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TALK RADIO: FACE-TO-FACE DEMOCRACY IN THE '90S

by

BEVERLEY A. MCRAE, B.A.

A thesis submitted to
the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfilment of
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Journalism

School of Journalism and Communications

Carleton University

Ottawa, Ontario

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Abstract

Talk radio has long suffered a reputation as cheap and trashy entertainment meant for late-night lonelyhearts and early-morning whiners, but in the '90s the format has earned a new prestige as a significant political force. That little has been written about talk radio in Canada is surprising considering the number of people who jam the phone lines on talk programs across the country, the number of politicians who listen and the number of political decisions that have been affected both directly and indirectly by talk radio's impact on public opinion. As one talk radio host put it, "Power of the people works."

While it is not the utopia of direct democracy so appealing to so many, talk radio bears uncanny parallels to the face-to-face democracy of ancient Greece.

This thesis examines Canadian talk radio's history, popularity and potential as a legitimate democratic forum.

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Chapter One

Talk Radio: Face-to-Face Democracy in the '90s

Let's go to another car phone. It's Michael. . . .

Michael: As I pull on to the Décare Expressway, I just want to tell Quebeckers this is my country too, I don't get to vote on Monday, the only chance I have to participate in this whole process is by coming down here. I've got my five-year-old son with me . . . and we're here with everyone else to tell Quebeckers that we love them. . . . My father came here as an immigrant . . . we don't go back 300 years in Canada, but it's our country too, and no one is going to take it away from us.

Green: Good for you. You know what I love most about this, Michael, is that this is not coming from the politicians. We sat by waiting for someone else to do this for us, and at the last moment we realized we've got to do it ourselves. We're not helpless in this country. As individuals we can move mountains. Hell, as individuals we might even save the country.

It's Friday morning, Oct. 27, 1995 on the Lowell Green Show at CFRA Radio in Ottawa, three days before Quebec votes on sovereignty association. Lowell and his listeners are overwhelmed by the numbers of people on their way to Montreal for the No Rally. Every available bus in eastern Ontario has been conscripted, 75 buses left New Brunswick last night, two busloads rolling in from Winnipeg, Via Rail jammed with supporters, people flying in on cut-rate Air Canada flights, the highway to Montreal bumper-to-bumper, Canadian flags flying. The caravan has been organized in only 48 hours — the Ottawa contingent of at least 10,000 mobilized by CFRA's talk radio hosts. The idea for a unity rally in Montreal had begun to percolate the weekend before on Parliament Hill, when the all-party No Committee realized the Yes side was winning in Quebec. But it was just an idea — too difficult to organize on a national scale — until an

assistant to then fisheries minister Brian Tobin heard CFRA's Steve Madely and his listeners discussing grassroots strategies for turning the Yes tide, among them a car rally from Ottawa to Montreal. After Tobin relayed this popular passion to cabinet the next day, the No Committee began to put the rally together. By Wednesday morning Madely's and Green's talk shows were organizing buses for Montreal, and talk shows across the country were mobilizing support.¹ Now, on Friday morning, tens of thousands of Canadians are on their way to Quebec. "Gerard the Separatist," one of Green's regular callers, is not impressed.

Gerard: All what those Anglo-Canadians are coming to tell us is they love us — well, that doesn't mean a thing. All what they want is a No. That's all, they want an English Canada from coast-to-coast.

Green: *Merde.*

Gerard: Assuming that the polls were saying the No is a high winner you would not see them in Montreal today. They would not be here, believe me.

Green: I understand how you cold-hearted separatists who would destroy this country don't like this, because one of the strongest weapons your elitist leaders have had is that the average Canadian doesn't care about Quebec, that we don't want you, etcetera. . .

Gerard: Would you like to know something else, Mr. Green. . .

Green: You know what, Gerard, I'm going to leave it to one of your own countrymen to reply for me.

"O Canada!, Terre de nos aïeux, Ton front est ceint de fleurons glorieux!" Roger Doucette's magnificent tenor rings out of the radio, and Gerard is gone.²

Now it's April 25, 1997 on the Lowell Green Show. A federal election is about to be

called. It's heady stuff after 3½ years of phoning, faxing and marching to pressure politicians (on talk radio you don't sit around and complain there ought to be a law, you do something about it). The ultimate decision-making moment approaches.

Green: We only have rights if we exercise them. Unfortunately a lot of people vote for somebody every four or five years then sit back and say, well, it's all in your hands. It's not. It's our responsibility as citizens of a free and democratic society to speak up, to speak up loudly, to demand that our elected representatives listen to us. If they don't, it's our duty to go to the ballot box and boot them out.

In the 18 months since the Unity Rally and the Quebec referendum, Jacques Parizeau is out, Lucien Bouchard is in, anglo- and allophone language rights have deteriorated, 'distinct society' is still whispered, but still, there is no plan to unite Canada. The politicians just don't seem to get it. Paul calls from Dartmouth, N.S.

Paul: I'm an ex-Liberal and I'm probably going to vote Reform. I come from a family of Liberals and I know for a fact there are seven votes that are not going to go Liberal. My attitude is no more made-in-Quebec governments. Manning says he's going to clean up the Young Offenders Act and I'm tired of criminals being coddled.

Green: Why would you not switch to the Conservatives?

Paul: Jean Charest is made in Quebec and I'm sick and tired of one province calling the shots for the rest of this country. I speak French, I like Quebecers, but no more made-in-Quebec governments.

That's the bottom line for most of Lowell's callers this day. They're not buying any campaign strategy to push jobs and the economy as the big election issues. For this electorate the issue is national unity, and they are angry, fed up with "pussyfooting" around Quebec, still ticked off that the prime minister didn't take a hard line with separatists on the referendum. Maybe if Reform Party leader Preston Manning stands up

to the separatists, they'll back down. Maybe not. Just as the "time-to-play-hardball" momentum gets rolling, Carol calls in from Rockland. She is appalled by this kind of talk.

Carol: I was there in Montreal the day Jean Charest talked about his Canada from sea to sea to sea. Frankly I'm worried when I hear a Maritimer talk about voting for Reform. If Reform gets in and has its way with Quebec, what will happen to the Maritimes? I'm 34 years old, I'm a small business owner, I'm a mother and I want to be able to have a country to deliver to my children. I'm voting Tory.

But only Carol and four other callers will support Charest and his 'distinct society' pacifier for Quebec, eight are undecided, four will vote Liberal just because of the economy. Lowell is careful to point out that the poll is not scientific because his audience tends to be conservative, still, he is flabbergasted that 31 callers — most of them lifelong *Liberals* — are voting Reform this time.

Eleanor: I'm voting Reform, which I have never done before, and I'm doing it because I'm so darn mad. I don't know what makes me the maddest: whether it's Somalia, or the tobacco law, or airbus, or Pearson Airport, or the town hall meeting where he yelled at the waitress, or the canoe museum, or the Krever commission, Sheila Copps and the GST — there's no accountability in this government at all. And the justice system is a joke.

Green: I'll be honest with you . . . up until six months ago I was a Liberal, I ran for the Liberal nomination, I've always supported the Liberals, but I feel that my Liberal Party has betrayed me . . . what they've done in Quebec, \$8 million in election handouts already . . . where I'm going to turn I don't know.

For three hours the callers fire opinions back and forth: Barb would vote Tory but she's read Stevie Cameron's book on former Prime Minister Brian Mulroney and sees the same backroom boys hovering around Tory leader Jean Charest; Richard is put off the Reform Party, they kept company with racists; Laurie argues that no one is more racist

than separatists; Marcus warns against falling into the separatist trap of talking about Quebec versus Canada when it's really the Parti Québécois versus Canada; Sharon, who was in the Philippines when the Marcos' were overthrown, says the big issues in this election are honesty and integrity. Then Gerry calls from Montreal.

Gerry: I'm just going to sit back and let the lesser of all evils take over.

Green: You're not going to vote?

Gerry: There's no one to vote for. Other people will vote and put in the liar of their choice instead of the liar of my choice.

Green: Well, Gerry, you can do whatever you like. But just keep in mind that the only thing that stands between a free and democratic society and a country like Bosnia is just one generation of people who didn't involve themselves in civics.³

This is talk radio democracy in the '90s — citizens debating issues voice-to-voice, taking action together. If they ever felt apathetic and powerless, in their minds they are taking back control. Lowell Green and his listeners have their own political arena, but it could easily be argued that they are playing out the face-to-face democracy of the ancient Athenian Assembly.

An Athenian citizen would have been ill-advised to approach the hill called the Pnyx 2,500 years ago without having discussed pressing issues with friends and family. He would have been unprepared to debate war and peace, legislation, public works, or religious decrees. The direct democracy of ancient Greece was, literally, 'government by the people.' There was no political party system, no class of 'occupationalized' politicians, no elected leadership, no bureaucracy — no 'government' as we know it. The

largest and smallest details of Athenian life were decided directly by a majority vote of eligible citizens at the Assembly, an outdoor mass meeting held almost every week.

Every Athenian citizen had the right of *isegoria*, the right to speak at the Assembly. Not every one did, since not everyone possessed the oratorical expertise necessary to address a crowd of thousands outdoors on a hill. But the Assembly was universally accessible.

So too is the radio talk show. Participation requires only a telephone and a radio, technologies found in almost every Canadian household. Long-distance callers can phone in free on 800 numbers; callers in cars dial in free on their cellular phones on special numbers. The talk show is a more democratic modern medium than the Internet, which requires at least \$2,000 worth of computer equipment, a modem, hookup charges to an access provider, and \$200 to \$300 a year in user fees.

Not every talk show listener participates. Less than ten per cent ever call in. But, as in the Athenian Assembly, not everyone is required to speak. Not everyone listens to The Lowell Green Show, just as not every eligible Athenian citizen attended the Assembly.

Athenian males were eligible for citizenship, and the right to vote, on turning 18 — upper class aristocrats, shopkeepers, craftsmen, peasants and farmers alike. Women, slaves and outsiders were excluded. The citizenship rolls embraced about one-sixth of a population spread out over 1,000 square miles, but farmers and villagers rarely traveled into the city for the Assembly. The voting population was several thousand :mostly older, upper class men from the urban areas.⁴

Discussion and debate on Green's talk show is as spontaneous and lively as it would have been at the Athenian Assembly, where citizens were unrestrained by the party loyalties or the rules of procedure that inhibit debate in today's House of Commons. Calls are screened, in the words of CFRA General Manager Mark Maheu, only "to weed out the wackos and the drunks.

"We want to make sure the incoherent or one-issue caller who thinks Lowell Green is the Devil Incarnate doesn't get on," says Maheu. "The producer screens the callers to make sure they're on topic. But we don't screen out points of view. You'll hear opinions from the both the extremely right, and the extremely left."

Maheu distinguishes between The Lowell Green Show and CFRA's other news talk program, The Steve Madely Show, which from 6 a.m. to 9 a.m. features various newsmakers and experts on the line with callers.

"Lowell does a talk show, where listeners are invited to participate and express their opinions. The host chooses the topic. Madely does a 'call-in' show where callers can talk to the guests, ask questions and express their opinions."⁵

The Lowell Green Show is more flamboyant, temperamental, designed to provoke strong reaction on political, economic and social issues. The forum is democratically accessible, but the conventions governing participation are strict. A seven-second delay censors profanity and libel, and callers with hidden commercial interests. Callers must never say, "Hi, Lowell, how are you doing?" The retort is a bazooka sound effect, and a roar from the host that he never answers that question because it's the "most stupid, asinine irrelevant question ever."

Green bills his show as an “Island of Sanity,” so he curtails callers whose ideas he finds absurd. Jean from Calabogie called the show on the Crusade for Canada:

Jean: I’m wondering about this race to Montreal, I, uh, I’m wondering if the same privileges are being given to the people who want to vote Yes.

Green: Excuse me. Jean, you’d better hit me with this question again. I’m still picking myself up off the floor here. You’re suggesting that we do what?

Jean: Well, you’re discriminating . . . [Buzzer sound effect interrupts her with an announcer’s voice booming out “Reality Check! Reality Check! This caller may not be from this planet! Reality Check! Reality Check!"]

Green: Jean, Jean, you’re pulling my leg, right? Check your calendar, Jean, it’s not April fool’s Day!⁶

Other callers who are inarticulate, whose ideas are too vague or offbeat are cut short by an announcer’s voice proclaiming the “Wacko Call of the Day,” or the sound of a chainsaw and Green’s warning that “You can’t call if you’ve had a lobotomy in the last 48 hours!” This is not your everyday conversation. Talk radio can sometimes be humiliating. But British researchers Livingstone and Lunt point out in *Talk On Television* that holding up everyday conversation as an ideal is a mistake.

While on one level all interactions are spontaneous and unique, conversations are highly rule-governed, frequently repetitive, and commonly used to repeat handed-down or unoriginal ideas (i.e. common sense). . . . The ideal that sender and receiver should be bound by the same rules — who can interrupt, or make jokes, or disagree — does not occur in many face-to-face conversations. Conversations where participants are differentiated by gender, generation, status or power, all place different demands on the participants, who speak with different voices reflecting a variety of subject positions.⁷

Sometimes the “subject positions” on a talk show are so passionately held that the rational process of exchanging ideas, developing an argument, or negotiating a compromise collapses. Debate becomes polemic.

It's April 10 on the Lowell Green show, the second day in a row Lowell has tangled with gun owners over Bill C-68, which forces gun owners to send in a \$10 registration card for each rifle or shotgun. Lowell has been fighting over this issue for 25 years, since he appeared before the parliamentary committee that resulted in the Firearms Acquisition Certificate for handguns. He's heard it all. Then Charles calls from Halifax. Right away Lowell's got his number.

Charles: Hi, long wait. [Green: Yessir.] You've already got . . . you have to take a safety course, you have to have an FAC . . . [Uh-huh.] both items are taxed . . . [Uh-huh.] you buy a gun it's taxed, you . . . [Charles, lookit . . .] buy a gun it's taxed . . . [Charles, I agree with you.] you buy shells, it's taxed . . . [Oh God, Charles.] this registration is guaranteed to go up. . .

Green: Charles, Charles can I tell you something . . . [Charles: No, no . . . you cannot.] if you're that damned poor and you want to register a gun, I'll pay the ten dollars. I mean let's get serious here. . .

Charles: Wait a minute, you can't let people talk, can you . . . [Green: Yeh, I can, go ahead.] You remind me . . . [Green: Go ahead, take the show, I'm gone.] of Pat Burns, you remember him?

Green: [off-mike] I'm not talkin' . . . Forget it, folks, forget it! I give up. I give up. [Music swells to a crescendo and the program goes to a commercial break. Lowell returns after the commercials. He was just kidding about giving up.]⁸

Green is stubborn and opinionated, and never changes his mind about an issue. He will discuss and debate, but only if callers abide by his rigorous rules of talk show conversation. Green first establishes the content of the show for the day: a hot issue on the morning news, or just whatever is bugging Lowell on that particular day. It might be the evil separatists, the wasteful government, the lazy civil service, the selfish, insensitive unions, crazy gun advocates, politically correct university administrators,

socialist “granola-crunchers,” and on and on.

Callers may agree or disagree, but each is expected to add to the discussion another detail, another perspective, a personal anecdote. The argument, the discussion develops over the hour assigned to it, through a progression of calls. Callers who agree are positively reinforced: “Good point.” Callers who don’t add to the discussion are dismissed matter-of-factly: “Thanks for calling,” or “Gotta move on.” Callers who meander from the topic, or introduce an element Green thinks is irrelevant are disconnected humorously, curtly, or apologetically: “Sorry, we’re almost out of time. Gotta go.” Charles is right. Lowell has control of the buttons.

But getting disconnected or humiliated by a talk radio host is minor punishment compared to the penalties endured by Athenians speaking out of turn at the Assembly on the Pnyx.

Every time an Athenian leader rose to speak, he knew he risked his status as leader — if not more radical sanctions. The debate was the prelude to all decisions on affairs of state, but it was also the performance by which citizens judged their leaders. Leaders were not elected, they were approved every time the Assembly met. It was a continuous and never-ending pressure.

Everyone, speakers and audience alike, knew that before night fell the issue must be decided, that each man present would vote “freely” (without fear of whips or other party controls) and purposefully, and therefore that every speech, every argument must seek to persuade the audience on the spot, that it was all a serious performance, as a whole and in each of its parts.⁹

The Assembly did not suffer fools gladly; orators required technical and political

expertise to address a multitude outdoors on a hill. Aristotle may have sneered at Cleon whose oratorical style was to “shout and rail,” but it is unlikely that any leader trying to convince the crowd would have whispered. We can infer that debate would have been at times reasoned, at times impassioned — just as it is on a talk show.

Should a leader fail to persuade the crowd, or be judged an excessive influence, he could be *ostracized*, exiled for up to 10 years. Should a decision taken by the Assembly turn out badly, those who proposed it or even voted for it could be criminally prosecuted. Such a *graphe paranomon* might mean a heavy fine, or even death. Penalties restricting discussion and debate in the Assembly were designed to protect the citizens from tyranny, but there was no protection for the leaders from the temperament of the citizens. Even Pericles was temporarily deposed when, in the second year of the Peloponnesian War the people, demoralized by a plague, turned on him and fined him heavily.

Athenian citizens were prepared to make these decisions, not only by everyday discussions of issues, and Assembly debates on affairs of state, but by direct experience in the political institutions of their democracy. Athenian citizens had not just a right to vote — but a responsibility, as Pericles puts it in the Funeral Oration.

A man may at the same time look after his own affairs and those of the state . . . We consider anyone who does not share in the life of the citizen not as minding his own business but as useless.¹⁰

Citizens were chosen by lot to serve as President of the Assembly, or on the Council of 500 (the administrative side of government), or for other annual offices such as market commissioners or as jurors. Such a small face-to-face society was necessarily familiar with public affairs, and politically sophisticated.

Athenian democracy is exalted as the purest form of democracy, the archetype. History has concluded that the debate was democratic, purposeful, and effective. In our own time however, talk radio programs have been seen as anything but a noble archetype. They suffered a reputation as cheap and trashy entertainment where lonely people congregate for late-night sympathy, or whiners converge for early-morning gripe sessions. So the question arises: Though talk radio has become increasingly political, how useful is this 'democratic forum' in providing genuine debate, how effective in inspiring authentic political action?

Talk radio in the 1990s serves the same function as it did for the ancient Athenians of democratic discussion, familiarization and political involvement. For citizens in the '90s talk radio is an antidote to the apathy and alienation of the '70s and '80s. While Canadian voter turnout in federal elections has hovered around 70 per cent over the last decade, there are more undecided voters, less party loyalty, less involvement in formal political institutions and more unpredictable election results.

Voters' cynicism and distrust of government is well-documented these days (see Chapter 3) but Sir Moses Finley noted 10 years ago that renewed interest in Athenian democracy was a symptom of public apathy and political ignorance in the United States.¹¹ Professor Murray B. Levin detailed the "malaise . . . the proletarian discontent" of talk radio callers in the early '80s, who spoke of their "alienation and powerlessness, of the futility of voting, and of the corruption and unresponsiveness of politicians."¹²

Talk radio audiences, at that time, seemed to be drawn from the margins of society. Studies indicated that listeners were older, less affluent and less educated than non-

listeners,¹³ many were retired and poor,¹⁴ and callers represented a disproportionate number of widows, retired people and invalids.¹⁵ These studies argued that listeners and callers, being on the social periphery, used talk radio as a “window on the world,”¹⁶ as interpersonal contact, to relieve loneliness,¹⁷ to provide companionship,¹⁸ or as a “democratic forum.”¹⁹

Talk radio in the '90s, however, is bigger and bolder than ever, more prestigious and more respectable. More and more radio stations like CFRA in Ottawa have adopted the format (23 stations in Canada at last count, more than 1,250 stations in the United States). Callers can choose from lively ‘low-brow’ debates like Green’s, or the university seminar atmosphere of CBC’s Radio Noon or Cross Country Checkup. There are even phone-in shows on television: CBC’s Newsworld, the Life Channel, the Women’s Television Network, BCTV. Local open-line radio shows are broadcast on television satellites in Nova Scotia and Alberta, and occasionally on C-PAC (Canadian Parliamentary Channel). ‘Talk’ comes in all topics these days: politics, health and fitness, gardening, finances, something for everybody. And more people are listening: in the largest cities of Canada, news/talk stations are number one in the AM market and in the U.S. the King of Talk Radio, Rush Limbaugh, has 20 million listeners on 650 stations.

CFRA general manager Mark Maheu says listeners to The Lowell Green Show are older, better educated, and more upscale than average.²⁰ The show still has a mostly male audience (55 per cent), but more women call in now that Green has stopped castigating them for not participating, as he used to. Green’s audience fits the profile drawn by the latest general surveys which show that the '90s audience is much different than in the

'70s — movers and shakers, not marginalized Miss Lonelyhearts. The change is partly due to demographics and economics: more men at home, fewer housewives, more unemployed people, more part-time workers, more people working at home. Even though these days you don't have to be at home to call an open-line show. Cellular phones mean you can call in from anywhere (see chapter 3).

Critical theorists dismiss talk radio as a "managed show" (Habermas), as "infotainment . . . a show, a spectacle" (Polan), where citizens are encouraged to know more, be more opinionated, but do less (Tuchman). Critics argue that citizens are too busy being consumers to notice they are being tricked into thinking they have political power or influence.²¹

CFRA's Maheu makes no apology for managing the direction talk takes on his station. Research has shown that the audience wants to listen to politics and social issues. "Producers work closely with the hosts to make sure the shows are listenable, and entertaining. Callers are selected by personality, and in that sense the discussion is 'constructed.' It's not a democratic snapshot, but a talk show on serious issues must be fair and balanced." Maheu says that's why when taxpayers light up the lines to protest a teachers' strike, for instance, the first teacher that calls in gets on right away.²²

Certainly concessions must be made to entertainment, since without advertisers or ratings there would be no forum for debate at all. Nonetheless, Livingstone and Lunt caution talk show critics not to be too quick to dismiss the potential of this medium for democratic debate in a legitimate 'public sphere.'

The production team probably puts more effort into staging the conversation

than biasing its content, for when frequent and regular episodes are required, any controversial argument is welcomed, any boring or consensual argument is not.²³

Audiences seem to recognize that the discussion is not a formal debate, that the talk show is not truly a 'town hall' meeting. It is not a formal organization or a legal institution, it has no formal agenda or requirement for a quorum, and foremost, it cannot legislate. But callers believe talk shows can "stimulate political communication, educate the public, formulate issues, recruit civic activists, [and] promote free political expression."²⁴ An analysis of Canadian and British call-in shows identified their capacity to "get regional public works done, and public complaints attended to," and to provide an arena in which political candidates are available to the public.²⁵

The Lowell Green Show has not, and never will, have a political candidate as a guest (Lowell flies solo), but the program wields considerable clout.

It's 11 a.m., Tuesday, March 21, 1995, the morning after CJOH-TV has revealed the plight of a 10-year-old boy with an immune disease who will have to live out the rest of his short life in a tiny isolation room at the children's hospital in Ottawa. The provincial health ministry will no longer pay for him to stay home with his family, even though home care would be cheaper. Lowell and his callers have made life miserable all morning for the provincial health minister's office.

Green: I understand hundreds and hundreds of you have faxed or phoned down to Queen's Park. It's truly the power of the people. Don't ever let anyone tell you you don't have any power.

Two MPP's, one of whom has contacted the provincial Liberal leader, call in on their own to promise support. Two of Tyler Monnick's aunts call: they're listening and just want to thank the listeners for everything they're doing. Tyler's nurse calls in from the boy's hospital room.

Green: Is there any question in your mind that Tyler belongs at home?

Nurse: None at all. He's happier and healthier at home.

Green: Any idea why the health minister has made this decision, and is so intransigent?

Nurse: It's just crap. Bureaucratic crap.

Finally, a caller reports he's just talked to someone in the health minister's office, and the minister has promised a decision on Tyler Monnick's case by noon. Lowell is elated. Power of the People works. A few moments after The Lowell Green Show goes off the air, Ontario's health minister, then Ruth Grier, calls CFRA to announce that Tyler will be going home to stay.

Neither is the federal government immune from the radio station's crusades. In addition to energizing the No Rally in Montreal, CFRA claims it has forced the federal government to cancel a plan to subsidize a Hamilton MP's sabbatical at Harvard, and pressured a federal cabinet minister to call off his lawsuit against the federal government. Green's show, along with other talk shows in New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Montreal, Saskatchewan and British Columbia generated such outrage over a 1995 Reader's Digest article on Senate abuses that the Senate Office took 254 irate phone calls, and published

a rejoinder.²⁶

CFRA's two main talk show hosts, Steve Madely and Lowell Green, can rally the troops for any worthy cause: flood aid for the Saguenay and for Manitoba (millions of dollars raised along with other open-line shows), a 1995 tax revolt (no increase in personal income tax in the federal budget), a Young Offenders Act protest on Parliament Hill (more than 1,000 people turned out), the gun amnesty (more than 300 handguns and firearms turned in), the Aylmer Tornado Relief Fund (\$125,000 in one day). Power of the People works. And politicians listen. Talk radio broadcasts the temper of the nation.

While this media discussion occurs in public it is echoed and continued privately in the living room, connecting public forums of argument on television (or radio) and the formation of private opinion . . . Surely the public sphere must affect voting, trade union and pressure-group activities and so forth, by affecting the climate of public opinion, by setting the agenda for discussion and by framing the meaning of key terms in a political debate?²⁷

Precise figures are not available, but Maheu says CFRA's media monitoring service, Mediascan, gets requests weekly from MP's and deputy ministers, provincial and local politicians for program tapes. He cautions, however, that what seems like consensus on a talk show may be simply "the tyranny of the urgent."

"The Lowell Green Show is a lightning rod for public opinion. If we hammer an issue, it creates the impression of a groundswell of opinion, a tidal wave of opposition. But it may be only a small, but committed group giving that impression."²⁸

Public opinion on talk shows is a force to be considered, but Canadian talk radio has not yet forged the awesome — and to some, alarming — power of talk radio in the United States. Talk radio has rolled through that country, gathering momentum for popular

causes, generating tidal waves of phone calls, faxes and e-mail to government offices, elevating Rush Limbaugh to the status of national hero, boosting Larry King to the top of CNN's ratings. Talk radio is credited with turning the 1994 Congressional election in favor of the Republicans; talk radio reaction aborted Zoe Baird's nomination as federal attorney-general; President Bill Clinton blames talk show hosts for inciting cynicism and criticism; Newsweek worries about "government by feverish plebiscite," Time condemns call-in government as "hyperdemocracy," responsible for "dubious" laws like the 'three strikes and you're out' provision of the 1994 federal crime bill. The legislation originated on a California talk show whose host was outraged by the lengthy criminal record of the career felon who murdered a teen-aged girl in Fresno. Catalyzed by talk radio shows, the notion spread across the country, and "President Clinton, with the support of Congress, complied promptly and cheerfully with the people's will."²⁹

The Athenians too might have been accused of "feverish plebiscite" when the Assembly voted to invade Sicily in the winter of 415 B.C. Thucydides thought the orators promoted the expedition for the wrong reasons, and played on the emotions and ignorance of citizens who didn't even know how big Sicily was, or how big its military forces.

There was a passion for the expedition which seized everyone alike . . . [T]he mass of the people, including the soldiers, saw the prospect of earning money for the time being, and by adding to the empire, of assuring income in the future. The result of this excessive enthusiasm of the great majority was that those who actually were opposed to the expedition were afraid of being thought unpatriotic if they voted against it, and therefore kept quiet.³⁰

The ensuing invasion was defeated, and the Athenian army and navy very nearly wiped out. But Finley warns that it would be a mistake to conclude that the decision was a dubious one made by a ‘mob’ provoked to fever pitch by demagogic oratory and chauvinistic patriotism at an outdoors mass meeting. The decision was not made in haste. The vote was preceded by the customary period of intense discussion in the shops and taverns, in the town square, and at the dinner table.

The possibility of ‘mob rule’ troubled the most empirical of Greek philosophers, Aristotle. No disciple of democracy, Aristotle believed the best citizens were farmers — because they lived too far away from the Assembly to bother voting. The worst were craftsmen and shopkeepers in Athens. With easy access to the Assembly, they were enthusiastically involved in the business of directing the state.³¹ Neither did Plato believe in ‘government by the people.’ If the state were run by a trained elite of philosophers, so Plato’s thinking went, mob rule would be eliminated. Deprive these philosophers of property rights and family, furthermore, and the ruling elite would make decisions based only on the best interest of the state — not class or personal gains.³² And that, say contemporary critics, is the danger of direct or participatory democracy: that decisions made by citizens will be guided by self-interest, not the good of all.

Time magazine deplores the government “gridlock” inflicted by a cacophony of voices from a multitude of interest groups, each empowered technologically to demand attention, and funding. In the 18th century as America pondered its future, James Madison dreaded “pure democracy” which “could admit of no cure for the mischiefs of faction.”³³ But the Athenians’ face-to-face democracy had a cure for faction: a sense of

community, *koinonia*. Athenians knew each other well, as friends and neighbors. In the narrow society of ancient Greece more than 200,000 people lived in an area half the size of Prince Edward Island. They were clustered in small urban centers and villages, living the typical outdoor Mediterranean life, something like that of a modern university community, certainly nothing on the scale of municipal or national life today.

It was that sense of community, I suggest, fortified by the state religion, by their myths and their traditions, which was an essential element in the pragmatic success of the Athenian democracy . . . Neither the sovereign Assembly with its unlimited right to vote . . . nor ostracism could have prevented either chaos on the one hand or tyranny on the other, had there not been the self-control among enough of the citizen-body to contain its own behavior within bounds.³⁴

When it came time to vote, every citizen not only knew personally many other citizens there on the Pnyx, he had a personal stake in each decision. When Alcibiades and Nicias argued in the Assembly over whether to invade Sicily in 415 B.C., each knew that one or both would take command should the invasion be approved. Many in the audience were voting to take themselves off to war as officers, soldiers or rowers in the fleet. All were committed to *eunomia*: the ideal of a state free from faction, whose aims were timeless and universal.

In The Lowell Green Show community, welfare mothers, union members, ex-convicts, business owners, racial minority groups, feminists, immigrants, conservatives, even politicians share their experiences. The grandmother of a teenager murdered in a gang killing calls in tears the day the killers get light sentences. A drug dealer calls to say he has retired from his million-dollar-a-year business because his son has been

arrested for dealing. An NDP MP from Yorkton calls in to argue about gun registration. Philip, the resident racist, calls to complain about war criminal prosecutions. The wife of a police officer says her children are sobbing with fright after yesterday's shooting of two officers during a bank holdup. Or an unemployed air traffic controller with 20 years experience in Yugoslavia calls to say he can't get by bureaucratic red tape in Canada.

Zoran: I've been on a simulator and they tell me I'm slow, I just want an opportunity to work in a real situation with an instructor. I've waited three months for an answer.

Green: I really don't know, Zoran, all I can tell you is you sound like a really great guy, this is Canada, my man, if you're any good at all, you'll make it. Just don't give up keep pounding them. [They laugh.]³⁵

The conversation continues, callers sharing information and personal experiences, arguing their viewpoints, annoying and appeasing, and exchanging possible strategies. In the face-to-face democracy of the '90s, Lowell's "Green Beanies" are on the march.

Athens managed for nearly 200 years to be the most prosperous, most powerful, most stable, most peaceful internally, and culturally by far the richest state in all the Greek world.³⁶

Athens' reputation has not survived intact over two millenia, however. In *Athens on Trial, The Anti-Democratic Tradition in Western Thought*, Jennifer Roberts explores the case against Athenian democracy — a government ruled by a brutish lower-class mob that ended in the dismal failure of the Macedonian conflict. Though 20th-century thinkers have come to prefer the "liabilities of democratic licence" to fascism, totalitarianism and communism, argues Roberts, the anti-Athenian tradition survives.

[T]he Athenians are censured today for oppressing women, slaves and allies, and the state that was once reproached for being too democratic is now

lambasted for not having been democratic enough. Whereas Americans confronted with two world wars had been happy to identify with high-minded Athenians fighting to make the world safe for democracy, ominous echoes of the Sicilian expedition in the wars in Vietnam and the Persian Gulf focused attention on the dangers of imperialism.³⁷

Still, there is something about the face-to-face democracy of ancient Greece that continues to fascinate, particularly since 20th-century democracy has now been diagnosed as suffering a ‘crisis of legitimation.’ The foundation of democracy — that its citizens make informed choices — is evidently on shaky ground. The culprit, countless theorists have concluded, is the mass media which have commodified, lobotomized, systemized, routinized and otherwise degraded public thought. As Christopher Dorman writes in *Sounding the Alarm*:

The complaint is not simply that these enormous agencies of public address are being squandered on trivia and titillation when they could well be instruments of social betterment. Rather, as almost everyone who thinks seriously about the matter agrees, it’s that they are actively making us all dumber. Right and left differ only on whether this is inadvertent or structurally convenient . . . As the media come to dominate public life, so the complaint runs, their values become society’s values. But the media’s values are entirely inappropriate to the conduct of a thinking and caring collective, because the media’s values are superficiality and histrionics, opportunism and the fast buck.³⁸

The problem for democracy, says Dorman, is not just that the mass media don’t lend themselves to intellectual discourse, but that they have actively reduced politics to “referendums on charisma — a quality the media themselves confer and revoke — or to contests between campaign machines.”³⁹ These are contests in which the ‘public’ participates only at the ballot box or in a survey questionnaire, politics being reduced to a spectator sport between politicians and interest groups, play-by-play coverage provided

by journalists.

The ‘public’ faded to a phantom, as James Carey explains it, when the polling industry got rolling early in the 1900s. Pollsters fixed on newly important interest groups, shutting the ‘public’ out of political life except as an artifact. Having been excluded from the political process, the public retired to private pursuits, and private pleasures. This, says Carey is a long way from the 18th-century definition of the ‘public’ which inspired democratic theory: the merchants, traders, citizens, writers and political activists who gathered in the coffeehouses of England or the colonial taverns of America. “It was a concrete social group who gathered in public houses to talk, read the news together, dispute the meaning of events and relate political impulses to political actions.” What they were reading were newspapers filled with information picked up from travelers, speeches, sermons, ads, and political opinions. In this “public sphere” (originally described by Jurgen Habermas) the public was both critical and rational.

It was *critical* in the sense that nothing in public was taken for granted; everything was subject to argument and evidence. It was *rational* in the sense that the speaker was responsible for giving reasons for believing in any assertion; and there was no intrinsic appeal to authority. The public was, thus, more than a group of people or a mode of discourse: it was a seat of political power, located in the world between the state and the private sector.⁴⁰

For many reasons — not the least of which is Habermas’ requirement for rational ‘debate’ to arrive at a consensus — talk radio cannot be a “seat of political power” in the 18th-century sense because the space between state and private sectors has disappeared as governments have moved into almost every aspect of private life. In any case, Habermas’ ideal “bourgeois” public sphere is perhaps too ideal — it excludes almost everybody. The

men sitting around English coffehouses or colonial taverns 200 years ago talking politics were an elite: they were literate, as most of the population wasn't, and well-enough off to be able to put aside any "what's in it for me?" anxiety to consider "what's good for the public?" A consensus on the public good in today's vast society — where any homogeneity of the "mass" audience has been splintered into "tribes" of special interests, tastes, occupations, race or ethnicity — is almost impossible. But talk radio may be able to provide a different kind of political space, one which postmodern thinkers call the "oppositional public sphere."⁴¹ There, all the 'tribes' can trade life-views, and work out compromises on how to divvy up society's resources through conversations rather than formal debates. By providing a meeting-place as much as a democratic forum, talk radio might help to alleviate today's conflicts of interest among all the interest groups clamoring for a share of the taxpayers' pie. Paradoxically, talk radio would then be using the very medium critics call a means of social control in order to challenge the status quo, "to subvert those ideological processes which construct the public as a mass to be governed," in the words of Livingstone and Lunt.

But is talk radio's conversation legitimate public discourse? Is it important? Or, as Edwin Diamond and Robert A. Silverman contest, is it "talk-show politics driven by . . . the power of Know-Nothing call-in shows" in a "blowhard culture"?⁴² The public, it seems, has finally noticed that they have been disconnected from the democratic decision-making process: they are discontented, frustrated and cynical about a representative government that seems to be run by arrogant politicians and selfish interest groups. Canada's 1991 Lortie Commission on Electoral Reform noted the high degree of

cynicism among voters (80 per cent felt politicians were out of touch with the people and made campaign promises they didn't keep);⁴³ the distancing of political parties from their constituents by television advertising and polling instead of interpersonal networks; and the alarming rise of narrowly focused interest groups with uninhibited amounts of money to spend on campaign issues.⁴⁴ More and more citizens use call-in radio, televised town hall meetings and chat rooms on the Internet — in Canada as well as the United States — to talk about term limits, ballot initiatives, and referenda. Closing the 'space' between the electors and the elected of representative democracy is now fashionable. Indeed, suggests former CBS and PBS president Lawrence Grossman, the convergence of technologies — computers, satellites, television, telephone and radio — has already changed the way government works in the United States. The White House has three pollsters who daily gauge public reaction, Congress is bombarded with telephone calls, e-mail and faxes. It's what Grossman calls "The Electronic Republic"; others call it "teledemocracy."

And already it is showing indications of being a hybrid between the direct democracy of ancient Greek city-states, and the representative democracy with which we've grown so familiar over the past 200 years. That is to say, the public has become the 4th branch of government.

If the public is now the "4th branch of government," what does that mean for traditional journalism? As Carey points out, journalism evolves as democracy evolves: from its original function reflecting the "ongoing flow of conversation, not in the halls of the legislatures, but in the public houses" through the nineteenth century rise of political parties and partisan newspapers, to the modern era of the mass audience created through national magazines, mass circulation newspapers, network radio and the news wire

services. When the muckrakers of the early 1900s began to expose business corruption and a democracy run by interest and pressure groups, the press began to break away from politics — journalism became a watchdog.

Paradoxically, this new role as representative of the public was contained within a sentiment that was increasingly antipopulist and antipublic. In a world ruled by interests and regulated by science, the public faded into a spectator. . . . Journalists merely translated the arcane language of experts — scientists in their labs, bureaucrats in their offices — into a publicly accessible language for the masses. By transmitting the judgements of experts, they ratified decisions made by that class — not those made by the public or public representatives.⁴⁵

Now that computers and satellites have fragmented the audience, says Carey, journalism and democracy are changing again. Feeling empowered by the new interactive technologies — and the older one of talk radio — the public is getting back into the game of politics, challenging the experts face-to-face (or voice-to-voice). The public's political discourse might not sound like traditional political debate, but Carpignano et al caution that radio and television talk shows can't be dismissed as merely insignificant conversations. "Those who consider this a trivialization of intellectual discourse do not take into account the fact that what is expressed is a refusal not of knowledge but of expertise. The talk show rejects the arrogance of a discourse that defines itself on the basis of its difference from common sense."⁴⁶ Representative democracy has always disdained populism, a bias inherited from liberal democracy 200 years ago. Membership in Habermas' public sphere was open only to the literate, and as Stanley Aronowitz writes, "restricted . . . to people like himself, those who have undergone the rigorous training of scientific and cultural intellectuals." Aronowitz argues that the history of

democratic revolutions in France, Cuba and the former Soviet Union illustrates that citizens need only share a history of oppression, not rigorous intellectual education.⁴⁷

Talk radio has picked up on the lesson of “oppression.” The audience is tired if not of being oppressed, at least of being the “phantom” public of Walter Lippman’s elitist democracy, where public opinion is formed by experts, then transmitted by journalists to the lowly citizens, who are not reasoned or experienced enough to participate. Talk radio, like John Dewey, hasn’t given up on democracy. If citizens are lost and bewildered in the complexity of the information age (for Dewey, the machine age), turning off politics and onto entertainment, if they aren’t capable of reason, then teach them how to think, and let the press inform and educate instead of titillate. Let talk radio become the voice of the people, the connection to politics and politicians.

Endnotes

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26. Interview with Senate communications officer, February 1995.
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32. Ibid., p. 47.
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Chapter 2

The History of Talk Radio in Canada

Talk radio today is primarily a populist protest movement on commercial AM radio, but as a forum for controversy and as a ready source of information it owes much to the CBC. When Farm Forum and Citizens' Forum went on the CBC airwaves in the early '40s, the programs set a precedent for two-way communication with the public, raised the possibility of participatory democracy, generated controversy, and defied radio's definition as just entertainment. For the first time, listeners were considered worthy of contributing to serious discussions on significant issues.

While radio of the late '30s in Canada was mostly broadcasting popular music, American comedy and variety shows, it occurred to the Canadian Association for Adult Education — an organization representing volunteer associations, populist and rural social movements — that radio might be better used. Farm Forum, the Association's first proposal, evolved from the CBC's noon-hour farm reports which began in 1939, and the farm family dramas like *The Craigs*, created by Orville Shugg to "provide entertainment and information in a framework farm people would understand.

Our idea with these noon broadcasts was to help put more dollars in the farmer's pocket, but there was another side . . . that was the social lot of farmers. We felt radio was much better than print in accomplishing this and so it was that "National Farm Radio Forum" came into being.¹

Improving the lot of the farmers in the Depression by discussing topics like credit unions, consumers' co-operatives and health insurance, however, provoked "resentment from the

champions of free enterprise.”² Farm Forum was cancelled in the winter of 1939 when businessmen objected. Only a vigorous campaign in the press put it back on the air. By 1941, weekly listening groups across the country met to listen to the night’s on-air debate by experts, discuss the topic, then file their conclusions to the CBC. Summaries were incorporated into the following week’s broadcast and published in a weekly Forum newsletter. The concept was so popular — 30,000 listeners with 135 discussion groups³ — that in 1943 the adult education association proposed Citizens’ Forum, a program aimed at urban Canadians. Featuring controversial postwar reconstruction topics such as public participation, the bitterness between English and French Canadians, and “democratic planning,”⁴ Citizens’ Forum provoked as much discomfort as Farm Forum, but this time the protest came from the government. Several Liberal cabinet ministers took violent exception to the list of left-leaning proposed speakers, which included several CCF members of the opposition, and threatened to keep Citizens’ Forum off the air. After the story of the controversy reached the press, the government backed off and Citizens’ Forum debuted in November 1943.

It quickly developed a national audience and was reluctantly tolerated by the government, offering a left-of-centre political orientation reflecting the position of social movements in English Canada in the 1940s.⁵

Within a year, Citizens’ Forum had 500,000 listeners, although it never inspired as many discussion groups as Farm Forum.⁶

The credo of the Adult Education Movement is a precursor of the possibilities of talk radio today — that citizens informed and motivated by talking to one another can be empowered.

Ordinary men and women have within themselves and their communities the spiritual and intellectual resources adequate to the solution of their own problems . . . The primary tasks of adult education, therefore, are to awaken people to the possibilities and dangers of modern life, to help them with knowledge and leadership, and to provide channels of communication between different cultural, occupational and social groups . . . in short, the task is the imaginative training for citizenship.⁷

The success of the programs — Farm Forum was honored by UNESCO, and inspired similar programs in India, Pakistan and Japan — was notable for two reasons, reasons that decades later would contribute to the genesis of talk radio. First, the notion that the listener could be an active participant was novel. Until the Forum programs, the edification of the citizen was a distinctly top-down process: from expert lecturers at the studio microphone to listeners at radio sets in living rooms or kitchens. Secondly, radio was not much interested in any sort of edification; the major thrust was entertainment.

That's Entertainment!

By the early '30s, music dominated the airwaves: as much as 70 per cent of a station's schedule might be popular, dance or classical music.⁸ Historian Mary Vipond suggests that radio's entertainment focus was not necessarily inevitable — bestseller lists of the 1920s, for instance, suggested a middle-class interest in self-improvement — but radio began as a “faddish toy for teenage boys and young men,” an entertaining diversion for the youngsters, not an educational vehicle for the middle class.

While their parents sought to better themselves by reading heavy tomes such as *The Outline of History*, the younger members of the family danced to radio music. For them, radio was not serious but rather a supplement to the cinema

and the phonograph in providing diversion and enjoyment.⁹

Gradually, radio earned a reputation as a respectable medium. The CNR put radios on its trains and piped in higher-brow music and church broadcasts for passengers in special radio listening cars. Stations broadcasting popular music began to add sponsored programs, many from the United States: dance bands, comedy shows, who-dunnits and soap operas. Radio was no longer just a fanciful novelty for teenaged tinkerers and a techno-addiction for their fathers — it was quickly becoming family entertainment. By 1931 there were 80 private, commercial stations in Canada, double the number of 1921,¹⁰ and one-third of Canadian households had radios.¹¹ Advertisers preferred to reach listeners who demonstrated by letters, requests and surveys an overwhelming preference for music — and that was nearly everybody. Only 10 per cent of the audience in a 1930 survey by Cockfield-Brown's advertising agency, for instance, was interested in 'educational' programs.¹²

What little nonmusical content dotted the schedule in radio's first decade included church broadcasts, hockey, occasional plays, household tips for women, the odd lecture or political speaker. Radio stations like CKUA at the University of Alberta in Edmonton or the University of Western Ontario in London carried talks by experts on such topics as "A Day in old Rome," or "The French Language in Alberta." Commercial stations like CFQC in Saskatoon aired informative features for farm listeners, and CJGC London ran weekly 15-minute features on topics from "Oliver Goldsmith" to "The Whys and Wherefores of Antifreeze" and "Mars and Its Inhabitants."¹³ Some concession might have been made to popular tastes but the titles from radio program guides in the '20s indicate

information and edification was serious business, as CBC producer Sandy Stewart notes in *Coast to Coast: A Personal History of Radio in Canada*.

Radio was considered a “high-class” medium and only the “best” was expected to lift the tastes of the audience. The man on the street’s opinion was not regarded as worthwhile, and radio was viewed mainly as a medium for the country’s experts and professors.¹⁴

What little time was devoted to information programming remained the province of experts and professors for decades. Ordinary people could get on the radio only as low-brow entertainers.

The Evolution of Active Participation

It is ironic that radio relegated listeners to a passive role, the same listeners who had worked so hard to get radio on the air in the first place. Vipond describes them as “men and boys with some technical facility” who usually built their own receiving sets from a crystal detector, a tuning wire and earphones, bits and pieces scrounged, bought and assembled . . . listening to the radio become an uncomplicated, everyday part of family life, a pleasant background for passing time only after cheap electrical table models finally became widely available in 1930.¹⁵

When given the chance, listeners were eager to participate in this magical medium. In the early days, those lucky enough to catch the sound of a distant human voice through the night air sent letters to faraway broadcasters acknowledging reception of the signal. The few stations which did provide continuous day and evening programming — usually in the largest cities — got an enthusiastic reception. In the early ’30s nearly 90,000

listeners called CKWX Vancouver to join Billy Browne's Sunrise Club.¹⁶ The Eaton's Good Deed Club, launched in 1933 to reward the most helpful children with a wrist watch, boasted 75,000 members 10 years later.¹⁷ Listeners could participate in programming by mailing or phoning in musical requests, and by entering contests:¹⁸ in the early '40s, Treasure Trail, the most popular game show on Canadian radio, was getting as many as 100,000 letters a week from listeners enclosing Wrigley's silver gum wrappers for a chance to win 50 silver dollars.¹⁹

Listeners participated in amateur contests, popular since the '20s on radio stations which could not afford to hire first-rate talent and were forbidden, by regulation, to play recorded music after 7:30 p.m.²⁰ Amateur hours were a big hit. CHWC Regina's weekly Saturday evening contest, for instance, had hundreds of people lined up at the Capitol Theatre every week, as Regina Daily Star reporter Andy McDermott discovered.

It was supposed to be an hour long, but it ran on sometimes to three hours depending on how much talent there was. People paid ten cents to come and stand there while the amateur show was on.²¹

Local amateur efforts evolved to network contests in the 1930s as sponsors searched for ways to get their brand names on the air without breaking the regulation banning direct advertising after 7:30 pm. In Canada, Ken Sobel's Amateur Hour for the Royal Canadian Tobacco Company, originating in Toronto at CFRB, was broadcast across the country.²² The most popular talent contest by far in 1935 was Major Bowes' Amateur Hour, an American show carried on Canadian stations. The contest attracted 10,000 applications a week, selected 10 hopefuls, and declared a weekly winner by listeners' phone or mail ballots.

Canadian listeners briefly got on air over the telephone in the early '30s in Sydney, N.S., but the concept was so far ahead of its time that it made the station owner nervous. CJCB's owner, Nate Nathanson, had second thoughts about announcer Harvey Dobbs' bright idea.

I started a show there called "The Havelock Home Reporter" in which I used the phone to carry on two-way conversations with listeners. As far as I know this was the first time anything like that had been done. I'd phone and ask a simple question. Then I'd send a case of Havelock beverage for the person's courtesy in talking to me. It worked great and became the talk of Cape Breton. Then somebody told Nathanson that this was an invasion of privacy and against the law. He got scared and took it off the air.²³

Listeners were just as eager to participate in the radio function that would be so important to talk radio decades later: helping your neighbors. In Saskatchewan one of the biggest Saturday night events for years was the ACT (Associated Canadian Travellers) Amateur Hour which took call-in pledges for the Anti-Tuberculosis League,²⁴ but spontaneous demonstrations of charity were more likely. Radio pioneer Gerry Quinney remembers one winter night in Regina in the middle of the Depression when an announcer worried — on air — that the children at the local orphanage might not get Christmas dinner.

Well, you never saw so damn many turkeys in your life. We must have had about six tons of turkey, all of them plucked and frozen sitting in a pallet behind the station. These turkeys were being sent in by people who had no money themselves. But all these poverty-stricken farmers had radios.²⁵

This sense of community was radio's major appeal to Canadians in isolated regions. The nearest neighbor might live hundreds of miles away, but company was as close as the radio. Long used as a message-sending service to trappers, traders and workers in the far

north,²⁶ radio was a link to the outside world in the fishing outports of Newfoundland,²⁷ on prairie farms — wherever people were widely scattered.

Radio listeners were happy to participate however they could — sending help to worthwhile causes, singing songs on the amateur stage, sending gum wrappers to contests — but to broadcasters and advertisers the audience was a crowd of passive consumers.

The 1930s surge of programs based on audience participation coincided with the emergence of the concept of public opinion, which found its institutionalization in George Gallup's 1935 establishment of the American Institute for Public Opinion . . . Audience participation in the radio of the period inscribed a nostalgia for "the people" at a time when they were being more and more defined as "average" and "mass" to fit useful consumption profiles.²⁸

The concept of the listener as more than a performer or contestant or consumer began to emerge as radio introduced "human interest" programs featuring interviews with ordinary people.²⁹ CBC's Night Shift in 1937, for instance, told the stories of working Canadians, from a lighthouse keeper to a pulp mill worker.³⁰ Spontaneous, unscripted daytime talk and variety programs, such as NBC's long-running Breakfast Club (1933-68) heard in Canada on the CBC³¹ responded to listeners' requests and used gags, nostalgic poetry and regional anecdotes from the listeners' mail bag.³² Canadian radio experimented with 'man-on-the-street' interviews³³ with mixed success. Private stations like CKNW Vancouver used a "Roving Mike" technique to collect comments from passersby on the sidewalk near the station. Wildly popular, Roving Mike continued for over 40 years with a succession of hosts, setting a Guinness Book world record in 1984 for the longest running radio program with its 12,000th broadcast.³⁴ The man-on-the-street approach was also adopted by CKDA Victoria's Roving Reporter, a three times weekly

weekly feature sponsored by a jewellery store.³⁵

The CBC was less confident in the technique. *What's Your Beef?* debuted in the late '40s as a daily feature with host Don Sims interviewing ordinary Canadians on the street, at service club meetings and at other get-togethers. On the March 6, 1950 show broadcast from a "social gathering" in the cafeteria of Reliable Toy in Toronto, for instance, employees have beefs for the federal government about unemployment, hospitals and income taxes. Mr. Albert Johnson from the accounting department gets a big round of applause from the audience when he tells Sims his beef is "preferential duties at the border" enjoyed by U.S. toy makers, and the federal government should "bring the duties to a more equitable level." Sims, in turn, challenges Johnson with a beef from the listening public "based on the number of letters we get" about defective toys.³⁶ *What's Your Beef?* was cancelled at the end of 1950. "It excited much interest, but its controversial nature brought jitters to the program department," according to Austin Weir.³⁷

Controversy itself was not especially uncomfortable for CBC programmers, bound by the principle of freedom of expression inscribed in CBC's 1939 policy statement: "The air belongs to the people, who are entitled to hear the principal points of view on all questions of importance."³⁸ As historian Paul Rutherford points out, the national broadcaster pioneered the acceptance of dissent in the media, considering controversial broadcasting a responsibility to educate the public. The Forum programs, for instance, dealt with "such sensitive questions as social equity and social security, wages and prices, labour and management."³⁹ But *What's Your Beef?* offered a public complaint

channel to Parliament Hill and other institutions (like toy manufacturers) for the *voices* of ordinary Canadians. It was a sound the Massey Commission didn't like to hear. In its May, 1951 report the Royal Commission upbraided the CBC for 'talks' programs featuring "speakers with no special knowledge or reputation in their fields . . . engaged because they have a natural facility for broadcasting and also . . . because the popular approach of the amateur is thought to have a special appeal to the average listener. . . . The popular talk should be in quality and authority comparable to the scholarly."⁴⁰ This intellectual disdain for the popular talk program has survived for years.

Certainly spontaneous on-air interviews with an audience were perilous. Flustered, inarticulate or clumsy reactions from participants were likely, but inappropriate or profane comments were always possible. The chaos, "the messiness" of live programming⁴¹ was part of the charm of radio — anecdotes abound of announcers' on-air expletives, fluffs, or tongue-twisters — but comedic entertainment did not fit into serious discussions. CJOR Vancouver's Town Meeting in Canada, launched in 1943, was a breakthrough. Unlike Farm Forum's listening groups, Town Meeting's audience grilled the experts on air after the night's debate on weighty topics such as "How Far Should Canada Go in Following United States Policy?" A northern version of NBC's America's Town Meeting of the Air which had debuted in 1935,⁴² Town Meeting, hosted by Arthur Helps and broadcast on 10 stations, won international awards over more than a decade.⁴³

The sound of "ordinary" voices in "expert" discussions of significant issues was a side effect of CBC's extensive news coverage of the Second World War, exposure which transformed radio's conception of the country's "common folk."

The Evolution of News

The use of the 'wireless' during the sinking of the Titanic in 1912 had sparked public interest in what was originally a weather-forecasting, shipping surveillance medium. But any news and information function of radio was muffled for almost 30 years by its primary role as entertainment. The typical daily radio schedule for 1924 reveals that most stations were on the air for only a few hours, with little time devoted to weather, farm prices, stock quotes or 'news of the day.'⁴⁴ An average 16-hour broadcast day at "Canada's premier radio station," CFCF Montreal, in 1931 included only 41 minutes of information, more than half of it stock quotations, the rest time checks and weather reports.⁴⁵ In any case, news was not a profitable proposition; newspaper publishers had seen to that. Radio stations who had sold news bulletins to advertisers in the early '30s were hard pressed to find any 'news' without access to a news teletype, or a news staff. Announcers like Harold Paulson in Vancouver had only one choice.

At CKWX we used to broadcast about 10 minutes of news at six o'clock every night. I'd have to go through the newspapers for news . . . I used to take a black pencil and circle the paragraphs. There'd be a great long article and I'd glance down it and take the "meat." We'd cut it all out of the pages and make it compact, and when we read the news at night we'd just read these paragraphs.⁴⁶

Newspaper publishers were outraged at the "piracy" of the news by the upstart medium. The dispute ended in 1933 when Canadian Press, representing the publishers, agreed to supply, free of charge, two five-minute news bulletins a day for broadcast — but stipulated they could not be sponsored. News, 'talks' and information programming remained merely a cost-efficient time-filler for stations who had meagre financial

resources. Radio advertising jumped in 1936 when the newly incorporated CBC built a network of powerful new stations to cover the country, beamed highly popular, profitable American entertainment to its affiliates and rounded out the schedule with Canadian variety, comedy and drama. Private, local stations — CBC's "partner" in Canada's broadcasting system — carried many of the national network's programs. By 1937, most stations were in the black.⁴⁷

At about the same time, broadcasters realized that coverage of historical events could be just as dramatic — and attract as many listeners — as top-rated American entertainment. The drama of the Moose River mine disaster in Nova Scotia held the entire continent spellbound for three days in 1936 waiting for three trapped miners to be rescued from a cave-in. All Canadian radio stations and 650 in the U.S. carried J. Frank Willis' reports every hour for 69 hours. Three years later, Canadians were enchanted by the Royal Tour of King George VI and Queen Elizabeth. It was a mammoth undertaking by the CBC — 91 broadcasts in six weeks by 100 people, travelling 7,000 miles.⁴⁸ — and a natural ratings-grabber. Coincidentally, the Royal Tour equipped CBC with \$50,000 worth of remote broadcasting equipment, equipment which made possible CBC's coverage of the Second World War. Because the U.S. was at peace for more than two years while Canada was at war, Canadians, anxious for news of the conflict, tuned in the CBC. By 1941 the CBC had set up its own news department and filled 20 per cent of the day's schedule with news bulletins, more than double the news content of two years before.⁴⁹ CBC's war coverage secured radio as an information source; it drew listeners away from U.S. to Canadian radio programs; and by focusing on individual soldiers,

sailors and airmen overseas, it created a space on the airwaves for ordinary citizens.

Three half-hour programs were sent to Canada every week — recorded flights, rides in tanks, interviews with soldiers, sailors, airmen, officials, doctors, nurses and other human interest material.⁵⁰

The CBC's wartime programming — the newscasts, the variety shows, the comedies, dramas and remote broadcasts — positioned Canada's fighting forces as individuals, heroes defending democracy, heroes worth listening to. In shows such as *Carry On Canada*, *L for Lanky*, *The Fighting Navy*, *Command Performance*, and *Victory Parade* "our boys" were no longer mere performers or consumers — they were real people with thoughts, feelings and opinions. They were, at long last, citizens.

For the first time in their history Canadians were listening to a lot of original Canadian programs. This had happened not only because of the war, but because the CBC had made a conscious decision to control the number of war broadcasts and maintain a balance between entertainment and the stark facts of the war.⁵¹

With highly rated shows like the *Happy Gang*, *Hockey Night in Canada* and *Stage*, along with American network productions, and plenty of patriotic sponsors, Canadian radio prospered. Radio's golden age lasted until 1954, when television usurped its function as prime time entertainment.

Television Arrives But Radio Survives

The first two television stations in Canada — Toronto and Montreal — went on the air in 1952. Four years later, the country was covered by 28 television stations broadcasting to 3.45 million homes.⁵² Sensing great profits in the new medium, networks

moved their most popular — and most lucrative — dramas, comedies and variety shows to television, along with the staffs required to produce them,⁵³ For the first time in history, sales of radio sets fell off.⁵⁴ Radio was in trouble. The effects were dramatic: the CBC and private radio stations adopted radically different survival strategies; their partnership in national programming ended; and radio moved out of the living room.

Private radio reverted to music aimed at a local audience and a new economy of production. The one-man show known as the ‘disc jockey’ spun records, read commercials, community announcements and even the news. Because stations ran Dominion and Trans Canada network programs only in the evening when most of the audience was lost to television, the demand for network programs dried up. The CBC shut down the Dominion Network in 1962, and two years later cancelled Farm Forum, “hoary with age,”⁵⁵ in a country increasingly urbanized.⁵⁶ The CBC in the ’60s turned to programs for more specialized audiences: “minority programming for housewives, music buffs, intellectuals, news addicts, New Canadians, culture-vultures, native people and the like.”⁵⁷

Private radio, meanwhile, had a new prime time in the morning — “drive time” filled with local news, weather, sports, community announcements, commercials for local advertisers and the local hits from the music charts. Mid-mornings and afternoons were programmed for housewives, evenings for teen-agers. The new drive time from 6 a.m. to 9 a.m. and, to a lesser extent, afternoons from 4 p.m. to 6 p.m. was reinforced by the ’50s population shift to the suburbs, and the burgeoning number of car radios. In 1950 there had been only half a million car radios in Canada; by 1965 there were nearly three

million.⁵⁸

Radio became the portable medium. While the television depended on the family gathering around the set in the living room, radio could follow its listeners into every room in the house. Transistor radios by the 1960s were too numerous to count.⁵⁹ Marshall McLuhan observed:

Since TV, radio has turned to the individual needs of people at different times of the day, a fact that goes with the multiplicity of receiving sets in bedrooms, bathrooms, kitchens, cars and now in people's pockets. Different programs are provided for those engaged in diverse activities. Radio, once a form of group listening that emptied churches, has reverted to private and individual uses since TV.⁶⁰

By the end of the '50s, the specialized 'format' had appeared, as radio stations carved out niches: Top 40, Beautiful Music, Country and Western, Classical, and Jazz. Fornatale and Mills, in *Radio In The Television Age*, credit these innovations to the exodus of radio staff to television, which left the door open for radio pioneers who were young, eager and had "nothing to unlearn."⁶¹ No concept was more radical than the notion of the open-line program. Audience participation, which had been merely an accoutrement to radio programming, became the essence of the talk show. The debut of the format, however, seems to have been more accidental than calculated.

Turning To Talk

The late Barry Gray of WOR New York is widely credited with the genesis of the call-in radio show in 1945. Gray said he got bored with his overnight music show early one morning, so he answered his phone and talked on air with the caller, who happened to

be jazz bandleader Woody Herman. Later Gray moved from celebrity guests to more ordinary people, such as “interesting cab drivers” and politicians.⁶² In 40 years of talkshows “he became radio's longest-running, highest-paid and most controversial interviewer, loathed and loved by his listeners.”⁶³

In Canada, CJCB Sydney's Havelock Home Reporter was on the telephone to listeners at least 10 years before Gray, but only temporarily. At the other end of the country, the inspiration for putting listeners on air surfaced just before television arrived in Canada, according to Murdo MacLachlan, part owner of CHWK Chilliwack :

I guess our first move to combat TV was in the late '40s or early '50s, when we started expanding our morning time . . . We started using mornings because we knew we weren't going to have too much activity in the evening. I think we were among the first to start the open-line type of program; we started ours about 1950, a morning show, and it caught on very quickly. Most of the other stations followed later in the '50s.⁶⁴

Which Canadian radio station was actually the first to use the open-line format is obscured by the lack of documentation by private radio, and the fading memories of its pioneers. MacLachlan claims Chiliwack was among the first, but media millionaire Geoff Stirling, for instance, swears that the first call-in show in Canada aired on CJON St. John's⁶⁵ in 1951 when newsman Don Jamieson (later a federal Liberal cabinet minister) began to include listeners' taped comments in his newscasts, and to put listeners on air over the telephone during CJON's weekly discussion program, Meet The Press.⁶⁶ From his interviews with radio pioneers in Saskatchewan, however, author Wayne Schmalz credits CKOM Saskatoon with the premiere of the open line show in Canada.⁶⁷ Charles Doering, news commentator on CFRB, claims he did the first open-line show in

Brantford when he, like Barry Gray in New York City, got bored being a deejay.

I kept wondering how to break the monotony, and I got the idea, maybe I could get people to participate in the show. I knew I had my problems, let's see if they had any. They did. The very first call I got was from a woman who wanted to know how to get the breast-milk stains out of her cotton blouse.⁶⁸

At whatever moment the open-line show began, it was soon popular all across the country in varieties that foreshadowed today's talk radio subgenres. Swap Shops and programs trading household hints and recipes presaged the self-help or service talk show; Beefs and Bouquets evolved to political talk radio; late-night call-ins matured to the psychological advice show. Talkshow pioneer Bas Jamieson remembers the United Church Minister in Dawson Creek who counselled listeners every Sunday night about marital, money, faith, or gambling problems, and more immediate crises such as suicide.⁶⁹ Larry Solway, the most famous talkshow host in Toronto in the '60s, recalls University of Toronto philosophy professor Marcus Long's half hour nightly show on CHUM in 1959.

It was a cozy thing, people would phone up and he would talk to them. There was a lot of groping around in those days for what to do with open-line radio. It was the first tottering step to interactive broadcasting although they didn't know the word then.⁷⁰

These early open-line shows were personal more than political, partially filling the void, Schmalz suggests, left when formal drama moved to prime time television.

Here the audience got to hear actual stories, unwritten and unrehearsed, often as interesting as anything fabricated. Every comment, every musical request, every item put up for sale told something about the person at the other end of the line and fed that insatiable curiosity all of us have about other people's lives.⁷¹

By the end of the decade many of the early open-line programs had matured to full-

blown call-in shows on community or news subjects, sometimes with local officials as guests. But if Canadian talk radio had been polite, reserved and well-bred in the '50s, the format became controversial, even abusive, in the '60s — particularly in Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver. As Rutherford notes:

Controversy was suddenly a hot item. People wanted to be jolted. Private radio's open-line broadcasts lent themselves to crude, vigorous commentaries upon marriage and morality, children and adolescents, jobs and work. Although occasionally liberal in tone (witness Larry Solway's "Speak Your Mind" on CHUM Toronto in the 1960s), more often the shows voiced a right-wing populism that decried, say, teenage smoking or socialized medicine.⁷²

No host was more right-wing or abrasive than Joe Pyne in Montreal, who later achieved legendary status in his native U.S. for screaming at callers to, "Go gargle razor blades!" before slamming the phone down. Pyne broke into major market radio when Geoff Stirling — a Newfoundland boy who put CJON Radio St. John's on the air before expanding his empire into Montreal at CKGM — was driving through Arizona one night in 1959.

About three o'clock in the morning I heard this guy on a little tiny station in Phoenix. He wasn't taking any notice of the other side of the conversation. It's as if you and I are talking about whatever, something unremarkable, and I am saying, "Madam that's the most obscene thing I have ever heard." And within seven days he was in Montreal and we just dominated the market.⁷³

Pyne's caustic style and extreme right-wing views captured the Montreal audience for two hours in the morning, and three in the evening, even against prime-time television. Pyne later took his controversial, confrontational style to KLAC Los Angeles where he was a huge success, syndicating his show to 165 stations. Pyne had left behind a taste for "shock talk" radio in Montreal satisfied at CKGM by Tom Cherrington, who

later went to Hamilton, and in 1965 by the late Pat Burns, a former North Vancouver alderman whose open-line show had debuted on CJOR Radio Vancouver in 1963. The gravelly voiced Burns, known for addressing women callers with, “Hello, doll!” was feisty and argumentative, often insulting his callers before hanging up on them. But his show was so popular that CJOR’s phone lines were jammed long before the three-hour Hotline show began.⁷⁴

Burns’ show was cancelled March 22, 1965 in a controversy about controversy that set limits for talk radio in Canada. CJOR was in trouble with the Board of Broadcast Governors (at the time, the federal broadcast regulator) over the “objectionable” nature of its talkshows, and had imposed guidelines of good behavior on its hosts a few weeks before. With a licence renewal hearing only two days away, CJOR’s owner refused to sign Burns’ new contract, which stipulated that the station would not censor Burns’ show. The outspoken host claimed that while he had been in Selma, Alabama the week before covering Martin Luther King and civil rights, a “conspiracy” of doctors, lawyers, clergymen, politicians and businessmen had pressured the station to tone down Burns’ attacks on the establishment. Ten thousand loyal fans tried to jam into Vancouver’s Queen Elizabeth Theatre to protest Burns’ cancellation — 7,000 people stood in the rain while the controversial host talked to the crowd inside.⁷⁵ When audio tapes of CJOR talkshows were played at the BBG hearing, Burns’ transgressions — telling a caller she was a “little off her rocker,” and talking about birth control (at the time forbidden on the radio) to a telephone operator who didn’t know she was on the air — seemed mild compared to tapes of one talk host describing homosexual/lesbian sex, and another screaming at a

caller that she was an “ignorant, emotional broad.” Representatives of the religious and legal communities objected to CJOR’s “excessive talk of promiscuity, free love, and pre-marital sex,” “vicious attacks on society in general,” and defamations such as “all lawyers are quacks.” Station owner Georgia Chandler promised that “controversy for controversy’s sake” was a thing of the past; letters from listeners ran more than 7-1 in favor of the station⁷⁶; but the BBG terminated the station’s licence anyway. The decision was later suspended when effective ownership of the station changed.

Burns, drafted by CKGM’s Geoff Stirling a few months later, was a hit in Montreal from his first day August 23, when reaction to the controversial host ran “eight-to-two” in favor. Stirling warned that despite the Canadian Association of Broadcasters new open-line guidelines, “We don’t agree you can be thoroughly courteous to all callers.”⁷⁷ Burns stirred up the Quebec political scene to the point that CKGM got bomb threats, a Montreal tabloid ran a picture of him framed in a gunsight, and then premier Daniel Johnson labelled him a “provocateur.”⁷⁸ After Burns was censured by the CRTC (the federal regulator which succeeded the BBG) in 1968 for anti-French remarks, Stirling hit on another method of curbing the talkshow host’s tongue.

I simply ran full-page ads in Quebec saying if you catch Mr. Burns saying one single anti-French phrase, you win \$1,000. And I told him it comes out of his salary. And that was the end of that.⁷⁹

Burns took his fractious talk show style back to CJOR in 1972, then briefly to CKO Radio until the news network folded in 1989. He had retired when he died in June 1996.

While Burns had been known for his contentious approach, talk radio proved it could handle controversial political issues in more thoughtful tones. In the spring of 1964 CHUM Toronto and CJMS Montreal produced *Dialogue*, a unique series of six open-line programs connecting two hosts with callers from both cities for a conversation on bilingualism and biculturalism in French and English with simultaneous translations. Both the press and the public praised the series for “thoughtful, intelligent and worthwhile views.”⁸⁰ On a different controversial issue, but with the same glowing reviews, CBC’s *Cross Country Checkup* debuted in the spring of 1965 to give Canadians a forum to discuss medicare. Intended as a one-time program, the response was so great that several months later CBC installed *Cross Country Checkup* as a weekly tradition.⁸¹

While Canadians had grown up with dignified controversy on CBC, Canadian commercial stations may have contracted their usual raw belligerence from the American program directors they hired. In the words of successful U.S. programmers, “Without controversy, mass audiences won’t listen, and station ratings will remain low. With controversy ratings will build.”⁸² Ratings built so high across the country that KABC Los Angeles converted to a 24-hour talk format in 1961, and the seven CBS stations who used the format logged over a million attempted phone calls in a one-month period. In a market overloaded with Top 40 stations, daring to be different and never dull made money. Giving listeners a chance to vent their anger, confusion and frustration over the radical changes of the ’60s — Viet Nam, flag-burning, long hair, ‘God is Dead,’ student sit-ins, civil rights marches — was profitable. By promoting their talk radio programs as “provocative,” “uninhibited,” or “no-holds-barred,” stations developed a large and loyal

‘foreground’ audience which was older and richer than the audience for other formats.

Talk radio’s economic strategy was to exploit news-generated controversies and contemporary problems about which people were emotionally charged — and therefore more vulnerable — so as to get their deeper attention and more effectively sell them something. Because the commercials often were (and still are) read by the host, their degree of program “interruption” was questionable, while credibility (salience) remained high.⁸³

Radio stations usually paid the talkshow host more than other DJ’s or news announcers, but stations could charge higher advertising rates to target an audience who listened regularly and had more money to spend. A CBS study in 1966 suggested that advertisers would be justified in spending twice as much for a talk station’s audience as for a music audience.⁸⁴

This commitment to controversy for the sake of success was brought to CHUM Toronto by American consultant George Davies, who had first been hired by CKGM in Montreal to fine tune the station’s talk format. Davies advised CHUM to move Larry Solway from his half hour nighttime talkshow to a higher-profile two-hour morning slot, as Solway recalls it.

A lot of what you did was for effect. They would turn you loose and tell you, “Don’t worry about your inhibitions, don’t worry about being polite, don’t worry about the ordinary diplomacy of daily life. If you feel something, let it out”. So you allowed yourself to get angry; you allowed yourself to be impatient; you hung up on people; you were as abrasive as you knew how to be.⁸⁵

Controversy might light up the phone lines, but the emotions it generated weren’t always easily contained. Compared to a music format, live talk radio was unpredictable: station managers knew what music was on a record, but could never tell what might come

up on a talk show. Good talk show hosts like Jack Webster in Vancouver were hard to find: well-informed, and energetic on air.

Talk radio forced those of us who considered ourselves reporters to be actors, larger than life characters, protagonists as well as narrators of our stories. You had to be an antagonist against all government; you had to stir the pot; go on crusades; broadcast your arguments with ordinary people. The more unpredictable the program the better.⁸⁶

Good hosts encouraged interesting callers, and eliminated boring ones by hanging up or taking a commercial break. Stations used call screeners to head off callers who were too drunk, too old, too frequent or too dull, and a seven-second tape delay to head off profanity or libel. Hosts had to avoid censure by the broadcast regulators for bad taste or offensive remarks, and stay out of court. At the same time, there was the pressure of the ratings book. If a host offended or bored the audience inordinately, listeners would tune out, ratings would slump, advertisers would balk, and the station would get rid of the host.

Controversy caught up to Larry Solway in 1970. Two years before, Solway had wearied of the abrasive style urged on him by management, and had turned to a more personal, open-line program on lifestyle issues, “the world’s largest sensitivity group.”⁸⁷ There was to be a five-part series on sexual behavior, featuring experts such as Dr. David Reuben, author of *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex*. CHUM agreed to the series, but when letters and calls to the station protested the explicit details of the first four shows and other Toronto media reacted negatively, the station yanked the final show and fired Solway in November 1970.

Earlier that year American stations had also begun to experiment with sex-oriented

talk. “Topless radio” shows, like Bill Balance’s Feminine Forum in Los Angeles — only women participated in the discussion while men listened in — titillated audiences. The experiment was terminated when the Federal Communications Commission chairman denounced “topless” programming as smut in 1973, threatened a test case against one of the shows, and threatened to impose strict controls on all call-ins requiring names and addresses of all callers, and public access to tapes of all phone-in shows.

The fact that such proposals were made suggests the kind and degree of fear lurking around the growth of the controversial radio call-in show. Apparently the government was reflecting the broadcast industry’s own desire for more control over a form built on the spontaneity, diversity and indeterminacy of personal narratives.⁸⁸

Certainly talk radio was popular even without sex; by 1970 more than half the listening population in both the United States and Canada was tuned in to talk radio at one time or another. In the U.S., 80 per cent of all radio stations had some form of talk program.⁸⁹ Across Canada, 51 per cent of those surveyed by the Special Senate Committee on the Mass Media said they listened to open-line shows. Maritime and Prairie listeners were the most faithful: in Saskatchewan and Manitoba nearly 67 per cent said they listened at least ‘sometimes,’ 28 per cent of those surveyed in Nova Scotia reported listening ‘very regularly.’⁹⁰ In the three largest cities in Canada a phone-in show claimed the highest ratings in its time slot. Nowhere was the open-line more popular than in Vancouver, where in the fall of 1972 three stations mustered for a ratings war with the biggest open-line names: Jack Webster, Pat Burns, Ed Murphy and former Liberal cabinet minister Judy Lamarsh.⁹¹ In Ottawa, Lowell Green’s Green Line sometimes had 47 per cent of the listening audience tuned in.⁹² From the time it debuted in 1961, Bill Bradley’s

Open-Line show on CFPL London, Ont. aired nearly 15,000 telephone calls annually.⁹³ In Windsor, Bas Jamieson (who had moved his *Beefs and Bouquets* from Dawson Creek to CKWW in 1963) at one time had 75 per cent of the listening audience in Windsor and Detroit tuned in to his *WW Line*.⁹⁴

Who were these people so anxious to get on the radio? What was the appeal to the people who called in, sometimes enduring hours of busy signals or waiting on hold to talk to the host?

The Open-Line Audience

Much of the attraction of talk radio has more to do with the nature of the medium itself than the novelty of spontaneous two-way conversation on air. Radio, as McLuhan describes it, is at once personal and communal.

Radio affects most people intimately, person-to-person, offering a world of unspoken communication between writer-speaker and the listener. That is the immediate aspect of radio. A private experience. The subliminal depths of radio are charged with the resonating echoes of tribal horns and antique drums. This is inherent in the very nature of this medium, with its power to turn the psyche and society into a single echo chamber.⁹⁵

Talk radio's personal nature was reinforced by the intimacy of the telephone, a technology which provided psychological security and anonymity. Schmalz points out that the incongruity of using the telephone for public broadcast on open-line shows heightened talk radio's appeal. "The telephone is a private device connecting us for the most part with one person and excluding everyone else. It brings that person's essence — his or her voice — into our inner ears and our minds. And when we talk on the phone we

usually do so from our own homes, where we conduct our lives.”⁹⁶ At the same time as radio is highly personal, suggests Vipond, the sense of sharing a single experience simultaneously with a vast, unseen audience has enthralled listeners since the 1920s.

Both these aspects of radio, one may speculate, found a ready response in an age commonly characterized as increasingly impersonal and alienating. Ironically, the new mass medium perhaps most appealed because it helped the anonymous individual feel more like a person and the mass more like a community.⁹⁷

What Vipond says about radio in its earliest days was talk radio’s *raison d’être* 50 years later. Academic studies of open-line programs and their audiences in the ’70s and ’80s revealed that in a very real sense talk radio provided a community in an urbanized, mechanized and impersonal society. Calling an open-line radio show was a substitute for interpersonal contact,⁹⁸ a “two-way window on the world,”⁹⁹ and listening in provided companionship¹⁰⁰ and a “functional outlet for escape.”¹⁰¹ In the talk radio community the audience exchanged information and opinions and got help,¹⁰² or complained about political and social issues and got action.¹⁰³

The talk radio audience over-all tended to be over 40, with a high school education, and lower- to middle-class incomes. On daytime open-line programs, most of the audience was female, since women had not yet gone back to the workplace in large numbers. Housewives in this group tended to be more middle class and more highly educated than the general population. Turow’s study of open-line shows in Philadelphia suggested that even when callers are asking for information, or giving an opinion on current events or government services what they really want is to “satisfy a class of psychic needs often associated with individuation,” the process which “promotes the

awareness by an individual of his identity and personality.”¹⁰⁴ Isolated from traditional sources of support — friends, family, work colleagues, social or political organizations¹⁰⁵ — callers turned to the open-line program for attention, status, or approval. These callers would not usually be in the higher socioeconomic bracket, Turow suggested, because people with higher incomes do not need surrogate personal interaction on the radio: they can afford long-distance calls to family or friends, can afford to go out to restaurants or the theatre, and are more likely to belong to professional or volunteer organizations.¹⁰⁶

Those most likely to need human contact via the talkshow would be those feeling isolated either physically or psychologically. It is not surprising, then, to find that callers represented a disproportionate number of retired people,¹⁰⁷ of housewives, widows, the chronically ill and disabled,¹⁰⁸ or of single people¹⁰⁹ than in the general population.

Sharing experiences in a group with which we have something in common is one of the strongest human tendencies. Uriel Foa points out that the need for affiliation is so strong that we will take any route to satisfy it — even if our behavior seems strange. Clearly, the behavior of calling a radio show did seem peculiar to many Canadians who categorized callers as the “semi-lunatic fringe,”¹¹⁰ or derided the format for the “low mentality of the callers.”¹¹¹ But it is too easy to dismiss the talk radio audience — more than half the Canadian population according to Senator Davey’s 1970 committee — as social misfits, lonely hearts, or whiners. They may be likely to call mostly to satisfy a need for human contact, but callers are a small minority of the entire talk show audience. In Benjamin Singer’s random survey of 1,000 homes in London, Ont., only 20 per cent of those canvassed had ever called a phone-in radio program, less than one per cent called

with any regularity, but 60 per cent said they listened. Those silent listeners may have different needs and motivations. Noting that callers to the top-rated night time call-in in Chicago were usually males under 34, while the audience was mostly women over 50, Bierig and Dimmick suggested further research to isolate the uses and gratifications of both segments of the audience.¹¹²

In contrast to the American studies, Singer's 1970 survey indicated that Canadian audiences seemed as interested in relieving ignorance as easing loneliness. Of those who listened to open-line programs, more tuned in for "information" (28.8 per cent) than for "contact with people" (22.7 per cent). Calling an open-line radio show, Singer theorized, was a coping mechanism in the tumultuous social landscape of the 1960s — a "Kafkan nightmare" — for two reasons:

One is that values are in a heightened state of change . . . with well-established patterns dealing with family life, sex, occupations and drugs being turned upside down and creating new information needs . . . Secondly . . . there is the sheer fact that 90 per cent of all knowledge in existence has been generated during the lifetime of the individual, according to Toffler.¹¹³

With standard feedback channels overloaded, people — particularly poor people — were confused about where to look for help and how to make contact. Singer suggested that an open-line show not only relieved confusion, it might very well relieve a problem, an important 'ombudsman' function, which was often overlooked. When callers to open-line programs in London, Ont. complained about their landlords or tenants, incorrect billings, unemployment insurance, family problems, even lost dogs, the talkshow host tried to help. The host usually answered directly, appealed to listeners for help, or referred the caller to another source.¹¹⁴

Solving people's problems could be an overwhelming task — as Bas Jamieson discovered at CKWW Windsor in the mid-'60s and early '70s.

It was a time when people felt they were being ripped off by government, a lot of welfare and so on. It turned out to be an ombudsman type of program although that wasn't the intention. I used to spend more time off the air helping people than I did on the air by a long shot. I would spend the whole day making phone calls to officials, cabinet ministers, the premier even, trying to help people.¹¹⁵

On the west coast, Jack Webster was performing the same service, though with a gruffer style. Webster, for years the Vancouver Sun's police reporter, was hosting City Mike on CKNW in 1963, when Pat Burns' Hotline at CJOR began to cut into the number one station's ratings. Although Webster considered open-line with the usual journalistic contempt, he soon found talk radio to be an "incredibly powerful vehicle for helping people. It was a pipeline into homes and hearts."¹¹⁶ One of Webster's fondest victories was getting a disability pension for Joe Holz, a Mountie who had been refused compensation after surgery for a brain tumor left him disabled. But there were many others.

I made my career championing the underdog. Time magazine called me a paladin of the poor, the powerless and the oppressed. I would investigate genuine complaints and steer sincere callers towards help. I stopped the sale of coffins door-to-door after learning about a swindle. I exposed a demolition contractor who was paying new immigrants with NSF cheques . . . I will not forget the case of one woman who was billed \$8,000 for a badly handled divorce.¹¹⁷

When a community is in crisis — power blackouts, tornadoes or floods — radio is the emergency medium of choice. The broadcasts can be dramatic. Bas Jamieson was doing an open-line show on CKWW Windsor in 1963 when blacks in neighboring Detroit began

torching and looting stores to protest racial discrimination.

We kept the lines open 24 hours a day for four days. Callers would hold their telephones out their windows and you could hear gunshots, and sirens and police shouting, “Come out of there, you black bastard,” right on air. The action was continuous, and listeners were totally informed. We got a lot of mail afterwards from people who said they were glad we stayed on with no music, just talk.¹¹⁸

It was the daily crises, however which kept listeners tuned so faithfully in the '60s and '70s. Verwey noted that her studies of three Vancouver open-line programs and two St. John's, Newfoundland radio talkshows from 1968-72 showed, “It is quite obvious that the public had found an important medium for their criticism, their complaints and their appeals for help.”¹¹⁹ General complaints about rising food prices, higher taxes and increasing unemployment might only blow off steam, but more specific complaints about bus service, potholes, unemployment or family allowance payments might provoke prompt attention from community leaders and politicians who also tuned in every day.¹²⁰

Talk Radio Fades in the '80s

In Vancouver, Montreal and Newfoundland talk radio is stitched into the social fabric, (for reasons discussed in Chapter 4) and has been steadily popular for nearly 40 years. In the rest of the country, the format faded early in the '80s, its reputation as a protest and complaint medium likely a contributing factor. Life was good, the economy was booming, the social turmoil of the '60s had been reconciled and there didn't seem to be much to complain about. Twenty years before, the Forum programs had withered away, according to Marc Raboy for similar reasons — economic prosperity and post-war optimism

distracted Canadians from social reform.¹²¹ The same connection holds for talk radio. Wherever or whenever the good times aren't rolling, talk radio is a popular forum. Bas Jamieson is convinced, for example, that life has never been good enough in Newfoundland not to need talk radio to complain: "The popularity of talk shows in Newfoundland is related to the economy and to people's lives. People here think the government should do everything for them and when the government is letting them down they get on the air and blast them."

But in centres of power and affluence the story was different. Two Toronto stations killed off their talk formats in June 1983. Citing dismal ratings and financial loss, CJCL and CKEY fired their talk hosts and producers and reverted to music. CKEY's general manager Doug Trowell blamed the CBC for doing talk too well: "There are lots of successful talk programs in Los Angeles and San Francisco and to some extent in Detroit. Of course, what they don't have is a CBC that has devotees who are hard to pull away from shows like Sunday Morning, Morningside and As It Happens."¹²² CJCL's general manager Doug Ackhurst agreed CBC Radio was a big factor in the demise of talk on commercial radio in Toronto, "They do a lot of talk, and it's pretty hard to compete with their unlimited budgets."¹²³

As well, advertising on radio in general was in a slump. While radio's share of marketing budgets was shrinking — thanks to television and non-media promotions like billboards — each stations's share of the limited ad revenue was dwindling as the number of radio stations (mostly FM) increased.¹²⁴ Consultants with MBA's told stations that the only way to survive was with tightly controlled and computerized music formats. "People

were getting into formula radio,” says Solway, “so it became a battle of the music librarians. The perception was that people wanted music, they wanted consistency, they didn’t want to do any thinking.”

As the decade drew to a close, the economy faded into a recession, and social fragmentation increased, Canadians lost their optimism in government and almost everything establishment. The social and technological trends of the '90s offered talk radio the chance of a revival — with a more sophisticated audience and a new prestige as a political force.

End Notes

1. Quoted in Bill McNeill and Morris Wolfe, *The Birth of Radio in Canada: Signing On* (Toronto: Doubleday, 1982), p. 249.
2. E.A. Corbett, *We Have With Us Tonight* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1957), p. 143.
3. Marc Raboy, *Missed Opportunities: The Story of Canada's Broadcasting Policy* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990), p. 374 n. 28.
4. Ibid., p. 74-77.
5. Ibid., p. 76.
6. See Corbett, *We Have With Us Tonight*.
7. Ron Faris, *The Passionate Educators: Voluntary Associations and the Struggle for Control of Adult Educational Broadcasting in Canada, 1919–1952* (Toronto: Peter Martin Associates, 1975), p. 42.
8. Mary Vipond, *Listening In: The First Decade of Canadian Broadcasting 1922–1932* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992), p. 96.

9. Ibid., p.100.

10. Ibid., p. 48.

11. Ibid., p. 36. Vipond points out that the number of receiving set licenses skyrocketed from 1,226 in 1921 to 598,358 ten years later, but it was a rule of thumb that only 80 per cent of owners bothered to get a license. Consequently, in the 1931 federal census, more than 750,000 households claimed to own a radio.

12. Ibid., p. 86-7.

13. Ibid., p. 95.

14. Sandy Stewart, *From Coast to Coast: A Personal History of Radio in Canada* (Toronto: CBC Enterprises, 1985), p. 39.

15. Vipond, p. 34-5.

16. Dennis J. Duffy, *Imagine Please: Early Radio Broadcasting in British Columbia* (Victoria: Public Archives of British Columbia, 1983), p. 53.

17. Ibid., p. 96.

18. Game shows and contests became daily radio fare across the country: John Wayne and Frank Shuster in *The Wife Preservers* on CFRB Toronto for the Javex Company (See McNeill and Wolfe, p. 285), Cinderella Slipper Time on CKMO Vancouver (Duffy, p. 33), Criss-Cross Clues and Did I Say That? on CKCL (later CKEY) in Toronto, Spin To Win and Double or Nothing (McNeill and Wolfe, p. 222) to name a few.

19. Donald Jack, *The Story of CFRB: Sinc, Betty, and the Morning Man* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1977), p. 123.

20. Vipond, p. 137.

21. Quoted in Wayne Schmalz, *On Air: Radio in Saskatchewan* (Regina: Coteau, 1990), p. 26.

22. McNeill and Wolfe, p.96.

23. Quoted in McNeill and Wolfe, p. 73.

24. Schmalz, p. 64. According to Schmalz, "From the drought-stricken '30s to the tuberculosis-free '70s, these broadcasts raised over \$1.2 million, an astounding amount

from a population of less than a million people.”

25. Quoted in McNeill and Wolfe, p. 165.

26. McNeill and Wolfe, p. 207. The Canadian Radio Broadcasting Commission (CRBC) started up the Northern Messenger Service when a British expedition in Labrador inquired about the possibility of getting messages to them over Canadian radio stations. After the popular Saturday night program spread across the rest of the country, CBC took over the service in 1936.

27. McNeill and Wolfe, p. 37.

28. Wayne Munson, *All Talk: The Talkshow in Media Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), p. 34.

29. Ibid., p. 27.

30. Knowlton Nash, *The Microphone Wars* (Toronto: McLelland, 1994), p. 152.

31. Duffy, p. 45.

32. John Dunning, *Tune in Yesterday: The Ultimate Encyclopedia of Old-Time Radio, 1925-1956* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1976), p. 94.

33. Duffy, p.69.

34. From *Top Dog*, the history of CKNW compiled from past issues of the station's monthly magazine which began publication in 1951,
<<http://www.cknw.com/history/1944.html>> accessed 16 February 1997.

35. *Canadian Broadcaster and Telescreen*, 15 June 1955, p. 20.

36. CBC Archives, *What's Your Beef?* (March 6, 1950), courtesy of Head Archivist Gail Donald. Because CBC Archives has no records for September, 1947 to September, 1948 Donald is unsure whether the Sims show debuted in 1947 or 1948.

37. E. Austin Weir, *The Struggle for National Broadcasting in Canada* (Toronto: McClelland Stewart, 1965), p. 281.

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the later version as a “better organized version of the original,” p. 181.

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41. Munson, p. 26.

42. Dunning, p. 30.

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44. *The Radio Bug*, September 1924, in McNeill and Wolfe, p. 138.

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46. Quoted in Duffy, p. 65.

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50. Ibid., p. 260.

51. Stewart, p. 81.

52. Weir, p. 262.

53. See Paul Rutherford, *The Making of The Canadian Media* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1978), p. 86; and Troyer p. 128-9.

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72. Rutherford, p. 109.
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113. Singer, p. 6.
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Chapter 3

‘Talk’ Saves AM Radio in the ‘90s

Talk radio may have grown up in the ‘90s, but it has not outgrown its reputation as a not-to-be-taken-seriously conversation. Thirty years ago, open-line radio was thought to be the domain of homemakers, widows and lonely singles tuning in for comfort and companionship. Now talk radio suffers from the Rush Limbaugh stigma — a right-wing assembly hall where the host dispenses disinformation to ‘dittoheads,’ insults any who disagree, and ridicules feminists, gays, immigrants and other minorities. Talk radio hosts in Canada suffer public disdain as angry white men, carnival barkers whose callers are at worst freaks, at best insignificant.

In fact, talk radio in the ‘90s is likely to be a place where upscale professionals on car phones talk politics while politicians listen in. Now the fastest growing radio format, ‘talk’ has revived the moribund AM industry: talk radio hosts garner record ratings, and listeners jam phone lines to have their say. Why a format that nearly died out in the ‘80s suddenly burst into popularity in the next decade is a matter of economics, changing audiences and improved technology.

Talk the Savior of AM Radio

AM (amplitude modulation) is to FM (frequency modulation) what a scratchy old 78 record is to a clean, crisp CD. As radio listeners caught on to the difference, and the high cost of FM receivers fell, the number of Canadian FM stations proliferated from a few in

the '60s to 279 stations in 1989. The number of FM listeners multiplied as well: from a mere 10 per cent of the radio audience in the early '70s, to nearly half of the audience by the end of the '80s.¹ FM now has the ears of nearly two-thirds of all radio listeners.² As the audience deserted AM radio, so did advertisers. By 1989 AM stations as a group were losing money, while FM stations collectively were nearly 20 million dollars in the black.³

With market share and ad revenue deteriorating, AM programmers searched for formats immune from the technology of CD-quality sound. They came up with two, talk and 'oldies.' The quality of the broadcast signal matters less for the spoken word, and for the less complex music recorded in the '50s and '60s. Of these two formats, the most popular has proved to be talk. Talk radio's 15.4-per-cent increase in market share outstripped gains by country and contemporary music formats from 1991 to 1995.⁴

"If it hadn't been for the phenomenon of FM," says talk radio veteran Lowell Green, "all radio stations would still be doing jukeboxes. The simple truth is that if AM radio is going to survive in the days of FM it's going to have to do it with newstalk. AM radio in many markets has died right out." Green, who debuted on open-line in 1966, was bumped from his Ottawa show in 1984, when talk radio tailed off. He has been back on the air at CFRA Ottawa for three years, riding the talk radio revival. "The only way AM radio can survive is to go into a niche market — all news, all sports, all religion — and the one that's going to get the largest audience is news/talk."⁵ Canadian radio stations have fewer options than those in the U.S. due to a smaller and widely scattered population. Only in the largest cities, for instance, would there be enough sports fans to make an all-sports format profitable. Chatting with your neighbors, however, has a broad appeal. A large-scale

survey of Canadians' listening habits in 1995 showed that talk radio was the third most popular format, behind adult contemporary/rock/oldies and country music, with 12 per cent of Canadians tuned in.⁶

"We switched from rock 'n' roll music to talk in March 1995," says Terry Williams, program director at News Talk Radio 920, CJCH Halifax. "You could call it the quest for AM radio salvation." Within a year of the programming change, CJCH's ratings had improved 76.8 per cent. While the station still trails the Halifax market in eighth place, CJCH now has listeners tuned for a total of a quarter of a million hours a week.⁷ The talk format at CJCH is typical of AM stations trying to survive. While 'talk radio' in the '60s and '70s in Canada was usually confined to a morning or late-night *program* on a radio station which also played music, the talk *format* broadcasts spoken-word most of the day. The weekday begins at CJCH with a local drive-time show featuring news, sports, weather and traffic reports, interviews, and syndicated features on money, careers, history and entertainment. The morning "Hotline" program is hosted by Brian Philipps, "one-on-one with local guests and callers" from 8 a.m. to 10 a.m., when CJCH picks up the last hour of Lowell Green's syndicated open-line show broadcast from CFRA in Ottawa, focussing on political topics of national scope. The rest of the CJCH day is filled with syndicated programs, most of them from the United States: Dr. Laura Schlessinger talks with callers about relationships, Dr. Gabe Mirkin discusses fitness and nutrition, Dr. Dean Edell dispenses medical advice, and the Golden Age of Radio brings back old-time serials. CJCH carries two other Canadian programs syndicated by the CHUM Satellite Network besides Green: Sports Call with Dean Brown, and People Helping People, a

late-night call-in group therapy session for addicts, hosted in Windsor by Marc Elliott, a former cocaine-addicted DJ.⁸

The talk radio concept is working well in Canada. Of Canada's 835 radio stations, 23 are talk or news/talk format, all of them on AM. Few AM stations are profitable, but the rest are less in the red than they used to be: a \$73.7 million loss in 1994 eased to a \$54.7 million loss last year for all AM radio stations.⁹ Compared to 1989 that is good news. In that year only two AM and eight FM stations in Canada listed their formats as news/talk, together accounting for only seven per cent of all listening.¹⁰ Nearly all of these stations belonged to the CKO Radio all-news network, which crashed in November 1989, never having turned a profit in a decade on the air.

Still, the success of the talk radio format in Canada is merely adequate compared to its spectacular rise in the United States: 1,250 news/talk stations in 1995, compared to 75 stations in 1980, and the most popular host — Rush Limbaugh — has 20 million listeners on more than 650 stations. One in nine U.S. radio stations is now a 'talker,' and that proportion is expected to rise as the format expands onto FM.¹¹ There is a National Association of Talk Radio Hosts, Talkers Magazine for the industry, Talk Radio Review for fans, talk radio consultants, talk radio news services, and talk radio newsgroups on the internet.

Cell Phones, Satellites and Other Gadgets

Talk radio's enormous audience in the '90s is largely due to a single advance — the cellular phone. Along with satellite up-links for syndicated programs and 800 telephone

numbers for long-distance callers, the cell phone has extended talk radio's reach — anybody anywhere can now join in, even from the internet. Cell phone users in Canada — 2.8 million subscribers at last count, 40 per cent of Canadians will own them by 2005¹² — have taken talk radio out of the house onto the road and into the workplace. As many as 50 per cent of any show's callers may be on cell phones; in Vancouver CKNW's drive-home open-line segment, *For Crying Out Loud*, is nearly all cell-phone callers.¹³ Radio stations make deals with cellular telephone companies to provide free calls to open-line programs.

Satellite transmission of syndicated talk shows and the increasing number of radio stations on the Internet has expanded the audience to include long-distance callers using 800 telephone numbers. Lowell Green reaches nearly 100,000 listeners in Halifax, Montreal, Ottawa and Windsor on the CHUM Satellite Network, and an unknown number all over North America who access CFRA Ottawa on the Internet. CKNW Vancouver and CFRB Toronto are also plugged into cyberspace. Rafe Mair's open-line program on CKNW is syndicated to half a million listeners at 26 radio stations in British Columbia. Dave Rutherford's *QR77* Calgary phone-in show is broadcast on radio and television to half a million listeners all over Alberta. Brian Phillips' *Hotline* on CJCH Halifax is simulcast on ATV and fed to the rest of Atlantic Canada on the Atlantic Satellite Network. The Dr. Laura Schlessinger show — one of the three top-rated call-ins in North America — identifies more than 12 per cent of the callers as Canadian.

Satellite syndication became a possibility for the smallest of radio stations in the late 1980s, when new compression technology cut costs of transmission and receivers in half.

Without low-cost syndicated shows via satellite, many stations could not afford to produce a talk format themselves. “It’s the single most expensive format,” says Bob Mackowycz, program director at CFRB Toronto, the number one talk station in the biggest market in Canada. “In music formats, 85 per cent of your content is produced by somebody else who spent a million dollars to make the best-sounding CD possible. In talk radio you generate all of the content yourself. Therefore you need probably four times as many people; every show has a board operator, a producer, a phone screener and a personality.”¹⁴

The pattern of talk at CFRB is typical of ‘heritage stations’ in Canada, long-established radio stations with a reputation built on a significant news and information presence in the community. CFRB’s daily schedule is almost entirely original and local: Ted Wolyshyn’s morning drive show, Charles Adler’s open-line from 9 a.m. to noon, The Motts’ and John Oakley’s phone-ins and The World Today in the afternoon, Michael Coren’s extremely conservative evening open-line, and The World Tonight in the evening. CFRB carries only one U.S. syndicated talk program, Dr. Joy Browne, from midnight to 2:30 a.m. Heritage stations — CFRB, CKNW Vancouver, CFAX Victoria, CHED Edmonton, CJOB Winnipeg, CHML Hamilton, CFRA Ottawa and CJAD Montreal, for instance — were well-equipped to join the ’90s talk radio revival, having large news staffs, and talk personalities already in place. CFRB, for example, maintained its standing as the most-listened-to radio station in Canada for many years with interviewers like Clare Wallace, Gordon Sinclair and Betty Kennedy. When the station finally slid out of top spot in the Toronto market in the fall of 1985, its audience aging

and its appeal to younger listeners minimal, CFRB changed its music to soft rock and plugged in a free-ranging morning talk show aimed at 25-54 year-olds.¹⁵ In 1993, the station finally dropped all music, and is back among the top three in the market.

Talk Radio's Audience in the '90s

What you hear on talk radio today are all kinds of callers. Widows, the unemployed and disabled now keep company with young parents at home, executives, teachers, truck drivers and sales professionals on the road, many of them on cell phones — hardly marginal people. U.S. surveys draw a profile of listeners as male (60 per cent), only slightly older than average, likely to have an annual income over \$50,000, and twice as likely as the population at large to have a college education.¹⁶ Audience research by individual Canadian radio stations indicates a similar profile for talk radio audiences in larger urban centres like Toronto, Vancouver, Montreal and Ottawa: older, more upscale and better-off than the average radio listener. Statistics Canada's national radio listening survey does not draw a profile of any format's audience, but measures the listening preferences of each age, occupational, or educational group. Thus, the Canadian survey shows that talk is the most popular choice of retired people, the second choice of homemakers, and the third most popular format with almost every other occupational sector, except for farmers, fishermen and students. The survey also shows that middle managers and self-employed business people are more likely to listen to talk radio than to the CBC.¹⁷

The changing profile of the talk radio audience has much to do with demographics.

First of all, the baby boomers — eight million Canadians born between 1946 and 1966 — are more inclined to talk than listen to music the older they get. Secondly, while cell phones have enabled any one at work on the road to call in, the profile of the stay-at-home listener has changed. Thirty years ago they were homemakers, retired people, the ill or disabled — those most likely to need comfort or company from the radio (see Chapter 2). In the 1990s, however, more women have left home to work, while more men stay at home, either because they have chosen full-time parenting, or because they are out of a job. The stay-at-home community now includes record numbers of the jobless, but also more home-based workers than ever before. Between 600,000 and two million people (one-quarter of the working population) work at home, almost half as self-employed consultants or home-based business operators. One-third are private or public sector teleworkers. These at-home workers are generally over 40, and better-educated than the general population.¹⁸

Late-night audiences are more diverse as well. Twenty per cent of the full-time working population now keeps ‘non-standard’ hours — evenings, rotating shifts, split shifts, and overnights — and they like to turn their radios on at work. Formerly just blue-collar workers in low-paying jobs, this off-hours segment now includes more white collars working in hospitals, finance, data processing or high-tech.¹⁹ Night and day the voices on talk radio are more male, better educated, and upscale. “It’s a 35-plus audience, skewed slightly towards men,” says Mackowycz of CFRB’s listeners. “From a sales point of view it’s the best audience: managers, professionals, the most well-heeled audience in the market, the \$100,000-plus folks. It’s pretty much the same at most heritage stations.

So you're not selling the GEO, you're selling the Buick and Cadillac."

And advertisers are selling to people who are actually listening. In a 500-channel universe (or an 18-station radio market), an impatient consumer quickly clicks out when interest lags. Advertisers who used to value the total number of listeners a radio station could boast (the weekly 'cume' or 'quarter-hour' average in radio lingo) are now more likely to treasure the number who actually stay tuned (a station's 'share'). "Talk radio is like blue chip stock to advertisers," says Williams at CJCH Halifax, whose audience is also over 35, both male and female, but not as upscale as CFRB's. "The quarter-hour average [of listeners] of a specialty show like Renovations may look low compared to a music-intensive radio station. But our point to advertisers is that a plumbing supply commercial aimed at 5,000 people listening to Renovations is like a laser shot. A commercial directed at 35,000 people listening to a music-based format is like a shotgun blast. You just hope it sticks to 400 or 500 people." Advertisers figure that talk radio's audience may pay more attention because the spoken word ('foreground' programming) cognitively requires more effort than 'background music,' and they like an audience that is loyal. Mackowycz says, "There's less tuning out of talk radio. People don't punch around as much, therefore the commercial is more effective. There's a continuity between the spoken word of the program and the spoken word in the commercial. One thing talk radio does is produce results for the client."

When the client is happy, so are radio station controllers. CFRB is one of several AM talk stations which are in the black. With a ten share (the percentage of the total radio audience which stays tuned to a radio station) in the crowded Toronto market, CFRB will

have its “best year ever, revenue-wise,” according to Mackowycz, who testifies, “Talk radio can be a very lucrative format.”

Talk radio is also a money-maker at other heritage stations like CKNW Vancouver is number one of all radio stations — AM or FM — in the entire Vancouver area with an astonishing 19 per cent share of the radio audience. CHED Edmonton sailed from the bottom of the AM ratings to the top after it turned to the talk format in 1993. CHED and sister station QR77 in Calgary are the most-listened-to AM stations in Alberta. But life is less certain at AM stations still trying to carve out a niche, like CJCH in Halifax.

“The biggest problem we have is media buyers who are 22 years old, have their bodies pierced in several places and don’t think AM radio is a viable format anymore,” says Williams. “They think it’s something their grandfathers used.” The talk format takes time to establish, and after two years the CJCH program director is hoping to “turn the corner this year.”

Other stations like CKGM Montreal — a CHUM station which turned from Oldies to talk in January 1996 — are having trouble. CKGM’s ratings are dismal in a city which has four English-language and two French-language talk stations. Talk 640, Westcom’s Toronto AM station, has also gone through several changes in the past five years, talk being its latest incarnation. Talk 640’s problems seem to be an audience too young to be interested in talk, and an inability to attract older listeners away from CFRB.

Some stations have abandoned the talk format altogether: CJOR Vancouver fired its entire talkshow staff, including the popular Pat Burns, in 1988 after heavy financial losses.²⁰ CFPL Radio 98, London’s heritage station, dropped its 40-year-old open-line

Talkback program in June of 1993 due to its high cost.²¹ CKSL-1410 London cancelled its two-year-old talk experiment in the fall of 1995, and adopted Oldies to improve its sixth-place standing in a seven-station market. CKST Vancouver, 1040 AM recently pulled the plug on the talk format and reverted to music, as had CKLG Vancouver several years ago.

In a highly competitive radio market, covering all the bases can pay off. Many stations like CKGO Hope, B.C.; CJJW Saskatoon; CFBC St. John, N.B.; and VOCM in St. John's, Newfoundland retain their music formats, but offer an open-line show in the morning and/or late at night. When VOCM's Bill Rowe is on the air with Open Line, he has the attention of nearly 70 per cent of the listening population of Newfoundland.

The talk format is a hit with many radio stations and their advertisers, but why do millions of Canadians tune in, and hundreds of thousands of callers jam the switchboards only to endure an hour on hold?

Audience Motivations

In general, people listen to talk radio for information — how to fix your own plumbing, restore marital bliss or figure out the blended sales tax in the Maritimes. It is the age of self-help. For many the nearest — and most reliable — source of information is talk radio. What talk radio audiences do not seem to need anymore is surrogate companionship (see chapter 2). Nearly half of the listeners in Hofstetter's 1994 study of talk radio in San Diego said they tuned in for information, less than 20 per cent for entertainment, and only 1.6 per cent for social contact.²² A 1993 survey of more than

1,500 people by the Times Mirror Center for the People and the Press revealed they listened to “keep up on issues and current events” for both listeners (69 per cent) and callers (81 per cent), and to “learn how different people feel about issues,” (69 per cent and 85 per cent). Wanting to be entertained ranked a distant third.²³ Two-thirds of the listeners in Talk Daily’s 1995 nationwide survey of more than 3,000 people said talk radio was an important source of political information and ideas.²⁴

The surveys should be taken with a dose of caution, however. As Hofstetter points out, respondents do not always “discriminate accurately among political, nonpolitical, and other programming.”²⁵ We can not assume then, as the Report from the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania notes, that “a large percent of the population is in fact focusing on interactive talk about politics.”²⁶ More significantly for this thesis, the surveys are all American and must be interpreted in a Canadian context. But what is true in the framework of communications theory should be true in both countries. Herbst’s 1993 survey of over 1,000 Chicago-area residents found that 38 per cent of callers wanted to give an opinion or contribute information and that 27 per cent wanted a dialogue of some sort. The results, according to Herbst, reflect the central dichotomy of communication research²⁷ — the dichotomy Carey describes in his distinction between *transmission* and *ritual* modes of communication.

In a ritual definition, communication is linked to terms such as “sharing,” “participation,” “association,” “fellowship,” and “the possession of a common faith.” . . . A ritual view of communication is directed not toward the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs. If the archetypal case of communication under a transmission view is the extension of messages across geography for the purpose of control, the

archetypal case under a ritual view is the sacred ceremony that draws persons together in fellowship and commonality.²⁸

What Herbst and Carey say about the dichotomy of communications seems to be true for the real life of talk radio. When an Edmonton Journal reporter asked open-line callers why they call, for instance, their comments echo the transmission-ritual theory. While several callers to CHED's Hot Line fit the profile of the old-style talk radio fan — a young mother with a baby listens while she does housework, a retired grandmother listens to keep in touch with the world — they are listening for information (transmission), and for the sense of participating in a conversation (ritual). Other callers are more typical of today's talk radio audience: a cell-phone caller likes to hear his voice on the radio and to hear what others are saying, a 40 year-old woman who is a faithful listener wants information, 'Paul' says talk radio is "an opportunity to participate in democracy and to practice it."²⁹ A 59-year-old plastics manufacturer wants to make a difference in his community; a 40 year-old University of Alberta public administration student believes talk radio educates people.³⁰

Certainly these comments to one Edmonton radio station are anecdotal evidence, but the callers are unfolding a theoretical thread which winds through every open-line program every day. Herbst describes it this way:

They seek a place in an imagined public — one that is scattered and nebulous, but achieves some coherence through the structure of the program. . . . It is the act of coming together (electronically) for the distinct purpose of political communication, even more than for the substance of dialogue itself, that makes this sort of participation unique and meaningful for so many.³¹

Talk radio programmers and participants are more likely to describe the experience in

terms of the real world of high-rise condominiums, hectic work schedules, driving children here, there and everywhere, and being stranded in traffic. “Talk radio has become the picket fence you talk over to your neighbor,” in the words of CFRB’s Mackowycz. “Nowadays you probably don’t even know your next door neighbor, but you can always hook up on a talk show.”

What most people want to talk about over radio’s picket fence is politics, current affairs, social issues — what’s wrong with this country and how to fix it. They light up the switchboards because they feel left out of conventional political arenas. That politics, the media and culture are highly-structured to reflect and maintain the status quo of society has been well-documented by countless scholars, as Herbst notes, from Max Weber to Habermas to Horkheimer & Adorno. Frustrated by the way public debate is ‘managed’ on conventional noninteractive talk programs (CBC Newsworld’s Face-Off, CTV’s Question Period and Sunday Edition, for instance) news broadcasts and newspapers, callers craft their own public sphere on the radio, where there is a better chance for unstructured political conversation. Calling a talk show is more rewarding than writing letters to the editor (which will be edited), voting or participating in opinion polls (which don’t represent feelings), or leaving messages on the CBC’s answering machine (which are not usually acknowledged). At least talk radio callers have the sense of being heard directly and immediately and, as Herbst points out, often have the opportunity to get mad with the host about mainstream media.³²

“The CBC has a left bias, anti-English, pro-Quebec and we see it constantly, *constantly*,” rails Lowell Green on his open-line show. The talk radio host is outraged that

the television network would exclude Reform Leader Preston Manning from the leaders' debate in the federal election campaign because Quebec viewers "don't want to hear his lousy French." Green cites a Jeffrey Simpson column in the *Globe and Mail* to back him up as he roars, "Can you imagine what would happen if the shoe were on the other foot? There would be World War Three." ³³

All American surveys indicate that the political talk radio audience is suspicious of the mainstream media, and distrustful of government. It would be a mistake to assume that Canadians feel any differently, according to studies by Michael Adams of Environics Research: "Canadians are no more trusting of the media and the government than are Americans."³⁴ In fact, Canadians are now even tougher on their governments. Historically, says Adams, Canadians "had a far greater faith in the state than did their American cousins," a legacy of Old Tory traditions that decreed the group more important than the individual. "Over the last quarter-century, however, Canada has undergone a social revolution "as profound as the liberal-democratic revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries." Eight million baby boomers have grown up, questioning society's stereotypes and roles.

The status associated with once-cherished institutions, both feudal and those created by liberal democracy — churches, legislative bodies and professional elites (politicians, lawyers, doctors and the clergy) — has gone into steep decline. Established authority has had its legitimacy questioned in every sphere.³⁵

Once deferential, Canadians are now more politically defiant, voters more volatile: the federal Conservatives were routed in the 1993 election; the Bloc Quebecois and the Reform party ensconced as the second and third parties in the House of Commons;

Ontario's NDP government, after ousting the provincial Liberals in 1990, was itself turned out by the provincial Conservatives in 1995. While Canadians have little confidence in political parties, they still are more likely than Americans to believe that government has a large and important role to play in society.³⁶ Voter turnout in Canada has remained steady around 70 per cent in federal elections. Americans, on the other hand, have become apathetic. Fewer than one in five Americans actually cast a ballot for the Republicans in the Congressional elections of 1994, although the GOP interpreted the 'victory' as a mandate for sweeping change.³⁷

Adams' assessment of the Canadian psyche in the '90s helps to explain why Canadians, despite historical and political differences from Americans, are just as willing to rush to the radio to talk politics — but without the right wing hysteria that has characterized talk radio in the United States. As Adams notes, Canadians are more pragmatic and less ideological than Americans: they want a social-welfare state that is more egalitarian than the republic to the south, but one that is affordable.³⁸

How Talk Works on the Radio

If circumventing a closed-off public sphere is what the talk radio audience is after, how well does public discourse work on the radio? Talk radio is not an ideal forum for the kind of 'undistorted communication' Habermas has in mind. It is limited by time, the host is traffic director at the very least, sometimes more of an *agent provocateur*, but within the limits of time and civility, almost anything can be said. In his analysis of British talk radio Andrew Crisell points out that the genre gives callers a chance to

express minority or unorthodox views, to modify “conventional wisdom” in language which is “spontaneously oral, and therefore likely to be fairly intelligible to the other listeners.”³⁹ Higgins and Moss see Australian talk-back radio as a “counter-hegemonic discourse phenomenon,” where callers can “give public expression to private and perhaps dissonant view-points.”⁴⁰ Talk radio dialogue is not a formal debate. It has, as Ian Hutchby points out, some of the features of ordinary conversation on the one hand, and “more institutional forms of verbal interaction (e.g. broadcast news interviews, courtroom or classroom exchanges), on the other.”⁴¹ Like lawyers, hosts are likely to cross-examine callers: to argue, dispute, belittle, and undermine. This contrary style, it seems to Hutchby, is not a matter of moral conviction, but a *construction* of controversy,

Controversial talk radio hosts are oriented for the duration of their time on air to the requisite task of pursuing controversy, finding something *to argue with* in what a caller is saying. Callers on the other hand are generally oriented to the task of presenting their opinion and if necessary defending their line against the host’s attacks.⁴²

Crisell argues, however, that only a few programs are highly mediated by a host waiting to “‘squash’ the caller as soon as he ceases to be interesting.” But few programs are unmediated by the host, and most hosts try to balance the need of the caller to have a say, and the need of the listener to hear something of interest. “The task is a difficult one.”⁴³ Higgins and Moss point out that the skill of the host is revealed in how he/she handles the tension of conducting a phone-in which provides “at best a semblance of personal interaction with the caller, yet at the same time uses the medium to entertain the wider listening audience.”⁴⁴

No matter what means a talk radio host uses to control the conversation —

solicitation, encouragement, disputation, ridicule — the host is the ultimate authority. No more so, according to Hutchby, than when the host decides the caller's time is up, and terminates the conversation.

[I]t is, therefore, in the routinely self-explicating work of the *closing* of conversations on talk radio that the operation of the broadcast as a *bureaucratic phenomenon*, and of the host as *the organizing agent at the interface of the 'public' and the 'private'* in talk radio talk itself, is at its most immediately visible.⁴⁵

Crisell portrays the host more benignly as the 'gatekeeper' in a complicated interactive process between broadcaster, callers and listeners. Higgins and Moss see the host as an agent of hegemony. They do, however, see 'democratic' spaces in the 'mediated' discourse of talk radio:

....[S]ome talk-back listeneres resist "domination", they are not "neutralized", and they voice opinions which are antagonistic to hegemony. In so doing they give the lie to those theories that stress only the massiveness of the media and the total "narcotization" of the population.⁴⁶

While agreeing with Higgins and Moss that hosts and callers negotiate meanings, Herbst argues that the authors are "trapped in a neo-Marxist straitjacket." American talk radio hosts are not agents of hegemony, she maintains, "They frequently challenge the status quo, from right, left, or libertarian positions. . . . Call-in programs provide an excellent, unstructured outlet for public discourse."⁴⁷

The public discourse is not unlimited, however. While this public sphere is available to all — 99 per cent of Canadian homes have telephones, 98 per cent have radios, as do 80 per cent of cars — time constraints dictate that not every caller can get through. Rarely does a host say, "Call now, we have a few lines open," especially on the most popular

programs in major cities. In any case, the time available for callers' comments is finite: within the two to three hours of the program, newsbreaks, traffic and weather reports and commercials eat up at least 17 minutes an hour — more on some programs. On CBC Radio's Radio Noon or Cross Country Checkup time for calls from listeners is limited by time for expert guests.

A talk radio host, then, must make the best use possible of the time: no idle chatter, no dillydallying. Democracy aside, the program must be 'entertaining.' Even on public radio, if people don't listen, the ratings are low, the program is cancelled, and the democratic space disappears. This is not a hegemonic ploy, it is a fact of life. Many programs use a "call screener" to ensure that the most lively, compelling callers get on the air. The screener sits in the control room adjacent to the host's studio answering as many as 10 phone lines, deciding in seconds who might get on the air that hour, telling others "Not today, thank you," and putting a brief synopsis of what the caller wants to say on the host's computer.

The media — even the Internet — are full of advice on how to get on talk radio: know the show and the host, make sure your point is relevant to the topic being discussed, and turn your radio down. Screeners and hosts get annoyed when callers try to listen to themselves on what is a seven-second delayed broadcast. And finally, be patient — a caller may have to wait on hold for half an hour or more, listening to the show through the telephone.⁴⁸ You are more likely to get on if you have something interesting to say and know how to say it. "Energy level," says Charles Adler, CFRB's morning open-line host, "we screen for energy level. Most people who call don't belong on air. They just

don't have the energy, they can't carry a conversation, they can't give you a sound bite, they can't focus." Adler, a 20-year veteran of Canadian radio, returned to CFRB last fall after five years in the United States, the last 2 1/2 on Boston's number-one talk radio station. "You ask Bill Clinton a question and he'll give you the top 10 reasons why he believes what he does and it will sound magnificent. But the average person doesn't deliver that way."⁴⁹

The Lowell Green Show, broadcast on the CHUM Satellite Network to four other stations from CFRA in Ottawa, screens out few callers, according to producer Ronnie Roberts. "Mostly we just screen for the topic of the day. If they're not on topic we ask them to call back when we have an open-phone segment. If it's too local an issue, we ask them to call back during the local portion of the show between 11 and noon."

Abusive and crank calls are screened out, regular callers are limited to once a week, and screener Jennifer Csiffary puts a brief comment about the caller's topic into the computer for Green to select. "If Jennifer writes in, 'Bob in Ottawa South thinks you're nuts,' 10 to one Lowell will go for that call. The more fiery the show gets the better he likes it, and that tends to make people call in too," says Roberts. While callers are never coached as to content, they are sometimes given a little tender loving care. "It's nerve-wracking going on the radio," says Green's producer, who tells first-time callers to pretend they are talking to a friend or relative. "You want that passion like when you are talking to your buddies, 'Can you believe . . . !' That's the kind of thing that moves people — real-life discourse."⁵⁰

Callers may think they'll have better luck on CBC's Cross Country Checkup, but

access is actually more restricted. Three call screeners briefly interview callers then call back the lucky few who are selected. “We try to get a wide range of opinions from the most outspoken, intelligent, entertaining and lively callers,” says Suzanne Mahoney, Checkup’s executive producer for six years. While commercial talk radio encourages callers with anonymity, Cross Country Checkup’s screeners record callers’ names, addresses and phone numbers. “We feel if you have an opinion you should stand behind it,” Mahoney maintains. “Besides, the chance of hearing someone you know increases listeners’ interest.”⁵¹

Hosts of at least two other major talk shows are themselves *de facto* screeners, taking all calls as they come in. In Vancouver and St. John’s, talk radio has been a fact of life for many years, the audience long conditioned to talk radio practices. “I think I have a sort of town meeting of the air,” says Rafe Mair, former B.C. Social Credit cabinet minister, now host of CKNW’s top-rated morning open-line program after 17 years in the genre. “Anybody who can get on should say their piece. What I have done is ask the regular callers — they know who they are — to confine their calls to one per week. Other than that, if they get through they get on the air.”⁵²

On the other side of the country, Bill Rowe, host of VOCM’s top-rated Open Line in St. John’s, is equally democratic. “We screen calls just to make sure we’re geographically balanced. If someone calls from Labrador and we haven’t had any Labrador calls for a few days we’ll put them on right away.” Rowe connects with his producer, Pat Murphy, through a ‘talkback’ system in the host’s headphones, not a computer. “Sometimes Pat will say this guy sounds drunk, and I’ll say stick him on anyway. Sometimes we’ve had

people on we thought were drunk who were actually brain-injured.”

Open Line is about as close to a universally accessible forum as you could get on radio: all comers, all topics. “Some of my opening comments are ‘No punches pulled. No holds barred. Just stay on the right side of the law of slander,’” says Rowe, a Rhodes Scholar who graduated from Oxford with a law degree in 1966. “My only criterion is that a topic has to be of public interest. I don’t want to hear about the scrap you’re having with a neighbor about a backyard fence. It has to be a matter of public interest. So the callers drive the agenda.” Rowe rarely has guests in studio, “hogging the show,” limits phone-out interviews to five or 10 minutes, and specifies a topic only if there is a guest.⁵³

Lowell Green too prefers the show to be just him and his callers. “Guests can really slow you down. The problem with guests is you are stuck for at least an hour, so that anyone not interested in that topic will turn you off. They may turn you on again in another hour, but if they know the guest will be there only a few minutes, they’ll hang on and wait until you get on to something else.” The something else may be a topic Green throws out from the day’s headlines, or whatever the listeners want to talk about on “Venting Thursday” and “Free-For-All Friday.”⁵⁴

Charles Adler, on the other hand, hates to be alone in his CFRB studio, preferring to be “more energized” in a round-table conversation with guests, often from the newsroom roster.⁵⁵ Adler’s show has the fewest callers on air, most of his program devoted to in-studio discussions, two newsbreaks per hour, many commercials and traffic/weather reports.⁵⁶ The commercial content is not surprising for the number one AM station in the biggest market in the country.

No matter what the topic, all hosts agree that the last thing in the world they want is all callers to agree with them. Whether for purposes of entertainment, or democracy, they want diversity – and so does the audience. “It makes it much more entertaining,” says CFRA’s Green, “the more variance of opinion — particularly emotional opinion — the better the program. As a side benefit it is balanced, but I don’t set out to do that.”⁵⁷

Neither does Adler at CFRB worry about any democratic obligation; diversity is simply more engaging: “Balance is much more interesting for me. If the callers are all on my side I get bored. A sense of drama is conflict and if there’s no conflict, there’s no entertainment.”⁵⁸ While conscious that their programs too must be listenable, Rowe and Mair seem to have more serious intentions, perhaps in line with their previous careers as politicians. “I invite people to disagree, and I invite people on who hold contrary views,” says Mair, former constitutional affairs minister in Bennett’s B.C. government, who sees his program as a public service. “I try to be balanced in that sense, but I don’t try — as Peter Gzowski does — to be even-handed ‘on the one hand and on the other hand.’”⁵⁹ At VOXM Rowe, once leader of Newfoundland’s Liberals after a stint in Joey Smallwood’s cabinet, also believes in his radio program’s political function as a forum for the exchange of information and opinions. “On my show I say, ‘It’s your duty as a citizen to express your opinion for yourself, for the powers-that-be up on Parliament Hill, and for your fellow citizens.’ Democracy would not exist without citizens getting involved, calling their politicians to task.” The reality is, of course, that the democratic forum would not exist without some entertainment value. “I’m not looking for balance, but I do encourage diversity and differences of opinion. There’s a sense of tension, what’s coming

next out of left field, there's a sense of suspense in that regard. There's a sense of entertainment," says Rowe,⁶⁰ who along with other hosts will resort to playing devil's advocate should diversity lag.

No other host amplifies the program's entertainment value as Green does with sound effects, songs, nicknames and fantasy 'militia' like the Green Beanies — or with his bombastic on-air style. A caller will get no rougher ride on a Canadian talk show as the host sometimes provokes, argues and insults his callers. Green says his abrasive style is not a deliberate attempt to be entertaining, it's just his personality. "Abrasive comes naturally because my flash point is fairly low. But the style I am using more now is satire, which can be your most powerful weapon. I get angry sometimes, but for the most part I like to make some outrageous statement in a funny kind of way." One day when Green threw out the satirical topic of taxpayer-sponsored toilet training many callers seemed appalled, others wary. "Most of the listeners would have been killing themselves laughing," protests Green, who points out that even the callers who agreed with him were just helping him make the point of "how far we have gone with this b-----t."⁶¹

The other three hosts are more agreeable with the callers, generally. Mair, whose take-no-prisoners (especially political ones) style with guests is legendary, claims most of his listeners would say he is "pretty polite and pretty patient" with them — except if a caller is abusive. Then Mair "is quick to slam the phone down in their ear."⁶² Neither does Rowe suffer fools gladly: "I've hung up on one or two, but very seldom. I'll tolerate anything except intolerance. If someone is abusive I'll just say, 'There's no point to anyone listening to this, you're nuts,' and cut him off."⁶³ Curtailing callers who are boring

or repetitive requires more finesse. In fact, this issue raises more complaints than any other — callers *hate* being cut off before they think they have had their say. CFRA's Green gets complaints every week for giving short shrift to callers who hesitate too long to make a point, who are repetitive or who waste time on niceties such as "How are you?" The show's pace cannot lag, and for that reason, Green doesn't allow callers to read anything on his show — it slows the show down. Reading and repetition aggravate VOCM's Open Line host as well. "Sometimes I'll get nasty letters from people who claim I didn't let them make their point," says Rowe, "but they've had elaborate notes, even a speech to read. I say, 'Don't read anything on Open Line because we don't want the sounds of radios clicking off to be picked up by the seismograph at Memorial University.'" Rowe is patient with callers, sometimes letting them go on for four minutes until his producer tells him it's boring. Getting rid of long-winded callers is an art in itself. If the host interrupts a caller who is dragging on and on, says Rowe, "The caller might complain, 'Hang on, I didn't make my point,' And after two or three times I'll say 'Well, you're not going to make your point because it's boring and everyone is falling asleep.' Then I'll get nasty letters from listeners saying I'm an idiot and should be taken off the air."⁶⁴ Rowe admits, as do the other hosts, that sometimes the most graceful conclusion is accomplished by turning the volume of a particularly stubborn caller's voice down in the control room while the host bids the caller good-bye.

The techniques for managing to keep conversation succinct and compelling are difficult to explain, according to CKNW's Mair, who says he has developed a "synergy" with the audience. "I think the host and the audience learn a lot as they go on together.

They know that that they are going to have about 30 seconds maximum to get their point out, so they don't bicker about." Mair says trying to explain how the rhythm develops is "like asking five golfers why their swings are different speeds and different tempos. It's all an individual thing."⁶⁵

At CFRB Adler says, "I have to keep the show entertaining and at the same time not sound like I'm cutting the listener off, not sound condescending, not give anyone the bum's rush. That requires a little finesse. Some days I just don't have the patience and I'll just say, 'Hey, great. Later.'" Adler is always amazed when he gets a flood of calls or letters complaining that a caller was cut off too quickly. "It's the Canadian penchant for fairness. In the States listeners don't care if I cut a caller short. They are just thrilled that I'm getting on with it. If a caller is boring it's my job to cut him short."⁶⁶ Adler notices also a distinct difference between what you can and cannot say on an open-line program in Canada. Stories abound of excesses on American talk radio: Gordon Liddy advising listeners to shoot federal agents trespassing on their property, Howard Stern's offensive sexual remarks, Bob Grant calling African-Americans "savages", Rush Limbaugh's nasty comments about homosexuals, poor people and AIDS victims. None of those comments would likely be heard in Canada. In fact CTV took Limbaugh's television show off the air in the spring of 1994 after complaints to the CRTC about Limbaugh's "right-wing and homophobic views."⁶⁷

Whether by inclination or regulation, Canadians are a kinder, gentler lot than Americans. Canadians have a history of accommodating differences, says Michael Adams, from the time Canada negotiated independence from Mother England, while the

Americans battled it out in the Revolution. And — except when playing hockey — notes Adams, Canadians are non-violent and courteous. “We raise the tone at the end of sentences, transforming assertions into hypotheses so as not to give offence, often adding ‘eh’ to emphasize our politeness. We will stop at Stop signs, even if no cars are in sight, and even if the sign says *Arrêt*.”⁶⁸

Canadians are especially tolerant on the airwaves. Whereas United States broadcasting is supervised by a Federal Communications Commission largely disarmed by the dropping of its “Fairness Doctrine” in 1987, Canadians have the Canadian Radio and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) to safeguard the Broadcasting Act (1991):

3. (1) It is hereby declared as the broadcasting policy for Canada that. . . the programming originated by broadcasting undertakings should be of high standard . . . providing a balance of information, enlightenment, and entertainment for men, women and children of all ages, interests and tastes . . . provide a reasonable opportunity for the public to be exposed to the expression of differing views on matters of public concern.⁶⁹

Within the Broadcasting Act are encribed the CRTC’s own Radio Regulations:

3. A licensee shall not broadcast (a) anything in contravention of the law; (b) any abusive comment that, when taken in context, tends to or is likely to expose an individual or a group or class of individuals to hatred or contempt on the basis of race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, sexual orientation, age or mental or physical disability; (c) any obscene or profane language;⁷⁰

Which is why Rush Limbaugh, Gordon Liddy, Howard Stern and their excesses are unlikely to find air time in Canada.

“Freedom of speech in the United States is almost more sacred than any other right,” says Lise Plouffe, CRTC senior information officer. “It’s not that way in Canada where

the airwaves belong to the public.” Plouffe points out that the CRTC was so concerned about the “inherent danger in open-line shows of abuse and ridicule” in 1988 that the commission considered implementing guidelines for open-line programs.⁷¹ At the time, the CRTC had received 134 written complaints in three years about unbalanced or restricted access to open-line programs. Three stations (CKNW Vancouver, CFRN Niagara Falls, and CFBC Saint John) had been censored for racist remarks, two of the three (CFRN and CFBC) were also fined \$5,000, and one (CFRN) had its license renewed for 18 months instead of the usual five years. CHRC Quebec also had its licence shortened as a result of continuing complaints about host Andre Arthur’s unbalanced opinions.⁷² But when the CRTC published its proposed open-line guidelines, the resulting hullabaloo from broadcasters⁷³ dissuaded the Commission from implementing the policy. The CRTC now enforces a seven-second tape delay system for open-line shows, and requires stations who have been cited for offenses to submit their own open-line programming guidelines for CRTC approval.

In recent years, the CRTC has twice shortened the licenses of offending radio stations. CFRB was granted a six-month license instead of the usual five-year term in December 1995 for a talk radio host’s racist remarks about Italians and organized crime. CHRC was again rebuked in August of 1990 for a string of offenses by open-line host Andre Arthur involving offensive remarks, unsubstantiated insinuations and unbalanced opinions regarding the Quebec Police Force, politicians and a rape case. The station was again granted only an 18-month licence, and only on strict conditions of keeping logger tapes for six months, drafting open-line guidelines and informing listeners of their

existence.⁷⁴

For the most part, the CRTC turns complaints about talk radio over to the Canadian Broadcast Standards Council, the broadcast industry's own watchdog. The CBSC is the brainchild of the Canadian Association of Broadcasters, who opted for self-regulation in 1988 when the CRTC was threatening bureaucratic supervision. Most Canadian radio and television stations now belong to the CBSC, which has the endorsement of the CRTC.

Complaints which cannot be resolved by dialogue between the complainant and the radio station are reviewed by a CBSC regional council, which then publishes a decision. In 1993 the Council ruled, for instance, that talk radio host John Gilbert of CKTB Niagara Falls was not abusive in calling Korean comfort women in the Second World War "whores," nor was he abusive to French-Canadians in his opinion that the policy of bilingualism in Canada is "an absolute farce."⁷⁵ CFRA's morning open-line host, Steve Madely, also escaped the wrath of the CBSC in November 1994. The Council ruled that Madely was merely trying to provoke listeners' reactions when he lost his temper on air because no one was calling on the topic of drunk driving.⁷⁶ The Council is not always so easy on talk radio hosts.

In February 1994, the CBSC rebuked CKTB Niagara Falls open-line host John Michael for "numerous inaccurate statements that were abusive and discriminatory toward French-speaking Canadians [which] exposed them to the contempt of other listeners."⁷⁷ In November of the same year, the CBSC censured Lowell Green for "demeaning and discriminatory remarks" and for hanging up on a caller who identified herself as a Christian.⁷⁸ Both radio stations were required to announce the decisions on-air

herself as a Christian.⁷⁸ Both radio stations were required to announce the decisions on-air in peak listening hours.

As a last resort, an irate public can appeal to the courts. CHRC host Andre Arthur recently settled a \$1.4-million lawsuit filed in July 1995 by Quebec Premier Lucien Bouchard and his wife over Arthur's remarks about the couple's marital affairs.⁷⁹ In March of this year CKNW's Rafe Mair paid \$300,000 in an out-of-court settlement to former federal fisheries minister Tom Siddon. In 1987 Mair had accused Siddon of promoting a massive Alcan Aluminum Ltd. hydro project for political payoffs.⁸⁰

If the CRTC, the CBSC or the courts don't muzzle talk radio hosts, sometimes a concerted effort by the audience can. Lowell Green claims his show was forced off the air in Peterborough. "They dropped out, too much controversy," says Green, who blames a boycott campaign spearheaded by angry teachers. "You can imagine what Joe Schmuck thinks when half a dozen teachers stop in at his service station and say they heard his advertisement on the Lowell Green Show and they're not going to buy there anymore."⁸¹ Such demonstrations of public wrath are rare. Citizens are more likely to aim their collective angst in a different direction: towards the legislatures of the land.

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Chapter 4

The Political Effects of Talk Radio

The headline in *The Economist* reads: 1-800-MOB-RULE. And the comments on Canadian op-ed pages are no kinder.

“Over on the talk radio dial, Canadians are force-fed a daily diet of angry, old white guys spewing out vitriol . . .”¹

“Open-mouth radio host. Little old ladies hail them on the street and pit bulls turn and flee at their approach.”²

“Green is staking out turf on the far right, a region of the political spectrum where passion runs high — in inverse proportion to IQ scores.”³

“May broadcasters across North America start to challenge the current trend in talk radio (widely, if erroneously, touted as the most democratic form of new media) of defining the medium through the extreme conservatism of its often bombastic, usually white and overwhelmingly male hosts.”⁴

What you read about talk radio is not necessarily what you hear on talk radio. Certainly there is anger. Voters feel they have much to be angry about, and they are increasingly pessimistic that government has the answers to the country’s problems. Listeners are not angry feeble-minded lunatics, however, and talk radio hosts are not malevolent right-wing maniacs. Even in the United States, where talk radio is portrayed as racist, violent, superficial, ill-informed and downright dangerous to democracy, only a few hosts are extremists. Still, the mainstream press treats talk radio as its bastard child, blaming right-wing “hatemongering” for the Oklahoma City bombing, “anglo angst,” voters’ cynicism, and even the impending demise of the American political system.

What has raised the alarm in liberal media and intellectual circles is talk radio’s

political power, a power that seemed to startle critics and politicians five years ago when Canada's leaders failed to strong-arm the Charlottetown accord past voters, and U.S. presidential candidates avoided mainstream coverage in favor of talk shows.

Talk Radio: the Voice of the People, the Majority Maker

Talk radio started to make national noises in Canada after the Meech Lake agreement in 1990. Canadians were deeply resentful that politicians had tried to decide Canada's future without consulting the electorate, but with the complicity of the media — particularly CBC television.⁵ Talk shows across the country were buzzing with angry voters, especially on Rafe Mair's open-line on CKNW Vancouver. The deal was a "sell-out" according to Mair, crafted by the "bully boys of the Canadian elite" which did not provide for B.C.'s rapidly growing population with more representation in Parliament. Dubbed "Dr. No" by the Vancouver Sun for his opposition to Meech Lake and the Charlottetown accord, the Sun called "raving Rafe's" performance "histrionic."⁶ The day after Mair's heated on-air debate with Joe Clark on constitutional reform, The Globe and Mail noted the "bombastic" host's "steady diet of vitriolic criticism." Justice Minister Kim Campbell, who had also tangled on air with the host, said "Rafe Mair has an ego like Mount Everest . . . He flatters himself that people are paying that much attention. Well, they're not."⁷ In the October, 1992 referendum, B.C. voters cast a resounding "No" to the Charlottetown accord, as did 54.8 per cent of voters in the rest of the country. "The establishment will blame me for a lot of what happened," protests Mair, "but all I did was give people the opportunity to talk to constitutional experts, to talk to people who knew

the other side, and I aired the issue so people made up their own minds.”⁸

Whether talk radio played any part in the narrow defeat of the October 1995 Quebec referendum on sovereignty association is debateable — French talk radio was pitching the Yes vote, while English radio was exhorting Quebec to vote No. But English talk radio did ignite tremendous enthusiasm for the giant unity rally in Montreal a few days before the vote, a rally which was a last-minute strategy by the federal No Committee (Chapter 1). CFRA in Ottawa, for instance, spread the word in the community before newspapers and television jumped on the story, and donated two station buses for the Crusade for Canada’s caravan. “There’s no question in my mind we played a major role,” says Lowell Green, who teamed up with CFRA’s morning talk radio host, Steve Madely to promote the rally on air. “About half the people there were from Ottawa and I would say at least half of them had to be listeners to my show or Madely’s.”⁹ Tens of thousands of people (100,000 in the eyes of the English press, only 30,000 to the French media) from all across the country gathered in downtown Montreal, waving Canada flags, cheering Quebec. The vote was “No,” but it was not, as Toronto Star columnist Dalton Camp put it the next day, a great victory.

The genuine passion of the people assembled in Montreal epitomized the huge gulf between millions of Canadians and their elected politicians . . . In the end, it was not a failure of campaign strategy — whether this was said too late or better left unsaid — that brought the harrowing verdict, but simply a failure of leadership to inspire the confidence and trust of Canadians inside and outside Quebec.¹⁰

Inspiring confidence and trust in alienated Americans had sent U.S. presidential candidates to the talk radio and television circuit in 1992 to appeal directly to voters.

Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton chatted with Don Imus, Donahue and played the saxophone on Arsenio Live. President George Bush followed reluctantly, visiting with Rush Limbaugh and chatting with the twentysomethings on MTV. Texas billionaire Ross Perot announced his presidential candidacy on Larry King Live. According to CNN's top-rated talk host, "There was a revolution in 1992. It happened on shows like ours and it grew out of the public's distrust of, and disgust with, their poll-driven leaders — and their perceived co-conspirators in the traditional press."¹¹ If the presidential campaign of 1992 was the "talk show campaign," the 1994 U.S. election was the "talk radio election." Talk radio voters — especially Rush Limbaugh's listeners — voted more thoroughly Republican than even nonlisteners, sending a Republican majority to Congress for the first time in 40 years, overturning Democratic control of state legislatures and governors' mansions for the first time in 60 years. Limbaugh was anointed the "Majority Maker" after Speaker Newt Gingrich said, "Without C-Span, without talk radio shows, without all the alternative media, I don't think we would have won."¹²

It is a far leap from fixing potholes on talk shows in the '60s (Chapter 2) to fixing the Canadian constitution in the '90s, or swaying congressional elections in the United States but it was not a sudden power surge in either country. Even in the '80s — long before Limbaugh — U.S. talk shows used their political muscles to derail the Massachusetts seat-belt law, defeat legislative pay raises, stage tax protests, and even to close down a crack house in Seattle. Talk radio's recent national clout began to build in 1989 when 35-year veteran Jerry Williams in Boston, teaming up with Ralph Nader and talk hosts across the U.S., delayed a congressional pay raise for six months.¹³ The public started tuning in

by the millions to talk about the Gulf War, and kept at it during the 1992 presidential campaign, the 1993 flap over gays in the military, Zoe Baird's aborted nomination as federal attorney-general, Whitewater, the 1994 health care debate and the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing.

Talk radio's political potential in Canada evolved in the same fashion, and some regions showed particular vitality through the '80s. In British Columbia "The Tartan Terrier," Jack Webster, had been "turning elections,"¹⁴ closing down swindles and influencing public policy for years.¹⁵ More than 10 years ago in Newfoundland, recalls Bill Rowe, protests by open-line callers halted the damming of the Lloyd's River, and talk radio's tradition of going to bat for the little guy against the powers-that-be (see Chapter 2) prompted former premier Clyde Wells to abolish the office of provincial ombudsman. "One of the reasons he gave was that the open-line shows were more than serving the purpose."¹⁶

More electrifying was the exposure of the Mount Cashel scandal on Rowe's program. Stories of sexual abuse of boys at the Christian Brothers orphanage had been circulating for years, but one day on Open Line in February 1989 the wife of Mr. Justice John Mahoney of the Newfoundland Court of Appeal heard a former provincial legislator talking about a cover-up. "She was a good Catholic," remembers Rowe, "and she was appalled and dismayed at the allegations. She called her husband to say these horrendous accusations should be looked at." Mr. Justice Mahoney called the attorney-general's office, a police investigation led to the conviction of eight Christian Brothers and a public inquiry shook the foundations of both the Catholic Church and the child care system in

Newfoundland. “Without that first phone call, without that opening,” says Rowe of the Mount Cashel scandal, “it would never have seen the light of day.”¹⁷

Talk radio’s power is a power of protest. It is most effective as an oppositional medium, says media historian Paul Rutherford. “Talk radio has a significance because it is a safety valve, an outlet for expressing opinions, normally — but not exclusively — of the right, opinions of protest and resentment. It gives people a voice to say what would otherwise be silenced. The downside is that sometimes it becomes a vehicle for all sorts of nasty opinions and views which we might want to see silenced in a different kind of world.”¹⁸ Rutherford is referring to the on-air excesses of talk radio hosts in the United States, a reputation which has spread over the border.

The American mainstream media are not comfortable with the political potency of talk radio, its domination by conservative-sounding voices, and its potential for extremism. Or with the callers, who “bristle with discontent and resentment,” in the words of Tom Lewis, writing in the *Media Studies Journal*.

These we may call the new populists, white-collar workers watching the tide of America’s greatness recede . . . [T]hey must work two jobs just to drive smaller cars and live in overpriced apartments. The stability of their youth is a fading memory. Jobs are no longer secure; marriages are crumbling; violence is unfettered; and people who have long lived on America’s margins — homosexuals, blacks, women who desire something other than heterosexual marriage — now get government help and preferential treatment to move into the mainstream. *Their* mainstream.¹⁹

The U.S. President himself has castigated talk radio for being a “drumbeat of negativism,” “promoters of paranoia” (after the April 1995 bombing of the Federal Building in Oklahoma City), and most recently for being “hostile, shrill . . .

overwhelmingly right-wing.”²⁰ Mainstream media, however, make too much of a few extreme comments by a few hosts like Gordon Liddy, Bob Grant, and Rush Limbaugh. The Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania analyzed 2,700 articles about talk radio and its hosts covering a six-year period in 28 of the top-50 circulation newspapers in the United States and concluded that the articles focussed on only a few comments by Liddy (advising listeners that the best way to shoot federal agents was to aim for the head), Grant (making racial slurs such as “savages”) and Limbaugh (calling militant feminists “feminazis”).

While the language of call-in political talk radio is less civil than the discourse of national party leaders, the segments mentioned in articles on talk radio are not typical of the hosts quoted, nor are they representative of the political talk radio shows with the largest audiences . . . Although we heard such words as “liar,” “slimeball” and “scumbag” — language usually not found in the public discourse of mainstream politicians — in coding 150 hours of talk from 50 programs and 105 hours of Rush Limbaugh, we located no instances comparable to Liddy’s reported call that threatening ATF agents be shot or Grant’s identification of some African Americans as “savages.” Even for Liddy and Grant these comments were not the norm.²¹

The Annenberg report suggested that the mainstream press exaggerates the impact of a few comments by focussing only on national talk radio, although there are hundreds of hosts with only local or limited syndicated exposure. Granted that talk radio is a conservative constituency — only two of the top nine hosts are liberal — but even conservative talk radio covers a wide range from Rush Limbaugh, who berates liberals, to extremist hosts like Chuck Harder who exhort listeners to arm themselves and “lynch the liberals.”²²

In any case, there are signs that the bombast is abating and Limbaugh’s influence is

waning. Limbaugh's audience in at least 11 of the top 25 U.S. markets has declined, his occasional listeners are dropping out, and the number of Americans who never listen is rising.²³ The political winds have shifted: the great wellspring of cynicism and distrust found relief in the '94 election, the Republican majority now has its 'Contract with America,' President Clinton has co-opted conservative tax cuts and a balanced budget and the economy is booming.²⁴ Clinton-bashing has worn thin²⁵ and — now what?

"What has peaked is right-wing, yell-at-the-audience-or-someone-who-disagrees-with-you polarized radio," says Bob Mackowycz at CFRB Toronto. Fresh from a national talk radio convention in Washington, D.C., the program director at Canada's number one talk station says the message is clear: "What people want now is solutions, some profundity, people who can synthesize information. It's not enough for a host to say, 'Crime on the street, dammit we gotta send these guys away for longer prison terms. Whaddya think? Gimme a call.'" Instead, Mackowycz suggests, the talk show discussion might focus on research which shows the high percentage of muggings at ATM's could be reduced with better lighting and security cameras. "The irony of being in Washington was that out of 80 hours of seminars the one that created the buzz was the one where the presenters talked about content. . . . I think because we genetically came out of the CBC pool, as a nation of broadcasters we've always been more content-oriented. So, here we are a little ahead of the game."²⁶

And a lot more polite. In Canada, political talk radio also leans to the right as hosts and callers complain about wasteful government spending, overblown rights for criminals and none for victims, labor unions, welfare cheats and illegal refugees. But there are no

rancorous attacks on the evils of big, intrusive government and no personal hatred of politicians. During the 1993 federal election campaign Canadians flinched at a Tory television ad featuring unflattering shots of Prime Minister Jean Chretien's facial paralysis. The political atmosphere in Canada is generally more civil than in the U.S. "The Americans are far more suspicious of government and in general far more libertarian," says Charles Adler, now at CFRB after five years in the United States. "Order in Canada is the highest virtue. In the United States it's liberty."²⁷

More particularly, Canadians don't line up along a right-left political fault line. For all Lowell Green browbeats socialists, the major divisions are geographical (east vs west) or cultural (French vs English) more than ideological or national. "National issues, I hate to say this but it's true," says Mair from his studio at CKNW Vancouver, "are of very, very little consequence unless they hit us directly. I'm surprised, for instance, that the Somali Inquiry hasn't really caught on here as a big issue."²⁸ Neither has it in St. John's. The hottest topics on VOCM's Open Line are the Voisey's Bay nickel discovery in Labrador ("Will the government bugger this up as bad as Churchill Falls?" as Rowe puts it), unemployment, welfare, the fisheries, government spending, anything provincial. "Local doesn't mean just Corner Brook, Buena Vista or St. John's," says Bill Rowe, "it means anything going on in St. Anthony on the great northern peninsula is of interest to people everywhere in Newfoundland because you feel part of an entity more than other people in Canada."²⁹

Talk radio's popularity has never flagged in British Columbia, Newfoundland or Quebec from the time radio stations opened up the phone lines in the '60s. Talk radio is

particularly effective in forging ties to bind communities separated from the rest of the country by mountains, the ocean or culture. It reinforces an attitude of us against the rest of the world. Mair says there is a considerable feeling his province might be better off by itself. "We've just been through a period where we've had six Liberals back in Ottawa, and when I call them 'toady-lickspittles' everyone in the audience knows I'm right, that they haven't done a damn thing to represent British Columbia, but they've done an awful lot to represent their own desires to be parliamentary secretaries or cabinet ministers."³⁰

On the other side of the country, Bill Rowe at VOCM St. John's agrees that Newfoundland too has grievances which unite its people, grievances he hears every day on his open-line show. "There's no doubt that in Newfoundland we feel screwed by joining Canada, that we're part of a lopsided confederation with all the power in Ontario and Quebec, that we would have been better off by ourselves. It's a separation from power more than a physical separation, I think."³¹ Francophones in Quebec have long translated their frustrations and anger against *les Anglais* into a passionate and obstreperous talk radio tradition. While the function of the press in Quebec is historically distinct from that of the English press, there are some obvious parallels between talk radio in the two cultures. In profiling Gilles Proulx, now of CKAV Montreal, for the *Globe and Mail*, journalist Andre Picard described the most popular talk host in the province:

Like most talk-radio hosts, he likes to blast politicians, harangue bureaucrats, bad-mouth the out-of-work, rage against unions and big business, insult immigrants and fulminate against feminism. But . . . all this fodder takes a back seat to the really hot topics: sovereignty, language and Mohawks.³²

During the Oka crisis of 1990 Proulx's on-air rants about certain Mohawk Warriors, "a gang of criminal thugs," were blamed for a rock-throwing attack on a convoy of children and elderly people leaving the Kahnawake Reserve near Montreal. A man who suffered a heart attack during the incident later died. These days, though, Proulx regularly rails against "Anglophone squareheads," and harangues Quebecers for being "sheep" who are too frightened to back independence and "wimps" who are too spineless to stand up for their culture and language.³³ But Proulx describes himself as a "soft sovereigntist" who might forgo separation for a better offer from the federal government, "Meech plus."³⁴

The accent on community leaves little national ire on talk radio. Mair speculates that Canadians don't share much in the way of conversational topics on the air because they don't share a national identity fortified by national icons. "Sir John A. MacDonald? Yes, he is to some, but to others he's a drunk who hanged Louis Riel. What about Sir Wilfrid Laurier? He certainly looked dignified, but I can't remember a single thing he did. Compare that to the United States where it doesn't matter that Washington and Jefferson were slave owners — and Jefferson probably sired a bunch of children by one of his slaves — they are national icons. A black kid in Los Angeles relates to them and to Lincoln just as a white kid does in New Hampshire. It brings everyone together. We don't have any national icons."³⁵

Without pressing national issues, a national talk radio program about politics like Limbaugh's just won't play in Canada. "You don't have to go much farther west than Toronto for separatism to be a non-issue," says Bob Laine, CHUM vice-president in charge of the CHUM Satellite Network. "And the further west you go the less important

any federal issue is.” Laine has tried to sell the Lowell Green Show, which has a national political focus, to CHUM stations across the country, “It’s tough in Canada.” So tough that Vancouver and London were never interested and of the eight stations that did carry the program, only four remain. Worse, the ‘national’ part of the show has been trimmed to two hours. “We took an hour back because it just wasn’t selling well,” says Laine. Only Ottawa, Windsor, Montreal and Halifax are still connected, the program’s success hampered by the low ratings of the Montreal and Halifax stations. Lowell may think controversy drove him off the air in Peterborough, North Bay, Thunder Bay and Winnipeg, but Laine insists, “It’s an issues-oriented program and the issues Lowell talks about don’t mirror what’s going on in the community.” When people want to gripe about local garbage collection, municipal anti-smoking bylaws, or higher school taxes, Lowell’s diatribes against “Jacques Piggyzeau” may not appeal.³⁶

CBC talk programs like Morningside (which doesn’t take listeners’ phone calls) and Cross Country Checkup (which does) may hold status as national talk programs, but Peter Gzowski’s ratings are dwarfed in the big cities by commercial radio hosts like Rafe Mair, Bill Rowe, Charles Adler, Lowell Green in Ottawa, Peter Warren in Winnipeg or Dave Rutherford in Calgary and Edmonton. Cross Country Checkup’s audience is too small (350,000 listeners) to sustain a commercial radio program which must offer a larger audience to national advertisers. “It’s impossible to reach a critical mass in Canada without the major markets,” says Laine. “Nearly one-third of the population is concentrated in Vancouver, Toronto, Ottawa and Montreal.” Add to that figure the population of southwestern Ontario from Windsor to Kingston and “you’re talking to half

the English-speaking people in the country.” Without those markets, declares Laine, you won’t be talking to anybody on a nationwide political talk radio show.³⁷ Recently C-PAC (the Canadian Parliamentary Channel) has experimented with simulcasts of local talk radio shows across the country and viewers have been enthusiastic, but the novelty might soon wear off if the shows were daily fare. Similarly, special programs connecting two talk shows — such as CJAD’s Tommy Schurmacher in Montreal talking to QR77’s Dave Rutherford in Calgary, alternating calls from each city — on topics such as national unity, or the Tories landslide in Alberta, likely could not sustain daily interest.

Talk radio still is a force to be reckoned with at the regional level, and it is capable of moving mountains — or at least huge hydroelectric projects. In British Columbia, Mair’s open-line campaign against Alcan’s massive Kemano Completion Project, a controversial environmental issue, is credited with the B.C. government’s 1995 decision to kill the project. In Newfoundland, a hue and cry on VOCM’s Open Line shut down former Newfoundland Premier Clyde Wells’ plan to privatize Newfoundland and Labrador Hydro. “The open-line . . . outcry made him look like a liar and a manipulator,” says Rowe, for years Wells’ colleague in the provincial Liberal party.³⁸

Occasionally, talk radio musters coast-to-coast support when hosts across the country zero in on a national issue like the Montreal No Rally. A 1995 countrywide write-in campaign of 230,000 letters may have influenced Finance Minister Paul Martin to drop a proposed tax increase in the federal budget. Thousands of irate talk radio listeners joined Canada-wide protests to change the Young Offenders Act. A talk radio ‘network’ campaign to pressure Hamilton MP Sheila Copps to resign barely got off the ground

April 30, 1996 before it was mentioned in Question Period that afternoon, and Copps resigned the next morning. No one counted the number of dollars talk radio listeners donated to flood victims in Quebec's Saguenay, or in Manitoba.

Talk radio hosts claim all they are doing is giving people a chance to talk about important issues, providing details they might otherwise miss. Liberal critics, however, worry that a radio program which is essentially entertainment is no place for voters to be getting information on complicated policy decisions.

The Hosts — Barkers or Opinion Leaders?

"Talk radio is first and foremost entertainment," says the open-line host who makes every effort to confirm his hypothesis. "People don't want to be uplifted and edified, they want to be entertained," says Lowell Green, "and if they learn a few things along the way from others, that's a benefit. But first and foremost it's got to be entertaining." Green cites the reality of a fragmented Ottawa market as reason enough to be bombastic, outrageous and highly opinionated: 13 radio stations, 60+ television channels. "If you're not entertaining and stimulating, forget it."³⁹ Green's open-line philosophy is uncannily like that of Rush Limbaugh's, who also claims status as an entertainer first and foremost. Songs. Sound effects. Jingles. They've both got them. Rush calls environmentalists 'wacko.' Lowell has the 'wacko' call of the day. Rush hates 'feminazis.' Lowell hates 'feminazis.' They crack jokes. They have a cadre of the devoted: Rush's dittoheads, Lowell's Green Beanies. Both have newsletters and bestsellers. Limbaugh is the consummate radio showman. He appeals to the public, as Tom Lewis writes in the Media

Studies Journal, in the same way snake oil salesmen, corrupt politicians, religious zealots and stand-up comics have on the radio since the '20s: a charismatic personality, a single message simply expressed from outside the corridors of power, humor "to inject a little life into tired subjects."⁴⁰ Other talk show hosts in Canada profess a more serious intent, but sidestep the term 'journalist.' CKNW's Rafe Mair, while admitting he is in "show business," labels himself an "editorialist."⁴¹ Charles Adler, agreeing his show at CFRB Toronto is more the op-ed page than the comics, prefers the term "conversationalist."⁴² VOCM's Bill Rowe resists the definition of talk radio as hard-nosed journalism: "What it is is a forum, a very informal forum for the exchange of information and opinions, but it's also for the entertainment of engagement, the back and forth. A dialogue is entertaining, a monologue is boring." That's as far as entertainment goes on Open Line, however. Sound effects? Songs? Constructed controversy? Bombast? "My show is based on a sensible debate of the issues," Rowe declares, "and if a sensible debate of the issues is not enough to keep the numbers up, then to hell with it."⁴³ The numbers are up: nearly two-thirds of the Newfoundlanders listening to morning radio are tuned in to Rowe.⁴⁴

The issue of "infotainment" is one that plagues talk radio programmers *and* television news producers and newspaper editors, according to Michael Harrison, editor of *Talkers* magazine, read by more than 3,000 talk radio hosts in the United States and Canada. "Even Presidential campaigns are preoccupied with capturing attention and developing interest. Or, to put it another way, to avoid being boring at all costs — even if it means leaving out important information or glossing over serious, complex issues." The trouble is, says Harrison, that the public wants to be entertained, "Remember during the Persian Gulf War when people talked about going home at night to 'watch' the war on CNN and

began to complain when it started to get ‘boring’?”⁴⁵ The entertainment factor may account for the dearth of liberal talk on the air. Jon Weiner, in “Looking for The Left’s Limbaugh,” suggests liberal analysis is too complex, the language too intellectual, the tone too serious. The left would have to come down from its ivory tower to the real world of pop culture to win any listeners.⁴⁶ Even Jim Hightower, the left’s leading national talk radio voice in the U.S. until he was pulled off the air in the fall of 1995 after the Disney Corporation bought the ABC network, calls most liberal hosts “dull and stuck-up.”⁴⁷

For sociologist Wayne Munson the debate over what’s interesting and what’s important conjures up ghosts of the old debate between “story journalism” and “information journalism” from the 1890s. Munson borrows the theme from media historian Michael Schudson, who argues that the competition between the New York Times and the New York World was more of a class conflict than a circulation war.

[The Times was] adapted to to the life experience of persons whose position in the social structure gave them most control over their own lives. Its readers were relatively independent and participant. The readers of the World were relatively dependent and nonparticipant.⁴⁸

In *All Talk: The Talkshow in Media Culture*, Munson suggests that while the *origins* of talk radio (and television) are working-class, the class orientation of ‘talk’ these days is not clear. “In any case, the legitimacy-based conflict between journalism and the audience participation talkshow reiterates the . . . high culture versus popular culture debate provoked by postmodern boundary crossings.”⁴⁹ Which is Munson’s way of saying that even when the media/academic elite defends some aspects of the talkshow genre — as an electronic back fence, a new-style Speaker’s Corner, or a vaguely democratic political

forum — it is faint praise. “The lowly talkshow’s lofty critics here grudgingly attribute to it some social and political utility for those somehow ‘beneath’ them.”⁵⁰

That lofty attitude riles Bill Rowe. “People who dismiss talk radio are narrow and strait in their thinking, contemptuous, ill-formed and ill-read. They are usually know-alls who have the arrogance of ignorance. People who listen to talk radio are intelligent people, broad-minded people with a plethora of ideas and wide horizons.” VOCM’s Open Line host, himself a Rhodes Scholar, has no patience with critics who “have contempt for the intellect of the ordinary citizen.”⁵¹

Neither has Rafe Mair, especially if the critic is former Minister of Justice and former Prime Minister Kim Campbell who appeared several times on Mair’s show (“bloodbaths, they were just wretched affairs”) to discuss the Constitution. “After the referendum, and after she was tossed out of office, she was down at Harvard teaching a course and she did a paper on how people are so stupid they didn’t understand the Charlottetown accord. They understood it, and they understood it very, very well.” Mair makes no apologies for simplifying arguments for the sake of radio listeners, “Churchill used to demand that the most complicated argument be put to him on one side of a piece of foolscap,” and points out that open-line debate piques listeners’ interest in more complicated details of an issue. “People were just begging for a copy of the Charlottetown accord because they wanted to read more on it,” Mair says. “I think we give them the impetus to inform themselves more thoroughly.”⁵²

Critics sneer at the “dumbing down of discourse” on talk radio, the “infotainment” that “takes the trivial and makes it substantial,”⁵³ replacing meaningful analysis of weighty issues with simplistic solutions to complex problems. When the Lowell Green

Show, like other talk radio shows in Canada, egged former fisheries minister Brian Tobin on against Spain in the ‘turbot war’ two years ago, Ottawa Citizen columnist Chris Cobb was appalled by the “jingoism” engendered by “talk radio’s pretend journalists.”

We haven’t heard too much about Canada’s destruction of its own fishing stocks, especially from media bottom feeders who tend to have more direct influence on public opinion than your average daily newspaper editorial. When a complex international dispute develops, the temptation to engage in gross over-simplification is difficult for some media outlets to resist.⁵⁴

Cobb seemed to miss the subtext that ordinary citizens tired of being pushed around by political and economic forces beyond their control, were uplifted by the romantic notion of their ‘hero’ firing a salvo across the bow of bureaucracy. Mainstream media critics are more concerned with what listeners might misinterpret as demagogic hosts are making up their minds for them.

Facts or Fiction?

Rush Limbaugh may have captivated 20 million listeners on 600 stations with his ultra-conservative message, but his popularity and his influence (he reads a daily fax from “Mr. Newt” on his show) have generated an anti-Rush tide of publications highlighting his “distortions,” and “misinformation.” Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR), for example, publishes *The Way Things Aren’t: Rush Limbaugh’s Reign of Error*, a tally of what FAIR calls “Big Fat Lies,” such as:

Limbaugh: “Don’t let the liberals deceive you into believing that a decade of sustained growth without inflation in America (in the ‘80s) resulted in a bigger gap between the have and the have-nots. Figures compiled by the Congressional Budget Office dispel that myth.” (Limbaugh, *The Way things Ought to Be*, p. 70).

Reality: CBO numbers for after-tax incomes show that in 1980 the richest

fifth of our country had eight times the income of the poorest fifth. By 1989, the ratio was more than 20-1.⁵⁵

Liberal alarm about misguided Limbaugh lemmings, however, is likely over-stated. As talk radio hosts claim, their audiences are not belly-up-to-the-bar intellectual inferiors — they tend to be well-educated and well-read. Neither do they rely only on talk radio for information about life, the world and politics. The 1993 Times Mirror Center survey found that both callers and listeners read or watch a wide range of news media, preferring the traditional to the tabloid: 72 per cent of callers read a daily newspaper, are more than twice as likely as the general public to watch the MacNeil-Lehrer News Hour, and nearly half of them watch CNN. What they don't spend a lot of time on are television talkshows, the Larry King Show, and magazines like People.⁵⁶ Every day on every program you hear similarities in Canadian callers: they refer to Newsworld, the Globe and Mail, the Citizen, the Sun, the Fifth Estate, C-PAC, even government reports and documents. The Annenburg Report found that talk radio listeners — even Limbaugh's — know more about civics, political and social issues, and general facts than non-listeners.⁵⁷ So even if Limbaugh makes mistakes, talk radio has a self-correcting system: the listeners themselves. Hosts make every effort to be well-prepared for a talk radio program. All are self-described "news junkies" subscribing to a wide range of newspapers and magazines, monitoring newscasts and public affairs shows. Bill Rowe, for example, reads at least 12 publications "of catholic tastes," from the Manchester Guardian, the Globe and Mail, the St. John's Telegram, to the London Review of Books, Maclean's and Saturday Night in addition to consuming broadcast news, and picking up scuttlebutt from his squash buddies.⁵⁸ Should a host, however, make an error in fact the audience is quick to "police the public sphere," in

“Lowell,” says Don from Kemptville on The Lowell Green Show, in the middle of a walloping argument on gun control. Lowell’s really up against it with all these crazy “gun nuts,” now here’s another one on the line who just can’t wait to nail him for a little slip. “Yesterday you stated that the last gun control bill passed was in 1972, but . . .” Don pauses to milk the moment then swoops in for the kill, “you’re forgetting Kim Campbell’s bill . . . 1991 . . . C-17, I’ve got it right here in front of me.” Lowell shuffles papers and grumbles, “Kim Campbell, you say? . . . I’m just looking . . . Okay, you may have me on that one.”⁵⁹

Or listeners can set the record straight off-air. All the hosts get letters, calls, faxes, and e-mail every day from people who want to contribute ideas and information or correct misapprehensions. The day after Green ranted on air about the Council of Canadians, a leftist lobby group, “wasting taxpayers’ money,” he got a letter from Maude Barlow saying her organization received no government funds. “I went on air and said I appreciated that she didn’t go the CRTC,” says Green. “I’m not perfect. I’m going to make mistakes and I’m not afraid to admit it, but at least she had the courtesy and courage to come to me directly.”⁶⁰ Charles Adler is not afraid to admit his mistakes either, usually when colleagues from CFRB’s newsroom “hold his feet to the fire” in the daily on-air free-for-all.⁶¹

The most notable example of a listener setting the record straight may be Rafe Mair’s about-face on the Kemano Completion Project. Mair, a free marketer, was originally in favor of Alcan’s plan to expand its Prince George hydroelectric generating station. When documents in brown paper envelopes started arriving at the radio station, Mair says he

soon realized an environmental catastrophe was in the works that threatened to eradicate sockeye and pink salmon in the area. After checking out the scientific details, the number one talk host in Vancouver embarked on his two-year crusade to get the project cancelled.⁶²

By mail, fax or phone the talk radio audience adds to the program's store of knowledge, contributing facts and real-life experiences. Journalists cringe at information unverified by 'scientific' or 'expert' authorities, but talk radio's information network seems to be effective.

It's March 13, 1997 on Open Line at VOCM St. John's, and the Harmonized Sales Tax combining the seven per cent GST with the 12 per cent provincial sales tax goes into effect in two weeks. Official sources have told consumers the cost of most things will go down, except for heating oil. Bill Rowe and his listeners are trying to figure out if that's true. George calls on his cell phone to say his transportation company in St. John's has to raise rates eight per cent to offset increased gasoline costs. Then Steve calls. He's just had a look at his monthly telephone bill.

Steve: Now the HST is not supposed to come into effect until April first, right? Well, I have a phone bill right in front of me dated March 4th with the three taxes right on it. The GST seven per cent, the HST 15 per cent and the provincial sales tax 12 per cent. The three of them are on the phone bill.

Rowe: (Laughs) But the HST is supposed to be a combination of the GST and the PST. What's the price after the HST?

Steve: It's only 35 cents, but I mean if 100,000 people pay 35 cents . . .

Rowe: But why would there be anything, that's the question. Steve, you have it right there in front of you so we're trusting you to give us accurate

information. What's the amount of the phone bill?

A perplexed Rowe and his caller spend a moment trying to figure out what the "HST" is on the phone bill. A suspicious Steve thinks "the government is doing one thing and the big companies are doing another." Rowe dodges that hot potato, and jokes that you need degrees in tax law and tax accounting to understand the HST changes. He agrees the new tax is not supposed to come into effect until April 1. The very next call the mystery is solved. There's no big business conspiracy after all.

Rowe: Good morning, Karen

Karen: Good morning. The reason the guy that just called in is paying HST is because you pay HST on your basic service in advance. So he's paying for four or five days in April.

Rowe: Right on, Karen.

Karen: And if anyone gets a cable bill in the next few days, they'll be paying HST in advance as well.

Rowe: Thanks for your views. It's great to get people like yourself calling in with different slants on this harmonized sales tax because it allows us all to get a better grip on what in the name of God is goin' on here, because a lot of people, myself included, aren't completely on top of this.

The rest of the program is a series of first-hand accounts of the issues of the day — political policy in personal terms: a public meeting to protest the proposed ban on using firearms within St. John's city limits; a conflict of interest reported in demolition work at the Voisey's Bay site; the Opposition Leader's chief of policy says she's listening for comments about the controversial privatization of provincial parks, because "the people make the policy." Ed consults his copy of the Atlantic Accord to straighten out Newfoundland's right to process its resources like Hibernia oil. Max, whose three-week

job cutting a snowmobile trail near the Meaney Mountains has been cut short by a court injunction granted to the Innu, finds it odd the Innu claim to want to retain their traditional culture when he has seen them flying into their hunting grounds in helicopters.⁶³

The talk show discussion is only one source listeners use to make up their minds on an issue, and it doesn't happen suddenly. "It's a long, slow process, a gradual shifting of gears," says Green at CFRA, who has founded the lobby group "Canada First" for those already committed to the ideals of personal responsibility and government accountability. An annual membership fee of \$39 includes the monthly edition of the Canada First newsletter. "Everybody else has an interest group," says Green, "it's about time the little guy had a voice."⁶⁴ Mair feels the open-line show is the people's "official opposition," where the host and voters examine government proposals and policy, and read between the lines of press releases. "I can tell you that when I was a cabinet member for five years I watched the spin doctors at work. I watched cabinet as they decided, well, we'll release the information at two o'clock on a Friday afternoon when the press corps is either drunk or has gone home. And I know that happens every single day." Getting at the other side of the story, or raising issues the mainstream media miss is the power of talk radio, says Mair, because it gives voters the ability to make informed decisions. "People don't tune in one day and say, 'Oh, if Rafe Mair thinks this then I think this.' When the Charlottetown Accord was voted on, the breakdown in the communities I don't reach was the same as in the areas I do reach. Of course I influence some people, but by and

people make up their own minds.”⁶⁵

Mair’s influence in British Columbia, where a talk radio host’s campaign may receive significant coverage in other media around the province (as both Mair’s constitutional and environmental efforts did) is probably atypical in Canada. Only Rowe at VOCM could match Mair for provincial influence, and he is more a democrat than a demagogue. “I’m not interested in imposing my opinion on anyone,” says Rowe, a self-described very private person who shuns the celebrity status of talk radio host. What he’s interested in is the “consciousness-raising” function of talk radio, the power “to make people more sophisticated, familiar with the issues and more issue-oriented.”⁶⁶ Neither does Charles Adler at CFRB Toronto set out to change any minds, “You have to be highly opinionated, but I don’t see myself as a revolutionary. In that sense I’m very Canadian — I don’t have any grandiosity.”⁶⁷

Highly opinionated hosts may be, but not as far right as the mainstream press portrays them. Mair positions himself as “fiscally conservative” but “a limp-wristed liberal” on social issues.⁶⁸ Lowell Green — “just right of Attila the Hun” in full-page newspaper ads⁶⁹ — is actually pro-choice, pro-gun control, anti-capital punishment, pro-immigration, and not anti-gay. He is a “fiscal conservative very much in favor of accepting individual responsibility,” who once unsuccessfully sought a federal Liberal nomination. Rowe, former leader of Newfoundland’s Liberals, still warns listeners to beware of big business, but bemoans Newfoundlanders reliance on government handouts, and exhorts them to take personal responsibility.⁷⁰ QR77’s Dave Rutherford is unabashedly Tory.⁷¹ Charles Adler is “more of a libertarian,” but cautions that hosts are

liable to exaggerate their political tendencies on air to be more entertaining. “There are very few entertaining and engaging moderate talk shows because the easiest way to light the phone up is to be on the extremes.” Adler suspects that while hosts and callers may appear to be conservative, “most people in both countries are more moderate, and the left just isn’t plugged in to talk radio.”⁷²

What critics forget is that listeners are hearing the callers as well as the host. Even the most intractably conservative host is challenged every day by otherminded callers, some of whom actually occupy the left side of the political spectrum — and that’s how the audience likes it. As Diana Owens’ analysis of the Times Mirror Center’s survey concludes, “callers — even more so than listeners — are driven by a desire to develop a deeper understanding of issues.” Hearing opinions that are different from their own (85 per cent of callers, 69 per cent of listeners) was a much more important reason for tuning in than liking the host (34 per cent, 26 per cent).⁷³ Certainly few listeners agree with the host all the time (only five per cent in Hofstetter’s survey.)⁷⁴

Talk radio listeners do not form their opinions “based on a slavish adherence to the host’s views,” according to Jonathan Tankel, who argues that talk radio is not a communications system where a transmitter (the host) sends a signal to the receiver (the listener) who passively absorbs the message. Listeners are *actively* participating in an ongoing, dynamic process of constructing their own meanings from what they hear on talk radio, in light of their own experience and knowledge.

This conversation is also continuous, as it exists across time, constantly shifting its content and meaning in the never-ending world of broadcasting, and, by extension in each participant’s continuous construction of social

reality.⁷⁵

The conversation on talk radio is never over, the topic may come up again on other days, and listeners are constantly updating their opinions from what they read and hear elsewhere, around the water cooler or around the dinner table. We are long past the “Magic Bullet” Theory. (This writer can’t be the only listener who argues out loud with the host or caller in the privacy of home or car.) Limbaugh, for instance, did not *create* 20 million “dittoheads,” he skillfully tapped into an audience that was already there — the people who feel unrepresented by mainstream media and cynical about politics as it is played. This audience uses talk radio as a “public sphere,” exchanging, validating or rejecting information drawn from all sources, modifying their opinions based on what’s heard, then taking their conclusions to the political arena itself.

Active and Alert: The Audience

The talk radio audience, by all accounts, is politically active. “Frequent listeners are more interested in politics, pay more attention to politics in mass media, vote more, and participate more than others in a variety of political activities,”⁷⁶ whether followers of Limbaugh or more liberal hosts.⁷⁷ Callers participate more than listeners “in letter writing, attending public meetings, contributing to political organizations and candidates, joining political organizations, and registering their opinions.” Listeners engage in these activities more than nonlisteners, but the difference is not so stark.⁷⁸ Hollander suggests that this personal sense of political efficacy combined with less trust in government has empowered the talk radio audience with the sense that not only is change necessary, it is

possible.⁷⁹ Countering suggestions that talk radio is the province of extreme right-wing militia groups, Owens points out that cynicism and distrust of the government may be at record highs, but the “good citizens” of talk radio “are generally willing to work within boundaries established by the very institutions they decry.”⁸⁰ The Media Studies Center sees things differently: the talk radio audience is “a powerful, elite audience — white, male, Republican and well-off,” and is politically more active than the general public “perhaps because they have so much at stake in the system.”⁸¹ It’s as if a huge vacuum existed which talk radio was happy to fill. Hacker argues that Americans are not so much alienated as “disconnected,” an assumption he makes based on a 1991 study by the Kettering Foundation.

Americans perceived Washington as a place run by a professional political class, comprised of politicians, lobbyists and journalists. This class does not work for them as much as for interest groups with lots of money. The research also indicated that these people wanted to change all of this by adding more integrity to public discourse and more public input into discussions about policy issues.⁸²

Once again, we must make some assumptions about the Canadian talk radio audience because these surveys are all American. But given the results of recent polls, it would not be a stretch.

The 1996 year-end Maclean’s-CBC News poll warns that Canadians have become “borderline nihilists” in the words of pollster Allan Gregg of The Strategic Counsel Inc. Few Canadians have any confidence in politicians, or politics. Asked which federal party has concrete solutions to the nation’s major problems, a pessimistic 76 per cent of respondents said, “None.”

There is no patience with partisanship, and many people think the real opposition to government comes from other outlets like volunteer organizations, lobby groups and just about anyone other than those on the opposition benches.⁸³

An April 1997 Globe and Mail Environics poll shows Canadians not only lack confidence in government, they lack trust. Asked whether the Liberal government had done a good job keeping their 1993 campaign promises, a resounding 73 per cent said no, and 53 per cent don't even think the government is honest.⁸⁴

Whether the Canadian talk radio audience has translated mistrust into political action we can only infer from the tens of thousands of people mobilized in public demonstrations, the dollars collected for disaster relief, and the number of calls tallied by government offices.

It's March 17, 1997 on the Lowell Green Show, and Lowell and his callers are in a frenzy at the chance to terminate the Bloc Quebecois as Canada's Official Opposition. The Reform Party now has the same number of seats as the Bloc. Preston Manning could be named Opposition Leader. Fran — a regular listener — calls in.

Fran: We've acquiesced to every whim and whine, it's time the federal government stood up and did something. I've been very busy. I'm in bed with bronchitis but my phone works fine. I phoned the PM's office, I phoned PC Headquarters, I phoned Mr. Manning, I phoned the NDP headquarters and I phoned my MP.

Lowell: Good for you.

Fran: I registered my disapproval and the fact that they better do something now while they have the chance, because they have to change the Official Opposition. We cannot have a party that wants to destroy Canada officially representing Canadians. Our tax money is giving them wonderful benefits,

wonderful perks. I resent my tax money going to stuff like that.

Lowell: If you from your sick bed could take that time and energy, maybe there's some hope for us. Thank you very much. Now get some rest.

In the hour specifically devoted to the topic of ousting the Bloc as the Official Opposition — a long-standing irritant to callers, who use adjectives like treasonous and seditious — most of the callers say they have been in touch with one or another government representative.⁸⁵

Some talk radio hosts, like Green, actively exhort their listeners to pressure politicians en masse. Others like Rowe refuse to mount any specific campaigns to “give a minister the gears,” but still urge the audience to be politically active. The Open Line host expects a caller with a beef to get in touch with the politician responsible for it, then report back to the program. “I tell people that democracy isn’t just electing a bunch of idiots and sticking them up on the hill. Democracy consists of keeping them on their guard.”⁸⁶

Listening In: How Talk Radio Sets Political Agendas

Politicians may hate to admit it, but they do listen to talk radio. All hosts claim their shows are monitored by politicians’ offices, but Rowe says he has been told by Newfoundland MP George Baker he saw transcripts of Open Line on the Prime Minister’s desk.⁸⁷

Most of talk radio’s influence may be in setting the political agenda, rather than pressing a particular cause. “Talk radio does have an influence on the agenda by

osmosis,” says Tom Van Dusen, the national media director of the Progressive Conservative Party of Canada, who says he listens to Green’s open-line if he is in the car in the morning. “If Tory organizers or staffers hear something it might percolate through to influence policy eventually.” Gun control, for instance, “has been kicked around on every talk show across the country and that has permeated PC party policy.”⁸⁸ The party platform now states that a PC government would repeal Bill C-68, in favor of a law that “does not treat law-abiding gun owners as criminals.”⁸⁹

The PC party may have amended its platform to fit what is perceived to be a conservative constituency, certainly callers are more conservative than listeners, but talk radio may also reflect what the general public is thinking. Northwestern University political science professor Benjamin Page documents the case of U.S. attorney-general nominee Zoe Baird, who was forced to withdraw in January 1993 by a tide of outrage on talk radio. Politicians and the mainstream media completely misjudged public reaction, supporting her nomination despite her admission of hiring illegal aliens and not paying their Social Security taxes. While talk radio audiences tend to be male, older and conservative, talk hosts reported angry calls on the Baird nomination from all kinds of people: young and old, conservative and liberal, and an unusually high number of women. A Gallup poll found that more than half thought the Baird controversy was a major concern.

Our point is not that the phone callers constituted a random sample of the public (they were almost certainly more knowledgeable, more negative and more intense than the general population), but that they voiced the values of average Americans more accurately than did the elite consensus of the time.⁹⁰

It is difficult to separate out the impact of talk radio from other media. Certainly many more people watch the evening television news than ever listen to talk radio. Van Dusen believes the press makes more impact, “The Ottawa Citizen has a circulation of 160,000 readers. If every paper is read by three people that’s nearly half a million. Lowell Green doesn’t have that many listeners.” And the printed word is more permanent, “It sits there and haunts you forever.” Nevertheless, getting the party’s message out to voters via talk radio is “relatively useful,” says Van Dusen. “These people all vote, so we don’t want to overlook them. We want to reach them.”⁹¹

Reaching them can be risky: talk radio is treacherous territory. Former prime minister Kim Campbell’s ratings soared after she appeared on a super-talkshow connecting eight hosts across the country just a few days before the 1993 election was called. Talking directly to voters as Clinton had in the ’92 presidential campaign, Campbell appeared approachable and human.⁹² Campbell began to lose the election, however, after she told a Toronto talk radio host she didn’t know the price of a litre of milk. The fact that the country’s leader was so out of touch with the reality of the average voter got national coverage in the news media.⁹³ Small wonder that politicians prefer to be in control on their own stage at an all-candidates meeting, without confronting a talk radio host. But Van Dusen warns that refusing to appear on a talk program may backfire. “You make yourself look twitchy and scared. None of the talk show hosts are shrinking violets, and if you don’t go on their shows they tend to blast you. They’ll call you cowardly for not facing the music.”⁹⁴

No political party in Canada is as anxious to “face the music” as the Reform party. In

Reform's strategy to get connected directly to the people via public meetings, newsletters, phone campaigns, the first and most elaborate political website on the 'net, and the promise of national referenda on major issues, talk radio is an end-run around the mainstream media. As Ontario MP ED Harper puts it, "Ignore the media. The media was against us in the last [1993] election. We still won 52 seats, and got a million votes in Ontario."⁹⁵ Talk radio is easier to access than the mainstream media, according to Maureen McGrath, national media boss for Reform, "MP's can call in from home, their cars even the cottage." Reform is the only party to actively seek out the talk radio forum, calling radio stations and offering MP's as guests. "Some shows and hosts are very co-operative," says McGrath, "others are hard to get on because they don't want politicians, they just want listeners."⁹⁶ A politician can still participate from outside the studio by calling in, as Reform MP Daphne Jennings (Mission-Coquitlam) did when the Lowell Green Show was discussing Bill C-41, the divorce bill. Reform also connects to open-lines through the fax machine. When Green was ranting about the \$1.2 billion the Liberal government gave to Bombardier in Quebec, "Look what was faxed to me, all the evidence on the grants and the TAGS program," says Green, "It came from Frank Hall, research and communications of the Reform party."⁹⁷

Government backbenchers use talk radio to boost their public profiles. Liberal MPs Ted McWhinney (Vancouver-Quadra), Dan McTeague (Ontario) and Independent MP John Nunziata have all used talk radio to distinguish themselves from the pack. Nunziata credits talk radio appearances across the country for pushing his crime bill denying early parole to murderers. "I urged people to call their MPs, and later MPs came up to me saying

their offices were swamped with calls,” Nunziata told the Hill Times.⁹⁸ Touting his opposition to the GST on talk radio raised Nunziata’s public profile so high that he was ousted from the Liberal caucus.

The federal politicians least likely to appear on talk radio are cabinet ministers. They may call in spontaneously, as former defence minister David Collenette once did to a Lowell Green open-line on DND spending. But cabinet ministers are usually reluctant to confront a talk radio host in the studio — especially Rafe Mair. The Prime Minister has never appeared on Mair’s open-line, and never will, according to the host. “He knows that the listeners and I will ask questions that he doesn’t want to answer. The more this happens the more remote government gets from the people, the angrier the people get. People are very disengaged from government.” One might forgive cabinet ministers’ reluctance to appear in this particular forum. Kim Campbell is said to have left his program in tears (Mair denies the tears, but admits she was upset) and Revenue Minister David Anderson’s appearance ended in a shouting match (Mair admits it was ‘heated’).⁹⁹

A cabinet minister daring to confront voters enjoys a more hospitable reception on CBC’s Cross Country Checkup, as Finance Minister Paul Martin did on Feb. 23, 1997. Martin calls talk radio a reality check, “If I’m giving a speech to an audience, I only reach the people in the room, but if I’m talking on the air I can reach a much bigger audience and it’s more immediate. They don’t have to see it in the press.”¹⁰⁰ The rare occasion when a high-ranking politician appears on talk radio, the lines are always jammed. People want answers, they want access. Phoning, faxing, and e-mailing politicians has its place, but talk radio is interactive — you get an answer right away.

Rex Murphy: Our next caller is David Orchard from Saskatoon, Good afternoon. Do you have a question for the minister?

Orchard: Yes, I do. Mr. Martin you campaigned against the Conservative policies in 1993. In the Red Book you said that you would end the Conservatives' obsession with the federal deficit. In power you have escalated that obsession, you have the national government withdrawing from every sphere, cutting, privatizing, you've sold off CN Rail, it's now 70 per cent U.S. owned . . .

Orchard's question goes on for one minute and 14 seconds — longer than Lowell Green may give to an entire call — and the 'question' turns into a political statement that sounds much like the anti-NAFTA, anti-banks, anti-Liberal, anti-Conservative platform of the New Democratic Party. Finally:

Orchard: How do you and your government justify becoming Mulroneytes? We threw Mulroney out.

Martin: Well, Mr. Orchard, it's been a while since I've heard you talk. The fact of the matter is, of course, that we have not become Mulroneytes. When we took office the Mulroney government told us the deficit was going to be \$32 billion and it could easily disappear within a relatively short period of time. What we found, of course, was that the deficit was 25 per cent higher, it was \$42 billion . . .

The Finance Minister concludes his response, Orchard is allowed a follow-up question, and neither agrees with the other's "facts" on economic sovereignty (Martin says you can't have it without cutting the deficit, Orchard says you can't have it without getting rid of NAFTA) or deficit-cutting strategies (Martin claims banks are more highly-taxed in Canada than anywhere else, Orchard claims the government is dumping the burden on "the people of the country who are least able to pay it").

Murphy: Our next caller is Alison McConnell from Prince George. Good afternoon.

McConnell: Good afternoon. Yes, Mr. Martin, I'm concerned about the increase in the CPP contribution. As a middle class Canadian, if I could come up with an extra \$600 a year I'd put it into an RRSP, get a tax refund and watch it grow an average of say six per cent compound interest over 30 years. I'm 36 years old and I don't believe, as do many of my friends, that I will ever see a Canada Pension Plan. How will you guarantee that I will?¹⁰¹

Putting the public in touch with politicians and other experts “face-to-face” is supposed to be one of the most critical aspects of talk radio. According to Herbst, “[O]nly call-in programs give citizens — who have no particular expertise or training — the opportunity to engage in mass dialogue about public affairs. Besides the inchoate Internet system, there are few such opportunities in a highly rationalized political sphere.”¹⁰² Most of the callers on Cross Country Checkup quizzing the finance minister, however, do not sound as if they lack expertise. They sound, as Tom Van Dusen warns, as if they are politically partisan plants. Stacking the phone lines with workers “to get their message through and embarrass the guest” is normal procedure when an MP or candidate is scheduled for an open-line appearance, says the PC's media director. “I don't know of a single instance where that hasn't happened. Hosts always say they can control it, but they can't. The seven-second delay screens out crazies, but not politicians.” The best you can hope for, says Van Dusen, is that “20 of 30 of the calls are from your people. It's not democratic, it's an orchestrated situation.”¹⁰³

This raises a critical challenge to democracy. As Hacker — citing political scientist Ian Shapiro — points out, experts cannot be allowed to monopolize decision-making, they must be required to explain their analyses in non-technical terms. Hacker, like Hutchby (Chapter 3) uses the courtroom metaphor to explain.

If a culture does not allow final courtroom evaluations of guilt or innocence to rest with psychiatrists, fingerprint specialists, forensics experts or lie-detector technicians, it should not allow domestic and foreign policy experts to make policies immune from public deliberation. A theory of democracy incorporates assumptions of the need for mechanisms that ensure public sovereignty (such as the jury system).¹⁰⁴

Is talk radio the jury system of democracy? Bolce et al suggest it's at least a *vox populi*, another monitor of the political system besides journalists and social scientists, a "growing and suspicious public" which now has to be factored into the political system, if only as a "new political type."¹⁰⁵ Owens cautions that talk radio is only as legitimate as the politicians who appear on it and respond to its opinions, "Once leaders stop taking talk shows seriously, their influence will abate very quickly."¹⁰⁶ Page and Tannenbaum warn that talk radio is not an "ideal case of public argument and reasoning among equal citizens" as Habermas would wish, it is a "blunt instrument" of populist determination, but one that is important for "enlarging the scope of conflict" on which democratic decisions are made.¹⁰⁷ Herbst agrees "it would be naive to think that they [talk radio broadcasts] will bring us true participatory democracy. But the *potential* for unstructured discussion is far greater here than in conventional media."¹⁰⁸

Talk radio, if not the utopia of participatory democracy, at least gives citizens a direct line they didn't have before. As listeners become more sophisticated about its construction — protesting political party members stacking the phone lines to a cabinet minister, for instance — the discussion will become more democratic. In the meantime, it is an important forum for people who have felt excluded from the political process.

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Summary and Conclusions

Only 12 per cent of the listening public is tuned into talk radio talking politics, which seems like a smallish crowd, until you consider that only one-quarter of the population, according to one study, ever talk politics at all.¹ Without exaggerating its importance, talk radio does offer some distinct advantages in a world where the public sphere has been closed off to the general public, and Canadian politics is contemplating several nasty developments that have limited American political discourse.

U.S. political campaigning is not only dreadfully expensive, but dangerous, apparently. As Tom Axworthy counts it, a would-be U.S. Senator would have to raise \$15,000 per week for six years to fund a campaign, a campaign run by very expensive professionals. “The mass party, dependent on an organization or even an army of volunteers to bring out the vote, has been displaced — if not replaced — by the direct-mail wizardry of the pollster, advertising executive and campaign consultant.”² Television advertising and direct mail or e-mail are now the central elements of campaign discourse, aimed at narrowly targeted audiences, and that’s the danger. “The U.S. experience has shown that smear campaigns through direct mail are possible because the check of public discourse has been bypassed,” warns Frederick Fletcher, for two years a research co-ordinator with the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing.³

Canadians would do well to pay attention because U.S. campaign strategies usually take only about five years to leak over into this country. In that light, talk radio has an important appeal. It is a cheap and easy medium, available almost everywhere in Canada,

at nearly every time of day — whether on radio, television or the internet. Talk radio is the most expensive format to produce on radio, but certainly much less expensive than an electronic town hall on television. And talk radio is out in the open, broadcast to all who care to tune in.

But how long the public sphere of talk radio will survive is unclear. The ironic convergence of financial, demographic and technological factors that ignited talk radio's growth isn't permanent. If the economy livens up, work habits or workplaces change, or technology finds something new to promote, AM radio may make a better deal elsewhere. For example, if the long-awaited digital radio transmission ever gets on the airwaves, AM radio will be on equal footing with FM, providing CD-quality sound, and multi-media capability right on the dashboard.

Because talk radio is an oppositional public sphere, if there is little to protest, then there is little to talk about. Long ago, Ron Faris thought that the lack of social action projects contributed to the eventual disinterest in the Forum programs. If talk radio doesn't have a 'project' — like correcting the excesses of an overly-generous welfare state, getting the right government in power — it loses energy. In the eighties in those parts of the country like Toronto, the forum faded when the good times were rolling. On the other hand, as Steve Madely at CFRA points out, when a hot news story is developing — a federal election, or a flood in Manitoba — the ratings are hot too.⁴

The winds of change are blowing to the right, in the words of David Taras, so talk radio's function as a protest medium may become superfluous as other media become more conservative. Conrad Black's Hollinger Inc. now owns 43 per cent of all newspaper

circulation in Canada, and the Toronto Sun Publishing adds another 11 per cent (more now that the company has bought the London Free Press) to the conservative total. Taras believes the ascendancy of conservative thought is no accident, but a deliberate buttressing of a right-wing information infrastructure through “think tanks such as the Fraser and C.D. Howe Institutes, the conservative ideological tilt and corporate boosterism of Canadian newspapers, and the rise of right-wing talk radio.” Conservative pundits and columnists are all over the TV screen, courtesy of CBC and Newsworld as the networks try to offset their left-wing reputations. Taras points out that the appearance of talk radio hosts as experts on television panels may increase their credibility.⁵ An academic analysis of talk radio hosts’ influence on public opinion in this country would help to establish talk radio’s particular place in political discourse. The Lortie Commission, for instance, concludes that the most persuasive model for two-way election campaign communication is the phone-in show, especially for discussions of local issues.⁶

Certainly, neither talk radio nor the Internet is a substitute for mainstream news coverage and analysis. As Michael Schudson emphasizes, interactive media and teledemocracy lack what journalism provides — constant scrutiny and follow-up.⁷ Former Prime Minister Kim Campbell’s gaffe on a Toronto talk radio program, for example, would have been less damaging had not the media told the entire country she didn’t know the price of a litre of milk. But the remarkable rise of talk radio in Canada should at least remind journalists that the callers and the listeners are *there* because they felt excluded from an exclusive political-journalistic coalition. If there is a lesson to be

learned from the popularity of interactive media, says James Carey, it is that journalism should be conceived less on the model of information and more on the model of conversation. "Journalists are merely part of the conversation of . . . culture; a partner with the rest of the public — no more no less. This is a humble role for journalism, but in fact what we need is a humble journalism."⁸ The public doesn't want to sit in the stands and watch anymore, it wants into the game.

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