



NVision 2009

The NewsVision Conference: Journalism Jobs in Transition

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Vivian Schiller, CEO of National Public Radio Excerpts¹ from her Keynote Speech to the NewsVision Conference

[A full presentation can be found at <http://newsvision.org/>]

Vivian began her presentation with two quotes:

"Nothing so wonderfully concentrates the mind as the prospect of a good hanging in the morning."

Samuel Johnson (1709-1784)

"A crisis is a terrible thing to waste."

Rahm Emanuel (1960 -)

Then, setting the scene at NPR, Vivian described a "best of times, worst of times" picture at the network. On the down side, she acknowledged that NPR, like most media companies, was going through a very rough financial patch, necessitating cuts in staff and service. On the positive side, she emphasized that the public radio audience in 2009 is large and impressive: a weekly cume of 27 million for NPR-originated programs and a weekly cume 32 million for all public radio programming. The daily audience for *Morning Edition*, alone, is 40% larger than the audience for any TV network morning show, and *Car Talk* draws an audience twice the size combined audience for *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*. She ended this introductory section emphasizing her optimism about the future of NPR given "the power of our audience and loyalty of our audience." Then she returned to the challenges facing NPR.



In an economic environment like this, the instinct, the urge, the pull to cut budgets where you're not making money is very strong. Every media company is going like this. At staff meetings, people will say "... with numbers like that (27 million listeners) and all those people listening to radio, which is where the bulk of our revenue is coming from and which is where the bulk of our impact is, why are you continuing to spend money on digital media, which has--for us, right now--a fraction of the audience and a fraction of the revenue?"

It's perfectly understandable why someone would say that.

But I am here today to tell you: *this is a crisis we will not waste*. The answer for us is not to retrench and go back to what we do best, but to regroup. We have to innovate. We

¹ Transcribed and edited for print

have to push. We have to take risks. We have to accept that it's okay to fail on certain efforts.

The entire news industry is changing before our very eyes. It's very rare that you actually see or feel history in the making. History is in the making in the news business. This is one of those moments when people are tested. And the news industry is being tested. Will we retrench or will we regroup? Will we cower in fear or will we go forward?

I say we absolutely must embrace the way that people use media today. It's scary. It's risky. The revenue models are unsure, but we have no choice.

So, what are we doing at NPR right now?

[Vivian begins with broad, foundational points]

First, we need to think about the way we approach media. We need to break down the core values of that make those 27 million people tune in to NPR every week—the intimacy, the authority, the storytelling, the voice, the quality of the voice (I mean that figuratively), the authenticity. And we need to break down (those values) to their core elements and reinvent them in new platforms.

I think we will succeed in this effort because NPR listeners already think of themselves as a community. Some think of themselves as a cult. The passion for NPR is incredibly strong. They feel the passion for NPR on an intellectual level and they feel it on a visceral level. I think the sense of ownership that people feel for NPR comes from the intimacy of the listening experience—when you're in your car, it's just you and "the voice."

[Next, she cites the importance of executive leadership.]

We brought in two stellar digital journalists. We brought in Dick Meyer (NPR News Executive Editor and Editorial Director for NPR Digital Media) who ran CBSNews.com and Kinsey Wilson (Senior Vice President and General Manager, NPR Digital Media) who came from USAToday.com. The two of them are spectacular. If feel like we have the right people on the bus.

[Then she goes on to list seven key objectives that NPR needs to accomplish.]

What specifically do we need to do as we start on this journey? There are seven points, and there is meaning to the order.

1. We (NPR) need to own audio.

We need to own radio, and we do. There is only one (radio) show that is listened to more than NPR's Morning Edition (i.e., Rush Limbaugh's daily talk show). We need to own audio in web streaming, in podcasting, in every way that people use audio.

People talk about radio as this legacy, dinosaur medium, and bucket it in the same category as newsprint and television, but in fact, radio it's an amazingly transportable medium, when you think about everything (digital devices) being a tuner. So owning audio on all platforms is fundamentally and absolutely necessary--but not sufficient.

We cannot expect a generation of digital natives to make NPR their (primary or only) news source, if all we give them is streaming audio. It's terrific that we have it, but it's not enough... (Just as) we would not expect them to make the New York Times website their only news source if all it offered was text. This would not take advantage of the way the web works. It's not recognizing the way news is consumed.

2. We need--as an organization at NPR and throughout the newsroom--to fundamentally understand the web.

Our website is not good enough. The biggest evidence of that is: in surveys of users tell us the number one reason why people come to NPR.org is either to hear the end of a radio story that they missed or to find out more about a story (that they heard). That's terrific and we need to offer that. But to me that indicates that we are not a destination in our own right. That smacks of "companion." Which is necessary, but not sufficient.

We need to give users a much more compelling reason to come to npr.org. We are re-launching our site, and more importantly, we are training the ranks of our stellar journalists to understand and to produce for the web.

Unlike a print organization, we don't start with one of the most basic ingredients of any website, which is text. That makes it a little tougher for us. And (our producers) are people who used to being the very best at what they do--and they are best at the craft of radio--so it's tough to move to a another medium and not be the best.

With help of the Knight Foundation (\$1.5 million grant + \$1 million from NPR), we are doing a systematic training of all of our journalists, training our staff in digital storytelling. So far, 55 journalists have gone through a five-week training; we will have 90 more (through the program) by the end of October (2009). The rest will attend shorter sessions.

We are teaching elementary, practical skills:

- How to write a great web news story or feature
- How to write a blog
- How to take good pictures
- How to think like news consumers

We want our producers to understand and to feel *how a story will appear on the web*--in the same way they think about how a radio piece will sound when it's played on the radio.

The impact of this training has been huge. We can already see the difference. We can see the creativity bubbling up.

3. We need to make our content transportable.

We're well on our way, and (in mobile delivery) we were an early leader. It helps to be in a non-commercial company, where you don't have to think about every click having to be monetized. For us, the most important thing is influence, for our stories to be read, to be heard.

So, when we put out RSS feeds, we put them out as full text, something I couldn't have done at the New York Times. We were one of the first to release our content to developers through an open API. We will be releasing other API's and we'll be sponsoring a hack day this summer, so we can get the developer community engaged with our content. You need the entire community of people who are passionate about this stuff out on the wider web to have fun with your content.

4. We need to make our content communal.

Like I said, the NPR audience is ready for this, even if they are not all digital natives. The sense community and ownership around NPR makes this possible.

5. We need to increase innovation in our core journalism--in radio, in digital; on a national and on a local level.

Our explanatory journalism is one of our great strengths. A perfect example of innovation is Planet Money. To me, this is the prototype of innovation. It's the classic "test and learn," nimble approach to developing new ideas. A couple of guys, Alex Bloomberg and Adam Davidson decided that there was so much economic terminology being bandied about that people did not understand, they decided that they wanted to start a special and a couple of features, called Planet Money, which was a way to explain what was going on in the economy and to use humor in doing so. And it has taken off like a rocket, it's our number most downloaded podcast; it's a daily blog; it's a weekly radio report; it's a series of special in cooperation with This American Life. And it is absolutely the prototype of how we need to innovate and incubate ideas across all platforms.

We also need more investigative journalism. This is an area where as local newspapers die away, there's going to be a gaping hole in American society. It's an area that we have focused on somewhat and will be focusing on more in the future.

6. We need to harness the power of the public radio system that works on a national and local level.

One of my number one goals is to work with public radio stations, which are all independently run. We are a membership organization; we do not have any control over any of the stations. This is fundamental to the relationship between NPR and the local stations.

But we need figure out a way to work together to harness the power of stations that have roots and deep loyalty in every city, town and campus in America. Some of them have quite wonderful web products--because they have the money. Most of them don't. What NPR can do is enable and connect together the constellation of local websites all over the country, to bring the quality up, by making blanket deals with vendors (for software and services), by training them how to use the API, so they can import NPR content into their sites; so they can their import their content into the API, so we put it on NPR.org; And most important, so they can share their content with one another.

I love the notion of local websites that serve the local community, that are owned and operated on the local level and use NPR national and international news on their sites

and pull from the local community and create original journalism and listings at the grassroots level, and become the must-go-to digital town square in each community.

7. We at NPR feel that we need to help all of journalism.

I think we will look back at this moment as a watershed moment. Local newspapers are dying. Many cable news programs are going more talk. Network news is losing audience and thousands of journalists are out of work...and if surveys are to be believed there will be thousands more (losing their jobs).

The big loser in all of this is American Democracy.

NPR will be fine, we have that audience. I'm completely optimistic about our future. We do have to weather this storm, but we have ways to get out of it, as will a few other major news sites. But we need many news organizations to keep our country strong. We need to help each other; we need to partner; we need to experiment; and we need to accept and agree that we will continue. We will not accept failure. We will keep trying different models until we get it right. There's just too much at stake.

There are signs of optimism across the industry. Just this morning, Huffington Post today announced a 1.75 million for investigative journalism. We at NPR are looking for ways that we can become conveners across the broader range of journalism, not just in public broadcasting.

We need to pull together; we need to work as an industry. We're just too important as an industry to fail.