

FIVE TENETS FOR PUBLIC RADIO'S FUTURE

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I can distill the most important lessons I've learned into five basic tenets for public radio's future, fundamental principles for achieving public radio's goals of more listeners, more value, and more diverse audiences.

These stem from my 27 years in public radio, following five years as a journalist in newspapers: I was an NPR foreign affairs correspondent, I was an NPR and MPR programmer creating new programs, I was a newsroom leader at the national level at NPR, at the international level working with the BBC World Service, and at the local/regional level at Minnesota Public Radio and American Public Media.

I look back on this personal history and the tremendous growth of public radio during those years with satisfaction and grateful appreciation for the hard work of so many people. There was no doubt a bit of luck in the success public radio can proudly point to as well. But, a clear focus on what made public radio a national beacon, I firmly believe, should continue to shine a light on the path ahead. This is not rocket science, yet neither does it represent some quick fix to get through the concerns of the present and the troubled economic times ahead.

Tenet No. 1: Content really is king, and hard news is public radio's most precious coin of the realm. There is a huge audience that cares, that remains hungry for up-to-the-minute fact-based reporting of the highest caliber. Creating the strongest possible news service everyday, with solid, hard-hitting, credible, analytical news coverage, is the most basic prerequisite for public radio's continued success. Please don't stray too far from this core mission to chase some imaginary larger audience. Investments in rock-solid news coverage must be efficient but are seldom wasted. One warning: entertainment, satire, punditry and fluff are everywhere available and to everyone at all times. My advice is to air these only in rare moderation when they can be used to leaven a news-heavy diet on appropriate occasions. Public radio does not have to shill for the music or publishing industry, which will get its marketing messages out just fine. The core news formula has been the basis of public radio's growth in stature and audience and can never be taken for granted.

Tenet No. 2: Every crisis is an opportunity to shine, providing both background and breaking news in all day parts when required. This is one of public radio's competitive advantages. Building on the solid day in and day out news coverage noted above, public radio should pour resources into crisis coverage whenever necessary. Live news coverage, instant specials, meaty background documentaries, global call-ins,

collaborations with other news organizations—all take advantage of the hunger for news when the need is most acute. There should be no apology for being serious (“won’t that be boring?”) for the serious times in which we live.

Tenet No. 3: Think balance. Tenets 1 and 2 apply equally to all levels of public radio—what I call the three legs of a balanced and therefore sturdy stool—international, national, and local/regional. Yes, the networks have to get it right on the national and international level, but so do stations on the local and regional level. Too many local stations, in my view, only see themselves as conduits for breaking news when it happens to be national (NPR driven) or international (BBC driven). Hello! The world has changed. In every market, public radio is a critical, primary news source, and one that has never been more important. Investing in local hard-news, fact-based, reporter-driven coverage has never been more essential as so many local newspapers continue to soften and contract, while local TV stations continue to go their merry ratings-driven, hyper ventilating, irrelevant way. Yes, quality counts, and good editing, fact-checking, and careful news selection are vital. But if public radio is to create the highest value that it can provide—and thus attract an audience that does not have to go elsewhere—it must make news sparkle at the local/regional level, as it so often does nationally and internationally. I can hear station X telling me that this is simply a matter of lack of resources. I believe it is a matter of priorities—think about regional collaborations, joint news operations, big ideas that can capture local philanthropy to help make public radio all that it can be. The strongest public service has three solid news legs.

Tenet No. 4: Of course, making use of the latest technology is crucial—but please understand this indispensable point: the new platforms all BUILD on radio/audio—they do not replace them or even supersede them. I love cell phone coverage, downloading podcasts, and the next ten new platforms that have yet to be invented where early adopters will all gather. But none of these should come at the expense of radio. Make the radio news service second-to-none—and the new technologies will also soar. One of the key advantages public radio has is that radio itself is a killer app—the best barker channel for the Web and all the other new services. Yes, use all platforms, but create the great audio that works on radio and then tell us about where else we can hear it or read it or see it. That fact that Talk of the Nation Science Friday with Ira Flatow (full disclosure, it is a program I helped get started) now has 12 million podcasts is not only a testament to technology and to Ira’s fine work, but should be reinforcement that this is a stellar radio program that really matters and because of that it travels on all platforms.

Tenet No. 5: Last but certainly not least, is my belief that the best way to make sure the audience is as diverse as our nation as a whole is to build that diversity into everything public radio does: into every drive-time program, every program staff, every story topic; in short, every input and every output. This can be a better approach than segregating coverage by creating side programs for specific audiences. There is nothing wrong with special programs for certain audiences used by some stations, but that is unlikely to be

the most viable option over the long run. I predict that if public radio does its work right, as I think it will, in covering the new Obama Administration, there will be an even more diverse audience for Morning Edition and All Things Considered and every other day part. Today, there are already millions of minorities listening to public radio who will be as hungry as every other listener for detailed coverage of the Obama White House, in the tent-poles, in newscasts, in call-in programs, etc. Getting that coverage right—from diverse angles with a diverse on-air and off-air staff—is the best approach. My view is that this can only strengthen the nation and public radio.

From an outsider's perspective, I have two other suggestions for public radio. I sometimes wish the industry would stop focusing on its scarce resources, a long-engrained half-empty attitude, and see itself as others do and as it truly is—one of the amazingly successful resource-rich media operations in the country, one that has a tremendous staff, a fantastic audience, a respected and venerated brand, and other advantages allowing the system to do its magnificent work.

My other desire is that the system would somehow strengthen its spine, take risks, be the home for more tough investigative work without fear or favor or second guessing what critics might say. In the words of William Lloyd Garrison, the great abolitionist editor, "The success of any great moral enterprise does not depend on numbers." Public radio is a unique form of journalism. It does not have to lean right or lean left or worry what its critics will charge on any given day or any given story. Public radio simply has to stand up straight. Today, it is a media powerhouse and it should feel the confidence of its storied past and its bright future.

Since January 2007, Bill Buzenberg has been Executive Director of the Center for Public Integrity in Washington, D.C. He was Vice President of News at National Public Radio from 1990-1997, an NPR foreign affairs correspondent from 1978-1989, and Vice President of News at Minnesota Public Radio/American Public Media from 1998-2006. The Center for Public Integrity is 20-year-old non-profit, non-partisan, award-winning, investigative, digital news organization based in Washington DC and online at www.publicintegrity.org