WBUR's Annual Local Content and Services Report

2019

As submitted to the Corporation of Public Broadcasting (CPB)

Report Date: February 15, 2020
1. Describe your overall goals and approach to address identified community issues, needs, and interests through your station’s vital local services, such as multiplatform long and short-form content, digital and in-person engagement, education services, community information, partnership support, and other activities, and audiences you reached or new audiences you engaged.

2019 was full of challenges and opportunities, for our community and for WBUR. Over the past twelve months, WBUR seized opportunities to enhance and enrich its local journalism, develop innovative new programming and increase its engagement with the community through CitySpace at The Lavine Broadcast Center.

We are doubling down on our mission of producing high-quality, fact-based journalism for the people of Boston and beyond. WBUR broke the news earlier this year on the US government’s decision to quietly end a federal program called “medical deferred action” thanks to immigration reporter Shannon Dooling’s intensive reporting. This story and Shannon’s ongoing reporting led to Congressional action and ultimately the government’s reversal of its position. For now, the humanitarian program has been restored. Shannon’s reporting exemplified the work of our newsroom: shedding light on societal issues, holding those in power accountable and giving voice to the voiceless.

WBUR played a key role in the exoneration of Darrell Jones, a Boston man who was found not guilty on June 11, 2019, after serving 32 years in prison for a crime he did not commit. Through exhaustive research, WBUR reporter Bruce Gellerman discovered that Darrell had not received a fair trial for a murder conviction in 1986. In 2017, Darrell was awarded a new trial after extensive litigation by a new legal team; key evidence tracked down by Bruce played a pivotal role in the litigation effort. WBUR hosted an emotional conversation between Darrell and Bruce at CitySpace in July.

The ARTery 25, a series highlighting millennials of color making an impact in the Boston arts scene, made its debut in March of 2019. This series was a first for WBUR, engaging artists throughout Greater Boston. The series successfully combined digital assets with broadcast radio and a culminating live event, fulfilling WBUR’s mission to serve the community on-air, online and on stage. The ARTery 25 advanced the work of the station’s arts and culture vertical reporting unit, The ARTery, by expanding coverage beyond traditional arts institutions. WBUR is now a critical voice on the arts and culture reporting scene. WBUR’s ARTery in 2019 also produced:

Tiny Desk: The Artery ran a Massachusetts Tiny Desk series and concert in partnership with NPR’s Tiny Desk. The Artery engaged with a panel of judges who chose one entry from hundreds of musicians across the state, wrote a profile on the artist and hosted a concert.

Young Critics: The Artery put on a three day boot camp workshop for emerging theater critics in New England. Alisa Solomon, the Director of Arts and Culture Journalism and Columbia Journalism School taught the course which was attended by nearly a dozen early career theater critics.

“Closing Pilgrim” focused on the closing of the Pilgrim Nuclear Power Station in Plymouth and its impact on the region and the local economy. The multi-part series produced by Earthwhile, WBUR’s environmental reporting team, successfully integrated both digital and broadcast reporting. The stories touched on the energy portfolio of Massachusetts and what
that means to those of us who live here. It also illuminated the long-standing tension between nuclear energy and green energy.

The Earthwhile team engaged personally with readers and listeners as part of its coverage of this story, researching and answering additional questions on the topic directly on wbur.org. Many questions related to issues of environmental justice.

Earthwhile influenced public conversation and policy around environmental topics, particularly through its extensive coverage of the proposed natural gas compressor in Weymouth, MA. Massachusetts US Senators Elizabeth Warren and Edward Markey cited a June 2019 story by reporter Miriam Simmons in an October letter to the president & CEO of Enbridge Inc. protesting the compressor. In November, Senator Markey also retweeted an exclusive Earthwhile story, “National Grid, Eversource Say They Can Meet Natural Gas Demand without Weymouth Compressor.” This article and another from WBUR, “Shifting Demand Fuels Weymouth Compressor Debate,” were cited by Mayor Robert Hedlund of Weymouth in his appeal to the state.

In October, Edify, WBUR’s reporting team dedicated to covering issues focused on education and learning, engaged in a joint investigation with ProPublica – WBUR’s first with the respected investigative news organization – on improper chemical dumping by MIT’s “OpenAg” initiative. WBUR’s investigative team also partnered on this effort. The story was picked up nationally and resulted in the initiative at MIT being put on hold “pending completion of all ongoing assessments.

“Small Colleges, Big Challenges” took an in-depth look at the pressures facing small private colleges in Massachusetts and how they are adapting to change. Edify looked into the future of these institutions and discussed how students and parents can think about making smart choices about higher education. Edify reporter Carrie Jung produced a year-long and ongoing series called “Lessons Learned.” It features non-narrated audio stories about deeply personal moments in education including the challenges of being a homeless student and the weight of affirmative action on a black student.

“The Price of Health,” a series exploring why drug prices are so high and what might be done about it, was a collaboration between WBUR Bostonomix reporters who focus on the intersection of business and technology, and WBUR CommonHealth reporters covering health, medicine and science. While newsroom collaboration occurs regularly, this series went deeper, taking advantage of Boston’s unique dual role as a bio-pharma and a tech/start-up capital. WBUR reporters analyzed how these industries overlap, looking into new and transformative drugs produced regularly and sold for astronomical prices. Our reports explored the question: “As a society, what is our ethical role in ensuring people have access to medication?”

CommonHealth produced a 12-part podcast called “Food, We Need To Talk” that launched with its first two episodes in December and has racked up close to a million downloads even though its hosts — a pioneering, 60-year-old lifestyle medicine doctor and a 24-year-old, legally-blind Harvard grad — are by no means celebrities. Calling on a wide variety of leading nutrition experts including Harvard’s Walt Willett, the entertaining podcast aims to serve the public by finding a healthy “middle way” between our “obesogenic” food environment and the risk of trying so hard to diet that eating becomes disordered. Also this year CommonHealth focused several special features on the hot new frontier of immunology,
including profiles of leading scientists and an immunotherapy patent trial worth billions and covered by no other media outlets.

WBUR's investigative team partnered with WBUR health policy reporter Martha Bebinger to report on how Purdue Pharma and its owners, the Sackler family, used questionable marketing techniques and reaped billions in profits from the sale of OxyContin, the highly-addictive pain medication.

Radio Boston, WBUR's local news and public affairs program, features provocative stories and authentic voices, reflecting what is unique about our region. In the spring, Radio Boston reporters took an in-depth look at housing affordability around Boston and the intersection of public policy, tenant protections and the free market. Tiziana Dearling joined WBUR as the new host of Radio Boston in June, bringing experience from her work in academia, the nonprofit sector and the corporate sector to her role as host. Radio Boston produced two documentaries this year: Chappaquiddick at 50 Years and the 50th Anniversary of the Moon Landing. Radio Boston sustained coverage of key regional issues including "Operation Clean Sweep" a controversial police action in Boston's South End, the MA Vaping Ban, and chronicling the rollout of recreational marijuana.

2. Describe key initiatives and the variety of partners with whom you collaborated, including other public media outlets, community nonprofits, government agencies, educational institutions, the business community, teachers and parents, etc. This will illustrate the many ways you're connected across the community and engaged with other important organizations in the area.

In 2019, WBUR enhanced our service to the public through thoughtful and strategic changes to our email newsletters.

We re-designed all of our editorial newsletters, including WBUR Today, the station's daily news email. The goal was to match the design and editorial standards of the news you consume on our website and hear on the air. WBUR Today shares the news Boston is talking about in a digestible way. The daily email is now a better reflection of our journalism and it sets the foundation for much of our work here at WBUR.

In addition, we launched a weekly political newsletter, Boston to the Beltway. In January and February, we asked the kind of newsletters you wanted from WBUR and you overwhelmingly voted for politics. Boston to the Beltway is a new offering from WBUR: Instead of an email that summarizes and links to distinct articles on wbur.org, this email is meant to be read in your inbox. Political correspondent Kimberly Atkins, our first-ever Washington D.C.-based journalist, joined WBUR in February to provide us with updates and inside info direct from the Congressional floor. The pieces have a unique voice and angle, looking at national political developments through our local New England lens. WBUR engages in a number of programming partnerships and collaborations, all of which amplify our community impact and strengthen the newsroom's reporting.

WBUR is an active member of the New England News Collaborative, an eight-station consortium of public media newsrooms. We also continue to nurture close partnerships with the State House News Service and the Dorchester Reporter, one of the largest community newspapers in Boston, to tell community-based stories of immediate interest to you and the
rest of our audience. WBUR has a bureau in the paper’s newsroom in Boston’s Dorchester neighborhood – the largest and most diverse neighborhood in the city.

WBUR continued its robust partnership with MassINC Polling Group to conduct regular polls – local and statewide – on important topics of the day. Our polls in 2018 gauged voters’ attitudes on a range of public policy issues and on all the important statewide candidates and ballot questions.

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Podcast production is a staple at WBUR: Endless Thread, a podcast from WBUR and Reddit, delves into Reddit’s vast communities to explore some of the most compelling stories the Internet has to offer, including revelations about our shared experience and powerful, personal stories.

Radio Boston and WBUR continued its partnership with Hubweek, a prominent Boston-area civic engagement initiative hosted by Harvard, MIT, Massachusetts General Hospital and The Boston Globe, as a main broadcast partner. Hubweek is a weeklong series of events throughout the Boston area that highlights the region’s entrepreneurialism, innovation and problem-solving people, ideas and research.

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WBUR is the media sponsor for many high profile festivals and conferences where our hosts and reporters serve as emcees and moderators: Boston Art & Music Soul Festival; The Boston Book Festival; Mass Poetry Festival; The Martha’s Vineyard Book Festival; the Independent Film Festival; The Woods Hole Film Festival; The Belmont Family Film Festival; Fluff Festival; Wicked Good Festival; Boston University Power of Narrative Conference; CRASHFest; Boston University Global Music Festival; Women in Comedy Festival; ARTweek; and HUBweek.
3. What impact did your key initiatives and partnerships have in your community? Describe any known measurable impact, such as increased awareness, learning or understanding about particular issues. Describe indicators of success, such as connecting people to needed resources or strengthening conversational ties across diverse neighborhoods. Did a partner see an increase in requests for related resources? Please include direct feedback from a partner(s) or from a person(s) served.

WBUR’s participation in myriad events across Greater Boston helps deepen our reach into the community; attract new listeners and members; and elevate the station’s standing as a convener of important, timely and enriching conversations.

Events help broaden the reach of our reporters’ beats: Carey Goldberg on medicine and science; Shannon Dooling on immigration; Barbara Moran and Bruce Gellerman on the environment; Maria Garcia on the arts; Amelia Mason on music; Martha Bebinger and Deborah Becker on the Opioid crisis; Shira Springer on sports; Zeninjor Enwemeka on business and innovation; Max Larkin on education.

Our presence (booths, banners, interactive games, and give-aways) at festivals reaches audiences in the thousands and allows us to meet different communities, introduce WBUR, and sign up new members.

In 2018, WBUR’s local newsroom, in partnership with World Boston, a local non-profit, hosted four delegations of journalists from different regions of Africa, Latin America and Asia, as part of a US State Department program to explain the editorial structure and operations of an American public news organization.

4. Please describe any efforts (e.g. programming, production, engagement activities) you have made to investigate and/or meet the needs of minority and other diverse audiences (including, but not limited to, new immigrants, people for whom English is a second language and illiterate adults) during Fiscal Year 2018, and any plans you have made to meet the needs of these audiences during Fiscal Year 2019. If you regularly broadcast in a language other than English, please note the language broadcast.

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WBUR opened its state-of-the-arts convening venue, CitySpace, on January 28, 2019. Having our own 280-seat theatre allows WBUR to program with more frequency and breadth. We have already partnered with many organizations to create programs that reach diverse, minority and new audiences. A small sampling of the events involving diverse audiences in 2019 include: “Diversity on the Runway” on June 13 celebrating designers of color in Boston, “Boston's Queer Creatives Investigate Safe Spaces” on June 6 was a panel discussion concerning safe spaces for creative professionals in the queer community, and “Diversity In Podcasting: Women In Their Own Words” on March 20 in which groups of women gathered to share stories telling a side of the city we don’t often see.

5. Please assess the impact that your CPB funding had on your ability to serve your community. What were you able to do with your grant that you wouldn't be able to do if you didn't receive it?

WBUR produces 19 daily local newscasts and, on average, 20 minutes of feature-length long-form stories per hour each morning within NPR’s Morning Edition and 14 minutes each afternoon for local features within All Things Considered. WBUR also produces Radio Boston – a one-hour daily public affairs program that typically focuses on several issues of local importance each day, including lengthy segments that often includes calls from listeners. The depth of the feature reporting is made possible with help from CPB. To do a strong job editorially, WBUR needs to understand what issues are important and vital to the region and then have resources to examine and report on those issues in the manner expected by our discerning listeners. Here are more details about WBUR’s efforts in 2019 that were made possible by CPB’s help:

- WBUR has 25 local reporters producing stories on issues and news events in eastern Massachusetts. The reporters cover state and city government, healthcare, the economy, education, arts & culture, the environment and many other issues and news stories of great importance to WBUR’s listeners and the users of wbur.org. There are another 33 staffers helping to make that content possible, including editors, producers and news writers. WBUR’s online body of work continued to flourish in 2019 with greater use of visual graphs, charts, videos and photographs.
- WBUR produces a daily public affairs program, Radio Boston (3-4pm, repeated 10-11pm each weekday). Each broadcast, supported by a staff of dedicated producers, focuses on issues of importance around greater Boston and tackles national issues through a distinctly local lens for residents.
- WBUR in 2019 continued to send out a portfolio of newsletters that includes news stories from WBUR and NPR. A newsletter is sent out to listeners every morning to let listeners know about the most important stories produced by WBUR and NPR— with links to each story.
- WBUR in 2019 continued our experimentation with aggressive social media strategies to get its content out to as many listeners and readers as possible. Included in the strategy were experiments with Facebook ‘live’ video offerings. The experiment has been wildly successful.
‘Live’ video offerings have also become popular covering events on Instagram and Twitter. WBUR is one of public radio’s leaders in this new and growing field.