ABSTRACT

WAIF-FM: A CASE STUDY IN COMMUNITY RADIO'S PLACE IN A GLOBALIZING MEDIASCAPE

by William Church Terry

The concentration of radio station ownership and the priority that stations place on content at national and global scales has led to deterritorialization and a sense of placelessness at the local scale. As an alternative to these homogenizing forces, community radio has proven itself to be an alternative medium that allows citizens to construct their own local media space on terms determined by themselves. This paper is an attempt to understand how WAIF 88.3 FM, an all-volunteer community radio station in Cincinnati, Ohio is meeting the needs of the local community. The study was conducted mostly through semi-structured interviews and observation of station activities as well as through content analysis. Interviews with station volunteers documented the motivation for participation in community radio and the networks of communication and support that are linked to the station. Analysis of programming revealed that WAIF maintains a multi-scalar product with emphasis on representing groups that have traditionally been denied access to mainstream media outlets. The paper concludes by noting the relevance of the WAIF case study for broader issues of media control, content, and scale.
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William Church Terry
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Advisor_________________________
(Dr. Thomas Klak)

Reader__________________________
(Dr. Bruce D’Arcus)

Reader__________________________
(Dr. David Sholle)
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Radio has been, historically, probably the most place-based electronic medium. Due to the prohibitive costs of television and filmmaking, few localities are able to create their own product with a specific sense of place, where the produced images are reflective of the local culture and generate a feeling that is wholly unique to the local community. On the other hand, radio’s relatively low cost has created a much greater opportunity for local flavor, ideals, attitudes, and culture to be embedded in its broadcasts. Its affordability has allowed for people to control radio at a local scale. However, while systems have always been in place to facilitate the broadcasting of syndicated programming aimed at a national or regional scale, until more recently this had not been the definitional character of radio. As radio undergoes similar restructuring processes that are involved in the globalization of our economies and cultures, it is important to reassess the state of our communication structures. This case-study seeks to understand how radio is meeting the needs of communities at a local scale, by examining the community radio station WAIF-FM in Cincinnati, Ohio.

Deregulation of radio markets in the United States over the past twenty-five years has led to an unprecedented concentration of station ownership under the control of a few corporations. Much of this consolidation has come following the passage of the Telecommunications Act of 1996. From 1996 to 2002, there was a 33% decrease in the number of commercial station owners, while the total number of stations in operation has experienced a slight increase of 5% (Dicola and Thomson 2002). The loosened regulatory structure embodied in the legislation is indicative of the neoliberal economic policies that have come to dominate during the last twenty years. This free market approach reflects the overall processes associated with economic globalization, which transfers greater power over to corporations and investors.

The concentration of radio ownership has been linked with a homogenization of content across space, a decreased level of competition, and a loss of local ownership and decision-making. These processes have worked to ‘deterritorialize’ radio, so that the connection of commercial stations with the local communities they serve has eroded (Fairchild 1999). Much of this can be attributed to the streamlined approach that larger stations have adopted in an attempt to make them more profitable. This includes an increase in nationally syndicated broadcasts and a similar increase in pre-taped broadcasting, which in turn leads to fewer employed DJs (Huntemann 1999). As the executive director for the Center for Digital Democracy, Jeff Chester, recently told the New York Times, “The goal is homogenization in order to contain costs, but that homogenization creates a kind of cookie-cutter blandness” (Rutenberg and Maynard 2003, 1).

In effect, there is a decreasing diversity both at the local and national scales with respect to content. One need only look as far as the names and logos of radio stations
across the United States to realize that many are carbon copies of one another. One example is the Clear Channel-owned MIX FM brand that is seemingly ubiquitous in Ohio with eight separate stations, each with the same basic logo and format (see Figure 1). One picture that comes to mind is that of a person driving on the interstate between cities. The driver experiences not only a generic landscape of restaurants and stores associated with urban sprawl, but also a generic radio landscape. When the radio does not generate a sense of unique place, it is shows symptoms of deterritorialization. While we have a term to describe the well-known processes associated with urban sprawl that include strip malls and generic suburbs, perhaps it is time to think of mediascapes in similar terms. Therefore, the phrase ‘media sprawl’ might prove a beneficial way of conceptualizing these trends.

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As a reaction to these mostly corporate-dominated media frameworks, alternative forms of media have arisen. Community radio is one form of alternative media that specifically addresses questions of community access to the airwaves. In allowing ordinary citizens to use the radio medium as a forum for the expression of political and artistic ideas, community radio works to construct a sense of place in its creation of content. WAIF defines itself as a community radio station, and actively seeks to give a voice to local citizens who otherwise would not have one. Therefore, WAIF’s position within the current media framework is an ideal setting for a critical account of community radio’s contribution to change driven by global and other extra-local forces.

In this thesis I hope to accomplish three goals. First, this case study will help to demonstrate the idiosyncrasies of developing a localized media space where the politics
of democratic decision-making create unique challenges. Second, in light of the rise of the internet broadcasting, this research evaluates how through web-streaming, WAIF actively creates a multi-scalar product and offers an alternative to other forms of up-scaling in the media. Third, this research provides insight into the changing conceptions of community and localism in the media, and how people involved in community radio see their role in contesting such forces.

The following are my research questions which aim at better understanding how community radio is serving the Cincinnati community.

1. Why do people volunteer at WAIF either as on-air personalities or staff?

2. How is “the local” being constructed on WAIF amidst multiple dimensions of up-scaling and homogenization of radio broadcasting?

3. How is web broadcasting changing WAIF’s traditional role as a “local” station?

These questions provide the basis for this thesis research, and the framework for data collection that is described later.

The next chapter (2) provides a theoretical framework for this topic of community radio in an era of global restructuring. It begins with an overview of the current theories for understanding how geographic scale is constructed, and how the organization of our culture and economies have changed as scale construction has evolved over time. Second, I discuss globalization and neoliberalism and how they relate to community radio. Finally, I provide a description of community radio and alternative media, and how these two terms hold different meanings for how we understand the construction of media spaces. Chapter 3 is a description of the methods I used to collect data for this project. Chapter 4 follows with the case study of WAIF, a description and critical examination of station practices. Chapter 5 finishes with a discussion of WAIF and community radio within the broad framework of the media in the United States.

Chapter Two: Theoretical Framework

The following is my thesis statement that serves to organize my thoughts for this literature review. **Community radio challenges up-scaling in the media, and gives a voice to local people who have been excluded from large scale media. It serves, therefore, in the empowerment of citizenship and place-based communities.** This chapter first provides an overview of current conceptualizations of geographic scale. Understanding scale is important, because community radio specifically deals with allowing the ability of local places to create their own medium outside of the dominant commercial interests that operate at greater scales. Because homogenization and corporatization of media spaces are characteristics of the contemporary media environment, it is important to understand the processes involved in creating such trends. Therefore, the second part of this chapter provides a contextual understanding of how globalization and more significantly neoliberalism have shaped the setting in which community radio operates today. Finally, the last portion of the chapter discusses
community radio as a place-based alternative to media conglomeration that effectively eliminates a sense of place.

**Geographic Scale & Globalization**

Geographic scale has become a major subject of theorization for social scientists, which provides us with a deeper understanding of how human beings seek to order space. Lefebvre (1991) argues that space is a product of social processes rather than simply a parcel of land or area. While this idea has become widely accepted theoretically, geographers have been left to grapple with the problem of geographical difference that his treatments of space did not fully treat. According to Marston and Smith (2001), geographers approached this problem during the 1980s and 90s by employing theories of scale. Like space, almost all theorists agree that scale is also socially-constructed. Theories have therefore made “the commitment to a constructionist framework and the rejection of scale as an ontologically given category” (Marston 2000).

Geographic scale is essentially a focus of geographic resolution of human processes. The creation or radio, a human-created product, is one such process that illustrates a construction of scale. However, these ideas have generally been applied to studies of political-economy, and not so thoroughly to studies of culture and community (Marston 2000). Radio though, cannot be simply examined as a mere political or economic entity. An understanding or radio reaches into the culture that helps to create it and the communities that it helps to define. Radio is as much a means of cultural transmission as it is a business or a platform for pundits. For this reason, it is necessary to understand the current theories of scale and interpret them in a way that makes more sense for radio.

Historically, the ways in which humans have constructed scale have changed over time. According to Brenner (1998), the breakdown of Fordist regulation and the Bretton Woods system led to a re-scaling process. Consequently, until the early 1970’s the nation-state was the most important scale at which most political and economic processes were conducted and the chief point at which regulation occurred. The combination of rising inflation and declining economic output in industrialized countries, part of the consequences of the oil crises of the 1970’s, led governments and businesses to proceed towards a rescaling of operations toward the global level or down to the local, regional urban etc… scales, away from the scale of the nation-state. This process of ‘glocalization’, i.e. scaling down and up simultaneously, was characteristic of the changes in the world economy throughout the past twenty-five years (Swyngedouw 1997). This rescaling is a significant aspect of globalization, which is further addressed below. Examples of glocalization can be seen in the growth of supranational organizations aimed at regulating the global economy (WTO, NAFTA, World Bank) or the global political structure (UN, NATO, EU), or in certain business practices where TNC’s approach organizations of ‘strategic localization’ to appeal to consumers at a local scale.

Such a topic of debate does speak to the ideas of scale and scale construction. Because scale is socially constructed, it can be used as a tool in an attempt to dominate or to resist hegemony. For this reason, construction of scale is essentially a political process.
(Smith 1992, Delany and Leitner 1997, Agnew 1997). By understanding how the ‘politics of scale’ are forged by processes of media creation, we might be able to understand how both media conglomerates and local actors use constructions of scale in order to achieve their own political goals.

Geographic communities (as opposed to communities bound by interests) and their social processes are wrapped up in what many would describe as the local scale. Culture, while an even broader topic, also maintains an air of localness especially when considering how local processes, propinquity and attachment to places act as agents of cultural creation. Since globalization has led to a rescaling of global economic regimes, the way in which localities have reacted is significant. The processes of globalization that have led to a more dominant capitalism and increased interconnectedness across the Earth have a direct impact on local communities through free flows of capital around the world and strategies of localization on the part of corporations aimed at securing new consumers. The net result is that many people are frightened that their own place will be forever changed.

One example of this fear in the media has been France’s restriction on the importation of foreign films in an effort to maintain a distinctly French culture. This cultural protectionism is a direct result of the concern that people have at a local scale for their own cultural survival. Politics of scale becomes a way in which people are able to appeal to higher scales in order to secure a more powerful position vis-à-vis capitalist hegemony. In the example of French cinema, the financial success of their films in other parts of the globe act as one type of ally in the struggle to maintain their own distinct cultural identity. As consumers in the United States or elsewhere begin to generate an expectation of what French films are like and eventually a taste for that style, France’s movie industry becomes stronger due to the increased global support.

This reconstitution of scale from lower scales to higher in order to gain an advantage is what Smith deemed ‘jumping scales’. One classic example of this idea is the use of labor unions to increase the bargaining power of workers by negotiating labor contracts at national as well as local scales. In this way, labor attempts to mirror capital’s moves toward the global scale in this period of restructuring (Herod 1997). Because the construction of scales is process-based, appealing to the collective strength of more people in an interactive network wields much greater power. As a political project, jumping scales can have a profound affect on the ability of people to secure the necessary support that can be found by tapping into resources more broadly. For example, Adams (1996) argues that political struggles are wrapped up in the construction of scale. His examples of the Civil Rights movement in the United States, the Filipino Peoples movement in the Philippines and the Tiananmen Square movement of Chinese students all reflect how political actors are able to appeal to a wider audience as a means of securing support beyond that scale at which their oppression lay.

It would not be a huge jump to consider how these theories that treat political economy might also be understood in terms of communities and local cultures. ‘Jumping scales’ might be applicable to resistance by local people. This is not to say that such a struggle necessarily be an overt project, but rather a means of gaining collective support of other people either within a community or similar cultural field via networking. Understanding scale in such a way may allow people to renegotiate their position in the face of capitalist hegemony.
Another more abstract understanding of how scale theories might be incorporated into issues of community concerns the very definitions of community and culture. Being that they are both nebulous concepts, both are not necessarily ontologically given, just like geographic scale. (Swyngedouw 1997) Both definitions may be wrapped up in ideas of scale insofar as they both have a variable geographic extent. To take this further, community is often understood as a group of people sharing a common set of meanings, values, or place. This makes it a variable concept, since the definition of community can be place-based, value based or any combination of qualities that connect people through commonalities. Because the definition of community changes based on the context of the situation it is not part of a set hierarchy of scales; in essence it is impossible to say that the scale of a community is greater or smaller than that of the urban or local because it is context dependent. Similarly, culture can be treated in the same way, so that in creating a definition of the culture in question, one will not make the mistake of conceptualizing a set notion of scale.

Global restructuring & neoliberalism: The contemporary condition

While theories of scale necessarily touch on the idea of globalization, it is important to generate an understanding of what globalization is, especially in providing a contextual basis for the understanding of contemporary forms of community radio. The last quarter of the twentieth century was one of great transition across the globe. Economic systems experienced thorough changes and ideas of economic development experienced a dramatic paradigm shift. Scholars have expended a great deal of effort in describing and labeling the various processes that were part and parcel to this restructuring. Two phrases that have become common in the literature surrounding this period are “economic globalization” and “neoliberalism”. While the concepts are often equated in their use, especially in non-academic work such as journalism, they are very different in their meanings.

Globalization as an idea is really a product of the last twenty-five years, although as many scholars argue, it may not be such a new phenomenon (Hirst and Thompson 1996). What it generally refers to, however, is the process of increasing economic integration across international frontiers. Certainly, the improvement of communication and transportation technologies (leading to “time-space compression”) in the past couple of decades has contributed to such integration. The implications for economic systems and actors are considerable due to the ability for human beings to conduct business globally in real time, and for capital flows to speed up dramatically. Due to globalization, places are increasingly “interconnected,” socially, politically and economically (Held et al 1999). But we must be careful not to think of economic globalization as a thing in and of itself. Conceptually, it is more useful to consider economic globalization, henceforth to simply be called globalization, as a process or set of processes that are increasing the connectivity of people around the globe.

However, these processes have been spatially uneven. There is certainly variation in the ability of people to access communication technologies, and foreign direct investment (FDI) varies enormously from country to country. Every location on earth experiences differing amounts of interconnectedness. The general idea of globalization is
that while for many people, especially those living in higher income countries, international economic integration is increasing, however unevenly. Sklair’s concept of the Transnational Capitalist Class (TCC) lends to the discussion of unequal access. The TCC in Sklair’s conception shapes globalization due to their influence as high-powered executives of TNC’s, bureaucrats, or independent investors (Sklair 2001). While the TCC, and furthermore TNC’s, remain powerful agents behind globalization of the globalization process, the vast majority of the world is not so influential.

Politically, globalization has created a great deal of discussion about the role of the nation-state in an economically integrated world. One of the key components of globalization has been the dominance of free-market capitalism and the growth of supranational organizations aimed at regulating above the national scale. According to Held and his coauthors (1999) the bulk of the literature surrounding globalization can be grouped into three categories. First are the hyperglobalists, who see the reduction in the power of the nation-state to organize and control due to strength and mobility of international capitalism at an unprecedented level. The second group is the skeptics, whose theories support that that globalization is not unprecedented in that international capital flows have been historically similar in the late 19th and early 20th century, and that the state remains powerful. Finally, are the transformationalists who see the current role of the nation-state as being in a state of transition with the outcome anything but clear. Dujon (2002) and Hirst/Thompson (1996) are scholars, for example, who remain skeptical of globalization due to the fact that the state retains much authority and remains a location of economic structuring. Hirst and Thompson in fact don’t believe that true TNC’s exist because the state still maintains the ability to control them. TNC’s are effectively embedded in their nation-states of origin. These three positions do share common ground, though, in their conceptions that indeed there is increasing divergence between places as economic development unfolds unevenly and a gap between the economically privileged and the disadvantaged grows (Gwynne et al. 2003).

Because one of the main characteristics of economic globalization is the preponderance of free-market economics and (according to some) the reduction of the role of the state, neoliberalism is often misinterpreted as globalization. They are in fact very different. Neoliberalism is in fact a theory that stresses laissez-faire economic policies with the assumption that market forces are inherently self-regulating. “Neoliberalism has provided a kind of operating framework or ‘ideological software’ for competitive globalization, inspiring and imposing far-reaching programs of state restructuring and rescaling across a wide range of national and local contexts.” (Peck and Tickell 2002, 380) It is considered such a big factor in globalization, because it is the dominant paradigm of global economic development (Gwynne et al. 2003). Its origins lie in the breakdown of the Bretton Woods system of economic regulation, also known as the Fordist or Keynesian period of structuring, and the subsequent move away from the nation-state as the major scale of economic regulation in the early 1970s (Peck and Tickell 2002). The idea of neoliberalism centers on the advancement of free-market economics and the reduction of state intervention in controlling capital flows. In addition, in order to improve one’s economy, neoliberalism emphasizes the reduction of state expenditures on social welfare programs and the reduction of state ownership via privatization. Neoliberalism also places emphasis on financial austerity with the desire to keep inflation low. The net result is increased inter-local competition on a smaller scale and openness to international competition on a large scale (Peck and Tickell 2002).
Neoliberalism became a force through the policies of Reagan and Thatcher in the 1980’s. There has been quite a lot of backlash to the neoliberal project since then, however, as many scholars have been quick to point out its many failures, especially in terms of economic development abroad, including increasing polarization between levels of wealth across the globe, economic crises in East Asia and Latin America, and a lack of a successful models in post-communist Eastern Europe (Jessop 2002).

**Media Consolidation and Erasure of Place**

Both neoliberalism and globalization are terms that are used quite often to explain political and economic outcomes beyond the scale of the nation-state. But they are relevant to the local level as well. According to Jessop (2003), the urban or regional scales are the places where neoliberalism’s effects are most noticeable. The same can be said for globalization, because it is the changes in the vernacular landscapes of places that provide the most conspicuous evidence that we live in a more global society. Fast food restaurants such as McDonald’s that are nestled in between centuries-old buildings in Europe and Asia are clear examples of this local impact.

For community radio, both are quite relevant. Because there is a greater deal of global economic integration, local places are necessarily affected. For example Amin and Thrift (1997) argue that it is incorrect to analyze the effects of globalization through a dualistic model of global vs. local. Instead, these levels of abstraction should be seen as containing multiple levels of interaction (Amin and Thrift 1997). This argument is very similar to debates regarding the construction of scale in the social science and geographic literature as described above. The important point of this is that the local scale can not be seen as something totally separate from the global scale. Therefore, what occurs globally, also occurs locally.

The transformative power of capitalism in today’s global system has led many to worry that as the world becomes more economically interdependent, local cultures will lose their distinctness. Such is the idea behind McWorld view of globalization which is brought on, “by the onrush of economic and ecological forces that demand integration and uniformity and that mesmerize the world with fast music, fast computers, and fast food.” (Barber 1992, 53) In this view, local people are quite resistant to globalizing trends and view them as a threat. Others such as Friedmann (1999) see this view as too shortsighted and feel that the processes of globalization lead to positive changes such as better functioning democracies even in the face of such regressive resistors. His opinion is that as international economies become more integrated and their populations want for more consumer opportunities, there will be less resistance by local actors to the loss of their uniqueness. Merett (2001) rejects both of these authors’ notions for not taking into account the possibility that local actors in fact can and do act in a progressive way in response towards globalization. His analysis rejects the theoretical binary system of global forces versus local resistance and seeks to replace such a concept with one that accepts the more complex realities of how people react to the condition of living in a globalizing society.

Once example of a globalizing force that is affecting the scale of community radio is the growth of TNC’s, especially media conglomerates. The impact of TNC’s upon the
media landscape has been enormous in the United States. While just the improvement in communications technology has had an enormous impact in linking people across the globe, so has the ability of corporations to organize themselves above the national level. With the power of the TNC’s growing with globalization, and the reduction of state involvement in regulation of media ownership (a reflection of neoliberalism’s emphasis on free-market policies) the media often finds itself subject to homogenization of content. This is one particular outcome as corporations are able to own more stations and hence streamline content with generic programming across a larger territorial swath. In essence, media companies are able to benefit financially by creating economies of scale, with the side-effect being increasing levels of homogenization. Community radio finds itself working in opposition to the homogenizing tendencies of globalization and neoliberalization. Whether or not people listen to or volunteer with community media specifically with intent to resist such forces is unclear, but the placement of community radio within the greater framework is not.

Hines (2002) provides an example of those who have begun to rethink the way in which globalization is affecting local places by advocating for a replacement of globalization with “localization” by actively “discriminating in favor of the local” (Hines 2002, 2). Unfortunately, aside from offering a modest set of guidelines for energizing localities with suggestions such as making sure that money remains within its place of origin, he offers no specifics as to the type of institutions that are needed to forge localizing tendencies. As in the case with theories of scale, Hines too focuses on economics without acknowledging the role of local cultural institutions in advocating a change in policy. It seems likely, that local actors could play a part in his vision of localization through organizations like community radio. As Peck and Tickell (2002) have argued, inter-local competition has been a consequence of the rise of neoliberalism. Because cities and local communities are forced to compete for business attraction and job creation, the possibilities of community radio providing a tool for growth are enormous. Neoliberalism and economic globalization are two terms that have defined economic, political, and social restructuring in the past few decades. While they are different in their conceptions, their implications for restructuring are similarly great. Their relevance to local activities such as community radio is apparent in both a textual understanding of the media landscape and in assessments of how community radio plays a role in both facilitating development and resisting these global forces.

*Community Radio as a Place-Based Alternative to Media Conglomeration*

While community radio has been addressed numerous times thus far, it is now necessary to more fully unpack the term. Community radio is a specific model of radio broadcasting that focuses on granting local communities airtime access. This places it totally outside the framework of most mainstream commercial media, which generally focuses on the communities’ needs only inasmuch as they increase the profit margin. In many ways community radio is variable in its actual manifestation, some of which is due to the fact that it is often difficult to define the local community itself in absolute terms. In most accounts, community radio is often lumped into the general term “alternative
media”, but both community media and alternative media are rather nebulous ideas. They are related in that they share characteristics, but they are not mutually exclusive terms.

Lewis (1993) addressed this definitional problem in a UNESCO report. Initially he attempted to address the definition of alternative media. To approach such a task he found it was first necessary to ask, “alternative to what?” His answer was that it must be alternative to the mainstream media. Its position in relation to mainstream media was one of supplementation. Alternative media acts in a manner of taking up where mainstream outlets leave off. The image that comes to mind is of alternative media dealing with whatever content mainstream media cannot carry, whatever the reasons. Other theorists have taken a different approach to Lewis, namely that alternative media represents everything that mainstream media is not. Such a definition is a broad construction, one that leads to a rather problematic binary. According to Rodriguez (2001), conceptualizing the media as a binary is to construct two forms of media in terms of levels of power. The binary understanding of powerful (global media corporations, mainstream) versus powerless (alternative media projects) is problematic because it ignores the different power regimes that the various actors construct and/or maintain. She goes on to explain this idea further:

Within a community, men and women are not fixed in one power position; instead, their identities are permanently displaced along a continuum. Sometimes we are more powerful, at other times we become powerless; access to power continually changes as people move through the landscapes of everyday life.

(Rodriguez 2001, 17)

Alternative media, therefore, doesn’t equate to a powerless media. The nature of alternative media is always changing on a contextual basis. What is alternative or marginal today often enters the social consciousness and becomes commonplace and invariably, mainstream, because it acts as a place of experimentation with content. Media companies generally use business models or formats that are well established rather than take on the risks associated with new programming types. When, for example, the FM radio spectrum was opened and stations began to operate, they were undoubtedly alternative media operations, because they lie outside of the hegemonic power of AM radio and newspapers and offered a product that could not be found anywhere else. However, as they gained strength through the cultural movements of the 1950’s and 1960’s, they became much more established and eventually were co-opted as mainstream outlets. So considering that what has traditionally been considered alternative media has changed over time, and that in practice all media generally involve many different models of communication, the use of one term such as alternative media to represent all media forms outside the mainstream is problematic. I therefore prefer a nomenclature that better represents the function of the individual medium over one that attempts to capture many complex models in a single term.

Community media is somewhat similar to that of alternative media, but requires some clarification. One common way in which community and alternative media have been differentiated is through their scale of operations. Community radio is often tagged with the label of “local”, whereas most people might think of alternative media happening at higher scales such as the national, regional, or even urban if the idea of a locality is that of a neighborhood. However, considering how advancements in
communication technologies have aided the ability of community media to operate or broadcast at much larger scales (i.e. via the internet), it is time to address our reified notions of scale in the context of community radio.

Perhaps a description of media involvement with the community can provide an additional understanding to the differences between alternative media and community radio. The name “alternative media” does not necessarily imply a certain level of commitment to communities, but “community media” does. Lewis and Booth (1990) conceptualize community media in terms of listener participation. Both by having listeners participate in funding station operations and being a part of station management and programming, a participatory approach to broadcasting allows community media to be responsive to their listeners (Bekken 1998).

Funding also plays a crucial role in the creation of community media, which doesn’t necessarily apply to alternative media. Because community media generally involves an almost total reliance on listener funding, they are necessarily “marginal” enterprises (Fairchild 2001, Lewis and Booth 1990, Rodriguez 2001). According to Bekken (1998) much of the reason that many college/public radio and television stations can no longer carry on in the guise of community media is that they have been forced, when they apply for and receive Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) funding, to appeal to the national level via syndicated programming and to conform to standards of professionalism that lead to a reduction in listeners who will serve as DJs, or station volunteers. (Dunaway 2002). Rodriguez (2001) feels that maintenance of community access is the most important component of community media, even if there is a blurring between the lines of professionalism and amateurism. In her opinion, the notion of access leads to a much stronger product.

My argument is that alternative media and community media are two separate ideas. Community radio is a type of alternative media, one single medium among many others that make up a much larger project of media creation outside the framework of the mainstream outlets. For example, free or pirate radio is an example of another type of alternative media that needs to be described in a very different way (i.e. similar to participatory approach of community radio, but officially illegal or not sanctioned by the government) (Soley 1999). Even certain magazines or even television broadcasters might also be considered “alternative” as well. Community media is in some ways consumer driven more than commercial media is, since the former is owned and operated by the people who actively engage the medium. This leads me to see NPR and PBS type broadcasters as mainstream in character, even considering their model as public stations which is often considered outside the mainstream. In contrast, active participation on the part of the viewers/listeners is essential to the community media model.

Fraser and Restrepo-Estrada (2002) offer a useful summation of community radio’s primary functions. Their model is useful in that it allows us to avoid defining community radio by what it isn’t rather than by what it is. Accordingly, community radio’s primary functions for Fraser and Restrepo-Estrada include:

- To reflect and promote local identity, character and culture by focusing principally on local content.
- To create a diversity of voices and opinions on the air through its openness to participation from all sectors.
To encourage open dialogue and democratic process by providing an independent platform for interactive discussion about matters and decisions of importance to the community.

To promote social change and development.

To promote good governance and civil society by playing a community watchdog role that makes local authorities and politicians more conscious of their public responsibilities.

Hendy (2000) offers a similar interpretation that further distances community radio from other, often illegal enterprises such as pirate radio. He writes, “Indeed, it can be argued that community radio is merely micro-radio in a legal guise, though perhaps with more of a concern with communal, rather than individual rights of expression” (Hendy 2000, 16). This distinction is important because it illustrates the difference between other forms of media and community radio, which seeks to allow for addressing the needs of many people in a locality rather than just a few. Community radio’s characteristics, listed below, also address a particular attention to scale and the democratic nature the community radio model. For Hendy, community radio is:

- Smaller in scale than mainstream ‘local’ radio, so that it is ‘closer’ to its listening community than other forms of radio.
- More ‘participatory’ than mainstream radio, and staffed more by volunteers drawn from the listening community rather than full-time professionals.
- Run for the benefit of the local community rather than to make a profit for shareholders.

Community radio is usually smaller in scale than mainstream local radio. There are some important exceptions, however. For example, most of the stations within the Pacifica Radio group, including the now famous KPFA in Berkeley (the first listener supported community station in the United States), have transmitting power equal to if not stronger than many commercial stations. In the case of this project, WAIF has a signal that, while not strong, is able to reach most of the Cincinnati metropolitan area.

While I consider community media as a specific form of alternative media, generally it is regarded as something different. This difference lies in scale and the perception that community media is an agent of localism. Community media faces many obstacles, politically and economically due to its marginality. As a political project, it challenges the notions of what democracy should be by granting a voice to average people. Economically, the reliance on donations from listeners and viewers generates less funding, but it does ensure that its voice is beholden to no one but the many people who each provide small amounts of capital. Because alternative media often gains a reputation of being larger in scale of operations, community media is often forgotten due to its limited production ability. Thinking of alternative media as supplemental to the mainstream excludes community media as being a full member of the alternative set. As it is often conceived, alternative media can enter the mainstream, but community media, based on its reliance on volunteers as managers and programmers, will never be able to make the same jump.
Chapter 3: Data Collection

Data collection methodologies for this project included a variety of qualitative approaches designed to understand WAIF from a participant observer’s perspective. Because the many volunteers who spend a great deal of their time at the station drive community radio, it was necessary to become acquainted with them and their function at the station. My first step in this process was to actually become a member myself. I have spent much of the last seven years as a casual listener and had some previous idea of what membership entailed. By joining WAIF, I hoped to add a bit more legitimacy and accuracy to what I wanted to accomplish, and hopefully give the volunteers with whom I would work the sense that I was part of their radio station as well. As a station member, I also received the *WAIF Alert*, a newsletter that is aimed at keeping members up to date with current events at the station, such as up-coming elections and changes in station personnel and policy. I was able to analyze this newsletter in addition to other primary data.

Much of my data collection time was spent attending board meetings as an observer. Over the course of 8 months I attended five board meetings, all of which lasted between 2 and 3 hours. During these meetings I recorded notes on the provided meeting agenda and collected any materials that were handed to meeting observers. These notes helped me to understand how the station was managed, and gave me background of any current station issues. These meetings generally attract a small crowd of onlookers, usually of around ten people, so I was never the only person in audience. This aided the research in that the members of the board did not seem anxious at my presence, and I feel confident that their actions and remarks within the meeting setting did not have an effect on what was said. Meetings also offered an opportunity to become acquainted with other members, programmers, and board members, for the purpose of requesting an interview. A long-time member also aided me with contact information for many of the programmers, and even went so far as to ascertain their willingness to speak with me. However, these programmers were not aware of the nature of my project until I spoke personally with them. Only after providing an explanation of my project did I ask proceed to interview the respondents.

I conducted interviews with 20 separate station volunteers between July and October of 2003. Each interview lasted between twenty minutes and 1 1/2 hours. With consent, I recorded the interviews with a handheld digital voice recorder. Additionally, I took notes to later match with the recordings, and provide a space to add my reflections on the interviews. These interviews occurred at the subjects’ residence, a third location such as a café, or the radio station itself. In order to maintain anonymity as required by the Human Subjects Committee at Miami University, which had previously approved this research, I have coded each of the respondents with a generic moniker. Therefore individual respondents appear as “Board member 1” or “Programmer 3”. While many of the responses would be considered innocuous to most readers, with such a diverse and potentially divisive group of people as WAIF represents, such an assumption cannot be made.

In addition to spending time with the people of WAIF, I also accessed information regarding station history, and fundraising. The fundraising information supplied to me included the total numbers of dollars pledged in support of individual programs during
the Spring 2003 pledge drive. Note that these numbers are not a reflection of actual money collected, but rather pledged. While the station officers are now (during 2004) calculating the actual amount of money collected per show, at the time of my data collection they were not available.

Following the pledge drive of Fall 2003, I was able to obtain access to information that WAIF collected in a survey of the listeners who called in to pledge their donation. The questions were mostly aimed at understanding the demographics of the audience, such as gender, time and place of listening, and use of the streaming internet broadcast. In my role as a volunteer and station member, as well as a researcher, I participated with another station volunteer in tabulating these responses. I am now in possession of this survey data.

Finally, I have spent the better portion of a year listening to WAIF in order to understand and stay in touch with their product. During this period I focused more intently than I had earlier as casual listener and tuned in more often. While I did not conduct a formal content analysis on live broadcasts, I was able to have a general sense of what was occurring at the station. Listening gave me a valuable way to stay in touch with this project following the initial stage of data collection, and continues to provide grounding to all the theoretical concepts involved in my analysis of community radio. I have used these various data collection methods to provide a comprehensive overview of WAIF and its people.

Unfortunately, the methods I used for data collection did not come without limitations. There were some pieces of information that I was not able to retrieve. I was not able to obtain the official Arbitron ratings, as WAIF does not subscribe due to their prohibitive costs. These would have provided me with statistical information regarding WAIF’s audience, and a deeper understanding of its impact on the community. I was also not able to conduct a thorough analysis of the listeners themselves. Time constraints and the difficulty of finding random listeners to interview kept me from performing a systematic survey of WAIF’s listeners. Lacking this sort of data is unfortunate considering that listeners themselves own and control WAIF. Another group of potential interview subjects that I was not able to access in the time I allotted to data collection were the people who originally formed WAIF as a station. None of these people are actively involved at WAIF presently and were therefore not readily available for interviews and were therefore difficult to contact without a time-consuming search. Lastly, I did not receive an accurate budget for the past year (2003). Since WAIF acquired its own property and moved the station in April, 2003, they were not able to give me a figure for the year’s cost of operations. This year’s costs are different from a normal year since there have been numerous expenditures on equipment to configure the new studio. In lieu of this information, I have relied on previous years’ budget reports to provided an estimate of annual costs. In all, I feel that my data sources proved adequate for this project, but I also realize that with any investigative process untapped information most likely exists that could potentially strengthen my arguments.
Chapter 4: A Profile of WAIF

In 1975, a group of concerned citizens formed Stepchild Radio of Cincinnati, Inc., a non-profit organization with the charge of running a community radio station. Having previously received an FCC broadcast license to share the 88.3 FM frequency with a local vocational school, they went on the air live for the first time on November 21, under the call letters WAIF. A local newspaper published within a month of WAIF’s debut provides a summation of its original mission:

In essence, the purpose of WAIF radio is to demystify the radio business. Unlike the commercial stations which listen to the jingle of silver, WAIF is offering the people of Cincinnati a station to listen to which listens to them. Unlike the commercial stations, WAIF depends on the participation and feedback of the community...What is most important, however, is the fact that WAIF is now on the air, and attempting to produce programs that are responsive to the multifaceted audience that is the community of Cincinnati.”

(Delagator 1975,10)

Almost thirty years later, WAIF remains on the air, and this original mission still continues to provide a concise description of the station’s primary function. It has posed a challenge to mainstream radio in Cincinnati.

Sixty-eight individual programs run during the school year when the station broadcasts from 3 PM until 8AM. During the summer months when WJVS (the vocational school which shares the 88.3 FM frequency) is off the air, this number of programs increases significantly to over one hundred, as WAIF broadcasts around the clock. The incredibly diverse list of programs includes shows such as Alternating Currents, a GLBT oriented talk show, various ethnic music and information shows presented bilingually, and music shows representing a myriad of musical genres. (See Figure 2 for the full schedule) Waif’s schedule is an eclectic “checkerboard” of various types of shows ranging from talk to music and various degrees in between, and is a reflection of its mission as a community radio station run by its listeners (Statvinsky 1994).

WAIF, like all community stations that use non-professionals for on-air talent, possesses a certain aesthetic that is difficult to describe to those who have not had the opportunity to listen. Without the need of attracting as many listeners as possible to create advertising revenue, WAIFers (as volunteers commonly refer to themselves) are free to create programs that don’t necessarily follow the formats found in commercial broadcasting. This free-form style of programming creates a sound that can range from widely palatable to barely listenable. DJ’s and talk show hosts who have been at WAIF longer tend to have more polished styles than inexperienced volunteers. So from one hour to the next the sound can shift dramatically. Throughout any given week the listening experiences have the potential to be as divergent as possible. For example, during a recent broadcast of Curved Air (Thursdays 4:00) it was possible to hear internationally renowned scholar Noam Chomsky, followed by rock music and follow-up
calls from listeners. The show which follows, *The Bottom Line with Larry Arnette*, regularly features specific but wide ranging topics such as social stereotyping or local politics which can change organically as callers often direct the flow of the conversations. Many of the Friday evening programs, most of which provide an African American perspective, have heavily breached the issue of racial profiling within the Cincinnati Police Department and the subsequent city-wide boycott of city functions that has aimed at eliminating such abuses. Such examples can only provide a small sampling of WAIF’s programming, but illustrate how eclectic programs can be.

Volunteers wholly run WAIF, from its decision-making body, the board of trustees, to every DJ and talk show host. Annually, this group consists of well over 100 people working in every necessary capacity. By design, WAIF’s listeners own the station. With a minimum donation of only fifteen dollars, any listener can become a station member for one year. This basic $15 membership fee has not changed since WAIF began operating in 1975. Considering inflation, the cost to become a member has decreased over time. Such low barriers to membership effectively make participation available to anyone in Cincinnati.

Membership status gives listeners voting rights at the annual membership meeting and a subscription to the *WAIF Alert*, the quarterly newsletter that aims to keep members informed of station activities. At this membership meeting held every fall, individual members vote for the 11 members of the board of trustees. Each board member serves a two-year term, but only half of the seats are available per election. By staggering the terms of office, WAIF is able to maintain some continuity, since an entire board is never replaced en masse. Board members are not required to step down between terms, so often individuals may sit on the board for many terms in a row. This board is charged with making most spending decisions, delegating job duties, and creating a vision for the future. In essence, it is the role of the board to run the day-to-day operations of the station. With eleven separate individuals who sit on the board, there is quite a lot of room for tension. I will return to a discussion of such tension and its implications for the functioning of the station later in this chapter.

WAIF operates with a working mission statement that informs the board’s decisions. This statement of station doctrine is known as the “WAIF Wants.” Listeners wishing to create their own show find this list when they access the application on the WAIF website (www.waif883.org). It provides potential programmers with the chance to match their intentions with the goals of the station. “WAIF Wants” fits within the conceptualization of community radio provided in chapter 2:

**WAIF Wants:**

- Programs by and for underrepresented and unrepresented segments of the population, minorities and others with little or no access to the media.

- Programs offering useful information, services, news and creative expression.

- Programs featuring local entertainers, artists and personalities; and programs offering varieties of music.

- Programs dealing with improving the quality of life.
o Programs dealing with the causes and elimination of racism, sexism and other forms of prejudice and oppression.

o Programs dealing with alternative approaches to institutions.

o Programs dealing with local issues and events, and local aspects of national and international issues.

o Programs dealing with the concerns of working people.

o Programs encouraging listener participation and involvement, and programs which serve to demystify the media, bringing technology within the reach of non-professionals.

(www.waif883.org/apply/)

This list of station goals is very important to understanding WAIF’s attempted mission in Cincinnati. It provides an operating framework that station volunteers and listeners can reflect on as they participate and interact with community radio. For newcomers, it also serves as an introduction to the community radio phenomenon. Community radio can be divisive due to its mission of bringing together people of divergent attitudes. The “WAIF wants” act as a rallying point to keep volunteers focused on the communal mission of the station rather than their own personal objectives. This point is further expanded later in this chapter.

This mission statement also reflects a specific attempt on the part of WAIF to serve a local audience. It tries to do this in a way that most commercial stations do not. In broadcasting local artists, WAIF gives an access point to musicians from Cincinnati who have virtually no other way to be played on the air. Since most of the mainstream commercial stations have moved to playlists run at a national or regional level, the airtime that had been reserved for local artists have been rolled back. Localism has also left an indelible mark on WAIF’s programming schedule. The checkerboard style of programming is indicative of WAIF’s attempt to serve as many underrepresented groups as possible within a local area. The result is a format that is constantly changing to provide access to as many people some of the time rather than a select group all of the time; the later of which is indicative of commercial broadcasting. One member of the board of trustees sums up WAIF’s mission as a community radio station:

(Community radio) gives people a chance to be heard on the radio that normally wouldn’t be heard. The groups that do shows on WAIF wouldn’t have a opportunity to do shows on any other station. It represents the unrepresented, and gives people a forum for...(pause)...to play their favorite kind of music and state their opinions. And listeners have choice, there are so many different things to listen to on WAIF that in any one day you can hear so many different things that you’d never hear anywhere else.

(Board Member 4)
The comments by this member reflect the general feeling of all the volunteers interviewed, who share a common interest in the local and altruistic aspirations of the station, as expressed through the “WAIF wants”.

WAIF operates with a 1600 watt transmitter that is capable of reaching most of the Greater Cincinnati area (see Figure 3). In this illustration, the red or “local” line represents the area of the strongest signal. Home stereos are most likely to receive a coherent WAIF signal within this area. Beyond this imaginary line, the signal deteriorates rapidly, and only car stereos, which are able to remove some interference, have the ability to receive the signal. By no means is WAIF’s a powerful transmission compared to larger commercial stations that may run a transmitter of 15,000 watts or more. In relation to similar community stations in operation in other cities, however, it is significant. Many community radio stations have a range of only a few miles, but WAIF is able to cover an urban area of roughly one million inhabitants. This includes areas of
South-Eastern Indiana and Northern Kentucky. Its potential audience size is consequently large. Unfortunately, the reality of WAIF’s signal is that it is not quite strong enough to cover some areas that would be considered as part of the Greater Cincinnati area. This comes from a combination of factors including low transmitter strength as well as the topography of the area. Since FM radio is essentially a line-of-sight transmission, Cincinnati’s abundance of hills plays a part in reducing the signal strength of those unfortunate enough to live in a valley, or on the opposite side of a rise.

In addition to broadcasting through the public airwaves, WAIF also provides a web stream which is accessible through their website. This service has been in place since 2000. The web broadcast is offered free to its listeners, much like most public radio stations. Additionally, archived programs are available in one-hour increments for replay up to 48 hours after their initial airtime. This unique offering allows flexibility to listeners who enjoy certain programs but are unable to tune in due to their own schedule. Remarkably, WAIF is able to provide this web service due to a donation of server space in an act of solidarity by a fellow local non-profit organization called Inspectacare.org.

While this service is extremely cheap and surprisingly innovative in allowing for archival programs, it has caveats. Among these is a lack of bandwidth, which only allows for a limited number (around 25) of listeners to join the stream at once. Low bandwidth also requires that the web stream be broadcast in mono rather than stereo, thereby creating a lower fidelity sound. For the talk show programs, this is not a serious drawback, but for music shows it reduces quality. Anyone who has listened to the difference between music played in stereo vs. mono can attest to much better sound quality, and a much more enjoyable listening experience. Reliance upon a third party for the web service is also somewhat problematic. While the provision of a free service is more than welcome to a non-profit enterprise that relies on community contributions, it also requires that they are not in total control of their own operation. In effect, until WAIF is able run the web service on its own, it is bound by the limitations of service that has been donated. Total control of their own web service appears to be a long-term goal, but one that is prohibited at the time being due to monetary constraints. With control and the necessary funding, WAIF could potentially create a better sounding web-stream and allow for more people to listen at once.

WAIF generates the vast majority of its funds from the local community. As stated previously, most funding comes directly in the form of memberships, which are offered to anyone for a minimum donation of $15. The Spring 2003 membership drive actually succeeded in raising over $30,000 in pledges. While only about 2/3 of any pledge total is actually received by the station, even $20,000 represents a significant amount to WAIF. This number, however, is not indicative of every pledge drive, since it was the largest in station history. In the past however, memberships have represented the bulk of the annual budget. In addition to capital generated via memberships, the station solicits underwriting from local area businesses that are interested in having their name and company information stated at the beginning of a particular program. Among these is a large international food store (Jungle Jim’s) that underwrites many of the ethnic programs in order to reach the various immigrant communities of Cincinnati. Normally, it is the duty of the individual program host or DJ to seek these underwriting opportunities and the current board of trustees has placed a great emphasis on attempting to increase the revenues in this way. For this reason, underwriting, while always part of the fundraising strategies at WAIF have only recently become a significant share of
revenue generation. Early in 2004, the underwriting total was projected at reaching $20,000 for the year. In past years the annual budget had run close to $30,000. Steady sources of underwriting then, could potentially create a very reliable source of income for the station.

Finally, WAIF is also eligible for a small fine arts grant of about $5000 from the city of Cincinnati, which is generally renewable per annum. Due to disorganization and miscommunication, this grant was allowed to lapse in previous years, leading to considerable consternation among station members who couldn’t believe such an opportunity for free funding could be lost by carelessness. Such an episode is a strong example of how maintaining an organization solely through the labor of volunteers can sometimes lead to minor chaos and inefficiency. One board member reflects on this type of disorganization, “I think for twenty-something years this place actually existed in spite of itself” (Board Member 7). According to this volunteer, WAIF is now moving in the right direction, but only after years of learning how to survive.

Contested notions of community

That WAIF has persevered for as long as it has is somewhat miraculous considering the obstacles to its success and somewhat chaotic nature of station operation. On one hand, reliance upon both volunteers as staff and listeners as the major source of revenue create a challenge both organizationally and monetarily. In terms of budget, throughout much of WAIF’s tenure, funding has been precarious at best. Only in the past couple years has the station begun to see real consistent financial stability. As stated before, the member pledge drive for the fall of 2003 generated the most pledges ever up to that point. In fact, during 2003, WAIF bought and moved into a brand new studio after having rented for 28 years. However, successful pledge drives and financial solvency are not common pieces of WAIF’s past. At times in the past WAIF found itself in serious debt of up to $15,000. In the early 1980’s when the station was not able to pay some of its basic bills, the Hamilton County sheriff placed a lock on the station doors until payment was met. Luckily, one station member generously wrote a personal check of around $3000 to clear the debt and get the station back on the air. This episode illustrates how tenuous community radio can be at times, but also how dedication by a core group of community members can create the necessary momentum to move the project through difficult times.

The same holds true for the decision making body: the board of trustees. At any time, this body consists of an extremely diverse group of people, elected by the members themselves. Such diversity, while easy to champion from a political standpoint, can be organizationally crippling at times, as one board member suggests:

Here you have a real diversity, people from every level of education and personal background, how do you make that all mesh into a viable organization with leadership and membership support, (it) is really kind of a tough job to do. And a lot of people wouldn’t even consider the concept.

(Board Member 3)
With elections held annually in the fall, each autumn brings a new crop of people to the board, and time is needed to adjust. In a sense, this very democratic process becomes a hindrance. One board member described the constant flux as necessary in order to maintain the ideals of the station: “We are always in a state of change, it’s counterproductive in a way, but see, that brings us back to what ‘WAIF wants’. If we didn’t keep following that and going through this process, it would just become a corporation.” (Board Member 1) It is attention to the “WAIF wants” ideals that seem to act as a glue to keep the situation functional. This means that considering the substantial political differences that exist between station members, WAIFers are often able to keep the goals of the station in perspective. How else could a board of trustees that includes a very conservative Republican and a member of the Nation of Islam work constructively? A long-time member described the necessary attitude that runs within most volunteers. “To be a benefit to WAIF you have to be altruistic, you have to care about the core of ideals above your own gain” (Programmer 8).

Another way to analyze the success of WAIF in lieu of the cacophony of voices that seemingly “tear the station apart” (Programmer 8) is that in reality, the struggle between so many divergent voices actually makes the station work. Salter (1980) in writing about radio in Canada offers a theory to help explain this process: “the strength of Co-op Radio, and the form of media politics it represents, may lie in its continuing failure to resolve underlying tensions and conflicts in approach as they emerged within the station and around specific issues” (quoted in Farchild 2001, 101). Here Salter speaks of co-op radio, which is virtually synonymous with community radio, and so is a product of the same democratic structure as WAIF. Whatever the reasons for WAIF’s continuation after almost thirty years, the fact remains that it is still around. One board member reflects, “We had some pretty far downs on shaky grounds…but it survived, and it survived just on that volunteer spirit and diverse programming spirit so there must be something to it” (Board Member 1).

Any one type of program does not define WAIF. Trying to define the station by a short list of program types quickly becomes an act of futility; there is simply too much diversity. By all means, the very idea of trying to represent as many underrepresented groups as possible is by nature egalitarian. But in terms of station funding, not all shows are created equally. What is clear is that music draws many more pledges from the membership than talk shows, and that of these, religious programs generate a disproportionate amount of revenue.

The pledge drive for Spring 2003 clearly illustrates the unbalanced nature of WAIF funding (See Table 1). As noted previously, a pledge is different from an actual donation. A pledge is a promise to donate money, but not an actual total of money collected. Only those who actually send money receive a membership. For these charts, I designated all of the show types, which may not reflect with total accuracy the actual content of all shows. This discrepancy comes from the difficulty of attempting to pigeonhole individual programs as a certain type. In many cases, these categories overlap. For example, many talk shows mix music with or between segments. For the purposes of analyzing this data, all shows of a mostly religious nature have been lumped together regardless of their format. The same holds true for the local and ethnic programs. The free-spirited nature of community radio creates a much more fluid type of programming than is experienced at commercial stations. In short, all decisions to include a particular show in a particular category were my own, and reflect my judgment as to their position. All shows remain in
### Total Pledges Spring 2003

- Religious: 41%
- Music: 36%
- Ethnic: 9%
- Local: 3%
- Unspecified: 3%
- Talk: 8%

### Program Types

- Religious: 19%
- Local: 14%
- Ethnic: 10%
- Music: 36%
- Talk: 21%

Table 1
the same category between both charts. The results, however, appear to be indicative of a long-term pattern in funding. While the Spring 2003 membership drive was historically the largest, there was no indication by volunteers that the allotment to the various types of programs was proportionally unusual. Without data that spans many years, it is impossible to tell with total accuracy how typical these percentages are, but conversations with volunteers revealed a sense that they were comparable to earlier pledge drives.

Approximately three-quarters of all programs on WAIF are music shows. However, roughly 90% of the total pledges made were in support of music shows. Talk shows should be expected to bring in nearly a quarter of the pledges based on their share of programming, but this is clearly not the case. According to one long-time board member, “music listeners will pay, but not talk show listeners” (Board Member 2). It is a lesson that has been learned over a period of time as this board member has been involved in WAIF long enough to see a pattern of how funding comes to the station. It must not be assumed, however, that funding is necessarily a function of listenership. Some talk programs have many callers throughout their time-slot despite the lack of pledges. Programmers generally have a feel for who is listening through their contact on the air and through e-mail, and get a sense for the interest that their shows bring. One talk show host described his role as a gateway program for potential members. “I do feel like I bring new listeners to that station” (Programmer 1). With the popularity of talk radio at an all-time high (at least in the commercial realm) it is clear that an audience does exist for WAIF’s talk programs. The answer may lie simply in the fact that people are most willing to fund what they are passionate about, and music seems to bring out those emotions more often than talk radio.

While music programming certainly maintains the bulk of pledges, interestingly, it is the religious shows that bring in the greatest share within this group. While most of the religious shows are generally music programs, such as gospel, inspirational, or Christian rock, for the purposes of this analysis, I have separated them from what I have labeled “genre music”, encompassing styles such as Jazz, Blues, Bluegrass, Reggae, Rock, etc… When compared to the percentage of shows on the air, the genre music category actually brings in exactly the amount of its air time, roughly 36%. It is the religious shows that maintain a significant and disproportionate amount of support for the station, with over 40% of overall pledges. This number is all the more surprising considering that all gospel programs are slotted in the early morning time-slots between 5 and 8AM, except for one that runs from 8 to 10AM on Sundays. These all-important gospel programs represent over 60% of all religious shows, and generate consistent base of listener support every year.

The most likely reasons for this concentration of pledges for religious shows are two-fold. One argument is that some of the religious programs, especially gospel, are actually legacies of a crisis at the station involving an attempted takeover of the station by a minister who had been elected chairman of the board of trustees. This minister sought to sell time-slots to other local ministers, but in doing so alienated the majority of the volunteers who believed that WAIF belonged to more than one interest group. One member describes how this came about during the mid-1980’s:

(the minister) canceled a bunch of programs, and he proceeded to delve out (sell)
the airtime to (other) ministers, African American Gospel ministers, Southern Baptist predominantly, for x number of dollars and hour, and it so outraged the core (members) that they formed a group called “Friends of Community Radio” and sued for control of the radio station….because he was selling what couldn’t be sold…and ultimately the seeds that he planted harvested into the gospel that we have now, which is great.

(Programmer 8)

Following this crisis at the station and the return of control to the “Friends of Community Radio,” many of the gospel programs remained. While the manner in which some of these programs arrived at WAIF is dubious, they did fulfill a divergent perspective and therefore were welcomed to stay and serve their respective audiences. Because the members of WAIF were able to look past the events which brought Gospel to the station, some of these shows continue to exist to this day. This episode shows how idealistic goals can prove to be a way to maintain the cohesion of a contested place.

Because these shows have been around for so long, they have had a lot of time to build a steady listenership. These gospel listeners have been consistently generous over the course of many years and have proven to be a steadying influence in terms of funding. Without this support there is a big question as to whether or not WAIF could have survived until this current point where the station remains financially solvent.

A possibly more compelling argument distinguishes between religious and secular charitable giving. Many arguments can be made for the link between religion and higher rates of philanthropy. In the United States, it has been a much higher priority for people to give to religious causes than secular ones. Three of every four dollars given to charity make their way to religious organizations or causes (Anft and Lipman 2003). While the money that is given to WAIF goes to the general fund that maintains the station, it is money that has been channeled by the listeners through a specifically religious broadcast. The listener is essentially able to give a signal to the WAIF programming committee that gospel is an important segment to the listening body. While money is not necessarily the largest motivating factor in programming decisions, shows that bring in significant contributions are much less vulnerable to cancellation than those that don’t bring in any.

Not only do religious institutions receive the bulk of charitable giving, but it has also been shown that simply being religious is a large determinant in the rates of giving. According to Brooks (2003) religious people are defined as those who report attending religious services at least once per week:

Religious people are 25 percentage points more likely than secularists to donate money (91 percent to 66 percent) and 23 points more likely to volunteer time (67 to 44 percent). And consistent with the findings of other writers, these data show that practicing a religion is more important than the actual religion itself in predicting charitable behavior.

(Brooks 2003, 41)

While it is clear in the case of WAIF that the religious programs on average take in much more money than secular ones, this must not be confused with being a measure of the number of listeners. Without access to Arbitron ratings, it is impossible to know for sure the actual size of the audience. The funding data, however, allow us to know
something about the audience. Pledges, therefore, aren’t necessarily a good measure of how WAIF serves the local community.

The fact that secular shows don’t bring in as much money is also of significance when considering relations among those who actually run the station. Amazingly, since the time of the previously mentioned crisis, religion has not been the source of major tension. This is a testament to the ability of volunteers to look toward the altruistic goals of keeping the station running as is prescribed by the “WAIF wants” mission statement, rather than within their own narrow interests. Even in the face of crises such as that described above, time usually proves to heal wounded relations. In the case of the gospel shows, no visible animosity remains between those who may have been involved. While normal tensions tend to arise in the normal course of events, people at WAIF seem to be able to maintain a focus on the goals laid out in the station’s mission. How they are able to maintain idealism in the face of conflict is of importance because by nature, community radio seeks to integrate as many people of differing backgrounds as possible. Large groups of people with divergent points of view are often rife with possibilities of civil discord.

Web Streaming: A Reconstruction of Community Radio’s Scale?

Broadcasting its production via the web has been an upgrade for WAIF, and has implications for the redrawing of scale in terms of broadcasting content and access. By offering a signal that is accessible through its website, it is able to stay abreast with most major public stations, an important factor when considering the role of appearances in determining audience. One of the board members expressed this sentiment through her attempts to invite wealthy members of community to the open house for the new studio. “If people could just see what we’ve become now, I think we could start to get more people involved” (Board Member 4). As stated before, the quality of the internet broadcast may be not as impressive as that of well-funded commercial or public stations, but it can nonetheless be deemed adequate and may in fact offer numerous psychological benefits when it comes time to recruit members. People are much more likely to support a project if they know their time and money is not wasted on a marginal product, or one that is not going to last. This has been the case in terms of the new studio. The same board member reflected on this attitude in regards to how the community has reacted to the recent facelift at the station:

People seem to be coming out of the woodwork now, putting in new proposals (for shows), and even people that want to get involved now that we have such a nice place that didn’t want anything to do with us before when we were in the dump (The old studio).

(Board Member 4)

Clearly, the new studio has been an important part of drawing new members. The maintenance of an internet broadcast should also be seen as a force in WAIF’s outreach to the community in sending the message that they will be around for a long time.
Traditional notions of radio hold that its listening audience or ‘community’ can be easily defined as the geographic area within the range of the transmitted signal. This leads us to see radio as a specifically local phenomenon, where listeners are indeed tied to place (Hendy 2000). However, the web calls into question the notion of a listening community as bounded by the geographic range of the radio signal. The emergence of internet radio creates the possibility to generate listeners at larger scales. Consequently, the potential for listeners spans the entire globe rather than a space within a twenty-five mile radius of the station. What are the implications of this type of jump in scale?

The impacts for WAIF vary. One clear benefit to the local community, as defined by geographic proximity to Cincinnati, is the fact that former Cincinnati citizens who have moved away are able to maintain a connection to their city through streamed radio. This is something that they might not be able to do well without WAIF, considering the deterritorialized nature of most commercial radio broadcasts produced in Cincinnati. A listener might just as well tune in to a local station in their new town with a similar format, since research has shown how alike these stations are. Another benefit of the web stream is that more local listeners can tune into WAIF. As described before, there are places within the Greater Cincinnati area that do not receive a strong signal from WAIF due to topographic barriers in the local landscape. The internet broadcast allows these people to listen from home. Also, for those who would otherwise be unable to listen while at work, it is also a welcome service.

Internet radio also raises questions of equity. By all measures, traditional radio waves are available to everyone. In the United States, there is no shortage of radio receivers at any income level. However, owning a computer offers a different scenario. Results from the 2000 census reveal that as of four years ago, 51% of US households owned a computer. This number had been rising steadily in the past decade, and can only be expected to increase in the future as computer prices continue to fall. According to the census, slightly fewer households (42%) have access to the internet, but this number also continues to rise with time. As encouraging as these numbers are, results also show that there is a considerable gap in computer ownership between high and low-income households. In 2000, only 28% of households with incomes below $25,000 owned computers. In terms of equal access, therefore, internet radio still has some way to go, but over time should improve considerably (Newburger, 2001).

More important is the question of whether or not broadcasting on the web has in any way changed the nature of what WAIF is trying to do as a community radio station. One might expect that as internet radio transcends the geographical barriers to listenership, the priorities of the station might be reordered as well. In other words, issues of discussion that are national or even global in scope could become prioritized over the issues of the local community. My research indicates that no such change has taken effect as yet at WAIF, and there is no evidence that it ever will, especially as long as the internet stream can only support twenty-five listeners at one time. While music maintains a certain universal feel, there has been no attempt on the part of WAIF’s board of trustees to remove programming of a local nature in order to appeal to a broader audience. Of the changes that have taken place over the last few years, including providing a web stream, but also buying a new property, none indicate that a change has taken place in the focus of the programs toward anything past a local audience.

Why this might be is a pertinent question. As a share of the total listeners of the station, those listening via the web are actually rather low. A survey of the paying
members taken during the Fall 2003 pledge drive revealed that only a small percentage, 11% of 280 respondents, ever listened to streaming broadcasts, while only 14% of 289 respondents stated that they listened to archived programs. (See Figures 4 and 5) If this low number is the norm for the people who are already supporting members of the WAIF community, then the number of independent listeners who somehow found their way to the broadcast is similarly rather low. In terms of access, it certainly displays the difficulty that WAIF faces in attempting to attract listeners directly from their streaming broadcast. According to one talk show host, the internet is simply not set up to channel people toward the WAIF website, without prior knowledge of it. “The problem with the web is that unless somebody knows who you are or accidentally bumps into it, how do they know you’re there? …. You’d really have to be surfing your brains out to look for offbeat stuff” (Programmer 1). Only those who are specifically looking for community radio in Cincinnati are likely to find WAIF’s website through a search engine.

Another reason that WAIF’s focus has not changed is tied to its mission as a community radio station. WAIF is mostly reliant on the residents of the Cincinnati area for volunteers and donations. Additionally, WAIF has more recently focused its fundraising attention towards securing underwriting from local businesses. The relationship between the way in which the station secures funding and the community it serves is directly proportional. With support for WAIF coming directly from a geographically local community, it can only be assumed that such a community is what they will attempt to serve. How this may change in the future is an interesting question worthy of observation. One board member expressed that WAIF could prove to serve other places in addition to Cincinnati, especially with its various music programs. When asked if he felt the web service was an important part of WAIF’s mission he stated, “If it’s promoted properly, I think that it’s an opportunity to expand… For instance a show like Metal Attack that is such a niche and is not being served anywhere, I don’t think in many other cities. So it is possible for, via the web, (to reach these people)” (Board Member 6). It is clear that many volunteers do like the potential that web streaming
creates. Only recently, a new member joined from as far away as Baltimore, Maryland. While one member will not be enough to affect a serious change in programming output, what might be the effect of one hundred or more? Such a situation could theoretically arise, and its consequences could be enough for decision makers to seriously consider altering the station’s course towards rethinking what is meant by localism in their mission to give access to underrepresented groups.

The Changing Conception of Localism and WAIF’s Response

Traditional (pre internet) radio is an inherently local phenomenon. As Fairchild (2001, 96) explains, “in the case of radio the local community is self-defining (the geographical range of transmission)…” However, in order to assess radio as a local scale product such a simple analysis does not suffice. Radio is much more complex and is a reflection of geographers’ most recent conceptions of scales as being mutually constituted rather than mutually exclusive. With the advent of web streaming, a radio signal is no longer bound geographically by its own signal. Access is instantaneously available at any scale from the local to the global. In terms of content, as it is produced at WAIF, is all at once global and local at the same time, as well as being regional, national, etc…. (See Figure 6). Consider the point from the mission statement that “WAIF Wants shows dealing with local issues and events, and local aspects of national and international...
issues.” In terms of content, this is evident in many of their talk shows as issues range from the current war in Iraq to debates about police abuse in Cincinnati and the city’s role in curbing such violence. Global issues are essentially viewed through the local lens by emphasizing their local impact just as local issues are interpreted in a way that shows Cincinnati’s interconnectedness with the wider world. Music is by nature universal in scale. Jazz, for example is played worldwide by a host of international artists. However, WAIF also pays special attention to local artists, by giving them a venue they might otherwise not have. Both commercial and public radio broadcasters have moved away from definitions of localism that cater to a geographic community, towards a conception of localism that seeks to bind communities of interest. Evidence for this shift in commercial radio lies in “format homogeneity” (Dicola and Thomson 2002, 36). By centralizing, and streamlining various formats such as ‘Adult Contemporary’, and using them across the country, commercial broadcasters attempt to serve one narrow community of interest rather than the many that exist within its area of license. This restructuring of radio has occurred over the last twenty-five years as commercial markets have been increasingly deregulated, and consequently, homogenous. Public radio has also become increasingly centralized as programs such as those produced by National Public Radio (NPR) or Public Radio International (PRI) have come to represent a good portion of programming on many stations. At least three of the public university-owned stations in the Cincinnati area run both Morning Edition and All Things Considered, both NPR syndicated shows. In addition, they run combinations of other PRI or NPR programs such as The World Café, The Diane Rehm Show, and Fresh Air, to mix with their locally produced shows. This change addresses two concerns. The first is the need to create economies of scale in order to reduce overhead costs and the second is an attempt to create programs of high production value for targeted audiences. In broadcasting on local radio stations, “these targeted audiences are served within their social communities of interest, which happen to fall within the broadcaster’s spatial community of license” (Stavinsky 1994). The general idea is that select demographics that exist within spatial communities will be served just as well, if not better, by specialization within the marketplace. For example, a station that presents only Jazz music should theoretically be able to serve its community better than that which attempts to present Jazz in addition to many other genres.

Community radio has specifically rejected such a change. The idea that these “communities of interest” are being served by either commercial or public is negated by the fact that so many people have flocked to WAIF as an outlet that wasn’t available anywhere else. Not all of the interviewees explicitly expressed their displeasure with commercial radio as the reason that they first became involved with community radio. However, most cited a true belief that their particular format was one that had no other outlet within Cincinnati, other than at WAIF. Many describe a sense of angst that the mainstream media makes no attempt to approach the type of programming that is important to them. Joani, cohost of “Crawfish Fiesta”, a program featuring Zydeco and Cajun music openly describes this feeling on the front page of the WAIF Alert for (Spring 2004):

The insatiable conglomerate radio machine that is gobbling up our nation’s airways has no memory and no compunction about disempowering local stations left in its ever-widening wake. The homogenization of radio in this country is
costing the regional “sound” that used to be the heartbeat of American music. The days when you could tell a record came from Memphis or from Detroit or from Chicago are dwindling. Local flavor is being discarded for the money making machinery of a national playlist that is blanketing our cities, smothering any regional feel, while mass-market radio stations with their puppet DJ’s are no longer allowed to vary from formula playlists.

(Lacy 2004)

While many public stations have taken the route of relying more heavily on syndication for its content, WAIF has maintained a strict adherence to producing its own local broadcast. This is partly a function of cost. NPR Programs such as All Things Considered and Morning Edition cost thousands of dollars to purchase, an amount that a station like WAIF can simply not afford. But also the general feeling from the station is that such a move would be contrary to the communal principles of the volunteers and loyal listeners. Bringing in syndicated programming might potentially cause a great deal of ideological struggle from within as has occurred at other stations when they have restructured themselves towards a more national appeal. For example, FUNM-FM, a public radio station in Albuquerque, experienced a debate among the listeners over the amount of syndicated programming that was seen as necessary to attract the kind of supporters who would donate to the station. Many loyal listeners wrote the station in support of more locally produced content even though only one third of the schedule was syndicated (see Bareiss 1998).

Another example of the conflict between promoting local or syndicated programming lies very close to WAIF in Yellow Spring’s WYSO-FM. When in March 2002 WYSO began removing programs produced at the station in favor of syndicated programming originating elsewhere, many listeners began to actively protest. The statement of one of these angry listeners is indicative of the powerful feelings that people have for localism in radio:

Over the past few months (and even years) we have noticed a trend in WYSO programming decisions that more and more community-based volunteer programs are being reduced or eliminated in order to make room for repetitive nationally syndicated corporate-sponsored programming. With the current trend of programming decision-making being done at WYSO, it doesn’t seem there is much 'community' left to support in community media as it relates to WYSO, a once-proud and nationally recognized institution for its strength of community involvement and diversity of programming perspectives.

(Batz and Simmons 2002, 1B)

This listener’s comments reflect a deep disappointment at the loss of community identity that WYSO had engendered in the past. It also illustrates the potential for similar conflicts over the role of localism at WAIF if it were to decide to eliminate volunteer-produced shows in favor of syndication.

These episodes illustrate the potential conflict over a shift in the approach to localism. As Dunaway writes, “Our community identity is partly determined by our identification with its local broadcasters; we may be citizens of a country but we are
residents of a locality, stations balance these multiple identities in their programming choices” (Dunaway 2003). In the case of WAIF, at the moment, this balance exists at WAIF, but through a conscience choice to provide it from a local prospective. WAIF as it exists now offers a blend of the two conceptions of localism. WAIFers would not reject the notion that community is borne out of shared meanings and values, but could also not separate it from the idea that their community is also the physical place in which they live.

The Rockin’ and Surfin’ show which airs Saturday nights provides an example of WAIF’s dualistic understanding of community. This show has become particularly successful on the internet, and more specifically has a contingent of fans in Germany. WAIF essentially serves this community of surfing music enthusiasts whether they live in Germany or Cincinnati. The fact that Rockin’ and Surfin’ is produced in Cincinnati is most likely irrelevant to its fans listening via the internet, who tune in to hear a very specific form of programming. So WAIF is effectively serving an extra-local audience as well as a Cincinnati one. However, it is WAIF’s attempt to serve as many communities of interest as possible within the geographic community of Cincinnati that have created its diverse programming schedule. So, unlike commercial and even public stations, WAIF tries its best to serve all of the people within its license of operations rather than focus on one or a couple communities of interest. With the advent of the internet, it is able now to serve people globally, but it is the adherence to geographic localism that maintains an eclectic mix of programs. In supporting certain types of programs, listeners make their choice to engage both their community of living and their community of interest. This choice reflects an understanding on the part of volunteers and listeners of their logical place within the overall media framework and a dedicated bias to remain local in the face of forces that work to make their voice less unique.

Chapter 5: Conclusion and Discussion

This thesis provides a case study of a community radio station, WAIF, as set in the context of today’s globalizing society. WAIF exhibits one example of a local legacy that began as a response to a mainstream media which presumably failed to address the needs of local communities. Throughout the 1980’s and 90’s, the emergence of neoliberal trends that favor up-scaling in the media began to further erode the diversity of radio broadcasting. WAIF now currently finds itself in a natural position to respond to such trends by maintaining its focus on serving as many underrepresented groups as possible at a local scale. In this struggle, WAIF has shown the need to adapt wherever possible to the challenges of running a democratic organization by overcoming personal differences between volunteers. WAIF has been able to use the uneven balance of funding, which has favored religious programming, in order to effectively make it possible for all types of programs to be aired. This has been possible in part because members of WAIF are able to maintain a focus on station’s idealism even in the face of contrary worldviews.

Internet radio has also become an interesting component to WAIF’s operation as it allows the station to theoretically reach listeners at the global scale. In being able to
reach communities of interest beyond the range of the Greater Cincinnati area, WAIF’s mission as an explicitly local station is called into question. While WAIF has always attempted to serve a local audience, as volunteers realize that under-served communities of interest exist in places now being served by the internet, it is possible that their intentions could shift upwards in scale. In a deterritorialized media environment the temptation to be the station that serves as many people as possible is very great.

During the summer of 2003 there was an upwelling of protest by the public nationally over the attempts by the FCC to further deregulate media markets. The lead up to the FCC decision “drew intense lobbying and more public attention…than any other proceeding in the commission’s history. Commission officials said they received more than 520,000 public comments, mostly in opposition” (Labaton, 2003, C1). This episode illustrates that average people are concerned with the impact that the restructuring of the media has on their lives and their localities. The outpouring of disgust by citizens across the political spectrum at the possibility for further homogenized radio and television reveals a level of geographic awareness among the public of how the media affect the cultural landscape. While much of the public concern has been focused on the dangers associated with too much corporate consolidation, it has also centered on the distaste that is generated by media sprawl. It seems paradoxical that the debates over media regulations have created such strong public action in a way that other aspects of homogenization and globalization have not engendered. Even issues like urban sprawl and WTO meetings have not created the kind of broad-based public concern that media consolidation has shown. The debate over consolidation has also shown the pertinence of examining a phenomenon such as community radio that works as a counter-balance to some of the homogenizing forces associated with the globalizing processes of capitalism.

While WAIF is in most ways a local phenomenon, it cannot be understood as existing apart from the globalizing trends that have affected localities throughout the world. The media in the United States has become dominated by commercial interests. One such measure lies in the increasing concentration of ownership among fewer corporations. According to McChesney (2002), “the U.S. media system is dominated by about ten transnational conglomerates…” (McChesney 2002, 48) Even in the example of public radio, the type of external funding required to keep stations on the air, beyond that of listener donations, has led to a public media that is more reliant on corporate donations in order to survive. With the media, especially radio, displaying more evidence of having shifted to a neoliberal model (the passage of the Telecommunications Act of 1996 being a good example of such a shift due to its roll back of state regulatory intervention in radio markets), the time has come to reexamine the role of our media in creating strong public spaces. With media ‘sprawling’ like never before, community radio provides one possibility of overcoming homogenizing trends, or at least continuing to provide a viable alternative to them.

While WAIF was not created with the intentions of resisting neoliberalism (indeed the station was running prior to neoliberalism’s rise), it has currently found itself in a position to do so. The motivation for WAIF’s volunteers reflects a deep desire to provide a service that isn’t available in homogenized radio markets. While this study cannot claim that people have specifically become involved at WAIF to resist neoliberalism, it does show that WAIF fulfills this role to some degree. There is an interesting correlation between the passage of the Telecommunications Act of 1996 and WAIF’s move toward financial solvency. It has only been in the last ten years that WAIF
has moved towards consistent fundraising and the ability to purchase its own studio. The parallel does exist between increased homogenization since 1996 and WAIF’s relative growth. Unfortunately, this thesis cannot answer whether or not volunteers now join WAIF to specifically resist neoliberal trends. It does, however, create a compelling question for future studies of community radio.

Of course, be careful to not overstate the importance of WAIF in the overall framework. It might indeed be a mistake to deem the contribution that community radio makes as profound when considering the overall scale of the media and the relatively small number of people interacting through community media. The challenge that mainstream media poses is rather daunting considering its grip upon the majority of consumers. Given that, however, one would definitely be hard pressed to find any active members of WAIF who feel that community radio is unimportant to their lives or city. Whatever the case in terms of its ability to affect real social change in the current framework, it cannot be altogether discounted that community radio has real potential if given the opportunity to expand and be embraced in a way that doesn’t doom it to marginality. For this reason, community radio holds real possibilities for the evaluation of media policies at local or even macro scales. If it is to be assumed that community radio in any way benefits the overall social functioning of a geographic area, then policy options to facilitate its growth should be explored.

One thing is undeniable about WAIF: it is unique in the Midwestern region. It is unique due to its ability to reach a large audience and maintain programming that attempts to represent as many groups as possible. Other community radio stations operating with a signal as strong as WAIF’s and with similarly diverse programming schedules are few and far between. For example, of all the cities of similar size within 120 miles of Cincinnati, including Columbus, Dayton, Indianapolis, Lexington, and Louisville, none have a community radio station that shares the same commitments to community and open access to listeners that WAIF has made. Those that attempt to call themselves community radio are really operating more along the lines of a public radio stations that broadcasts syndicated programming from NPR. This begs us to question the ability of the current media framework to provide new community radio stations elsewhere that can offer a similar type of product. Are mechanisms in place that can allow citizens to build their own station that holds the potential to reach as many listeners as WAIF? While other stations offering such a diverse schedule and true participatory access are not available in the area of Cincinnati, some do exist in other regions of the nation. But these have mostly been in place for a while; as has WAIF. What about the creation of new stations in places that don’t currently have them?

While there have been some attempts by the FCC in recent years to grant small low power FM (LPFM) licenses to small communities, such a process creates only very small stations. LPFM’s transmitting power is limited to 10 or 100 watts, generating a broadcast radius of roughly one mile or 3.5 miles respectively. Due to WAIF’s relatively strong signal size (1600 watts) and a signal radius of around 10 miles, it is able to draw on a larger community than any LPFM stations. Therefore low power FM follows a different approach than WAIF. In essence, by being able to reach an audience at the scale of the city, it is able to bind members of various social communities that may be scattered across many different neighborhoods. LPFM would never be able to achieve such a function due to its limited scope, except in the densest cities where a small area still yields a large pool of potential volunteers and listeners. In addition, many of these LPFM
licenses are granted to small community groups each with a separate narrow agenda. Many of these stations are simply not following the same path as WAIF by attempting to give a voice to as many groups as possible. In Cincinnati for example, of the many LPFM applications that have been submitted to the FCC, the majority have been for church groups, not for organizations wishing to promote a broad constituency.

The cost of obtaining a full-service radio license today (usually in the millions), even in the part of the radio spectrum reserved for educational broadcasting, would simply be too high for any community to afford. It is clear that barriers to entry that exist for full power community radio operating at the scale of WAIF are extremely high. It seems that new policies should be approached that address the creation of at least one station capable of reaching the majority of people at the scale of the city in addition to those already in place that allow multiple stations to operate at the scale of the neighborhood (LPFM).

Given the considerable inter-local competition that cities now face as a result of neoliberal economic trends, community radio also provides an interesting benefit in terms of creating a competitive atmosphere aimed at attracting the type of creative people that fuel economic growth. Richard Florida’s (2000) research on this “creative class” shows that the creative people prefer socially rewarding, diverse places to live and work and that cities should seek to attract these people or to at least facilitate the types of projects that will attract them. His work demonstrates that the type of community building project that WAIF exhibits is exactly what the creative class seeks:

Thus communities need to make it easier for people of all sorts to become involved. They essentially need to complement low barriers to entry with low barriers to effective participation….Communities can no longer attract and retain people simply by offering a high-paying job, an affordable place to live and a fast way to get between the two. People are more likely to personally commit to selecting and maintaining a community if it is a diverse, desirable, authentic and cohesive place to live and work.

(Florida 2000, 324)

As WAIF shows, community radio is one of the few places in the media that allows access to everyday, nonprofessional citizens. It is a place of free expression and diversity, two things that are very important to the creative class. While Florida does not specifically address radio in his larger equation of evaluating creative cities, he does state that, “people want to be involved in their communities.” He continues, “They (Members of the Creative Class) seek direct involvement on their own terms, in part because it is part of their creative identity” (Florida 2000, 96). If cities are serious about attracting creative people in an attempt to gain a comparative advantage over other places, then considering how to facilitate the use of community radio might be of considerable interest.

The “Creative Class” has become a buzzword in cities such as Cincinnati that struggle to attract business investment. While such an agenda is not what community radio boosters have in mind in the course of promoting their stations, it does reflect the current mind-set of many localities. Invoking popular ideas such as the “Creative Class” could be a potential way of bringing attention to populations that may otherwise have overlooked community radio. In this sense, community radio could possibly provide a
dual role in learning to function within the confines of a neoliberal project. First, if Florida’s theory is considered acceptable, it can help to provide part of the necessary infrastructure that attracts the best and brightest minds. Second, it can act as an activist project aimed at resisting the current homogenizing and individualizing trends associated with a highly privatized media.

Community radio and WAIF also offer an opportunity for understanding and evaluating geographic theories of scale. In three senses, as this project illustrates, community radio confronts issues of scale. The first is in terms of an explicit and locally produced content that is expressed on the station in an act of resistance to other dominant forms of media produced at much larger scales. Even in the case of music broadcasting, which appeals to people universally, the fact that it is either produced locally or broadcasted by someone living within a geographically local place, there is a qualitative difference between the product offered by a national or global player and a local one (i.e. WAIF).

The second is that through internet transmission, even community radio is in some way grasping the same type of scale-jumping strategies that other local players use in drawing support that is seemingly available at larger scales. Because the web expands the reach of community stations to a global level, listeners can potentially be found anywhere. The ability to have a reach unbounded by geography acts as a theoretical boost to formerly local-only stations as financial support could theoretically come from listeners anywhere in the world. For community radio boosters, having an unbounded signal also means the ability to serve audiences at scales that were impossible only a decade earlier.

Third, community radio adds further credibility to the arguments posed by most theorists about how scale is constituted. As many theorists have suggested, scale is produced through political struggles of exclusion and empowerment, both things that act as motivators for people to contribute their time and energy to community radio. Empirical evidence here, therefore, supports a constructionist theory of scale. This thesis is also a reminder that more work needs to be done by geographers interested in creating an integrated understanding of how local actors react to globalization with distinct approaches to producing scale. Additionally, community radio and mediascapes in general provide enormous potential for research across geography sub-disciplines. Our understanding of place, space, transnationalism, urbanism, and contemporary economics all could be well served by grounding them in empirical studies of radio and allied communication media.
Works Cited


