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Audience Research in U.S. Public Radio**

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## **GUYS IN SUITS WITH CHARTS: AUDIENCE RESEARCH IN U.S. PUBLIC RADIO**

A significant change in the practice of U.S. public radio during the 1980s was the acceptance of audience research as an essential management function. In commercial broadcasting the need for audience research has long been evident: to provide the institutional knowledge used by advertisers and broadcasters to buy and sell audiences (Beville, 1988; Buzzard, 1990; Webster and Lichty, 1991). For many years, however, public radio managers widely resisted the conduct and application of audience research as marking the ascendance of market considerations over public broadcasting's social and cultural imperatives. Nonetheless, during the 1980s what has been described as a "research revolution" swept across U.S. public radio (Giovannoni, 1991, p. 19). Today, audience research is extensively used by public radio managers, both network and station-based, when making decisions about programming and fundraising, and a cottage industry of consultants has emerged. The degree to which audience research has been embraced by the public radio community became evident when research consultants Tom Church and David Giovannoni were honored with awards for service to public radio during the 1994 Public Radio Conference (*Kudos for Audience Gurus*, 1994).

The rise of audience research in U.S. public radio, however, has become a lightning rod for critics both within and outside the industry, a symbol of the changing nature of public broadcasting. Some critics argue that increased emphasis on audience research reflects the transformation of public radio from its educational, service-based origins to an audience-driven orientation. They think that public stations will target those listeners

most likely to support the stations financially (for examples of this line of argument, see Fisher, 1989; Josephson, 1992; Katz, 1989; Lee and Solomon, 1990; Rauber, 1993; Rowland, 1986 and 1993). One of public radio's foremost personalities, Garrison Keillor, told an interviewer: "I think there has been an influx of commercial people... Guys in suits with charts and pages of numbers. I think that this is a pretty dreadful development" (quoted in *Thoughts from Lake Wobegon*, 1994, p. 58). Reacting to the awards given Church and Giovannoni, Larry Bensky, a journalist for the Pacifica chain of public radio stations, argued, "Not since Henry Kissinger won the Nobel Peace Prize has there been a more inappropriate award" (personal communication, May 7, 1994). Still another critic, independent producer Larry Josephson, contends that "Obsession with audience size, revenue and format have replaced the spiritual underpinnings of public radio, which sought to maximize intellectual and moral growth, passion, variety and pleasure" (personal communication, May 7, 1994).

Lumley, in a seminal book on audience research published in 1934, noted three "important questions" related to audience measurement: "What are the purposes of...radio broadcasting in general? How can methods be developed to determine validly whether broadcasting fulfills these purposes? Is it possible to standardize the measurement techniques which have been found to be useful?" (1934/1971, p. 3) This study illuminates anew Lumley's fundamental issues. Debate over audience research in public radio centers on Lumley's first question, which deals with the essence of broadcast-

ing, and researchers have grappled with the latter two questions in seeking to apply research techniques developed for the commercial sector to non-commercial communication. This study also highlights the relationship between research and practice; the availability of research techniques and applications shaped thinking about public radio's mission, and the reverse. Drawing heavily upon personal interviews with public broadcasters, audience researchers and other individuals concerned with the issue, this paper will describe the evolution of audience research in U.S. public radio and its implications.

A definitional issue must be noted. While there are nearly 1,700 U.S. radio stations licensed by the Federal Communications Commission as "non-commercial educational" ("By the numbers," 1994), the stations generally referred to as *public* radio are those which provide a regular schedule of programming intended to serve the public (Giovannoni, Thomas and Clifford, 1992). Such a categorization would exclude non-commercial religious stations as well as low-powered stations operated by educational institutions, which may not broadcast during school holidays and for which training students is the primary function. By this scheme, it can be estimated that there are about 850 U.S. stations categorized as *public* radio.

### **A "Pre-History" of Audience Research**

Prior to their contemporary engagement with audience research, U.S. public radio broadcasters were not as concerned about accountability to their audiences as Western European public-service broadcasters. Because public-service broadcasters were the first — and, for many years, the only — electronic media in much of Western

Europe, they sought to be comprehensive: to educate, inform *and* entertain. Their reliance upon listener support through license fees provided justification for audience research as a form of feedback, as well as providing a form of feedback in itself, to ensure that the public was being satisfied. The British Broadcasting Corporation, for example, set up a Listener Research Unit in 1936 (Blumler, 1992; Silvey, 1974).

In contrast, a number of forces militated against either an ethic of comprehensiveness in U.S. educational radio or a perceived need for accountability to audiences. Educational broadcasting in the United States was considered a supplement to the dominant commercial system — "a palliative," in the words of Raymond Williams (1974, p. 37). Popular, mass-appeal programming was considered the domain of the commercial sector (Rowland, 1993, p. 159). Educational broadcasters, generally based at colleges and universities, saw their industry as an oasis in the desert of commercial programming. Further, financial support for educational broadcasting prior to the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967 was largely institutional or from philanthropic foundations (Blakely, 1979), so the broadcasters did not need to feel beholden to the public.

Accordingly, audience research in U.S. educational radio (as non-commercial radio was known prior to the 1967 act) was sporadic and unsystematic. A study of educational radio stations found that station managers conducted audience research of various kinds as early as the 1920s (Stavitsky, 1993; see also Charters, 1930). Examples of early research included coverage maps from the 1920s, upon which stations indicated those areas from which they had gotten notice that people had received their signal; and 1930s-era analyses of how many and what kinds of letters had been received from listeners

about programs. However, such research was generally limited to stations based at land-grant universities. Further, the methods employed by educational broadcasters lagged in sophistication behind those used when researching commercial radio listening during the 1930s and 1940s. Commercial approaches to audience research in this era included telephone surveys conducted by the Cooperative Analysis of Broadcasting and C.E. Hooper, as well as A.C. Nielsen's Audimeter, a mechanical device which metered the usage of radio sets (see Beville, 1988, pp. 4-27; Buzzard, 1990, pp. 10-27).

During the 1950s several prominent faculty members who conducted audience research — notably Harrison Summers of Ohio State, a former NBC vice president — sought to encourage its use through presentations at National Association of Educational Broadcasters (NAEB) conventions and articles in academic journals (Summers, 1950). Interest in audience research spread, albeit gradually (see Wright, 1961, for an annotated bibliography of selected research findings to that time; also see Avery, Burrows and Pincus, 1980; Becker, 1962). NAEB established a Research Committee, which considered hiring an audience research consultant as early as 1953; lamented the lack of money for such research in 1954; and discussed purchasing Nielsen ratings data in 1955 (NAEB Research Committee, 1953; 1954; 1955). As a former Wisconsin educational radio manager said: “It’s not that the interest wasn’t there, the money wasn’t” (Ralph Johnson, former WHA station manager, personal communication, June 30, 1989). However, lack of funds and concern about commercialism kept such research widely scattered and limited to the larger stations (Stavitsky, 1993, pp. 15-16).

## Enter CPB

The Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) is an independent, non-profit organization, created as a result of the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967, that receives federal funds and allocates them to stations, program producers and others involved in the industry. CPB was charged by Congress with assisting in the establishment and development of a system of public radio and television stations (Public Broadcasting Act of 1967). In public television, station officials who had been troubled by what they perceived as an “East Coast, liberal bias” of National Educational Television, educational television’s program service, were determined to avoid creating a network in the model of U.S. commercial television (Robertson, 1993, pp. 251-255; Rowland, 1986, p. 257). The Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) was created by public television station leaders as a distribution entity and was forbidden from *producing* public television programs. Leaders of the lower-profile public radio system, on the other hand, had no such reluctance about a national programming organization. Most of educational radio’s previous shared programming had been “bicycled” from station to station on a sporadic basis, with the exception of occasional *ad hoc* wired or wireless networks (Wood and Wylie, 1977, p. 24). National Public Radio (NPR), therefore, was established to produce as well as distribute programming to a system of stations interconnected for the first time (Avery, 1979). NPR began to distribute programs nationwide in 1971 — initially classical music concerts and the newsmagazine *All Things Considered* (see Stamberg, 1982; Stavitsky and Gleason, in press).

CPB commissioned analyses of Nielsen ratings for the public television system as early as 1969 (Willard D. Rowland, Jr., former PBS research director, personal communication, February 23, 1993). CPB's director of research, Jack Lyle, was primarily interested in television and paid little attention to public radio research until 1973 (David J. LeRoy, former CPB deputy director of research, personal communication, February 15, 1994). In 1973, with new CPB president Henry Loomis placing an increased emphasis on radio, the corporation made its first purchase of Arbitron ratings data for public radio (Bailey and Church, 1979; LeRoy, personal communication, February 15, 1994). The size of public radio audiences was difficult to determine; listenership to public stations was not routinely listed in the ratings books, which were produced for commercial stations, and required customized computer runs by the ratings service and hand-tabulation by CPB staffers.

Though the ratings data were provided to public radio stations, the role and value of audience research locally as an audience-building tool was neither initially valued nor emphasized. Jack Mitchell, then an NPR producer, learned to interpret and apply ratings data not from CPB, but rather from a neighbor who happened to work for Arbitron (Mitchell, personal communication, October 25, 1993). CPB officials used the audience information primarily for representational purposes. The data were taken to Congress to demonstrate that people were indeed listening to public radio and that the CPB appropriation was justified (Bernadette McGuire, director of planning and research, Association of Public Television Stations, personal communication, March 5, 1993; Rowland, personal communication, February 23, 1993). Even after public radio professionals embraced audience research for programming and marketing purposes, its

representational function remained important. For instance, public broadcasters faced charges of elitism — that public broadcasting serves a relatively well-educated and wealthy audience, and that tax-based support therefore unfairly subsidizes upper-class tastes (Rowland, 1993, pp. 162-166). NPR officials, like their counterparts in public television, have long sought to counter this criticism by presenting audience demographic data to demonstrate that public broadcasting appeals to a broad spectrum of the U.S. citizenry (see Corporation for Public Broadcasting, 1993, p. 13).

### **Research and the Station**

The notion that audience research could be — and should be — fundamental in station programming became paramount after Tom Church, who had previously worked at Arbitron, joined CPB's research office in 1976. Church sought to merge the non-commercial broadcaster's sense of mission with the commercial concept of serving listeners. As he wrote in a primer on audience research for public radio: "While non-commercial stations may define success in more esoteric terms than profit, the bottom line for all radio stations is that a mission...cannot be achieved if there are no listeners" (Radio Research Consortium, 1986, p. 1). Church made a technical, but significant, change in the type of data purchased from the ratings service. Whereas CPB had previously requested a customized tabulation of ratings diaries based upon the stations' signal coverage areas, Church began buying diaries from the stations' actual home markets, or Area of Dominant Influence, as defined by Arbitron. The effect was that, for the first time, public radio stations could compare their audiences to those of their commercial competitors (Church, personal communication, March 1, 1993).

In 1977 Church began sending public radio stations the national rankings of stations in terms of their cumulative audience (*cumes*), the size of a station's unduplicated audience during a specified period of time. He also encouraged local stations to make further use of Arbitron data from their home markets, such as extracting demographic data (Church, personal communication, October 22, 1993). This provided an opening for the research consultants who were to have a major impact on the rise of audience research in public radio. Individuals interviewed for this study noted three leading consultants: Lawrence Lichty who had studied under Harrison Summers at Ohio State and was on leave from a faculty position at Wisconsin; David Giovannoni, Lichty's graduate assistant; and George Bailey, another former student of Lichty, who was a professor at Wisconsin-Milwaukee and also managed the university radio station, WUWM.

Station managers such as Peter Dominowski in Orlando, Wallace Smith in Los Angeles, and Max Wycisk in Denver welcomed the audience research during the late 1970s as a useful form of feedback. However, others in public radio "greeted the methods, paradigms, and proponents of research with open hostility and disdain" (Giovannoni, 1991, p. 3). These critics — including producers such as Larry Josephson and managers such as Marvin Granger, then in Spokane, both of whom participated in a debate with researchers at a 1978 conference — believed that concern for ratings "collided with the *art* of programming non-commercial radio" (Marvin Granger, personal communication, May 24, 1994). Anti-research antagonism boiled over at the 1978 Public Radio Conference. After a presentation by Church, E.B. Eiselein, an academic from Arizona and a consultant to public radio stations, stood up and proclaimed, "Arbitron is

bullshit." Many of the conferees cheered. Church realized that more missionary work was needed (Church, personal communication, March 1, 1993).

### **The Audience Research Road Show**

Church convinced CPB Research Director Leon Rosenbluth of the need for a series of seminars for station managers on the value and function of audience research. The seminars were modeled after a series of CPB-sponsored meetings on public television programming techniques and NAEB seminars on ascertainment during the mid-1970s (LeRoy, personal communication, February 15, 1994; Thomas A. McCain, Ohio State University professor and participant in NAEB seminars, personal communication, February 25, 1993). CPB's Office of Communication Research funded eight seminars across the United States between 1978 and 1981, entitled "Public Radio and the Ratings," to which managers and program directors were invited (CPB, 1981, p. 98). To help him conduct the seminars Church enlisted Lichty, Bailey, Giovannoni, and a cast of station managers.

Bailey characterized the attendees in three categories. First, managers who believed research was irrelevant because they had missions to fulfill. Second, skeptics who doubted the validity of research because their low ratings conflicted with intuition (often from phone or personal contacts) that many people were listening. Third, the "research converts" who sought more information about their audiences (George Bailey, personal communication, October 8, 1993). The presenters described the basics of social-scientific research, discussed the applications of ratings data, and sought to dispel some of the mythology surrounding audience research, such as the notion that a station's

Friends group or program guide readers were representative of the audience at large. Humor helped. Asked at one seminar about “the best time” to schedule radio drama, Bailey replied, “1938” (Bailey, personal communication, October 8, 1993).

More than 220 station managers attended the sessions (CPB, 1981, p. 98). While the “road show” contributed to the incremental acceptance of audience research during the late 1970s and early 1980s, the seminars exposed many managers to the techniques and availability of research. They also provided a forum for research proponents to argue that conducting research did not in itself compromise a public station’s mission. (See Church, personal communication, March 1, 1993; Giovannoni, personal communication, March 1, 1993; Lichty, personal communication, February 9, 1993). This process was also fostered by similar workshops at NPR meetings, numerous articles in professional publications (see, for example, Bailey and Church, 1979) and industry newsletters, and word of mouth.

### **The *Morning Edition* Project**

Another significant episode in the diffusion of audience research involved the creation of NPR’s *Morning Edition*, which was marketed with the help of research and led to the establishment of the network’s research unit. The network’s first news program, *All Things Considered* (*ATC*), was scheduled for late afternoon because some public stations were not on the air during radio’s “morning drive” time and because a morning program would have been more difficult for NPR’s small staff to produce (Lichty, personal communication, February 9, 1993). After *ATC* had established itself, NPR sought to add a morning news program in 1978, but several prominent stations, such as

Boston’s WGBH and WGUC in Cincinnati, resisted on grounds that another network offering would displace local morning programming (Samuel Holt, personal communication, March 4, 1993). NPR’s vice president for programming, Samuel Holt, used research to make the case that a morning news program would increase audience size throughout the day, as well as in the morning.

Holt contracted with Lichty in 1978 to survey morning radio listening. Some stations were dismayed to learn how few listeners they were attracting in the mornings, the time when radio listening in general was highest and when research showed there was high demand for news (Holt, personal communication, March 4, 1993; Lichty, personal communication, February 9, 1993). “If you want to serve listeners, you need to behave like radio,” Holt told managers (Holt, personal communication, March 4, 1993). He asked stations whether they could justify rejecting the network’s proposed morning program based on the performance of local programming. Holt offered them *Morning Edition* in a modular format, borrowed from his commercial radio experience, in which stations could insert local material between the national segments. Although fewer than half of NPR’s member stations carried *Morning Edition* when it debuted in November 1979, it was gradually picked up by more stations — and surpassed *ATC* in cumulative audience by 1989 — supporting NPR’s research claims about the importance of a morning news program (Piantadosi, 1979; Weinstein, 1989).

Nonetheless, Holt wanted more detailed audience information about national listenership to NPR programs, especially *Morning Edition*, than was currently available by summing up individual station cumes (Holt, personal communication, March 4, 1993).

Lichty was hired in 1979 as director of audience research and evaluation for NPR and brought on Giovannoni to develop a system to measure the NPR audience. The Public Radio Audience Profile (PRAP) was laboriously constructed by sampling local market listener diaries to compute national cumulative and average-quarter-hour audiences for public radio network programs (Giovannoni, personal communication, March 1, 1993). PRAP yielded its first audience estimates in 1981, the year that Lichty left NPR to work on a PBS documentary, and Giovannoni took over as head of research. That same year Church left CPB to form the Radio Research Consortium, a membership organization that provides stations with audience research data and consulting.

By the mid-1980s discord over the use of audience research in public radio had largely faded. As station manager Marvin Granger noted, “The issue was settled and the researchers won” (personal communication, May 24, 1994). In addition to NPR’s active research unit, individual stations were conducting audience studies by the mid-1980s, often with the help of consultants, though occasionally using station staff or university students (see Giovannoni, 1991; Stavitsky, 1990). As an example, the Ohio public radio station for which the author worked hired consultants to conduct a “psychographic analysis” of its listeners in 1985, to assess their preferences regarding the station’s programs and personalities (*Psychographic Analysis*, 1985).

Several external forces contributed to the ascendance of audience research. With tax-based funding for public broadcasting flat or decreasing during the 1980s, most station managers were forced to depend more on listener and underwriter dollars (Rowland, 1993, pp. 173-175, 180). Audience research became increasingly valuable as a means of assessing the appeal of programming to lis-

teners, and of pitching audiences to potential underwriters. Further, FM had become radio’s dominant band during the 1970s, which exposed more listeners to the public stations clustered between 88 and 92 megahertz, the portion of the spectrum set aside for non-commercial broadcasters. Stations also reaped the benefits of NPR popularity as *All Things Considered* and *Morning Edition* developed audiences; stations that had been run without concern for or awareness of how listeners used radio “lucked into an audience” nonetheless, in Bailey’s words (personal communication, October 8, 1993).

### **Changing Application of NPR Research**

Within this environment the applications of audience research had begun to broaden in the early 1980s. In 1981 NPR first purchased data on public radio listeners from the Simmons Market Research Bureau, which surveys people nationwide on their media usage, product usage and buying behavior, and demographics (Giovannoni, personal communication, March 1, 1993). This marked a shift from asking simply *how many* were listening to asking *what kinds* of people were tuning to public radio — demographics *and* psychographics. In this manner audience research became a tool for underwriting in addition to programming. For example, a spring 1991 survey found NPR news listeners were 47 percent more likely than average to own an Acura automobile; public station underwriting salespeople could descend on their local Acura dealerships armed with such data (“Who is listening,” 1992, p. 11).

The focus on underwriting at the national level was driven by NPR’s fiscal exigencies of the 1980s. Given the Reagan Administration’s marketplace ideology, even flat federal support for public broadcasting was no

longer assured. Under NPR President Frank Mankewicz, in 1982 the network attempted to become fiscally independent through a profit-making subsidiary and through technology ventures, as well as increased underwriting sales. However, amid a \$3 million deficit and charges of fiscal irresponsibility, Mankewicz resigned. With NPR on the verge of bankruptcy, its affiliated stations and CPB bailed the network out with an emergency loan in 1983 (Witherspoon and Kovitz, 1987, pp. 36-38).

Given NPR's financial straits in a time of uncertain federal support, under new President Douglas Bennet the function of research at the national level shifted further from a focus on building audience to an emphasis on underwriting and listener support (Giovannoni, personal communication, March 1, 1993). The network's audience research operation became analogous to a commercial station's sales department. Research became instrumental in determining who are the people most likely to listen to public radio, and why they do — or don't — support their local stations. Giovannoni left NPR in 1986 to devote full time to consulting. After several interim managers, the network hired a veteran of commercial radio programming and marketing, John Sutton, as its research director in 1990.

Today, NPR's Audience Research unit provides information to support the efforts of member stations to generate revenue (John Sutton, personal communication, March 3, 1993). For example, a recent study involved a comparison of fundraising programming, seeking to determine what styles and strategies would yield the best listener response. The department also provides stations and program producers with Simmons data on the demographics and product and media usage of NPR listeners. They provide ZIP code analyses of where pockets of each sta-

tion's listeners reside; information on what motivates listeners to give money; and customized profiles of station contributors, for purposes of eliciting increased donations and membership renewals (National Public Radio, 1993). For the network itself, the unit provides data to help NPR market its programs to member stations and to attract underwriters. Public radio's contemporary application of research at the network level, therefore, reflects a commercial orientation.

### **Leading Role of Consultants and Stations**

At CPB support for audience research in public radio declined after the corporation's Office of Communication Research was disbanded in 1982 by CPB's new administrators, who were displeased with OCR's line of research (John Fuller, PBS director of research, personal communication, March 2, 1993; LeRoy, personal communication, February 15, 1994). OCR studies had become "very sociological" and were generating "little actionable research," according to another researcher (Fuller, personal communication, March 2, 1993). An audience research unit at CPB was later restored in 1985 on a smaller scale as part of the planning department. By this time consultants and station managers had taken the lead in audience research that stressed programming applications (Ted Coltman, CPB director of plans and policy, personal communication, March 3, 1993).

Giovannoni, for example, produced a series of studies with CPB support. The so-called "Cheap 90" study — named for the roughly 90 percent of public radio listeners who do not support their local stations financially — compared supporters with non-supporters (Giovannoni, 1985). According to "Cheap 90," listeners who said public radio was important in their lives were more likely to

support it, and “programming causes audience.” AUDIENCE 88 was a study of public radio listeners’ demographic, values and life-style characteristics, as well as their uses of radio (Giovannoni, Liebold, Thomas & Clifford, 1988). AUDIENCE 88 contended that public radio listeners tended to be well educated, professionally employed, fairly well-off financially, 35 to 44 years old, and involved in social causes. Bailey, doing business with Church as Walrus Research, began consulting with CBS Radio’s FM stations as well as public radio clients and encouraged public radio managers to apply more sophisticated research methods, such as those utilized by commercial stations (Bailey, personal communication, October 8, 1993). One such application was the Denver Project, supported by CPB between 1988 and 1992, in which commercial research techniques were adapted for use at Denver public radio station KCFR. In addition to the standard Arbitron data (e.g. rating and audience share), the Denver Project included analysis of individual listener Arbitron diaries to determine such characteristics as audience loyalty. They recontacted diary keepers to ask about financial support for KCFR and attitudes toward the station. They conducted focus groups and a telephone “perceptual” survey to check the reliability of the focus group information about the image of the station. They also did auditorium music testing in which segments of prospective programs are played for groups of listeners, to assess what types of music appeal to what types of listeners (Giovannoni, 1991, pp. 73-74).

The Denver Project reflects the second wave of research in public radio: research as a predictive tool. The first phase of audience research in public radio involved technical mastery — developing the ability to compile ratings for public radio — and working to foster broad acceptance and application of

audience research on the part of managers. However, research was largely *descriptive* of past performance. Now researchers are seeking to use research as a *predictive* tool, a means of determining the preferred program choice from a range of options. This is the idea behind research for the CPB Radio Program Fund, a pool of money available to producers of prospective public radio programs. To help decide which programs will receive funding in their formative years, the fund’s director, Richard Madden, uses auditorium testing and a model known as Programming Economics (Giovannoni, Thomas, Clifford, Berky & Madden, 1989). Programming Economics seeks to determine how many listeners the funded program delivered *per CPB dollar spent* (Madden, personal communication, March 4, 1993).

However, in keeping with public radio’s long-standing contention over audience research, the debate still roils at individual stations. For instance, public radio listeners in four states organized successful campaigns during the past ten years to restore broadcasts of the Metropolitan Opera. Station officials had attempted to cancel the opera broadcasts, citing low ratings at a prime listening time — Saturday morning and early afternoon (Behrens, 1993; “Opera listeners triumphant,” 1993). At this writing, a dispute over Bailey’s research for WUSF in Tampa had become an issue of community controversy after the station’s news director stated publicly that the research findings would lead to elimination of local news coverage (Conciatore, 1994; Rosen, 1994).

### **Changing Conceptions of Localism**

The rise of audience research in U.S. public radio reflects changing conceptions of localism, as well as the fiscal realities of non-commercial media in a mediascape domi-

nated by private entities. As described in an earlier edition of the *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, the conception of localism in contemporary U.S. radio broadcasting has shifted to a *socially* derived conception from the traditional *spatial* notion of localism (Stavitsky, 1994). This theory holds that radio broadcasters, both commercial and public, seek to reach audiences defined by shared interests, tastes and values. Conceiving of audiences in social terms contrasts with a spatial conception, for which the parameters are geographic entities such as cities, counties and regions. The spatial conception corresponds with the U.S. policy ideal of localism: broadcasting that speaks — often in local voices — to the concerns and needs of residents of a specific geographic entity. Nonetheless, commercial radio stations have sought to construct audiences in social terms since radio adopted niche formats in response to the arrival of television. Few radio stations try to serve *all* of the people in their listening areas *some* of the time; instead they seek to serve *some* of the people *all* of the time with tightly defined formats (e.g. Classic Rock, New Country, Sports Talk).

In public radio, however, consolidation of programming into focussed formats, a necessary condition for social localism, was a phenomenon of the 1980s, and is still ongoing for some stations (see Hinman, 1992; Stavitsky, 1993, pp. 87-88). According to a 1992 study (Giovannoni, Thomas, and Clifford, 1992), public radio stations have increasingly focussed their formats to attract a loyal audience drawn to a consistent type of programming, an audience that would be willing to support the stations financially. This narrowing of programming, for example, may involve eliminating public affairs from jazz formats or opera from classical formats, which some stations have done despite the listener opposition noted earlier

(Behrens, 1993). Because audience research informs managers on the construction of a social community of listeners, public radio's engagement with audience research has fostered this changing conception of localism.

## Conclusions

Educational broadcasters often viewed their mission from a teacher-student perspective: as educators, they sought to transmit the information they believed their listeners needed to be informed and enlightened. While a number of educational broadcasters were interested in audience feedback (see Stavitsky, 1993), concerns of audience appeal were generally secondary to concerns about program quality and pedagogical value in educational radio, as determined by the educational broadcaster's sense of the commonweal and audience "needs." However, in contemporary public radio, audience researchers were successful in imbuing managers with the notion that audience size and composition *did* matter, that public radio could not justify itself if few people chose to listen — and could not survive if fewer still chose to contribute. External forces contributed to the diffusion of audience research during the past 15 years: the uncertainty of tax-based funding forced public stations to depend more upon listener and underwriter support, for which audience research was instrumental.

However, while audience research has been successfully diffused into public radio's managerial culture, its application continues to elicit concern at the level of producers. Put another way, the debate seems no longer to revolve around whether or not to conduct research. Instead the contemporary conflict involves the ways in which research is applied *in the service of mission*; the manager or program director's view of mission may

clash with the news or music producer's view. From a station manager or program director's standpoint, mission may be measurable in audience and revenue terms, while the producer's currency is often more amorphous — fealty to internalized professional values and standards. Nonetheless, the fiscal

realities of contemporary U.S. public radio — indeed of public broadcasting worldwide — dictate that stations must be cognizant of their appeal to listeners who will support them financially, and thus audience research will remain an essential management function.

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