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Public Service, Values, and Ratings

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Public Service, Values, And Ratings For Public Radio, Public Service Requires Significant Programming for Significant Audiences

by David Giovannoni

Intelligence
that you can use
on communications
media & technologies

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Public Broadcasting



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Every licensee who applies for a grant to operate in the public interest, convenience and necessity makes certain promises as to what he will do in terms of program content. Many recipients of licenses have, in blunt language, welsbed on those promises.... I do not advocate that we turn television into a 27-inch wailing wall, where longbairs constantly moan about the state of our culture.... I would just like to see it reflect occasionally the hard, unyielding realities of the world in which we live. I would like to see it done inside the existing framework, and I would like to see the doing of it redound to the credit of those who finance and program it. Measure the results by Nielsen, Trendex or Silex — it doesn't matter. The main thing is to try.

—Edward R. Murrow, 1958

It used to be the law that all broadcasters were to operate “in the public interest, convenience, and necessity.” I don’t know whether it’s still law today; it’s hard to tell just from listening. But the **public service** philosophy embodied in this phrase is deeply-rooted in public radio’s history, conscience, and programming. That’s easy to hear.

Public radio is nothing if not a public service. However, our definition of public service has undergone major changes during the long history of educational and public radio.

Today, most agree that public radio provides a public service only when it delivers **significant programming to significant audiences**. We judge the significance of programming in terms of our values, often referred to as our “mission.” We judge the significance of the audience in terms of syndicated audience research, or “the ratings.” We’ve come to understand that “mission” and “ratings,” “values” and “listeners” are not mutually-exclusive. Indeed, when multiplied together, these two factors actually define public service.

It hasn’t always been this way. To understand where this thinking may take us, we must first understand where we’ve been.

Values

People in public radio are imbued with a strong set of programming values. Sometimes we can sense these values better than we can define them; they have something to do with quality, intelligence, importance, mission. Although we can be vague on the specifics, we don't hesitate to judge programs by these standards. We may not be able to explicate them, but we know them when we hear them.

We inherited many of these values from educational institutions via the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967 — the legislation that established public radio as we know it today. These values have remained remarkably consistent through the years. But our attitude toward listeners has not.

Educational institutions established radio stations as extensions of their classrooms — both in the formal sense of **remote learning** (bringing the classroom to distant and/or multiple locations) and in the informal sense of **lifelong learning** (making the university's knowledge available to listeners). In both cases the presumption was that people were listening.

It was also the intent. Attendance was taken. Postcards and letters were logged. Academics periodically poked into their institutions' radio audiences to determine their number, discern their listening behaviors, and discover their preferences. There may not have been a lot of listeners, but for these licensees, a listening audience was part and parcel of their service.

Now fast forward to the 1960s. In 1967, the Carnegie Commission on Educational Television, and the Public Broadcasting Act that it inspired, reflected a wholesale change in attitude about the audience. The Act recast “educational” broadcasting into “public” broadcasting, and granted it certain privileges to protect it from the tyranny of “the ratings.” It sought to insulate non-commercial media from pressures that, in the

Commission's perception, had caused commercial broadcasting to devolve into Minnow's “vast wasteland,” or Murrow's “wires and lights in a box.”

The economics of commercial broadcasting were blamed for this state of affairs. The larger the audience for a program, the more money a sponsor would pay to be associated with it. When the size of the audience determined the broadcaster's bottom line, programming of quality and intelligence — programming that looked hard at important issues — programming that challenged citizens and their elected officials to be and to do better — was seen to suffer as a direct result.

The prescribed cure was a unique set of tax-based economics that removed the link between funding and use. Public broadcasting was reborn ensuring achievement in terms of adherence to values, and not — as in commercial media — on the number of people who actually heard or viewed its programming.

With the incentive to study actual listeners removed, values became public radio's sine qua non. It was assumed that the values educational broadcasters infused into their programs were public services in themselves. These values had built the system and passed the Public Broadcasting Act, and these were the values that the Act intended to preserve and foster.¹

Fast forward from the Great Society to the Silent Majority, when public broadcasting's values were politically assaulted ostensibly because they did not align with those of the mainstream. To many this served as an early warning: public broadcasting was not as insulated as they might have

¹ Although the Commission wished to protect public broadcasting from commercial audience concerns, it did suggest “research and development leading to the improvement of programming....” The adoption of auditorium testing by a number of stations in the 1980s was public radio's first major involvement in this activity.

hoped. Its values brought it under attack, and its funding made it quite vulnerable.

Similar aim was taken at public broadcasting in the 1980s. This time the attack was more than political. The combination of rescissions, recessions, tax revolts, and economic tough times at funding institutions shook and seriously cracked the foundations of tax-based support.

In this sense public broadcasting has been buffeted by the same forces prevailing on other public sector institutions. During the last 30 years universities have reassessed their roles and have shifted from “patron-driven” to “consumer-driven” services. Hospitals and other health care providers are following the same course; more choices invoke greater competition, a demand for efficiencies, and the need to increase the involvement of those being served.

Replace “students” and “patients” with “listeners” and it sounds very much like public radio’s evolution in a fragmenting media environment. The general trend is toward greater accountability to those being served.

Ratings

These broad trends and economic instabilities have forced public broadcasters to develop listener-based sources of support. Listeners—or the lack of them—entered into programming decisions as we learned how to interpret the Arbitron data that the CPB, National Public Radio, and later the Radio Research Consortium made available.

We replaced old programs with new ones—not because they lacked the values that public radio continued to represent, but because they lacked listeners. Indeed, our application of the commercial “ratings” has evolved well beyond the simple body counts of listeners. We routinely assess the degree to which certain listeners prefer us to other stations, how well our program schedules

fit together to serve them, and our place in the larger picture of their radio use.

We’ve accepted the ratings as the objective listener feedback they are. We’ve turned them from a tool for advertisers into a means of assessing customer satisfaction, and in the process we’ve freed ourselves from their tyranny.

This is a central point. Ratings themselves don’t threaten our existence or our values; the peril lies in the influence they exert on our funding sources. When funding is derived from other

Will Public Radio Sell Out?

If public radio must pay attention to listeners, will our programming decline as our founders feared? Are we sliding down the slippery slope, poised on the precipice, falling into the dreaded lowest common denominator? Probably not.

Public radio’s values run deep and wide. They infuse the educational institutions that comprise the majority of licensees, and they permeate the well-educated perspectives of the people drawn to work in the lower FM frequencies.

Public radio’s values are its listeners values. As Cheap 90, Audience 88, and subsequent studies have documented, people support public radio because they listen. They listen because its programming resonates with their beliefs, their interests, their values. Values attract listeners. They are the essence of appeal. Moving away from these values will diminish listener support.

If public radio does sell out, it won’t be to listeners; it will be to underwriters. Business support is akin to advertising or sponsorship, and brings with it the same pressures for audience maximization and the “right” demographics.

These pressures are kept in check by relying more heavily on direct audience support. This was the case as of fiscal year 1992, when \$86 million came to public radio directly from listeners compared to \$67 million from businesses.

than the people served, the urge to pander — programmatically in the case of advertisers, politically in the case of tax-based revenues — is very real.

Today, public radio derives its largest single source of income from the direct financial support of listeners. Public radio's economics now *require* it to include the public in its definition of service and its desire to survive.

In sum, public radio is in the business of public service. Public service demands that a significant audience be served by significant programming. Public service incorporates both ratings and values. Both are necessary, neither alone is sufficient.

Public Service

These insights suggest a working model of public service:

Public service is the product of the use of programming and the values inherent in the programming.

$$\text{Public Service} = \text{Use} \times \text{Values}$$

Of course “use” means “listening” or “audience.” But there are several ways to report listening: the sum total of different people reached (cume), the average time each spends listening (TSL), and the average number of people listening at any time (AQH).

The **listener-hour** rolls these three most basic audience estimates into one. In a sense it transcends cume, time spent listening, and average audience by combining them into a single measure of gross consumption. It also recognizes the length of time the program is available; the more hours a program is on the air, the greater the use of it can be.

Does this mean that more listening translates into greater public service? It does, but with an important caveat: to constitute a public service, programming must embody certain values. Sacrifice these values and public service suffers.

Calculating Listener-Hours

Listener-hours can be calculated two ways from readily-available Arbitron estimates.

1. Multiply the number of different people who hear at least part of that program times the average length of time each listens.

$$\text{Listener-Hours} = \text{Cume} \times \text{Time Spent Listening}$$

Ten people listening for five hours apiece yield fifty listener-hours; so do five people listening for ten hours each.

2. Multiply the average number of people hearing the program times the length of time the program is on the air.

$$\text{Listener-Hours} = \text{AQH} \times \text{Broadcast Length}$$

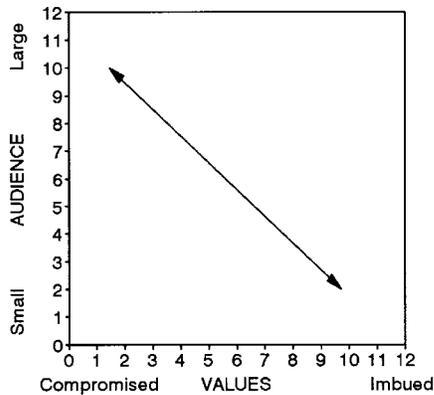
An average of five people listening to a ten-hour program yields fifty listener-hours; so does fifty people listening to a one-hour program.

This was the nub of the old “mission versus audience” debates. In their zeal to establish that more listening was better than less listening, those who used audience research to inform decisions sometimes failed to acknowledge that public radio could not seek listeners at any price. Similarly, in their zeal to preserve the values codified for public radio in the 1960s, those who judged programming solely on its inherent qualities did not always acknowledge the need to reach a *listening* public.

Today the nub of contention has shifted. The debate is not between mission and audience, but between mission and mission. As public radio diversifies, so do its ideas about mission.

Whose Values?

Does classical music have a higher inherent quality than jazz? Are there some types of jazz that deserve to be taken more seriously than others?

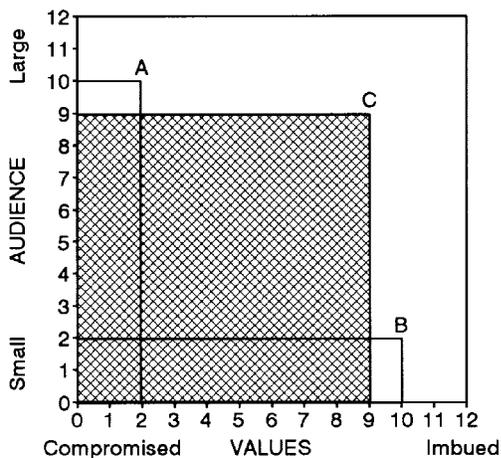


The idea that public radio's values must be compromised to attract larger audiences is portrayed above. It incorrectly assumes that audience size and values are inversely correlated; one gets bigger only when the other gets smaller.

The public service model suggested here asserts the independence of these two factors. Audience can be large or small regardless of the degree to which programming is imbued with values. Both are necessary — but neither is sufficient — to provide public service.

This concept is illustrated below. Program A has a large audience but contains a low dose of characteristics valued by public broadcasters. It yields only 20 (2x10) Public Service Units. So does Program B; only a few people listen to its high dose of valued characteristics.

Public service is optimized when both factors are high. Program C attracts 90 percent of Program A's audience with 90 percent of Program B's concentration of values. With 81 Public Service Units (9x9), this program provides four times more public service than either of the other two.



Are there musical genres so devoid of value that they don't merit attention, treatment, or resources of any kind?

And what about news and information? Are there stories that public radio should pursue at the expense of others? Are there stories that it should avoid? If so, what does it mean to assert that "the news is the news"? What does this subjective selection to do journalistic integrity?

This essay cannot resolve these questions. But it must pose them, because if we are to adopt the "use times values" model of public service, we've got to be very clear about our values. The diversification of licensees that has reshaped the public radio system during the last 20 years continues today. This diversification brings new voices, new concerns, new program content and approaches. What was unfit for one value system is quite appropriate for another.

Different sets of values can be debated on their own merits. However, once a set of values is established, it's a fairly straightforward task to insert it into the public service model.

Scoring Values

When translated into clear and objective measures, values can be assessed across any range of program services — both existing and proposed, non-commercial and commercial.

Is "high production quality" a part of the value system? If so, public radio professionals know quality when they hear it. Is "respect for the subject and the listener" among the values? Are "intelligence of presentation" and "depth of treatment"?

Any well-defined, well-communicated, well-understood criterion can be quantified. It can't be measured like antenna height or counted like listeners, but it most certainly can be assessed through the judgements of individuals. If we

know what we're listening for, we'll know when we hear it, and we'll know when one program, or one producer, or one station schedule has it and another doesn't.

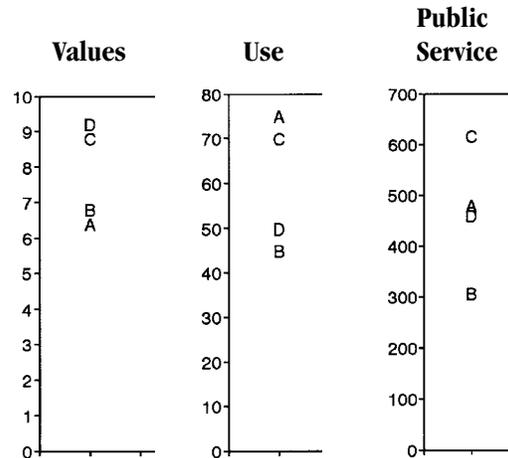
Just as one program can serve more listeners than another, one may embody to a greater or lesser degree a certain set of values. Program directors constantly judge this degree of endowment as part of their program-selection duties; CPB's Radio Program Fund annually convenes a panel to make this assessment; a number of institutions regularly give programming awards based on their own sets of values.

Public Service Units

Suppose we convened a panel to assess the relative levels of public service among a set of programs. On a ten-point value scale, programs A and B score 6.4 and 6.8 respectively, significantly below program C's 8.8 and D's 9.2. (Any scale or combination of scales can be used as long as each has a zero point.)

Now we introduce the consumption numbers. Programs A and C have audiences that are about 50 percent larger than programs B and D. With its strong component of value and use, program C's level of public service is head and shoulders above its nearest neighbors, A and D. Program A has a slightly larger audience, but it just doesn't embody the values; program D embodies the values to a slightly greater degree, but it doesn't draw listeners as well.

	Prg A	Prg B	Prg C	Prg D
Panelist 1 Score	5	7	9	10
Panelist 2 Score	7	7	10	8
Panelist 3 Score	6	6	8	9
Panelist 4 Score	6	8	9	1
Panelist 5 Score	8	6	8	9
Average Value Score	6.4	6.8	8.8	9.2
Listner-Hours (000s)	75	45	70	50
Public Service Units	480	306	616	460



This method also works for entire stations. How does your station's level of public service compare to others in the market? Using the value system under which you operate, give your station and others a score. Next, multiply each score times each station's listener-hours (use the station's full-week AQH times the number of hours it's on the air between 6:00 a.m. and midnight—usually 126 hours).

How are you doing compared with your commercial counterparts? Probably quite well, even though many have much larger audiences.

This is what we mean when we say that both ratings and values are necessary to provide a public service; neither alone is sufficient.

By the way, how are you doing compared with the other public stations in your market?

I'll wager that the extent of public service units is proportional to the total amount of listener support generated by each station.

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