TAKING BACK THE MUSIC

A study of capitalism, community, and social investment

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Under the private monopoly of culture tyranny does indeed 'leave the body free and sets to work directly on the soul. The ruler no longer says: "Either you think as I do or you die." He says: "You are free not to think as I do; your life, your property – all that you shall keep. But from this day on you will be a stranger among us."' Anyone who does not conform is condemned to an economic impotence which is prolonged in the intellectual powerlessness of the eccentric loner. – Max Horkeimer, quoting Alexis de Tocqueville

Taking Back the Music – an Introduction

In our current environment of financial upheaval and fundamental economic reconstruction and reconsideration, it is paramount that previously overlooked models and means of operation are addressed and explored thoroughly in an attempt to find a more stable, productive, and balanced system within which to build a new economic base. Since the most recent collapse of the global financial system - operating mainly under the ideologies of free-market capitalism - many scholars and experts in economic and anthropological fields have begun to place emphasis on the merits of local economies and community value systems. Then the question becomes: as the fundamental ideologies of the rational individual and the self-regulating free market - viewed as normative within economics over the last century - are shaken and questioned, how can we reconstitute the necessary community values and cultural structures into the landscape of market economy in order to provide a new base focused on mutual stability and sustainability? In an attempt to provide a set of models by which to explore these alternative economic systems, I have spent the last eight months researching two dialectic models of economy with quite different philosophies and value systems. 89.3 The Current, a radio station operating under Minnesota Public Radio, is a member-supported station with a mission statement to share music without commercial advertisement, and to support and strengthen the culture of local music in Minneapolis. Clear Channel is an expansive and commercially-supported for-profit corporation in the business of radio, with a mission statement to provide maximum returns for shareholders. Between these institutions is born a dialogue through which we may explore the responsibilities, successes, shortfallings, and concerns of two existent economic systems. Both are fallible and lend themselves to academic criticism. However, I hypothesize that considering what we have learned of the structural failings and reckless expansionism of private corporations with dominantly financial motives, a locally-invested and multi-faceted communal institution such as the Current will prove to be more stable and sustainable through changing economic environments.

It is in the name of this exploration that I present my research.

Electric Fetus Benefit

On February 26th of 2010, The Electric Fetus record shop threw a concert at First Avenue, a landmark Minneapolis music venue. The show included performances from a dozen local music groups, a silent auction for autographed guitars, a raffle for tickets to various upcoming Minnesota events, and a good chance for merriment and musical enjoyment. I paid 16 dollars for a ticket the day before at the Electric Fetus and showed up to take in the atmosphere the next night. The purchase, which in other circumstances I have made begrudgingly, felt wholesome and merited. At times, it becomes hard to justify handing over 40 dollars to see a hot new band from Southern California – or Lady Gaga perhaps - with a few hit songs. It was not hard to hand over 16 dollars to see active members of the Minneapolis music community get up on stage and perform for their hometown crowd. It felt pretty productive.

This was not a regular gig for most involved. The show was thrown for one specific reason. It was a call to the community for help. The Electric Fetus Benefit Concert was designed to raise funds to cover repair expenses the Electric Fetus suffered after a tornado blew through Minneapolis in August of 2009. A portion of the roof of the store was torn off. As a result the store, according to their website, "went into debt paying for uncovered repairs of extensive structural damage and revenue lost from having 40% of its floor space closed for more than three months." As a local icon in the Minneapolis music scene for over 40 years, the Electric Fetus gave out a call for help in the form of a concert. By gathering together an eclectic crew of notable local performers - who were willing to perform for free - and gaining the sponsorship of local breweries, radio stations, and other regional institutions, the Fetus orchestrated a sold-out event which not only garnered positive reviews from music reviewers, but also raised a large sum to go toward the repair expenses.

Taking in the show, I felt as if I had participated in something constructive. I paid my small sum, and in exchange I was allowed through the doors of First Avenue on that night. I was placed in a crowd of supporters who had come out to show they cared not only for the bands, but for the well-being of the store, and the continued well-being of the music community in Minneapolis. 89.3 The Current, an "anti-format" non-profit radio station owned and operated by Minnesota Public Radio, was there to show their support as well. By attaching themselves to the concert as a sponsor, and supplying one of their DJ's as a host, they influenced the event in a productive manner. Their announcements over the airwaves prior to the event helped draw listeners and members to the show. Their physical presence and direct interaction with musicians and audience members at the show provided concert-goers, band members, workers for the venue, and of course the organizers and managers of the event – the Electric Fetus – with a sense of reassurance. The message they wished to impart was apparent: 89.3 The Current is a radio station which is here to help construct, nurture, and promote a vibrant music community, with a dedication to upholding a set of values which support local musicians and artists, through a mutual and substantive relationship.

The level of mutuality exhibited by events such as this is important to heed. To further explore the relationship, let us consider some elements which make the connection between the Current and the Electric Fetus stable and constructive, not only for members of the two organizations, but for the community which fosters them. I returned to the record shop two months after the concert to pick up an album from a fairly new band in the Minneapolis area. The shop is substantial for an independent music store. It houses a large collection of CD’s, vinyl records, DVD’s, and various merchandise including hats, jewelry, T-shirts, posters, and other music-related products. As with any larger chain store that sells music CD’s, it is designed to be attractive, navigable, and exploitative of a person whose interests have drawn them there in the first place. In other words, it is an environment designed for consumers of music. Outside the shop, individuals may be musicians, musical hobbyists, casual listeners, record-industry talent scouts, or perhaps just lost. As soon as they step through the store’s doors, they are all consumers. The same happens in Best Buy. Also in WalMart. The structures of a capitalistic market which are present within the sprawling stores (each have designated departments for music CD’s and other music-related products) of the two corporations remain intact among the shelves and CD racks of the Electric Fetus. However, there are also different structures in place here – structures which do not survive the rigorous attention to nationalized (or globalized) efficiency and consumer rationality that large corporations such as Best Buy (or Clear Channel Radio) have developed.

As I began browsing about the store, I first noticed various flyers and homemade posters displaying details on an array of upcoming shows by local musicians. I noticed featured CDs from Minnesota artists. I noticed a “Thank You” poster with a list of bands that had performed at the Electric Fetus Benefit, which briefly recognized their voluntary commitment to sharing music on behalf of the store. This poster was taped to a unit of shelves which displayed CDs from each band that had performed. While all the performers had been thanked for their willingness to participate at the conclusion of the concert itself, this was a way for the Electric Fetus to offer something in return, as a symbol of gratitude and reciprocation. There were also posters for the Current on the walls, and not far from these, there was a shelf presenting a series of recently released albums, each one the chosen favorite of one of the Current’s regular DJs. The DJs’ selections sat near the counter, beckoning customers to observe them. Such collaborations have defined the store’s efforts, the musicians’ efforts, and the efforts of the members of the Current to build mutual relationships which provide support and visibility for all parties involved. The consumer is now more aware of the exchanges taking place as well, by absorbing this information as a sign of the personalized and visible presence of their radio hosts, the vibrancy of their musically-inclined neighbors, and the ability of their music outlets to be directly connected in constructive ways to the music culture of their city.

One could suppose that since I am doing research on both the Current and Clear Channel as influential radio organizations within Minneapolis and St. Paul, I have not had a similar experience relating to a Clear Channel station. I have not. I by no means wish to claim that other people have not. It is simply that as a participant and an active member of the music community in Minneapolis, I have had little contact with anything Clear Channel-related aside from billboard advertisements. They own seven radio stations in the area, four of which are purely music stations. Minnesota Public Radio owns three, two of which are music stations. I began the project as a way of exploring this dichotomy. Clear Channel, a dominant force in music entertainment radio, is rarely visible in the local music community, and is at times outwardly decried as a negative influence on music culture in general.

A Brief Look at the Development of Capitalism

This valuation of Clear Channel as a negative force dates back to cultural shifts at the dawn of capitalist ideology. The company is often correlated with the faults of the capitalist market system by journalists, critics, and theorists. Therefore, to get a better impression of what Clear Channel embodies and the history it carries, let us review some critical points throughout the development of capitalism. As the dominant and hegemonic ideological force of the national economy (at least through public perception and popular understanding), capitalism has acted as a platform for commercial radio.

Here I have compiled a list of ideological shifts and significant events that shaped our understanding of capitalism and market economy over the last 150 years, not necessarily in chronological order.

1.) The Homestead Act of 1862**:**

By promising "160 acres of the public domain to individuals for a nominal fee of $10" (Trachtenberg, 22), the government presented a plan for settling the frontier under private hands, in what appeared to be a fair promotion for pioneers to lay claim to their place within the rapidly-expanding borders of the young country. However, it soon became clear that the government was more willing to pass the small homesteaders over in favor of large *land-grabs* negotiated by speculative companies with pooled resources to invest, leaving the once wide-open spaces now in a few private hands. Thus, the small communities that once saw opportunity and freedom in Western agriculture now faced a growing and stratified market environment with centralized influence in the hands of government and privatized interests. The Wild West endured in folklore, romanticizing the cowboys and rugged outlaws as "heroes [who] often speak in praise of 'honest workingmen,' of 'labor' in its contests with 'capital'" (Trachtenberg, 24). In reality, the corporate speculation and privatization of land, following the path of the railroad monopolies toward the Western frontier, seeded the foundation for concentrated control of resources and established the government's role as collaborator and enabler of corporate practices and ideologies instead.

2.) Corporation as Individual**:**

During the trust-busting era of the late 19th and early 20th century, Government defined corporations as independent entities, endowed with all of the freedoms and rights of personhood but no statehood under which to be tried by law (this left the question of a corporation's accountability and responsibility open for debate for the next century). The newly established political weight of corporations began to exact influence on the forms of production and profit, their "proponents of corporate capitalism (sic) determined to project a national ideology that took a rosier view of vast wealth" (Doukas, 371).

3.) Shift in Perception of Labor:

Under corporate organization, labor was reformatted to fit the demands of mass production under the orchestration of networks and trusts. Now more than ever, craftsmen and artisans began to lose connection with the markets they once supplied. Formerly independent contractors were drawn into the corporate arena. Consolidating labor forces and eliminating direct interaction between the laborer and the commodity being produced allowed large-scale corporate operations to provide compensation for the workers in the form of wages. This alienated the workers' labor from the end-product of the production chain, and therefore opened labor to exploitation. Profits accumulated for company CEOs through the sale of commodities, which were being produced by laborers who never saw the full value of their work. It was traded for a fixed rate of monetary reimbursement while the product itself reaped benefits for the company's management team in profitable markets across the nation (and often the globe). This large-scale market speculation soon meant the interests of small economic spheres and localized markets were overshadowed, and the perceived well-being of the nation's economy was defined by lists of the top-performing (based mainly on growth and revenue) corporations, leaving significant political and economic power to rest in the hands of the elite few while the large majority labored under meticulously controlled wage systems.

4.) <u>Consumerism</u>:

The new market exchange was one of anonymity and alienation from the source of price and production. All of the crucial processes which led to the final product in a shiny package on the shelf of a department store or supermarket were largely veiled when production control left the hands of the laborer. Margaret Crawford explains this new mode of exchange in her article on the rise of shopping malls:

> The department store’s fixed prices altered the social and psychological relations of the marketplace. The obligation to buy implied by the active exchange of bargaining was replaced by the invitation to look, turning the shopper into a passive spectator, an isolated individual. (Crawford, 17-18)

Expressions of freedom, definitions of character, and the possibilities of social mobility became integrated into a framework of consumerism, structured around the practices and projections of what capitalist corporations (whether through self-serving manipulation or simply through rational reactions to market patterns) deemed to be important and relevant for the redefined American Public. What was briefly a philosophy of subsistence and labor has shifted to one of consumption and investment in capital, replacing romanticized images of the common laborer with one of mass production and mechanization with little to no attention paid to the debasement of community values and individual investment in labor. Labor is no longer a trade, nor a skill, nor a way of life. Labor is now a means (via wages) toward more accessibility to capital and therefore, freedom. Possession of commodities has become a defining factor of one’s social status and well-being, symbolizing the choices and decisions that were formerly affiliated with one’s occupation or artisanship. The emphasis is now laid upon "nature and community packaged and sold" (Crawford, 21).

5.) <u>The Commoditization of Risk and the Power of the Market</u>**:**

Interest rates, insurance companies, mortgages, large investment banking loans…once the financial sector redefined the nature of monetary exchange, the corporation was no longer the dominant source of wealth in the capitalist arena. Financial risk had been commoditized. What we now may view as the *costly instigation of derivatives* was at first an exciting new source of wealth for the economy's experts. Large financial investment firms began to swap and trade stocks and shares of various companies as prices rose and fell, greatly reifying the face value of capital. Insurance companies packaged and repackaged risks and uncertainties under convoluted and mystified contexts for further commoditization. And in the meantime, massive global markets for exchange and exportation of capital and risk threw the doors of exploitation even further open for corporate growth and capitalist expansion. In 2009, Dr. Karen Ho (a professor at the University of Minnesota) spent considerable time doing ethnographic research in investment banking institutions, and reported on the development of opportunistic ideologies within the growing financial framework in an article published for the *American Anthropoligist*. In this publication, she describes a social environment in which the moment was now, and the philosophy was one of heated competition, impermanence, and immediacy with little heed paid to future ramifications. With insecurity and mobility being the norm, the attention to consequences that may appear further down the road (for instance the collapse of highly inflated stock prices) was unnecessary. Traders claimed that their futures were uncertain, depending solely on the behavior of the market (by now a mystified and barely definable force, seen as synonymous with that of nature) while in reality they were creating, shaping and manipulating elements of the market through their daily interactions. By allowing the market to be understood as a self-propagating, self-dictating force, they largely ceded their responsibility for its direction as an unpredictable, indeterminate, and ethereal power. This indeterminacy meant investors and traders were wise to adapt to an environment free of accountability and ripe with the possibility of immediate profit generated by high-risk trading and irresponsible financial speculation. Of course, whether the consequences affected those who put the actions in process was never a large concern. Indeed, many damaging effects have become apparent by traders' and investors' lack of attention to the level of influence their actions impress upon lives across the nation. If it is a negative consequence, it is because of the inexplicable force of the market. As one VP of high-yields bonds put it, "every single day you realize that your job could be gone the next day. You have a downturn in the market and they lay off hundreds of people…" (Ho, 16-17). And yet they are fully aware of their influence if it means great financial gain and short-term economic success.

6.) <u>The Sub-Prime Mortgage Crisis of 2007 and further Financial Collapse</u>

The prevailing culture of immediacy and short-term gain gave rise to the same sort of sentiments in the *consumer* sector as well. Credit became a tool of immediacy, accompanied with the desire to rise in social stature, often deemed more important than financial security in the future. *Sub-prime mortgages* were negotiated, allowing those who could not afford such deals to become homeowners (one crucial facet of the long-standing American Dream) through deceptive and reified payment agreements which were not designed to be repayable. Such speculation (not far removed from loan-sharking and embezzlement) was produced for the benefit of financial trading in global markets, ultimately for the exponential profit of a few traders and investment bankers at the helm of market they claimed to be serving. Under these philosophies, countless alternative economies have been marginalized. This is certainly a timely conflict worth exploring, as we have faced a critical collapse of many of our major financial institutions in the last couple years due to this pattern of immediacy and short-term gain in the face of high risk and detrimental long-term consequences.

The events described above are but a few moments of a long and complicated back-story. Economic ideals have been underlying forces of civilization and society since prehistory. However, these few are most relevant to our current case, that of Clear Channel Radio. The advent of the corporation, the shift to consumerism, the perceived power of the market…all of these elements have helped shape the image and practice of the company today. Alongside their current role as a large corporation in capitalist markets, one of the main points of interest within this project is the wide-spread social backlash to the company's influence in *radio*. It has been blamed for pushing independent broadcasters out of the market. It has been blamed for homogenizing entertainment and monopolizing democratic territory. Perhaps most importantly, it has been demonized for its perceived dominance and singular nature as a hegemonic and unconquerable power. As J.K. Gibson and Graham reveal in a 1996 article, the same reaction (amongst academics and reformers) has been brought against capitalism itself.

> The virtually unquestioned dominance of capitalism can be seen as a complex product of a variety of discursive commitments, including but not limited to organicist social conceptions, heroic historical narratives, evolutionary scenarios of social development, and essentialist, phallocentric, or binary patterns of thinking. (Gibson-Graham, 4)

Gibson and Graham describe the systematic reading of capitalism as “an economic and social descriptor” (Gibson-Graham, 2). They outline the problematic nature of viewing capitalism as normative and prevalent as the “hegemonic, or even the only, present form of economy…that will continue to be so in the proximate future” (Gibson-Graham, 2). The main elements of all other forms of economy have become marginalized in social thought by this dominant attention to capitalism as an omnipotent economic force, to the point that “deliberate attempts to develop noncapitalist economic practices and institutions must take place in the social interstices, in the realm of experiment, or in a visionary space of revolutionary social replacement” (Gibson-Graham, 3). However, by “supplanting the (popularized) discourse of capitalist hegemony with a plurality and heterogeneity of economic forms” (Gibson Graham, 11) we may open up new explorations into economic dialogues which still occur all around us, mingling in complex patterns and interactions, creating an environment which is far more various than a theory of hegemonic capitalism would allow. For if capitalism is truly the dominant power defining the *economy*, what of collective housing initiatives? What of non-profit organizations? What of locally-supplied farmer’s markets, shared artist studios and free movie screenings? And if Clear Channel truly is the most influential source of music and entertainment in the region, then what of the local, independent Minneapolis music scene?

Of course, capitalism certainly still exists, and certainly exudes an “architecture or structure of power” in which ownership and financial control are the determinant factors, “quintessentially embodied in the multinational corporation” (Gibson-Graham, 8). While other forms of economy simultaneously coexist alongside free trade and unlimited capitalism, the classical assumptions that market competition of not only goods and products but of ideas and services as well, in the name of capital, will hone the playing field down to the best options and keep the economic system offering the most successful and efficient options available to the consumer base remains a prevalent assumption in the collective psyche. Likewise, the dominant fixtures of popular music culture such as commercial radio undeniably hold a large percentage of any given radio market. And as I will examine later, their role in shaping our understanding of music as a nationalized commodity is apparent even within the intimate workings of the local music scene.

Democracy and Influence

In exploring the discontent voiced specifically against Clear Channel, I have found that much of it stems from the company’s choice of medium: radio. Since its inception, radio has been a powerful tool of mass communication. Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s politically successful Fireside Chats during his campaign for the New Deal demonstrated radio’s potential for creating intimate connections with listeners, and shaping popular rhetoric. Roosevelt’s success was in part due to radio’s immediacy and personalized nature (the voice), which gave listeners an intimate connection to his simply-worded explanations of policy that was before unattainable on such a grand scale. His talks were a strong example of government manipulation of a powerful public medium, and its effect on mass audiences.

Often operating as a one-way broadcast from positions of privilege or power, radio holds historical and social weight as a potential source of democracy through large-scale participation, town-hall style meetings on the air, combined voice of the nation, etc. This element of radio was rarely utilized, but often implied. Although radio was founded on a premise of serving “public interest, convenience or necessity” (Heistad, 39) -- a phrase included in the 1927 Radio Act -- government influence and measures of profitability continually pushed such programming possibilities to the far reaches of the spectrum. As with the Homestead Act in the 19th Century, government set out with a responsibility to protect radio’s commercial development, and shape it as an industry. Programming was repeatedly reshaped to fit a competitive commercial market, until “public good” became synonymous with “commodity.” This shift gave rise to the complex role of radio as the salesman’s medium, always working to house the most ads and move the most goods from advertisers to consumers, while at the same time striving to function as a public service and portray the voice of “average” Americans.

Early experiments in street broadcasting and forays into public life displayed the complicated nature of attempting to encapsulate the American public as a cohesive, logical entity. Shows during the golden age of radio often attempted to capture this national voice. One such show entitled *Vox Pop* - in which a microphone was dangled from the broadcasters’ studio window down to street level – quizzed passersby on a series of topics, often comical in nature. These experiments revealed a “public mind overwhelmed by the blooming, buzzing confusion of public life and ruled by essentially private, psychological motivations” (Loviglio, 49). With the difficult boundary between intimate and public realms drawn to the surface, regulation of radio and its path toward commercialism was not unprecedented or illogical. In part, it was in lieu of frustrations from early broadcasters and competitors who demanded structure in which to operate. It was in lieu of confusion and conflict generated on the airwaves when void of organization or statutes of corporate collaboration. It was also in lieu of an intimate medium of social contact being brought to new levels of publicity and mass appeal.

As a somewhat humorous example of entirely deregulated public airwaves, and the product which is the most ideologically consistent representation of free speech and individual freedom, consider Citizens Band. Citizens Band was formed when a small portion of the broadcast spectrum was provided for the general public, with easy access to licenses (and easy access to the airwaves with or without one). Described as a “weird melting pot, a place where point-to-point chatter mixes with primitive broadcasts” (Walker, 271), the troubles of entirely unregulated and disorganized broadcasting quickly became manifest over the designated airwaves. Over a few decades, CB grew from a quirky and creative source of information, gossip, and entertainment, into a massive and unintelligible mess of noise and interfering signals. Its initial popularity and overwhelming public accessibility ended up completely dismantling its utility as a form of communication. In 1993, the writer I. R. Ybarra purchased a CB radio, listened in, and reported a belcher, a fast speed recording of the Woody Woodpecker trademark whistle, a male voice calling for Cleo, “CLEO! Cleo, got yer ears on?” and a man repeating the word ‘five’ for what he estimated to be “at least a thousand times…” (Walker, 271). After an initial rush of activity, CB soon disintegrated, with no structure or filter to make sense of the millions of samples of the lives of the general public, indiscriminately thrown into the ether as an ever-growing noise collage. By 1993, when Ybarra tuned in, this chaos had dissipated to the simplicity of the repeated number five, and the call of Woody Woodpecker at fast speed.

While radio was at times an unfiltered voice for public participation (amateur broadcasters at the dawn of radio, *Vox Pop* participants, and the chaos of Citizens Band) it has always been deemed unsuccessful to allow radio to operate as a completely unregulated space, free of all government influence. With jumbled programming, intersecting signals, and disputes over rights and property, public participation in radio revealed underlying confusions which run beneath the very foundation of democratic representation as a political form:

> Conflicting notions – the public as the arsenal of democratic reform and as a phantom – actually seemed to merge in the notion of the radio audience: immense, immediate, and united, yet also vulnerable, passive, and irrational. (Loviglio, 50)

The personable effectiveness of democratic communication was drawn into a paradox as government organized and instigated regulation dictating the use and propriety of the spectrum, seemingly in favor of broadcasters searching for the largest possible audience. The contrast between intimacy and publicity created a generalized and homogenized version of the American people as radio's largest audience. This development has caused tension between the varied and vast American Public, and broadcasters' abstractions of their wants and needs for the purpose of pandering to the widest possible base (serving ultimately to be cleanly packaged for advertisers).

Thus, a certain fervor has always surrounded radio's history, and this is primarily due to its conflicting roles in American society. Radio is a market for entertainment, an educational platform, a political soapbox, a voice of democracy, and a source for citizens' agency. Its influence has touched almost every element of society, meaning the landscape of radio is currently anything but simple. If we are to provide an analysis for present-day radio markets, we must first examine the prominent moments in radio's history which shaped what we know as the airwaves today.

A History of Radio

> The primary critique of commercial broadcasting was that the business side – the seeking of profits – conflicted with other aspects of radio, particularly its democratic informational and cultural functions…perhaps more importantly, however, the debate over sustaining public service time in the 1930s and ‘40s was not over whether radio had democratic informational and cultural functions, but rather over the appropriate roles commercial sponsors, audience ratings, non-profit public service agencies, listeners and government should play in shaping how, when and in what ways radio would fulfill those functions. (Heistad, 41-42)

From the moment radio was made cheap enough and accessible enough for commercial investment, it was commanded by private interests. Guglielmo Marconi was the first to construct a device to efficiently harness the potential of radio waves. While amateurs and hobbyists were beginning to build small sets to broadcast low-power signals, Marconi was looking for contracts with the British Navy, the U.S. Navy, and large commercial markets. He had quickly patented his invention, and proceeded to monopolize his newly discovered markets.

However, radio as a purely private enterprise did not last long. Amateur interference with Navy signals immediately preceding the Titanic disaster in April 1912 prompted government intervention. The “*Radio Act of 1912* by Congress… required all radio operators to have licenses and all ships to have wireless equipment” (Foege, 17). This act was an important step in structuring the radio *spectrum*, or designated frequencies reserved for radio transmission. At the time, it was sensible to clear up broadcasters’ signals and require them to be federally licensed to prevent further interference across the spectrum. Requiring federally regulated licenses for radio broadcasting wherein “no one could legally operate a radio without a license from the Department of Commerce and Labor” (Walker, 21-22), meant that many independent and low-power broadcasters who were operating on a small, community-based scale could no longer afford to do so. In essence, the new law favored the idea of large networks controlling nationally organized signals. Marconi, owning the largest company in the radio market, was “practically handed…a monopoly” (Foege, 17). Soon after, however, new technology (*continuous wave* radio) was presented which allowed the broadcast of music and voices, breaking Marconi’s grip on the market he once dominated. Music and voices meant main-stream appeal, and the medium quickly exploded. As the new capabilities of radio were made apparent, competitors began a frenzied attempt to capture audiences and establish profitable markets. The ensuing noise and confusion -- broadcasters overpowering others’ signals, jumping from frequency to frequency, and unpredictable programming -- led to further government action. Jesse Walker, who provides a history of alternative and independent broadcasters’ loss of legal rights to the airwaves, recounts the court case *Hoover vs. Intercity Radio Co.* The case involved Herbert Hoover’s rights over radio, as the head of the Department of Commerce. He would later be elected as President of the United States:

> A federal court ruled that Hoover did not have the legal right to deny an applicant a license but could assign the station particular hours and frequencies…Established broadcasters, looking to reduce competition, wanted the government to limit the number of new licenses it would issue. They had a friend in Hoover. The secretary…was a strong supporter of business-government cooperation, of the reign of experts acting in ‘the public interest.’ (Walker, 32)

Hoover’s ability to assign hours and frequencies was repealed in a later court case. In reaction to the struggle for “rights over the ether,” the *Radio Act of 1927* formed the Federal Radio Commission [FRC], the “forerunner of today’s FCC [Federal Communications Commission]” (Walker, 33). This act “gave authority over radio to an independent commission rather than to the Department of Commerce” (Foege, 19), meaning that radio was now privately owned but remained federally licensed.

With the building blocks in place, the landscape of radio we know well today began to take shape. Much as government involvement with democratic practice, free markets, and corporate capitalism began to shape our perception of the ideological *economy*, a pattern developed at the very inception of radio and persisted for the next 100 years; government and FCC regulatory practice limited the abilities of small independent stations while opening doors for large network expansion. While independent, educational, and non-profit organizations attempted to make space for their professed attention to *public service* and *cultural interests*, commercial networks worked to provide the public ear with an entertainment-based experience which would draw the largest audiences. Radio, as a powerful tool for both intimate communication and mass entertainment, became a stage like no other for the rise of capitalist markets to play out. With large networks' audiences growing and new markets of listeners opening up, other commercial enterprises became interested in the possibilities of radio. Walker states:

> It was natural for commercial interests, especially marginal ones, to look to radio as a way to sell their wares. And it was natural for at least some stations to seek sponsors, just to help pay the bills…what was far from inevitable was the ad-saturated radio that took hold in the late 1920s, with nearly no noncommercial alternatives in sight. (Walker, 35)

He continues by outlining how decisions by the FRC stripped the airwaves of many preliminary nonprofit efforts, generally moving radio forward with policies which favored large networks and advertising-driven commercial interests. Since there was never a development which allowed broadcasters to charge listeners for tuning in to a particular station, all a listener needed to do was buy a radio receiver. This provided some initial revenue, but the continued profitability of radio as a market was shaky until the advent of selling broadcasting time for advertising. As Alec Foege (author of Right of the Dial, a history of commercial radio and Clear Channel specifically) describes:

> From its very beginnings, radio advertisers in the United States held much more sway than those in newspapers and magazines, since commercial broadcasters made all their revenue from advertising. As early as the late 1920s, advertising agencies produced about one-third of all radio programs. Another 20 percent were created by individual sponsors. Radio networks at that time

> accounted for only 28 percent of the available programming; the rest was supplied by special-project producers. (Foege, 90)

The idea of selling airtime for advertising -- making radio a successful medium for profitable private business -- took deep roots, particularly during the *Golden Age of Radio* (roughly 1930 to 1950).

This national development came with resistance from broadcasters with alternative agendas. While becoming less and less accessible for direct public use apart from passive listenership, radio was still a powerful place for organizations and collectives to voice their agency. From the moment the majority of control was handed to private interests, reformers were there to make a case for radio's founding principles of serving the public good. In his dissertation on public service programming, Mark Heistad highlights some of these "sustaining public service programs… produced by the broadcasters themselves, often in cooperation with a government or non-profit agency or by non-profit and government agencies themselves" (Heistad, 7). The supposed role of these agencies was to provide programming for public needs and interests which fell outside the focus of commercial sponsors. Groups of reformers and government officials took reactionary stances against commercially-sponsored radio, and in doing so, provided critical insight into the established underworkings of the commercial radio structure. Among other things, reformers claimed that "broadcasters had largely ceded their control over the air, particularly the evening broadcast hours, to the sponsors and their advertising agencies" (Heistad, 298). This claim was problematic for the FRC/FCC as well as damaging to network programmers, who were under obligation via federal licenses to not simply sell advertisers' products, but (much more importantly, in the eyes of reformers and certain government regulators) to serve the public interest. The claims, as Heistad unveils, were not off-base: "While just one-third of all commercial network programs were produced by advertising agencies in 1929, more than 80 percent were by 1934" (Heistad, 299). Federal statutes were already in place which outlined the importance of alternative organizations, but little action had yet been taken to provide favorable conditions for them to share the airwaves with commercial networks. For instance, the FRC/FCC public interest standard from 1938 to 1941 provided guidelines in fairly direct opposition to the growing trends of advertising sales-dominated network broadcasting. In summary, the guidelines stated:

> *****_Broadcasting must be conducted with a public, not a private purpose._
> _The rights of listeners are paramount to those of broadcasters and advertisers._
> The FCC has regulatory authority over programming as well as technical aspect of radio.
> Past programming is an acceptable measure of a station's public interest performance.
> Individual station licensees are ultimately responsible for the content of their programming, including sponsored and network programming.
> The FRC/FCC will look with favor on broadcasters offering a balanced programming schedule, both with regard to various types of programming (entertainment, information, education, etc.) and with regard to the discussion of controversial issues.
> **Commercial advertising is the economic foundation of broadcasting. However, advertising must be incidental to the real public service offered by the broadcasters.*"
> (Heistad, 91-92)
> *emphasis added

This set of expectations came at a time when the FCC also ruled that it was a violation of *public interest* for "any organization to own more than one radio network and for any network to own more than one station in an area" (Foege, 91). This ruling was put in place to limit organizations from harming competition and preventing new networks to start up. One main concern cited was that large organizations controlling multiple radio networks had the ability to "prevent other [networks and] stations from serving the interest of their local communities" (Foege, 91). For a brief period, policy and practice seemed to be turning in favor of this focused attention on public service and local programming. But under pressure to negotiate the differences between profitable commercial stations and financially troublesome models employed by educational organizations and non-profit stations, the fervor for radio reform became overshadowed. The FCC repeatedly presented ideals and terms for radio use, and then failed to enforce them. For broadcasters, the terms of public service were never solidified, and such large questions still loomed unanswered as radio continued to change. "Was radio programming merely to seek the 'lowest common denominator?' Or did it have an obligation to 'uplift' and challenge the audience, thereby helping to raise the 'cultural level of the state or community?'" (Heistad, 11). A critical attention had been paid to the role of radio as educator and public servant – by government officials and committee leaders alike – during the 1930s. That critical attention faded as large networks reaffirmed their business models as profitable and powerful. Heistad notes, "Sustaining public service programming rose substantially from the early-1930s to the late-1930s, but then declined thereafter" (Heistad, 185). So far, according to Heistad, the general timeline of commercial radio involved changes through four broad periods:

> 1928-34 – Period of network consolidation culminating in passage of the Communications Act of 1934
> 1934-41 – Era of co-operative production of public service programming among the networks, educational and other groups and government agencies
> 1942-45 – World War II
> 1946-52 – Transition from 'golden age of radio' to television dominance
> (Heistad, 174).

As seen in the 1950s, radio's golden age received a jolt. The birth of television, and its availability to consumers, meant drastic changes for radio. Once again, technology reshaped the market. Listenership took a dive across the board, as consumers turned to the newest source of home entertainment. Up until this point, it was common for network stations to broadcast recordings of large live sets and musical arrangements. As popular performers started to migrate to television, radio "began cutting budgets by eliminating live bands and orchestras and sometimes airing the audio tracks for popular television shows" (Foege, 20). Such changes forced many broadcasters to quickly rethink the strengths and weaknesses of radio as a medium, and sparked new innovations for programmers intent on keeping a large audience. One of the most notable products of rethinking radio broadcasting was the idea of *format*. Essentially, format meant that "if you tuned to a station that you'd heard before, you'd have a pretty good idea of what you'd hear there again…now there'd be stations for different demographic(s), each playing its own kind of programming 'round the clock" (Walker, 56). The measured predictability of format broadcasts became a reassurance to listeners, providing reliability and genre-based platforms for different audiences. Such conventions simultaneously reinforced models which once again strengthened commercial networks and limited other independent competitors. Stations became name-brands for narrow playlists of easily-accessible hits, packaged and prepared for the perceived mainstream audience. While advertisers' direct control over programming (after scrutiny from critics) was no longer prevalent, commercial broadcasters nonetheless largely shaped their programming to be the most palatable to potential sponsors and investors. Radio was, in the most commercial sense, becoming a means to a financially-motivated end. Stations became assets, programming became equity, and formats became formulaic efforts to exploit pre-determined market niches. This language was recognizable and reassuring to financial groups, advertising firms, and prospective investors looking for economically successful ventures. In Walker's words:

> Financial speculation that set in after the first wave of FM entrepreneurs proved that one could make money outside the AM band. As more investors entered the marketplace, the price of the stations was bid further and further up… the moneymen who stayed wanted a quick return for their investment. It wasn't enough to be a respectable fourth place in the ratings; you had to jump quickly to number one, increasing the value of the station's ad time and, thus, the investors' stock. And the quickest road to a sudden ratings boost was to switch to a format that was doing well for someone else. (Walker, 126)

Innovation in the network sector meant innovation in the independent and non-profit sectors as well. As broadcasters scrambled to convince advertisers that they still had audiences, and listeners that they still had relevant content, other niches began to appear. Pacifica formed in 1949, as a collective of broadcasters intent on building an environment for independent and experimental stations. The collective started their first station in Berkely, California called KPFA. As an early foray into FM radio, the station was formed to operate free of commercials, initially taking "neither corporate nor government funds, preferring the little-tried notion of turning to its listeners for sponsorship" (Walker, 48). This became the first radio operation to attempt the membership support model, which is now a successful and widespread element of non-profit radio today; as I write this, 89.3 the Current is in the midst of a week-long member drive. Lewis Hill, creator of the Pacifica Foundation, pioneered the ideologies behind member-supported radio when he wrote *Voluntary Listener Sponsorship*, and its 1951 precursor, *The Theory of Listener-Sponsored Radio*. He states:

> The purpose of commercial radio is to induce mass sales…for mass sales there must be a mass norm, and the activity must be conducted as nearly as possible without risk of departure from the norm…by suppressing the individual, the unique, the industry reduces the risk of failure (abnormality) and assures itself a standard product for mass consumption. (Walker, 50)

He presented listener sponsorship as a viable alternative that could "give the genuine artist and thinker a possible, even a desirable, place to work." Walker elaborates on how this new system did so, "by restoring responsibility for programming to those who actually created the programs and by handing the power of the purse to the listener. The admen who pay for commercial broadcasts were cut out of the picture entirely" (Walker, 50). Soon, other stations began utilizing this new-found source of investment, partially due to financial desperation, but also partially due to local community dedication to keeping such operations on the air. KRAB-FM, a “small subscriber-supported enterprise” headed by Lorenzo Milam (also part of the Pacifica community), put one of the first massive fund drives into effect to counter perpetual deficits. Milam later expressed a sense of apology for what the innovation soon became, noting that “‘the [fund drive] Marathon is no longer a stop-gap emergency money-raise for the community stations. Rather, it has come to be a method whereby those stations can budget ahead of time an extra $20,000 or $80,000 - knowing that a month’s beggary will raise some sum like that’” (Walker, 87). As alternative minority-based stations began to emerge, scraping by with new tactics and locally-relevant programming, commercial networks regained stability by defining themselves to advertisers as efficient and influential programmers with still-substantial audiences tuned in to their frequencies.

Walker’s account of radio history largely decries network radio’s persistence as the most prolific and all-encompassing force in radio. He cites low-power (weak signal), unlicensed independent broadcasters operating illegally to serve small local audiences with sparse means and extremely limited resources as the true protagonists staged against the Network as antagonist. Operating on the platform of constitutional rights to the airwaves and free speech, intended to “reinvigorate localism in radio that was strongly opposed by the National Association of Broadcasters” (Foege, 190), they pop in and out of existence on open (and sometimes already-occupied) frequencies. Their small efforts have often been reactionary and politically charged, as movements of resistance to the status quo set in place by FCC limitations and commercial control of frequencies. The “pirate” broadcasters’ stance on free speech and their often erratic and quirky programming struck a chord with reformers, who were frustrated with the homogeneous repetition of format stations and Top 40 hits.

As voices of resistance to the perceived hegemonic force of network radio, illegal operations were often sought out by FCC agents, who then systematically raided unlicensed broadcasters’ makeshift stations and shut down their attempts to operate as clandestine communities on the airwaves. At the same time, while the FCC’s own standards on public service and democratic participation were imposed through published reports and reviews of the practices of network radio, very rarely were big-name licenses revoked or violations of the code brought to court. This is not surprising, as long-established commercial radio owners with consistent revenue, large audiences, and a host of investors and sponsors were not easily shut down.

The FCC developed precisely in parallel with this conflict of interests. While attempting to provide a *healthy, competitive* market (values largely based on free-market capitalism, but used as determinants for regulation) stable enough for private investment and economic growth, the Commission also strained to impress the importance of community programming, public service, education, and democracy onto the dominantly commercial landscape of radio broadcasting. Thus, the FCC was legally required, capable, and apparently determined (perhaps as a way of showcasing *action* to counter criticisms of their overall *inaction*) to shut down all illegal operators broadcasting without FCC-issued licenses. The FCC was less capable, less willing, and only liable for its own wavering code of public service when it came to holding large networks accountable for their broadcasting practices. Their chastisements of commercial radio fell empty with an accompanying lack of enforcement. This pattern led to the perception that the FCC has, over the many decades of radio's evolution, "eased the restrictions that chafe the most powerful companies while tightening the rules that protect their privileges" (Walker, 267).

In the context of Walker's somewhat polarized scale, the efforts of non-profit organizations, collaborations between government programs and licensed independent stations, educational programs, and other legalized public service and alternative entertainment stations fall somewhere in the middle. Critics have cited propagandized government interaction with programming, propagation of private interests similar to financial motives in the commercial sector, and elitist or class-oriented programming as pitfalls of such endeavors. As an example, let us consider the following case in which a government role in radio became questionable:

United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization partnered with Mallard Constructs, a company that "builds small, cheap, easy-to-use FM transmitters and helps set up community-radio stations in the Third World" (Walker, 193). This partnership seemed well-intentioned initially, focused on the local cultural benefits of such a development. In a published issue of the *UNESCO Courier* elaborating upon "self-reliant low-cost radio stations," they made a convincing claim:

> In this kind of project, the initiative comes from the communities. The local folk build the radio station, and after group discussions, they set the guidelines for the broadcasters. They organize the radio team, drawing on all sectors of the village. There is no lack of volunteers. (Walker, 193)

But in practice, many of the radio projects came as part of larger regional development schemes. These were designed to reformat social relations, economic practices, and ideals on quality of life, arguably serving policy-makers more so than the local peoples.

This case brings to light further evidence of the power of radio as a tool of community-building and local autonomy. Unfortunately, it also brings to light the recurring tendency of such power to be co-opted for the propagation of centralized and generalized ideals relating to social stratification, imperialism, expansionism, industrialism, capitalism, etc. With government-funded projects based in radio programming came suspicion and political debate, spurred by war-time propaganda, censorship of controversial discussion, and cases similar to the aforementioned. Interestingly, the charge of censorship has also been brought up against commercial radio programmers. In fact, as Heistad reports, a major failing of American radio was the “inevitable censorship of sponsor-controlled programming.” Such censorship, motivated by majority ideas and the mass-media appeal from advertisers, “was manifest in the commercial broadcasters’ tendency to ignore the views and interest of minorities, shy away from controversial issues, and favor banal entertainment programming over more intellectually stimulating and socially relevant material” (Heistad, 291). And while government influence may suggest censorship and self-promotion, radio itself has inarguably been shaped by government action, even in the most free-market, commercial sectors of radio today. Walker summarized:

> American radio is very capitalist, in the crude sense of the word: the industry is a busy bazaar, rife with deal making, speculation, and hustlers trying to get rich quick. It is also very socialist, in the crude sense of the word: it has long relied on the government to protect its biggest players, to shore up their profits, and to ensure that the competition doesn’t get too unruly. (Walker, 246)

Public interest, community broadcasting, and localized service were to remain contested grounds through to our current day, as the ideals of the free market claimed to supply consumers with what they requested, while minority groups on the periphery of large homogenized demographics were left unattended and unsatisfied by the dominant sources of radio broadcasting in all major markets across the country. From this point, we may take on the rise of Clear Channel, the corresponding development of Minnesota Public Radio, and the birth of 89.3 the Current.

Clear Channel Company History:

1972 marked the beginning of a new story in American entrepreneurship. It was a story about people “possessed of a strong sense of personal integrity, fiscal responsibility, corporate leadership, and family pride” (Bunzel, 13). Incidentally, it was also a story about radio. As with most radio networks, Clear Channel started as a single station. By the time we examine its history today, Clear Channel has overhauled radio market regulation, has made Lowry Mays (founder) and Red McCombs (initial investor) “two of the wealthiest men in the Lone Star State” (Bunzel, 13), and has become the most dominant voice in commercial radio.

For the most part, the company’s trajectory echoes much of what had happened amongst other large network radio conglomerates earlier in radio history. The idea was, as Randall Mays (son of Lowry) recalls: “‘(to buy) stations, (operate) them better than the people we bought them from, and that provided us the cash flow that enabled us to buy more stations’” (Bunzel, 90). Operations were mainly focused on financial speculation and opportunistic competition in lucrative markets. Given the financial focus, it was somewhat by chance that Lowry Mays chose to try his hand at radio. He is aware and open about this point, stating: “‘If anyone said we were in the radio business, it wouldn’t be someone from our company. We’re not in the business of providing news and information. We’re not in the business of providing well-researched music. We’re simply in the business of selling our customers’ products’” (Foege, 230).

On June 13, 1975, a small team headed by Mays started broadcasting operations on WOAI. His new company, consisting of one AM station, was "Clear Channel Communications, named after WOAI's clear channel signal" (Foege, 43). WOAI quickly built its mission around advertising. John Barger, while serving as WOAI's general manager, remembers strategies such as "reward the guys who sell the most ads" (Foege, 44). Stan Webb, while in charge of advertising sales under Barger's incentive, quickly discovered that advertisers "'liked to hear themselves on the radio. It's like if you're selling outdoor advertising… make sure you find out where the client's work is, so you can put one of the billboards up on his way to work… you're selling him on his own advertising'" (Foege, 47). Much of the station's early success was based on advertisement sales and in disregard for the ratings, to the point that by 1978, WOAI was recognized as the dominant station in San Antonio, turning over the highest annual revenue of any broadcast operation in the region, all the while resting at a lowly number eight on the ratings charts. The ratings were secondary to their main strength, "a personal relationship with advertisers who were also listeners" (Foege, 49). The mantra of sales over programming proved profitable. Stemming from this initial model by finding small struggling stations, purchasing them at a low price, and then converting them into successful businesses, the company began to grow in size and revenue.

Over the next fifteen years, Clear Channel continued to construct a strong commercial base, utilizing shifts to popular formats, market research, and efficient financial measures. All the while, Lowry Mays was becoming an influential force in radio's larger organizations of administration, including the National Association of Broadcasters. The NAB was essentially a board which represented the most powerful members in network broadcasting, and had considerable clout with the FCC. Amongst the members of the NAB, there was a popular belief that having many small, individual companies competing for airspace was detrimental to the economic base. Such competition generated cheap commercial sales, whereas true company growth was dependent on producing large revenues to spark investor interest. For these reasons, the NAB was consistently putting pressure on the Commission's regulatory structure. In 1985, the pressure began to take an effect. The FCC relaxed the 7-7-7 ownership rule (companies could own no more than seven AM stations, seven FM stations, and seven TV stations) that year, replacing it with a 12-12-12 regulation instead. The change was a victory for the NAB, whose members "repeatedly had maintained that a limit of seven stations in any one band was prohibitive in building a company that could deliver the kind of cash flow that was sustainable year in and year out" (Bunzel, 43). In turn, it was a victory for Clear Channel. As the company and its main competing radio groups grew, the increase of scale in operation meant a further interest in efficiency and finance, and therefore "less and less (attention to) creative input. Radio executives became far more interested in quantitative research than in the opinions of any one programmer, regardless of that person's level of experience" (Foege, 97). This led to a noticeable abstraction of content and programming, heavily reliant on predetermined formats, market predictions, and an ever-increasing amount of airtime dedicated to spot advertising.

By 1995, commercial radio was struggling. But instead of re-examining the debasement from the audience and abstraction of programming taking place, networks called out FCC regulation as the culprit. At this point, Lowry Mays was the chairman of the NAB board of directors, and had been working with lawmakers and the FCC to continue the push for deregulation. And when it came, he was ready. He had "helped draft the language that served as its blueprint" and was "very involved with formulating the regulatory environment" (Bunzel, 51) that later allowed network radio to rapidly balloon in size. The language was that of the Telecommunications Act of 1996, which "allow(ed) radio groups to own as many stations as they wanted (with some regional restrictions)" (Foege, 6). This shift came after years of assumption by network radio and regulators alike that bigger means better – that "to survive, radio must become a tight clan of consolidated chains offering formulaic formats" (Walker, 255). The FCC's ruling cushioned large radio networks from financial ruin by allowing existing station owners to own more stations within any single market, and by allowing companies to "own an unlimited number of stations nationwide" (Walker, 256). While ad sales rebounded, listenership continued to fall. Analysts attributed this to "the trend toward extremely segmented formats, the converse loss of several once-thriving niche formats, the decline in locally oriented programming, (and) the increase in the number of commercials per hour" (Walker, 256).

What followed the Telecommunications Act of 1996 is much akin to the land-grab which established the development of commercialized agriculture directly following the Homestead Act of 1862. In a frenzy of activity, competing networks jumped at the opportunity to consolidate as many stations as they could, pushing multi-million dollar deals and merging smaller competitors under their domains:

> By March 1996, more than $1.8 billion in radio deals had been announced. In the first week of that month alone, at least five station mergers or acquisitions totaling more than $630 million took place. Five of the ten largest radio companies purchased eighty-two stations in that same period of time. (Foege, 96)

Not surprisingly, given Lowry Mays' role in the shaping of regulation while also acting as the owner of a massive private company which would benefit from the manipulation of regulatory law, Clear Channel was on top with "around 1,233 radio stations, more than thirty times the number that would have been allowed prior to the Telecom Act of 1996" (Foege, 155). The closest competitor at the time accounted for 200 stations. Clear Channel's network, now at its peak, represented 27% of listenership and revenue nationwide. In 2001, as a logical step in advertising-based expansion, Clear Channel broke into the outdoor billboard market by purchasing Eller Media, which brought 700,000 billboards into their national inventory.

Today, Clear Channel remains a large international company holding a dominant position in the U.S. radio and outdoor advertising market, as well as holding sizeable shares of the largest radio providers in New Zealand, Australia, and Mexico. The company's radio stations across the globe still total over 1,000 and boast more than 110 million listeners throughout the U.S. While having received criticism for having a "*McDonald's* approach to radio programming that makes one city's offerings largely indistinguishable from another's" (Steinberg, 2008), Clear Channel offers a wide range of stations across the country, and maintains that its focus in radio is "serving local communities" (ClearChannel.com, 2009). However, as a corporate entity with large stakes in advertising and live entertainment as well, the company's creed ultimately settles on the bottom line by stating: "We believe the ultimate measure of our success is to provide a superior value to our stockholders" (ClearChannel.com, 2009). Since 1972, Clear Channel has rapidly expanded into a multi-faceted corporate powerhouse. But under a new wave of financial pressures, the stability and sustainability of their business practices are being scrutinized like many others in the current U.S. market environment.

According to Clear Channel's financial records over the past five years, the story is one of faltering revenue and growing debt. As a global company with interests dominantly in outdoor advertising, large-scale live entertainment, and radio broadcasting, the years of 2008 and 2009 marked a steep downturn. From 2005 to 2008, the company's yearly total revenue fluctuated between standard levels of rise and decline, never exceeding a difference of over 7%, and falling only once by 4% in 2005. However, tracking the ever-growing use of credit, which was marked by a credit line of 1.2 billion dollars in 2006 (at which point the public debt checked in at 750 million dollars), one can see a cause for concern. Mark Mays, the Chief Executive Officer at the time, was focused on investment for long-term growth, and full of positive forward-looking rhetoric while rebounding from the 4% decline in revenue in 2005. In a statement released in the 2006 Annual Report, he stated:

> We are one of the best performing companies in the media industry… our healthy fundamentals and solid growth highlight the superior positioning of our assets and the emerging benefits of our concerted investment strategy. (ClearChannel Annual Report 2006)

Like many other large global corporations with extensive financial interests and long-term investments backed by large sums of credit, the risk involved was not heeded while the economic environment appeared stable. Despite fringe economists, anthropologists, and other scholars warning of the opposite, corporations such as Clear Channel continued to spend on credit with risk assumedly far out of sight. Just a year later, the nature of Clear Channel's operations began to change. Having always been notorious as an expansionist entity with a pattern of "binge buying" (Steinberg, 1), it was a surprise to see the 2007 report review the proposed selling of the Television Group and 448 radio stations in the face of a merger with a group of private equity funds joined for the purpose of purchasing Clear Channel under the name of CC Media Holdings. As foreshadowed, the financial crisis took hold in 2008. Banks were sent reeling (particularly Goldman Sachs which served as Clear Channel's financial advisor) and Clear Channel, now operating under a parent company, watched their situation turn grim. It was in the very same year that Clear Channel sold off 238 of 275 stations (scaled back from 2007's proposal of 448 stations). This did little, however, to cover increasing debt. 2008 marked the termination of the company's credit facility (then capped at 1.75 billion dollars) and a flurry of loans, new credit facilities, and the balancing of prior outstanding credit, all of which measured in at a grand total of 20.8 billion dollars in debt. Mark Mays still pressed positive results "in the context of this challenging advertising climate," going on to state "we are hopeful that our streamlined operations coupled with a concentration on growth and execution will enable us to continue to perform well, despite a difficult economic environment" (Clear Channel annual report 2008, 2). Despite a constructive perspective and positive outlook, the situation did not improve. According to CC Media Holdings' reports for the first quarter of 2009, revenues have dropped 23%. Among the focuses was a reduction of fixed costs and restructuring expenses. Now operating on a vastly reduced credit facility of 12.6 million dollars, CC Media Holdings' debt has grown to 22 billion dollars.

Clear Channel Today

In April (2010), I started calling around to find a Clear Channel representative willing to talk about their situation and get a first-hand account of their present operations. The process was a lengthy one. After sending information to a variety of DJ's from a handful of local Clear Channel stations and calling administrators' secretaries, I was eventually put in contact with the Minneapolis and St. Paul Market Manager. Once tracked down, he was very willing to have a conversation. My objective was to get a personal, human sense of what goes on within the massive entity that is Clear Channel. To this point, I had only read accounts of their practices and analyzed their financial reports. My secondary objective was to unveil some of the ideologies that drive Clear Channel's market decisions as a dominant source of music entertainment and talk radio. The conversation that followed has been documented below. I cite the Market Manager's statements under the initials CS.

To begin, we talked through a typical day in his position. His duties include overseeing the programming, promotion, sales, the engineering, accounting, and the overall operation of the seven Clear Channel stations in the Twin Cities market. The day prior to our conversation, he had sat down for two one-on-one meetings with department members, relayed two direct reports regarding promotions, called a Fortune 500 company to discuss doing business, called the President of the Minnesota Twins (the city's prided Major League Baseball team) to discuss potential rights to the Twins in 2011, and met with a client regarding a weight loss campaign to be incorporated into six morning shows. As an outsider, this sampling of activity seemed to me congruent with many corporate managerial positions, so I asked why he is drawn to radio in particular. He explained, "the one-on-one relationship radio has had with its consumer combined with…there's something about radio where an individual's ideas and creativity can make such a big difference in the success of radio" (CS, interview). He described how radio's influence remains powerful, even in light of new media sources. He mentioned that "talk radio has had an unbelievable influence in the political game” (CS, interview) And with a line-up of prolific political talk radio hosts including Sean Hannity, Glenn Beck, and Rush Limbaugh, Clear Channel certainly does affect the nation’s political atmosphere. He also explained how “Contemporary Hits Radio (Top 40) stations play a significant role in the advancement and creation of new products, i.e. the Lady Gagas of the world. The radio still plays a significant role in that part of the business” (CS, interview). This statement was particularly interesting, for one of the issues at the core of this project relates precisely to how large corporate bodies such as Clear Channel project an image of what is perceived by a mass audience of consumers as American *culture*. His allusions to creating products out of pop music stars and how that power affects the business outlines the role of music and entertainment in Clear Channel ideology. Popular music figures are incorporated into the business plan as essential tools of a market that commoditizes cultural elements. The excitement for him stems from the powerful nature of this market. He stated:

> “It’s very competitive. It’s a strategy. You’re creating a market every day. It’s like war but nobody dies. You’ve got to figure out how to beat your competitors.” (CS, interview)

We talked of economic concerns, which in lieu of the financial crash, involved cutbacks. He is expected to hit a revenue goal each quarter, and the cuts were a critical part of hitting that number:

> “We had 180 full-time employees. About 79 were salespeople. The rest were promotion, on-air, administrative, engineering. We took the sales department down to 33. We took some of our top program directors and put them over two stations instead of one. We cut our promotions department more than in half. We cut our news staff back 50%. We tried to find the best people and give them more to do.” (CS, interview)

We discussed the importance of public service within the local community. Local Clear Channel stations have the capacity to run up to 10,000 Public Service Announcements a month. Each quarter, they sit down with a local advisory board: people from education, healthcare foundations, city government, chamber of commerce, and services. These 13 to 15 board members meet to asses the main three concerns in the market through their eyes as community leaders. The local directors then address these issues heavily in either public service announcements or in major campaigns. He claimed, “We’ll take 25-30% of our PSA inventory and customize it to address those issues… (they) aren’t just buried at night. They run as a part of our programming every hour” (CS, interview). The stations also pick up national public service projects:

> “The company is doing a very good balance between leveraging the assets of the 856 stations they have in 156 markets to make a difference all across the country. Simultaneously we are doing the same thing to embrace our community locally.” (CS, interview)

He stated that it is a duty at least in part motivated by ratings: “If you have two stations that entertain, but one does a better job in the community, the one that does a better job in the community will have better ratings” (CS, interview). Community relationships and connections

outside of Public Service include JAM Productions, the Excel Center in downtown St. Paul, Target (a Minnesota-based corporate chain of supermarkets), Live Nation (a concert promotions company, formerly owned by Clear Channel), Mystic Lake Casino and Grand Casino “(as they) become more and more important and bring more acts in” (CS, interview). His job does not necessarily entail making these connections or building these relationships. There are also considerable ties to record companies but, he explained:

> “I rarely meet with the record people. (Our) Operations manager has relationships specifically in country, (our) program director of Cities (Cities97: adult contemporary format station) and Kool (KOOL108: oldies format station)… has a tremendous amount of contact with the record labels. I’m not real hands-on with them.” (CS, interview)

As for the comparisons and differences between Clear Channel radio and other competitors in the market - Minnesota Public Radio specifically - he outlined the relationship between the organization and his as follows:

> "KNOW (91.1) and the Current (89.3) are very viable competitors. They play a pretty big role. When you look at the revenue under that whole network under Mr. Kling (acting President of MPR), they do (as much or more than) we do. We've got the sports and (talk) specialty. They've got the governmental and news side…they have financial pressures, but I think their financial pressures are different. They are getting better and better at the commercial side even though they don't call it that. What they're putting on the air is getting closer and closer to what we're doing. On the other hand we're looking as… sometimes maybe we ought to do it like they're doing it, more institutional. I like their approach sometimes and want to copy it. (However) we have more pressure to operate at a much more fiscal level. We squeeze more out of the orange than they do." (CS, interview)

Notably, he touched on the back-and-forth influence which has shaped both organizations. They have both taken elements of what is visibly successful, and have attempted to incorporate those elements into their operations and practices. He explained Clear Channel's evolving approach to market research, which was in the past based on listener "diaries" in which individuals were paid a small sum to log their listening practices. Now, a new technology called People Meter, which registers and identifies digital signals of radio broadcasts, provides accurate information on what listeners are responding to. People Meter feeds this data back to Arbitron. Arbitron is the main source of listenership data that the majority of stations use as a reference for pricing and selling advertising - to use the data, radio groups must purchase subscriptions. After receiving information from People Meter, Arbitron documents listener data for the use of radio networks with subscriptions. For Clear Channel, this data is used to "do some experimenting to see what works and what doesn't work. Now we're actually seeing when they turned us off" (CS, interview). Before this development, their decisions were based on a rougher perception of consumers' tastes…"It's causing us to program to please the listener as opposed to programming to convince them to listen to (us)" (CS, interview). Clear Channel, contrary to wide-spread belief, does not have nationally dictated playlists for their music stations. They incorporate a more flexible regional model, in which managers will trade results and ratings of listener response, and tweak their playlists according to what works and what does not. The news and talk formats, however, are less flexible. They consist of dominantly nationally-syndicated shows.

One of the most interesting elements to come out of our conversation was the assertion that Clear Channel is beginning to research more ways to incorporate some of the community engagement tactics which 89.3 has proven to be successful. The most notable of these is the dedication to local, relatively unknown artists who in the past have gotten minimal (if any) exposure on Clear Channel stations. They are looking for areas (within their programming schedules) to use as platforms for exposing new, local musicians. This is in part due to the data they have received from People Meter, showing that 89.3 has benefited from such practices. If they are incorporated as he claims, it may mean a real shift in Clear Channel’s practices, turning them toward a more constructive and locally-relevant approach to entertainment and culture. In closing, I asked for his thoughts on music as a valuable element in daily life:

> “From a pure value standpoint, music is an essential part of your life… (it serves as a) mood enhancer, as entertainment…I can’t imagine what life would be like without music. People retain way more of what they hear than what they see. In a concert, the experience solidifies the bond in what you like. (If you’re watching a movie and) you hear a song you like, it makes the movie better. It enhances the whole experience…it’s extremely valuable.” (CS, interview)

This experience coexists with music as an element of business. Outside of the personal realm, it is a powerful product, a “Lady Gaga” capable of shaping consumer patterns and perceptions of American culture.

The dialogical relationship between non-profit radio and Clear Channel as market and cultural forces is apparent throughout the conversation. Some of the commonly held criticisms that many listeners and reformers have held as negative aspects of Clear

Channel’s approach to radio are also present here. They include neglect - aside from public service announcements - of locally-relevant programming in favor of abstract formats, the heavily commoditized nature of their understanding of music, and their focus on advertisers. The voices of opposition to Clear Channel’s practice have mainly been born of frustration with commercial radio as a concept which put public service and democracy of the airwaves in jeopardy. For instance, Russell Feingold (a Democratic Senator from Wisconsin), in response to complaints voiced by constituents reacting to Clear Channel’s alleged anti-competitive business practices and corporate attitude, made the following remarks at a Future of Music Coalition policy summit in Washington in 2003: “‘The last time I checked, radio airwaves continued to be owned by the public. We need to remind the FCC that radio is a public medium. It must serve the public good’” (Foege, 210). Preceding and following a January 2003 hearing, FCC commissioners Jonathan Adelstein and Michael Copps, held hearings in thirteen major cities nationwide, expecting to receive feedback from the public on the state of radio. They experienced large attendance and fielded many complaints, “usually built around a core set of concerns about the rise of big media. The loss of localism. The loss of news coverage. Homogenization of programming.” By the conclusion of their tour, Adelstein and Copps agreed that there was “widespread frustration with radio” from the public it was supposedly serving. Adelstein also stated that “‘the deep sense of accountability to the community has been lost… a lot of times now, of course, the company that owns the radio station doesn’t even come from that community’” (Foege, 216).

In practice, Clear Channel remains to be a symbol for what Heistad terms as the (commerce and market-oriented) *transportation model* of radio:

> Radio broadcasters simply seek to compete among themselves by attempting to provide a product (the programming) most favored by consumers (listeners) or, in a more sophisticated analysis, they compete to produce audiences most favored by advertisers. The fact that they are in the process producing *intellectual* and *cultural* goods is of no particular importance.
> (Heistad, 33 emphasis added)

As I will elaborate upon later, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkeimer (prominent figures of the Frankfurt School of philosophy) consider this lack of attention of *great* importance (see Why Music?).

A New Niche: the Birth of 89.3 the Current under Non-Profit Radio

In any case, the noticeable discontent with network radio amongst certain groups gave rise to a new niche in the Minneapolis market: enter 89.3 the Current, an experimental Minnesota Public Radio music station. Minnesota Public Radio is a non-profit organization, which originated in 1967 when William Kling first took over a college radio station at St. John's University. From there, Kling built an institution that now operates 38 stations which cater to a regional listening population of 5 million people (103,575 of which are supporting members). MPR draws 850,000 listeners each week, which is the "largest audience of any regional radio network" (minnesota.publicradio.org, 2009). MPR, under Kling's leadership, has often been brought under critical fire for employing a market approach more akin to large commercial networks than regional public-supported organizations. Through successful member drives, private underwritings, and government subsidies, MPR has grown quickly. With the financial success of MPR, Kling was able to spread his regional network across the map through the creation of American Public Media, which now acts as the nation's "second-largest producer and distributor of national public radio programs" (minnesota.publicradio.org, 2009). American Public Media now acts as a parent organization for MPR – drawing it into the larger context of Kling's national network. This expansive philosophy and market-driven approach has put others (particularly market competitors) in the member-supported sector of non-profit organizations on edge. Skepticism regarding Kling’s priorities have been fore-fronted by his attention to the bottom line, his competitive nature in taking over market niches, and the rising number of contributions which come in the form of corporate underwritings. Public support, for instance, embodies three sectors: individual gifts and memberships - generated during on-air pledge drives, fundraisers, and through promotions or other public functions - regional underwriting, and national underwriting. Underwriters are corporate sponsors who provide support through philanthropic grants and contributions. In 2005, national and regional underwriting combined made up 43% of public support, whereas individual memberships constituted 34%. By 2008, corporate underwriting had risen to 46%, while individual memberships fell to 29%. While this may not appear to be a significant shift, it is an important way to contextualize public support. Critics are concerned that while Minnesota Public Radio presents itself as a member-supported organization, rising public support does not necessarily entail rising individual member support. The double-standard of presenting itself as a non-profit member-supported station in tune with local communities while in reality taking the majority of public support from national and regional corporations is often viewed in the same light as claiming to be a non-profit organization while aggressively pursuing larger markets and mass audiences in order to expand financially.

The approach, however, has been undeniably successful. MPR, despite changing economic conditions, has maintained steady if relatively small gains in member support and funding over the last 5 years. The non-profit model of operation eliminates the tendency to invest in financial ventures and utilize radio as a vehicle for larger economic goals, therefore eliminating the risks of long-term investment and borrowing in the face of future economic uncertainty. Kling has incorporated the non-profit model but driven it with a commercial mentality, constantly opening up new membership markets and expanding the breadth of MPR's regional listenership. Of course, for the same reasons, relative to for-profit radio companies, MPR's numbers are slight. In 2001, journalist Leigh Gallagher reported:

> Public radio is still dwarfed by its for-profit counterparts, which take in $20 billion a year in ad revenue. But note that the audience for public radio is up 57% over the past decade, while radio overall has seen listenership hours decline 13% since 1993. (Gallagher, 2001)

True to this observation, MPR increased its net assets by 118 thousand dollars between 2007 and 2008, with 64% of the total operating revenue being drawn from public support (corporate underwriting, grants from endowments, business support, educational sponsors, and individual gifts and memberships). Meanwhile, other financial markets across the globe were shaken and destabilized. MPR's success and stability through difficult economic shifts is in no small part due to the creation of 89.3 the Current.

89.3 The Current was launched in 2005. The Current is a member-supported, commercial-free music station with a self-prescribed "anti-format" playlist. The large range of music played (atypical and not always to everyone's taste) on the Current's airwaves have been classified as eclectic at best, and sporadic at worst. Under MPR's non-profit model, The Current had an immediate impact on total memberships and boosted public support. This excerpt, taken from the 2005 MPR annual report, outlines the Current's impact within the first year of its advent:

> Once The Current went on the air, listeners contributed more than $100,000 through the station's web site before there had been any on-air requests for donations. By the end of the year, 9,000 new members supported the station, bringing total membership to more than 88,000—the largest in Minnesota Public Radio history. (MPR annual report, 2005)

Over the last 5 years, the Current has continued to successfully draw more listeners, members, and financial support, significantly strengthening MPR's annual totals. As the Electric Fetus Benefit and other community events (Rock the Garden, Policy and a Pint, the Local Show, etc.) have shown, the success of the Current is due to its visibility within the Minneapolis and St. Paul communities which it calls home. By sponsoring local events, consciously supporting local music, and operating on a smaller scale than other regional stations, the Current has been able to cater to the specific responses and requests of the regional community which it relies on for support. While the creed of Clear Channel is operable on a large international and abstracted financial level, Minnesota Public Radio's mission is more applicable on a local scale. As stated, their mission is to "enrich the mind and nourish the spirit, thereby assisting our audiences to enhance their lives, expand perspectives and strengthen their communities" (minnesota.publicradio.org, 2009). The Current is an example of this statement in action, with Minneapolis and St. Paul serving as its central supportive locale.

89.3 the Current Today

As I did with Clear Channel, I went in search of a primary source for my account of 89.3 the Current. The process was fairly quick, and I was soon taking a tour of Minnesota Public Radio's downtown St. Paul studios, accompanied by 89.3's Program Director. After the tour, we sat down in his office and had a conversation about radio, similar in intent to the discussion with Clear Channel's regional Market Manager. I have documented the conversation below, and will cite the Program Director as PF. This time, we were talking about the non-profit radio sector. The Current's Program Director has experience in the commercial sphere, which made his perspective double-sided:

> “Working in the public radio sphere is pretty amazing because there is so much attention paid to content and connection between the content and the audience because our business model is based primarily on that connection and on providing a service for free and asking people to support it financially, whereas in my experience with many years of working in commercial radio – there, its about aggregating the largest possible audience and selling exposure to that audience to advertisers for as much money as possible, and so it’s a less individualized approach to content, and it’s kind of in the commercial corporate world it tends to be what’s the cheapest way I can program to get the most listeners to get the most revenue? That’s the big difference between the two.”
> (PF, interview)

He spoke about the joys of working in such a vibrant music scene, and his excitement to be able to nurture it and directly affect its success: “(Musicians), writers, clubs, record stores…having this station being dedicated to local music is the catalyst, the facilitator that pushes this scene even further, because it connects all those things together” (PF, interview). He described some of the difficulties of negotiating between playing as much local “competitive” music as possible, and judging which bands aren’t good enough to have a place next to the national material they also play. He states:

> “We played 450 local artists in 2009. A couple hundred of them we played a lot. We probably receive at least double that much music from the local music scene…we have to look at it as what our listeners want to hear… Hopefully that’s a bar for local music to aspire to. If they’re not quite there yet, we try to give them feedback. We want to have the maximum impact for the local bands we play. We could play local music all the time, but we wouldn’t have the size audience we do. (So) if we have to use a little David Bowie that gets another layer of consumer in the door, and then we get to throw (a local band) at them, more people get to hear (the local band).
> (PF, interview)

For him, the similarities shared with commercial stations were mainly about the nature of broadcasting in general. All stations playing music serve as cultural filters for the audience, providing as enjoyable an experience as possible while determining what’s fit to be heard and what’s not. While “Clear Channel has proven that you can be non-regional, nationalize your content, and you can be fairly successful at aggregating an audience with a limited amount of resources employed to make that possible” (PF, interview), the Current has found a niche audience that has supported it directly. He claims:

> “We do it the most modern and the most old-fashioned way. We have giant group music meetings arguing about which records to play, we don’t do research the way commercial radio does research. We do want to grow our ratings, but we don’t want to sacrifice the sort of inherent hard to explain sense of quality and curation that is part of what makes this station special and enables us to have that member-subscriber relationship with our audience.” (PF, interview).

Then we addressed a few issues which have driven this project since I started research. Issues like the current role of the FCC, of government, of democracy. In response to Clear Channel’s mission statement as providing a profit for shareholders he exclaimed:

> “Is this what people had in mind when the FCC was founded in the 1930s? Radio as a medium - many people believe that those airwaves belong to all of us, as a national people. So we empower the government to figure out what to do with them. The government creates the FCC and the FCC says, We’ll sell them! We get to this model now where it’s like hyper-capitalism.” (PF, interview)

He described other countries’ approaches of nationalized radio (particularly the BBC in England and the CBC in Canada), and how “those countries don’t have Clear Channel neo-monopolies dominating the airwaves” (PF, interview). He spoke to the problematic nature of radio as a commercial market:

> “If it was a typical consumer good like soda, it wouldn’t matter. But because it’s this communications mechanism, you start to talk about democracy and information and news. It’s a little more high-stakes here.” (PF, interview)

We also discussed some of the more market-based practices of the Current, such as corporate underwriting and private investments which often account for a significant amount of the revenue brought in as *public support.* He took the opportunity to confirm that financial pressures do affect the station, and that the Current is pursuing a larger audience to some extent to sell more underwriting. He explained, “Not anything like dictating promotional calendars or playlists. More like a newspaper where there’s a huge distinction between journalism and advertising” (PF, interview). We talked of music’s importance, and he explained how he saw the Current fitting into the local efforts:

> “We’re trying to see where we fit into the evolution of music, to help curate but also respond to feedback in a dialogue manner to have a discussion about where music’s been and where it’s going and help both reflect and shape that in a back and forth way.” (PF, interview)

Of course, this dialogue also includes the relationships with commercial stations. In contrast to what he saw the Current’s role to be, he outlined what commercial stations have done to influence the current market:

> “Most commercial radio stations are just about reacting to what the very general public favors with very little context or historical regard, and usually very little local regard.
> Part of that’s because in commercial radio the term *broad*caster is an important word, it’s about large-scale aggregation. That’s why it’s pretty homogenized. That’s why the way radio has changed in the last 15 years since the Telecommunications Act of 1996 which allowed the great land-grab of radio stations and the creation of companies like Clear Channel has led to the homogenization and lack of regional flavor in most *broad*casting radio formats.” (PF, interview)

In the end, he affirmed that the Current, in comparison to large commercial networks, had not taken as significant of a hit during the financial crash. Underwriting dipped about 10%, but memberships stayed stable, and even showed a minor rise. However, he noted that with smaller revenue numbers than commercial stations and plenty of employees, any financial hit is a critical one. With less cash flow comes less room for error. He plainly stated, “We don’t want to fire people” (PF, interview). Neither does Clear Channel. But they have. They have fired a significant portion of their workforce (50% in most departments, according to CS – see page 38).

Social Context of Clear Channel and MPR

While the two institutions hold very different positions in the radio market both nationally and in the Minneapolis/St. Paul region, they have entered into an important relationship which underlines our current economic situation. In a constant dialectic exchange, Clear Channel plays the role of the large corporate entity with main-stream, lowest-common-denominator playlists and ad-saturated broadcasts aimed at reaching the most ears with the most amount of time dedicated to advertisements deemed tolerable. However, as Stephen Lippmann points out in a 2008 publication on his investigation of networks during the Golden Age, the mere presence of such a large and homogeneous force actually opened up the public’s response to smaller non-network niches which provided a more locally-specific and community-based listening experience. In his conclusion, he states:

> There is evidence in the case of broadcasting that, despite the size, scope, and power of national networks, the industry evolved in a slightly more dynamic way than some scholars fear. In addition, media audiences and entrepreneurs were not passive agents eager to move out of the way as networks spread. Instead, the public often craved more locally oriented programming, and independent broadcasters kept their stations on the air. What is more, network stations may have had an overall stabilizing effect on broadcasting, as their presence decreased the local failure and founding rates. In addition, they appear to have contributed to market diversity instead of threatening it. (Lippmann, 431)

This counters popular theories that large networks washed out all variation and competition in the market, suffocated independent stations, and established dominant monopolies without resistance. Clear Channel is demonized along the same lines of this premise today. Instead, Lippmann claims that the large networks’ tendencies to concentrate on narrowing content to appeal to the largest demographic provided many opportunities for the creation of alternative, independent stations to fill the available gaps. This, in turn, acts as a balance for market diversity, rather than the opposite. If we are to apply this theory to the relationship between the Current and Clear Channel, then it is possible to say that the Current and Clear Channel exist in symbiosis. Clear Channel holds seven stations throughout the region, the largest holding in the market. Minnesota Public Radio holds three, including the Current. No other entity holds more than three. By holding the majority voice, Clear Channel provides space for other stations to hold positions in the market as alternatives to the majority. In an article based on the Current’s position as the alternative to corporate radio in the region a year after its launch, local journalist Chris Riemenschneider outlined the reactionary nature of the Current’s relationship with the Clear Channel by explaining:

> Over the past eight or nine years, FM stations in the Twin Cities - most of them owned by giant media corporations - rarely let their disc jockeys pick the music. They didn't often play songs by bands that lacked major recording contracts. They almost never paid attention to acts from the vibrant Twin Cities scene. And they definitely didn't have a playlist of 13,165 songs. More like 130. The Current changed all that. (Riemenschneider, 2006)

Here we can see a community demand, made possible by the presence of Clear Channel. In this sense, Clear Channel offers a context for community members to define their values. They choose to listen to the Current instead of Cities 97 because the Current provides a fostering environment for local musicians. They choose to listen to the Current because the mission of the organization is not focused on gains for shareholders; rather it caters to a regional-specific community. They listen to the Current because the Current is visible in the neighborhood: throwing events, hosting forums, building networks, representing a specific set of regional sponsors, etc. On the other hand, community members choose Cities 97, or Kool 108, or K102 because they offer a national perspective. They choose these stations because they offer catchy, popular music from recognizable, iconic artists. They choose these stations for entertainment and light content. They choose these stations because they want to hear hits, not obscure local talent. Priorities are ordered, and certain characteristics of both institutions hold relative amounts of value for a range of various listeners.

Electric Fetus Revisited

The day I returned to the Electric Fetus, I came with one album in mind. I came as a consumer and I took in the experience, drawing lines between the concert, the store, and the radio. I had set it to the Current on the drive over. My discovery of the band whose album I was there to purchase has become a relevant chain of events which led me back to the store. A friend and fellow musician had informed me about the band's music a few months back, and mentioned that it would suit my interests. It was not the first time I had heard their name. Before I had experienced them play live, before I had heard of them from any other source, I heard them mentioned over the airwaves of the Current. I had tuned in just after one of their songs had been played. They were praised as an energetic duo that is excellent live, their upcoming shows were mentioned, and then the DJ moved on to the next track. Within a matter of weeks, they were on the front page of the City Pages, a weekly “arts and news” publication which provides show listings for a wide range of music and entertainment venues around the city, music and film reviews, as well as journalism on local events. I do not have numbers which prove or disprove how influential the Current’s broadcasts are in shaping the community’s knowledge of local artists. In talking with the Program Director in charge of the station, I deduced that they do not necessarily know either. However, it has been a goal which they take seriously to unveil new regional artists to their listeners, and to inform listeners with information and resources which provide the necessary leads for those who are interested to pursue a band further. These resources include announcements of upcoming shows in the area, in-studio performances and interviews, online listings of albums and biographies, etc. One of the frequent listeners of the Current whom I spoke with noted this quality of the station, explaining that she was often motivated by the background information (a band’s story, origin, or reference to other groups) to pursue a band further, to take the next step. Another listener (cited as PW) described this link as well, stating:

> “Often you are told when the band they just played is coming to Minneapolis, of who is in studio, etc. It brings the music into the state in a physical and intellectual way. It’s something beyond commodity… – it has monetary worth but that’s not the overarching goal – the goal is to bring it to the people.” (PW, interview)

It is through these sources that, without hearing a single song, I had become quite aware of this new band. Likewise, my peers were becoming aware of their emergence as well. After purchasing the album and listening to it several times, my friend finally convinced me I should check them out. He told me, "I would just give you a copy but I would rather you buy it." He wanted me to support them by purchasing the album myself, when I could easily just rip the files off of the CD he had acquired and make a copy for myself. Had it been a CD released by a prolific band heard on Contemporary Hit stations across the nation, he would have voiced little concern if I were to copy the disc and therefore acquire it for free. As one community member (cited as FS) articulated, "for-profit, non-profit…that's the major distinction" (FS, interview). The perceived difference in value of music as a *commodity* or a *cultural good* comes from the motivation of those behind it. *Commodity* emerges when people enter into a market to make a profit off of music. Entrepreneurs or investors are always looking for new sources, and music will continue to be a source for such financial speculation until it becomes unprofitable. Under such pressure to produce profit, FS asks:

> "Take musician X, who is huge and makes a ton of money. I guess it's motivation… did they go into music to make it big and make a ton of money? Or did they go into music to do what they love and making it big was sharing their art with so many other people with money as an afterthought?" (FS, interview)

Artists creating the work are not always doing so as a means toward fame, financial success, or national exposure. Often, as seen on the local scale, they are creating work because they want to share it, because they need to communicate…because they love the act of engaging audiences musically. And if there is still a direct connection between the artists and their work, between the context of its creation and the community from which it came, then a dialogical, contextual, and engaged experience is still possible between listener and musician. In this case, I was more than willing to *pay* for what I considered to be a sincere effort by a local artist merely doing what they loved within the local scene. I was more willing to pay for a *cultural good*. Cultural goods, as defined by Arjo Klamer in an article written for *Culture and Public Action*, are dynamic elements within economic systems which “can play a constituting role in the life of individuals and their societies” (Klamer, 143). They often encompass “aesthetic, spiritual, social, symbolic, and historical values” and therefore reside on a sliding scale from individual to individual. This makes them most difficult to measure, leaving it determinant on people to “find out how to sort through values, how to evaluate, revalue, or devalue them” (Klamer, 146). In my case, I determined that the value of purchasing a local artist’s work was more important than acquiring the same music for free.

This phenomenon of valuation is precisely why the Current exists and is successful today. Anyone can tune in to the Current and listen for free. To become a member, one must contribute some amount of money. For this, the station provides a wide range of options. A monetary contribution of *any* amount designates a listener as a member, but often listeners sign on as *sustaining members*, which means they provide a certain dollar amount each month to the station’s budget. 24 dollars per month, for instance, equates to 288 dollars voluntarily paid per year for an otherwise free service. And more members sign on every year. Listeners are willing to *pay* to become members, and in return they are viewed as active participants in a musical community intent on preserving the dialogical connections between artists, audiences, and local context. By establishing themselves as the main alternative to commercial radio, the Current has exploited a niche of music enthusiasts who wish to be active and intellectually engaged within their community. However, if the Current fails to uphold the dialogical connections which make it successful, they will lose this niche of willing members.

Why Music?

> Regressive listening is tied to production by the machinery of distribution, and particularly by advertising. Regressive listening appears as soon as advertising turns into terror, as soon as nothing is left for the conciousness but to capitulate before the superior power of the advertised stuff…They overcome the feeling of impotence that creeps over them in the face of monopolistic production by identifying themselves with the inescapable product. –Theodor W. Adorno

I have done some study both through and outside the field of anthropology on music theory and social development in relation to emotive communication, and am intrigued with the powerful influences that can and do propagate through musical interactions. It is therefore even more important to explore the nature of institutions which choose music as a means through which to prosper. In theory, the marketized exploitation of music is also an exploitation of fundamental human emotive responses more powerful than any other. Music dominates advertising strategies and commercial spaces for this reason. The widespread frustration drawn forth by Clear Channel's practices and ideologies may be related to consumers' recognition of this exploitation, because music (due to its emotive qualities) usually holds very personal and intimate value with people. It was for this reason that I talked with members of the community about their perception of music's value. I received a range of answers, but all seemed to touch on that inherent emotive dictation. Here are some examples:

> "I think of it as something that makes life more enjoyable. I'm more relaxed and at peace when listening to music, or I feel better about myself when listening to more uplifting music. (So) Its ability to touch emotions and transcend normal communication (is what's important to me)."
> (NP, interview)

> "The way it makes me feel, the level of creativity and artistry that I can recognize within and appreciate – its ability to cultivate thought, dictate mood… The feeling of buying an important and anticipated album is like looking forward to the return of a good friend – it feels like a conversation between yourself and someone you respect and enjoy."
> (PW, interview)

> "I rarely don't have music playing…all day long…it's a soundtrack to everything. It's shows that I go to. It's music that's playing over dinner…it's ever present. If it's not, it's like your best friend is missing. I'm uncomfortable when it's not there."

(SC, interview)

To have such a deep investment and vulnerability to a medium, and to see that medium utilized as a tool for the direct profit of a private corporation that cares little for the value or meaning of its content breeds a certain sense of betrayal. And everywhere around us, this is taking place. For instance, within the dynamics of the retail environment, music has become a critical manipulator. "Music and people are 'caught up and bound together'; 'it keeps customers company' – and perhaps momentarily happy" (Leppert, 94). In the Mall of America, a tourist attraction just outside of Minneapolis, one finds forms of familiar music which have been *specifically designed* to be unobtrusive and subtle. That is, designed for the disengaged subject. By assuming such a target, the Mall's environment imposes a certain set of expectations on a consumer. The consumer should not be offended by the background music. The consumer should be comforted and lulled by the familiar yet distant string arrangements of popular music often found on generic, commercially-approved lists of inoffensive and universally pleasing music. Adorno describes, "The familiarity of the piece is a surrogate for the quality ascribed to it. To like it is almost the same thing as to recognize it" (Adorno, 30). In this interpretation, music as entertainment is more-so reduced to music *alluding* to entertainment:

> …complement(ing) the reduction of people to silence, the dying out of speech as expression, the inability to communicate at all…inhabit(ing) the pockets of silence that develop between people moulded by anxiety, work and undemanding docility. (Adorno, 30)

These soft sounds add to the overall atmosphere of the Mall hallways, while the more engaging and attention-demanding store entrances leak catchy tunes at higher volumes to capture the interest of their own target demographics. Retailers use music styles and definitions (all born of the Major Label Industry and the constant stratifications necessary for smooth commercial assimilation) to call out to their desired patrons, assuming that the music may yet hold some cultural value even in this out-of-context setting. Perhaps here we can mention Richard Leppert, and his assertion in an article elaborating upon theories proposed by Theodor Adorno, that music will never *completely* succumb to the manipulations of commoditization. It holds cultural and social value even here in the Mall of America. But by presupposing the consumer’s reaction to this highly-studied musical environment, the retailers and mall planners are assuming, through subtle but forceful insistence that such relations between the listener and commercial music are entirely natural. These environments leave no room for the listener’s creative exploration of the space, no opportunity to bring any agency to the surface.

To be specific, there is no place in the Mall of America’s public spaces for the graphic, historical account of Kurt Cobain’s suicide. But his poster may hang in a storefront window to proclaim their “understanding” of alternative culture. His hits may play through the speakers, deconstructed to the point of no original cultural or social value, and reconstituted by a tightly directed ensemble of string musicians. The intentions of these various acts of musicking have been so far divorced from Cobain’s stage performances at the dawn of his career that no single value once invested into the writing and performing of the song can be recognized in its new mall hallway form. The listener, if the Mall is to be proven correct, will be subtly reassured by the familiarity of the melody, but neither offended by any sentiment nor encouraged to question, extrapolate, or really think at all. Complete silence on the part of the passive listener is all that is necessary under such clandestine influences. In Adorno’s words, “if the standardized products, hopelessly like one another except for conspicuous bits such as hit lines, do not permit concentrated listening without becoming unbearable to the listeners, the latter are in any case no longer capable of concentrated listening" (Adorno, 50). For to concentrate would mean to come to terms with the exploitative nature of these forms which leave little room for dialogical readings of music and its place in contemporary culture (as it has been co-opted primarily for the use of commercial entertainment and deconcentration).

The end product of this exchange is an ambient buzz in the back of the consumer's brain, ideally creating a sense of familiarity and comfort with the constructed retail environment, but maintaining enough distance from a directly recognizable, culturally specific song to remain neutral in its appeal. In such scenarios, Adorno laments:

> It is contemporary listening which has regressed, arrested at an infantile stage. Not only do the listening subjects lose, along with the freedom of choice and responsibility, the capacity for conscious perception of music…but they stubbornly reject the possibility of such perception. They fluctuate between comprehensive forgetting and sudden dives into recognition. (Adorno, 46)

Utilizing music strictly as a tool for promotion or profit without paying heed to its origin or historical value removes it from its context and relevance, essentially draining it of its original meaning and repackaging it as a product for sale in mass market arenas. Adorno comments on the shift of music's commercial function as a banal, innocuous power, extending from jazz to light music (and in our updated environment, as abstracted and formatted playlists): "The diverse spheres of music must be thought of together. Their static separation (from relevance and context), which certain caretakers of culture have ardently sought – the totalitarian radio was assigned to the task…is illusionary" (Adorno, 34). However, if an institution utilizes music as a social interaction and a communal experience within its local environment and cultural relevance, a dialogical reading of the music is still possible. The values and processes through which the music operates are not lost, and can be integrated into the economic system not as commoditized goods, but as critical social identities and cultural investments capable of building a strong communal base.

Much in the same vein as Muzak Corporation, Clear Channel wields music as a tool for profit and emotive exploitation. For Clear Channel, music is utilized within a larger system of revenue-generating sectors, including outdoor advertising (and for a brief period, television). The use of music and radio designates *culture* as one of these sectors, and as Adorno elaborates:

> Culture, in the true sense, did not simply accommodate itself to human beings; but it always simultaneously raised a protest against the petrified relations under which they lived, thereby honouring them…cultural entities typical of the culture industry are no longer *also* commodities, they are commodities through and through. (Adorno, 100)

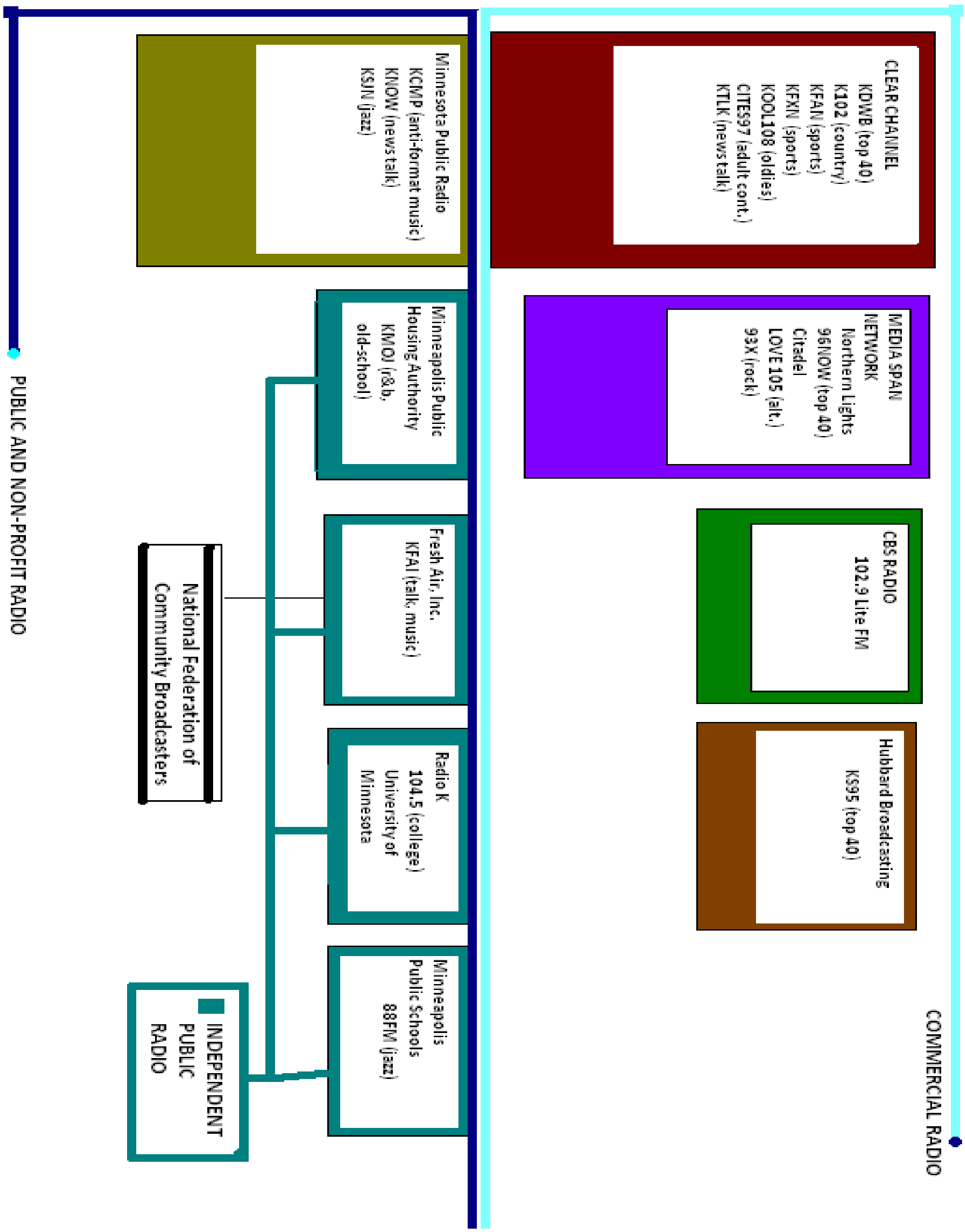
Therefore, the commoditization of culture is also its degradation. Meanwhile, 89.3 The Current, while still engaging with markets and culture, manages to incorporate music not as a "commodity through and through," but as the very core of its existence. Only through a careful and astute construction of the institution is this possible. By remaining dominantly a voice for local music, the Current is able to stay very much in tune with the environment from which the music is created. By requiring not ad revenue but public support, the Current is invested heavily in the community within which it resides, and vice versa for the community. Among those community members who I talked with, there was general agreement that the Current has held true to these values. Some members were more active than others as a result, but the relationship is seen as tangible and authentic. By hosting shows at local venues and promoting a fairly cohesive message of community and informed musical reading, the Current provides resources and opportunities for those who wish to further the development of our present musical society. These direct connections to the culture and society of the region allow for a clear reading of the powerful values and ideologies that are inherent to musical creation, rather than reading music as an alienated and reified package ready for exchange and ultimately financial profit. In doing so, the Current provides a concrete and mutual economic environment in which exchanges can be personal, intimate, and balanced when compared to the rational calculation of Clear Channel market research and the reified commodity which it provides.

Tying it Together

The radio market of Minneapolis and St. Paul is remarkably diverse and complex. Organizations such as Independent Public Radio, the National Federation of Community Braodcasters, the Minneapolis Public Housing Authority, college radio, and a variety of competing commercial networks constitute the landscape that Minnesota Public Radio and Clear Channel also inhabit. Unfortunately, I have only had the opportunity to focus on these two major forces. As differing entities which directly shape each other's markets and practices, the dialogue formed between them was most important to cast light on our current perception of *economy*. For the purpose of this research, utilizing models which operate on platforms (music and radio) involving controversial territory ranging from public service, democracy, free, speech, perception of culture, and the commoditization of cultural goods has been critical to exploring the difficulties we face today when attempting to define a global economy. Multiple levels of exchange and economic practice are present in our cultural environment, and the models of thought which they represent are only made clear when the shadows of singular, hegemonic readings made mainly in binary terms are dismissed.

By providing an in-depth reading of the historical background and current practices of both organizations, I hope to highlight situations which define economic diversity and differing market ideologies as coexistent and interactive. I hope to dissolve the perception of *economy* as synonymous with *capitalism.* Once this is accomplished, rather than approaching the term *economy* as signifying a financial powerhouse with elite administrators on top, consumers in the middle, and laborers on bottom, let us allow *economy* to also signify community models which provide chances for a more balanced and egalitarian relationship between individuals and institutions, and a better understanding of our deeply complex system of exchange. This can be accomplished primarily by recognizing value sets and cultural practices as healthy economic components, rather than simply focusing on capitalistic modes of operation, in which most functions focus primarily on individual gain and financial profit. I also hope to re-establish the dangers of compromising culture and local models based in mutuality in the name of globalized ideologies, which are ever-present. The history and development of capitalism as a set of economic and social ideologies has accounted for a wide-spread debasement and alienation of society from cultural goods and community models of stability and subsistence. Despite this, I do not wish to demonize corporations and other organizations which have operated through these ideologies; danger does not imply a willful and malicious attack. It is more-so an interpretation of culture and economy which, due to its rapid expansion and wide-spread perception as normative, has left many local needs and social foundations unaccounted for. At points, this could be read simply as an issue of scale. Consider sitting in an airliner, waiting to take off. All the buildings and structures at ground level appear concrete, large, and relevant. The workers on the runway are visible busying themselves with the maintenance of the aircraft. However, when the jet takes off and ascends into the atmosphere, the individuals on the runway are left out of sight and out of mind. Buildings dwindle into playhouses. Cities become geometric shapes on a homogenous landscape. And if we cross above the cloud cover, the Earth barely exists below. Only in landing (or crashing) do we rediscover it, only then do we remember the personal connections it holds as tired employees greet us at the gate. This analogy can be used to explain the nature of large-scale capitalism, and Clear Channel's practices in particular. Operating from such a height, it becomes more and more difficult to understand the intricacies of community value systems and attend to specified, local needs.

Clear Channel's potential turn toward local programming serves as a glimmer of reinvested interest in these needs. Minnesota Public Radio's commercial practices serve as a disconcerting potential turn *away* from these needs. And as 89.3 the Current continues to nurture a community of interdependence and collaboration, not only serving local needs and interests but carrying them forward into a larger dialogue, we find that such models can indeed survive and prosper. Over time, these models will hopefully serve as applicable blueprints in other fields of economic reconstruction. Sustainable agriculture, natural resources, cultural medicines, artwork, private property, risk…all of these and many more are on the global agenda, negotiating between the sectors of market economy and cultural goods. The communities which they constitute are largely affected by the dialogue which ensues today. Let us take this opportunity, in the midst of reevaluation and instability, to provide alternate answers to the dominant philosophies which have brought us to this point.


CLEAR CHANNEL
KDWB (top 40)
K102 (country)
KFAN (sports)
KFXN (sports)
KOOL108 (oldies)
CITES97 (adult cont.)
KTLK (news talk)
MEDIA SPAN NETWORK
Northern Lights
96NOW (top 40)
Citadel
LOVE 105 (alt.)
93X (rock)
CBS RADIO
102.9 Lite FM
Hubbard Broadcasting
KS95 (top 40)
COMMERCIAL RADIO
Minnesota Public Radio
KCMP (anti-format music)
KNOW (news talk)
KSJN (jazz)
Minneapolis Public Housing Authority
KMOJ (r&b, old-school)
Fresh Air, Inc.
KFAI (talk, music)
Radio K
104.5 (college)
University of Minnesota
Minneapolis Public Schools
88FM (jazz)
National Federation of Community Broadcasters
INDEPENDENT PUBLIC RADIO
PUBLIC AND NON-PROFIT RADIO

A Clear Channel Communications Billboard, advertising 91.1 News, an MPR talk radio station near downtown Minneapolis

A Clear Channel Communications Billboard advertising 89.3 the Current in downtown Minneapolis

< A Clear Channel electronic Billboard, cycling through digital images in downtown Minneapolis

Large Clear Channel electronic Billboards and tickers in downtown Minneapolis, featuring an advertisement for Cities 97, a Clear Channel station

A billboard along I-94, the main freeway between St. Paul and Minneapolis, advertising Cities 97, with a list of national artists

First Avenue music venue in downtown Minneapolis

Minnesota Public Radio, downtown St. Paul

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