

*Who Control Radio Listening in Cars?*

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Abstract

Despite much research on media consumption in the domestic sphere, few studies have been conducted on the context of commuting. Based on the author's research paper titled "In-vehicle radio listening patterns of Bangkokians" which collected data from a sample of 438 drivers using questionnaires and conducted in-depth interviews of 19 drivers as well as 13 driver companions, "Who controls radio listening in cars?" will explore the connection of power relations to radio listening while driving. In the domestic sphere, masculinity seems to control media program choices; in the context of driving, the power to choose radio programs is normally under the drivers' control. However, drivers do not have a monopoly on program choices. The intimate and hierarchical relationships between companions and drivers affect the control over radio programs in cars. Drivers usually indulge children, lovers, and bosses in order to strengthen relationships between them and their companions. This implies that drivers feel obligated to them, or want to drive peacefully, so they defer to their companions' preferences.

Additionally, a sense of car ownership plays an important role in the exercise of power. If drivers do not drive their own cars, they will lose or lessen power and control over car radio choices.

Keywords: Radio listening, Power relations, Car

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Listening to the radio is a habitual activity of drivers. Based on the author's research titled "In-vehicle radio listening patterns of Bangkokians" (Sarakornborrirak, 2011), which collected data from 438 drivers in Bangkok and interviewed 19 drivers and 13 companions, the results showed that 89.7 percent of drivers listened to their car radios, with nearly half of the total (46.3 percent) turning on their car radios every time they drove. Most of them (38.6 percent) listened to the car radio 1-2 hours per day (Sarakornborrirak, 2011 p.74-75).

The major reasons for this are the existence and availability of the radio in the car, the characteristic which allows drivers to listen to it while driving, the various contents of radio programs, and the sense of media ownership in the car (Sarakornborrirak, 2012 p.62-63).

Moreover, it has been found that driver's companions affect the listening patterns of drivers (Sarakornborrirak, 2012 p.63). Thus, in this article, I will explore radio use in cars with companions and discuss who controls the radio listening choices in various relationships in order to further understand the power relations of radio use in the context of the car.

## **2. POWER AND MEDIA CONTROL IN THE DOMESTIC AND COMMUTING CONTEXT**

Many researchers have explored media use in the domestic sphere and have explored the issue of power and media control (e.g., Hinviman, 1998; Hobson, 1989; Morley, 1992; Moores, 1988; Winocur, 2005). For example, when radio was first introduced to families, they could only be listened to with headphones. Therefore, it played the role of a toy for men but was considered an "ugly box" by women as women were excluded from listening to it (Moores, 1988 p.120). However, the radio set was later improved enabling a group of people to listen to it; therefore, women had a chance to listen to the radio and were appreciated the media as its characteristics served their domestic routines (Winocur, 2005 p.323).

Regarding television, men were often the gender who had power to control television use in the domestic sphere. Fathers, husbands and sons controlled television program choices (Morley, 1992 P. 147; Hinviman, 1998 P.150).

However, Morley (1992 p. 148) has pointed out that power did not absolutely depend on the physical power of masculinity. If the man was unemployed, he would often lose his power in controlling the television choices at home.

In the Thai context, observing TV soap opera viewing in the domestic space, Hinviman (1998) found that a remote control device, a preferred seat in the living room and a power to control television program choices are related to age and gender. He also stated that male and young family members dominated television watching in most households (Hinviman, 1998, 150-153). However, a degree of this domination over the domestic terrain varies according to various styles of household life.

In the context of driving, Walsh (2010) studied music listening in cars and found that drivers could state their needs clearly about what they wanted to listen to and ignored the needs of others (p. 211). In the case of public transport, Winocur (2005 p.322)

found that a bus driver turned the volume up not to entertain the passengers, but to establish the driver's boundaries and to listen to the radio clearly among various noises, including passenger noise. Accordingly, the power of controlling the radio is normally reserved for the driver.

Nevertheless, the power over a car radio does not exactly depend on the driver. The author has found that companions affect drivers' control over their car radio choices.

### 3. LISTENING TO THE CAR RADIO WITH COMPANIONS

The car radio listening patterns of drivers vary according to the relationships between the drivers and companions. Statistics revealed that driving with different companions affects the driver's control over radio program choices in different degrees, especially when driving with children, as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
**Respondents and the percentage of control over car radio choices**  
**when commuting with different companions**

Control over a car radio	Commuting with									
	Spouse		Children		Girl/boyfriend		Friends		Others	
	Respondents	Percentage	Respondents	Percentage	Respondents	Percentage	Respondents	Percentage	Respondents	Percentage
You (Driver)	63	55.8	28	29.2	32	41.0	81	57.0	8	47.0
Companion	14	12.4	36	37.5	13	16.7	11	7.7	2	11.7
Both	15	13.3	15	15.6	22	28.2	20	14.4	1	5.8
Depends on the situation	21	18.6	17	17.7	11	14.1	30	21.1	6	34.6
Total	113	100.0	96	100.0	78	100.0	142	100.0	17	100.0

Source: Sarakornborrirak (2011, P. 215-216)

#### **Listening to car radios with family members**

Though Morley (1992) found that a man in a family home has power to control a TV remote control, in the context of a car, the driver who is the owner of the car has the most power to control car radio choices, when commuting with their spouse. Most drivers (55.8%) control the car radio choices by themselves. However, a male driver seems to let his spouse control the car radio choices more than female drivers, as is seen in Table 2.

**Table 2**  
**Respondents and the percentage of control over car radio choices**  
**when commuting with a spouse, by gender**

Control over a car radio when commuting with a spouse	Male		Female		Total	
	Respondents	Percentage	Respondents	Percentage	Respondents	Percentage
You (Driver)	31	52.5	32	59.3	63	55.8
Companion	10	16.9	4	7.4	14	12.4
Both	7	11.9	8	14.8	15	13.3
Depends on the situation	11	18.6	10	18.5	21	18.6
Total	59	100.0	54	100.0	113	100.0

Source: Sarakornborrirak (2011, p. 215)

One of respondents stated that if she was the companion and her husband was the driver, she usually controlled the radio choices.

Paranee (Female, age 37): “If I am with my husband and he is listening to the news program, I will let him listen until the end of the program. We have the same taste in listening to news programs. But if we want to listen to music, he will ask me to choose any channel I prefer. I will turn the button. Sometimes he is listening to music but I want to listen to another song, so I will change the station immediately, and not ask him, which shows poor etiquette. And he doesn’t say anything” (Sarakornborrirak, 2011 p.317).

Nevertheless, when they were interviewed, drivers who were addicted to news programs had to listen to their favorite programs every morning; they would not let their spouses or children change the radio station. Interestingly, there were then compromises to let their spouses and children select program choices in the evening or after the end of the program.

Weerachai (Male, age 37): “I choose (the radio program). We listen to the news program, 91 MHz together every morning as a routine. I don’t want to listen to other stations ... My wife and my children sometimes ask to change the station but they know that they can ask at the end of the program” (Sarakornborrirak, 2011 p.318).

Chongchana (Male, age 41): “Every morning, I am the one who selects the station.

They all know that I listen to news programs. My wife will not change the station in the morning but in the evening I will let her change stations. She gets tired from work. She wants to listen to music” (Sarakornborrirak, 2011 p.318).

This implies that though the power to control over media choices in cars is usually with drivers, there are concessions for family members.

When commuting with children, most drivers (37.5%) indulged their children and let them select radio program choices; especially male drivers, who seemed to indulge their children, more than female drivers, as is shown in Table 3.

**Table 3**  
**Respondents and the percentage of control over car radio program choices**  
**when commuting with children, by gender**

Control over a car radio when commuting with children	Male		Female		Total	
	Respondents	Percentage	Respondents	Percentage	Respondents	Percentage
You (Driver)	8	18.6	20	37.7	28	29.2
Companion	20	46.5	16	30.2	36	37.5
Both	7	16.3	8	15.1	15	15.6
Depends on the situation	8	18.6	9	17.0	17	17.7
Total	43	100.0	53	100.0	96	100.0

Source: Sarakornborrirak (2011, p. 215)

The power of control over a car radio choice does not shift from drivers to children, but the driver themselves let the children do what they want, in order to drive peacefully in their cars.

Pradit (Male, age 74): “My nephew likes to turn buttons. He doesn’t want to change radio stations, but he wants to know the functions of each button. It makes me lose concentration while driving because I have to look at what he has done. Anyway, I have just moved him to sit in the back so he can eat snacks or sleep” (Sarakornborrirak, 2011 p.327).

Pornsuree (Female, age 40): “If I am with my nephew, I will allow him to do anything he wants, otherwise he will cry” (Sarakornborrirak, 2011 p.327).

Tik (Female, age 39): “If children come with me, my listening behaviors will change.

Children are naughty, and they want to do something all the time. If I want them to be quiet, I have to let them do what they want. Once I had a child come with me, and he sprayed sugar all around my car” (Sarakornborrirak, 2011 p.328).

Not only did drivers want to have peace while driving but they also indulged children to strengthen relationships. One of respondents said that she chose the children’s radio program for her children in order to listen together, leading to a dialogue about the program.

Paranee (Female, age 37): “I listen to kid’s programs because of my children. When I drive them to their school, there is a program by Aunt Nid and Mr. Preeda Punyachan. The children really love the program. They like listening to kid’s stories and there is only one channel that has children’s programs ... I talk with my children about the program, especially when the program has just begun. Sometimes they tell a story that is too short. I was so surprised. My children felt surprised too. They should be longer. We looked at each other and commented about the program together” (Sarakornborrirak, 2011 p.274-275).

**Listening to car radios with non-family members**

When the companion is a boyfriend, female drivers control the car radio choices. In contrast, male drivers seem to indulge their lovers more than female drivers, as can be seen in Table 4.

**Table 4**  
**Respondents and the percentage of control over car radio program choices**  
**when commuting with a girl/boyfriend, by gender**

Control over a car radio when commuting with a girl/boyfriend	Male		Female		Total	
	Respondents	Percentage	Respondents	Percentage	Respondents	Percentage
You (Driver)	13	31.0	19	52.8	32	41.0
Companion	10	23.8	3	8.3	13	16.7
Both	14	33.3	8	22.2	22	28.2
Depends on the situation	5	11.9	6	16.7	11	14.1
Total	42	100.0	36	100.0	78	100.0

Source: Sarakornborrirak (2011, p. 216)

The results from interviews also show that male drivers indulge their girlfriends and let them preset radio stations, change stations, and turn off or turn down the volume of their car radios.

Nirut (Male, age 30): “I preset 5 radio stations and my girlfriend, Miss G, presets 7 stations. If Miss G comes with me, she will choose her favorite program. Anyway, I can ask if I really want to listen to any program. I think that a girlfriend affects my listening behaviors. Normally, I listen to news programs while my girlfriend always listens to music programs” (Sarakornborrirak, 2011 p.322).

Miss G (Female, age 26 -Nirut’s girlfriend): “Normally, I control the car radio but if he wants to listen to any program I will let him listen to it. If we talk seriously, or one of us has a call, I will turn down the volume. If I come across my favorite song or an interesting story, I will turn the volume up” (Sarakornborrirak, 2011 p.322).

Nawachai (Male, age 26): “I always control the car radio except when I go with my girlfriend. She sometimes tells me to change the radio stations to music stations. Then, I say OK! If a friend tells me this, I will tell them “just a moment.” But if my girlfriend says this, I change the station immediately” (Sarakornborrirak, 2011 p.322).

Pongsathon (Male, age 21): “We love to listen to FAT radio. We have the same taste. Sometimes she turns down the volume but she has never changed the station” (Sarakornborrirak, 2011 p.322).

When traveling with friends and colleagues, most drivers, either male or female, control the car radio choices. One respondent, Chakarin, showed that a sense of car ownership played an important role in controlling the radio choices in a car.

Chakarin (Male, age 32): “I choose because I am the driver. They (friends) will not interfere with my radio. What I want to listen to ... they have to listen to it with me” (Sarakornborrirak, 2011 p.323).

The degree of intimacy also affects car radio listening behaviors. If the relationship is not close, the driver will control the car radio choices. If drivers are with their close friends, their close friends may negotiate for their preferences.

Suchitra (Female, age 38): “No one interferes with my car radio. I don’t have intimate friendships with my colleagues so they have no influence on my listening behaviors. Anyway, I usually turn off the radio when I have companions” (Sarakornborrirak, 2011 p.324).

Tisaporn (Female, age 20): “One of my friends doesn’t like K-Pop. If I listen to K-

Pop, she will change the station. Nat (Tisaporn's close friend) sometimes changes the station. I usually listen to 95.5 MHz or 102.5 MHz but she likes Chill 89 MHz. She likes easy listening music" (Sarakornborrirak, 2011 p.323).

Hierarchical relationships like superior-subordinate relationships affect radio listening behaviors in cars. When they were interviewed, some female respondents said that if they had a chance to drive for their bosses, they usually turned off the radio or tried to select the programs which suited their bosses. They also said that they would turn back to their favorite stations when their bosses got out of the car.

Kanokorn (Female, age 25, who drove a company's car for her boss): "It's just a short period when I had to be a driver for my boss, around 2 months. I was not happy at all. It isn't like driving with my friends. My listening behavior changed a lot. When I drove down to the building to pick my boss up, I listened to my favorite station, 106.5 MHz, and sang loudly. When he got in the car, I turned off the radio. After we reached the destination and the boss got out, I would turn on the radio again and waited inside the car, listening to the radio. When he got back in, I turned off the radio again. Sometimes my boss had CDs with him, so I had to play those for him. Normally, he doesn't listen to the radio" (Sarakornborrirak, 2011 p.325).

Kanokorn lost her power in controlling the use of her radio in the car not only because of the hierarchical relationship but also because of the sense of car ownership. As she drove the company's car, she had a sense of no power to control radio choices. However, Nun, who drove her own car, felt that she did not lose her power when driving with her boss.

Nun (Female, age 41): "If my boss or my elder colleagues come with me, I will not listen to modern music radio programs. I will choose old music CDs for their generation. But when they get out, I will turn the radio to my GET radio 102.5 MHz immediately. In fact, they don't request old songs but I think that it's good etiquette. .... Nobody has told me to change the radio stations but I know the nature of each companion. I think that it is good manners to select music that companions can listen together to. They never interfere with my car radio but I know, for example, that my boss doesn't like Thai country music. If I get in the car and turn the radio to Thai country music, I know that she will suddenly interfere with my radio. I can listen to many styles of music. So when she gets in, and hears old music, she will be happy and not ask me to change stations. But when she gets off, I will suddenly turn the radio to my favorite program" (Sarakornborrirak, 2011 p.325).

Female drivers pay a lot attention to "etiquette in listening to the car radio." They said that when they had companions, drivers should turn off or turn down the radio, especially when there is a person who uses a mobile phone in a car. Also, they stated that drivers should select a radio station which companions can listen to together.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

Driving alone allows drivers to indulge themselves and choose radio programs that they like. When driving with companions, normally, drivers have power to control the use of the radio in cars. However, if drivers do not own the cars, they will lose or face a lessening of their power in choosing the radio programs.

The degree of intimacy between drivers and companions also plays an important role in controlling radio choices. If they are close, companions sometimes control the use of the radio in cars.

Though it seems that the power in controlling a car radio is normally with the drivers, drivers will decide to yield to others in order to maintain the relationship between them and their companions. For example, Nirut and Nawachai indulged their girlfriends and let them control the radio in their cars, while Nun selected old music for her boss and Pornsuree and Tik let the children control the car radios in order to have peace while driving.

In summary, drivers have power in controlling their radio choices in cars because of a sense of car ownership. They will exercise their power through controlling the radio choices in their cars. They sometimes let their companions control the radio if their relationships are very intimate. Additionally, sometimes drivers indulge their companions to strengthen the relationship, especially when commuting with a child, a girlfriend, and their boss.

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