

Podcasts and Convergent Digital Media

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Public radio won the aesthetic battle for high quality audio storytelling but may lose the larger war for audience attention. While commercial radio failed to update ossified formats, public radio developed complex, sophisticated, and innovative forms of sound programming. Long standing tensions within public radio around commercial values that privilege entertainment and public values that privilege a information, had largely been kept in check by a lack of alternative venues for producing long form sound stories. Still, many of the highest profile and most popular programs did not necessarily fit cleanly into NPR's public service mission. While programs of this type contributed to public media institutions by driving membership and financially supporting unprofitable "mission oriented" programming, they depended a lack of alternative employment options for production staff.

The breakout success of *Serial* and the subsequent rush of venture capital money into podcasting means that to work creatively in long-form audio storytelling does not depend on being in the non-commercial sphere. Public radio is now facing a brain drain. In the last several years, its institutions have been roiled by the loss of producing talent to for-profit podcasting entities. In just one example, flagship station WNYC lost 15% of its entire staff to rival organizations, such as Gimlet, Audible, and Panoply. Shifts like this demonstrate the failure of public radio institutions to respond to the loss of their monopoly on quality, long form audio storytelling.

These dynamics in turn, led to crisis in defining the mission of both public radio and the commercial offshoots. Public radio must decide whether its mission is to inform or to educate. For profit podcasters do not have the same mission driven constraints as public radio. Public radio can no longer straddle the line between missions. If the goal of informing does give way to entertaining, definitions of the public would more fully align with those promulgated by commercial content creators (e.g. the public interest is what interests the public). Indeed, public radio may have inadvertently contributed to listener acceptance of sponsor messages through its reliance on underwriters (with attendant announcements) and foundation driven content (e.g. Kaiser Health News)

When faced with competition from more entertainment-oriented fare, will audiences remain committed to public broadcasting? If its most popular programs and genres are siphoned off into commercial podcasting, public radio faces the same fate as public television, which lost the audience for its most popular programs to niche cable channels.

The aesthetics of broadcasting and those of podcasting do not necessarily align. Radio programming relies on a strict hot clock that limits the length of show segments. As with streaming and premium cable programs, the lack of time constraints offers producers more flexibility and creative freedom. NPR has already made some limited attempts to differentiate itself from podcasting. For example, NPR's hourly news updates have added the phrase "live from...." to their opening to stress presence and simultaneity of production and consumption. In a world of up to the second social media, is broadcast liveness viable?

Public radio faces a generational divide in programming and financial models. Stations rely disproportionately on older listeners who prefer more established, and often sonically staid, programs. Witness the continued re-airing of *Car Talk* several years after one of its hosts passed away. Conversely, younger listeners are more platform agnostic. This creates tensions and overlaps such as when, this May, Mike Savage of WBAA, West Lafayette, Indiana eliminated *This American Life* from his schedule because of TAL's agreement with Pandora for exclusive online streaming rights. Podcast streams may cannibalize the audience for over-the air versions when programs are both streamed and aired.

Public radio must renegotiate its institutional structure. While larger stations regularly produce content for local and national audiences, smaller stations are considerably less likely to do so. Still, these stations have positions on the NPR board and there is a perception that they are much more reluctant to embrace a move from live broadcasting to on-demand podcasts. This spring's controversy over promoting podcasts in the NPROne smartphone app, laid the fault lines bare. It is not clear how NPR will balance its historical commitment to decentralized production with the changed ecosystem of program production.

With public radio now having to compete for production talent, it is faced with significant losses of institutional memory and skilled staff. It cannot make the same demands on talent that it might have several years ago. At the same time, it may become difficult for production staff to balance the imperatives of mission and individual creativity. It is not clear that public radio institutions are flexible enough to accommodate the new realities of competition for talent. The response of public

media institutions to the challenges of the new market for audio media and its producers will have profound ramifications for the survival of the mission of public media in the United States.