

A CASE STUDY OF NPR MUSIC

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This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Bud and Jeanne Brixey, with gratitude. When you're an only child, there is no "us and them" — it's just us.

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A CASE STUDY OF NPR MUSIC

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this May 2011 case study was to look at NPR Music: to find out what it was, how it worked and what it valued. At that time, it was succeeding as an innovation within a traditional news organization, as a digital space for audience interaction around music celebration and discovery, and as an Internet-age model for covering music.

Using diffusion of innovation theory and the single-case study method, five overarching observations were made: that creation of NPR Music and creativity within it come in a context of NPR's history of music presentation and its future in the Internet age; that music coverage and digital storytelling necessarily intertwine; that breathing room within the larger organization plus the passion of the music team results in steady productivity; that extending the conversation with audiences is a priority; and that staffers are first and foremost music advocates.

NPR Music points the way for established news media to take something for which they have been known and expand it in a fresh way within their organizations. It serves as a model for in-depth, multi-platform coverage of any topic that would be made richer by the "click here" experience. It shows how news organizations can encourage audience investment because users can interact with the curating team and with one another around particular areas of coverage. It also shows how audiences can have a voice in the creative process, the product, and ensuing conversations.

Introducing NPR Music and a Context for Research

U.S. news organizations are exploring ways to adjust to a marketplace permanently altered by the rise in the Internet and a resulting desire by audiences to pick and choose their information sources. In a 2009 report aimed at orienting reconstruction of American journalism around independent and local reporting, Downie and Schudson noted: “The Internet and those seizing its potential have made it possible — and often quite easy — to gather and distribute news more widely in new ways” (Downie and Schudson, 1).

Within arts journalism, the impact of both the Internet and the sea change in which news media find themselves has been significant. According to organizers at A National Summit on Arts Journalism, held in 2009 at the University of Southern California’s Annenberg School for Communications & Journalism: “Coverage of the arts in America is being transformed. Traditional news organizations have been dropping arts staff and reducing coverage. News organizations continuing to cover the arts are looking for new ways to do it” (Oct. 2, 2009).

The summit, run by USC with the National Arts Journalism Program, appears to have been the first such event to take comprehensive stock of emerging Internet-age models in arts journalism. Underlining the importance of new media, the event was live-streamed and live-blogged; several forms of online participation, including texting and Tweeting, were encouraged. In-person attendance was not; rather, groups gathered around the country to watch the live-streaming. The summit has since been broken down into 37 videos, more or less by topic, and is available on a [YouTube playlist](#).

In deciding what to feature, the organizers went for a cross section of models reflecting a range of thinking and proclivity to experiment. Probably the best known of these was [NPR Music](#), a digital arm of National Public Radio. Started in 1971, National Public Radio distributes news, information and music to a network of some 900 affiliate stations and through its website, NPR.org. Launched in late 2007, NPR Music, found at [nprmusic.org](#), covers music genres including rock, pop, folk, jazz, blues, classical, hip-hop, rhythm and blues, and world. It is a multi-platform content site for music exploration and celebration. Not until now the sole focus of scholarly study, NPR Music has steadily gained notice. It started with blogs such as *Scanning the Dial*, which covers classical music in broadcasting, then niche publications such as *Paste Magazine*, which covers music, film and culture, and onward into major mainstream publications such as the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and the *Wall Street Journal*.

As stated on its website, NPR Music offers news and feature stories in audio, text and video. It sends out push email to subscribers featuring new and established artists. It covers and live-streams big music events such as the annual festivals South by Southwest in Austin, Texas, and Bonnaroo in Manchester, Tenn., as well as smaller ones from clubs such as the jazz-centric Village Vanguard in New York City. It posts videos of “Tiny Desk Concerts” performed by musicians standing around staffers’ desks at the NPR Music offices in Washington, D.C. NPR Music aggregates links to music blogs, programs, interviews, music lists, music news and reviews; in many cases, this content is original. NPR Music interacts with users on social media networks such as Facebook and Twitter. It has a YouTube channel and iPhone and iPad apps. *Paste Magazine* has aptly called NPR Music “a kind of broadcast-meets-online magazine media hybrid” and has

described its staffers as curators. NPR Music's popularity reflects 2008 Pew Research Center data that said niche and specialty publications were flourishing (West, 4).

On the heels of broadcasting from South by Southwest in March 2011, NPR Music was credited in a *Washington Post* article with boosting the stature of its parent, NPR:

The Washington-based news outlet has emerged as an influential powerhouse in a splintering music industry thanks to the growing popularity of NPR Music, a web site that has connected with music fans by premiering new albums, streaming live concerts and landing exclusive interviews (March 18, 2011).

The Post reported that NPR Music accounts for about 14 percent “of the eyeballs visiting NPR.org.” NPR Music, the *Post* reported, “has averaged about 2.1 million unique visitors a month, putting the site somewhere between MTV.com, which pulled in 7.1 million unique visitors in January, and RollingStone.com, which drew just shy of a million that month, according to Nielsen” (March 18, 2011). Two years later, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that NPR Music had 2.7 million unique monthly visitors, 1.4 million podcast downloads every four weeks and an additional 1.4 million iPhone and iPad apps in circulation, and its portion of the NPR.org audience was 15 percent (March 14, 2013).

“It’s the closest thing we have to a pure startup inside what is now a 40-plus-year-old institution,” Kinsey Wilson, NPR executive vice president and chief content officer, told the *Wall Street Journal*. “The group of now roughly 20 people has had an opportunity to invent something from scratch” (March 14, 2013).

The purpose of this case study is to grab a snapshot of NPR Music circa May 2011. At that time, it was succeeding as an innovation within a traditional news organization, as an Internet-age model for covering music and as a digital space for audience interaction

around music celebration and discovery. Because NPR Music continues to rapidly change and adapt, there is need for a baseline assessment. “So what is the line between being a curator, a presenter, a journalist, a critic?” NPR Music Executive Producer Anya Grundmann asked at the USC arts summit. “You know, those things are all very fluid for us” (Oct. 2, 2009).

Literature Review

When the research for this thesis was begun in the late winter of 2011, NPR Music as a unit within National Public Radio was scarcely mentioned in the academic literature. Since then, references to it in scholarship have increased; but they are typically mentions in broader explorations of topics such as using music as a teaching tool, keeping up with music and greater use of podcasting in public-service media. NPR Music also comes up in case studies related to music, but still only briefly. Based on the literature published by April 2013, it has not been the focus of academic research.

Related research

In the absence of focused scholarship on NPR Music, it is appropriate to look at related research, including the intersection of corporate and entrepreneurial organizations, the changing relationship between journalists and audiences, unique audiences for music and the culture of arts journalists.

Freeman and Engel (2007) examined how corporate and entrepreneurial business models operate independently. However, they went on to describe how meta-structures combine them, “building symbiotic relationships between larger, older corporations and entrepreneurial ventures” (112).

When these interlocking mechanisms are understood, they can be actively managed to support the innovation cycle to the benefit of all parties. Certain industries and regions may be more adept at this active collaboration, resulting in accelerated innovation and value creation (112).

The researchers were not necessarily talking about the collaboration occurring within the same organization, but it is interesting to consider NPR Music and National Public Radio as a symbiotic relationship between an entrepreneurial business model and a corporate model within that corporate model.

Another relationship relevant to this research is the one between journalists who cover a niche topic and their audiences. Secko (2009) looked at the shifting relationship between science journalists and their audiences. He said science journalism once considered largely finished by the time it was published was entering an age in which new technologies could expand the “finished” project more or less in real time. “This potential for opening up the ‘we write, you read’ dogma, creating in effect an ‘unfinished’ science story upon online publication, plugs directly into questions of how journalistic authority is created” (263). Citing Burgess and Tansey, Secko said, “The prediction is that audiences will want to take some control over scientific narratives in the media. This could ultimately support the struggle to democratize technology development and increase public participation in science” (263). Secko’s exploration of the blurred lines around when a science story is finished is relevant to NPR Music, which invites and promotes heavy online interaction with audiences and wants the story to continue unfolding.

Johnson investigated audience use of new media features on NPR.org, the website for National Public Radio. She found that users who value new media are interested in technologies that let them decide when, where, and how to consume the media (28). She also found that these users, the ones who want to take control of their media consumption, are drawn to the social aspects of NPR.org (28).

These same users may also who an interest in exploring entertainment aspects of the site so long as the associated technologies have a clear, beneficial purpose. Arguably, this is a timely and insightful discovery given the addition of entertainment pages such as those found on NPR Music (28).

At least in these respects, Johnson's research supports NPR Music as a digital space meant to give users many points of access and ways to control their experience on the site.

In considering unique audiences for coverage of music, a study published in 2004, three years before NPR Music was launched, is helpful. Bailey found minimal audience crossover between NPR news stations and classical music stations.

Market to market, the respondents who populated our classical focus groups revealed themselves to be strikingly different from the NPR news respondents, not only in their empirical patterns of radio listening but also in their psychographic orientation toward life. Keep in mind that these two types of listeners cannot be distinguished on the basis of simplistic demographics like age, income, and education. Yet they are sharply differentiated by their needs and gratifications (191).

Bailey's findings support a guiding belief in the creation of NPR Music: that it would attract and serve a different audience than that of the news programs.

Harries and Wahl-Jorgensen's exploration (2007) of the culture of arts journalists is highly relevant to a case study of NPR Music, because staffers there create and curate music and music coverage. The researchers said there are occupational subcultures in journalism, including war reporters, foreign correspondents, television reporters, investigative reporters and political correspondents (621). Arts reporters "do not fit comfortably into the professional category of the journalist" and are more inclined to describe themselves as writers, reviewers and music journalists (623-624).

Citing Forde (2003), the researchers said:

Music journalists have their own “professional tradition, employment conditions, goal definitions, newsroom power structures, position within corporate publishing organizations, and sources and source relations.” On that basis, he described them as “journalists with a difference.” The same can be said for the arts critics who are the focus of this article. ... Their professional identity is tied to their ability to pass judgment on culture products, and their role in mediating the arts (622).

Harries and Wahl-Jorgensen concluded that arts journalists take on a crusading role and describe their work “as infused with a passion which is otherwise frowned upon within journalism cultures. They construct themselves as moral saviors, guiding the cultural public towards a better, more fulfilled existence through arts” (635).

Finally, Silva and Silva looked at whether NPR music critics influence listener opinions or reflect them. They found that listening to an NPR critic’s favorable review of artist CDs influenced listeners’ opinions of songs from those CDs. The researchers also said that “negative reviews of artists’ music are relatively rare on NPR. ... It is more common that a reviewer notes a weak song on an otherwise excellent album or describes an artist’s music in a way that is difficult to attach a positive, negative, or neutral valence to the descriptor.” For purposes of a case study of NPR Music, this observation is more interesting than their principal finding, because it suggests an ethos around what music is covered at NPR and how it is covered.

Diffusion of innovations

Because NPR Music is innovative in nature and fluid in development, it is appropriate to view it through the theoretical framework of diffusion of innovations. Rogers (2003) explained diffusion of innovations as a process by which an idea, practice, or object

perceived as new is communicated over time and through specific ways to people in a particular group (5).

Rogers (2003) said diffusion of innovations theory is distinct in these ways:

- Although at heart communications play a key role, the theory is used in many lines of study and was in use well before communications scholars found it.
- Information being diffused is necessarily perceived as new, thus uncertainty is high about whether individuals will seek, adopt and use it.
- Given the nature of the diffusion, time is an important vehicle.
- Interpersonal communication networks are key.

The roots of diffusion of innovations are in anthropology and rural sociology. A well-known use of the theory was in Ryan and Gross's Iowa hybrid seed corn study (1943) started in the late 1930s, which looked at the diffusion of hybrid seed corn among farmers. Among its findings, the study showed how difficult it was for many to adopt an innovation (31). A later, medical drug study by Mendel, Katz, and Coleman (1955) found that diffusion was a social process and that people who are interpersonally linked adopted an innovation to which they were being exposed more quickly than those who were isolated (65).

Over time, Rogers' understanding of diffusion theory began to be used to track technological change overall and then, to a lesser extent, such change in news organizations. In 1998, Singer looked at foundations for research into the changing roles of online journalists. She outlined how communications scholars were using, and could better use, established theories such as gate-keeping and diffusion of innovations to look at what she dubbed the explosion of interactive media forms in the later 1990s.

Among her observations:

Ultimately, Rogers suggests, the components involved in the diffusion process come down to an evaluation of consequences: What will happen if an innovation is adopted or rejected? Today's journalists are, consciously or not, weighing that question in considering whether to become involved in online media. A better understanding of the factors that go into that judgment may lead to a better understanding not just of tomorrow's media but of today's media as well (16-17).

In their sifting and winnowing of ideas for ways to put information out into the world, journalists are establishing best practices for media distribution; to understand their process is to understand their output.

In 2001, Garrison used the theory to look at the diffusion of online information technologies in newspaper newsrooms. Citing Leung and Wei (2000), Garrison justified his use of the theory: "The diffusion process remains a significant research interest in communications, and diffusion theory remains a dominant theoretical paradigm for the study of new media" (222). Later citing Rogers (1995), Garrison wrote that "the decision to adopt or not adopt an innovation is not an instantaneous act, but one that involves a process" (222).

With process in mind, Bressers built on diffusion of innovations theory, among other theories, in her 2006 look at the integration of print and online versions of major metropolitan newspapers. Bressers referenced Rogers' (1995) five stages organizations face in the innovation process: identifying problems that create the need for innovation; aligning the problem with an innovation; modifying the innovation to fit the organization and altering organizational structures accordingly; and integrating the innovation into the activities of the organization (135). Bressers continued: "Rogers' organizational representation is applicable to the media industry in that media companies recognized the

implications of the Internet and computerization ... developed online operations ... and increased focus on convergence, as when journalists began to be trained in cross-platform information delivery” (135).

In summary, diffusion of innovations theory will allow the researcher to track how the innovation is being adopted, how it is evolving, and the role that humans play in the process. It seems well suited to looking at emerging technology in media because it is a neutral gauge with a concrete checklist of ways to measure the pace and nature of the innovation’s adoption. Whether the object of observation is hybrid seed corn or a new digital space for music coverage, it can be assessed using diffusion theory.

Diffusion of innovations in case studies

A handful of scholars have looked at digital-age innovation in news organizations through the diffusion of innovations lens and used the case study as their primary method, as was done in this examination of NPR Music. In 2004, Singer conducted a case study of the diffusion of convergence in four newsrooms: the *Dallas Morning News*, the *Tampa Tribune*, the *Sarasota Herald-Tribune* and the *Lawrence Journal-World*. Singer took a strongly theoretical approach: She took Rogers’ breakdown of the core aspects of diffusion theory and tied them to research questions about how the journalists in those newsrooms were approaching change wrought by the digital age (4).

In 2007, Meier used diffusion theory as one of three theoretical approaches for research on innovations in European newsrooms, specifically a case study of the news agency Austria Presse Agentur in Vienna. Meier’s reasoning was to get as comprehensive a picture as possible of the process of innovation adoption (8).

Research questions

As a neutral gauge, diffusion of innovations is a good lens through which to provide an in-depth case study of NPR Music and attempt to answer the following questions:

How was NPR Music created and adopted?

How does NPR Music fit into the larger National Public Radio?

How does innovation occur within NPR Music?

What is the role of audience interaction at NPR Music?

How is NPR Music a digital-age model for covering music?

Methodology: The Case Study

The case study is the appropriate methodological tool for getting as close as possible to understanding the development of NPR Music, in particular because the case study can include direct observation and interviews. As a research method, the case study has its roots in social science. Citing Schramm (1971), Yin wrote, “The essence of the case study, the central tendency among all types of case study, is that it tries to illuminate a decision or set of decisions: why they were taken, how they were implemented and with what result” (17). Case studies are appropriate for use when the targeted research focuses on how and why, when it does not require control of behavioral events, when it does focus on contemporary events (8) and when context is critical (18). Citing Platt (1992) and then himself (1981), Yin noted that a case study strategy must have design logic. “A case study,” he wrote, “is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (17).

But Yin added a part two to his definition:

The case study inquiry copes with the technically distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables of interest than data points, and as one result relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion, and as another result benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis (18).

Yin is saying, go ahead, look at something up close and as it happens, but have a plan going into it and know that findings still must be checked to make sure they are reliable.

In addition to the case studies mentioned earlier in relation to diffusion of innovations theory, a relevant case study is Boczkowski's 2004 exhaustive examination of the adoption of multimedia and interactivity in three online newsrooms. He looked at The New York Times on the Web's "Technology Section," HoustonChronicle.com's "Virtual Voyager" and New Jersey Online's "Community Connection." As was done for this examination of NPR Music, he used open-ended interviews, observation of work practices and analysis of documents. Boczkowski was concerned with the accuracy of his interpretation of what he heard and saw and thus pursued member checks and triangulations. In the former, he asked the people he interviewed to look over his findings, and, in the latter, he contrasted his findings in search of congruity or lack of it (203).

Specifics of this case study

With the previous in mind, on-site research for a single-case study of NPR Music was conducted from May 24 through May 26, 2011, at its main location in the NPR building, 635 Massachusetts Ave., NW, in Washington, D.C. Financial limitations prohibited a longer stay. But thanks to the assistance of Grundmann, the executive producer, the researcher was given full access to staff for interviews and meetings and day-to-day operations for direct observation during that window of time. The researcher was allowed to watch this venture without limitations, and the staff was receptive and helpful. The researcher spent between seven and 11 hours there each day, recording interviews with staffers and writing observational notes. The researcher's visit was coordinated to ensure face-to-face interviews with people key to the development of NPR Music. Eleven

private interviews using open-ended questions were conducted and recorded for subsequent transcription. Other, less structured interviews were done here and there around NPR Music offices. An interview guide approved by the University of Missouri Campus Institutional Review Board was used for interviews, and confidentiality was offered, although no one wanted it.

Yin prescribed three principles for data collection: using multiple sources of evidence, which allows for converging lines of inquiry (115), and creating a case study database and maintaining a chain of evidence, both of which increase the study's reliability (118-124). To ensure accuracy in interpreting interviews and observations, the researcher reviewed the completed case study section of this thesis with Grundmann to clarify content or context. Also, during the interviews and, later, their transcription, the researcher sought to clarify any discrepancies.

Yin also was instructive in raising the strengths and weaknesses of evidence collection, outlining them for six sources of evidence in particular: documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant-observation, and physical artifacts (102). The final two, participant-observation and physical artifacts, seemed outside the focus of the research at this time, but the others applied. Among the strengths of documentation and archival records are their stability, specificity, and ability to cover a breadth of time. They are especially important in the event of memory failure or selective recall on the part of the people involved. Weaknesses can include finding and getting them. In this case, Grundmann dug through boxes and drawers in her office and found three records, all of which appear to be drawn from presentations: "NPR Music: A

Strategic Approach,” dated April 27, 2006; “NPR Music Digital Initiative, NPR Board Presentation,” July 16, 2006; and “NPR Music at 4 Months,” March 4, 2008.

Interviews and direct observation provided the opportunity to focus directly on the research subject, allowed for explanations and elaborations and yielded contextual information. From the researcher’s perspective, the interviewees were forthcoming and seemed happy and proud to talk about NPR Music. In alphabetical order, the people interviewed were:

- Bob Boilen, host, All Songs Considered
- Felix Contreras, reporter/producer, Arts Desk
- Jasmine Garsd, host, Alt Latino
- Lars Gotrich, assistant producer, NPR Music
- Anya Grundmann, director and executive producer, NPR Music
- Robin Hilton, producer and host, NPR Music
- Tom Huizenga, music producer
- Patrick Jarenwattananon, blogger, A Jazz Supreme
- Stephen Thompson, editor, NPR Music
- Kinsey Wilson, then senior vice president and general manager for Digital Media, now executive vice president and chief content officer for NPR

Limitation of the case study

The most obvious limitation of using a single-case study is that it doesn’t apply with certainty to any other situation. “As a case study, the ability to generalize the findings is

limited” (Gade and Perry, 340). It would be imprudent to carelessly extrapolate beyond NPR and NPR Music. In his assessment of Austria Presse Agentur, Meier said:

It needs to be pointed out that it is almost impossible to generalize answers in a case study of new models of newsroom organization. Every newsroom has different requirements. For example, there is work culture, work pressure, economical pressure and architectural design of the newsroom to be considered, as well as detailed additional innovation goals and strategies (17).

The creation and adoption processes used for NPR Music are unique to National Public Radio, which has had more than 40 years, since its first broadcast in 1971, to establish a unique internal culture, external presence, and overall sensibility.

Further, case studies can be perceived as soft research, which is why it is essential to follow a rigorous design.

Findings: A Case Study of NPR Music

On Tuesday, May 24, 2011, the word heard over and over at the NPR Music offices in Washington, D.C., was “Sasquatch.” The word’s crunch of consonants made it jump out of the aural landscape like silver carp from the Big Muddy. Everyone was saying it. “I think we have Sasquatch on the brain today,” Executive Producer Anya Grundmann said.

The reference was to the Sasquatch! Music Festival at The Gorge Ampitheatre above the Columbia River near George, Wash. A couple of weeks earlier, the NPR Music team decided to cover the entire indie rock festival held annually over the Memorial Day weekend. It was a tight window to organize such a large undertaking, particularly a festival new to the team. At a meeting to address final concerns before staffers headed west, discussion revolved around how their technology would interconnect in the remote area about 150 miles southeast of Seattle.

“This will be really cool to see how this works,” producer Robin Hilton said. “Let me rephrase that: This will be really cool to see *if* this works.”

Others laughed.

“And by this,” he continued, “I mean everything.”

Since its launch in late 2007, NPR Music has embraced a sense of adventure in covering, sharing, and celebrating music. Said Grundmann: “We want to be a place where people (staffers) feel passionate about music and where the audience feels passion about music and can feel that energy when they visit our content.”

This case study is drawn from the fruits of interviews and observation at NPR Music and is organized around five questions: How was NPR Music created and adopted? How

does it fit into the larger National Public Radio? How does innovation occur within NPR Music? What is the role of audience interaction there? Finally, how is NPR Music a digital-age model for covering music?

How was NPR Music created and adopted?

The most important thing to understand about NPR Music is that it is a digital space. NPR Music is a website dedicated to covering music within the National Public Radio website, NPR.org. It is not what music is played between stories on the news magazines such as “Morning Edition” and “All Things Considered.” It is not radio-centric. Sometimes stories about music heard on the news magazines come out of NPR Music, but many times they do not; all, however, can be found at the NPR Music site. If one were to call up NPR Music on a computer, iPad or smartphone (assuming, in the case of mobile devices, one had the apps), one would find many opportunities to “click here” for a wide but cohesive, multi-genre buffet of interviews, features, music news, full-fledged concerts, short performances, live-streamed festivals, music streams, artist pages, music blogs, and other types of music coverage. It is a complete listen-watch-read experience, assembled and curated by the NPR Music team.

People’s memories are that the idea for something like NPR Music fermented for a few years in the early to mid 2000s. Felix Contreras, a reporter and producer on NPR’s Arts Desk, said that for the longest time, when he asked people about NPR Music, they could not tell him exactly what it was, because it was going through so many phases. “It was always kind of left off on its own — like we’re developing something here, we’re going to figure it out,” Contreras said. “And once they zeroed in on something, it just

exploded. ... It's certainly become a tastemaker." As NPR Music Executive Producer Anya Grundmann and others there expressed it, the guiding ethos celebrates music. It is a digital space that cares deeply about music, connects with audiences around music, and provides a place for audiences to discover music. It does this by having an easily accessible, focused website intended to tap into the network of public radio stations and thus becomes a distribution vehicle for music from across the country. As seen through the lens of diffusion of innovation theory, NPR Music is, at heart, a new idea being communicated over time to a particular group of people.

Available documents

Although there appear to be earlier official references to it in NPR documents, the first coherent plan available for review is a PowerPoint, "NPR Music: A Strategic Approach," for an unnamed event on April 27, 2006. It is not attributed to any author or presenter; it, like the two documents to be described later, was shared with the researcher by Grundmann. "A Strategic Approach" lays out goals for the site in six overlapping circles. In order, they are: compelling music content for online audience; NPR brand and identity; self-sustaining business; revenue; traffic; and system-wide collaboration.

The document also identifies 10 guiding principles:

- Digital music, its revenue and IP (intellectual property) rights, is in its infancy;
- General consumer resistance to paying for digital music;
- NPR should work within core competencies and market trends;
- NPR Music should have the same curatorial, editorial, "NPR quality stamp of approval" as news and broadcast;

- Users should be guided to music discovery within select NPR system-wide content;
- Music is different than news, and needs a different online presentation;
- NPR Music business model and revenue are dependent upon building a broad user base;
- Music service must learn from podcasting experience, NPR and station process flow, revenue potential;
- Music service cannot be in a silo;
- Must be sustainable, including internal resources, financial commitment and revenue, rights management.

The document states NPR Music was intended to cultivate community through user-generated content and loyalty of public radio online music fans; to be easy to listen to, browse, search, read, buy and use; to be multi-genre, multi-station and multi-platform; and to be database-driven with music metadata. Noteworthy are the statements that a degree of independence is key to NPR Music's success and that the group would be housed in the Digital Media division versus Digital News. The overarching vision for NPR Music was for "a single framework of contact for all music activities," according to the document.

A subsequent document, "NPR Digital Music Initiative," appears to have been prepared for a presentation July 13, 2006, to the NPR Board of Directors. Presenters were listed as "Carlos Barrionuevo, you, Joyce Macdonald, Benjamin K. Roe, and Robert Spier." The content was left intentionally loose or this was an early version, because in

many places it is more talking points and notes than something fully formed. Still, early on, there is this description:

You're about to hear about the result of a partnership discussion we've been having with key stations on a blueprint for a new public radio content site for music discovery and exploration. The NPR Digital Music Initiative is an effort on our part to create a concrete, deliverable example of the public radio system's collaborative future.

The Digital Music Initiative will span all of NPR's music activities, including, but not limited to, on-air programs (both produced and acquired), podcasts, the new NPR Music Box, HD and satellite channels, and wireless delivery.

This presentation you're about to see describes a service that will serve audiences and the public radio system, establish NPR and partner organizations as innovators in music presentation, and create a mechanism for the community of public radio consumers — most of whom share a deep connection to music — to engage both us and themselves.

Here is another pitch found later in the document:

NPRMusic.org is the place where smart, curious people around the world can explore the music they already like and discover the music they don't know — be it Top 100, tangos, Tin Pan Alley, torch songs, or toccatas. The site will also be the gateway to the deep, rich and diverse world of music, encouraging visitors to sample, select, share, store and purchase — with the help of the trusted friends and tastemakers of public radio.

These documents lay out a vision for covering music in the digital space that celebrates music and encourages its exploration, embraces digital-age storytelling formats, builds on public radio's history and loyal audience, seeks to interact with old and new listeners, and collaborates individually with member stations and across the public radio system. The plans are loosely formed, and that appears to be a good thing: NPR Music was given a framework and vision, but neither was too specific. That empowered staffers individually and collectively to innovate within certain parameters, with the result that creativity flowed freely. The early plans for NPR Music offer general ideas that could be

reinterpreted for another startup around a different topic within an established organization with a different legacy.

The third available document, “NPR Music at 4 Months,” is dated March 4, 2008, and is also unattributed. It is a loose assessment and shows that something is starting to take shape. On a page titled “Looking back before we move forward: From the Original Business Plan,” that something is evaluated by unnamed assessors using the straightforward thumbs-up/thumbs-down gauge:

- Consolidate NPR’s disparate music activities (thumbs up)
- Primary output shifts to digital from radio (thumbs up)
- Make it pay (sideways thumb)
- Dream big and get the best partners (sideways thumb)
- Promote the hell out of it (thumbs down)

The document states that NPR Music was drawing enthusiastic response from the press and users and that traffic and revenue were just above end-of-year conservative goals. Next steps included greater promotion through NPR programs and social media; brand enhancement through public events and developing NPR Music personalities; more staffing; and developing station partnerships. It was further noted, “The music team is an emerging model for cross-platform content production.” This suggests that as early as four months into the venture, NPR Music was seen as successfully delivering on its potential to innovate in the digital space.

Although these documents were available for review and excerpting was allowed, Grundmann asked that the full documents not be included with this thesis.

New digital opportunities

NPR Music comes out of a more than 40-year history of music presentation and arts and culture journalism at National Public Radio. “You could see NPR Music as some kind of miracle child that grew up out of nothing or out of the ashes of something,” Grundmann said. “But actually it’s a flowering of something that public radio has been doing. It’s an effort to make it meaningful with new platforms and new digital opportunities.” This represents another level of diffusion of innovation at work: Innovation is occurring not only through the specific NPR Music vehicle but more generally in how music is being presented at NPR.

In her career at NPR, Grundmann has built on her lifelong passion for music. She is a musician. Before NPR Music launched, she was the executive producer of the NPR Music Unit; associate and later supervising editor of the national classical music program “Performance Today”; and a special projects editor, during which she produced “Creators at Carnegie,” a multi-genre concert series from Carnegie Hall. Her understanding of NPR operations and branding as well as her experience working with musicians were influential in the effective creation of NPR Music and its evolution since. After the ideas for it finally distilled into a business plan, she and others went on a multi-city tour to talk with NPR partner stations about the project. A website had to be built that departed from the core NPR site, which was still in early days itself; the thinking was that music needed a different type of presentation, and the music site had more elements planned.

Grundmann said that from the beginning, NPR Music was conceived to be multi-genre, multi-platform and have many points of user entry and access. It was intended to be a place where users could discover music through a constantly growing range of

features, interviews, reviews, performances, and music streams from across public radio. It would also be a new home for “All Songs Considered,” which had a radio presence starting about seven years before NPR Music was created. “How do you take all those pieces and put them together in a way that doesn’t create total brand cacophony and confuse the user?” Grundmann said. “Multiple genres and multiple artists across genres — how do you put that together and make it feel vital and some place that people want to come spend time?” In the months before the site was launched, they worked to answer those questions by developing a coherent Web presence.

Organizing the website

Decisions around organizing the content on the website were critical to the development of NPR Music. A crucial move early on was deciding whether to have what Grundmann called a micro-genre or macro-genre approach. “We decided to go macro, because there was so much you could just go on endlessly. You could have 50 genres and just confuse people,” she said. “We thought broader was better.” Another key decision was in picking which genres to feature, and Grundmann said it was made based on the strengths of the public radio system: rock, jazz, classical, folk, and world. Users going to NPR Music today can select from seven genres as one point of entry, including hip-hop/rhythm and blues and electronica/dance.

Another important move in shaping NPR Music was a decision to tag content. Each piece of content would be tagged in several ways, including from where it came, to what genre does it belong, which artist was featured, and what type of content it is. For example, is it an interview? A look at a song or album? Pure performance? Part of a

series? Part of a program? Tagging would make the site more navigable and thus the innovation process more fluid.

Going macro, focusing on genres that were established within the public radio system and tagging each piece of content in multiple ways became the building blocks of the infrastructure for the NPR Music website. As the site grew, other formats for sharing content were created, including blogs, pages dedicated to specific artists, videos, live coverage of festivals, “First Listens” in which a new album is featured shortly before its official release, themed music lists, a music streams directory, and “Tiny Desk Concerts,” for which musicians at all levels of stardom visit the NPR Music offices and are recorded performing right there among the desks. At the time of this case study, Grundmann said they were experimenting with special, web-based streams that they were curating on a regular basis, such as the All Songs 24/7 stream. She offered other examples:

We have a stream that we curate every two weeks right now with a station, usually around a theme, so we have a continuous listening experience for folks around a particular musical idea. So right now, Folk Alley did one around Bob Dylan’s 70th, and there’s one we coordinated with the news magazines for 95 songs for I-95. We did a social media callout with KPLU in Seattle around the 100 quintessential jazz songs, and that we crowd-sourced. There were 10,000 votes, and then we created a continuous stream. That jazz 24 stream in Seattle was the single-most potent thing they had done: This project where we crowd-sourced our audience and their audience; it was on air in Seattle and on our website; and then we created this continuous stream that they actually took and are hosting themselves as a specialty stream.

That kind of project fits in with NPR Music’s original vision to have a reciprocal relationship with partner stations and to be a means of distribution for music content from the public radio system nationwide. It also is an example of another major goal for NPR Music: creating original content and repeatable, promotable “ecosystems,” as Grundmann

called them, around certain kinds of coverage that will generate their own energies and their own stories. This idea that pieces of coverage should not be a one off — that they should have the potential to be repeated, expanded, and part of an overall ecosystem — permeates the strategic thinking of NPR Music staffers as they decide whether and how to pursue an idea. They are constantly thinking, “Should we do this? Why should we do this? Does it make sense for us?” This strategic thinking increases the steady, forward growth of innovation and is a key lesson for businesses looking at how they can successfully innovate within a traditional structure.

When NPR Music launched, the site was significantly different than the main NPR website. Then, when NPR.org went through a redesign, NPR Music did, too, so that it would look closer to the rest of the NPR site. “We were out there looking like a totally different site for a while,” she said. Grundmann said making the NPR Music site more like the parent site was done for reasons of infrastructure and brand.

How does NPR Music fit into the larger National Public Radio?

Kinsey Wilson

Kinsey Wilson was in an authoritative position to assess the place of NPR Music within the larger organization. Although he would be promoted in 2012 to chief content officer and executive vice president for NPR, in May 2011, he was senior vice president and general manager of Digital Media, which included oversight of NPR Music. Prior to joining NPR in 2008, Wilson was executive editor of USA Today and before that led USAToday.com. He has worked in online journalism since 1995. At the time of this

interview, he was a strong supporter of NPR Music, seeing it as successful in establishing a genuine brand that has influence out of proportion to its current audience:

We see that reflected in a lot of ways among artists, among record labels, among aficionados and others, that there is a really high regard for our critical capacity, our ability to help people find music that is likely to break out or may have gone unnoticed commercially or is worth listening to in some respect. We, in essence, found a gap in an otherwise really crowded space where there are a lot of commercial organizations vying at a journalistic level and at a commercial music entertainment level to figure out what the digital space is.

Wilson is saying, in essence, that NPR Music's success is due in part to it offering just the right content to just the right audience at just the right time.

Wilson noted that music has always been something NPR did. What is fascinating, he said, is that NPR Music has become a hub for music across NPR. That is not to say music stories cannot originate in the news magazines, but that NPR Music has become a resource for the rest of the organization and a place from which things percolate up. "We have had more success being digital first in the music arena than, I think, anyplace else," he said. "That's been interesting to watch and study and understand."

Wilson said there is a third element to NPR Music's development: station relations. It has been used as an opportunity to define a relationship with member stations to figure out — in an emerging digital space in which the relevance of local music stations is being challenged by changes in the marketplace and in technology — "whether we can define a relationship with them that allows them to continue to thrive even as we're building a brand that makes us collectively stronger." Wilson is basically outlining a way in which the innovation that is NPR Music can continue to develop and evolve through partnerships with member stations.

Wilson thinks NPR Music has a start-up mentality that allows it to be nimble and foster a culture of strategic experimentation. He said the prevailing ethic in the digital space in the past several years has been to try things and push boundaries. “We have tried very hard both to empower people to make decisions on their own, ask forgiveness rather than permission, and take strategic risks,” he said. In the digital space, which has fewer fixed expectations than a more traditional radio offering at NPR such as “All Things Considered,” the audience is going to be forgiving up to a point and one is not going to do irreparable damage to the organization if certain things fall flat. Part of it, he said, is how the experiment is framed and how the audience is invited to experience it.

Wilson is not concerned that as NPR Music becomes more established, it will become less nimble — not yet. He said it is still young enough and small enough that it is more “hand-stitched” as opposed to systematically driven by a series of routines honed over the years. “As we try to scale it up to serve more stations, to garner more audiences, there are aspects we’re probably going to have to do in a more systematic way,” he said. “But I don’t think it has to be at the expense of the creativity and the innovations going on.”

Because innovation can happen relatively quickly at NPR Music, Wilson sees loads of opportunity for discrete startups within NPR Music. He raised “Alt.Latino” as a good example. The program is dedicated to Latin alternative and rock music in Spanish and is hosted by Jasmine Garsd, who is based in NPR Music, and Felix Contreras, who is based on the arts desk on the news side. She is Argentinian, he is Mexican-American, and they both love Latin music. Initially, they did their podcast on their own time, but then a call went out organization-wide for innovative projects, and theirs was picked up. At the time

of this case study, “Alt.Latino” included a Spanish-language blog but now is primarily a podcast and curated music channel.

Wilson said Garsd and Contreras identified an area of music appreciation that was underserved in the market, began speaking to that audience, and, because of the online formats, gathered listeners in a way that would have been extremely hard to do 10 years ago. In May 2011, Garsd said the program was up to 80,000 downloads, up from 7,000 the previous year. Key to their success, Wilson said, was dropping them in the middle of the music team and letting them learn from the rest of that team.

This led Wilson, who began his career covering cops and working the overnight desk at Chicago’s City News Bureau before moving on to Newsday, to address innovation in online journalism more broadly:

More and more, I’ve come to recognize that success in the digital space is really about elaborate orchestration of lots of different roles. If you think about traditional media, you create a platform, an infrastructure that is largely fixed over time. You’ve got a front-end newspaper system and a printing press on the back end, and you’ve got organizational routines. But people understand their roles. It’s not that it isn’t a complex organization, but the roles are repeated day in and day out in a fairly systematic way. And I think the same is true for broadcast organizations. Here, the technology is constantly evolving. You’re trying to figure out this elaborate ballet between what you publish on the web and social media, how you engage with your audience. There are a lot of talents that come into play, and it requires a fair amount of communication and constant learning to execute that successfully. ... Digital media is a lot about orchestration of different functions, not simply the singled-minded pursuit of craft, if you will. You can’t take something like that (“Alt.Latino”) and drop it into our regular broadcast and expect an audience to suddenly gravitate to it. But you can go out into a digital environment and very quickly begin to pull together an audience.

Wilson’s key point is that digital media is fluid: The technology keeps evolving and people’s roles keep changing. Because it is a fluid environment, it also is a safe and

fertile environment in which to try something new. There is less cause to worry about whether something will fit in because the environment, like water, adjusts around changes. The fluidity also encourages the new thing to give back to the environment. Everybody wins.

Other perspectives

NPR has supported the growth of NPR Music and been fairly hands off in its day-to-day decision-making and even its bigger decision-making, Grundmann said. She said that from the beginning, she has made a conscious effort to have NPR Music touch frequently on those things the larger organization cares most about, including, in random order: its stations; its news programs; its image out in the world; having sustaining revenue opportunities; its audience and connecting with that audience; bringing in younger audiences; having a robust voice in the digital space; radio; and national programming initiatives. Said Grundmann:

So when you do that, and you find elegant ways to do that, and you find folks who are excited about what you are doing and support it across the organization, and they're part of your decision-making about what you end up doing and when you do it, then that makes it possible to continue to make the case that you are a vital part of the organization.

Grundmann's point is that the success of NPR Music is strongly linked to its ability to support and reflect the larger NPR organization.

Being the only editorial division within Digital Media (versus a news division) helps NPR Music in its quest for resources, said Grundmann, whose job includes raising money for her team. "If I had to argue whether we should have a jazz blogger versus are we going to have another Humvee for our guys in Afghanistan to get around safely or

whether it's going to compete with our tornado coverage, I'm never going to win," she said. "But I don't have to make that argument within the news division." She is more free than her counterparts in the news division to go after whatever she deems important for the forward motion of NPR Music.

From the Digital Media perspective, she said, NPR Music is viewed as creating a product that is developing a different audience from news, bringing in different revenue, and interacting with audiences differently. She said her philosophy is that when there are people around the NPR organization who want to support and work with NPR Music, "my arms are wide open. I want to harness all that energy. It's fun — we're supposed to be fun, right? We're supposed to sometimes be challenging, but we're supposed to be entertaining and fun and give people soul enrichment and sustenance, all of those things." In a gesture underscoring that, NPR Music has used its popular "Tiny Desk Concerts" to instill goodwill building-wide. When it is time for the performers to play, a call goes out over the public address system, and other NPR employees walk over and crowd into the warren of desks at NPR Music for 20 minutes of live music.

Robin Hilton, a producer and host at NPR Music, said the staff there definitely feels connected to the rest of NPR and to its brand. He said NPR Music gets credited a lot with expanding the NPR audience, particularly with attracting younger listeners. "But, I mean, we never would have gotten out of the gate if it wasn't for everything on the radio side," Hilton said. "Radio built up a huge audience over 40 years, and we definitely rode that when we started." A way to interpret this is that NPR Music is the next stop on the music presentation continuum for NPR. As it relates to diffusion of innovation theory, NPR

Music was able to capitalize on an established audience — a social network already in place and potentially primed to receive a new form of musical offering from NPR.

Hilton said NPR's digital presence generally and NPR Music specifically have changed the way people think about NPR. "There was a real struggle within the building for a number of years when the online started. ... Some people questioned whether or not we even needed a website," he said. "So it's definitely evolved, and now we realize it's so much more. It's huge media." Hilton's point is that across NPR, consciousness has been raised about the importance of digital media to NPR.

During interviews, NPR Music staffers repeatedly raised the freedom they have to operate and innovate as a major factor in their success. "News doesn't come and shadow over us and tell us what to do. It trusts us, and that's huge," said Bob Boilen, who directed "All Things Considered" for almost 20 years before moving to NPR Music; he and Hilton host and produce "All Songs Considered" and curate its 24/7 music channel. "We had the NPR name and trust to begin with. But that said, we weren't the news division trying to do it," Boilen said.

Fewer layers of oversight have meant that an idea can take on flesh and bone much more quickly. "It doesn't have to stew. You can just make it happen," Boilen said. "You can feel it in the air here — 'I've got to do this piece, it works right now.' — and you just do it. That's huge."

Felix Contreras put it this way: NPR Music is a smaller unit, and there is less space between idea and implementation, and there is less bureaucracy. There is still the rigorous editorial standard, but there are fewer people who have to weigh in. "At Tuesday 11 o'clock meetings (regular planning meetings at NPR Music), I've seen ideas start, and

by the end of the meeting, it's a reality," Contreras said. "That doesn't happen anywhere else in the building." The implication of his and Boilen's comments is that other parts of NPR have more layers of editorial or managerial oversight, which slows the approval process for story pitches and other types of ideas.

Pitching story ideas is part of the culture at NPR, said Patrick Jarenwattananon, a former intern on the news side who handles jazz for NPR Music including its jazz blog, "A Blog Supreme." "Come with a lot of energy and drive and passion to learn and read up on the news and pitch stories, and sometimes you'll get them on air," he said. "I think that's the way it works at NPR Music, too, and especially because we have a relatively young team, nobody feels intimidated to suggest ideas." This is another example of a sense of freedom staffers feel in the music unit.

As Wilson noted, NPR Music is having an influence organization-wide, and one result is the sincerest form of flattery: imitation. At the time of this case study, NPR Books was about to have a soft launch online. The site is oriented around NPR's coverage of books and authors. It is modeled after NPR Music, which reflects a key aspect of diffusion of innovation theory: that innovation is integrated into the activities of an organization.

There is also a sense that NPR Music is changing how music is perceived in the organization. Tom Huizenga said NPR Music's popularity has helped dispel what he called the Rodney Dangerfield problem. Huizenga, who introduced himself as NPR Music's classical guy and has a life-size cutout of opera diva Maria Callas behind his desk, said that when he worked on "Performance Today," he felt it was an incredibly important program and was proud of the work he and Grundmann did there. They won a prestigious Peabody Award for it. Said Huizenga:

Honestly, during the time that I produced that show, there were so many people in this building who had no idea what it was and couldn't have cared less. It was the typical classical music as ugly stepsister thing. But now, this digital music team, we, I feel, are one of the most respected divisions in the entire company because of what we're doing.

Huizenga is saying that the integration of new technology into music coverage has improved how the people who work in music presentation — the NPR Music team, at least — are perceived.

How does innovation occur within NPR Music?

The work environment and ethos

NPR Music is a human-powered endeavor. The NPR operation has since moved, but in May 2011 the Massachusetts Avenue office has a vibrant, upbeat energy that comes through not only in conversations but also in how the place looks. With the exception of Grundmann, who has an office just down the hall, the rest of the core staff have desks in a big, windowed room on one end of the NPR building. Someone's personality is stamped on every desk area. It feels like a working newsroom, with stacks of paper and pieces of equipment in piles, phones humming or sending out a favored song or noise and people in headphones clack-clacking on laptops. But then a music vibe starts to emerge: posters of old and new album covers (some of them psychedelic), records, jumbles of CDs, pictures of musicians, the life-size Maria Callas looming in a corner. The room reflects the people who work there and suggests an environment comfortable with self-expression. The tone of planning meetings — formal ones held in a conference room with floor-to-ceiling whiteboards used for brainstorming and organizing as well as informal,

desk-side conversations — suggest a sense of freedom to pursue new ideas. Innovation appears to flourish because NPR has given NPR Music room to strategically operate and experiment and because staffers feel empowered to do so.

Based on interviews and observation, Grundmann appears to wear her substantial authority lightly. Her style is laid-back, optimistic and non-confrontational; clearly, she would rather guide than mandate, encourage rather than demand. She wants her staff to find their passions around music and bring them to their work. Grundmann has assembled a staff with a range of expertise across storytelling platforms and music genres, and she credited a lot of the growth at NPR Music since its launch to them. Their capacity to innovate, tell stories, and celebrate music in various genres has increased exponentially, she said. “We’ve created venues around their expertise, so people are working in their areas of strength and passion, and you get incredible productivity when you do that,” Grundmann said. That also brings management time way down and dramatically lowers the need for her to micromanage, she said.

For their part, NPR Music staffers as well as Grundmann’s former boss, Kinsey Wilson, universally say that Grundmann’s leadership has been critical to the unit’s growth in stature and content. “We feed off her ideas, and she feeds off ours,” said Lars Gotrich, an assistant producer whose specialty is heavy-metal music. “If we can make our vision in a way that she can pitch elsewhere in NPR, then she will do it.” Grundmann’s role appears to be a driving force in the free flow of the innovation process at NPR Music; she encourages her staff to innovate within the unit, and she knows how to sell their ideas to the larger organization. She is what diffusion of innovation theorist Everett

Rogers calls “a change agent”; that is, a person who influences users’ innovation decisions in a direction seen as good by the change agency.

Grundmann said it is important that staffers really believe in what music they are choosing to share. As a team, they have decided that is their strong suit — guiding people toward music that they could fall in love with or that staffers feel passionate about. “That is the essential connection people have around music all the time,” Grundmann said. “It’s like backyard sharing: ‘I heard this great album, I want you to hear it.’ ”

She talked about the intimacy of radio, how it allows people’s voices to live inside the listeners’ heads, and said a challenge for NPR Music is how best to create that intimacy online. From a theory perspective, continuing to expand the sense of intimacy that has been radio’s hallmark into its relatively new online presence is another way to think about diffusing innovation. Grundmann said they are trying to “build out” on being a convener of conversations around music; an example is that when they present a live performance, they often have a chat room open on the NPR Music site and people talk in it. During the observation period for this case study, Patrick Jarenwattananon opened and participated in a chat room during a live jazz broadcast of the Roy Hargrove Quintet from the Village Vanguard in New York. This is NPR Music fostering audience interaction, but it also is a clear example of users adopting an innovation.

Excitement on the job

Bob Boilen seems to be the kind of person who thinks whatever he is doing at that time is pretty cool; he is utterly present in his life. Still, he acknowledged that NPR Music was in an exciting time in its young life and that the feeling is contagious. “I mean,

throwing a festival together in three weeks,” he said, referring to the Sasquatch! Music Festival.

You know, we did that last year, too. We got a call 2 ½ weeks before Bonnaroo (music festival) saying, “You want to do Bonnaroo?” I don’t remember what I was doing, but I was at some airport trying to figure out how we could do it and bringing it to the team and everyone saying, “Yeah, let’s go after it,” because that’s the attitude of our team.

Boilen is reflecting the sense, consistent across interviews with NPR Music staffers and seen in their workplace, that challenges of this nature are fun and worthwhile to the team.

In addition to relishing the creative process, especially if there is a deadline, Boilen is committed to championing artists. The NPR Music team shares that, collectively and individually, but Boilen seems to have an almost paternal or fraternal feeling about it. He loves surprising young artists with an offer to appear somewhere on the site, perhaps dedicating a “First Listen” segment to their new album or featuring them on “Tiny Desk Concerts.” “We’d say, ‘We love your records, we’d like to do a live Webcast with you when you come to town.’ And they’d say, ‘Wow. NPR.’ ” He envisions them as children strapped into their car seats listening to NPR on the radio while their parents drove, an image that suggests another level of diffusion of innovation in play — of children adopting an NPR evolved from, but still connected to, what their parents used.

“Particularly for the newer artists, when they get on NPR, it is the one legitimate thing that happens in their musical lives for a while,” Boilen said.

Lars Gotrich, who started as an intern for “All Songs Considered,” elbowed his “ravenous love” for metal music into NPR Music. Although it is not a featured genre, Gotrich has been supported in bringing more metal-related coverage to the site, including covering the Maryland Deathfest. Gotrich acknowledged that along with positive

feedback, there were users who thought metal had no business on an NPR site and were more than a little offended. Gotrich said the problem in covering metal is that he has to talk about some unsightly things, because that is part of what the music is. “I have to talk about the occult. I have to talk about drug use,” he said. “It’s hard finding that pulse and how best to present it. I think I’ve started to learn a little bit more how to do that just by trial and error.”

Gotrich, whose musical tastes are enthusiastically catholic generally, was the only staffer interviewed who felt he had to defend his particular passion. “It’s not like I practice any of this stuff — I’m a lapsed Protestant. I still mostly believe in God. I’m not a Satan worshipper or taking any drugs,” he said. “I just respond to the music.”

Gotrich’s comments are important for two reasons: They show how one staffer’s musical passions are supported and encouraged even if they do not directly line up with the featured music genres; and they show how the fluid NPR Music environment makes room for music coverage as the opportunity arises.

‘Tiny Desk Concerts’

Taking advantage of opportunities is an unofficial business strategy at NPR Music. The creation of one of its most popular features, “Tiny Desk Concerts,” illustrates how that happens: An idea inspires people, they go to the rest of the team for input and to make sure the idea makes sense, and then they put the time and sweat into making it happen. The creation of “Tiny Desk Concerts” also is a good story, and editor Stephen Thompson, formerly of the satirical newspaper “The Onion,” told it best:

First of all, I started here in 2006. One of the things I was most excited about working here was the idea that there were going to be these performances happening here all the time, that I was going to get up from my desk and walk over to a studio and there would be my favorite singer/songwriter and I would get to watch. And that didn't happen. For the first year and half that I worked here, I never saw a musician perform in this building. So there had already been that sort of existing little bit of a letdown about working here. Everybody has a vision in their head before they start working someplace of what it's going to be like.

Cut to March 2008. Bob Boilen and I were at the South by Southwest music festival in Austin, and I'm a huge fan of this singer named Laura Gibson. Bob is also a big fan of hers. And Bob and I are friends and like to hang out when there are opportunities to do so. So we're at South by Southwest, and we decide to meet up at Laura Gibson.

... We're standing there at Laura Gibson, and she's so quiet. She tends to project inward; she tends to sing into her own lungs a little bit; and she was drowned out by each individual yahoo at this bar. Each individual clinking glass was louder than the performance on the stage. And I, contributing to the din, said to Bob, you know, basically something to the effect of this is bullshit; why do we even bother going to these quiet shows at South by Southwest? We should just have her come to the office and perform at your desk. And he was like, we should. And I was like, we could call it "Live from Bob's Desk" or something like that. We were laughing about it, and so we thought, well, let's ask her.

So we stayed around. ... We knew her, we knew each other's faces by that point, so we said to her afterward, and I kind of led the charge, I was like, God, you know, I was saying to Bob, you were so quiet, it was so hard to hear you, we should just have you come to NPR and perform at his desk. And she said, I'm going to be in D.C. in three weeks — I would love it. So Bob and I were, like, all right.

And Bob, in his infinite capacity to execute, then administered steps two through 80, which is often how I describe how that project came together. I came up with step one: let's have a concert at Bob's desk. Bob then arranged it, figured out how to handle getting cameras, getting a microphone that would do the job and would create a product. We didn't necessarily know what the product was going to be, but we thought if we're going to have this musician, we should have video. And we're going to want to get a nice audio recording. And I was like, if we're going to do these sessions, the idea to have everybody from around the building was sort of like, well, let's do what I've always wanted there to

be — which is if you work for NPR, you get to see these musicians come and play.

So I kind of handled the internal relations, like hey everybody, we're going to do concerts at Bob's desk and we don't know what it's going to be yet, but just come and see this singer, and we really love her, and she's really great. She came in, and we recorded this thing. Bob made it. The visuals are shaky in those first few, but the sound was unbelievable. The sound was better than being there.

We were kind of like, we have something here; this is gorgeous. This is a document of a piece of art that would not exist if we hadn't arranged it, which is very exciting to those of us who love to build things and have the sort of egos that are like, here's a thing and it wouldn't exist if it weren't for me. That's the way I think the artistic ego works.

Since then, more than 250 artists have performed next to Boilen's desk, according to a March 2013 article in the *Wall Street Journal*. In launching "Tiny Desk Concerts," Thompson felt empowered to take an idea that might seem highly impractical or even a little crazy and play it out. Instead of laughing it off as a goofy idea dreamed up in a bar, he and Boilen took a risk and created something that champions artists, generates goodwill across the NPR organization by inviting people to attend, attracts audiences by offering a wide range of artists, and draws on the strengths of the digital space by integrating video, audio, and text and allowing users to consume it when they want to. "Tiny Desk Concerts" is an example of integrating innovation into the activities of the organization, a stage in the diffusion process.

Challenges

Even in a work climate friendly to enterprising thinking, Grundmann said it is wasted energy to spend a lot of time on what they cannot do or do not have the resources to do.

Rather, focus on the things that they can do and that will have the most impact. Put resources there, she said, and create an identity around those things.

Sometimes, Grundmann said, they are asked why they do not have this or that type of music as a featured genre. Her answer is that NPR Music cannot easily build an ecosystem and an infrastructure from scratch around any given music genre unless there is some activity going on in public radio around it. One exception appears to be the Latin alternative beat, “Alt.Latino,” that was placed in NPR Music as part of an internal enterprise initiative. Grundmann said they think they have a platform to be able to bring in an audience for it and to serve the broader public radio system with it.

But in general, she said, artists, managers, and record companies that have not dealt with public radio before do not understand it and are less likely to get involved than they would be with a commercial model. “A hip-hop label doesn’t understand what NPR is, doesn’t think their audience is listening to NPR,” Grundmann said. “Why would they give us an exclusive ‘First Listen’ of a hip-hop album rather than some other venue? But we’re trying.” It is worth noting that since that May 2011 interview, hip-hop has become a featured genre on NPR Music.

Looking ahead

When users go to the NPR Music site, they have lots of ways they can bump into stories, music, and artists that might interest them because of the site’s tagging system. Out in the world, there are multiple ways people can engage with NPR Music and discover its content. “And many of those people may never come to our site. That’s what we’re trying to get our minds around,” Grundmann said. At the time of the interview, she

said the NPR Music home page had up to 40,000 page views a day; the day before this interview, they had about 400,000 page views of music stories on the site, which she said was a little higher than average then.

In development at the time of the case study was a concept of having a system-wide distribution system: NPR would be able to provide a station with a basic website that has access to all of the content NPR Music is creating as well as the ability to put that station's own original content there and feature specialized music streams. "What can hundreds of stations out in our ecosystems own? They can't own a broad genre necessarily, but they can own smaller slices of the pie and become destinations themselves for that kind of conversation, based on several things including the quality of their interaction with their audience," Grundmann said.

If a station were to focus on, say, choral music and claim a part of the ecosystem; they could commission work; they could become experts who could be called on by the national news magazines; they could be on panels; they could have audience competitions on YouTube. "They could be a host of a conversation around choral music," Grundmann said. "That's the slice of the pie we envision a station could own, and it could be something that NPR Music might not be able to do." This kind of expansion is an example of a key stage for organizations in diffusion theory: modifying the innovation to fit the organization and altering organizational structures as needed.

What is the role for audience interaction at NPR Music?

The vision for NPR Music as a digital space in which audiences can regularly explore, discover, celebrate, and interact around music is fundamental. "The ideal scenario is

every platform that we have our hand in, we can have the conversation extended onto that platform,” Grundmann said. Previous sections in this case study have highlighted some of the opportunities for audience interaction, including specialty themes. Shortly before this case study, a pastor’s prediction that the world would end had gone unfulfilled; however, in the days leading up to the widely publicized date, the staff decided to do a social media callout asking what was the last song people would like to hear in the event the world did end. They put the callout on a blog, Twitter, and Facebook, and then “All Things Considered” invited them to share on the radio the many thousands of comments received across those platforms. “And once we were on ‘All Things Considered,’ which has millions of listeners, that invited more conversation back on the website and on Facebook and so forth,” Grundmann said. “That’s sort of an ideal version of it, which happens occasionally, where the social media will affect our programming.” An end-of-times music stream drawn from the crowd-sourcing effort was available on the site until it stopped being relevant.

That same week, on a smaller scale, NPR Music had a callout on the classical blog around what music to introduce to children and how to introduce it. Specific musicians were asked to respond as well as the public. Grundmann said the response was hundreds and hundreds of wonderful comments throughout the week. “And then yesterday, we put up a post of here’s what the audience said, and that generates more conversation,” she said. “The audience conversation and the audience comments become a part of the editorial content for NPR Music.”

Robin Hilton recalled doing an “All Songs Considered” show that stemmed from his own dislike of 1980s pop music:

That's when I was in high school and college, and I just hated it so much. So we did a poll: What was the best year or decade, I can't remember which, for pop music, and almost nobody picked the '80s. That was pretty telling and gave us a jumping-off point for the discussion as we talked about '80s music. That was a big show.

Grundmann said that a goal is to make audiences feel like they have a true voice in the conversation around music, "because they are essential to what we do," and that whenever audiences are asked to participate, it is important to circle back with them. She described an audacious series NPR Music did across the news programs called "50 Great Voices." In preparation for that, the music staff did an online callout and created a way for audiences to vote online on the voices they would like to hear stories about on the air. More than 100,000 people voted, a panel of experts winnowed the list to 50 — to make sure the list made sense, Grundmann said — and then the arts desk took over the project and put those stories on the radio. The series, still readily available online, included Nat King Cole, Enrico Caruso, Billie Holiday, Janis Joplin, Freddie Mercury, Howlin' Wolf and Biggie Smalls. The list also has a global sensibility, including Youssou N'Dour of Senegal, Umm Kulthun of Egypt, Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan of Pakistan and Celia Cruz of Cuba. In undertaking a project like this, Grundmann said, they were able to rely on the wide-reaching and diverse platforms of National Public Radio. The 100,000 voters were entitled to a sense of ownership in a national project of such magnitude.

Audience interaction is also done up close and in person. Grundmann described a listening party NPR Music had held a few weeks earlier at the Gibson Space in Washington, D.C. The invitation was posted on NPR Music's Facebook and main blog and filled up in 10 minutes. It was a cocktail-party atmosphere. Bob Boilen played music that had not yet been released; audience members, who were mostly in their 20s and 30s,

held up cards on which they rated the music by number; and an NPR Music staffer talked with them about why they gave it that rating. “We literally had a conversation in public with our listeners about the music,” Grundmann said. The same can be done online in a chat room, with Boilen hosting and the audience talking back.

Grundmann summarized the bigger picture this way:

There are many different ways that people can connect with an audience, and we’re trying to figure out how to do that. You can do that in person. You can do it virtually online in different ways. Sometimes it’s in real time; sometimes it’s not. We’re in a world of great opportunity. There are so many things we want to do to and see openings to do and we’re trying to do, wherever we can and wherever it makes sense.

Jasmine Garsd said she is happy to see a diversity of audiences attracted to at least some aspect of NPR Music. She said “Alt.Latino” draws a both Hispanic and non-Hispanic audiences; the interactivity occurs through social media and email.

One of the things I really do love about the Hispanic audience is a lot of times they share experiences that I don’t feel like maybe there’s a door to sharing on other parts of NPR — like, you know, about being a Latino in the U.S., about that immigrant experience. What I like about our non-Latino audience is that they talk about discovering this music. That’s exciting.

From a theory perspective, this is an example of an innovation — actually, an innovation within an innovation, “Alt.Latino” within NPR Music — being adopted by at least two distinct social networks: Hispanic and non-Hispanic audiences.

Bob Boilen, who made almost 20 years of music stories on “All Things Considered” before being solely affiliated with NPR Music, said he is a big fan of reading mail. He said that in doing so, he has learned that much of his audience is not going to like the music he is sharing and cannot be made to like it. Still, Boilen operates as if he were standing there talking with a listener; he has a stake in the conversation: He wants to tell

a story about why the music is meaningful — perhaps to him, perhaps to the artist, perhaps to a community. He is, in essence, trying to prod listeners into a consideration of the music and nudge them out of a posture of exclusivity.

We want to be inclusive. We want to say, “Here’s something really cool and why don’t you give it a listen.” I mean, the whole idea of “All Songs Considered” is to pick six or eight songs every week and have somebody fall in love with one of them. They do it? We’re done, we’re happy.

From a theory perspective, Boilen is communicating his approval of the innovation to audiences, with the likely result in this case that he is expanding the pro-innovation social network, hastening the rate of adoption, and increasing the number of adopters. This can be said generally of the passionate advocates on the music team.

How is NPR Music a digital-age model for covering music?

Grundmann was in New York City in October 2007 when she learned that NPR Music, a project to which she and others had devoted energy and vision at National Public Radio, had the green light to launch.

Grundmann was at Columbia University co-directing an annual arts journalism institute in classical music sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts. Most of the participants earned their living as critics and arts journalists affiliated with news media across the country. Talk during the daylong seminars and at the bar after evening performances often drifted to ominous changes in the workplace. Already, some worked on features beats stretched thin by staffing reductions, or they functioned as both critic and reporter, a situation that carries ethical challenges. Freelancers watched their opportunities dry up as newspapers, their primary employers, cut back on arts coverage.

Over the year that followed, several participants lost their jobs. It was as if the arts journalism sector of American newspapers felt the harsh waves of industry downsizing before the rest of the newsroom. Coverage of the arts, it seemed, was expendable.

The NEA group, which included this researcher, received Grundmann's news about the start of NPR Music with hope. Here was National Public Radio, with its millions of listeners, doing something almost no other legacy news organization in the country was doing: dedicating more resources to expanding its music coverage. Two years later, NPR Music was held up as a success at the 2009 National Summit on Arts Journalism at the University of Southern California on new ways to cover the arts. "It's a model for how you do innovation inside a large institution," Doug McLennan, a summit organizer and the founder of ArtsJournal, an early online aggregator of arts journalism, said in an interview with this researcher in January 2011.

The USC summit happened largely because arts advocates felt that in a time of transformation among news, it was important to look for new models of arts journalism. NPR Music was showcased, and appropriately so; there is nothing else like it in the country. National Public Radio, an established news organization, not only was expanding its arts coverage but was doing so in a way that bridges traditional, verification-based journalism with digital-age tools, techniques, and sensibilities.

But the question of whether NPR Music is a digital-age model of arts journalism and music coverage does not seem to be particularly exciting within the music team. Like many arts journalists, NPR Music staffers are a hybrid of hard-core music lovers who engage in journalism. "Oh, yeah, you have to wear that (journalism) hat all the time," Bob Boilen said. He said he fits in at NPR Music because he is a musician and cares

about music from that perspective, but he learned the journalism from working day in and day out on the news programs for so many years. “What it means to be fair, what it means to check your facts, what it means to be responsible to others in what you pass along, what it means to not be swayed by publicists, what it means to be honest always.”

“And did I say check your facts?” he added.

Boilen acknowledged that championing the music comes first. “You get carried away by the emotion of what you’re doing, because there’s not a right or wrong in music,” he said. “I don’t like being neutral about music. I think that’s where music journalism falls flat.”

Robin Hilton, who works with Boilen on “All Songs Considered,” said they have received some criticism from listeners who say he and Boilen like everything and who ask why aren’t they talking about this or that artist. The answer, Hilton said, is that if they do not like the music, they do not spend any time on it; everything that goes up on the site has at least one true believer in it on the staff. “We work really hard just to be music fans ourselves instead of being” — he paused — “I mean, we’re all journalists, I suppose. But we’re not trying to be reporters. Here’s the official word: We’re trying to be music fans, people who love music. I think listeners respond to that.”

Tom Huizenga, a music producer whose specialty is in the classical genre, confirmed that negative reviews generally are not done. “I think that we’re all such music evangelists and there’s so much good music out there that we don’t want to waste our time,” he said. Huizenga said he has a side job as a stringer critic for The Washington Post and puts his critical energies there. “But we don’t seem to bother with that here.”

Huizenga also reports for the news magazines, but at NPR Music, he feels a great deal more freedom of choice in deciding what he puts on the site. He said he has definitely been exercising that freedom when it comes to representing contemporary music, through concerts, album reviews and composer interviews.

Felix Contreras took on the question from more of a traditional journalist's perspective. Most of his duties are on the news-side arts desk, but he also works on "Alt.Latino." Talking about the latter, he put a percentage on it: 70 percent journalism.

We're looking for new voices, but we're not going to just find a voice and put it on. We're doing the five Ws and then trying to put it in some kind of context. There's this guy from Argentina — you put his music in the context of what's going on in Argentina socially and musically and in Latin America generally. That context is the journalism part.

Later in his interview, Contreras wanted to get back to the question. When he thinks about what NPR Music is doing, is it journalism? Music journalism?

I don't know that it makes a difference. We are speaking and talking about music and putting it in some kind of context. Which is what Rolling Stone used to do. It's now a kind of pop magazine. I mean, I had my subscription in '72 and '73, when they were reporting as much on the Vietnam War as on albums. I became politicized reading those guys.

Contreras is saying that at its best, covering music in the context from which it comes — cultural, societal, political, and economic — ends up being more than high-quality music coverage. It is high-quality journalism that reflects people, places, and times.

If the spectrum has traditional journalist on one end and music advocate on the other, Patrick Jarenwattananon, the jazz blogger, sees himself more in the middle. He said he has come to think of himself as a journalist but also said he sees arts journalism as a "weird thing," in which the same person often writes both profiles and reviews and the

line between the two is blurry. “I try to tell stories, and I try to be accurate in telling those stories even if personal opinion is involved. I think, why not?”

Jarenwattananon said he sees NPR Music as trying more to represent the way that “quote-unquote normal people” talk about music. Staffers there have opinions and like things for certain reasons; they don’t want to be stilted about it and want to welcome audiences rather than “criticize or critique or take down or dissect or remove yourself as if you weren’t a fan.” He said the public radio personality — he corrected himself to say the public media personality — “generates a very person-to-person contact, as much as possible, on the Internet. I think we’d like to be able to do that. It seems kind of basic-truthy to me.” From a theory perspective, no matter where Jarenwattananon, Boilen, Huizenga, Hilton and others fall on the music advocate-journalist spectrum, they are part of the social network at NPR Music that is bonded by a love of music and mutual respect for one another’s tastes and a desire to share what they love with the public. This social network has been critical to the pro-innovation environment within NPR Music and what, based on data and assessments reflected in the mainstream press, appears to be fairly rapid adoption by audiences.

Grundmann said NPR Music is branching more and more into disciplined, strategic, ongoing coverage about issues in the music world, especially around “why” and “what it means” questions. Examples include why people are experiencing music in certain ways today and what that means; why concert tickets cost what they do; why certain kinds of music are in the fore; and what technology means for experiencing music. Grundmann said they did a series listing 10 ways that people can interact with music and reporting on which one helps the musician the most: “Is it buying a CD on Amazon? Is it downloading

a track from iTunes? Is it going to a concert? Is it buying a T-shirt? Is it putting on a house concert? You know, asking those types of questions.” Through the lens of theory, this expansion of coverage is a way in which NPR Music continues to push the innovation of its content.

Discussion

Since its launch in 2007, NPR Music's profile has grown steadily outside the organization — mainly through coverage in the alternative and mainstream press, through the ways in which NPR Music has asserted itself in the marketplace, and through routine promotion on NPR radio programs. But until now, NPR Music has not been the sole focus of a scholarly record. That was the intention behind this case study: to find out what NPR Music is, how it works, and what it values. Based on this review, five overarching observations can be made: that creation of NPR Music and creativity within it come in a context of NPR's history of music presentation and its future in the Internet age; that music coverage and digital storytelling necessarily intertwine; that breathing room within the larger organization plus the passion of the music team results in steady productivity; that extending the conversation with audiences is a priority; and that staffers are first and foremost music advocates.

Creation comes in a context

The first observation is that NPR Music was created in a context of more than 40 years of music presentation at National Public Radio. Including stories about music, programs about music and the use of carefully chosen music between stories — in essence, the connective tissue of NPR news shows — music has been demonstrably valued at NPR. NPR Music was meant to consolidate NPR's music coverage, even if that coverage originated elsewhere in the organization, and it was able to capitalize on the established NPR brand to give it credibility. NPR Music also came out of the broader

context of sea change in the journalism industry as it expanded to include the Internet and to become more interdisciplinary in using audio, video and text. NPR Music was created to be a digital space and fill a niche; to be a 21st century model of how to blanket a subject using online storytelling platforms and ways to connect with new audiences. For legacy news organizations, the result is encouraging. The NPR Music model is a way to envision coverage of a niche topic — particularly one the organization has a record of covering — that takes advantage of digital tools and audiences more inclined to get their news online.

Music coverage, digital storytelling intertwine

Within National Public Radio, NPR Music's role is two-fold: It has become a hub for music across NPR, and it has developed a digital-first culture in which staffers decide how best to tell the story of whatever music is being featured. Kinsey Wilson, who formerly oversaw Digital Media, which includes NPR Music, and now holds one of the highest positions at NPR, said the organization has had more success being digital-first in the music arena than in anyplace else. Largely because it is digital, and perhaps also because it is centered on music, NPR Music is successfully exploring ways to draw new and younger audiences to the NPR brand.

NPR Music is being used to define a relationship with member stations in which there is greater reciprocal distribution of content. In essence, NPR Music cannot cover everything, and the much smaller member stations cannot begin to do what NPR Music does. The thinking goes that a smooth distribution model in which the infrastructure is present for easy online sharing would benefit everyone. NPR Music also is being used to

explore creating a startup within an established news organization. It is being used to foster even smaller startups, such as “Alt.Latino.” As “Alt.Latino” co-host Felix Contreras explained it, there is less space between idea and implementation at NPR Music, and that makes experimentation more possible. Further, as Wilson noted, the public is likely to forgive missteps in a fledgling undertaking versus NPR’s established news programs. Based on this, it seems possible that even medium-size newsrooms could dedicate resources to a team of two or three people inside the organization whose job is to experiment with coverage.

Breathing room plus passion equal productivity

NPR Music staffers repeatedly said innovation flourishes there because NPR lets them operate with relatively little oversight and experiment strategically; that is, in ways that make sense with the goals of NPR Music and support the overall NPR brand. One of the key ways the latter is done is by providing context with coverage; NPR prides itself on putting things in context. Staffers clearly feel empowered — by their work environment and by their immediate boss — to come up with ideas, bring them to the team for feedback and then take them on. They are encouraged to pursue music about which they feel passionate and to bring both the music and the passion to their jobs. “We’ve created venues around their expertise, so people are working in their areas of strength and passion, and you get incredible productivity when you do that,” Grundmann said. In this context, the NPR Music example makes a statement about the importance of the work environment. Staffers are clear about their goals individually and corporately. They recognize that they were put on the music team because they have an expertise in

something, and they know they must continue to develop it and demonstrate it in their work. The lack of micromanaging bosses fosters a climate of free-flowing creativity. This type of work environment, though, is probably suited only to certain enterprises such as a startup.

Extending the conversation a priority

Engaging with audiences around music is fundamental to NPR Music. A guiding light there is that audiences should feel they have a voice in the process and the resulting music coverage. The site is set up to be easily accessible to users with a variety of tastes and to help them bump into other musical experiences they might find appealing or, at a minimum, worth exploring. The ideal scenario is for conversations with audiences to extend onto every platform in which NPR Music is involved. The ability to connect with audiences is seen as a great opportunity, and there is no doubt it is. News organizations spent decades deciding what the public wanted without doing much listening, and the result was that when the Internet made it possible, news consumers went out and found what they wanted. The push toward strategic community outreach in many newsrooms is one of the ways news organizations have tried to regain their lost audiences.

Music advocates, always; journalists, often

NPR Music covers music, but it does so in a celebratory way that promotes music exploration and discovery. It is an advocate for music and musicians. Staffers champion and present music they love or want to share for some reason; they see anything else as a waste of time. They describe themselves using terms such as music fans and music

evangelists, but they emphasize putting artists and their music in context. They want to share everything they know about whatever music they are presenting. “We’re doing the five Ws and then trying to put them in some kind of context,” Felix Contreras said. Generally, staffers see giving users as much information as possible about music and putting that information in context as journalism.

The practice of journalists not being public about their passions and avoiding covering subjects in which they have deep knowledge and commitment has been seen by some as disingenuous. Certainly staffers at small-town newspapers do not worry about this; they cannot — they are known by everybody anyway. Music, though, is a safe topic around which to feel passionate, to be an advocate. The idea of being able to cover something about which one feels personally excited and invested sounds invigorating to both the journalist and the news organization.

Diffusion of innovations within NPR Music

Diffusion of innovations theory, as conceived by Rogers, is the process by which an idea, practice or object perceived as new is communicated over time and through specific ways to people in a particular group. Under the theory, the fact that the information being diffused is perceived as new means there is significant uncertainty about whether people will seek, adopt, and use it. The theory also emphasizes the importance of interpersonal communications networks.

In this case study, diffusion of innovations theory was used to look at how NPR Music — new in that it covers music online within a radio-oriented organization — was established and how it evolved from within during its first several years of existence. It

strongly confirmed a keystone of diffusion theory: the importance of social networks such as the staff of NPR Music to the pace at which an innovation is adopted. This case study did not look specifically at audiences, but at some point they become part of the social network propelling innovation.

NPR Music evolved quickly and productively because staffers jumped in with both feet. They fully embraced growing a digital space for ranging, in-depth music coverage; they championed online platforms and audience engagement practices to present the coverage; and they built on what they learned over time. Further, they let their passion for what they were doing inform their work and thus created a powerful, affirmative culture oriented toward trying new things. Although it is true that NPR Music was specifically created to innovate around online music presentation, it could have failed if staffers were slower to embrace the changes. That also would have supported how the theory works; the speed and extent to which people adopt an innovation is fundamental to whether it succeeds or fails.

Rogers' diffusion of innovations theory also lays out five stages that organizations face in the innovation process: identifying the problems that create the need for the innovation; aligning the problem with an innovation; modifying the innovation to fit the organization and altering organizational structures accordingly; and integrating innovation into the activities of the organization.

This case study showed that NPR Music followed these stages. Building on NPR's history of music presentation and wanting to take advantage of the new digital landscape, it was created to give users a much richer and complete music experience than radio alone could do. It is tailored to music presentation. It is small enough to function nimbly

as a startup yet big enough to produce a lot of content, much of which stays on the site and some of which feeds into the news programs. Its environment of possibility around innovation has made it a good home for smaller initiatives such as “Alt.Latino.”

NPR Music also is proving to be a model for expanding NPR arts and culture coverage. Like NPR Music, NPR Books was created as a niche digital space under the NPR.org umbrella. In May 2011, it was having a soft launch; now, in April 2013, NPR Books appears to be rooted and growing. As a website, is clearly patterned on NPR Music: NPR Books is an online site dedicated to celebration and discovery around books; taking into account that books need different types of presentation than music, NPR Books is nevertheless multi-genre and multi-platform, including podcasts, author interviews, reviews, and recommendations; and it is taking advantage of online and other ways to foster audience interaction — to create a community around books — and it has many points of user access.

This case study went in depth within NPR Music rather than broadly across the National Public Radio organization. Although the latter might have made it possible to more fully deploy the diffusion of innovations theory, the decision to sacrifice breadth for depth seemed necessary given the absence of any up-close scholarship on NPR Music itself. For now, it is possible to observe NPR Music’s development from the outside by tracking the progress of its mentions in the media over time. As was noted in the introduction to this research, NPR Music got early notice in blogs, then in niche publications, then in the biggest and most mainstream newspapers in the country, most recently the *Wall Street Journal*.

Probably most noteworthy in the WSJ article, published March 14, 2013, is the

observation that “NPR Music has become a sought-after stop for both aspiring and established artists” and “a rising power in the music industry.” The article quotes Lisa Sonkin, a vice president of promotion at Sony Music, as saying, “NPR is an extremely important part of our overall plan.” Peter Standing, a senior vice president of marketing at Warner Bros. Records, told the WSJ, “You can reach a lot of people on NPR Music that you can’t reach elsewhere.” This is outside confirmation that NPR Music is more than a flash-in-the-pan experiment; it is a legitimate, established voice in the media.

Conclusions

The chief conclusions are that NPR Music is succeeding as an innovation within a traditional news organization, as a digital-age model for covering music, and as a digital space for audience interaction around music celebration and discovery. Its success has several potential payoffs: It points the way for established news media to take something for which they have been known and expand it in a fresh way within their organizations. It serves as a model for in-depth, multi-platform coverage of any topic that would be made richer by the “click here” experience — which is to say, all topics: sports, government, education, public safety, and, of course, the arts in all varieties. It shows how audiences can be served by the complete listen-watch-read experience, thoughtfully assembled and curated by a team of passionate advocates who are also guided by best practices in journalism. It shows how news organizations can encourage audience investment because users can interact with the curating team and with one another around particular areas of coverage; and it shows how audiences can have a voice in the creative process, the product, and ensuing conversations.

Limitations

Although a case study potentially yields a raft of transferable lessons, as Yin and many other researchers note, the findings are ultimately unique to the subject of the case study. Also, the conclusions should be understood through the researcher's decision to go in-depth within NPR Music rather than to conduct a more across-the-organization case study.

Future research

Based on the findings, two areas of future research seem pressing and inviting. Given that the interviews used for this case study date to May 2011, the following topics seem ripe for updating: How is innovation at NPR Music influencing the rest of NPR? How has the distribution model with member stations evolved?

Regarding innovation, what appears to have happened is that the creation of NPR Music as a digital space occurred in the same time frame, meaning the middle to late 2000s, in which NPR — like news media nationwide — was developing a stronger web presence and learning to incorporate online storytelling methods. Kinsey Wilson said the entire NPR organization underwent in-depth digital training. Because that was the culture at NPR Music from the beginning, the team's orientation was web-first and staffers became facile at telling stories on the Web. But asked about the extent of influence NPR Music had in promoting online innovation in the larger organization, staffers hedged. Perhaps they didn't know for sure or didn't want NPR Music to eclipse the larger organization in any way. Grundmann, who spoke the most candidly about this, made it clear she operates in a way that always supports NPR and the NPR brand.

The way to approach this would be three-fold: look at the reciprocal nature of online innovation at NPR rather than starting with the assumption that NPR Music caused it; source the research across the organization rather than, as this case study did, focusing within NPR Music; and use as a specific starting point NPR Books, which was patterned on NPR Music.

Regarding the new distribution model, at the time of this case study, Grundmann talked about it guardedly, such was its precarious stage of development. Because it was so strongly tied to changes in infrastructure — for example, creating a Web page template that could be used by any member station, allowing it to incorporate NPR Music content with its own, niche coverage — it is not immediately clear from observing the current NPR Music whether this is happening. It would be happening more behind the scenes. But when this case study was done, Wilson was in the middle of a multi-city tour of member stations in which he was discussing the nature of their digital relationship with NPR.

Also, the recent *Wall Street Journal* article noted that NPR Music will introduce something for the moment called “the streaming project” this year, 2013. It is a series of personal music streams created by DJs from throughout the public radio system, the article said.

A good theory, a good model

In each example of future research, diffusion of innovations would be an excellent theory to apply because its fundamental purpose is to track how innovation occurs. As a theory, it is able to take into account both how human beings behave with innovation and

the evolution of the innovation itself. This means diffusion of innovations is ideally suited to take stock of digital-age changes in journalism and should be used more by mass media scholars. This case study of NPR Music confirms that.

Further, this case study was born of the researcher's belief that artistic creativity is one of the best things about being human and that journalism has a vital role in preserving and championing the arts. NPR Music deserves to be noticed for its celebration of music and as a fresh way to engage the public in meaningful conversation about music.

American journalism is an industry that has largely adhered to the status quo, and it is refreshing and inspiring to see the leap of faith made in the creation and support of NPR Music. It could be a model for almost every other legacy news organization. There also is something to be said for trusting audience loyalty enough to experiment with innovation for the sake of quality journalism.

Appendix

Interview guide for staffers at NPR Music

When did you start working for NPR Music?

What did you do before that?

How did you end up coming to NPR Music?

What does your job now entail?

How has this changed since you arrived?

How has NPR Music changed since you arrived?

What's an example of that?

How do you think what you do affects the bigger product?

Who are the main voices here that shape NPR Music?

To what extent is innovation here a collaborative process? Or is it more of an individual process — somebody says, “Hey, let’s try this,” and people get on board.

How does that collaboration/individualism work?

To what extent do you think you have a voice in the creative process here?

Tell me about a time you really felt heard/not heard in the process.

To what extent do you feel guided by a mission or a vision here?

(Assuming there is one) What is that vision?

How do you see that vision changing, if you do, in the next year?

In the next five years?

Is there a goal for NPR Music, an endpoint of sorts?

How do you see NPR Music fitting into the larger NPR?

To what extent do you think they shape each other's development?

Tell me about a time when you saw that happen/wished it had happened.

To what extent is there a difference between how you think about someone who uses NPR Music and a regular NPR user?

To what extent do you think NPR Music interacts with its users?

(Assuming there is some) What are examples of that interaction?

What do you think of that interaction — about the quality of it or the level of importance placed on it?

To what extent do, personally, interact with your audience?

(Assuming there is some) How does that affect what you do?

Tell me about how NPR Music interacts with musicians? What's their role here?

How do you think NPR Music fits into the landscape of arts journalism or music journalism?

NPR Music covers many genres of music. Tell me about the musical choices made here.

What are you proudest of here? Why?

What most excites you here?

What most concerns you?

What would you like to see changed? Why?

To what extent do you have to worry about the fiscal success of NPR Music?

What are the big lessons here for other news organizations wanting to innovate from within?

What the minor lessons, the things maybe nobody thinks about that really influence your day-to-day life here?

My goal here is to get as comprehensive a picture of NPR Music as possible. What have I missed? Is there anything you want to talk about?

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