

## **LIROFF: THE POWER AND PROBLEMS OF PUBLIC MEDIA**

### The Power and Problems of Public Media

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I've been spending a lot of time in recent days working on the challenges and opportunities of Digital Asset Management - how we at WGBH can derive maximum value from the content we create and acquire

In the course of doing this, I've had the opportunity to compare notes with many commercial producers and broadcasters. Their challenge - in their terminology - is to "monetize their assets" - to maximize the financial value of their content so that it has a positive impact on their companies' bottom line.

For all of us at not-for-profit public service institutions, this notion of "monetizing our assets" is a worthy goal. But our "bottom line" is measured in the metrics of public service.

Our continuing challenge is to maximize the public service value of the content we create and acquire. For us it is the extent to which we can maximize its usefulness to viewers and listeners, visitors to our web sites, teachers and students, researchers, other producers, both now and into the future. That's our version of "monetizing our assets".

I'm going to use the term "audiences" to describe those for whom all of us are working -

You may call them patrons, or visitors, or visitors to your websites, or researchers, or teachers and students, customers, viewers, listeners; even those who will come after us who will expect us to have been responsible stewards and custodians of our cultural heritage.

I'm going to refer to all of them collectively as "audiences".

I want to focus on three themes this afternoon -

First:  
That markets are conversations

Second:  
Understanding the expectations of our audiences, and

Third:

What are our audiences hiring us to do?

Those of us in public broadcasting began life as broadcasters - in electronic mass communications.

Broadcasting was the only game in town for distributing electronic media to large audiences - no internet, no cable, no satellites, home video or DVDs.

We were in the mass communications business, in which the audience is anonymous to the communicator, and the members of the audience are largely anonymous to each other.

And it was all in “real time” - you were either watching Sunday night at 8PM, or you wouldn't and couldn't see the show, unless the broadcaster chose to repeat it.

In those days, we thought it was relatively easy to determine if we were “monetizing our assets” - you'd count the eyeballs and divide by two.

As you may know, in most of the rest of the world, non-commercial public service broadcasting began first, decades before commercial broadcasting was permitted. That's why the BBC dominated British broadcasting for so many years.

In the US, public broadcasting came along years after commercial broadcasting was well established.

So it should come as no surprise that when US public broadcasters looked for a standard of accountability for how well we were serving our intended audiences, we turned to the Nielsen ratings - by then, long-used by the commercial broadcasters to determine, say, how many women aged 18 to 49 watched a particular commercial for laundry detergent, or how many men aged 25 to 54 watched a beer commercial.

Even though the Nielsen ratings didn't measure the extent to which public broadcasters were fulfilling their educational and public service missions - other than by estimating the number of viewers in the audience at any given time - they were the only measure of performance that we could afford on a continuous basis.

The cost of research of comparable scope and scale for measuring qualitative impact - for example, how much viewers and listeners were \*learning\* from our broadcasts, or how they were reacting to elements within them - was simply beyond our means in those days.

So in a world of relatively few channels - surely some of you remember the 70's - before cable and VCRs and the Internet - when most viewers had only a handful of channels from which to choose, the public television station stood out because it was so clearly different from the others.

At least in that limited mix, the Nielsen ratings provided an indication of whether or not we were "in the game", able to compete for viewers' attention with NBC, CBS, and ABC at some level.

And so, in the absence of any other widely available metric, the Nielsen ratings provided our performance standard. It was sufficient to note, for example, that if 50% of the homes in a particular city watched their public television station at least once during the course of an average week - not at all unusual then or now - that fact alone demonstrated that the station was fulfilling its role in the community.

But the number of sources of content has increased exponentially in recent years - principally from cable, satellite and the Internet. The average US household now receives more than 100 channels of video programming.

Add to that DVDs and home video, video-on-demand and personal video recorders, not to mention audio and video streaming over the Internet.

Audiences have become fragmented, and their patterns of media use behavior are becoming increasingly complex.

Each of us knows from our own lives how frequently we are multi-tasking - listening to the radio or watching television while on-line, watching DVDs rather than broadcast television or cable.

We all know kids who access almost all of their media - print, audio, video, directly from the Internet, and no longer listen to the radio, watch TV or read a newspaper.

So media use patterns are becoming too complex to track with any degree of accuracy using legacy measurement systems. If the Nielsen ratings were ever an adequate measure of accountability for public service broadcasters, they are certainly less so now.

The other phenomenon is that we're rapidly moving beyond the one-way mass communications model to one in which there is increasing interaction between members of the audience and the communicators, and among members of the audience as well.

Interactive media are taking many new forms, including the use of cell phone text messaging for audiences to register their responses to broadcast programming. Viewers and listeners and readers go on-line to participate in

forums and conversations, and to access additional audio, video and text which were not included in the broadcast program.

But what is “the voice” with which they hear us speaking when they visit with us on line?

There’s a website for a book called “The Cluetrain Manifesto” ([www.cluetrain.com](http://www.cluetrain.com)). The Cluetrain Manifesto is intended as a wakeup call to organizations which fail to recognize that the Internet is changing the character of the interaction between organizations which provide products and services, and their customers and audiences.

It’s clearly aimed at corporations and businesses - but there are some powerful lessons to be learned by those of us in the public service/not for profit world as well.

The Cluetrain Manifesto says:

“A powerful global conversation has begun. Through the Internet, people are discovering and inventing new ways to share relevant knowledge with blinding speed. As a direct result, markets are getting smarter - and getting smarter faster than most companies.

“These markets are conversations. Their members communicate in language that is natural, open, honest, direct, funny, and often shocking. Whether explaining or complaining, joking or serious, the human voice is unmistakably genuine. It can’t be faked.

“Most corporations, on the other hand, only know how to talk in the soothing, humorless monotone of the mission statement, marketing brochure, and your-call-is-important-to-us busy signal. Same old tone, same old lies. No wonder networked markets have no respect for companies unable or unwilling to speak as they do. . . .

”Corporate firewalls have kept smart employees in, and smart markets out. It’s going to cause real pain to tear those walls down. But the result will be a new kind of conversation. And it will be the most exciting conversation business has ever engaged in.”

Markets are conversations.

There’s a daily two-hour talk show on WBUR, one of the public radio stations in Boston. It’s called “The Connection”, and it’s hosted by journalist Dick Gordon.

Listeners can sign up for a free weekly e-mail letter from Dick Gordon which he sends out on Fridays, reflecting on the programs from the week just passed,

and looking forward to the following week's guests and topics. Here are excerpts from the letter he sent out last week.

Listen to the words, the tone. Listen for how removed this is from the "press release" voice which most of our organizations use when we speak with our audiences or present content to them:

"Dear David-

We've rarely done a show that attracted as much attention as the program we did from New York this past Tuesday. It was two hours with four women whose husbands were killed in the 9/11 bombing. They live near each other in New Jersey, and in the weeks and months after they lost their husbands, they banded together as critics of the 9/11 investigation process. . . .

"We also had Senator Bob Graham, 9/11 Commissioner Jamie Gorelick, and others join us, but nothing - nothing in the program was as compelling as listening to the women describe their own frustration, waiting and hoping that "the system" would help them out. It didn't, and they've become extremely articulate citizen advocates...

"We're a bit sad here this afternoon because one of our favorite producers, Orit Kuritsky-Fox is leaving us. She was only here about 2 years, but her range of interests and her skill at conceiving shows in the abstract will be missed. Most of all, we'll miss her sense of humor.

"Once I get over feeling sorry for myself about that, I'm planning a quiet weekend. Stuff to read, and some sleep catch-up required.....

"Here's what's coming up next week. (He then runs through the guests and topics planned for next week's programs).

"Have a great weekend! Cheers, Dick."

It reads like a letter from home.

Can you imagine if each of our web sites - and the organizations behind them - spoke with comparable human voices, reminding ourselves and our audiences that there are real human beings on both sides of the conversation?

Increasingly, it's what audiences are coming to expect from us.

Markets are conversations.

WHAT DO OUR AUDIENCES EXPECT FROM US?

As a result of the increasing number of choices in the media marketplace, audiences for individual channels are declining. For the networks, for the independent stations, for the cable program services, for public television.

So it's particularly important, in this environment, that we make every effort to learn more about about what our audiences expect from us.

We are in the middle of several major research projects underway in cities across the country, funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

It's too early to report any findings - We began with individual interviews and focus groups with hundreds of viewers, and we're now in the midst of a quantitative study to further explore some of the themes which emerged in the qualitative phase.

But what became clear in the focus groups is that different viewers had differing expectations of what needs they wanted television - and particularly public television - to fulfill for them.

Not surprising. But what was worthy of note was that each individual viewer had differing expectations depending upon the particular circumstance in which they found themselves when they turned on the TV.

If it had been a very busy day, for some the best cure was to "veg out" in front of the TV for passive entertainment. Or perhaps they were up for intellectual stimulation, for an experience of time well-spent. Were they prepared to engage, and be challenged, by television, or simply use it as wallpaper, as background for routine household activities?

(It's remarkable how much television viewing is accompanied by folding laundry. When else can a working mother - and none of the men said they folded laundry - catch up on household chores?)

It shouldn't surprise you to know that you couldn't easily predict a viewer's behavior based solely on stereotypes of socio-economic status or formal education.

Intellectual curiosity knows no bounds, and the producers on the other side of the one-way glass watching the focus groups were caught up short by seeing first-hand which viewers had been fully engaged by a NOVA program on "string theory". Check your stereotypes at the door.

I was sitting next to an executive producer of a public affairs program who groaned when a new group - all men - entered the room on the other side of the glass. They looked like they were just back from a tailgate party at a New England Patriot's game. "Where are my viewers?", he grumbled. Well, it turned out that these were his viewers - and loyal viewers at that.

In reviewing the tapes from the focus groups, it became clear that the answer to the question “What do viewers expect from us” is, in part, “it depends”.

Obviously, it depends on who they are, what we are offering, what’s on the other channels, “how was your day, dear?”, what else is competing for their attention.

I was looking for a succinct way to capture this idea as I was reading a recent book by Clayton Christensen of the Harvard Business School titled “The Innovator’s Solution”. It’s a sequel to his book “The Innovator’s Dilemma”. I recommend both to you highly.

In the book, Christensen and his co-author Michael Raynor talk about how companies typically segment their markets - identifying groups of customers who are similar enough so that the same product or service will appeal to all of those in that segment.

They segment markets by product type, by price point, or by the demographics and and psychographics of their customers. They use the attributes of their products and customers to delineate the segments

The problem is that this approach often fails because it assumes that there is a cause-effect correlation between the characteristics of a customer and the likelihood that a customer will purchase a product. For those of us in public broadcasting, it’s like saying that a viewer is more likely to watch NOVA because the viewer is a 35-49 year old male.

But what causes audiences to behave the way they do?

Christensen and Raynor assert that “predictable marketing requires an understanding of the circumstances in which customers buy or use things. Specifically, customers - people and companies - have “jobs” that arise regularly and need to get done.

“When customers become aware of a job that they need to get done in their lives, they look around for a product or service that they can “hire” to get the job done. This is how customers experience life.” . . .

“.....Companies that target their products at the circumstances in which customers find themselves, rather than at the customers themselves, are those that can launch predictably successful products. Put another way, the critical unit of analysis is the circumstance and not the customer.”

So here’s a clue to how we can determine why people watch certain television programs, or find certain web sites particularly appealing and useful.



The example they cite is a fast-food chain which wanted to increase its sales and profits from milkshakes.

First, the chain segmented their customers using a variety of psychobehavioral descriptors to develop a profile of the customer who was most likely to buy a milkshake. They then assembled panels of customers with these attributes, to determine whether making the shakes thicker, or more chocolate-y, or cheaper or chunkier would help them sell more milkshakes. The chain got clear feedback, but none of it affected sales or profits.

Then a new group of researchers came in to understand what customers were trying to get done for themselves when they “hired” a milkshake. They determined that - surprisingly - nearly half of all milkshakes were bought in the early morning by people who commuted to work in their cars. Most often, they were the only items these customers purchased, and they were rarely consumed in the restaurant.

Further research revealed that most of the customers had “hired” a milkshake to achieve a similar set of outcomes. “They faced a long, boring commute and needed something to make the commute more interesting”. They were in a hurry, were wearing their business clothes, and had only one free hand – they needed one to drive the car.

If they “hired” a bagel, it got crumbs all over their clothes and the car. Any cream cheese or jam, or eggs or sausage got their fingers and the steering wheel sticky or greasy. And if they tried to drag out the time they took to eat a sandwich, it got cold. On the other hand, it took at least twenty minutes to suck a milkshake through a skinny straw.

“It turned out that for the commuters, the milkshake did the job better than almost any available alternative.”

But there was another group of consumers who showed up later in the day. They were the parents who were tired of saying “no” to their kids, and wanted to placate their children and feel like they were loving parents.

But there was a problem - It took so long to drink the milkshakes that parents ran out of patience after they had finished their own meals. Many of the milkshakes were discarded, half-full, when the parents decided that it was time to move on.

So a parent who is a commuter in the morning “hires” a milkshake to do a very different job than that same parent in the afternoon with kids in tow.

“Knowing what job a product gets “hired” to do (and knowing what jobs are out there that aren’t getting done very well)” may be the key to addressing audience needs.



So we need to develop a far better understanding of what our audiences want and need us to do for them.

Research doesn't have to be expensive. In Boston, we're creating audience panels to provide us with regular feedback across a broad range of issues.

While the plural of "anecdote" may not be "data", any additional insight into audience expectations can only help us meet their needs.

We need to back away from over-dependence on quantitative audience data, which provides little insight into effects.

WGBH produces a program called *Between the Lions*. It teaches reading to kids, but it doesn't do very well in the ratings. But last year, when we got up close and personal through research with kids in the Mississippi Delta, independent researchers were able to document very significant increases in reading skills in those schools and homes where *Between the Lions* was used by teachers and parents and kids.

The results were so compelling that we've just received funding to continue this outreach project in New Mexico. That's the job we were hired to do.

We need to pay attention to the individual stories –

The fact that we reach tens of millions of viewers and listeners each week - and attract billions of page views on pbs.org each year - should not be allowed to obscure the fact that ultimately we're trying to reach audiences one at a time.

Here's a letter sent to Brian Greene, author of *The Elegant Universe* and host of the recent NOVA program based on his book:

Mr. Greene -

"I had to take the time to let you know that my 6-year old, (yes six!), son has become completely obsessed with quantum physics, especially in the area of string theory. We happened to tape one of your excellent Nova programs which he sat down and watched. Subsequently, his number one Christmas gift from Santa was the 3-hour video. I was also dragged off to Borders where he picked up a copy of John Gribbin's book 'The Search for Superstrings, Symmetry and the Theory of Everything'. Admittedly this proved to be too much of a challenge for him to read on his own but I am diligently reading ahead and then reading bits of it with him . . .

"..... I really wanted to thank you from the bottom of my heart for the spark you lit in (my son's) heart. He is a gifted and extremely talented child, and string

theory has given him an infinite number of interesting topics to get his hands onto.....(He) would be absolutely thrilled if he could receive a signed photo of you. “

“(Do you get fan mail or will I be getting a visit from the police for stalking a famous scientist?). If this is not possible if you could send (him) a brief email just to say hi then he would be equally pleased...”

While we don't get letters like this every day, I am pleased to say that there have been others like it, from viewers and listeners who - as a result of programs they have seen on public television or heard on public radio, have pursued careers in marine biology, in architecture, in music, dance and the arts, in teaching.

It turns out that, whether or not they knew it at the time, that's the job they hired us to do.

So here's what we've talked about:

- markets are conversations
- understanding the expectations of our audiences, and
- what are our audiences hiring us to do?

I thank you for your attention.