
TEXAS STANDARD

“UNPRECEDENTED COLLABORATION” CREATES
A LAUDED PUBLIC RADIO NEWS MAGAZINE

Local That Works: Public Radio Case Study No. 2

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LOCAL THAT WORKS

The premise of these four case studies, prepared for the Eastern Region Public Media [PUBLIC RADIO SUPER-REGIONAL CONFERENCE](#) (Oct. 25–27, 2016): stations need and want to be “more local.” The evidence we have collected suggests they will succeed in doing so by filling gaps in local news coverage and playing a larger role in the daily life of their communities.

It is safe to assume that all stations would do more of this—except for the fact that “being local” takes a good deal of money and staff. In an era of declining tax support, rural and small-market stations are getting squeezed. Through no fault of their own, their long-term prospects are being eroded by a combination of forces, including the inherent financial limits of a small local audience and small local economies; increasing ease of access to national program material; and increasing costs associated with multiplatform service.

This is not a new problem. The “large/small” divide has permeated system politics. Meanwhile, the growing “capacity gap” between smaller and larger stations—in membership, staffing and digital tools—has been well documented by the [PUBLIC MEDIA FUTURES FORUM](#).

If public broadcasting is to retain its [NEAR-UNIVERSAL REACH](#), the system will have to develop ways to sustain the service of small-market, especially rural, stations, and find ways to empower them to be both sustainable and more local.

The [LOCAL THAT WORKS](#) project involved three elements. We were looking for locally managed activities with

- (1) wide applicability across a range of small and large stations,
- (2) repeatability—meaning a program, feature or engagement effort could be reapplied over and over with continuing value—and
- (3) content or service output that could be delivered across several media platforms.

The case studies in this series look at local stations that meet these criteria. All have found ways to [THRIVE AND CONNECT](#) with their audiences in new and innovative ways despite trying market conditions.

INTRODUCTION

[TEXAS STANDARD](#) is an hour-long, weekday public radio news magazine program, hosted by award-winning journalist David Brown, that covers “stories that matter to Texans.” It began statewide broadcasts in March 2015.

While it is staffed and funded principally by KUT-Austin, [TEXAS STANDARD](#) is a co-production of the four largest public radio stations in Texas—KUT; KERA in Dallas; KUHF in Houston, and KSTX in San Antonio. The partner stations provide content, production support, and carriage, while the collaboration has set the stage for statewide sales including [TEXAS STANDARD](#), the statewide newscast and local spot sales. In addition to stories from its partner stations, [TEXAS STANDARD](#) brings in content from other news organizations across Texas, Mexico and the United States, and allows its content to be reused in other shows, including NPR.

Hosted from KUT’s studios in Austin, [TEXAS STANDARD](#) is a major part of the state’s daily weekday schedule, broadcasting live at 10 a.m. during high listening hours. The state of Texas, with a population over 27 million, is considered a major U.S. commercial market.

THE BACKSTORY

The mission of [TEXAS STANDARD](#), it says, is “to explore the world of news, economics, innovation and culture every day—from a Texas perspective—in a fresh, contemporary, conversational style.”

“If NPR’s Morning Edition were produced in Texas, then this is what it might sound like,” Stewart Vanderwilt, GM of partner station KUT-FM, said in 2014.

What Vanderwilt calls “an unprecedented collaboration” didn’t develop overnight. Austin’s KUT-FM launched its first news operation in 2002, and from the beginning had a vision of a signature news show. It took another 10 years of station growth, new facilities and a major acquisition for KUT to be in the position to act. Similarly, partner stations in Dallas, Houston and San Antonio were increasing their investments in journalism—and all four stations were developing strong collaborative relationships. For KUT, in particular, the launch of all-music KUTX (following KUT’s \$6 million acquisition of a commercial station) and the conversion of KUT-FM to an all-news format finally set the stage for the development of the [TEXAS STANDARD](#) show.

From the start, KUT knew that to reach its full potential, a statewide show would need carriage and support from the three other major market stations. So they set out to maximize the likelihood of buy-in from these stations. KUT committed to shouldering the

direct financial risk by agreeing to fund and house the show's production staff. The other key partners would shoulder their own content production and risk.

KUT began an in-depth development and fund-raising effort for a news-magazine style show focused on Texas news and issues. The first step was to assign two senior members of existing editorial staff to develop the concept, logistics and staffing plan.

Early in 2014, KUT approached the three other large Texas market stations—KUHF-Houston, KERA-Dallas and KSTX in-San Antonio—about collaborating on this state-focused news-magazine initiative. That spring, CEOs, GMs and senior news management from the four collaborating stations met and agreed on a path forward. KUT committed to cover the full costs of production and hosting the show, and to make the show available at no charge to any public station in Texas.

Several of the key players in the development of [TEXAS STANDARD](#) and the TSC brought experience working at organizations with a national focus (e.g., NPR and nationally syndicated shows) to the effort. Specifically, [TEXAS STANDARD](#) host David Brown and founding EP Emily Donahue had experience at Marketplace. Texas Public Radio GM Joyce Slocum was general counsel and interim CEO at NPR, where KERA's future vice president of news, Rick Holter, was an editor; and KERA's vice president of radio, Jeff Ramirez, previously worked at the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB).

By the fall of 2014, KUT had produced a series of weekly on-air trial programs to explore formats and content, and all collaboration partners were on board for a launch in early 2015. In January, the program began to air weekly on KUT; weekday broadcasts began in February; and on March 2—Texas Independence Day—[TEXAS STANDARD](#) debuted on more than 20 stations statewide.

As the show launched, the four partner stations applied for a CPB Collaborative Operations and Services Support grant to broaden the impact of their collaborative efforts. In August 2015, CPB awarded a two-year, \$750,000 grant for the newly christened Texas Station Collaborative (TSC) to “establish the infrastructure to organize editorial resources from public broadcasting newsrooms across Texas,” with some of the resources funded by this grant targeted at delivering more content to [TEXAS STANDARD](#).

IMPACT AND REACH

[TEXAS STANDARD](#) has two principal “outputs”: first, the one-hour radio show produced at KUT, broadcast live from the [TEXAS STANDARD](#) Studio in Austin at 10 am on weekdays. Second, with funding from the TSC, [TEXAS STANDARD](#) staff produce and distribute a statewide newscast available for broadcast at 8:04 a.m. and 12:04 p.m., as well as a

“Texas News Roundup” that airs live during [TEXAS STANDARD](#) at 10:30 a.m. The show can also be streamed live or downloaded as a podcast after the broadcast.

The show has had significant impact.

- ▶ As of June 2016, the show reaches a listening audience of more than 400,000 statewide. The show has high levels of unaided identification during surveys and fund drives and very strong underwriting support.
- ▶ The 18-plus audience in the top four markets has grown more than 40 percent year over year.
- ▶ Statewide, 26 stations carry the broadcast either live or time-shifted (or both), together reaching nearly 90 percent of the state.

COLLABORATION STRUCTURE AND OPERATIONAL MODEL

The statewide news collaboration that exists between the four major partner Texas public broadcasting stations has two distinct components:

- ▶ The [TEXAS STANDARD](#) news-magazine program, funded and staffed by KUT as the lead station and producer, which is the focus of this study.
- ▶ The TSC, funded by a CPB Collaborative Operations and Services grant that directly and indirectly provides support to [TEXAS STANDARD](#).

[TEXAS STANDARD](#) was created first, and it is by far the larger of the two components. It is now a well-established fixture in the operation of the partner stations. Still, the collaboration between the partners around the show is relatively informal: there are no formal agreements or governance frameworks between the partners to structure the collaboration, an arrangement made possible by the fact that (with limited exceptions) no funds are exchanged. This informal arrangement enabled the collaboration to get up and running without the need for legal approval by boards or licensee leadership.

However, there are guiding principles that define the roles each partner plays, and there are regular interactions between the [TEXAS STANDARD](#) news staff and the news staffs of the other stations as KUT develops each day’s show. With this model, each partner is responsible for managing and funding the resources it applies to [TEXAS STANDARD](#).

On the other side, there is a formal agreement between the CPB and the four partner stations for the TSC, with KERA acting as the designated lead station. This agreement established a formal governance structure for administration of the grant, including a steering committee made up of station senior leadership, regular meetings and structured reporting. This formal structure specifically exists for the TSC, but TSC steering

committee meetings routinely discuss [TEXAS STANDARD](#) because it plays such a major role in overall Texas news coverage.

FUNDING AND RESOURCING MODEL

Funding to support the development and launch of [TEXAS STANDARD](#) came from redirected staffing, as well money raised by KUT from private donors, foundations and a lead sponsor—all committing to three years of support. Statewide sponsorship expanded throughout the first year; the producers anticipate corporate underwriting will be the principle source of funding by year three.

Ongoing resources invested in [TEXAS STANDARD](#) and the TSC:

- ▶ [KUT](#) has a working staff of about 10 FTEs dedicated to [TEXAS STANDARD](#) in Austin. This includes both the KUT-funded staff and the Texas Roundup Newscast reporter, funded by the CPB grant.
- ▶ At [KERA](#), the TSC grant funds a staff of about 1.5 FTEs (a statewide coordinating editor and an administrative producer) who provide support to coordinate news coverage by public radio newsrooms statewide, but also work directly with [TEXAS STANDARD](#) on the planning, production and placement of content from newsrooms across the state.
- ▶ The partnering stations all have substantial newsroom staffs that develop content as part of their ongoing news reporting roles at their respective stations. The content created by these reporting organizations is all available for broadcast on [TEXAS STANDARD](#).

PARTNER STATION SUMMARY PROFILES

[KUT-FM](#) is a large public-radio university-licensee serving the Austin, Texas, area, the #35-ranked Radio Research Consortium (RRC) Metro Market. It is owned and operated by the University of Texas at Austin and began radio broadcast operations in 1958. It operates two broadcast stations with different formats: KUT (90.5)—an all-news and information station—and KUTX (98.9), an all-music station focused on the “Austin Music Experience” launched in 2013. More than 250,000 people listen to KUT in Central Texas each week.

KUT and KUTX both have an extensive web presence to complement their broadcast operations. The annual operating expense budget for the station is about \$11 million (FY15 audited financials) for full operations.

[KERA-FM](#) is a multi-station community joint licensee serving the Dallas–Fort Worth, Texas, area, the #5 ranked RRC Metro Market. KERA-FM, the all-news NPR affiliate,

provides content for [TEXAS STANDARD](#) and carries the show live. KERA is the lead station for the TSC, which provides some resources to [TEXAS STANDARD](#).

KERA began broadcast operations in 1974 and currently operates two broadcast radio stations with different formats: KERA (90.1)—an NPR affiliate all-news and information station—and KKXT (91.7), an AAA all-music station launched in 2009. The station has an extensive web presence to complement their broadcast operations. The annual operating expense budget for combined operations is about \$21.5 million (FY15 audited financials) with radio operations responsible for about half.

[TEXAS PUBLIC RADIO](#) (TPR) is a multi-station public radio community licensee with a mid-size budget (about \$4.2 million) serving San Antonio, Texas, the #5 ranked RRC Metro Market. TPR's all-news NPR affiliate station, KSTX-FM, provides content for [TEXAS STANDARD](#) and carries the show on weekdays.

KPAC-FM, the first station in the group to begin operation, launched in 1982 as an NPR and classical music station. In 1988, KPAC merged with the holders of another broadcasting license, KSTX-FM, to form Texas Public Radio. KSTX became an all-news station for the first time on October 31, 1988, allowing KPAC to become all-classical.

TPR operates six stations: KSTX (89.1), an NPR affiliate all-news and information station serving San Antonio and South Central Texas; KPAC (88.3), a classical music station serving San Antonio and South Central Texas; and four additional stations serving other nearby regions (KTXI 90.1 FM, broadcasting to the West Central Hill Country; KTPR 89.9 FM, broadcasting to Snyder and the Big Country; KVHL 91.7 FM, broadcasting to the Highland Lakes region; and KTPD 89.3 FM, broadcasting to Del Rio).

[HOUSTON PUBLIC MEDIA](#) (HPM) is a large joint licensee (budget about \$25 million, with about half allocated to radio operations) owned and operated by the University of Houston System. HPM serves the Houston area, the #6 ranked RRC Metro Market. HPM's all-news NPR affiliate station, KUHF-FM, provides content for [TEXAS STANDARD](#) and carries the show on weekdays. HPM has one public radio broadcast station (KUHF-FM) and utilizes two of the HD subcarriers of KUHF along with Internet streaming to carry classical music and arts programming as well as Xponential, an AAA station from WXPB.

UNIQUE FEATURES

- ▶ Some stations took substantial audience risk when they switched to [TEXAS STANDARD](#), because that meant dropping other listener favorites. For example, KERA moved the second hour of the Diane Rehm show from 10 am to 8 pm to make room for the live broadcast of [TEXAS STANDARD](#). The station received numerous letters and e-mails sent

criticizing this move, but that attitude seems to have shifted—with one listener actually writing in with “My apologies” for her earlier criticism, saying: “OK, I’ve been faithfully, but skeptically, listening to ‘The [TEXAS STANDARD](#),’ trying to give it a chance, since our last correspondence in March. Now, I’m hooked on this new program and would feel bereft if it were no longer on the air!”

- ▶ [TEXAS STANDARD](#) is an unusual “horizontal” initiative that broadly covers “a place,” a region, which is distinctly different from the majority journalism investments and projects and targeted to deep “content verticals,” specific topics, including projects like Precious Lives. Both can be very effective models of “local that works” when they strengthen and mesh with the strategic direction of the organizations involved.

KEY LESSONS

- ▶ In the terms of the framework developed for the 2016 PMBA conference, [TEXAS STANDARD](#) emerged from a “crisis of opportunity,” (versus a “crisis of sustainability”). The partner stations saw that they needed to reorganize a part of their operating model to seize an opportunity no single station could capture on its own.
- ▶ As in all of our “collaborations that worked” cases, leadership matters—all four partner station CEOs (including relatively new ones at HPM and TPR) were strong supporters of the [TEXAS STANDARD](#) collaboration.
- ▶ KUT’s commitment to cover the costs for development and ongoing production of [TEXAS STANDARD](#) was critical to its launch. This minimized the financial risk element from potential partners’ deliberations. The decision to make the program available for free, even to partner stations, also accelerated the uptake among stations throughout the state.
- ▶ As we saw in other collaboration case studies, personal trust among station leaders was an important factor, allowing inter-station discussions to proceed quickly and constructively. The informality of the [TEXAS STANDARD](#) collaboration also probably played an important role in quickening the project’s development, allowing stations to avoid time-consuming legal reviews and other potential roadblocks.
- ▶ The decision to allow all [TEXAS STANDARD](#) produced content to be available for use or re-use in other shows (e.g., as a drop-in feature during NPR’s *Morning Edition*) was a major plus in the growth of the show.