

NPR BEHIND THE SCENES – THE EARLY YEARS

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Introduction

NPR, National Public Radio, is without doubt one of the most influential, important and trusted information sources in the world today. It has not always been that way. There was a time when NPR was completely unknown, even in the city of Washington, D.C. where the company is located.

This course traces the early history of NPR from a time before the corporation existed up through the first twenty years of its existence. I was on NPR staff during this period; I held positions at NPR during that time in the Technical Operations, Distribution and Information Services divisions. I exited the company in an executive capacity. And I was in management during a critical financial period. This course features my personal insights on the company and, as important, its early staff many of whom would become household names.

We will discuss the people, the technology and the business of National Public Radio during its founding years that has led to the organization as it exists today. We will see where it came from, the forces that shaped it and public broadcasting in general and speculate on where it is going in the future.

This is not a political survey of the stories covered by NPR during these years. Nor is it an attempt to understand the company or its staff as it is configured today. It is however an insider's view of what it was like to be at one of this nation's most significant and influential media organizations at its inception.

BEFORE PUBLIC BROADCASTING

There were non-commercial educational stations in the years before Public radio and television as we know them today. These stations were licensed either to institutions like school systems, colleges and universities or to independent non-profit organizations with a public service educational focus.

These stations faced many challenges including under-funding, limited staff, limited broadcast hours, small audience service areas due to low transmitter power, and often antiquated equipment and facilities. While some regional station interconnects existed, there was no national network so there was no ability to offer live broadcasts on a national level, unlike the commercial networks.

Even though there were no network interconnects for live real-time program distribution, prerecorded programs were distributed by postal mail. National Educational Television (NET) distributed television programs on film and videotape. National Educational Radio (NER) distributed radio programs on audio tape. This media was passed around the country by mail in a process known as “bicycle networking”.

In the early years, one condition of FCC licensing for commercial broadcasters was providing a certain number of educational and instructional program hours weekly. This was intended to supplement the limitations of non-commercial stations. However commercial broadcasters scheduled these programs at times when there would be the least impact on the stations’ revenues, often overnight and on weekends. This resulted in a suboptimal availability of such programming to the public. By 1960 FCC Chairman Newton Minnow complained before Congress that commercial broadcasters had failed to satisfactorily comply with the intent of the broadcast regulations and had in fact produced what Minnow famously called “a vast wasteland” of programming instead.

To resolve these issues, members of Congress proposed new legislation consistent with President Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society initiative.

PUBLIC BROADCASTING ACT OF 1967

The Public Broadcasting Act was signed by President Johnson on September 28, 1967. The Act provided funding for infrastructure improvements at qualified local non-commercial radio and television stations, mandated the production and distribution of national radio and television programs, and established three new corporations to implement national infrastructures for public radio and television and funding for new national interconnects.

PUBLIC BROADCASTING ORGANIZATIONS

The Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) is the organization that is the steward of the federal government's investment in public broadcasting and the largest single source of funding for public media. The CPB mission is to ensure universal access to non-commercial, high-quality content and telecommunications services by distributing funds to locally owned public radio and television stations.

National Public Radio (NPR) is the member organization of public radio stations. The company produces much, although not all, of the public radio program content and distributes all the content.

The Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) is the member organization of public television stations. PBS distributes all public television programs direct to member stations. Public television program content is produced by member stations and independent producers.

NPR LOCATIONS IN WASHINGTON, D.C.

NPR has always been headquartered in Washington, D.C. The original locations were Dupont Circle NW and 1625 I Street NW. NPR occupied these locations between 1970 and 1973.

The Dupont Circle location housed the tape duplication facility NPR inherited from NER. The tape duplication services continued after NPR's national interconnect was established because the interconnect transmission quality was not as good as audio tape at the time; the national interconnect was used only for live national programming where immediacy was more important than quality.

The I Street facility housed offices, a newsroom, a single studio and control room and a technical shop. This facility was the point of origin for the public radio national interconnect, a 12,000 mile network serving 90 member stations across the nation. The network services were provided by common carriers like AT&T. These services were designed decades earlier at a time when all broadcast audio technology was low fidelity. NPR member stations are FM, capable of high fidelity radio transmissions, unlike AM and TV at that time. This technical limitation of the NPR national interconnect would be corrected in later years with the introduction of the public radio satellite-based interconnect.

In 1973 NPR moved from the original locations to a single facility at 2025 M Street NW. Production, distribution and tape duplication was housed in the same building. The first floor of the new facility housed master control, three studios and control rooms, two record centrals and the tape duplication facility. Reporters and administrative offices were on the second and third floors. In the late 1970s three more small studios were added on the second floor and non-production staff were relocated to the third and fourth floors. A new analog satellite system was deployed with a technical center on the first floor.

Due to staff expansion, in 1993 NPR moved to 635 Massachusetts Avenue SW. At this point the production systems were converted to digital audio. The analog satellite distribution system was retained so the move was invisible to member stations. During this time NPR developed many new programs. The new programs introduced NPR to new generations of public radio audiences.

In 2012, NPR deployed a new satellite system to member stations based on digital audio. In 2013 the company relocated to its present address at 1111 North Capitol Street. NPR began distributing programs via Internet as well as satellite to member stations. Excess satellite capacity was offered as services to commercial program distributors as an added corporate revenue stream. Staff was expanded to support these new initiatives. The NPR Distribution services were extended as commercial offerings to external producers and customers.

SELECTED NPR PERSONALITIES

These are selected NPR staff better known to the public with whom I worked.

Mike Waters came to NPR in 1971 from WBFO in Buffalo, New York. He was host of ATC from 1971 through 1974. He was the original host of Weekend ATC Saturday beginning in late 1974. In his later career with NPR he continued producing news magazine segments and documentaries including the weekly “Options” series.

Jim Russell came to NPR as a reporter in 1971 from United Press International (UPI). He briefly co-hosted ATC with Mike Waters and returned to UPI in early 1972. He came back to NPR a few years later as ATC executive producer. In later years, Jim became an independent producer.

Susan Stamberg is a native of New York City. A born conversationalist, she joined NPR in 1971 coming from local Washington DC public radio station WAMU at American University. Susan co-hosted ATC for 14 years beginning in 1972. She was the first woman to host a national nightly news broadcast in the U.S. and was the original host of Weekend ATC Sunday from 1987 through 1989. In addition to her many other accolades, Susan is the only public radio personality with a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

Linda Wertheimer was born in Carlsbad, New Mexico. She was raised in a politically-aware home. NBC television’s Pauline Frederick and CBS’s Edward R. Murrow were her idols. After college she worked for BBC in London where she learned broadcasting. When she returned to New York City she was hired as a writer at WCBS-FM. Linda finally realized her dream of becoming an on-air reporter when she was hired by NPR in 1971. She was the first full-time director of ATC from 1971 through early 1972. During the 1970s and 1980s she was NPR’s Senate correspondent. In the 1990s she returned to ATC as a co-host.

Ira Flatow came to NPR from WBFO in Buffalo, New York. He had an interest in science from a young age; Don Herbert, known popularly as “Mr. Wizard” on television, was an early idol. Ira was hired in 1971 and became the NPR science correspondent, producing weekly segments on ATC known as “The Flatow File”. In later years, Ira went on to host the popular PBS science show “Newton’s Apple”. He founded the Science Friday Foundation which promotes education in science and technology. His science podcast has one of the largest online audiences today, numbering over 600,000 subscribers. Ira broke free of public media with appearances as himself on the CBS series “The Big Bang Theory”.

Fred Calland was NPR’s first music and arts correspondent. He came to the company in 1971 from member station WFCR in Amherst, Massachusetts. His main expertise was classical music, although he was quite knowledgeable in music and arts history. Most of his production work, and in fact the general trend in NPR Arts and performance production, focused on longer programs. Shorter pieces were often extracted for programs like ATC. Fred spent almost his entire career with NPR, spanning some 20 years. Thereafter he continued at local Station WETA-FM as host of his program “World of Opera”.

Bob Edwards was born and raised in Louisville, Kentucky. He is tall, lanky and handsome with a deep resonant voice. He was trained in journalism at American University by Ed Bliss, one of the early colleagues of Edward R. Murrow at CBS News. This was appropriate since Murrow was one of Bob’s idols. From Bliss, Bob learned important lessons in journalism and broadcasting including, importantly, ethics and integrity; traits for which CBS News was famous. Bob initially worked for the Armed Forces network in Korea while in Army service. He then moved to Washington D.C. where he was a newscaster

at WTOP news radio and later at the Mutual radio network. Bob came to NPR in 1974 serving for a time as ATC newscaster. When Mike Waters left ATC, Bob began co-hosting with Susan Stamberg. It wasn't long before their voices became the most recognizable in public radio. The team was broken up in late 1978 when Bob was recruited, he would say "drafted", to host the new morning program, "Morning Edition". He served as host of that program for 25 years until he finally left NPR to move to Sirius/XM Satellite radio where he had his own show for several years more before retiring from broadcasting.

Nina Totenberg was born in New York City, her father was international violinist Roman Totenberg. Nina's forceful personality comes through clearly when you meet her for the first time. She is a woman who knows what she wants and how to get it. No one phases her. She was fascinated with solving problems and challenges; Nancy Drew was an early idol. Journalism for Nina was as close to detective work as she could imagine. She prefers to think of herself as a "professional gossip".

Nina is absolutely fearless. She will ask anyone any question at any time. This trait endeared her to some very famous people. Among them was Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg whom Nina knew well throughout Ginsberg's life. Over time, Nina acquired an unequalled intimate knowledge of the workings, intricacies and innuendoes of the U.S. Supreme Court. She has become respected and well-known as a legal expert in the prestigious Washington D.C. journalism community.

When she came to NPR in 1974, she had never worked in radio or television. She was a quick learner, asked many questions, and soon was a highly proficient broadcast journalist.

Cokie Roberts' connections and contacts were largely based in personal rather than professional relations. Her father was Congressman Hale Boggs from Louisiana. After his untimely death in 1972, her mother Lindy Boggs took over her husband's Congressional seat. Cokie was a precocious child, used to getting her way. But she also learned the art of persuasion at a young age. She met her husband, Steve Roberts, while attending Wellesley. The two married at the Boggs' home in Washington D.C. Over the next few years, they travelled to New York, Malibu and Greece before returning to Washington D.C. There, Cokie landed a job as NPR House Congressional correspondent. In the 1980s she also worked at ABC TV with the legendary Sam Donaldson. Cokie was quirky, intelligent, clever and vivacious. She was well-respected in Washington society and in the Washington journalism community.

Carl Kasell was a veteran newscaster when he came to NPR in 1974. He had most previously worked at commercial Washington D.C. news station WAVA. Carl was initially a newscaster on ATC. He debuted the new NPR+ morning news service when it premiered. And he was one of several newscasters on Morning Edition and Weekend Edition. But Carl's most famous role at NPR was, ironically, not as a newscaster but a gameshow host. He hosted and judged the NPR radio gameshow "Wait, Wait ... Don't. Tell Me!". Carl spent his entire career at NPR post-1974. His book, "Wait, Wait ... I'm Not Done Yet!" is a must-read.

NPR ADMINISTRATIONS 1970 - 2012

Don Quayle was NPR's first President. He came from educational television. Unafraid of confrontation, his style was forthright and direct. He had the can-do attitude needed in the early days of the company and was prepared to make tough choices to keep the company on course in the early years. Don mostly removed himself from daily operations, but would become involved when decisions were required that only he could make. He went to CPB after leaving NPR in 19xx.

Lee Frischknecht was NPR's first Vice President; he took over as President when Don Quayle moved on. Lee preferred compromise to confrontation and was much less hands-on than his predecessor. His initial approach to expanding the public radio audience was to hire consultants. It seems these expensive consultants never really studied the nuances of public radio, its offerings or its audiences. Their recommendation to Lee was to stop competing with commercial radio on news programming – where NPR had been successful of course – and instead to expand into more performance arts programs. The news staff was predictably not impressed with this advice and while Lee did hire more Arts staff who broadened the NPR Arts program offerings, news programs remained untouched. Lee tried to play down NPR's brand recognition challenge, claiming that being under the radar was good at a time when the White House was highly critical of the media. That position did not go over well with the staff. Lee's general laissez-faire attitude was one contributing reason the programming staff unionized with the American Federation of Radio and Television Artists (AFTRA).

Frank Mankewicz came from a well-known Hollywood family. His background was in entertainment, journalism, and more recently politics. Frank was probably best known to the nation at large as the person who in 1968 told the world Senator Robert F. Kennedy had been assassinated.

One of his greatest assets as he took over NPR was the size of his Rolodex. He knew important people in politics, journalism and entertainment; connections that would benefit NPR.

Frank faced the challenges that still existed: brand name recognition, audience growth, staff working conditions, and interconnect technical quality limitations. Unlike Lee, Frank was a big idea visionary. No challenge was too lofty and no plan too outrageous, especially his own. He brushed aside objections and potential obstacles, confident that everything would work out. He learned at a young age that, at least in Hollywood, great projects are funded. He was very much the leader NPR needed at that moment in the company's history. But he had one fatal flaw; a flaw that at the same time inadvertently made NPR a household name while bringing the company to the brink of extinction.

One of Frank's first moves was to expand into available space in the M Street building. As a former journalist, he had a particular fondness for News programming and reporters. He reasoned that NPR was well-positioned to do more news programs which would require more staff. Accordingly, he added studios on the second floor and relocated non-news staff to upper floors. He knew that radio is traditionally stronger in the morning and daytime than in the evenings. The member stations were ready for morning programs as well, unlike in earlier years. Frank created the Morning Edition show for this reason, although not without some issues along the way. And he pushed for new weekend versions of both ATC and Morning Edition. He recognized the amazing opportunities a new higher quality network interconnect would present. In fact, Frank actually identified new ways of recognizing revenue once NPR had its own satellite-based network transmission infrastructure.

Frank delivered when NPR needed funding. Whether testifying before Congress, leveraging personal contacts, or simply from good fortune, he got more money into NPR than ever before. But with all these good things, Frank brought to NPR to near disaster because he was not finance oriented. By mid-1983, the company was effectively bankrupt. While CPB would eventually save the company, it was the end of the road for Frank Mankewicz; someone as effective but better grounded in business had to be found.

Doug Bennett had the executive background NPR needed in the post-Mankewicz era. He had come from various leadership positions in and around the Federal government. He knew well-placed Federal functionaries; he could get things done. Doug used to say that his job was to make our dreams come true, to remove the obstacles to our success. His first move was to ensure the auditors CPB had called in to investigate the company's financial disaster were successful in their efforts. Doug welcomed a complete corporate audit so we all would know what had really happened. He hired Sid Brown, a highly respected executive, as the company's new Chief Financial Officer. Brown had most recently been head of the Congressional Budget Office, responsible for impartial, objective analysis of Federal budgets and legislative proposal cost factors. NPR had, at this juncture, the most experienced financial management team ever in its history to date. As a member of the NPR executive management team at that time, I reported directly to Brown and worked daily with both Bennett and Brown. Doug immediately implemented management protocols recognizable in any healthy corporation including metrics and measurements, full cost justifications, and decision impact analyses at all levels. One result of the new focus on analysis included discovering the true nature of the public radio audience instead of engaging in informed guesswork as had been the practice in the past. While a real understanding of the audience would take significant time and effort, this critical project began during the Bennett administration. Doug initiated another change of focus that had long-term consequences well beyond his administration. He insisted we focus on diversity in every aspect of the business from hiring and employee development to audience expansion and servicing.

Subsequent NPR administrations' tenures fall outside the time period in NPR history covered in this course.

PUBLIC RADIO PROGRAMS

While NPR today has dozens of programs produced weekly, this was not always the case. The programs discussed in this section are among the earliest NPR produced. In these programs are the ideas, formats and styles that have come to define most all public radio programming.

ALL THINGS CONSIDERED

All Things Considered was the first NPR news magazine program regularly broadcast live to member stations. NPR's Operations Director, George Geesey, suggested the name since the program was intended to literally examine all imaginable subjects. The program ran 90 minutes; the East coast edition was transmitted at 5 PM Eastern time and a replay was transmitted at 8 PM for delay to the West coast. The start time was chosen so the program would not compete with local television news.

The first director of the program was Bill Siemering. He quickly decided directing was not for him and appointed Linda Wertheimer as the program's first full-time director. She served in that capacity until early 1972 when Rich Firestone – recently arrived from WBFO – took over the director's chair. Rich continued to direct ATC through the mid-1970s. There have been about a dozen directors of ATC in its 50+ year history. This position is one of the most demanding at NPR requiring a unique combination of artistic, technical and communications skills in the constant face of certain disaster daily. Several former technical staff have become ATC directors including Dave Creagh, Maury Schlesinger and Jude Franco.

There have been about 30 hosts in the history of ATC. The first host was Robert Conley from NBC News. He was replaced in early 1972 for a brief time by Jim Russell and Mike Waters. Russell hosted the first hour of the program and Waters hosted the last half hour. Eventually Jim returned to UPI and Mike hosted the entire 90 minute program alone for a short time. By mid-1972, Susan Stamberg had begun co-hosting the entire program with Mike Waters. In 1975 Waters moved on to other production roles at NPR and Bob Edwards – recently arrived from Mutual Radio – co-hosted with Susan. This continued until late 1979 when Bob became the first host of the new NPR daytime news magazine, Morning Edition. Thereafter, until Susan took a sabbatical to write a book in 200x, she co-hosted variously with Bob Siegel and Noah Adams, among others. Eventually Susan became a Senior Correspondent for NPR and others took over the ATC hosting duties.

The program has always been formatted so stations had the option of airing the entire show or inserting their own local content into their local broadcast of the program. This places strict timing requirements on the production staff; each segment must be timed perfectly.

Today, ATC is two hours in duration and begins at 4 PM local time in response to evolving station capabilities and requirements related to changes in the broadcast news industry. Some of this expanded coverage reflects the reality that NPR today has original news reporting operations worldwide almost unequaled in the broadcast industry. The company has come a long way from only offering analysis and commentary on news stories often initially reported by others.

MORNING EDITION

One of the ironies of the first regular NPR news program offering, ATC, is that it is an evening News show in a broadcast medium known to be strongest in the mornings and daytime. While the Internet has altered this commonly held wisdom today, it was decidedly true in the mid-20th century.

As mentioned before, the reasoning for this apparent inconsistency was principally due to station broadcast hours at the time. This situation had changed at the local member stations by the mid-1970s. Not only had station broadcast hours extended to include mornings and daytime, but station staff production capabilities had improved, often as a result of experience producing contributions for the nightly ATC program. These new realities resulted in stations' desire for a morning NPR network news magazine similar to ATC.

Frank Mankewicz responded to these station requests by hiring an outside producer from a local Washington D.C. all-news radio station. This producer had no experience with public radio or public radio audiences. His attitude was apparently condescending to the NPR news staff. He seemed to have had no clue as to the success of ATC. He hired two commercial radio personalities to host the new show: Pete Williams and Mary Tillotson. Both would go on to successful commercial broadcast careers after their short time at NPR. The new producer created an audition of the new morning program which was transmitted closed-circuit to stations only and which was not broadcast to the public. Neither NPR staff nor station managers and program directors were impressed. No station wanted this program. Mankewicz immediately fired the new producer and the talent. But there was a problem: the stations had been told the program would begin in 10 days' time and NPR now had no show. Mankewicz appointed Jay Kernis, who up to this time had only produced audio promotions and a few Arts pieces for ATC. Jay had no experience producing news programming. He wisely tapped Bob Edwards from ATC as host of the new program. Initially Bob didn't want to leave ATC, but did so when was promised it was a short-term commitment; that a permanent host for Morning Edition would be found within 30 days. Bob stayed with Morning Edition as its sole host for about 25 years. It turned out that Bob's unique personality and sound was ideally suited for morning drive-time public radio. He became a trusted voice as people showered, had breakfast and drove to work.

For many, Morning Edition replaced the newspaper as a trusted and authoritative source for daily national and international news and feature stories. Cokie Roberts once remarked that, during her time as an NPR Congressional correspondent, typically about 400 of the 535 members of the House of Representatives listened to Morning Edition. And it became clear that Morning Edition stories were discussed in editorial meetings at virtually all the respected newspapers, news magazines and commercial broadcast networks. The phrase "NPR reports ..." became commonplace in other journalists' stories and news copy.

The format of Morning Edition was in many ways similar to that of ATC, except that stations had more opportunities to leave and rejoin the program during the broadcast. This enabled stations to replace any part of the national program with locally-produced content, thus giving the local broadcast a more local individual feel for listeners. Listeners often heard two hosts: Bob Edwards and a local station host. Because of the high-quality network audio, listeners could not tell which parts of the broadcast originated locally and which originated at NPR.

WEEKEND ALL THINGS CONSIDERED

In response to extended station broadcast schedules, NPR introduced weekend magazine programs based on existing weekday programs.

In 1974 Mike Waters hosted the inaugural broadcast of “ATC Weekend Saturday”. The weekend ATC programs had content similar to the weekday editions, except there was less focus on news events. Carl Kasell was the newscaster on these new programs.

In 1976 Susan Stamberg hosted the inaugural broadcast of “ATC Weekend Sunday”. This edition was heavily feature-oriented reflecting the more casual nature of Sunday listening conditions.

WEEKEND EDITION

Stations also requested national weekend morning programming from NPR. Thus was born “Weekend Edition” on Saturdays and Sundays. Scott Simon was the host of these programs, moving from his former position as NPR Chicago bureau chief and correspondent.

PRAIRIE HOME COMPANION

This is the one program discussed here that was not produced by NPR, although it was distributed over the NPR satellite network. The program was produced by American Public Radio (APR) in Minnesota. It was offered by APR to NPR but Frank Mankewicz decided the folksy nature of the proposed program content was likely inappropriate for the public radio audience as Frank perceived it. The true situation at the time was that no one, including Mankewicz, actually understood the public radio audience dynamics. This is why Frank made the wrong decision, historically. The program was incredibly successful and well-accepted in most public radio markets. The new satellite distribution system made it possible for the program to be transmitted to stations each week from the Minneapolis/St. Paul uplink. This was the first time a program not produced in collaboration with NPR was made available to public radio member stations in real time.

INTERCONNECT EVOLUTION – PUBLIC RADIO SATELLITE INTERCONNECTION SYSTEM (PR SIS)

Ever since the first network transmission from 1625 I Street, we at NPR knew we had to improve the quality of the network circuits interconnecting the Washington D.C studios to the member stations.

Most stations had the ability to broadcast high quality sound, much superior to that of AM radio and television in those days. By a strange quirk of history, the noncommercial stations had been allocated a broadcast spectrum whose technology was actually superior to that available to commercial broadcasters. The network interconnect quality provided to all broadcast networks in the early decades of the 20th century was designed to support the lower quality needs of AM radio and television.

At NPR we realized we would have to literally create the transmission infrastructure we needed because no other broadcast entity at the time shared our requirements. We chose to implement a new innovative form of satellite transmission direct to stations. This had never been done before anywhere.

The satellite made it possible to send high quality programs direct to stations. This was the first use of satellites in radio or television to send programs direct from a network center to stations with the attendant improved signal quality. Prior to this time, broadcasters used satellites to originate remote live events to network studios or to send network programs between East and West coast network centers only.

The first generation Public Radio Satellite Interconnection System (PR SIS) was an analog satellite audio system. Each channel was transmitted on its own radio frequency carrier direct to the satellite transponder. One of our unique innovations in satellite technology was putting multiple carriers on a single transponder.

A satellite transponder is like a piece of real estate: there is only so much available on a satellite in terms of power and bandwidth. A TV signal on a satellite transponder uses all the available transponder resources. But our lower power and narrower bandwidth audio-only carriers used only a tiny fraction of our transponder bandwidth and power. So we could put 12 channels, each on their own carrier frequency, on a single transponder with power and bandwidth left over.

This single channel per carrier, multiple carrier per transponder design allowed multiple uplinks in different parts of the country to transmit to the satellite simultaneously. It was not necessary for all programs to originate from NPR in Washington D.C., although many did.

The system was completed in the mid-1980s, with a total of 17 uplink sites around the country, including Washington DC; more than any other communications network in the world at the time. Eventually, there were 24 uplinks nationwide.

Because multiple programs could be uplinked from different sites simultaneously, other member stations could send programs directly to stations or use satellite channels to send production content to NPR in DC for inclusion into programs like ATC and, later, others.

With the satellite distribution system online, a new Main Origination Technical Center (MOTC) was built at the front of the first floor facing M Street; the first of its kind anywhere in the world. Because the MOTC was the nerve center of the network and was located on a major downtown street, bulletproof glass was installed in the windows. The MOTC appearance was often compared by many to the bridge of the Starship Enterprise.

A new computer controlled system switched the various audio sources onto the channels transmitted to the satellite. This task was automated because the switching could be complex due to the number of channels potentially involved.

As more programming hours originated from NPR in Washington D.C., it was necessary to likewise expand the network operating hours. In the early days, the network came alive just before 5 PM Eastern time for the first ATC transmission and went down for all practical purposes after the conclusion of the second West coast edition of ATC at 9:30 PM. MOTC Hours were expanded in the late 1970s when new and expanded network services became available as programs like Morning Edition began. Eventually the facility was operated overnight as well to handle refeeds of prerecorded material, mainly to West coast stations. The higher quality and stereo capability of the satellite system made it possible for stations to move away from receiving programs by mail on audio tape to recording programs fed on the high quality stereo-capable satellite channels. The satellite carried both live programs for immediate broadcast by stations and programs to be recorded at stations for broadcast at a later time of their choosing.

In 2012, NPR deployed a new satellite interconnect using digital audio technology. This provided stations state-of-the-art audio programs and removed the proprietary technologies that had been necessary in the first generation satellite system. The multiple uplinks at various member stations around the country were no longer needed with the arrival of Internet-based streaming audio and file transfer technologies.

The most recent interconnect is Content Depot which allows member stations to subscribe to programs and locally. The content Depot hardware and software is maintained remotely by PRSS staff in the Network Operating Center in Washington, D.C.

The reason NPR does not use the Internet as a distribution medium is stability. The shared resources of the public Internet are not sufficiently reliable. The satellite acts like a private network and is more secure and reliable and thus more suitable as a broadcast network Interconnect.

NPR FINANCIAL DISASTER OF 1983

In July 1983 NPR came to the brink of extinction; the network was bankrupt. This occurred chiefly because senior management was more focused on outcomes than financials. There was a general attitude that nothing should get in the way of achieving goals.

One of the riskiest ideas Frank put forward was NPR Ventures. This was a series of investments to make money selling services, mostly unconnected to radio production and distribution, to commercial buyers. It was risky by every reasonable measure. Even staff with no business experience doubted the wisdom of these ideas. Mankewicz brushed concerns aside when staff asked about potential risks and failures. The actual Ventures project was a disaster and lost the company millions of dollars at a time when such a loss could not be tolerated.

The business was run without significant management reporting and control measures. NPR had neither the necessary information available nor the management mindset required to run the company responsibly. This was the general finding of the independent external auditors hired by CPB to discover precisely what had happened.

While a great many issues focused on limited financial reporting and a lack of attention to those reports that were available, there were no issues in the Information Services division. Everything requested by management had been implemented. But, as I discovered when I became Director of Information Services in later years, there were reporting features available in the NPR financial software that were never used for some reason. After meeting with the owner of the firm that developed the financial software, it became clear to me the product was quite capable of serving NPR's needs to the satisfaction of the new executive management team.

One example of the blatant lack of financial oversight occurred in the Accounting department. It involved a breach of trust by a staff member who was responsible for assuring transaction integrity. This employee had created a false employee – who did not exist – assigned them an employee id, placed them in an innocuous position in the company, and paid them a salary which flowed to the staff member involved. This activity was not caught because of the limited reporting that had been requested by management at the time. It was discovered only when the external auditors tested both through and around the system.

The more often reported effect on staff was, quite frankly devastating. Reporters borrowed paper and other supplies from CBS across the street. Staff was told to take home any personal items in case the doors might be locked by a bankruptcy court. In mid-July the staff was notified the end-of-month paychecks might not be paid. This implied the grand experiment that was NPR might be over.

Eventually CPB authorized a financial bailout of NPR, but there were significant conditions. The NPR Board had to be reconstituted to include executives from commercial enterprises in addition to member station management. A new funding model was put in place that eventually gave purchasing power to member stations instead of vesting that authority in the NPR Board alone.

Perhaps the most significant outcomes in the aftermath were that NPR was now a household name due to the intense press scrutiny and national commentary from other news organizations and that NPR now had the most financially savvy executive management team in its history headed by CEO Doug Bennett.

SUGGESTED READING LIST

Noah Adams, et al., “This Is NPR – The First 40 Years” (supplemental audio CDs also available)

Bob Edwards, “Voice In The Box”

Carl Kasell, “Wait, Wait ... I’m Not Done Yet”

Jack Mitchell, “Listener Supported”

Linda Napoli, “Susan, Nina, Linda and Cokie – The Extraordinary Story of the Founding Mothers of NPR”

Susan Stamberg, “Every Night At Five”

Linda Wertheimer, ed., “Listening to America”