This paper locates some sources of gender differentiation in cultural practices within the capitalist production of communication. Through the examination of grounded activities of media capitalists such as the production of telephone calls and radio programmes, it uncovers a hidden dimension of the development of means of communication. This is done by unveiling elements of resistance, as well as some sources of compliance, which are opaque to simple structural analyses of cultural practices which use formal elements of analysis (e.g. structure of content) to explain social change. Using a means of communication which is commonly taken for granted, the voice, the paper demonstrates that class and gender are two necessary concepts for understanding the practices related to communication, even with what appears, in the first analysis, as a “natural” medium. The voice, as a means of production of communication, can become a source of profit for capitalists. With technologies such as the telephone and the radio, the voice is an essential element of communication. The article examines how the gendered voice was exploited in different ways by media capitalists in two technologies based on oral/aural communication.

Feminist Studies in Communication.

In her brilliant essay on the “myth of modernity,” Michèle Mattelart (1986) establishes a clear link between the politico-economic conditions of a society and its cultural practices. The concept of “modernity”, she says, is a myth created by the bourgeoisie to represent change in a capitalist society whose actual conditions of existence, the relations of production, remain fixed. In “modern” capitalist society, change does not mean evolution in terms of liberation but rather is synonymous with a continual desire for new commodities, namely with a dependence on consumption.
The bourgeoisie, which considers the capitalist mode of production to be “an absolute form of social production,” instead of a transitory moment in the history of civilisation, has “froze[n] the notion of movement,” and imposed on the dominated groups its ideal of culture supporting the capitalist order. (Mattelart, 1986: 33) This results in a social consumption involving efforts to make the dominated groups believe that the capitalist order is the ultimate form of civilisation leading to the invention of “modernity,” a notion of change which has lost any meaning of an evolution from a mode of production to a more advanced one. In reality, says Mattelart, the “myth of modernity” merely constitutes a “democracy of desires” which “transcends routine and in which conflicts are resolved the way acne is cured”. (Mattelart, 1986: 45) Democracy remains a democracy of desires for low-income classes which do not have the financial means to transform most desires into reality, but which are told that it is their own individual responsibility.

Thus, “modernity” has a political as well as an economic “raison d’être”, hidden under the appearance of a “cheerful, colourful, healthy formula for life,” under seemingly inoffensive cultural practices. Mattelart’s analysis unveils the contradictions involved in such modern activities as fashion. It is exclusively the privilege of the elite to develop a style, she says, but this privilege can only be preserved if the new fashion is extended to other social groups. In this case, “the same style which originally conferred aristocracy, after a period of diffusion confers democracy”. (Mattelart, 1986: 46) This “democratisation” of fashion is profitable for capital and, at the same time, diverts the dominated classes from the political consciousness of their oppression by focussing on the realm of consumption. (Ewen & Ewen, 1982) I suggest that this notion of modernity is not only conceived to reproduce the capitalist mode of production, but also to reproduce the patriarchal ideology.

Another area in which the term “modernity” is commonly applied is that of technological development. “Modern” technologies are usually regarded as “revolutionary,” and technological development either in labour processes or in wider society is generally equated with evolution and social change. But technology is also a domain subjected to male domination. (Cockburn, 1987) Men monopolize the technological know-how in a society in which the knowledge and ownership of the most modern technology is synonymous with status and power. Technology is not conceived to lead to women’s liberation. (Cockburn, 1985; Whicker, 1986; Rosshchild, 1982; Kramarae, 1988; Wright, 1988; Marvin, 1988) As Benston (1988) points out, “men’s control over technology and their adherence to a technological world view ... create a situation where women are silenced”. (Benston, 1988: 15) They are not only excluded from control of modern technology but also from understanding the principle by which these operate. This knowledge is essential to the control of technological development and thus to their use and operation leading to women’s liberation instead of oppression. For that reason, the link Mattelart makes between political-economy and cultural practices should not be forgotten in feminist studies in communication. Too often in mass communication studies (e.g. Tuchman, Daniels, Benét, 1978), the concept of gender is taken for granted and not related to the social structures and particular mode of production of a society.
In "Rethinking Gender and Research in Communication", Rakow (1986) echoes Mattelart's concern with the link between communication and social structures, though in a more modest and abstract way. Rakow, who is particularly interested in such means of communication as the telephone, asserts that to "understand the relationship between gender and communication technologies," we should not "start by looking for differences in women's and men's behaviour with a technology as if gender itself, as some independently possessed essence, causes behaviour". Rather, we should "look for the ways in which a technology is used to construct us as women and men through the social practices that put it to use". (Rakow, 1986: 21-2) In Rakow's review of the literature on feminist studies in communication, she supports analyses based on a political-economy of communication which relate the concept of gender to social practices and cultural meanings. She discusses this in terms of "doing a gender" and "thinking the world". "Doing a gender," she says, implies many aspects of that concept: gender assignment at birth, gender classification in interaction, gender role, gender identity. "Thinking the world" means "creating a gendered world within which we take our gendered places," the places determined by men who "structure the structures". (Rakow, 1986: 20-1) In other words, the world is thought, conceived and constructed for each human being to behave according to his/her assigned gender. This means that men have developed the politico-economic and patriarchal conditions in which we live and that women's practices and experiences are influenced by those conditions. Gender, she says, does not have a universal meaning. The meanings and experiences related to gender are socially specific. In short, gender is a "culturally constructed organization of biology and social life into particular ways of doing, thinking, and experiencing the world". (Rakow, 1986: 21) Rakow attempts to ground her conception in more concrete conditions, but is only partially successful.

Although Rakow refers to gender, power, social relations and ideology, her comments remain at an overly abstract level of analysis, even when she cites examples from her own research with the use of the telephone by women. She does not ground her conceptualisation on specific activities and thus fails to unveil the contradictions implied in the relationship between communication, gender and class. To use Probyn's words, in Rakow's article, "an unspecified local becomes the site for an unnamed politics". (Probyn, 1989: 3)

In her article "Travels in the Postmodern: Making Sense of the Local", Probyn (1989) points out that we must look at women's practices in terms of the "gendering of the spatio-temporal operations". (Probyn, 1989: 4) She stresses an important contradiction in women's experiences. Despite the fact that women's activities are sources of oppression because they are regulated by patriarchal rules, some aspects of these practices remain sources of pleasure. This paradoxical situation, in which women experience some pleasure in their oppression, finds its sources in the way women "struggle to become subjects," and in the way they "resist provided subjectivities in relation to the regulative power of modern social apparatuses". (Walkerdine, in Probyn, 1989: 11) Women are in a position in which their roles and practices
are prescribed by the dominant ideology created and supported by male power. However, women’s subjection to male domination does not prevent them from enjoying some of the activities performed or agreeing to their reproduction. It is through this contradiction that women “are daily involved in the reproduction of patriarchy”. (Probyn, 1989: 12)²

This paper examines how these contradictions apply to women’s practices in two communication industries: the telephone and radio. In both industries, the only possible means of producing communication through the technology is the voice. Telephone operators’ and radio speakers’ voices, as means of production of communication, become sources of profit for these industries. But women’s voices were recognised as an asset in the telephone industry while they were considered a disadvantage in the radio industry.

Communication studies on the voice, and particularly on women’s voice, are almost nonexistent. One of the very few, McKay’s (1988) “Speaking up: Voice Amplification and Women’s Struggle for Public Expression,” examines women’s struggles to be recognized as serious public speakers. McKay’s article discusses the contradictions involved in the debate generated by the presence of women on the radio at the beginning of the commercialisation of that medium. There were contradictory opinions among men in relation to women and means of communication such as the telephone and the radio: in the telephone industry, men thought that women’s voices were perfect to produce telephonic communication; on the other hand, men involved in the development of the radio argued that the technology was not sophisticated enough to amplify the “faint” voice of a woman. Yet, McKay discovered that more was involved than the voice itself, however “faint”. Indeed, “when women used the new technology in support of the goals and activities of established institutions, they were applauded at best or ignored at worst. When they attempted to use it in ways that would lead to change in the traditional order and in women’s customary roles, their right to use it at all was challenged”. (McKay, 1988: 187-8) Using the cases of telephonists and radio speakers, I show that these contradictions were not only due to gender differentiation in patriarchal society as McKay argues, but were also related to economic and political conditions.

The Private Telephone Voice:

A very common issue in the literature published during the telephone’s early development was that of the voice. With the telephone, the voice had become an especial agent of long-distance sociability. The characteristics of the telephonic voice were replacing those of handwriting in letters. This voice was increasingly seen to reveal much of the personality, and hence, it became as important to “practise” or “educate” the voice as it was to “form” one’s handwriting. Voice teaching was usually recommended for both sexes by telephone companies, but was particularly aimed at women’s voices. Special attention was directed to that of the operator. “Your voice and the telephone courtesy are your only seeing points in telephone conversation,”³ said a Bell Telephone Co.’s manager in a lecture to his employees in
the 1910s. (Document 29547, no date) The fact that the manager used the terminology usually reserved for sight implied that the voice had taken the place of both senses, speech and sight, and, as such, had become doubly important.

For telephone companies, the voice, as a cultural element, reflected the class of the person to whom it belonged. Courtesy was associated with bourgeois and upper-middle class manners. A working class voice could not be courteous if it was not trained to be "lady-like". A rough or high pitched voice could not belong to someone from affluent classes, and speech on the telephone had become an index of class identity. "A test of whether gentility is a thin veneer or the solid substance is that of the telephone voice". (Telephone Gazette, 1911, 3(1): 5) The identification of a "genteel" voice applied to both operators and subscribers.

For the operators, the voice itself, and not the worker as entire being, was regarded by telephone companies as the mediating component between subscribers and telephone companies. It was the "agent" representing the class, moral values and personal characteristics of the operator, although its importance gradually changed over the years, and stood in inverse relation to the operator's autonomy. The more mechanised the labour process, the more impersonal the contact between subscribers and operators, and the more important the voice.

Voicing the 'Pulse of the City'.

During the first period of the telephone's development, from 1876 to 1880, when the labour process was still unstructured and the relationship between the operators and the subscribers was on a very personal level, there was no mention of the voice as a characteristic of the labour force. At that time, the content rather than the form of the communication was emphasized. Using a speech which would adapt spontaneously to unforeseeable situations was the most important aspect of the operator's work. As such, courtesy, flexibility and patience were the required qualities, and very little attention was paid to the formal aspect of the relationship between the operator and the subscriber.

Telephone companies' management began to stress the role of the voice towards the mid-1880s with the elaboration of loosely defined rules to be enforced by newly appointed chief-operators. Chief-operators were told that regular operators should master their voices, which should be "checked" by the chief-operator. This matter took on an increasing significance in the internal policies of the company, and eventually operators were subjected to an extensive voice training. In an earlier period, however, it was only suggested that the chief-operator ask her operators to pay some attention to the tone of their voices, (Document 24096, 1884) while, at the same time, she was to prevent them from conversing with subscribers. The limitation of personal contact between operators and subscribers was associated with the increasing standardisation of the voice. The voice at once became a means of controlling of that relationship. A "mastered" voice could not and would not let the operator's identity—something which was a waste of time and potentially embarrassing for the companies—intrude into the means of communication.
The voice had become a component of the operators’ working conditions through its subjection to a list of official rules and regulations published by Bell Telephone Co. in 1892. In this list of twenty-seven rules, the tone of voice was clearly specified on two occasions: “Speak in a clear and distinct tone”, and “when number is given, repeat it back in a distinct tone, each figure separately”. (Document 920, 1892: 2) Henceforth, the operator’s tone of voice was disciplined, as was the content of her communication. Specific and standard phrases were to be used in particular circumstances. When she answered a subscriber’s call, for example, after 1892, she was to say only “number, please,” while, heretofore, she might have answered with one of a variety of phrases such as: “Whom would you like to call?”. She was also required to say “line busy” instead of “sorry! the line is busy now”; and “they do not answer” instead of “there doesn’t seem to be any answer,” or “sorry! they don’t answer”. The curtness of the recommended phrases, in addition to their formal regularity, not only deprived the operator of personal contact with the subscribers but, of course, also increased her rate of production: the shorter the answer, the more calls she put through within a given period of time.

The issue of the voice was not brought to the attention of the long-distance operator in the list of her duties included in the same publication of 1892. Long-distance lines were still technically problematic, and the conversations rather difficult. In such a case, the voice was not the most important element of production. Rather, the operator was told to “assist” the subscribers in a personal manner, to use a “soothing” speech to appease the ire of the businessmen, who considered the wait for a long-distance call as wasted time, and who sometimes reacted very rudely. The degree of sophistication of the technology partly determined the operator’s duty and qualities required of her.

Later, a new list of duties directed specifically to the regular operators by Bell Telephone Co.’s management made the limitations more formal. Here, two tones of voice were specified: a “clear tone” to speak to the subscribers, and a “low tone” for conversation between operators. (Document 926, 1899: 6-7) The different tones of voice were meant to conceal the element of human mediation in the subscribers’ conversations. The clear and distinct tone was employed to talk to the subscribers over the telephone wires, expressing effectiveness at the same time as deferent eagerness; the low and indistinct tone was used to hide the “domestic” contacts between operators from the users.

From 1899, these steps in the specification of the “telephonic voice” were part of the telephone company’s hiring policies: “The girls who work at the switchboard are now chosen largely for their native adaptability and qualifications, among which the possession of a good voice bulks heavily. They receive instruction, of course, in the right way of speaking”. (Kenney, 1905: 428)⁶ The voice, which had been a relatively neglected aspect in the hiring process during the previous stages—perhaps because of the poor quality of transmission of the telephone at that time—suddenly became an important asset. Its importance arose specifically from the fact that new
rules and regulations had reduced to a minimum any personal contact between operators and subscribers: “The only human element that enters into the situation is that intangible thing—the voice”. (Smith, 1911: 3) This uniquely human element in the telephonic operating labour process was to be exploited to the maximum. This was attempted through disciplining the voice as well as subjecting it to the use of a definite number and form of sentences. The “telephonic voice” was defined as a “clear voice”. As an operator pointed out: “That fascinating huskiness often recognized as a charm would never do in a telephone operator”. (Schmith, 1930) Applicants with the proper voice were chosen and put in training schools where they learned to “educate” their voices for “no crude material is ever put on the switchboard”. (Star, 1914) In these schools, the operator reached the ultimate quality of voice by going through a long process in which “she is taught to pronounce each syllable clearly and accurately, and with the rising inflection that gives a pleasant tone. The little phrase, ‘number, please’ may be made either very abrupt as [sic] very gracious, depending entirely on the tone”. (Schmith, 1930) In this way, the operator’s voice was standardised in form and content. Was it to avoid its revealing quality that telephone companies went to such lengths to annihilate this means of expression in training schools? The operators were drilled to repress the display of any personal feelings in their voices, except those carefully taught by the instructors.

The problem of the operator’s voice from the company’s viewpoint was mainly one of class identification. Most of the operators were from the working class while most of the subscribers were from the ruling and middle classes. Even when the operators had the right tone of voice, they needed training to change their working-class voices into “well-modulated lady-like voice[s] ... , always kept well under control, no matter how trying the circumstances ... , [and which] disarm those who are prone to be irritable or fault finding”. (Telephone Gazette 1909, 1(8): 10) The rough and harsh voice of the working-class operator was to be transformed into a “gentlewoman’s” voice which was “never to become strident, angry, or high-pitched”—the characteristics of a working-class voice. Hence, the working-class operator was to acquire a bourgeois or upper-middle class voice, the only one which successfully “disarms anger, repels insolence, makes the rough place of daily business smooth” (Telephone Gazette 1910, 2(6): 11) for the subscribers coming from these classes.

The telephone companies’ concern about voice and speech limitation was raised by their multi-faceted role in the development of the telephone business. It helped to increase the operator’s productivity considerably. C.F. Sise, the general-manager of Bell Telephone Co., emphasised this point in a letter he wrote to the Toronto local manager: “In Toronto ... I was surprised to see with what a very languid and leisurely manner the operators replied to, and made connections for subscribers—a manner which was very graceful, but which reminded me of my Grandmother playing the Harp; rather than a lot of women paid to do a certain work.” (Sise’s Letters, 1895) In addition, the control of the operator’s speech in her dealings with subscribers was also a way of controlling her moral character. The operator had opportunities to talk back
to unfriendly subscribers, but when she was using only standard phrases, there were few occasions where she could employ expressions disapproved of by the users.

The desired degree of effectiveness was reached in schools where

[a] great deal of attention is paid to the method of repeating numbers. The vigorous rolling of r's is discouraged, though the operator likes to do it, it works off her surplus energy. But to roll the 'thr-r-r-e' until it is exhausted is an unnecessary waste of time.\(^8\) The stereotyped phrases to which her conversation is limited today have been devised as time savers. In completing a connection, every tenth part of a second counts; she gives her report to the subscriber in the fewest possible words. To say 'thank you' instead of repeating the number saves one more brief second of time. (Schmith, 1930)

This instructor did not mention another essential aim of the training: to decrease the number of mistakes made by the operators.

Clarity of tone was also a "time-saver" in avoiding unnecessary repetition—most subscribers immediately understood an operator answering in a clear tone—and a "peace-maker" in limiting verbal contact between operators and subscribers. In short, the voice projected in a clear tone using specific phrases was an effective means of controlling of the production process at the same time as it was attractive to the users. As such, it was indisputably an economic and political asset for telephone companies.

"The woodsy voices of a summer day"

Thus trained, the "feminine" voice was said to be "limitless" in its possibilities for the operation of the telephone. (Mail 1916)

In the first place the clear feminine quality of voice suits best the delicate instrument. Then girls are usually more alert than boys, and always more patient.

Women are more sensitive, more amenable to discipline, far gentler and more forebearing than men. ... Boys and men are less patient. They have always an element of fight in them. When spoken to roughly and rudely they are not going to give the soft answer. Not they. And every man is a crank when he gets on a phone. The personal equation stands for naught. He is looking into the blank wooden receiver and it doesn't inspire him with respectful politeness. (Document 12016, 1898: 116)

As a newspaperman pointed out: "Instead of the noisy, abusive boy there came the gentle, soft-voiced girl. If ever the rush of girls into the business world was a blessing it was when they took possession of the telephone exchanges. ... The girl and the telephone are natural friends". (News, 1916) The perfect operator had a "gentle voice; musical as the woodsy voices of a summer day", "sweetly distinct to
the subscribers ... yet ... carefully articulated". (*Telephony* 1905, 9(5): 388) This voice was beneficial to subscribers as it was supposed to play "a big part in moulding the temper of the time. Irascible, petulant, hurried, the subscriber cannot help but feel the influence of that something which appeals to him as quiet, dignified, soothing, until his temper melts away as the mountain snows before the compelling chinook of the south west". (*Telephony* 1905, 9(5): 389)

This soporific voice was also said to possess a magnetism which attracted "men of wealth" and "farmer boys" equally. "I met my husband through a blind date, talking to him from the switchboard while on duty", said an operator. (Johnson, 1907-17) Standard romances were told of working-class operators attracting millionaires with their voices. (*Telephony* 1904, 7(2): 126-7) Other love stories between operators and low-income men were due to the "soft voice" which "ensnares[d] men's hearts". "There is something about the sound of the voice of a girl on the wire that sets a young man into a wooing mood," said the manager of an American independent telephone company. (*Telephony* 1905, 9(4): 328) Thus, the regulated voice was profitable to the companies and the subscribers, and could be a source of pleasure for the operators.

With the telephone where the other senses had a secondary role, the voice which had heretofore been a relatively neglected human characteristic, took on a much greater importance.

Too few of us realise that the voice is all that goes over the wire. It represents the person who is speaking. If the tone is harsh and grating, the smile in your eyes will be lost upon the person at the other end of the line.

Get the smile into your voice. (*Herald*, 1917)

This summarizes what the operators were taught in training school about the tone of their voices. Coupled with a specific speech, it turned an applicant into a perfect operator who contributed greatly in attracting new subscribers and keeping old ones.

**The Art of Talking over the Telephone.**

The importance of the telephonic voice, however, was not limited to the operators. Advice on the voice to be used over the telephone was also given to subscribers who could slow down the process of production as well. It was claimed that there was an interplay between the subscriber's voice and the use of the telephone: using the proper voice gave a more satisfactory quality of communication, while the regular use of the telephone improved the voice of the subscriber. The telephone voice was considered to be "greatly a question of sex, but not by any means altogether so". (*Toronto Newspapers*, 1913) There was agreement on the fact that "it was a difficult art to project one's personality over the telephone" (*Telephone Gazette* 1911, 3(1): 5), but the reasons offered for this difficulty were various. Some argued that it was because "the distinctness of telephone utterance" made the voice reveal all nuances in the user's mood, meaning that it was impossible to hide such feelings as impatience or anger. (Kenney, 1905: 428) Others, on the contrary, reasoned that "the telephone
deprives the voice of the speaker of characteristic inflections”. As a result, when the subscribers did not use the proper voice, “what was tenderly uttered may sound harsh and grating and be misconstrued”. (Telephone Gazette 1911, 3(1): 5) In any case, both arguments led to the necessity of adopting a “telephone voice” when using the technology. Businessmen were told that “a good voice, used intelligently, politely and persuasively, is a commercial asset”. Telephone companies advised “those who deal with the public by telephone” to coach “all new employees”, women or men, in the proper way of speaking over the phone. Women’s and men’s voices were said to have different characteristics: “The woman’s voice carries better over short-distance connections, the man’s over long-distance”. (Kenney 1905, 428) In both cases, though, a telephone voice was seen as an economic asset for these businessmen.

The effect of the telephone on the subscribers’ voices influenced their relationship with the operators as well. When the users clearly articulated the desired number, the operator could make the connection more promptly. This accelerated the general production of telephone calls. No wonder that telephone companies insisted on asking the subscribers to speak distinctly when asking for their numbers. Under the guise of an interactive relationship limited to the effects of a technology on cultural practices, lay the exigencies of profit, indirectly connected to political issues.

Indeed, the telephone voice had also a political advantage. Since talking over the phone was an art to be cultivated and since Americans were recognised as the most frequent telephone users, some writers stressed that the telephone had “improved [the] American voice”. As a nation composed of “early settlers, intense people, face to face with the most vexatious problems of existence,” Americans “spoke out with a certain crude harshness”. Sir Morell Mackenzie, “the eminent English specialist,” had attributed the cause of this problem to Americans’ puritan minds. (Kenney, 1905: 428) With the telephone, however, “the American voice [was given] a tone of culture and refreshment ... Hypercritical foreigners hereafter will not be able to find fault with the American voice, and call this a nation of nasal-voiced shouters, for the telephone is taming down the so-called loud manner of the native American”. (Telephony 1905, 10(5): 360) Americans were often ridiculed by people from other countries for their nasal voice. Some of them saw the telephone, whose influence was said to be mainly “upon the conversational voice,” as the technology which would enable them to correct this embarrassing “national” feature. This was so, they said, because regular use of the phone obliged one “to articulate with the greatest distinctions; to be deliberate on what one says and to make ample pause at the end of each sentence”. (Sissoni, 1904: 65) It seems that an improved voice gave the American nation a more impressive image in its political dealings with other nations.

The public radio voice:

It appears, however, that, in the long run, the telephone did not have that beneficial effect. Indeed, in the early 1920s, after the radio had been commercialised, some radio “experts” lamented that it was rather difficult to find the proper voice to make
Capitalizing on the ‘Feminine’ Voice/M. Martin

a good radio speaker. R.K. Morton, “who has broadcast speeches from [different] stations,” asserted that there were very few American speakers who had “really good voices and delivery”. According to him, Americans generally “are lip-lazy, ... clip [their] syllables and sounds ... [and] mumble down [their] shirt fronts”. (Mix, 1924-25: 50) This critique was mostly directed to men since the great majority of radio speakers were male. During the period 1924-1925, an important debate raged over the suitability of female voices for radio speakers. While the telephone industry considered a woman’s voice as the most suitable for a telephone voice, the question in the radio industry was whether a woman’s voice had the tone of a good speaker. The emergence of women as radio speakers challenged elements of the dominant ideology.

The Voice of “Authority”.

Early broadcasting of news and entertainment had begun through the telephone networks in the 1880s. It did not consist of mass broadcasting, as very few people at a time could hear it since it used individual telephone receivers connected to small networks. It is only in 1907 that the first broadcast to a general audience occurred through a “radio” technology by amateur stations. The technology developed rapidly during World War I, and commercial stations started to open in Canada and United States at the beginning of the 1920s. Until then, the radio was considered as “a means of transmission for high-value messages” (Pool, 1981: 174), especially useful on ships, airplanes, etc. during World War I. However, Pool (1981) asserts that pressure to use the radio as an entertainment medium forced the experts to change their view. He identifies three different “philosophies” of radio broadcasting in relation to early radio development. The first one was the “democratic radio” which consisted of broadcasting what people wanted to hear. This was illustrated by the development of radio in United States and Canada. The second form was the “elite radio” adopted in England, where listeners heard only what the state agencies who controlled radio production chose to broadcast. In that country, the Sykes committee, an inquiry into the possibility of privatisation of broadcasting, established that “the control of such a potential power over public opinion and the life of the nation ought to remain with the state”. (Pool, 1981: 179) Finally, the third category of radio practice was the “propaganda radio,” which appeared in the USSR and Germany where programming was limited to and censored by the “authorities,” namely the governments. In such countries, Pool argues, “people ... thought radio as a key to the control of society ... A medium through which every citizen could be made to listen to the same demonstration on the same afternoon was ... an ideal means of national mobilisation”. (Pool, 1981: 180) Whatever the “philosophy” adopted by those controlling the development of radio, though, the technology was seen as powerful because it enabled the broadcasters to reach a large number of people.

However, despite the rapid development of radio broadcasting, and because of experiments made during the war, “most radio people believed that the future of radio lay with narrowcasting or point-to-point communication, particularly between
mobile stations or over difficult terrain". (Sterling and Kittross 1978: 42-3) In the United States, the broadcasting of entertainment programming began in the early 1920s through commercial stations run by private companies like Westinghouse, Marconi, General Electric, etc linked to AT & T's networks. They were subject to very little regulation until the early 1930s.13

One of the most important problems for these commercial stations was that of financing. Several proposals were brought up to pay for programming: a 2% tax on receiver sales14; funds solicited from the radio audience; voluntary contributions from the audience; and a levy of an annual tax on radio. In the United States and Canada, none of those solutions were applied by commercial radio stations. Rather, from the 1920s, radio programming was financially supported by advertising. The favourite form of advertising was to attach the sponsor's name to a performer of its choice. As such, advertisers were indirectly responsible for the programming. (Sterling & Kittross, 1978: 70)15 Advertising was said to be very profitable to the sponsors, whose sales were considerably increased, at least in the short term. As Muriel and Joel Cantor put it: "By the time the Radio Act [in the United States] was passed in 1927, the floodgates had opened and commercial sponsorship was entrenched. The decision about how broadcasting was to be financed had been made, not through informed discussion by policy makers or educationalists [sic], but rather through default by business leaders interested in making profits, not in pursuing 'public service' goals". (Muriel and Joel Cantor, 1985: 167)

Early radio programmes broadcast on commercial stations took very much the form of vaudeville. (Sterling & Kittross, 1978: 71; Fritz, 1973: 276) "Talent who would broadcast free" were invited to perform. (Fritz, 1973: 278) Although many stations tried to set a schedule, unexpected events prevented them from doing so - e.g. bad weather, slow transportation, etc. - so that "there were few planned programmes and invited performers ran the programme as long as they could". (Sterling & Kittross, 1978: 72) This inconvenience did not prevent the audience from growing rapidly. In the United States in 1923, 556 radio stations were broadcasting in comparison to 34 in Canada. Moreover, the transmitting power of the American networks was almost 14 times that of the Canadian ones so that our neighbour's radio stations were very popular with Canadian listeners. (Collins, 1985: 201) These numerous radio stations were capturing a wide audience. Indeed, while in 1924 there were "approximately 2,500,000 broadcast receivers in use in the United States," the audience was estimated at about 20,000,000 listeners in 1926. (Page Jr, 1975: 467, 470) In spite of the high cost of the radio receiver—about $80.00—"one radio receiver had been sold for every 20 households". This makes Sterling and Kittross (1978) remark that in the United States, radio had already become a "national craze". (Sterling & Kittross, 1978: 81)

With the emergence of commercial radio stations, a new occupation was created: radio speaker or announcer. There was consensus on the notion that a radio speaker's main task was "to speak with dignity," "professional sense," and "authority,"
Capitalizing on the ‘Feminine’ Voice/M. Martin

apparently to give this new means of communication some credibility. Speakers were responsible mostly for programmes related to politics and news, or other "talk programmes" in which they "often discussed current new events". During the 1920s, these programmes were not scripted and speakers were relatively free to say what they wanted, although they had to conform to the broadcasters' desires. (Sterling & Kittross, 1978: 71; Young, 1975: 272) Whereas radio stations had some methods of investigating the audience makeup - through comment cards, signal coverage maps, receiver sales, and station mail - they did not bother to inquire into listening habits, until advertising became their main financial support in the late 1920s. (Sterling & Kittross, 1978: 83) The qualities required of a speaker were also determined guesswork, which might have been why there were contradictory opinions about these abilities. Some said that "the radio performer's personality was more important than his voice" (Young, 1975: 272), while others asserted that "voice was all". (Fritz, 1975: 278) In any case, it seems that men were seen as the most appropriate sex for the occupation, and when a woman was permitted some time on the radio, either as performer or speaker, she was disciplined by male radio broadcasters. (Young, 1975: 273) There were no regulations regarding programming in the 1920s, and those controlling broadcasting had the freedom to "censor many dissenting points of view and to present a conservative, business-oriented middle-class view-point". (Sterling and Kittross, 1978: 88) Consequently, radio was also subject to patriarchal ideology, an ideology in which women were considered objects to be seen rather than as persons to be heard. Women vested with "dignity" and "authority" were usually seen as difficult and were not invited to express their ideas, which were considered unsuitable for the radio. (Benston, 1988: 19) Only those who corresponded to the stereotypical image of women were likely to be given the opportunity to perform. This political screening would become increasingly important as the radio audience developed. "The avoidance of controversy became almost a fetish in later years". (Sterling and Kittross, 1978: 88)

Undesirable Voices.

A debate on the suitability of women's voices as radio speakers started in J.I. Mix's column in Radio Broadcast (1924-25) with a written comment from a phonograph retailer "denouncing all women announcers because, the voice of a woman when she cannot be seen, 'is undesirable, and to many, both men and women, displeasing'". (Mix, 1924-25: 333) Although, according to Mix, "radio [was] bringing women daily before the microphone," it was never as regular announcers, but rather as visitors or replacements. Women, it was said, were apt to make some "typical" mistakes when speaking over a microphone: they adopted either a patronising tone or were "precise to the point of exasperation" and, in both cases, were "lacking in humour". In other words, they did not know, as men did, "how far to carry familiarity" in their voices and speeches. (Mix, 1924-25: 334)

Given this paradoxical situation in which women were regularly used as radio speakers at the same time as they were dismissed as inadequate announcers, Mix did
a small survey among some male experts from the radio industry. She found that these experts believed that “a woman [was] rarely a success [as a radio speaker] ... because [her] voice did not carry the appeal” of a man’s voice. A woman’s appeal was in everything but her voice which was considered either “flat,” “shrill,” or “pitched too high”. (Mix, 1924-25: 391) In other words, her appeal was as an object in her reproductive body, not in her expressive body. This perfectly reflected the patriarchal values attached to the image of women of that time. Among the respondents, a director of a radio station admitted that “some of the women announcers have better sense than some of the men announcers” but that, despite this advantage, they were “not fitted for radio announcers” because they did not have “body to their voices” which had “an offensive nasal quality”. Another director of a radio station, which “feature[d] more women speakers than any other station in the country,” confirmed this opinion and asserted that, “for announcing, a well modulated male voice is the most pleasing to listen to”. (Mix, 1924-25: 292-3) These statements are scarcely surprising in a culture where being a man was more important than making sense. In that society which was based on male domination, women’s voices were also accused of lacking individuality: “[F]ew women have voices with distinct personality” (Mix, 1924-25: 391); or of being too personal: “Perhaps the best reason suggested for unpopularity of women’s voice over the radio is that it usually has too much personality”. (Wallace 1926, 45, quoted in McKay) Such divergence of opinions on the suitability of women’s voices to the radio suggests that the causes of the problem lay in other elements than the voice itself. The problem resided in the more complex issue of women coming into the public realm.

Voicing their Silence.

According to Walkerdine (1985), in patriarchal capitalist society, women are facing a paradoxical situation in which they have only two choices: either they agree to participate in the existing form of power and have a chance to validate themselves, or they reject male domination in order to learn more about themselves and are then devalued. In the first case, in agreeing to reproduce male power and social control, women lose their gender particularities and become only a part, or a shadow, of their male counterparts. In the latter case, women can live according to their own characteristics, albeit accepting the loss of power and control over social change. Confronted with such a situation, says Walkerdine, women often choose to remain silent as a defense against either option.

Benston (1988) links that policy of silence to the technological sphere, and argues that “gender differences around technology have consequences for verbal communication”. In patriarchal societies, the system of meanings are created and validated by men. This way, she says, “women are muted”. (Benston, 1988: 23) Since men have control not only over the creation of meanings but also over the development of communication technologies, women find themselves in situations in which they have the choice between being silent or being silenced, namely adopting the male systems. In both cases, women’s silence entails that, in order to
have access to means of communication, they accept not being given the opportunity to express opposing or different opinions from the dominant values. They may also choose not to take that opportunity if they have internalised the relation of authority so that they can discipline themselves. In either case, it must be seen as a "defensive resistance", to use A. Mattelart words, in order to survive as women under male domination.

Women’s voices on the radio seemed to express such a paradox. While a woman’s voice was considered an economic asset in the controlled labour process of the telephone industry because it involved little political impact on wider society, it had a more problematic role in the broadcasting industry where it could be amplified through technological means and be used in public to support such controversial political issues as women’s rights, or to contest the traditional role of woman. Women’s voices as radio speakers were related to a complex set of political issues not raised in private telephone conversation. Ideological and moral values coupled with economic and political elements were the basis of the problem.

In the early 1920s, woman’s place was still in the privacy of her home, and her presence in the public realm subverted fundamental values of the dominant ideology. Most of the women who were in a position to speak publicly were from the bourgeois and middle classes and, as McKay points out, many of them were women “unusually endowed with intellectual and educational resources and with personal dynamism rare in either gender”. (McKay 1988: 190) In addition, they often endorsed such political causes as women’s right to vote which did not support the dominant ideology. To avoid any embarrassment, women who were used as speakers were “frequently limited to ‘women’s subjects’”. (Mix, 1924-25: 202)

This suggests that media capitalists did not feel that women as radio speakers could be profitable to the industry. They might have seen those women capable of being announcers as a threat to the “ideals” of the dominant classes and a political challenge. At the ideological level, women did not carry the “authority” that men did in that male-dominated society. Men represented power and authority, characteristics necessary to lend credibility to that new means of communication. Further, although they had no tangible evidence to support their opinion, most radio broadcasters believed that the majority of their listeners, including most women, disapproved of women as radio speakers. Since radio stations were (and still are) economically dependent on the size of the audience they could attract, it was more profitable for them to please that audience than the small group of women interested in becoming announcers. It is paradoxical, however, that while the radio industry dismissed women as radio speakers, they sought their patronage as radio listeners. Indeed, radio retailers launched a widespread publicity campaign to encourage women to buy the technology, while radio stations were inserting an increasing number of programmes oriented towards “women’s issues”. (McKay, 1988: 202)

Thus, while the radio stations did not consider women’s voices to be profitable to the industry, they were most interested in acquiring their support as an audience, one not
restricted to bourgeois and middle classes women, but, as Ewen and Ewen (1982) point out, extended to working-class women as well.

Conclusion.

The issue of women's voices in relation to means of communication involves more than the vocal ability of both genders. This paper shows that its importance, for these particular communication industries, primarily stemmed from its economic and political implications. The voices of subordinated women workers in the controlled and private production process of the telephone industry were most welcome because, while they had little political impact, they accelerated the rate of production and, as such, were a financial asset. On the other hand, women as credible radio speakers were considered unprofitable by the media capitalists either because their controversial views might constitute a political threat or because they did not possess the "authority" vested in men. Yet, in both communication industries, silence was imposed on women very efficiently, albeit differently. In the telephone industry, women were much sought after as operators, but were "silenced" by the control exercised over them in the labour process. In the radio industry, women were altogether dismissed as regular speakers, or when hired as replacements or part-time announcers, were restricted to "women's subjects". However, this silencing which was a means of controlling women in those two labour processes should not be seen as a complete domination over totally defenseless women. In fact, it was accepted by them as a form of "defensive resistance", perhaps not always consciously used. These women agreed to observe a form of silence to get into desired occupations but, once hired, often retaliated in different ways.20

An important element of differentiation in these two cases was the private versus public use of women's voices in the communication industry. With such a means of communication as the telephone, where women's voices could only be used privately (though on a public system), the economic issue had priority. The cheaply-hired voices of working-class women operators, controlled and subjected to dominant values, were considered a financial asset. The case was different with such a means of mass-communication as the radio which allowed the public use of women's voices: voices not disciplined by the taylorisation of the labour process. As such, they involved a political aspect not so evident in the telephone industry. The control of educated women talking in public was problematic: the radio gave them the opportunity to express political views supporting women's issues in contradiction to the dominant ideology.21 At the same time, allowing women as speakers on the radio might have invested them with an authority heretofore exclusive to men. Hence, while media-capitalists concern about women's voices was mostly economic in the privacy of the production process, the issue became more political when related to their use in the public realm. It appears, then, that the private versus public expression of the "feminine" voice is an important issue in the study of women's participation in the use of media as it is not only related to the cultural elements but to the political and economic conditions of the society in which the media are used.
An examination of the economic and political incentives sustaining the development of these industries helped to understand the contradictions involved in a cultural issue such as women’s voices on the media. Profits and conformity to the norms and values of the dominant classes are the motives supporting the media-capitalists' policies of hiring women as workers. While telephonists were trained to conform to the dominant culture, women speakers’ untrained voices were an excuse for the radio industry to keep them away from a medium which they could have used to support women’s issues. The few who were hired were tracked into “women’s subjects”. Thus conforming to the dominant ideology, they stopped being a political threat and started to be an economic asset in attracting a female audience. Here Walkerdine’s paradox is illustrated: in being silenced on political issues, these women earned the financial possibility to have their voices heard on the radio. Only a combination of both perspectives, politico-economic and feminist, can unveil this very close relationship between media-capitalists’ incentives and cultural practices.

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**ENDNOTES**

1. I would like to thank Bruce Curtis and Graham Knight for their helpful comments and for helping me to obtain some of the data. The responsibility for any errors is entirely mine. I am grateful to Bell Canada for putting no restriction on my exploration of their Historical Collection and for providing very accommodating conditions of research.

2. Mattelart (1986) stresses the same contradiction in “Women as Consumers”, ch. 2 in *Women, Media, Crisis*.

3. My emphasis. “Over the telephone, the offensive voice cannot be softened or corrected by a glance or a smile”, said a voice instructor from Emerson College of Oratory in Boston. (Kenney, 1905: 428)

4. The voice was usually referred to by these companies as an independent element, a reified part of a woman’s body.


6. My emphasis. Women were seen as “naturally” adaptable, and promptly ready to follow instructions. These were considered biological characteristics.


8. Not to mention that the rolled “r-r-r” was a characteristic of working-class language.

9. There was no such analysis of the Canadian voice but, since the Canadians were second only to the Americans in phone use and that they also were settlers fighting against harsh conditions, it is safe to say that the telephone might have had the same effect, if any, on their voice than on that of their neighbours.

10. For an interesting study of the formation of “experts” related to the development of a new technology, see Marvin 1988.


12. These stations were closed during the first world war.
13. The Canadian development of the radio industry was very similar to the American, though on a much reduced scale.

14. This was the means adopted by Great Britain radio broadcasters.

15. The principle still applies today.

16. “Spontaneous comments” started to be scripted from the mid-1930s. (Pegg, 1983: 206)

17. This type of disciplining did not seem to apply to men, at least in United States and Canada.

18. This idea was suggested by Vincent Mosco.

19. For a politico-economic analysis of the relationship between audiences and media, see Lebowitz, 1986.

20. See my “Rulers of the Wires”.

21. At the time when the debate on women’s voices on the radio was going on, women had had the right to vote for less than a decade, in the United States, and their voices were still very much contested.