In a digital world increasingly driven by consumer demand, it becomes ever more difficult for individual news outlets to create impact. One solution is collaboration—by joining together to tell a story, individual outlets multiply rather than add their audiences. The virtues of editorial collaboration have been trumpeted by any number of media watchers: in [Mediashift](http://www.pbs.org/mediashift/2013/07/collaboration-key-to-the-future-of-investigative-journalism/), [NiemanLabs](http://www.niemanlab.org/2013/07/in-new-jersey-a-university-teams-up-with-local-news-orgs-to-collaborate-for-impact/), [J-Lab](http://www.j-lab.org/ideas/category/blogically-thinking/collaboration-is-the-new-competition/), [Journalism Accelerator](http://journalismaccelerator.com/blog/decoding-collaboration-part-1-can-or-should-news-collaboration-be-forced/), even [Wikipedia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Collaborative_journalism)!

What has become increasingly clear to those who create news collaborations, however, is that they have hidden costs. Sociologists John Kania and Mark Kramer, who write extensively on using collaboration to create impact, are clear about collaboration requires :

When we talk about the future of journalism, we too often think linearly, as if there were one type of journalism, one problem to solve, and one overarching solution. Yet this theoretical conversation has little grounding in our lived experience.

In fact, we look to journalists to inform us about people, places, things and events--local, regional, national, and international; to investigate malfeasance and corruption; to describe success; and to educate us about complex cultural, political, economic, religious and scientific movements. We seek both instrumental data that we can immediately put to use and commentary, synthesis and analysis that can shape our decision-making.

These different journalisms have very different requirements. Investigative work requires long lead-time, the ability to locate and protect secret sources, the expertise to sift through mounds of data, and the writerly gift to craft a narrative that will bring these very disparate elements into one story. Informational journalism requires a reporter with eyes and ears wide open, able to discriminate truth from rumor, and able to convey details quickly and accurately.

My focus in this post is on the third type of journalism, the kind that tells us about complex social issues such as poverty, health, education or the environment. These stories have always challenged journalists. The good news is that the digital revolution gives us new opportunities to tell this kind of complex story. [] ---------0Complex social issues are the right subject matter for collaborative horizontal networks.

Here’s an example. One response to the Great Recession was the rise of the Occupy movement. After “occupying” a large number of cities in the fall of 2011, the movement seemed to go dormant in the winter, yet promised a resurgence on May Day, 2012. How could journalists best cover this social movement?

Some outlets ignored the May Day plan, assuming Occupy was not active. Others prepared to give a short history of the movement, and send a reporter to check out whether anything was happening on May Day. In short, the response was to Occupy as an event, rather than to Occupy as a social movement.

Media Consortium members felt that something more was going on. They noticed that many Occupy members had moved from camping out at city halls to working on discreet issues, including home foreclosures, student debt, money in politics, and the minimum wage. May Day is traditionally a worker’s holiday, and had become in the past decade a day focused especially on ethnic immigrant workers. Yet many in the African American and Latino communities had accused Occupiers of being too white-centric. Would Occupiers pick up on themes of labor, racial inequity and economic justice? Would this populist movement join with labor?

Starting with this shared question, Media Consortium members decided to join forces to report on May Day. They decided to share reporting. The first task was to create a pop-up website, Mediaforthe99percent.com, to which over 45 news outlets contributed information on where May Day events would be taking place, as well as content they had previously written about Occupations in different cities. Free Speech TV offered to run a four hour broadcast on May Day, with reporters from over 20 outlets contributing on-air reports focusing on the interactions between Occupiers and labor. Reporters agreed to use a common hashtag on May Day for their reporting, with the material collected by a news team set up in San Francisco that built a storyify around their tweets. Finally, the San Francisco news team added arrests during May Day to the map, in order to draw attention to the project.

All of this work was organized by a team of staffers from twenty-some news outlets, facilitated and resourced by Media Consortium staff.

The result of this effort demonstrated how impact can arise from collaboration. Because Media Consortium reporting proved May Day was a national phenomena, with protests occuring from Daytona Beach to Seattle, from Kalamazoo to Birmingham, national media were unable to write off the event or to focus their coverage just on the coasts. Instead, the story changed from some New Yorkers trying to [“breathe new life”](http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/05/01/us-usa-occupy-may-idUSBRE8400NQ20120501) into a movement to [coverage of a national event](http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/05/01/us-usa-occupy-may-idUSBRE8400UV20120501) that had a complex relationship to the labor movement.

As it turns out, Occupy May Day 2012 appears to have been the last hurrah for the Occupy movement. Yet, the movement is not gone: the people and the tactics of Occupy have appeared again in the [fast food workers strike in the summer of 2013](http://www.csmonitor.com/Business/2013/0730/Schooled-by-Occupy-movement-fast-food-workers-put-demands-on-the-table-video). It turns out the focus of Media Consortium reporters was prescient, and—who knows—reporters’ questions to labor and Occupiers may have contributed to these movements growing rapprochement with each other.

What made the Occupy May Day collaborative reporting effort successful? To understand what is required to make this kind of journalism work, we can turn to the writing of sociologists John Kania and Mark Kramer, who have described how nonprofit organizations can best work together to creative collective impact.

Kania and Kramer suggest that this kind of collaborative work requires:

***Common Questions***

***Shared Measurement Systems***

***Mutually Reinforcing Activities***

***Continuous Communication***

***Backbone Support Organizations***

First, participants must share a common understanding of the problem they are tackling. Some journalists will be reluctant even to acknowledge that they have a “common understanding of the problem,” but they shouldn’t be. The job of journalism is to start with questions, and the essence of a collaboration is that everyone in the collaboration starts with the same set of questions.

Second, participants in a collaborative effort must agree on what they will report, how they will communicate their shared reporting to their audience, and how they will measure audience response. As the project unfolds, they must be willing to be in constant communication with each other—and must plan their resources to include that time.

Here is where the digital revolution has mightly increased our capacity to create these projects. Journalists now have an incredible set of tools not only to assist their own internal communications (thank you Dropbox and Google Docs) but also to collect and communicate their content in a way that supports individual brands.

For Occupy May Day, we were able to push all the content out via embeddable media (the map, storify and livestream) that participating outlets could feature on their own branded sites. In that way, each participant simultaneously could have the entire story while having contributed just a piece to it. Further, each embeddable piece of media contained a code so that we could track the total number of page views. And social media enabled participants to crosspromote each others’ stories before, during and in the aftermath of May Day.

None of that work, however, would have been possible without the Media Consortium as a backbone support organization. No matter how willing the staff, how awesome the digital toolbox, without external support none of these individuals would have had the energy or organizational capacity to maintain the communications or to erect the shared reporting and measurement systems the Occupy May Day effort required.

Kania and Kramer are explicit on this point. [They write](http://www.ssireview.org/blog/entry/channeling_change_making_collective_impact_work?cpgn=WP%20DL%20-%20Channeling%20Change): “The expectation that collaboration can occur without a supporting infrastructure is one of the most frequent reasons why it fails.”

In fact, the main barrier standing in the way of this kind of collaborative work is the reluctance of philanthropists to fund backbone organizations. Understandably, funders prefer to focus directly on their project areas. However, when the project area is complex—like poverty, or education, or immigration—then the kind of journalism most likely to have the biggest impact will be a collaborative effort guided by a backbone organization.

The good news is that the philanthropic community is beginning to understand the opportunity afforded by the digital revolution and the need to build the capacity of backbone organizations. Associations of philanthropists like the [Funders’ Committee for Civic Participation](http://www.funderscommittee.org), [Public Interest Projects](http://www.publicinterestprojects.org), the [Environmental Grantmakers Association](http://ega.org/), and others focus on encouraging collaboration among their grantees and have begun to make capacity grants to strengthen backbone organizations.

What journalists need now, for the future of journalism, is more support for this kind of infrastructure.

I started this set of essays with John Bracken’s question, “Can or should news collaboration be forced by funders?” The answer, I suggest, is that it is indeed up to funders to foster news collaboration, and that they can do that best by supporting the infrastructure that makes collaboration possible.