

Let's Collab: Exploring What Makes Collaborations in Public Media Newsrooms Succeed (or Fail)

More and more, newsrooms are choosing to collaborate to focus and expand coverage. These partnerships are becoming important with the decline of local news, which is leaving areas of the U.S. without a news source.

Public media is investing in collaborative efforts. The Corporation for Public Broadcasting has dedicated \$32 million in funding to 29 newsroom partnerships as of 2017, according to its website. The objective, it says, is to “fill the void in local ‘news deserts’ left by newspapers and other commercial media cutbacks” across the country. CPB continues to fund collaboration. Most recently, CPB funded a more than \$1 million regional collaboration between stations in Alabama, Louisiana and Mississippi. KCUR, a public radio station in Kansas City, received a \$1.9 million grant to lead a nationwide collaborative engagement project focusing on the U.S. 2020 presidential election.

The collaborative funding began in 2009, with a call for grant proposals to fund “local journalism centers” for two years to create multiplatform coverage of a specific topic like health or agriculture. Some LJs have lasted after the grant money ran out, like Harvest Public Media, based at the Kansas City station, KCUR. Others discontinued after the two-year CPB grant funding ran out.

Implementing an effective collaboration can prove difficult. It takes trust between station managers and reporters, good communication and a clear vision for the project. Eight current and former editors provided insights into what they see as the important elements of implementing and sustaining a collaboration.

The benefits of collaboration

Some of the most common examples of what has worked well about a collaboration was that it provided training for journalists and comprehensive coverage of a given topic across a large area. Jeff Young, the managing editor at the Ohio Valley ReSource collaborative, which reports on economic and social change across Kentucky, Ohio and West Virginia, said one success and innovation of the collaborative is that their reporting about the coal industry is getting published as a book, which will be released in 2020.

Holly Edgell, editor of the Sharing America collaborative based at St. Louis Public Radio, said a major strength was supporting local journalism in many different areas, as well as working on major projects that were national in scope.

Jeremy Bernfeld, the lead editor at the Guns & America collaboration based at WAMU in Washington DC, said a benefit of the collaboration is having a team that is laser focused on gun issues, which he says are incredibly complex and divisive. It also provides a support network to ask questions, and to contribute and build upon the work of others.

“We're able to do not just more work on gun issues, but better journalism on gun issues,” Bernfeld said.

The project, for example, made a project called “Shattered” which documented the lives of people after they were shot. The multimedia story has a web page designed through the online platform, Atavist.

Matthew Leonard, former editor of the collaboration Innovation Trail, which reported on the economy and technology in upstate New York, said the collaboration ended up training a lot of emerging journalists.

Communication

Communication is a key element of collaboration between newsrooms, because unlike a traditional working newsroom, collaborators aren't all sitting in the same room. Many are spread across several states. Side Effects Public Media, for example, is spread across six states.

Rachel Osier Lindley is the statewide senior editor for the Texas Hub at KERA in Dallas, a regional collaboration that links stations together and acts as a prototype for the effort to create a national virtual public radio newsroom. She said it's important to come up with a consistent and clear method of communication for how the team will communicate. Most editors said they communicated by regularly scheduled calls, and through the messaging app Slack.

“If you try to serve everyone's personal communication preference style, you will fail, because people will just be overwhelmed by all sorts of ... different little communication pokes throughout the day,” Osier Lindley said.

Donna Vestal, director of collaborations for the America Amplified collaboration based at KCUR and former executive editor of Harvest Public Media, agreed that it's important not to make communication overwhelming. She said they've always had a weekly call that news directors are invited to and aren't made to feel guilty if left unattended — but she said they're always clear about what was discussed and what decisions were made so editors have incentive to attend.

Your stations are your clients

Editors said there must be established expectations at the beginning of the formation of the partnership.

If expectations about outcomes and the finished products aren't discussed, each station might have differing ideas about what they want, resulting in lost time and effort, Osier Lindley said. Alisa Barba, former executive editor at the LJC Inside Energy, which reported on energy in Colorado, Wyoming and North Dakota, and now working at the America Amplified collaboration, said collaborators should be thought of as clients. "You have to make sure that the content that you're producing is what they are looking for," Barba said. "You have to be very, very clear about that, so that everybody has to be on the same page in terms of what that content is going to be."

Young said if stations aren't recognizing the benefit of the collaboration, or it becomes perceived as not worth the occasional hassle, it won't be sustainable in the long term. Bernfeld said if everyone can agree on a mission, how to do it and when to do it, the collaboration is more likely to succeed.

"If the partners are expecting one thing and delivered another, they're going to be disappointed," Bernfeld said. "If ... the collaboration is expecting one thing and the partners do another thing, they're going to be disappointed. So, everything works much better when you say this is what we expect to do. This is how we expect to do it. This is when we expect to do it."

Building trust is worth it

When a collaboration starts, relationships have to be built with not only the reporters, but also the other news directors and station leadership. The relationship has to be very honest, and face-to-face time is really important, Vestal said.

"And if you cannot get an honest answer to a question, like, 'What's not working for you?' If you can't get that answer ... it's never going to work," she said.

Dave Rosenthal, the editor at Side Effects Public Media, said there are scheduled meet-ups during the year to talk about the work everyone is doing, or at an annual health journalism conference.

Osier Lindley said their team does the same — at least once a year for reporters and quarterly for editors. and it has made a difference in coverage of breaking news. Osier Lindley said they have “summer camps” with trainings and classes, a cocktail hour the night before, so people can get to know each other. She said when the team was covering the Sutherland Springs church shooting in 2017, reporters were willing to jump in and help the overwhelmed station in San Antonio. She said it was a significant difference from how the team covered Hurricane Harvey and said meeting in person made a difference.

“You know, when breaking news events happen ... people are much more inclined to, you know, stick their neck out and jump in and help people when they feel like they have a personal relationship with them,” Osier Lindley said.

Have a plan once the money runs out

The money CPB gives out for collaboration grants only last for a limited amount of time. Several editors said there needs to be investment in the collaboration and planning for how it will continue after the funding ends. Barba said it’s critical to get the development teams at all the stations together, so they understand that it is something they need to raise money for moving forward. Leonard of Innovation Trail said getting marketing and social media engaged right away is also important. The business model should be thought about early, even before thinking about how many reporters the team

needs, he said. Innovation Trail went on after the CPB funding for five or six years, but said that was as long as it was able to be sustained.

Edgell said it's important to start this process early, and to have a plan for when the grant funding ends. "I kind of figured that out as I was sort of in the middle of year two. I was like, 'Oh, we don't really have a plan to continue what was some really good work,'" Edgell said.

Edgell said they plan to keep the brand of Sharing America and act as a consultant to other stations that want to continue or improve their coverage of race identity and culture.

Conclusion

There are clear benefits of collaborations, like pulling newsroom resources to dedicate coverage of a subject more extensively across the country or providing training for future journalists. However, it takes investment on all levels of the organization, planning for the future and good communication for the collaborations to continue when CPB grant funding runs out.