

Talk producers make localism real —if they don't burn out first

By Ken Mills

If you spend some time talking with the people who produce local talk shows on public radio, your faith in its future will be renewed.

"These people remind me why I got into public radio news," a 30-year veteran of public radio told me after reading comments from talk show producers in a recent series of interviews. "If you want to meet the hardest-working people in public radio, go to a station and meet talk show producers."

The number of talk and interview programs originating from stations is increasing at a steady pace. As part of our Talk Radio Initiative, we track the activities of 66 daily programs on 49 stations. Almost all of these programs air between Morning Edition and ATC, during dayparts when radio in general has some of its largest audiences.

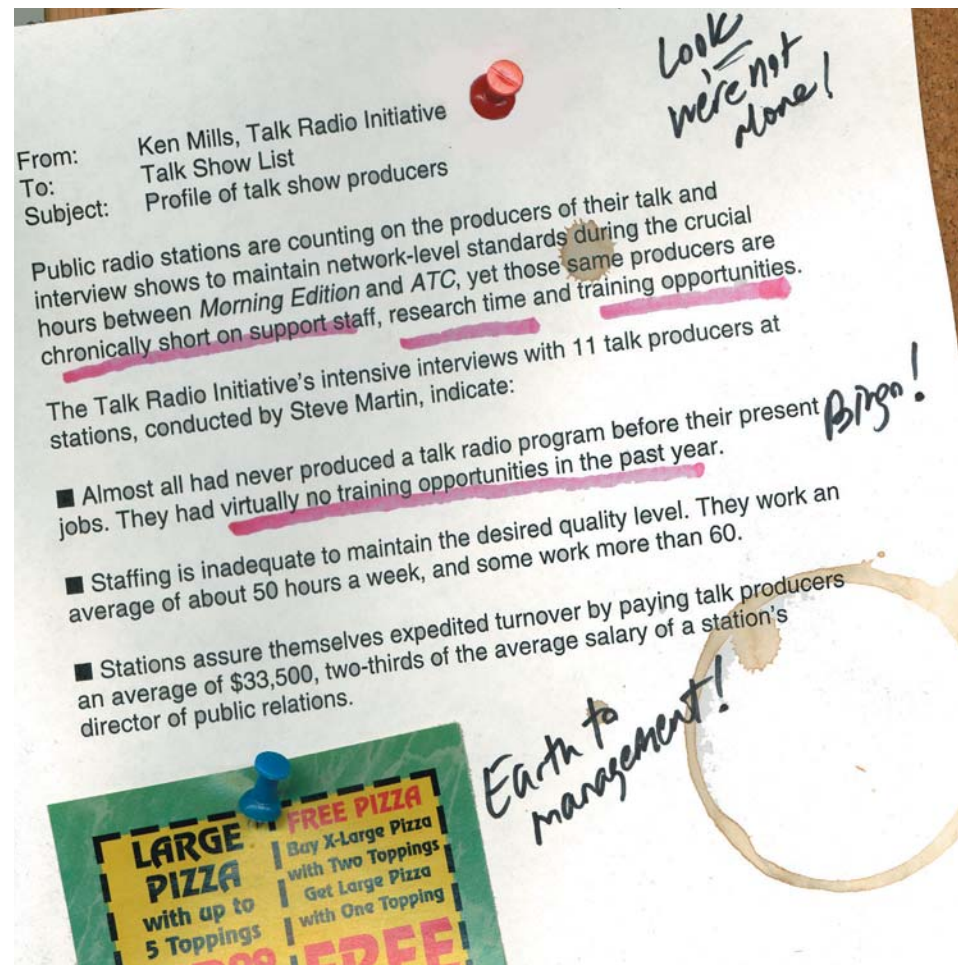
The good news is that talk producers are doing a great job. The bad news is that we are burning them out.

Low pay, long hours, lack of resources and—in some cases—grumpy, ego-driven hosts can make a talk producer's life grueling. Add the frustrations of being on the front line of production with no control over budgets, making decisions despite confusing lines of authority and, for institutionally licensed stations, withstanding the pressure to shine the university apple, and you might wonder why public radio talk shows sound as good as they do.

It is hard to believe we treat talk show producers so poorly. After a couple years in the hot seat, no wonder jobs in public relations look good to them.

Who pays for localism?

Talk and interview programs are a great way for stations to tap the power of localism. They are part of the strategy to make stations more significant local institutions, which helps keep them in business. Fundraisers find that playing a substantial role in a community will bring an institution higher levels of



listener-sensitive revenue, including major gifts.

But there is a huge gap between what public radio leaders say they want and what they do about it. Stations' treatment of talk show producers is primary evidence of public radio management dissing programming they recognize as crucial to the system's future.

The Talk Radio Initiative has been communicating with talk show producers over the past year. Regarding planning and management of the programs, our surveys found:

■ Producers' lines of authority are complicated by having their de facto responsibility for planning the shows without official authority. Are they managers or are they

minions for the hosts? What's their rank in the decision-making process? In such ambiguous situations, toes are stepped upon and decisions muddled.

■ In some newsrooms, managers and producers take pains not to annoy their talk hosts. After a day of slaying dragons or at least jousting with politicians, hosts can become accustomed to an exalted status. More than 70 percent of the producers surveyed indicated that their ability to do their jobs is affected by the host's ego.

■ Though producers answer to bosses with various roles from station to station, almost all who were surveyed said they have little or no involvement in planning or spending their program's budget.



**Talk Show Producer
All Stars**

Pamela Hardy
KPBS San Diego

SAYS: "Interesting to a lay audience, fulfilling for those with more knowledge."



**Talk Show Producer
All Stars**

Jeff Whittington
KERA Dallas

SAYS: "Evaluate the topic from the point of view of the audience member."



**Talk Show Producer
All Stars**

Mary Edwards
KWMU St. Louis

SAYS: "Gain listeners' trust to consider ideas that did not interest them before."



**Talk Show Producer
All Stars**

Benj. Jonas-Keeling
Capital Public Radio

SAYS: "The program shines with research, balance and supporting web content."

■ Though stations have the potential to be major news media in their communities, some talk show hosts operate like music announcers of the late 1970s—bringing in their own records to play for their friends. One highly respected station manager told me, "I could never bring in a consultant for [name of host]. He'd have a cow. That's just not a hill I want to die on."

The lack of training for talk show producers is telling. In our interviews, producers almost universally had never produced a talk radio program before starting their present jobs. They're trained on the job and that's it. Producers surveyed said they have had virtually no training opportunities in the past year.

On-the-job training is risky in front of a live audience of thousands of listeners, politicians and community leaders. Mistakes by the producer can damage the reputation of the whole station.

Doing their jobs

Program producers have a lot on their plates. They not only line up the subject matter, guests and sometimes even the call-

ers, but they also run the control board and supervise volunteers and interns.

Choosing show topics, perhaps producers' most important task, depends most often on "self-generated ideas," though ideas also come from hosts, NPR reports, the news director or pitches from publicists.

These programs deliver "localism" in real time—about two-thirds of the topics on talk shows surveyed were local in scope. The remaining third of the topics were national and international topics with a local person or angle. Very few topics were exclusively national or international in scope.

Talk show producers need to be informed in many subject areas. Politics, government and legal stories comprise about half of the topics featured on station-based shows. Lifestyle, pop culture and the arts were the second-largest group of topics, followed by authors, "news you can use" and retrospectives.

Pubradio's talk producers generate an amazing amount of programming. In a typical year they are responsible for creating 250 to 500 hours of talk.

The work requires long hours. Producers say they average about 50 hours per

week; several estimate they work more than 60. Come pay day, the producers surveyed are compensated, on average, at the rate of \$33,500 a year.

For more than 30 years, stations have relied on syndicated programming bought in bulk. Now stations are comparing the performance of their talk shows against national programs that probably cost the station less to acquire. Stations are sending out their brave and beleaguered talk show producers with extraordinarily high expectations—that they'll justify the program's costs while asserting the stations' role in localism. The stakes are high. Already many network programs bypass stations and go directly to listeners via satellite radio and the Internet. For many stations, talk programming is one way to offer unique and powerful local service. In the bigger picture, local talk shows may be an antidote to terrestrial radio's long slide in listening. ■

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