



Going Digital While Remaining on the Radio

Building on longstanding support from RWJF, NPR expands health and health care reporting

SUMMARY

From 2008 to 2011, [National Public Radio](#) (NPR) expanded its on-air and online reporting on health and health care, and its use of podcasts and social media to extend the reach of that reporting.

Anne Gudenkauf, senior supervising editor of NPR's science desk, called this effort "a ground-breaking initiative. This grant took us from being a radio journalism organization to being both a digital and radio journalism organization. It transformed what we are today."

Key Results

NPR's Health Unit reported these results to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF). The unit:

- Produced and aired more than 2,400 stories on health and health care from 2008 to 2011.
- Launched a [health page](#) on the NPR website in 2009 with original news updates, analysis, and commentary. In 2011, the unit began sending podcast feeds on this content to mobile devices, and posting on social media sites.
- Launched *Shots*, a health blog with three to five posts per day. It is now NPR's second-most-popular blog.

Funding

RWJF provided \$2.8 million from November 2008 to November 2011 to support this project.

CONTEXT

After launching NPR’s science desk in 1980, Anne Gudenkauf expected that “we would do science reporting, period.” But that quickly changed in the mid-1980s with the arrival of the AIDS epidemic.

“For a long time, it was a mad kind of hunt to find out what was making people so ill,” recalled Gudenkauf. “It was very much a scientific investigation story, but it very swiftly became a health care story. The country was really challenged to provide adequate care for increasing numbers of people, many of whom didn’t have health insurance and had to have a unique kind of care. We used the opportunity to expand into all kinds of health, medicine, and health policy reporting.”

22 Years of Expanding Health Coverage

In 1986, after deciding to bolster its coverage of health policy and health care, NPR turned to RWJF for support. From 1986 to 1999, NPR used six RWJF grants totaling \$4,624,958 to expand its health care reporting:¹

- NPR added four full-time health reporters to its staff.
- The amount of airtime NPR devoted to health care and health policy rose from two hours in 1986 to at least 20 hours in 1999.
- NPR science correspondents, including those covering health topics, won more than 60 awards during that time.

From 1999 to 2002, NPR used an RWJF grant of \$3,266,006 to create a Health Unit that focused on three key areas: behavioral and social health, health care and health policy, and the practice of medicine.² During that time:

- Health Unit staff produced or directed 576 health-related stories, accounting for 44 hours of programming.
- NPR expanded health-related news and features on its [website](#). As part of that coverage, NPR launched an interactive website in 2002 with [stories on housing](#) for people with special needs.

From 2003 to 2008, the Health Unit used two RWJF grants totaling \$4,730,748 to continue to expand on-air and online health coverage³:

- The unit hired a full-time reporter to focus on health care and health policy.

¹ Grant ID#s 10888, 12507, 12782, 16404, 24065, and 19315. For more information on these grants, read the [Program Results Report](#).

² Grant ID# 30972. For more information on this grant, read the [Program Results Report](#).

³ Grant ID# 45293 and Grant ID# 47450. More information on these grants is available [online](#).

- The unit produced 4,650 health-related stories heard by a weekly audience of nearly 27 million.
- Visitors to NPR’s website viewed information on health and science at least 500,000 times each month.

After 22 years of continuous RWJF support, NPR concluded that the Foundation “has enabled NPR to build and sustain our health and health care reporting—and ensure that we have become one of the most trusted sources for accurate information on these topics in the nation.”

Embracing the Digital Era

Still, with NPR’s audience, especially young people, increasingly tapping online resources, the Health Unit realized that “in this era of readily available information—some accurate, some not—there is an increasing need for trustworthy reporting.” NPR officials aimed to use a new three-year grant to both continue to expand health coverage and create “innovative ways to extend its reach.”

RWJF’s Continued Interest in This Area

Continuing funding of NPR supported the Foundation’s efforts to communicate its information to key audiences, as well as increase organizational visibility and understanding, specifically:

- NPR news programs reach one of the highest concentrations of key community leaders of all media; 24 percent of such leaders, compared with only 8 percent of the total U.S. population
- The NPR audience is intimately involved in public life.
 - Less than 8 percent did not participate in any community or political activities in the past year.
 - Some 70 percent of listeners voted in local, state, or federal elections.
- The NPR audience is also significantly more likely than the general population to work in government, with nearly 17 percent of all news listeners doing so.

RWJF staff noted that Foundation support has also served as an effective contributor to RWJF’s reputational capital. Many people outside the health sector recognize the Foundation’s name because the on-air announcements acknowledging RWJF’s support.

THE PROJECT

From 2008 to 2011, [National Public Radio](#) expanded its on-air and online reporting on health and health care, as well as its use of podcasts to mobile devices and social media to extend the reach of that reporting.

RESULTS

NPR's Health Unit reported the following results to RWJF. The unit:

- **Produced and aired more than 2,400 on-air stories on health and health care from 2008 to 2011.** More than 70 percent of these stories aired on NPR's flagship newsmagazines *Morning Edition*, with nearly 13 million weekly listeners, and *All Things Considered*, with nearly 12 million weekly listeners. These stories included:
 - "Living Large," a multi-part series on the social, medical, and economic effects of obesity in America. Available [online](#).
 - A study by the National Bureau of Economic Research finding that people on Medicaid obtained more health care, were less likely to face unpaid medical bills, and were more likely to report good health than comparable people without health insurance. The study contradicted the claims of Medicaid critics. Available [online](#).
 - A report on how drug shortages are forcing doctors and pharmaceutical companies to ration medication for a range of serious illnesses. Available [online](#).
- **Launched a [health page](#) on NPR's website in 2009 with original content such as news updates, analysis, and commentary, as well as transcripts of stories that had first run on radio.** In 2011, the unit began sending podcast feeds on this content to mobile devices and posting on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube.
- **Launched *Shots*, a health blog with three to five posts per day.** *Shots* is now NPR's second-most-popular blog, after *The Two-Way*, the news blog. Entries included:
 - A report on a study finding that emergency departments in California that treat large numbers of minorities and Medicaid patients face a greater risk of closing than other emergency departments. Available [online](#).
 - A report on high-tech medical interventions and health care costs. Available [online](#).
 - A look at Walmart's expansion into medical care. Available [online](#).

Monthly page views at *Shots* topped 1 million in January 2011, and reached 2 million by December 2011.

The Health Unit added *The Salt*, a sister blog that covers food and its health implications, in September 2011. *The Salt* reports 1 million page views a month.

AFTERWARD

In November 2011, RWJF renewed its support for NPR's health reporting with a three-year grant of \$2,800,000.⁴ Health Unit staff members intend to use this funding to expand production of video and animations on health topics, among other projects.

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⁴ Grant ID# 59464

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Communication or Promotion

Grantee Website

www.npr.org. Includes transcripts of radio-based stories and analysis, hourly news updates, and 24-hour podcast streams. A section of the site, www.npr.org/sections/health, focuses on health-related stories and commentary.

Social Media

Facebook page on NPR.org, www.facebook.com/NPR. More than 2 million Facebook followers, as of October 2011.

Twitter page on NPR.org, twitter.com/#!/npr. More than 3 million followers of NPR across multiple Twitter accounts, as of December 2011.

YouTube page on NPR.org, www.youtube.com/user/npr. More than 17,000 subscribers and more than 5 million video views, as of December 2011.