

# News Improved: NPR's Transition from Public Radio to Public Media

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# Executive Summary

In 2007, National Public Radio adopted a multiyear plan to increase the organization's digital footprint and begin transforming itself from a public radio company to a public media company. Achieving that transformation required staff members to improve their digital skills and to understand the relevancy of NPR's digital news strategy and structure to their own work. In addition, it required a culture shift in the organization to break down barriers and encourage collaboration between radio and digital staff.

NPR initiated the most comprehensive training in its history. Six hundred staff members, including reporters, producers and editors, were taught to write for the Web, create digital products including videos and photographs, and use the latest audio production tools. During the course of that massive effort, funded by a \$1.5 million grant from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, NPR and Knight learned important lessons about conducting effective digital media skills training.

These lessons are also relevant to other news organizations as they move from a single platform — whether audio, print or video — to a multimedia platform delivered via the Internet.

In November 2010, the Knight Foundation retained TCC Group to evaluate the training with an eye toward identifying best practices for both NPR and other journalism enterprises. While the training's goal was to improve NPR's digital content and audience engagement, TCC's evaluation design focused on assessing direct outcomes — including improvement in individual digital skills, integration of digital media throughout the organization and changes in attitudes toward digital storytelling — and examining what factors matter most in achieving these outcomes. TCC administered a 360-degree evaluation survey to NPR staff members and conducted in-depth interviews with 18 people.

Overall, the evaluation found that the Knight-funded NPR training resulted in a positive shift in individual and organizational attitudes toward digital news. Best practices to improve both individual and organizational outcomes included providing hands-on relevant training, applying it immediately and offering support after the training.

# Introduction

**“The digital revolution has upended journalism. The speed at which information moves — and the new ways people consume it — is transforming what journalists need to know and do.”**

— Michele McLellan and Tim Porter<sup>i</sup>

In May 2010, NPR was presented with a George Foster Peabody Award, one of the most prestigious honors in journalism. NPR and its reporters have won 56 Peabody awards since 1972, including three that same year. But this Peabody was particularly noteworthy because it was not for radio programming, but for the overall excellence of NPR’s multimedia website, npr.org.

The Peabody confirmed NPR’s own perception that the training program it embarked upon in 2007 had been a remarkable success.

“The award is, simply, breathtaking,” stated an NPR report to the Knight Foundation, a key supporter of NPR’s efforts to adopt multimedia approaches to its reporting and storytelling. “NPR.org isn’t old media or new media. It’s the synthesis of both, the product of a fully integrated multimedia organization.”<sup>ii</sup>

NPR, like other journalism outlets, is reinventing itself in response to “the new information ecology,” as described by Pew Research Center’s Internet & American Life Project. According to Kristen Purcell, associate director for research at Pew, “The Internet ... is fundamentally changing the way people consume and interact with information.”<sup>iii</sup>

On a typical day about 60 percent of Americans get at least some of their news or information online, according to Pew.<sup>iv</sup> Edison Media Research has reported that the Internet has easily surpassed radio as Americans’ most essential medium for news, information and entertainment. Roughly 25 million people shifted their primary affection from their radio to their computer between 2002 and 2007.<sup>v</sup>

Describing the new public media as “multiplatform, participatory and digital,” the Center for Social Media at American University noted, “Public media 2.0 will be an essential feature of truly democratic public life from here on in. And it’ll be media both for and by the public.”<sup>vi</sup>

Aware of the need to change, journalists at traditional media organizations today feel woefully unprepared to do so. A 2007 survey of journalists and news executives commissioned by Knight Foundation found that 90 percent needed more training. At the same time, only 31 percent of their organizations had increased their training budget in the previous five years. Interviews with almost 500 journalists also revealed that most of the newsroom training that was occurring was done with little or no connection to strategic goals.<sup>vii</sup>

In their book *News, Improved*,<sup>viii</sup> journalists Michele McLellan and Tim Porter drew on their work in newsrooms and on interviews with hundreds of news professionals to conclude that “even in the newsrooms most committed to professional development, training had little impact on the content. It was often opportunistic and not aligned with goals. It was, in short, nonstrategic.”

The authors advocated strategic training and staff development tied to editorial goals. They noted that participation by top managers, staff input and a focus on organizational learning as well as individual skills are critical for a successful training program.

Consistent with these recommendations, the NPR board adopted a multiyear plan known as Newsroom 2.0 in 2007 to increase the organization’s digital footprint and move it “further into the 21st century.”<sup>ix</sup> By then, NPR was already one of the most-visited news sites on the Web, with about 6 million unique visitors monthly. But it had just begun its transformation from a public *radio* company to a public *media* company.

NPR’s approach contrasted sharply with other traditional media outlets. While NPR joined news organizations throughout the country in laying off staff, it also chose to make a major investment in training to help its journalists develop the knowledge and skills to better serve its audience in the digital space. This signaled to staff members that NPR was preparing them for the next generation of public media, rather than replacing them.

In 2007, NPR received a \$1.5 million grant from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation to build the journalism organization of the future. The Knight grant is part of a portfolio designed to help public media organizations accomplish the recommendations of a 2009 report by the Knight Commission on Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy, which urged public media organizations to become more local, interactive and reflective of the communities they serve.\* Specific recommendations included investing in professional development to help staff acquire digital skills, promoting staff use of social media and purchasing digital equipment.

The grant funding was intended to help NPR transport the top-notch production and passion that it brought to the airwaves to an integrated digital newsroom. This required training 600 staff members well versed in sound to transition to multimedia storytelling, which training coordinator Kim Perry defined as “some combination of video, still photos, audio, graphics and text presented in a nonlinear format in which the information within each medium is complementary, not redundant.”

At the time the NPR training began, a Web-literacy training program geared to radio broadcasters did not exist.<sup>xi</sup> The goals were ambitious: NPR sought to improve individuals’ multimedia skills, increase digital production, increase Web traffic and stimulate a culture shift that encourages innovation and promotes collaboration on digital production across departments and teams.

NPR management envisioned three stages of training: 1) new audio production and content management systems; 2) multimedia leadership; and 3) multimedia skills. The first stage rolled out beginning in fall 2007 and was completed in time for the 2008 election cycle. The second stage — a four-day conference to familiarize NPR senior leaders and training staff with the planned changes — was conducted in January 2008. The third stage began in April and May 2008, with two pilot groups, comprising mostly NPR reporters, editors and producers.

Between May 2008 and February 2010, the news staff and engineers received hands-on training, and managers and executives were provided with basic background. Trainers also offered continuing education sessions in areas such as photography, editing software, photo ethics and writing for the Web.



# Evaluation Approach

As NPR and Knight began considering additional digital training for staff and member stations, they engaged TCC Group, a consulting firm that provides evaluation and other services to nonprofits and philanthropies, to conduct an independent assessment of the training. While the goal of the training was to improve NPR's digital content and audience engagement, TCC's evaluation approach focused on direct outcomes — assessing how the trainings changed attitudes and behavior related to digital news production, and examining which program qualities matter most in achieving those outcomes.

TCC worked closely with NPR to design assessment tools with three specific goals: 1) measure the impact of the training on newsroom operations at individual, department and organizational levels; 2) determine what worked and identify best practices; and 3) use the findings to inform future efforts related to digital transformation at NPR and its member stations.

In November 2010, TCC administered a 360-degree online survey to 368 NPR staff members, of whom 307 (83 percent) responded. Participants were asked to think back to the training, which had taken place about 18 months earlier, and report their own and colleagues' digital knowledge, skills, attitudes and practices, as well as workplace culture around digital production, before and after the training. The retrospective, pre-post design<sup>xiii</sup> gave staff members the benefit of additional experience and reflection.

To supplement the survey data, TCC conducted 18 in-depth telephone interviews<sup>xiii</sup> focused on work roles and responsibilities, organizational structure and the degree to which multimedia production is valued and encouraged in the newsroom. In addition, interviewees were asked to cite specific skills they had put to use in their daily work, and queried about challenges they faced in doing so. They also were asked to rate the quality of the training and the availability of continued training and support, and to indicate what additional training they would like to receive.

# Results

The NPR Knight training resulted in a positive shift in both individual and organizational outcomes. Individual outcomes refer to specific skills, such as using photography and writing for the Web; organizational outcomes refer to changes in culture and institutional practices, such as understanding the value of connecting visual and audio storytelling, and formalizing coordination with other departments (see Outcomes Summaries).

Interviewees said that NPR lacked a vision for digital news prior to the training. “It was like NPR wanted to get into it, but didn’t know how,” said one staff member. Others observed that the organization was divided into two camps: those who worked in digital media and those who didn’t. Another staff member said, “I think before the training initiative there was much more suspicion and wariness on both sides of the news and digital divide.”

Asked to compare their openness to the digital transition before and after training, 47 percent of survey respondents rated themselves open or extremely open to change prior to the training, compared to 73 percent after training (see Figure 1). Participants perceived that 35 percent of senior leaders were open or extremely open to change before the training, while 65 percent were after the training, a 30 percentage-point jump.

## Individual Outcomes Summary

### Personal digital production

- Digital writing and social media.
- Visual images.

### Personal digital literacy

- Personal digital skills.
- Personal understanding of NPR’s vision and the relevancy of its digital news strategy to my work.
- Personal understanding of NPR’s digital news structure.

## Organizational Outcomes Summary

### Supporting Digital News

- Managing, supporting and rewarding staff.
- Facilitating the integration of digital into everyday operation.

### Integration of digital at the department level

- Others at NPR support my department’s digital efforts.
- Structural challenges for digital integration.
- My department’s digital skills.
- My department’s digital technology.

### Department’s digital experience

- Digital as part of my department’s workflow.
- My department’s attitude and motivation toward digital news.
- My department’s skills and capacity in multimedia and social media.

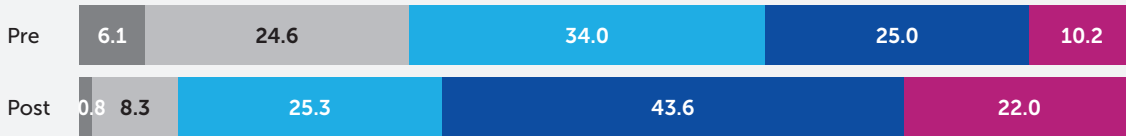


Figure 1

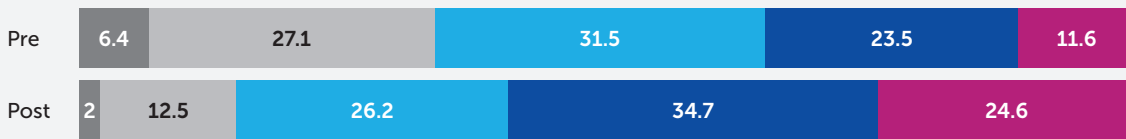
**Individual and institutional shift in attitudes and motivation toward digital media**

(Percentage)

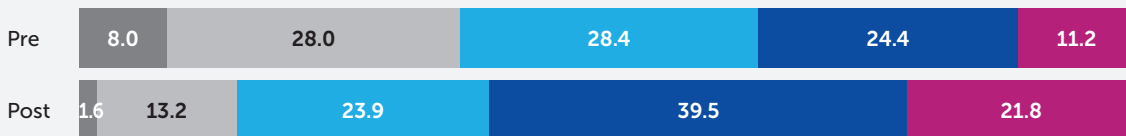
**Senior leaders at NPR**



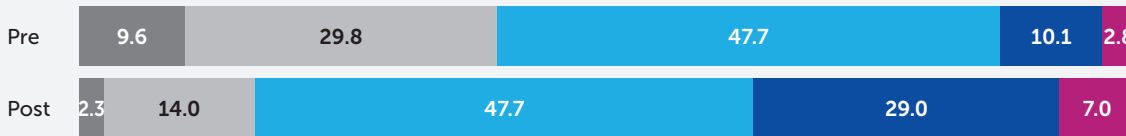
**Managers in my department/unit**



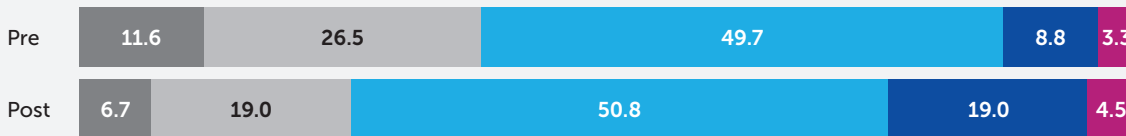
**Colleagues in my department/unit**



**Other units in NPR News**



**Non-news units (e. g. Legal, IT)**



**Myself**



- suspicious and resistant to change
- go along with new ideas/practices out of necessity
- follow the lead of others in adopting new ideas/practices
- adopt ideas/practices at early stage
- extremely open to changes and eager

In general, respondents reported greater improvement in organizational results than in individual results following the training, which is unusual and a positive sign for organizational transformation. Typically, individual change precedes organizational change, which occurs over a longer period of time. This was not the case at NPR, and likely reflects top leadership's commitment to transformation.

A concrete indicator of the success of NPR's digital transition is the steady increase in Web traffic to npr.org. Between February 2009 and February 2010, the number of unique visitors increased 45 percent, to 11.5 million. During the same period, page views increased 30 percent to a total of 54 million. Mobile page views, while a relatively small number overall, increased 156 percent in one year.

Respondents reported improvement in their digital skills, as well as their understanding of NPR's digital strategy and structure, as a result of the training (see Figure 2). Specifically, respondents said they are more aware of trends in online news; have a better understanding of the Web, including metrics and search engine optimization; and are more convinced of the value of compelling multimedia storytelling. Since the training, they can better articulate the value of visual storytelling using photography or graphics, good Web writing and design, and social media; and they see themselves as more informed consumers of digital news.

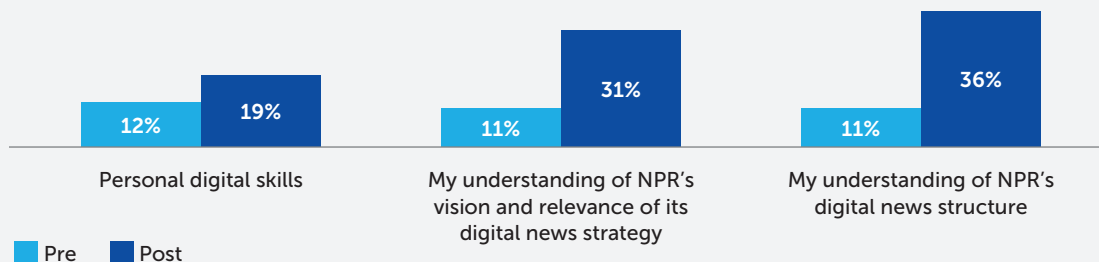
As one NPR producer put it, "I was introduced to photography through the Knight training. Now I see the value. It is one thing to have an event and talk about it, and another to use the camera to its advantage for a multimedia project that our audience will enjoy. I didn't get it then, but I get it now." Said another, "Digital is now second nature to us ... when we go out, we think about digital components as we plan and execute stories."

Respondents also reported a better grasp of NPR's digital strategy and how it relates to their daily work. The biggest improvement came in respondents' understanding of who does what in NPR's digital news department. The percentage of respondents who rated their understanding of NPR's digital news structure 4 or 5 (on a scale of 1 to 5) increased 25 percentage points after the training (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2**

**Participants' personal digital media skills improved, as did their understanding of NPR's digital strategy and structure**

Percent of respondents rated 4 or above (1=Not at all; 5=To a great extent)



As for output, participants said they are producing more digital content than before the training, but it is generally in addition to their daily audio work. When asked how often they engaged in digital writing, the average response was “less than once per month.” Incorporating visual images occurred more frequently, averaging “once per month to once per week.” Explained one staff member, “It feels like the big stories that we do are better conceived as multiplatform presentations — not always, [and not] that it works perfectly, but we are much better at producing a really compelling broadcast story and an equally compelling digital story that isn’t just a repackaging job.”

To keep up with consumer expectations, news organizations of all kinds and sizes are migrating their staff members from a single medium (print, audio, video, photography) to multimedia storytelling. While media organizations take different approaches based on the staff’s experience and skills with digital media, the NPR Knight training evaluation suggests certain factors are highly correlated with positive results.

Training elements associated with desired individual outcomes are (see Table 1):

- **Photography as an entry point for multimedia production**

Photography can be used as a catalyst to help staff members make the transition to multimedia storytelling. Participants who perceived photography content as very relevant were more likely to produce digital content. More study would be required to confirm that photography would have the same effect for print or television journalists.

- **Hands-on opportunities for participants to learn new skills**

Hands-on learning opportunities were a significant factor in achieving outcomes related to personal digital production (digital writing, social media, visual images) and personal digital literacy (understanding NPR’s vision, relevance and digital news structure).

- **Relevancy, length and intensity**

Participants achieved improved individual outcomes when trainings were fast-paced, experiential, relevant and immediately applicable to their jobs.

- **Peer networking**

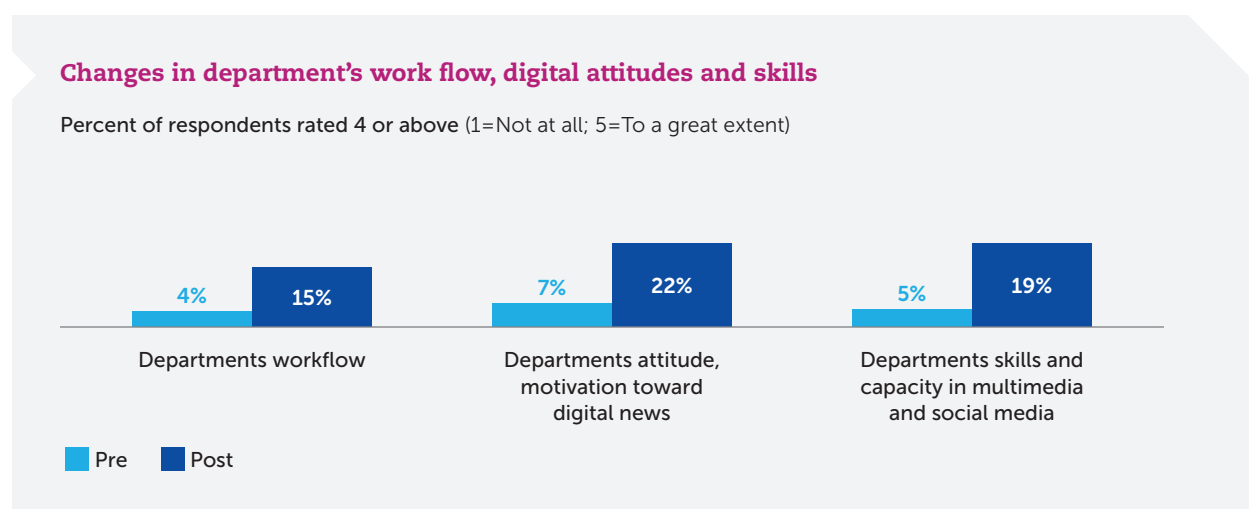
Staff members who spent more time networking with peers demonstrated greater improvement in digital production. In addition 43 percent of respondents found peer networking relevant or very relevant to their work.

- **Post-training support**

Respondents who indicated that they received support in their efforts to integrate lessons from the Knight-funded NPR training into their work produced more digital content and had greater digital literacy than those who did not receive this type of support.

After the training, survey respondents reported improvement in their departments’ workflow related to digital production, motivation to participate in it and digital skills (see Figure 3). The most significant increases were in the extent to which department members notify the digital team in the early stages of story development, consider digital news integration part of the work culture and seek opportunities to create digital content.

Figure 3



Specifically, the survey items that showed the greatest improvement (with an increase of 30 percentage points or more in the number of participants who rated the statement 4 or 5) include:

- My department/unit is very interested in supporting and/or creating online stories (e.g., writing Web text, taking photos, creating audio slideshows).
- My department/unit knows exactly who to approach when we want to produce digital news.
- Staff members in my department/unit are proactively engaged in looking for opportunities to create their own digital content.
- Staff members in my department unit are proactively engaged in looking for opportunities to collaborate with the digital team.
- Staff members in my department/unit are proactively engaged in looking for opportunities to enhance our capacity in creating digital content.
- Digital news integration is now fully a part of the working culture of our department/unit.
- It is a standard practice in my department/unit to notify the digital team in the early stages of story development.

One staff member interviewed by TCC Group pointed out that reporters are required to have a digital news team member on daily conference calls. “They will remind us [to get] charts or where we can look for information. It is an integral part [of the process] — [we are] no longer having separate conversations and then bringing them in. That wasn’t the case in the first six months, but now it is usual.”

When asked to rate their department’s or unit’s efforts to integrate digital into everyday work, survey respondents indicated that some challenges to digital integration remain. In particular, half of survey participants wish they could devote more time to creating digital content. Less than half agreed that managers and others in their department were “extremely supportive” of their efforts to integrate digital into everyday work. In addition, only one-quarter said that their department has the appropriate digital technology or enough people with the right skills to integrate digital content.

Nevertheless, among those respondents who considered it their responsibility, 58 percent had consciously facilitated collaboration between their department and the digital team since the training; and 53 percent had worked to integrate digital into their team’s productions. However, only about a third said they carved out time and resources to work on digital news, or rewarded performance around digital news (see Figure 4).

One staff member summed up the situation by saying, “I think everybody here thinks about it [digital] now. ... We made good progress down that path — better than a lot of print media — but there is still a long way to go.”

Figure 4



A number of best practices that news organizations can employ to improve organizational (including department-level) outcomes emerged from the NPR research (see Table 1). The most critical is that participants have the opportunity to apply training content immediately, first during hands-on activities with instructors, and then with peers within the context of their daily jobs. Support outside of the training environment is likely the critical ingredient to departmental and organizational change.

Specifically, the following factors are important for positive organizational outcomes:

- **Hands-on learning**

Respondents who said they had ample hands-on training in photography and Web writing reported better digital integration and upgraded multimedia skills in their departments.

- **Professional outside instructors**

Those who saw outside instruction as relevant and immediately applicable to their work also perceived that their department's digital integration was going well.

- **Post-training support for digital integration**

Post-training support, while critical to digital integration, was largely absent from the formal program. However, informal peer support was available. Highly motivated participants sought out informal support, creating a gap in outcomes between themselves and less-motivated coworkers. Support after the training had a significant relationship with nearly all organizational outcomes, including those related to supporting digital news, integrating digital at the department level, and attitude and motivation toward digital news.

- **Comprehensive content on digital production**

Those who perceived that instruction about NPR's Web activities and audience, social media, multimedia storytelling concepts, Web writing or photography as relevant to their jobs also were more likely to achieve the following outcomes: managing, supporting and rewarding staff; facilitating integration of digital into everyday work; support from other departments at NPR; overcoming structural challenges; and attitude and motivation toward digital news.

**Table 1.** What mattered most to individual and organizational outcomes

Qualities of training	# of individual outcomes affected (out of 5 outcomes)	# of organizational outcomes affected (out of 9 outcomes)
<b>Structure/Process</b>		
• Hands-on training/learning opportunities (photo, Web writing, social media)	3	3
• Outside, expert instructors made the content immediately applicable	1	1
<b>Dosage/Support</b>		
• Post training supports	3	7
<b>Content</b>		
• Introduction to NPR's Web activities and npr.org users	1	3
• Social media	1	3
• Concepts of multimedia storytelling	1	4
• Web writing	1	1
• Photography	2	1



# Recommendations

The evaluation results indicate that NPR could improve integration of digital into day-to-day operations by carving out more time to work on digital content. Staff members rated “more time” as the most needed in a list of 22 items. Constructive feedback on their digital work and opportunities for cross-department collaboration followed close behind. Respondents indicated that they would be least motivated by “including my involvement in digital news as part of my annual performance review” and “changing my job description to include my role in digital news” (see Figure 5).

Figure 5



Targeted skills training, as well as digital “boot camps” and refresher courses, could reinforce what staff members have already learned and allow them to gain exposure to new technologies. Creating opportunities for staff members to explore innovative audio technology would capitalize on NPR’s core competencies and likely stimulate interest in other digital tools. At the same time, increasing the digital news staff’s understanding of radio and offering ongoing training for nonproduction staff could contribute to a more unified and formidable NPR.

Structural changes could include recruiting and hiring more digital staff and providing incentives for current staff to increase their digital output.

As NPR works to expand digital training to more than 250 member stations, it can build on the lessons learned from the staff training and its subsequent implementation. TCC Group recommends that NPR:

- Conduct more sophisticated pre-training screening to assess organizational capacity and culture, including attitudes toward digital. Pre-training assessment gives trainers a better understanding of individual needs so they can adapt training and support accordingly.
- Provide more visual training, including photography. The data analysis shows that photography is key to enhancing support for multimedia storytelling.
- Use more outside professional instructors. Outside experts bring credibility and respect that internal personnel can rarely command.
- Embed digital news staff in other departments and units. This allows staff members to get their problems resolved while they are fresh in their minds, leading to a feeling of accomplishment rather than frustration.
- Match digital learners with trained peer mentors and coaches to ensure that trainees apply and practice new skills, and to facilitate organizational change. Peer mentors can provide feedback, support and guidance, as well as offer stability.
- Rather than training everyone, reduce costs by training only those people who will be involved with digital content. Others can be provided with an overview of digital storytelling and why it is critical to the organization’s future.

By taking these steps, NPR can “make public radio online live up to the standards already set on the air.”<sup>xiv</sup> Applying the lessons learned at NPR, other news organizations could make a smoother transition to the digital era.

***“Everyone realizes that the future of audio news is wrapped around digital. [We] can’t separate Web from audio. If we’re not in the digital space, we will be left behind.”***

**— NPR journalist**

# Endnotes

- i Michele McLellan and Tim Porter, “Investing in the Future of News, Training for Midcareer Journalists, Survey Findings,” March 2007.  
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- ii NPR, final report to the Knight Foundation on NPR’s Multimedia Training and Transformation Initiative, April 2009.
- iii Kristen Purcell, “Information Consumption 2010: Portable, Participatory and Personal,” Pew Internet Project, June 15, 2010.  
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- vi “Public Media 2.0: Dynamic, Engaged Publics,” produced by the Center for Social Media, School of Communication at American University, February 2009.
- vii McLellan and Porter, “Investing in the Future of News.”
- viii McLellan and Porter, *News, Improved: How America’s Newsrooms Are Learning to Change* (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2007).
- ix NPR, Journalism Initiatives grant proposal made to the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, 2007.
- x “Informing Communities: Sustaining Democracy in the Digital Age,” Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy, 2009.
- xi NPR, final report to the Knight Foundation.
- xii For a discussion of pre-post evaluation design, see George S. Howard, “Response Shift Bias: A Problem in Evaluating Interventions with Pre/Post Self-Reports,” *Evaluation Review* vol. 4, no. 1 (February 1980) 93-106.
- xiii In consultation with TCC Group, NPR leaders selected a diverse group of training participants for the interviews; they represented different departments, training sessions, positions and experience with digital production.
- xiv NPR, final report to the Knight Foundation.



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