

The Future of Public Radio -- Jon McTaggart
Public Radio Super Regional Meeting
St. Paul, MN Wednesday, September 27, 2017

Less than three weeks ago, many Florida residents were sheltering in place during Hurricane Irma...winds and rains were hammering their homes. They had no power and little way of knowing what was coming.

Minnesota Public Radio and American Public Media have Board members and donors, and our staff have extended families, in south Florida. Like so many others across the country, we anxiously waited to hear from them to know they were safe. A full day after the storm passed, I still had not heard from one of our Board members. I was worried about him and his family, and kept checking my email and texts. Finally, on September 13, I received this brief note:

I'm back online at a borrowed office with Air Conditioning and WiFi for the first time in four days. I've been thinking about you a lot: with all the expensive technology with which we have surrounded ourselves, it was a dinky, battery operated, portable transistor radio that kept us in touch at the height of the storm as everything else failed. It was a powerful reminder of the value that public radio provides. I look forward to seeing you soon.

During the recent storms that battered Texas and Florida and Puerto Rico, public radio was a lifeline for people with no power, and no other source of reliable information. I am so proud and grateful for our colleagues at those local public radio stations that stayed on the air, providing trusted, life-saving information for their neighbors. In the middle of these violent and terrifying and devastating storms, public radio was a vital resource when so many people needed it most.

I hope we are all *inspired* by that work, and by this self-sacrificing commitment to serving the public. Please join me in applauding our colleagues in the areas most affected by Hurricanes Harvey and Irma and Maria.

This year is the 50th Anniversary of the Public Broadcasting Act, of CPB and of Minnesota Public Radio. This year we've talked a lot about our past. We've looked back at how we got our start 50 years ago. We've drawn parallels between 1967 and now.

We've reflected on President Lyndon Johnson's words about public broadcasting and how "*yesterday's strangest dreams are today's headlines*" and how "*change is getting swifter every moment.*" We've celebrated those who had the vision and inspiration to create the public service we all enjoy today. And we've re-dedicated ourselves as stewards of our local stations and of our shared national services.

Those lessons from the past are important and help set the stage for where we're going next. And THAT is the question that we wrestle with today, isn't it? Our future. The future of our local station. The future of public radio.

Over the past few months, in public media gatherings from California to Maine, we've talked about what we must do to ensure the strength of public radio for future generations. And one thing is so clear to me...We must **serve more people**.

Many of us are investing in new programming, new ideas, new services and new technologies to do just that. We are investing in research, marketing and raising more money to know and to grow our audiences...making more people aware of who we are and what we're doing.

Today, I want to focus on two things that are vitally important for all of us as we lead the necessary and exciting changes for the future of our stations and for all of public radio.

Today I want to talk about **inspiration** and **trust**. Let's start with inspiration.

At Minnesota Public Radio and American Public Media, we are committed to serving more people. And one of the most important questions we are asking ourselves is **“What inspires us?”**

When you look at where your station is now, and you imagine where your station is going, ask yourself: **“What inspires you?”**

I believe that thinking about what inspires us will help us all to sharpen the focus on our future. Because, inspiration leads to ideas, and ideas move us to action.

My point is simple – if we want to **serve more people**, we need to take new actions. And before we can take new actions – before we can act differently – we need new ideas. And new ideas require new inspiration.

In fact, if we continue to find our inspiration in all the same places and from all the same experiences that have always inspired us, we will probably have more of the same ideas...and not much will change.

You see, to serve more people, **even our inspiration must change**. That means making ourselves uncomfortable and giving ourselves some new experiences.

How do we do that? We attend an unfamiliar cultural celebration in our community. Or we go to a museum we've never visited. We go to a high school sporting event or a junior high band concert in a school district very different from where we sent our kids. We wander around a locally-owned hardware store and try to image creative uses for odd gadgets. We attend a worship service that is not like our own faith tradition. We decided to watch a different set of cable news channels and read different blogs.

I've got a long list of unfamiliar experiences planned for myself.

Ask yourself, “What can I do to make myself uncomfortable?” Then do it. Seek out that new experience for yourself. You might even invite a colleague to go with you. Adding new sources of inspiration will lead to new and different ideas, and new ideas will change our actions.

Let me tell you about something that recently inspired me.

During a break in some business meetings I was attending in Red Wing, a small town in Southeastern Minnesota along the Mississippi River, I walked down the main street to the Red Wing Shoe Store. On the second level of the store, the Red Wing Shoe Company has a small history museum. I had no deep curiosity about the history of Minnesota-made shoes, but I decided to go upstairs, anyway.

I wandered through the displays of 100 years of work boots and odd shoe-making tools and pictures of the leaders and craftspeople who built that iconic Minnesota company. But the most interesting thing I saw, were copies of hand-written letters from Red Wing Shoe customers.

Railroad and oil field workers, store clerks and farmers sent letters from all over the world telling stories about how much they loved their Red Wing Shoes. Some of these folks sent cash money through the mail to the shoe store, asking the store to send them another pair of the same shoes they had bought ten or even 20 years earlier!

They trusted that the store would know all the details—the right size and the right style and the right fit—just for them. As I read those stories, I was inspired!

More than 100 years ago, Red Wing Shoes paid close attention to every person who bought a pair of their shoes. Red Wing Shoes decided it was important to really know their customers, and they kept excellent records about each one. And that commitment earned the trust of so many different kinds of people.

People trusting their shoe store. That inspired me.

It made me think about the second point I want to make today, and that is about trust. That's something we, in public radio, know a bit about. Trust is at the core of who we are and what we do – and for the past 50 years, we've all worked hard to build that trust.

So, when we look ahead to our next 50 years, we must commit ourselves to earning the trust of even more people.

In so much of media, today, trust is rare. But not in public radio. Public radio audiences trust us. They reward us by investing their time and sending us gifts. So, how have we earned this trust?

Let's make this personal for a minute. Ask yourself, "Who in my life do I really trust?" Next, ask yourself. "What are the qualities that have earned my trust?"

For me, the people I trust are honest, dependable and authentic—and I'll bet those are some of the words that describe the trusted people in your life. When public radio is at its best, those words describe us, too!

In our chaotic and noisy world, we all need trusted sources. I believe public radio can be a trusted source for much larger and more diverse audiences. We've already earned the trust of many Americans every week. But we still have work to do. Now it's time for us to earn the trust of people we don't yet serve.

That starts by being relevant to more people in our local communities. They must find us to be honest and dependable and authentic. And they must see us as a contributor and even a catalyst for the common good.

You know examples in your own community better than anyone: the story you broadcast that inspired people to volunteer; the investigation your newsroom conducted that led to reforms and needed improvements; the event you hosted that brought people together during a time of grief or

tragedy; and yes, the vital information provided by local public radio stations during devastating wild fires, hurricanes and flooding.

Think about what inspires you. Then decide to seek new experiences that will inspire you in new ways. If we ALL do that, we will create a wave of new ideas across public radio!

Minnesota is changing. And at Minnesota Public Radio we're inspired by how the state is changing and what we can do to serve our neighbors and our communities even more. We've been changing constantly for 50 years, and we know the changes ahead will be even greater and faster.

Your community is changing. America is changing. The media landscape is certainly changing. And what has always worked in the past may not work now.

So, let's find new inspiration, and then let's experiment. Let's try new things.

Let's learn all we can about the curious people we are not yet serving. Let's invest in people with new ideas and different life experiences who can help us make new programming. Let's use all the amazing technologies available to us. Let's tell more people who we are and what we're doing. And let's be clear about why we are doing it.

If some of what we try doesn't work, then we'll change it! We will keep asking questions, keep learning, keep experimenting and finding new ways to create value for larger and more diverse audiences.

This is an exciting time to be in public radio. In fact, a colleague recently said, "This is OUR time." And when I look at local and national and world events over the past year – even the past few weeks – I agree. This IS our time.

It's time for us to dream big. It's time for us to find new **inspiration**. It's time for us to earn the **trust** of many more people.

I am truly blessed to work with people I respect and for a cause that matters so much to me. Thank you for the dedicated and important work you do, every day. Thank you for coming to St. Paul. And Thank You for inviting me to talk with you this morning.