CLEARING THE SILENCE: THE RISE
OF CLEAR CHANNEL COMMUNICATIONS
AND THE FALL OF PUBLIC OPINION

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CLEARING THE SILENCE: THE RISE
OF CLEAR CHANNEL COMMUNICATIONS
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this thesis was to analyze WJER-FM Radio, Inc. in rural Dover, Ohio, which is one of the few small-market independent stations in the country, as it changes ownership to Clear Channel Communications. Clear Channel owns more than 1,200 stations in the country. Lack of diversity of ownership silences public opinion and jeopardizes democracy through Clear Channel’s monopoly on the airwaves and lack of social responsibility for the communities it serves. The research gauged the opinions and perceptions of current and former WJER employees and community members to determine what impact, if any, the corporation had on public opinion.
CHAPTER II
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Clear Channel Communications is a global media conglomerate that owns 1,200 radio stations in addition to television stations, concert venues and billboards in a number of countries. To manage these stations, the company has devised a broadcasting method that combines stations to share programming. The content usually is prerecorded and syndicated. As a result, the public may be limited in its choices and may also be presented with a skewed, censored environment. A theory that addresses the effect of public censorship is the Spiral of Silence.

Spiral of Silence

The Spiral of Silence Theory explains why people don’t disclose their viewpoints to other people when they think their opinions are in the minority. The theory created by Noelle-Neumann in 1974 attempts to explain public opinion. Noelle-Neumann (1989) defines public opinion as: “Modes of behavior in a value-laden arena which can be publicly expressed or demonstrated with the expectation that they will meet with approval or that there is no danger of thereby isolating oneself” (p. 12). The theory explains the motivation for everyone’s desire to be apart of the majority and on the winning team.
Lazarsfeld (1968) conducted a study of what he referred to as the “bandwagon effect” in the 1940 presidential election. He analyzed the voter’s decision process suggesting that communication from the mass media first reached opinion leaders who would then filter the information in what he called the two-step flow. The opinion leaders influence the attitudes of other people they know.

According to Noelle-Neumann (1977), individuals who perceive that their personal opinions match the majority view will voice this opinion confidently in public. On the other hand, individuals who notice that their own opinions are losing ground will be inclined to adopt a more reserved attitude when expressing their opinions in public. Noelle-Neumann writes:

The result is a spiral process which prompts other individuals to perceive the changes in opinion and to follow suit, until one opinion has become establish as the prevailing attitude while the other opinion will be pushed back and rejected by everybody with the exception of the hard core that nevertheless sticks to that opinion (p. 12).

Experiments by Asch (1951) showed that people often are willing to ignore what they know to be right in order to conform to the group. This phenomenon is known as the “fear of isolation.” Noelle-Neumann (1989) stresses fear of isolation as the first element in the Spiral of Silence Theory. This suggests that individuals will alter their behavior (i.e. speaking out on an issue) due to an innate fear of social isolation. When they perceive their opinion to be at odds with that of the majority, they will suppress their own expression in an attempt to avoid society’s disapproval and to avoid being ostracized. On the other hand, when they perceive their opinion to be congruent with that of the majority, they will be more likely to speak up.
Noelle-Neumann's Spiral of Silence model also requires examining how people monitor the information in their environment and search for evidence that their personal opinion is shared by a majority of citizens. Rimmer and Howard (1988) hypothesized that the level of media use would predict one's perceptions of the climate of opinion and congruency behaviors (i.e., high levels of media use would be correlated with more accurate estimates of the climate of opinion). They found that higher media use and higher issue salience were positively related to opinion expression, relative to those with lower media use.

In every survey where people are asked who in today’s society has too much power, the mass media are ranked right there at the top (Noelle-Neumann, 1989). This resulted in individual powerlessness. Noelle-Neumann describes this powerlessness in two ways. The first occurs when a person tries to gain public attention and the media, in their selection processes, choose not to give that person attention. The second aspect comes into play when the media draw faceless public attention to an individual who is surrendered to them as a scapegoat to be “exhibited,” such as appearing on talk show programs (Noelle-Neumann, 1989, p. 217).

The Spiral of Silence theory has been tested in a number of ways. Perry and Gonzenbach’s (2000) experiment explored the issue in relation to prayer in schools. The researchers created three video news stories representing supporting, balanced, and opposing stances on the issue. The respondents were then asked to complete a questionnaire on their perceptions of national and state public opinion distributions and their opinion as to whether a school prayer constitutional amendment would pass in the
future. The study concluded that the majority was in favor of school prayer mostly because “the minority often retreats when faced with the majority” (p. 278). The few people who voiced their opinions about the issue resulted in other participants assenting. The researchers also concluded that opinion was found to predict speaking out (p. 278).

Shoemaker, Breen, and Stamper (2000) examined the role of an operationalized fear of isolation variable in a model of the Spiral of Silence Theory. The researchers conducted 403 telephone interviews gauging opinions on the issue of abortion and how willing participants were to express their opinion. The findings suggested that fear of social isolation appeared to be negatively correlated with the individual’s opinion, but the negative direction may be a function of the opinion topic. Among the sample, most people thought that their opinion was identical to most other people’s opinions, reaffirming the attitude that being in the majority is best.

Mutz (1989) explored the role of perceptions of the opinions of others as they related to the formation of public opinion. Two interrelated theories involving such perceptions, the third person effect and the Spiral of Silence, were tested in the context of public opinion regarding divestment of financial interests in South Africa. Findings were strongly supportive of this component of the third person effect hypothesis. Perceptions of the opinions of others were also explored in relation to respondents' willingness to express their opinions publicly. As suggested by the Spiral of Silence Theory, respondents were found to be more willing to express their opinions publicly when they perceived a trend in support of their viewpoint, or when there was a greater perceived likelihood of achieving success for their issue position (p. 34).
Deregulation

President Reagan’s decision to repeal the Fairness Doctrine during the 1980’s facilitated a monopoly in the industry. The doctrine was in place to protect the publics’ right to hear contrasting points of view to ensure that all coverage of controversial issues by a broadcast station be balanced and fair (Kurtz, 1999). Media outlets were no longer responsible for presenting a wide range of ideas and topics after the doctrine was abolished.

Since the 1980’s there have been three significant regulatory changes in the radio industry. First, in 1984 the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) increased national ownership limits from 7 AM and 7 FM stations to 12 AM and 12 FM stations (FCC, 1984). Perhaps the most significant regulatory change, however, was the Telecommunications Act of 1996, which opened the door for companies like Clear Channel Communications to expand. The act lifted caps on radio ownership and paved the way for companies to buy as many stations as they could. Prior to 1996, a broadcaster could own no more than 40 stations (Hickey, 2003). It passed by wide majorities of both houses of Congress and was signed by President Clinton with the intent to open the telecom markets fully to competition and to deregulate them (Layton, 2003). As a result, 4,407 of 11,000 U.S. commercial radio stations changed hands (Hickey, 2003).

In 2003, the FCC allowed companies to own stations that together reach up to 45% of all households in the U.S. The previous limit was 35% (Layton, 2003). It also lifted a ban on companies owning a station and a daily newspaper in the same market with the exception of the smallest markets with three or fewer stations.
Prior to these changes of ownership, station owners safeguarded the public interest by responding to local community concerns, airing controversial issues. Stations served neglected constituencies such as children and provided politicians low-cost air time (FCC, 1994). Their behavior was under scrutiny particularly at license renewal time, when the FCC could consider public interest in its decision to renew.

As a result of the deregulation, Clear Channel Communications is widespread. It owns or operates more than 1,200 stations nationwide and it is also the world’s largest concert promoter with 135 venues (Kurtz, 1999). Clear Channel, along with Viacom, now attracts 42% of radio listeners and industry revenue (Hickey, 2003). L. Lowery Mays, the San Antonio-based billionaire founder of the company, owned 36 stations before deregulation and now has 1,225 in 50 states (Kurtz, 1999). Within a decade, the company’s revenue went from $74 million to about $8 billion and it generated more than $3.5 billion a year in advertising revenues (Nolter, 2002).

**Programming**

Clear Channel developed a method of programming that allows for little diversity. Author Brooke Shelby Biggs (2003) writes: “It’s the same fifty mindless cookie-cutter songs played in an endless, soul-numbing loop, the same conservative talk shows, even the same deejays are doing the same shows for simultaneous broadcast in a half dozen markets” (p. 22).

Clear Channel also perfected what is called voice-tracking. A radio station uses one announcer who records segments of programming that is shared with several stations.
across the country. The technique saves money and is more efficient. Listeners believe that the content is live and locally originated (Kurtz, 1999).

The current state of Clear Channel’s radio dominance can be classified into what is referred to as the “Disneyification” of our culture. Paul Kurtz (1995) explains that this idea focuses on fantasy and sensationalism and avoids real issues. Huge corporations are more often concerned about the bottom line and not equally committed to inquiry, debate or the First Amendment. Kurtz writes: “Conglomerates are more interested in providing entertainment as a source of profit than conveying information and knowledge” (p. 5). Stations owned by Clear Channel typically avoid controversial issues or diverse opinions and instead focus on making people and advertisers happy.

News

People that listen to their local radio station for the news may also be getting a skewed and filtered scope of ideas. In 1982, 98% of U.S. radio stations had news operations. In a little more than a decade, only 67% did and half of the 12,000 radio news staffers were part-timers (Kurtz, 1999). As Clear Channel combined radio stations and syndicated programming, “the people are not exposed to enough salient information and free and honest thought to enable them to form knowledgeable opinions on the great issues of the day” (Dugger, 2003, p. 2).

Gilens and Hertzman (2000) studied the influence of corporate media owners over news content. They claimed that the financial interests of corporate owners led America's news bureaus to downplay the significant issues surrounding the growing concentration
of ownership of the country's mass media. They examined newspaper coverage of one aspect of the 1996 Telecommunications Act which was the loosening of restrictions on television ownership. They compared coverage of this aspect of the Telecommunications Act in newspapers owned by companies that stood to gain from the loosening of these restrictions, with coverage in newspapers owned by companies which did not stand to gain. They found substantial differences in how newspapers reported on these proposed regulatory changes depending on the financial interests of their corporate owners. The study found that newspapers that stood to gain from the proposed loosening of TV ownership caps offered their readers favorable coverage of the proposed changes, with positive consequences outnumbering negative consequences by over two to one. But the coverage of the issue in newspapers owned by companies that did not stand to gain was overwhelmingly unfavorable, with negative consequences appearing over three times as often as positive consequences (p. 16).

Politics

Research also found that Clear Channel focused less on politics. The airwaves used to be a source of information about candidates and other political issues. Dugger (2003) explains, “candidates for office believe that the only way they can reach the mass of the voters is to beg corporations and the rich for enough campaign money so they can buy media time for message that won’t offend their paymasters” (p. 1). In addition, Dugger explains that the CEOs of the corporate mass media have the power to hire the reporters, editors, commentators and columnists they want. They also can fire or
sideline any of them who insist on raising prohibited ideas and subjects that threaten large corporations or the very rich (p. 3).

Glynn and McLeod (1984) studied the presidential election between Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan. The study found that Carter supporters in 1980 were comfortable expressing their viewpoints in public with campaign signs and buttons. The study also found that when the fear of isolation started to set in, the outward support started to slow down. As polls were being conducted, some of the Carter backers saw what they interpreted as a slip in support. The greater the perceived discrepancy in public opinion, the more likely Carter supporters would not express their views in public and, in some cases, they would switch their support to Ronald Reagan, who won by a landslide (p. 42).

Another study highlighted the effects of the Spiral of Silence Theory on politics and political views. Eveland, McLeod and Signorielli (1995) analyzed actual and perceived support for the Persian Gulf War in the United States. Data were collected from 292 residents of New Castle County, Delaware, during the 1991 Gulf War. Results showed that support for the war was not the strong consensus reported in mainstream media. According to the study, 53.1% of the respondents fell 6.6% of the respondents were in the strong support range. However, responses were significantly higher on an item measuring perceived support for the war. Consistent with the Spiral of Silence Theory, perceived public support for the war was a significant predictor of support for the war even after 13 variables were controlled. The alternative explanation that subjects were 'projecting' their own perceptions onto the public was discounted by the finding that liberals, moderates and conservatives did not differ in their perceptions of public support.
In addition, Katz and Baldassare (1994) measured the Spiral of Silence effect in the context of actual opinion change during President George Bush's popularity decline in one of his political strongholds. Three pre-election surveys sponsored by a prominent local newspaper in Orange County, California analyzed the willingness of voters to publicly express their opinions about Bush. Respondents were asked whether or not they would be willing to be re-interviewed by a reporter and have their names and views published in the paper. The hypothesis that Bush supporters would be less willing than others to agree to be re-interviewed during the period in which the president's ratings were dropping sharply was supported. This trend was most evident at the beginning of the presidential campaign when Bush's ratings were in the steepest decline.

Censorship

Clear Channel’s programming may also censor the public from a range of ideas and artistic differences. Following the September 11th, 2001, terrorist attacks, Clear Channel officials circulated a list of more than 150 songs with lyrics that affiliates should avoid playing (Biggs, 2003). Clear Channel also compiled uniform play lists for all of its stations and announcers were not entitled to play any other songs that they felt the public might want to hear. Clear Channel's official statement was that no songs were ever banned and that the company simply suggested in an internal memo that its staff members be sensitive to their audience's mood during a time of national mourning (Bednarski, 2003).
Bednarski adds:

Even if the memo was simply a suggestion to tastefully limit play lists, there were several reasons for the outcry. Underlying this criticism, however, was the fact that Clear Channel is a media conglomerate that owns approximately one out of every 10 U.S. radio stations and has more than 110 million listeners. Whether the list was misguided and the circumstances extreme, listeners ultimately became angry that Clear Channel had the ability to manipulate the entire nation's listening habits with a carefully worded fax (p. 3).

Research also showed that artists were also affected. Jenny Eliscu (2003) wrote in an article published in *Rolling Stone*: “There have been instances when the company has to withhold airplay if the artists refuse to perform at their concert venue” (p. 42).

Don Henley, lead singer of The Eagles, testified during Congressional hearing in 2003 that he knows of a musician who refused to do a promotional concert for Clear Channel, and, in return, the company boycotted her next single. Henley said, “consolidation in the industry has reduced the number of musical formats in radio, resulting in a homogenized sound” (Eliscu, as cited in *Rolling Stone*, 2003, p. 42).

The Telecommunications Act of 1996 includes a section that threatens criminal penalties, including fines and imprisonment, for anyone who uses telecommunications devices to be “ obscene, lewd, lascivious, filthy, or indecent” communications “with intent to annoy, abuse, threaten, or harass another person” or knowingly to make an “obscene or indecent” communication with anyone under 18 (Aufderheide, 1997, p. 19). Aufderheide (1997) writes: “This provision has incensed many users and organization, since it applies vague and loose terms” (p. 19).

In 2004, the FCC fined Clear Channel $495,000 because nationally syndicated talk show host Howard Stern made “indecent” comments (Saltzman, 2004). As a result,
Clear Channel dropped Stern from their six stations. There was no public input before Clear Channel made the decision to remove Stern from the airwaves. However, Saltzman writes: “Since Stern was taken off the air, his ratings soared in his other markets…But the silence of Stern’s 8,000,000 fans has been deafening” (p. 67).

Following the FCC fine and Clear Channel’s decision to drop *The Howard Stern Show*, Stern contracted with satellite radio to have more broadcasting freedom. As a result, the public no longer has free access to listen to Stern’s show because satellite is a fee service. Clear Channel also removed a similar program *Bubba the Love Sponge* from four of its Florida stations as another effort to clean up its image (Baker, 2004).

While much research has been conducted in relation to Noelle-Neumann’s Spiral of Silence Theory, there has been little research focusing on the radio sector (Bednarski, 2003). The radio industry has changed vastly since the FCC lifted rules under the Telecommunications Act of 1996. As a result, Clear Channel Communications has created a stronghold on the airwaves which has led to a silencing effect on public opinion. The current study will seek to explore the realm of Clear Channel’s silencing affect on one community.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study consisted of interviews with current and former WJER employees, as well as a focus group of Tuscarawas County residents. The data collected from the subjects was analyzed to gauge perceptions of Clear Channel Communications, its broadcasting practices, content and community involvement.

The study population included current and former employees of WJER Radio, most of whom have worked at the company more than 10 years. The sample size consisted of three current employees and two former employees. The questions centered on their experiences at WJER and Clear Channel Communications (Appendix A). The researcher selected eight people from visiting coffee shops to participate in a focus group. The participants were asked their opinions about what is important in a radio station (Appendix B) and how they felt, if anything, about WJER leaving Tuscarawas County. The researcher was a former member of the organization as well as a resident of the community.

Employees faced potential risks by participating in the study since they were asked their perceptions of their employer, which could be unfavorable. The participants remained entirely anonymous throughout the course of the study. The interviews and
focus group were recorded on audio tapes and transcribed. The participants also received a human subjects consent form (Appendix C) explaining the procedure and potential risks. The researcher requested a waiver of the form to ensure their anonymity while still having the specifics of the study and contact information. All data was assigned numbers instead of names to protect the subjects. The questions also focused primarily on the employees’ perceptions of the work environment during and after the station’s sale, not opinions about their employer.

The data was analyzed and coded. Each interview was transcribed and categorized with codes to establish themes connecting all of the responses. The themes used to draw the results of the study.

This research provided an opportunity to shed light on a topic through a company as it is undergoing the ownership change. The researcher had the ability to study one of the few radio stations of its kind in the country to attempt to understand the impact of large corporations, like Clear Channel Communications, on the local community.
CHAPTER IV
RESULTS/DISCUSSION

The data collected from the employee interviews and focus group discussion yielded five themes. The themes were created after the interviewees’ responses were transcribed and categorized with codes. The themes that emerged from the data were Clear Channel, WJER, Station Employee, Power and Community.

Clear Channel

The Clear Channel Corporation was prevalent throughout the coded data. The international media conglomerate owns or operates more than 1,200 stations nationwide and it is also the world’s largest concert promoter with 135 venues (Kurtz, 1999). Clear Channel purchased WJER Radio in Dover, Ohio in 2003. Employees interviewed for this study were impacted by the sale. Focus group participants were asked to explain their knowledge and opinions about the corporation, if any. Categories that emerged from the Clear Channel theme were criticism, greed and benefit.

Criticism was described as negative feelings relating to the programming and broadcast practices of Clear Channel. All of the WJER employees’ responses as well as some of the focus group responses included criticism. For example, one current WJER employee said:
[Clear Channel] was buying up a lot of radio stations and they were the ‘it girl’. It was becoming a monopoly where they would own every station in town and that would make people nervous because you don’t have that variety.

Another employee said:

The big, generic businesses seem to be taking over all around, not just with radio but there’s Wal-Mart. You can compare Clear Channel to like the Wal-Mart of businesses. You drive everyone else out of business and then you are all that’s left.

Hickey (2003) said that Clear Channel, along with Viacom, now attract 42% of radio listeners and industry revenue. My research suggested that employees felt Clear Channel offered unoriginal programming with few choices and that the service WJER was providing would be missed by the community.

Focus group participants also expressed criticism about Clear Channel. One participant responded:

There was an emergency in one area and of the five stations, one of them was owned by Clear Channel. When they tried to call to get the emergency notification on the radio, nobody answered at the Clear Channel station.

Another participant responded, “If we’re going to a concert or a baseball game, I like being able to turn on the radio and hear if there is a traffic jam. And we turn on those stations and you don’t hear it.” Previous research suggested that Clear Channel uses a deceptive technique called “voice tracking”. An announcer records a segment of programming that includes music, announcer introductions, station call letters and a generic weather forecast that is shared by several stations. Listeners believe that the content is all locally originated (Kurtz, 1999). The technique evolved after the Federal Communications Commission eased the rules on station ownership in 2003. The FCC allowed companies to own stations that together reach up to 45% of all households in the
U.S. The previous limit was 35% (Layton, 2003). Prior to these changes of ownership, station owners safeguarded the public interest on their information services by responding to local community concerns by airing controversial issues, serving neglected constituencies such as children, and providing politicians low-cost air time (FCC, 1994). However, no research has explored how the technique affects the community. My data suggested that when a radio station’s programming is voice tracked or pre-recorded, the community is uninformed about breaking news, emergencies or severe weather alerts. People are disconnected from the community and what is going on around them. They do not have the opportunity to be informed. If they called the radio station with a question, nobody would answer.

Interviewees also associated Clear Channel with greed. After learning that Clear Channel planned to move WJER-FM out of the community, employees expressed that the corporation was only interested in making a profit rather than providing a service. For example, one employee responded, “Moving the station just shows that they are after the advertising dollars from the beginning and it just confirmed that. They don’t care about people and they only care about money.” Clear Channel disregarded the interest of WJER-FM’s listeners and moved the station to where it would be more profitable for the company.

Clear Channel moved WJER-FM into one small studio in a building that houses three other radio stations in Canton, Ohio. The company can operate all four stations with the same staff rather than having four separate stations in different buildings. The stations can share advertising revenue and save money by employing fewer people. One
employee said, “They have a reputation for buying up lots of stations, combining them into one building and then firing the staff and operating the whole thing with just a few people.” My research suggested that Clear Channel is only concerned about providing programming at the lowest cost while still making the most money. The company owns most radio stations in a particular market and shares programming. It monopolizes advertisers by offering them more airtime for their dollar. Independent radio stations cannot compete.

Employees and focus group participants expressed a number of Clear Channel benefits. The responses indicated that Clear Channel’s status in the industry has value. For example, one employee said, “They were on top of the industry and they had the best technology, they had the most vibrant personalities and everyone wanted to listen to a Clear Channel station.” Another employee responded, “They can afford to update our equipment. They can afford to put money into this station that our owner didn’t have.” A former employee also said, “Clear Channel would be able to offer us better and more affordable benefits and invest in equipment and software and we could easily catch up with what others were doing in the industry.”

Employees at the station welcomed Clear Channel. My data suggested that while employees expressed criticism towards Clear Channel’s programming practices, the company had the ability to maximize equipment and streamline broadcasting techniques. For example, while WJER employees used outdated computers and cassette tapes for recording, Clear Channel offered the fastest computers and digital recording devices. Meanwhile, focus group participants expressed benefits relating to Clear Channel’s
primarily entertainment-driven programming. Asked why they liked listening to a Clear Channel station, one person replied, “I like 130 minutes of no commercials.” Another participant said, “They play more my age music.” This related to Noelle Neumann’s Spiral of Silence Theory. Neumann (1989) found that when people perceive their opinion to be congruent with that of the majority, they will be more likely to speak up. Throughout the focus group discussion, the two participants who were in favor of Clear Channel rarely spoke up while other focus group participants expressed criticism about the company.

Clear Channel’s entertainment benefit also related to Kurtz’s (1995) idea of Clear Channel’s “Disneyification” of culture. The corporation focuses on fantasy and sensationalism and avoided real issues. The goal was to make people feel good and keep them happy. A focus group member said, “I want to be entertained. And if I want news, I’ll turn to the Internet.” Clear Channel is in the business of keeping people happy and giving them what they want to hear. These examples show that many people are satisfied with the entertainment the corporation provides.

**WJER**

The second theme that emerged from the data was WJER. WJER was the small radio station that operated in rural Tuscarawas County, Ohio, for the past 60 years and was one of the few of its kind left in the country. It was independently owned for 55 years until the owner sold the stations (AM and FM) to Clear Channel with the understanding that the FM station would remain in the community. Clear Channel then
moved the FM station about 30 minutes north to join its cluster of three other similar stations that operate out of one building and share advertising revenue. In attempt to keep at least keep one station in the community, WJER’s owner re-purchased the AM station from Clear Channel. The AM station has a considerably weaker broadcast signal and does not reach all Tuscarawas County residents. The categories within the WJER theme were station unity, station uniqueness and station deterioration.

WJER employees reported unity among coworkers and management. For example, one employee said, “Station employees were not only in attendance at various community events, but a central part of them.” Another employee said, “You always had a partner. It was fun to be out with your coworkers and nobody could beat us because the whole station was involved.” My data suggested that because the station was small and independent, it operated more like a family. Employees also expressed that more than half of the staff worked at the company for more than 20 years, which they said is unusual in the industry. WJER employees also physically showed up to work each day, as opposed to most Clear Channel stations that are voice-tracked. They expressed that rather than becoming a member of an international company with millions of employees, they were among a small family of about 20 members.

Employees also expressed that the station was unique because it broadcast community events and information that was relevant to the people of Tuscarawas County. For example, one employee said:

You can go up and down that dial and get Canton, Cleveland stations, they don’t do what we do. They do not have that connection with listeners. We have a real connection to the community that no else does.
Another employee said:

When Easter is coming and there are Easter egg hunts going on, you want to take your kids out to do something. You now that you’re not going to hear that on those bigger stations, whereas in our small town radio station, we’ll tell you about things like that.

My data suggested that the employees felt that they were doing a community service. They enjoyed giving listeners information about activities and events going on around town.

Focus group participants expressed favorable opinions about WJER’s unique programming. One participant said, “I like programs like Conversation Corner and Plant Talk and the obituaries. I can’t find those on any other stations.” Another participant liked WJER’s regular newscasts throughout the day: “If I read in the newspaper that someone was killed and they haven’t identified them, I’ll turn on the radio to get updates throughout the day.” Biggs (2003) described Clear Channel stations as “playing the same fifty mindless cookie-cutter songs in an endless, soul-numbing loop, the same conservative talk shows, even the same deejays are doing the same shows for simultaneous broadcast in a half dozen markets” (p. 22). My data reinforced Biggs’ analysis that the Clear Channel stations in the listening area do not offer listeners the range of unique programming and news updates throughout the day. WJER employees also expressed that the news operation was unique. For example, one employee said, “The newsroom alone was better staffed than many large market stations. At one time in the late 1990’s, we actually had seven people on staff in the newsroom.” This is an industry trend according to Kurtz (1999) who found that 98% of U.S. radio stations had news operations in 1982. By 1999, only 67% did and half of the 12,000 radio news
staffers were part-timers (Kurtz, 1999). Gilens and Hertzmann (2000) studied the influence of corporate media owners over news content. They examined newspaper coverage of the 1996 Telecommunications Act: the loosening of restrictions on television ownership. They found substantial differences in how newspapers reported on these proposed regulatory changes depending on the financial interests of their corporate owners. My research shows that corporations like Clear Channel have more of an interest in making money than providing the community news and information. WJER, which at one time had a large news staff for its market size, was significantly cut back after its sale.

One focus group participant also said that WJER’s news coverage was the major reason for listening. The participant said:

I used to listen to WJER FM probably for two hours at least in the morning so that I would hear local news. Then I would always turn it on in the afternoon for a while to hear the changes in the news as the day went on.

However, the respondent could no longer listen to the news coverage on WJER AM because the signal no longer reached her home.

WJER employees stated that the station deteriorated after the sale to Clear Channel was finalized and the FM channel was moved to Canton. WJER’s AM station, with its much lower frequency, remained in the community. One employee said:

When it finally happened, we’re losing listeners, because the sound quality is not as good as FM. You spent so much time convincing the public to keep listening to AM, that you’re almost convincing yourself that it’s still going to be ok, when it’s not.
Another employee expressed, “people started leaving and weren’t replaced and it became a big, big struggle.” The employee explained that the owner had to cut back expenses to keep the radio station operating and could not hire new employees when others left. Another employee explained that the quality of WJER’s programming deteriorated as a result of the sale and the subsequent vacant job positions: “People call up at nine o’clock at night, it’s not very late, unless we have some Cavs [basketball] game on, there’s nobody here. We’re just as bad as Clear Channel.”

My data suggested that drastic changes followed the Clear Channel sale. The staff was cut back, the weak AM signal deterioriated the broadcast quality and employees assumed the role of telling the community that everything was still the same when many things had changed.

**Station Employee**

Another theme that emerged from the research was Station Employee. The Clear Channel sale had many impacts on WJER employees relating to the workplace, the community, security and pride. Before the sale to Clear Channel, employees expressed job satisfaction, co-worker friendship and job pride. After the sale, they expressed negative employee attitude, employee dissatisfaction, no job security and job apathy.

Current and former employees said they were satisfied working at WJER prior to the Clear Channel sale. One employee said, “It was a place I really wanted to be,” while another said, “Everyone wants to work there! That’s a great place! I really, really wanted to be there.” Another employee, who found another job after the Clear Channel sale was finalized, said, “Most of the people he hired were there for many, many years.” Again,
this data suggested that WJER created a family atmosphere that gave employees pride and satisfaction.

WJER’s reputation in the community carried into the workplace. The employees described a sense of pride about their jobs. One employee said, “My first memories of WJER involve feelings of pride and professionalism.” Another employee felt that management made each employee feel important and special: “I felt rather proud that my presence at the radio station was taken so seriously.” Another employee reflected that the workplace was also representative of the community as a whole. “We were all very proud to be a part of this community.” The employee expressed that the pride he felt wasn’t just about the job; it was about serving the community. However, after the sale the employees who still worked there for the AM station still felt this sense of pride. One employee said, “I still want to do the best job I can do while I’m still here.” Another said, “I want to make sure that our newscasts are not influenced by the morale in this building.” The employees, though expressing frustration and disappointment in the changes, still wanted to make sure their jobs were being done to the best of their ability.

The employees at WJER expressed having more friendship relationships than average coworker relationships. One employee said, “There was a group of people that got together outside of work and they were friends.” Another employee said, “Everyone seemed pretty close and everyone definitely knew plenty, probably too much, about each other.” Another employee agreed, “Everyone was friendly and it seemed like a family.” The employees worked in close proximity on a daily basis. They took a vested interest in each other because they enjoyed being there. My data suggested that they were also
proud to represent the organization, and as a result, all had something in common that they carried beyond the workplace.

After the sale to Clear Channel, employees expressed dissatisfaction about their jobs. They described an environment where people were leaving for new jobs, fired or felt undervalued. One employee said, “[the sale to Clear Channel] is terrible for morale. It’s really bad and morale just bottomed out.” Another employee said the broadcast quality deteriorated and subsequently they felt powerless. “Most staff members believed that our product, from public service announcements and promos to music selection and news format, had grown stale. We had little encouragement to change anything.” Another former employee, who left for a new job, said “If [the owner] had not sold the stations I know I would have stayed and retired from WJER.” My data suggested that employees saw a rapid decline after the Clear Channel sale and wished it had never occurred.

The Clear Channel sale also resulted in a negative employee attitude. One employee said, “By the time they sold it, it was like thank God! Thank God. Let someone else, who actually knows what they doing and can keep up with the times, take over.” Another employee said, “It was a relief. I am so glad. Let someone else come in, and put some money in to the place.” Another employee agreed: “I was happy to find out there would likely be changes.” My data suggested that although employees enjoyed working at WJER, they were frustrated with the outdated equipment and management’s unwillingness to keep up with the times. The negative attitude suggested that employees initially welcomed Clear Channel with the hopes that the corporation could improve their product.
Employees expressed apathy following the Clear Channel sale. As morale plummeted, employees reacted by contributing as little as possible. Before the change, employees were eager and willing to go above the call of duty. One employee said:

It was not uncommon several times per day to hear fellow employees make a mistake or mention what they were not going to do and follow up with. They would say, who cares. I won’t have a job in a few weeks anyway.

Another employee said, “People showed up, tried to sound good on the air and generally did their jobs. They did it however, without enthusiasm. Nothing extra. Griping constantly.” A third employee added:

By 2004, few people cared about representing the station and helping to promote it outside their own shifts. Management practically begged to find enough people to put a van in a parade and pass out candy.

My data suggested that WJER’s foundation of employee pride, professionalism and enthusiasm quickly deteriorated because of the dissatisfaction of the direction of the station following the sale. The workplace became an unhappy, apathetic environment where employees felt they could lose their jobs at any moment.

Another category that emerged from the Station Employee theme was a lack of job security. One employee reflected on how she felt following the Clear Channel sale:

Fear! Where is my next paycheck going to come from? What’s going to happen to us? Because even after we know we were sold, we still didn’t know what was going on for the longest time, and I still don’t really know what’s going on.

Another employee, who quit his job at WJER shortly after the sale was announced, said, “I decided that I could sit and wait for [the owner] or Clear Channel to determine my future. Or I could go out and find a new position.” Another employee, who also found another job said, “I had no guarantee that my job would be secure; I compared it to being
on death row.” My data suggested that employees equated Clear Channel with an unstable environment. They read articles and heard in the media that Clear Channel had a reputation of downsizing stations and firing employees. Another employee added that Clear Channel failed to keep employees informed about WJER’s future and refused to answer questions: “Clear Channel was not involved on a daily basis so none of us knew if we if we were in their plans or not.” The data suggested that Clear Channel’s unwillingness to keep employees informed about changes or plans created an uncertain workplace.

Power

Power was also a relevant theme that emerged from the data. WJER’s owner initially sold both the FM and AM stations and then changed his mind after Clear Channel announced it would move the FM station out of the community. Clear Channel agreed only to sell the AM station to the owner. As a result, the categories that emerged from the power theme include, owner indecision, negative management, owner greed and smart business.

Employees expressed that the negative morale within the organization was mostly attributed to the owner’s indecision. One employee said, “I don’t so much blame it on Clear Channel as I do on [the owner’s] struggle to figure out what he wanted to do.” Another employee agreed: “If management can’t come up with a clear path, then the employees have even less of a clear path.” An employee who quit WJER shortly after the sale said, “When [the owner] decided he changed his mind and wanted to stop the sale,
the status quo wasn’t so great and I was more than willing to leave it behind.” The data suggested that the owner’s indecision contributed somewhat to the volatile environment at WJER. The owner changed his mind and employees were unaware of their future. The employees faulted the owner for his indecision rather than Clear Channel for relocating the radio station.

The owner’s indecision led to another category that emerged from the data: negative management. Employees said that management declined after the sale was announced. One employee said: “The owner was very silent, distant, and offered little assurance.” Another employee added that management failed to adapt to industry changes over the years: “Management was very negative about many things. They are very resistant to change and they wanted to be like it was in 1950 when we first went on the air.” Another employee said management failed to continue to inspire employees: “There was such little emphasis on instilling pride in employees or rewarding them in any way that few, if any, had the desire to promote anything.” My data suggested that the employees were upset with Clear Channel and also frustrated with management during the process. Clear Channel was the cause of fear and uncertainty but management failed to reassure employees.

Another category that emerged was owner greed. Some focus group members expressed greed about the sale. Focus group members were residents in the community who only heard about the sale through the local newspaper or through friends. Some of the participants were regular WJER listeners and some never listened to the station. One participant said, “I just think [the owner] heard dollar signs, and then it was ‘oh my gosh
what did I do?’ It was an afterthought.” Another participant said, “It had to be greed on the owner’s part to sell the FM to get money because Clear Channel would move it and make more money.” My data suggested that the reaction from the community was that the owner cared more about money than the listeners.

Employees participating in the study were instructed not to make specific comments about the owner because some of them still work there and their responses could impact their employment. However, one employee said that the feedback received from the community suggested that the owner was at fault: “[Listeners] are betrayed that [the owner] took something away from them that they counted on.” The data suggested that the community felt that the owner was concerned about his own interests and didn’t protect the radio station for the community.

Some focus group participants felt that the sale was simply a smart business move and they didn’t blame the owner for selling. The focus group participants who gave these responses said they were not WJER listeners. One of them said, “Who doesn’t have the right to sell a business to make a profit? If that’s your business, why would you care?” Another participant gave a similar response: “Why shouldn’t the business move to where it’s more profitable? Sounds like a smart business move on their end.” The data suggested that community members who did not listen to WJER perceived the sale as something common in the business world.
The final theme that emerged from my research was Community. WJER-FM was a part of its community for more than 50 years and both employees and focus group participants said the sale impacted the community. The categories that emerged from this theme were involvement, loss and listener apathy.

The involvement category related to the community’s participation and sense of ownership in a radio station. Employees said their top priority was including listeners and keeping them informed. One employee said, “What sets us apart, and still does to some extent today is our involvement in the community. Those little ham dinners that we announce, people love that.” Another employee said, “Even just lost and found, it’s a small thing, but to the people who lost their dog and then found it because someone heard it on our radio station, then it’s important to them.” Employees said that the information they provide was valuable to many people. One employee said, “Those small little stupid things are a real connection to the community that no one else does.” Another employee said, “We let the community interact and think for themselves with programs like our election call-in shows with the candidates. Those things are important to the community.”

The data suggested that WJER employees felt a sense of responsibility to keep people informed and they got satisfaction in providing that service. The data also suggested that most stations (i.e. some of those owned by Clear Channel) did not offer those community services. It also suggested that WJER gave listeners the chance to contribute and interact with the radio station through phone calls. Listeners felt a sense of ownership.
Employees and focus group participants expressed a deep loss in WJER-FM leaving the community. One employee said, “[Clear Channel] is robbing the public of important information.” Another said, “[Clear Channel] is not doing those local things, so I feel like it was kind of stolen or least its soul was stolen.” Another employee also emphasized the loss:

I think it is a big loss to this community to take away an FM station that was so well liked and had a such a strong tradition. There are other FM stations here, but they don’t provide what we do.

Employees also described that the loss amounted to what Clear Channel lacked. The station was move and replaced by a station that no longer met the communitys’ needs. An employee said, “As far as information and I keep saying that community connection, they don’t have a clue.” Focus group participants also described loss following the Clear Channel sale. One person noticed that the station was broadcasting less local sports: “Everything was cut in half. You only get half the sports on the weekend and maybe not even that much.” Another participant said, “I always listen to the news and I can’t pick it up now in my car or anywhere.” After the FM station moved, the AM station remained in the community with a much weaker broadcasting signal. This person could no longer listen because they lived too far to pick up the AM signal. Another focus group participant expressed a huge disappointment in the sale: “To me, it just seems like a step backward for the community. To go from having a really nice FM station, to only AM, I just think it’s a step backward.” The data suggested that WJER-FM leaving the community had a profound impact. Employees said listeners relied on WJER-FM’s unique, around-the-clock information. Focus group participants said they missed certain
programs and information they enjoyed and counted on and they could no longer find similar programs on any other station.

Some employees expressed that most people in the community, excluding listeners, had no opinion or were unaware about the sale. Some focus group participants agreed. One employee said, “I don’t think most people have any idea what it’s like to have Clear Channel in their backyard. I don’t think the public is aware of ownership at all.” Another employee said, “Only people close to it see things in the extreme while the lives of everyone else don’t really change. There was hardly an outcry from the community that I noticed.” The data suggested that while the radio station leaving may be important to the people who work there and to people who listen regularly, most people had no opinion about it or didn’t know it existed.

When WJER-FM moved to Canton, Clear Channel changed its call letters to WHOF-FM and kept a similar music format that was mostly entertainment driven (little local news or community information). One current WJER employee said, “There are folks who don’t even really seem aware that the change has been made. We still get calls for WHOF.” Another focus group participant, who listens to radio regularly for entertainment, said, “I don’t know anything about [Clear Channel].” This supported Noelle-Neumann’s Spiral of Silence Theory. Noelle-Neumann’s (1977) Theory explained that people go along with the majority when they were presented with no other choices. Clear Channel is providing entertainment and dominates the airwaves. As a result, few people are aware of the ownership and just enjoy the entertainment. The few who do have opinion about the monopoly may refrain from speaking out.
In conclusion, the research suggested that Clear Channel had a negative impact on public opinion. Some WJER employees either quit or were fired, some community-related programs were eliminated or scaled back and morale declined. Outside of the workplace, some listeners were angry that the owner sold and that the radio station was leaving the community. Listeners blamed WJER’s owner rather than Clear Channel. But my research suggested that Clear Channel ignored the value WJER-FM to Tuscarwas County, Ohio and moved the station to where it was more profitable.

Listeners complained that they could no longer get important information, including news and community events because most other stations owned by Clear Channel did not provide those services. These listeners, who expressed this anger in the focus group, were also upset that they could not express their concerns to Clear Channel and were not given the opportunity to speak out about Clear Channel’s decision to move the station out of the community. The public was forced to listen to another Clear Channel station, and, as a result, listen to the same programming and limited information that is on every station on the dial.
The radio industry is owned by two major corporations, Clear Channel and Viacom. When two companies control an entire industry, it provides little room for diverse opinions, discussions and choices. My research reinforces Noelle-Nuemann’s Spiral of Silence Theory that states the public either accepts the monopoly or is afraid to speak up in fear of being ostracized from others. WJER-FM’s sale to Clear Channel went unknown to most people in the community until it was too late and the station was already relocated. People noticed that Clear Channel discontinued certain programs and scaled back its news coverage, however, they felt powerless because no one would listen to their concerns. They either began listening to a Clear Channel station because that was all that was available to them or they just stopped listening to the radio. Clear Channel is creating a silencing effect on public opinion because people no longer get to choose from a variety of stations to listen to and have no voice to challenge an international corporation.
REFERENCES


APPENDICES
APPENDIX A. Employee Interview Questions

Describe the environment at WJER when you first started.
Do (did) you have friendships here?
What sets this radio station apart from the others?
Describe your emotions when you learned that Clear Channel had bought the station
What did you know about Clear Channel then?
Do you know more about it now?
Have you (Did you) noticed any changes since the change of ownership?
What do you (did you) contribute to those changes?
Has (was) morale been affected?
What are some questions and comments you hear (you heard) from people in the community about the change in ownership? Can you tell some stories?
Do you (did you) fear your job security?
Do you (did you) take pride in the content that this station presents to the community?
Do you (did you) care what the people are exposed to? (news, information)
How has the radio industry as a whole changed since you first started working here?
Do you think independently-owned radio stations can survive in this industry anymore?
APPENDIX B. Focus Group Questions

Did you listen to WJER-FM?
How regularly?
What did you like on the station?
What’s important to you in a radio station (news, music, sports)
What is your perception of the company Clear Channel Communications? Have you heard anything about it?
Do you know if there are any Clear Channel stations that you listen to? Do you like them? Why or why not?
What does WJER mean to you?
Does it disappoint you that the station is gone? Why or why not?
Will you still listen to WJER-AM? Why or why not?
Do you feel helpless as a result of the move to North Canton?
What do you know, or what have you heard, about the sale?
Do you fault the previous owner for selling?
What do you listen to now that the station is gone?
What do you miss about WJER-FM? (news, music, sports)
Did you feel WJER-FM addresses community concerns and provide information?
By reading and accepting this document, you agree to participate in the research being conducted by Amanda Rabinowitz, graduate student under the direction of Dr. N.J. Brown, University of Akron Graduate School of Communication.

The purpose of the research is to analyze WJER-FM Radio and Clear Channel Communications to determine what degree local radio represents public interest and the overall impact of local radio on the communities it serves.

By participating in this study, you agree to allow the researcher to conduct a one-one-one interview or focus group to share your experiences and/or perceptions about WJER-FM Radio, Clear Channel Communications and the radio industry overall. The interview will be audio-taped and transcribed by the researcher.

Throughout the project, the researcher will not be collecting any identifying information so there will be no link between you and your responses. The audio tapes will be kept locked in the office of Dr. Brown throughout the course of the study and will be destroyed as soon as the information is transcribed by the researcher. Again, no names will be included in the study.

You will receive no monetary compensation for your participation. In addition, participation in this study is completely voluntary, and you have the right to discard particular statements and/or choose to opt out of the study at any time. You are not required to sign this document in order to maintain your anonymity, however, reading and accepting this document is your consent to cooperate in the study.

For questions about this study, you may contact the researcher, Amanda Rabinowitz (330) 447-9345 or Dr. N.J. Brown at (330) 972-7600.