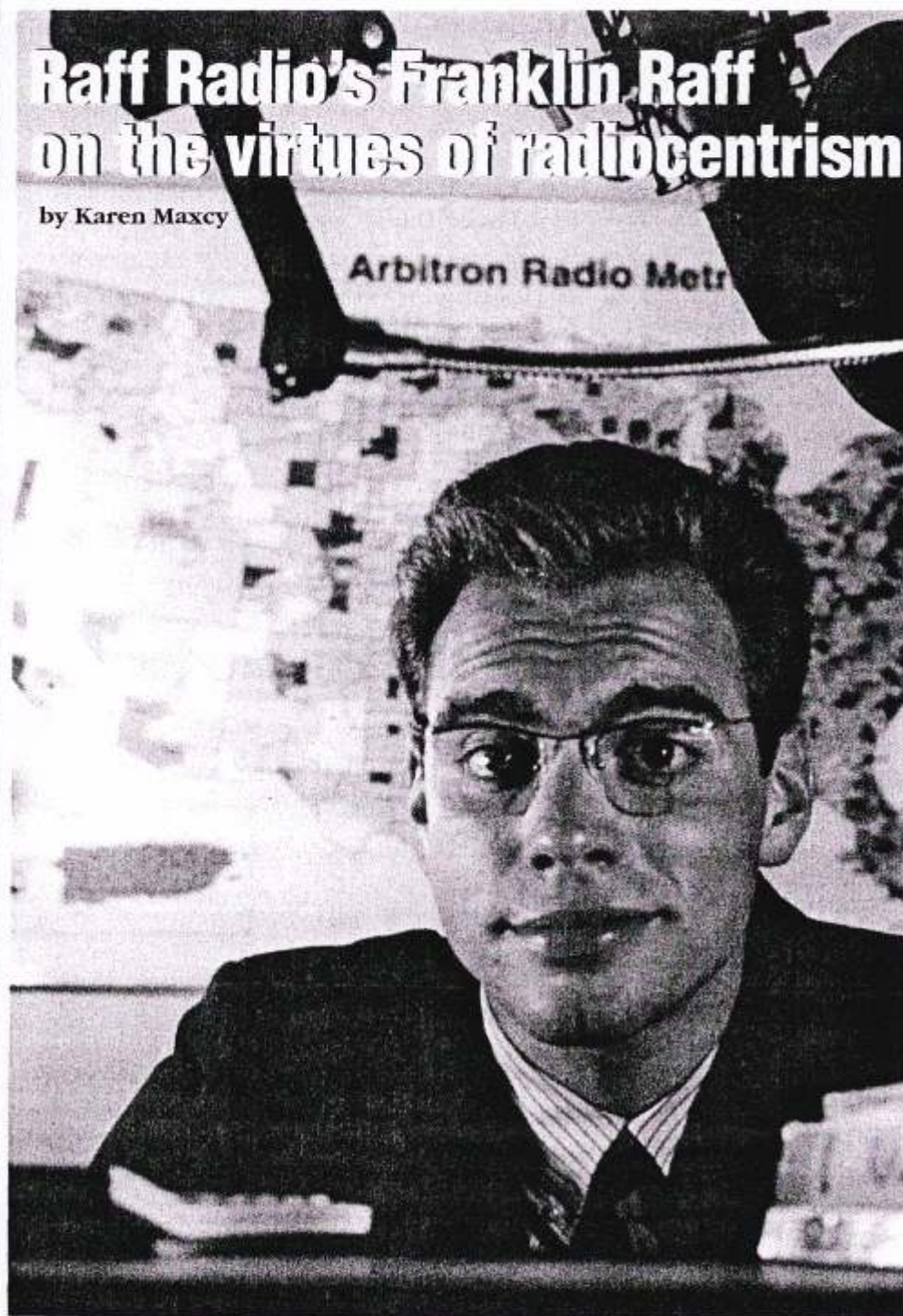


## Raff Radio's Franklin Raff on the virtues of radiocentrism

by Karen Maxcy



**Franklin Raff**, Director, Raff Radio, didn't think it was right for radio to wait in the wings, to be used only when TV was cast aside for it. In 1998, Raff and his college friend (both met at Yale University's WYBC-FM) **Tom Jameson**, Creative Director, launched the agency that was fully backed by client investments. With experience in radio management, sales and also as an on-air talent, Raff says that devoting his time to selling radio and helping his clients became a life-affirming choice for him. Along with a growing list of local and national clients, Raff Radio has been doing more consulting for new audio content and radio-related technology ventures. In this Agency Perspective, Raff focuses on employing radio creatively and centrally, and how content will ensure the centrality of radio.

### *How did Raff Radio start?*

After several years in local radio, I saw the need for an advertising agency that champions radio and specializes in it. Radio is an afterthought with most agencies. Few put their best people on radio. I saw the opportunity for a radiocentric agency that captures the power of radio by mixing hot creative audio with dynamic media buying. In creative work for clients and agencies, in buying, and in consultancy, Raff Radio is focused on radio like a laser.

### *What do you mean by "radiocentric"?*

We use radio as the primary medium for delivery of sales messages. Our methodology was developed after studying the classic problem of spraying, paying, and praying. Too many businesses spend too few dollars on too many media and get miserable results: diminished frequency, lousy recall, hopeless tracking efforts, and poor performance overall.

Radio broadcasters have traditionally gone along with this—happy to receive table scraps of any media mix. In the end, however, this means less money for radio. Desperate for results, clients and their agencies focus more dollars on media that offer instant accountability such as print coupons and direct mail. It's not unusual for an unfocused, creatively barren media campaign to reach 80% of its target through radio, but rarely with enough frequency or creative intensity to make an impact. So, for the sake of meeting some anxious reps' monthly sales goal, radio itself loses a client, or an agency, or an industry, forever.

### *Then how do you make radio accountable?*

We help our clients understand that radio's effectiveness is not measured in short-term results. The practical application of this mutual understanding is that we only buy annuals. Within those annuals, we start by airing spots in given custom daypart windows (i.e. 2-4PM or 3-4PM for 35-54 soccer moms) at least five times weekly, Monday-Friday, on a maximum of stations to reduce duplication, for at least a year. News/Talk, Talk/Sports, and Religious format buying enables us to align dayparting with formatting.

These listeners also tend to be uncannily responsive, which can be as important as results to new clients. Custom day-parting combined with tightly windowed news/traffic/weather billboards and sponsorships—horizontality—has proven a very effective way to blanket markets on a thrifty budget.

Horizontality lets us use the predictability and consistency of radio listening to our advantage when buying and scheduling, which in turn helps us get away from overemphasizing (and over-extrapolating) CPP, cume, and AQH values. These numbers are essential of course, but we focus on sending Judy a message every day at the same time, right as she goes to pick Billy up from soccer.

This approach fosters warm, qualitative information based relationships with our reps, makes responsible scheduling and planning that much easier, and helps clients get over the buzzwords and really understand how radio works. They know it works when they start seeing a lot more of Judy and her money. Which is to say that the only responsible way to track radio's effectiveness is to track the gross sales figures of the advertiser. That said, I believe creative is everything. Everything.

#### **What are the hallmarks of great radio creative?**

Anything that is memorable, penetrating, and persuasive is good. There is no formula for success. A unique selling proposition is exactly that, unique. Philosophically, our creative is unfettered. Liberated. We create spots to wake the mind and heart, and our approach is highly unconventional. We don't cut spots, we craft suggestive images. We apply visual concepts to audio; we think as cinematographers of the mind. We shoot sound, then take footage to production.

As producers, we think visually and speak of the sound-field and the landscape of a spot. As copywriters we are conflict-theorists—we thesis and antithesis, to synthesis in the mind of the listener. We believe in calculated injections of thick, rippling silence. We believe that our listeners are intelligent.

We employ a rich tapestry of voices, generally professional method actors rather than the usual gamut of voice-over talent. Despite the time it takes to train a serious actor in large-diaphragm mic technique, we feel the product is worth it. And we like "method" because there's a language to it which we know and which gets results. Good actors see copy as a script whose soul must be uncovered and expressed. One recommendation I'd give medium-market production directors—the overworked heroes of the radio industry—is to use your local theatrical talent. The results are often stunning.

#### **Outside of agency and consultancy work, what other projects are at hand?**

We are completing a national study that measures the relationship between the automation of radio stations and the erosion of radio listening shares. In essence, we are studying, in

a rigorous and objective manner, whether the current trend of consolidation in radio management serves the long-term interests of the medium. The quality of local content in many cases—its non-existence—is emerging as a major consumer issue that affects the future prospects of local broadcasters. Our study entails precise analyses of ratings, financial and market performance of broadcasters nationwide. We expect to publish in the fourth quarter.

We are very concerned about the future of the local radio industry. The impact of satellite radio and wireless Internet broadcasting will be profound. I have in my head images of rusty, abandoned FM towers on the hilltops, a scene perhaps only a few years away. Because of the furious pace of technological change and shifting consumer attitudes, it's possible that towers, frequencies, licenses, facilities now worth hundreds of millions of dollars may be worth little to nothing in the near future.

#### **What changes do you predict?**

We think national satellite radio will have a tremendous impact on the listening public. Will millions of Americans agree to pay for what has hitherto been free for the sake of improved content? Probably. The conventional wisdom in the seventies was that subscription cable TV programming would be a failure. Over-the-air TV broadcasters scoffed at the idea that Americans would pay for what had once been free. Well, Americans happily did pay, and that's why CNN and ESPN changed the face of TV and eroded traditional network audience shares.

**Nick Negroponte** of MIT's Media Lab was right years ago when he predicted the movement of wireless media to wired and wired media to wireless, but I doubt he anticipated the quickness of these technology-driven switchbacks. Take the Internet for example. In seven years, a majority of American homes have gone online.

While local radio broadcasters argue about the impact of satellite radio, the era of wireless Internet is fast approaching. Satellite radio may be a paper tiger in comparison. Wireless Internet offers potentially millions of free programming choices customized by listeners themselves. Furthermore, the choices will be delivered to us on our computers, pocket organizers, cell phones, and in our cars. Internet companies and telcos are working overtime to provide broadband, streaming, wireless Internet services in major metros. Alabama's Q-PC is already installing car computers that are ready

for wireless Internet. Metricom is launching 128-kbps always-on mobile Internet access in San Diego and Atlanta this summer, which means wireless Internet digital audio quality will rival FM stereo.

So again, the image of those rusty FM towers flashes in my mind and I feel a sudden chill.

#### **How, in your view, can radio respond to these changes?**

Radio industry bigwigs have spent inordinate amounts of time and money fighting satellite radio, LPFM, and digital radio. In this era of increasingly limitless bandwidth, these protectionist efforts are misplaced. We must not go down as the **Marie Antoinette** of the communications industry. The invasion is at hand, and in this age of limitless media choices, our best defense is superior content. We must bite the bullet and think of radio programming as audio content.

The key issue for both terrestrial stations looking to retain their listeners and new technology stations looking to find an audience is

content. The sharpest music programmers, for instance, are keeping an eye on how new technology can help them determine what their listeners want to hear. One of our clients, NOYSE.com, has developed a way to optimize radio programming using an internet-based real-time demographic polling system that monitors all listening media. Basically, it's a content-enhancing appliance, a saw-sharpener.

In terms of content, we must also recognize the long-term costs of radio having inadvertently abandoned its role as a cultivator of talent. **Dan Rather, Don Imus, Rush Limbaugh, Howard Stern** all came from local radio, and developed their talents in a ziggurat whose broad, small-market foundation we have nearly demolished. If radio operators continue their lemming-like stampede toward all-syndicated content, where will we find the next generation of talent that will keep radio growing and thriving?

It is superior audio content—advertising and otherwise—that will secure radio's status as a first-rank vehicle for advertising, information, and entertainment, no matter the physics of the actual delivery medium. The changes occurring in communications media, frankly, can be an unprecedented asset for radio. As an agency, we aim to help our clients understand and use that asset, to realize the full potential of audio, and radio, content.

