“Claiming a significantly larger role in American journalism will require a much more robust news-gathering capacity – more ‘feet on the street’ with notebooks, recorders, and cameras and more editors and producers to shape their work.” – Public Radio in the New Network Age, January 2010

There is a shared aspiration at dozens of public radio organizations to grow their reporting capacity and lift their presence as a critical source of local news and information. At the same time, there is uncertainty as to whether such investments will lead to larger audiences, more community financial support, or both.

We decided to take a close look and found:

- Public radio news stations with larger audiences and more listener support have larger local new teams.

- But the size of public radio stations’ newsrooms does not predict their audience performance or individual giving.

- Rather, stations with more resources are making mission-driven investments in local and regional community service.

This report is part of a series examining the performance of public radio news stations. GROW THE AUDIENCE reports are at www.srg/org/GTA

Tom Thomas & Terry Clifford  
Station Resource Group

George Bailey  
Walrus Research
INVESTING IN NEWS STAFF: Audience Share

News Staff and Listening

As stations, funders, and policymakers have watched the decline in local journalism at newspapers and local TV, there is a sense that public radio has an opportunity and responsibility to take on a larger role in meeting community information needs.

But will such efforts to serve the community through investments in local news capacity boost audience performance?

We looked at whether there is a correlation between the size of stations’ newsrooms and the extent to which their share of listening in their market is above or below the audience share predicted by our statistical model.

The answer is no – knowing the size of a station’s newsroom staff does not add to our ability to predict audience share beyond our previously reported model.

That model is based on the percent of core listeners in a news station’s audience, the education level of its market, and whether or not it has the exclusive local franchise for public radio news.

Because the percent of core listeners – those who listen to the news station more than any other station – is so important to audience share for news stations, we also examined whether the size of the newsroom correlates with core composition of the audience.

It does not.
INVESTING IN NEWS STAFF: Individual Giving

News Staff and Giving

Our analysis of individual giving to public radio news stations found that the typical station raises about $22 annually per core listener. This includes membership or subscription income, friends groups, and individual major donors.

Do stations with more news staff raise more money from individuals than those with fewer journalists?

One might think that a larger news staff would increase the perceived value of local programming and thus the amount a person gives.

Indeed, there is a modest correlation between the size of news staff and dollars raised per core listener. We also found a very strong correlation between size of news staff and total listener income.

But correlation is not causation, and the explanation could go either way. It could be that larger news staffs help produce more listener income, but it could also be that more listener income makes it possible to hire more news staff.

Sure enough, when we control for the station’s annual listener income, there is no relationship between size of news staff and dollars raised per core listener.

That is, the size of the audience predicts the listener income, which explains the size of the news staff.

The Role of Development

We don’t have data on the size or professionalism of development departments for news stations.

But we have seen a positive relationship between the size of a station’s development operation and its productivity in prior studies and projects, going back to SRG’s Brilliant on the Basics in the mid-90s.

That could be the case here, too.

Our instincts suggest that the stations raising the most listener income have more productive development teams.
We think the full story is this:

1. The relative audience performance of public radio news format stations is explained by the percent of core listeners in stations’ audience, education levels in the market, and whether or not stations have the exclusive public radio news format franchise in the market.

   The size of a station’s news staff adds no predictive power to this model.

2. Public service leads to public support. The amount of money raised from listeners is pretty much explained by total audience measures, of which the total number of core cume listeners works best.

3. We observe that stations that deliver more public service – as indicated by higher audience shares and greater audience reach – raise more money from their listeners and spend more money on news staff.

   Because they can.

   **Stations with larger news staffs are making mission-driven use of their revenue, investing in community service and a more significant role in community life.**

4. The stations with larger audience and larger amounts of listener revenue are further empowered to invest in their news staff because they are more productive in their development work.

5. There is no systematic evidence that hiring more news staff will increase a station’s share of listening in its market or that it will lead to more listener support relative to the size of its audience.

6. We should not dismiss the possibility of building a future link between the size of local newsrooms and growth in either audience or individual giving.

   We need to remember that all but a few of the news stations we examined are staffed within a relatively narrow band, one that is quite modest when compared with the newspapers that have long dominated local journalism.

   It could be that we will not see a lift in listening or giving until a number of stations reach a significantly higher level of editorial staffing than seen today.

   We need to be careful, though, not to confuse hopes and aspirations with the current reality.
INVESTING IN NEWS STAFF: Going Forward

Funding Local News

For now, the connections between major investments in local news staff and greater audience and financial success remain in the realm of speculation – something for piloting, experimentation, and demonstration projects followed by careful evaluation.

Stations that are building larger local news staffs should not expect quick dividends in audience shares or listener income. Instead, these investments will more likely need to be spurred and sustained for some time to come by major gifts and philanthropy.

We began our work armed with a 2010 census of public media’s local journalists conducted by Public Radio News Directors with support from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. The census provided counts of full-time and part-time news staff for stations across the country.

We were able to “double check” the census data for most stations in this study with results from another 2010 survey of local news efforts conducted by SRG and DEI.

We matched the newsroom counts with audience and financial data for public radio news stations measured by Arbitron’s PPM system as of Summer 2010 – the same set of stations used for other analyses and reports in this series.

Coming Soon

SRG, in partnership with DEI, will soon publish material on making the case for major donor and philanthropic support of public radio’s local journalism.

That report will be based on surveys of stations’ current efforts and aspirations and in-depth interviews with local and regional donors and national foundations.
For this analysis we identified public radio news stations that met the following criteria:

- Offering 75% or more news/talk programming on weekdays 6am-7pm, including *Morning Edition*
- Home to a PPM market as of Summer 2010
- At least a 0.5 PPM share in its home market

We measured the Performance of each station in terms of audience variables related to public service. For metro estimates such as AQH share and cume rating, we used PPM data for July-December 2010.

For total audience estimates such as AQH persons and cume persons, as well as loyalty and core composition, we used AudiGraphics data for Fall 2009/Spring 2010.

We classified each station with reference to competition from other public radio stations – whether the station had a market exclusive franchise for Morning Edition or for the defined public radio news format.

CPB provided listener support figures for FY2009.

The count of local newsrooms was created by Public Radio News Directors (PRNDI).

We used SPSS to run partial correlations and linear regression. We found that the audience share for public radio news format stations could be predicted by the combination of three variables:

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a. Predictors: (Constant), Core AudiGraphics 12+ Fall 2009/Spring 2010
b. Predictors: (Constant), Core AudiGraphics 12+ Fall 2009/Spring 2010, Metro College Grad 25plus Census 2009
c. Predictors: (Constant), Core AudiGraphics 12+ Fall 2009/Spring 2010, Metro College Grad 25plus Census 2009, NPR News Format Franchise
d. Dependent Variable: Share 6plus Summer-Fall 2010

Over 70 percent of the variance in station performance can be predicted by their core cume composition, the market’s composition of college graduates and direct format competition from another public radio station.

The number of core listeners generated by each station predicts 80 percent of the variation in annual listener support. Alternatively, the total AQH audience can be used to predict 72 percent of the variance in annual giving.