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THE CRITICAL DISTINCTIONS BETWEEN PUBLIC AND COMMERCIAL RADIO: THE AUDIENCE'S POINT OF VIEW

by David Giovannoni

One way to evaluate the various alternatives for expanding public radio services to the American public is to consider the listeners' perceptions of, uses for, and satisfaction with these services. This paper is an effort to do just that by examining the critical distinctions between public and commercial radio from the audience's point of view. Some implications for NPR's policies on expansion are posed at the conclusion of the paper.

First, four basic facts about radio in America:

1. People still listen to the radio. Of all people twelve years and older, more than 95% of them listen to the radio sometime each week. The average person spends almost three hours per day listening to the radio.¹
2. The free-marketplace is strongly evident in radio. People listen to the station(s) that give them what they want, expect, or like the most. Stations without listeners are analogous to businesses without customers — they do not stay in business very long.
3. Virtually all radio listeners tune in to at least one commercial station each week.

¹ All audience estimates are based on Arbitron reports for April/May 1979, unless otherwise noted. National listening estimates are from *Today's Radio Audience*, Arbitron, 1979.

4. Fewer than one in twenty persons listens to any public radio station at all in the average week.

As broadcasters, we can easily see the many distinctions between public and commercial radio. As public broadcasters, we do things differently than our commercial counterparts. We don't sell time. We play better music. We are intelligent, sophisticated, and personable. We talk to people, not at them. And so on.

But if we do things "better," why do so many of us find ourselves talking to so few people? Why do we not reach more deeply into the audiences we intend to serve? More than 90% of all public radio stations are heard each week by less than 5% of their potential audience. Are we then succeeding in our declared principle to "strive to make (our) services available to all?"²

Commercial radio services are available to virtually everyone in this country and virtually everyone listens. Public stations have a potential reach of about 2/3 of the total population (roughly 120 million persons 12 and older). Yet fewer than five million listen each week. Even allowing for our incomplete geographic coverage, only 4% of the people who can listen to public radio do listen to public radio each week.

² From the Declaration of Principles, adopted by the NPR Board on March 20, 1980.

The uncomfortable fact is that most public radio stations do not serve significant portions of their communities. This is true even though we support a goal of making our services available “through the most efficient, equitable and appropriate means.”³ But radio stations with small audiences are not inherently “efficient” or “appropriate.”

It is easy to rationalize small audiences. “We are an alternative to commercial radio. We are proponents of the highest quality. People seek out these programs and listen to them loyally.”

Does the audience indeed perceive public radio as an alternative service? Do we provide service of the highest quality? Are our listeners really that loyal? Apparently not.

Public radio users do listen to the radio longer each week than non-public radio users. However, not only do they listen longer, but as a group they listen to more radio stations. Public radio listeners typically spend less than one radio listening hour out of every four or five tuned to a public radio station. In general, public radio attracts a listener who is much more “radio-active” than the non-public radio user; who is more likely to be a “radio junkie” than a highly selective connoisseur of the medium; and, as measured by the amount of listening done to other stations, is exceedingly “disloyal.”

Public radio is heavily subsidized because it offers programming alternatives, i.e., formats that are not commercially available or viable in the local stations’ markets. But to the radio listener, public radio is an “alternative” only insofar as any station available to the listener satisfied his or her particular inter-

ests. Indeed, to the audience, the difference in concept between public and commercial radio has little meaning. Why? Because when people decide to listen to the radio, they do indeed decide to listen to the radio. They do not decide to turn on a “public radio” or a “commercial radio.” Once the radio is on, people listen to the kind of programming they expect, want, or like the most (or dislike the least). Whether this is on a commercial or noncommercial station does not matter. The decision to listen to a station is based upon the station’s “sound” — not its tax status.

It doesn’t take research to discover that most people listen to only one radio station at any given time. When a person is listening to a commercial station, he/she is not listening to a public station. Therefore, public radio and commercial radio are in direct competition with each other for the listener’s ear. If enough people do not listen to a commercial radio station often enough, it goes broke. Similarly, if a public station continues to serve consistently a mere smattering of its community, it becomes more difficult to justify subsidy. One way or the other — public or commercial — service to not enough people leads to similar results.

But don’t commercial stations program for the masses? And aren’t there also many more of them? If there were more of us, if we carried the same content they do, wouldn’t we have a massive audience too? Probably not.

Even if we went heavily into beautiful music, country, or rock, would most of us know how to attract and serve our listeners as well as the successful commercial stations? Today —this very minute — given the choice between relatively equivalent offerings on a commercial and a public station, more peo-

³ Ibid.

ple will listen to the commercial station. And they will listen longer. Commercial stations do consistently better in attracting (serving) audience than public stations in almost every market, in almost every case where this comparison can be made. It appears that in direct competition for the listener's ear, public radio loses.

Certainly all things are not equal, but most things are unequal in our favor. Most stations have as strong and clean a signal in their Metro Survey Area (MSA) as most commercial stations, and in many cases stronger and cleaner. Public stations do not have commercials, yet given the choice between relatively equivalent offerings, more people choose the commercials.

Why do people not listen to public radio when given the choice? Although we do not reject that public radio has an "image," we do reject the notion that this image neither attracts nor repels listeners. It is probably accurate to assume people tune across a public station once in a while in their search for program content, why do we so often lose to commercial stations? One answer may be we don't sound as good as they do.

What is it about public radio's sound that does not attract or keep listeners? Two major possibilities come to mind: as a collective body of stations public radio often presents its program content which is inconsistent with the quality of the content of the programs and on a program by program basis rather than a highly formatted basis.

Consistency of Presentation

As far back as 1907, such people as John Philip Sousa were predicting that the phonograph would have a profound negative effect

on music making in the home and at the local level. The reason why, he prophesied, was because Americans would be jaded by ever-increasing levels of professional performances heard on the readily available discs and cylinders.

Sousa was correct. Now, more than seventy years later, we live in a society where virtually everyone has grown up with the best performances. Records, films, radio, television — no matter how trivial the content, we expect high quality, professional production.

It's 1980. As fiduciaries of two major public resources (airwaves and tax dollars) we need to check regularly whether our quality of presentation is consistently as high as what we present. The data show more people find it easier to listen through commercials in order to hear the composer/performer credit pronounced properly than to sit through no commercials and hear the announcer stammer through "foreign" sounding names.

Clearly, radio listeners will judge us by our on-air sound, not by our philosophies about broadcasting. Thus, we must sound as if we care about our audiences, and understand our offerings. We will then be able to claim that we are indeed, across all dimensions, "something better."

Public Radio's Programming Techniques

Back in the days of radio's "Golden Age" (around 1938) radio was programmed on a program by program basis. It was listened to that way. People had relatively few entertainment sources from which to choose, listened primarily to network programs, and built up program listening habits.

However, the introduction and saturation of television into the American home replaced radio's role as the primary electronic home entertainment medium. The people who predicted radio's demise probably would have been close to correct had not radio programming been modified to adapt to its new situation. Economic dependence on advertising dictated the change from generalized content and its associated heterogeneous audience to more specific and narrow content targeted at a smaller, yet more homogeneous audiences.

This type of adaptation was not unprecedented — the print media had gone this way before. But whereby print could be more readily moved into income, occupational and other specific interest types of segmentation, radio (due to the inherent nature of its distribution) had a more difficult time of it. The age of modern radio programming began in the mid-fifties with the emergence of a new type of music — rock and roll. Television's erosion of radio's economic base convinced programmers that old-line block programming was passé. Rock and Roll provided the content (and economic incentive) for the new form of "Top 40," or "formula" radio. It is debatable whether this was indeed the earliest, but it was certainly the most persuasive occurrence of format radio.

One does not have to acknowledge that rock 'n' roll helped save radio from extinction. That thought is distasteful to some. But acknowledged or not, the fact remains that the best time to stick a radio program into your schedule was 1938. Because today, with very few exceptions, people listen to radio stations, to radio formats, and not to radio programs. That's a fact of inter-media-usage life.

If a station offers more than three major types of formats; if it must promote programs which air on the "first and third Tuesday evenings of each month at eight-fifteen;" if one needs a program schedule to know what to expect to hear; in short, if a station is offering "programs" instead of formats —then the station is not programming in the way which serves the listener.

Sam Holt's motto is "Programs are our product" — in the broadest sense, that's quite accurate. Programs as content are essential to radio. But if programs are our content, then programming must be our form. If quality of substance and execution are what most people in public broadcasting believe public radio is about, then the system must devote resources to developing programming skills as well as to producing programs.

This short paper cannot even begin to present all of the fundamental facts about how people use radio. What we know is voluminous, and we are adding to that knowledge constantly. But this paper can point out some of the major ramifications of its conclusions which should be considered during the exploration of alternatives for expanding public radio services to the American public.

Two very broad problems have been identified in this paper through an examination of public radio from the audience's point of view. To begin solving these problems we must adopt measures designed to:

- Upgrade overall on-air "sound" of NPR member stations.
- Increase local awareness of potential radio audience and actual usage.

In each of the above cases, what we are most broadly implying is the tremendous need to increase substantially the quality of program presentation. How do we plan ahead for a system which will encourage such changes?

A four-part process is suggested in an effort to explore a range of possibilities:

- We should think in terms of establishing quality of service (including program and programming) goals. Towards this end we could establish guidelines for acceptance of minimum levels of on-air sound, and professionalism of presentation. While the evaluation of on-air sound is somewhat subjective, the forces at work facilitating it are quite real and lend themselves quite well to objectification. Also objective guidelines for effective programming techniques which best serve the modern radio user could be established.
- Stations' personnel should be assisted, through workshops, seminars, and other educational activities, in establishing goals for raising their general level of programming and performance skills.
- Consideration should be given to establishing some type of evaluation process, one which would insure attainment of the minimum levels of quality of service adopted by the system. There are a number of models from other fields for such a peer evaluation process.
- NPR should provide stations with more relevant audience research support than is currently offered. In addition to audience data and workshops, provided by CPB, stations in many areas need more comprehensive data. The data provided

from the Public Radio Audience Profile Computer Analysis Package will be an example. Further, station managers need assistance in determining when local data assessment is necessary, and the best means for collecting and interpreting the data.

The extension of services to underserved audiences requires more market research into the needs and interest of the community. Often needs and interest will be found which are not being met — certainly fertile ground for many of the public radio's offerings. However, over-the-air broadcast of these materials should be considered only as one option for their distribution.

Given the impending changes in home communication technologies and their potential effects on current media usage, it is quite possible that we will be redefining the method for meeting our missions to serve better the people in the 1980s and beyond. Even given today's environment there are broad, basic changes which might lead to improvement of the entire system.

Perhaps we should not limit ourselves to being simply **National Public Radio**, but instead, realizing and accepting the current and impending realities which make other modes of distribution more effective for some programming we might expand our scope to become National Public **Audio**.

Whether or not we change the name, we would do well to think of ourselves (and re-define our goals accordingly) as the foremost audio service providing program material designed to serve the public and to distribute this material.