Different Paths, Different Voices:
The Historical Contexts of Women’s and Minorities’ Access to Broadcasting

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Jacci Duncan wrote that "Nearly every woman, at some point in her life, has been told 'Don't make waves.' Don't try to do something you've never done before; don't try to change things; above all, don't call attention to yourself – just go along to get along" (2001, p. ix). She also acknowledged how fortunate we are that some women (and by extension people of color) "did not heed that advice and as a result, went on to change the face of radio and television, and influence the impact broadcasting has had on our society and the world" (pg ix).

However, no-one – whether wishing to make waves or just go along – can simply plug in and begin broadcasting.¹ Potential broadcasters – especially in the commercial sector – encounter multiple gatekeepers controlling whether they may approach the microphone, and if so, what they can say (in whose voice they may speak).² Susan Carter (1996; 2004) presented a framework for conceptualizing women's access to radio. In this essay, I expand her three models of access to include racial and ethnic minorities.

Carter's conceptualizations of women's access are fundamentally similar to those of ethnic minority access presented by Browne, Firestone and Mickiewicz (1994) but Carter’s models lend themselves to the more overtly political stance I take when considering their hegemonic functioning. This essay about the historical contexts of female and minority access to commercial broadcasting argues that for the most part, due to the intersection of
race and gender, combined with an evolving cultural, political, and regulatory environment, women and minorities have rooted their access to media in different models.

Three Models of Access

In Carter’s first model of women’s access, only the gender of the broadcaster changes. In this model, epitomizing liberal feminism, women fill positions traditionally held by men, but the gender content of the messages is unchanged. Extending this model to include racial or ethnic minorities, broadcast stations accept people of color, but the message remains the same. Media content stagnates, bereft of the ability to capitalize on the cultural enrichment made possible by the addition of diverse personnel. Women and minorities may fill a token role, or may be relegated to the least profitable dayparts. Although a woman or minority-group member is presenting the message, the media content reflects the status quo and perpetuates the dominant ideology. In the early part of the 21st century, media consolidation may make this model even more dominant and threaten to eradicate the others.

In the second model, reflecting radical feminism and a transition to cultural feminism, women formed collectives to program discrete slots on a broadcast schedule. As a result "the gender content of a small part of the radio station programming was changed" (Carter, 1996, p. 1). Program collectives of racial or ethnic minorities function similarly, and challenge normative Whiteness. Although the programs produced by women’s radio collectives were frequently counter-hegemonic, they typically were found only on what Carter (1996, p. 1) called "fringe, non-traditional radio stations that did not have high ratings," often on public stations. In addition, the programs represented but a small portion of the station's broadcast schedule. Thus their potential for political impact went largely unrealized.
In Carter’s third model of access, a mixture of radical and cultural feminism, “the entire radio station is dedicated to women’s programming” (2004, p. 170). Expanded to racial and ethnic minorities, this includes stations focusing exclusively on the needs and interests of a minority group. This model represents a potentially significant challenge to the status quo, because the content is unlikely to perpetuate the dominant ideology. Carter described these alternative stations as economically marginal – and at least when women's stations were concerned, they were. As will be demonstrated below, however, that was not the case with Black-appeal radio.

**Women’s Access: Model One**

Even from the very earliest days of radio, women (usually White women) have typically followed Carter's first model of access: they stepped into the shoes of (usually White) men to present the same type of content on the same stations. Although one may find some examples of women gaining access via other models, and examples of minorities using this model, the predominant pattern of access is that women typically used model one and minorities used models two and three. In model one, women entered the mainstream, but their messages reproduced the status quo.

Especially in the days before the commercial potential of radio was realized, radio was relatively open to the women who expressed an interest. According to Fishman (1990, p. viii), there "was an egalitarian quality to early radio. The low pay and small budgets for programming created equal opportunities for women as vocalists and musicians." Halper (2014, p. 16) noted that by 1923, “just about every station had at least one woman announcer or program director. There were also many women performers, and women who gave radio talks about subjects ranging from cooking to politics.” She wrote that “as radio grew more
popular, some station owners, responding to letters from female listeners, decided they should devote more time to the housewives in the audience” (p. 16), and a variety of women's programs were launched, such as *Home Hour* and *Stitch and Chat Club*.

These shows provided what was, per the dominant ideology, a “natural” place for women in radio. Women were “likely to be found in safe, nonthreatening roles” (Halper, 2014, p. 65). Hosley and Yamada wrote that “most of the women who broadcast were on programs designed for homemakers” (1987, p. 1). Thus the content, though presented by a woman, was what Carter called “gender neutral” (2004, p. 180) – which of course meant that it perpetuated the dominant ideology, reinforcing traditional gender roles and heteronormativity.

Before long women’s roles became even more constrained. As Fishman (1990, p. viii) put it, “Broadcasting or performing was a role at odds with society's definition of femininity." By 1931, women announcers were the target of protests and were accused of being vain, temperamental, and unprofessional (Halper, 2014). One might also posit that underlying some of these challenges was the increasing awareness and exploitation of the fledgling industry’s economic value, beginning in the mid-late 1920s (Sterling & Kittross, 2002), a factor that has only become more important in the late 20th and early 21st century era of deregulation and consolidation.

America’s overt culture of segregation during radio’s early days meant that Blacks were less likely to follow the access route most commonly employed by women. People of color and members of linguistic minorities rarely appeared on general market (i.e., White) stations, even though “the limitations of sound potentially offered a shield of racial anonymity to [English-speaking] performers” (Newman, 1988, p. 56). However, even if the
roles held by the few Blacks on the air in the early days lacked the stigma of the minstrelsy tradition, they still were racially anonymous; they lacked authenticity and did not reflect a culturally Black voice. This represented the first of Carter’s models of access: the performer’s race had changed, but the message was “race neutral” and hence continued to function hegemonomically.

By not providing visual cues to the speaker’s race, radio allows for a phenomenon Barlow (1999) called racial ventriloquism. Hence, the first "Black" superstar characters of radio – Amos 'n' Andy – were voiced by White actors, and the first announcers of African descent in the U. S. sounded White. When Jack L. Cooper began on WCAP in Washington, DC in 1924, his act included four main characters, and he did numerous accents including Black dialect (Spaulding, 1974). Nobody knew he was Black; as Newman (1988, p. 56) put it, "For all intents and purposes it appeared that blacks still did not talk on the air." Further, when in the 1930s Eddie Honesty became the first Black radio personality to broadcast a regular weekly show in Chicago, he sounded White and the show was White oriented. Himself a Black radio pioneer, Richard Stams recalled that "Folks didn't know that Honesty was Negro until the forties when he started broadcasting over WJOB in Hammond" (Spaulding, 1974, p. 29).

Broadcasting, like other industries, allowed women increased access during times of war. During World War II, for example, women were needed in both technical and on-air roles. Needed, perhaps, but not welcomed: the trade publication Broadcasting referred to female engineers as "feminine invaders" (Halper, 2014, p. 114). And although the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) decided that women could join the union during the war, their membership would be only temporary; after the war ended, they
must quit their jobs as technicians and withdraw from the union (Halper, 2014). Some three decades had passed since Ralph Chaplin had written *Solidarity Forever*, but for the IBEW, at least, solidarity was intended only for some. Apparently the threat of allowing women to invade the Brotherhood was eclipsed by the threat of hiring nonunion workers.

As times changed, by the 1950s, a new on-air role for women emerged. Sounding sexy might have been an alternative to the happy homemaker, but it still reinforced traditional gender roles. This role became even more important when album-oriented rock gained strength on FM. According to Halper, the format required one female DJ per station, which “created a new archetype for women – the ‘hippie chick,’ who usually had long hair and a sexy voice” (2014, p. 214).

For the most part, women seeking access within the context of an established broadcast organization needed to ignore their gender, their ethnic background and their own voices, and produce an assimilationist message acceptable to the status quo. This happened in the early days of radio when women were relegated to hosting women's programs, but it remains evident. Connie Chung, with a degree in journalism, in 1969 took a job as newsroom secretary at WTTG in Washington, DC (Makers, n.d.-a). Accepting this traditionally female role allowed her to gain access and earn the opportunity to prove her capability. Once employed, had she failed to reinforce (or worse still, if she challenged outright) the system which limited her in this way, she may well have been prevented from enjoying what became a rewarding and successful career. A Chinese-American woman, Chung has stated that she experienced more sexism than racism in her career (Makers, n.d.-b). This may be attributable in part to the model minority stereotype (Chou, 2008) in which
Asian Americans are assumed to be submissive and “diligent, hard working, quiet, high achiever[s]” (Chao, Chiu, Chan, Mendoza-Denton, & Kwok, 2013, p. 85).

Generally, being allowed access meant highlighting neither one’s gender nor one’s race – especially if one were not a member of a model minority. Even in relatively recent times, according to Newkirk (2000), African Americans on television have been required to mimic Whites in their behavior, attitudes, and appearance, including speech patterns. Newkirk argued that although some Black viewers “accepted the affectations of black television journalists as prerequisites for middle-class achievement” (p. 81), these affectations were to many “a source of contention and alienation” (p. 81). Even allowing one’s hair to appear in a natural state – when one was of African descent – led to swift reprisals. For example, in 1971, Melba Tolliver was assigned by WABC-TV, New York, to cover the White House wedding of Tricia Nixon. But Tolliver appeared with her hair styled naturally in an Afro, and was suspended (Newkirk, 2000). What was natural for African Americans was deemed unacceptable even for a station in the nation’s largest market and which, according to the Maynard Institute for Journalism Education, “took great pains to make sure the staff was ethnically diverse” (n.d.). By the decade following Tolliver’s suspension, it seems that a moderate Afro had become acceptable because it was “natural.” However, the conscious manipulation of hair into an Afro-centric style for purely aesthetic reasons was still too much: in 1981, Dorothy Reed was suspended by KGO-TV, San Francisco, for wearing her hair in cornrows (Newkirk, 2000). Bringing attention to one’s race by the conscious celebration of one’s racial identity remained at odds with the conditions by which access had been granted.
Minority Access: Models Two and Three

Both racial ventriloquism (Barlow, 1999) and racial anonymity (Newman, 1988) by definition preclude the expression of any racial pride, and muzzle one’s authentic voice. They reinforce the normativity of Whiteness. And as noted above, although a few Blacks had gained access to the airwaves despite segregation, for the most part, early minority access followed what Carter identified as the second and third models.

Jack L. Cooper became frustrated with the racial ventriloquism that limited him on WCAP, and which required he produce material conforming to general market expectations and confirming the dominant ideology. His work at WCAP epitomized Carter’s first model of access: the content of the message did not reflect his racial identity, and the work could have been that of a White man. Although successful, Cooper left WCAP for Chicago, where he began using Carter’s second model: programming discrete slots on the schedule.

Model Two. In this model of access, discrete blocks of time are programmed by people outside of the dominant group, to serve people outside of the dominant group. This model (as does the third) represents a potentially fertile field within which counter-hegemonic messages may bloom. Indeed, I argue that unless the content is inconsistent with the dominant ideology and at least somewhat activist³, it represents the first model – the speaker changes, not the message.

The first examples of true Black-appeal radio –messages presented by Blacks for Blacks – followed Carter’s second model of access. On November 3, 1929, Jack Cooper bought some time on WSBC in Chicago, and launched The All-Negro Hour, providing an entertainment, religion, and service format to Blacks. By buying the airtime outright and selling advertising time on his own, Cooper was a time-broker. In time-brokering, the
producer absorbs all financial risks; the station makes its money up front, and it's up to the producer to recoup the investment. Cooper went on to make radio history, becoming, as Newman put it, “the starting point of any analysis” of Black-appeal radio (1988, p. 52). “At one point” wrote Newman, “he had 154 programs on the air, and controlled 19 ½ out of the 56 total weekly hours WSBC broadcast” (1988, p. 67).

Weak radio stations in large cities, such as WSBC in Chicago, had often split their broadcast schedules into discrete blocks of time, each targeting a specific ethnic group. According to Spaulding, many of Chicago’s less-powerful commercial stations "featured ethnic-oriented programming and gained their major sales from Chicago's German, Polish, Lithuanian, Greek, Italian and other ethnic groups" (1974, p. 35). This block programming strategy was effective even for non time-brokered weak stations: it allowed them to approach a wide array of unique and specialized advertisers, each of which sought to reach one of these ethnic communities. These stations could narrowcast their way into otherwise unattainable financial success. Thus, "the opening of the airwaves to Black-oriented radio programming can be directly attributable to the profit motive rather than any feelings of brotherhood or altruism" (Spaulding, 1974, p. 35). Jeter (1973, p. 9) wrote that "As much as any factor, Black-oriented radio owes its start to the old cliché that 'money talks'." A similar argument can be made for the launch of Spanish-language (Gutierrez & Schement, 1979) and other non-English programming.

This second model of access, used with such success by minorities, reflecting the authentic voices of those producing the content, and which Jack Cooper used to launch a media empire that included a production company and an advertising agency, can still be found in independently-owned commercial stations with weak signals (including, as of 2016,
WSBC in Chicago), but it is rarely used by women to gain access to commercial stations. When women seek blocks of time to program in a way that reflects their own voices – and they certainly have done so, often presenting significant challenges to the dominant ideology (see, e.g., Engstrom, 2010; Steiner, 1992) – it has most often been on noncommercial (public) stations. The relatively few forays into the commercial sector were restricted after FM emerged from what Carter called “the periphery” (2004, p. 170) and became profitable.

*Model Three.* Ethnic and racial minorities have a much richer tradition of following Carter's third model of access (programming an entire station to appeal to a particular non-dominant social group) than do women. Although individual women following the first model of access hit the airwaves far earlier, far more frequently, and with far greater success than members of ethnic or racial groups, there have been very few radio stations designed to cater exclusively to women. Because this model by definition presents content that is at least to some degree counter-hegemonic in intent and hence contains at least the seeds of radical change (if not, it would represent Carter’s first model of access), I can only identify two true women-oriented radio stations: WOMN and WWMN, and neither seems to have been as truly radical as some of the material prepared by women’s collectives for presentation using model two, in discrete time slots.

Launched on August 28, 1978, WOMN-AM in Hamden (New Haven), Connecticut, had a weak daytime-only signal. According to Halper (2014), the station was run by women, emphasized music by women, and featured female artists with a strong following who were not traditionally played on Top-40 stations. WOMN’s public affairs efforts emphasized women’s issues and current events of particular interest to women.
The station’s launch was promising -- the first three weeks were sold out, and the station received extensive media coverage. But unable to maintain an advertising base, the station stopped programming for women in September 1979. The next women-oriented station didn’t appear for more than two years. WWMN-AM in Flint, Michigan debuted January 1, 1982, but had an even shorter life than WOMN; lacking sufficient ad revenue, it "was a dedicated women's station for only 7 months" (Carter, 2004, p. 179).

In contrast, by the late 1970s and early 1980s, Black-appeal radio stations had established a firm, clear, long-lasting and valued presence in the African American communities they served. According to Spaulding (1974, p. 5), Black radio played “a significant role in developing a Black cultural consciousness.” He argued that “as Black oriented radio stations sold consumer goods, they also sold the concepts of equality, increased the Blacks’ cultural self image and helped develop social, religious and political institutions and organizations within the Black community” (1974, p. 5).

On October 25, 1948, WDIA, Memphis, became the first Black-oriented radio station in the country (see Cantor, 1992, for a rich history of the station). Although owned by Whites, WDIA evolved into such a vibrant example of Carter’s third model of access that Cantor (1992) described the station as a legendary powerhouse of information, entertainment, and public service. The station worked to integrate the community, and was a spokesperson and a communication network for the community. It conducted outreach activities and performed direct service such as public appearances, fund-raising, and supporting community projects. It became a giant not just of Black-appeal radio but of radio.

Although WDIA in its heyday was a constant and powerful force in and for the Black community of Memphis, it began almost unintentionally. John Pepper and Bart Ferguson had
launched WDIA in June 1947, trying first a country and then a classical/good music format. Neither format worked, and after less than a year and a half the owners put the station on the market. But, as Cantor (1992, p. 18) noted, Ferguson wasn’t ready to give up, and “in what can only be described as a desperate move, he made the monumental decision to experiment with what was then called Negro programming.” Cantor (1992, p. 23) quoted Ferguson as saying "We didn't come on with any ballyhoo saying, 'Now look, we are an all-black radio station'." Instead, he said, "We were already on the air for a year or so, and nobody paid any attention to us. Nobody was listening particularly, and so, we just kinda slipped it in" (in Cantor, 1992, p. 23).

After a period of White backlash, Blacks started tuning in. The Black-appeal format caught on, and generated substantial revenue, in part because its owners gambled on the value of the Black marketplace. Popular wisdom of the day held that Blacks had little money, didn't own or listen to radios, and wouldn't be motivated to seek out products aimed at them (not to mention White sponsors’ reluctance to have their products identified as appealing to Blacks lest that alienate their White consumers). The popular wisdom of the day would have encouraged lowering ad rates when the station began its Black-oriented format, but according to Cantor, the owners did just the opposite – they raised rates by nearly 60%. WDIA’s rate, which had been $5.00 per minute, soared to $8.75. The risky strategy worked, and Ferguson said "After a while we got more money out of an hour a day than we used to get all day long” (in Cantor, 1992, p. 139). The time was sold, and because the audience believed what it heard on WDIA, the advertising worked.

By 1954, only about six years after WDIA’s transformation and still a quarter century before the debut of WOMN, there were some 400 Black-appeal stations in the U.S.
According to Newman, “these stations blanketed the country with black-appeal programming that was similar in format but individually tailored to the needs of local audiences” (1988, p. xii). Whether owned by Blacks or Whites, whether motivated by altruism or profit, Black-appeal radio stations across the country shared a sense of purpose.

Some of those pursuits were overtly political. Spaulding argued that in the early 1960s, WVON in Chicago may have been "the first Black-oriented station in the country where management openly endorsed Black attitudes and the Civil Rights movement" (1974, p. 70). WVON’s activist stance was made clear by its call letters, an acronym for “Voice of the Negro.” As with WDIA, the station targeted a niche market but was profitable, with ad rates higher than those at the general market competition.

**Hopes and Fears: LPFM and Media Consolidation**

One way that more people may gain access to broadcast radio is through low power FM (LPFM) stations. LPFM service was established in January 2000; after quickly being restricted due to resistance from the broadcast industry (Brand, 2004; see also Lucas, 2006) it was given new life in 2011 by the Local Community Radio Act (Prometheus Radio Project, n.d.). Today there are about 800 LPFM stations in the US, most serving mid-sized and small markets. Instead of covering an entire urban area, the LPFM signal covers a neighborhood or a community – about 2 to 4 miles. LPFM’s relatively low construction and operating costs put broadcasting within reach of a variety of not-for-profit or community groups.

LPFM allows religious organizations, schools, and other nonprofit community groups access to media. According to then-FCC-Chairman William Kennard, "Today we… throw open the doors of opportunity to the smaller, community-oriented broadcaster" (Kennard,
LPFM is designed to provide voices for underserved groups, which signals great potential for media access by women and other minority groups. However, although Kennard’s characterization of “throwing open the doors” is a good quote, it’s over-optimistic. The 2011 Local Community Radio Act does allow for LPFM in major markets, thus overcoming a significant limitation of the earlier incarnation of LPFM. Still, in a map prepared by the FCC (2012), the number of LPFM opportunities appears inversely proportional to the population density across the U.S. As of this writing, the most recent filing window to apply for LPFM stations was a two-week period in October, 2013; the Prometheus Radio Project (n.d.) has since stated that this may well have been the final opportunity to obtain an LPFM license.

Even if it had reached its full potential – which it may still might – LPFM is not a panacea. The mainstream media are still the key, still the media that matter the most to most of the U.S.

And most of the mainstream media are owned by just a few big corporations. Many scholars have considered the impact of media consolidation on the diversity of media content (Ball, 2014; Byerly, 2014; Chambers, 2003; Craig, 2015; DiCola, 2006; Ho & Quinn, 2009; Napoli & Yan, 2007; Negron-Muntaner, 2016; Polinsky, 2007; Saffran, 2011; Wirth, 2002).  
Craig’s case study of Black Entertainment Television revealed that within a few years of its acquisition by Viacom, it had been turned “into another generic media outlet” (2015, p. 88). Although the results of empirical studies (relying on varying operationalizations of diversity) have differed, evidence indicates more negative than positive effects of consolidation. Economic pressures and consolidation have similarly constrained the diversity of Spanish-
language radio, which Castaneda Paredes (2003) argues may be of greater concern than with English-language radio, given the smaller number of stations broadcasting in Spanish.

As we await the results of further investigations, I side with those who hold that the influence of media owners on policy, and corporate leaders’ overarching responsibilities to shareholders rather than to citizens, cannot but affect media content. Craig noted that although owners aren’t involved in the day-to-day decisions made by media outlets, “they do have significant influence on the development of corporate policy and practice, as well as in the hiring of the personnel who directly make decisions” (2015, p. 5). He went on to argue that “the absence of African Americans among media owners equates to silencing alternative voices” (p. 5). A similar claim was made by Byerly: “media conglomeration signals the consolidation of men’s economic and political power, and the further marginalization of women’s [power], and presents “structural blocks to women’s voices in public discourse and the social and political participation that flows from that discourse” (2014, p. 323).

One of the most significant fears about media consolidation is that it will limit the flow of information on which citizens of a democracy rely. According to Grossman, “The number of news channels is certainly multiplying in this telecommunications era, but the number of news sources is shrinking. … We are seeing a kind of reverse funnel effect, in which more and more channels are pumping out the same news headlines gathered from a single all-purpose source” (1999, p. 21).

Hickey acknowledged that "Big isn't necessarily bad," but quickly went on to warn that “big contains the seeds of mischief that can hurt a republic like ours. Back in 1945, the Supreme Court…wrote that 'the widest possible dissemination of information from diverse
and antagonistic sources is essential to the welfare of the public” (2002, p. 50). It is, of course, no less essential today.

Former FCC Commissioner Michael Copps has long been concerned about media concentration. He argued that even a medium as disintermediated as the Internet cannot counteract the effects of media consolidation, and that the Internet isn't as disintermediated as many would like to think it is: "look at the ownership of the top twenty news sites on the Internet….It's pretty much the people who own the networks and the cable companies" (in Hickey, 2003, p. 31). Indeed, Jones, stating that most of the news disseminated via social media originates from legacy media, highlighted the irony that “the Web, which is usually touted for its power to diminish the power of established media, has effectively concentrated that power into even fewer institutions” (2009, p. 186).

Although the Internet has changed many things in our world, it hasn't significantly reduced the power of the media giants, who continue to rule the media landscape. We must continue to think about whether women and people of color are being granted access to the media.

**Contextualizing Access at the Intersection of Race and Gender**

When noticing the patterns of women’s and minorities’ access to commercial broadcasting, we can’t help but wonder: Why did individual women approach the media so differently than individual people of color? Why did stations programming for women fare so differently than, for example, Black-appeal stations? Certainly the extent to which segregation and discrimination have been overt or covert has been a huge factor in the former question, at least in terms of why minorities didn’t use the first model. But why didn’t women more fully embrace the second and third models? And why didn’t women’s stations
thrive, as did Black-appeal stations? We should consider the intersection of race and gender, public acceptance of the women’s movement at any particular point in time, and media policy and regulation. For example, Carter noted that WWMN and WOMN were launched “near the end of the modern women’s liberation movement” when “backlash against the women's movement was gaining energy” (2004, p. 181). Those stations had unsuccessfully resisted being called “feminist” due to the term’s negative connotations; 35 years hence, backlash to feminism has not abated (Boyd, Chunn, & Lessard, 2007; Silva & Mendes, 2015; Superson & Cudd, 2002).

Thus, especially in the early days of broadcasting, White women were able to access mainstream airwaves fairly regularly, but they did not usually question the status quo. This is Carter’s first model of access. These women presented messages with which the dominant social group was comfortable; they presented themselves as happy homemakers or sexy companions. Later, women of color were at times granted access to mainstream airwaves, but if they wished to celebrate their ethnic identity, their access was often revoked.

Although some women were allowed to approach the microphone if they spoke in a gender “neutral” voice deemed pleasing to the dominant culture, the early days of broadcasting did not welcome people recognized as members of a minority group. Reflective of both the dominant ideology and the culture of overt segregation, the first “Black” voices on radio were presented by White actors; the first African Americans on the air sounded White. Station owners believed that their White audiences would not welcome Blacks into their homes. The only options were to carve out a few hours here and there on stations which made time available (Carter’s model two), or to appear on a Black-appeal station (Carter’s model three).
When blocks of time are programmed by women and ethnic minorities they frequently bring issues of race/ethnicity and gender to the foreground; indeed, they seem more akin to the minority press than to contemporary commercial broadcasting. When media collectives are formed, they often exist primarily to bring attention to and rectify social inequality. In such cases, the group’s mission is explicitly counter-hegemonic. However – especially after deregulation resulted in the removal of many requirements for news and public affairs programming (Carter, 2004) – because the stations making time available to these groups tend to be weak, the message will not reach the bulk of the population, and change will be that much harder to realize.

The third model of media access, a station fully and robustly featuring the voices of women or people of color, presents not only the greatest possibility, but also the greatest frustration. Members of subordinated groups can use their own voices to create their own messages in an environment welcoming them in all their cultural richness. Their authentic voices can be fully embraced and explored in attempts to entertain, enlighten, and educate. Some messages may, for example, encourage tolerance and understanding of a minority group's cultural practices. Ironically, messages emanating from “a minority station” or “a women’s station” are easy for others to ignore simply by not including the station among their favorites. A group that needs to hear these messages can all too easily avoid them.

In 2004, Carter argued that only the first model of access has survived to any great extent. Extending her argument to include minorities, “the lesson of the three models of access for women [or minorities]… [is] a sober one: Women [or minorities] could speak if they kept the content ‘gender [or race] neutral.’ Messages that were gendered feminist [or advocated for racial equality or celebrated a racial/ethnic perspective] were either
marginalized or silenced altogether" (2004, p. 181). Equal opportunities laws have removed the overt restrictions preventing minorities from using the first model of access, but this assimilationist model precludes drawing attention to one’s race or ethnicity. To the extent that the access route is paved with the ideologies of color-blindness or post-racialism, the messages cannot but function hegemonically.

All in all, the history of women’s and minority groups’ access to broadcasting, and the extent to which they were allowed to speak in their own voices, demonstrates that society continues to be less threatened by women (at least not those labelled “feminist”) than by people of color. Simultaneously, in today’s deregulated and increasingly consolidated media environment, true alternative voices in mainstream broadcasting are becoming harder and harder to find. As citizens, we need alternative voices (with a nod to the banner across WVON’s home page in 2016) “Now, more than ever!”

Notes

1. Broadcast facilities are licensed by the Federal Communications Commission, and demand outstrips supply. Various programs for increasing minority and female ownership of broadcast stations have been implemented, contested, removed, revised, and reinstated. Considering the economic and other challenges impeding minority and female ownership of traditional radio and TV stations is important, but beyond the scope of this essay. For a good overview of the relevant legal and regulatory environment, see Byerly and Valentin (in press).

This essay focuses on radio, because of the significantly greater number of stations and the significantly lower cost of entry as compared to television. It also focuses on those seeking access to the microphone (usually to present material they have written or extemporized) rather than considering technical or engineering contributions. For more on early contributions by women and minorities in radio, see Beasley and Gibbons (1977, 1993), Casillas (2014), Duncan (2001), Gutiérrez and Schement (1979), Hosley and Yamada (1987), Pride and Wilson (1997), and Sies and Sies (2003).

Finally, examples in this essay primarily illustrate African Americans’ access, but Casillas’ (2014) impressive study of Spanish-language radio – although not invoking Carter’s models – is consistent with my argument. She found that early broadcasts targeted English language listeners (model one), contextualizing Latin American music and culture in a romanticized, distant location. Broadcasts using models two and three reflected the
politically symbolic nature of the medium as what she called an “acoustic ally.” Casillas also noted the influences of regulatory policy, corporate sponsorship, and consolidation.

2. It is important to note that although the contemporary media environment is undergoing rapid change, fueled in large part by Web 2.0 technologies, traditional broadcasting and legacy media remain critical players and warrant continued attention. According to Thorson & Wells, “from a normative democratic perspective, the persistence of traditional news processes is essential” (2015, p. 39). Indeed, Jones (2009) argued that contrary to many people’s assumptions, social media and the Internet have made legacy media even more powerful. User-generated content has not increased the coverage of certain key stories, especially if the information is complex or is being hidden, and audiences – despite their autonomy – have restricted media repertoires (Vos, 2015). Finally, despite the increasing penetration of cable TV and cable and satellite radio, broadcast media hold two key attributes: they are free, and they are local (Sauls, 2011). Radio is of particular value to Spanish-language listeners, in part due to its low cost; it is their medium of choice (Casillas, 2014).

3. I use “activist” to reflect a mission of accomplishing positive change associated with removing socially-constructed restrictions on women and people of color, and I assume that the content reflects an alternative to the status quo. I have not enjoined the discussion regarding the many definitions of alternative media – which to some scholars requires that the media outlet be owned by the people producing the alternative content – nor do I hold the examples presented herein to that standard (for discussions of alternative media, see Atton, 2001; Carpentier, Cammaerts, & Bailey, 2008).

4. I do not include stations simply based on having an all-female air staff, although scholars and historians have rightly acknowledged these stations. I do not, for example, present WHER-AM as a station following Carter’s third model of access. Although it featured an all-female air staff, and it did at times cover women’s issues, the station as a whole did not challenge the dominant ideology. It was presented as a novelty “all-girl station” (Ganzert, 2003, p. 83), and not what we would recognize as a women-oriented, change-seeking endeavor. Many of its practices reinforced traditional gender norms: the station positioned itself as “1000 Beautiful Watts” (Ganzert, 2003, p. 83), called the studio “The Doll’s Den,” the control room “The Playroom” and decorated engineering “with a clothesline and women’s undergarments” (p. 86).

5. Operationalization of the variables used to assess diversity across various types of media have ranged from audience perceptions and evaluations of localism, to the airing of local news, to editorial positions on non-unanimous Supreme Court decisions. Many studies of radio diversity focus on format, often using industry-supplied data. However, doing so risks underreporting homogeneity; according to DiCola, “we have been treating formats with overlapping playlists … as entirely different formats” (2006, p. 99). His analysis revealed significant cross-format overlap – up to 80% – when comparing the playlists of formats with different names.

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