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MEDIA

With layoffs, NPR becomes latest media outlet to cut jobs

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Heard on All Things Considered



David Folkenflik

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NPR will cut 10% of its workforce, CEO John Lansing said Wednesday. Lansing blamed a slowdown in advertising dollars.

Saul Loeb/AFP via Getty Images

NPR's chief executive announced the network would lay off roughly 10% of its current workforce – at least 100 people – and eliminate most vacant positions. CEO John Lansing cited the erosion of advertising dollars, particularly for NPR podcasts, and the tough financial outlook for the media industry more generally.

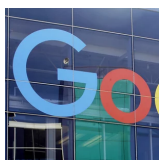
"When we say we are eliminating filled positions, we are talking about our colleagues - people whose skills, spirit and talents help make NPR what it is today," Lansing wrote in a memo to staff today. "This will be a major loss."

On an annual budget of roughly \$300 million, Lansing says, revenues are likely to fall short by close to \$30 million, although that gap could reach \$32 million.

"We're not seeing signs of a recovery in the advertising market," Lansing says in an interview. "Nothing is nailed down yet except the principles and what we know we have to reach."

The layoffs are in keeping with an increasingly grim landscape for media companies over recent months. Vox Media cut jobs by 7%; Gannett and Spotify by 6%. *The Washington Post*, owned by Amazon founder Jeff Bezos, eliminated its Sunday magazine and a handful of other jobs. After becoming part of Warner Bros. Discovery, CNN cut hundreds of jobs and killed off its brand-new streaming service, CNN+.

Tech companies that also rely heavily on advertising are undergoing layoffs too. Amazon, Google, Meta and Microsoft have announced more than 50,000 job cuts combined in just the past few months. Yet the tech and media industries' prospects stand at odds with a tight labor market and low unemployment more broadly.



TECHNOLOGY

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No details on which jobs will be cut

NPR's programming division, which produces its industry-leading podcasts, has more than doubled since 2019. Lansing says he remains committed to podcasting "1,000 percent," as well as the network's hallmark news magazines, such as *Morning Edition* and *All Things Considered*.

Lansing says he does not yet know who within NPR will be affected, but said the job cuts would not fall evenly across the organization.

"I don't anticipate that it would be like a haircut across every division, because that's just not management," Lansing says. "Management is about committing to strategy, making tough decisions."

He also vowed to make sure job cuts do not fall disproportionately on employees of color.

An NPR spokeswoman said final decisions on which jobs will be eliminated should occur by the week of March 20.

When asked about his priorities, Lansing invoked what he has called the network's "North Star" since his arrival in the fall of 2019: a push to ensure the network has a bigger and broader audience base, rooted in younger and more diverse listeners, readers and consumers. The emphasis, he says, must be on drawing in "the future audience to make NPR sustainable for the next 50 years."

Layoffs come after near-total freeze on hiring, travel and internships

Lansing, formerly a top television executive for the E.W. Scripps Co., says whenever an economic slowdown appears imminent, marketing budgets get slashed. (On NPR's radio side, advertising takes the form of underwriting, as corporate sponsors are not permitted to call for listeners to purchase goods or services.)

Last year, the network booked \$134 million in such corporate underwriting, a record built on strong growth in podcasting revenue in recent years. Fearing a tepid economy, Lansing and his corporate team projected that revenue would stay flat for the fiscal year that began October 1.

Within a few weeks, Lansing became convinced that projection would be unreachable. In late November, the network announced \$20 million in cuts, including a near-freeze on hiring, elimination of most travel, and suspension of internships.



NPR to impose near-freeze on hiring but avoids layoffs as budget cuts loom

Lansing says even that proved overly optimistic.

"We were doing everything we could against the tide and couldn't keep clipping our costs as the revenue kept slipping," Lansing says. "And we finally got to the point where there was nothing really that we could cut big enough to fill a hole like that."

In setting NPR's earlier rounds of budget cuts a couple months ago, Lansing consulted ahead of time with leaders of the unions representing workers at NPR with an eye to avoiding any layoffs. He won praise for doing so and says he informed leaders of SAG-AFTRA on Tuesday about the impending job cuts. The union represents 570 people at NPR. Pat O'Donnell, the executive director of the union's Mid-Atlantic unit, could not be reached for comment for this story.

Reminiscent of layoffs during 2008 financial crisis

The last time NPR faced such stark choices, it was 2008. During that financial crisis, NPR shut down shows and laid off scores of people. For several years, it eliminated salary increases and suspended retirement contributions. NPR's total workforce has grown by about 50 percent since before that crisis.

During the pandemic, NPR sidestepped layoffs through temporary cuts to pay and retirement contributions, distributed with an eye to shielding less well-paid employees, so they were most sharply felt by the most highly compensated staffers and executives. This time, Lansing says he is not confident the money will return anytime soon, so the network and its board have to plan more strategically.

Last fall, when announcing the earlier cuts, Lansing said the network would have to make tough choices - and to "do less with less." Now, he says, it must drum up more creative income sources, like the licensing of the popular show *How I Built This* to Amazon's streaming services, which he says generates \$8 million annually.

NPR aims to work more efficiently with local public radio stations

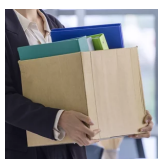
NPR undertook a strategic reorganization last fall, reinstating the position of a chief content officer overseeing both the newsroom and the programming division. The newsroom currently stands at just shy of 490 people, while programming has shot up to 230. That content executive position has not yet been filled; its creation led to the departure of then-NPR chief news executive Nancy Barnes.



MEDIA

NPR chief news executive Nancy Barnes to depart as network reshapes top ranks

Such distinctions between news and programming are tricky, however, as programming oversees podcasts, including those that perform journalistic functions, such as *Code Switch*, *It's Been A Minute*, *Planet Money*, and *Throughline*. New podcasts *Up First*, *Consider This* and *State of Ukraine* sit on both sides.



YOUR MONEY

January is often a big month for layoffs. Here's what to do in a worst case scenario

Lansing has also put significant stock into what he calls the NPR Network, which calls for greater unity of coverage and digital initiatives, such as newsletters, streaming, podcasts and more. It is intended to align the strategy of its often fractious member stations with one another and NPR itself and to allow NPR, for the first time, to raise money digitally from its audience in concert with those stations.

"A really important strategic vector that we'll be talking about more within the company going forward is maximizing the value of the content wherever it can live and wherever the audience demands it," NPR Chief Operating Officer Will Lee says in an interview. "What we've shown with podcasting is that we can take some of our core journalistic assets and we can create new formats and new programs around them and actually reach new audiences. And I think we have to extend that lead."

"It's always difficult in these situations, and I don't want to minimize the impact that it will have on our colleagues and in some cases, you know, our ability to do what we do,"

Lee says. "However, when you think how we look out longer term, right, not just for 20 years, but several years out, it's really about building a sustainable financial future for NPR."

Disclosure: This story was reported and written by NPR Media Correspondent David Folkenflik and edited by Acting Chief Business Editor Emily Kopp. Under NPR's protocol for reporting on itself, no corporate official or news executive reviewed this story before it was posted publicly.

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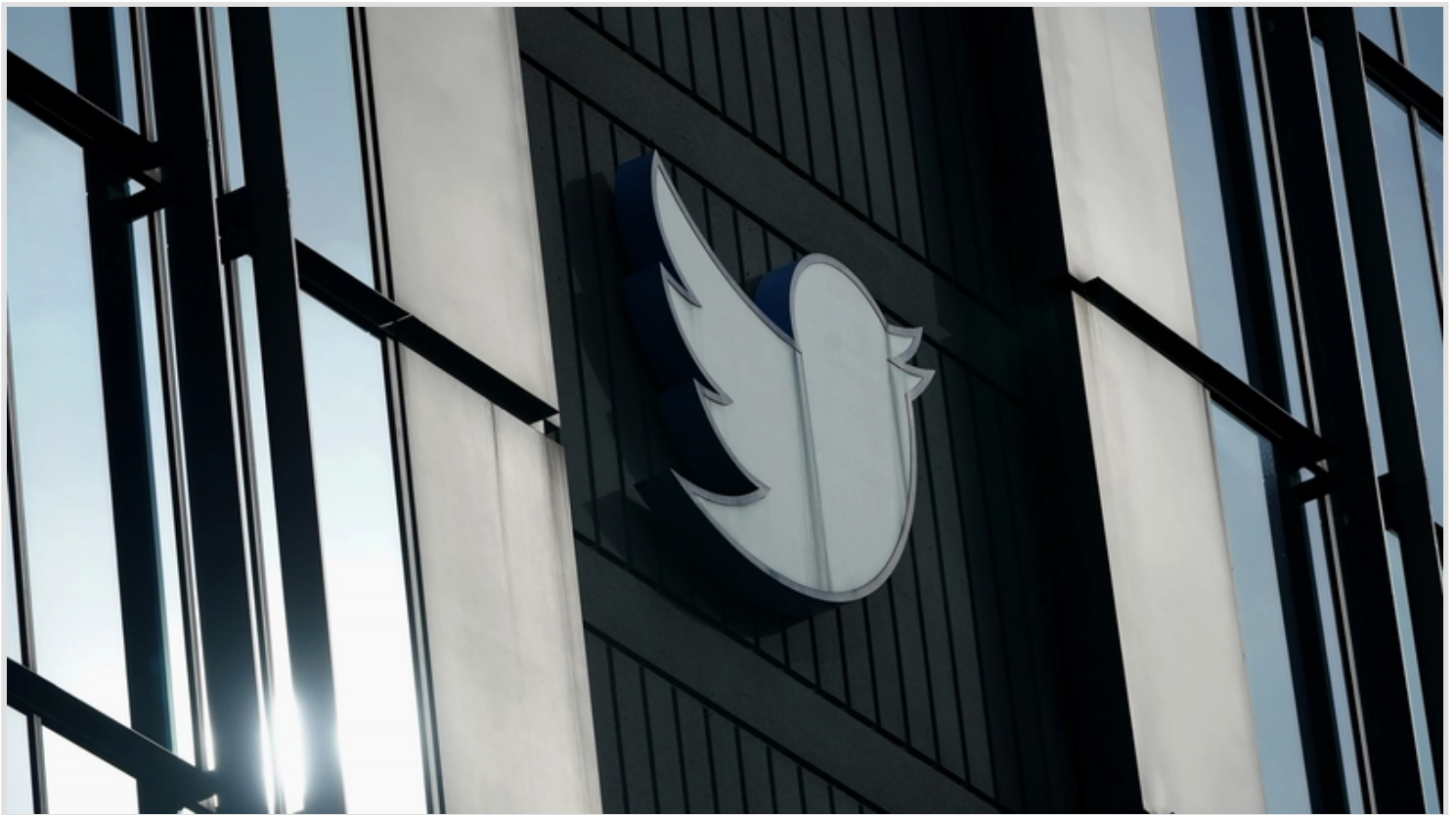
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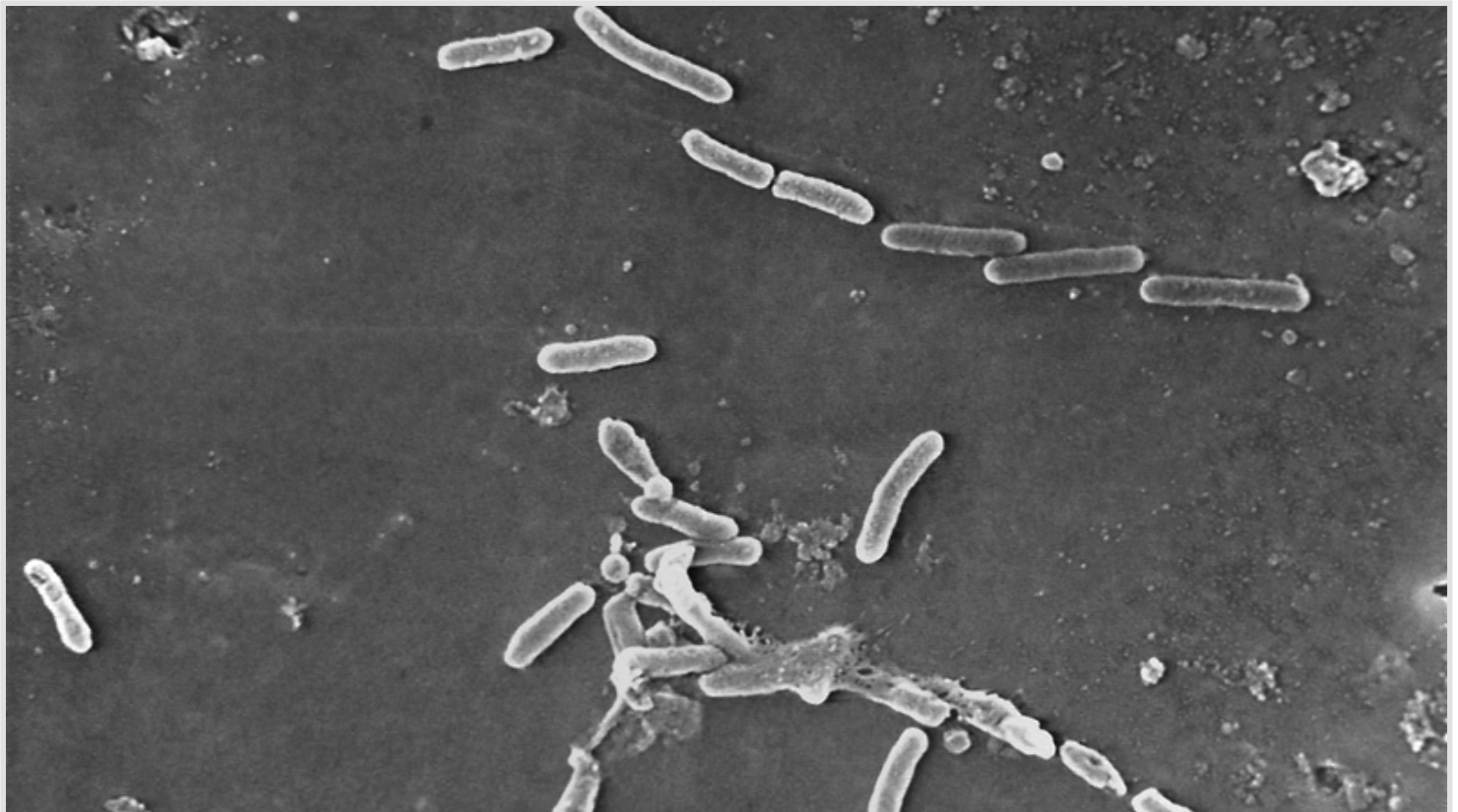
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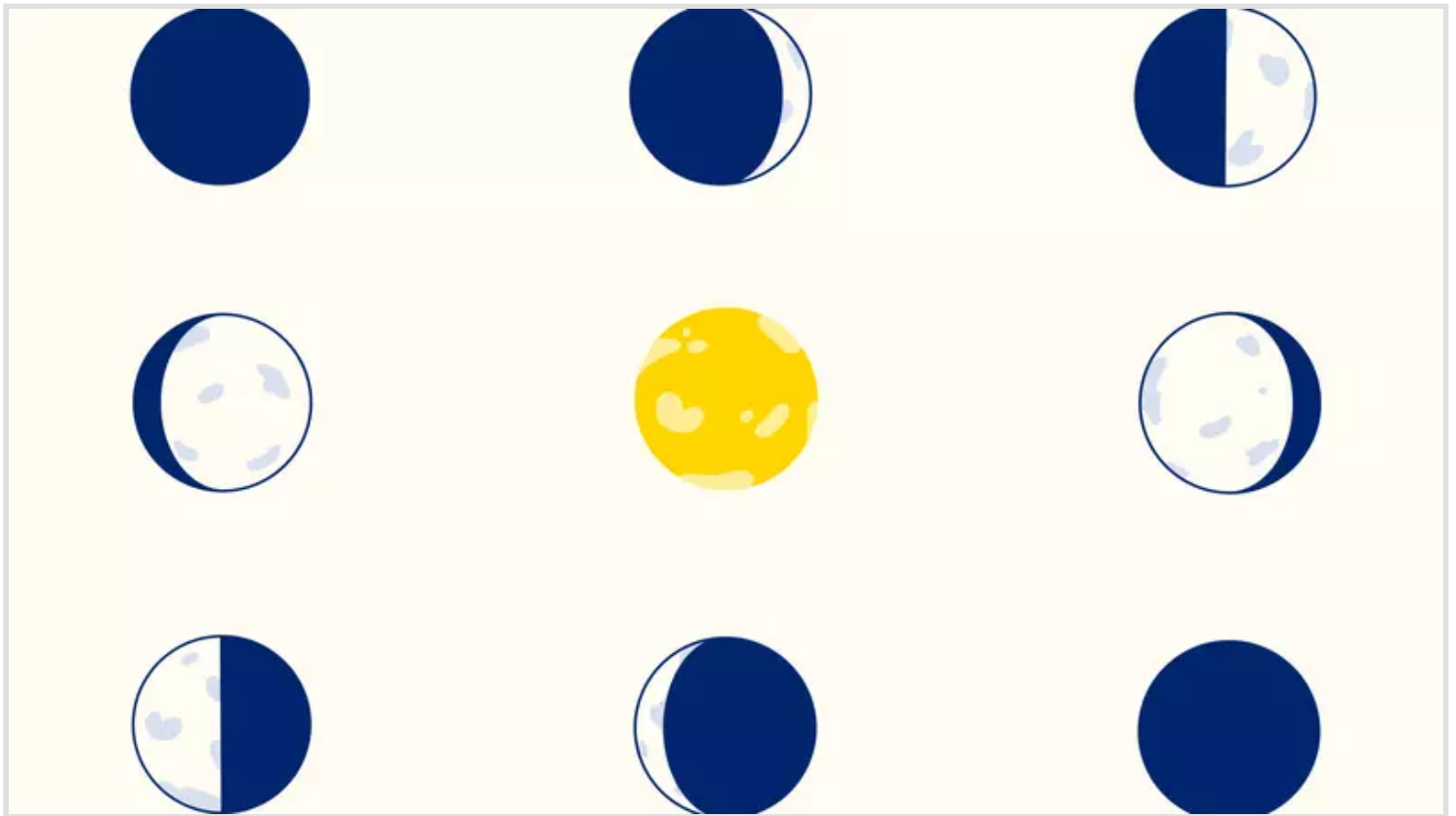
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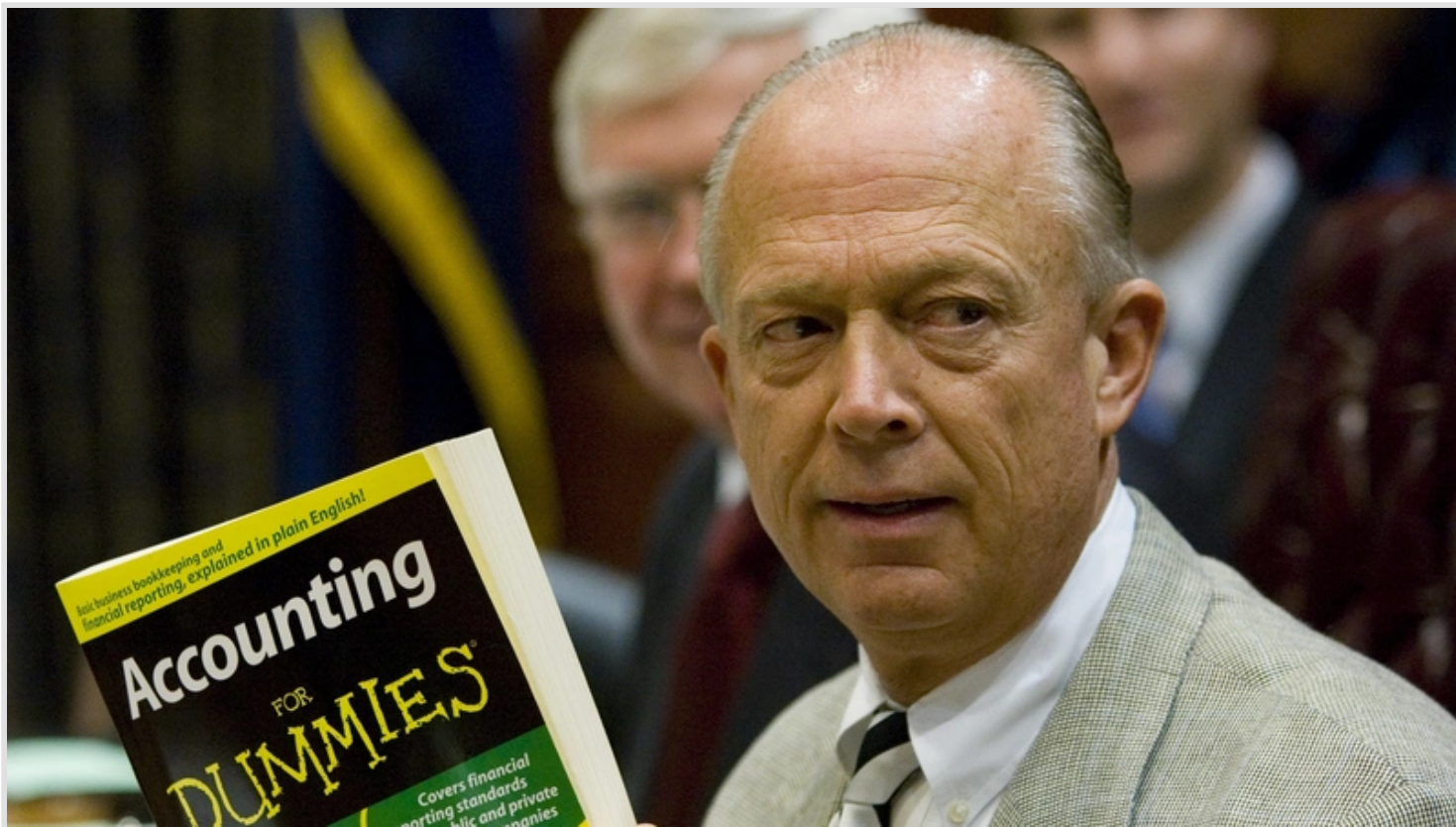
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