

# 'Ironic detachment': Locals laughing 'at' the local on commercial breakfast radio



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## Abstract

The relationship between 'Ironic detachment' and location was addressed by Sue Turnbull in her analysis of comedy use in Australian television series *Kath and Kim* and by comedian Barry Humphries in his performance as 'Dame Edna'. In this, she examined how comedy allowed an audience to embrace their locality (in this case 'suburbia') through laughter while at the same time allowing that audience to hold it "at a distance through ironic detachment" (Turnbull, 2008, p. 28). This perspective, she argued, depended on the audience's own position based on their own experience of life in the suburbs.

In considering how this may be applied to regional context, which relies on a participant's particular experience of a particular 'region' in Australia, this article examines the use of 'ironic detachment' as a specific technique by radio program hosts on an Australian regional commercial breakfast program. It uses a combination of conversation and membership category analysis to analyse two particular host/host interactions. The article reveals the way in which program hosts use irony to laugh 'at' that which is local while at the same time performing 'being local' when interacting with one another to entertain their audience.

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## 1. Introduction

Chat-based radio programs have risen in popularity in Australia and internationally, particularly those that have two or more hosts referred to as a team or crew. This type of formatting now dominates the commercial FM band breakfast and drive programming slots. In regional Australia, chat-based breakfast programs are generally local or regionally-based while afternoon programs are networked from a metropolitan base (Ames, 2004). Over many years of studying regional breakfast radio and examining the way in which locally-based breakfast program hosts interact with one another and their callers or listeners, I became particularly interested in how those hosts orient to 'being local' as a way of demonstrating membership of a community. It became evident that humour is used in a unique way to enable locally-based hosts to question or critique aspects of local life that could potentially be troublesome. As locals, they have a level of entitlement to speak but at the same time need to be sensitive to the possibility that overt critique may alienate members of their overbearing audience.

This observation was noted by Sue Turnbull in her analysis of the use of comedy in television programs *Kath and Kim* and *Dame Edna* (2008). Turnbull argued that comedy can allow the audience to embrace their locality (in their case

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'suburbia') through laughter, while at the same time enabling that audience to hold that same locality "at a distance through ironic detachment" (2008, p. 28). This perspective, she argued, depends on the audience's own position based on their own experience of (suburbia). The use of irony as a technique of detachment is also supported by Tannen, whose research on humour highlighted the individuality with which we use humour, and also the impact of role on the way humour is used (2005). Tannen observed that using humour in role can allow the person to distance themselves from that role by not taking it too seriously (2005). Humour can, therefore, be used as a technique to detach from both place, topic and role.

Focusing its attention on regionally-based breakfast radio in Australia, the article considers the way in which hosts use this type of distancing humour to criticise aspects of that which is 'local' in a way that confirms or supports membership of the local community.

## 2. The roles radio hosts 'play'

Chat-based programming is a genre of broadcast talk found in television and radio as a form of talk (Ames, 2016a; Tolson, 1991). Features of chat-based programming are that it is conversation-based and orients towards personal topics; displays of wit and humour accompany a shift to personal talk; and the potential for transgression is always present (Tolson, 1991). Despite its appearance as 'normal' conversation, talk in this context is strictly institutional. Noting that all talk is inherently performative (Edwards and Potter, 2001), radio talk is particularly constructed as talk for an overhearing audience (Hutchby, 2006; Pandora, 1998; Scannell, 1996; Stierstedt, 2014). Radio hosts manage the co-presence of the audience and themselves within a virtual and imagined 'place', and facilitate (and foster) a sense of community (see Ytreberg, 2004). Hosts therefore provide a mediated interface between radio as a public medium and the sometimes public/sometimes private world of the listener, and this has been well-considered as a general concept in study into radio talk (Brand and Scannell, 1991; Harris and Scannell, 1991; Hutchby, 1991; Scannell, 1996).

Research into interaction on radio, however, has focused more on talk-in-interaction than host–host interaction. However, hosts in multi-host radio environments talk conversationally and attempt to entertain one another and their audience by telling stories. Hosts identify locally important topics during these multi-party interactions (Korolija, 1998), and their selection or representation of a topic can therefore reveal their orientation to specific moral and social order (Jayyusi, 1984). Hosts involved in chat-based talk are required to employ devices that demonstrate shared knowledge, particularly when telling a collaborative story (Lerner, 1992, p. 248). Humour plays an important role in this context. Chat-based programming aims to 'entertain' its audience, and humour is a critical element deployed as a technique to engage audiences.

We know that humour is culturally specific and reliant on in-group knowledge to be successful (Boxer and Cortés-Conde). Participants in interaction will have relationships with and be part of a community in which there are 'in-group' and 'out-group' members (Boxer and Cortés-Conde, 1997; Holt, 2010). Speakers must therefore be familiar with local context to use humour successfully. Chat-based talk is grounded in lived usage, and humour is often performed within categorial roles. These roles are performed with great subtlety, as opposed to being overtly dramatic. Higgins and Moss, for example, argued that while good actors tried to individualise their interpretation of a role in drama generally, the opposite was true in radio:

The brisk idioms of the news readers, the "punch" of the D.J. and the commercial narrator (both very similar), the bland, cheery chat of the host are all unspecific. They are "stage" voices, not rooted in any lived usage, but created for the "life is a show" theme they are disseminating. (1982, p. 84)

The nature of chat-based radio is that performance occurs through the 'bland, cheery chat' to which Higgins and Moss refer, whereby humour is performed as institutional talk. This performance, despite its subtlety, makes action noticeable. That is, it calls something (for example, the topic on which performance is centred) to the listener's attention when it may not have previously been evident. If radio hosts use humour to perform for an overhearing audience, what form does this performance take? This question emerged as a specific point of interest during a study of chat-based programming recordings and is the focus of this article.

## 3. Data and method

Discussion in this article focuses on samples of data originally drawn from 80 h of recording collected from breakfast radio programs over a one month period. The hosts were based in, and broadcast from, one of Australia's most industrial cities. The regional nature of the station meant that the conversation was intended for an overhearing audience located in that city and its immediate surrounds. Two longer extracts were selected to allow for detailed analysis. Extracts were transcribed using the Jefferson Transcription method, developed by Gail Jefferson (Jefferson, 2004), commonly used within Conversation Analysis (CA) and Membership Category Analysis (MCA).

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