

Running head: Radio for the People, By the People

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A Mini-ethnography of WDVR-FM in Sergeantsville, N.J.

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to report on my observations regarding the social practices, organizational structure and communication at WDVR-FM, an all-volunteer, community radio station in the town of Sergeantsville, New Jersey. I visited the station on five occasions from Oct. 1 to Nov. 3, 2011, spending at least an hour each time, and interviewed the co-founder and general manager as well as several volunteers including the office manager and several DJs. For almost 22 years, WDVR has operated without benefit of a written set of rules or top-down guidelines for its volunteer staff. What I found instead was a highly informal, participatory culture and sense of "family" that creates a strong communal spirit. At the heart of everything, though, is an abiding love of music as well as an appreciation by the DJs of the freedom they are given to play and say what they want, along with the responsibility that goes along with that. It all makes for an independent and idiosyncratic organization that stands out from the crowd of corporate, for-profit radio stations, or even government-funded ones, and is a true reflection of the community it serves.

Introduction

If you happen to be driving through bucolic Delaware Township (pop: 4,563), or live anywhere near the rural central New Jersey community, and tune your FM radio dial to 89.7, you never know what you're likely to hear.

If it's noon on a Monday, it might be Bill Monroe picking and singing "Blue Moon of

Kentucky." On Wednesday evening, you might catch Victoria and Rosalind Davis chatting about the latest local news and gossip. It's wall-to-wall Dylan from 7 p.m. to 10 p.m. on Thursdays, and Saturday night features "Heartlands Hayride," live country music broadcast from a 113 year-old Gothic Revival style church just down the road from the studios of WDVR in Sergeantsville, NJ. (pronounced "SIR-gints-ville") On Sunday mornings, you can hear local clergy sermonize on how to save your soul.

This eclectic, 4,800-watt-powered blend of music, talk and community service comes to listeners from what used to be the town blacksmith shop, a two-story circa-1830 fieldstone building near the main intersection controlled by a blinking red light. Run entirely by volunteers, WDVR is one of about a dozen community radio stations in the state of New Jersey. Community radio stations, both full- and low-power (100 watts), are non-commercial and non-profit and unlike National Public Radio outlets, broadcast mostly locally produced content, typically by unpaid, non-professionals. They rely entirely on contributions from their listeners.

The organization structure of WDVR could be described as more participatory as opposed to hierarchical. The volunteers for the most part determine the musical makeup of the station, run fundraising drives and generally keep things moving. According to one scholar, "without these volunteers of good heart and diverse experience, community radio would be out of business."

(Dunaway, 1998)

As an occasional WDVR listener and contributor myself, I wanted to know what made this place tick. How does a station that's a throwback to the Golden Age of radio, that's run on a shoestring with no paid staff and no set format, musical or otherwise, survive in the digital age? How does a group of regular townfolk with no background in radio, from construction workers to retired judges, and with diverse musical tastes, political views and temperaments, keep the

whole thing, well, if not exactly running smoothly all the time, at least on the air for the better part of the past two decades?

Observations

Enter the "offices" of WDVR and you feel as if you've stepped back in time, or like you've slipped into an old worn pair of jeans. The "lobby" is cluttered with old table-top radios and boxes of CDs and records for an upcoming garage sale; a sign advertising a local Pumpkin Fest; two boxes of Dunkin' Donuts; a whiteboard on the floor has funeral information for a listener who recent passed away; a waste can that sits atop some mailbox cubbies near the ceiling has a sign on it that reads: "Don't move this bucket. It catches leaks"; the hallway leading to the back is lined with signed photographs of artists who've stopped by or just listened to the station over the years: Bobby Rydell, Ralph Stanley, Loretta Lynn, Moe Bandy, Joe Ely and Riders in the Sky ("To Frank and Ginny.")

Frank is Frank Napurano, or Frank Nap as he's more commonly know, the co-founder and general manager of WDVR. Ginny, his wife of 53 years and operations manager at the station, died last year of pancreatic cancer. At 6 p.m. on Friday nights Frank, a retired engineer, can be found behind a microphone in Studio A hosting "The Country Store," where he plays two hours of traditional country music, comments on the news or the weather, takes calls from listeners and reads community announcements.

"Chicken and waffle dinner. Just \$9," Frank is saying.

"Waffles are versatile," chimes in his sidekick, Tish Zimmerman (Miss Tish), who's seated across from him in the cozy studio. The walls are covered in tan carpeting. A couple of WDVR

sweatshirts hang from a curtain rod, a reminder that the station is about to kick off its fall fundraising drive. A typed sheet of paper taped to the wall reads: ``3 reasons why listeners donate. 1) WDVR radio is informative and intelligent 2) WDVR radio is stimulating and broadening 3) Listener support is vital to WDVR's survival. "

The telephone rings and Tish answers, politely telling the caller: ``He's not going to be able to make it to the phone right now."

``I'm going to send this out to Margaret," says Frank as he slides a CD into one of the three players stacked next to him. ``Springtime in the Rockies" drifts through the studio speakers while Frank prepares for the 6 p.m. news broadcast, which he downloads from the Internet on a PC next to the large dial-filled console in front of him.

``Sometimes it's like a Chinese fire drill in here," says Frank, a compact man with a neat grey goatee and a lilting voice.

While the news plays, Frank talks about the station he started 22 years ago with Ginny.

``I built this station," he says, sounding like a proud parent. ``It's all run by volunteers." About 55 people help keep WDVR on the air, he explains. DJs man the station from 6 a.m. to midnight, after which pre-recorded programs are broadcast.

Frank is back on the air talking with Tish about the \$75,000 fundraising goal and reminding listeners that WDVR is non-commercial and non-profit. ``Your donation is 100 percent deductible."

Downstairs, one of the volunteers, Diane Jordan, is getting ready for the fundraising drive. A large desk pad calendar is propped against a low divider separating her work area from the lobby. Written across it in red marker is: ``Crazy Lady is back." That would be Diane, who explained that during last year's fundraiser she erected a wall of empty cardboard boxes and

wrote "Please do not talk to the crazy lady" just so she could get some work done.

"I must have ADD," she laughs.

Later, Frank and Tish are marveling at the fact that WDVR can be heard anywhere in the world *via* the Internet.

"We're a community radio station that's worldwide," Frank says.

"We put Sergeantsville on the map," says Tish.

"Well, someone had to. All we have is a blinking red light," Frank says.

During another visit I bump into Carla Van Dyk, who lives in the apartment above the station with Blossom, a black and white cat that serves as WDVR's mascot. "She rules the roost," Carla says. Blossom even has a column in the monthly newsletter, "Tidbits and Tales," that Carla helps edit.

Carla hosts a couple of shows, one featuring new age and alternative music, and "Arriba," a Latin-tinged show, where she assumes the name of her alter ego, Carla Maria. Carla also helps organize concerts at the former Brethren Church down the road, which the station bought last year and renamed the Virginia Napurano Cultural Arts Center.

I wanted to know what made her want to get involved with the station 14 years ago.

"It's a creative outlet," Carla says. "We don't call it work. Being able to revel in music and to share it with people we don't know." She also talks about "the camaraderie," although most of the volunteers don't see each other that often, except during holiday parties or fundraising time.

Bob Dylan's "To Be Alone With You" can be heard coming from Studio A, where Jethro

Kin's "Freewheelin'" program is underway.

"We play what we want as long as it's tasteful," Carla says. "It's not dictated by commercial pressures."

The station is run almost like a cooperative.

"Frank is at the helm. Diane is the office manager. I work behind the scenes," Carla explains. "No one person runs it. We are our own engineers. We are our own programmers."

Like many of the other DJs, Carla basically stumbled into the job:

"I just started to listen and got this fantasy in my head that I'd like to do this," she says. "It was nothing planned."

It's not that hard to get your own show on WDVR. Some folks get hooked when they get to play "DJ for an Hour" in exchange for a \$100 pledge. Recently, a local resident and dog lover proposed a show on dogs. The result: "Dogs Rule: All About Dogs and Music" every Wednesday from 3 p.m. to 5 p.m.

Feedback is very important to Carla and the other volunteers and the fundraising season provides a great opportunity to hear from listeners.

"One woman, whose husband recently died, said she kept her radio on all the time and it saved her," Carla recalls. "It gets very intimate when it gets like that. It's very humbling to listen to these stories."

Carla notes that WDVR's average listener "is not a millionaire" and many are elderly. That adds an element of worry during fundraising.

"One of the biggest challenges is to get people to tune in, to explore the left side of the dial," she says.

In Studio A, it's 8:45 p.m. and the phones haven't rung for 45 minutes. Tonight's tally stands

at \$450, well short of the goal of \$2,500. Jethro is at the mic and his friend Tom is fielding fundraising calls.

``I'll play a song for Dave and Terry. They're getting married Saturday," says Jethro, who delivers oil and works construction during the day.

``Desolation Row" begins to play, but Jethro stops halfway through.

``I don't want to play that song for 12 minutes without jumping in for fundraising," he says.

``Jethro, you got a request for the other half of the song," Tom says.

Tish announces that the total is up to \$580. Carla walks in with some change on a (unused) pooper scooper. She leaves and returns with a donut on the pooper scooper.

``Thanks you, Carla. That's amazing," says Jethro, with a quizzical look.

Tish picks up the phone.

``Heidi called in a \$40 pledge. She got a cap for her pledge."

``A cat?" says Jethro.

``A cap," says Tish.

Around 9 p.m. Tom picks up the phone. It's his mother.

``Good night," he says. ``I love you."

6:50 a.m., Tuesday Oct. 18, and Bill Kahlke is on the phone in Studio B, his back to the 3x3-foot window that looks out onto the hallway. He prefers it to Studio A because it's smaller and more intimate. It, too, is covered in tan carpeting. A tall bookcase against one wall holds LPs including those by Roberta Flack, James Brown and Debby Boone, as well as an assortment of

music books, almanacs and encyclopedias.

“Morning, WDVR,” he says. “Ah, I didn't think about that one. The other one was the Lovin' Spoonful's ‘Summer in the City.’” A listener had called in earlier with a trivia question: name two songs from the 60's with traffic noise in them. (the other was “Expressway to Your Heart” by the Soul Survivors)

Bill is hosting his weekly show, “Hotel California,” that features music by the Eagles, the Byrds and Jackson Browne among others and includes a heavy dose of his all-time favorite, Gram Parsons. He also plays CDs by more contemporary bands such as The Decemberists and Band of Horses in an effort to attract a younger audience.

Bill says Frank's never complained about the music he plays.

“Sometimes, it's best if you don't hear from the general manager,” Bill says. “I don't play anything too hard. We've had some DJs who hit it too hard and they heard from him: tone it down or you won't have a show.” But generally, “it's a pretty forgiving group,” says Bill, even when a guest blurts out something inappropriate on-air or the station goes silent -- the dreaded “dead air.”

With two weeks to go, fundraising is lagging. Pledges have totaled just \$25,000, a third of the station's goal. Signs taped to the wall remind DJs that “Listeners like hearing the familiar during fund drive” and “Non-commercial radio still needs to dispel the myth that government pays for it.” Bill mentions that he hasn't heard from some listeners who called in during the spring fundraiser as the downturn in the economy takes its toll.

After the 7 a.m. news, the “on air” light flashes on.

“Bill Kahlke back with you for hour-two of “Hotel California.” Make it a fun day, but whatever you do I hope you take WDVR with you. Please consider stepping up to the plate and

making a contribution. Call 609-397-1620, extension 5."

One person who takes WDVR with him is Dave, who got married to Terry 10 days earlier. Dave drives a bus for the Delaware Township School and has his radio turned up so all the kids can hear it.

"Shout-out to the DVR kids on bus number 15," says Bill as he cues up Richard Thompson's "A Heart Needs a Home" and Nick Lowe's "True Love Travels on a Gravel Road" for the newlywed.

"The kids get such a kick out of it," Bill says as the music plays.

Bill is dressed in jeans and a grey James Madison University T-shirt. At 9 a.m. he'll do his "Superman routine," changing into a business suit for his regular job as an insurance salesman. But for three hours a week he gets to do what he really loves.

In fact, the show "is the best three hours of my week," he says. "I come out of here relaxed but on an incredible high. It's the only three hours where I'm really in the moment."

Despite the informal, laid-back atmosphere at the station, being a DJ "is a lot of responsibility," says Bill. "You don't want to just slap it together and not give the people something they want." While Jethro "wings it entirely," Bill sketches out a playlist before he comes in.

"You need to know where you're going until you're supremely confident and I'm not there yet," he says. Bill's been living his "lifetime dream" for 14 months after he received the "DJ for an Hour" premium as a Christmas gift.

I ask Bill what makes WDVR special. How and why does this group of 50-some volunteers, each with their own musical likes and dislikes, manage to work together and get along?

"It all starts with the love of music and love of radio. People who love radio the way it used

to be. It's a great opportunity to connect with the listeners. It's great that at 55 I'm making new friends. From the minute I got here everyone was supportive and they'll point out things that you can do better."

As the show winds down, Bill thinks about the similarities of the skill sets he brings to the station and to his sales job.

"I think you have to love people and if you love people you're going to want to do things that make them happy."

Nov. 3, 7:01 a.m.

It's been a trying week for the staff of WDVR. The station has been running on a gas-powered generator after a pre-Halloween Nor'easter dropped several inches of snow, bringing down trees and power lines throughout central and northern New Jersey. There was radio silence for much of the first day after the storm, but Frank eventually got things up and running. Listeners were kept up to date on the emergency as DJs broadcast from candle-lit studios.

The power is back on this Thursday morning as Ted Lyons, host of the "Honky Tonk Roadhouse" show, gets a call from Frank Nap reminding him to check on the generator, which is still chugging away outside. Back at the mic, Ted reflects on how little WDVR has changed in the 19 years since he started, back when it was only 500 watts.

"The overall freedom -- that hasn't changed since Day One," he says as he plays "Further on Up the Road" by Eric Clapton. "That public-radio feel."

The fall fundraising drive came up a little short, but Ted's not worried for the station's future.

"Twenty years from now you're going to walk in and see it just like this. You'll see the same posters on the wall," Ted says. "It will still smell the same. I'll still trip on the third step every

time."

Ted, 59, a musician who also works for a limo company when he's not at WDVR, which is the highlight of his week.

"I just want to come down here and have some fun, vent a little and play some music I haven't heard in a while," he says. "It's just like therapy; like going to a shrink once a week."

He thanks Frank for allowing him and the other volunteers the freedom to play and say what they want. Even though Frank is no fan of rock 'n roll, he stays out of the way, Ted says.

Considering the number of people that work at the station, "we just kind of cruise."

For Ted, it's all about freedom and family that makes WDVR unique -- the freedom to play the music you love and the spirit of family that suffuses the place.

It's 8:05 a.m. and Ted is back on the air urging folks who made a pledge to send in their contribution.

"We're not going to call you or mail you a reminder," he says.

Conclusions

On its home page, WDVR says its volunteer DJs "love what they do, and we are like one big family." During the time I spent at the station, I can honestly say that's not just a cliché. Like a benevolent parent, general manager Frank Napurano respects the DJs' independence, giving them the space to express their own personalities, while expecting them to do what needs to be done to fulfill the WDVR's commitment to the community. Volunteers support and encourage each other as members of any large, non-dysfunctional family would.

According to the National Federation of Community Broadcasters "a station's approach to

the role and contribution of volunteers has tremendous impact on organizational character." (<http://www.nfcb.org>) Treating volunteers with the same kind of respect and professionalism accorded paid staff will lead the volunteer to "take the station seriously." The organization, which represents community-oriented, non-commercial radio stations from Alaska to Florida, calls volunteer management "both a strategy and a philosophy" and even offers its members a "Volunteer Management Handbook." One of its member stations, WMNF in Tampa, Florida, has its own volunteer handbook, which includes a list of criteria such as "willingness and ability to follow the format" and "commitment to the mission of WMNF."

With more than 80 on-air programmers, WMNF is much larger than WDVR and syndicates content from NPR and the Pacfica network. WDVR is small enough that it doesn't need a formal, published guide for volunteers. And because there is no paid, professional supervisory staff to call the shots, the volunteers manage themselves, using their own set of unwritten rules. And as in other media organizations, the unique culture at WDVR as embodied by the "unwritten codes of conduct and standards of performance," is passed on to new members by the old. (Redmond & Trager, 2004).

As DJ Ted Lyons says: "That's the way we roll."

References

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