

WUWM 89.7

MILWAUKEE PUBLIC RADIO

WUWM'S NEWS STRATEGY

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In public radio, most stations have made a commitment to focus on the news of the day in their communities. Some try to replicate NPR's approach to news with hourly headline newscasts, along with in-depth stories, scheduled during MORNING EDITION and ALL THINGS CONSIDERED. But most public radio staffs are not large enough to do both well on a consistent basis.

KNOWING WHAT LISTENERS WANT

At WUWM, we do things a bit differently. Our thinking has largely been shaped by four major research studies:

The first-ever major study of the public radio audience was conducted in 1988. AUDIENCE 88 discovered that people who listened to public radio were very different than those who did not. They were well-educated, they voted, and they closely followed the news. The basics of good radio formatting were important to them.

A second major study, AUDIENCE 98, concluded that listeners were likely to consider NPR network programming to be more important to their lives than local programming. Quality of reporting and content were cited as major reasons.

Another research study was conducted by The Public Radio Program Director's Association in 2001, with the purpose of learning more about what public radio listeners expected to hear, based on the values that they held. Researchers discovered that public radio listeners were similar in every market: they praised public radio



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programming for focusing on depth, intelligence, authenticity, civility and a wider perspective. Once again, it was clear that listeners ranked local news' importance below NPR content. When faced with budget cuts, some public radio stations used this study's findings as an excuse to downsize their news departments.

A follow-up study in 2005 determined that the performance of local news and informational programming failed to deliver on its promise of NPR quality. Listeners said they would be satisfied if stations aired fewer stories, focusing only on producing ones that come closer to matching the quality of what they hear on NPR. They found less value in newscast headlines. WUWM participated in this SENSE OF PLACE project, in which listeners from around the country said that while they valued well-done local content, they expected us to tie our stories to the larger issues facing our country. Milwaukee's educational problems may be important, but those stories need to be reported in the broader context of educational problems facing other communities throughout the country. A WUWM story reported by Ann-Elise Henzl was ranked as one of the best local stories in focus groups held around the country. Participants noted the comprehensive nature of the reporting. As one listener put it, "We got the governor's voice, we got the opposition's voice. That was like two sides, I thought it was done. Then we got a third voice. I was impressed by that."

At a public radio program director's conference in 2006, NPR's then-Senior Vice President of Programming, Jay Kernis, said that all local news content could be broken down into 4 different types:

Local : Commercial Style – "If it bleeds, it leads." Crimes, fires, sensationalized weather and sports.

Local: Staged – City Council meetings, school board meetings. As Jay put it, "much of it is not very important in the long-run or very interesting."

Local: National Impact – What is the local impact of a national story? This connects local communities to what is happening in the rest of the nation and the world. This is what we feed NPR.

Local: Meaning – What is really happening to my community? What are people really concerned about? What news, event, person or new idea is making a real difference to the lives of this community?

Kernis suggested public radio newsrooms focus on the latter two categories. Newsrooms, he said, "should decide what stories to own and have the greatest impact."

Our newsroom does that. I believe that is why our listeners respond so well to the stories we produce.

JOURNALISTIC FOCUS

Reversing an earlier trend, more and more public radio newsrooms are adding staff. In the two-year period of 2012-2014, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting reported that stations added 142 new reporting positions. Stations in larger cities typically have larger news staff. For example, public radio stations in Los Angeles and New York have close to 100 journalists. So as these stations added staff, they were able to provide headline news as well as in-depth reporting. With WUWM having 7 full-time journalists in our newsroom, and 4 more who work on our daily news magazine/interview program, we simply don't have a news staff large enough to do a good job producing both headline news and in-depth coverage. So, we have chosen to focus on in-depth enterprise stories,

In addition to general assignment reporters who are focused on the issues and ideas that are important to the community, we have launched reporting initiatives around several important beats:

We have hired a full-time environmental reporter. Since beginning her beat in 2008, Susan Bence has become a resource to the community for environmental news. She is regularly featured on Milwaukee PBS programs, and her work has aired nationally on NPR.

Our education reporter has been investigating a myriad of issues, ranging from funding for public schools to standardized test scores and what makes schools successful. Rachel Morello's reporting has aired nationally on NPR.

WUWM's arts and culture reporter, Bonnie North, is co-host of the station's daily news magazine, LAKE EFFECT, where she brings her interviews and profiles to listeners. She is frequently called to interview and moderate panels in the community.

In early 2017, WUWM will launch an initiative on race and ethnicity. For some time, the station has focused much coverage on segregation, gun violence and other related issues. A new beat reporter will allow the station to expand this programming.

The station has also received much recognition for its award-winning PROJECT MILWAUKEE series. Twice each year, the station's journalists select an important issue facing the community that has gotten limited attention. They devise a week's worth of

programming, exploring the topic. A community forum invites participation from experts and listeners. The forum is excerpted and broadcast on the station. One such topic, black male incarceration, resulted in an Edward R. Murrow award and received significant attention from individuals who would not normally be consumers of public radio.

As funding permits, the station will explore other reporting initiatives, while providing more editing resources and expanding on digital platforms.

A NATIONAL FOOTPRINT

Michael Oreskes, NPR's Senior Vice President of News and Editorial Director, has said that NPR's ability to report on national issues is enhanced by its ability to work with member stations.

WUWM has always sought to share our local coverage with national audiences. In addition to regularly filing for NPR's news magazines, MORNING EDITION and ALL THINGS CONSIDERED, WUWM reporters are frequently heard on NPR's hourly newscasts. WUWM is also a collaborating partner with NPR and WBUR's midday news magazine, HERE AND NOW.

The station makes this commitment for reasons beyond how it helps NPR cover the nation. Our listeners notice when a WUWM reporter is heard on a national program. It is like a sports fan who gets excited when the local team's player is on an all-star team; it enhances our image in the community. Our reporters also benefit from working with NPR's top-notch editors. They become better writers and journalists and those benefits carry over to the work they do locally. And, because preparing a national story takes additional time, our journalists are able to accept payment for their work. In a University environment, this is similar to a professor accepting an honorarium for speaking or writing an article in addition to her daily teaching responsibilities.

IN THE COMMUNITY

WUWM programming reaches a growing segment of the radio audience in Milwaukee. But we seek to be more than a radio station. We want WUWM to be seen as a news organization that connects with the broader community. To that end, the station has formed a number of journalistic partnerships over the years.

MILWAUKEE PBS uses WUWM reporters as resources on its news magazine, 10thirtysix. The TV station has also videotaped interviews conducted in WUWM's studios for its own broadcast.

A two-year reporting effort on gun violence among youth in the city, gave WUWM the opportunity to work with independent producers from Milwaukee-based 371 Productions, The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, WNOV-AM, and the Wisconsin Center for Investigative Journalism.

WUWM also partners with the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, Neighborhood News Service, Milwaukee Magazine and others.

These collaborative efforts allow us to showcase our content on other platforms, hopefully bringing about more awareness, while retaining complete journalistic control of our content.

WIDER DISTRIBUTION

Based on a survey conducted in 2016, Edison Research reported that an estimated 155 million Americans over 12 had listened to some form of online radio in the preceding month, and 57 million had listened to a podcast. In 2012, former NPR President Gary Knell remarked that "No one under 30 reads a newspaper, not 20%, no one." We also know that there is a new generation of consumers who have never known a world without a touch screen. Therefore, the broadcast industry must respond.

WUWM posts content on its website. The station can be heard on various apps, and there has been an increase in usage on all of those platforms. The station has not launched any programming that is unique to the web or as a podcast. Despite the fact that hundreds of new podcasts are launched weekly, very few sustain an audience. While some people point to the success of SERIAL and the menu of offerings from NPR as a reason for a station to move in this direction, we see the wasteland of abandoned podcasts as a reason for creating content first for broadcast, while subscribing to the "long-tail" of prolonged distribution.

WUWM will not, however, pretend that the emerging digital platforms do not exist or don't deserve attention. The station's digital services coordinator is charged with keeping WUWM relevant on evolutionary technology.

THE FUTURE

WUWM promotes itself as “Milwaukee’s NPR station.” We understand that most listeners tune to the station primarily for the great NPR content. But, we want to reflect NPR’s values in the programming we create for and about Southeastern Wisconsin. As funding becomes available, the station will expand by adding more journalists to cover more beats, engage in investigative reporting and supplement what listeners can read, see or hear on other media outlets. This will be available on the air and on digital platforms. But, the station’s standards will remain high. Locally produced programming must equal NPR’s standards so that we meet the expectation of our listeners.

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UPDATE – September 2017

WUWM has now sustained funding to launch the ERIC VON FELLOWSHIP. Honoring long time Milwaukee journalist Eric Von, we are able to employ a person of color to work in the newsroom on a full-time basis for one year. Each year, we will open this opportunity to another recent journalism graduate.

Three years worth of funding has been secured to launch an INNOVATION reporting initiative that will focus on health, science and other ‘gee-wiz’ innovations in the region.

Partial funding is in place to begin a BUSINESS reporting initiative.

We have determined that the budgets for future initiatives will also include a digital component.

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