

The Really Big Questions

Evaluation Report

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Table of Contents

Program Overview	1
Evaluation Overview	2
Survey Results	2
Interview Findings	4
TRBQ Future	5
Conclusion	6
Appendix	8

Program Overview

Recent research in evolutionary biology, neuroscience and experimental psychology has broadened the public discussion about human nature, human understanding and the collective human experience. SoundVision's four-episode pilot, *The Really Big Questions* (TRBQ), is a part of this ongoing dialogue. By considering the intersection of empirical science and the humanities, TRBQ helps listeners explore the following questions:

- How do emotions shape our worldview?
- What is consciousness?
- How do we face our own mortality?
- Can science explain why we believe?

TRBQ's goal is to broaden the public discourse about the great questions of humanity and engage listeners in the ideas and views presented. In each episode TRBQ's host, Lynn Neary, speaks to a diverse range of researchers working on projects related to Emotion, Consciousness, Death and Religion. Below are overviews of each episode:

Emotion: What are emotions and how do they shape our worldview?

Paul Ekman, PhD. discusses the definition of emotion, how we use emotions to express ourselves, how we disguise our emotions and how we read the emotions of others. Martha Nussbaum, a professor at the University of Chicago, discusses how emotion underpins the functions of culture and society. Dominique Moisi, a French political strategist talks about his book *Geopolitics of Emotion* and William Reddy, a Duke University cultural historian talks about his book, *The Navigation of Feelings: A Framework for the History of Emotions*.

Consciousness: What is the source of awareness?

This episode addresses the difference between the human and animal brain. Christof Koch discusses the difference between the human brain and mind. Colin Allen describes his study of the non-human animal mind. Frans de Waal talks about his work on social behavior, empathy, and definition of consciousness in non-human animals.

Death: Are we psychologically and physiologically equipped to deal with constant reminders of death? Does the fear of death shape how we live?

Lynn Neary discusses death with Robert Kastenbaum, a University of Arizona clinical psychologist; Sheldon Solomon, a Skidmore College psychology professor; Jesse Bering, the Director of Institute of Cognition and Culture; and Robert Thompson; a professor of TV and popular culture at Syracuse University.

Religion: Why are humans the only living species with religion? What is religion for? Why do religions insist on truths that are either objectively false or unverifiable? Why is science unable to speak intelligibly about God, or Spirit, or the Divine? Lynn Neary talks to scientists, theologians, secular scholars and ordinary believers about religion's purpose and how religion evolved around the world.

Evaluation Overview

Rockman *et al*, a research and evaluation firm headquartered in San Francisco, was tasked with evaluating TRBQ's effectiveness in:

- a. engaging its audience and
- b. creating an interest in the intersection of empirical science and the humanities.

The overall goal of the evaluation was to assess audience engagement with the program content, but researchers also wanted to understand more about the audience's interests in order to inform future programming. The evaluation process consisted of an online survey of a sample of the listening audience and in-depth interviews with selected survey respondents.

Listeners of *The Really Big Questions* (TRBQ) and visitors to the TRBQ website and Facebook fan page were asked to complete a brief online survey. Because broadcast dates varied among stations throughout the country, the survey was open from February to July 2010. Survey questions sought to identify the listening habits of respondents, basic demographic information, how TRBQ was perceived, and ideas for future programs. 127 unique listeners responded to the survey.

Researchers at Rockman *et al* interviewed a sample of these online survey respondents. Interviews provided an opportunity to gather richer qualitative data and add depth to the demographic and qualitative data collected in the online survey.

Interview results mirrored those that emerged during the online survey and are discussed in combination below.

Survey Results

Survey results revealed that listeners feel overwhelming positive about *The Really Big Questions*. Listeners reported that they sought out the program both during radio broadcasts and online, and even reported that they went back to the same program multiple times. Of the survey respondents, 89% reported that if they were to miss a radio broadcast of the program they would download a podcast or go online to hear it.

The majority of respondents (102, 80%) reported having first been introduced to TRBQ through radio broadcasts, however a majority also indicated that they access a portion of their audio content via the internet with 28% reporting the use of podcasts and 55% reporting that they sometimes listened to streaming audio.

As with a typical public radio audience, the majority of those who responded to the survey are over 50 years old (67%) and Caucasian (86%). They are also highly educated with 76% reporting a college degree or above and 45% holding a graduate degree.

Respondents gave the following qualitative feedback when asked to describe *The Really Big Questions*:

I would say that listening to TRBQ's is a way to pause a moment in your hectic material life and reconsider your default outlook. I think it will cause people to remember and re-explore the big idealistic ideas they had when they were teenagers, before life forced them shut down. I will describe TRBQ as the beginning of a conversation.

The host appreciates that humans answer these big questions through science, art, and culture. In light of these different approaches to universal questions, she interviews with scientists, artists, and academics who together help put together a snapshot of humanity's answers.

Excellent, in-depth look at relevant, important and interesting topics. The science is easy to follow and well articulated.

We talked about it in my neuroscience book group. I would describe it as very accessible for listeners. I think we need to pay more attention to big questions in an age when we are constantly bombarded by bits of information.

Intelligent. Interesting. Worthwhile.

A collection of discussions on subjects which ultimately affect us all- bring 'hard' sciences and social sciences together in a way that doesn't require the listener to be a specialist in any subject.

Lynn Neary interviewed intelligent and articulate people. Her questions were inquisitive and interesting and the answers were thought provoking and compelling. The tone of the conversation was passionate and engaged. The content was totally accessible and easily understood.

An informed discussion of fundamental, intriguing philosophical and scientific questions with a variety of specialists who bring their expertise to bear in an

accessible way by providing examples and definitions that explain difficult concepts.

I love that someone (TRBQ) is thinking about the "middle of the night" questions that are difficult to put into words.

TRBQ lives up to its name with content and tone that stimulates thought and questions well after the program ends. It is broadcasting at it's very best, dealing with core issues of transcending importance.

The program is humanistic in outlook, and has somehow escaped the blinders often imposed by modern natural science.

Interview Findings

Researchers at Rockman *et al* interviewed a sample of survey respondents to better understand how listeners engaged with TRBQ. All interviewees engaged with TRBQ in at least one of the following ways:

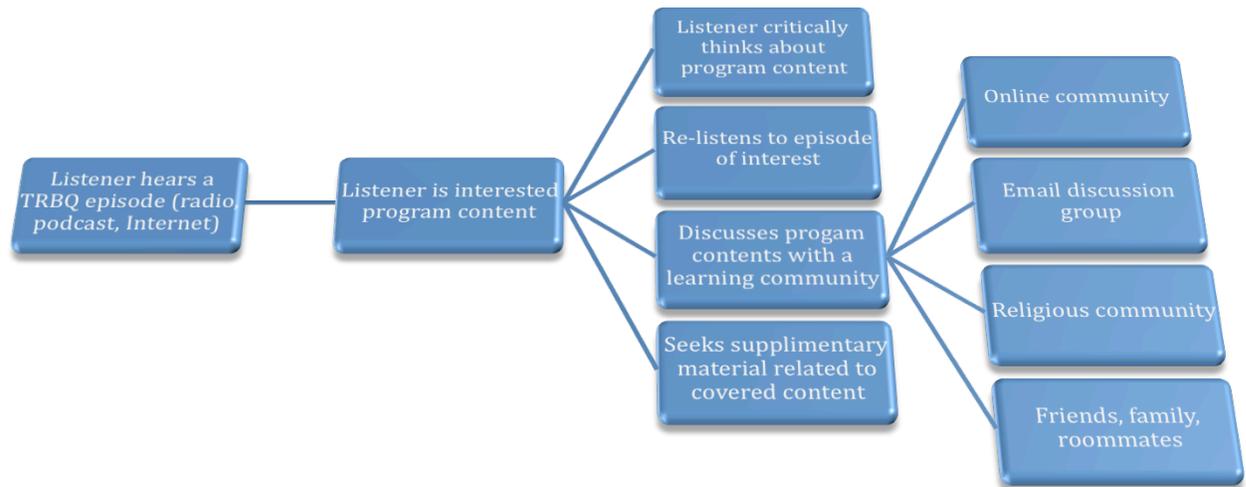
- Critically thinking about program content
- Re-listening to an episode of particular interest
- Discussing program contents with friends, family, learning community
- Seeking out supplementary material related to covered content

All those interviewed identified themselves as lifelong learners and members of a learning community. After the program ends, TRBQ provides fodder for further discussion. All interviewees and 65% of survey respondents report discussing program topics with others. TRBQ listeners shared and discussed program contents with online communities, email discussion groups, religious communities, and friends, family and roommates.

The majority of those interviewed had taken note of TRBQ's multi-disciplinary approach. About 50% were aware of and appreciated TRBQ's humanities lens and felt that it helped them understand and relate to more complex scientific matter.

In terms of TRBQ's online presence, those who had visited the TRBQ website or Facebook pages felt they were lacking in depth and information. Among the features that listeners would like to see include access to full, unedited interviews and supplemental materials including links, videos, and audio files.

TRBQ Listener Engagement Process



TRBQ Future

Those interviewed cited that they valued the depth and thoughtfulness of the TRBQ programs and said they would like to see more programming produced. When asked, listeners reported that they would be willing to access programming via the Internet if it were not available by radio broadcast. They also reported that while they would like to see new programming as frequently as every week, they felt that quality and depth were more important than the number of shows produced.

When asked to come up with topics for future TRBQ episodes, listeners asked for more in-depth coverage of the current topics – Emotion, Consciousness, Death, Religion – and the addition of new programs addressing a breadth of subject matter. New program suggestions included the following:

Evolution: Where do we come from? How do myths address this question? What do children think about humanity's origins?

Artificial Intelligence and Technology: Will machines one day qualify as life? What would that mean for humanity? How would artificial intelligence effect concepts of morality? How does technology create behavioral change?

Creativity: How and why do we need to create? Why does it matter? What are the origins of creativity? Does creativity serve an evolutionary purpose?

Gender and Sexuality: Do gender identities really exist? How have gender identities changed over time? How have past civilizations viewed gender identities and sexual orientation?

Happiness: What makes us happy – income, family, social status, a short commute? How do people deal with unhappiness? Can we quantify happiness? How do people around the world define happiness?

Love: What is it? Why do we need it? What evolutionary purpose does romantic love serve? Are we the only animals that love?

War, Violence, Peace and Humanity: Are we hardwired for war and violence? Is violence simply a part of human nature? Can world peace become a reality and if so, under what circumstances? Collectively, how do our responses to this question affect its feasibility? What role does empathy play in creating a more peaceful world?

In addition to producing more episodes, TRBQ could expand its reach by providing listeners with ways to continue the conversation. Most of those interviewed said they would value the opportunity to engage in moderated discussions with others around the program topics. While some listeners indicated that they would prefer an online forum, others expressed a strong interest in “live” events where they could interact with others, including those featured on the programs. If TRBQ wants to offer online forums, listeners indicated a strong preference for one that is well moderated. Online forums, live local lecture series, local conversation groups and/or Meetup (www.meetup.com) groups are just a few ways to keep TRBQ’s audience engaged in conversations that matter to them and their learning communities.

Conclusion

Based on survey and interview data people are overwhelmingly positive about TRBQ programming and would like to see more. Including supplementary materials on TRBQ’s website is an important first step in expanding the depth of listener experience. Currently, TRBQ provides listeners with access to interesting stimulating conversations, however listeners are not invited to participate in the discussion.

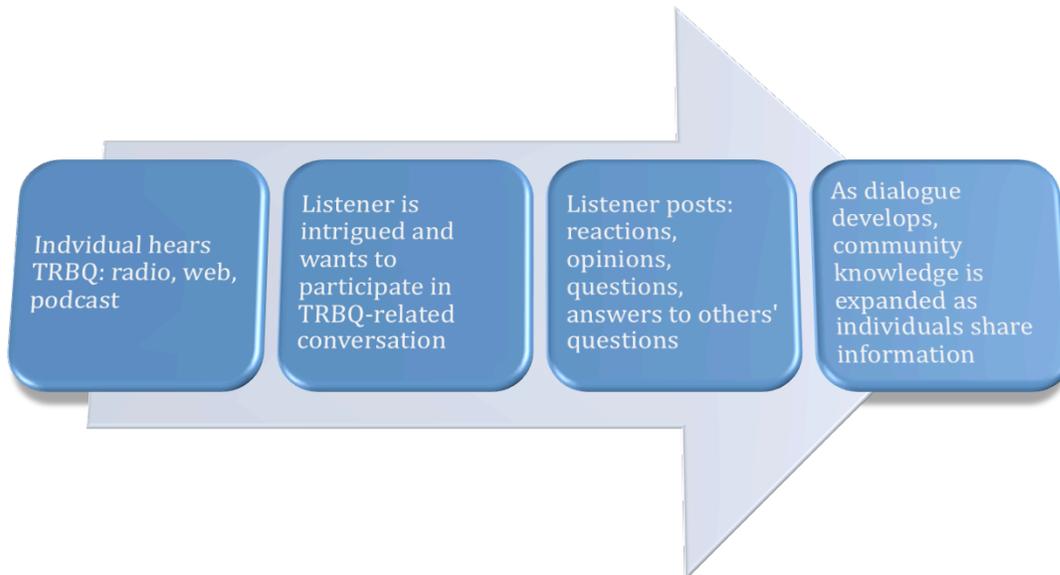
In its current format, TRBQ functions as a well-crafted thought-provoking radio program. However in order to achieve a more concrete impact, it is important that producers provide listeners and other interested individuals with an opportunity to continue and

contribute to the discussion. A moderated online discussion group would give listeners the opportunity to:

- critically think about program content,
- express their reactions to a particular episode or topic,
- share how they personally relate to presented content, and
- ask and answer follow-up questions.

Hypothetically, as the TRBQ online community grows, the online discussion group will be a space in which TRBQ enthusiasts can share their knowledge about a particular topic and learn from others.

TRBQ Online Community Learning Process



Appendix

Online Survey

SoundVision: The Really Big Questions (TRBQ) Survey

In an ongoing effort to better serve our audiences, the producers of The Really Big Questions (TRBQ), SoundVision Productions, would like to invite you to participate in a brief online survey about your experience with TRBQ and your media use and content interests. Your responses will help inform future programming.

All responses will be confidential and used only for research purposes. Your personal information will not be shared with anyone outside the research team. In order to take part in this survey you must be 18 years of age or older. Please contact Molly Reisman at molly@rockman.com if you have any questions.

1. How did you first find out about <i>The Really Big Questions</i>?
<input type="radio"/> On the radio: Which station? <input type="text"/> Are you a member of the station? <input type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No
<input type="radio"/> On the Internet, please specify: <input type="radio"/> Facebook <input type="radio"/> Twitter <input type="radio"/> Radio Station site <input type="radio"/> Search Engine <input type="radio"/> Other: <input type="text"/>
<input type="radio"/> Word of mouth
2. Which TRBQ programs have you heard? (Check all that apply.)
<input type="checkbox"/> Emotion <input type="checkbox"/> Consciousness <input type="checkbox"/> Death <input type="checkbox"/> Religion
3. How do you listen to audio programming? (Check all that apply.)
<input type="checkbox"/> Radio <input type="checkbox"/> Podcast <input type="checkbox"/> Internet
4. How often have you visited the website at www.trbq.org?
<input type="radio"/> Never <input type="radio"/> 1 time <input type="radio"/> 2 times <input type="radio"/> 3 or more times
5. Which of the following materials have you accessed on the TRBQ website? (Check all that apply.)
<input type="checkbox"/> Transcripts <input type="checkbox"/> Podcasts <input type="checkbox"/> Videos <input type="checkbox"/> Links to subject matter

6. What websites do you regularly visit?

7. If you missed a radio broadcast of TRBQ would you download a podcast or listen to a stream on trbq.org?

- Yes No

8. How often do you access online video or audio content?

- One or more times per day One or more times per month
 One or more times per week Less than once a month
 Never

9. How would you describe *The Really Big Questions* to someone who didn't know about it? (What did you like or not like? What did you learn? Was the "science" accessible and easily understood?)

10. Did you discuss any of the subjects explored in TRBQ with others?

- Yes No - [skip to the next question.](#)

If **Yes**, with whom? (Check all that apply.)

- Friend Colleague Relative
 Students Other:

If **Yes**, what did you discuss?

11. What topics would you like TRBQ to explore?

12. Is there anything else you would like to tell us about The Really Big Questions?

Demographic Information

1. Age:

18-24 25-34 35-49
 50-65 66+

2. Gender:

Male Female

3. Race/ethnicity: (Check all that apply.)

<input type="checkbox"/> American Indian or Alaska Native	<input type="checkbox"/> Asian
<input type="checkbox"/> Black/African American	<input type="checkbox"/> Hispanic/Latino(a)
<input type="checkbox"/> Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	<input type="checkbox"/> White/Caucasian
<input type="checkbox"/> Other: <input type="text"/>	

4. Highest level of education:

Less than high school High school/GED Some college
 College graduate Some graduate school Graduate degree

5. Name and email:

Name (optional):

Email (optional):

6. Can we contact you to follow up on this survey?

Yes No

SUBMIT FORM

Interview protocol

Background:

1. To provide some context, can you tell me your age? (Also note gender.)
2. And what's your highest level of education? What did you study?
3. Are you a member of a public radio station?
4. How did you first come across TRBQ? What was the medium (radio, web, podcast...)?
5. What did you initially think of it? Why did it interest you sufficiently to listen to one or more programs?
6. Did you listen to more than one broadcast? Did you seek it out? If you can remember, can you tell me which broadcasts you listened to? [Emotion, Consciousness, Death, Religion]
7. How did you listen to The Really Big Questions? (Radio broadcast, podcast, streaming, etc.). Do you think you'd listen to a program that wasn't produced for radio broadcast (for example, if you had to download it or listen via a mobile app)?
8. Did you listen to the entire program or just part of it? [If only part,] Do you remember which part or why you did listen to only one part? Why did you stop listening?
9. This was a pilot project of four programs. How frequently would you like to see new TRBQ programs broadcasts or made available? (Weekly? 5-part special series?)

Impact:

1. What kinds of impact did listening to the program(s) have on you? Did you learn anything? Did you talk about it with anyone? Did you go back and listen again? Did you seek out more information about the topics presented?
2. If you did something, what was it? Did you do it one time or more than once?
3. Is there anything that you wish TRBQ did more of? What? Are there any topics you wish the program addressed? Or is there a topic you would like the producers to come back to?

Lifelong Learning:

1. Do you feel like you're currently part of a learning community?
2. If yes, what kind of community is it? Can you describe it to me? Would it be an appropriate place to discuss issues raised on The Really Big Questions?
3. If not, where do you find you go to learn something new? Is this something you would seek out and if so, under what circumstances?
4. TRBQ takes a multi-disciplinary approach to many of the topics it addresses. Do you feel that using the humanities as a lens helps you relate to more complex or scientific subject matter? Does the scientific perspective help you to engage with the humanities content? What do you think about this approach?

Social Networking:

1. Did you sign up as a friend or a fan of TRBQ? Do you follow it on Facebook? If you do, how closely do you follow it?
2. Do you follow any groups or programs on Facebook or Twitter, or through another social networking site?
3. If yes, what do you follow (shows, programs, activities, groups, etc.)? Do you post content? What keeps you coming back?
4. If you aren't an active user of social networking sites, what makes you want to use them or come back more frequently?
5. If TRBQ had discussion forums do you think you would participate? Why or why not?

Other:

1. Is there anything else you'd like us or the producers to know about your thoughts on TRBQ?
2. Well, I think that's it for my questions. Thank you for taking the time to chat with me about TRBQ. I'd like to verify your contact information so we can send you your honoraria...