News Collaborations: A Three Part Series

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

Part II: How does collaboration create impact?

Part III: How will collaborations shape the future of journalism?

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 both their individual and group goals.

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:

* **Side-by-Side Sharing**

Outlets make an agreement to share content with each other via creative commons or similar licensing arrangement.

* **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 outlets taps into a national outlet’s database.

* **Merged Newsrooms**

Two outlets realize they are both tracking a story, and decide to fully share all resources to create one story which they will publish simultaneously. We are starting to see this more frequently between outlets on diffent platforms (i.e. a radio show and digital publication assign one reporter and one audio producer to a story, then produce both radio and digital content which go live simultaneously).

* **Vertical Networked Partnerships**

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 Corporation for Public Broadcasting’s [first effort](http://www.niemanlab.org/2013/07/for-public-radio-and-television-stations-collaboration-around-the-news-proves-challenging/) at creating Local Journalism Centers is an example of this kind of partnership.

* **Horizontal Networked Partnerships**

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. Often, a shared editorial schedule is required. [The Chauncey Bailey project](http://www.chaunceybaileyproject.org/) is the archetype of this kind of collaboration.

Of these types of collaboration, side-by-side sharing and resource sharing fit Bracken’s model—they can be organized by a couple of staffers brainstorming over coffee. Two people can realize they are doing similar work, and it would make sense to share it or even shape it jointly.

Merged newsrooms, while requiring much more preparation and buy-in, can also be created through the dedicated energy of high-level decision-makers at two outlets.

However, vertical and horizontal partnerships 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 makes the most sense: since one outlet will most likely be contributing most of the management resources, they want to control the production and product.

A horizontal networked partnership is almost impossible for outlets to create on their own. First, it is even more resource, time, and dollar intensive than the vertical partnership, 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 assocations like the Media Consortium, Investigative News Network, or Assocation of Alternative Newsmedia and powered with funder dollars.

So, pace Bracken, the involvement of funders is necessary for collaborations that take the form of large, networked partnerships. But 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 make them possible.

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