

FOR COLLABORATIVE JOURNALISM



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## BY CAROLINE PORTER

CENTER FOR COOPERATIVE MEDIA AT MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

# **ABOUT THE CENTER**



The Center for Cooperative Media is a primarily grant-funded program based at the School of Communication and Media at Montclair State University. Its mission is to grow and strengthen local journalism and support an informed society in New Jersey and beyond.

The Center for Cooperative Media's flagship program is the NJ News Commons, which is a

network of more than 300 publishers and dozens of freelancers in the state of New Jersey. The Center's work for the NJ News Commons focuses on regular communication and networking, training, coaching and support, grant opportunities, ecosystem research, coordinating collaborative projects and more.

Nationally the Center studies and advocates for the practice of collaborative journalism. That work includes maintenance of collaborativejournalism.org, an international database of collaborative reporting projects, a monthly newsletter, the publication of research studies and whitepapers and the annual Collaborative Journalism Summit.

The Center's work is financially supported by Montclair State University, Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, Democracy Fund, the New Jersey Local News Lab Fund (a partnership of the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, Democracy Fund, and Community Foundation of New Jersey) and the Abrams Foundation. To learn more about the Center, visit centerforcooperativemedia.org and collaborativejournalism.org.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**



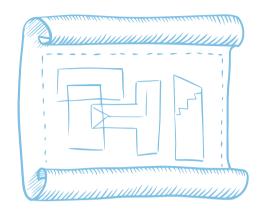
Caroline Porter is a media strategist and researcher. Caroline worked as a staff reporter for The Wall Street Journal in the Chicago and Los Angeles bureaus and served as an adjunct lecturer at Northwestern University's Medill School. As a Fulbright Scholar in Northern Ireland, Caroline researched the role of media in the post-conflict region. You can find her on Twitter at @carolineporter.



# INTRODUCTION

In the past decade, collaborative journalism has helped fill a void created by major shifts in the journalism industry, which historically has been slow to respond to the needs and behaviors of those it aims to serve.

With at least 40 permanent collaboratives in the U.S. alone, the rising popularity of collaboration underscores the need and value of these structures, which allow for greater



emphasis on specific reporting subjects and sharing of expertise and credibility, as well as fresh approaches to sustainability and community partnership.

In recent years, the Knight Foundation has invested \$5 million into Solution Journalism Network's Local Media Project, with the goal of launching at least 15 solutions-journalism collaboratives around the country. Local Media Association has made industry collaboration one of its four strategic pillars. In 2021, The Institute for Nonprofit News announced its largest collaboration to date, with more than 50 partners covering rural America.

These burgeoning opportunities bring new ways to participate in the journalism industry, and notably, new roles and jobs.

The goal of this playbook is to identify the role of the collaboration manager, the person who oversees the day-to-day operations of a journalism collaborative. At a time when many journalism jobs are in flux, there's an aperture to recognize and define the ways the collaboration manager role can help shape the future of the industry.

Whether you are a mid-career journalist looking for a new way to use your industry skills and experience or you are a journalism student considering your potential place in the field, this playbook is for you. If you do not fit into either of those categories, this playbook is also for you. People with backgrounds in civics, arts and nonprofit work have stepped into collaborative leadership roles in recent years. We hope you see this as a first act in an evolving journalism production, one with new opportunities and roles to consider.



## THE GROWING PROMINENCE OF COLLABORATIVE ROLES

In 2010, the launch of Local Journalism Centers (LJCs) by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) created new spaces for the collaboration manager role. These regional collaborations among public radio and television stations shared reporters and at times also included full-time leaders, often tethered to one of the member stations (Porter, 2020).

From our observations, the role of a collaboration manager began to gain prominence starting in 2016 and increased rapidly between 2019 and today (in late 2021), in tandem with the concurrent rise of collaborations.

A 2017 report from the Center for Cooperative Media at Montclair State University focusing on the models of collaboration in journalism identified "personnel dedicated to running the collaboration" as one of the seven variables among collaborations (Stonbely, 2017). In addition, Dr. Sarah Stonbely delineated which tensions and benefits required the attention of a project manager, highlighting the role as a crucial resource. For ongoing and separate collaborations, she noted that a "commonality among successful collaborations of this type (and perhaps most collaborations) is a dedicated project manager, who helps control daily workflow and mediate between the various parties involved."

As journalism collaborations can take various shapes to fit the needs of the member organizations and communities, the collaboration manager role can vary in title, scope and time commitment.

In some cases, we've observed that project managers can start out in part-time roles, and as the collaborative gains stability the collaboration leader's role grows into full-time director roles to meet the needs of the growing collaborative. In this way, the collaboration manager role is innately fluid. For instance, Melanie Plenda, a former freelance journalist, started as a part-time manager for the Granite State News Collaborative, a group of roughly 20 outlets serving New Hampshire. As the project grew and gained funding, Melanie moved into a full-time director role for the collaborative, adding more administrative and fundraising tasks to her job. In addition, she hosts a weekly broadcast program that showcases the collaborative's work in partnership with other members of the collaborative, namely New Hampshire PBS. In



this way, Melanie uses her reporting skills while also leveraging necessary skills for the role.

In other cases, the role can be a partnerships position, typically embedded within a news organization. This person often facilitates partnerships and collaborations on behalf of the news outlet, with other organizations. An example is Natalie Choate, who in her role in 2019 as director of media relations and partnerships, built partnerships on behalf of The Texas Tribune with regional and national outlets to distribute and publish the Tribune's content. She has since become the news organization's chief communications officer.

While the positions can vary in details, the role of the collaboration manager embodies specific characteristics distinct within the field of journalism. It comprises many roles, as the collaboration is its own editorial entity that requires team building, thought leadership, business skills, and of course, news judgment and editorial savvy. In this way, the role of the collaboration manager stands out for its wide-ranging scope and opportunity to flex different skill sets.

# WHAT IS YOUR MOST IMPORTANT SKILL?

What is your single most important skill as a collaboration manager? Answers were provided by collaboration managers during the 2021 Collaborative Journalism Summit.





## FIVE KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF THE ROLE



Third-party neutral: Collaboration members rely on the collaboration manager to serve each member's needs with parity, and this is often achieved with a manager who is not affiliated with a particular member organization. In this role, the collaboration manager maintains the capacity to "see all sides" and foster group cohesion. This applies more to roles for specific, stand-alone collaboratives, not to partnership roles attached to specific organizations.



Relational intelligence: While collaborative journalism is natural to some, for other members, and especially legacy outlets, collaborative journalism requires a foundation of trust. This trust is critical to the success of the collaborative and develops often through relationship-building, which requires time, commitment and soft skills to lead the group through trust-building exercises, like kickoffs and ice-breakers.



Sustainability chops: The collaboration manager has the primary responsibility for the collaborative's sustainability. The way this looks can run the gamut: ensuring a smooth membership meeting with thoughtful agendas and protocols, developing leads with potential funders, and spearheading strategy and accountability for the collaborative's mission and output.



Branding and organizing: Especially in the initial development phases, the collaboration manager serves as the chief ambassador for the burgeoning collaborative. Stepping into this role requires a capacity to organize, as part of a movement for something new and different. Some journalists, familiar with reporting from the sidelines, will need to be prepared for this shift.



Multi-hyphenate: Interested in reading a profit and loss statement, before editing a major story, and then meeting with a community member? The role of the collaboration manager requires wearing many hats and serving as project manager for the entity. Your beat is the collaborative itself, and you are responsible for knowing it inside and out. This distinguishes you within the group.



## 10 TASKS OF THE COLLABORATION MANAGER:

Cat-herder, diplomat, pilot, translator and counselor: While these roles entail distinct careers and industries, they also engender the essential qualities of the collaborative manager. Indeed, when asked to describe their roles, collaboration managers provided the above responses during the 2021 Collaborative Journalism Summit.

These widely divergent responses reflect a reality for the role of the collaboration manager, which is that their daily tasks shift and evolve with the collaborative they lead, and their day-to-day responsibilities change accordingly.

For someone who loves variety and can leverage a flexible mindset, the role of the collaboration manager is a unique position for hiring one day, budgeting another day, and very likely, line-editing every day.







Achieving impact

Increasing diversity

Being

connecting

celebrating

Building Systems

Power, agency, and leadership

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Answers provided by collaboration managers at CJS2021.



## SAMPLE JOB DESCRIPTIONS

Below are four job descriptions for different collaborative roles in journalism. Reflecting the diverse shapes that these roles can take, you'll see variety in title, time commitment, scope, requirements and responsibilities.

#### SAMPLE ONE: Member Collaborations Editor, Institute for Nonprofit News

Job description: The collaborations editor serves as a catalyst and coordinator, organizing nonprofit newsrooms that share public interest values and editorial standards and can produce stronger reporting by joining forces and combining their resources.

#### The editor will:

- Develop a deep understanding of common news coverage and needs among the INN network, which now has more than 2,500 journalists from more than 300 nonprofit news organizations in North America.
- Working as an organizer and facilitator, help member newsrooms with common coverage areas frame, fund, organize and execute project-based editorial collaborations, ongoing partnerships and collaborative networks, such as statehouse coverage networks, regional topic reporting partnerships and local joint reporting projects.
- Advise newsroom leaders on strategies to optimize stories for impact and community engagement.
- Provide tools and coaching to help collaboratives set goals and measure the impact of their work.
- Help with project fundraising, and identifying and negotiating with outside partners to enhance reporting and extend distribution of coverage.

The editor can identify large trends emerging from local stories, recognize the high-impact potential in stories that merit further development, and convey the power of collaboration to journalists interested in seeing their work generate the greatest impact.

• The collaborations editor also is adept at negotiating projects, roles and responsibilities, and engaging journalists in collaborative work.



### Roles and responsibilities

The collaborations editor is part of INN's collaborations team, reporting to INN's chief network officer. The editor also works with INN's Midwest collaborations leader to share context, connections and best practices around collaboration.

#### Key responsibilities and goals include:

- Identify areas of common editorial interest among diverse groups of nonprofit newsrooms.
- Develop trusted relationships with nonprofit news editors and the ability to help them join forces through journalism projects, both short-term and ongoing collaborations and partnerships.
- Strengthen and expand the reach of coverage by individual outlets around common issues that span communities, such public health, education, health care and the environment.
- Expand the impact of reporting so that resources, knowledge and potential solutions are shared among noncompeting reporters covering the same subject, thereby strengthening the journalism produced by each newsroom.
- Increase the impact and reach of individual stories.
- Identify and pursue funding to support journalism collaborations.
- Analyze impact of collaborations and create reports that catalogue the accomplishments of collaborative projects and share best practices with members, funders and the general public.
- Foster ongoing state and regional reporting networks and collaborative frameworks strengthening participating nonprofit newsrooms.

The ideal candidate for this position is an experienced editor who has worked with both local and national/topic publications and who has managed collaborations across multiple newsrooms or news outlets. You're someone who can lead grassroots efforts, tease common benefit out of a range of participant needs and help guide participants toward identifying common threads and joint projects that increase the impact of separate newsrooms.

### Specific responsibilities will include:

- Developing a comprehensive understanding of INN member editorial priorities and plans.
- Developing plans for editorial collaborations, to include developing project budgets, identifying participants, pursuing funding and supporting project reporting.



- Evaluate project reach and impact and prepare reports discussing project strengths and weaknesses.
- Ensure collaborative projects are meeting all shared goals and progressing along agreed timelines.
- In collaboration with the INN development department and membership team, develop ideas that could receive external funding and then develop proposals that would win support.
- Provide editorial advice and support to collaborative projects, while recognizing and respecting the editorial independence of member newsrooms.

#### **Qualifications include:**

- Extensive experience as an editor working with newsrooms of various sizes and specializations to deliver high-impact journalism.
- Good editorial instincts and understanding of how to develop state, regional, national and global story angles.
- Interest and ability to work at a high level on editorial collaborations. This isn't a job for an editor who expects to be in the weeds on every story.
- Commitment to and experience with creating equitable and inclusive news teams and generating journalism that is equitable and reflects and engages the communities it serves.
- Strong interpersonal and written communications skills, to rally and organize groups of colleagues.
- Ability to organize your own work and help others do the same, and a service orientation to helping others achieve their goals.
- Experience working with projects receiving restricted funding and managing individual projects to specific budgets.
- A bachelor's degree in a relevant field (journalism, communications, public affairs) and at least 5 years' news experience, including experience managing direct reports.

INN recognizes that a great candidate may not meet all of these requirements. Please use your cover letter to tell us how your own strengths and experiences would make you successful in this role.





## SAMPLE TWO: Managing Director, Word In Black

Job type/level: Full-time, 1-year renewable contract, director/senior director level

Reports to: The Managing Director reports to the Chief Content and Collaboration Officer. The team provides a significant amount of access, support, and resources. In addition, a data journalist reports to the Managing Director, with plans for further growth and expansion in 2022.

Location: Anywhere. LMA is a virtual organization. You must have access to high-speed internet (which LMA reimburses) and attend daily video meetings in a professional setting.

Compensation: \$95,000 (salary of \$85,000 + incentive of \$10,000) plus full benefits including health insurance, 401(k) plan, internet and cellphone stipends.

Job Summary: We seek an innovative, dynamic leader to guide, manage, and grow Word In Black, a groundbreaking digital startup backed by ten of the nation's leading Black-owned publishers, managed by the Local Media Foundation. This collaborative seeks to confront inequities, elevate solutions and amplify the Black experience with a solutions journalism approach. The Managing Director is responsible for the editorial direction, collaborating with the ten publishers, including generating original content and leveraging local reporting for a national platform, events, and newsletters. A secondary goal is to create sustainable and scalable practices ensuring a healthy, independent, and free Black press.

## The essence of the job

From the outset, most of the Managing Director's efforts will focus on these responsibilities:

- 1. Act as the WordInBlack.com lead website editor, curator, and publisher.
- 2. Lead our weekly newsletter by engaging with publishers on editorial content, opinion pieces, and curation of original content from publishers and other contributors.
- 3. Produce and coordinate events that elevate the conversation around our editorial strategies, audience engagement, and revenue opportunities.
- 4. Lead and manage editorial discussions with WIB publishers, their reporters, and our partners.



#### Characteristics we seek:

- A person who has had extensive experience leading, managing, and guiding content reflective of unserved, underserved, underrepresented, or marginalized communities and networks.
- Someone who is exceptionally collaborative and can manage multiple projects, and stakeholders, across a spectrum of diverse engagements, experiences, and perspectives.
- A leader who is actively engaged in the outcomes of the publishers and collaboration with them as they tackle digital transformation, revenue generation, and audience engagement that drives equity while managing the editorial process.
- Someone who can provide inclusive and nuanced feedback and explanation that leads to change understanding and long-term impact.

#### It probably won't work out if:

- You are not a team player.
- You have limited experience leading an editorial media enterprise.
- You don't believe that legacy media and digital media can coexist.
- You don't share the belief that a strong, independent, Black-owned press is vital to a healthy democracy.





### SAMPLE THREE: Project Manager, Dallas Media Collaborative

#### About the job:

The Dallas Media Collaborative (DMC) seeks a part-time Project Manager to coordinate and lead its efforts toward a city-wide solutions journalism network. Over the course of a year, the DMC partners will combine resources to explore issues and solutions to a systemic community problem.

#### The role:

Are you looking for the opportunity to help build a change-making organization from the ground up? Then this job is for you. DMC is looking for an organized self-starter to help its member organizations coordinate their work to report, edit and publish news coverage about various aspects of affordable housing.

You will develop a communications strategy to tell the organization's story and build engagement on its website and social media channels. Cultivating relationships with the community and potential financial supporters is a key aspect of this role. You'll lead the way in helping the organization solve problems and manage the intricate logistics of a large collaborative effecting change through solutions journalism right here in Dallas.

#### What you'll do:

- Act as point of contact for all collaborative communications with the national Solutions Journalism Network team
- Help facilitate conversations among the collaborative members about reporting priorities
- Track story pitches and ensure the necessary people and resources are available
- Manage and produce digital content across website, email, social media and text platforms
- Design workflows to encourage content distribution across the collaborative members' platforms
- Schedule and manage meetings with collaborative partners
- Coordinate any future events (virtual or in-person), working closely with community organizations
- Manage the collaborative's current budget and financial reporting
- Track and develop future funding opportunities



#### Who you are:

- You thrive in an energetic, people-focused environment
- You care about making Dallas an equitable city with a thriving journalism community that keeps citizens informed and holds officials accountable
- You are confident both keeping the trains running behind-the-scenes and speaking publicly
- You are proactive, generating new ideas and pathways for execution
- You are a creative thinker and value listening to diverse audiences
- You understand the current challenges building trust between community and newsrooms
- Fluency in both English and Spanish is strongly preferred
- Newsroom and field-reporting experience is a plus

This position is part-time, estimated at 25 hours per week, with some events during evening and weekend hours. Candidates must live in Dallas or the immediate surrounding area. The Dallas Media Collaborative is currently working remotely, but when it is safe to do so, the Project Manager will be working from a dedicated office and also traveling throughout the city for meetings and events.

The annual salary for this position is \$30,000-\$40,000, commensurate with experience. This position is a one-year contract position without benefits. Consideration for an extension will occur based on the viability of the project. The ideal candidate will start immediately.



#### SAMPLE FOUR: Director, Charlotte Journalism Collaborative

A coalition of media organizations called the Charlotte Journalism Collaborative seeks a talented and experienced individual to be its part-time project editor and director. The CJC launched two years ago under the initial guidance of the Solutions Journalism Network (SJN), which encourages rigorous, solutions-based reporting on community issues. Funding is provided by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation.

The collaborative's media partners include public radio station WFAE, NBC TV affiliate WCNC, the Charlotte Observer, Q-notes, Queen City Metro and La Noticia. Non-newsroom partners include The Charlotte Mecklenburg Library, the James L. Knight School of Communication at Queens University of Charlotte, and Free Press.

The collaborative has produced extensive coverage of Charlotte's affordable housing crisis, some of which can be found at <a href="https://www.charlottejournalism.org">www.charlottejournalism.org</a>. It now seeks a part-time director to help it expand on its success to date.

#### **Qualifications:**

- Significant experience in leading people and projects that consistently produce quality journalism.
- Superb editing and management skills. You can back-stop stories and edit for consistency and quality as needed. You are a good listener and know when to be flexible. You meet deadlines and keep partners focused on project goals.
- Strong news judgment, coupled with the ability to help develop and execute significant story ideas.
- An appreciation for journalism's role in helping society find answers to its most vexing problems. You know that illuminating a problem is only part of your role. Exploring possible solutions is just as important.
- Skilled at conducting meetings, conference calls, and webinars on a regular basis for excellent communication among partners.

#### **Expectations:**

The director will:

- Provide day-to-day leadership for the media partners in their work to report, edit
- and publish solutions-focused news.
- Offer high-level feedback on major stories to ensure shared standards for quality reporting and coverage.
- Convene and lead regular meetings of the collaborative. This includes building and distributing meeting agendas, finding meeting space and distributing meeting



notes.

- Provide constructive feedback that both highlights outstanding work and points to the needs for improvement.
- Provide coordination, planning, member approval and follow-through of activities
  to support collaborative content publishing plans, including administration of grant
  contracts, grant funds, invoices and payables, event planning, maintenance of the
  CJC budget and expenditures, and drafting of any reports needed by SJN for audit,
  grant or other purposes.
- Oversee the CJC website (charlottejournalism.org) in cooperation with the Charlotte Mecklenburg Library and CJC partners. This will include a plan to ensure the site is regularly refreshed with new content.
- Plan and oversee social media support.
- Act as spokesperson for the project where needed.

#### Other details:

- The project editor/director will be hired on a contractual basis for one year (renewal possible) and will be expected to work an average of 20-25 hours a week. Salary range: \$30,000-\$34,000.
- The successful candidate will be based in or near the Charlotte metropolitan area. No funds are available for relocation.





# **SPOTLIGHT: COLLABORATIVE LEADERS**

Today, the pathways to work in journalism are not set with brittle scaffolding or career ladders. Rather, they often require flexibility and openness to evolve, especially with community needs and advancing technology. Below, we highlight three journalists who have found their ways into collaborative journalism and share details about their histories and roles.

#### DANA COESTER

## Editor in Chief, 100 Days in Appalachia

As Dana Coester explains it, 100 Days in Appalachia came together in mere days, following years of discussion. "We literally launched almost overnight," she said. "It's just kind of a funny story because you know, all the planning, and the many, many charts and pie charts and graphs went out the window."

Dana incubated the collaborative nonprofit newsroom through her role as creative director of the Media Innovation Center at West Virginia University Reed College of Media, in collaboration with the Daily Yonder and West Virginia Public Broadcasting.



Following the 2016 U.S. presidential election, Dana and her partners recognized the urgent need for more storytelling and news directly from people living in Appalachia, and 100 Days in Appalachia was born. The collaborative's website explicitly states its mission with the tagline "Appalachia Matters." The organization's website puts it this way: "We're here to amplify the region's diverse voices, celebrate our successes, investigate our failures and empower our communities." As of fall 2021, the organization is nearly five years old.

Today, Dana serves as the editor in chief of the collaborative, in addition to her role with the Center, her teaching slate as a professor at West Virginia University Reed College of Media, and her research into extremism. She has held the editor in chief role for two years, prior to which she worked as the creative director and the executive editor. As the collaboration has evolved over time, so has Dana's time focused on the collaborative. "It was more than any person could do, what we were



trying to do, but that's typical for a startup, where you're just working around the clock ... Now it's more in maintenance mode."

A big shift for Dana was hiring an executive editor, who handles much of the editorial load. Dana manages the editor, as well as two other staff members.

"Ninety percent of my time [in this editor in chief role] deals with revenue generation," she said. Under the umbrella of revenue generation, she handles matters of sustainability, such as grant writing, relationship management, and donor opportunities. This can take the form of meetings, phone calls and email threads.

She also considers audience development and editorial consistency to be key components to sustainability. "It really is about who we are as a publication and why we are doing what we are doing," she said.

The 100 Days in Appalachia newsroom collaborates in several ways. In addition to launching the newsroom among three founding media partners, the collaborative works with outside media organizations to produce stories and invites other outlets to republish its original content. "It's exciting to me to see people's work within the region be seen widely," she said.

The organization has also built out an Appalachia advisers network, a group of citizens to advise on how to appropriately cover Appalachia from different perspectives and within different parts of the region, as well as a database of media makers in the region. "We make that database available to other outlets, especially external outlets, saying, 'Don't send your person in here ... Appalachia has people to hire,'" she said.

Dana described the primary hurdle to collaboration as logistical and pointed to the essential value of having one point person to manage the project and the relationships involved. "All of us who are well-meaning and eager and also completely overwhelmed with all the other things we're doing, you know, that tends to be where things fall apart, in the logistical aspect of it."

She also highlighted the importance of acknowledging power dynamics and imbalances within temporary collaborations. "We've gotten really good at negotiating, when we do collaborative things, who has final editorial say at the end of the day," Dana said. "And we've done that in different projects in different ways."



#### **VANESSA DE LA TORRE**

### Executive Editor, New England News Collaborative

After a career in newspapers, Vanessa de la Torre found collaborative journalism as a contemporary way to cover her passion, local news.

During college, Vanessa interned at her hometown newspaper in El Centro, California; after college, she moved on to a summer internship at The Washington Post, followed by a one-year fellowship at the St. Petersburg Times, before landing her first full-time position at the Hartford Courant in 2006. She moved her way up at the Courant, ultimately becoming an education reporter covering Hartford.



When an opportunity to report on race, identity and culture came up at nearby Connecticut Public Radio, she took it. The role was a collaborative one, and she produced stories for Sharing America, which was a four-station public radio collaborative.

After more than a decade as a reporter, Vanessa started to ask what came next. "I love journalism. So how do I stay with this? ... From a financial and longevity standpoint, I was just really wondering if being a reporter in local news was my forever?"

Today, Vanessa serves as the Executive Editor of the New England News Collaborative, a regional hub of nine public media stations. In her role, she oversees daily story-sharing from the nine stations, and she is guiding the development of multimedia story packages about New England and its relationship to climate change, racial inequality and the pandemic. In addition, the members gather to discuss and learn from each other about hiring, professional development and editorial best practices.

Managing the collaborative allows Vanessa to leverage her journalism skills in new ways. The journalism practice of source-building lends itself to the relationship-building that Vanessa does in her work today. Whereas before she worked the phones to connect with sources on her beat, she now does the same, to connect with news directors at member stations or journalists producing stories.



"I'm not just thinking about stories," Vanessa said. "I'm thinking about the relationships with the news directors, with the editors, with other reporters throughout the collaborative."

Aspects of journalism that attracted her to the work initially remain central to her job today: the values of local reporting, diversity and storytelling. Now, she adds, sustainability is an additional component to how she views her work. While not something she had planned for, within her first few months on the job, Vanessa began strategic planning and fundraising for the collaborative.

"I still do like line-editing," she said, "but I also like thinking big picture, really big picture, like what do we stand for? Who are we going to reach in the future? How do we sustain ourselves? How do we stay relevant? What technology are we going to use? How are we supporting our staff? You know, all of these big questions."

The collaborative shared more than 2,000 stories across the membership in 2020 alone, and there are plans in the works for more co-reporting projects in the future, as well as three new editorial hires and one business hire to make in the coming year. "Right now our projects have been about stations really chipping in toward a particular theme," she said.

One difficulty in the job is that Vanessa does not have official oversight over the members' editorial assignments. "It's not the function of this collaborative for me to assign a reporter at another station to do a story. There's a lot of influence and motivation that comes into play in this particular job and the stations and editors at those stations have to believe it's in their best interests to participate."

As the work required in this role continues to evolve with the collaborative's development, Vanessa said, it's a unique opportunity to keep learning. "It's just a different experience when you do have that seat at the table, in a formal position. It's not just like, 'Hey, you're a reporter with leadership skills or traits' ... It's remarkable. I would've never thought that I'd be here in this position."





#### **NICK CHARLES**

### Former Managing Director, Word In Black

From print to broadcast to digital and radio, Nick Charles' career mirrors the evolutions within the media industry, and as such, it's little surprise that collaboration is part of his recent history.

From summer 2020 through fall 2021, he served as the Managing Director of Word In Black, a collaborative of 10 Black-owned publishers with the aims to "confront inequities, elevate solutions and amplify the Black experience with a solutions journalism approach," per its website. Nick started in a part-time capacity, then he came on full-time in January 2021 once they had secured the funds to do so.



After working for newspapers ranging from The Cleveland Plain Dealer to the Daily News, New York for more than a decade, Nick pivoted to magazine writing for People. Before long, he focused on digital transformation at AOL, and added teaching to his plate. He also worked for a PR firm and a nonprofit challenging big tech.

Nick saw a direct correlation between his career trajectory and an underlying goal for the collaborative to fully embrace online publishing. "That digital transformation is what Word In Black is trying to support, facilitate and accentuate," he said.

He described the member organizations as generational businesses. "Beyond just being media entities, they're businesses in our communities that have existed in the case of a couple of them for over a hundred years," he said.

About half of Nick's job was in editorial work, such as writing the weekly newsletter note, line-editing copy and improving headlines and search-engine optimization. "A lot of this job is managing up," he said. "If you get buy-in from three or four [members], that's great; but, you really need buy-in from all 10."

The other half of the job focused on what Nick called the business end of the collaborative, which entailed working with the Local Media Association (LMA), the fiscal sponsor for Word In Black, and potential funders. Nick ran two standing,



weekly meetings on behalf of the collaborative. One was an editorial call with the members' editors and directors in charge of content decisions. The second call was focused on business and included publishers.

"One of the things you have to always do, and I've learned, is to accentuate the positive," he said of the meetings. "You start there, it goes a lot easier."

Nick also said that certain skills are critical to the role of a collaboration manager or director. "Knowing when to shut up, and patience, those are the soft skills, the things that people talk about. Everybody can do the math ... can you play in the sandbox?"

Taking the perspective of the member organizations is also necessary, he said. Valuing members' time and acknowledging competing priorities are important to the health of the collaborative.

For those interested in collaborative roles, Nick has one immediate piece of advice: Take a grant-writing course. "Identifying grants, understanding what grants are, knowing how to read and write them is very important," he said. In addition, he recommends clarifying what kind of collaborative interests you, and what funding is available for the collaborative in your sights.

This fall, Nick moved on to become National Public Radio's Chief Culture Editor. "It's a high-profile job in mainstream media, but again it's all about collaboration and communication," he said.

LMA's Chief Content and Collaboration Officer Andrew Ramsammy currently oversees the Word In Black collaboration.





# **CONCLUSION**

For those eager to build community and shape a new kind of journalism, the role of the collaboration manager is a unique opportunity.

As you consider how you might fit into the role, please consider reviewing the Center for Cooperative Media's additional collaboration guides. In partnership with Project Facet, the Center produced six guides related to journalism collaboration.

Go to collaborativejournalismhandbook.org for further discussion about building equity, creating a tool set, developing new partnerships, working with non-news partners, budgeting and planning your collaborative.





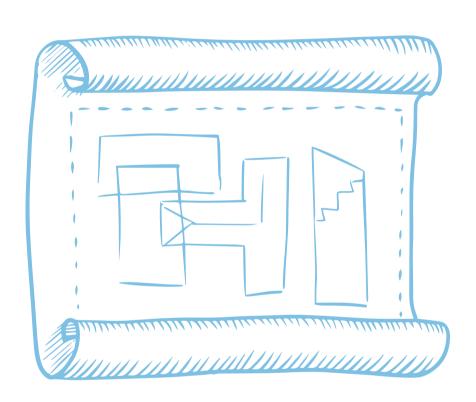












# **APPENDIX**

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