

Local Programs by Design

By Judith and David LeRoy

Every week, TRAC reviews program performance in the 56 metered markets. Through the years, we noted that many stations' most popular programs were local ones. Also, stations with the most popular local series were some of the most successful stations in the system. What, we wondered, was the connection between station success and local programming?

Success has different meanings at different public television stations. For some, it means simply being able to pay the bills. But for stations that are revered local institutions with loyal audiences and financial resources, the standard is higher; this higher standard is certainly a preferred definition for "success." What is the relationship between local programming and community value that lead to station success? This question led to TRAC's local program initiative (LPI), which will officially launch in October 2011.

Almost all licensees have some local shows, but subject matter and quality vary dramatically. In our ongoing study of local programming, two insights emerged rather early: First, only about one in three hours of local content is news and public affairs. The most viewed local programs are lifestyle-oriented, such as gardening, cooking, travel and history. Second, the most successful stations tend to have a repertoire of local program genres that serve a variety of audience and civic functions.

Each production decision affects others because stations have limited airtime and resources. In TRAC Media Services' initial work on the Local Programming Initiative, we recognized that stations had very limited airtime for scheduling local shows. Given the "must-carry" programming that PBS requires member stations to broadcast in weekday kids' blocks and in evening primetime, stations begin with only about 40 "open" hours in a broadcast week — most of it on the weekend.

That leaves little time to orchestrate a successful local programming strategy, so how stations use this time is critical. To study this, TRAC evolved a mini-case study approach that focuses on elements of individual station's programming practices. One such case study is Nashville Tennessee.

Nashville Public Television (NPT) began in 1962 as a humble school board licensee. It was able to gradually transform itself into one of the leading community licensed stations in the system. Other stations can learn from

studying that metamorphosis, especially by focusing on NPT's local programming strategy.

Let's look at the Top 10 highest-rated shows on the Nashville station in February 2011.

Rank	Program	Genre	Rating
1	Antiques Roadshow	Unscripted	5
2	Tenn Crossroads	Travel	4
3	Volunteer Gardener	How To	3
4	Bluegrass Special	Music	3
5	Pioneers of TV	History	2
6	Faces of America	History	2
7	Ask This Old House	How To	2
8	This Old House	How To	2
9	Secrets of the Dead	History	2
10	Tenn Crossroads*	Travel	2

*Sunday Repeat

Several local programs are on NPT's list, including a bluegrass music special, *Tennessee Gardener* and *Tennessee Crossroads*. *Tennessee Crossroads* is so popular in Nashville that it appears on the list not once, but twice.

Local Program Functions and Formats

We use NPT as a mini-case study because of how it has transformed its stable of local program formats to serve various and complementary functions throughout the broadcast month. The station's local programs fall into five broad strands. Of particular interest: How the programs are funded, and what audience functions they serve.

The "must haves": All public TV stations have these obligatory shows — NPT's are on local issues, news and public affairs. Their ratings vary by topic and time slot. General operating budgets fund these programs at most stations. (Stations that are able to get "must haves" underwritten are of particular interest in our local programming study — more about that in a later article.)

Lifestyle: These are series such as NPT's *Tennessee Crossroads* and *Volunteer Gardener*. They often draw higher-than-average 3, 4 and 5 ratings. While the must-haves' furnish context and analysis to political and communal activities, lifestyle offerings document and celebrate local events and regional ambience, or furnish pragmatic advice for gardening, cooking or home repair.

These formats attract large and diverse audiences, which generates legitimacy for the station across political and social constituencies. Further, on-air

promotion around these shows gives a crucial boost to programs in other parts of the broadcast schedule. So these genres fulfill many functions for a station.

Stations vary dramatically in the level of underwriting support these shows can generate. At NPT these titles are not completely underwritten.

“Units of good”: Social improvement series are community partnership naturals. Nashville’s *NPT Reports: Children’s Health Crisis* project, produced in partnership with Vanderbilt University, uses kids’ health issues such as obesity for outreach opportunities.

Next Door Neighbors examines neighborhood ethnic issues. NPT creates and/or fosters partnerships for these projects, and their success is measured in public-service “units of good” as well as many awards (think Emmys). The function and formats of these programs are generally news/public affairs or documentary. One of NPT’s characteristics is the relatively long timeframe that it will devote to a particular local issue.

The goal often is to affect social behavior, and that lends itself naturally to social metrics that can measure the success of the partnership and the programming in the community.

Warm glow: These are often single programs or mini-series focused on large, emotionally resonant projects such as *Beautiful Tennessee* or the sesquicentennial mini-series on the Civil War in Tennessee. They attract funding from local partners because they focus on local history, environment, natural/cultural assets and wellbeing. Such titles also address viewers’ criticisms that television “only dwells on problems” rather than celebrates community assets, achievements and ambience. Underwriters and partners like to support these feel good programs and bask in their warm glow.

Pledge programs: Their purpose is clear. They elicit pledges, attract new members and resonate with the community. Good pledge programs have value beyond their ability to gather fiscal support. They deserve, and will receive, a paper of their own.

The takeaway from this overview of Nashville’s efforts is that “local programming” is varied in format and serves multiple complementary functions for the station’s audience. Each strand generates and sustains various institution-building functions: for example, audiences attracted by popular fare (*Tennessee Crossroads*) are alerted to other local programs that serve the community, educating people and bringing them news and discussion of public affairs.

The mix of genres is a big part of the production culture that defines a station.

Refining the Secret Sauce

In marketing legend, McDonald's needed to come up with a steady stream of new fast-food items to survive and prosper. When the company was ready to launch a new menu item, its president would report it was time to go in the back room and put "the secret sauce" on the new burger — and voila, success! That secret sauce made the difference because any kitchen can make a burger, but McDonald's was said to add something special that set its product apart from others.

Each station concocts a secret sauce that flavors its programs. At NPT the sauce flows from an iterative process among the top managers, producers and others, who continually assess each program, considering quality, audience reaction, economic viability and other factors.

"As a former producer," says NPT chief executive Beth Curley, "I learned a lot from making a program and seeing the ratings the next day. I learned what worked and what didn't while everything was still fresh in my mind." In some cases, the station refines a program for years before any final verdict. In St. Louis, KETC produced its public affairs show *Donnybrook* for almost five years before its elements jelled and it became a hit.

In Nashville and at other stations with successful local strategies, the station staffs routinely examine programs and their expectations, revise and refine the productions, test and retest. What they discover and decide is unique to that station, that audience and that time. The result of the local production review process, on-air promotion, and the appeal of the produced programs determines success, coming together in what our friends in public radio call "stationality."

Just as we use the word personality to describe and differentiate between people, successful stations have their own unique personalities that resonate with their audiences and power elites.

And that is especially important because local programming plays a unique and crucial role in a pubTV station's personality and in its survival. In American public television there is no "national schedule." Instead there are 210 Nielsen markets broadcasting across five time zones. A pubTV station prospers or perishes in a specific market or community — geography is destiny.

A station in Brownsville, Texas, has a different pool of assets than WGBH has in Boston. A state system like Nebraska has more available resources than

the system in New Hampshire. Geography matters because each market's resources (people, climate, industry and educational amenities) help determine the support a local station is likely to receive.

PBS programming has its own characteristic attractions. Some places have more enthusiasts for PBS fare than other places do. Fans of PBS fare exist in all markets — in Odessa and Oklahoma as well as Oregon. A key factor is how many of them are in each market. Are there enough to sustain the station? Often, survival in a market with few PBS schedule loyalists depends on local programs' ability to attract substantial and supportive audiences to the station.

Many station managers manage their resources well, yet their stations fail to become valued community institutions. One reason, perhaps, is that stations need not just any local programming, but a planned *mix* of local programming that serves various functions in the community.

There are small stations with gifted managers and meager resources that produce outstanding local programming; they have the secret sauce. Great managers matter, but so do great local shows. And when the culture is right, the result is "stationality" — a great station with a personality that moves its community.

Judith and David LeRoy are the founders of TRAC Media Services, Tucson, which distributes Nielsen audience data to public TV stations and provides audience analysis and programming services.