

The Ethics of Public Radio Fundraising

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National public radio is a non-profit organization publicly and privately funded by corporations, individuals, and the government (*Public Radio Finances*, 2018). About 3 percent of NPR's revenue comes from their annual on-air membership drives (*Public Radio Finances*, 2018). These drives are a staple of public radio and well known amongst public radio listeners. During on-air drives NPR deejays cut into regular programming to make impassioned pleas for money that often make the listener feel morally obligated to donate. These infamous strategies are wildly successful, with some stations making upwards of \$1 million during their week-long membership drives (Devine, 2018). Public radio stations make ethical appeals to Americans' democratic values to justify their institutional goodness in order to extract financial contributions from their listeners.

Public radio fundraising materials use specific structural features to make a highly persuasive sales pitch that public radio is an institution worthy of their listeners' financial contributions. The function of the genre is to persuade radio listeners to give money to their local NPR stations. The text takes the form of a sales pitch as it presents a problem up front and follows with a solution in the form of its product. For example, NPR stations often point to the credibility crisis of the media in the era of fake news and then offer their product, fact-based news, as a solution. The message is succinct and to the point in order to capture the ears of an inattentive radio audience with limited time. Stations often create an artificial sense of urgency to convince their listeners that *now* is the time to donate. Here is an on-air pitch used during one of KCRW's annual membership drives. "The credibility of the media has never been this low, but the credibility of public radio has never been higher. This is because people like you decide to be active members of this service. You owe it to yourself to support what you rely on" (Devine, 2018). The station creates an ultimatum in which the availability of credible information hinges

on the financial support of the listener, making a persuasive argument that the listener *must* donate if they want to save something they value.

Public Radio makes an ethical appeal that as an institution that facilitates political participation it is not only worthy, but deserving, of listeners' money. The institution presents itself as an informant that facilitates political participation by providing listeners with the information they need to make informed political decisions. Public radio capitalizes on the notion of journalism as the 4th estate of the political system that informs, provides analysis and acts as a public forum for democratic civic engagement. (Schudson, 2008). Throughout its fundraising materials public radio emphasizes these functions as services they provide, suggesting that public radio is an embedded feature of the American political system. Here is a fundraising slogan from KCRW's 2018 membership that emphasizes NPR's role in helping their listeners digest information so that they can take a more participatory role in their society. "The slow news day is dead. Every day more headlines come at us. What does it all mean? KCRW and NPR give you the tools to make sense of it all" (Devine, 2018). Americans, specifically the customers of public radio, value these services because they help them to perform their civic duties, particularly voting. In claiming to provide a critical democratic service to its listeners, public radio "moralizes" itself as an indispensable institution needed for democratic participation.

Public radio stations make a deontological ethical appeal to convince their listeners that making a financial contribution to public radio is their civic duty (Alexander & Moore, 2007). In presenting itself an indispensable feature of democratic society, public radio can claim that it is the listeners' duty to protect public radio as an institution. By connecting public radio to the maintenance of democratic society, listeners are made to feel that giving money to public radio is

ethical. Listeners feel they are helping to maintain the integrity of their democracy by supporting an institution that provides valued democratic services. “KCRW and NPR are where to turn for reason, facts and real information from all sides. You deserve real information...Protect your source for balanced information today” (Devine, 2018). In this plea, KCRW makes the listener feel obligated to give money because the performance of their civic duty, voting, relies on public radio’s product, fact-based news. Public radio takes advantage of their customers’ democratic values in order to convince them that as a democratic citizen they are obligated to support a democratic institution.

Public radio makes an ethical appeal to the values of democratic culture by emphasizing its representative nature as an institution. For the modern American, institutional goodness is defined according to democratic standards. That is, an institution is good if it is highly reflective of the body it purports to represent. By claiming to be a representative body, public radio further embeds itself within the structure of America’s democratic political system. Not only does it provide an indispensable service to democratic society, it also *looks* like a political body one might find within a democratic society. Public radio creates this image by emphasizing the representative nature of its programming throughout its fundraising materials. In a fundraising letter sent to donors, KCSB describes its programming as “creative, socially-conscious work that reflects matters of regional and global interest” (Neikirk, MacDonald & Kiser, 2018).

Throughout their fundraising texts, public radio often describes its body of listeners as diverse, further aligning itself with democratic political institutions that represent diverse populations of Americans. For example, KCSB claims it is “dedicated to providing quality programming for our diverse community of listeners” (Neikirk, MacDonald & Kiser, 2018). Public radio makes an

ethical appeal to its listeners that by serving and representing a diverse community it possesses institutional goodness as defined by the ethical standards of the modern American.

The success of public radio's fundraising efforts is due to its persuasive ethical appeals to Americans' democratic ideals. On-air pitches sell public radio as a critical service in democratic society that is under threat and urgently in need of support. The pitches highlight the valued services that public radio offers to make the listener feel morally obligated to financially support NPR as an institution. In emphasizing the representative nature of their programming, NPR is making an appeal to Americans' democratic institutional standards, suggesting that supporting NPR is analogous to supporting democracy. Through ethics based pleas, NPR has justified itself as an institution worthy of the democratic citizen's financial support.

References

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