



**THE  
TEXAS  
TRIBUNE**



# A strategic vision for The Texas Tribune's future

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If Texas is the center of the universe, as lore and myth would have us believe, The Texas Tribune is the center of Texas. We operate in the literal center of the state — smack dab in the middle of the map — and sit in the existential center of the action.

Powerful Texans, from the most consequential elected and appointed officials to the informal influencers who pull the strings and grease the skids, read or otherwise interact with the Tribune multiple times a day. Issue activists, community organizers and other impassioned types look to the Trib for insight and perspective that inspires their work. An ever-larger number of people get context and clarity from us on matters that directly affect them and their families, friends and neighbors each day.

Here and elsewhere, for anyone who cares about politics and public policy, we are the first and most important read — a trusted source of news and information worthy of our beloved home.

We were exuberantly ambitious in 2009 when, in response to the decline in coverage of matters of statewide concern, we launched the Tribune to address unmet demand with ample, reliable supply. Our bold vision for enabling serious journalism turned on our embrace of the nonprofit business model. Like our public media peers, we would raise money from our stakeholders: the individuals, foundations and corporations that shared our commitment to civic health and purpose.

Just as critical was our unwavering promise to run a nonpartisan newsroom without fear or favor. We vowed to be fair, thorough and accurate in everything we produced, posted and published. No editorializing on issues. No endorsements of candidates or campaigns. Compulsive disclosure of the sources of our funding, requiring ourselves to clear the same high bar we put before those we covered. No real or perceived thumbs on the scale. An outpost of civility, credibility and transparency in the United States of Confirmation Bias.

**The call for a startup of this sort was undeniable. In Texas, even our news is bigger.**

- We have the most residents without health insurance of any state in the country.
- We have the most contiguous miles with the Mexican border.
- We produce the most crude oil.
- We have the second-highest public and higher education enrollment.
- We have more people in prison.
- We have the 11th-largest economy in the world — or would, if Texas were once again a nation.
- We're home to the most big cities of any state — six of the top 20 — and some of the fastest-growing big cities, small cities, suburbs and counties in the United States.
- And our population is not only growing quickly — an estimated 55 million by 2050, nearly double what it is today — it's also changing dynamically. In the next generation, Texas will be majority Hispanic, with all the accompanying opportunities and challenges.

There is no better time to be doing this work and no better place to do it. The stakes are mountain-high. The issues in play are getting more complex. The need for explanatory journalism, for investigative journalism and for the watchdog reporting that holds public officials and institutions accountable has never been greater.



Investigative reporter Neena Satija interviews a Guatemalan migrant whose wife and four children were separated at the Texas-Mexico border. Photo by Reynaldo Leal for The Texas Tribune.



Multimedia reporter Alana Rocha interviews House Speaker Joe Straus on his decision not to seek re-election. Photo by Bob Daemmerich Photography for The Texas Tribune.

With Texas' abysmal voter turnout only one of many measures of the state's flagging engagement, we enthusiastically reaffirm each day our mission to motivate civic participation through civic education. We've always said — and continue to believe — that a smarter Texas is a better Texas.

For going on nine years, all of us at the Tribune have been optimistic but realistic. We've made extraordinary strides, but we've struggled at times to execute precisely or perfectly on our best intentions. Pure hearts, sweat and toil are necessary but insufficient ingredients. There is more work to be done.

In a state that proudly proclaims its exceptionalism at every turn, The Texas Tribune is well on its way to becoming an exceptional news organization. It is not there yet. We are succeeding but have not yet succeeded. The path ahead is well lit but uncertain, which is why we undertook the many months of deliberation and debate that resulted in the plan that follows: a strategic roadmap to a stable, sustainable future.

**That roadmap begins with our mission.** Our editorial north star remains unchanged: to produce original journalism of consequence on politics and public policy in Texas, in service to the state's diverse population. But to best serve Texas, The Texas Tribune must grow with Texas.

To that end, by 2025 we aim to:

### **Double and Diversify**

Double our audience by deliberately pursuing readers in the fastest-growing population cohorts in Texas and by making editorial, platform and hiring decisions that better reflect the diversity of Texans.

### **Make Membership Our Mantra**

Expand our membership program to twice its current size and value member conversion as our most important measure of audience engagement.

### **Put the Tech Back in Texas Tribune**

Structure and train the organization for flexibility and collaboration, positioning the Tribune as a multimedia and technology innovator that doesn't chase fads but makes smart choices today to maximize our options tomorrow.

### **Rev Up Revenue**

Grow our operating revenue ambitiously year over year, with a greater emphasis on untapped major philanthropy and new and creative sponsor and events opportunities, and generate additional funds for innovation, for capacity-building and to shore up our reserves.

The greatest danger in our industry is complacency. We need to dig deep for the pioneering and plucky spirit that drove The Texas Tribune on day one. Nearly nine years in, it's time for us to get a little uncomfortable again.



# Double and Diversify

Since its launch, The Texas Tribune has grown from a niche publication favored by legislators and lobbyists to the state’s authoritative source on Texas politics and policy. Our website currently attracts an average of more than 1.9 million people each month — nearly eight times higher than in 2010 — and thousands of others consume our journalism in their local newspapers, on their local newscasts, through social media and at the Tribune’s statewide events.

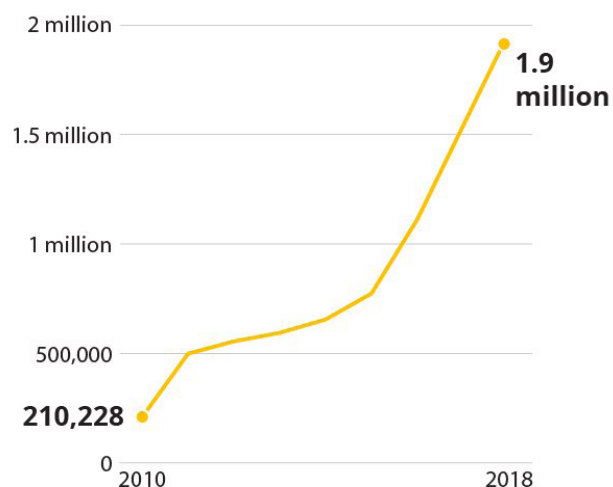
Yet the bulk of this growth has been organic — not rooted in a deliberate study of who our audience is and how it interacts with our content, let alone whom we optimally hope to reach. And our core readers are not yet representative of the state’s fast-changing demographics, the audience that’s critical to our — and the state’s — future.

With a more purposeful and targeted approach, we believe The Texas Tribune has the ability — and more important, the moral imperative — to double its audience over the next seven years, dramatically diversifying its reach in the process.

We will do it by making smarter choices around what we cover and when we cover it, establishing a dedicated breaking news desk and devoting our beat reporters to bigger and better explanatory and investigative reporting that draws in new and nontraditional readers.

We’ll develop specific audience and editorial strategies aimed at reaching and reflecting Texas’ fastest-growing populations: young and ethnically diverse Texans.

Monthly average users:



And we will seek deeper connections with urban and suburban readers, pursuing the nearly 10 percent market penetration we already have in Austin in cities like Houston, Dallas, San Antonio and El Paso by way of enhanced editorial coverage, new media partnerships and live events.

To be clear: We're not abandoning our politics and policy insiders, the decision-makers who rely on us around the clock. If anything, we've given them more tools to do their jobs. Nor are we moving away from our aggressive statewide syndication model, which distributes our journalism for free to Texans across this giant state.

"If we build it, they will come" is not an audience strategy. We must prioritize our readers' needs alongside our own. The people we're trying to reach must be able to see themselves reflected in both our reporting and our newsroom.



"Dreamers" share their experience of growing up undocumented during a Texas Tribune summer salon series aimed at young Texans. Photo by Callie Richmond for The Texas Tribune.

To do that we will:

### **Take a more ground-up, community-driven approach to our journalism**

This will help us explain and contextualize storylines for Texans who'd like to be engaged in what we cover but struggle to find a way in.

### **Get creative with editorial, newsletter and membership-driven live events**

This will attract new and different audiences and let readers participate in conversations with newsmakers and policymakers.

### **Lean more heavily on strategic partnerships**

We'll reach our target audiences by doubling down on cross-publishing — like landing our 2017 sex-trafficking project in Cosmopolitan magazine, where it reached hundreds of thousands of young women, and publishing a weekly legislative update in Community Impact, the state's network of ultra-local newspapers.

### **Give our journalists both the analytics and the insights to expand the reach of their work**

This includes beat-specific toolkits to help reporters do everything from leverage SEO and headlines to field reader questions.

### **Make diversity and Spanish-language skills a greater priority in hiring**

Our organization and our editorial decision-making must more accurately reflect the communities we serve.

### **Guard against the shifting tides of digital platforms**

We'll build direct relationships with our readers, with an emphasis on email acquisition and retention.

Growing our Texas Tribune community — our ranks of readers, members and evangelists — isn't just the audience team's responsibility. Going forward, it will be part of the job description for everyone on the Tribune staff. Our journalism can only make a difference if we maximize its reach.



# Make Membership Our Mantra

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For years, the Tribune has measured its performance and its audience engagement through broad, conventional, site-wide metrics — everything from unique readers and pageviews to social followers and comments. While this approach helped chart our growth over time, it never told the full story of our reach and never felt like the right fit for our public service mission.

What the Tribune wants most is loyalty: to produce journalism so compelling and useful to Texans that they're inspired to support us financially. More than 4,000 people do today. We believe this is the ultimate measure of an engaged audience, so we must focus our efforts on moving more readers from their initial contact with our work into channels and experiences that bring them closer to Texas Tribune membership.

Over time, membership has accounted for a modest but growing share of our revenue. But that growth hasn't kept pace with our overall audience growth. We aim to double the size of our membership program — and its associated revenue — by 2025.



**To do that we will:**

### **Redefine what it means to be a member**

It's not just about donating. We'll explicitly invite members to participate in our mission of engaging and informing Texans on politics and policy and reward them with inside opportunities, "ambassador" status and, yes, Tribune swag.

### **Create a culture of membership across the organization**

We'll get members more connected with our newsroom — and vice versa — by way of enhanced member newsletters, live chats with expert journalists and sneak peeks at new products.

### **Activate our network**

We'll enlist current members to help amplify our journalism and our cause, encouraging them to share our work and fundraise on our behalf.

### **Grow our newsletter subscriptions**

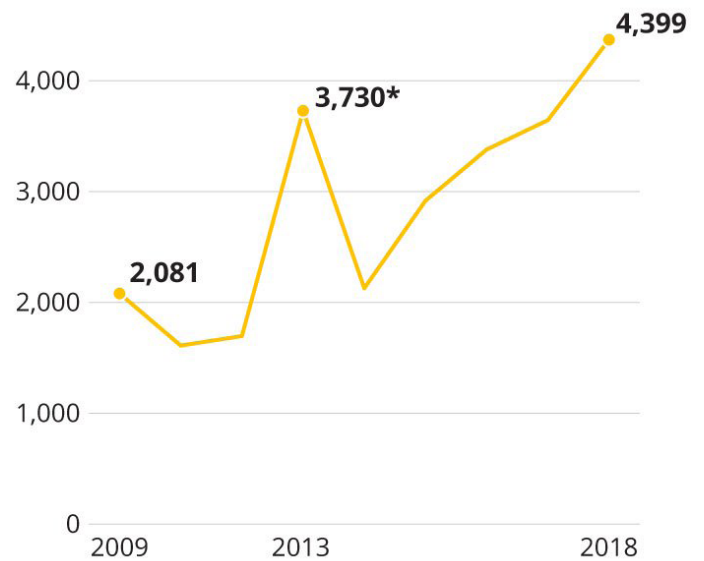
Newsletters are a direct pipeline to engagement and member conversion. If we can boost newsletter readership, we'll boost membership.

### **Leverage technology**

We'll improve member conversion and retention with a suite of tools that make it easier for readers to become donors and manage their giving preferences — and for us to learn more about what moves people from passive engagement into action.

From our founding, the Tribune's diverse revenue model — drawing on foundations and corporations as well as individuals to fund our operations — has been one of our biggest strengths. But ultimately, our sustainability as a news organization will depend heavily on the last of that group: fellow Texans who believe enough in our mission to invest in it.

### **How our membership has grown:**



As of July 2018

\* We saw a spike in membership in 2013 after livestreaming Sen. Wendy Davis' filibuster.



# Put the Tech Back in Texas Tribune

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As we look ahead to 2025, the pressure to continually innovate — to be on the latest platform, to customize our content for formats yet to be imagined, to maintain our brand and identity on whatever device or interface comes next — will only increase.

We want our technologies and systems to reflect and enhance our editorial and audience strategies, not dictate them. That means our core philosophy must be one of nimbleness and adaptation, of making smart technology, multimedia and organizational choices today that position us to move quickly but prudently tomorrow. We must prize responsible innovation, not chase shiny objects.

To do that we will:

### **Modernize our content management system**

We can't predict every storytelling form, platform or device that we'll need to support down the line, but our CMS must continuously evolve to work seamlessly with the stories and readers of tomorrow.

### **Invest in mobile storytelling forms**

From chat and voice interfaces to notifications and progressive web apps, we will increase our focus on new mobile interactions for users.

### **Provide new and personalized tools for our audience**

To reach our ambitious audience and membership goals, we must provide users with new tools to manage their membership status and customize their experience with the Tribune.

### **Connect our data**

Our editorial and audience data often live in silos that make analysis and reuse difficult. By connecting them, we'll keep our data fresh and rich across our products and gain better insights about our coverage and audience engagement.

### **Change the mission of our multimedia operation**

We'll be more than a de facto Capitol bureau for the state's TV stations. We'll independently produce new video and audio products that drive engagement on our site and across social platforms and create new revenue opportunities.

### **Adopt a "product" culture**

In a digital media landscape that's saturated with choices, expensive to operate in, difficult to measure and challenging to monetize, we can't afford to reduce what we do to merely hitting "publish" on a story. We must think beyond the story to the tools, platforms, practices and teams that support and amplify our journalism — and our mission.

Today's media consumers, awash in elegant digital experiences, expect us to rival our most ambitious peers: big or small, nonprofit or for-profit. We must deploy dedicated resources to improve our technology and processes, grow our ranks of engineers and multimedia storytellers and help shape the future of digital journalism — both for our own sake and for those who follow our lead.



# Rev Up Revenue

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The Tribune's ambitious journalistic, audience and membership goals require equally ambitious fiscal growth. We aim to increase our annual revenue roughly 10 percent year-over-year to fund our operational expenses, and we're already at work raising additional funds earmarked for innovation, experimentation and buttressing our cash position.

If this sounds aggressive, it is. But given the capacity of high-net-worth individuals, deep-pocketed foundations and corporate behemoths in our midst, we believe it's highly attainable.

We intend to:

### **Double down on major giving**

We'll recruit more individual donors to support public-interest journalism by leveraging the networks of our board members and other Tribune believers and partners, and we'll employ a more data-driven approach to prospect research, cultivation and solicitation.

### **Take our events business to the next level**

The Texas Tribune Festival's new downtown footprint creates the potential for increased attendance, ticket sales and sponsorship opportunities. Our in-house events space and staffing will bring in new revenue through rentals and let us better monetize our existing events.

### **Add gala fundraisers around the state**

Creating mission-focused, talent-driven evening events in Dallas, Houston and San Antonio similar to our annual TribFeast in Austin will boost revenue and enhance our profile.

### **Expand sponsor opportunities and revenue**

We'll grow our selling capacity and offer new ways for sponsors to message across our platforms without jeopardizing our editorial integrity or confusing our audience.

### **Double the size of our Circle Membership program**

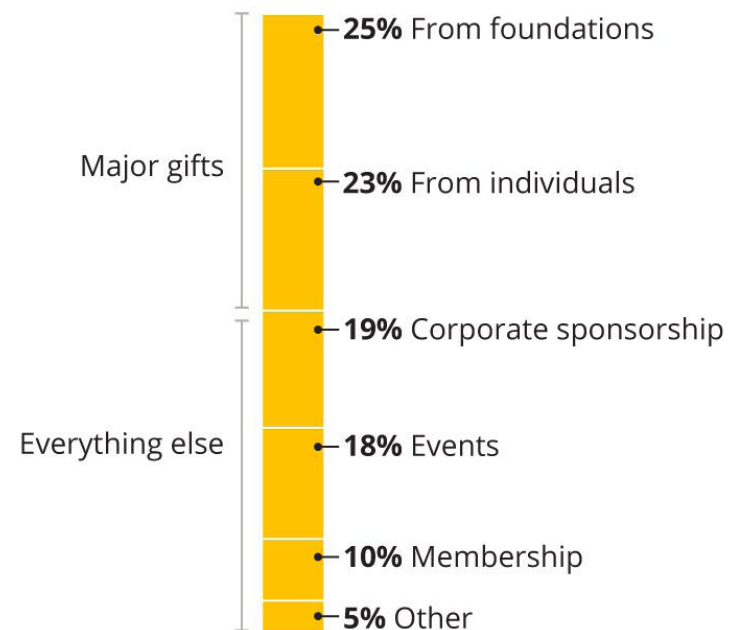
We'll expand revenue generated at this giving level by increasing outreach and stewardship in major Texas markets and by adding a complementary Business Circle to attract corporate philanthropic dollars not attached to sponsorships.

### **Reimagine our board composition and mission**

It's past time that we transition to a highly visible assemblage of movers and shakers whose principal focus is no longer operational direction and oversight. What we need is strategy, vision and help raising the revenue and forging the partnerships and relationships necessary to realize the Tribune's grand ambitions.

The Texas Tribune has built a gold-standard non-profit revenue operation with a tiny team. With a greater investment in development and sales staffing, smarter use of data and a creative approach to branding and selling new and existing products, we're confident we'll find that we've only just scratched the surface.

### **We've raised more than \$56 million in less than 9 years. How we're funded:**



As of June 2018



Members of the Texas Tribune staff on April 2, 2018. Photo by Steve Moakley for The Texas Tribune.

This all started as a wild hair, a novel experiment. In nearly nine years, it has grown into so much more: a renowned news operation, a hub for the Texas politics and policy community and a model for nonprofit media organizations around the globe.

A 2013 Forbes article said it best: “The Tribune, against all apparent odds, has hit on a sustainable model for funding important accountability journalism on a large scale and an ongoing basis.” The odds may be in our favor today, but success in this industry can be ephemeral. It’s not enough to keep riding that early wave.

The Texas Tribune must embrace the commitment to audience development, the entrepreneurial spirit and the mature processes that drive the digital leaders we seek to rival. And we must unleash our start-up energy on our most fundamental ambition: providing even more exceptional journalism to even more deeply engaged Texans.

# How we got here

The Texas Tribune's strategic plan is the result of nine months of research, introspection, collaboration and prioritization, and every single member of our staff contributed to it.

It was written by Becca Aaronson, Liam Andrew, Aman Batheja, Bobby Blanchard, Erin Boon, Natalie Choate, Daniel Craigmile, Rodney Gibbs, April Hinkle, Corrie MacLaggan, Ayan Mittra, Ryan Murphy, Terry Quinn, Emily Ramshaw, Debbie Seeger, Evan Smith, Morgan Smith, Alexa Ura, Agnes Varnum, Jacob Villanueva, Matthew Watkins, Todd Wiseman and Amanda Zamora. Emily Yount Swelgin designed this visual presentation, Emily Albracht and Ben Hasson created the illustrations and Darla Cameron created the graphics.

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**Have a question about this strategic plan? Email us: [strategicplan@texastribune.org](mailto:strategicplan@texastribune.org)**