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by David Giovannoni

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FORMAT FOCUSING: STATIONS PLAN TO DO MORE WITH LESS

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Our central strategy is one of multiple services, delivered through multiple stations.

— *The Report of the Public Radio Expansion Task Force*

The public radio station of 1995 will typically offer fewer formats than it does today. The formats it retains, however, will constitute a larger portion of its weekly program schedule.

This consolidation of programming is called *format focusing*, and it is a central finding of a study—highlighted on the bottom of page 2—that is now reaching the desks of public radio broadcasters. The study asked stations to predict their program schedules for 1995. Stations see themselves doing fewer formats and doing them longer in the future. In general they expect to move away from mixed or eclectic program schedules toward more consistent and focused formats.

Here we explore this predicted trend. We ask how it affects programmatic diversity in public radio, and what this bodes for the future of audience service.

Programmatic Shifts

Fewer stations expect to offer classical, jazz, folk, rock, and other music in the future. However, the stations then offering these formats will be committing more time to each, as shown in the graph on page 3. Today a significant number of stations are already *Classical Dominant*. The study shows how a “critical mass” of *Jazz Dominant* stations is expected to co-

alesce within the next few years, due in great part to a number of stations focusing on the format at the expense of others.

As stations devote more time to their central formats, fewer hours remain for formats on the fringe. Stations predict that formats that fall into this study’s “other” category — typically out-of-format “specialty” programs — will be the first to be displaced. The Saturday morning kid’s show, the Saturday afternoon ball game, the Sunday morning church service, the Sunday night drama... Most stations anticipate a declining role for these programs in their schedules.

Some of these programs may be difficult to displace, having (as they might) long histories or institutional backing. Indeed, programmers and station managers may have indulged in some wishful thinking, hopefully moving some of their sacred cows to other pastures: the volunteer who’s been doing the same show for 25 years; the irascible host who won’t retire; the university-mandated lectures; and so forth.

Whether they’ll be able to pull off these feats remains to be seen. However, the mindset at stations is clear: focus on the programming done best.

The only formats that more stations expect to be doing more of in the future are news/events,

public affairs, and call-in. Among a group of stations the study finds will be *Information Dominant*, the collective commitment of air time devoted to these formats is expected to increase by 30 percent. They expect most of this additional programming to come from the satellite.

Information Dominant does not mean all-news-and-talk all-of-the-time. Most of these stations will air music as well. However, it does mean that these public stations expect to offer significantly more information programming than others. Many of the *Information Dominant* stations of the future are not *Information Dominant* today. Some are stations expecting to become interconnected and “join the system” within the next few years; other are stations already “in the system” that expect to extend their information programming.

How About Diversity?

If stations are doing fewer types of programming, then doesn't the listener lose programmatic diversity? Not at all.

Programmatic diversity isn't declining, it's simply shifting — from one station striving to be several things to several types of listeners, to several public stations in a community each serving its own type of listener. The consis-

tency within formats serves more listeners and serves them better; the diversity among formats (stations) reaches a broader spectrum of the community.

In this way, public radio is maintaining programmatic diversity. In fact, to the extent that more people are better served by the diverse formats of multiple stations, programmatic diversity — and indeed, audience diversity — are on the rise.

This is what the Public Radio Expansion Task Force meant by its “central strategy... of multiple services, delivered through multiple stations.” The Programming Strategies study is the first hard programming data gathered in response to the Task Force's unanswered questions.

Where most listeners live, programmatic diversity will be accomplished less within any single station's schedule, and more among the schedules of multiple public radio services. Most Americans are served by at least two CSG-supported stations. One-quarter of all Americans can hear three or more. Add to this public radio's expansion stations — for every five listeners now served by “the system” they serve a sixth. Multiple public radio services are no longer the exception. They are the rule. They not only make possible but enhance public radio's continuing programmatic diversity.

PUBLIC RADIO PROGRAMMING STRATEGIES: A Report On The Programming Stations Broadcast And The People They Seek To Serve. Now arriving on the desks of station managers and program producers, this new study from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting explores the programming and audience goals of the more than 700 public radio stations that provide non-religious public service-oriented programming.

Three-quarters of all public radio stations participated by answering detailed questions about their current programming and audience traits; they also shared their best thinking about their future programming and audience traits. The finding that stations are focusing their formats is based on what they expect to be airing in 1995.

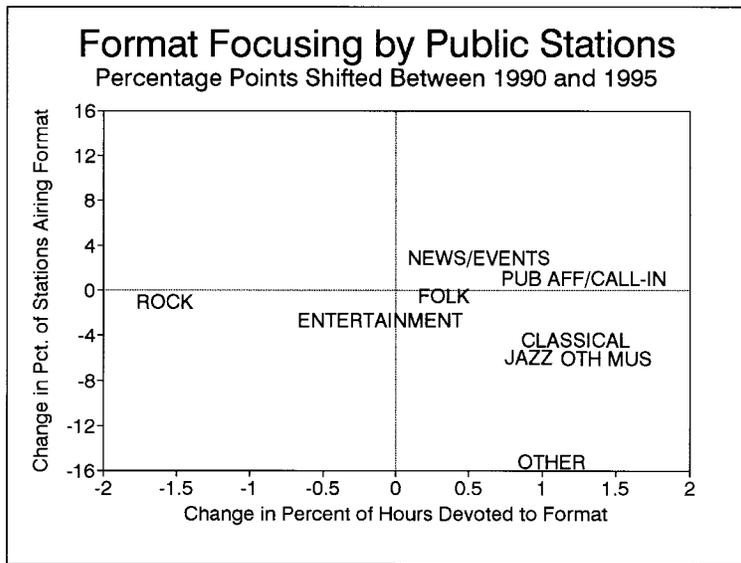
The graph summarizes the general directions that all stations participating in this study see themselves moving in the next few years. Formats below the horizontal line will be available on a smaller proportion of stations in 1995; formats above the line will be available on a larger share of stations. Formats to the right of the vertical line will be available for more hours per station; formats to the left will be available for fewer hours.

Public radio will offer more information programming in 1995 than today. Not only will more stations offer news/events and public affairs/call-in programming, but on average each expects to commit more time to the formats than today.

Rock and entertainment programming will be done by fewer stations. Stations that program these formats will, on average, expect to devote fewer hours to them in 1995.

Folk, classical, jazz, and other music formats will have homes on a smaller percentage of stations in the future. However, the stations that do carry them will be carrying them longer, as the formats become more central to the stations' focus.

"Other" programming includes arts/cultural magazines, children's, drama, instructional, literature, reading, religious, sports, and all targeted programming. It too will be carried a little longer per station on average, but by 1995, one-in-six stations expects to have replaced this programming with other formats.



History Continues

The practice of format focusing is nothing new to public radio. Stations have been consolidating their programming for years. A public radio station today typically serves many more listeners with fewer formats than it did fifteen years ago. This study finds a widespread inclination among stations to extend this historic and powerful trend.

The two previous *Radio Intelligence* columns took a long view back at the sources of public radio's audience growth. In the terms used in previous columns, format focusing brings with it a strong dose of accessibility. It serves more listeners longer by offering more consistent, reliable programming. Multiple services, by definition, increase availability.

Nothing about the future is certain, of course; but least uncertain is this: multiple services, delivered through multiple stations, will play a key role in the continued development of public radio's national audience service. The more choices the public has among programming streams and stations, the better it will be served by public radio's flourishing programmatic diversity.

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