Distribution of Radio News Stories by Telephone: A Louisiana Case Study

by John R. Brooks

The Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service (LCES) initiated a 6-month study of delivery of radio news stories by telephone. The purpose was to identify stations not presently receiving Extension material, and to identify the subjects radio news personnel seem to prefer. The study was also intended to determine if stories could be distributed more efficiently and economically this way, rather than by mailing tapes directly to stations. Radio station personnel were given a telephone number to call and would ask for stories noted in a weekly package of broadcast news stories.

A specialist with LCES recorded station call letters, callers' names, and tapes requested. During the study period, 113 calls were recorded and 188 stories were requested.

The significant finding is that Louisiana radio stations that used the service were greatly interested in stories on consumer/home economics subjects. These subjects were requested twice as often as subjects on home gardening and agriculture. Another high-request category was stories on aquaculture and fisheries, a significant industry and important part of the Louisiana's culture.

As a result of this study, LCES has converted most of its radio news distribution to an automated answering device. The savings on mailing costs are more than $800 per year in postage, not including additional costs for tape, reels, boxes, and other materials.

Background and Purposes

Radio has long been used by state Extension Services to educate and inform specific audiences about their educational programs in agriculture and home economics. Radio has been an effective medium for these purposes; Allen (1985) reported a study of 1,000 farmers that confirmed radio is "nearly indispensible as a carrier of daily information to farmers."

As our counterparts in other states have done, the Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service (LCES) has operated a radio tape service for many years. Most recently, the service included three stories that were mailed to 15 radio stations and two state radio networks each week; each tape contained a long (1:30) and short (:60 or less) version of each story for a total of six cuts.

However, we became interested in expanding the number of stations being reached. The decision was made to study the feasibility of a direct telephone delivery system similar to "Agline," the service operated in Washington and Idaho (Powell, 1983). We offered to make tapes available to broadcasters in a similar way: broadcasters had to call a specific number and indicate

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what tapes they wanted to record over the telephone line. Then, broadcasters could use the radio tapes at their convenience.

Since we were only studying the idea, one cassette tape player was connected to an existing telephone. Beginning in June 1987, our weekly packet of broadcast news stories included a billboard of the radio stories that were available, and the stations were given the telephone number with the tape player to call (Brooks, 1987). The packet goes to nearly all Louisiana radio and television stations.

Our plan called for a broadcast specialist to answer the phone, record the caller's station and the tape(s) requested. Callers paid for their own calls because a toll-free number was *not* available at the start of the experiment.

We had three purposes in conducting this 6-month experiment:

1. We wanted to find out if there was interest among Louisiana radio stations in a telephone news service. If yes, our plan was to reduce the tape mailings each week to save costs and convert to an automated answering system.
2. We wanted to identify stations and reporters who were interested in agricultural and consumer news and who were *not* presently receiving it.
3. We wanted to identify the kinds of subjects of greatest interest to Louisiana radio broadcasters.

Results

The experiment began June 1, and concluded November 30, 1987. During that time we recorded 113 calls, with requests for 188 different tapes. Most callers requested long versions of the stories they wanted, relying on the narration for background and using the actualities on the air. In a few cases, some stations wanted the long and short versions of the same story.

Boutwell (1980) found in a study of radio public service announcements that "there is a distinct advantage in using well-produced tapes with an emphasis on production quality (and) carefully timed material. . . ." We wanted to meet the same standards. Most of the callers said they were pleased to have such a source of tape.

However, since our system had to be answered by a specialist, the tape was not available 24 hours a day. It became clear early in the experiment that if we were to continue with a telephone service permanently, we needed a device that would permit access at any time.

In only two cases were there complaints that we did not have a toll-free number available. Most callers were willing to spend a few dollars to make a long distance call each week. However, nearly all were pleased when they learned that a toll-free number would soon be available, as Powell (1983) previously found. One reporter called early in our experiment to say he liked the service, but would not be able to call again until we had a toll-free line. He *did* call when the toll-free line became available in late September 1987.

During the 6-month experiment, we identified 16 stations that were not presently receiving a tape from the LCES.

Nine of the 16 are in some of Louisiana's larger broadcast markets. Prior to the experiment, we thought that reaching these larger markets with agricultural news could be difficult. However, this was not the case.

During the study, many of the reporters were repeat callers. In addition, we kept our weekly mailings at the same rate as before; therefore, each week we were reaching as many as 31 Louisiana radio stations and both state radio networks.

Subjects Requested

As was mentioned earlier, 188 tapes were requested by the callers during the study, and some asked for the long and short version of the same story. Counting these as *one* subject request, a total of 178 tapes were requested. Table 1 shows how the subjects were categorized and counted.

Table 1. Requests for tapes by category

Subject Category	Tapes Available	Number of Requests	Avg. Request per Tape
Aquaculture/fisheries	15	40	2.7
Agriculture	32	45	1.4
Consumer/home economics	26	82	3.2
Home gardening	7	11	1.6
Totals	80	178	2.2

Conclusions

It is obvious from the results that the stations requesting the tapes were greatly interested in consumer/home economics subjects. This was almost always the case when stations from larger cities called. These results are somewhat different from those of Fritz (1987), who found that consumer news in written form rated behind news of the farm economy, news of local meetings, and practical information for agricultural producers. The reason for the difference may have been the way in which the tapes were presented.

However, it should be noted that the stations most interested in consumer/home economics subjects *occasionally* asked for an agriculture or aquaculture/fisheries story. This result was somewhat unexpected, and it suggests that there is a place for these stories in city newsrooms.

Second, we noted a significant interest in aquaculture/fisheries stories. In Louisiana, seafood is an important part of diets and an important industry. Stories on this subject frequently appear in the newspapers and on the airwaves. Capitalizing on a unique part of our culture helps make the LCES a reliable source of such news.

Third, we have identified a significant number of stations that we can say are "new" clients. Many of them continue to call.

Fourth, we have given a new significance to our written broadcast news service. It is not only a source for ideas and stories, but serves as a place where stations can learn how to get some tape recordings, quickly, by making a simple phone call. We have, also, tried to match written stories with the tapes that are available each week, flagging these stories with the notation, "SOUND AVAILABLE."

Fifth, we determine that there was sufficient interest in a telephone actuality service and purchased an inexpensive ($170) automated answering device that is connected to a cartridge machine. The device records the numbers of calls and starts the cart machine with each call. A toll-free number is available to the stations (we were able to share an existing "800" number the LCES already maintains; otherwise, annual costs for such a line exceed $3,000). Also, a telephone was already available for the service, with annual costs of $180.

With the purchase of the machine, we trimmed our mailing list to 10 stations and adopted a policy that all new clients must call to receive tapes.

Stations that remain on the list today are mostly farm broadcasters, who have been regular users of our tapes for many years.

In trimming the mailing list, we estimated a yearly savings of $800 in postage costs alone. Not included are the savings in the cost of tape, reels, boxes, mailing envelopes, etc. Savings are particularly important as Extension communicators use new methods of delivering messages, with specific attention to the costs saved, as Quinn (1985) previously stated.

Other benefits of our telephone experiment included many opportunities to talk directly with key broadcasters regularly to discuss our mutual concerns. Also, it provided an opportunity to receive feedback on how to improve the kinds of stories we're providing to Louisiana broadcasters.

What will we do to receive feedback now that the system is automated? Early numbers indicate that the automated service is receiving more callers per week than the system we used during the study period. We plan to survey known users in a few months for their comments, and we plan to continue our strong public relations campaign to find potential new users.

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