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## **Power and Affinity: Incorporating Two New Statistics Into Program Decision-Making**

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# POWER AND AFFINITY: INCORPORATING TWO NEW STATISTICS INTO PROGRAM DECISION-MAKING

by David Giovannoni

*Form does not follow function. Form follows the failure of existing things to function as well as an inventor can imagine.*

— Henry Petroski

Two years ago in these pages we printed a series that examined the appeal and affinity of public radio's national programs\*. One table showed the degree to which the audiences to various programs matched *All Things Considered's*. Another displayed the programs that might not work well together because their audiences were so different. Both caused something of a minor ruckus.

Like anyone confronted with a new invention or idea, public broadcasters split into three camps. The vast majority ignored the information. Some attempted to discredit it. And more than a few sought to embrace it.

Indeed, people in the third camp tell me that the tables they clipped and saved from the newspaper are still pinned above their desks. Yellowed and curling with age, these preliminary explorations have remained the last published research on the matter for two whole years.

\* What Connects Programming With The Audience It Creates (Jun 93); Which Shows Work With NPR Magazines? Which Work Against Them? (Jul 93); Aversion: Program Pairings That You May Want To Avoid (Sep 93); How Do We Get The Most Reliable Picture Of Programming Appeal & Affinity? (Sep 93).

It's time to take down those tables. In mid-October we sent the latest affinity and power data to more than 150 stations (Arbitron subscribers with sufficient numbers of diaries to support this analysis).

Here we discuss how to include power and affinity in your decision to invest or not invest in certain programming. We conclude with some thoughts on strengthening the alliance between public stations and their national program suppliers.

## **Making Programming Decisions**

Every programming decision is a comparison between two options: the program now on the air and the program(s) that might be. This comparison is based on many factors. Each factor informs the decision-maker, but none alone makes the decision.

**Quality and Values.** Program decision-making begins by assessing the quality of a program and its adherence to the values that set your public radio station apart. If it's an inferior show with no redeeming value, there's no reason for it to be on your air. Nothing else is relevant. End of discussion.

**Adherence to Identity.** Programs that enhance your schedule's central identity — jazz programs on a jazz station, for instance — are typically referred to as programs that “fit the format.” But “identity” is a better way than “format” to address this factor.

Some of public radio's most powerful programs take a schedule “out of format” yet reinforce the identity of the station. For instance, certain weekend entertainment shows have a strong affinity with news programs not because they're “in format” — which they're not — but because they appeal to the same listeners.

**Affinity.** Affinity is the degree to which a program's audience is similar to a station's. A program has an affinity with the station when the people who listen to it are of the same type as those already listening to the station. Conversely, a program that serves a different type of listener exhibits aversion.

(Affinity and aversion are based on the age, sex, and race composition of the two audiences being compared.)

The affinity between a station's audience and listeners to national programs can suggest which programs might or might not work for the station's listeners.

Affinity tables (on pages 5 and 6) are shown for two stations: KQED in San Francisco and WQED in Pittsburgh. The audience that KQED serves with its news and information format is very similar to — i.e. has high affinity with — the programs at the top of the graph.

WQED generates a significantly different type of audience with its classical music format. Notice how the array of programs with affinity is completely changed.

Either station will probably want to avoid programs with aversion; these shows simply don't serve the types of people that the stations bring to them.

Does high affinity guarantee that a program will perform well? Not necessarily. Affinity reports how closely a program's audience matches a station's. But it does not report how well the program might serve listeners.

If a program fits a station's identity and does not show significant aversion with the station's audience, the next step is to consider its power.

**Power.** A program's power is its ability to serve a station's listeners relative to all programming on the station. Technically speaking, power is defined as the weekly audience's loyalty to the program in relation to its loyalty to the station across the week.

Practically speaking, the higher a program's power, the better able it is to serve the listeners to the stations that carry it.

Ranking is the most important factor on the power graph, shown on page seven. All other things being equal, a program can be expected to perform better than the programs below it.

A local program may be more powerful than many programs on this graph. Conversely, a national program may currently exhibit sub-par power, but it may well be more powerful among your listeners than what you now have on the air.

There is no shortage of quality programming in public radio. The operative questions are, “What program will best serve the listeners the station seeks to serve? What is the most powerful and appropriate program available at this time?”

**Not-So-Fine Points.** Before proceeding to the last step in the decision-making process, several points should be made about the appropriate interpretation of power and affinity information.

First, the power graph reports power across all public radio stations carrying each program. Certain programs may be more powerful among certain cohorts of stations. *Afropop*, for instance, seems to be more powerful among stations that serve predominantly African American audiences.

Second, affinities based on a station's full-week schedule can be obscured by major swings in the station's programming appeal. A station that serves 45-year-old news listeners week-day mornings and afternoons, for example, may not show a strong affinity with national news programs if it serves the parents of these listeners during the middays and their children on the weekend.

Finally, neither affinity nor power pass an aesthetic judgement on a program. Nothing here says that *Prairie Home Companion* is a "better" program than *Afropop*. Program decision-making is a comparison of choices. Your professional judgement addresses this issue at the "quality and values" stage. Affinity and power can inform your decision only on programs that have cleared the previous hurdles.

**Expense and Return.** The final stage in the decision-making process is to weigh the expense of a program against its return.

Each year public radio relies more heavily on listener and underwriting support. These sources are audience-sensitive — that is, the more listeners are served and the better they are served, the more listener and underwriting revenues are generated.

In other words, programming decisions are fast becoming "investment" decisions as they increasingly determine our budgets.

The cost of programming must therefore be viewed with an eye to return. Return is not just monetary — indeed, monetary return flows from the return a program provides in audience service. Insignificant programs serving insignificant audiences return nothing on either count.

Sometimes free programming is no bargain, and sometimes the most expensive programming is the best investment.

### Us And Them

Too often public stations and program purveyors see each other as adversaries. Indeed, some stations express concern that this information will be "used against us" by people with programs to sell. But that will only happen if stations are not prepared to engage in this discussion.

Doesn't affinity and power information raise the level of the producer/station dialogue? Doesn't it focus the two allies on the same goal: better service to the ultimate consumer (and bill-payer) — the listener?

Public radio does have real enemies. But the enemy isn't the program supplier. Nor is it the other public station(s) in town. Nor is it congress.

A public station's primary adversary is a commercial entity that can better serve its listeners.

Think it can't happen? This year alone we've seen commercial jazz services force public jazz stations out of the format. We've seen commercial broadcast organizations clearly annun-

ciate their feelings toward our public enterprise in congressional testimony. These and other developments leave absolutely no doubt: it's *all of us* — public stations, producers, and program suppliers — against them.

As resources get tighter and more closely tied to performance, public radio must make the most out of its assets at hand. We must align the right programs with the right stations at the right times, so that the power of our highest quality programming — local, national, from whatever source — can best serve the American public.

Indeed, the proper use of affinity and power information can promote the effective use of the most undervalued assets in public radio today — its best national programming.

That's right. Quality national programming is currently one of public radio's most squandered resources. Programs aren't carried on the right stations. Programs are carried on the wrong stations. Programs are carried at the wrong times. Programs are being wasted.

Affinity and power data will help program suppliers define and approach their markets. Now they can discuss how well specific programs match the audience characteristics of specific stations. They can address how programs perform relative to others. They can talk — or you can ask — about their ability to serve your listeners.

Remember that this information is a two-edged sword. Program suppliers are also learning that many of their programs — those with aversion and low power — simply shouldn't be on certain stations.

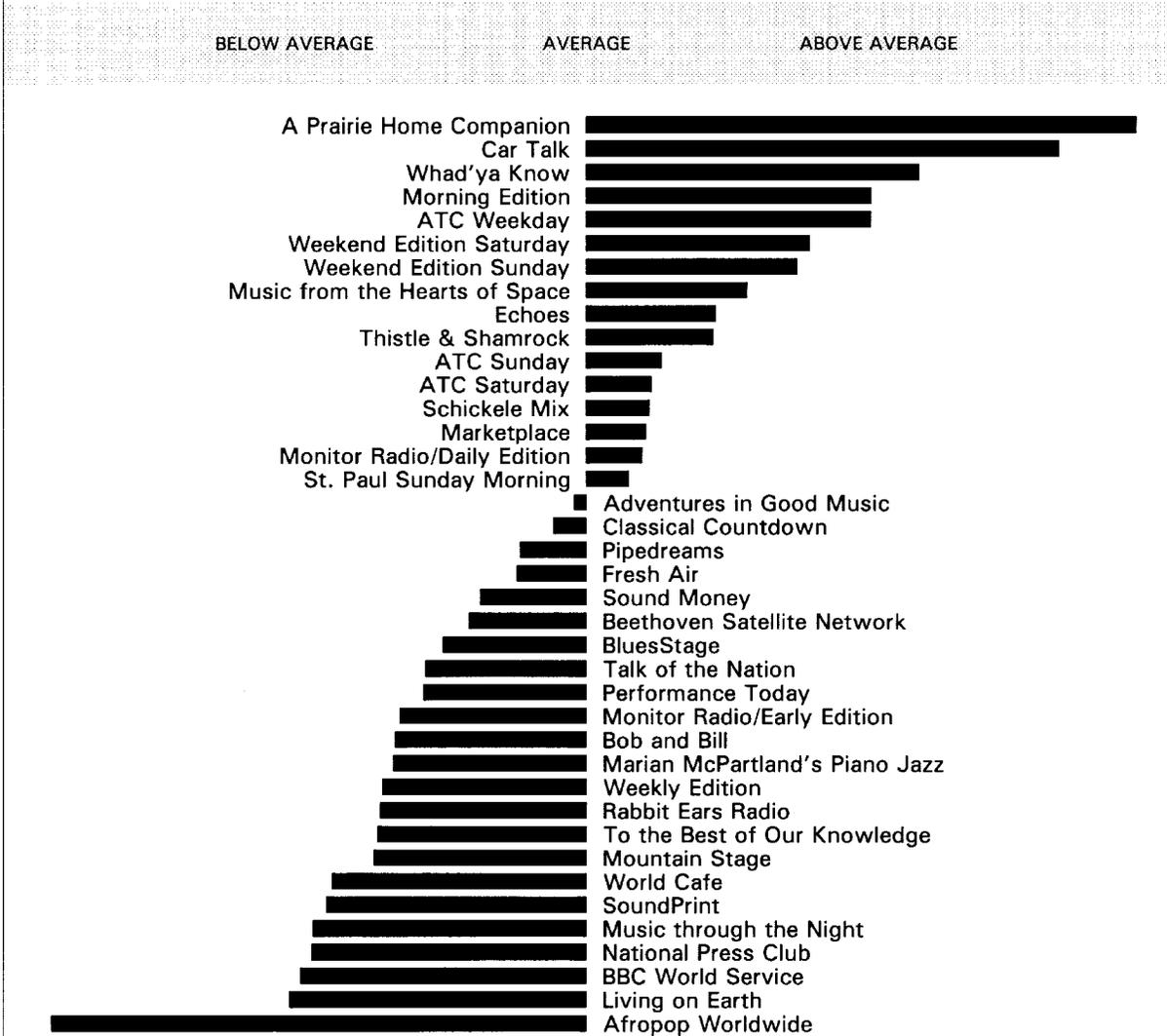
Will program suppliers ever suggest that you take one of their programs off your air? If they could offer a quality program with greater power and affinity — they should.

*David Giovannoni heads Audience Research Analysis, an independent firm specializing in radio audience research. Thanks go to Jo Anne Wallace at KQED and Jim Cunningham at WQED for permission to reprint their stations' Affinity graphs.*





# THE POWER OF NATIONAL PROGRAMS Spring 1995



POWER indicates how well a program serves listeners to the stations that carry it. Only programs heard by significant numbers of listeners are shown above.

Power is the loyalty of the station's weekly audience during the program in relation to its loyalty across all of the station's programming. It does not indicate how many people listen; indeed, it is unaffected by the number of people using radio when the program is offered. However, it does indicate the relative strength of the program. The higher a program's power, the better able it is to serve the carrying stations' listeners.

A program's national power doesn't guarantee that it is right or wrong for a particular station. Programmers should weigh a program's national power against its quality, its affinity with, and its appropriateness to the station's format.