

## Minnesota Public Radio News: Integrating Broadcast and Online Distribution to Reach and Serve Audiences

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### Introduction

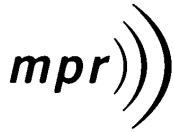
The MPR News' online operation began as an experiment. Now, the MPR News Web site has become an essential part of our news operation. During this transition, our newsroom has learned that online journalism can play a role as important, or more important, than radio broadcast journalism. We have become sharper and better at using online tools as we have learned to think creatively about the multiple platforms that are available to us, and how best to integrate our production process. News reporters and editors have taken ownership of the MPR News Web site. Just as we don't want to miss a major story on the radio, so too, we don't want to miss a major story or a great feature on the Web site. This represents a major change in journalists' thinking about their jobs, and about the ways to reach audiences.

### Background

MPR News' first years on the Internet were experimental, with the content that went online dictated for the most part by the capacity of a single online editor to convert radio stories into Web material. We discovered which presentations worked well and which didn't, providing a good foundation for our next phase of Web development. Now, we are in a period of formalizing some of the things that work well, so that they become routine. We are also working to make everyone in the newsroom, not just Web editors, responsible for Web content.

The challenge of this transition is twofold. First, and arguably most difficult, has been changing the staff mindset so editors, reporters and producers consider the Web from a story's inception—what elements might be available to enhance presentation on the Web? Rather than approaching Web editors as an afterthought, staff now thinks about providing Web editors with supplementary materials such as pictures, extended audio, and potential sidebar info.

Second, the responsibility for processing Web material has expanded beyond the newsroom's two online editors. The more we have been able to free Web editors from some of the time-



consuming duties necessary for getting content online, the more time they have for concentrating on journalism. To that end, we've begun teaching some staff members how to update headlines and some of the other more routine Web duties.

## The Plan

Our goal has been to develop an online news service that is valued in the region, and to integrate fully our radio and Web news operations. This has been attempted at many traditional outlets, most of which immediately separated the broadcast and online staffs. In these cases, problems resulted from lack of communication and poor use of online methods. Instead, we opted to expand the role of radio broadcasters to include working in an online environment.

How a radio station implements this is extremely important. If we had mandated this change, we would not have been able to achieve the "buy-in" necessary. We chose, instead, to show our staff how online could enhance their work, and let them see for themselves how the two fit together. In this way, we were able to generate the reporters' enthusiasm, and they began to explore online possibilities as a matter of professional interest, rather than management mandate.

This method takes longer to achieve the desired result. But the result is more than worth it.

Our philosophy carried its own set of challenges. The inclination of most radio news operations trying to establish an online presence is to take material off the radio and put it onto a Web site. But the Web is not radio and transferring radio to the Web also transfers some of radio's weaknesses. The strength of the Web is that its capacities can counter radio's weaknesses. And, as broadcasters, we're in a unique position to use radio's strength (an abundance of audio and well-written copy) to counter the weaknesses that many Web sites have (i.e. no multimedia).

To accomplish this, we've found a need to step away from the "radio mindset." In radio, our reporters think in terms of individual stories. Our talk-show producers think in terms of talk shows. But the online audience doesn't necessarily respond well to these isolated elements; they respond to the presentation afforded by the Web's ability to gather a number of elements together in a single location.

This requires someone in the news operation to be able to step back and say, "What are the stories and issues we want to cover?" and "How are we going to cover them?" Although this sounds simple, it's very easy in a broadcast environment to lose the "big picture" of an issue or a story because the effort to produce the individual components is so great.

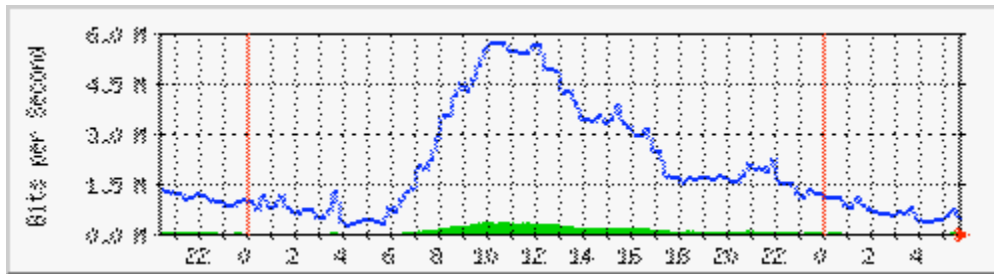
In a broadcast environment, it's very difficult to get all of the far-flung components – editors, show producers, newscasters etc. – together to be able to "package" a story or cover an issue. On a given day, for example, MPR may have a talk show, a four-minute story, or a two-

minute Q/A on a topic without having any of those elements “play off” the other. Online, we can do that and enhance it with, for example, listener commentary, a poll, or a sidebar piece. Our ability to do this, or at least to start to do this, has been the greatest success at MPR.

We also had to break out of the “radio mold” in order to deliver our stories on a timely fashion. For example, in radio we think in terms of four or five-minute stories, delivered in time for our *All Things Considered* audience. A reporter would spend the morning and early afternoon gathering information – audio primarily - and the mid- to late-afternoon writing and producing for a 5:20 p.m. segment. Our initial plan was once this story was available, we’d put it on the Web site.

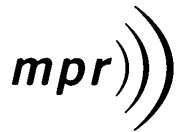
The problem with this mindset is that it misses the audience. Radio’s strength is its drive-time audience. But we found that a Web site’s audience is when people are at work. Under the scenario above, we were presenting stories at a time when the audience was just turning to radio; thus, a wasted effort.

This chart shows a typical 24-hour period in our online audience. Note that the audience *increases* during a workday, and *decreases* during radio’s “drive time.”



So we adjusted our method by providing stories online as soon as we had something to tell. In many cases it might be one or two paragraphs. If that’s all we have, that’s what we tell our online audience. Then, as reporters get more information, or obtain photographs, we add that to our online presentation. The result is a story presentation that builds throughout the day. In doing it this way, we’re also making it clear to our online audience, that additional information is available on their drive home – on the radio. In this way, we can continue to think in terms of how the Web can assist our broadcast audience, and our radio can assist our Web audience. This formula has become a daily mission plan for our online journalistic efforts.

As these stories are built, we begin to aggregate them with other related material. Perhaps it’s a talk show, or a previous story on the same subject. Whatever it is, if it’s related, we make sure that our presentation features *all* of it, so that our audience can get a fuller context. These “collections” have become some of our most popular information clusters on our Web site.



In formulating this plan with a broadcast staff, we would always hear the question, “How do you know what a Web component is?” In response, we say, “It’s all about angles.” In most radio stories, reporters have too much information to get into a time-limited format. The Web site provides a way to get this information to our audience. An editor might slice a paragraph out of a script because it takes the story in a different direction. The Web is a clear place for that added “value” to exist. Editors are happy, reporters are happy, the audience is happy.

We’ve also found that our audience appreciates having complete audio of news conferences upon which a radio story may be based. We’ve found that providing analysis, as a sidebar to a story is a great way to provide additional context. And it gives our audience additional information on a story, allowing them to hear – or see – for themselves what it is the radio reporter got to see.

How do already-overworked reporters do this? How do they handle the online side of things while handling radio duties? The short answer is the radio reporters already have the material. The challenge is coordinating with online to alert editors to its presence.

An example of this can be found at: (attached)  
[http://news.mpr.org/features/200106/06\\_scheckt\\_count/index.shtml](http://news.mpr.org/features/200106/06_scheckt_count/index.shtml)

This was a story that was part of large-scale coverage of a Twin Cities strike by nurses. On this particular day, however, the number of angles on the story was extremely large, with news conferences happening in several different locations. Our radio broadcasters were keeping up with things, but barely. And there was every expectation – as there should have been – that their radio duties would preclude additional online work.

But, as we indicated, the Web’s strength is the ability to use material that radio reporters already have, but cannot always use.

One reporter went to one news conference, and another reporter was sent to another news conference across town. Both returned to the newsroom at about the same time. And both were within 30 minutes of needing to have their material on the radio. Since we use digital audio workstations, the audio for the news conference(s) had to be dubbed into the system. The radio reporters would then slice the audio up into “cuts” for their pieces. But as the audio was entered into the digital audio system, we encoded it for the Web. Total amount of additional work for the radio broadcaster? Zero.

As each attended the news conference and listened, they took digital photos. When they returned to the newsroom, an online editor grabbed the camera and processed the pictures, while they attended to their radio needs, stopping long enough to identify the subjects. Total amount of additional work for the radio broadcaster? About 30 seconds.

You'll note that this story has the basic story from the reporter, images, and additional audio. But you'll actually see at least three separate stories here involving the work of these two reporters. In each case, the material was already in the hands of the radio reporters.

An important note: It's absolutely essential that the online editor be a journalist. At this relatively early stage of its life, the Web is often seen as a realm for the technically inclined. It's common to hire staffers based on their technical, rather than journalistic, ability. Under the scenario that we've created for a workflow, the online editor(s) must be a journalist first, and technical wizard second.

The situations we've described here cover day-to-day coverage of stories. We do these stories because we can't run a news site and not do daily stories. But we've found that online journalism is at its best in producing large-scale projects; it's what separates us from any other site. Again, our challenge was to be able to provide additional context to our radio stories through online offerings.



This project can be found at:

<http://news.mpr.org/programs/specials/lynching/index.shtml>

This regional project started with plans for a radio documentary. As we began the process of designing Web components, we found an abundance of information, extra audio, photographs, and sidebar stories. With an enthusiastic pair of reporters, online editor Melanie Sommer was able to get involved in the project at its earliest stages, and designed a Web project as the radio documentary was being assembled.

"Stephanie Hemphill and Chris Julin gave me so much material, so far ahead of the deadline that I had a fair amount of time to play around with it, and figure out the best way to present it," according to Sommer. "They provided lots of photographs and sources of information."

Again, most of this material was already in the hands of reporters; gathered as they were obtaining information for the radio documentary. The key for the online effort was to foster a climate in which the reporters enthusiastically volunteered the fact that they *had* this information. The fact that the online editor is a journalist, made the question of what to do with it online, easily answerable.



[http://news.mpr.org/features/200105/07\\_newsroom\\_dalai/](http://news.mpr.org/features/200105/07_newsroom_dalai/)

The Dalai Lama’s visit provided a good example of using additional material to enhance our radio product. And it also showed how enthusiastic some of our reporters have become in providing regional online content.

In this case, MPR’s Art Hughes found numerous photographs and angles of the upcoming visit. He also provided a “Web exclusive” about a local craftsman who built a throne for the Dalai Lama.

That allowed us to create a basic “collections” site. Then, as the visit occurred, we added additional material, including the full audio of speeches, more photographs, and stories. By the time the visit was concluded, MPR’s Web site carried one of the most extensive collections of information about the Dalai Lama anywhere on the Web, a tremendous future resource for our audience to come.

How a newsroom approaches projects is critical to its success. Planning for large-scale projects can be made easier by “thinking online.”

A good example of how this works is at:

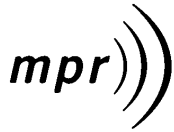
<http://news.mpr.org/programs/specials/u/index.shtml>



This February 2001 endeavor was the largest online project ever attempted at MPR. The topic – the state of the University of Minnesota – was massive; so massive that it was hard to know where to begin.

In its infancy as a radio project, Universal U floundered. Because we were thinking with a radio mindset, we started out plotting five stories (one for each day of the week). The stories that were suggested were all fine, they just didn’t relate to each other in a way that gave the entire project a point. And, we were thinking in terms of filling a radio slot, rather than focusing on a particular issue.

So online editors and the broadcast participants, instead, sat down and diagrammed what a supporting Web site would look like. Early in the process, it was easy to see where our shortcomings were because we were forced to look at it graphically. It was obvious one story



wasn't relating to another well. And once that was obvious, it was easy to settle on a theme, and begin to assemble assignments to provide stories and content built around it. We then redesigned what each component would be, what each reporter's role would be and where the separation would be between the content for radio and the content for the Web.

There's another untapped resource of online content. The audience. In radio, for the most part, the job of the listener is to listen and be passive. On a talk show, the job of the listener is to ask a question. There is, for the most part, no outlet for the audience to *provide* content, and yet in public radio, we know our listeners tend to be the very people around whom our stories swirl.

The answer at MPR is the Soapbox. Still in development, it goes beyond the idea of a "bulletin board," commonly found at Web sites. We are in the process of integrating our talk shows with our online Soapbox, to allow people to provide additional knowledge and additional content to our site, and subsequently, to our audience.

Take, for example, the material we received after we did a radio broadcast about racial profiling:

**Police Aren't A Part of the Community (July 3, 2001)**

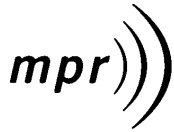
*I've lived in South Minneapolis for 12 years. For about 18 months in the early '90s, I lived on Portland Ave near Franklin. Two incidents are forever etched in my mind from that period of my life.*

*Several Southeast Asian families lived in the apartment building next to ours. Some of the children had a habit of breaking glass bottles on the concrete in our parking area. My housemate and I spoke with the children about it, and all but one stopped breaking bottles. We spoke with that one boy several times, to no avail. One hot summer day, we got fed up with the situation, and followed the boy into the back door of his building right after he broke some bottles. The man, who was presumably his father, was vacuuming the hallway.*

*When we tried to express our frustration, he whirled around and kicked the boy into the wall, and began poking a knife at the boy. We called the police, and several minutes later, a white and a black officer arrived. We followed the officers into the building, and virtually all the people in it had gathered into one apartment. The police officers had us point out the man who'd kicked the boy. The black officer nodded at the white officer, and the white officer asked us to leave. We stepped outside the apartment door, but something didn't feel right. The white officer kept saying, "we've got it under control, you can go home now." We heard a lot of bumping and thumping, and shrill screams in Vietnamese. We reported the incident to the Civilian Review Authority, but nothing ever came of it.*

*The second incident took place several weeks later. There was a shooting in the alley behind our building. There were about 20 young black men in the alley, and I saw one of them put a pistol down his pants. All 20 then proceeded to walk south down the alley. The police arrived*





*en masse, and started jumping over fences, blocking off the alley, etc. I gave a very clear description of the man with the gun to two white officers (green sweatshirt with one blue arm and one yellow arm, etc.). Fifteen minutes later, the officers brought 6 young black men to my back door for identification. None of them had been in our alley, and none were wearing the sweatshirt I'd described. The officers were indignant. "Are you sure it couldn't have been that one" "Yes, I'm sure." I told the officers that I didn't appreciate them bringing six anonymous black men to my back door, and that I'd never seen these six men before. I gave them the description again. The officers accused me of not wanting "to clean up my community." I slammed the door and haven't called the Minneapolis police department for anything other than a car accident since.*

*I'm a white man married to a black woman. We've lived together in South Minneapolis for the last 5 years. I've been pulled over twice in the last year on Lake Street when I had my black stepdaughter in the car with me. On both occasions, the police grilled us on who we were, where we were going, how we knew each other, etc. On the first occasion, an officer laughed sarcastically when my stepdaughter explained who I was. I guess the police think I'm a john and she's a prostitute.*

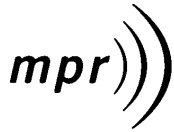
*It's not that there aren't white johns and black prostitutes around here. I'm painfully aware of them. The problem is that the police aren't "community members" any more, especially since Jerry Hoff was murdered. The only time "community members" encounter the police face-to-face is when there are problems. Yes, there are block clubs, I know. But they are formed of predominantly white homeowners with legitimate agendas, but racial and class problems of their own. Our block club leader lives next door to us. For failing to show up at a meeting she invited us to, she now "writes us up" if we so much as have our recycling bins in the wrong place.*

*My point is that, if the police were community members, they would know my stepdaughter and me, and they would have our confidence and cooperation in truly solving "the community's" crime problems. As it is, the police remain armed mystery men and women to us, and we remain a john and a ho to them.*

*Mark Aamot  
Minneapolis, MN*

We strongly believe that the quality of material that our audience can deliver to us is one of the greatest untapped resources that public radio stations have. Our effort over the next few months will be to continue to explore ways to migrate our broadcast conversations to online and create an online community. It is our belief that if we can keep the conversations going online that our broadcast programs begin, these conversations could become instrumental to solving problems within our community.





## What's Ahead

In the coming months, we intend to experiment more with some of the methods we've started using to tell online stories better. We are getting more comfortable with multimedia slideshows, which allows us to marry the audio that we obtain, with the pictures that we take, in a short multimedia presentation embedded in stories. Slideshows provide tremendous flexibility to tell a story quickly, be it an "issue" or an event.

In the case of a tornado that tore apart the small town of Siren, Wisconsin, a slideshow provided the best method of telling the story. There are two separate versions of slideshows we use. One is an audience-click version, which we usually use as a pop-up window (<http://news.mpr.org/headlines/slideshow/sirentornado/1.html>). The other is a multimedia slideshow, (<http://news.mpr.org/headlines/slideshow/siren2/siren2.ram>), which we embed in accompanying stories.

We have started additional training programs within our staff. These informal inservice lunches – which we call "Digital Delis," – are an opportunity, again, to share journalistic visions while focusing on online methods of telling stories. A recent Digital Deli, for example, focused on using digital cameras, and using pictures to tell a story. We've found these sessions to be greeted with a high degree of enthusiasm, not only by the newsroom staff but by staff from other departments with an interest in our online product as well.

We are also in the early stages of parceling out online duties to broadcast editors. We're starting small – editing for the eye, for example, and we're getting broadcast editors to get used to the idea of considering Web needs when dispatching reporters on stories and projects. We'll then move into having editors assist in preparing images, or actually inputting stories.

We're also working toward expanding the hours that our online material is updated, by training some editors and some reporters in HTML and our TeamSite interface. We believe that this is an extension of our philosophy to learn new "tricks" of the trade by meeting the enthusiastic clamor of reporters to learn more, to be better journalists, and to learn new ways of telling stories. We are, one might say, creating an ownership of our Web site on the part of our primarily-radio staff.

Any news operation intent on following our lead should do so acknowledging that it is a very long, and occasionally frustrating road. Our philosophy and methods have shown every indication of paying off, but it does require a dedicated online staff (we've done it with one person and now are doing it with two) to be able to cajole, teach, plead and beg reporters and editors. If the goal is to generate enthusiasm over time by *showing* reporters and editors (and the management) what can be accomplished, it will take months – possibly years – of individual work to be able to produce the material to be used as an example.