

The Professional Files of David Giovannoni: 1972-

How the study of its audience contributed to public radio's growth, cultural pervasiveness, and financial sustainability

Historians have long noted the role audience research has played in the maturation, cultural importance, and financial health of public radio. Other nonprofits, and increasingly public-spirited for-profits, acknowledge the value of public radio's audience metrics and the managerial approaches they inform. In recognition of the discipline's impact, the papers of several key individuals are being prepared for access by Special Collections in Mass Media and Culture at the University of Maryland, College Park. These primary sources, and the audience estimates on which they were based, are essential to placing public radio in its proper historical context.

Reception was far from positive when the Corporation for Public Broadcasting introduced radio station managers to syndicated audience estimates in the mid-1970s. Noncommercial broadcasters initially shunned "the numbers." Hadn't commercial broadcasting's pursuit of ratings lowered programming to the "least common denominator" of intellect? Didn't public radio's educational mission and newly-acquired federal subsidies set it squarely above that fray?

Within a decade, however, study of its own audience had become essential to public radio's daily operation and future planning. The industry's definition of public service evolved from simply being on the air to serving "significant audiences with significant programming." Accelerated by threats to its federal support (personified by Ronald Reagan in the 1980s and Newt Gingrich in the 1990s), industry leaders actively pivoted from politically vulnerable financial subsidies toward a "public service economy" – a virtuous cycle in which programming (the service), listening (consumption of the service), and giving (voluntary payment for the service) supported and amplified each other. Today, managers routinely consult audience analyses to inform their programming, fundraising, and policy decisions.

What happened? How did audience research come to influence the development, impact, and longevity of public radio? The professional papers of David Giovannoni are uniquely qualified to tell this story.

From his introduction to college radio in 1972 through his retirement in 2006, David Giovannoni worked with most public radio stations, networks, programmers and managers of consequence. He formed Audience Research Analysis in 1977 while a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin. From 1979 to 1986 he served as National Public Radio's director of research and evaluation. His influential *Radio Intelligence* columns appeared in the industry paper, *Current*, from 1987-1991. In 1989 he created AudiGraphics® — an analytical software system that extracts public service metrics from commercial ratings data.

In over 200 publications and uncounted proprietary reports, he and his colleagues helped public broadcasters develop their services responsibly and sustain their enterprises financially by strengthening their core noncommercial values. His work influenced policy as well as programming. Many of CPB's funding guidelines are based on his public service metrics. NPR relies on his audience estimates to establish service based fees for its member stations.

Giovannoni was widely recognized as an innovative theorist, a catalyst for change, a figure of controversy, and an iconoclast. A profile in *The New York Times* called him "A brilliant analyst of public radio's audience...quite possibly the most influential figure in shaping the sound of National Public Radio...." The *Weekly Standard* characterized him as "a large figure in the history of public radio...." The *Carnegie Reporter* cited his research as "the gold standard of public radio."

The public radio industry recognized his work by bestowing its highest honors:

- 1985 Radio Research Consortium Distinguished Service Award
"For Contributions of the Highest Order"
- 1994 Corporation for Public Broadcasting's Edward R. Murrow Award
"For Outstanding Contributions in Fostering the Growth, Quality, and Image of Public Radio"
- 1997 National Public Radio's Edward E. Elson Distinguished Service Award
"In Recognition of Outstanding Service to Public Radio"
- 1997 Public Radio International's William H. Kling Award
"For Innovation and Entrepreneurship in Public Radio"

David Giovannoni's professional papers and electronic files, in combination with those from other key contemporaries, are being prepared for access at Special Collections in Mass Media and Culture at the University of Maryland, College Park. They will serve as rich references for the study and appropriate interpretation of public broadcasting in America.