Building the Plane While Flying It: Creating a Collaborative Funder + News Ecosystem in Northeast Ohio

Lila Mills, Communications Manager, Neighborhood Connections
History of thinking about this

- We had an opportunity to work with the **Knight Foundation** on a human centered design project about the adult literacy epidemic in Cleveland. This prompted us to bridge to additional research to try to understand what information is available in our community.
  - How do residents receive information?
  - What kind of information are they seeking?
  - What does the information ecosystem look like in our community?
  - For information providers (journalists on the frontlines), what is their lived experience today?
What did residents tell us?

- They felt a deep level of distrust in media
- Legacy media are relying on antiquated narratives in their storytelling
- Information about basic needs was not seen as newsworthy…until COVID-19 came along
- Residents frequently don’t know where decisions about their neighborhoods and their city are being made
- What emerged was the reliance on interpersonal networks to get news: “Shirley and Jackie are Google for my neighborhood”
- Small grassroots media are starting to fill in the information gaps – to provide stories to neighborhoods from neighbors
We also talked to journalists

• Recognize that resources are limited and the pace doesn’t allow for the deep grassroots connections and storytelling of the past. Often feel disconnected from the community they are reporting on.

• There is also the need for media literacy, media training in the community to help readers decipher and interpret news

• Journalists expressed a strong desire for regional coverage and to tell a larger story that affects both Cleveland and Akron.

• In Cleveland specifically, there is frustration with closed government – the inability to work with city and county officials, records requests, coverage of committee meetings, etc.
So what is our experiment?

• Thanks to Stefanie and her team, we convened a **collaborative media workshop** in August 2019 with traditional journalists and resident media makers.

• Then we brought the group back together in October and issued a challenge. **Five funders pulled together nearly $120,000** (an experiment in itself) to provide microgrants of up to 12K for 6-month projects that address basic information needs in the community.

• Our co-funders:
  • Akron Community Foundation
  • The Center for Community Solutions
  • The George Gund Foundation
  • Knight Foundation
What is our experiment?

• The priorities for this initial round of grantmaking:
  • Create topic-based collaborative journalism projects that respond to community information needs and that explore and elevate solutions.
  • Encourage media outlets to explore the strengths and resources already present in the region, and to build trust among these communities.
  • Conduct restorative journalism that reframes community narratives to spotlight resident resilience and neighborhood progress, lifting up perspectives that are often not reflected in the traditional news media.

• The nine collaborative efforts span 22 media organizations and individual journalists and nearly 30 community organizations
• To address the frustration with closed government, we partnered with City Bureau to bring Documenters to Northeast Ohio.

• To continue to address the idea of regional collaboration, we collaborated with the Solutions Journalism Network to explore the possibilities for a Cleveland-Akron newsroom collaborative, inspired by Resolve Philly, the Detroit Journalism Collaborative, Charlotte Journalism Collaborative, and other great models from around the country.

• And to make sure there is equity in capacity support across the newsrooms, we are funding a Report for America position to serve in a “stringer” capacity - working across the newsrooms to report deeply on the determined editorial topic.

• Coming up: Exploration of nonprofit newsrooms, fellowship models
What have we learned on this journey?

• First and foremost, **don’t go it alone as a funder**.

• Similarly, to foster internal buy-in, **build a cross-departmental team** to explore it together.

• Be willing to experiment with **small funding ideas**. Don’t rush to make the big bet – use experiments and pilots and small investments to start to build confidence in the work.

• **Don’t feel the need to re-invent the wheel.** Every experiment we shared today has been “borrowed” from other communities in this country.

• Create a **sense of urgency** for the work. This isn’t a looming crisis, it’s already here.

• Position your support as **preserving democracy and empowering residents**, not trying to save newsrooms.
Cleveland’s double crisis — coronavirus and a shrinking number of reporters to cover it

By Margaret Sullivan

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News organizations everywhere are under immense pressure as a pandemic sweeps the globe.

Reporters scurry to cover an eruption of breaking news: deaths, illness, fear, cancellations, and Oval Office pronouncements that may or may not be true. Editors, meanwhile, are trying not only to get the news out but to keep their staffs safe — sometimes by instructing them to work remotely.

But if there were a competition for the American newsroom enduring the most hellish month, the Plain Dealer in Cleveland certainly would be among the finalists.

There’s never been more of a need to cover basic needs.