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Radio Talk: Discourse

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Talk Radio: Political
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Abstract:

Radio has always had the potential to change public life. Ordinary citizens participate in programs in which they call in the radio station and express their opinion. As such, these programs are part of the public sphere, as well as an entertainment form. These programs are taken as a service in public station, and as a revenue source in commercial stations. In the commercial stations, the shows promote the one-sided political agenda of their hosts-stars. In the public stations, the shows facilitate a balanced discussion among different citizens. All participants in both types of programs use argumentative practices, including the use of rhetoric. Yet, the host is the power-holder in the interactions. The programs and interactions in them also encode other power relations, as these programs may promote conservative, at times racist views. Radio is still a masculine medium, and participants in talk radio adhere to the normative gender order.

Main Text:
          Social Theorists have pointed to the political potential radio has had since the early 20th century. Brecht suggested that radio can revolutionize society for the better because it can be "not only of transmitting but of receiving, of making the listener not only hear but also speak, not of isolating him but of connecting him" (1932/1979, p.25). Radio (and its following electronic and digital media) has partially lived up to Brecht's dreamed potential and changed societies, yet often not in the revolutionary way. Still programs, which has two-way communication between the "transmitter," the station and a host, and the "receiver," the audience, receive high ratings and much attention from researchers.
          Quantitative research found connections between listening to call-in radio shows and participating in the political life. For example, listeners to right wing conservative talk radio in the United States tend to vote more than those who do not listen to these shows. Similar research demonstrated that radio talk shows and their hosts, via their discourse, enabled people to be part of a like-minded community. Some of these researchers are concerned with these homogeneous, not to say hegemonic, communities, at least in the US, and therefore study the potential negative influence of political talk radio on American politics. Indeed, Jamison and Cappella (2008) found radio talk to be a central part of the "echo chamber" that characterizes the new American conservative movement. This echo

chamber, comprised of voices and opinions from radio, television, and newspapers, has contributed to the polarization of American politics.

As Dori-Hacohen (2012a) writes, political talk radio is part of the public sphere. Habermas's public sphere demands that free and equal citizens rationally criticize the government, in order to reach a consensus on how to improve public life. Habermas (2006) modified his public sphere to be based on (1) an autonomous mediated space in which (2) ordinary citizens contribute to the public discussion. Additionally, Habermas located the public sphere between the private and the official sphere of politics, a space radio occupies since in most places the media is indeed not part of politics or of private life. In political talk radio citizens often talk critically of the government. The interaction is also between citizens who participate in the democratic deliberation in these programs. These discussions create a vibrant public life. Hosts treat callers equally, and at some programs strive for rational and practical discussions. Therefore talk radio is often studied as part of political participation current Western democracies.

Crisell (1994) explains that radio's popularity may be based on its ability to give the public a voice and to connect the individual to a public. On top of these contributions to Democracy, political talk radio also entertains. This entertainment is the result of the genre's argumentative nature and of the hosts' (masterful) use of rhetoric. Moreover, listeners enjoy both entertaining talk and get information about politics, in a genre that epitomizes infotainment. Infotainment is a current media trend to deliver information to the public in an entertaining, and often commercialized, way. For example, in American talk radio the hosts promote both a political agenda and products they like the audience to buy.

The discussion of talk radio, the public sphere, and infotainment has focused on highly developed, Western, usually English-speaking, democracies. As such, it is both endemic of Academia, as well as limited the discussion of radio's impact on the public sphere in other areas of the globe. Gunner, Ligaga, and Moyo (2011) showed how radio use contributed to the creation of a lively coherent public sphere in some communities in Africa, whereas in other African communities it promoted conflict. Regardless of its relations to the public sphere, radio has larger impact in Africa than elsewhere, as it is the medium of choice in this continent, which is often overlooked. I am not aware of similar research regarding South America or Asia for that matter, other than a study of phone-ins in Hong Kong, arguably the most Westernized area of Asia. Indeed, this study focused on infotainment and the role of radio phone-ins in it.

Origins of Political Talk Radio and its Subgenres

In the "Western" world, political talk radio programs stems from two traditions, originating in the U.S. and the United Kingdom. Talk was not always central in U.S. Radio, which between the 1920s and 1960s focused mainly on entertainment, e.g. music, live sport events, and other live events. Following the FM revolution at the end of the 1960s, radio talk developed on the vacant AM band. While music still dominates the FM dial, the AM dial has since been overridden by talk, and pundits' voices, personalities, and opinions, cheap resources, became the way to create revenues in these commercial stations. This development was coupled with a regulatory one, the cancellation of the fairness doctrine in 1987, which enabled hosts to present unbalanced political views. These developments, of technology and regulation, can be found in other countries as well.

The above differs from the story in the U.K.. There, starting as a public service, radio (the BBC) had a mandate to bring in the voices of ordinary people into the discussion, while the official policy of the station was to avoid promoting a specific political agenda. Following this view, public stations worldwide see it as their goal to have programs in which citizens share their views about current affairs, yet the stations should keep these discussions balanced.

These histories led to two types of political talk radio programs. The commercial-American model is a star oriented show, in which the host is the star and revenue maker. Moreover, the hosts own the show, which is named after him or her, and usually they promote their political opinions. These shows are called "Talk-Back" since the host talks back at the political regime, as he usually opposes the government. Listeners, who call the shows, usually agree with the host. On the rare occasions when they disagree, the host often mocks and humiliates them, to prove he is right.

While in the U.S., most hosts are conservative, in Israel the leading host of this genre is a left-wing socialist. As there is little resemblance between the American political right wing and the Israeli political left, the differences of opinions between the hosts in the US and in Israel suggest the "Talk-Back" does not demand a specific political slant but rather a populist one. Although these programs are one-sided they promote political action, as hosts motivate the audience to take an active role in politics.

In the public-U.K. model, taken up by many public stations, the program is for the callers, as the hosts facilitate the callers' discussions. The programs, therefore, are called "phone-ins" since ordinary citizens can phone into the station to express their opinion. Hosts treat the callers equally, as the programs enable the expression of their opinions. The callers voice diverse opinions, which present a balanced view of politics for their listeners. Yet, this balanced approach may result in low motivations for action, as the audience is not advised to take a specific line of political action.

These models are based on the type of station, and not on the country. The public model, the phone-in, can be found in public stations in the U.S. (in New York City, Haspell, 2001) and in Israel. Commercial stations in Israel broadcast "Talk-back" shows. Regardless of the sub-genre, political talk radio is based on specific phases and actions whose goal is to present an opinion.

Actions and Relations in the Political Phone-in Interaction

All political talk radio is based on the expressing of opinions. In the talk-back, the host is the one expressing his political opinions most often. Hutchby (cf. 1996) described the U.K. phone-ins, in which callers present their opinions interacting with the host. On top of the openings and closings of the interaction, Hutchby demonstrated the argument and its two main phases. Following the opening stage, the caller presents his or her opinion. During this phase, hosts use clarification questions, both to better understand the caller's position and for the audience to better understand as well.

Then the host and caller discuss the caller's opinion. As Hutchby (1996) describes, hosts employ various practices during this phase. The host can use utterances such as "you say X, what about Y." This usually functions to highlight a weakness, discrepancy, or tension in the caller's opinion, either through the fault of the caller's presentation, or the complexity of the topic introduced by the host. Hutchby describes other practices such as formulations, through which the host may exaggerate caller's position to ridicule it or them. Although hosts can present their opinions, using these and other similar practices, hosts

mainly challenge the caller's position without presenting a positive argument. Moreover, hosts can react with these practices to any position they hear without knowing it in advance. Therefore, they can deflect any opinion and thus focus on the caller's position.

Hutchby states that this "opinion-opposition" sequence creates disagreements in phone-ins. This sequence can also be found elsewhere, as in hybrid news interviews. In these interviews, the host starts with the traditional question-answer sequence but then switches to opinion-opposition sequences. Hutchby shows that this switch creates the hybridity of this genre, as opposed to the traditional news interview.

The argumentative nature of political talk radio shows explains the rhetorical elements in it. For example, Rush Limbaugh—the most popular U.S. talk-radio host and outspoken conservative—uses transpositions to ridicule or mock opinions he disagrees with, by quoting or mimicking the opinions he dislikes. Haspell (2001) showed that callers may start their interaction by presenting their credentials on the topic, which is another rhetorical ploy. Callers and hosts can use both pseudo-reasonable argumentative structures, yet Hutchby illustrated callers in the U.K. use "witnessing," by telling personal narratives, when they present their opinions.

Hutchby also studied relations between participants in phone-ins. He demonstrated how the host controls the interaction in the phone-in. This control is evident when hosts interrupt callers in order to manage the interaction. They use practices such as pre-questions to manage the interaction as well as to mark callers as uncooperative. Similarly, Housley and Fitzgerald (2009) show how hosts can play dumb when interacting with caller's biases. They show that callers try to present an opinion that includes the host, and the host rejects this inclusiveness, as part of the negotiations of morality, that can take place in the phone-ins.

Power and Identities as exercised on Radio

The negotiations of morality, norms and values, which Housley and Fitzgerald discuss, connect phone-ins to larger social issues, such as power and social relations. All Interactions encode social identities and power relations and phone-ins are no different. Interactions also encode social norms and hegemony. Especially in the U.S., political talk radio mainly promotes a conservative agenda. Therefore, at times, hosts use terms which betray racist viewpoints (Nicola, 2010). Similarly, sports radio was found to promote White American culture. Yet minority radio stations in the U.S., including Black communities, also utilize radio talk to unify their audience.

Moving from ethnicity to gender, radio is still a masculine medium. The dominant voice of radio broadcast is a male one. Political talk radio in particular has mainly male hosts, and they assume the callers are males:

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1. Host:      we're Starting i:n San Francisco:.
2.            Cris. (0.1) Thank you for calling sir.
3.            Great to have you here. Hi.
4. Caller:    (0.7) H↑i. I:: [I: must say:,
5. Host:                    [O:H. It's a female Kris.
6.            I'm sorry.    (The Rush Limbaugh Show, 07/31/2012)
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Here, the host assumes Cris is a masculine name by addressing the caller with "sir" (line 2). After hearing the female voice (line 4), the host shows his surprise (line 5), and

then apologizes to the female caller (line 6). The content of the discourse often trends towards sociocultural hegemonic norms. For instance, in Australian phone-ins, Rendle-Short (2005) found that heteronormativity is expressed more easily in some phone-ins. When a caller is part of a 'traditional' couple, containing a man and a woman, he or she referred to their relations in an unmarked way, whereas heterosexual relations were referred to with more difficulties, as callers avoided expressing their belonging to such social relations openly.

These findings resemble those of the Critical Discourse Analysis approach. CDA takes politics and inequalities to be inherent to all media programs and all interactions. For example, Fairclough (1995) analyzed interactions between hosts and different types of participants in medical radio shows. He demonstrated how the form of the interactions in the programs encodes social relations and power. When the hosts talked with doctors they showed deference and kept the traditional interview style. Thus, the host helped in constructing the doctors' expert status. This was opposed to the more conversational style of interaction between the host and ordinary people, which discredited their position.

As do all interactions, and especially mediated and institutional interactions, political radio talk demonstrates power relations and social identities in itself and within its structures. Yet, this division of power and labor may be culturally biased. Additionally, political talk radio also has the potential to enrich the public discussion by bringing various opinions and voices, exposing both the public biases and its creativity.

See Also: Political Discourse→ Power Discourse→ Identities→ Activism→ Radio Talk→ Discourse→ Gender→ Critical Discourse Analysis→ Public Participation→ Formulations→ Rhetoric devices

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