

Problem Solving for Collaborative Project Managers

How to Cut Through the Chaos
and Lead with Confidence



“Project management is so essential! It’s a growing field of expertise. Journalism collaboration is here to stay.”

Background and

Acknowledgments

Sometime in early 2020, a collaborative project manager came up with an idea. To this day, no project manager wants to claim being the catalyst, making the origins the stuff of lore.

The idea was simple: Project managers of different collaboratives (in different locations) should start talking to each other.

On March 6th, 2020, we hosted the first project managers water cooler with only four project managers and a few SJN staff politely listening.

They were: Melanie Plenda from the Granite State News Collaborative; André Natta who was managing the Broke in Philly collaboration at the time; Amy DeVault who had just come on to start the Wichita Journalism collaborative; and Sharon Broussard who had just started the NEO SOJO collaborative in Cleveland, Ohio.

The (physical) SJN office closed shortly after due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. After only a brief break to regroup, the project managers started to meet regularly again on Friday, April 10, 2020. The meetings provided an important opportunity for project managers to connect during a difficult time - an ethos that would continue to be a theme of the gatherings.

There have been bad days, tragedies in these communities, cataclysmic changes to these news ecosystems, layoffs, and firings. There have been personal losses, struggles, loneliness, and upheaval.

But the meetings continued. The original project managers continued to show up through it all, and more joined throughout the years that followed.

We experimented with the format, we took breaks (usually around elections), we played with the frequency, and we experienced the ebbs and flows of any group. But we never considered stopping.

This group indirectly inspired the project managers handbook from the Center for Cooperative Media, and it directly inspired the project management session at the 2023 Collaborative Journalism Summit.

Much of the content from that presentation is contained here — with some bonus material.

That session — and this guide — would also not exist without the heroic creativity of Leah Todd Lin, formerly of SJN and now vice president of Audience Strategy at New Hampshire Public Radio.

Further, we must thank The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation and the Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation for their generosity and unwavering support of the Local Media Project and collaborative work at the Solutions Journalism Network.

This guide would not exist without them, and without you, the reader.

Introduction

In 2019, a small team within the **Solutions Journalism Network** started the **Local Media Project**. They sought to catalyze and nurture transformational, sustainable solutions-oriented collaborative projects in order to strengthen and revitalize local media ecosystems. While collaborations were quickly becoming all the rage, the team still had some convincing to do.

One question we heard over and over again: “Won’t this just be *more work for me?*”

Enter the project manager!

If you’re reading this guide, you’ve perhaps participated in a collaborative (or more than one), heard about a collaborative, or thought about joining a collaborative.

But what about when it’s your turn to run one? What about when you’re the project manager?

Managing a collaboration can feel chaotic. Participants will trust you with their hopes as well as their anxieties, their triumphs as well as their challenges. You’ll navigate everything from communication to decision-making to facilitation to competition and everything in between.

And sometimes you might feel ... alone.

But here’s the good news: You’re not actually alone.

This guide will equip you with skills to solve these challenges and handle uncertainty. It’s interactive, and it’s inspired by real examples. While current and aspiring project managers will find it most useful, we think anyone interested in journalism collaboration will find something new and interesting.

The Practical Stuff

What kinds of collaboratives could this benefit?

What we learned here is based on what Sarah Stonbely would call “ongoing and co-creating” journalism collaborations — all of our collaboratives received 2 years of funding and coaching, came together to focus on a single topic, and had participation from non-news partners in their local ecosystem (libraries, universities). But, there are takeaways for journalism collaborations of any size!

Don't just read! Grab a friend!

With the help of these project managers, we have developed a few collaboration scenarios to share with you, based on real life examples. Details have been changed. If you think you recognize yourself — don't worry! These are common issues. If you've experienced them, chances are that someone else has too!

One thing all have in common: They all embody a challenge that a collaborative had to overcome – from communication issues, to power dynamics, to differences in practices across newsroom partners — all common issues we have seen across collaborations.

Where are you starting from?

Take a moment of self-reflection. Are you...

- Totally new to managing collaboratives
- Sort of familiar with collaborative project management
- A total expert (in which case, we want to hear from you for Volume 2!)

Don't worry — there's something in each scenario for folks at every level of expertise! Keep in mind that your specific background and experience may inform the way you see scenarios — and how others that you know see them.

No right or wrong answers!

For each scenario, potential different paths will be presented. You will “choose” which route you would take.

The point is to engage your own thinking and strategy to ask yourself: “What would be a good approach for my collaborative? How might I approach this in a way that fits our values and goals?”

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Scenario

1

The Slack Slacker

As the project manager of a new journalism collaborative, you recently set up a Slack channel to communicate about meeting plans and agendas.

Now, you didn't just unilaterally impose Slack upon your group! During the start-up process, you facilitated a group conversation about how best to circulate important updates throughout the participants. The group collectively decided on Slack — many participants were already using it, felt comfortable with it, and saw it as an easy platform to integrate into their day-to-day routine.

You know that some participants are still getting the hang of Slack, and you're confident they'll pick it up.

However, this week, a participant missed the Slack notification about the meeting agenda ... which included their chance to pitch their story for collaborative funding.

They missed the meeting (and their chance to pitch the story to the group). And, your collaborative's memorandum of understanding is clear — you forfeit your chance to pitch if you don't attend the meeting.

How do you respond?

- A BIG GROUP DISCUSSION:** Plan a refresher and review Slack in an all-hands session. If it's still not working and people are missing key communications, abandon the platform and return to email communication.
- B JUST A LITTLE HAND-HOLDING:** Offer a 1-1 tutorial with the participant having difficulty. Get curious and ask them: What's not working? What *is*? Is it the technology, or the process? And, what would it take to get them to embrace it?
- C HEDGE YOUR BETS:** Start duplicating all Slack messages in a group email thread.

INSIGHTS

- The best tool, process, or technology is the one that your collaborative will actually use! BUT (but) some folks will always have to learn something new or adapt to a new way of doing things.
- Be flexible and willing to give extra coaching. Remember that you'll make a lot of decisions in the early stages of the collaboration. Some will need to be revisited.
- Use the knowledge within the group (or in a peer collaborative): Don't be afraid to ask someone who did figure it out — "what worked for you?"

Scenario

2 The Persnickety Paywall

Different outlets bring different strengths and experiences to any collaborative project. And, that means different ways of doing things. A classic example is the paywall. Whether you love it, hate it, or see it as simply business-as-usual, nearly every collaborative will encounter a scenario like this one.

You're the project manager of a collaborative still in the start-up phase. The participants are energized, and it's time to lay down some ground rules for daily operations. You and your participants established early on that community reach and accessibility are core values of the collaborative. Everyone (you assume) wants your project's work to reach as many people as possible. To do that, you know that you need to set up a system to start sharing and republishing stories.

You were excited — and, a bit relieved — to get the local legacy newspaper to agree to participate in the collaborative. They've been a great partner so far, but they balk when the discussion turns to story sharing. They've always kept their content behind a paywall, and (seemingly) always will. "Story sharing doesn't work for us," they say. "We have a paywall. The business side will never agree to giving our stories away for free."

Yikes! You're in the middle of an important meeting and this hardline stance is making everyone squirm. You don't let it derail the meeting, but you make it clear to the representative of the legacy outlet that the discussion isn't over.

What do you do next?

- A CONNECT AND COMPROMISE:** If the opposition is really coming from the business side, would they be willing to sit down with you? Be open to a compromise, but hold firm on the importance of this content as a public service — not only to the community, but to your collaborative. A common compromise here is allowing collaboratively-funded stories in front of the paywall.
- B RE-EVALUATE THE FIT:** Sharing stories is one of the bedrocks of collaboration, and the other participants are eager to start. Be gentle, but ask sincerely: If this outlet isn't open to something this fundamental, is this the right time for them to participate in the project?
- C PICK YOUR BATTLES:** You can't force a partner to change their business practices. Besides, you might need to save your capital for another disagreement down the line. Move forward with a carve-out for the legacy outlet in your collaborative's MOU.



INSIGHTS

- Disagreements about processes or best practices often come down to the fear of trying something new or adjusting what's already familiar. Folks who have been doing things the same way may need a little prompting to imagine a new way of working. Try a more solutions-oriented approach: ask "How can we make this work?" or "What's really dividing us here?" rather than "Why can't you do this?"
- This example was about a paywall, but similar disagreements can emerge over just about anything. You may see discord brew over a shared website, how much to pay a project manager, or how to set up a pitch process. Remember that it's less about what the problems are and more about how you solve them: Establishing equity in the group and respect for everyone's voice will provide you with a strong base for the future.

Scenario

3 The Secretive Scoop

Historical competition between local news outlets can cause friction and can show up in many ways. We'll focus here on a common manifestation — hesitation about sharing story ideas.

You manage an early-stage collaborative. Partners signed on with excitement at the idea of working together, and now it's time to narrow your focus and choose a topic to report on as a group.

You kick off a facilitated discussion about potential topics, drawing from an established collaborative manager who shared their discussion guide.

You lead the group in a brainstorming session about which topics are both urgent and ripe for a reframing in your community. There is emerging consensus around one topic — somewhat shockingly, there's unanimous agreement on which topic is the most pressing and impactful.

Progress! You had no idea it would be this easy for folks to get on the same page.

However ... when the conversation turns to collaboratively pitching story ideas about this topic, you notice the representative of one of the digital news start-ups looks uncomfortable. You invite them to speak.

"We're seen as the experts on that topic — the community trusts us. We can't just let other outlets have our scoops."

To your frustration, others start to wonder the same thing — do they have to share everything they're working on?

You panic. Is your group backsliding already? You thought they were on board! You tell the group that there's clearly more to discuss than only the topic choice.

How do you move forward to get the group to leave these old competitive ideas behind?

A PREVENTION: Sure, it's true that this one requires foresight! Early on, talk one-on-one with the partners involved: What are your existing relationships with the other participants? Are there specific disagreements? Long-simmering history? Is there anyone who just doesn't get it?

- B DOCUMENTATION:** Part of preventing conflicts before they arise may involve being clear and concise about how the group agrees to work together. Whether it's your MOU or a separate document, have something that you can point to when the participants need a reminder that they agreed to work together and collaborate.
- C INSPIRATION:** Invite members of more established collaboratives to join a meeting and share their experiences. After all, they have the strongest perspective on the benefits of a collaboration. Plus, participants benefit from hearing from those who have been in their shoes!
- D INTRODUCTION:** Do a little matchmaking! To build relationships and emphasize small wins, try intentional pairing that allows members to demonstrate their unique strengths. Perhaps you pair the Spanish language outlet and the radio station for a talkback offered in English and Spanish. Or, maybe you encourage a digital news outlet to think about text to complement a TV story.



INSIGHTS

- This will come up repeatedly, but it bears repeating: Relationships take work and time, and it's worth spending the effort to establish them upfront.
- Every collaborative will need to establish its own norms. Remember: it's not always about what you disagree on, but how you solve those disagreements.

Scenario

4 Tricky Tradition

You manage a collaborative that has been working together for about six months. The start-up phase is behind you, but you work in a complex news ecosystem. Your collaborative is on the large side (with more than 15 participants) and it includes the legacy newspaper, one-person start-up shops, and seemingly everyone in between.

A community media outlet in your collaborative pitches a story about substance abuse disorder to produce using shared funds. This fits well within the chosen topic, and with the collaborative's stated commitment to cover overlooked stories with a reframed lens. The representative from the outlet already has the perfect reporter in mind. With the collaborative's approval, the representative gives the reporter the green light to get to work.

The reporter on the story is eager to pursue a nontraditional way of connecting with the community, and partners with a freelancer who has experienced addiction herself. The two reporters co-develop interview questions. In the interest of sensitivity to the sources — and getting this important story right — they make a joint decision to share the questions with sources in advance, and ask one source to review a version of the story for accuracy.

During the process, the source in question makes a few small changes for accuracy.

Another more "traditional" outlet in the collaborative finds out about this. They're uneasy, and they bring their concerns to you. From their perspective, it's simple: the outlet didn't adhere to the journalistic standards that everyone (they think) should know.

You have to sit down with the representative from the community outlet as well as the lead reporter to share these concerns. They're both discouraged — feeling like they aren't good enough, and like they'll always be second fiddle to the "old guard" in town.

How do you manage the very real concerns on both sides of this sensitive issue?

- A PRIORITY JOURNALISTIC STANDARDS:** Agree that your collaborative must follow the highest journalistic guidelines, and dissuade the reporter from publishing the story due to its nonstandard involvement with the source.
- B MAKE IT A LEARNING OPPORTUNITY:** Publish the story, but schedule a time to review the group's agreed-upon editorial guidelines before any resentment or hurt feelings start to fester. Be sure to build in follow-up discussions (or even delegate out a smaller committee of interested participants) to come to clarity on whether the editorial guidelines need a refresh.

- C EMBRACE IT:** Publish the story with an editor's note. In it, describe the approach in more detail and the reasoning behind it. Run the story alongside a first-person reflection from the freelancer who worked on the story, and what they learned in the process. Collaborations often provide an opportunity to be more flexible or creative in our approach to journalism and community involvement. In the included editor's note, describe the approach in more detail and the reasoning behind it. Run the story alongside a first-person reflection from the freelancer who worked on the story, and what they learned in the process.

INSIGHTS

- Community outlets are going to reach audiences in a different way than a legacy outlet. Legacy outlets might not be used to connecting with audiences in that way.
- Different outlets have different priorities. Some prioritize, above all, the community feeling seen and reflected in coverage and using the language and tone of the community that they cover. Anticipate and acknowledge those differences up front and as you progress — you don't want a dynamic where some voices are shut out or shut down.
- Think about the purpose of this collaboration: is your collaborative more focused on content production and straight news coverage, or is it also a space to build skills and amplify new voices? Your approach may change depending on the answer.
- These types of situations provide an opportunity for the group to grow and adapt to the needs of the collaborative. Keep careful note of how your collaborative approaches disagreements or tensions, so that they can be incorporated into future planning processes.

Scenario 5

(Dis)proportionate Participation

You manage a collaborative that's about to hit a big milestone: the one year mark! You're already full of ideas for how to deepen the collaboration and take the work to the next level.

You're proud and delighted that the momentum is still going strong. But, you're keeping an eye on the group dynamics. You can tell that a few core members are enthusiastically and consistently involved, while the rest are more "interested observers" — you see them at most (but not all) meetings and notice that they haven't pitched a story in months. When you check the republication stats, however, you find that they're consistently republishing content from all of the other partners.

You don't want to let the tension build any further. You already notice some resentment from members of the core group, who are increasingly frustrated with their outsize responsibility.

How do you proceed to make sure this doesn't derail your collaborative at this critical juncture?

- A ENGAGE:** Host a round of 1-1 conversations with those on the periphery. Be curious: what are their current barriers to getting more involved? What would get them more engaged?
- B ACCEPT:** Make your appreciation for the core group known, but understand that the less engaged partners will continue to benefit without stepping up.
- C CONFRONT:** Have a polite but candid conversation with the outlets who haven't been contributing. Set some guardrails: they need to come to a certain number of meetings per quarter, or submit a certain number of story pitches in order to reap the benefits of participating.

INSIGHTS

- If you don't see the value in collaboration, then these conversations are much much harder. Spend time upfront identifying what's in it for each news organization or member — and what the group's goals are.
- Identifying strengths: Be flexible and sensitive to what and how people are able to contribute. Not everyone will attend meetings! But they may contribute in other ways.

Scenario 6

“Too Many Meetings”

Let’s do an easy one! This one needs no explanation. If you haven’t seen it already, you will.

How do you keep up relationships and momentum when inevitably faced with meeting fatigue from your participants?

- A MAKE YOUR MEETINGS MORE EFFICIENT:** reduce your meetings to every other week and move essential communications to Slack.
- B DIVIDE AND CONQUER:** Split “editorial” and “business” items into separate meetings, to engage the people around their priorities. Set up opt-in discussion times dedicated to story brainstorming, event planning, or governance that participants can attend based on their needs and interests.
- C INCENTIVIZE PEOPLE TO ATTEND!** Group meetings are an important part of building the trust and relationships that make or break a successful collaborative. Start including a relationship-building exercise in your meetings, so folks see that part of the value.

INSIGHTS

- Group meetings are important to the overall strength of collaborative partner relationships, and so is how or where you have them! Do you meet virtually? Are meetings split between different groups or committees?
- Consider having at least one in-person meeting a year where you invite everyone who is participating in the collaborative (publishers, editors, reporters, community partners). Make these about strategy and team-building, maybe at the beginning of the year or as a point for mid-year review. When possible, in-person meetings that are longer provide an opportunity for the collaborative partners to reconnect, strengthen personal relationships and build consensus around the group’s mission and purpose.
- If you do meet in person — don’t forget lunch!

Scenario

7

Money Talks

Your collaborative has been slow to get off the ground, and you're hoping that a big, visible story will show folks just what they can accomplish when they work together.

A legacy news outlet pitches a complex enterprise story that will provide desperately needed context to your thorny, urgent topic. They're seeking collaborative funding for the story, and say that they have a trusted freelancer who's ready to go.

The collaborative is excited — they're feeling the frustration with the slow movement as well. But, when the participant comes back with the price tag for the story, some of the smaller outlets are uncomfortable and dismayed: it's double or triple what they're typically able to pay, even for longer stories.

How do you address these concerns without this turning into yet another delay?

- A COMPROMISE:** Propose a cost sharing setup for the more expensive story, where the collaborative helps cover some — but not all — of the above-and-beyond cost.
- B MAXIMIZE:** Ask the freelancer if they would be able to mentor a student or an intern from a smaller outlet during the process — adding value for the collaborative and the community.
- C JUSTIFY:** Tap into the brain trust of other collaborative project managers and grab some comps. Show the group comparable budgets from other projects, and explain the need for the higher price tag. Proceed with the project as planned so you don't lose momentum.

INSIGHTS

- Decisions about money are some of the hardest that your participants will ever make. Each outlet is going to have their own perspective and their own baggage. Build the muscle early — participants need to learn how to discuss tough topics openly.
- Collaborative budget decisions can also help identify the group's priorities both internally and for sustainable funding. Embrace financial conversations as an opportunity to align partners around the mission of the collaborative.

Scenario 8

New Kids on the Block

You manage an established collaborative — you're well into your second year working together. The kinks, the difficulties, the confusing early days — they're all behind you. Or so you think.

You've heard rumblings about a national chain that's making headway in your community. You take a wait-and-see approach, but you know that there's chatter in the collaborative about the new outlet's presence.

Then the day arrives: the new digital startup — backed by the national chain — is familiar with the collaborative's work, and wants to join up. You know that some members might balk, but you also know that some will want to explore the option.

You schedule a separate conversation with the participants about this particular request, but you're wondering about future requests too.

How do you prepare for the meeting?

ROUTES: Work in the fact that some participants might see this as an isolated incident, and want to just say "no thanks" and move on without building a process or having a conversation. Defer to the will of the group, even if it's just a few naysayers who are louder than everyone else.

BONUS

What do you do when everything is succeeding? Or the "what's next" question.

Here are a few ways that collaboratives have addressed this big — and important — question:

- Engaging a strategic planner
- Seeking the guidance (or even a more formal consulting partnership) with a more established collaborative
- Joining forces: experimenting with partnerships with another collaborative in another location

Conclusion

Some of the big ideas here: Project management is so essential! It's a growing field of expertise. Journalism collaboration is here to stay — you're going to encounter these scenarios eventually, and knowing how to manage collaborations is an important skill for the future of our industry.

We hope this exercise has left you with a little more confidence, conveyed a few of the strategies you can turn to in a pinch:

- Build buy-in.
- Know your champions.
- Tap into your partners' genius in solving problems together.
- And above all, the knowledge that collaboration is about relationships.



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