We Can Work It Out:
Understanding Local and National Collaborative Reporting Projects

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ProPublica
May 2020

Abstract

We Can Work It Out

It is no secret how drastically the field of journalism has changed within the last several decades. And as resources dwindle in newsrooms across the country, collaboration has emerged as one way to counteract economic hardships facing the industry. This study examined two types of local national investigative collaborations, the roadblocks they face and identified traits that make collaborations successful. The benefits of these collaborations can be economic, but these partnerships also help sustain and strengthen investigative journalism while economic resources that support it continue to diminish.

Acknowledgements

There are many, many, many people I could thank for all I have learned at the Missouri School of Journalism, both as an undergraduate and a graduate student. Thank you to them, and to my parents who have always supported me as I ventured into a field with an uncertain future.

But I would be remiss if I did not thank and dedicate this work to a man who is responsible for so much of my growth as a journalist: Mark Hinojosa.

Mark's boundless knowledge and precision stunned me when I was his student and continues to amaze me, even after his death. He was the toughest critic, but those criticisms always made me better. He was sick for as long as I knew him, but his resilience is one of the most breathtaking things I have ever seen. I hope I am able to achieve half of what he did.

Thank you, Mark.

"Anything for you, my friend."

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The stories about media tend to feel familiar these days: layoffs, cutbacks, furloughs, another publication shuttered. But many national organizations like the New York Times, the Washington Post and ProPublica have seen their businesses boom since the election of President Donald Trump in 2016. As the resource gap between local and national newsrooms grows, collaboration has emerged as one way to share the wealth. But as collaboration becomes more and more prominent within journalism, it becomes equally as critical to examine how to best structure collaborations so they can be successful. Of course, collaboration cannot solve all the many problems that face journalism as an industry, but a smarter distribution of resources can at least aid those problems — and ideally yield more authentic and accurate local coverage.

This project primarily focuses on ProPublica's Local Reporting Network, a local-national investigative project that began in 2018. Local journalists from across the country were interviewed for this professional analysis. They work at the South Bend Tribune in Indiana, AL.com in Alabama, and formerly the Charleston Gazette-Mail in West Virginia and the Malheur Enterprise in Oregon. Some interviewees have changed jobs since their interview or after their time in the Local Reporting Network. Additionally, ProPublica staff spoke about their experiences and lessons for collaborative investigative journalism. While one of the most well-known local-national investigative collaborations, ProPublica's Local Reporting Network is not the only model for this kind of work. Reveal from the Center for Investigative Reporting also has a collaborative investigative reporting project that takes place at a lower threshold of resources, showing that collaborations do not always have to be lengthy, year-long projects.

Ultimately, sharing the lessons and best practices of collaborations is, arguably, one of the most important parts of collaborations, a necessary last step. Collaborating is hard and takes time. But this project aims to democratize the lessons and best practices from organizations that have collaborated in local-national investigative projects, so that other news organizations may understand how to work together.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The goal of this professional project is to examine newsrooms participating in short-term collaborations and see how, or if, participating in a collaboration has adapted existing news routines. Changes in workflow due to collaborative processes could impact the understanding of news routines as a theory. The overarching question of this research project is this: how can newsrooms best collaborate to create watchdog journalism?

Definition

Collaboration can be defined in a number of ways, but this project will implement the definition laid out by Graves and Konieczna: cooperative practices by which rival news outlets work together to produce and distribute news (2015). However, the kinds of collaboration focused on in this project will not emphasize rival news organizations. For example, ProPublica and the South Bend Tribune in Indiana are not rivals in their collaborative partnership, per se. Each organization serves a different role for its audience. A local paper does not serve the same journalistic function as a national investigative news outlet, so there is no need to define them as rivals. Furthermore, no news organization can be all things to all people, so by collaborating news organizations can help and lift each other.

Additionally, collaboration focuses on "knowledge exchange and skill sharing between different experts" (Hultén & Picha Edwardsson, 2017, pg. 6). Since this project is generally focusing on collaborations between a large, national newsroom and a smaller, local outlet, each party has expertise to share. That may be local expertise or a specialty, like data reporting. Collaboration is cooperative production and distributive practices, in addition to knowledge, skill and method sharing (Hultén & Picha Edwardsson, 2017; Graves & Konieczna, 2015).

Prior Research

Journalism has long had elements of collaboration within it. For instance, wire services like The Associated Press can be viewed as one kind of collaboration. The Associated Press was created in 1846 by five competing newspapers to deliver the news of the Mexican War faster than the postal system could deliver (de la Serna, 2018). Another prominent kind of journalistic collaboration is the relationship between National Public Radio and its member stations. The Associated Press and National Public Radio share stories with its partners for a fee and in addition, the larger, international outlet may pick up stories from its local partners to be distributed across the network (Overview And History, 2013). Though National Public Radio was created more than 100 years after the Associated Press, the spirit and principles of collaboration have been embedded in the journalistic process. Those ideas, along with technological advancements like the internet and social media, have allowed for new kinds of collaboration to unfold.

Researchers have identified and defined six different types of collaboration (Stonbely, 2017; Hare, 2017; Murray, 2017). Collaborations may be classified as temporary and separate, ongoing and integrated, ongoing and separate. For example, an ongoing and separate collaboration would be Gannett's USA Today Network, where partners create content separately and share it (Stonbely, 2017). Wire services also fall into this category. Each of these types of collaboration requires different levels of attention, management and maintenance from the involved partners. Collaborations such as ProPublica's Local Reporting Network and Reveal Investigative Fellows from the Center for Investigative Reporting would fit into the category of a temporary and integrated collaboration. This kind of collaboration shares data, resources and more at the

level of the organization while coordinating closely and having regular communication for the length of the project (Stonbely, 2017). The most notable example of a temporary and integrated collaboration is the Panama Papers from the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists. According to the report from the Center for Cooperative Media, this is the least common type of collaboration, likely because it requires such an intimate relationship between partner organizations.

Several characteristics of a successful collaboration have been identified (Stonbely, 2017; Hare, 2017; Griggs, 2017). Successful collaborations need a project manager and at least some level of trust and goodwill among participants (Stonbely, 2017; Hare, 2017). A collaborative mindset, though hard to quantify, can also be an aid to creating and maintaining a successful collaboration. Some experts are of the mentality that news organizations should do what they do best and partner with other organizations in order to produce high-quality, and hopefully high-impact work (Griggs, 2017; Graves & Konieczna, 2015). Furthermore, participating newsrooms need to think early and often about how they can both benefit from the collaboration. They must also present the opportunity to gain new knowledge across platforms, newsrooms and generations.

In a small but growing number of cases, collaboration has been so deeply integrated into a newsroom's routine that it has led to the creation of new roles. The Center for Investigative Reporting and the ICIJ are two such places, along with ProPublica. ProPublica's partnership manager is in charge of large-scale collaborations, like the documenting of hate crimes during the Trump administration. Collaboration is a key part of the newsroom's mission, and the partnership manager's role allows the collaborations the sustained and dedicated attention they need (Glickhouse, 2018). Within

the newsroom, the partnership managers are seen at a stature similar to editors, both in terms of responsibility and hierarchy.

Competition among journalists and news organizations remains consistent, even as collaborative partnerships find their footing. Even if collaboration becomes more widely practiced, competition will still be an alive and well part of the journalistic process. Eads lays out one criterion that can be used to assess whether a story should be collaborative or competitive: which practice will a story and its audience benefit more from? (2018). Some instances, like election data, would generally benefit audiences more if it were collaborative. However, even as collaboration finds its footing, competition is an integral part of journalism.

If successful, collaboration can increase the spread and impact of journalistic work and build institutional reporting resources to be spread more widely (Graves & Konieczna, 2015). Additionally, in their ethnographic work Graves and Konieczna found that collaboration can allow for some journalists and/or news organizations to develop specializations in skill-intensive areas, like map or data journalism for example (2015). Those specialized skills can then be shared throughout the collaborative process with newsroom partners that may be underdeveloped in a specific area. However, this approach could potentially lead to a small number of concentrated highly-specialized individuals and organizations, but if news organizations emphasize learning and skill sharing within a collaboration, then this issue may not warrant too much concern. If newsrooms participating in a collaboration consider getting the story out there to be the biggest objective, then the skill specialization would be a potential secondary or tertiary problem.

Public media's business model makes it uniquely suited for collaborations (Barba, Holm & Solly, 2018). Collaborative journalism has not yet demonstrated its collective power and increasingly, public media has been called upon to fill in coverage gaps from the polarization of cable news and dwindling local coverage. But if the public media ecosystem were better connected, editorial collaboration would become instinctual, effortless and even routine (Barba, Holm & Solly, 2018). However, reaching that level of routine would require more collaboration, as well as several other steps to formalize and normalize the collaborative process. One potential step toward collaboration, as noted by Barba, Holm and Solly, is a need for a common language of collaboration that removes a barrier to entry. They suggest making a stylebook. In addition, they propose a central editorial clearinghouse in order to collaborate at all levels of journalism. But perhaps the practicality and feasibility of their ideas are lacking. The authors of this report are experts at creating collaboration within newsrooms, but their ideas may be too broad and not actionable. Creating an editorial clearinghouse would take countless hours, resources and coordination. Ultimately, who would oversee the clearinghouse? Who would take ownership of their grand ideas? And, most importantly, would those ideas be accepted? There are many potential paths toward the wider implementation of collaboration, but the ideas to get journalism there must be viable and achievable.

Researchers have defined the benefits of collaboration, and among them are sharing costs and information, increased story reach and a stronger hand in setting the news agenda (Graves & Konieczna, 2015; Carson & Farhall, 2018; Hatcher & Thayer, 2016). Effective collaborations can increase the quality of the investigative journalism that is published (Carson & Farhall, 2018). Hatcher and Thayer say one benchmark of a

successful collaboration could potentially be greater audience loyalty (2016). All of these concepts are ideas that news organizations should be able to get behind.

Yet, a prior lack of collaboration has a cost. The extensive documentation of economic pressures facing journalism have contributed, at least in part, to some stories going overlooked and unreported. South Bend Tribune reporter Christian Sheckler is a member of ProPublica's Local Reporting Network and confirmed that in an interview. He said covering some community and public safety meetings had become harder and harder as he had to cover more stories due to the paper's shrinking staff over the years (Sheckler, 2018). This led him to miss some important stories as they unfolded, regarding a local police department's administrative decisions. However, he says his collaboration with ProPublica has given him the ability, and more importantly, the time to report those stories in 2018, fulfilling journalism's role as a watchdog.

As discussed, collaboration is not a new concept, but news organizations have begun to take it much more seriously in the last 10 to 15 years, as the overall economic outlook facing news organizations has become more grim (Steiger, 2010). Additionally, collaboration can be used as an instrument to fulfill journalistic roles and missions. The nexus between a powerful investigation and the right publishing partner can lead to impact, which is often the goal of work published by investigative outlets (Steiger, 2010). An investigation can be powerful and jaw-dropping, but if it is not seen by the right audience, then it may not pack the intended punch. Paul Steiger, the founding editor-in-chief of ProPublica, also noted, at least observationally, that collaborative initiatives are more likely to come from a mission-driven non-profit than a for-profit news organization. Collaboration alone cannot solve all of the problems facing the media industry, but some

scholars think it can be a strong element in the future of news (de la Serna, 2018; Steiger, 2010; Eads, 2018; Stonbely, 2017; Carson & Farhall, 2018).

But collaboration can also have some drawbacks and roadblocks (Hatcher & Thayer, 2016; Carson & Farhall, 2018). One study of a collaboration between journalism and engineering students found that the students struggled with differing communication styles and schedules, but ultimately, both student groups felt the collaboration was a net positive (Hultén & Picha Edwardsson, 2017). Other problems include unclear ideas of what the partnership would entail and a lack of understanding, guidelines or a contract (Hatcher & Thayer, 2016). There is also a danger that collaboration may reduce the number of diverse investigative stories that are being done (Carson & Farhall, 2018; Steiger, 2010), but at this point, that reality seems unlikely to truly create an impact on what stories are being covered.

However, every part of the journalistic process includes some level of collaboration (Mills, 2018; Sanchez, 2018). A reporter's relationship with their editor— or editors—is a collaboration. Sometimes the reporter will have story ideas, or other times the editor will assign out stories. Employees in one single newsroom are often working toward the same goal. In investigative newsrooms, the goal is often to serve as the watchdog and hold the powerful accountable. Working with photographers, videographers, audience engagement producers, lawyers and more—all of those steps and rounds of edits are collaborative (Mills, 2018; Sanchez, 2018). But working within a newsroom is collaborative, even if it isn't labeled as a collaboration.

Working with freelancers is similarly collaborative. Therefore, hesitations around the newness of a collaborative partnerships should be void. That may be reductive, and

certainly collaborations between newsrooms will need additional attention, time and planning. Yet, if collaborations across newsrooms are framed as an extension of the daily routines that already take place at news organizations, then that could provide an additional push for hesitant newsroom leaders who have not yet embraced collaboration as a strategy to solve many of the perils facing the industry and to increase the amount of meaningful investigative journalism that is published.

Journalism's Watchdog Role

If more investigative collaborations take place, it will create more journalism that fulfills the watchdog role (Christians et. al, 2009; Eads, 2018). Serving as a watchdog is arguably one of journalism's most critical roles and can be attributed to maintaining democracy (Christians, 2009). A common refrain among investigative journalists is to "afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted." This role allows for mechanisms to holding public officials to account, as well as surveilling the sociopolitical environment (Christians et. al, 2009). However, one main obstacle is that the media is restricted by its own economic and institutional contexts. Economic and institutional contexts eventually create routines, and those routines may eventually be able to accommodate collaborative partnerships and practices. Regardless, the watchdog role is vital to journalism and vital to democracy. The economic conditions facing the industry have led to routines that do not always or necessarily emphasize the watchdog role. If collaborative partnerships are implemented into a wide number of routines across news organizations, greater watchdog accountability can be done.

Theory

News Routines

As a practice and a theoretical framework, news routines are one way journalists can process the vast amounts of information they receive and interpret on a daily basis (Vlad & Becker, 2009; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996; Tuchman, 1973). Often, routines create clear delineations (Sigal, 1973). A news organization's coverage area is often well-defined, unless an extraordinary event takes place. Within the newsroom, roles are well-integrated into its news routines. Editors serve different functions than reporters. Photographers serve different roles than copy editors. Beats also serve to further clarify which roles journalists are called upon to fill and create a structure within the newsroom (Vlad & Becker, 2009). Beats also allow for journalists to develop expertise and specialized skills (Vlad & Becker, 2009). Understanding how news routines operate, and what they emphasize, is a necessary part of the research process to see how collaborative practices can be implemented.

Although news routines are generally unchanging, advancements in technology have changed the routines, or at the very least, added additional steps in the routine (Usher, 2014; McIntosh, 2008). A researcher shadowing several reporters from the New York Times found that incorporating new elements to a story, like video, did change routines (Usher, 2014). Getting photos for a story has been part of the news production process for more than 50 years, but at the Times—a print news organization—adding a video to a story does change the process (Usher, 2014). If a video will be shot, the reporter might need to schedule in-person interviews and clear with interviewees that a camera will be present and more. It is significant that, as news organizations become more multimedia-oriented, that routines do become longer, even if they are not

transformed. In addition, this research shows that routines can change in order to cater to audiences.

The internet and social media have also played a role in changing news routines, even if they have not completely transformed (Ferrucci et.al, 2017; McIntosh, 2008; Usher, 2014). In the case of the researcher shadowing New York Times reporters, one reporter covering financial news was able to prewrite a story with one company's quarterly earnings, only needing to fill in the exact figures once the press release came through (Usher, 2014). The reporter's explanation for prewriting was simple: he knew when the press release was coming out, and if he prewrote the story, it could be published quickly online (Usher, 2014). Wanting to be the first to publish has long been a part of competitive journalistic routines (Beam & Di Cicco, 2010; Vlad & Becker, 2009), but the age of the internet does not need to wait for the printing press to distribute news. The internet's printing press is ready to go at all times, whenever a story breaks. This case study ultimately shows that routines can be changed, but it does not quite get into how, which is one gap this research project will aim to fill. Though the extra steps added to the routine for video is not a fundamentally new routine for news as an industry, it did change routines at that organization. Collaboration can likely find wider, mainstream implementation in a similar way, which this project seeks to understand.

Research on news routines generally fits into three differing perspectives: political economy, sociology and cultural constraints (Vlad & Becker, 2009; Herman & Chomsky, 1998; Epstein, 1973; Chalaby, 1996; Schudson, 2002). Most research on news construction is born out of the sociological perspective, and therefore seeks to understand how organizational theory and occupational theory impact news production. This

professional project will focus on the sociological perspective because it seeks to understand the outside forces pressing upon routines, along with their structure and function. Schudson, one of the most notable scholars on news production, says the political economy and cultural approaches have neglected social realities involved in news production (2005). However, social organization, political economy and culture have all played a role in shifts of news production routines (Schudson, 2005).

There is no one explanation for the current media environment, and while there are several notable events that have changed the landscape, understanding the current environment requires looking at all these factors in amalgamation. (Schudson, 2005; de la Serna, 2018). De la Serna recognizes the confluence of factors that have led to this moment where collaboration can be used as a powerful tool moving forward:

Traditional news media, nonprofit organizations, journalism schools, and other information producers are taking advantage of opportunities created by the combination of decentralized, networked, and traditional models for news production and dissemination to work together, create shared resources, and advance their work. The cooperation of multiple organizations and individuals to address journalistic challenges is happening at a scale that no single organization could replicate by itself (de la Serna, 2018).

Additionally, Schudson notes that news production is where "news sources, news reporters, news organization editors and the competing demands of professionalism, the market-place, and cultural traditions collect around the specific choices of what news to report and how to report it" (2005, pg. 175). Many, many forces have shaped news routines, and understanding those forces is an avenue to see opportunities for

collaborations to shift, modernize and invigorate news routines. Regardless, a new era of collaboration seems to be unfolding within journalism (de la Serna, 2018).

A key text from sociological perspective is Epstein's study of how the three major television networks structured newsgathering (1973). Even though the networks see each other as competitors, the routines of the organizations did not seem to vary. On the national level, news organizations must consider how the geographic placement of its teams can impact what is covered. During Epstein's period of study, they found that 90 percent of NBC national news coverage was produced in five major cities because that's where NBC had news crews (1973). This is one reason why local-national collaborative partnerships could disrupt current routines and lead to coverage that is a mirror of reality, and not a construction of reality. Additionally, many of the larger newsrooms that create collaborative frameworks that will be the focus of this study are in major metropolitan areas like Washington D.C., New York or San Francisco and the Bay Area. It is impossible for one news organization to be everywhere, but a collaborative partnership can allow for high-quality investigations to come from areas outside of the country's largest cities. Epstein's work shows the importance of how news processes are constructed and how routines are affects the news audiences ultimately consume. Because of this, journalists and researchers must think critically about what existing news routines emphasize and prioritize.

Furthermore, a relatively homogenous routine tends to be a theme across news organizations. News routines are generally considered to be unchanging, even across different news organizations, platforms and companies (Vlad & Becker, 2009; McIntosh, 2008; Ferrucci et.al, 2017). A push toward the wide integration of collaborative practices

within news routines could lead to a shift in the understanding of news routines as a

theoretical framework. Moving toward combining mainstream journalism with

collaborative principles could "re-energize the public sphere through news" (McIntosh,

2008). Vlad and Becker argue that news routines are largely homogenous because they

do not vary across time, place or organization (2009). This is perhaps the largest

challenge that collaborative partnerships face, but routines can be adapted.

Additionally, not much research has been done on how news production has

changed since the 1970s (Ferrucci et. al, 2017). While those scholars specifically

highlight a lack of ethnographic work looking at news production in the last 50 years,

using semi-structured interviews to understand how collaboration may have changed

news routines could provide insight into this research gap.

There is tension among scholars over whether news is a construction of reality or

a mirror of it—and which of the two it should be. For instance, Schudson says news is a

construction of reality (2005). Routines themselves are constructed, so it is no surprise

they lead to constructions (Epstein, 1973). But perhaps it should be a mirror of reality

when it comes to investigative journalism that fulfills the watchdog role.

Collaborative work and practices aim to share knowledge and broaden the

network of an individual (Harris, 2011; Murthy, 2015; Meltzer & Martik, 2017). Through

a framework of communities of practice, collaboration deemphasizes the contributions of

an individual and instead focuses on the shared practice of being effective in a given

domain (Meltzer & Martik, 2017). The practice strives to break down an individual's

"worlds of networks and information sources" (Harris, 2011, pg. 157) and make those

networks and information sources more widely shared.

Journalism, like many industries, struggles to change quickly, but the structure of many news routines does not encourage collaborative practices (Møller Hartley, 2017; Hatcher & Thayer, 2016; Zelizer, 2018). News organizations are competing for audience and advertiser attention while producing content that does not inform or engage audience members (Hatcher & Thayer, 2016). Institutional news routines still place emphasis on being the first to break a story, intense monitoring of other outlets and having the high-level sources. One scholar noted coverage of Brexit and Donald Trump's campaign for the presidency "emblematized journalism's failure to serve the electorate by not providing necessary information" (Zelizer, 2018, pg. 149). From an axiological perspective, news routines need reform to better serve audiences, and collaboration could be one way to foster new news routines.

Conclusion

Collaboration is one potential solution to many problems facing journalism. News organizations should opt to see each other not as competitors but as collaborators. Of course, not every story should be collaborative, but when appropriate, collaboration should be considered, and ideally, implemented. Competition is a well-integrated part of news routines and the landscape of journalism. However, the true competition is not between news organizations, but rather the forces pressing on journalism: misinformation, economic pressure, media trust and more.

A well-structured and well-done collaboration allows for news organizations to harness their collective power and to create something more commanding than one organization could do by itself. Collaboration is one way a rising tide could lift all boats.

Practically, understanding how collaborations work is an extension of the collaborative process, which emphasizes the sharing of both knowledge and skills. Participating in an effective collaboration is a skill and in keeping with the spirit of collaboration, should not be kept among a small group of news organizations and individuals.

News routines are generally considered to be unchanging across time, organization and medium (Becker & Vlad, 2009). However, implementing collaboration could disrupt those routines and potentially shift the understanding of news routines as a theory. In addition, journalism within one news organization is already collaborative, so participating in a collaboration between newsrooms is just an extension of existing routines.

Overall, the body of research regarding journalistic collaborations is underdeveloped and has not yet reached saturation. However, the timeline of completing academic research is lengthy, and journalistic collaborations have only gained momentum in the last few years. Much of the research on collaboration does not look at the process of structuring a collaboration and how news routines are adapted to account for partnerships. The research seems largely seems to be retrospective. The body of academic research on investigative collaborations is even smaller. However, journalistic trade publications like Poynter, Nieman Lab and the Columbia Journalism Review have examined collaborations more holistically. Trade publications have looked at how to create a collaborative partnership more frequently than academics have. But there is still plenty of room to examine how newsrooms can best collaborate to create investigative

work, fulfilling one of journalism's key roles as a watchdog and enforcer of accountability.

       Additionally, little is known about how the news production process has changed since the 1970s, and few ethnographies have been conducted in the nearly 50 years between then and now (Ferrucci et.al, 2017). Given how much journalism has changed, both from a business perspective and a distribution perspective, this topic clearly needs more academic attention and analysis.

Chapter 3: Professional Analysis

In the fall of 2017, the nonprofit investigative newsroom ProPublica launched a new initiative: the Local Reporting Network. The collaborative investigative program was created to counteract the "economic pressures that have reduced the ability of local and regional news organizations to support accountability reporting." The program's conceit is that if local newsrooms can't afford accountability and investigative reporting, ProPublica will pay for the salary and benefits of a local reporter for a year to work on an overarching project. The program began with funding from a three-year grant and solicited applications from news organizations in cities with populations below 1 million residents. Later cohorts of the Local Reporting Network have not had the same stipulations, but nevertheless, the collaborative investigative project has scaled quickly. In 2018, there were seven projects, then in 2019, more grant support came in, leading to 14 projects in the first half of the year. Then another grant meant the Local Reporting Network could grow to 22 projects in the latter half of the year. The first half of 2020 has 23 total projects. Overall, the Local Reporting Network has quickly gained notoriety as one of the premier mechanisms for local-national investigative collaborations.

If local reporters are selected to join the Local Reporting Network after an application and interview process, a given reporter is assigned to a ProPublica editor, who guides their project. They may also work with ProPublica's departments: engagement, audience, research, data, news applications and production. Staff on the ProPublica side has grown as the project has scaled, and resource allocation has become a more crucial question as the total number of projects has more than tripled.

The reporter spends their whole grant year working on the project they pitched with the aim of producing several stories throughout the year, though exactly how many

stories are expected has fluctuated over time and depends on the project's material. The goal of the Local Reporting Network is to free reporters, primarily at newspapers, from daily news routines that do not typically allow for stories that take three or six months to come together. At ProPublica, however, a monthslong, or even yearlong, investigation is the norm.

Additionally, it should be noted that the author of this analysis began working for ProPublica's Local Reporting Network in the fall of 2019. It provided unique access to interviewees and an enriched understanding of the challenges and successes of local national investigative collaborations.

As a nonprofit investigative newsroom, ProPublica's key performance indicator is not traffic or donations (though those things are nice), but rather impact. Was a given law changed? Did such-and-such wrongdoer resign? These metrics are hard to achieve, likely tying to the length of time it takes to create the investigations that hopefully lead to change.

ProPublica's Local Reporting Network is not the only local-national investigative collaboration model. Not all collaborations and newsrooms can wait for the benevolence of a kind grantor. While this professional analysis primarily focuses on the Local Reporting Network, it also examines a program from Reveal from the Center for Investigative Reporting that can facilitate local-national collaborative investigations at a lower cost of resources and staffing.

Collaborative investigative projects can serve as a boon to states that are historically undercovered when it comes to accountability stories. Connor Sheets is an investigative reporter for AL.com, the largest news organization in Alabama. Sheets is

also one of the only investigative reporters for AL.com, and outside of his organization, he says there are only a few other investigative reporters across the state. Sheets has worked at AL.com for the last five years and was a part of ProPublica's Local Reporting Network in 2019.

Given his experience, Sheets was already accustomed to the length, pace and rigor of investigative coverage. He didn't have to transition from traditional beat coverage into monthslong investigative work. But Sheets did acknowledge there was an adjustment from the rigor of an AL.com story to the rigor of a ProPublica story. Sheets also had to adjust to the nuance of differing editorial perspectives of the two organizations. ProPublica measures success for projects as impact. But AL.com, due to the small number of investigative reporters across Alabama and his organization, views it as better to have more stories covering many topics instead of the "perfect impact on one topic," Sheets said.

"I want to hit an issue, move on, maybe do some follow ups to get it out so we can go on to another issue, because there's so much stuff" to cover, Sheets said. However, his ProPublica editor was rigorous about selecting just the right character to center a story around. Sheets says that some potential stories he could've done while a part of the Local Reporting Network didn't make it past his ProPublica editor because the story didn't have characters that his editor believed were the perfect example for the topic. He conceded that the threshold for publishing was much higher at ProPublica than at AL.com. Sheets said he believes this perspective can have diminishing returns, even if it could've potentially led to more impact. All things being equal, if Sheets had just been working on those stories for AL.com, he says he would've been able to pursue and

publish those stories. Sheets described this as a fundamental editorial viewpoint of AL.com: the organization's stories do not need to reach the same level of longform investigative journalism as ProPublica's, but they focus on cutting their losses and getting the best story out there as possible so they can move on to a new topic. This chasm is a difference in culture and resources, but it's not insurmountable. Sheets called this gap a big difference in editorial perspectives, but he also said "I just don't know how you avoid that though, and it's probably one of the biggest things that any local-national partnership has an issue with."

Sheets highlighted a relationship in his collaborative investigative project that is rarely articulated but highly important: the relationship between his ProPublica editor and his AL.com editor. Sheets says the editors got along "exceptionally well," which streamlined his workflow. The editors agreed very early on that Sheets would never get an edit that only one of them had looked at, so there was never any conflicting feedback. And even earlier on in the editorial process, around the assigning editor phase, if there was disagreement between the two editors, they would talk first, get on the same page, then give feedback to Sheets. Generally they'd speak over a phone call. A positive and collaborative relationship between editors at partner organizations made workflows a lot less complicated.

However, there were small amounts of friction between AL.com and ProPublica. One friction point Sheets named was that his Local Reporting Network stories on the AL.com website needed to have a short editor's note at the top of stories:

> *This article was produced in partnership with the [ProPublica Local Reporting Network](#).*

ProPublica is a nonprofit newsroom that investigates abuses of power. Sign up for ProPublica's [Big Story](#) newsletter to receive stories like this one in your inbox as soon as they are published.

For context, ProPublica's "north star" metric in 2019 was reaching a certain number of newsletter subscribers, and Sheets highlighted a lack of communication about the context behind the ask. Instead, he only knew that it was an ask of him. These newsletter subscription call-to-actions were supposed to be included across collaborative partners, like Local Reporting Network members, and when news organizations republished ProPublica stories using its creative commons license. However, there was little oversight to see if this actually happened and few repercussions if it was not included. Sheets said that his AL.com editor was "not happy" about having to include that call to action at the top of stories, but Sheets said he would defer to ProPublica's request because AL.com was technically not paying him while he was in the Local Reporting Network.

Ken Ward Jr. is a self-described ProPublica fanboy who was a part of the Local Reporting Network in 2018 and 2019. He was working at the Charleston Gazette Mail both years, as well as the previous 26 years before that. In spring of 2020, he left the Gazette Mail to start a "nonprofit, civic, investigative news organization" in West Virginia. He said he came across applications for the program and encouraged other journalists at his paper to apply. But in the end, he was encouraged to apply by the newsroom's leadership as a "backstop if the paper went under."

In his first year of the collaborative investigation, he reported on fracking in West Virginia, something he'd wanted to do a project on for many years, but a number of

roadblocks had stood in his way. He would run into stops and starts as he tried to handle typical daily newspaper news routines. The project would be put on the backburner in the event of breaking news. Before participating in the Local Reporting Network, the expenses and logistics of overnight travel became less and less feasible as the paper's financial outlook got worse. "Having this kind of contractual agreement where this is what Ken has to work on really gave us the opportunity to spend the whole year focused on that in a way that I'm confident we wouldn't have otherwise," Ward said.

However, there are other models that can yield local-national investigative collaborations. At Reveal from The Center for Investigative Reporting, engagement reporter Byard Duncan has figured out a relatively low-lift way to more evenly distribute the resources between local and national newsrooms. Reveal's Reporting Networks came to be after several reporters were working on an investigation into workplace rehab in the spring of 2018.

"Every time our reporters published a new story, there was an influx of tips," Duncan said. "It became pretty clear pretty quickly that they wouldn't be able to tell all these local stories." Duncan worked on an infrastructure to share more local tips with local reporters, while Reveal focused on the national angle. In comparison to ProPublica's Local Reporting Network, Reveal's Reporting Networks have a very low barrier to entry. Filling out a simple form will allow journalists to be a part of the network and gaining its tips. However, there is a key difference between ProPublica's Local Reporting Network and Reveal's Reporting Networks. ProPublica publishes stories from the Local Reporting Network on its website as a ProPublica product. Reveal doesn't, and it doesn't not classify stories generated from the networks as a Reveal product.

Data from another investigation about rape clearance rates--already a collaboration with ProPublica and Newsy -- indisputably showed that the news organizations were looking at a problem that was pervasive across the country. The investigation from Reveal, ProPublica and Newsy focused on Austin, Texas, which had the highest rape clearance rate in the country without actually solving rape cases. National organizations often focus their investigation on a place where their specific problem is the worst. Just as often, local organizations may not necessarily mind that their community is, for instance, the fourth worst in a national ranking. Duncan says they are more likely to care that there is an issue prevalent in their community.

Duncan created a reporting network for the rape clearance investigation and also realized the networks could be an approach to every investigation. He began thinking about the potential for networks earlier on in the reporting process. But even Duncan had limitations. He was the only person working on the reporting networks, and it is not the only aspect of his job. So he wanted to streamline and automate his infrastructure as much as possible. He was managing separate Google Forms, spreadsheets and email lists for each Reporting Network. Instead of having separate digital communities for each network, Duncan consolidated the reporting networks in the spring of 2019. That way, any reporter who signed up for one reporting network was given access to all of them. The challenges and roadblocks of the reporting networks are familiar across collaborative projects. Duncan wants to improve the ratio of journalists who have signed up for the networks to the ratio of people who complete a story. One aspect of the networks is training materials like webinars. "I expect maybe two stories from a webinar that has 35 people," Duncan said. "I want to improve that."

Another roadblock is convincing reporters that a story has essentially landed in their laps. Duncan says he tried to design the networks in a way that reporters are set up at the "two-yard line." He tries to emphasize that the story is almost done and a reporter hasn't even started yet. After a reporter expresses interest in doing a story with a tip from the network, Duncan will try and get on the phone with their editor if he can. He'll talk about successful case studies and offer insight into expectations and time commitment while working on building trust with the editor. If editors serve as gatekeepers to a reporter's time, Duncan wants to win them over. He argues local editors should view collaborations as an "opportunity to augment and improve their capacities."

The networks enable something Reveal calls crowbar pieces: a story that wedges a topic open, and ideally leads to impact. Duncan says that as an organization, Reveal likes encouraging the production of crowbar pieces. The organization also finds that its investment into the reporting networks pays off. About once or twice a year, Reveal will create an episode of its radio show highlighting the stories that local journalists have done through the networks, closing the feedback loop of collaboration.

In the spring of 2020, Duncan says there are eight reporting networks that have yielded more than 40 stories from local partners. There are more than 1,000 journalists in the networks. Duncan says by combining all the networks into one access point, it led to something like a cross-pollination. The networks cover a diverse range of topics, so a diverse pool of journalists signed up. Immigration reporters would notice other networks, leading them to produce stories they might not have otherwise worked on. Duncan sees the networks as an opportunity to bridge the gap between the haves and the have-nots of journalism.

Technology and Collaboration

Along with the pervasive idea of competition within journalism, collaborations also face challenges from technical infrastructures that shape the modern world. The logistics involved with collaborations are a critical part of a collaboration's success, and canonical URLs — which signify an original version of a story and help drive search traffic — are an undercovered area within collaborative journalism.

"We have not come up with a good metadata framework to indicate that there are two equally important sources of information on the internet," Meg Marco, senior editor for audience at ProPublica, said. Existing metadata structures state that there is one author for a given article, which disincentivizes collaborating across organizations. Canonical URLs affect both traffic to news organizations and their domain authority — the way Google rates a given website — which again can affect how search engines are interpreting work from news organizations. Marco says arbitrary and unnecessary decisions by search engines require a hierarchy when there's no hierarchy.

In addition, collaborative projects should also consider how they will address things like off-platform traffic. Presumably news organizations will manage their own social media for collaborative projects, but this is a discussion of platforms specifically like Apple News, SmartNews, Flipboard, Pocket or other similar news aggregators and traffic drivers. In the local-national investigation collaborative relationship, it can be generally assumed that national organizations are more likely to have better relationships with these platforms. A secondary assumption would be that national organizations would be more likely to see traffic from these platforms because of existing relationships with these platforms. At ProPublica, a story being featured prominently on one of these

platforms can lead to hundreds of thousands, or even millions, of page views. How will news organizations participating in a collaboration handle off-platform traffic? Will it lead to an every-man-for-himself situation, thus somewhat contradicting the purpose of collaborating?

"There are so many things you can do with journalism from a technical publishing perspective that you should just try to figure that out ahead of time," Marco said.

Clarity around these questions is crucial for successful collaborations. Each organization should develop their own guidelines and practices. Then, when entering a collaboration, all involved organizations should lay their cards on the table to see if any practices are in opposition and if solutions should be reached. If differences are too large and unmovable, perhaps a collaboration should not be pursued. But arguably, it's better to know that up front than to put time, energy and resources into collaborating.

Differing business models between news organizations may disincentivize collaboration as well. If a nonprofit newsroom with no paywall collaborates with a for-profit organization that puts all its work behind one, collaboration Will the for-profit put the collaborative project behind its paywall or will they make an exception? Will the nonprofit have firm rules that they only collaborate when the collaborative product will be available for free? Or will they allow partner organizations to make their own choices? Each news organization interested in collaborating will have to determine and understand their own boundaries, and whether those boundaries are flexible.

For instance, nearly all of ProPublica's work is available for other news organizations to republish under creative commons. Only in very specific and agreed-upon-in-advance circumstances is work excluded from the creative commons license.

Roadblocks in Collaboration

The largely streamlined experience between local and national editors that Sheets had was not always mirrored by other reporters in the Local Reporting Network, who named competing feedback from editors as a primary roadblock of their time in the collaborative program.

Christain Sheckler, a reporter at the South Bend Tribune in Indiana, spoke about crushing amounts of editor feedback. Chronologically, Sheckler participated in the Local Reporting Network before Sheets, which may explain their differeing experiences here. He said there were probably eight different editors involved in his stories, which were also co-reported with ProPublica reporter Ken Armstrong. Three editors gave feedback on the South Bend side, and five different ProPublica editors weighed in on stories on the ProPublica side. Sheckler says many editors would often offer conflicting feedback and provide different concepts of how ideas should be tackled in their first story, a 10,000 word narrative. For subsequent stories, the editors changed course. They talked through edits amongst themselves, debated, then presented a more unified list of edits. This streamlined feedback loop helped Sheckler adjust to the unfamiliar workflow. He said he also gained a lot from working with Armstrong, a veteran investigative reporter. Being paired with a ProPublica reporter is relatively rare in Local Reporting Network partnership, but it was a huge boon to Sheckler, as he had never envisioned and executed an investigative project before participating in the collaboration.

The first 10,000 word narrative piece that they led the series with was new territory to him and he'd never done anything on that scale. Sheckler is accustomed to turning in a story every day to meet the news routines established by putting out a paper

everyday. His time in the Local Reporting Networking was a slow drip of research, reporting, writing and rewriting. With the first story, Sheckler and Armstrong would tackle their reporting, turn in a draft, then editors would tell them to do more reporting to build out other sections of the story. Sheckler called it a long process of repeating steps. But working with Armstrong helped him close that skills gap. The two men talked for several hours every day. Sheckler described it as a "constant conversation throughout the day about what's going on." With Sheckler in South Bend and Armstrong in Seattle, they shared "a cubicle via phone and Google Docs."

Sheckler, Armstrong and their ProPublica editor for the Local Reporting Network mapped out the stories the group thought they would tackle at the beginning of Sheckler's time in the collaborative program. But Sheckler said they didn't do as many stories as he thought they would. Stretches of time between stories and total number of stories being fewer than reporters hoped was another challenge heard during data collection.

Jayme Fraser was a participant in the first year of the Local Reporting Network as a reporter for the Malheur Enterprise in Oregon. Fraser has participated in other collaborative projects -- both partnering across newspapers owned by the same company and working with journalism students. But she said her time in the Local Reporting Network did require much more time devoted to remote communication, with the majority of ProPublica's staff based in New York. She said this also caused the need for pieces of the overall project to be much more defined:

> *If you're in the same room with someone, it's easier to kind of be flexible*
> *and roll with the punches. But if you're in a different time zone and you don't*

necessarily ever see these people face to face, you have to be much more explicit

about what the expectations are for each partner in the project.

Ken Ward Jr. also touched on this issue. He said he'd get an email from a

ProPublica staffer and had no idea who had reached out with a request and what team

they were on. Fraser also says collaboration is smoother when all team members are clear

on expectations. An understanding of how much work is required from each partner will

provide clarity and ideally a smoother workflow. It also requires more buy-in from

people who aren't necessarily involved in the collaboration.

Local-national investigative collaborations need contextual framing for local and

national audiences. But they also need internal framing within newsrooms to encourage

collaborations. News routines are inherently collaborative. Journalists work together all

day across their newsrooms without calling it collaboration or thinking of it as such. The

reporter and editor relationship is collaborative, as is the editor and photo editor

relationship or the reporter and the audience team. (Whether or not these relationships are

collaborative does not speak to if they are positive, or whether or not existing news

routines could be more collaborative.) News products, whether a paper, website or

broadcast, do not exist without a shared interest and differing skills. The morning

meeting is a collaboration, even though it can feel like editors talking from on

high. Fraser says daily collaborative processes have become so routine that those patterns

have become instinctual for journalists. Journalists need to be a little more deliberate

when working across newsrooms since most have not flexed that muscle in that way. But

often, the same fundamental routines are unfolding and newsrooms must communicate to

find where their routines can best overlap to create collaborative investigative journalism.

Fraser echoed ideas named by both local and national participants in collaborative investigative projects. It's good to agree on goals in the beginning of a collaboration, so that editing is smooth later. Naming and frequently reiterating a shared focus can help guide team members across disciplines and news organizations. "Hopefully everyone is focusing on the same thing," she said. But as a concession, Fraser says it is easier for ProPublica and local news organizations to collaborate since they are not competitors. However, that does call for slightly different framing for local and national audiences. This can be solved by adding context to reporting, so it focuses more on larger themes when relevant.

In addition, the need for clear communication across newsroom partners is more important than ever in a collaboration. Fraser suggests it can be a worthwhile endeavor to designate point people to communicate between the partners to streamline that process.

Gains From Collaborating

Local reporters who participated in the Local Reporting Network named many gains they felt from participating in the project. Fraser, Sheets, Sheckler and Ward all cited that the time and space to work on a long-term project as the biggest benefit. Sheets, the only previously full-time investigative reporter of the bunch, says he didn't devote as much time to a single story as he did when he was in the Local Reporting Network. He also said his own rigor for stories has increased. "Going through the ProPublica editing process really taught me how to do that myself on my own. When I turn in a story now, it's much more ready for a ProPublica-type publication." Sheets also says his fact-

checking process now is much more through than it was before he participated in the Local Reporting Network.

Aside from the financial gain the Gazette-Mail saw from participating in the Local Reporting Network, Ward described an almost intangible positive effect the project had on the rest of the newsroom. When Ward would meet with ProPublica staff on a video call across teams like video, engagement and news applications, they would all tell him "I'm so excited about your project" to the point where Ward wondered if ProPublica staff was given a script to use when talking to him. But he says their enthusiasm was genuine, and it reverberated throughout the Gazette Mail. Copy editors would come in on the weekend to get a piece of editing Ward's Local Reporting Network stories. In 2018, as he was in the collaborative investigative project, the paper went through bankruptcy and a sale. Coworkers were worrying about their job security and the job security of their peers. But Ward suggests that his colleagues were able to get through this period by finding ways to pitch in on the collaborative project, reminding them "why they were in that newsroom in the first place.

"I think that's really one of the things that collaboration can do. Help everybody remind everybody else that despite storm clouds that are gathering, we're here to serve the readers and do the story."

Other takeaways come from ProPublica's specialized teams. In his first year in the Local Reporting Network, Ward worked closely with ProPublica's engagement reporting team, and specifically with engagement reporter Beena Raghavendran. Raghavendran says an important part of her job is… explaining what her job actually is to Local Reporting Network partners. That way, they can decide together if a specific

project would benefit from engagement reporting. Here's how Raghavendran's boss, engagement editor Ariana Tobin defines engagement reporting in a [recent Nieman Lab article](#):

> "Sometimes you get evidence through the tiny corner of a forgotten public record that you cleverly request. Sometimes a deep background source tells you something and leads you to someone else. But sometimes, for stories about big systemic harms, what you really need is lots of people pointing you in the same direction, or who can share multiple pieces of evidence that add up to something larger and more compelling. It's taking individual stories, combining them, and adding some journalistic muscle."

Raghavendran says she uses a few different questions to decide if she and a Local Reporting Network partner should embark on an engagement reporting project together: What is their biggest challenge? Is there anything their community can give them to help their reporting? How crucial is that to their reporting? These questions become increasingly important as ProPublica's Local Reporting Network has grown and scaled quickly, but staffing has not scaled at the same rate. But she does offer a caveat that not all projects have engagement reporting potential. In working closely with Ward, Raghavendran brought a new perspective to the reporting. She took a crowdsourced trip through the entire state where she asked West Viriginians where she should go and what she should do to learn more about the state. Ward opted not to come on the trip, so Raghavendran could find new sources to enrich their reporting. Ward says the community-powered reporting led by Raghavendran has stayed with him even though he didn't work with her directly in 2019. He says she asked questions he would not have

thought of, even though he's been reporting on West Virginia for more than 25 years. At his new reporting outfit, Ward will work with Report for America fellows. Report for America is a similar program meant to place younger reporters in local newsrooms across the country. Some are traditional reporter positions, but one posting is for an engagement reporter, an posting he tied directly to his experience working with Raghavendran.

Quilt Journalism

One aim more generally of local-national collaborations is to avoid so-called parachute journalism where national reporters arrive from New York or Washington to a smaller, less covered place with no sense of context or history. These stories pop up constantly, across varying topics, but the friction point is overwhelmingly the same. Whether through lazy stereotyping or lack of cultural knowledge, coverage yielded through parachute journalism is not wholly accurate to the local. The Local Reporting Network and Reveal's Reporting Networks are collaborative programs meant to counteract extractive parachute journalism. In the end, they aim to achieve something new, something built by the expertise of national journalists and the place and cultural expertise of local journalists. Call it quilt journalism, something greater than the sum of its parts when well-executed. Local expertise paired with national resources

The local journalists interviewed in this project said that largely, their local expertise was respected by ProPublica. National journalists were not trying to steamroll them or extract a good story and skedaddle. The stories created through the Local Reporting Network simply would not exist if not for the insight of local partners and the resources of ProPublica. In fact, several local reporters highlighted in their interviews that they were so accustomed to certain parts of their communities that things that were

outrageous seemed normalized to them. Sheckler said that community outsiders --

ProPublica's staff -- were interested in and outraged by some things happening in South

Bend. As an example, he said some agencies or judges historically hadn't wanted to give

out certain public records, using what Sheckler called a "very flimsy reasoning that

probably isn't really maybe violating" Indiana public records law. But because of the

constraints of his daily newspaper news routines, he said he and his colleagues never

really gave this issue much more thought other than "they're up to their old tricks again."

But once ProPublica staff learned of the intricacies of the situation, they were outraged

public officials and agencies would withhold the records. "It just sort of showed us… this

isn't something we have to accept as business as usual. It's worth fighting because it is

outrageous."

A through line in Sheckler's reporting was only found because he and ProPublica

requested years of records from a civilian oversight board meeting that no journalists

attended at the time. "When we're all so busy, sometimes things like attending a routine

meeting falls off the priority list. You can miss things that are really good stories." But if

news routines do not allow for attendance at every civil oversight board meeting, or

something similar, Sheckler now knows to file records requests for the documents tied to

an agency's decision making.

Advice for Collaborating

Everyone interviewed for this project suggested several ways that others could

iterate on their experiences for collaborative investigative programs. Some are easy

solutions. Ken Ward Jr. said that in his first year in the Local Reporting Network, he

would have benefitted from a guide to ProPublica with staff intros, team functions,

frequently asked questions, workflow and news routines outlines. A few weeks later, one was made and new partners still receive it.

But some solutions require deeper thought. Rachel Glickhouse, ProPublica's partnership manager, says national newsrooms need to invest in planning for collaborative projects. Additionally, she suggests there should be specific funding for the projects, whether it comes from a grant or earmarking it in a budget. Many national news organizations have opted not to make these choices, perhaps illuminating how difficult it can feel to begin a collaboration. She says not every collaboration needs to be as involved as the Local Reporting Network, and in her role, the collaborative projects she has managed look more like the Reveal Reporting Network.

Both Glickhouse and Marco highlighted the need for national organizations interested in collaborating to think of their stance on things like canonical URLs. While those technical considerations may not feel important at the outset, it'll make the work of collaboration easier once it begins and can affect traffic. Other things investigative collaborations need, according to Glickhouse? "You need a good plan, you need leadership and you need buy-in internally."

Duncan at Reveal says it's important to consider the pitch national organizations make to local reporters to participate in these programs. The perceived prestige of national organizations is not enough alone to bring participants in. Duncan says he tries to make the resources in Reveal's Reporting Networks as easy to understand as possible so "journalists look at it and cannot resist but to do a story." He extends himself as much as he can upfront "because that's your sales pitch." He touched on news routines too: "If

you want to collaborate successfully with local reporters, you need to understand their needs."

Collaborative investigative partnerships also tend to benefit from consistent staffing throughout. Reporters in the Local Reporting Network are expected to remain in their position during their whole grant year. But the workflow of the overall project may be helped by avoiding staffing changes on the ProPublica side. Another common advice refrain: over-communicate. Who's tackling what topic? How much are they contributing? How much can they contribute? How's the reporting going? What are the roadblocks? Answer all these questions and more. There is no personal pride in collaboration, only lack of communication. As most collaborative investigative reporting projects require remote communication, this is especially important. There is no swing by the editor's desk. Some aspects of collaboration are merely extensions of being a good colleague, Raghavendran said. If a local reporter is friendly and pleasant to work with, national staff will simply enjoy working with them.

Raghavendran also says national staff should work hard and be cognizant of bigfooting local reporters. Ward says this is important to him too. National staff needs to "bring to the table a willingness to understand local communities." But as seen by Ward and Sheckler, the other side of that coin is having new perspectives to cultural norms. Both men say their reporting was enriched by the new perspective of ProPublica staff, who saw things they couldn't see after being normalized to their communities.

However, as a contrast, Sheets said understanding the nuance of his state and community was an important part of resource allocation decisions made during the course of his project. Alabama's weak public records laws make it difficult to request

information about how sheriffs across the state handle a given issue. The benefit of making all those requests, that he says are unlikely to be filled, would not have been equal to the effort it would take. The roadblocks of local reporters are likely different from the challenges of ProPublica reporters and editors, so bringing that awareness to the table should clarify these decisions.

Taken together, interviewees for this project lay out both steps to take in collaborating and things to avoid. Steps to avoid in local national investigations feel somewhat more intangible, but there are still some takeaways there. While many factors tie into this, it's best not to having staffing changes on either the local or national side during the duration of the collaboration. National editors and staff should not attempt to oversimplify the nuance of the local areas they are covering through the local national partnership.

As for steps worth repeating, local reporters seemed to benefit from expectation setting early and often. If possible, have a project manager who can steer the ship and manage details. In the Local Reporting Network, a guide introducing workflows and key stake holders helped resolve confusion. While local partners do not need to create such a guide, they can and should outline their own editorial processes, so both partners understand the steps necessary for a story to be published. As seen by Sheets, the relationship between local and national editors in a collaboration is critical and should be managed with care by all parties. Futhermore, the expertise of each partner in a collaboration like the Local Reporting Network needs to be respected too. It's also advantageous to discuss potential constraints created by existing news routines. For instance, some newspaper partners in the Local Reporting Network have had to run

shorter versions of lengthy investigations because the physical paper cannot accommodate the length in inches of a story. And finally, clear and consistent communication throughout a collaboration is highly effective and encouraged.

ProPublica staff interviewed for this professional analysis also said that success metrics of collaborating are not yet set in stone. Collaborating is in ProPublica's DNA, unlike most national news organizations, Marco says, but in her work, she asks: "What are the smartest ways we can deploy collaborating so we're maximizing potential?"

Though it is not necessarily easy, simple or straightforward to collaborate, the journalists interviewed in this professional analysis say these efforts are worth it. The work created by these programs has resulted in impact across the country and accountability journalism, the profession's highest calling.

Before Ward left the Gazette Mail after more than 28 years, he was asked by new management, who is going to control the story that came from his ProPublica partnership? Ward's reply: "It's not about who controls the story. It's about everyone collaborating together to make the story that needs to be… Understanding that the goal is to produce a story that everyone is proud of and nobody was in control of is really important."

Appendix

Interview Transcripts

Meg Marco
Senior editor for audience, ProPublica
February 28, 2020

What considerations do you think national newsrooms should make when creating a

partnership like the Local Reporting Network?

Something I've noticed is that journalism that is about you should also be for you. I think

that gets lost at national publications. They'll go somewhere because something is an

outlier, particularly interesting. But they're not really able to execute on something that is

also for the people that it is about. And when you're choosing a partner, it's better to find

somebody who can do that, who can help you execute that. I think that's a really crucial

thing to do. Does it make it easier to collaborate? I think it does.

(The Local Reporting Network) has generally been pretty positive. There's overlapping

interest and different skills, which is sometimes a good thing for collaborating. If you

have folks that have the same interests and skill sets, they might compete. Even if they're

collaborating, they're still elbowing each other to the front of the story. When you find

folks with different skills but the same interests, you have a more fruitful collaboration,

I've heard you talk about this idea before that "everything happens somewhere."

Can you explain what you mean?

I think there's no such thing as local journalism because everything does happen

somewhere. Sometimes the place is incredibly important to the story. Sometimes it isn't.

It depends on really whether or not you're trying to illustrate a sort of interesting systemic problem or explore something that affects a very large and disparate amount of people by narrowing in on a place that helps communicate and explain what that is.

So that's a way in which local journalism can be understood for a national audience. The problem is that you do have to like add context, right? You can make assumptions like... signs on the side of a building that don't have area codes on them. And like you're in this place, and you're like, well, I would love to call and get a pizza here in wherever I am. But I don't know the area code, I don't know it and I shall not receive pizza. Little tiny things like that can completely derail your explanation of the problem, because you're just making assumptions about the way that people understand things.

The other kind of thing is where the place is really, really important, but the story is big enough that it matters to everybody. There are a lot of examples of this, but generally, something bad is happening and no one is paying attention. And if you want me to pay attention, you have to bring the context for me. There are two ways that it operates and depends on what kind of story you're doing.

Can you talk about canonical URLs and the role they can play in collaborative projects?

The way we have designed the digital landscape for journalistic publications is that we have things that are like websites. And the website, conceptually, is under a domain. And the way that search engines understand the internet is that it's a collection of different domains. And it's actually an arbitrary decision. We didn't have to organize the internet

this way, but we chose to. And so we said, one domain equals a new one news org. And in some cases, one subdomain equals one news org. TV stations are often organized like that. And then we decided we were going to co publish things. And the way that works on paper is that you have paper. And then you put the stuff on the paper, and then you send it to people and they have the paper, and it's fine. If it's also somewhere else and like syndicated news stuff, it's all fine because you have to physically be there. But like with the internet, that's that's not how it works. And we have not come up with a good metadata framework to indicate that there are two equal important sources of the information on the internet. And that's a problem.

My personal opinion is that it disincentivizes collaboration, if you have to say there's one source, and it's this domain, and everything else is syndicated off of that, and it's just problematic. It's hierarchical design when the situation is not a hierarchy, and that's being forced on us, by the way the internet is currently operated. That's not good. We should change it. I'm not charging the internet, sadly.

Are there other constraints that would affect collaborating?

News organizations all have different goals. They have different business strategies. Every organization has different priorities. And when you're collaborating between two organizations like, you know, their business sides might be sort of on odds, right? You know, one organization maybe has a hard paywall and the other organization gives all their journalism away is Creative Commons. There are few journalism organizations like that.

That cannot be an obvious fit. It requires some thinking by the people who are on the other side of the firewall to figure out what's the best publishing strategy. Then the next layer is the different tech companies that have different platforms, and they have their own set of metrics and goals and relationship with you that may be different from the relationship of the other newsroom they are collaborating with. And so it's like an onion of complexity.

It's kind of good to focus on what your main goal is and talk about that beginning of the collaboration so that you end up with a story and then all of a sudden, we're putting this behind a paywall, and we're putting this on this platform. There's so many things you can do with journalism from a technical like publishing perspective that you just just try to work it out ahead of time. Try to make a balanced like, you know, everybody gets half of what they want.

ProPublica's DNA is collaborating. There's broad understanding here that it's good for journalism to go out into the world and exist and be read. So I think it's easier here than other places to sort of say, this is a success. We collaborated with these folks and they had a success and it's all our shared success.

Beena Raghavendran
Engagement Reporter for the Local Reporting Network, ProPublica
February 12, 2020

You've been a part of the Local Reporting Network since the beginning. Can you talk about how it's grown and changed over time?

In 2018, we had seven partners then and our staff here was much smaller because we were also just trying to figure out like… We had a sense of like, this is what local reporters need to do investigations, and this is how we can support them using things that we already have specialty in at ProPublica. But I think that idea of what they need on the ground and understanding some of the challenges that they are dealing with in the day to day, and even the challenges that happen when you get one full year to report on an investigation, definitely have evolved over time.

I think we have definitely put more structure into how we do things. Even just like internally we have big team meetings now. We send out kind of like training manuals to the newsrooms when they start with a big welcome to ProPublica. Here's who everybody is. And then we also bring all the reporters here early in the year so that they can talk and brainstorm and discuss things together. And these were all things that we had in year one, but it sort of took trial and error to figure out like the most the things that were going to help them the most, because it is like, it's like a lot of things that we're trying to do. Like we're trying to onboard them into ProPublica, like quickly and efficiently so that we can start working on the stories. we have one year to produce the stories.

We have some reporters who have never done an investigative project or like do not do investigative reporting on the daily. And so in some ways, this is like the nexus of like

many challenges. And in that way, I think I'm very proud to be on the team because I think like year one is sort of when we realize to the extent of all of those things and I think we really have kind of kept building and growing with more structure. We've tried a lot of different communication styles. And I think we've also learned that there are different communication styles that work for different people. A lot of it is just like building relationships with collaborators, but because they're like all over the country, because we're dealing with time zones, because sometimes we're dealing with like, remote call software. And just like… iit really has been like the coolest thing to do. I'm proud of the work we did in year one, but I'm also proud of like, how we really, really took like, what happened in year one and like, we used it to grow. I think the really great work we've done is also a testament to us being nimble and being willing to change things and willing to try things differently.

How does your work change since it's for a local-national investigative project whereas most of ProPublica's work is on the national scale?

Part of my job has been figuring out, what does engagement reporting mean for a company that like ProPublica? Then how does that role if at all change when we're applying it strictly to local reporting? And I think the nuts and bolts of the role are the same. But I think in execution, it can look very different when you are trying to do like a hyper local project versus some of the other projects that we do where we're trying to find people who are part of a community that extends across the entire country. I think the work just by its nature is very different when you're doing it in a focused community. And I also think that another thing that comes with the job is explaining what this role looks like in its hyper local evolution to local reporters who might never have heard the

term engagement reporting before and need kind of a step by step explanation of what that looks like.

And then you have like, the third complicated layer of like, this is reporting. I mean, engage reporting is reporting. It's like things that you know, journalists I think to some extent have always done and incorporated into their work. I think the great thing about it now is like we actually have a lot of tools and structures and like a tool kit that we can use to do this work just in a more scalable way and like a more thorough way in our communities. And so communicating all of that, to local reporters is like an interesting part of the job that I didn't necessarily think I was going to step into.

What do you think local reporters have gained from working with you as an engagement reporter?

I think like the probably most visible example of that is Ken Ward at the Gazette Mail. When he had four Report for America positions, he's made one of them kind of a devoted engagement reporter position and was I think very complimentary of our work. I think it really clicked for him because of the work that we also did him in West Virginia in 2018, which was like, I took a crowdsourced trip through the entire state where I went to the community for suggestions on literally where I should go? And they helped me build this agenda. And I met 60 people, and it was like this huge road trip. Ken really wanted me to do that also without him because he was I have been covering this area for many, many years. And I already have my sources, but let's use this to find other people. And so there were all of these people who just kind of came out and said, like, I want to talk and we met some really great people along the way.

I think the work really resonated with him. As far as other folks who are like still using our structures, there are some people who get there's one reporter in particular, who has still a very like, like a wealth of sources from a call out. And I think that those are hopefully going to be helpful to him, because, you know, if he wants to continue reporting on any of this, like, there are still sources there that are kind of available and accessible to people.

What does the conversation look like between you and a local reporter when you're kind of deciding if you're going to work together in a more resource intensive way?

Since we have so many projects, we have to prioritize. And the way that we prioritize is like, I usually ask them what is like the biggest challenge that you foresee in your reporting? That's the first question. And then the second question is always like, if, if there's anything that the community could give you to help you do your reporting, what is that thing? And also how crucial is that to your story? Because for some projects, they can't really do their reporting without without getting these certain things from the community, whether that's like getting them to request documents or records that only members of the community have, or if it is sharing a specific experience or anecdote that only somebody who went through it is going to have this going to help us hold this, whatever institution accountable or this person accountable. But there are some cases that are engagement heavy.

For the biggest stories I always think like, can this story be told without us?

Can you talk a little more about the pros of the Local Reporting Network model?

I think the nice thing about the way the Local Reporting Network is structured is like there are grants that are coming on a cycle. And, reporters not only get our support, like… I feel like there are other of these like reporting networks out there that exist that don't come with the financial support. And so I think by giving reporters the financial support, we're not only like clearing their plates, but we're also saying, we are in this with you. This is a commitment both of us are going to make to like, really give this our all and like try our hardest and we are all in and we know that you are all in so like, let's do this to the best of our ability.

Because I think that that is a thing that you can run into sometimes with other collaborations that maybe are less formal, or maybe don't come with some sort of financial backing to them is like, you know, you sometimes I mean, life is busy and like especially like life in local newsrooms is like super, super busy, like I know that firsthand, and I know how to Sometimes these things can be hard to get done if you don't have a totally clear plate, which is, which is why I like this.

And perhaps that's a cornerstone of collaborations. If we are doing this and trying to do a proof of concept in the journalism world to say like, we should sort of shed our natural competitive skin and just work together, now that the industry has evolved in this way and especially local news has evolved this way. Like maybe doing it as a proof of concept to people, almost like an encouragement or the inspiration others hopefully to keep trying.

What advice do you have for national newsrooms interested in collaborating?

One piece of advice is like, don't assume that everybody's coming at it from the same starting point. Really try to put yourself in your partner's shoes and think holistically about some of the other factors that might be going on with them. I mean, we've had newsrooms that have been in precarious financial situations. We've had people go through like, general life as a reporter and life as somebody who has a family and like things come up and I think that we're doing everybody a disservice if we're not empathetic about the life things, but then also the journalism things. You know, how to sort of even like the structure and investigation, how to, do a total pivot for some people from daily beat reporting and like, what are the things that are great about that and what are the challenges that come with it?

Other collaborative tips... over-communicate. Phone is always better. If there is a phone option that is like 1,000% going to be better than email or slack. Don't be afraid to ask questions about everything. If you are somebody who is working with someone who's a local partner, somebody who's more of like an on the ground expert, like give them the credit where credit is due. Try to mention that a lot, not only because it makes people feel good, but also, like, there are things that they're going to know about their newsroom in their hometown that we could never know. And and, again, we're not doing anybody any favors by just bigfooting and not asking.

But I think in general, the Local Reporting Network has done a very good job of not doing that, not bigfooting not coming in and assuming that we know everything about a place, and even when we are finding out things that are in service of the journalism and in service of the reporter. We've done a pretty good job of presenting that in a sensitive way

and still presenting it you know, asking for feedback and asking if this like, lines up with the reporters own lived experience. Be a kind human. I think it's like a general good rule of thumb for collaboration.

Rachel Glickhouse
Partnership Manager, ProPublica
March 13, 2020

Can you talk about the work you had to do when you started at ProPublica? How did you build up Documenting Hate?

I was given a list of people who had signed up and I was given access to the tips that had come in so far, and that was pretty much it. What I had to build was the entire structure, the entire process and workflow for both recruiting and onboarding partners, but also for working with them, and for giving them tips and also figuring out other things that we could get them that would be of interest and useful to them, like training, like written resource materials and records that we gathered ourselves. So there was like a bare bones starting point, and then I had to sort of make it up as I went along.

What changed over time?

How to manage incoming partners and onboard them. Just so that I didn't do everything by hand. So it's a process that involves having a phone call with them, sending them materials and making sure I update the various places that need to be updated to get them fully onboarded. Like getting them signed up for the newsletter, getting them on the Slack and then sending them all the materials they need. Making sure they understand how to use the database and how to get into it. Processes for using the database and showing folks how to use it. We did a lot of trainings that I recorded and then sent out. The process for me changed too, just trying not to let anything fall through the cracks. A lot of it is just human management.

When reporters would join Documenting Hate, what kind of skills did they have and what did they need help with?

There was a huge range. There were only a handful (of reporters covering hate crimes) who were doing this on a regular basis, mostly national reporters. So very very wide range of knowledge and abilities. I made resources like reporting recipes for reporters with less experience on this beat. I had a lot of onboarding like how to use the database properly, how to make the most of the project. I had a list of all the things I could help with like experts. This whole section of like, here are things that you can look at right now. And also just having myself as a resource. So like some of it was content based or some of it was the trainings with experts.

I tried to gather as much information as I could get those out, after we did the training, like written materials, but it was a combination of like, basic things and just how to make the most of the project. And here's the things we have that you can use. Because sometimes it's as simple as like, here's a list of experts that you can turn to when you have a story that was really common. And also you can call me like when you have a question. I may not know the answer, but I know who you can go to.

Can you talk about the guidelines that were put in place?

Yeah, so the way we set up the database was so that you could only see contact information for tips that came in through your organization form. You could see everything except the email name and phone number of the person. So that meant that if you wanted to follow up on anything else you need to go through to do that. So that really

helped a lot. But essentially, we let people go in of their own accord so they could follow up on stuff. The contact information definitely helped to sort that out a little bit. But basically, we had a rule that only one person could work on a tip at a time and I helped sort of mitigate that. And our database was set up so that you could provide information and see at any given time who's working on what, which ones are in progress, which ones have been confirmed, which we're still available. So the combination of the way we built database making sure that there were clear guidelines.

Was that rule always in place?

I think it might've had to do with how ProPublica did Electionland the first time, but it was a very smart way to do it.

Can you talk about Collaborate and how it came to be?

We got funding to make the software we used for Documenting Hate open source. So basically we just hired a developer to make some changes to it and make it easier to add data to it. And then we made it public. So that others could just sort of use the system we have. But it's also the workflow we have the capabilities we have in there, but it basically makes it a lot easier for lots of people to go into one database. I think it is most useful when you have a large number of people, although I have personally use it like for myself alone, and sometimes it's used by smaller groups. But it essentially is a way to sort of manage these big crowdsourced projects, and have multiple people working on it at a time. So we open sourced it and the Marshall Project has used it for a couple projects. The Center for Public Integrity is trying to do something now. There's one or two others

that I'm forgetting but ABC in Australia is trying to set it up. So there's a bunch of places that have used it or in the process of setting it up. Just because it can be really helpful when you have many people who are trying to look at this one data set and make sure that there's no overlap in what you're doing.

What challenges came up as the project progressed over time?

Making sure we have enough information to give people because tips weren't always coming in for everybody. That's why we did a lot more records requests the second and third years. So we have stuff to give people and more stuff for us to work on in turn. That was a really big piece, definitely a very easy solution when you don't have enough through crowdsourcing that you can do.

Just to make sure people have time to work on stuff that when there are disasters like hurricanes, people get pulled off for a period of time and don't have time to dedicate to this reporting. So just being able to recognize that and sort of deal with that, as it happens. We had different numbers of reporters that were counted at different times, and we had different amounts of resources at different times to do our own reporting.

Figuring out like how to handle tips that couldn't find a home. So we had, we had really good coverage in terms of geography. But that doesn't mean that every single tip was going to be fully was going to be taken up or fully reported out. It's a really difficult subject. And getting all the information you need can be very challenging. So we have many, many more tips than eventually turned into stories. And there are two reasons for

that. But one of them is people not having time to follow up, or just not being able to get all the information they needed.

So just figuring out who could immediately deal with something. And which national partners would have the resources to do some of these more in depth deep dives and just working with them to make sure could actually happen.

Can you talk about what project management adds to a collaborative reporting project?

Without a project manager, it's not impossible, but it just gets very chaotic. And it's very hard to track to keep track of things and to make sure things are happening when they need to happen. Like Electionland during the general election is impossible without someone who takes the lead on dealing with all the documents and partners.

So I think it depends on the project. With what we're doing with coronavirus right now, it's unclear how many people were actually gonna wind up working externally. But if that group expands, we're gonna need somebody to manage that because otherwise it has a lot to do with tracking and communication that reporters don't have time to do while they're working on stories and their daily jobs. So I think I've been growing a lot of these sort of people who manage these types of collaborations I see them. You know, in the last couple years, I've seen more and more examples of people in similar roles. Sometimes they're more editing roles. But essentially they are sort of at the center of all this to make sure that everything's happening.

So the problem I see more so is that like, what things sort of happen quickly. And then there's this idea of like, oh, let's do this type of collaboration. And let's just put it together. That is what it can get risky without having a person in charge because with these bigger projects that are grant funded, and a lot of planning goes into them. Now there has been a lot more importance given to having this role or some type of role.

Can you talk about similar traits you've seen in successful collaborations?

People who are really interested in the subject matter and have the time to invest in it. Because having reporters that are really excited and also have the time commitment will make the biggest difference, because those are the ones that ultimately did the best and most interesting stories.

Something to keep in mind is anything you can offer people whether that's sort of the general type of resources, or financial resources. The more you can offer the better. Just because of the amount of bandwidth people have. You know, I think the big challenge with these projects is ultimately the landscape that we're dealing with. So we have a really rocky local media landscape that has a lot of turnover, and a lot of insecurity and people getting moving in and out of jobs. So, when you're doing something in the long term, that's a really big challenge. So anything you can do to mitigate that which is you know, obviously with the Local Reporting Network and trying to do anything you can can be a really big help.

But to be successful, I think you need a role like some kind of sort of keeping things running. Buy in from the entire organization to the various efforts need across the board

and people recognize the value of what you're doing. Funding or a kind of longevity. A lot of these projects are often for a year. And that doesn't always work out great. Things sometimes take longer than that. So the longer the timeline, the better unless it is something that is like around a big event.

I think like finding the right people is really, really, really key. We've been really lucky to have people who are both excited to devote some time to it.

What advice do you have for national newsrooms who are interested in collaborative projects?

I would tell them, they need to put a lot of planning into this. And it probably should get some funding, whether that's outside funding or something earmarked within the existing budget, because it really requires a lot of work. It's going to work properly. And there's some things that you can do that are easier to do than others. It doesn't always have to be complicated, but you do need a measure of planning and someone to sort of run the show. But I think essentially you need a good plan, you need leadership and you need buy in internally.

Christian Sheckler
Reporter, South Bend Tribune
2018 Local Reporting Network Partner
November 5, 2018

What attracted you to apply for the Local Reporting Network?

Basically it just seemed like, you know, an amazing opportunity to be freed up for a whole year to work on one project, which, you know, I've never been able to have before and probably I mean, the vast majority of reporters who cover beats at daily newspapers like I do never get that opportunity.

You know, we are probably like a lot of newsrooms of our size, medium size papers. We are too short staffed to just have a full time investigative reporting position because we're just so busy trying to cover you know, put enough bodies on all the beats that we need covered.

The opportunity to have ProPublica come in and pay my salary in that way was just really really cool and attractive and you know, we were looking at sort of picking around the edges on stories about criminal justice. That's my favorite topic to cover, so it just seemed like the perfect time to go ahead and apply for it.

How did your workflow change once you started in the Local Reporting Network?

The senior editor at ProPublica who's in charge of the Local Reporting Network, he and one of the reporters, Ken Armstrong came out to South Bend for, I think three days in January. And so we got acquainted with them and sort of started to map out what were the stories that we wanted to do this year. So we came up with a tentative list of stories

and schedule for those. Our project has been sort of unique among the Local Reporting Network because Ken is actually co-reporting it with me.

I think we're the only ones that have a ProPublica reporter actually working on the stories with us like writing, reporting and writing the stories. And that's been awesome, because, you know, I've never sort of envisioned and executed an investigative project. I mean, the main story that we did in July was that we sort of launched it with was a 10,000 word narrative. And I had never done anything even remotely close to that type of scale. So having Ken who is, I think, a two time Pulitzer Prize winner who sort of specializes in narrative writing was just amazing. And I've learned so much from him.

And just have that firepower was awesome. But yeah, so we met with them in January and did some planning. And then basically my workflow has been definitely new for me because I'm used to just the daily, like turning around a story every day, on whatever's going on on the beat. And now it's, it's just like a very slow drip of, you know, research and recording and writing and rewriting for longer stories, project stories, so. So that's been a big change. And then I just spend a lot of time on the phone with Ken working together, comparing notes and writing together in like Google Docs or whatever. And that's been cool because he works in Seattle. He lives and works out of Seattle. And so yeah, we just basically have to have to sort of share a cubicle via telephone and Google Docs. Which has been interesting, but it's amazing how it's so doable now, with the technology we have.

What's different about working on longer-term stories?

I think one of the main things is the first story that we did the long narrative that we did about a couple of, or one really wrongful conviction case. It took a lot longer than I thought it was going to.

And so we haven't done as many stories this year as I was sort of thinking at the beginning, because the first story ended up having so much like… doing the recording, and then turning in a draft and then editors going through it and figuring out oh, actually, we need to do all this other reporting. So going back and doing that and then turning in another draft and then going through another round of like, rewriting and editing, and then figuring out, actually, there's more things that we need from the reporting. So going back and doing them and coming back, it was like a very, very long process of repeating steps over and over and that I had never experienced before. And that was kind of a challenge, because we basically had probably had eight different editors involved in the process at some point. Three editors on my side, and then, like, probably five that came in sort of at different points along the way on the ProPublica side, and would have different ideas about things. And then we'd have to sort of go back to the drawing board. So that was really interesting.

Wow, that's a lot.

Yeah, it is. We tried to streamline that a little bit for our subsequent story. Because that wasn't very efficient. So I think the editors are trying to do a better job now. It's like, they all talk and they talk things through and debate their thoughts on whatever draft we've turned in. And then they come up with more of a unified list of edits. Instead of three editors see it and then it goes up to the next editor. And then they have thoughts that

might be contrary to what the first three thought and then that goes up to the next woman who has thoughts that reverse it back to the way it was when the first three editors saw it. And so it's like, yeah, they've tried to, I think, sort of hash things out among themselves a little bit more before they bring it to us. People have legitimate different thoughts on how certain things should read, and so nobody's writing is wrong, but it's like, okay, at least we can all get on the same page.

I'm very curious when you're working with your editors in South Bend versus ProPublica. What does that balance look like?

So I keep my editors informed of what I'm doing on a day to day basis and then Ken keeps the ProPublica folks updated on what we're doing. And then if we have a sort of a very significant thing we need to talk about, or we have a new draft to turn in and talk about, and we'll all have a conference call together where we all talk at the same time.

Do you talk to Ken everyday?

Yeah, for like, probably several hours every day. That's awesome. It's a totally new thing that I've never experienced before. Sort of having almost like just a constant conversation throughout the day about what's going on. But it's kind of necessary because, you know, we work in different time zones and can't see each other at all during the week.

You're coming to the end of your time in the Local Reporting Network. How do you think this experience has changed the way you think about the work you do?

Well, one of my main takeaways is that...so we have this certain stories that we know we wanted to do and we've prioritized that we're going to try to get done by the end of the year. But since our project is focusing on criminal justice in one county, in Indiana, it's just amazing.

When you just focus so intensely on what's going on in one place, the information that you dig up is incredible. And the number of like other stories that we could do if we had time to do them, and it wasn't gonna throw off our main priorities would be a lot of stories that we could do because of just interesting things that we're finding by focusing so much on what's going on in the criminal justice in this one county. And so for me, it's just helps me sort of develop a mindset that that's something I want to take back to my beat reporting is just going down following every thread I can with reporting, asking for every record that I can just all the time while I'm covering the beat because just constantly keeping up that type of pressure. I think we'll just uncover a lot of great stories even on a beat.

For these peripheral stories, do you think in your beating reporting, they were things you saw but didn't have time to look at? Or were they things that you only uncovered once you were in the Local Reporting Network?

Probably a mix of both. Like, one one thing for an example would be, so we're writing about police accountability and sort of disciplinary outcomes with police officers in Elkhart, Indiana, and to try to come up with data on every instance, that a police officer was disciplined over a certain period of years. We went back and asked for a copy of the minutes of the civilian oversight board for every meeting that they've had for the last like

15 or 20 years. And then use that to like make a spreadsheet of every time the minutes recorded, the chief bringing a disciplinary action to the board. And it was only through going back through the minutes that I noticed in one case, recently, an officer had been placed on leave while he was being charged with a crime. And no one had been to the meeting because we, we hadn't gone to the meeting where this was talked about. And the other paper that covers this police department had not gone to the meeting. And so no one really knew that there was an officer that was charged with the crime. And that just shows like, when we're all so busy, that, you know, sometimes things like attending a routine meeting falls off the priority list. You can miss things that are really good stories. And you know, we only found out about it because we were sort of trying to gobble up as much data as we could for the project that we're working on. So yeah, like that that's sort of shown me okay, even if I can't go to every meeting of every city commission or whatever all the time, always be asking for whatever records are connected to these different agencies that are making these decisions because you never know what you're gonna get when you just continually try to scoop up records of what's going on in local government.

What advice do you have for newsrooms interested in collaborating?

Well, I think one of the things that's really stuck out to me is I think for us, local beat reporters… Sometimes, things that happen on the beat can be so routine, and just maybe not really impact us a whole lot. But when you talk about some of the things going on locally, to people from outside, like the folks at ProPublica, you realize that the things happening locally are really, really interesting and sometimes outrageous to people who

just aren't around them all the time. And so we've told some stories about things that we've seen in local law enforcement. And to us, it's just sort of the way it is, but others on the outside, they're like, oh, my gosh, that's so crazy. How can they do that type of thing? So it's really shown me that I think organizations like ProPublica, from what I've experienced, really, really value the local knowledge that we have, and the stories that we have to offer that are not just telling stories about local things happening but stories about issues and topics that matter and that are interesting and maybe outrageous to people in a broader audience to and so that's that's one thing that I would take away is just don't don't hesitate to pitch ideas about what's going on locally to you know, partners like ProPublica, especially if you're applying for the Local Reporting Network or something like that.

Jayme Fraser
2018 Local Reporting Network partner
Former reporter, Malheur Enterprise
December 12, 2018

What drew you to participate in local-national collaborative investigative work?

Essentially, each partner should be bringing something unique to the table. Whether that

a new skill set or a topic expert Keys, or simply more manpower. And a lot of times you

make that happen by finding, you know, common ground in our shared purpose for the

work. Now, personally, I enjoy it because it means I get to work with other smart people

who don't always have the same skill sets I do and I can learn from them and that process

and the final product ends up being richer because you have more people involved.

**Can you talk about your workflow now that you're a part of the Local Reporting
Network? What differences are there from your normal routine?**

Well, most of my career, I've been a daily reporter where it was the primary drive was

covering daily news, whether that was local or state government. And so, collaborative

work tended to be focused more on enterprise projects over long periods of time. Or they

were, you know, centered on breaking news, you know, being able to get out the best

story as quickly as possible by having more people involved. So before this project, there

were two kinds of collaborative work I did. As a state bureau reporter in Montana, I

partnered with beat reporters on different enterprise projects to do enterprise work. So for

instance, I pulled together the three education reporters that our network, and we

developed, pitched and wrote a package on underfunding of school maintenance that

ultimately led the legislature to, you know, change funding for those projects. And that

was, you know, something where the reporters really took the lead. I acted as a pseudo editor and managed the projects and getting all the pieces together. And yeah, that was very organic from the reporters coming together.

With the Local Reporting Network, it is entirely different again.You know, I'm in Eastern Oregon. Everyone from ProPublica is in New York. My local editor here in Oregon is in the office, maybe two days a week. The rest of the week, he's at his ranch two hours away, or he's on the other side of the state running a different newsroom. So there's a lot of remote communication with email or phones, or slack. Like all day today I was going back and forth with the researcher in New York on slack about, you know, a database that we are fact checking. So the communication modes are different and the pieces of work that everyone does seem to have to be more defined.

If you're in the same room with someone, it's easier to kind of be flexible and roll with the punches. But if you're in a different time zone and you don't necessarily ever see these people face to face, you have to be much more explicit about what the expectations are for each partner in the project. So that everyone stays on course when we get there in the end, you know, and then we have different audiences. So you know, previous collaboration so I was in, we shared an audience. It was a local one or state one. But with this, we have our local audience, which is particularly interested in one case. And you know how one case fits into the big picture. But the national audience is, you know, not as interested in a particular case, more interested in how the state as a whole operates or how Oregon compares to other states. So, having to think about how to frame our findings for two different audiences is, you know, a unique challenge of this

collaboration. And then editing. My stories go through my local editor first and then it goes through several people at ProPublica before we hit publish, and so you can have editors disagree about changes or tone or you know, those kinds of things. And so as a reporter, you sometimes are trying to facilitate a discussion between editors about how to best navigate that, and end up being a lot more hands on your story in the process.

Do you think that ultimately improves the story?

I think it depends on the quality of the editors you're working with. And also if you make the shared vision very clear from the beginning, then everyone throughout the entire process is going to be moving in the same direction. But if you start a collaboration without really agreeing on the goals, then when you get to the end of the editing process, that's where you start to see it because you'll have those different goals in mind as you edit. And so I think that initial discussion about the purpose of the work is really critical, not just to the reporting work, but ultimately in the editing in this one, that it's been great. I've worked with great editors, and the shared purpose has been really clear. And a lot of times when there's disagreement, it's some, it's a result of this piece of the story that doesn't really fit our shared purpose. And so it needs to go. You know, it's interesting, but it's not part of, you know, the overarching question we were asking. And in that way, it's mostly just cleaning out things that are off focus like you would in any editorial process, except the differences as you have multiple people making sure that you're on focus. And hopefully, everyone's focusing on the same thing.

Generally, journalism has spent many decades focusing on collaboration. How have you found ways to put that aside and work together?

I think collaborations are easier when there's not a lot of competition. I mean, the Local

Reporting Network now, it's ProPublica partnering with local papers. They don't

normally compete with each other on stories, right? It was different in the collaboration

when I would work with beat reporters. So the way it worked in Montana, there were five

newspapers all owned by Lee Enterprises, and I did spearhead projects for all five of

them. But, you know, there were education reporters at four of the papers and there were

no outdoor reporters at three of the papers. You know, cops reporters at four of the

papers. And so, historically, even though they were owned by the same company, there

was a competitive streak between the papers, you know, in particular, Missoula and

Billings, were always competitive. And it doesn't make a whole lot of sense, but they

would often write, you know, cover the same topic or the same event, even though they

had shared ownership and could share stories that they chose to but it was kind of a

matter of pride and rivalry between the two newsrooms.

But I was lucky that around when I started, some new editors took over and there was an

increased discussion on the editors about how do we collaborate better and maximize our

shared resources rather than fighting with each other over silly things? So part of it was

just an overall culture change that had to take place. And I think that that overall culture

change, you know, did most of the work for me in making a pitch about getting the

reporters to work together on a project. You know, if I had tried to pitch a collaborative

project before the editors that already had this, you know, aha moment, it wouldn't have

flown, right, maybe they would have agreed to it on a small basis, but their heart wouldn't

have really been in it. And I'm sure there would have been roadblocks that resulted

because of that. So I think, you know, when you're taking on something like an Enterprise Project, it's probably best to have a track record of collaboration with that partner in some smaller sense beforehand. Because your investable partners are all partners, they are investing a lot of time and resources into it. And if there's any hesitancy there, it's going to create a headache for everyone. So in that sense, yeah, I was lucky that the editors, you know, started to do things like, share more content, you know, plan together, like, Oh, you know that our senators going to be in town on this day, which one of us is going to send a reporter to feed to all the papers, that kind of thing. And you started to have, you know, the beat reporters, you know, talking to each other, and to some degree, the reporters had always kind of subverted The rivalry in that they were talking to each other anyway. I mean, you see that a lot of metro areas, right, like even in Houston, the Houston Chronicle reporters would get drinks with the TV reporters or some of the community reporters, you know, and you tend to have an affinity with people that work on the same beat as you, you know, you'll see it at national conferences, you'll see all the healthcare reporters, you know, going to get lunch together or, you know, all the crime reporters going to get lunch together with people that might normally be competition. So I think reporters have always had some level of camaraderie that wasn't necessarily always there in a formal way between the organizations.

I went on a long tangent. I don't know if that is helpful. Like it's horizontal instead of like, vertical.

On the education project, not everyone, you know, thrives or wants to be a part of the collaboration. So there were, you know, me and three education recorders and me and

one of the education reporters were excited about the work and work together, you know, really well for others. Another reporter, you know, loved the idea, but just didn't feel like she had the time to commit to it as much as she wanted to. And the third reporter was dragged kicking and screaming to participate. So, you know, it's not just a matter of culture and planning, but also, you know, recognizing that people that just are not collaborative team players, and maybe that's not how you put into a project. You know, or find new ways for them to be involved if they have to be.

I think it seems like to me, from what I've been reading, and in talking to people, it seems like what can sometimes be a little off putting about a collaboration is the amount of thought that has to go into it in terms of thinking about how are these people going to work together as a group and what is the mission we're working towards? And like, answering all of those questions can sometimes take a while and, and everyone has always got a million things on their plate and so sometimes it just seems like one more thing.

I push back on that a little bit because we do so much collaboration in the newsroom every day without using that word. And we ask those kinds of questions every day without thinking about it in such a structured way. I mean, the editor reporter relationship is a collaboration, right? Whether the reporter initiates the story idea or the editor assigns it, like you are in a collaborative team that this is our goal to set out and get this story or answer this question. And you're working together to get the information, get it presented in a clean way and get it out there by a deadline. So I think a lot of the questions that you ask when you form a collaboration about you know, what is the purpose who's going to

do which part of the work on what are our deadlines, or things that we tend to do on a daily basis without thinking about it in that way, and you know, whether it's a reporter and an editor or just reporters helping each other out across the room. I feel like we already do a lot of this. And we don't call it that. And we only use collaboration when it's something that we want to brand and, you know, maybe go outside, it gets outside the norm a little bit. But I think the big organizational questions are the same. I mean, you ask these same kinds of organizational questions, if you're launching, you know, a project on your own, or at least you should be or if you're, you know, launching a new marketing club. So, I mean, I don't think the questions and the tasks are that different. We just aren't used to labeling though, in our day to day.

That's really helpful. Once you normalize to like, this is how a story gets reported like it is an inherently collaborative process you just kind of are like, and this is the thing I'm used to. And here's something that's a little bit different.

Yeah, it becomes routine, and you're acting mostly on instinct. Whereas when you do a collaboration outside the normal routines, you have to be a little more deliberate in figuring out those lines of communication and what the expectations are and how the work will go. It's kind of like when you first start working for a new boss right when your recorder you start working with the new editor. There's no period where you're getting to know each other and figure out. So how do we make sure that we're on the same page about what the story should be, you know, on, you know, what you expect of it, and how we'll get through the process, you know, the sausage grinder to get it out at the end, right. So I feel like that's what you do when you form a collaboration between newsrooms or

between reporters or, you know, things that are outside of it. You're doing the same things. You're just you have to be a little more deliberate about it, because we don't we haven't trained those muscles in that way, I guess.

Can you talk about some of the roadblocks you've found in collaborating?

One roadblock is making sure that everyone is really clear on what you know, the purpose and expectations are, you know, when we get done with Project X, what do we hope the final product looks like? And then being, you know, saying, okay, well, this is the how much work from each of these partners it'll take to get there and having the support of the people above the, to know what that means for the day to day, right. So if you have education reporters, working together, running a shared project. That might mean that their daily editor has to give them you know, one day a week away from the daily grind to work on the project. And, you know, because it's one thing to say like, oh, we want you to work together on this project, but then not plan. So how do we make sure there's time that you actually can get it done? Right. And that requires buy in from more than just the people actively involved. I think a lot of times, you know, the people in the room when you plan a collaboration aren't the people that will be doing the actual work. But you need to bring in the people that are affected by it, too. So, you know, maybe the assistant city editor that oversees that education reporter isn't going to be involved in editing the project copy at all, but they have to be involved because you're taking away their reporter for one day a week to work on this and they need to have that buy in and understand why it's important.

And then having, you know, a plan for how you're going to handle road bumps? Right? There were inevitably ethical questions about, you know how to write particular parts of the stories or approach certain sources, or how to prioritize things when particular stories started to shift one way or the other. So we had a clear roadmap, which was, you know, anyone that felt like their story was drifting, or they had questions would come to me, I would consult with a coworker and we would come up with a pitch and then I would take it to the five editors of Lee and say, this is the problem. This is our pitch solution, and then they gave us a thumbs up or thumbs down. But if you don't have a clear, like, plan for communicating between the partners, and who's going to be the point person for that You can get a lot of mixed messages and signaling. So if, you know one of the reporters had gone to editor a and a different reporter had gone to editor be, and then they get different answers back and then it's confusion. So, you know, making it really clear who's going to be the linkage and the, you know, kind of the sinew between the two teams is really important. And we see that in the Local Reporting Network too. And that, you know, we agreed that first round a story would be read by my local editor and then it would go up the chain from there, rather than me setting the story to all five editors at once and having them all come back at the at the same time, which is more information to process some leads to conflicting ideas. So I think some of it is just being a little deliberate and figuring out that chain of command a little bit and show that you're organized and how you have those conversations that require both parties at the table.

Other roadblocks… Oh, the resources that are involved: the money, the time, that kind of thing. And make it clear up front who's going to pay for what, you know which partner is going to pay for travel, you know, is this going to be, you know, we get to the end and

you know, one partner pays all it upfront and then we get to the end of the other partner pays back half is one partner entirely responsible for travel. You know, is there are grants that they're pulling from, you know, so some of the nitty gritty stuff that normally you would have accountants in the room that are, you know, business managers in the room who just do it routine, and the reporters and editors don't have to think about it, but when you're in a collaboration some of those basic things like travel reimbursements and take a little more work to figure out how to handle.

Other roadblocks… Partners getting cold feet halfway through and wondering where are the results are. This is eating up more time than we realized. So you know, how do you if someone decides to get cold feet how do you manage that? Does it kill the whole project? Are you able to talk them back into it? Do you have to adjust course? And I think one thing that helps prevent that is having you know clear progress updates for everyone involved so they know that this time isn't just going into the eight here. And they feel invested in a day to day even if they're not the one doing the day to day work. So once a week I sent all of the editors a memo saying this is what we accomplished this week, and this is what we plan to accomplish the next week. And so now even though none of them were in the class or you know, meeting or talking with students, you know, once a week, they got a reminder about, by the way, we're doing this collaboration that you signed off on. And these are all the great things we've accomplished with the time and money you've given us. And so I think that made it easier for me to, you know, communicate, say, okay, I need a couple extra hours this week to get this done. You know, because I was giving them regular updates. They knew I wasn't squandering it.

What are the benefits you've experienced in collaborating?

Collaborations let people from a wide variety of skill sets and experienced ranges do work that would normally be beyond their capability on their own. And by doing that work, that's a stretch for you individually. You just end up learning a lot. And I think it's, you know, in the professional world, it's really tough to come up with opportunities to learn new skills or new ways of thinking within your daily routine, because at some point, you get that down pat, and everyone else is busy doing their own daily responsibilities. And so it's difficult to find ways to stretch and make yourself grow. And collaborations, you know, are great for that. Because by bringing together people with different skill sets or experiences, you're exposing them to new challenges and new ways of thinking. And so it ends up being a great learning opportunity for everyone involved, that you normally don't get, you know, day to day. Yeah, I think that's the big one is that, you know, collaborations produce great work, but more than that, it gives people an opportunity to stretch and grow that you can't normally find in your regular work.

Collaborations are about sharing resources. And sometimes those resources are skills, but not always. The biggest resource of the Local Reporting Network is the money and time to do this work. 99% of my work has been me on my own alone. And largely the, you know, the only time I'm working with ProPublica has been toward editing my copy and coordinating on graphics, which usually involves, you know, me, you know, writing this is what it should be or like mocking up a draft and InDesign or Illustrator and then, you know, their team works. I do all my own data analysis, and then they have someone from their data team replicated to make sure that I got everything right. They're bringing all of

the expertise to the project, but really what ProPublica brought was the money to pay my salary for a year to do a project that this little paper in the middle of nowhere couldn't do any other way. No, yeah, they're going to be times where, you know, the resources are the biggest part of the collaboration, you know, where you have, you know, someone with a particular skill set, adding something to a team that they wouldn't normally have, but it's not always doesn't always work in direction you think it does. And, you know, I think that's one reason why local newsrooms should think more about collaborations…. There are lots of really talented local reporters that don't get to flex their full skills every day because they are so busy. And a collaboration by working together can free up some time to let you focus on one aspect of your skills or one area of your expertise. So you can flex the full muscles. When I covered state government, I had all these same skills. But for instance, during the legislature, I was writing three or four stories a day. And so I wasn't getting to use my coding or data analysis skills at that point. It was only after the session was done, and I could squeeze a project in around my other daily duties so that I could do that. So, you know, that's, I think time is a valuable part of a collaboration that's overlooked. It's not just about bringing skills to the table.

Ken Ward Jr.
2018-2019 Local Reporting Network partner
Former reporter, Charleston Gazette Mail
March 1, 2020

Can you talk about your interest in the Local Reporting Network?

I had been kind of a ProPublica fanboy for a long time. You know, I even remember when I first heard about it, like, wow, these people forming this other thing to do journalism the right way. So I've been a big admirer of some of the stuff they were doing especially like, I was a huge, huge fan of the early work on fracking and I remember thinking, wow, that's just the best stuff that anybody's done about these topics to learn better this.

I saw an email or social media posts about the Local Reporting Network, kind of crossed my desktop. I was like, holy crap, we got to get involved in this and I talked to my editor about actually about having a couple of different people other than me apply for it because I thought that I've gotten to do a bunch of cool stuff. And we had younger reporters and hadn't gotten to do as much cool stuff and if somebody else should get to do this.

Kind of oddly enough, I think he was looking toward the future and seeing that the paper's finances were not going very well. And he was concerned about where we were heading. And he did this with a number of people in different ways. He was kind of pushed me to apply for the Local Reporting Network because he thought if I got into it, it would maybe provide some sort of backstop if the paper went under. But we also had wanted for a number of years to do a bigger project about fracking in West Virginia, and

we've started off to do it several times and we started off to do it one year and then hold off to cover some bigger stories. Another year, there was a big chemical spill. And so like our efforts to kind of let's go really look at fracking kept getting derailed. So being in the Local Reporting Network and having this kind of contractual agreement where this is what Ken has to work on really gave us the opportunity to, to spend the whole year focused on that in a way that I'm confident we wouldn't have otherwise.

I was going to ask you about how the pitch came to be and if it was something you were wanting to work on. It's interesting to hear that's what it was.

Well yeah, we did we kind of you know, we did a little story here a little story there and, but what what what unfortunately, kept happening is like some god awful, terrible thing what happened in West Virginia that we would have to kind of clear the decks and, you know, our staff was small enough and my reporting kind of area of interest was focused on these types of accidents, you know, and so, we kept getting derailed by that as much as anything else. And also really, I mean as the staff got smaller and budgets got tighter, the prospect of you know, the area of West Virginia when natural gas drilling goes on is, you know, three, four hours from Charleston, so it really requires, you know, it's an overnight travel and, you know, we were kind of pulling back from a lot of that sort of stuff.

Can you talk about your experience when you were getting started in the Local Reporting Network?

I always tell everyone that everyone I would work with at ProPublica, the first thing out of their mouths was,you know, I'm really excited about this project. And I started thinking this is some kind of script that they're giving you know, there's some ProPublica script here's what to say to their Local Reporting Networks smucks. But it was real and it really was that people were excited and for, you know.., watching the effect that had in our newsroom. You know, things for newspapers are really tough right now, whether it's bankruptcy and the finances, layoffs people leaving. But the excitement that ProPublica brought to the story and got everybody in our newsroom excited. We had like copy editors coming in on the weekends, because they wanted a piece of copy editing stories. In 2018, we did the natural gas stories, that was the year of our bankruptcy and sale. And I think the people that have a lot of kind of distractions about you know, not going to have a job, the person next to me, are they going to have a job? I think being able to for a little slice of the day, focus on working on this project, and I think helped get people through it, and help provide them with why they were in that first place.

And I think that that's really one of the things that collaboration can do. Help everybody helps remind everybody else, despite, you know, the storm clouds that are gathering, we're here to serve reader and do the story. And I think that is a big part of it for me, getting to know all of the all of my friends at ProPublica had that sort of excitement and dedication to the story.

I felt like I could tell on the couple of times I've gotten to come to New York. I could tell that rank and file people were proud of the fact that ProPublica is spending some of his money on this program and trying to actually do something unlike a lot of… I think

partly part of ProPublica's role in doing this is kind of shaming other organizations that aren't doing this. And I think it's also showing the way that hey, one second, you don't have to parachute into places to do the story, you can partner with people that are there. And that was another strength of the program. ProPublica came into it, not saying they knew how to do this story better than the people who lived there. That t akes a special sort of organizational attitude. And it also takes special people who bring that to this. When my editors came here they wanted to know about the place and we wanted to get a feel for it and for the people. We don't always see that from parachuting. These partnerships help. In the end, the journalism is better because of the partnership.

There are probably few other reporters who are more equipped to do a story about fracking in West Virginia or Jim Justice than you. The way the Local Reporting Network is structured allows for your knowledge to exist on the national level.

It's certainly a unique kind of respect. I mean that the routine is, you know, somebody from big national newspaper is coming to West Virginia to do, you know, coal in the election story. And the day before they come, they call a couple reporters here, ask some questions. And then they don't they don't do the story they wouldn't do as opposed to partnering with people that are there, that know the community and try to, you know, leverage the expertise and institutional knowledge.

You've been in two years of the Local Reporting Network. Can you talk about changes you've noticed in that time?

Most organizations and most human beings are not very good at kind of after action

analysis and figuring out well, we did this what could we do better next time. And, I

guess in December 2018, all of the Local Reporting Network went to New

York. Everybody sat around the conference room and let those of us who are in the

Local Reporting Network basically bad mouthing everything that we didn't like, for three

hours. And I'm pleased that it was just like mind blowing. Within a week, like a couple of

the things that we talked about were done. Well, you know, when you started the

program, you suddenly started getting emails and phone calls from people and you didn't

know who they are, what they did. And it was a little confusing. And within like a week,

maybe two, there was a welcome to ProPublica doc that was sent out to the Local

Reporting Network. And something as simple as that where it was clear that our concerns

will be paid attention to.

I will say that if you're the organization that's providing editorial support for local

organizations, if you can avoid big changes in editors in the middle of a project, it's a

good idea to do it. Because certainly no one knows when there's a change in the editors in

the middle of 2019. I don't care who knew what it was and who the old editor was, who

the reporters were. When you're like, six months into a project and the editors change, it's

gonna be a large learning curve. Nobody is so superhuman that they jumped in without

having to play catch up a little bit. So if that can be avoided, I think it's a good thing to

have. You know, as much as you can maintain continuity in a project. I think it's a good

idea.

And I think we have another issue that some of us brought up in the first year of Local Reporting Network and obviously all of the projects have pretty compelling looks and want to do the ball and interactive apps and data and engagement. And at some point like even the superpowers of ProPublica reach a limit. And so decisions have to be made about what we're going to do with this project. We're going to do a lot for that project. Because we will have lots of the first year some of those decisions about we're going to do these things for this project, but not this one. Some of those were made kind of late in the year and it made it difficult, but the second year, I think folks at ProPublica listened to us. And a lot of those kinds of decisions. You know, this projects going to get a data reporter who's going to help but this one's not. Those were made much earlier. And I think that let the local organizations kind of know the lay of the land earlier in the project and better be able to plan and put in their resources and so I think that was a really good change that was made. I think that something as little as there's now on the top of the story, there's a little like a sign off sheet. And I think something in the middle and that was really helpful because we were, you know, kind of what we had to do was take the text from the Google doc and flow it into our system. And you know, a couple times somebody would jump the gun on that on our copy desk and flowing it in, thinking everybody was done, because it was some miscommunication was it having that have you know, when we're remote working and editors here, editors there. Those kinds of little things were really helpful. So that was another really good change.

And one of the other really important things, I think with the natural gas stories especially, that story took off in leaps and bounds when Beena came and spent like a week here and then when the video team came and spent time here it really took off. And

I mean that largely speaks to their amazing talents and the way that they embed themselves into a place and try to suck up everything that there is suck up, but it just really helped me though. I mean, you know, AI was making these really fancy, you know, maps with all of the pipelines and all of this. And, you know, he could have done that from New York. But coming here, I'm sure he would say that really made the light bulbs go off for him about what the story was about. And having my Mayeta spend as much time as she did. I've been living here and working here my whole life. And having somebody like that come here, working with me, she saw and heard and felt things that I didn't, that really added to the story. And she even asked me or after she was talking to people somewhere doing some filming, she would call me and all of these fantastic questions. So I think that that's another kind of real strength of the background of collaboration.

What advice do you have for local reporters interested in collaborating?

I think one thing is just as ProPublica reporters and editors should get involved, they need to bring to the table a willingness to understand the local community better. I think local folks have to open their eyes to maybe this new person and seeing something that I'm kind of missing because I see it so much. And that that's I mean one of our examples about that when we're running about natural gas and we're getting into the fact that people who on the surface don't always own the minerals I kind of in a in a memo or something to Charlie and I kind of almost skipped over that and why it is and how it works. And he called me this like, wait, what I know how did this before and what are you talking about? And my initial reaction was well, because you don't live here you

don't understand. When in fact, a lot of people who do live here do not understand and that is part of the story where we really kind of explained all of that to people and explained what the impact of it ended up being one of the stronger parts of the project, I thought. So I think if you're a local reporter and editor and you want to do this, you need to kind of not come to it with a chip on your shoulder or hot shots. I think that's really really important is you know, one of the things that some of the new management style at the paper that concerns me, was this concern with whether it's working with ProPublica or Report for America collaboration, who's going to control the story? It's about everybody collaborating together to make the story that needs to be. And that kind of idea that if you're some omnipotent editor, you're in charge of the story just really doesn't serve anybody except that person's ego. So I think, you know, understanding that the goal is to produce a story that everybody is proud of. And nobody was in control of is really important.

Any other lessons learned that you want to share?

Well, the Gazette Mail has always been kind of reporter's paper so, you know, the shift to a more collaborative effort. Editing the story from the beginning of the idea of the story to the reporting plan to the final version, where it's more hands on, and you're working with an editor, this is new, and it was a big transition for me. And I think that what I learned from that is that that's all a process. And that's just because I turned something in. And whether it's Charlie or whoever has questions or issues or things like that maybe should be done differently. It's not them saying, well, this is crap. And what are you

doing which is the point is the process and getting to the point where the story is all that it can be, and I have really followed the pattern clearly that way.

And another thing is, I think probably when I started with the Local Reporting Network and Beena said, I'm an engagement reporter. I was kind of like, okay, what the hell is that? What does that even mean? But I mean, I'm just sold. I'm 100% down with all of the things that that brings to the table for a place like West Virginia where we have, where we do a lot of writing about people, not necessarily writing for them. Including them in the story instead of just trying to get a quick quote. So I think that those couple things are probably the most important things that I've learned. And really, what they all boil down to is it's all about the story and it's all about the audience and trying to serve the community as opposed to some company bottom line.

I was a reporter for 26 years before I got onto this. But it is not an understatement to say that the experience really changed my life and my career path and how I view what I'm doing. Maybe, you know, I'd like to think it just reminded me of what it was all about to me in the first place, but I think that really it had a huge impact on the way I view what our role in our society is.

Connor Sheets
2019 Local Reporting Network partner
Investigative reporter, AL.com
March 4, 2020

Can you talk about friction you felt while you were in the Local Reporting

Network?

My editor was really not happy about one little thing: including the newsletter call to

action at the top of my stories. He was really not happy about it. He was just like, really,

like, annoying how you put it at the bottom? I'm like, I'm gonna move on to the top since

you're not paying me.

But otherwise, I think I was in a very unique situation. I was already working on longer-

term things at a slower pace and more siloed off than almost anyone else in my cohort. I

really only know about the seven projects who were under my editor, Charlie. A lot of

other people were talking to me about things like, you know, editors are mad they're not

publishing enough and, you know, all that type of thing. And like, I mean, first of all,

they make it extremely clear at the outset of the Local Reporting Network, they really do

make it very clear that they're in charge. And like you're not going to publish all the time.

But it seemed like a lot of other reporters had reservations about that. And you know, I

probably got 12 stories the previous year. So it's kind of really trying for a year where I

do like seven stories is not really that big of a difference. I think the biggest friction that

we had was the fact that in all my end of year responses that I think ProPublica could

have solved a lot of issues that people had by communicating earlier on and how how

long it would take to publish the first story, and how infrequently published and the

differences between the first year. You have people like Christian Sheckler and Ken

Armstronog who published like 20 articles or something over the year. Yeah. And that was not the expectation for a lot of us this year. And that that was not fully communicated to a degree. Well, people tagging emails like it was said at times,but it should have been reiterated throughout the year. It was just a tiny bit more conversation from the ProPublica. A couple more encouraging emails would've been good.

Like, for instance, like, I was talking about the members of the cohort like, the main thing we complained we were worried about was like, are we completely messing up? We felt like we were completely failing. Like, even like the people who are doing the best work of the cohort but like, at the beginning of May, towards the beginning of June, like we were all like, we're completely just the worst class ever, we're never going to probably multiple people to start there, like never published anything. You know, like, it just seemed like, I feel like they've been like a shift in how it was working. We weren't really aware of it. And so that is so Charlie, you know, like really, like, just repeating that over and over again, would be helpful, even if it's like, you know, sometimes someone says something like once or twice and they think they've communicated more than it's really thinking, you know, suddenly blame them, but it's just something that would have solved a lot of headaches. But I have an extremely good relationship with my editor in Alabama. He's like, one of those very laid back reporter and editor relationships. So really, I think he had more friction with ProPublica than I had with him. And I think it was still pretty fairly minimal.

Can you talk about adjusting to the ProPublica workflow?

I think I've been in the fairly lucky situation of having already been working on like months long projects on sheriffs for the entire previous year. But the fact that took me six months to publish my first story, which is obviously a long time you know, that's like not normal

So like the reporting process was not that much different. And Charlie is very communicative. So I talked to him. I think Charlie's a unique editor. He's just like an epic level journalist. So like Charlie's been like a really great reporter for like years and years. I don't know that that's always true of every editor. And I think that's a much different type of relationship. So my editor here at AL.com like he was a reporter up until four years ago and is not unhappy about being editor which is often the case. So he's like, kinda like finally both of them sort of are like, excited to be like sheparding projects but not really jealous that they're not reporters anymore. Yeah, which is common. It is very unique working with Charlie and I get texts all the time, calls all the time, basically. He is always available for bouncing ideas and stuff. And so like that's always helped my project. So sort of just had an extra person. The most intelligent thing they did that they actually stuck to was sort of a mix of an idea between my boss Callen (AL.com editor) and Charlie was this concept that they wanted to get everyone to kind of tell us my editors idea, not only sure, but like, I feel like Charlie and Callen got along particularly well out of the people in the Local Reporting Network. I'm not sure it's like almost more than like really just exceptionally well, which was really helpful. But they came up with this idea very early on that I would never get an edit that only one of them had edited. So there was never anything conflicting. Like it would never be like, here's Charlie's version, here's Callen's version, and like, try to reconcile them. And like even if they

would have a big thing to talk over, they would talk first and get on the same page and then talk to me. So I think that was super helpful. It made it a lot less complicated.

But as far as things like,the actual editing process, and actually like, where there's actually a document legal or anything like that, that all went to both of them. So it was really helpful, that an entire thing of the transition, the transition is so like, I don't really it's so like a morphus collaboration. I feel like it was much less of a transition for me to find those people. But I think if you want to talk about the editing process, we can get into that topic.

Yeah, please.

That was a big transition. AL.com has got a small newsroom that's gone through layoffs and all that. We don't have copy editors or fact checkers or a research team or a data team, anyone, anything. So if they need another editor or like get involved in your story, it's not generally for the positive. It's generally best when it's just a few of us and you know, I did extreme levels of fact checking. Not anywhere near as extreme as the ProPublica way by the way but in a good way but like so the whole process of…. Like having the standards editor and like, the legal department was really great to work with and then like managing editor or all that stuff and research and all that he that was really interesting. But also because it can take way longer. So that I think was something again that if we had talked more about it up front… I was just like, whatever I don't care. I also worked for Newsweek before so like the whole magazine process before, you know, yeah, but not like it's gonna take 6 million years to do like, a tiny thing you know? ProPublica is like a magazine, as far as I'm concerned, the editing process. It's kind of it's

like a billion different people looking at it and all that, like, that's pretty much that wasn't it this week, it really felt like, sort of putting a home in that and I think newspaper editors, who are probably the people leading most of these reporters in the Local Reporting Network, probably are not at all. So I think that was interesting, like the whole again, the timeframe of how long everything takes could have been better communicated with the same time I think it was all for the past. I mean, like that, because it's always better, having more eyes on the work, all that that was all great.

And one thing that was frustrating, I hadn't really thought about that. I mean, it's almost 100% unavoidable. And I don't know how anyone could have enjoyed this is the realities of different local places, and what it's like to report there, versus places that other people might be familiar with. So take that out of the abstract like Alabama has no public records law, essentially, the voting public records law doesn't think that that's the best way to put it. Our sheriff's offices...like my editor has been like five years ago, if you went to a couple sheriff's offices in a rural area that I had back on a specific one day and they didn't have computers yet, you know, they just don't use them with paper. So like the concept, like some of the things that were being asked of us from ProPublica were like just non starters. Like, why don't you email all the sheriffs and get them to just give you all of their budgetary documents or whatever? Like I'd be lucky if 20 of them responded. Nevermind, like there's no incentive to do that. We've had national orgs sue for records like that, and they, they lose, they lose, you know, because it was so weak.

So, a lot of times they were asking for things that we just would never even consider. Like if this were rural Florida obviously we would get all that stuff, it'd be

amazing but here we don't. So that was probably the most disconnect with us because every time we turn the stories, they'd be like why don't you ask all the sheriffs this one question? But it's just not a thing or like, you know, stuff like that. I'm not being lazy. So, I mean that I don't know how you could possibly avoid those types of issues. But like if you don't have that local experience in a specific place that can be cosmetic. I'm sure that that can happen with Alaska. You know, I mean, I don't know. I mean, obviously his project was dependent on getting parts of those 200 police departments or whatever. So that was worth it for them. For us, it was like, instead of having a story as a bunch of people had this happened in less than two months, so you could say exactly this many people, it's like the benefit was not equal to the amount of effort it would take. Now there's so few reporters here like, we rather just like, do more stories to have more broad range of impact, rather than, like, perfect impact on one topic, you know, and that was kind of that was a big difference. Also, like, for me, I want to hit an issue, move on, maybe do some follow ups to like, get it out. So we can go on to another issue, because there's so much stuff here, you know, and I think ProPublica is more like, we want to have like the perfect story to the point of like, sending like, you know, diminishing returns, like we will cut our losses early because we've gone through the process and many times I think there's that situation like that we were feeling that we weren't going all the way with the sentence like we could do that or we could get on another topic and expose another injustice, you know what's worth more, you know, sort of interesting. I just don't know how you can avoid that though. And it's probably one of the biggest things that any local national partnership has an issue with. Yeah.

Do you think your local expertise was respected by ProPublica?

I think that they did. I just think Charlie was always pushing for more. So I think there were times where it was hard to get him to understand the reason we weren't doing something was not because we didn't want to make the story perfect, or we were being lazy or something. It was more like a fact of life on the ground here. So we just had to be very, like deliberate, explaining what was going on. And like, I'm not sure he ever fully accepted it. But that's just, you know, there's just certain things that we're just not doing. Sorry, thank, you know what I mean? Like, that's how it's working. You don't want to believe us about it. Like, I think 99% of the time, that's fine. I just think that records that situation, or like, the idea that you can just contact these tiny little sheriff's offices without going to them, and that it wouldn't take, you know, an entire month to go to all of them and it's not worth it. You know, that was just one minor issue. I think overall, they did defer to our judgment on that stuff a lot. Yeah, I would say much more so than not, you know, it's like 99 to 1is like the ratio I don't feel like it was this is this like a couple little topics that I think you know, I'm sorry just trying to get the backstory so I don't think it was anything that he was like disrespecting our judgment or something? Yeah, well you're challenged like really like, Look, this is never gonna happen, you know, but I think he you know, I think he would just like to have enough resources that we could just do all that stuff but it's some on some level like we work in a news environment of having resources so like this always are trying a lot just getting the best story we can out to change the law or explode the issue without just completely spending an entire year on something. The best for us like if we're talking about impact, like this is what we're trying to have like, this is like a central concept for us is like, impact is not the perfect story. In fact, I think getting it out there moving on to a whole new topic because there's so many

topics you know, and like, instead of just like taking one making that 100% perfect and thinking six months on We could have done it like three months, and done another whole story, which that whole story would have so much more impact in a little bit more perfect. But that first story was the only man. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Like, basically, I'm the only best get recorded here. So there's like one other one. It's like, only focus on, like what it tells. So like, she's doing great work. But I mean, you know, that's one issue for all the other issues. I guess you just hired another one. So these answers are but I mean, like, for us to cover every single issue in Alabama, and there's essentially no competition. There's like one or two other investigative reporters in the whole thing. Like, it's just not worth it to us to drill down a little bit. I mean, that's, you know, ProPublica does. The difference in culture and resources and that's made us able to do those longer term things in a way that we would not have usually done, you know, so it was good. It's a totally different, the nature of the two organizations.

Do you mean ideally you would've been able to spend three months on sheriffs, three months on another topic and so on?

No, I wouldn't want to do that. I would've preferred to do more stories. I think there were several stories that we didn't do because certain things didn't work out in the way that Charlie didn't foresee that we could've totally published. there were things like, it wasn't clearly like, this is the person who's going to go to jail. So at that point, Charlie's let's move on from that. It was still an interesting story that exposed an issue that was important and stuff, but like, you know, ProPublica is really trying to, like, change laws or, like, bring people down with every single article. And at some point, like we spend

like a month of the return about something, it's not like a complete bust. But yeah, so I think the threshold for publishing is much much higher at ProPublica. But I think there were a couple points, we should have just gone ahead and published something without ProPublica publishing it, but it felt like we couldn't really do that. So that was a weird situation. But at the end of the day,. I don't think expanding it out to more issues would be better. I mean, one of the best things about the whole project is that you're able to just focus on one day, probably, yeah. I don't think anyone would be like, Man, I wish I could have spread myself thinner, you know?

Can you talk about things you gained from being in the Local Reporting Network?

It's a hard question like I feel like, I think just to like up my game considerably just like the concept of being surrounded by people who are operating at that level, just comparision of having my work being published in that forum was like so intensely read by people that are specifically good thing that I'm trying to do, you know, that was very important and like interacting with those people on a daily basis and being fully considered on that level, despite the fact I'm not actually at the organization, so that was really great. I mean, just like that, all the psychological aspects and then I think fact checking is done 10 times better because of that, because it's like seeing things I wasn't doing I was in the place I should have been doing. It's hard to separate like Charlie from the organization and the Local Reporting Network. I don't know that a lot of the things that I got from it or anything that will happen without struggling, you know, like, a lot of it is just like seeing how he brings the story from original ideas and that whole editing process related, all the things of going through the ProPublica editing process really

taught me how to do that myself on my own, in a way like when I turned to the story now it's much more ready for ProPublica type of publication than it used to be when we used to publish stuff. There's a lot looser and more different types of things.

What advice do you have for local national investigative collaborations?

Local reporters should apply. Hands down. But then, people don't put enough time into the initial stages of the application processes type of thing. Like if we're talking about like, at that level, like I think I probably numerous people to them like, Hey, I'm thinking of applying, but the thing is like, so often people like clearly haven't read the very clear guidelines. ProPublica has what you need to submit. You know, like, I think I'm going to submit on obesity, like what about it? That's just getting thrown out the second ProPublica reads it. You would know that if you were to read, like the one page thing that they have out about how to apply. So I think people either like to be more cognizant of that, but also I think people should reach out directly to human beings about this stuff too, because I mean, that's really one big takeaway for me. But, then like on the ProPublica side, I think they the one thing I said day one, and I said like, in my last, my wrap up with basically pay a percentage of the money to the person because I got zero cents more zero anything more for working like 10 times as hard last year.

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Byard Duncan
Engagement Reporter, Reveal from the Center for Investigative Reporting
February 21, 2020

How did Reveal's Reporting Network come together?

When we were doing a lot of reporting on work based rehab, and every time the reporters put out another story, there was an influx of tips that they would go into their stories through direct emails to the reporters, and came out via social media, all those different places. And it became pretty clear pretty quickly that like, they wouldn't be able to tell all these local stories about a set of this system of rehab that was clearly kind of endemic across the United States. And we began having the conversation like how might we create some infrastructure to share these local tips with local reporters? Because they want to be telling the national angle and not just basically chasing individual local stories week after week after week. So we use that premise to build our reporting network, which had zero members when it launched but we like announced it with a story like an investigation from them. And so kind of on the heels of the investigation, the momentum of people reading it, sharing it, we were able to pick up maybe 150 or 200 participants interested local reporters who wanted access to the tips as well as some training and it was successful people started digging, kind of right away. A couple months later, the first investigation came out.

So we look at that, and we're like, oh, that was a successful project. Very cool. Then before long, we had another investigation in the pipeline, an investigation with ProPublica about rape clearance rates across the United States, called Case Cleared. And all of a sudden, it was like, oh, wow, we're looking at this data set that shows industry the

way that thousands of cities are clearing cases, which is to say, taking them off their books without actually solving them. And we have this data that proves what's happening. You know Oakland, California is open on a rape cases involving them what's going on there? Louisville, Kentucky. But the thing that we're doing is we're telling the national story. Investigative reporters always do this if you choose the place where the problem is the worst, and you use that as sort of the case study of your investigation, and then you kind of mentioned offhand the other places. I understand why you would do that, but if you're in Louisville, Kentucky, and you don't really care that you're like the third worst in the country, you just care that it's really bad. It's really bad. And so if you're a local reporter, and you're like, wow, look into this. But again, we didn't have the infrastructure to share that stuff every single day. We had to build that out. So we have our second reporting network, the Case Cleared reporting network. So the second network, the Case Cleared point, and the rehab one, we started to realize that this could be an approach to every investigation. And so we started thinking earlier on in the process about how we might build in the potential for a network approach. And at the moment, we have eight networks that have produced a bit more than 40 stories.

What steps did you take to systematize the reporting networks? Can you talk about that a little more?

Yeah, good question. Kind of like, it's been in a series of phases. So the first three, we have rehab, Case Cleared and the high school concussion reporting network. We made those on top of each other. And there was a lot of redundancy in the signup process. We were trying to communicate with people by email and we have their email addresses

which is like Gmail. So just have like a lump of email addresses in one google doc and another and another. And then in April of 2019, we consolidated them all. So they all live in the same place, as anybody who had signed up for any of them would now say up for all of them. And we put them all together and the MailChimp list, we kind of did a little audit of like, just to make sure people didn't sign up to have to sign up twice, they could just sign up once for the entire network and get access to everything.

And we continue to try to make improvements on it right now kind of like discovering the limitations of the technology we're using. You know, hoping to eliminate, kind of busy work of, you know, sending people resources when they sign up, then people are trying to automate as much as possible. But, you know, the first few projects were just kind of stacked on top of each other because we didn't know we were going to consolidate this and turn it into an approach and once we turned it into an approach, that's when we created the homepage and that's what we consolidated everybody, so that they all when you sign up for one you sign up for them all.

Not surprisingly we see flurries inviting in sign up every time there's like a new network to offer. And one thing that has been really surprising and interesting is if you have a diversity of coverage areas, you get a diverse pool of journalists signing up. So for example, like we did one about immigration, about people trying to get U visas. And we found that a lot of journalists have like, you know, Latino background, who happen to cover immigration, all of a sudden we're joining the network on the strength of that individual network but then they get in and they're like, ooh. We had some great partners in high school concussions and police officers and hate groups like this is all interesting.

And so some of them you know, some of them ended up going off in other directions to cover different stuff.

Can you talk about roadblocks you've faced in this process?

The biggest challenge of these networks is trying to improve the ratio of people who have signed up to the ratio of folks who actually completed stories. There are a lot of steps and challenges in between. You sign up because you're interested in you want to poke around, then you look at one of the networks and you check out the data set or whatever, and you're like, oh, there's actually a story in my area. It looks like nobody's covered it. That's great. So then maybe sign up for one of our webinars to talk about issues. Maybe there are 35 people at the webinar. I expect maybe two stories out of a webinar that has 35 people. And I want to improve that. I want 10 stories.

And so the way we design them, and the thing that we're constantly striving to improve is the ease of control. Basically, the ease of convincing reporters that a story has landed in their laps. It's like right there. But we do want to design the network in such a way that we're really setting them up at the two yard line of a completed story. You know what I mean? Yeah. And so the challenge of that, there are many roadblocks, even if you're a great story sitting right in front of you, there's no guarantee that your editor will let you do it. Because maybe you want to cover and you may not have the resources, even if it's really close, close to complete.

You know, some of the stuff that we offer up is like data. So some of the tips and some of the tips might not lead it everywhere. We do our best, our best at them, but you know, they're not all

always like really, really, really serious stories, even after we've done our best about them.

So the myriad of challenges in the way that I try to deal with some of them, like I try to get on calls with editors from somebody who seems interested. And somebody told me like, okay, I'm going to start because I want the editors to know that this is a real thing. And that there are a lot of successful case studies and 40 examples of how this worked out with different reporters across the country. And I find that interfacing with editors and gaining their trust and also communicating clearly about expectations and time commitment and all that stuff is pretty important. Because it's one thing for an editor to theoretically say, what are you working on? What is this versus to meet me to be provided with the various things you're getting right now? And to actually be like, okay, it's pretty cool. They're just like giving this stuff away for purposes x y&z So yes, I should for you up to skip. Skip a fucking city council meeting for once and then go report on the thing that could have some real impact in our community.

I have been hearing that the relationship between the editor and the national organization is pretty essential to success.

But I think it's up to them to kind of look at this as an opportunity to augment and to improve their capacities. Our goal would be to help reporters who never do like look this again in the best possible terms. You just go to them like this is almost done already. And

you haven't even started. It could be really impactful in your community. We call them crowbar pieces. In other words, like a story that like, kind of wedges open something. And then through that opening, make more impact. And then you can really sink your teeth and you really like promoting the production of those crowbar pieces where it's like to trigger findings talking to people, lay it out there, and then see what comes back. With your thoughts on the editor thing obviously, because you're not like, hey, once you give your reporter 3 months off, he says we work on this thing I just got from you. Ideally, ideally local editors are really energized and motivated by this because all the stuff we give them... we don't give them stuff that's like meaningless crap. Like anything we give them is going to be something that is really serious. And we've had a lot of success and I'm not saying that those are the key blockers, you know, but that is one of the big blockers.

There's a partnership requirements document on your website. Did you have that at the beginning, or did you add that over time?

Yeah, they're a tiny bit different now, because there's so many networks, so they had to be a little bit more broad in scope. And I think you got to correct me if I'm wrong, Abby, but I think one key difference between our networks and yours is that, doesn't ProPublica publish literally every story that a local reporter completes with your help from the Local Reporting Network?

Yeah.

Okay, so we don't actually publish these on our site. And again, that's that born sort of capacity issues like I run this whole program by myself. And we do offer opportunities, like if somebody does a really awesome investigation, we will, and I hope we do this more. Once or twice a year we'll have a Reveal episode. That's like, hey, this is like one of our local episodes. And it's all stories that sort of sprang from the reporting network. So in other words, like, we did this one story a year ago. We keep an eye on them. Definitely because we're interested in modeling them, we got to them on every page and probably notice there's like a list of links below, at the bottom of each networks page on our site. Yeah. But yeah, we don't really publish them unless we're doing a full on Reveal product, where we're drawing from I call it a buffet. At the end of every few months, we have this buffet of local stories that these partners have produced. That if we do so one, we can be like, ooh, if we get these two together, that would be a really awesome. And that's something we've always got one I like our radio teams always like just the way that we work with other, you know, local public radio stations. That worked at the national level. But yeah, we don't have an editor and we don't publish as a rule don't publish their stories on our site. We just give them the resources to do local important stories. We share it on our social channels. And so that that interfaces with the partnership requirements in the sense that those are written with all of the caveats. Yeah, so, so please credit us. You know, we're giving you the data that we vetted. But anything else from there is like, that's your responsibility, just like if you were using data from the Pew Research Center or something. You talk to somebody in, you know, if there's an error or something in recording. I can't remember point by point, credit.

People don't do a great job telling you in particular when they've published something. Because I like to share it and we'd like to keep track of it, put a link to it on my page. I end up having to beg people. Often I email, like the whole network and be like, hey, anything I missed, and I'll get five people be like, oh, we did this one

What advice do you have for national organizations about collaborating with local organizations?

I'm always, always looking to provide the most possible, easiest to understand set of resources, so that journalists look at it and cannot resist, but to do it so that that's different for every project. Obviously, every project is different in nature. But what gets me the most excited is when I look at what we actually have to offer, and I feel like it would be really hard to say no to the opportunity, because the findings are so shocking and there's not many not to do it. For a bunch of different places that we could see some, like really widespread impact from disseminating this to our new people. And that's in service. It's just like our CEO once called the free network stuff almost like journalism Mad Libs. In other words, like if you live in Detroit, and we've proven that issue x is, you know, super severe in Detroit, you already have that to go on. You don't have to do the very hard, very frustrating work of dealing with the story I don't know like what, you know, what's, what's the norm is nothing worse than the not know, you know, that we've already done that work for you. You just need to go talk to people. Talk to people who are affected by the issues that we've already made clear is an issue. And so I think when, when they're bringing or work at their best, it's given people a lot of really, really good stuff to go on. And the nature of that stuff in a lot of different places. is so severe that they and their

editor look at it and be like, oh shit drop everything and get on this that doesn't always happen because all of our investigations are different. And you know, some stuff is provable, some needs assistance so typically requires more legwork to shoot down tips messages, like look at a data set and be like, wow. Let me just go call a couple experts and I'll publish something.

But yeah, my goal is always and my advice to other national orgs who are hoping to do collaboration is to just bend over backwards to give as much as you can off the bat. Because that's like your sales pitch. If you want to collaborate successfully with local reporters, you need to understand their needs and you need to, I mean, we report your pitch all the time. You know what, you know, how to make something that people don't want to turn down. You need your kind of that same logic to pitch what you have to offer.

Think of it like a very, very much a low hanging fruit scenario. The networks are not hands on, which is kind of the reason I love them so much. It's just like, here's some stuff. In many cases, it's like here's some really, really, really good stuff. Go forth. Other collaborations can be more hands on and there's nothing wrong with that. I kind of like, kind of like being hands off though. It kind of just kind of like showing up and dropping the mic, you know, to say like, Oh, yeah, here's something completely crazy happening in your community.

Weekly Field Notes

August. 26, 2019

What all did you accomplish in your internship over the past week?

This was my first week at ProPublica! I'm so happy and excited to be there. This week was a lot of training, meetings, lunches and coffees to get to know my team and some of the people I'll be working with. They all seem great and very smart, so I'm looking forward to working with them more.

I'll be working with 10 projects from the Local Reporting Network: 7 that just started on July 1 and picking up a few that started at the beginning of the year. I worked really closely with the other audience fellow to understand the existing workflows and areas for growth.

I wrote a bunch of headlines for a few different stories that are publishing next week, as well as some social posts for stories that published this week, like this one.

But the thing I was most surprised by in my first week was that the newsroom's pace is incredibly different than other newsrooms' I've worked in. At previous newsroom internships, I've seen 80-100 articles published a day. But at ProPublica, I'm told a "busy day" is when four stories publish. We'll see how that holds up, but publishing far fewer stories leaves a lot of space to be intentional about the stories we do publish. I can really get behind that idea.

1a. What did you accomplish related to your project over the past week?
Nothing! This week was about getting settled in New York and starting my fellowship

2. What all did you learn, via your internship, about journalism/strategic communication? Be specific.

Your business model sets your priorities! When you have to put out a paper every day, you need stories to fill that paper. But when your production schedule is not tied to a paper or a broadcast, you don't have to publish every day. ProPublica also does the best job I've seen so far of recirculating stories after they publish, so long as they are still relevant and accurate. Having an evergreen strategy seems to be paying off for them and takes some pressure off of publishing for publishing's sake.

What could you have done better?

I could've done a little better at introducing myself to other people in the newsroom who aren't on my team. Next week I'll try to branch out a little more.

4. Are you facing any issues/challenges/frustrations? If so, what are they and

how could you address it?

I missed several calls with the new crop of LRN partners, but only because those calls to place before I started. So I have to play a bit of catch-up to get up to speed with them, but my team is aware of these issues and we're working to fix that up ASAP.

5. What do you hope to accomplish and/or learn at your internship in the week ahead? And how do you plan to make that happen?

I'd like to meet more people in the newsroom that aren't on my team or in my little section of cubicles. So I'd like to be a little more extroverted in the kitchen or what have you. I'd also like to do some off-platform work for a ~big investigation~ that's publishing either next week or the week after.

5a. What do you plan to accomplish related to your project in the week ahead?
I'd like to create a back-out calendar to see what has to be accomplished in certain timeframes so I can graduate by May.

September 3, 2019

What all did you accomplish in your internship over the past week?

It was a short week with the holiday, but I still feel like I packed a lot of work into a few days. Here are some of the things I did:

Wrote social copy for our investigation into Amazon delivery driver contractors have caused death and injury, while Amazon escapes responsibility, which was co-published with the New York Times
        Helped execute and refine this Twitter thread on the story too
Saw the rollout of a Local Reporting Network story
        Wrote tweets like this
Started to make some headway on a project to understand how LRN stories perform on ProPublica's platforms vs. local partner's platforms
Wrote heds and deks and did other prep for stories publishing next week

I also reached my goal of meeting more people in the newsroom. Still more to go but I wasn't feeling as shy as I did last week.

1a. What did you accomplish related to your project over the past week?
I did some more research into a few more sources I'd like to interview.

2. What all did you learn, via your internship, about journalism/strategic communication? Be specific.

There is a meeting on Fridays with the engagement team and the audience team that's a brainstorm over one specific project. And the premise of the meeting is that we talk about bad ideas. And this is wild to me. I have never been in a meeting where that is the frame. But it's also showing me that some of the things one person thinks is a bad idea, someone else—or multiple people--think is a good idea. And in the meetings I've been in so far have generated some good ideas, but it's really cool to me to see how ProPublica's newsroom culture permeates through the newsroom in, so far, a really positive way.

3 What could you have done better?

This past week, I struggled to understand what the action items were after some meetings, so going forward, I want to be more direct in understanding what's expected of me after a meeting.

4. Are you facing any issues/challenges/frustrations? If so, what are they and how could you address it?

Nothing comes to mind for this week, honestly.

5. What do you hope to accomplish and/or learn at your internship in the week ahead? And how do you plan to make that happen?

In the week ahead, I'll be talking with some of our Local Reporting Network partners and I really want to understand their audience goals, so I can find audience work to maximize for both of our news orgs. In the second half of the week I'll be at ONA, so I'll be trying to maximize my time there too.

I'll also be the point person for all of ProPublica's main social accounts all week, so there's a lot going on!

5a. What do you plan to accomplish related to your project in the week ahead?
I'll be working to make connections with potential interviewees at ONA and continuing to work through the backout calendar.

September 9, 2019

What all did you accomplish in your internship over the past week?

This week really consisted of two halves: first half of the week in the office and second half at ONA. I was in charge of ProPublica's main social accounts this week, which came with a bit of a learning curve.

I did a good bit of prep work for next week, when our local partners will be visiting the newsroom for a few days. The audience and engagement teams are giving a presentation to the reporters, so we got that ready. I made a spoof on Maslow's

Hierarchy of Needs to help explain what my team does, along with the building blocks of good audience work.

I also talked with a few of our partners to better understand their audience goals and how we can find synergies for both of us.

Lastly, I am in the early stages of workshopping a few ideas and pitches for different projects.

1a. What did you accomplish related to your project over the past week?
At ONA, I met two people who could be interviews for the project. I talked to them about it and they seemed interested in being interviewed!

2. What all did you learn, via your internship, about journalism/strategic communication? Be specific.

This week at ONA I went to a few sessions that lined up with early ideas for projects I'd like to do at ProPublica, so I was able to piece some advice together for pitching them.

Also, I saw an investigation we published really gain traction on Twitter, which drove back to on-site referrals. It was cool to see the story spread through the Twitter accounts of stakeholders and how much traffic it drove back. At one point Anthony Scarmucci tweeted about the story, and I messaged my editor about whether or not I should engage with the tweet. Kind of surreal.

3 What could you have done better?

In a bit of a combo of question 3 and 4, this week was my first week on social rotation, where I was the one primarily responsible for managing ProPublica's social accounts all week. I didn't have a lot of training on this before I did it, so I think in the week ahead I'd like to talk with my editor about how she thinks I went.

It was also kind of a weird week to have my first go at the social rotation during ONA, and also my editors were travelling before ONA, so I didn't have a lot of opportunities to talk about how I was doing in person with them as the week progressed. I played it pretty safe overall on the accounts because I was pretty nervous, so I'd like to have a bit of a post-mortem and ask sone questions since this'll be something I do roughly every month.

4. Are you facing any issues/challenges/frustrations? If so, what are they and how could you address it?

See above.

5. What do you hope to accomplish and/or learn at your internship in the week

ahead? And how do you plan to make that happen?

I'm really excited for this next week because six of the reporters for the Local Reporting Network will be in the newsroom for a few days. I'm looking forward to spending time with them in person and brainstorming audience ideas for their projects.

5a. What do you plan to accomplish related to your project in the week ahead? Looking at my week ahead and catching up from ONA likely leaves little time to accomplish project tasks.

September 20, 2019

What all did you accomplish in your internship over the past week? *(Also include links to any published work.)*

This week was a doozy! Monday-Wednesday, the local reporters I'm working with all year were in town and their visit dominated those days. The audience and engagement teams made a presentation to them about what our teams do and how we can work with them. Another fellow and I made a worksheet to help them think about what they need on their projects.

I also had one-on-one meetings with nearly all six of them to talk about their projects in more depth and potential ideas. I attended group brainstorms. I also talked with editors in our partner newsrooms about some best practices and other key info before stories start to publish. I did some work for stories set to publish next week too, but not a ton.

I also talked with one of my editors about how I did last week on the social rotation, and he said everything was good! Basically in this duty, no news is good news.

On Thursday, I used a comp day to go for our media tour, and on Friday, I was able to work on some analytics projects.
1a. What all did you accomplish related to your master's research project? *[Grad students only.]*

Nothing this week! It was a busy week like I predicted.

What all did you learn, via your internship, about journalism/strategic communication? Be specific.

This week involved more soft-skills than a typical week so far. I spent a lot of time talking with reporters trying to suss out their problems so far and how the audience and engagement teams can help them. I tried really hard to listen and then explained how I saw their problems and a few potential solutions. I think the industry focuses a

lot on hard skills, but I think developing soft skills is a strength that doesn't get enough attention.

What could you have done better?

Monday-Wednesday were pretty jammed with meetings and talking with partners so it was hard to get other work done. But I think that was to be expected and if there were any pressing tasks, I was able to get them done. Regardless, I think I could do a better job at making sure I'm balancing short term and long term tasks.

Are you facing any issues/challenges/frustrations? If so, what are they and how could you address it?

I'm not getting a response from a few of our partners. I've followed up with them, but still no word. Next week I'll talk with an editor about how to best get a response.

What do you hope to accomplish and/or learn at your internship *[AND related to your master's project]* in the week ahead? And how do you plan to make that happen?

Next week I want to talk more about some longer-term planning and next steps after the partners visited this week. A few meetings are set up and I think a few more need to be scheduled. For my project, I'll consult with Mark about a back-out calendar.

September 23, 2019

What all did you accomplish in your internship over the past week? *(Also include links to any published work.)*

Oof, I was a little overwhelmed this week, but ultimately, I'm happy how things turned out. I used this week as an opportunity to check in on a few different projects and assess where things are at and what needs to be done next. I also did some planning in terms of what's publishing between now and the end of the year, so I feel better having taken the 30,000-foot view.

I'm starting to think about themes on a few different projects and how I can tackle them in the months to come. How do you make sure someone sees ProPublica's journalism if they don't have internet access? Or they aren't a subscriber of a partner in the Local Reporting Network? Or they're in jail? I don't know the answers to those questions yet, but I think I can figure it out.

This week was a lot of conceptual thinking, which I like, but I also did some work around [this story about impact](#) from an LRN partner. I wrote the headline and did some social for it.

And as always, I did some work for stories publishing down the line, including one I'm excited about it early next week.

1a. What all did you accomplish related to your master's research project? *[Grad students only.]*

Nothing.

What all did you learn, via your internship, about journalism/strategic communication? Be specific.

Showing other people your work is scary but makes it better. I feel like I'm still a shy and sensitive headline writer, but I feel like I'm starting to grasp the style of a ProPublica headline. I wrote quite a few for several stories this week, and showed them to people on my team who helped me workshop them. Now, the heds are better than what I would've done alone, and that's what the stories deserve.

What could you have done better?

I procrastinated! I could've stayed on top of one story a little better. Everything got done, but I could've moved that work a little earlier into the week instead of saving it for the end.

Are you facing any issues/challenges/frustrations? If so, what are they and how could you address it?

I think I am doing a better job of identifying my challenges before they become issues. I have gotten better at asking for feedback in the last few weeks, and that's helped a lot. I think I could still be more upfront sometimes about when I don't understand the workflow or where a story is at in the workflow. I'll work on that going forward.

What do you hope to accomplish and/or learn at your internship *[AND related to your master's project]* in the week ahead? And how do you plan to make that happen?

This week I'm hoping to talk to Mark about the timeline for finishing my project. (Mark, I'm gonna email about this as soon as I send this memo.)

I think in the week ahead I am going to try blocking off some time in my calendar for myself, so I can do deep work. I'm still attending a lot of meetings which makes it harder to go deep on a task.

September 30, 2019

When you have never worked at a national news org and then you start to work at a pretty cool national news org, weird things happened.

For example: say you're on the train and you get an email that Cher tweeted a story you worked on. With the headline you wrote.

Weird! Wild!

Cher tweeted aside, it was a great week. I wrote headlines and deks for stories about Alabama sheriffs, poltically powerful families and even made a meme about the IRS. I also made some headway on longer term projects. I booked time on my calendar for myself and was able to get a lot done. I'll definitely be doing that more regularly because I really felt like I was able to focus on more in-depth tasks.

I checked in with some of our partners to work on next steps, and I also got started on Q3 analytics project.

1a. What all did you accomplish related to your master's research project? *[Grad students only.]*

Talked with Mark about a timeline for finishing my project. More TK.

What all did you learn, via your internship, about journalism/strategic communication? Be specific.

Showing other people your work is scary but makes it better. I feel like I'm still a shy and sensitive headline writer, but I feel like I'm starting to grasp the style of a ProPublica headline. I wrote quite a few for several stories this week, and showed them to people on my team who helped me workshop them. Now, the heds are better than what I would've done alone, and that's what the stories deserve.

What could you have done better?

I realized this week that my Google Analytics skills are not quite as high as I thought! I'm gonna work on getting better at nagivating that platform.

Are you facing any issues/challenges/frustrations? If so, what are they and how could you address it?

This week I realized I might be doing a little too much for a team that isn't mine own, so I think I need to be a little more strategic about what I am investing my time in.

What do you hope to accomplish and/or learn at your internship *[AND related to your master's project]* in the week ahead? And how do you plan to make that happen?

For my project, I'm waiting to hear from Mark on next steps.

Next week I want to focus some time on thinking about a project launching later this month.

October 7, 2019

This week was more chill than weeks in the past, but still felt really busy. There were no Local Reporting Network stories that published, so I got to work on a few longer term projects. The main one was a Q3 analytics report, but I realized on EOD Wednesday that the data I was working with was inaccurate. Sometimes it was wrong by 90k pageviews.

Thursday was a media tour day so I was OOO. I started working on headlines and deks for a story next week. I also started to do work on a complicated story that's scheduled to publish later in October, and I really think it will require some extra TLC. I checked in on a few projects to think about how to share them once they're published. An engagement reporter and I did a brainstorm about getting her some more responses on a call-out, and she said that one of the ideas I suggest was really effective in helping her get some responses.

1a. What all did you accomplish related to your master's research project? *[Grad students only.]*

Alright, it's official. I'll be working on my project in the spring to finish by May.

What all did you learn, via your internship, about journalism/strategic communication? Be specific.

This week I saw how important it is to have streamlined communications about where stories are in the publishing process. ProPublica doesn't have as formal of a system, compared to other newsrooms. It can make things a little ambiguous, but I'm starting to get a handle on how editors best communicate and how I can work with them to learn the information I need.

What could you have done better?

I ran into more Google Analytics troubles this week. I brought them to an editor on my team, and he was also couldn't get to the root of the problem either. It's on my to-do list for next week.

Are you facing any issues/challenges/frustrations? If so, what are they and how could you address it?

I think I could do a better job of long term planning. I think one thing that would help me is setting some calendar invites to check in on longer projects.

What do you hope to accomplish and/or learn at your internship *[AND related to your master's project]* in the week ahead? And how do you plan to make that happen?

Next week, I'm back on the social rotation where I'll be the primary person on the social accounts. I want to focus on devoting time each day to getting ahead of the social schedule. I'll carve out some time each day.

October 14, 2019

What all did you accomplish in your internship over the past week? (Also include links to any published work.)

This week I felt like I was able to keep most of my plates spinning pretty well. I was on social rotation this week which meant I was the primary person in charge of keeping the accounts alive and well. This took up a pretty hefty amount of time, but I still tackled a bunch of other things:

Got to the root of my problems on Google Analytics, got the correct data, made some progress on my analytics report

Wrote a headline, dek and social copy for this story from Ken Ward Jr.

Same for this story from our partner at NPR Illinois

Worked with some colleagues across teams to share our medical debt tips with journalists across the country. More on this TK.

Same for the general medical debt tip callout

This week brought an update to the Dollars for Docs database, and I did some crowdsourcing around it. More below.

Did an Instagram about our Intuit story, and came up with a small Instagram plan for future stories

Moderated a webinar for the Local Reporting Network (almost forgot about this!) about general FAQ and other application questions before the deadline at the end of the month.

Did more launch prep for a story coming (hopefully) at the end of the month

Did some long-term planning about more things I want to tackle in my time at ProPublica

Upon reflection, a pretty productive week, no?

What all did you learn, via your internship, about journalism/strategic communication? Be specific.

Ask your audience to tell you things! I've seen this done in newsrooms before, of course, but on Friday, I saw someone tweet about the updated Dollars for Docs database and said their doctor got nearly $147,000. So I was curious: how much money are other people's doctors getting? I wanted to put a call out on twitter for folks to tell us what their doctors get. I ran the idea by the platforms editor and he was into it. So I started sending [tweets like this](). There have been [quite]() a few [tweets]() in this [vein]() now, and it seems like each one is generating more responses than the one before it.

I'm not quite sure what, if anything, we'll do with these responses. I was juggling this on top of a few other things and meetings on Friday. But at the very least, it empowered some folks to learn more about their doctors.

What could you have done better?

I could've gotten a bit ahead of when a story was scheduled to publish. I wanted to hold it for next week, and I should've brought that idea up to the relevant editor earlier, but I kind of missed my window.

Are you facing any issues/challenges/frustrations? If so, what are they and how could you address it?

I have been facing a good amount of imposter syndrome! Since I started, I'd say. I've been trying to push it aside and sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't. I've talked to a few people at ProPublica about it and have found it's "pretty normal." But I'd still like to try and get it a little more under control.

What do you hope to accomplish and/or learn at your internship *[AND related to your master's project]* in the week ahead? And how do you plan to make that happen?

This week, I want to finish my analytics report now that I sorted out my Google Analytics problems. I also want to see if there's anything else I should be doing with my crowdsourced Dollars for Docs materials.

October 22, 2019

What all did you accomplish in your internship over the past week? *(Also include links to any published work.)*

This week really flew by, and being out for media tour on Thursday made me feel like I was on a time crunch all week. Plus, everything took longer than I thought and budgeted for. I didn't get everything done that I had hoped and planned for. The immediate priorities got tackled, but some of those still important but less pressing projects got pushed to the wayside.

Here's what I did:

More analytics report progress. Should be done soon

[A big story I worked](#) on published. This headline took forever to sort out and changed many many times. This took a lot of time. I also worked with a few different teams on presentation and design, which also took longer than I thought.

> I wrote a bunch of heds and deks, but had to hand off the social copy to someone else

> This is the [second day sidebar](#) and I wrote the hed and dek.

Worked with some colleagues across teams to share our [medical debt tips](#) with journalists across the country.

Did more Dollars for Docs work. More TK.

Did more launch prep for a story coming (hopefully) at the end of the month

More distribution work for stories coming at the end of the month

Did some long-term planning about more things I want to tackle in my time at ProPublica

Got connected with a reporter and developer for a project I'm going to start working on

What all did you learn, via your internship, about journalism/strategic communication? Be specific.

Collaborating is the best. But sometimes the collaborative process requires a little more intentionality. I was working with a few different teams this week on different stories and tasks, and it took a bit longer than I thought to sort things out to the point where everyone and every team was satisfied with the choices we made. I got frustrated a bit in the process because it felt like everyone had different objectives. Which, inherently is kind of true. The design team's priorities are different than my own, even if we are all working towards great journalism. I had to remind myself not to take things personally, and to explain my team's processes and objectives. I also tried to ask questions of other teams to understand their workflows and priorities.

Overall, it was good to step back and remember the ultimate goal even if I was frustrated in the moment. Working across teams is the best, but sometimes it just takes a little bit longer.

What could you have done better?

Hm, I think since the theme of this week was everything took longer than I thought, I could've done a better job setting expectations for people on when I'd get work back to them.

Are you facing any issues/challenges/frustrations? If so, what are they and how could you address it?

This week, I'd say being out of the office on Thursday for media tour put pressure on the rest of the week for me. I had a lot to get done and being out during the middle of the week—and when a big feature was publishing—was stressful. My team was really understanding and helpful, but I still felt bad giving them work in progress and then being MIA and asking them to carry it across the finish line.

What do you hope to accomplish and/or learn at your internship *[AND related to your master's project]* in the week ahead? And how do you plan to make that happen?

This week, as long as everything goes according to plan, a big package should be publishing. I think that'll take up a lot of my time. But I'm looking forward to seeing the rollout of such a big story with many parts. Feeling like I'll have some good takeaways this time next week.

October 28, 2019

What all did you accomplish in your internship over the past week? *(Also include links to any published work.)*

This week was largely dominated by one project: [Polluter's Paradise](). This project has been in the works since January and only just published this week. I came in towards the end to prep its distribution, and it's the project I've been alluding to in memos for a few weeks now.

Here's what I did:

Wrote heds and deks for 4 of the 6 pieces of the package, including the mainbar, which took… awhile to settle on.

> [Elizabeth Warren tweeted my hed](#)! Fun!

Wrote series title, dek and summary.

Coordinated social with our partners in New Orleans

Started to work with reporters on a thread. More TK.

Did some training with the newsletter editor, who I'll be working more closely with going forward.

Went to a digital security training. Learned my digital security training is bad

Met with reporters, editors and developers for a project I'm starting to work on with a pub date about 5 weeks away.

Worked on social copy for some evergreen stories

Worked on a story publishing next week

What all did you learn, via your internship, about journalism/strategic communication? Be specific.

Give a project time and space to be seen once it publishes. For New Orleans I felt like it wouldn't have better second-day readership compared to its first day, but I was wrong! Then it got a lot of referrals from Pocket over the weekend. At ProPublica I'm learning more about giving stories a longer tail of outreach. Maybe more people will see it in a few days. So if you build it, they will come, they just might not come right away.

What could you have done better?

This week, my lesson is that I can't be tinkering with things until I get feedback from editors. Going forward, I want to submit my work to them and move on to something else until they either give me a thumbs up or thumbs down. I wasn't twiddling my thumbs this week, but I did find it hard to jump to a completely different task while I was waiting for headline approval from editors, etc. But next time, I'll keep plowing through my work until they let me know what they think.

Are you facing any issues/challenges/frustrations? If so, what are they and how could you address it?

I talked with Damon this week about asking for some feedback from my manager and plan to set up a time for she and I to have a check-in.

What do you hope to accomplish and/or learn at your internship *[AND related to your master's project]* in the week ahead? And how do you plan to make that happen?

This week I want to dive back into some of my longer term projects.

11/4 reflection

What all did you accomplish in your internship over the past week? *(Also include links to any published work.)*

- Wrote the hed and dek for [this story](#)
- And [this one](#) which took a while to sort out
- Did more project prep for a story coming out in a few weeks
- Worked on partnerships for our partner in Oklahoma
- Talked with editors at Oregon Public Broadcasting and the Oregonian about audience workflows
- Same with the Arizona Republic
- Worked on a yet to be published twitter thread
- Wrote an internal memo about a checklist of best practices
- Wrote social copy for a story publishing next week
- Looked at analytics for recently published New Orleans package
- Went to a few strategy meetings

What all did you learn, via your internship, about journalism/strategic communication? Be specific.

This week there were a few moments where I was working with different teams, and I didn't quite understand their constraints, so it took some extra time to sort out the next steps.

What could you have done better?

Hm, just wish I could've gotten more done.

Are you facing any issues/challenges/frustrations? If so, what are they and how could you address it?

I have to keep reminding reporters of the same few points. Talked with my editors, and they suggested I write a memo that can be sent to all of them at once.

What do you hope to accomplish and/or learn at your internship *[AND related to your master's project]* in the week ahead? And how do you plan to make that happen?

Next week, I want to understand the workflow of our newsapps team better, so I can better understand how we can work together.

November 11, 2019

What all did you accomplish in your internship over the past week? *(Also include links to any published work.)*

Busy week! Another audience fellow for the Local Reporting Network started this week so I spent some time working with her to get her up to speed, which really

showed me I've learned a lot at ProPublica since I started three months ago. I also feel like I took a few leaps, like providing my team's update at the big budget meeting and having one of my projects be the subject of a cross-functional brainstorm. Here's what else I did:

Wrote hed, dek and social copy for [this story](#)

And [this story](#)

Did a little ~product management~ for a story that's supposed to publish at the end of the coming week. Coordinated across teams, proposed a few aesthetic choices

Worked on my early December project

> Coordinated with reporter on callout language and goals

> Worked with newsapps team to think about how callout will be featured on database

> Thought more about distribution. Who needs this project once it's out so we can get the tips we want?

> Wrote a memo about things I've done so far and things I want to tackle in the time before publishing, which was the subject of a brainstorm meeting with 4 different newsroom teams on Friday. Will synthesize next week.

Worked on canonical URL strategy and how it should differ for LRN stories

Wrote a hed and dek for a story publishing Monday

Worked on slides for a team brownbag next week

What all did you learn, via your internship, about journalism/strategic communication? Be specific.

Helping train my new teammate a bit made me realize something I knew abstractly: having processes and training materials written down somewhere would help bring new people up to speed, but instead we mainly rely on passing around info verbally. This works in theory, but doesn't account for institutional knowledge. If this is a field where people regularly get laid off or use cheap short-term labor, there has to be a better system to catalog a newsroom's knowledge, workflow and expectations.

What could you have done better?

This week I felt pulled in a few different directions, and I think I could've done a better job of understanding the publishing timeline for a few different stories that could've been more clear.

Are you facing any issues/challenges/frustrations? If so, what are they and how could you address it?

Hm, I'd say I'm wondering the best way to delegate work between my new teammate and I. I think time will help as she gets up to speed, but definitely something I'm asking others about.

What do you hope to accomplish and/or learn at your internship *[AND related to your master's project]* in the week ahead? And how do you plan to make that happen?

Next week I want to focus some time crafting a plan for a feature that's supposed to publish at the end of the week. Also want to spend some more time on the project launching early December.

Week of 11/18 memo

What all did you accomplish in your internship over the past week? *(Also include links to any published work.)*

Busy week! I'm feeling the crush of things that need to be done by the end of the year. I also went to Connecticut to help with an event the engagement team was putting on. In New Haven, I also did some work around finding distribution partners for a guide someone on the engagement team is working on. Here are other things I did:

Was on social this week, so I was the primary person in charge of Facebook

Hed and dek for [this story](#)

Did some project management for a freelancer working on a video

Planned out story publishing schedules with my team for the next few weeks

Did some more work on my project that's publishing early December: worked on callout, partners, schedule

This story that I worked on [published](#). I contributed to the hed and also advocated for the share buttons. I also worked closely with the newsapps developer on larger strategic goals earlier on in this project.

Per usual, did work on stories for next week

What all did you learn, via your internship, about journalism/strategic communication? Be specific.

Hm, this week I was glad to have the resources to go to Connecticut to do some distribution groundwork. I think it'll make the final product better at reaching its aims. And sure, that work could've been done over the phone or email, but it's nice to be in a newsroom that values getting out there, even though I'm not a reporter. Again, I think it'll make the work better.

What could you have done better?

Hm, leaving the office midweek still kind of feels like a mad dash to me. But I did make sure I had my bases covered. But I kind of piled up some work to do on Friday once I was back in the office, and I didn't get all of it done.

Are you facing any issues/challenges/frustrations? If so, what are they and how could you address it?

The main thing I would say I'm facing is just all the things that need to be done between now and the end of the year. But everyone is feeling that pressure, especially on my team, so I think we're all empathetic to the sprint-y marathon. To-do lists and priorities are my friends.

What do you hope to accomplish and/or learn at your internship in the week ahead? And how do you plan to make that happen?

Looking forward to having a few days off next week, but also planning to get the packaging for a few stories done so everything runs smoothly. I'm gonna try working remote which I am a little scared of, so we'll see how that goes!

Week of 12/2 memo

What all did you accomplish in your internship over the past week? *(Also include links to any published work.)*

Oof, another busy week! A lot of stories came out this week and there's still a lot to do by the end of the year. [Dollars for Profs](#), the project I've been alluding to for last several memos, finally came out this week. Here's what I did:

For Dollars for Profs

      I wrote heds and deks for the three features in the package

Wrote social copy

Wrote part of the callout

Thought about how to make the callout a little more frictionless within the database

Made an outreach list

Wrote an intro for a special email that went out to newsletter subscribers with .edu emails

Still a few more things TK

I wrote heds and deks for [this story,](#) which we ended up changing several times since the story didn't do that well. But also it published at 11:30 on an impeachment day and the same day we published a video of a 16-year-old boy dying under Border Patrol care

[Hed, dek, social copy](#) for this story

Heds and deks for stories next week

Definitely a few other things I am forgetting

Worked on something for Pamela Colloff's newest story (!!) which should be alive next week.

What all did you learn, via your internship, about journalism/strategic communication? Be specific.

This week I really noticed how much we are trying to get out the door between now and the end of the year, so packages can be submitted for awards. Awards are an important part of ProPublica's ecosystem, and there are several stories that "have to publish by the end of the year." But I don't think pushing out so much great journalism at this point in the year is great for readers. And it causes everyone in the newsroom to lose their heads a little bit and slip into old, bad habits. (Should we publish a short impact story on a Friday at 5:30 p.m? No, but that's what a senior editor wanted to do. I talked him out of it.) Anyway, I guess the lesson is that we should think about *when* we publish our best journalism, and does that timeline work for readers? I don't know that it does right now.

What could you have done better?

Dollars for Profs was the first big big package I had a hand in while it was still being reported, etc. and I think I could've done things over the last weeks and months to make publishing week easier. Long-term planning, still hard for me!

Are you facing any issues/challenges/frustrations? If so, what are they and how could you address it?

Staying on top of everything! Everyone has their head under water though, and a lot of non-urgent, but still important, conversations are being pushed to 2020.

What do you hope to accomplish and/or learn at your internship in the week ahead? And how do you plan to make that happen?

Moving through work quickly and effectively!

Key Words

Collaboration

Partnership

Investigation

Local news

National news

Workflows

News routines

Watchdog

Working together

P̄Ï

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April 28, 2020

Dear Mr. Horvit,

I'm writing to you to confirm that Abby Ivory-Ganja has worked productively and successfully at ProPublica as a Local Reporting Network fellow on the Audience team.

During her time with us, Abby has made many positive contributions to our work, helping us achieve unprecedented audience growth and engagement over the past several months.

As our coverage pivoted to focus on the coronavirus pandemic, Abby has taken the lead in putting together a thoughtful analysis of all of our COVID-19 coverage, and we are especially grateful for her sharp thinking and keen journalistic insights during this challenging time.

Both ProPublica and the Local Reporting Network partners across the country have benefited greatly from her work.

Sincerely,

Meg Marco
Senior Editor

Self-evalution

     Well, I have to admit right away: it was very, very strange to go from researching local national investigative collaborations to getting a fellowship at the very news organization that inspired my work. And the other thing I should say: it is my favorite job I've ever had.

     As the audience fellow for the Local Reporting Network, I spend most of my time thinking about to frame local stories for a national audience. In my role, I generally write headlines and deks, social copy, coordinate with different teams and analyze data for trends and takeaways. I've also elbowed my way into working on newsletter projects too. When I first started, I focused on building relationships with people on my team, editors and other Local Reporting Network staff. That has paid off really well for me because ProPublica is a very decentralized newsroom, and having many relationships is one of the best ways to operate there.

     Typically, a few days before a story publishes, a draft slides across my desk, where I start to think about heds, deks and how to frame the story online. It is not quick or easy to condense complicated and nuanced investigations into a 100 character headline or 280 character tweet. The more time I can have to mull those ideas over, the better. Then my work goes through a long approval process: reporter, editors, copy and legal must sign off on my work before it can go up. But ultimately, it makes the work better.

     In my first few months, I struggled with imposter syndrome pretty severly. I felt out of place, like no one was taking me seriously and that I wasn't cut out for the role. I went from barely seeing stories before they publish in other newsrooms to debating with Pulitizer Prize winners about what their headlines should be. It was a hard pivot, and it

took me a while to adapt. I'm not sure exactly what changed, but I did get over this period and started to gain more confidence in my work and my expertise. But sometimes I just feel like three toddlers underneath a trench coat.

The audience team at ProPublica is unlike any other I've ever worked on. We are not seen only as a social media team—in some ways that is the least important thing we do. Instead, we generally get the feedback that it's better when we're involved in the editorial process as early as possible. I find that hugely empowering and hope to be in more spaces like this in my career.

I have grown immensely as a journalist in my time at ProPublica. But I also see more opportunities to grow. I'd like to learn more about newsletters in my career, as a tactic for audience loyalty. And I think some of the things I struggled with is simply settling into the rhythm of a job like building a relationship with a manager that will last for moroe than 10 weeks or understanding how to effectively work across departments. At ProPubliica, sometimes seemingly small tasks stretch on for much longer than I would've originally thought. I could also learn to say no more, when appropriate. Surely these are things I will get better at with more experience.

My experience at ProPublica has really been incredible. I've learned so much about framing stories for a national audiences, the qualities that make for strong stories and from the people who I still can't believe I can call my colleagues. I am still shocked I work there sometimes, and I do not take for grant the resources that are available to me there. I've tried to both learn as much as I can and contribute as much as I can. That attitude has served me well, just as my time at ProPublica has too.

Multimedia/links
This Governor Still Guides His Billion-Dollar Business Empire, Even Though He

Said He Wouldn't

- Wrote hed and dek

https://www.propublica.org/article/this-governor-still-guides-his-billion-dollar-business-empire-even-though-he-said-he-wouldnt

These Sheriffs Release Sick Inmates to Avoid Paying Their Hospital Bills

- Wrote hed and dek

https://www.propublica.org/article/these-sheriffs-release-sick-inmates-to-avoid-paying-their-hospital-bills

An Inmate Needed Emergency Medical Help. The Jail's Response: See if She Has

Insurance.

- Wrote hed and dek

https://www.propublica.org/article/an-inmate-needed-emergency-medical-help-the-jails-response-see-if-she-has-insurance

Internal Emails Show How Chaos at the CDC Slowed the Early Response to

Coronavirus

- Wrote Twitter thread

https://twitter.com/propublica/status/1243915217689612288?s=20

Under Trump, LGBTQ Progress Is Being Reversed in Plain Sight

- Wrote hed and dek

- Worked with newsapps team to maximize share potential

https://projects.propublica.org/graphics/lgbtq-rights-rollback

These Judges Can Have Less Training Than Barbers but Still Decide Thousands of Cases Each Year

- Wrote hed, dek, social copy

- Worked with editor to inform publishing strategy for maximum audience potential

https://www.propublica.org/article/these-judges-can-have-less-training-than-barbers-but-still-decide-thousands-of-cases-each-year

This Doctors Group Is Owned by a Private Equity Firm and Repeatedly Sued the Poor Until We Called Them

- Wrote hed, dek, social copy

https://www.propublica.org/article/this-doctors-group-is-owned-by-a-private-equity-firm-and-repeatedly-sued-the-poor-until-we-called-them

We Reported on a Nonprofit Hospital System That Sues Poor Patients. It Just Freed Thousands From Debt.
- Wrote hed, dek, social copy
-
https://www.propublica.org/article/we-reported-on-a-nonprofit-hospital-system-that-sues-poor-patients-it-just-freed-thousands-from-debt

Twitter

- Made this meme Valentine
https://twitter.com/propublica/status/1228460572758421505?s=20

The Weekly Dispatch
- Wrote
https://go.propublica.org/webmail/125411/496426806/4c365a523950a326692d55abdf907b726f0ea34e8e5a5dbc873f7a54cb1495b2

The Weekly Dispatch
- Wrote

https://go.propublica.org/webmail/125411/506881529/4c365a523950a326692d55abdf90
7b726f0ea34e8e5a5dbc873f7a54cb1495b2

Project Proposal

Introduction

It is no secret how drastically the field of journalism has changed within the last several decades. News distribution processes have been altered dramatically. News cycles are 24/7, creating a cascade of stories to create, produce and distribute. Media ownership models have shifted towards conglomerations, and perhaps most importantly, the economic pressures facing the industry have become more and more dire. Layoffs are no longer infrequent, and neither is the shuttering of news organizations that can no longer stay afloat in the market. Critical stories slip through the cracks because there are simply fewer journalists covering them.

As resources dwindle in newsrooms across the country, collaboration has emerged as one way to counteract economic hardships facing journalism. While there are several kinds of collaboration, this project will focus on finite, short-term collaborations which are generally range from a few months in length to a year. In this kind of collaboration, typically, one large, highly specialized newsroom—like the Center for Investigative Reporting or ProPublica—will create a collaborative framework and smaller, more local newsrooms are able to opt in to participate. Some collaborative programs go even further and seek to bolster minority groups underrepresented in investigative journalism, or journalism as a whole.

The structures, goals and objectives vary based on the framework created by the larger newsroom, but the overarching goal is to have both newsrooms benefit. For the larger newsroom, that may mean creating a high-quality investigation from a location where the organization is not actively located or covering, as well as knowledge sharing

with other journalists. For the smaller newsroom, the benefits are similar, with the addition of getting expertise from investigative journalists. Often, they also get the time and resources necessary to complete a high-quality investigation. Therefore, the benefits can also be economic, but these partnerships also help sustain and strengthen investigative journalism while economic resources that support that kind of journalism continue to diminish.

Professional Skills Component

For my professional skills component, I'll be working at ProPublica as an audience fellow for the Local Reporting Network. I'll work with six projects in the Local Reporting Network to package and distribute their stories throughout the year. I'll also help journalists connect with their communities both online and offline in service of their journalism.

I'll work with editors, producers and developers on visual storytelling means for stories. Part of my role will include doing social media work for ProPublica. The news organization says they have a collaborative approach to social storytelling, and part of my role will be bringing everything together in the end.

I'll also look at the analytics for stories and interpret and explain findings to reporters, editors and the rest of the team. This yearlong position will start in late August, and I'll work 40 hours a week.

Analysis Component

Topic and research questions

In my professional project, I plan to analyze newsrooms that are participating in collaborative partnerships and offer best practices for newsrooms interested in collaboration. My research questions are as follows:

RQ 1: What best practices should be implemented when newsrooms collaborate?

RQ 2: How can collaboration be built into news routines?

Literature Review

The goal of this professional project is to examine newsrooms participating in finite, short-term collaborations and see how, or if, participating in a collaboration has adapted existing news routines. Changes in workflow due to collaborative processes could impact the understanding of news routines as a theory. The overarching question of this research project is this: how can newsrooms best collaborate to create watchdog journalism?

Definition

Collaboration can be defined in a number of ways, but this project will implement the definition laid out by Graves and Konieczna: cooperative practices by which rival news outlets work together to produce at distribute news (2015). However, the kinds of collaboration focused on in this project will not emphasize rival news organizations. For example, ProPublica and the South Bend Tribune in Indiana are not rivals in their collaborative partnership, per say. Each organization serves a different role for its audience. A local paper does not serve the same journalistic function as a national investigative news outlet, so there is no need to define them as rivals. Furthermore, no news organization can be all things to all people, so by collaborating, news organizations can help and lift each other.

Additionally, collaboration focuses on "knowledge exchange and skill sharing between different experts" (Hultén & Picha Edwardsson, 2017, pg. 6). Since this project is generally focusing on collaborations between a large, national newsroom and a smaller, local outlet, each party has expertise to share. That may be local expertise or a specialty, like data reporting. Collaboration is cooperative production and distributive practices, in addition to knowledge, skill and method sharing (Hultén & Picha Edwardsson, 2017; Graves & Konieczna, 2015).

Prior Research

Journalism has long had elements of collaboration within it. For instance, wire services like The Associated Press can be viewed as one kind of collaboration. The Associated Press was created in 1846 to deliver the news of the Mexican War faster than the postal system could deliver (de la Serna, 2018). Another prominent kind of journalistic collaboration is the relationship between National Public Radio and its member stations. The Associated Press and National Public Radio share stories with its partners for a fee and in addition, the larger, international outlet may pick up stories from its local partners to be distributed across the network (Overview And History, 2013). Though National Public Radio was created more than 100 years after the Associated Press, the spirit and principles of collaboration have been embedded in the journalistic process. Those ideas, along with technological advancements like the internet and social media, have allowed for new kinds of collaboration to unfold.

Researchers have identified and defined six different types of collaboration (Stonbely, 2017; Hare, 2017; Murray, 2017). Collaborations may be classified as temporary and separate, ongoing and integrated, ongoing and separate and more. For

example, an ongoing and separate collaboration would be Gannett's USA Today Network, where partners create content separately and share it (Stonbely, 2017). Wire services also fall into this category. Each of these types of collaboration requires different levels of attention, management and maintenance from the involved partners. Collaborations such as ProPublica's Local Reporting Network and Reveal Investigative Fellows from the Center for Investigative Reporting would fit into the category of a temporary and integrated collaboration. This kind of collaboration shares data, resources and more at the level of the organization while coordinating closely and having regular communication for the length of the project (Stonbely, 2017). The most notable example of a temporary and integrated collaboration is the Panama Papers from the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists. According to the report from the Center for Cooperative Media, this is the least common type of collaboration, likely because it requires such an intimate relationship between partner organizations.

Several characteristics of a successful collaboration have been identified (Stonbely, 2017; Hare, 2017; Griggs, 2017). Successful collaborations need a project manager and at least some level of trust and goodwill among participants (Stonbely, 2017; Hare, 2017). A collaborative mindset, though hard to quantify, can also be an aid to creating and maintaining a successful collaboration. Some experts are of the mentality that news organizations should do what they do best and partner with other organizations in order to produce high-quality, and hopefully high-impact work (Griggs, 2017; Graves & Konieczna, 2015). Furthermore, participating newsrooms need to think early and often about how they can both benefit from the collaboration. They must also present the opportunity to gain new knowledge across platforms, newsrooms and generations.

In a small but growing number of cases, collaboration has been so deeply integrated into a newsroom's routine that it has led to the creation of new roles. The Center for Investigative Reporting and the ICIJ are two such places, along with ProPublica. ProPublica's partnership manager is in charge of large-scale collaborations, like the documenting of hate crimes during the Trump administration. Collaboration is a key part of the newsroom's mission, and the partnership manager's role allows the collaborations the sustained and dedicated attention they need (Glickhouse, 2018). Within the newsroom, the partnership managers are seen at a stature similar to editors, both in terms of responsibility and hierarchy.

Competition among journalists and news organizations remains consistent, even as collaborative partnerships find their footing. Even if collaboration becomes more widely practiced, competition will still be an alive and well part of the journalistic process. Eads lays out one criterion that can be used to assess whether a story should be collaborative or competitive: which practice will a story and its audience benefit more from? (2018). Some instances, like election data, would generally benefit audiences more if it were collaborative. However, even as collaboration finds its footing, competition is an integral part of journalism.

If successful, collaboration can increase the spread and impact of journalistic work and build institutional reporting resources to be spread more widely (Graves & Konieczna, 2015). Additionally, in their ethnographic work, Graves and Konieczna found that collaboration can allow for some journalists and/or news organizations to develop specializations in skill intensive areas, like map or data journalism for example (2015). Those specialized skills can then be shared throughout the collaborative process

with newsroom partners that may be underdeveloped in a specific area. However, this approach could potentially lead to a small number of concentrated highly-specialized individuals and organizations, but if news organizations emphasize learning and skill sharing within a collaboration, then this issue may not warrant too much concern. If newsrooms participating in a collaboration consider getting the story out there to be the biggest objective, then the skill specialization would be a potential secondary or tertiary problem.

Public media's business model makes it uniquely suited for collaborations (Barba, Holm & Solly, 2018). Collaborative journalism has not yet demonstrated its collective power and increasingly, public media has been called upon to fill in coverage gaps from the polarization of cable news and dwindling local coverage. But if the public media ecosystem were better connected, editorial collaboration would become instinctual, effortless and even, routine (Barba, Holm & Solly, 2018). However, reaching that level of routine would require more collaboration, as well as several other steps to formalize and normalize the collaborative process. One potential step toward collaboration, as noted by the authors, is a need for a common language of collaboration so that removes a barrier to entry. They suggest making a stylebook. In addition, they propose a central editorial clearinghouse in order to collaborate at all levels of journalism, but perhaps the practicality and feasibility of their ideas are lacking. The authors of this report are experts are creating collaboration within newsrooms, but their ideas may be too broad and not actionable. Creating an editorial clearinghouse would take countless hours, resources and coordination. Ultimately, who would oversee the clearinghouse? Who would take ownership of their grand ideas? And, most importantly, would those ideas be

accepted? There are many potential paths toward the wider implementation of collaboration, but the ideas to get journalism there must be viable and achievable.

Researchers have defined the benefits of collaboration, and among them are sharing costs and information, increased story reach and a stronger hand in setting the news agenda (Graves & Konieczna, 2015; Carson & Farhall, 2018; Hatcher & Thayer, 2016). Effective collaborations can have the ability to increase the quality of investigative journalism that is published (Carson & Farhall, 2018). Hatcher and Thayer say one benchmark of a successful collaboration could potentially be greater audience loyalty (2016). All of these concepts are ideas that news organizations should be able to get behind.

Yet, reaching this point has come at a price. The extensive documentation of economic pressures facing journalism have contributed, at least in part, to some stories going overlooked and unreported. South Bend Tribune reporter Christian Sheckler is a member of ProPublica's Local Reporting Network and confirmed that in an interview. He said covering some community and public safety meetings had become harder and harder as he had to cover more stories due to the paper's shrinking staff over the years (Sheckler, 2018). This led him to miss some important stories as they unfolded, regarding a local police department's administrative decisions. However, he says his collaboration with ProPublica has given him the ability, and more importantly, the time to report those stories in 2018, fulfilling journalism's role as a watchdog.

As discussed, collaboration is not a new concept, but news organizations have begun to take it much more seriously in the last 10 to 15 years, as the overall economic outlook facing news organizations has become more grim (Steiger, 2010). Additionally,

collaboration can be used as an instrument to fulfill journalistic roles and missions. The nexus between a powerful investigation and the right publishing partner can lead to impact, which is often the goal of work published by investigative outlets (Steiger, 2010). An investigation can be powerful and jaw-dropping, but if it is not seen by the right audience, then it may not pack the intended punch. Paul Steiger, the founding editor-in-chief of ProPublica, also noted, at least observationally, that collaborative initiatives are more likely to come from a mission-driven non-profit than a for-profit news organization. Collaboration alone cannot solve all of the problems facing the media industry, but some scholars think it can be a strong element in the future of news (de la Serna, 2018; Steiger, 2010; Eads, 2018; Stonbely, 2017; Carson & Farhall, 2018).

But collaboration can also have some drawbacks and roadblocks (Hatcher & Thayer, 2016; Carson & Farhall, 2018). One study of a collaboration between journalism and engineering students found that the students struggled with differing communication styles and schedules, but ultimately, both student groups felt the collaboration was a net positive (Hultén & Picha Edwardsson, 2017). Other problems include unclear ideas of what the partnership would entail and a lack of understanding, guidelines or a contract (Hatcher & Thayer, 2016). There is also a danger that collaboration may reduce the number of diverse investigative stories that are being done (Carson & Farhall, 2018; Steiger, 2010), but at this point, that reality seems unlikely to truly create an impact on what stories are being covered.

However, every part of the journalistic process includes some level of collaboration (Mills, 2018; Sanchez, 2018). A reporter's relationship with their editor—or editors—is a collaboration. Sometimes the reporter will have story ideas, or other

times the editor will assign out stories. Employees in one single newsroom are often

working toward the same goal. In investigative newsrooms, the goal is often to serve as

the watchdog and hold the powerful accountable. Working with photographers,

videographers, audience engagement producers, lawyers and more—all of those steps and

rounds of edits are collaborative (Mills, 2018; Sanchez, 2018). But working within a

newsroom is collaborative, even if it isn't labeled as a collaboration.

Working with freelancers is similarly collaborative. Therefore, hesitations around the

newness of a collaborative partnerships *should* be void. That may be reductive, and

certainly collaborations between newsrooms will need additional attention, time and

planning. Yet, if collaborations across newsrooms are framed as an extension of the daily

routines that already take place at news organizations, then that could provide an

additional push for hesitant newsroom leaders who have not yet embraced collaboration

as a strategy to solve many of the perils facing the industry and to increase the amount of

meaningful investigative journalism that is published.

Journalism's Watchdog Role

If more investigative collaborations take place, it will create more journalism that

fulfills the watchdog role (Christians et. al, 2009; Eads, 2018). Serving as a watchdog is

arguably one of journalism's most critical roles and can be attributed to maintaining

democracy (Christians, 2009). A common refrain among investigative journalists is to

"afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted." This role allows for mechanisms to

holding public officials to account, as well as surveilling the sociopolitical environment

(Christians et. al, 2009). However, one main obstacle is that the media is restricted by its

own economic and institutional contexts. Economic and institutional contexts eventually

create routines, and those routines may eventually be able to accommodate collaborative partnerships and practices. Regardless, the watchdog role is vital to journalism and vital to democracy. The economic conditions facing the industry have led to routines that do not always or necessarily emphasize the watchdog role. If collaborative partnerships are implemented into a wide number of routines across news organizations, greater watchdog accountability can be done.

Theory

News Routines

As a practice and a theoretical framework, news routines are one way journalists can process the vast amounts of information they receive and interpret on a daily basis (Vlad & Becker, 2009; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996; Tuchman, 1973). Often, routines create clear delineations (Sigal, 1973). A news organization's coverage area is often well-defined, unless an extraordinary event takes place. Within the newsroom, roles are well-integrated into its news routines. Editors serve different functions than reporters. Photographers serve different roles than copy editors. Beats also serve to further clarify which roles journalists are called upon to fill and create a structure within the newsroom (Vlad & Becker, 2009). Beats also allow for journalists to develop expertise and specialized skills (Vlad & Becker, 2009). Understanding how news routines operate, and what they emphasize, is a necessary part of the research process to see how collaborative practices can be implemented.

Although news routines are generally unchanging, advancements in technology have changed the routines, or at the very least, added additional steps in the routine (Usher, 2014; McIntosh, 2008). A researcher shadowing several reporters from the New

York Times found that incorporating new elements to a story, like video, did change routines (Usher, 2014). Getting photos for a story has been part of the news production process for more than 50 years, but at the Times—a print news organization—adding a video to a story does change the process (Usher, 2014). If a video will be shot, the reporter might need to schedule in-person interviews and clear with interviewees that a camera will be present and more. It is significant that, as news organizations become more multimedia-oriented, that routines do become longer, even if they are not transformed. In addition, this research shows that routines can change in order to cater to audiences.

The internet and social media have also played a role in changing news routines, even if they have not completely transformed (Ferrucci et.al, 2017; McIntosh, 2008; Usher, 2014). In the case of the researcher shadowing New York Times reporters, one reporter covering financial news was able to prewrite a story with one company's quarterly earnings, only needing to fill in the exact figures once the press release came through (Usher, 2014). The reporter's explanation for prewriting was simple: he knew when the press release was coming out, and if he prewrote the story, it could be published quickly online (Usher, 2014). Wanting to be the first to publish has long been a part of competitive journalistic routines (Beam & Di Cicco, 2010; Vlad & Becker, 2009), but the age of the internet does not need to wait for the printing press to distribute news. The internet's printing press is ready to go at all times, whenever a story breaks. This case study ultimately shows that routines can be changed, but it does not quite get into how, which is one gap this research project will aim to fill. Though the extra steps added to the routine for video is not a fundamentally new routine for news as an industry, it did

change routines at that organization. Collaboration can likely find wider, mainstream implementation in a similar way, which this project seeks to understand.

Research on news routines generally fits into three differing perspectives: political economy, sociology and cultural constraints (Vlad & Becker, 2009; Herman & Chomsky, 1998; Epstein, 1973; Chalaby, 1996; Schudson, 2002). Most research on news construction is born out of the sociological perspective, and therefore seeks to understand how organizational theory and occupational theory impact news production. This professional project will focus on the sociological perspective because it seeks to understand the outside forces pressing upon routines, along with their structure and function. Schudson, one of the most notable scholars on news production, says the political economy and cultural approaches have neglected social realities involved in news production (2005). However, social organization, political economy and culture have all played a role in shifts of news production routines (Schudson, 2005).

There is no one explanation for the current media environment, and while there are several notable events that have changed the landscape, understanding the current environment requires looking at all these factors in amalgamation. (Schudson, 2005; de la Serna, 2018). De la Serna recognizes the confluence of factors that have led to this moment where collaboration can be used as a powerful tool moving forward:

> Traditional news media, nonprofit organizations, journalism schools, and other information producers are taking advantage of opportunities created by the combination of decentralized, networked, and traditional models for news production and dissemination to work together, create shared resources, and advance their work. The cooperation of multiple organizations and individuals to address journalistic challenges is happening at a scale that no single organization could replicate by itself (de la Serna, 2018).

Additionally, Schudson notes that news production is where "news sources, news reporters, news organization editors and the competing demands of professionalism, the

market-place, and cultural traditions collect around the specific choices of what news to report and how to report it" (2005, pg. 175). Many, many forces have shaped news routines, and understanding those forces is an avenue to see opportunities for collaborations to shift, modernize and invigorate news routines. Regardless, a new era of collaboration seems to be unfolding within journalism (de la Serna, 2018).

A key text from sociological perspective is Epstein's study of how the three major television networks structured newsgathering (1973). Even though the networks see each other as competitors, the routines of the organizations did not seem to vary. On the national level, news organizations must consider how the geographic placement of its teams can impact what is covered. During Epstein's period of study, they found that 90 percent of NBC national news coverage was produced in five major cities because that's where NBC had news crews (1973). This is one reason why local-national collaborative partnerships could disrupt current routines and lead to coverage that is a mirror of reality, and not a construction of reality. Additionally, many of the larger newsrooms that create collaborative frameworks that will be the focus of this study are in major metropolitan areas like Washington D.C., New York or San Francisco and the Bay Area. It is impossible for one news organization to be everywhere, but a collaborative partnership can allow for high-quality investigations to come from areas outside of the country's largest cities. Epstein's work shows the importance of how news processes are constructed and how routines are affects the news audiences ultimately consume. Because of this, journalists and researchers must think critically about what existing news routines emphasize and prioritize.

Furthermore, a relatively homogenous routine tends be a theme across news organizations. News routines are generally considered to be unchanging, even across different news organizations, platforms and companies (Vlad & Becker, 2009; McIntosh, 2008; Ferrucci et.al, 2017). A push toward the wide integration of collaborative practices within news routines could lead to a shift in the understanding of news routines as a theoretical framework. Moving toward combining mainstream journalism with collaborative principles could "re-energize the public sphere through news" (McIntosh, 2008). Vlad and Becker argue that news routines are largely homogenous because they do not vary across time, place or organization (2009). This is perhaps the largest challenge that collaborative partnerships face, but routines can be adapted.

Additionally, not much research has been done on how news production has changed since the 1970s (Ferrucci et. al, 2017). While those scholars specifically highlight a lack of ethnographic work looking at news production in the last 50 years, using semi-structured interviews to understand how collaboration may have changed news routines could provide insight into this research gap.

There is tension among scholars over whether news is a construction of reality or a mirror of it—and which of the two it should be. For instance, Schudson says news is a construction of reality (2005). Routines themselves are constructed, so it is no surprise they lead to constructions (Epstein, 1973). But perhaps it should be a mirror of reality when it comes to investigative journalism that fulfills the watchdog role.

Collaborative work and practices aim to share knowledge and broaden the network of an individual (Harris, 2011; Murthy, 2015; Meltzer & Martik, 2017). Through a framework of communities of practice, collaboration deemphasizes the contributions of

an individual and instead focuses on the shared practice of being effective in a given domain (Meltzer & Martik, 2017). The practice strives to break down an individual's "worlds of networks and information sources" (Harris, 2011, pg. 157) and make those networks and information sources more widely shared.

Journalism, like many industries, struggles to change quickly, but the structure of many news routines does not encourage collaborative practices (Møller Hartley, 2017; Hatcher & Thayer, 2016; Zelizer, 2018). News organizations are competing for audience and advertiser attention while producing content that does not inform or engage audience members (Hatcher & Thayer, 2016). Institutional news routines still place emphasis on being the first to break a story, intense monitoring of other outlets and having the high-level sources. One scholar noted coverage of Brexit and Donald Trump's campaign for the presidency "emblematized journalism's failure to serve the electorate by not providing necessary information" (Zelizer, 2018, pg. 149). From an axiological perspective, news routines need reform to better serve audiences, and collaboration could be one way to foster new news routines.

Conclusion

Collaboration is one potential solution to many problems facing journalism. News organizations should opt to see each other not as competitors but as collaborators. Of course, not every story should be collaborative, but when appropriate, collaboration should be considered, and ideally, implemented. Competition is a well-integrated part of news routines and the landscape of journalism. However, the true competition is not between news organizations, but rather the forces pressing on journalism: misinformation, economic pressure, media trust and more.

A well-structured and well-done collaboration allow for news organizations to harness their collective power and to create something more commanding than one organization could do by itself. Collaboration is one way a rising tide could lift all boats.

Practically, understanding how collaborations work is an extension of the collaborative process, which emphasizes the sharing of both knowledge and skills. Participating in an effective collaboration is a skill and in keeping with the spirit of collaboration, should not be kept among a small group of news organizations and individuals.

News routines are generally considered to be unchanging across time, organization and medium (Becker & Vlad, 2009). However, implementing collaboration could disrupt those routines and potentially shift the understanding of news routines as a theory. In addition, journalism within one news organization is already collaborative, so participating in a collaboration between newsrooms is just an extension of existing routines.

Overall, the body of research regarding journalistic collaborations is underdeveloped and has not yet reached saturation. However, the timeline of completing academic research is lengthy, and journalistic collaborations have only gained momentum in the last few years. Much of the research on collaboration does not look at the process of structuring of a collaboration and how news routines are adapted to account for partnerships. The research seems largely seems to be retrospective. The body of academic research on investigative collaborations is even smaller. However, journalistic trade publications like Poynter, Nieman Lab and the Columbia Journalism Review have examined collaborations more holistically. Trade publications have looked

at how to create a collaborative partnership more frequently than academics have. But there is still plenty of room to examine how newsrooms can best collaborative to create investigative work, fulfilling one of journalism's key roles as a watchdog and enforcer of accountability. Additionally, little is known about how the news production process has changed since the 1970s, and few ethnographies have been conducted in the nearly 50 years between then and now (Ferrucci et.al, 2017). Given how much journalism has changed, both from a business perspective and a distribution perspective, this topic clearly needs more academic attention and analysis.

Methodology

For my methodological approach, I will be conducting semi-structured in-depth interviews, not only because they are required for a professional project, but also because I believe semi-structured interviews will be able to answer my research questions most effectively. When conducting my literature review, I found that there is not much research on journalistic collaboration to begin with, and the research that is out there does not address how to build a successful collaboration. Furthermore, the subset of research on investigative journalism collaborations is even smaller. Much of the published research looks back at a collaboration, and while my project will look back, it will also seek to understand how collaborations can be best implemented into news routines from the beginning. Because of this, aspects of my research will focus on the real-time process of participating in a collaborative partnership as explained by the journalists who participate.

By conducting interviews, I will be able to understand some of the barriers and benefits that come with a collaboration. My project will examine what common factors

allow a collaboration to succeed and how to allow collective knowledge to flow freely

between the borders of a collaborative partnership.

Sample

In my sample, I will focus on investigative collaborations, like ProPublica's Local

Reporting Network or Reveal Investigative Fellows from the Center for Investigative

Reporting. In each of these collaborations, the larger newsroom provides money,

resources and training for local reporters in order to complete an investigative project.

For instance, the Local Reporting Network pays the salary and benefits of local reporters

for a year, which allows them to devote their time to creating investigative journalism.

I'm interested in this kind of collaborations because they give power to local newsrooms

and emphasize partnerships, instead of national reporters parachuting into a community

to cover a story when it becomes newsworthy. Additionally, in this kind of collaboration,

reporters have one foot in the door of their regular news routine and one foot in a routine

changed by participating in the collaboration. Research participants will be able to share

insight from both perspectives.

The community of investigative journalists seems to already have some

collaborative legs. Investigative journalists are often very open to sharing information

about investigations they've conducted through professional development organizations

like Investigative Reporters and Editors or social media. With interviewees, I will seek to

gather a few different kinds of perspectives to understand how to build collaborative

practices and how they can be integrated into existing news routines, but I primarily want

to talk to reporters from the smaller, local newsrooms who are the ones receiving

guidance and resources from the larger newsroom within collaboration. I believe this will

be the core of my interviews since the reporters are balancing working with the larger newsroom while continuing to work in the smaller, more local newsroom. I'd also like to interview editors from the larger newsrooms that guide the reporters. They can provide context to how the collaboration was envisioned within their newsroom, as well as if and how that vision has changed once implemented, but I realize access here could inhibit the project's progress, so these potential interviews would be useful but not make or break for the project's success. I may also speak with editors within the smaller newsroom to understand how participating in a collaborative partnership has or has not changed news routines and culture within that newsroom.

For my timeframe, I will be focusing on collaborations within the last few years— 2015 to present. In 2016, the International Consortium for Investigative Journalism published the Panama Papers, which seemed to usher in a new era of investigative journalism collaborations. The timeframe could change based on feedback from research participants, but to begin, I will look at only relatively recent partnerships that have taken place since 2015. I'm opting to study recent partnerships because that also serves to best answer my research questions. Additionally, it will account for the current landscape within journalism.

Conducting The Study

By using semi-structured interviews as my methodology, I will be able to ask similar questions overall but I will also be able to tailor some questions to interviewees based on their role in the collaborative process. Semi-structured interviews would also give me the opportunity let the interviewees talk about what is important to them (Burman, Batchelor and Brown, 2001). The methodology will also allow the potential

for "surprise data" and points of view I may not be seeing at this time (Becker, 2014). I also know that interviewers are "aware that interviews take place in a social interaction context, and they are influenced by that context" (Fontana & Frey, 1994), so I will work to manage that context. For example, if I'm conducting an interview over the phone, I will likely encourage the interviewee to take the call in a private space, instead of an open-office floor plan typically seen in newsrooms. This way, the interviewee will feel like they can speak freely without the concern of co-workers hearing what they are saying.

When it comes saturation for my project, I'll be looking for themes and patterns. I anticipate some answers along the line of wanting to share resources, creating more impactful journalism and bolstering local news. Additionally, some journalists from larger, national newsrooms may say they had too much information to process by themselves or that they wanted to gather information at the local level that would be too difficult to obtain otherwise. These are some themes I noticed while conducting my literature review. I want to know what worked well and what didn't work for participants in the collaborative process.

Most interviews will likely take place over the phone, and generally, I've found that holistically investigative reporters, perhaps more than other journalists, are very open to discuss their process and their careers if they're given enough time to include it in their schedule.

Given that there is little research on how to build and maintain a journalistic collaboration, it's harder to anticipate what the responses will be to my interview questions. I would imagine some roadblocks and problems are similar across newsrooms

participating in collaborations. When conducting the project, I will plan to group

interviews into patterns and themes like positive parts of collaboration, roadblocks,

surprises, lessons and takeaways. If I can fill those buckets, I believe at the end of the

research process, I will be able to answer my research questions.

Preliminary Analysis Questions

For reporters:

- What do you like about collaborative work?

- Have you participated in collaborative work before?

- What attracted you to participate?

- What did your day-to-day look like before you participated in the collaboration? What does it look like now?

- What worked well in the collaboration?

- How the larger newsroom help you? How did you help them?

- What roadblocks were there?

- What surprises—good or bad—were there?

- How did collaborating change your POV as a journalist, if at all?

- What takeaways do you have from collaborating?

- Does this process have any kind of effect on what kind of work you'd like to do?

- What worked well regarding the collaboration?

- What didn't work?

- What advice do you have for other newsrooms interested in collaborating?

- What did you not anticipate planning for that came up during the collaboration?

- In your view, did this collaboration work? How did you determine it worked?

- Would you participate in a collaboration like this again? Why or why not?

For editors:

- Why did your newsroom decide to create a collaborative program?

- What resources were necessary to create and implement the program?

- How did you create buy-in across the newsroom?

- Was there any resistance to collaborating?

- What worked well regarding the collaboration?

- What didn't work?

- What roadblocks did you encounter throughout the collaboration?

- What advice do you have for other newsrooms interested in collaborating?

- What did you not anticipate planning for that came up during the collaboration?

- How did you build collaboration into your existing routine?

- How do you think about collaboration now?

- In your view, did this collaboration work? How did you determine it worked?

- Would you participate in a collaboration like this again? Why or why not?

Potential Interviewees:

1. Christian Scheckler is a reporter at the South Bend Tribune and a member of ProPublica's Local Reporting Network first cohort. Reporting from the South Bend Tribune and ProPublica revealed deep flaws and abuses of power in the criminal justice system in Elkhart, Indiana – from new revelations in the wrongful convictions of two men, to the promotions of police supervisors with serious disciplinary records, to the mishandling of police misconduct cases. The investigation led to the resignation of the police chief, criminal charges against two officers and plans for an independent investigation of the department, demonstrating the strong, immediate impact that investigative journalism can have at the local level – and its ability to force critical changes in communities, according to the Shorenstein Center which nominated the reporting for a Goldsmith Award.

2. <u>Jayme Fraser</u> was a reporter for the Malheur Enterprise and another member of the Local Reporting Network's first cohort. Her reporting focused on how the state of Oregon has freed some people found "guilty except for insanity" in violent crimes, and they later attacked again. As her time in the Local Reporting Network came to an end, ProPublica <u>issued a huge correction</u> about several stories in the series which had fundamental errors.
3. <u>Bobby Caina Calvan</u> is the collaborations editor at Reveal from the Center for Investigative Reporting. He's working on <u>Reveal Local Labs</u>, a new role to foster news partnerships that produce investigative journalism in four communities over the next two years.
4. Connor Sheets is an experienced, award-winning journalist based in Birmingham, Alabama, where he is an investigative reporter for The Birmingham News. He's a member of ProPublica's 2019 Local Reporting Network.
5. <u>Beena Raghavendran</u> is an engagement reporter for ProPublica's Local Reporting Network where she works with several reporters around the country to boost audience voice and engagement in stories, according to ProPublica. She's written about how she lets <u>local communities guide reporting projects</u>.
6. <u>Emily Le Coz</u> is the national data projects editor for GateHouse Media. She oversaw and edited GateHouse's investigation into the dangers surrounding midwife assisted births.
7. <u>Rachel Glickhouse</u> is a partner manager for ProPublica's Documenting Hate project. Her role "emerged after <u>Electionland 2016</u>, one of the largest-ever journalism collaborations, which many ProPublica staff members pitched in to organize. While the project was a journalistic success, its editors learned a key lesson about the need for somebody to own the relationship with partner newsrooms. In short, we came to think that the collaboration itself was something that needed editing, including recruiting partners, making sure they saw the reporting tips they needed to see, and tracking what partners were publishing," she wrote in a post for ProPublica.
8. Charlie Ornstein is a deputy managing editor at ProPublica where he oversees the Local Reporting Network, which works with local news organizations to produce accountability journalism on issues of importance to their communities, according to ProPublica's website. From 2008 to 2017, he was a senior reporter covering health care and the pharmaceutical industry. He then worked as a senior editor.
9. Elly Yu is a reporter at WAMU in Washington D.C. and was part of the cohort of Reveal Investigative Fellows in 2017-2018 when she worked for WABE in Atlanta. The program from the Center for Investigative Reporting helps journalists of color hone their investigative skills. Yu reported on how Georgia's immigrant detention centers operate.
10. Rebecca Moss covers energy and the environment for the Santa Fe New Mexican and was a member of the first cohort of ProPublica's Local Reporting Network, according to ProPublica. Her time in the Local Reporting Network focused on nuclear lab workers who get sick.

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