

Developing Journalism Collaborations for **Local Impact**

The Role of Collaborative Scaffolding
and Solutions Journalism in Changing
Local Media Ecosystems

by CAROLINE PORTER and ELIZABETH HANSEN SHAPIRO

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About the Center for Cooperative Media

The **Center for Cooperative Media** is a grant-funded program within the School of Communication and Media at Montclair State University in New Jersey. Established in 2012, its mission is to grow and strengthen local journalism and support an informed society in New Jersey and beyond through collaboration.

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Executive Summary

A solutions journalism collaborative is a group of local newsrooms and partners working together to produce and distribute local news stories with a solutions-focused approach. Solutions journalism collaboratives represent a two-pronged response to the challenges of diminished local news capacity. First, solutions journalism as a framework represents a potentially more transformative alternative to traditional problem-focused reporting. Second, collaborative journalism as an approach seeks to address dwindling local media resources by bringing different newsrooms and partners together to share and co-create content. Ideally, a solutions journalism framework combined with a collaboration approach should have the potential to be a powerful intervention into local media ecosystems and should lead to meaningful outcomes for both journalists and audiences. What evidence do we have of the outcomes generated by solutions journalism collaboratives so far?

In this report, we summarize findings from a yearlong research project in 2020-2021, during which we studied a cohort of six solutions journalism collaboratives based in different parts of the United States. The research included baseline case studies; interviews with journalists, editors and non-news partners, as well as audience members; meeting observations; and surveys among collaborative members and audience members. Our interest was in specifying what outcomes these collaboratives were able to generate and how. Our findings reveal:

- During our year of observation, we were able to construct a developmental life cycle for collaborative projects with four distinct phases, each with its own set of outcomes. These phases are coming together, sharing stories, co-creating content, and making space for impact.
- We found the strongest evidence of outcomes in these developmental stages at the individual and group levels. We found evidence that, by bringing together journalists on a regular basis to discuss and debate how to produce work oriented around community needs, the collaboratives were able to build new connections between collaborators, deepen trust between their members, change traditional journalism mindsets, and eventually make space for wider impact.
- We found that the most mature collaboratives had a strong sense of shared values, operated with a high degree of trust, and had a commitment to the collaborative as an entity. The values, trust, and

commitment operated like a scaffold to keep the groups moving forward on their projects, even when they encountered challenges.

- The overall outcome of successful collaborative development was strong **collaborative scaffolding**. Collaborative scaffolding is a collaborative-specific structure and culture that supports a new way of envisioning, producing and sharing high-quality information and news at the ecosystem level. This scaffolding is built over time as members work and learn together. Strong collaborative scaffolding allows members to rise above their specific newsroom identities and sustain working together in new ways.
- We found evidence that strong collaborative scaffolding was leading to positive media funding and policy outcomes, and to some change in audience attitudes for some collaboratives.
- We found variations in the development of collaborative scaffolding that could be explained by the age and size of a collaborative, its degree of in-person interactions, the degree of shared commitment to the solutions journalism framework, the quality of a collaborative's leadership and project management, and the clarity of its subject orientation.
- Within the timeframe of this study, and given the relatively short life of most of the collaboratives we studied, we were not able to uncover robust evidence of the long-term impact of the collaboratives on their local audiences. Audience members' relationships with the media are typically older than the collaboratives' efforts, and longstanding, sustained change in dialogue and trust requires more time.
- We did, however, observe that the solutions framework is helping lay out pathways for audience members to participate in community change, which is one possible pathway through which collaboratives may be able to create systemic change over time. Though gathering widespread evidence will require more time to study, we do have evidence which points to possible long-term outcomes.
- Finally, our analysis suggests that solutions journalism can develop and strengthen collaborative scaffolding in three ways: through meeting collaborators' needs beyond monetary resources, by providing a rigorous way to test assumptions, and through fostering a sense of community and belonging to a movement larger than a single collaborative.

At the end of the report, we reflect on how solutions journalism collaboratives are like hands-on educational laboratories for training journalists in cutting-edge practices.

Introduction

As reporting capacity inside traditional mainstream newsrooms continues to decline, journalism collaboratives have emerged as a way to strengthen local news and information ecosystems by sharing resources, reporting and story distribution among local outlets. The rise of journalism collaboratives has engendered an explosion of research and practice around what collaboratives can accomplish ([Green-Barber and Stonbely, 2020](#)), how they work best ([Stonbely, 2017](#)), and how to start them ([Gross, 2018](#)). In parallel to the rise of collaboration as an alternative to single-outlet competitive practices of reporting, the solutions journalism framework has emerged as an alternative to traditional modes of journalistic inquiry that focus on problems.

Solutions journalism collaboratives, then, are an interesting mix of new practices. And while significant research has been done on journalism collaboration, and on the solutions journalism framework ([SmithGeiger, 2021](#)) ([Wenzel, Gerson, & Moreno, 2016](#)) ([Solutions Journalism Network, 2021](#)), little is known about what particular outcomes distinguish solutions journalism collaboratives as entities, and their relative power to shift news and information ecosystems in content and practice.

As funders and communities search for ways to rebuild and strengthen local news and information ecosystems to be more diverse, equitable, inclusive, impactful and sustainable, it would seem that solutions-based collaboratives might have a unique role to play. What can we learn from the existing set of local, solutions journalism collaboratives about the distinctiveness of their evolution and outcomes?

Our research study set out to capture and measure the outcomes that six solutions journalism collaboratives are producing for newsrooms, audiences, and communities. The cohort of journalism collaboratives that we studied are part of the Local Media Project, a five-year program conceived and produced by the Solutions Journalism Network to launch and support solutions-journalism collaboratives around the United States, with funding from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation and the Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation. These collaboratives' distinction lies in their commitment to reporting on both problems and ways to fix them, and in their focus on a single subject of particular urgency within their community.

In our study, we found that all collaboratives went through a developmental life cycle of maturation and growth in which they strengthened their ability to work together and to produce outcomes for their members and their communities. The most mature of the collaboratives

we studied had a strong sense of shared values, operated with a high degree of trust, and had a commitment to the collaborative as an entity. The values, trust, and commitment operated like a scaffold to keep the groups moving forward on their projects, even when they encountered challenges.

We call the critical outcome of collaborative development *collaborative scaffolding*. It is a way of thinking and working together that any collaborative group can build and that increases the chances of being able to produce real community impact. This report describes the developmental phases of the collaborative projects we studied, describes the characteristics and impact of strong collaborative scaffolding, and explores why some collaboratives were able to build stronger scaffolding than others.

Our hope is that by exploring the development and outcomes of a specific group of local media collaborative projects, this research can help inform collaborative leaders, members, and funders everywhere who are striving for community engagement and impact.

This report begins with a brief review of some of the existing literature that informed our study. We next provide a brief background on our methodology and the local media projects themselves. For an extended look at our methodology, please see the Appendix.

We begin our findings sections with a look at the developmental phases and associated intermediate outcomes of the collaboratives we studied; we then lay out the concept of collaborative scaffolding as the main outcome of collaborative development and its impact. We conclude with an analysis of the factors that contribute to variations in collaborative scaffolding and the special role solutions journalism played in the development of collaborative scaffolding in our cohort.

Situating the Impact of Solutions Journalism Collaboratives

Before we explain our findings, we want to situate solutions journalism collaboratives and their impact in the wider fields of collaborative journalism and impact research. In recent years *collaboration* as a journalistic practice has developed into an established area of inquiry; meanwhile, *collaboratives*, or new group entities of news and non-news members, have received attention via case studies and industry news stories. With our yearlong study of six collaboratives practicing solutions journalism collaboration, we aimed to build on research about both the act of *collaboration* and the entity known as the *collaborative*.

Ongoing, co-creative and integrated collaborative models

Efforts to assess journalism collaborations have focused on the structural components of collaboratives, their process and their impacts. As newsrooms have grown more practiced in collaboration, researchers have been able to capture the different formal structures and forms that collaboration can take. For example, [Stonbely \(2017\)](#) identified six models of collaborative journalism, delineating the levels of commitment and the methods for partnering. And as part of a study into nonprofit, single-subject news organizations, [Porter \(2019\)](#) described the rise of “partnership journalism” and detailed the differences between syndication partnerships and collaborative partnerships.

The structure of the collaboratives in our study represent the “ongoing co-creating” and “ongoing integrated” models, as named by [Stonbely \(2017\)](#). These structures remained constant across the cohort. The participating members agreed to a fully collaborative structure in which members worked together on reporting projects and focused on a single subject with an intent to sustain the collaborative over time. Because the collaboratives in our study were intended to be ongoing, self-sustaining entities, we were able to study them as organically evolving entities, as opposed to time-bound projects or dyadic partnerships.

Solutions journalism as the practice of collaboration

As collaborative journalism has evolved, its practitioners and supporters have become more sophisticated in understanding how to promote acts of collaboration. A veritable wealth of published resources now exist on how to support collaborative journalism. For example, the Center for Cooperative Media and Project Facet have produced [at least six guides and workbooks](#) that focus on aspects of collaborating. Subjects include “Building equity in

journalism collaborations," "Collaborative journalism workbook," "Building new partnerships for journalism collaborations," "Collaborative partnerships with non-news partners," "Budget and finance for journalism collaborations," and "Building a tool set for journalism collaborations" ([Collaborative Journalism website](#)).

While the groups we studied required collaborative acts by design, their primary distinction was that all collaboration had to be focused on solutions journalism. This distinction is important because, as we will show in great depth below, solutions journalism gave a particular focus and flavor to acts of collaborative journalism. Collaboration was focused on meeting community needs and understanding community solutions, rather than reporting on community problems, and collaboratives focused on a single subject of particular urgency within their community. For an overview of their process, please see the Appendix.

So what is solutions journalism? Solutions journalism is motivated by the belief that in addition to reporting on problems, journalists should report on solutions to problems. As a formal framework, solutions journalism gained credence with the Solutions Journalism Network, an organization launched by three journalists, two of whom ran a column in the New York Times called "Fixes" for nearly a decade and leveraged the column's success to start the network. Solutions journalism, according to the Solutions Journalism Network, relies on **FOUR TENETS** that form a standard for reporting quality.

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|--------------------|---|
| TENET ONE | <i>"A solutions story focuses on a response to a social problem — and how that response has worked or why it hasn't."</i> |
| TENET TWO | <i>"The best solutions reporting distills the lessons that make the response relevant and accessible to others. In other words, it offers insight."</i> |
| TENET THREE | <i>"Solutions journalism looks for evidence — data or qualitative results that show effectiveness (or lack thereof)."</i> |
| TENET FOUR | <i>"Reporting on limitations is essential."</i> |

These tenets informed all the joint work of the collaboratives we studied.

Defining impact for collaborative journalism

The goal of all collaborative journalism is to produce impact — to produce an effect that represents change in the status quo at some level of analysis. Alongside the growing popularity of collaborative journalism has come a greater desire among journalism funders, practitioners, and supporters to assess its outcomes and impact. Some of the best impact thinking has come in the form of guidance to collaborative partners on how to measure impact.

For example, Maestas and Todd Lin (2021) built a helpful practitioner guide for measuring collaborative impact that also helps articulate a collaborative's priorities.

Impact researchers have also developed insightful models to identify and explain the changes collaborative journalism can create. To assess the outcomes and impact in our cohort, we drew on the collaborative journalism assessment model created by Green-Barber and Stonbely (2020). Following their model, we focused on the changes in status quo at the level of an individual, network, institution and news and information ecosystem, noting as they do that impact can be experienced externally and internally¹. Internal impact can be found in changes to "journalistic capacity," "higher quality content" and "culture shift" in newsrooms. In the external impact category, changes are assessed at the "individual," "network" and "institutional" levels, as well as through "media amplification."²

We are also building on evidence that solutions journalism itself can have a positive impact on communities. For example, Wenzel, Gerson, and Moreno (2016) analyzed the impacts of the "solutions journalism format" in South Los Angeles and found that "focus group participants said they would be more likely to seek out news and share stories if solutions journalism were more common."³ Research like this gave us confidence that solutions journalism has the potential to change community members' attitudes and actions regarding local media. Though in highlighting the long-term nature of the relationship between audience members and the local media, Wenzel et al's report also sheds light on the longer timeframes that might be required to assess the impact of solutions journalism at a community level.

We adopted a rigorous, multimethod approach to examining the outcomes and impacts of the collaboratives we studied. Our study unfolded between the fall of 2020 and the fall of 2021. For a detailed review of our method, please refer to the Appendix.

¹ Adapted from "Collaborating for Change: Approaches to Measuring the Impact of Collaborative Journalism" (Green-Barber & Stonbely, 2020): <https://collaborativejournalism.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/8/2020/07/Collaborating-for-Change-Approaches-to-measuring-the-impact-of-collaborative-journalism-31JUL2020.pdf>

² Adapted from "Collaborating for Change: Approaches to Measuring the Impact of Collaborative Journalism" (Green-Barber & Stonbely, 2020): <https://collaborativejournalism.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/8/2020/07/Collaborating-for-Change-Approaches-to-measuring-the-impact-of-collaborative-journalism-31JUL2020.pdf>

³ Adapted from "Engaging Communities Through Solutions Journalism" (Wenzel, Gerson & Moreno, 2016): https://www.cjr.org/tow_center_reports/engaging_communities_through_solutions_journalism.php#executive-summary

Brief history of Local Media Project

Launched in 2019, the Local Media Project is a five-year effort run by a team within the Solutions Journalism Network to launch 15 solutions-journalism collaboratives around the country, each with a two-year grant cycle that includes up to \$200,000 in funding total and support from Solutions Journalism Network. Our research cohort examined six collaboratives in various phases of their grant cycle.

1. Broke in Philly

Launched in April 2018, Broke in Philly is a collaborative reporting project focused on economic mobility in Philadelphia. More than 20 participating local organizations have signed on to a five-year commitment, with a planned end date in 2023. The project, which adapted to cover the Covid-19 pandemic as well, aims to serve neighborhoods in Philadelphia that have high levels of poverty and face barriers to economic mobility.

2. Granite State News Collaborative

The statewide news collaborative in New Hampshire began officially in October 2018 and published its first stories, focused on mental health and the opioid crisis, in January 2019. By the end of 2019, the collaborative had roughly doubled from about 10 members to 20 members. In addition to covering the Covid-19 pandemic, GSNC has since shifted to the subject of race and equity in New Hampshire.

3. Charlotte Journalism Collaborative

The Charlotte Journalism Collaborative is a collaborative reporting project focused on affordable housing in Charlotte, including the impacts of Covid-19 on the subject. While an initial convening occurred in September 2018, the process to draft and sign memorandums of understanding and contracts lasted until spring 2019. The collaborative entails six news organizations and three community organizations, and in summer 2021, members committed to a five-year plan to continue the work.

4. Northeast Ohio Solutions Journalism Collaborative

The 22 members of the Northeast Ohio Solutions Journalism Collaborative completed paperwork to launch the collaborative reporting project in the early months of 2020 and published their first stories in June 2020, focusing on two metro areas, both Cleveland and Akron. The collaborative pivoted its primary focus from domestic violence to the impact of the global coronavirus pandemic within marginalized communities in the Cleveland and Akron regions.

5. Solving for Chicago

The Chicago-based reporting collaborative launched in May 2020, with financial support from both Google News Initiative and Solutions Journalism Network (SJN), and with management provided by Local Media Association (LMA). Launching alongside the onslaught of the Covid-19 pandemic, the collaborative's 20 members agreed to focus their reporting on essential workers in Chicago. In addition, the collaborative provides business training to its members, through group training, 1-1 sessions, and access to tools, resources, and audits. In fall 2021, the group decided to pivot to cover solutions to longstanding equity issues exacerbated by the pandemic.

6. Wichita Journalism Collaborative

The official launch of the Wichita Journalism Collaborative was at the beginning of June 2020, with seven media organizations, three community organizations, and an intern student from Wichita State University. The coverage area includes the entire state of Kansas, while collaborative members are Wichita-centric. While the topic of mental health had originally been singled out, the collaborative switched its focus to the coronavirus pandemic in March 2020.



The Developmental Life Cycle of Collaboratives

Analyzing data from a year of study across these six collaboratives, we were able to construct a developmental life cycle for collaborative projects with at least four distinct phases, each with its own set of outcomes. In this section, we explain each distinct phase and its primary outcomes.

PHASE 1: COMING TOGETHER

Without exception, each of the collaboratives we studied required a significant dedication of time, resources and consideration on the front-end of their development—often totalling about one calendar year of discussions—in forming their new entity, organizing funding, and learning how to work together.

Building membership

While time-consuming and intangible, building the initial member composition of the group laid the foundation for critical conversations and questions, such as financial and branding decisions. In successful collaboratives, this phase often took the form of relationship building among the members of the collaborative through one-on-one conversations. In the

collaboratives that were successfully able to come together and progress to the next stage of development, it was critical that at least a few stakeholders were continually ensuring the positive momentum of the collaborative. A collaborative's project manager, a collaborative's Solutions Journalism Network liaisons, and the collaborative's most engaged members were usually the key drivers of this stage.

Choosing a mission and focus

In our observations, we found that agreeing to a shared mission took the most time in the first phase of collaborative development, particularly the choice of a reporting subject. And while the first phase is where these conversations began, maintaining buy-in on mission and focus could also take much longer. For example, one older collaborative took more than a year to determine what to cover, while younger collaboratives chose subjects in about six-month timeframes. As one member described it: "We had to make sure everybody who was in the partnership understood the mission and the standards and expectations. And in my experience, it sometimes takes quite a few years to feel like you're all in that place."

Developing communication and policy guidelines

The other critical piece of work early in the life of a collaborative was to develop explicit communication and policy guidelines to support the shared subject and mission. These included how to parcel out funding, how to choose stories, and how to conduct meetings. We saw that spending time on these policies early in a collaborative's life led to later success. Often developing communication and policy guidelines was the responsibility of a collaborative's project manager. A project manager who could point to written policies and who could lead with clear communication created trust and confidence in a collaborative among members over time. However, though the project manager's personal style and experience made a huge difference for success in this phase, some collaboratives also had serious issues deciding policies — for example, around quoting and sources — that led to conflict and confusion.

PHASE 1 OUTCOMES: BUILDING NEW CONNECTIONS

At the start of the collaborative's developmental cycle, we saw that the biggest outcome was individuals from different organizations successfully meeting together, in some cases for the first time, and beginning to build new networks and connections that could strengthen over time.

The collaboratives brought together individuals from a wide spectrum of news organizations, many of whom otherwise would not have reason to meet, let alone work together. For example, each collaborative

included a Spanish-language media outlet or a Spanish media advisory group, as well as a mix of community media, corporate-owned media, public media and non-news partners, such as a local public library. “Many of us were meeting each other for the first time and are much more inclined now to offer a hand or lend an ear,” wrote one respondent in the research survey of members. “We’re certainly all talking more frequently, which is a huge benefit, and learning more about how other folks work,” wrote another.

Across the cohort we studied, the collaborative as a social environment for members infused a sense of camaraderie that many members felt had been lacking after years of dispiriting losses for the news industry writ large. Providing the space for members to air their concerns about local news allowed some members to make sense of broader industry changes, especially amid the unique reporting cycle that was 2020. “It’s a weird time to be sure in the aftermath of our city’s large metro newsroom closure,” wrote one respondent in the research survey of members. “I think everyone is trying to make the best of it, and this has really helped.” Another wrote: “The editors, publishers and producers have connected in a way that would have been unheard of a few years ago. In our monthly editorial meetings, it feels like we are in a large newsroom again — only we’re all focused on the communities we serve.”

PHASE 2: SHARING STORIES

The second phase of collaborative development began when members started to share their content for cross-publication among other member outlets. Some of this content was sponsored by the collaborative and represented the first efforts at solutions journalism by member organizations, and some of this content was simply cross-syndication of stories. We observed this phase beginning roughly after about six months of work together.

Developing a system for content sharing

Each collaborative we studied found their own method for gathering and disseminating content across the member organizations. One collaborative relied on regular email messages throughout the day, while others built online dashboards to organize the information. In general, the communication system matched the cultural and structural components of the group and reflected the group’s maturity. For example, one older collaborative used Slack, highlighting their ability to use more passive and indirect forms of collaborative communication. A younger collaborative used direct emails between members, because they needed more high-touch communications among members. Most clearly, we saw that more communication was better than less, especially in younger collaboratives.

But sharing content was not without its challenges in this stage. One initial area of friction we observed was in the editing process, as diverse members used different editing standards in handling one another's work. Delicately addressing differences in the editing process took time. For example, in one collaborative, one story went through multiple unique editors before being approved for publishing, we learned in a research interview with a collaborative member. "After the story is written, how it goes through our process can be a little bit maddening, to say the least," said the interviewee. "It's supposed to be just two or three editors. The piece that we did, it was six editors that looked at it, and it was just like, 'Stop. Everybody, please stop looking at this piece.'"

Developing standard collaborative branding language

Another key moment in phase 2 comes when collaboratives develop standard language for branding their collaborative content. We observed that collaboratives successfully navigating phase 2 leveraged agreed-upon boilerplate language about the collaboratives, to be placed at the top or bottom of stories co-shared. These efforts were a way to showcase the collaborative's brand and its work and expand the reach of member newsrooms. The higher up in the story the collaboratives placed their branding language, the greater likelihood that it would be noticed. We observed that enforcement of this boilerplate language could be hit or miss among member outlets, with some managers often noting that they had to follow up with members to add the language.

Experiencing early benefits

As members successfully co-shared stories, an additional level of buy-in began to build among members as they saw the early fruits of collaboration — more content, more thinking together, and wider reach. However, across our cohort, regardless of which stage of development a collaborative was in, we also observed an uptick in co-sharing among member outlets during the height of the pandemic, in the midst of the 2020 U.S. election season, and during the protests following the murder of George Floyd. During this intense news cycle, the collaborative approach appeared prescient to news outlets eager to serve their audiences but lacking resources.

PHASE 2 OUTCOMES: DEEPENING TRUST

At this point in the collaborative's developmental cycle, as members were beginning to practice working together in earnest, we saw evidence of deepening trust within the collaboratives. In the strongest collaboratives we studied, these deeper relationships helped foster other forms of collaboration outside the group.

New and deep local connections

In our research interviews and surveys, we found strong evidence that the members in the collaboratives who had passed and were passing through Phase 2 were creating new and meaningful connections in their local industry made via the collaborative. For example, when asked what kind of high-value, professionally relevant connections our collaborative member survey respondents had made through the collaborative, 79% said they made new professional friend(s) outside their organization and 17% said they made new newsroom colleagues within their own organizations.

"I've been talking out ideas (before they're even close to being flushed out) with different newsroom partners [which] has been refreshing," wrote one survey respondent. "Since the collaboration was launched, I think we all have a better understanding of what everyone does and universal challenges," said another. "It's improved communication and the collaborative spirit overall."

Organic collaboration outside the collaborative

We also found that once collaborative members made connections with each other and began working together, they often found reasons to collaborate outside of the formal collaborative as well. "We just traded articles with a partner in the Collaborative. The two articles were not part of what the collaborative shares, but we both decided it was mutually beneficial to trade," wrote one survey respondent.

Some of these new collaborations become structural to the organizations. For example, one member in Charlotte said the collaborative connected her directly with another news leader, and together they have built out separate collaborations, including the sharing of a Report for America reporter. "This partnership has allowed us to write stories that we were unable to write before for lack of resources and we are expanding our audiences," she wrote.

PHASE 3: CO-CREATING CONTENT

As collaborative members gained confidence in sharing content, we observed an organic evolution toward more use of the solutions journalism framework and a greater focus on creating content together. Collaboratives successfully progressing through this third phase of development transitioned from acting like a supportive trade association to becoming a meaningful group with an identity of its own. This evolution occurred at least one year after the creation of a collaborative, and in one case, more than two years after the collaborative began meeting together.

Pitching together and managing member engagement

The creation of reporter-led pitch meetings was a clear indication of a collaborative successfully progressing through the phase of co-creating content. The practices of co-creating content and practicing solutions reporting appeared to be more organic in collaboratives that had instituted reporter-led pitch meetings than in those that did not.

Because collaborative members were beginning to pitch and create content together in this stage, we also observed that both positive and negative engagement among the members became a more obvious issue for collaboratives to manage. A deft approach on the part of the project manager to handling different members' capacities and interests was critical to the collaborative's overall health in this stage. We observed that where engagement was uneven among members in a collaborative at this stage, it was difficult for the group to progress on to create wider impact.

Seeing the solutions impact

As they continued to pitch and create stories together in phase 3, members were able to see the deepening impact of the collaborative through the solutions journalism they produced and shared. Indeed, at this stage in a collaborative's evolution, we saw a powerful shift emerge. While what often incentivized members to join the collaborative in phase 1 were the additional monetary and capacity resources, what kept them committed to the collaborative in this stage was the meaningful reporting experiences that solutions journalism reinforced. We saw many collaborative members in this stage feel reawakened and re-energized by the public service they were providing.

PHASE 3 OUTCOMES: CHANGING TRADITIONAL MINDSETS

At this point in the collaborative's developmental cycle, the main outcome we saw was a shift in the traditional journalism mindset among collaborative members. Most members of the collaboratives we studied were professional journalists. Collaboration, and especially solutions journalism-based collaboration, ran counter to many of the competitive norms and practices of the broader journalism industry.

Because so much of phases 2 and 3 were focused on developing new ways to work together through solutions journalism, we heard that the new connections among collaborative members spurred reflective discussions that were surfacing and challenging members' traditional ideas and understandings about the practice of journalism. In our member surveys and interviews, we found evidence that participating in the solutions journalism collaborative was leading to a fundamental change in members' traditional mindsets and behaviors.

For example, in the collaborative member survey we conducted, the statement “My views of what makes for good journalism have shifted as a result of my participation in the solutions journalism collaborative within the past year” earned a 4 out of 5 score, on average. The survey statement, “I have shifted the types of stories and events that I pursue in my work as a result of my participation in the solutions journalism collaborative within the past year” earned a 3 out of 5 score, on average.

We further found in our surveys that participation in the collaboratives also consistently correlated with appreciation for collaboration, with members ranking collaboration as higher in significance than competition. The statement “Journalism as an industry requires a healthy amount of competition to succeed” earned a 3 out of 5 score, on average. The statement “Journalism as an industry requires a healthy amount of collaboration to succeed” earned a 4 out of 5 score, on average.

These member survey findings were backed up by our interviews as well. For example, one collaborative member shared that she thought the collaborative group discussions were fruitful, in part because it was possible to ask questions about story pitches and refine ideas. “It’s not a combative or competitive environment, which I feel like is usually the case when reporters are trying to beat each other to the story,” she said. “That energy is not at the collaborative meetings, which I think is really nice.”

“I know I communicate more with fellow reporters outside my organization to bounce ideas off of or discuss topics in a way that doesn’t hurt my authority on the beat or uniqueness of my coverage but rather affirms if we’re all going in the right general direction with reporting,” wrote one respondent in the research survey of members.

Another wrote: “Unfortunately, I think our media ecosystem has been struggling for many years as we all grapple with fewer and fewer resources and shrunken staffs. That’s why the collaborative has been so welcome — it has healed our organization, and others, to reach out and join together to enhance the quality of the journalism our readers and listeners are receiving.”

PHASE 4: MAKING SPACE FOR IMPACT

Phase 4 is a maturing phase for collaboratives. Collaboratives in phase 4 in our study had reached a new stage of making space for greater impact in their communities. Our research found that in this phase, collaboratives had a strong foundation of new norms and ways of working and were beginning to engage with community members in more varied ways.

Indeed, the very mature collaboratives in our study had members who were becoming more invested in their capacity to catalyze change among the communities they served. Rather than seeing their role as primarily to report on issues, the most mature collaborative members in

Phase 4

phase 4 grasped the possibility of practicing journalism as a way of catalyzing systems-level change. Collaboratives generally entered this phase after more than two years of collaborating.

This maturing led some collaboratives to explore a more “organizing” role in their communities. This shift was particularly clear for the collaboratives in Philadelphia, New Hampshire, and to some extent, Charlotte. (It is important to note that these three collaboratives are the oldest of the collaboratives in our research cohort.) For example, in New Hampshire, the launch of the race and equity project led to the creation of advisory councils of citizens with lived experience who could weigh in on the project’s direction and output. After producing the graphic news series PANDEM!C, the Charlotte collaborative organized an event for people to create their own original comic books through an interactive, virtual two-hour workshop. In Philadelphia, Broke in Philly’s sister organization under the Resolve Philly umbrella, Equally Informed, offers a free, two-way texting service in English and Spanish with news updates.

Expanded engagement, resource-sharing, and resource commitments

We also observed that as collaboratives were maturing in phase 4, many began to share new and different kinds of resources with one another to amplify their service to communities. This included experimenting with new revenue streams to sustain their work and engaging in long-term planning. For example, the Philadelphia collaborative’s umbrella organization, Resolve Philly, undertook efforts to develop new funding sources with legacy gifts and for-profit consulting. The collaborative in Charlotte was working with a strategic consultancy to iron out its elevator pitch and sustainability plan.

In addition, collaboratives in phase 4 were starting to experiment with new ways to follow their community service mandate. Several mature and maturing collaboratives made hires to support expanded coverage, including engagement reporters and data and impact reporters, and a few leveraged funding for targeted group training. These trainings ran the gamut from lessons in design thinking in New Hampshire to legal training in Philadelphia.

The maturing and mature collaboratives also showed deeper connections and engagement between newsrooms and the non-news partners in the collaboratives. In these collaboratives, news members were engaging more with the non-news collaborative partners, who in turn were providing fresh perspectives on developing new norms. For example, in Charlotte, the representative from the public library described how his knowledge of broadband gaps led him to press harder on the subject. “I really want to democratize data literacy, and understanding why data is important, also understanding there’s a lot of issues in our power dynamics in the community,”

he said. “We don’t know our eviction data because it is designed so that we don’t know our eviction data in our community. These are the things we need to confront with a brave face and say, ‘What are we doing?’”

Assessing the long-term sustainability for the collaborative

As collaboratives matured in phase 4, each was also exploring its own path to sustainability based on the culture of the group, the resources in the region, and its engagement with the community.

For example, one mature collaborative conducted a comprehensive review of its budget and decided to find a different fiscal sponsor than the one originally planned on to better control its overhead costs. Another mature collaborative had begun its planning for the next five years in an effort to continue the collaborative past its current grant funding, primarily by doubling down on its commitment to being a central hub for information related to its topic, and building out new revenue streams, including events.

The Philadelphia collaborative stood out for its clarity and organization in its approach to finding sustainability. In part due to its embedded structure within the broader Resolve Philly umbrella, Broke in Philly leveraged its planning and precision about funding allocations and timelines to communicate across the membership about resource availability, mitigating the risk for membership confusion.

PHASE 4 OUTCOMES: STRONG COLLABORATIVE SCAFFOLDING

Phase 4 collaboratives were the most mature in our study, and were also beginning to have the greatest impact in their communities. We found that collaboratives in this phase had a strong sense of shared values, operated with a high degree of trust, and had a commitment to the collaborative as an entity. The values, trust, and commitment operated like a scaffold to keep the groups moving forward on their projects, even when they encountered challenges.

We call the critical outcome of this maturation *collaborative scaffolding*. Collaborative scaffolding is a way of thinking and working together that orients members to community service and a drive for community impact. Because strong collaborative scaffolding represents the most significant outcome of the groups we studied, we spend the bulk of the next section describing collaborative scaffolding, how it worked in the mature collaboratives we studied, and evidence of its community impact.

The Outcomes of Successful Collaborative Development:

Collaborative Scaffolding

The primary outcome of successful collaborative development was strong collaborative scaffolding. Collaborative scaffolding is a collaborative-specific structure and culture that supports a new way of envisioning, producing and sharing high-quality information and news at the ecosystem level. This collaborative scaffolding is built over time as members work and learn together. Strong collaborative scaffolding allows members to rise above their specific newsroom identities and work together in new ways. We describe the vital features of strong collaborative scaffolding in more detail below.

Strong scaffolding looks like a community-first value system.

The most powerful value we saw in mature collaboratives involved putting communities' information needs first. We saw that in mature collaboratives, a shared orientation to not just provide information to an audience but to actually support a community with actionable information led to different editorial products than we saw in developing collaboratives. In mature collaboratives, a shared orientation to community service had the power to bring together journalists from different backgrounds and different newsrooms into a sense of common purpose, motivation, and momentum.

What did this look like in practice? The most obvious examples we saw were in mature collaboratives' responses to the murder of George Floyd, the pandemic and the 2020 election cycle. Before spring 2020, most of the collaboratives we studied were finding their way, choosing subject areas to focus on and building out their processes. The heavy news cycle of 2020 required unique responses from newsrooms of all kinds, and we observed that the mature collaboratives in our study were able to move more swiftly to identify and address the information needs of their communities.

In all of our mature and maturing collaboratives, the members expanded and coordinated coverage that would not have been feasible from one newsroom alone, motivated by the desire to get their communities as much critical information as possible. At a mundane level, this often looked like members working together to compile questions for press conferences or hash out strategies to avoid duplicate stories. At a more complex level, this looked like, for example, the Charlotte Journalism Collaborative's production of a multipart graphic news series that was freely distributed through the public library branches and online through social media. The series explains the pandemic at the local level, in both English and Spanish, in partnership with a local arts group and the public library.





The murder of George Floyd, the 2020 election cycle and the Covid-19 pandemic catalyzed a growth spurt in the collaborative scaffolding of the mature collaboratives we studied. Rather than drive these newsrooms apart, we saw how the shared community-service orientation encouraged closer coordination, sharing, strategizing, and led to a sense of pride and meaning in the quality of the group's output.

For example, collaborative members in New Hampshire reflected that the murder of George Floyd, the pandemic and the 2020 election marked a new phase of development within their collaborative. Whereas before, members were tentative about sharing and coordinating plans, the urgency of community needs helped collaborative members begin to share and delegate coverage organically. "We all kind of saw this new opportunity to create a statewide collaborative reporting effort on Covid-19," said one collaborative member. "We were able to collaboratively give readers a statewide view of Covid. It happened seamlessly."

But the community orientation in mature and maturing collaboratives went many steps beyond coordinated coverage. Guided by the solutions framework, the Northeast Ohio collaborative, for example, approached the issue of residents' utilities being turned off by preparing a guide of how to get help to keep residents' lights on. The guide was distributed at places where residents were already, like a local health center.

Orienting together to meet community needs also helped mature collaboratives think concretely about how those needs might differ by community and by story. For example, one collaborative member in Charlotte explained how she evolved her thinking from the idea that one newspaper could meet all parts of her community and started leaning on smaller news partners:

"Everything can't serve every audience," she said. "So we stop trying to do that and instead think about how multiple pieces of journalism serve more specific audiences. You tend to serve nobody if you try to say, 'Well, this is for everybody,' Because it can't be! The collaborative really challenged my thinking about who cares about a story, and why are they going to read it."

Strong scaffolding looks like high degrees of trust among members.

Trust is a bedrock ingredient of strong collaborative scaffolding because high-quality collaborative work is dependent on the quality of relationships among collaborators. In the mature collaboratives we studied, members had developed enough trust to share time, resources, and learning with one another. That trust took time to build, and we learned, could also be damaged.

In some cases the trust among members was built through the process of re-examining their reporting practices and assumptions in light of solutions journalism's community-first orientation. For example, the members of the Charlotte collaborative reported to us that they appreciated the role of solutions journalism in forcing an explicit reassessment and re-dedication to the craft of reporting through the lens of community service. That reflective process required more communication, vulnerability, and sharing among the members than they usually shared with industry colleagues.

In addition to building trust in the group, members felt the reflection and learning inherent solutions approach also was leading to an improvement in their reporting chops and in other collaborations blooming outside the collaborative. For example, one New Hampshire collaborative member shared, "Because both [my news organization] and the Granite State News Collaborative are engaged in SJN projects, the quality of our reporting has improved; I consider coaching and instruction in these methods important and game-changing."

Collaborative scaffolding takes time to build in part because trust takes time to build. But we saw in the mature collaboratives we studied that building trust is possible, even when things start out rocky. For example, the New Hampshire collaborative, which had a high degree of trust among its members during our observation period, initially struggled to build this element of collaborative scaffolding. "The biggest hurdle in our first two years was that the members seemed to struggle to trust each other," explained the New Hampshire collaborative director.

Some of the trust hurdles in news collaboration stem from competitive feelings among newsrooms and among reporters. Explained one New Hampshire member: "Certainly at the beginning, people were much more cautious, not knowing am I going to be giving up a competitive advantage?"

Working together with positive results helped collaborative members in New Hampshire moderate their fear and feelings of competition and build trust. The collaborative member continued: "Over time, I think that people have seen other people are sharing, and have seen that people are willing to contribute and contribute quality pieces. The collaborative itself was producing pieces, which I think also made it easier to see that this was a shared work product."

Strong scaffolding looks like commitment to the collaborative as an entity.

Strong collaborative scaffolding helped members of mature collaboratives rise above their organizational identity to identify with — and feel commitment to — the collaborative as a whole. The members of the mature collaboratives we studied expressed deep commitment to and affiliation with the collaborative as a “thing.” This went beyond buy-in and enthusiasm to a true identification with the collaborative itself. Participation in the collaborative influenced how members thought about themselves as journalists and the service they provide to their community.

The best example of commitment to the collaborative as a stand-alone entity is the Broke in Philly (BIP) collaborative. This collaborative benefits from a unique sense of confidence among the cohort we studied, in part because it is the oldest and most experienced, but also because of its role as part of a larger operation, Resolve Philly. Resolve Philly grew out of the first solutions journalism collaborative supported by Solutions Journalism Network, The Reentry Project.

“There is a whole organization that is dedicated to making this collaboration work as well as it can,” shared an editor within the organization.

Resolve Philly’s stewardship of Broke in Philly means their members benefit from additional time and resources dedicated to making collaborative relationships successful. For example, in 2021 alone, 109 BIP journalists participated in BIP-sponsored lunch and learns, intended to allow members to share skills with one another. The collaborative offered \$15 Grubhub gift certificates to encourage members from different newsrooms to have lunch together. And each collaborative meeting started with an ice-breaker as an activity to prioritize relationship-building outside of the reporting work.



The Impact of Strong Collaborative Scaffolding: Early Evidence of Funding, Policy, and Community Change

Impact on communities is the ultimate, highest aim for collaborations. Within the timeframe of our study, and given the relatively short life to date of most of the collaboratives we studied, we were not able to uncover robust indications of the long-term impact of the collaboratives on their local communities. This stands to reason: community members' relationships with the media are typically older than the collaboratives' efforts, and longstanding, sustained change in community dialogue and trust requires more time.

However, we were able to gather evidence of positive media and policy outcomes in the mature collaboratives we studied. And we believe the solutions journalism framework in particular helps lay out pathways for audience members to participate in community change, which is one possible pathway through which local collaboratives may be able to create systemic change. Though gathering widespread evidence will require more time to study, we do have indications of possible long-term outcomes, which we explain below.

Strong scaffolding promotes deeper engagement with communities.

Strong collaborative scaffolding also produced more outward-facing engagement between collaboratives and their communities. We saw that compared with developing collaboratives, the mature collaboratives with

strong scaffolding made notable strides in holding engagement events, which showed promise as ways to lift community voices into the public arena. For example, a maturing collaborative within the cohort participated in nine events throughout the year, ranging from panels to listening sessions.

We also saw that when collaborative scaffolding worked well, joint coverage reflected new sources, different languages and humanizing details that had the potential to widen the communities served. For example, one mature collaborative with strong scaffolding chose the subject of race and equity in their coverage area for their reporting subject, and developed community boards to offer feedback and ideas for each reporting vertical within the broader subject. “The collaborative is helping to broaden editorial viewpoints, which ... would then also lead to different coverage, maybe more diverse coverage in more neighborhoods by [my news organization],” shared one member of another mature collaborative.

Strong scaffolding can lead to positive funding and policy outcomes.

Strong collaborative scaffolding can also have a direct impact on policy and funding. We saw how maturing and mature collaboratives’ focus on a single subject generated buzz and could command the awareness, attention, and action of media funders and policymakers.

The policy impacts we observed were often directly related to the solutions covered by the collaboratives. For example, in Charlotte, after the collaborative covered solutions to [expiring housing vouchers](#), the Charlotte Housing Authority voted to move forward with one of the solutions highlighted by the collaborative. In New Hampshire, as part of its solutions-focused series on race and equity, the collaborative heard from members of the Latino community about a controversial draft bill prohibiting certain types of diversity curricula in the state’s schools. Following the collaborative’s reporting on the legislation and the impacts it might have, the governor opposed the measure and ultimately a weaker version of the bill was included in the state budget. And in Cleveland, a collaborative member published a [solution-focused story](#) about housing legislation, and shortly thereafter, a nearby city replicated the idea, which was also introduced in two other communities.

In addition to direct policy impact, we also found that many collaboratives were able to amplify the successful work of community groups in ways that influenced local funding. For example, in 2021, a group focused on vaccine distribution called Chicagoland Vaccine Partnership was awarded \$1 million through a pooled fund from different foundations. The group cited the Chicago collaborative’s coverage of their efforts as a reason for the funding. Another group, Increase the Peace, said it raised \$400,000 through grants and donations after it was covered by a member of the Chicago

collaborative. In Northeast Ohio, an anonymous donor gave \$50,000 to a community group after a collaborative member produced a story about the group's work to prevent evictions. The community group cited the collaborative and the story as the reason for the donation. In another Northeast Ohio example, an organization that hosted Covid-19 vaccination clinics in historically Black churches received \$250,000 from the Cleveland Foundation after a collaborative story on the subject, and the organization's leader pointed to the story as an impetus for the grant.

Collaboratives have also been able to raise additional funds to support their work on the strength of their reporting, and some have been able to recruit new funders into local media. For example, in New Hampshire, the Granite State News Collaborative has raised about \$343,900 since 2019 from local and national funders as well as from individual donors on the strength of its work, outside of its Solutions Journalism Network funding. One donor, the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation, asked the collaborative to speak about the importance of journalism and civic engagement at their Funders Forum meeting. And in Philadelphia, Resolve Philly, which houses Broke in Philly, received an award as a top nonprofit in 2021 and was granted \$1 million from the [Philadelphia COVID-19 Community Information Fund](#) to support member newsrooms' Covid-19 coverage in 2020.

Strong scaffolding and solutions journalism can build pathways to community change, over time.

As a result of the solutions journalism coverage our collaboratives produced, we saw a handful of action-oriented networks developing in local ecosystems through attendance at events, building email lists, a texting group and volunteer opportunities. For example, in the English version of our audience survey for Philadelphia's collaborative, 75% of respondents said that after engaging with a news story about economic mobility in Philadelphia, they discussed it with a friend or family member. Nearly 1 in 5 respondents said they had changed personal behaviors or beliefs, and 26% said they had followed a local journalist or journalism organization on social media. Other examples that respondents provided include "share with educators for classroom use," "contacted my state representative," "shared with colleagues, use to inform my work," and "raising my consciousness."

In other words, our nascent community impact data suggest that collaborative scaffolding is the foundation on which collaboratives can create community impact. Creating impact at the community level requires the kinds of long-term practice changes, mindset shifts, and community engagement that collaborative scaffolding makes possible. This means strong collaborative scaffolding is **a necessary but not sufficient ingredient** for creating community impact. Collaboratives need more time and resources to continue the hard work of making community change.

Variations in Collaborative Scaffolding

We saw collaborative scaffolding taking shape as collaboratives progressed through different stages of development. And while we identified collaborative scaffolding as the primary outcome of collaborative development, we also used our data to analyze specific factors that seemed to help or hinder the development of scaffolding across collaboratives. We concluded that a collaborative's age, size, and its degree of in-person interaction, among other factors, were shaping the strength of collaborative scaffolding. We explain these factors below.

1. Age and size of the collaborative

We observed that both the age and size of the collaborative influenced differences in the quality of collaborative scaffolding between collaboratives. This makes sense because as collaboratives develop in time, their members benefit from a deeper well of shared experiences. It is also easier to build trust in small groups than in large ones.

Among the older collaboratives we studied, we found that building momentum and overcoming early challenges were particularly important both for building strong collaborative scaffolding and for weathering further challenges. For example, the Granite State Collaborative, which was one of the oldest we studied, spent its first year producing no content at all, and instead building internal consensus and seeking funding. When the collaborative officially launched, eight months after it started, the collaborative was able to hire a part-time collaborative director, but it also lost two collaborative members.

But rather than lose momentum and disband, the collaborative persisted and embarked on another year of covering mental health and the opioid crisis in the state. When the pandemic hit in 2020, the core group had formed and practiced collaboration, setting them up for deeper forms of collaboration as the urgency increased to produce critical Covid-related news and information together. Those two years, according to members, were critical for learning how to work together.

By contrast, some of the younger collaboratives in our study struggled to build momentum and construct the rudimentary elements of collaborative scaffolding, especially during the pandemic. We found that addressing questions of membership (who is in the collaborative and who is not) and creating and managing basic communication protocols were key stumbling blocks.

The number of members in the collaborative had short-term impacts on how quickly collaborative scaffolding could develop. We observed how the smallest collaborative was very protective of the close-knit trust it had earned over time and reticent to bring on new members; whereas we also observed the largest collaborative at inception in our research cohort struggle to get all members on the proverbial same page, leading to a sense of decentralization within the group.

2. In-person interactions of the collaborative

We observed that the capacity for in-person interactions influenced differences in the quality of collaborative scaffolding that different groups were able to build. In-person interactions set the context for deep person-to-person connections and helped members break out of their everyday newsroom routines. The collaboratives that were able to manage more in-person interactions were able to build stronger collaborative scaffolding.

One collaborative's member put it this way: "When you meet in person, sometimes you can have that parking lot conversation on your way out of the meeting where you can ask a collaborator, 'Someone said this, and I was just wondering what you thought about that.' It's harder to have those reflective conversations now, unless you're intentionally going to reach out to someone and say, 'I need to talk about this conversation.'"

Before the pandemic hit, the Charlotte collaborative held in-person meetings at rotating library branches around the city of Charlotte, with the goal of experiencing and understanding various aspects of the city in new ways. This kind of in-person interaction had two benefits. First, it allowed members of the Charlotte collaborative to forge real relationships with one another. It also exposed newsroom members in a tangible way to community settings and community members that they would not necessarily have otherwise encountered.

Because of the importance of in-person interactions for strengthening collaborative scaffolding, the collaboratives that launched just before and during the pandemic were at a distinct disadvantage. One collaborative that launched during the pandemic had robust plans to promote in-person interactions — including the use of a dedicated co-working space provided by a local funder and a planned series of in-person audience forums. But those plans were shelved when pandemic lockdowns began. All of this young collaborative's meetings were then conducted by Zoom.

3. Shared understanding and commitment to the solutions journalism framework

We observed that differences between collaboratives in their shared understanding and commitment to solutions journalism also helped explain their differences in collaborative scaffolding. The collaboratives that had a deep and shared understanding of the solutions journalism framework were able to orient together around shared values that prioritized community and service.

The Broke in Philly collaborative, which had a very strong commitment to the values of solutions journalism and strong collaborative scaffolding, was able to break new ground in the ways it reported on tragedy in its communities. For example, Broke in Philly launched a series called “With Love” to pay tribute to those who died from Covid-19, then extended the series to include those who died from gun violence. To support the series, the collaborative built out a website to publish tributes and encouraged community members to submit letters and stories commemorating their loved ones.

The Broke in Philly collaborative also pushed itself to continually find new ways to apply the solutions journalism framework to its coverage, even in the midst of persistently difficult local and national events. (For some examples, see [here](#) and [here](#) and [here](#).) A member put it this way: “In covering the twin crises of the pandemic and the racial justice protests of last summer, it was hard to find the good news amid all of the tension and tragedy. However, by forcing ourselves to look through a solutions lens, we found stories that proved that people are already out there, working for a better world. And these are solid ideas that can persist in a post-pandemic world.”

But not all collaboratives we studied were able to fully understand or embrace the solutions journalism framework and share its values. One young collaborative we studied was still in the process of cultivating buy-in from its members on the solutions journalism framework but was not initiating shared solutions-based reporting projects. Members had gone through solutions journalism training, but the framework was proving difficult to grasp and implement in actual story generation. “It’s not instinctive for reporters or editors,” said one collaborative member, referencing the practice of solutions journalism. “And we haven’t practiced enough to get strong at it.” Another member said, “I’m someone who’s been also interested in solutions journalism for a long time, but hasn’t really done any of it yet.”

4. Collaborative leadership and project management

We found that collaborative leadership and project management were critical differentiating factors in developing strong scaffolding. The role of the collaborative project manager in particular was pivotal in explaining the differences in collaborative scaffolding among groups in our study cohort.

In collaboratives with strong scaffolding, the project manager was consistently setting a positive tone for collaborative meetings and was disciplined in structuring the time when members were together. Strong project managers also took responsibility for steering the group through fulfillment of its grant obligations. In addition to providing clear and steady project management, we observed that the project managers in strong collaboratives acted as a neutral third-party among member newsrooms, helping resolve disputes, bring clarity to confusion, and coaching members to contribute their best.

Finding and keeping strong project managers was not easy. In Charlotte, finding a collaborative leader took years, and strongly shaped the collaboratives ability to gain momentum. Explained one member: “We went through some really, really, long meetings that didn’t go anywhere. And people were starting to say, ‘Maybe this is one of those things everybody talks about and nothing ever happens. We got to a point where the group agreed that we would use some of our funding money to hire a director. And even though he’s not full time, I feel like that was a moment at which we crossed to a whole different era.”

In some of the collaboratives still working to build collaborative scaffolding, we observed that collaborative meetings were often disorganized in their focus and flow. Some members in those collaboratives pointed out to us that meeting invitations and agendas were not reliably set and shared in advance.

For example, one young collaborative we studied hired a project manager who was only able to devote 10 hours per week to managing the group. The limited capacity of the project manager meant that very little time was able to be spent tending to the needs of the group. Thorny questions about collaborative membership and focus persisted throughout the first year of the collaborative’s life. Two key members stopped participating in the collaborative, citing bandwidth issues. By the time our period of observation ended, the collaborative disbanded after SJN did not renew the collaborative for its second year of the grant. Since then, the collaborative has brought on a new project manager, established a new plan, and relaunched with new funding from SJN for six more months.

While strong project management was a critical factor in determining how quickly collaboratives could develop scaffolding, initial leadership and

buy-in at the ecosystem level also made a difference. We observed that collaboratives that were originated and initiated by a funder, rather than a coalition of funders and local newsrooms tended to require more time to build momentum than collaboratives that began with organic interest among newsrooms to collaborate. Explained one member in a funder-driven collaborative: “One of the struggles of our collaborative is that a funder came in and decided we were all going to work together, rather than all of us saying, ooh, let’s work together and see if we can get funding to do it.” The collaboratives that were funder-led had to work harder to create and maintain buy-in from their member newsrooms.

The quality of collaborative leadership inevitably also included issues around the status and centrality of legacy metro newsrooms. We heard multiple examples in different collaboratives of members working in digital-first or small news organizations who could sometimes feel that their major newspaper colleagues were slowing down decision-making capacity, or “bigfooting” story coverage and agenda setting. While collaboratives with strong scaffolding were able to find ways to navigate around the issue of legacy news cultures, in other collaboratives dynamics around legacy news cultures prompted members from smaller newsrooms to pull back from collaborative efforts.


5. Clear subject orientation

We also observed that the subject choice for each collaborative influenced the group’s ability to develop collaborative scaffolding. The more well specified and well planned a collaborative’s chosen reporting subject, the easier it was for collaborative members to assess the intended audience, brainstorm story ideas, and build a specific strategy and brand for the collaborative as an entity. We also saw that a well-specified subject helped moderate competition between newsrooms in the ecosystem by clearly defining the boundaries of what kinds of stories a collaborative would and would not cover.

A clear subject orientation early in a collaborative’s life also sets the stage for later success. We saw that as the maturing collaboratives evolved into new subject areas, their track record of successfully working together on a specific subject became a foundation of experience and trust that enabled the members to take on more complex subject areas. For example, the New Hampshire collaborative was eventually able to take on the broader subject of race and equity across the state because of how it had succeeded in its previous subjects. Tackling that subject required serious organizational structuring within the collaborative, as they selected subject verticals to break down the broad umbrella subject of race and equity.

Conversely, the less track record a collaborative had working on a specific subject, the more the collaborative struggled to change directions. For example, when the pandemic struck, all the collaboratives we studied quickly adjusted their focus to cover Covid-19 in their communities. But we saw that the pivot to cover Covid-19 was particularly challenging for developing collaboratives that had not yet had time to establish trust within the group or familiarity with solutions journalism inside their groups. Explained one member of a developing collaborative, "When we decided to pivot at the urging of the Solutions Journalism Network to Covid, we weren't prepared. ... We hadn't done a lot of brainstorming about deeper pieces, smarter pieces, solutions pieces."

The Special Role of Solutions Journalism in Generating Outcomes and Impact

 Our study of the development, outcomes, and impact of collaboratives is unique in that the collaboratives we studied are not focused on producing traditional journalism, but rather on applying a solutions journalism framework to reporting. While we believe the idea of a collaborative lifecycle and the concept of collaborative scaffolding can be usefully applied to all types of collaborative journalism, it is worth exploring the special role that solutions journalism might play in the creation and development of collaborative scaffolding. While this study did not compare solutions-focused collaboratives to traditional journalism collaboratives, we were able to use our data to create an initial analysis of the special role solutions journalism may play in the development of collaborative scaffolding.

As outlined above, collaborative scaffolding can be observed through a shared values orientation, trust among members, and commitment to the collaborative as an entity. So how might solutions journalism itself influence the development of collaborative scaffolding? Our analysis suggests that solutions journalism can develop and strengthen collaborative scaffolding in three ways: through meeting collaborators' needs beyond monetary resources, by providing a rigorous way to test assumptions, and through fostering a sense of community and belonging to a movement larger than the single collaborative.

Meeting collaborators' needs for meaningful participation

Solutions journalism as a whole provides a ready-made values framework that is the core of collaborative scaffolding. The mere existence of an explicit, shared set of values has the potential to get collaborators from very different backgrounds on the same page from the very beginning. The kind of strong, early, momentum that explicit values provide can carry a collaborative through the inevitable ups and downs of the early stages of work together.

How does it do this? We have heard from collaborative members in this study and from industry colleagues who work in collaboratives that the promise of resources (usually money, though sometimes capacity) is often the core motivating factor for newsrooms to step outside their comfort zones and collaborate with others. The unique differentiator of solutions journalism as a basis for collaboration is that the specific values of the approach meet collaborators' needs for meaningful participation, service, and learning — in addition to the Solutions Journalism Network providing resources for reporting.



For example, the solutions journalism focus on generating insight about urgent problems meant that for some of the collaboratives we studied, the Covid-19 pandemic was experienced as an opportunity for meaningful work. The New Hampshire collaborative, which had been operating for years by the start of the pandemic and worked on mental health as a topic, found its stride with the subject of Covid-19, finding newfound promise and potential in the collaborative's power as a group.

Providing a rigorous way to test assumptions

The solutions journalism framework provides explicit ways to test assumptions about usual ways of practicing journalism. The reporting style can be very exacting and rigorous, even as the reporting products can take a wide range of forms. When practiced in a collaborative context, solutions journalism's focus on generating insight with rigor helps build the trust that is a vital component of collaborative scaffolding because reporters are forced to question their assumptions and be transparent about their practices together.

Collaborative members across the cohort described the benefit of the "learning lab" component of their respective collaboratives: Learning more about their own region and communities, learning more about their craft through trainings and shared expertise, and learning more ways to work alongside the community members. This capacity for learning can lead to more relevance, access and insight. For example, Charlotte's story output includes solutions journalism emphasis and experimentation through PANDEM!C graphic news series, which was distributed through the public library and placed in the public school system.

The rigor required of solutions journalism is critical to maintaining the heft of this type of journalism and was valued by the journalists we



interviewed. For those trained in theories of objectivity and fairness, the rigor of solutions journalism gained credibility and helped ensure quality. And for journalists eager to rethink traditional journalism paradigms, this component served as a guiding bedrock principle. For example, the Northeast Ohio collaborative paid particular attention to the Solutions Journalism “tracker,” identifying which stories technically qualified and which did not. This was a simple way of ensuring a certain baseline level of quality in stories.

Fostering a sense of community and belonging to a movement

The structure, resources, and network of the Solutions Journalism Network itself helped create a container for collaborative scaffolding to develop and foster community and belonging. In our observation, the Network does not foster competition among collaboratives and newsrooms but rather promotes resource sharing and mutual learning, especially during twice-monthly “water cooler” meetings for collaborative leaders. This takes the shape of sharing internal planning documents, revenue strategies, and other tips for engaging group members. Distinct from other funders and associations in the space, funding flows to collaboratives, not to specific media organizations. With the help of inter- and intra-collaborative meet-ups, the Local Media Project central organizers created a specific space for members to feel part of the values of the collaborative effort and the values of solutions journalism. In addition to the support of the Local Media Project vice president and a central coordinator, each collaborative in the research cohort was assigned a representative from SJN. This person provided support to the group and the group’s leader by providing momentum for the work, fostering experimentation and dialogue, and developing opportunities for the group.

Conclusion

In an industry whose history is pockmarked by clickbait, hero worship, and competitive speed, acts of collaboration cut against the grain of decades of business-as-usual in the news. And yet, as a rallying cry for a new way of doing the news, collaboration can often seem like just another flashy buzzword. Anyone who has dared mount a collaborative project has quickly learned that productive and authentic collaboration remains exceptionally difficult to sustain. Personalities clash, incentives get easily misaligned, resources inevitably dry up, the news cycle moves on.

But collaboration for impact is possible. Our research has shown that with sufficient time, resources, and leadership, collaborative groups can learn to work together and produce truly remarkable journalism. We believe strong collaborative scaffolding is the foundation for impactful journalism and for journalism that catalyzes community change.

This study of solutions journalism collaboratives and their outcomes led us to a deep exploration of collaborative scaffolding, how it functions, and how solutions journalism can underpin its development. In the process of teasing out these particulars, we discovered another broader truth about the solutions journalism collaboratives. Their power stems in part from the fact that they fill a vacuum in today's journalism education landscape. By providing an environment for testing assumptions, working across boundaries, and learning together, the solutions journalism collaboratives we studied are establishing themselves as training grounds for the practice of cutting-edge journalism.

This gives us hope for the future of local journalism. As our colleagues in the field have rightly pointed out, journalism's systems and theory of change are in need of an update. We believe that collaborative scaffolding, built with explicit values and goals that work alongside and for community needs, is one path to creating new structures that truly produce positive change. This is especially the case when collaboratives include member organizations that are not news organizations.

We have seen firsthand the incredible capacity of journalists to work together, across differences and divides, in pursuit of community service. Collaborations, especially when they grow more expansive in their ideas and less beholden to industry culture, can better partner with community members to share information and stories to pave the way for better outcomes, faster and with more buy-in. Strong collaborative scaffolding is the key to that success.

Methodological Appendix

Defining Impact

The umbrella term of *impact* is often used to capture the effects of journalistic outcomes within a context. To define impact in this study, we followed the definition of Green-Barber and Stonbely in “Collaborating for Change: Approaches to Measuring the Impact of Collaborative Journalism” (2020). They define media impact¹ as “a change in the status quo at the level of an individual, network, or institution, resulting from a direct journalistic intervention that gathers, assesses, creates and presents news and information” (p. 4, Green-Barber, Stonbely, 2020). For this study we added an additional level of interest: the news and information ecosystem. We defined a *news and information ecosystem* as a structure that is made of three parts: information providers, such as traditional journalism outlets and non-journalism entities; community members; and, the relationship between information providers and community members (Stonebraker and Green-Barber, 2021).

To unpack how impact functions in society, we build on the impact typology from Green-Barber, “Media Impact Model”² and Green-Barber and Stonbely, “Collaborating for Change: Approaches to Measuring the Impact of Collaborative Journalism” (2020). This model elaborates four types of impact: Individual change (e.g. more people engage with community events), network change (e.g. resources and access to resources shift in a community), institutional change (e.g. an organization amends a policy), and media amplification (e.g. growing awareness and attention on a fixed idea or subject). As we identified the ways these types of impact might occur, we referenced examples provided in a presentation by Todd Lin and Gross for Solutions Journalism Network, “Northeast Ohio Journalism Collaborative: Impact and metrics” (2020).³

Impact can be experienced both externally and internally to journalism collaborations, as outlined in Green-Barber and Stonbely (2020). Following this approach, we defined impact in a collaborative as occurring *externally* if we could identify a shift in a tangible form outside the collaborative itself — for example, a policy change following the publication

⁴ Adapted from “Collaborating for Change: Approaches to Measuring the Impact of Collaborative Journalism” (Green-Barber & Stonbely, 2020): <https://collaborativejournalism.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/8/2020/07/Collaborating-for-Change-Approaches-to-measuring-the-impact-of-collaborative-journalism-31JUL2020.pdf>

⁵ Adapted from “Media Impact Model” (Green-Barber, 2017): <https://s3-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/lindsaygreenbarber.com/assets/Impact+Architects+LLC+Media+Impact+Model.pdf>

⁶ Adapted from “Northeast Ohio Journalism Collaborative: Impact and metrics” (Todd Lin & Gross, 2020)

of a journalistic product. And we defined impact as occurring *internally* if we saw evidence of a shift in attitudes and perspectives felt by collaborative members.

We used this typology of impact to guide our thinking about the ways to identify and measure impact, and then leveraged those ideas in our research design to build hypotheses about what shape the collaboratives' impact might take.

Focusing on diversity, equity, inclusion, and sustainability indicators

In constructing the hypotheses of potential impact outcomes for our surveys and interview questions, we focused particularly on diversity, equity, inclusion, and sustainability.

Following Berglez, Olausson and Ots (2017), we defined *sustainability*⁴ in this study as the capacity to consistently produce "journalism that meets the information needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own journalistic information needs" (p. xxII). By this definition, sustainability includes an entity's business model and its methods to adapt to, and meet the needs of, evolving realities in our society and environment. We used this definition in our research to guide the development of hypotheses about the collaboratives' progress toward sustainable business models, as well as their capacity for adaptation to societal and environmental change.

To build our definitions of diversity, equity and inclusion, we relied on work by the Ford Foundation. The Foundation defined *diversity* as "the representation of all our varied identities and differences (race, ethnicity, gender, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, national origin, tribe, caste, socio-economic status, thinking and communication styles, etc.), collectively and as individuals" and the effort "to proactively engage, understand, and draw on a variety of perspectives"⁵ (Ford Foundation 2021). The Foundation added emphasis on viewing differences among a group as a source of opportunity and strength, a further refinement which we also adopt.

The Foundation defined *equity* as, "fair treatment, equality of opportunity, and fairness in access to information and resources for all"⁶ (Ford Foundation 2021). Building on this definition, we aimed to explore the ways that collaboratives were able to achieve fairness and equal access in their structure, decision-making, and impact on communities.

⁴ Adapted from "What is Sustainable Journalism? An Introduction" (Berglez, Olausson & Ots, 2017)

⁵ Adapted from "Diversity, equity, and inclusion." (2021): <https://www.fordfoundation.org/about/people/diversity-equity-and-inclusion/>

⁶ Adapted from "Diversity, equity, and inclusion." (2021): <https://www.fordfoundation.org/about/people/diversity-equity-and-inclusion/>

Inclusion characterizes an environment and a practice in which people feel free to represent themselves as they truly are, and feel their unique experiences and expressions are respected by others (Ford Foundation 2021). It is the belief that “every person’s voice adds value” and inclusive efforts “create balance in the face of power differences”⁷ (Ford Foundation 2021). Therefore, in our study, we aimed to explore the ways that power was shared among participants in the collaboratives, and between the collaboratives and the communities, as indicators of inclusion.

Methodological Approach and Study Design

Building a theory of the case

Our study design began with the premise that the act of creating a collaborative involved forming a new entity. This new entity can set expectations, traditions and norms for the entity itself, as well as for the stories and events it produced and the community it involved. In addition, following the stated tenets of the solutions journalism approach, we described the intended effects of a solutions framework as empowerment, discernment and adaptation, experienced by the collaborative’s reporters and editors, by the collaborative’s participating organizations, by the communities the collaboratives engaged, and by the collaborative itself.

Our theory, therefore, was that the formation of a new entity, combined with the solutions framework, can foster values and practices that are different from—even outside the bounds of—standard journalism expectations and belief systems. By the logic of this theory, the creation of new entities and the solutions framework would be the mechanisms through which solutions journalism collaboratives could create the new outcomes at the individual, collaborative, story, network, and institution levels.

Study design

Hypotheses and indicators

From the theory of the case, we constructed a structured set of hypotheses organized by levels and types of impact. We then operationalized each hypothesis into a set of indicators and related methods for measurement. This key indicators framework formed the basis of our study design.

Baseline case studies

To help ensure our data collection and analysis would be attuned to baseline differences between the collaboratives, we began the study by constructing

⁷ Adapted from “Diversity, equity, and inclusion.” (2021): <https://www.fordfoundation.org/about/people/diversity-equity-and-inclusion/>

baseline case studies of the founding, development, and current state of each collaborative in the study. We conducted 18 interviews total, and two to four per collaborative, to understand the context, key players, major initiatives and evolution of each collaborative. We used this data to construct baseline case descriptions of the collaboratives. These cases served as the baseline reference point for future data collection.

Survey development and administration

From the key indicators framework and baseline case data, we then created surveys to capture data for each item at each level. These instruments were standardized for use across the cohorts and developed through reviewing existing literature and conversations with Solutions Journalism Network staff.

Collaborative member survey

The first survey we administered focused on the experience and attitudes of collaborative members. A total of 85 respondents submitted responses between March 2, 2021 and May 19, 2021. Respondents included newsroom leaders, staff reporters, non-news members and freelancers who work directly for the collaboratives. Of the 85 responses, 79 identified their respective collaborative. Using those response rates and comparing with the membership total for each collaborative, we calculated a 78% response rate.

Audience surveys

We then administered a set of audience surveys for each collaborative in the research cohort, with a total of 10 surveys. We sent surveys in English and in Spanish to five of the six collaboratives⁸ between May and September 2021. Survey distribution was conducted via the collaboratives, with call-outs over social media channels, newsletters and in some cases, through direct emails. In total, 144 audience responses were generated through the surveys. Of those 144 responses, 4 responses were in Spanish and 140 were in English. More than one-third of the results came from the Broke in Philly collaborative, with a total of 57 responses generated from newsletter calls to action. This number represents a 12.6% response rate among the newsletter's super users.

Research interviews

Including the initial 18 interviews conducted for the baseline case studies, we conducted a total of 67 interviews during the course of the research study. Interviews lasted between 45 to 60 minutes and occurred in one-on-one settings.

⁸ We did not send surveys for one collaborative because it had recently fielded its own audience survey and chose not to participate.

Member interviews

Following the member survey, we conducted five to six interviews with collaborative members per collaborative, for a total of 31 interviews. Interviewees self-selected to participate in interviews when they responded to the member survey. These interviews took place over Zoom and by phone between April 7, 2021 and June 21, 2021.

Audience interviews

Following the audience surveys, we conducted 10 interviews with audience members, with one to three interviews per collaborative. We had zero audience interviews for one collaborative. Interviewees self-selected to participate in interviews when they responded to their respective audience survey. These interviews took place over Zoom and by phone between June 8, 2021 and July 28, 2021.

Manager interviews

Near the end of our data-gathering process, we conducted five interviews with each collaborative manager for each respective collaborative. There was one exception where we did not interview the manager. These interviews took place over Zoom between July 30, 2021 and August 30, 2021.

Local Media Project interviews

Near the end of our data-gathering process, we conducted three one-on-one interviews with the leaders of the Local Media Project at Solutions Journalism Network. These interviews took place over Zoom and by phone between August 23, 2021 and August 30, 2021.

Observations

As part of our research study, we observed 25 meetings among collaborative members, with members of the Local Media Project team, and during public-facing meetings.

Collaborative meetings

Throughout the course of the research study, we observed collaboratives in action during their own monthly member meetings. In total we observed five collaborative membership meetings among our research cohort, one of which was not a formal membership meeting but rather a subject-based meeting. We also observed one membership meeting of a collaborative outside our research cohort. These meetings took place between January 21, 2021 and April 1, 2021.

Local Media Project meetings

Throughout the course of the research study, we observed collaborative leaders in action during their typically monthly “water cooler” meetings. In total we observed 10 water cooler meetings between October 23, 2020 and June 25, 2021. In addition, we observed related meetings for both collaborative leaders and members, such as a discussion about a software product and post-conference meet-ups. In total we observed five such meetings between March 4, 2021 and May 19, 2021. Throughout the course of the research study, we conducted four group meetings to gather information about the history and context of the collaboratives in the research cohort with the leaders of the Local Media Project. These meetings took place over Zoom between September 9, 2020 and March 9, 2021.

Content Audit

During the month of July 2021, we performed an audit of content for each of the six collaboratives in our research cohort to track how the content of each collaborative reflected the outcomes under study. We tracked the content as it was published, the platforms for the content, the engagement with the content, and any additional notes observed. We also tracked if the published content qualified as solutions journalism content.

Process Overview

A “collaborative” refers to a group of newsrooms and non-news members from different organizations that come together to produce joint reporting, often related to a single topic. The newsrooms which were part of the collaboratives we studied generally designated one journalist per newsroom (one person per organization, in the case of non-news members) to participate in the collaborative. The journalist members of the collaborative would then work on behalf of the newsroom in the collaborative. Some collaboratives also held separate meetings for editorial leaders and for reporters. The collaboratives we studied met as a group with a cadence of their choosing, such as weekly or monthly, to review editorial projects in the works and to pitch and approve new projects. Across the collaboratives we studied, group decisions were generally made by majority rule, with members voting in-person in meetings or sometimes weighing in over email. Group policies such as voting methods, as well as editorial policies, such as how to edit, credit and share content, were decided at the collaborative-specific level.

The collaboratives in our cohort were each based in a geographic region and were given funding to become part of the Solutions Journalism Network’s Local Media Project. As a condition of funding, the collaboratives were required to choose a single topic and cover that topic using a solutions journalism approach. Once a collaborative had identified a subject, members

often pitched stories that interested them, and then members would weigh how new story ideas fit within their broader collection of work. Other times, members identified a critical issue and broke down the story into separate areas to cover, assigning different members different stories. "

Data Analysis

In our data analysis, we organized interviews and meetings in separate spreadsheets and assigned unique reference numbers to each interview and meeting. Throughout the research window, there was a continuous process of comparing interviews and interview notes to the research hypotheses. We collected these observations in a shared document and reviewed them during regular meetings.

Of the interviews performed, we transcribed 24 interviews and 5 meetings verbatim. In our review of these documents, we highlighted and noted variables as identified in our research questions, such as key metrics and evidence of inclusion and connection with community members. In our analysis of surveys, we applied a similar method. Our surveys were built with the hypotheses in mind, and in our review of the results, we tethered the findings back to the original hypotheses.

In our research analysis, we built an analysis template that segmented findings according to the following levels: journalists and community members as individuals; the collaborative, local community groups and institutions as groups; and, the local and national information ecosystems as networks. We then distinguished the findings among three buckets: the process, the outcomes and the relationship to solutions journalism.

The analytic questions we framed included: Did the collaborative change the views and actions of individuals, build internal structures and processes that level the playing field, re-appraise goals to meet changing needs, develop healthy financial footing, foster vulnerability and openness to address social and environmental concerns, and prompt a shift in the local media ecosystem, community groups, institutional policy or funding?

Leveraging the analysis template, we built case files for each collaborative, organized by the level of impact and the framing question. After building out each case file, we then returned to the questions of the analysis template, and filled out the template for each collaborative, generating unique analysis reports for each collaborative.

Our analysis in the report is synthetic and constructed both inductively and deductively from the data we gathered. While a rigorous hypothesis focus informed our instrument design, in the analysis stage we sought to bring together insights from each of our methods into a comprehensive analytic narrative that could explain our core findings.



About the Solutions Journalism Network

The **Solutions Journalism Network (SJN)** is leading a global shift in journalism, focused on what the news misses most often: how people are trying to solve problems and what we can learn from their successes or failures. SJN is a New York-based nonprofit with the mission to transform journalism globally through rigorous and compelling reporting about responses to social problems. The Local Media Project is an initiative of the Solutions Journalism Network that focuses on building solutions journalism collaboratives in local media ecosystems.

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