

ANALYSIS

Across the United States, investigative journalism organizations and public media outlets have started joining forces in greater numbers, most recently in St. Louis and Boston. Partners in the collaborations often find that the relationship demands thoughtfulness and hard work, but yields great rewards. What follows is a collection of wisdom from reporters and editors who have worked as members of collaborations at NPR, the Center for Public Integrity (CPI), KPBS and inewssource in San Diego and InvestigateWest and KUOW in Seattle.

Tip One: Communicate early and often.

In 2011 a grain elevator exploded at the Bartlett Grain Co. in Kansas, killing six. The disaster caught the attention of Center for Public Integrity reporter Jim Morris, who mentioned it to fellow reporter, Howard Berkes at NPR. Morris and Berkes were in the midst of reporting on pollution for a project called Poisoned Places, but were already setting their sights on their next collaboration.

The reporters started researching and discovered that such explosions were rare, but worker deaths because of drowning in a grain bin was much more common. Chris Hamby at CPI pulled Occupational Safety and Health Administration data and the reporters started looking more deeply into it. The result was a series called “Buried In Grain.”

NPR and CPI often work together on stories or collaborate with reporters and editors at other organizations. Berkes and Morris have a lot of experience working with others as members of a collaboration, and they have figured out ways to collaborate more successfully.

Morris recommends pitching a story to a partner as soon as the idea is developed. Morris and Berkes starting talking early.

“You don’t want to have a half-baked idea, but you don’t want to report it to death.” Bringing a partner on board quickly fosters early buy-in rather than bringing them up to speed later in the game.

Working together allowed the reporters to share resources – such as legal and data experts – as well as the burden of reporting. “We hold nothing back,” Berkes said. They share sources, documents and interview transcripts over email if one partner can’t sit in.

Generally, Morris and Berkes like to do their own interviews and build on each other’s work, he said, either recording broadcast-quality audio in person or calling a source later on their own to get quotes.

The reporters cover for each other when someone gets pulled onto another assignment, he said, and negotiate who tackles each task, Berkes said.

“While I was busy with the Olympics, Jim was busy laying the groundwork,” Berkes said. Jim was contacting and interviewing key sources and gathering court documents.

On Berkes’ first day back from covering the 2012 London Olympics, both men met in Mount Carroll, Ill. to interview the survivor of a grain bin tragedy. The young man, Will Piper, was caught in a grain bin accident and saw his friend die within arm’s reach. Morris had been ready to write the story months earlier using deposition documents.

“That didn’t work for me,” Berkes said. “I needed him face to face and I needed him to tell me in a way that would work for radio what happened that day.”

The young man played a key role in telling the story to a radio audience, even if listeners were urbanites unfamiliar with agriculture. He narrated the events of the day, his voice full of emotion. “It was what connected people to grain bins and OSHA penalties,” Morris said. “When you get the voice like Will Piper, it makes the story infinitely more powerful and interesting.”

Morris’s groundwork paid off, but so did Berkes’s persistence in getting Piper to talk – a process of persuasion and building trust that spanned six months. Both reporters dug through local court documents extensively. Interviewing sources together, each reporter would pick up on different bits of information and storytelling that the other would miss, Berkes said.

Morris contributed his extensive background covering workplace safety issues. Berkes dug through every workplace fatality reported to OSHA to find ones the agency had misclassified.

The reporters spoke several times a week at the beginning and every day when the reporting really picked up. They constantly emailed each other. Berkes periodically sent an email to his editor and Morris summarizing the progress in the reporting and the next steps.

The reporters represent an institutional partnership at its most basic level, so it’s important to have chemistry, Morris said. He and Berkes are thinking of their next story together.

“Sometimes you just sort of click with people,” Morris said in a phone interview with both reporters on the call. “You find out that you can work together without killing each other too much, right Howard?”

Tip Two: Understand the demands of each medium and learn how to work across them.

During the 2012 election, former inewsource reporter Ryann Growchowski saw a campaign mailer that endorsed both Barack Obama and conservative Gary Kreep – a strange pairing, considering that Kreep was a “birther” and believed Obama was not born in the U.S. and not fit to be president.

Growchowski looked more closely at fine print on the flier and realized what looked like an endorsement from a literacy group was actually “slate mailer,” a piece of mail voters receive where candidates have paid to place their name, alongside those of other politicians. The team decided to investigate.

The investigative non-profit, inewsource, has been embedded in the headquarters of public broadcaster KPBS since October 2011. Today the desks of inewsource staff line a wall near the news hub, steps away from KPBS beat reporters and producers. The two organizations work together to report and produce local watchdog journalism.

The transition to a new medium has posed challenges for inewsource.

“It was crazy,” Growchowski said, laughing. Coming from a print background, she learned more and more how to “think in radio” as her story on slate mailers progressed.

Growchowski started researching the campaign fliers and recorded interviews with her sources over the phone. That is, until former KPBS investigative producer

Joanne Faryon stepped in with advice. (Faryon has since become employed as a reporter by the inewssource side of the collaboration.)

Since some of Growchowski's sources were local, Faryon suggested an in-person interview instead. Growchowski didn't realize how that in-person recordings are always better than recordings done over the phone.

"I honestly didn't think it mattered," Growchowski said. "But Joanne played me audio of both, and it was obvious that the in-person recorded interview was miles ahead in quality and clarity."

At the next interview for the piece – this time with a voter – Growchowski learned about using natural sound to paint a scene. Faryon suggested Growchowski start recording sound as soon as she got to the source's house, instead of pressing the "record" button at the start of the interview. She was able to capture the sound of a dog barking, which Faryon mixed into the piece to add color.

The final piece featured both Faryon and Growchowski's voices talking about what Growchowski had found in her reporting.

Faryon: "If I got one of these in the mail, I might feel a little duped."

Growchowski: "And that's how Nadine Scott felt. I met with her in her house in Oceanside."

Natural sound: "Growl, growl. Woof! Woof!" (Doorbell rings.)

Growchowski: "And once I got past her dog, we talked about how she felt about getting these in her mailbox."

Faryon worked with Growchowski to identify the key storytelling elements among the information she had gathered. Faryon helped Growchowski with what she calls “simple things” that distinguish broadcast from print reporting.

“The difference is you have to leave the building, and you have to spend time with this person” you are interviewing to capture color for the story, Faryon said.

Collaborating on stories like this have allowed KPBS to beef up its investigative reporting capacity and better fulfill its mission of serving the public high-quality, high-impact news. Growchowski was able to spend enough time to thoroughly understand and report the story, and Faryon coached her through conceiving the material in a broadcast-friendly format, she said.

“KPBS got great content on three platforms – web, radio and TV,” Faryon said. The station has trained inewsource reporters extensively in audio production skills and even voice coaching, KPBS editor Suzanne Marmion said – a process which took about six months and some “awkward-sounding” radio stories.

Marmion has encountered skepticism from broadcast producers at other stations about the quality of investigative storytelling, and she tries to convince them the final product is the same engaging storytelling audiences expect.

“It doesn’t have to be a bunch of dry data blah-blah,” Marmion said. “We know how to tell good stories for broadcast; we’ve been doing it forever.”

Tip Three: Start small, build trust and take on more risk gradually.

Anacortes, Wash., police chief Bonnie Bowers knew where to find the body; she’d heard from another law enforcement official how Alzheimer’s dementia patients follow straight lines when they start to wander.

KUOW reporter, Ruby de Luna traveled with the police chief to a grassy marsh where the body of 69-year-old William Landers was found dead, four days after he had wandered away from his apartment. Her mic captured the sound of chirping birds as the police chief explained how she deduced where the missing man may have ended up. Landers' case was among dozens identified by the series, "Wandering," jointly produced by KUOW radio, KCTS television and InvestigativeWest, a local investigative journalism non-profit. The story signaled a greater level of collaborative reporting than the organizations had undertaken before.

De Luna had reported on Alzheimer's patients before, but wouldn't have come upon this story without the station's partnership with the investigative organizations, which her editor at KUOW, Carol Smith helped found.

De Luna was game when her editor approached her with the idea.

"I thought, 'Sure'", she said. "When I learned more about it, I was really intrigued."

In 2009 InvestigateWest was started from journalists who had been laid off from the Seattle Post-Intelligencer when it shifted from a daily paper to an online-only newsroom. Early on, the new organization began forging a relationship with NPR affiliate, Associate Director Jason Alcorn said. Thanks to KUOW, InvestigateWest reporters received training in the craft of radio, won a few grant to produce radio reports, and appeared on day-time talk shows to share their investigations.

Still, the collaboration was limited to providing content, rather than jointly reporting and producing stories.

“We were collaborating with them, but it wasn’t a rich collaboration,” Alcorn said.

That changed in January 2013, when InvestigateWest founder Carol Smith was hired as a KUOW editor, and the two organizations began to embark on more involved projects together, Alcorn said.

At the request of KCTS TV, InvestigateWest started researching law enforcement and missing persons and soon realized the story lay in discussing how well (or poorly) officials respond to reports of people with Alzheimer’s and dementia who go missing. Alcorn used interviews and news clippings to compile a database of missing people. He wrote a story brief and listed key sources, which he shared with de Luna.

De Luna said she became involved in the story after a lot of the research was already complete, so her challenge was understanding what Alcorn had found and contribute her own original reporting without duplicating his efforts.

Alcorn divided up the sources and reporting tasks so each part of the team wouldn’t call the same people and make them answer the same questions over and over. The radio station followed the case of William Landers, a missing man in the western part of the state. The TV station followed a case in the east. Meanwhile, the investigative non-profit tackled the policy-makers and state officials.

While Alcorn dealt with the data, de Luna focused on the voice of the affected families.

“I felt like we all contributed our strengths to this piece,” de Luna said. “It makes the series more multidimensional.”

This November, another KUOW and InvestigateWest collaboration on foster care launched, the product of much more joint reporting than the series “Wandering.” This time, de Luna’s “pod-mate” in the newsroom, Liz Jones, got a turn digging into a collaboratively reported story.

“Because (“Wandering”) was such a positive experience it made us more open to future collaborations,” de Luna said.

KUOW took on a larger risk agreeing to dig into the topic, and the reporter played a larger role reporting it from the beginning, Alcorn said.

“We were able to do that because we established that trust the first time around,” he said.

Achieving that level of credibility has been a process for the small start-up, which this year won 10 awards, including the Society of Professional Journalists New America Award for reporting on an immigration detention center in Tacoma, Wash. Now, instead of approaching partners, practically “holding our tin cup out,” Alcorn said, others are asking to work with InvestigateWest.

“In the last 12 months we’ve become an organization that traditional news organizations want to work with,” Alcorn said.

Tip Four: Little details make a big difference.

By working together, public radio organizations and investigative non-profits can fill the gaps in capacity that the other lacks. NPR member stations can serve their audiences with well-reported, in-depth coverage that would be too time- or resource-intensive to produce on their own. Investigative non-profits can achieve greater impact by translating their findings into new mediums and reaching more people with their stories.

Some collaborations encounter greater hurdles and flounder because the basic foundation wasn't established in the first place: picking a partner who shares your organization's journalistic values and is completely committed to the success of the partnership, communicating constantly and sharing everything.

Opportunities for conflict abound, said Ellen Weiss, who has served as a news executive and managed collaborations at NPR, CPI and most recently at Scripps Howard.

The examples in this article demonstrate the need to balance the autonomy of the partners and their mediums while unifying their members around common reporting. Successful collaborations defy old patterns of competition and rely on strong relationships built on trust between reporters and leadership at two separate institutions. Like many relationships, hard work may be required. A journalistic partnership requires that both parties put their humility on the table and take equal ownership over the final product.

"They can be infuriating," Weiss said. "But my experience has been they're so worth it because – if you can get past your ego – you have access to a ton more ideas and resources."