

Radio Must Enfranchise Creative Talent

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In the 1960s, Marshall McLuhan, the famous but oft-forgotten media theorist, communications scholar and social critic, wrote *Understanding Media*, where he introduced us to the idea that “the medium is the message.” Buried inside this 5 word sentence is the essence of radio. McLuhan observed that the means of delivering a message dominates content of the message. Each medium, be it a written novel or a 3D cinema in surround sound, has properties that emphasize one aspect of a message and suppress others.

In analyzing electronic media technology of the 1960s, McLuhan concluded that “radio was hot” and that “television was cold.” He further goes on to explain that radio (at least at the time when he was writing) was hot because sound has high information content. An entire world can be created just from a compelling soundscape that contains people, social interactions, physical events, and an aural environment of ambience and acoustics.

Perhaps the sad part of radio history is that the industry moved from being a cultural leader to a passive follower. Where are the creative visionaries who understand the power of sound, and where are the network executives who are willing to give those aural visionaries a playground to be creative? If nothing else history also teaches us that creative innovation and artistic risk can create fortunes, as the movie empire of Walt Disney and the radio empire of David Sarnoff demonstrate.

Desire for Escape

The economic success of the *Harry Potter* stories proves that people in our modern culture are still hungry for a way to escape into a world of fantasy. Even though the printed word is the oldest media, the most recent *Harry Potter* book sold more than 8 million copies in the first 24 hours. A high-tech medium can still be overpowered by a traditional medium, in this case print. Similarly, radio need not cede the high road to the techno-wizardry of the Internet and computers.

Levi-Straus, the famous French anthropologist suggested that story telling reflects the fundamental structure of the human mind. We are not computers that store data; rather we retain experience of ourselves and others in the form of a sequence of events and emotions. We empathize and sympathize by building an internal replica of an external world. The mind recreates life. A good journalist will embed facts into an event that comes alive in the minds of readers or listeners. Facts and life are not mutually exclusive but mutually dependent on each other.

There is a sad, yet notable, example of how modern media uses our imagination: peddling of fear and anxiety. Doomsday weather forecasts describe massive storms,

which usually prove to be nothing more than rain. Sound bites of political figures argue that the world is doomed unless some other agenda is accepted. And there is the old standby of terrorists threatening massive destruction to our way of life, which they have been doing for more than 10 years. What about all the other forms of imagination that comfort and warm our souls? Where is that hunger being satisfied?

Driveway Moments

Harry Potter is a rich form of “theater of the mind.” So too are the radio dramas of the 1930s, 1940s and 1950’s. Radio of the 21st century also has its “theater of the mind,” but it is found mostly on the public radio network in such programs as *Prairie Home Companion* and *All Things Considered*. In these examples, good story telling with rich soundscapes transport the listeners into their imagination. Attending to these aspects of the aural experience has contributed to the popularity and growth of public radio. It is not radio drama of the 1930s but it is built from the same principles. Public radio executives refer to the “the driveway moment,” when the program is so compelling that people sit for several minutes in their driveway to listen to the end of a story—even when their commute is over and dinner is getting cold. History repeats the dual themes of the Golden Age of radio: transporting the listener to a virtual world, and drawing them in so deeply that they stay.

On commercial radio, there are a few shows that harness this power. Live sports broadcasts, for example, are “theater of the mind.” A baseball game, with the excitement of the announcer, the crack the bat, and roar of the crowd, places you in the “ballpark in your head,” all in real-time. You are in the story, you are in the grandstands, and you have been transported out of stalled traffic. Even a traffic report broadcast live from a helicopter gives you the feeling of looking down at the roads from on high. The report is more than just information.

The Most Important Sense

Radio has more than its share of paradoxes. In public broadcasting, the program content often has wonderful imagery, while the underwriting announcements are as dry as toast. Conversely, on commercial talk shows, most announcers are disembodied voices floating out of automobile dashboards, while the show’s commercial spots are often the most creative components in the hour. Good commercials can stand alone as miniature stories, dramas or narratives that do not focus just on a product or service. They draw in the listener by providing a story with a broad range of emotions, often using vivid soundscapes of images, humanity, and dramatic events.

In all older cultures with their deep understanding of the senses, the ears were for “seeing life,” while vision was simply a means for navigating the environment without colliding with obstacles. In his book, *The Variety of Sensory Experiences*, David Howes describes how our concept of the senses is specific to culture rather than being biologically determined. And for most cultures hearing was the number one sense, while

vision was third in terms of importance. The blind seer was honored for his refined ability to “see” the future. Radio provides the means for listeners to see other worlds and lives.

People vote with their feet; listeners vote with their ears. The greatest success story in broadcast radio during the last 20 years may be NPR and the rise of its affiliate stations. They have been enjoying real growth against a backdrop of shrinking commercial radio numbers. The executives of commercial radio may well be ignoring the fact that there is a deep hunger for something other than talking heads with loud opinions—“junk food for the ear.” The magnitude of this hunger may finally be quantified with the advent of the PPM measurement system, which could transform a “stealth audience” into hard numbers. Even if some people dismiss public radio for its supposed “leftist and intellectual” bias, it may nevertheless manifest a deep understanding of the power of the imagination and the appeal of a good story.

Content Captures an Audience

Broadcast radio is far more than a piece of technology. The news stories on NPR and various other radio shows paint pictures in sound through the use of sound effects, ambience gathered on location and production sensibilities that place the listener in the story. With the National Geographic Radio Show story you float down the Amazon River, hear the water rushing and become aware of birds flying overhead. In a forest, you hear the distinct sounds of the wooded soundscape. Listeners enjoy hearing these worlds transported to them by radio.

Lest you think that this argument is too academic for an industry required to make profits, consider the evidence. In 1958, Stan Freberg wrote a 6-minute 35-second spot to help Butter-Nut’s instant coffee overcome a 5-year lag in entering the tough southern California market. The spot, called “Omaha!” was a spoof on the musical “Oklahoma.” The product name was not mentioned until the very end of the story. Listeners simply enjoyed the humor and entertainment. As a result of the spot, Butter-Nut sales quadrupled, and the company’s product became a featured story in the Los Angeles Times.

At a recent NTS Aircheck’s Talk Media Conference, Paul Harvey Jr. creator, producer and writer of the longest running series on radio, “The Rest of the Story” asked the audience “how many stations here have full time writers on staff?” One hand went up. Anyone who has ever listened to “The Rest of the Story” will instantly recognize how a master who knows how to write for the audio broadcast medium can turn spoken word into pure story telling.

A Tested Path for Success

In the mid 1960s, when radio was dominated by the top-40 AM powerhouses, FM was without any apparent economic value. Radios that could receive FM broadcasts in automobiles would only become standard equipment some 10 years later. Without being able to immediately monetize the new technology, executives and managers allowed a “bunch of kids” to experiment with FM. Left alone, they reinvented radio content, which then begat a large number of new listeners, thereby creating value that now dwarfs the

original golden goose, AM broadcasting. A half century later, the analogy of FM is HD radio.

Look at the current value for some other industries that began as play toys: personal computers, video games, search engines, and even digital audio. We are confident that HD radio would attract a new audience if the next generation were given the opportunity to combine their innate understanding of social networking and web connectivity with the power of our aural medium.

In our view, the industry must enfranchise creative talent, be they writers, comedians, aural artists, or enthusiastic kids. Leave the ultra-conservative bureaucrats to sit in the waiting room until there is something of value to be managed. Content is king. Long live the king.