

Demise of KGO talk radio silences community debate

Peter Laufer

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The surprise silencing of KGO's talk shows may make budget sense for the radio station's absentee owners, but pulling the plug is bad news for civic discourse. I know the potency of talk radio, especially at KGO, where I hosted a show in the early 1970s. Stacks of letters from listeners clutter my basement, testimonials - many in elegant cursive flowing from pre-e-mail fountain pens - of the role radio interlocutors play in our culture.

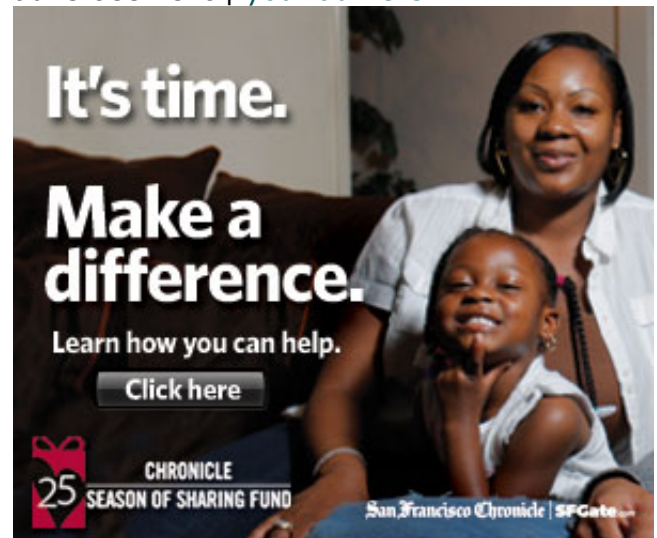
The nationally syndicated demagogues still on the air on other Bay Area radio stations - the Rush Limbaugh clones - spew divisiveness. But general interest local talk shows can help bring us together. Like the Chronicle op-ed pages, KGO was one of the few remaining Bay Area public spaces where many of us came together to figure out what we are as a community, and just to hang out.

When I commuted to KGO's studios from my Sausalito home, I exchanged a few words with the [Golden Gate Bridge](#) toll taker. Today, instead of a chat, my FasTrak beeps as I speed through the toll plaza. If I'm short of cash, I stop at an ATM and hear more electronic beeps rather than the voice of a bank teller. When I fly up to Eugene, there's no need to waste time exchanging pleasantries with a clerk at SFO: I'm directed by the airline to a ticket machine, and it's impossible to secure a window seat by winking at a kiosk.

Not long ago I met with a colleague at Royal Ground Coffee on Fillmore Street in San Francisco. The tables were lined with customers in deep communion with their laptops. As he and I engaged in animated conversation, the loners around us looked disturbed. So much for cafe society.

The demise of most KGO talk shows is not the end of the world as we know it. But it is another incremental step in our alienation from one another, and an important one. Don't believe the argument that the Internet allows for so much interaction that radio is inconsequential. We choose about what and with whom we interact online; online we exist in special-interest neighborhoods. Nothing wrong with that.

But local talk radio - especially when we're faced with long commutes alone - helps create and define us. Ratings spike when there is a crisis. We want to be in touch with each other, guided by a familiar - if flawed - "host" such as the local celebrities fired last week as if they were of no special value to the community KGO is licensed to serve. They've become our radio friends because no other mass medium enjoys such a feeling of one-to-one intimacy. When we tune into talk shows, it seems as if our radio friend behind the microphone is



talking to each of us alone, even as we know that voice is talking to all of us at once.

A viable community needs a common curriculum of knowledge, otherwise we cannot share the joys and concerns of our neighbors. If we're isolated from one another, we're much less likely to care about each other and to work together for common goals.

Shuttering talk at KGO may be an attractive business decision for its Atlanta-based owner Cumulus Media, but the rest of us need to find a new general store where we can play checkers together.

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<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2011/12/06/EDFJ1M8HPE.DTL>

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