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The Personal Importance of Public Radio

by David Giovannoni
(26 pages)

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The Personal Importance of Public Radio

Prepared by:

David Giovannoni



CORPORATION
FOR PUBLIC
BROADCASTING

1111 Sixteenth Street N.W.
Washington, DC 20036
(202) 955-5100

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FOREWORD

We know a lot more about public radio's listeners than we think. Over the years a great deal of audience information has been gathered, but for one reason or another it hasn't made it to the front lines. As a professional generator and analyst of such data, I find that the lag time is far too long between intelligence gathering and intelligent application.

One person sharing this concern is **Ric Grefé**, Director of Policy Development & Planning at CPB. At the 1986 Public Radio Conference in San Diego, he suggested we embark on a three-fold approach to increase the level of radio intelligence among practitioners:

1. recycle existing knowledge in bite-size, accessible chunks;
2. get more mileage out of existing research by reexamining data already "in the can;"
3. synthesize knowledge — and strategies — public broadcasters could immediately apply.

These papers had to be widely distributed and widely read in order to accomplish their ends. After thinking about this, I proposed that we establish a regular radio research column in the *CURRENT*. Managing Editor **JJ Yore** enthusiastically embraced the idea, and *Radio Intelligence* made its debut in the January 13, 1987 issue.

PERSONAL IMPORTANCE began as a series of *Radio Intelligence* columns. JJ Yore edited my original drafts for the paper — a thankless but necessary task well done. I've done a little rewriting for this compilation; JJ deserves none of the blame for that.

My thanks go to **George Bailey**, President of Walrus Research, for his time and suggestions; to **Ted Coltman**, Senior Policy and Planning Analyst, CPB's Policy Development & Planning, for overseeing this project; and to my wife, **Katherine Sheram**, for overseeing me.

David Giovannoni

Silver Spring MD
January 1988

1.

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING IMPORTANT

*all ignorance toboggans into know
and trudges up to ignorance again
- ee cummings*

The Cheap-90

Ninety percent of the people who listen to public radio don't support it.

In 1985 the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) and Audience Research Analysis (ARA) teamed up with National Public Radio (NPR), The Development Exchange, and Arbitron Ratings to explore this “cheap” ninety percent of the audience. The study's report bears a title only a researcher could have invented and only an academic could love:

*Public Radio Listeners:
Supporters and Non-Supporters
An Examination of the Causes Influencing
the Decision of Public Radio Listeners
to Support or Not Support Public Radio*

Because of the title's sheer weight, the study was immediately nicknamed the “Cheap-90.” While not an easy read, it presents lots of useful information that bears revisiting.

The Cheap-90 demonstrates that public radio's supporters are quite a different group than its non-supporters. It shows *who* these listeners are, *how* they use public radio, *what* they listen to, and *why* they listen to it. It explores what they think of public radio, and why they do or do not support it.

Actionable Research

Why study the differences between supporters and

the rest of public radio's audience? Suppose the study finds (as it does) that a listener's perception of the “public” nature of public radio is linked to his or her willingness to give money. In other words, if listeners believe that their contributions support a station, they are much more likely to give money than if they think a university, the government, or tax dollars support it.

This is *actionable* research. Having identified one difference between supporters' and non-supporters' perceptions, public radio can take steps to change the perceptions of its non-supporting listeners. In this case, one strategy is for public radio to position itself as “listener-supported” every chance it gets — every ID, every time a record is announced, on every piece of correspondence — always. “You're tuned to *listener-supported* WXYZ” — not “WXYZ, a service of Quad-State University.”

A small thing, perhaps, but a *big* small thing resulting in more people realizing their role in public radio's existence. This translates into more people being more inclined to contribute when asked.

“Positioning” is the term marketers use when referring to the ability to influence what people think about a product or service — such as public radio. You might consider this a positioning strategy, or you may simply consider it a new twist to the old phrase “educational radio.” In either case, it's an honest way to convey to your listeners the important role they play in providing a service which many — but not enough — consider *important*.

The “Importance” of Public Radio

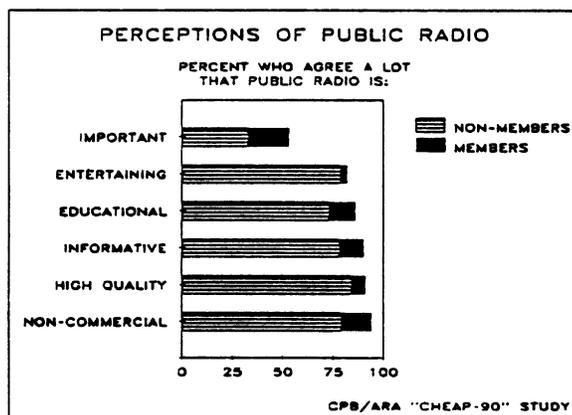
Important? A radio station *important* in somebody’s life? What does this mean, and if it does mean something, can it really be true?

The Cheap-90 study asked listeners to describe their public radio station. More than three-quarters agree a lot that public radio is “high quality,” “non-commercial,” “entertaining,” “informative,” “educational,” and “a station I can trust and rely on.” Yet fewer than half of all listeners consider public radio “important.”

Importance was measured by the question, “[Public station call letters] is important in my life.” The key here is “in my life.” This is *personal importance* — the station is important because it is *used*.

It’s like Burma Shave — not a life-sustaining product by any means, but a nice product to use if you wanted to use something like it. Some users probably considered it important in their lives simply because they used it; others probably didn’t.

In the aggregate, fewer than half of its listeners consider public radio personally important. However, there is a significant difference between supporters and non-supporters on this count. Only 34 percent of public radio’s non-supporters consider public radio important, compared with 54 percent of its supporters.



This is a tremendous opportunity for public radio. People who consider public radio to be important in their lives are much more likely to support it. As public radio becomes important to more people, it finds itself with more supporters.

There’s an altruistic motive for this, too. By becoming more important to more people, public radio better fulfills its mandate to serve in the public “interest, convenience, and necessity.” So it does well by doing good.

Back to Ignorance

The Cheap-90 study ascertains that personal importance is important, but it doesn’t explore *to whom* or *why* or *how* public radio is important; it doesn’t explain what else these people think about public radio, or whether importance is tied to the use of particular programs or formats.

By itself the “personal importance” finding is fascinating and consequential, but without more information it’s barely actionable. This is a classic case of the answer to one question creating a whole new batch of questions. After the intellectual toboggan rush, we once again find ourselves trudging back up to ignorance.

Fortunately, well-designed databases are like libraries. If after your first visit you realize there is something you forgot to look up, you can go back to the database library and check it out. This is what we’ve done with the Cheap-90 database and the importance questions.

2.

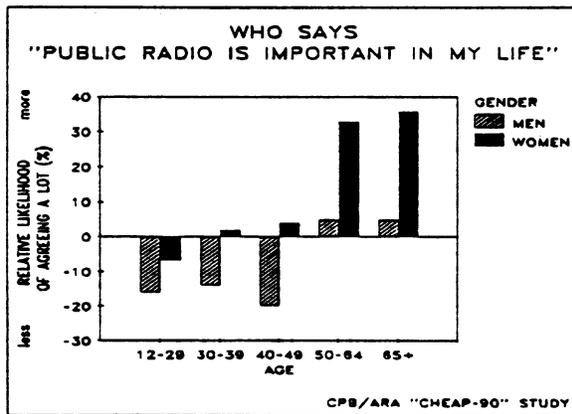
THE DEMOGRAPHICS OF PERSONAL IMPORTANCE

*A thing is important
if anyone **think** it important.*
- William James

Who Says Public Radio Is Important?

The first step in examining any set of listeners is to describe their basic demographic characteristics.

Women are more likely than men to say that public radio is important in their lives. The older a person of either gender is, the more likely they are to consider the medium important. Women over 50 years old are particularly likely to say that public radio is important to them. On the other side of the gender-age spectrum, men under 50 are particularly *unlikely* to hold this belief.



Some of this may reflect an “amicability bias” — that is, older women may be more likely to say what they think the interviewer wants them to say. But this amicability might also work in public radio’s favor: pledging is a response to appeals for support, and people who are eager to please aren’t

so bad to have around.

Don’t be misled by this information: for a variety of reasons discussed in the Cheap-90 report, men and younger people *do* support public radio. They are just less likely to consider the medium important in their lives. Think about the lifestyles of people you know in these different demographic groups and you may hit upon the reasons why.

Some Things Can’t Be Changed

Demographic information is useful because it suggests how public radio might tailor its appeals or programming to make itself more important to listeners. But unlike perceptions, demographics cannot be altered; public broadcasters can influence what listeners think about public radio, or how much they use it, but they can’t change a listener’s age or gender.

The Cheap-90 discovered that listener demographics are limited in another way. Age, gender, race, education, and income reveal less about a listener’s willingness to support public radio than does their level of public radio use.

In other words, personal importance is most closely associated with *how* (not necessarily *how much*) a person uses public radio. Since programming directly influences listeners’ use, public radio should be able to encourage the perception of importance by fine-tuning its programming.

WHY DO RESEARCH?

Textbooks teach that *the purpose of research is to reduce uncertainty*. I learned this when I was a teenager in high school, but not from a textbook.

There was this girl in German class who I liked a lot. I wanted to ask her out, but I faced the age-old teenage dilemma: should I ask her for a date and risk being rejected, or should I try to find out what she thought about me first?

I asked my best friend what to do. He told me I'd avoid a lot of grief by asking around. "See if you even have a chance," he said. In other words: Do research. Reduce uncertainty. Decrease the risk. Minimize the chances of making a mistake.

Public radio is now in its teenage years, and more than ever public radio broadcasters desperately want their listeners to love it. Like an adolescent experiencing these feelings for the first time, they

yearn to know what listeners think of it; they feel that without care and support from listeners, public radio could just *die*!

The difference between our adolescent experiences is that public radio *will* die without the care and support it seeks. Knowing what listeners like, dislike, value, or kindly overlook is basic to any decision to change public radio — or to keep it the same.

I haven't forgotten this lesson learned in high school. As a professional researcher I offer my clients the same basic rationale for doing research: *Research is finding out what you **need** to know **in order to make decisions***. Not only must it reduce uncertainty, and not only must it be *applicable* and *actionable*, but it should also be *acted upon*.

Sometimes, that's the hardest part.

3.

THE UTILIGRAPHICS OF PERSONAL IMPORTANCE

*She says how far are you going
He said depends on what you mean
I'm only stoppin' here to get some gasoline
I guess I'm going thataway
Just as long as it's paved
I guess you'd say I'm on my way to Burma Shave*
-Tom Waits

The notion of “importance” comes from listeners’ response to the statement “public radio is important in my life.” This *personal* importance differs from the *altruistic* sentiment that “public radio is important to society.” For example, when someone says “public radio is important to other people; it is a community resource which should be preserved,” that’s *altruistic* importance.

On the other hand, *personal* importance comes directly from a listener’s *use of radio*. *Personal* importance is when someone says, “I listen to public radio, therefore it’s important.” As Section 1 explained, the progression is clear: *listening leads to personal importance, and personal importance leads to support*.

The “utiligraphics” gathered by the Cheap-90 study provide insights into the relationship between public radio use and personal importance.

U-What-i-Graphics?

Utiligraphics are like demographics in that they report some trait about a listener. But unlike demographics, which describe *who* a listener is,

utiligraphics describe *how* a listener uses radio.

Each of the following is a utiligraphic measure of a listener’s use of a public radio station: the total time spent listening to public radio in a week; the number of times they tuned in during the week; and the amount of time spent listening per tune-in.

Ascertaining the utiligraphic differences between people for whom public radio is personally important and people for whom it is not constitutes actionable research; alter the way people use public radio through programming strategies, and increase their propensity to support the medium. Easy.

Time Spent Listening

The total time a person spends listening to public radio in a seven day period is called time spent listening, or TSL. The TSL of the “average” public radio listener is about eight hours per week. But listeners who consider public radio personally important listen to it more than ten hours a week — four hours longer than listeners who do not hold public radio in such high esteem.

EXTENDING DURATION

Just because occasions characterize listeners who consider public radio to be personally important doesn't mean that increasing the *duration* of a tune-in is a meaningless goal. Far from it. Influencing duration affects *all* listeners, and can have a significant effect on your station's average quarter-hour audience.

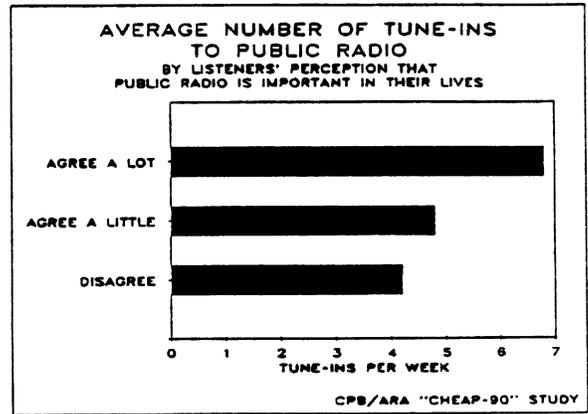
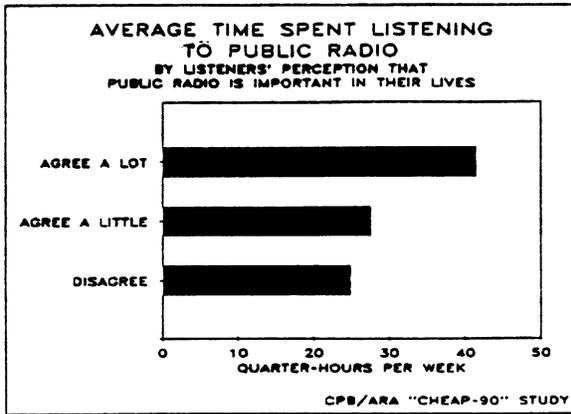
But duration often is as much a function of life as it is of programming. People generally turn off their radios because they move on to other things; there's not much any programmer can do when a person turns off the radio, gets out of the car, and walks into an office building for a meeting.

Yet duration can be *prematurely* shortened, and this is what public broadcasters need to avoid. Abrupt transitions, changes from one appeal to another, jarring public service announcements,

stumbling announcers — these and many more problems invite listeners to *tune out*.

About one in five tune-ins are from another station. Forward promotion — telling a listener what is coming up in the next quarter-hour — may encourage a listener to stay with you rather than tune to another station.

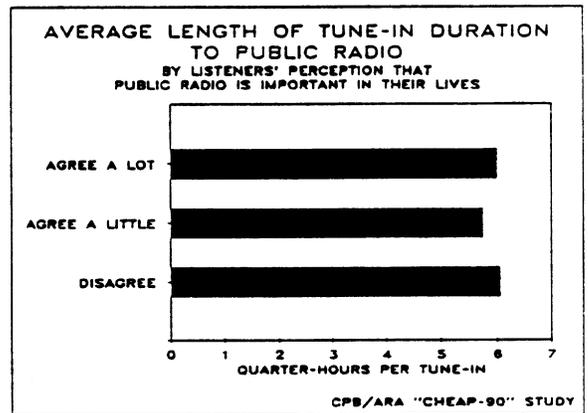
Where a listener listens also influences duration, and public radio can take advantage of this. People who stick with a single activity for long, uninterrupted periods of time can and do use radio for longer periods than people who don't. Midday, for example, is critical to building TSL because that's when people tend to listen longest — while house-keeping, while at work, etc. Advertising, promotion, positioning, programming — all can encourage people to use a station in specific places or situations of potentially long duration.



A person's TSL is really a combination of two things. First, someone tunes in to a public radio station. Then they stay tuned to the station for a certain amount of time. The total time that person spends listening during the course of a week is thus a function of the number of times they tune in *and* the amount of time they spend listening each time they do.

It would seem that the *duration* of these two groups of listeners would also be different, but it's not. Both groups average 90 minutes per tune-in.

Researchers call tune-ins "occasions," and the average time spent listening per occasion is called "duration." Mathematically,



$$\text{TSL} = \text{occasions} \times \text{duration}.$$

For example, if a person spends two hours listening to public radio in a week, and tunes in on four different occasions, their average duration is a half-hour per tune-in. As the equation above shows, increasing either the number of times a person tunes in (occasions) or the average length of time spent listening per tune-in (duration) will increase total time spent listening.

This means that *people who consider public radio important in their lives listen to more of it because they tune it in more often — not because they stay tuned longer each tune-in.*

Occasions and Duration

This is important knowledge. It tells public radio programmers that *the key to influencing listeners' perception of personal importance lies with their decision to tune in — not with their duration once tuned in.*

Public radio listeners average between five and six occasions (tune-ins) per week for an average duration (length of tune-in) of 90 minutes per occasion. But listeners who say public radio is important in their lives tune in *seven* times a week; listeners who don't tune in only *four* times a week.

It's important to understand the mechanics of listening — particularly how an occasion happens — before devising strategies which encourage tune-in.

The Anatomy of an Occasion

An occasion begins when a person turns on the radio, or when a person changes from one station to another. Research tells us that most tune-ins are from “off” — not from another station. This means that *most occasions begin when the radio is turned on.*

Think about it.... You flip on the receiver, maybe listen for a few seconds, consider what other station might be worth checking out, maybe tune to it, listen a few more seconds...very quickly you’ve settled on a station. Four times out of five you stay tuned to that station until you turn off the radio.

The same is true of people who consider public radio personally important. The only difference between them and other listeners is that they give public radio more of their occasions. Remember — most occasions begin when the radio is turned on — which means for these listeners, public radio is more often the programming choice *when they turn on the radio.*

Why is this? Apparently, the programming itself has convinced these listeners that it gives them something they want, need, or enjoy; it is worth their time, it is worth their attention — it may even be worth their support. Funny — all the reasons why people might support public radio are the same reasons why they might want to listen to it.

Influencing Tune-In

The moment someone tunes in is obviously critical. What sort of things can public broadcasters control that might influence a person to choose a public station over some other station?

Certainly a station’s content — *what* it programs — is essential. High quality and intelligent information, music, and entertainment programming distinguish public from commercial radio (more on this in subsequent sections). In essence, public radio

changes format when it sacrifices quality or intelligence; it becomes less of what people are listening for.

Just as certainly, the *form* of a station’s programming — *how* it presents its content — is also essential in influencing a decision to tune in.

People tend to build their lives around routines; the way they listen to the radio reflects those routines. Public radio can encourage listeners to tune in just by having a consistent format. This doesn’t mean being bland; it means whatever the content, it should be reliable.

Other strategies also can increase occasions. Here are a few simple strategies worth considering:

“Think WXYZ when you want radio worth listening to.”

“For the finest performances of the finest classics, set your radio dial to 87.9.”

“If you haven’t done so already, set your button now.”

After a news summary: “We’ll have the latest on this story at five on *All Things Considered*, here on listener-supported WXYZ.”

You can certainly think of many other ways to help listeners use your service. But in the end, it all comes down to programming in its broadest sense — the sound that comes out of the speaker when a person tunes a radio to your frequency.

If you’re providing listenable, quality programming that meets a person’s needs on a regular basis, he or she will set the button and tune you in more often. If you’re not, he or she will set the button to something else and avoid you.

Without tune-in and regular use there can be no perception of personal importance; without these, there will be no audience support.

At least, that’s what the research shows.

4.

THE PROGRAM CONTENT OF PERSONAL IMPORTANCE

*Yea, he spun out, and he rolled,
hit a telephone pole;
he died with the radio on.*
-Tom Waits

Contrary to what some program producers would have us believe, events in people's lives control the way they use radio. People generally live in a certain way and listen to the radio when they can; they rarely live however (or as long as) they can in order to listen to the radio.

Yet while public radio doesn't *control* their lives, it *is* important to many people. Analysis of existing research constructs an important sequence of causes and reactions:

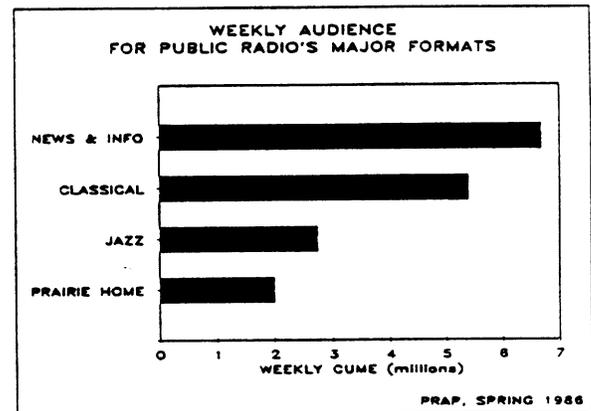
1. Certain programming attributes — most often related to form — can encourage listeners to tune in more often.
2. Listeners who tune in more often are more likely to consider public radio important in their lives than are listeners who tune in less often.
3. Listeners who consider public radio personally important are much more likely to support it financially.

It would be wrong to assume that the *form* of public radio's programming is solely responsible for people tuning in; certainly the *content* of the programming plays some kind of role.

Programming Worth Listening To

There are several ways to assess what content makes public radio important. One is through audience estimates. Since a person's use of public radio correlates with how important it is to them,

audience estimates should indicate what listeners as a group think is important.



No surprises here. Two out of three public radio listeners hear news and information programming sometime during the week; more than half hear classical music; more than a quarter hear jazz, and one in five hears *A Prairie Home Companion*.

You can run into problems looking at aggregate statistics because they often don't tell the whole story. For instance, these estimates don't account for how many days or hours each format airs.

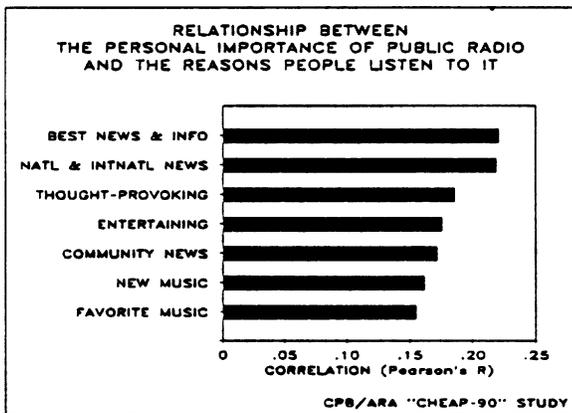
Nevertheless, the numbers do profile what is happening nationally: in its listeners' minds, public radio is news and information first, classical music second, jazz a distant third, with *A Prairie Home Companion* on Saturday evenings.

There are other ways of assessing what makes public radio worth tuning in, personally important, and

eventually worth paying for. The Cheap-90 study asked listeners open-ended questions about their radio listening preferences:

1. Which station plays the music you like to listen to most? (FAVORITE MUSIC)
2. Which station keeps you informed about national and international events? (NATL & INTNATL NEWS)
3. Which station keeps you informed about events in your community? (COMMUNITY NEWS)
4. What station introduces you to music you haven't heard before? (NEW MUSIC)
5. What station gives you the best news and information? (BEST NEWS & INFO)
6. What station is the most entertaining? (ENTERTAINING)
7. What station is the most thought-provoking? (THOUGHT-PROVOKING)

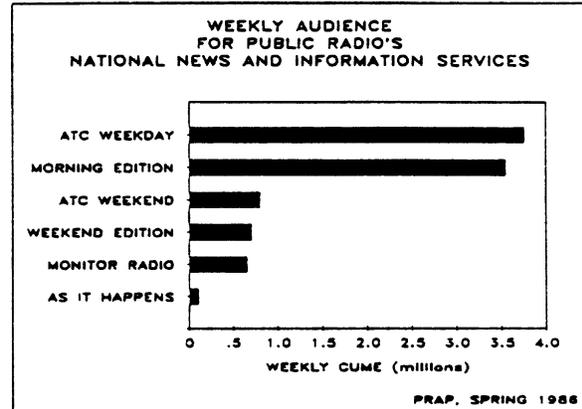
The phrases in parentheses show how these questions are represented on the graph below. The longer the bar on the graph, the more likely people who consider public radio important in their lives are to tune it in for that reason.



All the reasons people listen correlate with personal importance. But news and information — specifically national and international news — is clearly the most highly correlated. Listening for local news is not as highly associated with the belief that public radio is personally important. (Section 5 gets into

this in more detail.)

One thing public radio stations have that others don't is high-quality news programming dealing with events and issues on a national and international scale. Let's look at the relative audience sizes for each of these programs.



No surprises here, either. Were we to ask people what makes public radio personally important to them, we would expect them to mention *All Things Considered* and *Morning Edition* more often than any other programs.

The Cheap-90 study offered two reasons why people might listen to music on public radio: “to hear music I’ve never heard before” and “because [the station] plays the music I like to listen to most.” While more than 80 percent of its weekly audience listens to music on public radio, only 51 percent of all listeners say they listen to public radio for music they *haven't heard before*, and only 44 percent say they listen to public radio to *hear their favorite music*.

And as the graph to the left shows, these reasons for listening do not correlate as highly as do others with listeners' perception that public radio is important in their lives. Why is this? Is music merely background? Wallpaper? Does it just fill in the gaps between news shows? Or do public radio listeners simply prefer classic rock to classical music?

The answers are not in the Cheap-90 database library. Nor is the biased, self-selected “sample” of listeners who write to stations a good indicator. So why don't we just ask listeners what makes public radio important — or unimportant — to them?

5.

SEARCHING FOR PERSONAL IMPORTANCE

*Basic research is what I am doing
when I don't know what I am doing.*
-Wernher von Braun

Asking listeners what they think is a really good idea. Most public broadcasters *think* they know what makes public radio important to listeners; but professionals don't listen to their stations the same way listeners do. Research is needed to touch base with listener reality.

In this case, the research technique must probe listeners' beliefs, explore their perceptions, and mine their ideas.

Basic research.

But it's not as easy as it sounds. If you don't ask the right questions in the right way, you can get quite misleading results.

Focus Groups

Relatively new to public radio, focus groups have been used for years by commercial broadcasters to touch base with listeners.

Focus groups gather information on a person-to-person basis. Eight to a dozen listeners meet around a table with a moderator who *focuses* the discussion on specific topics. Broadcasters observe the proceedings from behind one-way mirrors. Listeners do not know the broadcaster's identity until the end of the discussion, if ever.

Keeping the broadcaster hidden allows focus group participants to be more objective and critical, and differentiates focus groups from cocktail parties. You know the scenario: You meet a person socially who discovers you're a public radio broadcaster,

they tell you how much they love public radio, your station, etc. Some of this may in fact be true. But the interpersonal dynamics of the situation rule out objectivity.

When listeners don't know who you are, they are much more likely to say what they really think about you. In research jargon, objective and accurate responses from listeners are called *valid*. Focus groups are *highly valid* probes of listeners' ideas, feelings, and perceptions.

For this reason on-air personalities are *never* allowed behind the mirror. Naked validity can be very demoralizing.

Focus groups provide a great way to find out what makes public radio personally important. So in 1986 the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, National Public Radio, and public stations in five markets across the country funded a series of local focus group studies. Lauer, Lalley & Associates conducted the groups, asking 160 listeners in five markets across the country what they think — particularly what they think *important* — about public radio. Effie Metropoulos, NPR's Director of Research, oversaw the project.

Public broadcasters are far too close to their work to hear their radio stations in the same way as listeners do. Lauer and Lalley's knowledgeable yet impartial moderators got listeners to divulge, *in their own terms*, what they *really* think of public radio's programming, and what they *really* believe about it.

Reality as listeners hear it; what a concept.

SURVEY RESEARCH AND THE FOCUS GROUP TECHNIQUE

Most people are familiar with *survey research*; questionnaires, Arbitron's diary, Birch's phone calls, opinion polls — are all types of survey research.

When done right, survey research is a powerful tool that combines the scientific method, quantitative measurement, and statistical analysis, allowing us to answer well-defined questions with a known degree of certainty. In other words, not only do we get answers, but we know how much to believe them.

But survey research has its limits. The questions have to be formulated in advance; there is no room for exploring, or for seeking new ideas or different perspectives. Typically respondents can only tell you what you think you want to know; not necessarily what is on their minds.

The weaknesses of the survey method are the strengths of the focus group technique. The strengths of each can be exploited by using them in a coordinated way; the results of focus group research can inform the design of survey research,

and vice versa.

Like surveys, focus groups have trade-offs. While highly *valid*, they are not highly *reliable* in a statistical sense. You find out in great detail what a few people think, but these people may not necessarily be representative of the audience.

You can attempt to increase the reliability of any focus group study by interviewing larger numbers of people, but this quickly gets expensive.

Because focus groups are more “qualitative” than quantitative, they are susceptible to subjective bias. This is why it is crucial to hire trained individuals who have no vested interest in the outcome to synthesize and present the results.

When done correctly, focus groups are vastly superior to cocktail parties as a source of information, but they're not science. In combination with carefully-designed and implemented scientific surveys, however, they make a research team that's hard to beat.

6.

NEWS AND PERSONAL IMPORTANCE

*You don't need a weatherman
to know which way the wind blows.*

- Robert (Bob Dylan) Zimmerman

Listeners appreciate public radio primarily for its news programming. In the focus groups undertaken throughout 1986, they spontaneously discussed *Morning Edition*, *All Things Considered*, and *Week-end Edition* more than any other programming.

Public radio listeners place a high premium on staying informed. They know they can get local news and headlines from commercial radio, and many of them do. Yet they tune to public radio for *detailed* national and international news coverage — the story behind the story. Getting well beyond headlines, public radio tells why an event occurred, what it means, why it is important, and what to expect next. This is important to listeners.

National News Appeal

Depth of coverage is only one of the several qualities inherent in public radio news programming.

Listeners mention that public radio displays an intelligence, integrity, and degree of professionalism not found elsewhere. They also feel that network journalism on public radio treats its subjects and its audience with respect. Public radio's approach is analytical, not sensational; it assumes a certain level of intelligence among its listeners and, in so doing, treats them as intelligent people.

Public radio listeners *are* an intelligent group of people who appreciate being treated with respect: many say public radio is the *only* electronic mass medium that takes its audience seriously.

Listeners believe that commercial broadcasters are locked in a ratings war — sensationalizing news in an effort to attract the biggest audience. Listeners feel that public radio's non-commercial nature

allows it to provide a less afflicted *public service*.

This attitude permeates listeners' perceptions about what motivates reporters. They feel that commercial considerations require reporters and newscasters to be *personalities*. By contrast, listeners believe that public radio's non-commercial environment encourages news professionals to be *professional* — to concentrate on intelligently informing the public.

Listeners feel that public radio reporters usually do not impose themselves upon a story, and they value this perceived detachment, objectivity, accuracy, and professionalism. Everything Geraldo Rivera is, public radio reporters are not.

Most listeners are familiar with the term "National Public Radio," and many use "NPR" interchangeably with "public radio." For them, NPR is public radio. A significant number are aware that "NPR" is a production center; but most listeners think in *programmatic*, not *organizational* terms.

Indeed, when asked point-blank if public radio's news is based too heavily on events happening in Washington, DC, listeners typically react with surprise, indicating that this is where important news is made, so it *should* be a focus of attention.

They don't care where programming is produced, *as long as it maintains the qualities they value*. Some listeners noted that some local shows do not always meet the standards of those produced by NPR.

Listeners value public radio's distinctive qualities, and for them its national news occupies a unique position. They do not expect public radio to broadcast from "the scene;" they don't fault public radio for its "inability" to provide local news, weather, and traffic — they can get all of this elsewhere.

Instead, they value public radio for its ability to do more “important” things exceptionally well.

Local News

Several stations in cities where the focus groups were conducted invest a lot in local news and events coverage; their local news sounds better than local news at many other public stations. Yet many listeners say this local news does not attract or endear them to public radio.

Indeed, when listeners discuss news on public radio they are talking about *NPR* news. There appear to be several reasons why national news is a definite listener draw and local news is not.

Local news is not unique; it’s widely available on other radio stations, and this will not change soon. Of course, national news is also not unique — particularly on television. However, *Morning Edition* airs at a time when radio is better suited to listeners’ activities; and *All Things Considered* beats the television networks by ninety minutes.

Many listeners cite lower “professional standards” in local productions; many say station-originated programming just “isn’t as good” as *NPR*’s. Of course this varies widely from station to station. Listeners refer not to technical qualities, but to presentation styles and professionalism. Many say local programming does not possess the analysis, intelligence, depth, respect, and professionalism they expect from (National) public radio.

Listeners are very clear about the “tones” of public versus commercial radio. To many in public radio’s audience, commercial radio sounds “loud, insistent, hard-sell, noisy;” public radio is “low-key, calm, relaxed, soothing.” Public stations sometime cross this line with negative audience reaction. For instance, the audio from syndicated traffic services usually does not match *Morning Edition*’s tone; in order to do so it would be better for the host to read the printed version.

There are many other ways stations can improve their tone, professionalism, analysis, and other appeals. But perhaps there are qualities *inherent* in local news which simply do not satisfy public radio listeners. Information bits such as weather,

traffic, and school closings seem much more useful than stories about fires, robberies, muggings — perhaps even more highly valued than city council reports. Maybe local events are perceived by listeners as transient or less universal than national and international events — *less important* to an audience that values public radio for its attention to the “important” things.

The last paragraph is conjecture on my part, but it rings true with years of research and observation.

The Public Service Image

To listeners, public radio is the sum of a number of positive qualities — qualities which make public radio important to them — qualities which public radio must foster.

For instance, listeners’ perception of public radio as a public service distinguishes it from commercial radio as much as the lack of commercials does. It’s an accurate perception which public radio’s preoccupation with increasing audience could shatter.

This is important to remember because it would be very easy to inadvertently blow the public service image.

Discussions about “audience doubling,” for instance, should always be carefully characterized and presented. It’s one thing for a listener to hear you say “Public radio will double its audience;” that’s commercial talk. It’s quite another to say “Public radio will double its service to the audience.” That’s the talk of a responsible public broadcaster — consistent with audience perception.

Of course, audience service *is* what most public broadcasters are implicitly addressing when they talk about doubling audience. It would be a shame if the audience — or people who believe public monies would be better spent elsewhere — misunderstood these discussions. Such a misunderstanding could decimate the crucial “mutual bond of trust” between public radio and its listeners — a bond identified by listeners as important.

Remember — the reasons listeners think public radio is important are the reasons they listen to and support it.

7. LISTENER-SUPPORTED, COMMERCIAL-FREE, AND GOD-AWFUL

*There was a little girl
Who had a little curl
Right in the middle of her forehead.
And when she was good
She was very, very good;
But when she was bad, she was horrid.*

- Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Most listeners abhor on-air fundraising. Just because they listen to public radio — and even send it money — doesn't mean they have to like everything they hear.

On the surface it seems somewhat incongruent. Most listeners understand (to some degree) that public radio is “commercial-free and listener-supported;” the more they understand this, the more they appreciate it. While you might *think* that this would lead to listener tolerance, it doesn't.

Sure, in focus groups some listeners politely say that on-air fundraising is an acceptable price to pay for having no commercials, and that it must be necessary or public stations wouldn't be doing it. Yet even these sophisticated persons suggest there must be a better way. Even for them, on-air fundraising is insufferable.

Begging for money, being free of commercials, and accepting support from listeners are linked in another important way: they are the three non-programming attributes which listeners say distinguish public from commercial radio.

Public broadcasters must understand what listeners think about each of these characteristics in order to make the appropriate changes — and to maintain critical elements of the status quo.

Commercial-Free

Listeners value public radio's lack of commercials for at least three reasons. First, they appreciate not having to endure interruptions. Second, they associate commercials with “rapid-fire, hard-sell, loud, obnoxious” presentations which usually insult their intelligence — qualities not at all consistent with public radio's “soothing, calm, *intelligent*” image.

The third reason comes somewhat as a surprise. Many listeners believe that commercial forces — such as sponsors and the need to attract the largest possible audience — determine the content of commercial broadcasting. They believe that public radio is free from these “commercial influences” because it does not sell time to advertisers.

Listeners believe that freedom from commercial influences allows public radio to program for the *public* rather than for advertisers. This in turn leads them to think that public radio programming is based on listener preferences, and that commercial radio programming is not.

Of course, they're wrong — commercial radio depends *more* on listeners' preferences. Commercial broadcasters have been doing listener perception, music preference, and “product” research for years; public radio is just beginning this kind of audience-

responsive research. But public radio's listeners don't *believe* this.

While their reasoning may be wrong, the result is great. *Public radio's listeners believe that commercial radio is programmed for the masses and that public radio is programmed for them.* This is a *positive* myth, quite important to foster because it precedes listener understanding that public radio depends on them for financial support. Remember: listeners who understand that public radio is listener-supported are much more likely to support it.

There is a corollary to this finding: many listeners believe that public radio has no commercials *because* listeners help support it. It all adds up.

Listener-Supported

After the Cheap-90 study demonstrated that listeners are more likely to contribute to public radio if they understand that it depends on them for money, many broadcasters began to remind listeners whenever and however possible that public radio needs their support.

Judging by the perceptions of listeners in the focus groups, this strategy is succeeding. That's good news. But further analysis shows even more clearly the links between listening, programming, and support. The news gets better.

People listen to public radio for its programming — not because of how that programming is funded. And if public radio doesn't convince people to listen, they're not likely to think it's "personally important" — that is, important in their lives — and they're not likely to contribute.

Yet the nagging question persists: does "altruistic importance" — the belief that public radio is important to others and to society as a whole — also play a role in attracting listener support?

Focus group research suggests that people *do* judge public radio — at least in part — on whether they think it serves the needs of others. Listeners' comments also suggest that their perception of public radio's "altruistic importance" comes from *listening* — just as the perception of "personal importance" does. It seems to work this way.

From *tune-in experience*, listeners notice that programming on public radio is typically more diverse than programming on commercial stations. They assume that this diversity satisfies the tastes of a variety of listeners; they may not *personally* like or listen to some programs, but since (they believe) *public radio is programmed for listeners*, they conclude that there must be plenty of other listeners grateful for these programs.

In other words, *listeners kindly interpret diversity as evidence that public radio is being responsive to the public.* This is their polite, well-educated, upper-middle class way of justifying why a radio station they use for news (and maybe some music) is airing programming they have no interest in hearing — or paying for.

Altruistic importance is almost certainly a factor in the "reasons to support public radio" mix. But we still don't know how important it is, nor do we know to how many people it is important. At the time of writing, the AUDIENCE 88 study is addressing these issues.

On-Air Fundraising

Listeners are aware that corporate support and underwriting announcements are part of being non-commercial. There is some concern about what some listeners call "creeping commercialism" — something they sense is happening in public television. For the most part, though, listeners find underwriting announcements an acceptable price to pay for non-commercialism — especially if these announcements reduce time spent fundraising on-air.

In fact, *on-air fundraising rouses the most universal and vehement complaint about public radio.* A vast majority of listeners complained — some quite passionately — that on-air fund drives are "obnoxious, amateurish, degrading, emotional, tasteless, embarrassing." These words are vastly different from those used by listeners to describe the qualities they *like* about public radio: depth, respect, professionalism, intelligence, and integrity.

It's the *way* public radio does on-air fundraising — *not the fact that it does it* — which irritates listeners. One would expect that *any* on-air fundraising activity which put public radio out of char-

acter — whether created locally or acquired from any program producer — would be just as obnoxious to public radio’s audience.

Fund-drives are programming and should receive the same kind of review, fine-tuning, and development as the rest of a station’s sound. Why should listeners be expected to tolerate horrid programming, whatever its purpose?

Stations are now experimenting with alternatives to traditional pledge drives for a variety of reasons, which include respect for listeners, concern about their image, and perhaps fear that people will not tolerate traditional fund drives much longer. Particularly promising is the “quiet drive.” The quiet drive attracts support through low-key appeals — appeals which epitomize the qualities people like and respect about public radio.

Public broadcasters can *tell* the listener that public radio is important; but all indications are that listeners already know why it is important to them — perhaps better than the broadcasters do. More effective is to *demonstrate* a station’s importance in ways that reinforce the quality and importance

of the service. Keeping the sound of fundraising appeals consistent with the rest of a station’s sound pays off — literally — as fewer listeners tune-out and more of them remain satisfied with what they’re hearing.

Take Action

When public radio is good, listeners think it is the best, take it to heart, and give it money. When public radio screws up — as it is doing with on-air fundraising drives — listeners consider it horrid. Some are forgiving, but others — particularly non-supporters — are not.

That’s important because non-contributors make up between 80-90 percent of the weekly audience — and that’s a huge and accessible pool of untapped revenue. In focus groups these people say they would be willing to support public radio if they were asked to do so in a more responsible, professional, and intelligent way. Your air is the most efficient way to reach these listening non-members.

Think about it. Then do something about it.

On one side you've got people who [simply] want to succeed in bringing programming of importance and timeliness to as many people as possible. Then there are people on another wavelength who see audience building as a code word for lowering the level of public radio's quality in order to be more popular and to have more money. My feeling is, you don't have to sell your soul to have a big soul.

Jon Schwartz

8.

FROM NON-LISTENER TO MEMBER

*You can't pick a guy's pocket
if you can't reach his pants.*
- Gary Bond

Sometimes people in public radio seem to forget a simple but fundamental truth: *You can't have supporters if you don't have listeners.*

The fact is, audience leads membership: the number of people listening to your station now is a good indicator of how many supporters you'll have one to four years from now.

This is why public radio's national audience estimates from the last few years are so distressing. The early 1980s saw double-digit audience growth rates; every year in recent history more people are supporting public radio.

The single-digit audience growth rates of the last few years mark the passing of better days. The writings's on the wall: harder fundraising times are just around the corner. Membership and development directors will have to work both harder *and* smarter to offset decreased audience growth rates.

To conclude this exploration into "personal importance," we review four basic steps a person takes in becoming a public radio supporter. First explained in the Cheap-90 report, the resulting strategy suggests that *an effective way to attract support is to provide a significant number of people with unique, high-quality programming that they come to depend on, and to make sure they understand that their support is as important to public radio as public radio's programming is to them.*

Step 1: Program to Attract Audience

Each week 94 percent of all Americans don't listen to public radio. Even during public radio's most popular hours, when over one-million persons are

listening nationwide, 99.5 percent of all Americans are *not listening* to public radio.

Since people must *use* public radio before they'll support it, the first step is to turn non-listeners into listeners. Programming is what makes that happen. It is what people tune in for, and what they pay to maintain. The idea is simple yet crucial: if your programming serves few people, you'll earn few supporters. In the long run, an increase or decrease in audience service means a corresponding increase or decrease in audience support — not this year perhaps, but probably next, and certainly the year after.

Step 2: Program to Satisfy Audience

But maximizing audience *size* isn't enough. You also need to maximize audience *satisfaction*. Are you programming to satisfy the public or musicologists? Is your programming *listenable*? Is it consistently scheduled so that listeners can develop habits and work it into their lives? Does it appeal to a consistent target audience? Is it high quality? Is it always worth listening to? If it's not worth listening to, it's not worth paying for.

(I didn't say that.... your listeners did.)

Audience size and audience satisfaction go hand in hand: the more a station's programming satisfies people, the more people listen.

Audience size and audience satisfaction add up to audience *service*. Maximizing audience satisfaction doesn't have to mean compromising public radio's mission or its integrity — indeed, maintaining public radio's quality and uniqueness is vital to maintaining

and increasing audience support. If your station sounds like everything else on the dial, why should anyone pay for it?

In short, *you maximize and satisfy public radio's well-educated audience by raising your standards, not lowering them.* Well-executed, high-quality programming is the key. It's the single most important variable under your control affecting how many people will support your service.

Step 3: Position As Public

Before successfully asking people for support, you have to convince them that your station relies on them. Listeners are much less likely to support an operation they believe is already funded by a university or other institution.

The research shows that once a station takes steps to maximize audience service (size and satisfaction), the "public" nature of public radio is the only perception we've been able to measure (so far) which significantly increases a listener's willingness to support the medium.

Influencing what listeners think about a station and its programming is called "positioning." Your own air is the best positioning medium available. It's the most *efficient* because it costs nothing to use; it's the most *effective* because it reaches *all* of your listeners.

Listeners need to be constantly reminded that public radio is supported by "the public," "listeners," or "you" — not "the university," "the government," or "your tax dollars." However, positioning can't attract or hold a listener to a station that doesn't offer people what they need or want.

Step 4: Ask — With Respect — For Money

The first three steps lay the foundation for the big request; done effectively, they will maximize the number of people accepting your invitation to support your station.

An increasingly popular method, still in the experimental stage, is the "quiet drive." Designed to enhance — not interrupt — the regular program service, quiet drives consist of short, low-key announcements which reinforce the station's position *while* soliciting support. WJHU in Baltimore, for one, has relied exclusively on quiet drives in its first year on the air, with great success. It's a very promising method.

Regardless of how you ask for money, programming and positioning are key. If you haven't programmed to attract and satisfy audience, and if you haven't positioned your station as dependent on listener support, you won't get much money from the audience. Pitchers and programmers must work hand-in-hand to maximize the station's service to the public before the public will maximize its service to the station.