“*The expectation that collaboration can occur without a supporting infrastructure is one of the most frequent reasons why it fails.”* --Fay HanleyBrown, 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.

However, the type of impact we may expect to see from a collaboration depends very much on what kind of collaboration it is, and what kinds of issues the collaboration is designed to address. I’ve argued that if by “impact” we mean changing how the public thinks about an issue and giving them an incentive to act upon their thinking—what sociologists call “collective impact”-- then we need to create horizontally networked collaborations in which a number of different outlets come together to report on one common issue.

The benefit of such horizontally networked collaborations is that they offer a new future for journalism, one in which journalists can provoke solutions-oriented conversations about complex issues. However, the sad truth is that this kind of collaboration is not cost-effective or revenue neutral. The fact is that the kind of collaboration that will create collective impact requires a supporting infrastructure, and that supporting infrastructure requires deep financial support.

The Media Consortium’s May Day collaboration provides an illuminating example both of the power of horizontally-networked collaborations and of their cost.

**May Day 2012: A Horizontally-Networked Collaboration**

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. The first task was to create a pop-up website, [Mediaforthe99percent.com](mediaforthe99percent.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 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: Collective Impact**

The result of the May Day effort demonstrated how collective impact can arise from 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.

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 widespread [coverage of a national event](http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/05/01/us-usa-occupy-may-idUSBRE8400UV20120501).

Collective impact by definition provides new ways of looking at—and solving--complex social problems. The Consortium’s collaboration had 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 reporters 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.

**Providing the Backbone**

The May Day effort happened because the individual outlets were supported by the Media Consortium as a backbone organization. Media Consortium staff organized 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.

Outlets need this kind of backbone to make networked collaborations work. 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.

The cost for such backbone infrastructure is real. Media Consortium staff put in 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. Total cost to the Media Consortium alone was $7100. We could have done even more if we had had the funding—but no funders stepped up. This money came out of our general operating funds.

After the event, we 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.

How much is it worth to accurately report on a complex social movement in a way that changes people’s thinking and potentially provides for new relationships and connections? How do we begin to measure collective impact, and understand the ROI it can deliver?

Funders understandably have preferred to fund specific organizations and specific issues, where the answers to such questions appear clearer, even if the potential benefits are not as great. The good news is that the philanthropic community is beginning to understand the opportunity afforded by networked collaborations 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.