

November 2021

Case study

Collaborative journalism in Wichita

A look at the future of the Wichita Journalism Collaborative, plus a discussion of other opportunities where collaboration could strengthen local news and information.

Executive summary

In assessing the landscape for collaborative journalism in Wichita, one dichotomy stood out clear as day: The partners involved in the Wichita Journalism Collaborative (WJC) largely think it was a success and want it to continue, but a competitive concern still underlines their work, especially when it comes to the future.

Nevertheless, the collaborative laid a foundation for what could be a robust partnership among news organizations and community media in service of Wichita residents. There are assets to build on. There is also more trust-building, learning and experimenting that needs to happen.

This case study will look at the stakeholders in the Wichita Journalism Collaborative and their appetite to continue working together, as well as draw out other opportunities for cooperation that could strengthen the local information ecosystem. Some key findings include:

- There is a shared desire to continue collaborating among current Wichita Journalism Collaborative members.
- The trust that was built between certain members of the WJC is likely to remain fruitful, such as how The Wichita Eagle and KSN are able to easily share content.
- WJC partners who were not deemed as “media” partners were largely marginalized or underutilized.
- There is mistrust of some other potential partners to the collaborative, most notably The Wichita Beacon.
- The mistrust of other potential partners in the ecosystem is harmful and could eventually lead to the demise of the collaborative, as it lays the groundwork for secrecy and a focus on “us versus them” rather than serving community information needs.

Background

In 2018, the Wichita Community Foundation (WCF) established news and information as one of its strategic initiatives. Since then, the Foundation has made [several important investments](#) in the news ecosystem, including in the WJC.

The origins of the WJC began in 2019, when the WCF worked with the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, Solutions Journalism Network (SJM) and Hearken to host a collaborative journalism workshop for the Wichita media ecosystem. The goal was to bring together media professionals from Wichita to learn about solutions and collaborative journalism and surface ideas for potentially working together, with an ultimate goal of assembling a group that could apply for SJM’s Local Media Project funding.

And that is exactly what happened. The Wichita Journalism Collaborative was founded and launched in 2020, thanks to a \$100,000 grant from SJN and additional funding from the WCF. The founding partners included The Active Age, The Community Voice, The Journal (Kansas Leadership Center), KMWU, KSN-TV, The Sunflower and The Wichita Eagle, along with the Wichita Public Library, AB&C Bilingual Resources and The Elliott School of Communication at Wichita State University. Amy DeVault, a journalism instructor at Wichita State University, was hired as the project manager

The first set of goals for the WJC, developed by partners, included:

- Help partner newsrooms coordinate COVID-19 coverage
- Maximize existing resources through collaboration and co-reporting
- Find and tell important stories — with an emphasis on solutions
- Combat misinformation and encourage media literacy
- Fight for open government and transparency
- Further the reach of important coverage, including to people who do not speak English as a first language

Other important goals included:

- Strengthen the local journalism ecosystem
- Encourage collaboration among newsrooms
- Facilitate audience engagement initiatives
- Push boundaries of traditional delivery platforms and experiment with new methods

The group was announced in June 2020 and mainly found success through content sharing. Toward the end of its first year, the WJC shifted to more original reporting and a co-sponsored event focused on mental health.

Collaborative members struggled throughout the first year with the solutions journalism aspect of their work, leading SJN to decline to fund the WJC for a second year. Most thought the expectations from SJN were not realistic during a pandemic given the size of their newsrooms.

Methodology

To prepare this case study, author Stefanie Murray completed the following:

- Discussion with Courtney Bengston at the Wichita Community Foundation.
- Review of written materials including from the Wichita News Workshop, Hearken’s Collaboration Roadmap, Hearken’s Participant Capacity Assessment, Wichita State University’s “Media Coverage of Community Driven Issues,” Hearken’s report on community stakeholder validation of priority coverage areas in Wichita, and the WJC’s launch announcement, six-month and final report.
- Interviews with 13 individual stakeholders.
- Discussion with Liza Gross of Solutions Journalism Network.

- Synthesis during group presentation to 12 individual stakeholders (one stakeholder, The Wichita Beacon, did not attend the group presentation).

Key objectives

This case study was intended to assess the future potential of the WJC, as well as:

- Provide a clear picture of all players in the collaborative and their outlooks.
- Surface opportunities for future collaborative efforts.
- Provide recommendations for future collaboration in the Wichita ecosystem.

Overview of stakeholders

To begin this case study, the WCF provided the Center with a list of interview participants. Key notes and takeaways from each of their interviews follows.

Amy DeVault, project manager for the WJC and Wichita State University journalism instructor

Amy's overall view is that the collaborative was successful and got better as time went on. She noted the sense of caution that the group felt in working with the WCF and the separation that was needed. She also noted that the group liked that each participant had their own niche.

"By the time we got into the final 4-5 months on the mental health project, everyone saw the benefits of collaboration," Amy said. "They had gained each other's trust, which was huge ... Our early editorial meetings, there were some members who would not talk ... but that 100% changed over time. They were helping each other out, not only on the things we were working on, but as journalists in the Wichita community."

Amy echoed the sentiment shared by many that having a central person to coordinate the collaborative is necessary, and that members would appreciate having a half-time joint reporter as well, similar to the role Matthew Kelly played. She said that a fund for traveling, conferences and events would be welcome. She also thought the collaborative could be open to new members but noted they will be quite selective about who joins.

Joe Stumpe, The Active Age

Joe described his experience with the collaborative as "great." As a nonprofit organization with a very small staff, he really appreciated the funding and support he got to do some deeper stories during the pandemic. He also developed trust and relationships with other collaborative members.

He did not, however, appreciate the amount of time he was required to invest to stay an active member in the group. “I did not have time for those meetings. I AM the editorial staff. There was no way I could carve out an hour a week.”

As stated in the final report prepared for SJN, Joe did not think the stringent solutions-oriented approach to all of the WJC’s journalism was useful. Specifically, he wondered how the group was supposed to do solutions reporting during a pandemic when there were few other tested “solutions” out there.

He would like the effort to continue but also requested a more permanent shared reporter.

Bonita Gooch, The Community Voice

The Community Voice is a small African American newspaper in a community that, as Bonita described, has a small African American population. Bonita expressed gratitude for the trips to New Orleans and Miami and said the conversations she had and connections she made were game-changing.

Her participation in the collaborative ebbed and flowed. As the head of a small publication with few staff members, Bonita felt that the time commitment was too much. She did not think enough journalists were involved in the collaborative, something other interviewees also echoed, and she specifically felt more media outlets could be involved, even those that reach beyond Wichita proper. Bonita felt at a disadvantage compared with other members of the collaborative, given the small size of her staff. “You had me, Joe from Active Age and the Wichita Eagle. And Joe and I are sitting here with zero journalists.”

A lot of Bonita’s feedback centered around resources. For The Community Voice to actively engage in the collaborative, she needs to have a reporter to devote time to the project. She also noted that while the content sharing was valuable to her, many of the stories done by collaborative members were written through a white lens, which is not useful to her or her readers.

Going forward, Bonita also noted that she would like to see the collaborative move beyond an editorial-only focus to include training webinars and networking opportunities.

Chris Green, The Journal/Kansas Leadership Center

Chris said The Journal made “huge gains” as a result of its participation in the collaborative, and he got a lot out of the relationship with SJN. In fact, he has now embedded a solutions journalism model in The Journal’s reporting.

“It’s a better fit for us than some other publications as it allows us to take on tough issues but from a perspective that takes on a leadership mindset,” Chris said. “Traditional journalism focuses more on the problem. It was an easy transition.”

Chris's team is also working with KSN now on what will be the first co-reported solutions story done by the collaborative, a piece that looks at how San Antonio handles mental health issues at its jail. He also noted how "foreign" working with KSN initially felt, which underscores the need for more co-reporting ventures to make this kind of work common and accepted.

Chris wanted the WJC to continue, but emphasized that it needs to be about more than content sharing. Having a core focus is important, too, he noted; if the group is not focused on solutions reporting, then what will it be focused on? He noted the need for a full-time project manager and that governance will be an issue. He also would like to see the Wichita Beacon join the collaborative but worried it would push the Wichita Eagle out. He agrees with the potential for looking beyond traditional partners and embracing an inclusive ecosystem-oriented collaborative. He mentioned the Tallgrass Film Festival as an example. And he, like Bonita, would like to see other potential work be introduced to the collaborative, such as joint fundraising support and training.

He also noted the need for more progressive thinking within the collaborative: "People have to lose their attachment to the past. One reason the Journal is successful is that we are not tied to old ideas of the past. We can be flexible and innovative. There is an attachment to an idea of ... how things used to be."

Tom Shine, KMUW

Tom said KMUW was very enthusiastic about the idea of the WJC from the beginning. "We aren't like a TV station, we're not trying to crush people," Tom said. "And we are not like the Eagle, we are not as competitive. Here it's easier: What would serve our (listeners and) readers best?" Tom was supported by his supervisor, a general manager who he said is a proponent of collaboration, sharing and partnerships. His experience with the Kansas News Service gave him a glimpse into what a stable collaboration looks like, as well.

Tom said he appreciated the solutions journalism approach and that the mental health angle was appealing to the station given Kansas's remarkably high suicide rate.

Overall, Tom felt the WJC was successful in story sharing and some cross-pollination of story ideas. He was frustrated by the budget constraints of the SJN grant.

"We are able to call Channel 3 and say, I want to grab that story," he said. "That didn't happen before. Wasn't even a thought; it would seem weird."

Tom also noted that KMUW does about 50 events a year, and that the station could be willing to help support more collaborative events for the WJC. At a minimum, he would like the WJC's content sharing and group communication to continue. He thinks weekly meetings that are short touch-bases, maybe 20 minutes, could help with communication, trust and familiarity. He is used to daily meetings for the Kansas News Service.

Tom agreed with others that a neutral project manager is essential to continuing the WJC, and noted that although Amy did good work in the role, her naturally deferential nature was an issue. He agreed that the library could be a potential host. Tom felt that The Community Voice needed to be supported because they are critical to the collaborative. He also said he would welcome the Wichita Beacon to the WJC but that others might object.

Rachel Sommerfeld, KSN

Rachel acknowledged up front that competition was an issue when KSN was considering joining the WJC, but that melted away when her key competitors declined to join the collaborative. However, if another commercial TV station were to be invited to join, she may have to reconsider her involvement.

Rachel wished the WJC could have done more original reporting and co-reported stories. She also at times has struggled to get buy-in from her team, as her station is focused on the news of the day, and freeing up staff to do longer-term stories with other partners can be difficult. She is grateful that the SJN grant paid for travel costs so KSN could work with The Journal on the San Antonio story.

Like others, Rachel agreed that a project manager is essential and she sees a need for one to return to the WJC as soon as possible. The project manager must be someone who has local experience and knowledge in Wichita's local journalism field.

Rachel said she wants to see the WJC continue and have a very clear focus determined early with specific expectations set out. Finding regular standing meeting times is important. Funding is needed for the project manager, for staff/freelance costs, and to cover other expenses for the group including travel and open records requests, Rachel said.

"Anything we can do to improve local journalism in our community is essential," Rachel said. "It's important to do this. I fear for local journalism."

Lindsay Smith, The Sunflower

Lindsay joined the WJC in October 2020 when she was editor in chief of The Sunflower, and so was involved in the COVID-19 content sharing. For her, the overall experience was positive.

"It has been neat, as a student newspaper we really value experiences to connect with professionals," Lindsay said, noting that last fall, some students were able to help The Eagle with election coverage. Additionally, "it is a whole other ballgame to be with a different group of people" brainstorming and discussing story ideas, she said.

Lindsay felt that The Sunflower was treated as an equal by the media partners, especially since the publication has a specific niche in serving the student population at Wichita State. Going forward she wants to get more people from The Sunflower involved in the WJC.

Michael Roehrman, The Wichita Eagle

Michael felt that the purpose of the WJC was solid but the execution faltered. He felt that the diversity in the types of media organizations involved was a strength that also became a weakness when it came to working together. He found it more successful when, for example, he worked with The Journal on a specific story and each side committed resources to it.

“I committed a visual journalist, they committed a text reporter, and then we combined both of their works and agreed on a publishing schedule and that worked really well,” Michael said.

Being able to access content from WJC partners was important, too, although he couldn’t use the content from some participants as he didn’t feel it was written in a style relevant to his audience.

The best thing to come out of the WJC, from Michael’s perspective, was trust between partners. “It took a while to get there, being suspicious because we were all competitors. Overcoming that was huge,” he said. “If Rachel wants something she just picks up the phone and calls me now, and vice versa.”

He also noted that working with The Sunflower on election night was a win.

Michael’s core issues with the WJC focused on SJN. He felt that SJN staffers were trying to exert editorial control by requiring a certain number of stories be produced, which the MOU specifically said would not happen. He did not have a positive view of the way SJN handled the WJC overall.

He does want the WJC to continue but noted there are a lot of logistical questions to be addressed, such as ownership of the domain, how the collaborative will be organized, legal and insurance issues, etc. Will they work on a specific, agreed-upon story topic or leave the organization more loose and open? He would like to see the project manager be based at a neutral third-party, but not one with governmental ties.

Claudia Amaro, AB&C Bilingual Resources and Planeta Venus

Claudia’s experience starting a Spanish-language newspaper in 2014 and doing the Planeta Venus weekly radio program clearly should have made her a media partner, but she was assigned as a community partner from the beginning. This labeling resulted in her being marginalized.

In addition to her work in marketing AB&C and creating radio programming, Claudia is a local activist for immigration rights and is trusted within her community.

“It was hard at the beginning because they didn’t see me as a media partner,” Claudia said. “They didn’t take me seriously.”

A bulk of Claudia's involvement in the WJC was doing translation of COVID-19-related stories. Doing that gave her more content to share with the local Latino community through her online radio work. She was also able to experiment with Subtext, which was a good opportunity to test a new platform and do some research. "It gave me the content and confidence to share information that wasn't mine but I was allowed to use."

Claudia pointed out that she was often the only person to raise questions about equity and access during story discussions, asking if services were available in Spanish or accessible to people with disabilities or other marginalized groups. She also noted that Wichita is very segregated.

Going forward, Claudia would like to see more collaboration happen between her and other media partners, and she would like to be classified as a media partner. She gave the example of trying to work with KMUW but never getting a response; however, she was able to work with a KSN reporter who co-hosted an event. Claudia would also welcome adding new partners to the WJC and expanding the definition of who gets to join.

Sean Jones, Wichita Public Library

Sean works in communications for the Wichita Public Library and its seven branches. Early on, he thought the library could play a key convening role in the WJC as a location for events and meetings with the community.

The pandemic put a pause to that. Still, Sean said the library "tries to sneak in to the (WJC) as much as we could."

"We tried to support the stories in different ways," Sean said. "We tried to be the audience engagement component to the collaborative." That included doing things such as helping to get out surveys or reaching residents to get input or feedback.

Sean would have liked to see the library play a bigger role, but he wasn't sure exactly what that could look like. He is familiar with the role that the library in Charlotte plays in that SJN collaborative. However, Sean is the only person at his library who was part of the WJC, which limits how active the organization can be.

Looking ahead, Sean thinks the library is well-positioned to grow its work in the WJC, especially as its new director is a strong advocate for community engagement. He also noted that there is a lot of misinformation and disinformation in the information landscape in Wichita, and discussed how bringing additional partners and influencers to the collaborative could have a positive impact on this issue.

Sean hopes the WJC is funded in some fashion for at least another year.

“I think it’s a great way for people to see that local journalists can work together,” he said. “We need the right person to really push it and move it forward in the community.”

Kelsey Ryan and Matt Hennie, The Wichita Beacon

Kelsey was aware of the WJC when it first launched, as she had already been thinking about launching a newsroom in Wichita and knows Amy DeVault and several of the collaborative members given her background in Wichita journalism. She is close with Tom Shine, as he was one of her editors at The Eagle.

Additionally, The Kansas City Beacon is part of a newly formed collaborative, called the KC Media Collective. The collective is all nonprofit and public media organizations in Kansas City funded by the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation. The fact that all organizations in the collective are not-for-profit is important, in Kelsey’s mind, and she would prefer that setup rather than join forces with commercial media outlets that do not have ownership independence.

The Kauffman Foundation played an integral role in catalyzing the collaborative by providing funding support and hiring a facilitator for their kickoff call, a four-hour Zoom meeting where the members got to know each other and discuss shared values. After that, the collective determined its own structure; it is self-governed by a rotating group of participants who organize and lead the meetings monthly, and all members are funded for their work through their general operating grants from Kauffman. Separate committees lead things such as marketing. Kelsey thinks that structure is something for Wichita to consider.

The collective’s news organizations then started sharing content and are now building on that to do co-reporting on affordable housing, with a co-branded event coming up.

As far as Wichita is concerned, The Beacon is open to considering joining a collaborative but likely not the WJC as it is currently structured. They are also open to training others on solutions journalism, open records and more.

Future of the Wichita Journalism Collaborative

There are assets to build on from the first iteration of the WJC. The participating partners built new relationships and trust; they engaged in regular conversations; they shared content; and they collaborated on a successful co-branded event, Mindfest. It’s important to remember that just because the SJN Local Media Project pulled its support for year two doesn’t mean there wasn’t foundational work that can be built upon.

The main liabilities of the WJC include its current infrastructure, membership, and lack of focus.

Every partner said they wanted the WJC to continue, but as noted in their interviews, their thoughts on what that meant varied. For the WJC to go forward, the liabilities need to be addressed, which means the group has work to do. Getting all the current partners on the same page about that work will be tricky, especially since there is virtually no existing governance structure to speak of. The partners don't even know who technically owns the name of the group or its website. (It's likely the website is owned by SJN or WCF, as they pay for the domain hosting and registration.)

Here are five things that should happen or be considered for the future of the group as it exists now:

1. **Re-hiring of a project manager:** A project manager for this group needs to again be someone local who brings excellent people skills to the table, who is energetic and has a forward-thinking approach to the local media ecosystem. This person does not have to be a journalist.
2. **Re-orientation to focus on information gaps:** Putting the WJC's focus back on filling identified information needs in greater Wichita would be more impactful for the group, while also benefiting the community and building trust. In its "About" language, the WJC says it was formed "to support and enhance quality local journalism." Shifting this to be explicitly focused on serving community information needs instead could ensure the group is more outwardly service-oriented and could help naturally move its emphasis toward solutions. (There are many, many folks around the country who could do good training sessions on this.)
3. **Shared values, vision and mission defined:** A strong facilitator could help the group workshop through shared values, vision and its revised mission. This would put everyone on the same page about the purpose of their work together.
4. **Governance structure outlined:** Working from the SJN MOU, the group would benefit from additional concrete ground rules now that SJN is out of the picture — who can be a member, what membership terms are, how the group makes decisions, where the project is based, etc.
5. **Doing away with media vs. community partners:** The separation of media and community partners is destructive and should end.

Future opportunities for other collaborative efforts

Outside of the WJC, there are several other potential opportunities to support collaboration in service of Wichitans. A formal partnership is not always needed to spur impactful partnerships in news ecosystems. One-time, temporary reporting projects and co-branded events are likely to be most common in the short term in Wichita.

The Beacon's entry into the market is significant and it could serve as an anchor for future efforts. Its editor and publisher are interested in working with like-minded organizations such as KMUW and The Journal. The fact that KMUW does such a wide variety of events every year also lends itself well to collaboration.

The library is also clearly a player, as a central convening hub in neighborhoods around the city and as a neutral space. Encouraging the library to work with local media in any way it can, especially to combat mis- and disinformation could be a good starting point.

Since the WJC members found such success through content sharing, perhaps there could be a way to formalize that outside of just the WJC. A Wichita News Service that picks up all content available to be shared and disseminated could potentially be a good project for Wichita State, using a platform such as AP's StoryShare or others that are currently being built. (The Local Media Association has one in development.)

Potential investments to consider

As the WCF or other funders consider additional investments in the Wichita information ecosystem related to collaboration, there are a few points to consider.

If there is funding committed for the WCF to continue — no matter which shape it takes — doing so for at least two years would help give stability and time to mature. There's a question among the current group as to where the project would be based (i.e., who will actually hire and manage the project leader) that might factor into a funding decision. There is also a clear need for some members of the collaborative to have access to funds to help support their involvement in the work, such as to hire freelancers, host events and do community engagement and outreach. A budget of \$100,000 a year could cover this, if broken down as follows:

YEAR ONE

\$5,000 for facilitation to move the group forward

\$52,000 salary for project manager (calculated at \$50/hour, 20 hours a week for 52 weeks)

\$5,200 fringe for project manager (calculated at 10%)

\$10,000 indirect costs for host (calculated at 10%)

\$7,800 other operating costs (events, supplies, etc.)

\$20,000 freelance pool

ANNUAL TOTAL: \$100,000

An alternative funding plan to encourage collaboration could be considered similar to the Kauffman Foundation's work in Kansas City, wherein each organization is given funding to support their participation. This may, however, limit support to nonprofit entities, whittling the group down a bit. The Knight Foundation tried this in Detroit with the Detroit Journalism Cooperative.

YEAR ONE

\$60,000 participation grants (calculated with 6 each at \$10K, although equity considerations may change individual amounts)

\$5,000 for facilitation to get the group moving

\$10,000 other operating costs (events, supplies, etc.)

ANNUAL TOTAL: \$75,000

A third potential investment could be made in an open pool of funding that could be accessed when there is a one-time collaboration multiple organizations want to pursue. This would set up essentially a small fund that would make commitments on a rolling basis over the course of a set time period. This Wichita Collaboration Fund (for lack of a better name) would support micro-grants aimed at funding collaboration efforts that directly serve the needs of Wichitans, for example, or that employ solutions journalism. The Peer Learning + Collaboration Fund, funded by Democracy Fund and administered by the Center for Cooperative Media, eventually pivoted to this model. A budget could be broken down as follows:

YEAR ONE

\$20,000 (planning for 10 \$2K grants each)

\$25,000 (planning for five \$5K grants each)

\$30,000 (planning for three \$10K grants each)

ANNUAL TOTAL: \$75,000

Each of these potential investments has benefits and drawbacks. In the first option, the benefit would be a stable, formalized collaborative that would be well-prepared to tackle complex topics. The drawback is that it puts a lot of weight into the project manager.

In the second option, the benefit is that each participant is incentivized somewhat equally to be part of the group and it spreads out the leadership structure. The drawback is that it may limit who gets to be involved.

In the third option, the benefit is that it has the potential to seed multiple different impactful one-time collaborations and naturally (and widely) opens up the pool of potential participants. The drawback is that managing such a program will fall to someone at the WCF or wherever the fund is placed and that most of the funded work will be temporary.

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