Reshaping the Public Radio Newsroom for the Digital Future

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Abstract: This paper provides a discussion of NPR's journey as it strives to become a more multimedia savvy company. The paper details the early vision of NPR's leaders – one that included an emphasis on the web and particularly the move to visual storytelling and the extensive retraining necessary to achieve this goal—as well as the progress review at the mid-point of the transformation that caused the strategy to become more organic to the organization and tailored to the mission and employee base of the organization. An examination of NPR's "lessons learned" provides insights for other organizations involved in a variety of media convergence issues as well as its ability to model important elements of a learning organization in a time of dramatic change.

Reshaping the Public Radio Newsroom for the Digital Future

Introduction:

News organizations that are currently undergoing the transition from a legacy news media model to a digital, online reality face tremendous challenges. It is now well understood that many organizations in legacy media face a "transform or die" imperative – most obvious, perhaps, in the newspaper industry where circulation in the US is in steep decline.[1] News organizations are forced to make difficult decisions; in a time of decreasing resources due to staff cuts and budget reductions, they must figure out how to think broadly about the future and invest in the innovations that can help light the path of success, or at least prevent bankruptcy. At the same time, these news organizations must hold on to their core values, both to keep producing the level of quality that maintains both their credibility and their loyal audiences and to retain a sense of cultural continuity within each organization in order to withstand the conflicts and tensions that come with tremendous change.

[1]The plunge in U.S. newspaper circulation is accelerating, as "Average weekday circulation at 379 daily newspapers fell 10.6 percent to about 30.4 million copies for the six months that ended on Sept. 30, 2009 from the same period last year, according to the U.S. Audit Bureau of Circulations. The pace of decline more than doubled compared with last year. From September 2007 to September 2008, circulation fell 4.6 percent" (MacMillan, Oct. 26, 2009).

This paper explores one period in National Public Radio's attempt to reshape itself for the digital future –2007-2009. NPR's sense of the future, like many in radio, was that the precipitous decline in the print new industry could easily become their own nightmare. The best way to address this looming problem appeared to be for NPR to become a digital hub of innovation. And, thanks to a $1.5 million Knight Foundation grant, large portions of the staff could be retrained in order to accomplish this vision. According to the goals of the grant (Fest, 2007), NPR would be aided by the Knight Digital Media Center (split between $2.8 million for UC Berkeley and $2.4 million for the University of Southern California). The grant supported:

· About 600 NPR staff in its new audio production and content management systems.

· 40 NPR senior managers, leaders and training staff to support's NPR newsroom of the future project, "Newsroom 2.0."

· 400 NPR reporters, producers, editors and other staff in multimedia skills .

This story of change and transformation requires a background in the news industry as well as general theories of organizational change and learning in addition to the case analysis of NPR.

Newsrooms and change

A number of scholars have explored newsrooms undergoing change in the age of digital media, often in print organizations. In a national survey, Gade (2008) found that an editor's influence in creating change in newsrooms depended on how integrated a newsroom was, the size of the newspaper, the profit emphasis, and their perceived organizational importance. Gade and Perry (2003) also looked at organizational change through the introduction of a new editor at the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* using theories of organizational development and found that employees failed to see how change initiatives were related to producing a better newspaper.

Ryfe (2009a; 2009b) used an ethnographic approach to examine a newsroom where an editor had mandated a vision less daily news and more enterprise reporting, only to find that this vision was inconsistent with reporters ingrained patterns. Ryfe (2009b) argued that some of this had to do with a disconnect between reporting culture and editorial vision, "a sense of belonging is absolutely crucial for generating the collective imagination necessary to bear these costs" (p. 678). Meier (2007) argued that Central European newsrooms, in the push towards convergence, were aided by eliminating traditional boundaries between departments and actually physically restructuring the newsroom.

But the speed of information dissemination has changed the way that newsrooms have to operate in a web based world and new, multiplatform modes of news production. Klinenberg (2005) argues that newsrooms have been restructured and journalists' daily patterns have been reformulated in order to make way for what he calls the "news cyclone" of the 24-7 news cycle (p. 54). Boczkowski (2009a; 2009b; Boczkowski & de Santos, 2007), in a series of articles, outlines how newsrooms are increasingly moving towards homogenization of content in an effort to stay ahead of competitors. He has also observed a restructuring of hard and soft news content where hard news is little more than re-written wire stories, and soft-news takes on a bifurcated world within the newsroom as reporters and editors have more space to write these stories. In some cases, multiplatform journalism has ended up looking more like a primary platform with some secondary support as Singer (2004) notes in her study of four American converged newsrooms.

It is important not to give too much primacy to the simple existence of new technology as a force of change itself. As Deuze (2007), like structurationists (Barley, 1986; DeSanctis & Poole, 1994; Giddens, 1979), argues that technology does not itself reshape work patterns, but it

how that technology gets taken up in practice. This paper underscores the human element, how executives in a newsroom can shape a vision about the use of technology in a newsroom – and how that technology is then actually taken up and experienced.

This paper explores change in the production of new by applying the theory of sensemaking to the decisions, practices and judgments of NPR executives and staffers as they came to their understanding of their new vision for change. Sensemaking (Weick, 1995) is most broadly an activity and a process about invention and reflexivity. For Weick, there is no way to talk about organizations that do not "allow for sensemaking to be a central activity in the construction of the organization and the environment" (p. 70). At the core of sensemaking is both individual and group identity, formed by the interaction, interpretation, beliefs, and value assumptions of individuals who share and consider the acts of others with mutual relevance.

The processes of sensemaking, according to Weick (1995, p. 27-35), includes: a) being grounded in identity construction – where the sense maker is constantly going through redefinition and is socially constructed; b) understanding that much of sense making is retrospective – people can only know what they have done after they have done it; c) the enactment of sensible environments – such that people help create the events they are making sense of; d) creating the social environment – in that people make sense of each other; and e) being ongoing – people "chop moments" (p. 43) from their experiences to "extract cues from those moments" and make sense of things. Because people are driven by plausibility rather than accuracy, the process of sensemaking often involves bringing coherence to things in a pragmatic way. Leaders can extract cues from moments in the organization where their vision either fails or is taken up by members of the organization, and from this, make sense of their overarching vision, adjust, recalibrate and bring order to the organization.

Weick's sensemaking is useful to apply to an organization like NPR because sensemaking views organizations as evolving on a continual basis, and as creating stabilizing forces through routines and of course, ongoing communication so that people can share their sensemaking experiences and create common understandings. Organizations can be characterized by the way they make these processes visible and ones of choice - and if all things work well, people feel better about being a part of an organization.

Method and Data Collection

Our data for this paper include observations from a strategic communication planning workshop, interviews with key executives, interviews with staff members who went through the training sessions, observations of network meetings and the observation of a workshop that brought together network executives and executives from NPR's key member stations. The time frame is from January 2008 to January 2010 although we have historical documents from the onset of the Knight Foundation Grant.[2]

These data were analyzed primarily using key themes, particularly honing in on ideas such as "new technology," "views on training," "views on leadership," "views of organizational structure," and "views about change" and "sense of NPR" or what the organization called "NPRness." As part of our request to honor confidentiality at NPR in return for access, we do

[2] In January 2008, when the Knight Digital Media Center held a summit for NPR leaders to discuss the new change initiatives for NPR training we developed a pre-workshop survey for the participants to identify the clarity of NPR's vision and points of strength and/or friction facing NPR. Then, we observed the strategic communication and planning leadership meeting held at USC for these executives and some top staff. We then followed this up with an on-site visit in May 2008, and then held 16 interviews with training participants past and present as well as other members involved in the change process in September 2008. We followed this up with further interviews with top executives held in February 2009, then again in September 2009, and finally regrouped for another strategic meeting, this time with member stations, early in January 2010. Disclosure: the second author gave a lecture at each of summits.

not name the people we are quoting and have to constrain the use of material that could be traced to the interviewee/speaker.

I. Newsroom 2.0—The Stern vision

NPR's initial digital strategy began under the direction of then CEO Ken Stern. He called this vision "Newsroom 2.0." This was Stern's way of bringing NPR into the digital future, a vision he shared with then Senior VP of Programming Jay Kernis, the founder of NPR's Morning Edition. This vision saw NPR as not only "in audio but in text, and video, and photography, and graphics, and whatever else comes along" (Kernis, 2007, p. 3). Stern and Kernis took their cues from the convergence happening at newspapers around the country. Kernis described what he saw as the NPR of tomorrow – a "single/editorial production line – one, digital newsroom, where editors, reporters and producers can access a single system to coordinate, approve and edit content for multiple platforms" (p. 6). The goal was to retain the core of NPR "NESS" – or core values – standards of excellence, balance, in-depth coverage, and integrity – while moving toward a multiplatform vision.

This vision was to be enabled by the Knight Foundation grant. It offered the resources to retrain nearly 400 NPR staffers in multimedia production as well as offer leadership development for key executives and create alignment around the vision. The plan included a training program originally developed by UC Berkeley's instructors for its digital boot camps for print reporters. Over seven intense weeks, NPR staff attended a series of training modules that included instruction in: flash, video, digital photography, and in editing the products of those media in order to create content for NPR's web site. A workshop at USC would set the plan in motion by investing "change leaders" with the facts, figures and guiding narratives that would be needed to convince their colleagues "back home" (members of the organization who did not get

to attend the workshop) that they should embrace the new vision and go through the training process in order to become a part of their digital future. [3]

Stern's vision was intended to augment NPR's traditional strength in audio with video and other digital amenities. Stern argued that NPR's output needed to be available on whatever platforms people had access to – from social networks to ipods to mobile—using a concept of convergence often called the "one-man-band" approach. This concept is based in multi-platform story-telling and training staff in new equipment and software as well as a new way of thinking about the work process. But his plans for the future did not include an explicit mechanism to involve the member stations and some of those executives were concerned that a stronger NPR Web site with more multimedia content might draw away their audiences and leave them in a shrinking radio industry.

II. Planting the seeds for the vision & training

At the workshop, NPR executives and staff were introduced to a number of experts from the media industry who told them about the increasingly dire straits facing news media but also about the opportunities that existed in a multiplatform world that could connect with NPR audiences. NPR's own innovators and researchers also informed these "change leaders" about projects NPR had launched or was piloting so that they could engage with audiences in new

[3] NPR convened on USC's campus in January 2008 for a digital leadership summit. On hand were approximately 40 people whom top leadership had identified as "change leaders" – managers, reporters, editors and other staff whom would be likely to spread the message that change was coming to NPR. The thrust of the multi-day workshop was to a) convince these potential "change leaders" that NPR needed to change and b) to encourage them to spread the message of how NPR would change – via these training sessions that the Knight Digital Media Center would administer.

ways. NPR executives and staff were divided into teams to create and pitch a new project to NPR – a challenge to get them to think outside of their radio-centric box.

Prior to the workshop, the NPR leaders were sent a link to a survey about the new vision. The results of the survey indicated that staff were concerned about upcoming changes at NPR for a variety of reasons: including 1) the perception that the organization as a whole resists change; 2) that it was not multimedia ready; 3) the lack of a clear vision or sense of priorities for NPR; and 4) the lack of strong leadership at the organization. Taken together, these concerns indicated that there was real doubt within the executive and managerial ranks about the capacity of the organization and the 27 respondents also indicated they were unsure if NPR had the right people in place with the right vision to succeed.

The survey served as a sense-making experience for NPR staff, as they were able to see, collectively, what barriers and opportunities they saw as they faced an uncertain future. They saw themselves overwhelmingly as a collaborative group, continuously expected to be abreast of new information and continuously learning. At the same time, they feared that ventures into the Web-first world would harm their culture—their overarching organizational value of "NPR-ness." This NPR-ness reflected expressions of core organizational values. To most, it meant integrity, credibility and trust, good storytelling, and a commitment to core values. One respondent, in all caps, said it meant, "HIGHEST QUALITY STORYETLLING AND JOURNALISM." Respondents also used the words "curiosity, creativity, ability to surprise, perspective, humor and playfulness." NPR-ness, to one, meant, "playfulness, long-form exploration, mix of arts and culture with hard news, integrity, smart but not highbrow." Others, noting the core values, saw NPR-ness as journalism that stood apart from the larger din of the "crass commercialism of other media."

The survey provoked considerable discussion at the workshop and was followed by the opportunity for NPR staff and executives to deliver elevator pitches as to why the training was necessary and why change was necessary at NPR. Each "change leader" was given the task of going back to his or her "home" at NPR with this elevator pitch and was told to give this speech to fellow employees in order to help prepare them for change. After the workshop, an intranet wiki was established to keep up the dialogue but it was quickly disbanded.

III. Departures of Key Staff and Reintegration of a New Team

Just three days after the NPR workshop at USC, Kernis announced his resignation and his decision to return to his roots in television. Then, a few short months later on March 6, 2008, Ken Stern announced his resignation. The reason for his resignation was widely cited as a lack of ability to find a shared vision for a digital future that included NPR's member stations and for focusing too much on multimedia to the possible detriment of the core brand. As a result, Stern was essentially forced out of his position by the NPR board – which consists of many member stations heads - because his vision did not include these stations and may have been too threatening (Flokenflik, 2008).

During our May 2008 visit, one interviewee discussed some of the concerns that had been brewing regarding Stern's vision and his thoughts about the departure:

> There has never been a consistent vision. Ken articulated that video was our strategy but he could not explain that….We did a brown bag seminar and they showed some of the professional video work and people are asking how to get on the list. There is grass roots to the extreme issue though and we have to figure out how to really do this—if I wanted

to put a video on the website I would need approval from 18 people and folks will get frustrated.

Such a mismatch between vision and implementation underscores the importance of developing a unified and collective vision for change.

Other departures followed. NPR's longtime digital head, Maria Thomas, who had all but started the NPR Web presence, left in April. Her collaboration with Senior VP for News Ellen Weiss had been to present a unified vision for change, but with her departure, Weiss noted, "It took three people to replace her." New bodies needed to be put in place so that the new vision had some agents of change.

New and important hires were made – among them, bringing Dick Meyer from CBS to be the editorial head of digital operations. Meyer came six days after Thomas' departure and his title was intended to insure that someone with editorial knowledge would have a hand in the running of digital operations. Kinsey Wilson of USA Today then joined NPR as Senior VP for Digital Operations, bringing another executive with both editorial content experience as well as digital experience into a key leadership position. The new leadership team was deemed complete with the announcement of a new CEO in November 2008 when Vivian Schiller, the former head of the day-to-day operations of the *New York Times'* digital operations, joined NPR. Recalibrated, NPR had a new management team with Ellen Weiss, the Senior VP for News, remaining as the anchor of the change effort.

IV. The Summer of 2008

In Summer 2008, prior to the completion of the new leadership team, the multimedia training sessions had just begun. At this point, the change language was as much about

rebranding as it was about retraining. We were told by one NPR executive at the company about what the new NPR would stand for, "Captivating, Open & Smart," yet we also heard another catchphrase for NPR – to be "basic, relevant and vital." Then another executive told us that NPR's mantra was "service, revenue and potential." Another executive told us:

> Our vertical websites are weak now. We need to strengthen our news—headlines don't change too often. Stories are robust. There is an insatiable appetite for help from the digital group. So I said cut the cord and give them the tools to do it themselves—extend the functionality of templates. Need to embed digital people. We will need section producers for the vertical websites. It will be a combination of internals and new hires. The train has left the station. There will be confusion between who does what.

The executive acknowledged that change would be difficult for the ingrained cultures of many of the traditional shows NPR produces to accept and thought the best approach would be to imbed digital people in these shows. This was, of course, a different conception of convergence than the "one-man-band" approach.

At this point, new executives were starting to see the scope of the content creation process, and were beginning to articulate some of the challenges to any kind of digital vision for the future. Another executive noted:

> No one here keeps an eye on a digital content audit. We can't do it. Our tech infrastructure is very primitive. We need a new interface with the content. There is a huge difference between broadcast site and print. There is no plop factor like in newspaper—nothing automated and it is very labor intensive. Except for AP no one else has the local to national –right now everyone is investing in aggregation.

Also hanging in the air were questions about NPR's relationship with its member stations. NPR executives were confident that they could pull off a "culture change" in their own newsroom, but they were also aware that they were part of a much larger interconnected network of stations that could not be left behind – not only because these stations provide revenue to NPR but also because these stations provide the main audience for NPR content. It would clearly benefit NPR if these stations were also to be digitally savvy, so the executives were struggling to find ways to embrace member stations as part of the digital plan.

The first of the Knight Training programs had also begun – these were seven week introduction programs designed to turn each staff member into a multimedia storyteller. Each would learn to produce video, create flash graphics, shoot pictures, and then produce them into audio slide shows that would be web-ready. But several of the people we spoke with viewed the training program with suspicion. A producer from one of the high-profile shows noted:

> It's not been explained to me to figure out how or when it is that I am going to go off and do a video—might be easier for an intern trained that way. I'm not sure the web can inspire people to listen—I am still caught up in the purity of radio. It still just feels like an experimental initiative.

One of the reporters who had just finished with the first round of training found that it was difficult for him to figure out how to balance his time and still maintain his regular reporting duties. He found that he was working longer hours to keep up, though he admitted that everyone seemed to be in this economic environment. Still, to take on any additional responsibilities, as far as digital was concerned, he'd have to take away his time from radio. He noted:

> A lot of this will depend on the deal I can strike with my editors plus you don't want to be off the air much. Now we can think about how to approach a story with all these tools

> in mind. In the training I did the tools by myself because I don't expect to get a lot of support. This is a small company. I can put the packages together. Even in 7 weeks I can only do some things. Flash templates are not pretty. I can do digital video but I am not too sure about flash. Each time you go out you get shrewder about how to do it.

This reporter also noted that NPR had encountered one problem that no one had anticipated—the training sessions were originally developed for newspaper "digital boot-camps"– but in an audio environment, it turned out that many people didn't have the capacity to write text for the Web. As a former print reporter, he knew how to write text for the web, but broadcast writing, he claimed, is very different from Web writing.

Others were quite positive about the training program. Many welcomed the opportunity of the Knight training as a way to see the new possibilities that they could bring to their audio work:

> Today is our first day back at the job. But my thinking is already altered and I thought of a visual story before I thought of an audio story. And I thought of a sidebar interview we could do. This is happening organically.

Another spoke about being aware of the possibilities but not yet up to speed at the pace her boss wanted:

> The headline is that it was great. [The training] It let us know where the tech is going and what we are capable of doing. I am comfortable with audio slide shows and less with video. My boss is very gung ho on this but wants turnaround that is very fast. But I am comfortable but not proficient.

After this first round of training was completed, participants gave presentations on their story ideas and web products. NPR executives also consulted with the trainees, their bosses, and

the web consultants about the content, delivery, time invested in the training program. They decided to reshape the training, primarily based on feedback from the first round of trainees. They curbed the training from 7 weeks to 5 weeks. They also were debating about the focus on video in the training. There was certainly an argument that video was important but they weren't sure how much to emphasize video since the level of training they received meant that some of the radio staff were unable to produce quality video for the Web. Two of the executives explained to us in that they were considering a recalibration of the training modules:

> Executive 1—what we need is more emphasis on bread and butter and a large part of that is text. The other stuff wins awards but it does me a whole lot more good if someone can get me 500 words on a breaking story like the Attorney General drops dead—not a slide show. Video is not the holy grail.
>
> Executive 2—It all starts with the words. If you don't have a compelling first line no one will listen. They (the UC Berkeley instructors) have been very receptive.

The executives also reconsidered how they were going to execute the training: in the future, they would group people by verticals (reporter, editor, producer) for the training and in one case, send half of the science desk for training at one time (in Sept. 2008, during a time filled with political coverage). Thus, NPR executives were responding to what they had seen from their employees and were crafting a new vision of the future and how they would like to retrain their employees in order to create that future.

V. Fall 2008: An Evolving Vision

By Fall 2008, the vision for NPR was expanding. Leaders were beginning to take into consideration the new needs of the digital media consumer as well as one that began to discuss ways to integrate member stations into NPR's plans for their ongoing digital evolution. The

thrust of the vision was to treat NPR consumers as people that could access NPR at any time and at any place. In addition, executives were starting to see the work of NPR digital as a world apart from NPR radio – rather than a replication, NPR would be doing something different on the Web than it would on the radio – though it would still have the same sense of "NPR-ness." At the same time, executives were starting to see the challenges that were particularly unique to creating a digital, multi-platform environment in what was primarily an audio newsroom. These challenges were reflected in the ways that executives continued to rethink the purpose and goals of the Knight Training program and the frustrations that some of the trainees had as they tried to translate their new skills back to the newsroom.

The vision for NPR in October 2008 had evolved from the Ken Stern world of video and the idea that everything multiplatform was possible to a more considered version of how NPR would use its resources with respect to the NPR consumer. As one executive noted:

> Strategy is one thing and reality is another, and it has to be translated into stories and into graphics and into headlines. The nugget of NPR's strategy revolves around the acceptance of a basic thesis: which is that it is disrespectful of the modern news consumer to insist that your news is available in only one form in only one platform… for NPR to say to our community of users that you may only get our journalism on radio when we say you can, at the time we say, is profoundly disrespectful. The strategy is the discovery of how to put NPR quality storytelling and journalism on a new platform; how to convey NPRness online, through mobile, through podcast. And not any more complicated than that, and you can really over-think that.

But, as executives explained to us, this new strategy was somewhat unique to NPR as it turned out to be in a different position than most news outlets. As a radio network, it lacks the

basic structure newspapers have: for example, written content that can be directly uploaded to the web site. Newspapers also have photography staffs that can quickly have their photography turned into web images. Broadcast sites have compelling video which again can be turned easily into images for the Web. NPR, in contrast, has scripts which are written for radio – and are quite different from the written text one is used to seeing in print or online. NPR has "no natural visual or written content" according to one executive, which creates a tremendous resource question for NPR, according to that executive. NPR would have to go out and hire massive numbers of staff just to compete with the CNNs and NY Times of the world, and as a result, NPR needs to be more "selective" with what it chooses to use on its Web site and make multiplatform. It is a non-profit that does have resources, but these resources do have limitations. The executive noted:

> I have no naturally occurring web content, everything has to be hand sewn on saddle row. All I have is a bunch of sound. The minimum is to link and create a headline and code it in. To do all the things we need to do is labor intensive. Turning radio stories into web stories and getting pictures is multimedia, or integrating the web. We don't want to repurpose AP, we want it to be NPR, so its phenomenally time consuming and NPR has an intense culture of quality.

At the same time, however, NPR news executives also saw a vision for NPR digital being apart from the regular NPR shows and NPR desks in what was described by many staffers as a highly "siloed" organizational structure. Though digital staff attend NPR show meetings, "They aren't supposed to be basing what they do off the show," said a NPR news executive.

More broadly, NPR news executives spoke to us about the relationship between the online and digital newsrooms and noted how difficult it was to figure out how the two groups would interrelate. As of October 2008, the digital and news staff had been reconfigured and put

under different organizational directives three times – switching between news and digital heads. Ultimately, it was decided that all "content" including digital content would go up through the news pipeline of the organization. NPR.org, as such, has a different mission, described by one executive this way:

> If you don't minimally do a good job of giving the audience an NPR snapshot of the day's news we are not doing our job. We will not be a breaking news site – we won't be up to minute or up to the now or incremental shouted out news of the second, but we are going to have NPR's take on what are the NPR stories of the hour – part of NPRness is the story selection. It's not the incremental; not the tabloid.

Another executive described the difference between the digital vision for NPR.org and the NPR radio world with this analysis:

> I don't want digital news to be derivative of radio news – that is not how the web should be produced – [it should be] what's going on now, what do we need to be produced? [The digital news executive] is at the hub every morning, he knows exactly what's going on. The show is producing for 4 pm, but we need to be producing for 9 am or 10 am. The web audience is not fixed but a continuum. [The digital news executive] needs to assign someone to write for web as quickly as possible as opposed to doing something that may not get on the radio.

The executive then reflected on the uncertainties ahead:

> The challenge for me is that the system works for them now but isn't really the right system. And to move out of their comfort zones of a system that grew up when it was one program and is suddenly not just multiple programs but an entity that is never going off the air.

Thus the digital NPR.org strategy was being rethought as a more complicated entity within the already structured and acculturated world of NPR. It would not reproduce NPR, but it would share NPR values. The digital world for NPR would be responsive to user demands for information on their time, but it would be calibrated according to the idea of "NPRness." And as such, a more customized vision of what digital NPR means was beginning to emerge.

One of the more difficult aspects of the transition – and the original reason for the departure of CEO Ken Stern—was the failure of Stern to consider his relationship to member stations. However, at this time, NPR executives were more broadly conceiving of a way for NPR member stations to become part of the digital movement forward as active participants in this next phase of vision development. Though the details still needed to be worked out, it was clear that NPR leaders saw that they had a unique opportunity in the combination of local, national and international news-gathering potential that few news organizations could match. One NPR executive described the potential of NPR as doing what the BBC does in Britian, noting that newspapers for the most part are regional and that television reporting is often so information-poor. He had this vision of the affiliate-NPR digital future:

> You could go to NPR.org and you could put in your own zip code or your own favorite station and see all the local news from your area and you could participate through NPR.org in chatting with people through your own local community, see listings of little league and soccer schedules through NPR.org. Or conversely, you could go to member station web sites and see same stuff but also see international stuff, and be able to connect with people from all over the country if you are international or national. We would be able to aggregate up local news from all over and disaggregate down in one big breathing system.

The goal, too, would be to create a system founded on principles of social media. NPR had just launched its own internal social media platform, the NPR Community site, where one can friend NPR listeners and staff. NPR, then, at this point was expanding its vision both in terms of its affiliate digital strategy and through the integration of social media.

VI. Multimedia Training, reconsidered – Fall 2008

In October 2008, interviews were again conducted to see how the training program had changed and how the overall vision was developing. We spoke to three groups of trainees: the first pilot group (seven weeks of training); the second pilot group (five weeks of training); and the third pilot group (five weeks of training). The third group was in the midst of training during our visit.

A number of key themes emerged. The first was that the training was not long enough to give the trainees enough instruction and practice to be able to create multimedia content that was of the same level of quality that NPR demanded for its radio content – and ultimately expected of its web content. As one of the executives noted:

> Part of it reflects on the disconnect of what we were asking people to do. It's a little like if we plopped someone into radio in five weeks, are we going to teach you to be a radio journalist and produce complicated radio productions?… we were not enabling success. People left Knight [training] thinking that they should be producing flash and edited video stories and not only was that something we couldn't support, but they couldn't take a good picture, and they weren't using video in a productive way, and it was a (unforeseen) clash between (existing) digital and video staff about how much support they could provide.

One of the Knight trainees from the second round of the training sessions, whose home is in the arts section rather than the news section, noted that he wouldn't be able to use his multimedia training because he simply wasn't good enough at it and needed more practice.

> "They [photo slide shows, photography, video, flash] were fun to do when we were doing the Knight training and with little videos you can tell a completely different story. You can do the same with a slide show, but you know, it not something you can learn in five weeks, you can learn the rudiments in five weeks but you really have to keep practicing and practicing to get really good at it.

The executives adjusted their expectations about what they wanted from the video as a result.

> It's much more important to me to have [reporter] in Jerusalem understand if he sees live and action and he can provide us with 30 seconds or 1 min of video which is much more important than 4 minute video story when he should be working on radio. It's not a good use of his time.

The executives also noted that there had not been clear goals articulated for the first two training sessions, but that they had had much more extensive interaction between the digital desks and the science desks during the third iteration of the training. This training focused more on photography and text and less on video and flash, and more importantly, included people across the levels of desk hierarchy.

But there was still confusion about how the Knight training was going to fit into ordinary workflow. Now that the desks were more aware of the amount of time that needed to be devoted to long projects, people hoped they might be able to avoid workflow problems. But workflow concerns extended both to Knight trainees in as well as to more general concerns about how to integrate digital and news production. The result was that the first rounds of Knight training had

not been integrated properly into a daily workflow. Some people were able to go back to their jobs and find ways to use their digital training whereas others found that they couldn't use their digital training in addition to doing their regular work.

One correspondent, who has a background in print, described how his work was in fact adequate enough for the NPR web site and he did feel competent in his work, but that he was being asked to produce radio stories, copy for the Web in text form from his stories, and he wanted to make time to do additional projects now that he "saw that it was possible to tell these stories in different and interesting ways."

Another senior producer found that he simply couldn't fit his digital work into his every day output. He had been on assignment and wanted to do special projects from the field. In order to accommodate his digital requests, he was working extra time – overtime in fact. This issue meant, to his supervisor, that digital was actually costing the company more money because it had not been successfully integrated into the workflow.

As one NPR executive explained, workflow continues to be a challenge for the organization as it challenges people to leave their comfort zones and take on new responsibilities:

> I think this is one of the things identified as a goal with [this] desk is that we can't impose workflow from the top down. It has to emerge from the bottom up. Shows or desks are organically changing.

The executive preferred to take an audience-centered view of what workflow would look like:

> Workflow is the big question that we have to keep on talking about. I have to keep the conversation at a 30,000 foot level as a news division… So much of my work is about interdependence and mutual respect for what each other needs and in terms of supporting

what the audience needs as opposed to sometimes supporting what the show thinks it needs and the desk thinks it needs.

The training recalibration should serve as a warning to other news organizations –an off-the-shelf training program that has worked elsewhere may not work in another newsroom. As one executive explained, "One of the key things that emerged was that text is multimedia for us. We're not a newspaper so the training has to be different." The later emphasis was on creating a sense of multimedia thinking rather than multimedia technical ability. The idea was to get editors, producers and correspondents to understand what multimedia could add to a project, and how digital news could be integrated into their projects and workflow. With some groups, there were presentations on text and more emphasis on photography.

This not to say that NPR has not had its shining moments on the web – with or without training. Following the earthquakes in China, NPR hosts who previously had not had much training in multimedia saw the importance of continuing a conversation through a blog – something that surprised the executive in charge of news. In a way, the news dictated the need for transformation. Accompanying this earthquake and NPR's coverage – before the Knight training – were some of NPR's most widely-viewed graphics. To NPR executives, the Chengdu Diaries, as they were called, demonstrated the ability of NPR to act flexibily in times of great need – and underscored the capacity for NPR to function on a digital level, reinforcing their belief in their organizational change capability.

VII. The New Vision

By January 2010, NPR had a new CEO, Vivian Schiller, who had been in her job for a full year. NPR came to USC prepared this time to share their recalibrated vision with key member stations. At this point, they believed strongly enough in what they were doing that they

felt they could share it with affiliates. Significantly, member stations were part of the conversation about change. Twelve different affiliates were invited to what was called the "Digital Leadership Summit for Public Radio." Those invited were not just executives but also included their online directors.

At this summit, member stations had the opportunity to hear from numerous marketing executives, technology gurus, social media analysts, futurists and change management experts. The participants experienced a workshop that was similar to the one held for NPR executives in January 2008. The need to change was reinforced. But most significantly, NPR executives expressed a forward-looking, inclusive vision for a more integrated, web-based affiliate network of relationships. And the station executives were invited to articulate their visions of enhanced integrated and support with the larger NPR network.

Stories were shared about how the digital training had been recalibrated yet again--"NPR-ized" –much smaller groups, now around 5 people were being trained at a time, and some for only two-day workshops on multimedia thinking. The overall goal of training 400 people as described at the outset of the NPR/Knight grant remained. But not everyone would go through the extensive training; instead, more staff would be exposed to multimedia thinking as a direction of how the company would grow in the future.

Early successes of this strategy emerged from change leaders within NPR. Without much digital training, the Weekend Edition show had become a hotbed of innovation. Talk of the Nation was also a site of new audience participation with Neil Conant regularly engaging with Twitter. Nina Totenberg was on Twitter, even if her intern happened to be writing the tweets. And NPR was particularly pleased with the launch of Planet Money – though the Web-friendly show Bryant Park had been cut, Planet Money was a podcast that had a live, active and involved

online audience. The show evolved and emerged naturally out of a need to respond to the economic crisis. But the show has a loyal audience following and depends on audience engagement for questions and content. This was a sign, according to executives, of NPR being able to naturally fulfill its vision by combining digital and news strategy and allowing the culture of the organization to change as it comes to understand its own multimedia vision.

Member stations would be part of the future digital strategy for NPR and NPR planned to help member stations boost their opportunities for news gathering and distribution, and provide best practices for their own digital mistakes. While they do not necessarily expect every member station to have a robust multimedia site, they do want member stations to remember that they have strong and loyal listeners to draw on for conversation and naturally occurring community-driven content.

News executives offered points of advice to member stations based on the experiences of change. The vision as stressed to NPR member stations for NPR.org was to provide breaking news in an NPR-style with selection and content; what one executive called "information on the real clock not on programming time." The lessons learned, though, were provided by Senior VP for News executive Ellen Weiss as stated here in 10 directives[4]:

1. **There is no end state –** change is always evolving
2. **Be realistic about how much multimedia you can handle**
3. **Communicate** (by this Weiss meant to encourage good conversations about change)
4. **Test and learn. Repeat.**
5. **Do not play into Web versus radio competition.**
6. **Demonstrate your affection and enthusiasm for digital work.**

[4]http://www.knightdigitalmediacenter.org/leadership_blog/comments/10_lessons_from_nprs_digital_transformation/

7. **Make tough decisions about what you want to stop.**
8. **Be transparent about metrics**
9. **Listen to people's concerns**
10. **Have reasonable expectations**

These were Weiss' best practices, culled from her team's assessment of NPR's ability to be innovative, flexible and adaptive to change. And as a result, NPR was in a position to develop new programs that were responsive to multimedia goals and audience needs, and able to form a coherent multimedia vision for digital operations – one that differed greatly from the one presented at the start of the digital transformation two years prior.

VIII. Conclusions

First, NPR demonstrates the characteristics of a learning organization, as discussed by Barker and Camarata (1998). Organizational learning can be defined as "developing new knowledge that changes behavior to improve future performance" (p. 443). The conditions necessary to develop a learning organization include trust, commitment and perceived organizational support. In addition, Barker and Camarata suggest that learning organizations are able to build shared visions and team learning – as well as to have a sense of systems thinking and personal mastery.

Second, Weick's (1995) concept of retrospective sensemaking helps us understand how NPR was able to make changes in its vision in a very complicated environment. It was not just a simple set of experiments that were tested and recalibrated with subsequent incremental changes, although it looks that way on the surface. It was more a process of doing and then talking about it to understand what had happened, again and again. In circumstances where metrics and goals

are still being developed, and the strategy itself is borrowed, only over the course of many months and many conversations can organizational members make sense of their actions relative to a changing environment since the measures are still emerging. The language of testing, experimentation and recalibration gives both insiders and outsiders that image of a controlled, rational process but the view from the inside is much fuzzier than those descriptors would indicate. The use of socio-technical language gives an aura of calm and rationality to a situation fraught with massive leadership turnover, political upheaval in the member station network, global economic turbulence, the need for rapid skill acquisition in a profession known to be resistant to change, along with a major shift in the expectations of that group formerly known as the audience. By constantly communicating that the training is an on-going experiment, the leaders create a frame that has space for both failure and change, but does not require organizational members to abandon their values. And when the tension between multimedia output and quality audio output stretches resources and frays nerves, quality audio retains its primacy in the system.

Through all these challenges, NPR continued to improve its performance as a news organization and continues to become more empowered in the digital age. The organization adapted its original vision, in part by bringing on new change leaders and losing others, and in part by adjusting what had been an ambitious retraining effort into one more calculated for the other important aspect of a learning organization – the idea of perceived organizational support. Within this context, NPR was able to assure employees that they would not be turning over the keys to radio anytime soon, but at the same time they had a vision to create employee confidence in a vision for the future that included a digital strategy for survival. NPR executives thought about the organization apart from previously existing silos of shows and desks and attempted to

incorporate digital news into the facets of existing silos; but also realized the importance of creating digital news as its own entity. NPR realized its own boundaries and limitations- in what it could expect from its employees and what it could expect from its member stations and enacted Weick's rule that good organizations create a pragmatic coherence to turbulent times. As a result, NPR stands well-positioned to continue to both adapt to the digital future and create it, even in a time of harsh economic conditions, what Ernie Wilson, the current head of the CPB and USC's Annenberg School, calls taking advantage of a "dire opportunity."

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