



The New News Business

All Things Considered Digitally

James Erik Abels, 11.10.08, 6:15 PM ET

National Public Radio has seen its share of shake-ups lately, including the departure of chief executive Ken Stern in March. Soon after, an NPR journalist reported the reason was a failure "to convince the board where local stations fit into the digital age, when listeners can bypass old-fashioned FM stations." Like all media, NPR—which supplies programming to over 860 local radio stations—is struggling with the results of the Internet's ability to cheaply distribute content.

Late last month, Kinsey Wilson joined NPR as senior vice president and general manager of NPR Digital Media from **Gannet**-owned *USA Today*, where he was executive editor. One early goal: to boost NPR's traffic, which comScore estimates at some 2.2 million unique visitors in September. Forbes.com talked with him about the future of public radio and the role of its 38-year old affiliate network. Here's an edited version of what he had to say:

Forbes.com: What attracted you to the NPR job after running Internet operations at *USA Today*?

Kinsey Wilson: I think NPR is at a point where it's really poised to take advantage of digital. I don't think, in the long term, we can think of ourselves as a radio or purely as an audio news organization.

Do you have any examples of how that's coming along?

We're in the process of integrating our editorial digital staff and the rest of the editorial staff. Dick Meyer, who heads the Digital Editorial Staff, reports to me and to Ellen Weiss, who is the VP for news.

Increasing the unique visitors to NPR content is a priority online, how do you accomplish that?

We've moved from being primarily destination sites to moving into an arena where it is all about distributed media. We've got an architecture that supports open distribution of our content. So you try to create a virtual circle between high-quality content, ease of distribution and a connection with audiences that inspires them to distribute links, etc. ... I think that's where the real opportunity for traffic growth is.

So you are trying to work with the local affiliates digitally and not supplant them?

Deepening and improving our relationships with our member stations is a big priority. It's difficult to say exactly how technology will change the ways in which the content is distributed and the relationship between the member stations and NPR in Washington.

If you're looking at consumer preference, the answer may not be the local affiliate's site. What then?

In this environment you cannot ultimately fight the tide of consumer preference. I think the good news is that that's the subject of open, transparent, healthy conversation within the organization at this point.

But you think there's time to figure it out?

The speed in which our business is being challenged is very different than that of most of our commercial brethren. It does so far have the advantage of not being forced to react to things in quite the same kind of time frame. [One reason is] our audience is growing. There is a tremendous opportunity for the local stations, particularly with newspapers suffering the kind of staff cuts and reductions that they have, to become an even more robust provider of news to their communities.

Does NPR offer something particularly valuable to digital news consumers?

[People] want analysis. I think they also want a connection with individuals; they want to understand something about the person that stands behind the news report. I think the mix of authority and familiarity that NPR has managed to combine on air is something that translates very nicely to the Web, where the traditional, formal voice of authority of a newspaper or even a traditional network television broadcast does not meet the expectations of Web readers.