

Envision a Larger Success

*Thoughts on Public Radio's Victories,
Missteps, and Future*

By Thomas J. Thomas

This essay is adapted from a presentation at the national conference of the Public Radio Program Directors Association earlier this year. The essay benefits from conversations with several SRG members about the future of our stations' service as well as research on public radio's multi-channel service supported by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

The growth in public radio's service to the American public over the past twenty years is a remarkable collective accomplishment. Our reach across the nation and into our communities has multiplied near five times over. One of the reasons I love to reflect upon this history of growth is that so many stories inform how we did it.

Public radio today reaches, each week, one of every ten

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SRG's forty-four member licensees operate 165 public radio stations, account for over a third of public radio's audience and financial support, and produce the majority of public radio's national programming. SRG informs stations' strategies and strengthens their operating effectiveness through in-depth analysis, long-term planning, and collaborative projects.

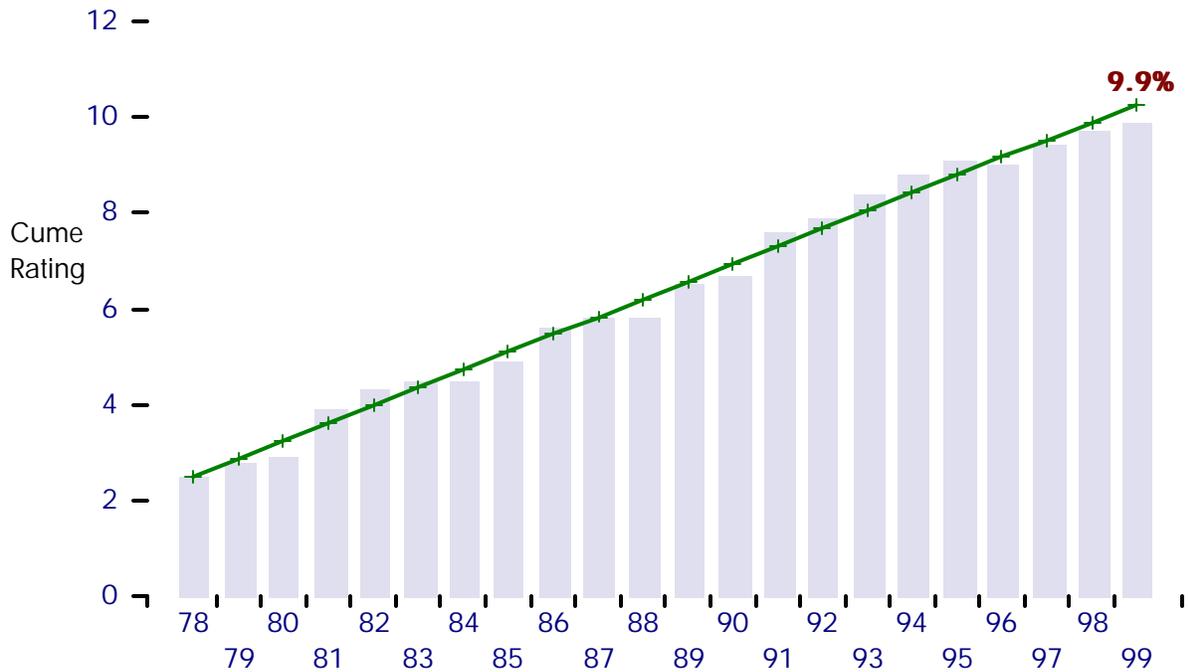
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Americans because of the efforts of all us working in our respective areas—producers who create the programs, program directors who schedule the air time, engineers who refine the signal, people who raise the money that fuels the economic engine, and all of us working to push the reach just a little bit further. All of these things go together to make the impact of public radio what it is today.

This is no small thing. From the vantage point of twenty years ago, where we stand today was not a certain prospect. Everyone who works in this field should take enormous pride in what we have been able to do together.

Public Radio's National Service

Percent of US Population Using a CPB-Supported Station Each Week



Source: Arbitron Nationwide

All of this wouldn't mean much, though, if it were not for the *significance* of the service that's happening within this pattern of growth.

Our first duty as broadcasters is to find an audience. If we can't find an audience we ought to be in a different field. The chart of our audience growth shows our success as broadcasters. But we're *public service* broadcasters and so our companion responsibility is to have something truly significant to say to that audience and for that audience.

So the second, equally important—probably more important—dimension of our success as a field is the significance of the service that we've crafted over the years. And again it's been many, many efforts of many, many people, at all levels, that have created that.

Someone cited a listener's complaint that we get redundant when we talk about our programming—especially during pledge drives—it's always "intelligent and in-depth" or "in-depth and intelligent." If we are so intelligent, maybe we ought to have something more to say for ourselves.

Today we can shape a powerful vocabulary to describe what our service is about. There are many concepts that are so fundamental to what we do that we take them for granted. We are so close to these fundamentals that it is difficult to step back from the proximity of our own service, to think of how we're perceived and how important we really are, to understand how our shared values make a difference in American life.

I'm going to take a stab at three or four things that I believe define our service—from the perspective of our audience.

At the top, I would say, is the trust and credibility that we've established over thirty years of public service. Trust and credibility are powerful assets in today's society. They are delicate assets, something that we have to preserve and protect every day in our work. The trust and credibility that we have in American life as journalists, as cultural advocates, is a remarkable accomplishment and an incredible asset.

The sense of authenticity. We speak to people honestly and openly. We empower communities to speak in their own voices and people to talk in their own accents. There's an authenticity that you hear when you listen to public radio that you hear very rarely anyplace else on the radio dial. We have created an art of authenticity. And it takes an art to present it day in and day out and also succeed as broadcasters. The art of authenticity is an important asset for public radio.

Third, we have created a sense that the work we do is informed by principles. It's not that the principles are the same every place. People of good conscience in our field are at different points on the political spectrum and would disagree on matters of both civic and cultural life. But the voice with which we speak to people is a principled voice. When you hear someone talking on public radio you know they believe what they say. This is an important asset.

And fourth, I would venture durability. This isn't a word

that most of us think of when saying key characteristics of what we are. But we've been around a while. Today I attended a luncheon where we celebrated this durability in honoring *Morning Edition*. Not only is *Morning Edition* terrific. Not only does Bob Edwards do a really great job every morning. He's been doing that job for twenty years! And that's just one example. We in public radio have been here through thick and thin and we've been able to sustain all of these other values over that period of time.

Durability is not common in American life. There are many valuable and precious things that happen in our communities and that happen in national life, brief shining stars that come and then they go. I've been associated with some of them in other parts of my life. They are great and then they're gone. We in public radio have a quality of enduring, a durability to what we do that, over time, multiplies the strength of what we are in our communities—community institutions of significance, influence, and lasting value.

I think it's important to reflect on these kinds of things and maybe add a couple of others of your own. Write them down and stick them over your desk someplace. Because as the environment in which we work changes around us, as we figure out our way into new media, it's these characteristics and others like them that will remain our signature. The medium may change, but if these aspects of our character remain strong, the success that we see in our increased reach and influence over the years looking back will be the success that we will see as we go forward.

To the growth of our service and the strength of our values I will add a third key element of our success. We have increasingly aligned our public radio economy with the use of our services by the public. Our most important revenue streams come from and correlate closely with the public's use of our most important programming.

This is not the only service model one can follow. The earliest model of public broadcasting was to create a "safe space" for programmers to do something without paying attention to whether anybody actually watched or listened. The creative laboratory for American broadcasting. There's a value to that function. We need that function. But that, alone, leads to a very limited role in society. It's a strategy that leads to institutions with either short lives or heavy dependencies. It's not the durability that public radio has created.

Another model is to capture revenue through activities that are at some distance from core mission and values—the "bake sale" model writ large. There is an element of that in public television's funding: pledge drives built around special programs that have little to do with the core service and increasingly costly "thank you gifts" that have scant connection to public service.

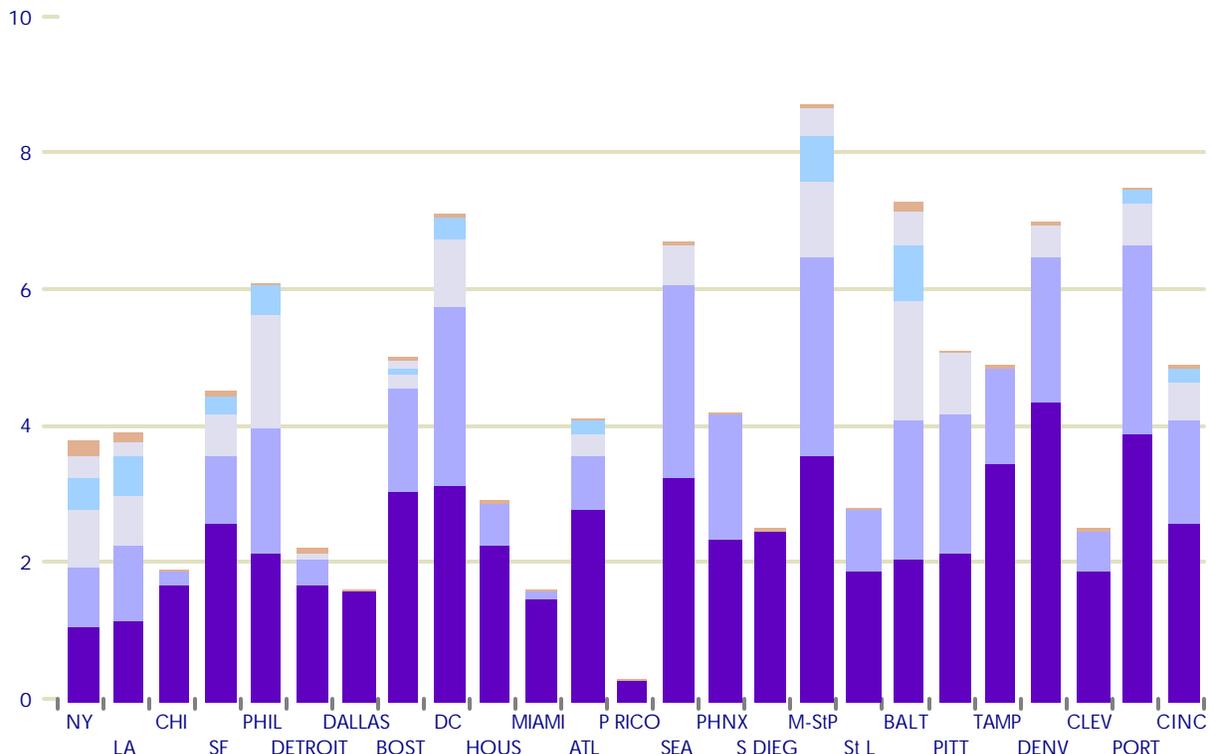
Part of why we're still here, part of why the number of people we serve ever increases, part of why I expect the number will go up in the year ahead and the year after that, is because we have anchored our strategies of organizational growth as a field to the public's use of our core services. It's not the only measure. It's not the only validation. But it's a fundamental aspect of our strategy. It separates us in significant ways from our colleagues in

public television and from many others in public life. That was a very successful and smart thing to do.

Let me now turn to the question of where we have not succeeded. Again I'll start with some data—a chart of public radio's share of the audience in the top 25 markets. New York is on the left; Cincinnati is on the right. There are twenty-three other markets in between. The height of the bar is the *total* share of public radio listening in each of the respective communities. Each of the gradations is a station, showing its share of listening.

This is one of those half-full, half-empty kind of stories.

Public Radio Listening Share: Top 25 Markets



Listening Share, Metro Survey Area, Spring 1999

Source: Arbitron

Station Resource Group

Part of what we see here is exciting. We can see stations with three shares—something that was near-unthinkable when we started out. There are several stations that have that kind of market share. In some of these markets, public radio collectively is approaching seven and eight shares and even ten shares. This level of accomplishment is the good news story.

But the other part is the white spaces. That's what I tend to focus on a lot recently. I should add that it looks the same if you do a similar chart for markets 26-50 and so on. The public radio shares are a little higher as the markets get smaller, but the basic pattern is the same. I've been looking at the white spaces and saying, So what's wrong here? Why are we in these situations and how can we address that? I would like to highlight a couple of points from those reflections.

First, in our efforts in the earliest years of public radio to build the system quickly, we embedded many of our stations in organizations and institutions whose missions address public radio in only the most distant fashion. Many of our stations have benefitted from their institutional homes, to be sure. Many institutional licensees provide generous financial support, space to work from, and support for the utility bills. But the institutional home is increasingly a liability for many of our stations, too. It plays out in several ways.

Far too many of our stations have no real accountability in broadcast terms. There may be institutional accountability in other terms, but as broadcasters, as public servants in the broadcast medium, that's not the focus, not the mission, not the accountability path within

their own organization.

Second, too many of our stations are isolated by their institutional surround from civic leadership in their community. The distance between those who are doing public radio and where the civic leadership is in the community is just too great.

And third, as the pace of communications technology quickens, these stations will have a difficult time moving swiftly and adroitly through a shifting media environment.

These are not fatal flaws, by any means. In certain circumstances, these qualities afford a needed protective buffer against adverse forces. But they are more often impediments to public service. Some of them could have been avoided by more creative station organizing strategies in our middle years of growth as a system.

It also strikes me that in our collective desire to give great value and importance to being a decentralized, community-based, community-controlled, highly autonomous system of public radio stations, we've been indulgent of many stations whose public service performance leaves a great deal to be desired. We have not, as a field, been very tough with ourselves. We're easy on our colleagues who seem not to deliver public service for inexplicable reasons. Now maybe that's just part of the style that goes with some of the other values that define us as a field. But I think we need to challenge each other more.

We are weaker because we have not done that in the

past. We have not, as a field, succeeded in finding enough creative and constructive ways to make those challenges to each other. When we do challenge each other, it often degenerates into “who-do-you-hate-this-year” dynamics of small stations versus large stations, or rural versus urban, or stations versus networks—not creative “how-do-we-get-better-as-a-field?” questions.

For the years ahead we must be rigorous with ourselves and demand the very best of each other in the work we do on a daily basis.

But enough of this. The real issue is what should we do to succeed—to provide more listener service in the future?

One thing is that we all have to stay focused on the basics. We screw up when we get distracted. If you look at our long-term track record of service, it's not a straight, upward glide from one year to the next. There are periods when we've done better and there are periods when we've done worse. And you can pinpoint some of the times when we've done worse and say, “So what was going on with public radio right then?” Well, probably we were fighting about dues or unbundling (who remembers unbundling?) or Newt Gingrich.

We get distracted as a system. We lose our collective focus on our programming service. We can't afford to do that. When we do that we pay. And our community pays because we're not delivering the service as sharply and as competitively as we should be. We have to stay focused on the basics of what we do every day.

Second, we need to expand our delivery system. Part of the reason for the white spaces on the chart of service in the top twenty-five markets is that we don't have outlets in many of our major communities from which to deliver some of our most significant formats. We're in the position today where in virtually any community in this country we should be able to deliver *at least* three strong, competitive public radio program services. We have the program assets.

We are program-rich as a system right now. But our pipeline to get that programming to users, to listeners, is not up to the task. There are too many places where we have only one station holding the franchise. Or two stations. We can do better.

It's going to be tough. The spectrum, for the most part, has been given away. We're going to have to be creative in how to find spectrum. We're probably going to have to buy some spectrum. And it's going to be worth doing it. The programming is valuable enough to our communities that our communities will give us the money to acquire the spectrum so we can deliver the service to them. I absolutely believe that. It's a different way of thinking about how we move forward in our system but I think we can do it. The dividends will be literally millions of additional listeners that we can serve as public radio broadcasters.

This is a big challenge to us. It is as provocative a challenge in its own way to do this in the old medium of radio as any of the services and dreams and ambitions that we've talked about for the new medium of the web.

Finally, and most importantly, we need to create a larger vision of what we do.

Right now we are in a period where we are enduring the curse of moderate success. We've been pretty good at a lot of things. We can celebrate our growth and talk about our awards and how our income is up. And it takes a little bit of the fire out of the belly about needing to do better.

We also endure the curse of undue humility. "Aw shucks, we're just public radio." Something that we have heard time and time again from the consultants who work with our stations to build major giving programs is that the people who listen to us place a higher value on our work and have a higher set of expectations and ambitions for us than we do ourselves.

That's fascinating when you think about it. When we talk to community leaders, to the kind of people that we would be willing to ask for significant gifts as major donors, or to regular listeners and say, "What do you think about public radio?", "How do you value it?", or "How important is this stuff?" the answers that they give are uniformly imbued with a higher set of expectations and value for what we do than when we ask the same set of questions to the people who work professionally inside the field. Get a grip, folks. We're great! We have to envision a larger success for ourselves.

The way we can do this is to start with those people who *already* think we're great. Start with an outside perspective. Connect ourselves with civic leadership in our communities. A lot of people are scared of that.

They say, “Oh my gosh if we start letting community leaders in to really work with us, next thing you know they’re going to start telling us what to put on at three o’clock in the afternoon.” We’re radio professionals. We’re program directors. They’re just civic leaders.

They don’t want to do that. True civic leaders respect your professionalism. That’s why they love you. That’s why they want to be involved with what you’re doing.

But they do know things that we don’t know. They have connections to the agenda of the community. They can leverage the resources of the community. They can help us succeed in our ambitions. They can help us talk about those ambitions in ways that we ourselves may not be able to do.

Secondly, we have to connect to larger agendas in our communities, to the civic and cultural life of other organizations. We’ve done a lot of thinking about partnerships *within* public radio. How do we connect my station to some other station to sell a little bit more underwriting? Or do this show? But we must also look to larger worlds of political and civic life and of cultural life of which we are a part.

People in these worlds think of us as a fundamental part of the classical music scene, of the jazz scene, of the civic life in many of our communities. Yet, *our* sense of connection to these larger agendas remains fairly tenuous. If we can more firmly envision ourselves as the radio part of a much larger thing, this is a pathway to a larger sense of ourselves in our communities and, in fact, the nation.

We also need to find new voices *within* public radio to tell us our ambitions. That goes with being as old as we are as a field. I look back at some of the inspiring rhetoric that has informed so many of us in public radio—Bill Siemering’s famous outline of what *All Things Considered* might be, that E.B. White quote from the first Carnegie Commission report about public broadcasting as “our Minsky’s and our Camelot.” These are inspiring words. They are motivating words.

But they’re not words of the now. For me, these words, in recent years, have started to have the same feel as the inspiring words of the Declaration of Independence or Martin Luther King’s, “I Have A Dream” speech. Powerful stuff, but of a then, not of the now.

We must listen for the inspiring rhetoric, the passion, the vision, and the ambition that speaks to what we are as public radio of the moment—and the future. There will be, I am certain, a reinterpretation of our enduring values that will resonate in new and different ways to the sensibilities of this time. As culture and society change around us, so do our opportunities. As our character as a nation evolves in directions both more diverse and more commodified, so do the challenges of public service. As the place of the individual is transformed in a globalized, hyper-connected, data-mined, multi-cultural world, our heritage as the most intimate and personal of the mass media takes new meaning.

We must listen for new voices. Joined with the old, we can, together, envision a larger success that, as we look back in years to come, will astound us as much as the distance we have already come.