Hearing community radio listeners: A storytelling approach for community media audience research

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Summary:
Community radio stations worldwide are mandated to empower their audiences and facilitate community participation in political life. Thus, the perspectives of listeners are vital to ascertain how effective community radio stations are in contributing to political education and civic awareness that motivates listener engagement in the station and in the community. This article draws on the first extensive study of community radio audiences in the Middle East to contribute new insights about documenting the impacts of community radio, and the evaluative mechanisms that should be in place for non-profit, community media to better fulfill their mission to serve the community. Building on critical ethnographic audience research, I argue for a storytelling approach that facilitates personal narratives and cooperative focus groups among community radio audiences**.**

Keywords: Community radio, audiences, storytelling, Middle East, Jordan, alternative media

Introduction

Where community radio stations worldwide are mandated to empower their audiences and facilitate community participation in political life (AMARC, 2003), the perspectives of listeners are vital to ascertain how effective community radio stations are in contributing to politicization and social change. Too few scholars produce research about community radio that investigates how community radio stations actually meet the needs of the community. The majority of audience reception data collected is produced by audience measurement firms that rely on applied

quantitative approaches (Napoli, 2011) that are not a viable option for documenting the experiences of community media audiences. Indeed, many of the basic assumptions made by theorists and researchers concerning audiences (McQuail, 1997) conflict with the practices and experiences of community radio stations and their listeners.

Drawing on radical adult education theory to illuminate the embedded learning in everyday practices, third sector studies to evaluate non-profit institutional practices concerning participation and accountability, and anti-oppression literature to focus on structures of power, privilege and exclusion, I argue for an approach to studying community radio that incorporates the experiences of community radio audience members by prioritizing their own storytelling, by engaging them in collaborative research, and through facilitating critical reflection on station and programming practices more generally. Based on fieldwork conducted over two periods in 2012 and 2013 at Radio al-Balad 92.4FM, the country of Jordan's first community radio station, this article builds on critical ethnographic audience research to prioritize personal narrative as a means for listeners to evaluate the impact of ~~the~~ community radio stations established to serve community needs. Over a decade of community media scholarship and the corresponding rise in the use of personal narrative and reflexivity in qualitative research (Jones et al., 2013, pp. 25-6) inspires this proposed framework for evaluating the effectiveness of community radio's mission to democratize local media and political landscapes. Although time consuming and intimidating for some listeners, storytelling procured within this framework can amplify the voices of community radio audiences and provides rich data that offer a means for evaluating the effectiveness of community radio stations more generally.

Informed by the first extensive study of community radio audiences in the Middle East (King, n.d.), this article contributes new insights about investigating the impacts of community radio on listener engagement within the station and in the community, and the evaluative mechanisms that should be in place for non-profit, community media to better fulfill their mission to serve the community. What follows is an introduction to Radio al-Balad and the formation of community radio in Jordan. I then present an overview of the literature and research that situate community radio stations as non-profit organizations, providing a participatory media platform for raising the civic awareness of listeners. After reviewing the theories and research that derive storytelling as the core methodology for gathering community radio audience data, I summarize my experimentation with this tool in the field by excerpting from the narratives offered by listeners concerning their experiences engaging Radio al-Balad's structures and programming. The concluding section discusses the outcomes and limitations of this approach as revealed in the field among selected members of Radio al-Balad's audiences.

Visiting Jordan's first community radio station

Before beginning my doctoral studies, I travelled to Jordan in late 2009 to visit family in the Middle East. During this trip, I had the opportunity to tour and interview staff at Amman's

first community radio station, Radio al-Balad. Two features stood out about the station's programming and structure. Radio al-Balad was founded as a local news station, which contrasts with many community stations in the United States and Canada that typically offer music or cultural programs and often struggle to maintain news departments (King et al., *forthcoming*). Additionally, the station has a Listeners' Club that is active in station programming and works within the community to address political and social problems. These practices are the complete opposite of the corporate and state-run media institutions in Jordan that focus on regional or international news (Pintak, 2007). Most radio stations on the FM dial do not engage audiences within their governance structures or media production practices. This uniqueness among media institutions in Jordan is what made Radio al-Balad an inspiring example of community media to study how local news produced by and for the community can be used to influence political change.

Like most community radio stations, Radio al-Balad is at the same time a "media institution" (Downing, 1984/2001) as well as a non-profit organization (Coyer, 2011). Community radio stations are unique in their charters in that they are guided by participatory values in their work towards democratizing local media and political landscapes (AMARC, 2003). Radio al-Balad achieves this goal even while operating a private radio licence because no such category for community licencing exists currently in Jordan. Many community radio stations also recognize their programming is a tool for education, inspiring listeners to contest power and injustice (Rodriguez, 2001; Couldry and Curran, 2003; Milan, 2008). In Jordan, where community radio emerged to weaken the government's monopoly over local media (Aqrabawi et al., 2006, p. 5), AmmanNet was launched in 2000 to produce community news content for Internet distribution and broadcast on nearby radio stations in Palestine. After receiving a radio licence in 2005, AmmanNet began broadcasting independent news on the FM dial reaching listeners throughout the greater Amman area (or over two-million people). By 2008, the station had re-branded itself as Radio al-Balad 92.4FM – voice of the people and the community.

Since that time, there have been very few opportunities to engage extensive qualitative or quantitative audience research. For example Radio al-Balad regularly considers the outcomes of its work in project reports to its Board of Directors, funders, and donors; yet, the station has only facilitated one focus group among listeners in 2007 and commissioned its first audience phone survey documenting listener preferences in 2010 (Harris Interactive). As a practitioner myself of community news media, I have learned that this is not uncommon in the field of community radio practice. This is because most community radio stations are rarely afforded an opportunity to collect such data, even though that information is useful for making informed decisions about the station's mandate, programming policies, funding strategies, or advocacy work within the community and among government officials and regulators. Radio al-Balad offers a prime example of this. Prior to my research intervention, the station had no measure for assessing its mandate to impact the political education of its audiences. As a community radio stations mandated to serve the community, Radio al-Balad needs relevant, practical, and accessible

methods for gathering qualitative data among listeners that enables the community to assess the station's achievements. For these reasons, this article offers a new direction for conducting engaged, non-commercial media audience research by proposing storytelling as a means to investigate the reception experiences of Radio al-Balad's audiences. Collecting qualitative audience data through storytelling is an accessible means for documenting a community radio station's influence on the political awareness and engagement of listeners.

A blind spot in audience research

Community media audiences have yet to be prioritized by academic and industry researchers who largely focus on audiences as consumers of for-profit media. Even though audiences have been a central subject in media and communication studies since the field's founding (Dohle, 2008), this scholarship rarely investigates the experiences of *community* media audiences. In fact, despite the long history of community radio practices (Lewis, 1984; Raboy, 1984; Kidd, 1998; Rodriguez, 2001; Rennie, 2006; Milan, 2013), community radio audiences have largely been overlooked in scholarship. The tools of audience researchers may have changed over the years, but the sites of their work have largely remained homogenous in depicting audiences that are White and/or Western (Parameswaran, 2003, 2013). Even where qualitative audience research has re-located in the non-Western world, the focus remains largely on audiences of private sector media (Abu-Lughod, 1997; Kraidy, 2010; La Pastina, 2003; Murphy, 1999). Only Australia's community media sector has benefitted from large-scale data gathering facilitated by Meadows and a team of researchers among audiences tuning-in to dozens of community radio and television stations (Meadows et al., 2007). This neglect of scholars to look beyond private media and corporate-controlled platforms leaves the voices and experiences of community media audiences in non-Western contexts largely unheard and understudied.

Within the non-profit community radio sector, there are very few practical or affordable opportunities to gather data from listeners. Measuring audience satisfaction is expensive and most broadcasters rely on quantitative data generated by expensive ratings systems that typically only measure reach, not impact (O'Sullivan & Lewis, 2006; Napoli, 2011). Audiences are largely invisible for public and corporate media, so there is great value in this kind of data for profit-driven media institutions (McQuail, 1997, pp. 4-5). However, this type of quantitative audience research is beyond the means of and hardly relevant to community broadcasters (King, 2014). Instead of paying for or otherwise collecting quantitative data, some community radio stations rely on their ability to fundraise for part of their operating budget annually from their listeners to mark their achievements within the community; yet, counting listener donations is not the best method for measuring audience engagement (Orozco, 2011, pp. 140-1).

These gaps in the capacity for community radio stations to collect audience data is surprising given how, for community broadcasters like Radio al-Balad at least, the audience is not distant or unknowable. In contrast to public or private radio stations, audience members of community radio are often volunteers who receive training at the station,

participate in programming, and/or attend station meetings. These activities for community radio listeners contradict conceptualizations of audiences by theorists that depict passive consumers (McQuail, 1997, p. 22) who have little to do with media production and no opportunity to participate in media governance. Relations between a community radio station and its listeners are not one hundred per cent mediated through programming, yet there is still a need for audiences to be heard beyond on-air or face-to-face encounters in their stations.

Several studies observe community radio engages community participation (Girard, 1992; Gumucio Dagron, 2001; Rodriguez, 2001; Sussman & Estes, 2005), yet only a handful examine the impact of these practices within community radio stations (Fairchild, 2001; Khan, 2010; Anderson, 2012). Where recent shifts in audience studies have move beyond the reception of media (Nightingale, 2007), only a few researchers have turned to community media audiences to allow the "community" to assess how effectively they are being served by their community radio stations (Meadows et al., 2007; Orozco, 2011). Indeed, alternative media scholar Downing (2003) and community radio researchers like Meadows et al. (2007, 2006, 2005) note that the audiences of community media have largely gone unnoticed. With these ideas in mind, this article contributes to closing the gap in knowledge about community media audiences as participating and political actors by hearing from the listeners of a community radio station in Amman, Jordan.

Insights from current approaches to studying community radio audiences

Community radio audience researcher Gordon (2012) agrees that community radio stations, especially those stations working in criminalized contexts where community radio is illegal, are not served well by research techniques employed by audience measurement firms or academic researchers. Reflecting on the impact studies of community radio facilitated by UNESCO (Berrigan, 1977, 1981), media scholars (Lewis, 1993; Tacchi et al 2003; Hearn et al 2009), and anthropologists (Keith, 1995), Gordon concludes that quantitative and qualitative approaches deployed in combination can enrich audience data collected for community radio stations. She argues that quantitative data can give credibility to a station by enumerating audience size and qualitative data can document audience motivations or impact. By contrast, ethnographic action researchers investigating the impact of community radio deploy qualitative methods in the field to document a community's use and interaction with technology within the larger social and cultural structures, referred to as "communicative ecologies" (Tacchi et al., 2003, p. 2). Drawing on engaged, participatory, and action-oriented qualitative research, a new wave of scholarship offers innovative techniques to studying the impact of community radio on listeners.

Where community radio stations have few resources to evaluate station practices, community radio researchers have developed new applied approaches drawing on the communication for development tradition. Jallov's 'bare foot' impact assessment (2005) offers an approach to community radio audience research that combines ethnographic action research with monitoring and evaluation techniques from communication and

development studies. The 'bare foot' impact assessment considers three levels of analysis that include: 1) the internal functioning of the radio station from the point of view of staff and volunteers, 2) the station's programming content and engagement activities through regularly listening to the listeners, and 3) the impact or change achieved through interviews or focus groups in the community (Jallov, 2005, p. 3). This research model is aimed at increasing the capacity of community radio station to collect data and conduct assessments without requiring an external researcher. Data collected through this methodology can ensure community radio is achieving station goals as well as be accountable to local partners and funders.

Other researchers similarly foreground participatory and qualitative methods that not only build collaborative research relations to amplify the voices of community radio audiences, but also reflect principles guiding the practices of community radio stations (Meadows et al., 2007; Sobers, 2010; Orozco, 2011). For the research project *Community Media Matters*, one method inspired by community radio practices used by Meadows et al. (2007) was their approach to focus groups, which they argue matches the democratic ideals of community radio in promoting access and participation. Meadows and his team of researchers developed a method that included "cooperative" focus groups to "complement the nature, goals, and processes of the community broadcasting sector" (2007, p. 23). They write, "by involving community media organizations in our research method and encouraging audience involvement and participation in our discussions about community media, we attempted – by the very nature of our methodology – to achieve this aim of active citizenship" (p. 23). My research design draws on the motivations of Meadows and his team of researchers to build an engaged and collaborative approach that values self-representation within my research design by prioritizing storytelling and cooperative focus groups. The above engaged, participatory, and action-oriented research approaches offer new methods for valuing community radio listeners.

Building a framework for hearing community media audiences

At a retreat held in the Dead Sea in 2011, a decade after the founding of AmmanNet, Radio al-Balad staff, board members, and listeners affirmed their vision of the station is to be "the most influential radio in Jordan in order to create a democratic society" (Radio al-Balad, 2011). According to one producer, Radio al-Balad achieves this mandate by airing community radio news that cultivates social movements and challenges forms of power not addressed elsewhere in the media (King, 2012). To investigate the impact of Radio al-Balad on the political lives of its listeners, I problematize audience research and scholarship on community radio while drawing on approaches from community radio audience research to enrich my own theoretical framework for my case study of the one and only community radio station on the FM dial in Amman. What follows is a review of the literatures that informs my investigation of the impact of community radio on the political lives of community radio's audiences.

My theoretical framework addresses the gaps identified above in scholarship concerning community radio research and the theorization of audiences. Viewing community radio in the MENA region as a form of social movement media (Downing, 2011) recognizes community radio station practices that help cultivate social movements and political learning opportunities. Investigating these practices at Radio al-Balad problematizes audience theorization by viewing listeners as participating and political actors. Further, my approach to studying the impact of community radio perceives political and social change beyond transformations of state power to also examine the effect of independent, participatory media on social movements and in the political lives of audiences, including station practices that perpetuate internal conflicts or oppression.

My research design builds on a theoretical framework informed by radical adult education theory and anti-oppression literatures to shape evaluative approaches borrowed from third sector (or non-profit) studies. Community radio stations are typically non-profit organizations with mandates guided by participatory values in their work towards democratizing local media and political landscapes. A distinct field of scholarly study has focused its attention on non-profit institutions, philanthropies, and other non-state and non-corporate types of organizations, commonly referred to as third sector studies (Taylor, 2011). Both social movement and third sector studies pay little attention to the role of media institutions per se, yet maintain overlapping interests in the mobilization of collective action however different the starting points. For example, where social movement studies emphasizes media use in the service of oppositional politics, studies of the third sector commonly investigate media use for campaigns or coalitions of civic action and public opinion. Della Porta and Diani (2011) suggest the two overlap creating a common interest in "the mechanisms that facilitate or discourage citizens' involvement in collective action" (p. 69). This orientation is useful in critically evaluating how the reception of community radio programming and engagement practices of community radio stations impact the political education of audiences.

Community radio audiences in Australia report that local news "enables them to participate in the social and political lives of their community" (Meadows et al., 2008, p. 8). Indeed, community radio audiences deserve more attention to assess the impact of this programming on their daily lives and third sector studies helps orient my investigation concerning issues of participation, governance, and accountability. Recently several scholars (Fischer, 2011; Brandsma & Schillemans, 2012) have offered third sector studies new frameworks for measuring impact, assessing participation, and ensuring accountability to funders, governments, and members. Measures offered by Fischer of governance practices include the distribution of power, resources, and decision-making processes, evident transparency in knowledge and information exchanges, and established collaborative partnerships, inter-institutional dialogue, and greater accountability (2011, p. 458). This work helps to problematize participatory community media, especially where critical development researchers have found that "tyranny is both a real and a potential consequence of participatory development" (Cooke and Kothari, 2001, p. 3). Third sector

researchers and critical development scholars inspire new questions for investigating the impact of community radio stations and programs in the civic lives of audiences.

Combining anti-oppression literature with third sector researchers and critical development scholars who focus on transparency and accountability offers an opportunity to explore the conflictual realities of community radio stations, including "core tensions" identified by Fairchild (2001, p. 7) among community radio stations in Canada and "inter-community discord" described by Huesca (1995, p. 105) that required a response by community radio stations in Bolivia. Indeed, the corruption of power and privilege is harmful to the sustainability of any community radio station (Hancock and Khan, 2004). This view of conflict helps illuminate the processes of exclusion experienced at Radio al-Balad among audience and station members. My approach is inspired by those found within third sector and critical development studies. I deploy an anti-oppression lens that views systematic oppression and exclusion of marginalized communities as constituencies who may have similar experiences within their own community radio stations.

Where Dominelli (2002) documents the central role of anti-oppression literature in social work, scholars like Khan (2010) demonstrate the value of this understanding in evaluating the training practices of community radio stations in Canada. Challenging oppression and forms of power not addressed elsewhere in the media is part of the mandate of Radio al-Balad (King, 2012). Drawing on anti-oppression literature to inform approaches borrowed from third sector studies allows my research to interrogate this mandate and the station's practices in order to create sustainable mechanisms for participation and accountability. This approach is necessary according to practitioner and scholar Coyer (2011), who examines the "normative view" of community radio. Drawing on the work of Williams (1985), she asserts, "the use of the word 'community' is always afforded positive status." Because community radio "is typically seen as a good thing" and "it tends to aspire to some form of inclusiveness," Coyer (2011) suggests this orientation necessitates a more critical review of each station "to identify who is 'in' and who is 'out;' who belongs and who does not" (pp. 170-1). Thus, anti-oppression literature offers a lens for viewing the processes within community radio stations that may include or exclude listeners and station members.

Third sector scholarship and anti-oppression literature helps to problematize the mechanisms of engagement practiced by community radio stations, but how does this critical view of community radio practices apply to assessing the political learning environments cultivated by stations? The field of radical adult education offers ways to investigate how learning is built into community organizing and social movement activities. Radical adult education scholar Foley (1999) offers a broad definition of education and learning, emphasizing the relationship between education and collective struggle to create a framework that situates learning and education within a context of political economy, micro politics, ideologies, and discursive practices (pp. 130-131). While the contribution of community radio stations has generally been overlooked in social movement and third

sector studies (Holst, 2002, pp. 80-81), the field of radical adult education studies has similarly neglected the role of community media in struggles for social change.

Investigating the pedagogical function of community radio in the political lives of Radio al-Balad's audience requires an understanding of radical theories of adult education to evaluate learning in struggle. From this viewpoint, we can approach social movement organizations, and the community radio stations that support them, as facilitating learning environments and acknowledge the links between adult education and the political transformation of society (Foley, 1999). Theorists Dykstra and Law (1994) conceptualize social movements as educative forces. They argue that the critical pedagogy of movements is one that "critically informs, challenges and engages people in the creation and re-creation of knowledge" (p. 123). Much of this literature continues a lifetime of work by Freire (1970, 1972, 1985) whose education for liberation constructs a "vision of education as preeminently a political process" (Coben, 1998, p. 68). The result is that theories of radical adult education highlight the importance of educative forces necessary for building and sustaining social movements.

Radical adult education theorists focus on political education within social movements, but the field largely neglects the role of media in cultivating political learning environments (Foley, 1996). Downing's groundbreaking work on radical media (1984/2001), a term that includes community radio, documents the ways in which media ferment political change by targeting oppression and strengthening social movements. Many community radio stations encourage their listeners to take an active role in the station and their communities (Sussman & Estes, 2005). My theoretical framework builds the theories and practices of radical adult education compiled by Foley (1999) and Newman (2006)--the latter of which offers a view of storytelling (a popular tool for community radio productions) as a "magical way of teaching and learning" (p. 256). The former reveals the potential of community media in "informal, incidental and embedded learning" (p. 2) that occurs in the civic lives and everyday experiences of community radio audiences. These approaches to the study of radical adult education inform my theoretical framework for valuing the impact of community radio by inspiring relevant methodological tools and research questions.

Having reviewed several bodies of literature, including theories of social movements, radical adult education, community media, and non-profit or civil society institutions; I have concluded that a storytelling approach is necessary to critically evaluate the participatory structures facilitated by Radio al-Balad and the processes of engagement that underpin the listening experiences of community radio audiences. To achieve this, my methods in the field included facilitating narratives recorded by Radio al-Balad audiences along with collecting station artifacts (minutes, bylaws, historical documents, etc.) and conducting participant observation, key interviews with station producers, and two focus groups with listeners of Radio al-Balad. I prepared excerpts from the audience-generated stories I collected to share with the two focus groups, ensuring Radio al-Balad listeners had the opportunity to articulate their own experiences by hearing and contributing to the stories of other audience members. These focus groups in combination with storytelling sessions

recorded by listeners allowed what I like to refer to as "the passing of the research microphone" to prioritize self-representation in community radio audience research, allowing many voices to produce and analyze audience research data.

This approach to data collection drew on some of methods used by community radio audience researchers as well as new techniques that I discovered while doing this research in the field. Throughout my fieldwork in Amman, community radio principles influenced my choices of data collection and analysis methods, including collecting feedback on the research methodology, facilitating opportunities during and after my fieldwork for mutual learning (including interventional tools for Radio al-Balad based on the research outcomes), and gathering data through participatory production methods. In keeping with these principles, my collaborative research design also encouraged the participation of Radio al-Balad staff and volunteers in the validation of the analysis and the reporting of the data.

Advancing storytelling in community media audience research

The preceding literature on radical learning within social movements foregrounds reasons why my methodological approach to investigating the impact of Radio al-Balad prioritizes storytelling among listeners in contrasts with audience research on "decodings" (or audience interpretations), which accounts for the bulk of qualitative audience reception studies (Jensen, 2002). Over the years, decoding has been criticized for projecting meaning and reproducing dominant ideologies while ignoring the dynamic practices and divergent experiences of audiences themselves (Ang, 1990). Facilitating storytelling to document experiences of community radio listeners, I also address a broader challenge for contemporary scholars of audiences:

> All audience research faces the problem of how audiences can be researched with any sort of rigor, given the complexity of the communication processes it involves. Audience experiences have to be put into words, and the words have to be interpreted… The study of audience is implicated in the contemporary crisis of knowledge (Nightingale, 2007).

A response to important criticisms of ethnography concerning ethics, power, identity, and politics, autoethnography has since evolved as a popular tool within many fields (Jones et al., 2013, pp. 25-6). Autoethnography was first termed as a "mode of self-representation" as early as 1975 by American anthropologist Heider (Sobers, 2010, p. 114). This methodology has only just begun to be considered in audience research (Dhoest, 2015). However, Sobers (2010) has taken up autoethnography in the study of community media and he affirms the applicability of this methodology in community radio research:

> [Autoethnography] favours the stakeholders to speak for themselves, presenting individuals articulating what the impacts were on their own lives directly, thus matching the methodology of the study with the

principles of the community media sector itself: to enable individuals to represent themselves (p. 2).

To promote self-representation among community radio listeners in Jordan, I gathered audience-produced personal narratives and facilitated a space for listeners to share stories of the impact of community radio in their civic lives. In this way, I was afforded a greater opportunity to *hear* the listeners.

Experimenting with storytelling among community radio listeners

Before returning to the field, I discussed my proposed methodology with staff members at Radio al-Balad. Through prior consultation, we had already concluded audience research would be crucial for Radio al-Balad in assessing the station's decade-long effort to provide community access to independent news programming in Amman. The station producers and the Listeners' Club supported the proposed research and agreed to help facilitate audience participation. I also developed a protocol for guiding listeners in creating their own narratives and purchased portable recording equipment to aid them in recording their stories. **Appendix: Table 1** lists the audience members who recorded stories and the protocol provided. Through the support my research assistant along with Radio al-Balad producers and volunteers, I collected over fifteen hours of audience generated data through storytelling and focus groups within five weeks. **Appendix: Table 2** lists the audience members who participated in the on-air focus group hosted on June 10, 2013, and **Appendix: Table 3** lists the audience members who joined the in-person focus group held on June 15, 2013.

Drawing on the intersections of audience research, social movement and third sector studies, and theories of radical adult education, my primary research questions investigate the impact of Radio al-Balad's news programming on civic life by asking audience members: 1) how this content informs their actions or opinions and whether they perceive any specific impacts in their community resulting from programming aired on the station; and 2) how audience members engage in the structures of the station (including its Listeners' Club) and in producing programming content or participating during call-in shows. With this approach, I explore how community radio programming informs opinions, raises awareness, and promotes criticism of problems in society and awareness of political solutions.

Conducting primary research in the field among Radio al-Balad audiences presented several limitations to my intended research design. Storytelling proved to be a challenge for some participants who either had no time for recording their personal narrative or were intimidated by the portable recording technology. Some listeners (notably two women) requested that they be interviewed rather than take an audio recorder to use on their own time. The president of the Listeners' Club similarly suggested that data collection would be more efficient if he could invite members of the club to the station. Eight members of the Listeners' Club attended a two-hour meeting at the station, during which they recorded narratives and interviews among each other using the questions prepared for the

storytelling component. For all but two of the participants, it was their first time facilitating an interview or using recording equipment.

In the field, I was struck by the diversity of ways in which audiences of Radio al-Balad chose to tell their story. During the meeting at the station called by the President of the Listeners' Club, eight participants were provided an overview of the questions provided to facilitate storytelling and were requested to take turns asking them to each other and recording the answers. All participants were encouraged to tell stories in response to the questions; some of the questions were even phrased as "Please tell the story of …." Before beginning their recordings, two listeners asked if they could write their narratives down and read it aloud for the recording. As a researcher interested in facilitating collaborative methodologies and embracing the "inherently experimental" nature of self-representation in autoethnographic approaches (Chang, 2013, p. 207), I agreed hoping to accommodate listeners for however they desired to participate.

Image 1: Members of Radio al-Balad's Listeners' Club recording narratives from written scripts on May 18, 2013 (Amman, Jordan).

The resulting stories recorded by listeners varied in length and narrative style. Even though all participants received the same instructions to answer the questions through storytelling, some listeners recorded extensive narratives (upwards of thirty minutes), while others told a very concise story (in just a few minutes) in response to the ten questions provided.

Facilitating narratives in this manner procured richer data than had I attempted to conduct interviews through a translator or relied on my own limited Arabic language skills.

For the on-air and in-person focus groups, I played clips from listener narratives and asked audience members to react to the stories being shared. In both focus groups, this produced lively discussions, but the more critical discussion happened during the in-person session. After the on-air focus group, my research assistant and I realized listeners joining live by telephone were largely hesitant to address bad experiences or offer negative criticism of the station. This was also true of the audience-produced narratives, which did not include very many criticisms of the station. By contrast, listeners shared many frustrations about the station (and offered solutions) during the in-person focus group. For example, during both the on-air and in-person focus groups, some listeners acknowledged not knowing much about the structure of Radio al-Balad and other listeners affirmed getting to know the station through the Listeners' Club. At the in-person focus group, the lack of awareness among listeners about the station's structure led to a discussion about the absence of advertising for the station. Many suggestions were made by listeners during the in-person focus group about how the station could strengthen approaches to promotions, such as putting a sign or a banner outside the station's office building indicating the home of Radio al-Balad, buying advertising around the city, hosting live broadcasts or public events from locations in the community, and advertising shows and special programming airing on Radio al-Balad. In this way, listeners used the focus group discussion to share and talk about solutions to problems they observe at Radio al-Balad.

While listeners did engage in storytelling during both the in-person and on-air focus groups, the generation of new narratives during these discussions was limited by time constraints and the dynamics of group participation that included interruptions and cross talking. An additional positive outcome of the on-air focus group was airing content never before heard on Radio al-Balad. For the first time, listeners were invited to participate in a live call-in show to share stories about Radio al-Balad's achievements and challenges. My research methods had made evident the fact that Radio al-Balad rarely commits airtime to engage listeners about its community radio mandate, structure, practices, or impact.

Hearing the listeners of Radio al-Balad

The following excerpts from the audience data collected through listener narratives exemplify what a storytelling approach within community radio audience research can achieve. Here is the entire narrative prepared by AK, a Listeners' Club member who wrote out and read aloud her narrative:

> My name is AK. I am 51 years old. I live in el-Hasmi shamali (or northern Hasmi neighborhood), I am married and I have a high school degree. The first time listened to Radio al-Balad was in the car going through the frequencies. I liked what I heard, that program was the morning show [*Tallet Subuh*]. My impression was very good when I heard the show. The

workers and listeners are very respectful. And the station had a familiar atmosphere; a lot of cooperation happening at the station. I participate in the Listeners' Club, our meetings were at the station and I participated in a lot of shows after. This participation was very meaningful to me. Oh, I forgot to say that I work at Citil Company. Anyway, it was good to meet new people and people to meet me. These programs help in the popular education of people. Through listening to Radio al-Balad and what other people are going through you, if you have a problem, sometimes you can find solutions. Also you get awareness about other people's issues so you don't fall into the same problems. Also when people have an issue, they get other people to experience it. I came into the station and thought it was a respectable crew. As a working lady, having this experience meeting new people and making good friends, I had a good experience and my awareness was raised.

In her concise narrative, we learn her story, how she came to find the station, whether she participates in the programing or structures of the station, and what impact the station had on her opinions and within her community. This story by AK not only reveals that the station has influenced her political education, but allows her to self-identify the value of social engagement ("meeting new people and making good friends") in fermenting her own awareness and increasing her participation. In this way, storytelling helps to document the transformative experience of participatory community media.

AA was also invited to the Listeners' Club meeting at the station to record his story of engaging in Radio al-Balad as a long time listener of the station and now also co-producer of the popular program *Sayarah FM* (Car FM). AA agreed to be interviewed for his story, and perhaps because of this format difference, the narrative he provided in his answers is longer than the one written out by AK. The following excerpt by AA recalls how he found out about Radio al-Balad through meeting a journalist from the station along his taxi route:

I am 54 years old, live in eastern Amman, am married, have an accounting diploma, am a cab driver, producer of *Sayarah FM*, and Secretary on the Board of the Listeners' Club. These are volunteer positions. As a taxi driver, I used to wake up early in the morning. It was by chance my route would take me close to where this journalist for Radio al-Balad lives. One day I picked her up, then next day also, and I dropped her at the station. Days later I was going to work and an Egyptian building janitor said there is a woman who is going to come down and take a ride. It was the same lady. I smiled and she smiled. She asked me if I pass every day. I said not on purpose, but this is the route for my work. She asked me for my number and she gave me her number to pass in the morning to take her to work. I asked where she worked and she said she was a reporter at Radio al-Balad

and that she presents the *Tallet Subuh* [A morning visit]. That's how I got to know Radio al-Balad. The first show I listened to was… [*AA stops himself*] just to say the radio was not working in my car, so I got a new radio so I could hear *Tallet Subuh*. It's a great show. It was a service oriented show, humanitarian, community oriented. The host was amazing and she did an extraordinary job in engaging the listeners.

Through this story of the listener's first encounter with a Radio al-Balad host along his work route, we learn of his efforts to buy a radio and tune-in to community radio for the first time. AA's account illustrates the extraordinary actions taken by listeners to tune-in and participate in independent community media. In response to the first three questions asking listeners to tell their personal story (age, employment, place of residence, etc.), to talk about how they found Radio al-Balad, and to describe the first program they recall hearing, AA told a longer story than AK prepared in her written narrative in response to all nine questions. He also modified his narrative account repeatedly by adding more details whenever he felt it was necessary, rather than sticking to a written script like AK. While six of the eight participants who attended the Listeners' Club meeting did participate in interviews to share their stories, being interviewed or writing a narrative did not determine the length of a listener's contribution. For example AX was also interviewed and her contribution is nearly as brief as the narratives written out and read aloud by AK and FS.

Image 2: LK recording her narrative during an interview on May 28, 2013 (Amman, Jordan).

Beyond this gathering of the Listeners' Club, other audience members had difficulty accepting the invitation to keep a portable recorder for a week and record their story as a Radio al-Balad listener. LK wanted to participate, but also expressed a preference to be interviewed noting that as a working mother and lawyer supporting several activist cases she has little time. Even so, we spent nearly an hour in her office going through the questions prepared to facilitate storytelling, which included asking her to tell the story of how she came to be a Radio al-Balad listener and contributor:

Let me tell you why. The other radio stations do not have differences between entertainment, information, and news programs talking about serious things. This is one. Let me explain. I cannot hear [a pop star] in one minute then I hear about the traffic problem in Jordan. I cannot hear many drums and suddenly I have to hear about how much I have to be a patriot to my country. I cannot concentrate in this way. I believe they try to mix serious things with the music with entertainment so you cannot get the main clear idea. What is this radio station? Is it for entertainment, or anti-government, is it governmental program. Even the government radio station like Amen FM [operated by the police] – you cannot figure what is the reason for having this radio station. Sometimes it is just like Rotana [one of Jordan's loudest pop music stations run by a local media conglomerate] and the other times it is like we have a war and it is a military radio station. At Radio al-Balad we have a system – at 1pm you will hear the news, 2pm you will hear for music, at 3 o'clock you will hear *Nas Wa Nas* [a popular program on human rights in Jordan] without mixing fun with serious things and that makes things more clear.

Two – I believe Radio al-Balad crossed many red lines and that was good. For the first time you talk about the State Security Court loud and clear that this court cannot have fair trails for civilians and that this court should be stopped. For the first time, you can talk about smoking marijuana without making it like a school or lecturing people; you let people talk and you don't lecture, you make some dialogue with them. That was very interesting and I did participate with this issue. For the first time I can talk about virginity test [a pseudo-medical exam for women-only allegedly used to determine virginity status] and it was a problem for them to find someone. For the first time, I can talk about the rapping of children. Or having rights for gays or lesbians and without cutting my words or without the host telling me, "Let me tell you something - there are some red lines we will not cross."

We sat in her law office as LK told stories like the above about her listening experience and collaborations with Radio al-Balad. In addition to talking about the impact she perceives by the station on discourses around problems and rights in Jordan, LK also shared her criticisms of the practices of other radio stations. The stories she told indicate that Radio al-Balad has impacted civic awareness by providing a participatory platform where no issue is silenced when discussing social and political problems.

Image 3: AH picking-up equipment to record his story
on May 28, 2013 (Amman, Jordan).

Storytelling also afforded a space for audience members to talk about their negative criticisms of the station. However, as mentioned above, most of the listeners who produced personal narratives told very few stories about any "bad experiences." The following excerpts are shared from AH, who accepted a portable recorder and in response to the guiding questions provided the most extensive narrative during his drive to work.

> Let me talk about myself. I grew up in Amman; my childhood was between Amman and Palestine, 50-50. Amman is a different city; I don't want to say special, but it leaves in you something when you live in it. Through a person's life experiences some experiences might come in the way that can lead you to walk with the mainstream or form your own mentality and a different way of thinking. In a moment of awareness, maybe in a book or

accident, in any possible incident that happen in one's life, mentalities can change. This awareness can be formed in a different way than the mainstream and the reality, then the consumption and commercial way of life.

I was touched mostly by the difference in AmmanNet. I am one of those people who like to be different. I do not want to in the herd, the culture of the mainstream, the culture of blind imitation of the society -- the west, east, north or south -- its imitation after all.

When I was in the university, it was the time I was introduced to Radio al-Balad, that period extended from 2001-2006. I transferred between universities. I was studying in Palestine and then I settled in Amman and finished my studies in Amman; although my studies were not related to cultural, politics or arts in Amman. I studied finance, but out of curiosity, personal interest and hobbies, and because at that age we all look for something, I entered these circles and found an atmosphere that contains what we can call different and I insist on this word different because I still believe that Radio al-Balad is still presenting something different even now in 2013. Regardless what it's presenting. It is presenting something different. As a citizen, as a human, I believe Radio al-Balad is presenting something different until today.

… I indirectly participated once, like I said. I use to listen to the radio at the beginning. I remember once, maybe two years ago, we noticed Radio al-Balad is going towards commercial music, the mainstream songs. This bothered and annoyed me as a listener because I knew this radio for long, I know how it was, why can this happen? We talked with friends, to people working there asking them why are you going in this direction. I am saying this for the first time to anyone, but I reached a point where I made a group on Facebook demanding Radio al-Balad to return to broadcasting different music, that music we're used to listening to on Radio al-Balad, principled music, that from musicians I mentioned before. Music that was not available on other stations, what will differentiate them if I tune to Radio al-Balad and hear commercial music. This is not an attack on that kind of music, but that is not what we wanted to hear on Radio al-Balad. I started the Facebook page and worked on it, it started spreading fast and it was supported from inside and outside of the radio. By time the policy slowly changed. Was the FB page effective? No, the Facebook did not have much of an effect, but at least it was a spark it shined light on a space, that some people were demanding the return of this kind of music.

While driving in his car, AH produced this narrative offering the most extensive example of storytelling and self-reflection engage by an audience member about the impact of listening to Radio al-Balad. In his approach to storytelling, he took up the recorder and guiding questions and comfortably offered his critical reflections of society, his life, and the station from behind his car's steering wheel. He often took time while recording his narrative to interrogate his own answers and provide additional context through offering other stories. AH also did not hesitate to make histories known by disclosing "for the first time" (Jones et al., 2013, p. 24) details of his experience as a Radio al-Balad listener who autonomously organized other audience members to seek changes in programming practices at the station. AH documented in his personal narrative the story of how he engaged in collective action as a community radio listener.

Evaluative storytelling & self-reflection: tools for community media

Radio al-Balad organizes itself as a radio station seeking to "exercise democracy" (King, 2009) in Jordan and it strives to attain this goal by offering an independent, participatory, and non-profit mass media platform. Community radio, from the perspective of Radio al-Balad listeners, offers a transformative experience by providing a participatory platform for media and political education, offering programming that raises civic awareness, and providing space for autonomous collective action through which audience members can increase their access to political power as well as opportunities for social change. Mobilizing storytelling among listeners in combination with focus group discussions effectively creates a space for audiences to report on the positive and negatives they experienced listening to and participating in Radio al-Balad over the last decade. In addition, within their personal narratives and focus groups discussions, listeners describe how community radio programming cultivates political education and raises civic awareness in the community. Thus, this framework for investigating audience engagement at Radio al-Balad has afforded listeners an opportunity to evaluate whether the station is achieving its mandate to democratize local political and media landscapes in Jordan.

Storytelling may be awkward for some listeners who may prefer a more formal interview. However, personal narratives and focus groups can give voice to audiences and provide a means for evaluating the impact of community radio stations. An additional outcome of this approach is the strengthening of audience and volunteer engagement within community radio stations. This observation is based on my research assistant's encounter with this audience research methodology. Her involvement collecting and translating the audience data informed her own perspective as a station volunteer about the mandate of community radio. She learned about what the listeners really want and think about Radio al-Balad's contribution. I concluded from this and other comments she made about how the research project affected her views of community radio that this model for *hearing* community radio audiences provides DIY-type tools for community media institutions to not only document impact and facilitate critical self-reflection but also to

encourage an opportunity to orient new volunteers to community radio's mandate and the needs of audiences.

Conclusion

In this article, I presented a theoretical framework and research design orienting my case study of Radio al-Balad to address the gaps that I identified in community media audience research. After reviewing several bodies of literature that informed my investigation of the impact of community radio on the political lives of community radio's audiences, including radical adult education theories, anti-oppression literature, and third sector studies, I demonstrate the value of storytelling to prioritize hearing community radio listeners and to help address the larger crisis in representation debated among contemporary scholars of audience research. As a former community radio journalist and news program producer myself, I believe that this collaborative approach facilitates a form of "engaged" community radio research that ensures knowledge is co-constructed as opposed to imposing conclusions or assumptions of myself as a researcher or expert (Milan, 2013, p. 183). Self-recorded storytelling and cooperative focus groups provided audience members with a platform for critically evaluating the participatory structures facilitated by community radio stations like Radio al-Balad and the processes of engagement that underpin the listening experiences of community radio audiences. In this way, the listeners assessed how effectively they were being served by their community radio stations.

During my fieldwork, my methods allowed me to investigate how Radio al-Balad challenges hegemonic media and political power in Jordan. I have detailed in this article how and why my fieldwork was oriented to valuing community radio audiences as participating actors in generating knowledge that is produced by, for, and about them. This approach to conducting engaged, non-commercial audience research is critical to investigating the impact of community radio news programming in facilitating political learning.

Biographical note:

Gretchen King conducted fieldwork at Jordan's first community radio station, Radio al-Balad 92.4FM for her recently awarded doctorate at McGill University. She approaches community radio stations as civic media institutions that facilitate political learning environments and thereby promote social change. Her research enjoys support from Media@McGill, the Faculty of Arts, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, and the Fonds de recherche du Québec - Société et culture. Previously News Director at Montreal's community radio station CKUT 90.3FM for ten years, Gretchen continues to work as a scholar-activist within autonomous media movements and recently published on her experiences in *Islands of Resistance: Pirate Radio in Canada* (2010), *Free City Radio* (2014), *InCirculation* (2014), and *The Civic Media Reader* (2015). Contact: gretchen.king@mail.mcgill.ca.

NOTE: Participants gave consent, via verbally recorded affirmation or signed forms, for all interviews and photos.

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APPENDIX:

Table 1: Audience Storytelling Data Collected (n=13) and Protocol for Guiding Storytelling

Listener Club 1, Amman, May 18, 2013
Listener Club 2, Amman, May 18, 2013
Listener Club 3, Amman, May 18, 2013
Listener Club 4, Amman, May 18, 2013
Listener Club 5, Amman, May 18, 2013
Listener Club 6, Amman, May 18, 2013
Listener Club 7, Amman, May 18, 2013
Listener Club 8, Amman, May 18, 2013
Listener 1, Amman, May 18, 2013
Listener 2, Amman, May 27, 2013
Listener 3, Amman, May 31, 2013
Listener 4, Amman, June 3, 2013
Listener 5, Amman, June 4, 2013
Interview Protocol for Audience Storytelling

Introduction
1. Tell your story (age, from, family, education, work, etc.).
2. Tell the story of how you found Radio al-Balad.
3. What is the first program you recall hearing? What did you think of it?

Structure
1. Have you ever visited Radio al-Balad? If so can you tell the story of your first visit? If not, why?
2. Have you ever attended a Listeners' Club meeting?
3. If so can you tell the story of your first meeting? If not, why?

Participation
1. Have you participated in any of the programs on Radio al-Balad, how and what do you recall? If not, why?
2. Have you ever produced content for Radio al-Balad? If so can you tell the story of the production you are most proud of? If not, why?

Engagement
1. Have you ever heard anything on Radio al-Balad that informed your political actions?
2. Do you recall any programs that had a direct impact on you or someone or something in your community?

Table 2: On-Air Focus Group Data Collected (n=13)

Assigned code
On-air focus group 1, Amman, June 10, 2013
On-air focus group 2, Amman, June 10, 2013
On-air focus group 3, Amman, June 10, 2013

On-air focus group 4, Amman, June 10, 2013
On-air focus group 5, Amman, June 10, 2013
On-air focus group 6, Amman, June 10, 2013
On-air focus group 7, Amman, June 10, 2013
On-air focus group 8, Amman, June 10, 2013
On-air focus group 9, Amman, June 10, 2013
On-air focus group 10, Amman, June 10, 2013
On-air focus group 11, Amman, June 10, 2013
On-air focus group 12, Amman, June 10, 2013
On-air focus group 13, Amman, June 10, 2013

Table 3: In-person Focus Group Data Collected (n=5)

Assigned code
In-person focus group 1, Amman, June 15, 2013
In-person focus group 2, Amman, June 15, 2013
In-person focus group 3, Amman, June 15, 2013
In-person focus group 4, Amman, June 15, 2013
In-person focus group 5, Amman, June 15, 2013