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TECHNOLOGY



Revenge of the 'Big Ears'

By Christine Boese
 CNN Headline News
 Monday, May 3, 2004 Posted: 1:45 PM EDT (1745 GMT)

(CNN) -- I like to think about broadcasting as a technology for devices that have big ears -- ears that catch whatever happens to fall into them from the ethers, or nowadays, from wires and wireless devices.

Interactivity, through a medium such as the Internet, sends out words, pictures and sounds to fall on lots of "big ears," with a key difference: The big ears can talk back, often instantaneously.

Mass media broadcasters often seem to cry great crocodile tears over the obstructions that keep viewers and listeners from talking back. This is what communication professionals call the "feedback loop."

The thick glass of the TV keeps broadcasters from hearing when you yell at your TV set, so television professionals spend boodles on ratings methodologies and focus groups, often while seeming to ignore viewers' calls and letters.

Radio is a medium I associate with sounds in the dark -- a ballgame, an emblematic tune of an era or some patient person taking calls from wackos in the night. My best radio memories are by dashboard light or on a dark porch in summer, an evocative space that is rarely remembered in blinking sunlight or a bright kitchen.

There are ways to talk back to the radio -- winning a concert ticket or having a dream analyzed or requesting a song -- or there used to be, until the taped networks became dominant. Now we can't even get local weather on many stations.

Sometimes the "big ears" catch encrypted things, or things that should be encrypted but aren't. No, you shouldn't be listening to those private cell phone calls that sometimes pop in on your police scanner. That's naughty. Plug your ears!

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Cable and satellite TV companies say viewers must not look or listen to their "broadcasts" unless they pay the bill for the decryption. I don't know what a person of good conscience should do if she happens to see or hear one by accident.

Odd, isn't it? We can close our eyes, but we don't have flaps to close off our ears. They are undiscerning -- great big sound catchers. Our eyes may be light catchers, but we have built-in mechanisms to regulate them: eyelids. Marshall McLuhan would point out that our senses are helping to determine the shape of our media products, our communications.

Turn a monologue into a conversation with interactivity and the shape of what you have to say changes. There's give and take. The "listeners" start gaining power over the broadcast content through dialogue. I'd argue we shouldn't even call it "broadcast," because eventually it won't be "one size fits all" falling upon indiscriminate ears anywhere.

The really funny part is that folks on the Internet aren't asking broadcasters' permission before they talk back and exert power over the shape of media products. If interactivity and dialogue mean having to live in a space of constant feedback, then if broadcasters choose not to join the "conversation," the media "conversation" may move on without them.

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