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## A Comparison of Two Omaha Radio Talk Shows: Local vs. National Issues

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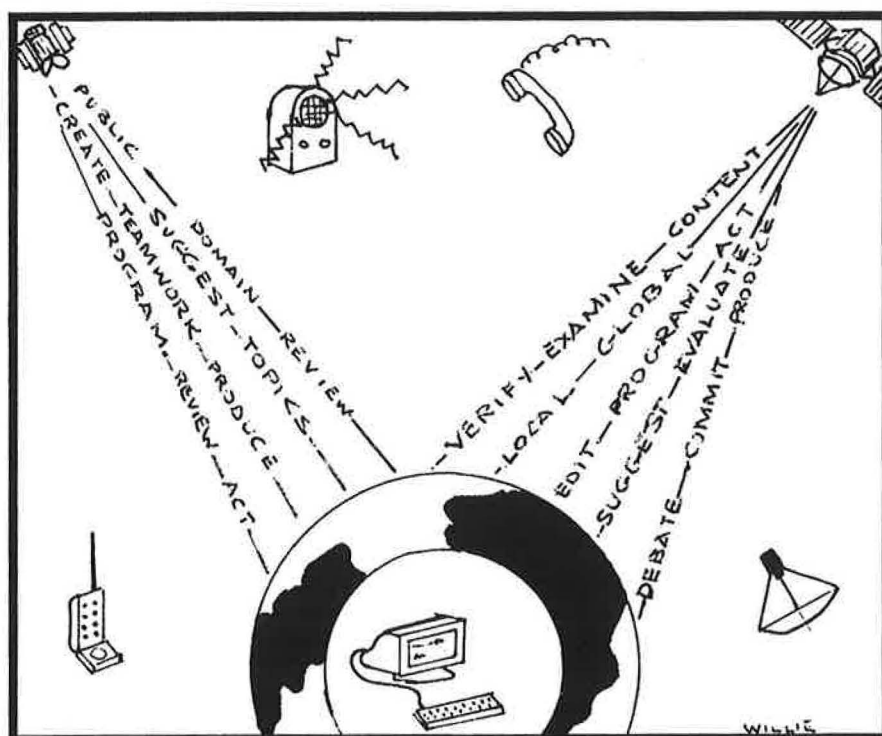
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# A Comparison of Two Omaha Radio Talk Shows: Local vs. National Issues

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It's 9:06 a.m. in Omaha, Nebraska. A stout, forty-year-old male with sandy blond hair sips a cup of coffee. The "on air" microphone turns red signaling the start of a new morning on talk radio. "Good morning you're on news/talk 1110 KFAB." Tom Becka, a three-year veteran of talk radio speaks quickly and loudly. Becka describes his show and the audience as the gang in the kitchen. "By that I mean, if you're at a party the best part of the party is the gang in the kitchen," says Becka. "They're arguing, they're fighting, they're laughing, they're discussing, they're disagreeing. . . that's what we do on my show."

"The Tom Becka Show" airs five times a week on 1110 KFAB. In downtown Omaha, "Talk of the Town with Steve Brown" attracts its own listeners to 1290 KKAR. "You're on Talk of the Town with Steve Brown, what's on your mind Dorothy?" the polite, 57-year-old Brown says with a deep voice. Brown describes his show as a "public forum for elected officials and their constituents" and for "people with interests and expertise on activities other than politics."

These two radio programs have a common background in that both are caller-driven political talk shows broadcast live from Omaha, Nebraska each weekday morning from 8:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m. (Becka is on until Noon). The purpose of this study was to investigate the role of these two Omaha, Nebraska radio talk show hosts during the 1996 presidential campaign, and to see if callers may be influenced by the host's views or if the hosts may be influenced by the caller's views.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The host of a radio talk show is an active participant in influencing the topic and direction of the program. A particular news item may be considered more important by a listener just by virtue of the attention it receives from the host. This is an example of the agenda-setting research first conducted in 1972 by McCombs and Shaw. The more coverage, the more important the issue. The less coverage, the less important the issue (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

McCombs and Shaw (1972) coined the phrase "agenda-setting" in their quest to research the role of the media in the 1968 presidential campaign. The 1976 election allowed agenda-setting to expand further into the political arena. Research sought to find what motivated voters and what role the media played in its reporting of candidate characteristics (McCombs & Shaw, 1993). The 1976 election study suggested that issues and most interesting by the press were reported more often than the issues found most interesting by the candidate. It was suggested that "the press is more a kaleidoscope reflecting reality than a mirror reflecting it; that the press is a more active interpreter than a passive transmission belt" (Weaver, 1987, p. 177).

One component of the agenda-setting theory is described as priming. This effect suggests that an audience evaluates election candidates in terms of what issues are included by the news media as opposed to what issues are neglected by the news media.

Therefore the news media set the standards by which an audience evaluates candidates. Use of priming in the news media is becoming responsible for selecting the criteria in which the public views an issue, event, or person. Research has found "the news media promote social consensus--not consensus in terms of opinions about whether the press is doing a good or bad job, but consensus about the criteria used in reaching that judgment" (McCombs & Shaw, 1993, p. 64).

Radio talk show hosts provide a unique spin on priming in that they typically have more time to discuss an issue, and immediate feedback can be considered quite unlike a typical news report. Those who call a radio talk show also affect the process of priming by influencing discussion (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). It is the host, however, who has ultimate control of the direction and details of the conversation (Levin, 1987; Hutchby, 1992; Laufer, 1995).

Talk radio can be seen as one way the public develops its view of an issue, even a person, for it is a "window to the world for millions" and "is the archive of American life" (Levin, 1987, p. 15). Crittenden was the first scholar to research the contributions that talk radio gives to the political process. In his 1967 study of a local Indiana call-in show titled "Speak Out," Crittenden found that in a smaller market callers were motivated by a desire to mobilize others into action. He also concluded that the program "seemed to stimulate political communication and to formulate political issues to some degree" (Crittenden, 1971, pp. 209-210). The discussion was never terminated, which allowed alternate views and discussion. Callers to talk radio were predominately lower-middle class or working class people whom otherwise might not have access to community leaders. However, with the use of talk radio, they felt they could prompt action (Crittenden, 1971). Those who call have personal motivations, such as expressing an opinion or hoping to get the facts straight (Moore, 1993). By doing so, the callers gain a sense of belonging (Turow, 1974). Other research has found that the majority of the people who call radio talk shows are conservatives and Republican males (Cappella, Turow, Hall Jamieson, 1996), and less mobile and more uncomfortable with personal communication (Armstrong & Rubin, 1989; Hofstetter, Donovan, Klauber, Cole, H. Yuasa, 1994). Those who listen to talk radio are over 50 years old but listeners who actually call are usually unmarried men, living alone, and between the ages of 18-to-34 (Bierig & Dimmick, 1979).

Like most of those who listen and call talk radio shows, the majority of the talk show hosts are white males (Cappella, Turow, & Hall Jamieson, 1996). The host persuades a caller to reach the outer edges of his or her position in order to incite interaction. Moreover, hosts "frequently and indeed routinely engage in overtly argumentative talk, disputing points with a caller, undermining the rational grounds for a caller's case, taking up positions contrary to the caller's avowed positions on the issue in question and so forth" (Hutchby, 1992, p. 674). The host may even go so far as abandoning his/her moral convictions or opinions in order to incite a controversy. Controversies keep discussion alive and interesting. This "construction of controversy" (Hutchby, 1992, p. 674) is perhaps the most important feature of talk on talk radio. The radio talk show host is a professional talker and an expert manipulator of both the information and the conversation. The ideology of the host usually dictates the political persuasion of the shows content (Greatbatch, 1986).

## METHODOLOGY

This study examined two Omaha, Nebraska radio talk shows and the hosts, including where they got their information and why they chose to talk about a particular news event on their radio show. This study also attempted to determine whether information disseminated by the hosts influenced callers during the 1996 presidential election, and if callers influenced the hosts with information the callers added to the show. The two talk show hosts were interviewed and studied on four selected dates (two days per each host). The talk shows were selected because of the lively political discussion generated on their shows and because of the opposing time slots during the day allowing for a greater cross-section of listeners. The two talk show hosts are:

- Steve Brown, who is heard on 1290 KKAR AM each weekday morning between 9 a.m. and 11 a.m. Brown is a self-described political conservative who addresses a variety of topics during his radio talk show "Talk of the Town with Steve Brown." The emphasis is on local, state, and national politics.
- Tom Becka, who is heard on 1110 KFAB AM each weekday morning between 9 a.m. and Noon. "The Tom Becka Show" is described by the host as a politically moderate radio talk show with the emphasis on the latest news events of the day.

Both qualitative and quantitative research was conducted to examine the two talk show hosts and their callers.

### Qualitative Approach

In-depth interviews allow the researcher to "understand the meanings people hold for their everyday activities" (Marshall & Rossman, 1995, p. 81). In-depth personal interviews with Becka and Brown were conducted after the data on the callers were collected. A pre-determined list of questions was administered to both talk show hosts, but each host was allowed to expand on the questions to allow for personal anecdotes. The data from the interviews were transcribed and analyzed to find themes among the two talk show hosts.

Two days was spent observing each talk show as a non-participant observer (Babbie, 1995). Also, "The Tom Becka Show" and "Talk of the Town with Steve Brown" were both audio recorded October 21 - 25, 1996 and October 27 - November 1, 1996 in their entirety. Information from the recordings was analyzed for themes and to compare the open-ended interviews of each host with their actual show. The recordings were also used to provide actual dialogue between the hosts and callers.

### Quantitative Approach

Babbie (1995) describes a purposive sample as "a type of nonprobability sampling method in which the researcher uses his or her own judgment in the selection of sample members" (p. 227). The purposive sample consisted of those who called the Tom Becka and Steve Brown shows. A survey consisting of twenty questions was administered to callers of "The Tom Becka Show" and "Talk of the Town with Steve Brown".

Forty-three surveys were administered to callers during the two days on "The Tom Becka Show" and twenty-eight surveys were administered to callers during the two days on "Talk of the Town with Steve Brown." The survey was necessarily short because

of the fear that a longer instrument might hamper the flow of calls to the show. Callers were surveyed while they were on hold prior to talking to the host. This avoided the problem of callers hanging up directly after their conversation was terminated by the host. Every caller who was asked to participate in this study agreed, resulting in 100 percent participation in this study. The callers' data were collected October 22, 1996 and October 24, 1996 from KFAB and on October 29, 1996 and October 31, 1996 from KKAR. These dates were selected because of the close proximity to the November 5, 1996 general election when political news and advertising is at its highest (Weaver, 1987). The data was derived from previous research on talk radio and caller motivations (Cappella & Hall Jamieson, 1996; Crittenden, 1971; Herbst, 1995) as well as research on age and gender setting (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Demographic information was included on the survey as well as questions describing caller motivations (Herbst, 1995).

## QUALITATIVE OBSERVATIONS

Data were collected at KFAB in a small, isolated office. About fifty feet away from the on-air studio. Viewers could see Becka from a large glass window. An on-air studio was allowed for the show to be heard while gathering data. Surveys were administered ten minutes after the beginning of each show. This allowed for the momentum of the show to build. After the ten minutes, the five lines were usually full. Each caller was asked the short series of questions while they were on hold.

On October 22, 1996 the topic for the full three hours was about a note on a newspaper given to the Democratic candidate for House of Representatives, James Martin Davis and his wife. A few men who were a few tables away from Davis in a restaurant wrote the handwritten note. The note made a reference to Davis losing the election in November. The note also included the epithet R.I.P. (meaning rest in peace). This offended James Martin Davis and his wife because their son was killed in a car accident earlier in the year. The person responsible for the note was a man who worked in the election department for the city of Omaha.

This topic generated calls from both sides of the issue, including an explanation from one of the men at the table. This man said the note was the culmination of an evening of light-hearted bantering back and forth between the Davis and the group at the table. Many callers agreed with this man saying, "Davis just wants to get political. He's going to lose the election and this is a last ditch effort to salvage a few more votes."

Other callers said while the note was inappropriate, it shouldn't cost anybody his job. This was the position taken by Becka. "Was it inappropriate? Yes. Was it tacky? Yes. Should a man lose his job over this? No."

Callers on October 24, 1996 were slightly less emotional. The first hour was devoted to the Mayor of Omaha, Hal Daub who was an in-studio guest. Daub answered several questions from callers and while Becka also asked questions and made a few comments, his role was mainly moderator between the callers and the Mayor.

The remaining two hours were devoted to open calls, which allows the caller to talk about any topic on their minds. Again, this was less passionate and even somewhat light-hearted compared to October 22nd. There were far fewer calls this day than during the previous observation.

The KKAR studios face two large glass windows and a glass door that view the street outside. Passers-by can walk by and watch a radio show in progress. The south side



studio is separated from the newsroom by another large glass window. The layout of the studio gives the feeling of openness when on the air. Because KKAR is fully automated, there are no hold lines. The producer would take the call, ask the caller if he or she would answer the survey, the survey was administered and then the callers were put on hold to wait to go on the air.

An accident on Interstate-80 on October 29, 1996 prompted Brown to address the delays with the Department of Roads in fixing problems with the streets in Omaha. Brown said the "non-caring" people of the D.O.R. decide to take action in October and November when Brown says weather is likely to delay repairs. "Who is making these insane, ignorant, stupid decisions? Who is doing it? No, it's not us. It's not you and I. It's somebody making a decent salary."

On October 31, 1996, the show, while less passionate, was still full of opinions. Male callers dominated the phone lines and one of those callers was angry because he was told his child, a Bellevue, Nebraska elementary school student, could not dress like a lumberjack and carry a fake ax for Halloween. The ax apparently violated the school's no weapons policy. "This is just a costume for Halloween and the school officials are so politically correct that they won't allow a little boy to dress up for Halloween. What's a lumberjack supposed to carry?" the boy's father asked. Brown too was angered by the school's action and said it was just another political move by an already "messed up" school system.

Both Brown and Becka claimed they get the ideas for show topics from newspapers, magazines, television, and their news reporters. But both agreed the main source of topics is gathered 24 hours a day. According to Becka, "If I'm at a store and something happens and it's something that I think can happen to other people, we'll talk about that." He said he filters that information and puts his own "spin" on it, an example of manipulating the information and ultimately the callers.

Brown had similar views. "I spend a lot of time walking around. I love it when I'm pumping gas and somebody comes up to me and says 'you're full of crap on what you said this morning' or 'you're right on that one.' I try to figure out what people are going to be talking about around the water coolers, around the bar, at home around the kitchen table at night."

"I'll throw three or four things up in the air. Everybody else will react to it. Often I'm really surprised at what people really want to talk about. You just don't know until you try it. One- topic shows are a drag if I have to pick the topic because invariably half the time I'll pick the wrong topic. The phone lines will be full, but the feeling won't come through. Becka and Brown each consider their shows open forums for public debate. Neither host says he tries to persuade a caller to vote for a candidate they support, nor do they wish to influence a caller's political views.

"Look, I'm just a guy with a radio show, O.K? I'm not some great oracle who has the wisdom beyond belief that I can impart on the masses. This is what I believe, 'You know what you think and we live in a great country' and that is really the attitude," according to Becka who, despite this attitude, still believes some callers are influenced by his words.

Brown has a similar theory. He says his job is not to tell people how to think or vote sometimes he'll even disagree with the Republican philosophy. Brown says he very rarely tells listeners who he'll vote for and says (with a laugh) his endorsement of a candidate could actually hurt that candidate.

## QUANTITATIVE RESULTS

Callers calling into KFAB on October 22, 1996 were predominantly white, low middle-class females with little more than a high school degree. These women also declared themselves to be Democrats. On the second day of data collecting, October 23, 1996 the callers were slightly more mixed with the amount of male callers increasing. Those males who called were predominantly white Republican males with some college education.

Findings from KKAR were quite different than those of KFAB. At KKAR, the majority of callers was male. Over the two day survey period, there were only four female callers. Of the four female callers, two considered themselves Democrats. The rest were white males who typically earned more than \$20,000 a year and had some college education. Most of these callers also considered themselves Republican while a few claimed to be Democrats and a few claimed to be Independents.

A total of 71 callers were surveyed from the two Omaha radio talk shows.

**Table 1**  
Demographics of Omaha Radio Talk Show Callers (N = 71)

<b>Gender</b>	
Men	69.0% (49)
Women	31.0% (22)
<b>Age</b>	
18-25	7.0% (5)
26-35	23.9% (17)
36-45	29.6% (21)
46-55	19.7% (14)
55+	19.7% (14)
<b>Political Affiliation</b>	
Republican	43.7% (31)
Democrat	33.8% (24)
Independent	18.3% (13)
Other	4.2% (3)
<b>Education</b>	
H. School graduate	14.1% (10)
Some College	40.8% (29)
College graduate	36.6% (26)
Graduate degree	8.4% (6)
<b>Ethnicity</b>	
Caucasian	88.7% (63)
Native American	2.8% (2)
African American	2.8% (2)
No response	5.6% (4)
<b>Income</b>	
\$0 - \$15,000	11.3% (8)
\$16 - \$30,000	8.3% (13)
\$31 - \$45,000	45.1% (32)
\$46 - \$60,000	7.0% (5)
\$61 - \$75,000	2.8% (2)
\$75,000+	7.0% (5)
No response	8.5% (6)

Surveyed callers to KFAB and KKAR said they typically listened to local talk radio several hours a week with 40.8 percent listening more than six hours a week.

**Table 2**  
**Omaha Radio Talk Show Callers (N = 71)**

How often do you listen to local talk radio?	
More than six hours per week	40.8% (29)
Five to six hours per week	12.7% (9)
Three to four hours per week	16.9% (12)
One to two hours per week	19.7% (14)
Less than one hour per week	9.9% (7)
Why do you listen to talk radio?	
Information seeking	
Entertainment	81.7% (58)
Only thing on radio	16.9% (12)
How often do you call local talk radio shows?	1.4% (1)
Less than once per week	
Once per week	50.8% (36)
Twice per week	15.5% (11)
More than twice per week	7.0% (5)
First time caller	5.6% (4)
Why do you call local talk radio shows?	21.1% (15)
Set the record straight	
Further an agenda	69.0% (49)
Entertainment	19.7% (14)
No response	8.5% (6)
Has a radio talk show host changed your opinion on an issue?	2.8% (2)
Strongly Agree	
Agree	1.4% (1)
Neutral	31.0% (22)
Disagree	31.0% (22)
Strongly Disagree	23.9% (17)
Has a radio talk show host effected your opinion in the 1996 presidential election?	12.7% (9)
Strongly Agree	
Agree	2.8% (2)
Neutral	16.9% (12)
Disagree	21.1% (15)
Strongly Disagree	33.8% (24)
	25.4% (18)

One item all the callers from both radio stations on all four days had in common was their political efficacy. Every single caller was registered to vote in the 1996 general election and every caller said they intended on voting in the election. This supports past research that those who listen to talk radio are more politically active and more likely to vote (Cappella, Turow, & Hall Jamieson, 1996). The surveyed callers were divided when asked if the hosts changed their opinion on issues. Most callers said the local host would not effect their vote in the 1996 presidential election. However, some said talk show hosts could effect other listener's opinions. One caller said, "I'm sure they change people's minds, that's what's scary. They've never changed my mind." This supports the third-person effect theory that hosts don't influence "me" but rather "them" (Davison, 1983; Smith, 1986; Duck, Hogg, & Terry, 1995).

Hutchby (1992) found that some talk show hosts alter their political ideology to keep conversation interesting; however, Brown and Becka say they do not. While both claim they are open to different points of view, a caller has not persuaded them to change their political ideology. The two men are conservative in nature, thus contributing to a politically conservative talk show. Becka says he may play devil's advocate to try to see the other side of an issue. Brown says he won't alter his political beliefs unless there is new evidence to back it up. Like their callers, both Becka and Brown are registered voters and

voted in the 1996 general election. While Brown describes himself as a Republican, he says he is a moderate Libertarian.

## DISCUSSION

The findings in this study support Crittenden's 1971 study of talk radio in that political talk radio at the two Omaha, Nebraska stations are democratic forums open to anyone who wants to call-in. However, unlike the callers in Crittenden's study, callers to Brown and Becka's show were limited for time, unless their arguments were extremely compelling. Another change from the 1971 study is that those who call are not predominately lower-middle class people without access to community leaders. Many of the callers and in-studio guests are community leaders who wish to hear directly from their constituents. Those who call-in are typically college educated men and women with high political efficacy. These callers, like those in Crittenden's study, feel they may prompt action with a phone call. Time and money limited this research. To conduct an actual agenda-setting study, one would have to allow at least a year and gather data in several waves. Future research should examine the role a local talk radio show host plays in local and state elections. Local events were discussed at length on these two talk shows, so future research should study how local and state officials view the role of talk shows as a legitimate medium.

A common bond between Becka and Brown was the sense of "you and me against them." The hosts and callers were unified against the institution, be it the school board, the local, state, and federal legislature. It is this element that motivates the listeners to call and the callers to voice their opinions. Both shows concentrated on important events or issues of the day. The listeners heard more than just facts about these topics; they heard the pulse of a community and were able to listen to more than just two sides to a story. This is the core of political talk radio.

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