

Response to: If I Ran A Station

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Someone asked what my ideal public radio station would look like, if I could start one today from scratch. Cool thought puzzle! Here it is:

I've worked at a (successful, large market) member station for almost nine years. Here are some responses to MK's suggestions and ideas.

I'd set the station up as a facilitator rather than a disseminator. We would:

1. run training classes in communities - at local libraries and community centers and in schools - teaching people how to collect audio from their communities and then hire producers at the station edit the tape and help shape them for air. See reporters and producers as facilitators: not a one-way street of disseminating information, but working with the community to unearth a) what stories are important b) the best way to tell them and c) the best ways to share them. The medium is not the message here - sometimes it's radio, sometimes it's paper, sometimes it's a podcast, sometimes it's the web - sometimes it's all of the above.

Getting down and dirty in our communities should be the goal of all stations. What are the real voices? What do people care about? Ideally reporters and producers *are* facilitators. They have been trained to take those stories and to make them relevant and to make people care. I don't think every story is appropriate or worthy for air - but that doesn't mean that the process of someone telling their story isn't powerful and worthwhile. It would be great to have one point person in each community that is trained to gather voices and stories. But that takes time and resources. And that person hasn't necessarily been trained as a journalist, so those stories need a filter before they make it on air (or in print, etc).

2. personalize every complex story we could. KPCC did this recently with their local [municipal primary election coverage](#).

I love the KPCC example. Dear God, a way to make reporting on municipal voter turnout sexy!

3. set up booths around town - again in libraries, at the station, in public spaces - that would allow people to share their stories.

“The Storycorps Model” is a great way to collect stories from different populations, for different projects, etc. We just did a pilot program called *Words to Give By* collecting “stories of everyday generosity” around the greater Hartford region. This was a partnership with a funder, paid for by that organization. The key to doing this well: you need great quality audio, you need compelling stories. We collected about 150 stories, of which we will put 50 on the web, and 29 will air in two-minute packages. We invested an incredible amount of time and resources towards this project - new equipment, a full time producer, a part time producer, an event coordinator, web designer, social media, etc. Again, without the resources provided by the granting partner, we never could have come close to making this project work.

Another less successful effort was for our “Polish Stories Project” -- in which I put out word to the Polish community that for one week I would be holding “office hours” at various locations in a Polish historical district in New Britain, CT. I was standing by to talk to people, collect stories, meet sources. This was a one-woman project, with none of the above resources, and so that particular effort wasn’t all I hoped it would be. But I could see it working with more of a lead up.

4. have a show on that would simply pilot short or longform podcasts showcasing different voices in the community. There’s a precious element in public media that doesn’t allow us to put anything on the air that’s not perfect. It doesn’t have to be perfect. You can’t experiment if the bar is constantly out of reach.

As a talk show producer from a station that has three locally produced shows, I couldn't agree with this more. At least when it comes to getting “regular people” voices on the air. Hearing from politicians and professional talkers is sometimes necessary, but if there is ever a show where we are talking *about* a population (veterans, immigrants, teens, homeless, etc.) and not talking *to* them... then we have a problem.

We’re lucky enough at WNPR to have a high school in our building - the Journalism and Media Academy. I have pushed to get their voices on our news and talk programs, with success and buy-in from producers and hosts. I think this is something that member

stations can do much better than the national news shows. We have a lot more room to experiment.

We're working on a hyper-local podcast that would produce 5 or 6 episodes -- each focusing on different neighborhoods in Hartford. Hosted by Hartford residents. This would be a pilot for something we could replicate in other cities.

We have to think about what we mean by "community." Connecticut is a small state, with 169 very individual cities and towns. Hartford is very different than Greenwich. We can't just focus on one city - how do we cover all the nooks and crannies?

5. place audio cones in public areas - at bus stations, in parks - that would broadcast stories back out in public places. Partner with the local public bus and put stories on the bus/subway ads.

Audio cones = speakers? Is it collecting audio and then broadcasting it out? Who decides on locations? Would it broadcast the station stream?

6. partner with local libraries to project every data visualization and map we make on the outside of the building. Anyone who doesn't have high-speed internet cannot experience interactives. Put them on a building!

Another interesting idea. Where are the data visualizations and maps coming from? At WNPR, our web and multimedia team is under-staffed and responsible for creating content for WNPR and CPTV platforms (aka overworked). We aren't producing a whole lot of data visualizations BUT if we were (!!) it would be great to get those and all of our online content to those communities with limited internet access.

7. ask people to come on the air and teach everyone in the community something - anything - that they had learned in the past year or so. I can't think of any show or station that operates in this way.

As the first point of contact for our audience to the station, I get a LOT of requests for people pitching shows, stories, angles, authors, you name it. At first glance, this suggestion seems like opening a whole big scary can o worms. And, logistically, could be difficult.

Some questions: What are the people teaching us (what are the actual lessons -- how to fish? How to cook? How to bind a book?) How do these lessons translate to radio? Who is the audience for this? Why do they care?

I could see it as a fun segment of our talk show - could be quirky and local. But would take some real vetting.

A lot of community/college stations do this already, it seems - offer slots to (not necessarily trained), passionate people to host shows, etc. I don't see the role of member stations in the same way. I think there has to be a high bar for what and who gets on the air.

We need to (and currently do) have an ongoing and real discussion about diversity -- we certainly aren't hearing all the voices we need to, all the voices that are representative of our communities -- but that doesn't mean there shouldn't be standards.

JD says: The barrier for most radio stations to any heavy investment of time in projects like this is that they are, by their nature, better suited to niche audiences than broadcast audiences. We're still - everyday - reaching a big group of people who might not share the interests we might personally have in these stories.

8. set up Storytelling as a Service to train others in the community to tell their stories. (Facilitated workshops can bring in revenue.)

I've often thought about writing a curriculum that would work to drop into schools and do crash courses on storytelling. Could we do that in retirement homes? Places of employment?

Questions: How are we training them (community), and why? To tell their stories for a website? for air? for their own personal fulfillment? Who is doing the training? To do this well, it takes time, equipment, interpreters, etc.

9. Highlight material from other STATIONS that people in the community might like. Build up station-station relationships.

Something that we've also been very focused on as a station that is part of a region, New England, in a state that is a transportation corridor -- linked to NY and RI by rail, Linked to all surrounding states by freeway. The southern part of Connecticut is

essentially a suburb of New York City. Politics, sports, all sorts of ways that we blend into other states.

We have relationships with several member stations in our vicinity - sharing content. On our website we pull content from other stations. NPR pulls content from our website. We all share content through PRX (Public Radio Exchange).

Our news director is currently working on a proposed “collaborative coverage” model in which we’d work much more regionally and in cooperation with surrounding stations. This is just the future of how we have to operate. So, how do we do it in a way that is mutually beneficial to stations and listeners?

10. Share everything we learned about process for others stations to learn. (Perhaps run facilitated workshops.)

Yes. Not enough support or communication between local talk shows, imo. Facebook has some great community conversations between stations, but how can we do this better? And what are the “processes” that we’re trying to get better at? Who’s doing it right?

Could there be a conference for regional station staff, supported by NPR?

JD: We are talking with WNYC about how local talk shows can work together during the 2016 election - specifically asking questions of listeners about what issues they care most about.

11. Create paper versions of complex stories and put them in tourist bureaus, courthouses, and other places that contain pamphlets. What does a public radio station look like if it disseminates information like a tourist bureau?

Thinking about better ways of disseminating information. Would it be better to create pamphlets about stories? Or find ways to get those actual stories to people - through access to internet or just getting the word out about the station? Would business story pamphlets be geared towards businesses? What stories get chosen? What do the pamphlets look like? Mini newspapers?

12. Raise money through public-private partnerships that would strengthen the archives and allow material (which costs a lot to produce) to be resurfaced.

JD: The issue of funding this - and these other - great ideas is just about the trickiest problem we face. We've been building public-private partnerships to cover news, to upgrade our equipment, to pay for new digital content to be created, for years. The question is: In what do we ask people to invest? We want to make sure we can strengthen our ability to resurface material from our archives - but covering the news is such a priority for us and for funders - that we constantly have to make this our priority.

13. Build the public media equivalent of 311. Call a line. Ask a news question. We dig up the answer. Maybe we air it. And we air it in every possible way.

On the surface this seems like something we do now - except instead of a dedicated line, they usually call me, or the news room. Or they email the talk show. Many times, we do follow up.

Curious City is still my favorite example of how to do this kind of community reporting thing really well. Station reporter works with community member, who has a question they want to answer. But in that case, the reporter makes critical and informed decisions along the way -- what's the story? Who tells it? How do they tell it?

14. Build a network of block captains to share hyperlocal news. Make them members.

"Block captains" makes me think of neighborhoods. For a station that covers an entire state and more, it presents a challenge. This hyper-local coverage is important -- but what blocks do you choose to focus on?

Something we were talking about at WNPR was a "Project 169" where we'd find one community "reporter" from each town who could report back to us on news, community happenings, etc. There could be a very cool interactive map that would go along with this too. Another great idea that would take a tremendous amount of resources that we just haven't been able to pull together.

15. Open source everything. Cheaper and transparent, and allows community to have input in what is build. Have software as a service set up, to build/consult for other stations.

HB says: Member stations can probably use help with their websites, but stations who have staff to work on websites also probably have a capacity problem. If certain stations become a kind of go-to resource for other stations that can use guidance, it turns the

web staffers into a sort of help desk, and their role changes. Maybe those stations should pitch in resources for those staffers' salaries if they can use that support.

16. Have slack instead of email. Email sucks and wastes time and makes people feel overwhelmed.

A solid way to attract millennials, but not other populations. In my experience, not a lot of people even know what Slack is.

HB says: If stations are going to work more with the community, email matters -- and so do phone calls. Slack is a good internal tool but it's all about the assigned team using it.

17. Not separate departments physically in buildings. This is weird and means people don't share ideas or information. Pick two names of coworkers out of a hat every month - have them have lunch.

Love this idea about the lunches. Seems easy to implement and could start tomorrow. We can learn a lot from all parts of the operation. We've been very siloed for most of my tenure at WNPR, and just recently started collaborating more. Makes a huge difference.

18. Invite people to the station to record podcasts in an empty studio.

See #7

19. Invite people from community to station once a month to preview new stuff, give feedback. Maybe the station is a food truck. What's the station version of a little free library?

Station food truck! Free food for feedback! Or maybe this "food truck" is also a storytelling van. Multi purpose vehicle that can drive into communities, park, and collect stories or ideas/feedback.

A few more things:

We need more interaction and feedback and stories from communities. We need to hear authentic voices from our communities.

Stations are short-staffed and under-funded, and not able to put on trainings or work as closely with community partners as much as we'd like.

When this happens well - examples like Words to Give By or Curious City - it is because there is an infusion of cash and resources. Where does that come from? Can we earmark certain dollars for these community projects?

Member station v. Community/college radio. There is a community model where you open the airwaves, allow access to everyone.

JD: Public radio is not only that. For better or worse, we've become a trusted, primary source of news and analysis, entertainment and talk for a big segment of the American public. We do want to make sure the public gets access to the airwaves...but we also need to make sure that we're able to give the rest of the public, the ones who count on us to inform them, the stuff they crave from public radio.

Should member stations spend a whole lot of time and energy collecting stories in a Storycorps-like way, when most won't make it on air? What seems more important to me is making and fostering relationships in communities, knowing who to contact when we need a certain voice or viewpoint, representing our communities in our coverage, telling great personal surprising stories... and then when we do go into the community looking for specific stories/voices we can be focused and do it really well.