



Stalin and the Big 8:

Radio's secret weapons in the Age of Immediacy

by Franklin Raff

"How can we establish an audio-link right along the front-line? [We must] record every rustle, every whisper, the sound of a waterfall, a public speaker's address, etc. In the broadcasting program of every radio station, a fixed ratio can be established between radio dramas, radio concerts, and radio news from the life of the peoples in every land. A radio-newspaper minus paper and limits of distance: that is radio's basic significance."

—Dziga Vertov (Mikhail Kaufman)
Kinopravda & Radiopravda, 1925.

It has been 75 years already since Vertov wrote his Leninist 'new technology' treatises and manifestos; it has been some 55 years since his ideas were suffocated by Stalin's bureaucracies. But in his own formalist-propagandist way, Vertov predicted our strongest selling proposition: as catalysts of imaginations *en masse*, free from the financial and temporal constraints of outdated (paper) delivery systems. Vertov maintained radio news should fundamentally serve as "an audio link right along the front line," an aggressive observer and participant in the lives of its listeners.

Many of our programmers have come to believe that contemporary demographic targeting and music repetition-programming trends have indoctrinated us with certain false ideas, one of them being that stations should strive to appeal to an inattentive audience.

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We are increasingly forced to defend this philosophy, as its practical execution has helped generate a nation of inattentive listeners. At the same time, contemporary targeting practices dictate that programming shouldn't try to be all things to all people (12+). We all play the pinpoint demographic/psychographic targeting game, of course, and the quality movement instructs us to benchmark—to chase—our industry leaders while carving a niche and cutting costs. But in the face of radio's declining national audience shares, many business professionals wonder whether we lemmings are not simply trying to mount each other *en route*.

I do not mourn the days when radio was new, when national networks were new, or even for the infancy of free-form FM Rock 'n Roll radio. But allow me, at least, to hearken to the hard-hitting, blood-and-guts style of CKLW AM 800 in the late sixties and early seventies. I am thinking of CKLW's 20/20 News—news on a top-40 station—pioneered by **Byron MacGregor**, **Grant Hudson**, and the silent board-ops that ensured 'heavy' audio element layering with a 'no air failure' mandate to seamlessly wage an all-out audio attack. CKLW—The Big 8—was a *madhouse* of sound. It *demand*ed active listenership, it did try to be everything to everybody. And CKLW was a ferocious success. Under **Bill Drake**, CK held at number one (and only occasionally number two) in Detroit, Cleveland, Toledo and Akron/Canton. All while garnering equally astonishing numbers north of the border.

Of course it was the 'little things' that made CKLW win. While competitors read the news at the top of the hour, for instance, CK's hits broke at the top-twenties for news bits that were as brief, wrenching, and compelling as gunfire. Hudson's news copy was legendary. Former CKLW DJ **Mike Rivers** recalls Hudson's reporting a

local pedestrian-traffic fatality: The victim was "strained through the grille of a '65 Cadillac." And though copy was hypercreative, CK's teletype-clacking, SFX-bedded, caller-eyewitness cutaways would launch in and out of the hits in seconds minimizing the tune-out factor, maximizing TSL. The sound was big-time, the content was *local*. CK *broke* the news. It was said: First you called the cops, then you called The Big 8.

Today's radio has a new advantage when it comes to reporting the news, a secret weapon the Big 8 would have eagerly employed: *cell phones*. Each is a microphone and a Marti; each listener is an eyewitness. From the standpoint of production, it takes no more than a few minutes to verify a story (call volume, police-band monitoring, etc.), edit, and break the news. Compare this with the clip-gathering, layout, and postproduction times of our TV, print and Internet competitors! Today, rapid response is more important than ever: In an age of limitless media choices, news consumers expect *immediacy*. Convergence has armed radio with an unprecedented capability for nearly instantaneous on-line eyewitness action reporting.

Radio is still positioned, technologically, to dominate the front lines of information media: to break the news, to scoop the press, to get local. Yet this potential seems to be largely unfulfilled. In small, medium, and major market stations nationwide, air talent (where they remain) pull 'news' from the wire services and regurgitate—often tracking the VOs hours before airtime. We are usually last to report the news, and concurrently suffer from chronic local content deficiency. Do we believe that radio news must be preceded or validated by the national networks and print? Or are we just too short-sighted to properly staff the

air, production, and news departments of our stations?

To be sure, we are presently more interested in benchmarking our immediate competition (other radio stations) than in redefining our approach to radio programming. **Al Ries** and **Jack Trout**, at least, maintain that benchmarking doesn't work. An earnest study of national media audience trends might induce us to agree with them. It is better to be *first*, they say, than it is to be *better*. History would agree: From a programming standpoint, at least, it may be said that radio's victors, news-breaking stations like CKLW, were relentless, radical, and fearless in their pursuit of the *new*.

Radio is softly losing the war for national media audience shares, and this is not altogether due to the inherent strengths of competing media. Maybe it is that we are relinquishing our most crucial weapon: content. News is important: News/Talk stations still garner a greater total national audience share than any other format. But if we resign ourselves to regurgitative parasitism, how can we hope to reposition ourselves at the top of the food chain? Let us remind ourselves, at least, of Vertov's old idea: Radio technology has intrinsic, immutable strategic advantages with regard to the collection and delivery of news and entertainment. We are *gatherers* and *providers* of compelling audio content. Convergence has multiplied our potential in this regard. Times have indeed changed, but the old question remains: Does our potential come with a special duty? Is it our duty to serve on the front lines?

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