

The Essence of Collaborative News

A field report on collaborative news innovations by Innovation Fellow
Abby Orf and the Reynolds Journalism Institute

Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Organizational Taxonomy	4
Minimal or Limited Collaboration Model	4
NJ News Commons	4
Harvest Media	4
Word in Black	5
Unified Newsrooms Model	5
Side Effects Public Media	6
Seeking Conviction	6
Wisconsin Watch	7
“Pre-Journalism” Third Party Participation Model	7
Climate Central	7
Granite State News Collaborative	8
Best Practices	9
Establishing the Collaborative	9
Communication and Workflow	10
Content Distribution	10
Conclusion	12

Introduction

Collaborative journalism has come a long way from the days when it involved only months-long, serial content featured in several newspapers over several weeks that tackled a major issue.

That, of course, still goes on but the digital age and the ease of coordinating and sharing content along with new goals and ways to achieve those goals online have made “working together” a much more common occurrence.

With that in mind, the Reynolds Journalism Institute interviewed eight purveyors, coordinators and champions of collaborations to put together some basic data and best practices about the art of collaboration. It starts with the understanding that Collaborative news is all about harnessing existing infrastructure and maximizing resources, but first newsrooms must be willing to choose collaboration over competition.

“Newsrooms seem to have woken up and realized your neighboring newsroom is no longer your biggest competitor,” said the director of the Center for Cooperative Media, Stephanie Murray, at Montclair State University in New Jersey. Now, newsrooms are in competition with the internet, influencers, and social media channels for audience attention.

“I completely agree with Stephanie,” said Melanie Pelinda, the executive director of the Granite State News Collaborative, “I am willing to even take what she said a step further, when hyperlocal news organizations don’t have to expend extra resources for state and regional news, they still get great coverage and are able to deploy more resources to local community issues.”

However, the most difficult part of creating collaborative news effort is getting editors to take the initial leap to work together. “It felt like I spent half of my time trying to set up the collaboration,” said John Upton, Executive Editor for Climate Central.

Murray also experienced competition and lack of trust among partners initially, but also stated the importance of experimentation. She said “A temporary lead for a collaborative reporting project can lead to long-term impactful collaborations.”

“There is nothing better to build trust than having success in what you plan to do,” said Side Effects Public Media Editor Dav Rosenthal, “Little success builds into larger successes.”

This field report is meant to dissect the current workings of the collaborative news field to make starting collaboratives easier for newsrooms. The report is divided into several sections including organizational taxonomy and best practices.

Organizational Taxonomy

Minimal or Limited Collaboration Model

There are three categories of collaboratives that each build off each other. The first is the minimal or limited model of collaboration.

Partners sharing content and/or funding through a grant. Content or fund sharing is effective for newsrooms without bandwidth for more time and staff.

Newsrooms aren't required to submit any of their content or required to publish any content from the partners. Instead, full content is made accessible to partnering newsrooms and interested parties with an embargo date before publication so that editors and reporters can rely on their own skills to judge the quality and relevance of specific pieces to coordinate publication.

NJ News Commons

An example of this form of collaboration is The NJ News Commons. The project is a massive content sharing network with over 330 news outlets and freelancers. The NJ News Commons is one of many collaborative projects managed by the Center for Cooperative Media at Montclair State University.

The program director Stephanie Murray said the key to running the collaborative is buy-in from the bottom to the top, which requires flexibility.

Each of the partners are able to retain their own collaboration republishing guidelines. Editors receive content through a shared google drive folder and an email notification is sent daily at 5 am with links to the available articles.

Harvest Media

Another minimal or limited collaboration is Harvest Media. It's an agricultural news collaboration of 5 newsrooms for radio broadcast and web publication.

The director of Harvest Media Maria Carter said sensitivity to the position of newsrooms and finding the right personality in a project manager was critical to the success of their content sharing program.

They have five participating newsrooms spread between Nebraska, Missouri, Illinois, and Oklahoma. They have one director who coordinates with the newsrooms, runs weekly meetings, and sends weekly email updates.

The content is made available to the partners through the platform PRX, meaning automatic notifications are sent to the media partners. Harvest Media also publishes stories on their website. “Not every story will fit the needs of every partner, but if 70-80% republish it, that is pretty good,” said Carter.

Harvest Media was initially funded by a grant from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting which paid for a staff of three five reporters, but the organization cut back to one staff member after funding ended. Harvest Media was not the only news organization to face financial hardship.

Word in Black

10 newspapers in the National Newspaper Publishers Association, also known as the Black Press of America, sought to digitize their content and bring in additional revenue. They formed a minimal or limited collaboration known as the Word in Black.

They came together through the Local Media Association to “address financial hardship as some of our peers closed their newsrooms in the last 5-10 years,” said the managing director of Word in Black Nick Charles.

They have weekly editorial and publisher meetings to decide and discuss the direction of the collaboration. When partners want to run content from the hub, it's as simple as asking for permission and approval from the authoring partner.

Through sharing a grant, the 10 newsrooms received funding to produce two educational stories a month. Ultimately, the newsrooms receive an opportunity to collaborate at a sustainable level and receive funds and content they otherwise wouldn't have access to.

Sharing a grant is also an easy way for newsroom partners with little trust to build a collaborative relationship because cross republication is not required, but is an available option. If all else fails, the simplest form of collaboration is coordinating information gathering and sharing information like recorded interviews or raw data.

Unified Newsrooms Model

The unified newsrooms model builds off the limited or minimal model. Not only are the participating newsrooms sharing content or information, they are also following the lead of a fellow newsroom and coordinating their production and research efforts.

Side Effects Public Media

Side Effects Public Media is a health based collaborative of 5 public broadcast radio stations. They aim to produce two feature stories weekly and developed a content sharing collaborative after initial foundation project funding ended.

The small staff at side effects manages the collaboration through a virtual newsroom of 6 reporters based in Indiana and a variety of part time reporters in 6 states. Although the collaboration is small in staff, they were able to produce a podcast called “Sick”, which was downloaded over 1.5 million times.

Side Effects Public Media doubles down on reaching new audiences both regionally and nationally through stories, events, and collaboration. They have even started collaborating with organizations in Burmese and Spanish to reach across language barriers in the region.

Although Side Effects Media has been successful, Rosenthal calls for the importance of experimentation and failure. “Nobody hits on ideas that work 100% of the time. Being flexible and experimenting all the time is important to keeping Side Effects relevant and not stale.”

Seeking Conviction (TW: SA)

Seeking Conviction is an issue based unified newsroom collaborative that all started with a tip to the North Carolina Public press. The newsroom was tipped that conviction rates for adult rape cases were low or nonexistent in some parts of the state.

The project’s lead, Frank Taylor, reached out to 9 normally competitive newsrooms in the area and invited them to collaborate based on their location and capacity to contribute to an investigation of the North Carolina Court System. None of the organizations in the area had resources on their own to dedicate to a six-month-long investigation with data complications.

Taylor worked with newsrooms to have listening sessions with the community, agree on research roles, and expectations for co-authorship. Each newsroom participated by researching conviction rates in their area and writing a segment that was to be stitched together into a four part series that was approved and published simultaneously by all of the collaborating newsrooms.

In terms of impact, the reporting project was able to connect law enforcement, survivors, attorneys, the court system, and the press, which resulted in legislative changes. Some of

the newsrooms were able to hire journalists from the collaboration after the project ended.

Project lead Frank Taylor said, “CNN quoted the poorest district the collaborative covered, which otherwise would not have the resources to gain national attention.”

Taylor said the purpose of the collaborative was to extend reach in reporting and distribution. “We got the Stories out to additional people, but we also were able to hit voices that we weren't able to hit by ourselves,” said Taylor.

Wisconsin Watch

Wisconsin Watch is a unified newsroom collaborative funded and organized by a Microsoft news initiative. Microsoft also chose the participating newsrooms and created a virtual newsroom.

Wisconsin Watch is an investigative collaboration that has its own journalists and editors, but works with 5 other newsrooms in the area to share content and discuss reporting projects. We have also developed a “robust distribution network of about 300 editors,” said their digital and multimedia editor Coburn Dukeheart.

She said their content sharing mindset is “the more places to distribute content, the better.” The group shares their content to partners through email notification and a password protected website a few days before planned publication so that newsroom staff have time to work it into their publication schedule.

“Pre-Journalism” Third Party Participation Model

The “pre-journalism” third party participation model allows newsrooms to focus on the journalism production side of news. The third party is generally not a newsroom, but tries to be a support branch of the newsroom through harnessing existing infrastructure.

Climate Central

Climate Central is a true pre-journalism organization. They are made up of communicators, scientists, volunteers, and engineers.

The executive director John Upton described the collaboration as “an unusual group.” They scour raw data for stories, contextualize the complicated or specialized data for journalists, work with university researchers, and generally “fill the gaps” in news organizations.

“Nobody does what we do, where we cover a particular topic with science and data skills,” said Upton.

Their specialty is finding in-depth investigative and data-driven stories for news collaboration. They even wait to publish the collaborative content to avoid taking attention from news organizations.

Granite State News Collaborative

The Granite State News Collaborative in New Hampshire is also a “pre-journalism” third party participation model aiming to fill newsroom gaps. “When the editor doesn't have to do all the work, it makes collaboration and communication easier,” said executive director Melanie Pelinda.

Granite State News Collaborative is a small staff that organizes a story share and works closely with newsrooms to identify their needs and address them through listening sessions with their communities. The collaborative also researches public data sets that are difficult to find and understand.

The organization started slowly with a lot of hesitancy from news organizations, but attitudes shifted as the pandemic began. The pressure to cover crucial information in many different ways influenced the partners to be more willing of cross publication related to covid.

“Before covid we had maybe 3 to 4 editors that were solidly participating,” said Pelinda, “Now we have 10 editors.”

The collaborative even began hiring journalists as freelancers who were let go from newsrooms for collaborative projects in a rotating crew of 20 freelancers. By retaining local journalists who belong to the community, they were able to uplift the regional journalism ecosystem.

Between March and December of 2020 the collaboration produced over 1700 articles with over 400 freelance journalists.

After editors started feeling more comfortable with collaboration, they began to develop beats together. First they reported on covid, then expanded to include a racial justice and equity editor after the death of George Flyod. Beats continued to be created as editors were brought on.

Eventually, they agreed to coordinate efforts to cover events like election season so that hyperlocal elections can be better covered. Pelinda said, “Coordinating newsroom efforts made breaking news easier to cover,” because there is access to reporters in the field that previously were seen as competition.

Pelinda said distributing content to the partners can be as simple as hiring a project manager and sharing a google drive folder.

Best Practices

Establishing the Collaborative

Research on possible news partners must be completed to start establishing a collaborative. It is important to try to understand possible partners in terms of audience, scope, mission, content, geography and any other relevant characteristics to a newsroom’s identity.

After some brief research, begin speaking privately with newsrooms about their interest in a collaboration. This alerts newsrooms of collaborative intentions and starts conversations about how they might fit into the collaborative.

Having a private conversation allows the newsrooms to talk about potentially sensitive information like financial needs and staffing capacity and can inform them of the benefits the collaboration could offer their organization.

Invite newsrooms to a listening session to hear thoughts from newsrooms, freelancers, higher education professionals, local topic experts, researchers, stakeholders, and invested community members. Not only does a listening session allow community feedback about collaborative ideas, it can also inform journalists of issues that need to be covered, reveal community sources, spread the word about the new collaborative effort and shape the collaborative to fit the communities needs and utilize existing infrastructure.

Use a survey at the event to gauge who is interested, what role they might fulfill, and which resources are available to the potential collaboration. This step can also set up the collaboration to have an email list and name/organization list of interested parties.

After gathering information from the listening session, begin examining the resource dynamic of interested parties. Develop a pitch for the collaborative effort and begin formally inviting newsrooms and applying for appropriate grants and funding.

When a collaboration is invite only, it maintains credibility and partnership trust, and adds value because the collaborating partners can access content days before other non-collaborators get access to content through a creative commons license.

Once newsrooms have agreed to some form of collaboration, work on finding common ground. Some collaborations choose a website for the new collaboration with a goal of populating the website with stories on top of distribution of interested partner channels like the Word in Black. Other collaborations align on a mission, beat, or issue like Seeking Conviction or Climate Central.

However, if an organization is mainly a limited or minimal model collaboration like the NJ News Commons, newsrooms should consider making the collaboration open source through an application process to encourage a wider distribution network.

Communication and Workflow

Communication in the collaboration process is key. Word in Black director Nick Charrles agreed, “Communication, communication, communication! During the process of collaboration, all partners need to be on the same page.”

Wisconsin Watch director Coburn Dukehart suggests, “checking in frequently to see if it's working and asking their opinion on things.” Out of all the collaboration we spoke with, most of them met weekly between 15 minutes and an hour to check in with each other about completed work and future work. Several of the organizations also hold weekly editorial and publisher meetings.

“All partners need to buy-in at the very beginning and be ready that things could change; there will always be recessions, election sessions, and job vacancies to fill,” said Editor with Side Effects Public Media Dave Rosenthal. “All those things can be roadblocks to the original plan, but building trust helps to figure out ways and means to get around roadblocks.”

“You really need a people-person in those central roles to develop trust and a relationship,” said Maria Carter of Harvest Media. In addition to weekly meetings, using a slack channel or messaging platform will support streamlined communication among several bustling newsrooms.

Content Distribution

There are many channels to provide content to the partnership editors and their audiences. If the collaboration is for broadcast, there may already be a platform or content management system multiple newsrooms are already using that could be utilized for sharing content, like PRX for radio distribution.

While some newsrooms use existing content management systems, others opt for a password protected website. Wisconsin Watch even uses a mailchimp email list daily to notify editors of new content on the password protected collaborative hub.

However, if the collaboration is small or frequency of publication in the collaboration is closer to weekly or monthly, a shared google drive folder may suffice.

Method of distribution often depends on trust and financial models. If collaborators find themselves unwilling to have their content published on their partner's channels a website or hub for the collaboration may be the answer. If a hub or website is utilized as a form of neutral ground for the collaborators, promotion is needed in publishing channels to bring an audience to the hub.

Contributors can provide content in full to the hub or partial content with a link to the publisher's website to see the content in full. This method works best for collaborations including organizations with paywalls in their funding models or advertisements as their main source of funding.

However philanthropic funded partners may want to forgo a hub or website and mainly use their own publishing channels for other benefits like audience outreach and issue reporting which can lead to an increase in donations. Instead, partners would attribute the content to the collaborative with reporters bylined.

It is crucial that newsrooms are not required to cross publish content. Newsrooms are liable for what they publish and editors need room to judge the finished content before deciding to publish it.

For example, not all of the newsrooms under the Granite State News Collaborative share their content with every partner. Although each partner is allowed the editorial authority to choose who can and cannot share their content, only 3 partners have additional publication restrictions.

If content is quality and of interest to a partner organization's audience, cross distribution maximizes resources of both newsrooms because the publishing organization didn't have to expend time and energy in their own newsrooms to produce relevant and accurate content. And while cross publication may save the publishing newsroom time and energy, the authoring newsroom benefits from increased distribution.

Pelinda of Granite State News Collaborative said in her experience, at least anecdotally, the increased audience attention created buy-in to the collaborative.

Dave Rosenthal of Side Effects Public Media said the collaborative also works with newsrooms in other languages to expand their audience reach as well as pitching stories to national newsrooms.

The collaboration is built on trust so distribution must be by choice, not by contract. If newsrooms feel like they are being forced into publication and production or the collaboration is a large workload burden, the collaboration will not be sustainable, as the mission of most collaborations is to maximize existing resources.

Remind newsrooms to utilize email newsletters and social channels to promote collaborative content. Ask partners to follow each other on social media to encourage likes and distribution.

Conclusion

The best collaboratives utilize and maximize existing infrastructure, communicate regularly, and update collaboration expectations as new issues and barriers arrive for newsrooms. Overall, in order to successfully collaborate, “All parties have something to gain and something to offer,” said Upton.

Harvest Media director Maria Carter said in order for a collaboration to be effective, editors must feel they are making an impact for the effort they are putting in. However, impact isn’t easy to track in a collaborative.

The Granite State News Collective recommends recording everywhere an article or project was cross published, mentioned by local authority, led to a discussion, or was referenced on social media. Many collaboratives also track views, likes, downloads, mentions and shares.

Stephanie Murray of the Center for cooperative media said it's best to set metric goals ahead of time to better track impact. Collaboratives can also track impact by recording when journalists are invited on talk shows, which articles gain national attention, and award reception.

For many collaboratives like Word in Black, impact is more finite like reaching more people or addressing resource scarcity. For others like Climate Central, impact is increased awareness and thought of a topic, which can be almost impossible to measure outside of anecdotal evidence.