

THE LOCAL NEWS PROJECT II

Research Report Summary

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INTRODUCTION

The Local News Project II [LNP II] of 2003 was the second national study by Market Trends Research to examine reporting produced by stations. **The Local News Project I** of 1998 and 1999 was the first national research study to focus primarily on listener reactions to station-produced reporting.

LNP II RESEARCH RESULTS SUMMARY

✦ The term 'local news' has negative connotations for most listeners. Public radio listeners often associate the term with the sensationalism of local television news shows. Additionally, localism, in and of itself, is not necessarily viewed as a virtue.

ACTION ITEM

It is recommended that stations do not use the term 'local news' on air or in promotional materials to describe their reporting.

✦ Listeners considered state and local news produced by public radio stations to be vastly superior to most of the news on commercial radio and television. LNP II demonstrated that the gap in quality listeners perceive between state and local news on public radio and commercial media is significant.

Of course, stations should never become complacent. Improvement in sound and service is always both possible and desirable. These lukewarm attitudes about commercial radio news are most prevalent among current core public radio news listeners. Many fringe listeners and non-listeners find value in commercial radio and TV news.

A C T I O N I T E M

Some markets have significant sharing between public and commercial news stations, but commercial media are not generally significant competitors for the public radio core news audience.

In many respects, public radio is its own strongest competition.

The task of public radio news is not so much defeating the competition, but challenging ourselves. How interesting and compelling can news programming be, story by story, day by day. Getting stale, repetitive, overly predictable, and irrelevant are the major threats to news reporting, and these are very much within a station's control. Much of the future success of public radio news depends upon an unrelenting effort to increase the quality and interest of our service.

While remaining timely is important, few listeners care if their public station has the 'scoop' on the top story of the day.

Reporting a story minutes before other media outlets is not significant to most listeners [although stations should have an action plan to handle really significant local, national, or international events]. What IS significant is whether stations consistently provide thoughtful, balanced, in-depth, and credible reporting on significant issues and events, as well as cultural and human interest reporting that listeners may never encounter in other media.

Many media sources are viewed as sensationalized, or beholden to corporate or political interests. The perceived fairness, balance, and objectivity of public radio news is an increasingly valuable asset for stations that uphold these high standards.

Reporting produced by stations should strive to go beyond the obvious, and provide information and perspectives that listeners are not likely to encounter in other media. These are the types of 'surprises' that listeners appreciate, and that add value to their listening.

A C T I O N I T E M

✦ **While listeners value many aspects of news reporting on public radio, fairness, balance, objectivity, and in-depth reporting are among the characteristics they value most. Listeners also value hearing stories, or different approaches to a story, that they are not likely to encounter in other media.**

Another reason that news and information on public radio is appreciated is that it is perceived to be among the few sources not beholden to corporate media. The perceived independence and high ethical standards of reporting on public radio adds immeasurably to its attractiveness to listeners.

✦ In most cases, listeners underestimate the amount of in-depth reporting produced by stations. The problems of relatively low awareness and ineffective or nonexistent promotion of station-produced reporting still exist. Over the years, NPR has established a strong brand identity for news – most stations have not established an identity for the news they produce.

An awareness gap remains between the amount of in-depth reporting stations provide, and the amount listeners perceive. Adding to this problem is that newscasts are the station-produced news that is top-of-mind for most listeners – and that this type of headline news is not representative of the in-depth reporting stations want listeners to associate with them most.

A C T I O N I T E M

For stations to increase awareness of their in-depth reporting, improved promotion and branding, and greater consistency in airing reports at predictable times, will be required.

Stations will also benefit from producing [and promoting] an in-depth version of one or more stories heard during newscasts for broadcast later in the same program or day.

✦ **Most listeners still perceive the quality of in-depth reporting of national and international news to be superior to state and local news reports.**

There is both good news and bad news here. The good news is that 81% of listeners would rate station produced news as either 'excellent' or 'good.'

The bad news is that more than twice as many listeners consider national and international reporting to be 'excellent' when compared to state and local news.

Despite trailing overall network perceptions of quality, positive reactions to station-produced reports heard in focus groups demonstrate that stations are already producing reports that listeners perceive as being of the same quality and interest as any heard on a national news program.

In the end, expectations greatly influence perceptions. In many ways, it is a self-fulfilling prophecy. The more consistently stations produce – and listeners are aware of – news stories that match the quality and interest standards established by national news programs, the more station-produced reporting is likely to achieve similar quality ratings.

A C T I O N I T E M

Listeners perceive virtually all network reports as excellent, while station-produced reporting is less consistent; some of it is excellent, most is good, and occasionally it is poor.

Consistency is one key – making each report interesting and valuable to listeners. Station reporting already equals network standards in some cases, this must occur more frequently, combined with increased listener awareness, for perceptions of quality to change significantly.

The importance of promotion cannot be overemphasized - if an in-depth news report is worth the time and effort to produce, it is also worth the time and effort to promote.

✦ **Public radio listeners are very interested in understanding how issues and events affect them, but even more interested in how issues and events affect the country and the world. This applies equally to state and local news, and is not confined solely to national and international reporting. Listeners expect the big picture to be provided regardless of the source of the report.**

In order for a well-produced report on a state or local issue or event to be interesting to most listeners, LNP II demonstrates an approach to greatly increase the chances of success:

- Connect the issue or event to a larger context
- Explain how another city or state has or is reacting to a similar situation
- Explain how this event impacts the nation or world
- Explain how the events or issue represents a larger trend
- Explain how the issue or event affects them or their community

Doing one or more of the above considerably increases the likelihood of enhancing listener service.

Looking at issues and events through a broader lens holds true for both the production and selection of news stories. Since there are generally more potential stories to cover than resources to cover them, stations should favor issues and events that contain the greatest potential for making larger, significant connections.

Because public radio listeners are interested in reports that make broader connections and include the 'big picture,' reports with broader appeal increase the chance that listeners will respond favorably to a station-produced news report. Examples of this approach that tested positively were reports with subjects and treatments that used multiple sources and had broader implications beyond one portion of a station's coverage area.

A C T I O N I T E M

There is no inherent value to listeners simply because reporting emanates from their community – localism for the sake of localism does not equal audience service or create value for listeners.

The reports receiving the most positive response took a national or international issue or event and brought it to the community level, or looked at an issue or event in the community through a wider lens. If anything in this research approaches being a formula for success, this is it.

In selecting stories, consider how they might be connected to a larger context, show how another city or state is reacting to a similar situation, explain how the event impacts the nation or world, demonstrate how the event or issue represent a larger trend, or explain how the issue or event affects the listeners community, nation and/or world.

This does not mean it is impossible to provide a story of purely local interest that will be of value to listeners. But with virtually infinite story selection options, and finite time and resources, why not concentrate on reports that are most likely to provide the maximum in listener service?

If stations consistently selected stories that connected listeners not only to their community – but beyond - it would have a significant impact on listener service.

- ✦ **If given a choice, listeners would not eliminate state and local reporting. In fact, many listeners would even expand their station's current news service.**

Nearly all listeners agreed that stations should broadcast at least one in-depth local or state news report per day. For many stations, this would actually represent an **increase** in their in-depth news reporting! Only 5% of listeners would eliminate all state and local news reporting from their public radio station.

This result suggests several other conclusions:

- Despite rating the quality of local news lower than national and international news, most listeners indicate that it generally meets or exceeds their minimum standards.
- State and local reporting on public radio serves a need. Most listeners realize that the quantity and quality of reporting on area issues or events on most commercial media is low. If produced and presented properly, reporting on state and local issues and events increase listener service and satisfaction.

A C T I O N I T E M

A vast majority of listeners – 95% - support at least some station-produced news reporting.

To increase acceptance of station-produced reporting, focus on the importance of consistency, of quality, and listener awareness. Unless reports are clearly identified, promoted, and branded, listeners often do not distinguish station reports from national program content, and may remember only those reports that do not meet their standards.

Improving the quality of station reporting in the minds of listeners will require a combination of actual changes in quality and consistency, and increasing awareness.

- ✦ **While stations can surmise many of the topics that will be heard on national news programs, networks and producers of national programs could assist stations in serving listeners by providing advance notification of major issue reporting and multi-part series they are producing in coming months. This would allow stations to produce companion pieces from the viewpoint of their communities. This would create a win-win situation for the networks, the stations, and most importantly, the listeners.**

A C T I O N I T E M

The most appropriate way to initiate this sharing of information would be for stations to encourage a national organization to discuss a system through which the producers of major national news programs can share advance plans for special features or areas of concentration. Many producers are reticent to reveal their plans in advance.

Producers and networks must realize that stations will understand that not all of their advance plans materialize. Stations should match this understanding with the knowledge that having this information available, even if not 100% accurate, will be helpful in planning ways to provide local tie-ins with major national reports, and increasing the effectiveness of promoting these stories.

✦ One of the surprises of LNP II – a solid majority of listeners - 70% - agree that traffic reports during drive times are a valuable service. This total includes listeners who are retired or not regular commuters. Most listeners did not express a problem with how the sound of traffic reporting fits in with a station's overall sound. However, most listeners would not favor an increase in the frequency of traffic reports [most stations in LNP II ran 3-4 traffic reports per hour during drive time].

Considerable discussion has occurred about whether stations should provide traffic reports. Some claim that they are duplicative of other stations' programming, that the airtime can be used to provide content with greater listener service, or that their sound is incompatible and may repel listeners. The LNP II results disagree with these contentions.

While not a definitive conclusion, the LNP II data suggests that the need for traffic reporting generally increases with the size of the market.

A C T I O N I T E M

While stations should take steps to continually improve the accuracy, comprehensiveness, and sound of traffic reports, most listeners want traffic information to be provided as part of the morning and afternoon drive time news and information service, and throughout the day when conditions warrant.

This result does not erase the fact that listeners find fault with many aspects of traffic reporting on most public and commercial stations. They cite reports that are inaccurate or untimely, that use odd or inappropriate lingo or phrases [i.e. 'crash' instead of 'accident', 'car vs. pedestrian,' 'we're working an accident,' etc.], or that discuss only one portion of a station's coverage area. These are roadblocks that stations need to continue to overcome. Despite these shortcomings, traffic reports received strong support from listeners.

- ✦ **Many stations attempt to provide comprehensive coverage of state and local issues and candidates before, during, and after general elections. LNP II confirmed that these different types of coverage are not equally important to listeners. Coverage before the election, focusing on issues and candidates, is most important to listeners. Post-election analysis is their second priority, with the lowest priority being breaking news and results on election night.**

Many listeners use public radio as a primary source of information for deciding how to mark their ballots on Election Day. This important role, combined with the perception of many listeners that there are few other sources of in-depth and relatively unbiased political coverage, contribute to the vital role public radio can play prior to elections.

After the election, listeners perceive that some analysis is available [and perhaps over-saturated!] on a variety of media outlets, making public radio's role slightly less significant.

The area where many commercial media out-perform public radio is in reporting breaking news on election night. Few stations can match the election night staff or budget of commercial networks, and this type of coverage has become an event more closely associated with television than radio.

A C T I O N I T E M

This provides a clear picture of how most stations should allocate their time and resources in covering elections. In-depth coverage prior to the election provides the greatest listener service, with post-election analysis a close second. For most stations, local election night spot news coverage should be minimal. In many cases, the effort required for comprehensive local election night is not commensurate with the listener service that is provided.

- ✦ **Most news listeners did not favor gavel-to-gavel coverage of events such as Senate hearings or Supreme Court confirmation hearings. Just over half of the listeners surveyed preferred edited highlights of hearings and similar events, with one third of listeners preferred that NPR and/or stations produce news stories containing the important points of the hearings.**

This is not to say that stations should never carry gavel-to-gavel coverage. Each station must define its own vision of listener service. However, the data indicate that for many of these events, listeners prefer a condensed synopsis [by NPR or the station] rather than hearing the entire event itself. Based on listener reaction, gavel-to-gavel type coverage on public radio should generally be the exception, not the rule.

A C T I O N I T E M

Gavel-to-gavel coverage can provide a valuable public service. But the media landscape has changed - twenty years ago NPR stations were among the only outlets for this type of coverage. Continuing coverage is now often provided by cable news channels and internet sources. While there may be times when stations feel compelled to provide gavel-to-gavel coverage, regardless of potential duplication, listeners have suggested that this should be the exception, not the rule.

The Role of Newscasts

The role that newscasts play in listener perceptions about station-produced news is significant, and merits special attention. It was among the most interesting results of the research. The term 'newscasts' refers to 4-6 minute reports produced by stations within and adjacent to major national programs, such as Morning Edition, All Things Considered, and The World.

When listeners are asked about the kind of reporting their local station provides, newscasts [particularly those near the top and/or bottom of the hour on Morning Edition or All Things Considered] are almost always the first content that comes to mind.

Why are newscasts generally the most memorable local news programming?

Newscasts are heard every day and often every hour or half hour, at a consistent time. This consistency [and its 'fit' within the format of most national news programs] is a main reason that listeners identify a series of brief local and state stories, with or without sound, more easily as local than a longer, produced report embedded within a national news magazine.

When newscasts are the top-of-mind news product, this may be a problem for stations for several reasons:

- Newscasts often duplicate coverage provided by other media
- Newscasts do not typically include in-depth reporting
- Stories in newscasts are often repetitive from one hour to the next, and on some stations throughout the day – listeners are sensitive to repetition, particularly throughout rollovers within national programming
- Most of the content in newscasts is often not connected to other reporting by the station, i.e. many times the stories in the newscast are not followed by in-depth reporting on the same subjects

The ramifications of these problems include:

- Listeners are more likely to hear and remember stories that are provided on other media during newscasts. This contributes to the perception that the station is simply duplicating reporting available to them on other media
- When newscasts have the highest awareness among listeners, they are less likely to recall in-depth stories that stations give the most time and effort in producing, and which generally provide the greatest listener service, in-depth reporting is public radio's calling card and one of its greatest perceived strengths – a station's standing with listeners would certainly be enhanced by emphasizing its strengths – and how it is unique - not how it is similar to other media options
- Repetition [particularly during rollovers of Morning Edition] is already one of the major complaints of core news listeners –newscasts often include many of the same stories each hour, and this only adds to the negative perception of repetition
- Some listeners perceive that newscasts have lesser value if the stories in the headlines are not followed by in-depth reporting on the same subjects. It is commonly perceived that many stories on an NPR newscast during Morning Edition or All Things Considered will be followed up by an in-depth report later in the program. The same cannot be said about stories heard during a station-produced newscast.

A C T I O N I T E M

The research results suggest that the linkage between newscasts and in-depth reporting should be more closely examined. Listener perceptions might change if more stories reported in newscasts were followed-up [and promoted] as in-depth reports. The best case scenario for most stations would be a daily in-depth report about at least one of the topics presented in a newscast.

LNP II does not indicate that newscasts are causing direct harm to stations. Most listeners prefer a mix of headlines, in-depth reporting, arts, cultural, and human interest stories. But it is clear that there is benefit to be gained by:

- Examining alternative formats for at least some newscasts
- Ensuring, and clearly promoting, any in-depth reports that are related to one or more of the stories in the newscast
- Finding ways to promote and brand station-produced in-depth reporting, without damaging the positive association with NPR news
- Considering a more dynamic approach in story selection that ensures a higher frequency of in-depth reports that are related to one or more of the stories in the newscast

A C T I O N I T E M

If news headlines are the most memorable part of a station's news service, these will form the primary impression listeners will have of that station's coverage. This perception will not often include the in-depth news service that the station provides.