

HOW AUDIENCE HABITS SHOULD INFLUENCE THE DEVELOPMENT OF  
RADIO STATION WEB SITES  
A CASE STUDY OF WISCONSIN PUBLIC RADIO

Media outlets have faced a lot of change in the past decade: the increasing dominance of the Internet, the transition to digital formats and shrinking newsrooms, to name a few. But the root challenges taxing newsrooms aren't new: Media outlets are still facing the same twin hurdles of figuring out what content consumers want, and how to get them to pay for it. They just have to fight their battles on a new playing field, one that's much "flatter" thanks to the Internet. (Friedman)

Online sites represent an organization's window to the world, allowing a news outfit the broadest possible reach. Young audiences are habituated to consuming news online, rather than watching it via TV, reading it, or listening to the radio. Radio stations would therefore benefit greatly from analytical study of web sites, particularly through the lens of audience uses and gratifications. A recent study by Dr. Lisa Bu on media consumption habits also sheds very useful light on how radio stations might want to think about tailoring their web sites for new and existing audiences. This analysis explores what Wisconsin Public Radio could do to better serve its online audience.

Wisconsin Public Radio is one of the nation's oldest and most venerable public broadcasting institutions. As such, it's no stranger to evolution. Its beginning was humble: In 1914, a University of Wisconsin electrical engineering

professor set up a personal wireless transmitter, later receiving his own call sign from the Department of Commerce. Just two years later, station 9XM broadcasted its first bulletin of a Wisconsin state weather forecast by Morse code. Soon after, the station incorporated music. In 1919, after the Army had time to fiddle with the controls, the first documented broadcast of human speech occurred, quickly followed by relicensure by the U.S. Commerce Department as "WHA," making the station one of the oldest in the United States, and one of the first educational institutions (along with WLB at the University of Minnesota) to be granted a license in the new "limited commercial" category for broadcasting. (Rieland & Davidson)

The university-owned station WHA has a history of innovation, both in terms of programming offered and also in its quick response to changing technology. Randall Davidson describes how the station

became a tangible example of 'the Wisconsin Idea,' bringing the educational riches of the university to all the state's residents. From the beginning, those involved with the radio station felt it should 'provide a service for the practical use of Wisconsin citizens.' (Davidson, 2007)

Its "Chapter A Day" program, which debuted in the 1920s, is one of the longest running radio shows in history, involving nothing more than dramatic readings of book chapters yet remaining extremely popular today. In 1932, network stations pioneered "the use of radio for political discussion by candidates" with the "Political Education Forum." (Rieland & Davidson) The

WHA network was also constantly improving its technological capacities and audience reach by building new towers and stations across Wisconsin. In 1947, years before the "FM" band became more popular than "AM", the state constructed an FM network in Madison. Those stations became the backbone of the network now known as Wisconsin Public Radio. In 1984, the WPR network became one of only 22 sites in the U.S. with a National Public Radio satellite uplink. (ibid) The station began replacing all of its analog equipment in 1994, and the very next year published its first web site pages online at WPR.org. As of 2005, that site contained the equivalent of 10,000 pages of information and received more than 1,600,000 page views each month. (ibid)

Yet while WPR has remained at the forefront of technology and innovation for most of its history, in recent years the radio station has lagged behind its counterparts when it comes to a polished, interactive web site. The current WPR site looks much as it did in 1995, according to WPR News Director Michael Leland. The site aesthetics have not kept pace with evolving audience preferences. It continues to be text dense, difficult to navigate and lack many basic interactive functions such as online comment sections (Image 1). An employee in WPR's Audience Services department, whose job is to interact with and satisfy the listener audience through answering phones, emails and web comments, said of the site's lack of functionality, "I've been here three years and I still find things on the web site I didn't know were there. I'd say that happens at least once a week." (Personal interview, WPR Staff)

It's clear that this lack of a robust online presence hurts WPR. As news consumers migrate online, media organizations have seen their advertising revenue plummet. "In 2011, losses in print advertising dollars outpaced gains in digital revenue by a factor of roughly 10 to 1, a ratio even worse than in 2010," according to the Pew Research Center. (Pew, 2009) But "the news industry does not know -- and has done less than it could to learn -- how to convert this more active online audience into revenue." (Pew, 2012)

Image 1: The current WPR.org site.



Even though public radio follows a non-profit model and has a different revenue stream than its commercial counterparts, it is still losing audience to online news sites. (Bu, 2010) That translates to a lot of potential lost donations, especially since radio fund drives occur via broadcast. If public broadcasting is to remain a viable, competitive model in the current news landscape, it must devote

more energy and resources toward recapturing its online audience as well as retaining its offline, listening audience. It must also realize that the demographics of its listening audience are different from those of its online audience. To that end, understanding the content users want, need and expect from a news web site is critical to a radio station's online success.

WPR is by no means alone in its lack of attention to the importance of a sleek, useful web site. Radio as a whole has been slow to respond to increasing its online presence. NPR, the nation's largest public radio network, didn't launch its website redesign until mid-2009. (Brand, 2009)

According to the Pew Research Center for Excellence in Journalism, two trends have emerged in 2012 that reinforce "the sense that the gap between the news and technology industries is widening.

First, the explosion of new mobile platforms and social media channels represents another layer of technology with which news organizations must keep pace. Second, in the last year a small number of technology giants began rapidly moving to consolidate their power by becoming makers of "everything" in our digital lives. Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple and a few others are maneuvering to make the hardware people use, the operating systems that run those devices, the browsers on which people navigate, the e-mail services on which they communicate, the social networks on which they share and the web platforms on which they shop and play... A year ago, we wrote here: "The news industry, late to adapt and culturally more tied to content creation than engineering, finds

itself more a follower than leader shaping its business.” In 2012, that phenomenon has grown. (Pew, 2012)

It turns out that one of the biggest barriers to success for radio stations - indeed, any public broadcasting outlet - is the very law which signed them into existence, the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967. Dr. Lisa Bu, who wrote her dissertation on radio audience media habits in digital platforms, writes a comprehensive overview of the current public broadcasting model:

Created by the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967, America’s public broadcasting system is a network of nearly 1,300 independent member stations, of which 365 are public television stations and 900 public radio stations. Even though the Act created the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) to oversee the development of public telecommunication system, the law prohibits CPB from owning or operating any television or radio stations, or producing or disseminating programs to the public. The main function of CPB is to distribute federal funding as grants to member stations and special projects. All member stations are locally owned, locally controlled, and locally supported with three major revenue streams -- federal and local government grants, corporate sponsorship, and public donations. Each station also makes independent decision about its production structures and workflows. (Bu)

This fragmented system reinforces the “silo” mentality that has become detrimental to public broadcasting’s success. Bu writes,

Radio and television programs often have a fixed broadcast schedule. Their production usually follows a set of work routines carefully developed by media organizations to coordinate the work of a staff and to meet rigid deadlines. Some of those deeply entrenched routines or organizational habits may become obstacles as an organization tries to adapt to the digital age. A successful adaptor usually has changed its organizational habits from working in medium silos (radio vs. television vs. online) to working in an integrated media environment. (ibid)

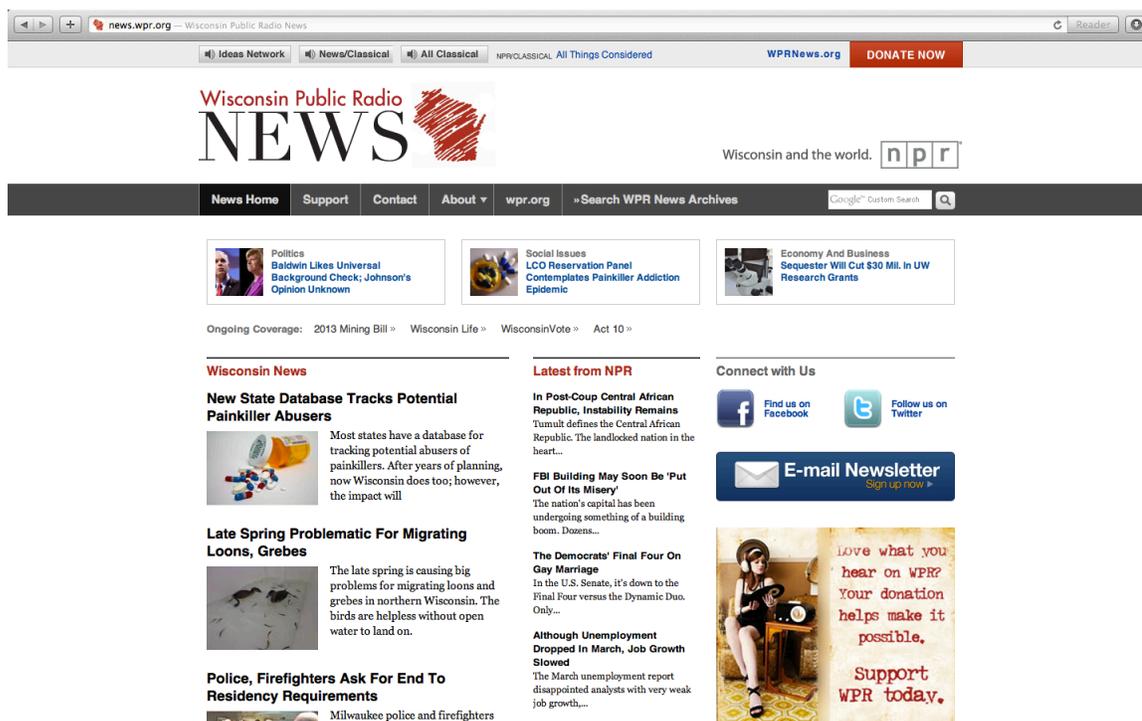
The CPB is required to distribute two-thirds of federal funding to local television stations, 22 percent to radio stations, and six percent for “system support,” for areas like research, planning and professional development. This formula has never been updated (to include an online component, for example), making it extremely difficult for stations to break out of the silo structure. (ibid)

One of the main uses of the WPR web site identified by audience listener services was to access news stories, either previously heard on-air or not yet read or heard. (Personal interview, WPR staff) Other identified primary audience uses of the WPR site were related to archives and live streaming. (ibid) This silo mentality is very prominent at WPR, with the radio, TV and online staff having little interaction or content sharing.

Because some of the main reasons audience members called in related directly to the news portion of the WPR site, WPR administrators made the decision to roll out a re-design in stages rather than all at once, with the news site appearing first. In late 2011, the WPR news department’s new site appeared,

news.wpr.org, and followed a template designed and distributed by NPR (Image 2). The new News site allows the online audience to listen to the aired broadcast directly from the story landing page. It also contains clear and easily accessible links to podcasts and RSS feeds, as well as updated station schedules. As attractive as this new site is, however, it is still not fully integrated with the “parent” WPR.org site. From the News site, clicking on “Support” leads a user directly back to the old purple and red WPR.org site with its dense text, user-unfriendly designs and antiquated styling. While the new site is much more visually appealing, having two WPR sites can create a sense of confusion and fragmentation for listeners who go online. Audience services employees bemoaned the difficulties they have with callers who can’t navigate the WPR sites, “People don’t know the difference between NPR and WPR. They get really confused.” (ibid)

Image 2: The WPR News web site, a new site separate from WPR.org and launched in late 2011.



## Uses and Gratifications through the lens of “habit”

The “Uses and Gratifications” theory sees the media audience as active communicators rather than passive consumers. (Bu) In terms of U&G specific to radio, Mendelsohn identified several reasons for radio listening: companionship, filling a void created by daily routine, altering mood, relieving boredom, providing news and information, allowing active participation in events such as sports and overcoming social isolation. (Mendelsohn) But listening to radio is an inherently passive activity. By migrating online, radio listeners transition from passive to active content consumers. Bu’s research shows that individuals’ media habits have strong influences on the decision on which content to use. As younger

audiences are more habituated to consuming news online than their elderly counterparts, one could argue that devoting more resources toward developing original online content will become a necessity for radio station web sites.

During a personal interview with Dr. Bu, it became apparent that her data was less about which specific stories and treatments received the most traffic on WPR's web site and more about the audience uses, gratifications and media habits that informed their likeliness to use the site at all, and their willingness to pay for content. Bu's research on media habits as a motivator distinct from U&G adds significantly to the field of research on radio station web sites. And by analyzing Bu's data from the angle of U&G theory, one can discover not only how and why audience members visit a radio station's web site, therefore revealing to journalists and editors more about how they might want to produce and air a story, but also the underlying passive habits associated with accessing those stories on the web site, giving online editors useful data in terms of whom they should be targeting, ads, story placement on the web site, etc. As such, this survey data can allow WPR to once again return to its tradition of innovation and being at the forefront of technology by incorporating many of the elements revealed in Bu's study. This analysis is therefore based on results from Bu's dissertation.

The survey targeted the WPR listening audience, aged 18 and older, who tuned in either by radio or on the Internet including program downloading. WPR's on-air broadcast covers all Wisconsin and parts of neighboring states such as Minnesota and Illinois, and the online downloads can be accessed from

anywhere in the world via the internet. There was no complete list of WPR listeners, but the station does keep a database of about 30,000 listeners who have contacted WPR to donate, to subscribe to the newsletter, or for other purposes. That database was the sample frame, and a random sample of people was selected from the database to complete a survey. The survey was anonymous. On March 14, 2010, the questionnaire was sent to 10,829 randomly selected listeners from the database. When the survey was closed on April 14, the study had collected 1,513 completed questionnaires with the response rate of 13.9 percent. (Bu, pg. 61)

The survey data asked online audience members specifically about their gratification motivations for using the WPR web site, including options such as social utility (using news to facilitate social interaction), personal utility (using news for problem solving), surveillance (using news to acquire information), parasocial relationship (using news for perceived interaction with media personalities, i.e., to follow the work of certain journalists), diversion (using news to escape). (Bu, pg. 81)

The survey also asked respondents how often they listened to news or other programs online rather than on-air, as well as questions about their perceived usability of the web site (“In general I can find what I want on WPR’s website,” “In general it’s easy to play audio on WPR’s website,” and “In general it’s easy to download audio from WPR’s website”). (ibid, pg. 78)

The survey also asked about respondents’ willingness to pay for news online: “If my favorite news website begins charging a fee, I think I will pay to

continue using it on my computer.” (ibid, pg. 82) It turns out that it depends on the media form whether or not people are willing to pay for content. The association is negative for TV, but positive for online content. (ibid, pg. 97)

The demographics of the respondents reflected an audience that was primarily female (61 percent), with the largest age range in the 35-64 group (63.5 percent). Out of the three traditional media channel related habits (watching TV, listening to radio, and accessing content online), only the habit of listening to radio has significant negative effect on WPR digital news use. (ibid, pg. 92) Basically, people who tend to listen to radio more often also tend to consume WPR’s web content less frequently. Furthermore, the data also show that listeners who are younger, who consider WPR’s website useful, and who are likely to access news online are more likely to use WPR’s website. Those same respondents who consider the web site useful and who are more likely to use the site are also less likely to be radio listeners. WPR should prepare itself for the possibility that as its young audience ages, its preference for the online medium may diminish or even stop their habit of using radio. (ibid, pg. 116)

According to the data, the habit of checking national and international news was associated with more use of digital media, while the habits of reading the newspaper and listening to radio were associated with less use of digital media. WPR should therefore consider placing more national and international content on its website to encourage development of new habits among its digital audience. (ibid, pg. 111)

When it came to willingness to pay for content, middle-aged adults, who both listened to radio and watched TV regularly were less likely to say they were willing to pay for content. But those who preferred online news sources were more likely to pay. Elderly adults who preferred the online medium were also more likely to be willing to pay for content. For young respondents (33 and younger), there was no correlation between the content medium and their willingness to pay; in general, they were unwilling. Bu speculates that these generational differences may reflect the fact that young people tend to have less disposable income, and therefore are less willing to pay for online news when they can get news so many other places for free. Also, Bu states, “Young people grew up during the time when online news usually was free, while older people were used to paying for traditional news. Each group’s past experience with paying for news may have influenced their present attitude at paying for online news. (ibid, pg. 112)

This has broad and potentially disturbing implications for WPR. Unless younger generations develop a habit of listening to radio, Bu’s data suggest that their typical gratifications won’t be enough to overcome their innate unwillingness to pay for content. They may not even be listening to radio at all, unless their immediate social networks inspire them to do so or they otherwise develop the habit on their own. In other words, the sooner WPR can cultivate a listening habit among its younger audiences, the more likely those listeners will be to donate to the organization.

Bu's evidence challenges an important assumption of Uses and Gratifications theory that media consumers are always an active audience. She therefore opens new territory for audience research by distinguishing habits from gratifications. (ibid, pg. 115)

WPR has many options for building upon its new "News" web site and for rolling out an updated version of its parent site. Based on Bu's research and other literature in the field of U&G, it is clear that WPR needs to work toward engaging young audiences, who in particular are hungry for customizable content on the web. In the case of a radio news Web site, this content could take the form of region- or city-specific tab options rather than one catch-all statewide option. According to the survey data, content also needs to include more national and international content. Radio station web sites also need to include more space for audience participation, which might come in the form of creative ways to engage citizens with their local government officials, politicians, scientists, etc., or in the form of surveys and questionnaires. The web site should also branch into the realm of interactivity by including a blog and a discussion forum, or even citizen journalism opportunities for students such as publishing student-produced content. At a university-based station like the WPR flagship in Madison, this last opportunity is very feasible. One thing the station cannot afford to do is wait. As audiences become increasingly habituated to navigating to other online content that gratifies them, they'll become less and less likely to return to a site like WPR.org.

More broadly, these findings can benefit other radio station web sites by encouraging administrators to think about online audiences not only in terms of audience uses and gratifications but also their passive consumption habits. The survey data show important distinctions between audience ages and the willingness to pay for online content, and also highlight some potentially disturbing trends for radio stations: Younger audiences may be less likely to listen to the radio at all, preferring instead to get all their news content online. Radio stations should explore more customizable online content and include more national and international news on their sites to draw in news consumers and ingrain the habit of checking their web sites. Also, having staff devoted to compiling audience feedback, such as WPR's Listener Services department, is crucial to keeping a finger on the ever-changing pulse of news consumption.

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