INTRO:

[*Jo Ellen Green Kaiser*](http://journalismaccelerator.com/members/jo-ellen-green-kaiser/), who leads *[The Media Consortium](http://www.themediaconsortium.org/about/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)*, has been going deep on collaboration in her work. Here, she generously offers a number of insights, with this the third of her three-part series:

***News Collaborations:******Part I:*** [*What do we mean by the word “collaboration”?*](http://journalismaccelerator.com/blog/decoding-collaboration-part-1-can-or-should-news-collaboration-be-forced/)***Part II:*** [*How does collaboration create impact?*](http://journalismaccelerator.com/blog/decoding-collaboration-part-2-news-collaborations-defining-impact/) ***Part III:*** How might collaboration shape the future of journalism? (see below)

***“The expectation that collaboration can occur without a supporting infrastructure is one of the most frequent reasons why it fails.”*** *--Fay Hanley Brown, John Kania and Mark Kramer,* [*Stanford Social Review*](http://www.ssireview.org/pdf/Channeling_Change_PDF.pdf)

*There is a reason why the virtues of editorial collaboration have been trumpeted by any number of media watchers in publications like* [*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/)*, and* [*Journalism Accelerator*](http://journalismaccelerator.com/blog/decoding-collaboration-part-1-can-or-should-news-collaboration-be-forced/)*. Collaboration is seen as the best way to leverage scarce resources in order to create more impact than any of the participants could do individually.*

*The key word is “impact.” As many have found to their chagrin, collaborations often cost more in resources—staff, time, and dollars—than stand-alone pieces. In such cases, the primary return on investment that collaboration offers is impact.*

*What kind of impact is worth such an investment? What if the very process of collaboration could provide new pathways for reporters to understand and present an issue, such that the reporting became more likely to change how the public would think and act? That’s what sociologists call “collective impact.”*

*I’ve argued that the way to create collective impact is by organizing horizontally networked collaborations where a number of different outlets come together to advance a shared stake around a specific issue or opportunity. The benefit of horizontally networked collaboration is that it may offer a new path for journalism, one in which journalists can illuminate* [*solutions-oriented conversations*](http://www.forbes.com/sites/skollworldforum/2012/11/29/up-for-debate-why-we-need-solutions-journalism/) *about complex issues.*

*To innovate around collective impact, the journalism world will need philanthropists who understand that collaboration requires resources, not only for the outlets that collaborate, but for the* [*backbone organizations*](http://www.fsg.org/OurApproach/WhatIsCollectiveImpact.aspx) *that support these collaborations. An increasing number of philanthropists have seized this opportunity afford by networked collaborations: for example 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. These funders, understanding the return on investment collective impact offers, have* ***incentivized******collaboration*** *among their grantees by funding both the outlets and their supporting organizations.*

*In this post, I'll detail the Media Consortium’s 2012 May Day collaboration to demonstrate how horizontally-networked collaborations are organized, the investment they require, and the return they offer.*

**May Day 2012: How might journalists best cover this social movement?**

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.

Some outlets ignored the May Day plan, many thought 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. Media outlets were poised to cover the response to Occupy as an event, rather than report out on 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.

**May Day 2012: The details of a horizontally-networked collaboration**

The first task was to create a pop-up website, [Mediaforthe99percent.com](file:///C%3A%5CUsers%5CLisa%5CDownloads%5Cmediaforthe99percent.com), with a map 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 (FSTV) offered to run a four hour free livestream 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 Storify 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. Critically, however, the editorial content was not controlled by Media Consortium staff—the collaboration was entirely horizontal, with editors sharing content but not taking direction from anyone outside their own outlet.

**May Day 2012: Collective impact**

The result of the May Day effort demonstrated how collective impact is achieved by a horizontally networked collaboration. More than 65 outlets embedded the May Day map on their websites. Over 25,000 unique viewers checked out the Storify, while the FSTV show reached over 20 million homes.

With Media Consortium's collaborative reporting May Day was reveled as a national phenomena, with protests occurring from Daytona Beach to Seattle, from Kalamazoo to Birmingham. National media were scooped, 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 widespread [coverage of a national event](http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/05/01/us-usa-occupy-may-idUSBRE8400UV20120501).

[Collective impact by definition](http://www.fsg.org/OurApproach/WhatIsCollectiveImpact.aspx) provides new ways of looking at—and solving--complex social problems. TMC's May Day collaboration demonstrates some of these effects. Occupy May Day 2012 may have been the last hurrah for the Occupy movement. Yet 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). By mapping the relationship between the labor and Occupy movements on May Day, Media Consortium members expanded reporting that may have contributed to the conversations that led to these movements’ [growing rapprochement](http://newpol.org/content/occupy-labor-partnership-chicago) with each other.

Most of all, **the act of working together changed the members of the Media Consortium. Reporters discovered the benefit of sharing information with other reporters in order to improve their own stories**. Social media curators learned the power of a shared media site to which they could link in and link out. Publishers, producers and editors noticed that working collectively on May Day led to increased hits and mentions for their outlet—that **there was a tangible value to working collaboratively.**

Within a year after Occupy May Day, Media Consortium members had asked Media Consortium staff to help them set up issue-based working groups with the aim of exploring future horizontally networked collaborations. **A whole new approach to media making was sparked by this one event.**

**Horizontal Collaboration: Providing the backbone**

The May Day effort happened because the individual outlets were supported by the Media Consortium as a [backbone organization](http://www.ssireview.org/blog/entry/understanding_the_value_of_backbone_organizations_in_collective_impact_2). Media Consortium staff coordinated a pool of 50+ reporters and social media staff from 21 outlets to contribute to the reporting and promotion of the day. Media Consortium staff set up a listserv for internal communications, held conference calls with sub-groups, set up the microsite, oversaw the data visualization work, helped produce the TV show, and assembled the day-of staff for the Storify.

Individual outlets need this kind of shared infrastructure to enable networked collaborations that work. No matter how willing the staff or how awesome the digital toolbox, without assigned external support none of these individuals would have had the energy or organizational capacity to tackle the complexity, maintain the communications or to erect the shared reporting and measurement systems a centralized media Occupy May Day effort required.

**The coordination costs for infrastructure is real**. Media Consortium staff invested over 180 staff hours on the Occupy May Day project. We hired freelancers to run the social media promotions, to create the data visualization and to produce the Storify. Not including the donation of volunteer time or earned media, hard costs to the Media Consortium alone were over $7,000.

After the event, TMC interviewed managers at the 21 outlets that supported the effort. They told us that they also experienced additional, uncompensated overhead costs to run the collaboration—approximately 20 hours per staffer, with some putting in more hours, some less. If those costs had been reimbursed, total cost of the project would have been north of $32,000 – and that was for a collaboration around one day, not an ongoing effort.

Traditionally funders investing in media have preferred to fund specific organizations and specific issues, where the answers to such questions appear clearer, even if the potential benefits, or hard evidence of impact, are not as great.

**What journalists need now, for the future of journalism, is more support for this kind of infrastructure to deepen and expand sector level sustainability.**

I started this series of essays inspired by John Bracken’s question, “Can or should news collaboration be forced by funders?” Let’s turn that question on its head. Journalism needs funders to underwrite the kind of horizontally networked collaborations that lead to collective impact. Without capacity-building dollars for infrastructure, these projects that have so much to offer simply will not get off the ground.

We often hear complaints that the media is too siloed. It is. If we want to create synergies among different media outlets, we will have to fund the organizations that provide that kind of infrastructure—organizations of outlets like the Media Consortium, the Investigative News Network, the National Federation of Community Broadcasters or the Association of Alternative Newsmedia, and organizations that convene us, like Journalism Accelerator.

Earlier in my career, I worked in Jewish media and had the privelege of seeing a philanthropist work with organizations to create collective impact.

The funder was the Nathan Cummings Foundation. They became aware—undoubtedly through multiple grant requests—that Jewish social justice organizations had proliferated. Every city had its own group, each vying to become a national presence. Meanwhile, the leaders knew they wanted to join grassroots activism, national advocacy, and Jewish spirituality, but could not find the right mix.

Jennie Rosenn, over at Cummings, decided to invest her resources in bringing these groups together—not to dictate to them, but to encourage them to collaborate with each other in a way that felt comfortable to their individual missions and visions. After two years of support, through capacity grants, convenings, and staff facilitation, many of these groups chose to merge with each other, ultimately creating a national group, Bend the Arc, that is finally able to meet the community’s needs.

Would the groups have merged if they had been forced, or if their funding had been dropped? Unlikely. They were quite territorial at the start, and might have chosen to close down rather than join forces, depriving a national outlet of the grassroots organizations they had built. By funding a collaborative environment where each organization felt supported, Cummings enabled the organizations to reach for a new solution.

That’s the power of collective impact. It’s that kind of new thinking we must bring to the journalism space. So yes, we need funders—not to force collaborations, but to invite them, and to support the backbone infrastructure that makes them possible.