



Jon McTaggart, President and CEO, Minnesota Public Radio

Prescription for today's media: invest less energy in diagnosing problems, more in probing solutions

A Civic Caucus Review of Minnesota's Public Policy Process Interview

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Present

John Adams, Steve Anderson, Angie Andresen, Heather Bandeen, Audrey Clay, Janis Clay, Pat Davies, Paul Gilje (executive director), Sallie Kemper (associate director), Dan Loritz (chair), Jon McTaggart, Paul Ostrow, Dana Schroeder (associate director).

Summary

Media are spending 80 to 90 percent of their time debating the diagnosis of problems, according to Jon McTaggart, CEO of Minnesota Public Radio (MPR). When so much media energy is invested in diagnosis, it overwhelms prescriptions for solutions. Not enough time, he says, is spent really probing what someone is prescribing. He challenges MPR to look beyond the diagnostic debate and to probe whether suggested solutions are good in the long term.

He lists four pillars to MPR's mission: (1) Enrich the mind; (2) Nourish the spirit; (3) Expand perspectives; and (4) Strengthen communities. MPR is committed to an informed democracy. McTaggart believes that when communities are informed and inspired, they will be motivated to seek solutions that will be good for all of us. He says those solutions are more elusive today than in the past.

McTaggart asserts that informing the public is not as simple today as it used to be. Headlines are outrageous, we speak in sound bites, the news cycle has shrunk to seconds and news is delivered in tweets. Digital media allows us to get news only from people we agree with. He believes those developments are not good for a democracy. He argues that MPR is a trusted convener of important conversations among neighbors, community members and citizens of the state and of the country. The station wants to inject civility and mutual respect to inspire solutions, but is not advocating for a particular outcome.

Biography

Jon McTaggart is president and CEO of Minnesota Public Radio and CEO of American Public Media Group, the parent company of Minnesota Public Radio, American Public Media and The Fitzgerald Theater in St. Paul, Southern California Public Radio in Los Angeles and Classical South Florida in Miami.

McTaggart has been deeply involved in the growth of American Public Media Group (APMG) since 1983. He started as a station manager in Bemidji and has served in multiple capacities since then, including general manager, vice president of business development, senior vice president for new media, senior vice president of content and media, and chief operating officer.

In addition to his tenure at APMG, McTaggart has led strategic planning, communications, fundraising and business development as executive director of a hospital foundation in Reading, Pennsylvania, and advancement and external relations as vice president of a liberal arts university in Riverside, California.

McTaggart holds a bachelor's degree in communications and journalism from Bemidji State University in Minnesota and a master's in public administration from Kutztown University in Pennsylvania. He serves on several organizational boards, including Second Harvest Heartland, Bemidji State University Foundation and National Public Radio.

Background

The Civic Caucus is undertaking a review of the quality of Minnesota's past, present and future public-policy process for anticipating, defining and resolving major public problems. The Caucus interviewed Jon McTaggart of Minnesota Public Radio to learn more about the station's role in that public-policy process.

Discussion

Minnesota Public Radio (MPR) comprises a 45-station network in Minnesota and surrounding states. It provides three distinct radio services to about 900,000 radio listeners every week: News, Classical Music and The Current contemporary music. About 1 million people come to the websites and other digital formats every month, according to MPR CEO Jon McTaggart.

Nineteen million people listen to a program created or distributed by American Public Media (APM). American Public Media Group (APMG) is the parent company of Minnesota Public Radio, American Public Media and The Fitzgerald Theater in St. Paul, Southern California Public Radio in Los Angeles and Classical South Florida in Miami. It has staff in Los Angeles, New York, Washington and other bureaus around the country, as well as in London and Shanghai. About two-thirds of the entire APMG staff are in the Midwest and the other one-third are spread throughout the country and the world.

There are four specific pillars to MPR's mission:

1. Enrich the mind;
2. Nourish the spirit;
3. Expand perspectives; and
4. Strengthen communities.

MPR's mission has not changed, even though our community and the world have changed dramatically, McTaggart said. "The way we work and the way our audience experiences us are different, but our fundamental purpose is not." MPR's 50th anniversary is in 2017.

"We want people to be inspired and to be informed," he said. "We want them to understand issues and to appreciate art. We want to motivate solutions to the common good. That's what a public service does. It leans into the common good: the good of society and the good of citizens."

McTaggart pointed out that MPR is not beholden to stockholders. "As a public service, our motivation is to create value for the community," he said. "We're committed to an informed democracy. We want to be part of informing the people."

Informing the public is not as simple as it used to be. "We're living in a time when headlines are outrageous," McTaggart said, "when we're speaking in sound bites, when story lines and stories are written before the sources are ever interviewed and news is delivered in tweets. Digital media is changing the way we work. It allows us to get news only from people we agree with. It allows us to live in an ideological echo chamber. I don't believe that's good for a democracy."

He commented that some media companies' paid pundits are making huge profits by inflaming our fears and making us angry. "But our job is not to inflame or enrage."

How does MPR grow, survive and thrive in this environment? "We're clear-eyed about the condition of society," McTaggart said. "We're not looking through rose-colored glasses at anything. We have a compelling vision for the future and we believe we can have an impact on the common good."

"We're trusted conveners," he said. "We want to convene the most important conversations that we need to have as neighbors, as community members, as citizens of the state and of the country. We want to inject civility and mutual respect in an increasingly polarized world. We want to inform and inspire some of the solutions."

"We're doubling down on journalism and investigative journalism," McTaggart continued. APM Reports is a new investigative journalism unit, he said, that will be going deep on a number of issues that matter to people in Minnesota and the whole country. "Our role is to inform," he said. "We try to go broadly enough to a broad number of issues and deep enough on a few issues."

MPR is committed to music and the arts. "Music and the arts are essential, because they nourish the soul," McTaggart said. A city or a country that does not appreciate music and the arts does not have a soul. "Music and the arts elevate all of us."

MPR is working every day to inform and inspire. " When communities are informed and inspired, they will be motivated to seek solutions that will be good for all of us," McTaggart said. "We have to find solutions to the things that matter to us and those solutions are more elusive today than they have been in a long time."

Media are spending far more time on diagnosis than on prescription. Diagnosis is fun and prescription is hard, McTaggart argued. Prescription moves from what we think to what we do. It's easy to get fixed on debating the diagnosis. We're spending 80 to 90 percent of our time on diagnosis that scares us. When so much energy gets invested in diagnosis from the media perspective, it overwhelms the prescription.

"Legislators and elected officials need to be held accountable for having a firm grip on the diagnosis," he said. "The questions on diagnosis *are* important. But not enough time is spent really probing what someone is prescribing. We're so wrapped up in diagnosis that the prescription rarely gets the attention or time it should. We as a society and the media have become conditioned to debate the diagnosis and to reach for a simple solution to the symptoms."

"As a media organization, I have to challenge us to look beyond the diagnostic debate, to look to contributing factors and probe whether a suggested solution will be good in the long term," he said.

The news cycle used to be measured in days and weeks, but now it changes every second. An interviewer asked what keeps public-policy proposals from coming forth to be debated. McTaggart responded that now the news cycle changes every second. Because of the compression of time, there is little opportunity to think through and sort through things. "A timeless news cycle doesn't allow people to step back and take time to distill things," he said.

That's why APMG created APM Reports, a new investigative reporting unit, he said. It took six months before the recent APM Reports piece on Mesabi Academy, a treatment facility for vulnerable kids, was aired. He noted that APMG is spending \$1 million on the investigative unit this year. Most media organizations will never invest in that.

"Why are we doing it?" McTaggart asked. "Because some stories can't be told in a sound bite or reported on a daily, relentless news cycle. You have to take the time to step back, reflect and consider."

We believe if we inform people, they will move toward the common good. An interviewer noted MPR's decision to put a heavy focus on water issues in Minnesota and asked whether, when the station focuses on an issue like that, it has a goal of influencing public policy.

McTaggart responded that MPR's sweet spot is in building understanding and awareness. We're not a public-policy organization. If we inform people, our belief is they will move toward the common good. We're not advocating for a particular outcome. We want to hold those organizations involved in the issue accountable.

"We think building awareness and understanding takes time," he said. "It also takes trust. We want to be a source you can trust to deliver information without polemic or an expectation of a certain ideological response. It's easy to raise awareness; it's harder to build understanding."

There's no profit to be made by media in the middle. But MPR doesn't have to make a profit, McTaggart said. "So we can play between the 40-yard lines and have a chance to inform on some of these issues. And we can seek conversations across that common middle. No one scores a goal without having to cross the middle. But most of the profit is not made between the 40-yard lines. Most media are in either end of the field. If you try to play in the middle, you will be punished financially."

Through independent monitoring and volunteered information, MPR knows who's listening.

McTaggart said the station knows the age and ethnicity of the listeners:

- The audience for The Current station (under age 35) is the youngest of any public radio station in America.
- The average age of listeners to the News station is 55.
- The average age of the Classical Music station listeners is 65.

McTaggart noted that outside of years when a presidential election is on the ballot, MPR's audience self-identifies as 40 percent Democrats, 25 percent Republicans and 35 percent independents—approximately 1/3, 1/3, 1/3 ideologically. In presidential election years, those numbers change significantly, he said. The independents evaporate, falling to 10 percent or less, and the poles grow larger. The progressive-leaning liberal audience is bigger than the conservative audience, but not by much, he said.

MPR's audience is growing slowly on radio and growing rapidly on digital media. McTaggart said MPR is very focused on audience growth right now. It's a mission imperative: We want more Minnesotans and more Americans to benefit from the public service we offer. That will also be good business for us. Increasing our audience requires behaving in some different ways. We have to make some changes that will bring us audiences who aren't finding us now or who aren't finding us as relevant as we'd like.

Membership is MPR's most important source of revenue, he said. MPR has 135,000 members, which amounts to about 10 percent of the audience. Seventy percent of those are sustaining members, who give automatically each month. "We take that very seriously," he said. "That is a deep trust we have earned and we're not going to risk it."

MPR's audience development has historically been focused on a college-educated audience, but now is changing its focus to curiosity. McTaggart said stations were put in communities where the incidence of college-educated people is high. He said 28 percent of Minnesotans have college degrees and MPR touches about 25 percent of the state, with one million radio listeners alone.

"We must rethink how we're going to be appealing," he said, "and how to get to an audience that's broader than just the highly educated. Curiosity is a better definer of the audience. It includes all ages and demographic groups. It includes a much broader swath of Minnesotans. We should try to inspire curiosity at a higher level."

That means hiring curious people, he said, who are not always the same as college-educated people. And it means learning how to serve curious people in a more complicated world. "Can we ask a better question and does that lead to better understanding?"

We want to be partners with higher education, but we want people to know that our particular focus is curiosity, McTaggart said. "It's a very interesting change for us and will have a significant cultural impact within the organization. It's already having a significant impact on audiences that previously found us irrelevant."

He noted that MPR has kind of an academic sound that has worked well for a long time. But if MPR is going to sound more curious than educated, he believes, it must sound different. He said the station is moving toward the sound of the "Marketplace" program, which he called smart, accessible and very curious. "You learn, but it doesn't sound like a college classroom every day," he said.

If public media is not highly relevant in today's polarized environment, then it is irrelevant.

McTaggart said public media must be "an important, contributory value-add in a polarized environment." It's an advantage now for public broadcasting to be located in Minnesota, he added, because, "it's not a bright blue or bright red state; we're purple."

"There's an obligation for us to find a place where we can bring very divergent views to the table," he said. "We need to have a civil conversation leading to understanding, without flame throwing or bumper stickers. We need to help people understand how the solution works, not just what the diagnosis is."

"That's the role we should have," he continued. "You get to judge how well we're doing that every day."

MPR wants to be the context setter on complex topics. "We are very interested in the appetite for complexity, but we want to be the sense maker and the context setter," McTaggart said. "That depends on who we choose to work here, their expertise and who we have come in to speak. We set the context on talk shows like Kerri Miller's."

The Civic Caucus is doing the public a great service. "There is definitely a role for informed citizens to come together and share information on issues," McTaggart said. "If there were more of this going on, our job would be much easier."