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FROM WAR TIME TO DRIVE TIME

BY MAUREEN NEVIN DUFFY • CORRESPONDENT • JULY 6, 2008

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Public Radio International, which sells content to stations as does National Public Radio, is offering "The Takeaway," a very different style of public radio that is usurping some of NPR's morning-edition time slots, from 6 a.m. to 7 a.m. on WNYC 93.9 FM, and again from 8 a.m. to 9 a.m. at 820 AM on the dial. "The Takeaway" also can be heard in 14 other markets.

Launched April 28, "The Takeaway" features veteran journalists John Hockenberry and Adaora Udoji, who have distinguished themselves by filing prize-winning reports from war zones. And in a way, the highly competitive front known as morning radio is a war zone. Morning "drive time" listeners and the

personalities who can keep them coming back are even more widely prized than their drive-home-time brethren.

Despite the Internet and TV, radio has hung onto morning audiences, even though surveys show they listen in shorter bursts. Hence, the importance placed on information they can take away.

There is immediacy on "The Takeaway," from the news breaks called in live by print reporters from the Wall Street Journal, The New York Times and the Financial Times or broadcast journalists at the British Broadcasting Corp., to the live guest interviews and fresh comments from listeners.

A recent exchange with a Wall Street Journal reporter on the case against two Bear Stearns portfolio managers expanded into a discussion of the government's case (that the managers were allegedly touting investments they knew were duds). Through the interaction between the reporter and "The Takeaway," the show actually broke news.

Listener input is another area where this version of public radio diverges from your mother's brand. On live radio it's hard to control call content, which can break the rhythm and take the discussion off course. WNYC is using Spin Vox, software by the UK company of the same name, which converts voice to text and stores the messages for retrieval by numerous key words. When appropriate, "The Takeaway" can search the database of calls for a fitting opinion or reaction for replay instantly. Spin Vox also captures the caller's phone number, for callbacks, and e-mail address for list building.

When George Carlin died, Hockenberry says, the spontaneity in the callers' voices surpassed any "stale reports" with "filtered" comments offered five hours later on TV.

"You could just imagine a kid with his parents there listening to Carlin for the first time," says Udoji of one caller. "He called in, and I could just live that."

The combination of being live and being able to capture, analyze and retrieve information from news sources and emotion from callers makes the show "more nimble," says Hockenberry, who has hosted his own shows, "Hockenberry" and "Edgewise," on MSNBC. "The Journal report on Bear Stearns is a perfect example."

The show acted on an email from the Wall Street Journal and was able to quickly set up a live interview all while they were on the air.

"The New York Times didn't have it on that day — but we did and could scoop NPR on the same day," says Hockenberry.

Udoji shared a Peabody Award with CNN for Hurricane Katrina coverage. She reported on the Southeast Asia tsunami, which won CNN a DuPont-Columbia University Award.

Why did these seasoned TV journalists choose radio for their medium?

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"TV has chosen to abdicate its role as conveyor of thoughtful news," says Hockenberry. "With some exceptions — '60 Minutes' and CNN, but they're getting fewer and fewer — in general, major-market TV success doesn't mean covering important stories of the day."

Look for video feeds in the coming months, says Hockenberry.

"What we envision for 'The Takeaway' is partly made up of what we do on the air and partly online," says Udoji, whose first name means "Daughter of All" in Nigerian. "There are really robust discussions happening all the time (online), even when we're not on the air."

The show plans more interaction over its Web site, www.the

takeaway.org, when it completes its move from City Hall to the Soho section of New York City, and goes to a four-hour format on July 28.

Do the two ever yearn to grab their bags and head for the action again?

"Not with four kids," says Hockenberry, who has two sets of twins, ages 9 and 6. "Sure, you want to get the real deal, but we also trust our staff and resources."

"I regret not going to Lebanon and Pakistan this year," says Udoji. "It has been an extraordinary 365 days in Pakistan. But I'm not yearning to go back to Baghdad."

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