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# Sound Commodity: Contemporary Public Radio and Podcasting

Casey R. Kelly

University of Maine, casey.kelly@maine.edu

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SOUND COMMODITY: CONTEMPORARY PUBLIC RADIO AND PODCASTING

By

Casey Kelly

B.S. University of Oregon, 2002

A THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

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(in Communication)

The Graduate School

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May 2019

Advisory Committee:

Michael J. Socolow, Associate Professor, Department of Communication and Journalism,

Advisor

Judith Rosenbaum, Assistant Professor, Department of Communication and Journalism

Holly E. Schreiber, Assistant Professor, Department of Communication and Journalism

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# **SOUND COMMODITY: CONTEMPORARY PUBLIC RADIO AND PODCASTING**

By Casey Kelly

Thesis Advisor: Dr. Michael J. Socolow

An Abstract of the Thesis Presented  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
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Podcasting is both a disruption and an opportunity for public radio. It's disruptive in that it marks a shift in how public radio organizations connect with listeners, who increasingly seek on-demand content. For traditional broadcast outlets like public radio this has raised a host of questions around how to allocate resources and deal with new workflow and labor demands in the digital age. It also has exacerbated ever-present commercial pressures in public media. As for opportunities, podcasting is a platform for public radio to reach new listeners, elevate underrepresented voices, and experiment with new sounds and storytelling techniques. It also offers the opportunity to attract new sources of revenue, though that also plays into the commercial tensions.

This thesis explores these themes in an effort to shed light on how public radio is adapting to the growing audience for podcasts. It seeks to illuminate two interrelated questions prompted by the public discourse over podcasting in public radio: How did commercial imperatives get embedded into these conversations? And, in what ways are public radio organizations managing the disruptions and opportunities presented by podcasting? It is a descriptive, critical, and cultural analysis, grounded in political economy of communication theory.

The findings suggest that the commercial pressures on public radio organizations as they integrate podcasting into the work they produce are the result of historical, political, economic, and social structures. Specifically, the Telecommunications Act of 1996 created a regulatory system in the United States that privileges a highly commercialized and privatized media. That Act and similar policies are informed by neoliberalism—the belief that free markets and free trade are the most efficient systems for promoting individual and social welfare. This thesis shows how neoliberal ideology has become so prevalent in society that well-known public radio producers and podcasters like Ira Glass and Alex Blumberg regularly employ its rhetoric, heightening commercial tensions. Yet, through qualitative interviews with individuals working in public radio, this research also shows that many stations are still figuring out how to meet the growing demand for podcasts. As they do so, the new medium has become a place to experiment with different narrative styles, to foster collaboration between stations and outside of public radio, and to provide a public service to both local and national audiences.

## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated to my mom and dad, Bobbie Ann and Bill Kelly, who always encouraged me to follow my own path. The universe reminds me everyday how lucky I am to have had such supportive parents.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For me, this journey began a little more than three years ago with an email to assistant professor Josh Roiland asking if I could take his graduate course on Journalism and Democracy. After warning that the class would involve a lot of reading, Josh was kind enough to welcome me into his classroom. He has since moved on from the University of Maine, but I am grateful to Josh for accepting me and introducing me to the world of graduate-level media studies.

I first got to know my advisor Michael Socolow on (where else?) Twitter. If I remember correctly, he tweeted some harmless bit of misinformation about Alaska and I politely corrected him. We've been Twitter pals ever since. Mike's guidance throughout this process has been invaluable. Two of the chapters in this thesis are based on papers I originally wrote for his classes. He's inspired me to want to be a better scholar and writer, and I can't thank him enough for his encouragement and support.

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

In late April 2015, NPR and two of its leading member stations—WNYC, New York and WBEZ, Chicago—hosted a roomful of ad buyers and brand managers at a cabaret venue in New York City, the media capital of the world. *This American Life* host Ira Glass stood on stage and gave his best pitch about why they should spend their advertising dollars on public radio’s booming stable of podcasts. Glass would later tell *Advertising Age*: “My hope is that we can move away from a model of asking listeners for money and join the free market. I think we’re ready for capitalism, which made this country so great. Public radio is ready for capitalism” (Greiff, 2015).

Appearing alongside Glass at the event—dubbed “Hearing is Believing”—were some of the biggest names in public radio: *Radiolab*’s Jad Abumrad, NPR’s Guy Raz, *Invisibilia*’s Lulu Miller, and *Snap Judgment*’s Glynn Washington. But Glass, arguably the most recognized public radio voice of his generation, was perhaps the biggest name of them all. Earlier that month, the debut season of *This American Life* spinoff *Serial* became the first podcast to win a Peabody award (Gorelick, 2015). As public media trade publication *Current* put it, “*Serial*’s popularity put podcasting on a new trajectory,” and suddenly the public radio’s podcasts were a hot commodity (Falk, 2015).

But Glass’ remarks were controversial in public radio circles, where commercialism has long been seen as objectionable in a culture dominated by loftier notions of the social good. Melody Kramer, a former NPR digital strategist, remarked to *Current*: “The entire mission of public radio is to disseminate information to the public and have an unbiased source of news that is not controlled in any way by advertising.” She added: “I think if we go that route, I wouldn’t

want to be a part of it. I feel like we're moving just so far away from our roots" (Ragusea, 2015). Writing for *The Awl*, radio producer Conor Gillies (2015) noted that while public radio stations face strict government rules when it comes to program underwriting or sponsorships on terrestrial radio—only “short, neutral, non-promotional messages” are allowed—in cyberspace, “those rules are basically null.” The commercialization of public radio via podcasting, Gillies argued, threatens the “long-protected public trust” that noncommercial radio has enjoyed.

In response to his critics, Glass tried to clarify his statement in an editorial for *Current*. “I’m not advocating a cartoony and stupid version of embracing capitalism,” he wrote, arguing that podcasting presented public radio with an opportunity to reach new audiences *and* attract new revenue. Calling himself “a public radio lifer,” Glass pointed to *This American Life*’s success turning the money from podcast sponsorships into special projects like *Serial*, investigative reporting, and more producers. In other words, he said, public radio could use the revenue from podcasting “to make the same idealistic and ambitious stuff we’ve always made.” He added that it would be “hard to imagine a healthy public radio system” with no public or listener support (Glass, 2015).

The controversy surrounding Glass’s comments exemplifies a larger debate within public radio—a debate that continues to this day. Podcasting is both a disruption and an opportunity for public radio. It’s disruptive in that it marks a shift in how public radio organizations connect with listeners, who increasingly seek on-demand content like podcasts (Lichterman, 2015). For traditional broadcast outlets like public radio this has raised a host of questions around how to allocate resources and deal with new workflow and labor demands in the digital age. It also has exacerbated ever-present commercial tensions in public media. Throughout its history in the United States, noncommercial radio has faced financial pressure to be more like commercial

outlets—largely due to stagnant government funding, but also because the commercial paradigm is dominant in the U.S. (Engelman, 1996; McCauley, 2005; McChesney, 1999; McCourt, 1999; Mitchell, 2005). As for opportunities, podcasting is a platform for public radio to reach new listeners, elevate underrepresented voices, and experiment with new sounds and storytelling techniques. It also offers the opportunity to attract new sources of revenue, though that also plays into the commercial tensions. The debate concerns how to manage the disruptions and seize the opportunities while sticking to the core values that have defined public broadcasting for more than five decades. It is a complex problem that defies easy solutions, complicated by the fact that public radio is highly decentralized and some organizations have more resources than others.

This thesis explores these themes in an effort to shed light on how public radio is adapting to the growing audience for podcasts. It seeks to illuminate two interrelated questions prompted by the public discourse over podcasting in public radio: How did commercial imperatives get embedded into these conversations? And, in what ways are public radio organizations managing the disruptions and opportunities presented by podcasting? This is a descriptive, critical, and cultural analysis, grounded in political economy of communication theory (Mosco, 2009). Political economy provides a framework well suited to the study of public radio in a changing media landscape. It emphasizes systemic issues, such as how regulatory, financial, and social structures shape our communications systems. I argue that the principle structure shaping podcasting and public radio today is the dominant capitalist economic system in the United States and much of the globe. Although public media have managed to retain some commitment to noncommercial and public service values (Mitchell, 2002; Kramer, 2016), they are not immune from the norms and practices of commodity capitalism that tend to erode these values (McChesney, 1999). Furthermore, as new media technologies like podcasting develop,

they too are influenced by capitalism. Political economy forces us to consider whether this produces a media system that best serves democracy (Mosco, 2009). Over the years, this has been a fundamental concern of those who have sought to create and maintain alternatives to the prevailing commercial system, such as public broadcasting (Pickard, 2015; Pickard, 2017).

I discuss political economy, as well as my methodology, in more detail later in this introduction. But first, I turn my attention to the history of public radio in the United States. This is by no means a complete history. Rather I focus on the original developmental philosophy of public broadcasting, and how noncommercial outlets traditionally have been disadvantaged compared to commercial media. Yet, in recent years, public radio's audience has seen significant growth, accompanied by increased demand for the kind of in-depth audio journalism and storytelling public radio is known for. This history helps to contextualize the development of podcasting in public radio, as well as its more recent commercial appeal.

### **Public radio in the U.S.**

When I discuss public radio in this thesis, I am referring to the universe of independent, noncommercial stations and other organizations that loosely revolve around NPR, the largest and most recognizable noncommercial radio network in the U.S. Admittedly, this excludes other types of noncommercial radio, including community, low power, and part-time broadcasters. While these outlets are vital elements of the U.S. media, historically they have been considered separate from public radio for a variety of cultural and political reasons (Huntsberger, 2017). Still, there is some overlap between public radio and other types of noncommercial radio in terms of values and mission, and while this thesis does not deal directly with them, some of the themes may be applicable. Other scholars have written thoroughly researched analyses of NPR and the public radio system in general, and while I cite many of them, I will not attempt to

reproduce their work here. Rather, this is a brief overview, meant to provide context and demonstrate that many issues in the public discourse over podcasting in public radio have historical parallels and origins.

It is generally agreed that public broadcasting in the U.S. is part of a tradition that includes the land-grant colleges largely established during the nineteenth century, and Progressive Era social and political reforms that sought to expand democracy and civic values from the 1890s through the 1920s (Engelman, 1996; McCauley, 2005; McCourt, 1999; Mitchell, 2005; Slotten, 2009). John Dewey, the philosopher and progressive education activist, is often said to have tacitly inspired public broadcasting (McChesney, 1999; McCourt, 1999; Mitchell, 2005). Dewey believed news media ought to play an educational role in public life, publishing and broadcasting information that would lead to greater democratic participation and a stronger sense of community in society. He drew a distinction between “news” as simply a report on “something which has just happened” and information that conveys meaning and context. The importance of a news story, he said, “cannot be determined unless the new is placed in relation to the old, to what has happened and been integrated into the course of events” (Dewey, 1981, p. 347). Dewey also argued that journalism is most effective as a social tool when it is widely available, and he warned that where the “interests of pecuniary profit are powerful, and a public has not located and identified itself, those who have this interest will have an unresisted motive for tampering with the springs of political action in all that affects them” (p. 348). In other words, he saw the capitalist system as a barrier to a more community-oriented and democratic media—the type of media where the public is able to find itself.

Before the mid-1920s radio was by and large free from advertising. In 1922, companies that manufactured radio sets operated the largest number of radio stations in the U.S., but their

main interest was getting the public to buy their receivers. That same year, college and university affiliated stations accounted for 65 stations nationwide (Slotten, 2009). These early educational radio stations in particular were committed “to providing noncommercial service with diverse forms of programming not merely meant to entertain but also to educate, inform, enlighten, and uplift local citizens” (Slotten, 2009, p. 2).

The American system of principally advertising-supported radio became dominant during the late 1920s through the mid-1930s, largely through a series of government policy decisions that privileged commercial network broadcasting. The Federal Radio Act of 1927 elevated the for-profit model by reallocating the radio spectrum in favor of commercial stations. But there was a period after the Radio Act went into effect and before passage of the Federal Communications Act of 1934 when regulation of the nation’s broadcasting system was contested. As Robert McChesney (1993) documents in his classic study of the period, a coalition of religious, labor, educational, journalism, and civic-minded groups, among others, “generated a significant critique of the limitations of network-dominated, advertising-supported broadcasting for the communication requirements of a democratic society” (p. 3). Forty years before the Public Broadcasting Act, they argued that a portion of the broadcast spectrum ought to be reserved for noncommercial and nonprofit use. But the 1934 Communications Act included no such set-aside, cementing the advertising-based system as the status quo. In 1936, the number of stations licensed to educational institutions was less than half what it had been in the early 1920s (McChesney, 1993, p. 233).

For the next three decades, noncommercial radio stayed alive through the dedicated work of a small handful of groups and individuals. In 1945, the National Association of Educational Broadcasters (NAEB), a trade group formed early in the broadcasting era, achieved its

longstanding goal when the Federal Communications Commission reserved a portion of the FM dial for noncommercial purposes. At the time, FM radio was not in widespread use. As Ralph Engelman (1996) writes: “In the immediate postwar period, the broadcast industry, preeminent in radio on AM, had little interest in FM, an undeveloped system that required listeners to purchase new radios” (p. 84). Just having dedicated spectrum space boosted noncommercial radio, but the ultimate goal was an interconnection system for shared programming between stations. Early efforts lacked consistency and coordination, but by the mid-1950s NAEB members began taking genuine steps in that direction. State and regional educational radio networks formed around the practice of “bicycling” tapes—that is, mailing them between stations. According to Engelman (1996), this activity promoted greater “communication and collective consciousness among” noncommercial broadcasters. However, he also notes that the system was far from perfect: “The level of programs... was highly uneven as was the technical quality of the tapes... In general, the bicycle network could not be considered a substitute for an established mechanism for live interconnection” (p. 86).

During the postwar years, noncommercial radio was further sidelined by the advent of television. The Ford Foundation and other major funders of educational broadcasting directed their resources toward establishing an educational TV system. When Congress approved the Educational Television Facilities Act of 1962, providing \$32 million for noncommercial stations, there was no similar funding for radio. Engelman (1996) says that in the mid-1960s, “educational radio faced the threat of being excluded from a movement to provide federal funding for educational television in a new public broadcasting system” (p. 87). Indeed, radio was a last minute addition to the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967, literally taped into the text of the bill (Hellewell, 2012).

The Public Broadcasting Act articulates the need to make noncommercial educational and cultural programming and public telecommunications services “available to all citizens of the United States,” and provides justification for the federal government’s role in doing so. The Act created the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, a private nonprofit that distributes federal funds to public radio and television organizations. But as many observers have noted, it failed to insulate public media in the U.S. from political and economic pressures (Engelman, 1996; McCauley, 2005; McChesney, 1999; McCourt, 1999). For example, CPB funding is subject to Congressional appropriations and the corporation’s board of directors is subject to presidential appointment and Senate confirmation. These features inject political influence into the CPB’s stewardship of public media in this country, and have contributed to the U.S. lagging behind other developed nations when it comes to funding for public broadcasting. According to one recent study, the U.S. spends about \$3 per capita annually on public radio and television compared to some European countries like Norway, Germany, and Denmark that spend more than \$100 per capita to fund public media outlets. The United Kingdom and Canada, two of the countries closest to the U.S. culturally and politically, spend nearly \$100 and \$31 per capita on the BBC and CBC respectively (Benson et al, 2017). Michael McCauley (2005) concisely sums up the underlying problems with the Act:

Public broadcasting in the United States was designed as an entity that would not threaten the profits of commercial broadcasters or the sensibilities of conservative politicians; as a consequence, there are still no workable mechanisms for political insulation or long-range public financing (p. 34).

With the shortage of public investment, public media have turned to other sources of revenue, primarily listener and viewer contributions, corporate sponsorships, and grants from foundations. Critics like McChesney (1999) say this forces public broadcasting outlets to behave more like the commercial media, and compromises their egalitarian and inclusive public service

mission. But Jack Mitchell (2002), an early employee of National Public Radio, has argued public service is still at the core of what public radio offers: “Public radio’s business is not information, media, or even radio. Its business is public service” (p. 407). Without taking a position either way, these conflicting views reveal how there have long been tensions around economic imperatives ingrained in the modern public media system.

At the same time, the Public Broadcasting Act did help establish a nationwide noncommercial radio network that had previously eluded proponents of nonprofit and educational broadcasting. National Public Radio was founded in 1970 and started offering its flagship afternoon newsmagazine *All Things Considered* a year later. (*Morning Edition* debuted in 1979). NPR does not own or operate any stations itself. Rather it produces content and distributes shows via satellite to more than 1,000 locally owned and operated member stations across the country that pay annual membership dues and a programming fee. NPR was one of the first radio outlets to utilize satellite technology. In fact, communication scholar Susan Douglas (2004) argues that NPR and talk radio personalities like Rush Limbaugh, Howard Stern, and Larry King were the biggest beneficiaries of satellite distribution, which began in the late 1970s. Similar to how podcasting is transforming the way public radio programming reaches its audience today, Douglas (2004) says satellite connectivity “provided a much cheaper and technologically superior method of transmitting a local broadcast nationally” (p. 289).

A proper exploration of public radio is not complete without considering the original NPR mission statement, written by the network’s first director of programming William Siemering. As other scholars have noted (Engelman, 1996; McCauley, 2005; McCourt, 1999; Mitchell, 2005), Siemering’s “National Public Radio Purposes” laid the philosophical foundation

that guided the system during the early years, and arguably beyond. Echoing Dewey, Siemerling (1970) outlined an idealistic vision of what public radio ought to be:

National Public Radio will serve the individual: it will promote personal growth; it will regard the individual differences among men with respect and joy rather than derision and hate; it will celebrate the human experience as infinitely varied rather than vacuous and banal; it will encourage a sense of active constructive participation, rather than apathetic helplessness (n.p.).

A key theme of “National Public Radio Purposes” was that audiences should be able to trust what they hear on public radio, and Siemerling (1970) wrote that the noncommercial nature of the service would be important to ensuring the public’s confidence: “National Public Radio will not regard its audience as a ‘market’ or in terms of its disposable income, but as curious, complex individuals who are looking for some understanding, meaning and joy in the human experience” (n.p.). However, the programming inspired by this mission statement did eventually attract a certain type of listener that represented a valuable and marketable demographic. Today, nearly 15 million people tune in to both *Morning Edition* and *All Things Considered* each week, and the total audience for all NPR programming is more than 30 million (NPR, 2018a).

Beginning in the early 1980s, researcher David Giovannoni worked at NPR and as a private consultant to better understand public radio’s audience. His studies revealed that public radio listeners are on average highly educated and socially conscious, and argued stations should tailor programming to better serve them (Giovannoni, 1991). This research was controversial within public radio, as many saw it as a shift from the democratic and communal values of early nonprofit and educational radio toward the predominantly commercial radio practice of audience segmentation. Others argued that having more information about public radio’s audience allowed stations to better serve their listeners. Proponents also pointed out that as stations aligned their programming to audience interests, listenership tended to increase, as did revenue from

membership and program sponsorship (Engelman, 1996; McCauley, 2005; McCourt, 1999; Mitchell, 2005; Stavitsky, 1995).

Besides NPR, other organizations that create and disseminate public radio programming include American Public Media (APM), Public Radio International (PRI), and Public Radio Exchange (PRX). In 2018, PRI and PRX merged in what was billed as an attempt to better position both organizations for the growth in podcasting (Steele, 2018). Local stations are growing more ambitious as well. Pew Research Center (2018) reports that from 2015 to 2016, the 123 largest news-oriented local public radio licensees increased spending on program and production costs 7%, to \$427 million. This suggests that “stations are directing more dollars towards the creation of news content,” the Pew study notes.

Despite numerous financial and political challenges over the years, as well as a fair amount of internal strife, public radio has grown steadily—to the point that it is considered part of the mainstream news media (Engelman, 1996; McCauley, 2005; Mitchell, 2005). However, the nonprofit structure and explicit, if somewhat compromised, public service mission sets public radio apart from commercial media. As public radio organizations struggle with managing the integration of podcasting into the work they produce they must grapple with longstanding political and cultural tensions that come with being established as an alternative service. In the next section I examine the history of podcasting, which has roots in public radio but is rapidly becoming a more commercial medium.

### **History of Podcasting**

Although it can seem like podcasting just recently exploded onto the scene, the medium is almost twenty years old. Christopher Lydon, a former *New York Times* journalist and NPR host, started what is considered to be one of the oldest continuously running podcasts, *Open*

*Source*, in 2003. While serving a fellowship at Harvard University's Berkman Center for Internet & Society, Lydon began recording interviews with bloggers, celebrities, public intellectuals, political figures, and others, which he would post as MP3 files on his blog. Dave Winer—a blogger and software developer, and colleague of Lydon's at the Berkman Center—helped him set up a feed for these audio files, which Winer called “a weblog for your ears” (Quirk, 2016). Today, in addition to remaining a podcast, *Radio Open Source* airs on public radio stations across the country from its home station, WBUR in Boston (radioopensource.org).

Winer developed the software that enabled podcasting in the late 1990s. Really Simple Syndication (RSS) allows creators to make a feed that can “push” digital content to anyone with an Internet connection. Early RSS only worked with text, and was originally used by bloggers as a way to notify readers of a new post. In 2000, Winer created a version of the software that worked for digital audio files (Quirk, 2016). Technically speaking, a podcast is an episodic digital audio program delivered through download or streaming to a computer or mobile device. Creators upload individual episodes to a server, where they can be accessed on the World Wide Web. In many cases podcasters have a website where audiences can go to find individual episodes as well as additional content, such as photos, video, and text. However, many listeners use podcasting apps that allow them to subscribe to shows and listen to them without having to open a web browser. Journalist Ben Hammersley coined the word “podcast” in 2004 in an article about the rise of digital audio content available on the Internet (Berry, 2006). The term is a hybrid of “iPod,” Apple's once popular media player, and “broadcast.”

The connection between podcasting and radio is a topic media scholars have explored since the medium was in its infancy (Berry, 2006; Menduni, 2007; Bottomley, 2015). Both are forms of audio media that are produced in similar ways, and share many of the same stylistic

trappings. But they also diverge in significant ways. Whereas linear radio broadcasts typically are consumed live as they happen, podcasts are time-shifted, meaning consumers can choose when to listen. Also, barriers to entry are lower for podcasting than they are for radio. You need a license to legally start a radio station, as well as a sizeable investment of capital. But to start a podcast all you need are inexpensive digital audio production tools and an Internet connection.

According to Richard Berry (2006), podcasting is an example of a “converged medium (bringing together audio, the web and portable media devices).” He adds that it is disruptive in that it has caused “some in the radio business to reconsider some established practices and preconceptions about audiences, consumption, production and distribution” (p. 144). Berry argues radio is a useful launching point for talking about podcasting, but the ability of listeners to consume podcasts whenever and wherever they want and “mix genres, styles, formats and even languages” makes podcasting and radio distinct mediums (p. 156). At the same time, many of the most popular podcasts began as terrestrial radio shows and are still on the air (Bottomley, 2015). That includes several from the world of public radio such as *This American Life*, *Radiolab*, and the *TED Radio Hour*. Andrew Bottomley (2015) says there’s a question as to whether podcasting is a separate medium or an expansion of radio. Berry (2016) maintains they are different, though he admits there is overlap: “Podcasting and radio are closely intertwined, sharing technologies, techniques and content, but they are increasingly coexisting on divergent and often intersecting paths” (p. 17). In this thesis I refer to podcasting as a medium. This is intended in part to be consistent with how it is discussed by and large in the academic literature as well as in the industry (Bottomley, 2015).

During its short history, podcasting has garnered a great deal of hype at times, followed by periods of less attention. The word “podcast” was *New Oxford American Dictionary*’s word

of the year in 2005, prompting *Slate* to declare it the “Year of the Podcast” (Bowers, 2005). That was the year Apple integrated playback and management of podcast files into iTunes (Quirk, 2016). Nine years later, the debut of *This American Life* spinoff *Serial* prompted a new round of excitement about podcasting. *Serial*’s first season was a 12-episode true crime investigation into the 1999 murder of Baltimore teenager Hae Min Lee. Host Sarah Koenig examined the evidence in the case, and conducted several in-depth interviews with Lee’s former boyfriend Adnan Syed, who was convicted of the crime and remains in jail. Shortly after the show launched Apple announced it was the fastest podcast to reach 5-million downloads on iTunes (Dredge, 2014), and the late *New York Times* media columnist David Carr (2014) called it “arguably the medium’s first breakout hit.” Some even wondered if the show had inaugurated the “golden age of podcasting” (Sillesen, 2014), though as Berry (2015) points out, *Serial* owed its initial success to “a combination of factors, in which technologies, brands, social sharing, and engaging content all play a part.” Similarly, Vanessa Quirk (2016) argues that perhaps the most significant factor in the “so-called *Serial* effect” was that Apple made the Podcasts app “a native, undeletable” part of the operating system for iPhone and iPad just weeks before the show debuted. Quirk writes: “When *Serial* launched, it was the perfect storm: fantastically reported, edge-of-your-seat content released just as for thousands of iPhone users podcasts were suddenly easier to find, subscribe to, and consume” (p. 9).

More recently, *The Daily* from the *New York Times* has helped popularize the genre of daily news podcasts. Within nine months of its debut, *The Daily* had more than 100 million downloads (Doctor, 2017), and it consistently ranks among the most-listened to podcasts, according to analytics firm Podtrac (2019). Some have suggested daily news podcasts are a threat to public radio. Journalist Felix Salmon (2018), for example, declared that the rise of *The*

*Daily* and Vox's *Today, Explained* shows "The Podcasting Juggernaut Has (Finally) Arrived." Commercial podcasting, Salmon argues, "is now matching and even eclipsing public radio in terms of ambition and budgets." If public radio wants to stay relevant he says it must "up its own game and rise to meet the challenge." Salmon's rhetoric is a bit exaggerated. For one thing, he fails to mention NPR's daily news podcast, *Up First*, which debuted around the same time as *The Daily*, and is also a top podcast, according to Podtrac (2019). For another thing, Salmon writes: "Podcasting has become industrialized, in quite an exciting way. It's shaping the future of audio-only storytelling, the future of radio—and, possibly, even the future of narrative nonfiction more broadly." Although podcasting certainly has become more professionalized as it has matured, to say it's industrialized is an overstatement. Like so much of digital media, podcasting can be both an amateur pursuit and a professional media product.

As Berry (2006) has pointed out, the words "podcast" and "podcasting" tend to privilege Apple, since they were inspired by the company's iPod device. Apple does not produce any podcasts of its own, but the company has encouraged the medium's growth—first by integrating podcasts into iTunes, and later by introducing the standalone Podcasts app on devices like the iPhone and iPad (Ingraham, 2012). By most industry estimates, Apple's share of the podcast player market is around 60% or higher (Quah, 2017). So it was significant when the company began offering audience analytics to podcast creators and advertisers. As journalist Peter Kafka (2017) pointed out, more information about listening habits is key to the long-term monetization of the industry, and there was "comically little data about podcast consumption, especially compared to other digital media" prior to the debut of Apple's analytics. Recently, other companies have sought to weaken Apple's grip on the podcast player market. For example, in

2018 Google debuted an integrated podcast app for its Android operating system (Newton, 2018).

Public radio organizations are making a play in the app space as well. PRX, the first distributor of public radio programming to embrace digital content delivery, started a subsidiary called RadioPublic in 2016 that created a podcast app of the same name (Wang, 2016). In 2018, four public radio outfits—NPR, WNYC, WBEZ, and *This American Life*—acquired the podcast app Pocket Casts. In a news release announcing the purchase, WBEZ CEO Goli Sheikholeslami said the organization’s entered the app market hoping “to work with producers to find new and broader audiences, which will enable creators to better connect with fans and potential audiences and build a sustainable business for their podcast” (NPR, 2018b).

As this thesis neared completion, there were signs that podcasting was developing into a more commercial-oriented medium. For instance, in early 2019 Swedish streaming audio giant Spotify reportedly spent more than \$230 million to acquire three podcasting companies, including Gimlet Media, founded in 2014 by public radio alums Alex Blumberg and Matthew Lieber. Spotify also announced it was prepared to spend up to half a billion dollars on podcasting in the near term (Kafka, 2019). The company’s founder Daniel Ek (2019) wrote on his blog that podcasts represent a significant business opportunity: “Based on radio industry data, we believe it is a safe assumption that, over time, more than 20% of all Spotify listening will be non-music content.” Another big player to enter the industry in early 2019 was Luminary, a venture capital-backed startup trying to make paid subscriptions work in podcasting. Luminary co-founder and CEO Matt Sacks told the *New York Times*: “We want to become synonymous with podcasting in the same way Netflix has become synonymous with streaming” (Barnes, 2019).

Meanwhile, other media companies that at one time invested in podcasting have scaled back. For example, within a few weeks in the fall of 2018, the podcasting industry saw layoffs at three different companies: *Slate*'s podcasting arm Panoply let go most of its creative team to focus on distribution; tech giant Amazon's audio subsidiary Audible shut down its podcasting unit; and *BuzzFeed* closed its in-house podcast shop as well (Ingram, 2018). Although some former members of *Slate*'s team—including longtime editor Jacob Weisberg and bestselling author Malcolm Gladwell—announced their own podcasting venture at the same time, the rash of layoffs wasn't a positive development. *Columbia Journalism Review*'s Mathew Ingram (2018) wondered if the podcast bubble had burst, and identified an overabundance of podcasts as one possible reason for the retreat: "At some point, even podcasting aficionados started to wonder who had time to listen to all those podcasts."

Consumer surveys conducted by Edison Research for "The Infinite Dial" annual report (2019) show that people are listening to more audio from multiple sources on a variety of different devices. This indicates that the podcasting industry will continue to be a potential growth area. Public radio has been and will in all likelihood continue to be a significant player in podcasting. The question for public radio organizations is how to integrate podcasting in a way that stays true to their public service values.

### **Toward a political economy of podcasting**

I have already noted that podcasting is considered to be a converged medium (Berry, 2006). Scholars and industry insiders use the term "convergence" to signal the integration of old and new media (Lawson-Borders, 2003). Convergence can refer to a technological process facilitated by the complete digitization of media—text, audio, visual, and more—along with the ability to send and receive messages via broadband networks (van Dijk, 2006). But it also can

refer to the culture produced through the combination of old and new media, particularly where content is shared on numerous platforms, and where consumers are viewed as active participants, as opposed to passive receivers of information (Jenkins, 2006). Throughout this thesis, I discuss podcasting as a converged medium in both senses of the word.

Much of the research on convergence in news media focuses on the technological adaptations of newsrooms and individual journalists, especially at newspapers (Boczkowski, 2004; Gade, 2008; Singer, 2004). Some scholars have examined convergence in a public radio context. Usher (2012; 2013), for instance, conducted in-depth ethnographic and sociological studies of digital change inside the newsrooms of both NPR and the public radio business program *Marketplace*. Evans (2015) explored how individuals who work in public radio perceive the differences between their organizations and other types of news outlets. She also investigated how public radio employees understand innovation in their organizations (Evans, 2018). These studies are largely concerned with the internal culture of newsrooms and public radio organizations, but tend to elide larger political, social, and economic factors that influence the adoption of technology by these outlets. This thesis seeks to address some of these broader forces that play into how public radio is managing convergence in the form of podcasting.

I've grounded my study in political economy of communication, a theoretical framework that Vincent Mosco (2009) defines as "*the study of the social relations, particularly the power relations, that mutually constitute the production, distribution, and consumption of resources, including communication resources*" (p. 2, italics in original). Within such a broad discipline there are many ways to study media. After all, both Adam Smith and Karl Marx are considered to be part of the political economy tradition. As Mosco writes: "Political economy has always believed there is a big picture of society and that we should try to understand it" (2009, p. 4). In

this section I discuss some of the ways I will be using political economy to investigate how commercial imperatives got embedded into the debate over the adoption of podcasting in public radio.

A typical starting point for political economists is commodification, or the process of transforming something with use value into something with an exchange value. In other words, converting a good, service, or idea into a unit that can be bought, sold, or traded for other commodities—giving it a market value. Political economists study commodification of content, audiences, and labor in communication industries (Mosco, 2009, p. 11-14). In this study, I mostly discuss the commodification of content and audiences. Take a podcast, for example. By itself, the content of a podcast has a certain value as a source of information or a work of art that listeners can enjoy. But when producers charge people money to listen to a podcast, that content is transformed into a marketable product. Another example is when producers sell advertising to support production and distribution of their podcast. It's no longer valued just for its useful properties (e.g. as journalism or entertainment) but also for its exchange value in terms of the amount of money the producers can charge advertisers for access to their audience. In this case, the audience is the commodity (Smythe, 1981).

The commodification process is central to this thesis on several levels. For instance, as Mosco points out: "The growth of the Internet has advanced opportunities for commodification because it deepens and extends opportunities to measure and monitor, as well as to package and repack, communication content" (2009, p. 12). As discussed in the section on podcasting, many of the most popular podcasts are, in fact, repackaged terrestrial radio programs. Thus, some podcasts by themselves are examples of the further commodification of radio content. The commodification process also matters because as podcasting grows more attractive to

commercial media as a marketable product, it affects public media. Mosco puts it this way: “What we call the public media is public, not because it occupies a separate space, relatively free from market considerations, but because it is constituted out a particular patterning of processes that privilege the democratic over commodification” (2009, p. 154). In other words, when commodification directly or indirectly affects public media, the value of these institutions as democratic forms of media is reduced.

Another idea that I explore in this thesis (especially in chapter 2) is government regulation of media and communication industries—the political aspect of political economy. It is worth discussing the history of mass communications regulation in the U.S. to establish some of the issues that will come up later. Historian Hugh Sloten (2000) argues that during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, two views shaped federal intervention into the radio and later television industries. The technocratic view held that the government “should deal with problems involving the establishment of standards as narrowly defined—factual issues divorced from social, economic, and political considerations” (p. xii). In other words, its primary role ought to be ensuring the technical aspects of broadcast industries work to the benefit of all, while taking a hands-off approach to other issues. The question of spectrum scarcity—the limited number of channels on the broadcast spectrum and how to allocate them—was often raised in connection with the notion of a technocratic regulatory framework (Sloten, 2000, p. 42). This was balanced by what Sloten calls the nontechnocratic view, which said policymakers should consider issues such as “the character of broadcasters, the use of advertising, the value of large-scale networks, and the educational benefits of programming” (Sloten, 2000, p. xii). An example of this approach would be ownership limits that prevent a single company or organization from consolidating control

over broadcast stations. Proponents of these kinds of rules argue that it is in the public interest to encourage more diversity in station ownership.

The idea that broadcasting and other communications industries should serve “the public interest, convenience, or necessity” was codified in U.S. policy with the Federal Radio Act of 1927. In the early years of radio, it was common to have widespread interference caused by stations operating on the same or neighboring frequencies. With the 1927 Act, Congress created the Federal Radio Commission, which was granted the authority to license stations and assign channels on the radio spectrum. In exchange for monopoly rights to operate on their assigned frequency, the law stated that when operators applied for a license or license renewal, the commission would determine whether granting the license would benefit the public (Slotten, 2000). The public interest standard remained part of U.S. communication policy with the Communications Act of 1934, which reflected a technocratic ideal in that it created a single agency to oversee all electronic communication—telegraphy, telephone, and broadcasting. The idea was that having one government body setting standards for these loosely related industries would streamline the regulatory process. Thus, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) replaced the Federal Radio Commission (Slotten, 2000).

Although Slotten (2000) says U.S. regulators in the 20<sup>th</sup> century tended to favor the technocratic view of government intervention, he argues elements of both views influenced the nation’s communications policies. Others, like McChesney (1993), argue the technocratic approach naturally favored more established players and the dominant commercial system. Thus, the commercial model was privileged over nonprofit and educational alternatives as broadcasting developed.

Over roughly the past 40 years, but with heightened intensity in the past two decades, some policymakers and industry insiders have pushed for what is often referred to as deregulation of communications industries (Shaw, 2001). This involves removing barriers to the free flow of goods and services in these sectors of the economy. According to Mosco (2009), however, the term deregulation is misleading, and political economists consider “the entire social field, including the pattern of industry activity, as a form of regulation” (p. 176). Therefore, the distinction is between market regulation driven largely by communications industries, and state regulation, where the government actively intervenes in communications markets to achieve social, political, or economic objectives. Different regulatory schemes may have more or less market regulation versus state regulation, but it’s nearly always a mixture that favors one over the other, and political economy focuses on analyzing the advantages and disadvantages of various schemes for different social groups (Mosco, 2009). Since the Telecommunications Act of 1996 the U.S. system has been skewed heavily toward market-style regulation (Aufderheide, 1999). This is important, because as podcasting evolves, it is doing so in a regulatory environment where commercial industry largely determines what is in the public interest.

Two processes resulting from the shift toward market regulation that are central to this thesis are commercialization and privatization. Commercialization occurs as market standards replace other “forms of regulation based on public interest, public service, and related standards, such as universality” (Mosco, 2009, p. 176). This, in turn, tends to place more importance on large audiences, advertising, and corporate efficiencies in the media. Privatization happens when a government “literally sells off a state enterprise such as a public broadcaster or a state telephone company” (Mosco, 2009, p. 177). As Mosco notes, this process can take many forms. In the U.S., for example, efforts to defund the Corporation for Public Broadcasting would be

considered privatization. Even though public media in this country technically are not state-owned. The ultimate goal is the same—to diminish state involvement in media markets.

A potential issue with having highly commercialized, largely unregulated news media is the increased likelihood of what economists refer to as “market failure” (Brown, 1996; Stiglitz, 1989). This occurs when the provision of goods or services through the free market is inefficient, meaning not produced in high enough quantity or quality to suit society’s needs. Market failure is especially likely to affect what are called “public goods.” These are commodities defined as being nonrivalrous, meaning if one person consumes them it does not encumber another person’s ability to do so. They’re also nonexcludable, which means it’s hard to keep people who do not pay from enjoying them. This is called the free rider problem (Samuelson, 1958). Nobel Prize winning economist Joseph Stiglitz (1989) has said that some of the goods “for which markets are most imperfect are those associated with knowledge and information” (p. 198). News media—including podcasts—are in the business of producing knowledge and information. As Victor Pickard (2019) has observed, there is increasing evidence of pervasive market failure in the American media system, particularly the predominant commercial media sector. This evidence includes drastic job losses in newsrooms across the country (Grieco, 2018), and the rise of so-called “news deserts” caused by local newspapers and other outlets scaling back coverage or shutting down altogether (Abernathy, 2018).

Tim Wu (2010) points to another consequence of market style regulation that could have an impact as the medium of podcasting develops. He notes a recurring pattern in information industries, where they start out open and freely accessible to any individual or outlet that wants to enter, but before long they become closed, controlled by one company or a small handful of them:

Without exception, the brave new technologies of the twentieth century—free use of which was originally encouraged, for the sake of further invention and individual expression—eventually evolved into privately controlled industrial behemoths, the “old media” giants of the twenty-first, through which the flow and nature of content would be strictly controlled for reasons of commerce (p. 6).

Wu calls this pattern “the Cycle” because of how often it has repeated itself throughout history. He argues that once communications industries become “integrated and centralized,” they typically remain that way until either another new technology comes along to disrupt the old one, or the state steps in to regulate the industry either as a monopoly to promote efficiency of service, or with a heavier hand in the name of promoting competition among multiple players. Thus, says Wu, “information industries—the defining business ventures of our time—have from their inception been subject to the same cycle of rise and fall, imperial consolidation and dispersion” (2010, p. 299).

Another issue is the hype surrounding digital communication technology. Mosco (2004) provides a framework for analyzing this phenomenon. He writes: “computers and the world of what came to be called cyberspace embody and drive important myths about our time,” including the idea that they will enable humans to “transcend time (the end of history), space (the end of geography), and power (the end of politics)” (pp. 2-3). In short, Mosco says, these myths are derived from “the sense that we are leaving one era, the Industrial Age, and entering a new one, with a host of names, most of which, like ‘Information Age’ and ‘Digital Age,’ have to do with computers” (p. 32). But as he also notes, “much of the allure is manufactured by the very companies that stand to benefit from the sale of computer technology, software, and access to cyberspace” (p. 41). Mosco also points out that previous advances in communication technology, dating at least to the telegraph, have been greeted with similarly mythic declarations. It’s worth quoting him at length on this matter:

Looking at the history of technology literally puts us in our place by suggesting that rather than ending time, space, and social relations as we have known them, the rise of cyberspace amounts to just another in a series of interesting, but ultimately banal exercises in the extension of human tools. They are potentially very profound extensions, but not enough to warrant claims about the end of anything, other than the end of a chapter in a seemingly never ending story (Mosco, 2004, p. 119)

The analysis offered by Mosco and Wu suggests the shine on podcasting will inevitably wear off. Yet because it's a medium that grew out of and has been shaped by its association with public radio, it is also likely that podcasts will be a part of the content provided by public radio organizations well into the future.

### **Chapter Organization**

The rest of this thesis will unfold in three subsequent chapters:

In chapter 2 I explore a forgotten piece of public radio history. Namely, the contributions of former NPR president and CEO Delano Lewis to shaping the digital media system we have today. Lewis is most often remembered for his efforts to instill a more corporate style culture at NPR and for being the network's first African American chief executive. Few recall that he helped lead the U.S. Advisory Council on the National Information Infrastructure, a Clinton administration task force that helped craft the Telecommunications Act of 1996. This regulatory framework, which remains in place today, deepened the commercialization and privatization of the American media. It may seem strange to discuss events that happened in the mid 1990s in a thesis on contemporary podcasting. But as Mosco (2009) argues, analyzing the past through a political economic framework shows "that media systems in place today are the result of a deeply contested history" (p. 110).

Chapter 3 is a contemporary analysis looking at the neoliberal rhetoric of *This American Life's* Ira Glass and Gimlet Media's Alex Blumberg. Neoliberalism is a political-economic framework that privileges free markets and free trade as the primary organizing principles for

society (Harvey, 2005). Following political philosopher Jason Stanley's (2015) work on propaganda and flawed ideologies, I argue that when Glass and Blumberg engage in neoliberal discourse to justify their business decisions, they erode the core values of noncommercial public radio.

Chapter 4 will explore how local public radio stations are managing the transition from being solely focused on broadcasting to incorporating podcasts into the content they produce. Based on interviews with 10 public radio employees from stations across the country, this analysis provides a snapshot of this moment in the history of public radio, and tries to illuminate the second overarching question of this thesis: How are public radio organizations managing both the disruptions and opportunities related to podcasting?

## CHAPTER 2

### THE INFORMATION SUPERHIGHWAY AND FUNDING THREATS:

#### NPR AT THE DAWN OF THE DIGITAL AGE

In August 1993, at his introductory press conference as NPR's new president and CEO, Delano Lewis was asked what he thought qualified him to lead a journalism and broadcasting organization despite having no experience in either field. Lewis answered by highlighting his previous experience as a local telephone company executive, saying the broader field of telecommunications was on the cusp of major change: "The communications war is going to be fought in a very different way, in a very competitive way, over the next decade. We are going to look at the merger of voice, data, information, cable TV, and entertainment. The challenge for us is where does radio fit" (Trescott, 1993).

Lewis was NPR's first African American chief executive, but this fact was almost an afterthought at the time. The main reason cited for his hiring by the network's board of directors was his ability to run the organization "more like a business" (Mitchell, 2005, p. 151). Before coming to NPR, Lewis had worked more than 20 years at Chesapeake & Potomac Telephone, the local provider for the Washington, D.C. area. Before that he was a lawyer with the Department of Justice in the 1960s, worked at the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and as a congressional staffer, and spent time in the Peace Corps. He also sat on the corporate boards of Colgate Palmolive, Chase Manhattan, and Geico (McCauley, 2005, p. 85). In short, his political, business, and philanthropic connections, not to mention his interest in the changing world of communications, made him an attractive choice for the job.

Ten years before Lewis came to NPR, ballooning debt nearly forced the network to shutdown before it was bailed out by a loan from member stations. As a result, the stations

received additional seats on the network's board of directors and greater say in its business matters. By 1993, NPR had recovered financially, but still relied on station dues and fees for more than 60% of its revenue. Meanwhile, its aspirations were growing, and spending at the network increased roughly 4% annually during the early 1990s (McCourt, 1999, p. 61). The board did not want to discourage these ambitions, which paralleled an increase in listenership. Thus, Lewis was charged with producing "more of NPR's budget from underwriting and entrepreneurship and less from NPR member stations" (Mitchell, 2005, p. 151). This turn toward more external funding was part of a long-term shift away from the original developmental philosophy of public radio. Embarking on a strategy of raising more revenue from sources like underwriting, corporate partnerships, merchandising, and philanthropy heightened concerns about commodification and economic determinism in public radio (McCauley, 2005; McCourt, 1999; Mitchell, 2005).

But there's a forgotten story from Lewis' tenure at NPR that highlights the deepening commercialization and privatization of public radio—not to mention the wider U.S. media system—over the past 25 years. From 1994 until early 1996, Lewis served as co-chair of the U.S. Advisory Council on the National Information Infrastructure (NII Advisory Council), a panel established by President Bill Clinton to help his administration develop a national communications policy for the coming Internet age. The resulting Telecommunications Act of 1996 implemented a market-oriented regulatory framework governing various industries, including telephone, cable, and broadcasting. The Act lifted cross-media ownership restrictions, allowing virtually any individual or corporation to enter any sector of the communications economy. Policymakers and industry insiders sold the Act on the idea that it would boost competition and be good for consumers, but as critics have noted the actual result has been

increased industry consolidation and the intensification of the underlying commercial dynamic of the U.S. media (Aufderheide, 1999; Hilliard & Keith, 2005; McChesney, 2013).

This chapter examines the work of the NII Advisory Council in an attempt to illuminate how the political and cultural environment a quarter century ago produced new commercial imperatives that continue to inform present day discourses surrounding media—including public radio and podcasting. Historians of public radio have not written about Lewis’ involvement in the panel, perhaps because it is hard to tell precisely what role he played. The council included more than 30 members, representing various interest groups from education to labor to local and state government to private industry. It met several times and traveled around the country gathering input from the public before releasing three reports containing recommendations for connecting the country to the “Information Superhighway” (NII Advisory Council, 1995; NII Advisory Council, 1996a; NII Advisory Council, 1996b). As is often the case where various interests are involved, the authorship of these reports is opaque. We can assume that Lewis as co-chair had significant input, and looking at his public statements from the time we see that his views did align with much of what the advisory council’s reports said. Yet, the bureaucratic process largely obscured his specific contributions.

In order to add context to these events, this chapter revisits another episode from Lewis’ time at NPR. It’s well documented that he played a prominent role standing up for public radio and television when Republicans threatened to eliminate funding for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting in the mid 1990s (McCauley, 2005; Mitchell, 2005). But a closer examination of these events reveals parallels to the discussions over telecommunications reform—especially in terms of the privatization and commercialization of the media—and further explains the deepening commercial pressures on public media over the past quarter century.

Applying descriptive historical analysis to primary sources, including the NII Advisory Council's reports and contemporaneous press accounts, this chapter shows how Lewis was advancing a financial model that clashed with the original public service mission of public radio. It demonstrates that the social, technological, and political pressure that we see in the adoption of podcasting by public radio organizations is not new, but has roots in the recent past.

### **“Technology is exploding”: Delano Lewis and the National Information Infrastructure**

In September 1993, President Clinton's first year in office, his administration published a report—*National Information Infrastructure: Agenda for Action*—that signaled its commitment to modernizing the nation's communications systems. On the cusp of the personal computer era, the document declared: “All Americans have a stake in the construction of an advanced National Information Infrastructure (NII), a seamless web of communications networks, computers, databases, and consumer electronics that will put vast amounts of information at users' fingertips” (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1993, p. 5). The White House announced that Vice President Al Gore and Secretary of Commerce Ron Brown would lead a task force of federal officials focused on enacting its communications agenda. At the same time, the administration said it would form an advisory panel made up of members of the private sector to help guide government officials in their work (Duston, 1993). The executive order establishing the U.S. Advisory Council on National Information Infrastructure said it would assist the administration with, among other things, “the appropriate roles of the private and public sectors in developing the National Information Infrastructure” and “the impact of current and proposed regulatory regimes on the evolution of the National Information Infrastructure” (NII Advisory Council, 1995).

In early 1994, Clinton appointed members to the panel, with NPR's Lewis and Ed McCracken, chairman and CEO of computer manufacturer Silicon Graphics, as co-chairs. After his appointment, Lewis told *Broadcasting & Cable*: "The way we shop, bank, entertain, receive news and educate our children will all change. Technology is exploding" (Petrozzello, 1994). Despite the fact that he led the country's most recognizable noncommercial radio organization, Lewis also made clear that the conversation over communications policy would be tilted in favor of free market imperatives, saying in one interview on C-Span (1994) that NPR would "have to compete in the marketplace to put our audio on that information highway." Such statements from Lewis reflect the technological determinism embedded in the discourse surrounding the Internet during its early years. In media studies, scholars such as Harold Innis (1971) and Marshall McLuhan (1967) have argued that media technologies—the printing press, radio, the Internet—are key forces in historical and social change. Others, notably Raymond Williams, have critiqued this view. For example, Williams (1962) argues, "All the new means of communication have been abused, for political control (as in propaganda) or for commercial profit (as in advertising)" (p. 11). In other words, power lies not in the technologies themselves, but in how individuals and societies use them. Lewis was not alone in thinking that the Internet would radically remake society. The reports of the NII Advisory Council epitomized that view as well.

Over the course of two years, the advisory council held a total of 14 meetings—six in Washington, D.C. and the rest around the country in cities such as New York, Minneapolis, Seattle, and Pittsburgh (NII Advisory Council, 1996a, p. 73). According to one account, the panel's first meeting in Washington in February 1994 attracted nearly 400 people, and had to be relocated to a larger room to accommodate the crowd. There was a lot of hype, but still no clear idea of what the National Information Infrastructure entailed. Lewis gave council members an

assignment to write two pages “defining it—what it means” before the group’s next meeting (Quittner, 1994). By April of that year, the council had settled on three “mega-projects” on which to focus: vision and goals driven by specific applications, examining how the emergent Internet would affect the areas of education, electronic commerce, health care, and public safety; access to the NII, focusing on the issue of ensuring universal Internet service throughout the U.S.; and privacy, security and intellectual property, which aimed at “setting guidelines for personal privacy and intellectual property protection, and outlining methods for protecting First Amendment rights and for addressing national security and emergency preparedness” (PR Newswire, 1994).

Almost a year later, in March 1995, the advisory council issued a preliminary report, *Common Ground: Fundamental Principles for the National Information Infrastructure*. The introduction included the following definition of the NII:

It is a series of components, including the collection of public and private high-speed, interactive, narrow and broadband networks that exist today and will emerge tomorrow. It is the satellite, terrestrial, and wireless technologies that deliver content to homes, businesses, and other public and private institutions. It is the information and content that flows over the infrastructure whether in the form of databases, the written word, a film, a piece of music, a sound recording, a picture, or computer software. It is the computers, televisions, telephones, radios, and other products that people will employ to access the infrastructure. It is the people who will provide, manage, and generate new information, and those that will help others do the same. And it is the individual Americans who will use and benefit from the NII (NII Advisory Council, 1995, p. 1)

The report’s fundamental principles were categorized in five key areas: universal access and services; privacy and security; intellectual property; education and lifelong learning; and electronic commerce. Each category included several principles, but the council largely elided discussion of how policymakers should manage tensions that might arise from competing priorities. Instead, *Common Ground* clearly argued the private sector should take the lead in building the information infrastructure, leaving it to the free market to resolve conflicts. Even in

the section on universal access—where state regulation might be expected to ensure all Americans would be able to enjoy the benefits of the Internet—one principle said: “Commercial and competitive initiatives should be the driving force behind the NII, and regulatory disincentives should be removed” (NII Advisory Council, 1995, p. 8). The government’s primary role as articulated in the report should be to serve as a facilitator by making laws regarding issues like privacy, security, intellectual property, and commerce simple, clear, and unobtrusive for the private sector.

Less than a month after *Common Ground* was released, Republican Senator Larry Pressler of South Dakota, chair of the Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee, introduced the bill that would later be adopted as the Telecommunications Act of 1996. The purpose of the “Telecommunications Competition and Deregulation Act of 1995” (S. 652) was to eliminate barriers between different sectors of the economy—including telephone, cable, and broadcasting—meaning the broad field of telecommunications would be regulated largely by market forces. According to the bill summary, it was intended to provide “a pro-competitive, deregulatory national policy framework designed to accelerate rapidly private sector deployment of advanced telecommunications and information technologies and services to all Americans by opening all telecommunications markets to competition.” This aligned with the NII Advisory Council’s call for “commercial and competitive initiatives” to take the lead in developing the nation’s communications infrastructure.

I won’t recap the entire legislative process that led to passage of the 1996 Act, but it involved significant input from stakeholders, including corporations and consumer groups, as well as backroom deals between members of Congress and between lawmakers and the White House (Aufderheide, 1999, pp. 44-60). As the Clinton administration worked with Republicans

like Pressler on a compromise bill that all sides could accept, the NII Advisory Council continued to advise the administration. For instance, in October 1995, co-chairs Lewis and McCracken sent a letter on behalf of the council to the head of Information & Regulatory Affairs at the Office of Management and Budget regarding security issues and information infrastructure. The letter stated: “The Advisory Council believes strongly that responses to the security needs of the NII will and must come principally from the private sector in response to demands from users” (NII Advisory Council, 1996a, p. 100). Thus, the panel once again privileged market-style regulation and private development of the emergent Internet.

In January 1996, a month before the final vote on the telecommunications act bill, the advisory council released its final report, *A Nation of Opportunity: Realizing the Promise of the Information Superhighway*. In their transmission letter to the White House, Lewis and McCracken wrote that there was still a lot of work to do: “The terrain over which the Information Superhighway will be built is not yet mapped, and the President tasked the Advisory Council to put down benchmarks that might guide the builders” (NII Advisory Council, 1996a, p. 5). The benchmarks identified in the final report were not radically different from the fundamental principles outlined in *Common Ground*. The council discussed key areas where the Internet would affect the lives of Americans, including electronic commerce; education and lifelong learning; emergency management and public safety; health; and government information and services. The report also stressed universal access and services, intellectual property, and privacy and security. Again, besides arguing that these were all important elements to consider, the report offered little guidance to policymakers for how to manage conflicts that arose from the different demands and repercussions of various concerns. What *A Nation of Opportunity* did say was: “The private sector—defined broadly to include an array of nongovernmental entities—

must have the primary responsibility for the continued design, deployment, and operation of the Information Superhighway.” Individual citizens should also “be its champions at the local level,” while the main role of government ought to be serving as a catalyst, “not the primary builders” (NII Advisory Council, 1996a, p. 12).

*A Nation of Opportunity* came with a companion volume, *Kickstart Initiative: Connecting America’s Communities to the Information Superhighway*. This report featured more than 30 case studies of schools, libraries, museums, and other community organizations having success with Internet adoption. One case study even highlighted a public radio initiative. NPR’s Community Wide Education and Information Service (CWEIS) project aimed to “encourage free and universal public access to education and information online services” (NII Advisory Council, 1996b, p. 69). As part of the project, two public media stations in the San Francisco Bay Area—KQED and KALW—were involved in a project called “San Francisco CityLink Bridge” that hosted “a central Web site that aggregates information about community resources” (NII Advisory Council, 1996b, p. 69). This and other examples from the *Kickstart Initiative* show that the advisory council did explore some initiatives that did not involve commercial interests and the private sector taking the lead.

Patricia Aufderheide (1999), who has written the most thorough account of the public discourse leading up to passage of the Telecommunications Act of 1996, says differences “between the vested interests of various stakeholders were often obscured by a highly contagious fascination with the newest networked communication: the Internet” (p. 37). This tendency—a symptom of the era’s technological determinism—is clear in the NII Advisory Council’s work. With 30-plus members representing different social and economic interests, the Clinton administration advisory panel no doubt had a number of internal policy differences. Yet when

you read the three reports the group put out, any competing priorities are masked by the excitement surrounding the Information Superhighway. The reports stress the informational opportunities the Internet would provide for businesses, educators, cultural institutions, community groups, and more. They also discuss the possibilities for the government to more efficiently share information with citizens and for citizens to more directly petition the government. There's a lot of talk about how the Internet would make it easy to exchange information, and the wide range of "content" that would be available, but the reports elide discussion of specific kinds of information and content. For example, there's no mention of journalism. This omission is notable considering how important the Internet has become to the dissemination of news in today's society.

Another area where differences between the various interest groups on the NII Advisory Council were obscured was in the panel's definition of the private sector. By adopting a broad definition that included a wide range of nongovernmental organizations, the council concealed some fundamental distinctions between for-profit and nonprofit interests. A more nuanced definition would have acknowledged that commercial and noncommercial organizations have different and sometimes competing social and economic motives. The failure to recognize this is reflected in the Telecommunications Act of 1996 as well. As Aufderheide notes, legislators largely elided discussion of noncommercial services in the Act, creating a media environment that is "impoverished in public sites or even noncommercial arenas of any kind" (1999, p. 105). In fact, since the Act passed, its critics have charged that the predominant commercial paradigm has grown stronger, and far from creating a competitive environment, U.S. media and communication industries have become more consolidated (DiCola & Thomson, 2002; McChesney, 2013, p. 122).

As one of the leaders of the NII Advisory Council, Delano Lewis supported this regulatory system, which remains in place today. Although the Telecommunications Act of 1996 did not deal directly with public radio, it's important to recover this largely forgotten episode from his tenure at NPR, because the law has shaped the wider media and communications landscape in which public media operate. By supporting a policy aimed explicitly at creating a more commercialized media system, Lewis was working at cross-purposes to the foundational values of public broadcasting. I explore this idea in more detail later in this chapter, but first I turn my attention to another media policy battle in which Lewis played a prominent role: His fight to preserve federal funding for public broadcasting in response to attacks from conservative politicians. These events overlapped with the discourse surrounding telecommunications reform, and further highlight the origins of the commercial tensions that public radio organizations face as they navigate the adoption of podcasting.

#### **“The Road to Self-Sufficiency”: Delano Lewis and the fight over federal funding**

In December 1994, a little more than a month after the Republican wave in that year's midterm elections, incoming House Speaker Newt Gingrich went on the conservative cable channel National Empowerment Television and announced his intention to “zero out” funding for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. CPB had received \$285 million from the federal government that year—about a dollar per U.S. citizen, according to Richard Carlson, head of the corporation at the time. But Gingrich claimed it was “eating taxpayers’ money” with what amounted to “involuntary” taxation (De Witt, 1994).

Other Republicans argued that advances in communication technology since the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967—particularly cable TV—allowed commercial outlets to meet the needs of children and minority audiences, meaning government funding of public media was no

longer justified. For example, in January 1995, Larry Pressler—who was simultaneously preparing to introduce the “Telecommunications Competition and Deregulation Act of 1995”—told the *Washington Post* that public broadcasting programming did not have to go away, but it should be privatized: “There’s a lot of TV being made today by Nickelodeon, the Disney Channel, Nickelodeon in particular, the Learning Channel and elsewhere, that could be contracted out by public broadcasting.” In the same article, Pressler described the CPB as “an arrogant bureaucracy” and promised to use his budget oversight authority as chairman of the Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee to evaluate its entire operation when it came up for reauthorization (Edwards, 1995).

The GOP push to eliminate the federal subsidy for public broadcasting was motivated by ideology, not popular demand. Public opinion polling at the time showed a significant majority of Americans supported the funding (Maynard, 1995). But ending it had been a priority of political conservatives since the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967 created the modern public media system. In the early 1970s, President Richard Nixon tried to do away with CPB funding, because he thought the programming was too far to the left. The Reagan administration succeeded in cutting the corporation’s budget about 20% in the 1980s, contributing to NPR’s funding crisis a decade before Delano Lewis became president and CEO. Conservative media watchdogs like Accuracy in Media regularly attacked public broadcasting as an example of liberal bias in the press and government waste (Engelman, 1996; McCauley, 2005; McCourt, 1999; Mitchell, 2005).

Lewis had been with NPR about a year when Republicans took control of Congress and renewed the push to defund public broadcasting. The attacks sidetracked his efforts to create a more entrepreneurial culture at the network (McCauley, 2005, p. 86). But the circumstances also

revealed his savvy political side. Former NPR producer and public radio historian Jack Mitchell (2005) says Lewis' primary strategy to counter conservative attacks on public broadcasting was to concede that federal support was unlikely to last forever: "That position was what the Republicans wanted to hear, and it made them more open to his plea to hold off the day of reckoning until public radio was better able to deal with it" (p. 172). In January 1995, Lewis told *Broadcasting & Cable*, "We don't want to be in the advertising/commercial market." But, he added: "I'm not dismissing ideas" (Rathbun, 1995a). Behind the scenes, Lewis and other public broadcasting leaders began devising a proposal to help get them off federal support for good (Rathbun, 1995b).

In May 1995, Lewis announced "The Road to Self-Sufficiency," developed by officials from NPR, PBS, Public Radio International, and the Association of America's Public Television Stations (De Witt, 1995). In September of that year, he detailed the proposal in testimony before the House Subcommittee on Telecommunications and Finance. The plan called for a new private corporation to manage an investment portfolio that would be used to distribute money to public media organizations. The corporation would draw on a \$4 billion trust fund, but in order to capitalize the fund, public broadcasters would need the help of Congress. For example, initially a portion of the fund would come from broadcast spectrum auctions administered by the FCC. The plan also called for unutilized spectrum designated for noncommercial use to be transferred to the new public broadcasting corporation for it to lease to both commercial and noncommercial users. Finally, under the plan the federal government would have collected a small transfer fee on purchases of commercial broadcast licenses, with the fees helping to seed the trust fund. In his testimony, Lewis even referenced the telecommunications reform legislation then being considered by lawmakers, noting that it was expected "to cause significant restructuring of the

broadcast marketplace, with extensive sales of existing stations and an increased concentration of ownership” (Federal News Service, 1995). Thus, Lewis and his fellow public broadcasters were proposing to use the pending consolidation of the commercial broadcasting industry to finance their own privatization. To be fair, Lewis also said public broadcasters planned to remain noncommercial, though he did not go into detail about how they planned to do that.

Ultimately, the self-sufficiency plan did not come to pass. However, it contributed to the further privatization of public radio anyway. As Mitchell writes, public support played a larger role in saving federal funding for public broadcasting than the proposal offered by the system’s leaders. Listeners and viewers wrote their elected representatives by the thousands, demanding the government continue to fund the CPB. Republicans reduced the agency’s budget by nearly 25% for a few years, but later allowed it grow beyond mid-1990s levels. Not only that, but individual contributions to public radio reached unprecedented levels in the immediate aftermath of the threats. Mitchell (2005) argues the conservative attacks ensured public radio’s long-term survival by mobilizing support for the subsidy while “provoking an influx of private money” (p. 174). Thus, despite the continuation of federal funding, the episode fostered the privatization of public radio by making the system more reliant on individual giving. As Mitchell points out: “Believing that federal money might disappear, public broadcasting set out on the road to self-sufficiency, a journey it did not abandon when the threat abated” (p. 174). Around the turn of the century, NPR member stations received on average 13% of their revenue from the CPB (NPR, 2001, p. 12). Today, federal support accounts for just 8% of stations’ revenue (NPR, 2019).

### **Commercial and public radio, post-Telecommunications Act of 1996**

To tie these two episodes from Delano Lewis’ time leading NPR together, we return to the Telecommunications Act of 1996. Specifically, it is useful to examine the Act’s impact on

the U.S. commercial radio industry, which had a direct affect on public radio as a competing service in the same medium. The law eliminated a nationwide cap on how many commercial stations a single individual or organization could own, leading to horizontal consolidation—where one or two companies own several stations in a single market—as well as an increase in stations owned by large, vertically integrated corporations (Drushel, 1998). It led to considerable declines in local ownership of small-market stations, increased market power for large chain owners, and a reduction in audience satisfaction with local stations as outside owners cut programming budgets and installed cookie-cutter formats (Chambers, 2001; Chambers, 2011; Saffran, 2011).

Robert Hilliard and Michael Keith (2005) argue the Telecommunications Act of 1996 led to a decline in what media scholars, regulators, and industry insiders call localism on the radio dial. While an agreed upon definition is somewhat elusive, there's general consensus that localism means programming relevant to and reflective of local communities. These can be communities based in a particular geographic area or constituted by social factors, such as shared values and interests (Ali, 2017; Napoli, 2001; Stavitsky, 1994). Industry interests have argued that since the telecommunications Act, listeners have more format options on the radio dial, and thus better local service (National Association of Broadcasters, 2006). But if the goal of media regulation is to ensure a mix of socially and geographically relevant programming (Ali, 2017), then the industry has failed to meet that standard. As Hilliard and Keith (2005) put it:

With consolidation, local needs and programming become secondary to profits. Local programming needs frequently have been ignored, not necessarily out of will or even neglect but because it is not cost-efficient and because corporate officials in a far-off state are not likely to know much about a given station's community needs and interests (p. 8).

Jack Mitchell (2005) argues that as commercial radio sought profits at the expense of local public service, public radio became the only place on the dial offering “anything

approaching meaningful radio journalism.” Furthermore, he suggests this has translated into larger audiences and “more income from listeners and the underwriters who wanted to reach them” (p. 175). Indeed, over nearly two decades, the weekly audience for NPR programming on terrestrial radio has grown from almost 20 million listeners to more than 30 million (NPR, 2001, p. 1; Pew Research Center, 2018).

This loyal, dedicated, and growing listener base has developed an appetite for podcasts as well. According to industry rankings, NPR is the number one podcast publisher, with more than 18 million listeners in the U.S. for its nearly 50 shows. Other public radio entities, such as PRX, WNYC Studios, and *This American Life* rank in the top 10 (Podtrac, 2019). It’s been argued that podcasting finally put public radio on stable financial footing (Greenberg, 2015). Yet, the new medium largely replicates radio in terms of how it brings in revenue. That means more income from listener donations and program sponsorships, which can lead to additional questions about the privatization of public media. Adding to the concern is that unlike on-air underwriting, where neutral language is required, podcast ads technically have no restrictions—even for public radio organizations. As podcasting has evolved, the common practice of host-read advertising has raised ethical questions for public radio podcasters (Grandoni, 2015). Thus, despite its success in both the new and traditional media worlds, public radio continues to face many of the same challenges that have defined it from the beginning.

### **Conclusion**

The Delano Lewis era at NPR marked a shift to a more corporate culture at the public radio network. However, as Michael McCauley (2005) has observed, this “desire to run NPR like a for-profit business alienated some important members of the NPR News team” (p. 88). McCauley writes that Lewis clashed with William Buzenberg, vice president of news at NPR,

who later accused him of not understanding the network's public service mission. McCauley says several of Lewis' business ventures failed as well. He tried to broker a merger between NPR and Public Radio International, but officials from the two organizations couldn't reach an agreement. McCauley (2005) also notes that Lewis had "a brief flirtation with Liberty Media (a subsidiary of cable giant TCI)," which also failed to pan out (p. 89). Lewis resigned from the network in 1998, and was appointed U.S. ambassador to South Africa by President Clinton in 1999.

Ironically, one of the defining moments of Lewis' tenure was the fight to save the Corporation for Public Broadcasting from budget cuts. He was supposed to raise more of NPR's revenue from private sources, yet ended up securing federal funding for public radio into the future. This chapter shows there's more to that story. Lewis may have saved the CPB from the chopping block, but the road to self-sufficiency he advocated for turned into a roadmap for the further (though not total) privatization of public radio. And his work on the Telecommunications Act of 1996 resulted in the hyper-commercial, less public-oriented media we have today.

## CHAPTER 3

### THIS NEOLIBERAL LIFE: IRA GLASS, ALEX BLUMBERG AND THE UNDERMINING RHETORIC OF NEOLIBERALISM

In December 2018, *This American Life*'s Ira Glass appeared on the podcast *Without Fail*, hosted by his protégé and former *TAL* employee Alex Blumberg, co-founder of Gimlet Media. The episode was titled “Ira Glass: The Man Who Launched a Thousand Podcasts,” and in his introduction Blumberg (2018) credits Glass not only with teaching him the basics of radio production, but inspiring him to start his own business: “There is no doubt that you are hearing my voice right now, because of Ira.” Over the course of an hour-long interview, the two veteran radio producers and podcasters discuss how *TAL* started, how it grew into a hugely successful public radio show, and their respective thoughts on running media companies. About 20 minutes into the episode, Glass mentions that during *TAL*'s early years he had to convince public radio stations to air the show. After noting how “public radio is radically decentralized in a great way,” he tells Blumberg that his main pitch was: “Don't pick up the show because we are trying to reinvent radio. Do it because we will make you money” (Blumberg, 2018). What he meant was, *TAL* would send fundraising modules to stations for them to use during pledge drives. These modules typically feature a humorous bit and an appeal from Glass to listeners to support the local station. As he tells Blumberg, the strategy was so effective it helped *TAL* become one of the most popular shows on public radio.

Glass' anecdote exemplifies the neoliberal discourse both he and Blumberg regularly engage in while discussing the modes of production at their respective organizations. The framing of *TAL*'s early success in terms of revenue generated for stations aligns with the rhetoric of neoliberalism—the belief that free-market capitalism is the most efficient and fairest way to

promote individual and societal welfare (Harvey, 2005). This chapter explores other examples of this rhetoric in statements made by Blumberg and Glass. As neoliberalism has become arguably the dominant ideology of our time, other scholars have taken note of the increasingly neoliberal tone and perspective of public radio programming (Freund, 2015; Loviglio, 2011; Loviglio, 2013; McChesney, 1999; Russo, 2016). I am interested less in content, and more in how the neoliberal rhetoric of Glass and Blumberg feeds the commercial pressures in public radio as the new medium of podcasting emerges. Following the political philosopher Jason Stanley (2015), I argue neoliberal rhetoric undermines the noncommercial, public service values of public radio, and raises concerns about its commercialization and privatization.

Glass and Blumberg make good case studies, because both have been successful and influential in podcasting and public radio. Glass has hosted *TAL* since 1995, and helped build it into a massively popular radio show with a weekly audience of 2.2 million listeners on more than 500 public radio stations. Another 2.5 million people download each episode of the podcast. *TAL* has also spawned two spinoff podcasts, *Serial* and *S-Town*, as well as various projects in film, television, live events, and more (*This American Life*, 2019). Blumberg got his start as a radio producer on *TAL* and later helped launch *Planet Money*, an economics and business podcast co-produced by *TAL* and NPR. In 2014, he and fellow public radio veteran Matthew Lieber co-founded Gimlet, and Blumberg document the company's launch in the first season of his podcast *StartUp* (Blumberg, 2014). Currently, Gimlet's lineup includes more than 20 podcasts that are downloaded more than 12 million times a month and listened to by people in nearly 190 countries (Gimlet Media, 2019). In early 2019, Swedish streaming audio giant Spotify acquired the company for a reported \$230 million (Kafka, 2019).

In the next section I discuss neoliberalism and some of its basic tenets, as well as Stanley's (2015) concepts of undermining propaganda and flawed ideologies. Following that, I review the literature from critics who have noted a neoliberal shift in public radio. I then investigate specific examples of Glass and Blumberg using neoliberal rhetoric. In conclusion, I discuss how this kind of discourse feeds into the commercial tensions in public radio.

### **Neoliberalism and undermining propaganda**

Before analyzing the neoliberal discourse of Ira Glass and Alex Blumberg, it's important to discuss what neoliberalism is and identify some of its core principles. This is no easy task, since neoliberal theory often diverges from neoliberalism in practice (Harvey, 2005). However, highlighting some common threads underscores how neoliberal values, assumptions and beliefs fundamentally shape our social and cultural experiences. The neoliberal ideology, like any powerful ideology, "is a way of thinking about the world that emerges from and reinforces a specific social order" (Becker, 2018, p. 11). Thus, neoliberal political and economic systems help structure how we interpret and interact with the world, even if we may not entirely agree with them.

What is neoliberalism? According to David Harvey (2005):

Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade (p. 2).

To better understand neoliberal rhetoric, it is useful to examine how neoliberals conceptualize individual freedoms versus the role of the state (i.e. government) in society. As Harvey (2005) writes, a basic assumption of neoliberal thinking is "that individual freedoms are guaranteed by freedom of the market and of trade," which tends to privilege "the interests of private property owners, businesses, multinational corporations, and financial capital" (p. 7). In

theory, the primary purpose of the neoliberal state is to protect these private property rights, and ensure free markets and free trade. Therefore, parts of the economy “formerly run or regulated by the state must be turned over to the private sphere and be deregulated” (Harvey, 2005, p. 65). Harvey (2005) adds that while neoliberal theory assumes that “personal and individual freedom in the marketplace is guaranteed, each individual is held responsible and accountable for his or her own actions and well-being” (p. 65). Thus, under neoliberal policies the state has retreated from the provision of programs and services aimed at boosting the common good, including education, health care, and welfare (Harvey, 2005), as well as public broadcasting (Hoynes, 1994; Tracey, 1998). This withdrawal is tied to another feature of neoliberalism—the depoliticization of public life. Neoliberals worry that democratic political movements, as well as strong collective institutions, pose a threat to the free market, which is assumed to be unaffected by politics. As a result, they tend to prefer “governance by experts and elites” (Harvey, 2005, p. 66).

Starting in the 1970s, neoliberalism began to supplant the dominant political-economic system of the postwar period known as embedded liberalism, which featured “a web of social and political constraints and a regulatory environment that sometimes restrained but in other instances led the way in economic and industrial strategy” (Harvey, 2005, p. 11). This shift took place worldwide by various means, but Harvey (2005) argues that in western democracies like the U.S. neoliberalization happened through a systematic process of social and cultural change that “required the prior construction of political consent across a sufficiently large spectrum of the population to win elections” (p. 39). The idea of consent is drawn from the Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci (2002), whose concept of hegemony refers to the ways those in power secure the consent to govern from those they rule through “common sense.” Hegemony is

key to understanding how neoliberal systems became prevalent and how the ideology maintains its influence. As Harvey writes:

Common sense is constructed out of longstanding practices of cultural socialization often rooted deep in regional or national traditions. It is not the same as ‘good sense’ that can be constructed out of critical engagement with issues of the day. Common sense can, therefore, be profoundly misleading, obfuscating or disguising real problems under cultural prejudices (2005, p. 39).

It took decades for neoliberal ideas to become common sense. According to Harvey (2005), “the organization of think-tanks (with corporate backing and funding), the capture of certain segments of the media, and the conversion of many intellectuals to neoliberal ways of thinking, created a climate of opinion in support of neoliberalism as the exclusive guarantor of freedom” (p. 40). These institutions and individuals were able to frame neoliberal ideas, such as the equation of individual liberties with the free market and the privatization of public assets, in ways that were palatable to large segments of the population.

Philosophy professor Jason Stanley’s (2015) work on propaganda helps further explain how neoliberal ideas spread. According to Stanley, there are two kinds of propaganda. One is supporting propaganda: “A contribution to public discourse that is presented as an embodiment of certain ideals, yet is of a kind that tends to increase the realization of those very ideals by either emotional or other nonrational means.” The other is undermining propaganda: “A contribution to public discourse that is presented as an embodiment of certain ideals, yet is of a kind that tends to erode those very ideals” (p. 53). Stanley contends that neoliberal rhetoric is a form of undermining propaganda. The neoliberal argument that personal liberties are guaranteed by free markets and free trade is presented as embodying the values of liberalism such as individual freedom and equality. But in practice, neoliberal policies actually undermine these values. As Stanley (2015) puts it: “There are certain traditional views of liberalism that privilege

market exchange. But it is nevertheless undermining propaganda to present even these views as the view that what *now* passes for market exchange in the United States is this kind of liberalism” (p. 67, italics in original).

Stanley’s concept of flawed ideology provides a key framework to explain why figures like Ira Glass and Alex Blumberg engage in neoliberal discourse despite the fact that neoliberalism undermines public radio. Flawed ideologies, according to Stanley (2015), are not flawed just because the set of beliefs on which they are based are wrong, but because those beliefs “are resistant to the available evidence” (p. 178). In other words, they feature epistemic flaws related to how knowledge is acquired. Neoliberalism fits the definition of a flawed ideology, because belief in the supremacy of the market does not leave room for evidence that imperfect markets lead to inequality unless properly regulated. Another important feature of this concept is that the more widespread a flawed ideology becomes, the more its flawed beliefs are reinforced. As Stanley (2015) writes: “Structural features of a society are not merely the *cause* of flawed ideology; they also may *constitute* it” (p. 200, italics in original). Of course, everyone has flawed ideologies, or sets of beliefs that prevent us from carefully examining evidence. The point is we are more likely to adopt a particular ideology—neoliberalism, for example—the more we are exposed to it through our social circles and other channels, such as the media. Therefore, Glass and Blumberg’s participation in neoliberal discourse can be explained in part by the prevalence of neoliberalism itself.

### **Neoliberalism in public radio**

Critics on the left and some scholars have identified an increasingly neoliberal tone in public radio (Ames, 2013; Freund, 2015; Loviglio, 2011; Loviglio, 2013; McChesney, 1999; Russo, 2016). Some of these critiques note that the programming itself takes on certain

neoliberal characteristics, what one of these scholars calls “an orientation toward the world that retreats from an outward, public face toward an internally focused individual one” (Russo, 2016). In other cases, the neoliberal assault on public radio is seen as more systemic (McChesney, 1999). As many of these analyses note, a belief in market superiority conflicts with the original vision of public media articulated in documents such as the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967 and William Siemering’s (1970) *National Public Radio Purposes*, in which public radio and television are described as alternatives to and even safeguards against unchecked market forces.

Media and communications professor Jason Loviglio (2013) argues public radio is “a key cultural institution in the evolving structure of feeling of the neo-liberal era” (p. 25). The term “structure of feeling” is similar to Gramsci’s concept of hegemony. It comes from Raymond Williams (1961), who argued that different generations collectively organize, make sense of, and shape society in different ways. The culture produced during an era reflects its structure of feeling, and serves as documentary evidence for later generations. Loviglio (2013) uses it to explain how public radio in the U.S. has been informed by the rise of neoliberalism:

Straddling competing assumptions about public service, buffeted by partisan attacks, and chivvied by untenable funding formulas, public radio’s struggles exemplify many of the challenges that beset liberal institutions starting in the 1970s. At the same time, public radio networks have embraced commercial approaches to marketing and audience research, new developments in satellite and digital technology, and entrepreneurial funding formulas; such innovations, efficiencies, and privatization schemes, of course are exemplary of the neo-liberal “reforms” that mark this era (p. 30).

*This American Life* in particular encapsulates public radio’s neoliberal shift, argues Loviglio (2011; 2013). While *TAL* contains some “liberal sound effects (the liberated voices of men and women broadcasters)” that have defined public radio since the beginning, he contends the show actually reflects “the turn inward that has characterized the retreat from liberalism in the years that followed NPR’s debut” (Loviglio, 2011, pp. 283-284). In other words, he claims

that *TAL* primarily offers nostalgia for liberalism. But this nostalgia is filtered through the lens of individualistic personal narratives that are more characteristic of neoliberalism than the more public-facing, humanist ethos of liberalism. The economics and business podcast *Planet Money*—originally a co-production of NPR and *TAL* that was co-hosted by Alex Blumberg—further exemplifies the turn toward neoliberalism in public radio, says Loviglio (2011; 2013). The journalistic framing and reporting on *Planet Money*, he argues, “strikes just the right tone for unraveling the knotty confusion of the nation’s financial problems in a way that avoids any criticism of the tenets of capitalism” (Loviglio, 2013, p. 38).

When popular shows like *TAL* and *Planet Money* reflect the values of neoliberalism, it affects the entire public radio system. It also helps constitute the larger phenomenon of neoliberalism’s systematic assault on public media institutions. As media scholar Robert McChesney (1999) writes: “Even if public broadcasting is allotted a large budget and is seemingly immune from direct commercial influence, it is difficult to maintain standards of public service when every other aspect of the media and broader culture is subject to commercial principles” (p. 245). This pressure to conform to neoliberal values is present not just in the programming itself, but also in the public statements of individuals like Ira Glass and Alex Blumberg, who host popular shows and are well regarded in the fields of public radio and podcasting. In the next section I examine specific examples of such comments, and how they serve to undermine the fundamental values of public media, which Glass, and to some extent Blumberg, claim to support.

### **“I should get that freedom”: The neoliberal rhetoric of Ira Glass and Alex Blumberg**

The neoliberal discourse of Ira Glass and Alex Blumberg cannot be separated from the economic changes in podcasting in recent years. When Spotify purchased Gimlet for a reported

\$230 million in February 2019, it was seen as a sign of just how much the industry had grown in the five years since the company was founded (Kachka, 2019). As Blumberg (2018) has said, he was inspired to start Gimlet after spending 15 years in public radio, honing his craft under the tutelage of Glass. While Gimlet took *This American Life*'s penchant for personal narrative, documentary-style radio and built an entire commercial podcast network around it, *TAL* itself was becoming more of a commercial-oriented venture. In 2015, Glass took *TAL* and its various side projects private, starting his own public-benefit corporation and leaving Chicago Public Media, parent company of the show's longtime home station WBEZ (Feder, 2015). Although the show still airs on hundreds of public radio stations, *TAL*'s economic evolution over nearly a quarter century reflects the mounting privatization and commercialization of public radio. And both companies have contributed to the growing commodification of podcasts, which feeds into the neoliberal discourse of Blumberg and Glass. Below I identify two contexts in which Glass and Blumberg regularly traffic in neoliberal ideas: When they discuss their business decisions and when they talk about the rising popularity of podcasting. For each context I also highlight how the rhetoric used undermines public radio's core values.

The undermining nature of Glass and Blumberg's neoliberal discourse is perhaps most obvious when they discuss the motivations behind their respective decisions to form private companies. As Eleanor Patterson (2016) notes, *TAL* has transformed in recent years from public radio show to media franchise, "whose production and extension into film, television, live performances, and podcast spinoffs, like *Serial*, represent an economic hybridity of both public and commercial production cultures" (p. 451). Patterson traces the show's franchising to the late 1990s, when the *TAL* producers explored the idea of a spinoff TV series with Hollywood executives. The program signed agreements with Warner Brothers and later DreamWorks, giving

those studios first option to produce film or TV projects based on segments that originally aired on the radio show. A *TAL* television show did end up running for two seasons on Showtime beginning in 2007. More recently, *TAL* has continued to develop its franchise with commercial ventures such as *Sleepwalk with Me*, the 2012 film based on a monologue originally delivered on the radio show by comedian Mike Birbiglia (Patterson, 2016, p. 453). As this public-commercial hybrid has emerged, Patterson argues the show seeks to legitimize its increasingly commercial orientation in various ways, including by framing them as fundraising activities for public radio. For example, she points to Glass' characterization of licensing deals with studios as public radio revenue. This framing not only attempts to legitimize the commercial activity, but Patterson (2016) contends it "realigns *TAL*'s franchising agreements within the symbolic publicness of public radio, discursively attempting to reassert this is a media product uncompromised by the constraints of commercial sponsors or advertisers" (p. 455). Such discourse can be viewed as undermining, because while Glass claims to support the values of public media, the commercial imperative embedded in his statements actually serves to erode public radio's noncommercial values.

Glass used similar rhetoric to justify his decision to leave Chicago Public Media in 2015, explaining to journalist Robert Feder: "At this point I wanted the freedom to be able to make some things without WBEZ." While adding that he had nothing bad to say about the station, Glass argued: "I've been doing this for 20 years, and I just want to be in a position to decide what I want to do, and not have to clear it with the board or anybody else. I feel that I'm experienced enough that I should get that freedom" (Feder, 2015). The repeated use of the word "freedom" aligns with the neoliberal assumption that personal freedom is guaranteed by the free market. However, Glass largely overlooks the fact that he was able to grow *TAL* into a successful

radio show and podcast in large part thanks to the institutional support of Chicago Public Media/WBEZ and the wider public radio system.

Blumberg often uses neoliberal framing to discuss his decision to leave public radio and co-found Gimlet. For instance, in a 2015 interview with the website *NiemanLab* he argued that “just because you’re a for-profit company doesn’t mean that your ideals have changed, or that what you care about has changed. It just means that you’re a little bit more in control of the money that comes in to support your business” (Wang, 2015). In the next sentence, Blumberg adds that being the owner of a company sometimes involves leaving money on the table when a business decision doesn’t fit the company’s values. This rhetorical maneuver seeks to legitimize his decision to establish a for-profit podcasting company, and offers another example of the undermining nature of neoliberal discourse. By suggesting that a commercial company like Gimlet can uphold the same values as noncommercial public radio, Blumberg is undermining an essential justification of nonprofit public media. This is clear earlier in the interview, when he claims: “I think the organizational structure of the outfit that’s doing the journalism doesn’t really matter, that somebody’s always paying your bills” (Wang, 2015).

Conversations about the growing popularity of podcasts also show how Blumberg and Glass engage in neoliberal discourse. For example, in the *NiemanLab* interview, Blumberg says:

With *This American Life*, the digital audience kept growing; *Planet Money*, the digital audience kept growing. Year over year, double-digit growth. We thought they’d probably want other stuff to listen to. We could serve that audience with more, right away, and if we had a company, we could also look for other audiences for this stuff (Wang, 2015).

This statement highlights how Blumberg sees podcasts and their audiences as commodities, a view that aligns with the neoliberal tendency to assume all aspects of social and cultural life are open to commodification (Harvey, 2005). In fact, Blumberg has said that he created the first season of *StartUp*, in which he documented Gimlet’s launch, in part as a

marketing ploy: “Originally, I thought it was just going to be a way to hook people into the idea of the company and build up some kind of audience as I was starting this company from scratch” (Bloomgarden-Smoke, 2015). Because Gimlet’s podcasts are available for anyone to listen to for free, the audience is the primary commodity. Blumberg has asserted that the company’s podcasts are effective advertising vehicles, because “people trust us” (Dean, 2015). However, by discursively linking the trust listeners have in the hosts and journalists of Gimlet’s podcasts with the products and services the company is advertising, Blumberg risks eroding of the idea of trust in the media (Grandoni, 2015). Thus, such discourse serves as another example of undermining rhetoric.

Glass has occasionally warned of “a bubble” in podcast advertising, showing how he also views podcasts and podcast audiences as commodities. For instance, in a 2016 speech to the Public Radio Program Directors conference, Glass said: “The ad rates are still very high. There’s a bubble, and I feel like we should try to ride out that bubble as long as we can, because it’s going to go away” (Ragusea, 2016). Like his efforts to link *TAL*’s franchising agreements with public radio fundraising, Glass’ framing of podcast advertising as something stations “should try to ride out” and exploit for profit undermines the noncommercial ideals of public media.

### **Conclusion**

The increasing commercial orientation of *This American Life* and the neoliberal rhetoric used by Glass to legitimize it creates tensions within public radio. To cite one example, in 2016 *TAL* entered a partnership with Pandora that allowed episodes of the show to run on the streaming audio service. In response, WBAA, the public radio station in West Lafayette, Indiana, announced it would no longer air the program. In a statement, WBAA station manager Mike Savage—at the time a member of NPR’s board of directors—argued: “public radio leaders must

keep the balance between mission and bottom line forefront.” He also hinted at how Glass’ rhetoric undermines the core values of noncommercial public media: “For a program that got its start on public radio and had some of the best on-air fundraising messages for listeners where Ira Glass says he is volunteering his time because he believes in the mission of public broadcasting, the move by *This American Life* to Pandora is disingenuous at best” (Falk, 2016).

Although Savage eventually relented and kept *TAL* on the air at WBAA, Glass’ response to the situation is worthy of examination. In online posts and interviews, he pushed back on the notion that partnering with a commercial entity violates the mission of public media. In one particularly revealing comment to the website *Fast Company*, Glass claimed that creating shows to make money is part of public radio’s mission:

What we’re talking about is you’re starting a business within your business and that’s really hard. It’s hard to get the money to start. It’s hard to figure out a plan. It’s hard to figure out a product that people would want. Yeah. That’s really hard. Okay, well, not to be harsh about it, but that’s kind of their mission (Chafin, 2016).

This comment not only undermines the noncommercial and nonprofit, public service values of public media, it demonstrates the pervasiveness of the neoliberal ideology—a flawed ideology, according to Stanley (2015). In Glass’ mind he is supporting public radio by participating in commercial activities. Because neoliberalism is a powerful ideology, he’s not able to process the evidence that doing so actually constitutes an attack on public radio.

Because public media are affected by what happens in the broader media environment, the language Alex Blumberg employs to justify starting Gimlet also feeds into commercial pressures in public radio. For example, in his interview with *NiemanLab*, Blumberg argues that public radio is unable to focus on digital audiences because it “is still servicing primarily the radio audience,” and that “podcast audiences are growing and public radio audiences are shrinking” (Wang, 2015). Such statements simply aren’t supported by evidence. NPR, for

instance, regularly ranks at the top of the podcast industry rankings (Podtrac, 2019), and the terrestrial public radio audience has been remarkably stable in recent years, despite the rising popularity of podcasting (Pew Research Center, 2018). Regardless, arguments like this feed the narrative that commercial podcasting is displacing public radio, requiring public radio to adapt to the changing marketplace (Salmon, 2018).

Glass and Blumberg are just two examples used to highlight how neoliberal rhetoric informs the commercial tensions surrounding public radio and podcasting. I don't mean to suggest they represent all or even most of the views of individuals working in public radio. However, their stature as well-known hosts of popular shows gives their words additional weight as public radio organizations navigate the best way to manage the new technology. And those words often align with neoliberalism, an ideology that undermines some of the fundamental values of public media.

In the next chapter I expand the focus by looking at what local stations are doing with podcasting, and the ways local station employees are navigating some of the same terrain as national producers like Glass and Blumberg.

## CHAPTER 4

### “WE HAVE THESE GREAT PLATFORMS EMBEDDED IN OUR DNA”:

#### LOCAL PUBLIC RADIO AND PODCASTING

This chapter examines how local public radio stations are managing the growing demand for podcasts. As previous chapters have shown, public radio does not exist in a vacuum. It is influenced by political, economic, and social structures that shape the entire media sphere, public and commercial. Since the dawn of the digital age, neoliberal regulatory policy has fostered growing commodification in and commercialization of the media, including public radio.

The same forces affect podcasting. Since being invented nearly 20 years ago, podcasts have transformed from “folksy art form with deep roots in public radio” into a lucrative, multi-million dollar industry (Kachka, 2019). Some have suggested the rise of commercial podcasting represents an existential threat to public radio (Neyfahk, 2016; Salmon, 2018). Others have noted opportunities for public radio to profit from podcasting (Bernfeld, 2016; Greenberg, 2015). However, by focusing on economic issues, these analyses feed into the commercial tensions surrounding podcasting in public radio.

Through in-depth interviews with individuals who work in public radio, this chapter seeks to illuminate some additional questions related to how local stations are adapting to the rising popularity of podcasting. For example, despite commercial pressures, public radio retains a strong commitment to public service (Mitchell, 2002; Kramer, 2016). This chapter tries to shed light on how these values carry over into podcasting, specifically through the concept of localism (Ali, 2017; Napoli, 2001; Stavitsky, 1994). In addition, it investigates how stations are using podcasts to employ new audience engagement strategies (Nelson, 2018), to diversify their audiences (Powell, 2015), and to collaborate (Alcorn, 2017; Martínez de la Serna, 2018;

Stonbely, 2017). This chapter's overarching goal is to clarify one of the central research questions of this thesis: In what ways are public radio organizations managing the disruptions and opportunities presented by podcasting?

### **Methodology**

Data for this chapter came from semi-structured, qualitative interviews of 10 individuals with experience working in public radio. To obtain a purposeful sample reflective of the variety of organizational structures and market sizes within public radio, participants were recruited via email between December 2018 and March 2019. The participant with the longest tenure in public radio had 31 years in the field, while two participants reported only a year. Three of the participants worked for organizations located in top 10 markets (KQED – San Francisco; Georgia Public Broadcasting – Atlanta; WBUR – Boston). Two others were in top 15 markets (KNKX – Seattle-Tacoma; Michigan Radio – Detroit). Three participants worked for statewide networks in largely rural states (Maine Public Radio; Vermont Public Radio; Alaska Public Media). One worked for a station located in a small college town located near Dayton, Ohio (WYSO – Yellow Springs). The final participant worked at a Corporation for Public Broadcasting-funded regional journalism collaborative that's a partnership between six different public media organizations (New England News Collaborative, based in Harford, CT). Participants ranged in age from 63 to 26 years old; six out of the 10 were female; the majority identified as white, one as African American, and one as Japanese American.

Most of the interviews were conducted over the phone, although one was conducted at the office of the interviewee. Following Institutional Review Board procedures (Appendix A), participants were informed that their comments would not be anonymous, and verbal consent was obtained before each interview started. The interviewer asked participants to reflect on their

personal experiences and the experiences of their stations when it came to the adoption of podcasting. An interview guide was employed (Appendix B), however the semi-structured nature of the conversations allowed the interviewer and participants to explore various topics in more depth when warranted. Sample questions included: Thinking about your station or other stations where you have worked, what factors did the staff consider before starting any podcasts? Has podcasting changed how you think about your station's audience? As podcasting becomes increasingly popular with both noncommercial and commercial media, are you concerned about pressure to compete with for-profit media outlets? How do you think public radio should seek to insulate itself from market pressures when it comes to podcasting (if at all)? The interviews lasted about an hour, were audio recorded, and then transcribed by a transcription service that the author checked for accuracy.

Data were evaluated using thematic analysis, an inductive method used frequently by qualitative researchers to identify themes in interviews and sets of interviews, and to avoid situations where such data is used to confirm pre-existing assumptions (Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2012). The process used to analyze the interviews included:

- 1) Creating preliminary observations and codes while reviewing the interview audio and transcripts
- 2) Producing a written account of each interview, and seeking emerging themes and subthemes, as well as connections between interviews
- 3) Identifying emerging themes
- 4) Establishing and describing final themes

Five main themes and numerous subthemes were identified based on the interview data.

## **Findings**

### **Theme #1: Overlap and differences between radio and podcasting**

As the literature on podcasting suggests, the new medium shares many qualities with radio, since they are both forms of audio media. But while there is some debate, scholars and

industry insiders increasingly consider podcasts to be a different medium altogether (Berry, 2006; Berry, 2016; Bottomley, 2015; Menduni, 2007). Participants in this study talked about podcasting as an extension of and complement to their stations' traditional broadcasting services.

For many public radio organizations there's significant overlap in terms of what is considered a podcast and what is a radio program. All interviewees said their stations turn broadcast-first shows into podcasts, and that podcast-first content aired on the radio. Mark Simpson, director of news and public affairs at Maine Public, points out that many public media organizations are dual licensees, meaning they operate both radio and television stations. Thus, they're familiar with working in different media spaces. "Good content is good content. Why restrict the ways people can access it? We have these great platforms embedded in our DNA, so we should own that and take advantage of it," Simpson says (personal interview, 2019). Georgia Public Broadcasting is an example of a dual-licensee, where podcasts and traditional broadcast media often share content. Director of podcasting Sean Powers says podcast episodes or segments of episodes will air on GPB's daily talk show, *On Second Thought*: "It's a way to help feed their need for content and for us to cross-promote" (personal interview, 2019). In addition, Powers says one podcast, *Football Fridays in Georgia*, is a spinoff of a GPB TV show. These examples show some of the continuities between broadcasting and podcasting. Stations are able to create content in one medium and utilize it in another.

But some aspects of podcasting distinguish the medium from radio or television. Participants generally described podcasts as a space to experiment with different sonic and narrative structures not heard on the radio, especially straight radio news stories. For example, several cited the fact that podcasts are able to run longer than radio stories and include elements such as music beds. Powers says he wants GPB's podcasts to sound less "radio-y," moving away

from tightly scripted, 4-5 minute news features toward more of a longform style with “room to breathe.” He points to *The Bitter Southerner* podcast produced by GPB in collaboration with an online lifestyle magazine of the same name: “The host does these longer monologues, it’s more opinionated at times” (Powers, personal interview, 2019). Other participants described using different storytelling techniques. For instance, Devin Katayama, host of *The Bay*, a three-times-a-week news podcast from KQED in San Francisco, says he’ll often break the fourth wall when talking to the audience: “We will interview a reporter and maybe we’ll do a step aside, where I kind of come out of the interview and need to explain something” (personal interview, 2019). Katayama says similar structures could be employed on the radio, but it’s more ingrained in the culture of podcasting. John Dankosky, executive editor of the regional journalism cooperative New England News Collaborative, says there’s a tension in public radio newsrooms, “between people who think that good podcasts and good broadcasts basically have the same thing going for them, and people who think good broadcasting and good podcasting are completely separate things that are made in completely different ways” (personal interview, 2019). Dankosky says he’s constantly trying to navigate that tension himself.

Even as the two mediums grow more distinct, it seems like there will continue to be overlap. For example, some participants have noticed the podcast style making its way into their stations’ terrestrial radio content. Angela Evancie, managing editor for podcasts at Vermont Public Radio, hosts a monthly podcast called *Brave Little State*. When she’s working on an episode, Evancie will co-report it with a rotation of journalists from VPR’s newsroom:

It exposes reporters to a very intensive writing and editing process, as well as a lot of design thinking around how we’re structuring episodes and how we’re making choices about sources and where we’re going to report. And I can hear some of the *Brave Little State* style making its way into newscast stories for sure (Evancie, personal interview, 2019).

*Brave Little State* is also an example of how podcasting is being used by some public radio stations as a space to experiment with different ways of gathering information. VPR uses Hearken's tools to collect audience questions and have the public vote on which ones the podcast should try to answer each month. Hearken describes itself as an audience engagement company that helps news organizations "re-envision the public not as consumers, but as partners who have valuable insights to contribute to their work" (Hearken, 2019, n.p.). Although this particular concept of audience engagement is relatively new and its effectiveness is under-theorized (Nelson, 2018), Evancie says it has worked well for VPR: "Our motto at *Brave Little State* is that we want to make our journalism more inclusive, more transparent, and more fun. Using the Hearken model, we're able to engage people with our journalism in a way that we don't always with our sort of day-to-day news stories" (personal interview, 2019). With Hearken, she says VPR's audience are viewed as partners in the reporting process—sometimes literally, as the people who pose the questions featured on *Brave Little State* often become characters in episodes of the podcast.

## **Theme #2: Podcasting and the economics of public radio**

The growing commercial appeal of podcasting—evidenced by the recent flurry of business activity surrounding the medium (Kachka, 2019)—shows that many in the media see on-demand audio as a potential moneymaker. As discussed in chapter 3, public radio shows like *This American Life* have embraced the free market as podcasting has grown in popularity. However, most of the public radio employees interviewed for this chapter said podcasting has not resulted in increased revenue for their stations and that their organizations are still figuring out what business models will work in the digital space. Those stations that are finding success

monetizing podcasts are doing it in ways that mirror traditional public media revenue models, through program sponsorships and support from listeners.

Podcasting is so new for some stations that they haven't given much thought yet to how it will generate revenue. At GPB, where Powers became director of podcasting in mid-2018, he says managers told him not to worry about making money initially. After a few years, he thinks the bottom line will be to bring in enough revenue from sponsorships and other sources so the organization's podcasts at least break even. But for now, the priority is more on building an audience for GPB's podcasts (Powers, personal interview, 2019). Similarly, KQED's Katayama says the station is still trying to figure out the revenue model that will work best to support *The Bay* long-term. While the show has some sponsors, he says it's "not completely underwritten, paid for by the underwriters" (personal interview, 2019). Some participants said their stations or organizations simply don't have the staff or sales experience to sell podcasts to potential underwriters. Juliet Fromholt is programming coordinator, webmaster, deputy operations director, and host of two radio shows at WYSO in Yellow Springs, Ohio: "I'll never say never—there will probably come a time when that will make sense for us," Fromholt says of putting more effort into generating revenue from podcasts. But for now she says the best they've been able to do is get grants or sponsorships to cover part of the cost of podcasting (Fromholt, personal interview, 2019).

Several interviewees mentioned grant money, whether from foundations, nonprofit organizations, or the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, as a source of support for podcasting. While these one-time funds were helpful in terms of starting podcasts or doing one-off projects, participants cautioned that they were not a sustainable source of long-term funding. Annie Feidt, a senior editor at Alaska Public Media, says the organization started the podcast *Midnight Oil* in

2017, after receiving a large grant from the CPB for a statewide journalism project looking at energy and environmental issues. “We had more reporting power and time than we ever had, so we were able to do these long, intricate, sound rich, in-depth stories. But we’re not looking at that model anymore” Feidt says. In the future, unless they figure out a more stable source of funding, she says Alaska Public Media’s podcasts are likely to be “quick turn, not as resource intensive” (personal interview, 2019). Imani Mixon, a freelance writer and independent producer from Detroit, had a similar experience at Michigan Radio. The station received a grant from the Knight Foundation for a yearlong community storytelling podcast in Detroit’s MorningSide neighborhood, called *MorningSide 48224*. When the grant funding ended after a year, the podcast ended with it. Mixon says: “A lot of people are excited about podcasting and want to jump into it, but it’s important to check to see if the framework is even there” to support projects over the long term (personal interview, 2019). Even when grants are used for short-term projects, it can have ripple effects through the entire organization. For example, Erin Hennessey—news director at KNKX in Tacoma, Washington—says her station received a grant to produce a six-part podcast called *Forgotten Prison*, about an Alcatraz-like prison in Puget Sound. Two producers at the station spent a year on the project. Hennessey says: “You can really feel that in the newsroom. They cut back on their daily reporting, and then during the last part of it—probably the last six weeks—we brought in freelancers to backfill daily news while they could just work full-steam ahead on the podcast” (personal interview, 2019).

Some public radio organizations face challenges in terms of audience and infrastructure when it comes to monetizing podcasts. At Maine Public, for example, Simpson says the staff wrestles with the fact that the state’s population is the oldest in the country (McGuire, 2018), while the audience for podcasts skews younger (Nielsen, 2019). Maine also has significant

disparities in broadband connectivity between urban and rural parts of the state (Milliken, 2018), meaning parts of Maine Public's core audience might have trouble accessing podcasts. When he sees other public radio stations doing exciting things with podcasting and other digital media, Simpson says, "It looks great, except our audience isn't there" (personal interview, 2019). Vermont Public Radio confronts similar issues, Evancie says, but has found ways to adapt. Like Maine, Vermont has a large rural population and deploying broadband in the state is complicated (Dillon, 2019). With a new platform like podcasting, Evancie says education is an important part of VPR's strategy. In 2018, the organization ran a campaign to inform audiences about what podcasts are and where to find them. On its website, VPR posted "A Beginner's Guide to Podcasts" that features graphics answering some of those questions and others, like suggestions for when to listen to podcasts and how to use specific podcast apps (Evancie & Ste. Marie, 2018). In addition, VPR started using a new podcast publishing platform in 2018 that allows dynamic insertion of sponsor messages. It lets the station update the messages on a weekly or monthly basis, so if someone discovers one of their podcasts and goes back to listen to old episodes, they aren't hearing old underwriting spots. "It allows us to monetize that catalog in a way that we couldn't if we just sold per episode" (Evancie, personal interview, 2019).

In addition to underwriting, some public radio organizations are turning to another traditional public media revenue model when it comes to podcasts: The pledge drive. Joan Dimicco is executive director of Public Radio Business Laboratory, which is housed at WBUR in Boston and launched in 2015 with Knight Foundation funding in order to "invest in innovation and experimentation to identify new revenue channels to sustain public radio into the future" (Public Radio Business Laboratory, 2019). She points to WNYC Studios, the podcasting arm of public radio station WNYC in New York City: "They're getting \$3 million a year in individual

donations to their podcasts” (personal interview, 2019). WNYC solicits donations for podcasts the same way it asks radio listeners to contribute to its on-air product: Four times a year, podcast hosts will ask their audiences for monetary support. The station also does an email campaign “explaining the value of supporting WNYC podcasts” (Dimicco, personal interview, 2019). It’s reasonable to question whether the pledge drive model can be a sustainable revenue source for public radio organizations that don’t have as many listeners as WNYC Studios, which ranks among the top 10 podcast producers in terms of audience size and has one of the most listened to podcasts in *Radiolab* (Podtrac, 2019). But at least one smaller public radio station has had success with the strategy. New Hampshire Public Radio received 1,800 donations totaling more than \$38,000 after a direct appeal to listeners of its *Bear Brook* podcast. It should be noted that *Bear Brook* was downloaded more than 4.5 million times in its first six months—a large number for a podcast produced by a local station of NHPR’s size. As podcast industry newsletter *Hot Pod* put it, “The project had local flavor; the case looked into a series of unidentified bodies found years earlier in the eponymous state park. But the podcast had broad potential appeal: *Bear Brook*, after all, had all the trappings of the true crime genre,” which has been popular with podcast listeners at least since *Serial* (Quah, 2019).

It’s hard to extrapolate from a few isolated examples whether pledge drives can be a sustainable source of funding for most public radio stations’ podcasts. The same goes for the other funding sources discussed by participants in this research. What these interviews suggest is that many stations are still trying to figure out how to make enough money via podcasting to meet the growing demand from listeners. In the meantime, they’re turning to tried and true methods that have been part of public media funding models for years.

### **Theme #3: Intentionality in podcast production**

An idea that resonated in many of the interviews was the importance of being deliberate when it comes to planning and executing podcasts. There's increasing awareness that issues such as audience, type of show, scheduling, workflow, job responsibilities, and time commitment need to be discussed before launching a podcast, and that as organizations change over time some of these conversations will need to be revisited. Public radio stations also are trying to be more deliberate by highlighting diverse voices—both in terms of the individuals who host podcasts and the sources that appear in them—and by seeking new audiences that haven't traditionally listened to public radio. These trends suggest public radio stations are being more intentional about the types of podcasts they produce.

In the past, WYSO's Juliet Fromholt says there was a feeling in public radio that if one station had a successful podcast, everyone should be doing something similar. Now, she says organizations are "figuring out what makes sense for their station and their team" (Fromholt, personal interview, 2019). More stations also are recognizing that podcasts don't have to be produced on a regular schedule, like a radio talk show or newscast: "You can do a season and then take a six-month to a year break and do another season. You can do a bimonthly thing. You can do a limited series. You can do a documentary series" (Fromholt, personal interview, 2019). Erin Hennessey with KNKX says because podcasts are more of a storytelling medium as opposed to straight news, it's important to carefully plan episodes and shows: "We create a storyboard. There are usually four parts to a 30-minute piece, and we write the objective for each part. Just the dynamics of the length changes the way you do the storytelling" (personal interview, 2019). Vermont Public Radio's Angela Evancie says podcasting is a space that's open to adaptation and experimentation: "One thing I always say here is that podcasting isn't a genre—in the same way

that books aren't a genre, movies aren't a genre. They're a type of media, and then within that you can have a whole range of styles and priorities" (personal interview, 2019). At Maine Public, Simpson says the staff is starting to discuss ways to be more deliberate across all content. He says the newsroom is looking at developing an intentional coverage plan to guide decisions about which stories and topics to report on. Regarding podcasting he says: "I think the conversation has to start with, what kind of podcast do we want this to be? Who's the audience? Why are we doing this? And I think at the manager's level, a big conversation too is, you know, is this thing going to make money for us?" (Simpson, personal interview, 2019). Moving forward, as podcasting becomes a way more people consume audio news, Simpson says it will become more important to have these kinds of discussions: "We can't just ignore it, because it's no longer just a cool new thing that people are doing. It's in the environment. It's in the ethos" (personal interview, 2019).

The trend toward public radio organizations being more thoughtful about podcasts could be viewed as further evidence that radio and podcasting are becoming distinct mediums. But it also illustrates the ways they continue to overlap. VPR's Evancie says there's an inevitable tension "within an organization that is trying to balance the broadcast work with the rising priority of podcasting," which is why it's important to think about how to manage staff time and workflow. Furthermore, she says it's important to think about each platform on which an organization offers content, and "be intentional about what your primary audience is, and where you want to meet them, and how you want to serve them" (Evancie, personal interview, 2019). Similarly, Joan Dimicco of the Public Radio Business Laboratory says stations should think strategically about how podcasts are different from radio: "Rather than just putting it up there and seeing what happens, position it in the best way so you can have a strategy for that platform"

(personal interview, 2019). For instance, Dimicco says with an online medium like podcasting, stations should provide a rich description of each episode on the web and on podcast hosting platforms, so the podcasts show up better in search and can be discovered by new audiences. New England News Collaborative's John Dankosky says the station where he is based—WNPR in Hartford, Connecticut—has started thinking about podcasting as they plan radio programs, knowing they are likely to have a second life in podcast form. He says WNPR will sometimes repost old talk show episodes or segments as podcasts, “if they’re relevant, if they hold up,” or if the issues they cover suddenly become pertinent to the public again (Dankosky, personal interview, 2019). For Alaska Public Media's Annie Feidt, being more intentional about podcasting means thinking about what the organization brings to the table in terms of radio production and journalism, and how to translate that to the new medium. She says: “There’s so much that we can’t fit into the daily news, and we have so much expertise in these areas. How do we take advantage of that?” (personal interview, 2019). She says the main product remains the day-to-day reporting that goes primarily into the evening newscast and the Alaska Public Media website, while podcasting serves as a kind of value-add for certain topics about which the organization is well positioned to provide additional content.

Some participants said their stations are using podcasting to more intentionally highlight voices from different race, gender, and social backgrounds, as well as to target listeners who don't fit the typical public radio audience profile. This aligns with an increasing awareness of diversity issues in public media, including the need to better reflect diverse communities and to do a better job retaining diverse talent (Powell, 2015; Ramsammy, 2016; Woods, 2016). Sean Powers of Georgia Public Broadcasting says he wants GPB's podcasts to feature “a diverse crop of hosts, and topics, and subject matter that is representative of the entire state of Georgia”

(personal interview, 2019). *The Credits*, a show about workers in the state's film industry and one of the first podcasts Powers launched at GPB, is hosted by an African American woman, Kalena Boller. The host of *The Bitter Southerner* podcast, co-produced by GPB and an online lifestyle magazine in Atlanta, is a white man. But Powers says, "We are very strategic about trying to find diverse guests" (personal interview, 2019). Devin Katayama, host of KQED's *The Bay*, notes that he and the show's two producers all are people of color. When they started the podcast, he says managers told them, "You guys make a show that you—younger people, people of color—would want to listen to" (personal interview, 2019). Katayama says based on traffic to *The Bay*'s website, its audience is younger and more diverse than, for example, KQED's terrestrial radio audience. Juliet Fromholt says WYSO is planning a community storytelling podcast with residents in a historically black part of Dayton, Ohio, in the station's listening area. "Our hope is that we will be able to launch a podcast out of this storytelling project that will be launched by us and housed by us, but essentially run by community members" (Fromholt, personal interview, 2019). Imani Mixon, who ran Michigan Radio's community storytelling podcast *MorningSide 48224*, says the project did provide a platform to showcase a predominantly African American community, "whose voices we don't necessarily hear in public media." But she cautions that public radio stations shouldn't view podcasting as a quick fix for lack of diversity: "If you want to talk about a neighborhood, maybe spend more time there or report on it for years at a time, and then take it to the next level when you've already got the familiarity" (Mixon, personal interview, 2019).

Consumer research shows that the audience for podcasts closely mirrors the population of the U.S. as a whole, and that over time the medium's audiences have been getting more diverse (Webster, 2018). This shows there's an opportunity in podcasting for public radio stations to

reach new audiences. Being intentional about reaching those audiences is one take away from the interviewees in this chapter. However, intentionality also involves issues such as workflow planning, time commitment, and more. For multi-platform media outlets, such as dual-license public media stations, these are not new conversations. But the new technology is adding a new dynamic that must be taken into account.

#### **Theme #4: Podcasting and collaboration in public radio**

In recent years, scholars and media insiders have noted an increasing trend toward collaboration in journalism and other aspects of the media industry (Alcorn, 2017; Martínez de la Serna, 2018; Stonbely, 2017). According to the Center for Cooperative Media, this growing interest has coincided with a period in which the media outlets have faced “resource scarcity, uncertainty, and rapid technological development,” and collaborative approaches are seen as “a way to share data and stretch limited resources, while also providing what are often more comprehensive stories to bigger audiences” (Stonbely, 2017, p. 9). Collaboration is not a new concept in public media—it’s a tradition that dates back at least to the bicycling of tapes between noncommercial stations in the days before NPR (Engelman, 1996). Participants interviewed for this chapter identified two kinds of collaboration associated with podcasting: internal public media collaboration and collaboration with outside partners, such as other news organizations and nonprofits.

John Dankosky of the CPB-funded New England News Collaborative says podcasting contributes to the regional journalism cooperative in a couple ways. First, he says the eight public media organizations that are part of the collaborative share content, including podcasts. For example, Dankosky is host and producer of the weekly radio show and podcast *NEXT*, which has a regional news focus. “I will feature segments from these local podcasts on *NEXT* to get

them to a wider audience,” he says (Dankosky, personal interview, 2019). Second, Dankosky says podcasting has helped reporters at New England News Collaborative member organizations develop new storytelling skills. “Every single person at New Hampshire Public Radio is a good talker. If you ask them to talk about their beat and they come on the radio to talk, they all have a podcast-y banter, you know, they’re very good at talking in a way that is engaging, talking directly to listeners” (Dankosky, personal interview, 2019). Telling engaging stories—whether on the radio, on podcasts, or on the web—is central to the regional group’s mission. Sometimes collaboration between stations is less formal than the regional journalism organizations funded by the CPB. For example, Georgia Public Broadcasting’s Sean Powers reached out to other public radio stations when he first started as director of podcasting to ask questions about workflow, legal contracts, music licensing, and more. Thus, behind the scenes sharing of information is taking place as organizations develop podcasting strategies. When she was producing the Michigan Radio podcast *MorningSide 48224*, freelance journalist Imani Mixon connected with the producers of *Out of the Blocks*, a similar community storytelling podcast produced at WYPR in Baltimore: “They came [to Detroit] for a whole week and probably did about 10 or more interviews, and then those ended up being two different episodes of their podcast that we were also able to share for *MorningSide 48224*” (Mixon, personal interview, 2019). Mixon says the biggest benefit to her from the collaboration, being relatively new to the world of audio journalism, was seeing how the *Out of the Blocks* team put the show together.

Other participants discussed cooperating with entities outside the public media system. One example I’ve already discussed is Georgia Public Broadcasting’s *The Bitter Southerner* podcast. Powers says GPB brings its audio production expertise to the relationship, while *The Bitter Southerner* magazine brings its “massive online following and social media presence”

(personal interview, 2019). Devin Katayama of KQED's *The Bay* says the show frequently features interviews with journalists from local newspapers and other media outlets in the San Francisco Bay Area: "We've talked to (San Francisco) *Chronicle* reporters, we've talked to reporters at *Wired*, we've talked to reporters at the *East Bay Times*, Bay Area News Group" (personal interview, 2019). He says if one of these outlets has the story of the day for the region, it's mutually beneficial for them and KQED to share it with the podcast's listeners. The station has even trained print reporters on how to use their smartphones to collect audio for *The Bay*. Katayama says: "We have developed pretty good partnerships with those reporters to the point where occasionally they'll pitch us stories" (personal interview, 2019). The KNKX podcast *Forgotten Prison* coincided with a Washington State History Museum exhibit. News director Erin Hennessey says in that case the collaboration made sense. But she says working with an external partner has to be a good fit for both parties: "There are a lot of partnerships that look good, but don't make sense. Just making sure you have editorial independence when you do a partnership and mapping out really carefully who does what" (Hennessey, personal interview, 2019).

These interviews shed light on how podcasts are being used to continue the culture of collaboration that has long been a part of public radio (Engelman, 1996). Stations are sharing content and working collaboratively to improve their services—both traditional radio and digital products like podcasts. Meanwhile, some stations are taking advantage of the new technology to forge relationships with external partners, such as non-public radio news outlets, who can help them expand their audience and provide more information to listeners. Podcasts and other digital media have the ability to make these kinds of collaborations easier than in the past (Stonbely, 2017, p. 9).

## **Theme #5: The concept of localism in podcasting**

The idea of localism in the media has been widely debated over the years. But in general, scholars agree there are two ways it has been conceived—a spatial conception, bounded by a particular geographic area, and a social conception, defined by shared lifestyles, beliefs, and issues of common concern (Ali, 2017; Napoli, 2001; Stavitsky, 1994). As Christopher Ali (2017) argues, these are not mutually exclusive definitions, but rather helpful guideposts for media regulators and those working in media industries. Most participants in this research discussed their audience in terms of the spatial definition of localism, as those who live within a particular city, state, or region. However, podcasting’s ability to reach audiences beyond the confines of a terrestrial radio signal complicates this conception, and raises the question of how the medium can be used to serve local audiences in both a social and spatial sense.

As the medium of podcasting becomes more of a commercial concern, dominated by national and international companies, several interviewees said focusing on listeners within a particular geographic area could be to public radio’s advantage. WYSO’s Juliet Fromholt, for example, says public radio can distinguish itself by being more responsive to local listeners: “Even with our podcasts, I’m always going to be thinking about my local folks first” (Fromholt, personal interview, 2019). Since 2011, WYSO has offered a Community Voices program that trains volunteers to produce radio stories and podcasts. Besides being a good way to expose the station’s audience to the new medium, she says some of the individuals who have taken the program’s Podcasting 101 class have gone on to produce their own podcasts, either for the station or on their own. Fromholt says she knows not every public radio station is comfortable viewing their audience as potential media makers, but she’d like to see “more stations doing trainings and bringing people in and doing community engagement with podcasting the way

we're doing it" (personal interview, 2019). KNKX news director Erin Hennessey says because the station is located in Washington state and the Pacific Northwest, "that's what we reflect back, that's what we dig into." However, she says that's not a limiting factor in terms of the audience for the station's podcasts: "If people anywhere in the world want to go in their minds to western Washington and get a sense of place and the people, that's what our station is. And if people want to access that any place in the world, we welcome that" (Hennessey, personal interview, 2019).

KQED's Katayama says *The Bay* was conceived from the beginning as a podcast intended primarily for listeners in a specific geographic area. Like many parts of the country, Katayama says the Bay Area has experienced significant loss of local news coverage in recent years due to consolidation and layoffs in the newspaper industry. He argues that makes it even more important for the podcast to serve local listeners: "I'm of the mind that the stuff happening in city council meetings and in your neighborhood impacts your life a lot—probably a lot more than national. It's clear that a lot of the changes that are happening in our daily lives are happening at the local level" (Katayama, personal interview, 2019). Echoing these comments, Alaska Public Media's Annie Feidt says as podcasting grows into a more commercialized medium, public radio can stay relevant by continuing, "to do a really good job serving the local audience." At the same time, she recognizes there's "a little bit of a competing pressure when you're trying to do podcasts that do well locally and nationally as well" (personal interview, 2019). Feidt says there is a demand for Alaska stories outside of the state, and Alaska Public Media has worked with NPR to promote them on the network's streaming audio app, NPR One.

There are opportunities for local stories to attract broader audiences when they start from a social conception of localism tied to issues of concern across geographic lines. One example

discussed by Vermont Public Radio's Angela Evancie was VPR's podcast *Jolted*, about an averted school shooting in the state in early 2018. Months after the incident, the VPR newsroom decided to revisit it in a five-part investigative series that would be offered as a podcast-first product, which also got a heavy treatment for radio. "We very intentionally conceived of it, reported it, wrote it to serve our Vermont audience," Evancie says. "This was a big story for our state. But we also wanted anyone to be able to find their way into the story, because this conversation about gun rights and school shootings is really urgent for so many people in our country right now" (personal interview, 2019). She says the podcast exceeded expectations with listeners outside Vermont, even though the story was about a local event.

The tension between the two conceptions of localism—spatial and social—is not new in public radio. Since the establishment of NPR in the early 1970s, local stations began to adopt more of a social conception of localism as programming increasingly came from syndicated sources. As Alan Stavitsky (1994) argued a quarter century ago, "The popularity and high production values of NPR and other national programming provide a disincentive for local station managers to emphasize local production. Instead, national program suppliers provide "cut-ins" to allow stations an opportunity to establish a local presence" (n.p.). Podcasting is unlikely to resolve the tension between the two concepts of localism. As the interviews in this chapter show, public radio stations are thinking about localism in both senses of the term when it comes to podcasts. Some stations are deliberately trying to serve local communities in the spatial sense. Others are using a social conception to flip the traditional network-dominated model of broadcasting on its head, going directly to national audiences. Because the business of podcasting is changing so rapidly, it remains to be seen whether this will continue in the future.

If it does, it could have a significant impact on how public radio stations conceive of their audience.

### **Discussion**

The themes identified in this chapter illuminate how public radio stations are managing the integration of podcasts into the content they produce. As other studies have shown, podcasting and radio remain closely connected, yet are increasingly developing into distinct mediums (Berry, 2006; Berry, 2016; Bottomley, 2015; Menduni, 2007). Participants in this research described some of the ways this is happening in public radio. For example, stations are using podcasts to experiment with different narrative styles and audience engagement techniques, as well as to target listeners who traditionally have not been part of public radio's audience. In other ways, podcasting is more of an evolution in public radio. For instance, the revenue model is not that different from traditional public media income sources. Stations still rely on listener donations, sponsorships, and grants to pay for podcasts. Furthermore, as indicated by the discussion of localism, public service remains a central concern of public radio stations when it comes to podcasting. Even those stations finding a wider audience through podcasts are doing so in a way that continues to serve their geographically local communities.

Given the limited, purposive sample of this research, it may be difficult to generalize the results to all public radio stations. Further investigation of how public radio stations are utilizing podcasts is warranted. Future studies could look at how public media journalists and organizations conceive of all their content platforms—radio, television, websites, podcasts, social media, and more. In addition, this chapter did not attempt to evaluate the content of public radio podcasts. Additional research could compare how producers describe their strategic goals when it comes to podcasting with the actual content itself.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

In March 2016, a short, seemingly innocuous post appeared on the blog of NPR standards and practices editor Mark Memmott. Under the headline “Guidance On Podcast ‘Back Announces,’” Memmott shared a directive from Chris Turpin, NPR’s vice president for news operations and programming. It said the network’s on-air hosts should avoid promoting podcasts—even NPR’s own podcasts—on the radio. “We won’t tell people to actively download a podcast or where to find them,” said Turpin, who added it was fine to refer to a podcast by name “but not in a way that explicitly endorses it.” In addition, the memo said that for the time being hosts should refrain from promoting the network’s NPR One streaming audio app (Memmott, 2016).

The blog post sparked a full-throated debate among public radio insiders on social media. Former public radio reporter Adam Ragusea (2016b) tweeted of Turpin’s directive: “It’s a logical and, I’d argue, appropriate policy. But it also serves as an emblem of why NPR is doomed long term.” NPR ombudsman Elizabeth Jensen (2016) characterized that reaction as hyperbolic. But she acknowledged that the controversy stemmed from the tension between those in public radio who want to move rapidly into an all-digital future and others who argue that terrestrial radio is still where member stations raise the bulk of their revenue through listener donations and underwriting. On her blog, Jensen (2016) wrote: “NPR and the member stations must confront the challenges inherent in the transition head-on or risk going the way of newspapers.” One of the more critical reactions to the directive came from former *Planet Money* co-host Adam Davidson, who argued that NPR management was blowing its opportunity to be the dominant player in podcasting, effectively conceding the future of audio media to commercial companies.

Writing on the website Medium, Davidson (2016) said: “I think there’s this giant huge prize just sitting there, waiting to be grabbed up. NPR, itself, can make a lot more money, support its mission in better ways, create a more exciting place to work, create more amazing audio; so can most of the member stations.” Soon, other news outlets took notice of the dispute playing out on social media, with *NiemanLab*’s Joshua Benton (2016) suggesting the controversy was perhaps overblown: “The number of people who want to listen to podcasts but won’t figure out how to download one without Steve Inskeep walking them through the process is tiny.”

Like the anecdote at the beginning of this thesis—*This American Life*’s Ira Glass saying, “Public radio is ready for capitalism” (Greiff, 2015)—the debate over whether NPR hosts should talk about podcasts on the air epitomized larger conversations about the future of public radio in an increasingly digital media world. Podcasting is disruptive to traditional broadcast outlets like public radio, because listeners are no longer required to consume content as it airs. The growth in on-demand listening puts pressure on stations to reevaluate established practices and operating assumptions. At the same time, podcasting is an opportunity for stations to find new audiences, to diversify, and to experiment with different narrative and production styles.

This thesis sought to clarify two interconnected questions raised by the public discourse surrounding podcasting in public radio: How did commercial pressures become embedded in the debate over public radio stations producing podcasts? And, how are stations managing the disruptions and opportunities presented by podcasting?

With regard to the first question, the political-economic systems that govern the media, as well as powerful ideologies like neoliberalism, structure how public radio organizations adopt new media technologies such as podcasting. As other scholars have noted, the commercialism of the entire media system has an impact on public radio (Engelman, 1996; McCauley, 2005;

McChesney, 1999; McCourt, 1999; Mitchell, 2005). There is no firewall between public and commercial media to insulate noncommercial outlets from the market (Mosco, 2009). This thesis contributes to this line of research by showing how the communications policy proposals put forth and enacted at the dawn of the digital era affected public radio. It's well documented that the Telecommunications Act of 1996 led to massive consolidation and a decline in localism in commercial radio (Chambers, 2001; Chambers, 2011; DiCola & Thomson, 2002; Drushel, 1998; Hilliard & Keith, 2005; Saffran, 2011). Chapter 2 shows how the Act—as well as efforts to defund the Corporation for Public Broadcasting—intensified the commercialization and privatization of public radio over the past quarter century. Furthermore, the neoliberal ideology that promotes these market-oriented policies is so prevalent in our culture that even well known public radio figures like Ira Glass and Alex Blumberg engage in its rhetoric. In doing so, they undermine the noncommercial values of public radio and contribute to the commercial tensions surrounding public radio and podcasting.

In terms of disruptions and opportunities, the interviews with public radio employees included in this thesis suggest that as podcasting and radio develop into distinct mediums, stations are being more deliberate about the types of podcasts they produce. Figuring out what kinds of podcasts make sense for their organization is one way that participants said they are trying to manage the disruptive aspect of podcasting. One notable finding from the interviews is that traditional public media funding models—program sponsorships, individual donations, and grants—endure in podcasting. This means the new medium is unlikely to resolve the commercial tensions already present in public radio. However, participants also described using the platform to target new listeners, highlight diverse voices and talent, and take creative risks—all potential opportunities. In addition, podcasting extends the long history of collaboration in public radio, as

stations cooperate both with each other and with outside partners. Finally, podcasting represents another way that stations can serve and engage local audiences. In fact, as podcasting grows into a more competitive, commercialized medium, many of the media professionals interviewed for this thesis believe that a commitment to public service will be public radio's strategic advantage.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: University of Maine IRB Application Approval

APPLICATION COVER PAGE

- KEEP THIS PAGE AS ONE PAGE - DO NOT CHANGE MARGINS/FONTS!!!!!!!!!!
PLEASE SUBMIT THIS PAGE AS WORD DOCUMENT

APPLICATION FOR APPROVAL OF RESEARCH WITH HUMAN SUBJECTS
Protection of Human Subjects Review Board, 400 Corbett Hall

(Type inside gray areas)

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Casey Kelly EMAIL: casey.kelly@maine.edu
CO-INVESTIGATOR: EMAIL:
CO-INVESTIGATOR: EMAIL:
FACULTY SPONSOR: Michael Socolow EMAIL: michael.socolow@maine.edu
(Required if PI is a student):
TITLE OF PROJECT: Sound Commodity: The Political Economy of Contemporary Public Radio and Podcasting
START DATE: 11-1-18 PI DEPARTMENT: Communication and Journalism
FUNDING AGENCY (if any): N/A

STATUS OF PI: FACULTY/STAFF/GRADUATE/UNDERGRADUATE G (F,S,G,U)

- 1. If PI is a student, is this research to be performed:
for an honors thesis/senior thesis/capstone?
for a doctoral dissertation?
other (specify)
for a master's thesis?
for a course project?
2. Does this application modify a previously approved project? N (Y/N). If yes, please give assigned number (if known) of previously approved project:
3. Is an expedited review requested? Y (Y/N).

Submitting the application indicates the principal investigator's agreement to abide by the responsibilities outlined in Section I.E. of the Policies and Procedures for the Protection of Human Subjects.

Faculty Sponsors are responsible for oversight of research conducted by their students. The Faculty Sponsor ensures that he/she has read the application and that the conduct of such research will be in accordance with the University of Maine's Policies and Procedures for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research. REMINDER: if the principal investigator is an undergraduate student, the Faculty Sponsor MUST submit the application to the IRB.

Email this cover page and complete application to UMRIC@maine.edu

FOR IRB USE ONLY Application # 2018-10-12 Review (F/E): E Expedited Category: I.L.3.g
ACTION TAKEN:

- Judged Exempt; category Modifications required? Accepted (date)
Approved as submitted. Date of next review: by Degree of Risk:
Approved pending modifications. Date of next review: by 10/23/2019 Degree of Risk: Minimal
Modifications accepted (date): 10/24/2018
Not approved (see attached statement)
Judged not research with human subjects

FINAL APPROVAL TO BEGIN 10/24/2018
Date

01/2017

## Appendix B: Interview Guide

### Interview Guide

1. Have you had a chance to read the consent form? If yes, do you have any questions? If no, ask them to read it, and if necessary, reschedule the interview to a later time.
2. Do you have any questions?
3. To recap, this consent form explains that you are asked to participate in a personal interview. I am going to ask you several questions about your experiences working in public radio. It is possible some of these questions may make you feel uncomfortable, but you do not have to answer any questions that do so. If you participate, you will help us find out how public radio stations are managing the introduction of podcasting to the content they produce. This interview will be recorded and your comments will not be anonymous. You do not have to take part in this interview, and you can stop at any time. Do you have any questions?
4. Do you consent to participate in this interview?
5. Please introduce yourself, first and last name.
6. Introduce topic: Today we're talking about how public radio stations are managing the production of podcasts as part of the content they produce.
7. Icebreaker questions: How long have you worked as a producer in public radio? Where? What jobs did you hold?
8. Does your station produce podcasts? If yes, please provide a brief description of each one, including its title and how often it comes out. If no, is your station planning to produce any podcasts?
9. Thinking about your station or other stations where you have worked, what factors did the staff consider before starting any podcasts? If your station does not produce any podcasts, what factors are keeping it from doing so?
10. Does your station have a dedicated podcast producer/team? If yes, is the content they produce integrated into other aspects of what the station does, for example, as segments on the radio? If your station does not have a dedicated podcast producer/team, who is responsible for making your station's podcasts?
11. Thinking about the topics, issues, and communities your station covers, does the format (podcast vs. radio) affect what you cover or how in-depth your coverage is? If yes, can you describe any examples that illustrate how podcasting affects what you cover or how in-depth your coverage is?

12. Media scholars and regulators often distinguish between two broad conceptions of media localism – one in which local is conceived of spatially (in terms of geography) and one in which local is conceived of socially (in terms of shared interests or values). Thinking about your career in public radio, would you describe public media’s role in serving local audiences as more spatially or more socially conceived?
13. Has podcasting’s ability to reach audiences beyond the confines of terrestrial radio’s geographic listening area changed how you think about your station’s audience? If yes, how so?
14. Has your station used podcasts to experiment with new narrative reporting styles or production techniques? If yes, can you describe any examples? Have these experiments influenced your radio content in any way? If so, how so?
15. Does your station keep track of how many downloads/listeners its podcasts have? If so, what trends have you seen?
16. Has your station noticed any change in radio audience size since the introduction of podcasting? If so, please describe what has changed?
17. Have changes in audience listening habits from radio to podcasting changed your station’s decisions broadly regarding what topics, issues, or communities to cover? If yes, please provide examples of how your coverage has been informed by audience behavior.
18. Does your station sell sponsorships, underwriting, or advertising on its podcasts? If so, how much revenue does this produce? If your station does not produce podcasts, do you feel like you’re missing out on a revenue opportunity?
19. Media scholars and others have long been concerned about free-market pressures on public media. For example, anemic state/federal funding is thought to force non-commercial media organizations to compete with commercial outlets for audiences in order to attract underwriting revenue. Thinking about your career in public radio, how have market pressures affected you and the stations where you have worked?
20. As podcasts become increasingly popular with both public and for-profit media organizations, are you concerned about increasing pressure to compete with commercial media? If so, how should public radio stations seek to insulate themselves from free-market pressures?
21. Thinking about your career in public radio, how have different public media organizations – NPR, PRI, PRX, various member stations – influenced each other when it comes to the adoption of podcasting?
22. Conclusion: Do you have anything to add to what we have talked about?
23. Thank you’s.

## BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR

Casey Kelly is from Portland, Oregon, where he attended David Douglas High School and was editor of the school newspaper, *The Highlander*. He earned a Bachelor of Science degree in journalism from University of Oregon in 2002 and an associate's degree in radio broadcasting from Mt. Hood Community College in 2006. Upon completion of the radio degree program, Casey embarked on a career in public radio in Alaska. He was a general assignment reporter and host of the *Alaska Fisheries Report* at KMXT in Kodiak from 2006-2008, news director at KBBI in Homer from 2008-2009, and reporter/producer/news editor at KTOO in Juneau from 2009-2015. Casey's radio stories earned several Alaska Press Club and Alaska Broadcasters Association awards, and have appeared on *All Things Considered*, *National Native News*, and *Only A Game*. In Juneau, Casey met his wife, Kate Walters. They got married in 2015 and moved across the country to Maine. They live in Dedham with Ubu the dog and Little Debbie the cat. Casey is currently the communications coordinator for the University of Maine College of Education and Human Development. He is a candidate for the Master of Arts degree in Communication from the University of Maine in May 2019.