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WILL POWER:

LEARNING WHAT IT TAKES TO BUILD A RADIO SHOW (NOT A PODCAST) AT WILL-AM

Benjamin Payne

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“In 1949, Wilbur Schramm organized a conference of the National Association of Educational Broadcasters, which laid the philosophical basis for public broadcasting in the United States. From that beginning, grew both National Public Radio (NPR) and the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS).”¹

A stone bearing this epigraph caught my attention outside Gregory Hall on the campus of the University of Illinois. It was just one of the many dozens, if not hundreds, of campus markers dotting the sprawling campus, but this one was special. This one called out to me—not merely because it appealed to my inner public radio nerd, but because it built up anticipation for the experience I was about to embark on the following day: an internship with *The 21st*, a new statewide public radio talk show covering issues and topics across Illinois, produced by Illinois Public Media’s WILL-AM radio station on the campus of the state's flagship public university.

"Produced" is simplistic, though, as this program wasn't being *produced* by WILL, so much as it is was being *built*, from the ground up: the concept of a statewide public radio talk show might not seem innovative at first glance, but in Illinois—where Chicago-based outlets dominate the media landscape—it is truly a novel format for broadcasting. At the time I began my summer internship in June, the program had yet to celebrate its three-month anniversary, having just launched in March of 2016. Furthermore, the show had only just begun broadcasting five days per week, up from the twice-weekly schedule it had been on for the first several weeks. Sure, the show had a few things locked in: a slick name, a clever tagline ("21st century radio for the 21st state"), a veteran host (Niala Boodhoo, formerly of WBEZ), and an eponymous theme

¹ Boodhoo, "My Fav Historic Landmark"

song ("Niala Boodhoo", by Public Access T.V.²), but—as I would discover throughout my internship—it still was trying to find its voice, its audience, and its team.

The Voice

"We'll be smart, curious and open to hearing and providing you an opportunity to hear voices from all across the state."

– Niala Boodhoo, host and executive producer of *The 21st*³

As the show's first production intern, I was responsible for executing a wide range of production tasks: investigating potential segment topics, pitching segments, researching through pre-interview telephone calls and background news articles, writing scripts, and—my personal favorite—creating audio postcards.

An audio postcard is a short (usually one- or two-minute) cut of sound that uses ambience ("ambi") and actualities ("axx") to tell a story without narration. Before I began my internship, the show did on occasion produce audio postcards, but they had only come from places in the immediate Champaign–Urbana area. When I came to WILL, I knew that if the show truly wanted to live up to Niala's promise that it would let listeners "hear voices from all across the state", then it would have to sample voices from all across the state.

What better way to do this than through audio postcards? Not only would this give me a chance to demonstrate and hone the audio-gathering and -editing skills I was introduced to in MJMC-252; it would also make my weekend trips back home more productive, since I could stop at various locales along the way to record audio.

² Eatherly, *Niala Boodhoo*.

³ Boodhoo, "What's The 21st?"

One such locale I toured, microphone in hand: the Peoria riverfront. There I conducted an onsite interview with the city's chief innovation officer about an ambitious stormwater removal project his team was about to begin work on. Having recently worked on a stormwater removal project myself in Clinton, Iowa, through Augustana's Sustainable Working Landscapes Initiative⁴, I was able to probe deeper into the specifics of the project with the innovation officer. Thanks to my well-rounded liberal arts background, I was able to explore the issue of Peoria's combined sewer overflow in greater detail through my audio postcard⁵.

The Audience

“...I believe—as do others involved in the show—that there’s a need for broadcast journalism that is produced in Illinois, for people in Illinois...[W]e believe in local journalism and helping inform and start conversations about what’s going on here and what matters to people here.”

– Niala Boodhoo⁶

One is easily able to infer from *The 21st*'s tagline ("21st century radio for the 21st state") that the show's target audience is Illinoisans. While that simple, geographically based audience might seem to some as a typical target for a public radio program, it is anything but: as University of Oregon journalism professor Alan Stavinsky writes, there is a "changing conception of localism in U.S. public radio, from a spatial emphasis—based on traditional geographic notions of community—to a social conception in which community is defined in

⁴ Payne, "Clean Water Clinton"

⁵ Payne and Boodhoo, "The Greening of Peoria."

⁶ Boodhoo, "What's The 21st?"

terms of shared interests, tastes, and values.”⁷ This conclusion was evident as early as 1994, when Stavinsky conducted his research, and yet, the trend seems to have only intensified ever since, with niche programming such as podcasts suffusing the audio media landscape. Case in point: when Niala attended during the second week of my internship a conference hosted by WNYC in New York City for female broadcasters, she was the only participant representing a terrestrial-based radio show; all the other women came from podcasts. All of this is to say that while most of today's audio producers narrowcast to a niche audience of like-minded listeners, *The 21st* broadcasts to a general audience spanning a diverse demography. As Niala put it, “We want to be a bridge for the (admittedly dwindling number of) people who are used to listening to your traditional public radio call-in show and the all-elusive audience who’s not tuning in. They’re not listening because they don’t know about us, and because, frankly, we need to be better at producing radio that’s relevant.”⁸

It was easy enough for me to help the production staff reach the people who, as Niala put it, are "used to listening": writing copy for the show's 30-second promos that previewed the following day's episode did the trick. But how did I help find that untapped, "all-elusive audience who's not tuning in"? Facebook. I used this service on a number of occasions not only help promote episodes to our preexisting audience after they aired and were available online, but, more importantly, to connect the show with those who—as Niala put it—“don't know about us”, but who are, nevertheless, still out there in the digital space. One such connection I made between a show segment and its target audience can be seen through a post I published to a public Facebook group I located through a simple search, called "The Problems With Illinois Childcare":

⁷ Stavinsky, “The changing conception of localism”, 19.

⁸ Boodhoo, “What’s The 21st?”

I'm a producer with *The 21st*, a statewide radio talk show for Illinois from Illinois Public Media in Champaign-Urbana. Today we'll be talking about a new study that found that despite the high costs of child care, nearly half of all childcare workers in Illinois are paid so little that they rely on some form of government assistance. How does this make you feel? If you're a childcare provider, what do other people just not understand about the financial sacrifices involved in becoming a childcare provider? If you're a parent, are you being impacted by the governor's cuts in childcare financial assistance? Comment here, and we'll do our best to read it on air! You can also call in live today anytime from 11-11:30AM: 1-800-222-9455⁹

Shortly after posting this, a childcare provider in Rockford, Illinois, commented on how the governor's cuts in childcare financial assistance impacted her, by delaying her customers' (parents) payments, which in turn made it more difficult for the provider to run her daycare. As promised in my opening post, we did our best to read her comment on air, and, indeed, her perspective made it onto the show. There is no way of telling whether or not this person became a repeat listener of the show (or whether she even listened to the segment at all), but I can say with confidence that she is now, at the very least, aware of the program.

Through this experience, I learned that even an old media operation such as a terrestrial radio station can take a digital-first approach to engagement and audience-building. European media scholars Thorsten Quandt and Ari Heinonen would call this an "integrationist" approach, in which the public is regarded as "an ally in a co-creative journalistic process."¹⁰ By contrast, a "segregationist" approach, according to Quandt and Heinonen, occurs when journalists believe that "one should leave journalism to the journalists." It wouldn't have made any sense to go this route: not only because *The 21st* is a live call-in show, and therefore open to public participation, but also because teaming up with the public in a "co-creative journalistic process" was practically an imperative: during my internship, the show was short a producer or two.

⁹ Payne, Facebook.

¹⁰ Quandt and Heinonen, "User-Generated Content"

The Team

“We’ll connect you with people, places, communities and most importantly, conversations.”

– Niala Boodhoo¹¹

Who exactly is this “we” behind *The 21st*? One full-time producer, one part-time producer, one executive producer, one news director, and me. This seemed to me to be plenty of people to make a daily radio show, but as Niala told me early on in my internship, the show was still looking to add another full-time producer or two to the staff. This meant that each one of us on the team was going to have to take on extra responsibility. For me, this meant training Khaoula, the next intern—just three weeks after I began my own internship.

“What on earth do I have to teach her?” I thought to myself. Actually, quite a lot: how to use the team-messaging platform Slack, how to upload the show’s audio files to SoundCloud and WILL’s content management system, and how to operate the segment timer that notifies Niala how much time she has until the break, among other tasks. As I found out, I was teaching not one, but two interns: Khaoula and myself. As the Roman philosopher Seneca said, “While we teach, we learn.”¹²

I was learning that I knew far more than I thought I knew. And as for the tasks that I hadn’t yet got a good handle on—writing segment copy and making cold calls to potential guests—I was developing my proficiency in those areas by reinforcing them through instruction. Without knowing it, I had stumbled upon peer-assisted learning, an educational approach often

¹¹ Boodhoo, “What’s The 21st?”

¹² Paul, “The Protégé Effect.”

employed in elementary schools.¹³ I came to the realization that this approach can prove to be just as effective on the job as it can be in the classroom. Khaoula quickly picked up on all that I had to teach her, and so the understaffing situation turned out to be a nonissue, and even a blessing in disguise, for it gave me the opportunity during my internship to give, not just receive. Thanks to this experience, I can go into the next newsroom I work in knowing who I should turn to for help and instruction: my peers.

Using Multiple Outlets (But Radio First) to Gratify The Audience

“...yes, [The 21st] will be available as a podcast, although we're hoping even more people will tune into us live, online.”

– Niala Boodhoo¹⁴

Voice, audience, and team all came together to build a radio show, but one that, as Niala indicated, is made available as a podcast and as a live Internet radio stream. Why is this? Why design *The 21st* as a current affairs radio show, as opposed to a current affairs podcast? And why even bother investing the time and energy in also distributing the show as an on-demand product through Apple's Podcast app and SoundCloud embeds on the web publishing platform Storify?

Uses and gratifications theory helps us answer both of these questions. This theory posits that an individual utilizes media to "connect or disconnect with themselves and others" so as to gratify specific needs (e.g., entertainment or education).¹⁵ *What* the individual chooses to connect to has been the focus of most uses and gratifications studies, but equally as important to applying

¹³ Topping and Ehly, *Peer-assisted Learning*.

¹⁴ Boodhoo, “What’s The 21st?”

¹⁵ Albarran et al., “What Happened to our Audience?”, 93.

this theory is *how* the individual chooses to connect: that is, which medium of delivery the individual uses in order to deliver a gratifying listening experience—be that medium a terrestrial (AM/FM) radio station, a live Internet radio stream, or a recorded audio file (such as an MP3). Researchers at the University of North Texas examined this very thing, conducting a study to see how young people (ages 18-24) choose between the three aforementioned media of delivery for a gratifying listening experience.¹⁶

Through a content analysis of two randomly selected focus group surveys, the researchers found AM/FM radio to be the preferred medium when it comes to accessing a gratifying news listening experience.¹⁷ The executive producers of *The 21st* of course did not base their decision to design the show as a terrestrial radio program from this academic study, but the study's findings do help us understand that, even among an active audience of younger listeners—a target demographic for *The 21st*—terrestrial radio remains the listeners' choice, not just the producers' choice.

With the first question addressed, what about that second question: why bother distributing the show as an on-demand (MP3) product? Again, the North Texas uses and gratifications study helps explain. Even though, as mentioned before, AM/FM radio listening scored highest among respondents under the news gratification item ("To give you access to news and information"), MP3 (on-demand) listening outscored terrestrial and Internet radio in all the other nine gratification items that were coded, such as music and entertainment.¹⁸ So, even though young adults may prefer to listen to news and information on an AM/FM radio, it is much more likely that young adults will have ready access to MP3-enabled devices (as opposed to

¹⁶ Ibid, 95.

¹⁷ Ibid, 97.

¹⁸ Ibid, 98.

AM/FM radios, which the researchers note are usually only accessible in a car), since these on-demand devices meet most of their needs.

All of this is to say that the AM/FM wavelength is the optimum medium for *The 21st's* genre, but the MP3-enabled device is the preferred medium for *The 21st's* target audience. The executive producers, then, seem to have struck a balance between the two, by designing the show as a live program, but also distributing the show in on-demand format through SoundCloud and the Podcasts app for listeners who either cannot or choose not to tune in live.

The Final Favor

For my last assignment, I was asked by Niala to author her Wikipedia article. (It turns out that you can't write your own Wikipedia article, but you *can* get your intern to.) At first, I was a bit peeved by this request: "I'm an intern, not a ghostwriter!" I thought to myself. But then I realized that what I was being asked to do was an indication of just how far I had come in earning the trust of my supervisor: in the first week of my internship, I was frantically fetching the host her tea, trying my best to deliver it to her studio seat by showtime. (Only later did it occur to me just how important this task was: if Niala doesn't get her tea, the show sounds a lot raspier.) In the last week of my internship, I was being entrusted to write her abbreviated biography for all the Internet to read: indeed, Wikipedia articles are often among the first entries to return in a Google search.

While researching Niala's professional history for her Wikipedia article, something else occurred to me: people in public media don't always start out in public media; likewise, people in radio journalism don't always start out in radio journalism: Niala got her start in the field not through a nonprofit radio station, but through a commercial print publication in the *Miami*

Herald. It would be eighteen years before she took her first position in public media, as a reporter with Chicago Public Media. Along the way, she wrote for the AP and Reuters, business stories for the *Herald* and *Sun-Sentinel*, and even taught journalism to kids in Haiti. I don't bring this up as some miscellaneous factoid; I bring this up as an illustration of something that I've heard time and again in my MJMC courses: if you want to succeed in the field, you have to be willing to adapt to whichever medium you find yourself working with.

Even when it seems you will be working with only one medium, chances are that you'll be working with two or three media types. My MJMC sequence coursework prepared me to work *across* a variety of media at my internship, as opposed to *within* only the medium of radio: MJMC-251 honed my visual acuity and photographic composition skills, which served me well when I shot photos at special events, such as the show's outreach event at the Boys and Girls Club of Danville, about half an hour east of Urbana. The video I shot from this event also benefited from my MJMC coursework, particularly from the video unit of MJMC-252, where I learned the rule of thirds, something that helped frame my shots in a visually appealing way. Perhaps the greatest benefit I derived from my MJMC coursework came from MJMC-225 (practicum). My three sequences of this course prepared me to work as part of a reporting team, something that was integral to my internship as I coordinated constantly with "Team 21st".

"...I believe that at its best, public radio talk shows can bridge divides, spark insightful conversations and perhaps most importantly, give us all a chance to see that we maybe have more in common than we think we do."

– Niala Boodhoo¹⁹

¹⁹ Boodhoo, "What's The 21st?"

The manifesto quoted throughout this paper reflects the intent of *The 21st*: to amplify a *voice* that speaks to the richness and diversity of Illinois, to serve an *audience* that listens to the program as much as it engages in discussion—be it on-air or online—with the program, and to assemble a *team* that works—and learns—together to make a public radio program (not a podcast) in a place where it simply did not exist before: Illinois (not Chicago).

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