

Meaningful collaboration with non-news partners

By Heather Bryant

A collaborative journalism
guide from the Center
for Cooperative Media at
Montclair State University





About the Center for Cooperative Media

The mission of the Center for Cooperative Media at Montclair State University is to grow and strengthen local journalism, and in doing so, serve New Jersey citizens.

The Center does that through the use of partnerships, collaborations, training, product development, research and communication. It works with more than 270 partners throughout the Garden State as part of a network known as the NJ News Commons, which is its flagship project. The network includes hyperlocal digital publishers, public media, newspapers, television outlets, radio stations, multimedia news organizations and independent journalists. The Center is also a national leader in the study of collaborative journalism. It believes that collaboration is a key component of the future success of local news organizations and healthy news ecosystems.

The Center is a grant-funded organization based at Montclair State University's School of Communication and Media. The Center is supported with funding from Montclair State University, John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, Democracy Fund, the New Jersey Local News Lab (a partnership of the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, Democracy Fund, and Community Foundation of New Jersey), and the Abrams Foundation.

For more information, visit CenterforCooperativeMedia.org.

About the author

Heather Bryant is the founder and director of Project Facet, an open source infrastructure project that supports newsroom collaboration with tools to manage the logistics of creating, editing and distributing collaborative content, managing projects, facilitating collaborative relationships and sharing the best practices of collaborative journalism. She published the Collaborative Journalism Workbook and works with the Center for Cooperative Media to build resources for collaboration. Bryant researches and writes about the intersection of class, poverty, technology and journalism ethics.



Introduction

There is a whole world of partners to work with

The accelerated pace in which news organizations are collaborating is an indicator of the significant cultural shift regarding traditional notions of who is involved with the process of doing journalism.

Whereas organizations most often treated other news organizations as competitors, changing attitudes and declining resources have prompted many to rethink competition and embrace collaboration. However, the practice of collaboration also faces cultural challenges as those who seek to partner are exploring who they want to partner with and who wants to partner with them.

The work of journalism has gone through multiple evolutions from a blue-collar field to a rapidly professionalized practice, where college degrees are more commonly held by journalists than by many other sectors of society. Media ownership, commercial media, systemic biases, and more are just some of the reasons why news organizations and journalists can be reluctant to share the process of doing journalism with those who are seen as external to the professionalized practice of journalism.

The shift happening now within the practice of collaborative journalism is moving beyond the idea that a collaboration is only a partnership between news organizations and journalists.

Lest we forget, the evolution of the journalist as a professionalized, degree-holding occupation is fairly recent. And indeed, professional journalism organizations and many practitioners, fight back against efforts to license journalists. More than credentials or titles, the essential traits for doing this work are curiosity, fairness, and the desire to seek out information and share it. When we view journalism through the lens of an act instead of an identity, we move toward a more equitable, inclusive and effective practice.

What we need now more than ever are a variety of stakeholders, storytellers, and information influencers to bring their expertise and experiences to inform and perform the work of journalism in collaborative settings.

This guide is written primarily for journalists and is meant to serve as a roadmap to successful partnerships with important stakeholders outside the field. The purpose of this guide is to explore some of the questions and considerations to help you along the path toward working with partners who are not news organizations or professional journalists.

The guide starts with the assumption that you are open to the idea of partnering with non-news collaborators, but maybe aren't sure where to start. This work exists within a series of guides, each tackling different aspects of collaboration and I highly recommend working through each to help build a cohesive and comprehensive approach.

Angilee Shah has put together an excellent resource, ***Building equity in journalism collaborations***, that is a crucial consideration especially when working with partners outside of the field of journalism. This is because the responsibility is on us to ensure we help our partners understand what we're trying to do and our processes, and to create full and empowered seats at the table that share decision-making whenever possible.

This guide builds off the work of ***Building new partnerships for journalism collaborations***. This guide can help inform your approach to including non-news partnerships, while ***Building*** helps you think about how to organize and experiment within that system. The ***Collaborative Journalism Workbook*** can help you organize the overall work of collaborating together.

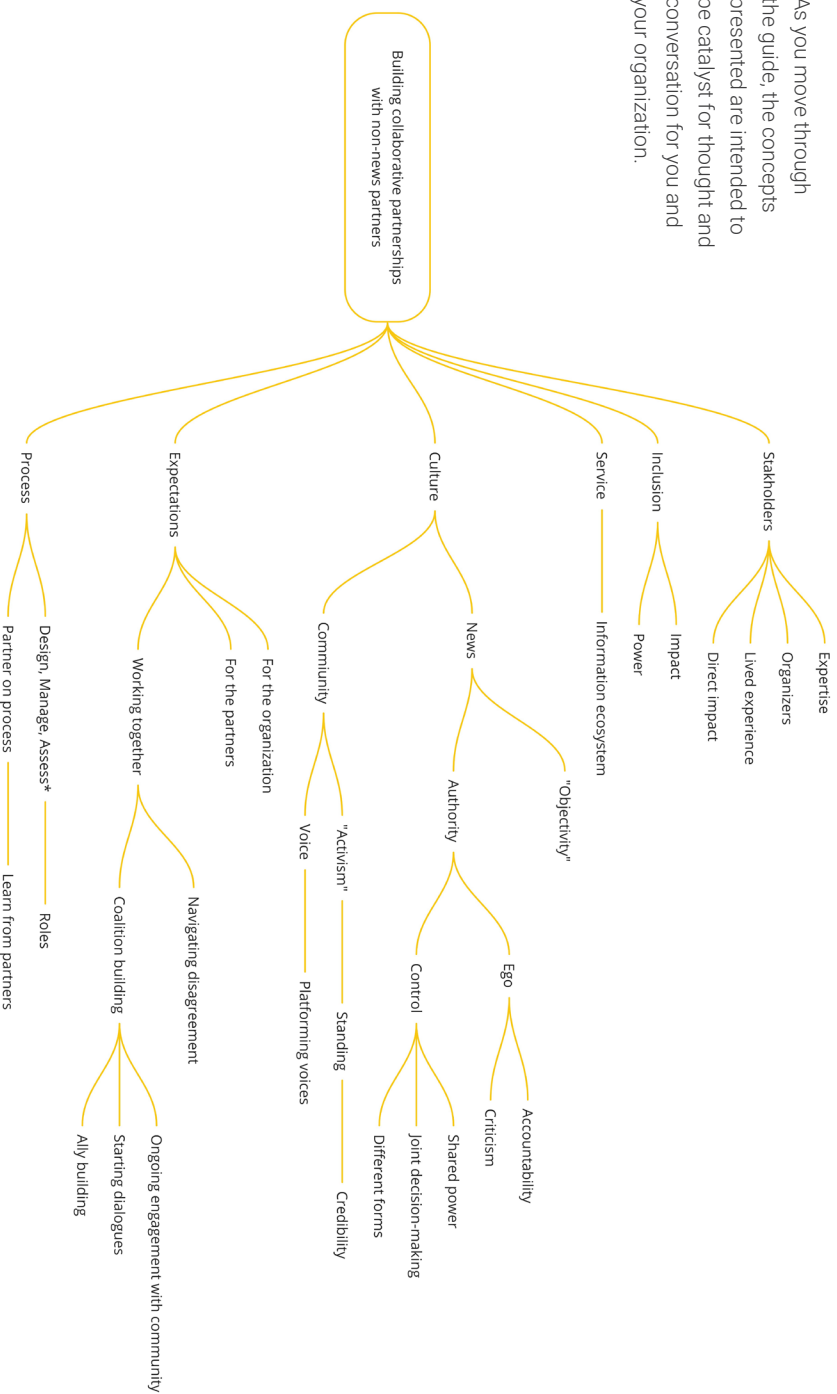
The structure for this entry in the series is not chronological, but rather topical and organized by the different aspects of partnering with people outside of journalism, including how you might think about internal and institutional questions, concerns and hesitations about kinds of partners. Some of this might contradict long-held beliefs about journalism norms and processes, and some of this might sound familiar as it includes part

of the thinking and discourse about inclusion, equity and doing better for the people journalism should serve.

As in ***Building new partnerships for journalism collaborations***, one thing you may notice is that there are no direct quotes attributed to individuals spoken to for this guide. This is an intentional decision. Interviews were conducted to inform the material included in this guide but not directly quoted so as not to inadvertently create any misunderstandings in current collaborative relationships those people are participating in.

As we know in this space, collaboration can sometimes be one of the more difficult topics to talk about constructively. That is because unlike other journalistic practices, we're talking about what it means to work with one another and our field is an increasingly small one. In the About section at the end, you will find information about the people who contributed their time and expertise that shaped this guide and without whom it would not be complete.

As you move through the guide, the concepts presented are intended to be catalyst for thought and conversation for you and your organization.



Consider the Stakeholders



The most significant and compelling reason to broaden the range of participants from professional journalists to people with a variety of connections to the work being done is that it strengthens the work itself. Goals and outcomes are better calibrated to meet the needs of the audience because they better account for those needs. Success metrics can be built not just around what is success for the journalists and newsrooms (which often include things like pageviews and awards) but also what is success for the stakeholders and community (different voices being heard, different stories being told, a problem being solved). Areas of blindness exhibited by a homogenous group are more likely to be identified and resolved when the group encompasses a variety of experiences and perspectives.

The Value of Stakeholders

Expertise

No newsroom anywhere can be staffed to include every skill set, every perspective, every expertise. Partnerships are an opportunity to bring people on board who can speak to the needs of a project.

- ▶ **Who are the stakeholders who hold expertise or skills relevant to successfully completing the project?**

Organizers/Conveners

For almost any story, there are people already activated by the subject matter and organizing action or connecting affected people. Beyond just being sources, community participants are valuable in connecting the journalism to the people affected by the topic.

- ▶ **Who are the stakeholders already organizing and convening around the subject?**

Lived experience

There is no identifiable number of interviews that can be claimed as the equivalent of someone's lived experience, especially for those whose lives have included discrimination, marginalization, or harm.

- ▶ **Who has direct or related experiences that would contribute to a more well-rounded and nuanced piece of journalism?**
- ▶ **How might their experience guide the creation of the right kind of product to reach the audience most in need of the information?**

Shared power

Where collaborations aim to meet the needs of underserved communities, the work of sharing the process of journalism with the community is an important step. By creating opportunities for the community to participate, and in making the tools of journalism available, the impact of information is amplified by the distribution of the power to create and share it.

Service

A recurrent theme in collaboration is how it facilitates work that might not otherwise be done. Within a community context, collaboration lends itself to understanding the larger information ecosystem and working toward a better fit within it. No single organization or institution is capable of serving the entirety of an ecosystem, but in collaborating with partners that serve different aspects of it, more comprehensive service becomes possible.

- ▶ **How does your organization fit into the broader ecosystem of information sources within your community?**
- ▶ **What other participants in the ecosystem seem like natural allies?**
- ▶ **How can you reach out to other kinds of organizations to discuss potential partnerships that will serve the ecosystem in a more comprehensive way?**

Who might these stakeholders be?

- Community groups
- Individuals of a community
- Technical partners
- Field experts
- NGOs
- Academics
- Scholars/Researchers
- Civic sector/municipal parties
- Institutions (museums, libraries, etc)

Stories of Atlantic City was a project that sought to tell a more complete story of Atlantic City by bringing together local news organizations and engaged community members. The goal for the project was to use restorative narrative to highlight the good stories of a community, guided by the experiences and perspectives of the community members.

37 Voices embraced solutions-oriented journalism to explore the reality of economic insecurity in New Jersey from the perspective of people navigating economic insecurity in a variety of circumstances.

Playwrights in the Newsroom flipped the more common dynamic of collaborations in that the story being told was one of what it looked like to be in a newsroom. The playwrights spent months embedded at the Dallas Morning News learning from and shadowing journalists while working to understand what the role of newspapers is.

Expectations



While the field is largely driven by the work to be done, for better or worse, the optics of doing the work is still a significant factor for many. This creates tensions particularly when newsrooms worry over whether working with people who are actively engaged in different ways with a topic will mean the work itself cannot still be defended as good journalistic practice, transparent, fact-checked, and fair.

Instead of bracing yourself for the moment when your partners who aren't professional journalists push you to break some ethical boundary, you can build in the training and processes that result in solid journalistic work. It's highly likely that community partners do not have as much experience with the tools and processes of journalistic work as newsroom partners do. Missteps that could be read as antagonistic are actually inexperience. What programming or workshopping can you do to help align your partners around a shared understanding of journalism processes and ethics.

If mutual understanding is established and there is still significant disagreement, that presents a valuable opportunity to inspect the processes of a newsroom to see if there is a better way to do the work.

Being a professional journalist working with people who aren't

There are things that journalists concern themselves with that aren't instinctively front of mind for most people. Where such things are essential to solid journalism, it's the role and responsibility of journalists to equip non-news partners with the tools and frameworks for those aspects of journalistic work.

Consideration

- ▶ **Are there elements of the work that might expose your organization to liability that need to be discussed and decided upon before the work begins?**

Training

- ▶ What is necessary to establish up front so there is a shared understanding of how information is supported? (For example: Fact-checking isn't saying that you doubt their credibility. It is part of the process to maintain accuracy and excellence.)
- ▶ What parts of the process can you train your partners on? (And how much capacity do you have for doing so?)
- ▶ Should there be some kind of introduction to journalism workshop or do the circumstances lend themselves to learning as you go?
- ▶ What skills do you use in your work that would be valuable for your partners?

Partner expertise

- ▶ What skills or insights do you hope your partners can contribute? What can they do better or faster than you?

Explaining to the audience

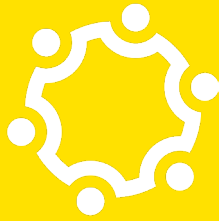
- ▶ In what ways do you need to be accountable to your audience for the partnership?
- ▶ How will you disclose the partnership?
- ▶ What explanation is needed for who you are partnering with and why?
- ▶ Are there questions you should anticipate about the veracity of the work done by the partnership? How will you address them?

Being a community member working with professional journalists

For people without formal training in the tools and work of journalism, participating in a journalism project is an opportunity to gain insight into how journalistic processes can be used to meet the goals that have motivated their participation. It's important to remember that partners who aren't journalists or newsrooms also have goals going into these projects. You need to help identify and serve the goals of your partners. They aren't there just to facilitate your journalism.

Considerations

- ▼ How will you pitch a collaboration to potential partners?
- ▼ Are you able to articulate how you perceive their possible contribution?
(Are you able to evolve that perception based on their feedback?)
- ▼ Are you able to articulate what you think they will gain from participating?
(Are you able to evolve that perception based on their feedback?)
- ▼ What do you need to understand about the nature of their involvement?
(What kind of stakeholder are they?)



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Heather Bryant



Creating and facilitating a healthy culture within a collaboration is an essential part of leading a successful collaboration. Whether your partners are fellow journalists or people from different backgrounds and professions, a collaborative culture values equitably the contributions and unique perspectives of all the partners. Understanding the potential for participation requires building and maintaining a coalition. Relationships are not a just-in-time resource, they require ongoing effort.

- ▶ **Are you engaging with the people, groups across your community now?**
- ▶ **How can you begin to start these dialogues where you don't already have one?**
- ▶ **Who are the people who are natural allies for information creation, access and distribution?**

Newsroom

From a cultural perspective, some of the more traditional aspects of news organizations will present challenges to shifting the paradigm from full control of journalism as a process and product to one of distributed power and equitable partnership. Whether it's traditional notions of objectivity, the influence of ego or need for control, and hesitation to share credit and attribution, there are questions to reckon with internally to help you be a good partner to those coming to the partnership from a different background.

- ▶ **Are you/your organization obligated to follow traditional notions of journalistic "objectivity"?**
- ▶ **Are you able to reconcile your ideas of "objectivity" with the reality of people's lived experience?**
- ▶ **Are you prepared to be accountable for the harm that your newsroom or other newsrooms may have caused in the past?**
- ▶ **Are you prepared to accept criticism?**
- ▶ **Are you ready to share power?**
- ▶ **How do you plan to share decision-making?**

- ▶ Are you open to the output of the collaboration looking different from what you're used to journalism looking like?
- ▶ How will you share credit for the work?
- ▶ Will you share revenue from the work or look for another way to compensate your partners for their contribution?

Community

- ▶ Are you prepared to trust the standing of your partners to say what they say? (Think about the tendency to label activists as biased while positioning people in positions of power as trustworthy, like police or business leaders)
- ▶ Are you able to let your partners speak the way they want to speak so long as it's factual?
- ▶ Are you prepared to stand up for your partner's ability to participate in the work of journalism as much as you would stand up for your own?

Process

Beyond the journalism you aspire to do, the work of partnering with others can be an act of self improvement and skill development. You are not limited to just partnering for whatever output you intend to produce; take this opportunity to partner in designing the process of doing the work itself. In designing the process, you can also establish the roles to be filled by the journalists and non-journalist partners.

- ▶ What can you learn from your partners so that you do better journalism?
- ▶ How can your partners help expand on the ideas of what journalism can produce?
- ▶ How might that shape who fills what roles within the partnership?

Design, Manage, Assess

Once you establish the roles and parameters of the collaboration, much of the process of doing the work is the same as any other kind of collaboration. Planning for the work to be done, communication, expectations for deliverables, timelines and benchmarks for assessment can be designed among the collaborators as you would for any kind of partnership. To dig into this process more fully, you can apply much of the ***Collaborative Journalism Workbook*** to the effort.

About this guide

Among the research for this guide, interviews with several people were instrumental in synthesizing the different areas of consideration and suggestions contained within.

Candice Fortman is the executive director at Outlier Media and a leading voice on what a more just and equitable future of service journalism should be.

Cole Goins is a journalist and consultant with hands-on experience in collaborations at CIR and brings to the conversation a valuable view of the variety of ways that partnerships can occur.

Andrea Faye Hart is a co-founder and former community engagement director at City Bureau, where her work has brought much insight into the relationships and organizing that go into partnerships of all kinds.

Mike Rispoli is the director of Free Press' News Voices project and offers much wisdom in the realm of empowering and including people in the processes of journalism.

This report is part of a series of five collaborative journalism guides produced in 2020 by the Center for Cooperative Media at Montclair State University, thanks to generous support from Rita Allen Foundation.

The Rita Allen Foundation invests in transformative ideas in their earliest stages to leverage their growth and promote breakthrough solutions to significant problems.

The guides were also produced in partnership with Heather Bryant, who agreed to update her Collaborative Journalism Workbook for inclusion as one of the series' six guides.

To see the guides online, visit collaborativejournalismhandbook.org.

To learn more about collaborative journalism in general, visit collaborativejournalism.org.

Guides in this series

Building equity in journalism collaborations

by Angilee Shah

Building a tool set for journalism collaborations

by Heather Bryant

Budget and finance for journalism collaborations

by Shady Grove Oliver

Building new partnerships for journalism collaborations

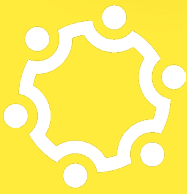
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Collaborating with non-news partners

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***The Collaborative Journalism Workbook*, Second Edition**

by Heather Bryant



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