

2017

What Can Libraries Learn From the Future of Public Media?

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Recommended Citation

Kretz, C. (2017). What Can Libraries Learn From the Future of Public Media?. *Urban Library Journal*, 23 (2). Retrieved from <http://academicworks.cuny.edu/ulj/vol23/iss2/1>

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What Can Libraries Learn From the Future of Public Media?

Cover Page Footnote

2017 LACUNY Institute

What Can Libraries Learn From the Future of Public Media?

Chris Kretz

Abstract

The world of public media has much in common with the world of libraries. Both are made up of outward-facing, civic-minded people and systems, mission-driven to educate, serve, and engage a diverse community of users. This paper examines the current state of public media, both radio and television, to outline the problems being faced, the debates within the profession, and the strategies being pursued to ensure relevance and effectiveness for the industry. Understanding how public media is adapting and innovating in response to changing user behaviors and technological disruption can help inform decision-making in libraries of all types. This paper also pinpoints areas where the mission of libraries and public media overlap, revealing opportunities for collaboration.

Keywords: public media, public radio, public broadcasting, digital humanities, engagement

Introduction

I am a long-time fan of public media, as I suspect many librarians are. However, I had never given much thought to the inner workings of the public media system nor, in fact, considered it as a system at all. To remedy that, I spent a good deal of time studying the current state of public media and the concerns that people in the field are facing. I took a deep dive into their world, delving into the mission statements and strategic plans of radio and television stations, watching videos of their conference proceedings, following threads down the rabbit holes of Twitter and Facebook. I monitored their press coverage and eavesdropped on their industry podcasts and publications.

What I found was a parallel universe sharing much in common with libraries. Both public media and libraries can be seen as civic-minded, outward-facing institutions concerned about their future and adapting to changes in their respective audiences. Even a cursory glance at the titles of public media conference presentations will strike a familiar chord in a librarian's ear: "Design Thinking for Radio," "Creating a Digital Dashboard," "Innovation You Can Afford," "Insight on Millennials," and "What Does America Think About Us – If They Think About Us at All?" We are kindred spirits striving to stay relevant and maintain our place in the modern world.

Studying the state of affairs in public media can be of value to libraries, both academic and public. Knowing the problems and challenges they face, as well as the strategies and innovations they are pursuing, can help inform our own decision making. There are many areas where our mission and activities overlap with public media. There are lessons we

can learn from each other. And somewhere in that Venn diagram of overlapping concerns there are opportunities to work together.

The Public Media System

To provide some background in broad strokes, the public media system as we know it today started with the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967, signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson. Congress recognized a need for a system of public radio and television stations dedicated to “instructional, educational, cultural purposes” that could focus on “the needs of unserved and underserved audiences” as well as “solve local problems through community...and outreach programs” (Public Broadcasting Act of 1967, 2017).

The Public Broadcasting Act created the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) to oversee and distribute funds to the two arms of public media: over 900 radio stations as represented by National Public Radio (NPR) and 350 television stations as represented by the Public Broadcasting System (PBS). CPB currently receives \$445 million dollars in appropriations and is funded two years in advance (CPB’s Federal Appropriation, n.d.). One interesting statistic to note – two thirds of public radio licenses are held by universities and educational institutions (Member Stations, n.d.).

The outlook on public media funding has become more precarious in the recent political climate although CPB’s current funding level is, at the moment, still in place. That’s not to say that funding isn’t a large area of concern in current public media debates – it is and probably always will be. While this is one of the areas in which drawing direct parallels to the library world is difficult, a look at funding sources for public radio stations will give some context to their situation.

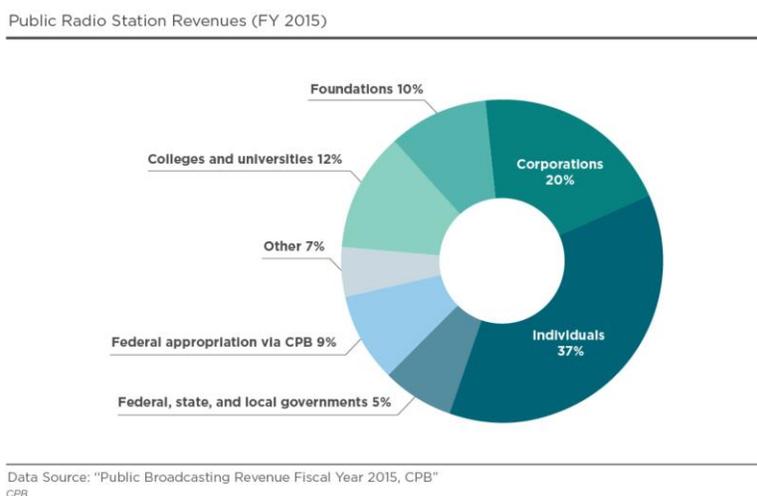


Figure 1: Public radio station revenues for fiscal year 2015. Public Radio Finances. (n.d.). Retrieved May 1, 2017 from <http://www.npr.org/about-npr/178660742/public-radio-finances>

NPR member stations receive 9% of their revenues from the CPB while 37% comes from individual donations (Public Radio Finances, n.d.). This reliance on listener donations has led to some criticism, the fear being that programming is geared towards the demographics most likely to donate to the station. Christopher Chávez, Assistant Professor of Communications at the University of Oregon, charges just that, finding public media to be full of programs catering to “an almost exclusively upscale audience of baby boomers” (2017).

Public Radio Programming

In fact, a vigorous debate over programming has been going on within public radio for some time. One clarification: I had long thought of all public radio programming as being synonymous with NPR. That is not the case. To use an imperfect library metaphor, picture NPR as a large consortium made up of public radio stations. Now think of individual radio programs (*All Things Considered*, *Car Talk*) as databases each station can license. Some of these programs are produced by and are licensed from NPR. But as libraries know, you can subscribe to databases from a number of different sources: consortiums, publishers, third-party aggregators, etc. Just as we license databases from a number of different sources, stations can get programming from a number of different entities beyond NPR. Public Radio International (PRI), Public Radio Exchange (PRX), and American Public Media (APM), in addition to individual stations like WHYY are all sources that produce and distribute programs.

The fact remained, however, that until recently all of this programming was produced for only one market: public radio stations. That is no longer the case. With a surge in popularity, podcasts are now seen as a viable alternative market to public media. In the past, if you wanted to hear (or create) compelling audio content, those “driveway moment”-type stories with emotional content and strong narrative momentum, public radio was the only place to go. That model has been disrupted in the last few years by the rise of podcasting. By 2016 a new market had arisen for audio stories, ironically hastened by the popularity of the podcast *Serial* which itself began life on public radio.

In a 2016 article in *Slate* entitled “The Fight for the Future of NPR,” Leon Neyfakh documented the shifts that were occurring through a migration of personnel: NPR’s head of programming left to join Audible. NPR journalist Alex Blumberg left to found the podcast company Gimlet. Other talent would soon depart to create content for other outlets. With podcasts now seen as a viable market, audio storytelling skills were in demand. Adam Davidson, a journalist who co-founded and subsequently left the influential NPR program *Planet Money* called it the “private sector audio industry” (2016). What had once been a unique job of public radio – audio stories - was now being done by start-ups pitching their programs directly to the public. Librarians who have seen the rise of Google, Amazon, and Netflix know what that feels like.

This was not, however, the end of public media. One of the arguments public radio can

pose against this “private audio sector” is a focus on journalism. Many of these new podcasting networks can compete on the level of narrative storytelling but it is harder to duplicate the journalistic work of public radio stations that have newsrooms and reporters in the field. This is a core part of the public media mission and one they are uniquely qualified to do. Finding such a key strength within an organization can be used as a strong differentiator in a competitive landscape.

Innovations

Regardless of competition from the outside, there have been ongoing efforts to foster innovative new programming within public radio. The Association of Independents in Radio (AIR) has been running a series of *Localore* projects since 2013 in an attempt to create new types of programs and reach new audiences. They embedded teams of audio producers in radio stations and charged them with getting out of the studio and creating. Their key findings include: the value of public radio stations as community hubs, the importance of developing networks within communities, and the power of creating teams of talent to “throw...like a lightning bolt at a problem or an idea” (*What's Outside*, 2014, p. 5). Two of the projects that came out of *Localore* point the way towards possible public media/library collaboration.



Figure 2: Austin Music Map. Austin Music Map (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://austinmusicmap.com>

The *Austin Music Map* documents the world of music and performance in that city. The project collects digital recordings and interviews and photographs into a topography of music captured on street corners, in backyards, and other out-of-the-way places. From the perspective of an academic librarian, this type of project is within hailing distance of the digital humanities. Is there a way to bridge that gap, to pursue projects like these using the expertise of audio producers and bringing in the structure and standards of digital humanities?

Another project, *Curious City* from station WBEZ in Chicago, incorporated help from the public to pose and help answer questions about the city. A number of episodes used the resources of Chicago Collections, a consortium of libraries and related cultural organizations. This type of programming draws directly on the strengths of library collections and librarians' expertise and could be expanded indefinitely.

Membership

The role and definition of “member” is another aspect of public radio that is being re-examined. Melody Kramer, a Nieman Center Fellow and former public media digital analyst, issued a report in 2015 on new ways to view membership in public media. She found that a new generation of listeners were looking for more meaningful experiences and opportunities. She proposed a number of approaches to membership, including letting users contribute skills instead of money and using the station as a platform for people to connect and collaborate on projects.

Kramer also makes a number of interesting suggestions regarding public radio stations and students, positing an online repository of NPR stories for use in a school's curriculum (2015). Think of all the work being done with open educational resources (OER) and LibGuides. What role can libraries – particularly academic libraries – play in making this type of public media content accessible for faculty and teachers?

Public Television

I want to touch briefly on public broadcasting, particularly to mention an event that many of us may not have seen: the FCC's broadcast incentive auction. This plan let public broadcasters sell back some of the spectrum they had been assigned, the impetus being the need to accommodate the huge demand for broadband access faced by telecommunication carriers like Verizon and AT&T (Spectrum, n.d.). Through a complex and drawn-out process, participating public television stations received an estimated \$1.9 billion dollars (Hand, 2017). Imagine what kind of future that windfall could build for your library. Craig Aaron, writing in the online site *Current*, asked:

What if they used the money to set up cutting-edge investigative newsrooms in cities across the country? Or built new tools to help the public sort through data and public records? Or leveraged it to support community-engagement efforts to attract and grow new and diverse audiences? (2016, para. 4)

Some specific ideas on public broadcasting's engagement efforts were offered in Toby Chaudhuri's presentation “Partnering with Third-Party Organizations around Community Engagement” at the 2016 Public Media Marketing and Development Conference. Chaudhuri lists some of the positives that public television offers to potential partners, technical expertise and the allure of PBS' “public service halo” being two of

them (2016, p. 4). He also notes that collaborating with a PBS station needs to be seen not as an end in itself but rather as “an ongoing effort to create impact” (2016, p. 7). He maps out a number of potential partners that mirror the types of institutions that libraries can and have worked with themselves.

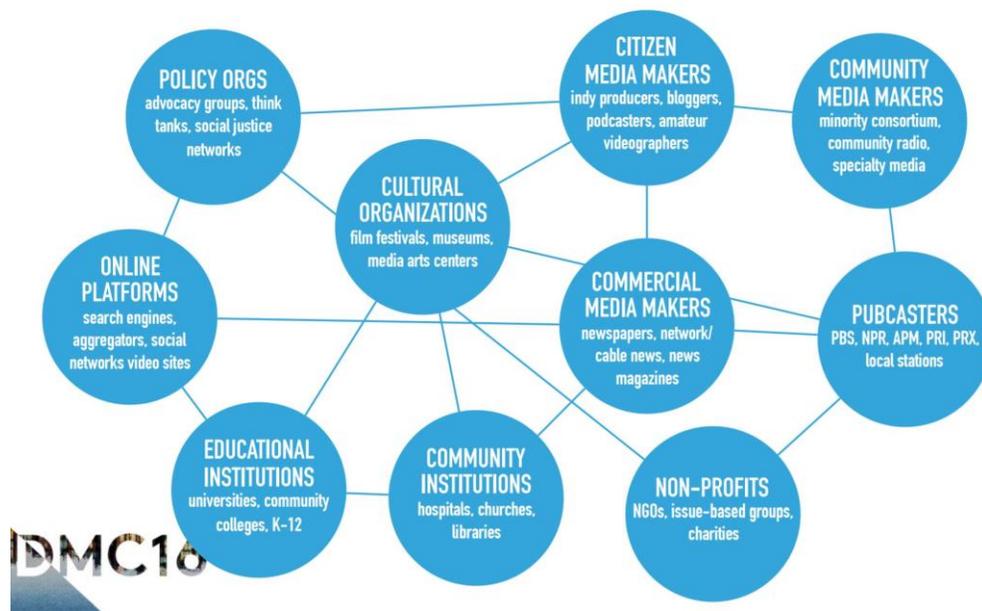


Figure 3: Third-party partners for public broadcasters. Chaudhuri, T. (2016). Partnering with third-party organizations around community engagement [PowerPoint Slides]. Retrieved from https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B6UjHl_XHUPuc05XaG5ELVhULTA/view

Collaborative Projects

I’ll conclude with a review of projects going on in the public media world right now, some that already involve libraries and some that offer intriguing possibilities.

Wyoming Public Media (WPM), which incidentally is licensed to the University of Wyoming, currently employs a reporter/content creator who is shared with the Buffalo Bill Center for the West. This reporter operates out of a recording studio at the Buffalo Bill Center, creating content for the Center while also covering stories for WPM (Conner, 2017). Imagine an academic library with an embedded producer or “audio producer in residence” tasked with creating stories from the library’s special collections or collaborating on projects with the library’s students and staff.



Figure 4: WGBH radio studio in Boston Public Library. WGBH. (n.d.). WGBH's Boston Public Library studio. Retrieved from <http://www.wgbh.org/support/BPLStudiocalendar.cfm>

The Boston Public Library recently redesigned part of its central library complex in Copley Square to include a recording studio for public radio station WGBH. The new space gives WGBH more visibility in public and creates a centerpiece for the library. WGBH has used the space to tape shows and record special programs with the public (WGBH, n.d.). So far they are recording *in* the library but not *with* the library. Having come so close, why not? What if they developed programs and events that incorporated the library more?

Another avenue to be explored are collaborations based on libraries' existing expertise. Philadelphia station WHYY worked with Drexel University Libraries to catalog and make accessible over 8,000 interviews from the WHYY-produced *Fresh Air* program. The project was supported by a grant from the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR) (Lee, 2015). Extrapolating from here, and including Kramer's call for more educational access to content, might there be an open access corollary to public media? With an (admittedly small) portion of their funding coming from federal funds, could there be a mandate to make a certain portion of public media content available in some kind of open access repository of sound?

Conclusion

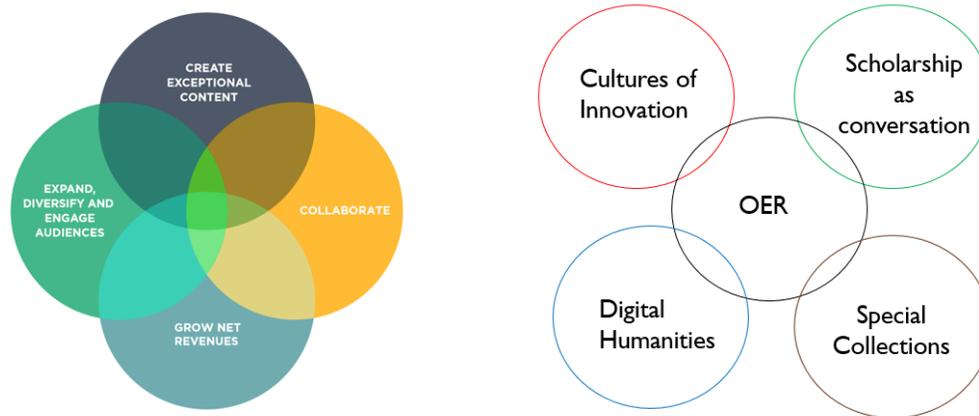


Figure 5: NPR's strategic priorities juxtaposed with potential areas of library overlap. Priorities from NPR: A strategic plan. (2014). Retrieved from http://www.npr.org/about/strategic_plan/2014_StrategicPlan.PDF

The priorities of NPR's current strategic plan are shown in Figure 5. If we leave aside the issue of revenue generation, which will always be unique, we can see that they have a clear mandate to collaborate, create exceptional content, and expand and engage with audiences. On the right are some of the library-related themes raised in this paper as well as emerging trends. Public media, in order to reach its goals in a changing marketplace, has formed innovative partnerships, explored new models of operation, and identified core areas of their mission that make them unique. These are all practices to take to heart. Even if libraries are doing these things already, it's informative to see how and with whom public media has taken similar steps.

In addition, we can learn from the innovative attitudes and creative spirit of the *Localore* projects. We can think of new ways to have students and patrons contribute to the work of the library. And we can seek out deeper partnerships with like-minded organizations, finding ways to sustain and broadcast our core values and mission. Once you recognize that, the idea of public media and libraries working together sounds promising indeed.

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