

Signal Without Support

NPR's Leadership Challenge in a New Funding Landscape

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I. Introduction

Public media acts as the lifeblood that sustains democracy's beating heart. As Americans, we rely on access to accurate information more than we often realize, and in many communities, public radio or television is their only consistent source. Public media fills the gaps that commercial outlets don't — reliable emergency alerts, in-depth reporting, and educational content.

For more than fifty years, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) has made this system possible by distributing federal appropriations to local NPR and PBS stations nationwide. The CPB wasn't just a "middle man" for public media — it provided stability and structure across the system, allowing station leaders to prioritize their mission and plan ahead with confidence. That changed earlier this year, when political efforts to eliminate federal support finally succeeded, and the CPB was defunded and ultimately shut down.

This has created a leadership challenge that NPR has never experienced before. The system that once held public media together is gone, and NPR must figure out how to sustain its mission while building an entirely new model of national support. In these unprecedented times for the industry, addressing this disruption requires leadership rooted in effective communication, a clear strategy, and active collaboration. The choices NPR's leaders make in the coming months will shape not only the network itself but also the stability of hundreds of local stations that depend on it. These needs reflect many of the leadership principles we studied this semester in the Harvard Business Review readings, which offer insights on navigating paradoxes, leading across multiple silos, and mobilizing organizations during uncertainty. Examining NPR's situation through these lenses may reveal solutions that aren't immediately obvious.

II. The Current Situation

To understand the scale of this issue, it's essential to know how CPB funding worked and why local stations relied on it. CPB funding came from annual congressional appropriations, and, under the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967, roughly 70% of each year's appropriation was required to go directly to local public television and radio stations as community service grants. These grants served as the single largest and most stable source of funding for many regional stations. Earlier this year, the Senate rescinded \$1.1 billion in CPB funding for the 2025-2026 fiscal year, which effectively shut down the organization.

There's a common misconception circulating that NPR "only keeps one percent of its revenue" from federal sources. That interpretation is misleading. It was the CPB — not NPR — that kept about one percent of the federal appropriation for its administrative costs. The remaining funds were distributed through NPR, PBS, and other public media networks to their over one thousand member stations. Without that support, many local stations face layoffs, canceled programming, and loss of community outreach or educational projects. Smaller and rural markets have been hit the hardest; in some cases, CPB grants accounted for 25-36% of a station's budget.

CPB support also extended far beyond payroll. Federal funds covered essential infrastructure, including tower maintenance, transmitter repair, and emergency broadcasting. In October, severe coastal flooding struck several western Alaska villages after the remnants of a typhoon made landfall, displacing more than 1,500 people. KCHU Valdez, a small public station that previously relied on CPB grants to maintain its equipment, reported that tower erosion and the loss of engineering staff had weakened its emergency broadcast capabilities during the crisis.

With the CPB gone, NPR must now confront the leadership, coordination, and planning responsibilities that the CPB once absorbed — tasks the organization has never had to manage on this scale.

To better understand how these leadership challenges are affecting NPR at scale, I first examined the crisis through the perspective of our local member station, my employer, WCMU Public Media. I interviewed our station manager, Mike Horace, who provided insight into how the CPB shutdown is influencing station-level planning, staffing decisions, and long-term sustainability. His perspective connects NPR's national leadership challenges with the realities experienced by local leadership.

III. Leadership Challenge #1: NPR Needs Long-Term System Planning

NPR is now facing a range of leadership challenges, but one of the most significant is the need to build a national structure for funding, stability, and coordination without the federal support that once held the system together. Our Harvard Business Review readings this semester offer several leadership frameworks that help illuminate this challenge. Intertwining these approaches reveals strategies that might not be obvious at first glance.

National and local leadership at NPR now need to adopt strategic leadership practices to prepare for every possible financial scenario. They must develop a long-term roadmap not only for sustaining operations, but also for transitioning the system toward a much heavier reliance on digital infrastructure. Rebuilding that framework requires extensive collaboration across fields, which is where Cross-Silo Leadership becomes essential. A sustainable nationwide system will demand cooperation between editorial teams, engineering, fundraising, digital development, legal departments, and all member stations. NPR leadership must also balance multiple

competing priorities at once — stability and innovation, mission and revenue, and local needs and national structure — which reflects the tensions described in *Both/And Leadership*. Even as public media evolves, one reality remains constant: leaders must find a way to balance legacy radio with digital expansion.

This leadership challenge also connects to Watkin’s Seven Seismic Shifts, especially the transition from Tactician to Strategist. NPR’s leaders can no longer operate with a newsroom-focused, day-to-day mindset; they now have to think at the level of an enterprise responsible for the entire public media system. This shift requires looking beyond immediate operational issues and focusing on developing a long-term structure for nationwide stability. NPR needs to anticipate system-wide vulnerabilities and design a structure that withstands political and economic volatility. In simple terms, leadership can’t wait for problems to happen — they must develop a system that handles these issues efficiently.

Another one of Watkin’s shifts — from Problem Solver to Agenda Setter — also applies. Since its creation in 1967, the CPB has been seen as the agenda-setting institution for public media by defining system-wide priorities through its federal formula. With the CPB gone, instead of reacting to each station’s financial emergency individually, leadership should determine which services are the most important, identify the stations most in trouble, and decide how to distribute resources to keep the network running smoothly. This marks a fundamental shift from crisis response to proactively shaping the future of public media.

These national leadership pressures also exist at the local level. Leadership at WCMU Public Media, my employer, has already begun developing a five-year strategic plan to prepare for this new landscape without CPB funding. In my interview with station manager Mike

Horace, he explained that WCMU is reassessing its audience habits, strengthening its digital presence, and planning for a future without federal support. His perspective shows that local stations are already adopting the strategic, collaborative, and visionary practices that network leaders at NPR need.

These shifts illustrate how rapidly NPR's role is evolving in less than a year. Rebuilding long-term stability will require strategic planning, cross-silo collaboration, and a willingness to assume responsibilities that once belonged to the CPB. The next major challenge lies in how NPR can preserve its core mission while also innovating enough to survive in a completely new funding structure.

IV. Leadership Challenge #2: Communication & Transparency

Following the CPB shutdown, staff across NPR and local stations faced fear and uncertainty. Leadership can no longer rely on the system that supported public media for nearly sixty years; they now have to communicate clearly, honestly, and consistently. This requires open, two-way dialogue with staff rather than the traditional top-down messaging typical in most leadership.

This challenge closely aligns with the ideas presented in "Leadership is a Conversation," which emphasizes open dialogue over directive communication. NPR cannot rely on periodic memos or carefully crafted statements; the organization now needs sustained communication with staff and local stations so that people understand what is happening, what remains uncertain, and how decisions are being made. Not only does NPR need to establish a sustainable system for distributing funds and resources, but it also needs to develop a new nationwide communication network.

This situation also demonstrates principles we learned from reading about Labor-Savvy Leadership. Transparency and trust are essential, especially in moments of instability and disruption. Staff need to know what leadership actually knows, and they need reassurance that critical information won't be kept from them. During my interview with Mike, he told me that his priority after the shutdown was to have candid conversations with staff: "We took the path of essentially trying to reassure staff that, like, for now, your jobs are safe; for now, the station is in good shape." His approach demonstrates how honest, grounded communication can stabilize morale even when the future is unclear. NPR's leadership must adopt a similar posture if they hope to maintain trust across hundreds of stations.

Communication on a national scale is a cross-silo responsibility. NPR's future now depends on meaningful collaboration between editorial teams, digital staff, engineers, fundraisers, legal departments, and partner stations across the country. Effective communication makes sure that every group understands its role and isn't left in the dark about major decisions. Now that the CPB is shut down, NPR must build internal pathways that keep all these groups aligned.

V. Leadership Challenge #3: Mission vs. Innovation

The third major leadership challenge NPR faces is balancing the organization's long-standing public-service mission with the need to innovate to ensure financial survival. Public media has always been shaped by fact-based journalism, educational content, and community service, but the elimination of federal funding forces NPR to rethink how it delivers that mission. Meanwhile, audience habits are migrating towards digital platforms, on-demand streaming, and mobile access. NPR must find a way to continue honoring its traditional role while adapting enough to stay relevant in a changing media landscape. This creates a paradox for leadership:

How do you hold onto your mission while also adapting to the way people consume media today?

This challenge is a clear application of Both/And Leadership because NPR cannot choose between strengthening its mission or innovating to stay relevant; it has to do both simultaneously. Leadership at WCMU had already been navigating this balance long before the CPB shutdown. As station manager Mike Horace explained to me, “We haven’t redefined [our mission] because of the funding situation that happened... We’ve changed the way we talk about ourselves. We’ve taken steps to ensure that our mission still aligns with what the expectations are from our audience... There wasn’t anything that changed because of defunding, but there have been changes that happen at the same time.” His perspective highlights how leadership must continually reframe the mission so that it resonates across evolving platforms and audience expectations.

On one hand, NPR needs to cultivate a stronger digital presence to reach younger audiences and compete in a rapidly changing media environment. On the other hand, the organization cannot neglect the communities that still depend on traditional broadcast radio, especially rural regions where internet access remains limited. As Mike told me, “We have lagged behind here in Central and Northern Michigan because internet accessibility is a big issue. We can’t move to digital platforms exclusively because there are still entire communities in our coverage area that don’t have high-speed internet, so we have to keep those people in mind. At the end of the day, radio is still a thing that is always on the air... we are still able to stay on the air and broadcast information.” His insight illustrates the balancing act NPR must navigate nationally: pursuing innovation without leaving parts of its audience behind.

VI. Rebuilding Public Media: My Personal Strategy

After examining NPR's current challenges through the leadership frameworks we studied this semester, some strategies emerge that I believe could strengthen the organization's long-term stability. These aren't just abstract theories but practical decisions grounded in strategic leadership, cross-silo collaboration, and Both/And thinking. If implemented across the network, they could help NPR preserve its mission in this post-CPB landscape.

A. Strategy #1: National Digital Expansion (NPR+ Model)

One of the most impactful things NPR should pursue is the development of a unified national digital plan that expands online content without alienating communities that still rely on legacy radio; something like an "NPR+" app. Digital innovation is vital for sustainability, especially as younger audiences move toward podcasts, mobile apps, and on-demand programming. However, as WCMU's station manager, Mike Horace, pointed out, many rural and low-income regions in Central and Northern Michigan still lack reliable internet access. These communities can't be pushed into a digital-only future if they have no means of accessing it. NPR's digital strategy must be designed under a Both/And approach — strengthening their digital presence while continuing to invest in broadcast infrastructure. Cross-silo coordination could create a plan that includes multilingual content and mobile-friendly news products, while maintaining strong over-the-air service for communities still reliant on radio for news, education, and emergency communication. Framing this strategy through Both/And and Cross-Silo leadership ensures that digital expansion isn't treated as a replacement for traditional service, but as a coordinated effort to strengthen the entire public media ecosystem. Ultimately, enhancing

NPR's digital presence only matters if it continues to reflect the core mission of public media: serving every community, not just the ones easiest to reach.

B. Strategy #2: National Solidarity Fund for Local Stations

A second strategy NPR could adopt is creating a national solidarity fund to support stations most vulnerable without CPB assistance. Before the shutdown, CPB grants served as a safety net, keeping smaller stations financially afloat. Now that this structure has been dismantled, NPR needs a new vehicle to redistribute resources across the network. A solidarity fund would allow financially strong stations, philanthropic donors, and listeners to contribute directly to the survival of stations in underserved communities. This fund could also be supported through a subscription to a digital platform, much like an "NPR+" app, that provides users with the option to donate to individual stations or to the broader network. A model like this would reinforce the idea that public media is a collective resource, one that thrives when stronger partners actively support those with fewer local financial options.

C. Strategy #3: Strengthening Emergency Communication

Another strategy NPR should pursue is developing a stronger emergency communication system that reinforces public trust. One of the most important functions of public media is its reliability during crises, especially for rural areas that depend on over-the-air broadcasting during storms, outages, or disasters. The absence of CPB funding poses a risk to this reliability. NPR could address this issue by creating nationwide standards for emergency alerts across member stations, investing in transmitter resilience, and exploring tools like mobile push notifications from the aforementioned NPR+ app. Even simple features, such as geo-targeted alerts or real-time shelter maps, could dramatically improve safety in areas with undesirable internet or

cellular access. Strengthening this infrastructure would not only protect vulnerable communities but also reinforce NPR's identity as a trusted public-served institution at a time when credibility is in question.

VII. Conclusion

The collapse of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting is an issue that goes far beyond simply budgeting. The entire framework that NPR was structured around vanished, and what remains are a handful of challenges that leadership is left to solve. The models we studied this semester make it clear that restructuring public media will require far more than short-term solutions; it will demand strategic thinking, collaboration across silos, and the ability to balance competing priorities without losing sight of the mission.

Talking with WCMU station manager Mike Horace highlighted what these challenges are like firsthand: local stations are adapting in real time while still trying to serve the people who depend on them. NPR's next steps must honor that commitment. Strengthening digital platforms without abandoning rural listeners, supporting weaker stations through a national solidarity fund, and improving emergency communication systems are just a few of the ways NPR can begin reshaping the future of public media. This transition is, without a doubt, difficult, but it also gives an opportunity for NPR to reimagine what public service looks like in a changing media landscape and to build a model strong enough to last for the next fifty years.

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