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# MARKET TRENDS RESEARCH

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## MARKET TRENDS – AN INTRODUCTION

Market Trends Research is a full service research and consulting company serving public radio and private industry. Market Trends has provided qualitative research [focus groups], and quantitative research [surveys], for clients in twenty-nine states and abroad. The company is a member of the Qualitative Research Consultant's Association [QRCA], the national organization for focus group professionals. Market Trends also consults for public radio stations on issues involving programming, audience research, and fund raising.

Peter Dominowski, President of Market Trends Research, has been involved in public radio since 1975, in programming, fund raising, and management capacities. He was an award-winning programmer at WFMT, Chicago [NAB Marconi Award], and WMFE, Orlando [Ralph Award]. Dominowski was a founder of the Public Radio Program Director's Association [PRPD], and of the original "PD Bee" programming workshops. He served on the Board of Directors of the Radio Research Consortium for eleven years, and has been a panelist for both the PRPD Announcer Flo and Fundraising Flo Awards. Working with Doug Eichten and John Sutton, he was one of the creators of the Public Radio Underwriting Partnership [PRUP].

This is Dominowski's fifth publication on public radio programming and research. Previously writings were: *Audience Ratings, A Primer* [with Tom and Joanne Church], *The PRPD Program Director's Handbook* [with Craig Oliver and Marcia Alvar], *Extended Focus Group Research* [with Al Bartholet], and *The Listener Survey Toolkit* [with Al Bartholet]. He also contributed two segments of the AUDIENCE '98 report, *Underwriting Anxiety* [with John Sutton], and *The Old Folks At Home; Public Radio's Older Audience*.

Dominowski is also a partner with Scott Williams and Tim Emmons in Strategic Programming Partners, a programming consulting company working with public radio stations and New Media.

He received his M.A. in Telecommunications from Kent State University and his B.S. in Communications from Illinois State University.

## **Acknowledgements**

A project of this magnitude requires the cooperation of many people.

This research would not have been possible without the support of the twenty-two participating stations. They financially supported the study and generously shared this information in the hope that it will contribute to the collective knowledge about listeners and their reactions to news programming. Each station has my thanks, and all the stations that benefit from these results should also thank them.

Support from Public Radio International made possible in part national dissemination of the research results. PRI demonstrated their belief in the project from the start, and their understanding of the importance of both national and local reporting. Dale Spear of PRI was particularly instrumental in helping The Local News Project get off the ground.

Peter Iglinski and Public Radio News Directors [PRNDI] deserve a great deal of credit for encouraging The Local News Project research. Many professional organizations would not have had the fortitude to support research that could potentially have reflected poorly on their mission and members. PRINDI should be commended for its foresight, and for being such a helpful and objective partner in the research process.

Ken Mills of the Ken Mills Agency [formerly of PRI] provided many ideas and much encouragement that was crucial in the early stages of this project.

No acknowledgement can be complete without thanking John Perry and Dennis Miller, for whom I began working in public radio at WKSU, and Tom Church, without whose help I would have never had the opportunity to make research my life's work.

And finally to my business and life partner Patty Dominowski, who not only struggled valiantly with several unruly computer programs to create twenty-three different news research reports, but who also endured, without complaint, my near-obsession with this research for the past eighteen months. She has my deepest appreciation and thanks.

Peter Dominowski  
Palm Harbor, Florida  
September 1999

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# MARKET TRENDS RESEARCH

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***"If the story is interesting, I don't care if it's national or local, or international, or galactical!"***

## **THE LOCAL NEWS PROJECT**

The Local News Project is **the first national research study to concentrate on locally produced information programming, its interaction with network news programming, and its value to listeners.** It is also the largest station funded research study in public radio history. The generous support of **Public Radio International** helped to make possible national dissemination of the research information.

**The Local News Project research consisted of thirty-five focus groups in eighteen markets, and telephone surveys conducted in nineteen different markets.** The project was developed by Peter Dominowski of Market Trends Research with the cooperation of the Public Radio News Directors, Inc. [PRNDI] and the assistance of the participating stations.

### **Stations sponsoring both surveys and focus groups in The Local News Project:**

KJZZ, Phoenix, KPBS, San Diego, KPLU, Seattle/Tacoma, KQED, San Francisco, KUER, Salt Lake City, WCPN, Cleveland, WEMU, Ypsilanti, WKNO, Memphis, WKSU, Akron/Cleveland, WNYC, New York, WUAL, Tuscaloosa, WUSF, Tampa/St. Petersburg, and Wyoming Public Radio.

### **Stations sponsoring focus groups only:**

KCUR, Kansas City, WVPE, Elkhart, and Minnesota Public Radio.

### **Stations sponsoring surveys only:**

KWMU, St. Louis, WBHM, Birmingham, WDET, Detroit, WUOT, Knoxville, Maine Public Radio, and Wisconsin Public Radio.

The focus groups were conducted primarily in the summer and fall of 1998. The surveys were administered beginning in December 1998 and completed in March of 1999. The research agenda for each were designed to accommodate a core group of national questions presented identically in each market, and several local questions tailored specifically to each station.

## **THE RESEARCH OBJECTIVE**

**The overall goal of this research is to provide an evaluation of local news and information programming from a national and local station perspective, to determine how useful and valuable this programming is for listeners, and how it might provide a greater audience service.**

### About the Report

This report has four sections. Following this introduction, **Part Two** contains information from listeners in the focus groups and national survey questions. **Part Three** provides a summary and some recommendations based on the results of the national research. **Part Four** offers some ideas for future consideration and study.

All survey data used in the report are the cumulative results from each station participating in the national sample. Listener comments are verbatims taken from The Local News Project focus groups.

### Terms and Definitions

The term "local news" in this report represents all non-national information programming, regardless of whether the origination or subject is local, state, or regional.

The terms "national and international news," "national news," and "network news" represent information programming produced by NPR or PRI that is aired in or adjacent to morning or afternoon drivetimes. These include programs such as Morning Edition, The World, Marketplace, and All Things Considered.

Additionally, when the term “listeners” appears in this report, it represents the listeners who participated in the focus group or survey research. It is **not** intended to represent all listeners to public radio or an individual station.

## **THE NATIONAL SAMPLE**

In research, as in programming, it is crucial to identify and understand the target audience. **This research was designed to measure the opinions of current public radio news listeners.** It was **not** designed to be representative of the general population, of all current public radio listeners, or potential new listeners.

To be included in the focus groups or the survey, an individual had to listen to their local public radio station, and when listening, use news programming more than or equal to any other type of programming available on that station. In other words, **this research represents the opinions of news imperatives and dual imperatives only.**

Respondents in the focus groups were recruited from current member, former member, and prospect lists provided by each station. Survey respondents were recruited from current member, former member, and prospect lists provided by each station, and from random lists using education and five-digit zip codes as selection variables. **The national survey sample totaled 2,908** and represents a variety of age groups, listening histories, and giving status. This sample size puts the maximum standard error for survey data from the national sample is plus or minus less than 3%.

As a comparison, the typical nationwide public opinion poll generally has between 700 and 1,200 total respondents.

These are the characteristics of the national sample.

<b>NATIONAL SAMPLE COMPOSITION</b>	
<b>LISTS</b>	
Current member	<b>49%</b>
Former member	<b>26%</b>
Never member	<b>12%</b>
Random list	<b>13%</b>
<b>FORMAT PREFERENCE</b>	
News imperative	<b>51%</b>
Dual imperative	<b>49%</b>
<b>YEARS LISTENING</b>	
1 or less	<b>3%</b>
2-3 years	<b>9%</b>
4-5 years	<b>12%</b>
6-7 years	<b>7%</b>
8-9 years	<b>7%</b>
10 years or more	<b>62%</b>
Not sure	<b>1%</b>
<b>IDENTIFIED AS A CURRENT GIVER</b>	<b>73%</b>
<b>AGE</b>	
24 or less	<b>5%</b>
25-34	<b>8%</b>
35-44	<b>23%</b>
45-54	<b>28%</b>
55-64	<b>17%</b>
65-74	<b>12%</b>
75+	<b>6%</b>
<b>GENDER</b>	
Men	<b>45%</b>
Women	<b>55%</b>
<b>RACE</b>	
Caucasian	<b>92%</b>
African-American	<b>2%</b>
Asian-American	<b>1%</b>
Hispanic	<b>1%</b>
Native American	<b>&lt;1%</b>
Other/Refused	<b>4%</b>

*[Due to rounding, all categories may not add precisely to 100%]*

## The Data in Perspective

As the research results are examined and analyzed, it is important to view them in the proper perspective.

In discussing the preferences of their audiences, musicians have a saying, **“people know what they like and they like what they know.”** In other words, the audience’s familiarity with the music being played enhances their enjoyment of it. Most people are generally happiest hearing music they have heard before.

The same holds true for most core and heavy public radio listeners. They tend to be satisfied with most of the current programming heard on their station. **If they were not already pleased with the programming as it is, they would probably not be core or heavy listeners!**

This is a useful perspective to keep in mind when considering the results of this research. **The listeners included in the focus groups and survey listen to public radio news programming and most like it as it is now!**

Listeners are more adequately equipped to evaluate programming that is already familiar to them. They find speculating about what they might like to hear instead of a current program or responding to potential changes in a program a much more difficult task. **The status quo will be the point of reference for most listeners.**



## NEWS SOURCES OF PUBLIC RADIO LISTENERS

***"What public radio does well is to add depth to stories. I'm more interested in the national stories than the local ones but the depth would make any story interesting."***

In The Local News Project research, listeners were asked to specify the sources they used and preferred for national and local news and information.

### Public Radio

While **public radio is a primary source for international, national, state, and local information for many listeners, most also use other sources for news.**

For many listeners, public radio serves an additional function beyond the information it provides. They often seem to have an intellectual and emotional bond with the programming.

**Public radio news is appreciated both for the content it offers, and for what it does not have. Listeners love the intelligence and depth, but are hypersensitive to any reporting that is perceived as sensational or commercial.**

Listeners feel assaulted by many aspects of commercial media. They consider much of the programming and advertising an insult to their intelligence. Their love for public radio news is in part a reaction to the media world they see around them. Beyond even the programming, **the relative lack of commercialism, and the appeal to thought and intellect causes them think of public radio as a haven and an oasis.** Many news listeners feel that public radio is valuable and distinctive because it:

- Provides rational and factual information in a universe of media hyperbole
- Provides journalistic balance where many listeners perceive predominantly biased reporting in other media
- Provides depth when many other sources offer little more than the sound bite

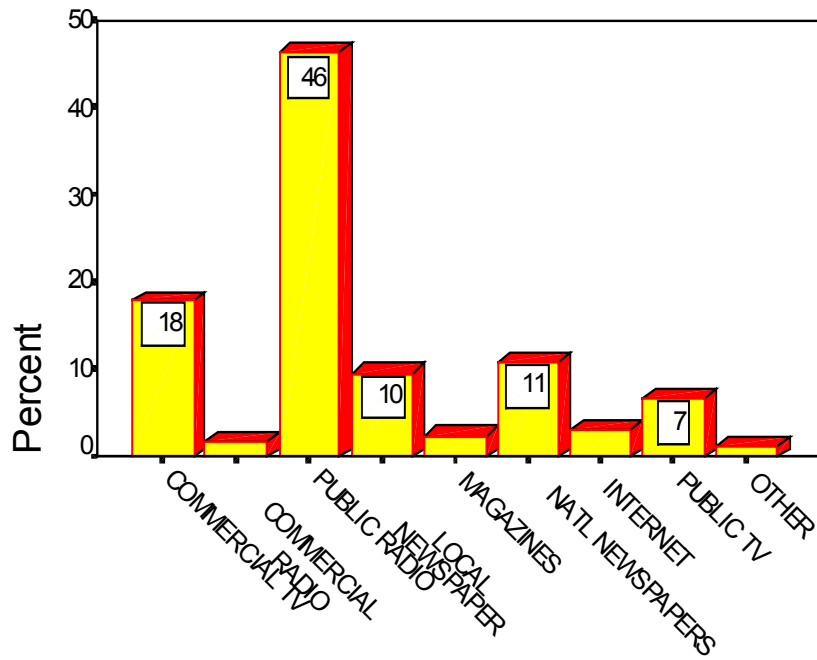
- Provides information that is significant where others concentrate primarily on murder and mayhem
- Makes sense when many other media provide mostly sensationalism
- Provides a perceived connection with the best of contemporary thought and culture, and combats a feeling of intellectual or social isolation expressed by many listeners
- Offers few pundits in a media world saturated with overbearing buffoonery and conjecture
- Explores the human side of the news without an over-emphasis on melodrama, or media stars and personalities
- Creates an emotional bond or connection with many listeners which is not often expressed about most other forms of media

Others have taken aspects of listener attitudes and portrayed public radio as a virtual community unfettered by geography. While this is not the exact description used by listeners in this study, their sentiments and feelings about public radio readily match this overall concept of a virtual community.

Listeners rely on public radio stations for national, international, and local news. **They value the in-depth reporting and what they call "human interest" stories.** By human interest, they mean hearing interesting people interviewed, or the humanization of a major news story or event through talking to one person, or several people, to discover how the event affects them or influences their life. This establishes **a personal connection to the news for the listener that no amount of speeches by Prime Ministers or statements by official spokespersons could ever accomplish.**

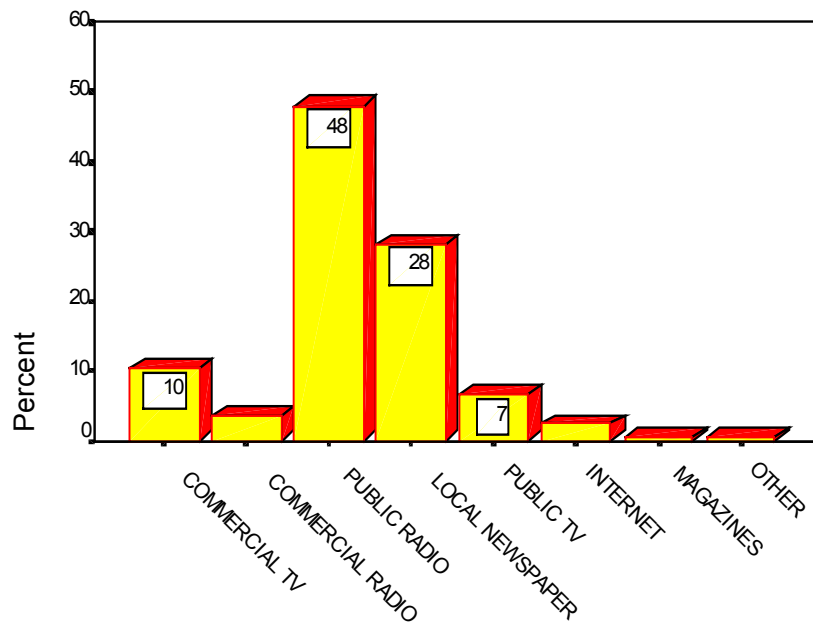
The responses from listeners generally highlighted the depth and breadth of public radio news, in contrast with most commercial news sources that they find limited. The survey results reinforce the strong dependence that listeners have on public radio for national and international news.

**What source do you use most for national and international news?**



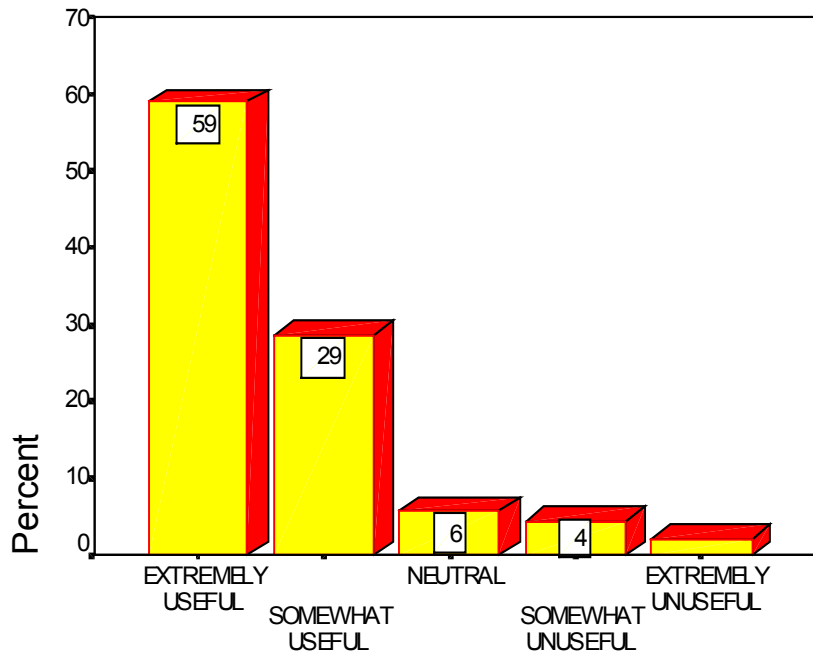
For national and international news, public radio is favored as a first choice by a wide margin [more than two-to-one] over all other media. How do they feel about state and local news?

***If it offered the kind of coverage you wanted,  
what one source would you prefer to use most for  
state and local news?***



Most listeners preferred public radio as their primary source of state and local news, **IF** it offered the kind of coverage they wanted. Newspapers were the only other medium seen as a viable option for local coverage.

**Rate the usefulness of Public Radio as a source for state and local news.**



A sizable 88% of listeners **already** feel that public radio is a useful source for state and local information. Nearly two in three give the state and local news on public radio the highest rating of “extremely useful.”

Many listeners were effusive in their praise for national and local news programming on public radio.

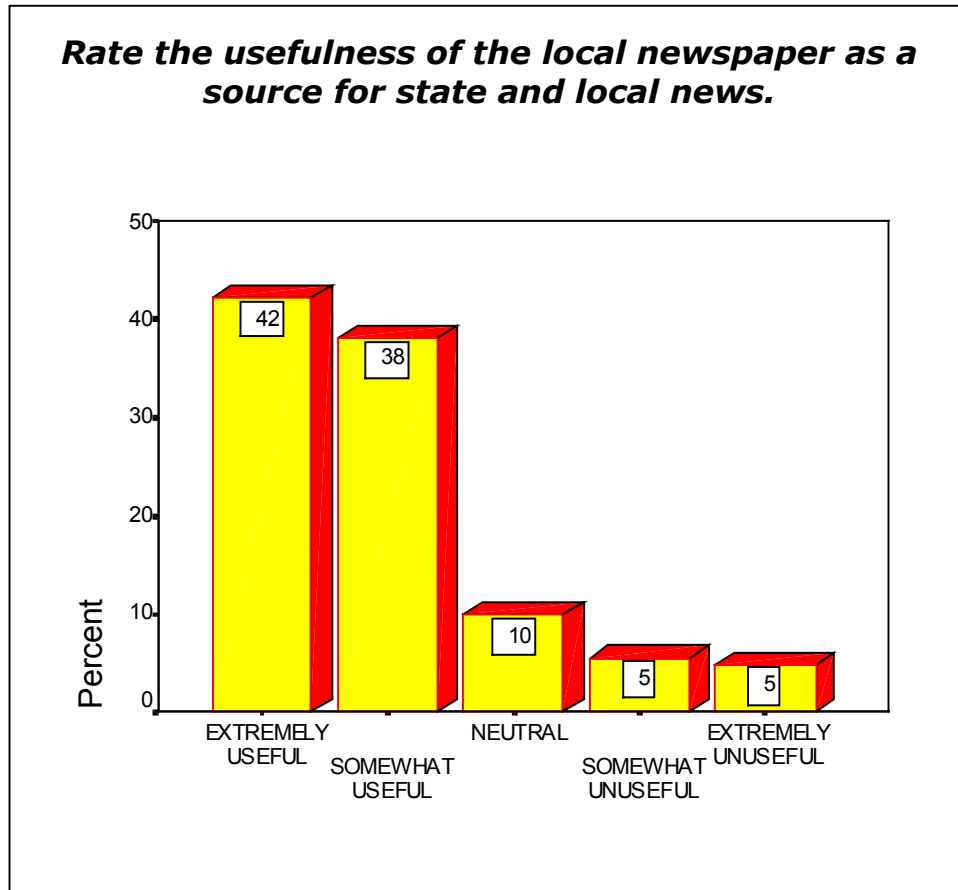
- “Quality of local public radio news compared to what? It’s still miles beyond commercial broadcasting on TV and radio.”
- “I get very drawn into any story I hear. That’s a measure for me, how much I get into the stories, how interesting they make it.”

## Newspapers

Local newspapers, along with public radio, are the overwhelming choice among listeners as a source for state and local information.

Frequently, listeners reported reading **national newspapers** such as the New York Times, Wall Street Journal, and even USA Today. Some listeners read these publications online as well. Their primary purpose is for national and international news. In most cases, they play a supplementary or secondary role in a listener's information universe.

Local newspapers received the highest ratings for state and local news coverage, other than public radio, from surveyed listeners.



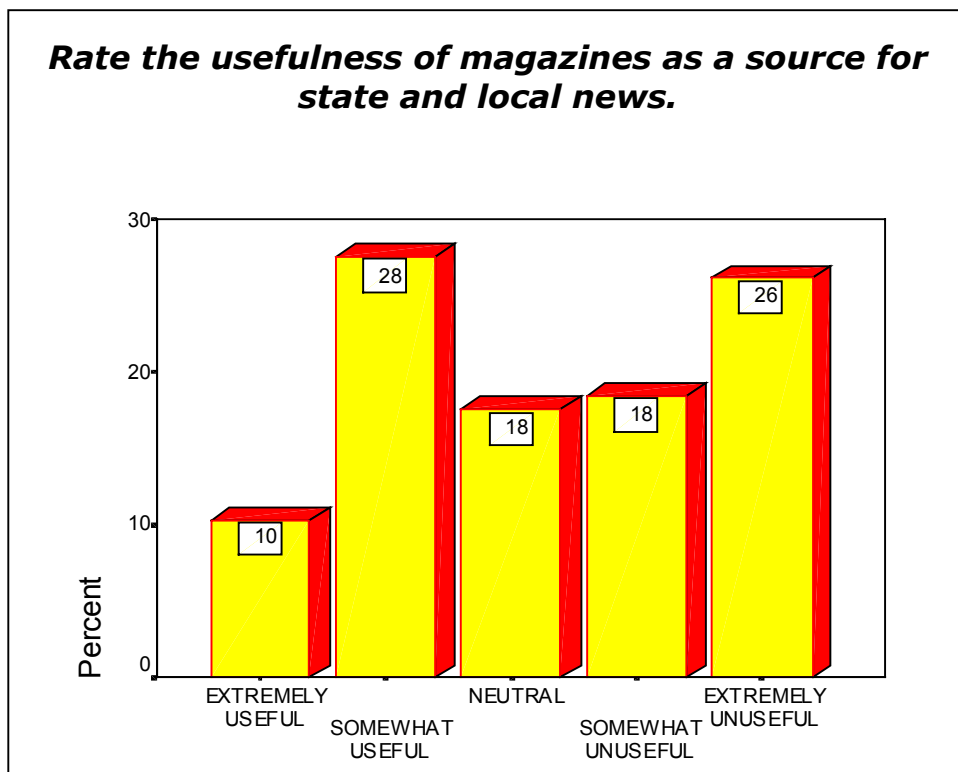
Over three of four listeners found newspapers to be useful sources of local news, and well over a third half felt that they are extremely useful.

## Magazines

Some listeners read the prominent national weekly news magazines, Time, Newsweek, and U.S. News and World Report. Magazine readers like the fact that they provide in-depth stories with a different perspective. They provide a different, in-depth perspective on an issue or event, and the convenience of being able to skip through the various articles and choose to read only those of interest.

But some feel that they are becoming more like "People" Magazine and others simply cannot find the time to read them. Specialized information magazines, such as Scientific American, Harper's, The New Yorker, and The Atlantic were also mentioned frequently.

For state and local news, magazines had relatively little use for listeners.



## Public and Commercial Television

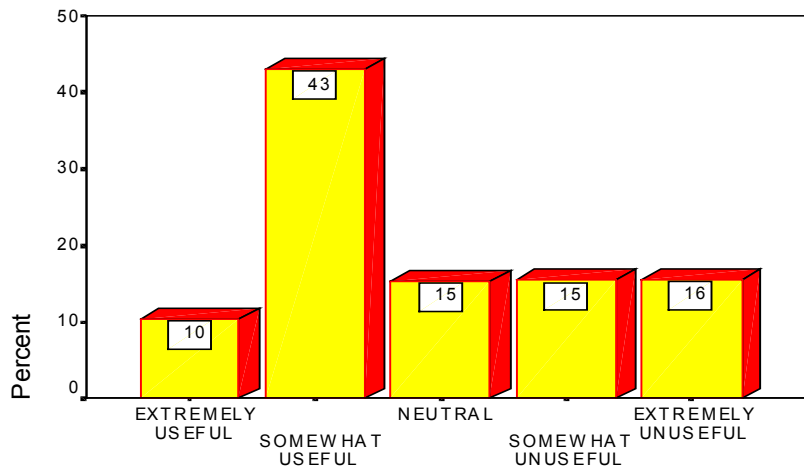
Listeners mentioned national television network news and network news programs much more often than local television news. Television sources cited as important information outlets most frequently were CNN, and the Jim Lehrer Newshour on PBS. But **a sector of the public radio news audience is averse to television.** It was common for several persons in a focus group to either not own a television set, or to claim to view very little TV. Local commercial television news (especially local news) was generally scorned, as too sensational, one-dimensional, and short on substance.

Listeners saved some of their most vitriolic comments for commercial television news coverage.

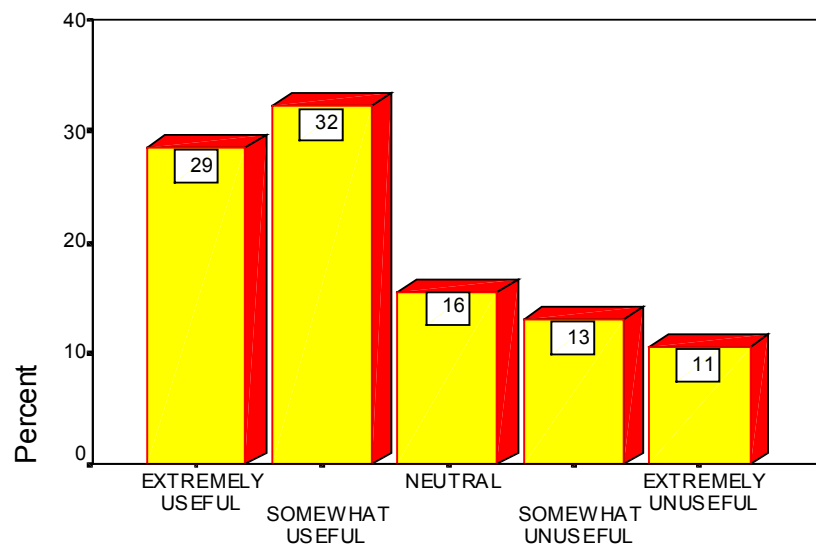
- "It's like a circus, it's amazing the things they'll do to try to get people to watch."
- "They spend so much time leading up to a story, that the story is shorter than the lead-in."
- "They waste so much airtime on stuff that has zero impact on anybody's life and that nobody needs to know about."
- "The local news, no matter what channel you watch, is worthless."
- "There's very little news in a half-hour show."
- [Local TV news is described as] "a lot of 'news' that's not news."

For local news, the usefulness of commercial television cannot compare with public radio or newspapers. Public television fares somewhat better

**Rate the usefulness of commercial TV as a source for state and local news.**



**Rate the usefulness of public TV as a source for state and local news.**

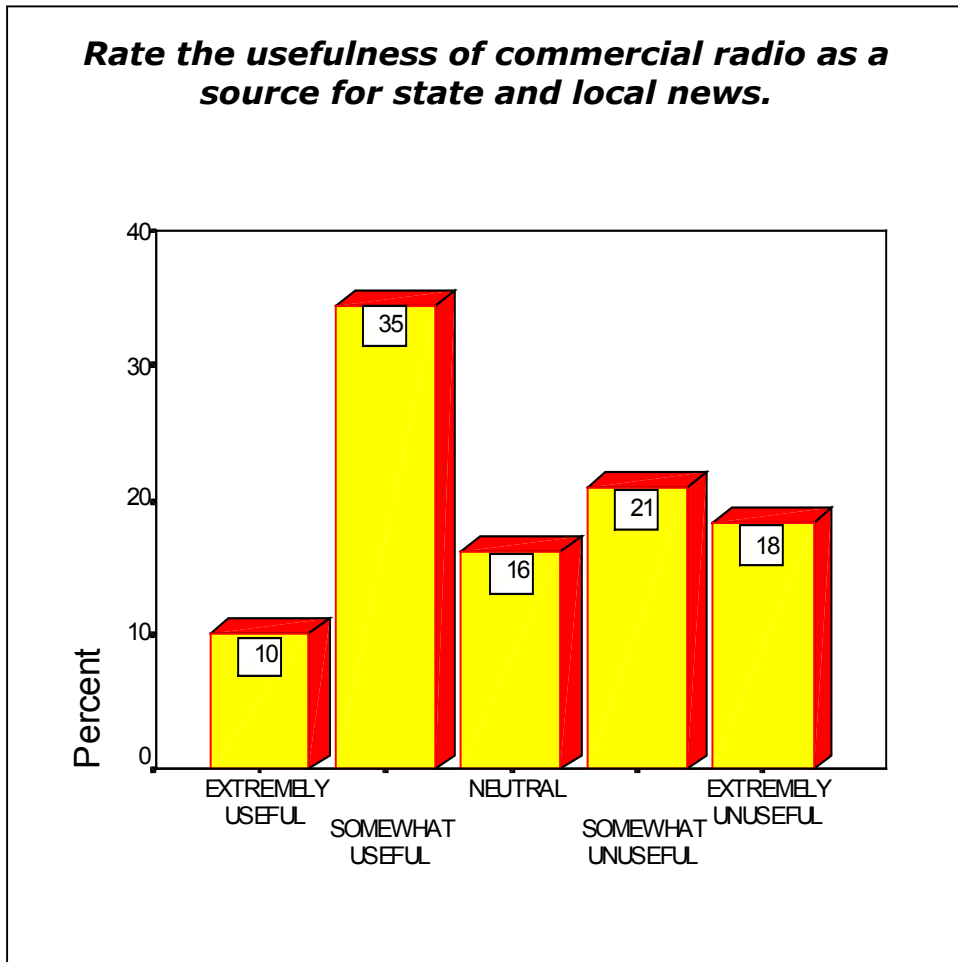


Only 10% of listeners rated local commercial TV as very useful for state and local news!

Public television fared somewhat better with nearly two-thirds of listeners feeling it was useful as a source of state and local news.

## Commercial Radio

Overall, **listeners did not rely on commercial radio as a primary source of news reported in the research.** In most markets commercial radio news was simply not a major factor. Some use commercial newscasts, but for most the usage was secondary or tertiary.

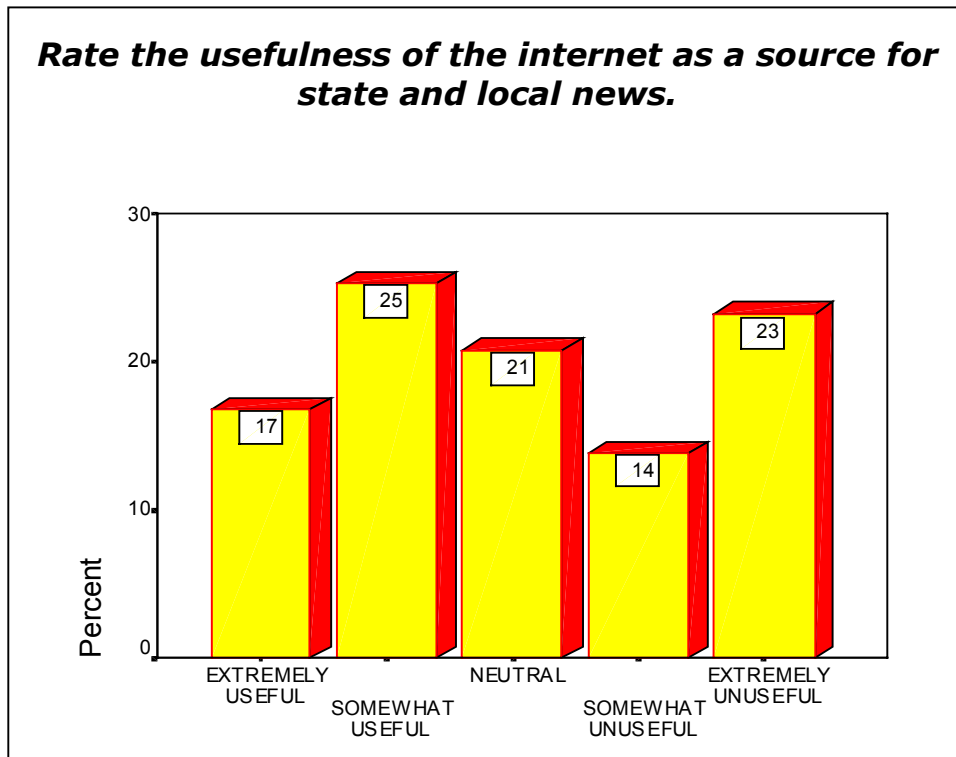


In the survey, nearly a third one-half found commercial radio somewhat useful source of state and local news, but only 10% felt it was extremely useful.

## The Internet

**Some public radio listeners use the Internet for news, but this does not appear to have grown to the point that influences occasions or duration of listening.** Most listeners appear to be using the Internet more as a substitute for newspapers and magazines, rather than radio or television. Advances in technology and increased access to the Internet may dramatically change patterns of usage in the future. But **at least for the moment, the Internet does not appear to be a significant threat to the listening loyalty of public radio's news audience.**

The Internet is not the main news source for most listeners, only 3% indicated in the survey that it was their primary source for national and international news.



At this stage, less than half of all listeners felt the Internet to be useful as a source for state and local news.

Perhaps the most significant result of this question is that about one in four listeners could not respond to this question, suggesting that they are not connected to or are unfamiliar with the information content available on the Internet.

## **News Sources Conclusion**

For most listeners, the style of reporting and the amount of local and state news currently available from other sources leaves something to be desired. With the exception of newspapers, existing sources do not generally provide the type and depth of reporting most public radio listeners seek. The Internet has potential to be a medium for state and local news, but is currently used more for business, national, and international information. Public radio and local newspapers are clearly the most useful sources of state and local news.

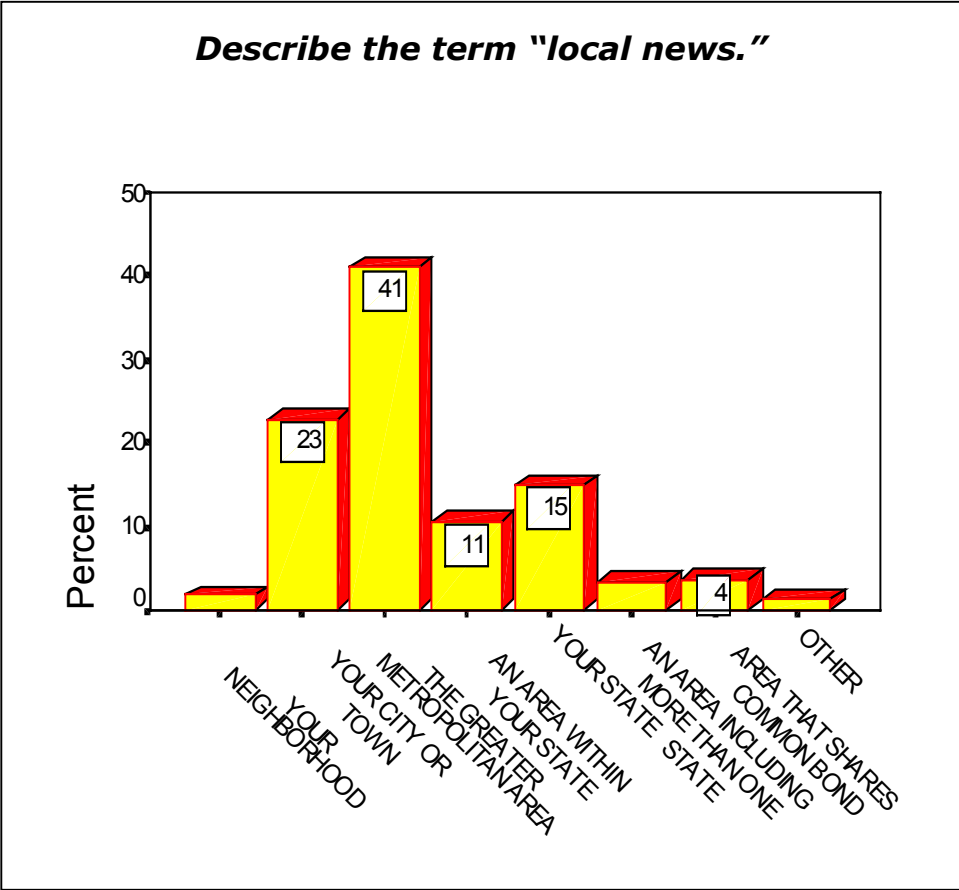
**Given the relatively low levels of satisfaction with most other sources providing state and local news coverage, many public stations have a real opportunity to provide a valuable service to listeners through in-depth state, regional, and local news reporting.**

## **DEFINING LOCAL NEWS**

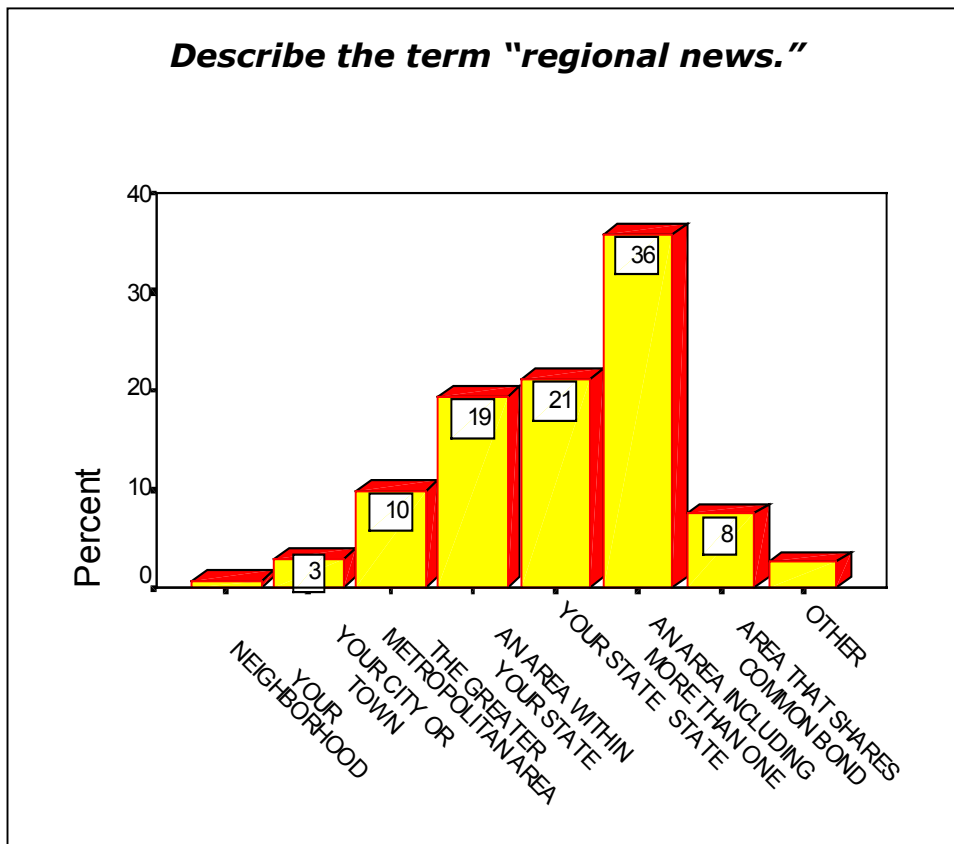
***"That's local to me, something that impacts me and something that I can have an impact on."***

What exactly is local news? Each station operates on its own definition. But how do listeners define local news? Listener definitions of local news are influenced by a combination of geography, experiences, expectations, and the information they feel is most meaningful and relevant to their lives.

The programming they are accustomed to also influences perceptions about local news. Programming that is already featured prominently in a station's schedule is more likely to be accepted by heavy and core news listeners.



Listeners in the survey provided their definitions of local and regional news. **The most common definition [41%] for local news was the greater metropolitan area.** Another 26% defined local news either as an area within the state or as the entire state, while 24% felt that local news was best defined as their neighborhood, city, or town.



**The most common definition of regional news [36%] was an area including more than one entire state.** State news was the most common definition of 21%. Only 13% of listeners defined regional news as the greater metropolitan area or smaller.

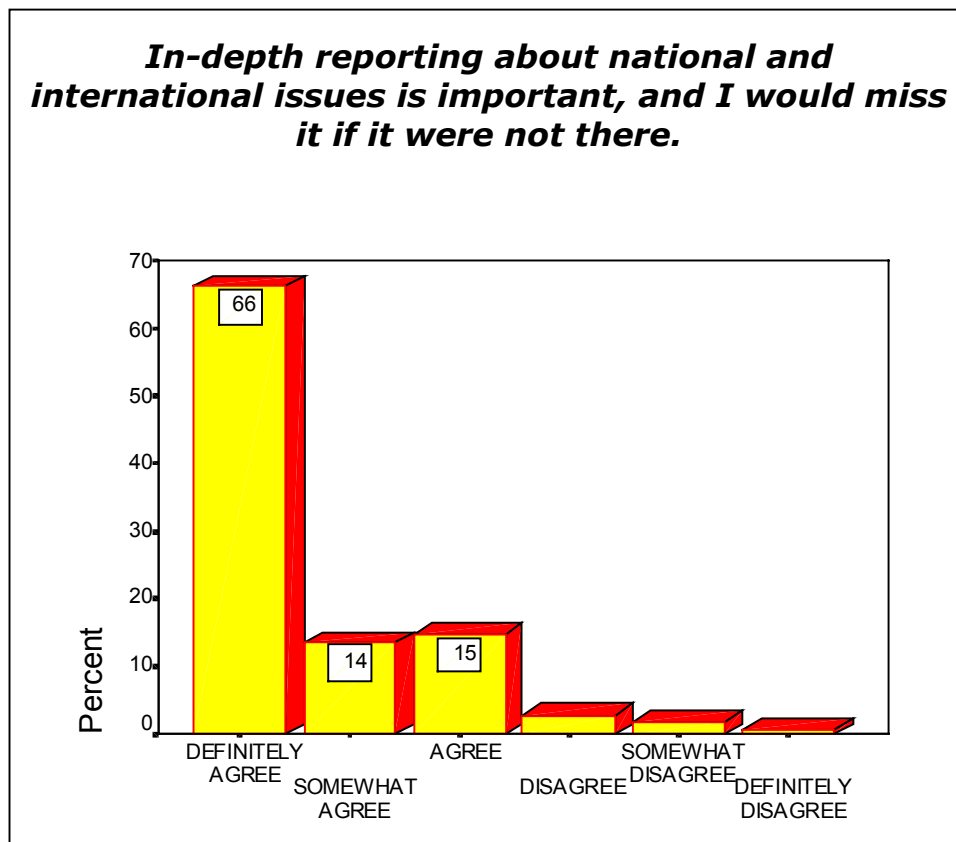
While public radio listeners are concerned about events in their immediate community, their interests are not bound to their own neighborhood or town. One third consider local news to include at least part of, or their entire state.

# THE IMPORTANCE, PERCEPTIONS, AND QUALITY OF NEWS ON PUBLIC RADIO

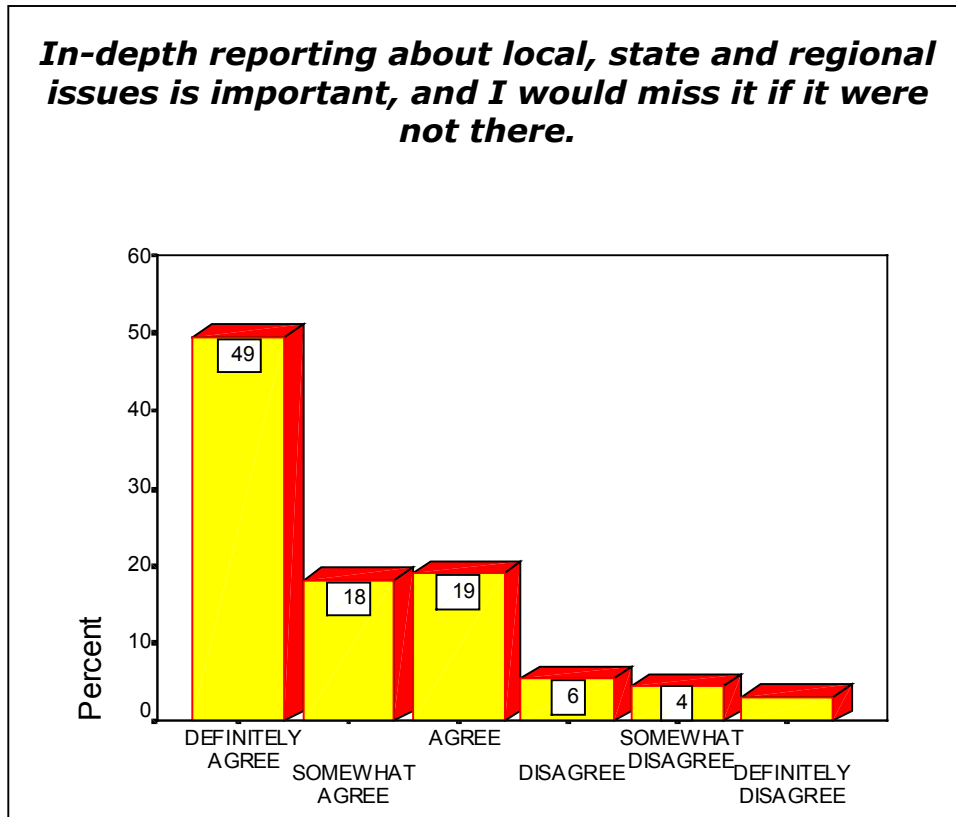
***"I get very drawn into any story I hear. That's a measure for me, how much I get into the stories, how interesting they make it."***

Every station presents some local information. Do listeners notice the local news being presented? Are they aware of the in-depth reporting most public radio stations offer on local, regional, and state issues? Responses from the focus groups and the survey provide information about listener perceptions of locally originated news reporting, and how listeners feel it integrates with national programming.

We know that personal importance is a key concept in listener loyalty and individual giving. How important is national and international news to public radio listeners, and how does this compare to their perceptions of the importance of state and local news?



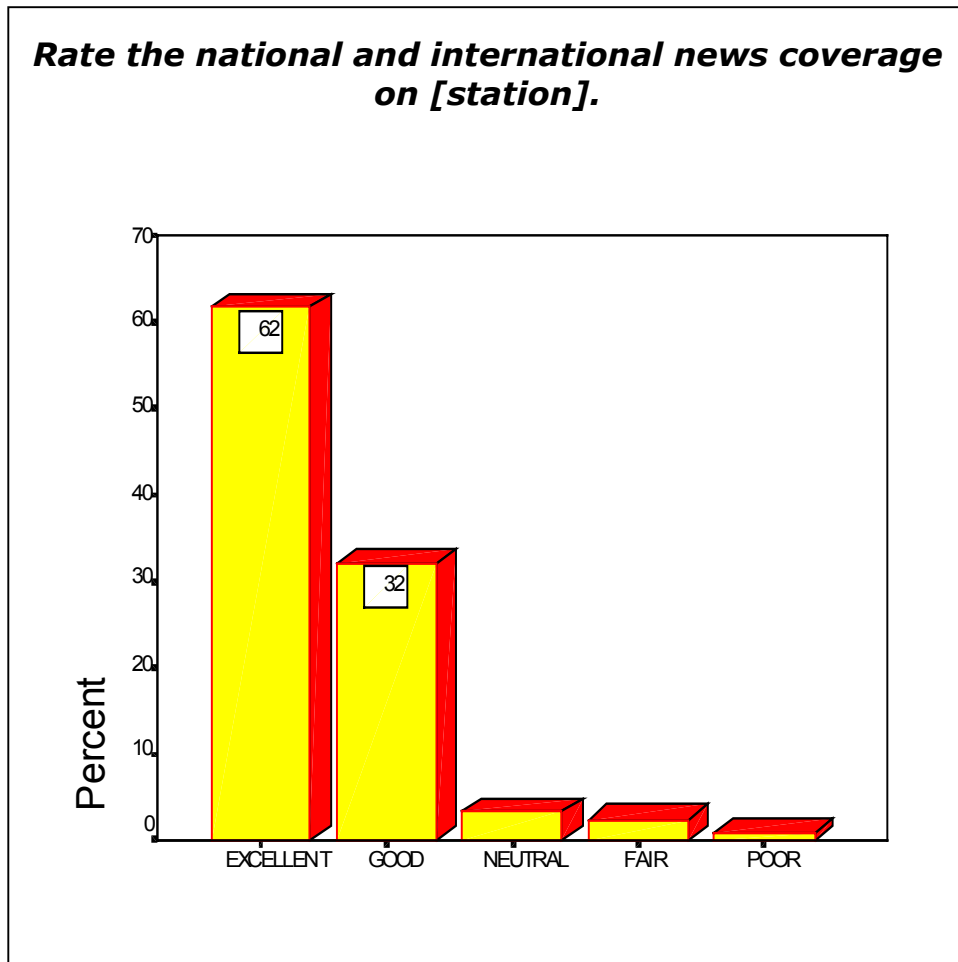
Not surprisingly, in-depth reporting about national and international news is vitally important to most listeners. Overall, 95% agree with this importance, and 66% feel it is very important. This is one of the highest results in the research, and is a formidable standard to match. How does the importance of state and local news reporting measure up?



In-depth reporting about state and local news is nearly as important to news listeners as national and international reporting. Overall, 86% agree with its importance. This differs only slightly from the importance of national news. But **the main difference is in the percentage of listeners who feel state and local news is very important [49%] versus the same totals for national news [66%]**. This 17% difference encapsulates listener perceptions.

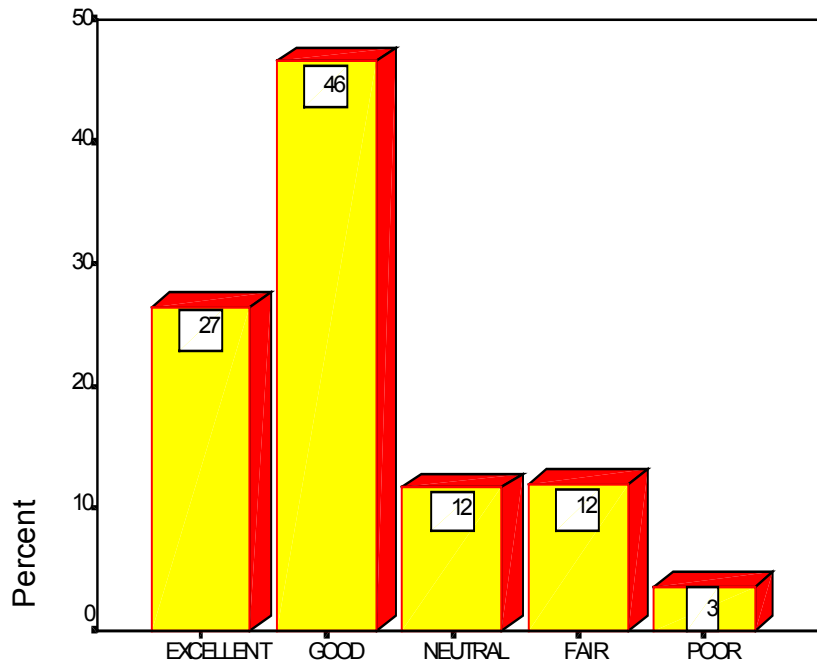
**It might simply be said that listeners like state and local news, but love the national and international news on public radio.**

To more closely examine the perceived quality of public radio news, listeners were asked to evaluate the overall local and national news product, and both the newscasts and in-depth local news reporting on the station.



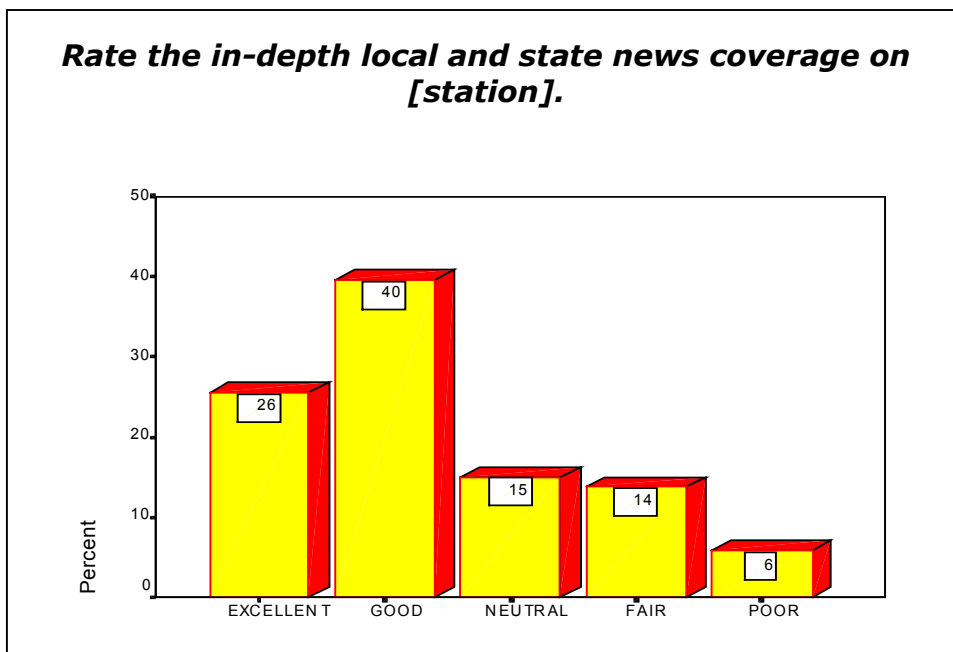
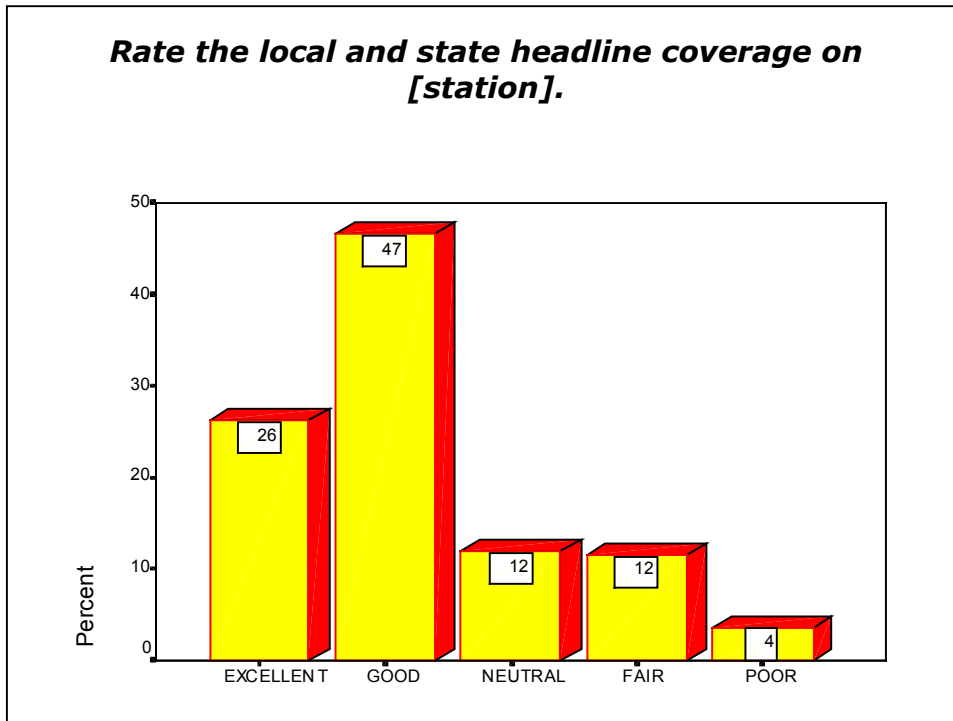
These questions ask listeners to directly evaluate the quality of national and local news. As expected, national and international news coverage on is highly rated, with 62% of listeners considering it to be "excellent," and 94% rating it either "excellent" or "good." The significant result is the comparison between the ratings for national and local news.

**Rate the local and state news coverage on [station].**



The difference in the overall ratings is significant. Less than half as many listeners [27%] rate state and local news as "excellent," as they do national news. A very respectable 73% rated local reporting as either "excellent" or "good," but this falls short of the 94% who rated national news the same way.

The survey also measured perceptions about locally produced newscasts and in-depth reports on stations.



Both local headlines and in-depth reports received generally good but not excellent ratings. But it may come as a surprise that local newscasts were rated slightly higher than in-depth reporting. This anomaly is explained by listener perceptions and recall.

In focus groups, listeners consistently underestimated the amount of in-depth news local coverage provided by stations. **There is a gap between the amount of local reporting stations produce, and listener awareness of it.** This is especially true for in-depth local reports heard within network programs. Although they are aware of their existence, many listeners could not identify a specific in-depth local report that they have heard in the past month. At many stations, these in-depth stories are not heard at specific times. Newscasts are easier for listeners to remember, since they are generally broadcast at the same time every day.

**In a word, national and international reporting is generally considered "excellent," while local reporting is considered "good."**

Most stations have suspected that there was a gap between listener perceptions of network and local news importance and quality. Now, for the first time, these data indicate the size of that gap.

## How Do Listeners Know When the News is Local

During a program like Morning Edition or All Things Considered, most listeners become aware of the shift to local origination when stations actually tell them that they are providing a report. Some recognize the voice of a local announcer, host, or newscaster. A few said that they become aware of the transition simply because of the time or a regular change in the format. Others say the transition is so seamless that they do not always know when programming shifts from national to local.

Listeners vary greatly in their awareness and perception of local news inserts. A handful can recite the precise times that local and national segments transition. But although the majority knows that network programs also have local content, they do not always remember exactly when this occurs. They do not consciously carry the Morning Edition clock with them as they listen.

- "If I'm not out of the shower and shaving by the time that Carl Kasell finishes the news I know I'm running late!"
- "I guess I don't pay attention to who is doing it."
- "I have no clue when it comes on, it just happens!"
- "It just runs all together."

- “I think some of the local things fit in so well and organically that you can’t tell.”

- 

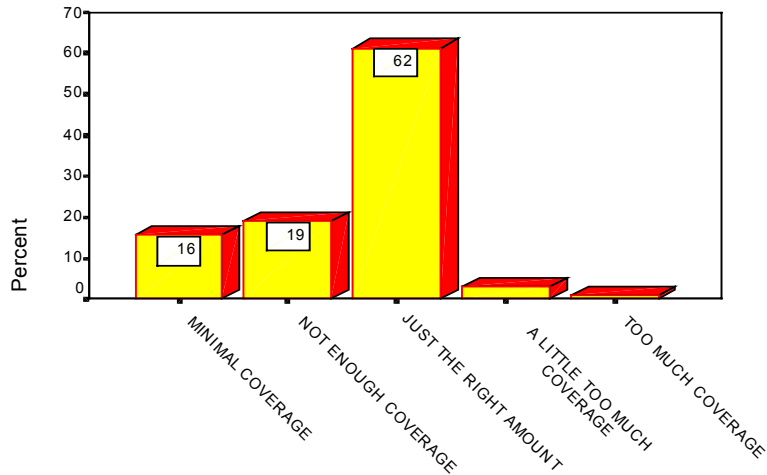
Most listeners do not object to local inserts, and many perceive that the network programs were designed to allow a certain amount of local input. From the focus groups is a sampling of listener comments about transitions between national and local news.

- “It fits real well ‘cause mostly I wouldn’t know [where the programming originated] unless they told me.”
- “They take an ‘intermission’ from Morning Edition.”
- “It’s interspersed [with the network].”
- “The stories interweave pretty well, there’s kind of a cadence to the stories and the way they interweave that you come to expect.”
- “I think it’s pretty seamless, ‘cause I’m not that aware of when it is and when it isn’t...[local]”
- “I’m just interested in getting the news while I get dressed and I’m not interested in how they do it.”
- “One of the reasons we all listen to NPR is the random things that come on the air and one of those random things is the local news.”
- “NPR leaves spaces for the local station.”
- “They fit in well, the fact that we don’t really know when they’re on means they must be good. They’re just as good. You don’t realize until later that it’s local.”
- “They have little pockets [of news] in the morning.”

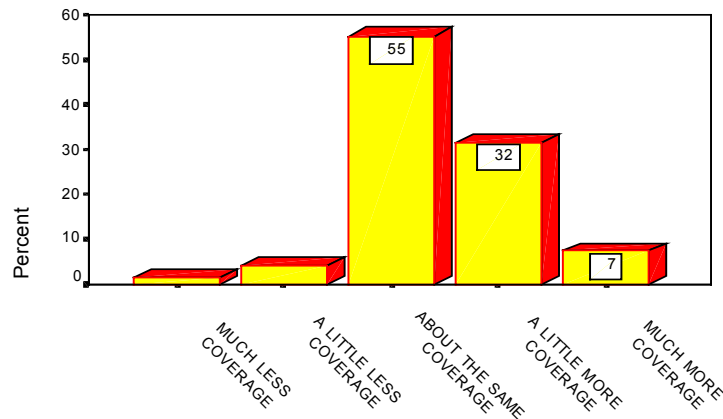
## Local and National Reporting in Network News Programming

Although their perceptions are often different from reality, listeners are generally aware that local stations produce some of the news heard during Morning Edition and All Things Considered. How do they perceive the mix of local and network reporting in these programs? How much locally originated news do listeners really want? What is the right amount? Since this is a crucial question, listeners were asked about it several times in the survey.

***Describe the amount of local, state, and regional news you hear currently during Morning Edition and All Things Considered.***



***Describe the amount of local, state, and regional news you would like to hear during Morning Edition and All Things Considered.***

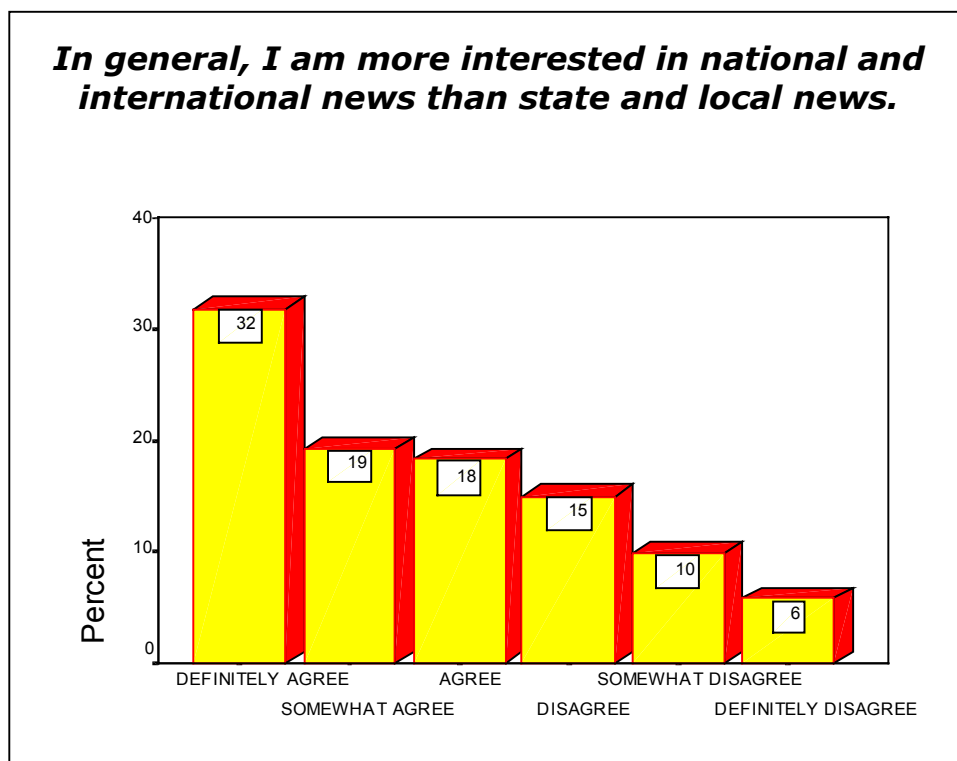


Satisfaction with the current amount of local news in Morning Edition and All Things Considered was expected. The interesting data is for those who might desire less or more local news at these times. Very few [less than 5%] feel that the network news programs contain too much state and local news, or would choose to lessen the current amount.

**35% of listeners indicated that the current amount of local news in Morning Edition and All Things Considered is either minimal or not enough, and 39% would include more state and local news during these programs.**

While the 55% who would maintain the current balance of national and local news is not a call for dramatic changes, there is clear support for the local news currently with these programs and some incentive for future expansion of state and local news.

Indicative of the balance that must be struck between national and local news is the realization that Morning Edition and All Things Considered cater to the primary interests of most listeners, which is in-depth national and international reporting.



More than two of three listeners agree that they are generally more interested in national and international news.

The bottom line is that most news listeners are satisfied with the current balance of national and local news, but would accept moderate additions to the amount of local news reporting during Morning Edition and All Things Considered, IF the reporting was interesting and consistent with public radio quality standards. But where the report originates is not the listener's primary concern.

- "Local is just something that may have an effect in my life."
- "Whatever affects me directly [is local news]."

**It makes little difference if a report is produced in their city or state or halfway around the world. Each report must be produced in a style that maintains their interest, and the subject must be interesting to them, or made interesting by the content and presentation of the piece. If a report meets these criteria, they will continue listening.**

## Newscasts

What do listeners think about local newscasts, especially during Morning Edition or All Things Considered? Although public radio listeners value in-depth reporting, few listeners would replace hourly local newscasts to accommodate an additional produced piece. The local news summary remains a valued service for most listeners.

A newscast, for the purposes of this research, is a four to five minute report of local, state and regional news. A brief fifteen-to-thirty second recap of local and state headlines is not considered to be a newscast in this study.

How often should local newscasts occur during drivetime? 64% of listeners favored local newscasts every hour. **Local newscasts every half-hour were favored by only 25% of listeners.**

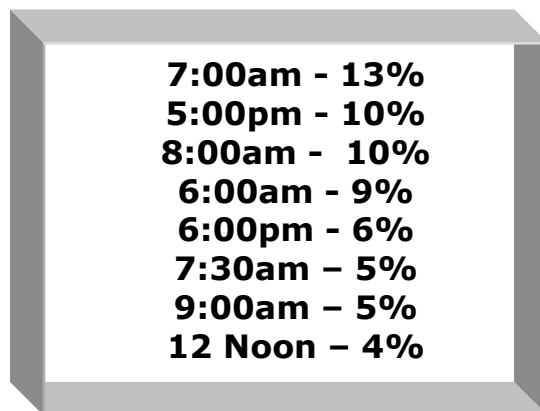
**A full local newscast once per hour is the preferred choice of most listeners.**

## PRODUCING A LOCAL NEWS PROGRAM

Many stations have produced a discrete local news program at one time or another in their history, with generally disappointing results. **Yet, a large majority [82%] of listeners said they would listen to a half-hour local news program if it were on at a convenient listening time.** 44% were very likely to listen to this kind of program, and only 19% indicated that they would not be likely to listen to a discrete local news program.

When would they listen to a local news program? A weekday broadcast time was a nearly unanimous [92%] choice. If it were to be a weekly program, Monday would be the preferred broadcast day.

What were the most popular times for a local news program to air? The top times selected by listeners were:



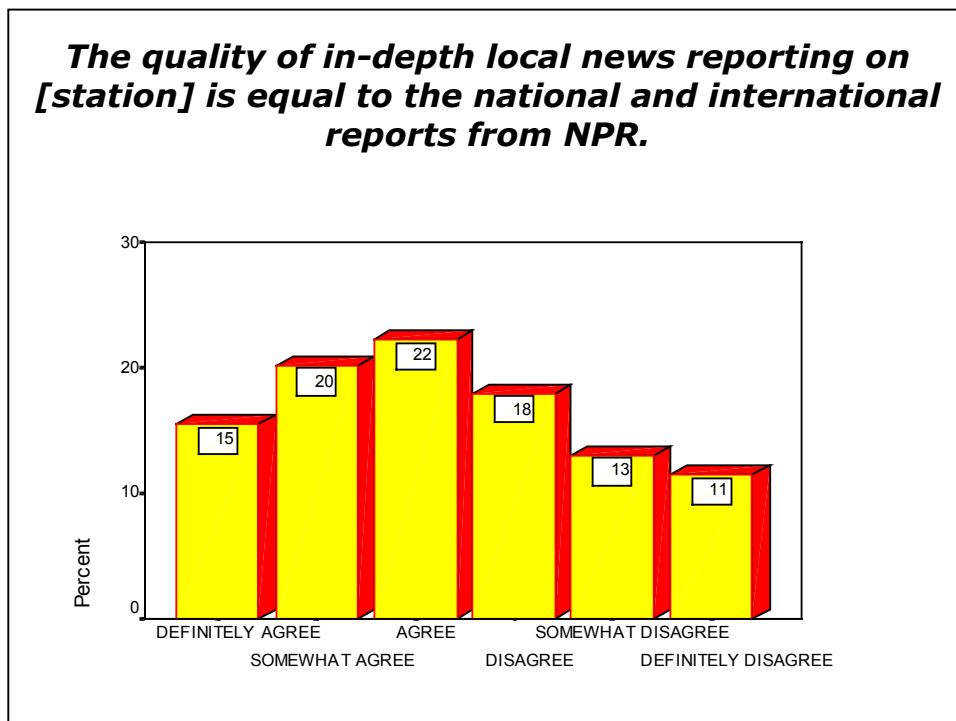
Despite this result, **it is not recommended that any station begin production of a discrete local news program.** These data are primarily a strong show of support for local news, as nearly three of four of listeners agreed that they would consider listening to a local news program in their prime listening time [between 6 - 9 am and 4 - 6 pm weekdays]. If they were simply paying lip service to local news reporting, most would not have suggested that it be scheduled during the times they are most likely to be listening to news on public radio.

But the data are also an indication that most public radio news listeners would prefer to have it all – uninterrupted network news programming **and** a complete, in-depth local news report. Due to formatic constraints and limited resources, most public stations cannot adequately provide all the in-depth coverage that avid news listeners want. Many stations have difficulty producing one network-quality report a day, let alone an entire program. **For most stations, the best strategy will be to continue providing local information in and around prime-time network programming.**

## THE QUALITY and PLACEMENT of LOCAL NEWS

*"They intersperse local news stories during Morning Edition and All Things Considered."*

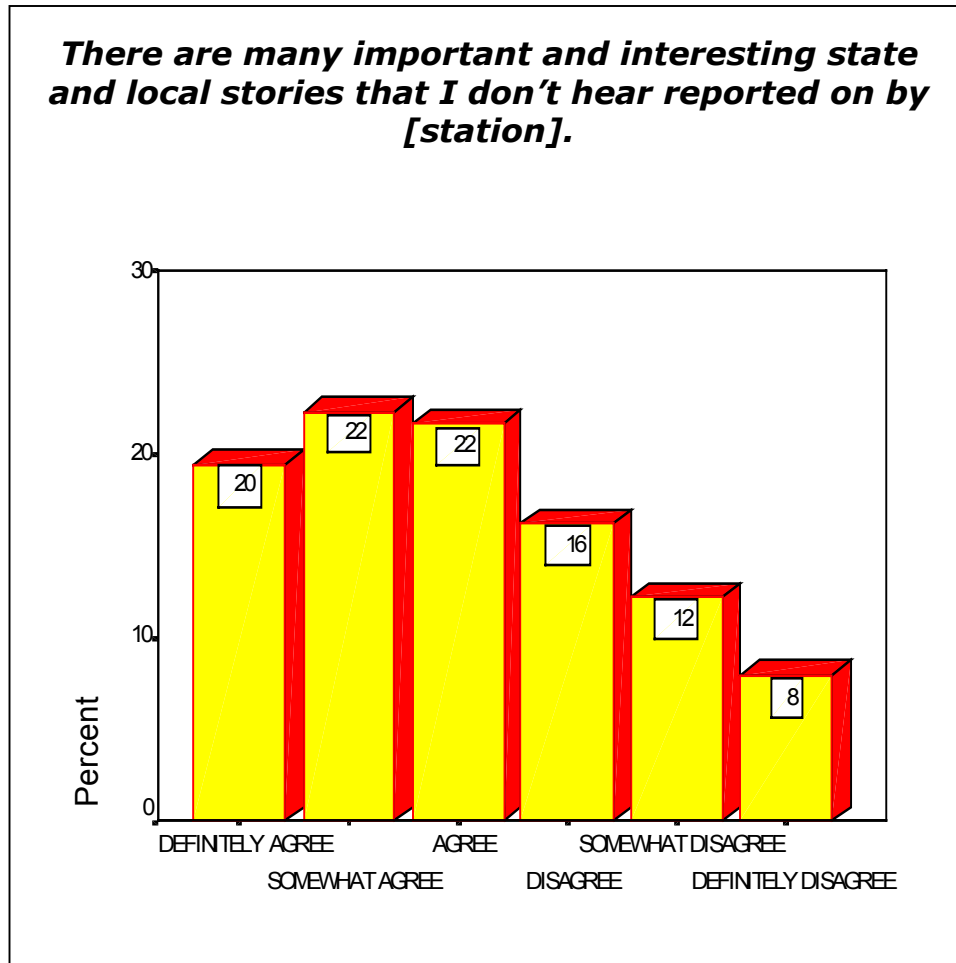
Because of its importance, listeners were asked about the quality of local news several times during the survey. Overall, local news is considered to be very good while national news is rated as excellent. How does local reporting fare when compared directly with NPR news?



Over half of surveyed listeners agree that the quality of local and national reporting is comparable, while 42% disagree. Most responses are near the middle of the scale, with relatively few listeners strongly agreeing or disagreeing with the statement.

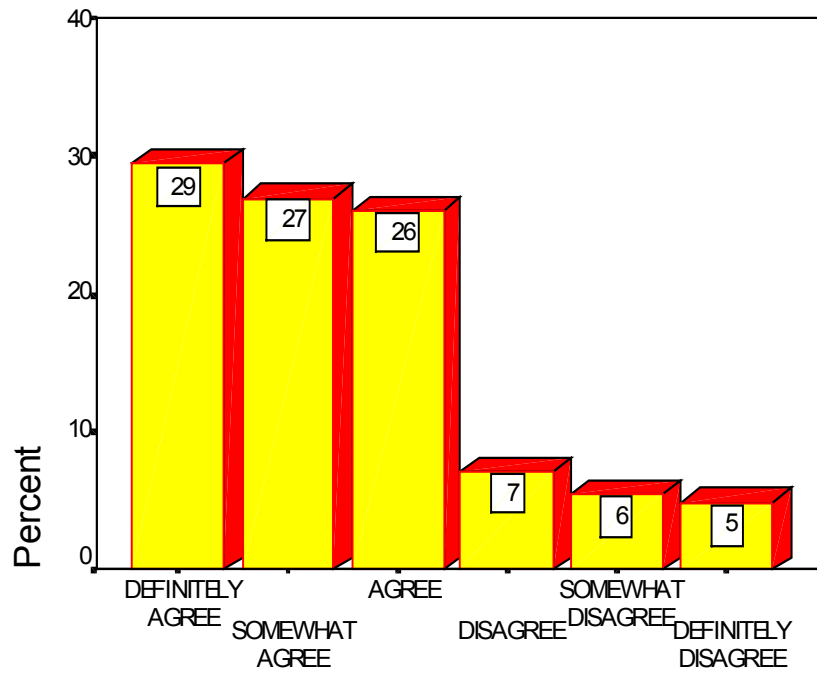
## How Much Local News, Where & When?

The data have shown that most listeners approve of the broad spectrum of national, international, state, and local news they receive on public radio. But how much local news do they want, and when do they want it?



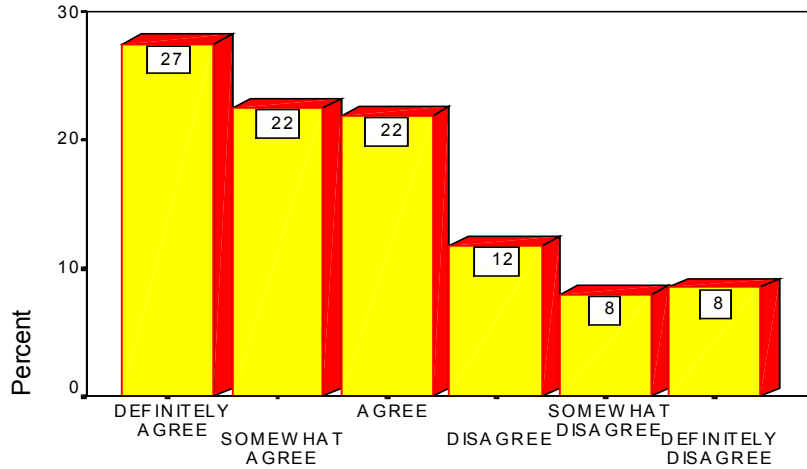
The fact that there is some pent-up desire for local reporting is indicated by the 64% who agree that there are important state and local news stories they do not hear on their local public station.

***If [station] expands its in-depth local, state, and regional reporting, these reports should be included within Morning Edition or All Things Considered.***

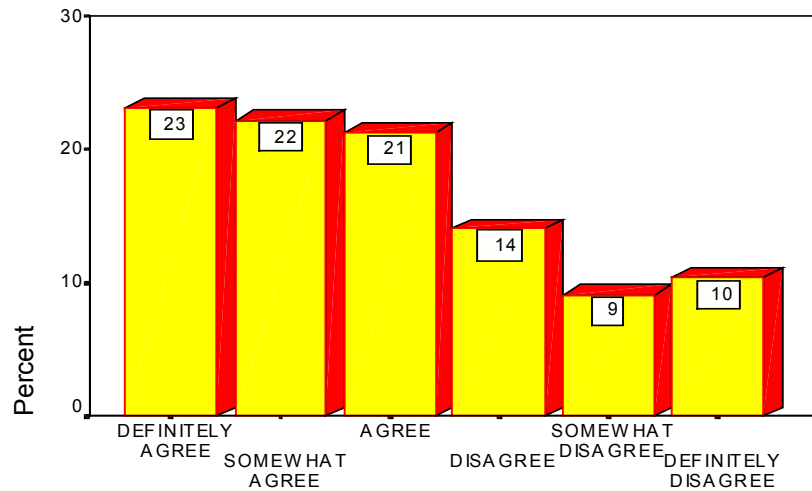


This is more evidence that news listeners want to hear local news during the times they are most likely to be tuned into public radio. More than three-in-four agree that any additional state and local reporting should be included in Morning Edition and All Things Considered.

***I would like at least ten minutes of in-depth state and local reporting during each hour of Morning Edition.***

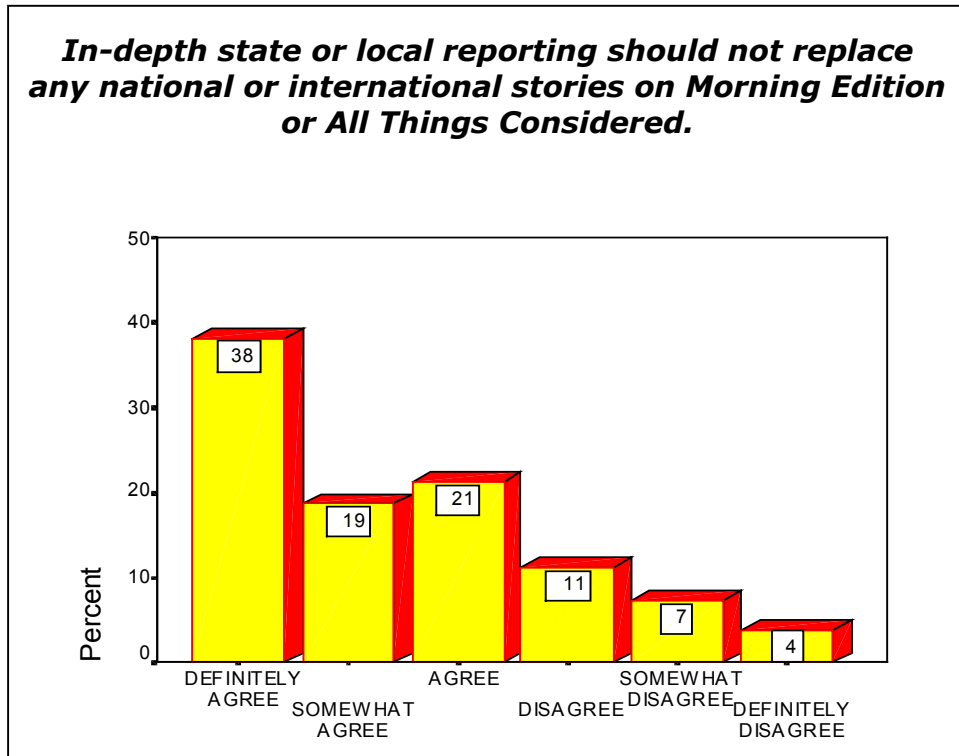


***I would like at least ten minutes of in-depth state and local reporting during each hour of All Things Considered.***



There is a slight difference between the amount of local news listeners want in the morning or afternoon, as 71% agree that they would like at least ten minutes of in-depth state and local reporting during each hour of Morning Edition, and 66% desire the same during All Things Considered.

As positively as most listeners feel about state and local news programming, stations must exercise caution when integrating news into network programming.



Over three-quarters of listeners agree that local news should not usurp national news in network programs. There were some listeners who felt that the quality of local news could not consistently measure up to the network product.

- “We’ve been spoiled by such good national reporting, I’d hate to see local news done in a ‘second class’ way.”
- “And if it’s a zero sum game, I would not like them to trim what they’re doing [nationally] in order to do more local stuff.”
- “I’d be willing to put the extra [local news] time into [ME/ATC] if they were well produced stories, but I’m nervous about it.”
- “Let NPR have that 5 minutes, instead of turning out something bland and kind of halfway. Just say ‘we can’t do this, so we’re not going to screw around’.”
- “There is something to be said for interspersing local news and for having a separate local program. But it can’t be fill or fluff, it’s got to be good. Don’t just fill up ten minutes just because you’ve got ten minutes to fill.”

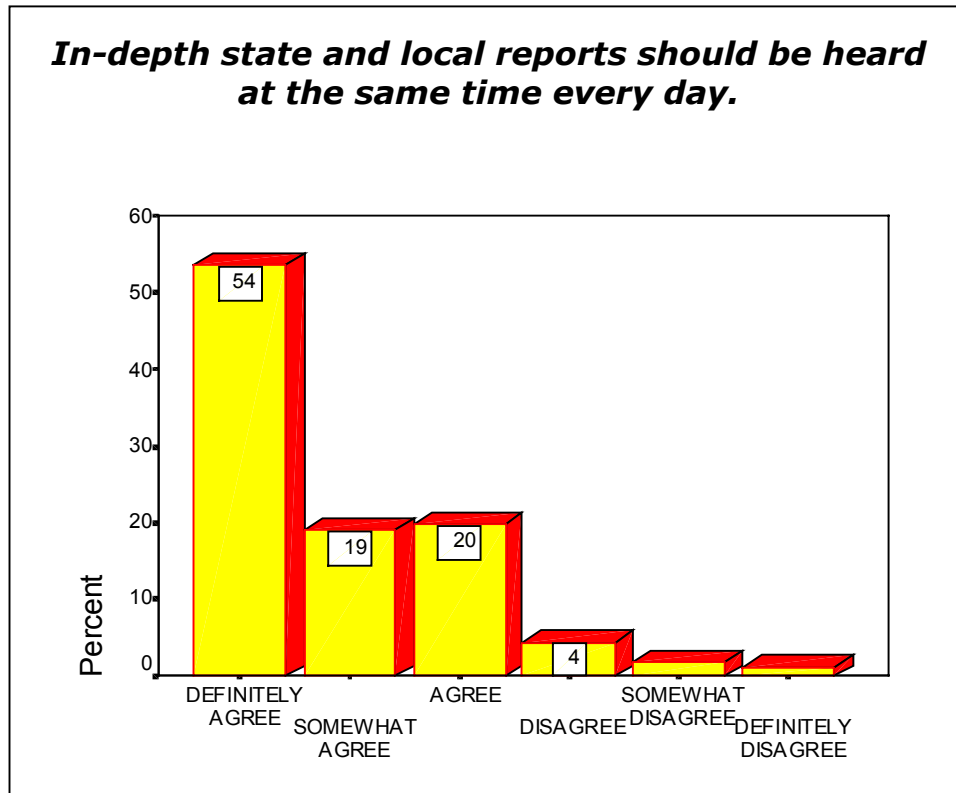
This information may seem to be at odds with the strong support for hearing local news reports in prime listening times during and adjacent to Morning Edition and All Things Considered. The result is not as contradictory as it may appear on the surface. This is because of the way listeners define Morning Edition and All Things Considered, and due to their perceptions about the construction and content of these programs.

Most listeners perceive Morning Edition or All Things Considered as the programs they are now hearing on their station, with a mix of local and national news. Based on their reactions in this study, relatively few consider that there is a version of these programs emanating from NPR with fifty-nine minutes per hour of exclusively national and international news, and no local inserts. Most already accept the local newscasts and in-depth stories that the station provides. They believe that network programs are designed to accommodate local news, and that stations and the network have a structure through which both are presented without conflicting. This perception causes listeners to believe that they are not “missing” any national reporting, and makes a mixture of local and national news acceptable, since they believe that stations only air local reports during the times designated by the Morning Edition or All Things Considered format.

- “I think of both the local and national news as Morning Edition.”
- “I don’t think that we care, as long as the content is interesting.”
- “I think it means that they’re doing a good job if we don’t notice which ones are local or national.”
- “I expect both in-depth local and network reports. I weight them equal. I have no sense of exactly when these things come on, but there is a rhythm to it.”

**When the choice between national and local reporting is presented as an either/or situation, most listeners will prefer national news. But when listeners have the option of compatibly integrating local and network product, most prefer a combination of national and local reporting.**

News listeners, who enjoy the consistency of regular, predictable transitions [especially during Morning Edition], have the same feelings about scheduling local news reports.

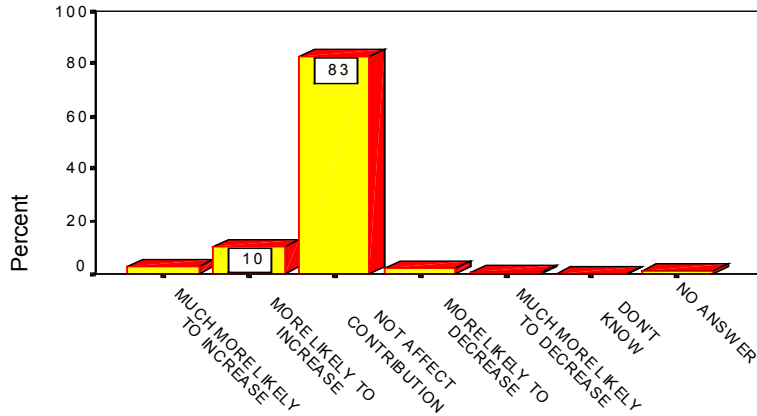


A virtually unanimous 93% prefer to have state and local news reporting heard at the same time every day. Consistency should raise listener awareness of local news reporting.

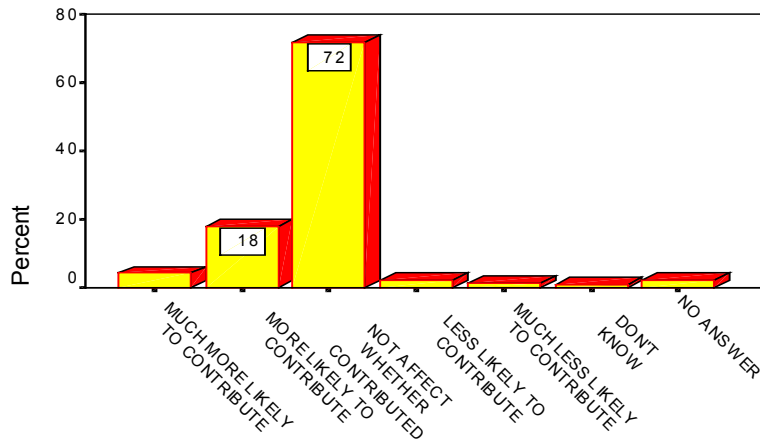
## The Financial Value of Locally Produced News

Individual giving is a complex process. Very few listeners to public radio become givers for any single reason. Survey questions asked if the perceived expansion of local news would provide an incentive or a deterrent to individual giving.

***If [station] increased its in-depth coverage of state and local issues, how would that affect the amount of your financial support of [station]?***



***If [station] increased its in-depth coverage of state and local issues, how would that affect whether you supported [station] financially?***



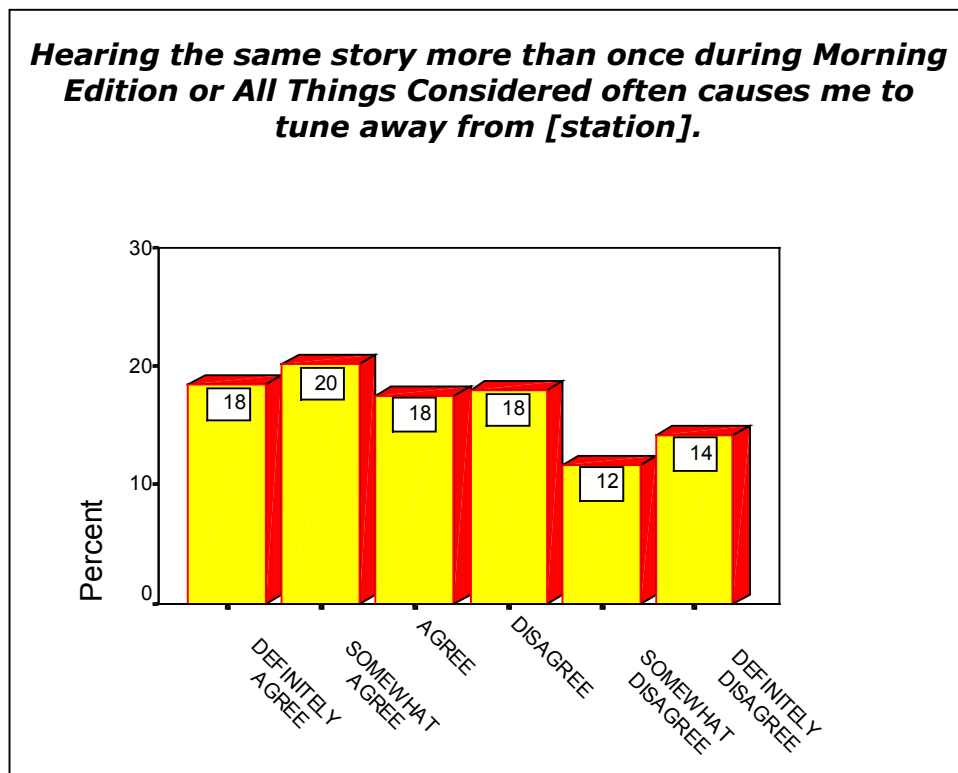
Among current givers, 83% felt that expanded local news would have no direct influence on the amount of their financial support. Only 19% of non-givers felt that more state and local news coverage would increase the likelihood of their financial support for their public station.

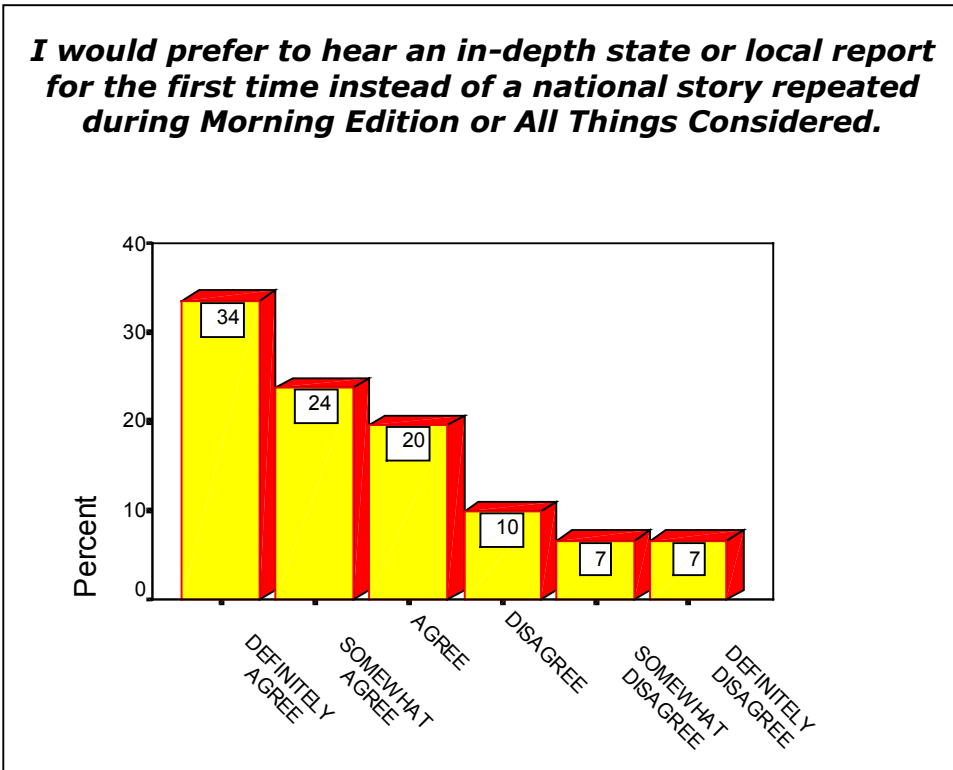
No station should increase local news or any other format with the sole intent of acquiring larger contributions or more givers. Giving is based on loyalty and perceptions of programming value and importance, but it cannot be predicted by a single survey question. Rather, this data indicates that local news is not an impediment to individual giving, and it exerts more of a positive than a negative influence on the amount or likelihood of news listeners' contributions.

## Opportunities for Local News Programming

Optimizing the integration of local and national news product in network programming will require additional research and discussion beyond this study. But there are some areas where Morning Edition and All Things Considered may be bolstered by the inclusion of quality, in-depth local reporting.

In focus groups, repetition and "rollover fatigue" was mentioned in conjunction with Morning Edition and All Things Considered listening. Might this provide an opportunity for integrating local news reports?





While one listener's third repeat is another's first opportunity to hear a story, these questions give some perspective to the impact that repetition has on listener attention spans. 56% of agree [18% strongly agree] that hearing the same story on the news magazines often causes them to tune away. But more than three-fourths agree [34% strongly] that they would prefer hearing an original local news story to a national repeat.

It is important that each station consult their Arbitron listening data to more precisely calculate the number of listeners that are likely to hear a specific segment repeated in any network programming that is rolled-over. All things being equal, keeping local and national reports fresh will add to their value.

### Interesting Subjects for Local News Reporting

Many comments during the focus groups demonstrate that **the interest generated by the story, not the place where it originated, is the most important factor in their listening.**

- "If there were issues that were common to all communities and they could talk about how they are being played out on a local basis, local news could be of interest to all without being metropolitan or state news."
- "My listening is content-based, not program-based."
- "Some things are not literally local news but it's news of interest to almost anyone because it might affect you."
- "If I'm interested in it, it's local news to me."
- "What's important is the subject and if it's interesting."

A variety of local angles were suggested. Many involve producing stories on the local level that are similar in style to those heard on network programs, or doing local follow-ups on national stories.

- "I'd like local to be the flip side of the national and international coverage. All the issues they talk about on Morning Edition and All Things Considered, at some point we're facing the same challenges locally."
- "Like the in-depth human interest stories you hear nationally and we could do more of that locally."
- "I would appreciate if they had real statewide news, with reporters in key areas around the state, and do with state news what NPR does with national and international news."
- "Add any interesting, compelling local story, not just in the sense of human interest, but, things that are intriguing about how we live today."
- "News that impacts our lives here, that can be affected by what we do here; doesn't have to be government, can be business news or just what people are doing" [defined by impact than by where it takes place]
- "Bringing national stories down to a local impact"
- "An absence of local shootings and junk news, sensational news, stuff that's repulsive."
- "What happens in the Capitol that affects my region is local to me."
- "I'd like to hear more about the impact of national issues on local stories."
- "Sometimes it seems as though they have a teaching function. They'll take something nobody knows about and tell you enough about it that you can understand the conversation or educate yourself further."
- "I am educated about things I never would have even thought about, I'm learning some new thought, concept or idea every day."

Public radio listeners do not expect happy talk, but if there is positive news to report, or a constructive situation that influences their lives to be mentioned, most listeners would approve.

- "We don't want it to become happy talk, but there's very little in the news right now that makes you feel good about your community."
- "Highlight people and their achievements in the community maybe people could see that and use it as an example."
- "Hear some inspiring, positive stories. It's nice to hear that not everybody is a stinker."
- "We cover a lot of policies but we don't actually get into the community to see what's going on, you don't see positive or what can be done"
- "Things that I could participate with, if I hear something about Russia, I'm not going to have a great deal of influence over it, but something local that might effect me or I can participate in, how they effect schools, or taxes."

Many public radio listeners want to hear "the real story" of what occurs in their communities. Stories about power brokers and the individuals and businesses that have a strong influence on the community would be of interest.

- "In policy and politics, there's a lot going on behind the scenes that we really don't see or understand, how so some of these policies impact us?"
- "I like it when they cover controversial issues that you will not hear any other stations or media cover around here. Things you really want to hear about but no one else will touch with a ten foot pole, they do a great job of that."



## Listeners Value Local News

***"If they could do the kind of in-depth reporting locally that they do nationally it would appeal to me."***

**The most fundamental goal of this research was to determine whether stations should continue devoting their time and resources to producing local information programming. The answer is a definitive "yes."**

The major news programs on public radio are presented with a primary focus on national and international reporting, with some additional local content.

But just because national and international information is the primary reason for listening does not mean that it the **only reason** for listening. State and local news are also valued.

There are many similar examples within radio and in other businesses. For instance, there are some listeners who may tune into *A Prairie Home Companion* primarily for Garrison Keillor's *News From Lake Wobegone* monologue. But most also listen to and enjoy other parts of the program. Listeners may tune in to a classical program primarily to hear the music, but many enjoy the announcer as well.

In a parallel to consumer behavior, most people go to one of the large bookstores to browse or shop for books. They probably do not go primarily for the gourmet coffee bars, but many nevertheless use this service and are glad it is available. The same can be said of many sporting events. Most people do not attend a football or baseball game primarily to eat the hot dogs or drink the beer, but they are glad these refreshments are available. They add to the atmosphere and overall quality of the experience.

The situation with national programming is comparable. The primary reason for listening to network news programs is undoubtedly national and international news, but most people appreciate the local content, and have come to expect it and depend upon it. Few would dramatically reduce or rid them entirely of their local information content.

## How Listeners Perceive Network News Programs

When a listener says that they “love Marketplace” or “really like All Things Considered,” what exactly do they mean? Listeners judge a program as a single package, based on what they hear on their public radio station, and do not compare news stories based on their point of origination.

**For a listener, Marketplace or All Things Considered is Marketplace or All Things Considered as they hear it on their station, not as it is transmitted in its pure form from NPR or PRI.**

On some stations, network programs are heard with considerable local input, on other stations, local content is limited. Regardless, the way that a program is heard on their local station is the way they evaluate it. Listeners rarely separate the different kinds of news they hear, nor judge the quality and interest of a report based on the source. **Listeners value quality and interest over source.**

**Duke Ellington once said that there are only two kinds of music - good and bad. We might say the same about news reports on public radio. Our listeners say that there are only two kinds of news reports - the kind that are well produced with a subject that they are interested in or that is made interesting by the production and presentation of the report, and the kind that do not meet their standards of quality and interest.**

High praise that listeners often pay to the best local reporting is that it's indistinguishable from network news. This may seem like a backhanded compliment, but most people would not be upset if someone told them that their golf swing was indistinguishable from Tiger Woods'. Or that their jump shot was indistinguishable from Michael Jordan's. Or that they threw the football just as well as Joe Montana. **When listeners say the best local reporting cannot be distinguished from the network, they are comparing station efforts to the news they rate the highest among all their media choices.** A more hearty endorsement cannot be expected!

## The Mix of Nationally and Locally Produced News

This research does not suggest that most stations should dramatically increase their local news presence. But it does not suggest a decrease, and shows that most listeners welcome well-produced, interesting local news reports. **Stations that present news reporting with consistent quality and interest will find them accepted on par with national and international news.**

**Finding ways to optimally integrate network and local production will be an important follow-up task to this study for both networks and stations.**

## The Quality of Local and National News

Most listeners do not expect locally produced information to sound *exactly* like network productions. Focus group participants often remarked that they enjoyed hearing the differences in accent and regionalism of language in their local announcers. Local presenters do not have to be carbon copies of national talent. But despite welcoming these differences, there remains a standard of quality that local reporting and announcing must consistently achieve and uphold to be successful. It is important that local talent sounds mature, professional, and consistently employs good grammar and pronunciation. And use good taste in selecting and producing stories.

Public radio news, whether it is produced at NPR in Washington, in Italy by Sylvia Poggoli, in Los Angeles for Marketplace, in Boston for The World, or at a station, enjoys a unique perception of quality and credibility among listeners. When producing local information programming, a station's responsibility is to maintain and contribute to the quality that listeners already perceive and expect from the product.

## Producing Local News Reports

Why do listeners sometimes express dissatisfaction with local news reporting? One reason local reporting fails to meet expectations is when listeners notice a significant difference in quality compared to network productions. But another even more important factor may be the narrow scope and potential appeal of some local stories.

The subjects and reporting approach used in most network reports generally appeals to the broad target audience of listeners to national news programs. Whether a story originates in Maine or Ohio, Japan or Africa, the subject is chosen and the story produced in a way that it could potentially be of interest to all listeners. If the reason that a story is significant to everyone is not obvious, it is usually made clear early in the report.

This broad scope and inclusiveness may not be achieved as often in local reporting. While a well-produced report on a national or international event will be potentially interesting to most news listeners, a story about Bronx politics may not elicit universal interest in Queens. Coverage of the Detroit School System may have little value to listeners in Ann Arbor. Traffic reports from Seattle may not help listeners driving in Tacoma.

Some stations spend considerable time and effort reporting on stories that are interesting to only a small portion of their audience. If these reports are produced with a narrow scope that fails to broaden the subject to make it universally interesting, or frame the report so that a singular local issue is used as an example of a regional problem, interest levels will almost inherently be diminished.

**For local news to approach the status of network programming, more than just the quality will need to be improved. It will require a change of mindset and approach. A concerted effort is needed to ensure that the reports produced by stations have the same broad interest and appeal as nationally produced stories.**

This research does not make journalistic judgments about what should be reported. It simply points out that local news will provide a more valuable audience service by producing stories that are broader in scope with more potential appeal to all news listeners. **If a story truly has enough significance, it should be able to be reported in such a manner that it would potentially be interesting to most listeners.**

Much of what stations produce is governed by their prevailing mindset. Conventional thinking often results in narrowly focused reporting.

It might be beneficial to think of station staff not as local reporters, but more like national correspondents stationed in your city, to report on interesting events, issues, and people in the region that would be of interest to all listeners.

Another useful way to think of a local news operation is like a bureau, reporting with a quality and scope that would be comparable to a national report on Morning Edition, All Things Considered, The World, or Marketplace.

This broader scope has other potential benefits. As more stations produce reports focusing on people and events in their area, but with a more universally-appealing scope, the prospects for more sharing and exchanging of stories between news departments in the same region become much more appealing.

Many listeners perceive and define local news differently than those of us in the industry. Local news may even be an inaccurate or misleading term. **Public radio might be better served by a change of mindset and begin to consider station-based reporting as "non-national news," instead of "local news."**

Because most listeners do not judge news programming by its source, it is not productive to think of local news and national news as separate entities. **National and local news and information programming is inexorably intertwined.** A strong local news presence also strengthens national news, and vice versa.

Many public radio news listeners have a strong aversion to sensationalistic reporting, and stories they perceive to be blown out of proportion on many of the commercial media. While this research cannot suggest a blanket prohibition of stories about automobile accidents, murders, and celebrities on public radio, local stations should choose to report on subjects such as these with caution and with the knowledge that many listeners hold public radio news to a higher standard. They seek reporting that adds meaning and about issues that influence their life. They do not generally listen to public radio news for reports on subjects they could easily find on commercial radio or television.

## Differences Between Groups of Listeners

The dominant themes of this research were examined carefully to determine if there were any significant differences in response based on variables including market size, region, format, gender, race, age, and giving status. The results were surprisingly consistent.

There was no significant difference in response to the main themes of the research based on any of these variables. There is nothing in the research that suggests a significant difference in the value of local news, or the willingness to listen to it and support it, based on any demographic, geographic, or utiligraphic variable.

While the opinions different groups of listeners sometimes varied by several percent, nothing in the results shows enough of a difference to cause a change of programming strategy or tactics based on a station's location, format, or composition of its audience. The main conclusions of the research are supported consistently on the different stations, and by the different types of listeners within the study.

## The Financial Value of Local News

One of the ways listeners express the value of programming is by their willingness to support it financially. In the survey, listeners were asked to allocate a hypothetical gift of \$100 towards several different types of public radio programming. They were free to divide the contribution in any way they chose; giving it all to one type of programming, or using it to support any or all of the program categories in any amount.

Naturally, national and international news programming received strong support. But would listeners choose to use their money to support local news? In a word, yes.

***Imagine you had \$100 to contribute to your public radio station, and you could divide the money to support different types of programming. How much would you give to support:***

	<b>National Average</b>
<b>In-depth state and local news</b>	<b>\$25.68</b>
<b>National news programs</b>	<b>\$32.66</b>
<b>National call-in programs</b>	<b>\$11.87</b>
<b>All other programs</b>	<b>\$29.78</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$100.00</b>

**Listeners chose to allocate almost one-third of their money to national news programming, and provided more than one-fourth of their financial contribution to support local news.** While it was demonstrated in the survey that additional local news programming may not significantly influence giving habits, listeners nonetheless are willing to pay to support the product.

## SUMMARY

***"The quality of local public radio news compared to what? It's still miles beyond commercial broadcasting on TV and radio."***

A considerable volume of information was collected in The Local News Project research. While every conceivable question about local news reporting was not answered definitively, here is a brief summary, in a question and answer format, of the overall results that apply to all stations.

### ***How do listeners perceive national network news programs?***

Listeners perceive network programs as they are heard on their local station, not in the way they are produced by the network. A local or national underwrite credit, a local or national newscast, local time and temperature, all are perceived to be a part of the program. **Local and national reporting are inexorably intertwined. They are inseparable in the minds of listeners.** Several hundred different versions of programs like Morning Edition or All Things Considered are heard in markets across the country every day.

These market-to-market variations cause some legitimate logistical concerns for networks or producers. Viewing this in an adversarial manner between networks and stations is unproductive and inconsiderate to the listener. The vast majority of listeners prefer network news programs with some local content included. This makes it imperative that stations and networks cooperate to find the optimum methods of integrating national and local material.

The concept that there are specific times during programs that belong to the network or the local station is an industry notion, not a listener concern. All of the programming belongs to the listener. It must be presented for their service and convenience first, not primarily for the convenience of stations, networks, or underwriters.

***What traits do most public radio news listeners have in common that influences their attitudes and listening habits?***

- They dislike most mainstream media coverage of news, particularly local television news. They feel that it is often lightweight, and emphasizes sensationalism over content.
- They have a negative impression of most media's local news coverage, especially commercial television. This gives them pause about expanding public radio's local news coverage. Some listeners have difficulty understanding how public radio could expand local news coverage without duplicating or imitating the local coverage on commercial media.
- They tend to have an above-average interest in politics and political issues.
- They are more concerned about the content, production, and interest level in a news story than where it originated
- They want to know "what's really going on." They crave the story behind the headlines. They want to know more about the people who influence their city, the nation, and the world. They feel that most news reporting is superficial and only scratches the surface of issues and events.

***Why do listeners tune into public radio news?***

They listen for what it has; intelligent, thoughtful, in-depth reports on national and international news, and well-produced human-interest stories. They listen for what it does not have; the sensationalism and shallowness of most commercial media.

While local news is not the primary motivation for tune-in, it remains a valued service for most news listeners. Most prefer a mix of international, national, state, and local news.

***Are listeners more interested in national and international news than state and local news?***

Public radio is the primary source of national and international news for most listeners. On the whole, public radio listeners *are* more interested in national and international news than in state and local news. But *this should not be taken out of context.*

Two important variables relate to these existing attitudes. The network programs that attracted most listeners to public radio are primarily focused on national and international news. So it is not surprising that this would be their primary interest. Second, listeners are reacting to the way local news is presented now, not necessarily how the levels of quality or interest might be changed in the future. An increase in the overall quality and interest level of local reporting is likely to also increase the value of local reporting to listeners.

### ***What is the best time to broadcast local news programming?***

Listeners would prefer to have their cake and eat it too. One indication of the way they value local news is that most prefer it to be heard during or adjacent to Morning Edition and All Things Considered, i.e. the times when they would be most likely to be listening. But listeners also wish that local news could be provided without replacing any national or international stories produced by the networks.

Short of having national and local news programs on two separate stations, the only options remaining for stations are to integrate local reporting within network drive-time programs, or to air a separate local news program. With a few exceptions, producing a separate local news program is neither realistic nor recommended. Therefore, integrating local, state, national, and international news in and around the network drive-time news programs remains the best option for most stations.

### ***When is the best time for a station to "cover" a network report with local news?***

This research cannot supply a definitive answer to this question. But it does provide some direction. One place to start is to use local pieces to freshen rollover sections of national programs whenever possible. Before taking any action, stations must remember to examine their Arbitron listening data to aid in their placement decisions. Radio usage patterns dictate that the third time some listeners are hearing a report will be the first time for many others. But quality and interest being equal, most listeners would prefer to hear a local news report for the first time instead of a repeat of a network story.

### ***Is it important that local reports be heard at the same time every day?***

No issue in the research was more definitive. Listeners would prefer that local pieces be heard at the same time every day or week. Especially during morning and afternoons, they often gauge their day by the segment of programming they are hearing [i.e. "if Carl Kasell finishes reading the news before I'm done shaving, I know I'm running late!"]

Consistency also has the likely benefit of increasing the profile and awareness of local reporting among the audience.

In short, listeners love to be surprised and delighted by the subjects, content, and treatment of news stories, but they are creatures of habit when it comes to a program's schedule and format.

A reminder: this recommendation of consistency assumes that the local reports are produced with high quality and that the subject has broad interest.

### ***How often should stations air local newscasts?***

The preferred frequency for a four-to-six-minute newscast during network programming is once per hour. Brief local headline updates may occur more often. Most listeners were not in favor of two full local newscasts per hour.

### ***What financial value do listeners place on local news programming?***

Since most listeners perceive a station's programming as a whole, not as numerous small parts, it is difficult for them to put a price on any single facet of programming. As much as Daniel Shorr or David Brancaccio may add value to their listening experience, most do not make a direct connection between the amount of financial support and any specific person or program.

There is no question that if allowed to allocate their giving, the typical news listener would choose to channel most of their support towards news programming. It is also clear that the largest amount of their support for news programming would be directed to national and international news. Nevertheless, local news received a healthy share of support. On average, **news listeners allocated about one-fourth of their total financial support to local news programming.**

While the quality of network reporting is a natural asset to discuss during fund raising campaigns, stations with a quality local news service may be selling themselves short by not placing some emphasis on this unique and valuable aspect of their information programming. The research suggests that news listeners should be reminded that their station provides in-depth local news reporting, and that featuring some of the best local reports during the fund raising campaign would be a benefit.

***What are the most important things stations can do to increase the appeal and value of their local news programming?***

Quality

A gap between the quality of many network and local news productions has long been suspected. These research results confirm that overall, local news is perceived as "very good," while network productions are considered to be "excellent." Most local news falls short of a very high standard. But how can stations improve the quality of their reporting, and what does the concept of quality mean to news listeners?

When discussing quality, listeners most often mention two factors: **presentation and production.**

**The most common difference listeners perceive between national and local news is the use of production elements.** Listeners' first impression of a local report is often an announcer reading copy, while their image of national news is a produced report. This may not always be accurate or fair, but their perception is their reality. This impression is caused in part by local newscasts that employ limited sound. But it is also a reflection of the amount and quality of production used in local reports, when compared with network programs.

Presentation is another issue. By and large, listeners are tolerant of local announcers. Their expectations are not unrealistic. They want a clear presentation, a sense of maturity and professionalism, and reasonable grammar and pronunciation. When stations do not provide this sound, it stands in stark contrast to network programming.

The most important steps stations can take to improve listener perceptions of quality are to provide consistent announcing and use network-style production in news pieces whenever appropriate. Equally important is to be sure that listeners are aware that these high quality reports are locally produced, not the product of a network. [*See 'What can stations do to raise listener awareness of local news reporting?' for additional details.*]

## Scope

Many stations still produce stories with a narrow subject or geographical focus, stories that are not likely to be of interest to most of their listeners. To increase the impact and value of local news reporting, the subjects and the approach of the story must appeal to a broad spectrum of listeners, not just listeners living in one area or community.

This does not mean a station cannot produce reports about a specific school board or city council. It does mean that these reports should be framed in such a manner that the relevance of the story is obvious to all listeners. Every report a station produces that does not encompass the interests of all listeners limits the value and utility of local news.

### ***What can stations do to raise listener awareness of local news reporting?***

While the source of the news is relatively unimportant to most listeners, most stations want listeners to be aware of and value the coverage they provide. How can this be accomplished? It begins with the fundamentals.

## Identity

Each station must determine how they choose to associate or differentiate their frequency and call letters with the network identity. There is no one right answer, but if establishing a local identity is a goal, the name of the station should be mentioned as many, if not more times, than the names NPR or PRI during network news programs. As with all issues of identity, reach and frequency will eventually win out and raise perceptions of local content provided by stations. When listeners consistently hear local reporting identified as such, levels of awareness should increase.

## Consistency

Consistency is crucial to raising awareness. Local reports should be broadcast at the same time each day or week whenever practical. This is true even if stations cannot at all of their local reports at the same time. Some consistency will prove more beneficial than none. Listeners prefer, and have greater awareness of, programming segments that are heard at a specific time every week or every day. This is especially true during drive time, when many listeners establish a lifestyle routine that meshes with their radio listening.

## Multi-part features

One of the best ways for stations to raise awareness of local news reporting is through multi-part reports. More listeners are likely to be aware of a local report when it is broadcast over several days. This is a function of reach and frequency. Multi-part reports are more promotable, more likely to be perceived on par with network productions, and they also encourage presentation of stories with a broader appeal to a wide audience.

## Promotion and Branding

To raise listener awareness of local news reporting, stations must consistently specify that a segment or newscast is locally originated. For example, if a station wishes to raise awareness of its contribution to Morning Edition, it should consider referring to the program on the air as of "Morning Edition on WXXX" rather than "NPR's Morning Edition." Depending upon the promotion strategy, the station should be given equal, if not primary billing. These seemingly subtle distinctions can make a difference over time.

Stations should remember to promote local segments on-air. These can be specific promotions for upcoming reports, and also generic image pieces for local news. They might sound similar to the best generic promos now produced for network programming, reminding listeners that the station brings this same depth and thoughtfulness to local reporting as the networks provide for national and international news.

**The results of this study demonstrate that it is mistaken to assume that listeners know about a station's local contributions to network programming automatically, without being told and reminded regularly. While airtime is often at a premium, if a locally produced in-depth news report is worth airing, it is also worth promoting. Generally, more listeners will hear the promotions for the in-depth report than will ever hear the report itself.**



## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

The Local News Project research provides insight on a number of issues. It also raises questions that every public radio station, network, or organization involved with producing information programming should consider. Readers of this report will likely devise their own questions. These are some of the questions suggested by the research results.

- Listeners often do not recognize the in-depth local reporting that is produced by stations. Is it important for local news reporting to be branded and differentiated from NPR or PRI programming?
- If differentiating network and local news is important, how can it be accomplished in a manner that does not weaken national or local programming?
- Would listeners benefit from greater cooperation and sharing of news reports between stations in the same state, region, or even nationwide?
- Should alternative distribution channels be created for non-national reports that could be utilized at many stations across the country?
- How should stations allocate their news resources to maximize listener service and satisfaction?
- What changes in conceptualization, training, and definitions of news must occur for stations to consistently produce stories that appeal to the entire audience?
- Is a station's definition of quality in news reporting the same as the listeners? Do listeners discern the subtleties of the writing and editing process, or are they more concerned that stations consistently meet basic standards of quality. If the definitions **are** different, how should stations respond?
- It has been said that public radio network news [NPR and PRI] plays a major role in setting the news agenda among national opinion leaders. Is it possible, or desirable, for public radio stations to equivalently set the local news agenda in their communities?

## AREAS FOR FUTURE STUDY

As the first-ever national study about local reporting, The Local News Project was designed to be fundamental research. If this research had determined that listeners found limited value in local news, there would be little point in conducting further research. Since most listeners value local news, and because good research often raises nearly as many questions as it answers, the following are suggested as potential subjects for future research investigations.

A future study could include more extensive use of recordings to study the interplay between local and national news. This would provide information about the mix of locally and nationally produced news, and assist in gauging the appeal of different approaches to producing local news stories

A question many stations still seek to answer involves public radio as a source of basic information, such as weather and traffic. Do listeners presume these services will be offered as part of public radio news, or would they be better served by hearing information they cannot readily obtain through other media sources?

Research could provide a more detailed examination of the reasons that listeners reacted positively to the idea of discrete local news programs. Listeners tend to think of radio in terms of **programs**, and not **programming**. By requesting discrete local news programs, are they simply expressing their desire to hear this information in their prime listening time, hoping to segregate national and local news, or attempting to fulfill some other need?

Most stations incorporate some state and local news within Morning Edition and All Things Considered. Should non-national information be incorporated into other network information programming [call-ins, Marketplace, etc.]? If so, what kind of information, how often, and when?

Stations would benefit from additional study of the correlation between news staff size, allocation of staff, and the amount of local news programming on air to listener awareness, satisfaction, and perceptions of reporting quality.

Research could provide a more detailed examination of locally produced call-in talk and interview programs.

There could be greater concentration in future research on the most appropriate role for local news in larger and smaller markets

Research could provide the opinions and perceptions of listeners not included in the sample for this project. For example, evaluating the opinions of listeners who use news programming on public radio, but are not news or dual imperatives.

Public radio still has much to learn about making state and local news reporting more valuable to listeners. This research study is a first step in understanding their attitudes and behavior. The Local News Project established that most listeners value non-national news, are willing to support it financially, and that local reporting that meets listener standards of quality and interest can match the appeal of any national or international news story.

Future studies can build upon the results of this research, answer many of the questions raised in this study, and explore new areas of interest.

This research should also encourage additional discussions about the role of local news programming. Many news directors and program directors would benefit from a dialogue about the types of stories, and placement of stories that would best serve listeners. Discussions between stations, networks, and producers would also be a constructive step in incorporating local and national reporting in a more consistent and coherent format for listeners.

The first phase of The Local News Project research is completed. It marks the beginning of a better understanding of listener reactions to and expectations of local news reporting. The study will have succeeded if it allows stations to provide an improved service to listeners, and results in increased listener loyalty through the news reporting and information programming produced at public radio stations.

