



Transforming Public Radio's Local Journalism Making the Case

The Views of Donors and Foundations, June 2011

Making the Case conducted in-depth interviews with 18 current or prospective funders regarding local journalism and public radio's role in their communities. The interviews were conducted in St. Louis, Vermont, and Louisville. Some of the individual donors interviewed were also associated with family, local, regional, and or state foundations that have supported station initiatives in journalism or other areas including the C.E. & S. Foundation, the Gheens Foundation, the Dana Brown Charitable Trust, The Vermont Community Foundation, and the High Meadows Fund.

Making the Case also conducted interviews with officers at five national foundations with a track record of support for public radio's journalism:

- Atlantic Philanthropies
- James Irvine Foundation
- John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation
- McCormick Foundation
- William Penn Foundation

Interviews were conducted by KublerWirka. KublerWirka works with cultural, educational, and service organizations to identify strategic challenges and opportunities and develop appropriate and effective responses to them. KublerWirka helps nonprofit organizations anticipate and respond to change.

KublerWirka's full report follows.

KublerWirka
Transforming Local Journalism
Making the Case for Philanthropic Support
Donor and Key Informant Interviews

INTRODUCTION

The following is a summary of interviews conducted for the *Transforming Public Radio's Local Journalism Project*.

The purpose of these interviews was to test the case for philanthropic investments in local journalism for public radio by soliciting the perspectives and opinions of individual public radio donors and foundation representatives in three public radio markets—Vermont; St. Louis, Missouri; and Louisville, Kentucky—and among a cross-section of regional and national foundations.

These were not feasibility interviews to test specific inclinations to provide support, but rather in-depth conceptual discussions of the overall need for local journalism and the role that public radio might play in that context.

The comments and perspectives developed through these interviews are intended to inform the thinking and fundraising strategy of the entire public radio community through the *Transforming Public Radio's Local Journalism Project*.

METHODOLOGY

The three locations were identified by the Station Resource Group and reviewed and approved by the Project Team. These were judged to be robust public radio markets with some local journalism activity, but not too large or too small as to be seen as less relevant to the entire station community. A statewide public radio network was included.

Interviewees were invited to participate by the local public radio station in each market. These participants were selected based upon criteria developed by KublerWirka, the consulting firm conducting the interviews, and discussed with the Project Team. Participants were selected based upon their familiarity with public radio in their market, the range and depth of their civic and philanthropic experience, and their ability to speak to the interests and priorities of their local philanthropic community.

National and regional foundations were selected by the Station Resource Group based on geographic diversity and existing engagement with journalism funding. Interviews were confidential. Twenty-three interviews have been conducted. A list of interview participants is included following the summary.

AREAS OF INQUIRY

The interviews were structured around an open-ended set of topics. Discussions were highly contextual and KublerWirka was prepared with information and briefings on public radio and local journalism in each market.

Major areas of inquiry included:

1. The state of local news, reporting and information in the specific market.
2. The role that public radio and the local station currently play in meeting the communities' need for local news and information.
3. The potential for philanthropic investment to build capacity in local news and reporting through public radio.

Participants were asked their thoughts and opinions on these topics and offered a range of responses summarized below.

NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

In the summary below, we use the following terms:

- “participant” indicates an individual interviewed for this project;
- “public radio” indicates the general scope of programming and stations locally and nationally, this is shorthand for participants' descriptions of the industry;
- “local station” indicates when a participant is referring to his or her local public radio station;
- “NPR” indicates when a participant is referring to national programming and content provided through local stations, internet and podcasts—most frequently used in reference to particular high-profile programs such as *Morning Edition* or *All Things Considered*. Any references to NPR as an organizational entity are specifically noted as such.

All local participants had an understanding of the complex nature of “public radio” in terms of their local station; NPR, PRI, APM and other producers of content; and a program schedule populated with a mix of local content, content produced by other public radio stations, and content produced by national-level organizations. They often used the shorthand of “NPR” to refer to the mix of non-local programs.

TOPICAL SUMMARY

Topic #1: the state of local news, reporting and information.

There was a strong and consistent assessment of the challenging state of local news and reporting in each participating market. Participants were very familiar with changes in the print, television, and radio marketplace and the impact of those changes on the quality, breadth and depth of news and information.

Generally speaking, participants pointed to a significant vacuum in the community's ability to access high-quality and in-depth news and analysis on issues important in each community. Overall assessments such as "abysmal" or "ridiculous" were offered to describe the current state of local journalism, particularly print journalism, which had declined significantly in each market. National/regional foundations noted the gross loss of talent in terms of declining numbers of reporters assigned locally and at a state level.

Participants drew careful distinctions between different types of "news" at the local level, including: timely reports on important current events, basic information about politics and policy issues in the region, in-depth analysis and assessment of news and events, and thoughtful commentary. These four areas (in shorthand: news, information, analysis, and commentary) were consistently used by participants to describe an ideal balance of "news" at the local level. It is important to note that nearly equal emphasis was placed on high-quality information about issues of public importance as on in-depth news and analysis. (National/regional foundations were well-informed about the major "data mining" efforts underway in public-interest journalism and reinforced the importance of access to such information as a core function of news organizations.)

Geographically, participants framed "local" as extending from neighborhood and community to city, state, and even region. Many participants noted that "local" often extended between and among different public radio markets in terms of issues of public importance (in Vermont, for example, the agricultural economy is predominantly regional rather than confined to state boundaries).

Participants consistently identified a key challenge as the public's inability to determine what information and news it was missing in the absence of reliable and comprehensive reporting. "We do not know what we do not know," was a frequent comment. Participants noted that many factual reports and statements can easily go unchallenged in civic and political discussions in the absence of news and information.

Participants had a strong appreciation that the news industry is in a significant phase of transition and upheaval, in terms of changes in types of media (print, television, Internet video and print, etc.) and modes of access (print, Internet, satellite, mobile, etc.). They noted, in particular, the proliferation of information tools and sources used by younger generations. This was reinforced by the national/regional foundations as very dynamic and as yet unresolved in terms of one or two emerging dominant modes of consumption.

Within this context, all participants identified the need for measured and well-edited local news and reporting. The importance of local news and information was framed in terms of its role in informing public debate and discussion on local issues; its role in engaging and developing the electorate; its contributions to quality of life and the strength of civic fabric; and its importance in promoting a sense of vitality in the community (including to individuals and businesses considering relocation).

There were several notable points raised in the discussion of this topic:

- Participants defined “high-quality” news and information most often by reference to national exemplars, including: NPR, the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, and the New Yorker.
- All participants noted the emergence of online or Internet-based news and information sources in their community. Some participants were active and regular users of these new sources and noted that these sources were credibly responding to the need for high-quality news and information on particular topics. (In some markets, Louisville for example, there is active collaboration between public radio and Internet-based organizations.)
- Many participants noted the difficulty in sorting through a proliferating number of alternative sources, and articulated a particular need for editorial discernment in identifying high-quality news and information.
- Participants noted that, in a vacuum, some of the “loudest voices were at the extremes,” reinforcing the need for an “independent view from media you can trust.”
- Some participants noted that access to local news, and even a sense of connection to local events, depended in part upon technology used to access news and information. It is possible in each market to bypass local shows and reporting, whether on radio or television, and select only programs of interest provided by national sources.
- In addition to public radio (discussed separately in the following topic), participants also noted the quality and effectiveness of alternative weekly or biweekly papers in responding to the need for news and information on local events and issues. They noted, however, that the consistency of coverage varied.

The supposition of the Transforming Public Radio’s Local Journalism Project that there is a significant gap, or vacuum, in local news and information is well understood and shared by project participants. All participants reinforced the importance of quality news and information. At the same time, participants were well aware that in a changing and dynamic media market, new sources were emerging in response, in some cases at a high-level of quality and consistency.

Topic #2: the role of public radio in local news and information.

Discussions of the role of public radio in general, and the local station in each market in particular, were a significant portion of the interview conversations. Participants had sophisticated and nuanced understandings of the manner in which public radio is responding to the need for local news and information, and in many cases pointed to inherent and emerging challenges for public radio to fill the “vacuum.”

Generally speaking, participants identified public radio as part of the solution to local news and information, but not “the answer” in terms of the only possible approach.

There were several notable points raised in the discussion of this topic:

- The limitations of broadcast-based radio programming to cover and distribute important news and information. Participants noted that, in the context of drive time programming on public radio, there was limited airtime for local news given listeners’ interests in *Morning Edition* and *All Things Considered*. Further, while every market had a daily or weekly news and affairs show (such as *Vermont Edition*), participants noted a range of quality and appeal in these programs (in terms of both content and on-air talent).
- Participants drew a distinction between descriptive local reporting and analytical local reporting, and strongly suggested that public radio not attempt to fill a descriptive role (described by one participant as “dogcatcher stories”). Analytical local reporting, or “educational journalism,” was seen as a more effective area of endeavor for public radio, and more consistent with the “NPR brand.”
- The quality and depth of national level public radio programming, such as produced by NPR, PRI, and some large stations, was held up as a high standard by participants. They frequently noted, however, that current local programs were not consistently at that level of quality or interest for listeners. The quality and likability of on-air talent was an area of particular comment by some participants, in comparison to nationally recognized personalities on public radio.
- Some participants noted the need for “public radio” to cultivate and engage “articulate conservatives” in producing news and information programs, even at the local level, to ensure balance in reporting and commentary.

Areas of opportunity for public radio. Participants offered several perspectives regarding new capabilities, editorial considerations, and aspects of branding and positioning that they see as important for public radio and their local station to address in order to strengthen local news and information. These included:

- Developing a role as a value added and discerning aggregator of news and information from a wide range of sources. Beyond simply “pointing” to other news sources, participants saw an important and branded role for public radio to apply judgment in facilitating listeners’ access to other news sources. From the national/regional foundation perspective, this point extends to carrying content from other sources on-air (e.g. both print and internet journalism sources).
- Carefully considering whether broadcast radio is the right medium to fill the vacuum in local news and, if not, asking whether public radio can play a role in developing content and audience across other media. The long-term, as one participant noted, might mean “less and less a radio station and more and more an organization that provides news and entertainment that I can access in many other ways.” National/regional foundations noted, in particular, that many media markets are awash in experimentation and innovation, including new distribution strategies. This is seen as a fertile and positive context, but one that requires flexibility from “traditional” players, including public radio.

- Understanding that to play a comprehensive role in local news and information, public radio will also need to continue to build audience (participants noted, for example, that emerging minority communities and longtime rural residents in their markets may not be active public radio listeners, even though they have important needs for local news and information).
- Considering how to “extend the brand of NPR” at the local level, in terms of quality of programming, depth and balance of reporting analysis, and loyalty and affinity of the listener base¹.
- Considering whether an “editorial point of view” is compatible with the identity of public radio in many markets. Participants noted that, in contrast to the historical role of local newspapers, local public radio stations are not necessarily seen as having an established point of view. They reinforced the role that public radio can play as a voice in the “center”.
- Developing and fostering discussion and dialogue. Many participants specifically noted that public radio is an excellent medium for discussion and debate of issues of local importance and that, in this way, radio has advantages over new media such as Internet-based reporting. Interviews, debates, forums, etc. all serve to raise the level of conversation on important public issues. One participant noted that such dialog is the next best thing to live interaction.
- Developing a collaborative approach rather than a competitive position. Participants noted that, in an environment of many new sources of news and information, it was important for public radio to seriously consider a predominantly collaborative approach to building capacity, particularly where sources of funding are limited and there is a high potential for local competition. This collaboration could be between public radio and other local sources for news and information, or between public radio organizations on a state or regional level in programming areas of common interest to the public (economic and environmental issues were commonly cited as topics where regional reporting capacity would be an effective approach).
- Building the talent pool. Participants strongly recognized that local news and information depends upon high-quality reporting and editorial work. Building and retaining talent is an important aspect of filling the vacuum in news and information. Participants noted two important aspects: 1) truly deep reporting depends upon long-standing relationships between reporters and the community (thus retention is an important consideration), and 2) the importance of developing talent that is comfortable with new media as a reporting and production tool.
- Digital news production was an important area of comment for participants. Not all participants were equally aware of progress in this area at their local station, but all participants noted the importance of working effectively in this area for public radio, including the willingness to work in the messy “blogosphere” even when some might consider it a lesser form of journalism.
- Some participants noted that genuine local reporting on hot topic issues could be risky in a local context because in a small community the risk of offending people, including public radio benefactors, would be quite high on some issues.

¹ This point is discussed further in the section on the case for support below.

- A few participants raised specific concerns about the separation of station control from editorial control in a public radio context, particularly where station governance was a mix of institutionally appointed and independently elected members.

Topic #3: the potential for philanthropic investment to build capacity in local news and reporting through public radio.

Conversation on this topic focused on two major aspects of the case for philanthropy supporting local journalism: one is the priority of investments in public radio capacity at the local level compared to other philanthropic priorities; another is recommendations and considerations for how public radio can effectively make the case for support.

Relative priority of local journalism as a philanthropic priority. Participants offered a range of opinions. Some participants acknowledged a number of higher competing priorities for local philanthropy, including direct human services, civic development and conservation of green space, local educational institutions, hospitals and healthcare, and the arts. Participants also noted that the local supply of philanthropic resources was limited and already spread across competing priorities. A few participants wondered whether the decline of journalism had reached the level of crisis necessary to raise it higher as a philanthropic priority.

On the other hand, some participants ranked investments in journalism quite high, “in the top third,” or “number one of the top 10”. This perspective was informed by a belief that without high-quality local news and information, the understanding of important public issues, and the decision-making about public and private funding for those issues (including philanthropy), would be severely hampered. As one participant noted: “if we become any more ignorant, we are at risk of losing everything.”

This perspective makes a nuanced argument that connects the effectiveness of philanthropy focused on “direct services and programs” to the quality of public discussion and debate about community priorities. In this way, investments in local news and information might be considered catalytic to effective giving elsewhere. (It is important to note that participants who made this argument understood that it is a complex and multilayered case for the importance of investment in local journalism).

Generally, participants expressed an understanding that, regardless of competing priorities, philanthropy could play an important role in supporting local journalism, particularly when traditional media funding models are under such transition. A few noted that tying local journalism efforts to other civic priorities (such as education or arts/culture) would be an effective strategy for reaching some funders.

Effectively making the case for public radio’s role in local journalism. Beyond relative priority against other funding needs, participants offered a number of comments and suggestions about how public radio and their local station could most effectively “make the case” for investments in local journalism. These ranged from practical suggestions to strategic advice on positioning and communications:

- Participants reinforced the importance of clarity and transparency about the business model and mechanisms for investment in local journalism by public radio. As noted above, several participants mentioned the importance of collaboration (locally, regionally, nationally) to leverage funding and avoid competitive duplication of efforts (We “cannot be fighting over resources” and “I don’t really know why there is so much duplication” were comments on this topic.) (One Midwest participant offered the possibility of a large-scale public radio collaboration and “news bureau” for the heartland.)
- Participants noted that investments on a topical basis (resources focused on one important area, such as energy or education) might be an effective approach to addressing reporting needs that extend beyond local radio markets.
- Although participants understood—and believed in—the benefit of public-funded and non-profit journalism, they also saw the benefit of a diversity of models provided that stewardship of public trust and high-quality reporting was maintained. In some respects, the “ownership model” was less important than the ability to materially address the need for high-quality news, information, analysis and commentary.
- Participants were aware of the national discussion regarding “bias” and “elitism” in public media journalism; although participants were not necessarily concerned about this issue *in fact*, they noted that both NPR and local stations would have to continue to address it, convincingly, in the context of making a case for support. “Take care not to be branded as partisan . . .” was one such comment on this topic.
- Some participants noted that the current “case” for public radio (described in terms of membership pledge drive messaging, for example) was very focused on benefits to the listener and the quality and availability of national-level programming (“your support makes it possible for us to bring you *Morning Edition* . . .”). Participants noted that this positioning (public radio as a personal benefit) would not necessarily be as effective in terms of making the case for investments in local journalism (news and information as a public good). [See also notes from the national/regional foundation conversations below.]
- Some participants noted the importance of articulating strategic trade-offs at the local level in terms of the priority of local news and reporting against other types of program development and program air time: does more news mean less of something else? (A few participants expressed a willingness to sacrifice other programming in favor of news programming)

cross-cutting notes from national/regional foundation interviews

The five foundations interviewed outside of the three local markets were Atlantic Philanthropies, James Irvine Foundation, MacArthur Foundation, McCormick Foundation, and William Penn Foundation. As noted in the above summary, these interviews were broadly reinforcing of the points raised at the local level.

As informed observers and active funders, however, the foundations also offered several macro-level points on the question of the evolving role of public radio in local journalism and the appropriate role of philanthropies in supporting that role.

The foundations noted a clear appetite for funding in this area in the foundation community, both nationally and among major regional foundations. In general, all of the foundations see an important and credible role for public radio in local journalism. They all noted, however, that there is significant emerging competition from internet-based sources, some of very high quality.

The foundations reinforced the distinct strengths of public radio: a large and committed audience, a demonstrated commitment to quality of reporting, radio as a distinctive and impactful auditory medium, and experience in membership and fundraising. They also identified areas of “the case” that public radio would need to make in terms of its role in local journalism: building new audiences, new capabilities, and new journalistic expertise (not just more local journalism for current listeners); showing demonstrated impact beyond gross listeners; effectively using new non-broadcast media; and demonstrating a willingness to partner in both content and production.

Notable comments included:

- The long-term goal is better journalism for the public. The foundations were fairly “platform-agnostic” in terms of how this goal might best be achieved in such a dynamic media context.
- The messy context is seen as a positive force for change that should be leveraged: proliferation of models and approaches, boom in internet-based journalism, entrepreneurial journalism school graduates, growing number of collaborations between organizations (including public radio).
- Key role of funders—right now and for the foreseeable future—is to incentivize collaboration: push the on-air/on-line collaboration, including with public radio, and determine whether increased quality/value can result (thus, potentially, making the case for support by listeners/users).
- Three layers of funding were described: 1) investments in content specific activities (e.g. “education reporting”), 2) investments in novel collaborations and experiments, and 3) investments in larger scale efforts.
- Consistent theme that it is “too early” to determine how the local journalism model will coalesce and mature—too much uncertainty in terms of content generation (quality and capacity) and distribution technologies (both in terms of media and platforms).
- Many identified “the middle” of the public radio/local journalism market as very important (understand that larger metro areas have, in general, greater capacity to invest in local journalism).
- Reinforcement of the need to continue experimenting and collaborating: “learn what works.” Experimentation should focus on quality reporting and editorial work.
- Journalism schools have an important role to play as potential partners and as sources of new talent with broad range of skills.
- A long-term strategic question is whether there a logical successor to investigative reporting at the local level—an entity (or group of entities) that would fill the role of the legacy press along several dimensions: quality of reporting, alacrity of investigative focus, nurturing/development of talent.

- On the question of talent development, one participant asked: what can public radio (alone or in collaboration with others) offer established and emerging journalists that they cannot get from other local news organizations?
- Consistency and constancy is an important consideration: ability to sustain capacity and attention on key issues; ability to build a base of investigative knowledge within an organization or collaborative group. Question is not just: who will survive, but who will survive at a high level of quality?
- The relationship between platform and audience matters, in both directions. As public radio enters local journalism, it should ideally be multi-platform and multi-audience.
- Changes in media technology and distribution platforms (desktop, handheld, mobile, tablet, etc.) have implications for relationship between audience and the “digital divide”. An important nexus is broadband residential access and mobile access—a level of access that is currently both aligned and mis-aligned with public radio audience and potential audiences.
- Also noted that public radio has a distinct capability as a membership/fundraising organization (not many internet news organizations have such experience); although there are questions about whether/how membership fundraising translates to online delivery of news/content.

appendix #1—issues of local importance

While it was not the purpose of these interviews to catalog or assess specific issues where local news and reporting was an important factor, outlined below are the common topics reported by local participants. These are offered here as additional context to framing the case for philanthropic support.

It is interesting to note that these issues were mentioned commonly in each of the three markets despite their geographic and regional differences.

Issues of local importance that would benefit from in-depth analysis and reporting included:

- The economic future and health of the state and region, particularly looking beyond state tax policy and state budgets to consider questions of business development, urban and community development, sustainable industry, and employment. A particular aspect of this is the plight of the states in responding to the economic crisis.
- The energy future of the state and region, including cost and access to affordable energy, the environmental impact of local and regional energy producers, and transitioning from a legacy sources to new and sustainable sources. Also, the relationship between energy and economic vitality.
- Public education, in terms of local control, statewide funding, quality, and student success.
- The environment, including local and regional environmental quality, water quality, preservation and conservation, use of natural resources (including for alternative energy such as wind), sustainability, and relationship to economic vitality.
- Healthcare, including costs of state-supported and state-mandated health coverage, costs to private businesses and insurers, and access to quality care across the state or region.
- Transportation and infrastructure, including mass transit, automobile infrastructure, waterways, and the relationship between transportation and economic development.
- Political accountability; not only investigation and exposure of “wrong doing”, but also a broader question about whether statewide initiatives, projects, and innovations as legislated have had their intended effects and demonstrable returns on investments.
- Social challenges such as addiction, persistent urban and rural poverty, and access to human services and support.

appendix #2—interviews

Louisville (6)

Tyler Allen
Christopher Boone
Gill Holland
Bruce Maza, The C.E. & S. Foundation
Carl Thomas, The Gheens Foundation
Phoebe Wood

St. Louis (6)

David Denier, The Dana Brown Charitable Trust
Julian Edison
Harvey Harris
David Lemkemeier
Thomas Schlafly
Peter Van Cleve

Vermont (6)

Stuart Comstock-Gay, The Vermont Community Foundation
Carl Ferenbach, The High Meadows Fund
Deborah & Wayne Granquist
Eleanor Ignat
Bill Schubart
Bill Stetson

National/Regional Foundations (5)

Amy Dominguez-Arms, The James Irvine Foundation
David Haas and Feather Houstoun, William Penn Foundation
Mark Hallett, McCormick Foundation
Elsbeth Revere, John D. & Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation
Jack Rosenthal, The Atlantic Philanthropies