

Sports Radio America: The Starting Point When There Is No College Radio

Derek Futterman | September 28, 2021 | Barrett Sports Media

It is a laboratory. A place to make mistakes. A spot to make friends. The hub of many communications schools. College radio stations are the pipeline by which young, aspiring broadcasters, engineers and producers carve their path to the pros. Broadcasters from around the United States credit college radio for helping them get to where they are today, and view it as a conduit for the next generation of talent.

“I can’t speak highly enough about my college experience doing radio,” said Evan Wilner, senior radio producer at ESPN and former member of WRHU-FM at Hofstra University in Hempstead, N.Y. “I realized in college that I am much better at fixing things rather than talking while other people tried doing something about it. Every place I’ve been, I feel like I’ve been ahead of the game because of the experience I got in college.”

Wilner’s story is far from unique among professionals in broadcasting today, and proves valuable in ascertaining the role college radio plays in preparing broadcasters in their journey. Travis Demers, the radio play-by-play voice of the N.B.A.’s Portland Trail Blazers, shares a similar sentiment regarding the opportunities college radio afforded him, and how it helped him work in the industry he had a nascent passion for.

“In sixth grade, I was listening to WFAN, and when I realized I wasn’t going to be a professional baseball player, I started [radio] right away as a college freshman.”

Demers attended LIU Post in Brookville, N.Y. beginning in 1999, and eventually served as the sports director of WCWP-FM. In his time at the station, Demers was given numerous opportunities to broadcast football, basketball and lacrosse games on campus, eventually leading to an internship, and corresponding full-time job, at ABC Radio in New York City.

“Everything I could do specifically with sports is what I was trying to do right from the start,” reminisced Demers, “and I was fortunate enough to do that.”

Dan Zangrilli, who serves as a play-by-play announcer at West Virginia University and host of the M.L.B.’s Pittsburgh Pirates’ pre- and post-game shows on 93.7 The Fan, got his start in college radio at Clarion University in Clarion, P.A. The 4,000-watt WCUC 91.1 FM was Zangrilli’s place to get practice broadcasting live basketball games, and hosting a morning talk show.

“I had free reign; it was basically like my easel,” elucidated Zangrilli. “I started out as a freshman and became the sports director, and ascended to the general manager position by my junior year. That’s just such invaluable experience to be immersed in every aspect of the radio industry, and I wouldn’t trade that place for anything.”

In a media landscape full of changes accelerated by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the lifespan of college radio as a subset of the industry is at greater risk of being classified as ephemeral than ever before, a harrowing realization that one former operations manager for a mortgage company had in Memphis, Tenn. had just over a decade ago.

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Ayokunle Spencer, a graduate of the University of Memphis and former paralegal, was working for the Rawlings Company in Louisville, Ky., when he happened to overhear a conversation that forever changed his life. One of his co-workers was apprehensive about how his daughter, set to graduate from the University of Louisville, would leave as the school's radio station would be shut down due to a lack of funding. At the onset of the 2008 economic recession, college radio stations were slashed from budgets around the country, stymying the development of prospective talent and rendering vagabonds heavily involved, and invested, students. Forsaken from the ability to develop the skill set and collect the air checks needed to land a job in the industry, Spencer decided it was time to make a concerted effort to resuscitate an ostensibly-dying concentration of the evolving medium.

"When the need presented itself... we [tried to] put something together [to give] people opportunities to sharpen the skills, and develop the next broadcast talent," said Spencer. "We posted on the message boards at the colleges and, in about a year's time, there was an influx of different students we were getting a chance to work with."

Sports Radio America was founded by Ayokunle Spencer in 2008 as a digital broadcasting network intended to give college students attending universities without a campus radio station the chance to polish their on-air skills and perfect their craft. A member of the jazz-format WUMR while attending the University of Memphis, Spencer had previous experience in pitching up-and-coming hip-hop and R&B artists to local radio stations, including the likes of All-Star and Yo Gotti, through his promotional company and record label, Dynasty Digital Entertainment. Progressive in his thinking, Spencer was one of the first to stream radio broadcasts on the Internet, assisting Bishop G.E. Patterson in the dissemination of a small, A.M. religious station to the masses.

"Radio was always a passion for me as a kid," said Spencer, "but I always took steps towards that passion before the University of Memphis. I felt, at that time, I was more at the forefront of what was going to come next. I wrote a paper that the Internet would be the place for media in thirty years, and twenty-five years later, I think I was dead on with that one."

Conceived by means of necessity, Sports Radio America is a haven for young talent, broadcasting live games and talk radio shows on the Internet. The outlet, though, became more of a potpourri of commentators and journalists alike in order to help them evolve to the dynamic world of mediated communication.

“What it started out to be isn’t necessarily what it is now, although I want to get back to those roots of working with highly-talented students and getting them prepared for the next stage of their careers,” said Spencer. “Other journalists that were leaving FOX or ESPN, or older guys that had gotten kicked out of their radio stations because they didn’t know anything about digital, they ended up here. It kind of became a collage of different broadcasters and media personalities from around the U.S.”

As Sports Radio America celebrates its 10-year anniversary, Spencer remains focused on positioning the media venture ahead of the pack, cogently aware of industry changes and best practices to help its broadcasters land jobs and the company prosper after unforeseen circumstances over the previous year-and-a-half.

“We just came through COVID, and in terms of advertising, all that stuff was crushed,” explained Spencer. “We are kind of almost in a rebuild mode now. We give people the opportunity to create something new, build up your audience and see if something works.”

Once Sports Radio America’s popularity began to grow around the country, the broadcasting outlet, to avoid being overwhelmed with participants, began interviewing and selecting talent to join them. Throughout his professional career, Spencer has had an innate ability to evaluate talent across all industries, something he calls “a God-given gift.” In his current role, which he compares to a professional football scout, one of Spencer’s jobs is to find the best people to join Sports Radio America, and help them get to where they want to go.

“The way my brain processes information, I can just tell certain people in certain things are creative enough to meet industry standards and excel,” said Spencer. “In sports radio, I evaluate voice, how interesting they are in being able to hold a conversation, the topics they pick out, etc. It’s really the only gift I think I actually have.”

Spencer has been successful in helping aspiring collegiate-level industry talent get the experience they need, with his organization serving as the pipeline many colleges have come to eliminate from their campuses. His method of evaluating talent aligns with principles employed by current hiring managers and industry professionals, such as Nick Cattles, host of *The Nick Cattles Show* on ESPN Radio 94.1 in Virginia Beach. Cattles highly values relatability and uniqueness in his evaluations of talent, along with if they are able to keep a listener actively engaged in their program.

“I think hosts around the country are better off when they allow themselves to be an open book,” said Cattles. “I always listen, probably more intently, to somebody who is willing to give the ‘secrets’ so to speak as opposed to somebody who is more guarded. The cool thing about radio is that there are so many talented people, and there is no one way to do it right. You try to find people who can do it their own way with the passion and the work-ethic that you can invest and believe in.”

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Hardly esoteric in understanding, radio, and media altogether, is changing, and seismically in that matter. With today's reliance on digital platforms for distribution, programs are, evidently, being adapted to fit the proclivities of the listening audience, including a shortening total attention span.

In a recent study by Microsoft, the average human being has an attention span of eight seconds, down a whopping four seconds over the last twenty years. This figure, which is shorter than that of a goldfish, is a direct byproduct of the principle of instant gratification, and the evolution of technology to enable its propagation. The inability to sustain focus has become an endemic in today's society, and mediums of communication have had to adjust to fit this dynamic psychological paradigm.

Furthermore, consumers of mass media are more apt than ever before to selectively filter information; that is, specifically choosing what to concentrate on. As a result, media, in all of its forms, is less concentrated in scope, being narrowed to appeal to the target audience. The conflation of methodologies, simultaneously existing within a preponderance of content and a widening definition as to just who is considered to be a journalist, challenges the fundamental precept of what media is entirely. So how is radio adapting in this new landscape? By expanding its means of dissemination.

"It's much more multi-faceted, social media-oriented and digital as opposed to [it being] siloed, [as it was] when I got into it," said Brad Carson, operations and brand manager of 92.9 FM ESPN and Audacy Memphis Sports. "It used to be that you were a radio guy. Now in 2021, you are getting people that are entertainers. The latest joke is, 'Hey, here's our latest talent with one million TikTok followers.' I think you can get people on a radio station or on our Audacy platforms from all walks of life. It's a much more inexact science than [ever before]."

Spencer, whose progressive thoughts on the media landscape are openly conveyed in conversation, believes the introduction of streaming to be a considerable advancement that can play across multiple platforms. Unsurprisingly, he was ahead of the game at Sports Radio America, basing the online platform on this technology.

"The market for audio is always going to be there. The question is what medium we are going to use to deliver it," said Spencer. "Everything will probably be streaming by 2030. I think that there will still be the public channels on the airwaves, but the majority of media will be consumed [via] streaming because [it is] a more accurate [platform] to measure who is listening. Whatever the next area of audio is, we will probably start it here first."

Based on my conversations with these industry professionals, it is safe to say that Ayokunle Spencer, Brad Carson, Travis Demers, Evan Wilner, Dan Zangrilli and Nick Cattles attribute their college radio experience as one of the reasons they possess the skills to succeed in their current jobs. Being able to have the flexibility to make mistakes, try new things and establish long-lasting professional relationships are invaluable to

ambitious young broadcasters, and all evolving broadcasters for that matter. Belonging to a college media outlet is undoubtedly something many students savor, with many largely basing their choice of college on the quality of the media outlets if they are so fortunate. However, not all ambitious young broadcasters are equally privy to the same resources.

Not all ambitious young broadcasters are able to provide sufficient previous experience when trying to secure an internship or a job.

Not all ambitious young broadcasters are privy to changing industry trends, nor do they have the resources to render them an understanding as to how to achieve their goals.

Not all ambitious young broadcasters have a place to be mentored, and mentors willing to leverage valuable industry connections that could lead them to an internship or a job.

For Ayokunle Spencer and his team at Sports Radio America, lessening the discrepancies between those with the ability to easily make connections and expend resources, and those looking to establish or collect them, has always been at the forefront of their mission — and they intend to keep shrinking the gap.

“I am surprised there aren’t more places like this where people can develop their skills before they reach the big-time,” expressed Spencer. “If we want to replace talent with talent, we have to develop talent at the lowest levels much more than asking for requirements at the highest levels. Every industry needs their farm-system.”