



SCRIBE



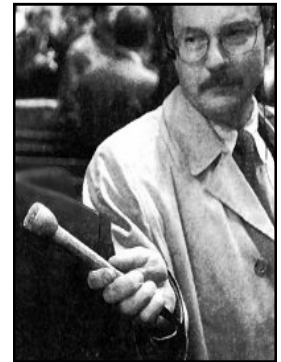
Losing Local Radio News

by Gordon Govier

After helping with SPJ's SDX contest last spring, I was asked to judge Nebraska AP radio news contest entries. When I opened the package of CD's I noticed that every single entry was from Nebraska Public Radio. It

was just as Bonnie Bressers had written (in the May 2004 *QUILL*), credible commercial radio news no longer exists in Omaha and Lincoln. Certainly not like it was when I was a reporter there just a couple decades ago.

I flashed back to one of the sessions at the 1999 SPJ convention in Indianapolis when local broadcast executive Jeff Smulyan, president of Emmis Communications, sat on a panel surrounded by two public radio



Gordon Govier, covering the Wisconsin legislature

This is an expanded version of an article that was printed in the December 2004 issue of *QUILL*, published by the Society of Professional Journalists.

veterans. The title was, "The Radio Journalist: An Endangered Species." Smulyan's stations, with a few exceptions, are music intensive with minimal news.

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End of Transmission

by Gordon Govier

With this issue *SCRIBE* newsletter ceases production, at least as a regular quarterly newsletter focusing on news in Christian broadcasting.

I've spent the last year, since leaving my own news job, weighing exactly what should be done about *SCRIBE*. It's not an easy decision. The Scribe has been with me for almost two decades. It's hard to say good-bye to an old friend.

But 18 months ago I was faced with a choice. I could fight for the message I've been proclaiming through *SCRIBE* newsletter since its inception. Or I could acquiesce to changes that I believe were short-sighted and ultimately harmful for Christian radio. I knew my job might be on the line but I decided to stand up for what I believe.

It was not an easy decision. Philippians 2:5 is an important verse to me, "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ

Jesus." What would Jesus do? I decided that Jesus would throw the moneychangers out of the temple.

Is it that serious? I have only to look at my former employer. After a half dozen years of consistently exceeding its Sharathon goal, the station fell more than \$100,000 short of its goal in 2004. In fact it still hasn't reached its goal after almost four more months of fund appeals.

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"All across America, there are offices that resemble newsrooms, and in those offices there are people who resemble journalists, but they are not engaged in journalism. What they do is not journalism because it does not regard the reader — or, in the case of broadcasting, the listener or the viewer — as a master to be served. * In this realm of pseudo-journalism, the audience is regarded as something to be manipulated. And when the audience is misled, no one in the pseudo-newsroom ever offers a peep of protest."

- from a column by John Carroll, editor of *THE LOS ANGELES TIMES*, May 16, 2004

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Smulyan, at his turn, talked about segmentation in the radio industry. "There will always be some news stations," he said, "but we have lots of research indicating most audiences don't have a great interest in news."

Ken Barcus, the Midwest Bureau Chief for National Public Radio, then responded by saying their research showed just the opposite. People are turning away from commercial radio and turning on NPR for local news.

Then Smulyan jumped back in. "The marketplace determines what's available," he said. "NPR is a wonderful niche for about 1-2 percent of the population and serves them very well. But that's not large enough to be commercially viable."

Smulyan's newstalk station in Indianapolis, WIBC-AM, is the place most locals turn to for news, he suggested, but even they don't do in-depth NPR type coverage. His FM music stations do more lifestyle news.

"I've seen 100 surveys," he went on. "They all say I want to hear music. Don't give me a lot of information. I think it's the ultimate indictment of our society but it's reality."

But as the dialogue continued, I couldn't help but wonder whose research was right.

Perhaps the best answer came a year later when the Radio Television News Directors Foundation 2000 American Radio News Audience Survey was released. It showed radio listeners still consuming two and a half times more news on music stations than on all-news stations. It said "News is an expected part of radio listening." In fact the survey found that news is second only to music as the main reason for choosing a particular radio station.

The 2004 report on the State of the News Media by the Project for Excellence in Journalism called radio journalism's forgotten child.

"There is little academic research into radio, either as journalism or the medium as a whole," the report said. "What research is done is often conducted to persuade advertisers about the medium's continued vitality, usually by gathering proprietary data for specific needs."

So much for Smulyan's 100 studies.

Back at the SPJ convention a radio reporter from NPR's biggest affiliate, WNYC in New York City, jumped in to say "our research shows public radio is the future of radio." New York City, she asserted, had no significant news on commercial radio. There was frustration over job cuts and the lack of commercial radio news jobs. But when WNYC expanded its local news, listenership grew from 800,000 to over one million.

"The decline in the quality of news in radio is frightening," Smulyan agreed. "I would love to see greater depth in commercial news. But what we do on the commercial side is market driven. America gets the (TV & radio) it deserves."

Someone wanted to know, given the state of commercial radio, what responsibility it had to shape public opinion.

"It would be easy to be an arbiter of public taste," Smulyan responded, "but when you tell them what their taste should be it doesn't work."

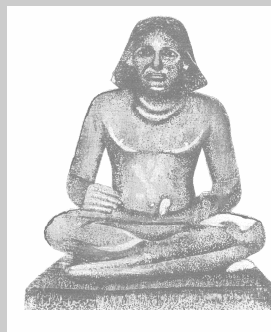
As the parent of a 17-year old, he said he would like to see some changes. "But we cannot change what the public wants. We can only try to motivate the audience we reach to get into some kind of public service. We do have a responsibility to demonstrate that in our community activities."

Another public radio veteran in the audience agreed that it was expecting a lot of commercial radio, as it now stands, to lead the marketplace. He recalled the days when the FCC used to obligate

licensees to do local news, and there were many good commercial radio news operations.

When the rules changed he expected those that did a poor job to drop their news. But he was surprised that within just about two years almost all of the radio news jobs dried up, even at the stations that had been doing a good job at it. "Should we return to more regulation?" he wondered.

After that discussion some nagging questions remained. Did market driven radio give news a chance or was it so eager to trim news expenses that it jumped at every survey that showed people were apathetic about news? How much news is really enough? Doesn't America deserve better?



**Write with your hand,
recite with your mouth
and speak with those more
knowledgeable than you.**
- Papyrus Anastasis V:8:1

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When listeners who are hungry for news leave Smulyan's music stations there's a good chance they'll end up at his news station. So he wins either way. Other stations without a news stablemate can't count on that, yet they seem to believe the same surveys. Are they really being responsible members of the community when they feature happy talk and Hollywood updates, or even the police blotter, over government coverage and other serious topics?

Sensationalism and entertainment crowding out serious news is not just a recent problem. Willard Bleyer mentioned it, as well as the way advertising and government propaganda skewed reality, in the introduction to his book "The Profession of Journalism," in 1918.

Bleyer was the founder of the journalism school at my alma mater, the University of Wisconsin. He taught the UW's first journalism class in 1905.

In that era when radio was just getting started, television was a vague idea and the internet was totally inconceivable, Bleyer wrote "the future of democratic government in this country depends upon the character of its newspapers."

Bleyer suggested that while a poorly trained doctor could not kill more than a hundred patients, or an incompetent lawyer could lose only a client's money or freedom, an incompetent journalist endangered democracy for an entire nation by providing inaccurate information and false impressions.

That's where we are today and why this is a serious topic. The founding fathers put Freedom of the Press in the Bill of Rights for a reason. The republic is always at some risk from incompetent journalists but the risk seems especially critical right now.

"I'm in a unique occupation," said one radio news director I know, upon accepting a news award a few

years ago. "It's the only one protected by the Constitution."

But it's not protected from short-sighted consultants and bottom-line fixated media executives. Like a lot of news directors these days, my friend found himself facing a news cutback as his station put most of its eggs in a music basket. He was able to find a way to keep his job. When I faced a similar confrontation, I was not. I have close friends at other stations who were also forced to make similarly tough decisions, some stayed and others left.

Among the challenges I faced were morning drive news times slashed from five minutes to two and writing instructions from marketing-oriented consultants who'd obviously had no experience with real news. The prime objective was to pump up the ratings, which was especially curious because my station was a non-commercial, inspirational format station.

Obviously a station wants as many listeners as possible. I'm not against using consultants to make improvements. But news done professionally, with a local focus, is a proven tune-in and not a tune-out. The RTNDF 2000 survey showed, for instance:

- 81% of radio listeners agreed that news on radio was a welcome way to catch-up on the day's headlines.
- 77% disagreed with the statement that news broadcasts are longer than they need to be.
- Women (our station's target audience) are only slightly less likely than men to say they follow the news every day, 50%-44%. Arbitron statistics show heavy male listenership in talk/personality formats and news/talk. But all-news is split much more closely (57%-male, 43-percent female).

But a station manager who feels ambivalent about news and its

expense, and also has an investment in a consultant to account for, won't have second thoughts over a recommendation to trim news to win more listeners. And who bothers about what the Constitution says?

As a journalist employed by a radio station owned by a Christian college, I always felt the Old Testament prophet Hosea understood the news concept when he wrote, "my people are destroyed for lack of knowledge." That wasn't so different from what Willard Bleyer wrote 2600 years later. ❖

Radio Often Overlooked

Radio might be called journalism's forgotten but stable middle child.

The medium that came after newspapers and before television remains one that virtually every American continues to use, and one whose audience isn't declining. While the medium spans as many as 47 different formats, many radio stations include some hourly news briefs in the course of the day, and the number of news stations that are mostly news and public affairs remains robust.

Some outlets, such as National Public Radio's affiliate stations, are a reminder that there is a growing audience for in-depth radio news coverage from around the world.

But there are also signs of concern, as in other media.

Though the evidence is hard to pin down, the amount and character of locally produced news on radio appears to have seriously eroded in recent years. Consolidation has made original local public affairs content more of an afterthought. Hourly updates are often not more than headline reads. And the data available suggest a growing number of stations are not local at all, despite a high desire among audiences for local information. The

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Sign-off

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It wasn't just the loss of news that hurt. To me it was a consultant-induced attitude change from serving the listeners (Matt. 20:26 is another key verse for me) to manipulating listeners. Listeners *do* pick up on those things.

Well, I lost my battle. After seven months of "freelancing" I landed a media position with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. It's a wonderful job with a strategic ministry and I'm thrilled to be working with some great people. It's rather ironic too, since it was while covering InterVarsity's Urbana 84 student mission convention that I realized something needed to be done about news in Christian radio. That ultimately lead to *SCRIBE*.

If possible, I would like to continue to publish *SCRIBE* as an occasional media commentary. Perhaps in the future I'll even be able to return to a regular publication schedule, as the Lord allows.

But for now I end with a word of thanks to some of those who have played a key role in helping spread the message of *SCRIBE*. Jonathan Petersen, was my first subscriber, and a consistent encourager. Chad

Bresson, Greg Yoder, L.B. Lyon, Don Rupp, Bob Morrison, Fred Jackson, Ben Avery and Frank Imhoff know how news should be done. Their counsel has meant a lot to me. And thanks Sue Bahner for supporting *SCRIBE* at NRB. My life is richer for knowing you all.

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Christians should reconsider how we engage the media as a whole. We can offer no excuse for being uninformed, and we should never trust any single media outlet as our only news authority. We must learn to ask basic questions about the truthfulness and trustworthiness of reporters, commentators, and media outlets, and we must be aware at all times that every reporter, every producer, every editor, and every viewer comes to a story with some degree of bias. As Christians, we know that truth will always be a contested commodity, because we are the people who know what sin is really all about. We know that credibility is a matter of character as well as content, and we know that the press is interested in persuasion, not merely in the transfer of information. Armed with this understanding, we can engage the media critically and carefully. We must always have our minds set on finding the news beyond the news.

- R. Albert Mohler, Jr., president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville KY

Overlooked

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people who work in radio news are not well paid. Their ranks are shrinking and those who remain are being stretched thinner.

Despite radio's durability, when the subject of the news media comes up, radio often sits ignored. The conversation usually centers on newspapers, the oldest medium; television, the most visual, or the Internet, the newest. There is little academic research into radio, either as journalism or the medium as a whole, and what research is done is often conducted to persuade advertisers about the medium's continued vitality, usually by gathering proprietary data for specific needs.

Thus, much of what people know about radio is rather like blind men touching an elephant. Each comprehends the elephant in a different way. The man grasping the trunk thinks the elephant is like a snake. The man holding the tail thinks it is like a paintbrush.

- Introduction to the Radio Section on the State of the News Media 2004, by the Project for Excellence in Journalism.