Building equity in journalism collaborations

By Angilee Shah

A collaborative journalism
guide from the Center
for Cooperative Media at
Montclair State University

About the Center for Cooperative Media

The mission of the Center for Cooperative Media at Montclair State University is to grow and strengthen local journalism, and in doing so, serve New Jersey citizens.

The Center does that through the use of partnerships, collaborations, training, product development, research and communication. It works with more than 270 partners throughout the Garden State as part of a network known as the NJ News Commons, which is its flagship project. The network includes hyperlocal digital publishers, public media, newspapers, television outlets, radio stations, multimedia news organizations and independent journalists. The Center is also a national leader in the study of collaborative journalism. It believes that collaboration is a key component of the future success of local news organizations and healthy news ecosystems.

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For more information, visit CenterforCooperativeMedia.org.

About the author

Angilee Shah is an editor, reporter and teacher who builds successful teams and engaging content. Recently, she spent six years in public media, establishing U.S. immigration coverage for The World and building a community to support it. There, she ran a successful campaign to bring 50 new contributors into public media — in a year. Now she is a coach and the founder of a media company that will launch in 2020.

So you're thinking of entering into a collaborative news project?

As it becomes more common for news organizations to collaborate — and for foundations and donors to support this kind of work — we need to be especially careful that our collaborations do not simply replicate the inequities of our industry.

I've spent 15 years building new kinds of journalism practices, mostly as an editor in newsrooms. I've trained and consulted with many organizations that are trying to bring diversity to their ranks. What I've counseled them, though, is that making a few hires or partnerships isn't enough. There should not just be diversity in numbers, but diversity among those who have power in news media. In other words, there should be equity.

In its most literal, financial sense, equity is how much you own in a property or business. How much of it is yours and not on loan from a bank? (A small digression: Khan Academy has an excellent explainer on equity and home ownership.) In news media, it is tempting to confuse the metaphorical lending of editorial power with actual equity, actual durable power in the system. Actual equity in news includes financial ownership, decision-making power and non-temporary leadership.

This guide is meant for those who are making decisions about collaborative projects through the lens of the question: Does this collaboration give our organization and our partners equity?

In its broadest, dictionary-definition sense, the word equity means justice. Although it is not a precise, measurable thing, justice does represent an idea about how resources are allocated. Kris Putnam-Walkerly and Elizabeth Russell surveyed foundations on how they define equity in 2016 for the Stanford Social Innovation Review. They came up with a definition that is not simply diversity, inclusion or equality.

"It describes something deeper and more complex," Putnam-Walkerly and Russell write. "It is about each of us getting what we need to survive or succeed — access to opportunity, networks, resources, and supports — based on where we are and where we want to go."

So the broader purpose of this guide is to help news media organizations create collaborations that allow us all to succeed in news, to have equity in this system. While I tried to provide concrete questions for you to answer in each section — the pragmatic ways you can evaluate your collaborative work — some of the deepest work is more philosophical in nature. I have tried to introduce some of those concepts through narratives and experiences as well.

I hope this guide can serve as a reference of ideas and questions for you to consider when you are choosing or designing collaborative projects.

A note about the collaborative nature of this guide itself: Seeking equity is a constant and imperfect pursuit and in this guide I am cognizant of my failings. Dozens of colleagues have been generous and courageous to offer their valuable time and wisdom for this guide. I have quoted and named as many of those colleagues as possible, and attributed as much as possible. But I know I have done this imperfectly, as I distilled the lessons of others and my own experience into this guide. Please know that I am grateful to my colleagues over the years who have opened so many doors of inquiry that ended up in this text, and sorry that I was unable to name you all.

Wendi C. Thomas, the founder and editor of MLK50: Justice Through Journalism, described her comments about collaborations as "observations, not criticisms." This guide is also written in that spirit, as a lens through which to view and question the work. It is not a commentary on what is right or wrong, what is valuable and not. In equitable collaborations, it is important that partners make that evaluation for themselves.

So I submit this guide to you with humility and with hope that it can both challenge you and that you might challenge it.

Consider the
big picture

Some groups have been excluded from the most powerful halls of U.S. news media for as long as U.S. news media have existed. The structures and institutions we rely on for news were designed, like many U.S. institutions, to grant power to a select few.

Here is one example: We recently saw the 50th anniversary of the Kerner Commission Report on Civil Disorder come and go. The 1968 report found the news media shockingly negligent in its inclusion of African Americans, and a major factor in why society was increasingly divided. It concluded, "The painful process of readjustment that is required of the American news media must begin now."

Fast-forward 50 years and diversity among news media staff and leadership is still inadequate. And news media leaders' commitment to "readjustment" is questionable: The American Society of News Editors survey of diversity in newsrooms had a historically low rate of participation in its data collection, despite an elegant and impassioned call by lead researcher Meredith D. Clark, University of Virginia assistant professor, for leaders to "hold themselves to the same accountability standards we expect from other influential sectors."

And yet, through these decades, marginalized people and communities have continued to build incredible organizations of immense value to the U.S. media landscape. Scholars and historians recall that history to remind us that, yes, we have been here all along. (See Joshunda Sanders' "How Racism and Sexism Killed Traditional Media" and Lewis Raven Wallace's "The View from Somewhere" for just two of many examples.)

When you take this into account, research by Monash University senior lecturer Bill Birnbauer about lopsided philanthropic funding is eye-opening.

"I analyzed the IRS returns of 60 Institute for Nonprofit News members, about half of the institute's membership at the time," Birnbauer writes. "Foundations and donors gave those outlets a total of $469.5 million between 2009 and 2015. Three national news organizations – ProPublica, the Center for Public Integrity and the Center for Investigative Reporting – took in $185.4 million, or 40 percent of that money."

Organizations that are founded by or primarily serve people of color are notably absent from lists of the biggest recipients of both philanthropy

and venture capitalism dollars. Instead of making up for lost time in supporting media organizations founded for or by marginalized people, resources are still concentrated in the hands of a select few institutions.

What does this have to do with your pending collaboration?

The context of the institutions around us are important to consider, even as we make decisions that are right for our own organizations or colleagues. Or as Kathleen Osta and Hugh Vasquez with the National Equity Project write, "As leaders for equity, we have to examine, unpack and mitigate our own biases and dismantle the policies and structures that hold inequity in place."

Jo Ellen Kaiser was the director of The Media Consortium from 2011 until the organization closed in 2018. The consortium acted as a nonprofit and was fiscally sponsored by the Foundation for National Progress, which runs the non-profit news organization Mother Jones. It started as a way to transition the member organizations into digital publishing models; only later did it begin to address issues of equity and representation.

Kaiser says their efforts toward equity did not feel successful, though many organizations in The Media Consortium made progress. Why? Because the consortium was led by mostly white, progressive organizations. Even as individuals made decisions that increased diversity in their work, what was needed was more systemic change. What was really needed in this consortium was for those who

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were actually underrepresented — people of color — to be setting the guidelines for what the steps toward equity should be. In other words, the consortium had to concede decision-making power to others to build equity in their organizations over all.

The Southern journalism collective Press On has a draft code on equity in collaborations, which it inherited from the disbanded Media Consortium. While the draft is still in process as of this writing, it is worth reading. It extols the virtues of collaborations that make possible the kind of journalism that news organizations could not accomplish alone. But it offers important cautions, among them:

"Community trust is violated when outlets parachute into communities, taking advantage of the hard work of indigenous news outlets, journalists, and citizen reporters. The sustainability, diversity and vibrancy of the news economy is put at risk when individual reporters and smaller independent or community-based news outlets are not compensated or credited for their work."

I want to call attention to the broader consideration of the "news economy" in Press On's code, which places collaborations into the context of a system. While entering into a collaboration, whether funded by foundations, subscribers or other revenue sources, organizations can make decisions based purely on what is beneficial to them. But what Press On suggests here — and I agree — is that organizations should also consider the impact their decisions will have on the broader ecosystem if they are committed to equity in our industry.

One example of how a collaboration might affect a news economy is the way in which it distributes, or does not distribute general operating funds.

"General operating funds are hard to come by and they are what we need, what everyone needs," says Lovey Cooper, managing editor of Scalawag, a five-year-old organization that covers social justice in the South. When Scalawag chooses its collaborative projects, it keeps the need for core, institutional support in mind.

"Collaboration is no substitute for direct, unrestricted funding for news organizations," says Jonathan Kealing, chief network officer of the Institute for Nonprofit News. He helps to facilitate collaborations among more than 230 members, and while those collaborations can produce great journalism, he says more foundations and supporters should offer general operating support for smaller organizations, especially those that serve underrepresented people. While external funding can be crucial to making collaborations happen, general support is crucial to the long-term sustainability of diverse organizations, he says. "You need both — one does not substitute for the other."

This is, as the Press On Code describes, the "news economy" in which we live. So it is important to consider whether a collaborative project or series is the right use of your resources, especially if what you really need is general operating funds. And if you have a large operating budget, consider how a collaboration will affect the bottom lines of your partners who might not have equitable access to that kind of funding or capital.

Here are additional questions you might ask about the big picture of your collaboration. There are no right or wrong answers to these questions, and not all questions will apply to every potential collaboration. Rather, the questions are meant to spur a kind of mindfulness about how a collaboration will affect your whole organization and the ecosystem around you.

◤ **What is the benefit to my organization? Will I gain reach, skills, money, content or something else?**

◤ **What is the benefit to the community I want to serve? Will it help build a sustainable and diverse news ecosystem in the long term for them?**

◤ **How long will the project or relationship last? Does it come with long-term obligations, or requirements beyond publication or broadcast?**

◤ **Can I spare the resources the collaboration will require? Does the collaboration include resources that allow me to continue the core of my work?**

◤ **Will the collaboration contribute to my core mission, or distract?**

◤ **Who gets credited on the collaborators' properties and any third-party distributors' platforms? Will this build my audience?**

◤ **Does the collaboration empower the communities I want to serve, or follow victimhood narratives? If I want to tell the story in a different way, will I be empowered to do so?**

And from the people I've interviewed for this report, here are some red flags that the collaboration is not equitable. Again, these are things to think about, rather than a prescription to exit or enter into a collaboration.

◤ **If one organization frames it as giving another an "opportunity" or if they say anything close to "You should feel lucky." This is an indication that there is a power imbalance that should be addressed.**

◤ **If collaborators are hesitant to talk about money or are not transparent about who is funding the project or benefitting financially.**

◤ **If one organization acts without the consensus of the group.**

◤ **If you are asked to join a project after most of the parameters and goals of the collaboration have been set, especially if you are part of or serve an underrepresented community.**

Show us the **money!**

In 2016, Manolia Charlotin led collaborations for The Media Consortium. She also created TMC in Color, to help connect non-white journalists who worked in member journalism organizations. At the next year's annual meeting, in facilitated conversations with non-members and TMC in Color, some of the problems with collaborative work became clear.

"They found that the worst problem that POC-led outlets and POC writers face is larger organizations using their work and not compensating them properly," Kaiser says.

Collaboration is not subcontracting. There are many financial models you might consider, beyond one organization receiving funds from another. The budget can be divided per story, for specific expenses or can be divided along the lines of values of the project. It can be distributed equally among partners or by need or size.

"One of the things I've started doing," Kaiser says, "is paying more to outlets that are working in lower income communities or that are breaking ground or just getting started. It's equitable, but not equal."

If you want your collaboration to have equity, whatever model you choose, the finances should be clear to all members. Everyone should know all the "guideposts and guardrails," Kealing says.

Kaiser, too, stresses the need for transparency. "Money is where the power is," she says. Once you have a complete picture, you can make decisions that are right for you and your organization.

Lewis Raven Wallace, who co-founded and is a program director of Press On, says it's not just the responsibility of the smaller organizations to seek equity in the finances. "Don't exploit people's commitment to the project or willingness to work for less," he says.

Quincy Surasmith, a founding member of the Potluck Podcast Collective, says it is really important for individuals and organizations who are considering partnerships to have a clear sense of mission going in. For smaller organizations, this can be a challenge.

"A lot of them are hungry just to have their voices heard," Surasmith says. Resist that urge and "come in clear about how you want to frame your story and protect your sources." Have your purpose ready, he says, "or they will pick one for you."

All parties should interrogate how and why resources are spent. First, ask questions about the source of the money to get a complete picture of the transaction being made. Know where money and resources come from and how they are distributed among collaborators. Ask for real numbers and negotiate how much you give and get from the collaboration.

Knowing the requirements up front will also help you decide how much a collaboration will require you to change how you work. Jacob Nelson and Patrick Ferrucci's 2019 study of foundations and journalism, published in Media and Communication, explains how this works in the nonprofit context.

"We found that foundation funding did not push journalists to pursue or avoid specific topics with their reporting — perhaps the most obvious form of editorial influence," they wrote in the Columbia Journalism Review. "Instead, foundation funding was tied with the methods that journalists utilized for their reporting."

This is not to say that using new or different methods is bad, just that it should be explicit when you enter into a collaboration.

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Members should also think about their overhead, the general expenses to keep the lights on. Kealing says that he has seen partnerships that make organizations poorer because they do not consider the indirect costs of participating.

"Overhead is not a bad thing," Kealing says. All members should think about and understand their own financial needs and be sure they aren't putting their core operations at risk by entering a collaboration.

(Without veering too far into turning this into a business planning guide, Khan Academy again has great tutorials on business planning, including factoring overhead into your expenses.)

Or as Surasmith says, "Funding has a way of shaping practice and purpose." Does the funding that comes with collaborations shape your organization the way you want it to?

Here are some questions you might ask about the budget and funding. Again, there are no right or wrong answers to any of these questions, but asking them can help you make more informed decisions.

- **What is the budget and where did the money come from?**

- **Is the funding coming directly from a donor or foundation, or is it going through another organization?**

- **What are the deliverables of the funding? Rarely will a funder tell you what to publish, but they might require certain processes that influence what you do.**

- **What are the reporting requirements? This includes writing, data collection, presentations and travel.**

- **Can the collaboration give you access to new sources of revenue or funding over time?**

- **Can the collaboration help bring you closer to or maintain financial stability?**

Here are some questions you might ask about general operating expenses, like paying independent journalists or designers, and overhead, like rent or accounting:

- **Is anyone in the funding chain getting money for general operating expenses or overhead from the grants or investments in the projects?**

- **Are members of the collaborations getting equitable shares in those general operating expenses? Or have they agreed not to receive this kind of funding?**

- **Is there agreement about how general operating expenses are accounted for in the budget?**

- **Is the agreement in writing?** *(Stefanie Murray of the Center for Collaborative Media has a good list of examples of written agreements for collaborations.)*

Once you feel that the money at its source is equitable, you can make choices about how it will be spent:

- Is the budget transparent to all members? Or will the funds be split in a way agreeable to all members?

- How much will the facilitator receive? Are they being compensated well and also enough to prioritize the needs of the members of the collaboration? From whom do they receive payment? (We'll talk more about facilitators in the next section.)

- What other expenses will the group have collectively? If you need contractors or third-party companies to help create or distribute the work, how will they be chosen?

Get to know the **partners**

The Potluck Podcast Collective formed in 2016, as technology and media companies began consolidating around audio. It was, says founding member Quincy Surasmith, a way for Asian Americans with heterogeneous perspectives to lift one another. The group of ten podcasts (about seven are actively producing episodes at any given time) makes one another's work easier to find, even if people of color aren't the founders of the biggest audio companies. They promote one another and identify themselves as Potluck podcasts in each of their episodes. That kind of work helps keep podcasts about Asian Americans visible even when iTunes isn't celebrating Asian American Heritage Month, Surasmith says.

"It was never meant to be a market monetization model," he says. "Its purpose wasn't just to get big, to get notoriety."

That's not to say the members of the collective didn't get big reach. Among the podcasts was Good Muslim, Bad Muslim, which Surasmith says was getting 40,000 downloads per month. And that success helped others in the collective to increase their reach and improve their skills. The collective was created to give people with great stories and perspectives a chance to learn skills, a chance to try and even to fail.

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Good collaborations should "raise the boat for everyone," Kealing says. So it's important that you're in the water with collaborators whose boats you want to raise.

Cooper says some of Scalawag's most successful collaborations have been with Southerly, another publication in the South run by Lyndsey Gilpin. They have overlapping audiences and mission; Scalawag's focus is broadly social change while Southerly zooms in on environmental issues. The two organizations have sought funding together and their work has helped their core missions, while also lifting the editorial load.

Scalawag's less successful partnerships, often with big name publications, are with those who "don't know how to write about the South." These were often one-off stories in which their authors, independent journalists and writers were not compensated more for appearing in multiple publications. This was a problem because fair compensation for authors is among Scalawag's core values. They mentor and help raise up their contributors and appreciate partners who do the same.

"We want to be able to shepherd them along the freelance pipeline," Cooper says. "Sometimes that's why we collaborate."

While Scalawag might gain visibility from some partnerships, large reach does not always help them grow or sustain their work. Still, a partnership where the values don't align perfectly might still be worthwhile for promotional value or capacity to produce an ambitious story. For Cooper, it's about being intentional when you make this judgment call.

While you won't have the same revenue models or workplace practices, it is good to ask questions about your partners before you enter into a collaboration with them. It's appropriate for different organizations to play different roles in a collaboration, but it's up to each member to determine the roles they feel are aligned with their values.

Here are some questions you might ask about your potential partner organizations:

Labor

▼ **How do they compensate their employees and independent contractors?**

▼ **How open are their hiring practices and how diverse is their staff?**

▼ **Does their staff look roughly like the community the project is trying to serve? Are they parachuting into a new subject or neighborhood?**

▼ **Have they historically helped or harmed that community? If they have a history of harm or exclusion, what will make them a good partner this time around?**

▼ **Are people paid equitably across race and gender? Are the organizations' physical and digital spaces accessible?**

▼ **Are the organizations unionized or in the process of forming unions?**

▼ **Are organizations in the collaboration, including the funder, seeking to hire? Is the collaboration a recruitment tool, and if so, is that made transparent?**

Data

▼ **What kinds of data collection and privacy standards do collaborators have? Will you be exposing your own audience's data in a way you're uncomfortable with?**

▼ **Do the organizations have deals or integrations with Facebook or other technology companies?**

▼ **Will you be able to access the data that partners are collecting? Will you be able to track data related to your goals with the collaboration, whether it's revenue, reach or something else?**

Relationships

▼ **Do you know your potential collaborators? Do you trust that they will act with your interests and agreements in mind?**

▼ **Do your working styles align? Are you able to communicate effectively with all partners?**

▼ **Is your relationship with individuals or institutions? Are your collaborations about working with certain individuals or with whole organizations, and what happens in the event of layoffs or individuals leaving an organization?**

Understand the editorial **process**

It is important in collaborations to avoid taking for granted how the content will be created. Every organization has a different process, and when two organizations come together, a new process must be created. Understand what that editorial process will be, including who will be involved at every stage, who has veto power, and when and how you will handle disagreements. When the editorial process has space to change course and to entertain different perspectives, the collaboration can produce journalism with impact.

Wendi C. Thomas has found her partnerships essential to the growth and good work of MLK50 in Memphis, Tennessee. She was a 2019 ProPublica Local Reporting Network Fellow, and with that partnership, the organization she founded published investigative stories that relieved thousands of people from medical debt. The collaboration, she says, was "absolutely incredible" and brought resources to her small newsroom (at the time, just Thomas and one other full-time person, along with some part-time and freelance journalists).

"Professionally, this has probably been the best year of my life," Thomas says.

Could she have achieved this kind of success and meaningful journalistic work without her collaboration with ProPublica? She thinks yes, but it would have taken much longer and might not have gotten the reach it did.

Thomas has a strong sense of mission for her organization, and the conviction that the people of Memphis deserve to be represented as whole people, to "not reduce them to a prop" for investigations. She finds this mission easier to accomplish when her editors are local; national-level editing does not have to consider what happens when you run into the people you write about at the grocery store.

That tension between national resources and context and local mission is a very important one to navigate well. It's not bad that different organizations have different perspectives, but Thomas says it takes experience and confidence to navigate those differences, to speak up when it's time to take a stand and to learn from each other when that is what most benefits the project.

"A lot of times, organizations use collaborations as a way to not look like

they are doing parachute journalism," Cooper of Scalawag says. She calls it a kind of "parachute editing." People unfamiliar with the communities being reported on often edit out nuance, or place-making details that are core to Scalawag's style and values.

But when a collaboration is good, when editorial conflicts are productive, having second and third editors helps to make stories better and can be great for an organization. "It gets you out of a rut," she says.

Wallace, who created "The View from Somewhere" book and podcast to interrogate the history of what people understand as objectivity in journalism, says he is continually learning about how the systems and ways we produce journalism can be extractive, especially from marginalized people.

"The process of how we produce the news really matters," Wallace says. "How does process itself lead to a more just world?" In his trainings, he shows editors and reporters "how to interrupt," how to challenge rooted practices that exclude people or perspectives.

Here's an example of that kind of interruption: MLK50 takes as a starting point, from its founding in 2017, the values of Martin Luther King, Jr., who was assassinated in Memphis in 1968. Significantly, he was there in support of sanitation workers and their labor conditions. Though he is deified today, at the time he advocated for a "radical redistribution of wealth" that was incredibly controversial, Thomas says.

"It was not just a racial equity dream," she says, "but an economic equity dream."

Openly pursuing economic equity with MLK50 still makes some people in media bristle; they see the work as having a point of view that constitutes advocacy. But for Thomas, everyone comes from some point of view. Just making decisions about how to allocate resources reflects organizations' perspectives: "They trick themselves when they say they have not chosen a side."

"In the writing and editing process, as the reporter with the byline, I sign off on everything," Thomas says. Though most edits with collaborators are good, it's important to assert yourself when something matters to you or the community you are serving.

Ultimately, feeling confident that you can have open conversations and a process to navigate editorial differences with collaborators is key.

Here are some questions you might ask about editorial values in partnerships:

▼ **Do the missions align? Where do the missions of the organizations involved diverge and intersect?**

▼ **How do the organizations define bias and advocacy? In editorial conversations, will a fundamental disagreement hinder your ability to produce work in line with your mission?**

▼ **Do you feel that partners are honest about their points of view? Everyone has a perspective; can you articulate that perspective to each other?**

▼ **Who is producing content and who is editing? What is the workflow?**

▼ **Is there time and space to change course or adjust to process if something isn't working?**

▼ **When your collaborations have impact or win prizes, how will the recognition and rewards be shared?**

▼ **Does this work come with liabilities, legal or otherwise? How will the costs be shared?**

Get to know the **facilitator**

One model in collaborations is to have a neutral facilitator, someone who does not have direct or indirect power over everyone else. But even if that facilitator is neutral, it's important to know what motivates them.

Kealing sees his role as a "strategic enabler" to help collaborating organizations increase the visibility and impact of their journalism. In this role, his job is not to drive what news organizations do, but help members to connect and drive their own special projects.

"I'm Switzerland, a neutral advocate," Kealing says. "I'm not driving members' editorial."

As a facilitator, Kaiser can see her privilege as a white woman. She says that she has had blind spots in past collaborations, missing critical

perspectives. But she also puts in the time to fill her blind spots, which is a good characteristic to look for in a project leader. After all, everyone has blind spots, but not everyone knows they are there.

"I didn't really get the message until 2015," Kaiser says. But you can have a practice that helps. "You have to immerse yourself in places where people get it, and you have to be quiet and listen."

Not everyone has a large enough staff to invest equally — smaller organizations can often end up investing more proportionally because they are trying to keep up with everyone else. Kealing says that part of his role with smaller organizations is to "keep them on the bus." A facilitator can help by understanding when one member cannot make a meeting, by catching them up and soliciting and sharing their input, he says. They can serve organizations according to their interests and needs, and by respecting their time.

What smaller organizations cannot give in time or personnel, they might more than make up for in quality and understanding of communities. A good facilitator will express the values of the collaboration well and keep the project from suffering from a power imbalance.

If your collaboration has an independent or appointed facilitator, you might ask questions about how they work:

▼ **How is the facilitator being compensated and by whom?**

▼ **How is the facilitator's work being evaluated and by whom?**

▼ **Do you prefer a facilitator who helps lead the content of the project, or one who has a more administrative role?**

▼ **What role does the facilitator have in making decisions?**

▼ **Does the facilitator communicate well with the members of the collaboration?**

▼ **Does the facilitator ask good questions?**

▼ **And this one is hard to pin down, but it's important: Do you have trust in the facilitator?**

The power of
no

Much like in job negotiations, it is important to enter into collaborations in a position of strength. You affirmatively choose to work with another organization for mutual benefit, rather than simply taking the opportunity or funding that is available in the moment.

Putting the work in up front to evaluate partners and processes takes time, but everyone I spoke with agreed that it is essential to collaborations that are equitable and mutually beneficial.

Surasmith wants more organizations, especially those run by underrepresented people, to seize the power to say no. And remember, he says, it's not an all-or-nothing deal. You might find one project with a collaborator doesn't fit with your mission, but the next one does.

In other words, you can always say, "Not for this project, but let's keep talking."

Here are a few notes of encouragement, especially for founders and newsroom leaders who serve underrepresented people:

> What you bring to the table is valuable. Your local or topical know-how, experience and trust from the people you cover is an asset that you should protect and share strategically and with discretion.

> When you are growing something new or keeping something afloat, remember to step back and look at the big picture. Though a collaboration might seem like the only way forward, it will set you back in the long run if it's not equitable.

> Don't be afraid to ask questions, even if you are talking to organizations that you admire or are excited to work with.

> You're in charge of how you spend your resources and with whom you spend your time. Keep that in mind throughout your collaborations and adjust early and often.

Further **reading**

This guide was commissioned by the Center for Cooperative Media in 2019, after I wrote a [critique of that year's Collaborative Journalism Summit](#), and the big grants organizations get often to bolster coverage of underrepresented people. I was seeking more conversation about money and justice, and I am grateful that Stefanie Murray, the director of the Center, approached me and gave me space to explore the topic further in this guide.

Among the Center's many resources, Murray has [shared a list of example written agreements](#) — MOUs, term sheets and copyright agreements — that organizations have made with their collaborators. Putting things down in writing can help collaborators better communicate and adhere to their agreements.

The [Code for Equitable Partnerships in Journalism](#) is an in-progress document by Press On. The text and notes in the document tackle structural discrimination much more than this guide. It's a framework worth understanding.

For a good introduction of the importance of understanding structural inequity, see this 2019 essay by Kathleen Osta and Hugh Vasquez with the National Equity Project, "[Don't Talk about Implicit Bias Without Talking about Structural Racism](#)."

Also from outside the news realm, understanding equity in finance is a great way to think about news media. [Khan Academy does a great job teaching this subject from the lens of home ownership](#), and other types of personal finance as well. Want to know more about overhead, operating expenses and profit? [There's a lesson on that, too](#).

And lastly, on what equity means, Kris Putnam-Walkerly and Elizabeth Russell's short piece for the Stanford Social Innovation Review in September, 2016, "[What the Heck Does 'Equity' Mean?](#)" is worth a read.

As cited in the Press On Code, a [2010 presentation by SD Seifer, E Greene-Moton and R. Redman of Sustainability & Community-Based Research](#) on creating equitable partnerships in health organizations provides excellent insights for any industry.

If you're considering the motivations of those who might be funding your collaborations, [Matin Scott's 2019 writing and research on private foundations and journalism](#) is a good place to start.

This guide mentions different models for collaborations, but just for illustration. For a more thorough accounting of ways collaborations can operate, see Sarah Stonebly's 2017 tipsheet and report for the Center for Cooperative Media, "[Comparing models of collaborative journalism](#)."

A 2018 study by the Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy at the Harvard Kennedy School and Northeastern University's School of Journalism, "[Funding the News: Foundations and Nonprofit Media](#)," analyzes $1.8 billion of philanthropic funding for journalism over five years. The vast majority of funding for news organizations went to public media and national nonprofit new organizations. This is important to understand when you are, or work with partners who are not in these spheres.

Bill Birnbauer at Monash University has studied U.S. nonprofit investigative news, and analyzed the members of the Institute for Nonprofit News. His findings about how lopsided funding is, explained in a short piece for The Conversation called "[The biggest nonprofit media outlets are thriving but smaller ones may not survive](#)," is eye-opening.

Here is more about the [American Society of News Editors 2018 Newsroom Employment Diversity Survey](#); just 293 of 1,700 newsrooms queried, 17 percent, participated.

All of University of Virginia assistant professor Meredith Clark's writing on diversity in newsrooms is illuminating. Here is a short piece from 2018 to start, about the [impact of layoffs on newsroom diversity and the importance that leaders participate](#) in bringing about more representation.

Paul Delaney wrote elegantly in [USA Today in 2018](#) about living through the Kerner Commission Report and what has and hasn't happened since.

Two books I mentioned on representation in U.S. media are "[The View from Somewhere](#)" (Wallace, University of Chicago Press, 2019) and "[How Racism and Sexism Killed Traditional Media](#)" (Sanders, ABC-CLIO, 2015). There are so many good references and narrative books on this topic; these are just two that have recently helped me challenge my understanding of how U.S. news media work.

About this guide

This report is part of a series of five collaborative journalism guides produced in 2020 by the Center for Cooperative Media at Montclair State University, thanks to generous support from Rita Allen Foundation.

The Rita Allen Foundation invests in transformative ideas in their earliest stages to leverage their growth and promote breakthrough solutions to significant problems.

The guides were also produced in partnership with Heather Bryant, who agreed to update her Collaborative Journalism Workbook for inclusion as one of the series' six guides.

To see the guides online, visit collaborativejournalismhandbook.org.

To learn more about collaborative journalism in general, visit collaborativejournalism.org.

Guides in this series

Building equity in journalism collaborations
by Angilee Shah

Building a tool set for journalism collaborations
by Heather Bryant

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by Shady Grove Oliver

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Collaborating with non-news partners
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The Collaborative Journalism Workbook, Second Edition
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