

# Wisconsin's Public Radio

## WHAD hosts discussions about the state, the country and the world

by Evan Rytlewski for The Sheperd Express – May 2007

Ben Merens recalls his encounter with Clark Weber fondly. It was 1991 and Merens was set to launch his own Wisconsin Public Radio talk show, so he didn't want to pass up the chance to pick the brain of the longtime Chicago radio staple when he ran into Weber at a wedding.

When Merens approached Weber at the bar to ask for advice about hosting a talk show, however, Weber offered only a brief, cryptic response: "Sell hammers."

Merens was baffled.

"I'm thinking, 'Man, I finally got to talk to one of the greats of Chicago Public Radio and he's up to the bar for his third drink,'" Merens recalls with a warm chuckle. Thankfully, he says, Weber soon sat him down to lay out his philosophy in more detail. Think of yourself as a hardware salesman, Weber advised. If customers come into the store and pick out the wrong hammer, a good salesman won't laugh at them; instead he'll gently recommend the proper tool. This will keep customers coming back.

To this day, Merens heeds that advice, he explains. He doesn't brush off or belittle callers with ill- or misinformed opinions and questions; rather he works their comments into the conversation.

"So that's what I try to do with my guests and my callers—sell hammers," Merens says.

Unlike the brash world of commercial talk radio, where callers who challenge the opinionated hosts risk on-air flagellation, Wisconsin Public Radio (WPR) hosts like Merens moderate a more civil, in-depth discussion that invites everyone to participate. A typical program dedicates the bulk of an hour to just one chosen topic: the environment, the war, political controversies, health issues, gas prices, trends in television or advertising, or the history of daylight-saving time—anything that may be of interest to Wisconsin listeners.

And unlike the public radio stations in most states—which rely heavily on syndicated National Public Radio programming and blocks of classical music peppered with only the occasional locally produced program—the news and talk wing of WPR, known as the Ideas Network, produces about 55 to 60 hours of original programming a week.



## A Rich History of Radio

Bill Estes, the Milwaukee-area regional manager for WPR, explains that along with Minnesota, Wisconsin has one of the largest public radio networks in the country, one that spans 29 broadcast stations and seven bureaus. Milwaukee's Ideas Network station is WHAD 90.7 FM Delafield.

"Wisconsin Public Radio has a long and rich history of making radio," Estes says. That history started with WHA 970 AM in Madison, one of the first public radio stations in the country.

"Our first station went on the air as soon as radio was invented practically, back in 1917," Estes says. "Then, as soon as FM radio went on the air after World War II, our engineers went out and built a series of stations across Wisconsin to bring FM radio to everybody. We've been adding affiliates since then."

Over the past nine decades, WPR has kept up with the changing technology. Most recently, WHAD began broadcasting in high definition, a format that requires a special receiver but promises crisper, CD-quality sound and less interference than regular radio. In April, WHAD also launched a new, high-definition-only station that plays classical music around the clock.

While public radio ratings have taken a hit nationally in recent years, perhaps in part because of the emergence of satellite radio, WPR Director Phil Corriveau says that WPR's numbers have stayed comparatively strong. Because of its emphasis on locally produced content, it will likely stay that way, he predicts.

"I think this format is one that will survive better than a lot of other public radio stations around the country," Corriveau says. "As satellite radio and the Internet and iPods and everything else become more popular, people are going to be able to get programs from National Public Radio in any way they want to get them. If the stations just rebroadcast a lot of programming that's already being broadcast somewhere else, those stations will become less important. The more original, locally produced programs a station can produce, the stronger it will be. The Ideas Network, with the 10 hours a day we produce here, will be in good shape for the future."

Estes doesn't see satellite radio as a threat, either.

"Right now it really is an emerging technology, a paid technology, so it's going to have a slow growth curve," Estes says. "If you want to listen to a satellite service based out of New York or

Los Angeles, that's fine, but you can't hear local weather or local traffic or things that are going on in the Wisconsin Legislature; it's got to be generic and national to appeal to listeners. You'll never hear a program with Wisconsinites, about Wisconsin, with Wisconsin hosts on satellite radio, so that's what we're concentrating on."

### Wide-Ranging Topics

On the weekdays, WHAD begins broadcasting state-produced content at 6 in the morning and, with the exception of a two-hour afternoon block of NPR's "Talk of the Nation," runs original programming until 6 p.m., when it broadcasts national programs, BBC News and repeats of state-produced programs. On the weekends the station broadcasts lighter, more features-oriented programs and additional syndicated NPR content.

The station has been able to specialize its content to this degree, Estes explains, because Milwaukee is so well served by other public radio stations: WYMS 88.9 and WMSE 91.7 handle music, while WHAD and WUWM 89.7 divide talk and news coverage, with WUWM placing more emphasis on syndicated NPR news magazines and music programs. This gives morning commuters, for instance, the choice of listening to Joy Cardin's Madison-based call-in show on WHAD, or NPR's "Morning Edition" on WUWM.

Just because the programs on WHAD and the Ideas Network are state-produced, however, doesn't mean their topics are restricted to Wisconsin. National and international discussions are common, and Wisconsin callers get to debate with major national figures.

Merens notes that since 9/11, listeners are taking more interest in overseas headlines.

"International topics don't dominate our discussion," Merens says of his 3 p.m. program, which he records in Milwaukee. "We still have a lot of state talk, but now nobody blinks an eye if we talk about Afghanistan or Israel, or Iraq or China or Darfur."

He speculates that the Internet has made international news more accessible.

"The world is smaller now," he says. "Now you can go and read about Afghanistan on your computer. But in the early '90s you couldn't do that, so Afghanistan was like Pluto. Now Afghanistan is like Waukesha."

Cardin's program in particular straddles the line between state and international issues. Recent

guests have included state Sen. Carol Roessler (discussing her proposal to require Wisconsin children to wear life jackets) and *The Washington Times'* Joseph Curl (discussing a Republican presidential debate). *Shepherd Express* editor and publisher Louis Fortis is a regular guest during the program's Friday "Week In Review" discussion, where two panelists weigh in on a host of issues, from local to global.

Other recent topics on Cardin's show have included the Motion Picture Association of America's push to give movies that glamorize smoking more restrictive ratings, a proposal allowing Wisconsin employers to fire violent felons and a debate over whether universities should be able to reprimand students for off-campus behavior, as some at UW-Milwaukee have proposed.

### The Politics of Radio

The Ideas Network hosts try their hardest to keep their own political convictions off the air.

"I've had people say to me, 'I've been listening to you for 15 years, and I have no idea what your politics are,'" Merens says. "I take that as a great compliment. It's not my job to voice my opinion—it's not always easy, but I was raised and educated as a journalist, so that's what I do."

But both sides of the aisle have their own beliefs about public radio. While Merens says that he often gets a good response for facilitating a nonpartisan dialogue, he also hears from people on the left who say it's public radio's responsibility to better represent their views.

"Some people call in frustrated," Merens says. "They want to hear Amy Goodman's program on our network; they want us to be the anti-Rush [Limbaugh]."

And, on the other side, there are Republicans who believe that public radio is fundamentally a liberal soapbox.

"We invite all sides on the air, and we hear from Democrats and Republicans and those in between who don't have necessarily a [political affiliation], and we try to get Green people in and the Libertarian Party in," Cardin explains. "But more often than not, we'll hear from conservative listeners—and we do have conservative listeners—who believe that we're biased to the left."

Cardin responds by telling them that if they examine the station's archives, available at [www.wpr.org](http://www.wpr.org), they'll see that the programs invite guests from all over the political spectrum. To

that, she says, some critics reply that while there may be diversity in guests, most of the station's callers are liberal.

That could be true, Cardin concedes. "This is anecdotal, because we don't necessarily ask a caller what their party affiliation is, but I personally do hear more left-leaning callers than right-leaning callers, although we do have right-leaning callers as well," Cardin says.

But she notes that the very small percentage of listeners who call in doesn't necessarily represent the network's entire audience. "What I try to tell those who complain is that I don't think that's proof that Wisconsin Public Radio is liberally biased, and I don't think that means that all of our listeners are liberal, either."

Cardin says that while she tries to ask challenging, devil's advocate questions of all her guests regardless of their politics, allegations of bias keep her on her toes.

"There are times when I'll be talking, for example, to a liberal guest who is funny, or who may crack a joke," Cardin says. "And I'll sometimes feel uncomfortable laughing at that joke, because I do get calls or e-mails from listeners who will insist that because I laughed at that joke, I was showing my liberal bias. So there's a fine line to walk, and sometimes it is difficult.

"I do try very hard to come across as objective, but more importantly, come across as fair," she adds. "We want to treat all sides fairly."