News Collaborations: Defining Impact

“Collaboration” has become such a sexy term in the journalism world that centers and [sites](http://www.pbs.org/mediashift/collaborationcentral) are being built around it. As I noted in my previous post, content sharing, resource sharing, and even joint reporting is not new. What excites those of us looking to the future of journalism is what I have called networked collaboration.

In a networked collaboration, a number of different outlets work together to produce original reporting around a particular topic. In vertical networks, that reporting is designed and supervised by one outlet; in horizontal networks, the work is co-operatively created, managed by a backbone organization with no editorial skin in the game.

Why create complex collaborative networks at all, especially when such networks require more resources to sustain than simple partnerships? [Josh Stearns wrote](http://www.pbs.org/mediashift/2012/04/catalysts-of-collaboration-what-motivates-new-journalism-partnerships111) to this point in April 2012 when he argued that technology has made these collaborations possible and economic factors have made them necessary, but that they have flourished because collaborations often lead to better journalism. Stearns gives several examples of award-winning collaborations, and more can be added [insert examples with urls].

What we don’t yet know for sure is when collaborations are more effective than single-outlet journalism, and which types of collaborations are most effective. As with so much else in journalism, we are in an ongoing experiment.

The good news is that we are approaching agreement on what we mean by effectiveness. It is impact. Charles Lewis and Hilary Niles, in a [recent report](http://investigativereportingworkshop.org/ilab/story/measuring-impact/), draw on the past five years of studies to distinguish between “reach,” “engagement,” and “impact.” To summarize: “reach” is the “number of individuals who come into contact with news content.” “Engagement” is “a more sophisticated form of reach that encourages and explores an exchange of information between the news source and audience members.” Only impact takes us out of the “interpersonal” space to measure how a news story has led to a society-wide outcome.

Yet what, precisely, is impact? Lewis and Niles suggest that impact has not yet been defined for the journalism community, and indeed may not have one single definition.

Because impact has to do with the social outcome of a story, I suggest we look outside journalism to the social sciences for a definition. I thank Jack Walsh, of [NAMAC](http://www.namac.org), for pointing me to a recent set of articles by John Kania and Mark Kramer in the [Stanford Social Innovation Review](http://www.ssireview.org/articles/entry/collective_impact) defining impact. According to Kania and Kramer, the word “impact” in the NGO world means arriving at a solution to a social problem. They give as an example “installing inventory controls in a food bank” to ensure that money is effectively spent and food distributed to those who need it.

We can see a parallel to this kind of impact in journalism when reporters discover that a politician or organization has misused public funds, or that a program does not provide the services it was contracted to provide. This is the “watch-dog” function of journalism, and it is an important and valuable one. Stories making this kind of impact inform the public, which then has a clear path to a solution (throw the bums out!).

What Kania and Kramer point out, however, is that many social issues don’t have single solutions. Issues like poverty, health, education and the environment, they write, are composed of a set of interacting actions and actors. Attempts to influence just one action or one set of actors will create unpredictable effects on the system.

A case in point would be well-meaning efforts by environmentalists to turn energy markets away from oil. The impact of those efforts (combined with the situation in the Mideast and other market-based concerns) has led many energy companies to “go green” by turning towards natural gas fracking. The result? One environmental problem is replaced with another.

Drawing on complexity science, Kania and Kramer suggest that no one solution can ever be found to complex societal problems; instead, those who want to change the social fabric must parallel its complexity. When a number of actors who represent different aspects of a social issue join together with a common agenda and a shared set of rules, their interactions can actually create new solutions—what Kania and Kramer refer to as “emergent solutions.” They call this ability for a set of organizations working together to locate new opportunities and resources where none before existed “collective impact.”

Let’s transfer this concept of collective impact to journalism. Reporters also want and need to address complex social issues—poverty, health, education, the environment. Often, however, the reporter has trouble even getting a handle on the topic. Is the story of the 86-year-old woman who dies from a fire during a Chicago winter a story of gas company malfeasance in turning off her gas (making her rely on an electric heater)? Is it about Social Security payments being less than even one woman’s cost of living? Is it about the ghettoization of poverty in buildings that lack smoke detectors? Is it about the breakdown of the social fabric, with no one checking in on this elder? Yes, yes, yes, and yes, but these stories are hard to tell, so too often we end up with a sensational blurb, or a data set on deaths, neither of which will actually give the public a way to take action and change their society for the better.

Sometimes, in short, there is a deep societal problem, but there is no muck to rake. It is then that we need collaborative networked parnerships. Rather than coming together with a shared “agenda,” these networked newsrooms join together to explore a shared question. As they bring together their diverse resources and capacities, they will learn from each other how to tell this complex story in new ways. And the promise of this method is that this new, unfolding story will open up new pathways to action for the public.

In the next installment, I will give an example of a networked partnership that achieved collective impact, and review what is necessary to make such partnerships succeed.