

The Great Leap of Faith

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There is a poster hanging on the wall in my office, created by Jane Evershed. I got it when I was program director at a Community Radio station, about to lead the station through a major programming change. The poster depicts a woman in mid-flight, leaping over the abyss between two cliffs. The poster is titled *The Great Leap of Faith: It's yours—take it!* The caption reads “Leap like a lunatic over the chasm below, erupting as you go, your true self awaits you—now you will know!”

It looks like the leaping woman will make it to the other side, but you never know.

The woman knows what's on the cliff that she's leaving. We can assume she has some idea of what's on the cliff she's headed towards, but having never been there, she can't be certain what she'll find, how she'll feel when she gets there, whether she'll land on her feet.

She could have stayed where she was, in the known. She could probably have survived there—maybe even done quite well there—for a number of years. But she was at the edge of what that world has to offer. By taking the leap she could be risking everything—she could fall into the chasm; she could land badly on the other side and break her legs; she could find the climate hostile to her values and the ways of being dangerous to her soul. Under the best circumstances, she will find an unfamiliar landscape which will require her to discover and learn new ways of coping.

Of course, this is not at all unlike the place in which Community Radio finds itself in 2006. For those of us in our 40's or older, so much of the world we grew up with has changed. Without even mentioning the profound political and economic changes and the increasing threats to the survival of our planet and our species, we can identify several deeply significant changes that have had—and will continue to have—considerable impact on us as Community Radio stations and producers.

- Changing demographics. The population of the United States is changing. It is becoming less European in origin, and more Latino and Asian/Pacific Islander in origin. In California, people of European descent are once again in the minority.
- Changing technology. The advent of the Internet and all things digital has changed everything—how we get news; buy music; book plane flights; trade stocks; order clothes; organize demonstrations; conduct research; watch TV; talk on the phone; pay bills; communicate with friends and family.
- Changing media.
 - Media consolidation means fewer companies control more media.
 - Vertical integration means that one corporation owns the commercial radio station that plays the music, the record label that records the artist, the concert hall where the artist performs, the outdoor billboards that promote the concert and the CD.
 - Everyone with a computer and some inexpensive software can create their own blogs, their own podcasts, their own streams, their own CDs, their own newscasts, their own radio stations. The first photos of the London

subway bombings to air on the BBC came from the cell phones of people in the stations.

- Within a very short amount of time, some form of hand-held device will deliver phone calls, text messaging, high quality videos, photos, emails, podcasts, high quality music, and—maybe—radio signals. People will plug into headphones or plug their device into their car system and be able to listen to what they want to all the time. There is tremendous competition for the attention of listeners. (These devices already exist, but are expensive. In time, the cost will come down and they might be as ubiquitous as cell phones are now).
- We're in a My Time world. Media consumers—especially people younger than 50—expect to be able to watch and listen on their own time.
- Everything (almost) is available everywhere (almost). There are thousands of radio stations and music streams now available on the internet. There are two satellite radio companies beaming over 100 channels of music and information to subscribers. Listeners are not stuck with what is available locally.
- The rules of engagement have changed. Media “consumers” have become media “creators”. There may be 5 media giants who control most of what we watch, read and listen to, but there are ways around them, and they are growing more powerful. People—especially young people—want to be part of a conversation with media.

The Community Radio Glass is Half Empty.

The external environment is putting tremendous new pressures on Community Radio. There are also some big internal factors that could make it seem as if Community Radio stations are in trouble.

- Most Community Radio station managers are in their first position of executive leadership. Their only management training has been on the job. They have had no leadership training.
- Many Community Radio station managers are nearing retirement age. The economics of most CR stations means two things: many people cannot afford to retire; and succession planning is hampered by stations' inability to hire assistant managers who can be trained to take over.
- Most CR managers began their careers in a pre-digital age. The number of new technological developments and the speed at which they are coming at us, are overwhelming to people not raised in that culture.
- Many CR stations have youth training projects, and hundreds of students have been trained in the art of audio production. More often than not, the students' work is ghettoized—you will only hear young producers during the “youth hour”, and stations have been unsuccessful at integrating young producers into the mainstream of the stations.
- Many CR stations intend to serve the diverse racial and ethnic communities in their locales, but have been unsuccessful at bringing those communities into full participation in the station.
- Many rural CR stations have a hard time finding and keeping good volunteers.

- Many CR stations have no reliable audience research, and many that do don't trust it or use it.
- Many CR stations still struggle to make programming changes. Programs are rarely removed from the air; new programs (meaning new voices) can only be added by chopping off time from existing programs. Program schedules are not listener-friendly.
- Many CR stations' websites are not audience-focused. Program grids begin at midnight and/or are unreadable; content rarely changes; content assumes that visitors are either insiders or deeply interested in "inside the station" politics.
- Many CR stations struggle to meet fundraising goals, drive listeners away with long on-air pledge drives, pay low wages, and have few resources to develop new programs, upgrade equipment or hire staff.
- The typical fundraising model used by most CR stations (membership, underwriting, major gifts) does not work at CR stations that primarily serve low income people.

The Community Radio Station Glass is Half Full.

On the other hand, Community Radio is in the right place at the right time.

- Many CR stations are valued community institutions. They are part of the fabric of the community. (We know of one station where 100% of the local businesses underwrite the station).
- CR stations are deeply connected to their communities; they know the issues, the people, the history.
- Many CR stations are their community's only local electronic media. As such, the stations are the source of information about local government, local events, and emergencies. They give access to local artists and new voices.
- Low Power FM stations are popping up all over the country and enabling communities to talk about what's really important to them.
- Most of the programming on most CR stations is created locally. With few exceptions, CR stations broadcasting nationally syndicated programs are still producing the majority of the content they are broadcasting.
- Many CR stations operate with a great deal of transparency and with at least some degree of democracy. While there may be hierarchies, CR stations tend to be on the side of more collaboration rather than the side of top-down organizations.
- Community Radio stations are already having some kinds of conversations with their listeners. The unfiltered voices of ordinary people are heard in talk shows, news stories, and through the volunteer programmers.
- Community Radio stations broadcast an enormous diversity of content.
- Community Radio stations do not stick to the mainstream. They play music that breaks new artists and that breaks format; they cover stories and issues ignored by other media; they provided analysts with fresh and daring perspectives.
- Community Radio stations have a network of stations (and a Federation) that share their values.

- There is a growing Media Democracy/Media Reform movement. Community Radio is a part of that movement and is a model of responsive, accessible, diverse, community-controlled media.
- Most of the people who work at most CR stations are passionate, committed, and want to make life better for their communities.

Which Community?

One criticism of Community Radio stations is that we are too broad. We try to be all things to all people and end up serving few. Most CR stations are multi-format, and even multi-multi format, broadcasting many different genres of music, plus information programming, plus arts programming (drama, literature, etc.) and frequently in more than one language. Given what we know about how people listen to the radio (and there's no reason to think there is a special category of "Community Radio" listeners), why do we continue to do this? Every time a radio station changes format—from music to information, from English to Spanish, from reggae to bluegrass, listeners go away.

Another criticism of Community Radio stations is that we are too narrow. We are only or primarily interested in talking to people who we think will advance the same political agenda that we have. We interview people who agree with us and we don't ask them hard questions. We talk to radicals but we disdain liberals (and conservatives dominate the rest of the media, so why should we even bother with them). I worked at a station where the Music Director became apoplectic because one of the DJs played a song by Stevie Wonder. The Music Director thought that all commercial music should be banned.

In the late 1960's and throughout the 1970's, political and cultural movements based on identity exploded—Black Power, La Raza, the American Indian Movement, Women's Liberation, Gay Liberation, Disability Rights, among others. Many Community Radio stations responded to these movements, and in fact, were part of these movements. Every group wanted to be heard, every group wanted to define itself and its issues and talk about itself to its group members and (sometimes) to the world. Community Radio stations found this very much in keeping with station missions and a completely legitimate use of airtime.

Many stations still operate this way. Every group has its hour or two of programming a week or a month. And many stations still feel intense pressure from community groups to continue programming this way. Every group has a point of view and every group wants it heard. If Community Radio is not for this, what is it for?

The American people, the people who live in our communities, are incredibly polarized. I don't think Community Radio has created this problem, but I'm not sure Community Radio is doing much to address it either, and it may be that this is one of the greatest public services that we can provide.

Who is on the air at your station? Who produces and hosts the prime time information programs? Are the African-Americans primarily hosting the "African-American" shows, the Latinos the "Latino" shows? The women the "women's" shows? Who hosts the

“mainstream” shows? Who hosts the labor program? Who hosts the programs that talk about environmental issues, city government, education, agricultural issues, health? If we believe that there is a legitimate “ethnic” perspective on “ethnic” issues, why isn’t that perspective legitimate on all issues? Who isn’t concerned about the environment, government, education, etc? Why is the dominant culture in any community allowed to be the voice that defines the dominant issues?

Who are the guests on all these programs? Even if we are primarily committed to hearing the voices of the “progressive communities”, can we cast a wider net? How often do we include the local leaders of the “mainstream” (more middle class) political organizations (like the NAACP) as opposed to the more radical, “alternative” organizations?

How often do we use our airwaves to **really** foster dialogue, to **really** encourage people to find common ground? Is this one of the values of the station? Are program hosts encouraged to do this? Are they taught how?

I would suggest that this is an area that Community Radio can grow into. We can take a significant leadership role in our communities by making our stations **the** place to hear what’s really going on, how lots of people are thinking and what they’re thinking about, where there is agreement on issues, where there isn’t. We can be the catalyst for coalition-building in our communities.

In order to do this, we have to be willing to make changes.

So What?

Community Radio is facing enormous challenges. We also have tremendous strengths. The question is, how can we bring our strengths to bear on these challenges?

How do we strengthen and extend the Community Radio brand if you will (forgive me, I hate that term) to keep the attention of our current listeners and attract new listeners? How do we encourage people to embrace the values of localism, transparency, accessibility, diversity?

Is our future in creating, organizing and delivering content? What will our unique offerings be? Will people listen to us because they trust us? Because they share our values? Because they value us as institutions? Because they like the way we organize content? Because they like our DJs and program hosts? Because in times of crisis (political, environmental, natural) they can count on us for critical information?

Will our offerings be important enough to people that they will continue to pay us?

Are we satisfied with the number of listeners we have? Do we even know how many that is? Do we care? Do we have other ways of measuring our impact on people? Are we satisfied that we are having the kind of impact we want on the number of people we want?

Are we reaching everyone in our communities that we want to be reaching? How do we know? Do we have a clear idea of who that is, or is our target audience “everyone”? As the population of our signal area changes, are we doing anything differently?

What kinds of conversations are we having with our listeners? Whose needs are they meeting? Are we enabling listeners to have conversations with each other? Is that important?

Is it necessary to invest resources in every new technology? What do we lose if we don't podcast our public affairs programs? If we don't stream our signal or add a second non-broadcast stream? If we don't update our website regularly? How do we choose among all the demands on our limited resources? Do we know which are more likely to produce short-term revenues? Long-term revenues?

Will we be media centers where people learn to use technology to create their own content? Will we be trainers, teaching journalism, announcing, documentary production, creative music programming?

Lead Us Into Temptation

This is not a call for a 5 year plan. Rather, it is a call for leadership. It is a call for knowing how to lead your station through change—whatever the change may be.

Leadership starts with vision—not planning, but vision. What is your vision for your station? Where do you want it to be in 5 years?

Are you having this conversation at your station? Who else is in the conversation? Who else would you like to be in the conversation?

Are there other organizations in your community that are having similar conversations? Do you talk to them? Are there other organizations who share at least some of your values—community media, technology centers, community colleges—with whom you can create alliances/partnerships/coalitions?

What are you doing to prepare your station for change, and to help everyone—staff, board, volunteers, listeners, other stakeholders—cope as they struggle through change?

The Answer

Ha. Nobody knows **the** answer. There is no “right” answer. There are lots of questions, and there are answers that may be right for you.

You will make mistakes. You will not succeed in everything you do. (Or you might—and lots of people are more afraid of success than they are of failure). Any movement forward involves risk—the risk of failure. On the other hand, standing still involves risk, too.

The only thing we know for sure is that we—our enterprise, our world of Community Radio—we are in the middle of enormous change. That doesn't mean that we have to change, or that we have to change everything. But we have to decide—whether to change, what to change, when to change, how to change.

Does our “true self” await us on the other side? There's only one way to find out.

Ginny Z. Berson
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