Intro: *Jo Ellen Green Kaiser [*[*http://www.linkedin.com/in/joellengreenkaiser*](http://www.linkedin.com/in/joellengreenkaiser)*], who leads The Media Consortium [*[*http://www.themediaconsortium.org/the-media-consortium-welcomes-new-executive-director-jo-ellen-green-kaiser/*](http://www.themediaconsortium.org/the-media-consortium-welcomes-new-executive-director-jo-ellen-green-kaiser/)*], has been going deep on collaboration in her work. Here she generously offers a number of insights, with this the first of her three part series:*

*News Collaborations:*

*Part I: What do we mean by the word “collaboration”?*

*Part II: How does collaboration create impact?*

*Part III: How can collaborations shape the future of journalism?*

*With collaboration at the center of the JA’s work, we’ve followed Media Shift’s Collaboration Central work with interest. As well as others who are monitoring new models of collaboration emerging across the news and information spectrum. Civic engagement “table” development methodology is part of the DNA that inspired the JA’s cross network emphasis (“beyond the usual suspects”). Inspired by wildly successful state organizing efforts, collaboration in this instance fueled by a philanthropic community where funders worked in partnership to build infrastructure to deliver commonly held objectives, leveraging the existing capabilities of civic organizations already existing in the marketplace. Taking out all partisan attachment (progressives were the architects of this infrastructure) – the simple genius of this: How to deploy the power of civic good networks around common aims – respectful of unique missions – to deliver the combined capabilities of unique specialization already creating small scale impact in the marketplace? (i.e. content delivery, craft, community conduit, social, business, technology, product development, topical expertise, etc.) Last year about this time the JA was looking at the combination of revenue and sustainability related to collaboration. Taking this a step further, we’re revisiting this asking others where they see the greatest impact around networked collaboration. As well as asking, what are the barriers slowing progress?*

*In this post, Jo Ellen explores new working definitions of collaboration and opportunities to consider for deeper impact, leveraging collaboration to unleash the combined power of networks in more intentional and strategic ways.*

Jo Ellen Green Kaiser

**Can or should news collaboration be forced?**  
That very good question was raised by John Bracken in a PBS MediaShift conversation last year with Amanda Hirsch. Bracken's answer was a decisive "no":

“A funder can come up with an idea and get two organizations at a table and force a relationship… but my hunch is that’s going to be less effective and less fun for all involved than if two people doing the work have a cup of coffee.” [http://www.pbs.org/mediashift/2012/10/knight-foundations-john-bracken-funders-shouldnt-force-collaboration300#sthash.MeN5ruzQ.dpuf]

Certainly, brainstorming over coffee is more fun than being hauled into a meeting with a demanding funder—but is it really more effective? That depends very much on what we mean by collaboration, and what kind of impact we seek from the collaboration. In my experience, impactful collaboration often requires creating a network of organizations rather than a paired partnership, and those networks require an intermediary to ensure that all parties achieve their individual and group goals. This role also presents the added value of a dedicated partner to monitor and report progress and track impact -- in aggregate.

As Bracken and Hirsch both note, collaboration has become an almost meaningless word. “Collaboration” is now an umbrella term for these very different kinds of relationships. A taxonomy of collaboration is well overdue.

* **Side-by-Side Sharing**

Outlets make an agreement to share content with each other via Creative Commons or similar licensing arrangement. This type of content sharing practically defined upstart outlets in the early days of digital news. A contemporary version is [multiplatform sharing](http://truth-out.org/news/item/3321-the-war-you-dont-see), such as we see between digital outlet [Truthout](http://www.truth-out.org) and the national weekly radio show, [Making Contact](http://www.radioproject.org) .

**Resource Sharing**

Two outlets make an agreement to share resources with each other; for example, a national outlet makes use of a local outlet’s reporter, or a regional outlet taps into a national outlet’s database. The impetus behind this sharing often is geography—the need for national outlets to access local stories, and the need for local outlets to nationalize their content. This kind of collaboration is built into the largest national news networks, especially broadcasters like ABC, NBC and CBS, who draw on local affiliate stations for breaking news. See also CIR’s Media Network (below).

* **Joint Reporting**

Two or three outlets realize they are both tracking the same story, and decide to fully share all resources to create one story which they will publish simultaneously. A good recent example would be the partnership between [The Nation](http://www.thenation.com) and [Colorlines.com](http://colorlines.com), whose reporters and editors worked together to produce a special series they named [Voting Rights Watch](http://colorlines.com/voting-rights-watch/). This kind of collaboration is perhaps the best example of the “two writers in a coffeeshop” model Bracken imagines.

* **Vertical Network**

One outlet, usually but not always a large national, designs a complex, resource-intensive project, and then recruits other outlets to participate in the project. The Center for Investigative Reporting’s [Media Network](http://cironline.org/about/partners) is the premiere exemplar of this model. Media Network members may simply share CIR’s stories (Side-by-Side Sharing) or use its resources as they localize CIR’s investigative pieces (Resource Sharing), but they also may, on occasion, work with CIR editors on investigative projects (e.g. [America’s Worst Charities](http://cironline.org/americasworstcharities) with the Tampa Bay Times).

* **Horizontal Network**

A number of outlets jointly agree upon a complex, resource-intensive project, and agree to divide the project amongst themselves, while retaining ownership of the individual parts. The main difference between a vertical and horizontal networked collaboration lies in control over the project. In a vertical network, the project is designed and controlled by one outlet or organization; in a horizontal network, all the stakeholders in a project contribute to the design and understand themselves to be co-equals. The Media Consortium’s [Occupy May Day](http://www.themediaconsortium.org/media-99/) exemplifies this kind of horizontal network—outlets came up with the idea for the collaboration, and maintained editorial control over their own content; Media Consortium staff supplied infrastructure and digital tools.

Of these types of collaboration, the first three have been in use as long as news outlets have been publishing. Side-by-side sharing, resource sharing, and even joint reporting require only the participation of the two or three outlets involved in the partnership.

Vertical and horizontal networks, however, are much more difficult to create and sustain. These collaborations require buy-in from everyone on staff, from design, tech, marketing and business staff to editorial. In addition, financial elements of networked partnerships are complex, and often delicate. Above all, networked partnerships require more resources from the partners than their regular newsroom activities, and much more management. They are resource, time, and dollar intensive.

As a result, few outlets have the capacity to create networked partnerships on their own. For those that do, the vertical partnership model often makes the most sense: since one outlet will most likely be contributing most of the management resources, that outlet wants to control the production and product.

A horizontal network is almost impossible for outlets to create on their own. First, it is even more resource, time, and dollar intensive than the vertical network, because each outlet retains its editorial independence even as all outlets work together. Second, no one outlet can be the “boss” of this kind of partnership—it only works if the outlets come into the partnership as equals. Increasingly, these kinds of collaborations are being facilitated by associations like the Media Consortium, Investigative News Network, or Association of Alternative Newsmedia and powered by funder dollars.

Once this taxonomy is understood, questions about the role of funders in collaboration must be rephrased. If we want large, networked partnerships, we will need funders to support the infrastructure these types of collaborations require. The critical question to ask is this: are such networked collaborations desirable, or more desirable than the easy to arrange paired partnerships?

If the aim of the collaboration is increased impact, the answer is yes: we need more networked partnerships, we need them to be systemic (i.e. to last over the long term), and we need funders to work with us to help make them possible.

Stay tuned for the next post: what do we mean by impact, and how do networked partnerships get us there?