KNIGHT LECTURE 2009
Ellen Weiss of NPR

INTRODUCTION by JIM BETTINGER: Good evening. My name is Jim Bettinger and I'm the director of the John S. Knight Journalism Fellowship at Stanford, which is the sponsor of tonight's lecture. Knight Fellows are outstanding experienced journalists selected to study for a year at Stanford. The program is named for the distinguished editor and newspaper owner whose major concern throughout a long career was the news and editorial quality of his newspapers and, indeed, of journalism in general. Twenty-one years ago the Knight Fellowship Program established a lecture series in John Knight's name to bring outstanding journalists to speak to Stanford and the Bay Area community. Tonight we are very pleased to have Ellen Weiss, the Senior Vice President for News at National Public Radio.

A couple of years ago, I had a little epiphany: I realized that I had come to depend on NPR as a primary source of daily in-depth news and information. Now, I'm a person who reads three daily newspapers, and I mean the dead-tree versions, and is online most of the day, so it takes journalism of real quality to break into my field of vision. I'd thought of NPR as an auxiliary source, but now I realized it was for me required listening. And not just for national and international government and politics, as important as they are. I was learning about music that interested me, books, plays, films and much more. I realized that I felt deprived and irritated when parts of "Morning Edition," "All Things Considered" were preempted for pledge drives. I paid my membership, damn it! And I was missing valuable information.

Ellen Weiss has played a major role in the changes that have made NPR so essential to me. She's a real NPR "lifer," having worked for the network since 1982. She was executive producer of "All Things Considered" for a dozen years, including the period of the 1989 Loma Prieta Earthquake and the fall of the Berlin Wall. In the early years of the 21st century, she was senior editor of the National Desk, managing 80 reporters and editors covering all manner of events and issues, and in April 2007, she was promoted to the top news management job at NPR. She got there just in time for tough challenges and tough decisions, which she will talk about tonight.

NPR has not been immune from the forces that have buffeted journalism and journalists these last few years, but the network has also looked to take advantage of new technologies, in what I really think are ambitious and entrepreneurial ways. So we decided to bring her tonight to deliver the Knight Lecture. Ellen Weiss.

ELLEN WEISS: Good evening. Well, having spent most of my career, as you heard, working intensely off mike, letting my NPR colleagues—Dan Schorr, Michele Norris, Susan Stamberg, Robert Siegel—do the talking. I actually look forward to these on-mike opportunities. So thank you for the gracious introduction. It is such an honor to be here in front of this distinguished group of journalism fellows from around the world, the Stanford community and the community at large.

One of the wisest people I know once remarked that the difference between an optimist and a pessimist is that an optimist looks around and argues that this is the best of all possible worlds, and a pessimist agrees. My encounter with the world of journalism in these last two years

embodied both views. Until fairly recently, I spent my days and more than a few of my nights actually committing journalism, doing the real work of reporting and editing, producing on daily deadlines, covering stories around the world and deeply involved in NPR's investigative work, and I loved it passionately. Not only did I feel like I was paid to be curious, but I also went home with that incredible sensation of accomplishment that my work was going to reach several million people. What can I say? We journalists have egos and there is no greater head-trip for a radio journalist than hearing your story on the air.

So it comes as no surprise that having moved to the news executive level, the past year has been a challenging one. Finding myself standing in front of three program staffs, telling them that we were canceling their shows and that they were losing their jobs was not exactly what I expected to be doing when I took this job. I realized that for every newsroom executive, some part of the last year, maybe the last few, has been spent doing this exact thing over and over again. But this was new to me, and it was new for NPR.

As daunting as this period is for the news media, I am still not at all pessimistic about the future for journalism, and certainly not for NPR. To set the context, let me just give you a brief insight as to what I do and where I work. NPR is, as most of you know, a noncommercial radio network. NPR produced shows such as "All Things Considered" and "Morning Edition" are broadcast on some 800 member stations around the country. The shows run a full two hours each day, four times longer than most of the network television news programs, giving us more time to cover more stories across the globe, to explore those stories in greater depth, and to air a more diverse cross-section of voices than any of the other half-hour broadcast news shows.

Each week NPR produces more than 40 hours of live news and talk programming across mornings and afternoons seven days a week. We are reaching 27.5 million listeners each week on the radio, some 10 million visit our website in that same time. We're the leading podcaster, and we're making headway in the world of global. Audience research reveals that NPR's distinctive coverage has earned it an unusually loyal audience comprised of listeners with higher levels of educational achievement, community leadership and political participation than any other broadcast audience.

The shows produced by NPR combined with those of our local station partners are primary news sources for nearly 33 million Americans each week. More Americans listen to public radio today than at any other time in history. Our audience is relying on us to deliver information and insight to help them cope with the same feeling of chaos that we are all experiencing. And there are a couple of key factors we know that are driving the growth in public radio. Trust in NPR reporting is growing, according to a recent Pew poll. The audience values our mixture of strong local, national and international coverage. We've got 17 bureaus around the world—that's more than ABC, CBS, NBC, Fox. We've got 19 bureaus in the U.S. and hundreds, hundreds of strong local news departments doing what fewer and fewer news outlets are doing—covering local communities, local issues.

As the senior vice president for news, I have to answer for all of our news coverage across the nation, the globe, and now on all of our platforms. And for most of the last two years, I've been trying to move a group of journalists who have focused all their energy and creativity into radio

to understand and embrace the need to serve the audience no matter where they come for their NPR experience. And here's a vivid example why. Thanks to Mrs. Joan Kroc, the widow of McDonald's founder Ray Kroc, NPR received an inspiring and generous gift of $225,000,000. Now most of that money became the foundation of an endowment, an endowment that is currently worth less than the original gift but one that has actually enabled us to weather this financial storm in far better shape than if it didn't exist.

As part of that gift, we created a program where we select three young people for a yearlong fellowship and train them to become public radio journalists. I'm a member of the selection committee and every year we bring in the 10 finalists for a dinner and interview. At dinner last year, I went around the table and asked these remarkable young people, all of whom were strong public radio listeners, I asked, "How many of you own a radio?" None. They don't have one in their dorm room or apartment. Maybe they have one in their car, but the bottom line is the radio is not their tool of choice. They listen online. They podcast, they stream, they decide when and where, and they do that for all their news and media consumption.

I like this story because it shows that there is most definitely a next generation of newsies deeply interested in the world around them, that we need to understand and respect the habits of these consumers. They aren't looking for dumbed-down news. They're looking for control and choice. Yet even with this growing audience and expanding platform, due to the global economic crisis, NPR is also facing a revenue problem. We cut about 10 percent of the staff in December and just negotiated cuts in our benefits, and we're a relatively comfy news organization.

Let's face it. The news industry, the statistics are chilling. Here's a quick rundown from what is perhaps the most depressing document I've read in a while—the most recent Pew Research Center report on the state of journalism. Newspaper ad revenues have fallen 23 percent in the last two years. Papers are in bankruptcy. Others have lost three-quarters of their value. Nearly one out of every five journalists working for a newspaper in 2001 is gone. The impact has been particularly severe in overseas bureaus and in Washington D.C. bureaus. Audiences for network news programs continue to decline. Cable has decided to value opinion mongering and arguing over reporting, and 2009 may be the worst year yet as the industry's structural revolution intersects with the recession that requires cuts to be made just to keep up with the downturn.

We are seeing, and have been seeing the public moving away from the printed word and the broadcast news. But what we are not seeing, what we are not seeing is less interest in news. In fact, I think you could argue there's an increased interest in news. Audience migration to the web is growing, and it may be, according to this Pew report, that we look back at 2008 as a milestone in the history of the web as a news destination. The number of people who began to rely on the web as a main news source surpassed all other media except for TV, and it is connected with mainstream media that are attracting most of the online news audience. So they still want us; they just don't want to pay for what we produce.

The structural model, the business model is shot. The sustained downturn of the economy with the attendant fall in advertising income exacerbates the dilemma. It is a dreadful irony that as information technology has vastly expanded society's capacity to collect and distribute the special kind of information traditionally called "news," the technology is challenging the revenue

model that has supported news businesses for so long, and in order to cope American news businesses are fleeing the practice of news gathering. This is the stark reality.

Other urgent challenges face the profession and industry as well. As the statistics show, America isn't facing a dearth of news for consumers. Rather, it's facing a shortage of news, an imminent acute shortage of reliable fact-checked edited, mediated and trusted information about local, national and international current events gathered by professionals who are trained, specialized and ethical. That this is a threat to news organizations is obvious. The more important threat is to American society, to the capacity of our democracy to be well informed and functional, of our culture to be enriching and generous, of our economy to be productive and agile.

This sounds melodramatic, but a fair and open press is an aberration in history, not the norm. There is no guarantee that what we now call "journalism" will endure in the 21st century. Institutions and social practices pass away. In a democracy and in an information age, however, the death of the spirit and virtues of traditional American journalism would have dire consequences. And to be perfectly honest, my profession, our profession, has suffered from many self-inflicted wounds that have grown deeper over the last decade. If our democracy is to be healthy, if the media is to serve the role I think the founders envisioned for it, if we are all to benefit we must be purveyors of information useful to the public debate. In an ideal democratic society, journalists play a vital role by providing people with the information they need to be intellectually and thoughtfully involved in public debate. And in doing so, we raise the level of public discourse and encourage public involvement in the great issues of our time. As I said, this is the ideal. And it is the goal that good journalists pursue every day. Not only have we never really achieved this ideal but many would argue that we seem to be moving far away from it. The credibility gap has widened.

But this challenge is really not a surprise. It's been coming for a long time. You know the key trends that have caused it as well as I. From the corporate takeovers to the need to fill every minute with breaking news to the trend toward being the first with the most sensational and tantalizing story. Among the many death notices and obits for news that have flooded my in-box, one has really stayed with me because it is both brutally honest and provocative. I've been using it over this last difficult stretch in helping my staff and the NPR community think about what this moment means, and just this past week I see others have picked it up as well. It came from a blog posting by a thought leader named Clay Shirky called "Newspapers and Thinking the Unthinkable." Shirky posits that it isn't that newspapers—I'll take the liberty to extend his thesis to the entire traditional news industry—it isn't that they didn't see the Internet or the digital revolution coming. In fact they came up with a number of plans throughout the '90s to deal with it—partnering with companies like AOL, creating a subscription service, developing new payment models like micropayment, focusing on ad support revenue entirely, developing software that prohibited or limited sharing or, as Shirky puts its, going nuclear and suing the copyright infringers. But the way things turned out proved to be remarkably different. The ability to share content didn't shrink—it grew. Indeed, it defines this new Internet Age. The walled garden payment model, the New York Times and others learned, was really unpopular. I guess Steven Brill doesn't agree with that. Software developers wouldn't regard the user as the enemy. Suing people just alienated potential customers.

As Shirky describes, all these plans had one thing in common. They were attempts to preserve the old forms of organization in a world of cheap, perfect copy. Keep the old structure, just give it a digital facelift. So if the old model is broken, and surely it is, what will replace it? Nothing, according to Shirky. The Internet broke the model and nothing will replace it. The thing that made us all so special and even powerful, the difficult complexity and expense of making something available to the public, whether it's through massive printing presses or huge radio satellite systems has simply stopped being so special. When in the history of humankind have we faced such a revolution? Shirky says go back a few centuries and study the invention of the printing press as a comparison to what's going on today, and refers to Elizabeth Eisenstein's book on Guttenberg's invention, the printing press, as an agent of change. Eisenstein focuses on the absolute revolution that took place in the 1500s. It was chaos. Suddenly the Bible was translated into local languages, the Church's absolute power was thrown upside down. Was this an educational boon or the work of the devil? Erotic novels appeared prompting the same set of questions. Copies of Aristotle and Galen circulated widely. … As novelty spread, old institutions seemed exhausted while new ones seemed untrustworthy. As a result, people almost literally didn't know what to think. If you can't trust Aristotle, whom can you trust?

And here's what Shirky writes: ”This is what real revolutions are like. The old stuff gets broken faster than the new stuff is put in its place. The importance of any given experiment isn't apparent at the moment it appears. Big changes stall. Small changes spread. Even the revolutionaries can't predict what will happen. Agreements on all sides that core institutions must be protected are rendered meaningless by the very people doing the agreeing. … And so it is today. When someone demands to know how we are going to replace newspapers, they are demanding to be told that we are not living through a revolution. They are demanding to be told that all systems won't break before new systems are in place. They are demanding to be told that ancient social bargains aren't in peril, that core institutions will be spared, that new methods of spreading information will improve previous practice rather than upending it. They are demanding to be lied to.”

So what does that mean for all of us? Clay Shirky doesn't know; nobody really knows. We are in the middle of a revolution and we can't see the end yet. And this is where I think the opportunity exists, the source of my optimism. Society may be telling us that it doesn't need newspapers or radio but it does need journalism. And when the unthinkable is already upon us, experiment must take place. It seems daunting to maintain optimism when the prevailing trends, when reality paints such a different picture. You know things have hit rock bottom when Congress is holding hearings on the future of journalism. But in the immortal words of that great philosopher Rahm Emanuel, Rule No. 1: Never let a crisis go to waste; they are opportunities to do big things. Yes, I know, two sentences from Rahm Emanuel and not a single use of the "F" word. It's unbelievable.

We know from history that entrepreneurship blossoms in the worst of economic times, and I believe this is a moment to be more ambitious, more aggressive, more creative, to raise the bar on our journalism. Now, NPR has some unique advantages, and it is an interesting time to live in a major journalism institution that is still succeeding in its traditional form and yet also trying to embrace and adapt to the new world order. Maybe it helps that public radio was the earliest precursor of a defining characteristic of the Internet: asking the public to pay for something they

could get for free. We've been refining that model for decades, and the greatest source of revenue in Public Radio is you, the public, and I'm sure you've all contributed this week to KQED. … That support not only strengthens what you get in local coverage, but it comes back to NPR in the form of membership fees. We provide the programming, the stations provide the audience, the audience provides the revenue. It's a beautiful thing.

As I said, that model is still working for us on radio, yet the handwriting is on the wall and it's clear, and we, too, have to move forward into the new world. But unlike many of the others, we're pushing transformation not out of desperation but from a position of strength. This is causing us to function very differently as a news company, and challenging so many cultural taboos not only for NPR but for all of public radio.

As I said earlier, we just got the news that our audience is at record high levels. Yet in the face of our revenue problem, the instinct for some inside the organization and inside the Public Radio system is to hunker down, to play it safe, to keep all our eggs in the radio basket. After all, "Morning Edition" and "All Things Considered" are still the cash cows for NPR and the Public Radio system—highly successful with the audience and big revenue drivers. Why would we bother making new investments? In particular, why bother investing in online? This has been the ongoing, sometimes tense conversation. When the going gets tough, when the revenue from sponsorship—our second most important source—drops by 30 percent and you're thinking staff cuts, the instinct is to stop investing in new products. But while NPR may not be safe from the same kind of pressures as our print colleagues, we also don't want to make the same mistakes. … There is a world of people all around the globe, many of whom are our next generation of news consumers. Many live outside the U.S. Many have never heard of public radio but find us through search engines. They like what they read. They like what they see, and they may learn to like what they hear. And we have to be there for them. This is a remarkable opportunity to expand our mission.

So in the midst of all this bad news, at a time when so much of what is happening for large news organizations, what should NPR be doing? Well, the answer is not to retrench but to regroup, to break down our success to its core essence, figure out what values draw 27 million people to NPR every week, and not only do it better and better in radio, but also translate those core values underlying NPR's success to other mediums. At NPR we call that essence "NPR-ness": intimacy, authority, storytelling voice and authenticity.

Now, we have some special ingredients that commercial media lacks. NPR listeners already think of themselves as a community. Some might call it a cult. Go through the Personals in the New York Review of Books and you are sure to see the following: "Nobel Prize winning violist and NPR listener looking for the same." Our listeners feel a personal connection with NPR unlike any other news outlet. The intimacy of the listening experience creates a bond and a loyalty and a sense of community. Still, the facts remain the same—the facts about how news consumers are changing their behavior are just not deniable. News consumption is continual, not fixed in time and space like a radio program. The audience wants in; the advertisers don't have the answers.

So what do NPR and public radio need to do? How can we serve the public in new ways? Here's some of what we're trying to do:

No. 1. We do need to own the audio streaming, podcasting and anything else. Everything is a tuner; it's portable. We cannot expect digital to make NPR their news source if all we give them is streaming audio. Any more than they would make a newspaper site their news source if it's only text. It's not the way the web works and it's no longer the way news is consumed. And mobile may be the best opportunity for us yet.

No. 2. Cross-train our journalists. Unlike a print organization, we don't start at NPR with one of the most basic ingredients for a website: text. We lack what one colleague of mine calls the "plop" factor. Unlike a newspaper that can simply plop all of its text and stories and pictures and commentary, we have to hand stitch a radio script into a readable story. People who are the best at their craft are learning how to take that story and translate it visually, in writing, in pictures. So it's tough. I have to believe that we are the only news organization in America that is currently taking groups of journalists off their regular assignments for five weeks in order to train them in digital literacy and digital journalism. And I am incredibly grateful to the Knight Foundation for making this possible.

At NPR, our storytelling, our personalities, our style are distinctive. What we need to do is to make sure that we provide that same authentic NPR experience to the audience, no matter where they interact with us. We have the audio. You drive around the country, you know, you scroll down at the left side of the dial and you listen and you instantly recognize that sound. But what do we look like? What are our colors? Most of us got into radio because we can't spell. Suddenly NPR has a copy desk, so we are helping our staff not only learn what people are doing online and how they as journalists can benefit from that knowledge, but also how to reach that audience through writing, photography, graphics, how to tell stories in a variety of ways and for a variety of media.

No. 3. Harness the power of the unique international, national and local service that public radio provides, and fill that growing gap in local news coverage. This trisecta is something that most news organizations would kill for: trusted local outlets in communities across America. KQED, KALW in the San Francisco Bay Area. Working with them to be stronger sources of local news and information across all platforms is a major priority for NPR.

No. 4. Take advantage of the new relationship with the audience. We know it's no longer a one-way street where we deliver information from the mountaintops to the masses below. People have always been able to write letters about our radio stories, but the communication is totally different now, and I think the opportunity to make us better journalists is enormous. The people are reviewing and writing about our work much more easily, immediately and much more publicly than ever. There's an enormous talent pool out there that we can tap into. The opportunity to test the story and idea on the web is like accessing a million fixers. They can refine and improve our work; they make us more accountable. And yes, they are not infrequently rude or uncivil, and there is some reason for concern. But for the most part, the transparency, the accountability we journalists are now held to, I believe, is for the good and will help us build a new future. We are witnessing the ultimate democratization of knowledge. Everything is

increasingly accessible to everyone, and in such a world, helping to set standards for this new discourse is a central contribution journalism can make. We can do this by challenging those entering into this dialogue to see that there are standards that help truth rise to the surface. That fact-checking, proper editing and transparent sourcing enhances our human dialogue.

No. 5. Remember that content is king. It isn't enough for NPR to just make its audio content available online. Radio is passive. You leave it on. If the story isn't interesting, you put on your lipstick or you make a call on your cell phone and wait until the next story. Online is not passive, so NPR has to develop content that is uniquely suited to the online audience. But this means we have to play to our strengths. We're not going to be CNN.com any more than we're going to be CNN in the broadcast space. Our strength is going to be depth and quality and storytelling. What we do online has to deliver distinctive value to the audience: stories that have impact, stories that drive conversation, stories that are worth someone's time. In fact, one of the things I'm proudest of is that after having photojournalists and video journalists on staff for less than two years, NPR won 18 awards from the White House Photographers' News Association and six awards for video and multimedia in the National Press Photographers Association Best of Photojournalism contest. And if you really want to know how much we're changing, we won first place in sports audio slide show. Sports in public radio? I don't think so. I actually believe that sometime in the future, the cover photo of Time or Newsweek will have an NPR credit.

And finally, No. 6. We need to be more nimble and innovative in our core journalism. One of the most exciting things we started this past year is the initiative we call "Planet Money." It actually started a year ago, after we co-produced an hour-long program called "The Giant Pool of Money" on the program "This American Life." It explained the global meltdown and the mortgage crisis and as difficult as this might be to believe, it was a huge hit. It actually won the [Alfred I.] duPont, the Peabody and the George Polk awards. Somehow we figured out that a very smart audience was struggling to understand the economic crisis. And their response was so great that we spent the summer creating a little unit that would produce a blog and a podcast to begin to start to challenge ourselves in terms of the way we were reaching the audience, and to do so based on the economy.

This was really a new model for public radio. Normally you launch a new hour-long show and try to get it on as many stations as possible, but that model just didn't seem sustainable. A new show could cost two or three million dollars. Starting this unit, starting this venture cost nothing. We thought starting it in the fall would be good. There was this huge election. We could experiment and let it make mistakes, and take our time. Nobody would really be paying attention.

Well, it would be nice to say that we at NPR were in possession of a crystal ball, because as it happened, the day before we launched Planet Money, government regulators essentially seized the two giant mortgage lenders, Freddie Mae [sic] and Fanny Mac [sic] and this new specialized economic team got to work a day earlier than planned, and in the months since the results speak for themselves. Within two weeks, our Planet Money contest was No. 1 on iTunes. This was without any advertising and no promotion. I've had publishers, movie producers, TV networks and so many news outlets wanting to collaborate with us on this work. And last month, we did a live show in L.A. Five hundred people paid to see two sort of nerdy but adorable guys explain why banks failed. Basically we realized that there is an unbelievable hunger in America and

around the world, not just for economic news but for economic information— for smart, non-expert audiences. And frankly, for smart expert audiences as well.

I guess I feel an urgency—some call it a fear—to act now. Public radio has never faced a disruptive challenge the way commercial media has—radio to TV to cable. Public Radio is resilient, but we can't take anything for granted. NPR has survived and thrived because we focused on quality content, top journalism, a little whimsy, serendipity and surprise, and when it comes to meaningful content, I believe there is still an essential role for journalists. But this remains a watershed moment for all of us. If we do this right, NPR may be fine and certainly some others as well. But if the overall result of the current crisis is the diminution in the quality and quantity of solid news coverage in America, the big loser is American democracy. We need journalists, we need reporting and editing and boots on the ground in far-flung regions of the world. We need beat reporters who are holding local, state and federal officials accountable. We need reporters covering city council meetings, congressional hearings and U.S. missile strikes in Afghan provinces. And we need to help each other. We need to partner, we need to experiment, and we need to accept that we will continue to fail until we get it right.

What all this comes down to finally is that we are together not merely entering a new age, but we are being thrust into a new age, an age in which the concept of what the media are and how they are used is fundamentally transformed. Twenty-five years ago, for example, there were altogether 40,000 rather clunky cell phones in the world. Today there are two billion, and you can, and people do, watch films and family and their favorite television programs on these devices. And weather reports and stock market prices and news. The very definition of an audience is changing, as our listeners and our readers are no longer passive participants but co-conspirators in our endeavor.

Yet for all this change, our mission remains as it ever was. One way to describe it is that, and I quote, "We must consider new ways to build a great network for knowledge, not just a broadcast system but one that employs every means of sending and storing information that the individual can use." That's a very digital mission statement. Could have come out of Silicon Valley. Actually it was President Johnson. Actually it was Bill Moyers writing for President Johnson speaking about the Public Broadcasting Act back in 1967. I'd like to think that Moyers anticipated the Internet long before Al Gore invented it, but what I find so important in that message is the mission. Build a network of knowledge to serve the public by every means.

We are now still in the early years of digital democracy, part of the greatest revolution in technology and in democracy since the time of Gutenberg. Who can possibly flesh out the ramifications of a time when all the acquired knowledge of the human species may be available in an instant to every man and woman in the world? And yet our mission, the mission of journalism, the role and the responsibility of the journalist remains constant—a lodestar if you will—in the ongoing effort to protect freedom. And the most basic freedom of all, the one on which all others depend, is freedom of speech. But unless freedom of speech is nurtured by freedom of inquiry, it is reduced to public relations.

We journalists come to the public squares of the world from the cell phones to the stadium with questions, and we do not and will not rest unless and until those questions are heard. Erase the

question and governments will hide behind press releases. It falls to the fourth estate to ask the questions, to insist on the answers, to force—yes, force—the transparency we have been promised and on which a free people devoted to democracy depend. Finding the best ways to generate and present the information that free peoples require in order to remain free, that is our ongoing responsibility, our enduring challenge. It is the responsibility we accept with pride and with humility, for we know in our bones that a free and fearless press are [sic] not ornaments of freedom; they are [sic] its lifeblood.

This is, of course, the season for commencement addresses, and if this were a commencement address, I would turn to those journalists among this impressive gathering and conclude by saying you journalists are that free press and you are therefore the ones on whom democracy depends. I wish you every success in this sacred work. This is not a commencement address, yet you are that free press and you are therefore on whom democracy depends, and I wish you every success in that sacred work. Thank you.

QUESTIONS FROM THE AUDIENCE:

QUESTION: So you touched early on one of the topics that I've been somewhat annoyed by — the variability of the quality that's available out there. How do you maintain quality inside NPR and how would you tell your consumers to assess the quality of other sources? How do you assess the quality of your own recording, and can you talk a little bit about more objective measures of quality?

WEISS: Well, NPR online, in particular, one of the things we do, for example, is people have to actually sign up. They have to register; they have to give us a real e-mail address. They can't hide behind anonymity, and I think that's really important. I don't know if our online audience is particularly different but it is functioning differently. And I would say that the discourse—I love actually watching the audience—the audience at npr.org spends more time talking to each other than talking about the stories, and I think that's really wonderful. And there is a sort of self-correction that goes on, and it's also possible for the journalist to jump in. We just had a sort of a teeny little online controversy. … At Planet Money, they did a rather aggressive interview with Elizabeth Warren, the head of the commission that oversees the TARP program, and it was great to see the dialogue. I mean, not only did the audience give the reporter hell, which they should have, but the reporter got a chance to talk back. … I've been impressed by how people have behaved and how it's really infrequent that we remove comments. It's not the same for everybody, but we've been lucky.

QUESTION: What do you consider the major responsibility of journalists to readers and listeners?

WEISS: I guess I'd like to say the same that they've always been but maybe that's not so obvious. I expect fact-based journalism. That doesn't mean the story you print today won't change tomorrow or the next day, but basically it's a fair representation of all the information you could gather. I expect that when people are quoted in the newspaper or interviewed that it's an accurate reflection of what someone says and that their words aren't twisted. I expect that the journalist

would reveal any conflicts of interest so that there isn't any question about what they're doing, and I would expect them to be, to attempt to make their stories airtight.

QUESTION: Do you think journalism meets these standards right now?

WEISS: Not all journalism. But I think most journalists try to. But certainly not. I think one of the most difficult tings, particularly in the broadcast spectrum, is really this urge to be first. We've seen it over and over again, and we've seen the damage that it can do … and also to continue live coverage for hours and hours. Sometimes there's only a minute worth of information to share, but when you try to sustain coverage for two or three hours, you get into my pet peeve, which is prognosticating, which is predicting, and I think that is such a dangerous and slippery slope.

QUESTION: Over on this side, I have a regional note—KPFA. You mentioned NPR as being the pioneer in the model of people paying for the news, and I think KPFA deserves a nod.

WEISS: I said public radio.

QUESTION: All right. The question I have is how threatened did you feel, I think about three years ago, in being able to continue to give a free people the required information to remain free when there is pressure from the Republican Congress, from conservatives generally … they were complaining about journalism as practiced the way you're speaking. And [Corporation for Public Broadcasting chairman Kenneth] Tomlinson was—wasn't it Tomlinson who was pushed, and I don't know if NPR suffered from that as much as PBS, but it was that model of attacking your core values of journalism.

WEISS: I've been at NPR 27 years, and I don't feel threatened at all. And I can say that I have never been asked to do a story or not do a story based on any influence, either from sponsorship or from a foundation. The firewall is very firm. I think one of the interesting things during the Republican administration, particularly during the 1994 attempt to reduce funding for public broadcast in general, was that Republicans learned that a lot of Republicans rely on public broadcasting.

You know, whatever the reputation is of public broadcasting and public radio, at least the way the audience self-identifies themselves, they're split. It's actually 30 percent self-identified liberals, 30 percent self-identify as conservatives, and 30 percent don't want to tell you what they are. I don't think that Republicans realize that out there in their communities that often the public radio station is the only source of news and information. They thought we were going to be an easy target, and it wasn't really NPR that changed their minds. It was the public that changed their minds, and I think that really squashed the attempt to censor or to somehow try to impact the journalism that we're doing. It was a real wake-up call. I know there was one other attempt. It didn't even get out of committee it got squashed so early. And I don't know what the Obama administration will do, but hopefully they'll leave us alone.

QUESTION: You touted very nicely the advantages of going online and your web presence, except that I come from print journalism and for the last several years, print journalism has found

that about 7 percent of their entire revenues come from advertising on the web, and Dean Singleton, who's head of Media News, says how can we make money on the web? It's just not happening, and yet they pour a lot of money into the web. My first question to you is, Is NPR experiencing anything different in terms of making money off the web? My second question is, I know you're changing "Nightly News with Jim Lehrer" and I'd like to …

WEISS: That's not me. That's public TV.

QUESTION: I'm sorry. I'll withdraw that one. So if you could talk about the revenue side.

WEISS: Yes. You know, the truth is that the revenue for NPR online is going up. I mean the sponsorship on the radio is going down, which is sort of an artifact of the whole economic crisis. But traditional ad dollars are moving from places like radio to online. The proportions are not close. NPR in 2008 earned about $45 million through sponsorship revenue on the radio, and I'm pretty sure less than $10 million online. But it's going in the right direction. I think the answer is not to have only one revenue source, to diversify. You see these experiments going on everywhere, and you see a lot of people talking about the public radio model for commercial news organizations as well. I don't have the answer, but I don't think that depending on ad revenue online is the answer at all. It might be part of it, but it's not going to be the whole answer, and we're seeing that right now.

QUESTION: I'm a reporter for my high school newspaper. I have a really hard time coming up with stories that would interest the audience, so first of all how do you decide what stories would be interesting to the public, and secondly, what have you done to access a younger audience like teens?

WEISS: Boy, you're asking for that magic secret pill that we take to figure out interesting stories. You know, the truth is that I often, I'll often turn to a reporter and say, "What did you find interesting about this story?" And that could be going to a hearing or being able to be out in the field. I think if you can figure out what's inherently interesting and make sure that you communicate that, that's more important than anything else. I'm amazed. I can't tell you how many times I wake up in the morning and hear something and I think "God, I wasn't interested in that at all, but somebody has made it meaningful in my life," and I think if anything as a reporter, what you should recognize is that people's time is really valuable and somehow you have to give them a reason and a meaning and a purpose to read your story or listen to your story. And if you're just reporting it out—I've done a lot of edits where I've said to someone, "Well, it's a perfectly good story. We've gotten all the facts. Now you have to make it interesting."

We have a relationship with Youth Radio. That's probably our best outlet for getting young voices on the air. There's a couple of other public radio outlets. Radio Rookies is sponsored by WNYC. They do a lot of reporting on "All Things Considered." We have two projects that are aimed at growing young journalists. One is our internship program, which is fairly vibrant. The other is something we call Next Generation, and that is combined with a lot of journalism conferences. We bring both high school and college journalists for a week of training, and that has tended to be a source for people moving into internships both at NPR and across the public

radio system. So we try to do it both through training, through internships, through using the outlets where young people are already reporting on the air, a couple of different things.

QUESTION: Since so many of us do get PBS and NPR mixed up, I was hoping you could just give a little brief explanation maybe of the differences in their evolution and history.

WEISS: OK. Well, one is television, one is radio.

QUESTION: Got that.

WEISS: I think the major difference is that NPR is a producer of programming. We actually have a large newsroom and we produce programs that get distributed out to the system. PBS tends to be a distributor of other people's programs. So if you walk into PBS, you won't necessarily see a newsroom or—I'm sure there's something going on there that I'm not thinking of and I apologize ahead of time if I've forgotten about it—but for the most part, they're not a production house. They make take a WGBH program or the BBC or WNET in New York, and they distribute those programs, and that's really—that's the biggest difference.

QUESTION: Are they totally separate, independent?

WEISS: Yes, totally separate and independent. We're linked together by the mother ship called the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, which is the nongovernmental entity that essentially takes the funding the government sets aside for public broadcasting and distributes it. In our case, the money gets distributed to public radio stations, not to NPR. It comes back in the form of membership fees. But we get less than 2 percent of money directly from the federal government, and most of that is with competitive grants. That's our link, but editorially or otherwise—obviously we're linked in interest. We want the public broadcasting system to be a healthy system and to be a system that continues to get support, but we don't co-produce anything together.

QUESTION: When I travel, I just love trying to find the NPR station and listening to it and seeing the differences. So my question to you is do you have a favorite station?

WEISS: No. Especially not in a town where there's two public radio stations. No, I mean I also like listening around the country. I like it because they play different programs. There's different program lineups. What I really love is podcasting now, because I get to hear things that I don't get to hear in Washington D.C. because their lineup is different. So if I want to listen to Michael Krasny, if I want to listen to "Morning Becomes Eclectic" from KCRW, or if I want to listen to a WBUR program, I can listen to them now. But no, of course, I don't have a favorite public radio station. It's a trick question.

QUESTION: So one thing I think some of us do get confused with is that on the same NPR station we'll hear different Public Broadcasting stations, like American Public Media …

WEISS: We're not an exclusive club.

QUESTION: Right, so you have, in a sense, nonprofit competitors?

WEISS: Yes, there is competition in public broadcasting. It doesn't look anything like competition anywhere else in the world, but there are different networks and there are independent producers and then there are large institutions like the BBC. A public radio station can access and be part of any club they want to be part of, so on a given station, you'll hear NPR programming; you'll hear programming from American Public Media, which is based in Los Angeles; you'll hear Public Radio International, which is based in Minnesota; you might hear something that's produced by an independent producer. … So when any public radio station tries to create a lineup that they think will be the most interesting and best service to their community, it'll differ from community to community.

QUESTION: I'm also a high school journalist on the same paper she is. We go to Mountain View High School, but I'm more interested in the multimedia aspect of it. I'm in a film program and in design class and things like that, so what would be your advice to a young journalist who wants to break into the multimedia aspect of it, and is getting frustrated with the fact a lot of colleges don't have multimedia as a major. I've heard that they're not credible, you know. I've heard people get majors in multimedia and it's like useless and you might as well as just go out and be an English major. What would be your advice?

WEISS: You know, it's really interesting. I mean the training that we're doing at NPR; we don't even call it multimedia training because I think we're really trying to teach foundational training. And I would say that learning how to take a really good picture if you're taking a photography class is one of the best things you can do. Just like learning how to be a good writer … you want to practice it every day. I don't know that multimedia necessarily has to be the end state and whether or not you can look at the different parts of it and decide which ones you want to put together. It's really hard to be good in all those things.

That's one of the things that we're recognizing. I don't have an expectation that I'm going to send out a reporter who's going to be, you know, an automaton and be able to do great video and do great pictures and do great radio. Something's going to suffer, and I would much rather start with them saying what's the best way to tell this story? Is there more than one way to tell the story, and what does it mean if I want you to collect the audio for the story but I also want you to take pictures? So if I were you, I would sort of deconstruct it a little bit and figure out what you love to do. If you love to take pictures, then focus on photography. If you love to shoot video and you want to learn more about it, take video classes, and not worry about having to be the expert in all things. I'm probably giving you terrible advice, but that's my advice.

QUESTION: I do have a question but before I pose it I'd like to offer my heartfelt congratulations and thanks for the recent news coverage where NPR has taken the lead, including but not limited to Nina Totenberg's recent breaking news of the Supreme Court changes. It's terrific to hear other networks report "as reported on NPR."

WEISS: Yes, we like that, too.

QUESTION: My question has to do not with the news but the funding of the news. In this market there are two public radio stations, but one now has mobile devices available where you can also stream WNYC or WBUR or Oregon Public Broadcasting. The markets that have long depended upon contributions of local members may now find themselves in competition with other areas of the country. How will NPR address that?

WEISS: This is the elephant in the room, and it's totally understandable because it's what the public radio system calls "bypass." What if the local community can completely bypass their local station and listen to whatever they want and therefore not feel an affiliation? And part of what we're trying to do is not wait for that to happen but to work with the stations, and we're looking at things like online giving, different ways to access the community and to make the community feel like there's a relationship there. Even if it's not necessarily on the radio. That's why I think it's so important that we also develop the local journalism that can be online as well. It's not going to be a replacement for your local newspaper. But if we can make the public radio station function as a convener for information, a convener for conversation, that's a new way to sort of inform its role in the community. But this is the very, very biggest issue out there, and we've advanced the conversation more in the past year than in the past 25, but it's very, very sensitive for that exact reason.

QUESTION: I guess some of the great journalistic coups in the past were like when Edward R. Murrow took on Senator McCarthy or Woodward and Bernstein took on the Watergate scandal or the New York Times published the Pentagon Papers and were punished, I guess, and maybe Iran-Contra. Maybe this will fall someday where you make a decision on how you'll deal with a story like that. Are you strong enough at NPR to ever do something like that?

WEISS: You mean the pressure?

QUESTION: The pressure.

WEISS: Oh I think so. I mean, Clarence Thomas, there was a lot of pressure on that one. This was a Supreme Court Justice nominee who was assumed would be voted in without any kind of pressure. And when Nina Totenberg wrote the story, there was a lot of pressure and a lot of questions about the timing of the story and whether or not we were being used and all of that. You know, I was deeply involved with a lot of our investigative reporting and inevitably, the day after a story ran, whether it was about jails with Homeland Security contracts that were using dogs to torture detainees—inevitably the next day I would get a call and the official would start yelling at me about the story, and they would yell and yell and yell, and about five minutes in I'd say to them, "Can I just ask you one question? Did we get anything wrong?" And he'd say no. And then he'd say, "But ..." and I'd say, "OK, I just want to make sure because if we got something wrong, then we're having a different conversation."

I learned from my mentors in investigative reporting that you better have it airtight. And if you got it right and you go out there, then you have no problem. You can defend it. If you didn't get it right, then you're in trouble, and, you know, that's where the credibility gap happens. Sometimes when you see stories and they're not airtight and people haven't done their fact checking … it hurts us all. But you make it airtight and you're just fine, and you can weather any storm.

QUESTION: A suggestion and a question. Suggestion is: I'm starting to listen to podcast. Tell your reporters to identify the date. They say, "Today something's going to happen," but they never mention when the podcast is broadcast, so when I hear about it three days later on a podcast, I have no idea what "today" they're talking about. The question is based on the fact that I would like to eliminate all governmental funding of the public system and turn you into a member co-op. I tried to submit an anti-matching fund contribution, which said I will give you $200.The first hundred is free, the second hundred is to supplant government funding, to replace it, because as I understand it, the government funding is relatively minor. I got an answer back from the people I talked to, "We'll look into it." And that's all I heard, but I really would like to …

WEISS: You know, there's a part of me that says you go, because I'm with you. But I'll tell you a couple of things that I learned: One is that, actually, for a lot of stations and a lot of our smallest stations, it's not insignificant. It's really important.

QUESTION: Federal?

WEISS: Yeah, the money they get from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting because they don't have large communities. The second is that it supports our satellite network. I think it's like $80 million, and without that, it would be very difficult for you and many people around the country to hear public radio. So it's slightly more complicated and, depending on where you are, that system will probably lead to the end of certain public radio stations, and it's probably not what your goal is. I think your goal is to just get the government out of the business.

QUESTION: My goal is primarily to prevent my conservative friends from saying, "Why is my tax dollar …"

WEISS: And I get that. That's why I agree with you, but I would say that if you go back to the reason why the government decided there was a need to reserve some part of the spectrum and to support noncommercial broadcasting, that need is still there and it is particularly needed in the areas where they really don't have access to other sources of news and information.

QUESTION: OK, if you can't do it, you can't do it.

ELLEN WEISS: I don't think I can do it personally, but you keep on trying.

QUESTION: I wonder how podcasting, which you sound very keen on, is affecting the NPR sense of community and, indeed, listening figures.

WEISS: Well, it's great for NPR, to be honest with you, because one of the things we found with podcasting, which I tried to allude to a little bit, is the average age of the radio listener is about 49 or 50. The average age of a podcaster is about 35, and that's great. That makes me very happy that we're able to bring new people in and they have ear buds and they want to listen, so that's one thing that it’s done. I think when you have the sort of trisecta of a blog and a podcast and

artifacts of both of those on the radio, it really does create a sense of community, and this is exactly what we experienced with Planet Money.

People listen to the podcast. They blog. They may hear it on the radio, but it has created a community around this particular issue and idea. It's through the combination of those three ways, and I would say three different timings of the story. So the blog is sort of giving you the incremental during the day; the podcast is delivered three times a week and it's sort of a casual conversation about something going on; and the radio piece is a more finished reported product. And sometimes the three appeal to different people at different times of the week in their day. But they're knitted together.

QUESTION: How is podcasting affecting the relationship between NPR and the affiliate stations?

WEISS: It's actually an area in which we've been experimenting with a new revenue model. What we try to do is avoid people having to search really, really hard for the particular show that they're looking for. So we sort of created an umbrella of NPR, but you could find KQED programming or WNYC programming or WBUR programming. But you could just type in an NPR program. And we were also able to sell sponsorship at a national level, which helped, and then give the money back to the stations. So it’s been good, it's given us an opportunity to experiment and deal with some of those issues about bypass and where are we going to raise money. It hasn't caused any tension. And we're about to—a big announcement—we're about to launch a "Morning Edition" podcast. But it's not NPR's "Morning Edition." We're creating a system where each station can put on its own version of "Morning Edition." But it won't be like they will go on iTunes and see 400 versions of "Morning Edition." You'll be able to type in your zip code or city or anything that identifies, and then you can pull up KQED's "Morning Edition," and then you'll get the local stories as well. So we're trying to work with them to create, again, new opportunities, new ways to generate revenue and ultimately new ways to reach the audience.

QUESTION: Do you know how diverse your 27 million listeners are? Do Asians feel there's enough content to interest them? Do people on the Mississippi River think, "All we hear is New York, Washington, everything is East Coast, East Coast, East Coast?" How much are you reflecting the diversity of the country?

WEISS: That's interesting. I don't know as much about the geographic diversity although I suspect just because of the size of the radio market that major cities attract the largest audiences. I know more about our ethnic diversity, which is not equal to the ethnic diversity of the U.S., which is certainly at the starting point one of our goals. So that we are—actually I'm not even gong to give you the statistics because I'll get them wrong and we'll be embarrassed. But I know that we're not where we should be, and that's a major adjustment for NPR. We want to be a network, a destination where people can hear their authentic voice and their authentic experience played back to them.

QUESTION: I have a question, too, about government subsidies. I understand that some time ago the subsidy was somewhat larger, and I assume that this was just in support of the same objectives—good journalism. Then I believe it was cut back probably because they figured it

wasn't good at supporting their points of view. I wonder whether under the new administration you've noticed or anticipate a change in the subsidization of public television and radio.

ELLEN WEISS: I think you may be wrong, actually, because I know going back to that 1994 time when there was a big push to cut the subsidy, it actually went up and it went up the following year, which again was sort of testament to the fact that the audience was speaking. It hasn't suffered a big cut. … I don't know if [the Obama administration will] feel that public broadcasting should take the same cuts that they're asking for across the board, as part of the $17 billion they're trying to cut. They certainly seem to be—well, I shouldn't even say that. I mean, when you went into the White House or talked to people in the Bush Administration, they were public radio listeners, so I don't know that this administration is any more or less public radio listeners or supporters. Like I said, I hope they like us, but they haven't said anything about cuts.

JIM BETTINGER: Ellen, thank you very much.