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**Engaging Voices or Talking to Air? A Study of Alternative and  
Community Radio Audience in the Digital Era**

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**Engaging Voices or Talking to Air? A Study of Alternative and  
Community Radio Audience in the Digital Era**

**by**

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## **Dedication**

I dedicate this dissertation to my parents.

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# **Engaging Voices or Talking to Air? A Study of Alternative and Community Radio Audience in the Digital Era**

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2014

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In November 2012, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) announced the implementation of the Local Community Radio Act of 2010, which marks the largest expansion of community radio stations in U.S. history. The act responds to the decade-long community radio movement in which many civilian groups advocated that community radio—an “old-fashioned” yet affordable public medium—still plays a significant role in fostering the expression of diverse voices and citizen participation in this digital era. Despite the successful advocacy effort in the policy-making arena, the real impact of community radio remains a question. Who listens to and participates in community radio? Does the connection between *community* radio and *community* exist? This dissertation investigates audience interaction and participation in the U.S. community radio sector, seeking to empirically and theoretically advance audience research in community radio and alternative media in general.

Methodologically, this dissertation is based on case studies from two community radio stations KOOP and KPFT in Texas through multiple methods including 5-year ethnographic fieldwork, in-depth interviews with 70 individuals including staff,

programmers and listeners, a web-based listener survey with 131 respondents, and a textual analysis of producer-audience communication platforms such as blogs and social networking sites.

The results demonstrate the limitations of audience interaction and participation caused by resource constraints and community radio programmers' tendency to speak with themselves. Therefore, I recommend that community radio broadcasters should consider developing systemic approaches to evaluate and facilitate audience participation, which requires an understanding that the value of community engagement lies beyond audience size or the amount of listener donations.

This dissertation concludes that community radio remains relevant in this digital era. This affordable and accessible form of alternative media to some extent bridges a digital divide. The medium also facilitates the development of a genuine relationship between radio programmers and listeners, thus the formation of virtual and real communities. These are the very elements that make meaningful dialogues possible in any communication environment.



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## Chapter 1: Introduction

In various socio-cultural contexts around the world, alternative media<sup>1</sup> commit to providing content that contests the hegemonic discourses and are organized to give voice to those ignored or marginalized (e.g., Atton, 2007; Couldry & Curran, 2003; Downing, 2001). From the 1776 pre-revolutionary publication of Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* in the United States (Armstrong, 1981) to the citizens' video projects in Latin American countries (Rodriguez, 2001); from the community radio stations in post-apartheid South Africa (Olorunnisola, 2002) to the global-scaled grassroots independent media network Indymedia (Kidd, 2003; Sullivan, Spicer, & Bohm, 2011), alternative media play a significant role in advancing justice and equity in different societies.

Considering the importance of such media practices, research on alternative media burgeoned in recent years (Atton, 2007). However, most scholars focused on media content and the production process, leaving the audience—a crucial dimension of communication—understudied. As Downing (2003) states, the audiences of alternative media are “the absent lure of the virtually unknown” (p. 625). Moreover, despite the fact that the media environment experienced dramatic changes over the past decade, few studies investigated the audiences of alternative media against the backdrop of the transforming mediascape, a gap this dissertation seeks to narrow.

In fact, thanks to the unprecedented interactive capabilities the emerging communication technologies bring about, the understanding of media audiences in the discourse of mainstream and corporate media experiences significant transformation. As Napoli (2011) suggests, audience autonomy is one central characteristic of this ongoing

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<sup>1</sup> This dissertation uses “alternative media” as an umbrella term to encompass a variety of media concepts such as community media, citizens' media, progressive media, radical media, etc.

audience evolution. Individuals no longer receive news and information passively, but may actively interact with the news media and even report news themselves. Considering the widespread user-generated content, particularly the rise of citizen journalism, many scholars argue that the boundary between media content providers and receivers has been blurred in this digital era (e.g., Cover, 2006; Rosen, 2008).

However, within the wall of corporate media organizations, while audience members are able to contribute content, news editors (often referred to as “gatekeepers”) still make the final decision on what news to include and how to frame it (e.g, Metykova, 2008; Robinson, 2010). User-generated content is still considered as a type of audience activity, with citizen journalists at best a celebration of active audience (Carpentier, 2011). In other words, the hierarchical power relationship between mainstream media professionals and audiences remains little challenged.

On the other hand, in the field of alternative media, the roles of media producers and audiences were considered intertwined even before the emergence of various interactive communication technologies. For alternative media scholars, ideally, the boundary between producers and audiences should be truly deconstructed to the point that producers and audiences collectively construct social realities (e.g., Atton, 2002; Downing, 2001). This conceptualization is enlightening, but few scholars have systematically theorized audience interaction and participation in alternative media practices. Little empirical evidence of producer-audience interaction can be found in the literature. In the context of this digital era, it also remains a question whether the transforming communication technologies further facilitate the communication process.



The first goal of this dissertation is to theorize audience interaction and participation in alternative media. I define alternative media as either content-oriented or participation-oriented based on theories of hegemony and post-hegemony. I then construct a normative model of producer-audience relationship and interaction within each category. As a contribution to the literature, the study seeks to provide insights into how alternative media can theoretically contribute to a more democratic society from the standpoint of audience participation. Chapter 2 details the theoretical framework of this dissertation.

An equally important objective of the research is to empirically scrutinize whether the proposed model of audience interaction and participation is reflected in actuality. In particular, this dissertation focuses on a traditional alternative media platform—community radio in the context of the United States.

The United States enjoys a long and rich history of alternative and independent media. Its founding began as early as the country's first independent newspaper from Britain *The Boston Gazette* (1719-1798). Abolitionist press of 1830s to 1860s and underground newspapers during the civil rights movement of the 1960s added new spurt to the history (Armstrong, 1981). Nowadays, alternative media of various types (e.g., newspaper, radio, public-access television, online magazine, website, etc.) provide the U.S. public with information and opinions underreported in the corporate news media and the media as a whole exert significant impact on the society.

Radio started to provide a “new” form of alternative media back in 1949 when the first community radio station Pacifica Radio (KPFA) went on air in Berkeley, California. In its early years, opponents to the Korean War were among the many minority

viewpoints given freedom of speech on Pacifica during the McCarthy era (Pacifica Foundation Radio, n.d.). The community radio sector began to grow rapidly in the 1960s and 1970s and it has become one of the most important alternative media outlets in the country. Boasting a 70-year record, community radio enriches the U.S communication system by broadcasting content less likely to be heard in the mainstream media and by facilitating public access and participation in media production (Barlow, 1988; Cammaerts, 2009). Today, there are about 200 self-claimed community radio stations across the country<sup>2</sup> according to Wikipedia (Category: Community radio stations in the United States, n.d.). These community radio stations range from low-power radio with signals covering three to five miles to full-power stations reaching audience as wide as some commercial radio.

This dissertation focuses on the investigation of community radio because it presents a unique case of “old-fashioned” alternative media in this digital era. Consider first two other traditional alternative media outlets: alternative newsweeklies and community-access television. According to the recent State of the News Media reports (e.g., Anderson, Guskin, & Jurkowitz, 2013; Anderson, Guskin, & Rosenstiel, 2012), the circulation of alternative weeklies continued to shrink over the last decade. This observation is accompanied by the trend that a dozen of reputable alternative newspapers such as *The Boston Phoenix* ceased publications and some others became part of a press chain and less alternative. On the other hand, more than 100 PEG (Public, Educational

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<sup>2</sup> There is no solid data about the number of community radio stations in the United States. According to the FCC, there are a total of 4,345 full-service radio stations categorized as “non-commercial educational” and 798 low-power FM radio stations, which are also for non-commercial educational purposes but broadcast with a much weaker signal (FCC Encyclopedia, n.d.). These radio stations include college radio, religious radio or other educational radio stations that are only accessible to one particular community. This dissertation focuses on public-accessible community radio stations.

and Governmental) access television centers, which include a number of community access television channels, have closed since 2005 and many others are threatened by severe funding cuts (Goldfarb, 2011). Most of the remaining alternative weeklies and community-access television centers resort to the digitalization of traditional media platforms in order to survive and remain relevant in this digital age.

Unlike alternative newsweeklies and community-access television, community radio is in fact witnessing its largest expansion in U.S. history. After a decade-long struggle between community radio advocates and corporate obstruction, the Federal Communication Commission (FCC) finally passed the Local Community Radio Act of 2010 and then announced the implementation of the act in November 2012. This historical decision opened airwaves for hundreds of new low-power community radio stations across the country (Yu & Renderos, 2013). As a number of grassroots civilian groups advocate, community radio is still largely needed in this digital age because it remains the most accessible and affordable communication tool for both producers and listeners—especially those from marginalized communities, and because it continues as local, non-profit, and independent of any external institutions (e.g., Common Dreams staff, 2012; Promesthus Radio Project, n.d.).

Despite the successful advocacy effort in the policy-making arena, the impact of community radio on different communities and the general public remains understudied. Research shows that a substantial number of low-power community radio stations do not have any way of tracking audience (Goetz, 2006). What is worse, many low-power community radio broadcasters are even not sure whether anybody listens (Conti, 2011).

The bond between community radio programmers and audience, one of the central characteristics of community radio, seems weak in reality.

The situation appears not too much better with respect to community radio stations with a stronger signal. WBAI, the New York branch of the Pacifica Foundation Radio network, enjoys a much wider geographic reach for listeners. However, the station laid off two-thirds of its staff in 2013 in order to cover its \$2 million debt. As a listener-supported radio station, WBAI's financial crisis is in part due to a decline of its listenership in recent years (Stuart, 2013).

Cases like the lower-power community radio stations and WBAI appear to contradict the recent FCC decision. While the advocacy groups argue that community radios serve numerous and diverse communities, and the FCC acknowledges the importance of community radios, research reveals the missing link between *community* radio and *community*. These contradicting facts lead to the main question this dissertation seeks to answer: It is true that community radio helps us to tell our stories (Barlow, 1988; Cammaerts, 2009), but to whom?

Given that multiple studies have examined low-power community radio stations, this dissertation sheds light on audience interaction and participation in mid- and large-sized community radio. Specifically, the dissertation investigates two community radio stations in Texas: KOOP, a community radio station in Austin that broadcasts at 3,000 watts; and KPFT, a 100,000-watt full-power community radio station located in Houston and one of the five radio stations within the Pacifica Foundation Radio network. Four programs from each station were selected for case studies.

As far as can be determined, this is one of the first studies that extensively examine audience interaction and participation in community radio from the perspectives from both programmers and listeners. Findings of this research are based on 5-year ethnographic fieldwork, in-depth interviews with 70 individuals including staff, programmers and listeners, a web-based listener survey with 131 respondents, and a textual analysis of producer-audience communication platforms such as blogs and social networking sites. Chapter 3 reviews the research methods and procedures.

Overall, the study finds that most of the community radio broadcasters from the two stations do have a sense of listenership size and characteristics by using multiple communication tools. It is also optimistic to report that producer-audience interaction and community engagement exist in actuality. From the perspective of listeners, they find community radio programs relevant and even more precious in this digital era because they believe it is one of the few places that still broadcast real and trustworthy human voices, and hence community radio creates a form of imagined community as well as a real community.

However, although audience interaction and participation exists, it is limited in various degrees in the eight community radio programs analyzed. While some producers only occasionally interact with their listeners, others find dialogues being established among people who share very similar viewpoints. In addition, a few programs that started with the mission to serve an open, participatory platform only see the conversation take place among a small group of individuals. Across the board is the discovery that the most active listeners and participants of community radio are typically White, fairly well educated, and middle-aged—even though the mission of both community radio stations is

to reach a diverse range of communities. Among other factors, resource constraints including the difficulties in using new communication technologies in part explains the limitation of producer-audience interaction in community radio. After all, the majority of the community radio programmers are unpaid volunteers motivated by altruism. Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 detail the findings of the dissertation.

In addition to providing theoretical and empirical examination on producer-audience interaction in alternative media and specifically in community radio, this dissertation also contributes to the literature in the following aspects.

Findings of this study offer theoretical values to the wider research agenda of media audience studies. The examination of audience in community radio provides a different angle for researchers to reevaluate audience interaction and participation in the field of mainstream media. It also provides “alternative” insights for researchers to revisit some popular concepts such as audience autonomy, citizen journalism, and user-generated content.

Further, with an investigation on the role of digital communication technologies, this dissertation enriches our understanding of how such traditional modes of communication as radio are potentially “going through a revival” (Doogue, 2012) because of the unprecedented opportunities the Internet provides. Theoretically, the availability of all kinds of digital tools such as live radio streaming technologies, audio podcast<sup>3</sup>, and social networking sites enable community radio programmers to better connect with their listeners beyond physical barriers, thus allowing for greater access and participation. This study demonstrates the benefits and, perhaps, more challenges in using

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<sup>3</sup> An audio podcast is a series of digital audio files that are released episodically and often downloaded through web syndication.

digital technologies in this traditional media sector. It also suggests that the existence of community radio in some ways bridges the digital divide in this transforming media environment.

Lastly, the findings and implications of the study about audience are beneficial to alternative media practitioners worldwide, and are especially relevant to community radio broadcasters in the United States. Given that hundreds of community radio stations will start operating in the next few years thanks to the new FCC decision, this study provides timely guidance and advice for both old and new generations of community radio practitioners to better engage their listeners and thus better serve their communities. Chapter 6, the concluding chapter, discusses the theoretical and practical implications of the results for community radio, alternative media, and audience studies in greater length.

## **Chapter 2: Theoretical Background and Literature Review**

This chapter offers a working definition of alternative media based on the theoretical framework of hegemony and post-hegemony. For analytical purposes, this study categorizes alternative media as content-oriented and participation-oriented. For audience research, I argue that producer-audience relationship and interaction is central to the theorization of alternative media audiences. In this light, I propose a normative model of audience interaction and participation for both content-oriented and participation-oriented alternative media. The chapter ends with a literature review of audience participation in the U.S. community radio sector.

### **2.1 MAINSTREAM VERSUS ALTERNATIVE MEDIA**

Because the term “alternative media” is often used to distinguish it from “corporate” or “mainstream media,” this chapter begins by exploring the relationship between the two.

Until about a decade ago, scholars tended to perceive mainstream and alternative media as two contrasting types of print or broadcast media. According to Herbert Gans (1979), mainstream media are those media that uphold “the legitimacy of holders of formal authority as long as they abide by relevant and enduring values” (p. 60). As he summarizes, “In short, when all other things are equal, the news pays most attention to and upholds the actions of elite individuals and elite institutions (p. 61).”

As media moved toward institutions of compressed ownership, they also came to be seen as more in line with corporate interests. Ben Bagdikian (1983) in his classic work *Media Monopoly* warns of this evolution. As Bagdikian notes and as many other scholars argue later (e.g., Herman & Chomsky, 1988; McChesney, 2008), the parent corporation



tends to control the content of its media subsidiary, and thus corporate leaders become hegemonic representatives. In order to maximize profits, such media usually provide news content to target the general, “mainstream” audience members in a given society.

In contrast, alternative media were often defined as oppositional media, which served the interests of marginalized groups ignored or underrepresented in the mainstream media. For example, Downing (1984) considered alternative media as a type of media in strict opposition to mainstream media in aspects of purpose, content, organization, production process and audience.

However, mainstream and alternative media are not necessarily two distinct entities. First, it is apparent that the two words “mainstream” and “alternative” are culturally contingent. Media widely considered mainstream in a certain time and space could be perceived as alternative in another context. Thus, Atton (2002) approaches alternative media from the perspective of “mixed radicalism,” avoiding consistent adherence to a pure fixed set of criteria (p. 29). In addition, as Rodriguez (2001) contends, when scholars employ a binary thinking to differentiate between alternative and mainstream media, they some times explicitly or implicitly categorize alternative media as “the powerless” and their opponent (e.g., mainstream and corporate media) as “the powerful.” This binary thinking would result in a static view of alternative media, eventually running the risk of self-marginalization and limiting the media’s potential to or its ability to resist the mainstream media message. Such thinking also tends to presume that all alternative media serve democratic purposes and that all mainstream media seek to maintain the status quo. It is in this sense that Downing (2001) acknowledges that the binarism implied in his earlier work prevented him from taking into account the

possibility of democratizing mainstream media and the variety of alternative media. Further, as the explosion of communication technologies allows a richer diversity of voices to shape media, the boundary between mainstream and alternative media becomes even more blurred.

In this light, Kenix (2011) rightly conceptualizes a converging media spectrum, listing a number of areas that mainstream and alternative media could intertwine in different socio-cultural contexts. While I too prefer a model of a converging media spectrum, for the purpose of this dissertation I also seek to provide a more specific working definition of alternative media.

In this dissertation, alternative media are defined from two perspectives—content and participation—based on the theoretical framework of hegemony and post-hegemony. I consider a media project as alternative media when it provides content that questions the dominant hegemonic articulations and articulates and rearticulates alternative points of view. From the standpoint of participation, I also define alternative media as those that are intentionally organized for marginalized communities to participate and to challenge the media hegemony.

## **2.2 HEGEMONY AND POST-HEGEMONY**

### **2.2.1 Ideology, Hegemony and Hegemonic Articulation**

Antonio Gramsci argues that while ideology advances a system of ideas for individuals to make sense of the world, hegemony is a form of ideological control (Gramsci, 1988). The dominant class or other decision-making groups tend to exclusively promote their own values as “common sense” norms and as values of all members in the society, thus socializing people to consent.

As noted earlier, mainstream news media have long been considered as an important arena through which the major institutions, market forces, or other decision-making groups exert ideological pressures on ordinary people (e.g., Bagdikian, 1983, 1983; Herman & Chomsky, 1988; McChesney, 2008). Hegemonic ideologies can be “encoded” into media texts, possibly marginalizing and subordinating groups in terms of their gender, race, class, nationality or other social categories (Hall, 1986). Laclau and Mouffe (1985) term this process as “hegemonic articulation,” suggesting that news media “articulate” such ideological controls as if they are real and natural. For example, when some news media recurrently portray women as subordinated to men, they “articulate” an unequal gender relationship as if it is a fact of essential gender difference.

In response, activists, dissidents, intellectuals or many other groups of people in society seek to expose and contest the hegemonic articulations prevalent in the mainstream news media and other distributed discourses. Alternative media provide a discursive platform for such contestations (Downing, 2001; Fuchs, 2010).

### **2.2.2 Alternative Hegemony?**

In addition to contestations, equally as important is to advance an alternative vision of the society. To Gramsci, ideology per se is not necessarily negative. In fact, marginalized communities can construct their own ideologies and wage a “war of position” in the ideological terrain. In other words, Gramsci suggests the possibility to build an “alternative hegemony.”

In Gramsci’s conceptualization, building an alternative hegemony is a process of “researching after new truths and better, more coherent, clearer formulations of the truth” (Gramsci, 1988, p. 341). “Organic intellectuals” are the leaders of this movement.

Gramsci uses the term “organic” in the sense that these people develop new philosophies through contacts with the general marginalized population. Notably, what distinguishes this new philosophy from the old, dominant hegemony is that the former—the “philosophy of praxis”—does not project its ideals upon individuals starting from a scratch to build a system of thoughts. Rather, “organic intellectuals” frequently communicate the philosophy with the ones they reach, and remind them that everyone is a philosopher for whom criticism is an existing activity.

As I will argue later, Gramsci’s discussion of “organic intellectuals” provides helpful guidance in constructing a normative model of audience interaction in alternative media. The producer-audience communication makes an “alternative hegemony” more democratic than the established one. Still, Gramsci’s theorization about alternative hegemony is problematic in several aspects.

### **2.2.3 A Poststructuralist Criticism of Alternative Hegemony**

The concept “alternative hegemony” warrants careful consideration. A poststructuralist criticism to the Marxist/Gramscian tradition of hegemony focuses on its assumption of a Platonist truth and a better articulation of reality by a particular group of people. As Gramsci implies, while the bourgeois class in his era provided a self-serving version of reality, he believes that the working class is able to develop a holistic new truth. He describes the revolution to achieve an alternative hegemony:

This revolution...presupposes the formation of a new set of standards, a new psychology, new ways of feeling, thinking and living that must be specific to the working class, that must be created by it, that will become “dominant” when the working class becomes the dominant class (Gramsci & Forgacs, 2000, p. 70).

From a poststructuralist perspective, this approach of “alternative hegemony” could be harmful to alternative media projects. If we prioritize the ideology articulated by one marginalized group of people (e.g., the working class), the ideology constructed by the dominant group (e.g., the bourgeois class) then becomes “Othered.” Simply put, “there is no possibility of complete inclusion, because in order to create a hegemonic order, there is always something [that] needs to be *oppressed*” (Carpentier & Cammaerts, 2006, p. 4, italics added). Even when one group establishes a new hegemony, the suppressor-suppressed model still exists.

Therefore, some poststructuralists reject the existence of *the* reality, thus rejecting any ideology that claims to be the *true* representation of reality. Rather than creating an alternative hegemony, one poststructuralist approach is to overturn the hegemonic system per se.

Indeed, poststructuralist critiques do provide some helpful insights into the conceptualization of hegemony, but their solution threatens a dead end. A poststructuralist approach could render the whole system weightless, leaving “subaltern groups without a secure footing from which to launch any political actions” (Leonard, 2005, p. 150). Further, an irresponsible poststructuralist understanding of social realities would risk ignoring social categories such as class and race as lived and material experiences, which might even turn out to perpetuate the ideologies of racial colorblindness and neoliberalism (Flores & Moon, 2002; Lacy & Ono, 2011).

The resulting theoretical dilemma emerges that, on the one hand, a determined political position would risk becoming an echo of the existing hegemonic system; on the

other, a poststructuralist take could disrupt all kinds of power relations, rendering a helpless political vacuum.

#### **2.2.4 New Political Spaces**

To solve the aforementioned dilemma, Laclau and Mouffe (1985) helpfully develop a new political space. They suggest it impossible to disrupt the entire hegemonic system. To them, no society operates without power relations, and some forms of hegemonic order are more democratic than others (Carpentier & Cammaerts, 2006).

In particular, Gramsci does suggest a more transparent and democratic hegemonic order. To reiterate, Gramsci argues that building an alternative hegemony is an ongoing process, which should be subject to the constant communication between organic intellectuals and the constituency they speak to. However, as discussed earlier, Gramsci problematically prioritizes the ideas advanced by one particular social group, the working class, and assumes this particular group's vision could represent an ultimate truth.

To refine Gramsci's theorization on alternative hegemony, Laclau and Mouffe propose a post-hegemony model that avoids privileging any particular group or any fixed, linear political project. Instead, they suggest a new order in which each identity group could articulate for its own validity in the new political spaces and then work together to achieve a "maximum autonomization" (p. 67). On the one hand, the establishment of such spaces and alliances are only possible through hegemonic articulations of a political frontier and a common opponent. On the other, the boundaries of these new political spaces should be constantly recreated and renegotiated. This conceptualization is helpful in constructing the definition and the goal of alternative media.

## 2.3 CONCEPTULIZING ALTERNATIVE MEDIA

Based on the above discussion of hegemony and post-hegemony, I envision the field of alternative media as a network composed of various political spaces and alliances. Different social groups articulate their respective visions of the world through a wide range of alternative media projects. Similar to what Fraser (1990) describes as “alternative public spheres,” these various alternative media projects may overlap in ideologies and social lines, and are subject to constant regroupment.

Following the existing literature of alternative media, I consider that each individual alternative media project contests the dominant hegemonic articulations and (re)constructs alternative worldviews by producing *content* and/or through encouraging *participation*.

### 2.3.1 Content versus Process

Most scholars define alternative media from two perspectives: content and process. For example, Downing (2001) defines alternative media as the media that “express alternative vision to hegemonic policies, priorities and perspectives” (Downing, 2001, p. v)—a content-oriented definition. Atton (2002) posits that while critical content is crucial to alternative media, his concern focuses on how alternative media empower ordinary citizens by giving them the opportunity to produce their own media—an emphasis on process. Rodriguez’s (2001) model of “citizens’ media” further highlights the importance of self-education and community building functions offered in such alternative media production process.

It is important to clarify that a self-organized production process has at least two layers of meaning in the existing literature. It can refer to a democratic, anti-hierarchical

organization structure, or “prefigurative politics” (Downing, 2001). To Downing, alternative media practitioners should practice what they preach.

On the other hand, a self-organized production process could also refer to the process that ordinary citizens both *access* and *participate* in alternative media production. It is this process of access and participation that enables these ordinary citizens contest the dominant hegemonic ideologies, particularly the media hegemony.

This perspective of access and participation is worth further explication. The emphasis on access and participation in alternative media is largely a response to the lack of access and participation in mainstream media. According to Couldry and Curran (2003), mainstream news media hold the power to mobilize symbolic resources and a claim to represent the social reality, thus becoming a social force (or hegemony) in their own right. Particularly due to the prevalence of neoliberalism worldwide, media power is increasingly concentrated in a limited number of media corporations (McChesney, 2008). Consequently, a small group of mainstream media giants represent the “myth of the mediated center” (Curran, 2003), and the social reality they construct is considered as *the* reality.

It is in this context that Couldry and Curran define alternative media as “media production[s] that challenge, at least implicitly, actual concentration of media power” (p. 7). They contest media power not only by providing alternative frames through which to understand social realities—a content approach, but also by having ordinary citizens directly access and participate in media productions so that they understand how social realities have been created. Such media participation process serves to debunk the myth that mainstream media represent the mediated center. Further, in producing their own



media content, these ordinary citizens gain the power of defining themselves rather than being defined by others (e.g., mainstream media). The process of alternative media participation on its own right already contests the media hegemony. Simply put, the participation itself is considered as the objective of such media practices.

It is clear that while both content and process are emphasized in the literature of alternative media, the latter is a more salient theme. However, Fuchs (2010) recently challenges the process-oriented approach in defining alternative media. He argues that alternative media should be defined as “critical media” with content that contests the dominant repressive perspectives. He contends that the self-organized production process is a desirable option but not a necessary condition for producing an alternative media project in a given capitalist society. In this sense, researchers should not exclude media projects that are organized in professional forms.

Based on my theoretical framework of hegemony and post-hegemony, I agree with Fuchs that “critical” content is a crucial characteristic in defining alternative media, and that professional and anti-hierarchical organizational forms are both options for such media. Therefore, I first define alternative media as those that provide *content* to question the prevalent hegemonic articulations, and to (re)construct alternative points of view.

On the other hand, I also contend that a process-oriented approach from the aspect of access and participation should still be considered as a central defining character of alternative media. But it is important to revisit this approach by taking into consideration of the socio-cultural context in this digital era.

### **2.3.2 A Revisit of Access and Participation**

Fairly recently the Internet-based media such as websites, blogs and social media began to allow ordinary citizens to produce and distribute their own media content easily at minimal costs, resulting in numerous media outlets for information and opinions. A growing number of people started to question mainstream media's authority in creating the social reality and turned to alternative media for news, or even created their own social realities (Groshek & Han, 2011; Jakob, 2010). The myth of mainstream media as the mediated center, a center that stages "reality," is being debunked with increasing speed. In this transforming mediascape where self-organized media projects are so commonplace, I suggest that researchers should be more cautious about defining alternative media from the theoretical lens of access and participation.

First, it is important to consider the specific circumstances under which alternative media are organized. In fact, the mainstream mediated center remains powerful, though it is not as "central" as before. Digital divide—whether caused by the lack of access, rigid control, economic limitations, literacy or interest—always works to exclude some populations from obtaining alternative news sources or creating their own media (e.g., Bonfadelli, 2002). Therefore, providing people on the disadvantaged side of the divide the opportunity to create their own media online or offline still transforms the established media system to some extent. To be sure, even if such media projects could not provide information or opinions to critique the dominant hegemonic system, the very process of involving members from marginalized community to participate in media productions serves to challenge the dominant hegemony that mainstream media is the authoritative mediated center.

In other circumstances particularly in the online environment, it is also important to consider media makers' intentions. A self-organized media production process does not necessarily lead to access and participation, which concerns the change of power relations. Undoubtedly, not everyone who produces his/her own media project via new technologies purports to contest the concentration of media power. Instead, they do this for self-promotion, social networking and many other nonpolitical reasons. In this light, some scholars suggest that defining alternative media in the digital era could be a matter of ethical choice. For example, Rennie, Berkeley and Murphet (2010) compare YouTube and community media and contend that, "Unlike YouTube, the ethic of care in community media is not a retrospective ethical reflection...but as a foundation principle—one that theoretically should enable the user to know what he or she is dealing with *before* he or she gets involved" (p.7, emphasis in original). In other words, it is important to consider media maker's intention while determining whether a media project is "participatory" in this digital age.

Therefore, given the changing media environment, I refine Couldry and Curran's definition of alternative media, and suggest that alternative media are *intentionally* organized to allow marginalized communities to participate to challenge the concentration of media power. Here, the term "marginalized communities" refer to the groups of individuals who do not usually have the opportunity to access and participate in media production.

### **2.3.3 A Working Definition**

To recapitulate, I define alternative media as media projects (1) that provide content to challenge the dominant hegemonic articulations in various expressions and to

(re)articulate alternative perspectives of the world, or/and (2) that are intentionally organized for marginalized communities to participate so as to contest the concentration of media power.

Both practices serve to question the dominant hegemonic articulations. With respect to content, alternative media discursively criticize the repressive hegemonic ideologies, and constantly work on an alternative system of ideas. As for the participation process, alternative media allow ordinary people especially those from disadvantaged groups to construct their own social realities. For some alternative media projects, compared to the content they publish or broadcast, the media participation process is considered a more important objective as it serves to deconstruct the rationale of media hegemony—the myth of the mediated center.

While it is true that a media project or organization can highlight both alternative content and participation process, many alternative media practices are oriented toward one of the two directions. For example, independent magazines such as *the Nation* and *Mother Jones* and radio programs such as *Democracy Now!* are examples of content-oriented alternative media. On the other hand, the citizens' video programs in Rodriguez's study, which allow members of marginalized communities to articulate their own identities with their own ways of expression, well illustrate the idea of participation-oriented media practices. This dissertation project seeks to empirically examine both content-oriented and participation-oriented alternative media projects. Of particular interest is a microcosm of the community radio sector in the United States.

## **2.4 COMMUNITY MEDIA AND COMMUNITY RADIO**

### **2.4.1 Community Media**

Like many other types of alternative media, community media (e.g., community radio, community-access television, etc.) also provide critical and alternative media content, and/or allow ordinary people to access and participate in media productions. What distinguishes community media from other types of alternative media is the concept of “community.” It can refer to a geographic community (e.g., a city), a community of identity (e.g., Asian American community), or a community of interest (e.g., a group that identifies with progressive politics).

In line with the poststructuralist viewpoints discussed above, “community” does not imply any essential existence; rather, the meaning of community is subject to constant articulation and negotiation by its members and non-members (Carpentier & Cammaerts, 2006). The notion “imagined communities” offered by Benedict Anderson (2006) is helpful here. In Anderson’s theorization, “communities” particularly refer to nations. Specifically, a nation is an imagined political community because “the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (p. 6). Importantly, Anderson suggests that the consumption of mass media such as newspapers facilitate the formation of such “imagined communities.”

Likewise, the purpose of community media is also to encourage the imagining of diverse geographic, identity and interest communities. What distinguishes community media from mass media is that the creation of communities in community media does not simply rely on media consumption, but also on the process of media making and the

interaction between media makers and their audience. As Rennie (2006, p. 40) emphasizes, community is “a process, a relationship; it is interaction and communication.” In this regard, “community media” are often organized towards a given community, providing a media platform for members to access and participate, to articulate and rearticulate the meaning of community, and to express their relationship with the community as well as with the outside world.

Community media are also closely related to the concept of civil society, a “third sector” independent from government and market, and is a segment considered crucial to the society’s democracy. As a part of civil society, community media are considered a “third voice” between public media and private commercial media (Servaes, 1999). By making the communication resources available to the public, community media make it possible for ordinary people to directly represent themselves within the media (e.g., Barlow, 1988; Cammaerts, 2009; Goetz, 2006). In such an open platform, ordinary individuals can participate at all levels as audience members, producers, managers, and even owners.

Like many other civil society organizations, community media are usually in the form of nonprofits and often run by volunteers. Despite its role as the “third sector” or “third voice,” community media are not completely separate from the market and/or the government; instead, they are inevitably related with market (e.g., organizational finances) and/or the government (e.g., regulations and policies) in many respects. Further, as Rennie (2006) suggests, researchers should consider community media as a media sector that complements rather than replaces the existing media system. As the case

studies of this dissertation indicate, government policies as well as financial challenges closely affect the history and status quo of community radio in the United States.

#### **2.4.2 Community Radio in the United States**

Community radio is an important form of community media. In fact, community radio stations are widely available in both developed and developing countries around the world because the medium, radio, offers the most practical and cost-effective means of communication (e.g., Barlow, 1988; Meadows, Forde, Ewart, & Foxwell, 2009; Olorunnisola, 2002; Pavarala & Malik, 2007).

Within the United States, the history of community radio can be traced to more than 70 years ago. In U.S. the law defines broadcast airwaves as the property of the public. So in 1941, the FCC decided to reserve part of the radio spectrum for community and other non-commercial broadcasters. Lewis Hill, a pacifist and journalist, took this opportunity to launch Pacifica Radio (KPFA) in Berkeley, California in 1949, which is generally considered as one of the first community radio stations in the United States. As a non-commercial, listener-sponsored “free speech radio,” Pacifica pioneered the “alternative” ethos in the radio sector and started to provide content of “a well produced mix of news and in depth public affairs” that are unlikely to be heard in the corporate mainstream media (KPFA, n.d.). Following the tradition of Pacifica, four more similar radio stations affiliated nationwide, and comprise what is known as the Pacifica Foundation Radio network. The Houston-based KPFT radio station, which is analyzed in the dissertation, is one of the five stations in the network.

As an important alternative medium in the U.S. mediascape, community radio grew quickly in the 1960s and 1970s. However, the growth of community radio stations

provoked immense resistance from both commercial and public radio broadcasters. Their combined lobbying power swayed Congress and the FCC to support media policies that would increase media consolidation, and thus restrict the development of community radio stations in the country (Cammaerts, 2009).

In part as a reaction to the increasing media concentration, a low power FM (LPFM) movement emerged in the late 1990s to demand more community control of the airwaves. LPFM radio stations are required to broadcast at Effective Radiated Power (ERP)<sup>4</sup> of up to 100 watts, with signals that travel three to five miles. Advocates contend that these small-scaled community radio stations enable people within their range who do not have access to other media outlets to acquire information relevant to their communities and to participate as media makers. Both are essential for social equity and justice (Common Dreams staff, 2012; Promesthus Radio Project, n.d.). In response to the movement, the FCC began licensing LPFM radio stations as a community radio service in January 2000. More recently, thanks to over a decade of persistent efforts of several advocacy groups such as the Prometheus Radio Project, the Local Community Radio Act passed in December 2010 and went into effect in November 2012. The Act further opens the airwaves for hundreds of new LPFM community radio stations across the country.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the expansion of community radio stations, it remains a question whether the media truly serve the underserved communities. By surveying 133 LPFM community radio stations, Goetz (2006) finds that nearly half of the stations (47%) do not have any ways of tracking audience. This finding is confirmed by a more recent study in which

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<sup>4</sup> Effective Radiated Power is s the final power output from the radio station's antenna, which is used to predict the broadcast range of the radio signal.

<sup>5</sup> The FCC started receiving applications for LPFM radio station licenses in October 2013. 2,819 applications were filed before the application window closed in November of the same year.



Conti (2011) interviewed 45 LPFM community radio station founders and programmers. The results highlight that one-fourth of the community radio broadcasters cannot describe the character or size of their audience, and seven are even unsure whether anyone listens.

Conti concludes that:

This presumption (of an inherent connection between community radio broadcasters and local audience) leaves LPFM broadcasters in a precarious position in relationship to their operation when their local communities demonstrate a lesser degree of interest in programming, and commitment to the station's success, than expected (p. 33).

These empirical studies raise a number of questions about the audience of community radio stations: Who listens to community radio? How do listeners respond to community radio programming? To what extent are listeners involved in community radio? How *should* community radio broadcasters engage their audiences? To answer these questions, the following section first traces the theoretical roots of media audience identity.

## **2.5 AUDIENCE AND ALTERNATIVE MEDIA**

The conceptualization of community radio audience, or alternative media audience in general, is inevitably related to the ways audience has been conceived in mainstream media. In fact, the *raison d'être* of alternative media is in part to transform the passive role of audience or to reach the alienated audience in the media sector.

### **2.5.1 The Audiences of Mainstream Media**

Throughout the history of media studies and practices, the conceptualization of audiences has evolved from the debate of passive versus active audience to the discussion of “citizen journalists” in today’s media environment.

In early media studies, audiences were conceived as information recipients. While professional journalists, editors and news directors decided what is news and how to frame it, audiences remained at the receiving end of the communication (e.g., Gans, 1979; Shannon & Weaver, 1949).

The conceptualizations of “active audience” recognize the agency of media audience. For example, the approach of uses and gratifications highlights audience’s role in using media with utilitarian considerations (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973). Hall’s (1980) encoding-decoding model also contributes to the concept of “active audience.” In this model, news reporters “encode,” or select codes that assign meanings to events—usually influenced by the dominant ideologies, but audience could “decode” media text in their own ways to resist the intended frames. Fiske (1987) further suggests that the meaning of media text is unstable, making it always susceptible to audience’s reinterpretation. These theorizations correctly perceive the active role of media audience, making them no longer the ending point of communication process. Nevertheless, as Carpentier (2011) argues, these conceptualizations of “active audience” merely invoke a weak form of audience interaction—the audience reactions could hardly communicate back to the news media.

In fact, the Hutchins Commission’s report on freedom of the press early recommends that journalists should solicit and consider audience feedback in their news coverage. The report writes, “The free press must be free to all who have something worth saying to the public, since the essential object for which a free press is valued is that ideas deserving a public hearing shall have a public hearing” (Commission on Freedom of the Press & Hutchins, 1947, p. 129). Central to the report is the idea that a

free press should operate in a way that all opinions—including those from audiences in different segments of the society—are entitled to an equal chance to be heard. But the report also notes that when the press evolved into big business, its priorities shifted from dissemination and exchange of diverse ideas to economic concerns.

In the emerging mediascape, the interactive communication technologies provide unprecedented opportunities for audience members to interact with the news media, and thus audience autonomy became an expanded feature of this new media environment (Napoli, 2011). Nowadays, it is commonplace for one to leave a comment about a news story online, or Tweet about a television news program. Further, “the people formerly known as the audience” employ the press tools they have in their possession to inform others, serving the role of citizen journalists (Rosen, 2006, 2008). Arguably, the traditional boundary between content providers and audience has melted away (e.g., Cover, 2006).

However, within the discussion of mainstream and corporate news media, even though the interactive media environment provides unprecedented opportunities for audience members to interact or to participate in media practices, the power relationship between media professionals and audiences has not necessarily changed. While professional journalists and editors acknowledge that audiences have gained more control over this new mediascape, many of them still consider themselves to be the authoritative interpreters of news and the social realities (Robinson, 2010). In practice, media professionals respond to audience comments—e.g., whether and how they address comments to their journalistic work—based on entrenched journalism values,

assumptions and standards (Metykova, 2008; O’Sullivan & Heinon, 2008; Robinson, 2010).

Along the same line of thought, within the discourse of the online environment, citizen journalism is primarily theorized as a new, audience-related practice adopted in professional media organizations (Domingo et al., 2008; Hermida & Thurman, 2008; Paulussen, Heinonen, Domingo, & Quandt, 2007). Though ordinary citizens may contribute original reporting to such news organizations, media professionals serve as the “gatekeepers” and make the final decision on whether and how to present *audience* activities (Deuze, Bruns, & Neuberger, 2007; Sambrook, 2005; Tilley & Cokley, 2008).

As the existing literature illustrates, the boundary between content provider and recipients has blurred in the digital era, but a top-down, hierarchical journalist-audience relationship remains prevalent in the mainstream media practices.

### **2.5.2 The Audiences of Alternative Media: A Normative Model**

Compared to mainstream media, alternative media usually address smaller and specialized audiences. Depending on the focus of different alternative media, they reach a wide range of niche audiences. For example, the audience members may belong to the same geographic community (e.g., Meadows, Forde, Ewart, & Foxwell, 2008), tend to possess a critical worldview (Atkinson & Dougherty, 2006), or to be more active in civic activities (Boyle & Schmierbach, 2009). Indeed, many alternative media audience members themselves enjoy an identity of an “alternative” reader/viewer/listener, which suggests a marker of individual taste and group belonging distinct from their “mainstream” counterparts (Rauch, 2007).

I argue that central to the theorization of community radio audience, or alternative media audience in general, is the bond and interaction between producers and audiences in such media practices. For alternative media researchers, the boundary between producers and audiences has been deconstructed since the very beginning of the research field—earlier than the emergence of the Internet. Challenging the notion that professional journalists and editors are the sole “experts” or determiners of the social reality, alternative media scholars suggest that producers and audiences should be truly intertwined to the point that they collectively construct truth (Atton, 2004). Based on the working definition of alternative media for this dissertation, I propose that the relationship and interaction between alternative media producers and audiences be theorized from two perspectives: content and participation. What follows is the discussion of a normative model of audience interaction and participation in alternative media.

### *A Content-oriented Perspective*

Gramsci’s notion of “organic intellectual” provides a helpful framework to examine producer-audience relationship and interaction in content-oriented alternative media. Specifically, alternative media producers can be considered as a kind of organic intellectuals (Atkinson, 2005; Downing, 2001). In Gramsci’s theorization, organic intellectuals are a group of people who specialize in conceptual and philosophical elaboration of ideas. They are leaders in the “war of position,” a war that seeks to challenge the dominant hegemony and build an alternative. Unlike “traditional intellectuals” who might remain aloof from the grassroots, “organic intellectuals” keep contacts with the social groups they represent and discuss issues that concern the ones

they reach. Further, rather than promoting an established system of ideas, “organic intellectuals” remind the audience that everyone is inherently a critical thinker. As many scholars posit, Gramsci theorizes a non-elitist, democratic relationship between organic intellectuals and the social groups they represent (Brook & Darlington, 2013; Hall, 1992; Szelenyi & Martin, 1989).

When it comes to alternative media, Downing (2001) suggests that organic intellectuals can be re-rendered as “communicator/activist” (p. 15), or producers of alternative media. Ideally, as organic intellectuals, alternative media producers should constantly interact with their audience about content, and take their audience’s thoughts into consideration while articulating and rearticulating alternative ideas about the world. Further, not only should they help their audiences develop a critical worldview against the dominant hegemonic discourses, they should also actively encourage their audiences to discuss and critique the perspectives and thoughts published or broadcast by alternative media projects. In other words, alternative media producers should not behave as “gatekeepers” like many journalists and editors do in other corporate media organizations, nor should they serve the “mouthpiece” of any counter-hegemonic party or organization. Rather, they should perform as “gate-openers” (Godfried, 2008, p. 36) for different opinions, arguments and perspectives (e.g., from audience) in order to refine and rearticulate their vision and the boundary of their political space. It is in this sense that I also contend that alternative media producers should speak with people beyond their existing constituencies in order to keep the “gate” open.

To summarize the normative model of audience interaction in content-oriented alternative media, a dynamic and constant idea exchange between producers and audiences is the key to discursively (re)constructing a new political space.

### ***A Participation-oriented Perspective***

Not all alternative media producers are “organic intellectuals” in Gramsci’s sense. One becomes an alternative media producer not necessarily because he or she can represent a particular social group, or because of his or her specialized capability to better articulate thoughts. Rather, in alternative media that are intentionally organized to allow ordinary people to participate and to challenge the concentration of media power, any ordinary citizen can become a producer or participant and share his or her own story or point of view (Atton, 2002; Couldry & Curran, 2003). Indeed, the rationale of participation-oriented alternative media is to make communication channels and resources available to ordinary people, especially members of underserved communities.

Therefore, in those alternative media that prioritize the participation process, producers—who are former media users—are just *like* their audience members. They are “one of us” (Forde, 2011, p. 90) in the community. For example, in Atton’s (2002) analysis of an alternative video magazine, one reporter described herself as “overawed” and “nervous” while reporting news, and reacted to news events “ordinarily and spontaneously much as her audience might do in a similar situation” (p.114).

Then, in a normative model of participation-oriented alternative media, the roles of producers and audiences are interchangeable. Each individual alternative media project should serve as an “alternative public sphere” (Fraser, 1990) for a particular community or group where anyone in that community or group can access and participate. As Fraser

states, “We can conclude that the idea of an egalitarian, multi-cultural society only makes sense if we suppose a plurality of public arenas in which groups with diverse values and rhetorics *participate*” (p. 69, italics added). In other words, central to the normative goal of participation-oriented alternative media is participation by members from various marginalized communities, with the difference between “producers” and “audience” deconstructed. In this sense, researchers posit that community media sector in Australia serve as a variety of “community public spheres” (e.g., Foxwell, Ewart, Forde, & Meadows, 2008; Meadows, Forde, Ewart, & Foxwell, 2008, 2009). Any community members can participate in the public lives of their communities through being media producers, volunteers and listeners, and through dialogues with each other. Again, one important purpose of such media is to contest the traditional power relationship between media producers—the ones who define the social reality—and audiences—the ones being defined.

### **2.5.3 Audience Interaction and Participation in Community Radio**

In the context of the United States, how has producer-audience relationship been conceived in real-world practices? To what extent do these theoretical conceptions such as “organic intellectual” and “alternative public sphere” operate in reality? Indeed, do alternative media practitioners communicate with their audiences at all? In fact, Downing (2003) raises the concern that some alternative media projects might start ostensibly to allow “other voices,” but turn out only to express the voices of a few individuals. Dialogues between producers and audience might be inexistent, and it is possible that the latter become the ones to be communicated *at*. It is in part due to this concern that Downing (2003) calls for more empirical studies on the audiences of alternative media.



As one of the first exploratory studies to investigate producer-audience relationship and interaction in broadcast alternative media practices in the United States, this dissertation focuses on community radio programs. The following section reviews the relevant existing literature.

Only a few studies theorize or empirically examine producer-audience relationship and interaction in U.S. community radio programs. Eliasoph (1998) provides some empirical evidence about how community radio programmers conceive the relationship with their listeners based on the study of Pacifica Radio's KPFA in Berkeley, the first community radio station as noted earlier. All the radio programmers who participated in the study agree that the station should provide their listeners with a variety of viewpoints, not just the "correct line;" they believe that the listeners resent being fed a line. Unlike professional journalists who tend to frame news within established ideological perspectives but are defined as "objective," the community radio programmers emphasize the importance of including different analyses of any issues anyone involved advocates. However, although Eliasoph's study sheds some light on the programmer-listener relationship in community radio programs, the findings are solely based on the perspectives of programmers and they only briefly touch upon the topic of audience. The actual interaction between the programmers and listeners remains unknown. In addition, the study, conducted more than 20 years ago, is less relevant within today's socio-cultural context.

More recently, two studies bring attention to the actual interaction between community radio programmers and their listeners. As noted earlier, Conti (2011) reveals that little communication exists between the radio programmers and listeners based on

her interviews with 45 LPFM radio station broadcasters in 2008 and 2009, with seven interviewees even questioning whether they had any listeners.

Atkinson (2008) paints a slightly different picture of community radio, and that is the only study that examines the producer-audience interaction from the perspectives of audience. Based on several case studies including a social-movement-oriented community radio program, Atkinson shows that the radio programmers usually interact with their listeners via in-person communication, and the exchanges are mostly superficial encouragements. Those listeners interviewed often praised the “good work” of the programmers rather than offered any comments on content. Unlike audiences of some global-scaled alternative media such as *Democracy Now!* and *Commondreams.org* who actively gave their feedback through emails, listeners of that particular community radio program tend to avoid discussing any perceived problems about the broadcast content. This encouragement-oriented interaction helps to establish organizational support, which makes the community radio programmers feel their work is important and appreciated, but it also prevents them from hearing any potential problems. As Atkinson concludes, the breadth of alternative media projects (i.e., local or global) makes a difference when it comes to the form and content of the producer-audience communication.

The two studies generate an impression that the U.S. community radio sector sees very limited audience interaction and participation—either in terms of content or the participation aspect. Again, if it is true that few people listen to community radio, or little dialogue between *community* radio and *community* has been established, then why is community radio still relevant in today’s mediascape?

With this question in mind, this dissertation more exhaustively investigates audience in the U.S. community radio programs, focusing on their interaction with the media content and the degree of audience participation. Unlike all the previous studies, this dissertation explores insights from both community radio programmers and listeners through diverse case studies. Further, in light of the transformation of media technologies over the past few years, this research also examines the impact of new communication technologies on producer-audience interaction in community radio practices, a subject not previously addressed.

## **2.6 RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The dissertation first explores how community radio programmers and listeners conceptualize producer-audience relationship. In particular, for content-oriented community radio programs, the effort focuses on the exploration of the concept “organic intellectual,” examining whether such media practices reflect a democratic, organic relationship. For participation-oriented community radio programs, the study explores the extent to which community radio programmers and listeners consider the platform as an “alternative public sphere” where any one from the community can access and participate.

***RQ1:*** How do community radio (a) programmers and (b) listeners conceive producer-audience relationship?

Second, this dissertation looks for empirical evidence of actual audience interaction and participation in community radio programs. For content-oriented community radio programs, this dissertation investigates whether radio programmers take the initiative to encourage their listeners—especially those beyond their constituencies—

to respond to the broadcast content, and whether and how they address comments and critiques from listeners. From the perspectives of listeners, the dissertation explores whether they keep a critical stance in interpreting the broadcast content, and whether and how they communicate their thoughts with the radio programmers. Overall, the study asks whether the programmers and listeners collectively and actively articulate and rearticulate the meaning of a given “community” or a political space.

***RQ2a:*** To what extent and in what forms do content-oriented community radio programmers interact with their listeners about the broadcast content?

For participation-oriented community radio programs, the study focuses on the exploration of audience participation. This research question is concerned about whether such community radio programmers, who are former media audiences, also intend to transform their current audience; to what extent listeners are involved in the community radio production process; and, if there is listener participation, who these participants are. Overall, this question examines the degree to which the theoretical concept of “alternative public sphere” can be operated in real-life practices.

***RQ2b:*** To what extent do listeners participate in the participation-oriented community radio production process?

Lastly, the dissertation investigates whether and how digital communication technologies contribute to the audience interaction and participation in community radio programs. In Atkinson’s (2008) model, the producer-audience interaction differs according to whether the alternative media project is at a local or global level. This distinction could be problematic in the digital era considering the fact that any media project can theoretically reach a global audience, and that alternative media producers

can also communicate with their local audience via the Internet. But, are the new communication technologies really beneficial in helping community radio programmers better connect with their listeners, whether local or global? For content-oriented community radio programs, can radio programmers elicit more constructive audience responses because of the availability of more communication tools? For participation-oriented community radio programs, what are some new forms of audience participation, if any? Bearing these questions in mind, the study investigates:

***RQ3:*** To what extent do digital communication tools contribute to audience interaction and participation in community radio programs?

### **Chapter 3: Research Background and Methods**

To reiterate, I define alternative media as media projects (1) that provide content to challenge the dominant hegemonic articulations and to (re)articulate alternative perspectives of the world, or/and (2) that are intentionally organized for underserved communities to participate to contest the concentration of media power. I suggested earlier that while some alternative media projects or organizations highlight both content and process, many others are oriented toward one of the two directions. For analytical purposes, this study categorizes alternative media as content-oriented and participation-oriented and then examines producer-audience relationship and interaction within each category.

Of particular interest of this dissertation is a traditional type of alternative media: community radio. It should be noted that community radio in general advocates access and participation (e.g., Barlow, 1988; Cammaerts, 2009). The purpose of community radio is to permit anyone in the community to participate in media production. In practice, some community radio programmers mainly utilize the media platform to broadcast news and information, with an emphasis on content; others operate the programs as a discussion board, focusing on the participation aspect of community media.

Therefore, this analysis employs an approach of case study and includes multiple cases of community radio programs in each category, content- or participation-oriented alternative media. As Yin (2003) suggests, evidence from multiple cases is often more compelling; they can be considered as multiple experiments in order to “replicate” results. Moreover, I choose cases from two different community radio stations KOOP and

KPFT. Both are located in Texas, a politically and culturally conservative southern state in the United States. Including community radio programs from two organizations in the analysis contributes to the diversity of case studies. Specifically, the unit of analysis in this research is a community radio program, not a radio station.

With respects to specific methods, I employed multiple research methods including participatory ethnography, in-depth interview, web-based survey and textual analysis. The main body of the research methods is qualitative. By observing a communication environment for a substantial period of time and by interviewing both media producers and users, this exploratory study provides a nuanced understanding of how different individuals interpret the content and participation experience of community radio, and how different cultural and social factors affect the interpretations (Everbach, 2006; Gibson, 2000). It should also be noted that the results are based on a limited number of case studies, and thus are not generalizable to any larger population.

On the other hand, a quantitative web-based survey—an efficient, low-cost survey method (Sue & Ritter, 2012)—supplies background information on listeners—who they are and how they listen to these programs. Moreover, the incorporation of textual analysis—both qualitative and quantitative—of different producer-audience communication platforms such as blogs and social media provides additional data that further contextualizes findings of the study. Overall, the use of multiple methods ensures methodological triangulation, allowing a better understanding of the issue under investigation (Flick, 2004; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

What follows is a brief overview of the two community radio stations and the eight radio programs included in the analysis. The results sections will include more details and patterns about these cases.

### **3.1 RESEARCH BACKGROUND**

Both community radio stations are based in Texas, a state with a past known as “racist, segregated, and anti-union as the Deep South” (Dugger, 2004, p. 410). The situation is not much better today. Despite its rapid growth in economy, Texas is among the states with the worst income inequality, with many of the findings cut along racial/ethnic lines: Poverty rates among Latino/Hispanic and African American population are 2.5 to 3 times higher than Whites (Zaragovia, 2014). These trends are in line with the increasingly racial/ethnic and economic segregation in neighborhoods and schools in Texas. For example, recent research shows that Texas public schools are as racially/ethnically segregated as they were 60 years ago when U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Brown v. Board of Education* that segregation in public schools is unconstitutional (Heilig & Holmes, 2013). Texas also has ranked among the worst states in education, health care, and welfare programs (Thomas, 2012; Thurber, 2011). In light of the unique historical and cultural context of Texas, many media activists believe that alternative media play an extremely important role in pushing this “backward” state in a progressive direction (e.g., see Guo, 2010).

On the other hand, it also poses challenges for alternative media outlets to find audiences and supporters in a state where residents are predominantly conservative. Texas has been a reliably red state in presidential elections since 1980. Republicans also have enjoyed an average of 10-point advantage over their Democratic counterparts in



statewide races since the mid 1990s (McKinley, 2010). Moreover, while alternative media mainly appeal to those who are politically active, Texas ranks among the lowest in the nation for political participation and civic involvement. According to a recent report on the Texas civic health index, the state ranks 51st in voter turnout, 49th in the number of citizens who contact public officials, 44th in the number of people who discuss politics a few times a week or more, 42nd in volunteering (Lawrence, Wise, & Einsohn, 2013). The report also reveals that Hispanic Texans and immigrants are significantly less likely to participate in almost every form of civic engagement.

All of these indicators provide a social-cultural context for the two community radio stations in Austin and Houston, two major metropolitan cities in Texas.

### **3.1.1 Austin and KOOP Radio**

Austin, the capital of Texas, is the 11th largest and one of the fastest-growing cities in the United States with a population of approximately 850,000 people (Egan, 2013). Known as a “weird” city or an “oasis” from the rest of the state’s political and cultural conservatism, Austin values eclectic, liberal lifestyles, and is friendly to diverse subcultures and communities that are not mainstream (Salzman, 2013). However, it also remains a highly segregated city with sectors of minority, low-income communities living in the once restricted neighborhoods (Balli, 2013; Grattan, 2014).

As liberal and progressive as Austin is perceived to be, the city did not boast its own community radio station until the 1980s when Jim Ellinger decided to launch a community radio station (Beatty, 2000). After a decade of negotiation between Ellinger and the University of Texas at Austin, which proposed a student radio station at the same time point, the court ruled that the two groups share the last remaining non-commercial

frequency in Austin, 91.7FM. KOOP finally went on air in 1994; it can be heard during the day and the University of Texas student radio station KVRX broadcasts at night.

Over the past 20 years, KOOP has operated as a listener-supported, nonprofit organization and provides a diverse mix of community-oriented programming. The station's mission is "to provide high quality, innovative, and diverse community-oriented programming to Austin with an emphasis on those communities that are ignored or underserved by mainstream media" (KOOP, n.d.).

Nowadays, more than 70 locally produced programs air on KOOP, with each program lasting from 30 minutes to two hours per week. Over two thirds of these are music programs, featuring particular music genres such as bluegrass, blues, country music or many others less likely to be heard in the commercial radio. The other one third are news and public affairs shows or those that combine music and discussion. These talk shows cover topics such as women's reproductive health issues, environment and energy, progressive politics, and sports; and serve communities such as Asian/Asian Americans, Latino/nas, Indigenous people, gays and lesbians, youth, and people with disabilities.

The station broadcasts at an effective radiated power of 3,000 watts, which has an estimated reach of 15 miles (FCC, n.d.). Since KOOP has not subscribed to any radio rating services in recent years, the size of its listenership remains unknown.

In addition to FM broadcasting, KOOP also provides live streaming services for people to listen to the shows on the Internet in real time. Eleven programs are online-only. The station does not provide podcast or archives for listeners to access and download, but some individual programmers archive their shows online using different public distribution platforms such as iTunes, SoundCloud and Internet Archive.

### **3.1.2 Houston and KPFT Radio**

Over the past few decades, Houston has experienced a significant social change from a “redneck white city down in Texas” to the fourth largest metropolitan, multicultural city in the United States (Kaminski, 2013). Analyzing the 1990, 2000 and 2010 censuses, a report concludes that the Houston region has grown dramatically more racially/ethnically diverse over the past 20 years (Emerson et al., n.d.). According to the 2010 census, Houston metropolitan area is in fact the most racially/ethnically diverse large metropolitan area in the country with only 50% of the population being White. However, the report also notes that the segregation between racial/ethnic groups only “slightly” declined over this period. Further, Houston is among the most economically segregated cities in the United States (Tolson, 2012).

KPFT (90.1 FM) was formed back in the late 1960s, during the entrenched “redneck” era. At that time, Larry Lee and Don Gardner led a group of activists and convinced Pacifica Foundation Radio Network to establish an independent listener-supported community radio station in Houston. KPFT was launched in 1970, with the goal “to educate, to outrage and to get programs on the air that other stations won’t, don’t or can’t” (Pugh, 2002).

As the only liberal, progressive radio station in this large conservative city, KPFT has been the target of a number of politically motivated attacks. It is the first and only radio station in the United States that has been bombed off the air. In May 1970, just two months after the station began broadcasting, members of the Ku Klux Klan blew up the station’s transmitters with dynamite. Shortly after the first assault, in October, the same group bombed the station again. Simply put, KPFT “was surrounded by hard-core

reactionaries and even terrorists who hated its politics and literally wanted it to be destroyed” (Lasar, 2006, p. 138). Though Houston is no longer a “redneck white city,” the controversial content broadcast by KPFT still appears to anger some people from time to time. One more recent example is the drive-by shooting that targeted KPFT in August 2007; many station staff and volunteers believed the attack had a political motive (Goodman & Gonzales, 2007).

On the other hand, it has always been a struggle for KPFT, a listener-supported radio station, to balance between its mission and reality. While progressive, experimental programming better serves the station’s mission, the less controversial music shows always attract a larger number of listeners, thus more financial supporters. Like many other Pacifica affiliated stations, KPFT went through a period when the programming was considered to be “mainstream.” From the mid 1980s through the end of the 1990s, the majority of the station’s locally produced news and public affairs programs, which served a wide range of marginalized communities in Houston, were replaced with music shows or nationally syndicated programs. The programming conversion was a part of Pacifica’s national plan in hope of drawing a broader audience and thus raising more funds.

In 2001, upon continuing protests and demonstrations in the city and on a national level, KPFT hired a new general manager Duane Bradley, a former KPFT news director and volunteer programmer, to supervise a content change. Bradley, on the one hand, reopened the station to more community-oriented news and public affairs shows; on the other, he kept quite a number of music programs that had a strong following (Pugh, 2002).

Today, a total of nearly 80 programs air on KPFT, including national news programs *Democracy Now!* and *BBC News* and locally produced news as well as music shows. About half of the KPFT programming features music of diverse genres. Local news and public affair programs serve various marginalized communities such as Native Americans, Latino/Hispanics, African Americans, gays and lesbians, and prisoners; and feature topics such as labor issues, progressive politics, environment and ecology, and immigration.

Compared with KOOP radio, KPFT reaches a broader audience. The radio station broadcasts 24 hours, 7 days a week at full power of 100,000 watts. According to the most recent available radio ratings in 2012, KPFT reached an estimated weekly listenership of over 135,000, which accounted for less than 1% of the entire radio audience in the Houston-Galveston market (The Nielsen Company, 2012).

Like KOOP, KPFT also provides live streaming services. In addition, all the programs are automatically archived on KPFT's website for up to two months.

### **3.1.3 Community Radio Programs as Case Studies**

Based on a preliminary analysis of the radio programs in both KOOP and KPFT, four radio programs—two content-oriented and two participation-oriented—were selected from each radio station. According to the working definition of alternative media in this dissertation, the analysis does not consider pure music shows because these are not mainly for the purpose of promoting alternative viewpoints or for community participation. Table 3.1 shows the list of the community radio programs included in the analysis.

	<b>Content-oriented</b>	<b>Participation-oriented</b>
<b>KOOP, Austin</b>	People United (1:00-2:00 p.m. Friday) Rag Radio (2:00-3:00 p.m. Friday)	OutCast (6:00-7:00 p.m. Tuesday) Chop Suey (4:00-5:00 p.m. Saturday)
<b>KPFT, Houston</b>	KPFT News (4:00-4:30 p.m. M-F) Progressive Forum (7:00-9:00 p.m. Thursday)	Open Journal Community Conversation (9:00-9:30 a.m. M-F) Community Spotlight (9:30-10:00 a.m. M-F)

Table 3.1: A List of Case Studies<sup>6</sup>

***People United***

*People United*, an hour-long weekly radio program, features news, interviews, and lectures on a variety of social justice topics. According to the program description, it addresses “the concerns of a diverse, interdependent people opposed to oppression in all its various forms and committed to the struggle for social justice” (People United, n.d.).

Allan Campbell, a middle-aged white male, is the sole programmer of *People United*. He started volunteering at KOOP in 2003, and took over a KOOP program *El Gringo Show* after the programmer left the station. In 2005, Campbell changed the show’s name to *People United* with a subtitle *The Show in Solidarity with the People of the World*. This dissertation includes *People United* as a content-oriented program because of its focus on a wide range of subjects.

***Rag Radio***

Like *People United*, *Rag Radio* is also a one-hour weekly radio program showcasing interviews and discussions about issues of progressive politics, culture and

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<sup>6</sup> The table reflects the programming schedules in May 2014.

history. Notably, the history of *Rag Radio* can be traced back to Austin's historic 1960s underground newspaper *The Rag* (1966-1977), one of the first, the most long lasting and most influential sixties underground papers in the United States. In 2005, about 75 people who were involved in the original newspaper came from all over the world to attend an Austin reunion. That resulted in a renewed alliance among many of *The Rag's* former staff members. Many of them were retired and returned to politics after the reunion. They initially communicated through an email listserve, which then became *The Rag Blog* ([www.theragblog.com](http://www.theragblog.com)), an independent progressive Internet newsmagazine.

Thorne Dreyer, the founding editor of *The Rag*, also founded its legacy *The Rag Blog*, and then launched *Rag Radio* in 2009. Dreyer is a White male in his late 60s with significant experience and reputation as a journalist, writer and political activist. In addition to Dreyer who serves as the chief producer and host/interviewer of *Rag Radio*, Tracey Schulz helps with producing and engineering the program. Schulz also runs another show at KOOP, and used to work at a commercial radio station in Austin.

As an interview-formatted show, *Rag Radio* features guests including newsmakers, artists, leading thinkers, and public figures; many of them with national and/or international reputation. The mission of the program is to provide “cutting edge alternative journalism, politics, and culture in the spirit of the 60's underground press” (Rag Radio, n.d.). The program is selected as a case study of content-oriented community radio program because of its focus on content.

To sponsor their efforts, Dreyer and his colleagues formed a 501 (c) 3 nonprofit organization known as the New Journalism Project<sup>7</sup>. The nonprofit sponsors the operation

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<sup>7</sup> Mercedes de Uriarte, a co-chair of this dissertation, is a board member of the New Journalism Project.

of *The Rag Blog* and in various ways also provides financial support for *Rag Radio*. For example, their fundraiser activities usually cross promote the magazine and the radio show. Dreyer also receives a small monthly stipend from the nonprofit, but his efforts are mainly altruist.

### ***OutCast***

*OutCast* is the only LGBT<sup>8</sup> radio program in Austin, which is “by, for and about the LGBT community of Austin and elsewhere” (OutCast, n.d.). The mission of the program is to “provide a resource for LGBT Austin, building community through a weekly forum for the exchange of information and ideas” (OutCast, n.d.).

Heath Riddles launched *OutCast* in 2008 because the programmer of a former LGBT program *Outspoken* quit KOOP. After Riddles and several other co-hosts left, Stephen Rice and Chase Martin took over and became current producers and hosts of the program. Most of the former and current programmers at *OutCast* are gay-White-males in their late 30s and early 40s. Some have media experience. For example, Riddle worked in commercial television stations. Rice currently holds a part-time position at a local public radio station. The other current co-host Marin runs a LGBT news and events website [TheRepubliq.com](http://TheRepubliq.com), which is also the server that hosts *OutCast*'s website [www.outcastaustin.com](http://www.outcastaustin.com).

In every show, Rice and Martin usually invite three or four guests from different LGBT communities to participate in their live broadcast to discuss their interests and causes. *OutCast* is included in this dissertation as a participation-oriented program because not only does it provide LGBT-related news and information, it also serves an

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<sup>8</sup> LGBT stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender.



open platform where anyone from the community can participate and talk about their interests and causes.

### *Chop Suey*

*Chop Suey*<sup>9</sup> is the first Asian-oriented radio program at KOOP, and one of the first on Austin's radio dial. Brandon Webb—an American businessman who spent six years in Beijing—first had the idea to launch a Chinese radio program in Austin. Webb recruited two University of Texas journalism students from Mainland China including me, and we co-founded *Chop Suey* in early 2009. The show first started as a half-hour weekly showcase of Chinese music, and then became an hour-long program featuring East Asian and Asian American music, culture, news, and events.

In addition to presenting music and culture, *Chop Suey* is structured to give voices to ordinary people from the local Asian/Asian American community. Over the past five years, more than 10 college students and young professionals from diverse ethnic backgrounds have participated in the program as regular hosts and producers. The program also occasionally features guests who are leaders and members from local Asian groups and organizations. Lorin Lee, an Asian American, and I, a journalism student from Mainland China, are the current producers and hosts. *Chop Suey* is included as a participation-oriented program in this dissertation.

Inspired by the *Chop Suey* model, Webb and some members of *Chop Suey* including me formed a Texas-registered non-profit organization known as Asian Radio. The organization also helped establish two other community radio programs at KVRX, the aforementioned student radio station at the University of Texas at Austin. The

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<sup>9</sup> The show is entitled “Chop Suey” because it is a dish invented by early Chinese immigrants to the United States

organization does not generate income, and all the members are unpaid. Webb and some leading members of the organization underwrite the organization operations such as website maintenance fees ([www.asianradio.org](http://www.asianradio.org)), the expenses on music albums, and audio equipment such as audio recorders and headphones.

### ***KPFT News***

*KPFT News* is a half-hour daily news program, which provides “local news in a global context” (KPFT, n.d.-a). In 2002, after a decade-long desert of local news programming at KPFT, Renée Feltz—a young White female activist—and a group of volunteers rebuilt the news department in the station under the new management. In the early years of *KPFT News*, a few paid staff members including Feltz and some experienced volunteer journalists organized a news reporting workshop every month, providing an opportunity for ordinary people from the community—students, stay-home mothers, retirees or anyone interested—to learn to become a citizen reporter. The news program not only aired news and information unheard in the city’s mainstream media, but also served as a dynamic platform for grassroots to report issues from their own communities. In other words, the approach of *KPFT News* in the early years was both participation and content-oriented.

The approach of the current KPFT newsroom is slightly different. Tucker Wilson, the present news director, is the only paid staff member at *KPFT News*. The monthly reporting workshop is no longer offered. Instead, Wilson works with three to five volunteer reporters on news production and reporting. Many volunteer reporters are college students and recent graduates majoring in journalism and communication. For example, David Rozycki received a Bachelor’s degree in communication from a local

university. He is now interning with *KPFT News* while in the same time looking for a job in the media industry. There are also volunteer reporters like Marlo Blue, who has solid experience in areas of radio broadcast and public relations. The current program emphasizes more the news production than the aspect of participation. Therefore, this dissertation includes *KPFT News* as a case study for content-oriented programs.

### ***Progressive Forum***

*Progressive Forum* is a weekly news and public affairs program, which covers issues from a progressive perspective and features interviews and speeches by activists, scholars, and writers from across local to the international spectrum.

The chief producer of *Progressive Forum* Wally James began volunteering with KPFT in early 1980s. Now a retired White male, James has experienced the aforementioned period when most of the news and public affairs programs at KPFT were removed in order to give space for music programming. Because there no longer was peace and justice show at KPFT, James and his wife Suzie Shead co-founded *Progressive Forum* in 1996. The program started as a continuation of a previous KPFT program *Enfoque latinoamericano* that focused on conflicts between the United States and Latin America. The current version of *Progressive Forum* deals with a wide variety of issues such as politics, human rights, globalization, the environment, and other peace and justice concerns.

In addition to James, there are other two co-producers: Larry Krizan and Lillian Care. Krizan joined KPFT in late 1970s. He started working as a producer for *Enfoque latinoamericano* and then continued when the program was changed to *Progressive Forum*. Krizan now specializes in the coverage of global warming, food safety and

technology. Care is originally from Hong Kong; she joined the team in 2000. Care focuses on the reporting and discussion of gender issues. *Progressive Forum* is included as a content-oriented program in this project because of its focus on the coverage of issues.

### ***Open Journal***

The original *Open Journal* started in the 1980s. The goal of the program is to provide the opportunity for ordinary people in the greater Houston community to participate in radio at KPFT. The current show format took shape in 2011. It airs 9:00 to 10:00 a.m. on weekdays from Monday to Friday.

### ***Community Conversation***

The first half hour (9:00 to 9:30 a.m.), called “Community Conversation,” provides time when anyone can call the studio and discuss whatever they wish. Duane Bradley, the station’s general manager and a White male in his 50s, takes calls and serves as a facilitator of the discussion.

### ***Community Spotlight***

The second half hour (9:30 to 10:00 a.m.), “Community Spotlight,” is a segment where any individual can apply and become a host to discuss issues important to him/her. A KPFT staff engineer will operate the control board and provide technical support. The volunteer producer/host and their guests come to the studio and discuss the topics for which they have prepared.

Both *Community Conversation* and *Community Spotlight* are entirely open to the public, and thus are included as participation-oriented programs.

## 3.2 RESEARCH METHODS

### 3.2.1 Participatory Ethnography

To provide a context of how community radio programmers interact with listeners, I used a participatory ethnographic approach to investigate the culture and programmer-listener dynamics at KOOP radio. As an “active-member researcher” (Adler & Adler, 1987), I combined long-term participant observations and ethnographic interviews.

I became involved with KOOP in April 2009 when I co-founded *Chop Suey*, one of the programs included in this analysis, and remain active at the time of this writing<sup>10</sup>. In order to become a certified KOOP programmer and to keep the program on air, I have gone through the initial orientation and training sessions, and attend an annual retraining meeting every year. In addition to programming, I also help with other general duties such as monthly show review, tabling at farm markets to promote the station, membership drive<sup>11</sup>, community outreach meetings, and other general station meetings for at least four hours a month over the past five years. In this process, I observed other KOOP programmers and volunteers and conducted personal and informal interviews with them from time to time. Following the approach of ethnographic research (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995), I took field notes and wrote research diaries about my experiences and reflections while working at KOOP.

Like other collaborative ethnographers (Lassiter, 2005), I consider the individuals under investigation as “consultants” and “co-intellectuals” rather than strangers or

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<sup>10</sup> Chop Suey will discontinue in June 2014 as I will leave Austin.

<sup>11</sup> KOOP conducts membership drive twice a year to raise money for the station. I volunteered to answer listener calls, and helped with mailing gifts to contributors.

objects. During the past five years, I have developed a close relationship with KOOP's programmers, staff members, volunteers and some listeners. After talking with the station's executive director Kim McCarson about this dissertation project, she invited me to help design a general listener survey for the radio station.

For KPFT, I visited the radio station on January 25, 2014, when they were in the middle of the station's winter membership drive. During that day, I toured the office building and studios, and observed the staff and volunteer work at the station.

### **3.2.2 Staff and Volunteer Leaders: In-depth Interviews**

Though the unit of analysis of this study is a radio program, it is helpful to understand the background information about each community radio station. Of particular interest is how each station perceives and measures its listenership. Therefore, I conducted formal in-depth interviews with some staff members and volunteer leaders from each station.

For KOOP, I interviewed with Kim McCarson, the station's executive director, about KOOP's organizational structure and its approaches to measure audience. The interviews with Art Baker and Rush Evans, chair and member of the KOOP's Programming Committee, focused on the station's programming design and decisions. I also talked with Pedro Gatos, Greg Ciotti, David Fruchter, chair and members of the Community Council, about the station's community outreach activities.

For KPFT, I interviewed the station's general manager Duane Bradley and programming director Ernesto Aguilar about the station's structure, listener measurement, programming decisions, and community engagement.

### 3.2.3 Programmers: In-depth Interviews

To answer research questions about (1) how programmers perceive their relationships with listeners, (2) how they interact with listeners in practice, and (3) how new communication technologies influence the relationship and interaction, I interviewed the programmers of the eight programs included in this study.

For KOOP shows, I interviewed Thorne Dreyer and Tracey Schulz from *Rag Radio*, Allan Campbell from *People United*, Stephen Rice and Chase Martin from *OutCast*, and Lorin Lee, Larissa Chu and Ginny Williams, current and former hosts and producers from *Chop Suey*.

For programs at KPFT, I interviewed Duane Bradley for his role as a “facilitator” of *Community Conversation*. For *Community Spotlight*, I interviewed three individuals who participated as hosts. For *KPFT News*, I interviewed Marlo Blue, David Rozycki, and Harry,<sup>12</sup> who are former and current volunteer reporters; and Renée Feltz, a co-founder of *KPFT News* and a former news director.<sup>13</sup> For *Progressive Forum*, I interviewed Wally James, the chief producer of the program, and Lillian Care and Larry Krizan, the co-producers.

### 3.2.4 Listeners: In-depth Interviews and Web-based Survey

To answer the research questions from the perspectives of listeners, I combined the methods of in-depth interview and web-based survey. I recruited participants in multiple ways. For the programs at KOOP, the survey and interview invitation was first announced on each program’s live broadcast in October 2013. I was invited as a guest to

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<sup>12</sup> “Harry” is an alias. The individual requested to be kept anonymous.

<sup>13</sup> I have contacted Tucker Wilson, the current news director, three times for an interview. But she said she was too busy to do an in-depth interview at the moment.

discuss the project on *OutCast* and *Rag Radio*; and I explained the project in my own program *Chop Suey*. Programmer of *People United* played my pre-recorded announcement on his show. In the following two weeks, the programmers reminded their listeners of the project in the live broadcasts. In addition, reminders were sent to KOOP's volunteer email list and to the programs' email lists and social networking sites.

With respect to the programs at KPFT, the programmers of *Open Journal*<sup>14</sup> and *KPFT News* played my pre-recorded announcement of the survey and interview invitation on their live broadcasts during the second week of February 2014. The survey and interview invitation was also posted on the station's Facebook page and *KPFT News*' Facebook page. In the following week, the programmers reminded their listeners of the survey and interview invitation in their live broadcasts.

I also used a "snowball" method (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002) to ask recruits to invite other potential listeners to participate in the online survey and in-depth interview. To assure maximum participation, I used all the ways possible to target people who potentially listen to the programs under investigation.

Wally James, the chief producer of *Progressive Forum*, declined the survey request for the show's listeners because he considers that not much interaction take place between the programmers and listeners due to technological difficulties (W. James, email, February 2014). Therefore, I conducted in-depth interviews with the program's listeners instead. I recruited listener participants via contact information provided by the programmers as well as a "snowball" method as described above. The results section will

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<sup>14</sup> Since listeners of the two segments of *Open Journal* largely overlap, one survey was conducted for both segments. But the survey includes questions that ask how respondent participates in each segment.



provide more details about how resources and expertise affect the degree of programmer-audience interaction in community radio programs.

### **3.2.5 Survey Procedure and Protocol**

Listeners were directed to a website ([radio.leiguo.net](http://radio.leiguo.net)) to participate in the survey. To obtain background information about the listeners, the survey includes questions such as whether they listen through traditional FM radio or the Internet, with what communication tools they interact with the programmers, their relationships with the programmers, as well as their basic demographic information. Appendix 1 provides a list of survey questions.

In order to increase the survey responses, I provided small monetary gifts as incentives. For each program, through a random drawing, five \$10 gift cards were given to those who completed the survey.

### **3.2.6 In-depth Interview Procedure and Protocol**

The vast majority of the interviews were conducted in-person or through telephone conversation. I conducted two interviews by emails. The length of the interviews ranged from 20 minutes to two hours. The semi-structured interviews included mostly open-ended questions. Appropriate probes were used during the interviews. Per participants' permission, all the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

I asked each programmer his or her motivation to work as a community radio programmer, his or her perceptions of the producer-audience relationship, the actual communication between the programmer and listeners, and his or her thoughts on how new communication technologies influence the audience interaction and participation. For programmers of content-oriented shows, I specifically asked him or her about the

importance of exchanging ideas with listeners over the broadcast content. For programmers of participation-oriented shows, I asked his or her thoughts on the aspect of audience participation. Appendix 2 provides the list of interview questions for community radio programmers.

With respect to listeners, I asked each listener his or her motivation to listen to the given community radio program, his or her perceptions of the producer-audience relationship, whether the listener interacted with the programmers and for what reasons, and his or her insights on the benefits and challenges that new communication technologies bring to community radio. For individuals who listen to content-oriented programs, I specifically asked them about their thoughts on the viewpoints presented in the programs. For individuals who listen to participation-oriented programs, I asked them about their experiences participating in community radio production, if there is any. Appendix 3 details the interview questions for community radio listeners.

### **3.2.7 An Overview of Research Participants**

A total of 131 listeners responded to the web-based survey, and 70 individuals including staff members, volunteer leaders, programmers, and listeners at KOOP and KPFT participated in the formal in-depth interviews (see Table 3.2). Table 3.2 details the number of participants for each program.

### **3.2.8 Textual Analysis**

Finally, I analyzed all the available text materials that might provide evidence for programmer-audience interactions such as the program blogs and their social networking sites. Moreover, I analyzed the two stations' general listener surveys conducted in recent years.

Programs		Interview (Programmers)	Interview (Listeners)	Survey (Listeners)
KOOP	People United	1	5	17
	Rag Radio	2	7	27
	OutCast	2	7	23
	Chop Suey	3	6	17
	Staff and volunteer leaders: 6			
KPFT	Progressive Forum	3	6	N/A
	KPFT News	4	6	18
	Open Journal <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community Conversation</li> <li>• Community Spotlight</li> </ul>	N/A	10	29
	Staff and volunteer leaders: 2			

Table 3.2: KOOP and KPFT Survey and Interview Participants

### 3.2.9 Data Analysis

The qualitative data in this dissertation consist of participant observation field notes and research diaries, interview transcripts, open-ended question responses in the listener surveys, program blogs, social networking sites, and other relevant documents. Coding took place throughout the process of research when I collected data, took field notes, wrote research diaries, transcribed recorded interviews, and conducted formal data analysis after all fieldwork was done (Saldaña, 2012). The coding process is cyclical rather than linear. I “immersed” myself in the data by closely and repeatedly reading all the collected materials (Borkan, 1999). Based on the initial reading and coding across different sets of data, preliminary themes and patterns and their interrelationships emerged. I then identified a list of analytical categories, each with a detailed description. I conducted another round of coding to relate particular text to each analytical category.

In this round of analysis, I further refined the categories and their variants. In addition, I selected a few individual cases for in-depth analysis (Schmidt, 2004).

Moreover, I treated all the collected data as discursive practices situated in a specific social, cultural and historical context (e.g., Stuart Hall, 1977; Van Dijk, 1991). Therefore, I interpreted the emergent patterns and meanings of the data within the particulate context of this study: U.S. community radio sector in a transforming media environment.

Lastly, quantitative data—e.g., survey responses, online radio streaming and downloading data, the number of posts and comments on social networking sites, etc.—was also analyzed to contextualize the results of qualitative analysis.

## **Chapter 4: An Overview of KOOP and KPFT Structure and Listeners**

For both KOOP and KPFT, listeners play an essential role in the operations at the station level. Both radio stations rely on their listener-volunteers to assist with many different aspects of the organizations. Financially, the majority of the revenue for both stations comes from listener contributions.

On the other hand, though both KOOP and KPFT are nonprofit and community-oriented, they have very different policies and evaluation methods for listenership. While KOOP is predominantly mission-driven, KPFT employs a relatively more pragmatic approach.

### **4.1 AN OVERVIEW OF KOOP STRUCTURE AND LISTENERS**

#### **4.1.1 Studios and Offices**

KOOP radio studios and offices were originally located at 304 E. 5th Street in the center of downtown Austin. In early 2006, two fires reported to be “accidental” broke out there and both knocked the station off the air. At the end of the year, KOOP moved to its new home at 3823 Airport Blvd, a small plaza about four miles from downtown. The plaza also houses *The City Theatre Austin*, a performing arts group, and other local small businesses and venues.

In the new KOOP suite, right next to the entrance in the lobby, people meet, hang out, and work on volunteer duties or other projects. The space can accommodate about a dozen of people and feels packed during membership drives or at other times when more people gather. The same area also hosts a volunteer coordinator’s office desk. There one can frequently find a birthday or sympathy or other greeting card for KOOP members to leave their wishes or blessings for the card recipient. The walls, covered with awards,

posters of the station events or other community activities, and thank-you cards from listeners, provide an index of well-being.

Behind the lobby are two broadcast studios, a main studio for live broadcast and a backup one for production and other purposes. Both studios offer state-of-the-art broadcast equipment because less than ten years KOOP rebuilt its studios and facilities. There is no control room. Programmers broadcast shows and take phone calls in the same room except for membership drives when volunteers answer phones from the backup studio. The suite also includes staff offices, production studios, and a music library.

Overall, the KOOP suite is simply designed, but fairly well equipped for a community radio station. The studios look “professional” to some newcomers and can sometimes bring “wow”s. It is not unusual to see new programmers or guests take pictures beside the broadcast equipment and “show off” their radio experience to families and friends (field notes, March 2013). But the small station also occasionally “disappoints” others. As a *Chop Suey* guest described her first impression of the radio station, “it is not as fancy as I thought a ‘radio station’ would look” (Mingmei<sup>15</sup>, interview, February 2014).

#### **4.1.2 A Cooperatively Run Community Radio**

KOOP radio is the only cooperatively run all-volunteer community radio station in the United States. That means the station is 100 percent owned and governed by its members. Anyone can be a member of the station by becoming a radio programmer, a volunteer, or a listener-member by donating a small amount of money (\$35) to the station. Among its 150 active volunteers, 90 serve radio programmers. There are about

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<sup>15</sup> All the interviewed listeners are kept anonymous and referred with aliases.

1,750 paid listener-members. The volunteers help with all levels of station duties such as administrative work, radio production, technical maintenance, community outreach, and office cleanups.

In a cooperatively run organization, members vote for candidates of the station's governing bodies including the Board of Directors, the Programming Committee, and the Community Council. Only a few staff run the day-to-day operational activities of the station. Currently, it relies on four paid staff members, two full-time and two part-time: executive director, development director, financial assistant, and volunteer coordinator. In other words, all the other positions including programmers are volunteers and unpaid.

#### **4.1.3 Listeners as Programmers**

Anyone can apply and become a certified radio programmer at KOOP. Many current programmers are long-term KOOP listeners. The station offers free training workshops on a regular basis for applicants to learn the FCC policies<sup>16</sup> and use of broadcast studio and equipment. All applicants must pass a written and a control board operation test, and apprentice with an existing program before becoming a certified programmer. The tests are straightforward and easy to pass. KOOP allows applicants additional opportunities to re-try if they fail the tests. After receiving the certificate, one can create his or her own program depending on the availability of the station's timeslot opening, or join a current program as a member of the collective.

#### **4.1.4 Decisions on Programming**

The Programming Committee—an elected committee of seven active programmers—makes programming decisions at KOOP. For example, they review

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<sup>16</sup> The programmers must follow basic FCC rules on air. For example, they are not allowed to promote commercial products on air; they cannot use profane and obscene language.

program renewals and new program applications every season.<sup>17</sup> During the past few years, the number of new show applications ranged from two to 12 each season. The Committee meets and discusses whether the existing programs or new applications conform to KOOP’s mission statement, which is “to provide high quality, innovative, and diverse community-oriented programming to Austin with an emphasis on those communities that are ignored or underserved by mainstream media” (KOOP, n.d.). The Committee prioritizes applications that focus on unique subject matters or underserved communities that are not yet covered in the current programming schedule. Overall, “mission statement is the most important criteria we rely on,” said Art Baker, current chair of the Programming Committee (A. Baker, interview, January 2014).

To decide about show renewals, the committee members also evaluate whether programmers comply with the station’s volunteer hour requirements. At KOOP, each programmer must complete a certain amount of volunteer hours<sup>18</sup> (besides programming hours) in order to keep the show on air. The rationale affirms that the programmers do not “own” the airtime, and therefore they have to “earn” it by contributing volunteer work.

Individual programmers’ personal concerns also factor among the Committee considerations in designing the programming schedule. For example, *Chop Suey* originally aired on Friday afternoons. The collective requested a weekend timeslot

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<sup>17</sup> Starting this year, KOOP changed a season from six months to one year. In other words, the Programming Committee members reviewed show applications every six months before 2014, and now review applications once a year. They made this change to allow the Programming Committee more time to work on other things (e.g., listener survey) in addition to reviewing the applications. To be sure, the Committee will still be responsible for the programming change (e.g., a programmer quits because of his or her life change) in the middle of the season.

<sup>18</sup> Each programmer has to complete several hours of regular volunteering activities each month, and the number of hours depends on the length of each program. In addition, everyone has to spend ten hours each on the biannual membership drive.



because that was the only way to keep the show on the air. Its members were mostly college students who were not available on weekdays. The Programming Committee therefore moved the program to Saturday afternoon. The meetings about programming decisions are open to all station members, but decisions are made by majority vote among the seven Committee members. Depending on the timeslot opening availability each season, some individuals might be able to launch a new program at the time of application, whereas others might wait from several months to two years.

While programming decisions are mainly mission-driven, they also reflect the radio market in Austin. For example, the Committee intentionally schedules music programming instead of news and public affairs content shows between 4:30-6:00 p.m. on weekdays because at that time KUT—an Austin-based listener-supported public radio station and the membership station of NPR for the central Texas—airs *All Things Considered*, one of the highest rated news programs at the station. KOOP made this decision to avoid direct competition with KUT, which Baker believes is the “closest animal on the board” (A. Baker, interview, January 2014).

#### **4.1.5 Community Participation**

The current KOOP programming includes shows that serve Indigenous people, Asian/Asian Americans, Latinos/as, elders, LGBT, women, people with disabilities, youth and other underserved communities. In order to further encourage community participation, members of the Community Council host a half-hour show *Community Outreach* that intentionally features individuals and groups in the community that are not covered in the other current programming.

However, the diversity of community participation remains an issue at KOOP. Pedro Gatos, chair of the Community Council, and many other volunteers express concern about observations that the majority of KOOP programmers and volunteers are White and mostly are males (Gatos, interview, March 2014). It even happened that some programmers aired culturally inappropriate content that offended minority and underserved communities. For example, the station suspended David Fruchter—a White male programmer— for three weeks because he played a track by the activist poet Saul Williams (an African American artist), which contained several uses of the “n-word.” With no racist intention at all, Fruchter first felt KOOP was engaging in censorship by not allowing him to air certain content containing the “n-word.” He later realized that the airing of the “n-word” was hurtful to African American programmers and listeners regardless of context and that “the issue was more complicated than one of simple censorship” (D. Fruchter, email, March 2014).

Due to these observations and incidents, the Community Council formed a Cultural Sensitivity and Diversity Subcommittee in late 2013 to address diversity issues at the station. The Subcommittee includes ten KOOP programmers and volunteers from diverse backgrounds. Fruchter also joined this initiative “for the most part to listen and support” (D. Fruchter, email, March 2014). The Subcommittee seeks to make KOOP a more welcoming environment for people from marginalized communities to participate. Their planned measures include conducting more community outreach, making recommendations for a policy change in the station, and incorporating diversity education in orientation, training and daily programming. To assist in this effort, the station paid a professional consultant with experience in diversity management.

#### 4.1.6 Listeners as Financial Sponsors

As a nonprofit organization, KOOP receives financial support through listener donations, small business underwritings<sup>19</sup>, and foundation and government grants. Take the station's revenue and expenses of 2012 as an example. Donations from individuals and local business supporters accounted for more than 75% of its revenue of about \$270,000. The revenue was used to cover staff salaries, station events, administration expenses and fundraising activities (K. McCarson, email, March 2014).

The station conducts a membership drive twice a year, each lasting about three weeks. Listeners and local business members call the station or go to the station's website to make contributions. In the past few years, the goal of each drive ranged from \$62,000 to \$75,000. Before 2013, the station could always reach their goals; many times they were even able to raise the needed amount of funds prior to the final day of the drive. However, the two membership drives in 2013 did not fulfill the station's goals. Kim McCarson, the KOOP executive director, suggests that one reason might be the heightened competition from new radio stations in the Austin market<sup>20</sup> (K. McCarson, interview, January 2014). To fill the funding gap, the station ended up conducting an extra "mini-drive" in the summer.

Many listeners pledge not only because they support the station, but also because they like a specific program. Therefore, they purposefully choose to donate during that program's airtime as a sign of specific support. Therefore, the funding each program can

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<sup>19</sup> According to FCC, "underwriting" is a form of financial sponsorship by local businesses or other nonprofits in exchange for a mention of their product or service in the station's programming. Unlike advertising in commercial media, the underwriting announcements may only provide basic, "value-neutral" information of the product or service rather than actively solicit listener purchases.

<sup>20</sup> For example, a new radio station KUTX went on air in January 2013, providing an all-music service. Its long-established sister station, KUT, then started to adopt an all-news, talk format programs. Both stations are listener-supported public radio stations.

raise largely varies. A few popular, long-standing music programs make significant financial contributions to the station during membership drives. However, many other programs might receive only a few listener pledges. Take the station's Saturday lineup as an example. Three music programs *Jamaican Gold*, *Strictly Bluegrass* and *The Lounge Show* could each bring in around \$5,000-6,000 per membership drive. Other programs like *Chop Suey* could only contribute several hundreds. Many KOOP programmers agree that a small number of popular music programs, like the three above-mentioned ones, serve as the financial backbones of the station. Those shows to some extent "subsidize" less popular programs.

#### **4.1.7 Funding versus Mission**

Regardless of the amount each program raises during membership drives, all the funding belongs to the station to cover the expenses of the entire station's operations. Further, each program's funding performance only affects the programming decision to a minimum extent. For program that attracts substantial funds during membership drives, the Programming Committee might keep assigning the same timeslot to that program. But indeed, no program has ever been canceled or treated differently because of its "poor" performance during membership drives.

Consider *Chop Suey* again as an example. Though it is not necessarily a show that brings a substantial amount of listener donations to the station, it is assigned to the 4:00-5:00 p.m. slot on Saturdays, a prime time at KOOP. The Programming Committee considers *Chop Suey* "the ultimate KOOP mission show" (R. Evan, interview, February 2014), meaning that it serves an underserved community in town. They worry less about the funding potential of the program. As Barker emphasizes:

I always said that, I never want to serve on a programming committee that looks at membership drive turnout and say, “That show just didn’t bring in any money. I think we are gonna have to cut that loose.” I never want to be in that position because the content we offer, ideally, is that no other station in this town will try and do. We are aiming at less affluent area of the community. I think we have to understand that (A. Barker, interview, January 2014).

Though some KOOP programmers and volunteers also agree that evaluating the amount of donations can be a practical way to determine the degree of listener support for a particular program, they do not feel comfortable with the approach. Rush Evan, who used to work in an advertising-driven commercial radio station, is now a KOOP programmer and a member of the Programming Committee. He is one of many KOOPers who are not comfortable with donations deciding the fate of a program. As he states, “we’re a society that lives and dies by sales and profit motive. But KOOP doesn’t have that, although we have to have money to survive too...But I’ll just say this: I’m glad KOOP’s different from that” (R. Evan, interview, February 2014).

#### **4.1.8 A Vague Understanding of Audience**

KOOP staff and programmers do not grasp an accurate understanding of their audience. In part due to a concern over the budget, KOOP cannot afford the radio rating services provided by companies such as Arbitron (now Nielsen Audio). When such services were cheaper about six years ago, KOOP subscribed to two different rating services and found that their weekly unique listenership numbered 13,000 according to one service, and 40,000 from another. Not only did these two findings contradict each

other, neither source was necessarily accurate due to multiple technical difficulties in measuring radio audience back then (K. McC Carson, interview, January 2014).

Apart from the budget concerns, many KOOP members believe that even though such radio rating services can be beneficial to the station, they are not necessary. Again, they believe their mission rather than the listener size or demographics drives the programming decisions at KOOP.

Therefore, without the assistance of external rating services, KOOP staff and programmers hardly know how many listeners tune in to the station or how many people listen to a particular program. Their idea about audience comes from other data such as membership drive, online listener statistics, listener surveys, and direct listener feedback from various communication channels.

### ***Membership Drive***

The biannual membership drive performance is a major source for the station to keep track of their followers. After each drive, the executive director announces the total raised funding amount in a station-wide meeting and then emails the results to all the programmers and volunteers.

Volunteer phone answerers also ask contributors to provide comments when they pledge. These comments offer insights into contributors' motivations for listening to KOOP and in their willingness to pledge. In particular, the station's executive director and some volunteers analyzed the 709 pledge forms collected in their 2011 membership drive. In this drive, 39% of the contributors said they liked the music programming, while 7% enjoyed the talk shows. In addition, 12% indicated they listened mainly because of the DJ's personality.

### ***Online Listener Statistics***

After KOOP started to provide online streaming services to its listeners in 2003, the streaming data became another source of listener statistics. The number of unique online listeners ranges from five to 60, with the number usually peaking during the mid day (see Figure 4.1). These statistics also indicate the number of real time online listeners. Such data are available to all programmers and volunteers.

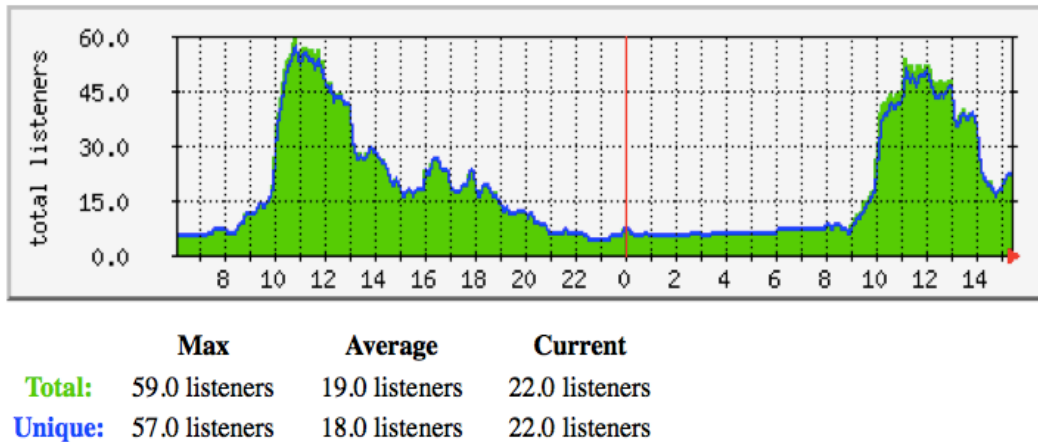


Figure 4.1: An Example of KOOP Online Listener Statistics

*Note:* The screenshot was taken at 2:30 p.m., February 27, 2014 when *Rag Radio* was on.

### ***Station-wide Listener Surveys***

KOOP staff and volunteers occasionally conduct their own listener surveys and focus groups. One survey in 2011 shed some light on the station’s listenership. The web-based survey was sent out to KOOP’s emailing list of about 3,000 listeners. These people provided email addresses to the station either when they made pledges or when they participated in station events. In other words, these survey results mainly provide insights into a particular segment of KOOP listeners—the most loyal listeners and supporters and those who had access to the Internet.

Table 4.1 compares the survey results with the 2010 City of Austin demographic profile. The data indicate that KOOP had more male than female listeners. The majority of its listeners were middle-aged, older than the general population in the city. In terms of race and ethnicity, KOOP listeners were predominantly White. Further, these listeners were better educated than the general population.

	<b>KOOP (2011 Listener Survey)</b>	<b>City of Austin (U.S. Census, 2010)</b>
<b>Gender</b>	Male: 57% Female: 43%	Male: 51% Female: 49%
<b>Age</b>	18-24 years old: 1% 25-34 years old: 18% 35-44 years old: 27% 45-54 years old: 29% 55-64 years old: 23% Over 65 years old: 1%	20-24 years old: 11% 25-34 years old: 21% 35-44 years old: 15% 45-54 years old: 12% 55-64 years old: 9% Over 65 years old: 7%
<b>Race/Ethnicity<sup>1</sup></b>	White: 85% Latino/Hispanic: 7% African American: 1% Asian: 1% American-Indian: 1% Multi-racial/other: 5%	White: 68% Latino/Hispanic: 35% African American: 8% Asian: 6% American-Indian: 1% Multi-racial/other: 3%
<b>Education</b>	High school graduate: 2% Some college: 23% Associate's degree: 11% Four-year college or university diploma/degree: 35% Post-graduate/professional education: 29%	High school graduate: 17% Some college: 19% Associate's degree: 5% Four-year college or university diploma/degree: 28% Post-graduate/professional education: 27%

Table 4.1: 2011 KOOP Listener Survey<sup>21</sup>; 2010 City of Austin Demographic Profile

*Note:*

1. The six percentages in 2010 City of Austin demographic profile may add to more than 100 percent because individuals may report more than one race.

At the time of this writing, KOOP staff and volunteers are working on another station-wide online listener survey. Unlike previous surveys and listener analyses, which

<sup>21</sup> The survey result also reflects KOOP listeners outside of Austin. But the percentage of local versus out-of-town listeners is unknown.



were mainly for the purpose of seeking business underwriters, this ongoing survey is the first one that focuses on listeners' thoughts about the programming content. While the management and the Programming Committee always wanted to conduct such a survey, they did not have the time and resources to do so until this year (A. Baker, interview, January 2014). Baker suggests that that the Committee might consider incorporating listener feedback into its programming decisions in the future.

### *Other Activities*

KOOP staff and programmers also learn about their listeners through other station-wide activities and communication channels. For example, KOOP recently held its 19th annual pajama-themed birthday party and fundraiser at Spider House Ballroom, a popular bar and an eclectic event venue in Austin. Some KOOP programmers also volunteer to help with the station's tabling at farmers' markets and many different cultural festivals where they can directly interact with listeners.

In addition to phone calls and emails, KOOP staff and programmers also use various social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter to promote the station's activities and individual programs. More than 2,900 people "liked" the station's Facebook pages and nearly 5,000 follow its Twitter channel.

Overall, although radio rating data are not available, KOOP staff and programmer learn about their audiences through various ways. Almost all the station staff and volunteer leaders I interviewed used the word "curious" to describe typical KOOP listeners. As McCarson states, KOOP reaches "people who are just curious about other cultures or things [they] don't hear about on commercial radio" (K. McCarson, interview, January 2014).

## **4.2 AN OVERVIEW OF KPFT STRUCTURE AND LISTENERSHIP**

### **4.2.1 Offices and Studios**

KPFT studios and business offices are located in a 1915-era house at 419 Lovett Blvd., a residential neighborhood three miles from downtown Houston. Compared with the KOOP suite, it is much more spacious and accommodates more station members and visitors. Yet it feels “homey” at the same time. As a KPFT listener described, “It’s very inviting to come in. [When] you walk into their main lobby, you really feel like you are in somebody’s house rather than [a radio station]” (Wallace, interview, February 2014).

From the lobby to the meeting room, all walls are decorated with handcrafted cards and paintings from listeners, awards, Pacifica’s slogans, pictures of station activities, and even decorations for different cultures such as a pair of Chinese Spring Festival couplets. Surrounding the meeting rooms are the station’s music library, its broadcast studios, control rooms, and production studios. The staff offices are on the second floor of the house. A typical KPFT tour includes a stop at a display room where visitors can see the remnants of the destroyed transmitter from the first KKK attack in May 1970. A recent addition in that room is the glass window with a bullet hole from the 2005 drive-by shooting. In the backyard KPFT hosts gatherings or BBQ parties for programmers, volunteers and listeners to meet and talk.

Listeners are welcome to come down to the station and volunteer. The day I conducted the fieldwork at KPFT, many schools and companies were closed because of the severe freezing weather in Houston. Spontaneously several people came over to the station and joined the scheduled volunteers to help take phone calls for the station’s membership drive.

#### **4.2.2 A Branch of the Pacifica Foundation Network**

The Pacifica Foundation Radio network has two levels of governance: a national board, representing the Pacifica Foundation as license holders, and each station's local board. Like KOOP, members of KPFT including listener-members, volunteers and staff members vote for the local Board of Directors. Any person who donates at least \$40 or volunteers for a certain amount of time can become a member of KPFT, thereby eligible to vote. Currently, KPFT has about 8,000 paid listener-members and 240 active volunteers who participate in radio programming and various other station activities. There are ten paid staff members, five full-time and five part-time, including general manager, programming director, news director, Webmaster, broadcasting engineers, and other coordinators. Again, all other positions are unpaid.

#### **4.2.3 Decisions on Programming**

Similar to KOOP, anyone can propose a new program or participate in the existing broadcasting team at KPFT. Differently, here, the programming director is mainly in charge of the station's programming decisions. Ernesto Aguilar, the current KPFT programming director, evaluates the performance of existing programs and reviews new program applications. The Program Council, an elected body of 12 members, serves an advisory role and makes recommendations about programming. But programming decisions ultimately are the program director's responsibility (KPFT, 2009).

Like their counterparts in KOOP, the programming director and the Program Council also make decisions based on whether a proposal or a current show fulfills the station's mission. KPFT defines itself as a "listener-supported, commercial free, people powered, free speech radio from Houston" on its website homepage, [www.kpft.org](http://www.kpft.org). As a

branch of the Pacifica Radio Foundation network, KPFT also follows the Foundation's mission statement, which can be summarized as (1) for educational purposes, (2) independent and self-sustaining, (3) to provide an outlet for creative activities; (4) to create mutual understanding among diverse groups, and (5) to provide information alternative to mainstream media through radio broadcasting (KPFT, n.d.-b).

Compared with KOOP, new program application at KPFT is much more competitive. The station receives about 75 applications over the course of a year, but the broadcasting schedule might only have one on-air opening or even no opening at all. In addition, that one open slot is usually between 2:00 and 5:00 a.m., which can hardly fit the schedules of most applicants. However, a wait for an ideal timeslot such as in the evening can be as long as six years. Shows that serve the station's mission and offer unique subject matters will be considered first. The programming director also rejects quite a number of applications when the proposed content does not fit the station's need. For example, if the proposed subject matter or served community has already been included in the programming schedule, Aguilar rejects the application.

Once a proposed program is approved, the new programmer(s) receives a copy of the KPFT Operations Guide to learn radio broadcast standards, and attends training as needed. Those who fail to have their own programs approved are encouraged to participate in the station at all other levels. For example, one can participate as a radio host in *Community Spotlight*, the second half of *Open Journal*, or join a current program as a member of the collective.

On the other hand, KPFT's programming decisions take the size of listenership into consideration as much as its mission. As discussed in Chapter 3, the management at

KPFT always works on the balance between mission-driven programming (e.g., community-oriented public affair programs) and music programming, which more likely will attract listeners. Today, the station's weekday programming features a 50-50 talk-music mix. Weekend programming predominantly provides music.

#### **4.2.4 Community Participation**

The current KPFT community-oriented programming serve underrepresented communities such as Native Americans, Latino/Hispanics, African Americans, gays and lesbians, workers, and prisoners. Since the programming schedule does not usually open slots for new programs, the station set up the aforementioned daily open-access program *Open Journal* with two unique segments, which will be analyzed in Chapter 5.

Still, the issue of diversity also concerns those who work at KPFT. The majority of its programmers and volunteers are White and elderly according to both the station manager and the programming director (D. Bradley, interview, January 2014; E. Aguilar, interview, January 2014). To address the diversity issue in the station, the staff actively reaches out to different ethnic communities and young people in the city and encourages them to participate in radio production. For example, during the past five years, KPFT has worked with a Houston-based nonprofit organization known as Writers in the School on a project to have elementary students read their poems on the radio in April, the national poem month.

#### **4.2.5 Listeners as Financial Sponsors**

Like KOOP, KPFT also financially depends on its listener donations through its four on-air membership drives every year. Take the year of 2012 for example. On-air listener donations contributed nearly \$1 million, which accounted for more than three

fourths of the station's revenue that year (KPFT, 2012). The rest of the revenue came from grants such as the Community Service Grant, and donations through other means such as community fundraiser events. The station revenue covered staff salaries, programming expenses (e.g., tower rent, subscription fees for nationally syndicated programs), equipment, administrative expenses, and development expenses for funding activities.

Also similar to KOOP, the amount each program can bring to the station varies at KPFT. Consider the 2014 KPFT winter membership drive. Popular music program *Lonestar Jukebox* and nationally syndicated program *Democracy Now!* each brought more than \$10,000 to the station. The majority of the other programs contributed from several hundreds to thousands. A small number of programs, those at midnight or in the early morning, received funds of less than \$100.

Each major membership drive aims for around \$300,000. During the past two years, KPFT met 65% to 90% of the goal. The station remains self-sustainable but is running very close to its margins. "It would be very interesting to see where we are in six months," said Aguilar (E. Aguilar, interview, January 2014).<sup>22</sup>

#### **4.2.6 Funding versus Listener Engagement**

A major difference between KOOP and KPFT lies in their attitudes towards listener donations. At KPFT, the amount of money a program brings to the station during membership drive serves as an important factor to determine the fate of a program. A new program usually has a 90-day window to demonstrate its performance. Each program sets a monetary goal, determined by that of the previous program in the same

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<sup>22</sup> Even worse, the stability of KPFT has also been threatened by the financial crisis in WBAI, the New York affiliate of the Pacifica Network. KPFT to some extent subsidizes WBAI by covering the subscription fees of some syndicated news programs.

timeslot. If the program cannot achieve the goal during the 90-day window, the director Aguilar meets with the programmers and then gives them a time period to improve. If the program still fails to make the financial goal, Aguilar may cancel it. Aguilar also reviews membership performances of existing radio programs on a regular basis. During Aguilar's tenure as programming director at KPFT since 2005, he has canceled about 40 programs because they fail their financial goal in the membership drives.

Aguilar says this is the only fair way and the most pragmatic method to determine whether a program should be kept on air given factors such as the large amount of show applications every year and the tight budget of the station. He believes that the amount of donations a program receives directly correlates to the community engagement with the program. So, if a program cannot win the hearts of the listeners in the allotted time, it should be replaced with another program that can better serve the communities.

For programs that serve a less affluent community, the station gives the programmers some leeway provided that they can present evidence to the programming director verifying the existence of that audience. In practice, Aguilar regularly calls and checks with community leaders and members to ensure that each program reaches the target listening community. Still, Aguilar believes, "if the community cares about and is interested in it [the program], even it is a very poor community, they figure out ways to support you" (E. Aguilar, interview, January 2014). He added that several well-supported programs at KPFT do reach people who live and work in the margins.

Under the pressure to meet financial goals, many volunteer programmers at KPFT make an extra effort to raise funds during membership drive weeks. Wally James, the chief producer of *Progressive Forum*, usually invites well-known guest speakers to help

pitch the program (W. James, interview, January 2014). Volunteer programmers at *Vegan World Radio* even conduct fundraising through book sales outside the station in order to reach their financial goal (Scott, interview, January 2014).

#### **4.2.7 A Systematic Understanding of Audience**

In addition to membership drive results, KPFT uses other audience metrics and other approaches to evaluate both station and individual program listenership.

##### ***Radio Ratings***

With a relatively bigger budget than KOOP, KPFT subscribed to Arbitron radio rating service (now Nielsen Audio) regularly to understand its audience. According to the most recent data, KPFT reached an average of weekly listenership of over 135,000 in 2012, which accounted for less than 1% of the entire radio audience in the Houston-Galveston market (The Nielsen Company, 2012).

Rating services also provide audience data for each time period of the day. Consider the last three months of 2012. On weekdays, the number of listeners started to increase during the morning commute time when the syndicated programs *Democracy Now!* and *BBC News* were on air. The number of listeners during these two shows ranged from 2,000 to 8,500. About 6,500 listeners tuned in the first half hour of *Open Journal*, 9:00 to 9:30 a.m., and then the number decreased to 3,000 listeners during the second half of the program, 9:30 to 10:00 a.m. KPFT's midday music programming between 10:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m. attracted an average of 4,000 listeners. In the afternoons and evenings, the size of the listeners further diminished. For example, when *KPFT News* was on air between 4:00 to 4:30 p.m., about 2,500 listeners tuned in. During *Progressive Forum's* broadcast time between 7:00 to 9:00 p.m., an average of 1,500 persons listened to KPFT.



Over the weekend, a few popular morning and midday music programs reached up to 20,000 listeners in the Houston-Galveston area. These music shows also usually raise the most amount of money during membership drives. For example, *Lonestar Jukebox*, one of KPFT's biggest moneymaker music programs, broadcasts 9:00 to 12:00 a.m. on Saturdays. The data show that an average 10,000 people listened to that program every week.

The Arbitron radio rating data were accessible to all programmers at KPFT. However, KPFT stopped renewing the radio rating service in 2013 because its budget could not afford the subscription fees.

With respect to listeners' demographic information, listeners of KPFT tend to be elderly. According to the most recent and available Arbitron data in 2012, persons over 55 years old represented nearly half (45%) of the KPFT listener population. In addition, the KPFT listeners are typically White, middle-class and they usually identify with liberal, progressive politics (E. Aguilar, interview, January 2014; D. Bradley, interview, January 2014).<sup>23</sup> In fact, Corporation for Public Radio informed KPFT in October 2013 that it would lose part of its funding due to the declines in its minority listenership. The grant requires more than 40% minority audience; the percentage at KPFT was 34% (Carr, 2013; Save KPFA, 2014).

### ***Station-wide Listener Survey***

KPFT also conducts station-wide listener surveys to better understand its audience. The staff finished one in September 2013 about the KPFT radio listening habits. The online survey was announced on air and sent to KPFT's emailing list. A total of 429

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<sup>23</sup> The details of KPFT's listener demographic data are not available. Both the programming director and the general manager provide the information based on their memories about the most recent Arbitron radio rating data. KPFT's online streaming data are also not available.

listeners responded. Results show that nearly two thirds (58%) of the survey respondents had been listening to KPFT for more than a decade. More than half of the respondents (54%) mostly listened to KPFT in the car while driving. As with the membership drive and the radio rating results, the majority of listeners preferred to listen to music program (76%) and syndicated news shows (62%). Over one third of the listeners tuned into KPFT local news (35%) and locally produced programs (42%).

### ***Other Activities***

Like KOOP, KPFT also receives phone calls, emails, and organizes station-wide activities to interact with their audience members. When it comes to social media, KPFT maintains a Facebook page with more than 11,000 “likes” and a Twitter account with about 2,700 followers. The KPFT staff and volunteers use these two sites to post information about the station as well as about individual programs.

### **4.3 SUMMARY**

Driven by different mindsets and budget concerns, KOOP and KPFT employ different approaches to understand their audiences. At KOOP, the limited budget and a predominantly mission-driven attitude prevent its programmers from obtaining a more systematic understanding of their audience. Also out of a realistic concern, KPFT staff and programmers rely on listener metrics and each show’s membership drive performance to make programming decisions. Overall, the two radio stations keep financially self-sustainable but both operate on a very tight budget.

Each individual programmer also understands his or her audiences through direct listener feedback from a number of channels: community events, phone calls, emails, and

their own social network sites. The next chapter will detail how individual programmers interact with their listeners.

## **Chapter 5: Audience Participation in Community Radio**

The dissertation examines how community radio programmers and listeners perceive their interrelationships (R1). Results show that it is the bond between the programmers and listeners and thus a sense of community that distinguishes community radio programs from other media outlets in this transforming mediascape. Among other sentiments, the listeners have more faith in the information provided in community radio programs than that in corporate or digital media outlets.

Another important goal of this study is to look for empirical evidence of audience interaction and participation in practice (R2). The research shows that, due to resource constraints and other factors, the actual programmer-audience interaction in the analyzed eight community radio programs is limited in various degrees. In most cases, the dialogue only takes place among people who share at least some similar perspectives.

In response to the research question how the new communication technologies have influenced the ways community radio programmers communicate with their listeners (R3), the study finds that a digital divide exists in the community radio sector. Regardless, listeners believe that community radio symbolizes a token of democracy and thus deserves a space in the digital era.

Table 5.1 presents the listener survey results of the programs at KOOP and KPFT. The data detail how people listen to community radio, whether they interact with the programmers, and in what ways. Demographic information of respondents is also provided. The results demonstrate commonalities as well as some differences among the community radio programs analyzed. What follows is a detailed discussion about the most salient themes that emerged from the analysis.

	KOOP SHOWS					KPFT SHOWS		
	Rag Radio (n=27)	People United (n=17)	OutCast (n=23)	Chop Suey (n=17)	Total (N=84)	Open Journal (n=29)	KPFT News (n=18)	Total (N=47)
<b>The Way to Listen</b>								
Traditional Radio	44%	47%	48%	59%	49%	77%	91%	39.5%
Streaming Live	22%	12%	24%	41%	24%	17%	4.5%	36%
Podcast/Online Archive	30%	35%	24%	0	23%	3%	0	23%
Other	4%	6%	4%	0	4%	3%	4.5%	1.5%
<b>Relationship with the Programmer(s)</b>								
Pure listener	22%	44%	41%	14%	30%	N/A	84%	N/A
Friend or acquaintance	67%	44%	47%	79%	60%	N/A	5%	N/A
Other	11%	12%	12%	7%	10%	N/A	11%	N/A
<b>Interaction &amp; Participation</b>								
Talk in person	59%	65%	67%	47%	60%	N/A	53%	N/A
Call the studio	11%	0	10%	13%	9%	74% <sup>a</sup>	20%	N/A
Email	33%	47%	19%	27%	31%	N/A	40%	N/A
Facebook	26%	N/A	43%	47%	37%	N/A	60%	N/A
Twitter	0	N/A	19%	0	6%	N/A	7%	N/A
On the show	22%	12%	38%	18%	23%	32% <sup>b</sup>	7%	N/A
<b>Place to Listen</b>								
Local (Austin or Houston)	63%	81%	94%	85%	78%	90%	84%	87%
Non-local	37%	19%	6%	15%	22%	10%	16%	13%
<b>Age</b>								
18-24 years old	0	6%	0	21%	5%	3.5%	0	1.5%
25-34 years old	4%	25%	23.5%	36%	19%	3.5%	26%	14.5%
35-44 years old	4%	25%	41%	7%	18%	24%	16%	20%
45-54 years old	11%	13%	23.5%	29%	18%	17%	26%	21.5%
55-64 years old	18%	6%	6%	0	10%	45%	16%	30.5%

Over 65 years old	63%	25%	6%	7%	31%	7%	16%	11.5%
<b>Gender</b>								
Male	59%	38%	77%	50%	57%	62%	53%	57.5%
Female	42%	56%	23%	50%	42%	38%	42%	40%
Other	0	6%	0	0	1%	0	5%	2.5%
<b>Education</b>								
High School Graduate	0	0	6%	0	1%	10%	5%	7.5%
Some College	15%	12%	12%	0	11%	7%	37%	22%
College Graduate	33%	19%	47%	50%	37%	31%	32%	31.5%
Post Graduate	52%	69%	35%	50%	51%	52%	26%	39%
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>								
White	88%	81%	65%	36%	72%	76%	68%	72%
Hispanic/Latino	4%	6%	24%	7%	10%	3.5%	0	2%
Asian	4%	0	0	50%	11%	7%	5%	6%
Black/African American	0	0	0	0	0	3.5%	11%	7%
Native American	0	0	0	0	0	0	5%	2.5%
Other or mixed	4%	13%	11%	7%	8%	10%	11%	10.5%

Table 5.1: Listener Survey Results

Notes:

- a. It refers to the number of people who called *Community Conversation*.
- b. It refers to the number of people who participated in *Community Spotlight* as a host.

## 5.1 PROGRAMMER-LISTENER RELATIONSHIP

### 5.1.1 A Reality-based Imagined Community

#### *Personal Relationship*

Many personal relationships exist between community radio programmers and listeners. Especially at KOOP, listeners include friends, families, co-workers, neighbors, or acquaintances of the programmers (K. McCarson, interview, January 2014). Among the four KOOP shows analyzed, more than half (60%) of the 84 survey respondents reported they know the programmers personally (see Table 5.1). For example, 18 or two thirds of the listeners who participated in the *Rag Radio* survey indicated they know the programmer Thorne Dreyer in person. Nearly half of them were involved in the original *Rag* underground newspaper as a staff member or a reader. Many of these people attend the same activism and community events. As Dreyer said, “we *see* a lot of people who listen to the show” (T. Dreyer, interview, September 2013).

For those listeners who have a personal relationship with the programmers, knowing the voice on air is one of the reasons they tune into the program. Amy, a personal friend of the two *OutCast* hosts and an advocate of LGBT issues, said, “I like the people on the show. I know them. I enjoy hearing what they are doing” (Amy, interview, October 2013).

*Community Spotlight*, an public access program at KPFT, also appeals to the families, friends and coworkers of the hosts: Most of them are typical area residents and many are from marginalized communities in the Houston area. Nkechi, an immigrant originally from West Africa, hosted the program several times to share her experience being an immigrant in the United States. Every time she was on air, her families and

friends from her hometown would stream the show online and listen. Nkechi said in the interview: “They [my family] love it. They said I sounded American. They are proud of me that I am able to go to America and be on an America radio show and do my thing. That’s a big deal. That’s satisfying for me. That’s why I do this” (Nkechi, interview, February 2014).

For both KOOP and KPFT, these personal relationships are essential because they represent networks into various parts of the community (K. McCarter, interview, January 2014; D. Bradley, interview, February 2014). Many of these people who have a personal relationship with the programmers also support the stations financially during membership drives (field notes, September 2012).

### ***Imagined Friendship***

The two community radio stations also reach listeners beyond those who know programmers in person. For example, the majority of the *KPFT News* listeners (84%) reported they are “pure” listeners, meaning that they do not have a personal relationship with the news anchors or reporters (see Table 5.1). Still, whether the listeners know the programmers or not, almost all the interviewees *feel* the “connection” or “friendship” through the airwave. Twelve community radio programmers, and 37 listeners—three-fourths individuals of each group—explicitly articulated this feeling of imagined friendship. In particular, the listeners consider the programmers to be “personal,” “friendly,” “homey,” “humane,” “warm,” and “talking to me.”

One reason the listeners feel closer with the community radio programmers is that they belong to the same identity group or the same geographic area. Frederick, a regular listener of *OutCast*, identifies with the two hosts because they are all from the LGBT



community. Vesta, who listens to *Chop Suey*, perceives the hosts as friends because they are all Asian/Asian Americans. From the perspective of Nora, a listener of *Progressive Forum*, she feels connected with the programmers because they all believe in the values of progressive social change. And indeed, to most of the listeners, especially those who listen to *Community Conversation* and *Community Spotlight*, the community radio programmers and participants are all ordinary residents from the same physical community

Moreover, the listeners sense a more intimate relationship with the community radio programmers because, here, there are no external layers that interject commercial broadcasting. No supervisors, editors, or advertisers intervene between the ones who speak on the radio and the ones who listen. According to Luken, a listener of *Rag Radio*:

I think there is no longer an overbearing eye, there is no big brother trying to look on the show...and tells you what to ask your guests...the imagination is that now the producer is also the guy or woman who's talking to you on the radio (Luken, interview, October 2013).

Wallace, who listens *KPFT News* regularly, also compares community radio to mainstream media when he discusses the relationship between him and the *KPFT News* reporters:

...As far as from a listener standpoint, any time I listen to mainstream news these days I almost have a feeling inside that whatever this guy is saying, he's lying. It's not a truth because I know there are a lot of truths and lies mixed together... I don't feel that about KPFT because I know that even though I don't know the people, I understand they are there to bring it to you straight. So when they come

across the story, I try to approach from the standpoint of, you know, they are being *genuine* with me (Wallace, interview, February 2014).

Like Wallace, many listener respondents in this research project used the word “genuine,” “sincere” and “honest” to describe community radio programmers. This finding is in line with the results of the KOOP station-wide listener survey conducted in 2013. Out of the 152 participants who responded to that survey, 57% agreed that KOOP programmers are best described to be “honest,” and 43% used the word “trusted.” In a society where corporations predominantly own and control news media, this genuineness and sincerity shortens the distance between the community radio programmers and listeners, thus encouraging the construction of an imagined friendship.

### ***Imagined vs. Real Community***

These real and imagined relationships between community radio programmers and listeners serve to build a reality-based imagined community. Almost everyone in the interview said that producing or listening to community radio programs makes them feel like a member in a “community,” “club,” “brotherhood,” or “family.”

Roy’s experience with *Rag Radio* provides a compelling example. He was involved in the original *Rag* back in the 1960s, but now lives in Germany. Roy is a loyal follower of *Rag Radio* and listens to the program almost every week. The program provides a way for him to connect with the Austin-based progressive community in the spirit of 1960s underground culture. He recalled one of his favorite episodes:

One thing that touches me a great deal is that a friend of mine, who was a lawyer, died. *Rag Radio* had a number of his friends on to talk about him. I enjoyed that. They were friendly lawyers back in the 60s/70s that helped out with dissidents

and other kinds of people back on those days. It was nice to hear from a bunch of different people who remembered all the work back then... It makes me feel a little bit in touch with this old friend of mine. It was a nice friendly connection to that (Roy, interview, October 2013).

The community radio programs serve as the glue that connects listeners like Roy to the community, whether it refers to a values identity group or a physical community.

Community radio can also potentially build communities and foster actions in real life. It is the attraction of community feeling that drives people to volunteer at the stations. David Rozycki, a communication-major college student, chooses to intern with *KPFT News* other than other news organization because “KPFT is specifically a easygoing group of people. It’s more like a family, not like a big fancy organization where you have all that hierarchy” (D. Rozycki, interview, February 2014). Thomas is one of the volunteer phone answerers I met when I conducted fieldwork at KPFT. “Just feels good,” said Thomas, “That (volunteering) gives me a way to be involved in the communities” (Thomas, interview, February 2014). Listeners also contribute financially for the same reason. Jared, a listener of *KPFT News*, donates every time there is a membership drive. “I try to give them something, to do my part, because I want to remain a part of my community” (Jared, interview, February 2014). According to the 2013 KPFT station-wide survey, more than 75% of the 429 survey respondents are donating members and 15% used to be donating members.

Moreover, community radio provides a starting point for similar-minded people to meet and further participate in civic activities outside of the radio stations. According to Dreyer, the goal of *Rag Radio* is not just reporting, but also to “build a community that

can work together, and may be involved in activism in the future” (T. Dreyer, interview, September 2013). Kim McC Carson, the executive director of KOOP, best summarizes the idea of a reality-based imagined community:

When we come together and create that network, people meet each other here (KOOP studio) and amazing things happen when that starts to happen. Because they find things they like in common and they share interests. And before you know it somebody is working on this new project, [or] serves some particular community. Relationships develop here (K. McC Carson, interview, January 2014).

### **5.1.2 Education versus Conversation**

Both content-oriented and participation-oriented programs provide information that appeal to listeners. Almost all interviewed listeners said that they are attracted to the unique content and viewpoints presented in the community radio programs, which are unlikely to be heard anywhere else including the online sphere.

Notably, listeners listen to content-oriented programs mainly for their systematic analysis and comprehensive representations of diverse subject matters. They consider it a learning process. On the other hand, people who listen to participation-oriented programs are more interested in hearing the personal side of the story. They feel engaged in a conversation with the programmers.

#### ***Content-oriented Program: A Learning Experience***

The programmer-audience relationship tends to be more didactic in content-oriented community radio programs than that in participation-oriented programs. All the ten hosts and producers of such programs indicated that one of their goals is to educate

listeners. People listen to content-oriented programs because they can learn a diverse range of topics and perspectives and a systematic analysis of the issues.

Seventeen, nearly three-fourths of the listeners who listen to content-oriented programs said they enjoy hearing a broad spectrum of subject matters. Kaitlyn, a self-acclaimed “nerd” with “multiple degrees,” and Cheryl, a young community college student, both find themselves obtaining a better understanding of various issues and can thus better articulate these issues in other occasions.

Ten listeners also said that the depth of the content and expert analyses appealed to them. As Kevin said, “When I listen to [*Progressive Forum*], I know that I’m listening to people who are experts on the subject. So it’s a wonderful source of information” (Kevin, interview, February 2014). Luken, a graduate student in social science, finds the discussions on *Rag Radio* “intellectually inclined.” To him, the program presents much more meaningful analyses of the issues than many commercial media, which often feature “a Democratic talking head and...a Republican talking head in every show that go back and forth” (Luken, interview, October 2013). Joyce, a listener of *People United*, finds the program so deep that she has to fully concentrate while listening: “It’s really dense. I have to kinda just *listen* to it. I can’t really do other things at the same time...I feel enriched by it. I feel my perspectives broadened by listening to the show” (Joyce, interview, October 2013). Though radio is traditionally regarded as a passive, background medium, Joyce listens to a community radio program as if she is “reading” it.

As many of these listeners emphasize, it is the “objective” information and the systemic analyses of the issues featured in the programs that is most attractive to them rather than the hosts’ personal stories or opinions. “It’s not about him (the host),” said

Joyce, who prefers *People United* to some other KOOP talk shows, which sound “a little chatty” to her (Joyce, interview, October 2013). Likewise, Kaitlyn appreciates the solid research Dreyer has done on the issues presented in *Rag Radio*. She likes the fact that Dreyer “is not trying to tell the Thorne Dreyer story” (Kaitlyn, interview, October 2013).

*KPFT News* presents another example of content-oriented community radio program that goes beyond the personal side of the stories. According to Renée Feltz, one of the co-founders of the news department at KPFT, the mission of *KPFT News* is to provide a relatively “fair and balanced” coverage of the news rather than just to offer one set of viewpoints or stories from the programmers. “We (*KPFT News*) are a legitimate media outlet. That’s a different feeling about the news station than just a bunch of hippies playing music, [or] talk[ing] about protests or something. It’s a different dynamic” (R. Feltz, interview, February 2014). Accordingly, Wallace, one of *KPFT News* listeners, appreciates that the program offers “a fresh look” at the news and that in most cases the coverage is not “biased” or “slanted” (Wallace, interview, February 2014).

Overall, listeners of the content-oriented community radio programs expect to hear and to learn a general picture of the story rather than what the hosts have experienced in their own small worlds.

### ***Participation-oriented Program: A Friendly Conversation***

Most programmers and contributors of participation-oriented programs suggest that their goal is to “share” and to “tell a story” in addition to “educate.” Those who talk in such programs are not necessarily experts on the given subject matter. Nor are their viewpoints necessarily established or insightful. Considering themselves members in the community, these programmers seek to create a “conversation” with their listeners.

Stephen Rice, host of *OutCast*, described how he pictures the program: “Even though they (listeners) don’t have a microphone in front of them. But we have a kinda conversation...almost like [in] somebody’s living room. We are just sitting there talking about things, brainstorming ideas, and bringing new things to people” (S. Rice, interview, September 2013).

From the standpoint of listeners, they do enjoy the hosts or other speakers of such programs when they express themselves on certain topics. Nineteen of 23 listeners of participation-oriented programs suggest they are attracted to the personal side of the stories and opinions from *ordinary* people. For example, all ten listeners of *Open Journal*—both *Community Conversation* and *Community Spotlight*—said they want to hear what others in the Houston area say about things such as local government policies, and what others in the community are doing. Eleanor’s favorite example is a discussion in *Community Conversation* about standing while working versus sitting eight hours a day as an option for a healthier lifestyle. She remembered that a truck driver called the station and countered the argument by using his own case as an example. Though it can be a “mundane” conversation between the callers, Eleanor enjoyed this dialogue very much because “it’s very specific. It’s real. It’s very much in their lives right there” (Eleanor, interview, February 2014).

As many listeners illustrate, such participation-oriented community programs are particularly well received by those who are not “members” of the targeted communities. In fact, the community radio stations open windows for listeners to “eavesdrop” on the worlds beyond their everyday experiences.

For example, Barry is not a LGBT person but he uses *OutCast* as a source of information because he enjoys listening to the hosts—two gay men—talking about LGBT-related news and events. As Barry explained, “You know, when Stephen talked about gay marriage. He would be like ‘here is news, which is very important because it affects all of us.’ And they have a personal interest in it. Somehow it makes the news more interesting to listen to” (Barry, interview, October 2013).

Likewise, Don—a dedicated listener of *Chop Suey*—has very limited knowledge about Asian culture but he likes to hear the hosts sharing their personal side of the stories. At one time, *Chop Suey* had four regular hosts: Lorin Lee and Larissa Chu, two Asian American college students with parents originally from Taiwan and Hong Kong; Ginny William, a local Austin resident who has a passion towards East Asian music and culture; and me, a Mainland Chinese student who is studying in the United States. When the hosts talked about culture-related subjects on air, they tended to share thoughts drawing from their direct life experience. Consider the example of a show when the hosts discussed the topic of education and parenthood in reference to the “Tiger Mother,” a Chinese American mother whose book about parenting immediately became controversial.<sup>24</sup> The four hosts discussed their own experience with parents growing up in the United States or in China. Rather than providing a systematic analysis of the topic or reaching any conclusion, the show is more like a casual conversation between friends. Don said, “The conversations are very interesting because you all show the background of your culture [in] what you are talking about. You give me insight of that. I just loved the conversations” (Don, interview, October 2013). Another *Chop Suey* listener George also

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<sup>24</sup> The term is from the 2011 book *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, written by a Chinese American mother Amy Chua who discussed using the Chinese way to raise children in the United States.



had no personal connection with Asia prior to his experience listening to the program. He finds the program “fascinating” by just hearing “young folks...who are from the other side of the world” play the music they listen to and talk about their stories on the radio (George, interview, February 2014).

Similar to Don and George, John is also a White, 45-54 years old, straight, male listener. He became especially interested in the LGBT issues and Asian/Asian American music and culture after he was exposed to *OutCast* and *Chop Suey*. The two programs remind John of his college years, which makes him feel almost like he is entering someone’s dorm room and joining their conversations. Because of the personal relationship built between John and the hosts, he takes a personal interest in these issues to which he might not pay that much attention otherwise. “I remember Vietnam [War] didn’t exist until [my] close friends got involved. That’s the same,” said John (John, interview, October 2013).

In a nutshell, to listeners of participation-oriented programs, the purpose of listening is not necessarily for the sake of an intellectual learning experience. Rather, they enjoy the feeling of having a casual dialogue with the programmers—their friends—whether it is a real friend or a perceived one, whether the friend is from his or her own immediate community.

## **5.2 AUDIENCE INTERACTION AND PARTICIPATION**

### **5.2.1 Community Involvement**

The majority of the community radio programmers—of both content-oriented and participation-oriented programmers—are grounded in their respective communities. The programmers of content-oriented programs are passionate about and involved in the

issues they cover in the radio. Many of them started working with community radio with an activist background. Allan Campbell, programmer of *People United*, said that his journey at KOOP started “by accident:”

In Jan 2003, [when] I was on my way to the Congress Avenue Bridge (near downtown Austin), President Bush was giving his State of Union address that day. So those were opposed to the invasion of Iraq...[had] a protest, [which] blocked the sidewalk of the bridge. A friend of mine was on the radio (KOOP)...So I stopped by the station<sup>25</sup> and asked him if he wanted to come with me to the demonstration... So he was like, “do you want to read this article on air?” I was like “no, that’s ok.” But then I came back and read something.

As an active member in the community, Campbell draws inspirations of show ideas from the demonstrations he goes to. While the program frequently airs speeches and lectures recorded in *MonkeyWrench Books*—a local bookstore and a place where political activists meet and network, Campbell himself is a volunteer in that organization. When he discusses immigrant justice on air, he feels that “I am the guy who should do that show” because of his advocacy experience with the subject matter (A. Campbell, interview, September 2013). Simply put, the program keeps connected to the progressive, activist community in Austin.

Like Campbell, many other content-oriented community radio programmers including Thorne Dreyer from *Rag Radio*, Wally James and Lillian Care from *Progressive Forum*, and Renée Feltz from *KPFT News* also have experience organizing and participating in protests and demonstrations. They feel strongly about educating

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<sup>25</sup> KOOP studios were located in downtown Austin back then.

listeners with the issues and alternative perspectives they are personally involved with or at least concerned about.

Programmers of participation-oriented community radio shows are also in touch with the society, particularly their respective segment of the society. Stephen Rice and Chase Martin, hosts of *OutCast*, support a lot of gay organizations and events in Austin not only by having people on the show, but also by being involved in the organizations themselves. As one of their listeners Jackson said, “They (the hosts) are well connected to the community. They are there” (Jackson, interview, October 2013). Likewise, as a producer of *Chop Suey*, I have been to a number of Asian/Asian American community meetings and events, and volunteered at a local nonprofit organization that deals with domestic violence in Asian families. All these experiences became subjects to discuss on the program.

However, the community members that these community radio programmers interact with only account for a part of their audiences. It remains a challenge for many of them to interact with those beyond their personal circles of the communities.

### **5.2.2 Limited Interaction and Participation**

The majority of interviewees, both programmers and listeners, agree that the community radio programs *should* serve an open forum where listeners are encouraged to express their feedback about the content or to directly participate as a media maker. In practice, without an evaluation system at the station level, the actual interaction between the programmers and listeners varies. While some programs heavily rely on the input from listeners or their direct participation, a couple of others mainly follow their own interests and passion to run the shows without considering much of the audience

feedback. Further, even for programs that do function as an open forum, they might only attract a certain type of listeners to use this forum. In other words, community radio offers a variety of content and options for engagement. Accordingly, listeners respond in a variety of ways.

### ***Content-oriented Programs: Preaching to the Choir?***

The most salient theme in this analysis is that community radio programs, especially content-oriented ones, inevitably attract those seeking content that presents an alternative to mainstream and that they already agree with. Some criticize this interaction as “preaching to the choir.” All the ten programmers and three fourths of the listeners of content-oriented programs expressed this concern about being seen as follow perspectives within a particular spectrum. Five of them literally used the word “choir.” Whether the programmers are willing to communicate with the “non-choir” or not, they end up being engaged in dialogues only within a circle of similar-minded people. This can be both intellectually unchallenging and frustrating.

#### *“Friends” vs. “Strangers”*

Campbell, programmer of *People United*, hesitates to interact with “strangers” on and off the air. Since 2005, Campbell has built an email list of about 400 people. To them he sends out a weekly announcement to promote the upcoming programs. In fact, Campbell knows everyone on the list: they are his friends, guests on the program, or at least acquaintances he personally met through community events. As Campbell explained:

I had a few people who do request [to be added to the email list]. But I don't know. I just am suspicious of these people...I just have been hesitant so far. I kinda like to meet who I am talking to...When I go record things [e.g., speeches,

lectures], people will say, ‘Hey, are you recording for the radio?’ [I would add them to the email list.] It’s like people that I met for 5 minutes. I figure if they are on this event, they have a sense of citizenship (A. Campbell, interview, September 2013).

Campbell’s caution comes in part as a result of the spam emails he receives frequently. Perhaps more importantly, while the programmer wishes to reach people “beyond the choir,” he is more inclined to communicate with “the choir.” Campbell described a listener who called the studio while he was covering the topic of immigrant justice:

Somebody called...[and] said something about horrible crimes that were committed by immigrants. Then I was back on the air and said, ‘U.S. citizens commit crimes all the time. That means nothing, you know.’ *That’s not really my target audience.* Obviously he was just very hostile to the questions we were talking about. So whom I may *want to hear* and whom I end up hearing from are not always the same (A. Campbell, interview, September 2013).

As Campbell noted, the ones he wants to hear from are those who already agree with the viewpoints presented in the program, or at least those who are open-minded with different perspectives.

Campbell’s “choir” listeners do perceive him as an open-minded programmer. All the five *People United* listeners, whether they contacted the program or not, said they feel Campbell is approachable and open for ideas and suggestions. “He’s someone I know. I know he will listen [to my feedback],” said Charles, who said that he does not have the same feeling for other media outlets in the city (Charles, interview, October 2013).

Still, the actual interaction between the programmer and listeners of *People United* is limited. Most of the responses from listeners are compliments and encouragements. Rarely does Campbell actively solicit ideas from listeners. Among other factors, time and resources present constraints for volunteer programmers like Campbell to “deal with listeners.” A later section will elaborate on how such matters affect community radio.

*“The Tendency to Speak with Ourselves”*

*Rag Radio* is better in facilitating a dynamic dialogue between the programmers and listeners as well as among listeners themselves. However, though the program is open to any comments including those from “strangers,” it hardly reaches people outside of their constituency: the “60s desert audience,” a term Dreyer coined.

All seven *Rag Radio* listeners interviewed respect Dreyer as an open-minded alternative media journalist. “Some hosts that I listen to clearly have their own agenda...I never heard that on *Rag Radio*,” said Carola (Carola, interview, October 2013). “I know what his positions are. I don’t think he pushes them,” Kaitlyn commented (Kaitlyn, interview, October 2013). The listeners also agree that the program is open to comments, suggestions and constructive criticism. In practice, Dreyer does communicate with his listeners frequently through personal conversation, phone calls, emails, and even Facebook—a challenge to many people of Dreyer’s age. Dreyer describes himself as “the least tech-savvy person who works on tech stuff on a daily basis” (T. Dreyer, interview, September 2013). In 2013, Dreyer posted or forwarded a total of 84 messages on his personal Facebook page about *Rag Radio* or *The Rag Blog*. More than 1,200 people follow Dreyer’s page.

The *Rag Radio* listeners claim they themselves are open-minded. They do not always agree with topics discussed in the program, and they contact Dreyer if they have different opinions on the given issues. Kaitlyn is one of the listeners who are willing to offer feedback on the program: “If that happens to be something I am knowledgeable about, that’s either in my work or my education, or my personal experience, then the chances are very good that I am gonna talk to Thorne afterwards and give him my view on that” (Kaitlyn, interview, October 2013). In practice, Kaitlyn contacts Dreyer several times a month by phone or personal communication about the content discussed in the program.

As a producer of an interview-based program, Dreyer also frequently receives suggestions for guests to be interviewed. Carola is a loyal listener of *Rag Radio*. Though she lives out of town, she still listens to the program via the Internet and maintains contact with Dreyer through email. Whenever Carola sees someone or topic that she thinks *Rag Radio* listeners might find interesting, she emails Dreyer and lets him know. It turned out that both guests Carola suggested were invited to *Rag Radio*. Carola believes that it is important for any media organization to be open to new ideas and suggestions from listeners; and that community radio programs like *Rag Radio* are obviously better than many mainstream media programs at such idea exchange (Carola, interview, October 2013).

In reality, due to the constrained time and space of a weekly radio program, Dreyer would not be able to address all the comments or suggestions provided by his listeners. As an alternative, listeners may contribute to the online magazine *The Rag Blog*, especially when they have a longer comment about a certain topic discussed on the

radio or any other subjects. *Rag Radio* serves as a starting point, or a point in process, that facilitates an ongoing conversation on diverse subjects among the programmers and listeners.

However, though the forum is open and an ongoing dialogue has been established, the ones who use the forum are usually the group of people who already believe in the left leaning, progressive politics covered in the program. Ruth represents a typical listener of *Rag Radio*. She was acquainted with Dreyer back in the 1960s, and began listening to *Rag Radio* when it started because she is a member of the same progressive community as the programmer. Ruth emphasized in the interview, “Thorne doesn’t preach to the choir,” and then she confessed, “I am biased because I am the choir” (Ruth, interview, October 2013). The same mindset applies to Joseph, another loyal follower of *Rag Radio*. Though he also likes to be challenged, he finds himself always in agreement with the viewpoints of the show (Joseph, interview, October 2013). To Ruth, Joseph and many other *Rag Radio* listeners, the program provides information and arguments that reinforce their own viewpoints.

Though *Rag Radio* aims to reach an audience across race, age and interests, it ends up reaching people who mostly identify with the progressive politics rooted in the history of 1960s. From the perspective of Tracey Schulz, a co-producer of *Rag Radio*, the program is almost like a “time capsule” that brings people back to the 1960s, and thus it mainly attracts people that already share a sense of the activism culture from that era.

The listener survey results confirmed what the *Rag Radio* programmers and listeners reported in the in-depth interviews. Among the 27 people who responded to the survey of *Rag Radio*, 24 of them are White, 22 are over 55 years old, and half of them



have a graduate degree. In terms of their political stances, 20 participants indicate they identify with the liberal or radical/progressive politics.

“I think we have to overcome the tendency to talk with ourselves and to talk to people just like us,” said Dreyer, who is currently working with his colleagues trying to reach a wider, younger audience (T. Dreyer, interview, September 2013).

### ***Participation-oriented Programs: Who Participates?***

For participation-oriented programs, all the programmers are willing to have ordinary members from the community participate in the programs. For example, as the only LGBT program in Austin, *OutCast* provides an important media outlet for members from the community to talk about their causes and interests on air. When *Chop Suey* recruited new DJs, the programmers purposefully prioritized those who did not usually have the opportunity to add their voice to the public sphere. At KPFT, *Open Journal* provides the best example of the concept of open forum. Whether it is *Community Conversation* or *Community Spotlight*, any one in the community can access, participate, and broadcast their voices to the thousands of KPFT listeners.

In practice, however open the media platform is, community participation remains limited in various degrees. *Chop Suey* started with the mission to enable members from different Asian/Asian American communities in Austin to participate as media makers, but the majority of its programmers and participants are limited to college students. *OutCast* is better at involving the local LGBT community to the program by making it a routine that each show features three or more guest speakers from the community. Still, as the two programmers acknowledge, though they sincerely wish to include all LGBT persons who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and queer as well as their allies to this

only LGBT radio program in town, they end up reaching primarily White gay males—just like the two programmers—and the people they personally hang out with. After all, every *Chop Suey* and *Outcast* programmer is an unpaid KOOP volunteer who has a day job or is a full-time student.

*Community Conversation* perhaps provides the best example among all participate-oriented programs. Though it is a 100% public-accessible open forum, the “community conversation” only occurs among a small pool of people. What follows is a detailed discussion about this program.

### *A Wide Open Space*

On *Community Conversation*, literally anyone can call the studio and have their voice heard on air without any censors except when it is necessary to block profanity, obscenity or sexually explicit language according to the FCC requirements. The phone operator does not even “preview” the content, and will only hold a call when someone else is speaking on air. In rare cases a person will say something forbidden under the FCC regulations. If that happens, the broadcasting engineer can press the “dump” button to remove the unwanted content because there is an eight-second delay on live broadcast. Duane Bradley, the general manager, serves as the facilitator of this “community conversation.” To fill the time while waiting for listeners to call in, Bradley might share some of his personal thoughts on recent news or other subject matters. But callers can speak about whatever they want without having to comment on topics introduced by Bradley. Indeed, this program is truly open to the community and with the exceptions noted, does not have a gatekeeper.

Jay is a loyal listener and an active participant of the “community conversation;” he calls the studio about once or twice a month. To him, the best thing about the program is that, “they don’t have screeners to ask you what you are gonna talk about, and try to argue you down before you get on air” (Jay, interview, February 2014). Jay explained that he has experienced such “screening” process while he was trying to call some AM “right-wing” radio programs.

Because of this open mike, *Community Conversation* is accessible to any comment and announcement. People call to share news they have heard elsewhere on the previous night or to give their opinions on diverse subjects. At times, if a caller brings up something interesting, the entire half hour focuses on a discussion of that one particular topic. David is one of those callers whose story or viewpoint can spark a dynamic conversation among listeners. He once called and shared the information of a bill proposed by Elizabeth Warren, a U.S. senator from Massachusetts. The bill explores the possibility of local postal offices offering basic banking services. David wanted to introduce this bill to the KPFT audience because he thought it might be beneficial to the community. Right after David spoke on the air, several other people including a retired postal worker “jumped on board” and discussed the practicality of the bill.

The program also frequently receives phone calls from people who take advantage of the airtime to publicize causes in which they are involved. William is the president of a Houston local nonprofit organization. He considers *Community Conversation* an ideal platform for him to promote the organization and the events they organize. Whenever there is a new event, he calls the studio to announce the information.

“It’s fairly pragmatic motivation for me,” said William (William, interview, February 2014).

The program also accepts callers who advance visions that contradict what many KPFT programmers or volunteers believe. To some listeners like David, it is a waste of time for KPFT, a “liberal-minded” station to air a caller discussing talking points that have already been well covered in extremists or right-wing media outlets such as Rush Limbaugh’s talk show or Fox News. Still, he respects the fact that the general manager allows sufficient time for such a caller and treats them fairly.

Also because this space is open to all, listeners might call for very “trivial” things. It happens that some people call and just say, “How are you doing?” or to whine about daily lives. As Bradley comments, “[*Community Conversation*] is basically just an open call in [program] so that community can kind of vent itself. That way they can get [whatever] off from their chests. They can yell at the manager. They can say what they want” (D. Bradley, interview, January 2014). Again, although listeners find these “trivial” talks or complaints less interesting, they still embrace the openness of the program.

It is important to note that in this typical participation-oriented media program, most of the listener-participants—except for those who use the platform to announce events—care more about the act of expression than the actual outcome of their expression. Frank mentioned that *Community Conversation* is his favorite program at KPFT, and he already called the studio about 15 times. When asked whether his participation would influence any of the audience, he commented, “Can I not care about that? It’s just what I express. I don’t really need the validation of influence... It’s a full

velocity freedom of expression... The fact I just put it out there without care is thrilling” (Frank, interview, February 2014).

The aforementioned listener Jay offers another unique example about how the process of participation by itself can serve the interest of some underserved communities. Jay, who is disabled, does not usually leave the house or meet with people. When he calls the studio, he has no idea about his audience, or whether the audience agrees with him. For Jay, *Community Conversation* provides a comfortable environment for him to interact with people and to connect with the community—the most common experience for many people, but it can be a luxury to people like Jay.

*“The Three People Who Call Everyday”*

Although *Community Conversation* operates as entirely accessible to any listener, in reality only a small number of people take advantage of the platform. Bradley is concerned about the fact that it is always a small pool of listeners who calls the station recurrently. He confessed:

...[A] challenge for me is to just not get depressed and feel like it’s a complete waste of time when you end up spending the first 15 minutes basically just talking and there is no one calling, or when the first three calls are the same three people everyday. It’s like, really? Why do we even have a radio station in that case? Why don’t three of you just come over and we sit around and have a talk... I know it’s not true because there are hundreds of people maybe thousands who are listening. It’s not really depressing. But it seems I fight that on an ongoing basis (D. Bradley, interview, January 2014).

Not only is the conversation facilitator concerned about the limited scope of the “community conversation,” the listeners also tire of the program when they hear a small number of regular callers calling the station all the time. David enjoys *Community Conversation* most of the time, but he criticized: “I get a little annoyed ‘cuz the same people call in over and over again. I mean those three people” (Davie, interview, February 2014).

What makes the situation even worse is that “the three people” are very similar demographically. According to Bradley and the listeners interviewed, they believe the callers to be White, male, elderly, and well educated. The survey results provide evidence for the perception. Among 29 people who responded to the *Open Journal* survey, 14 people reported they once called and participated in *Community Conversation*. All of these 14 participants are White. Eleven of them are male; 10 are 55-64 years old; and 11 received at least a Bachelor’s degree. It is safe to say that the idea of open forum is only partially translated in actuality.

### **5.2.3 Real Life Challenges**

#### ***Lack of Time and Resources***

Among many other factors, time and resources can always explain some of the limited audience interaction and participation in these different case studies. Consider the difference between *People United* and *Rag Radio* in terms of their audience interaction discussed earlier. While Campbell is the only one who does the interviewing, editing and hosting for the program, Dreyer and *Rag Radio* are sponsored by a non-profit organization—the New Journalism Project. In addition to Dreyer, other people in the organization help to communicate with their audience. That includes *Rag Radio*’s

community events, and the maintenance of *The Rag Blog*—an effective communication tool to read further input from listeners as well as a wide number of writer contributors. As mentioned earlier, Dreyer also receives a small monthly stipend from the nonprofit.

In fact, the case of *Rag Radio* is rare in the community radio sector. The majority of community radio programmers are volunteers without any payments. Many of them have daytime jobs. As noted above, the constraints of time and resources prevent the programmers of *Chop Suey* and *OutCast* from reaching a wider community. The same challenge also applies to Marlo Blue, a volunteer news anchor and reporter at *KPFT News*. Blues wishes she had more time to produce podcast and incorporate other digital media tools to communicate with her listeners. But she already spent 20-25 hours every week on the volunteer work at KPFT besides her two other part-time jobs.

### ***Lack of Expertise***

In addition to time and resources, lack of technological expertise serves another factor that can account for why some community radio programmers are a bit isolated from the community at large. Even with all kinds of new digital communication channels available, these tools can only be effectively used if the programmers acquire the skills.

For a program like *Progressive Forum* with a history of several decades, new communication technologies hardly changed the way the programmers communicate with their listeners. The station's membership drive remains the only active channel for the programmers to interact with their listeners. Contributors usually express their encouragement and support when they make pledges. Occasionally, the programmers receive phone calls and emails. Sometimes they encounter some of their listeners at

community events. But as the three producers themselves acknowledge, the interaction between them and the listeners is very limited.

The unfamiliarity with new communication technologies poses a serious problem for the programmers according to Wally James, the chief producer of the program. In fact, a former co-producer, James' wife Suzie Shead, used to take charge of the program website ([www.progressiveforum.org](http://www.progressiveforum.org)). However, no one on the team knows or is available to build and maintain a website after Shead passed away. James has to turn to KPFT volunteers for help with the website and the Facebook page. As expected, the available time and work efficiency of volunteers cannot be guaranteed. Consequently, the program website has been down for more than a year. During this period, the email address (previously, [info@progressiveforum.org](mailto:info@progressiveforum.org)) provided for listeners to contact the programmers also became inoperable. With respect to their Facebook page, only four messages were posted in 2013.

In fact, this is one of the reasons that James declined a listener survey for the program. As he wrote in his email: "That with the trouble we have had with our website and Facebook, I don't think many people will say they have had contact with us" (W. James, email, February 2014). Though James and the other two co-producers all suggest they are open to comments and critiques from listeners, real life challenges prevent them from offering sustained ways for interaction.

## **5.3 COMMUNITY RADIO IN THE DIGITAL AGE**

### **5.3.1 "Adapt or Die"?**

In the two community radio stations, while some programmers make good use of all kinds of new communication technologies in reaching a wider audience, those at the



disadvantaged side of digital divide benefit less from this digital age. Regardless of their technological expertise and resources, most agree that community radio broadcasters must adapt to this new digital world.

In the opinion of more than half of interview participants, digital communication tools are essential for community radio, a “dying art,” to stay alive and to grow in the Internet age. Notably, a substantial portion of audience now listens to the community radio programs online. Nearly half of the KOOP survey participants (47%) reported that they listen to the community radio programs through online streaming services or podcasting (see Table 5.1). About 39% of the 429 listeners in the 2013 KPFT station-wide survey said they mainly listened from computer or mobile devices.

Given the reality that community radio audience is aging, bringing the community radio online becomes especially important in attracting the younger generation. Luken, a *Rag Radio* listener in his thirties, even avoids the word “radio” when he introduces the program to his friends. Instead, he describes *Rag Radio* as “a cool place that you can get a bunch of podcast to listen to whatever you want” (Luken, interview, October 2014). Similarly, Mingmei, in her twenties, prefers *Chop Suey’s* YouTube channel to its FM broadcast simply because radio is no longer a part of her media diet.

In addition to making the traditional radio content more accessible, new communication technologies also help community radio programmers to better interact with their audience. Among the eight community radio programs under analysis, five provide email addresses, five launched Facebook pages, four have Twitter accounts, and six use the station’s website or their own websites to communicate with their listeners (see Table 5.2).

	Face-to-Face	Phone	Podcast/Online Archive	Email	Facebook	Twitter	YouTube	Station website	External website
People United	✓	✓	✓	✓				✓	
Rag Radio	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
OutCast	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Chop Suey	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
KPFT News	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
Progressive Forum	✓	✓	✓		✓				
Community Conversation	✓	✓	✓					✓	
Community Spotlight	✓	✓	✓					✓	

Table 5.2: Community Radio Communication Tools

Indeed, given the real life challenges discussed above, many community radio programmers at two stations still slowly adopt the new communication tools. Elsa, an active KPFT volunteer, worries that some “older programmers” at the station still feel hesitant about, or even resist, a change moving to the new communication environment. Preference for earlier status quo is also well illustrated by a young volunteer’s observation about *KPFT News*. Harry commented that, “everyone treated it as a ‘revolution’ thing” when the program launched its Facebook page in August 2011” (Harry, interview, February 2012). Even Duane Bradley, the general manager of the station and a middle-aged White male, described himself as a “slow adapter of this new technology.” But Bradley does acknowledge that community radio broadcasters are facing “a challenge to adapt or die:”

We have Tweets that go out. We have people leveraging our Facebook page and sharing and magnifying the broadcast power of the radio station. The future is beyond radio waves being broadcasted from the tower. It’s in the new media, the Cloud, the Internet, whatever these things are... eventually evolving into. At some point, those will supersede a simple terrestrial broadcast radio as the vehicle that people think of or even call what we call radio now (D. Bradley, interview January 2014).

It is true that people still consider radio maintains its own utility as a special medium in this digital era. For example, 54% of the listener participants in the 2013 KPFT station-wide survey reported that they mostly listened to the radio in the car while driving. In this research, 84% of the *KPFT News* and *Open Journal* listeners use traditional radio (see Table 5.1). But still, the programmers and listeners in the two radio

stations widely believe that new communication technology is the inevitable future for the community radio sector.

### **5.3.2 Community Radio and A Global Community**

New communication technologies also allow community radio to reach audience beyond their local communities. Thanks to the Internet, once small community radio programs now recognize the potential to construct global communities of diverse or parallel interests. Several programs analyzed in this study demonstrate such a potential.

*Rag Radio* purposefully targets a global audience. In addition to KOOP's online streaming services, *Rag Radio* also archives its shows on the Internet. With respect to the content, the program covers both local and international issues. When they focus on topics specific to Austin, they "try to present [them] in a way that's interesting to people in other places because [they] do think [of themselves as] having a national and international audience," said Dreyer (T. Dreyer, interview, September 2013). Currently, *Rag Radio* has an email list of about 7,000 people and that is a national and international list.

The observation is also supported by the survey results. More than one third of the 27 survey respondents reported that they live outside of Austin (see Table 5.1). Roy, the aforementioned listener who lives in Germany, said that listening to *Rag Radio* not only brings him back to the 1960s progressive community, but also provides a way for him to hear a "hometown radio station." Some of Roy's American friends in Germany also use the Internet and listen to "KOOPs" in their own cities to keep track of goings on at home.

*OutCast* provides another example that illustrates a community radio program's potential to construct a global community. The two *OutCast* programmers are more

familiar with using the new technologies to communicate with their listeners. They have an active Facebook page, a Twitter account, a YouTube channel and a website. Take *OutCast*'s Facebook page as an example. The hosts, as well as their listeners and guests, actively post messages on the Facebook page. In 2013, a total of 75 Facebook messages were posted, 66 from the two hosts and nine from their guests or listeners. The hosts mainly post Facebook messages to promote the upcoming programs; they also occasionally share news related to the LGBT community. An average message received four "likes," one "comment," and one "share."

Though *OutCast*'s Facebook page appears not to foster dialogues, it does help the programmers to better understand their audience or, at least, their supporters. Currently, more than 1,500 people follow *OutCast*'s Facebook page, with at least 1,100 outside the hosts' personal circles. According to Facebook Insights, an audience measurement tool, about 65% of the followers are male, and 35% are female; the most popular age group is 35-44 years old. Most interestingly, the followers message from all over the world. Rice believes that new communication technologies such as Facebook enable *OutCast*, a small local community radio program, to reach the LGBT community everywhere in the world. He remarked:

We've got fans all over the world even in places people are not okay with homosexuals like Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, [and] Afghan. To me, these people are very brave to find our page...People that live in really small towns like Oklahoma, Iowa, Mississippi, Georgia, [and] Alabama who don't have the luxury to be able to live their lives out as a LGBT person, they have to live in the closet. Otherwise they can lose their jobs, their friends, that sort of thing. And this is a

way for them to have some kinda connection to the greater LGBT community (S. Rice, interview, September 2013).

Indeed, not all of these people are regular listeners of *OutCast*; the core audience of the program might still be those who live in the Austin area. In fact, the survey results show that only one out of 23 *OutCast* respondents lives out of town. Recognizing its limitations, Rice also noted that one could easily “click the ‘like’ button” on Facebook. Still, because of Facebook and other digital communication tools, *OutCast* to some extent created an imagined global community of LGBT members and supporters.

### **5.3.3 The “Realness” in the Digital Age**

Although radio, the specific media form, might be outdated to some people, the concept of community radio remains valuable to most of the interview participants. In fact, some believe that the hypocritical, indifferent, and opinionated Internet makes community radio even more precious in this transforming mediascape. More than one third of the listener participants expressed their preference for community radio programs compared to other online media outlets.

These listeners favor community radio in this digital era because they can hear *real* people. John, a long-term KOOP volunteer and listener, explained why community radio programs are more meaningful to him:

How much [can] you trust what you read [on the Internet]?...I can't think of one pretentious programmer that we have here. They are what you hear. And that's a kind of sincerity. These are the real people...It's hard to get it on the Internet. It's really hard to find it on the Internet (John, interview, October 2013).

The real and the perceived connection between the community radio programmers and listener, as discussed above, also explains the attractiveness of community radio in this digital era. As Thomas commented on the difference between the community radio programs he listens to at KPFT and media outlets on the Internet: “I think it’s the touch. You can experience it. If you want to do a show, you can do it. If you find something online, you might not be able to interact with them, [but you can] go down check out the studio” (Thomas, interview, January 2014).

Moreover, the connection not only refers to the imagined friendship and community, but also to the real dialogues about ideas. While people mainly go to the Internet to seek information they already know or agree, they turn to community radio for surprises or even challenges—at least to some extent. For example, participation-oriented programs can always expose listeners with very different cultures beyond their own worlds. On the other hand, though content-oriented programs discuss issues that usually fall in a given political spectrum, they do bring audiences unique perspectives on many subject matters. Eleanor, a listener of *Open Journal*, raised the problem of the community radio programs “preaching to the choir.” Nevertheless, she still considers that the degree of interaction between the programmers and listeners differentiates community radio from other media outlets in the present mediascape:

What makes community radio unique and appealing to many people like me is that there is a dialogue being established. Even it is within a constituency who think alike, it’s a dialogue between the people presenting them and the people listening. And they make that explicit and they want to encourage this type of dialogue, cross-learning. It’s crucial (Eleanor, interview, February 2014).

To be sure, it is the combination of real and imagined personal relationship developed in the community radio makes the dialogue possible. “I think that still would be necessary for humans to survive is that they have a personal relationship since they will overcome barriers of prejudice and miss information,” said Larry Krizan, a co-producer of *Progressive Forum*, “Community is the same as communicating” (L. Krizan, interview, February 2014).

#### **5.3.4 A Token of Democracy**

As the research suggests, the community radio audience is aging and might be shrinking as time goes by. Further, not all the content—especially that in the participation-oriented community radio programs—is interesting to hear. Still, most people believe that community radio stands as a token of democracy and thus deserves a spot in this digital era.

The programmers and listeners at KOOP expressed mixed feelings about the size of the audience. Without knowing the exact number of listeners, some programmers and listeners interviewed understand that a few programs might only attract a small number of followers. Rush Evans, a member of the KOOP Programming Committee, feels sad about the possible small audience. But at the same time, he is proud that the station willingly serves the underserved, however small in number. “Having a small audience is sometimes the very point of providing an alternative,” said him (R. Evan, interview, February 2014).

For example, programmers, listeners and supporters of *Chop Suey* all believe it important to keep an Asian presence on the Austin radio dial regardless of the popularity of the program. Yvonne Wilson, one of the local Asian American community leaders,



considers the existence of *Chop Suey* to be essential to the local Asian community. Despite the fact that Wilson herself only listens to the program occasionally, she commented, “I’m just so thrilled that you guys exist and I want you to keep going for as long as there is radio” (Y. Wilson, interview, February 2014). Larissa Chu, a former programmer of *Chop Suey*, expressed the similar feeling about the program. For her personally, she rarely listens to the program after she moved out of town and left the team. Still, Chu elaborated on the significance of *Chop Suey* by referring to the public response to the possibility of stopping government funding for PBS during the 2012 U.S. presidential election:

If you don’t listen to it all the time, [you still want the program to stay.] It’s like PBS. When people hear, oh no, the government is gonna stop funding PBS, but why? They have all the awesome educational shows. That’s pretty much what community radio is. It’s not the pop culture we are having now. It’s just a bunch of people who care about community, who care about the music, or the genre, or the show they are doing. They care about it. And they really genuinely love it (L. Chu, interview, February 2014).

To many people at KOOP, the existence of the community radio programs does not need to be justified by the number of audience. They are important simply because, “it’s that kind of media,” said one of the listeners (Vesta, interview, February 2014).

Unlike their counterparts at KOOP, the programmers and listeners at KPFT are less concerned about the listenership size but more about the generation split in the radio station. To many of the older KPFT listeners who experienced the golden years of the station, KPFT represents an irreplaceable part in their life. The fact that KPFT is the only

radio station in the country that was bombed off the air for making space for controversial ideas makes them feel proud. David, one of those typical KPFT listeners, worries that the younger generation no longer appreciates the democratic implication of the community radio station:

I came out of the late 70s. That was more of a political era. FM music back then had a lot of power. They actually have DJs and pick their own music. None of that happens any more in commercial [media]. The young people they don't politically have any sense as far as I can tell from observing what my daughter is, although she started to vote now, which is fine. But everything for them seems real easy to consume (David, interview, February 2014).

Remarkably, Frank is the only KPFT listener participant in this body of research who falls in the 18-24 age group. Given that community radio skews toward an older population, he said, "I kinda feel the *duty* to listen to KPFT because they (the older listeners) are gonna [pass away] relatively soon" (Frank, interview, February 2014). To Frank, to listen to and participate in KPFT is to continue the tradition of democracy and to preserve history.

After all, in the current mediascape in the United States, community radio remains one of the very few media outlets still greatly accessible to the general public and, at the same time, retains a listener base—however large its size. It is a public forum where ordinary people can include their voices and the voices are heard and appreciated by at least a group of others. The research shows that listeners of community radio enjoy the content as much as the concept of the media outlet being independent, open and

alternative. The majority of the 70 individuals whom I interviewed in the research project wish and believe that this legacy of the First Amendment will survive in the digital era.

## Chapter 6: Discussion and Conclusion

Drawing from the theories of hegemony and post-hegemony, this dissertation offers a working definition of alternative media as media projects that: (1) provide content to challenge the dominant hegemonic articulations and to (re)articulate alternative perspectives of the world, or/and (2) are intentionally organized for marginalized communities to participate and contest the concentration of media power. While an alternative media project can highlight both directions, many mainly focus on one of the two. Therefore, for analytical purposes, this study categorizes alternative media as content-oriented or participation-oriented, and empirically examines the two types of media in this study.

I also suggest that the bond and interaction between media producers and audience is central to the theorization of the audience of alternative media. I thus offer a normative model of audience interaction and participation for both content- and participation-oriented alternative media projects. For content-oriented alternative media, the producers *should* ideally behave as “organic intellectuals” who constantly exchange ideas with the social groups they represent and ones beyond their constituencies. For participation-oriented alternative media, they *should* serve as “alternative public spheres” where any one in the respective community can access, participate, and express their voices. As its main objective, this dissertation examines whether these theoretical conceptualizations are reflected in reality.

Specifically, this dissertation focuses on a particular type of alternative media: low budget community radio programs in the United States. To answer the research questions, the study analyzes eight radio programs from two community radio stations in

Texas—KOOP and KPFT—and employs multiple research methods including ethnography, in-depth interview, web-based survey and textual analysis.

## **6.1 BOND BETWEEN PROGRAMMERS AND LISTENERS**

The research demonstrates that the community radio broadcasters at KOOP and KPFT do have a sense of their audience at least to some extent. The membership drives at both stations provide evidence that the two stations are self-sustainable through listener donations and participation. The majority of the community radio managers and programmers interviewed also know about their listeners—more or less—by using various communication tools or by referring to multiple audience metrics. Overall, the results paint a more optimistic picture than that in Conti’s (2011) study, which found that a number of LPFM community radio broadcasters are unsure “if anybody is listening.” The findings perhaps suggest that those who work at community radio stations with a stronger signal than that in LPFM have relatively more audience responses and thus are more confident about the existence of their listenership.

The study also demonstrates that the two community radio stations construct a form of “imagined communities” as well as an actual community. Community radio not only produces perceived friendship and community, it is in fact based on one-on-one personal relationships. Moreover, individuals share a sense of community and social cohesion not only by consuming the media (Anderson, 2006; Masahiro, 2011; Stamm, 1985); rather, community radio serves the glue that brings people to take actions and participate in causes in and outside of the radio station. As Armstrong notes (1981, p. 21), alternative media are “used as tools for community action and organizing.” These programmers, volunteers and listeners jointly create and practice the notion of

“community” rather than them being imposed upon an ideology of community. The relationship between community radio programmers and their audiences is organic and anti-hierarchical.

Another optimistic finding is that community radio programs, content-oriented and participation-oriented, offer unique content that is demanded in the current mediascape. Content-oriented programs feature systematic and in-depth analysis of diverse subject matters both local and international, which in some ways offers an alternative to the market-driven infotainment-style journalism (Thussu, 2008). Like many other alternative and independent media outlets (Atton & Hamilton, 2008), such programs aim to educate rather than entertain their audiences.

On the other hand, members from marginalized communities share their personal stories with their audiences through participation-oriented programs. Studies of other media indicate that “human interest” is one of the dominant and well-received news frames (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000), so it is not surprising that the similar way of presentation (i.e., presenting personal interest of the news) serves community radio well. What distinguishes community radio from other media is the relationship developed between the programmers and listeners. Because of such relationship, listeners including those who are not members of the served communities are more likely to identify and sympathize with the programmers. Rather than staging the “exotic other” (Durham, 2001; Lalvani, 1995), community radio establishes a livelier conversation that transcends and blurs social boundaries.

## 6.2 LIMITED AUDIENCE INTERACTION AND PARTICIPATION

With respect to the actual interaction, the results suggest that the analyzed community radio programs reflect the normative model of audience interaction and participation, but at best to a limited degree. Figure 6.1 summarizes the research findings.

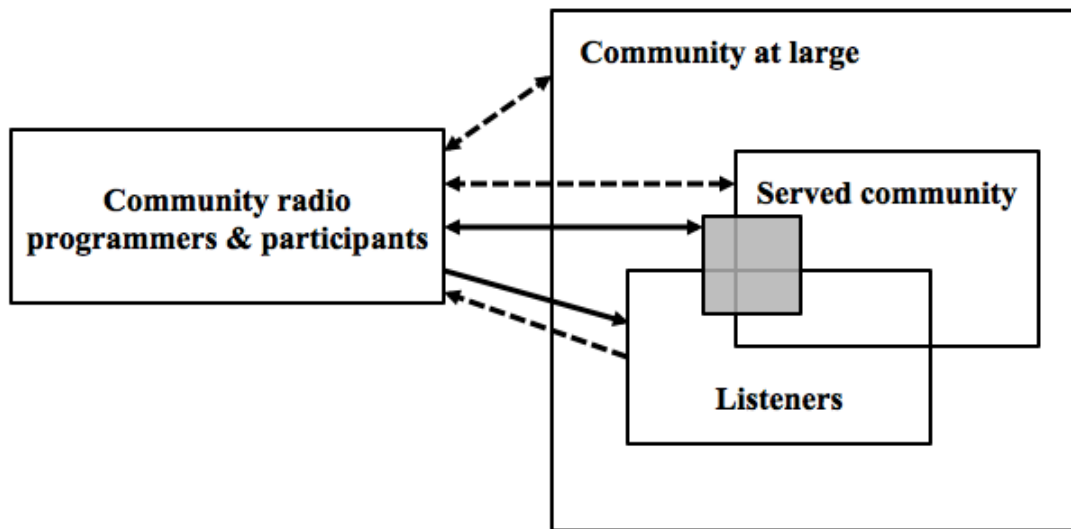


Figure 6.1: Programmer-Audience Interaction in Community Radio Programs

*Note:* The grey box refers to the group of people that community radio programmers actively interact with for the program.

The research shows that all the community radio programmers interviewed connect with their respective served communities to some extent. But the community members with whom the programmers interact only account for a portion of their documented and presumed listeners. In addition, not all of these interacting community members necessarily listen to the programs. Comparing the eight programs, the interaction between the programmers and their listeners varies. While some programmers intentionally facilitate a dynamic dialogue with their listeners, others do not have the same intention and resources to do so. Overall, it remains a challenge for most

community radio programmers to reach out and interact with individuals beyond their personal circle of communities or constituencies.

### **6.2.1 The Interaction with the Served Community**

The results demonstrate that the majority of the community radio programmers—from both content-oriented and participation-oriented programs—connect with their served communities at least to some extent. Unlike many mainstream news reporters who simply “report” news and events, these community radio programmers are organizers, advocates, members, or participants of the civic activities or intellectually engaged in the issues discussed in the programs. Producers of content-oriented programs draw inspiration from the subject matters with which they are involved. The participation-oriented programmers invite community leaders and members to participate in the programs and publicize their causes; they themselves are members in these organizations or supporters of these causes. As Figure 6.1 illustrates, the interaction between a program and its served community—at least a part of it—exists in all the eight programs analyzed.

### **6.2.2 Content-oriented Media: A Revisit of “Organic Intellectuals”**

Though the community radio broadcasters are grounded in their respective communities, the interaction between them and their listeners—those beyond their personal circles—is limited. For content-oriented programs, the normative model of “organic intellectuals,” which suggests that alternative media practitioners constantly exchange ideas with their constituencies and those beyond, is hardly realized in practice.

In at least two content-oriented program analyzed in this study, it is primarily one-way communication from the programmers to listeners. The programmers choose to cover issues and perspectives related to their personal interests and passion without



taking into much consideration the feedback from listeners. In fact, without establishing an effective communication system, they seldom know how listeners respond to the content featured in the program, or to what degree the content affects listeners' points of view. The community radio programs merely reflect several individuals' personal anthology of interviews and lectures. Interestingly, the present study provides a conduit for many listeners to express their thoughts on the program for the first time.

On the other hand, this research does show that some content-oriented programs like *Rag Radio* facilitate a robust conversation between the programmers and listeners, as well as among listener themselves. The radio program sparks new ideas for listeners to consider, or about which to conduct their own research, and perhaps develop or discover some different opinions and perspectives. Many times such opinions and perspectives become posts in *The Rag Blog*, the companion alternative communication vehicle, and sometimes the blog inspires discussions featured in *Rag Radio*. Thorne Dreyer, the chief producer of both the radio program and the blog, well represents the notion of “organic intellectual” in Antonio Gramsci’s sense (Gramsci, 1988). Clearly, the bond between Dreyer and his targeted social group—members of the 1960s-spirited progressive community—is strong.

However, *Rag Radio* is also a compelling example that illustrates a poststructural criticism of Gramsci’s definition of “organic intellectuals.” While Gramsci conceives that organic intellectuals should maintain contacts with *one* group (e.g., the working class in Gramsci’s era), poststructuralist scholars such as Laclau and Mouffe (1985) contend that the boundary of the “targeted group” should be subject to constant negotiation and reconstruction, and should include people beyond its predetermined constituency.

Otherwise, the given community, along with its advocated ideas and perspectives, would become essentialized and thus a form of separatism from the community at large.

Indeed, a dedicated group of similar-minded people—White, elderly, well educated, and progressive—to a large extent preserves the tradition of the 1960s underground culture and politics. An open and ongoing conversation is undoubtedly important even among a small group of people. But the questions are: How to stimulate a dialogue that is intellectually challenging to what the programmers and listeners already believe? How to make the program and the ideas relevant to the wider society? In particular, how to involve the younger generation to join these discussions?

The programmers and many others of the *Rag* family are aware of the danger of them “talking with themselves.” In addition to opening the discourses for more ideas with respect to the program’s content, Dreyer and some of his listeners believe the new technology can help expand reach. Among other efforts, the nonprofit that supports *Rag Radio* has constructed a website that will incorporate new features to attract more and diverse audience interactions. It is with hope that the new technology can help the community radio program to reach people beyond its predetermined community. A follow-up study of *Rag Radio* and its affiliated projects in the next few years would be beneficial.

Overall, the case studies of content-oriented community radio programs provide empirical evidence about the practice and limitations of “organic intellectuals” in actuality. The challenge of time and resources emerges as one of the factors that explain the different interaction dynamics in the four content-oriented programs analyzed. *Rag Radio*, which is a component of a nonprofit organization and whose chief organizer has

decades of alternative media experience and an extensive personal networks, clearly has many more resources to facilitate such dialogues than some other community radio programs.

The research also shows that although all the community radio programmers seem to embrace the concept of welcoming discussion of ideas beyond their preconceived ideological framework, they all consciously or unconsciously end up “preaching to the choir.” Simply put, the discursive boundary of the alternative political spaces is not so much subject to constant negotiation and reconstruction as the normative model suggests. This study calls attention to this weakness in alternative media practices. However, it also recognizes that, in all fairness, for such broader exchanges to occur, individuals outside the “choir” must also value intellectual diversity and interact. Those with other perspectives must have the courage to advance them in a public forum offered by community radio.

### **6.2.3 Participation-oriented Media: A Revisit of “Alternative Public Sphere”**

Ideally, participation-oriented community radio programs should serve as diverse “alternative public spheres” (Fraser, 1990) where any ordinary member of the respective communities can access and participate in this platform. However, Downing (2003) early raises the concern that:

We need to admit in all frankness that there have been only too many examples of people...who started alternative media ostensibly to allow ‘other voices’ but actually only to express their own, and where the term ‘dialogic’ has definitely been honored far more in the breach than in its observance (p. 633).

That is one of the reasons Downing called for more empirical studies on the audiences of alternative media.

The present study empirically responds to Downing's concern. The findings show a positive sign that all the programmers of participation-oriented programs believe that the community radio platform should be accessible and open to the community. They understand that the space is for the community rather than for satisfying their own individual needs. And indeed, quite a few programmers do reach out and involve members from their served communities to participate and broadcast their voices.

However, the research also shows that the actual community participation is limited in various degrees. For example, time and resources remain a challenge that prevents the programmers of *Chop Suey* and *OutCast* from interacting more vigorously outside their immediate communities. As a result, the programmers in most cases end up reaching out to people just like themselves or whom they know personally. Inevitably, the supposedly open platform turns out to be a stage for the several programmers and their "known communities."

Then comes the question: Who are these programmers? All the former and current programmers of *Chop Suey* and *OutCast* share one thing in common: They are all fairly well educated. All of them hold at least a Bachelor's degree. Some even received professional journalism training or have prior commercial broadcast media experience. This observation also holds true for callers of *Community Conversation*.

These results make it important reconsider the *raison d'être* of "alternative public sphere." In her seminal article *Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy* (1990), Fraser critiques the assumptions

underlying Habermas' bourgeois public sphere. One of the assumptions is that "it is possible for interlocutors in a public sphere to *bracket* status differentials and to deliberate 'as if' they were social equals" (p. 117). In other words, provided that only one single, comprehensive public sphere exists, even if the public sphere is entirely public and open in its ideal form, it still excludes those who can not well articulate themselves due to their different social backgrounds. Therefore, as Fraser concludes, "in most cases it would be more appropriate to *unbracket* inequalities in the senses of explicitly thematizing them" (p.118). To be sure, she advocates the importance to replace a single comprehensive public sphere with a nexus of multiple alternative public spheres that explicitly prioritize each identity group's voices and needs.

Indeed, community radio stations make such diverse alternative public spheres possible in practice. KOOP even makes it explicit in its mission statement, which asserts that the station's objective is to serve and promote "specific communities of African-Americans, Asian-Americans, Chicanas/os, elders, gays, lesbians, homeless, immigrants, Indigenous peoples, Latinos/as, peoples with disabilities, women, working and poor people, youth, and other underserved communities" (KOOP, n.d.). Likewise, KPFT also intentionally creates programs like *Community Conversation* and *Community Spotlight* to encourage ordinary Houstonians to freely express them.

However, based on the evidence found in this research, I argue that while "alternative public sphere" is built to "unbracket" certain inequalities, some others remain "bracketed." As the cases of *Chop Suey* and *OutCast* illustrate, those who are better educated from the underserved communities are more likely to access and participate in the alternative public spheres. When it comes to *Community Conversation* where

participants are typically White, well-educated, older males, perhaps the supposedly “alternative public sphere” is not much different than the “masculist” bourgeois public sphere assumed in Habermas’ theorization. In other words, it is possible that “alternative public sphere” could also discourage participation by those who feel less articulate.

Overall, findings of this research demonstrate the limits of theoretical concepts of “alternative public sphere.” While the group of Australian scholars (e.g., Foxwell, Ewart, Forde, & Meadows, 2008; Meadows, Forde, Ewart, & Foxwell, 2008, 2009) propose the possibility of community media to construct “community public spheres,” this study demonstrate some real-life constraints at least in the U.S. context.

#### **6.2.4 Community Radio, Diversity and Resources**

The station-wide listener surveys and other data of KOOP and KPFT also confirmed the finding that audience interaction and participation may be limited in community radio. Surprisingly, the majority of the most active community radio listeners are White, middle-aged, middle class, and well educated. The audience composition to some extent reflects the demographic profiles of the programmers and volunteers at the two stations. Of course, none of social or ethnic categories in and of themselves assure diversity, and many of these “privileged” community radio programmers do discuss issues that affect different marginalized communities in their shows. Still, it is ironic to find that while both KOOP and KPFT strive to serve diverse underrepresented communities and create mutual understanding, it turns out that the “mainstream” communities mostly construct and participate in both stations.

These results perhaps speak to the fact that though both Austin and Houston boast significant demographic diversity, they are also among the most ethnically and

economically segregated metropolitan cities in the nation (Balli, 2013; Grattan, 2014; Smith, 2012). The results are also in line with the overall civic health index in Texas, a state that ranks among the lowest in the nation in terms of voter turnout and civic participation; in particular, minority groups such as Latinos/Hispanics and immigrants are significantly less likely to participate in civic activities (Lawrence et al., 2013). After all, it is a bit disheartening to report that the two community radio stations barely challenge the status quo.

Again, time and resources can in part explain the limitation of audience interaction and participation. Both stations are primarily volunteer-run and both operate on tight budget. Without adequate financial and human resources, the capability of the two stations, or the individual programmers, to reach out and interact with a wider, more diverse audience is constrained.

Indeed, the finding of alternative media being short of resources is not new. Throughout the history alternative media of all forms have published or broadcast on a shoestring (e.g., Armstrong, 1981; Atton & Hamilton, 2008). Essentially, alternative media “comprise what the German critic and poet Hans Magnus Enzensberger calls ‘the consciousness industry’” (Armstrong, 1981, p.19); therefore, they are born for cause not for profit.

In light of financial challenges, previous studies suggest alternative media practitioners could consider employing professional business and marketing strategies and that professionalism in organization does not necessarily threaten the media’s mission to provide critical content and participation opportunities (Comedia, 1984; Fuchs, 2010; Guo, 2010). These studies provide evidence for the argument that mission

and business performance are not one way or the other. Along the same line of thought, making efforts to encourage more audience interaction and participation in community radio programs might also financially benefit the two stations, both of which are listener-supported. The discussion of business models for alternative media is beyond the scope of this dissertation. What I seek to emphasize is the importance of making audience involvement a normative goal for alternative media projects. To answer the “so what” question, one way is to critically reconsider the two stations’ approaches to audience.

### **6.2.5 A Reevaluation of the Two Stations’ Approaches to Audience**

The research shows that while KOOPers employ an almost “idealistic” approach in making programming decisions, KPFTers’ method is somewhat “mainstream.” It turns out that the former rarely consider audiences; the latter mainly focus the amount of listener donations. Neither of the two stations has a system to evaluate audience interaction and participation in individual radio programs.

At KOOP, without a systematic listener evaluation system, a program can stay as long as the programmer(s) produces “mission-driven” content and complies with the volunteer requirements without worrying about its listenership. The number of listeners or the funds a program can bring to the station in the membership drives will not affect the station’s programming decisions at all. Simply put, the KOOPers are “not comfortable” with number-dependent programming. Under this “idealistic” approach, programs that fail to attract substantial listener donations during membership drives are not considered to be “failing” the mission. Instead, the Programming Committee and many programmers assume the programs serve a less affluent population. Even if the KOOPers understand that the listenership of some programs might be small, they believe



the small audience could be exactly the point of community radio serving underserved communities.

Such an idealistic approach can be potentially problematic. Does the assumed less affluent listening community exist? Is the small audience really from underserved communities? We do not know the answer for either question. Consider the case of *Chop Suey* again. To most people interviewed, the very fact that the program *exists* is a mission accomplished. The KOOPers celebrate the first-ever Asian program on the station's programming schedule. Asian community leaders are thrilled about having their community's voice on the city's radio dial. But the reality is that it remains vague how exactly the program serves the community. The research shows that the program hardly reaches Asian/Asian American listeners beyond the hosts' personal circles. Moreover, the community participation in this participation-oriented program remains limited to a few college students. Proudly, programs like *Chop Suey* are tokens of democracy. Sadly, the token can be reduced to tokenism at times. Participants of either content- or participation-oriented shows can become isolated nevertheless.

KPFT presents a totally different case study than KOOP. Whether a program deserves to stay or leave depends on its fundraising capabilities. Donations are regarded as votes of approval. From the perspective of the programming director, a program's membership drive turnout is positively correlated with the extent to which the program engages the community. The director also "double checks" with the leaders and members of different communities on a regular basis to ensure a listening community exists for each program.

To be fair, this practical approach does assure an audience base for the station and for each individual program. However, it should also be noted that the size of listening community does not necessarily translate to a program's community *engagement*. As the research shows, although some programs at KPFT enjoy a substantial audience base and can successfully reach financial goals in membership drives, the audience interaction and participation beyond that may still be limited.

Furthermore, the size of community that each program is able to engage varies. While music programming is easier to listen to, programs that become deliberately provocative can discomfort the majority of the listening community.<sup>26</sup> For example, a show that plays blues music is perhaps more likely to appeal audience than a show that advances a vegan world—only two percent of the U.S. population consider themselves vegan (Newport, 2012). Likewise, nationally syndicated programs such as *Democracy Now!* attract more followers than locally-produced programs mostly because the former are far more established and better resourced. In fact, for this very reason more than half of the KPFT programming is music-focused; nationally syndicated programs are placed during the weekday morning and evening drive time—the prime time for radio broadcasting. Historically, the balance between its mission (i.e., to offer more community-oriented programming) and the number of listeners (i.e., financial sponsors) has always been a struggle for KPFT.

To clarify, it is not my intention to argue that music programming is not mission-driven. Indeed, to introduce talented artists who are underrepresented or ignored in

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<sup>26</sup> Music programming is also more popular than news programming when it comes to the radio market as a whole. Data show that while the percentage of people who listen to the AM/FM radio each week remains essentially unchanged over the past decades, considerably less people listen to “news radio” nowadays compared to the number in 1990 (Anderson, Guskin, & Jurkowitz, 2013).

commercial radio well serves Pacifica's mission. In addition, music is also an important medium to communicate alternative viewpoints. Social justice issues such as civil rights struggles and anti-war protests fuel much folk music. What I contend is the added value of an approach that places more emphasis on the actual audience interaction and participation as well as the context of different programs in addition to the rating numbers and donation amount.

### **6.2.6 Recommendations**

Based on the evidence collected for this dissertation, I suggest that community radio managers and directors should consider using audience interaction and participation as one of the criteria to evaluate a program's performance, or at least consider making it part of the mission for its programmers to work towards. The first step is to raise awareness about the importance of audience engagement in community radio.

To achieve better audience participation, station managers and directors should consider providing resources and assistance for individual programmers—especially those who are short of resources—to interact with a wider and more diverse audience. Of particular importance is to help programmers of participation-oriented programs to actively approach more members from their communities—especially those who do not have opportunities to access and participate in any media—and have them become media makers. It is essential to take the initiative to further “unbracket” social status differentials in such as an “alternative public sphere.”

Overall, community radio stations should consider forming a community outreach team not only to promote the entire station but also to help individual programs to reach their targeted communities.

### 6.3 COMMUNITY RADIO IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Despite all the limitations of audience interaction and participation uncovered by this research, it is important to acknowledge that connections and dialogues at least *exist* in the community radio sector. Both the programmers and listeners highly value these because they can hardly find any of those in corporate news organizations or in alternative media outlets on the Internet. While commercial media insert layers of gatekeepers and advertisements between those who speak and those who listen (e.g., Herman & Chomsky, 1988; McChesney, 2008), community radio programmers are simply what you hear. In the context where 60% of Americans had little or no trust in mainstream media (Morales, 2012), participants in this study found community radio as “sincere” and “trustworthy.” While the digital age witnesses an increasingly segregated and fragmented mediascape (Atton, 2004; Bennett, 2003), community radio remains a place where listeners can still experience challenges and surprises at least to some extent.

The research also demonstrates the benefits and challenges the digital communication technologies bring to the community radio programs. It is not surprising to find that a digital divide, accompanied by a generational or an economic gap, remains a common concern for community radio broadcasters. For tech-savvy community radio programmers and listeners who enjoy more assets, the use of various new communication tools does enable a small community radio program to better connect with the world and to provide more options for audience to interact and participate. In contrast, for those who are at the other end of the divide, new technologies hardly change the way programmers and listeners communicate. In this sense, this study presents some different findings from previous research. While Atkinson (2008) suggests that the scale of alternative media

projects (i.e., local or international) determines producers' use of new technologies in communicating with their audiences, this study adds that the digital divide is another determinant.

After all, the very rationale of community radio is to provide a cheap, accessible medium for members from the underserved communities, including the elderly, to use and participate. According to the Pew Research Center, age is a main factor tied to the digital divide: 44% of those over age 65, and 17% of those 50-64 do not go online, versus 8% of those 30-49 who do not and only 2% of those 19-29 (Caumont, 2013). The present study shows that the programmers and listeners of both community radio stations are older than the general population. While most agree that digitalization is the inevitable future for community radio, this research also suggests that community radio supplies communication resources for people who have not yet embraced a digital life.

Finally, in an era when the media industry—both online and offline—is increasingly commercialized and tabloidized, community radio saves a spot for “free press” with the potential to create meaningful dialogues. Using the standard listed in the Hutchins Commission’s report on freedom of the press, the two community radio stations do offer a platform that is “free to all who have something worth saying to the public” (Commission on Freedom of the Press & Hutchins, 1947, p. 129). Vincent, a listener, supporter, and former board member of KPFT, well summarizes the point:

I care about it (community radio) so much because I think journalism [has been] in real decline in this country for a number of years. The founders of our country [wrote] the First Amendment. They singled out the freedom of press for a reason because it is sort of a check on the government and the corporations even back

then, which are of course more powerful now. And most of the [commercial] broadcast media is not doing that any more... So I think for a free society, we really need stations like KPFT and independent community radio stations. They might tell things that advertisers might not want to hear (Vincent, interview, February 2014).

## **6.4 CONCLUSION**

This dissertation makes theoretical contributions by providing a normative model of audience interaction and participation in alternative media. The model provides an exploratory theoretical framework for scholars to examine the audience of alternative media as well as to reconsider that of mainstream corporate media in future studies.

In addition, this dissertation offers empirical evidence for the existence as well as the limitation of such interaction and participation in the eight community radio programs examined. The limitation can be explained by the time and resource constraints, as well as by the community radio programmers' tendency to speak with themselves. Based on the evidence I collected, I recommend community radio broadcasters, as well as other alternative media practitioners, should consider developing systematic approaches to evaluate and facilitate better audience interaction and participation in practices. This should ensure that a token of democracy is not reduced to a tokenism that misleads with the appearance of democracy, but not its delivery. This may also require the understanding that the value and context of community engagement lies beyond the size of audience or the dollar amount of audience donations. To be sure, the findings of this dissertation have practical implications for community radio broadcasters and for alternative media practitioners in general.

This dissertation also concludes that the community radio sector remains relevant in this digital era at least in the socio-cultural context analyzed in this study. This accessible and affordable form of alternative media to some extent bridges a digital divide and thus is well needed in the current communication system. The finding speaks to the reality that while many traditional alternative media outlets such as alternative newweeklies and public access televisions are struggling, community radio stations continue growing. Though the audience for each radio program or each radio station is relatively small (and might remain small especially in conservative social-cultural environments), the entire community radio sector collectively has the potential to serve diverse communities in different corners of the society.

Further, community radio perhaps even becomes more precious in this emerging mediascape. The media promise genuineness, relationships, and imagined and real communities. These are the very elements that make meaningful dialogues possible in any communication environment.

Overall, the findings of this dissertation provide empirical support for the recent FCC policy that will bring about the largest expansion of community radio stations in the United States.

## **6.5 LIMITATION**

This dissertation is limited in its scope and methodology. Based on eight unique programs from two community radio stations in Texas, the findings of the research are not generalizable to all the programs in the two stations, let alone to the entire community radio sector in the United States. The purpose of the dissertation is to provide details and nuances for the audience interaction and participation in real life community radio

practices. Future research should consider conducting case studies of community radio programs in other socio-economic contexts, and using more extensive quantitative research methods to learn a broader picture of the community radio sector in U.S and abroad. Scholars should also consider seeking evidence of audience interaction and participation proposed in this dissertation in other types of alternative media besides community radio.



## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Listener Survey Questions

1. How do you usually listen to the program?
  - FM radio
  - Listen to the show LIVE over the Internet
  - Listen to the podcast
  - Other \_\_\_\_\_
  
2. Have you ever interacted with the radio program or the programmer? (Please check all that apply.)
  - I talked with the programmer in person (e.g., community events)
  - I called the studio when the show was on air
  - I emailed the programmer
  - I “liked” the show-related posts on Facebook
  - I interacted with the show-related posts on Facebook beyond “like” (e.g., comment, share, etc.)
  - I interacted with the show-related Twitter feeds (e.g., retweet, "mention," etc.)
  - I participated in the program as a guest
  - Other \_\_\_\_\_
  
3. Why do you listen to the program? \_\_\_\_\_
  
4. What do you like/dislike about the program? \_\_\_\_\_
  
5. What do you like/dislike about the radio station? \_\_\_\_\_
  
6. Any other comments about the program? \_\_\_\_\_
  
7. Which of the following statements best describes you?
  - I am a pure listener
  - I know the programmer in person
  - Other \_\_\_\_\_

8. Where do you live?

- Local (Austin for KOOP or Houston for KPFT)
- Non-local (Specify\_\_\_\_\_)

9. Your age

- 18-24
- 25-34
- 35-44
- 45-54
- 55-64
- 65 or older

10. Gender

- Male
- Female
- Other

11. Education attainment (i.e., The highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree you have received)

- None, or grade 1-8
- High school incomplete (Grades 9-11)
- High school graduate (Grade 12 or GED certificate)
- Business, Technical, or vocational school AFTER high school
- Some college, no 4-year degree
- Community college AA degree
- College graduate (B.S., B.A., or other 4-year degree)
- Post-graduate training or professional schooling after college (e.g., toward a master's Degree or Ph.D.; law or medical school)

12. Race/ethnicity

- White
- Black/African American
- Hispanic/Latino
- Asian
- Native American
- Other or mixed race

## Appendix 2. Interview Questions for Community Radio Programmers

1. Why did you decide to join KOOP/KPFT and launch or participate in the radio program? Why did you choose community radio as opposed to other media platforms?
2. How would you describe the mission of your radio program? Does this program achieve the goal in your opinion?
3. What kind(s) of audience do you seek to reach (e.g., demographics, social-economic groups, etc.)? What kind(s) of audience do you actually reach (e.g., demographics, social-economic groups, etc.)? How do you determine that?
4. How would you describe the relationship between you and your listeners?
5. Do you actively solicit your audience's feedback for your program?
  - [For content-oriented alternative media]: Do you actively solicit your audience's suggestions or critiques on your show's content? If so, what motivated you to do so and in what ways? If not, why not?
6. Do you receive comments and suggestions from your listeners? If not, do you have any ideas why? If yes—
  - How often and in what ways (e.g., call-in, emails, social networking sites)?
  - Which topics or concerns come up most frequently from your listeners? Does audience interaction spike at any time?
  - Do you hear repeatedly from same listeners? If so, who are they (e.g., demographics, social-economic groups)?
  - Do you respond to listener messages (e.g., comment, critique, suggestion), on and off air? If so, what motivated you to do so and in what ways? If not, why not?
  - To what extent do your listeners' messages affect your show's production? Can you give some examples?
7. [For process-oriented alternative media]: Do you invite your listeners to participate in your show's productions (e.g., make them guest reporters, hosts or producers)? If so, what motivated you to do so and in what ways? If not, why not?
8. Would you say digital communication tools change the way you communicate with your listeners? If so, how?
9. In the future, do you plan to increase interaction with your listeners? If so, how? If not, why not?
10. Overall, how do you evaluate the interaction between you and your listeners? In your opinion, how important is such interaction?

### Appendix 3. Interview Questions for Community Radio Listeners

1. How did you learn about the KOOP/KPFT program? Why do you listen to it?
2. How would you describe the program (e.g., to your friends)?
3. What are your thoughts on the program (e.g., content, hosts, style)?
  - [For content-oriented program]: What are your thoughts on the content and viewpoints presented in the program? Can you recall some stories and discussions featured in the program, and tell me how you interpret the content? To what extent do the show's information and viewpoints affect your own points of view?
4. How would you describe the relationship between you as listeners and the KOOP/KPFT programmer(s)?
5. Have you ever interacted with the show's programmer(s) (e.g., call-in, email)?  
If not, why not?  
If yes—
  - In what ways do you interact with them (e.g., call-in, email, social networking sites)?
  - How often do you communicate with the programmer(s)?
  - What are the concerns or topics that you contact producers about?  
[For content-oriented alternative media]: Have you communicated with the programmer(s) about your thoughts about the show's content?
  - What motivated you to communicate with the programmer(s)?
  - In your opinion, to what extent do your messages affect the programmers' show production? Why?
6. [For process-oriented alternative media]: Have you ever participated in the program's production (e.g., as a guest host, producer)? If so, what did this experience bring to you?
7. Overall, in your opinion, how important is the programmer-listener interaction in such community radio program? Why?

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## **Vita**

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