

# RADIO VOICES: How One Grant Changed A Public Radio Station

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The Norman Lear Center is a nonpartisan research and public policy center that studies the social, political, economic and cultural impact of entertainment on the world. The Lear Center translates its findings into action through testimony, journalism, strategic research and innovative public outreach campaigns. On campus, from its base in the USC Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism, the Lear Center builds bridges between schools and disciplines whose faculty study aspects of entertainment, media and culture. Beyond campus, it bridges the gap between the entertainment industry and academia, and between them and the public. Through scholarship and research; through its conferences, public events and publications; and in its attempts to illuminate and repair the world, the Lear Center works to be at the forefront of discussion and practice in the field. For more information, please visit: [www.learcenter.org](http://www.learcenter.org).



At the Lear Center's Media Impact Project ([www.mediaimpactproject.org](http://www.mediaimpactproject.org)), we study the impact of news and entertainment on viewers. Our goal is to prove that media matters, and to improve the quality of media to serve the public good. We partner with media makers and funders to create and conduct program evaluation, develop and test research hypotheses, and publish and promote thought leadership on the role of media in social change.

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Special thanks to the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation and the dedication of KCRW employees, past and present.

# FOREWORD

Dear Reader,

KCRW is deeply grateful for the opportunity to collaborate with the USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center's Media Impact Project to create this overview and evaluation of one of our most consequential periods to date. Thanks to the generous support of the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, KCRW was able to revolutionize the way our newsroom functions through a number of in-depth reporting projects that proved that Southern California—and the world—has a tremendous desire to learn more about the people and institutions that comprise our communities.

The major reporting projects undertaken as a result of this grant, such as *There Goes The Neighborhood*, *KCRW Investigates*, and *Below The Ten*, optimized the way that our organization operates, enabled our employees to build upon their existing skill sets, and allowed our newsroom to reorganize its workflow. These improvements have made lasting, positive changes here at KCRW as we continue to work on new, innovative efforts that stretch the capabilities of our newsroom.

Through this grant, KCRW learned the power of diving deep on a single subject. Through our in-depth investigations into workers' rights, homelessness and housing, and more, we have learned firsthand that one of the most effective ways for local media outlets to build community-wide conversations about essential issues

is by investing in projects that look at the issues through multiple, interdisciplinary lenses.

Moreover, we discovered that these efforts are best shared across a range of multimedia outlets, including podcasts, live radio, our website, and social media. By engaging individuals across these platforms, we are able to reach the most diverse listenership possible to help build thoughtful conversation at all levels of society. Implementing these strategies has proved essential as we think about developing new content and reporting series.

This work would not have been possible without the steadfast commitment of the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation and program evaluation from the USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center's Media Impact Project. We are truly grateful for the support of these two great institutions on such a groundbreaking effort.

Sincerely,

**Jennifer Ferro**  
KCRW President



 ...[W]e have learned firsthand that one of the most effective ways for local media outlets to build community-wide conversations about essential issues is by investing in projects that look at the issues through multiple, interdisciplinary lenses.

# PROJECT SUMMARY

National Public Radio (NPR) affiliate KCRW received a grant from the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation in 2015 to spark public discourse about homeless issues in Los Angeles. The Hilton Foundation has long been committed to combating homelessness by supporting shelters and other direct aid programs. This three-year grant sought to bring housing insecurity to the public spotlight. It included initiatives to sponsor live events and to improve reporting across KCRW's digital platforms. Its goals were to:

1. **build capacity** within KCRW's newsroom to find and tell underreported stories;
2. **increase coverage of social issues** impacting vulnerable populations;
3. and find new ways to amplify coverage through **multimedia reporting**.

The USC Norman Lear Center's Media Impact Project (MIP) was invited to evaluate the project. Outcomes were very positive and transformed many aspects of the way KCRW conducted operations. Additionally, the funder garnered media attention on its issues through KCRW's in-depth investigative reporting and cross-platform promotions.

Content coding analysis revealed increased sophistication in KCRW's investigative capacity by the end of the three-year grant.

Journalists, staff professionals and administrators reported a renewed sense of pride in their work and increased skill sets at airing complex stories on the radio, on social media and at live forums. Employees exceeded what they thought they could accomplish, taking on additional responsibilities and fresh perspectives and discovering new ways to engage with a wider demographic of audiences. Results included:

- three nationally-recognized radio programs on social issues
- top slots on iTunes podcasts
- connections to more diverse audiences through deployment of multiple platforms
- new paradigm for partnerships between public radio stations
- creation of a permanent documentary unit
- stronger station identity within the community on social issues
- award-winning coverage of the funder's priority issues
- amplified community engagement

This MIP Insights Case Study showcases the work accomplished under this KCRW-Hilton Foundation project and outlines best practices for future collaborations between philanthropy and public media. It includes recommendations for media and philanthropists who wish to focus on issues important to both.



My capacity to think about our stories in different digital places has expanded. I've had time to really strategize about each project and the best way to build audience participation around it. — Caitlin Shamberg, Director, Digital Content, KCRW

## THREE NEW PROGRAMS AND A PARADIGM

KCRW began by inviting pitches from independent producers on how to uncover the stories of Los Angeles' homeless, poor and disenfranchised. An array of compelling ideas and themes surfaced, becoming the subject of three award-winning series:

### 1. *Below the Ten: Life in South LA* (2015)

Fourteen episodes explored stories about the people who live in the neighborhoods south of the 10 freeway. KCRW listeners met Mr. Fries Man, an entrepreneur representing the home chef movement burgeoning across the Southland, and other warm, witty and compelling figures. Feature stories ran 8-30 minutes. The series was produced and hosted by David Weinberg.

### 2. *KCRW Investigates* (2016)

Twelve episodes focused on vulnerable workers and the industries that employ them. Issues ranged from environmental to health care to neglectful labor practices among employers of immigrant workers. Stories ran 7-8 minutes. The series was produced and hosted by Karen Foshay.

### 3. *There Goes the Neighborhood* (2017)

Eight-episode Los Angeles season of New York's WNYC series, on housing costs, gentrification and homelessness. The show was produced as podcasts in partnership with WNYC Studios, one of the largest NPR stations in the nation, and cross-promoted on Press Play with Madeleine Brand. Episodes ran 23-29 minutes and were hosted by Saul Gonzalez.

## WHAT KCRW DID DIFFERENTLY

How did the station achieve such dynamic success? First, KCRW team

members bought in to the process. They rethought their procedures, from how a story was conceptualized, to who should be in the room when it was being discussed, to how digital media would be employed throughout the process. Stories became single strokes in larger pictures of complex issues the station covers over the long-term. Much of the growth centered around the way team members think about the life of the stories they tell. Stories are now considered keys to building more opportunities for audience engagement.

*Major thematic change areas included:*

### 1. Revamped Operations

- Communications were streamlined between staff members.
- Communication efforts increased between marketing, engagement, events, and editorial.
- The digital team was brought into editorial meetings.
- Web and social media infrastructure was used in new ways.
- Cross promotions on different KCRW shows helped build audiences across programs.

### 2. Personal Growth Factor

- Underlying the Hilton Initiative was a desire to create a space for personal growth of staff members as well as shore-up KCRW's capacity to produce provocative journalism.

### 3. Gift of Time

- Reporters were given time to search out subtle stories and develop ideas; journalists spent weeks walking neighborhoods, talking to residents and delving into issues.
- If an article wasn't working, they gathered more information or killed the story, something seldom possible in the usual fast-paced newsroom schedule.
- Reporters expanded their roles; they took photographs and videos and engaged with audiences on social media. They also participated in public forums.

#### 4. Voice for Listeners

- On-air programming became just one element of broader conversations with community members.
- The team began cultivating audiences earlier and stayed with the stories for a longer time, through both live and online forums.
- A Facebook page built community buzz and germinated listeners before the stories were available, as explained in detail in the next section.

#### 5. Embrace of Multimedia

As the KCRW team grew in multiplatform marketing expertise over the course of the grant, they elected to try something new: cultivate an audience interested in housing issues in Los Angeles before their program aired, with the intent of nurturing a forum for informed debate on the topic. The team started a *There Goes The Neighborhood* Facebook page in August 2015 on the issue of neighborhood redevelopment. The page immediately garnered attention from listeners and others who found the site through alternate channels. By the end of November 2015, the Facebook board had 1,426 followers from across the listening area and around the world. Postings had received at least 4,195 views; 872 reactions; and 568 comments. Social media allowed KCRW to build an audience for the podcast as well as seeding live events. Each episode was announced online and the group was invited to station-hosted housing issue events. On-air talent interacted directly with the Facebook group, forging a stronger connection with the listeners as well as spotlighting the podcasts. These connections also produced additional story ideas.

#### 6. Live Events

- Events were viewed strategically as an extension of programming and social media engagements.
- Venues for panel discussions were held in diverse neighborhoods outside of usual hosting spots.
- Accommodations were made for more open discussions: for example, offering refreshments after the event instead of prior gave panelists and audience a chance to mingle and discuss what had been debated.
- iPads were made available to write comments on social media and ask questions of KCRW team members.



This project was the first time two major public media stations have collaborated on this level. It seems logical, but it just hadn't happened before this. Although they do sometimes share the same reporters, there has never before been a direct collaboration on a specific series; there's a lot of power in cities coming together and highlighting differences but also similarities. — Jill Smayo, VP of Operations, KCRW

# MEETING THE GOALS

## Objective 1. Building Capacity

Overall, the Hilton Foundation grant resulted in both professional growth in employees' skill sets and a streamlining of operations for the station. Employees exceeded what they thought they could accomplish and learned to take on new responsibilities and perspectives. Staffers spoke of coming up with new ways to strategize multimedia support for stories; they now utilize different platforms to cultivate longer term engagement with audiences beyond the initial broadcast or publication.

## Objective 2. Increased Coverage of the Issues

The stories produced under the grant brought listeners into the lives and issues faced by many who reside in some of the city's least affluent neighborhoods. A content analysis of the three series confirms that each episode featured vulnerable populations. MIP tracked 26 topics ranging from gang violence and substance abuse to housing shortages and criminal justice. The study revealed signs of a greater evolution in storytelling capacity in the final series, *There Goes the Neighborhood*.

## Objective 3. Amplified Multimedia Coverage

The Hilton Foundation grant transformed KCRW's approach to multimedia. This is particularly true in how they use social media to engage audiences. Over time, increased communication between marketing, engagement, online and editorial departments appears to have led to a deeper understanding of how to build audiences around issues and how to augment on-air reporting with web, video and so-

cial media components. Experiences gleaned from this "cross-pollination" were applied in Year 3 to great effect.



Conceptually, team members now talk about the life of a story; reporters have taken on new roles in leading discussions at live events and on social media, making them more accessible to listeners as well as allowing for ongoing conversation about topics that the Hilton Foundation supports.



Being able to invest in our news team has been amazing. Saul [Gonzalez] and Anna [Scott] are at the top of their game and now (after the grant) they will still be here reporting on these issues in different ways. So as the intention was to build knowledge and experience within the station and the network, we hit the mark. — Christi Corpus, Director of Institutional Giving, KCRW

## ACHIEVEMENTS

The quality of programming is evidenced by nine national and regional journalism awards to date, including the Excellence in Journalism Awards for *Below the Ten: Grace of the Sea*; Best Hard News Reporting for *KCRW Investigates: Burned: Abuse in LA's Restaurant Industry*; and a National Edward R. Murrow Award for Best Feature Reporting for *Below The Ten: Mr. Fries Man*.

## ACTION IN THE REAL WORLD

The podcasts and on-air stories from *Below the Ten*, *KCRW Investigates* and *There Goes The Neighborhood* attracted and engaged audiences from around the globe.

### BELOW THE TEN:

- Episodes received national awards for best feature stories.

### KCRW INVESTIGATES:

- California Department of Industrial Relations (DIR), which praised the unique investigation conducted during this series, made systemic changes to improve data collection processes in order to generate more accurate data and develop more effective policy recommendations.
- Christine Baker (head of the DIR) used a radio segment to secure greater funding for the labor division.
- KCRW's partner KQED reported interest and inquiries from the San Francisco Department of Industrial Relations after the series aired in the Bay area.
- A district attorney featured in one of the stories received a public tip as a result, which resulted in [a major human trafficking investigation](#).



We are just starting the conversation, not ending it. On the radio, in digital and in our live events, how we see our role and how we engage our audience have become very deliberate since the Hilton grant.

— Jill Smayo, VP of Operations, KCRW



*Below the Ten: Grace of the Sea.*

- Several workers who had been waiting years to settle their cases received settlements from their employers, likely as a result of the heightened scrutiny engendered by the series.
- A local attorney offered pro-bono legal services at Bet Tzedek, which provides free legal services for low-income people in LA, after hearing the “Burned” stories.
- California Attorney General office under Kamala Harris used “The Future of Work” series as an example their investigators could use to learn how to conduct good interviews.
- A member of the California Bar Association used the series during a wage seminar as an instructional instrument.

### THERE GOES THE NEIGHBORHOOD:

- Two live panels drew hundreds of residents, many of whom expressed frustration over the swift pace of gentrification in their neighborhoods.
- A Facebook group of concerned citizens with regular meet-ups formed around the series; the discussion board helped seed an audience for the broadcast and the live events.
- A Facebook campaign was the topic of a presentation at the Online News Association annual conference, and additional NPR affiliates expressed interest in the model.
- The series broke into the top-100 most popular iTunes podcasts and placed 69th nationally out of all iTunes podcasts during its initial offering in Fall 2017.
- The series ranked #8 on *Atlantic Magazine's* list of the year's 50 best podcasts.



*There Goes the Neighborhood: Shackled to the Market*



*There Goes The Neighborhood* represents a different way of distribution for us, of reaching new audiences, and also a project with entirely new objectives. The grant gave us the opportunity to literally change what and how we will be able to cover issues in the future. — Sonya Geis, Managing Editor, KCRW

# WHO LISTENED, WHO WATCHED

## AUDIO DOWNLOADS

Listeners could access the programs from a variety of on-demand platforms, including the mobile app, the KCRW site, or iTunes:

- *Below the Ten* was accessed 55,609 times.
- *KCRW Investigates* was accessed a total of 14,575 times.
- *There Goes The Neighborhood*, by far the most popular of the three series, had a total of 266,975 downloads.

MIP's examination of listener's comments on KCRW's social media attest to the added impact created by the multimedia approach, which included 11 separate platforms. One listener wrote: *"This story caught my ear on KCRW Press Play today because I heard voices of Filipino seafarers talking about injustices happening to them ON THE JOB. This is an informative investigative piece including audio, video, text and data visuals. It's worth the time to look through."*

## AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT

One indicator of audience interest is whether listeners seek further information on the topic via a website, on social media or through other online platforms. Audience members viewed KCRW Hilton Foundation-supported programming webpages more than 230,000 times, with *KCRW Investigates* leading at over 145,000 pageviews.

## SOCIAL MEDIA

Audiences engaged with KCRW content on social media platforms. Contributions to the Facebook page's debate were informed and thoughtful. The post that received the most comments (142) and reactions (170) was: *"With supply & demand being a frequent argument for solving the housing crisis, I'd like to hear Airbnb's effect on housing supply discussed in greater detail on one of the upcoming episodes."*

Another member received 102 comments and 133 reactions after posting: *"I haven't heard Brown or Garcetti consider banning foreign investment in hopes of benefiting CA/LA residents."*

An added benefit of the audience engagement on social media was that it allowed KCRW to connect directly with audience members and continue to inform and discuss the is-



From *KCRW Investigates: Broken at sea.*

## KCRW on REDDIT

*KCRW Investigates: Burned*, stories on the widespread abuse of workers in the restaurant industry, also inspired 87 contributions to a Reddit thread naming and sharing thoughts on restaurants guilty of wage theft and other unethical practices. Contributors revealed the impact this increased awareness had on them. For example: “Gone to multiples of these places. One of them I even asked how they could even stay in business with the prices they charged. Looks like we know how now!”

Another expressed: “I guess the moral dilemma is: Do I support these restaurants so they can afford to pay their employees? Or do I take my business elsewhere because they weren't going to pay the employees anyway?”

Similarly, in *Troubled Waters*, *KCRW Investigates'* exposure of ways cruise lines exploit workers, the episode raised awareness and generated strong reactions: “This is outrageous. If you go on cruises or do business with cruise lines, I urge you to examine their business practices... Some [workers] get paid as little as 41 cents an hour and are denied medical care and compensation if they get hurt, with no recourse in American courts. Your cheap cruise tickets are paid for by the exploitation of shipping employees.”

issues off air. Saul Gonzalez wrote: “Whether rent control is an effective way to preserve affordable housing has been debated for decades. In this photo from the archives of the Los Angeles Public Library, pro rent-control advocates march in front of L.A.'s City Hall in 1979.” (Figure 1)

*There Goes The Neighborhood's* Facebook group hit a nerve across the United States and around the world, indicating that difficulties associated with land use, urban development, and gentrification are not unique to New York and L.A. (Figure 2)

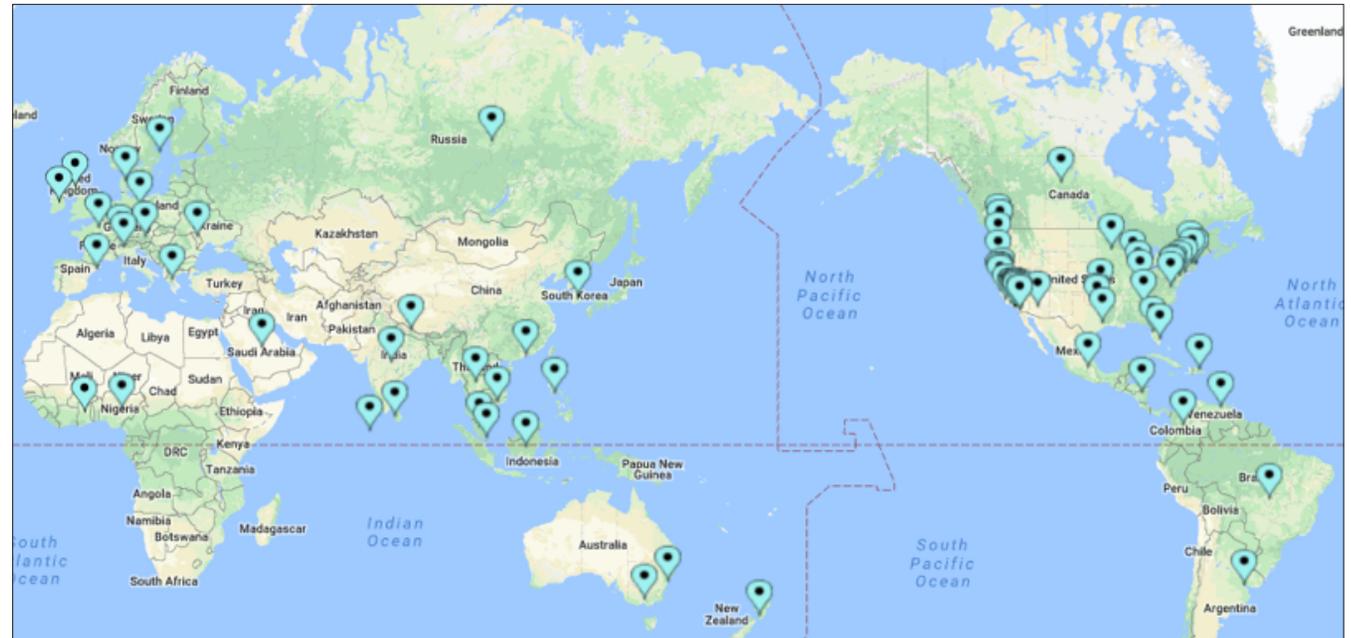
### AUDIENCE ACTION

There was evidence to suggest that KCRW's programming elicited pro-social action. One *There Goes The Neighborhood* listener emailed:

RE: “There are 6,000 homeless youth in LA, reaching them is crucial

### FIGURE 2

*There Goes The Neighborhood* Facebook Group Members' Locations.



### FIGURE 1

A post from KCRW's Facebook page



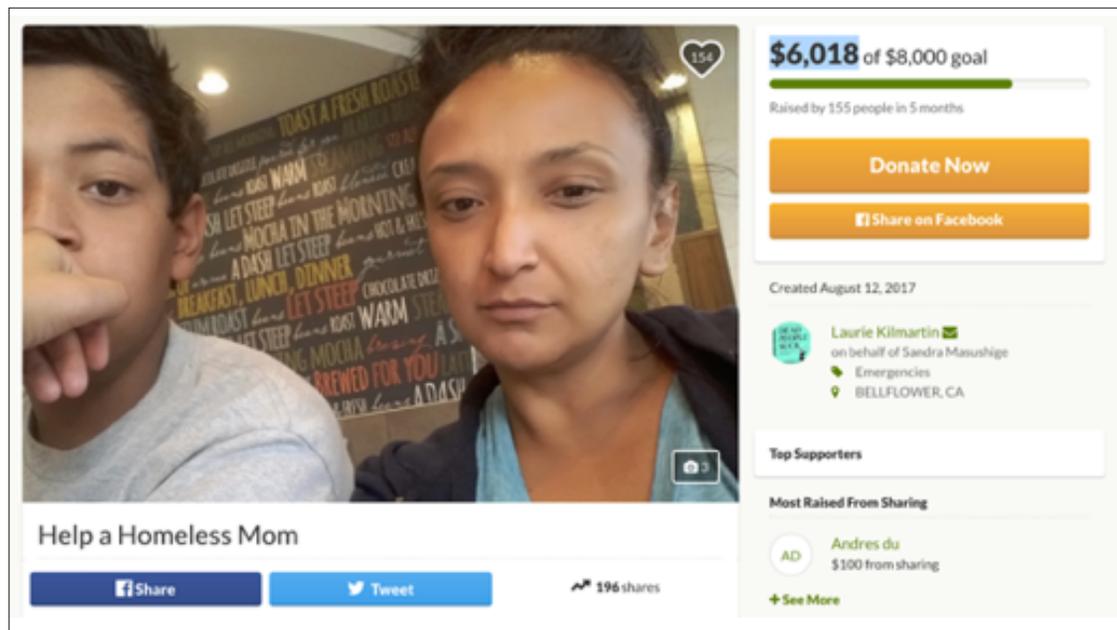
I am the Vice-President of Development for the Los Angeles Forum for Architecture and Urban Design. I heard about Leo Serrano — the homeless kid who wants to be an architect — through your recent broadcast. I'm hoping to find a way to let Leo know that there are resources available, if he's interested in career guidance/mentorship. Thank you. Best, Andrea"

KCRW producer Jenny Hamel connected Andrea to the organization through which she met and interviewed Leo.

Another listener was so moved by another TGTN story about a homeless mother

### FIGURE 3

The GoFundMe page



that she offered to help directly: “I am a KCRW member very moved by the plight of the woman interviewed on Press Play today... who is living in a motel room with her 11 year-old son. How can I send her \$65 to take care of her lodging for one

night? Thank you for your assistance.

Producer/Reporter Saul Gonzalez connected them.

Another listener dedicated a comedy show as a fundraiser as well as a separate GoFundMe campaign, which raised \$6,018. (Figure 3)

### EVENTS

The audience drew more from social media and skewed younger than audiences drawn from traditional KCRW sources.

Survey data indicates 44% and 36% of attendees of two *There Goes The Neighborhood* events were between the ages of 25-34, close to double the amount at other KCRW events.

*There Goes the Neighborhood* events also drew more racially and ethnically diverse listeners from a much broader section of Los Angeles and Orange County.

### OUTREACH AND INFLUENCE

The initiative led to outreach opportunities among KCRW professionals, including a presentation at the Online News Association’s annual conference on digital strategies developed under Hilton Foundation programming. Several stations expressed interest in creating a similar podcast to spotlight their own communities’ housing issues, using the KCRW Facebook group as a template.

*There Goes the Neighborhood* was also used as a curriculum supplement in at least one high school. Says KCRW Managing Editor Sonya Geiss: “The [high] school invited me in to speak to the class and it was a wonderful experience. I was there for over two hours. The students asked really detailed questions about the content

(“Why is downtown having this building boom?” “What do you think it means to be “authentically” from a neighborhood?” etc.). And then I gave a seminar about how to build a radio story (pre-reporting, reporting, logging, scripting, etc). It

was super cool to see young people engaging with their city in this way. I was really proud to be involved with something that had them so excited.”

## PRESS

Funding from the Hilton Foundation drew coverage in other news outlets and promotion from various media partners, organizations, advocates, and industry experts, including:

- *Current*, "KCRW receives \$1 million grant for new reporting series." January 26, 2015.
- *My News LA*, "KCRW gets \$1 million grant for documentary reporting series." January 20, 2015.
- *Los Angeles Magazine*, "KCRW Awarded 1 Million Dollar Grant for Reporting on Social Issues in L.A." January 22, 2015.
- *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, "Journalists Wanted to Explore Vulnerable Populations in California." February 11, 2015
- *LA Observed*, "KCRW wants your proposals for 'vulnerable populations' project." April 10, 2015.

## CONCLUSIONS

The MIP evaluation determined this grant created positive change among many stakeholders.

### FOR KCRW

- Positive growth in capacity building to report on more complex investigative stories
- Knowledge acquisition and professional development among team members
- Ability to reach younger, more diverse audiences through cross-platform promotions and live events

### FOR THE PUBLIC

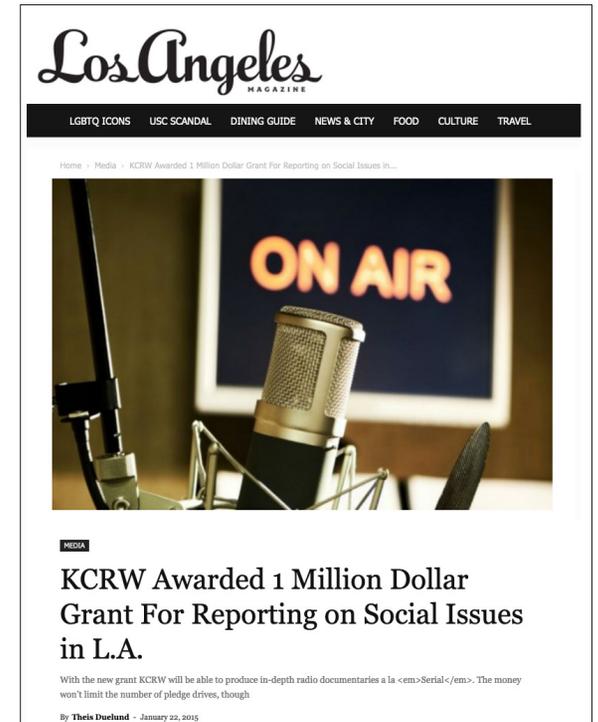
- New paths to information and ways to communicate important issues
- Thoughtful, award-winning stories about uncovered issues and neighborhoods
- Community-building events and social media forums providing a platform to voice concerns about gentrification and housing insecurity

### FOR THE FUNDER

- Amplified public awareness of issues important to the Conrad Hilton Foundation
- Personal stories creating a compassionate response among residents
- Grant outcomes easing the burden of the Southland’s vulnerable and needy populations through a range of personal and policy actions

## FIGURE 4 & 5

The station's quest for story ideas drew coverage from outside media.



## BEST PRACTICES

Based on our evaluation of the Hilton Foundation's KCRW grant activities, the Media Impact Project recommends the following best practices for collaboration between public media and philanthropy:

### FOR STATIONS:

#### **Try New Approaches**

Establish an “ecosystem of change” across your newsroom; when given the opportunity, professionals can produce, edit and market stories of social relevance in exciting new ways.

#### **Break Employees Out of Boxes**

Rethink a compartmentalized approach: a renewed sense of pride, ownership and camaraderie can be developed among employees who work together on stories with social impact.

#### **Create a Space for Deep Investigative Reporting**

The popular success of the issue-based reporting at KCRW shows that deep investigations can be worthwhile. Consider establishing a documentary unit.

#### **Support Creative Process**

Provide journalists the time to develop in-depth stories. The Hilton Foundation grant gave journalists the luxury to do just that, and the results were compelling, award-winning storytelling on Foundation issues.

#### **Heighten and Track Audience Engagement**

Document the impact of your story and continue engaging with audiences. This change brought seismic shifts to KCRW, which now looks at a story as one step in a continuum that can include events, multi-media and multiplatform engagements.

#### **Develop Greater Capacity to Tell More Complex Stories**

Start with smaller projects to flex investigative muscles and build to greater capacity issues. Team members point to lessons learned and skills honed during Grant Years 1 and 2 as essential to enabling the cross-country production partnership with WNYC in Year 3.

#### **Broaden Models for Future NPR Collaborations**

The success of the unprecedented partnership between two NPR affiliates suggests a model for sharing expertise that could be replicated by other NPR stations.

#### **Initiate Plans for Future Coverage**

The grant helped plant seeds for future stories on vulnerable populations within NPR. Contacts to producers and stories developed during the initiative remain a fruitful source for future development.

### FOR FOUNDATIONS:

Consider the power of public media as a method for supporting your initiatives.

Consider supporting collaboration with multi-station partnerships, where transfer of knowledge and mentorship helped take the smaller Los Angeles station to the next level.



This has been my best experience as a journalist.  
— David Weinberg, Producer, KCRW

The Media Impact Project is a program of the USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center working towards greater understanding of the impact of media on society.

*Media Insights* provide highlights of MIP research for wider dissemination.

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