

Imaging WITF in 2012

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- From the viewer/listener/reader's perspective
- From the board room of a local foundation
- From inside the organization
- From the office of a local business partner
- From the office of the Governor

Overview

By 2012, central Pennsylvania has had five year's experience with the "new" WITF, or at least its most recent incarnation. WITF has changed a great deal since its inception in a converted bowling alley in 1963, when it began as an educational, television-only service. By its middle years (1982-2007) in a converted elementary school, WITF had expanded to include a magazine, FM, a commercial radio subsidiary and a robust web presence. The multi-year effort that resulted in the Public Media Center, inaugurated in April 2007, coincided with the expansion of original production in television, FM and on the web, and in the beginning of transformation in fundraising, from a transactional to a relationship-based approach.

The "imagining" below adds two perspectives not included in the original assignment: that of a business partner/advertiser/sponsor and that of the state government, which has provided funding to WITF-TV since 1964 and which represents a significant portion of revenues in other areas (advertising and sponsorship and fee-for-service training).

From the viewer/listener/reader's/browser's (i.e., Participant's) perspective

One indication of how challenging it is to see WITF from this perspective is how difficult it is to "define" the user. Traditional media executives have defined their audience members by the medium used ("viewers" for TV, "listeners" for radio). Yet today's users may access our content or services on platforms which defy these definitions. Is an internet user of streamed audio a "listener"? What if the same user is downloading a video clip? What if the user is adding a comment to a reporter's blog? "User" is an unappealing term, so as a more pleasant placeholder, I'll use "participant."

What is most fundamentally different about WITF in 2012 is that WITF is perceived as more than a one-way provider of valued content. WITF also perceived as a knowledgeable resource to be engaged with, queried, added to and participated with. We have taken the trust which is public television and public radio's most valuable characteristic and extended the principle to include participants as well: if audiences trust public television and radio, they will also trust public television and radio's *users*—and want to interact with people who share their values and interests.

In 2012, participants think of WITF as a resource or destination for content that can be described by (1) its geography, (2) its quality and (2) its values. For central Pennsylvanians and for state residents anywhere who want to know what the state government is doing (or doing "to" them!), WITF and its media is the place to go. Is

property tax reform being debated in the state legislature? PortalPA.com (WITF's content destination website) is where the debate is summarized by respected journalists—and where participants can share their perspectives and ask questions.

Similar topics can be accessed in other media, too—news reports on one of WITF-FM's digital channels or on WITF-TV or the Pennsylvania Channel, a multicast service that includes all of the state's eight public television stations. How to measure success? That WITF's various media are perceived as the “best” or “most valuable” source of information about Pennsylvania's state government anywhere.

We've begun to see results in one of our most important goals: to reach some of the 25-45 year-old audience—a younger version of the same subset that WITF had been reaching in the 45+ demographic: intelligent, discerning individuals interested in the world around them, who expect substance, quality, authenticity and (yes) humor. PortalPA.com has been critical to that success, but we've also seen demographic growth in that segment on FM and on TV, as well (in part because of promotion from PortalPA.com and in part from long-needed national program improvements.)

Under the auspices of WITF's *Institute for Civic Engagement*, participants can hear speakers on topics of public interest, from the role of religion in public life to how life in the Army has changed—courtesy of a speaker from the Army Heritage Center in nearby Carlisle. The Institute will be both a virtual and a real-world resource. Lunch-hour talks in the Lowengard Atrium of the Public Media Center are an opportunity for face-to-face connections. But streamed and podcast video (combined with participant discussion on-line) is another way to access and participate.

The audience research conducted by public radio (*Cores Values*, 2000) and public television (*Prime-Time Audience*, 2004) have turned out to be critically valuable (and accurate) in its depiction of public audiences. Our participants continue to seek the qualities of heart, mind and craft which distinguish public broadcasting—authenticity, quality, fairness, humor. We have continued to use those qualities as the determinant for new programs, web content, podcasts and events.

The WITF of 2012 is much more aware, than at any other time in its history, of the need for content to be easy to find, easy to access and easy to interact with. That has been a difficult transition for an organization invented as a broadcaster—a “many-to-one” provider of content in a world of few choices. So in 2012, participants can access WITF content on many platforms, from Audible to I-Tunes to GoogleVideo to Comcast Video on Demand.

From the Board of the Local Foundation

In 2012, the Local Foundation has had five years of experience with the new WITF and its initiatives, specifically through support of two educational efforts: college internships the Ready to Learn. WITF is valued because it has used its facility and its staff as a resource *to assist its region's educators*.

Specifically, the Local Foundation has supported semester stipends for college students, which WITF could not afford in the past. Stipends make internships more feasible for students financially and help to attract the best students, too.

Ready to Learn supports parents, teachers and caregivers at the earliest end of the educational spectrum: pre-K. Through training workshops offered throughout the year, adults are taught how to help children become “ready to learn” through a learning triangle approach of View-Do-Read. First, participants watch a program segment on how food is produced (*Mr. Rogers Neighborhood*), then do an activity related to it (making a sandwich), then reading a story (*Green Eggs and Ham*).

By 2012, WITF has achieved consistent success in “making its case” with donors. By 2012, WITF tripled the annual revenue from gifts of \$2500 or more, and was consistently receiving 5 and 6-figure bequests each year, the result of years of planned giving efforts.

From Inside the Organization

When WITF moved to its new facility in November 2006, the organization was at a “Tarzan moment”—faced with the need to let go of its existing mindset, model and identity before the next ones have been grasped. It was a scary time in many ways—and while the terror factor has diminished now, the precariousness of operating in the media environment has remained.

In 2012, WITF has grown to a \$20 million organization (from just over \$13 million in 2006), with an endowment ten times larger than in 2006.

Three years after its opening in 2007, the Public Media Center received its top naming gift—a \$3 million contribution from a businessman who came to understand the role that *only* WITF could play in the region and wanted to perpetuate it. The Susquehanna Public Media Center was dedicated in 2010, memorializing the name of the river that “runs through” our region.

WITF is now a more open and community-minded organization than it has been since its earliest days. The facility is now a regular and popular destination for community meetings, public discussions and, of course, media productions. The Digital Media Tour, inaugurated in 2007 with the opening of the facility, has continued to delight visitors with its hands-on opportunities to be on-camera, operate a graphics console or record sound. We’ve added to the Tour with a Digital Storytelling initiative, which trains and encourages middle and high school students to use our media (text, audio, video, graphics) to construct compelling narratives. The best of the DS projects are a real addition to our media offerings.

Initiatives are now created with interaction firmly in mind from the beginning. Following the template of Minnesota Public Radio’s Public Insight Journalism, WITF has developed a virtual rolodex of citizen experts and a small team of PI editors to help our producers and writers use their knowledge. It’s been an intellectual challenge to develop new forms for media journalism that are more inclusive of community participants while at the same

time maintaining journalistic standards of fairness and accuracy and without becoming an advocate, even for the worthiest of goals.

WITF is more open to interactivity on the web (at PortalPA.com) and in our mobile formats, too, where we solicit and distribute podcast walking tours of our communities—as recorded by residents themselves. (This is an evolution of our TV series *Our Town*, which utilized community residents to videotape the essential qualities of their hometowns.)

From the office of a business partner

WITF's relationship with businesses and corporations has changed a great deal since its founding in 1963, in part because the business environment itself has changed. Early on, contributions from businesses were truly charitable. Later, business contributions were expected to meet both marketing and philanthropic objectives. By the late 20th century, it was clear that corporate giving was not “giving” in the traditional sense but advertising, branding or marketing.

At about the same time, WITF realized that our value to corporate partners rested on (1) the demographic appeal of our audiences; (2) our willingness to listen carefully to their needs (as opposed to our own) and (3) our ability to be creative in supporting their objectives.

By 2012, WITF's relationships with businesses had as many forms as we had media formats: on television and radio, sponsor presentation was limited by policy, by federal law and by audience expectations (not to interrupt programs; not to “pitch” prices or make product comparisons). PortalPA.com (as a website with advertising) was our most important demonstration that advertising and the values of public broadcasting could be compatible. (This principle had been previously demonstrated with *Central PA*, our advertiser-supported regional magazine, but the high fixed costs of magazines made this platform less successful than we liked.) In developing new initiatives, we concluded that substantive information delivered with a business model was better than substantive information delivered without a business model, every time.

WITF in 2012 had also become more sophisticated in developing packages of exposure (across all media platforms and including personal impressions) that could mesh with corporate goals. We came to understand that our business clients were as confused about changes in the media environment as we were—and that we could become essential by jointly finding cost-effective solutions.

From the office of the Governor

WITF has operated in a state government “hothouse” since its founding. Its board, senior staff (and journalists) have observed every kind of political environment, from relatively friendly to deeply partisan; from broadly corrupt to largely clean; from expansive with revenue to slash-and-burn cuts.

WITF has managed, through it all, to keep its value and credibility with members of the legislature, governors and with administration officials. A steady (if rarely increasing) stream of annual support has provided an operating foundation for WITF since 1967, providing single-digit percentage support. During WITF's capital campaign in the early 2000s, grants totaling \$7 million were released by a Republican and a Democratic governor respectively—an important demonstration of WITF's bi-partisan backing.

From the early 1990s onward, WITF provided technical services for a fee to state agencies (distance education, satellite uplinking) and received competitive grants to produce programs on topics of shared interest, including tourism and health care.

In the new millennium, though, additional opportunities emerged for fee-for-service revenue, including use of WITF-TV's digital spectrum for emergency services and datacasting.

The Pennsylvania Channel is part of the reason that the Commonwealth values public television in 2012. This multicast service is carried by cable systems and consists entirely of Pennsylvania content produced by PPTN stations. While PCN (Pennsylvania's C-SPAN-like channel) provides important coverage of the state legislature, the Pennsylvania Channel provides both aggressive news reporting (PCN is limited to "coverage") and cultural programs.