THE STORY of KAISER HEALTH NEWS

The origin and evolution of a nonprofit newsroom that’s an editorially independent part of a foundation

The Future of Journalism: Part 2
Industrialist Henry J. Kaiser lived by the credo “Find a need and fill it.” The modern-day Kaiser Family Foundation, which is not affiliated with any other organization bearing our benefactor’s name, continues his legacy by filling the need for credible, independent information on the biggest health issues facing our nation and its people. When our President and CEO Drew Altman took over and rebooted the organization in the early 1990s, he began a process of transforming a traditional grantmaking foundation into a public charity that today operates its own policy analysis, journalism, and communications programs, frequently in partnership with other nonprofits and media organizations.

The story of Kaiser Health News is rooted in KFF’s history as a trusted and independent source of information with a focus on how health policy affects people. In a sphere dominated by commercial and political interests, our history of providing unbiased and nonpartisan analysis, facts, polling, and explanation established KFF as a reliable and go-to source for many policymakers, health industry leaders, and journalists.

New Journalism Models
But by the late 2000s, this latter audience began to shrink dramatically as the news business became far less profitable due to sharp declines in newspaper advertising revenue that continue to this day. KHN was born out of a recognition that because of these ongoing revenue declines and their attendant staff cuts, newsrooms everywhere were having difficulty supporting and producing the kind of in-depth and high-quality health policy journalism that we believe our nation and health care system need.

As our concern grew, we struck upon an approach to help stem this tide that fits our model as a foundation that operates its own policy analysis, polling, and communications programs. It was also an approach that we believed could make a significant and sustainable contribution to supporting the production of high-quality health journalism.

We created a new type of nonprofit health news service that would function as an editorially independent program within our existing health policy information organization. Like all our programs, it would be supported primarily by the proceeds we earn from managing our own endowment, augmented at times by funds from other like-minded foundations or partners.

We launched KHN in the summer of 2009 as an editorially independent program of the foundation, based in our Washington, D.C. offices.

Editorial Independence
We began by hiring a core group of highly respected health policy journalists, setting up a network of freelance reporters, and assembling a distinguished National Advisory Committee, chaired by former Washington Post Executive Editor Len Downie, to inform our strategy and to bring added credibility to our work.

From the start, KHN has been and will always be editorially independent from the rest of the Kaiser Family Foundation, meaning that while all its journalists work for the Foundation, which is its publisher, the newsroom has final say over the content of the journalism. And while the newsroom may at times cover KFF’s policy analysis and polling releases or quote its experts, they are under no obligation to do so and, in fact, do so less frequently than other news organizations. This can at times be frustrating to some of our staff, but is critical to maintaining KHN’s credibility, especially in the eyes of our publication partners.

Although we created a new and separate news website (khn.org) when we launched, our strategy from the outset has been to disseminate our original reporting through partnerships with major media organizations, such as The Washington Post, The New York Times, USA Today, CNN, PBS NewsHour, and NPR. We also produce daily newsletters summarizing the health policy news of the day and highlighting our original reporting. These reach an engaged and important core audience of tens of thousands of readers who frequently have a strong professional or personal interest and engagement in health policy issues.

While khn.org is a destination site that, together with its targeted newsletters, attracts many leaders in the health policy and health industry community, our media partners provide the mass audience we seek to inform with our reporting; and we in turn provide these partners with content they would not otherwise be able to produce, always free of charge under a Creative Commons license. When stories are published by a media partner, they also appear on KHN.org, though we occasionally offer selected partners a short-lived exclusive for certain stories and packages.
A New Appetite for Health Stories

As it turned out, the summer of 2009 was a fortuitous time to launch a health news service, as it coincided with the beginning of the Congressional hearings and debates that would lead to the enactment of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) in March 2010, followed by the legal and electoral battles that would seek to repeal and did change the law prior to its implementation in 2014. Newsrooms across the country had an increased appetite for health policy stories during this period. At the same time, their steadily shrinking revenues led to ongoing staff cuts, leaving newsrooms with fewer journalists with the experience, ability, and time to cover the complex new law on their own. The news business also changed significantly during this period, with many commercial media companies growing willing and often eager to partner with other news organizations, including KHN, and with ever fewer averse to running stories that had already been published by other outlets.

These factors combined to help us grow our distribution base considerably in our early years, beginning with a single story in The Washington Post to several stories each day in media outlets nationwide. And during this period we also established novel partnerships with more than two dozen public radio stations and NPR to bring local reporting both to KHN and to NPR’s flagship news programs by creating a training program and a virtual newsroom, and by assigning a dedicated editor at KHN and a producer at NPR to organize this coverage from around the nation.

This ongoing partnership allows our D.C.-based newsroom to have eyes and ears in communities across the country, supports local health journalism at participating public radio stations, and supports NPR’s ability to provide high-quality health journalism on Morning Edition and All Things Considered, as well as on NPR.org and other news programs. We also worked in close partnership with 10 leading regional news organizations to create a consortium around the country that coordinated coverage and shared content during the years immediately prior to and immediately after ACA implementation.

In 2013 we also began partnering with several leading California health foundations to expand our reporting capacity on the West Coast, and today we have a full-fledged California bureau. In January of this year we became the publisher of the California Health Care Foundation’s California Healthline.

A New Team

Based on the success and efficiency of the health news creation and distribution platform we have built, several other foundations joined with us this year to support a new investigative and enterprise reporting team that will focus on issues such as drug pricing, end of life, serious
In the Newsroom. KHN’s Emily Kopp works on a story in October 2016. Photo: KHN / Lynne Shallcross
illness care, and how we care for the nation’s growing population of seniors. This grew out of work on aging and long-term care that our newsroom has undertaken since its inception with the support of The SCAN Foundation, which was KHN’s first funding partner. This fall we welcomed former *New York Times* reporter Elisabeth Rosenthal as KHN’s new editor in chief, and she discussed this next phase in KHN’s evolution in a recent interview in the *Columbia Journalism Review*. Based on her great success building an online community around her “Paying Till It Hurts” series in *The New York Times*, KHN will move under her leadership to more use of social media as both a reporting and a communications tool to surface stories, engage with readers, and find new audiences for our work.

**Rapidly Evolving Tools**

We continue to experiment with a wide variety of storytelling approaches, such as video, photo essays, animations, interactives, podcasts, and data-driven reporting. Our “Sounds Like a Good Idea” animation series is a great example of one of our new approaches to storytelling. I am hopeful that the next chapter in the story of KHN will see us enter into more long-term partnerships with other health foundations to expand our work in the South and in selected communities around the nation where more and better journalism can shine a light on problems, identify solutions, and improve health. With a staff of more than 40 talented journalists to help write the next chapter in the story of KHN, I am certain that our newsroom will continue to live up to our benefactor’s credo and continue to find health information needs and fill them.

We as a nation are a long way from identifying a new revenue model to support the type of news and information our democracy requires in the 21st century. But with a rapidly evolving and expanding set of tools to disseminate information, connect audiences, and gather and analyze information more efficiently, I am encouraged that news organizations themselves are evolving to build private, public, and nonprofit partnerships; to experiment with micro-payments, co-ops, events, sponsorships, and new models of reader-supported journalism. And I am hopeful that some greater share of the vast philanthropic resources in our nation can be directed toward supporting media and journalism on health, together with the many other complex issues newsrooms are struggling to cover effectively today. That is a need we should all be doing our best to fill.

**David Rousseau** is Vice President and Executive Director of Health Policy Media and Technology. He oversees the Foundation’s health policy media programs, including Kaiser Health News and all journalism programs, and directs the Foundation’s technology and online activities.