

KALW.org
91.7 FM Bay Area

From a Whisper to a Roar

2024-2027 Strategic Plan
Executive Summary



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KALW Public Media is at an inflection point.

As a cornerstone of independent journalism and cultural expression in the Bay Area, our Strategic Plan for 2024-2027 outlines a bold vision of transformation, designed to elevate KALW's role in informing, inspiring, and uniting audiences of all ages. What the Bay Area – and the country – now needs from **public media is different from the past, and** we know that KALW must *be* a part of that change. We are determined to wake up every day committed to keeping KALW a trusted place where people turn to in moments of crisis and celebration.

In an era where the power of narrative shapes our understanding of the world, KALW Public Media stands as a vital institution committed to harnessing this power for the public good. Our plan is not merely a document outlining our goals and strategies; it is a testament to our unwavering commitment to employing public media to inspire, inform, learn from, engage, and mobilize our diverse Bay Area community and beyond.

KALW is seeking to scale our impact by investing in our infrastructure and programmatic future.

This Executive Summary outlines our comprehensive vision for a future where public media is not just relevant but essential, and details our commitment to shaping a vibrant and inclusive future here in the Bay Area while serving as a demonstration project and model for the public media sector overall.

The Future of KALW

- » growing our training programs
- » advancing a digital transformation
- » creating more original programming
- » experimenting with new distribution channels
- » expanding educational programs
- » fostering deeper community engagement
- » investing in our ability to tell our story and developing innovative narrative strategies
- » building a sustainable staffing model
- » financing a durable future, and
- » finding a new permanent home

KALW: A Legacy of Trust and Innovation

Since 1941, KALW has been a trusted voice in the Bay Area, renowned for our dedication to local communities, innovative programming, and training new journalists and media makers. Our steadfast commitment to ignite conversations, uplift new voices, challenge prevailing narratives, and empower communities to envision a better world has created a strong foundation from which to build a forward-thinking future that parallels the aspirations of the public. We work to inform and inspire people to act on behalf of the place they call home.

As we navigate the complexities of today’s media landscape, KALW remains steadfast in delivering free, independent, and high-quality journalism, cultural programming, and music that is not beholden to commercial and political pressures, and not reliant upon the kinds of sensationalism that dominates the airwaves.


The history of KALW is rich with stories of innovation and resilience. We have consistently pushed the boundaries of what public media can and should be, from pioneering educational programming to launching groundbreaking initiatives like our Audio Academy and *Uncuffed* program in Northern California prisons. These programs provide valuable training to participants, and empower them to tell their own stories,

thereby enriching the public discourse with a diversity of voices and experiences. As we look to the future, we are more committed than ever to leverage the power of narrative in building a more just and inclusive society.

Moving forward, strategic thinking about narrative and cultural power will undergird our identity as an organization; cultural and community power-building will flow from our increased investments in stories, ethical journalism, music, and the arts. Grounding our work in our community enables us to fulfill our mission—one story and experience at a time.

Our belief in the power of the hyper-local drives us

As we explore ways in which free, independent public media can allow the people of the Bay to design the future they wish to see, we will also prepare the system for new creators, new funding strategies, and new distribution models focused on long-lasting impact.



When launching this planning process, our aim was to design an evolving organization that reflects the scale of impact we aspire to achieve. The rapidly evolving Bay Area needs KALW to be at its best, and this plan represents a pivotal evolution toward a more robust, dynamic, and relevant future.

To achieve this, we began by asking fundamental questions about our purpose, values, and the role of public media in 21st Century America. Our strategic plan is framed as a series of questions to allow us to stay true to our theory of change while evolving alongside the ever-changing world. This plan is about what we hope to learn from our actions, not just what we will do.

What will remain unchanged is the independence of KALW, our authenticity and free access, our commitment to training new voices, and building a home for original ideas, music, art, and information. Our belief in the power of the hyper-local drives us and we will continue to foster a generative process where KALW catalyzes and sparks future conversations rather than containing them.

Despite public media's challenges and need for rapid changes, we see this as an opportunity to redefine its value. We know listening habits have changed. We may never recover the bulk of people's time that used to be spent listening to the radio. Many younger people have never—and might never—tune in to hear us on the dial, but they appreciate much of what radio offers and it's our job to find them where they are.

We can acknowledge the uncertainty of the market and not respond by becoming a mere corporate-lite version of commercial media. Across the sector, and particularly at KALW, there are years of effective and impactful practices that we must lean into.

In times when social cohesion is frayed, we believe we have a profound moral obligation to act, fostering progress toward a more just and equitable society. Given our shared dissatisfaction with the state of politics, economics, and media, failing to act with the tools at our fingertips would be a moral failure. We promise to not allow KALW to morally fail.

The Power of Narrative and Public Media in a Healthy Democracy

Our strategies offer a framework to understand the broader cultural context in which public media operates. Recognizing cultural forces—shifting demographics, evolving media consumption habits, and political movements designed to undermine democratic institutions and practices—enables us to better respond to the needs and interests of current and potential public media audiences. Our understanding of journalism embraces the idea that a key part of our work is to facilitate the spaces in which others can tell their own stories: truthfully and accurately and with interrogation, but in their own words to best represent their worlds.

Our work is to facilitate the spaces in which others can tell their own stories

By integrating these concepts into our strategic planning and organizational development, we hope to ensure that KALW remains a trusted source of news, music, information, community building, and cultural expression for years to come.

Public media, with its mandate to serve the public interest, has a unique role in nurturing and amplifying these narratives. Unlike commercial media, which often prioritizes profit over substance, public media provides content that is educational, informative, and culturally enriching. It is a space where complex issues can be explored in depth, where diverse voices can be heard, and where the public can engage in thoughtful discussion.

In a time when misinformation and polarized rhetoric are pervasive, public media stands as a beacon of reliability and integrity, offering narratives that are rooted in truth and committed to fostering understanding. When misinformation and media sensationalism threaten the fabric of our democracy, public media must provide a platform for authentic and transformative narratives, and offer in-depth reporting and diverse perspectives that challenge audiences to think critically and act accordingly.

By prioritizing stories that expand understanding and amplify marginalized and often unheard voices to provide a fuller—and truer—picture, we aim to shift public understanding and inspire action on critical social issues.

Economic and political pressures often constrain national public media organizations' ability to take risks, diversify narratives, and challenge the status quo. This creates an opportunity for local organizations to step up as the drivers of a sustainable, equitable, and impactful future for the field. As the nation's most trusted and visible platforms for media created in the public interest, local public media organizations are undervalued allies to those working on narrative strategy, community development, creative placemaking and place-keeping, cultural vibrancy, equitable systems and policies, civic engagement, and more.

This is particularly important in a diverse region like the Bay Area, where a multiplicity of voices and perspectives is essential to understanding the complex social, economic, and cultural issues that affect our communities. By giving voice to these diverse perspectives, KALW helps to bridge divides and foster a sense of shared purpose and community.

Even as KALW evolves from a public radio station to a public media organization, we remain committed to:

» Supporting Local Journalism and New Local Journalists

Since 1941, KALW's historical strength lies in our deep focus on nurturing a new population of audio-first journalists and media makers, creating multiple pathways for people (artists, aspiring journalists, incarcerated people, youth, etc.) to enter the field in unexpected and unconventional ways. Many of them find their way to KALW because they are motivated to tell stories of their communities and bring perspectives that are inadequately represented on the airwaves and in other public domains.

Providing Reliable and Unbiased Information

» We are committed to high standards of journalism and providing reliable, fact-based reporting to help our listeners stay informed about important issues, current events, and government actions, along with a deeper connection to the wide and diverse communities that make up the Bay Area.

» Promoting Civic Engagement

By covering local issues, promoting community events, and providing platforms for public discourse, we hope to stimulate interest in local governance and encourage listeners to participate in democratic processes in myriad ways.

» Focusing on Learning

We seek to enhance the public's understanding of political systems, history, and current affairs, and lean into the nuance of issues by expanding the knowledge base. Shows that delve into policy analysis, explain complex issues, and discuss the implications of legislative actions help listeners make more informed decisions, and KALW hopes to create more original production in this vein.

» Providing a Platform for Diverse Voices

KALW has long showcased a wide range of voices and perspectives from throughout the Bay Area. Our desire is to expand our program while remaining committed to inclusivity. This will foster a more comprehensive public dialogue and ensure that different viewpoints are heard, contributing to a more equitable and representative democracy.

» Fostering Critical Thinking

By presenting in-depth analysis, interviews with experts, and investigative journalism, we encourage listeners to think critically about the information they receive and the sources they trust. This critical thinking is vital for a healthy democracy, as it enables citizens to scrutinize policies, politicians, practices, and media messages.

Holding Power to Account

- » KALW has never focused on breaking news; we focus on the impact that news has. By exposing the impacts of policy on everyday lives, we can influence and inform the way listeners relate to governmental institutions to ensure that their issues are present when decisions are made.

» Encouraging Civil Discourse

KALW is a home for respectful and informed dialogue on contentious issues. We facilitate debates and discussions through our many programs and live events in a civil manner to help bridge divides and promote a more cooperative political environment.

» Celebrating the Creativity of the Bay Area

Whether through our music programming or variety of arts coverage, we will remain a place in which the artists and culture keepers that live in and visit the Bay Area are highlighted and amplified.

By leveraging these strengths, KALW can continue to play a vital role in nurturing an informed, engaged, and critical citizenry—the bedrock of a healthy democracy.

An Emergent Theory of Change

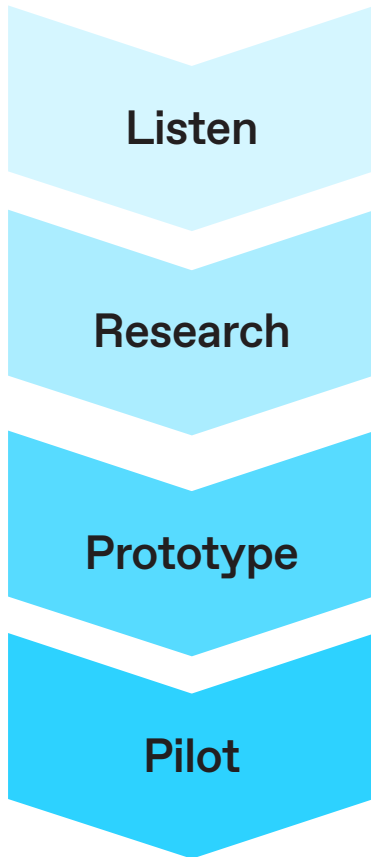
Across the country, more than 42 million people regularly tune in to their local public radio stations each week. It is a powerful influencer, shaping people’s understanding of place, culture, issues, people, economics, and politics. Critically, even the most unbiased and rigorous reporting reflects subjective decisions about what is important for people to know and understand. Every story reinforces, expands, complicates, or disrupts people’s worldviews, which in turn impacts beliefs, behaviors, and a larger sense of social cohesion—or lack thereof. Therefore, how we choose to make media must reflect our values, and we must always be aware of our value to inform a broader discourse.

KALW’s Theory of Change is founded on the belief that by broadening and deepening the range of narratives and cultures represented in our programming, we create a more inclusive public discourse.

In our next chapter, KALW will build on this track record, shoring up our infrastructure while experimenting with innovative ways for public media to catalyze positive and durable change.

The terrain ahead is rich with unknowns and plentiful opportunities for learning and discovery. Public media offers no comprehensive playbook for the adaptations KALW believes are necessary to maximize our impact. In these kinds of situations, where examples are few and data is scarce, organizations are wise to embrace emergent strategies. That is what KALW is doing. Our plan’s pillars are framed as a series of questions:

- » How can we grow our impact as a trusted hub for voices and narratives not yet represented in public media?
- » How can we foster belonging and connection?
- » How can we influence the field with what we’re learning?
- » How can we build a durable organizational and financial model that supports and propels our people and work?



Many of the strategies and tactics within each pillar speak of listening, researching, prototyping, and piloting, and run parallel to and enhance existing practices already making an impact through KALW. All are to be done with a sense of urgency.

Internally, we aspire to cultivate and support a distributed leadership model, including a large cross-section of staff, community advisory groups, and board—all working in an organized and supported fashion to envision, learn, reflect, and iterate. The seeds for this approach have been planted through our ongoing staff meetings and the strategic planning process.

In addition, we intend to revisit the strategies and tactics outlined in this plan every six months, updating them based on new learnings and discoveries.

Strategic Focus Areas

1 Enhancing Digital Strategy

- **Comprehensive Website Rebuild:** Our digital strategy includes a complete overhaul of our website, creating an interactive and user-friendly platform. This new site will feature a Digital Learning Environment (DLE) offering educational resources and audience-generated content, becoming a central hub for KALW’s digital presence. The rebuilt website will integrate advanced features such as interactive storytelling tools, a comprehensive archive of past programs, and real-time engagement capabilities to foster a more dynamic connection with our audience.
- **Podcast and Content Distribution:** We aim to expand our podcast offerings, leveraging this popular format to deliver curated high-quality, in-depth stories and storytellers. Our strategy includes developing new select series, exploring syndication opportunities, and utilizing digital channels to reach younger audiences. Podcasts like “The Spiritual Edge” and “How Wild” have already demonstrated the impact of deep, narrative-driven journalism that is relevant and engaging to a diverse range of listeners. We plan to build on this success by creating new series that explore critical social issues, cultural dynamics, and untold local stories.
- **Resource Hub for Educators and Students:** As part of our educational commitment, we will develop a digital resource hub providing tools, lesson plans, and multimedia content for educators and students. We also plan to feature more student voices, fostering a new generation of media-literate individuals. This hub will include interactive modules on journalism, media ethics, and storytelling, empowering the next generation to critically engage with media and develop their own narratives, while providing educators with the tools to bring today’s world into the classroom in meaningful ways.
- **Our Digital Learning Environment (DLE)** will serve as a key component of our pivot beyond radio, offering educational resources, interactive workshops, and virtual town halls. By leveraging digital tools, we aim to create a more dynamic and engaging learning experience that empowers our audiences and provides opportunities for community members to learn new skills, share their stories, and participate in meaningful dialogues about the issues that matter most to them.

2 Growing our Original Production Capacity: KALW Public Media can continue to grow as a vital and innovative public media outlet, staying relevant and engaging in the rapidly changing media landscape by focusing on:

- **National and Global Connections:** Blend local content with stories that connect to broader national and global issues, making local stories relevant to a wider audience.
- **Thematic Series:** Develop series focused on critical themes like climate change, social justice, technology, and cultural heritage.
- **Innovative Formats**
 - » Podcast Expansion: Invest in creating a variety of podcast series, including investigative journalism, storytelling, interviews, and niche interests.
 - » Live and Virtual Events: Organize live shows, community forums, and virtual events to engage with the audience directly and foster community involvement.
- **Technology, Accessibility, and Community Engagement**
 - » Streaming and On-Demand Content: Ensure all productions are available on-demand across multiple platforms, including streaming services, apps, and the KALW website.
 - » Interactive Apps: Develop mobile apps with features like live streaming, exclusive content, audience interaction, and easy navigation of archives.
 - » Accessibility Enhancements: Include transcripts, closed captioning, and multilingual options to make content accessible to all audiences.

- » Feedback Loops: Create mechanisms for audience feedback and interaction, such as comment sections, social media discussions, and listener surveys.
- » Youth and Educational Programs: Develop programs aimed at younger audiences and partnerships with educational institutions to foster media literacy and engagement.
- » Community Collaborations: Partner with local organizations, artists, and community leaders to co-create content and ensure it reflects the community's needs.
- » Multimedia Integration: Enhance stories with visual content, interactive web features, and social media engagement to create a multi-platform storytelling experience.

3 Scaling Training Programs

- Expansion of Audio Academy, Uncuffed, and Tbh Programs: Our flagship training programs, Audio Academy and Uncuffed, have been instrumental in amplifying voices and stories not yet heard in public media. We plan to expand these initiatives by increasing both cohorts and fellowships, enhancing stipends, increasing community-based partnerships, and offering comprehensive professional development. By integrating formerly incarcerated individuals and youth into the media industry, providing them with the skills and platforms to tell their stories, we will continue to foster a more diverse media landscape. The Audio Academy has been a breeding ground for innovative audio storytelling, training over 200 journalists who have gone on to contribute significantly to the public media landscape. Uncuffed, our program that brings journalism training to incarcerated individuals, has been transformative, allowing those within the prison system to share their stories, fostering empathy and understanding in the broader community. Tbh (to be honest) has engaged dozens of young people giving us a strong foundation to scale our youth work in the near future.

- **New Fellowship Programs:** We will introduce fellowships focused on new voices in public media, emerging journalists and storytellers who bring unique perspectives to public media. These fellowships will support in-depth reporting on local issues, cultural narratives, and community-driven stories, ensuring a richer representation of voices. By nurturing these absent and emerging talents, we aim to challenge conventional narratives and bring fresh voices to the forefront of public discourse.

4 Building New Audiences and Exploring New Modes of Distribution

- **Live Events and Community Hub:** KALW will establish a new facility that serves as a production hub, event space, and community center. This venue will host live events, including performances, discussions, and cultural gatherings. It will be a place where community members can come together to engage with KALW's content and with each other, fostering a deeper sense of connection and belonging. By creating a physical space for community engagement, we aim to build stronger relationships with our audience and provide a platform for meaningful dialogue and cultural exchange while celebrating the rich diversity of the Bay Area.
- **Expanding Audience Reach:** In addition to working to maintain our current audiences, we will focus on engaging younger and more diverse audiences through targeted digital marketing, partnerships with local community leaders, and collaborations with community organizations. By creating content that resonates with diverse communities and leveraging social media platforms, we aim to broaden our reach and foster a deeper connection with our audience.
- **Innovative Content Delivery:** We are exploring new modes of content delivery to meet the evolving preferences of our audiences, including short-form content and interactive storytelling, to enhance our digital engagement strategies. We will also expand our use of social media and streaming services to distribute our content more widely and engage with audiences in real-time. By embracing new technologies and formats, we can create more engaging and dynamic content that resonates with a diverse range of listeners.

This approach includes partnerships with educational institutions, community centers, and public spaces where our content can be featured. By leveraging these partnerships, we can expand the reach of our content and engage with new audiences in innovative ways.

- Developing a Multimedia Production Hub: Our new facility will include a production center, enabling high-quality video content, livestream events, and interactive digital experiences. This hub will serve as an incubator for innovative media projects, bringing together storytellers, technologists, and community members to collaborate on groundbreaking content. This facility will also serve as a space for community members to create and share their own stories, further enriching our content and fostering community engagement.

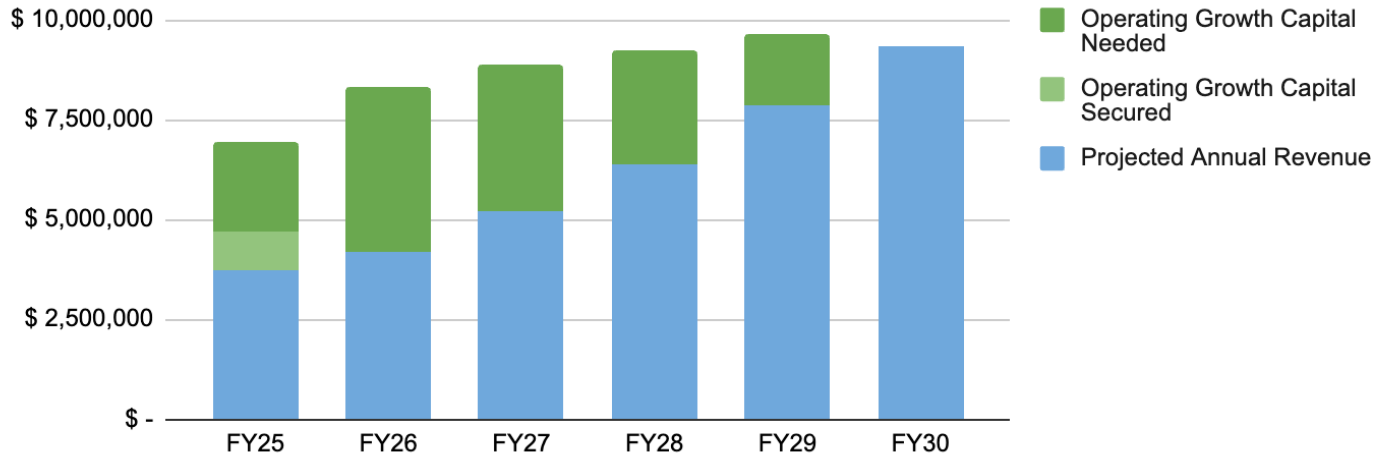
Focus Areas

1. Enhancing Digital Strategy
2. Growing our Original Production Capacity
3. Scaling Training Programs
4. Building New Audiences and Exploring New Modes of Distribution

Financial Plan and Sustainability

KALW has launched a \$25 million goal in growth capital to both shore up our infrastructure and invest in our future (almost \$5 million of which has already been raised). This critical capital is designed to cover much of our new expenses over the next three years as we enter a time of experimentation to navigate changing—and challenging—media, economic, and political ecosystems. The hope is that in the next few years, we will have built up our internal capacity and partnership base to cover our ongoing operations, and support future innovation.

KALW Operating Growth Capital Needs FY25-30



Conclusion

KALW Public Media stands at a transformative juncture in our history. Our Strategic Plan for 2024-2027 outlines a bold and comprehensive vision for the future, one that embraces innovation, inclusivity, and impact. We are confident that KALW can continue to be a trusted source of news, culture, and music, fostering dialogue and understanding in our diverse and dynamic region that meets the needs and desires of the public that we serve.

This transformation is not merely an operational shift but a bold declaration of our commitment to be at the forefront of media innovation.

Our narrative strategy is central to this transformation, focusing on the power of storytelling to foster social change. By prioritizing stories that challenge dominant narratives and amplify voices that have been marginalized in the media, we aim to shift public perceptions and inspire action on critical social issues. This strategy not only serves our mission to inform and engage but also reinforces our commitment to social justice and equity.

By integrating a culture of learning and evaluation into our daily operations, we will be able to continually refine our strategies and improve our effectiveness.

Our financial plan outlines a sustainable path forward, leveraging diverse revenue streams to support our ambitious goals. We are confident that KALW can continue to be a beacon of independent journalism and cultural expression in the Bay Area and beyond. We invite you to join us in this journey as we work to build a stronger, more informed, and engaged community through the power of public media.



James Kass
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