

Great Plains, Great Listeners Growing Audience in North Dakota

By Bill Thomas

My triple A host is on the phone. We talk on the phone a lot, since he's in his studio in Grand Forks, 70 miles north of my Fargo office.

He's a long time public radio pro. Besides being one of my two full time music hosts, overseeing most of one of our program streams, he also handles a good part of operations and production and runs an extra board when the other stream's talk show has a guest in Grand Forks. He's excited about the public radio cell phone apps. "My son in Oregon is listening to me on his iPhone and says it sounds great. I'm listening on my iTouch [iPhones don't work in North Dakota] and it does sound great! Blackberry's getting it, too!"

He is exhilarated that, between cell phones and desktop streaming, he can reach more people in our own area and he's even a bit of a national host (1% of our paid members now come from outside our radio coverage). But he is also intimidated that, by the same channels, he's got a bunch of new competition. It's a fair approximation of how a lot of us feel.

The big states in the middle of the country have a long tradition of public service radio, going back to the big AMs started by idealistic university extension folks collaborating with 1920s cutting edge tech-heads, morphing to wide-reaching FM networks like Prairie Public where the transmitters outnumber the programming staff. Public policy and public funding, in the national and state capitals, have supported the idea of extending public radio service as far as we could – with a local component.

My own network is one of the newer ones, three licensees collaborating when they found it hard to keep up three separate operations in a state with just over 700,000 people.

A large element of the infrastructure of public radio today is the local station – but what if your "local" station is a state network covering widely separated communities? One of the central problems I've found in a regional network is just how to be local. The weapons I've learned so well for connecting locally – announcements of local events, coverage of local groups, local news, and local characters on the air – become double edged swords. Many things that are very relevant to one city are not so interesting to all the people in our other cities. On top of that, physical proximity is of less value in the internet age. The people 500 miles away know I live in Fargo, not their town. As broadband internet becomes available more widely, are they going to care about what I and my news staff and program producers have to say when they can click into a great stream from Seattle?

Well, yes, I think so. If we pick what to say right and say it well and use all the new tools to bring them in on it even more than we have. And if we offer them more alternatives.

There is a huge value to having a conduit for programming from the great media centers broadcast or wired or whatever into North Dakota, but there is a great value to also have someone mixing in the things that matter most here. North Dakota is number one in youth binge drinking in most of the recent years – who else is going to pull together information and put it out to the public about why that is and what 20 different North Dakota towns are trying to do about it? Selling beans to Cuba is a blip nationally – but it's a piece of economic life or death for some parts of North Dakota. During the intense three months every two years when the Legislature meets, who's going to watch all the bills and get the guy from way up by Canada to talk so the people in Minot and Fargo can hear why he's pushing that law?

Well, with the way things are going a lot of people could try. But we already know how, we're good at it, and there are new tools that are making us better. And, we care about whether the kids get drunk, the beans get sold, or the bill gets passed.

There is public radio audience to be gained here, even if the population hasn't grown since the Dust Bowl. In the next year we will put on two new transmitters, one in the midst of our growing oil field, the other in a place that's been the one big blank spot in our coverage map. The proportion of people with more education is going up, and outmigration is slowing. FM is going to be a major mode of listening for a while – the killer app, the big megaphone. We want to take advantage of all the sharpening of the skills and the new techniques that the current national discussion in public radio is bringing out. We must keep abreast of that and use what we can, which I hope is a lot.

And then the internet. Take social networking. Someone in North Dakota can use it to talk with people all over the world, and I am doing that, too (it's already helped me grow weird varieties of carrots). But it can also meld into radio on our drought, our flooding, our new coal-fired power plant and our new bunch of wind farms and what they might do to our waterfowl migration. Its impact in a region with a small, dispersed population can be a way to pull together discussion that both deepens and broadens what we as program producers do. But our staff is already stretched trying to do good radio. It's been fits and starts as yet – when it has worked, it's been with some of us who find it's use natural.

I should mention that there are three Native American stations in North Dakota – four if you count the one just over the border in South Dakota. They are very local, with loads of announcements about what's going on, and intimately involved with their communities. What we do as a regional network is different.

We are still finding the kinds of connections we can have with our regional community. That means building partnerships. I used to work in what is called community radio, and there we both struggled with and relished our outsider position. As a statewide public radio network we are not outsiders. As the role of public radio changes and grows, working more often and more closely with other organizations and institutions is likely to be a key part of whether we fade or flourish, so we are already started down that path, with all its editorial complexities to watch for.

One of our strengths is that we are part of a joint licensee. Many of my colleagues at other joint licensees complain about being the little dog next to TV. But my experience at Prairie Public is that we radio folks here would be worse off on our own. The power of having the shared engineering, development and administrative staff is undeniable. Yes, we wish they weren't preoccupied with running the TV drive when we are planning ours, and we wish the engineer we need right now wasn't off installing the digital TV transmitters. But having, for example, skilled in-house engineers to plot out our rather complex interconnection needs, or having a top of the line direct mail program – well, we just wouldn't have those on our own. And I'd have to spend a whole lot more of my scarce time doing my own bookkeeping and finances. Since I don't, I can work on things that help add listeners.

Joint licensee cooperation in programming and production is harder in practice than it seems in theory, and not just because public radio and TV have different stylistic traditions and some different needs (like that “pictures” thing), or the big difference in costs (and therefore funding needs). We put most of our effort into daily news and a talk show. The TV people do one-time half hours or hours, or short series. Cross-platform work that in concept seems simple runs into all kinds of hitches. But, gradually, more is happening. The latest example is for a series of commentaries we are doing. We are getting them on video, too. Simple, but the last time we did a similar series the idea did not even come up. The video is not for air – it's for the web. Interestingly, I think the web, where the radio/TV distinction is not so sharp, is helping us work together more. This gains listeners.

Regional collaboration – say, for us, with other Great Plains operations – is something that we have tried more than once. We'll keep trying it, too – it is certainly urged on us often. It is another area that seems great in concept but the real application is tough. While we have for a long time traded news cuts and stories, real collaboration has been sporadic and driven by occasional project grants. It is going to take work and resources, and the results need to be worth the trouble. Where it is appropriate, we produce good programs more efficiently, and we gain listeners.

One area of growth for public radio in North Dakota is going to be more different service. Different parts of the state have vastly different public radio needs. At

one extreme for us is Grand Forks. With less than a hundred thousand people in the metro, it has five public radio stations – news/classical. Triple A, all classical, all news, and a decent college/community rocker (we and MPR overlap). In the western two thirds of the state the main FM public radio is one – our news/classical (and, in a few places, the tribal licensees). Prairie Public is all HD and we have our own HD2 stream everywhere – if HD actually picks up, it will bring in more than the few additional listeners we’ve already gotten. Right now, cell phone and desktop streaming/on demand listening are more likely to be the ways North Dakotans will get new public radio alternatives. A major donor who looked to be in her 70s came up to me a couple of weeks ago and told me she’s listening a lot – via the web – to a small college station she ran into on vacation. She likes their wildly eclectic music. But she said she missed our North Dakota interviews and news. I hope that the mechanisms of listening will allow, with more facility than they do now, the easy mixing of content from different sources, so that Prairie Public can still be part of her service. But a big question for us is what the addition of alternatives, through various channels, does to our ability to survive. North Dakota may have more listeners to public radio in 5 years, but will Prairie Public have the role to raise the funds to pay our dues and keep our own contribution to that service strong?

Well, again, yes, I think so. There is audience growing to be done in North Dakota, but it will take some diverse work. It will take things that have been outlined in other Grow the Audience essays – such as building on quality news, smart use of our own promotion, and addressing people who now feel outside of public radio. New partnerships are difficult, too, but whether with our own TV colleagues, other public radio entities, or groups outside of public radio, we need them. We add new transmitters when and where it makes sense, and new streams with which we try to build rather than diffuse support. We use the web to connect to our audience better. One way and another, it adds up.

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