


BOOKS ON THE AIR: THE CULTURAL MISSION OF PUBLIC RADIO IN THE UNITED STATES

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to answer the question about how missionary cultural programming duties are carried out by the American National Public Radio (NPR). For almost fifty years, NPR has been an alternative to the programming of commercial radio broadcasters, filling the gaps present in their schedules. But do listeners in the United States still need the American public radio today, in the times of an abundance of digital audio broadcasters? This article, focused on NPR literary broadcasts, and on the WAMC network's "The Book Show" in particular, was based on intensive interviews, conducted with employees of public media institutions in Upstate New York during the spring of 2019, and content analysis of radio broadcasts. Results of the study indicate that American public broadcasters do play a significant role in the promotion of reading.

Keywords: radio, public media, United States of America, public mission, literature

The very notion of "public" media emerged for the first time in American political discourse in the 1967 report of the Carnegie Commission¹. Established two years earlier as an attempt to study the state of the U.S. educational television broadcasting, Carnegie Commission put forward the idea that the social responsibility of electronic media involves not only academic instruction and vocational training (hence "educational") but also improving the nation's life in a variety

¹ It should be emphasized that non-commercial and listener-supported radio broadcasters existed in the United States long before the 1960s reform. An example of those would be the famous Pacifica network (established already in 1946).

of other ways. According to the report, public television was supposed to “arouse our dreams, satisfy our hunger for beauty, take us on journeys, enable us to participate in events, present great drama and music, explore the sea and the sky and the woods and the hills” (Carnegie Commission 1967, p. 13). Although the impact of the Commission’s proposal has been, as expected, watered down by the partisan bickering in Congress, and radio broadcasting was added as an controversial afterthought (Golka 2004, p. 85) to the text of the resulting Public Broadcasting Act of 1967, the mission of the U.S. public media has remained pretty much the same since then.

The aim of this paper is to explore how present-day American public radio fulfills the imperative of delivering quality (“excellent and diverse”, in the words of the Carnegie Commission) cultural programming to listeners all across the United States. Its focus is on literary radio shows, providing information about premieres and translations, giving airtime to authors and editors, and generally informing the U.S. public about new events in the world of books. A special emphasis was put on WAMC Albany’s “The Book Show”, hosted by Joe Donahue and broadcast by many public radio stations in the United States, which was used as a case for study. The main research questions discussed here concern whether public radio is able to realize this role effectively and whether the American public still needs this kind of cultural service in the modern day flourishing media environment. The study was conducted, in the spirit of methodological pluralism, with the use of both quantitative and qualitative research techniques: intensive interviews with employees of public media institutions in Upstate New York, carried out during the spring of 2019², were used as the primary method of research, with content analysis of “The Book Show” episodes and other radio broadcasts as subsidiary procedure.

The Medium

Radio is sometimes considered a medium that is increasingly obsolete and unable to keep up with more modern means of mass communication. Who needs traditional audio broadcasting in the age of the ubiquitous, breathtaking interactive multimedia? It should be emphasized however that researchers of mass communication can downplay radio significance only at their own peril as this basic method for spreading information has proven many times its amazing capability to adapt to new technological and market conditions (a case in point would be the transformation of radio from the main platform for distribution of family content to a more

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mobile and personal, secondary communication technology in the early 1950s, after the emergence of television as the dominant medium in the U.S. (Campbell, Martin, Fabos, p. 154–156). Writing about today's radio, David Hendy suggests that when compared to other, more flashy media technologies, "its profile in the social landscape is small and its *influence* large" (Hendy 2000, p. 3). Therefore, one of the presumptive hypotheses of this paper is that radio broadcasting still has an important role to serve in the contemporary society of the United States.

The American system of public radio broadcasting is a vast network of over 1000 individual non-commercial radio stations, spread across the United States. In the popular understanding, it is sometimes used synonymously with the National Public Radio (NPR), the largest producer and syndicator of current affairs and cultural programming in the U.S. Unlike the U.S. public television – PBS, NPR does produce some of its shows (Witherspoon, Kovitz 2000, p. 33)³. It should be emphasized however that NPR is merely one of several major organizations serving American non-commercial radio stations (among such entities as American Public Media, Public Radio International, and Public Radio Exchange). Its roots may be traced back to the complex plans of audiovisual media reforms of the 1960s, best embodied by the Carnegie Commission's work and undertaken as a reaction to the various ailments of commercial radio and television that could be clearly seen by the U.S. public by that time (Kuś 2013a, p. 228–229). Unlike the European public media, which are usually funded from relatively few sources such as state subsidies, license fees, and commercials (or any combination of the above), the financing of the American public broadcasting system can be most accurately described using an extremely diversified pie chart, including donations from the public, CPB⁴ support, funds acquired from various foundations, universities, local organizations, etc. (Kuś 2013b, p. 75–90). Since no part of the network's budget can come from commercial communication (with the quasi-exception of "underwriting"⁵), National Public Radio broadcasters do not compete directly with their for-profit counterparts, searching instead for programming niches left out by commercial stations, in what is known as the "monastic" model of public media (Jaskiernia 2006, p. 39).

Every week, NPR broadcasts reach 105 million Americans via diverse platforms such as traditional wireless receivers, smart speakers, mobile apps, the NPR.org

3 It might be argued that this high public visibility of National Public Radio today stems from the fact that it is responsible for production of some of the country's most iconic shows, including "All Things Considered" and "Morning Edition", carried by virtually all public radio stations in the United States.

4 CPB (or Corporation for Public Broadcasting) is a non-profit corporation established under Public Broadcasting Act of 1967, designed to be both the main distributor of federal money and a barrier against direct influence of Washington authorities on the United States public media system.

5 "Underwriting" is sponsoring of individual public media shows by private companies, allowed under Communications Act of 1934 and subsequent acts of law. Drawing from the illustrious traditions of corporate patronage of American cultural institutions, it has nevertheless attracted much criticism over the years. See: Kuś 2009.

website, and social media. National Public Radio is also the U.S. leader among podcast publishers, with “over 20 million people downloading NPR podcasts every month” (About NPR 2019). A convenient way of reaching NPR digital content (distributed both by streaming and as podcasts) is *NPR One*: an application launched in 2014 and available on Apple App Store and Google Play. Among the most popular and influential shows of National Public Radio are “All Things Considered” and “Morning Edition”, both general interest, nationally-distributed current affairs programs. NPR and its affiliate stations are also responsible for the production of many other broadcasts, aimed at different audiences and focused on various social, cultural, or scientific problems, both from the local and global perspective. It should be noted that broadcasting schedules are determined by individual stations, which choose from vast catalogs of programming provided by NPR and other syndicators; one could argue that in the U.S. public broadcasting the power is concentrated on the local level, within the individual stations (in contrast to the generally more centralized European public networks). This allows for significant differences between broadcasting profiles of the many U.S. non-commercial radio stations and for precise tailoring of their offerings for the needs and expectations of listeners.

Public Radio’s Literary Shows

The cultural mission constitutes one of the fundamental duties of NPR. The network was conceived and has been operating since 1971 as an instrument for improving the United States society by delivering quality content that was absent from the schedules of commercial broadcasters for monetary reasons (Carnegie Commission 1967, p. 98–99). It was during the signing of the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967 that President Lyndon B. Johnson proudly declared: “Our Nation wants more than just material wealth; our Nation wants more than a «chicken in every pot» [...] we want most of all to enrich man’s spirit” (President Johnson Remarks 1967). In the case of literature, this lofty endeavor is carried out by a variety of sound broadcasts produced by either National Public Radio, individual public radio stations, or external companies, and then distributed by the network across the nation. Those shows may be roughly divided into five basic categories:

1. general interest broadcasts that dedicate some of their airtime to cultural news and stories (including literature), such as the flagships of NPR’s programming: “All Things Considered” and “Morning Edition” (every now and then they feature segments with book recommendations, such as “My Three Books”, “This Week’s Must Read”, etc.), countless local news shows (produced by individual National Public Radio affiliates) that cover cultural events as well, etc.
2. cultural programs of a generalist provenience, covering the full range of audiovisual and literary works of art, including:
 - “Pop Culture Happy Hour”, produced by National Public Radio itself, a weekly roundtable discussion featuring blogger Linda Holmes,

- “Pop Life”, produced by WAER in New York and hosted by Joe Lee, who is joined by expert guests to discuss significant works, events and milestones in popular culture,
 - “Watch Read Listen Feed”, produced by WAMC in New York and offering monthly recommendations of movies, books, music albums, and food,
3. broadcasts focusing on literary criticism, usually featuring reviews of one or several books, including:
 - “All about Books”, produced by NET in Nebraska and hosted by Pat Leach of Lincoln City Libraries, offering weekly book reviews and discussions,
 - “Baum on Books”, produced by WSHU in Connecticut and featuring short reviews of fiction and nonfiction that has resonance for the region,
 - “Book Review”, produced by KMUW | NPR in Kansas, hosted by journalist Suzanne Tobias (formerly by Sarah Bagby of Wichita’s Watermark Books & Café bookstore),
 4. interview shows, offering listeners a chance to get to know better their favorite authors, such as:
 - “Book Nook”, produced by WYSO in Ohio and hosted by veteran radio journalist Vick Mickunas,
 - “KCRW’s Bookworm”, produced by KCRW in California and focusing on interviews with writers of fiction and poetry,
 - “Nancy’s Bookshelf”, produced by North State Public Radio in California and featuring Nancy Wiegman’s talks with writers of local, regional, or national fame,
 5. broadcasts featuring serialized readings of works of literature, such as:
 - “The Bookshelf”, produced by Spokane Public Radio in Washington and offering daily half-hour readings of books by local and national authors, performed by local voices.

As mentioned above, listeners may access those broadcasts by tuning in to their local terrestrial broadcaster (provided that it carries the show) or by using one of the many digital alternatives, including visiting the show’s website, using a podcast player, or tapping the show’s name on the *NPR One* mobile application. Some of them are available only in the traditional or digital form.

Another aspect of National Public Radio’s “missionary” activities in the field of culture is its vast online presence; the *NPR.org* website offers an abundance of text materials (unavailable in audio format) featuring reviews, recommendations, or discussions of literature. This content may be accessed as well via a newsletter, while some of its sections are presented online in a very sophisticated manner; “NPR’s Book Concierge. Our Guide To 2018’s Great Reads” is, for example, a comprehensive yet easy to use Web application, which helps users to find their next favorite books (Friedman, Mayer, Novey, Sullivan 2018).

Case Study: The Book Show with Joe Donahue

Albany's WAMC "The Book Show", hosted by Joe Donahue, falls in the fourth category of literary broadcasts in the above classification: it is a weekly show in which Donahue interviews authors about "their books, lives, and craft" (The Book Show 2019). The host, himself an experienced radio journalist and a graduate of the local College of Saint Rose has been working at WAMC since 1994 and is a host of the daily three-hour general interest broadcast "The Roundtable". Himself the son of a librarian, Donahue worked as a library assistant and a clerk at an independent book store before turning his professional focus towards journalism; in his own words: "It was a natural extension to start doing that show" (Donahue 2019). Since 2010, having succeeded American author and professor Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina, he has been the fourth host of "The Book Show". It is worth emphasizing that all of the past anchor persons of the broadcast were renowned scholars from the state of New York, giving the show "a very academic approach" (Donahue 2019).

Donahue's employer, WAMC Northeast Public Radio, is a robust network of non-commercial radio stations headquartered in Albany and serving seven states in the region. Established in 1958 as a station for a medical school, with its location in the New York capital, and reorganized in the early 1980s, WAMC is a prime source of political news for inhabitants of the state. This is in no small part thanks to the work of its President and CEO, Alan Chartock, who in the last couple of decades has become one of the major voices in the Empire State politics commentary. Strong involvement in local public affairs brought WAMC popularity among listeners and a fairly powerful financial stature (for a non-commercial broadcaster). Chartock himself argues that in recent years, under the controversial Trump administration, the audience "needs some comfort, so they come to us, because people tend to come where they are welcome and where people have similar views" (Chartock 2019). This sense of belonging and participation, a sort of communion of shared values gives the network a much-needed protection against economic hardships and political pressure; yearly donations from listeners amount to about 3 million dollars (in a \$7 million budget of the network).

Joe Donahue's radio series consists of weekly half-hour interviews with authors of books recently published in the U.S. The choice of guests is for the most part not determined by a deliberate strategy, but rather the availability of literary figures who might be attractive for the audience; "There is no agenda per se", says Donahue:

We try to get really good guests, to talk about interesting things. For example, I worked really hard this week to try to get an interview with David McCullough who is one of our foremost historians, he has a new book coming up in May. Why do I want him on the air? Because I know he's a fantastic guest, our listeners love him, and he's always brilliant (Donahue 2019).

His approach is seconded by the network's news director Ian Pickus, who commends Donahue's choices:

The show's on air fifty-two weeks a year. Pound for pound, the guest list is off-the-charts good. People who won Pulitzer prizes, people on number one on the *New York Times* bestsellers list. If the guest list is A-list most weeks, that makes it interesting (Pickus 2019).

Nevertheless, an emphasis is put on the diversity of the show's guest list:

We are trying to have a mix of male and female authors. I do like to have debut novelists on, people who never published a book and this is their first time, as well as people who have published forty novels. So we try to do everything (Donahue 2019).

In contrast to the previous hosts' highbrow literary journalism, Joe Donahue attempts to move into the popular culture territory as well:

Not that the way it was done before was bad, just the way I do it is a little bit different. I would say that a writer like David Baldacci or Mary Higgins Clark, what we consider to be a commercial fiction writer, would not be on those programs, [but they] are welcome on our shows. We don't do it all the time, but we do it enough (Donahue 2019).

There is no preference for local talents in Joe Donahue's rolodex, with the majority of guests coming from different parts of the United States, and some from abroad. While the vast majority of the broadcasts are recorded in Albany, the guests can be occasionally interviewed in remote locations as well:

They don't have to come here, but a lot of them do. They can live wherever, wherever there is a radio studio and we can get them in. We have done interviews from New Delhi, India, Germany, and England, and all over the place. That's a nationally syndicated show, so it doesn't reflect New York City writers... it's universal in that nature (Donahue 2019).

A content analysis of the last year of "The Book Show" broadcasts confirms, in many respects, Joe Donahue's assertions. The study involved the last 52 episodes of his series, broadcast between August 2018 and August 2019. Some of its findings can be found below:

Fig. 1. A breakdown of “The Book Show” guests according to gender

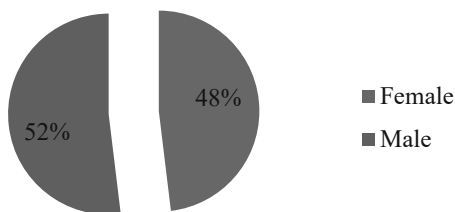


Fig. 2. A breakdown of “The Book Show” guests according to their publishing experience

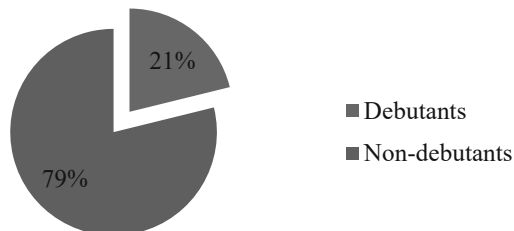


Fig. 3. A breakdown of “The Book Show” guests according to the genre of their books discussed in the broadcast

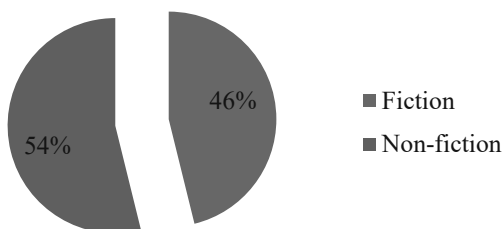
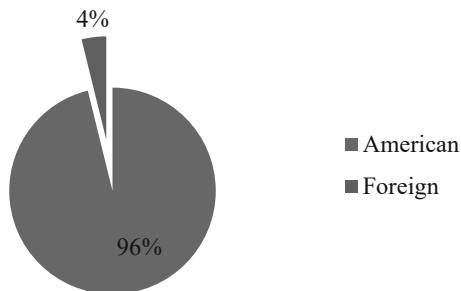


Fig. 4. A breakdown of “The Book Show” guests according to their nationality



Worth noticing is the fact that works of fiction account for almost 54% of all books discussed in Joe Donahue’s show (46% for non-fiction), while recent analyses

of the publishing market in the United States suggest that it is the latter category that gets the majority of the industry's sales pie. According to the American Association of Publishers (AAP),

“adult non-fiction revenue totaled \$6.18 billion across the publishing industry in 2017, while adult fiction revenues reached \$4.38 billion”, 59% to 41% respectively, if only those two categories are considered (Rowe 2018).

This difference suggests that novelists make for more interesting talk show guests than non-fiction authors, at least in the eyes of Donahue and his staff. Among works of fiction discussed in the show in the analyzed period were novels, collections of short stories, and one graphic novel⁶, entitled “#SAD! Doonesbury in the Times of Trump” by G. B. Trudeau.

Some of “The Book Show” episodes are broadcast live (this is a recent innovation that was introduced during Donahue's tenure as the show's host).

“When Frances Mayes who writes about Italy or Susan Orlean who just wrote a new book about libraries, if they are in our region or somewhere around, we do those events live before an audience. And those are a blast, they're really fun”, Donahue says. “We do the conversation from an audience and what we air is pretty much what we tape. We'll take some awkward pauses out of it but it's what you would experience in that room” (Donahue 2019).

Interaction with the listeners takes place via mail messages as well. In the words of Joe Donahue:

My feedback probably goes to two main categories. One category is: “I wrote a novel and I published it myself and I want to be on your show”. I get fifty of those a week. It's great for them, but for a general interest nationally syndicated show – no. So we say NO to them a lot. The other category is... Well, people saying they like the idea that you have a conversation that is meaningful, deep, respectful. And also just from people who are happy that I'm championing books. And that's really the mail. The rest of people doesn't care (Donahue 2019).

The show's ratings depend to a large degree on the relative attractiveness of each week's guest. Donahue says:

If John Grisham, who is a bestselling author, did our show, posted it to his fanbase, then we would have hundreds of thousands of people listening... a lot. Whereas for other shows, when the person would not do that, the numbers would be normal. That's fine too, those numbers are good and the ratings for the show

⁶ Graphic novels use the comic-strip format, incorporating “static imagery and written words to produce meaning” (Skwarzyński 2019, p. 103).

at 3 o'clock on a Tuesday afternoon are respectable. But it's very guest-driven (Donahue 2019).

Due to the specificity of the functioning of the American non-commercial programming distribution platforms, WAMC does not have full control over the national reach of "The Book Show" and it cannot disclose precise data for the overall audience of the broadcast in the United States:

We throw our shows on Public Radio Exchange and there are other ways the people can get the shows. The shows are available to whoever wants them. A station in Bismarck, North Dakota, can be taking that show every week and unless they report it to us, we would never know (Donahue 2019).

The complete archive of Joe Donahue's broadcast can also be accessed via *NPR One* mobile application.

Discussion: Does NPR Serve its Audience Well?

The realization of the National Public Radio's cultural mission has been assessed critically since the very establishment of public broadcasting institutions in the United States. There are several significant charges that, through the years, have been targeted at the non-commercial radio and television. For one, public media are often accused of pandering to elite tastes, without regard to local sensibilities, needs, and cultural specificity. It was already in 1980, during the first wave of evaluations and criticism of the functioning of the American public broadcasting, that renowned documentary filmmaker George Stoney protested against what he felt was "a schedule filled with Shakespeare, BBC imports, opera, ballet", with no relevance for diverse cultures of the inner New York City PBS audiences (Brewin 1980, p. 8). This practice was regarded to be in strict contrast with the Carnegie Commission's assertion that "there is the whole living, meaningful world [...] at something less than national level" (Carnegie Commission 1967, p. 15).

A 2007 study by Glenda Balas offers a condemning opinion of the public radio network's functioning, inspired by her car journey through the Southwestern states, from Albuquerque, New Mexico to Kingman, Arizona. In her article, she recalls listening to wonderful cultural and public affairs programming along the way, "all bound together by the sane, rational, and civilized tone of public radio" (Balas 2007, p. 365). The shows, although of a undoubtedly high quality, were not representative of the cultural and economic diversity of places Balas visited during her journey:

Even as I appreciated the safety and familiarity of NPR that night, I couldn't help but wonder where the people of central New Mexico and northern Arizona were. Where were the Native American stories, the Diné language, the local lore of the

west, the genuine dilemmas facing agricultural producers? Where were the voices of people living in this isolated region? (Balas 2007, p. 366).

Now, does this hold true in case of cultural shows distributed today by the U.S. public radio as well? Taking into consideration the relative abundance of literary programs of diverse variety in the schedules of public radio station and the ease of accessing them via the Internet, even if they are originally produced by a remotely located broadcaster (as described above), it can be argued that the overall programming available to a listener is wide and attractive, if only because of advantages of the new digital methods of distribution. On the other hand, the question of promotion of local authors and literary culture remains complicated as many of those programs offer a fairly universalist formula, with no preference for homegrown writers.

Even a simple query of shows distributed on the NPR One platform demonstrates a variety of approaches towards solving this particular problem. An example of a locally-focused broadcast is WSHU's review show "Baum on Books", hosted by a former professor from the City University of New York, Joan Baum. In her criticism, Baum proudly puts a special emphasis on fiction and non-fiction premieres associated in some sense with the Long Island and the state of Connecticut. Out of eleven books covered by "Baum on Books" episodes aired between August 2018 and August 2019, five were directly connected to this specific area by either their authors (e.g. "Long Island collector and researcher, and typewriter restorer Anthony Carillo"; Baum 2019) or the places discussed in the given literary work: East Granby (Connecticut), Sag Harbor, Montauk, and Great Neck (all located on Long Island, New York), with the rest coming primarily from New York City based authors (Baum on Books 2019). Another case in point would be Spokane Public Radio's half-hour show "The Bookshelf", described by the broadcaster as "a celebration of the spoken word", which in the summer of 2019 aired a special series entitled "Summer Stories". Produced in cooperation with the popular local daily newspaper "The Spokesman-Review", and already in its sixth year, "Summer Stories" features "short fiction pieces, all centered around a particular theme" (in 2019, it was "Summer of '69"), read by the writers themselves (The Bookshelf 2019).

WAMC's "The Book Show" does not give a special parity to local authors, as indicated above, yet the Albany-based network puts an emphasis on reporting on local cultural events in its schedule.

If you look at the totality of the radio station, from 6 a.m. Monday morning until wee hours of the morning on Sunday and Monday, you will see that we have covered a lot. I don't think there's an arts institution that is from here, from New York, to Montréal, that hasn't been on air. So our mission has always been to cover that... you can't do everything but we sure try (Donahue 2019).

News director Ian Pickus expresses a similar opinion:

For this community and for the arts in this community, we're sort of the Noah's ark, we take everybody. We definitely feel responsibility because it's not going to get the attention elsewhere. We are of this community, we are inextricably linked to the places we broadcast to (Pickus 2019).

Some of those links are institutional in nature, as WAMC owns The Linda (also known as WAMC's Performing Arts Studio), a major venue for music in Albany, just across the street from the network's headquarters. Many other public radio stations across the nation can boast about similar connections with the communities they serve.

Another fundamental question concerns the rationale of the very existence of public broadcasting in the times of abundance of digital media providing diverse content. Public broadcasting institutions in the United States were originally founded in order to deliver programming that, for one reason or another, was not being provided by commercial outlets in the pre-Public Broadcasting Act media landscape. Carnegie Commission wrote in 1967:

We seek freedom from the constraints, however necessary in their context, of commercial television. [...] We seek for the artist, the technician, the journalist, the scholar, and the public servant freedom to create, freedom to innovate, freedom to be heard in this most far-reaching medium. We seek for the citizen freedom to view, to see programs that the present system, by its incompleteness, denies him (Carnegie Commission 1967, p. 99).

This sentiment, however, was built upon the notion that broadcasting frequencies are rare and cherished assets that should be employed for the good of the whole community; as the Federal Radio Commission stated already in 1929:

There is no room in the broadcast band for every school of thought, religious, political, social, and economic, each to have its separate broadcasting station, its mouthpiece in the ether (McChesney 1987, p. 120).

In the present day, many of the above issues have been mitigated by technological development itself. Even the most unusual interests of the public can be satisfied by the myriad independent media outlets, functioning in the "many-to-many" communication paradigm of the new media (as opposed to the "one-to-many" approach of the traditional broadcasting systems); this is of course possible thanks to the general availability of technology and low costs of becoming a "broadcaster" on the Internet. The traditional media markets have also broadened due to advances of broadcasting technologies (e.g. cable television, digital multiplexing), allowing for a much richer audience experience in recent decades. Does public broadcasting still have a relevance in today's media environment? Has it been able to redefine the role it plays in American communities?

From the opinions I was able to gather from public media professionals as a part of this study, several significant lines of reasoning can be distinguished. The uniqueness of public broadcasting institutions is seen by many in their ability to stay true to their mission (in comparison with those commercial outlets that also attempt to serve niche interests). Bill McColgan, president and CEO of Mountain Lake PBS in Plattsburgh, says:

Let me give you an example from the perspective of someone who was in the cable industry for almost twenty years. [...] Over those years, I would watch really interesting programming services come along and say “we’re going to be The Learning Channel”, “we’re going to be laser-focused on high quality arts and entertainment”. Watch where those channels are now because of their commercial nature. They’re reality TV trash, most of them. [...] People forget that “TLC” was “The Learning Channel”. They’ve totally lost focus of their mission. It’s understandable, they’re in the business of making money (McColgan 2019).

Others point out to the commercial media not fulfilling their public service obligations and not participating in delivering the complete media package to the listeners (since the Radio Act of 1927, radio waves have been regarded as a common resource of the American people, only temporarily leased to broadcasters, which in turn are burdened with some social responsibilities; Engelman 1996, p. 21–23), even in the present-day times of abundance of audio-visual content. Certain categories of programming are thus still left for the public media to provide. According to Chris Bolt, news director of National Public Radio affiliate WAER in Syracuse:

Most of commercial radio stations are not seen as a public service even though the FCC calls them that and the license renewals are based on providing some public service, but those requirements have been chipped away, and chipped away, and chipped away. So, it’s a commercial enterprise (Bolt 2019).

Another argument concerns the added rewards of having a public media station in a community, advantages far exceeding the educational and cultural merits of the broadcasts themselves. For Bill McColgan, a part of public broadcasting’s significance in contemporary America lies in its ability to gather the audience around common values and ideas:

I think there is a value to having a really community-based focus on education and culture that is more of a community convener that a YouTube channel is going to be, that is a mixture of physical presence and an operation that follows up on what is the local aspect of this, what does this mean here. How does it apply to our own natural environment, where we are (McColgan 2019).

A good example of such a practice would be the above-described live audience episodes of “The Book Show”, offering Albany residents an opportunity to meet

literary figures in person and discuss topics of common interest in a civilized, respectful atmosphere. Healthy, well-functioning public broadcasting institutions might also serve as a kind of a “paragon of virtue” standard for other media to emulate, providing “certain axiological and normative framework, employee socialization and training systems, models and criteria for professional evaluation” (Jakubowicz 2007, p. 185) and improving a nation’s mass communication system as a whole.

It may be also argued that even with the unparalleled richness of today’s digital media, it is still the traditional broadcasting institutions that provide the audience with the most of quality content.

If you go to Stitcher⁷ and you look at the top ten list of podcasts” says Joe Donahue “Seven out of ten of those and arguably eight or nine out of ten are on the heels of an established media outlet. There are exceptions, there are certainly podcasts that have done very well, that have come from outside, but not a lot (Donahue 2019).

One of the main factors that might hinder the capability of independent content providers to deliver consistently good output is the financing. In the words of Donahue:

One of my dearest friends says that every week he goes on and looks at this... YouTube channel about boat cleaning. And he sits there just religiously, waiting for the next video to come up about cleaning his boat. My question is: is the guy who’s making the videos making enough money to live, to pay for his boat. I don’t know. I don’t think so (Donahue 2019).

In some cases, this uncertain financial situation of Internet broadcasters might lead to compromising their integrity as cultural journalists (with the danger of hidden sponsorship deals or unscrupulous product placement agreements). The modest yet steady income of public radio stations and the legal and institutional restraints of the U.S. public broadcasting constitute some form of protection against such practices.

In fact, ideals of quality and credibility seem to be most important values in the public broadcasting ethos, frequently mentioned by the media professionals I interviewed as a part of this project. William Drake, station manager of public radio station WRVO in Oswego, says:

I have a lot of friends who work in commercial media journalism. They do a very good job but in the end they’re at the mercy of whether the company they work for can make a profit. We’re a little bit more fortunate, we have challenges too, but our bottom line is the quality of our journalism (Drake 2019).

⁷ Stitcher is an on-demand Internet radio service that focuses on news and information radio and podcasts.

In Drake's reasoning, these values can be seen as the main rationale for the network's further existence:

I would argue, like a lot of people do, that the public media is more valuable now that it ever has been because of the decreasing availability of quality journalism in the mainstream media. [...] In general, public radio and media is very well positioned to fill that gap journalism media has left us with and I don't think anybody would agree that the main online options and channels are real journalism [...] Public radio is one place where news is vetted and that's being done less and less in the commercial media (Drake 2019).

The other important issue concerns the availability of new media channels for certain groups within the American society and the potential role of public broadcasting in filling in the digital divide. Thom Hallock, Emmy-nominated journalist of PBS Mountain Lake in Plattsburgh, says:

There are so many choices out there, so many options. But I think it is so critical that they [the audience] have public television. We're in an area that is rural and you might be surprised by how many people up here still get their television signal over the air. I know that may surprise many people in the metropolitan areas but that's true up here (Hallock 2019).

While Hallock's argument concerns television, it is still valid for radio broadcasting and closely connected to the very idea of social improvement that formed the foundation of the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967. Available to everyone, NPR programming is supposed to carry the torch of cultural enlightenment to the underprivileged strata of the U.S. population, bridging the gap between groups of differing social capital and delivering "missionary" content to the poor, the elderly, and the digitally excluded, among others.

Conclusion

The cultural mission of American public broadcasting remains one of its major responsibilities to the United States society. The above analysis, revealing a large number and diversity of literary radio broadcasts, among which WAMC's "The Book Show" is merely one, suggests that this duty is taken seriously by National Public Radio. Questions about alleged shortcomings of the programming and its diminished significance in the new technological environment remain valid, but the interviews I conducted in Upstate New York in the spring of 2019 lead to the belief that there are many weighty reasons to be appreciative and optimistic about the network's potential of promoting culture. As all traditional media outlets and public broadcasters all around the world, NPR needs now, and will need in the future, comprehensive redefinitions of many aspects of its functioning, but

there's no denying that U.S. society is better off with public radio's "civilized voice in a civilized community" (Carnegie Commission 1967, p. 18).

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STRESZCZENIE

Książki na antenie: misja kulturalna radia publicznego w Stanach Zjednoczonych

Artykuł stanowi próbę odpowiedzi na pytanie o sposób realizacji przez amerykańskie Narodowe Radio Publiczne (*National Public Radio*, NPR) misyjnych zadań kulturalnych. NPR stanowi od blisko pięćdziesięciu lat alternatywę dla oferty komercyjnych nadawców radiowych, wypełniając luki obecne w ich programach. Czy jednak dzisiaj, w obliczu obfitości cyfrowych nadawców audialnych, amerykańskie radio publiczne jest wciąż potrzebne słuchaczom w Stanach Zjednoczonych? Niniejsze opracowanie, skoncentrowane na literackich audycjach NPR, w tym szczególności na „The Book Show” sieci WAMC, zostało sporządzone na podstawie wywiadów pogłębionych przeprowadzonych z pracownikami instytucji mediów publicznych w północnej części stanu Nowy Jork wiosną 2019 r. oraz analizy zawartości przekazów radiowych. Wnioski z badania wskazują na istotną rolę amerykańskich rozgłośni publicznych w promocji czytelnictwa.

Słowa kluczowe: radio, media publiczne, Stany Zjednoczone Ameryki, misja publiczna, literatura