Distribution as Promotion
Setting public radio objects in motion

by Rekha Murthy
Public Radio Exchange (PRX)

Six years ago, I left NPR to work with Web and mobile media. Now I'm back in public radio, with Public Radio Exchange, and I think of that time away as a really long aircheck. I'm no longer the listener I used to produce for at *All Things Considered*: terrestrial broadcast is only a fraction of a listening experience that has become fragmented and dynamic. I stream station and show feeds from across the country, catching *Morning Edition* on KCRW when I oversleep on a snowy morning, and sticking around for sunny weather reports and *Morning Becomes Eclectic*. My browser's bookmarks include *On the Media*, *Studio 360*, *This American Life*, and *All Songs Considered*. I download podcasts like *World Cafe*, *alt.NPR*, and *The World Technology Podcast*. I tend to listen to *All Things Considered* by scanning the online rundowns and streaming only what grabs my interest. Even when I do use my radio receiver, I'll then go to the Web to email a good story or episode to friends and post the link on a social bookmarking site. The Web is where I find new listening, too.

This experience of fragmentation and recombination forms the basis of how I think about growing the public radio audience.

Break Public Radio Down to Build It Back Up
Public radio is often talked about as a single entity. In some ways – such as mission and standards – it is, and we should continue to raise public awareness at the entity level. However, there's another kind of outreach that has great potential in today's fragmented media landscape, one that wields public radio objects, not just categories or entities.

It helps to think of the system as a hierarchy:
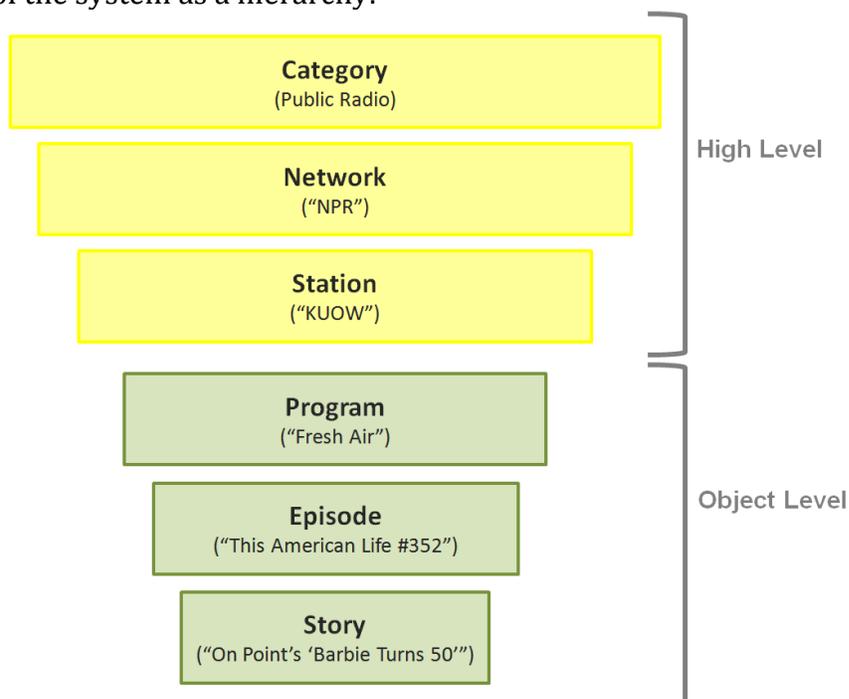
In addition to promoting public radio at its high levels – Category, Network, and Station – it's important to use the object levels – Program, Episode, and Story – when reaching out to new audiences. In other words, promote the content, not just the source.

People wear their favorite media – music, movies, books, Web sites, TV shows – as badges that express identity. Many social networking sites make Favorite Movies, Books, etc. the cornerstone of a user's profile (although I've yet to see a site ask for Favorite Audio). My favorite movie is the "Sound of Music" and I think Frank Sinatra and Hot Chip are the best musicians ever. "Weeds" is so-so but you've got to watch "Flight of the Conchords". I'm in the middle of reading *Cloud Atlas* so I've fallen behind on watching "Lost."

Everyone has these self-announcements and conversations. So why isn't public radio in more of them?

Public radio's objects should take their rightful place among all of the other media objects out there clamoring for people's attention. I believe that the more they do, their quality and relevance will bring people back to the sources for more. The hook needs some bait, and it's the content.

'The Hook Needs Bait' Means Distribution IS Promotion
Everyone seems to agree that public radio doesn't promote itself enough. Some say it's because of reluctance to spend precious money on anything seemingly extraneous to our mission, which is content production itself. That's an understandable concern, although we shouldn't forget that the best content isn't serving its purpose if too few people know about it. Promotion doesn't have to mean hiring an expensive agency to come up with slick ads. It can be simply making the content, the *objects*, more visible, more accessible, and more easily shared. We can make promotion more respectable by grounding it in distribution.

User experience designers think about the media, services, and products people encounter in the flow of their daily lives, preferably without effort. Public radio needs to be where people are. If they're at the gym, be on their mobile player. If they're searching for video games at the iTunes store, show up in the search results with a related video game review. If they're scanning their Facebook News Feed, be a link that someone else posted. In these scenarios, it's not really "public radio" that's there; rather, it's the public radio object, because that's the level of specificity best suited to so many digital platforms.

Fishing Where the Fish Are Saves a Lot of Effort
With fragmentation, the fear can be that people are all over the place and impossible to reach without a million micro-targeted efforts. Actually, a lot of people can be found in just a few places.

A Forrester Research analyst has said that outdoor media (such as billboards) are the last remaining way to reach a broad set of eyes that haven't deliberately clicked a link or pressed a button on their remote. When I studied how people use the streetscape to communicate (flyers, posters, stickers, etc.), I was surprised to find that rather than set

themselves apart by placing their messages on an empty surface far away, people post where everyone else is posting. Presumably, the clusters get read more often than the outliers. By identifying the largest digital clusters and targeting those with a few compelling objects, we probably don't need to be everywhere or promote everything at once. The select Programs, Episodes, and Stories can be live or on demand, as long as they are available for online listening and sharing. Set these objects in motion on Facebook, Twitter, and (if you dare) MySpace, post some podcasts on iTunes, keep an engaging but occasional blog and get your RSS feed listed in NetVibes and Google Reader. Alert some relevant blogs with a sizable readership and provide links directly back to the chosen objects. It takes time, but not as much as you might think.

Is this distribution, or is it just promotion? Online and at the object level, the distinction blurs. If you send someone a link and they can listen to your piece with just a click or two, that's fundamentally different from announcing on a billboard that there's this great thing called public radio they should check out the next time they're near a receiver. Distribution as promotion is about immediacy and connection, too.

After Thinking Big, Consider Thinking Small
Seeding the major online clusters with public radio objects may be all that's needed to get things moving. However, it's worth identifying some niche targets as well. Public radio Programs, Episodes, and Stories do not have one uniform sound or style, much as people like to say they do. Find out where subcultures hang out online, and tell them about an object they'd find of particular interest.

Stations produce programming for their local markets, but even more public radio content is produced that can appeal to non-geographical niches. Drawing from the high quality and diverse works that producers and stations have made available on PRX.org, I've assembled albums about travel, health, kids, art, and technology and sent them to iTunes and other online audio stores. Now that these album-objects exist, I can distribute them in creative ways. Maybe the National Geographic Store will want to carry the Travel album. Maybe the Technology album has a place in the Xbox Live Marketplace. Maybe some food bloggers would like to know about the album with the James Beard documentary. While I'm at it, maybe a community of knitters simply want to know about some great, curated content to keep them company while they knit.

Everyone Is Someone's Trusted Tastemaker
Once we place them online and give them a push, our objects enter the same mix as everyone else's. This highly variegated mix needs filtering for anyone to find anything relevant, useful, or personally entertaining. Friends and acquaintances are among the most powerful filters out there. So are those niche communities that form around shared tastes. If we get our Programs, Episodes, and Stories into the hands of trusted recommenders and tastemakers, they'll do some of our work for us. Remember, the new audiences we're going after might have no idea who we are. However, they do know who they trust to recommend things to them. We need to help those tastemakers by making finding and sharing easy. This means creating a Web page of audio, text, and images, or at the very least a simple page with a unique link and a specific browser title. This could also

mean transcribing audio so it can be searched for and quoted. We might even go further and create visualization, annotation, and excerpting tools that make the audio medium as digitally viral as text.

Being Part of the Mix without Being Part of the Noise
Public radio is such a special and unique body of content that we sometimes hesitate to join the teeming media masses in order to get the word out. But we have little to worry about. Amid an overwhelming swirl of media offerings, what sets an object apart is its relevance, creativity, and quality. Public radio offers so much of this. A high-quality object might trigger curiosity about its source. At that moment, we want the listener to recognize just what that source means. They'll do that more easily if they've already heard of "public radio" or "American Public Media" or "WFCR". Distributing objects is not an end in itself: Promoting the high levels of the hierarchy is essential to reinforce any distribution and promotion at the object level. Otherwise, we stir up enthusiasm without showing it where to go next.

User experience design encourages us to provide the simplest experience first (*e.g.*, 'listen to this'), and slowly reveal additional complexity and information as people are ready for it (*e.g.*, 'learn who made this', 'learn what public radio is', 'listen to other things by this Network or Station', 'recommend this Story to others').

By reaching new audiences from both the top down and the ground up, we can truly expand our reach and durability.

All of this ties into tastemaking. Our loyal listeners trust us as they would a good friend to tell them about current events and new music. We should aim to become that trusted tastemaker for more kinds of people. We might even consider wielding our tastemaking status by doing cross-promotion as well.

Technology Is the Friend of Good Content
Being in the mix doesn't require being out in front of new technology. Targeting large clusters actually requires first seeing where the clusters have formed. It does take some foresight to keep pace with the digital world, and to get in on the act before the act moves elsewhere. On the other hand, if while you're planning your presence on a platform, the platform dies, then it wasn't worth your time.

The Public Radio Tuner project, in which APM, NPR, PI, PRI, and PRX are collaborating to bring hundreds of station streams to iPhone users, is a creative example of several of these ideas. Networks and Stations provide the code and the content, resulting in an object that hundreds of thousands of people have downloaded. They have also reviewed it online, told their friends, and inspired bloggers and news organizations to talk about it. At the time of writing, the Public Radio Tuner is the number two ranked free application in the iTunes Store, number one in the free music category, and closing in on half a million downloads. The public radio system has given its audience – and hopefully a lot of new listeners – an object that helps them express and share their appreciation for public radio.

The Tuner is a good example of keeping pace with technology without jumping in front. There were already several other successful audio tuner-style iPhone apps when the Tuner hit the scene. There were also approximately four million iPhone users – obviously a much bigger potential audience than when the device first came out. We're still understanding all the reasons for the Tuner's success, but one thing is clear: its great content sets it apart. Reviews in the iTunes Store and comments at PublicRadioTuner.org indicate that users with iPhones who were already fans of public radio quickly knew the app was worth a try. Again, high-level awareness-raising supports every object we put forth.

Content Is Our Strength
The Tuner's success demonstrates how the clear and essential role of content in new technologies is a great opportunity for public radio. So many Web and mobile products are centered on the delivery of content, but good content is hard to come by without significant expertise, resources, and commitment. While the commercial sector does produce much that's creative and quality, a lot of it is highly branded, hard to access, and influenced (sometimes to its detriment) by market forces.

Public radio is still the space with the greatest possibility for creativity and communication unfettered by commercial considerations and constraints. It's tempting to let anxiety about business models and organizational structures obscure our very real success. That's not to say public radio can't improve and change, but we are justified in being proud of what we do, and amplifying our work with good promotion.

Other writers in this *Thinking Audience* series call on public radio to be more confident and aim higher. I agree. From a distribution perspective, I'm trying to bring that confidence to how I position public radio pieces in the digital marketplace. People buy movies and TV series, music albums and tracks, and all sorts of other media objects; they should be buying public radio, too. Of course, our mission first and foremost is openness and inclusiveness. But I think people will pay a fair price for curated collections and portable formats. At the higher levels of the system, we call payment "pledging". Maybe we can think of buying Programs, Episodes, and Stories as pledging at the object level.

Giving People What They Want Doesn't Mean We're Giving In
I strongly believe that public radio doesn't always have to make what people say they want to hear. That's a freedom we have that commercial media does not. However, a lot of good can come from learning what resonates with people and making more of that. An advantage of a strong online presence is that it's trackable. If we remember where we place our objects, we can also track where they go, and catalog people's responses along the way. As we learn what takes off, we can consider why it might have done so, and work those insights into future productions. That way, we retain some of the listeners we attracted with our initial effort.

Giving people what they want does not have to mean selling out. It can mean being more relevant, which is another way to think about the call for greater diversity in programming. Diversity is about ethnicity and race, but it's also about age, income,

lifestyle, opinions, interests, and the tone in which these are delivered. The more diverse public radio content gets, the more places it can go online, and the more people it will connect with.

Public Radio as Many Treasured Objects
Public radio has been called a national treasure. I'd like to see public radio objects treated as treasured objects. Thanks to exceptional content, accessible online tools, and a vast potential audience, we're in a great position to make that happen. Especially if we share the lessons we learn along the way.

Rekha Murthy has worked with a broad range of media platforms. Before joining Public Radio Exchange, she was a user experience designer for Web and mobile software clients from startups to large organizations including France Telecom, Bank of America, IEEE, and BarnesandNoble.com. Rekha spent several years in Washington, DC, as an editor of NPR Online and later as an assistant producer for All Things Considered. *She has since freelanced for* On Point, Day to Day, *and* The World. *While working toward her Masters at MIT's Comparative Media Studies program, Rekha documented the high- and low-tech ways that people use urban streetscapes to communicate. She can be reached at rekha-at-prx-dot-org or* www.rmurthy.com.