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## **Scheduling “Indecent” Programming: Using Audience Data to Balance Competing Interests by Time and Place**

by David Giovannoni

*(3 pages)*

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# SCHEDULING “INDECENT” PROGRAMMING: USING AUDIENCE DATA TO BALANCE COMPETING INTERESTS BY TIME AND PLACE

by David Giovannoni

*The science of life is a superb and dazzlingly lighted hall which may be reached only by passing through a long and ghastly kitchen.*  
—Claude Bernard

If you ran a restaurant, how would you prepare a meal that you didn't want certain people to eat? This is essentially the question regulators have posed to broadcasters in the matter of “indecent” programming: How might you schedule a program so that certain listeners wouldn't hear it?

A proposed ruling would limit “indecent” broadcasts to specific times of the evening and early morning. Broadcasters and other interested parties have recently placed their arguments on record with the FCC on this matter. In separate developments, we see renewed attention turning to the “indecent” remarks of on-air personalities.

This column does not attempt to resolve or even join this debate — that's the job of policy makers, broadcasters, special interest groups, attorneys, and even listeners. However, arriving at policy entails the balancing of competing interests — a process that can be informed by knowledge of how people actually choose and use their radio stations. This column *does* strive to illustrate how research can be applied.

What are the competing interests? One set of parties strives to protect minors from “indecent” broadcasts. This might be accomplished by prohibiting the airing of “indecent” language when minors could hear it, or by encouraging parents to shield their children from such broadcasts. Some parties go further to assert the right of the public — regardless of age — to be free from “indecent” material over the airwaves at any time. Opposed are those who assert the right of the public to receive such broadcasts in the privacy of their own listening environments.

Audience data have more to say to those wishing to balance these interests than to those whose positions are absolute. For instance, the assertion that the public has a right to receive such broadcasts is not premised on how people actually use radio. Neither is the opposing assertion — that the public has a right to be protected from such broadcasts. Audience data are irrelevant to either absolute position.

## Balancing Interests With Facts

Laws and regulations are rarely absolute, however, and audience data can help strike the balance among competing interests. For instance, if the regulatory goal is to weigh the right of adults to receive such broadcasts against the protection of minors from them, it's reasonable to ask, "at what times are minors least likely to hear such broadcasts?"

The graph on page 3 answers this question. Four o'clock on Sunday morning is when the fewest teens are listening to radio (1.8 percent). Indeed, fewer than six percent of all teens are listening to the radio any morning between one and seven o'clock.

Because similarly small numbers of adults are listening to the radio at that time, this balance is clearly tipped in favor of protection. The right of adults to receive such broadcasts is met perhaps in theory — and this may be deemed the appropriate balance — but it is not met in practice.

Another way to approach this balance asks, "at what times are minors *least* likely and interested adults *most* likely to hear such a broadcast?" More than 25 percent of all adults are listening to the radio weekdays between 8:00 a.m. and 2:00 p.m. Yet teen listening is low at this time. During the school year only 6 to 9 percent are using radio between 8:00 a.m. and 2:00 p.m. These percentages are much smaller for the youngest teens.

The ratio of high-adult to low-teen listening is particularly high in the nine-to-noon period. During these hours only one teen is listening to the radio for every 40 adults.

These facts may run counter to intuition. For instance, some parties suggest limiting "indecent" material to late evening and after midnight. But the facts show that teens are the

*most likely* radio listeners in the late evening and wee hours. Between 8:00 p.m. and 4:00 a.m., at least two out of every 15 radio listeners are between 12 and 17 years of age. Some hours are much higher than this. Teens account for nearly one-in-six listeners week nights between 10 and 11 o'clock, for example.

It's important to remember that these numbers reflect total radio use. Every station would have to air such material at the same time to reach this number of people. Of course this isn't how radio works. The fact is, when we consider how people use radio, we find that scheduling (time of day) realizes only part of radio's power to reach (or not reach) certain portions of the population. The appeal of the station airing such material is every bit as important.

## Picking The Station

Radio is a highly-segmented medium. Rap, rock, and contemporary formats appeal to teens; news and talk, classical and beautiful music formats do not. Public radio is not a format; but with an audience of 97 adults to every teen, its appeal is essentially adult.

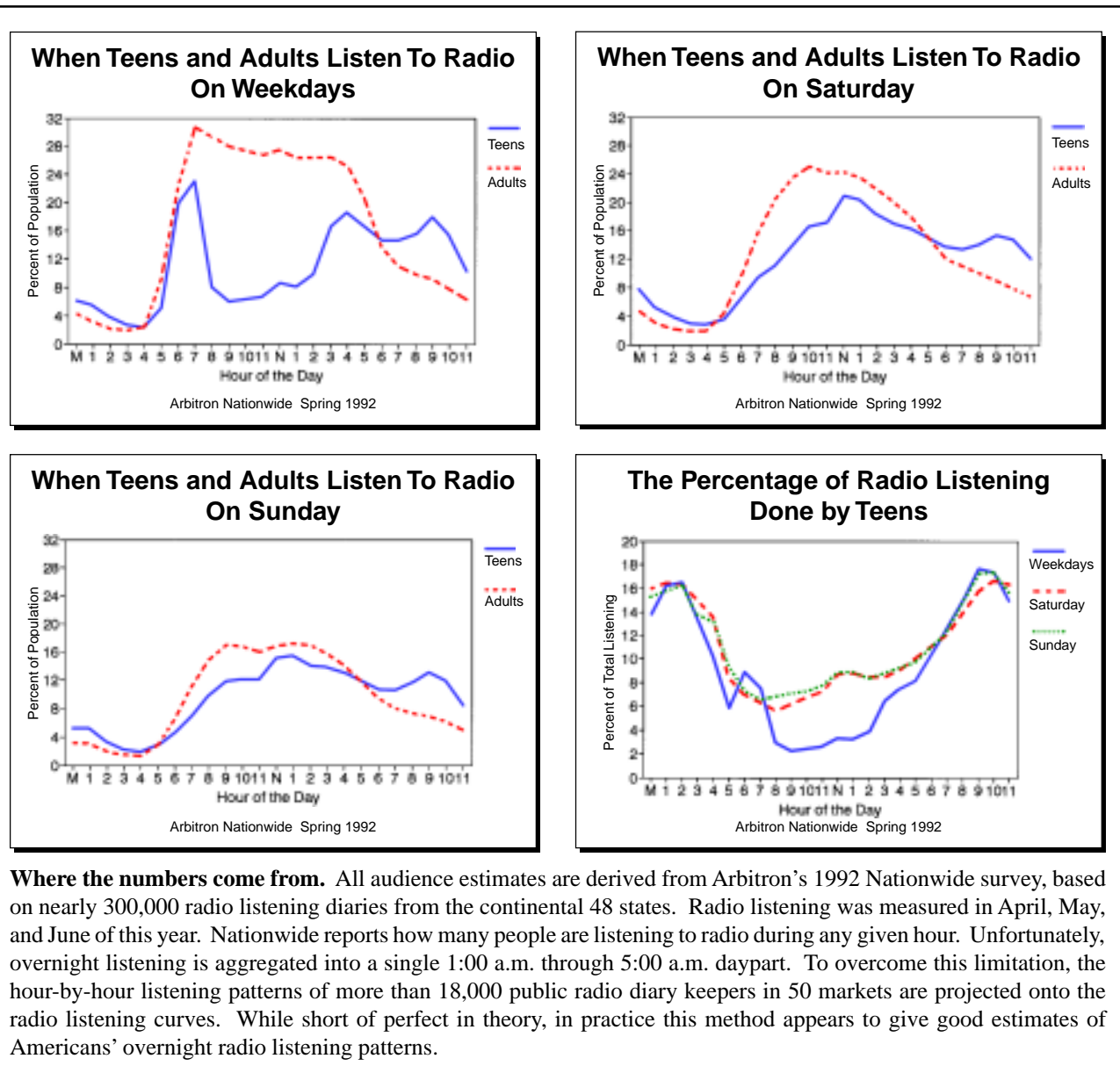
Balancing the extent to which a broadcast message reaches certain groups and not others requires attention to the station as well as to the time of day.

For instance, any program element — "indecent" or otherwise — aired on a public station Monday morning at nine o'clock, would be heard by more than 5,000 adults and only 27 teens in a market of one million people. The same program element, aired on a rap station at 4 o'clock on a Sunday morning, might be heard by more than 300 teens and only 600 adults in the same market. *At a time when the fewest teens are listening to radio,*

*the rap station will reach more than ten times the number of minors as would a public station in prime time. (Estimates based on a typical public station with a full-week share of 2 for adults and .5 for teens, and a rap station with a 5 share of adults and a 20 share of teens.)*

As the appeal of the station carries as much weight as the time of day, arriving at the appropriate balance requires putting both on the kitchen scale.

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**Where the numbers come from.** All audience estimates are derived from Arbitron's 1992 Nationwide survey, based on nearly 300,000 radio listening diaries from the continental 48 states. Radio listening was measured in April, May, and June of this year. Nationwide reports how many people are listening to radio during any given hour. Unfortunately, overnight listening is aggregated into a single 1:00 a.m. through 5:00 a.m. daypart. To overcome this limitation, the hour-by-hour listening patterns of more than 18,000 public radio diary keepers in 50 markets are projected onto the radio listening curves. While short of perfect in theory, in practice this method appears to give good estimates of Americans' overnight radio listening patterns.