

## **Between Controversy and Concurrence: The Structure of Opinion and Commu- nication in Call-in Radio Programs**

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### **SUMMARY**

*The topics of this paper builds on the fact that call-in radio programmes are inherently confrontational and focuses on the manner in which confrontations of opinion relate to the flow of conversation on air. Through the use of conversation, a specific fusion of the private and the public occurs by means of which call-in programmes transform into a specific public forum, where the realms of the public and the private become closely intertwined and penetrate each other. The roles of everyday experience and personal perspectives become central to the essentially institutional setting. To the audience, this forum appears accessible because its conversations invite rather than exclude. As the analyses presented here show, controversy and concurrence stand out as its prevailing characteristics. They both emerge out of the conversational style of exchange on air; it is suggested, moreover, that they should be understood as formative for their counterpart. Although there is no direct cause-and effect relation between the two concepts on the empirical level, they can be clearly related through the role of mediating activities, such as attempts to direct and manage the course of conversation by participants of call-in radio. In this respect, the paper makes a contribution, both theoretical and methodological to our understanding of a typical output of a quintessential, yet theoretically undervalued medium of mass communication.*

Key words: radio programme, call-in radio, public sphere, conversation

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## Introduction

Interactive media programs, especially call-in radio broadcasts, are characteristic for the fact that they are constituted on the notion of confrontation, in particular, they include confrontations of different social roles, experiences, opposing perspectives, opinions. In most cases, this fact secures them substantial social and, sometimes even political, significance (e.g., Moss and Higgins 1984, Bolce et al. 1996, Hutchby 1996, Page and Tannenbaum 1996, Hofstetter and Gianos 1997, Mitchell 1998). It is therefore possible to analyze these programs as examples of the public sphere, because they are likely to develop into an open forum which provides extensive hearing to different claims and ideas, evaluated in turn on the basis of the arguments presented by those who promote them (Livingstone and Lunt 1994, Coleman 1997, Kane 1998). Yet, it is often argued, especially with respect to the call-in radio, that the quality and target of these confrontations is far from the expectations about rational debate and deliberation which are implied by the idea of public sphere. It is true on the one hand that call-in radio as a rule enables universal access and invite participant's artless contributions, but it is also the case that these public interventions may be utterly populist (Page and Tannenbaum 1996), sectarian (Coleman 1997), intolerant (Barker 1998), and so forth. There is a general impression that opinions expressed in call-in radio programs are quite extreme and prejudiced. Benjamin Barber (1995) similarly observed in his recent book *Jihad vs McWorld* that, »talk radio and scream television have already depreciated our political currency, and new technologies are as likely to reinforce as to impede the trend if not subjected to the test of deliberative competence« (Barber 1996: 187; emphasis added).

The central concern of this paper is closely related to the point that interactive radio programs are inherently confrontational, but it also expands this simplistic perception and focuses on the manner in which confrontations relate to the flow of communication on air and structure of expressed opinions. Although the rhetoric of radio programs is strongly underlined by the evolving power relations and contains elements of communicative flaming, it also seems that it is wedded to the symmetrical dynamism of exchange, which is very close to the dynamics of ordinary conversation (Fairclough 1995, 1998). Despite clear divisions of roles between the participants, it is claimed that these programs offer equal footing to them to argue their cases and to challenge other ideas presented. The balanced structure of conversation on air is in fact expected by the listeners. Such assessment is grounded on a widely accepted premise (Drew and Heritage 1992: 47) that it is the institutional talk which involves and actually demands asymmetrical relations, whereas the more mundane, casual discourse, found in everyday life of any individual is able to avoid the conventionally formal framework and sets up more egalitarian grounds for sharing, exchange, and expression.

This tension between controversy and concord, which emerges from the apparent confrontational communication that, in turn, is often observable in mass communication, is in the present study approached as a function of opinion processes between participants of call-in radio programs. The central question is to what extent the characteristics of call-in programs can be explained by distinguishing these two aspects of

communication. It is theoretically productive to observe how explicit controversy and concurrence take their shape and then continue to mutually structure dialogues between participants of call-in radio. Participation in call-in radio by the audience, whatever their message and intent, is generally triggered by some strongly felt opinion of something heard on air. This implies strong cognitive and emotional commitment, which requires a sense of secure and safe publicity in order to be expressed; it requires and expects concurrence. Yet, by taking sides on an issue every act of participation necessarily contributes to the impression of controversy that also dominates these programs. The central theoretical question may therefore be put in terms of the extent to which controversy and concurrence are mutually dependent characteristics of call-in radio programs. It will be argued in the paper that both aspects develop simultaneously as their own generating conditions.

The paper presents findings of two complementary studies, developed specifically to address this conceptual tension: one in which perceptions of the radio audience were investigated and the other in which flows of exchange within a number of call-in programs were analyzed. It seems both theoretically and methodologically productive to investigate this conceptual tension from two complementary perspectives, because it is not difficult to demonstrate that dimensions of both conflict and concurrence are located within the actual flows of communication and outside their immediate boundaries as well. By using two complementary methodological approaches it is possible to expand the investigated scope of ongoing communication, opinion conflict and controversy. The second study should be particularly highlighted because it is only rarely, with the profusion of discourse (e.g., Fairclough 1998) and conversation analyses (e.g., Hutchby 1996), that transcripts of radio programs are investigated by using methods of quantitative text analysis (but see Zgrabljic 2001). For the purpose of our research, an inventive methodological procedure, which transformed dialogue between two individuals as typically interactive features of the call-in radio into manageable units of analysis, was developed.

According to our analysis, call-in radio exchanges clearly nurture conversations as the dominant form of communicative exchange. This is most apparent in the prevalence of informal mode of address between participants of call-in radio programs and also in the evasion of abstract, technical vocabulary. Yet, these accessible and inviting communicative structures generate strong impression of controversy, which in this sense should be treated as direct result of concurrent talk on air. As argued on the basis of survey results, which are discussed in the first part of this paper, controversy has its roots in the flows of exchange themselves, rather than in their outward social contexts. Participants of the call-in programs by and large do not hold extremist and radical opinions of participants, however it is not possible to conclude from this point that conflicts of opinion have nothing to do with the expression of extremist and prejudiced opinions. A closer look at the structure of actually expressed opinions is also needed in order to account for this question, especially because it seems that controversies are generally emergent from the ongoing communication on air. Although these flows of exchanges are underlined with a strong tendency to mimic the gentle and inviting outlook of everyday conversation, controversy itself is not in a linear cause and effect re-

lation to concurrent talk. The mediating role between the two concepts is played the participants' degree of activity in dialogue. Either in the atmosphere of antagonist communication or during concurrent exchanges, participants are most active in directing their dialogues. Controversy and concurrence are in this sense formative conditions of communication in call-in radio.

### **Call-in radio as a public forum**

Radio figures as a "blind" medium, however, it is able to set up effective two-way communication and interactive exchange, by means of which it can develop a specific conception of publicness. This was also the point of Berthold Brecht (1993), who was convinced that radio should primarily become a medium of participatory communication. In order to be fully integrated into the communicative dynamics of a society, and in order to contribute to the integration of scattered voices, it is important that radio embraces input of its own audience. Kellner similarly argues that "call-in and talk radio and television, as well as electronic town meetings, can involve two-way communication and participatory democratic discussion. Theorists like Baudrillard who argue against television and the media on the grounds that they promote only one-way, top-down communication, essentialize the media and freeze the current forms of the media into fixed configuration, covering over the fact that media can be reconstructed, re-functioned, and constantly changed." (Kellner 1996: 180) Contemporary theories generally take into account the dialogic nature of radio (Scannell 1991, 1996). As a means of mass communication, radio became characteristic for making public informative and entertaining flows of natural, spontaneous, unstructured dialogue from the very locations in which they are emerging.

The process by which radio became a site of social exchange, an informative public forum, has to do mainly with the structural changes, which it has undergone recently. As Vanger, suggests, these changes were triggered by the quest of broadcasters for new audiences. Her research showed (Vanger 1997), that the structure of radio talk and delivery gained new characteristics and developed distinctive feature which it did not possess before. "Gradually, multi-voice formats with interactional characteristics, more or less imitative of ordinary turn-taking, were introduced. The innovation center seems to have been programs directed at children and youth, in addition to entertainment programs. So, there are both qualitative and quantitative transitions from monologue formats towards formats with interaction of various kinds." (Vanger 1997: 200).

As a medium of mass communication, radio is able to convey that which is expressed in public and intended to be heard by others into the everyday experience of its audience, yet on the other hand, it is also able to structure the messages in a way that suits the environment in which reception takes place. As Scannell put it, radio mediates "the public into the private and the private into the public in the manner and style of their performances in a wide range of settings and for correspondingly diverse purposes" (Scannell 1991: 11).<sup>1</sup> But the idea that intense dialogic communication which takes place on air closely relates to the notions of private and public is not built on the geography of broadcasting alone; in other words, it does not have to do merely with

the fact that the site of broadcasting is an institutional, public place, whereas the place of consumption remains private, even intimate environment of individuals. The fact that radio programs, in particular those that enable some sort of participation to its audiences, fuse the public and the private derives to a great extent from their communicative structures, and also from the fact that participation in the program is valued mostly for the opinions presented.

Call-in programs are characteristic for dialogic communication, which has only vague and approximate initial scenario, thus proceeding according to the interests or input of the participants. According to Zgrabljic (2001), "dialogue as a variety of talk on radio represents an encounter between two conversants, one that by expressing some personal opinion or by representing some institution in the name of which it appears on air stands for the public, and between a representative of the institution of radio. Their encounter takes place in a specific time and place, and it is also conditioned by time and place. Conversation emerges and develops as a mediated interaction between the two spheres: public and private. This conversation is institutionally determined and interacts with the broader social reality." (Zgrabljic 2002: 59-60)

Unlike more structured media genres, such as are interviews, documentaries, or newscasts for instance, participants of call-in programs can only have a vague idea about positions of their conversants, before they are actually voiced out. Call-in radio thus presents a distinctive public forum where scattered individuals participate to address a given issue. This is consistent with the notion of public sphere developed by Jürgen Habermas (1989), who traced the historical roots of the modern perceptions of publicness and analyzed their intellectual underpinnings; he wrote that "a portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body" (1989, 79). A crucial question with respect to this notion of a public forum is whether and to what extent discussions which call-in radio makes possible have any observable political or social effect. On the one hand, confrontations of different social roles and experiences that are broadcast by interactive radio programs confer substantial social and, sometimes even political, significance to the radio as a public forum (e.g., Moss and Higgins 1984, Hutchby 1996, Page and Tannenbaum 1996, Mitchell 1998). On the other hand, there is evidence that the impact of these forums extends beyond its own borders. Empirical analyses of talk and call-in radio audience show, especially in the American context, that there is significant dependence between opinion climates of call-in programs and, for instance, political preferences of their audience (Barker and Knight 2000, Hollander 1996, Pfau et al. 1998). How such participatory communication in call-in radio can shape the course of action taken by the authorities, was convincingly demonstrated by Page and Tannenbaum (1996) in their analysis of a triumphant public protest against Bill Clinton's nominee for attorney general. In some sense it is even expected by the participating audience that what they say on air is listened to and accommodated by the authorities. It is possible to illustrate this attitude, which immediately derives from the specific fusion of the private and public in call-in radio programs, with the following exchange between a listener and the host of a popular Slovenian call-in program.

Caller: *“Good morning. I have an opinion – but no one from the higher positions will hear it anyway”*

Host: *“No, no... I must interrupt and emphasize that our station is listened to even by the most influential people!”*

Caller: *“Well, it is a pity then that we cannot have any of these people by this telephone line. I would love to tell my opinion to any such person!”* (RGL 2000)

One conspicuous characteristic of participatory communication facilitated by call-in radio programs is their inherent tension between controversy and concurrence. Apparently, participation in the flow of publicly expressed opinions is fuelled by very strong approving or disproving perceptions of what is said on air. Participants engage in public discussion because they become either cognitively or emotionally involved in a particular fragment of the ongoing exchange, but by showing how they take sides they also contribute to the development of controversy which dominates these programs. On the other hand, the style of exchange in call-in radio programs does not seem to be equal to the institutional discourse, which is characterized by rigid formality and asymmetrical relations. A general impression of participatory communication in call-in radio is that of concurrence, of acting together towards a shared objective, taking part in a joint undertaking, harmoniously structured by the ongoing flows of communication. Individuals that communicate in call-in radio programs participate in the flow of exchange on an equal footing; they are permitted to present whatever argument, there are no restricted areas of examination save those that are limited by the socially shared ethics of mutual recognition and respect. Even conflict of opinions seems to be a joint product of harmonious exchange. This makes concurrence a curious counterpart to the atmosphere of controversy, whereas the very possibility of controversy to unfold and develop into a continuous stream of voices is dependent on the inviting climate of concurrence and partaking.

Although radio is situated as a quintessential communication medium within contemporary societies, it is nevertheless possible to argue that it is more often than not neglected in both theoretical and empirical studies of communication. Some even argue that radio as a medium of mass communication is theoretically undervalued (Mitchell 1997, Strauss 1993). While extensive studies of radio were conducted decades ago, especially during and after both world wars, for instance by Lazarsfeld (1939) or Cantrill (1999), the influence of radio research declined substantially since that stage of communication research. The conceptual tension between controversy and concurrence – which is the central concern of the present paper – seems a productive framework for empirical research, with clear aptitude of contributing to the existing understanding of radio as a public forum. It is also my belief, that this specific conceptual tension provides a creative approach to the analysis of mediated communication in general.

### **Origins of controversy in call-in radio**

It is not difficult to see that the existence of controversy attracts attention, nor that conflicts of opinions are exceptionally magnetic. According to Kant, arguing is a common form of entertainment among human beings; he observed that “if we attend to the course of conversation in mixed companies consisting not merely of scholars and subtle reasoners but also of business people or women, we notice that besides storytelling and jesting they have another entertainment, namely, arguing” (Kant, cited in Habermas 1989, 106). Arguing in this context signifies engaged exchange of opinions and reasons to hold them true or credible. This form of communication, which requires focused consideration and also intense cognitive involvement from the participants, may be found in any human associations; moreover it is in principle applicable to any issue that may be under consideration.

There are several social factors that contribute to the fact that public discussions are perceived as events in themselves in contemporary societies and that they are often framed as controversies. With respect to the mass media contents the following are probably the most influential. (1) With the rise of electronic media, the ability to dispute publicly becomes valued for its performance value; it sometimes seems that is not so important what you say, but how you say it or how you are able to say it. Especially with the rise and popularity of television, attention is focused more and more on participants and their image, their reputation, the drama, and performance (see e.g., Dayan and Katz 1994). (2) The tendency to stage public discussions in the mass media, both as a popular form of entertainment and a required element of established genres, is also related to the understanding of discussion as a way of approaching issues through the journalistic rule of balanced accounts of controversial issues; reading current affairs through opposing perspectives serves as an approximation to the encounter of “both sides” of an issue (e.g., Meijer 2001). (3) The presence of antagonist positions is also typical for other areas of social life, not only to mediated public debates which, admittedly, contribute the most to their present outlook. The focus on antagonist positions seems consistent with the existing social polarities, ideological divides, and contesting interests.

Emergent controversies in call-in radio programs are best understood as direct and immediate *products of opinion processes*. Participants present their opinions to the forum and they are therefore immersed into a flow of ongoing exchange, which is usually filled with adverse perspectives and also with references to what other participants have said or argued. Theoretical discussion that follows is aimed at elucidating main theoretical implications of this idea.

Taking opinion processes as a conceptual starting point for the investigation of call-in programs can be productive and fertile only if a broader social context is taken into account. There are, in this sense, two main types of contexts which are likely to generate adversarial communication on air: (1) conflicts between existing opinions, and (2) conflicts between newly discovered differences in opinions. Discussions that call-in radio stages are quite often – depending on the issue which is selected for discussion – immersed into authentic social cleavings and polarities that exist in a soci-

ety. There, call-in radio operates as an easily accessible and open forum of exchange, and even of contest between clearly distinct, articulate and antagonistic positions. A good case in point is a famous call-in show from BBC Ulster, *Talkback* (see Coleman 1997). The social setting in which this program is broadcast and received involves a particular conflict which relates to the sharp ideological divide among the audiences who take the program as their site of communication across ideological borders; this controversial and divisive issue is regularly addressed by the radio host and participants. Stephen Coleman argues that it is precisely on these grounds that conflict functions as constitutive of the public forum: "If by talking on the radio, publics can speak unto publics whom they would ignore if they lived in the next street, then phone-in programs could be regarded as the basis of an authentic public sphere" (Coleman 1997: 9).

Call-in radio is on the other hand often deliberately oriented towards articulation of new and possibly contentious differences in spontaneously articulated perspectives as well. Because call-in radio programs gladly invite adversarial communication, they try to engage all participants into absorbing exposition of their own perspectives, regardless of their positions. There, as Ian Hutchby (1996) explains, "arguments emerge locally out of the improvised opening statements that callers make at the beginning of calls. The host has little idea of the possible contents of each caller's position before the production of these statements. Consequently, if he wants to build opposition in pursuit of the kind of controversial talk for which open-line talk radio shows are notorious, he will have to closely monitor the caller's account for possible arguables." (Hutchby 1996: 59)

Taking both types of cases into account it seems important to ask what is the nature of opinions that appear in call-in programs. How are these opinions structured? It has long been recognized in the study of public opinion that to outline the structure of publicly expressed opinions is an imperative research objective (Bogart 1988, Splichal 1997, Wilson 1975, Zaller 1992). Are opinions expressed by participants of call-in programs extreme, radical and hostile to alternatives when they enter the flow of exchange on air? How do they relate to other opinions held by the participant? It seems crucial to identify the extent to which opinions expressed in call-in programs serve as vehicles of social interaction and, conversely the extent to which they are cognitive representations of one's interest, ideologies, or political choices. According to some researchers, reception of talk broadcast by radio, and also participation in it, may have important implications for the experience of immediate social interaction. As Armstrong and Rubin (1989) argue, "talk or 'call-in' radio programs provide a sense of involvement for their participants. Talk radio enables callers to communicate with the outside world, get quick answers to questions, express opinions, and simply talk to other people. In short, talk radio allows for interpersonal communication." (Armstrong and Rubin 1989: 84). In addition to being a forum for ideas and opinions, call-in radio is therefore also used as a medium for face-to-face exchange and bonding. "The telephone interactions between callers and program hosts provide companionship, a form of social network, and a forum for their ideas." (Armstrong and Rubin 1989: 84)



For the purposes of our research, five explanatory concepts which define particular aspects of opinion expression were empirically investigated in relation to participation in call-in radio: (a) *sociability*, (b) *appeal of public appearance*, (c) *willingness to express opinions*, (d) *opinion extremity*, (e) *maintenance of minority opinions*. Sociability was understood as openness of an individual to diverse social contacts. This notion involves personal characteristics of individuals, especially their positive orientation towards social interaction, their conviviality and general friendliness. It is expected on the basis of the above exposition that participation in call-in radio programs is significantly conditioned by one's desire to communicate and share his views with others (Armstrong and Rubin 1989). Our first hypothesis (H1) is: the more a person is sociable the more he or she will participate in call-in radio programs. It is conceivable that participants in call-in radio programs generally do not find it problematic to appear in front of the public. Admittedly, the kind of publicness that is embodied by radio programs differs, for instance, from that of television or of direct, unmediated exchange, primarily because of the lack of visual cues and impossibility of communication on this particular level, yet participation in such a program is still to a great extent a matter of personal exposure in front of others, i.e. public. By contributing to the conversations on air, individuals immediately transcend their boundaries of the sphere of privacy and intimacy (see Scannell 1996). It is therefore expected (H2) that the more public appearance is attractive to an individual, the more he or she will participate in the call-in programs.

Underlying both sociability and attractiveness of appearance in front of a broader audience is a notion central to the study of public opinion processes – willingness to express opinion. In a more technical sense, willingness to express opinion is a kind of imagined or intended act of participation, despite the fact that it is frequently linked with the notion of social control and normative influence (see Noelle-Neumann 1993). Willingness to express opinions is, according to the spiral of silence theory, amplified in the context of favorable climate of opinion; and vice versa. Regardless of particular social-psychological inhibitions to express opinion on the basis of perceived opinion climate, willingness to express opinion may be conceptualized as factual antecedent to the acts of opinion expression (see Petrič and Pinter 2001). It is therefore reasonable to expect that (H3) willingness to express opinion is higher among the group of people who participate more frequently in call-in radio programs.

Interactive radio programs are perhaps not the main political forum of opinion exchange and discussion, but they can to some extent reflect the climate of political opinion (e.g., Baker and Knight 2000, Coleman 1997, Levine 1987, Page and Tannenbaum 1996). Precisely because of its specific publicness, which in some cases includes even elements of anonymity, and because of its adversarial flows of communication, call-in radio invites a wide variety of opinions. But as Hollander (1996) puts it, "since audience members often select programs that agree with their own ideological viewpoints, this suggests that talk radio, by reinforcing ideological beliefs, may increase the extremity of attitudes among listeners" (Hollander 1996: 103-4). It is therefore interesting to explore whether (H4) the propensity to hold extreme opinions or, in more specific terms on the other hand, (H5) maintenance of minority opinions in-

creases participation in call-in radio programs.<sup>2</sup> It is conceivable how a call-in radio can constitute a platform to express opinion that do not receive extensive hearing in a society or are dismissed as unpopular. The act of expressing such opinions is consistent with the very fact that a minority position should strive for attention, coverage, and discussion (Moscovici 1985).

On the basis of the above hypotheses, a regression model was composed, with the level of participation in call-in programs as a dependent variable.<sup>3</sup> *Table 1* presents our results.<sup>4</sup>

Table 1. Regression analysis of participation in call-in radio

Regression coefficients <sup>a</sup>						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	2,986	,328		9,094	,000
	PUBLIC APPEARANCE	<b>,270</b>	<b>,099</b>	<b>,184</b>	<b>2,728</b>	<b>,007</b>
	SOCIABILITY	,071	,100	,047	,709	,479
	WILLINGNESS TO EXPRESS OPINION	<b>,277</b>	<b>,089</b>	<b>,209</b>	<b>3,111</b>	<b>,002</b>
	EXTREME OPINIONS	<b>-,361</b>	<b>,142</b>	<b>-,172</b>	<b>-2,550</b>	<b>,011</b>
	MINORITY OPINIONS	,053	,051	,069	1,056	,292

<sup>a</sup>. Dependent Variable: PARTICIPATION IN CALL-IN SHOWS, N=272, Rsquare = 0,12 Adjusted Rsquare = 0,09

Data from our survey show that three hypotheses concerning the structure of opinions expressed by participants in call-in radio programs cannot be rejected: hypotheses concerning the influence of public appearance, concerning the influence of willingness to express opinion, and concerning the maintenance of extreme opinions on participation in call-in radio programs. It is important to recognize that respondents of our survey perceive discussion forums of radio programs as public settings, which is contingent on the point that attraction to public appearance explains to some extent participation in call-in programs ( $\beta=0,184$ , sig. 0,007). This is also consistent with another finding that willingness to express opinion contributes to participation in call-in radio programs ( $\beta=0,209$ , sig. 0,002).

Contrary to the suggestion of Anderson and Rubin (1989: 90), it should be concluded from the present data that call-in radio is generally not perceived as a functional equivalent to interpersonal communication. It may be the case that gratifications that individuals satisfy by participating in call-in programs are not experienced as so clearly separate as their argument assumes, on the other hand it is quite likely that the notion of publicness and accessibility outweighs the context of sharing and partaking which is generally attributed to the face-to-face discourse (see Dewey 1999).

It seems quite striking, however, that participation in call-in radio is not conditioned by individuals' propensity to hold extreme, radical opinions. In fact, the more

extreme opinions people hold, the less they participate in call-in radio, as our regression analysis shows ( $\beta = -0,172$ , sig. 0,011). Contrary to the suggestions that call-in radio is primarily a site of irrational, extremist discourse (Page and Tannenbaum 1996, Coleman 1997, Levine 1987), these data reject such disapproving judgment. However, the point that individuals with extreme opinions are not attracted to participate in call-in programs does not explain the impression of adversarial communication on air, or the presence of *some* such opinions in these programs. Call-in radio is characteristic for communication which is consistently in pursuit of controversy and confrontation of opinion (Hutchby 1996).

The first explanation is that probably only a relatively small number of extreme opinions is expressed on air, however their expression may generate a collective response by more moderate individuals who make continuous reference to the more radical perceptions. The second part of this explanation is possible on the basis of results for the remaining two hypotheses, which regression analysis rejected. Apparently, call-in radio does not serve as a platform for minority opinions (H4). Conversation in call-in radio revolves around dominant opinions. It is also quite likely, however, that majority opinions expressed on air are extremely hostile to alternatives, which is consistent with the finding of the above regression analysis, namely that willingness to express opinion significantly contributes to the level of participation in call-in programs. Hostility towards alternatives immediately generates a strong image of controversy. This point seems quite likely with respect to the talk in call-in radio, where the image of controversy can be generated by blunt attacks of those who hold dominant perspectives against isolated proponents of different opinions or where vigorous calls are triggered by a different, minority opinion. On the basis of this idea, it is even possible to formulate a hypothesis that controversy in call-in radio emerges from the referential mention of some third party, that is when communication is oriented towards some imaginary proponents of an opinion (most likely an extreme opinion), but who do not participate in the show at all. Controversy, according to this explanation, is the main and direct result of concurrent talk on air.

### **Inviting conversation**

Conversation refers in general to free and comfortable social exchange. It develops within a spontaneous flow, experienced as a pleasurable and enjoyable activity which may accommodate interests of its participants, rather than as a product of some structured performance. Conversation is easily accessible and it is in principle not exclusive to either participants, topics, or places. Recently, the notion of conversation is increasingly found in connection with the characteristics and production of media broadcasts (Scannell 1991, Carey 1995, Luthar 1998). The notion of conversation has historically been very strongly linked to the production of radio programs; in some form or another, conversation played a role in the creative process of discovering “the appropriate forms of talk for broadcasting” (Scannell 1991: 2).

As the history of BBC radio shows, the style of delivery was often deliberately shaped so as to remain as close as possible to the structures of everyday, mundane, and

casual conversations. In fact, it turned out that “broadcasting could not speak to its audience as a crowd. It had to learn to speak to them as individuals” (Scannell 1991). From this perspective, the famous BBC dictum that radio programs are conversations with the nation should be understood. There are good reasons for this historical parallel, because, as Ruohomaa (1997) mentions, “radio has adapted to the contemporary media landscape – in which the leading role is attributed to television – by finding its own mode of delivery and presentation. In some sense, consumption of contemporary radio resembles early radio receivers “when listeners had to use headphones and individually receive radio’s output.” (Ruohomaa 1997: 159)

That conversation is so typical for radio texts stems from the fact that they both share a striking natural alliance.<sup>5</sup> As Zgrabljic (2001: 51) put it, radio is both “an instrument and a weapon for talk”. The unstructured, spontaneous talk, which is broadcast by the radio blends well with the spontaneous and impulsive conversation that is ongoing in the everyday life. “Radio listening is almost like a side-activity, a way to use the mental capacities not needed in tasks, such as driving a car or doing manual work, that do not require an individual’s whole attention. The time spent on listening to the radio is not away from something else. On the contrary, by listening to the radio in addition to doing something else an individual may feel that he or she is more efficient and dynamic.” (Alasuutari 1997: 170) From the perspective of media producers, this point is particularly important because conversation – once broadcast to the wider audiences – is easily incorporated into different environments and processes outside its immediate scope, like for instance at work, in the household, if it does not necessarily bring the audience together as a circle of friends or a family in front of the receiver.

It is important to frame the notion of conversational style on radio within the broader perspective of radio as a communication device, since the sites from which radio talk is broadcast represent essentially institutional settings. As Scannell argues, “the studio is the *institutional* discursive space (...). It is a public space in which and from which institutional authority is maintained and displayed. The power of broadcasting, like that of any institution, lies in the way it can define the terms of social interaction in its own domain by pre-allocating social roles and statuses, and by *controlling* the content, style and duration of events.” (Scannell 1991: 2, emphases added) Yet it is advantageous to the institution of broadcasting itself that talk which emanates from the sphere of institutional authority is rendered in sharp contrast to the expected patterns of the asymmetrical, authority based communication, because consequently it is much more attractive to the audience. The control over the structure of talk is to an important degree shared by all who participate, and anyone who may wish to enter a flow of exchange can be quite certain that his or her contribution will make a difference.

Through the use of conversation in call-radio, a specific fusion of the private and public takes place; because the role of everyday experience and of personal perspectives becomes so central, both social realms become closely intertwined and penetrate each other. On the basis of his critical discourse analyses Norman Fairclough (1995, 1998) argues that explicitly political issues, the presence of which is indicative of the

modernist notion of an engaged public sphere, are treated in predominantly conversational style by the majority of contemporary mass media. Fairclough calls this pervasive tendency “conversationalization of discourse” (1998: 145). In his study of a BBC radio program *Today*, Fairclough was able to show how communicative exchanges between participants are modelled on “ordinary conversation”, which prioritizes the ethos of common sense and brings personal, even intimate experiences to the center of attention.

Clearly, “conversationalization” should be understood as a tendency to offer the audiences more open and accessible programs, although Fairclough also argues (1998: 160) that from the broader perspective of the field of discourse and specific forces which give it identifiable shape, this interpretation may not be entirely valid. The immediate effect of tendency towards conversationalization on the radio audience seems to be that by framing even delicate political issues in the form of light, humorous and personalized conversation, they produce an impression of a more down-to-earth treatment of issues. Casual dialogue and chatty climate primarily signify a departure from more rigid and abstract attitudes towards current affairs. These conversations invite rather than exclude and they enable a treatment of all other participants as equally casual. The gentle and welcoming setting of causal conversation increases the likelihood of the common person to participate with his or her contribution.

#### **Analyzing call-in radio dialogue – epistemology and method**

In the previous section it was argued that controversy is a direct product of concurrent talk in call-in radio programs. In order to convincingly account for the nature of this conceptual relation, a methodological approach is required that deals immediately with talk itself. In our study, quantitative text analysis was employed for this purpose (see Roberts 1997). This methodological approach is not very frequent in radio studies, as in most cases conversation or discourse analyses are used in order to account for the characteristics of broadcast talk (see Hutchby, 1996, Scannell 1991, Fairclough 1998). In fact, quantitative approach was fiercely dismissed by Hutchby (1996: 4) by saying that with quantification it is possible to observe certain patterns on a very general level, but that allegedly leaves out the “actual, situated speaking practices” which are very central to understanding the structure of communication in these programs. In direct relation to this argument, which I think is misleading,<sup>6</sup> it should be pointed out that the main purpose of this analysis is to address the introductory question concerning the tension between controversy and concurrence. In order to be able to establish and explore its empirical dimensions general patterns that are accessible through quantitative methods are precisely what is required.

When any aspect of communication is selected for inquiry, it stands, just like every other social phenomenon, undetermined by possible, and even more by the most popular, or most frequent, methodological qualifications. It stands completely undetermined by the almost paradigmatic divide between qualitative and quantitative methods; consistent with this idea, concepts and hypotheses which were investigated in the present study had been selected and developed independently of the methods

used; their selection depended on the theoretical problem and existing body of knowledge. As Klaus Bruhn Jensen argued (1991: 6), “no object of analysis is by nature quantitative or qualitative”. But it is important to recognize that interpretation of results is very much dependent on the methods from which results themselves are acquired. In order to fully understand a phenomenon, as wide and as diverse range of methods should be used, although this integrative approach is very impractical and unfeasible.

For the purpose of our research, an innovative methodological procedure, which transformed dialogue between two individuals as typically interactive features of the call-in radio programs, into manageable units of analysis, was developed. A unit of analysis was therefore defined as one dyadic exchange, i.e. as that part of radio program which is “produced” by any two speakers. Dyadic exchange as a communicative sequence is in this sense limited by the introduction of new speakers to the conversation; for example, when another listener calls the show, when the host or the guest of the show takes over, and so forth. The idea to focus on pairs of conversing individuals is not entirely new. Theoretically, it may be traced back to the social interactionist tradition, especially to Herbert Blumer<sup>7</sup>. In the present context, dyadic exchanges are used as typically “structural units” (Splichal 1990), but they differ from other segments of interactive texts that may also appear logical or normal to anyone with the same communicative competence.<sup>8</sup>

### **Results and interpretation**

In order to address the conceptual tension between controversy and concurrence, four variables were developed and applied to the analysis of call-in radio transcripts: (1) conversationality, (2) activity in dialogue, (3) affection between conversants. (Coding procedure also included other variables but they are not relevant for the theoretical problem that this research attempts to address.) *Conversationality* was defined as a characteristics of interaction, which is typical for its open and individualized relations between participants. It involves a high degree of informality, even personalized references, and elements of humor. To this extent conversationality prevents references to participants’ social roles or institutions they represent indicative of which is evasion of abstract and technically sophisticated vocabulary, which is inaccessible to the general audience. *Activity in dialogue* signifies the extent to which conversants in a given dyadic exchange attempt to direct and manage the course of dialogue, by means of interceptions, inferences, asking questions, demanding answers, or with other such strategies. *Affection between conversants* refers to the general mode of address between participants in dyadic exchanges. Conceptual relations between these variables were framed so as to contribute to the exploration of the main research problem and, accordingly, two hypotheses were formulated. Consistent with findings and interpretations presented above, it may be expected that (H1) conversationalization takes place irrespective of mutual affect between conversants. Also it may be hypothesized that (H2) activity in dialogue channels both controversy and concurrence towards greater involvement.

In order to explore relations between these variables and to test our hypotheses, 20 call-in radio programs broadcast by the Slovenian radio stations between 10<sup>th</sup> of May and 15<sup>th</sup> of July 2000 were sampled, recorded and transcribed. Included in the sample were commercial, regional and public radio stations. Our uniting procedure generated 350 dyadic exchanges (38 % of which were from commercial stations).

According to our analysis, call-in radio exchanges tend to nurture informal address between conversants which clearly prevails. Values, which were assigned according to Osgood's method of evaluation, ranged from 1 to 7, where the higher the number the more informal address was observable in dyadic exchanges. Only 2% of units demonstrated completely formal address in contrast to 39% of units with complete informality (1 = 2 %, 2 = 3,71 %, 3 = 4,86, 4 = 8,29, 5 = 7,14, 6 = 7,43, 7 = 38,29; in 28, 29 % of units, mode address was impossible to assign; N=350). This means that participants in Slovenian call-in radio programs are referred to primarily as individuals, as subjects with their own personal experiences, rather than as representatives of their social roles or of institutions in the name of which they appear before the audience. It turned out, however, that this is a very specific type of conversation in which humorous elements, such as are commonly found in the everyday life have very little role. In fact, the two items correlate negatively ( $r=-0,204$ , sig. 0,001), which strongly indicates that humor (operationalized as counts of explicit jokey and comical remarks by the conversants) has nothing to do with informal exchanges in call-in radio, but the reverse – it is part and parcel of more formal exchanges. It is even possible to suggest that humor is an exclusive resort of formal exchanges which may break up and dispel the nuisance of a pressing issue under consideration, whereas in informal conversations these robust measures of communicative escape are not necessary.<sup>9</sup>

It was interesting, however, that a very strong and statistically significant correlation was observed between the use of abstract concepts and the formality of address ( $r=-0,193$ , sig. 0,000). The more informal mode of address existed between conversants the less technical concepts and abstract words that may not be understood by the general audience were used. So, conversation on call-in radio tends to reach closer to the wider audience by utilizing informal modes of address and by refraining from the use of abstract, technical vocabulary, yet it also refrains from the use of humor, probably in order not to demolish the impression of serious, while accessible and gentle treatment of issues.

With the prevailing informality of exchanges in call-in radio, our hypothesis that conversationalization takes place irrespective of whether there exists mutual affection between individual participants gains additional importance. Our text analysis convincingly corroborated this interpretation. Statistical correlation between mutual affection and mode of address does not exist ( $r= 0,009$ , sig. = 0,890), which means that controversy does not emerge from formal talk alone. Or in other words, formal mode of address is no more nor less likely to generate controversy than in informal modes. Controversy, according to these results is not in linear cause-effect relation to concurrent talk.

In what sense then are concurrent exchanges generating conditions of controversies, in particular of explicit conflicts of opinions between participants of call-in pro-

grams? According to the theoretical discussion above, both aspects of communication simultaneously emerge and mutually structure the course of social exchange on air. In order to expand on these point empirically the role of a mediating variable should be considered. As general perceptions of radio broadcasts are heavily dependent on the activity of participants in dialogue, regardless of its degree, this is the most likely candidate. This concept was operationalized in the present research as a measure for each participant in a dyadic exchange separately. It consisted of two 4-points scales per unit: 1=the speaker does not direct the course of conversation, 2=the speaker directs conversation to a small extent, 3=the speaker directs conversation to a great extent, 4= the speaker exclusively directs conversation. The two scores were added and the following combined measure (see last row of Table 2) was constructed.

Table 2. The mediating role of activity in dialogue

**Crosstabulation btw. mutual affection and activity in dialogue**

		<i>activity in dialogue</i>			Total
		both inactive	domination of one	both active	
<b>mutual affection</b>	negative	4	9	19	32
	%	12,5%	28,1%	59,4%	
	neutral	31	9	18	58
	%	53,4%	15,5%	31,0%	
	positive	67	88	104	259
	%	25,9%	34,0%	40,2%	
Total		102	106	141	349
		%	29,2%	30,4%	40,4%

There is a clear and statistically significant nonlinear relation between activity in dialogue and mutual affection (the value of chi-square statistic is 25.195, sig. = 0,000). It may be argued that either a climate of conflict or of agreement similarly triggers participants' activity and increases the number of their attempts to direct the course of dialogue. In this sense the empirical link between controversy and dialogue is established and may lead to further theoretically grounded explorations of communication in call-in radio programs.

**Conclusion**

The focus on the interpenetration of interpersonal and mass communication, such as found in call-in radio programs, implies that it is possible to go beyond the framework of institutional approach which primarily explains the functions of mass media with respect to their structural determinants and socially attributed roles. In this sense,



contemporary communication research pays very close attention to the various forms of interactive, dialogic communication as broadcast by the mass media (Livingstone and Lunt 1994; Hutchby 1996) or encountered in everyday life (Drew and Heritage 1992; Markham 1998). Increasing attention is paid to both formal and more informal types of dialogic exchange, such as for instance interviews, debates among peers, casual conversations, counseling, etc. Given relatively widespread institutional tendency to reduce as much as possible the give and take of communication and to transform it into simple delivery and reception, this focus is more than just a matter of scholarly fashion. By means of dialogic communication, contemporary social and communication theory effectively grasps its central issues like participation, rationality, identity, opinion formation, social control, and so forth. In particular, these complex phenomena all find some degree of expression in interactive media programs.

Productivity of this area of research derives in large part from the fact that interactive media programs found ways to effectively fuse and combine different, technologically or socially conditioned aspects of social life, as for instance the fusion of (1) mass and interpersonal communication in interactive media programs, which in their own right represent two distinct levels of exchange and sharing, that importantly contribute to the broader social processes (see Dayan and Katz 1994); interactive media programs also fuse (2) domains of private and public with their simultaneous framing of entirely different walks of life and confrontation of agents with different social roles (Kress 1986); often it is argued on the same grounds that (3) the key element of interactive programs is their blend of the ordinary and that which may be called expert (Livingstone and Lunt 1994); it is not the least important, that interactive media programs (4) are themselves a mix of more traditional genres, developed historically in broadcasting for a variety of unrelated purposes (Fairclough 1995: 175).

The present paper attempted to contribute to the understanding of these phenomena by addressing another conceptual tension observable in a specific type of interactive media programs (radio call-in programs), but which may probably be generalized onto other kinds of interactive media programs as well. The main problem of this paper was a conceptual tension between controversy and concurrence. This tension find in expression in different characteristics of communication and opinion processes in call-in radio programs, for instance in conflict, confrontation, or opposition on the one hand, and the symmetrical, accommodating, and casual elements of exchange on the other. Call-in radio programs are essentially constituted around confrontation of different viewpoints, of different social roles and experiences, of that which constitutes expert knowledge and everyday experience, yet it is also the case that by and large, the rhetoric, mode of address, and conversation between individuals are immersed into the patterns of acceptance, evasion of direct resistance, shared emotions, and mutual passions.

Controversy and concurrence were confirmed as prevailing characteristics of call-in radio. According to our analyses, they both emerge out of the conversational style of exchange on air, since both controversy and concurrence strongly relate to its constitutive characteristics. Moreover, controversy and concurrence should be understood as formative dynamics of their conceptual counterpart. Although there is no direct

cause-and effect relation between the two concepts on the empirical level, they can be clearly related through the role of mediating activities, such as are for instance attempts to direct and manage the course of conversation by participants of call-in radio. This also involves a point that controversy emerges from the context of inner features of communication in call-in radio, rather than in their outward determinants. Opinions expressed in call-in shows are by and large not characteristic for their antecedent extreme orientation or intolerance, but develop into antagonist forces as a result of specific communication on air. It seems then, that controversies are generally emergent from the ongoing communication on air.

### ENDNOTES:

<sup>1</sup> For a more elaborate discussion of radio as a medium that reverses the relationship between public and private see Scannell (1996: 68-69).

<sup>2</sup> The measure of *minority opinion* was constructed as one's position on an issue relative to his perceived (rather than factual) majority on an issue. This operational procedure is familiar from public opinion research and has been tested in a number of studies (see Petrič and Pinter 2001). Three current issues were included in the survey: integration of Slovenia into NATO, integration into EU, and gender equality. Additive index was constructed from responses so that the higher the number, the more frequently a respondent expressed a minority opinion.

The measure of *opinion extremity* was constructed on the basis of answers that respondents returned to the 6 current issues (Nato, EU, gender equality and evaluation of media coverage of the three issues). Values of the variable were computed as counts of extreme (both maximum or minimum) responses returned on the 5-point response scales, so that the higher the value, the more often a respondent returned extreme opinions (see also Hollander 1996 for a similar methodological approach).

<sup>3</sup> Dependent variable was constructed in terms of passive or active involvement in call-in radio. Values for this variable were calculated from two survey questions: a) "How often do you usually listen to call-in radio programs (programs, in which audience gets a chance to express opinion) – (1) every day, (2) several times during a week, (3) at least once a week, or (4) at least once a month?" and b) "How frequently did you express your opinion on any issue in call-in radio programs during the last five years – (1) never, (2) once, or (3) several times?" Values were indexed so that the higher value of the dependent variable signify higher levels of participation in call-in programs.

<sup>4</sup> Data were collected during a research project "*Participacija v mediatizirani javni sferi*", which was completed in July 2001. A random field survey was used (N=275). Demographical characteristics of the sample are consistent with the general Slovenian population (for more details see Petrič and Pinter 2001).

<sup>5</sup> As Zgrabljic (2001) found out in her study of Croatian radio, it is possible to distinguish no less than eight types of dialogue if they are differentiated in terms of their locality.

<sup>6</sup> The quality and merit of results can be only assessed relative to the extent to which they answer initial question or research problem.

<sup>7</sup> Blumer mentioned the fertility of analyzing interacting pairs in his critique of opinion polls (1948), but he did not develop this point any further nor did he use it in an empirical study. It seems, however, that other researcher have come to the same conclusion, because a similar idea is mentioned also in the famous study of voting behavior (Berelson et al. 1954: 300), where it was submitted as a methodological proposal to solve the problem of explaining information flows, as was later described by Katz (Katz 1957). As a curiosity, to some extent this very same reflection is also present in Tarde (2001).

- <sup>8</sup> Similar methodological assumptions are also implied in the notion of the “speaking turn”, which appears frequently in qualitative analyses of interactive communication (Hutchby 1996, Scannell 1991).
- <sup>9</sup> It was therefore not possible to construct a more complex measure of conversationalization, because two indicators used in our analysis covered distinctly different areas of conversation.
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**Andrej Pinter**

## **Između suprotstavljanja i slaganja. Struktura mišljenja i komunikacije u radijskom kontaktnom programu**

### **SAŽETAK**

Ovaj rad temelji svoj interes u argumentu da su kontaktne radijske emisije u svojoj biti konfrontacijske te se fokusira na način na koji sukobi mišljenja utječu na tijek emitirane konverzacije. Korištenjem razgovora dolazi do specifičnog pretapanja privatnog i javnog. Na taj se način kontaktne emisije probražavaju u poseban javni forum gdje se domene javnog i privatnog tijesno isprepliću i prožimaju. Uloga svakodnevnog iskustva i osobnih pogleda postaje ključnim čimbenikom u jednom okruženju koje je u svojoj biti institucijsko. Slušateljima se ovakav forum doima pristupačnim, jer razgovori nisu isključivi, nego pozivaju na sudjelovanje. Kao što pokazuju analize prikazane u ovom radu, polemika i suglasnost ističu se kao dominantna obilježja konverzacije. Oba obilježja proizlaze iz razgovornog stila razmjene u eteru; štoviše, sugerira se shvaćanje da ta obilježja djeluju formativno na svoje pandane. Iako ne postoji izravna uzročno-posljedična veza između ovih dvaju koncepata na empirijskoj razini, može se utvrditi nedvosmislena povezanost putem posredničkih aktivnosti, kao što su, primjerice, pokušaji sudionika u kontaktnim emisijama da usmjeravaju i upravljaju tijekom razgovora. U tom smislu, ovaj rad nudi teoretski i metodološki doprinos razumijevanju tipičnog proizvoda ovog bitnog, no teoretski potcijenjenog medija masovne komunikacije.

Ključne riječi: kontakt emisije, radijski program, komunikacija putem radija, konverzacija