

ASJMC Speech

*Association of Schools of Journalism & Mass Communications*

**Saturday, Feb. 3, 2007 St. Louis**

Kernis 1-7-07 Draft #3 (As delivered)

Tom, thank you so much for those kind words, and for inviting me to speak with you today.

OK, here's my favorite public radio attempt at humor:

A station manager walks into her program director's office and asks: "When is the best time to schedule radio drama?"

The program director looks up from his computer, stops typing-- and says, "1943."

Fact is, every now and then, *devoted* public radio listeners will ask me why NPR doesn't air any radio drama anymore? And the reason is--great drama is expensive to produce, very few people can do it well, and more importantly, audiences basically stopped using radio to get their dramas and comedies some fifty years ago.

Which raises the more urgent question: five or ten years from now, where will people go for fact-based, news reporting and analysis—for coverage that puts events and ideas in a larger context? To public radio?

A year and a-half ago, my boss--NPR CEO Ken Stern—asked the staff this question: What good is it to be Smith-Corona—the maker of the finest typewriters in the world—to a world that doesn't need typewriters?

He asked that question to focus us on the revolutionary times we are now in. And to demand significant change.

Two years ago, I don't think I ever used the word podcasting.

Today, NPR is a leading provider of audio podcasts. Two or three of our titles frequently rank among i-Tunes Top 10 charts. NPR and our Member stations now offer some 360 different podcasts, and since launching our directory in August of 2005, there's been a total of 74 million downloads.

Are we leading or catching up?

You've probably heard this countless times in conversations with your peers, but some days, it feels like we're running a marathon just to stay in place.

Today, I'll talk about what NPR is doing to *win* the race--and what our efforts might mean to what's being taught at colleges and universities...realizing that very few young

people wake up one morning and think: yes, that's it, that's what I want to do--I'll go into public radio!

So, for a few minutes, let me take you behind-the-scenes.

After years of unprecedented growth, we've now experienced two years of slow declines in the public radio audience. Every week, some 29 million people still tune to public radio stations, but for the past few ratings books, we keep losing 2%.

Now that's better than what's happening in all of radio—and what's happening to newspapers and TV news—and our internet traffic continues to grow at a healthy pace--but it's obviously troubling nonetheless.

And the top researchers in the industry don't yet know why this is happening. Are people going elsewhere? Has public radio become too predictable, too grey, possibly--even boring?

Are people becoming fatigued by a constant diet of war, terrorism, seemingly unsolvable problems, and the constant bad behavior of prominent government, business and spiritual leaders? Has public radio missed the boat by ignoring Paris or Brad or Suri or Brittney?

We *do* know that the most important challenge now facing NPR is just capturing the attention of the audience. There is so much out there, all gently urging--or screaming loudly: [click here](#), [download this](#), [comment on that](#), [sign-up now for regular feeds or messages](#).

The battle over the dashboard alone keeps lots of people awake at night: there's AM and FM broadcast radio, hundreds of satellite radio channels, HD radio, thousands of internet radio stations, compact discs—all asking you to concentrate less on your driving.

Before I continue, please let me explain a reality that makes my job so...interesting: Yes, I have the title of Senior Vice President for Programming, which means I watch over the evaluation and creation of all NPR content on radio, online, and on hand-held devices. But I have nothing to do with the schedules of 800 individual public radio stations.

We're not a network in the classic commercial sense—we're a membership system. I control no air time on Member stations—there is no must-carry program schedule, like PBS has. You want to program news, talk, classical music, jazz, folk—it's up to you or whoever holds your license.

Stations *buy* programs from NPR—the programs that stations feel will best-serve their local and regional audiences.

They also buy programs from American Public Media, from Public Radio International and from independent producers. *A Prairie Home Companion*, for instance, is not an NPR program.

Neither is *This American Life*, although I am a huge fan of both Garrison Keillor and Ira Glass

But so many stations air our newsmagazines in drive time--Morning Edition and All Things Considered--people might think I am actually influential. Yes, we distribute the Car guys from WBUR in Boston, and once a year, I beg them to make fun of me at the end of the show.

One thing I *can* take credit for is leading an initiative at NPR we once called The Newsroom of The Future—which we’ve now re-titled as Newsroom 2.0.

And not unlike hundreds of newsrooms across the country, we’re trying to figure out how to efficiently and creatively produce content for many different platforms: one continuous 24/7 editorial and production process that brings together the work of the traditional radio newsroom and what’s happening in our digital division.

Even though NPR stands for National Public Radio, we believe that our future is not only in audio, but in text, and video, photography, and graphics, and whatever else comes along. This must sound quite familiar to all of you.

And we figure it will take at least three years to build this new newsroom, and after almost a year of research and brainstorming, we went out and hired a professional project director to manage the initiative, figure out who needs to play better in the sandbox, create a real timeline, , and keep us on it.

Another thing we did was ask our Audience and Corporate Research Department to examine the literature on the new newsrooms that are growing around the country. This past December, our researchers delivered an internal report on the “State of Converged Newsrooms.” We didn’t commission the report for public release. We just wanted to know what was going on in other newsrooms. A number of us also visited various newsrooms that we knew were ahead of us.

Here are some highlights: It’s written in researcher language—and even though I have tried to break apart some of the longer sentences--please bear with me for a few moments.

The report says: that the media industry is still in transition, as it debates how to translate its new convergence *potential* into the practice of contemporary newsrooms. (I know that convergence is a word that is no longer used, but that’s what our researcher used in his report, so rather than change it, I’ll just keep saying it.)

While most media analysts--and a growing number of scholars--are promoting convergence as a solution to the industry’s problems, many industry critics fear that convergence does not really address the sources of consumer discontent--and worse...

- Critics worry that 24-7 news reporting--and expanded partnerships with broadcasters--will reduce the scope for in-depth news reporting--force journalists to work longer and harder for the same pay--and generally undermine the quality of the news, further alienating the prospective news consumer. What little research is available suggests that these concerns may be somewhat overblown.

Nonetheless, convergence issues are playing themselves out in a growing number of newsrooms that are delivering news content across more than one media platform. One key source estimates that there are 100 news markets in the US (and Canada) where at least a minimum of multi-platform news sharing is occurring. The two most common forms of convergent partnerships are between print newspapers and their own web sites -- and between newspapers and television stations.

- There is a noticeable disjunction between the *expansive theorizing* about newsroom convergence and the *actual scope* of current practice.
- No major newsroom has collapsed its multi-platform news staffs into a single staff--or established a single focal point for managing news across all platforms. Instead, the various staffs collaborate *tactically* to achieve specific news goals. (That bullet point may be wrong, and if it is, we'd love to make a visit to that newsroom.)

In fact, a number of *inhibiting factors* seem to be limiting what media companies and their news organizations are prepared to do. These include:

- **Fear of failure.** Many media companies seem wary of “grand” experiments in convergence and want to take a wait and see approach, preferring to make easier, more marginal changes in the most obvious operational areas, without additional spending.
- **Fear of the Internet.** A key business model concern for news organizations is how to generate new revenues from the Internet, while preserving--as much as possible--the revenues from print and broadcast.

It is generally agreed that news organizations committed a serious error by not charging for advertising space when they first launched their websites. Since then, news organizations have debated whether and how to charge consumers for general access to their news sites, but have basically concluded that the nature of the Web--including active news competition from Yahoo and Google--would make it impossible to impose a general fee for browsing.

- **Fear of the Consumer.** Especially young consumers, who are not only turning away from television news and newspapers, but are also turning away from news in general, even news available online.

News organizations worry that media applications are changing so rapidly - and that consumer tastes are now so fickle – that it is nearly impossible to plan and budget for sustainable, long-term news programming.

Well, to continue mixing metaphors, we at NPR have confronted our fears and have plunged into the deep end of the digital newsroom. And we're probably 3 – 5 years behind a lot of others.

Right now at NPR, the radio News Division has some 400 staff members. Those are reporters, editors, producers, production assistants. Our Digital Division has 40 staff, members and approximately 15 of them are involved in creating content.

How can they work together so when a reporter comes up with a story—or is assigned one—he or she knows where the story will appear first--how many radio stories or online postings are expected--and how we can make the most of the story on various platforms? Or, to put it more bluntly, when will Nina Totenberg carry a camera and start blogging?

Here are some of the fundamental questions that we are grappling with:

- What will NPR look like in the year 2010? What will we produce? What will we provide on radio, on line, on hand-held devices, and in auditoriums?
- How will it be made? What will the new editorial and production process be?
- How will it be organized and managed? Who will be responsible for what?
- What skill sets will be necessary to do this? Who needs more training? Who else needs to be hired?
- What new systems and technology will we need?
- How do we foster audience participation?
- How will we *improve* the way content is created and delivered, in order to produce the highest quality, essential content around the clock?

And during months of discussions, more than 400 staff members told us that they want us to articulate a clear set of expectations about what NPR is asking them to produce in new media. And they want integrated systems that work.

On multiple platforms—and this is a big concern--they want to make sure that we continue to provide excellent journalism. Wherever the content appears, they want to tell stories that embody what is special about NPR--that “NPR-ness.”

It's clear that the NPR of tomorrow will be different from the NPR of today.

Today, the radio newsroom staff sort of “hand off” original content to the Digital Media editorial team for final editing and publishing.

Tomorrow, there will be 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. In this converged newsroom, NPR News staff will follow one clear line of editorial decision-making and approvals...

We are developing a single management line that will determine the priority for assignments. A newsroom in which reporters will be asked to file for radio, for the Web, and for podcasting--based on audience needs.

Today, the 24/7 Newsroom is still very much a Monday-Friday, 9-5 newsgathering operation, revolving around our magazine programs. There are very limited reporting or editing resources dedicated to the overnight or weekend hours.

Tomorrow, the Newsroom will provide news content 24 hours a day, 7 days a week where and when the global audience wants it. There will be staff operating around the clock—we're building a continuous news desk—to generate fresh material for multiple platforms.

Today, many decisions are made within silos.

Tomorrow, a group of colleagues we refer to as The Hub, will work within that digital newsroom to:

- ✓ Coordinate content decisions for broadcast radio, npr.org, mobile devices, live events, etc. What part of the story belongs on which medium and how quickly?
- ✓ The Hub will define coverage periods, main story themes, and top booking targets
- ✓ It will conduct ongoing editorial discussions throughout the daily news cycle in order to meet the demands of 24/7 coverage; and coordinate futures meetings of various desks and shows
- ✓ It will coordinate the work of crisis teams, shows and desks during breaking news coverage
- ✓ The Hub will manage workflow, resources and staffing, to eliminate unnecessary duplication.
- ✓ It will explore coverage possibilities with our Member stations.

You know what we've started experimenting with? All of the show executive producers and the desk editors actually sitting in the *same room*, talking to each other. Yes, they sit in front of various computer screens, but decisions that once took hours, now take minutes.

Today, we still duplicate reporting and production efforts, and unfortunately, miss opportunities to make the most of a story.

Tomorrow, we will collect once—and then report on multiple platforms.

Today, NPR News mostly operates with a one-to-many mindset—a one-way news delivery mindset.

Tomorrow, our news cycle will include the audience. They will be able to schedule content themselves, edit it, comment on it, question us, add to it, generate some of it, store it, send it to various devices, rate it, recommend or share it with others, and play with it.

As I said, a main concern of the staff is that the special qualities we've achieved in radio extend to other platforms. In our discussions, we started calling those qualities "NPR-ness," which eventually got shortened to "ness."

The message is: if we are really going in these new directions, it better look and read the way NPR sounds at its best.

And we talked about NESS so much that I thought we had better define what it actually is--so I did:

### **"NESS" BEGINS WITH PUBLIC RADIO'S CORE VALUES**

The Core Values were developed a few years ago by the program directors at Member stations (PRPD, Inc) who determined why our top shows (Morning Edition, All Things Considered, Fresh Air, Marketplace, A Prairie Home Companion, Car Talk) were so valuable to listeners. They conducted years of quantitative and qualitative research.

We discovered that if producers respect the core values in content, the audience will recognize that content as worthy of its time and attention. The values are expressed as Qualities of the Mind & Intellect, including a love of lifelong learning, substance, curiosity, credibility, accuracy, honesty, respect for the listener and purpose; Qualities of the Heart and Spirit, including idealism, humor, being inspired about public life and culture, and a belief in civil discourse; and Qualities of Craft: excellence in our use of the radio medium, a human voice that is conversational and authentic, and attention to the details of pacing, language, sound elements and the use of music.

### **WHEN THE CONTENT IS JOURNALISM, "NESS" MEANS INTEGRITY**

NPR produces excellent journalism by conducting a continuous and relentless search for what is true. We strive for the highest standards of balance and fairness and accuracy. We check and re-check our facts. We do not dumb-down our coverage. We avoid sensationalizing.

### **"NESS" MEANS CONTEXT; THAT WE WILL HELP THE AUDIENCE MAKE SENSE OF THE WORLD**

We offer in-depth coverage. We present more than the black and white sides of a story, but the shades of grey in between.

Our goal is to present information in such a way that it leads to greater understanding. We recognize that a science story will also have repercussions in politics, history, education, business and the arts.

### **“NESS” MEANS COMPELLING STORYTELLING**

The NPR storyteller never assumes that you care about a subject, and knows how to grab your attention and explain what happened in such a way that you are captivated by the story and by the way it is being told—through great writing, incisive interviews, and the force of the host or reporter’s on-air or on-line personality.

We understand that real life is more colorful than packaged news; people involved in news events tell their own stories. We take the time or space necessary to tell the story well. We are curious about people and the world--and that sense of curiosity is evident in everything we create.

### **INHERENT TO “NESS” IS THAT WE FOSTER SEREDIPITIOUS DISCOVERY**

There are things you *didn’t know* you would be fascinated by until you heard or read the NPR take on them. NPR understands the delight in discovering new ideas and the excitement that comes when that idea surprises you or challenges conventional wisdom. “NPR stories tell me something I wasn’t expecting.”

### **“NESS” MEANS PERSONAL CONNECTION**

Every day, NPR at its best says to listeners:

- That what happens in the world is important and we will do everything we can to help you make sense of it.
- That the things that *you* think are interesting—well, other people also feel the same way
- That you are part of a larger community, not only of public radio listeners, but of concerned citizens. That events and ideas can be influenced by individuals to the betterment of society
- That someone’s idea in St. Louis may make a difference to the life of someone in Texas.
- That some of the things that confound, confuse, or amuse you--have the same effect on others
- That someone is here who wants to listen, who thinks that your thoughts are important for others to hear.

If we can translate those special qualities—that NPR-ness—to multiple platforms--and not murder each other in the process--we may just figure this out. I didn’t articulate those “ness” qualities to convince you of our worth. I wrote them to convince staff that we had not lost our compass.

Fact is, we love radio and sound and we always will.

In the late 1960's, I edited my high school newspaper. Hot type. I still have my pica ruler.

In the early 1970s, I sat in journalism classes at the University of Maryland, College Park. I used a typewriter and carbon paper. Took two courses in typography.

I worked at the campus radio station, and edited one-quarter inch recording tape with a single-edged razor blade. Played music from 45s and lps on turntables.

You all have similar stories and memories. And I bet, lots of solutions.

I figure it's about naming what you do well and what you want to do well.

It's about serving the audience and being informative, and useful and wonderful.

It's about committing to training.

It's about committing to diversity—because most of our newsrooms are still too white.

And, fundamentally, it's about good writing.

From what I've seen, the best producers, graphic designers and videographers—well, many of them are also great writers. I know you will do what you can.

There's a lot of stuff going on. A staff member asked me recently: Do you have a *vision* for all of this?

I said: Yes. I did:

Of the highest importance is that NPR and the public radio community use various platforms to create a trusted space in which people can tell each other the truth.

One listener recently referred to NPR as “my other brain,” and that metaphor may truly capture NPR's value. The brain processes information, memory, and emotion. It is where new experiences are stored, where we think--and perceive joy, fear and pain. It is where we make ethical decisions and where we make sense of things. It is where we file the stories that we tell each other. At its best, NPR content helps the audience to be smarter, and possibly, more human.

Now that may not be a traditional definition of journalism, but I think it is an idea that audiences will understand and respond to.

Thanks so much for having me here today.