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**Myth and the Minority Audience:  
Black and Hispanic Use of Public  
and Commercial Radio**

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# MYTH AND THE MINORITY AUDIENCE: BLACK AND HISPANIC USE OF PUBLIC AND COMMERCIAL RADIO

By Frank Tavares

## The Old Dilemmas

There have always been dilemmas in the world of public radio about broadcasting for minority or “specialized” audiences. For two decades we have bumped into each other with arguments about the value and purpose of such broadcasting, and how it relates to the missions of public radio. Whether the discussions focus on definition and mission or distribution and measurement, in every one, contradictory assumptions about “specialized audience programming” are made to defend or attack arguments about its production, distribution, broadcasting, or funding.

This has been especially true when the specialized audience is defined in ethnic terms. The largest ethnic minority audiences are composed of Black or Hispanic listeners, and it is around these listeners that a mythology has developed. Decisions about the inherent importance — or lack of importance — of programming to this audience are often based on unfounded tenets about how we presume Black and Hispanic listeners use radio.

In April 1987, these myths and assumptions were the topic of a meeting organized by Ric Grefe, then director of Policy Development and Planning for CPB. It began a comprehensive study of what actually **is** known about minorities and radio. A number of prevalent myths and assumptions about spe-

cialized audience programming were examined in new ways under the light of existing radio research about minority listening. This is an overview of the work which has been done. In it we will look at a gold mine of previously unused data, what it has revealed about specialized audience mythology, and the implications of these revelations.

The ultimate objective is to provide programmers and producers factual basics about how minorities actually use radio. This will help us all make more informed decisions about whether and how to program for listeners defined along ethnic lines.

## Tunneling Under the Myths

So, what gold mine of information has been beneath our feet all along? And how come we have not been able to extract high grade ore from it before this?

Here we have an example of how counterproductive a myth can be. It is the myth that empirical data are not available about minority radio use — specifically Black and Hispanic radio use — or that what **is** available is unrepresentative and useless. How many times has this stopped us like bedrock? Too often.

The origins of the myth lay in our past reluctance as public radio broadcasters to look beyond our own instincts and interests in

regard to how our listeners listen. Combined with a tendency to ignore or downplay data not specifically gathered for public radio, we left ourselves few alternatives for better understanding our audience.

This certainly has changed in the 1980s as public radio researchers have demonstrated how useful information about the listening audience can be. Ironically, almost all of this information has its genesis in data gathered for commercial broadcasters.

For decades, commercial broadcasters have been insatiate in their desire for “numbers” information. An entire industry was founded and has prospered doing nothing more than constantly surveying radio listeners for our commercial radio brethren. The numbers of people surveyed are massive. Most national surveys try for a sample size of 1,600 to 2,000 respondents. The biggest national radio survey, Arbitron, collects extensive data from hundreds of thousands of listeners.

This has tremendous significance for us as we dig in to examine our myths and assumptions. The data bases are so huge, they yield tens of thousands of identified Black and Hispanic listeners, and the information we want is imbedded within their responses.

So, empirical data about ethnic minority use of radio — Black and Hispanic — do exist. This is the gold mine. Its exploitation, however, has only been piecemeal. We have never really explored its potential before.

### **Are the data really representative?**

Can the data be trusted in regard to Black and Hispanic listeners? In a word, yes. The extremely large sample of Black and His-

panic listeners in our multi-market databases assures the accuracy of the conclusions reached.

There are a couple of things worth mentioning, however.

Even though we have an enormous nationwide sample, the sample spreads thin if we try to examine the audience for a specific specialized audience program, or if we choose to extract precise audience measurements in smaller markets.

In other words, the number of Hispanic or Black listeners to specific programs in some markets, may be too small for the nationwide survey to detect. In these instances, a more sharply focused measurement method may be required. We will talk about this more later.

It is also worth mentioning a continuing debate among Hispanic broadcasters and advertisers about methodology.

Spanish language broadcasters have often claimed that Arbitron underestimates the number of Hispanic listeners within different markets. It is a controversy which has recently revolved around telephone versus door-to-door interviewing.

In 1987, the Spanish Radio Advertising Council (SRAC), an industry group established to evaluate Arbitron’s methodology, commissioned a field experiment in Chicago. The purpose was to compare the telephone method with interviews conducted in listeners’ homes (Arbitron’s diary method was not included in this test). The results were inconclusive and the debate continues.

Remember, though, that this does **not** affect our nationwide study of **how** Hispanics and Blacks use radio.

### **Running Around the Bases**

The examination of myths and assumptions surrounding specialized audience programming uses information from four different databases, derived from Arbitron surveys. Each one yields a different kind of knowledge.

The first goes back to the beginning of the decade when NPR and CPB developed the Public Radio Audience Profile (PRAP). During each of the years between 1980 and 1987, NPR concentrated its research energy on the public radio listeners identified in the larger Arbitron sample. For our study these original data were looked at in new ways. As the research folks like to say, they “re-crunched the numbers.”

Covering the many markets where there is a significant Black or Hispanic population, Arbitron puts out a book for commercial stations containing basic audience estimates by ethnicity. It is called The Ethnic Composition Report (ECR). For our study, public radio data from these markets (as reported by the Radio Research Consortium) were added to the ECR data giving us a new source of information.

The third database involves a unique access to original Arbitron data tapes from fourteen major markets. The size of this major market sample is extraordinary. It contains over 135,000 diaries, of which almost 20,000 are identified as Black and almost 9,000 as Hispanic. This has allowed valuable original analysis for our study’s specific purposes.

The fourth database is also unique. It is a national sample of listeners to NPR stations who not only kept Arbitron diaries, but also responded to a custom survey. It was originally defined for use in CPB’s AUDIENCE 88 report, but for this study, a special analysis of Black, Hispanic and Asian respondents was made.

An extensive review of the literature on minorities and radio also was done. This included literature published in scholarly journals as well as industry trades.

All in all, a tremendous amount of data was assembled for this look at minority use of public and commercial radio. Some of the results support the gut feelings which created the myths and assumptions. Others are surprising. All are helpful.

### **Tuning in the Hits**

Part of what we are up to here is trying to determine how effectively public radio can meet the needs of minority listeners, particularly those who are Black and Hispanic. To do this, we really must know **how** Black and Hispanic listeners use the medium.

Survey information has confirmed for years that radio is an important medium in the lives of Blacks and Hispanics, just as it is for members of the general audience. Customary patterns of listening by minorities are similar to those of the overall population. For example, major daypart for Black use of radio is weekday morning, the same as for the general audience.

Knowing about these similarities is helpful, but it is also necessary to know about the specific differences in listening behavior.

Contradictory assumptions about these differences have often been made.

For instance, one assumption about Black and Hispanic listening has to do with station use:

- Since they are loyal to a favorite station, Blacks and Hispanics tend to use fewer stations per week than members of the general audience.

Another prevalent assumption gives an opposite spin.

- Blacks and Hispanics tend to use more stations per week, switching around, since they listen to mainstream formats as well as their own formats.

It is necessary to know if either or neither of these is correct. For one thing, it will help us in determining how loyal Black and Hispanic listeners may be to particular types of stations. That in turn will help us figure out how successful we may be at luring them to public radio's specialized audience programming.

Audience research demonstrates that, although most radio markets have a variety of stations to which people listen, the average individual listener will only tune in a few of them. Put another way, most people **do not** listen to most radio stations. Although the average available choice is much larger, the average radio listener tunes in only 3.1 radio stations per week. Black and Hispanic listeners use slightly more stations, 3.3, and 3.2 respectively.

Just as their choice of stations is slightly larger than the "non-ethnic" audience, Black and Hispanic radio listeners also tune in for

longer periods each time they listen. As a result, compared to other listeners, Blacks and Hispanics listen to more radio during an average week. Black listening is about 20% higher, and Hispanic listening is about 6% higher. Although the percentages vary throughout the day, it is true in all dayparts, including "prime time."

How much time a listener spends with each of these stations is one measure of loyalty. From the surveys we know that half of all radio listeners use a single station exclusively on any given day. This is strong confirmation that listeners tune to stations — formats — and not radio programs.

The average Black and Hispanic listener chooses radio stations for the same reasons other radio listeners do. The stations meet particular needs. They meet those needs by broadcasting in certain formats. Listeners whose interests lay outside of the format of a station are unlikely to use that station. This has great implications for those of us in public broadcasting wanting to reach Black and Hispanic listeners.

### **Luring the Listener**

Radio programmers have long understood that formats are designed to draw listeners differentiated by the demographics of age and sex. For example, a nostalgia music format appeals to older adults, while an album rock format appeals to younger males.

We can also break out listening by the demographic of ethnicity. In other words, some formats will be more or less appealing to listeners who are Black or Hispanic.

During the course of this study, a number of myths and assumptions about format appeal

and preference surfaced and were examined. For example:

- Mainstream formats like contemporary hit radio, beautiful music or all news are not used by minority listeners if there is a choice.
- Blacks will listen mostly to Black stations, if available. Hispanics prefer listening to Spanish stations.
- Public radio is not the format which minorities prefer for their music and news.

The specific formats to which minority listeners tune may vary from market to market according to the size of the market and the formats which are available. One large market with both a substantial Black and Hispanic population, and a wide variety of station formats was examined at length.

Without debating every implication of the assumptions above — such as Spanish broadcasting being the only Hispanic format — the research reveals a number of things. The most significant is that stations with formats specifically aimed at Blacks and Hispanics dominate the radio listening by Blacks and Hispanics. This is not to say that minority listeners did not use mainstream formats, but these were not main choices.

### **Black Listeners in Black Markets**

Following the examination of minority use of radio in a very large market where the Black population was approximately 19%, the question was asked if Black listeners used radio formats differently in markets where they made up a greater percentage of the population.

Two markets were selected, one, a large market with a population of about a million, and a medium market of about 300,000. In both markets, the Black population was about one third of the total; also, the dominant stations were geared towards the Black listener. In the larger market, one station with an urban contemporary format reached nearly 60% of the Black population.

### **Spanish and the Hispanic Listener**

This brings us around to the question about the necessity or desirability of broadcasting in Spanish to reach the Hispanic audience. Myths and assumptions are common:

- Spanish language stations reach older Hispanics, since they are more likely to hold onto the traditional culture.
- Younger Hispanics may speak Spanish to their parents but English to their peers. Away from home they listen to English language radio.
- Even if Hispanics understand English, they prefer to get their news delivered in Spanish.

But what does the research show?

It shows that the most important thing to consider is the diversity of the Hispanic population. The tendency of non-Hispanics to lump all Latino cultures together is well known. The reality is that Hispanic preferences for radio formats vary tremendously from market to market. To the extent that members of any ethnic minority share language and culture, broadcasters can treat them as one audience. But differences among Hispanic communities are great. As a result, a Spanish language format station

that draws a large Hispanic audience with contemporary music in one market may hardly register a share point in another.

Using “Spanish” as the total designation of a format is also misleading. Stations broadcasting in Spanish use different formats.

To illustrate these points, two heavily Hispanic markets were scrutinized. One was a large market with a metro population of over two million, nearly a third of whom were Hispanic. The second was a medium size market of around a half-million, more than half of whom were Hispanic.

In the major market, nearly half of the listening by Hispanics was to Spanish language stations. In the smaller market, less than 22% of the Hispanic population listened to Spanish language stations. In the large market, of the stations used by Hispanic listeners, six of the top ten were Spanish. In the smaller market, although there were eight different stations broadcasting in Spanish, only two were in the top ten used.

Why such a difference?

Again, it has to do with the diversity of the Hispanic population. A variety of considerations need to be factored in. For example, how assimilated is the Hispanic population in a market? An Hispanic population with many recent immigrants will probably prefer Spanish language stations.

The presence of Spanish stations in a market does not necessarily mean that Hispanics will use those stations. The success of a Spanish formatted station depends entirely on the makeup of the Hispanic community in that particular market.

## **Public Radio, Act I: Do Minority Radio Listeners Listen?**

And what does this mean in terms of public radio’s minority audience? Here are two common assumptions with which we can begin:

- The minority composition of the public radio audience matches that of the US population.
- Public radio in general does not appeal to minorities; they are less likely to listen than the non-minority population.

To determine the accuracy of either of these statements, attention was focused on the Public Radio Audience Profile data. PRAP is based on survey information gathered about listeners to National Public Radio stations in approximately fifty radio markets across the country each year.

The research confidently shows that across the entire market sample, which is approximately 11% Black and 7% Hispanic, the weekly NPR cume is composed of about 8% Black listeners, and 2% Hispanic listeners. In the markets within the sample where Black and Hispanic listening is specifically broken out, the cume percentages over a five year period are slightly higher — Black listeners running about 10 to 12 percent, and Hispanic listeners about 3 to 4 percent. The average five-year total is slightly above 14% of those specific markets.

In these same markets, reconfiguring the data reveals an average quarter hour (AQH) for Black and Hispanic listening of 13%. In other words, at any one time, approximately 13 out of every 100 listeners to NPR member stations are Black or Hispanic.

Earlier we said that both Black and Hispanic listeners tend to listen longer each time they tune in a station than members of the general audience. Unfortunately, this is not true when it comes to their public radio listening. The data reveals that Black and Hispanic listeners to NPR stations listen for less time than do other public radio listeners. What is the bottom line in all of this?

The minority population of public radio is lower than that of the general population. Black and Hispanic listeners are less likely to listen, and when they do, they do not listen as long.

There is also one additional thing to keep in mind. This percentage of NPR's audience translates into only approximately 3.5% of Blacks living in metro areas, and 1.3% of Hispanics living in metro areas. It is a very small part of the potential Black and Hispanic listening audience.

### **Public Radio, Act II: Do Minority Radio Listeners Listen to Specialized Audience Programming?**

This is the question most often asked: do Black and Hispanic listeners listen to public radio's specialized audience programming?

For the sake of argument, let us just say yes, they do. That will clear the way for the more focused questions we have to answer. How many listen? And, how often?

In regard to the myriad discussions about specialized audience programming on public radio stations, it all comes down to assumptions about the effectiveness of using discrete programming for minority audiences, how this affects public radio's "main" audi-

ence, whether a station should try to draw minority listeners into their mainstream, or if those of us who want to reach a minority audience should look elsewhere.

As the study turned its attention specifically to public radio's minority listeners, the research revealed several very startling statistics. In particular, they concerned NPR's *Enfoque Nacional*, a program often cited as a specialized audience model because of its format and purpose. Distributed between 1979 and March of 1988, *Enfoque* was a half-hour, weekly, news magazine produced in Spanish by an NPR member station and targeted to Hispanics. The program was a carefully produced, quality product which had won a number of national awards.

During the 1980's a total of about 18,000 Hispanics in PRAP markets returned Arbitron diaries. There are PRAP data available for six years of *Enfoque*. The largest listening audience reached was in 1982 — 38,500. The quirk in all of this is that throughout the six years, none of the Hispanics in the PRAP samples indicated that they listened to the program. None of the listeners is identified as Hispanic!

There are caveats.

For example, the 1985 PRAP sample — the latest year available — estimated that the national weekly public radio cume audience for *Enfoque* was 18,300 listeners. Of these, 11,700, almost two thirds, were in markets where ethnicity was not identified. That could account for part of it. But, there were two other data facts for which there were no quick and easy answers.

First, the remaining third of the audience for *Enfoque*, over 6,500 listeners, were in mar-

kets where ethnicity **was** broken out, and none identified themselves as being Hispanic.

And second, while no listeners who identified themselves as Hispanic were listening to *Enfoque*, there were Hispanic-identified listeners listening to other programming on NPR stations. As a matter of fact, the number for national weekly Hispanic come to NPR stations topped 250,000 in 1984. But none of these Hispanic public radio listeners reported listening to *Enfoque*. They reported listening to *All Things Considered*, or music or other programming, but not *Enfoque*.

What is going on here?

Dozens of programmers who have used *Enfoque* have talked about feedback they received from Hispanic listeners to the program. So, there **were** Hispanic listeners. How come they did not show on the national data?

Caveat number two. Although the data registered no Hispanic listeners to *Enfoque* throughout that six-year period, it did not mean that no Hispanics were listening. What it **did** mean is that the number of Hispanic listeners to a single, discrete program like *Enfoque* may simply have been too small to detect on a survey spread across the entire country.

The same is true for specialized audience programming targeted to a Black audience. The PRAP analysis indicates that 99% of Blacks who listen to NPR stations, do not hear specialized audience programming targeted to them.

It becomes easier to accept this when you think about how a specialized audience pro-

gram like *Enfoque* is used. First of all, *Enfoque* was not carried on a majority of NPR stations. That meant that much of the measured Hispanic audience did not have access to it. Secondly, even when it was carried, it was often difficult for Hispanic audiences to find.

All of this information about *Enfoque* is very significant, because the *Enfoque* model is one that many of us have used over and over to develop other specialized audience programming — that is, specific, discrete programs targeted to specific audiences.

What we have learned from our examination of how ethnic minority listeners use radio, is that some of our efforts (like these) are doomed to failure. The vast majority of radio listeners listen to formats, not to programs. Radio listeners, including public radio listeners, tune to stations because they expect them to instantly gratify a need, be it a particular type of music or information.

Any discrete radio program broadcast only once a week for a half-hour will not reach its intended audience if that audience is different from the station's target during the rest of the week.

### **Public Radio, Act III: The Potential?**

We began this overview by talking about the prevalent belief that research information about public radio and ethnic minority listeners was not available. Well, as we have wended our way along the research paths we can see that that is not the case. The databases assembled for this study revealed a lot, and the implications are necessary to think about.

Black and Hispanic listeners **do** tune in public radio stations; however, their reasons for doing so are the same as those of the non-ethnic audience. They tune into formats — music formats, information formats, whatever. Discrete specialized audience programs distributed nationally for use in local formats do not attract very significant numbers of listeners, and will not unless they are a part of a larger format targeted to the same audience.

This is the most consequential finding to emerge from all of this research: targeted specialized audience programming will only effectively reach the targeted audience if the format of a particular station generally appeals to listeners in that target group.

*Enfoque Nacional*, for example, would more likely have reached its target when it was used on stations already attracting large numbers of Spanish speaking listeners. First of all, that means that the station's format would have to be substantially Spanish. Scheduling a handful of Spanish language programs in the middle of an English language format will not attract the target audience.

NPR realized this several years ago when it began exploring the feasibility of placing *Enfoque* on commercial Spanish language stations. Indeed, it became a major effort of the program's producers prior to its loss of funding. If this could have been implemented earlier, the results might have been dramatic. For example, WOJO-FM, a Spanish language station in Chicago, has an average quarter hour audience of 15,300. That one airing could have almost doubled the program's national audience.

However, this is easier said than done. Hispanic listeners are concentrated in the major urban markets, and though there is great potential for increasing public radio's Hispanic audience in these markets, these are the very ones where radio is the most competitive. A public radio, specialized audience program on a Spanish speaking public radio station would still need to be compatible with the specific format of that station.

The same is true for programming targeted to the Black listener.

As we said before, this does not mean that no Black or Hispanic listeners will hear the programming, only that the numbers will be very, very small.

There is another alternative. That is to mix material traditionally has been targeted towards ethnic minorities into the programming we know they are listening to on public radio. Remember, one PRAP sample showed that 250,000 Hispanics were listening to NPR stations each week, and at any one time, approximately 13% of the national audience listening to NPR stations are Black or Hispanic.

Here is where some would try to force in the word, "mainstreaming." But, in reality, as we have seen above, the listeners we want to reach are already in the mainstream. "Specialized audience programming" such as *Crossroads*, *Horizons*, or *Latin File* have taken this approach. They are designed to fit within the context of a larger, consistent station format. In this case, English language, news programming. The programming is more accessible to **all** listeners, and, as a result, will be heard by more Black and Hispanic listeners.

It is important to remember that the idea of serving specialized audiences is not at issue here, only the ways in which we have tried to do it. As radio researcher George Bailey says, “The flaw in public radio’s concept of specialized audience programming is not in its mission, but in its tactics.”

As we continue this mission to serve minority listeners via public radio, we must set clear goals, then plan and develop programming to meet those goals. Knowledge about how our listeners use radio is a valuable and necessary commodity.

What we have tried to do in this study is show the kind of information available and what it means to us. All of this is very important. Quite simply, the more we know, the more effective we will be in producing and programming for minority audiences.

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*The study referred to in the Research Note was commissioned by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and conducted by George Bailey, president of Walrus Research. Dr. Bailey is also an Associate Professor of Mass Communication at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.*