

A Future for Public Radio

by Mark Ramsey

One of the most popular Public Radio personalities has never had a show on Public Radio.

And it's simply because we have never asked him.

What is the future of Public Radio? That future is what you will make it. And this much is for certain, it is not more of the past.

I don't need to lecture you about audience and technology trends with which you're already well acquainted. I don't need to tell you about the tidal wave of entertainment and information options listeners have today. I don't need to rant about the unprecedented control any individual listener has over her own audio experience. I don't need to explain the new primacy of the listener as the source of content, no longer simply its recipient. You've heard all about this before.

But what are you doing about it?

The old models have a scant few years of life left in them.

Will there always be Public Radio no matter what? Sure, maybe. But it doesn't have to be vital. It doesn't have to matter. It doesn't have to be "public." And it doesn't have to include you or me in its ranks.

eBay was born in 1995 when a computer programmer named Pierre Omidyar couldn't register the name of his consulting company, Echo Bay Technology Group, so he shortened the domain to "eBay."

The very first item to appear on eBay was Omidyar's laser pointer – his *broken* laser pointer.

After selling the item for \$14.83, Omidyar contacted the winning bidder to make sure he understood that this laser pointer was, in fact, busted.

He did. You see, he was a collector of broken laser pointers.

There's something for everyone and, thanks to the democratizing force of digital media, there's now everyone for something.

Either you're the best in the world at "*something for everyone*" or you're the best in the world at "*one thing for someone*." The former is the "big head" and the latter is the "long tail."

Radio is all about the "big head." We are blessed with a gift no new media outfit can match: The power of the tower - a megaphone reaching into every home, workplace, and car. A megaphone mediating the close relationship between you and

your audiences in your local communities. Want them to do something they want to do? Want them to go someplace they want to go? Just ask, and ye shall receive.

Can even the mighty Google match your ability to move your audience to any destination that interests them, online, on-air, or off?

Not on your life.

So how do you use this gift, this power, this megaphone?

It was Public Broadcasting's own elder mythologist Joseph Campbell who once uttered the famous words "follow your bliss." What Campbell meant was to live out of your own center, and that, I think, is great advice for Public Radio as it gauges its future.

Who are you, Public Radio? What is your center? And - more to the point - what are you capable of if you really stretch your wings?

What do you do better than anybody else, no matter what techno-whiz-bang comes along?

You create content. You are the program producers, the dream-makers. What Spielberg is to movies you are to audio. Or at least, you can be.

Have you ever asked yourself why so little of Public Radio's programming is entertainment-oriented? Sure there's lots of entertainment content out there. But on radio there's almost none aimed at the very audience best served by and most fanatical about Public Radio: Smart people.

I would argue that Public Radio's future was first glimpsed on a cold night in March of 1948, but it would take 60 years before anyone would see it.

That was the night of the 20th Academy Awards, and the world of American movie-making was on the verge of radical change – thanks in part to the advent of an alternative entertainment medium called television. The Hollywood studios would try to battle this new medium, they would try to kill it. They were dependent on audiences and any substantial decrease in those audiences would mean economic disaster.

Fear was in the air that night for all the studio-heads. All but one. The one with the crazy ideas.

Walt Disney would win no awards that night, but he would be the spark that ignited his industry's future and, at the same time, point the way for our own.

Previously, all studios but Disney made their money strictly from theatrical exhibition of their motion pictures. They profited by squeezing down the costs of producing films and distributing them to their own theaters. The talent was under contract and they owned the channel of distribution from head to tail.

Disney had already baffled the other studio heads after successfully creating the first full-length animated feature, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, which had once been known as "Disney's folly." Not just any movie, this was the first film to gross \$100 million, the first to have a soundtrack, the first to have a merchandising tie-in, the first with multiple licensable characters.

In one fell swoop, Walt Disney had done more than create a new hit, he had created a new business model.

Today, the movie business per se is a relatively unimportant part of the business of the conglomerates which own the studios. All the majors routinely lose money on theatrical release, where the massive audiences of days gone by no longer exist. According to Edward Jay Epstein, author of *The Big Picture: Money and Power in Hollywood*, the studios make the bulk of their profits from licensing their filmed entertainment for home viewing and by leveraging that content across all entertainment channels: Video, music, television, gaming, etc. Writes Epstein, "Theatrical releases now serve essentially as launching platforms for licensing rights."

Put another way, the movie studios aren't in the movie business, they're in the content licensing business.

To license content you have to create it first.

Is it strictly a coincidence that "*Wait, Wait...Don't Tell Me!*" has a deal with CBS Entertainment to produce a TV pilot? Is it an accident that Ira Glass begat *This American Life* the Radio show which begat CD's and books, which begat a first-look deal with Warner Bros. which begat an Emmy-nominated series on Showtime? Is it only good fortune that turned *A Prairie Home Companion* the Radio show into *A Prairie Home Companion*, the movie?

These are the exceptions. And that's because Public Radio is aiming too low and aspiring to too little.

Why is it that Deepak Chopra, an incredible pledge-driver for Public Broadcasting, has a radio show...

...on Sirius/XM?!

Could it be that we simply didn't ask first? Don't you think Deepak knows he'd sell a lot more books on Public Radio than on Sirius/XM?

How will we ever create another show as distinctive and entertaining as *Car Talk* unless we seek to create another show as distinctive and entertaining as *Car Talk*?

And, by the way, who is that top-ranked Public Radio personality who has never had a Public Radio show?

The one who ranks in the top five of all Public Radio personalities as judged by Public Radio listeners, themselves?

He is Jon Stewart.

Where is the radio show for his audience?

I'm waiting.

Bueller?

Bueller??

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