Abstract:

In the last twenty years the developing world has experienced an explosion of community-based radio initiatives. These stations are largely decentralized and receive large amounts of funding from international development and aid agencies or from NGOs within or outside of their own state. Community radio is often used as a development tool and is often not defined by the state; however, in the “developed” world, community radio enjoys a distinct legal definition.

Literature of community radio in the developing world, by contrast, mainly discusses the pragmatics and logistics of setting up a station and the building of a stronger civil society. The literature on community radio is mainly confined to AMARC (World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters) publications and UNESCO’s handbook of How to do Community Radio. In this project, I single out UNESCO list of “The Nature of Radio” within How to do Community Radio as a framework for the academic literature on community radio.

I argue that the literature on community radio, based in pragmatics, ignores the most fundamental characteristic of community radio: the voice and speech disseminated by the broadcast. Furthermore, I argue that if community radio is going to continue to be a development tool, then a larger normative framework about speech and voice as it relates to community radio should be developed. I argue that, based on theory of speech
and voice in public, the normative framework of community radio is three-fold: 1) speech in community radio is rooted in plurality; 2) community radio is a unique source of political and social imagination and; 3) community radio provides a model through which we can re-envision Habermas’s notion of the “ideal speech situation”. To best present this juxtaposition of theory and real community radio case studies, I break the theory into sections and speech and voice and provide examples in sections that I call “Interludes.”

I begin by examining theory of speech under the definition set forth by Hannah Arendt, whose work is prominent in the field. I divide her definition of speech into the categories of plurality and imagination, and then I set them into her construction of the web of human affairs. I begin with presenting aspects of speech that Arendt brings to the forefront—the revelatory quality of the “who-ness” of the speaker. When the “who-ness” of the speaker is projected to the listener, the true plurality of voice emerges in that we now experience the speaker for “who” they are, rather than their “what”, which applies to, among other things, their profession and social standing. I present examples from community radio stations in the developing world to argue that plurality occurs in the making and listening aspects of community radio.

From that plurality of voices, the imagination then gives us a platform for how to understand what happens to voice after it is disseminated into public. I argue through cases of community radio that the ideas that were part of a speech act can then be transferred into tangible actions and results. Additionally, the imagination allows the listener to engage in a process of “enlarged thought” and can therefore put the stories of the speakers into a larger context of an understanding of their community. Efforts of “consciousness-raising” in community radio public service announcements make perfect
sense when juxtaposed with an understanding of social and political imagination.

Finally, due to the public nature of community radio, I discuss the public sphere, beginning with Habermas’s framework, then I build upon his critics. Habermas presents the concept of the “ideal speech situation” through which a better deliberative democracy can emerge. In order to realize the plurality that is inherent in voice, we must accept the many forms that voice can take and therefore, community radio gives us a new way of understanding the “ideal speech situation”. Community radio utilizes forms of voice that are not always present in the moment of democratic deliberation. Through examples of community radio I argue that these different forms of voice are evident in the broadcast and should be considered valid in the “ideal speech situation”.

I argue that the voice broadcasted by community radio reshapes the public sphere. Private messages are transmitted onto public airspace. Public messages are transmitted into the private sphere of the home. Finally, community radio stations become centers of community gathering and discussion. I argue that this aspect of community radio is essential to allowing us to envision plurality, imagination, and a reframing of the “ideal speech situation” as vital aspects of community radio and make available the analysis of voice in community radio rather than the more common discussion of pragmatic logistics. Through an understanding of these theoretical frameworks, we are given a new way of thinking about UNESCO’s original points about “The Nature of Radio.” Through a presentation of the theory behind speech in public and the use of case studies of community radio from the developing world, I have made my argument for a reworking of the UNESCO points on “The Nature of Radio” and have added my own voice to the fleshing out of these characteristics.