TRAC media services

# In Search of the Bright Spots

TRAC's Local Program Initiative

David and Judith LeRoy

For over 25 years, we have been studying public television stations and programming; and for all those years we sat on one the best kept secrets in the system. We knew for decades that some of the most viewed programs on public television were locally produced shows. But local shows don't show up in the national ratings, and there are very few reliable ways for people in other markets to become aware of them. After years of schedule watching, we had a revelation. Many of the stations that had very popular local programs were among the most successful stations in viewership, in community partnerships, and in public support. How come, we wondered? Could the programs and the stations' success be cloned?

## Find the Bright Spots

In 1990, Jerry Sternin, of Save the Children, went to Vietnam to assist the government with a complicated social problem, malnourished children. As reported in the book *Switch* by Chip and Dan Heath[(1)], Sternin arrived with no resources; the government had little money for the project, and Sternin only had six months in which to solve the problem.

The usual bureaucratic response to such social problems would be to convene panels of experts who would study the problem to death with papers on water pollution, the causes of poverty, and the lack of a transportation infrastructure. But this was Vietnam, and there was no time for bureaucratic analysis.

So Jerry Sternin, his wife, and interpreters travelled to Vietnamese villages. With the help of local mothers, they began weighing and measuring all babies in each village. They were looking for "bright spots"—healthy, nourished babies, and they found a few. The team then studied those babies, trying to discover what their mothers knew and did that was different. In due course, they discovered it was the feeding pattern developed by the babies' mothers.

Understand, the mothers of the healthy babies had the same resources as the other mothers, and all babies were exposed to the same environmental hazards. But some were nourished and healthy, and others were not. Once the bright spots were discovered, analyzed and understood, the team enlisted the mothers of the healthy babies as teachers. In small groups, they trained the other mothers how to feed and nourish their babies. (See the endnote for references.)

The project was a success, and the results persisted for decades. We use this example because it provides a model for managing seemingly difficult, complex problems, which we intend to use as a model for TRAC's Local Programming Initiative (LPI). The LPI will seek out relevant bright spots at local stations.

In the children's malnutrition analogy, the unit of Jerry Sternin's analysis was first the village, then, families with infants. In our case, we also start with the village (the Nielsen DMA), and move to the local public television station and the programs it produces. When we look for bright spots, we are looking for stations with successful local programming strategies.

Why do some stations have successful local programs and strategies and others do not? If we were to follow the usual model of analysis, the so-called disease model, we would focus on negatives, spending far too much time and money puzzling about why some stations can't achieve local success. Using a bright spot model, we will engage in no national panels of experts and issue no woeful reports about inadequate funding. Instead, we'll look for what works and see if we can clone it. And we don't know all the answers. We do know, however, that we have some great programs, some great stations and some bright spots. And we want more.

**It's Blue**

Stations are social organizations. The "moving parts" are its people. Wisconsin's Malcolm Brett told us the story of the manager who asked a producer: "Is this glass half-empty or half-full?" Without hesitation the producer answered, "It's blue." The insight is not new: People view the world through different perceptual lenses, which can result in internal conflicts between station schedulers, producers and managers. The perceptual lens is attuned to one's function. Managers manage, producers produce, schedulers schedule and audiences audience.

But audiences don't really "audience." "Audience" is an abstraction. After years of studying stations, we concluded that it is oftentimes confusion about "audience" that creates unnecessary problems and conflict. For producers, the audience might be other producers; for schedulers, it might be an abstraction called the ratings; and for managers, it might be the stations' members, key foundations, potential community partners, or the state legislature. End result: confusion.

Viewing is a result of both habit and choice, and the local station's audience is, in fact, made up of thousands of individuals who congregate to view it at a specific time or record it to watch later. Station professionals see their relationship to the audience in the aggregate . . . not the thousands of individuals viewing

**Tennessee Crossroads, Oregon Field Guide** or **Georgia Sports Central**. But each of those viewers' perceptions is very different and very personal. Viewers often regard the relationship between the station, the program, and themselves as a private, unique experience, happening in the living room of their home in a specific city of the US.

After years of watching, viewers form emotional and psychological bonds with the station. Just about everything the viewer knows about the station is drawn from its programming and what they see in program breaks. And, of course, pledge drives. (The average viewer has seen pledge for an estimated 20 years.) This builds a palpable relationship for many viewers. Others could care less. Relationships may center on a particular show personality or host, a specific program or genre, or even a whole station.

The feelings involved in this relationship clump together into what some marketers call "brand." But a television station is more dynamic than a box of Kraft Macaroni and Cheese, and the relationship between the station and the viewer is more complex.

Core viewers possess an enormous number of factoids about their PTV stations and just as many anecdotes about programs and, even, pledge personalities. All of these ideas, emotions, needs and wants combine into what public radio professionals call "stationality." That is, the station's unique personality . . . that which differentiates it from other stations in the market. For commercial network affiliates, it is often the local news operation that creates stationality. In large part, it is local programming that helps establish and sustain the local PTV's outlet's stationality.

## The Science of Place (Or Why You May Be Addicted to Your House)

Psychology has changed a lot in the past 30 years. For those of us over 40, just about everything we learned is now passé. A new insight concerns the science of place—the effect of where we live. As humans, we're social animals, and the effects of place are complex. Our place includes the landscape and the environment in which we live and where we work. The effects of our neighborhoods (streets, houses, restaurants, markets) on our perceptions and behavior are especially dense and subtle. Brain research shows that continual and daily exposure to objects and events in our environments breeds affection for the place(s) in which we live. Studies show that people evolve complex, almost addictive relationships with where they spend their days and live their lives.

Where we live shapes us in ways we seldom articulate or appreciate. The French vineyard notion of terroir is appropriate, perhaps, to explain the regional appeals

of program preferences. Programs that are appealing in Portland, Oregon might be less so to someone in Portland, Maine.

The biological appeal of locale is the epiphany. Local programs, whether they're about local history, architecture, or local ambience (e.g., **North Carolina Weekend, Tennessee Crossroads, Georgia Traveler** or **Oregon Field Guide**) just "feel good" to the local viewer. This emotional resonance is biological and specific to a place and time. The editor of **Current,** Steve Behrens, tells the story of how he assembled a large number of local programs. When he watched them, he kept asking himself, "why would anybody find this interesting?" If we don't live in St. Louis, a locally highly-rated political discussion show like **Donnybrook** holds little emotional or psychological appeal—simply because we don't live there. For some programs, local is local, and the appeal doesn't travel very far. There are numerous exceptions (e.g., **Desert Speaks, Okie Noodlin'**). And formats such as WTTW's **Check, Please!**, when localized, can be quite popular.

When you examine local schedules, they become Rubik's cubes of various genres, organized in a multitude of configurations. Some stations have lots of local sports; others, lots of performance or local history shows. The best stations have a plethora of local program genres that reflect their markets' interests rather than the personal prejudices of station producers, programmers or management. At TRAC, we have identified four broad genres – Must-haves, Lifestyle, Units of Good, and Warm Glow. Readers can learn more in the Oct. 3, 2011, **Current** article "Mix of local programs gives a pubTV station its 'secret sauce'."

The result is programming that reflects the localism of the market/DMA/village. This sense of localism is felt and expressed by the station's staff. It is the result of a long process that may take years to achieve. The other result: viewers sense the authenticity of the programming and reciprocate with their trust.

## Geography, Biology and Bright Spots

The federal government assigns stations to specific geographical locations, creating the concept of local stations. Nielsen, in turn, rearranges the local geography into 210 different DMAs. That's what we have to work with, and it provides us with opportunities as well as challenges.

In the first article in this series we concluded that geography is destiny. The manager of KMBH in Brownsville, Texas confronts a different set of circumstances than the manager of WGBH in Boston. In this article, we argue that biology is destiny, also. Human beings come prepackaged (hardwired) with

a set of responses to their environment, their homes and their loved ones—their local milieu—giving them something in common with the people around them.

There is a connection between biology and geography. People synch up with their environment. People in Massachusetts and people in Southeast Texas respond much the same way to their families, their homes and their neighborhoods. Still, the people in Boston are different from folks in Brownsville. Each market creates its own set of psychological differences. (You can take the girl out of the country, but you can't take the country out of the girl.)

People adopt identities based on where they live, who they are, and what they do. Identities can be shaped and molded by cues in the environment and by communication campaigns. When communication campaigns instill local pride in unique local resources, they promote the development of a common identity and the people, organizations, and environments in the communities all benefit.

PTV stations are uniquely positioned to help their local communities foster identities that will support and nourish local values, and if the local PTV station is seen as the catalyst at the heart of this change, the station becomes a powerful symbol of local identity.

Successful local programming understands and uses market differences, preferences and identities to develop good programs that identify the station with the market and the station with its viewers. Successful programs and the local programming strategies may be somewhat different from market to market—but they follow similar models, relying, at least in part, on biological and geographical appeals.

The markets, our Nielsen "villages," will be the LPI's starting point. Just as Jerry Sternin's Vietnam focus changed from visiting villages and finding healthy babies to enlisting their mothers to create change, the LPI's focus will shift from markets and programs to stations and the people that produce them. How do they manage their resources, their personnel and their viewers to produce successful local program strategies?

The LPI will develop local strategies that augment and/or compensate for the national schedule. It will help stations promote and manage "stationality," encouraging viewer trust in the station's authenticity and relevance. In previous research, core viewers and members have recognized "localness" as a primary asset of PTV stations. Research shows that they are heavy viewers of local shows. The LPI hopes to help stations reinforce their "localness," making them more inviting for viewer and partner support. Then, the strategies developed in the LPI will increase local public value, ensuring the survival and well being of PTV stations.

Sources

The books and articles about the "biology of place" tend to organize themselves around the results of that impact, and the resulting trope is the culture of place and somehow that translates into "nations". So the original was The Nine Nations of North America by Joel Garreau. About the same time Winifred Gallagher's The Power of Place appeared. Gallagher stresses the psychological and addictive power of your living domains, while Garreau noted that shared culture values associated with specific areas were so consistent the nations could be named (e.g., Breadbasket, Dixie, Mexamerica)  More recent work follows in Garreau's tradition, namely, The Patchwork Nation by Dante Chinni and James Gimpel. The latest entry is by an historian Colin Woodard American Nations. We also like The Big Sort by Bill Bishop. If you like this field, called cultural geography by some, you should visit Garreau's web site. It is organized around his three books with a blog for each which has some interesting reading. For example, how social media usage differs by geographic region; especially interesting is the ecology cell phone/smart phone usage patterns by region.

(1) *Switch*: How to Change Things when Change is Hard, © 2010 by Chip and Dan Heath, Broadway Books.