

**LAURA WALKER  
PRESIDENT, NEW YORK PUBLIC RADIO**

***ROAD TRIPS***

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When I was a kid, my family took a lot of road trips during the summer. Usually, we would meander through upstate New York or Pennsylvania on our way to visit relatives.

My sister and I would take turns navigating. We loved to unfold those big, detailed maps. I could never quite figure out how to refold them properly.

As soon as we arrived at our evening's destination, my dad would buy a copy of the local newspaper. I remember the day we picked up *The Leader-Herald* in Gloversville, New York in 1968, I read a beautiful portrait of a close-knit family which had worked in the factory there for generations . . . making gloves. The image has stayed in my mind all these years.

My dad always told us that the key to truly understanding a community could be found in the local paper.

Today, when my family is on the road, we are not armed with maps and newspapers. Our GPS guides the way and we tune into the local public radio station to understand what's going on when we arrive.

When I went to New Haven, Connecticut last week, I didn't even contemplate buying *The New Haven Register*. Instead, I tuned into WNPR and caught up on the latest developments as that city prepares for the first new mayor in twenty years.

In more communities than I can count, public radio has taken over the traditional role of the local newspaper. Today, we are anchors of our local communities.

It is certainly true in New Jersey as the newspapers there devote less time and attention to local news. The voice of New Jersey can be heard on WNYC and New Jersey Public Radio – which reaches 60 percent of the state's population – as well as on WHYY and its New Jersey stations.

All of us in the room know we are anchors of our communities because our listeners tell us that all the time. One listener recently told me that WNYC was the longest relationship she has ever been in.

Lately, I've been wondering what the family road trips will be like when my kids are in the driver's seat and my grandkids are in tow. What will change during the course of their lifetimes? Will the GPS I use today, seem as ancient as Gordon Gekko's cell phone in the movie *Wall Street*?

There are times when I am confident that public radio will remain an indispensable source for news and compelling story. Like when my son calls home to tell me that the recent episode of *Radiolab* on quicksand and quicksand fetishes is the talk of his college dining hall. (At least they learned some science!) Or when I get an email from a young college graduate who – like me at that age – wants nothing more than to work in public radio. I think of what Bill Siemering said, “Hearing a voice alone gives radio an intimacy unmatched by any other medium.”

But there are times when I am not so hopeful. I worry that so many of us in this room don't have the resources to tell the stories of our communities. From NPR to local stations, finding revenue the traditional way may not work so well in the future.

Fundamentally, I don't think that our current structures and models provide us with the path forward to get us to where we need to go.

We need strong leadership and a collective vision of collaboration that will sustain our work and move us forward. Together, we need to translate what's so special about public radio – our unique model of national and local news, our powerful storytelling and our relationship with the audience – for the digital age.

We are a community. We are an extraordinarily strong community – with an audience of almost 30 million

loyal listeners on the radio and many more digitally. It is an audience that any internet startup would die for these days. Let's remember the power we have and the depth of the engagement we engender.

But we must adapt and progress together. And fast.

Jim Collins, author and business advisor, said that successful companies "preserve the core and stimulate progress."

What he meant by that is preserve the core values and the core purpose and change the cultural and operating practices in order to progress.

*That is what I believe we need to do.*

With humility, I offer three ideas about how we might stimulate progress, while preserving our core values.

First, let's intentionally plan the evolution of one of the most brilliant aspects of public radio--the powerful national/local mix. No one else mixes the national and local like we do.

On the radio, individual stations and independent producers need more resources to tell the stories of their communities. NPR and other national producers need to be healthy. Let's all be more like Kit Jensen in Cleveland who is raising money to double the size of her newsroom.

And stations need *more flexibility – not less-* to create the highest quality and most responsive mix of content. National producers need to work with local stations to provide that kind of flexibility in the service of the audience. As a national producer and a local station I understand both sides of this equation—and I am committed to finding solutions.

On the digital side, we also have an amazing opportunity to create entirely new content mixes for our audiences that are rooted in what we do best – audio.

At New York Public Radio, we are working on an app that will allow listeners to download bundles of national and local content by interests and length of their commute. In this case, the audience is becoming part of the curation process and we are creating personal experiences.

Kinsey Wilson at NPR is also leading an effort to work with several stations – including WNYC – to develop new digital tools to personalize listening.

I think there is an exciting opportunity to create mobile experiences for listeners that will geo-locate and serve up public radio and related content and *I look forward to collaborating to make it happen—not just for WNYC and NPR , but for every station in this room.*

There's an information overload epidemic today. I heard it referred to as "Infobesity". I think if we remain committed to curating the best content out there of our audience and giving them the tools to curate

along with us, we can fight it and remain the credible, turn-to source that our listeners value.

Second, we need new models of collaboration. We should ask ourselves . . . if we were creating public radio today from scratch, how would we structure it?

For sure, there is continued value in the model of national producers producing great “national content” with local stations putting “inserts” in – kind of like a hub and spoke.

But what if we thought of ourselves less like a hub and spoke system and more like a neural network. There are new models emerging – models where local stations collaborate directly with one other, others in which national producers work with independent producers acting as catalysts to create something where the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Models like Fronteras, AIR’s Localore Project, *Here and Now* from WBUR and NPR, and PRI and WNYC’s *The Takeaway*.

When we are honest with ourselves and our partners about our own self-interests, when we are committed to aligning mutual self-interests, then the right collaboration can work. Take WNYC’s recent collaboration with The Center for Public Integrity and *The Takeaway*, where vets gave advice to other vets – it was a tapestry that arose from all our strengths. Too often, we in public radio want a one-size-fits-all solution, when instead we need to find many solutions. That is

hard work, takes skill, compromise – but in the end it is worth it.

Third, we need to look at our business model and figure out how to boost revenue and cut costs. On the revenue side, We have a great opportunity to re-define the membership model for the digital age.

Over the years, we've built a strong and loyal audience that values our mission-driven work. The bet on this model has paid off for us. . . so far. But looking forward, it's up to us to grow both our audience and our membership base.

We are at risk of losing members as our audience increasingly accesses our content on digital platforms. We need to act fast and we need to engage listeners more effectively – to know who they are, to understand them, and to engage their deep, deep loyalty.

To do this, we need new CRM AND data tools . . . and new skills in big data, marketing. It would be insane for each of us to invest in all this in a vacuum. What if we create a shared resource that would bring the best data skills, marketing skills, target marketing to know and convert large numbers of listeners to members. Let's figure out how to ask for support on digital platforms.

Let's set an audacious goal to increase membership revenue from the system by 25 percent in five years. We've set such a goal at NYPR. Two years ago, we set

a goal to increase our membership from 140k to 250k in five years. We are now at 170k with a goal of 240k in three more. The trick here is that we need to invest first – on a local and national level. Some of the larger stations can invest, but what about the others? What if we banded together to get funds from philanthropy and station investment with the express purpose of building a model for membership in the digital age?

COST: In order to focus on our telling the stories of our communities, we may be able to cut unnecessary costs within this system. Share backend costs. Share CRM. Share reporting resources.

In every major American market, there is a strong public radio station serving the local community – a station that has that direct relationship with the audience.

Does NPR need separate operations in these cities? When WNYC is covering the stories that matter to New Yorkers, does NPR need a separate newsroom here? Or can we cut costs, share responsibilities and find efficiencies that in the end will enable us to do more and serve our audience better?

You know and I know that change must always start at home. Let's take a long hard look at our own organizations and ask ourselves – how can we reinvent ourselves for this digital world we live in?

We all have a powerhouse brand, a special host, a topic or a show that makes us special. How can we



harness that and build on that? What is our defining purpose?

Here's an assignment for you all today. See if you can start a new conversation, explore a new relationship or collaboration that has the power to help you reinvent your station and harness what's so special about it.

Take a moment and think about your powerhouse brand – your unique position is in your market. What is your biggest problem? Then approach someone over the next few days who might help you make your biggest asset even more impactful. Or solve your biggest problem.

When it comes down to it, we need to approach the structuring of our business with the same urgency we deliver the news and the same gritty entrepreneurial spirit we embrace when we create new content.

I think if we take on these three challenges together, we CAN preserve the core values of public radio AND progress. But we need to think big, start soon and seek impact.

I think we are heading down the right road. And I am hopeful that when my great grandchildren hit the road some things will not have changed.

I envision them hopping into their solar-powered transport vehicles on their way to visit me through time. I picture them hearing the news of the universe and

discovering communities as they pass along the way by experiencing the power of the human story on public radio.

They just might be listening on a device we haven't contemplated yet, and that's ok.