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MARKETPLACE

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HEADLINE: Martin Kaplan of the University of Southern California discusses the concept of voice tracking

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BRANCACCIO: Coming up on MARKETPLACE, should it take a village to run a radio station?

Mr. MARTIN KAPLAN (University of Southern California): One of the checks against a federal government was a local government, and in principal, one of the checks against national media are local media.

BODY:

DAVID BRANCACCIO, anchor:

This is MARKETPLACE. I'm David Brancaccio.

Sometimes investigative reporting can start just by turning on the radio. The Wall Street Journal has a piece this week chronicling how Clear Channel Communications, which owns 1,200 radio stations, can make a disc jockey sound local, even though he or she is thousands of miles away. Listeners to a station in Idaho heard the deejay talking to a band about what a heck of a place Boise is. Neither the band nor the deejay were in Boise at the time. Martin Kaplan, associate dean at the Annenberg School at the University of Southern California, is an expert on localness in media. Marty, what is this technique called?

Mr. MARTIN KAPLAN (University of Southern California): It's called voice tracking. This allows a central location to be used, quite efficiently, in order to provide programming for places all over the country, which don't seem like they're coming from a central location, but rather get adapted and localized so that, depending on where you're listening, you think that's the guy from the transmitter next door.

BRANCACCIO: So Dirk Disc Jockey #1 in Boise might actually be in San Diego feeding a number of stations.

Mr. KAPLAN: Yes. And, in fact, in San Diego, unlike you, he'd know to say Boise (pronounced B-OY-ce) rather than Boise (pronounced B-oyze) so that he doesn't give away the fact that he's an import.

BRANCACCIO: Sounds like a wonderful and efficient use of human capital. A big broadcasting company like this can employ fewer of the likes of me.

Mr. KAPLAN: It's a fabulous idea if you don't think that there's a difference between reality and illusion. If you do think that truth counts, if there are reasons to disclose when you're faking things, then we're in trouble. And, in fact, there is reason to think that we're in trouble because that's the last bastion of something called news in enterprise you should be interested in. Otherwise, there is only entertainment. And so the standards that a disc jockey has to observe about, 'I was at some cool party in your neighborhood last week,' are no different than the standards that you have to observe when you're covering a national story.

BRANCACCIO: And it looks like Clear Channel is presuming that the standards are the ones that movie-makers use when they come up with an Arnold Schwarzenegger film. The audiences don't believe that Arnie is actually a superhero, and perhaps we shouldn't believe the disc jockey is local.

Mr. KAPLAN: No, they don't believe and they don't care. And, in fact, these days, technology has meant basically the death of distance. There is no reason to care about geography because we can overcome it through mediation. And so the Malagasy loincloth that you acquired in your childhood can now be gotten on eBay, and whether, in fact, it was actually manufactured at the locale or merely a simulation from Burma and repackaged and mailed from Des Moines, it is alleged, doesn't matter anymore.

BRANCACCIO: So there is a disclosure issue here. I mean, early in my career, we used to have to say by government mandate 'portions recorded' if it was not going to be live. Certainly don't have to do that now. I think our audience presumes that some of this, like our conversation right now, Marty, is recorded, but there's also an issue of the need in our society to have some kind of local discourse. I mean, the government is not just set up nationally. The government is also local.

Mr. KAPLAN: That's right. And, in fact, the Framers wanted to be sure that there were checks and balances at all levels, and one of the checks against a federal government was a local government. And in principal, one of the checks against national media are local media. In fact, the storytellers on every block, the oral historians in your neighborhood, are the glue that keep the society going. When we say community, it's not just some social science term; it means literally the people that you see every day. In the Clear Channel instance, you don't see these people, so you don't know that they're not real.

BRANCACCIO: Marty, thank you. Martin Kaplan is also director of The Norman Lear Center at USC. On this topic of artifice in the media, Marty and I recorded that at 9:22 this morning, Los Angeles time. We were actually together in the same room, which is not always the case. The interview was shortened by 29 percent.