

Memo

To: SRG Planning Retreat Attendees
From: Mark Fuerst
Re: Leveraging this critical moment in local news
Date: July 27, 2022

Many of you were in the room when we were discussing some hard questions about the state of public media journalism at the SRG retreat in 2019. There was frustration about the lack of public media presence in that year's Knight Media Forum and dismay about the American Journalism Project's decision to exclude public media applicants from its first round of grants.

The material I am sharing with you and the session we will deliver on Tuesday in Denver continues that discussion. It reflects real progress and areas that still need attention.

Before traveling to the SRG retreat in 2019, I met with Feather Houstoun, principal advisor at Wyncote, to get her thoughts on why public media was receiving so little attention. She identified four issues that, in her view, were under-appreciated within public media. I presented those issues to you in the slides I am attaching. Feather suggested a few things Wyncote might do to address these concerns, including informal contact with a few key funders and expanded information sharing between public media and other nonprofit news providers. Those steps—along with hard work from many who will be in the room next week—had an effect. Today public media has a seat at the table in many local journalism forums. Policies at AJP changed with money flowing to a few SRG members. Webinars now take place every month, some with Wyncote support, to advance practices across every sector of public service journalism.

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Feather also recognized that many people outside “the system” did not realize how far local journalism had advanced within public media. So, she asked Elizabeth Hansen Shapiro and me to compile a set of slides that documented the financial growth and expanding newsroom capacity at many of the leading stations. Much of that information came from SRG. We presented versions of those slides in 2020 and 2021. Then Caroline Porter joined us early this year to turn those slides into a formal paper. A draft of that paper is attached. It will be published later this year by the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University.

Earlier this year, Feather asked us to take our work in a different direction—this time reporting “into the field.” She asked Caroline and me to interview station leaders to see if we could identify “a path of change” that stations were traveling at this critical moment of opportunity in local journalism. The attached memo summarizes what we heard in those interviews.

We want to use that memo as the starting point for a discussion on Tuesday morning. With your help we will look to expand and update this analysis, and then we will bring all this work to a general session of the PRPD Conference in late August.

Feather, Caroline and I all look forward to this discussion and thank you in advance for your time and attention.

Trends we observed

Following interviews with station and newsroom leaders, we observed the following six trends about station newsrooms' continued evolution, especially as they expand their roles in their local news ecosystems and deliver their services across multiple platforms. These represent the state of play as we see it today.

- (1) Stations largely want and need more sophisticated understandings of their current and potential local audiences.
- (2) Stations are shifting away from an audio-dominant emphasis to focus on digital products and platforms.
- (3) Stations see investments in diversity, equity and inclusion as critical components to their current and future success.
- (4) Stations are reorganizing staff needs and investments to reflect the changes referenced above.
- (5) Stations are developing local brands distinct from NPR.
- (6) Stations are experimenting with the most relevant and necessary metrics and key performance indicators to meet their goals.

Actions taken by stations

Below we mapped early evidence of the steps that newsroom and station leaders are taking in relation to the trends highlighted above.

Trend	Action
Increasing efforts to connect with a broader audience within the local community.	Audience research to better understand the potential audiences and their wants/needs.
Shifting priorities to digital products and platforms.	Creation of newsletters, podcasts and social media.
Investing in diversity, equity and inclusion as critical to success.	Source and story audits, naming DEI as a key strategic goal.
Reorganizing staff needs and investments.	Hiring for different skill sets.
Developing a local brand distinct from NPR.	Dropping call letters, changing station names.
Questioning current metrics and key performance indicators.	Creation of metrics dashboards.

Recommendations

Through the course of this work, we developed recommendations about how the field can work together to address the above-mentioned trends and actions taken by stations. We add them here to hopefully propel further conversation on these subjects.

(1) Stations would benefit from a set of audience-building conceptual frameworks aimed at connecting with broader, more diverse audiences in local communities.

Well-researched audience-building concepts played a key role in public radio's service growth. While some of these basic concepts, like "core listener," are now being challenged, there is no similar set of audience-building concepts or "paths" available to decision-makers who face new audience needs in a more competitive media landscape. A few stations have launched audience-research projects, and these efforts look like a good first step. But these discrete projects have not been synthesized into a framework that reflects the large-scale changes in audience diversity and media consumption. There is no shared vocabulary or set of agreed upon concepts that can be tailored to fit local characteristics and provide a basis of advances across a wide front of stations. For some managers we interviewed, assessing and meeting audience needs has led to evolving efforts to become "public squares" for community members to meet, often in person. In these instances, we observed more attention paid to community cohesion and creative thinking about ways to meet directly with people "on the ground." There is increasing talk of collaboration with other local organizations and media outlets. This approach should, we think, provide a foundation for work with other sectors of the local journalism world that are prioritizing community engagement, collaboration, and building "local news ecosystems."

(2) Stations would benefit from a more sophisticated effort, perhaps organized by station type, to share best practices about newsroom transformation.

All the stations we contacted were optimistic about their potential to play a larger role in local journalism. They share many common questions and challenges. Some are aggressively seeking to be a "front line news provider," and in some cases becoming a new "paper of record." This may be the greatest management challenge faced by public radio since the "audience doubling" efforts of the '80s and '90s. Newsroom managers are trying to decide: What portion of their reporting capacity should be devoted to "breaking news," versus "deeper dives" and features? How do they balance state news reporting with the need to cover local issues or events that have little regional interest; and everyone is looking to right-size their shift to digital, to develop greater literacy with social platforms and to expand online writing within teams trained initially for audio. Our interviews found that support for this transition is ad-hoc, with smaller rural stations needing more support so the transition becomes a shared, more efficient experience. Larger stations are tracking one another, sharing advice on change management and newsroom processes. But the smaller stations did not seem to have a good set of models to use for reference and replication or even informal peer-to-peer networks through which they could ask questions and share lessons.

(3) Stations would benefit from moving faster to develop their distinct branding, which for so long was “NPR for [this place].”

NPR and other network programs still fill the majority of prime-time hours in broadcast schedules, and the appeal of NPR content is fundamental to their service impact and audience loyalty. But we heard station leaders asking: “How much should we emphasize NPR affiliation versus how much should we emphasize our distinctive *local* brand?” Our structured interview protocol focused on local news, investment, and strategy; a much smaller part of our interviews focused on NPR. Nonetheless, it appeared to us that managerial attention is shifting from national to local, and based on what we heard in our interviews, it is likely that shift will continue. None of the stations expressed an interest in separation from NPR, but their attention is focused on their role in a state and local news ecosystems defined by local and regional interests with NPR becoming a valued content provider and important partner rather than a core identity.

We also heard some managers in conservative areas acknowledge that being an “NPR station” can be a barrier, making it harder to reach parts of their community where NPR is seen as a liberal voice. To the extent that stations are looking to establish themselves as non-partisan local and state news providers, this is an issue they will need to resolve.

(4) Stations would benefit from a shared business strategy with clearer, fewer KPIs.

Our interviews on metrics led in several important directions that may need attention and investment on a national scale. Most of the managers we contacted have lots of data displayed in sophisticated dashboards—but they are having trouble identifying *the real KPIs* they can use to track audience growth and service impact across their multiple platforms. “Total audience reach” is surfacing as a trend that managers are following; newsletter subscription numbers (sign-ups and opt-outs) are gaining importance as an indicator of reach. No one seemed confident that they had the right set of measures.

This lack of agreement about metrics is important. There is so much talk about reaching “beyond the NPR audience.” Everyone wants to “expand their digital service.” In that context, what indicators are most useful in guiding decisions to develop sustainable revenues, to reach new audiences and enhance local service impact? We expect that identifying those indicators will require a large project, fueled by lots of collaboration and collective investment. One specific point that caught our attention, we noticed that none of our interviewees seemed confident about the metrics that could allow them to follow visitors/listeners as they move through an engagement “funnel” toward, potentially, direct financial support. Predictive indicators that can accurately forecast digital membership growth will likely be an essential part of developing a multi-platform service that finally moves “beyond broadcast.”

Appendix

Station Selection

On May 19, 2022, we sent an email to 34 people who we believed had a good view of the local journalism field in public media. The initial contact group included 18 station executives (CEOs, PDs, News Directors), seven public media association executives, two industry consultants, and seven people who have been working on Wyncote's "Local that Works" webinar series, which has a strong journalism component. Our outreach included some stations that we anticipated would be selected for interviews, and we believed those stations could be particularly helpful in identifying peer stations that are providing strong local news. We specifically asked our contacts to identify "smaller and mid-sized stations [that] are delivering effective and sustainable local journalism," including "...smaller stations that may be setting the pace, discovering, and establishing the practices that will allow them to deliver strong local news in the coming decade."

Our contact list members recommended 39 stations for us to consider. We divided those stations into two groups: 12 were categorized as "larger;" 27 as "mid-sized and smaller."

We reviewed the news pages at the website of each station, looking for (a) the volume of local news, (b) journalism newsletters (c) podcasts and other indications of higher-level local news outputs. Using those criteria and looking to provide a mix of larger and smaller stations, we then chose 10 stations for interviews, four larger stations and six mid-sized and smaller stations. Later we added two more interview prospects, bringing our full interview list to 12.

The Interviews

We completed 11 of those 12 interviews between June 1, 2022 and July 5, 2022. In each interview, we referenced an interview protocol with five questions to guide our conversation. All these interviews were recorded and transcribed. Initially, we identified nine trends and anchored those variables to specific comments we found in the transcriptions. We then combined our observations into the points listed above and reconfirmed their importance and relevance for public media managers.

As these interviews were taking place, Mark also had the opportunity to interview four other newsroom leaders as part of the "Local that Works" (LTW) webinar series he manages for the Wyncote Foundation. The comments and observations expressed in those LTW interviews provided additional confirmation for the trends and points that surfaced in our initial round of station calls.

Selected Station Interviewees

Interview No.	Interviewee	Location	Role	Org
1	Steve Swenson	Nashville, TN	President & CEO	NPR
2	Rachel Hubbard	Oklahoma City, OK	Executive Director	KOSU
3	Mitch Teich	Canton, NY	Station Manager	NCPR
4	Sarah L. Morris	Kansas City, MO	General Manager	KCUR
5	Stephen George	Louisville, KY	President	LPM
6	Ron Hetrick	Harrisburg, PA	President & CEO	WITF
7	Jun Reina	Sacramento, CA	General Manager	CapRadio
8	John Mooney	Newark, NJ	Executive Director & Founder	NJ Spotlight News
9	Jessie Dick	Rhinelander, WI	General Manager / President	WXPR
10	Jim Schachter	Concord, NH	President & CEO	NHPR
11	Scott Finn	Burlington, VT	President & CEO	Vermont Public

Additional Interviewees as Part of the "Local that Works" Webinars

Interview No.	Interviewee	Location	Role	Org
1	Dan Barrick	Concord, NH	News Director	NHPR
2	Terence Shepherd	Miami, FL	News Director	WLRN
3	Megan Garvey	Los Angeles, CA	Executive Editor	KPCC/LAist
4	Kevin Dale	Denver, CO	Executive Editor	Colorado PR

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Elizabeth Hansen,
Research Fellow,
Shorenstein Center, Harvard



Feather Houstoun,
Sr. Adviser,
Wyncote



Sarah Lutman,
Principal,
8 Bridges Workshop

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Our approach

- Begin informal discussion with a small set of selected journalism funders



3

Our approach

- Encourage information exchange and cross-sector discussions with leadership in public broadcasting and the INN Community.



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Nonprofit News**

4

Our approach

- Share information and analysis through established channels of journalism “thought leadership”



NiemanLab

5



Stephen R. Covey
The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People

6

The questions

- What role can public broadcasters play in this emerging **local** journalism landscape?
- Are leading funders recognizing the strengths and assets that public broadcasters bring to this challenge?
- Are public broadcasters actively addressing their shortcomings and weaknesses?
- Who are the organizations and individuals best suited to “make the case” for public media journalism?

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Our Concerns (1)

How many stations are prepared to take on the work and responsibility of becoming primary news sources for the local communities?

8

Our Concerns (2)

Are stations making progress diversifying their newsrooms and extending their reach beyond their traditional, white, upper income public media audience?

9

Our Concerns (3)

Are stations adequately improving their digital content and digital reach?

10

Our Concerns (4)

Are stations developing the governance structures and funding disclosure practices required for accountability and investigative journalism?

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