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## How Public Radio Gained Two Million Listeners

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# HOW RADIO GAINED TWO MILLION LISTENERS

New tune-in strategies doubled audiences of *Earplay* and classical music in a year, says analyst for NPR. *Sunday Show* is next test of good programming.

by David Giovannoni

By now, we have all heard about the intruder which has invaded the sanctuary of public radio. Discouraged from tuning in for so long, a significant number of people are now listening to public radio — 7 million per week at last count, and growing fast.

We have been attacked by an audience. And we brought this attack upon ourselves by paying attention to programming.

Until 1980, public radio's audience growth had barely outpaced inflation and the price of gasoline. From 1974 until 1980, its audience increased at a fairly steady rate averaging 14% per year. But most of that increase was attributable to the expansion of the system, upgrading of facilities, the improvement of a few stations in the larger markets, and population growth.

However, an amazing thing happened during the 12-month period between Spring 1980 and Spring 1981: The system's weekly cume audience increased by 2 million listeners. In Spring 1981, Arbitron estimated a weekly national audience of 7.1 million listeners — up 37% from Spring 1980's 5.1 million. Simmons Market Research Bureau data confirm the extent of the increase.

In addition, public radio was being listened to by an average of more than one-third of a million people during the average quarter-hour, compared to only a quarter of a million the previous spring. That increase in cume

and average quarter-hour audiences marked the first time dramatic audience growth was attributable primarily to good programming.

## Did hype do it?

Could the increase have been caused by all the publicity surrounding public radio in the Spring of 1981? Probably not. Certainly, *some* of these new listeners were attracted by publicity accompanying *Star Wars*, the Jonestown special, *All Things Considered's* 10th anniversary, and, perhaps, Mr. Reagan's recession show.

But listeners attracted by hype usually don't listen very long. They listen for a while, then tune out. Yet the data show that was not the case in Spring 1981. While some people listened **only** to *Star Wars* or **only** to Jonestown, the new listeners who did return to public radio stayed just as long or longer than the old listeners!

For example, more than 600,000 people over the age of 11 listened to *Star Wars* each week. About one in five listened *only* to *Star Wars*, but the remaining 81% of the *Star Wars* audience typically listened to their public radio station an additional 5½ hours more during the week. ("Typically" is meant as the median time spent listening, not the mean or average.) Six hours is twice as long as the "typical" public radio audience listens (about three hours per week).

The *Star Wars* audience listened longer to public radio than other listeners due to the concentrated efforts to do good programming around the show.

What is this “good programming” I keep mentioning? Radio “programming” does not mean radio programs. While public radio’s *programs* have been winning awards for years, public radio’s *programming* of them has not. Programming is the form in which programs and other elements are presented. Good programming consists of related strategies designed to maximize audience tune-in and to minimize tune-out.

Again *Star Wars* provides a good example. One of the reasons each episode was 29 minutes long instead of an hour was because of our knowledge of how people used *Earplay*. Virtually no one was listening to *Earplay*’s entire 60-minute presentation. It was just too long for an audience to hang on.

So *Earplay* itself was repackaged into half-hour presentations in the Spring of 1981, and along with *Star Wars* and *Hitchhikers’ Guide to the Galaxy*, was “stripped” (aired at the same time each day) in the *NPR Playhouse* series. This repackaging alone increased *Earplay*’s weekly audience from 85,000 weekly listeners in 1980 to 200,000 weekly listeners in 1981.

**That’s good programming.**

### **Smoothing the Seams**

There are many other examples of programming experimentation. The transition between programs is known as a “seam.” When ignored by programmers, awkward and disorienting seams interrupt program flow and

induce audience tune-out. Prompted by this realization, programmers are now consciously *smoothing the seams*, intending to lead the audience through to the next program element.

Maintaining audience flow through the smoothing of seams is as much of an art as a science; in addition to requiring careful design and placement of on-air promos and other elements, smooth transitions rely heavily on the awareness and skill of the on-air announcer.

Programmers also are decreasing the number of seams altogether, by “blocking” program elements into a larger format. This is known as *formatting* or *block programming*.

To illustrate: Professional radio journalists have known for years that very few people remember, desire or listen to more than a few minutes of investigation into all but the most important issues. In late 1979, *Morning Edition* was made available, and allowed programmers to retain their commitment to local issues while ridding themselves of ineffective long-form programs.

*Morning Edition* provided a regular format, blocked and stripped to help build regular listening patterns. Local programmers were able for the first time to effectively distill the essence of important local stories into reports three to five minutes long. When dropped in to *Morning Edition*, the information in these reports was heard by 10 to 20 times the number of people who would have heard it in public radio’s traditional “long-form” hour-long, roundtable public affairs programs.

### **More Time and Audience for Music**

Since the placement of local news and issues

within *Morning Edition* has decreased the amount of local long-form public affairs programming, more time is available for public radio's most listened-to commodity — music. In Spring of 1981, 5.7 million people per week listened to music on NPR-member stations. Three quarters of these music listeners (4.4 million) listened to classical music programming — up 27% from the previous year. Jazz, the second most prevalent music on public radio, was heard by 1.5 million people per week, up 41% over the year before.

Yet while there has been some increase in the number of hours devoted to classical and jazz music, the overwhelming reasons for their larger audience is based on the better *scheduling* of music blocks. For example, stations which formerly aired concert and recital programs as discrete programs now are stripping them five afternoons or evenings per week — and more frequently within the context of larger classical music blocks. As a result of this practice, NPR-distributed classical music programs were heard by 1.1 million persons per week in 1981 — *more than double* the 500,000 weekly listeners of the previous year.

While the results of better programming practices were first seen in the dramatic audience increase of 1981, the concern for better programming was first voiced in the mid-1970s by a small group of “audience researchers.”

### **Nobody was listening!**

Initially viewed with skepticism because of their ideas and treated with contempt for their numerical, “commercial” methods, the irreverent and disreputable-looking band pointed out to their fellow public broadcasters some disarming facts: Some public radio stations and many public radio programs had *no measurable audience*. Nobody was listening!

With a few relatively simple programming changes, those researchers argued, public radio could begin to serve a significant, perhaps sizable, portion of the public. But such techniques were tainted by their origin in commercial radio. Many public broadcasters felt the techniques were grossly inappropriate for them to use.

Proponents of new programming practices persisted. They asked how public radio could relate to the public if it doesn't recognize a responsibility to serve a significant portion of the public. Without a *listening* public, the system would never be able to rely on public support. Nobody tunes in because of a station's non-profit tax status, the programming proponents argued. They concluded that the only way to get people to tune in — and stay tuned — was by cleaning up the programming act.

Understandably skeptical at first, a few programmers began to experiment. Adapting effective “commercial” techniques, they soon realized their stations were not sounding more commercial at all. Indeed, they were sounding *better*. Listeners agreed. More programmers followed suit, some prompted by impending funding reductions, until “good programming” reached its critical mass in 1981.

### **Radical Action**

Some programmers are now trying even more radical strategies to better serve their audiences:

- There is some rumor that a few local programmers, no doubt members of an extremist faction, are consciously excising protracted segments of applause, concert hall ambiance, and even interviews from pre-produced concert programs. They say

the audience would rather enjoy the music than hear someone explain why they should enjoy it.

- Next week, NPR makes *The Sunday Show* available to stations for broadcast. Although its name implies that it is a program, *The Sunday Show* will be a virtually seamless five-hour format block. The service will maximize tune-in through the appeals of its host, his treatment of program elements, and the scheduling and internal promotion of series across weeks (such as Andres Segovia interviews and performances). It will minimize audience tune-out through carefully planned billboarding, tight editing, and a sensitivity to the mixture and flow of program elements.

### **Turnabout**

If *The Sunday Show* does not succeed it will be because of corporate underwriter disinterest. If it can survive financially for a full year, its audience success will change programming strategies of classical music programmers all

across America — commercial as well as non-commercial. At that point, our turnabout with commercial radio will be complete.

In the Spring of 1981, 3.8% of all Americans over the age of 11 listened to a public radio station an average of 6½ hours per week. Compilation of Fall 1981 Arbitron statistics by the Radio Research Consortium shows the new audience to be staying with public radio even longer per week (see box). It is not unreasonable to imagine that very soon, perhaps even sometime this year, one out of 20 Americans will be listening to better-programmed public radio weekly — perhaps one out of ten during each month.

Even by commercial standards, that would be a significant audience for a significant radio service.

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### Fall Ratings 'Confirm' 1981 Audience Jump

Latest Arbitron ratings show that public radio listening has continued to grow *since* the surprising one-year gain of two million listeners between Spring 1980 and Spring 1981, according to an analysis by researcher Tom Church.

Arbitron figures released last December showed a 37% gain in public radio's cumulative audience from Spring to Spring, with the cume topping 7 million last Spring.

Now, Church reports that the spring-to-spring gain has been confirmed by additional gains between Spring 1981 and Fall 1981. He says that 65 public radio stations, full members of his Radio Research Consortium, have shown a 12% increase in their listeners' average time-spent-listening (TSL) between Spring and Fall. Also, the average quarter-hour audience (6 a.m. to midnight) grew by 15%, and the weekly cume gained 3%.

**Nice:** "The increase is nice," Church said in his newsletter, "because it means a continued growth of public radio use beyond the reported Spring '81 level. And the pattern is encouraging: a large increase in cume (Spring '81), followed by a significant increase in TSL (Fall '81), and without any loss of cume."

Church explains that a gain in TSL by the average public radio listener can sometimes hurt cume, the total audience in a week. "As you begin to build cume, it's often because you offer different kinds of programming," he told *Current*. But then a station risks losing constant listeners who don't like the variety.

"If the national trend is the same as the stations analyzed (and RRC member stations account for approximately 70% of the total public radio audience), it means an increase in the average TSL from 6.6 hours to 7.4 hours weekly," Church reported.

Arbitron's Spring ratings are the average over a 12-week period in March through June, with listener samplings taken weekly. The Fall sweeps cover 12 weeks in September through December.