

or section front pages. The *Register's* managers then forced the newsroom to cut down on the number of "jumping" stories. But in 1997, folks were asked again whether they'd be more likely to read the paper if fewer stories jumped—and 59 percent said yes, as if nothing had happened. Thirty-nine percent said they wanted shorter stories. But 44 percent desired "more in-depth stories," and 59 percent craved "more explanation of complex issues"!

"For years now," Layton observes, "editors and reporters have been told that their journalistic instincts were out of sync with readers, and that the cure for this occupational malady was research." It turns out, however, he says, "that newspaper research yields as much uncertainty as clarity. Much of it is subjective, unscientific and amenable to manipulation." And for all the reader surveys

and focus groups, newspaper readership has continued to decline.

Partly as a result of pressure from Wall Street, many publishers are unwilling "to invest much in better journalism," Layton says, and some have used "talk about 'reader-driven journalism'" as a cover, while taking measures "that readers could not possibly endorse," such as slashing news staffs and trivializing news content.

"We can say with confidence that people want the paper delivered on time and that they want the ink not to rub off," Layton writes. "We can say they want accurate, fair reporting and that good writing and compelling headlines are a plus. And we can make some other broad generalizations, most of them rather obvious. Beyond that, the results of market research, as applied to news, are disappointing."

Radio Wal-Mart

"The Death of Local Radio" by Lydia Polgreen, in *The Washington Monthly* (Apr. 1999), 1611
Connecticut Ave., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20009.

Is local radio's signal fast fading out? Polgreen, business manager of the *Washington Monthly*, contends that reception of truly local sounds has indeed become a lot more intermittent since the 1996 Telecommunications Act became law.

Before then, she explains, a company could own no more than 40 radio stations nationwide, and no more than two AM and two FM stations in a single market. The Telecommunications Act removed all restrictions on national ownership, and greatly relaxed the rules on how many stations a company could own in a particular market (up to eight now in a big market, between five and seven in smaller ones).

Since 1996, one-third of all radio stations in the country have changed hands. Today, almost half of the 4,992 stations in the 268 ranked markets are owned by a company that has three or more stations in the same market. A major advantage of owning many stations, Polgreen points out, is the ability to attract national, in addition to local, advertising. The four biggest companies—Chancellor Media, Infinity Broadcasting, Clear Channel Communications, and Jacor Communications (which Clear Channel is in the process of

acquiring)—control nearly three times as many stations as the top 10 companies were allowed to own before the Telecommunications Act went into effect.

Though much of radio has long been in thrall to "the top 40" and other standardized programming formulas, the trend toward consolidation has made it less likely that listeners will hear anything "even slightly out of the ordinary" on commercial radio, Polgreen believes. Some dedicated local station owners, such as Andrew Langston and his family—whose WDKX-FM, in Rochester, New York, with 14 broadcasters and music in "an eclectic, quasi-urban contemporary format," has offered live local programming all day, every day, for the last 25 years—intend to keep operating. But they are the exception.

The Wal-Marting of radio still could be stopped, Polgreen believes. William Kennard, chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, has proposed creating three new classes of licenses for low-power FM stations. This would open up the airwaves to hundreds, if not thousands, of new broadcasters. The broadcasting industry, not surprisingly, hates the idea. But Polgreen views it as "a practical way to recapture some of radio's lost diversity."