POWER to the PEOPLE

AUDIENCE-BASED PROGRAMMING IN ACTION

Imagine a world where radio programmers surrender their usual iron-clad grip on playlists ... where listeners vote in real-time, deciding which songs air and in what sequence they'll play, minute by minute. Well, dream no more.

Say hello to programming via crowd-sourcing, a term the dictionary defines as: "labor contributed by the general public, often via the Internet and without compensation." If the two primary developers of this technology – Jelli ("100% User Controlled Radio") and Listener Driven Radio (LDR) – are right, what is now a mere groundswell of fewer than 120 stations will eventually become an industry standard.

Changing the very notion of radio and how it's consumed is intended to help terrestrial broadcasters not just remain viable, but actually thrive in the face of ever-increasing new media challenges. The respective brain trusts behind Jelli and LDR share this vision, yet their approaches are vastly different.

There's Always Room For Jelli

CEO **Michael Dougherty** and Chief Technology Officer **Jateen Parekh** co-founded Jelli 18 months ago and bring experience from Microsoft, Yahoo! and Amazon to their startup. Dougherty developed content pushed to mobile devices; Parekh was instrumental in developing the Kindle. Neither has any prior experience with radio.

"We saw a huge medium that for decades hasn't really changed how it operates," Dougherty says. "People forget how big radio is and how streaming is such an opportunity, though it's still in its early days. If we could combine [those forces] with the explosive growth in social web, perhaps we could create something new, exciting and different for radio. We designed it by asking first, 'How will it be fun?' and second, 'How will it work?'"

The fun commences when listeners vote on songs while listening to a station in a highly social environment. After logging on via the station website, Jelli users have access to a chat window. "They can talk to each other about whether they like a song and what should play next," Dougherty says. "That creates community."

Jateen Parekh & Michael Dougherty

Interactive song tags called "rockets" and "bombs" create a game-like experience. The former works to elevate your favorite song to the top of the playlist queue. The latter brings a song's score down. Each day that listeners visit Jelli they're issued three rockets and one bomb to use at their discretion. If they wish, they can stockpile up to five bombs and 11 rockets. Inviting a friend to participate gets you a rocket pack. But wait, there's more!

As the voting process moves along, users can voice their approval of a selection by clicking a "Rocks" button while it plays. Conversely, there's also a self-explanatory "Sucks" button. If enough users simultaneously hit the "Sucks" button, the song is removed from the air immediately, even if it hasn't finished. Dougherty says the aim is to "keep them coming back every day."

Although listeners are chatting, interacting on Facebook, voting for songs and slinging those rockets and bombs, it's not quite the wild, wild West. Programmers ultimately build the sandbox in which listeners play by choosing the overall pool of songs.

"It's like going into a bar with a jukebox and trying to find a song you'd really like to hear," Dougherty says.

Hey, You, Get Into Our Cloud

For a couple of neo-radio techno-geeks, the learning seems to be going both ways. "PDs have a robust and deep understanding of how to create one stream of music that's pleasing to a broad number of people," Dougherty says. "And that is not trivial. It's challenging in a world of personalization, fragmentation and instant gratification." And on the other side, "Web people have moved beyond traditional media and are discovering the power of simultaneous, live listening. More power to them, but more power to radio, too, because it's always been that."

As for Country radio specifically, Dougherty and his team quickly discovered the format's strong community orientation. There were also surprises. "When we started, the premise I heard about [Country] listeners not being connected or using Facebook is just not true. They use it a lot and are highly collaborative. They're also buying Android phones and laptops and trying to figure out cool things to do with them."

So far, Clear Channel's **KEEY/Minneapolis** is Jelli's only Country station among its 18 affiliates, but Dougherty says, "We've seen that their audience is just as active an any of our pop stations and more, in some cases."
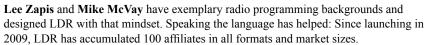
He also believes the collaborative, community-building Jelli experience will make listeners with an already-high affinity for radio use the medium even more. Conversely, he asserts the technology's opportunity to bring new appeal to those who are, to one extent or another, disenfranchised with radio.

"Half our listeners are 18-34," Dougherty says. "Our average user is 27, and our proportion of teens have grown from 8-14% in the past year. Our 18-25 demo – that college age – is very strong. That's the age group most at risk to try other media. Jelli can educate them, keep them excited about radio and attach them to a station."

Post-Modern Radio

Listener Driven Radio comes at the concept from a much different angle. "We're not trying to reinvent the way radio does business," co-founder **Daniel Anstandig** says. "We're trying to help strong stations become even stronger."

Here's another distinction: He and co-founders **Lee Zapis** and **Mike McVay** have exemplary radio programming backgrounds and designed LDR with that mindset. Speaking the language has helped: Since launching in 2009, LDR has accumulated 100 affiliates in all formats and market sizes.

The LDR team asked itself, "Wouldn't it be interesting if radio were invented *after* the Internet instead of the other way around? How would we do programming differently?" The big idea was to invite listeners to control what airs on a minute-by-minute basis via web browser or smart phone, with the hope of getting them to spend more time with the station.

Whereas Jelli is cloud-based, LDR integrates its software with music scheduling systems and major automation companies, as well as with stations' websites. "We don't have to ship a separate server to the station, so they don't have to manage anything beyond what's already on-site," Anstandig says, adding that LDR is not building its own consumer brand name. "We treat it like RCS, a software service you buy via barter and call it whatever you want."

Building Cume, TSL

Stations can choose from two levels of LDR. One lets fans pick songs in specific parts of the hour, perhaps coming out of stopsets with a fan-voted tune or kicking off the hour. The other level, LDR Takeover, allows the audience to choose all the music played during an entire daypart in real time.

Like Jelli, the PD ultimately decides what songs the audience can select. "We call it LDR Takeover, not *hostile* takeover," Anstandig explains. Some programmers allow voting for selected categories; some opt for specific clock placement. A few PDs open the music envelope completely.

LDR's social media component allows users to share their voting via Facebook. The "dedication" button pulls up all of a listener's Facebook friends, posting to the selected friend's wall, as well as that of the air personality. "For every person who's made a dedication, four people come back from Facebook to the station site to try it," Anstandig says. "That's why we think social media is a cume builder."

And because listeners can now vote on what plays next, they have a horse in the race and will sit through the process longer. Hence, TSL. "We've seen people spend more time on the station's site," observes Anstandig. The average time on an LDR Takeover show's site is more than 20 minutes, contrasted to a two-minute average he cites for radio sites in general.

Could this be radio's answer to Pandora? Anstandig thinks so. "Instead of doing one-to-many programming, you're doing many-to-many, with listeners becoming the MD. It gives a more interactive hook to a station, versus an independent jukebox that doesn't respond to listeners' real-time opinions."

Speaking of those opinions, what about overzealous LDR participants who attempt to commandeer the playlist – a kind of programming "prize pig"? LDR has apparently taken that into consideration, too. "We can monitor every listener's voting and have a formula to curb abuse," Anstandig says. "If we see a situation where you're not contributing to the station's good, we screen you out."

Country Connected

Similar to the Jelli team, Anstandig and LDR have been pleasantly surprised at how adult listeners have embraced the crowd-sourcing concept. "We bought into the stereotype that only young listeners would use an interactive tool, but we quickly found out that was a myth."

When LDR analyzed who was voting, it closely mirrored each station's respective target demo. "I have to credit the industry for being willing to explode our illusions about which formats would pick this up. We thought it would be Rock and Top 40; in fact, it's everybody." Andstandig adds that Country is a natural fit, citing its "passionate, vocal and interactive" fans.

Most of LDR's affiliates are adult-targeted, with Country stations just starting to get into the game. Peak's KAWO/Boise, Oasis' WBTU/Ft. Wayne, IN and Clear Channel's WBCT/Grand Rapids are current users. "The PDs who really get this find a simple way of explaining it to the audience and the team inside the station," Anstandig says.

LDR and Jelli execs both believe real-time listener interaction is where radio programming is headed. Says Anstandig, "This is one way digital media and broadcast radio are merging."

Daniel Anstandig

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THE PROGRAMMER'S TAKE

Two months ago, Clear Channel's KEEY/Minneapolis PD **Gregg Swedberg** *began running the Jelli platform Sundays 7pm-midnight. Here, he explains his experience thus far:*

"When we talked to the Jelli team, I really liked the social networking aspect where there's potential to create your own culture of people. I look at this almost like when we were all really young. You'd take your 45s over to somebody's house and say, 'Listen to this song.' Jelli is like inviting 1,000 of my friends over to play music, and they all get a chance to vote. The plan is to expand it to lunchtime with a legends show where we play '70s and '80s classics.

"There are some things I'd change, like watching if someone has two user IDs or tracking IP addresses, or if somebody has too many rockets and bombs. There are people who know how to game the system and want to influence it.

"The music is all over the place, but it's okay for Country. You're talking about the music we normally play, just rearranged. The math isn't as good as what I can do, but the audience doesn't care about my stinking rules; they want what they want. You have to be in the room to feel the vibe. The mood swings all the time. Recently, Jason Aldean was owning the room, then the room decided it was tired of him for awhile.

"A lot of people will put their absolute worst programming on the air on a Sunday night, and this is *way* better than that, so it doesn't bother me so much."

Gregg Swedberg

In addition to his work with Alpha's KUPL/Portland, **Scott Mahalick** *is involved in station ownership, serving as Managing Director for Aurora Media, operators of Alternative KXLI & Top 40 KYLI/Las Vegas. Both utilize the Jelli brand 24/7, the only affiliates to do so and going so far as to integrate "LI" into their call letters.*

"We wanted to throw out conventional rules and wondered what a technology company would do if they had a radio station attached to it, instead of a radio station with an add-on website.

"It might be a bit of risk, but it's the highest level of listener engagement ever with the right kind of security blankets. We're migrating towards a closer, more intimate relationship with the audience. Jelli takes us there and jumps right into the deep end.

"In Las Vegas, there are six Top 40 stations. We needed to do something to stand out, and it is creating a buzz. There's no greater city in the world to put a control room in everybody's hands. Sprinkle in a chat window and the Facebook interactivity, and you've connected all the dots and delivered more passion.

"Data collection is a complete profile of the listener, similar to the depth of information on Facebook. As we get the profile fully developed, we'll have a lot of interests, likes and tastes that will enable us to touch all of their passion buttons.

"The Jelli guys have been wide open to our feedback, and I'll be a better broadcaster and programmer just having this association."

Scott Mahalick

Oasis Radio Group's WBTU/Ft. Wayne, IN is the first Country station to become an LDR Takeover affiliate. The station uses LDR weekdays 6pm-midnight, branding the feature "Click It & Pick It." GM/Dir. Programming **Phil Becker** *shares his thoughts:*

"It's probably going to go through the adoption process with super-hyper P1s using it first. Over time, if we could get 10-20% of our weekly cume to participate, I'd be pretty happy. Right now we're at 6-7%, almost on par with our CHR station. We do lean young at WBTU, so the people that use it are the same ones who appreciate the younger, more contemporary approach.

"There are 378 songs active outside of *Pick It & Click It* and 622 titles at night. It is sizeable, but nothing out of the format because we still believe every song is a marketing decision. A lot of the songs we added were the kinds of songs that end up just south of the cut-off line in an auditorium test. We're starting to see titles the audience knows are out there, but we're not playing. Pistol Annies, for example.

"LDR sends us data on a weekly basis, and it shows last week vs. this week. You get positives, negatives, total votes and how many songs each typical user votes on per visit. This week, the average listener voted on 17 titles. You also get a list of songs you didn't have available that the audience suggested."

Phil Becker