Welcome to the NPR Network Conversation

April 7, 2022

What is the NPR Network initiative? It’s a renewed commitment to focus our local-national network to better serve our communities, reach new and more diverse audiences, and significantly grow audience support for public media. It is an answer to the critical questions of where public media will find new members and future audiences.

The NPR Network initiative is the beginning of a vision for how we might work together in new ways to deliver on this imperative.

What is the goal? Our ability to serve future audiences depends on a strong base of support. By 2030, we aim to:

- Double the number of people directly supporting local stations annually
- Double the amount of annual revenue within the network

The NPR Network marks a critical moment for us to redesign some aspects of how we work together as a network, identify necessary investments, let new audiences guide us to new solutions, and prioritize shared benefits.

How can I get involved? You may already be familiar with some of the work that supports the NPR Network vision. Some of the components below are already underway and building momentum. Other work is at the planning stage. Some elements need NPR Board action, or investment by NPR and Members. All of them will benefit from your input. NPR Board members and staff are planning opportunities for you to contribute in the coming weeks and months.

NPR Network brand

Commit to a unifying brand and brand message that captures the full universe of content and experiences that we offer across all platforms. Grow awareness and strengthen engagement by creating brand consistency in a crowded marketplace.

What is it? The NPR Network is a unifying, audience-facing brand that powerfully articulates our unique value proposition: a blend of local, national and global that helps listeners fully understand and connect with the world around them.

Why unite under one brand? No other media brand matches our local depth and our global scope. Audiences today — particularly younger ones — demand a clear brand with core values that they can believe in. We need to bring branding discipline and focus to win the hearts and minds of future audiences.

How does this impact my station’s branding practice? The NPR Network brand will not replace your station brand — only strengthen it. It will be built with flexibility; your station can articulate it at various levels and in various ways across platforms. We strongly encourage stations to embrace the brand ethos and develop unique plans that are best suited for your audiences, understanding that the more consistency we bring to this work, the more opportunity we have to break through the noise and create awareness amongst new audiences.
This work is designed to:

- Cement our unmatched local-national value in a competitive landscape
- Introduce platform-neutral terms in a fast-changing digital world
- Reveal our tremendous scale and potential to serve the many distinct needs in our listeners’ lives
- Clearly connect our real value in our audiences’ lives to our requests for their loyalty and financial support
- Create space for the hard-earned identities of Member stations to stand alongside our shared brand

**When will this happen?** A single, united brand will provide NPR the ability to invest marketing dollars and resources to strengthen and support it. We are working to deliver a significant paid NPR Network awareness campaign in Fall 2022, building a strong foundation ahead of our year-end fundraising campaign.

### Growing Audience Support

The core of the NPR Network initiative is a plan to develop the next generation of supporters for our shared mission. It builds on work to drive station donations from NPR platforms. It envisions new approaches to convert digital natives who may not understand what “stations” are, as well as data-driven techniques to grow their giving levels over time.

Working together, we can better cultivate prospective and current donors based on what they already love about public media and what the NPR Network is doing in their community. We can also drive more support to local stations.

**Why is this important?** There are two main challenges that we want to address:

- Less than 1% of the 20 million people who access only NPR digital content are contributing members.
- Our current audience could be giving more. 98% of our current donors are giving less than $1,000 per year.

**How can we convert more of the NPR digital audience?** People give to the projects and causes that they feel personally connected to. For this reason, we need to develop new strategies to engage, cultivate and steward audience members in a more individualized way, based on the places they call home, podcasts they listen to, topics they care about, and connection points with stations and NPR.

To start, there is more NPR can do to help drive membership to stations - including the younger audiences who primarily engage with us on digital platforms. We want to help these audiences to develop an affinity for local stations and become the next generation of public media supporters.

Additionally, we seek to launch the NPR Network donation option. It will give NPR’s vast digital audience the chance to support the content they are passionate about, creating an on-ramp for donors who do not yet have a relationship with a local Member station.

**How would the NPR Network donation work?** People making a gift on NPR digital platforms would have the option to give to a station or support the NPR Network as a whole.
How would NPR Network donations be used? We’ve seen in our annual Member station survey and conversations with NPR’s newsroom, as well as station partners, that many of us share goals, challenges and priorities. Gifts to the NPR Network would help raise funds for some of these shared goals - things that would strengthen our network as a whole.

Some ideas include:

- New initiatives that benefit stations (eg, a network-wide internship program, journalist training)
- Regional priorities (eg, adding reporters at stations that serve news deserts)
- Direct distributions to stations
- Implementation of NPR Network initiative projects (eg, marketing campaigns, etc)
- Fee model implementation (speed up promised fee reductions without triggering big increases)
- Existing NPR work that benefits stations and is not funded by station fees or broadcast sponsorship

How does this idea support station membership if donors don’t have to choose a station? This initiative is designed to drive engagement from an audience that currently does not give. NPR will steward each donor toward a relationship with a local Member station, while creating a customized path for them based on their interests, their capacity, and their willingness to give.

How can we grow donors’ giving levels? Working together, stations and NPR can develop more tailored approaches to cultivating, soliciting and stewarding donors based on their interests and offer them new opportunities to support what they love. Additionally, NPR is investing staff and fiscal resources to strengthen local fundraising and help stations expand and grow their donor pyramids.

Would data on NPR Network donors be shared with their local station(s)? Yes. When a person in your community gives, NPR will share donor information with you, so you may introduce him or her to all of the wonderful work that you do locally.

What if the donor already gives to my station? Would you share their information with other stations in my market? Currently, NPR does not know who is a station donor and who is not. That would require a centralized record of station donors. We’re looking at options to validate whether an NPR Network donor has station affiliation(s) and limit data sharing to those station(s).

When would this happen? These ideas are still being refined and we would love your feedback on the approaches described here. Our hope is to begin to incorporate some of these ideas, including the NPR Network donation option, into the 2022 end-of-year donation campaign. Others can roll out during 2023 and or beyond.

NPR Network podcasts

Create a podcast network that unites NPR and station podcasting efforts with a common brand, and open up cross-promotion inventory opportunities.

What is it? The name of our podcast network is NPR Network. It will include all podcasts distributed by NPR and any podcasts that local stations choose to include.

How does it work? All participants will continue to produce, distribute and monetize their podcasts the same way they always have. They will also add the network icon to their podcast
tiles and describe their podcasts as part of the NPR Network in show credits and marketing materials. Think, “Wavelength from WYPR, part of the NPR Network.”

Along with the launch of the NPR Network paid advertising campaign this fall, we will begin to cross-promote. NPR plans to promote station shows across its platforms at about 2x the rate that stations promote NPR national shows.

**Why does it exist?** Uniting our podcasts under a single brand will make clear the breadth of our offerings. It also enables coherent cross-promotion, which will grow show audiences and, over time, drive user loyalty within our ecosystem.

**Is there revenue involved?** Yes. The ultimate goal of the podcast network and the NPR+ effort is to motivate more people to become station members, and to provide them with value. We aim to double station membership. It is also a tangible thing around which we can raise philanthropic funding to further invest in the tools, products and services necessary for our growth.

**NPR+ podcast bundle**

Listeners can listen to NPR podcasts sponsorship-free, and receive other benefits, only by becoming a station member.

**What is it?** We will make all NPR podcasts available, sponsorship-free and with other potential benefits, exclusively as a benefit of membership to a station. This is a program to acquire new donors to stations from digital listeners who love podcasts.

**Why does it exist?** The NPR+ podcast bundle exists as a member acquisition program, to create station members from podcast listeners.

**How does it work?** Fans of NPR podcasts will be directed to a central page where they will be prompted to localize to a station, and proceed with donating to the selected station. The form will be powered by the Stripe platform, enabling integration between a station’s account and NPR’s. Stations will receive donor data and funds less payment processing fees (Stripe) and platform fees (Supporting Cast) directly from each transaction.

**NPR Network platform**

Our network strategy will depend on an owned digital platform where the content experience and user relationship is directly managed by the network and not dependent on competing, commercial audio platforms.

**What is it?** NPR One currently offers the best local/national audio experience available anywhere. NPR will continue to develop it to be the best place to experience the network, including the best place to experience NPR+. Its success will depend on adoption and promotion by the entire network.

**Why does it exist?** Our goal is to show NPR audiences the breadth of the network’s content. We need to do this on the platforms where they’re already getting NPR content, rather than asking them to access the network’s local content somewhere else.
Public Media Digital Audio Exchange

A newly-launched initiative to turn NPR and stations’ unsold digital inventory into revenue and create more sponsorship opportunities.

**What is it?** A way to maximize digital audio underwriting support for the network. The Public Media Digital Audio Exchange (PMDAE) from National Public Media enables the sale of inventory from stations and publishers that would have otherwise gone unsold. It generates passive revenue that complements and does not impede existing sales.

**Why does it exist?** Well over 30 million digital station sponsorship units go unsold every month. That’s worth about $4.3 million a year. That doesn’t even count podcasts or streams from all stations, just the portion we have insight into. With that much revenue left on the table, we can’t fully realize our mission.

**How does it work?** It’s all managed automatically through ad servers. Your ad server will automatically send your unsold impressions into the exchange before they go unfilled, for a last chance to make revenue. All the creative and sponsors are pre-vetted and suitable for public media messaging and guidelines. In Phase One, the inventory will be sold by National Public Media, similar to how the spot radio model works. NPM will also manage programmatic audio demand sourced from AdsWizz. Once there’s enough scale in the Public Media Digital Audio Exchange, the goal is to enable participating stations to sell into the Exchange and the inventory from any participating publisher, including NPR, in their local DMA. We expect to start trialing local sales before the end of 2022.

Fee model review

An upcoming evaluation of the NPR fee model that funds the content and services that NPR provides to Members, taking these new NPR Network initiatives into account.

**Why are we doing this?** One of the outcomes of the NPR/Station Compact process was a commitment to review the NPR core fee model once we had three years of data. Following the finalization of FY23 NPR fees in the Spring 2022, we will have that data.

**What will the process be?** We will have approximately 10 months (April 2022-February 2023) to conduct and complete the review. We intend to design the process to include:

- Opportunities for Members to contribute their perspectives
- Opportunities to consider fees in the context of external market forces
- Opportunities to consider fees in the context of the full NPR-station value exchange, taking into account the data, revenue, and audience goals of the NPR Network Initiative. For example, revenue from NPR Network donation could be allocated to:
  - Speed up fee reductions, with less impact on stations facing increases, and no impact to NPR
  - Reduce fees further in future years, so that all Members pay less than they do now, and allocate corresponding amounts to NPR to remain whole financially
How can I learn more and be heard on this? There are so many more details to share and ideas to gather. Please consider joining the upcoming webinars and small group sessions with NPR Board members and staff leading this work – along with leaders in the system who are eager to bring their energy and expertise to the table.

- **NPR Network Overview Webinars**: We’ll be hosting overview webinars where we will discuss the NPR Network Initiative in more detail and go deep on the Audience Support proposals specifically.

- **Small Group Discussions**: We’ll convene a series of small group discussions hosted by members of the Advisory Board Working Group; these sessions will be a great opportunity to roll up your sleeves, invite your teams, and provide expertise, insights, and feedback on the initiative.