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NPR, online streaming, and driveway moments

By Dana Greenlee, Technology Columnist

If you ever bought into the term "appointment radio," then you may also know the disappointment of missing your favorite NPR radio show. That's why one of the popular sections on npr.org (<http://www.npr.org>) is called "Driveway Moments" -- a story so good you can't turn off your car radio, even if you're parked in your driveway.

Maria Thomas makes it her job to identify those moments, and take them to a more portable level. As vice president and general manager for NPR digital radio, Thomas is responsible for the development and delivery of NPR content on new media platforms -- namely, streaming and downloading on your mobile devices. Maria took a moment to tell us about when NPR started online streaming and how they see their shifting strategy.

DANA GREENLEE: Give us a starting point of just what is NPR.

MARIA THOMAS: Within public radio, National Public Radio is the largest producer and distributor of content.

GREENLEE: How long have you been offering streams of your content?

THOMAS: NPR.org was one of the early entrants into the streaming business. We started 10 years ago with Rea INetworks, which was called Progressive Networks. There was early thinking around streaming and, mostly, on-demand archive streaming of programming on the Web site. Go to npr.org, click on 'archive,' and you'll see streaming that goes back almost ten years.

GREENLEE: You can't go to npr.org and listen to live programming, but what on-demand content do you have?

THOMAS: You certainly can listen to an entire show. For instance, you can listen to all the components of Morning Edition -- all the stories -- but no sort of live hosted show.

GREENLEE: Where is the incentive for you to offer it free as a stream from the site?

THOMAS: Originally, I think there was some concern at the station whether this type of



MARIA THOMAS

programming should be archived and what that would mean regarding folks that might otherwise listen to the radio. Over the years, it is my strong sense that the archive that is available on npr.org is what I would call additive rather than substitutive. Listeners aren't coming to npr.org as their primary source of listening unless they are out of the country or outside of the signal area of an actual NPR member radio station. They also use it as a time-shifting device because radio is ephemeral and the Web isn't.

GREENLEE: It seems the Web site has much shorter, news-related sound bites.

THOMAS: We take the long-form content and break it into bite-size pieces. We operate the Web site in what we call the story level. We construct the Web site in a modular fashion with each story as the atom of the web site.

GREENLEE: It seems npr.org is a perfect platform for podcasting. Tell us about your download strategies and how podcasting fits into the mix.

THOMAS: The real important trend is to make content easily portable. A lot of content is long-form, but our audience is comprised of busy people who are increasingly on the run and multitasking. If we can make it easier and more convenient to listen as they are walking the dog or going to the grocery store, this will enable us to reach our audience on [its own] time. We've been streaming for 10 years. We're very accustomed to the time-shifting. It is the place shifting that the portability brings to the table. Our podcasting strategy has been informed greatly by the strategy we have on our Web site -- meaning our podcasts are organized around topics and individual stories. Our most popular podcast we have in the marketplace today is something we call "Story of the Day." This is a single story that is four to eight minutes [long] and chosen by an editor on my team. The criteria is the one story we think represents NPR that our listeners must hear, that they can't get anywhere else -- typically not the top news story of the day. And they can hear it on their own schedule.

To hear the audio of the hour-long conversation with NPR's Maria Thomas, go to <http://WebTalkRadio.com> and click on 'archives.'

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