'm turning to email now, email and text.

In this interaction, the two participants demonstrate a noticeable level of format expertise. One participant adds information to the other's story by inserting a surname, reflecting shared knowledge about the host to which P1 was referring. P1 reflects knowledge of a range of speakers and station approaches, and indicates a change in interactive practice (turning to text and email) because of this knowledge. The way in which these participants conversed about the topic reflected that knowledge was expressed as a form of cultural capital within the group. The focus group was comprised of people who had self-nominated

as radio listeners, but discussion suggested that participants potentially viewed themselves as expert listeners who were confident to display detailed knowledge about programs and hosts to fellow participants.

This is significant because previous research about talk radio audiences has almost exclusively focused on specific programs and the interactions of hosts with callers. We refer to this broader sense of awareness and knowledge as 'format literacy'. While listeners may be aligned to a particular host, many of them were more strongly aligned to the format, and the ability within the format to participate as a member of a listening community. It is therefore the genre of talkback with which they want to engage. This supports Tebbutt's assertion that that: 'Talk formats, their incarnation by hosts and the tailoring of advertising copy to the qualities of corporate identities, are critical procedures in the commodity audience production process' (p. 879). What is most interesting for the purposes of our study is the absolute awareness among participants that they, as the audience, are providing value within the format.

Valued adding for entertainment

There was a value-adding element for some participants in their engagement with talk radio programs and this was part of their understanding of the demands of the format – in other words part of their format literacy. This was evidenced through the way they talked about their interactions with the format. The following extract is based on an interaction between two participants in one focus group:

> P1: I've replied to a few letters to the editor, reply to the person that wrote the letter, get my point of view across, tell him he's an idiot

> P2: I'm not a regular phone in person but I've never really had to wait, say 20 minutes or something like that, you get on, I think, in five minutes or something. But the other thing I have done, phoning up, was to correct something they said but my first comment is 'I don't need to go on air', what I just want to say it … and often you find is it will get repeated later, someone else phones up in that same.

> P1: They won't give you that credit.

> P2: Oh, I'm not worried about that, I just think, I'm putting out the information

> P1: You should get the credit

The significance of this exchange lies in audience members' recognition that their own and others' contributions to talk segments adds value. This role of 'caller as entertainer' was

reinforced when callers were actively recruited by radio programs. Another caller said they were contacted regularly by a program producer:

> P1: (Host's) producer will call me during the day and say we know you are interested in this subject, we want to talk about this subject this afternoon, would you like to call.

> P2: Are you serious, they're recruiting you as a caller? That's great.

> P1: They have actually called me a few times just to say, we know you're interested in this subject, would you like to talk about it. I also run my own websites so … I put something on there that interests them.

P2's response here that it was 'great' that a producer attempted to proactively contact them reflects the perceived value of a relationship between the station and a member of the audience. That P2 was surprised about a producer proactively seeking contact indicates that this is possibly not a wide practice, or may be a practice specific to a particular station. The interaction also illustrates the fact that producers recognize the potential value in audience members as 'talent' for the program. Overall, this interaction indicates that the relationships between callers and programs are more complex than may appear to the casual observer, with some programs actively recruiting those callers they know will make a significant contribution to the program be it through humour or information.

Further to this, participants identified what they considered 'acceptable' behaviour by producers when interaction was mediated. For example, in the following interaction, participants generally agreed that a call rejection was understandable:

> P1: I'm also a self-regulator as well, because, if I'm on in the morning, then I'll try not to get on in the afternoons. I did actually have, on one occasion, I was on the drive show one day, then I think I was on the overnight show that night, and then I just, I wasn't thinking and then I just rang in for the breakfast show and I was told, you were on this show and this show, we're not taking your call, go away. Call back tomorrow or send an email.

> P2: They actually said that?

> P1: Yes.

> P2: I think that's reasonable.

> P1: They pretty much said that same thing, we don't want to just have it being the same people over and over, we want a mix of people and a mix of views.

Many callers talked about calling on behalf of others. For example:

> I sort of ring up and make some calls other people wouldn't do because they're probably not like me, you know. Some people might call me a nark, you know, like ((host)) at 8 o'clock, I probably listen to ((host)) for an hour and a half but I normally get in the first ten minutes cos after that they go on a bit different, other programming on the program, and I'd say he's probably liberal like myself. He's got a point of view and I always like to follow it up with something and some people might like it and some people don't but obviously it's more regular callers that call in that you look forward to, to help.

This responder makes a contribution because he wants to help, and he did this because he believed others wouldn't, or weren't in a position to make the call. These interactions demonstrated a nuanced understanding of the requirements of the format, including the role of callers as entertainment (or entertainers) or to provide assistance to other listeners.

Another way in which study participants felt they value-added to talk segments was by performing to entertain the listening community Participants were aware of their own entertainment value but saw interaction as having personal value – it was an enjoyable part of being a radio audience member. For example:

> Well in my case, I ring up, not because I want to pretend I'm a journalist, I ring up because I just get a buzz out of it and like I said, at the beginning, it's interacting and participating and I know that other people are listening and they don't have the courage to ring up. I even have friends ring up and say, why don't you ring up about this? So I attempt to ring up or usually send an email. It's what you get out of it and how you participate in it.

This participant therefore recognised that one of his potential roles was to entertain the listening community, but he also realised the specific performative requirements of the format. Participants also demonstrated that a certain amount of confidence was needed to be able to interact with the station and hosts:

> Can I just say, I think it requires a degree of self-confidence to call in anyhow and so I think for any immigrant that would be calling in, it would really require a certain degree of confidence with the language.

This response indicates that the participant recognizes the public and interactive nature of the medium. They also recognize the performative nature of engagement, whereby interaction needs to be understood by others.

Previous research into agenda setting and talkback has largely focused on the role of talkback programs and hosts in setting news agendas and the flow through of this to

mainstream news media agendas (Ewart, 2016; Turner, 2001, 2009). Some participants in this study, however, clearly believed they had a role in setting the agenda for the talk on a program. They believed they did this by attracting listeners and callers, and it was clear that participants didn't orient to talk radio as a news-based format; rather, they viewed talk radio as entertainment. For example:

> *Interviewer: So you're actually setting the agenda to an extent?*
>
> P1: Kind of because that's the whole point of having talkback. Like for instance there was a time where ((Host and Host))...were giving away tickets to a show and for one or two seconds, ((Host)) started singing so I sent them a text message ...everybody started talking about how they were singing and started the talk about that.
>
> *Interviewer: You started the whole world singing.*
>
> P1: So the whole point, and then people were ringing me up at work saying, they were singing because of you or whatever. So I use it as a form of, I don't know, interaction and just getting into it. I don't want to be a passive listener because the other thing, might as well put a CD on.

Here, the participant believes that they have influenced the performance of the host. Their involvement in the program is about getting something out of it at a more personal level; they don't want to just be passive listeners – they want to be part of the show. This was echoed by a number of other participants. For example:

> So I also do it for entertainment. I entertain my friends by ringing up or sending emails or texting. So the idea is that I don't believe, because news articles are so controlled by the media moguls that control, they tell you what they want you to hear or read and television is the same. The media is so controlled by the people that own that you really can't say, I'm going to be just listening to the radio or listening to the news so you've got to sort of mix it all up and then you make your own decisions on it. But I see it as entertainment because if you really strictly think the radio is going to give you all the news or all the information, I think that's not right. So you've got to mix it up and to see it as only as entertainment.

This participant was very clear that they were aware of the power relationship between owners and media. By acknowledging this in the response, it is clear that this talk radio caller feels a sense of control of the media by being able to make choices about the way in which they can interact. This is consistent with previous research on talk radio callers that

highlights that they are aware of the context in which their interaction with a radio program occurs (O'Sullivan, 2005).

The above comments indicate that callers are proactively engaging with talk radio for entertainment-based agenda setting purposes. Most significantly, these callers were driving an agenda that focused on entertainment within and for a virtual listening community. For example, participants said they liked being able to hear regular callers because there was an element of familiarity and entertainment in listening to those callers:

> But people want entertainment, that's why I like to listen to regular callers, you know. ((Caller)) from ((Suburb)), he used to ring in all the time but I haven't heard him for a long time, I think occasionally he rings, I think he emails or something, and that's why I listen to the show, I mean ((Different Caller)) rings in every now and then ((muffled, complaints about that caller)).

However, this familiarity with callers extended beyond the entertainment factor into a familiarity that manifested itself in various ways including acute awareness of the names of regular callers and events in their lives. Participants spoke enthusiastically and energetically about programs and hosts, and interacted with one another within the focus groups almost as friends who had shared connections. For example, the following interaction reveals the way in which listeners from one station-based group made reference to a regular caller who died:

> P1: Lots of people ring in. When ((host)) was on I think there was a guy who used to always ring up from ((City)) and he would talk about the ((Museum)).
>
> P2: That's ((name)).
>
> P1: Is he still going?
>
> P2: No he died.
>
> P1: He died?
>
> P2: He passed away. He died on air.
>
> P1: He died on air?
>
> P2: … I was joking. No, he passed away.
>
> P1: He passed away.
>
> P2: But it would be nice to die while ringing ((station)).

This interaction demonstrates shared community knowledge about a particular listener. The ability to share knowledge about this person within the focus group demonstrates the way in which members of an audience are able to connect about another listener based on common listening practices. It also reinforces the notion that callers provide value to the format and orient to one another as members of a format-based listening community.

One of the significant features of this data is that it revealed that participants oriented to the format of talkback generally, and stations broadly, as opposed to particular alignment with a program. Although participants mentioned specific programs and hosts in their discussions, they reported listening across programs. This is significant because most studies have examined the specific relationship between callers and hosts, rather than the connection audience members have with talkback as a format.

This research supports previous studies that have identified the proactive and participatory nature of talk radio audiences. It confirms that callers who self-identify as active participants in a radio audience are aware of the 'rules of engagement' (O'Sullivan, 2005). It also confirms the way in which callers self-regulate their behavior (Ewart, 2016). It provides empirical evidence that supports the concept thesis that audiences are format-based (Tebbutt, 2006b), and demonstrates that talk radio callers acknowledge their place within a commodified media environment.

Talk radio is not a format specific to mainstream media, and participants for this study were drawn from commercial, community and public broadcasters. Of interest was the orientation by participants to both voice as process *and* voice as value, with reference to Couldry's work voice as process and voice as value, noting the difference between them (Couldry, 2015). Participants were aware of the performance required to speak on a topic in a very public way, but they were also very aware of the opportunity afforded to them, the impact this had on the broader community, and the actual value they were providing to the program. They demonstrated a very high level of 'format literacy' – they understood the requirements of the format at interactional levels, and the broader context of the format in terms of how it may be used and understood by other participants. This was particularly the case with their understanding of the format requirements in relation to entertainment and humour.

Of particular interest was the way in which participants conversed with one another during the focus groups. It was through this interaction that categorization occurred as listeners and members of a community. Participants questioned, challenged, and supported one another on regular occasions, and helped qualify comments, again demonstrating a collective level of format literacy. If participants had only been interviewed or surveyed, the results may not have included reference to value or community and it was a reminder of the role focus groups play in qualitative research.

However, more importantly it reveals the way in which callers identify themselves as adding value to the program. Surprisingly the engagement with and contribution of talkback audience members to programs has received relatively little attention despite the significant lure/attraction of the format for audiences. It is an area that requires further exploration. In

addition it would be useful to track whether there are long-term changes in the ways in which audiences engage with talk radio as they age.

Conclusion

This article reviewed data from a large qualitative study on talk radio for which participants self-selected for involvement. Participants demonstrated that they were engaged and enthusiastic members of a listening audience. Key findings were that participants orient to format rather than programs, and see themselves as part of the 'entertainment value' of a program. This work builds on previous knowledge that highlights the informed way listeners engage with radio programs. It argues that audience members are literate about a format, not just programs, and demonstrates the way in which members see that they contribute value to the genre. The findings have application for media audience researchers internationally, because it demonstrates the way in which audience members engage actively as consumers and participants in the mediasphere.

Acknowledgements:

Biographical notes:

Kate Ames is an Associate Professor at Central Queensland University, Australia. Academically, she is a cultural sociologist whose scholarship is in the area of culture, language, interaction, and education. She has a particular interest in radio, storytelling, and community membership that occurs in and for the public. Contact: k.ames@cqu.edu.au.

Jacqui Ewart is a Professor at Griffith University in Brisbane, Australia. She was a journalist and communications manager for more than a decade before joining the academy. Jacqui's main research interests are news media representations of Muslims, disasters communication and radio audiences. She is the Chief Investigator on the Reporting Islam project (2014-2018). Her latest book (2018) co-authored with Dr Kate O'Donnell is *Reporting Islam: International Best Practice for Journalists* published by Routledge. Contact: j.ewart@griffith.edu.au.

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