**1. Research Question**

How do radio co-DJs interact with each other and the music to construct a playlist live on air?

**2. Method**

To answer my research question, I utilized participant observation. I observed two DJs (Esmail Hamidi and Nick Stropko) for one hour during their joint radio show, “Toilet Radio,” on WKDU 91.7 FM. The observation took place in WKDU’s station in the basement of Drexel University’s Creese Student Center. I took notes on a laptop while sitting in the main control room with the DJs. My observations focused on the dialogue between the two DJs. I am also a DJ at the station, though less experienced, which affected my participation.

**3. Findings**

“Toilet Radio” is a term coined by Esmail. In his words, it is a radio format which is “so bad it’s good” and which “does not focus on the popular. It focuses on the things that were inevitably created in the mad cultural rush to make something cool, and discarded when someone powerful arbitrarily . . . thought that it wasn't.” The show aimed to create a live broadcast in this spirit. Despite its namesake’s subversive connotations, many of the DJs’ strategies align with standards for quality radio.

Through my observation, I found that the playlist was created based on a hierarchy of unspoken priorities and confirmed through specific types of communication, namely enthusiastic expletives and humorous quips. The playlist was generally planned out verbally a few songs ahead with the following goals in mind: (1) loyalty to the “so bad it’s good” format; (2) enjoyment of the music by the DJs; (3) mutual respect and equality between the DJs; and (4) adherence to station policies.

The music was where the “so bad it’s good” influence was most prevalent. During the show, Esmail pulled a random record from the WKDU library and cued it up. The response from both DJs was immediate and unanimously negative. Nick denounced it as an “off-cut from the Breakfast Club soundtrack or something”: too easily recognized as “cool,” and therefore not fit for the playlist.

Following typical “good” radio criteria, emphasis was placed on “smooth” transitions, which have two parts: (1) choosing the next song so that it is similar in feeling, tempo, and general style to the current and (2) carefully timing the switch to avoid either cutting off a song or “dead air” in between. During the show, the genre was guided carefully from garage rock to early electronic music and back with no sudden shifts. During the two instances that dead air did occur, one of the DJs (Esmail, then Nick) swore off-air repeatedly until it ended. After one exceptional transition, Nick said, “That was really good. Fuck.”

The DJs also made their enjoyment of the music a high priority. On multiple occasions, one of the DJs stopped mid-sentence to turn up the speakers or express their appreciation of the current song. When they weren’t busy planning or cueing up songs, they leaned against the wall behind the broadcast console to enjoy the music. If they weren’t going to enjoy listening to a song, it wouldn’t make the playlist.

Equality and respect were also priorities. The DJs functioned as a unit with constant two-way communication. They mostly alternated who would choose the next song and always confirmed it with the other DJ. Late in the show, Nick said that he felt like Esmail had not liked a song he chose earlier, though Esmail had not verbally objected. This was an indication of their familiarity with each other’s tastes. Esmail replied, “That’s just not what I want for Toilet Radio,” which Nick acknowledged.

To a lesser extent, station policies influenced playlist choices. Based on FCC requirements, the program included station identifications, a public service announcement, and an approved promotion. One WKDU-specific policy discourages playing music that can be heard on other stations. This generally steers DJs away from songs that made top-40 lists and bands that are widely known. The DJs discussed playing a cover of an Alice Cooper song. They decided to play it after a short debate on its popularity.

Though playlist choices were usually made in a matter of moments based on the instinctual choices of fairly experienced DJs, my observations led me to believe that there were clear, underlying reasons for the selections. These reasons came from the show’s “Toilet Radio” format and dual-DJ direction.