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# “With the Support of Listeners Like You”

## *Lessons from U.S. Public Radio*

Alan G. Stavitsky & Michael W. Huntsberger

Too often it feels to American media scholars that Europeans view the experience of public broadcasting in the United States as an aberration, a view that neatly neuters any imperative to take the case seriously. Europeans see PSB in the USA as an interesting novelty at best, and not infrequently as an irrelevant anomaly. In comparison with many European contexts the limited amount of public funding, the highly localised nature of its organisation and orientation, and the lack of a nationally owned public broadcasting conglomerate make the American case unique. But to acknowledge difference is not to justify any notion that the American case is insignificant to Europe.

The character of social and financial relations linking U.S. public broadcasters to their audiences in a dependency condition is especially important for European PSB given historical problems with insularity and lack of sensitivity to public preferences. It might also have implications in its mode of direct financial support from audiences given that the licence-fee regime is in trouble in much of Europe and the outlook for its preservation is uncertain. The American approach to PSB has of necessity always more strongly encouraged interdependence between the service and the public, and increasingly so since the mid-1980s as federal funding has been slashed and public broadcasters had to secure financial resources from direct supporter contributions and underwriting. The disposition to strengthen audience involvement has become even more pronounced with developments in digital platforms, particularly in public radio. This is not to say that all is sweetness and light in the American experience; it is to say there are pointed lessons Europeans should find useful in the current climate.

### The path to public broadcasting

Interdependence between audiences and public broadcasters flows directly from the historically decentralised structure of American broadcasting, a structure which has also made funding a more uncertain and complex element than in

much of Europe, especially the grand old firms of northwest Europe. Whereas national broadcasting systems dominated the development of European radio (Avery 1993), in the United States it was developed as a patchwork of independent stations licensed to communities of all sizes and kinds. The context rather insisted on this approach given that radio had to ultimately serve a comparatively quite large 9.6 million square kilometres of territory under conditions of economic depression in the 1930s and in a society long and strongly favouring private commercial approaches to handling most civic needs. Several forces gave rise to this approach, most notably a government policy of localism that was central to conceptions of community life prior to the rise of contemporary urbanism. In association with the ingrained U.S. commitment to the concept and practice of market dynamics as the best way to organise and develop social services, localism brought together the forces of capitalism and communication. As Stavitsky (1994: 20) observed, "Within the local marketplace unfettered capitalism would lead to efficient exchange of goods and services, while unfettered discourse would yield the 'truth,' the best ideas to animate the democratic process". Accordingly, formative broadcasting policy in the United States drew upon utopian notions of radio as a tool to provide civic information and enhance democracy at the local level in a federal system.

The fundamental structure for the regulation of broadcasting in the U.S. was established in the Radio Act of 1927, provisions of which authorised licensing locally owned stations to serve the "public interest, convenience, and necessity" of host communities (U.S. Congress 1927). Perhaps surprising to many, the Act expressed only passing concern for the role of the then-nascent commercial radio networks, known as "chains," although of course these would quickly come to dominate American broadcasting. Though the law restricted chains to ownership of only a few stations, a few were enough as they owned big stations in major cities. They produced and distributed the bulk of mass-appeal entertainment shows that others rushed to access via affiliation. This amounted to abandoning much of the community-oriented programming that policymakers had sought to encourage in the localised structure, which in turn undermined the effectiveness of U.S. media policy from the outset because the nature of the broadcast service could scarcely be influenced by regulating local stations when market power rested with national networks (first NBC and later also CBS). Thus, the principles in policy and co-related ideals for realising its objectives were undermined by the practices of its systemic organisation. This raises interest in observing the degrees to which various structures and practices of PSB organisation in European countries either facilitate or obstruct audience participation at varied levels of developmental, managerial and production practice.

In the early days of U.S. *public* broadcasting, however, networking was not generally an issue because these non-commercial stations, primarily licensed to educational institutions, lacked funds to produce and distribute programming (Frost 1937)<sup>1</sup>. Public broadcasters instead aired locally produced educational and cultural fare for small but typically loyal audiences, thereby cementing bonds (Stavitsky 1993). Nonetheless, from the 1920s through the 1960s these public

stations weren't especially concerned about accountability to their audiences and in this sense were little different from their European counterparts. Similarly driven by an enlightenment mission that defined their ethos, American public broadcasters also conceived their audiences as pupils they were mandated to elevate and educate. They were not sensitive to audience desires and in very many cases eschewed general tastes as crass populism. As in much of Europe, American PSB practitioners drank from the same cup the elixir of enlightenment, if not necessarily to the 'dregs'.

Because U.S. public broadcasters ceded 'popular' programming to the commercial sector and received most of their financial support from sponsor universities (which held the licences) or philanthropic foundations (such as Ford) they did not feel beholden to listeners and viewers. They conducted little audience research (Stavitsky 1995). The pedagogical relationship with audiences shifted markedly, however, in the years following passage of the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967 (U.S. Congress 1967). For the first time American public channels received federal funds to support their non-commercial status. With this change public broadcasters were impelled to justify this expenditure from the public treasury – to strengthen the view of such as an investment. The 1967 Act established the Corporation for Public Broadcasting [CPB]. This private non-profit corporation funded by tax revenue allocates federal funds to stations, producers and others involved in the public broadcasting system. In this, too, the American approach was in some ways 'ahead of the curve' as we view trends in Europe today where top-slicing and contestable funding, or whatever formulas pass muster in their respective contexts, seek to open funding to agencies beyond traditional (and not so traditional, as with C4 in the UK) PSB companies. Subsequently, CPB began commissioning audience studies to demonstrate to Congress that Americans tuned in to – and valued – public broadcasting.

Although audience research was initially used for such 'representational' purposes, even mainly rhetorical as has been the case in much of Europe over the years, some producers (particularly in public radio) realised that the data could be used to assess audience satisfaction and programme quality to focus developmental efforts and, ultimately, to increase audience size (Stavitsky 1995). Research consultant Tom Church sought to merge the public broadcaster's service mission with the commercial broadcaster's mission to build audience: "While non-commercial stations may define success in more esoteric terms than profit, the bottom line for all radio stations is that a mission...cannot be achieved if there are no listeners" (Radio Research Consortium 1986: 1). Many public broadcasting managers and producers initially resisted the application of audience research "as marking the ascendance of market considerations over (their) social and cultural imperatives" (Stavitsky 1995: 177). Garrison Keillor, the popular host of the renowned radio programme, *A Prairie Home Companion*, told a trade publication: "I think there has been an influx of commercial people....Guys in suits with charts and pages of numbers. I think that this is a pretty dreadful development" (Thoughts from Lake Wobegon 1994: 58).

Eventually, however, the advocacy of Church and other consultants, together with supportive public broadcasters, prompted a 'research revolution' in American public radio during the late 1970s and 1980s. That its depth and breadth was revolutionary was stimulated by budget exigency when the administration of President Ronald Reagan, with its so-called 'Reagan Revolution', threatened to eliminate federal funding entirely. Public broadcasters realised they *must* depend much more on private support in two forms: 1) direct contributions from "listeners like you", and 2) corporate funding via quasi-commercial underwriting announcements – akin, in fact, to the way programming was funded in the early days of private commercial broadcasting in the U.S. Audience research became increasingly sophisticated as a result; it changed from simple interest in *how many* people were listening to concern about *which kinds* of people were listening in terms of characteristic demographics, personal beliefs, attitudes, and buying behaviours. For example, a 1991 survey found that National Public Radio [NPR] news listeners were 47 percent more likely than the national average to own an expensive Acura automobile (Who is Listening 1992). Such data was valuable to public radio in the work of selling underwriting sponsorship to corporations such as Acura, and for identifying the interests of affluent listeners likely to support these stations with direct financial contributions.

Another force influencing the broadcaster/audience relationship was the emergence of a plentiful marketplace of national and regional programming in public radio. NPR was established as a result of the 1967 act not as a network but as a programme supplier, to provide the confederation of stations with news and cultural shows. Federal support also allowed for creation of a national satellite distribution network in 1980, permitting stations to interconnect and share programmes. No longer were stations limited to carrying programmes produced locally. As programme schedules increasingly incorporated regional and national productions, the public broadcaster's conception of localism changed (Stavitsky 1994; 1995). It had become strategically important to "superserve the core" – those audience members who spent most of their listening time with your station and would be most likely to support it financially.

Traditionally localism had been considered in exclusive geographic terms (i.e. cities, states, regions), a pattern in keeping with U.S. government policies in general. Over time, access to national programming, such as NPR news with its high production values, coupled with research data indicating that listeners enjoyed national shows, prompted schedulers to include more shows produced elsewhere. This led to a redefinition of localism in social (rather than spatial) terms; it was important to serve listeners sharing social interests, tastes and values. Of course commercial broadcasters had long mapped and mobilised audiences in this way, pursuing demographic niches with centralised programming. But for ideological and economic reasons this was a new approach in American public radio. With this definition of localism came larger audiences and increased private support. In fact, U.S. public radio has boomed in popularity and influence in this first decade of the new century. In markets from Boston on the East Coast to Portland on the West, public radio stations have

outperformed commercial competitors in key dayparts and in desired audience segments. With such close connections to local listeners, U.S. public radio is well positioned in its growing effort to reshape its relationship to its audience as digital technologies enable expanded opportunities in the emerging media marketplace.

The forces and pressures that caused American public broadcasters to become more sensitive to audience relations and to re-orient their missions during the 1970s and 1980s are remarkably similar to those that buffet European PSB today, not only the fear of reduced public subsidy but also the need to compete effectively in an expanded marketplace. The same essential pattern of emphasising the strategic and tactical uses of audience research have been evident in many European PSB firms in recent years as they, too, has moved from a view that utilised research results mainly for defensive and rhetorical purposes to uses for developmental purposes. It can be argued that the Americans have been dealing with these salient issues for decades longer because of historically lower levels of federal support.

PSB advocates in the U.S. regularly focus on *how little* public money goes into public broadcasting there, especially in comparison with military, health-care, and other public treasury obligations. In 2009, for example, the CPB, which allocates federal dollars to the PSB system, received an appropriation of \$400 million. With the U.S. Census estimating the national population at just over 304 million, federal support for public broadcasting comes to about \$1.32 per capita, a fraction of the amount provided by most European governments (Lowe 2009). This raises significant questions about the 'publicness' of PSB in the USA. For fiscal year 2007, the most recent PSB system data available, tax-based funds from the U.S. federal treasury made up less than 17% of revenues to the American public broadcasting system. Additional tax-based funds from cities, states, and other public authorities made up just over 22% of revenues. Thus, more than 60 percent of system revenues – nearly \$1.8 billion – originated from *private* sources. The majority of this, more than \$714 million, came directly from listeners and viewers becoming "members" of public stations via personal donations (i.e. "contributions").

In addition, public broadcasters received over \$450 million in charitable contributions from corporations and businesses (Corporation for Public Broadcasting)<sup>2</sup>. This dependence on the financial largesse of often large and sometimes controversial corporations, including Wal-Mart, Monsanto, and Exxon Mobil, has sometimes been at odds with the values and sensibilities of individual contributors and consequently a source of contention (Simon 2009). As an example, in recognition of oil company underwriting, some critics have remarked that the acronym PBS – Public Broadcasting Service – stood for the Petroleum Broadcasting Service.

This history of tenuous funding and marginal status has played a determinant role in making American public broadcasters more successful than their commercial counterparts in responding to the tastes, habits, and interests of their audiences. In particular, American PSBs have led the way by integrating

new digital content forms and distribution strategies more broadly and more successfully than the commercial sector. Their success can be attributed in large measure to their consistent focus on the redefinition of localism, as well as an emphasis on promoting public service via audience engagement, i.e. *public participation*. Indeed, the very weakness of PSB's market position would seem to have fuelled their interests in a strategy of experimentation and entrepreneurship. On their own initiative, some public broadcasters undertook experiments with forms of digital distribution as early as 1994 (We Got Here First). Because U.S. commercial interests drove the overall direction of broadcasting policy and technical development in the 1990s, public broadcasters were not party to the prevailing movements toward ownership consolidation and digital implementation. Consequently, public broadcasters had more freedom to test new platforms, and in some instances paved the way for the convergence of digital technologies that has reshaped audience expectations, attitudes, and behaviours in recent years.

### Innovation in American public radio

We treat three case examples of innovation in American public radio. The case of Oregon Public Broadcasting [OPB] reflects an attempt to bring the listening audience into the programme-planning process, and to make programming catalyse a conversation in which the public broadcaster acts as content gatherer, facilitator, producer, and active participant. The account of WFMU demonstrates how a radio service can reach listeners in circumstances where the broadcast signal is inaccessible, and how radio programming can serve as a starting point for a realm of more wide-ranging and personal social experiences. Finally, the inspiring story of WWOZ represents the importance of secondary platforms at times of crisis and the power of localism, conceptualised in terms of taste and values, to engage audiences.

#### *Oregon Public Broadcasting*

From a warren of offices, studios, and support facilities in the city of Portland, Oregon Public Broadcasting operates a statewide network of more than 50 full- and low-power television, FM and AM radio services. Established originally as an agency of the state of Oregon, OPB has operated as an independent non-profit agency since 1993. Ratings for OPB radio and television services are among the highest in the United States for public broadcasting, and the agency is the third-largest producer of programming for U.S. public television. With the assistance of capital funding from state government, OPB recently completed the transition of its television facilities from analogue to digital transmission (Bass 2007). The scale of broadcast programming and operations creates special challenges for the organisation as it integrates digital communication capacity into the agency's public service mission.

As Vice President for New Media, part of Lynne Pollard's mandate is to change workflow processes to accommodate the production needs of digital platforms. In some cases this requires preparing the existing media files for online distribution, or providing server space and streaming capacity to make broadcast radio and television content available to online audiences. Such tasks are now considered a routine part of the processes in television and radio production. Some content adds components that are available only on line<sup>3</sup>. For example, the daily hour-long program, *Think Out Loud*, is accompanied by a real-time blog moderated by the producers. In the course of each broadcast comments from the blog are made available to the programme hosts and guests in a manner similar to 'traditional' listener phone-in calls. The programme's web site invites audience members to contribute ideas for future topics and guests, and to add comments to the blogs of previous programs (Think Out Loud).

According to Pollard, the programme currently registers about 25,000 page views per month and averages 40 posted comments per day. Some contributors post more than once per programme. Those listeners who post frequently help OPB break through the monolithic conception of the mass audience, emerging as unique voices and engaged participants in a broadcast-plus-online community. Access is controlled through registration, but discussions generally proceed without interference from the moderator. In a few instances where the substance has taken up particularly divisive topics, Pollard has observed that participants seem to be perfectly capable of moderating each other, posting reminders in a manner that upholds the values of democracy and civil discourse. Pollard describes OPB's online audience as "extraordinarily well mannered," and says members regularly express an appreciation of the mission of public service broadcasting "in a very authentic way".

In addition to streaming its broadcast FM news and information format (including content from National Public Radio), OPB offers a stream of hosted Triple A (Adult Album Alternative) music over its website and digitally distributed HD-radio channel. It's accompanied by a blog that provides a text-based forum for the programme host to introduce topics related to the music content. However, response comments from the audience are not limited to these topics and drift into personal conversations between the host and individual listeners. Additional audio content includes downloadable MP3 files of performances recorded in the OPB studios and links to podcasts from OPB and NPR.

Pollard says that the pattern of online listening to OPB runs counter to the classic "two humps" pattern of morning and evening "drive-time" broadcast listening. Online use rises in the late morning and early afternoon, falls in the late afternoon, and rises again in the evening as people return home and log-on to computer networks. This pattern suggests that radio remains the basic utility for the OPB audience during peak commuting hours (i.e. periods when mobility matters most), while online reception is more characteristic for stationary listening. Pollard cites anecdotal evidence from fundraising activities and listener communications to suggest that a sizable portion of OPB's online audience is located beyond the geographic limits of its broadcast signals.

The market for digital content has opened OPB to direct competition from its most prominent partner because National Public Radio is distributing directly to listeners online, and on satellite channels. OPB is responding by trying to recast itself as a unique, multi-platform content provider. OPB's digital initiatives anticipate a marketplace in which geographic boundaries no longer pose barriers for consumers. Interestingly, the loss of this traditional audience boundary is pushing OPB to develop a niche in the worldwide market that expresses a unique regional character. By creating and supporting interactive channels, OPB is allowing listeners to share in and shape a real community of people who share the values expressed in that regional character, and the values of public service media.

OPB's digital initiatives are hardly unique – radio stations in both the private and public sectors are undertaking similar projects in Europe and the U.S. What distinguishes the efforts of OPB is the degree to which the broadcaster has tapped into the culture of its community. The pre-existing combination of thoughtful programming and well-mannered listeners provides a strong basis to extend the station's conversations with the audience beyond the studio and on to new platforms where interactions are no longer constrained by the clock. OPB's success with *Think Out Loud* shows that public radio listeners want more depth and breadth in their discussions of local issues and concerns. This in turn is reflective of the culture of the city and the region served by OPB, which share a long history of popular democracy and grassroots involvement. While commercial broadcasters often focus their interactive capacities on instant polls and consumption opportunities, the case of OPB shows that the PSB audience wants to engage in more substantive and meaningful interactions.

### *WFMU New Jersey*

Broadcasting at 1450 watts from East Orange, a gritty New Jersey suburban community, WFMU has served metropolitan New York City and the lower Hudson Valley with an eclectic mix of freeform programming since 1985 (About WFMU; Freeform Timeline). When the station mounted its first web site in 1993, station manager Ken Freedman anticipated that the internet could emerge as a new platform for delivering audio content to existing and, hopefully also, new audiences. WFMU began streaming its broadcast programming in 1997 and today supports seven live audio streams using five different codecs (WFMU Audiostream). In 2005, the station inaugurated fifteen hours per week of live programming exclusively for internet distribution; in 2006 it instituted streams for mobile devices using the Palm and PocketPC operating systems. Freedman believes WFMU was the first broadcaster to stream content for the iPhone in 2007<sup>4</sup>.

According to Freedman, WFMU has a weekly cumulative (i.e. unduplicated) audience of 200,000 listeners. Of these, 50 percent listen online at some point during the week and 15 percent listen online exclusively. Thus, the webcast primarily provides an alternate channel for the broadcast audience: Freedman

estimates that 60 percent of online listening occurs within the geographic boundaries of the station's FM coverage. Anecdotal data suggest that many of these listeners are capturing the stream while they are at work. WFMU currently distributes thirteen broadcast programmes as podcasts, and two programmes available only as podcasts (WFMU Podcasts). Although webcasting and podcasting have made the station's programming available through more channels and in more circumstances, WFMU has turned to newer technologies mainly to take advantage of their interactive capabilities.

Established in 2004, WFMU's *Beware of the Blog* serves as an ongoing forum for station staff and listeners to share interests in music and popular culture. Moderated by Freedman, the blog mirrors the station's freeform programming, offering discussions on a wide range of categories including music, art, current events, religion, real estate, travel, and books (WFMU's *Beware of the Blog*). Bloggers include a handful of listeners who regularly post on a variety of topics. For the most part the blog provides a multimedia forum for station staff members to share their interests with that portion of the WFMU audience that chooses to participate. Freedman observes that the nature of interactivity in the blog provides a distinct social experience that is related, but not integral, to the listening experience. Those listeners who choose to participate may be listening concurrently to WFMU programming, but concurrent listening is not a necessary condition of participation in the social experience.

A more complex relationship between the station and its audience can be observed in the WFMU programmes that offer real time interactive playlists online (Fig. 1).

Figure 1. WFMU interactive playlist

**Playlist for Tony Coulter - September 9, 2008**

Tuesdays Noon - 3pm on WFMU 91.1 fm 90.1 fm [wfmuz.org](http://wfmuz.org)

I play rhinoceros and psychedelic folk.

Listen live to WFMU:  
[\[RealAudio\]](#) [\[Windows Media Player\]](#) [\[24K AAC+\]](#) [\[32K MP3\]](#) [\[128K MP3\]](#) [\[40K Ogg\]](#)  
 Visit our [audio streaming page](#) for help

[<-- Previous playlist](#) | [Back to Tony Coulter playlists](#) | [\[...\]](#)

September 9, 2008

Now playing:  
**"Sibelius in His Radio Corner"** by INGRAM MARSHALL from *Ikon* and *Other early works*

Artist	Track	Album
SABOTEN	Accel.	Saboten
SUBVERSE	Chance Romance	V.A.: Starforce Studios: Compilation 1
FETUS PRODUCTIONS	What's Going On	Fetalmania
DIETER NEIER	Madman	7"
ROBYN HITCHCOCK	Mr. Deadly	Invisible Hitchcock
UNDERGROUND LIFE	Noncurance	7"
CHANCE OPERATION	Image Dance	Chance Operation [12" EP]
DER JUNGE HUND	Lotze Vuurorde Urine	Alte und Idioten Wirten Niecht Viel Gefragt
DER JUNGE HUND	Ghalla Ghalla	Alte und Idioten Wirten Niecht Viel Gefragt
SRP	Maturantiski Izlet	SRP
NOTORISCHE RFLXE	Breschnew Rap	7"
BERUKJER NOOR	Vive le Feu	Joyeux Merdier [12" EP]
THOMAS LEER	Private Plane	7"
TRESPASSERS W	Ice Cream Man	kinder EP

**Listener comment**

[Pause comment auto-update](#)

**From:** Kyle      Tue, 9/9/08 12:04pm  
 Good day sir

**From:** Bad Ronald      Tue, 9/9/08 12:08pm  
 Tony C and the place to be!

Hello all.

**From:** Dead Corporate      Tue, 9/9/08 12:10pm  
 Eyes  
 gather round, now, for some f'd up tunes on Tuesday.  
 Messed ya last week.

**From:** Seen Daily      Tue, 9/9/08 12:18pm  
 Fourth comment! Woo hoo!

**From:** clueless but      Tue, 9/9/08 12:19pm  
 excited  
 can someone tell me about this show at all?

**From:** Dead Corporate      Tue, 9/9/08 12:23pm  
 Eyes  
 suffice it to say, it's THE BEST! I'll let Tony do the

**Post your comment to this playlist!**

Your name:

Email address (optional, only seen by WFMU 01):

Your comment (100 HTML, please):

Available from a link on the station's home page, a web page for the current broadcast programme provides a frame for the playlist. The producer

periodically updates the playlist throughout the programme and the updates appear on the web page in real time. Frames on the right side allow listeners to engage in real-time text-based conversations with the programme host and other audience members. The producer serves as the discussion moderator. Generally, conversations revolve around programme content. However, Freedman observes that participants are not obligated to limit their comments to programme-related topics and do engage in conversations that are completely unrelated to the programme. In this manner, the interactive playlists use the entertainment and information capabilities of broadcasting to provide the basis for the interactive experience of social media.

The recent history of WFMU demonstrates the value of experimentation with new technologies, and new approaches to the audience. The station's early experiences with streaming provided the basis for distribution on a series of increasingly accessible, powerful, and user-friendly platforms in succeeding years. The knowledge gained through these initiatives provided a substantial advantage in the rapidly growing market for online audiences. Concurrently, WFMU anticipated widespread interest in these technologies by appealing to early adopters, first as listeners, and subsequently as participants in an increasingly varied array of programming and program-related services. These developments followed from two aspects of the federal promotion of local service: 1) local operational control provides WFMU with the autonomy required to pursue innovative approaches to technology and program services, and 2) WFMU online channels reach listeners at work and in other environments where it is impractical to receive the FM signal.

The experience of WFMU demonstrates how broadcasters can use digital channels to alter the social relations of broadcasting. In the new reality of multi-platform delivery, receivers have the opportunity to establish direct contact with each other, suggesting and pursuing conversations of their own choosing, and exercising new degrees of control over the nature and content of messages. Ken Freedman compares this new relationship to hosting a party: Guests are invited to come in and listen to music, but as the party progresses the conversations move naturally to a variety of topics. This sort of spontaneity and participation is impossible with traditional transmission and reception. The case of WFMU demonstrates how public broadcasters can take advantage of existing capacities to move beyond broadcasting and into the channels of social media.

### *WWOZ New Orleans*

Since December 1980, listener-supported non-commercial WWOZ-FM has served the New Orleans, Louisiana, area with a 24-hour mixed music format. Recognising a special responsibility to the population within its 4000-watt signal radius, the programming on WWOZ has always reflected the area's unique musical heritage, featuring jazz, blues, rhythm and blues, brass band, gospel, Cajun, Zydeco, Caribbean, Latin, Brazilian, and African genres (WWOZ Facts).

Throughout its history, WWOZ has broadcast live from the area's clubs and events, including Mardi Gras and the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival. The station has cultivated strong and productive relations with local musicians, among them the city's most recognised recording artists (WWOZ History).

In 1995, WWOZ became the first public radio station in the United States to stream its programming on the internet in real time (Freedman 2008). Over the years the station refocused its approach to localism in social terms rather than only geographic, concurrently developing an international audience for its programmes (Freedman 2007). Because programming relied on numerous live performances and a substantial archive of its own recordings, WWOZ was less reliant on copyrighted materials and thus less vulnerable to complications associated with international restrictions on copyrights and performances than other streaming services. The extension of the station's programme service beyond its signal coverage through online channels opened the sounds and culture of New Orleans to listeners around the world, and proved especially valued by former residents of the city who had relocated – in many cases outside the U.S. For these expatriates, WWOZ's programme streams and associated online content offer "an opportunity to experience the grace of New Orleans, that redeem[s] what seem[s] at times the mortal sin of leaving" (Folse 2008). Similar expressions of appreciation are attributed to locations abroad, especially in northern Europe (WWOZ Forums). These forums provide the opportunity for listeners to interact directly with programme producers, staff, and each other through lines of communication unavailable to the typical broadcast audience.

Strong connections with the online audience were proven crucial to the survival of WWOZ in the aftermath of hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005. In conjunction with the general evacuation of New Orleans, WWOZ shut down its FM broadcast service to allow staff and volunteers to escape two days before the storms arrived. By Wednesday August 31, as the extent of the damage became apparent, station manager David Freedman recognised that the prospects for the future of the station's broadcast service were uncertain. Freedman worried that "the roots culture of New Orleans" that connected the station and its listeners was "itself greatly imperilled" (Freedman 2005).

Assistance in keeping WWOZ in contact with its audience came from staff at a sister public station, WFMU (described above). This channel offered to host "WWOZ in Exile," a continuous stream of audio programming from a local server linked to the WWOZ home page. Initially the stream consisted of CD tracks by New Orleans artists. But in the following days and weeks, WWOZ producers – *and listeners* – sent old reel-to-reel tapes and cassettes, and emailed MP3 files, of past programmes to WFMU. Gradually, producers began creating new programmes wherever they could secure production facilities. Recorded messages from manager Freedman, delivered by telephone, explained the circumstances of WWOZ in Exile for listeners and this rallied support for the station's continuance. For more than a month the WWOZ in Exile webcast was the sole connection between the station and its audience – those listeners who had always tuned in to the webcast and, even more crucially, for broadcast

listeners scattered across several states in the devastation that followed the hurricanes. The web site provided a central point of contact for musicians, producers, and listeners, and a collection point for more than sixty thousand dollars in donations (Troeh 2005).

The online presence superseded the broadcast service as the station's primary platform. When WWOZ began its streaming service in 1995 American radio broadcasters did not anticipate the emergence of social media. However, it was clear at the time that digital communication technologies were contributing to the development of powerful networks in many industries. The subsequent emergence of the World Wide Web provided the open standard necessary to utilise these networking capabilities to distribute media content to the public. The lessons learned from these early experiments allowed WWOZ to integrate new platforms into its broadcasting operations, and rely on them entirely when the broadcast service became inoperable. The lesson of Hurricane Katrina, in David Freedman's view, is that "we have entered the post-broadcast era" (Freedman 2008). The station's broadcast signal is now the secondary service: Since the fall of 2005, the primary services provided by WWOZ have been available on line. The experience of WWOZ demonstrates the primacy of shared tastes and values, rather than geography, in the "post-broadcast" era.

### Potential lessons for PSB elsewhere

Broadcast radio has always been "a clearly defined medium with certain established social and cultural functions and distinct delivery networks". Broadcasters have relied on signal coverage and scheduled programs to be the foundation of their services. Their audiences have been described by geography and behavioural routines. This approach relied on historical conceptions of market and regulatory structures, and assumptions about technology that have turned out to be "too simplified and optimistic" (ibid).

The public broadcasters presented here have been open to other conceptions of public service. None of these cases is uniquely experimental or innovative: Other broadcasters in the U.S. and Europe are undertaking similar projects. What is notable in each of these cases is the degree to which these stations and their audiences depend on one another as supporters, contributors, sponsors, and members of communities that are established, nourished and sustained by public service media programming and other content. This interdependence has been born of the American tradition that is rooted in historical commitment to localism, and of economic necessity. These cases provide evidence that conventional public service broadcasting can be transformed into a multiplicity of public media services that engage and satisfy audiences in a variety of ways that are fundamentally about *communication* and not only transmission (Bardoel and Lowe 2007).

In the United States, this transformation has been made possible in large measure by the degree of independence afforded to licensees and stations un-

der the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967, on the one hand, and their increased interdependence with audiences on the other. CPB grants have been used to foster entrepreneurial ventures, encourage investment in new technology, and promote experiments in audience engagement and participation. Encouraged to seek and acquire funds directly from audiences, businesses and foundations, stations have been empowered – indeed required – to develop strong connections with those people they intend to serve. The re-conception of localism as a social identity (rather than an exclusively geographic one) has allowed U.S. public broadcasters to target particular sectors of the audience that have historically been unserved or underserved by mass media, and to develop new service strategies to provide audience members with a variety of ways to engage public broadcasting – and each other – both locally and globally. This has significant revenue implications, of course. Research has shown that the more useful and meaningful public media channels are to a listener, the more likely that listener is to provide financial support, and the more likely it is that corporations will want to be associated with that public media organisation through underwriting (Stavitsky 1995).

Douglas (1999: 23), Breiner (2003: 95), Reader (2007: 655), and other scholars have drawn on Anderson's theory of the "imagined community" to describe the relationship of broadcast radio providers and audiences. While the imagined community provides a powerful metaphor for identity formation and social awareness, it also demonstrates the limitation of the disseminative nature of broadcasting: Broadcasting is about transmission and affords no opportunity for receivers to engage in direct contact with each other. While transmission systems have migrated to a variety of digital platforms, most radio broadcasting continues to operate within the long-established paradigms of one-to-many social relations and discrete delivery systems. The cases presented here demonstrate how the tools, processes, and practices of digital communication redefine *community* by breaking through the historic barriers to interaction, as cultural content and expertise are stored and retrieved across distributed networks of producers and agencies. Brecht conceived the ideal radio system as "an apparatus of communication...a vast network of pipes that organises listeners as suppliers" (1932). The technologies of digital communication allow public broadcasters to extend their mission to move much closer to Brecht's ideal of interactivity.

This new reality is common to both American and European PSB and is arguably fundamental to the shift to PSM (i.e. beyond broadcasting). The historic differences and legacies are central to understanding the nature and scope of public service broadcasting, but need not constrain the strategic development of services in the present, or in the years to come. Public service broadcasters on both continents possess knowledge, tools, and techniques to provide diverse, accessible, and responsive public services to citizens when the need for such is greater than ever. Media scholars on both sides of the Atlantic can draw valuable lessons from their experiences in efforts to involve the public *both in and through* public service media.

## Notes

1. Prior to the passage of the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967, noncommercial nonsectarian broadcast licensees in the U.S. were generally designated "educational" stations.
2. As an incentive for private support, donations and contributions to public broadcasting organizations and authorities are often exempt from federal taxes.
3. Comments by Lynne Pollard from unpublished interview with an author, August 6, 2008 (Greenville SC).
4. Comments by Ken Freedman from unpublished interviews with an author, October 19 2005 (Eugene OR); and March 27 2008 (Atlanta GA).

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