Technology for Change Supplement
Tech and Data That Inform, Inspire, and Involve
By Adrienne Day
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The public radio and television station KQED has thrived amid a tumultuous period in the media industry by using technology and data to optimize the delivery of its grassroots journalism and improve relationships with its listeners.

BY ADRIENNE DAY

With more than 230,000 members, KQED is one of the most popular public radio and television stations in the United States. Even as changes in the media industry are decimating magazines, newspapers, and other outlets, the member-supported nonprofit based in California has not only survived for nearly seven decades, but flourished.

If you’re wondering how, Tim Olson, KQED’s senior vice president of strategic digital partnerships, has two words for you: reach and relationships.

Ensuring the station reaches as many listeners as possible involves some familiar and well-tested steps, such as being part of the public news ecosystem—NPR, PBS, and other outlets. Other approaches are newer, involving partnerships with technology companies such as Apple, Google, Salesforce, and Amazon.

“We want to get our stuff out there for people to consume it, whether they are using Alexa, YouTube TV, or Google News,” Olson says.

But when it comes to long-term financial sustainability, getting content in front of people isn’t enough; the internet has transformed the advertising business, gutting revenues for traditional publishing outlets. Coverage of local news and less sensational topics has largely dried up along with money from ads. Yet KQED’s newsroom has grown at least 25 percent over the past decade and includes a robust science team. To fill the financial gap, the station needed to increase listener donations, and to do that, they had to get closer to their audience members than ever before.

“We need them to have a relationship with us,” Olson says. “That’s a core theme of the publishing world right now. We need to continue to move into the modern age of: You actually know me and you are providing me digital relationship touch points that are relevant to me.”

Building those personalized relationships can be difficult, but technology and data are powerful and essential allies in the struggle, according to Salesforce’s 2020 Nonprofit Trends Report. Their strength lies in their ability to provide a granular assessment of audience members, helping to provide content experiences tailored to the interests of a single person.

“We used to have a household model, and now it’s obviously an individual model,” Olson says, comparing it to a group Netflix account that offers different login options for different people.

It’s no secret that businesses possessing and acting upon troves of data about their customers can experience extraordinary success—look no further than Google, Facebook, and Amazon, tech behemoths that are both revered and denounced for their close relationship and fulfillment of people’s needs and wants. With those prominent examples, it’s unsurprising that 84 percent of nonprofits surveyed in the Salesforce report say they use insights from fundraising data to hone their messaging. Yet only 43 percent of them actually measure their fundraising goals, and nearly half “feel challenged in capturing and measuring data on constituents.” In addition, only 44 percent of respondents say that they measure their impact, and 50 percent report challenges when trying to glean insights from the data they do collect. And 73 percent say they can’t tell if their programs are effective or reaching target populations.

Clearly, nonprofits are struggling to capture and use the information they need. The challenge is two-fold: In the case of KQED, granular measurement involves capturing...
not just data on the popularity of the station’s programming, but also data on the communities being served.

For assistance, the station turns to its alliance with other public media organizations like NPR or PBS, which provide detailed information about their shared audiences. These combined data sets give KQED a clearer picture of what its audience wants and needs. With that knowledge, the station can, for instance, reach new audiences, provide podcasts its existing listeners might like, share information on events in people’s neighborhoods, or identify nearby locations to donate blood.

The approach is similar to how the Girl Scouts use data from all 113 of its local organizations in its digital cookie program to make decisions about how to best sell their famous treats. For another example of the power of interwoven data sets, take the work done by two social scientists for Allegheny County, Pennsylvania. They built an algorithm that pulled together a fractured array of public government data about allegations of maltreatment of local children into a single score that indicated how safe the children were in their homes, explains Emily Putnam-Hornstein, one of the scientists and an associate professor at the University of Southern California. By freeing the data from its silos, it became clearer which family needed help.

More nefariously, the KQED approach also evokes Facebook, which tracks its users as they travel from page to profile to comments to videos, enabling the social network site to deliver personalized ads. Yet Olson stresses that KQED “wants to use data for good, not data for creepy.” The station’s focus is on informing people, not marketing to them. And like any responsible outlet trying to manage the large responsibilities that come with large collections of data, it takes people’s security and privacy seriously.

The benefits of custom-tailored content feeds are clear. But there are risks, too. More and more concerns are being raised about constrictive bubbles of news and views that insulate people from important information and strain social bonds. To counter that threat, KQED editors strive for a hybrid model—every listener might get a relatively uniform update about COVID-19, for example, but individuals might receive personalized information about where to pick up personal protective equipment based on where they live.

The goal, Olson says, is to smartly distribute grassroots journalism in all its forms to the station’s listeners, not create a “filter bubble of editorial.” As KQED’s motto puts it, technology and data should “inform, inspire, and involve.”