WHEN PUBLIC RADIO GOES PRIVATE:
THE CONSEQUENCES OF PRIVATIZATION ON
THE NPR NETWORK OF STATIONS

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by
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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the consequences of the privatization of National Public Radio for the NPR network of stations. In Chapter 1, I introduce the major questions posed by this dissertation and review some of its limitations. In Chapter 2, by analyzing the rates of stations’ adoption of NPR membership and departure from the network, this research tests several hypotheses from literature on organizational population ecology, crowding in/out theory, and political composition. The results indicate that after an initial wave of departures from NPR in the wake of privatization, the NPR network of stations has continued to grow. At the same time, greater dependence on federal funding tends to be associated with more stability in the network of stations (fewer adoptions and departures), while business funding increases the rate of departures. These findings suggest that in the privatization era of reduced government funding, the NPR network of stations may operate more like a private marketplace. I also find that the concepts of the liability of newness, density delay, and density dependence while significantly shaping the dynamics of the organizational population’s pattern of growth, must be significantly adapted to apply to adoptions and departures rather than organizational foundings and mortalities. Finally, the results suggest that, controlling for levels of government funding for the NPR network, Republican control of at least one house of Congress does little to increase the probability of the departure of any individual station, but were associated with higher rates of departures at the national level. Though further research is needed, this finding may suggest that Republican anti-NPR rhetoric creates unease throughout the system that discourages continued membership for stations.
In Chapter 3 and 4, I use two datasets – one from a 1984 internal NPR survey and one from a 1999-2005 Station Resource Group survey – to analyze how privatization of stations may have affected the balance of news and cultural content (Chapter 3) and national and local content (Chapter 4) at NPR stations. These datasets allowed me to test key questions about private funding and market demand in media content as well as broad claims about the death of localism. The findings quite clearly indicate a radical shift in the programming content of NPR stations between the 1980s and the early 2000s. By the 2000s, stations were airing far more news than local content (a reversal from the 1980s) and a somewhat greater proportion of national rather than local content. In Chapter 3, the findings of several analyses of the sample from the 2000s indicate that more privatized stations (i.e., those with a greater dependence on subscriber funds) tend to follow the patterns of market demand, giving listeners the news content they want. By contrast, for various reasons, stations with more funding from the government and business were more able to resist market demand, providing more cultural content. In the pre-privatization sample from 1984, I observed no such patterns.

While the findings regarding news and cultural content from Chapter 3 tend to support a market demand theory of privatization, Chapter 4 suggests that market demand effects do not fully extend to the balance of national and local content. In 1984, federal funds had the effect of increasing local programming, supporting one of the stated missions of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. By the 2000s, greater federal and business funds actually increased the proportion of national programming, resisting the observed demand for less national and more local content. On the other hand, increased
levels of subscriber funding exerted no affect on the programming content of the stations. This finding suggests that though federal and business funds may affect stations ability to purchase more national programming, NPR stations are not directly responding to market demand when more reliant on subscriber funds. In both the results from Chapters 3 and 4, the effect of national political composition on local programming decisions was highly limited.

In Chapter 5, I conclude by reviewing the implications of the findings for theory on privatization, media funding and market demand, organizational population ecology, and crowding in/out theory. I also discuss what our model of public radio means for informed citizenship in a democratic society. Finally, I consider some recent changes in the NPR’s business model and what they may mean for the future of the NPR network of stations.
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The staff members of the NPBA were also essential to my data collection process. The NPBA is an underfunded archive that gathers a widely varied hodgepodge of old public broadcasting files as well as audio and video recordings. Several staff members helped guide me to the survey records I needed for Chapters 3 and 4 and put up with two days of loud photocopying.

One of my primary data sources for this research was the Station Resource Group (SRG) Survey (1999-2005). SRG is a non-profit organization that conducts valuable
research for public radio stations. The research they carry out is time-consuming and demands cooperation from a large number of stations. I employ the fruit of their labor in Chapters 3 and 4, drawing on their survey of stations’ content from 1999 to 2005 originally collected for their Public Radio Format Study. I was able to gain access to this dataset with the help of Rekha Murphy of The Public Radio Exchange who encouraged Terry Clifford of SRG to trust me to use the data only for academic purposes. Both of them are kind people who are genuinely committed to the vitality of public radio in America. I owe them a great debt of gratitude for sharing these data which were invaluable to my research.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

On the last day of the year in 1926, a four year-old commercial radio venture known as the British Broadcasting Company Ltd. was dissolved and its 773 employees’ contracts were terminated (Briggs, 1985). The company’s assets were transferred to a newly established public radio organization that would become a worldwide media leader for the next eight decades: The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). Today, the BBC produces programming for eight television and five radio channels domestically as well as a global multimedia network via the *BBC World News* and *BBC World Service*. Its journalism division, BBC News, claims to be “the largest broadcast news gathering operation in the world” (“About the BBC,” 2010).

Initially funded by the State, in 1946, the BBC was freed of the whims of the reigning government by way of a new television license fee paid by every TV-owning household in the United Kingdom (in 2010, it cost £145 for a color television license). Even today with multiple worldwide revenue streams, the BBC continues to draw more than three-quarters of its funding from television licensing and another 6% from direct government grants (“About the BBC,” 2010). This secure financial mechanism is matched with a stable administrative structure in the form of the BBC Trust (formerly the Board of Governors) and Executive Board. This separation of powers is widely credited with ensuring the steady growth of the BBC and preventing political interference. Given its stability and success, the BBC’s model of an appointed administrative body alongside an independent financial base has served as a paradigm for public broadcasting systems in countries throughout the world (Briggs, 1985).
Though the United States was a leader in the development of private mass media, it got a late start in establishing a system of public broadcasting. While Canada’s CBC was founded in 1936, it was not until the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967 that the United States began to construct a national system of public media by creating the administrative body known as the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB). On the occasion of signing the bill into the law, President Lyndon Johnson told the gathered press that the law “announces to the world that our Nation wants more than material wealth.” Public media, Johnson argued, would “help make our Nation a replica of the old Greek marketplace, where public affairs took place in view of all the citizens.” For the Carnegie Commission, whose report inspired the creation of the CPB, public media would be a boon for democracy and an important tool in the education of children. Unlike the country’s extensive commercial media, public radio and television could make programming decisions based on the public interest, rather than on the ever-loom ing need to increase profits (McCua ley, 2005; Mitchell, 2005; Hoynes, 1994).

Like the Communications Act of 1934, which created the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), the Public Broadcasting Act (PBA) envisioned the airwaves as public resources that must be regulated and molded for the common good. Just as land use is federally regulated and our greatest natural treasures protected as National Parks, so, too, the airwaves would be regulated and have space set aside for programming important for democracy. The creators of the PBA believed that the new radio and television networks would foster long form discussion of social issues, policy, and politics, developing a more informed public. They would promote the creation of local programming to engage the public with civic issues and the arts scene in their own
communities. The new networks would offer programming for children as well as for
racial and ethnic minorities who were too often left out of commercial media. By 1971,
the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) and National Public Radio (NPR) would be
created to bring this vision to the nation’s televisions and radios.

Despite the optimism for the new system, President Johnson’s remarks regarding
the country’s concern for material wealth foreshadowed the challenges in public
broadcasting’s future. Even in the relatively progressive Johnson era, anti-tax and anti-
“big government” ideology prevailed in Congress, preventing the creation of a
permanent, independent funding structure for public broadcasting. Funding for the
system would be allocated in the annual federal budget and would, thus, be dependent on
the changing political commitments of Congress. Only 16 years after its 1971 founding,
NPR became the first victim of this system. In a moment of crisis for NPR, the CPB
ceased to distribute funds through NPR, instead, giving them directly to the stations.
This decision effectively privatized NPR, leaving it as a non-profit content provider for
stations, dependent on revenue from stations purchasing programming and charitable
donations.

The privatization of NPR is simply one case in a wider trend toward the off-
loading of government programs and services into the private sector. The same anti-“big
government” ideology that crippled public broadcasting in the first place has led to a
reduction in the size and scope of government by off-loading programs and services like
sanitation, education, correctional facilities, and public transportation into the private
sphere. The neo-liberal ideology behind privatization holds that the capitalist
marketplace can offer more efficient solutions than the government and that lowest taxes
are the surest protection against corporate flight in a globalized age (Piven, 2001). While these views emerge from the conservative movement, they are now shared within both of the country’s major political parties. Previous studies of privatization have revealed that many of the former government programs that have been released into the wild of the private sector collapse (Goodman, 1987; Greene, 1996; Starr, 1987; Savas, 1989). However, so far, that fate has not befallen the NPR network of stations despite entering an intensely competitive media market.

Despite its privatization and intense competition from a landscape of “supersaturated” corporate media, the NPR network of station has consistently grown, doubling between 1990 and 2005. Its news service is one of the most trusted sources of information in the country, regularly drawing top interview subjects. NPR programming is known for addressing subjects that are not addressed elsewhere in the mainstream media. Nonetheless, hidden behind the NPR network’s successes are historic and ongoing challenges to achieving its founding mission of supporting localism and programming in the public interest.

This dissertation explores the fate of the NPR network of stations as a case study in the consequences of privatization. Drawing on three unique datasets, I investigate how privatization and the shifting funding model of NPR affected the growth of the network of stations and the balance of their programming content. In addition to expanding our knowledge of the history of public radio in America and its contribution to democracy, this research also contributes new evidence to theoretical debates in four areas: the role of market demand in non-profit media, content homogenization in mass media, organizational population ecology, and crowding in/out theory of non-profit funding.
In this introduction, I begin by discussing each of the four major theoretical debates considered in this dissertation. Next, I describe the data and analyses used in this dissertation and several issues related to data quality. Finally, I outline the chapter structure and provide a brief preview of their contents.

**Privatization And Market Demand**

That NPR has not only survived, but thrived is stunning given the remarkable growth in mass media in the past twenty years. With the birth of the Internet, the development of 24-hour cable news networks, and emergence of portable audio, we now live in what Gitlin (2002) calls an era of media “supersaturation.” We spend most of our time in front of various screens – computer, television, smartphone – and consume a gigantic amount of information that arrives unceasingly. As Gitlin writes, “In a society that fancies itself the freest ever, spending time with communications machinery is the main use to which we have put our freedom” (pg. 6).

With the mass media largely owned by massive profit-earning enterprises, television and radio outlets too often seek revenue over enlightened discourse and consolidation over democratization. In this quest for profits, media companies tend to reproduce known market successes, rather than produce new content that informs or challenges the public (Grazian, 2010). It is an all too common belief in the culture industry that there is no clear formula for success or that “all hits are flukes” (Bielby and Bielby 1994). Given the pressing need to be profitable and the perceived unpredictability of film performance, Grazian (2010) has argued “media industries are driven by the minimization of risk” (p. 113). The ironic upshot is that, despite believing there is no
formula to success, studio executives attempt to reproduce what they see as successful formulas.

In Bielby and Bielby’s (1994) study of television programming directors’ decisions in selecting new primetime TV series, they found that network programmers act in an extremely conservative fashion, selecting only from reputable creators, concepts, and genres. “As the level of risk… increases… reliance on established writer-producers is likely to intensify” (p. 1309). The network programmers use reputation and formula to rationalize and justify their decisions. Likewise, in the film industry, each additional past credit a filmmaker has increases his or her subsequent chances of being hired for other projects (Faulkner and Anderson 1987). All such decisions are made in the hopes of reducing the risk of box office bomb. The net result of this tendency to reproduce past success has been an overwhelming amount of homogenized entertainment programming (Bagdikian, 1992; Benson, 2004; Postman, 1985). Serious and local programming are often squelched in order to offer more nationally standardized fluff.

Nowhere have these patterns been more obvious than in the radio industry. In the midst of such unrelenting information and futuristic toys, radio seems a very quaint technology with its disembodied voices and limited potential for interactivity. However, with ongoing deregulation of media ownership, companies like Clear Channel have purchased radio stations across the country, leading to great uniformity and an emphasis on the bottom-line (Klinenberg, 2007; Rossman, 2005).

For-profit radio, like the NPR network of stations, would seem immune from this market demand-driven trend towards homogeneity. Indeed, the Carnegie Commission’s vision for NPR was for its programming decisions to be based on editorial vision, rather
than consumer preference. Yet, in the post-privatization era, with a smaller proportion of their funding coming from the government, the NPR network of stations are now far more dependent on financial support from satisfied listeners and corporate donations. In such an environment, radio programming directors may be tempted to yield to popular demand in order to ensure future funding. Though the link between a for-profit media outlet’s funding base and its content have clearly been of great interest to media scholars, no research has quantitatively considered whether the greatly shifting funding base of public broadcasting has changed the content of public radio. By examining the funding patterns of NPR stations and their content, this dissertation tests whether previous theorizing about the link between the funding model and the content of for-profit media can be extended to non-profit media. These questions are explored in Chapters 3 and 4.

**Homogenization of Mass Media**

In addition to testing whether a greater reliance on private funds leads radio stations to more readily respond to market demand, this research also examines the larger question of how privatization may have lead to greater homogenization in content at NPR stations. Many media scholars and commentators have decried the loss of localism across a range of media (Bagdikian, 1992; McChesney, 2000; Starr, 2009; Klinenberg, 2007). In commercial radio in particular, a wave of studies documented the homogenization of playlists in the wake of ClearChannel’s station buying spree in 1990s (Lee, 2004; Rossman, 2005; Klinenberg, 2007). The local, radical punk rock station of yesteryear is now a Top 40 station with content relayed from a remote studio.
Though the loss of a raucous rock station may not seem like a threat to democracy, scholars and the public alike view local media as essential watchdogs of local politics and vital to supporting local arts and culture (Molotch, 1976; Papper, 2003). In some dramatic examples, a lack of local media has even had fatal consequences in emergency situations (Klinenberg, 2007). For exactly these reasons, both the CPB and the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) are charged with promoting “localism” (McChesney, 1993).

At the same time, Starr (2009) has warned of the dangers of “hyperlocalism.” As local media outlets attempt to cut costs, they often reducing original national and foreign news reporting while also supporting less arts and science journalism. Thus, for Starr (2009), localism often comes at the cost of programming of greater civic importance. Though past research has demonstrated a decline in local programming in for-profit media, we still know little about how the balance of local vs. national content on non-profit radio may have changed. By considering how market demand may affect the balance of local and national programming at NPR stations, Chapter 4 of this dissertation contributes to our understanding of the conditions which foster adequate local and national journalism.

Crowding In/Out Theory

Since its privatization, one of the central questions for NPR stations has been how to support their programming and operations. As we will see, stations have largely replaced government funding with support from individual contributors and corporations. An extensive literature in public administration and economics known as Crowding Out...
Theory has explored the relationship between government support and individual contributions in the funding of non-profits. Most importantly, researchers offered extensive empirical evidence that greater levels of government funding at non-profits tends to “crowd out” contributions from individuals (Andreoni, 2006). While the causal mechanism remains unclear, Roberts (1984) argues that as government funding to a non-profit increases, potential contributors see their tax dollars as a donation and feel less obliged to offer additional support. Andreoni and Payne (2008), by contrast, are skeptical that contributors are aware of the levels of government support. Instead, they claim that additional government support leads to reduced community fundraising efforts by the non-profits. Either way, more government support translates into fewer individual contributions.

A competing view – Crowding In Theory – claims that government funding actually encourages private contributions by strengthening the non-profit organizations both through granting greater legitimacy and by providing a larger range of resources (Schiff, 1985; Hughes and Luksetich, 1999). Brooks (2000a, 2000b, 2003) offers synthesis, proposing a curvilinear relationship wherein initial government contributions increase individual donations by lending legitimacy. However, at the tipping point of 25% support from government sources, the non-profit is seen by the public as a “quasi-public agency” (Brooks, 2000a), leading to a reduction in individual support.

Adopting the “Crowding Out” perspective, we might suspect that the reduction of government spending would actually benefit the NPR network of stations by creating a larger base of individual contributors. In such a healthy financial environment, we would expect more stations to adopt NPR membership and fewer stations to depart the network
as individual contributions are more readily available. Thus, declining government support would be associated with greater growth in the population of organizations. Alternatively, the “Crowding In” perspective would suggest that the withdrawal of government funding would leave the NPR network of stations with fewer resources and less legitimacy. In these dire circumstances, few stations would consider adopting NPR membership and stations unable to survive with less government funding and fewer individual contributions might depart the network.

By examining how the balance of contributions from the government, individuals, and businesses affect the size of the population of NPR station (tracking rates of adoption and departures), this dissertation offers a test of the empirical utility of the Crowding In/Out theories. The findings presented in Chapter 2 surely will not settle this debate, but provide one case for better understanding how government funding affects the vitality of non-profits.

**Organizational Population Ecology**

Finally, this dissertation offers a test of three key questions in the extensive literature on organizational population ecology. Organizational researchers have long contended that the size and age of the population of similar organizations exerts great influence on the fate of each individual organization. In studies of credit unions, breweries, and newspapers alike, the population of organizations follows a curvilinear pattern of growth, with expansion as the industry gains legitimacy and contraction as the marketplace becomes crowded with an excess of similar organizations. Thus, initial growth in the population density is associated with more organizational foundings, but later growth in density leads to organizational mortalities. Researchers have found
extensive support for this pattern, known as “density dependence” (for a review, see Carroll, Feng, Le Mens, and McKendrick, 2009).

Researchers as early as Stinchcombe (1965) have noted that a “liability of newness” or that new organizations are more likely to fail than older ones. Older organizations have often “worked out the kinks,” developing reliable systems and practices. Established organizations also tend to have greater legitimacy and name recognition within the field. These internal and external advantages allow older organizations to weather resource scarcity and other challenges better than newer organizations.

A final concept, “density delay,” suggests that not only contemporaneous population density, but density at the organization’s time of founding exerts great influence on the likelihood of an organizational mortality (Carroll and Hannan, 1989; Barron, West, and Hannan, 1994). In short, the conditions at the time of founding leave a permanent imprint on the organizational that shape its ultimate fate. Organizations founded in times of high density face greater challenges due to resource scarcity. Moreover, they must market to a narrower niche to avoid head-to-head competition. Though a rational decision, it often means a smaller customer or member base for the lifetime of the organization.

In this dissertation, I apply organizational population ecology theory to the study of the NPR network of stations, testing the concepts of density dependence, liability of newness, and density delay. However, since the emphasis of this research is on the vitality of the NPR network and not the stations per se, I examine adoptions and departures rather than founding foundings and mortalities. While these events represent
major landmarks in the life of stations, adoptions and departures are substantially more varied. Sometimes adoptions occur at the founding of a new station, while at other times, stations adopt NPR membership later in the organizational lifecourse (as was the case with the 82 stations that formed the original nucleus of the network). Some departures occur when a station signs off the air for good, others simply leave the network in order to transform the nature of the station (e.g., changing programming format). For this reason, it is quite possible that the population of NPR stations follows growth patterns quite unlike organization. In Chapter 2, I discuss the nature of adoptions and departures in further detail and test the value of organizational population ecology theory in explaining the patterns of growth in the NPR network of stations.

Data And Analytic Strategy

This dissertation explores the theoretical debates described above using three sets of data. In the following section, I describe each of these datasets, my approach to analyzing them, and some limitations of these data. In Chapter 2, I explore the factors that affected the vitality of the NPR network of stations by studying the patterns of stations adopting NPR membership and departing the network. For the research, I conducted a historical census of NPR stations from 1971-2006, linking the data on adoptions and departures with data on a) the balance of government and private funding sources, b) organizational population density, and c) political composition of the federal government. I analyze this new dataset by examining the results from OLS regression analyses of the adoption and departure rates of NPR stations as well as the results of a Random Effects Discrete Time Logit regression analysis of the departure patterns of
stations. These analyses test important questions about the role of government funding in promoting or inhibiting growth, the influence of the organizational environment, and the effect of the political environment.

The data assembled for these analyses have both advantages and disadvantages. NPR has not placed great emphasis on maintaining its historical records in a systematic way. As a consequence, most of its records are available in paper form only and not publically available. Some of the historical files have been shipped to the National Public Broadcasting Archives (NPBA) at the University of Maryland, while others remain boxed in storage closets in the national headquarters. The historical census of stations used in Chapter 2 was constructed using archival files from the NPBA and radio station listings from the *Yearbook of Cable and Broadcasting* (YCB). From these files, I constructed measures of the population density and the number of adoptions and departures in each year. In some ways, this undertaking alone represents a significant achievement. Previously, it was impossible to construct a simple chart of the number of stations in each year of NPR’s existence.

Ideally, I would have combined information on station adoptions and departures with annual station-level data on the balance of funding from the government, individual subscribers, and businesses. Unfortunately, I was not able to gain access to all of the paper documents necessary to assemble such a dataset. As we will see in Chapter 3, I was able to find the financial data for 1984 only in one of the NPBA’s collections. Nonetheless, the Research Department of CPB did supply me with annual national-level data on funding from the government, individual subscribers, and businesses. These data allowed me to conduct analyses with the year as the unit of analysis. Station-level
financial data would have allowed me to study how the shift from government funding to private funding at individual stations affected their likelihood of a departure. Instead, I am restricted to assessing how the national balance of funding in a given year affected the population of stations. In secondary analysis, I was able to study the likelihood of a departure at a given station in a given year, but had to do so absent the financial data. To complete the dataset, I combined the station population and financial data with national political composition data collected by Edward Walker (2007) and a measure of median household income taken from the U.S. Census Bureau’s Current Population Survey.

For Chapters 3 and 4, I turn to analyzing the programming content of NPR stations, drawing on datasets from 1984 and 1999-2005. These chapters rely on nearly identical data, methods, and analytic approaches, I discuss them together here. Chapter 3 considers the balance of news and cultural talk programming at NPR stations – a longstanding struggle among NPR’s leadership. Drawing on literature on media ownership, I examine whether the increased reliance of NPR stations on subscriber funding has led them to respond to market demand in the same manner as commercial radio stations and how that affects the balance of news and cultural content. In Chapter 4, I apply the same set of questions to the issue of local vs. national content, addressing another theoretical issue. In both of these chapters, I test the broader question of whether the subscriber-dependent stations of the post-privatization network are forced to yield to listener demand for national programming.

Like its station financial records, NPR’s historical records of the programming at their member stations are limited and not publicly available. While NPR maintains readily available electronic records of its member stations programming schedules since
2000, prior to 1996, its records of what NPR stations broadcasted are fragmentary. Given this limitation, Chapters 3 and 4 use two different datasets – one collected by NPR in 1984 and one collected by a non-profit group called The Station Resource Group (SRG) that covers the period from spring 1999 to spring 2005. Using these two datasets, I use OLS regression to model the effect of funding on programming in 1984, employ multi-level General Estimating Equation (GEE) models to assess the same relationship from 1999-2005, and examine programming changes in the 74 stations appearing in both datasets using a series of charts.

The first of the two datasets is NPR’s 1984 Stations Survey. Prior to the 1990s, when NPR and the CPB began to institute a more uniform annual survey of NPR stations (restricted to the public) as well as a more professional recordkeeping system, NPR administered infrequent and inconsistent surveys to their member stations. A comprehensive review of the NPBA’s files on NPR produced fragmentary remnants of surveys in 1976, 1981, and 1983. Fortunately, all returned forms from the 1984 survey of all NPR stations survived.

Four pages long, the 1984 survey contained a variety of questions about station hardware, staff diversity, programming content, listenership, and funding. Of the 276 NPR stations in 1984, 144 stations (52%) returned the survey and 104 stations (38%) provided enough information to conduct the analyses for this research. While 38% is not typically considered a sufficient response rate from a sample, the dataset used here represents 38% of the population of stations in 1984. Moreover, comparing the stations that responded to the survey to the population of stations, the responding stations were similarly geographically distributed and were NPR stations almost exactly the same
number of years on average as the population. While the data may be less than ideal, we can have some confidence in its generalizability to the population of stations in 1984. More to the point, whatever its shortcomings, it is the only existing data to capture NPR station programming content at that time.

The other dataset used for this research was collected by the Station Resource Group (SRG), a non-profit organization offering research and guidance to over 168 public radio stations nationally. They conducted a survey of NPR stations’ funding patterns and programming content each season from spring 1999 through spring 2005 (thirteen time points). Of the 555 NPR stations that existed throughout that six year period, SRG sampled 228 stations (41% of the population in 1999). Comparing the 228 sampled stations to the 1999 population of stations, they were similarly distributed geographically and had only been part of the NPR network 5 years longer on average than the general population. For the study, SRG used funding records and programming information from the stations as well as listenership data from Arbitron Inc., the leading source of radio ratings. While the stations in their study are a bit older than average and may, therefore, enjoy some advantages over newer stations, the large sample size and proportion of the population represented allow us some confidence in the survey’s generalizability.

In comparing the 1984 results to the 1999-2005, it is possible that any changes may have come from innovations by new stations that didn’t exist in 1984. Alternatively, it may be that changes occurred even within longstanding stations. To offer some insight into this question about the process of change, I conduct a very elementary examination of the 74 NPR stations appearing in both the 1984 and 1999-2005 samples. Without a
doubt, these stations are quite different from the population of stations as a whole. Though their programming content is similar to other 1984 stations, they were better funded, older, and had more than twice as many subscribers on average. By spring of 1999, there are some more noticeable differences in the content with the 74 stations offering almost 15 more hours of talk programming a week. This difference is unsurprising given that older stations have more resources – financial and otherwise – create or purchase additional programming. Though these stations are undeniably distinct from many NPR stations, we would expect that stations that survived since the 1980s would be stronger organizations. The value in examining these stations is learn whether changes in the content came principally through the founding of new stations with different programming choices or through system-wide changes.

The ideal data for the questions posed in Chapters 3 and 4 would have been bi-annual programming schedules and associated financial data for each station in each year since 1971. In reality, there is a black hole in the historical record of NPR’s programming content between 1984 and 1999. The data I use allow us to observe programming schedules before and after privatization, but do not allow us to chart the transitional period. We can compare more or less privately-funded stations cross-sectionally, but cannot make direct comparisons within a single station over a twenty year period. Unfortunately, those data do not exist anywhere, electronically or on paper.

During the early days of NPR, the organization’s leadership simply did not prize consistent or precise recordkeeping. And NPR’s current leadership has not made it a high priority to organize and publicly archive those records that do exist. Despite the limitations in the three datasets used in this dissertation, they represent the very best data
available to examine the set of questions at hand. They also allow us to observe some foundational facts about the growth and content of the NPR network that simply were not organized anywhere else previously.

With the findings presented in this dissertation, we can better understand how privatization, for better or for worse, changed the nature of the NPR network of stations. From a small state-funded organization, supporting localism and editorial control, the NPR network of stations grew into a large, privately-funded network with a nationally-standardized line-up, driven by market demand. If the BBC’s legacy is as a sterling example of what state-supported public media can be, NPR offers a powerful case study in the transition from the collectivist Great Society principles of the Johnson administration to the neo-liberal, pro-privatization administrations of the 1990s and 2000s.
Chapter 2
The Impact of Privatization, Organizational Ecology, and Political Composition in the Rise of NPR Stations

Over the past thirty-five years, National Public Radio (NPR) has grown from a small coalition of 82 member stations concentrated in the mid-west to a national network of nearly 700 stations spread across the United States, Puerto Rico, and Guam. In the same time, the member stations evolved from a heavy reliance on federal funding to an increasing dependence on subscriber donations and support from businesses. Because of this transition, public radio activists often claim that powerful Republicans continue to endanger the future of NPR by supposedly slashing federal funding for public broadcasting. While the influence of political actors or transitions in the funding base may partially explain patterns of expansion and decline in the NPR network, explanations stemming from organizational theory are arguably more compelling. Because of the paucity of available data, very few studies have quantitatively examined any aspect of this important American institution. To the best of my knowledge, no previous research has considered the various roles of the political, organizational, and financial environments in the growth of the NPR network.

In this chapter, I document the expansion of the NPR network over time and compare the relative importance of political make-up, organizational environment, and funding patterns in explaining the patterns of radio station adoption (of NPR membership) and departure (from the NPR network). To better understand these issues, I used files from the National Public Broadcasting Archives and The Yearbook of Broadcasting and Cable to conduct a census of NPR stations from the network’s founding in 1971 through 2006. Using additional political, social, and financial data, I
explore the sociological puzzle of what environmental factors best explain the patterns of adoptions and departures over time.

I begin by providing a background on NPR and its expansion over time. Next, I review relevant literatures on organizational ecology and the funding of non-profit organizations. After explaining the specific research questions, I detail the unique dataset used in the current research. Then, I present the results from OLS regression analyses of the adoption and departure rates of NPR stations as well as the results of a Random Effects Discrete Time Logit regression analysis of the departure patterns of stations. I conclude by applying the results of these analyses to the larger theoretical question of whether the vitality of public institutions is affected most by political actors, funding patterns, or their organizational environment.

**Background**

NPR signed on the air in 1971 with a meager network of 82 radio stations located primarily in the mid-west. Since that time, NPR has grown in a fairly linear fashion to be a network of nearly 700 stations, as Figure 2-1 demonstrates. As the maps shown in Figures 1-2 through 1-4 illustrate, NPR has developed its stronghold in the mid-west, but has also greatly expanded its network into big states like New York, Texas, and California. There are NPR stations in nearly every part of the country and there are no apparent signs of the rate of adoptions slowing in recent years.
Figure 2-1: NPR Station Density, 1971-2006

Figure 2-2: Geographic Distribution of NPR Stations in 1971
Figure 2-3: Geographic Distribution of NPR Stations in 1993

Figure 2-4: Geographic Distribution of NPR Stations in 2006
Adoptions and Departures

Even as the NPR network has expanded, the path has been uneven with stations adopting NPR membership and departing the system along the way. Most scholars who study organizational populations examine the foundings and mortalities of organizations. In this study, I consider the stations’ adoptions of NPR and departures from the network. Because the emphasis of this project is on the expansion of NPR network, rather than the life and death of the stations per se, we can only understand the larger sociological questions at hand by analyzing adoption and departure patterns. In many ways, adoptions and departures act much like an organizational founding or mortality since NPR membership greatly shapes the essential character of a radio station.

During much of the history of the network, being a NPR station meant that NPR provided nearly all of its national programming. While transformations in the network’s organization in the mid-1990s have since changed that, being a NPR station still means structuring one’s local and national programming around NPR’s news content. Being a NPR station also offers new resources, like access to listener research findings, web development tools, and donor campaign materials. Adoption of NPR brings a host of popular programming and organizational resources, but also comes at the cost of losing some distinctive local programming as the station becomes more similar other stations.

Station adoptions take many different forms. Some stations are NPR stations from their organizational founding. Other stations adopt NPR membership after a long history as a radio station. Of the 760 stations that have ever been part of the NPR network, 18.4% adopt NPR in their founding year and 58.2% adopt within five years of their founding. On the other hand, 30.7% adopt NPR more than ten years after their founding. The
average number of years between founding and adoption is 9.62, while the median is only 3 years, indicating that very few stations are longstanding at the time of adoption into the NPR network. This skew is due, in part, to the age of the well established of radio stations that adopted NPR when it was formed in 1971. The average number of years between founding and adoption for those stations was 17.2. Nonetheless, older stations have continued to join NPR over time.

At opposite ends of the adoption spectrum are KSUI-FM in Iowa City, Iowa and KHPR-FM in Honolulu, Hawaii. KSUI, a classical music public radio station administered by the University of Iowa, was an innovator in educational radio, first going on the air in 1919. It was one of the original stations to join NPR in 1971 and, by that time, had amassed substantial financial and human resources ("Iowa Public Radio: History," 2010). In stark contrast, KHPR’s history began at 4:30 am on November 13, 1981 when they began broadcasting NPR’s Morning Edition from an improvised studio with cardboard egg cartons nailed to the wall as a means of acoustic dampening ("Hawaii Public Radio: History," 2010). NPR has always been an essential part of KHPR. The prototypical station’s adoption of NPR matches neither of these extremes. The median station adopted NPR three years after its founding, likely with more resources than KHPR, but far fewer than KSUI.

Departures from NPR are far less common than adoptions. Only 129 stations have ever departed from the NPR network, fewer than 4 per year. Thirty-eight of those stations departed during a period of crisis in 1994. Recent years have seen better much retention with only one station departure since 2000. Most of the stations that depart the NPR network do not sign off the air permanently, but are often stations with an alternative
source of financial and organizational support that allows them to continue without
NPR’s network.

KBBG-FM is the largest African-American owned and operated community radio
station in the state of Iowa. Because of its outreach to a minority community, it has long
been directly funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. Founded in 1978,
KBBG became a NPR station in 1993, only to depart the next year in the midst of NPR’s
1994 crisis ("About KBBG,” 2010). Numerous college or university stations have
departed NPR to reinvent themselves as low-cost stations broadcasting student-produced
content. KVNO-FM, operated by University of Nebraska-Omaha, airs an around-the-
clock schedule of classical music. Though the station purchases a few national classical
music programs, all of its short news and weather updates are announced by local
deejays.

Still, some departures do occur due to a station closure. Despite having very
different missions and systems of funding, public radio stations operate within the same
media ecosystem as commercial radio. Though highly visible due to its sophisticated
news and cultural programming, public radio has always represented a small fraction of
the population of radio stations. In many ways, the remarkable expansion of the NPR
network of stations reflects substantial growth in the radio market as a whole. The
number of radio stations in the U.S. consistently grew from 7,871 in 1980 to 10,770 in
1990 to 12,717 in 2000. By 2008, there were 13,837 commercial stations in the U.S
(Federal Communications Commission, 2010). Over the past few decades, with ever
more public and commercial stations, consumers have had a wider range of choices, but
stations have faced more intense competition for listeners.
Another important social development since the early 1970s has been the ever-increasing length of the average America’s commute time (documented regularly in the Census’ *Journey to Work* survey). Heath (1998), among others, has attributed the rising popularity of talk radio in the 1990s to the increase in “commuter culture.” According to Heath (1998), 42% of all talk radio listeners tuned in primarily in cars. Though public radio content differs dramatically from most “shock jock” talk radio format (e.g., Rush Limbaugh, Howard Stern, Laura Schlessinger, etc.) favored by many, we would expect to find more public radio stations with longer car-based commute times.

As media companies sought to open new stations, broadcast licenses and call letters became scarce and valuable commodities. The FCC has, in some years, received as many as 30,000 requests from organizations hoping to start new radio stations. Yet, the FCC cannot fulfill this demand because in many markets every notch on the dial is already occupied. Unable to expand either the AM (520-1710 kHz) or FM (88.1-107.9 MHz) bands upwards or downwards for a variety of technical reasons, the FCC has opened brief windows for applications as new spaces become available. With such limitations, the sale of call letters and a broadcast license can offer a way for a radio station in decline to settle debts or fund other ventures. The Telecommunications Act of 1996, which substantially loosened regulations on ownerships allowing major media corporations to buy stations by the dozens, only increased the going rate for broadcast licenses. By the end of 1996, 2,157 radio stations had changed ownership with Clear Channel being the leading buyer of stations (Fratrik, 2002).

With intense competition for listeners in a crowded radio market and increasingly valuable broadcast licenses, since the late-1990s, the incentives for failing radio stations
to sell and sign off the air have been immense. In such an environment, many smaller stations that might have otherwise struggled along can be easily tempted into high priced buy-outs. WSFP-FM, for example, was founded in Tampa, FL in 1983 and adopted NPR the next year. It lasted only two years until 1986 when it dissolved in the face of local competition from Tampa’s WUSF-FM and the burgeoning Southwest Florida Public Radio network. The WSFP call letters were sold to the Southwest Florida network as a low-range translator and then re-sold to a Christian radio station in Alpena, Michigan (“WSFP,” 2010). Today, WSFP’s fate is rare. Departures due to either dissolution or disinterest have all but disappeared since 2000.

This dissertation does not seek to understand why some of these stations stayed and why others left. Rather than individual characteristics, this research examines adoptions and departures to understand the factors that have shaped the vitality of the NPR network as a whole. In recent years, NPR has been quite healthy with numerous adoptions and few departures. However, despite NPR’s strong position today, there have been many times when its future did not look so bright.

A Public Network

In the 1920s, nonprofit educational radio stations run primarily by colleges and universities flourished (McCauley, 2005; Mitchell, 2005). With support from the Ford Foundation, a small number of these stations were able to survive into the 1960s despite external pressures, such as government regulation friendly to commercial radio and the introduction of television. In 1967, with the signing of the Public Broadcasting Act by Lyndon Johnson, this hodge-podge of stations and a few other small radio networks (e.g.,
radio networks from Native American reservations) were re-organized alongside the proposed public television system as National Public Radio (NPR) and the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), administered by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB).

According to Hoynes (1994), the Johnson administration and all involved with the development of public broadcasting wanted to protect against the government intervention into state television and radio that had sometimes been seen in Europe. Thus, the original proposal called for an independent administrative and financial structure to support the system. However, after some internal struggle, anti-“big government” sentiment prevailed, and the Public Broadcasting Act set up the CPB as only an administrative organization, “leaving the financing to the federal government’s regular appropriations process” (pg. 2). The consequence has been the rancorous political debates every time funding for public broadcasting must re-authorized.

In the resulting system, the President and Congress allocate funds in their annual budget, which are then distributed by the CPB to either to NPR and PBS centrally or directly to the stations as the CPB sees fit. The public television system, which was essentially built from the ground up with the passage of the Public Broadcasting Act, has always been far more centralized than NPR. PBS’s programming schedule varies very little between stations, nearly all of their shows are centrally produced, and, with few exceptions, local programs are limited to less than two hours per day. Thus, with the exception of grants for station hardware upgrades (e.g., all PBS stations have been granted funds to convert to high definition television in recent years), it has made sense
for the CPB to give the lion’s share of funding to PBS centrally rather than to individual stations.

NPR, by contrast, follows a far more de-centralized model. While some of their marquee shows, such as *Morning Edition*, are centrally produced, many popular NPR programs are produced by local stations, acquired by NPR, and re-distributed to member stations across the country. Such is the case with the talk show, *Fresh Air With Terry Gross*, which is produced by WHYY in Philadelphia and re-distributed by NPR, Inc. (the central organization) to member stations. Moreover, NPR stations’ programming schedules vary widely and include a substantial amount of local programming (much of it being classical music). Initially, the CPB followed the same funding model with NPR as with PBS, distributing funds primarily to NPR, Inc. and allowing them to re-distribute to stations. However, in 1985, a five-year plan went into effect that changed the structure of NPR in several ways. Beginning with the 1987 fiscal year, the CPB would begin to distribute the funds directly to stations. Stations, in turn, would be required to pay a fee to NPR, Inc. that would “cover the cost of programming, lobbying, and other services” and would have a vote on NPR, Inc.’s annual budget (McCauley, 2005, pg. 75). However, stations could also use funds to purchase shows from other content vendors (most notably American Public Radio (APR), later called Public Radio International (PRI)).

This change in the funding model is significant for two key reasons. First, though NPR, Inc. still held a unique status as the premier content provider for public radio stations via its membership relationship, this decision certainly created more
opportunities for local stations to purchase content from other sources. Second, while this decision gave station program directors a new set of opportunities, it also placed a heavier burden on their shoulders. In years past, if a local station struggled to attract listener donations in a given year, NPR, Inc. could swing some of the CPB allocation from a more successful station to help out the financially strapped station. Under the new system, local stations were not protected in the same way and all member stations were encouraged to secure their bases of private support for just such a situation (McCauley, 2005).

Conveniently, another important change also came in the 1980s that enabled the process of shoring up private funding. In 1984, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) began to allow for “enhanced underwriting.” That is, they allowed corporate underwriters to use “logos or slogans that identify – but do not promote or compare – locations, value-neutral descriptions of a product line or service, trade names, and product or service listings” (Witherspoon and Kovitz, 1987, pg. 56). Previously, underwriting had been restricted to tags like “Morning Edition brought to you with support by Parkway Toyota.” Under the new rules, to the brand tag could be added, “the maker of Toyota Camry and a full line of new cars now in the showroom located at…” While these new semi-advertisements irked many public broadcasters, corporate underwriting quickly injected large sums of private funds into the public broadcasting system as local businesses and national corporations alike jumped at the opportunity to promote their products on NPR’s most popular shows.
Privatization and the Funding of Non-Profits

Traditionally, federal funding heavily supported public radio. Federal appropriation reached a peak of 43% of support for NPR stations in 1977 (see Figure 2-5). However, in the period immediately following the major shift in the distribution of federal funds, we see a substantial change in the funding base of NPR. Whereas funding from “listeners like you” made up only 12.8% of financial support for NPR in 1984, by 2006, it represented just over a third. Likewise, given the attractiveness of “enhanced underwriting,” business funding grew from 9.3% to 17.6% in the same period. This shift of NPR from being primarily supported by public monies to being largely private is just one example of a broader shift of government services and functions into the private sector.
A tremendous body of work has focused on the recent trend of nation states toward “load-shedding” of welfare state provisions through privatization (Bailey, 1987). *Privatization*, or the transfer of governmental operations to a private organization (usually a company), has increased substantially over the past thirty years at all levels of government through the post-industrialized world and, as Piven (2001) has noted, “the United States has been the rollback pioneer.” While the debate about privatization in Western Europe has focused heavily on the transfer of state owned enterprises (SOEs) into private hands (Megginsion, 2000; Savas, 1989; Bailey, 1987), the “original contribution of American proponents of privatization is that they would like to privatize the full gamut of public assets and services” (Starr, 1987, pg. 124). Public institutions and services as disparate as public schools, correctional facilities, public broadcasting,
sanitation, public transportation, and even national parks have all been slated at some point for privatization (Goodman, 1987; Greene, 1996; Starr, 1987; Savas, 1989). Government funding for politically divisive, traditional entitlements (e.g., welfare) have been substantial scaled back or dumped altogether (for a review, see Piven, 2001). With a few exceptions (such as conservative spending for faith-based organizations under the second Bush administration), cumulatively, government support for welfare state provisions has dramatically withered in the past twenty-five years and public broadcasting has not been immune.

Beginning with the Reagan and Thatcher era “conservative revolution,” governments have undertaken the process of privatization, essentially moving the large governmental apparatuses assembled in the twentieth century into the private sector. While this process seems easily understood, privatization has been defined in a variety of ways and is often confused with other concepts, such as liberalization. In Bailey’s (1987) seminal work on privatization, he points to four definitions of the term. The first definition, most relevant to the current research, is frequently referred to as “load-shedding” or “the transfer of a service or operation from a public agency to a private organization” (pg. 139). Starr (1987) refines this definition, offering, “the cessation of public programs and disengagement of government from specific kinds of responsibilities” (pg. 125). Whereas Bailey’s definition implies the continuation of services (simply performed by a different type of organization), Starr emphasizes the government’s relinquishment of responsibility. The second definition, more relevant to Europe than the United States, focuses on the sale of SOEs. At the time of Bailey’s work, the privatization of SOEs had recently been brought to public attention by the sale of
British Telecom in 1984 for $4.8 billion. As of 1998, governments, primarily in Western Europe and Asia, had raised more than $1 trillion by selling state telecommunications, oil and gas, and electricity companies (Megginson, 2000). The third definition of privatization refers to the sale of government assets, such as public lands (often oil rich land) or public infrastructure (e.g., rail systems). Finally, the fourth definition -- privatization by contract -- has been argued by some not to be privatization at all because the government has a continuing role (Boaz, 1982).

These four definitions of privatization are further complicated by a frequent confusion with the linked concept of liberalization. Starr (1987) clarifies, “liberalization refers to the opening up of any industry to competitive pressures … [and though related,] it is entirely possible to privatize without liberalizing” (pg. 125). As an example, Starr points to the sale of British Telecom, which sold to a private corporation, yet retained a monopoly and was not liberalized. Thus, “Britain substituted public monopolies for private ones” (pg. 125).

In the United States, conservative thinkers and politicians have often argued that globalization has created a period of capital flight risk in which countries must compete for the lowest taxes and lowest wages. According to Piven (2001), “Under these conditions, the argument goes, the relatively generous social programs of the industrial era have become dysfunctional” (pg. 27). Since public institutions and services, such as public schools, welfare, and public broadcasting increase both taxes and base wages, it is further argued, “load-shedding” is essential for a nation (or cities and states for that matter) to remain competitive in the global economy. Thus, politicians have often argued,
as Savas (1989) does, that “privatization is a broad policy to improve the economic performance of governments and of nations” (pg. 344). Following this logic, during the Reagan and George H. W. Bush presidencies, privatization nearly doubled as a tactic for city administration (Greene, 1996). At the federal level, though it is difficult to estimate the total “load shed,” nearly all experts agree that “privatization of public services has soared” (Minow, 2003), while “government programs [have been] steadily whittled back” (Piven, 2001). According to Piven, the most common tactic for “load shed” of traditional entitlements has been to hold funding for social programs constant as inflation creeps up. In this way, the lawmakers allowed “inflation to erode the real value of [welfare] benefits, by one-third between the early 1970s and the mid-1990s” (pg. 30).

In case of public radio, federal support has been able to resist the erosion of support via inflation. Despite the frequent claims of public radio activists, in fact, in 2003 dollars, federal funding grew from $24.7 million in 1971 to $85.3 million in 2006, as Figure 6 reveals. Nonetheless, the incredible growth of subscriber and business dollars in recent years has made the federal support increasingly unimportant. Moreover, in one important respect, we can think of federal support as decreasing. The CPB has had a near fetish in recent years for providing funds to stations for hardware upgrades. In the late-1990s, the CPB placed a great emphasis on extending public radio into sparsely populated areas. As public radio trade periodical Current reported in 1998, “About six out of every 10 added radio dollars next year would go for rural service” (Conciatore, 1998). Then, between 2000 and 2005, the CPB distributed $190 million in funds to station for conversion to digital radio (“CPB Grants Help More Local Public Radio Stations Move Toward Digital Services,” 2005). Thus, we see that while federal funding
in real dollars has remained constant in recent years, the proportion given to fund programming, staffing, and other important costs has likely declined. In these ways, both NPR, Inc. and its member stations have largely moved into the private sector.

Various Funding Sources for NPR Stations in 2003 Dollars, 1971-2006

Figure 2-6: Various Funding Sources for NPR Stations, 1971-2006

Crowding In/Out

A substantial body of literature in public administration and economics has focused on the effects of governmental funding of non-profits on support from other sources (for a review, see Andreoni (2006)). Classical “crowding out” theory suggests that governmental grants to private charitable organizations displace contributions by individuals (Bergstrom, Blume, and Varian, 1985; Roberts, 1984). While researchers have clearly documented the crowding out of private contributors in several different
types of non-profit organizations, there is no clear consensus on the reasons why individual contributions disappear as government funding increases.

Early researchers in this area, like Roberts (1984) and Bergstrom et al. (1985), adopted a rational choice approach, contending that when the government gives money to a non-profit, individuals are likely to see their tax dollars as a contribution to the organization. Given this rationale, individuals are unlikely to make a “second” donation by directly contributing to the organization. However, as Andreoni and Payne (2008) have noted this explanation “requires that donors are aware of the fluctuations in governments grants received by the charity and respond accordingly” (pg. 1). In fact, Andreoni and Payne (2008) find that much of the crowding effect of governmental funds can be explained by reduced community fundraising efforts by the non-profit organizations.

Alternatively, some researchers (Schiff, 1985; Hughes and Luksetich, 1999) have advocated a “crowding in” theory, showing that government funding actually encourages private contributions by strengthening the non-profit organizations both through granting greater legitimacy and by providing a larger range of resources. Brooks (2000a, 2000b, 2003) propose a synthesis, claiming that the effect of government funding on private contributions is non-linear. That is to say, that low levels of government funding crowd in greater individual contributions by lending legitimacy to an organization (Brooks, 2000b). However, a crucial tipping point occurs when government funding account for approximately 25% of the organization’s total budget (Brooks, 2003). At that point, the organization is seen as a “quasi-public agency,” to which few people feel compelled to donate (Brooks, 2000a).
In a 2003 study of 90 public radio stations, Brooks found support for a curvilinear effect of government funding on private contributions. Among stations with a relatively low level of government funding, greater government support is positively associated with private donations. However, at higher levels of government funding, public support had a strong negative effect, displacing individual contributions.

The past literatures on privatization and the effects of government funding offer mixed answers to the questions raised in this dissertation. Research on privatization tends to paint a bleak picture of the life of an organization offloaded to the private sector. In periods of lesser government funding, we would expect to see fewer adoptions as new radio stations are unlikely to enter a financially insecure environment. Likewise, we would expect to see more departures during government funding droughts as stations struggle to replace the shrinking bedrock of public financial support. On the other hand, Brooks’ (2003) synthesis of crowding out and crowding in theory suggests that radio stations might thrive in an era of low levels of governmental support. If low levels of public support encouraged more contributions from individuals, stations might see it as an era of popular interest in public radio and be more eager to adopt NPR. Similarly, if low levels of government funding help legitimize the organizations without making them appear to be part of a “quasi-public agency,” we might see fewer departures as well.

Thus, based on Brooks’ reasoning and weighing the initial evidence, I propose the following hypotheses:

\[ H_{1a}: \text{NPR adoption rates will be negatively associated with federal government appropriations.} \]
H$_1$b: *NPR departure rates will be negatively associated with federal government appropriations.*

With regard to individual contributions, given that the size and quality of the listening community are the essential measures of success in the radio industry, I suspect that growth in individual contributions can only lead to expansion in the population of stations. Therefore, I hypothesize

H$_3$a: *NPR adoption rates will be positively associated with the system-wide total of subscriber contributions.*

H$_3$b: *NPR departure rates will be negatively associated with the system-wide total of subscriber contributions*

Finally, while several researchers (Lichenstein, Drumwright, and Braig, 2004; Andreoni, 2006) have noted the lack of a comparable theory of the effect of business support on individual contributions, we might speculate that business support would have an effect similar to that of governmental support. On the one hand, business contributions might serve to legitimize the population of radio stations. However, business support and the associated expansion of “enhanced underwriting” might deter listeners from contributing by giving off the appearance of being a network rich with advertising dollars. Nonetheless, in its cumulative effect, the legitimacy and resources made possible by business support would likely do more to encourage adoptions than to discourage them. Thus, I hypothesize:

H$_3$a: *NPR adoption rates will be positively associated with the system-wide total of business contributions.*
H₃b: *NPR departure rates will be negatively associated with the system-wide total of business contributions.*

To summarize, despite the claims of privatization researchers, I expect that the findings of the current study will support Brooks’ (2003) synthesis of existing crowding out/in theory, suggesting that limited, rather than sumptuous, government support might actually help the NPR station network. While this paper explores the consequences of government support on the growth of NPR rather than on other potential sources of funding, I expect to find a related result: that high levels of governmental funding stifle growth in the station network. At the same time, I expect that both forms of private support – individual and business contributions – will lead to growth in the network of stations.

**Organizational Population Ecology**

Though changes in the financial base of public radio may partially explain the growth of the NPR station network, it is also important to consider the role that the organizational environment may have. Organizational researchers have long argued that the fates of individual organizations are highly influenced by the size and age of the population of similar organizations. While most studies of organizational population ecology examine the foundings and mortalities of organizations, in this study, I consider the stations’ adoptions of NPR and departures from the network. Because the emphasis of this project is on the expansion of NPR network, rather than the life and death of the stations *per se*, we can only understand the larger sociological questions at hand by analyzing adoption and departure patterns. Despite the important difference in these
measurements, joining or leaving the NPR is such a radical transformation that much organizational theory is still applicable. For the current research, I use three key concepts from organizational theory: density dependence, density delay, and the liability of newness. Below, I briefly discuss each of these concepts and how they can be applied to the current research questions.

Hannan and Freeman (1977) have proposed that nearly all organizational populations (e.g., credit unions, microbreweries, labor unions, newspapers) follow a curvilinear pattern of growth. As a population of any given type of organizations grows, that industry gains increasing legitimacy, lowering the risk of entry for new organizations. At some point, however, “competitive processes in an environment with a finite carrying capacity” lead to substantial organizational mortalities (Delacroix, Swaminathan, and Solt, 1989, pg. 246). That is to say, that in this second phase, smaller, weaker, or otherwise unstable organizations are unable to compete in a crowded marketplace and, eventually, close up shop. Thus, patterns in the adoptions and departures of NPR stations may be explained by dynamics of the organizational population at various points in time. Specifically, I hypothesize:

H₄a: The relationship between organizational population density and NPR adoption rates will be curvilinear, with initial increases in density leading to growth in adoption rates. However, density growth above a certain threshold will decrease adoption rates.

H₄b: Similarly, the relationship between organizational population density and NPR departure rates will be curvilinear, with initial increases in density
decreasing the rate of departures. However, density growth above a certain threshold will increase the station departures.

Continuing in this line of logic, several researchers have suggested that density at the time of founding as well as contemporaneous density may have an effect on organizational mortality (Carroll and Hannan, 1989; Barron, West, and Hannan, 1994). In proposing the concept of density delay, Carroll and Hannan (1989) propose three reasons why density at founding might lead to a higher probability of mortality. First, they claim “intense competition at time of founding (due to high density) creates conditions of resource scarcity” (pg. 415). Without essential resources, organizations have difficulty moving to “full-scale operations” and are more likely to imprint dysfunctional structures. Second, at times of high density, the newly founded organizations are forced to market to a narrow niche to avoid head-to-head competition with older, more stable organizations. In marketing to a narrower segment, they are less likely to survive than organizations marketing to wider audiences. Finally, as a third reason, they suggest that being founded in time of high density is a “trial by fire.” “Frail” organizations that might find a way to survive in more favorable circumstances are weakened by the intense competition associated with high density.

In the current research, I also test whether these data support the concept of density delay. I consider whether density at the time of adopting NPR has an effect on the likelihood of subsequent departure. I expect that higher density will be associated with a higher likelihood of departure. Following the literature on density delay, I hypothesize:

H5: Population density at the time of adoption will increase the likelihood of departure from the NPR network.
A final organizational concept, the liability of newness, stems from Stinchcombe’s (1965) observation that newer organizations are more likely to fail than older organizations. Using this idea, Hannan and Freeman (1984) argued that organizations with greater reliability and accountability were more likely to expand and become successful. Reliability and accountability are developed through many repetitions of the same function. Thus, older organizations that have more experience are more likely to be highly reliable and, therefore, successful than younger organizations. In an empirical test using three populations – national labor unions, electronics manufacturers, and newspaper companies – Freeman, Carroll, and Hannan (1983) found support for a liability of newness. Since then, such an incredible volume of research has supported this finding that Barron, West, and Hannan (1994) claimed that the liability of newness had become “part of the conventional wisdom of organizational sociology” (pg. 384).

Following past findings, I hypothesize:

\( H_6: \) The more years a station is part of the NPR network is the less likely it is to leave.

To summarize, this paper replicates previous organizational researchers’ findings with regards to density dependence, density delay, and the liability of newness using the population of NPR stations. Unlike past research, the current study considers adoptions of and departures from the NPR network as opposed organizational foundings and mortalities. Despite this key difference, I expect that the theoretically-anticipated patterns described above will be borne out in the empirical findings.
Alternative Explanations

Several factors other than those already mentioned may also explain the growth of the NPR network. I now consider three of these explanations: political party composition, historical conditions, and demographic shifts in the potential listening population. I examine these in turn.

Political Composition

Public radio activists have long seen the Republican Party as a group of villains, sparing no expense or effort to close down public broadcasting (McCauley, 2005). And, in fact, conservatives have often stood in opposition to NPR. In 1994, Newt Gingrich publicly decried the public funding of NPR and PBS and supported a blueprint prepared by the conservative think-tank, the Heritage Foundation, to privatize public broadcasting (Jarvik, 1992; McCauley, 2005). Because funding for the CPB (and, therefore, NPR) needs to be re-allocated annually in the federal budget, rarely does Congress pass a budget without some new calls by Republicans to “defund NPR.”

Despite nearly twenty years of regular promises to cut NPR’s funding, Republicans have been unsuccessful in removing the CPB’s budget line. Though the budgeting process is a shared responsibility of Congress and the White House, rarely do Presidents make cutting public broadcasting funding priority in proposing their budget\(^1\) (McCauley, 2005). Indeed, based on a search of Presidents’ speeches at *The American*

\(^1\)President Ronald Reagan was a notable exception to this rule. In 1984, he penned a letter to the U.S. Senate threatening to veto an omnibus spending bill that allocated funds for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (Reagan, 1984).
Presidency Project (2010), public broadcasting has only been mentioned by Presidents twice since 1987. Congresswomen and men, on the other hand, often seize upon the issue. Washington Post columnist, Chris Cillizza, argues that neither the Republicans nor the Democrats want to change the status quo on NPR funding, but find the debate politically useful: “...the fight over NPR’s funding mechanism is a rare occasion where both sides may wind up on the winning side. For Republicans, the fight energizes their base ... For Democrats, the debate is a fundraising boon” (2011). This political theater of the NPR funding debate reoccurs annually when Republicans control at least one chamber of Congress and have the ability to influence the budget. Still, GOP-controlled Congresses have not been any more likely than Democratic ones to cut funding. Nor have Democratic Congresses significantly boosted public funding of NPR, perhaps due to the shared “market fundamentalism” of both American political parties (Somers and Block, 2005).

Even so, Republicans having control of at least one chamber of Congress could still contribute to an atmosphere that stifles growth in the NPR network. Regardless of the actual budget allocation to the CPB, the perception that Republicans in Congress pose a threat to NPR’s federal funding may affect the decision-making of the leadership of local radio stations. The anti-NPR rhetoric that usually accompanies NPR defunding campaigns (e.g., charges of liberal bias) may create increased anxiety among radio staff members about their ability to secure future contributions and grants from controversy-adverse businesses and foundations. In the climate of uncertainty produced by GOP control of at least one chamber of Congress, public radio stations may be less likely to adopt NPR and more eager to depart the NPR network. Therefore, I hypothesize:
\( H_7a: \) Republican control of at least one chamber of Congress will decrease rate of NPR adoptions.

\( H_7b: \) Republican control of at least one chamber of Congress will increase the NPR departure rate.

**Historical Conditions**

The year 1994 was among the darkest for the NPR network. Still recovering from the transformation in funding patterns (from a centralized system to distributing the funds directly to stations), the NPR network was saddled with incredible debts. Facing these debts and Gingrich’s conspicuous attempt to axe future government support, NPR, Inc. sought to reduce costs by ceasing production on half of its cultural programs (including highly regarded show *Afro Pop*) (McCauley, 2005). At the very same moment, American Public Radio (APR) changed its name to Public Radio International (PRI) and became the first legitimate competition to NPR, offering stations programming alternatives for purchase with their newly freed up government funds (Mitchell, 2005). In such a turbulent environment, jumping ship might look very attractive. Thus, it should follow that:

\( H_8a: \) The likelihood of a station departing the NPR network was significantly higher in 1994 than any other year.

**Demographic Shifts**

The final quarter of the twentieth century saw tremendous changes in the demographic composition of the United States. Among many other trends, many
businesses moved out of the “rust belt” (the northern states, formerly home to much manufacturing) toward the “sun belt” (southern states, particularly the southwest), taking many jobs and families along with them. While I will not offer formal hypotheses regarding the effect of demographic trends, it would follow that growth in either the population size or the income level of a region might contribute to a higher rate of NPR adoptions. Similarly, decreases in income or population might lead to higher departure rates. For this reason, I control for both population size and median income in the following analyses.

Data

Prior to the current study, neither NPR nor the CPB maintained complete annual list of NPR member stations. To assemble such a list, the author and a research assistant conducted a census of NPR stations from 1971 through 2006 using archival files from the National Public Broadcasting Archives (NPBA) at the University of Maryland and radio station listings from the *Yearbook of Cable and Broadcasting* (YCB). The NPBA files consisted of thousands of internal NPR documents dating from the late 1960s through 1994. However, though unclear in NPR’s official station listings, it quickly became clear that many of the so-called stations simply repeat transmissions of other stations.

Essentially, three categories of “stations” exist (FCC, 2007). First, there are *producing stations* which fit the traditional image of a radio station with a studio, on-air talent, and the means to produce original content. Producing stations have call signs with four letters in the familiar format (e.g., KUER-FM). The second category of stations is the *booster station*, which extend the distance that the station’s signal travels by simply repeating its content. Booster stations take their call signs from their parent station, but
add a serial number suffix (e.g., KUER-FM2). Finally, *translator stations*, which can be owned be an organization or business other than the parent organization, are often located well beyond the range of the parent station. Translator stations’ call signs consist of K or W plus a three-digit number followed by two letters (e.g., K202BU). Importantly, the latter two categories do not have the hardware necessary to air original content. KUER, for example, broadcasts their content through an extensive system of 33 boosters and translators.

Producing stations vary widely in the amount of content produced locally. Many producing stations primarily repeat programming from a regional provider (e.g., Minnesota Public Radio), NPR, and/or other national content providers. For many smaller stations, it is common practice to rebroadcast 80% of their content from a larger station in the same state or region, but to have a few original music or cultural shows and to provide local news and weather.

For the purposes of this research, I follow Klinenberg’s logic in *Fighting for Air* (2007), and adopt the definition of a station as a radio facility with the capability of transmitting its own original content, even if it would only do so in the case of an emergency. Thus, the current research excludes booster and translator stations, but includes those whose local programming may consist of little more than a pre-recorded local news and weather update aired several times during the day. Though these stations may not use their hardware capabilities to their fullest extent, they nonetheless have the physical and human resources to produce local content and take control of the airwaves during a crisis. Fortunately, the YCB listings contained enough detailed information
about station equipment and the percentage of content rebroadcast from other stations to assess whether the station was a producer, booster, or translator.

Because the stations were simply coded for existing or not in a given year, a high degree of inter-coder reliability would naturally be expected. However, 5% of the stations listings randomly selected across years were double coded to ensure reliability and all cases were found to be coded in the same way. In all, 760 producing stations have existed at one time or another. The mean number of years in existence was 17.4, with a standard deviation of 10.3. Geographically, the stations were fairly evenly divided among the Midwest (29.7%), South (27.1%), and the West (27.8%), with the North having fewer stations (14.7%). As Figure 2-1 clearly demonstrates, the network of NPR stations has grown steadily over time with only slight and short-lived declines.

**Measures**

**Adoptions**

Since the analyses of adoption and departures ask quite different questions, multiple methodologies were employed to answer the various questions. In this regard, I follow the methodology of the majority of past organizational ecology research (for example, Barron, West, and Hannan’s (1994) study of credit unions in New York City). Studies of foundings (here, adoptions) typically consider rates of foundings (adoptions) within a particularly time period. Thus, this analysis uses simply OLS regression to examine adoptions in each of NPR’s 35 years. These results should be analyzed at the national level.
Departures

A comparable analysis was conducted to examine rates of departures at the national level in each of the 35 years. However, in order to test the core organizational hypotheses (particularly regarding density delay and the liability of newness) and better understand what predicts departures, it was also essential to use station-level characteristics. Therefore, I analyze departures in two ways: at the year-level and at the station-level. For the year-level analysis, the dependent measure is simply the number of departures each year (n=35).

In a secondary, multi-level analysis, the unit of analysis was station-year. Each station is represented by one case for each year of its NPR membership. The dependent variable is whether or not a station departed the NPR network in a given year (1=departure, 0=NPR member). The sample size for the analysis of station departures was 12,564.

Independent Variables

While it is apparent that the NPR network has grown in a fairly linear fashion, it remains unclear what factors are most important in explaining the adoption and departure patterns of NPR stations. I now describe the independent variables used to better understand the expansion of this organizational population. Descriptive statistics for all variables are presented in Appendix B.

First, the measure of yearly financial contributions from individual subscribers, businesses, and the federal government were supplied by the Research Department of the CPB. While station level and regional level funding data would have been preferable, no
such data is available prior to 1984. Thus, national, yearly data is the only consistent measure available for the entire time period. Raw dollar values were converted into 2003-dollar values. All financial measures are presented in millions.

Next, I created a few measures of density. For the year-level analyses of station adoptions and departures, I create a simple measure of the number of stations in each year. To test the curvilinear effect of density, a density squared measure was also created. In the station-level analysis of departures, following Barron, West, and Hannan (1994), I create both regional and national measures of station density. First, I created a measure of organizational density specific to each region and year by simply summing the radio stations existing in each region and year. The second density variable aimed to represent national density, while avoiding issues of multi-collinearity. In order to accomplish this, I created a measure of the organizational population density in all other regions (created by subtracting the regional density from the total density in each year). This allows us to test whether the effects of the organizational population density on the station’s fate are national or regional in scope. Finally, a measure of regional density squared was computed to test for curvilinearity.

For the analysis of departures, I also created variables to test the effects of the liability of newness and density delay. By simple subtraction, a variable was computed measuring the radio stations’ number of years as part of the NPR network for each station-year to assess the impact of the liability of newness. Then, I created a measure of the regional organizational population density in the adoption year. This measure was used to consider the role of density delay.
Four measures of political composition were used to analyze the effect of Republican controlled political institutions on the adoption and departure rates of NPR stations. Using data gathered from official government web sites collected by Walker (2007), I created dummy variables for Republican control of the House of Representatives, the Senate, and the Presidency (Democrat = 0, Republican = 1) in each year.

Finally, several measures were created for the control variables. In the two analyses of departures, a dummy variable was created to represent for all cases occurring in 1994 (1994 = 1, all other years = 0). In the adoptions, a dummy variable was using representing the year 1971 (1971=1, all other years=0) to control for the unusually high number of adoptions during NPR’s founding year. Using data from the U.S. Census Bureau’s Current Population Survey, I created a measure of region-year median household income (in 2003 dollars, measured in millions). From the same dataset, I created a measure of the size of the human population in each region-year.

Analysis

The current study used two different analytic models to test the various hypotheses. Standard OLS regression was used in investigating the yearly rates of both adoptions and departures. While the adoption data do not violate standard OLS regression’s assumption of a normal distribution, the large proportion of years with zero departures leads to a rather skewed distribution of yearly departure counts. Many researchers working with count-based data have made use of zero-inflated models, which adjust for “structural zeros” and offer a better model fit (Lambert, 1992). However, zero-
infated Poisson and Negative Binomial models are inappropriate for small sample sizes such as the one used in the current study (Long, 1997; Long and Freese, 2005). Moreover, past research has shown that even given moderate violations, OLS regression provides fairly robust estimates (Cleves, Gould, and Gutierrez, 2004). For these reasons, OLS regression is the most appropriate method for analyzing both the yearly adoption and departure rates in the current research.

Given that the concepts of density delay and liability of newness must be tested at the level of an individual station, a much different estimation method was required for the analysis of stations departing the NPR network. While one might be tempted to use logistic regression here, it is inappropriate because it lacks the capacity to analyze the effect of time-varying covariates or to deal with right-censoring concerns. Rather than throw out much of the data and/or produce a model with an absurd number of dummy variables, instead I estimate a nested model with an event history framework (Liang and Zeger, 1986; Box-Steensmeier and Jones, 2004; Cleves, Gould, and Gutierrez, 2004). Using a Discrete Time Logit model, a type of survival analysis, I am able to consider why departures happen in two ways: both across stations and over the life of a single station.

The results of the analysis can be interpreted in much the same way as the results of a logistic regression model. An odds ratio of less than 1 indicates that that independent variable leads to a decrease in the odds of a departure happening. The Discrete Time Logit analysis efficiently handles issues of non-independence of station and year by adjusting for intra-station correlation (Allison, 1982). Nonetheless, I used random effects estimation on region to account for potential non-independence of stations within the
same region. All analyses were conducted using Stata 9.2 statistical analysis software (StatCorp, 2007).

**Results**

I now consider the results of the two analyses. I begin by examining how financial, political, and organization measures affected the likelihood of adoptions in each year (results presented in Figure 2-7 and Table 2-1). Then, I describe the effects of the same independent variables on the rate of NPR departures (as seen in Figure 2-8 and Table 2). Finally, I consider the effect of organizational and political measures on the likelihood of a departure in a given station-year. In evaluating the results of these analyses, it is important to remember that the current study investigates a population, rather than a sample of stations. Thus, it is far more valuable to focus on the magnitude of effects than on the significance levels (although significance levels are reported).

![NPR Adoption Rate, 1971-2006](image)

Figure 2-7: NPR Adoption Rate, 1971-2006
Adoptions

Figure 2-7 depicts the rate of adoptions of the NPR network over time. Given that NPR did not exist prior to 1971, the first year of the network has by far the most adoptions (82). Subsequently, like most organizational founding patterns, the station adoption rate is inconsistent, rising and falling sharply in almost every other year, particularly in the 1980s and early 1990s. For the entire 36 year period, the mean yearly rate was 23.75 adoptions. For complete descriptive statistics, see Appendix B.

Table 2-1: OLS Regression of Adoptions on Various Predictors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Constant</strong></td>
<td>23.837</td>
<td>20.339</td>
<td>52.085</td>
<td>167.042</td>
<td>31.349</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Density</td>
<td>-.000</td>
<td>.021</td>
<td>.067</td>
<td>.114</td>
<td>.247*</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.986)</td>
<td>(.734)</td>
<td>(.494)</td>
<td>(.323)</td>
<td>(.017)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Density squared</td>
<td>-.000</td>
<td>-.000†</td>
<td>-.000</td>
<td>-.000*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.726)</td>
<td>(.085)</td>
<td>(.166)</td>
<td>(.010)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subscriber Funding</td>
<td>.074</td>
<td>-.104</td>
<td>-.016</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.802)</td>
<td>(1.724)</td>
<td>(1.948)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPB Funding</td>
<td>-.738**</td>
<td>-1.169***</td>
<td>-.554†</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.004)</td>
<td>(.000)</td>
<td>(.060)</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business Funding</td>
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<td>.639</td>
<td>-.036</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>(.408)</td>
<td>(.211)</td>
<td>(.936)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>GOP Congress</td>
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<td></td>
<td>-12.883</td>
<td>-9.129</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(.122)</td>
<td>(.178)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median Household Income in thousands</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-2.033†</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Constant Dollars)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(.057)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(.708)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>62.504***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| \( R^2 \) | .000 | .004 | .261 | .378 | .607 |

n=36; Significance Levels: *** p<.001, ** p<.01, * p<.05, † p<.1
Financial Hypotheses

Drawing on crowding out theory, I argued that increases in federal funding might serve to create a more financially insecure environment, thus discouraging adoptions (H$_{1a}$). Conversely, I hypothesized that contributions from subscribers, who are the lifeblood of public radio, would be positively associated with NPR adoption rates (H$_{2a}$). Finally, I expected that contributions from business would increase the rate of adoptions by offering the population of radio stations greater legitimacy (H$_{3a}$). The results of an OLS Regression analysis of adoption rates in the 35 years between 1971 and 2006 found strong support for the first hypothesis and none for the latter two.

Table 2-1 presents five successive regression analyses, each adding variables in order to isolate the individual contribution of various independent variables. One of the most consistent findings in these analyses is the influence of federal funding in reducing the number of new adoptions. In the full model, for every ten million dollar increase in federal funding, there were 5.54 fewer stations (p<0.1), supporting the first of the three financial hypotheses (H$_{1a}$). By contrast, in none of the models did either subscriber or business funding have any significant effect on adoption rates. These results suggest that federal funds decrease the rate of adoption, while levels of subscriber and business funds have little influence on adoption rates. These findings tend to provide support for crowding out theory, while rejecting the traditional thinking of privatization scholars and activists who argue that non-profits wither as federal funding is withdrawn.
**Organizational Population Ecology Hypotheses**

Using theory from the tremendous amount of research on organizational foundings, I argued that the logic of organizational population ecology theory could be applied to the study of NPR adoptions. In particular, I hypothesized that the density of the population would be associated with adoption rates in a curvilinear fashion, with initial increases in density leading to more adoptions (as legitimacy expands), but subsequent density growth contributing to decreases in adoptions (as competition becomes too great).

The results of the analysis of adoption rates found some support for organizational population ecology theory. A simple model (model #2 in Table 2-1) of only density and density squared reveals no significant effect on adoption rates. However, when controlling for funding levels and the unusually high rate of adoptions in NPR’s first year (1971), the density variables were statistically significant in the expected fashion. Based on model #5, for every ten additional NPR stations existing in a given year, we would expect 2.47 more new station adoptions (p<.05). While the magnitude of a one unit increase in regional density squared is very small, there was a statistically significant negative association with the adoption rate (p<.001). These results suggest that density does have a curvilinear relationship with NPR adoption rates in the direction anticipated by most organizational founding research.

**Political Hypotheses**

Republicans have long publicly professed a desire to cut federal funding for public media. In practice, these cuts have not materialized. Yet, Republican control of at least one chamber of Congress could lead to a climate of uncertainty over the *perceived*
lack of future funding from the government. For this reason, I hypothesized that, all things being equal, Republican control of at least one chamber of Congress would decrease the rate of NPR adoptions (H7a). The current study found no support for the idea that Republican presence in Congress affects the rate of NPR adoptions. Models 4 and 5 in Table 2-1 reveal no significant effect of either a Republican House or Senate on adoptions rates. Of course, because we are examining a population rather than a sample, an effect of any magnitude is a real effect. In these analyses, all things being equal, years with a Republican control of at least one chamber of Congress had approximately nine fewer adoptions (model #5). Still, this effect was not statistically significant and may reflect a quirk of historical fact.

**Controls**

NPR’s founding year, 1971, was unique as it introduced the 82 stations that would form the initial basis of NPR. Never again would there be so many adoptions in a single year. Because of the potential of the unusual circumstances of 1971 to affect the results, I inserted a dummy variable for 1971 into model #5 in Table 2-2. The results clearly indicate how exceptional that year was. Controlling for organizational ecology, funding levels, and political composition, there were still 62.5 more adoptions than would otherwise be expected in 1971. In at least one important way, introducing a dummy for the year 1971 also clarified the rest of the model. Holding aside the exception of 1971 which had a massive number of adoptions and low density, allowed us to recognize the wider effects of density on adoption rates. Taken together, the independent variables in the final model account for about 60% of the variation in adoption rates.
Departures

I now turn to considering the results of two analyses of departures: the OLS regression of departure rates in the 35 years of NPR and the Random Effects Discrete Time Logit Regression of departures in station-years (n=12,564). Figure 2-8 depicts the rate of departures from the NPR network over time. Immediately apparent is that departures have been relatively rare to this date. Altogether, only 129 stations have ever left the NPR network (a mean of 3.58 per year). Of course, the most dramatic spike in the graph occurs in 1994 when 38 stations left the network. Since 2000, departures have been almost non-existent.

![NPR Station Departure Rate, 1972-2006](image)

Figure 2-8: NPR Station Departure Rate, 1972-2006

Financial Hypotheses

Mirroring the hypotheses for adoptions, I hypothesized that federal funding (H₁b), subscriber support (H₂b), and business dollars (H₃b) would all reduce the risk of a
departure. The results of the OLS regression model in Table 2-2 reveal that only federal funding reduces departure rate. In model #5, all things being equal, for every ten million dollar increase in federal funds, 1.37 stations fewer departed the NPR network (p<.05). Subscriber funding, by contrast, had no significant effect on departure rates. Business funding, on the other hand, seems to significantly increase the rate of departures. The full model (#5) indicates that, controlling for other factors, years with more business funding had significantly more departures (p<.05). For every ten million dollars of business funding, 3.7 more stations departed the NPR network. Thus, evidence suggests that federal funding decreases the rate of departures, business funding increases departures, and subscriber funding has no apparent effect.

Combined with the results from the analysis of adoption rates, these findings suggest that federal funds tend to maintain the status quo, decreasing both adoptions and departures. Business funds appear to do little to encourage the adoption of new stations, but are associated with station departures. Finally, levels of subscriber funding does not seem to affect either adoptions or departures. Perhaps, the influence of funds from the government on the NPR network is to encourage stations to engage in more conservative (less risk-taking) decisions. Such findings may ultimately support the thinking of privatization researchers in an unexpected way. It’s not that the withdrawal of government funds and the advance of business funds kills non-profit, former government programs altogether. Rather, the disappearance of government support may lead non-profits to turn to the more unstable environment created by business monies. For example, it may be that in years with more business funding, stations are able to depart the NPR network and produce or buy other programming content. Even if such funds are
being used to spur new innovative, non-NPR content, it appears to be the case that
funding from businesses is detrimental to the NPR network of stations.

Table 2-2: OLS Regression of Departures on Various Measures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>5.011</td>
<td>-2.767</td>
<td>10.861</td>
<td>49.270†</td>
<td>33.659*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Density</td>
<td>-.003</td>
<td>.046†</td>
<td>-.034</td>
<td>-.082</td>
<td>-.038</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.565) (0.98) (.428) (.112) (.152)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Density²</td>
<td>-.000†</td>
<td>-.000</td>
<td>-.000</td>
<td>-.000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.079) (.218) (.414) (.279)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subscriber Funding</td>
<td>-.044</td>
<td>-.025</td>
<td>-.049</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.731) (.848) (.428)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPB Funding</td>
<td>-.089</td>
<td>-.144</td>
<td>-.137*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.395) (0.276) (0.044)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business Funding</td>
<td>.478*</td>
<td>.619**</td>
<td>.377**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.034) (.009) (0.003)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GOP Congress</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3.668</td>
<td>3.693*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.311) (.049)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median Household Income</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in thousands (Constant</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dollars)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-.635</td>
<td>-.412†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.169) (0.082)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pseudo R²</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.010</td>
<td>0.102</td>
<td>0.320</td>
<td>0.408</td>
<td>0.855</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| n=36; Significance Levels: *** p<.001, ** p<.01, * p<.05, † p<.1

Organizational Population Ecology Hypotheses

Like the analysis of adoptions, I hypothesized a curvilinear relationship between
organizational population density and the likelihood of a departure (H₄b): early growth in
the population will decrease the likelihood of a departure, while subsequent growth will
lead to more departures. I examined the effect of organization population density in two separate analyses presented in Tables 1-2 and 1-3. First, as with adoptions, I analyzed the effect of density and density-squared on departures in each of the 35 years of NPR. In a model using only those two independent variables (model #2), I found significant support for a curvilinear relationship between density and departures, but in the opposite direction as hypothesized. Initially, increases in density led to increases in the number of departures. However, after reaching certain point, density reduces the number of departures. These findings became non-significant when controlling for other factors. More importantly, the magnitude of the effect was tiny (a decrease of 1 station for every 300 stations in the population).

The Random Effects Discrete Time Logit Regression conducted at the station-year level (n=12,564) adds more complexity to these results. For this analysis, there were measures of density at both the regional and national level. National density (as measured by density in all regions other than the station’s home region) was consistently non-significant. It seems that organizational population density at the national level has little effect on a station’s odds of departure in a given year.

On the other hand, population density within the station’s own region appears to have a curvilinear affect on odds of departure. In all of the models in Table 2-3, regional population density and regional population density squared were statistically significant (and acted in the same direction as the non-significant OLS findings regarding population density). The results suggest that as regional density increases, the odds of departure are also increase (each additional station in the population increases the odds of departure by
1.045 in Model #6). Once density in region becomes too great, the odds of departures decrease.

Table 2-3: Random Effects Discrete Time Logit Regression Of Station-Year Departures On Various Measures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Models</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Organizational Measures</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional Density</td>
<td>1.001**</td>
<td>1.029**</td>
<td>1.025*</td>
<td>1.025*</td>
<td>1.026*</td>
<td>1.045***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional Density$^2$</td>
<td>.999**</td>
<td>.999*</td>
<td>.999*</td>
<td>.999*</td>
<td>.999*</td>
<td>.999*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Density</td>
<td>.994</td>
<td>.996</td>
<td>.996</td>
<td>.996</td>
<td>.996</td>
<td>.996</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Density in Adoption Year</td>
<td>.983***</td>
<td>.971***</td>
<td>.971***</td>
<td>.971***</td>
<td>.971***</td>
<td>.971***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.898***</td>
<td>.898***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Measure</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican Presence in Congress</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.060</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Controls</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region Population</td>
<td>.980**</td>
<td>.921**</td>
<td>.984</td>
<td>.982</td>
<td>.982</td>
<td>.982</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region Median Income</td>
<td>.939**</td>
<td>.910**</td>
<td>.979</td>
<td>.979</td>
<td>.993</td>
<td>.993</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pseudo R2</td>
<td>.084</td>
<td>.087</td>
<td>.087</td>
<td>.132</td>
<td>.220</td>
<td>.220</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n=12,564; random effects on region; odds ratios presented
Significance Levels: *** p<.001, ** p<.01, * p<.05

These findings tend to suggest that while density at the national level has limited consequences for an individual station’s odds of departure, organizational population density at the regional level has quite a great effect. Perhaps, as the population of stations at the regional level grew, the NPR network still lacked the legitimacy and resources to
support existing stations while continuing to add new ones. However, as the population of stations stabilized, NPR became a more recognizable brand and was able to offer stations the content and resources to maintain their membership. Recall, there has only been one departure since 2000. As the findings suggest, the NPR network seems to have achieved a sustainable model of station development that prevents further departures. Though these findings lead us to reject my original hypothesis (H4b), they do intuitively match the larger patterns of NPR’s growth.

As a test of density delay (H5) – the concept that organizations founded in periods of high density are imprinted with characteristics that make them more likely to die off – a measure of the density at the time of adoption was included. As seen in Table 2-3, I found substantial support for the idea that density at the time of founding affects the likelihood of departure. However, it seems that stations adopting in a period of higher density are less likely to depart the NPR network. In the complete model (#6), each additional station in the population in the year of the station’s adoption led to a .971 reduction in the odds of departure (p<.001). This counterintuitive finding is likely the result of the smaller number of departures in the later years of NPR. Previous research has argued that organizations founded in periods of high density faced highly competitive circumstances that tend to weaken them. Adoption of the NPR network, rather than organizational founding, may operate differently. It may be that having overseen the adoption process of many other stations, NPR has developed resources and routines to better integrate new stations. In this way, it seems that organizations adopting in a period of higher density have some advantages that reduce the likelihood of departure. In other
words, as NPR developed a substantial network of stations, new adoptees were less likely to depart the network.

Finally, the current study finds support for the liability of newness, the notion that older organizations are more likely to survive. Each additional year of age reduced the odds of departure by .898 (p<.001). Whether a result of better financing, more efficient internal systems, or greater legitimacy, older organizations are less likely to depart the NPR network. Unsurprisingly, this finding supports the great volume of previous organizational population ecology studies.

### Political Hypotheses

In considering the effect of political institutions, I hypothesized that Republican control of at least one chamber of Congress would create fear among leadership at NPR stations of fewer financial resources in the future, leading to increases in departures (H₇b). As in the analysis of adoptions, the current study found no support for Republican control having an effect on NPR’s growth at the level of the individual station. On the other hand, at the national level, years with Republicans in control of at least one chamber of Congress did have 3.69 more departures, all things being equal (p<.05).

The apparent conflict in these findings is most likely a product of the differing units of analysis. While Republican control in Congress and its associated anti-NPR rhetoric may not have a strong enough effect to motivate the departure of an individual station, it does create unease throughout the NPR network as a whole. As NPR executives view Congressional debates about their funding with concern and anticipate tightening of the organizational belts, they may provide fewer resources that stations on
the verge of departing anyway deem valuable. Of course, without qualitative research into the response of NPR staff to such debates, this remains speculation.

**Controls**

Unsurprisingly, in both analyses, the dummy variable for the year 1994 had an enormous effect. In the full model (#6) presented in Table 2-3, stations had 19.01 greater odds of departing NPR in 1994 than in other years (p<.001). Similarly in the analysis of departure rates by year, there were 31.74 more departures in 1994 than would have otherwise been expected (p<.001). As previously stated, 1994 was a particularly difficult time for NPR between their massive financial difficulties, the increasing anti-public broadcasting rhetoric, and the introduction of PRI. As expected, controlling for political, financial, and organization factors, 1994 was still a time with great risk of stations leaving the network (H8). Unlike the analysis of adoptions, the median household income had a minor, but significant effect on the rate of yearly departures (p<.1). For every additional ten thousand dollars in median household income, there were 4.1 fewer departures. When the economic climate as a whole improves, there are more resources available to non-profits and their leaders have greater confidence in the organization’s future. Preliminary models (#1 and 2) in the station-level analysis revealed significant effects of population and median household income, but these effects disappeared when controlling for other factors.
Discussion

The current study examined the population dynamics of the NPR station network from 1971-2006. Drawing on several literatures, I hypothesized that financial trends, political composition, and the nature of the organizational population might have had an effect on NPR’s patterns of adoptions and departures of stations from the network. To better understand the issue, I conducted OLS regression analysis on yearly adoption and departure rates and a Random Effects Discrete Time Logit model on station departures. In this section, I discuss the theoretical conclusions that can be drawn from the results and propose new directions for future research. I begin by briefly reviewing the results and suggesting implications for the aforementioned literatures. Next, I point out a few important limitations of the current study and propose ways in which future research might address these issues. Finally, I consider how the NPR network fits into the larger radio industry and discuss what changes the future might hold.

Privatization and the Funding of Non-Profits

The findings of the two analyses suggest an important new way of thinking about the impact of federal, subscriber, and business funds on the growth patterns of non-profits. While privatization scholars have written about the dangers of off-loading government programs and services to the vicissitudes of the free market, “crowding out” theorists have argued that federal support makes non-profits lazy, no longer eagerly seeking the private support necessary for survival. Whereas privatization literature depicts the private sector, outside the shelter of government funding, as a place where non-profits and former government programs struggle to survive, crowding out scholars
seem to view individual and business contributions as essential to the vitality of an organization. Despite my original hypotheses, the results of this study suggest that, in fact, subscriber contributions have no significant effect in encouraging adoptions or discouraging departures. Business funds have no significant impact on adoptions, but appear to promote more population flux by increasing the rate of departures. Nonetheless, federal funds encourage greater stability in the organizational population by decreasing the rate of both departures and adoptions. These findings seem to indicate that as business funds increase, a population of non-profits begins to more closely resemble a competitive marketplace where risk and departures are commonplace. By contrast, government funds discourage change – either by addition or subtraction – and, thus, produce a more stable population. To confirm these findings, it will be important for future research to examine how funding patterns affect the growth of other non-profits – both those formerly under the wing of the government (e.g., parks departments, public schools, and/or postal services) and those non-profits that have always been private. In terms of the NPR network, which has largely supplanted federal support with funds from both subscribers and business, we might envision an era with more risky behavior and more population flux, higher rates of adoptions and departures. Of course, such a pattern would run contrary to the recent trend of continuing adoptions and declining departures.

**Organizational Population Ecology**

The essential difference between the current study and nearly all previous research on organizational population is the examination of adoptions of and departures as opposed to foundings and mortalities. I argued that becoming (or ceasing to be) a NPR
station constitutes such a huge transformation in organizational structure, spending, and programming that much organizational theory might still be applicable. The results demonstrated mixed support for the concept of density dependence. The curvilinear relationship between density and the adoption rate (initially increasing and, at high level of density, decreasing adoptions) was observed as expected. Moreover, like Barron, West, and Hannan’s (1994) study of New York credit unions, the effect of density on adoption rates was primarily regional. However, one exceptional finding was that, increasing levels of density appear to increase the likelihood of departures, while declining density reduced the odds of departure. This finding runs contrary to past research on density dependence, but reflects the fact that few departures have occurred in NPR’s recent departure-free era. Nonetheless, taken together, these results offer support for the notion that curvilinear patterns of organization population density affect the rates of adoption and departure.

Two other organizational concepts were tested: density delay and the liability of newness. Density at the time of adoption and organizational age both had substantial effects on the likelihood of departure from NPR. While this research’s findings regarding the liability of newness support existing research, density at the time of adopting operates in the opposite of the expected direction. Stations founded in a period of higher density are less likely to depart the NPR network. Taken together, these results suggest that some of the principles of organizational theory are useful for understanding adoptions and departures rather than foundings and mortalities, but they may need to modified to accommodate some the differences between the types of events.
Political Composition

Government funding for NPR remains a contentious debate between Republican and Democrats because the funding must be reallocated annually in the federal budget. However, only when Republicans have control in at least one chamber of Congress is there any chance that they will make good on their threats to slice the budget. While the budget has not been reduced during windows of Republican control, I hypothesized that the resulting in a climate of unease within the NPR network which may lead to fewer adoptions and more departures. The results of the current research reveal no effect of Republican control on the rate of adoptions or the likelihood of departures at the individual station-level. On the other hand, controlling for other factors, nationally, there were more departures in years of Republican control of at least one chamber of Congress. These apparently conflicting results may indicate that the effect of the Republican climate primarily affects the decisionmaking of NPR’s leadership at a national level. Still, there appears to be little difference between a Republican and a Democratic climate.

Limitations and Future Research

I now discuss two important limitations of the current study and how future research might handle these issues. First, this research uses only national funding data. Neither the CPB nor NPR has financial data at the station or even state-level prior to 1984. The stations’ IRS files are not adequately detailed to determine the source of funds. Financial information at the station level would have allowed me to explain more of the variation in adoption rates and the likelihood of departure both across and within the units of analysis (i.e., regions and stations) over time.
A secondary limitation also stems from a lack of data. Many recent studies of organizational populations have taken organizational size as their dependent variable. Unfortunately, neither the NPR files nor the YCB contained information that could have been used as a measure of organizational size consistently over time. Such information would have allowed me study how funding, politics, and organizational population characteristics shape organizational vitality. Moreover, size data would allow me to differentiate between stations that depart because they are no longer able to afford NPR as opposed to those that depart because they are so wealthy they can produce their own content.

Detailed historical information on station funding, size, and a host of other relevant variables would need to come from the stations themselves. Aside from the time and expense of surveying NPR stations, the quality of the stations’ historical records is likely to vary greatly and might result in a large amount of missing data. Nonetheless, given the importance of NPR in the history of American media as one of the few public media outlets, gathering detailed historical station information would be not only offer a useful dataset for contemporary scholars of media and organizations, but would also be a great act of preservation.

**American Radio and the Future of NPR**

This chapter sought to understand whether financial, political, or organizational factors could best explain the growth of the NPR network in the 35 years since its inception. In fact, I find support for the influence of organizational and financial factors, although not necessarily in the hypothesized fashion. The results also suggest that
Republican control of at least one chamber of Congress contributes to a greater number of departures from the NPR network.

The findings of this study offer two valuable theoretical insights. First, by demonstrating how federal funds encourage a more stable organizational population, while funds from business contribute to far more population flux (more closely resembling the for-profit sector), this study proposes a new way of thinking about the divergent ways in which government and business support affect the growth of non-profit populations. Secondly, this paper provides an example of how existing organizational theory can be used to examine organizational membership statuses (adoptions and departures) rather foundings and mortalities, opening the door for future studies to use organizational population ecology theory to consider the growth or decline of a variety of membership groups drawing on pre-existing organizations (e.g., political organizations’ endorsement of an elected official, newspaper subscriptions to various wire services, universities publicly rejecting college rankings, etc.). Perhaps, more significantly, the data collection process that enabled this study allowed us, for the first time, to examine the population dynamics of this important American media institution. In the next chapter, we turn to considering how privatization has affected the balance of news and cultural content in programming at NPR stations.
Chapter 3
The Rise of Market Demand: News and Cultural Content

In the previous chapter, I examined how the privatization of the NPR has shaped the growth of the population of stations. In the next chapters three and four, I consider how the transition to the private sector has affected the nature of NPR stations’ programming content. This chapter explores the effects of privatization on the balance of news and cultural programming at NPR stations. I begin by reviewing relevant literature on privatization as well as on the relationship between media ownership and market demand. Next, I introduce the unique datasets and various measures used in this study. Then, using both OLS regression and generalized estimating equation (GEE) models, I analyze how listenership and funding patterns have influenced the levels of news and cultural before and after the privatization of NPR. Finally, I consider the implications of these results for policies regarding both media and the privatization of government programs.

Over the past thirty-five years, many commentators have noted the neo-liberal trend toward the privatization of social services and programs. Though several researchers have documented the practice of “load-shedding,” few studies have examined how the actual provision of these social services is affected by moving into the private sector. National Public Radio (NPR) offers one important example of a former government-supported social program that has been slowly off-loaded to the private sector.

During the same time period as government programs have been privatized, another neo-liberal policy – de-regulation of industry – has contributed to the incredible consolidation of media ownership. As an ever-smaller number of large corporations and distant ownership groups have bought up media outlets, many media critics have worried about the supposedly disappearing “wall” between the newsroom and the marketing division. Publicly-traded
corporations, with the inherent goal of maximizing profits, are under constant pressure to respond to popular demand in order to earn higher ratings or readership (Bagdikian, 1992; Bogart, 1996; Demers, 1996; Gamson and Latteier, 2004; Hickey, 1998). Thus, many frequently noted trends in the media, such as the growth of “light fare” (e.g., news-you-can-use and entertainment news), can be seen as the result of increasing imperatives to respond to market demand.

Though NPR stations do not have a profit-earning agenda, when they are forced to depend on the private sector for funding, some of the same demand principles may apply (as stations try to entice potential contributors). Despite much scholarly interest in the consequences of ownership of for-profit media outlets, few researchers have considered how the increasingly private funding of NPR stations has affected its programming content, perhaps assuming NPR programming directors enjoy relatively complete freedom from market demands courtesy of government funding coupled with financial support from “listeners like you.” However, given public broadcasting’s increasing reliance for regular support from members and coupled with increasing support from corporate sources, it follows that public broadcasting may increasingly respond to demand pressures quite similar to those shaping for-profit media.

The chapter examines whether the privatization of the NPR network has led public radio stations to be more responsive to market demand. Because NPR listeners are, on average, more educated than other media consumers, it is quite possible that they have different programming preferences than consumers of for-profit media. Nonetheless, even if NPR listeners prefer, for example, policy-oriented news shows over celebrity reports, if the increasing dependence of NPR stations on listener support contributes to a greater adherence to market demand, it reflects an important shift in the nature of the NPR network. As with other government-supported media
outlets, like the BBC in the U.K. or the CBC in Canada, NPR was originally charged with providing the public with news and cultural programming in the public interest, free from influence by either the government or the whims of the free market. If, as a result of privatization, programming at NPR stations is influenced as much by popular demand as by editorial judgment, then one consequence of the off-loading of NPR would be to undercut public radio’s unique status in the American media industry as a space free from the vicissitudes of the free market.

In this way, this dissertation provides a unique case study of how the transition of a social service from government funding to the private sector can fundamentally alter the nature of organization and the service it offers. More particularly, this chapter considers how various sources of funding (government, listener, and corporate) and listenership levels affect the balance between news and cultural programming at NPR stations over time. To examine this question, I employ two sources of data: NPR’s 1984 Station Survey from the pre-privatization period and data from a longitudinal study of a random sample of NPR stations over thirteen time points between spring 1999 through spring 2005 (in the post-privatization period).

**Background**

**Media Ownership and Market Demand**

A popular conservative criticism of public media is apparent in a 1992 Heritage Foundation report called “Making Public Television Public” (Jarvik, 1992), which argues that the government funding of the CPB has allowed public television and radio to produce shows with a “far leftward tilt” (pg. 9), unchecked by the accountability of a competitive market. “The way to end this tension is to make public television truly public by selling the CPB to the private
sector, allowing it to operate as a publicly held corporation accountable to its shareholders” (pg. 2). Implicit in the report’s manipulation of the term “public” is the idea that only by putting the public television and radio system in a competitive market and demanding profits can there be any real public accountability. Essentially, they contend, in becoming private, public broadcasting would either have to change to meet market demands or go out of business. In fact, the notion that for-profit networks have had to become responsive to market demands or suffer is at least partially supported by existing research on media ownership (Bagdikian, 1992; Bogart, 1996; Demers, 1996; Gamson and Latteier, 2004; Hickey, 1998; Lacy and Fico, 1990).

In 1992, Bagdikian famously observed that the fifty largest corporations owned the majority of all American media (i.e., radio, television, movies, newspapers, books, and magazines). For example, Bagdikian writes, “At the end of World War II … 80 percent of the daily newspapers in the United States were independently owned, but by 1989 the proportion was reversed, with 80 percent owned by corporate chains” (pg. 4). In a new edition of the The Media Monopoly in 2004, following the flurry of acquisitions and mergers in the communications sector in the late-1990s, Bagdikian amended his figure from fifty corporations owning a majority to a mere five. His critique of consolidation in media ownership is essentially three-fold: a) as the pool of content creators shrinks, diversity in media content decreases as well, b) the need to please advertisers saps the political bite from media, and, most importantly, c) the supposed increase-the-bottom-line-at-all-costs mentality of large corporations leads to a willingness to respond to demand for entertainment and “soft news” stories at the cost of journalistic principles if it will raise profits.

Despite relying on data that is skimpy at best, Bagdikian’s claims been widely repeated and cited as fact by many of the most well recognized scholars of media and politics (among
many others, Herman and Chomsky, 2000; Klinenberg, 2007; Benson, 2004). The immense influence of Bagdikian’s work is probably unsurprising given both a literature severely lacking in large, established media datasets and a media environment apparently ever-tending toward the superficial (as Postman (1985) put it, “the smiling face of television is unalterable”). Moreover, the “frightening vision” put forward by Bagdikian and others – that leaving the Fourth Estate in the hands of a few corporations isn’t in the public’s best interest – seems “intuitively reasonable” (Gamson and Latteier, 2004). However, several studies cast doubt on his claims on some of Bagdikian’s claims. Gamson and Latteier (2004) argue that across three key types of diversity (demographic, format, and idea), consolidation in ownership does not necessarily decrease diversity and, in some cases, may increase it. With regards to demographic diversity, the bias toward disproportionately representing “white, middle-class men between the ages of 20 and 60 … clearly cuts across commercial and non-commercial media” (pg. 30) and, further, appears with the same frequency on minority-owned vs. non-minority media outlets. However, the lack of an ownership effect on demographic diversity seems to be primarily of a case of almost no variation in representation of minorities (i.e., regardless of ownership, few minorities are depicted).

Format diversity, or the extent to which a wide variety of types of programming is available, also seems intuitively endangered by corporation ownership in an age of endless reality shows on television and Rush Limbaugh sound-alikes on radio. Quite to the contrary, as Baker (2002) points out, in competitive (or “standard”) markets, a company will create a “preference-maximizing” product (i.e., what the majority of consumers wants) to attract the largest number of consumers, but in a market with monopoly or near-monopoly ownership, the company would diversify its product line to maximize profits. With regards to the media, in a
city with three competing newspapers, each will produce a standard broadsheet paper to respond to the greatest single demand. However, in a single newspaper city where there is no competition for the broadsheet, the media company will, in all likelihood, also produce a special edition to appeal to youth or perhaps an art-focused publication to try to grab a larger portion of readers. Thus, ideally, consolidation would lead to greater diversity, not less. Some quantitative studies have also shown that newspaper purchases by corporation ownership groups lead to greater diversity. Coulson and Hansen (1995), for example, found that following a take-over by Gannett newspapers, one newspaper increased its news content by a third and marginally decreased advertising space (nonetheless, post-take-over, news stories were much shorter and adopted the terse style of USA Today).

On the other hand, turning to idea diversity, Gamson and Latteier, in reporting the findings of a Project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ) study, do concede some relationship between quality and ownership. Within the news format, the highest quality programs “tended to come from smaller station groups or from stations affiliated with but no owned by networks” (pg. 29). These programs tended to have less celebrity news and human-interest stories. Likewise, Rossman (2005) has documented the tremendously homogenizing effects of Clear Channel ownership on the playlists of the 1,200 rock radio stations they now own (see also Starr, 2004). Another study by Williams (2002) demonstrated the tendency of media conglomerates toward “synergy bias,” that is, cross-promoting a company’s products through a media outlet owned by the same parent corporation, such as when cast members of Bravo’s Queer Eye for the Straight Guy do make-overs on NBC’s The Today Show (both owned by NBC Universal).

To the extent that the existing data can be synthesized, the emerging pattern seems to suggest that while conglomerates seek diversity across formats as a matter of reducing financial
risk (Baker, 2002) and may even advance serious programming under certain circumstances (Coulson and Hansen, 1995), the overall trend does provide some support for Bagdikian’s claims about the detrimental effects of consolidated private ownership. Moreover, the largest study to date (conducted by the PEJ) provides evidence that corporately-held media outlets did, in fact, produce more “soft news” programming within their news shows than independently-owned outlets. This finding does seem to confirm the logic underlying Bagdikian’s most significant critique, namely that the need to translate media consumption into higher profits leads corporate media outlets to respond more directly to consumer demand for entertainment rather than to hold fast to a higher standard of journalism.

Though the link between a for-profit media outlet’s funding base and its content have clearly been of great interest to media scholars, no research has quantitatively considered whether the greatly shifting funding base of public broadcasting has changed the content of public radio. In Chapter 2, I documented how, since the mid-1980s, NPR has operated as a private organization in all but name. Most significantly, recall that in the period between 1985 and 1990, the CPB shifted from indirectly funding stations via NPR, Inc. to allocating funds directly to stations. While this created new opportunities for NPR stations to purchase programming content from PRI and other sources, it also shifted the burden of station survival from NPR, Inc. to each individual station. No longer could NPR, Inc. transfer CPB funds to bail out a struggling station as it did with WXPR of Rhinelander, Wisconsin, a fledging station without a secure base of subscribers in the early 1980s. This enormous change led stations to focus far more heavily on raising funds from listeners (or subscribers) as way of maintaining stability.
Since that time, though non-profit, the need for NPR member stations to increase their listenership in order to secure funding closely follows the patterns Bagdikian (1992) describes in for-profit media. As in corporate media, this turn toward a subscriber-based funding model has led stations to respond more closely to market demand. Thus, in the aggregate, as NPR stations became increasingly privatized (i.e., higher levels of subscriber funding), we would expect to see a corresponding rise in the types of programming that attract the most listenership.

**News vs. Culture**

Most new forms of media in the 20th century were originally envisioned as primarily informational. The first American radio stations were educational, often operated on university campuses. Television was initially touted for its potential to educate illiterate masses. Even the Internet was originally dubbed “the informational superhighway.” Of course, today, a substantial majority of American radio stations play pop music, the Internet serves as much to entertain as to inform, and television is awash in celebrity news, lifestyle shows, and degrading competitions. Even newspapers have given over more space to cultural programming. Meyer (2004), for example, finds the amount of space given to sports, lifestyles, and entertainment news has grown substantially in recent years.

The increasing replacement of news with cultural content\(^1\) has been a source of great consternation to media observers who often see such programming as a threat to more high-

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\(^1\) Throughout this chapter, I draw a distinction between news and cultural content. For empirical purposes, I follow NPR’s categorization scheme of labeling radio shows as either “news/informational,” “music,” or “cultural/entertainment talk.” While NPR does not provide definitions for these terms, I describe them as follows. **News** programming focuses mainly on reporting and analyzing current events and major social trends, serving a primarily informational function. **Cultural** programming does not necessarily emphasize current events or “breaking news”; it might focus on any aspect of human activity, including arts, science and technology, sports, and/or entertainment; it serves to entertain and sometimes to inform as well. For example, though NPR classifies a show like *On The Media (OTM)* as cultural, it clearly touches upon
minded democratic discourse regarding serious social and political issues. As the editorial board of *The Economist* notes, “[newspapers are] spending less on journalism. Many are also trying to attract younger readers by shifting the mix of their stories towards entertainment, lifestyle and subjects that may seem more relevant to people's daily lives than international affairs and politics are” (2006). As we have seen, most media scholars regard the expansion of cultural programming as the unfortunate consequence of the imperative for media companies to response to popular demand in an unregulated marketplace. The logic, of course, being that networks and stations act isomorphically, simply creating new shows similar to whatever existing shows get the highest ratings, regardless of whether they have any educational or social value. For example, many *American Idol* imitators, such as *America’s Got Talent*, have been produced because of the immense popularity (and, therefore, huge profits) of the first.

Naturally, not all people are interested in the same types of media content. Studies of NPR listeners have found that older, more educated, somewhat more wealthy media consumers are drawn to public radio. It may be that such listeners turn to NPR stations specifically because it offers an alternative to the glut of cultural programming on television and often in print. In fact, as one CPB commissioned study found, listeners turn to public radio primarily for news programming, with headlines, in-depth news coverage, and political news being ranked as the three top forms of preferred content (Giovannoni, Peters, and Youngclaus, 1998). More importantly, station programming managers believe NPR listeners have a strong preference for news. In 2002, an internal NPR survey found that station managers viewed the news shows *Morning Edition* and *All Things Considered* as the most important draw for their listeners (McCauley, 2005). However, given that *OTM* focuses on how happenings are communicated, rather than the events themselves, the show has a fundamentally cultural nature.
However, even within NPR, there has been an internal struggle over whether to be primarily a news organization or a media outlet dedicated to capturing various aspects of American cultural life at all levels. In the early 1970s, Bill Siemering, the first Director of Programming for the newly created NPR, sought to provide the listening public with both news and cultural programming in equal measure (Siemering, 2003). However, after his departure, as McCauley (2005) explains in his social history of NPR, there was “a philosophical rift between those staff members who advocated for a hard news focus and those who wanted more ‘soft’ content” (pg. 35). This tension has continued to simmer with news content gradually winning a partial victory. In 1987, NPR “unbundled” their programming for the first time, allowing stations to purchase news shows a la carte without additional cultural programming. Then, in 1995, NPR cancelled nine of its twenty cultural shows and laid off twenty cultural programming production staff (McCauley, 2005; Gunther, 1995). Today, NPR, Inc. puts the substantial majority of its resources into the production of news, but distributes numerous cultural shows produced at member stations.

Since the mid-1980s, station programming managers have had to decide how much news and/or cultural programming to purchase from NPR, Inc., PRI, and/or other sources, or how much local programming content the station can afford to produce. NPR stations vary widely, from all-news stations to stations featuring primarily music with a limited number of news updates. By far the most common programming pattern is to feature NPR’s trademark news programs (Morning Edition, All Things Considered, and Weekend Edition) and the NPR news service (a 10 minute news update six, twelve, or twenty three times per day), interspersed with a few cultural programs (e.g., Fresh Air, Car Talk, On The Media, This American Life, etc.) and either jazz or classical music. However, some non-music stations offer a mixture of news and
cultural programming around the clock and a limited number of music stations purchase only the NPR news service.

Essentially, three primary programming formats exist: talk, talk and music, and music. These formats are ideal typical as there is incredible variation within these categories and nearly all stations have at least some talk and at least some music. To better illuminate the range of programming, I offer an example of each of these formats:

**Talk – WNYC-AM (New York, NY)**

WNYC is one of the country largest and most well supported NPR stations. It is atypical only in that it is larger than most stations and, therefore, produces more of its own local shows. Like most talk stations, on weekdays, from 5 am to 9 am, WNYC airs NPR’s *Morning Edition* and includes short segments of local and regional news. During the day, WNYC plays PRI’s *BBC World News*, and the cultural, discussion programs, *The Leonard Lopate Show* and *The Brian Lehrer Show*. The latter two shows happen to be produced by WNYC, but are distributed to many talk NPR stations across the country. Another very popular show played at many stations is *The Diane Rehm Show*, distributed by WAMU-FM (Washington D.C.). At 3 pm, WNYC airs a PRI news program, *The World*, followed by *All Things Considered*, NPR’s afternoon news program, and PRI’s *Marketplace*. At 7 pm, NPR’s *Fresh Air*, a cultural interview show hosted by Terry Gross, is aired. From 8 pm to 1 am, WNYC plays several different news shows including *On Point* (NPR), *News and Notes* (NPR), *The News Hour* (a radio broadcast of the popular PBS evening news shows), and, finally, the first hour of the next day’s *BBC World News*. Between 1 am and 4 am, WNYC repeats the day’s *Brian Lehrer* and *Leonard Lopate*
shows. Many talk stations play repeats or *BBC World News* throughout the night. Others simply go off the air for several hours.

On the weekend, WNYC, like most talk stations, turns distinctly cultural. While they do play NPR’s *Weekend Edition* from 8-11 am on Saturdays and Sundays and feature *BBC World News* overnight, they primarily air cultural shows on a variety of topics. These include NPR’s *On the Media* (WNYC), *This American Life* (PRI), *A Prairie Home Companion* (American Public Media), *Living on Earth* (PRI), and *Car Talk* (NPR), among others.

**Talk and Music – WPSU-FM (University Park, PA)**

WPSU is fairly typical talk and music station, featuring classical music on the weekdays and folk and blues on the weekend. While a fair number of NPR talk and music stations also play jazz or adult album alternative (AAA), classical music is, by far, most common. WPSU, located on the Penn State campus, is well-supported by the University and the community and, therefore, does not go off air overnight, but rather plays *BBC World News* (1 am to 5 am weekdays, 12:30 to 6 am Saturdays, and 1 to 7 am on Sundays). Like most talk and music stations, on weekdays, WPSU airs *Morning Edition*, *Fresh Air*, and *All Things Considered* daily as well as the NPR news service for ten minutes every hour. In addition, WPSU plays the PRI shows *The World* and *Marketplace* daily, and the independently produced *Democracy Now* on Friday evenings. However, from 9 am to 3 pm and from 8 pm to 1 am, WPSU airs classical music for a total of 11 hours of music every weekday.

On weekends, like WNYC, WPSU plays primarily cultural programming, including *Car Talk, Living on Earth, A Prairie Home Companion, This American Life, Studio 360*, and *Whad’Ya Know?*, in addition to *Weekend Edition* and the weekend version of *All Things*
Considered. WPSU also devotes considerable weekend time to folk and blues music and regional programming like The Allegheny Front. The smallest NPR talk and music stations tend to be more limited to NPR’s trademark news shows, NPR news service, Fresh Air, A Prairie Home Companion, and, perhaps, one other cultural weekend show.

Music – WNED-FM (Buffalo, NY)

WNED-FM is a typical public classical music station in the southwest corner of New York State, serving areas as far as Rochester, Niagara Falls, and Erie, PA. Like a fair number of NPR stations, WNED operates both an AM news station and the FM classical music station. On the other hand, many music stations operate independently, playing music ranging from jazz to AAA to folk. Of course, the majority of NPR music stations play classical music like WNED-FM. The news and cultural talk offerings of music stations tend to be limited. WNED-FM plays various classical music programs around the clock, stopping only for the hourly ten-minute NPR news service and A Prairie Home Companion on Saturdays. Some NPR music stations pick up cultural talk programs that frequently feature interviews with musicians, such as Fresh Air or All Songs Considered. Except for the very limited number of NPR music stations playing AAA (which are sometimes as popular as commercial radio stations), music stations tend to be smaller than other formats.

Hypotheses

Past media theory suggests that corporate ownership has led to a proliferation of entertainment programming as a result of market demand. NPR, dependent on subscribers for financial support since the mid-1980s, may now respond to similar demand pressures. If this is
the case, we would expect to find that stations with higher levels of subscriber funding would be more likely to air a higher proportion of whatever type of programming listeners most want.

Since past research has shown that public radio listeners are most interested in news programming, we might suspect that increased demand would result in higher ratio of news to cultural programming. With this in mind, I propose the following hypotheses:

**H_9.** Controlling for other factors, the higher a station’s listenership ratings, the more hours per week of both news and cultural content it will air. It is more costly to purchase talk programming – either news or cultural – or produce it locally than to play music or go off the air at night. Thus, stations with higher listenership ratings will have more overall content of both types.

**H_{10}.** Controlling for other factors, the higher a station’s listenership ratings, the more talk programming will be news content. If, indeed, NPR listeners are drawn to public radio for its news, we would expect to see that more popular stations have a greater amount of their programming devoted to news. By controlling for funding levels (a good proxy measure for organizational size), we can be confident that any significant finding would not simply be the result of larger stations having a greater balance of news. Moreover, the dependent measure is the *difference* between hours of news and hours of cultural programming, not the total *amount* of news programming. Thus, stations with fewer overall hours could still have a high difference score.

**H_{11}.** All things being equal, stations with higher levels of subscriber, CPB, and business funding will have more hours per week of both news and cultural content. Because purchasing more
programs of any sort costs more money, we would expect that any increase in funding would lead to more total hours of talk programming.

$H_{12}$. All things being equal, the higher a station’s level of subscriber contributions, the higher the percentage of all talk programming will be news content. If, as expected, privatization contributes to an increased responsiveness to market demand and support is found for the idea that a greater balance of news is associated with greater listenership ($H_2$), then we should find a significant positive relationship between subscriber funding and the percentage of news programming. That is to say, that subscriber funding is expected to affect content in the same direction as listenership ratings.

$H_{13}$. All things being equal, the higher a station’s level of CPB funding, the less talk programming will be news content. Though I expect that increased CPB funding will lead to higher levels of both news and cultural content, stations with higher levels of CPB funding (those stations in a “less privatized” state) might be able to resist the pressures of market demand to greater extent. Therefore, we would expect such stations to have a lower balance of news as compared to cultural programming than stations more dependent on subscriber funds.

$H_{14}$. All things being equal, the higher a station’s level of funding from business, the less talk programming will be news content. This hypothesis is stated with less conviction. On the one hand, we might expect that increased funding from business would insulate a station from the market pressures associated with subscriber funding, leading to lower levels of news as a percentage of the whole. On the other hand, especially since the introduction of “enhanced
underwriting” (which amounts to advertising), businesses would likely want to be attached to the most popular form of content. Thus, in that case, we would expect higher levels of business funding to be associated with a greater balance of news content. Ultimately, I expect that the desire of businesses to be connected to be popular programming will lead to higher levels of business funding being associated lower levels of news programming out of all talk content.

\[ H_{15}. \text{Controlling for other factors, in years without a Democratic presence in the federal government, there will be fewer hours of both news and cultural content.} \]

In Chapter 2, I hypothesized that because of the frequent calls by Republicans to “defund NPR,” GOP control of at least one house of Congress might create an atmosphere of uncertainty within the NPR network of stations that lead to fewer adoptions and more departures. In fact, at the national level, GOP control of at least one house of Congress was associated with more departures. It stands to reason that the uncertainty about future funding created in periods of Republican control might also influence programming patterns. In an atmosphere of such uncertainty, stations may attempt to avoid controversy by airing less overtly political content. Though that would tend to suggest a tipping of the balance towards cultural programming, cultural content can often be of as political a nature as news. Without question, the least controversial programming is classical music. Thus, in periods of greater Republican control, we should expect to see less talk programming of both types as stations replace it with music.

### Methods

As is the case with most media research, consistent historical data on NPR programming is very difficult to come by. While NPR maintains electronic records of its member stations
programming schedules since 2000, prior to 1996, its records of what NPR stations broadcasted are fragmentary. Likewise, the CPB maintains station-by-station funding records since 1984, but there is extremely limited funding data before that. Given these limitations, the current research uses two different datasets – one collected by NPR in 1984 and one collected by a non-profit group called The Station Resource Group (SRG) that covers the period from spring 1999 to spring 2005 – to consider the question of how privatization affected the programming content of NPR stations.

The overall analytic strategy for the current research was to compare trends over time using graphs, use OLS regression to model the effect of funding on programming in 1984, use multi-level General Estimating Equation (GEE) models to assess the same relationship from 1999-2005, and, finally, to consider changes in the 74 stations appearing in both datasets.

**NPR 1984 Stations Survey**

Prior to the 1990s, when NPR and the CPB began to institute a more uniform annual survey of NPR stations (restricted to the public) as well as a more professional recordkeeping system, NPR administered infrequent and inconsistent surveys to their member stations. A comprehensive review of the National Public Broadcasting Archives’ files on NPR produced fragmentary remnants of surveys in 1976, 1981, and 1983. There may have been others for which no trace survived. However, luckily, all returned forms from the 1984 survey of all NPR stations did survive.

The 1984 survey was four pages long and included a wide variety of questions about station hardware, staff diversity, programming content, listenership, and funding. Of the population of 276 stations in 1984, 144 stations returned the survey (52%) and 104 stations
(38%) provided enough information to conduct the analyses for this research. While 38% is not typically considered a sufficient response rate from a sample, the dataset used here represents 38% of the population of stations in 1984. Comparing the stations that responded to the survey to the population of stations, the responding stations were similarly geographically distributed\(^2\) and were NPR stations almost exactly the same number of years on average as the population (8.87 years compared to 8.66 years). Thus, while the data may be less than ideal, we can have some confidence in its generalizability to the population of stations in 1984. Moreover, it is the only existing data to capture programming content at that time.

Though the NPR 1984 Stations Survey captured detailed information about funding, it did not ask stations how much funding they received from the CPB. Presumably, this question was omitted because, in 1984, NPR, Inc. doled out CPB funds to stations and had these figures on hand. Fortunately, I was able to supplement the data from the survey with 1984 station-by-station CPB funding allocation records also found in the National Public Broadcasting Archives. Table 3-1 presents descriptive statistics for the 1984 dataset.

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\(^2\) In the population of stations in 1984, 11.3% were in the North, 27.6% were in the South, 36.3% in the Midwest, and 24.3% in the West. Of the stations in the 1984 sample, 15.8% were in the North, 28.2% in the South, 37.2% in the Midwest, and 18.6% in the West. This distribution is quite similar with only slight overrepresentation of the North and minor underrepresentation of the West.
Table 3.1: Descriptive Statistics for 1984 Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev.</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>News Hours (per week)</td>
<td>34.26</td>
<td>19.64</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Hours (per week)</td>
<td>36.84</td>
<td>25.30</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News – Cultural Difference</td>
<td>-2.57</td>
<td>35.57</td>
<td>-147</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% News (of all Talk content)</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local Hours (per week)</td>
<td>20.71</td>
<td>23.32</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Hours (per week)</td>
<td>50.38</td>
<td>21.85</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National – Local Difference</td>
<td>29.67</td>
<td>35.45</td>
<td>-107</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% National (of all Talk content)</td>
<td>.73</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subscriber Funds (in thousands, annual)</td>
<td>115.15</td>
<td>203.07</td>
<td>2.62</td>
<td>1154.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPB Funds (in thousands, annual)</td>
<td>160.25</td>
<td>108.76</td>
<td>23.40</td>
<td>686.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business Funds (in thousands, annual)</td>
<td>32.19</td>
<td>50.56</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>324.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subscribers</td>
<td>4642.17</td>
<td>6776.52</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>46000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N 104

Station Resource Group Survey (1999-2005)

Collection of data on programming content has become considerably easier in recent years with the advent of electronic records. In fall 2005, the Station Resource Group (SRG), a non-profit group offering research and guidance to over 168 stations nationally, conducted a survey of NPR stations’ funding patterns and programming content each season from spring 1999 through spring 2005 (thirteen time points). They limited their sampling frame to only the 555 stations that were part of the NPR network for the entire period (excluding the 114 stations that adopted NPR during the period and one station that departed in 2002). From that group, they

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3 The Station Resource Group data used here was originally collected for their Public Radio Format Study. Terry Clifford graciously provided me with the original dataset with help from Rekha Murthy of The Public Radio Exchange, a partner organization.
sampled 228 stations (about 41% of the population in 1999). Comparing the 228 sampled stations to the 1999 population of stations, they were fairly similarly distributed geographically\textsuperscript{4} and had only been part of the NPR network 5 years longer on average (19.71 years compared to 14.4 years) than the general population. For the study, SRG used funding records and programming information from the stations as well as listenership data from Arbitron Inc., the leading source of radio ratings. Descriptive statistics for the 1999-2005 data can be found in Table 3-2.

Table 3-2: Descriptive Statistics for 1999-2005 Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev.</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>News Hours (per week)</td>
<td>48.43</td>
<td>39.46</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Hours (per week)</td>
<td>15.96</td>
<td>9.71</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News – Cultural Difference</td>
<td>32.47</td>
<td>.647</td>
<td>-26</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% News (of all Talk content)</td>
<td>.679</td>
<td>.193</td>
<td>.087</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local Hours (per week)</td>
<td>9.28</td>
<td>10.02</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Hours (per week)</td>
<td>47.06</td>
<td>29.50</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National – Local Difference</td>
<td>37.77</td>
<td>27.48</td>
<td>-29</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% National (of all Talk content)</td>
<td>.842</td>
<td>.148</td>
<td>.061</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subscriber Funds (in thousands, half year)</td>
<td>98.62</td>
<td>122.20</td>
<td>21.78</td>
<td>976.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPB Funds (in thousands, half year)</td>
<td>53.49</td>
<td>11.50</td>
<td>37.48</td>
<td>115.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business Funds (in thousands, half year)</td>
<td>54.62</td>
<td>35.62</td>
<td>18.76</td>
<td>230.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Quarter-Hour Audience</td>
<td>5430.75</td>
<td>3137.00</td>
<td>1213</td>
<td>32860</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>2964</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Only 74 NPR stations appear in both datasets. Because larger, more financially and organizationally stable stations were much more likely to survive the entire period from 1984 to

\textsuperscript{4} In the population of stations in 1999, 14.3% were in the North, 28.3% were in the South, 32.0% in the Midwest, and 25.3% in the West. Of the stations in the 1999-2005 sample, 20.0% were in the North, 30.0% in the South, 30.4% in the Midwest, and 19.6% in the West. These distributions are fairly similar with some overrepresentation of the North and underrepresentation of the West in the sample.
2005 (or at least continue to be NPR stations), those stations appearing in both samples tend to be larger stations. The average number of subscribers in 1984 for stations appearing in both samples is 5732, as compared to only 2683 subscribers for stations only appearing in 1984. Nonetheless, differences in programming were limited in 1984. Stations appearing in both samples carried an average of 34.3 hours per week of news and 36.2 hours per week of cultural content in 1984, while 1984-only stations aired 33.3 hours per week of news and 36.4 hours per week of cultural programming. By spring of 1999, the differences are more pronounced with the 74 stations have substantially more talk programming. On average, in spring of 1999, the 74 stations existing in both periods had 3.8 more hours of news programming and a full 12.1 more hours of cultural content. This difference makes sense given that older stations with more resources (financial and otherwise) are able to create or purchase additional programming. However, using these data, we can learn whether changes in the content came principally through the founding of new stations with different programming choices or through system-wide changes in the balance of news vs. cultural content. Table 3-3 presents descriptive statistics from both the 1984 and 1999-2005 datasets on the 74 stations.
Table 3-3: Seventy-four stations appearing both 1984 and 1999-2005 sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev.</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1984 News Hours (per week)</td>
<td>34.28</td>
<td>19.72</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999-2005 News Hours (per week)</td>
<td>52.85</td>
<td>39.87</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984 Cultural Hours (per week)</td>
<td>36.24</td>
<td>24.67</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999-2005 Cultural Hours (per week)</td>
<td>28.11</td>
<td>19.61</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984 Local Hours (per week)</td>
<td>21.51</td>
<td>24.32</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999-2005 Local Hours (per week)</td>
<td>10.80</td>
<td>11.45</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984 National Hours (per week)</td>
<td>49.01</td>
<td>18.31</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999-2005 National Hours (per week)</td>
<td>70.16</td>
<td>37.81</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999-2005 Subscriber Funds (in thousands, half year)</td>
<td>123.16</td>
<td>169.43</td>
<td>22.31</td>
<td>976.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999-2005 CPB Funds (in thousands, half year)</td>
<td>54.82</td>
<td>12.54</td>
<td>38.50</td>
<td>114.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999-2005 Business Funds (in thousands, half year)</td>
<td>61.55</td>
<td>45.20</td>
<td>18.76</td>
<td>230.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984 Subscriber Funds (in thousands, annual)</td>
<td>211.21</td>
<td>236.54</td>
<td>15.2</td>
<td>1154.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984 CPB Funds (in thousands, annual)</td>
<td>181.98</td>
<td>121.76</td>
<td>64.46</td>
<td>686.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984 Business Funds (in thousands, annual)</td>
<td>40.77</td>
<td>61.69</td>
<td>.075</td>
<td>324.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Quarter-Hour Audience (1999-2005 only)</td>
<td>5955.55</td>
<td>4426.68</td>
<td>1213</td>
<td>32860</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subscribers (1984 only)</td>
<td>5732.36</td>
<td>6450.59</td>
<td>420</td>
<td>35000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>74</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Measures

Four major independent variables are used here: CPB funding, subscriber funding, business funding, and listenership. For the 1984 sample, the funding variables are measured as the annual contribution (in thousands) from each of these sources. As a measure of listenership, since no listenership ratings were available, I use total number of subscribers as a proxy measure. Though past research has shown that only about 10% of NPR listeners become subscribers, this measure can still give us an approximation of the variation in listenership between stations.

The SRG survey makes use of more precise measures. For each of the thirteen time points (i.e., spring 1999, fall 1999, spring 2000, fall 2000, and so on), half year funding totals (in
thousands) for each source of support were available. The SRG survey also had several different measures of listenership. For the current study, I used the standard metric in radio ratings, Average Quarter Hour (AQH) Persons listenership. AQH Persons is the average number of people listening to the station for at least a five-minute period at any given 15 minutes period during the week (Radio Research Consortium, 2008). AQH data is collected by Arbitron, Inc. on all legally broadcasting radio stations in the United States on an ongoing basis. AQH data can be expressed as either persons (the average number of listeners per-quarter hour), rating (AQH as a percentage of the population in the geographic area of the radio station), or share (AQH as a percentage of all radio use in the market). In all analyses presented here, I measure AQH in persons. Rating and share are particularly appropriate when making comparisons within a single radio market. However, measuring in persons takes into account the population size of the local listening area (e.g., a radio station with a 5.5% share in the New York area is very different from a station with a 5.5% share in Eau Claire, Wisconsin).

In both datasets, I also control for the total number of hours of talk programming and the percentage of time devoted to national vs. local programming. Measuring total hours of talk programming allows us to distinguish between a culture-oriented talk station with 5 hours of news and 50 hours of cultural programming and a music station with 5 hours of news and no other talk content. Similarly, stations that produce most of their programming locally may be quite different from those that principally purchase national content. The percentage variable is constructed by dividing the number of hours of national content by the total number of hours of talk programming.

Because of the limited number of years examined, it is difficult to test the hypothesis concerning the effect of Republican influence in government. For the 1984 dataset, it is simply
not possible to test this hypothesis as there are no years of comparison. In Chapter 2, I constructed a dummy variable measuring whether Republicans had control of either house of Congress. In analyzing the 1999-2005 dataset, this coding is not particular useful because Republicans held at least one house of Congress throughout the period. For this reason, in this chapter, I measure whether the House, the Senate, and/or the White House was occupied by a Democrat (yes=1, no=0) in a given season and year. Though this measure is constructed differently, it serves the same purpose. If NPR funding seems endangered in years when Republicans have control of either house of Congress, there should be an even greater atmosphere of uncertainty within the NPR network when there are no Democrats to serve as bulwarks against slashing funding.

Three dependent variables are used in the current study: total hours of news programming, total hours of cultural programming, and a difference score computed by subtracting hours of cultural programming from hours of news programming. In the 1984 survey, this data was culled from two questions. Stations were asked, “How many hours of news do you air each week?” They were also asked, “How many total hours of non-music programming do you air each week?” The values for hours of news programming were taken from the first question, and the values for cultural programming were established by subtracting news hours from total non-music hours. By examining a difference score (news hours – cultural hours), we are able to assess the relative balance of news vs. cultural content while also measuring the absolute number of hours of difference. In interpreting difference scores, a positive score means more news content than cultural programming, a zero is equal amounts, and a negative score means more cultural than news. Thus, as the difference score increases there is a growing imbalance of news relative to cultural programming.
The SRG survey contained a number of questions about programming, including the number of weekly hours from each content source (e.g., NPR, PRI, APR, independent, etc.), number of hours from regional and local sources, as well as the number of hours dedicated to “news/informational,” “cultural/entertainment,” and music. The difference score was constructed by subtracting the number of cultural hours from the number of news hours.

**Analysis**

Because of the different samples and the differing independent variables measurements, it was not possible to analyze both samples together. Accordingly, to begin to answer the primary research questions, I analyzed the two datasets in several different ways. First, I graph the historical trends in the broadcasting of news and cultural programming. Second, using the 1984 sample, I use OLS regression and simple correlations to attempt to establish the relationship between funding and content (n=104). For this analysis, the unit of analysis is the station. Though these methods are relatively simple, there is no reason to believe that characteristics of the 1984 sample fundamentally violate assumptions of OLS regression. By analyzing the 1984 sample cross-sectionally, we can better understand the ways in which funding affected programming prior to the major shift towards the privatization of NPR.

With so many time points, the SRG sample required more complex and efficient analyses. To analyze variation between both stations and over time, I used a Generalized Estimating Equation (GEE) model a type of analysis well-suited to the examination of time-varying data (Liang and Zeger, 1986). By reorganizing the data into station-season units (i.e., each of the 13 time points for WNYC becomes its own case), I was able to construct a type of multilevel model (although not using random effects like most multilevel models) that adjusts
the correlation matrix for both station-level and temporal clustering (n=2964). Despite the arrangement of the data, results should be interpreted at the station level. All analyses for both samples were conducted using Stata 10.

I consider the effect of privatization on the 74 stations appearing in both samples. Using charts, I track changes in the funding and programming models of these stations. Such an analysis will help us understand how privatization affected stations that lived through the transition and whether change has happened primarily through change within existing stations or in new stations.

Results

As Figure 3-1 illustrates, since 1999, programming has changed fairly slowly with news content increasing from an average of 45 hours per week to only 51 hours per week in spring of 2005. In particular, there are slight increases in the hours stations devoted to news coverage during the tumultuous events of September 11th, 2001, the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and the 2004 presidential election. Cultural programming grew even more slowly increasing only two hours from an average of 15 per week to 17 per week during the period from spring 1999 to spring 2005. Moreover, these averages belie great diversity in programming schedules. As seen in Table 3-2, the news hours variable has a standard deviation of 39.46 and a range from 2 hours per week to 146 hours per week. Likewise, stations vary from 0 to 49 hours per week. Still, in the aggregate, in the first half of this decade, non-music programming at NPR stations has grown overall, with the balance shifting toward news over cultural content.

What is particularly remarkable is the change in programming from the 1984 sample to the 1999 sample. In 1984, stations aired an average of 36.8 hours of cultural programming a
week (as compared to a mere 15.2 hours in 1999). Histories of public radio do note that NPR, Inc. offered a much more broad range of cultural programs until the financial crisis of the late 1980s. Table 3-1 clearly demonstrates that stations in 1984 varied widely in their cultural programming, with a standard deviation of 25.3 hours per week. In 1999-2005 (Table 3-2), the comparable standard deviation was only 9.71 hours per week, indicating not only less cultural programming, but also a relatively more standardized schedule of it. As seen in Chapter 2, the period between 1984 and 1999 saw a doubling of stations and some radical transformations in NPR’s structure. Some significant changes in stations’ programming are to be expected. Nonetheless, this halving of cultural programming over the 15-year period is still quite surprising. In the same time period, average weekly news hours grew from 34.3 to 45.5. Thus, in the gap between the two samples, the percentage of news content out of all non-music programming grew from 48% to 75%.

![Graph showing news and cultural programming at NPR stations (1984, Spring 99 - Spring 2005)](image)

Figure 3-1: News and Cultural Programming at NPR Stations (1984, Spring 99 - Spring 2005)
In terms of funding, reflecting the broader trend, support from subscribers made up less than a quarter of all funding in 1984. While subscriber support accounted for about 5% more of the total funding for stations in the sample than in the overall population in 1984, as Figure 3-2 shows, federal funding still made up slightly more and funding from business was limited. By 1999, following the trend toward privatization, subscriber funding increased to 35% and business monies to 20% of all support for NPR stations. Throughout the period covered by the SRG sample (1999-2005), rates of CPB funding (fairly steady at around 21%) are approximately 5% higher than in the general population of stations. However, unlike the other sources of funding, support from the federal government has not grown over time.

Figure 3-2: Rates of Funding for NPR Stations from Various Sources (1984, SP1999-SP2005)
Examining the 74 stations present throughout the period from 1984 to 2005, we see funding patterns (Figure 3-4) and slow growth in news coverage (Figure 3-3) comparable to the full samples. Despite institutional processes that might encourage inertia, the seventy-four stations observed in both periods made as radical changes in programming between 1984 and spring 1999 as the full samples. Whereas the full samples grew from 34.3 hours per week of news in 1984 to 45 hours in spring 1999, the seventy-four stations went from 34.3 to 49.2 hours. Likewise, the seventy-four stations also dropped nearly 9 hours per week of cultural programming as compared to 21 hours in the full sample. Nonetheless, the seventy-four stations present in both periods had nearly double the amount of cultural programming as the other stations between 1999 and 2005 (27.3 vs. 15.2). Though older, wealthier stations can afford more programming, these findings do seem to indicate that immense changes occurred in the NPR system not only through the birth of stations with different programming line-ups, but also through a massive transformation of the content of existing stations.

Figure 3-3: News and Cultural Programming at 74 NPR Stations (1984, SP1999-SP2005)
Figure 3-4: Rates of Funding for 74 NPR Stations from Various Sources (1984, Spring 1999-Spring 2005)

**Listenership**

The first hypothesis being tested held that all things being equal, higher listenership would yield more non-music content of both types, largely because stations with more listeners have more resources to produce non-music programming. While some support was found for this hypothesis in the 1999-2005 data (see Table 3-4), surprisingly, the number of subscribers had no effect on the amount of news and cultural content in 1984 (Table 3-5). In the 1984 sample, there was no significant partial or zero-order correlation between number of subscribers and programming (Table 3-6). Though it is important to be cautious in drawing conclusions from a small sample, it appears to be the case that there was tremendous variation in programming at all levels of listenership during the mid-1980s. The largest standard deviations in news (19.64 hours) and cultural hours (25.30) as well as national (23.32) and local (21.85) hours (Table 3.1) suggests
great diversity in NPR stations’ programming schedules in 1984. The non-significance of
listenership indicates that the particular balance of news and cultural programming did
not differ greatly between big and small stations.

By contrast, between 1999-2005, controlling for funding levels, NPR stations
with greater listenership were significantly more likely to air more hours of news content
each week (p<.001). As seen in Table 3-4, for every thousand additional audience
members per quarter hour, stations aired nearly an additional hour (.889) of news. On the
other hand, listenership had no significant impact on the hours of cultural programming.
All things being equal, stations that have more listeners tend to have more news
programming, but not necessarily any more cultural content. Thus, partial support was
found for this hypothesis. It seems that prior to the major shift in the distribution of funds,
stations with subscriber bases of all sizes could elect to have substantial non-music
programming. In the observed period since 1999, it is clear that stations with fewer
listeners air comparable levels of cultural programming, but are more limited in their
ability to air news programming.

Given that past NPR research has found that public radio listeners are most
interested in news, a second hypothesis held that more popular stations (i.e., those with
the highest listenership) would broadcast more news than cultural programming. The
results of this study tend to provide support for this idea. There is no zero-order or partial
correlation between number of subscribers and news difference score (Table 3-5). Again,
there was great diversity in programming in 1984 and the differences do not appear to
vary by listenership. Alternatively, as Table 3-4 shows, in the 1999-2005 sample, stations
with higher levels of listenership had a significantly higher percentage of news content.
out of all talk programming, controlling for funding levels, total hours, percentage of national content, and divided government (p<.05). For every additional 1000 listeners per quarter hour, stations had .804 of an hour more news than culture programming. Given two otherwise similar stations, the one with more listeners will not only tend to have more hours of news programming, but will also have a greater portion of its programming devoted to news. These results tend to suggest that more popular NPR stations tended to tip the balance of programming toward more news content, but, perhaps, more so in recent years than in the 1980s.

Funding Sources

Though perhaps obvious, in the third hypothesis, I predicted that stations with greater levels of funding overall would have more total hours of programming. Examining the zero-order correlations for the 1984 sample (Table 3-6), we find that stations with greater funds from subscribers and businesses had significantly fewer hours of news programming (p<.05 for both). However, these relationships become non-significant when controlling for total hours and percentage of national content. The regression analysis presented in Table 3-5 offers some insight into these relationships. The best predictor of news programming was the percentage of content coming from national sources. For each 10% increase in the percentage of all talk programming that is national, there is a 4 hour decrease in news programming (p<.001). In other words, national programming skews towards cultural content. Because stations with greater funding from subscribers and business were able to purchase more national cultural content, they offer somewhat less news. At the same time, funding sources had no
significant effect on the number of hours of cultural programming in 1984 (Table 3-5). This apparent contradiction is easily explained by the fact that without the financial resources to buy national cultural programming, stations produce cultural programming locally. While funding did not directly shape the total amount or balance of news and cultural programming, in 1984, it did affect the amount of national or local content that stations air. These questions will be addressed more fully in Chapter 4.

The results of the analysis of the 1999-2005 sample produced similarly complex findings (Table 3-4). Of the three sources of funding, CPB funds were the best predictor of hours of news and cultural programming, but had opposite effects on the two variables. Holding all else constant, for every additional ten thousand dollars of CPB funding, stations aired 1.35 fewer hours of news and 1.17 more hours of cultural programming (p<.001 for both). Stations with greater CPB funding appear not only to purchase more cultural programming, but also to eschew news. As expected, stations with more funding from subscribers had significantly more news programming (.68 hour per $10,000; p<.001). More surprisingly, subscriber funding had no significant impact on hours of cultural programming. For business funding, the effects were exactly reversed, with additional funding leading to significantly more cultural content (p<.001), but having no effect on news. As a whole, these findings suggest that funding source plays a more important role in determining content in recent years, but its effect is domain-specific. Financial support from subscribers quite clearly influences programming differently than funding from the CPB or business.
Table 3-4: Multilevel General Estimating Equations for News, Cultural, and Difference Score (Spring 1999-Spring 2005)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Hours of News</th>
<th></th>
<th>Hours of Cultural</th>
<th></th>
<th>Difference (News – Cultural)</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coefficient</td>
<td>Standard Error</td>
<td>Coefficient</td>
<td>Standard Error</td>
<td>Coefficient</td>
<td>Standard Error</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>11.137***</td>
<td>2.555</td>
<td>0.969</td>
<td>0.999</td>
<td>8.095***</td>
<td>2.842</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listeners (1000s)</td>
<td>0.889***</td>
<td>0.093</td>
<td>0.063</td>
<td>0.043</td>
<td>0.804***</td>
<td>0.110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPB $ (10,000s)</td>
<td>-1.347***</td>
<td>0.374</td>
<td>1.167***</td>
<td>0.172</td>
<td>-2.531***</td>
<td>0.440</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subscribers $ (10,000s)</td>
<td>0.680***</td>
<td>0.054</td>
<td>0.038</td>
<td>0.024</td>
<td>0.649***</td>
<td>0.064</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business $ (10,000s)</td>
<td>-0.076</td>
<td>0.167</td>
<td>0.299***</td>
<td>0.076</td>
<td>-0.397*</td>
<td>0.196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Hours</td>
<td>0.466***</td>
<td>0.018</td>
<td>0.092***</td>
<td>0.007</td>
<td>0.401***</td>
<td>0.021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% National Content</td>
<td>8.215***</td>
<td>1.111</td>
<td>1.402**</td>
<td>0.506</td>
<td>7.734***</td>
<td>1.302</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic Presence</td>
<td>0.657***</td>
<td>0.127</td>
<td>-0.006</td>
<td>0.059</td>
<td>0.656</td>
<td>0.150</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*** p<.001, ** p<.01, * p<.05; n=2964 (13 observations for 228 stations); clustered both temporally and at station-level
Based on past research and theory on the effects of privatization, I predicted that stations with greater funding from subscribers (and, thus, greater demand for news) would have a greater balance of news as opposed to cultural content (H4). By contrast, hypotheses 5 and 6 held that funding from either the CPB or business would shift programming in the direction of cultural content. In the 1999-2005 sample, during the period of privatization, the regression analysis results presented in Table 3-4 provide support for all three hypotheses. As expected (H4), funding from subscribers significantly increased the difference score, indicating .649 hours more of news over cultural programming per ten thousand dollars (p<.001). By contrast, funding from businesses (H6) shifted the balance toward cultural content by .397 of an hour per ten thousand dollars (p<.05). CPB was the strongest predictor of difference score with each additional ten thousand dollars leading to a huge 2.531 hour shift towards cultural programming (p<.001). On the whole, this provides strong support for the idea that in the privatization era, NPR stations are quite responsive to market demand from subscribers and that alternative funding sources may allow stations to insulate themselves from that pressure.

Controls

This study controlled for three other factors: total hours of talk programming, percentage of content from national programming, and periods of divided government. Predictably, stations with more total hours of talk programming total tended to have more news and cultural content. As seen in the analysis of 1999-2005 data in Table 3-4, for each additional hour of total programming, there was a .466 hour increase in news and a .092 hour increase in cultural programming (p<.001 for both). However, stations
with more talk programming overall were significantly more likely to lean towards news
(p<.001). For each increase of ten hours in total talk programming, there is a 4 hour
increase in difference score towards news programming. In 1984 (Table 3-5), the
opposite pattern held true as stations with more hours of total programming used them to
shift the balance towards cultural programming (p<.1).
Table 3-5: OLS Regression for News, Cultural, and Difference Score (1984)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>News</th>
<th></th>
<th>Cultural</th>
<th></th>
<th>Difference (News – Cultural)</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coefficient</td>
<td>Std. Error</td>
<td>Coefficient</td>
<td>Std. Error</td>
<td>Coefficient</td>
<td>Std. Error</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>70.929***</td>
<td>14.347</td>
<td>-8.211***</td>
<td>20.920</td>
<td>79.141***</td>
<td>29.126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Subscribers (in hundreds)</td>
<td>.009</td>
<td>.055</td>
<td>-.068</td>
<td>.081</td>
<td>.077</td>
<td>.113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPB $ (in thousands)</td>
<td>-.008</td>
<td>.027</td>
<td>.036</td>
<td>.039</td>
<td>-.044</td>
<td>.054</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subscriber $ (in thousands)</td>
<td>-.014</td>
<td>.023</td>
<td>.028</td>
<td>.033</td>
<td>-.042</td>
<td>.046</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business $ (in thousands)</td>
<td>-.021</td>
<td>.051</td>
<td>-.115</td>
<td>.074</td>
<td>.094</td>
<td>.103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Hours</td>
<td>-.020</td>
<td>.088</td>
<td>.329*</td>
<td>.128</td>
<td>-.349†</td>
<td>.179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent National</td>
<td>-.419***</td>
<td>.087</td>
<td>-.047</td>
<td>.127</td>
<td>-.372*</td>
<td>.177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td>.231</td>
<td></td>
<td>.110</td>
<td></td>
<td>.112</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

***<.001; **<.01; *<.05; †<.1; n=104
Table 3-6: Correlation Matrix of 1984 Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>News Hours</th>
<th>Cultural Hours</th>
<th>Local Hours</th>
<th>National Hours</th>
<th>Subscriber $</th>
<th>Corporate $</th>
<th>CPB $</th>
<th># of Subscribers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>News Hours</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-.241***</td>
<td>.413***</td>
<td>.179*</td>
<td>-.195*</td>
<td>-.203*</td>
<td>-.123*</td>
<td>-0.011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Hours</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.403***</td>
<td>.512***</td>
<td>.037</td>
<td>-.019</td>
<td>.062</td>
<td>0.024</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local Hours</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-.231**</td>
<td>.013</td>
<td>-.097</td>
<td>.086</td>
<td>.100</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Hours</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-.148</td>
<td>-.096</td>
<td>-.136</td>
<td>-.094</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subscriber $</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>.725**</td>
<td>.792**</td>
<td>.775**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corporate $</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.614**</td>
<td>.584**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPB $</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.557**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># of Subscribers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Similarly, in 1984 (Table 3-5), stations with a higher percentage of national programming had less news programming (p<.001) and a difference score leaning towards cultural content (p<.05). In the 1980s, national programming was primarily cultural. By 1999, there was more news and cultural national programming. As seen in Table 3-4, for each one percent increase in national content, there was an 8.2 hour increase in news (p<.001) and a 1.4 hour increase in cultural content (p<.01). But the net effect of more national programming was to shift the balance towards more news. Each one percent increase in national programming pushed the difference score 7.7 hours in the direction of news content (p<.001). To be sure, one of the biggest changes in programming at NPR stations in the decade and a half between 1984 and 1999 was a shift from filling the air with cultural programming to stations seeking evermore national news.

Finally, continuing with a theoretical question raised in Chapter 2, I examined whether the perception of a threat from Republicans in Congress had an effect on the programming content of NPR stations. I hypothesized that in order to skirt controversy, in years of Republican control of both Congress and the White House, stations would play more music, leading to reductions in talk programming of both sorts. Using a measure of political composition, I tested whether stations in years with a Democrat in at least one house of Congress or the White House had more news and cultural programming. This hypothesis was partially supported. Stations did, in fact, air significantly more news content in years where Democrats controlled at least one political body (p<.001). However, political composition appears to have no effect on either the hours of cultural programming or the balance of news and culture. Given the small sample of years, it is important to be cautious in interpreting this result. It may be due to a quirk of the few seasons and years that happened to have Democrats in at least one political body. On the other
hand, it offers some support to the notion that uncertainty due to a perceived Republican threat to future funding may affect programming habits\(^5\).

**Discussion**

As can be seen in Table 3-7, the results of the GEE analyses of the 1999-2005 largely supported the stated hypotheses. Stations with higher listenership were able to afford more hours of news, shifting the overall balance toward news rather than cultural programming. NPR stations with greater funding from subscribers had more news programming overall, but also aired a greater balance of news content. As expected, funds from the CPB and business increased the hours of cultural content. Moreover, funds from the CPB and business led stations to air less news than cultural content.

In contrast, few significant results were found in the 1984 sample. Shockingly, stations with greater listenership did not carry significantly more programming of either type than stations with a smaller subscriber base. At the same time, for the most part, level of funding from various sources affected neither the amount nor the news/cultural balance of stations’ programming.

Taken together, these findings actually lend some support to the idea that the privatization of NPR has led stations to be more responsive to market demands. I will begin by considering possible interpretations of the 1984 data. Then, I explain how the findings inform the central question of how privatization altered the programming of NPR stations.

\(^5\) In analyses without the Democratic presence variable (not presented here), neither the direction nor significance levels of the other independent variables changed.
Table 3-7: Summary of News vs. Cultural Findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hypothesis</th>
<th>1984</th>
<th>1999-2005</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>H1: Higher listenership, more hours of non-music content</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Higher news only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H2: Higher listenership, higher percentage of news</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H3: Greater funding, more non-music content</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>CPB and business funds increase cultural, CPB decreases news, subscriber increases news</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H4: More subscriber funds, higher percentage of news</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H5: More CPB funds, lower percentage of news</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H6: More business funds, lower percentage of news</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H7: Stations in years with a Democratic presence, fewer hours of non-music content</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>More hours of news only</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

+ indicates a supported hypothesis; - indicates an unsupported hypothesis

What happened in 1984?

Given the largely non-significant results in the 1984 sample, we must be careful in our interpretation. With a small sample of only 104 stations, it is difficult to know if the analyses simply lacked the statistical power to produce significant findings. On the other hand, regardless of statistical significant, the tiny coefficients suggest that any effect would be of a very limited magnitude. Further, since the sample represents a full 38% of the population (and the sample appears comparable to the rest in important ways), we can have some confidence that patterns
present in the general population would be observed here. Moreover, to accommodate the small sample size, I allowed for a p<.1 level of significance.

More importantly, the findings appear stable at all levels. For example, because of the cost of producing or purchasing shows, it seems almost unimaginable that stations with more subscribers and listeners wouldn’t purchase more hours of news and cultural programs. But at both the bivariate and multivariate level, the findings are consistent: programming is not greatly affected by station size or funding patterns.

In many ways, these findings make sense with prevailing spirit of the NPR network prior to privatization. NPR, Inc. dispersed CPB funds to the stations and made a wide variety of programs (including many more cultural programs than today) available to stations for purchase on a sliding scale based on station resources. That is to say, NPR made its programs available at rates most of the stations could afford and provided them much of the funding necessary to make program purchases. This egalitarian approach made it possible for even small stations to afford programming comparable (in number of hours at least) to have the larger stations offered.

While there is always the possibility of an unobserved effect due to small sample size, the durability and consistency of the findings suggest that, prior to privatization, listenership and funding base made very little difference in shaping the programming of a station. What is clear is that in the window between 1984 and 1999, a titanic shift took place in the programming of NPR stations, moving from a line-up heavily featuring cultural programming to one with news at its core.
Privatization and Programming

How did the privatization of NPR affect the programming line-up of its stations? As previously explained, the major change in the disbursement of CPB funds shifted NPR’s position in the public radio system from a parental role, providing its stations with funds and programming, to a role as a vendor of radio programming (albeit as the premiere content provider). Though the stations gained some independence in how they could use CPB funds, they also lost some collective strength to advocate for continued government funding. At the same time, the neo-liberal ideal of the limited welfare state gained strength and CPB funding declined in real dollars. Today, the largest source of funding for NPR stations comes from subscribers, listeners who make charitable donations.

Because of the dependence of NPR stations on funding from subscribers, I have argued that stations may need to respond to market demand for programming in much the same way for-profit media outlets do. For most commercial radio stations, responding to market demand might mean broadcasting the music of Lady Gaga instead of a Schoenburg twelve tone composition, or three hours daily of Rush Limbaugh instead of something resembling democratic discourse. By contrast, NPR stations have an older, educated, but also more diverse audience that “demands” programming quite unlike what airs at most commercial stations. Existing research suggests that NPR listeners tend to tune in primarily for news. This pattern is generally supported in the current study by the finding that stations with greater listenership have a higher percentage of news programming.

The findings suggest, in the pre-privatization era of 1984, there was little relationship between level of funding and programming. Yet, the analysis of stations from 1999 through 2005 reveal that a station’s funding base significantly affects its content. As expected, stations with
more subscriber support not only can buy more news content, leaning in the direction of market demand of their audience. Meanwhile, support from businesses and the CPB tend to fund additional cultural programming. The influence of business dollars may be to purchase more fun, non-controversial content rather than the often serious stuff of news. Alternatively, business funds may operate like CPB funds, providing station program directors with monetary insulation from the pressure of market demand. That is to say, non-subscriber funds may make program directors feel freer to purchase a science program instead of another hour of news programming.

In some ways, privatization of public radio sounds like a happy story: listeners get the programming they want, more serious news is broadcast, and the tax burden is lightened. Unfortunately, this arrangement is based on a very precarious foundation: the audience’s taste. One of the great strengths of NPR’s original mission was the charge to produce content “in the public interest.” What is best for the public would be decided by through thoughtful editorial decision-making in conversation with the community. If the programming directors believed the public would be best served by more artistic or scientific programming, they did not need to worry about the whims of public response the way television executives sweat over Nielson ratings. They were secure in their funding and could air content as they saw fit. With today’s audience-dependent funding base, program directors need to worry more about retaining subscribers.

At the moment, NPR subscribers have a discerning taste for serious news programming and so NPR stations provide content that often informs and can even enrich our democracy. But programming not longer is guided by “the public interest,” it is driven by popular demand. Just as popular demand transformed CBS from the network of Cronkite to the home of crass reality shows, any media outlet driven by demand can be changed as quickly as the audience’s tastes.
Limitations

The most significant shortcoming of the current research lies with the lack of data to describe the gap between 1984 and 1999. The sample of stations from 1999-2005 gives us a great capacity to understand how funding sources shape programming in recent years. But with only one time point prior to privatization and none during the shift itself, we can only speculate about the precise nature of the transition. What appears to be a radical shift may well have been a slow and inconsistent transition during the late-1980s and the 1990s.

Furthermore, the small sample size from 1984 (albeit a sample representing a rather large chunk of the population) limits our ability to speak with conviction about the relationship between funding and content at that point in time. The stations in the sample are those that responded to NPR’s survey. We might suspect that stations that returned the survey were more organized and staffed by more experienced professionals – traits typical of older, bigger stations. While we know that the stations in the sample were similar to the population in institutional longevity, they may well have been better funded or more influential. Less funded stations might have been able to purchase or produce fewer hours of talk programming, turning instead to classical music. Of more immediate relevance to the hypotheses here, stations with less funding from subscribers, kept alive by funds from the CPB, may have felt less obliged to respond to the demands of their subscribers. That said, the 1984 sample includes some incredibly small stations, such as KSKO in McGrath, Alaska, which reported only 172 subscribers. Such stations do not appear to have their programming affected by their funding model any more than medium or large stations.
Conclusion

The current study examined the changes in the programming of NPR stations between 1984 and 2005, a period of remarkable transformation in both the organization of NPR and the stations’ basic funding model. In the years after 1984, NPR changed from the central recipient and distributor of CPB funds to the prominent provider of radio content. As the CPB began to fund stations directly, they increasingly turned to listeners and businesses for support. The findings of this study suggest that more privatized stations (those less dependent on CPB funds and more dependent on subscriber funds) tended to respond to market demand for news rather than cultural content.

Though news provided by NPR is of great social value, this shift to a demand-based model of programming is troublesome. Public radio in America, like publicly-funded media throughout the world, was designed to be free of the influence of either business or consumers. Public media would be a space where decisions about content would be made on the basis of editorial judgment. The findings of this study suggest that NPR stations are no longer such a space.

In the past thirty years, the reigning neoliberal ideology of our elected officials has led to the privatization of many important welfare state provisions. These offloaded organizations and services were designed to establish a more just, informed, and democratic society. Since its privatization, to the extent that NPR contributes to these goals, it is a happy consequence of the tastes of its sophisticated consumer base, not a reflection of careful consideration of the needs of American society.
Chapter 4
The Rise of Market Demand: Local and National Content

In Chapter 2, I described the neoliberal practice of “load-shedding” and how, in the late-1980s, the NPR network of stations became privatized. In Chapter 3, I demonstrated how more privatized stations (those particularly dependent on subscriber donations) were more likely to respond to market demand for news rather than cultural programming. In this chapter, I utilize the same methodology and data to test whether the same patterns have occurred with regards to the balance of local vs. national programming.

Many media scholars have observed the decline in local content in both newspapers and commercial radio in recent years as media corporations have sought to cut costs by airing/printing homogenous national content (Klinenberg, 2007; Meyer, 2004; Hickey, 1998). This transition from the local to the national is often seen as detrimental as media consumers become less informed about issues of immediate relevance. With fewer and less diverse voices on-air and in print, citizens are exposed to a more limited range of ideas. At the same time, some small number of analysts have begun to become concerned over the quite the opposite trend: hyperlocalism (Starr, 2009). To date, studies in the production of local vs. national content have been conducted principally by non-profit organizations supporting the public radio network and have not taken examined the issue longitudinally.

To better understand how privatization affected the NPR network of stations, this chapter examines how various sources of funding (government, listener, and corporate) shape the balance of local and national content. This analysis will also tell whether the
same patterns concerning local programming that are occurring in commercial media are also taking place within NPR stations. In examining this question, I employ two sources of data: NPR’s 1984 Station Survey from the pre-privatization period and data from a longitudinal study of a random sample of NPR stations over thirteen time points between spring 1999 through spring 2005 (in the post-privatization period).

I begin by discussing relevant literature regarding the balance of local and national programming in various media. Next, I review the datasets, measures, and analytic strategy employed in this study. Then, using both OLS regression and generalized estimating equation (GEE) models, I analyze how listenership and funding patterns have influenced the levels of local and national programming before and after the privatization of NPR. Finally, I consider what the findings suggest about the consequences of privatization for NPR and its stations.

**Background**

**Localism and Ownership**

Social commentators, particularly on the political Left, have long been critical of the corporation ownership of media outlets. Though the primary mission of the press is to serve as a watch-dog of the powerful and produce news in the public interest, the sole purpose of corporations is to increase shareholder value. According to McChesney (2000), the profit motive inherent in business leads owners to make decisions that are not in the public interest. In recent years, in order to maximize profit, media corporations have laid off journalists, purchased an increasing number of articles from the wire service instead of supporting original reporting, dedicated more space to advertisements, and
expanded sports and entertainment coverage. These kind of bottom-line decisions undermine the ability of the journalists to produce the type of reporting important to a robust democracy. According to this line of thought, given their wholly different goals, news media and for-profit ownership are not compatible (Starr, 2009).

For other thinkers, the essential problem is not ownership itself, but concentration in ownership (Bagdikian, 1992). These analysts do not tend to be terribly troubled by for-profit media when managed by family owners (like the Sulzbergers who own the New York Times). They argue that it is the consolidation in ownership of media companies that leads to a squelching of diversity. Such concerns are not without foundation. Corporate lobbying by major entertainment conglomerates have led to massive de-regulation of media ownership. In radio, the FCC had repeatedly rolled back the caps on the number of stations a company could own over the years, from seven AM and seven FM in 1953 to twenty FM and twenty AM in 1994. Then, a landmark shift came with the Telecommunications Act of 1996, which eliminated the national caps and raised the caps within a given media market (Williams and Roberts, 2002). With these regulations lifted, large media companies went on an unrestrained shopping spree, buying up 4400 stations nationwide (Klinenberg, 2007). Leading the way was Clear Channel, which now owns 1200 radio stations. By 2005, only 8% of radio stations were independently owned. And it’s not just radio; this pattern of deregulation and conglomeration has been replicated with both newspapers and television stations.

While the eagerness with which media companies lobbied for deregulation is certainly unsettling, one might reasonably ask, what exactly is at stake here? The answer is localism. Eric Klinenberg’s 2007 book, Fighting for Air, opens with the tragic story of
112-car Canadian Pacific Railway train that derailed near Minot, North Dakota in the middle of the night in 2002. The train was carrying hazardous chemicals and when the train derailed, 240,000 gallons spilled, releasing toxic fumes into the air. Local officials were alerted and they readied a public service announcement, telling residents how to protect themselves. The local television stations were off-air at that hour and no crew could be safely brought into the studios. Unfortunately, all six of the prominent local radio stations – usually the central source of information in such a situation – “continued playing a standard menu of canned music, served up by smooth-talking DJs trading in light banter and off-color jokes while the giant toxic cloud floated into town” (pg. 6). No one was able to put the PSA on the air because all six of the local stations were being broadcast from Clear Channel’s studios in San Antonio, Texas. In the end, Minot suffered one fatality and over a thousand people suffering recurring illness, most of which could have been prevented had the PSA been broadcast.

Few examples of the importance of localism are as dramatic as the one recounted by Klinenberg. Nonetheless, the anecdote offers an illustration of both the importance of local media and how corporate consolidation has led to its decline. Other evidence of the loss of localism abounds. Rossman (2005), for example, has used playlist data from a national sample of FM rock music stations to document how the playlists of ClearChannel stations are significantly less diverse than those of independently owned stations (both internally and between stations). Similarly, Lee (2004) conducted a natural experiment using the periods before and after the Telecommunications Act of 1996. He found that while diversity in radio station format stayed quite high, diversity in both songs and artists decline precipitously.
While this evidence is convincing, several scholars have refuted the connection between concentration in ownership and the decline of localism (Gamson and Latteier, 2004). Entman (1989), for example, studied 91 newspapers in monopoly, quasi-monopoly, and competitive local markets. He found no significant differences in the newspapers based on the ownership concentration of the market. Unfortunately, it was difficult to detect any differences because *all of the newspapers were incredibly homogenous*. Many of them ran identical combinations of wire stories. Similarly, Meyer (2004), conducting a content analysis of thirty-two newspapers on four days in April 2002, found that only 46% of the content was staff-written (i.e., local). The percentage of local content ranged from 64% to 31% with far more local content appearing in newspapers from larger cities. Kaplan et al. (2004), in a study of 4,333 evening news broadcasts during a presidential election, found that while 64% of the shows contained at least one election story, but only 8% featured any coverage of a local campaigns (including the U.S. Congressional races). In fact, the primary focuses of local coverage were sports and weather. Connected to concentration in ownership or not, it seems clear that locally produced content is in decline.

If localism has been sacrificed due to economic pressures, political decisions have also shaped the availability of local public interest programming. In 1987, the FCC voted to repeal the Fairness Doctrine, a policy requiring stations to “devote a reasonable percentage of their broadcasting time to the discussion of public issues of interest in the community served by their stations” and offer differing views on these issues (Jung, 1996). The Fairness Doctrine had ensured that radio and television stations would offer programming of local relevance, but also that national networks would seriously address
issues of public interest. On several occasions, the broadcast industry had challenged the policy’s constitutionality, claiming that it placed limits on freedom speech. However, the Supreme Court upheld the policy by claiming that “the airwaves were a scarce public resources [and] broadcasters should use them to serve the public” (Croteau and Hoynes, 2003, pg. 100).

In 1987, as part of a larger de-regulation campaign, the Reagan administration championed the repeal of the Fairness Doctrine, arguing that with the proliferation of new television and radio stations, there was no longer an issue of scarcity. With such a competitive media marketplace, local public interest programming could be found somewhere if there was demand (Croteau and Hoynes, 2003). The net result of the decision was to significantly reduce the amount of serious coverage of issues of local public interest on most stations. Further, too often, when such issues are covered, the stations present only a single ideological stance. Thus, the repeal of the Fairness Doctrine allowed for the rise of ideologically monolithic stations like Fox News Channel and MSNBC. At the same time, it let many local television and radio stations off the hook for covering important local issues. This change, which may have been a loss for democracy, could be seen as a boon for NPR, a network of stations known for its commitments to public interest reporting and localism. For a particular market segment, the changes brought about by the repeal of the Fairness Doctrine may have served to make their local NPR station a more attractive news source.

The apparent decline of localism in media is concerning not only because of dramatic incidents like the one in Minot, but also because local programming have and can still play an important role in the life of communities. Local media inform citizens
about pressing social and environment problems in the community, pending civic
decisions and political contests, and the needs of various demographic groups within the
area. As Molotch (1976) claimed, “the newspaper tends to achieve a statesman-like
attitude in the community” (pg. 310). Serving in this capacity, newspapers and other
forms of local media create a legitimate forum where issues can be debated and disputes
between competing special interests are given voice. Local media can also support local
arts and culture, providing information and potentially a venue for performance. These
important contributions of a vital local media are also recognized by the American public.
According to survey fielded by Papper (2003), 93% of people “an important function of
local TV news is to inform people like you what’s happening in your community.”
Seventy percent think local news should “act as a watchdog looking over local
government” (pg. 23). In Klinenberg’s words, “Consolidated media
companies…compromise the quality of democratic politics and cultural life when they
grow out of touch with the communities in which they operate” (2007, pg. 26).

At the same time, other scholars have warned of the dangers of “hyperlocalism”
(Starr, 2009). As profits have declined, many newspapers have reacted by cutting back on
foreign, national, and state coverage while also reducing staff dedicated to the arts and
science. Starr (2009) argues that as newspaper cut back on other sections, they focus
more narrowly on local stories. However, “the less coverage of the wider world and
cultural life that newspapers provide, the more they stand to lose readership among the
relatively affluent who have those interests.” With the loss of affluent readers, advertisers
lose interest in publishing and the basic funding model of the newspaper collapses. Starr
envisions affluent news consumers fleeing to the Internet, never to return to ink-and-
paper newspaper. With the disappearance of the newspaper comes the death of “public-service journalism.” Thus, for Starr, the problem is not that there’s too little local programming, it’s that there is too much to support the kind of nationally-focused coverage essential to an informed democracy.

Both supporters and critics of localism (or “hyperlocalism”) share a concern for a loss of the media necessary for informed citizenship, but they offer differing accounts of whether localism is disappearing or unduly dominating. One possible explanation for this apparent disagreement is that while media outlets are, in fact, expanding local coverage, it tends to be of accidental deaths, sports, and weather rather than issues of more substance. Where Starr is certainly correct is in his assessment of the affluent reader who prefers national news to local coverage. This apparent preference of the affluent is as true in radio as it is in newspaper and has presented NPR stations with a dilemma throughout the network’s four decade history.

**History of Localism at NPR Stations**

When the FCC was created in 1934, the U.S. government empowered the agency to regulate the airwaves in “the public interest,” deciding who would have access to this shared resource and with what conditions. The FCC was assigned to pursue three goals in regulating media: “diversity, localism, and competition” (McChesney, 1993). Similarly, one of the original charges of NPR was to establish a network with a “bedrock of localism” (Carnegie Commission, 1978). The immediate reason for this charge was not a notable principle, but a political motive. President Nixon was concerned about the “East Coast bias” that might be introduced by national system of noncommercial media. He and
his advisors believed that by having programming based in local communities it would be less likely to represent the liberal views of the NPR staff in Washington, D.C. (McCauley, 2005).

In initial meetings, some broad members of the newly created NPR suggested that it would act as an exchange, sharing recordings of book readings, lectures, and classical music performances among the existing network of educational radio station. Fortunately for fans of NPR shows, it immediately became clear that many of the stations in the newly created NPR network would not have the resources to produce much local programming. For this reason, one of the first steps of Bill Siemering, a board member and, later, the first program director of NPR, was to create a national news and information program, *This Is Radio*, which was later renamed *All Things Considered*. In the first battle over the balance of local and national content at NPR, nationally standardized programming won. Still, out of necessity, much of the content in the early days of NPR stations was locally-produced classical music programming (Starr, 2000). During the 1970s and early 1980s, as the NPR network expand, the organization developed more national offerings, while also encouraging localism by distributing funds to support the creation of new local programming. In this way, both local and national programming flourished at NPR stations.

This pattern held until 1988 when NPR’s approach to programming changed. In the wake of the transformation of the CPB’s funding model (i.e., funds now went directly to stations), member stations had to be far more attuned to the preferences of their listeners in order to amass subscriber funds. To accomplish this task, NPR began to conduct audience research to learn more about its listeners. As an organization, NPR was
famously averse to collecting any sort of data since its staff saw themselves as guided by editorial principles. Nonetheless, under the direction of NPR President Doug Bennet, starting in 1986, the organization initiated a process of audience research that culminated in the Audience ’88 report. As McCauley writes, “…audience research, once consider heretical in public broadcasting, helped the network and its member stations become even more attractive to a highly educated audience whose income level made commercial broadcasters drool with envy” (pg. 70).

The Audience ’88 report held several findings that shocked the NPR staff. Most prominent among them was that their listeners and especially “high value” (read: affluent and regularly donating) listeners preferred national programming over local programming and prized news over all other content (Thomas and Clifford, 1988). This finding has been supported in NPR’s subsequent major audience research studies in 1998 and 2005. Audience ’98, for example found that 38% of listeners viewed network (i.e., national) programming as most important as compared to only 19% who thought local programming was most important (Giovannoni, Peters, and Youngclaus, 1998). The report claims that audiences found national programming “more unique,” more important in their lives, and felt more loyalty towards it. Perhaps most surprising, listeners felt a stronger sense of “community” and “shared beliefs and interests” with national programming than with local content. As the report explains, “A person’s use of local programming does not contribute to this sense of community; his or her use of national programming does” (Giovannoni et al., 1998, pg. 60).

Audience 2005 found that the skew in favor of national programming had only increased. Sixty-two percent of all radio listening hours on the sampled NPR stations
were devoted to national programming, with *Morning Edition* and *All Things Considered* accounting for 25% alone. Additionally, *Audience 2005* found a trend toward consolidation in listenership with 19 national programs accounting for half of all listening. As in 1998, listeners felt substantially less loyalty to local programming than national content (Peters and Olson, 2005).

Despite the clear preferences for national programming, the CPB and NPR still believe strongly in the value of localism. As recently as March 2010, the CPB announced that it would disperse $10 million to support the creation of more local programming at NPR and PBS stations (Zongker, 2010). Nonetheless, it is important for the current research to bear in mind that NPR, Inc. has repeatedly told program directors at stations nationwide that their listeners have a strong preference for national programming.

Today, there is already a great deal of variation in stations’ balance of national and local content. Nearly stations carry the national programming of *Morning Edition*, *All Things Considered*, and *Weekend Edition*. Beyond those core shows, most stations also air *Fresh Air*, *Wait, Wait, Don’t Tell Me*, *Car Talk*, and *Prairie Home Companion*. An important consideration for many stations is whether to play classical music or *BBC World News* overnight. In terms of local content, for many stations, it is easier and more affordable to produce a cultural program (e.g., an interview show hosted by an eager volunteer) for an hour or two each week than an hour-long daily news show staffed by professionals. However, most stations, even very small ones, create some type of local news and weather programming to play during *Morning Edition* and *All Things Considered*. Wealthier stations have more freedom either to purchase more national programming or to produce their own content. Classical music stations tend to skew
heavily toward national content for their talk segments, while talk formatted stations usually try to have some local programming each day. In the results section, I examine the patterns of national vs. local content at NPR stations as a whole, but it should be clear from a brief review of history that national programming is at a serious advantage. This pattern reflects the balance elsewhere in the mass media.

**Hypotheses**

As previously explained, ever since NPR, Inc. was privatized in the mid-1980s, member stations have had to raise operating funds first and foremost through subscriber donations. Evidence in Chapter 3 demonstrates that an increased reliance on subscribing funding is associated with higher levels of the type of coverage that audiences prefer: news. These findings suggest that as a result of NPR stations’ dependency on subscribers, they may now make decisions based on market demand rather than editorial discretion. For twenty years, program directors at NPR stations have had reason to believe that subscribers have a preference for national rather than local programming. If market demand has taken hold among NPR stations, we would expect to find that the balance of programming is tipped toward national content, with it being even higher at stations particularly dependent on financial support from subscribers. With this in mind, I propose the following hypotheses:

\[ H_{16}: \text{Controlling for other factors, the higher a station's listenership ratings, the more hours per week of both local and national talk programming it will air.} \] It is more costly to purchase national talk programming or produce it locally than to play music or go off the air at night. Thus, larger stations, with higher listenership ratings, will have more overall content of both types.
H17. Controlling for other factors, the higher a station’s listenership ratings, the more of the station’s talk programming will be national content. As we have seen, much audience research establishes the preferences of audiences for national programming. Program directors, aware of this preference, will likely respond to market demand and purchase more popular national shows.

H18. All things being equal, stations with higher levels of subscriber, CPB, and business funding will have more hours per week of both national and local content. Because purchasing and/or producing more programs of any sort costs more money, we would expect that any increase in funding would lead to more total hours of talk programming – both local and national.

H19. All things being equal, the higher a station’s level of subscriber contributions, the more talk programming will be national content. If, as expected, privatization contributes to an increased responsiveness to market demand and support is found for the idea that a greater balance of national programming is associated with greater listenership (H2), then we should find a significant positive relationship between subscriber funding and the percentage of national programming. That is to say, that subscriber funding is expected to affect content in the same direction as listenership ratings.

H20. All things being equal, the higher a station’s level of CPB funding, the less talk programming will be national content. Though I expect that increased CPB funding will lead to higher levels of both news and cultural content, stations with higher levels of CPB funding (those stations in a “less privatized” state) might be able to resist the pressures of market demand to greater extent. Moreover, the CPB has actively pushed an agenda of localism and portions of the funding may be directed toward the creation of local programming. Therefore, we would expect such stations to have a lower proportion of national programming as compared to stations more dependent on subscriber funds.

H21. All things being equal, the higher a station’s level of funding from business, the less talk programming will be national content. Businesses are attracted to programming with the largest number of affluent listeners. Audience research suggests that national content fits that description far more than local programming. Moreover, the national programs are a known quantity, whereas local content runs the risk of appearing less professional, being more politically radical, or, on occasion, offensive. For this reason as well, national programming is likely more appealing to business sponsors who will have their company’s name attached to the show.

H22. Controlling for other factors, in years without a Democratic presence in the federal government, there will be both types of all non-music content. In this chapter, I extend the analysis of the influence of political composition on programming content raised in previous chapters. As indicated in Chapter 3, in years without any Democratic presence in either house of Congress or the White House, NPR station programming directors may perceive a threat to future funding by Republicans in Congress. In such an environment, they may cut programming in order to reduce expenses or avoid association with national
shows that might be deemed controversial. For these reasons, I expect that years with a Democratic presence in government will have more national and local content.

**Methods**

The methodology for this section is nearly identical to the previous chapter. To review, I make use of two datasets. The first is a 1984 survey of NPR stations \( n=104 \), which represented 38% of population of stations at the time and were of a similar age and geographical distribution as the population. The second source of data comes from a longitudinal survey conducted by the Station Resource Group (SRG) of 228 stations between spring 1999 and spring 2005 (thirteen time points). These 228 stations represented 41% of the population of member stations when the study began in 1999. Though these stations were five years older on average than the population of stations, they vary greatly in size and geographical location. Seventy-four stations appear in both datasets. This cluster of stations had somewhat larger listenership and carried far more cultural programming than other stations between 1999 and 2005. While these data are less than ideal for understanding how privatization affected the programming of the NPR network of stations, they likely offer the best data available and provide us with a valuable glimpse into the changes.

**Measures**

The six of the same independent variables are used as in the previous chapter: CPB funding, subscriber funding, business funding, listenership, total hours, and Democratic control in at least one house of Congress or the White House. One additional independent variable parallels the analysis in Chapter 3. Instead of controlling for the
percentage national, in this chapter, I control for the percentage news in order to interpret the relationship between the type of content and its origin. While the funding is measured in annual totals in the 1984 sample, it is measured biannually in the 1999-2005 sample. The 1984 sample uses a proxy measure of total number of subscribers to assess listenership. By contrast, the 1999-2005 sample uses the standard metric in radio ratings, Average Quarter Hour (AQH) Persons listenership. AQH Persons is the average number of people listening to the station for at least a five-minute period at any given 15 minutes period during the week.

The current section differs from the previous section in its three dependent variables: total hours of local programming, total hours of national programming, and a difference score, subtracting the weekly hours of local programming from the weekly hours of national programming. In the 1984 survey, these measures were culled from two questions. Stations were asked, “How many hours of locally produced non-music programming do you air each week?” They were also asked, “How many total hours of non-music programming do you air each week?” The values for local programming were taken from the first question. The measure of national programming was created by subtracting the hours of local programming from the total hours of non-music programming. A higher score in the difference score measure indicates that a greater portion of the talk programming comes from national sources.

The SRG survey contained far more detailed information about programming, including the number of weekly hours from each content provider (e.g., NPR, PRI, APR, independent, etc.) as well as number of hours from regional and local sources. This information was subdivided into music and non-music hours. The measure of national
programming hours was constructed by summing the number of weekly hours by each national content provider. For the purposes of the current study, the measure of local programming was created by adding the number of hours from regional sources to the number of hours from local sources. I made the decision to add regional and local hours together for two reasons. First, the central distinction in the divisions within NPR over favoring national vs. local content was actually a disagreement over national vs. non-national content. Indeed, the CPB’s recent injection of funds to support “local” programming created several regional production centers. Second, in the listener’s experience, regional programming (usually about one’s state) can feel local unlike the celebrity voices on the national programs. The percentage national measure was constructed by dividing the number of national hours by the total number of non-music hours.

**Analysis**

As in the previous section, using Stata 10 software, I employed OLS regression to analyze the 1984 data and a Generalized Estimating Equation (GEE) model to analyze the 1999-2005 data. The GEE model is used to examine time-varying data and organizes the data into 13 station-season units per case (n=2964), clustering at the station-level and temporally. All analyses should be interpreted at the station level. Additionally, I present bivariate findings and analysis of the 74 stations in both periods by presenting a series of charts.
Results

As Figure 4-1 illustrates, there were comparable levels of national programming in 1984 and spring 1999. In both periods, there was substantial variation in the extent of implementation of national programming across stations. In 1984, though no station had fewer than 11 hours of national programming, some had up to 126 hours weekly, more than doubling the mean (see Table 3.1). In 1999-2005, stations range from two to 152 hours of national programming weekly (Table 3.2). Still, the standard deviations of 29.5 in 1999-2005 and 21.4 in 1984 indicate only slightly more variation among stations in hours of national programming in the later period. Since 1999, however, there has been a substantial, if incremental, increase in the weekly hours of national programming, expanding by approximately 8 hours per week in that period. A major contributor to this growth in national programming has been the slow roll-out in the early 2000s of the popular show *BBC World News* as an option for between 4 and 6 hours overnight. The addition of even four hours of *BBC World News* overnight each night tacks an additional 28 hours of national programming onto the weekly count.
Despite the growth in national content, local programming has been essentially static at fewer than ten hours per week since fall 1999, growing only about an hour per week in that period. Local programming has been halved since 1984 when it accounted for 20.7 hours per week. Of course, these low average levels of local programming can be deceptive given the wide range of local programming (ranging from literally no local programming to 59 hours per week in spring 1999 and zero to 122 hours in 1984). In both periods, the standard deviation is greater than the mean (23.3 in 1984 and 10.0 in 1999-2005), but there was substantially more variation in local programming in the 1980s.
Considering both lines in Figure 4-1, the broader trend is clear: national programming grew substantially during the early 2000s, while local content held constant.

Examining the 74 stations in both periods, we find essentially the same pattern in more dramatic relief. Recall that for the full samples, national programming held constant between 1984 and spring 1999. As Figure 4-2 reveals, for the 74 stations, national programming grew by a full 17 hours between 1984 and spring of 1999. Between 1999 and spring 2005, the weekly hours of national programming grew another seven hours to reach a peak of 73 hours per week (essentially ten hours of national programming per day). Strangely, examining the standard deviations in Table 3.3, it appears that in 1984, the 74 stations ranged less than the larger sample (18.3 vs. 21.8), while in the 1999-2005 sample, the 74 stations varied more than the larger sample (37.8 vs. 29.5). Meanwhile, local programming was halved between 1984 and 1999 (from 21.5 to 10.4) and has since grown by only an hour. Here, the standard deviations for the 74 stations are quite similar to the larger samples. Accounting for the massive leap in hours of national programming (approximately 2.5 hours per day) in these 74 stations is difficult, but it is clear that the growth came in the form of national news programming. Following the wider patterns in local programming, the stations that existed throughout the period appear to have increased their load of national programming, but vary greatly in the scale of that change. Some of the stations transitioned from being mixed news and classical format (playing classical overnight) to being 24 hour talk formatted stations, while other simply purchased a couple more hours per day. The results in Figure 4-2 suggest that the growth of national programming in the NPR network came not only from adoptions of new stations, but also substantial transformation of existing stations.
Listenership

The first hypothesis being tested held that all things being equal, higher listenership would yield more hours of non-music programming of both types because larger stations with greater listenership can afford to purchase and produce more programming. Stations with greater listenership did, indeed, have higher levels of local programming (Table 4-1) in the 1999-2005 sample. For every additional 5000 listeners, stations had one more hour of local programming (p<.01). Surprisingly, stations with more listeners had significantly fewer hours of national programming (p<.01). This result is likely due to the fact that with more local programming, there is relatively less time for

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1 I have multiplied the coefficients in order to produce more easily interpretable results. For example, for every 1000 listeners, there was a 0.198 hour increase in local programming. Thus, in order to produce a full hour increase (0.198 * 5), it would require 5000 more listeners (1000 * 5).
national programming. Additionally, a small number of very large stations produce local content that is syndicated to other stations as national programming. In the data here, it is not possible to distinguish between local programming that is nationally distributed and the content that is not. The clear result is that stations with more listeners are producing more local content and broadcasting less national programming. As in the previous chapter, stations with more subscribers were no more likely to air more national or local programming in 1984 (Table 4-2). Prior to the privatization of NPR, number of subscribers had little effect on the amounts of national and local content.

Given the substantial evidence of NPR listeners’ preference for national programming, a second hypothesis held that stations with higher listenership would have a portion of national rather than local programming. Remarkably, I found nearly the opposite. In the 1984 sample, the number of subscribers had no effect on the balance between national and local content (Table 4-2). This finding suggests that, in the pre-privatization era, the programming schedules of NPR stations did not vary substantially based on station popularity. By contrast, in the 1999-2005 sample, higher levels of listenership were associated with a less national as compared to local programming. As Table 4-1 reveals, for every 3000 additional listeners, there was a one hour shift in difference score towards local programming (p<.01). Controlling for the finances of the stations, those with greater listenership produce much more local programming leading to a lower percentage of national content (out of all non-music content). It is still quite possible that the most popular shows at NPR stations are national programs, but, contrary to the hypothesis, the findings of this analysis suggest that more popular stations air more local non-music content than national.
Table 4-1: Multilevel General Estimating Equations for National, Local, and Difference Score (Spring 1999-Spring 2005)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Hours of National</th>
<th></th>
<th>Hours of Local</th>
<th></th>
<th>Difference Score (National – Local)</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coefficient</td>
<td>Standard Error</td>
<td>Coefficient</td>
<td>Standard Error</td>
<td>Coefficient</td>
<td>Standard Error</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listeners (1000s)</td>
<td>-0.191**</td>
<td>0.062</td>
<td>0.198**</td>
<td>0.003</td>
<td>-0.383**</td>
<td>0.124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPB $ (10,000s)</td>
<td>0.949***</td>
<td>0.245</td>
<td>-0.727**</td>
<td>-1.208</td>
<td>1.899***</td>
<td>.491</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subscribers $ (10,000s)</td>
<td>0.009</td>
<td>0.036</td>
<td>-0.021</td>
<td>0.035</td>
<td>0.019</td>
<td>0.071</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business $ (10,000s)</td>
<td>0.665***</td>
<td>0.111</td>
<td>-0.602***</td>
<td>0.112</td>
<td>1.329***</td>
<td>0.221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Hours</td>
<td>0.535***</td>
<td>0.010</td>
<td>0.466***</td>
<td>0.010</td>
<td>0.071***</td>
<td>0.020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% News Content</td>
<td>0.026*</td>
<td>0.123</td>
<td>-.024*</td>
<td>0.123</td>
<td>0.051*</td>
<td>0.024</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic Presence</td>
<td>-0.044</td>
<td>0.085</td>
<td>-0.254**</td>
<td>0.090</td>
<td>-.088</td>
<td>0.170</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*** p<.001, ** p<.01, * p<.05; n=2964 (13 observations for 228 stations); clustered both temporally and at station-level
Table 4-2: OLS Regression for National, Local, and Percent of National Content (1984)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>National</th>
<th>Std. Error</th>
<th>Local</th>
<th>Std. Error</th>
<th>Percent National</th>
<th>Std. Error</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>65.091***</td>
<td>15.064</td>
<td>-21.670</td>
<td>18.528</td>
<td>86.761**</td>
<td>26.711</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Subscribers</td>
<td>-.055</td>
<td>.062</td>
<td>.040</td>
<td>.076</td>
<td>-.095</td>
<td>.109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(in hundreds)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPB $</td>
<td>-.012</td>
<td>.029</td>
<td>.065†</td>
<td>.036</td>
<td>-.077</td>
<td>.051</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(in thousands)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subscriber $</td>
<td>-.003</td>
<td>.025</td>
<td>.002</td>
<td>.031</td>
<td>-.005</td>
<td>.045</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(in thousands)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business $</td>
<td>-.004</td>
<td>.055</td>
<td>-.168**</td>
<td>.068</td>
<td>.175†</td>
<td>.098</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(in thousands)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Hours</td>
<td>.056</td>
<td>.098</td>
<td>.235†</td>
<td>.121</td>
<td>-.179</td>
<td>.174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent News</td>
<td>-.370***</td>
<td>.090</td>
<td>.088</td>
<td>.111</td>
<td>-.459**</td>
<td>.160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R2</td>
<td>.188</td>
<td></td>
<td>.120</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.143</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*<.05; †<.1; n=104

***<.001; **<.01;
Funding

The third hypothesis held that more funding of all types would lead to more national and local non-music programming. The findings only partially support this hypothesis. In the 1984 sample (Table 4-2), no source of funding had a significant effect on the number hours of national programming. This finding suggests little difference between wealthy and poor stations or between more and less privatized stations in the number of hours of national programming. On the other hand, stations were greater funds from the CPB were significantly more likely to produce local content (p<.1). However, the magnitude of this effect was quite small with a full $15,000 of CPB funding leading to only one additional hour of local programming. Stations with more funds from business were less likely to air local content (p<.01), with an hour decrease in local programming for every $6,000 of business funding. These findings are, perhaps, unsurprising given the CPB’s commitment to localism and the potential aversion of businesses to less predictable local programming.

In the 1999-2005 sample (Table 4-1), as expected, funding from the CPB and business significantly increased the number of hours of national programming that a station airs. Every additional $10,000 of CPB funding led to nearly a full hour (0.949) increase in national programming (p<.001), while every $10,000 of business funding led to a 0.646 of an hour increase in national content (p<.001). As in the 1984 sample, between 1999 and 2005, subscriber funding had no significant impact on total hours of either national or local programming. As would be expected based on the 1984 findings, business funding significantly decreased the amount of local programming (p<.001). Quite unexpectedly, stations with more funding from the CPB were significantly less
likely to produce local programming (p<.01). This finding runs contrary to both the results from the 1984 sample and the CPB’s concern with protecting localism. Surprising as this finding is, it is robust and holds up when analyzed multiple ways. It is possible that despite the CPB’s best intentions, stations receiving funding from them use it to purchase more name-brand national programs rather than produce their own programs. Perhaps, the CPB’s newer efforts to increase localism will be more successful, but, for the observed period, it seems to reduce weekly hours of local programming.

The fourth hypothesis held that stations with more funds from subscribers, responding to market demand, would have a greater balance of national rather than local content. The results clearly reject this hypothesis. In both the 1984 and 1999-2005 samples, the level of funding from subscribers had no significant effect on the balance of national and local programming. While Chapter 3 demonstrated that the level of subscriber funding can affect stations’ programming content, greater funding quite clearly does not shape the balance of national and local content.

The results also contradicted the fifth hypothesis that stations in a less privatized condition, with more funds from the CPB, would have a lower of percentage of local content. In the 1984 sample, CPB funding had no statistically significant impact on the difference score of national and local programming. In 1999-2005, stations with more funding from the CPB had a significantly greater portion of national programming (p<.001). In fact, for every additional $10,000 per season of CPB funding, we would expect an almost two hour per week shift towards national content. Combined with the previous results, this provides strong evidence that CPB funds lead to more national programming rather than the sort of local programming they are expected to encourage.
A sixth hypothesis held that stations with more business funding would air a greater share of national programming, preferring its predictability to local content. The results strongly supported this hypothesis in both time periods. In 1984, for every thousand dollar increase in funds from business, stations had a .175 hour greater amount of national programming than local content (p<.1). Similarly, in the 1999-2005 results, for every $10,000 increase in business funds, there was 1.329 hour shift towards national programming (p<.001). These findings strongly suggest that the effect of greater business funds is to shift programming towards national content and away from local content.

A final hypothesis held that stations in seasons and years with Democrats holding at least one house of Congress or the White House would perceive less of a threat to future funding than in years where Republicans controlled all three political bodies. In such an environment, program directors might decide to drop potential contentious national programming in favor of less predictable, but also less visible local radio shows. The results showed no significant effect of a Democratic presence in government on hours of national programming or, ultimately, on the difference score. Nonetheless, contrary to the hypothesis, during eras of Democratic presence in government, stations had .254 hours less of weekly local content (p<.01). It is difficult to conceive of a rationale for this finding and the magnitude is relatively modest.

Controls

This research controlled for the total weekly hours of talk programming and the percentage of news content. In the 1984 sample, the only statistically significant effect of total hours was to increase the hours of local programming by almost an hour for every 4
additional hours of content (p<.1). As might be expected, in 1999-2005, stations with more total hours of talk programming had significantly more hours of both national and local content (p<.001), increasing each by about one hour for every two additional hours in total non-music programming. Stations with more total hours of non-music programming also had significantly more national than local content (p<.001). That said, the magnitude of the effect was quite small. For every 14 hours of total programming, there is a one hour increase of national over local content.

Percentage of news content also proved to be an important predictor. In the 1984 sample, for each one percent increase in news, there was 0.370 decrease in national content and a 0.459 decrease in difference score (p<.001). In the 1980s, stations with more news programming tended to have less national programming as well. By the time of the 1999-2005 sample, that relationship is reversed. For each 1% increase in percentage of news, stations aired 0.026 hours more national, 0.024 hours less local, and 0.051 hours more national than local programming (all p<.05).

**Discussion**

As would be expected from a review of literature on trends in localism, there was a significant decline in local programming between 1984 and 1999. Between 1999 and 2005, weekly hours of local programming remained largely static. By contrast, national programming has grown throughout the period with particular large expansion exhibited in those stations appearing in both samples. This result tends to suggest that changes in the balance of national and local programming at NPR stations did not occur primarily through newly adopted stations. Existing stations changed dramatically, too.
Though the univariate results matched expectations, the results of the OLS and GEE analyses were largely inconsistent with this study’s hypotheses, as seen in Table 4-3. Most surprisingly, level of subscriber funding had no significant effect on the amount or balance of national and local programming, while CPB funding in the more recent period was linked with fewer hours of local programming and a greater share of national content. Likewise, despite the well-documented preference of NPR listeners for national content, the current study found that popular stations devoted a smaller portion of their non-music content to national programming. These findings certainly provide evidence that the funding models of NPR stations affect the type of programming they air. However, the results also appear to challenge the theory that privatization has led stations to respond to market demand.

**Localism**

The current study suggests that, since the 1980s, NPR stations have followed more or less the same pattern as newspapers and commercial radio – less local programming. Between 1984 and 1999, weekly hours of local programming were halved. This pattern held within the 74 stations appearing in both samples as well, suggesting a transformation in the programming of the existing stations, not simply change through new station adoptions. Between 1999 and 2005, the hours of local programming more or less stagnated, growing only slightly.

Throughout this period of time, NPR repeatedly issued audience research reports suggesting that listeners prefer national programming. Perhaps the decline in local programming is partially attributable to a conviction among program directors that
listeners are uninterested in localism. What is apparent is that program directors added national programming with fervor in the first half of the 2000s, adding eight hours per week on average. Much of this growth came in the form of additional national news programming, particular the overnight show *BBC World News*. Like the commercial stations that piped in music from San Antonio, TX while toxic gases poured from a derailed train in Minot, ND, many public radio listeners now tune into reports from London that rarely offer information pertaining to local concerns.

Table 4-3: Summary of National vs. Local Findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hypothesis</th>
<th>1984</th>
<th>1999-2005</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>H1: Higher listenership, higher total hours of national and local non-music content</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Less national, more local</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H2: Higher listenership, greater portion of national content</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H3: Greater funding, more national and local non-music content</td>
<td>CPB funds increase local, while business funds decrease it; no other effects</td>
<td>CPB and business increase national and decrease local; no effect of subscriber funds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H4: More subscriber funds, greater portion of national content</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H5: More CPB funds, lesser portion of national content</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>CPB funds <em>increase</em> portion of national</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H6: More business funds, greater portion of national content</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H7: Stations in years with a Democratic presence, greater portion of national content</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Of course, the amount of time devoted to national and local programming is not a zero sum game. The average station aired 67.5 hours of non-music programming per week in 2005, leaving 100 hours of music that could be replaced with talk content. The CPB signaled its continued commitment to localism in 2010 with the injection of funds specifically designed to encourage more local non-music programming. If such efforts prove successful, we could see the weekly hours of local programming grow without listeners having to surrender their favorite national shows.

**Market Demand**

The previous section (Chapter 3) found some support for the notion that since the privatization of NPR, stations have increasingly responded to market demand due to their reliance on financial support from the public. In that chapter, I found that more privatized stations (those with less CPB support and more dependency on subscribers) were more likely to air the news content preferred by listeners. In this chapter, I found only partial support for this theory. Less privatized stations (those with more support from the CPB) played more hours of the national programming. Though past research has shown a preference of NPR listeners for national programming, the results here suggest that stations with more listeners actually have more local programming. In other words, more privatized stations had more local programming, acting in the same direction as listenership. As our theory would suggest, more government dependent stations (those receiving more CPB funds) are more protected from market forces and can act contrary to listenership patterns. Nonetheless, subscriber funding had no discernible effect on programming. At least in the case of the balance of national and local programming at
NPR stations, there is no evidence that subscribers exert their will through financial contributions. Given the significant effect of levels of CPB funding, it may be the case that the real dividing line in privatization is the extent of government support.

**Conclusion**

This study examined how the largely privatized funding model of NPR stations affects their balance of national and local programming. Many scholars and media commentators have indicated a concern over the loss of much local programming in recent years. Given NPR’s stated role as a network dedicated to ensuring diversity and localism, its stations might be expected to offer a reprieve from the largely nationally standardized programming at commercial radio stations. Such localism can be invaluable for the development of citizenship, the nurturing of local arts, and the growth of social capital in communities. Unfortunately, the findings presented here suggest that local programming at NPR stations represents a small portion of all programming and has substantially declined since the mid-1980s.

Contrary to expectations, in the post-privatization era, more CPB dependent stations have tended to tip their balance of programming to national content. This finding is surprising given the CPB’s longstanding commitment to localism. On the other hand, more privatized stations follow the same programming pattern as the most popular stations, perhaps indicating that less government dependent stations tend to follow templates that have been shown to attract listeners. Taken together, the results suggest that though localism as declined in the post-privatization era of NPR, the privatized model of funding at stations is particularly effective in cultivating local programming.
Chapter 5

Conclusion

In July 2010, National Public Radio ceased to exist. As part of an organizational “re-branding,” officials announced that the content producer would simply be known as NPR. On the surface, this change was a minor and abstract one since the hosts of all of their shows had already referred to the organization only by its acronym for a couple of years prior. Symbolically, however, it spoke to two massive transformations in the organization since its founding. No longer was NPR either “public” or exclusive to “radio.”

According to NPR, the immediate reason for the change was to reflect the new largely online landscape of mass media. As the Washington Post reported, “NPR says it’s abbreviating the name...because its more than radio these days. Its news, music and informational programming is heard over a variety of digital devices that aren’t radios; it also operates news and music Web sites” (Farhi, 2010). As a content producer, NPR had begun to release its programming directly to media consumers, in some ways directly competing with their own radio stations. That NPR could be a competitor to its own member stations was reflective of its role as content provider in the post-privatization era.

Perhaps even more telling about the name change was the disappearance of the word “public.” In a sense, dropping “public” offered a more honest account of what the organization had become. Since the privatization of NPR in the 1980s, the organization has been little more than a non-profit organization receiving a small portion of its budget in the form of grants from the government. Since 2000, government funding has never accounted for more than 3% of NPR, Inc.’s budget. Far from the initial vision of creating
an American version of the BBC, the organization today is 3% public. The central organization aside, the network of member stations receive less than 15% of their funding from public sources.

This dissertation has documented how privatization has affected both the population of NPR member stations and their programming content. In this final chapter, I review the major findings of the study and the limitations of this research. Next, I analyze the implications of the findings for the theoretical questions raised in Chapter 1. Then, I consider the possible consequences of the privatization of NPR for a democratic society. Finally, I discuss some of the new forces facing NPR and discuss what the future may hold for the network of stations.

**Findings**

Perhaps, the most important finding of this study is the NPR network of stations has grown at an incredible rate in nearly every respect since its founding. From 82 stations in 1971, the NPR network now includes nearly 700 stations in urban, suburban, and rural areas in all parts of the country. Since 2000, departures of stations from the network have become almost non-existent. Most member stations broadcast quite a bit of NPR’s content (particularly its news), with the average station airing almost seven hours a day of national programming. Given the robust level of content being purchased, neither NPR, Inc. nor its member stations seem in danger of failing in the near future.

All of this growth occurred even as NPR stations made a major shift from receiving most of their funding from the government via the CPB to being funded principally by subscribers and business donations. Though federal spending on NPR
stations has held constant in real dollars, the funds from subscribers have continued to grow precipitously. A notable turning point came in the 1980s when the CPB began to disperse funds directly to stations rather than filter it through NPR. As is clear from the massive growth of the network of stations, in the wake of the privatization of NPR, the network of stations found an alternative model of funding to support its further expansion.

Still, as Chapter 2 demonstrated, various sources of funding affect the growth of the population of NPR stations in differing ways. Greater levels of funding from the CPB seem to reduce volatility in the population, by reducing both the number of adoptions of and departures from the network. By contrast, increased funds from business are associated with more departures of stations from the NPR network. In a future with more business funding than CPB funds, we may observe the network of stations following more typical market patterns with less stability.

Some of the changes to the network of stations can be attribute to organizational population ecology effects observed in many other studies. As the population density of NPR stations increased, the annual rate of adoptions also increased. However, as anticipated, once the population reached its carrying capacity, the rate of adoptions decreased. While no comparable effect existed at the national level for departures, the population density of stations within the geographic region exerted great influence over a station’s odds of departing the network. As the population in a region grows, departures are more likely, but after the population reaches a substantial density, the odds of departure are significantly reduced. These findings suggest that growth periods involve
great instability with many adoptions and departures, but the NPR network of stations has ultimately achieved a more stable population size.

In tracking the content at stations over time, it is clear that, today, NPR stations play primarily national news programming. Despite the CPB’s mandate to promote localism, local programming has always represented a smaller portion of the content at most stations. One major change since the 1980s has been marked turn in programming from cultural to news content. Today, most stations broadcast more than three times as much news as cultural programming, a big shift from the almost even balance of programming in the 1980s.

Broadly speaking, in recent years, stations with greater listenership have tilted their programming more than stations with less listenership. Controlling for financial resources, higher listenership stations also tend to lean towards local rather than national programming. In a marked contrast, in 1984, listenership had no discernible effect on programming choices.

Supporting the primary hypothesis of Chapter 3, I found that, between 1999 and 2005, stations with more of their funding from subscribers carried more news programming, while stations with more funding from the CPB broadcast more cultural content. The fact that more privatized stations (i.e., more subscriber-reliant stations) tend to adopt more of the news content that generates more listeners tends to suggest a market demand effect. Stations with more funding from the CPB are more sheltered from market demand and can, therefore, air more cultural programming. No such effects were found in the pre-privatization sample from 1984.
With regards to the balance of national and local content (Chapter 4), there were somewhat similar findings. More funding from the CPB did allow stations to act counter to market demand by airing more national programming. But unlike in Chapter 3, subscriber funding had no effect on the balance of national and local programming. In both time periods, higher funding from business had the effect of increasing the share of national content, perhaps, due to a desire to be associated with stations carrying more “name-brand” programming. Considering the results from Chapters 3 and 4, the balance of evidence tends to suggest that in the post-privatization period, funding from the CPB offers a sort of shield from the market demand, while the effects of other types of funding yield inconsistent results.

Throughout all chapters, I examined the role political composition played in shaping the NPR network of stations. Because of the need to reallocate funding for the CPB (and, thus, NPR stations) annually through the federal budgeting process, federal funding for public radio has been a regular political football. Though budget cuts have not materialized under Republicans any more than Democrats, Republicans have consistently decried federal funding for public radio (often accusing of having a “liberal bias”). Thus, during periods of Republican control of Congress, I speculated that the future of public radio might seem particularly bleak. In this environment, stations might be less likely to adopt and more likely to depart the NPR network. Further, stations might drop some of their NPR programming, leading to fewer hours of non-talk programming and more local content. The effects of the political measures proved weak and inconsistent. In Chapter 2, at the national level, years with Republicans controlling at least one house of Congress did have fewer departures, but, on the station-level, the odds
of a departure wasn’t higher in Republican years. Political composition had no effects on adoptions.

In Chapter 3 and 4, due to the small window of the data, the variable had to be measured as years in which Democrats had control of either house of Congress or the White House. In such years, there was a modest amount of more news programming and slightly fewer hours of local programming. The decrease in news programming during periods of exclusive Republican control may indicate a retreat from NPR, but even the inconsistency of the findings, these effects could just as easily be artifacts. Either way, political composition clearly does not play a major role in affecting the NPR network of stations.

**Limitations**

As explained in Chapter 1, all three of the datasets utilized in this dissertation are less than ideal. In Chapter 2, data on funding source at the individual station level would have allowed us to examine how the extent of privatization at individual stations affected the likelihood of a departure. Instead, I could only assess how the balance of funding from public vs. private sources in the overall population of stations shaped the odds of a station departure. Thus, the results in Chapter 2 speak more to the public radio environment than the finances of one station. Unfortunately, the data necessary to construct the ideal dataset simply does not exist.

In Chapters 3 and 4, the large gap in years between 1984 and 1999 makes it extremely difficult to interpret the effects of the privatization process (rather than station-level privatization) on programming content. The small sample in 1984 (though
representing a reasonably large portion of the population of stations at the time) may also limit the generalizability of findings in that period. Finally, only 74 stations existed in both periods. By examining these stations, I was able to demonstrate that changes occurred not only through the emergence of new stations, but in existing ones, too. However, these stations are very small sample and may not be representative of all stations that existed in both periods. But again, the datasets used here are the best available sources of information to answer the questions at hand.

**Theoretical Implications**

**Privatization and Market Demand**

What do these results tell us about how the privatization of NPR affected the network of stations? Whether or not market demand has taken hold of NPR stations, there was a drastic change in the balance of national and local programming in the post-privatization era. The increases in national programming make sense given NPR, Inc.’s new role as a content provider. Prior to privatization, NPR was under no great pressure to push their content on stations since it was the central recipient of CPB funding. Once the CPB began to disperse funds directly to stations, NPR, Inc. became a content provider like PRI and American Public Media. Its new financial circumstances led NPR, Inc. to more aggressively market their programming to member stations and pick off the best local programming to distribute nationally.

These changes may explain the rise of national programming, but tell us little about why local programming was halved in the years between 1984 and 1999. The data do indicate that more privatized stations (those less dependent on CPB funds) offer more
local programming. Moreover, that finding is not simply an artifact of larger stations being able to afford to produce more total programming (given the control for total hours of programming). Additionally, that finding controls for listenership and other sources of funding. In other words, given two stations with equal listenership and CPB funding, the one with more subscriber funds will use those resources to tip the programming balance toward local content. Hence, while the NPR network of stations as a whole have featured less local content in the post-privatization era, individually, more privatized stations are doing more to preserve localism. For those concerned with maintaining or expanding local content, it appears that a private sector, subscriber-based funding model is more successful than a government funded one.

Homogenization of Mass Media and Localism

Contrary to Starr’s (2009) of “hyperlocalism” in local media outlets, this research found that NPR stations have substantially reduced their hours of non-music content devoted to local programming. What the findings presented here cannot tell us is about the nature of this lost local programming. Many scholars have argued that local media serve as watchdogs for local politics and promoters of local arts and culture. But local radio can also be amateurish, insipid, and boring. It is quite possible that NPR stations in the post-privatization period simply decided to trim their weaker offerings. However, even such wise programming decisions would be indicative of a more professionalized culture that comes with the need to compete in the private sector. Alternatively, it is quite possible that stations have trimmed back important local programming as a means of creating space for national content.
Either way, it is clear that local programming represents less of a presence on NPR stations than it did in the pre-privatization era. Though perhaps for different reasons, this pattern reflects the larger trend in commercial radio, TV, and newspapers (Bagdikian, 1992; McChesney, 2000; Starr, 2009; Klinenberg, 2007). While claims of “the death of localism” are probably overstated (Starr, 2009), a decline in the local potentially undermines citizens access the information necessary for full civic participation (Papper, 2003), threatens access to vital information in emergency situations (Klinenberg, 2007), and offers inadequate support for a lively arts culture (Molotch, 1976).

Yet, the irony is that there does not seem to be great market demand or editorial preference for local programming. Subscriber donations were not associated with higher levels of local programming and the editorial freedom offered by greater funding from the CPB is typically used to air more national content (despite the CPB’s stated commitment to promoting local programming). Localism may have been reduced but neither consumers nor producers seem terribly worried. Though this pattern may present a threat to local civic life, the silver lining for defenders of localism is that the average number of hours of local programming seems to be holding constant since 1999.

**Crowding In/Out Theory**

A classic debate within the study of non-profits involves the effect of government funding on non-profit organizations’ fundraising from individuals and businesses. One perspective – Crowding Out Theory – argues that government funding “crowds out” contributions from individuals because people come to see their taxes as donations
(Roberts, 1984) and because it reduces the organizations incentive to raise money within the community (Andreoni and Payne, 2008). For this reason, government funding is not particularly healthy for non-profit organizations. A competing view – Crowding In Theory – claims that government funding offers increased legitimacy and other resources that actually increase individual donations (Schiff, 1985; Hughes and Luksetich, 1999).

Taking the second view, I hypothesized that with less funding from the government, stations would have a smaller pool of resources from subscribers and businesses and would, therefore, be reluctant to adopt NPR membership and more likely to depart the network.

The findings of this study offer a new way of thinking about the effect of government funding on a population of non-profits. Greater funding from the government did, in fact, reduce the risk of a station departing the NPR network. However, it also reduced the chance of new adoptions. By contrast, business funding increased the rate of both new adoptions and departures. Taken together, these results suggest that government funding promotes stability in the network of stations, discouraging change. With greater business funding, the stations begin to more closely resemble a competitive marketplace with greater risk. New stations abound, but departures are more common as well.

For the Crowding In/Out debate, these findings indicate that government funding is a double-edged sword for a population of organizations, offering stability, but not necessarily promoting new growth. Thus, perhaps unsurprisingly, the net effect of privatization is to create dynamics similar to a for-profit environment. Far from settling the debate, these results will surely need to be replicated with other former public organizations.
Organizational Population Ecology

This dissertation tested whether three key theories in organizational population ecology could be applied to NPR station adoptions and departures. Though studies of organizational populations have traditionally examined foundings and mortalities, I argued that adoptions and departures from the NPR network represent such radical transformations that similar patterns might apply. The three theories I tested are “density dependence” (the curvilinear pattern of growth in organizational populations), the “liability of newness” (the increased likelihood of new organizations to fail), and “density delay” (density at the time of organizational founding affects likelihood of failure).

In Chapter 2, I found strong support for the application of the “liability of newness” to the study of departures (as opposed to organizational mortalities). Newer stations were significantly more likely to depart the NPR network than older stations. This result tends to indicate that organizational newness influences departures in the same way as mortalities. Additionally, this research finds some support for density dependence in the study of NPR adoptions. Like most past research, we found that increasing population density led to increased adoptions, but subsequent increases reduced the rate of adoptions. In this way, station adoptions of NPR appear to act in the same way as foundings in most organizational populations.

By contrast, both density delay and density dependence appear to operate differently with departures than with organizational mortalities. Initial increases in density increased the likelihood of departures, while subsequent density to a lower likelihood of departures. Density at the time of adoption also had a significant effect on
the odds of departure, but in the opposite of the anticipated direction. Stations adopting NPR in periods of higher density were less likely to depart the network.

Both of these results are reflective of the fact that as the population of NPR stations has grown, departures for all stations have become rarer. As NPR grew, adoptions and departures were both common, but as the population matured, both slowed. Stations adopting NPR in an era of high density (once the network had achieved a mature and stable population) were less like to depart. These findings suggest that while organizational population density quite clearly has an effect on likelihood of departure, organizational departures function quite differently from mortalities.

In sum, the findings of this dissertation indicate that many of the insights of organizational population ecology are applicable to the study of adoptions and departures. However, neither density dependence nor density delay consistently acted in the anticipated direction. Future research will be necessary to determine whether these effects are due to the study of departures rather than mortalities or simply because of the particulars of the NPR network of stations.

**Privatization, Public Radio, and Democracy**

By most measures, the post-privatization era has been good for both NPR, Inc. and its member stations. The number of stations has grown substantially and NPR programming airs in nearly every part of the country, reaching over 25 million listeners a year. When the CPB began to allocate funding directly to stations, some commentators predicted that NPR, Inc. would die a slow death as stations used the funds to produce more local programming or purchased from other sources. Far from it, member stations
now carry more hours of national programming than prior to privatization and NPR, Inc. is the leading provider of their national content. Being part of the NPR network offers stations more resources, name-brand programming, and an identity that attracts an educated, engaged demographic. Still, NPR is no BBC. It lacks the size, influence, and editorial freedom of its across-the-pond counterpart. The constitutive decisions in 1971 not to establish a permanent funding mechanism for NPR and in 1987 to redistribute radio funding to individual stations dramatically altered NPR’s role in supporting an informed democracy.

The BBC is the beneficiary of a funding mechanism (through a television license fee) which permanently supports the organization independent of the Parliament’s annual budget. This permanent line of funding affords the BBC financial stability, autonomy from political influence, and the freedom to concentrate on programming without having to sink resources into fundraising drives. Because the BBC is not reliant on funding from the public, they have little need to respond to market demand and exercise enormous editorial control. As a consequence, the BBC often features long-form segments of public interest. Finally, the BBC’s centralized control of radio stations in the United Kingdom allow them to manage a careful balance of national and local, news and cultural programming.¹

NPR, subject to the whims of Congress’s annual budget, has always had to look to the public for funding. In the post-privatization period, as this dissertation has shown, an

¹ Of course, there are other less relevant reasons for the BBC’s success. It is an integrated, multi-media organization with strong television presence. It benefits from the long arm of Britain’s former colonial empire with distribution throughout the world. While the American radio market has always been dominated by commercial stations, for-profit radio was limited in Britain until far more recently. Nonetheless, the core of the BBC’s strength has been its public funding and essential to NPR’s history has been its financial instability.
increased reliance on subscriber funding does shape programming content. For this reason, NPR has less editorial control over what airs on its stations than fully publicly-funded media (like the BBC). This pattern has only been exacerbated by the de-centralized funding of NPR after privatization. While NPR, Inc. may still be the first among content providers, it no longer exerts as much control over its member stations.

As Lippman (1920) famously argued, in complex societies governed by technocratic elites, it is impossible for people to be “omnicompetent citizens.” The job of a responsible press is to act as translators, helping the public grasp complex social problems and matters of policy. A strong model of public media, like the BBC, need not worry about what the public wants, but can focus on what the public needs in order to be informed, engaged participants in democracy. For-profit media, by its very nature, must prioritize consumer demand (and, therefore, profitability) over democratic ideals. A weak model of public media, like NPR, similarly has to respond, in part, to market demand rather than using editorial control to narrowly pursue issues in the public interest. While original mission of NPR was to create programming that would serve the public interest, its funding model has always limited its editorial control – never more so than in the post-privatization era. Lippman’s vision for a press that facilitates a functional democracy is best served by strong models of public media. To the extent that NPR stations have had to bow to market demand rather than editorial vision, public radio in the United States has fallen short of serving a vital democracy as fully as it might.

Fortunately, not at all is bleak at NPR. The NPR, Inc. programming that airs on many public radio stations often addresses social problems and issues of public concern. Their award-winning programs tend to be more critical and sophisticated than most
commercial news programs. However, this programming slate is possible because NPR stations cater to an audience that prefers serious news programming. Were this audience and its taste change, in the era of privatization, the stations would have to responsive to that consumer demand. In other words, post-privatization NPR stations are only as good as their audiences. With the rise of “NPR” instead of “National Public Radio,” we have begun to witness some of these changes.

The Future of the NPR Network

National Public Radio was never cool. Informative, certainly. Fascinating, often. Vaguely humorous, occasionally. But most the marquee shows of the network – Morning Edition, Car Talk, Fresh Air – were aimed squarely at educated Baby Boomers. NPR, by contrast, is downright hip. In its new life as a content provider, NPR, Inc. has moved online and begun to attract a younger set by featuring shows with younger hosts, offering multimedia features, and acting as a tastemaker in the indie rock scene. In some ways, these moves have made NPR programming even more appealing to stations as they seek to attract a larger pool of listeners. On the other hand, such moves can put NPR, Inc. at odds with its member stations when listeners circumvent their local station by going straight to the web site. Though the future of NPR, Inc. looks promising, there are some reasons to be concerned about its network of stations.

Prior to privatization, NPR acted as the primary advocate for public radio stations, lobbying Congress and the CPB for greater funding and directing money and resources where needed. With the allocation of funding directly to stations, NPR’s primary goal became to get as many stations as possible to use their funds to purchase NPR programs.
To be sure, part of the way NPR, Inc. makes itself attractive to stations is by offering member stations research and fundraising resources. No longer, though, would NPR be the shepherd for the flock.

As the iPod and other mobile music players became more popular, many commentators predicted the end of radio. What was a challenge for radio stations, however, was an opportunity for NPR, Inc. Most mp3 players did not have built-in radios, but many listeners were able to download NPR programs. Thus, NPR programs developed devoted followings for their shows rather than for the local radio stations airing them. Its powerful web presence and nifty smartphone apps have only enhanced the popularity of the content produced by NPR, Inc. Fears that the organization might fold in the face of “government de-funding” are preposterous. Funded primarily by payments from member stations, subscriber donations, and business and foundation contributions, the future of NPR, Inc. is secure.

On the other hand, the withdrawal of funding to public radio station could have some serious consequences. While larger stations tend to have a secure mixture of private funding sources, rural public radio stations draw a larger portion of their funding from government sources. Were Congress to slash CPB funding, it would barely affect NPR, Inc., but it might lead to smaller, particularly, rural stations having to shut down. In many rural areas, NPR stations serve as one of the few alternatives to the superficial news and cultural content offered by commercial stations. The real threat of the privatizing public radio is not that NPR programming would go away altogether, but that it would disappear in the places where it is most needed.
In conclusion, since the network’s founding, NPR stations have served an important role in shaping political discourse and encouraging informed citizenship. Through a number of transitions both financial and technological, the network has grown and evolved. Still, in the wake of privatization, the NPR network of stations has had to respond to market demand, ceding a degree of editorial autonomy. Furthermore, by turning NPR, Inc. into a content provider in the age of the Internet, privatization transformed the organization into a potential competitor to its own stations. While NPR, Inc. is likely to continue to produce outstanding programming for the foreseeable future, this change imperils the most vulnerable – and perhaps most important – public radio stations.
References


*Sociological Methodology* 13:61-98.


Appendix A: Abbreviations

NPR – National Public Radio
PBS – Public Broadcasting Service (TV)
CPB – Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the administrative organization
APR – American Public Radio (later PRI), NPR’s chief competition
PRI – Public Radio International (previously APR)
Appendix B. Organizational Population Descriptive Statistics

YEARLY DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

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STATION-LEVEL DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

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