Building new partnerships for journalism collaborations

By Heather Bryant

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.

The Center is a grant-funded organization based at Montclair State University's School of Communication and Media. The Center is supported with funding from Montclair State University, John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, Democracy Fund, the New Jersey Local News Lab (a partnership of the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, Democracy Fund, and Community Foundation of New Jersey), and the Abrams Foundation.

For more information, visit CenterforCooperativeMedia.org.

About the author

Heather Bryant is the founder and director of Project Facet, an open source infrastructure project that supports newsroom collaboration with tools to manage the logistics of creating, editing and distributing collaborative content, managing projects, facilitating collaborative relationships and sharing the best practices of collaborative journalism. She published the Collaborative Journalism Workbook and works with the Center for Cooperative Media to build resources for collaboration. Bryant researches and writes about the intersection of class, poverty, technology and journalism ethics.

Introduction

Building new partnerships

Newsrooms have collaborated in ways big and small for more than a century, but the rate and variety of collaborations and their form have increased dramatically over the past decade as news organizations respond to declining resources and increased awareness of the depth and breadth of news and information needs of communities.

The work is getting more complicated with impact that stretches beyond geographies and any single audience group. The reality is that collaboration is increasingly necessary in doing the work of journalism. But no solution comes without its challenges. It's only natural that what makes collaboration so powerful is often what makes it challenging: people. For us to gain from all the potential benefits of collaboration, we have to do the work of finding people with similar purpose, complementary values and compatible goals who possess the willingness to collaborate, to be open and invested in the relationship building and management of successful partnerships. Most important, we have to do the work of being good partners to others.

This guide is intended to speak to the work of finding, evaluating and committing to partnerships with new partners. It explores what a healthy, equitable and effective partnership with other news organizations or freelancers could look like for you and your organization.

This guide begins at the point where you are seeking partners. But before you actually do so, I respectfully request that you first take an inventory of yourself, your organization and your participating team and evaluate whether you are ready and able to be a good partner to others.

In this series of guides, Angilee Shah has put together an excellent resource, *Building equity in journalism collaborations*, which I urge you to review. The *Collaborative Journalism Workbook* contains guided

questions that can help with the process of being ready to be a good partner. As a companion to this piece, **Collaborative partnerships with non-news partners** focuses on the particular aspects of partnering with people outside of newsrooms and how to create the right kind of process for the context you're working in. It's our hope that together these guides can help you navigate most kinds of partnership scenarios.

The sections of this guide are divided based on phases, but you can step into it wherever you find yourself already on the path. You may notice that some ideas repeat through the course of the guide. That's because there are different cycles in regard to stakeholders and experimentation that apply to different parts of the roadmap, and where you join the path will determine how often you see these cycles appear.

The guide is the product of years of research into collaborative journalism as well as interviews with people doing incredible work in this space. As you go through the guide, one thing you may notice is that there are no direct quotes attributed to individuals. This is an intentional decision. As this guide is specific to the nuanced and complicated dynamics between people and politics between organizations, interviewees were not directly quoted to avoid inadvertently creating any misunderstandings in the current collaborative relationships in which those people are participating.

As we know, collaboration can sometimes be one of the more difficult topics to talk about constructively. Unlike other journalistic practices, we're talking about what it means to work with one another in an increasingly small field. In the "About" section at the end, you will find information about the people who contributed their time and expertise to shape this guide and without whom it would be incomplete.

Discovery
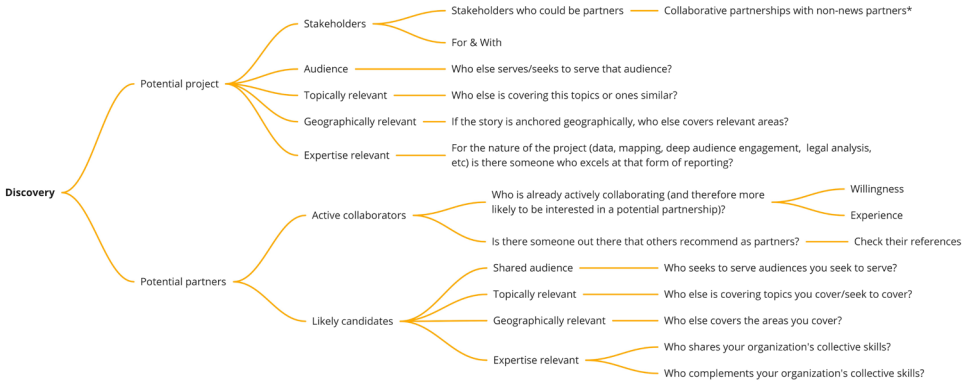
The decision to collaborate is usually catalyzed by one of two circumstances: you have a project in mind that you want to work on or you have a potential partner (or partners) in mind and want to explore what possibilities might exist. In other cases, collaborators may find themselves coming together in response to a call from an organizing entity or funder.

These likely paths can guide how you can approach building partnerships.

Potential Project

One of the most common entry points to collaboration is taking an idea for a potential project and then developing with, and around, a group of collaborators.

In this scenario the planning work is not unlike the work that goes into thoughtful journalism of any sort: identifying stakeholders, discussing the audience, figuring out what information needs are most valuable to meet, and convening the expertise required to meet those needs. The act of collaborating adds a few additional layers.

When you conceive a project, you might already have an idea of how it should be executed. Before you start approaching partners, it is important to consider what kind of project management situation you are seeking so your potential partners can make an informed decision about whether they want to participate.

▼ **Do you want to have a plan and you're asking potential partners to help execute your plan?**

   "This is what we're doing, here's how we plan for it to work, do you want to join?"

Or

▼ **Are you seeking a more collaborative process in which the project is designed by the partners participating?**

   "We want to work on something about X and are seeking partners to develop a project with."

This determination will help calibrate how much detail to have ready when you approach potential partners. It will help them understand the nature of the collaboration and guide the extent of planning.

I'll note that either of these scenarios can be the right fit for a project or an organization depending on the circumstances of the collaboration. There are times when it may make sense for your capacity and goals to have a concise and contained process and there are times when you will have the capacity to explore a collaboration that is more open and with more variables. In both approaches, with intentional design, it is possible to ensure a fair and equitable partnership where everyone benefits.

Stakeholders

Identifying a potential story's stakeholders is an important part of the process of evaluating what audience the work is serving and ensuring that the information needs of that audience are met.

Exploring stakeholders will also help identify people or organizations that could be either potential partners in the collaboration, sources of expertise or participants in the production process.

This is the opportunity to evaluate not only what the story is about, but who it is for and who it will be created with.

▼ **What stakeholders exist for the project?**

▼ **How are they connected to the project?**

▼ **What role might any of them have to play in the journalism to be done?**

▼ **What information needs exist for these stakeholders?**

If you don't have partners, a way to find them would be to seek out newsrooms who serve the audience you have in mind, tend to cover the topic, cover the geographic area, etc.

Audience

� Who else serves or seeks to serve the audience for this project?

Relevant Topic

▼ Who else is covering this topic or similar ones?

Relevant Geography

▼ If the story is anchored geographically, who else covers relevant areas?

Relevant Expertise

▼ For the nature of the project (data, mapping, deep audience engagement, legal analysis, etc.), is there someone who excels at that form of reporting?

Potential Partners

As you gather your list of stakeholders and partners, it can be helpful to see if anyone on your list is known to be collaborative or if they haven't engaged in an active partnership before.

Active collaborators

▼ Who is already actively collaborating (and therefore more likely to be interested in a potential partnership)?

▼ How many projects have they participated in?

Something partnership managers say is that the reputation of potential partners matters as they evaluate who they want to work with. You should avoid partnering with organizations or individuals who are known to make the process difficult or charged. No one person or organization is so brilliant that it's worth making you or your team's lives miserable. There is no story in the world that can only be reported on by one specific news organization. There are, however, an uncountable number of stories that cannot be fully covered by any one newsroom or journalist.

- Is there a person or organization that has been recommended as a potential partner?

- Have they made any public statements on collaboration that give you insight into how they think of the process?

Possible candidates

Much like how you can consider audience, topic, geography and expertise when evaluating a specific project, the same framing can help you identify potential partners who may share common reporting interests.

Audience

- Who seeks to serve audiences you seek to serve?

Relevant Topic

- Who else is covering topics you cover/seek to cover?

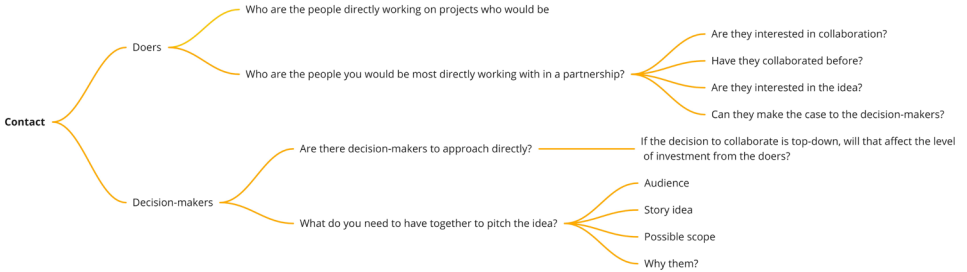## Relevant Geography

- Who else covers the areas you cover?

Relevant Expertise

- Who shares your organization's collective skills?

- Who complements your organization's collective skills?

Contact

Contact
- Doers
  - Who are the people directly working on projects who would be
  - Who are the people you would be most directly working with in a partnership?
    - Are they interested in collaboration?
    - Have they collaborated before?
    - Are they interested in the idea?
    - Can they make the case to the decision-makers?
- Decision-makers
  - Are there decision-makers to approach directly?
    - If the decision to collaborate is top-down, will that affect the level of investment from the doers?
  - What do you need to have together to pitch the idea?
    - Audience
    - Story idea
    - Possible scope
    - Why them?

If you don't already have a connection to a newsroom that you'd like to work with, this step can feel tricky. You'll need to do some research on who, specifically, might be the best person to get in touch with. Generally speaking, there are two main ways to go about this: Connecting with reporters and editors that you are interested in working with, or trying to connect with organizational leadership. Which path you take will depend on your read of the situation and the accessibility of the people involved.

Doers

In some cases, it's advisable to first reach out to the reporters and editors who would be directly involved in a collaborative project. First, they would actually do the work and it's important to know if they're up for it. Second,a pitch may be better received by decision-makers if it's first introduced by a member of their team.

◥ **Are they interested in collaboration?**

◥ **Have they collaborated before?**

◥ **Are they interested in the idea?**

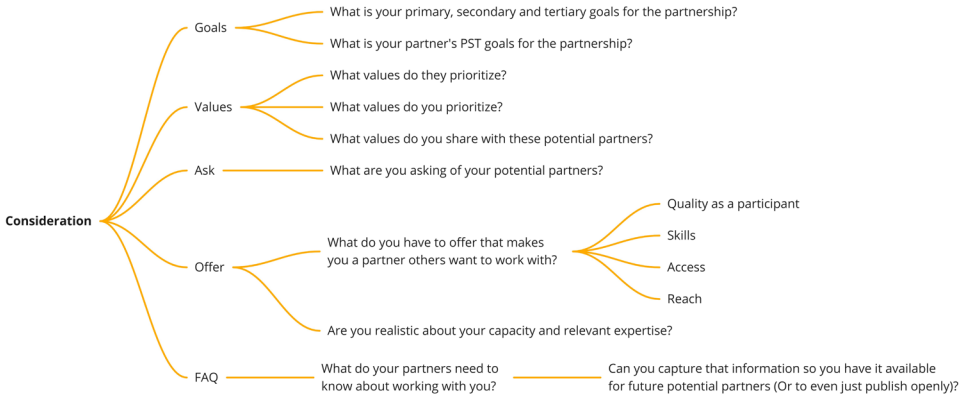◥ **Can they make a case to the decision-makers?**

Decision-makers

If you immediately start with the decision-makers or are making the pitch after getting buy-in from staff, much of what you need to be prepared to discuss is the same.

If you do approach decision-makers directly, it's helpful to keep in mind that sometimes when the decision to collaborate is top-down, it can affect the level of investment in the project from the people who will be working on it. Obviously, you don't have any control or influence over the culture and processes of another organization, but if you have a sense of the situation, you might decide on one approach over another.

The Pitch

- **What is the story to be explored?**

- **What do you currently see as the possible scope?**

- **Which audiences will be served and how?**

- **How do you see the project management happening?**

  - **Are you/your organization managing the project or do you plan on a democratic process once partners are convened?**

- **Why are you approaching them?**

  - **What kind of resources do you expect them to invest in the project?**

- **Why should they partner with you?**

  - **What is it about you/your organization that makes you a good potential partner?**

Consideration

Consideration

- Goals
  - What is your primary, secondary and tertiary goals for the partnership?
  - What is your partner's PST goals for the partnership?
- Values
  - What values do they prioritize?
  - What values do you prioritize?
  - What values do you share with these potential partners?
- Ask
  - What are you asking of your potential partners?
- Offer
  - What do you have to offer that makes you a partner others want to work with?
    - Quality as a participant
    - Skills
    - Access
    - Reach
  - Are you realistic about your capacity and relevant expertise?
- FAQ
  - What do your partners need to know about working with you?
  - Can you capture that information so you have it available for future potential partners (Or to even just publish openly)?

You're at the point where you have some potential partners who will consider working together. Now is when you start working out whether you are compatible.

In collaborations that fail, the failure usually happens when the group comes apart for some reason and the project is either never fully realized as planned or is dropped entirely. Perhaps a couple of things get published or broadcast here and there, but it's not what you had in mind. This can be the result of miscommunication, misaligned goals and misunderstood expectations.

To avoid this outcome, it's important to understand the goals and values of your partners, what you are asking of them and what they are asking of you.

One of the challenges around figuring out how to work together is that so much of the guidance and textbooks on collaboration out there assume collaboration is internal to an existing organization or inherent in a new organization.

When people collaborate within the same organization, they have the influence of a shared culture, workflows, understanding of the organization's specific responsibilities to their communities, and institutional priorities. The goals for the institution are the same and they are negotiating for space within their shared capacity. This is a different environment than journalism collaborations between different individuals and organizations.

In a collaboration made up of different organizations, we have different kinds of newsrooms, business models, publishing platforms, engagement styles and audience focus. All of these factors influence how each partner will function in and participate in a collaboration. Being aware of that is an important part in understanding your partners, how to work with them and how to make decisions with them.

Goals

▼ **What are your top three goals for the partnership?**

▼ **What are your partners' top three goals for the partnership?**

Values

▼ **What values do they prioritize?**

▼ **What values do you prioritize?**

▼ **What values are shared?**

Ask

▼ **What are you asking of your potential partners?**

Offer

▼ **What do you have to offer that makes you a partner that others want to work with?**

▼ **How do you make sure you are a good partner?**

▼ **What skills are you bringing to the table?**

▼ **What resources do you have to contribute?**

▼ **How will the work that you've done in building access and reach aid in the partnership?**

▼ **Are you realistic about your capacity and relevant expertise?**

FAQ

▼ **What do your partners need to know about working with you?**

▼ **Can you capture this information so you have it available for future potential partners (or to even just publish)?**

For us to gain from all the potential benefits of collaboration, we have to do the work of finding people with similar purpose, complementary values and compatible goals who possess the willingness to collaborate, to be open and invested in the relationship building and management of successful partnerships. Most important, we have to do the work of being good partners to others.

Heather Bryant

Negotiation
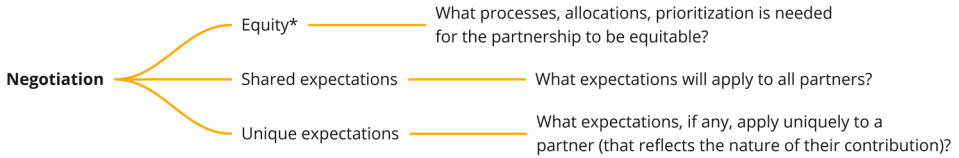
Building a cohesive plan for a collaboration requires finding the acceptable balance for contributions, resource expenditure and responsibilities among the partners. While the term negotiation may bring to mind a formal, or even antagonistic process, the real goal is to create the space for partners to advocate for their needs and capacity and find a mutually agreeable set of expectations for participation. This step is particularly essential when there is a significant power imbalance among partners.

Equity

◤ **What processes, allocations, expectations or prioritizations are needed for the partnership to be equitable?**

Shared expectations

◤ **What expectations apply to all partners?**

Unique expectations

◤ **What expectations, if any, apply uniquely to a partner (that reflects the nature of their contribution)?**

Decision making

How decisions are made as a group can influence trust among group members. When you make a decision as a partnership, you are making it as one united group. It's not enough to step back, let one partner make the call and if it doesn't work out, exclude yourself from accountability for the outcome.

We've all experienced some form of a project with multiple participants

where people go along with a decision they don't agree with and later say something to the effect of "That was their call. I just went along with it."

When there aren't clear goals and expectations, it's easy for us to default to modes of ego and habit in making decisions. Decisions that are not made explicitly or intentionally are often decided by whomever is willing to argue the loudest or longest rather than what's best for the partners or project.

Part of our accountability to one another in partnerships is to not just go along with things. We need to disagree together. Decide together. And ultimately commit together. Otherwise you will not be building the trust and dynamics that you need to succeed.

While this may sound intense in reading, in reality, you can test-run decision making as partners through small experiments.

--

To keep this guide focused on the process of finding partners and getting a collaboration up and running, I'm not going to dig into the actual process and workflow of what a small collaborative experiment or your bigger project might be, but fortunately, guides that do explore that in depth already exist.

[Collaborative Journalism Workbook](#)
[Building a toolset for journalism collaborations](#)
[Budget and finance for journalism collaborations](#)

Experimentation

Experimentation
- Test the waters with a Little Idea
  - Design, Manage, Assess*
  - Workflow and Tools*
  - Finances*
- Planning for something more → Explore and research the Big Idea
  - Stakeholders
    - Identify additional potential partners
    - Collaborative partnerships with non-news partners*
  - SWOT the collective of partners for the Big I
- Developing a baseline of trust
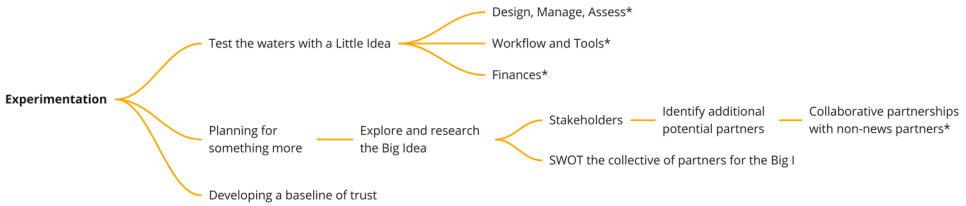
Trust is something that has to be built over time. If it's at all possible, one of the best things you can do first is not immediately dive into a long, involved collaboration. Start with something small that you can constrain to a short time frame of a few weeks or a month with a small-scale outcome to get a sense of how you work together and to develop trust. It's always possible to scope out a small piece of a larger project that can be worked on to test your process.

Test the water with a Little Idea while planning for the Big Idea

While you're working on your experiment, you can be laying the groundwork for the full project.
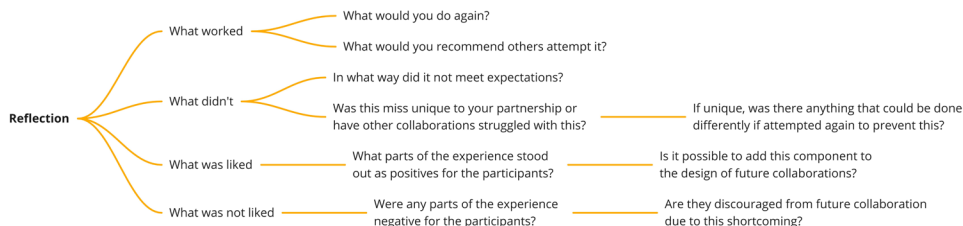
Stakeholders

- **Identify additional potential partners**
- **Collaborative partnerships with non-news partners**

Do a Strengths and Weaknesses analysis of the collective of partners

▸ **What things are partners good at and where might they have fewer resources or less skills?**

▸ **What roles are needed for the project?**

▸ **Who best can fill them?**

Reflection


```
                              ┌── What would you do again?
               ┌─ What worked ┤
               │              └── What would you recommend others attempt it?
               │
               │              ┌── In what way did it not meet expectations?
               ├─ What didn't ┤
               │              └── Was this miss unique to your partnership or ──── If unique, was there anything that could be done
Reflection ────┤                  have other collaborations struggled with this?     differently if attempted again to prevent this?
               │
               ├─ What was liked ──── What parts of the experience stood ──── Is it possible to add this component to
               │                      out as positives for the participants?     the design of future collaborations?
               │
               └─ What was not liked ──── Were any parts of the experience ──── Are they discouraged from future collaboration
                                          negative for the participants?          due to this shortcoming?
```

Whether you are assessing the experiment, reflecting on the totality of your partnership or you're at a check-in moment along the path, stop to think about where there are clear successes, where things are muddy and where there have been failures.

When considering these points, try to answer in terms of the organizing, communication, decision-making and other details of the partners and not only in terms of the journalism on which you're collaborating.

What worked

◤ What would you do again?

◤ If you were advising someone running their own collaboration, is there anything you've done that you'd recommend they try?

What didn't

◤ In what way has the partnership not met expectations?

◤ Was this miss unique to your partnership or have others struggled with this?

◤ If this was unique, was there anything that could be done differently if attempted again to prevent this?

What was liked

◤ What parts of the experience stood out as positive for the participants?

◤ Is it possible to add this component to the design of future collaborations?

What was not liked

◤ Were any parts of the experience negative for the participants?

◤ Are they discouraged from future collaboration due to this shortcoming?

Commitment

Commitment
- Deciding whether this is the right situation for you/your organization
  - Are your values sufficiently compatible?
  - Is there enough trust to proceed?
  - Do you feel that there is sufficient recognition of the unique value of you/your organization?
  - Do you have the capacity to be a good partner in this instance?
- Moving forward with the collaboration
  - Repeat "Test the Waters"
  - Repeat "Stakeholders"
  - Repeat "SWOT the Collective"
- Maintaining the potential for a future partnership
  - Maybe it's not the right partner
    - Manage your expectations
    - Mind your actions and words
    - Remember that your reputation as a partner will not stay a secret
    - Whom you don't want to partner with today, you may want to partner with tomorrow
      - Be intentional about your bridge-burning
  - Maybe it's not the right project
    - Think about what projects are the right fit for your organization
      - Is it about the kind of coverage you already do or aspire to do?
    - What aspect of your circumstances became most relevant to deciding it wasn't the right project?
      - Audience
      - Expertise
      - Capacity
    - Is there feedback you can share that can help?

Whether you work together again or not is something only you will be able to decide. Collaborations can succeed or fail due to variables out of our control. There can also be clear reasons that you can factor into your decision about whether to continue to work with a specific partner or a group of partners.

Deciding whether this is the right situation for you/your organization

▼ **Are your values sufficiently compatible?**

▼ **Is there enough trust to proceed?**

▼ **Do you feel that there is sufficient recognition of the value of you/your organization?**

▼ **Do you have the capacity to be a good partner in this instance?**

▼ **Was the partnership mutually beneficial?**

▼ **Was power shared?**

Maintaining the potential for a future partnership

Maybe it's not the right partner

You won't be compatible with every partner, especially as so many organizations are still undergoing the cultural change and skill-building needed to make collaboration possible.

It's important to manage your expectations and reckon with the reality of a potential partner as they are, not as you wish them to be. You aren't going to be able to change them into the kind of partner you need or suddenly convince them to embrace some practice or process that they don't currently value. Ideally, your partners learn something from working with you, but don't forget it's not your responsibility to help them become a better partner or newsroom. Only they can choose to do that.

What you can do is mind your actions and your words. Whom you don't want to partner with today could become a good partner tomorrow. Staffs change, organizations change. Reserve your bridge-burning for the rare occasions it's warranted. Remember that your reputation as a partner also travels.

Maybe it's not the right project

Maybe the original idea has evolved into something else and no longer fits your organization's priorities, or maybe the project is such that you aren't the right person or organization to play a role in reporting on it at this time. Whatever the reason, sometimes projects aren't the right match for collaboration right now.

Think about what projects are the right fit for your organization

- **Is it about the kind of coverage you already do or aspire to do?**

- **What aspect of your circumstances became most relevant to deciding it wasn't the right project?**
  - **Audience**
  - **Expertise**
  - **Capacity**

- **Is there some overall lesson or observation to make note of that can help in considering future projects?**

Growth

Keep open lines of communication with people you'd like to work with. Maybe you don't have the right project now, but it's worth investing time in learning about what they are working on or interested in. Relationships take effort to build and maintain and the more you put in ahead of time, the easier it will be to collaborate when the right opportunity comes along.

Active feedback cycle

Collaborate with your potential partners on the process itself

- **What did you need?**

- **Do they have ideas for how to consider potential collaborations?**

Check-in intervals

- **Are things on track for project goals?**

- **Are things functioning in a way that people feel informed, included and empowered?**

On-ramp/off-ramps

- **What does it look like for a partner to exit?**

Under ideal circumstances
- **What kind of questions should be asked?**

- **Is there any kind of evaluation or feedback they could offer?**

Under less-than-ideal circumstance
- **Is everyone clear on requirements around embargoes, sensitive information, etc.?**

- **Is there any kind of feedback that would be useful for either party?**

- **If the partnership expands, how does that occur?**

- **Would you rather make it known that newsrooms can request to join?**

- **Or would you rather seek out additional specific newsrooms and invite them?**

About this guide

Among the research for this guide, interviews with several people were instrumental in synthesizing the different areas of consideration and suggestions contained within.

Candice Fortman is the executive director at Outlier Media and a leading voice on what a more just and equitable future of service journalism should be.

Cole Goins is a journalist and consultant with hands-on experience in collaborations at CIR and brings to the conversation a valuable view of the variety of ways that partnerships can occur.

Andrea Faye Hart is a co-founder and former community engagement director at City Bureau, where her work has brought much insight into the relationships and organizing that go into partnerships of all kinds.

Mike Rispoli is the director of Free Press' News Voices project and offers much wisdom in the realm of empowering and including people in the processes of journalism.

Guides in this series

Building equity in journalism collaborations
by Angilee Shah

Building a tool set for journalism collaborations
by Heather Bryant

Budget and finance for journalism collaborations
by Shady Grove Oliver

Building new partnerships for journalism collaborations
 by Heather Bryant

Collaborating with non-news partners
by Heather Bryant

The Collaborative Journalism Workbook, Second Edition
by Heather Bryant

Center for Cooperative Media

www.collaborativejournalism.org