A case study of two Omaha radio talk shows during the 1996 presidential campaign

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A case study of two Omaha radio talk shows during the 1996 presidential campaign

A Thesis
Presented to the
Department of Communication
And the
Faculty of the Graduate College In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
University of Nebraska at Omaha

By
Jodeane Newcomb Brownlee

June 1997
THESIS ACCEPTANCE

Acceptance for the faculty of the Graduate College, University of Nebraska, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts, University of Nebraska at Omaha.

Committee

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Chairperson

Date June 18, 1997
Abstract

A case study of two Omaha radio talk shows during the 1996 presidential campaign

This study explored the importance of agenda-setting and priming effects by two Omaha talk radio show hosts during a presidential election. This project examined past research on agenda-setting and priming effects and applied it to local radio talk show hosts and their callers.

To explore agenda-setting and radio talk show hosts, in-depth interviews were administered to KFAB talk show host Tom Becka and KKAR talk show host Steve Brown. The two hosts were also observed during their shows. Fifty hours of audio tape were recorded two weeks prior to the 1996 presidential election.

A survey of twenty questions was administered to the callers of both shows on four separate days. A total of 71 surveys were completed. The purpose of the survey was to find who was calling “The Tom Becka Show” and “Talk of the Town with Steve Brown” and why. Other demographic information was sought to find if the callers to Omaha talk shows were typical of other callers to radio talk shows found in past research.

Both radio talk show hosts said the main source of usable on-air information came from co-workers, people on the street, or the callers. Finally, those who typically called into KFAB and KKAR were Caucasian, male, and Republican with one or more years of college education.
Acknowledgements

I extend my appreciation to the members of my thesis committee. Dr. Jeremy Lipschultz and Dr. Chuck Powell, and especially to committee chairman Dr. Michael Hilt. I am also grateful to Steve Brown and Tom Becka for so graciously extending their time and allowing me the opportunity to observe their environment and speak to their callers. Without their effort, this project would not have gotten off the ground.

And finally, I would like to thank my parents for working so hard to get me through undergraduate school and my husband, Rusty, for supporting me through graduate school and lending me his computer skills when I needed them.
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Chapter I

Introduction

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 participation 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. These people are talking about politics, they’re talking about sex, they’re talking about relationships, they’re talking about current events, and they’re telling jokes. They’re arguing, they’re fighting, they’re laughing, they’re discussing, they’re disagreeing... that’s what we do on my show (T. Becka. personal communication. October 24, 1996).

Becka says that at any one time during his three hour radio talk show, 10,000 people are tuning into his program. “The Tom Becka Show” airs five times a week on 1110 KFAB in Omaha, Nebraska. Meanwhile 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 svelte, 57-year-old Brown says with a deep voice.

Brown says he tries to make the caller less intimidated.

“It’s just you and me and forty thousand listeners.” Brown chuckles.
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 radio talk shows have a common background in that they are both political in nature, both broadcast live from Omaha, Nebraska, both are on every weekday morning from 9:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m. (Becka is on until Noon), and both are caller driven. Each man runs his own audio console, able to start any commercial, jingle, song, or sound effect at a moment’s notice. Becka and Brown both admit to being “control freaks.”

At Becka’s side, separated by a glass window is Darcy, his call-screener who is known to the listeners by just her first name. It is her responsibility to answer the phones, screen the calls to keep people on the topic of the hour and to keep Becka abreast on who is on which of the five lines to the “Tom Becka Show.”

Darcy is an integral part of Becka’s show. Not only does she perform her call-screening duties, she also acts as a “sidekick” to Becka. She chats with Becka on the air and often voices an opposing opinion. For the most part the callers empathize with Darcy, believing she is often a victim of Becka’s rhetoric. Off the air, it is a very different story. Becka and Darcy have a very cordial relationship. Becka often asks Darcy for her opinion about particular show topics.

Darcy’s counterpart at KKAR is Denny, who is also known on a first-name basis and openly admits to being Brown’s “sidekick.” Denny answers calls and makes sure the caller stays on the current topic, unless it is “open phones,” meaning the callers can talk
on any topic they have in mind. Because KKAR is computerized, Denny simply types in the name and age of the caller and the data is immediately transferred to Brown’s computer. Brown boasts that there has never been a problem with a caller violating FCC regulations despite the fact that there is no seven second audio delay. This delay would enable Brown to push a button and edit out any comments that could potentially be an FCC violation (Hilt & Lipschultz, 1990).

While Becka and Brown’s talk radio shows are relatively new in the history of radio, 75 years have passed since the inception of the talk radio show.

The first radio talk show aired in 1921 (Munson, 1993) but it wasn’t until 50 years later in 1971 that John Crittenden (1971) conducted the first study of talk radio. Crittendon examined the motivations of callers and found that talk radio in Terra Haute, Indiana was a democratic forum in which anyone with access to a telephone could participate. A handful of studies used Crittenden’s findings as a foundation for further research (Turow, 1974; Tramer & Jeffres, 1983; Moores, 1993; Herbst, 1995) but the most recent comprehensive study found talk radio to be a very effective forum for political debate. For instance, some radio talk show hosts tout political efficacy while those who listen to talk radio were found to be more politically active (Cappella, Turow, & Hall Jamieson, 1996).

There are more than 3,000 radio talk show hosts in America (Herbst, 1995). The host of a radio call-in show is an active participant in influencing which news items receive more attention. A particular news item may be considered more important by an individual just by virtue of the attention it receives from the host. This is referred to as
the agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw. 1972). One component of this 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.

However, 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 unlike a typical news report. Those who call-in 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).

Past research has found that talk show hosts yield much influence—particularly with those individuals who are older, male, and living alone. The number of people tuning into talk radio programs has steadily increased since the mid-1980s (Herbst. 1995).

While talk radio has been the focus of past research, studies have failed to examine the talk show host’s role in setting the political agenda. This concept has never been applied to the Omaha radio market.

The 1996 presidential election provided an opportunity to study the effect local radio talk show hosts played in influencing those listeners who call-in.

By merging past research of radio talk shows and agenda-setting, an examination of the role local talk radio shows hosts played in the 1996 presidential elections was conducted.
Chapter II

Review of Literature

Individuals can listen to the radio in the privacy of their home, their car or at work. They can call-in a program from anywhere, including their car, as long as they have access to a telephone (Cappella, Turow, & Hall Jamieson. 1996: Herbst, 1995).

There are an estimated 580 million radio receivers in the U.S. and an average of 5.6 receivers per U.S. household. More than 11,700 U.S. radio stations broadcast weekly to 96 percent of all persons twelve and older. Persons twelve years and older listen to the radio an average of more than 3.2 hours daily. Four out of every five adults listen at least once during a week to the radio in their cars and there are an estimated 144 million vehicle receivers in use (The Radio Market Guide and Factbook for Advertisers 1995-96, 1994).

In October of 1995, an estimated 1,005 AM stations were described as news/talk stations and 304 FM stations described as utilizing the news/talk format. There are more than 3,000 members of the National Association of Radio Talk Show Hosts (Cappella, Turow, & Hall Jamieson. 1996). The top three radio talk show hosts generate an estimated audience of between 47 to 69 million listeners (Herbst. 1995). With new and improved technology, this medium is now more accessible and provides a unique form of instantaneous public debate. Any person with a comment, question, or opinion can simply call a talk show and, provided they get on the air, express their concerns. Callers receive immediate feedback from both the host and other callers (Cappella, Turow, & Hall Jamieson. 1996).
Talk radio is said to be a democratic form of communication because of its convenience and access to the mass audience. There are several reasons why individuals participate in talk radio, but research shows the majority of people participate to express their opinions and to alleviate loneliness (Armstrong & Rubin, 1989; Tramer & Jeffres, 1983).

The talk show host is the central part of the format because it is this person who initiates the topic and frames the way the conversation shifts. The host has ultimate control in that he or she decides who will get on the air and when to terminate the conversation. Research has found the host is driven by controversy because this element keeps discussion alive and interesting (Hutchby, 1992).

Talk radio has been described as a “new” political medium (McQuail, 1994; Herbst, 1995) and has been credited with influencing enough voters to allow Republican representatives and senators to gain control of Congress (Cappella, Turow, & Hall Jamieson, 1996).

Talk show hosts and political priming have a symbiotic relationship. Often the news events of the day are political in nature, and talk show hosts are driven by the news events of the day. However, how the host chooses to present the news event to the public is dependent on the hosts’ personal opinions. Therefore, whatever the host deems the most important information will be passed on to the audience, and the less important information will be left undiscussed (Severin & Tankard, 1992).
The Evolution of Talk Radio

The first radio talk show aired in Springfield, Massachusetts in 1921. The topic was farming but by 1933 audience participation became a success with shows such as *The Voice of Experience* allowing call-in participants to ask questions or make comments (Laufer, 1995). The topics were similar to those we often hear on the radio today: hobbies, current affairs, news, and Hollywood gossip. “On the basis of scope alone, what the term ‘talk show’ meant, apart from propagation of discursive knowledge, was indeed so diverse and unstable as to defy any singular definition other than ‘information’ or ‘conversation’ in the broadest sense” (Munson, 1993, p.27).

Through the 1930s and 1940s, participatory talk shows merged interviews with human interest programs. Interviewer Art Barker hosted these new specialized programs. Among them were *Reunion of the States*, *Pull Over Neighbor*, *Paging John Doe*, and *Meet Joe Public*. Game shows also gained popularity during the 1930s. Among the syndicated game shows were *The Answer Man*, *Information Please*, and *Juvenile Jury*. By the 1950s and 1960s the variety show genre appeared in shows such as *Talent Scouts* and *Amateur Hour*.

In the mid-1950s, Todd Storz, founder of the Top-40 format, introduced a call-in show in Kansas City which “echoed a modernist participatory thrust permitting public expressiveness and self-assertion” (Munson, 1993, p.37). Call-in shows such as Storz’ eventually grew into longer call-in programs featuring news and community issues. By
1961, talk radio became an accepted format when KABC Los Angeles converted entirely to a talk radio format (Moores. 1993).

By the 1970s talk radio dipped in the market, forcing hosts to prepare for few if any callers. Talk show hosts became more spontaneous, diverse, and personal. There was an “attempt at new provocative audience-grabbing material as well as a type of program that would cultivate young female audiences” (Munson. 1993, p. 49) which later became known as topless radio (Munson. 1993). The clearer signal on FM radio lead to the slow demise of AM stations in most markets. Technology in the 1980s allowed for talk radio shows to become syndicated and link national talk show hosts with every market in the country. This national link is what some say eventually saved AM radio (Cappella, Turow. & Hall Jamieson. 1996).

By the late 1980s, hosts began to rely less on audience participation and more on “shock” value. “Howard Stern’s morning shows on WXRK New York have kept young listeners, especially teens, from abandoning radio (especially AM), which has an aging listenership” (Munson. 1993, p. 49).

The 1990s have ushered in change in the talk radio format. Radio stations are dumping news and opting for more entertainment. With increased satellite technology, it is cheaper to run syndicated shows than to pay a staff of journalists. “What’s troubling is that the continued proliferation of talk radio and its focus on entertainment may persuade more and more stations to de-emphasize, or eliminate, serious news in their quest for higher ratings” (Prato. 1993, p. 65).
With the advent of new technology such as satellites and cellular phones, the 1990s have created a new breed of talk show hosts and callers. Participation is as easy as pushing a button while driving in a car during drive time (Cappella, Turow, & Hall Jamieson, 1996).

Talk radio, however, is not just a drive-time format anymore. Programs are aired at all times of the day and with this newfound “respectability” more people are listening (Hofstetter, Donovan, Klauber, Cole, Huie, & Yuasa, 1994, p. 469). Baby boomers are dropping rock-and-roll formats for talk formats and are able to engage in dialogue despite their geographic location (Fineman, 1993).

**Talk Radio: The “New” Medium**

Stephen Singular (1995) writes “a hundred years earlier, Walt Whitman had listened to his countrymen speak and written that he could hear American singing. Talk radio became the sound of America singing, arguing, whining, bitching, confessing, and letting raw feelings, private problems, and political or social opinions hang in the air for everyone with a radio to absorb” (qtd. in Laufer, 1995, p. 43). Opinionated political talk shows are growing. In the last twenty years, almost every large city in the country has seen a growth in political talk show hosts with the ability to “generate intense passion on sensitive public issues” (Katz, 1991, p. 40).

Some have even credited this new political medium with the Republican takeover of congress in the 1994 elections as well as other influential behaviors (Cappella, Turow, & Hall Jamieson, 1996). A report in the *New York Times* suggested political talk show
hosts throughout the country are making themselves heard and doing it in a way their audience can understand. For example, one caller referred to bathroom humor while another used the phrase "it makes me want to puke" (Manegold. 1995. p. A13).

Political talk shows are becoming teledemocracies and have even been credited with changing politics in the 1992 presidential election (Cappella. Turow. & Hall Jamieson. 1996). Politicians are eager to jump on the talk radio bandwagon. Former Democratic New York Governor Mario Cuomo has hosted a radio call-in show for years and so has Republican Pat Buchanan. President Bill Clinton is said to be considering making time available for constituents to call-in and air their concerns and opinions (Fineman, 1993).

Types of Talk Shows

There are several types of talk within the talk radio format. Some talk show hosts do not express any particular ideological agenda, such as Bruce Williams. Of all the talk shows on the air, 50 percent of the listeners say they listen to politically-based shows (Cappella. Turow. & Hall Jamieson. 1996).

Other types of talk shows include health, sports, and religion (Hofstetter, Donovan. Klauber. Cole. Huie. & Yuasa. 1994), but political talk radio is the format that continues to grow, both in terms of audience size as well as political influence (Hoyt, 1992). According to a talk radio poll, the ten most vilified personalities discussed on talk radio since 1990 all have political ties. They are, in order of rank: 1) Bill Clinton; 2) Hillary Rodham Clinton; 3) Saddam Hussein; 4) Dan Quayle; 5) George Bush; 6)

One political model of the media theorizes that each newsperson reflects his/her own ideological biases in the news that is reported. Those who support the system are seen as the good guys, while those who oppose the system are perceived as the bad guys. “High-status people and approved institutions are covered by the media: people and events outside the dominant system or remote from the centers of power are generally ignored” (Graber, 1997, p. 24).

The transmission model of mass communication suggests that the sender receive the message from society or events. The communicator sends the message and finally the message is received. However, it is not necessarily linear because the communicator also receives feedback from the receivers. It also suggests that the mass media exist because of the demands and responses of the audience (McQuail, 1994).

Research theorizes that people have schemas and process the news they hear from the news media. This helps people to control information overload. They tend to store information drawn from the evidence rather than the evidence itself. Information-seekers often use matching strategies from existing information with new information. If they cannot associate new information with past references, the information is likely to be lost (Graber, 1984).
Parasocial Interaction and Third-Person Effect

Parasocial interaction helps to explain listener motivations. This theory suggests that viewers of television programs build a one-sided relationship with media personalities and over time begin to feel comfortable with them. It also leads to viewing intent, viewing expectations and viewing pleasure. The viewer perceives the local newscaster as highly credible and knowledgeable. This person is more likely to select a program on the basis of the media personality than on the content of the program (Conway & Rubin, 1991).

Parasocial interaction is an interpersonal effect similar to a pseudo-friendship. Viewers seek information from local newscasters and the relationship grows in part because viewers learn personal information about individual newscasters (Perse, 1990). If the newscaster is perceived as more social, friendly, and charming, the information seeking viewer will see that person as more credible (McCain, Chilberg, & Wakshlag, 1977).

Third-person effect is a theory which suggests that listeners assume they are less influenced by the mass media than others. These listeners often over-estimate the effects of mass communication on others while believing they are less susceptible to media influence (Davison, 1983). They perceive others as more gullible but find themselves unique and hold a higher self-image (Smith, 1986).

The more a person understands an issue or is involved in an issue, the more pronounced the third-person effect. They believe the media does not influence "me" or "us" but rather "them," the third-persons (Davison, 1983).
The third-person effect is evident in political media campaigns. The media are often perceived as biased against a person's political affiliation. People are more influenced by favorable news of their party but not influenced by favorable news of the opposing party. These people also see the third-person being swayed politically by the news media (Duck, Hogg, & Terry, 1995).

Another component to third-person effect is the idea that people "take actions in response to that overestimation of effect on others" (Gunther, 1991, p. 356). People perceive others of being influenced by those undesirable social attitudes they deplore.

**Listeners Who Call-In**

Participants in talk radio can participate vicariously in the events of the day which allows them to feel involved, but talk radio is also immediate and accessible (Mendelsohn, 1965). People trust information heard via the radio more so than a newspaper (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). Tuning into radio, listeners synchronize their personal activities with those of larger, including national, communities (Morley, 1993).

Talk radio is an electronic broadcast that brings together people who are geographically separated and not able to conduct face-to-face conversation (Ellis, Hawes, & Avery, 1981). It is a "window to the world for millions" and "is the archive of Americana" (Levin, 1987, p. 15). It is suggested that the medium is a democratic form of communication being open to all sorts of listeners, including shut-ins, commuters, housewives and people who are simply in need of a companion. The appeal of talk radio is that the caller is unknown by color, race, religion or creed. Those who
listen to talk radio are primarily members of the working class. “It is the only medium not dominated by established figures, romance, cops and robbers, or celebrities” (Levin. 1987. p.16). Talk radio is user-friendly, meaning it is immediate and accessible but it is also “an anti-intellectualist reaction against ‘high’ cultural forms” (Levin. 1987. p. 24).

Crittenden was the first scholar to research the contributions talk radio gives to a democracy. 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 for 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-in to talk shows are looking for human contact and there is a sense of closeness to a person broadcasting over the radio. That person is invited into a home, car or office and becomes a companion. Those who call-in have personal motivations, such as expressing an opinion or hoping to get the facts straight (Moores. 1993). The majority of callers found individuation and personal contact the primary motivations for phoning in. By doing so, the callers felt a sense of belonging. “Continuous talk show radio callers are motivated to dial the station out of a need for interpersonal contact rather than out of desire to incite social reform” (Turow. 1974, p. 178).
The talk format allows the caller to actively participate in the conversation and it can be a forum used by callers and guests. The majority of those who phone-in are seeking companionship. However, other callers participate to talk about a person or incident. Some participants use the time to express their views. The minority of callers say they use talk shows as a forum, while even fewer people simply want to correct misinformation. "The gratification prompting the greatest frequency was companionship seeking...today's talk radio formats are providing an outlet of escape for people who are isolated" (Tramer & Jeffres, 1983, p. 300).

Many people are more comfortable talking over the telephone because of the lack of physical cues. This lack of face-to-face communication may lead to fewer inhibitions for callers who wish to address personal issues (Armstrong & Rubin, 1989). A telephone is a person's psychological neighbor and they feel less isolated when they use it. Calling a radio talk show is as immediate as using a telephone because the moment of speaking occurs at the same time as the moment of hearing (Wurtzel & Turner, 1977).

Talk radio fills in as a surrogate family member and fills voids experienced by lonely listeners. Dialogue in talk radio is different than face-to-face conversation. Listeners have to:

Interpret nuance, must learn to read between the differing pitches of words, must be able to assess the meanings which may be attached to silence, and generally be able to explore with some confidence the possibilities of language in the constructions of radio messages (Moss & Higgins, 1986, p. 284).

While many scholars are focusing their research on television, radio cannot be neglected because it "continues to outdraw audiences in both time and numbers" (Moss &
Talk radio allows both the minority and majority to voice their opinions in the public arena making it truly a democratic medium.

Differences have been found between those who listen to talk shows and those who actually call-in to talk shows. Listeners who participate in a talk show found talk radio a very important part of their lives and listen for more hours a day than those who only listen to talk radio. Participants use this medium to seek information, to relax, and to be entertained more so than those who only listen. Those who call-in are found to be less mobile and more uncomfortable with personal communication (Armstrong & Rubin, 1989; Hofstetter, Donovan, Klauber, Cole, Huie, & Yuasa, 1994).

Talk radio is accessible and non-threatening. People listen to be informed, to pass time, and to escape. Listener involvement becomes part of the programming. The person can steer the conversation by adding personal experience or opinions. Talk radio encourages three types of involvement: “affective (through personalities or hosts and other callers), cognitive (through issues and information discussed), and behavioral (by calling the show)” (Armstrong & Rubin, 1989, p. 91). Those who listen to talk radio are over 50 years old but listeners who actually call in are usually unmarried men, living alone, and between the ages of 18-to-34 (Bierig & Dimmick, 1979).

Call-in programs are a source for unstructured public discourse and they provide a forum for participants to express their emotions. There are four motivations for active participation in talk shows. First, it provides callers an outlet to express their opinion. Second, callers are encouraged to engage in dialogue so they feel a sense of involvement.
Third, it relieves loneliness. Finally, callers phone in to correct the host or other callers (Herbst, 1995).

The most recent study found that calling into a radio talk show is another outlet for individuals who are more politically active. These callers are more likely to use other forms of media and are more likely to follow news events. Conservatives and Republican males make up the majority of those individuals who call-in (Cappella, Turow, & Hall Jamieson, 1996).

Callers to talk radio are often more flamboyant on the air because it is this characteristic they may have heard previously and what may entice the host to take their call. This flamboyance, however, often implies that the caller is more politically intolerant than he actually is (Hofstetter, Donovan, Klauber, Cole, Huie, & Yuasa, 1994).

Since the 1940s, participants in talk radio felt a sense of belonging and a boost in their self-esteem without giving up their privacy. Participants could be a part of society without leaving the comfort of their homes and it provided them communication that lessened loneliness and increased security. Call-in programs allow callers to “get quick answers to questions, express opinions, and simply talk to other people” (Armstrong & Rubin, 1989, p. 84).

**Listeners Who Do Not Call-In**

People use talk radio as a companion and those who listen to talk radio are usually older, less affluent, isolated, and less mobile. Living alone may tend to produce a sense of social isolation which makes radio appear particularly attractive (Turow, 1974).
Talk radio is highly participatory. Research suggests that 70 to 80 percent of those who listen to talk radio tune in everyday (Livingston & Hunt, 1994). Those who listen to talk radio are more likely than those who do not listen to utilize other forms of media. They are less likely to utilize other forms of media than those who call-in (Cappella, Turow, & Hall Jamieson, 1996).

Individuals who are exposed to political talk radio are found to be more politically active and pay more attention to politics in the news. They are also said to be less alienated than those who do not listen to political talk radio and feel they are more capable of participatory action (Hofstetter, Donovan, Klauber, Cole, Huie, & Yuasa, 1994).

Talk radio is a voice for the working man and talk radio provides an outlet for these individuals to participate (Katz, 1991).

*The Host*

Like most of those who listen to talk radio, the majority of the talk show hosts are white males (Cappella, Turow, & Hall Jamieson, 1996). The host serves a very important function in this unique form of communication. It is unique in that the host persuades the caller to reach the outer edges of their position in order to incite interaction. 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).
Talk radio is a medium which allows and thrives on active participation from both
the audience as well as the host. It is a live medium which allows two-way
communication between the listener and the broadcaster. The broadcaster addresses the
audience, not as a whole but as an individual. Typically, the speaker acts as an equal
when speaking with the audience and the conversation is ordinary and informal (Scannell.

Talk radio is a new medium for political participation. It involves active
participation from an anonymous caller in intimate dialogue with the host but shared
with the many listeners (McQuail. 1994; Herbst. 1995). If the speaker is considered
trustworthy or has high credibility, that speaker can use persuasive speaking to change
attitudes. A speaker who is perceived as less trustworthy or credible is less likely to
change attitudes (Zimbardo & Ebbeson, 1973). A speaker may also change listener
attitudes by using affective communication. The speaker moves the listener in the
direction the speaker wants. This is accomplished through the use of compliments, praise
or even cutting remarks. The speaker can also use convincing language. A listener is
more apt to support a certain position if the listener is convinced it is his idea (Condon.
1973).

The dialogue between the speaker and listener consists of feedback and
feedforward. Feedback is described as "a relationship between the behavior of the
speaker, the response of the listener, and the effect of that response on further behavior of
the speaker" (Clevenger & Matthews. 1973, p. 157). This feedback can enrich dialogue
because both the speaker and listener can influence one another. It is the speaker.
however, who must be flexible in his own behavior if the speaker wants to make use of feedback. Perhaps more important to the speaker than feedback is feedforward. To accomplish feedforward the speaker must "set goals, establish expectancies, and plan contingencies. Without feedforward, feedback would be a static and sterile affair; and without flexible feedback, interaction would scarcely be human" (Clevenger & Matthews, 1973, p. 157 & 160).

Hosts encourage discussion by taking up the counter-position to the caller. The host may even go so far as abandoning his/her own 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 host also plays the role of the interviewer and is responsible for the direction of the conversation (Greatbatch, 1986). He is a professional talker and an expert manipulator. The ideology of the host usually dictates the political persuasion of the shows content.

"The host is a master of verbal arts" (Levin, 1987, p. 17) and often uses his skill to bait his caller. Many callers are nervous and can not articulate their message skillfully. The host initiates debate by "provoking extremist or simple-minded argument" (Levin, 1987, p. 17). It is the host’s job to create excitement, generate listeners and boost ratings.

The host serves as an information source as well as a human who can "confirm or disconfirm a caller’s self-concept" (Avery, Ellis, & Glover, 1978, p. 14). This can impact a caller’s emotion by mistreating them. Callers feel angry or rejected if mistreated by the
host. The callers also respond differently to different hosts at different times of the day. For instance, the study showed that the morning hours provide the caller with new information, structure and positive reinforcement. Callers and hosts generally support each other (Avery, Ellis, & Glover, 1978).

Spontaneity is another attraction of talk radio. Hosts cannot predict what a caller will discuss or argue which leads to a highly spontaneous debate. Given constraints of time and the amount of callers, hosts cannot meticulously screen callers and their arguments (Hutchby, 1992). There are four rules to a talk radio conversation between a host and a caller. The host must first attempt a conversation by requesting a call. A conversation is initiated when the call is successful, meaning a caller has reached the host. Now, the caller and host accomplish conversation through turn-taking. Finally, the caller or host hangs up and the conversation is terminated (Ellis, Hawes, & Avery, 1981).

Callers maintain the ability to voice their opinions through talk radio, but the host is the person with the ultimate control. After all, it is his/her few hours on the air. The host decides who speaks and when it is time to hang up. The host will still be on the radio long after the caller hangs up (Laufer, 1995).

Radio talk show host Rush Limbaugh has been credited for redefining the radio talk jockey. Before Limbaugh’s success, hosts were generally referred to as the “air personality” or the “communicaster” but “he [Limbaugh] used it to impart a sense of value and prestige to his position” (Laufer, 1995, p. 56).

The three most listened to talks show hosts in 1992 were: Rush Limbaugh, who had an estimated audience of between 18 to 40 million listeners: Paul Harvey, whose
estimated audience size was 23 million listeners; and Larry King, whose estimated audience size was 6 million listeners. As for the popularity of Limbaugh, Herbst (1995) writes that his conservative followers are disillusioned with what they perceive as the “liberal news media” (Herbst, 1995, p. 272) and find Limbaugh’s talk show an outlet where they can voice their more conservative opinions.

The majority of Limbaugh’s listeners are men between the ages of 25 to 54. An estimated 85 percent have completed at least one year of college. Limbaugh cashes in on the civic unhappiness of white-collar workers:

The stability of their youth is a fading memory. Jobs are no longer secure; marriages are crumbling; violence is unfettered; and people who have long lived on America’s margins- homosexuals, blacks, women who desire something other than heterosexual marriage-now get government help and preferential treatment to move into the mainstream. Their mainstream (Lewis, 1993, p. 59-60).

As evidence of agenda-setting, Limbaugh is able to articulate the frustrations of this group of Americans and develop his own solutions with “carefully chosen power words” (Lewis, 1993, p. 60) and often cites newspaper articles that report the success or failure of liberals in America. “Limbaugh’s show offers group therapy for mostly white males who feel politically challenged and who would rather hear Rush’s voice than their own” (Fineman, 1993, p. 27).

In 1993, Limbaugh’s audience was estimated at 15 million syndicated on at least 560 radio stations. Limbaugh’s book, “The Way Things Ought to Be” sold two million copies and at one time his half hour TV show produced ratings near Jay Leno and David Letterman and ranked third among late night shows, surpassing the Fox network’s Arsenio Hall Show in the ratings (Fineman, 1993; Cappella, Turow, & Hall Jamieson.
By 1996, Limbaugh’s estimated weekly audience size, radio talk show and television show combined, reached about 90 million people. Limbaugh’s monthly publication, “The Limbaugh Letter,” has 170,000 subscribers (Cappella, Turow, & Hall Jamieson, 1996).

However, it is not just at the national level that political talk show hosts are effective. Local talk show hosts are becoming more “tart-tongued” (Fineman, 1993, p. 25) and are influencing constituents to call and write their local congressmen.

*Agenda-Setting and Priming Effects*

Since 1972, there have been more than 200 articles written about agenda-setting and the pace continues (McCombs, & Shaw, 1993). For instance, in 1987 and 1991, a record number of articles pertaining to agenda-setting were published.

McCombs and Shaw conducted the earliest research in 1972 (McCombs & Shaw, 1993). The news media, including television and newspapers, can influence the way audiences feel about a news event or issue by the amount of coverage the news organization gives to the event or issue. The more coverage, the more important the issue. The less coverage, the less important the issue. (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

Without using the term, Walter Lippman was the first researcher to address agenda-setting by arguing that the mass media bring events of the world into the minds of people. Humans connect images portrayed by the media with those images in the mind (Rogers.
Dearing, & Bregman. 1993). McCombs and Shaw (1972) coined the phrase “agenda-setting” in their quest to research the role of the media in the 1968 presidential campaign.

*Agenda-Setting, Priming and Politics*

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 found 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 filtering reality than a mirror reflecting it; that the press is a more active interpreter than a passive transmission belt” (Weaver, 1987, p. 177).

News gatherers do not reflect reality but instead shape it by their reports. Topics reported by the news media are generally considered more important by an individual than other issues (Weaver, 1987). The way a journalist reports a political story especially during a campaign can affect the way an individual perceives that candidate. For instance, interest in a candidate can be aroused by stories that personalize the candidate. These are known as romantic stories. Ironic stories, on the other hand, dive into character and ability flaws of a candidate (Barber, 1978).

Priming is becoming responsible for selecting the criteria in which the public views an issue, event, or person. For instance, research has found “the news media promote social consensus—not consensus in terms of opinions about whether the
president is doing a good or bad job, but consensus about the criteria used in reaching that judgment” (McCombs & Shaw, 1993, p. 64).

Intermedia agenda-setting is defined as “the influence that the news agendas of different news organizations have on each other” (Roberts & McCombs, 1994, p. 250), and includes advertising. There are many factors that go into shaping the media’s agenda including governmental and private sources, to a journalist’s idiosyncrasies. The results of a study during the 1990 Texas gubernatorial election found political campaigns can set the news agenda. In fact, political advertising effected the way television and newspaper covered the issues of the candidates (Roberts & McCombs, 1994).

Media agenda-setting is most active during the spring and summer months and then again in the final few months of a campaign (Weaver, 1987).

More recent research in the area of agenda-setting, priming, and media framing “suggest that the media not only tell us what to think about, but also how to think about it, and, consequently, what to think” (McCombs & Shaw, 1993, p. 65; Kosicki, 1993).

Callers of political talk radio can also set the political agenda. Some callers call several times a week in hopes of getting their agenda to the masses. These callers are often limited by the host and allowed only one call a week (Cappella, Turow, & Hall Jamieson, 1996).
Examples of Media Agenda-Setting and Priming in Politics

A study of the news coverage of the Gulf War found a crisis that is covered intensely by the news media “not only elevates the prominence of the target issue but also removes other issues from public attention” (Iyengar & Simon, 1993, p. 376).

Before the Gulf War, Americans were concerned primarily by the economic state of the country and their opinions of President George Bush were based primarily on this concern. However, television news coverage of the Gulf War had a significant impact on what political concerns were on the minds of the American people. It also effected the President’s image and the criteria in which Americans evaluated George Bush.

Television news coverage has a significant impact on public opinion and the study of the Gulf War was an excellent case in which public opinion could be predicted by television news coverage (Iyengar & Simon, 1993).

Research by Wanta and Foote (1994) examined the relationship of the media and the President of the United States. The basis of their study was to find if the President influences the press agenda or if the President is influenced by the press agenda. Their findings reinforced the notion that agenda-setting by a president is an important but limited activity. A president might be able to influence the media agenda in a few specific, isolated issues. However, media coverage and presidential influence often coincided and may have simultaneously responded to real-world events (Wanta & Foote, 1994).
Media effects theories have changed from a view that the effects are minimal to relatively powerful effects, yet not unlimited. Concern now focuses on how the media manipulates the public and how politics manipulate the media.

Media influence seems to be greater for those issues least likely to have a direct impact on most voters’ daily lives, the so-called unobtrusive issues such as the Iran-Contra scandal...and the alleged extramarital affairs of Bill Clinton and George Bush. In 1992, however, there seemed to be more voter concern over obtrusive issues such as the economy and jobs, health care, education, and abortion law (Weaver, 1994. p. 348).

*Priming and the Radio Talk Show*

During the 1992 presidential campaign, America saw the increase of more nontraditional media such as “radio and television talk shows, MTV, toll free numbers, computer bulletin boards and electronic town hall meetings” (Weaver, 1994. p. 348). Media coverage following the summer party conventions was found to have followed rather than lead the agendas of the nontraditional media.

Low voter turnout in the 1992 presidential election may have been the result of voter alienation. If the journalists and/or the politicians set the agenda, it is excluding the voters thus resulting in low voter involvement. However, the “new” media or radio talk shows, may shift to more voter involvement because it allows voters to hear or question the candidates directly without the filter of a journalist:

Agenda setting can lead to greater involvement in politics and elections if the issues of most concern to voters are prominent on the agendas of the media and the politicians—and if voters feel that their efforts make a difference in how these issues are addressed by the political processes of the society (Weaver, 1994. p. 353).
Journalists in the so-called mainstream media believe talk radio is influencing politics particularly in the conservative direction, and Limbaugh is the most mentioned radio talk show host by other members of the media. It was also found that Limbaugh spends more time than other talk show hosts urging political efficacy and insisting listeners can make a difference (Cappella, Turow, & Hall Jamieson. 1996).
Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study was to investigate the role of two Omaha, Nebraska radio talk show hosts during the 1996 presidential campaign, and to see if priming was present in which callers may be influenced by the host’s views or the hosts may be influenced by the caller’s views. It was relevant because past research has found that talk show hosts influence many age groups, particularly older individuals who live alone (Hofstetter, Donovan, Klauber, Cole, Huie, & Yuasa, 1994).

Research in the area of agenda-setting, more specifically priming, has concluded that the media do influence the way an audience feels about a certain issue just by the amount of coverage the issue receives. Individuals generally report topics covered by the media are more important than those topics not covered (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987).

The two Omaha, Nebraska talk radio hosts, Steve Brown and Tom Becka, are on the air a cumulative 25 hours a week in the 78th largest radio market in the United States.

According to Becka, at any one time during a three-hour show, 10,000 people are listening to his talk show. The 1996 winter Arbitron ratings listed KFAB with a 9.8 rating--the highest rating of all 18-radio stations. KKAR showed a rating of 4.6--or ninth in the Omaha market. In the 1996 spring Arbitron rating book, KFAB dropped to an 8.0 rating falling to third in the Omaha market. KKAR remained the same at 4.7 and ninth in the Omaha market (Arbitron. http://www.rronline.com/rating13.htm).
Research Questions

RQ 1: Where do Brown and Becka find their information?

RQ 2: How do Brown and Becka decide which information to talk about during their show?

RQ 3: Do those who call-in to Brown and Becka’s shows support previous findings that callers to talk shows are typically male, Caucasian, and Republican?
Chapter III
Methodology

This study examined the priming effect of local radio talk show hosts, including where they get their information and why they choose to talk about a particular news event on their radio show. This study also attempted to determine whether or not information disseminated by hosts of this “new” medium influenced callers during the 1996 presidential election and if callers influenced the hosts with information callers added to the show. Demographic data of the callers was also gathered to support results from previous research.

Talk Shows Selected

Two Omaha radio talk show hosts were interviewed and studied on four selected dates (two days per each host). The following talk shows were selected because of the 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 best described as politically 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 best described as a politically moderate radio talk show with the emphasis on the latest news events of the day. Becka says he decides the day’s topics but allows the caller the freedom to expand the topic.

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

Qualitative Approach

In-depth Interviews

In-depth interviews allow for the researcher to “understand the meanings people hold for their everyday activities” (Marshall & Rossman, 1995, p. 81).

In-depth interviews with Becka and Brown were conducted after the data on the callers were collected (See appendix B). A pre-determined list of questions was administered to both talk shows hosts, but each host was allowed to expand on the questions to allow for personal anecdotes. A thirty-minute interview with Becka was conducted immediately following the October 24th show at his desk at the KFAB studios. Brown was interviewed immediately following his show on October 31st in the green room at the studios of KKAR. This interview lasted about 50 minutes.

Time was spent observing both talk shows as a nonparticipant observer (Babbie, 1995). Becka was observed in the final twenty minutes of his shows when he asked that
the telephone surveys be stopped in order to keep the flow of calls going to the show.
Because of the studio set-up, Brown was observed all four hours of his show. Permission
to conduct research was given prior to the observing.

By observing Becka and Brown in their work setting, it was easier to contextualize
the data from each interview (Babbie, 1995; Marshall & Rossman, 1995).

The data from the interviews were transcribed and analyzed to find themes among
the two talk show hosts.

Unobtrusive Measures

Audio tape can be a form of gathering qualitative data in an unobtrusive manner.
This form of data gathering does not interfere with the everyday process of talk radio. It
is especially helpful when combined with other forms of qualitative analysis including in-
depth interviewing (Marshall & Rossman, 1995).

"The Tom Becka Show" and "Talk of the Town with Steve Brown" were both
audio recorded October 21 - 25 and October 27 - November 1 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.

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 dates occur on Tuesdays and Thursdays
because of prior commitments on Mondays and Wednesdays and because Fridays on
“The Tom Becka Show” are committed to the topic of “Butthead of the Week” which deviated from the political nature of the show.

Quantitative Approach

Purposive Sampling

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-in to the Tom Becka and Steve Brown show.

Sample and Instrument

A purposive sample was selected and a survey consisting of twenty questions was administered to callers of the “Tom Becka Show” and “Talk of the Town with Steve Brown” (See appendix A). The survey was derived from previous research on talk radio and caller motivations (Cappella, Turow, & Hall Jamieson. 1996; Crittendon. 1971; Herbst. 1995) as well as research on agenda-setting (McCombs & Shaw. 1972).

Demographic information was included on the survey as well as questions describing caller motivations (Herbst. 1995).

Forty-three surveys were administered to callers during the two days on the “Tom Becka’s 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 therefore resulting in 100 percent
participation.

The data obtained from the sample was processed using an SPSSX computer
program. Frequency distributions of response sets are shown in the accompanying Table
in the Results Section of this study.
Chapter IV

Results

“The Tom Becka Show” and “Talk of the Town with Steve Brown” followed similar formats. Both hosts began their shows with monologues usually containing tidbits of information from their personal lives or particular news events that have caught their attention. Becka began one show with a letter from a listener that read. “. . .don’t you get sick of being so lacking in self-confidence? No wonder you are a loud-mouthed, vulgar, rude, crude, fatso. No self esteem.”

“No wonder I have no self-esteem,” Becka replies. Then he goes on to read some more of the letter.

“I was thrilled to read in the World-Herald that KFAB has been purchased by a new manager. Hopefully you will be the first to go. . .Keep Darcy though, she’s a peach.”

Darcy explains over the air that letters like this one usually do not serve the purpose they were intended to. They actually serve as entertainment for Becka and the more he gets the more he uses them to his advantage.

Another similarity is that both hosts rely on bumper music to segue back into their show. For example, Brown is particular to jazz music, so he uses old jazz tunes when he comes out of a commercial break. This allows for a smooth transition between the commercial breaks, also known as a stop-set, and the show.
Becka uses bumper music but also likes to edit previous callers and use their statements to segue after a stop-set. He says this format isn't new and most talk show hosts use bumper music and bites.

Both Becka and Brown also invite guests on their show but primarily rely on callers for their dialogue. The two men are also conservative in nature, thus contributing to a politically conservative talk show. While Brown describes himself as a Republican, Becka says he is a moderate Libertarian.

KFAB

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

October 22, 1996 the topic for the full three hours was about a note on a piece of paper 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 from 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.”

Other callers to “The Tom Becka Show” supported the Davis’ point.

Caller Carol said. “It was completely uncalled for and the group of men should have realized that they just buried their son. They should be beyond these kinds of child antics.”

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 callers to talk about any topic on their minds. Again, this was less passionate and even sometimes light-hearted compared to October 22nd. There were far fewer calls this day than the
previous observation. However, when Becka asked callers to explain why they were conservative, liberal or other many callers were eager to express their political ideology.

**KKAR**

The KKAR studios face two large glass windows and a glass door that view the outside. Passer-bys can walk by and watch a radio show in progress. Hosts of these shows are allowed a view of the Old Market area of Omaha and can watch cars and people pass by. The south side of the 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 were no hold lines. Denny, the producer, would take the call, ask the caller if they 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."

Brown also took a few minutes to talk about the safety in Omaha schools.

The remaining two hours were spent on discussing the ousting of a Nebraska Supreme Court judge. A guest, Kent Burnback was in the studio in support of the
removal of Judge David Lanphier. This topic generated emotional responses from both Brown and the callers. Brown said he did not want to vote Lanphier out of office.

Brown repeatedly asked Burnback to disclose how much money was being spent on the campaign to remove Lanphier. but Burnback refused.

"You, in my reading, are in violation of the state law. It’s that simple."

"We’re not," replied Burnback.

"You say you’re not. I say you are. The guy that runs the disclosure commission (interruption). You may be dead right about David Lanphier."

"I’m right about the disclosure and accountability commission also."

"O.K. But I’m saying why won’t you tell absent of any law. What are you hiding? What do you fear?"

Callers to “Talk of the Town” were also eager to express their opinion and the phone lines were “jammed.”

Caller Scott said. “As someone who contributed to the campaign and a law abiding citizen. I do not want my name disclosed if I give money to oust a judge. When a judge does or does not know who has made contributions to a campaign. then he has to treat everybody the same which is exactly what they’re supposed to do.”

Caller Dorothy said while Burnback says the campaign started with a grass roots campaign it’s really not.

“My idea of a grass roots campaign is you have volunteers who are Nebraska citizens who go door-to-door and spend their time and their money on the campaign.” Dorothy commented.
“O.K. What do you think Kent’s campaign is?” asked Brown.

“I myself received a telephone call that was an automated telephone call from Charlotte, North Carolina asking me how I would vote on Judge Lanphier and I think that normally on a grass roots campaign you’d see local people working in local telephone banks and....”

Brown cuts in. “I understand that Dorothy, but in the answer of time. I’ve got a lot of people to get on the air here. Was the caller trying to influence your vote.” asked Brown.

“O.K. I think they were taking a survey and yes trying to influence the vote.” replied Dorothy.

On this day, Channel 7 News in Omaha sent a news crew to Kkar to do a story and get feedback on the ousting of Lanphier. The photographer gathered several minutes of video and the reporter took notes on the on-air dialogue. The topic of this day continued to the next day’s show.

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.

**Agenda-Setting**

**Research Question One: Where do Brown and Becka find their information?**

In the in-depth interview, 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 topic ideas 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.”

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 that night.’”

While both men read the Omaha World-Herald daily and keep abreast on current issues by means of television and radio news, the main source of their show topics are issues they hear from the public, from co-workers, from friends and from family. Becka say he finds information and input from other media, but he filters that information and puts his own “spin” on it.
Research Question Two: How do Brown and Becka decide which information to talk about during their show?

Becka said he decides what information to talk about if it’s obvious. “Like when Jimmy Wilson Jr. was murdered. That was obviously a major news story. Everyone knew that when there was a story where a cop was shot, that’s the topic. (Jimmy Wilson Jr. was a rookie Omaha police officer who was shot to death during a routine traffic stop. His father Jimmy Wilson Sr. was a retired Omaha police officer). Other things, the day after the election, we are obviously going to talk about the election. That’s just the major topic. That’s what everybody is going to be talking about.”

Brown lets the callers decide what topic is hot. “I’ll throw three or four things up in the air. Everybody else will react to it. Often I am 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.”

The talk shows also may set the agenda for other news media. This was evident on October 29th when Channel 7 News used Kkar as a source for a news story about the retention of a Nebraska Supreme Court judge. On November 14, 1996 KFab was the source for Channel 6 News. A murder suspect killed himself in jail and was the only person to testify in the case of the death of an Omaha high school girl. The media were not able to get any official sources, but a person close to suspect called to talk to Tom Becka. Channel 6 used audio of the show on their evening newscast.
Hosts and Priming Effects

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 some wisdom beyond belief that I can impart on the masses. This is what I believe. ‘You think 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 and 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.

In Chart 1 we find that callers to KFAB and KKAR typically listened to local talk radio several hours a week with 40.8 percent listening more than six hours a week. 12.7 percent listening five to six hours a week. 16.9 percent tuning in three to four hours a week. 19.7 percent tuning in one to two hours a week, and 9.9 percent of the callers said they listen less than one hour a week.

Moving on to Chart 2 we find that information seeking was the number one reason why 81.7 percent of the callers said they listen to local talk radio. while 16.9 percent of the callers claimed to listen for entertainment and 1.4 percent said they listen because it’s the only thing.
In Chart 3 most of the callers. 50.7 percent said they called-in to local talk radio less than once a week. 15.5 percent said they called in once a week. 7 percent said they called in twice a week. 5.6 percent called in more than twice a week. and for 21.1 percent of those surveyed, this was the first time they had called a local radio talk show.

According to Chart 4, the reason 69 percent of the callers claimed to call-in was to set the record straight, while 19.7 percent said they wanted to further an agenda. 8.5 percent said it was for entertainment. and 2.8 percent has no response.

Callers, we find in Chart 5 were divided when asked if the hosts changed their opinion. 1.4 percent said they would strongly agree with that while 31 percent said they agreed. 12.7 percent of the callers strongly disagreed. and 23.9 percent disagreed. The remaining 31 percent said they were neutral. However, some said talk show hosts could effect other listener’s opinions. One caller said. “I’m sure they change people’s mind. 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).

Most callers said the local host would not effect their vote in the 1996 presidential. In Chart 6 we find that 25.4 percent of the callers strongly disagreed that the host would effect their vote. while 33.8 percent disagreed. 2.8 percent strongly agreed that a local radio talk show would effect the way they voted while 16.9 percent agreed. The remaining 21.1 percent of the callers were neutral.
Characteristics of Agenda-Setting

Chart 1: Hours Callers Listen to Local Talk Radio per Week

- **More than Six Hours**: 40.8% (29)
- **Five to Six Hours**: 12.7% (9)
- **Three to Four Hours**: 16.9% (12)
- **One to Two Hours**: 19.7% (14)
- **Less than One Hour**: 9.9% (7)
- **No response**: 0.0% (0)

N=71
Chart 2: Reason Callers Listen

- No response: 0.0% (0)
- Relieve Loneliness: 0.0% (0)
- Only Thing On: 1.4% (1)
- Entertainment: 16.9% (12)
- Information: 81.7% (58)

N=71
Chart 3: Frequency of Calls to Radio Talk Shows

N=71
Chart 4: Motivation for Calling-in

- Set the Record Straight: 69.0% (49)
- Further an Agenda: 19.7% (14)
- Entertainment: 8.5% (6)
- No response: 2.8% (2)
- Relieve Loneliness: 0.0% (0)

N=71
Chart 5: Local Host Changed Listener’s Opinion

- Strongly Agree: 1.4% (1)
- Strongly Disagree: 12.7% (9)
- Disagree: 23.9% (17)
- Agree: 31.0% (22)
- Neutral: 31.0% (22)

N=71
Chart 6: Local Host Effects Caller’s Vote

Strongly
Agree
2.8% (2)

Agree
16.9% (12)

Neutral
21.1% (15)

Disagree
33.8% (24)

Strongly
Disagree
25.4% (18)

N=71
Caller Influence

The callers wield power when determining the flow of conversation. Brown says he begins the day with a few topics in mind but ultimately leaves the topic up to the caller. “Open phones mean exactly that as far as I’m concerned on my two hours. If I think we should talk about the fact that there may be evidence that there was life on Mars and a caller says I want to talk about Norbert Schuerman at the Omaha public school district, guess which one we’ll go with? The caller’s Norbert Schuerman thoughts. Not my life on Mars thoughts. I have to be as responsive to the audience as they have been to me simply by turning me on or I’m gonna lose them.”

Becka’s thoughts differ somewhat. He prepares each hour with a topic he has in mind then he lets the callers decide where the topic goes.

According to Becka, “Callers have a lot of input and callers have changed my mind on issues. I listen to the callers on what they have to say because in many cases, they’re living it. I can talk about the government regulations on small businesses but I got some guy out there who is trying to make a small business go. He’s living it.”
Who Listens to Omaha Talk Radio?

Research Question Three: Do those who call-in to Brown and Becka's shows support previous findings that callers to talk shows are typically male, Caucasian, and Republican?

Previous research reports that the average listener is typically a white, conservative affluent male with some college education (Cappella, Turow, & Hall Jamieson 1996: Herbst 1995). Callers calling into KFAB on October 22nd were predominantly white, lower 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 24th, the callers were slightly more mixed with the amount of male callers increasing. Those males who called in typically fit into the previous findings: white Republican males with some college education.

Findings from KKAR were quite different than those of KFAB. At KKAR, the vast majority of callers were male. Over the two day survey period, there were only four female callers. Of the four female callers, two considered themselves Democrats. The rest of the callers 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.

Of the total 71 callers surveyed from both radio stations. Chart 7 illustrates the distribution of the sample by respondent sex. We observe that 69 percent of the sample were males while 31 percent were females.
Moving to Chart 8, the distribution of the sample by age of the callers is provided. In this Chart we find: 7 percent of the callers were between the ages of 18 and 25. 23.9 percent were between the ages of 26 and 35. 29.6 percent of the callers were between the ages of 36 and 45 years. 19.7 were between 46 and 55. and 19.7 percent of the callers said they were 55 or older.

In Chart 9, the distribution of the sample by party affiliation was observed. In this Chart we find: 43.7 considered themselves Republicans. while 18.3 percent said they were Independents. and 33.8 percent said they were Democrats.

The education of the distribution of the sample was illustrated in Chart 10. In this chart we find: 14.1 percent of the callers had a high school degree while the remaining 86 percent had at least one to four years of college.

Chart 11 examines the distribution of the sample by respondent ethnic background. In this Chart, we find: 88.9 percent of the callers were Caucasian while 2.8 percent were American-Indian and 2.8 percent were African-American.

In Chart 12, the distribution of the sample by household income was provided. In this Chart we find: 45.1 percent earned between $31,000 and $45,000. 18.3 percent earned between $16,000 and $30,000. 11.3 percent earned up to $15,000 annually. while 7 percent earned between $46,000 and $60,000. another 7 percent earned $75,000 or more. 2.8 percent said they earned between $61,000 and $75,000 annually. while 8.5 percent had no response.
Demographic Information

Chart 7: Gender of Callers

Female
31.0% (22)

Male
69.0% (49)

N=71
Chart 8: Age of Callers

55 or older: 19.7% (14)
46 to 55: 19.7% (14)
36 to 45: 29.6% (21)
26 to 35: 23.9% (17)
18 to 25: 7.0% (5)
12 to 17: 0.0% (0)
No response: 0.0% (0)

N=71
Chart 9: Party Affiliation of Callers

N = 71
Chart 10: Education of Callers

N=71
Chart 11: Ethnic Background of Callers

N=71
Chart 12: Household Income of Callers

N=71
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. Of the 71 callers, 44 percent claimed to be Republican. 34 percent said they were Democrat. 18 percent said they were Independent, while the remaining 4 percent said they were affiliated with another political party. 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).

Those who called-in to KFAB and KKAR were also high consumers of other media. 61 percent received news from the newspaper while 25 percent relied on television news. Others used their personal computers for information. This too supports research that those who listen to talk radio are more likely to utilize other forms of media for information (Cappella, Turow, & Hall Jamieson. 1996).

Hosts: Ratings First, Ideology Second?

Do Brown and Becka alter their political ideology just to keep a conversation interesting? While Hutchby (1992) found that some talk show hosts do. Brown and Becka do not. While both claim they are open to different points of view, a caller has not persuaded them to change their core political ideology. Becka says he may play devil’s advocate to try to see another side of an issue.

For instance Becka says, ‘I’m not a big fan of the unions. If somebody else calls up and says they are not a big fan of the unions, then I’ll go and say ‘yeah, but what about
the people who can't take care of themselves? What about the health care or what about
the negotiating' and we'll talk about it. If somebody comes to the table with something, I
want them to at least have formulated their opinions based on something other than a
bumper sticker or a T.V. ad that they saw:"

Brown says he won't alter his political beliefs unless there is new evidence to
back it up. He maintains, "On basics. I'll never change my mind, but on the others. I have
had my mind changed right there on the air. I am told the listener can hear my mind
being changed. It's like watching open-heart surgery. In this case it's open-head surgery.
I hope this happens a lot of time because nobody's ever a hundred percent right. Core
beliefs. I got them from my mom. my dad. teachers. role models and a higher power and
I'll fight to the death to defend most of those:"

Like their callers, both Becka and Brown are registered voters and intended to
vote in the 1996 general election.

Local Radio News Reporters and Talk Show Callers

Radio news reporters from KFAB and Kkar said that callers to talk radio are
different than the average citizen. One KFAB news reporter said some callers are "nuts"
and another news reporter at Kkar referred to callers as "losers who have nothing better
to do with their time." Both said they have heard several repeat callers who just like to
get on the radio. Brown and Becka said these callers are limited to a certain number of
times they can call in per week.
However, both news teams did record segments of their talk show host's show to use as stories on the air. For example, at KFAB the reporters were “rolling tape” while Mayor Daub was a studio guest and news personnel were recording Brown’s show during the heated discussion on the retention of Lanphier.
Chapter V
Discussion

The hosts of two Omaha radio talk shows show signs of agenda-setting. They have the capability to broadcast to thousands of people a day a cumulative of 25 hours a week to get their message across. In some cases, they are the source for other forms of media, including television and their own news teams.

This medium also plays a role in agenda-setting in that, depending on the program, the host has two-to-three hours a day to address a certain issue. Some shows are devoted entirely to one topic, while other shows might cover a broad range of topics. Simply because a talk show is on 10 to 15 hours a week would lead to some form of agenda-setting, be it the host or the caller who is setting the agenda.

Talk radio allows hours of public opinions and debate in which anyone with a telephone can participate. Unlike television which offers only the reporter's version of a story and is limited by time and editing as well as print, which is limited by space. Brown said the other media also lack human emotion, unless the writer is exceptional. Becka may receive at least 30 calls on a given day allowing for 30 different opinions on a subject. While the host has ultimate control and his opinion is dominant throughout the show, the program and listeners are open to many different views.

During the four days of data collecting, very little evidence of priming a presidential candidate by the talk show host was found. The majority of the conversations centered around local and state campaigns and politics. Becka said he
didn’t care for any of the presidential candidates, while Brown said he would vote for Republican Bob Dole although he disagreed with some of the candidate’s philosophies. The hosts said they try very hard not to influence the way a listener will vote in an election and both maintained they did not have the ability to do so anyway.

When Becka would address the race between President Bill Clinton and retired Senator Bob Dole, callers called to “set the record straight” if they felt Becka treated the President unfairly. However, when Brown would address flaws in the President’s administration, the majority of callers supported his opinions while adding their own ideas and comments. This directly relates to the difference among callers of the two shows. Becka’s callers consisted of many female Democrats living on a fixed income, while Brown’s callers consisted of mostly male Republicans with higher paying jobs.

Study Limitations

Time and money limited this study of local talk radio shows. To conduct an actual agenda-setting study, one would have to allow at least a year and gather data in waves. For instance when McCombs and Shaw (1972) studied agenda-setting, they conducted tests several times throughout an election campaign.

Many more days of observing the host in action would also serve to understand the priming effects more conclusively as well as allowing the researcher to become better acquainted with the format and the overall personality of the callers. The use of focus groups in this study could be useful in studying agenda-setting and priming effects.
Future Research

There are many areas of future research on talk radio that warrant study. First, the relationship between the host and the news anchors and reporters. What type of relationship do they have? Do they share news or are they two completely separate entities?

Second, what is the role a local radio talk show host plays in local and state elections? Because local events were discussed at length on the two local talk shows a study of how local and state elected officials view the role of talk shows as a legitimate medium is an area of future research.

Finally, a more comprehensive study of talk show hosts throughout the Midwest could lead to more conclusive findings on agenda-setting and caller influence.

Conclusion

Research in the area of political talk radio is needed because this medium continues to grow in this country. Finding out where these radio talk show hosts receive their information is valuable in that it gives the listeners more choices. The listeners can ask, “How credible is the source of this information?” or they may find that local talk radio is an open forum where they, to some extent, can control the content of the discussion.

Information must be quick and accessible to suit people in the workforce, at home, or while driving in the car. Many people do not have time to read the morning newspaper and some may not be home in time for the evening news. Talk radio is
formatted around these people. Callers can now call from the office, from the home, and even the car and radio stations are improving caller's accessibility with 800 numbers as well as multiple local and long distance phone lines.

The research in the study supports findings by Crittenden's 1971 study of talk radio in that political talk radio at KFAB and KKAR is a democratic forum open to anyone who wants to call-in. Discussion, however, is often terminated abruptly in order to allow enough time for all the callers. 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-in 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.

A common bond between Becka and Brown was the sense of "you and me against them." In other words, the hosts and callers unified against the institution, be it the school board, the Department of Roads, or the local, state, and federal legislature. It is this element that motivates the listeners to call and the callers to voice their opinions.

While "Talk of the Town with Steve Brown" focused on local, grass roots politics, "The Tom Becka Show" included more humor and lighthearted topics. However, both shows concentrated on important news events or issues of the day when warranted. 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.
References


Appendix A:
Radio Talk Show Survey

Q-1. How often do you listen to local talk radio?

1. less than an hour a week
2. one to two hours a week
3. three to four hours a week
4. five to six hours a week
5. more than six hours a week
6. no response

Q-2. How often do you listen to a nationally syndicated talk radio show?

1. less than an hour a week
2. one to two hours a week
3. three to four hours a week
4. five to six hours a week
5. more than six hours a week
6. no response

Q-3. What best describes the reason why you listen to talk radio?

1. relieve loneliness
2. information
3. entertainment
4. it’s the only thing on
5. no response

Q-4. How often do you call-in to a radio talk show?

1. first time
2. less than once a week
3. once a week
4. twice a week
5. more than twice a week
6. no response
Q-5. What best describes your motivations for calling-in?

1. relieve loneliness
2. set the record straight
3. further an agenda
4. entertainment
5. no response

Q-6. A local radio talk show host has succeeded in changing my opinion.

1. strongly agree
2. agree
3. neutral
4. disagree
5. strongly disagree

Q-7. A national radio talk show host has succeeded in changing my opinion.

1. strongly agree
2. agree
3. neutral
4. disagree
5. strongly disagree

Q-8. Listening to a local talk radio show will effect the way I vote in the 1996 presidential election.

1. strongly agree
2. agree
3. neutral
4. disagree
5. strongly disagree

Q-9. Calling into a local talk radio show will effect the way I vote in the 1996 presidential election.

1. strongly agree
2. agree
3. neutral
4. disagree
5. strongly disagree
Q-10. What best describes your political affiliation?

1 Democrat
2 Republican
3 Independent
4 Other
5 No Response

Q-11. Are you registered to vote in the 1996 Presidential election?

1 yes
2 no
3 maybe
4 no response

Q-12. Do you plan on voting in the 1996 Presidential election?

1 yes
2 no
3 maybe
4 no response

Q-13. Which presidential candidate do you intend to vote for?

1 Bill Clinton
2 Bob Dole
3 Ross Perot
4 other
5 no response

Q-14. Where do you receive additional information on the presidential candidates?

1 newspaper
2 television
3 personal computer
4 other radio stations
5 friends
6 family
7 no response
Q-15. Where are you calling from?

1. home phone
2. car phone
3. pay phone
4. work phone
5. no response

Q-16. Which of the following best describes your age?

1. 12-17
2. 18-25
3. 26-35
4. 36-45
5. 46-55
6. 55 or older
7. no response

Q-17. Which of the following best describes your ethnic background?

1. Caucasian
2. African-American
3. Asian
4. American Indian
5. Hispanic
6. other
7. no response

Q-18. Which of the following best describes your annual household income?

1. 0-$15,000
2. $16,000-$30,000
3. $31,000-$45,000
4. $46,000-$60,000
5. $61,000-$75,000
6. $75,000-over
7. no response
Q-19. Which of the following best describes your educational background?

1. less than high school
2. high school graduate
3. one to four years of college
4. college graduate
5. master's degree
6. Ph.D.
7. no response

Q-20. You are:

1. male
2. female
Appendix B:  
Talk Show Host Survey

1. Where do you find your information?

2. How do you decide what information to talk about during your talk show?

3. How much influence do callers have on directing the topic of on-air conversation?

4. How much time do you spend preparing for your daily talk show?

5. Approximately how much time do you spend addressing political issues during one show?

6. Do you ever alter your political belief, just to keep a conversation interesting?

7. What is your political affiliation?

8. Are you a registered voter?

9. Do you intend on voting in the 1996 Presidential election?

10. If so, which presidential candidate do you plan on voting for?

11. Do you try to persuade listeners of your talk show to vote for the same candidate as yourself?

12. Why do you host a radio talk show?

13. Which part of hosting a radio talk show do you most enjoy?

14. How long have you lived in Omaha?

15. Do you belong to any private organizations?

16. Do you belong to any public organizations?

17. If yes to question 15 and/or 16, do you give the organizations you’re involved in preferential treatment on the air?

18. Do you listen to nationally syndicated talk radio host Rush Limbaugh?
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Talk Show Host Survey

1. Where do you find your information?

2. How do you decide what information to talk about during your talk show?

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15. Do you belong to any private organizations?

16. Do you belong to any public organizations?

17. If yes to question 15 and/or 16, do you give the organizations you’re involved in preferential treatment on the air?

18. Do you listen to nationally syndicated talk radio host Rush Limbaugh?
19. Has Limbaugh’s influence impacted the talk radio format?

20. If yes to question 19, how has his influence impacted talk radio?

21. Does he influence the way you host your talk radio show?

22. What do you do to attract listeners to your show?

23. What do you do to attract callers to your show?

24. What is your age?

25. What is your educational background?