

characteristics of

PERMANENT JOURNALISM COLLABORATIVES

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CENTER FOR COOPERATIVE MEDIA
MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY • SCHOOL OF COMMUNICATION AND MEDIA

ABOUT THE CENTER

The mission of the Center for Cooperative Media is to grow and strengthen local journalism and support an informed society in New Jersey and beyond. The Center was founded in 2012 in response to the downsizing of New Jersey news organizations and the changes in the ownership of regional public media.



These shifts in the news and information landscape hurt the volume of local news available in a state that has historically limited news coverage, due to its proximity to the major metropolitan areas of New York City and Philadelphia. With 564 municipalities packed into a densely populated state, New Jersey was—and is—ripe for innovation in local journalism. The Center provides communication, networking, professional development, coaching, and more to more than 300 journalists and news organizations across the state through its flagship project, the NJ News Commons.

The Commons helps partners share content and encourages them to collaborate and support one another. The Center also conducts and publishes research on emerging ideas and best practices in local and collaborative journalism. The Center is a national leader in the study of, and advocacy for, collaboration in journalism; it hosts the annual Collaborative Journalism Summit, runs collaborativejournalism.org, and more. The Center's [annual reports](#) offer a detailed history of programs and their impact.

The Center is a primarily grant-funded program within the School of Communication and Media at Montclair State University. The Center is supported with funding from Montclair State University, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, the Democracy Fund, the New Jersey Civic Information Consortium, the Independence Public Media Foundation, the Rita Allen Foundation, Inasmuch Foundation, and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation.

Learn more about the Center and its work at centerforcooperativemedia.org.

INTRODUCTION

The Center for Cooperative Media at Montclair State University has studied collaboration in journalism since 2017, just when the practice began to take off across the industry. The Center originally defined collaborative journalism as two or more journalistic entities working together toward a shared journalistic goal. Today, that definition has expanded to include any group of entities working together toward a shared journalistically-related goal.

The Center's [first research paper in regard to collaborative journalism](#) analyzed the different models by which journalists in the U.S. were working in partnership. Dr. Sarah Stonbely, the author of that paper, mapped out a matrix of multiple models using the time and level of integration as the axis against which to classify collaborative work.

At that time, many collaborations studied were finite projects, focusing on a specific topic or with a clear beginning and end. Since then, however, the industry has seen a surge in the number of semi-permanent or permanent collaboratives being launched. The Center defines a permanent collaborative as one that is ongoing and integrated (per Stonbely's models), where a group of entities commits to working together toward shared journalistically-related goals over the course of multiple projects. Such collaboratives often have their own employees, budgets, websites, and more.

Note that in this paper, the Center uses the term "collaborative" to refer to an ongoing, integrated permanent journalism collaboration and uses the term "collaboration" to refer to a single project.

It is important to pause here and note that permanent collaboratives have been around for many years; there just have not been very many of them historically. In her paper, "[Comparing models of collaborative journalism](#)," Stonbely points out that "collaboration among reporters or between newsrooms has been practiced in different forms for more than one hundred years," including such permanent collaboratives as the Associated Press, CNN Newsource, and New California Media/New American Media.

By 2021 the Center had counted more than three dozen such [permanent collaboratives](#) in the United States. The earliest ones in the current wave of the rise of collaborative journalism — which began in the mid-2000s, [according to Stonbely](#) — were mostly funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. NPR has also launched its own steady stream of geographically focused collaboratives.

Solutions Journalism Network's Local Media Project, which started in 2018 under a \$5 million grant from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, launched 14 collaboratives in five years. The Local Media Association joined in 2020 with the launch of Word in Black; it now supports four nationwide collaboratives.

In late 2023 the Center launched a research project to better define the key characteristics of permanent collaboratives in the U.S. and to provide a baseline for the industry on how such organizations are set up. This project was supported thanks to funding from the Inasmuch Foundation and Democracy Fund.

The report examines the state of permanent journalism collaborations in the United States, offering valuable insights into their structure, management, and sustainability. By analyzing data from a comprehensive survey of 42 collaborations, the Center aims to paint a clear picture of the current trends, challenges, and opportunities in this dynamic field.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study sought to assess, for the first time, the basic characteristics of permanent journalism collaboratives in the U.S. The research found that permanent journalism collaboratives are predominantly small-scale operations with stable partner relationships. The majority of these collaborations are led by dedicated project managers, who are typically white and female, highlighting a need for diversity.

Most collaborations maintain a permanent set of partners and operate with shared governing agreements, suggesting a trend towards more formalized collaborative structures in journalism. Financial sustainability is a key concern, with most collaboratives saying they are only stable for the short term and the vast majority reporting philanthropy or major donors being key contributors to revenue. Despite these challenges, these organizations are finding ways to operate effectively on modest budgets with small teams, primarily allocating resources to staffing.

This research was possible thanks to support from the Inasmuch Foundation.

METHODOLOGY

To gather data for this report, a survey was constructed and sent to as many people involved with permanent journalism collaboratives as the Center could get in touch within the U.S.

The survey included the following questions:

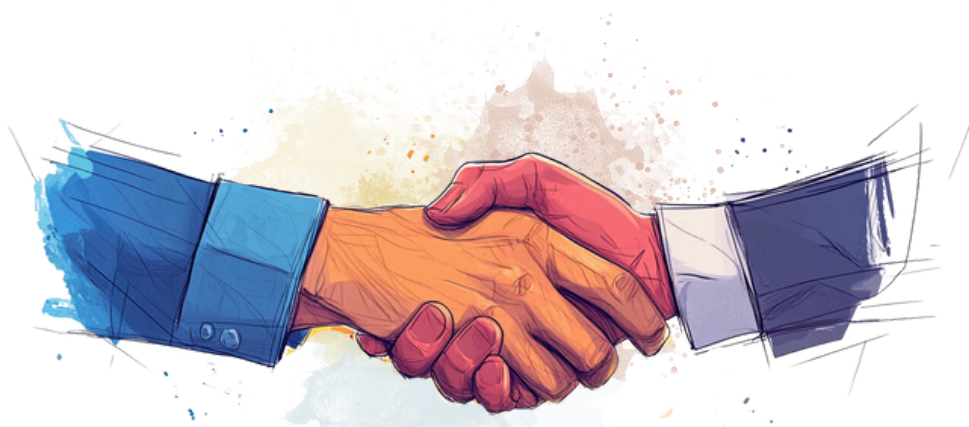
- Name of the collaborative, its website, and where geographically it was based.
- What is the organizational structure of your collaborative?
- Is there a dedicated project manager for the collaborative?
- How many employees does the collaborative employ? Please include the project manager in your count.
- Does the collaborative have a permanent set of partners, or do the partners change depending on the project?

- Describe the partners the collaborative works with — is it primarily news organizations and if so, which platforms do they use (i.e., text, video, audio, etc.)? If it involves more than only journalism partners, please detail that.
- How do you define when another organization becomes a partner in the collaborative, and how do you decide who to add as a partner?
- What are partners required to contribute to the collaborative?
- What is the collaborative required to do to support the partners?
- How is the collaborative funded? Select as many that apply.
- What is the collaborative's total annual budget? Please list in USD rounded to the nearest dollar.
- What is the collaborative's budget used for? Please detail major expenditures and their total percentage of the budget, such as project manager (50%), freelance pool (25%), etc.
- Is the collaborative financially sustainable? (i.e., does it have enough money and resources to complete its intended work annually, or is fundraising a constant burden?)
- Does your collaborative have a shared written agreement that governs the group?
- What is the focus of the collaborative? (i.e., does it focus on serving a specific geographic or identity-based community? It is focused on a specific topic? etc.) Please be as detailed as possible.

The Center maintains a database of more than 1,100 individual journalism collaborations, which includes many permanent collaboratives. The Center also maintains a listserv of collaboration managers in the U.S. and abroad, and for several years has hosted monthly collaboration manager community conference calls to foster a community of practice. Additionally, in 2021, the Center named more than three dozen permanent collaboratives it could identify along with their funding sources.

Center staff Stefanie Murray and Mariela Santos-Muñiz used those lists to begin outreach for the survey. The survey was directly sent to 84 people on the collaboration managers listserv multiple times and was then sent to the project managers for the more than three dozen permanent collaboratives the Center had previously named.

A total of 41 unique responses were received.



KEY FINDINGS

Focus + location

As noted in the introduction to this paper, the Center defines a permanent collaborative as one that is ongoing and integrated (per Stonbely's models), where a group of entities commits to working together toward shared journalistically-related goals over the course of multiple projects. Such collaboratives often have their own employees, budgets, websites, and more.

The 41 collaboratives that answered the survey were spread out fairly evenly across the United States, with the largest number based in the Midwest but at least a half-dozen based each in the Northwest, South, and West. A handful were regional or national in nature; two were U.S.-based but international in scope.

The focus areas of the respondents were wide-ranging but could generally be grouped into one of the following categories:

- A general focus on collaboration in news in a defined geographic area (with the geographic areas including local, regional, national, and international).
- A focus on health and social issues.
- A focus on environmental issues.
- A focus on education and civic engagement.

Solutions journalism was mentioned frequently in respondents' description of focus areas, as was engagement work and participatory media, serving marginalized communities and addressing news gaps. This is not surprising given the fact that Solutions Journalism Network's Local Media Project helped to launch several respondent collaboratives and influenced several others, and both solutions journalism and community engagement were pillars of that effort.

Some of the individual areas of focus included:

- "Focused on news deserts and filling news gaps, especially in non-urban areas. Broadly committed to bringing underrepresented voices to air."
- "Our collaborative of news outlets, individual journalists, and institutions that serve journalists are grounded in a belief that more and better climate coverage is itself an essential climate solution."
- "Focus is on a better-informed Macon, i.e. addressing information gaps and educating the next generation of journalists."
- "We are a group of news, education, and media organizations that have come together to better inform and engage the public about the crisis facing the Great Salt Lake — and what can be done to make a difference before it is too late."
- "A reporting project focusing on solutions to problems shaping everyday life in our city."

- “Focus of our collaborative is to serve rural Alaska with local news and community information as well as access for local voices and public entities to share directly with their community.”
- “Through our journalism, we focus on covering solutions focused on the issues of: affordable housing, homelessness, economic equity, the environment, and the arts.”
- “Goal is to improve local news service in all 159 counties of state.”

Personnel

One key finding of this research shows that most permanent collaboratives in this sample, or 85%, had a dedicated project manager, while 7% had no project manager, and 7% had multiple or rotating project managers.

This supports previous research which indicated that collaborations with a project manager were more likely to be successful (Stonbely, 2017). Having someone in authority to delegate has been found to be more effective, compared to a less hierarchical system of decision-making. Additionally, this was supported in a study on cross-field collaboration — or the collaboration between media makers and civil society organizations — that also showed having a project manager or leader was more likely to result in a successful collaboration (Stonbely & Siemaszko, 2022).

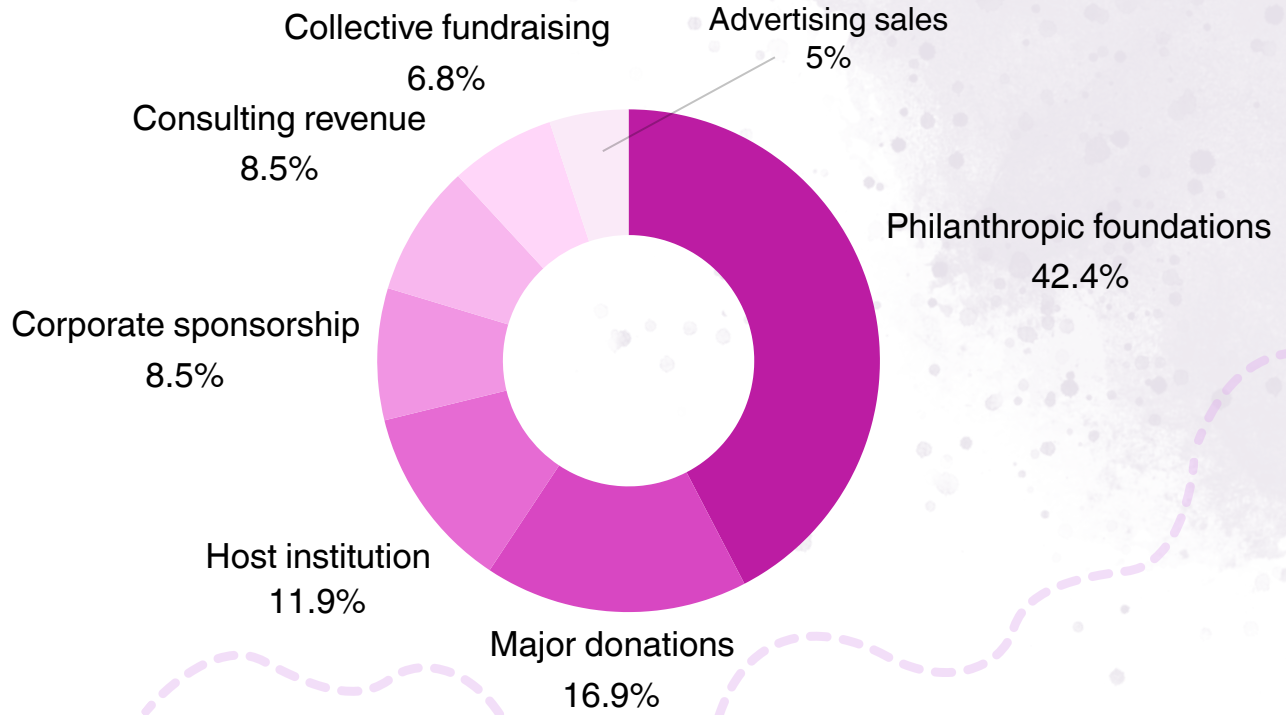
Of those who reported having a designated or rotating project manager, the demographic makeup of said project managers varied greatly. The majority of respondents, or about 66%, of the project managers are white. The next largest demographic group was Latinx at about 14%. The remaining demographic categories of Black, Asian, Other, or Prefers not to answer were all about 3% each, with LGBTQIA+ being 6%. In terms of gender breakdown, about 69% of the project managers are female, while about 29% reported as male; about 3% did not answer.

There is no other research on the demographics of project leaders of collaborations to compare these findings with. However, a [2022 survey of 12,000 journalists](#) by the Pew Research Center found that 76% of reporting journalists surveyed indicated that they were white, while 8% were Hispanic, 6% were Black and 3% were Asian.

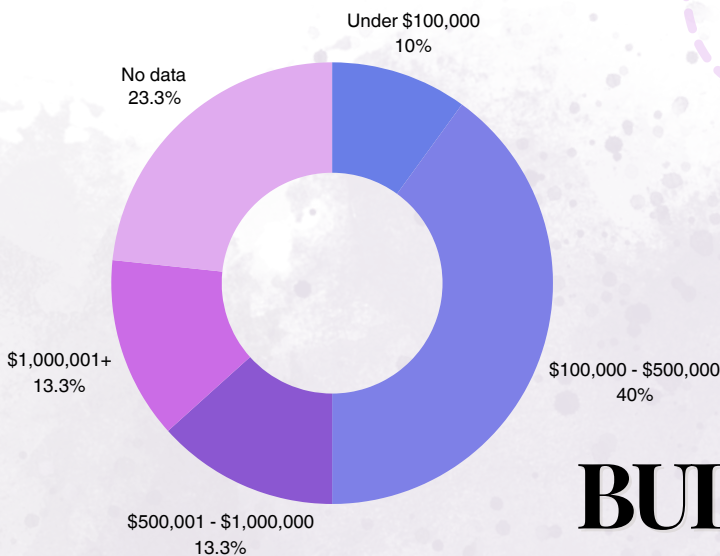
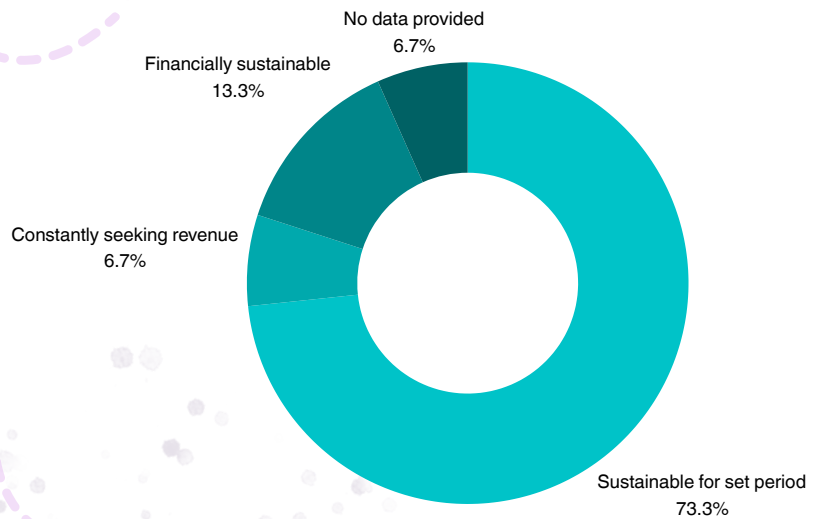
What is evident among collaborative managers is that though there is a high representation of women in leadership, there is a lack of representation of people of color.

Aside from the project manager, half of the collaboratives studied had only zero, one, or two additional employees; the median number of total full-time and part-time employees was three, with three collaboratives reporting zero employees and four reporting 10 or more employees.

FUNDING SOURCE *by type of revenue*



FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY *self-reported*



BUDGET RANGE *per project*

Collaborative partners

In terms of partners, about 80% of the collaboratives evaluated reported having a permanent set of partners participating. The remaining 20% reported having partners who change depending on the project.

Setting aside one outlier — a large collaborative with hundreds of partners — the median number of partners for those who reported having a permanent set of partners was 12, meaning that about half of the collaborations studied had fewer than a dozen permanent partners. Four collaboratives had 50 or more partners.

What this indicates is that the majority of collaborations are smaller. Previous research on cross-field collaboration supports this as it showed that around 96.9% of the collaborations studied had fewer than 30 partners; however, it must be noted that in that study, the collaborations were cataloged between journalism outlets and civil society organizations, whereas most of the partners in this study were news organizations.

About 39% of the respondent collaboratives reported having at least one non-news partner, which included a range of institutional partners, science partners, education partners, libraries, fact-checking organizations, associations, and civic organizations.

Of the news partners in the collaboratives, 84% had partners that produced content across the spectrum of text-based, video, audio, digital, social media-based, and print media. Five were audio-focused and one was text-based (newspapers only). This underscores the notion that many collaboratives leverage platform diversity to reach a wider audience.

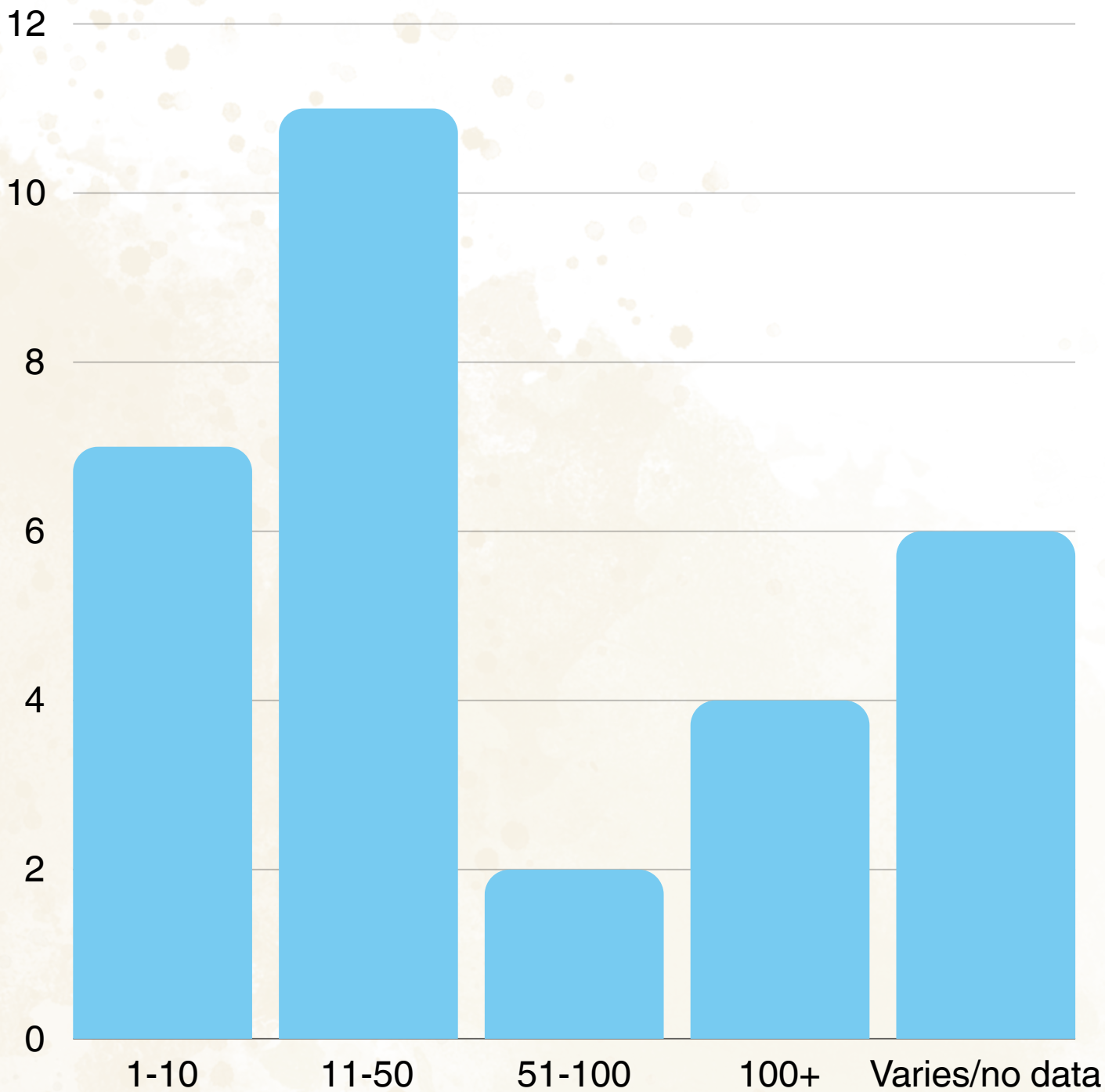
The process for onboarding new collaborative partners varied widely. Seventy-two percent of the collaboratives reported having a shared written agreement that governs the group, and several respondents said the process for selecting new partners was detailed in that agreement, which was described often as an MOU (memorandum of understanding).

Some collaboratives said new partners could apply to join, while others said their work was geographically defined and they were always recruiting.

- “We have an annual recruitment process for each cohort and each partner signs an MOU.”
- “They are voted in by the collaborative and sign an MOU. Members are recruited and/or express interest and meet with the project manager for a discussion before they're presented to the collaborative.”
- “Interested outlets can submit a membership application and a majority of partner outlets must approve the application to join the group.”

NUMBER OF PARTNERS

per collaboration



- “To join as a partner, the new member attends a virtual meeting with our publishers team, and then the publishers vote (majority vote). If a new member joins, they sign the collaborative's MOU. We decide to add new partners if their mission aligns.”

The requirements to remain a partner and an active member of the collaborative were highly varied, but most focused at least somewhat on editorial content. A few collaboratives reported no strict requirements while others set content metrics (i.e., one story produced per month or per topical project) or said members had to share costs. Attending meetings of the collaborative was a popular requirement.

Others said:

- “We don't have requirements but we prefer that partners work to reduce the duplication of reporting and to work/mentor students in our program.”
- “The Collaborative includes newsrooms and community partners. The newsrooms are responsible for producing news content. The community partners are responsible for helping elevate that content and creating and participating in meaningful public engagement.”
- “Content, mainly. We try to work together on stories, but the main way we collaborate is by sharing and republishing one another's content.”
- “Partners agree to participate in collaborative projects and devote staff and time to the project. We have biweekly meetings and two in-person half-day planning meetings. Partners provide staff time to reporting and agree to work together to collaboratively publish.”

On the flip side, 55% of collaboratives said one of the key things they provide to their partners is a mechanism for content sharing across the participating organizations. The second most common benefit that collaboratives provided their partners was funding and coordinating the production of stories, followed by running meetings and providing communication.

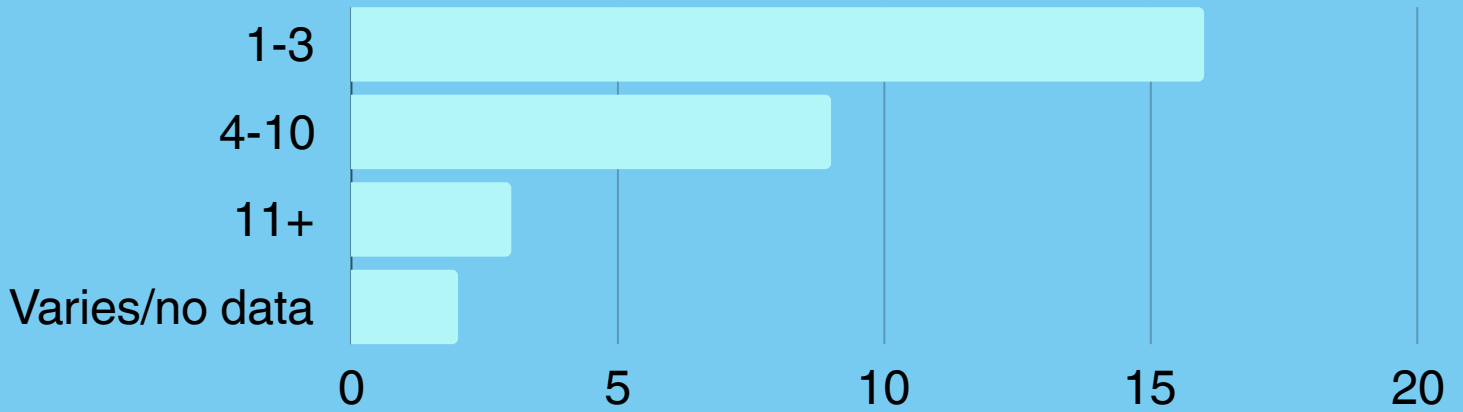
Organizational structure + finance

In terms of organizational structure, about 46% reported being part of, or coordinated through, another organization (often, it was one of the partners in the collaborative.) Seven of the collaboratives, or 17%, reported being their own 501(c)3, and 15% were part of a university. The rest (22%) were mostly fiscally sponsored projects and one reported being a for-profit network.

Philanthropy is clearly funding a large chunk of collaboratives in the U.S.: 89% of respondents said philanthropic funding from foundations was part of their revenue stream, followed next by major giving or individual donations (37%), money provided by a host institution (29%), collective fundraising (24%), corporate sponsorship or

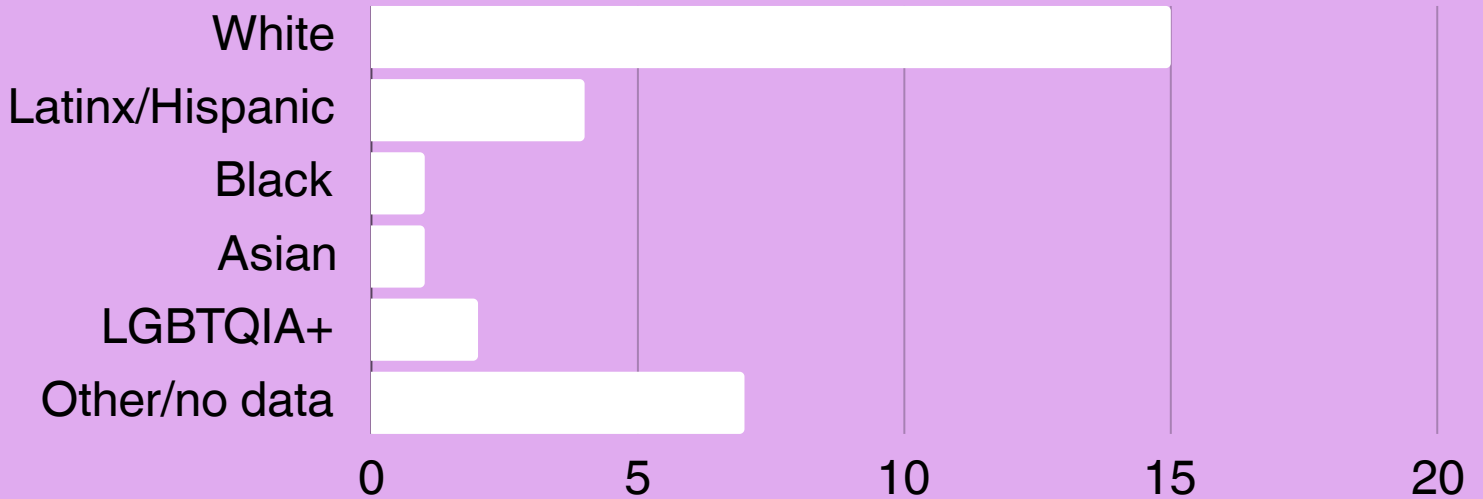
STAFF MEMBERS

per project



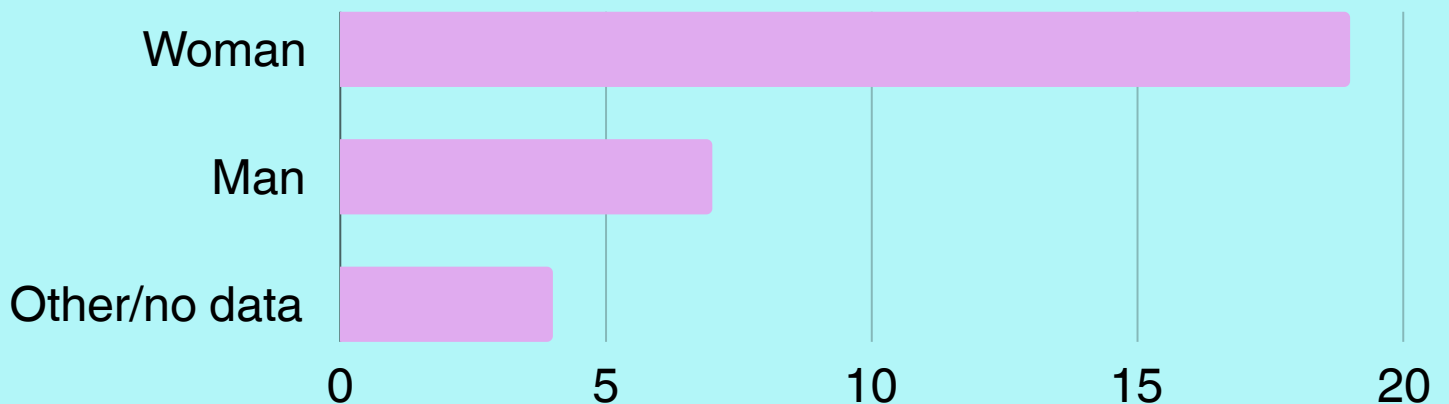
PROJECT MANAGERS

by identity



PROJECT MANAGERS

by gender



underwriting (18%) and consulting revenue (16%). Surprisingly, only 5% of collaboratives said advertising sales were part of their revenue mix.

These answers show an obvious over-reliance on philanthropy and huge opportunities for revenue growth in other areas. The financial stability of the collaboratives varied greatly. Approximately 75% reported that they were “sort of” financially stable, in that the collaborative is sustainable at the moment or for a specific period of time. About 19% said they were financially stable. Six percent reported that they were not financially stable.

What this indicates is that the majority of permanent collaborations require some degree of additional revenue to guarantee financial stability for the foreseeable future — and this makes sense knowing that many collaboratives appear to be heavily reliant on philanthropic funding, which can be fickle and unreliable for the long-term.

The annual budgets of the collaboratives yielded a higher non-response rate than one would hope for. About 32% did not or would not answer the question and gave various reasons as to why, such as their budget was not finalized, they didn’t know, or they were not authorized to share, which is not surprising given the fact that so many collaboratives are coordinated financially through a larger parent or host organization.

That said, of those that did answer, the median budget was \$300,000. The lowest budget was \$25,000 and five collaboratives reported having annual budgets between \$1 million and \$6 million.

Answers about how those budgets were spent were coded into the following categories:

- Salary and benefits (33)
- Reporting stipends/journalism grants/journalism costs (13)
- Training (4)
- Engagement and events (8)
- Freelancers or consultants (12)
- Travel (10)
- Legal costs — this was separated from general operating since it was mentioned on its own multiple times (3)
- General operating/administrative costs (16)



TYPE OF CONTENT

by platform

Video/TV (10)

Audio/radio (14)

Digital/web (25)

Multiple/all (18)

Print (15)

Every respondent collaborative reported that its budget at least in part goes toward staffing; six, or about 18%, spent their entire budgets only on staffing for the collaborative.

About 42% of the participants who responded said that some of their budget goes toward general operational and administrative costs, including fiscal sponsor fees, software, accounting, equipment, etc.

After that, 48% said they spent money on reporting stipends or journalism grants, 36% on freelancers or consultants (some of these people were producing journalism for the collaborative, respondents indicated); 30% had budgeted for travel and 24% for events and engagement. Training and legal costs were reported by four or fewer collaboratives.

CONCLUSIONS + RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on this analysis of permanent journalism collaborations in the U.S., the Center has identified several key areas for improvement and growth, including:

Enhance financial sustainability

Long-term financial stability remains a challenge for many collaborations, and most are too reliant on philanthropy. It is never good to be reliant on any one revenue stream as a business, but philanthropy is notoriously difficult to depend on because foundations can change funding philosophies at their own discretion and, as a result, destroy a collaborative.

Although it's easy on its face to assert that collaboratives should diversify revenue streams, respondents indicated that this can be difficult given the fact that many are part of parent organizations or have members/partners that may see such new revenue streams as competition.

Therefore, enhancing long-term financial sustainability will require a more nuanced approach than a typical news business. Some collaboratives have seen success with joint advertising and sponsored content opportunities or creating value-added services such as consulting. This is an area that merits much more exploration and attention.

Diversify leadership

This report highlights a significant lack of diversity in project management roles within journalism collaboratives. To address this, organizations should prioritize diversity in their leadership recruitment and development programs. By fostering a more diverse leadership, collaborations can bring fresh perspectives, enhance creativity, and better represent the communities they serve.

Expand partner networks, launch additional collaboratives

While maintaining manageable numbers, collaborations should explore expanding their partner networks to increase reach and diversify perspectives. This might involve creating tiered partnership models, where different levels of involvement are possible.

Collaborations should also continue to develop cross-field partnerships, engaging with academic institutions, community organizations, or civil society groups to bring in complementary skills and resources.

Additionally, more collaboratives should — and are likely to — form in different parts of the country and on different topics. Indeed, a handful of new collaborations were launched and some collaboratives formed in the course of this research.

Track impact + outcomes

One major shortcoming of this research was the absence of a question about how impact and outcomes are tracked by collaboratives. The Center knows from its own work and interaction with collaboratives that many track impacts, but this should be a standard for all. Additionally, any kind of tracking of nuanced community impact and direct outcomes will help collaboratives make a better case for financial support.

In conclusion, it is clear that permanent journalism collaboratives in the U.S. are carving out a viable and important niche. While they face challenges — particularly in terms of leadership diversity and long-term financial sustainability — the majority are finding ways to operate effectively with limited resources. The prevalence of stable partner relationships and shared governance structures points to a trend toward more formalized, enduring collaborative models.

As the media ecosystem continues to evolve, these collaborations have the potential to play an increasingly vital role. By addressing the challenges identified in this report and building on their strengths, permanent journalism collaborations can enhance their impact and sustainability, contributing to a more robust and diverse news landscape in the U.S.



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- Covering Climate Collaborative
- Covering Climate Now
- Dallas Media Collaborative
- Delaware Journalism Collaborative
- Documenters Network
- Education Reporting Collaborative
- Engaged Cities
- Floodlight
- Granite State News Collaborative
- Great Lakes News Collaborative
- Great Salt Lake Collaborative
- International Fact-Checking Network
- Kansas News Service
- Mental Health Parity Collaborative
- Mississippi River Basin Ag & Water Desk
- Mountain West News Bureau
- New England News Collaborative
- New York & Michigan Solutions Journalism Collaborative
- News is Out
- NJ News Commons
- Oklahoma Media Center
- Philadelphia Journalism Collaborative
- Pittsburgh Media Partnership
- Reg Murphy Center for Collaborative Journalism
- Rural News Network
- Side Effects Public Media
- Solving Sacramento
- Southwest Michigan Journalism Collaborative
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