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## **'I know exactly who they are': radio presenters' conceptions of audience**

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### **Abstract:**

Since Horton and Wohl's (1956) recognition of the para-social relationship, there has been an interest in understanding audiences beyond commodification models. But while the relationship has long been named, little is understood about the process from 'inside' the presenter experience: what audiences mean to presenters, how the relationship is constructed and becomes real in the absence of face-to-face contact and when, for the most part, the presenter can only know the audience as an abstraction or a projection.

This paper will explore the way Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) talk radio presenters construct their audience as a dialogue partner, and the way that the on-air self is managed, in line with the corporate expectations of their employer, to achieve the appropriate symbolic indicators of friendship, sympathy, companionship, disclosure and intimacy. The findings are based on interviews with 14 leading ABC radio presenters, their producers, and trainers and associates.

**Keywords:** radio, audience, presenter, identity

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It's not surprising that audience research is a field that attracts attention. If you can catch them, audiences are valuable things: culturally as well as financially. Researchers including academics, ratings agencies, market research firms and broadcasting organisations have spent countless hours and dollars trying to work out just who watches and listens to, and why they do it.

But for all the ethnographic, content, uses and gratifications, effects models and rhetoric studies, a pivotal element in the mix has almost always been overlooked.

In radio at least, the audience and the broadcaster cannot be thought of as independent from each other; both are active in constituting the relationship. The dominant assumption is the naturalistic and somewhat simplistic position that presenters just need to 'be themselves'. However, because the relationship is unseen and from the audience side mostly anonymous, the actual processes through which the relationship is constituted are complex and have been somewhat obscure. Indications are that these processes are complex and involve high degrees of skill and experience on the part of presenters. Presenters and radio programme makers more broadly (producers and researchers) have much to tell us about audiences. An exploration of these understandings of audience has been largely absent from the debate.

### **'Pervasiveness and closeness'**

When Horton and Wohl coined the term 'para-social interaction' back in the 1950s they observed the bond that an audience forms with those they listen to and watch via electronic media. This was a strange phenomenon:

before that we generally needed to actually interact with someone – to be co-located with them over time – in order to feel that strong bond. But these (then relatively new) devices of television and radio had created a situation where people felt this level of connection with someone they'd never actually been in the same room with.

Horton and Wohl call those with whom this bond is formed 'personae'.

The persona is the typical and indigenous figure of the social scene presented by radio and television. To say that he is familiar and intimate is to use pale and feeble language for the pervasiveness and closeness with which multitudes feel his presence. The spectacular fact about such personae is that they can claim and achieve an intimacy with what are literally crowds of strangers, and this intimacy, even if it is an imitation and a shadow of what is ordinarily meant by that word, is extremely influential with, and satisfying for, the great numbers who willingly receive it and share in it. They 'know' such a persona in somewhat the same way they know their chosen friends: through direct observation and interpretation of his appearance, his gestures and voice, his conversation and conduct in a variety of situations (1956: 126).

Horton and Wohl's position is to see the persona as a deliberate and strategic creation:

The persona may be considered by his audience as a friend, counsellor, comforter, and model; but, unlike real associates, he has the peculiar virtue of being standardized according to the 'formula' for his character and performance which he and his managers have worked out and embodied in an appropriate 'production format' (1956: 217).

One of the criticisms of Horton and Wohl is the lack of empirical evidence to support these claims (Moore, 1997: 222). In the decades since a lot of work has been done to fill the gap, including analysing the output of personae and broadcasting organisations in content studies.

As someone who formerly worked in a role that Horton and Wohl would have characterised as a persona, their description of standardized and formulaic representations of character collaboratively designed with management is not representative of my experience. Paradoxically it was my own struggle to understand this dynamic that led me to research – but from the other side of the experience divide. This research is based on depth interviews with 14 radio presenters, eight producers, two leading radio trainers and close family or friends of the presenters. The presenters and producers all worked for Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) Local Radio stations or Radio National, presenting live daily (weekday) programmes.

### **Which self?**

As a talk radio presenter, working for the ABC on the Local Radio network, I was told to 'just be myself' on the radio. But the 'self' is a problematic and contested category. 'Which self?' seemed to be the next obvious question and one which the industry, even in its training literature, was not addressing.

Erving Goffman (1959) and the Symbolic Interactionists (Cooley, 1922; Mead, 1934) considered that a self is not so much a singular and fixed entity as a contingent response to a social context. People do not behave in the same way at home with family as they would in a job interview. People present versions of themselves to match the situation they are in and you use information and feedback from the environment – especially other people – to mostly unconsciously determine an appropriate self. It's not so much a case of *being yourself* as being a *situationally suitable self*.

The problem in the radio studio is that there is no face-to-face feedback information available to make a situational assessment. The presenter is in a padded room, often on his or her own, talking into a microphone. There might be a producer or two on the other side of the glass, but the presenter is quarantined in a social vacuum. One of the key tasks of a radio presenter is to create a social context out of thin air.

It is clear then how the agency of a presenter, and specifically the way a presenter conceives his or her audience, is critical not only in establishing an on-air self, but calling the audience into being. Whist most studies

have looked at output, what presenters say on-air, here we consider the social process through which this output emerges, and the impact this has in shaping the audience.

MacFarland points out that '[t]here are lots of terms for the people who comprise the on-air staff of a radio station. Most of those terms leave something to be desired' (1997: 118). 'Persona' is now rarely used. In this account I will use 'presenter'.

Superficially, the presenter role looks straightforward. The presenter turns on a microphone and talks. But it is like ice skating – not nearly as easy to do as it looks. To get the qualities of connection that Horton and Wohl describe requires something sophisticated: even more so when you start to consider the identity challenge of talk radio presentation from an Interactionist perspective.

### **Not knowing: 'they defy anyone's attempt to put them into boxes'**

Several scholars suggest that audiences are unknowable. Paddy Scannell claims that:

How to speak to its unknown, invisible absent listeners and viewers was and remains the fundamental communicative dilemma for broadcasters (2000: 10).

Ien Ang argues that our understanding of audiences has been co-opted by the ways institutions need to quantify and measure them. She has demolished the credibility of ratings systems as any kind of accurate representation of audiences (1991). For John Hartley audiences are 'invisible fictions' and that 'in all cases the product is a fiction which serves the needs of the imagining institution. In no case is the audience "real", or external to its discursive construction' (1992: 105).

Radio presenters are similarly confounded.

*TC: I don't have a perception of the audience because it's so different. (Chappell, 2008)*

*TD: I once thought that I knew what the audience was but it's so much bigger than you even imagine... it's a very broad church that we that we go for. (Delroy, 2008)*

*LB: ...it kind of changes depending on who's rung me up that day and it's interesting because some days you sort of have this idea in your head of the audience and then you get three calls and you go [sighs] 'ok yeah'. Because you know maybe I'm thinking all eastern suburbs and then suddenly I've got a call from Footscray and Preston and Altona... (Burns, 2008)*

*JF: ...it's always wonderful to see how diverse the audience is and they defy anyone's attempt to put them into boxes... You're talking to all sorts of different people. You're not talking to a person or a version of a person. (Faine, 2008)*

*MK: It's important to me to try and visualise who that person is and I don't know. (King, 2008)*

*BY: Well if I think of the entire audience I mean they're so ridiculously different [laughs] that it scares you. (Young, 2008)*

But despite the magnitude of the problem and the nebulous nature of audience described here, radio presenters have to find some way to operationalize conceptions of audience.

### **Institutional solutions: the 'by-the-book audience'**

Broadcasting organisations have wrestled with the question of 'unknown, invisible and absent' (Scannell, 2000: 10) audiences for as long as anyone. The BBC began researching audiences in 1936 (Crisell, 2002: 46). This correlated with the recognition that the existing ways of addressing the audience – then adapted from styles appropriate to large auditorium gatherings – were unsuitable for the medium of radio (Scannell, 1991: 2-3). For

public service broadcasters the challenge is even greater because of their complex obligations to the audience. Ang explains that for organisations like the ABC and the BBC, the public service obligation to 'inform, educate and entertain' is vague and values laden. For this reason the process of programming is often fraught – much more so than in commercial broadcasting intuitions where profit is the clearly defined objective. (1991: 105-6)

Public service broadcasting is a prime instance of the rejection of the subordination of cultural politics to economic forces. Public broadcasters therefore often see their work as unremittingly antithetical to that of their commercially-motivated colleagues. They often display a confident disrespect towards the latter. 'Giving the audience what it wants', a principal celebrated within commercial rhetoric as a triumph of cultural democracy, is deeply distrusted in public broadcasting circles, connoted as it is within submission to the easy, unprincipled path of populism (Ang, 1991: 101-2).

Despite this staunchly defended demarcation however, public service broadcasters in recent years have increasingly adopted commercial techniques.

The growing prominence of audience measurement within European public service broadcasting is often associated with an increasing 'commercialization' of the public service intuitions, at least in spirit if not in structure and finance (Ang, 1991: 103).

Perhaps the most striking example of this was the BBC's 'Project Bullseye'. This initiative 'require[d] every BBC Local Radio presenter to "target" Dave and Sue at all times' (Self, 2005).

Dave and Sue are both 55. He is a self-employed plumber; she is a school secretary. Both have grown-up children from previous marriages. They shop at Asda, wear fleeces and T-shirts, and their cultural horizon stretches to an Abba tribute show. They are "deeply suspicious" of politicians, think the world is "a dangerous and depressing place", and are consequently always on the lookout for "something that will cheer them up and make them laugh" (Self, 2005).

Ang's analysis provides an explanation for such an approach, pointing out that 'consensus [about the audience] is not pre-given and needs to be constructed' (Ang, 1991: 105). But BBC management's designation of Dave and Sue as the audience does not necessarily mean that a consensus has been achieved amongst the broadcasters who are supposed to speak to 'them'.

The ABC's institutional reflections on audience can be found both in their training documents and their annual reports. The 2010 Radio Audience section of the Annual Report includes graphs with the headings 'ABC Radio's average weekly reach increased to 4.3 million people' and 'ABC Radio had a 23.9% share of the five-city metropolitan market' (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2010: 37). It is reasonable to assume that the ABC wants it to be known that their radio audience is a significant proportion of the Australian population – over 4 million people – and about a quarter of those listening to radio in the cities are tuned to the ABC. The Annual Report's message, consistent with that of commercial organisations, is that the audience is *big*.

However, it is worth acknowledging the eternal paradox that binds public broadcasters. They must simultaneously provide something for everyone to justify the allocation of public funds, while also serving niche audiences that the commercial dollar would not deem profitable to reach.

The ABC's training documents include a section on 'Industry Knowledge'. Much of the familiar marketing discourse is evident with an emphasis on 'target audiences' and 'target markets'. A 17 point checklist is provided to help broadcasters identify these 'markets'. The checklist includes questions such as:

1. *What kinds of people make up your target audience? How do they differ from the whole population – e.g. in terms of age group, sex, occupation, etc?*
2. *What types of programming are best to gain a maximum share of the above audience?*
3. *Where is your audience located? In each part of your coverage area, what percentage of the target audience are members of your audience? Are there particular geographical areas where you are not reaching your target audience?*

4. *What can you do to gain greater exposure and sampling in low-listening areas?*
5. *When does your target audience tune into your station most? What can you do to improve tune-ins at other times of the day?*
- ...
17. *Is there anything about the image of your station or what you do that prevents your primary and secondary target audiences from listening to you as much as they could? (Guilfoyle, 2002: 73)*

After giving a series of statistics about the Australian population the training guide asks:

Why should you care?

The reason you should care is that each of the statistics above provides a snapshot of a particular slice of contemporary Australian life and give some hints about what Australians care about and what they don't. Statistics, like the one above, indicate what you should be talking about, how you should be talking about it, and to whom you should be talking about it (Guilfoyle, 2002: 150 emphasis in original).

The discourse, both in the annual report and the training literature is 'geared at "audience maximisation" – a principle that is fundamentally at odds with the classic public service ideal.' (Ang, 1991: 103) Ang goes on to argue that for public service broadcasting '[s]uccess cannot be gauged by purely quantitative means of popularity; it must encompass more qualitative and substantial achievements...' (1991: 103).

Central in this ongoing discursive search for criteria is the question, implicit or explicit, of how the audience-as-public should be defined and addressed. In other words, it is in these discourses that normative knowledge about the audience emerges from the public service institution's point of view (Ang, 1991: 106).

Despite these institutional efforts to define the audience, research participants indicated that market driven approaches are often unusable for presenters.

*JF: if you ask someone what's your standard audience for the demographic breakdown of 774 ABC Melbourne's Morning Show you wouldn't think it was a blue collar truck driver. But of course there are lots of them all over the place. It's not just blue rinse ladies in Brighton. (Faine, 2008)*

*BY: Ultimately if we're going to go with the by-the-book audience then it's 40 plus, majority 55 plus, and their kids are older, and they've come through the 60s and 70s. They loved music. They still love music... they're worried about their super. That's the text book 720 Local Radio audience member. I try to bring it back to just a much more humane level than that... (Young, 2008)*

Age, along with gender is one of the foundation distinctions used to demographically define an audience. But presenters reference it not to contain the audience, but to demonstrate diversity.

*TD: I think my youngest contestant on the quiz was nine and my oldest has been 93. (Delroy, 2008)*

*BY: Some days I would get off air and think, you know I had a talkback caller from a 28 year old and a 98 year old. (Young, 2008)*

*RF: ...wide ranging in age from probably from anything from early 30s to 70s, even 80s. You know, early 30s onwards. (Fidler, 2008)*

*GMI: My audience is younger than our normal audience for my network... especially when test cricket's on for example. We're the only radio network in Australia that broadcasts test cricket. So if youngsters are interested in cricket – Bang! They're going to come on. We get them at 12, 13, 18, 20 years of age... (Mitchell, 2008)*

Presenters do not experience their audience as a discrete object. Instead they know their audience collectively as a *relational subject*. Institutions are working with management and marketing models of audience that create discrete material discourses. But presenters need to work with managing emotion and connecting relationships. In a direct exchange with an audience, both literally and virtually, the challenge is to build a

connection that feels real – both for the presenter and listeners. That is difficult to achieve from a set of demographic data.

Presenters are able to sustain instability in their presentational address which maintains openness in the discourse. Indeed, it is a linguistic requirement for competently dealing with the way audiences must be configured and reconfigured in presentational language. Martin Montgomery demonstrated this in his analysis of *DJ Talk*.

*Members of the audience are thereby cast and recast into different positions: any listener may vary from being addressed directly in particular terms, to being addressed directly in general terms, to being some kind of non-addressed recipient of the talk. Indeed, since any use of a specific identifier (e.g. 'anyone listening in Edinburgh') singles out a determinate sub-segment of the audience, it thereby has the simultaneous effect of excluding others, so that it is quite common for the audience to be in the position of overhearing recipient of a discourse that is being directly addressed to someone else.*

*Despite relegating substantial sections of the audience to the status of overhearers, it does not seem that the use of identifiers - even of the more specific kind - actually reduces the capacity of the discourse to engage the audience in general. On the contrary, the combination of identifiers with greetings and with direct address would seem to be part of the way in which a relatively dynamic relationship is achieved between the discourse and its broadcast audience (Montgomery, 1986: 428).*

### **Unifying characteristics: 'we're all awake at a time when most people are asleep'**

Presenters have a number of strategies for building the 'dynamic relationship' to which Montgomery refers. The most elemental approach they use is that they recognise the structural dynamics that create commonalities. These are the unifying characteristics of the situation.

*TC: All I know is that they're all people that are awake at the same time of the day as me. And that's my thing, is that we're all awake at a time when most people are asleep. (Chappell, 2008)*

*MK: In my mind what I do is think the person is as busy as me; they could have been up all night with sick children; perhaps on some mornings I have been too; they're trying to make their budget meet; and they're trying to have some time in their day to do things they enjoy. (King, 2008)*

*BY: I just like to think that it's people who respect other people's stories and opinions, who really like to learn something every day, like just really like the idea of 'I didn't know that'. So I guess I hope they're a bit curious and that they just enjoy pleasant company. That's how I imagine the audience. And I imagine them to be busy. I don't imagine them to be sitting down and listening to my whole programme for three hours. (Young, 2008)*

*JV: I conceive of them as a collective mass one at a time... the person is washing the dishes and the tranny's on top of the fridge. You know the person is stuck in traffic. The person is a sales rep who spends all day in the car and is so happy when he gets back in the car that there's something funny on the radio because he's now got 45 minutes just dragging his ass across town, you know. The person is a hectic housewife who's you know just had a sandwich with her girlfriend and now has try to get the supermarket shopping done to get to the kids at three o'clock. (Valentine, 2008)*

Presenters can use this common ground to begin to define their interactional relationship. These descriptions are about the character of individuals who are likely to engage with the content being produced ('curious'), or circumstances people are likely to be in ('stuck in traffic'). They are frequently inconsequential to demographic or market characteristics. The presenter descriptions are consistent with Ang's assertion that the public service audience is a 'public' rather than a 'market' (1991: 105).

The assumption of shared values in public service broadcasting is also instrumental in creating common ground with the audience.

*JV: I'm a very ABC person. I grew up listening to the ABC. I grew up watching the ABC. (Valentine, 2008)*

*MT: I've got this joke, I always say I speak fluent ABC, I grew up in an ABC household... And so I just know who's listening because I come from that background. (Trevorrow, 2008)*

*LB: I looked at what the ABC did and what it stood for and the way in which it conducted itself, the way in which programmes went to air and I thought 'I want to be a part of that'. So it was never a case of me having to come from a different background and then being moulded into an ABC person... I was kind of an ABC person before I even arrived. (Burns, 2008)*

*GMe: I'm a real ABC presenter. I'm not someone you'd find on commercial radio. I don't sound like a commercial radio presenter. (Mellett, 2008)*

It is evident that many presenters have specifically sought to work for the ABC because of their own previous relationship as listeners and their personal commitment to, or preference for, public service broadcasting. These choices are often made with some personal sacrifice, typically in the form of lower pay rates. But there may be perceived benefits such as greater stability of employment.

### **Archetypes: 'somebody in their kitchen or in their car'**

Beyond the unifiers, presenters use common listening scenarios. They can be thought of as 'radio spaces'. As an extension of the unifying characteristics, radio spaces are often structural and relational. Radio spaces can be defined as situations where you are quite happy for your ears to be engaged, but not your eyes. From these radio spaces, and the unifiers, presenters build archetypes.

*RF: ...one person is a stay at home mum or dad, mostly a mum who's working hard, who've got kids at school or at kindy or in the house somewhere. Who wants and needs to be spoken to as a sophisticated adult. I've got some retirees in my mind as well and also business people in cars who are driving around who need to be told what's happening around town at the moment. (Fidler, 2008)*

*JV: I suppose I've got half a dozen archetypes in my head: home office, pottering at home, retired, semi-retired, in the car, the busy sales rep, the busy mum. That sort of thing is the kind of thing I've got in my mind. (Valentine, 2008)*

*BY: I have pretty much just two scenarios that are usually in my mind. And it's usually somebody in their kitchen or in their car... and I know that you can listen in plenty of other scenarios but I suppose that's where I do most of my radio listening, is in the kitchen or in the car. And so I imagine people kind of walking in and out of the room. You know, even if they are kind of pottering around the house it doesn't mean that your radio is like right beside you that whole time. (Young, 2008)*

*LB: [M]ost days I go in with a picture in my mind of who might be listening and some days I'm thinking about a woman who's in the kitchen who's preparing the dinner for their family or whatever, or a bloke who's in the kitchen preparing dinner for their family, or a guy in a truck on the Western Ring Road... (Burns, 2008)*

It is worth noting that the remarkable similarity evident in these responses emerged in the course of the research interviews rather than in response to a specific archetypes question. It is clear that presenters work fluidly with often contradictory ideas and frequently speak into familiar 'spaces' rather than to individuals.

### **Relationships: 'a lady... crochets my cat a rug every two years'**

What emerges over time, for both the presenter and, as Horton and Wohl have established, the audience, is a rich and complex relationship. Horton and Wohl identify the 'intimacy' of the para-social relationship, only to dismiss it 'an imitation and a shadow of what is ordinarily meant by that word' (Horton & Wohl, 1956: 125). Horton and Wohl have not recognised that this relationship is as potentially meaningful for the presenter as it is for their listeners. Tony Delroy, presenter of *Nightlife* on ABC Network Local Radio, provides a particularly powerful example.

Delroy has been presenting his programme for over 20 years. It is heard live across Australia and the various time zones mean that for some listeners it is an early to mid-evening programme and for others a late night show. Over two decades a highly engaged and interactive community has developed – both on the radio and in the ‘real world’.

*TD: [I]t's very much in inner club feeling you know. We actually have almost a little network of listeners who contact each other in various states. We had a caller on the other night from Tasmania who said 'oh yes I spoke to Tom.' Tom's in Queensland. And they have sort of got to know each other through the program. We've actually had a wedding as a result of the show as well. Magpie, from Bingera, she was going to Queensland and met up with one of our other listeners. He sort of said 'Oh look if you're coming to Queensland you might as well stay here. I've got a space'. So anyway six months down the track they announced their engagement and got married. (Delroy, 2008)*

Delroy was of course invited to the wedding but unfortunately could not go.

I worked on Delroy's show one night and was struck by the sense of community. Delroy is like a benevolent patriarch, with a genuine interest in, and affection for, his listeners. At the end of the show we went out for a drink – it was a live studio audience and a relatively rare visit to Perth, so quite significant. I had understood that the programme making team would be going out, but I had not anticipated that the audience would come too. Many of them did. It seemed to be something of a tradition and Delroy recognised people and greeted them as old friends. I suggested to him that these people had become part of his life in a real way.

*TD: Oh very much so. And in fact that has always been the basis of the program. So that even though you might be separated by three thousand kilometres, there is an attachment. People recognise voices. Tom has become a real icon for us. He is in his early eighties. He is a former engineer on the Queensland railways, was a member of the union for about 70 years, a member of the ALP for almost as long and he's based in Toowoomba. He's a salt of the earth sort of person and comes out with yeah sort of the left of centre stuff but you know a real traditional Australian view. And that is often what people seek. It's not only me, it's the regulars and the characters that call in. (Delroy, 2008)*

Remember Tom is an ordinary listener – or at least he used to be. Over time, he has gone from being just another regular talkback caller to being part of the fabric of the programme; someone who other listeners not only tune in to hear, but also to interact with independently of the programme.

Tom is not an isolated example

*TD: it's amazing I've got a lady who crochets my cat a rug every two years. And I mean it's a really intricate rug. You know it must take her weeks and weeks to put together. And you know it turns up 'for Barbara' you know 'love Vera'. (Delroy, 2008)*

But whilst there is a sense that Horton and Wohl regard the para-social relationship as being a little sad and desperate, Delroy's language reflects a relationship perceived as more equal and reciprocal.

*TD: Often particularly late night is a very lonely experience for some people. And it is one of those things where particularly if you're older and lonely, a connection like that is important. I had a really sad letter from somebody the other day saying you know, 'Your voice is the only thing that I interact with during the day'. She said, 'I often lie in bed talking to the radio because you've become part of my life'. And that's what radio does. You know it's a very personal medium. And I guess if you're there long enough you start to become part of the furniture. And I guess that's what your aim is, to become a friend. (Delroy, 2008)*

Delroy treats this listener and her circumstances with respect. He's happy to be able to provide the companionship she seeks and needs. He sees that as a significant part of his job. He does not stigmatise or ridicule her for the relationship she has formed with him. Despite the limitations of a lack of shared physical space Delroy deals with the relationship as something akin to 'social' rather than 'para-social'. It is an attitude that is consistent amongst presenters in this study.

### **Relationship troubles: 'hate that came through the airwaves'**

It is important not to romanticise this connection. If these relationships reflect something authentic they must also be imbued with all the complexity and ambivalence of any physically proximate relationship. This is indeed the case. Presenters recount incidents of hostile audience reactions, particularly when they are new to a programme and its existing audience. Audiences do not like changes and will express their dissatisfaction. The instant communication functions of mobile phone text messaging and now, services like Twitter, also provide listeners with the ability to directly pass comment to the presenter in the studio in real time. The distance and relative anonymity of this communication, and perhaps a lack of awareness that presenters access these comments unfiltered, frees some people to say things which are hurtful.

*JF: Funny thing actually – text messages. We now have a screen where text messages come through very very thick and fast I can assure you. You get such instant feedback now because you can adjust the screen to refresh. I've got it set on refreshing every 30 seconds. So you'll be halfway through an interview and you'll be starting to get feedback, whether you want it or not, unfiltered, directly. It's not in any way monitored or checked or edited or vetted. It just comes straight onto the screen in front of you... My second day back I started getting a whole lot of texts half way through an interview saying "go back on holidays you've really lost it" or "what happened to you while you were away" or I can't remember now... people will send you a text when they'd never call in on talkback. People who don't want to be identified or want to be anonymous or who are busy in the car, or they ring in and the phones are engaged or whatever. They just send a text now. So you know you've got a whole other way of the audience telling you whether you're doing a good job or a bad job. (Faine, 2008)*

Faine brushes this kind of feedback aside but other presenters feel it much more keenly. It can represent a significant distraction and be quite painful. These comments are generally in the minority and, as Faine points out, these forms of communication provide access to a broader range of listeners than talkback.

The more interactive exchange of talkback can also produce some problematic encounters for presenters. Geraldine Mellet presents on 720 ABC Perth. Mellet says she mostly experiences her audience as 'very generous'. But she recounts an experience where that was not the case.

*GMe: There have been times in the last year where I've had a bit of a shock I suppose. I felt that they weren't the people I knew I was talking to. I was filling in on the Morning Program, so primarily current affairs, and Australian Story had run the third in a series of stories on a local trial... A lot of strong feeling in the community that the guys who were put in gaol for the crime and then appealed and got out had been unflatteringly portrayed by Australian Story. I happened to be there when the third episode was being run and I did an interview with the producer. And the amount of hate that came through the radio waves was extraordinary. It felt like there was a mob waiting for these guys but also waiting for anybody who dared even go near the subject... I got off air that day and I thought I don't know that I actually want to go back on again. (Mellett, 2008)*

Difficult encounters with an audience is not an easy thing to discuss. Presenters work hard to remain positive about their listeners. If we accept the Symbolic Interactionists' perspective that the self is constructed in the social context, it is easier to be warm and companionable if you like the people you are talking to. Presenters are conflicted by negative interpretations of the audience. Mellet says, 'Part of me thinks that's dreadful. You know I should be this all neutral person. But I'm a human being. I have a different opinion' (Mellett, 2008). Presenters manage these negative encounters by recognising them as isolated events that reflect a minority of the audience. They work hard not to let a few individuals spoil that dynamic or do interpersonal damage.

Talkback is one of the most important elements for building the relationship between presenters and their audiences. All the presenters I interviewed say they 'love it'. They are frequently reminded, and reiterate, the widely accepted belief that talkback callers are not representative of the broader audience. But the viscerality of their interaction is so powerful that no rational defence can keep them from becoming the primary reference.

Talkback is such a significant element that a comprehensive exploration of the data from this study is beyond the scope of this paper and will be published separately. However, some of the impacts are already evident.

### **Sensing the audience: 'however hippy trippy you want to get about it.'**

With experience presenters become familiar and more relaxed in the on-air space. The accumulation of the elements outlined above means that what emerges is something that is often more intuitively than rationally understood. Long-time cabaret performer and high profile fill-in ABC presenter Mark Trevorrow responds to the question of how he constructs his audience this way:

*MT: I don't need to because I know exactly who they are.*

*HW: But it's different from theatre where you're getting that immediate feedback.*

*MT: No no no. You do.*

*HW: You still feel it?*

*MT: I feel the feedback... the difference between being on air live on television or radio and doing recording is just profound. And the only way to explain the difference is that there is something coming back. There is a collective conscious or whatever you want to call it – however hippy trippy you want to get about it. There is no denying you can feel them. And you also sense when they're getting bored. You sense when they're offended. You can feel their reactions. You just feel it. It's a two-way process.*

Other presenters echo this 'sixth sense' for the audience – particularly when broadcasting live.

*JF: there's a joke we used to make about a guest, you could hear the sound of radios being turned off all over Melbourne. (Faine, 2008)*

*TD: You can feel it in the water... (Delroy, 2008)*

If we accept these accounts, we do not yet have the concepts to be able to fully make sense of them. We do not have frameworks for understanding relationships with a collective, with all their endless flux and openness, as something that is material. What is evident is the skill of radio presenters in working with the dialectic of both the unknown and known audience. Much of the institutional and market framed constructions endeavour to create a closed picture of the audience. In reality presenters work with an open concept of audience which can accommodate a host of overhearers and is endlessly changing. In presenters' accounts we hear the constant play in their conception between individuals, characters, archetypes, and the generality of the mass of people listening to the radio.

### **That's all we have time for...**

There are multiple narratives available for understanding audiences. What has been absent from these stories are the presenter or persona understandings of audience. Presenters have not had an opportunity to tell their story and their intelligence about this relationship has not been recognised. This account is the beginning of an effort to add these narratives, and the relational experience of interacting with listeners, to the broad palette of audience studies.

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