Building Community Through Dialogue at NPR Member Stations

Joseph Kasko[*]

This research is composed of 20 in-depth, qualitative interviews with managers at NPR member stations to examine how they are attempting to build community through the use of dialogue. The stations came from various market sizes and from different regions across the United States. The managers reported they are using many types of dialogue, including face-to-face, formal written and electronic communication, to engage their listeners. The findings suggest the stations are working to build a presence in the community through personal relationships, regular contact with listeners and by inviting regular feedback. This research can provide an example to media outlets and other nonprofits for community building through the use of dialogue.

The radio industry has experienced a great number of changes in recent years. Traditional radio audiences have waned, as new audio platforms have provided listeners with a variety of competing options. However, one area of traditional radio that appears to be thriving is public radio, with news programming at the center of its success. It has been observed that most news organizations in the U.S. have seen declines in audience, but public radio, especially NPR has seen substantial growth. The network is one of the few segments of broadcasting that saw audience growth during the 2000s. NPR, the largest of the U.S. public radio providers, had a reported weekly audience of 30.1 million in 2017 and the network distributes programming and newscasts to 991 member stations nationwide and to satellite radio (Pew, 2018). NPR's two news-based flagship programs, *All Things Considered* and *Morning Edition*, each have a weekly audience of over 14 million people (NPR, 2018). The network also has a large digital audience that draws 41 million unique visitors monthly to its website npr.org and has a monthly podcast audience of over 20 million (NPR, 2018). That makes NPR one of the strongest and most listened to news outlets in the country.

Over its 43-year history, NPR has evolved from mostly government funded to mostly community supported, through individual donations and business support (Bailey, 2004; McCauley, 2005). The birth of the modern public radio system can be traced to the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967, which established and provided federal funding for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (McCauley, 2005). The newly created CPB included a mandate to develop public radio (Mitchell, 2005), which led to the creation of National Public Radio in March 1970 (Douglas, 2004). Over time public radio managers recognized the need to become

---

[*] Dr. Joseph Kasko is an assistant professor at Winthrop University.

less reliant on government funding and they began to seek out new and more reliable sources of revenue. As a result, public stations would turn to listeners and businesses in their community for support (Bailey, 2004; McCauley, 2005). Therefore, the presence of community is important when studying public broadcasting.

NPR reports member stations, on average, receive 39 percent of their budget from individual contributions and 17 percent from businesses (NPR, 2013) and at some stations the percentage of community support is even higher. This demonstrates that the majority of financial support at stations comes from people and organizations within the community. However, little research has been conducted on this topic. Only a handful of studies (Stavitsky, 1994; Bareiss, 1998; McCauley, 2002; Reader, 2007) have examined the relationship between NPR and community. This work attempts to build on that early work and explore the important role community plays at member stations.

A review of public relations literature (Day, Dong & Robins, 2001; Kent & Taylor, 2002; Kruckeberg & Starck, 1988; Pickering & King, 1995; Stein, 2006) reveals the importance of dialogue with stakeholders in community building. Therefore, this study attempts to examine what member stations are doing to build community through the use of dialogue. This work consists of qualitative interviews with managers at NPR stations to determine what tools and strategies they are using to communicate with their listeners. The major research questions for this work included: *Do stations see dialogue as a tool for building community? What efforts are the stations making, through the use of dialogue, to build a sense of community? Are stations engaged in a continuous conversation with their listeners?* The findings from this study may provide important information to public radio managers interested in improving their community outreach and strengthening their efforts to engage their audience. It may also provide practical examples for other media organizations and nonprofits interested in community building among their stakeholders through the use of dialogue.

Literature Review

Community

Community is often defined as a group of individuals living and working in harmony with one another, which is typically applied to those living in close proximity to one another. In recent years, however, scholars have recognized that a sense of community may develop regardless of geography (Stein, 2006). Heller (1989) proposed that communities could be "relational" and not bound by location. Therefore, communities can be composed of members who interact with others of shared values. Kruckeberg and Starck (2004) argue that new forms of communication and transportation have destroyed the geographic sense of community that may have existed earlier.

Prior work by Kruckeberg and Starck (1988) identified a number of elements of community that can be applied to NPR listeners. For example, they state an individual participates in the life of the community and regulates their behavior to help achieve the common goals of the community. They also argue a community can develop particular cultural characteristics. Additionally, Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) identified three core components of community. The first is conscious of kind, which refers to the connection that members feel towards each other and the difference they feel from nonmembers. The second is the presence of shared rituals and traditions, which set norms and values within the community. Finally, their

third component of community is a sense of moral responsibility, which is felt as a sense of obligation to the community (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001).

Some scholars have argued that public radio listeners and supporters can be examined using Anderson's (1983) concept of the "imagined community," which suggests that large groups of people with similar interests can view themselves as part of distinct communities (Reader, 2007). Anderson's original concept dealt with spatial characteristics shared by groups of people that he argued fueled nationalism. However, the imagined community has since been applied to many different disciplines, including public broadcasting. Anderson (1983) says that communities are frames of reference that are distinguished by the way they are imagined. Bareiss (1998) writes that communities have members who interact regularly and consist of insiders who have common interests, values and allegiances. He argues that the social characteristics of the community are not natural, but are imagined because they are the result of historical trends and negotiation. Pearson (1993) states community is created by shared meanings, which individuals find in the social codes in their environment. This implies that community is created in the minds of members based on perceived similarities with other members.

Reader (2007) argued that NPR produces segments to encourage listeners to feel as if they are part of a community. He believed that radio producers create an imagined community that reflects their own values. Stavitsky (1994, 1995) suggested that a changing conception of localism in public radio has deemphasized the traditional geographic notions of community. He argued that listening to public radio produced a social conception in which community is defined in terms of shared interests, tastes and values. Additionally, Douglas (2004) writes that public radio listeners share a kindred spirit that helps them relate to other listeners and makes them feel like they are a part of a community. Bareiss (1998) argued that public radio can create imagined communities, because local radio is a place-based medium. Therefore, he concluded that programing tastes and local interests can define a community of public radio listeners.

Dialogue

A number of researchers (Daft & Lengel, 1984; Day, Dong & Robins, 2001; Kent & Taylor, 2002; Kruckeberg & Starck, 1988; Pickering & King, 1995; Stein, 2006; Willis, 2012) have recognized that communication is one of the most important tools an organization can use to build a sense of community. Kruckeberg and Starck (1988) theorize communication can be used to develop and improve community. Pickering and King (1995) note communication is crucial when members are separated geographically. They argue tools, such as newsletters, conferences and other media are needed to foster a sense of community. Kent and Taylor (2002) write that community building requires a commitment to conversations and relationships and that the communication must be genuine and authentic. Additionally, Stein (2006) states, "there is a definite relationship between communication and the process of community building" (p. 256).

The recognition of the important role of communication in community building has lead to the development of a dialogic theory of communication. Day, Dong and Robins (2001) argue dialogic communication can help organizations build community relations and engage in philanthropy. They also warn that contrived dialogue will be of no use to the organization and deceptive communication will ultimately harm the organization's relationship with its public. Kent and Taylor (2002) suggest the community should be considered and consulted on all matters that affect them. They argue that dialogue with the public will lead to positive outcomes for the organization.

There are a number of ways that organizations, specifically public radio stations, can communicate with their community. Information Richness Theory suggests that the medium used for communication can influence the effectiveness of the message. Daft and Lengel (1984) argued different types of communication tools and media have varying degrees of importance or richness. The theory ranked five types of media based on their level of effectiveness from richest to leanest: (1) face-to-face, (2) telephone, (3) personal written (letters), (4) formal written (flyers) and (5) computer output. This ranking of richness is likely outdated in today's digital world. For example, Stein (2006) noted only a handful of studies have addressed the theory since the mid-1990s. However, information richness highlights the importance of dialogue and face-to-face communication. Willis (2012) also noted the important role face-to-face communication plays in community engagement and building trust.

Method

This study used purposive sampling to select managers at 20 public radio stations for telephone interviews. The in-depth, semi-structured interviews were intended to determine what techniques stations are using to communicate with their listeners in an effort to build a sense of community. It also hoped to learn how stations are using dialogue to engage their listeners.

Recruitment

To gain a diverse sample, stations were separated by region and market size. Stations from the West, Southwest, Midwest, Northeast and Southeast regions (see appendix 1) were included in the sample. A station was defined as "large" if it was located in a designated radio market (DMA) between 1-50, according to Arbitron's spring 2013 rankings. A station was defined as "medium" if it was located in market 51-100 and a "small" station came from market 101 or higher. Only stations that carried NPR programming, including the network's two flagship programs (*Morning Edition* and *All Things Considered*), were included. This ensured the stations included in the sample were closely associated with NPR and likely had a strong news audience.

Starting with Arbitron's list of market rankings, DMAs with NPR stations were identified using a Google search. The author then visited the websites of a number of public radio stations to identify and compile a list of managers. Only top leaders at the station, including those who held the title of station manager or general manager, were included. Thus, a total of 57 managers were contacted by letter, email or phone to invite their participation, which resulted in a response rate of 35 percent. Formal letters were initially sent to 30 managers, which where followed up with emails and phone calls. After a number of weeks an additional nine managers were contacted by email and phone. This process was repeated until the target of 20 responses was achieved.

Sample Characteristics

Managers from 20 different states were included in the sample. The majority of those interviewed held the title general manager, however some other titles included station manager, director, president or CEO. The subjects were overwhelmingly male (16), compared to female (4) and they held their position for an average of 7.76 years. The longest tenure was 25 years and the shortest was one year. The sample (see appendix 2) included six stations from the West, four

each from the Southwest and Midwest, and three each from the Northeast and Southeast. It also included six "large" market stations, nine "medium" market stations and five "small" market stations.

Interview Procedures

The interviews were conducted by telephone from March to August of 2013. Each interview began with a description of the study and the subjects were offered anonymity in exchange for participating. The interviews consisted of a set of semi-structured questions that were followed by appropriate probing questions (Berger, 2013; Jankowski & Jensen, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The interviews were audio taped and transcribed to ensure accuracy and they ranged in length from 14 to 73 minutes. The mean length was 28 minutes. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the author's university approved this method.

Instrument Development

The interview protocols consisted of four main topics with a total of 17 items. The questions were influenced by previous literature on dialogue and community building (Daft & Lengel, 1984; Day, Dong & Robins, 2001; Kent & Taylor, 2002; Kruckeberg & Starck, 1988; Pickering & King, 1995; Stein, 2006; Willis, 2012). Some of the questions included: *What efforts do you make to build a sense of community with your audience? Not including your air signal, how do you communicate with your audience? What kinds of opportunities are there for listeners to communicate with the station? How do you feel about listener feedback?* The interview instrument was pilot-tested with a manager at a small station in the Midwest before it was employed.

Qualitative Data Coding and Analysis

The audio recording of each interview was transcribed into Microsoft Word and coded for common themes. The transcripts were read multiple times by the researcher until themes, or topics that were frequently discussed, emerged. The interview protocols helped to guide the development of the codebook. The initial codebook was used to review a few transcripts, which allowed the codebook and definitions to be modified and refined before they were finalized. All of the transcripts were then examined using the final version of the codebook and each transcript was read thoroughly by the author.

Findings

There were four main themes that emerged from the data, which included: (1) an active station presence in the community, (2) the development of personal relationships, (3) regular contact through multiple channels and (4) two-way conversations. There were also a number of sub-topics that arose within each main theme. All of these emergent themes are discussed below because they provide insight on how public radio stations are using dialogue to build a sense of community.

Station Presence in the Community

Every manager in the sample reported that representatives from their station have some type of personal, face-to-face contact with their listeners, most often through some type of station-sponsored event. Many managers also stated they felt events were an important tool the station is using to build a sense of community with their audience. Some of the most cited events included concerts, live broadcasts, open houses, community forums, lectures or events with NPR talent. Some of the events are open to the public and some are intended only for donors, according to a number of managers. "I think generally, it's an opportunity for people to get out, go somewhere and be engaged," said a manager from a medium sized station in the Southwest.

The majority of stations reported that members of their staff are making appearances in the community. A few managers said they expect their employees to play a role in communicating with the audience face-to-face. "It's written into their job description to interact with the public and to have a station presence at public events, concerts and things like that," said one GM from a small station in the Southeast. "Staff members on a pretty regular basis are being emcees or hosting…for various events around town." One manager from a medium station in the Southeast reported many members of her staff are active in the arts community and serve as volunteers for other nonprofits. "They're ambassadors for the station wherever they go and whatever they do," she said. "We're all faces to the community. We're all ambassadors to the community," added a GM from a small station in the Southwest.

A number of managers said they hosted listeners at their station in some capacity, including open houses and tours. One manager from a medium station in the West reported tours were offered at his station on a quarterly basis. "Our goal is for everybody who listens and is interested to come down to the station and look at what we're doing with limited resources," he said. "We invite our donors to come in and meet with me and our director of content to talk to us about what we have on-air," said a manager from a large station in the Northeast. "When we have these events at the station…we just laugh and feed people," said a manager from a large station in the West. "The staff and program volunteers from the station are here and we're just hanging out and talking to people."

A few managers reported they felt that their stations were serving as community centers. "We are constantly bringing people into our studios and our performance studios and having community events, discussions, musical events, (and) performances," said a manager from a medium station in the Southeast. "We're constantly having events here and people know where the station is and they like to come here for events." One GM from a medium station in the West reported his station built a remote studio in a building where a number of listeners created a community center. "We are trying to be visible in the community and support these efforts that these folks have made," he said.

Personal Relationships

Nearly every manager reported they have some type of personal relationship with listeners who served as volunteers for the station. Some stations said they relied on volunteers more heavily than others and some of their duties included answering phones, stuffing envelopes, conducting office work, helping with membership and development, assisting with events and hosting programs. A number of managers stated they work with as many as hundreds of volunteers a year and others said the number was much smaller. One GM from a small station in the West

said they use volunteers on-air during pledge campaigns. "We have members of the community come on and do pitch breaks with us…giving testimonials," he said. About half of the stations reported that volunteers were hosting programs, including music and public affairs shows. One manager from a medium station in the Southwest reported people from underserved groups in the community are hosting specialty shows. "We invite them in to make the programming," he said.

A number of managers stressed the importance of having personal contact with listeners over the telephone. "Usually when people call, often I can recognize their voice," said the GM of a small station in the Southwest. Many managers said volunteers are often fielding phone calls, especially during pledge campaigns. This highlights that listeners, on behalf of the station, are having dialogue with other listeners. One GM from a small station in the Southeast shared a story about an attempt to use an out-of-state call center during a pledge campaign, rather than allowing listeners to speak directly with volunteers at the station. "It was a disaster. People hated and it didn't work," he said. "Just two days into the drive we went back to having (volunteers) through the station, because I think it killed a lot of the locality of our fund drive." This illustrates how important personal interaction with station staff or other listeners can be for many members of the audience.

Half of the stations reported they are cultivating personal relationships with listeners through handwritten correspondence, including cards, notes and letters. "Donors above $500 receive a personal note from somebody in development thanking them and donors above that level will receive a letter from myself thanking them," said the GM of a large station in the Midwest. Additionally, a number of stations said some of their thank you letters to donors were "hand-signed," rather than hand-written. Again, most of these materials were sent to listeners who made large contributions.

A few managers reported they write notes in response to listener complaints. "I like writing the responses to people and I like having those moments when I can really tie someone physically to the station," said a manger from a medium station in the West. One GM from a medium station in the Northeast said it was important to take the time to respond to listeners with a personal letter. "That is really powerful because it just sends a message to the person that I really do know who you are and I do really care about what's going on here," he said.

One manager from a medium station in the Southeast shared a story about sending a get-well card to a long-time listener who was the victim of an assault during a home invasion. She said the card was signed by most of the station staff. "We got a card for him, because he considers us a part of his family," she said. "A lot of relationships we have are very personal. Now we don't know a lot of our listeners…but we know a lot of our members and our volunteers, and they know us."

One interesting topic that arose, which highlighted the strength of personal relationships, came from a few managers who reported they have received feedback from listeners who didn't or couldn't attend station events, but said they simply enjoyed hearing about them. "It's just amazing to me, some of the calls I get and conversations I have with people who we are their companion and they just love hearing where we're going," said the GM of a medium station in the Northeast. Another manager, from a small station in the Southwest, said he felt talking about station and community events on the air helped to bring people closer together because it let listeners know what other people in their community were doing. It's almost as if listeners feel like their getting updates about their friends, who are other listeners, despite the fact they have never met.

Additionally, a manager from a medium station in the Southeast said they recently sent out wall calendars, which featured photos of the staff and provided an inside look at the station, to people who have supported the station for 15 years or longer. "It's just unbelievable that so many (people) have been with us for so long and have really helped us not only survive, but thrive and prosper," she said. "It was amazing because it wasn't a premium or a thank you gift or anything. It was just a little letter." She said they have since received a number of thank you notes from listeners who really appreciated the gesture, because they said they feel like they know the staff personally.

Regular Contact Through Multiple Channels

Nearly every manager reported they have regular interactions with listeners via telephone. Many managers said phone conversations with listeners were frequently held during pledge campaigns. Most stations reported they often receive feedback from members of the audience over the phone and a number of managers stressed the importance of taking calls from listeners. "All of my managers and I spend quite a bit of time just talking to people on the phone. Responding to ideas, suggestions, criticism, whatever, so it's a big part of what they do and I think that's really healthy," said the manager of a medium station in the Southeast. "I've had a couple of situations where I've called people who have called and (complained) for one reason or another and if I can get their phone number, I call them," said a GM from a medium station in the Northeast.

Roughly a third of the managers said representatives from their station were making calls to listeners and donors to say thank you or respond to complaints. Most said staff members or volunteers were making calls to thank mostly high-end donors, although the dollar amount that triggered the call often varied. "Major donors of multi-thousands of dollars will receive a call from one of our board members, thanking them for their contribution," said one GM from a large station in the Midwest. A few others reported they made calls to high-end donors to personally invite them to station events. "We will sometimes invite them to special events if we have someone coming into town," said the manager of a large station in the Northeast. "So we try to reach out to them and make them a part of the activities that we're doing," she said. Additionally, a manager from a small station in the Midwest said board members would occasionally call to thank new donors.

Nearly every station in the sample reported sending some type of formal written correspondence to their listeners. Some of the most cited examples included thank you letters, tax documents, membership renewal reminders and newsletters. A number of station managers said they believed direct mailings were a good way to encourage future support. The majority of the stations said they send their newsletters on a quarterly basis, but a few stated they send them out monthly. One GM from a medium station in the Midwest said he met with a consultant who felt newsletters served little purpose. "It's better to just…do them when you've got something really important going on," he said. "I really don't want our mail communication to turn into junk mail, because it's so effective. So we try not to abuse the power that we have with mail." A couple of stations also reported they published a monthly magazine that is sent to their supporters.

Every station reported they are using some type of electronic communication to correspond with their audience. Three-fourths of the managers stated their station is emailing listeners an electronic newsletter or e-blast on a consistent basis. Some of the stations reported they email their members daily and others said they did so weekly or monthly. A manager at a

large station in the Southwest said "email and electronic communication is probably the most prevalent" way they are communicating with their audience. "Digital and online is probably one of the areas where we feel we'll be able to get more and more traction," said the GM of a large station in the Southeast.

Nearly every station reported they were using social media to connect with their listeners. Facebook and Twitter were by far the most cited tools used, but a few managers also said were using sites such as Tumblr, Instagram, Vine, Flickr, Pinterest and YouTube. A few stations said members of their staff were maintaining multiple Facebook and Twitter pages, especially for news content. "Each of our reporters have Twitter accounts and they are tweeting out and they are also working with our digital content," said a GM from a large station in the Northeast. "We have four or five relatively younger folks who are actively involved in social media and we are training all of our content people to be involved," said the manager of small station in the West. "We tweet everything, especially news stuff as it's happening," said a GM from a medium station in the West. "We just put a bunch of stuff out everywhere, all the time." A number of stations also said their music hosts were often maintaining their own social media accounts and sharing information.

Many managers expressed concern that they weren't doing as much online as they would like or using social media as effectively as they could. "I would say we're kind of increasing our activity, but we're not at the level of having a strategy about it. We're not doing a horrible job, but I don't think we're really strategic about it yet," said a manager from a large station in the West. "I think part of what we still need to be working on is improving (with Facebook), because there are so many different ways you can actually be communicating with your audience now. You should probably be trying to reach them in all the methods you possibly can," said a manager from a small station in the Midwest. "We don't have a coherent digital strategy in terms of social media. I think there's a real opportunity to engage the community in an online space, but we just don't have the resources for it," said a GM from a medium station in the Southwest.

Two-way Conversations

The data revealed a number of examples that illustrate that stations are engaged in a continuous conversation with their listeners. All of the stations reported they receive listener feedback on a regular basis through multiple channels, including phone calls, letters, emails, web and social media postings and face-to-face comments. Many managers said they receive a lot of feedback during fund drives. "That's the time of year when people are listening and responding to your requests for support and they call in to say 'we love what you do and we are willing to put our money behind our love,'" said one GM from a small station in the West, in reference to comments during a pledge drive. "I'd say it's one of the times that we get the most feedback on what we're doing. It's also a really interesting time for us to chat with listeners and folks who are involved with the station," said the manager of a large station in the Southeast.

Most of the managers stated they have a high opinion of listener feedback. Many of the stations also reported that they often seek out comments and encourage listeners to respond. As a result, a number of managers said they felt their stations are in a continuous conversation with listeners. "We need to know what they're thinking about us. We need to know that they know about us and we need to know what they want from us," said a GM from a large station in the Northeast. "We love (feedback), the more the better. When people call up and have a serious concern or a serious question, we love to talk to them," said the GM of a medium station in the

Midwest. "I love (feedback). Good, bad or indifferent. For me it's connecting the dots and it's an opportunity to create relationships. With a lot of radio stations you can't create a relationship," said a GM from a medium station in the Southwest. "I think that it's the dialogue that gets created when somebody feels compelled enough to take time out of their day to call and either show appreciation or complain about something that they have heard on the radio station," said a manager from a small station in the West. "I like the fact that people are listening and thinking about what we're doing. I like the constructive criticism, as well as the pats on the back," said one manager from a medium station in the Southeast.

A number of managers reported that audience feedback led to changes with programming or content. "We use listener feedback to select topics that we'll discuss on our talk show," said one GM from a large station in the Northeast. "We had a huge Facebook discussion that led to us bringing in a few shows," said a manager from a small station in the Southeast. A few other managers said listener dialogue helped to dictate news coverage. "We listen to them to find out what they think are the critical issues that we should be covering and discussing," said the manager of a medium station in the Southeast.

A few managers expressed that feedback was important, but it couldn't be the only factor when making decisions. "(Feedback) goes into the mix of deciding what we should set as our priorities, but it is only one element. It's not something by and of itself that should or can dictate any of the direction the station takes, in terms of programming or initiatives," said the GM of a large station in the Midwest. "It can't be the only decision tool that we use. Community feedback is a really important way to make sure that donors and supporters have a positive experience with the organization," said a manager from a medium station in the Northeast. "I get one listener's feedback and then I think 'oh my gosh, I've got to change this because someone said it, but then you've got to step back and go 'okay, it's important, but one is not a majority,'" said one manager from a medium station in the Midwest. These examples illustrate how closely stations are listening to their audience.

Discussion

NPR is one of the strongest news outlets in the U.S. with a weekly audience of 30.1 million (Pew, 2018) and a monthly digital audience of 41 million (NPR, 2018). A study of the history of the network reveals that NPR and its member stations have evolved into a mostly community supported entity (Bailey, 2004; McCauley, 2005). However, very little research has been dedicated to the relationship between public radio listening and community. This study aimed to learn what public radio stations are doing to build community through the use of dialogue. Prior research has demonstrated that dialogue is one of the most effective tools an organization can use to foster a sense of community (Kruckeberg & Starck, 1988; Pickering & King, 1995; Day, Dong & Robins, 2001; Kent & Taylor; 2002; Stein, 2006). These findings suggest stations are using a number of different tactics and channels to engage in dialogue with their audience.

For example, every manager in the sample reported their station has a presence in their community, which included some type of face-to-face contact, mostly through station sponsored functions. Information Richness Theory suggests that face-to-face communication can produce some of the most effective messages (Daft & Lengel, 1984). These findings suggest that many stations and their representatives are engaged in regular, in-person contact with their listeners. Nearly every manager reported their station regularly hosts events, such as concerts or

community forums. They also said members of their staff are taking active roles in their community.

A few managers said they had face-to-face contact with listeners by hosting open houses or offering station tours. A few other managers reported their station served as a community center, which was open to the public for various types of events. These findings suggest that many stations are attempting to create an open and welcoming atmosphere. Some managers expressed that these tactics can help to make listeners feel like they are part of the station. These tactics are likely to strengthen the bond between the listener and the station and aid in building a sense of community.

Nearly every manager stated they make efforts to build personal relationships with listeners. Some of those relationships are with listeners who work for the station as volunteers. Heller (1989) notes that communities are made up of members who interact with people who share their values. Therefore, volunteers would likely share the values of the station, its mission and message if they are willing to work on its behalf. Volunteers and staff would likely also share similar beliefs, so this could strengthen the bond between listeners and the station.

Many managers also said members of their staff are maintaining personal contact with listeners over the phone and through hand-written notes. Some of the calls and notes were in response to complaints, but others included thank you notes or get-well wishes. This is an example of Muniz and O'Guinn's (2001) concept of conscious of kind, which refers to the connection that members of a community feel towards each other. Members of a community have a desire to stay connected to other members. The desire to say thank you or respond to complaints, which was reported by the managers, highlights the efforts stations are making to cultivate and maintain personal relationships with their members.

One interesting theme that arose from the data suggests there is a connection between listeners, even though they may have never met. A few managers reported they heard from listeners who said they enjoy hearing about station events and the activities of other listeners even though they didn't plan to participate. They told the managers they simply liked hearing about the things members of the station community are involved in. Heller (1989) noted that community can be "relational" and Pearson (1993) suggested that community is created in the mind of the member. Therefore, it's likely that some listeners are interested in staying connected with other listeners by hearing news of their activities. This suggests a bond between listeners that is strengthened through dialogue.

The interviews reveal that stations are engaged in regular contact with their listeners through multiple channels. Many managers reported they stay connected with their audience through the use of formal-written materials, such as newsletters. Pickering and King (1995) noted that newsletters, and other tools, could foster a sense of community if members are separated geographically. The data also highlights that stations are very active with new media, including email and social networks, to communicate with listeners. A number of managers also expressed their concern that they weren't doing as much as they could to communicate with their audience through social media. However, many managers said they felt these tactics helped them to engage and stay connected with their listeners. These tools are also likely to strengthen the ties the listener feels to the station.

The managers also stated they are listening to audience feedback on a regular basis, which suggests stations are engaged in a continuous conversation with listeners. Prior research has highlighted that dialogue should be continuous and genuine to be effective (Day, Dong & Robins, 2001; Kent & Taylor, 2002). Many managers said they get the most feedback from

listeners during fund drives. Therefore, these findings suggest that dialogue may have played a role in securing community support.

The interviews reveal the managers have a high opinion of audience feedback and they often seek out comments and encourage listeners to respond. A number of managers expressed that listening to feedback creates an opportunity to build relationships with listeners, which is supported by the literature (Day, Dong & Robins, 2001; Kent & Taylor, 2002; Stein, 2006). A number of managers said that dialogue with listeners lead to changes at the station, which further highlights its importance. The fact that stations are listening to audience feedback and responding could aid in creating a sense of community. Listeners are likely to feel a stronger bond with the station if they know their comments and concerns are taken seriously and viewed as important. These findings suggest that the dialogue between stations and listeners is two-way and continuous.

Now perhaps some might ask are the tactics used for community engagement outlined in this research offering anything new? Older radio listeners likely will recall a time when it was commonplace for a disc jockey to attend an event or spend time with a listener on the telephone. However, times have changed and in today's digital world of corporate radio where conglomerates (such as iHeartMedia or Entercom) own hundreds of stations, there seems to be far less emphasis on community engagement. Often these stations are operated from central locations, in an effort to cut costs and maximize profits, far from the communities where the broadcast signal is heard. As a result, it is difficult to imagine commercial stations investing much time or effort in building personal relationships with their listeners. Thus, these tactics appear to be unique to public radio, which may explain why NPR stations have been more successful in drawing and maintaining an audience in recent years. For example, maintaining regular personal contact, creating a welcoming atmosphere, listening to feedback or engaging in continuous conversations, seems to be rare in broadcasting. Therefore, employing these tactics, especially through the use of dialogue, may be a way for stations to remain relevant in today's digital media landscape.

Finally, there are a few limitations to this study. For example, it used a small (20) and purposive sample, so these findings are not representative of the general population. Therefore, the views of these station managers cannot be generalized to all public radio managers. However, this method is typical with this type of qualitative work (Berger, 2013; Jankowski & Jensen, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Furthermore, the author was able to identify and recruit a diverse national sample of managers from various market sizes and geographic regions.

Despite the limitations, this study provides a lot of information on the tactics and strategies public radio stations are using to engage in dialogue with their listeners. These findings also suggest these tools are helping to foster a sense of community. However, future research is needed to examine how listeners feel about these tactics. A survey of listeners could attempt to measure how effective the stations have been in their efforts. For example, some important questions could include: (1) Does attending an event or interacting through social media make listeners feel more connected to the station? (2) Are listeners who feel more connected more likely to give? (3) Do people feel they are part of a community of listeners? These are just a few examples, but these questions demonstrate the need for more information. This present study is just the first step.

Works Cited

Anderson, B. (1983). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism.* New York: Verso.

Arbitron. (2013). *Spring 2013 Market Populations & Rankings.* Retrieved from http://www.arbitron.com/downloads/sp13_market_survey_schedule_poprankings.pdf

Bailey, G. (2004). Free Riders, Givers, and Heavy Users: Predicting Listener Support for Public Radio. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 48(4): 607-619.

Bareiss, W. (1998). Public space, private face: Audience construction at a noncommercial radio station. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, *15*(4), 405-422.

Berger, A.A. (2013). *Media and communication research methods: An introduction to qualitative and quantitative approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Daft, R. L., & Lengel, R. H. (1984). Information Richness: A New Approach to Managerial Behaviour and Organizational Design. *Research in Organizational Behavior*, 6, 191-233.

Day, K.; Dong, Q. & Robins C. (2001). Public relations ethics: an overview and discussion of issues for the 21st century, in: R.L. Heath (Ed.), *Handbook of Public Relations*, 403–410. Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.

Douglas, S.J. (2004). *Listening In: Radio and the American Imagination.* Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Heller, K. (1989). The return to community. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 17(1), 1-15.

Jankowski, N.W., & Jensen, K.B. (Eds.). (2002). *A handbook of qualitative methodologies for mass communication research*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Kent, M. L., & Taylor, M. (2002). Toward a dialogic theory of public relations. *Public Relations Review*, 28(1), 21-37.

Kruckeberg, D. & Starck, K. (1988). *Public Relations and Community: A Reconstituted Theory.* New York, NY: Praeger.

Kruckeberg, D., & Starck, K. (2004). The role and ethics of community building for consumer products and services. *Journal of Promotion Management*, 10(1-2), 133-146.

McCauley, M.P. (2002). Leveraging the NPR Brand: Serving the Public While Boosting the Bottom Line. *Journal of Radio Studies*, 9(1): 65-91.

McCauley, M.P. (2005). *NPR: The Trials and Triumphs of National Public Radio.* New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

Mitchell, J. (2005). *Listener Supported: The Culture and History Public Radio.* Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers.

Muniz Jr, A.M. & O'Guinn, T.C. (2001). Brand community. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 27(4), 412-432.

NPR. (2013). *Public Radio Finances.* Retrieved from http://www.npr.org/about/aboutnpr/publicradiofinances.html

NPR. (2018). *NPR Maintains Highest Ratings Ever*. Retrieved from https://www.npr.org/about-npr/597590072/npr-maintains-highest-ratings-ever

Pearson, R. (1993). Knowing one's place: perceptions of community in the industrial suburbs of Leeds, 1790-1890. *Journal of Social History*, 221-244.

Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism. (2011). *State of the News Media 2011: An Annual Report on American Journalism: Audio.* Retrieved from http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/13/2017/05/24141615/State-of-the-News-Media-Report-2011-FINAL.pdf

Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism. (2013). *State of the News Media 2013: An Annual Report on American Journalism: Audio.* Retrieved from http://assets.pewresearch.org.s3.amazonaws.com/files/journalism/State-of-the-News-Media-Report-2013-FINAL.pdf

Pew Research Center. (2018). *State of the News Media 2018: Public Broadcasting.* Retrieved from http://www.journalism.org/fact-sheet/public-broadcasting/

Pickering, J. M., & King, J. L. (1995). Hardwiring weak ties: Interorganizational computer-mediated communication, occupational communities, and organizational change. *Organization Science*, 6(4), 479-486.

Reader, B. (2007). Air Mail: NPR Sees" Community" in Letters From Listeners. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, *51*(4), 651-669.

Stavitsky, A.G. (1995). "Guys in Suits with Charts": Audience Research in U.S. Public Radio. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 39: 177-189.

Stavitsky, A.G. (1994). The Changing Conception of Localism in U.S. Public Radio. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 38: 19-33.

Stein, A. (2006). Employee communications and community: An exploratory study. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 18(3): 249-264.

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Willis, P. (2012). Engaging communities: Ostrom's economic commons, social capital and public relations. *Public Relations Review*, *38*(1), 116-122.

Appendix 1 – Geographic Region Map
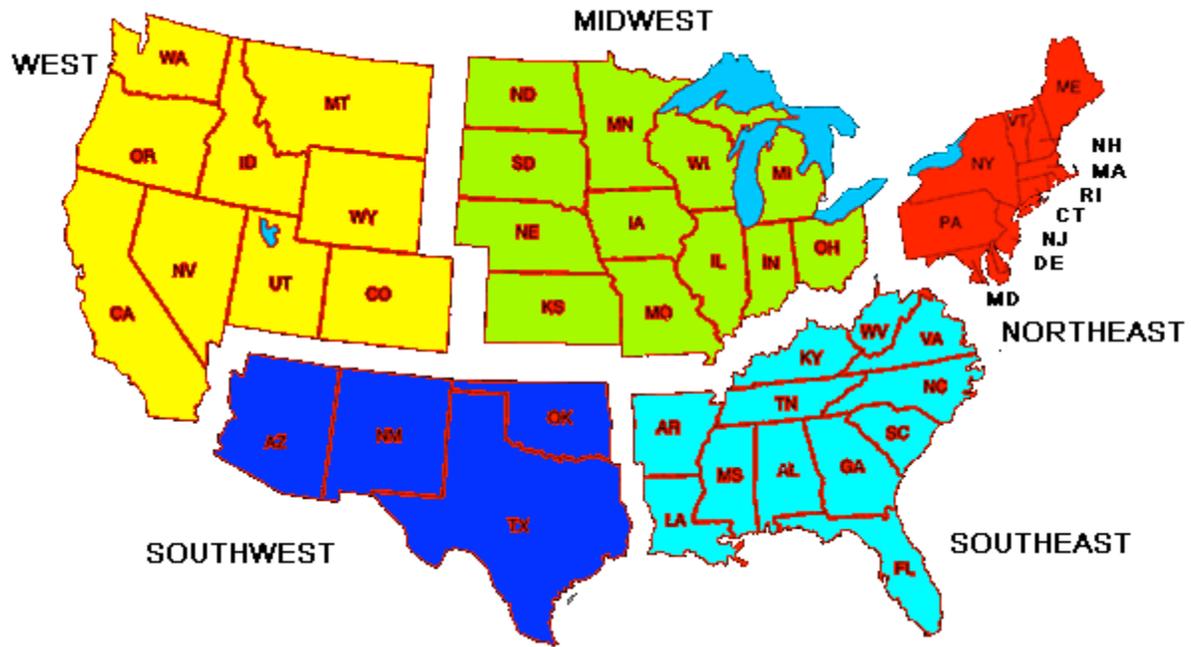
Appendix 2 – Sample Characteristics

Region	# of Stations
Northeast	3
Southeast	3
Midwest	4
Southwest	4
West	6

Market Size	# of Stations
Small	5
Medium	9
Large	6