

What's your share?

Arbitron book tracks radio stations' ups and downs



Jeff DeBell
Entertainment
Editor

The decline in WSLC's share was sharp enough (from 19.7 to 13.2) to startle local radio executives — including, no doubt, those at WSLC. One theory is that WSLC suffered from a dilution of its audience. "Cross-over" music has blurred the differences among country, rock and other forms so much, according to the theory, that WSLC no longer can count on the pure country audience that it once had all to itself.

Herm Reavis inclines more to the rotten luck theory. Specifically, he notes that the April 19-May 16 ratings period coincided with equipment changes and related work at his station. The goings-on forced WSLC to broadcast at reduced power and was responsible for the static, feedback and hum that occasionally interfered with the warblings of Dolly and the wailings of Waylon.

Reavis asked Arbitron to note the station's problems in the ratings book. The book mentioned only the reduced power, attributing it to "technical difficulties." That's accurate, but reduced power wouldn't affect listenership in the metropolitan area, whereas the interference might.

"They didn't do me justice," said Reavis, sounding a bit like a line from a country song.

"We are confident... it was a temporary thing," said Reavis. "It might be truly representative of the (ratings) period, but it was not true before and is not now."

Over at WFIR, which also concentrates on the contemporary sound, station manager Doug Matthews declared himself satisfied with the Arbitron results. "We're staying pretty steady," he said. That's certainly true, the station having finished third last year, too.

It is interesting, as Matthews pointed out, that WFIR's "CBS Mystery Theater" and "Sears Theater" rated dramatically higher than music did when it occupied the same time slots. This shows, according to Matthews, that "creative programming works in radio."

WTOY and WUEZ also made appreciable jumps in the ratings. A spokesman for WTOY attributed its gain to the appeal of program director Donny Dean's move from soul to a new blend of disco, rhythm and blues, jazz and Top 40 music. WUEZ's Ray Bentley said his station benefited from good promotion and from offering "more of what people want" (WUEZ recently went contemporary too).

Arbitron placed 700 diaries in local households. Of them, 480 were deemed usable. The ratings company drew its conclusions about the radio listening habits of everyone in metropolitan Roanoke from those 480 diaries.

As you no doubt have deduced, the method leaves a certain amount of room for error. The radio stations know that. They don't pretend that the ratings are perfectly accurate. They subscribe to them because they need a yardstick to measure their relative performances and to help set their advertising rates. They can't help it if the yardstick is 37 inches long.

The measurements are broken into minute detail. Weeks are divided into days and groups of days, days into hours and groups of hours, hours into minutes, and so on. Audiences are divided according to age, gender and who-knows-what-else.

This is called demographics, and station salesmen study demographics intently, searching for useful gems that are likely to be buried there. A station might be virtually ignored most of the time. But if its salesman discovers that it has a lock on 65-year-old males at 12:05 p.m. Friday, say, he might try to sell the Preparation H people on sponsoring the noon news.

That's why radio stations like the Arbitron book. It generally contains something for everyone. And providing something for everyone doesn't exactly hurt Arbitron's sales of its costly little book, either.

It's a bum deal, says Herm Reavis, but it's true. WSLC, the radio station that he bosses and that plays country music around the clock, has slipped to second place in the metropolitan Roanoke market.

Roosting happily at the top is WROV. It plays "contemporary" music, which mostly means rock 'n' roll.

That's the gospel according to Arbitron, the company that annually measures radio audiences and stacks the stations accordingly. The stations use the ratings to set their advertising rates.

They also can give a station something to brag about on the air. In fact, their public relations value is one of the ratings' most usable assets. Radio executives can be counted on to "tip" the local newspaper if their station looks good in the Arbitron book.

What we're talking about here is the percentage of listeners, aged 12 and up, between the hours of 6 a.m. and midnight. WROV's share is 20.1 percent, WSLC's is 13.2 percent. Continuing downward, we have WFIR (12.2), WTOY (11.1), WLRG-FM (10.4), WPVR-FM and WSLQ-FM (both 10.1), WUEZ (3.8), WRIS (3.5), WKBA (1.0) and WJLM-FM (.7).

WVWR-FM, the local public radio station, was not included in the survey. It's a noncommercial operation and wouldn't be caught dead with an advertising rate.

WROV jumped to first place after playing Avis to WSLC's Hertz for two years. Jim Carroll of WROV credits his station's "credibility and reliability" during last winter's ice storm for attracting listeners in numbers sufficient to win the ratings game.

Carroll and his colleagues at WROV, an AM station, are particularly tickled about having out-ranked WSLQ-FM, which also offers popular music. FM rock stations have become a powerful force in radio markets. Carroll believes WROV proved more appealing because, being less automated than WSLQ, it is more personal to the listeners.

On radio