

Public Radio 2.0 Grow the Audience New Media Working Group

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Introduction

The following report presents viewpoints on public radio investments in today's new media environment, as assessed by professionals in the field, both inside and outside of public broadcasting.

It begins with some high level guidance on how public radio professionals should inform their actions and decisions regarding new media going forward, and concludes with some specific recommendations for the most appropriate new-media directions to consider for next investments.

Guiding Principles

The following is a list of 10 important concepts that public radio professionals should keep as touchstones in charting their courses through the new media environment.

- AGILITY** Today's most important survival instinct for media professionals is the ability to shift among content creation and delivery models more readily than in the past. Public media management must gain such agility to adapt to new platforms and a changing marketplace, while maintaining a central focus on core content strengths.
- BRAND** This is the fundamental asset of public media. It includes a rare combination of integrity/credibility with hipness and high marketability to certain desirable demographics. In fact, it manages today to hold slightly *different* values for several different demographics, and this potential must be expanded (another form of agility – maintaining multiple variations of branding for various audience cohorts). It's critical, however that a coherent focus be retained. Perhaps this is best expressed as "My Proxy," in which public radio serves as a primary filter for a certain worldview – both for news/info and arts/entertainment – and ideally one that "works" (i.e., translates easily) for several distinct demographic targets.
- MAINTAIN** Keep the anchor of an *on-air* service sacrosanct. FM is still strong as a core. Without it, public media web audience would be much less. Audiences are shifting, but at best there is still a 10:1 advantage to on-air listenership, with typical station numbers at 50:1 or higher.

- BALANCE** Public Media's greatest management challenge today and for the near future is driving a proper balance (with high temporal granularity) between currently shifting parameters:
- Local vs. National content
 - Real-time vs. On-demand services
 - Original vs. Acquired/shared content ("co-opetition")
 - Mission vs. Monetization
- Any reinvention of public radio into a 2.0 mode should be done incrementally, with a careful weighing of institutional priorities against the advantages or disadvantages of each prospective new approach.
- PROMOTE** Aggressive promotion via traditional and new venues is increasingly important. Perhaps the best area to explore is partnerships with BoF organizations, where mutual benefits can flow (e.g., Google, Starbucks; certain national magazines; local newspapers; large local employers).
- ENGAGE** Encourage and assess audience reactions; get representation from all demographics, and heed their counsel appropriately; learn, adapt and grow. Hire smartly (ex-print people are one opportunity – remember much of the NPR News brand was built this way, taking strong print journalists and teaching them the craft of aural storytelling). Include, invite listener feedback and participation through social networks and other new venues of consumer access/traffic.
- STUDY** Keep abreast of all relevant and peripheral new technologies. Consider them both for the appropriateness of their inclusion within your services, and for their potential impacts if implemented by competitors. Develop stable metrics or benchmarks by which to evaluate new opportunities.
- MEASURE** Watch the changing audience numbers closely, with special attention to the Diary/PPM shift as it continues. Weight respective metrics (on-air and online), and establish credible analysis algorithms. Remember to account for behavioral shifts that may occur as audiences age: These may proceed differently or faster today than in the past, but they will occur.
- NO BLEEDING** Public media does not have a mandate to be ahead of the curve. A "fast follower" position is preferable. Maintain good vision ahead to know what's coming. Always keep aspirational targets in sight. Be open to big new ideas, but don't rely on them for *deus ex machina* event. Scale well.
- DEVELOP** Remember that compelling content always trumps delivery technology. If you provide something listeners want to hear, they will find their way to it, however cumbersome. Conversely, the most convenient and up-to-date media-access

methods are of little value if they provide no interesting content. Thus the true goal in new media for public broadcasters is **great content made broadly and easily available**. Seek new talent, topics and presentation methods, while maintaining traditional programming. Extend and expand the core.

Recommendations

A group of thoughtful and highly respected individuals was asked to comment on what they felt were the most likely areas within the new and emerging media landscape in which investment by public radio would provide reasonable returns.

As one might expect, opinions varied across the group, but there was considerable convergence of thinking in some areas. A summary of the most relevant highlights gathered from the group is presented below (including a few cogent verbatim quotations), followed by this author's conclusions from the process.

Key ideas

Use new media tools to create a stronger public radio community: Different respondents championed different platforms (e.g., SMS, Blogs, RSS feeds, various social networking sites), but there was wide agreement that these new technologies should be used to leverage the existing but inadequately exploited "natural network" of public radio audiences. Encouraging community-building aspects of these new platforms to a level of ubiquity was a common goal, but there was some disagreement as to which platforms to use, and the appropriate levels of investment. Responsiveness to user feedback was also frequently recommended. Traditional tools such as strong on-air promotion, encouraging word-of-mouth advertising, and sponsoring in-person events were also suggested as methods to empower and build usage of such new-media outreach.

"Our listeners are doing plenty of things online--they're just not doing things with us."

"We already have a network. We just need to activate it."

"(Audience) participation stops the minute people think no one's paying attention".

"Public media needs to be more aggressive...in engaging directly and meaningfully to help communities."

Develop a world-class news portal site: A number of respondents suggested that a world-class public radio news site should be developed, to provide a competitive presence along the lines of BBC.com, NYTimes.com, Washingtonpost.com or CNN.com. Several different ideas arose for how to best integrate local and national elements, but there was broad agreement that such seamless integration was essential. There was substantial divergence on how to best name and brand the site, however, as well as how to structure and monetize it. Other individual suggestions included the segregation of content by subject matter over a few separate sites and streams (e.g., national news, international news, business

news, sports, etc.), partnerships with local newspapers, combined public radio and public television efforts, users' ability to personalize the site's display to their preferences, and special emphasis on minority/underserved audiences.

"In every city that I have examined, the public station site attracts levels of traffic and loyalty far below the level attracted to their local newspaper site..."

...No radio or television station site is ranked in the top 1,000 websites in the US, and no public radio or television station website is ranked in the top 15,000."

"Practice branding discipline—and deliver quality content to back it up."

Support and influence universal broadband policy: Entirely separate from considerations of content were recommendations of advocacy for expansion of broadband Internet access, particularly to minority and underserved audiences.

Develop online membership plans: Extending the on-air membership model to a separate online membership was also proposed as a mechanism for access to aggregated public radio content site(s). Among specific suggestions here were tiered service levels (free and paid), including a pledge-free service for paid memberships, centralized underwriting, and revenue-sharing among stations and content providers.

"There is no other scheme that is bold or comprehensive enough to benefit all stakeholders in the existing public radio community... that can produce as much new revenue... provide more public service... (or) take more courage, foresight and determination to accomplish."

Cross-promotion: Although a bit of a no-brainer, the continued or expanded use of public radio's on-air "push" services to drive traffic to its "pull" services provided on-line was strongly recommended.

"Promote online content on-air like crazy."

SEO/SEM: Greater facility in search-engine optimization and marketing was recommended as a method of increasing public radio's presence and profile as a leading online content provider.

"Public media content should top search results across thousands of topics."

Original vs. repurposed content for new platforms: There were several strong recommendations for development of new content and services optimized for online and other new platforms, rather than simple repurposing or curating of existing on-air content to these alternative delivery systems. Of particular interest were new mobile platforms, given radio's traditional strength in such environments due to its inherent legacy of portable/mobile usage. Applications of both on-demand/podcast and live-

streaming content to these mobile platforms were suggested. Short-form video was also recommended as a content type, particularly targeting mobile devices. A serious commitment to customer focus in developing any new content was stressed.

“Move beyond companion websites to make (broadcaster) websites valuable in and of themselves, not as adjuncts to radio programs.”

“We should ruthlessly prototype, test, and deploy until we get it right.”

Create a current sense of urgency: There are new opportunities for public radio to establish a beachhead in the emerging Web 2.0 environment, but this will not happen by default – just as it did not in Web 1.0. Others are aware of these new opportunities, and they will likely invest early to capitalize upon them. Development of a coherent new media strategy sooner rather than later is essential.

“We don’t have this field to ourselves.”

Retain & build upon core assets: While developing new media investment strategies, keep focus on over-the-air radio as public radio’s primary asset base. Consider this both from content and policy perspectives, focusing in the latter area on gaining additional spectrum and channels, dealing aggressively with interference issues, and extending influence to new over-the-air digital broadcast services (IBOC and its multicast/datacast extensions, ATSC M/H).

“(With) more wireless streams available... segment the content to super-serve different audiences.”

Reduce polarization of new media capabilities across system: Current new media development in public radio has been disproportionately top-heavy, with networks and largest-market stations carrying most of the load, and reaping most of the benefits unilaterally. Before extending these existing leaders’ footprint into next-generation technologies, additional system investment should be directed toward the currently disenfranchised smaller-market stations, to help them establish a *basic* online presence. Pull up the bottom before pushing out the top.

“In 2008 most stations still don’t have integrated fulltime new media people on staff.”

Focus on new media *content* (over technology) development: New media is ultimately not about the platform but the content it delivers. Public radio investment should be primarily directed at developing new content for new platforms, rather than investing in the delivery platforms themselves. Next-generation audiences will not be impressed by public radio’s mere *presence* in these spaces – they expect that much intrinsically from any modern media source. They will only consume such services from public radio if its new media content is compelling to them.

“Play to our strengths.”

Synthesis

The collective intelligence of the group consulted on this question is well focused on three major points, which are presented as the primary findings here:

1. An organized and coherent strategy should be developed and funded for public radio to advance its current position as a media provider through the use of currently un/under-utilized new media tools. This strategy should be designed to build and strengthen both national and local public radio audiences through focused applications of customizable alerts, membership models, social networks and other opt-in pushed content.
2. A comprehensive plan should be drawn for developing a world-class news portal operated by and for public media entities across the U.S. This plan should include strategies for content contribution from many entities, user subscription/customization and authentication, revenue generation and sharing, and collaborative site governance. The site should serve well as both a standalone on-line service, and a companion to legacy broadcast services.
3. Public media should pursue a policy of advocacy for provision of universal broadband access to minority and underserved audiences. Meanwhile, it should plan a systemwide effort to develop a baseline level of new-media fluency among all content creation and delivery nodes in the public media system, again with proactive emphasis on content relevant to minority and underserved audiences.

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