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Walrus Research

**Abridged Report**

**Core Values**

**Local Information Programs**

PRPD Focus Groups

Summer 2001

*Fortunately for public radio, the financial value that listeners place on its programming is a direct consequence of its personal value in their lives.*

*If programming doesn't share their social and cultural values, they simply won't listen.*

- - - AUDIENCE 98

## Introduction

Last year the PRPD convened a meeting of the producers of public radio's seven most popular network programs to talk about Core Values.

The summit had two overall goals:

1. To develop a vocabulary that defines the Core Values of programming that really works for our listeners
2. To understand the process of how these successful producers make the right programming decisions

The producers of successful network programs ranging from Morning Edition to Prairie Home Companion displayed a common understanding of public radio's Core Values. They explained how the Core Values of public radio provide guidance for their daily practice.

In 2001, PRPD continued its exploration of public radio's Core Values by sponsoring this qualitative research at the local station level.

For a theoretical perspective that could inform our research design, we began by reviewing the findings of AUDIENCE 98 with reference to local programming.

### **AUDIENCE 98**

According to AUDIENCE 98, listeners are generally more loyal and more likely to send money for network rather than local programs.

*The listener-sensitive return on locally produced programming is much smaller than acquired programming.*

*The financial value that listeners place on public radio's programming directly reflects the personal value they place on it, its importance in their lives, its significance to them, its reflection of their own social and cultural values. -- AUDIENCE 98*

Yet AUDIENCE 98 found that locally produced **news and call-in programming** can generate listener income at a rate that is somewhat higher than locally produced music.

*Most public stations produce little local information programming outside of inserts into the national vehicles. However, the stand-alone News and Call-In programs tracked in this study offer a very high return from listeners.*

*Does this mean that resources invested in local News and Call-In programming is well spent? In terms of significant programming the audience is saying “yes.” But in terms of fiscal responsibility the answer is not so clear. Because even though the return is high, it may never be high enough to offset the expense. -- AUDIENCE 98*

AUDIENCE 98 helped us to think more clearly about the term “value.”

*In the relationship between radio programming and the people who listen to it, personal value has much to do with the sharing of social and cultural values between the listener and the programming.  
-- AUDIENCE 98*

### **Research Questions**

In March 2001 the PRPD board articulated research questions with reference to local news and call-in programs on public radio stations:

- What are the Core Values projected by successful local programs?
- Are those Core Values the same as successful network programs?
- Is localism itself a value? Or is the origination irrelevant to value?

Since these are qualitative questions, we designed a series of focus groups with public radio listeners.

***Markets and Stations***

We selected four markets where NPR stations have made significant investments in local information programs.

In Chicago, WBEZ produces Eight Forty-Eight, Odyssey and Worldview each weekday after Morning Edition.

In Connecticut, WNPR produces the Faith Middleton Show each weekday before All Things Considered.

In Seattle, KUOW produces Weekday after Morning Edition. KUOW also airs The Conversation and The Beat after Talk of the Nation.

In San Francisco, KQED produces Forum each weekday after Morning Edition.

We conducted eight focus groups with public radio listeners--two in each market during the last two weeks in June 2001. The last page of this report is a brief summary of our design for sampling and recruitment.

***Credits***

We appreciate the support of Torey Malatia, John Berky, Wayne Roth and Jo Anne Wallace who co-sponsored this research along with the PRPD.

We also appreciate the good work of Tish Valva, Kim Grehn, Jeff Hansen and Raul Ramirez who provided airchecks of their programs.

Marcia Alvar conceived this project, recruited the stations, designed the tape examples, observed all of the groups and edited the video. Most importantly, Marcia will continue to lead the PRPD and the public radio system in strategic action based on our findings.

## Summary Findings

- We found that many public radio listeners, especially those who are core to an NPR station, want a **comprehensive** range of news and information programming from their station—including local as well as national and international.
- However, the term “local” is not particularly useful to producers who seek to understand what our listeners want. Any story that is treated as **merely local** will fail to reflect the Core Values of public radio.
- Public radio listeners, especially those who use an NPR station as their primary choice, see the world as an **interconnected web** of causal relationships. In their view, no event is isolated on any level—local, national or international.
- Public radio listeners want local programming on their station to reflect **the same Core Values** as network programming. Most importantly, they want information in depth **so they can think** about large issues.
- Public radio listeners want information delivered in a style that is intelligent, balanced, civil and conversational. There is no advantage in local origination if the presentation is below **network standards**.
- We found a **widening opportunity** for public radio stations to serve listeners who are highly critical of the moronic local news and local talk shows on commercial radio and television.

## *Programming Economics*

We must emphasize that the findings of focus group research are necessarily **qualitative** in nature. We cannot say whether local programming will pay off in terms of listener support.

Only a Programming Economics study can quantify the listener-sensitive income from members, which might justify the expense of high quality local programming.

## **Programming Goals**

Before we designed the agenda for our focus groups, we interviewed the GM or PD from each participating station. We wanted to know why they were investing time, money and staff in local programming.

Their explanations are paraphrased below.

### ***WBEZ***

Torey Malatia explained that he wanted to add value to the local side of the NPR brand. While the network's education reporter will cover educational issues around the country, WBEZ investigates how schools are funded in the Chicago metropolitan area.

WBEZ spends a lot of money on Eight Forty-Eight. Torey pays 9 full-time people including producers, editors and the anchor. Even at that level of expenditure, Eight Forty-Eight might deliver one or two stories per week that truly achieve its goals.

Do WBEZ listeners realize that Eight Forty-Eight is a local production? When it gets really good, they might think that it's an NPR show.

### ***WNPR***

John Berky explained that Faith Middleton is a well-known personality around the state of Connecticut. She has been on the air for a long time.

Connecticut Public Radio is based in Hartford, but Middleton works independently out of a rented studio near Yale in New Haven. It's a live talk show with a producer to screen calls.

John thinks that personality is important to local programming. In that sense, the program's local component is Faith herself. Her approach is cultural. She is more interested in food, art or travel than the news.

***KUOW***

Jeff Hansen explained that KUOW's Weekday is a public forum, giving public radio listeners the opportunity to interact on the air about issues of interest to their community.

Jeff thinks that public radio listeners want substance, regardless of whether the show is local or network. They are intelligent, and they want to learn. Weekday should reflect the attributes of Morning Edition or ATC.

Jeff wants Weekday to sound live, not canned. He thinks that public radio listeners enjoy the unfolding of live, intelligent discussion. The anchor must make decisions every second.

Weekday is topical, concerned with public affairs in the news.

***KQED***

Joanne Wallace used similar terms to describe KQED's Forum. She said it is live and interactive, a window on the San Francisco Bay Area. Forum gives public radio listeners in the local community an opportunity to hear each other.

In addition to the anchor, there are three full-time producers. The producers control the booking, research and background work. Then it is up to the anchor to control the live show.

Joanne agrees with Jeff Hansen that live radio can be more involving than produced packages.

KQED's philosophy is that the station will present a combined service of national, regional and local programming. Do listeners appreciate that? Or are they tuning in for NPR only?

## Agenda

Based on the research questions, we designed an agenda for the focus groups that moved from general impressions of each station to specific critiques of program examples.

We followed the same agenda in each market. We did vary the airchecks played in each group—always leading with familiar, local examples before moving on to unfamiliar programs from other markets.

Here is the agenda we used in Chicago:

### 1. Introduction

What you have in common all listen to similar radio stations  
We are going around the country – Chicago, New Haven, Seattle,  
and San Francisco – a national research study

### 2. Market Positioning

Which are the stations in town for local news?  
Which are the stations in town for national news?

### 3. Differentiation

Written: WBBM vs WBEZ

### 4. Programs

Flashcards: First Impression  
Written Scale: Weekly listening  
Written Scale: Personal importance

### 5. Evaluation of WBEZ Airchecks

Written: Like/improved  
Discuss: Compare notes

### 6. Evaluation of Airchecks from WNPR, KUOW and KQED

Written: Like/improved  
Discuss: Compare notes

### 7. Summary Discussion

Local Programming

## **Sense of Place**

In each focus group the moderator asked a curious question, “Where are we now?” That question was followed by another, “Where do you live?”

Obviously, we knew the location of each focus group facility. But we wanted to know how our respondents mapped their home territory in their heads. We wanted to know the mental boundaries of their sense of place.

### Chicago

We recruited WBEZ listeners to a facility located in a rich North Shore suburb. Half of our respondents lived in the suburbs, but half lived within the city limits of Chicago.

In response to the moderator’s questions, all respondents agreed that the facility was located in “Chicago” and that they all lived in “Chicago.” When the moderator probed further, they explained that “Chicago” extended north to the Wisconsin state line and east to the Indiana state line.

In their minds, they were citizens of an extensive yet integrated spread of territory. All of “Chicago” was their community, and they felt a part of it.

### New Haven

Connecticut was strikingly different. We recruited WNPR listeners to a facility located in North Haven. Our respondents lived in various towns strung along the Interstate, including Middletown and New Haven.

When the moderator asked about territory, our Connecticut respondents could explain where they did NOT live. They did not feel connected to Hartford. In fact, they did not feel connected to the adjacent town.

They explained that Connecticut does not have a center. It is just the space between New York and Boston.

### Seattle and San Francisco

The cities of San Jose and Oakland adjoin San Francisco, just as Everett and Tacoma bracket Seattle. The Seattle and San Francisco markets are both mega-markets, clusters of cities.

We conducted the Seattle focus groups in an affluent suburb across the lake from the city, near Microsoft headquarters. Yet our respondents said that we were still in “Seattle” because “Seattle” extended well beyond the city. It certainly included Redmond, Bellevue and Kirkland.

However, when the moderator probed, these KUOW listeners said that the city of Tacoma to the south was not part of their “Seattle.” Neither was Everett to the north. In their minds, their home territory ran east/west but not north/south.

We conducted the San Francisco focus groups downtown in a high-rise office building just off Market Street. Yet these KQED listeners said that their home territory was “the Bay area” ranging from San Jose to Oakland to Santa Rosa.

### Observation

Public radio listeners are the same all over. Yet the listeners to a given station may have a particular **sense of place** when they think about their local community. Understanding their sense of place may be a prerequisite to the design of truly valuable local programming.

## **Image and Positioning: AM News/Talk**

At the start of each group we asked an open-ended question: “Which are the news, talk or information stations in this market?”

By starting out that wide and open, we let respondents include whatever stations, public or commercial, that came to mind—regardless of their actual listening.

For example, in Chicago our respondents came up with WGN (the Tribune’s talk station), WBBM (the CBS newsradio station) and WLS (the Rush Limbaugh station) as well as WBEZ.

All of the commercial stations mentioned by our respondents broadcast on the AM band. With reference to news and information programming, the terms “commercial” and “AM” mean the same to our respondents.

### ***WBBM in Chicago***

In Chicago most of the respondents were familiar with WBBM, an AM station that has rotated the CBS newsradio hot clock for 35 years.

Here are some typical descriptions of WBBM:

*Newsradio 780, headlines, weather, traffic, sports*

*Abbreviated, quick, basic info on news, no opinions, jam it in*

*Quick sound bytes, “hyper” voice (the horse-race or auctioneer sort of exaggerated, “manufactured emotions” style*

*Headlines shallow, too many commercials!*

They talked about the utility of WBBM’s clock. By punching that button you can get local weather and local traffic, along with quick headlines.

They punch out just as quickly.

***WELI and WCBS in New Haven***

Public radio listeners in New Haven can tune to the local news/talk station, WELI, or pick up WCBS AM from New York.

WELI

*School closings, Rush Limbaugh*

*Rightwing talk shows, Dr Laura*

*School cancellations, local sports*

*Mostly talk programs, local news and weather*

WCBS

*News on a loop*

*Relentless commercials, heavy emphasis on crime, particularly if sensational*

*Traffic/weather, national/NYC metropolitan area, headlines*

*News repeated every 25 min, road and weather every 8 min*

Recall that our Connecticut respondents live in a collection of towns located well outside of the New York metro. When they listen to WCBS AM they are monitoring events over the horizon.

WNPR listeners find minimal value in news/talk formats on commercial AM radio. They tune in for utilitarian reasons—weather, traffic, and sometimes sports.

### ***KIRO in Seattle***

The big AM station in Seattle is KIRO.

*Mariners baseball, irritating talk shows, good if snow for info*

*Newsradio, Mariners, traffic and weather every 10 minutes*

*Sports, traffic report*

*Ads, hard sell, bad news*

*Baseball, TV station, traffic report helicopters*

*Cursory, bland presentation of the news, not meant nor designed to elicit thinking*

*Plastic sounding, old school radio style, announcers talking loud and fast, commercials, cocky, arrogant talk show host, sports*

### ***KCBS in San Francisco***

The CBS newsradio format may also be heard in San Francisco.

*Consistent news and traffic, sports weather*

*AM news format*

*Quick/brief headlines, do not listen to it*

*Traffic and weather together on the eights*

Public radio managers often assert that their market is different. Yet across these four markets we found **no differences** in the positioning of commercial AM news/talk stations.

Our respondents used exactly the same images to describe the AM competition in Chicago, New Haven, Seattle and San Francisco.

Our respondents—mostly core NPR listeners—are repelled by the headline news, sensationalism, loud announcers and intrusive commercials heard on AM news/talk.

Sensational local headlines do not serve the needs of public radio listeners. Neither do local talk jocks who shout their simplistic opinions.

We asked our respondents whether the NPR station ought to do frequent weather and traffic. Our respondents said no.

By their reasoning, frequent weather and traffic checks would conflict with a Core Value of public radio—in depth coverage that informs thinking about issues.

By the way, while our respondents complained about the commercials on AM news/talk stations, across eight groups we heard **not one complaint** about underwriting credits on public radio.

## Image and Positioning: NPR Stations

In the mind of the public radio listener, there is no comparison between commercial AM news and NPR stations. They are positioned as polar opposites on several dimensions.

### **WBEZ**

*National Public Radio, in depth look at specific issues and stories*

*Cerebral, informative, in depth, liberal, different opinions, relaxed*

*In depth coverage of important news topics*

*Elegant, questioning, calming, incisive interviews and commentary, giving an unusually generous portion*

*In depth, discussion, experts, scholars, scientists*

*Very useful information which I often can't hear anywhere else*

### **WNPR**

*Faith Middleton, the opposite of Dr Laura*

*Developed news stories, variety of issues, thoughtful analysis, presentation creative interesting*

*All Things Considered, intelligent, in depth, world wide*

*Long in depth news stories, Radio Expeditions, international news, no commercials*

*Different slant on stories seems to concentrate on the human condition rather than evoking a visceral response, informative and in depth reporting on issues that don't seem to interest the more commercial stations*

**KUOW**

*NPR—more in depth info, interest subjects*

*Intellectual (sort of), liberal*

*Baby boomers talking in conversational tones, provocative approaches to interesting, relevant subjects, non-condescending humor, no commercials!*

*A diverse presentation of news and events, usually an attempt is made to discern who or what is affected, thoughtful news coverage, interviews with cutting edge thinkers, artists*

*U of Washington radio, real journalism, leftwing but balanced, NPR*

*Thorough*

**KQED**

*In depth, daily, international, Car Talk, Forum, Cal Report, Prair Home*

*More detail*

*NPR coverage of news/current events*

*Morning Edition, Bob Edwards, listening to news in the morning*

*Prairie Home Companion, having your say, Car Talk*

*All Things Considered, Fresh Air, the World, Marketplace, the Cal Report (all of my dose of news for the day)*

We cannot say that “great local coverage” jumped out as a first impression for any of these stations. There were scattered references to “Faith Middleton” or “The California Report” but the moderator had to probe to get respondents talking about local programming in particular.

And that’s the point. When public radio listeners, especially core listeners, think about their NPR station, their first impressions reflect the Core Values that **cut across various programs**.

*In depth*

*Cerebral*

*Calming*

*Thoughtful*

*Intelligent*

*Conversational*

In fact, the WBEZ listeners in our sample said that when they listened to WBEZ they often could not name the particular program that was on.

Station positioning happens in the mind of the consumer and all positioning is necessarily **relative**. When public radio listeners think about Core Values, they inevitably make contrasts with commercial news/talk radio.

The newsradio format, as originated by CBS and Group W, has become quicker and shallower. Traffic on the 8’s.

The AM talk format has become strident. You listen to Rush or Dr Laura for their harsh opinions, not for an open discussion.

As commercial radio changed in the 1990s, the relative positioning of public radio also changed. The distance widened on several dimensions.

The Core Values of public radio stand out in sharper contrast.

## Program Examples

In each group we spent a lot of time listening to program examples. The stations had provided airchecks of their local programs. Marcia Alvar selected 2-3 minute excerpts that we played in the groups.

The moderator started with examples from the hometown station.

Most of our respondents had not heard the particular stories we excerpted when they had originally played on the station, but most respondents were familiar with the local program.

After playing hometown examples in each group, we played examples from the other three markets. So Chicago listeners also heard excerpts from local programs in New Haven, Seattle and San Francisco.

We gave each respondent a printed form for each excerpt. There were two open-ended questions:

*What did you especially like about this programming?*

*How could this programming be improved for you?*

After listening to a program example, each respondent wrote personal answers on the form. Then we opened up for discussion.

## Verbatims

The four participating stations received a comprehensive report that includes detailed verbatims as written by respondents. Because those verbatims include both positive and negative references to air talent, we have deleted 25 pages of written verbatims from this **abridged** report.

At the 2001 PRPD Conference, Marcia Alvar delivered a presentation on Local Core Values with selected video highlights from our focus groups. In this abridged report we are providing transcripts of spoken verbatims from the PRPD video highlights.

## **Core Values on Video**

Marcia Alvar produced a video edit of the groups for presentation at the 2001 PRPD Conference. The Core Values of public radio may be revealed in the following spoken verbatims as transcribed from that video.

### ***In Depth for Thinking People***

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.

It sort of reminds me: People magazine compared to Harper's. Cliff's 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.

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

### ***Noncommercial Integrity***

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.

### ***Societal-Consciousness***

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, people have some answers. But I think that their whole purpose is they want to bring up, pluck subjects that can help people become better people and make the world a better place. Not too many other stations have that.

### ***Comprehensive Coverage***

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

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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.

### ***An Interconnected World View***

So, they talked about parts of Chicago that we all know, but in looking at the history and they 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: 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 if 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.

### ***Universal Stories***

The topic they were talking about was a universal topic, so it was interesting to me. Societal....a problem with our society...Meaning more than local.

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

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.

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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..... really interested in the whole issue of the teacher salary and especially and how it.

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

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.

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It's 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 want 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!

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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.

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. I was interested.

## Method in Brief

We conducted eight focus groups across four markets during the last two weeks in June, 2001. In each market we did a 6pm group of women and an 8pm group of men. We limited the demographics to 25-64.

Most of the respondents turned out to be core listeners, meaning that they used the public radio station as their primary station.

Core listeners generate most of the listening and giving to public radio.

In each market the station provided a list of phone numbers from their membership list, but we recruited no more than half of our respondents from that list. The other half were recruited by random phone calls targeted to high income/high education neighborhoods.

All respondents had to pass the same telephone screener. Here is the wording of the qualification questions in Seattle:

*4) When you listen to radio at home, at work or in the car, which radio station do you listen to most often for NEWS and INFORMATION?*

*[DO NOT READ – UNAIDED RESPONSE]*

*KUOW FM                    /\_\_\_/ [QUALIFY: SKIP TO Q6]  
Any Other Station        /\_\_\_/ [CONTINUE]*

*[[INSTRUCTION: IF RESPONDENT SAYS “NPR” OR “PUBLIC RADIO” OR CHANNEL NUMBER, ASK FOR A SPECIFIC CALL LETTERS.]*

*5) Which would be your second radio station for NEWS and INFORMATION?*

*[DO NOT READ – UNAIDED RESPONSE]*

*KUOW FM                    /\_\_\_/ [QUALIFY: CONTINUE]  
Any Other Station        /\_\_\_/ [THANKS AND TERMINATE]*