



THE CORE VALUES OF LOCAL PROGRAMMING:

What are the core values projected by local public radio programs?

Are those values the same as those for national/network shows?

Is localism itself a value or is origination irrelevant to value?

-A presentation prepared for delivery at the 2001 national conference of Public Radio Program Directors by PRPD President Marcia Alvar.

The Core Values of Local Programming, is a project conducted in June, 2001 by PRPD, George Bailey of Walrus Research and four partner stations

- WBEZ, Chicago
- Connecticut Public Radio
- KUOW, Seattle
- KQED, San Francisco

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At last year's PRPD Conference, we presented the results of PRPD's Core Values Summit, a meeting convened by PRPD to talk with the executive producers of the top seven programs in public radio:

- Morning Edition
- All Things Considered
- Marketplace
- Car Talk
- Fresh Air
- A Prairie Home Companion
- Talk of the Nation

The summit had two goals:

- To create a vocabulary of the shared qualities and values embodied in and across that body of programs
- To explore how public radio's highest standards are set and maintained -- by deconstructing the decision-making process used on a daily and weekly basis to draw the line between what goes into these programs and what doesn't .

Over the past year, the results of the summit have been widely distributed in a PRPD report called ***Defining Public Radio's Core Values***. Thanks to NPR for including a presentation of the report at this year's PRC, and to the CBC for extending an invitation to speak on core values at a national meeting of their reporters and producers next month in Toronto. But most gratifying is how PRPD members are using the core values report to talk about public radio with their staffs, boards, licensees and listeners. As Bill Thomas of Prairie Public Radio wrote me recently:

" It resonates much better than the mission statement and is shorter than the long-range plan. It sums up the essence of public radio so accurately

and in such an instantly recognizable way that I always get "aahs" of recognition – you can almost hear people thinking "yes—that's it—it does fit together—that's public radio."

The focus of the first core values report was national programming
Today our focus is public radio's local programming.

The inspiration for all of this work was Audience 98. It told us that our national programming is more highly valued by our listeners than our local programming.

But Audience 98 presented a puzzle for us to look at on the local level -- an exception in the way listeners responded to one particular type of local programming -- stand-alone local news and call-in programs which Audience 98 said offered a very high return from listeners. This is the puzzle we set out to explore in our look at the core values of our local programming.

Before I talk about what we found I want to emphasize that in addition to our focus today, there are other important forms of local programming – different forms of news, and many approaches to culture and music. I think it's reasonable to assume that the core values we identified last year and that we'll talk more about today will also play out in some fashion in these other genres and formats. We just won't know for sure until we look. And the details of how we create and deliver value in these other genres and formats may require different kinds of solutions than the ones we'll hear about in this session.

A bit about the methodology we used in our look at local news and call-in programs:

PRPD identified stations in four markets where there has been a long-time investment in stand alone local news and call-in programs. We wanted to focus on programs that air Monday-Friday, are at least one hour in length and scheduled adjacent to either Morning Edition or ATC.

The stations and programs that participated are:

- *Eight Forty-Eight*, a daily morning magazine produced by WBEZ
- *The Faith Middleton Show*, an afternoon call-in on Connecticut Public Radio
- *Weekday*, a morning call-in on KUOW
- *Forum* a morning call-in on KQED

In June, George Bailey of Walrus Research conducted eight focus groups; two in each partner city. Tape excerpts from all four programs were played for every listener group. As you'll see the men and women met separately – routinely done in focus groups to encourage more candid and relaxed group conversation. Most of the people we talked with were core listeners – our biggest fans—but not all of them.

"I don't listen to it all day - or I mean ever - because at work I can't listen to a radio so that eliminates a lot of time. I don't listen to it early in the morning because listen to WBBM cause when I get up, I want to know if the world is still intact and how I'm going to get to work.

Tell me more about that. You said when you get up you need to know if the world is intact. Why do you need to go to WBBM for that? Doesn't...wouldn't WBEZ tell you if the world was intact?

It might but I think it would take them a lot longer"

Our goal was to explore three fundamental questions:

- What are the core values projected by these local programs?
- Are the core values the same as those for the national, network shows?
- Is localism itself a value or is origination irrelevant to value?

Last year's core values summit produced a vocabulary of qualities that define the fundamental appeal of public radio's most popular national programs. They grouped into three clusters:

Qualities of the Mind and Intellect

- Substance
- Expands understanding
- Connects with the world
- Curiosity
- Credibility
- Respect for listener
- Strong sense of purpose

Qualities of the Heart and Spirit

- Idealism
- Inspired about public life
- Civil discourse as a way to find solutions
- Content has center stage – no hype

Qualities of Craft/Our use of the Radio Medium

- Uniquely human voice
- Authentic
- Intimate
- Deliberate/thoughtful pace

It is the fusion, the cross-cutting of these three sets of qualities and values that has created public radio's "signature" and form the common ground for the powerful shared appeal of these programs.

That vocabulary of qualities was created by the producers of public radio's national programs. The first step in our look at local programs was to draw out language from listeners -- the vocabulary they use to describe what sets public radio apart from everything else on the dial. Here are some ways listeners described public radio's core values:

It depends on your personality. If you really want some serious depth, you'd want WBEZ because it's the best local journalism as well as a lot of national and international. If you don't have the patience for that and you're more of a grazer you'll want WBBM or the WMAQ. It really depends on you.

Moderator: Grazer ...philosophical...what do you mean a grazer?

It sort of reminds me...People magazine compared to Harper's Cliffs notes vs Shakespeare. It depends on you.

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Well I think you could boil it all down to Dr Laura vs. Faith Middleton.

Moderator: You'll have to explain that to me – go ahead.

Well Dr. Laura Schlessinger we all know is very conservative. Now I don't want my politics to show too much but.... a gay-baiting y'know bigot vs Faith Middleton who is a thoughtful, provocative, y'know inclusive intelligent... goes to brings as many different people and points of view.... interesting topics on her show.

Moderator: That just kinds of sums up those stations for you.

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Moderator: What do you think KQED is supposed to be should be about?

Well it's sort of a notch above isn't it? It's not sold to bring the news to you. The news we listen to today so often is purchased by every nickel and dime of advertising and controlled by advertising and the integrity is vacant from our news. KQED comes off to me as being a very, very strong integrity – sort of bringing the news without any outside influence

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I think that BEZ has a purpose that they're just trying to make the world a better place. They always don't have the right solutions but they ...it's hard to come up with solutions... but at least they bring up the topic...you

can...it gets into people's minds ...maybe after a year or two thinking about it y'know, people have some answers. But I think that their whole purpose is they want to bring up..ah pluck subjects that can help people become better people and make the world a better place. Not too many other stations have that."

The language used by listeners in all of the groups closely matched the producers' core values vocabulary.

We also found consistency in the way listeners talked about the leading AM station that dominates commercial news in their market. They use the AM as a utility for traffic and weather because of its reliable scheduling – punching over "on the 8s... on the 9s." They just as quickly punched away because they don't find the overall programming on those stations appealing -- quite the opposite. Almost all of the listeners we met are repelled by what they termed the loud, intrusive, sensational, manipulative and shallow content on commercial AM news. One man even described it as "baby food for the brain."

Having confirmed the consistency of the core values vocabulary, it was time to start digging in to the central question of the study:

Is localism itself a value and most importantly how do listeners both define and regard "local" programming?

To begin getting at this, each group was asked a series of 2 questions:

"What if you read in the paper that your local station was going to drop all of its NPR programs to provide only local programming?"

The response to dropping national programming was uniformly negative:

- Boo Hiss
- Why would they do that?
- They'll never get another dime out of me
- Surely someone will pick up NPR – that's the button I'll be setting

Then the question was reversed: *"What if the station said it was going to provide only national programming and was dropping all of its local programs?"* Here's how listeners responded to that scenario:

Well I think part of the beauty of WBEZ is that you get a little bit of everything.

Moderator: Tell me why. What do you mean?

Well we're part of the world. We're not just our own little microcosm of Chicago. And yes it's important to have, to know what's going on around you...in your neighborhoods...in the local area... but I also like to know what's going on in other parts of the world in other parts of the country. And I don't like to listen to something or watch something on TV or whatever that just concentrates on the one area. I'd like to be able to know that if I turn it on that I'm gonna hear a little bit of everything. Well not just a little bit but as we were saying more in depth. Maybe there's a place for strictly local and strictly national and international but I kind of like that they combine it all.

I want to know what's going on. I want to know what's going on locally to a certain degree, in California to a certain degree, in the nation to a certain degree and internationally to a certain degree – all of that -- a nice balance. I'd be very disappointed in something like that -- because I've got a satellite dish where I get the carte blanche, America blended national public television and I also get the local national public television and it's kind of like the programming is a little bit more San Francisco centric – even in the choices of the programs it brings so if it were too broad it would strike me as a little bit too milquetoast...

Moderator: Got it. That's a good explanation.

Listeners consistently told us they want a comprehensive range of local, national and international programming. When we first opened this subject, they said they wanted a balance. But as the discussion went on, it was clear that they meant *more* than balance – a word that conjures up a mental image of a scale –with equilibrium maintained by equal and separate parts.

We've had other mental images in the past about how listeners regard the value of local Vs national –and international programming:

One you might envision as a series of concentric rings – local – national - international with listener value increasing the further from local we get.

Another has local content as a kind of extra benefit — the cherry on the sundae. Not the primary reason listeners tune in but nice that it's there.

None of those images get to heart of what listeners in these groups said they most want from us in local coverage and most value when we do it well:

So, they talked about parts of Chicago that we all know, but in looking at the history and the way things are put together, it kind of brings everything together, either from a political perspective if they're talking

politics from a sociological perspective, a lot of different ways. In other words they integrate a lot of our experience as Chicagoans with the kind of topics they discuss.

They take more time and give you a full depth interview on something or a discussion or something and to me.. what I wrote down the two different its bad news and good news. Good news - something I can use, something I find interesting rather than something like the latest shooting out in the central area which I really don't want to know about thank you.

Moderator: Let me try to connect something here. Stephanie just said there was a shooting in the central area – I assume that's someplace (women say "it's Seattle"). But then as I recall Laura—did you say something like when I asked you for examples of programs or something - -stories– you said something about nutrition in a developing country or something like that – so help me understand this -- why would you be interested in nutrition on the other side of the world but not in a shooting in Seattle.

But I would be interested in the situation going on in Seattle that they actually went in depth to it. Instead of just a 15 minute blurb.on this or that, they'll actually take it into...I mean when I gave a relevant issue I'm talking about an international perspective. But that can include here too. And they may bring up...they won't just....they might have a blurb on the shooting or something but they're going to go in depth on a situation. They're not just going to talk about one shooting. They're gonna talk about a series of incidents in the area and kind of be exploring about what's going on.

As the man in Chicago put it. "It brings everything together—it integrates our experience."

And as the woman in Seattle said, "When I gave a relevant issue, I'm talking about an international perspective. But that can include here too.

A gesture she made – using both hands to draw a rainbow over her head -- was something we saw repeated in every group – and it's a powerful symbol for the way these listeners think. Public radio listeners, especially those who use an NPR station as their primary choice for news, see the world as an interconnected web of causal relationships. In their view no event is isolated on any level – international, national or local. As we just heard – and as we heard consistently from group to group -- they want us to go in-depth, to put a development in context—has it happened before—is it part of a pattern — cause/effect – not just what but why.

The New York Times recently conducted research on its most loyal readers – a group that bears no small resemblance to our core audience. They found that while most people used a newspaper as a utility, their most loyal readers are:

- interested in abstract theorizing
- getting underneath
- being surprised
- being challenged.

They had what the researchers came to call **"a vigilant curiosity" about the world.**

Like public radio's most loyal listeners, these are people who put a very high value on news coverage that connects the dots. A little later I'll talk about why the New York Times did that research because it provides more parallels to the work we're talking about today.

Having confirmed the consistency of the core values vocabulary and gotten a basic sense of the unique way our audience views the world, our third step was to play tape – to find out how listeners would describe and differentiate local programming they value and local programming they don't. In each group, listeners heard examples from their local station and examples from the other 3 project partners.

The first was a produced piece from WBEZ's daily magazine show Eight Forty-Eight;

Reporter: Teacher salaries in Illinois vary widely from school district to school district, ranging from the low twenties for starting teachers in some of the state's poorer areas to more than one hundred thousand dollars for experienced teachers with PhDs in some wealthy suburbs. And those wide disparities in teacher salaries even between neighboring communities can dramatically affect student performance.

Bob Leininger It's just not fair

Reporter: That's Bob Leininger, former Illinois State School Superintendent, and now Chairman of Governor George Ryan's School Funding Advisory Board.

Leininger: It's not fair that a student in Illinois...their opportunity for an education depends upon where they live and they have nothing to say about where they live.

Reporter: Leininger says that since Illinois schools are funded primarily by property taxes, the amount of money a school district spends on educating each child depends on the amount of property wealth in the district. With a

looming shortage of teachers, Leininger says schools with the greatest wealth gain a competitive advantage.

Leininger: The opportunity certainly presents itself for them to hire the brightest and the best teachers, because they have a higher salary schedule. So they can be very selective and very choosy. Many districts won't hire first year teachers. And they go out and find the experienced teacher that is the better teacher.

Reporter: Here's how that plays out for two school districts in north suburban Lake County - Libertyville and Waukegan. (ambient sound) The aging city along the Lake Michigan shoreline can't compete with its wealthier neighbors because the Waukegan property tax base isn't growing as rapidly as it is in those other towns. Waukegan has lost much of its industry over the last few decades and has one of the few concentrations of poverty along the north shore. At the same time, the district is getting more new students - 700 this year alone and 1500 over the past 3 years. This drives up costs while the district's financial resources remain limited. This disparity adds up. Waukegan student test scores are below state norms, while students in those wealthy districts score among the best in the state. State revenue could make up the difference between rich and poor school districts, but doesn't according to former Illinois School Superintendent Bob Leininger. In fact, Leininger says, everything the state legislature has done in recent years has only made the situation worse

Leininger: The rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer.

Reporter: Illinois unequal funding of schools earns the state an F from Education Week Magazine. And on virtually every national school finance survey, Illinois ranks near the bottom

The second piece was an excerpt from Forum, KQED's live call-in program.

Krasny: And we go next to Karen...Karen you're on the air...

Karen: Yes. I'm concerned about the focus and nothing is being said about the gouging that is going on by the companies that are supplying this power. They have increased their prices by what...four thousand percent or what is the percentage going from forty dollars per unit to four hundred dollars? Or If you could shed some light on that. But why are we not talking more about the high prices that are being charged? This happened overnight.

Krasny: The profits have been going up exponentially and Senator Perata

alluded to the fact ...I think Don you used the phrase "nailed to the wall by these companies." What are you doing about it?

State Senator Don Perata: Well, unfortunately we have no control over what they do. We've been appealing...in fact a delegation of congress members from California – both Republicans and Democrats have been arguing with the federal regulatory commission that is responsible to give us some relief because they see it as a California problem not as a partisan problem. So far the Chair, Mr Hebert or Herbert whatever it is... has been pretty disagreeable. He comes from Louisiana - probably has a lot of friends who are making a lot of money off of California. So we've done everything that we can politically. George Bush could make it happen. The Republican congress could make it happen. But this becomes a territorial issue. They hide behind markets saying this is the free enterprise system. The fact of the matter is, a lot of the guys in Texas and in the Carolinas and generally in the Southern Sunbelt states are just making a fortune on California. We do not evoke much sympathy

Here are some examples of what listeners had to say.

Moderator: Michael what did you think of that last one..first impressions?

I thought it was...the topic they were talking about was a universal topic, so it was interesting to me.

Moderator: This is interesting because you use the term "universal topic." I think someone else said that...

Societal....a problem with our society...Meaning more than local.

It's a story about that town but it plays out everywhere

Moderator: Tell me about that - what do you mean?

Well you know, you could say it plays out between certain towns in Fairfield and certain towns in Bridgeport and they're like adjoining townships....you know, it could play out in the Bronx and downtown Manhattan. It's everywhere and that kind of story is just something I think everyone can relate to.

What I wrote in the positive was that it was informative. It was interesting. It was pertinent and it was a universal subject. I think everybody you know.... Having kids or not..... is really interested in the whole issue of the

teacher salary and especially and how it ah...

Moderator: We were talking earlier where we are ...you said we're in Seattle but Tacoma's not Seattle... you were saying east, west, north south. Now we're talking about Chicago...

But it's a national subject. It's not only talking about the subject as it pertains to Chicago. Yes specifically, they're sitting in Chicago

Moderator: There's no one saying..well that's just Chicago

No. They're just using Chicago as an example...it's happening here but you could apply it a lot of other areas. It's a universal topic. In the sense that maybe even around here there are areas where you could send your child to school to get better public funding and that doesn't make any sense to me either.

Moderator: Were you guys seeing that as well that's California?

Not at all...Its gonna happen here in about 3 years. Because we're - Connecticut is.... 2002 deregulation affects the power companies???. They're already talking about making the dirty six clean up their ...mess...and they don't what to clean it up and they haven't got enough money so....It's a precursor of things to come. First thing you write down is this is something that could eventually affect us on the east coast.... Absolutely!

It's not local.

Moderator: Who said it's not local?

I did. It's not local. Energy consumption and price affects all of us eventually will affect all of us.... Watch the gas as it goes up and down. The gas station was – I don't know it dropped 3 cents from morning till afternoon today but next week it could be up 20 cents.

Moderator: I'm still trying to understand what you mean when you said it's not local...

No I said...That's talking about California but it's really local because everything to do with energy consumption is local in the United States. It affects us all. That's what I'm trying to say

Moderator: So you are interested?

Oh I was interested.

Those excerpts were chosen for a purpose and I want to be very clear at this point about what that purpose is and is not. It was NOT to advocate that your local coverage focus only on topics that would appeal to listeners around the country.

The purpose in selecting what you just saw was to clearly illustrate how our listeners think – a sense of the way in which that vigilant curiosity actually operates. The central focus of both excerpts was why:

- Why are schools in Chicago providing an unequal education to students?
- Why is there an energy crisis?
- What's the cause that's creating the effect?

Because of this, the listeners began connecting the dots. In the case of the school story, it prompted them to think:

- about how education funding plays out in their community
- about the social inequality that exists there
- about their role and responsibility as citizens
- about what might be done to solve the problem.

They want information in depth so they can think about large issues.

That's why even though the excerpts we just heard were from local programs, the listeners didn't hear them as local. So what is the meaning of local? In the dictionary, local has two meanings – one of them is where we get tripped up when we even use the word – it is:

Local: of or affecting a part and not the whole

a definition which is just an eyelash away from:

Parochial: of narrow range, merely local, provincial, restricted

As it turns out, local is not a very positive word to our listeners who equate it with the junk they get from commercial radio and TV. It's not very useful to us to describe the mindset we need to better serve listeners looking for connection, context and depth in our programming.

Not all of the examples we played drew the positive reactions you've seen. When these same listeners heard examples they found limited or parochial in scope, when they heard a host or interviewer who was not well prepared, or when the technical quality of the programming was sloppy, they quickly judged the programming to be "merely local" of no interest and a waste of their time.

I mentioned the New York Times a bit ago and the research they did on their core readers. It connects the dots to this project because the reason the New

York Times did that research is because it too is concerned about the quality of its local coverage:

Local/metro coverage is perceived as the newspaper's greatest weakness. Its local home penetration is 9 % compared to 45% for the Washington Post. At the same time the paper's national circulation continues to grow.

So the question was "Will the NY Times stop being the NY Times and become like papers in Western Europe that cover a country with little focus on the city of origin?"

The leaders at the paper said NO. That was not the future they wanted so they began looking at how they could make their local coverage as strong and as compelling to their readers as their national and international coverage.

Here's what they did:

- They looked their problem square in the face and made an institutional commitment to improving their local coverage.
- They decided they couldn't beat their competition on quantity but could on quality
- They set a goal to do news that satisfies the vigilant curiosity of their readers
- They changed the way their metro reporters framed the scope of their stories. They hired several former foreign correspondents, people versed in translating the cause and effect of events in faraway countries for the folks back home. The reporters were told to treat their new beats in the outer boroughs like a foreign country,

That's what the New York Times did when they looked at the challenge of making their local coverage more valuable to their readers.

So what will it take for us to consistently meet the aspirations our listeners have for our programming? We think we've identified how we can frame our local news in a way that will be extremely powerful and of tremendous value to our listeners. But making that happen will not be easy. Here's a short list of the tasks that lie ahead:

Commitment

Like the New York Times -- when faced with the challenge of strengthening its local coverage -- the process begins with an institutional commitment to improvement.

Honesty

We have a really good track record in public radio identifying when our national programs fall below their own standards – we are not as stringent when it comes to hearing when our own creations, our own programming falls below these standards.

Rick Madden referred to this in his Murrow acceptance speech last spring when he shared the results of a survey CPB did to track audience growth rates from national and local programming over the last five years. Rick reported that ***half of the stations that described their local programming as strong or very strong had decreasing listener hours over that period.*** He urged people to look closely at their own station's performance when they got home. That remains very good advice. If we ignore that our own programming is steadily driving listeners away, our future will not be bright.

Higher Standards

We need to set higher standards for ourselves -- to commit ourselves to using the same filters for our local programming that the national producers identified last year – filters for content, talent and quality.

As Fresh Air's Danny Miller described the filter for content:

"Listeners trust us to respect their intelligence and curiosity, and make interesting choices on their behalf. Not to waste their time, but to enrich their time while they're listening. They depend on us to sift through all the "run of the mill" talk show possibilities. In other words, they depend on us to find the distinctive people ideas and stories, which distinguish public radio from most of the "drek" on the dial."

A filter for talent – as Doug Berman described it::

"Editing and filtering, in some form, is one of the things that creates great talent, that the talent does not simply exist on its own, that it has to be produced and created. I have yet to meet someone who's so interesting that we can just run whatever happens to come out their mouth for an hour and have it be great talent and great radio."

A filter for craft -- As Ellen Weiss described the work being done on All Things Considered:

"We need to look at not only what we're putting on the air but how we're putting it on the air...to continually ask ourselves –how are we sounding? Are we sounding as good as we can?"

This is a question we all need to ask ourselves every day.

To reach these higher standards, we'll need to make tough choices:

As we've emphasized already, there is no advantage to doing local programming if the presentation is below the standards our listeners have come to expect. Listeners want the same qualities and core values in our local programming that they hear in their favorite national programming. They draw a clear line between local information like headline news that they can get from other sources and coverage that gives them knowledge, understanding and makes them think. I'm not saying we shouldn't do newscasts, I'm simply saying we found no evidence that spot news adds significant value for our listeners.

Additionally we're faced with a conundrum when it comes to getting listener value from coverage we insert in the national magazines. The better we do it, the less awareness listeners have that they're local pieces. If you do it well, it's all NPR.

If you decide you want your station to be a major source of local news in your community – If that is your mission -- the key may lie in your ability to reversion material and use it at multiple points in your schedule. The implication there is that having two formats may tie your hands by severely limiting your ability to reversion your coverage.

From a positioning perspective you can't be a comprehensive source of news and information if you have a dual position – there are inherent limitations on how much a dual format station can do in the finite hours between 6am and 6pm. Finally having a dual format means you are never able to devote the resources and energy of the station in one direction. This is particularly important because everything we heard indicates that if you do create local news programming it must consistently achieve a high level of quality or there's no point in doing it.

Decisions about format and programming excellence raise a host of related issues that could be the subject of an entirely different speech -- about budgets, management strategy, development, about risk, return on investment, institutional identity and on and on. Conversations about these and other issues will necessarily be part of any station's effort to raise the bar for its programming,

So we have the sense that this will be very hard work. So why should we do it? Because the opportunity to better serve our listeners is enormous. Your stations are about the last locally owned and operated broadcasters in your communities -- something that gives you a huge competitive advantage.

And because as public broadcasters service to listeners is our central purpose – What sets public radio apart -- as Jim Russell put it during the core values summit – is that

"We aspire to do something with the media that most American broadcasters simply don't."