

Internship Reflection: KFAN Sports Radio

When I decided to pursue an internship at KFAN radio, Minneapolis' ESPN radio affiliate, I did so with the intention of adding to my sports media knowledge base. I had no intention of entering the sports radio industry, per se. Instead, I hoped to build upon my understanding of how a sports culture interacts with the sports media, and specifically how new media and radio allow the sports consumer (i.e. fan) to be involved with the games they love. Keeping in mind that I have relative extensive experience in the print realm with two professional teams, both in terms of public relations and online web reporting, I went about this experience with an open mind.

I worked on the production of PA & Dubay, one of KFAN's most respected shows aired 9-noon, mostly because leading co-host PA (Paul Allen, the voice of the Minnesota Vikings) is known for talking sports and only sports. My role was relatively simple: I screened phone calls when the show was to take calls, edited some tape for broadcast (during the 10 a.m. hour, I routinely edited audio from the previous day for the show's "Sound of Sports" segment), posted clips from the show to the web so listeners could download a podcast "on-demand" and assisted when needed. I was relatively invisible.

It was okay to be invisible. I didn't need to be on-air, nor was it a personal requirement for me to see the inner-workings of the technicalities of production. My single goal was to learn why and how radio is such an influence upon the life of a sports fan, and why a sports fan may choose radio as opposed to a different form of media. These questions

were answered over the course of my time at KFAN simply by completing the basic intern responsibilities.

The PA & Dubai show took a tragic turn at the beginning of November, when Jeff Dubai was cited for cocaine use, and after a few days, fired from his post at the station. This left PA by his lonesome to run the show. Producer Justin Gaard stepped in to play a more critical role, but the jury was out: the “rubes” missed Dubai. I only knew this because I was the one answering the phones. Impatient and upset listeners vented and spoke their mind to an intern not sure, in all honesty, how to respond, especially given the circumstances. I stuck to an “I can’t comment on the situation at this time” policy, not because I was told per ClearChannel policy; I didn’t know the details of the situation beyond what the callers knew, even experiencing it first hand! But that wasn’t the important part of this situation. The important part here – the learning experience – was seeing how a fan community dealt with change and the Dubai ordeal.

Sports media is about relationships, and those relationships are especially prevalent in radio. Whereas a newspaper columnist submits written words to an editor, sees the article the following day and there is little opportunity in terms of feedback from fans, the radio personality is very much an active presence in the life of a sports fan. There are opportunities in radio not found in other mediums for direct contact with media personalities and athletes. It is an unlikely connection not found in other mediums. Sports radio provides an opportunity for a sporting democracy, where fans of all shapes and sizes are able to contribute to a relevant discussion.

The Twin Cities’ highest-rated sports radio show has a solid contingency of followers, many of whom phone in to the show on a regular basis. It is my personal belief

that Dubay was a mediocre personality, someone that would struggle to fill a three-hour timeframe with insightful and thought-provoking analysis. Alongside PA, however, the two formed the “Love Covenant” and established one of the most well respected duos in Twin Cities talk radio.

When the news came about Dubay’s departure, it shocked many. For the rubes, they had grown to love “Puffy,” his childish remarks and his immature personality. But the larger cultural context of this situation suggests that these personalities are not common folk. They are not, in the minds of fans, fans. They are experts that aid this democratic forum, that instantly make it possible for fans to discuss issues that matter to them. With Dubay’s departure came uncharted territory as a part of this democracy disappeared. Frequent contributors to this democratic forum had grown to trust Dubay, and after he left, a part of this democracy was suddenly missing.

Another part of fans’ connection to Dubay was cultural attitudes to that of a sports reporter, and in this case, a sports talk radio personality. Dubay respected the listeners. A talk show host is supposed to be the all-knowing figure that not only is extremely knowledgeable about a given topic, but also can be the final judge during a critical conversation. Listeners typically react positively to a response, and if they don’t, there is a good chance they will be ridiculed for any sense of disagreement on-air. Dubay didn’t fit this traditional “hate-speech” role; instead, he was the soft-spoken, high-pitched, sometimes-stuttering Gopher Nation mind.

I do think the show declined in terms of performance since Dubay’s departure. Much of this stems from PA’s intense passion for Vikings football. PA suffers from “homer-itis” – the intense passion for one’s hometown teams – an unfortunate situation given that fans

count on him for accurate reflection of the larger sporting context. When Dubay was PA's co-host, Dubay's passion for Gopher hockey, for instance, brought a necessary perspective – and an additional listening audience – to the forefront. After Dubay's departure, the NFL and the Vikings specifically dominate much of the show – something that PA not only is extremely passionate about, but comfortable with as he is the Vikings' voice – and I see this as an issue. Firstly, homer-itis and having specific allegiances is one thing, but to actively suggest that the Vikings, Wild, Wolves and Twins are your “favorite teams” not only limits perspectives, but also promotes disillusion when attempting to have an open and honest discussion. What, then, are sports radio personalities supposed to accomplish? For one, the radio personality must promote an open dialogue. Second, whereas local talk radio has its advantages over a nationally syndicated program such as *Jim Rome* (local teams are covered extensively and in-depth, for example), the personality is to provide questions and answers free from personal bias even in a local, tight-knit sports market. When the Twins lost the final game of the regular season, which forced them out of the playoffs, the show served as a venting point for passionate fans' devastation and aggravation. This is acceptable, and one purpose for sports radio; however, only when initiated by the callers themselves.

One interesting bit about answering the phones and talking with these fans was how many of them would preface their statement with where they were calling from: their car. This location, I would learn, is sacred to sports talk radio. The car is a time when people – typically men – are in between home and work, and radio shows are obviously easily accessible on a car stereo. It is this time, I would presume, that is especially rewarding, as the talk show personality not is able to cure boredom of the road. Many callers, I could tell, were solo commuters, and I could tell that they were seeking a connection to the show and the host

by phoning. Others would phone in with a group while in a vehicle, and in this sense, sports talk radio is able to serve as a bonding experience for fan communities.

My experience at KFAN was both rewarding and eye-opening. I began the internship simply hoping to see how sports radio affects fan communities, and at the conclusion of my experience, I can comfortably say that I accomplished that. As new media options become more and more prevalent in the life of the sports consumer, the way in which fans acquire information is likely to change. For instance, XM Satellite Radio now has several nationally syndicated programs. KFAN is one of ten nationwide stations that streams live via the iPhone. Live Internet feeds permeate desktops across America. In any case, sports radio – at the local level especially – provides democratization. The personality, consequently, is responsible for facilitating the relationship with the listener and the larger sporting society.

