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# Another View of 'Citizen Feedback' to the Mass Media

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## Another View of 'Citizen Feedback' to the Mass Media

### **Abstract**

Letter-writing has traditionally been an encouraged form of expressing opinion in the United States. The oft-heard advice to "write your congressman," the space which magazines devote to correspondence they receive, and the importance that newspapers lend to their "letters to the editor" by placing them next to the editorial page seem to legitimize this form of public communication as an integral part of the democratic process. It is understandable, then, that many individuals direct letters of complaint and demand for change at organizations which they perceive as responsible to the public and important to their lives.

### **Disciplines**

Communication | Social and Behavioral Sciences

## Another View of 'Citizen Feedback' to the Mass Media

JOSEPH TUROW

LETTER-WRITING has traditionally been an encouraged form of expressing opinion in the United States. The oft-heard advice to "write your congressman," the space which magazines devote to correspondence they receive, and the importance that newspapers lend to their "letters to the editor" by placing them next to the editorial page seem to legitimize this form of public communication as an intergral part of the democratic process. It is understandable, then, that many individuals direct letters of complaint and demand for change at organizations which they perceive as responsible to the public and important to their lives (Singer, 1973).

Quite a bit of research during the past several decades has been devoted to investigating the kinds of people who send letters to various mass media organizations and to noting the kinds of letters they send.<sup>1</sup> However, no study could be found that examines such "citizen feedback" in terms of the responses which it elicits within the organizations that receive it. This is a report on such an examination. Specifically, it is a study of the nature and organizational functions of a radio station's procedure for dealing with letters addressed to the station or its manager.

A "performance program" has been observed with respect to those letters that has two complementary functions for the organization: From the standpoint of internal station operations, the performance program serves to minimize the feedback letters' direct influence upon organizational routines by rejecting in a formularized manner any perceived

<sup>1</sup> For an extensive review of past studies, see Williams and Leroy (1974).

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**Current Research** This section of POQ is reserved for brief reports of research in progress, discussions of unsolved problems, methodological studies, and public opinion data not extensively analyzed or interpreted. Succinct case histories are welcomed, as well as hypotheses and insights that may be useful to other students of public opinion. Usually, material in this section is shorter, more informal, and more tentative than in preceding pages.

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threats to organizational autonomy. From the standpoint of station "public relations," the performance program serves to conceal the firm's standardized reply procedure and, as a consequence, to satisfy the overwhelming majority of writers that the station has dealt with their letters satisfactorily, in an individualized and concerned manner. The findings raise some important questions about the role of certain types of feedback in inhibiting effectively critical citizen activity, and point to unexplored areas for further research.

### **Some Preliminary Considerations**

The specific problem of a radio station's response to its letter-writing public can be fruitfully connected to the more general problem of an organization's response to environmental forces. A broadcasting company, like any organization, may be viewed as a dynamic, open system. As a system, its interactions with the environment must be regulated by certain structurally imposed limits that define it. Any internal or external factor which causes the disruption of these limits (and thus the system) will be countered by forces that restore the system as closely as possible to its previous state. However, a system which is constantly being disrupted by demands for change would tend to mobilize its forces to anticipate the disturbances before they disrupt normal operations (Katz and Kahn, 1966). March and Simon (1958) point out that such a mobilization of forces would take the form of a highly complex and organized set of responses which will be evoked at the appearance of a particular environmental stimulus. They call this routinized set of responses a "performance program."

From this perspective, it could be predicted that an established radio station would have an established, routinized procedure—a performance program—for handling commonly received letters. Because a performance program is, by definition, an organization's particular responses to particular influences, it could also be predicted that the nature of the program would depend on two major factors—the types of letters received and the importance of the letter-writers to the organization. The purpose of this study was to investigate these factors and, in the process, delineate the performance program, note its functions, and gauge its actual success from the standpoint of the letter-writers.

### **Method**

The study was conducted in a network-affiliated radio station in a major American city. The station has served its area for over 40 years under the same call letters, and the management likes to refer to it as the vicinity's most influential radio station. News and public affairs are regularly

broadcast, and on-air audience participation is encouraged through “talk show” programs. Letters from the audience are addressed to the radio personalities, the station manager, or the station itself. Since the purpose of this study was to concentrate upon the radio station’s response to complaints and demands for change (rather than to fan mail or personal remarks directed at an individual), the letters to the station or the station manager were chosen as the focus of the investigation.

It should be noted that, as far as listeners are concerned, the station manager *is* the radio station. He is the only member of the organization’s leadership who is in the public eye (or ear), by virtue of his reading editorials (“The opinions of the management . . .”) which are broadcast regularly. After the presentation of an editorial, listeners are invited to write to the station to express their opinions about the issue. Evidently, many listeners decide to write to the station manager to voice their opinions about the station itself.

The first step in this investigation was to analyze the letters that were sent to the station. The 100 letters that were received during two months were categorized according to general topic, length, and whether the letter was hand-written or typed. The 83 replies that the station sent to the correspondents were analyzed in a similar manner.<sup>2</sup> Next, the letter-receiving/reading/answering procedure was observed during several working days. The two key participants were interviewed. In addition, a questionnaire was devised and sent to 100 letter-writers in the sample. The questionnaire was designed to determine some demographic characteristics of the people who wrote, to gauge their satisfaction with the station’s reply or lack of reply, and to generally get some indication of their understanding of the broadcasting business, their belief in the efficacy of their letters, and their opinions of the station management. Taken together, the analysis of listener letters and station replies, the non-participant observation and interviews, and the questionnaire allowed an in-depth analysis of the firm’s approach to feedback, the criteria for success which guided that approach, and the extent to which that success was achieved.<sup>3</sup>

### **Factors Guiding the Performance Program**

The criteria for success which the principals of the radio station used with regard to feedback letters could be inferred from remarks by the sta-

<sup>2</sup> The failure to reply to 17 letters was due to illness of the editorial director, who writes the replies. The letters were eventually answered, though the replies were not included in the study.

<sup>3</sup> Access to the feedback letters was facilitated by an FCC ruling which obliges all broadcasting companies to establish a public file of all complaint letters to the management. The people at the station were quite generous, however, in allowing the scrutiny of their replies and procedures.

tion manager about the importance of letter-writers to his organization. The manager noted an FCC requirement to respond to every complaint and underscored his desire not to alienate any member of the audience. At the same time, he said that his feeling, and the feeling of executives within the parent firm, is that sentiments of letter-writers are not at all representative of the audience as a whole. Audience ratings, he noted, are the only form of listener feedback that influences station policy and operations. In fact, when asked specifically about the dismissal of a radio personality who had been inciting angry mail, the station manager (and, later, the program director) denied that the letters had any effect on the individual's forced departure. The executive added that if ratings of that person's program had been climbing over the past several years instead of remaining low with an undesirable (i.e., old) audience, he would still be on the air.

As implied by this example, the necessity of responding to every letter without alienating the correspondent sometimes confronts the equally crucial goal of not allowing angry or demanding feedback letters to alter or disrupt station activities. That such a confrontation is the rule rather than the exception can be inferred from Table 1, which presents a breakdown of the topics found in the 100 letters. The range of topics that was represented in the sample of letters (all but six of which were devoted to only one subject) also represents a wide variety in the degree to which the correspondence threatened the station's autonomy.

The guideline for comparing topics in terms of threats to organizational autonomy is whether one subject, if pursued through the formal regulatory and legal channels, could, more likely than another subject, force the station to relinquish some or all of its programing decisions to the plaintiff. The categories in Table 1 are arranged with this guideline in mind, in an order ranging from "no threat" (Topic I) to "substantial threat" (Topic VII).

It can be seen that letters with favorable remarks (Topic I) and those with non-station related requests (Topic II—such as requests for infor-

**Table 1. Breakdown of Feedback Letter Topics**

	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percent</i>
I. Favorable remark about the station or personalities	22	21
II. Non-station related request	10	9
III. Opinions and proposals relating to current events	17	16
IV. General complaint about a personality's actions	24	23
V. Specific complaint about a personality's actions	17	16
VI. Complaint about station policy	7	7
VII. Complaint about a specific station action	9	8
	106	100

mation regarding the return of defective products) could be characterized as no threats. "Opinions and proposals relating to national or local affairs" (Topic III) are very slight threats, for while they do not *demand* station action, they may be implying that the station take an editorial stance. General complaints about a personality's actions (Topic IV—"He's too loud," "he's a leftist") cannot be proven so easily and are consequently less challenging than specific complaints about a personality's actions (Topic V—"He insulted me when I spoke to him over the air," "He had a pro-Arab bias during a Middle East discussion"). Personality-related complaints are not, however, as threatening as station-related complaints about policy and actions (Topics VI and VII), because problems in these areas often have the greatest potential for coming under FCC scrutiny. Topic VII letters in the sample contained the implicit (and, in three cases, explicit) assertion that the station had not adhered to the Fairness Doctrine or the Equal Time rule of the Communications Act in specific incidents. The writers demanded free air time (sometimes in particular periods) to rectify the problem.

It should be noted that both the station manager (who assumes final responsibility for the replies) and the editorial director (who writes them) agreed that the ranking presented in Table 1 is the correct order of "the types of letters we'd rather receive," from "most rather" to "least rather." The editorial director also stated that the sample of letters examined for this study is fairly typical of most months. Such predictability regarding feedback, the fact that a majority of the letters are at least somewhat threatening, and the organizational requirement to respond to all letter-writers without alienating any of them point to a performance program that divorces the letters from the mainstream of station operation while using rhetorical skill to disguise this fact.

### **The Program and Internal Station Operations**

These expectations proved to be well-founded. An established routine for handling feedback letters and replying to them could be observed, a routine which severely limits their circulation within the station. Only two nonsecretarial members of the firm—the station manager and editorial director—participate in the performance program. The station manager contended that he reads every letter that is addressed to him. However, he was not as informed as the editorial director with regard to the frequency with which letters on different topics are received. He admitted the delegation of almost all the responsibility for dealing with the letters to the editorial director, though he added that he does consult with her on responses to some particularly thorny complaints.

In the overwhelming number of cases, the editorial director composes and types her own reply to every letter in the station manager's name,

and the latter simply signs them.<sup>4</sup> The editorial director also typically answers letters referring to many aspects of the organization without consulting the people involved. Not even the program director is informed about the letters or their responses even though he would, by virtue of his intimate involvement with daily station fare, be an important individual to weigh complaints and suggestions if consideration as to their implementation were desirable. No tallies are kept on the amount of mail on various topics.

In discussing how she composes responses to "feedback" letters, the editorial director (who had been working at the station for a year at the time of study) stated that the reply process could devour all her time if she had to write a newly conceived message to every correspondent. She also stressed that her mail-answering function is secondary in importance to her task of writing daily editorials to be read over the air by the station manager. Consequently, she said, a systematic reply procedure is used to answer the feedback letters (and has been used for several years). While every letter receives a personal reply (in that the salutation is directed to the letter-writer and the topic of the initial correspondence is mentioned in the body of the reply), a model for the reply is taken from a loose-leaf notebook of past responses to similar letters.

#### THE PATTERN OF RESPONSE

An analysis of the letters which were sent by the radio station to 83 of its correspondents revealed that the patterned approach which was evident in the interviews and activities of the station manager and editorial director was also evident in the actual replies. Sandwiched between a fixed introductory thanks for the writer's comments and a fixed final hope that the writer would continue listening to the station were remarks which attempted to deal with the particulars of the complaint, demand, praise, or question. These remarks were usually brief: Of the 83 letters, 73 (88 percent) comprised 7 or fewer sentences (including the fixed introduction and conclusion), and even the longest letter was only 11 sentences in length.

Because of the brevity of the replies and the propositional nature of many of the statements (which were often lifted verbatim from notebook samples), it was possible to categorize the answers in terms of single statements. An analysis of the coincidence of the topics in the initial feedback letters with those reply statements revealed an exact association, as is exemplified in Table 2. It can be noted in the table that the ordering of topics is terms of their increasing threat to the radio station's autonomy

<sup>4</sup> It is interesting to note that while an interview with the station manager was being conducted, his secretary brought in a pile of replies. The station manager proceeded to sign every one—without reading any—while still answering the interviewer's questions.



Table 2. Association of Feedback Topics with Station Replies

<i>Topic</i>	<i>Reply</i>
I.	"Always happy to hear from a satisfied listener."
II.	"Here is some information that may help you . . ." "Write to this government agency to get information."
III.	"Why don't you call our talk shows and present your ideas on radio?" "Since we feel that your idea is most interesting, why not present it as a rebuttal to our editorial? Contact our editorial director . . ."
IV.	"Our moderator is among the best-informed in the country." "Thousands of listeners feel different from you."
V.	"Our moderators often take positions they really don't believe for the sake of stimulating discussion." "You may be assured the problem will not be repeated."*
VI.	"It is a practical truth of broadcasting that high commercial content is necessary to maintain high quality service to listeners."
VII.	"We have no obligation under Federal Communications Commission regulations to provide equal time . . ."

\* This response was evoked by two complaints against the rudeness of a talk show host and by one complaint against the rudeness of a producer.

is accompanied by a parallel movement of the replies from what might be called an "accommodation" stance (characterized by openness and encouragement towards action or continued letter-writing) to a "rule invocation" stance (characterized by rigidity and the blocking of action).

As can be seen in Table 2, "rule invocation" is an attempt to defuse potential or actual threats through the direct or indirect association of station programming and policy with fundamental tenets against which the plaintiff would not be likely to argue. For example, the tenet of cultural democracy is invoked when, in reply to a negative opinion of a station personality (Topic IV), the "station manager" says that "thousands of listeners feel different from you." A commitment to intellectual excellence and superior performance is the defense used in the comment that a talk show host is "among the best in the country." A charge of bias or racism on the part of a talk-show host (Topic V) is countered by an invocation of the principle of diverse and free-flowing ideas. And a complaint against too many commercials (Topic VI) is met by a categorical statement about the need to recognize the connection between good business and good service. Interestingly, when a *feedback* letter invokes a rule—the equal time rule, for example—the station counters by saying that the writer has misunderstood its meaning and applicability: "Until [one of two men who are both obviously running for public office] announces his candidacy, we have no obligation under Federal Communications Commission regulations to provide equal time to either man."<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> The general program of response that is illustrated in Table 2 could be seen to operate even when the talents of the editorial director were absent. During the editorial director's temporary hospitalization, the station manager delegated the responsibility of responding to feedback letters to his secretary, who had never written replies before. Using the loose-leaf notebook as a guide, the secretary proceeded to compose letters which, though slightly longer, were remarkably similar to those of her predecessor.

### The Program and Public Relations

An analysis of the 63 questionnaires which were returned by feedback letter-writers indicates that, despite the "rule invocation" stance, the station's pattern of reply was quite successful in accomplishing the station manager's objective of not alienating any members of the audience. Of the 54 questionnaire respondents who had, at the time of the study, received replies from the radio station to their feedback letters, 39 (72 percent) agreed that the "person who answered" their letters understood what they wanted to say and replied "in the best way possible." Moreover, only 13 (24 percent) of the 54 thought that the station's letter was "just a standard reply."

It was found that only 25 (40 percent) of the 63 respondents felt that their letters "had an effect on the station or its programing." Closer examination, however, revealed an interesting division of the sample in this regard: Of the 33 respondents who had written "nonthreatening" letters (Topics I-III), 19 (58 percent) felt that their messages had an effect upon the station or its programing. In contrast, only 6 (20 percent) of the 30 respondents who had sent "threatening" letters (Topics IV-VIII) believed they had made such an impact. This difference (which is significant at the .005 level) might be related to the pattern of reply. It is possible that the "nonthreateners" received the impression that they had reinforced program decisions they favored. "Threateners," on the other hand, were likely to get the quite explicit message that their complaints and demands were unwarranted. It is important to note, however, that no significant difference could be found between the two groups regarding their satisfaction with the station's replies. In fact, of the entire sample, 35 (55 percent) said they had written before and 55 (87 percent) said they would write again.

It is tempting to attribute the "success" of the radio station replies solely to the expertness of the formularized responses. However, an additional explanation is suggested by the low awareness in the sample of the primary importance of audience research to the firm: Only 13 (21 percent) of the 63 respondents knew that the most important way in which the radio station "learns about its listeners" is through the activities of research companies; 24 (38 percent) thought "letters from listeners" are most important in providing such knowledge, 21 (33 percent) checked "opinions of talk show callers" or "opinions of talk show hosts," and 5 (8 percent) gave no reply. This belief that listener-initiated rather than station-initiated feedback provides the most crucial information to the organization about its audience could not be associated with any particular age, education, or employment level of the respondents.<sup>6</sup> The finding

<sup>6</sup> The group of respondents (which was 52 percent female) did consist predominantly (68 percent) of people over 50. These findings parallel the Arbitron research findings that 53 percent of the station's listeners are female and 59 percent are over 50. It might be noted that 33 percent of the respondents said they had had "some college" or had "graduated college." No comparable figures were collected by Arbitron.

was also unrelated to the writing of “threatening” or “nonthreatening” letters, though it might be important to note that all three writers who invoked the Equal Time rule (and were thus most explicitly threatening) were among those who pointed to the research firms.

Unfortunately, no data could be found on how knowledgeable the general population is regarding the crucial importance of research companies to a radio station’s delineation of its audience. Despite the absence of such data, it is suggested that people who hold impressions regarding the primary importance of audience-initiated feedback are motivated to “sound off” to broadcasting organizations more than are people who regard station-initiated feedback as most important. The reasoning behind this very tentative suggestion is that members of the former group are more likely to feel that their opinions will have consequence for programing decisions. A more firmly based conclusion from the study is that the radio station’s replies did little to illuminate the approach of the station to their messages and, by the very nature of the rhetorical pattern, actually functioned to capitalize on their lack of knowledge regarding organizational procedures. In this sense, the ignorance of the letter-writers can be seen as an integral part of—and perhaps also a product of—the performance program.

### Conclusion

The findings of this study shed a somewhat unusual light on the activity of “citizen feedback.” Because most investigations do not deal with the subject from an organizational standpoint, they tend to leave the impression that feedback is accepted and considered by the target organizations in the spirit of serious criticism (or compliment) which is often inferred from interviewing the senders or examining the messages. The present study dispels this impression, at least with regard to a particular kind of feedback—letters to a radio station which are directed at the station or its manager. In fact, the feedback letters can be seen as invitations to formularized responses which disguise the performance program by capitalizing upon—and possibly reinforcing—the writers’ misconception about the importance of audience-initiated feedback.

The perspective with which this study has approached “citizen feedback” suggests the profitability of investigating whether that many-faceted phenomenon should be differentiated according to a typology of organizational responses based on two factors—the perceived obligation of the organization to reply and the degree to which the letters it receives threaten that organization’s autonomy. For example, it would be interesting to investigate whether the letter-answering performance program of broadcasting firms, which are required by the FCC to answer complaints, are fundamentally different from organizations, in or out of mass

media, which are not so required. The second factor points to a mass media organization's handling of feedback letters which are not aimed at the organization itself but, rather, are directed at appearing in a "letters to the editor" column. Research on such feedback would be aimed at investigating the organizational factors which influence the selection (and rejection) of material for the column.

It is important to stress that research on organizational response to feedback should not ignore the senders of the feedback. On the contrary, a response should be seen as part of a complex interaction between senders and receivers who have different—sometimes incompatible—goals. From this wholistic perspective, the interesting phenomenon that has come to be called "citizen feedback" will be more fully understood.

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