

# The RadioInfo Headline Opinion

*Radio's 2012 lesson from death of a pop star...*



## BE PREPARED AND OWN THE MUSIC

*Holland Cooke: Although radio rose to Sandy with flying colors and was rewarded by the PPM – the same cannot be said for our performance in the wake of the death of Whitney Houston earlier in the year.*

## Two Major Stories: A Radio Show and Radio No-Show

Holland Cooke • November 29, 2012



BLOCK ISLAND, RI — Just-released Arbitron data affirms that – despite all the new-tech competition – radio can still shine when the lights go out. Stations in Hurricane Sandy's path that were staffed-up, and stepped-up, were rewarded.

And not just news and talk AMs. Music FMs that suspended business-as-usual to guide listeners through the storm earned long-term cred.

But we knew the hurricane was coming. In retrospect, we might have anticipated another major 2012 story, but on February 11, it sure seemed to take radio by surprise:



**Whitney Houston**

*"I listened to the streams of over 100 radio stations, in multiple formats, with multiple owners, and in markets ranging from New York City to Minot. Less than a dozen of those stations either played Whitney Houston's music or talked about her untimely passing."*

*- Blogger Mark Edwards, witnessing a 2012 radio no-show that echoed 2009's embarrassing slight when Michael Jackson died.*

So much of radio is now automated that radio often sounds oblivious to events like these, which go top-of-mind instantly and for days. As sudden as Houston's passing was she was – like Michael Jackson and Amy Winehouse – a train wreck we saw coming.

Sadly, the most conspicuous radio sound bite was a faux pas:

*"Very good crack ho...' After a while everybody's exhausted. And then you find out she's dead. It's like, 'Really? 'Took this long?'"*

*- KFI/LA's John & Ken, whose gaffe earned 'em a token suspension and prompted management meetings with PO'd minority groups*

Radio did a better pivot when Monkee Davy Jones' death was announced this year. And not just music FMs. Smart news/talk stations – many of which played Monkees hits as currents during their top 40 heyday – quickly cued-up "Daydream Believer" and the plaintive "I Wanna Be Free," as now-fifty-something teenage girls teared-up.



**Harvey  
Nagler**

*We had people in place when rumors started swirling around Washington in the early evening. So when the story broke, we were ready to go on the air.”*

*- CBS News VP/Radio Harvey Nagler, whom I interviewed after Michael Jackson’s death*

Ditto ABC Radio, whose coverage lit-up my affiliated clients, as Harvey’s gang did my CBS-affiliated stations. But much of the self-congratulations our radio trade press gushed was undeserved, if content never got to the transmitter.

With lights-out operation now so commonplace, is it time for “a hot button” that can override local automation, and let networks themselves take-to-air?

I’m not suggesting that radio should pre-produce obit packages for falling stars like Jackson or Houston, in the way that TV networks anticipate the passing of elderly ex-presidents. Even if we had the manpower to do so, it’s too ghoulish.

But radio needs a rapid-response plan. As-is, we’re losing buzz to Twitter, and failing our imperative to “own” music.



*See/hear/read more from consultant Holland Cooke at [www.HollandCooke.com](http://www.HollandCooke.com); and follow HC on Twitter @HollandCooke.*