

The challenge for public radio

Letting go of our expected future

By Bruce Theriault

There is no question that the media industry is in the midst of disruptive change. We have seen many of the signs already: imploding newspapers, the growing obsolescence of the advertising-based business model of traditional media, ownership conglomeration, and a profusion of new technologies enabling entirely new modes of producing and consuming media. Here's another sign: In December, nearly 150 million U.S. Internet users watched a record 14.3 billion online videos. [1]

Disruptive change, a term increasingly showing up in business circles, occurs when the underlying forces that drive an industry shift significantly. It can be fueled by shifts in technology, demographics, business models, the economy, and production and consumption patterns—which pretty much encapsulates what has been happening in the media industry over the past two decades.

In a time of disruptive change, as management consultant Douglas Berger [2] has noted, “the expected future ceases to exist.” It is a time marked by disequilibrium and instability. It is a time when some players succeed and others go under. It can be a time of fear and retrenchment. It can also be a time of transformative innovation. But there should be no doubt: We are in the midst of irreversible change in our expected future.

What will this time of disruptive change mean for public radio?

In public broadcasting, we think about mission a lot. We like to chew on existential questions such as: What does it mean to be public radio (or public television or, probably most appropriate of all, public media) in the digital, participatory era? And who's going to build our new-media platforms when budgets are already stretched to produce programming, retain audiences and deal with a major recession?

This is not an easy discussion. But, as Harvard's Clayton Christensen recently said, “The breakthrough innovations come when tension is greatest and the resources are most limited. That's when people are actually a lot more open to rethinking the fundamental way they do business.” [3]

Yes, many people in public broadcasting

see rich opportunities in digital media, and some have been pursuing these opportunities for several years. But there is also a widespread sense of threat, of losing our footing, of changes demanded by forces that many do not understand.

Certainly, public broadcasters are not the only people who feel this way. Harvard Business School Prof. Lynda Applegate notes that disruptive change can be viewed as either an opportunity or a threat. By and large, entrepreneurs see it as an opportunity. Established companies, on the other hand, with their infrastructures, customer bases, and time-tested business models, often see it as a threat.

So what is public radio to do? Two things, I would suggest: Stay exactly the same and become completely different.

We need to hold on to the very same values that have undergirded public radio for the past 40 years, the ones that assert that accessible, in-depth, fact-based journalism and high-quality cultural programming are essential to a healthy democracy; that media can and should serve people while respecting their intelligence even when they don't comprise a desirable consumer market; that media are capable of building bridges of understanding among diverse communities; and that it is a good thing for media outlets to be rooted in local communities. These fundamental values have driven public radio since its inception; now following them enables us to provide meaningful, relevant and compelling service to nearly 30 million

people every week.

But we also need to be completely different. We need to let go of the future we expected. And do what?

The first thing we can do, indeed must do, is throw open the doors to new people. If public radio is to be truly public and play an essential role in society, we cannot live in a gated community. The fact that the public radio audience is 82 percent white is a problem when the public we aspire to serve is becoming rapidly more diverse. It is absolutely imperative that we find ways to bring in new voices, and that we resist the urge to apply old filters to new ideas. Some in public radio are already leading the way, and CPB is providing support for some of these innovative public-service initiatives.

Chicago Public Radio, for instance, launched Vocalo, a new, entirely user-driven online/broadcast hybrid, designed explicitly to engage Chicagoans who did not hear their voices and concerns reflected by traditional public radio. The idea for Vocalo was born when Chicago Public Radio had the courage to ask a simple but challenging question: “Is what we do necessary?” Even though the station reaches some 550,000 listeners every week, the truth was that, for many Chicagoans—especially African-Americans, Latinos, immigrants and Asian-Americans—the answer was no. Not because they weren't interested in issues; they very much were. But they felt that the programming they heard on public radio did not speak to them.

Not everyone can start an all-new station like Vocalo, but we all should try, in many different and locally appropriate ways, to offer content that speaks to a much more diverse America.

Second, we must open the doors to young people. In a recent CPB Board retreat on the future of public-service media, participants were fundamentally asking (among other things), “How do we get interactivity into our DNA?”

The fact of the matter is that we won't succeed by grafting new-media components onto an old-media platform. It's not going to happen by single-platform producers

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working really, really hard to catch up by launching a blog or a podcast. It's going to happen when we bring in the people whose DNA is already infused with interactivity—the young people who grew up on media interactivity and consider it media-as-usual.

For instance, the Digital Native Project, jointly developed by KQED and Youth Radio, will explore ways in which the core principles and practices of public broadcasting and the unique perspectives of digital natives [4] can inspire and engender innovative content distributed over digital, nonbroadcast platforms such as YouTube, Facebook and Twitter. The project seeks to help traditional broadcast media and new digital media influence each other in ways that will enhance the storytelling power of each and to explore ways in which the public radio world can modify its production model to blend further with a Web 2.0 world.

The truth, of course, is that young people are already redefining media, whether we invite them in or not. Young people everywhere take part in digital media. They produce content, experiment with media, tinker, socialize, and just hang out online. For most of the media establishment, new media means extra work. But for young people, it's play, which is why trying to catch up to where they already are will always be a losing game. Digital natives don't think in terms of radio, television or Internet. They think about sound. About video. About text, games, widgets, podcasts, social networks—and all of it together at once.

This is the future of media—with us or without us. Talented people are out there and eager to join us. CPB's Public Radio Talent Quest proved that if we invite them, they will come.

Finally, we have to open the doors to our communities. We need to find out what issues really matter in our communities and, together, figure out how we can help to address them. It means that we have to listen, carefully and deeply, to what other people have to say about what is relevant and compelling in their lives. It means that we need to embrace our capacity to have an impact on our communities by helping to solve problems and build on opportunities.

Public broadcasting is different from other media because we are driven by a public-service mission. Our goal is not to

return dividends to shareholders or drive business to advertisers. Our goal, fundamentally, is and always has been to use the extraordinary power of media to educate, empower and enlighten—in short, to help make the communities we serve better, stronger, healthier and more vibrant places to live. But to do that, we have to remember that media are the means, not the end.

Public broadcasting in general—and public radio in particular—has seen remarkable success over the past four decades, growing from a haphazard collection of individual stations when President Lyndon Johnson signed the Public Broadcasting Act in 1967 to a powerful network that altogether serves millions of people every week. But as the system has grown, it has also become more institutionalized and more resistant to change. This makes it challenging to let go of the future we expected, even as it becomes increasingly clear that letting go is exactly what is required to respond to disruptive change.

At the same time, however, public radio especially has the exceptional advantage of being composed of hundreds of small, locally grown stations and fed by hundreds of independent producers. Structurally, the system is both institutional and independent, risk-averse and entrepreneurial. This could be viewed as a threat, a system too divided to respond in a time of change. But I prefer to view it as an opportunity, as a system with the capacity to spur local innovation that has potential for national impact and much greater service for the full span of Americans, now and to come. ■

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