

LocalMedia Association

Local Media Association / Local Media Foundation
Industry Report • June 2022

The menu of collaboration

What we've learned from launching and managing
nine industry collaboratives



By LMA staff

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Introduction and summary

By Nancy Lane

To say we are bullish on industry collaboration is an understatement.

It's one of LMA's four strategic pillars and we have invested heavily in this space. To date, we have launched and/or managed nine industry collaborations in the last two years:

- **Word In Black:** Ten of the nation's leading Black publishers who launched a digital news site focused on racial inequities in America.
- **Oklahoma Media Center:** 25-plus news organizations whose mission is to support and strengthen Oklahoma's local journalism ecosystem and spur innovation through statewide collaboration that benefits diverse audiences.
- **LMA Covering Climate Collaborative:** More than 25 of the leading local news organizations that focus on the impact of climate change including broadcasters (commercial and public, TV and radio), newspapers, digital sites, universities and science partners.
- **News is Out:** Seven of the nation's leading LGBTQ+ publishers whose mission is to advance LGBTQ+ equality through solutions-oriented journalism, in the face of continued discrimination.
- **Crosstown Data Journalism Project:** A data reporting pilot among a university, a newspaper publisher and a TV broadcaster.
- **Solving for Chicago:** 20-plus news organizations covering underreported topics such as essential workers in the Chicago region.
- **Solving Sacramento:** A collaborative of six newsrooms that seeks to shine a light on the Sacramento communities' most pressing issues. (LMA serves as a fiscal sponsor/managing partner, but did not start this collaboration.)
- **New York and Michigan Solutions Journalism Collaborative:** 27 news organizations and several community partners in New York and Michigan working together to share resources on under-reported topics. (LMA serves as a fiscal sponsor/managing partner, but did not start this collaboration.)

- **Amplify Ohio:** Three organizations in Ohio that worked together on revenue-generating ideas and business transformation initiatives for one year.

Suffice to say, we've learned a lot.

We believe strongly that collaboratives should focus on two things: producing great journalism and business sustainability for both the collaborative and the individual media companies involved. It's not either/or. Many collaboratives produce great journalism but can't sustain the infrastructure beyond the initial funding.

We talk about it all the time at LMA — *collaboration is hard*. It will test your patience. Defensive posturing is the biggest roadblock when it comes to getting local media organizations to work together. It can be addressed by trust and buy-in at the top levels of the organizations. When members of a collaborative trust each other and the top executives are involved, the collaboration has the highest chance of success.

Word In Black is by far our most successful collaborative. There is a high level of trust. The owners of the 10 media organizations are personally involved, attending calls every Friday, and putting skin in the game. To date more than \$3 million has been raised with nearly \$150,000 going back to each publisher in the collaborative. They have used this funding to start education and health beats, among other things. The rest of the funding is supporting a staff of seven full-time equivalents focused on building Word In Black into a successful national brand.

I can already see that News is Out is following the same path as Word In Black. Seven dedicated publishers are on every call, working hard to build a new brand with a focus on LGBTQ+ inequalities.

Topic-based collaboratives bring out the passion. Without passion for the subject matter, the collaborative will fail.

Oklahoma Media Center is a great example. Its first topic focused on the impact of COVID-19 on K-12 education. Participant support for the topic was mixed — not because it wasn't important, but because the news organizations were already covering it. When they embraced [Promised Land](#) as the next topic, with a focus on how the landmark [McGirt v. Oklahoma](#) decision will affect both tribal and non-Indigenous residents in the state, things changed dramatically. For the first time, mainstream media were working hand-in-hand with tribal media. The passion for this work was contagious. All participants elevated their coverage of this complex and sensitive topic. The citizens of

Oklahoma became more educated and informed on a subject that few really understood.

Another top learning involves the funding community. For regional collaboration, a strong local funder makes all the difference in the world. [Inasmuch Foundation](#) is that funder for Oklahoma Media Center. In Chicago, however, the local funding community never stepped up to support [Solving for Chicago](#), despite dozens of calls and presentations. [Google News Initiative](#) and [Solutions Journalism Network](#) supported the Chicago collaborative, but that isn't enough. A local funder is more invested in the community and will work closely with the group to ensure success. For national collaboratives, a diverse mix of funding is needed. This includes funding for journalism projects, infrastructure, sponsorships and branded content.

We're also bullish on collaboration that brings many different media types together. LMA's [Covering Climate Collaborative](#) consists of TV broadcasters, both commercial and public, newspapers, digital news sites, universities and science partners. It is powerful.

Our plea to local media CEOs is to better understand the value of industry collaboration. Support it in your organization. And realize that going it alone is not a great strategy in 2022 and beyond.

In this report, LMA staff members share firsthand experiences from our collaboratives that demonstrate the different types and depths of collaboration that are possible between newsrooms, and to what end goals. We share examples of both the successes and challenges, as well as what these initiatives have meant to news outlet participants. The menu of collaboration is a guide for any news organization looking for more information about the why and how behind forming partnerships that drive revenue, better inform communities, bridge gaps in knowledge, and ease the burden on staff resources.

Content Collaboration

Newsrooms identify an under-reported topic in their community and agree to publish stories together

Solving for Chicago came together to help essential workers

By Penny Riordan and Sam Cholke

Solving for Chicago started in March 2020, just as COVID-19 was rapidly spreading in the country and news organizations were going remote. With initial funding from the Google News Initiative, the goal of the collaboration at the outset was to focus on creating shared journalism projects together. Many of the 25 news organizations coming to the table represented poorer and marginalized communities who hadn't worked with larger outlets in the city before.



As COVID spread, nearly a third of the workforce in Chicago found themselves labeled “essential” by state officials and continued to come into work. From doctors to grocery store clerks, these workers were asked to take on an outsized risk of infection at a time of deep uncertainty.



'Our hope was that we would not just tell great stories about essential workers, but bring about real change for those impacted by our collective work. We're seeing that manifest in ways bigger than we imagined with local officials committing millions of dollars in resources to those issues and communities in need.'

Tracy Brown, chief content officer
Chicago Public Media / WBEZ

For nearly a year, the collaborative devoted its resources to serving the information needs of essential workers and reporting on their experiences. The newsrooms investigated how the pandemic was reshaping work and employment and the inequities exposed by the pandemic.

The group found excellent stories immediately and [jumped at](#) the content sharing agreements, finding ways to boost traffic by helping get news to essential workers in their audience. As the pandemic lagged on and winter set in, the collaboration conducted a first-of-its-kind survey of essential workers and received nearly 200 responses. This [resulted in more stories](#) and more collaboration.

In total, the first round of stories on essential workers from the group resulted in 87 new pieces of content and a 200% increase in traffic on republished stories.

In March, the [South Side Weekly](#) published its special edition on essential workers. The issue drew heavily from the collaborative's outreach to essential workers and provided personal stories, investigations and engaging graphics. This work by the Weekly, the outlet with one of the smallest native audiences of the group, was shared most broadly by other outlets.

[WBEZ](#) and [Borderless Magazine](#) were the most active in sharing each other's content, frequently citing that

republishing the content resulted in a 100% increase in traffic and greater awareness of their coverage among those they were most eager to reach.

Without the collaborative agreeing to come together to listen to audiences and cover this topic, many of these stories would have never been reported.

News is Out is responding to the state legislative attacks on the LGBTQ+ community

By Penny Riordan and Dana Piccoli

When News is Out formed in November 2021, the LGBTQ+ community was seeing more discriminatory bills and policies being introduced at the state level. The seven publishers represented some of the oldest publications serving queer audiences in the United States, and while they have faced discrimination before, they knew the recent round of attacks aimed to roll back their rights.

Chicago Frontline Workers Speak on Their Experiences With the Vaccine

A grocery store worker, a youth shelter manager, and a hospital physician reflect on the vaccine rollout

by Yiwen Lu — South Side Weekly
March 17, 2021



Illustrations by Isabella Scott

When grocery store worker Julian Hendrix first approached [Howard Brown Health Center in Hyde Park for vaccine appointments](#), the response was, “don’t call us, we will call you.”

These publishers have a long history of advocating for and informing their audiences at the local level, but they had never worked together across state lines to bring more impact to their reporting.

The collaborative was started with an initial round of funding from Google News Initiative's Innovation Challenge, which required an audience listening component as part of the grant funds.

Not long after the group launched the website [newsisout.com](https://www.newsisout.com) and began meeting weekly, participants also quickly developed a survey to send to their collective audiences. The survey asked readers questions about if they felt represented in the media, what



topics they would like to see more about, and if they would give financially to local news. More than 1,100 readers responded over a period of two weeks. The collaborative also conducted 13 focus groups with people selected from the respondents, which provided more insights into the communities.

By [starting with audience listening](#), the group discovered new topics to cover within the LGBTQ+ community. Participants also heard that many rural communities and suburban families feel left out of most queer coverage. For News is Out, this sentiment reiterated that an untapped audience needs to be served in ways it has never been.

So far the group's project manager, Dana Piccoli, has written about the return of LGBTQ+ travel post pandemic and shared a list of Pride events happening in small towns or rural areas.

The group's editors and reporters have also worked together to write a comprehensive long-form story about the impact legislation such as Florida's "Don't Say Gay" bill has on children and families.

Editors and reporters each agreed to tackle a separate piece of the story, and came together to edit the final version collaboratively. This was the first time publishers agreed to work together on a story from the brainstorming phase all the way to publication.

News organizations looking to work together on a comprehensive story should first agree on a few ground rules on reporting, what sources to include, and editing. The more the team agrees on a format and process before starting, the faster the story will be published.

How Word In Black's content strategy evolved

By Nancy Lane and Andrew Ramsammy

In June 2021, Word In Black debuted a [weekly newsletter](#) focused on racial inequities in America. At the time, Word In Black had one full-time employee, its managing director. It was ambitious, to say the least, to launch without a lot of original content.

The 10 publishers stepped up and agreed to write one strong opinion piece to lead the newsletter each week. The [first post came from Patrick Washington](#), publisher of the Dallas Weekly, and focused on Juneteenth. That set the bar high for subsequent submissions, such as a recent piece by Chris B. Bennett, CEO and publisher of The Seattle Medium, about why it's [time for Congress to pass a hate crime bill](#) that specifically protects Black people in the United States.

Over that time period, the publishers addressed a wide variety of topics including education and health disparities, critical race theory, gun control, white supremacy, and much more. These opinion pieces helped drive newsletter signups and donations. Today, Word In Black is approaching 40,000 subscribers as a result of an initial opt-in campaign in which each publisher used a custom landing page. The opt-in program received a boost from Meta in the form of a [paid promotional campaign via Social News Desk](#).

In 2022, Word In Black promoted a part-time data journalist focused on education to full-time. More original content helped grow audience and drive traffic to the site. An education reporter was also hired along with a digital editor, a health reporter and soon, a health data journalist.

■ Opinion

Attacked Just Because We're Black

It's time for Congress to pass a hate crime bill that specifically protects Black folks in the United States

by Chris B. Bennett
June 2, 2022



Photograph by Fibonacci Blue/Flickr

We are a few weeks removed from the [horrific shooting in Buffalo](#), and yet we've already seen the sunset of the media coverage of this tragic event, as the news cycle has shifted to the mass shootings in Uvalde, Texas, and now Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Eleven months later, Word In Black launched a second newsletter focused on health. [Wellness Wednesdays](#) features the best weekly content from the dedicated health reporter as well as the 10 publishers.

Managing director Liz Dwyer hosts an editorial meeting each week with the 10 members of the collaborative and their editorial staff leads. Together they work on content strategy.



Later this year, a third newsletter will launch. The goal is to reach 100,000 newsletter subscribers and \$100,000 in reader revenue by the end of 2022. Content is driving that strategy.

The 10 publishers are also upping their game when it comes to producing content. Through various funding sources, the publishers have established education and health beats for their individual markets. This addition has resulted in more newsletter subscribers, more recurring donations/members, and significant audience growth.

The goal of Word In Black was always to grow revenue and audience for the 10 publishers in the collaborative, as well as launch a national brand together that could diversify their revenue. It's the most interesting experiment in local media, despite not getting a lot of industry attention.



Word In Black members and stakeholders meet weekly in two separate meetings, one focused on revenue and another focused on content.

Mission

Companies agree to participate in a collaboration that has shared goals

LGBTQ+ publishers create a mission for the moment

By Penny Riordan and Dana Piccoli

Even before publishers of News is Out started their audience survey and writing content, they talked about goals for the collaborative. While some publishers knew each other, others were meeting for the first time. What they had in common was their work to report on and connect the LGBTQ+ community locally.

The group decided to set a mission and vision statement together. Over the course of several weeks, they workshopped those statements. They shared the missions of each of their local outlets, and dropped their ideas and hopes for News is Out into a shared document.

After several meetings and a majority vote, the group agreed on the following statements:

Mission statement: *We deliver compelling journalism, which engages, amplifies and connects the LGBTQ+ community.*

Vision statement: *To advance LGBTQ+ equality through solutions-oriented journalism, in the face of continued discrimination.*



'The mission of News Is Out is vital to help sustain local LGBTQ+ journalism while providing a trusted voice for our loyal community. ... We endeavor to guide the LGBTQ+ community's deliberation of public issues, motivating our community to get involved in the process and advocating for solutions.'

Leo Cusimano, publisher
Dallas Voice

Publishers who report specifically for and about the LGBTQ+ audience have a unique perspective on the impact anti-gay legislation is having on their communities. They agreed to participate in the collaborative because of their goal to share their

stories with a broader audience.

Not all news organizations have mission or vision statements. They may have a tagline or a defined audience, but that is different from a statement that aligns and informs everything the news organization does.

One key to a successful collaborative is to develop a mission or vision for participants to get behind. Without a mission statement, they may not agree on priorities. They may not fully participate in the group because they don't understand the shared goals.

When developing a mission or vision statement, it is important to keep your audience in mind. The News is Out statements reflect participants' commitment to their audiences, in addition to the journalism they hope to produce.

Covering Climate Collaborative's mission at the local level

By Frank Mungeam

Climate change is a planet-sized problem, but Local Media Association designed and launched the Covering Climate Collaborative around local reporting for four reasons.

First, at the local level, climate change is personal, not political. It's in our local communities where we have direct experiences with climate change, whether it's flooding or sea level rise in the East and Southeast, more intense tropical storms in the Gulf region, wildfires in the West, or drought in the Midwest and Southwest. The climate conversation is personal, locally.

Second, local news outlets are trusted more, according to a recent [Knight-Gallup](#) study. With so much climate misinformation around, trusted messengers are essential. An article in The Atlantic earlier this year called out the uniquely [influential role played by local TV meteorologists](#) in communicating the facts about climate change, a trend I predicted in [a 2019 Nieman Reports](#) op-ed.

Third, the easiest place to take action on climate is in your own community. So climate "doomism" is best combated locally.

Finally, innovative responses and true solutions typically start locally first, and scale once established. For all these reasons, local reporting on climate change is essential.

We set as our mission to create a best-in-class collaborative of local newsrooms and climate partners across the country “to localize and humanize the impacts of climate change, and to empower residents in our communities to take meaningful local action.”

With that mission in mind, we recruited science partners first, even before soliciting applications from news organizations. We were able to assemble a best-in-class set of science and journalism partners to support local newsrooms with their climate journalism, including [SciLine](#), [Climate](#)

[Central](#), [Climate Communications](#), [Solutions Journalism Network](#), [Society for Environmental Journalists](#) and the [GMU Center for Climate Communication](#).

Only then did we invite newsrooms to join.

The application process for the LMA Covering Climate Collaborative screened for key requirements and goals of the initiative:

- A reporter dedicated to covering climate, and a track record of past stories.
- A commitment to reporting on solutions and responses, not only “problem-reporting.”
- A commitment to reporting on the climate justice and the unequal impacts of climate change on communities of color.
- A commitment to do collaborative reporting in partnership with other newsrooms.
- A letter from the outlet’s general manager or publisher was also required, to insure buy-in from the top.

An additional goal of the climate collaborative was to reach audiences wherever they choose to get their news. Therefore, the application process invited news organizations with varied platform expertise. Ultimately, 25 newsrooms were selected to be in the launch cohort, representing five different regions of the country, and each region included at least one TV, one radio and one print/digital news partner. The LMA Covering Climate Collaborative celebrated its [first anniversary on Earth Day 2022](#). In the first year they collectively produced [more than 250 original, local climate stories](#).



Knowledge expertise

Newsrooms participate in shared collaboration that bring in thought leaders and knowledge/community experts to the collaborative

Covering Climate Collaborative gets the science right through partnerships

By Frank Mungeam

Reporters might be reluctant to admit it, but climate change can be an intimidating topic to cover — no reporter wants to get the science wrong. This collaborative has offered participants training and support to check their work and get the science right.

The LMA Covering Climate Collaborative regularly hosts sessions with national experts to better equip local newsrooms to tackle the most important aspects of the issue. Dr. Robert Bullard, often called the father of environmental justice, spoke to the group about the intersection between social justice issues and climate impacts, helping our news organizations connect the dots between [climate change and social justice](#) in their local reporting. Dr. John Cook, a global leader on climate misinformation research,

shared the most effective ways to report on, and combat, climate misinformation. Susan Hassol and Climate Communication have helped newsrooms with quick facts on key aspects of climate change. And Dr. Michael Mann spoke to reporters about detecting and exposing the techniques of those who have business interests in deflecting



'SciLine knows what a difference a great scientist-source can make when a story needs a dose of research-backed evidence — and how hard it can be to find that perfect expert on deadline. We make those connections for reporters every day and appreciate our partnership with the LMA Covering Climate Collaborative.'

Rick Weiss, director
SciLine

and delaying meaningful responses to climate change.

For many news collaboratives, the partners are only other journalists. For the Covering Climate Collaborative, our newsrooms also collaborate with [six leading national science partner organizations](#), and they've found these science resources invaluable. [SciLine](#) connects reporters on deadline with scientists who are not only category experts but also capable communicators. [Climate Central](#) provides vetted research, data and data visualizations that our newsrooms are able to localize to their market. It also collaborates with local newsrooms on reporting, like this partnership with our member newsroom WJCT in Jacksonville, Florida, titled [Fewer fumes: What the switch to electric cars means for Jacksonville](#). Solutions Journalism Network has provided training and resources to help newsrooms report on responses to climate change. Its [Solutions Story Tracker](#) is a potent repository of past solutions reporting that journalists can use to develop new stories. [Quick Facts](#) from Climate Communication and SciLine provide climate journalists with just-in-time context for covering key aspects of climate change. The team at George Mason University's [Center for Climate Change Communication](#) has provided invaluable insight into accessing and understanding public opinion data on climate. And, the [Society of Environmental Journalists](#) plays an essential role supporting, connecting and educating many of our collaborative members.

Broadening the Covering Climate Collaborative to include science as well as journalism partners has made a big impact for the newsrooms. When we surveyed the 25 local newsrooms in our collaborative about what has been most valuable to them, access to science partners and experts, through our on the record speakers and training sessions, ranked at the top.



Fewer fumes: What the switch to electric vehicles means for Jacksonville

By *Brendan Rivers*

Published on November 2, 2021 at 11:21 am

At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic and during the ensuing economic slowdown, Jacksonville virtually shut down. Businesses shuttered their doors and most who were able to started working from home. That meant far fewer internal combustion engine vehicles were being driven, leading to massive **reductions in air pollution** and noticeably cleaner air.

Oklahoma Media Center brings together resources for historic, underreported topic

By Rob Collins

The Oklahoma Media Center consistently offers training opportunities to elevate journalistic standards. This offering helps foster respect and trust among industry professionals in Oklahoma's media ecosystem.

OMC has partnered with the [Native American Journalists Association](#) to provide training on ethical coverage of Indigenous issues for journalists throughout the state, including background on the tribal landscape, historical context and a virtual "[Check Your Bias](#)" roundtable to avoid stereotypical coverage. The Oklahoma-based NAJA hosted a September 2021 training with tribal media on the importance of a free press in Indian Country.

OMC also featured Freedom of Information Act training with Oklahoma's statewide attorney from the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press. Building on that, the nonprofit [Trusting News](#) did training on the importance of explaining how journalism works, because many do not trust journalists or understand the [Fourth Estate](#). OMC did one session on listening to marginalized voices typically not quoted as stakeholders by traditional media. And [Joe Hight](#), who was editor when David Philipps and The Gazette in Colorado Springs won the Pulitzer Prize, led a candid training among its collaborators on ethics and best practices for journalists on social media.

[Angela Walton-Raji](#), a genealogical and historical researcher working with Oklahoma-Native American records, gave a presentation to OMC on the Freedmen issue in relation to the McGirt decision.

Rashad Mahmood, executive director of the [New Mexico Local News Fund](#), talked to OMC about the Local News Fellowship Program to explain how that innovative program matches recently graduated college journalists with in-state newsrooms for nine-month fellowships. Another training showed collaborators how to access a legislative tracking service paid for by OMC.



Technology partnerships

News organizations or collaborative brings in technology partner to help develop a tool

Automating story-sharing with technology with the climate collaborative

By Frank Mungeam

In news collaboratives, story sharing is often considered a primary benefit, yet its potential may go unrealized because, in practice, the process is manual and time-consuming. Often, the result is that a time-strapped reporter or editor must choose between spending their time copying and pasting another news outlet's text into their own content management system, including chasing down images or video, confirming rights, etc; or, investing that same time into creating original, local content for their publication (and for sharing with the collaborative). It's a bit of a devil's bargain!

Thanks to support from Google News Initiative, LMA received \$200,000 in funding to partner with [Distributed Media Lab](#) to [automate sharing of climate stories](#) within each region. The back-end technology is based on Accelerated Mobile Pages. Newsrooms who use AMP and have an RSS feed or even a dedicated section for climate, green or environmental stories, are able to automate the process of contributing their stories; those stories feed into a regional story collection and then those collections can be embedded by all partner newsrooms, for free, on their local stories and section fronts.

Key features of the technology include:

- The collections are fed automatically, but can also be curated by an editor, which our climate collaborative project manager does to insure quality control
- The collections are easily embeddable with a line of code
- Local sales teams can direct-sell sponsorship of the collections, driving revenue

- The user experience keeps the online reader on the site where they see the collection, but pops up the stories in the look and feel of the originating publisher. SEO and traffic go to the originator, so the originator, the partner and the end user experience are all optimized

One year later, newsrooms in [each of five regions have an embeddable collection](#) of local, original climate content from partners, and the ability to sell sponsorships as well.

CLIMATE NEWS: EAST/SOUTHEAST

The News Observer



Duke's carbon plan includes 'all of the above' approach to slashing emissions

News 4 JAX



Surprise climate change contributor: Retention ponds that reduce flooding

Miami Herald



The seawalls in Florida's future: Higher, stronger and better for marine life

CLICKORLANDO.com



Here's how Brevard County's new beach cleaning robot could save lives

Crosstown brings together newsrooms and technology partners to collaborate on innovation

By Frank Mungeam

The LMA/Crosstown Data Journalism Pilot illustrates how newsrooms can also collaborate with technology partners to improve both the quality and amount of journalism produced. The goal of the collaboration was to aid local newsrooms in doing more and better data journalism by addressing the tech and expertise challenges specific to this type of reporting. Most local newsrooms don't have a journalist with deep data reporting skills, and they don't have the technical expertise to access and interpret data sets. The goal of the pilot project was to see if a collaboration between local newsrooms and a technology partner could enhance a newsroom's ability to access and interpret data to inform its reporting.

With funding from the [Meta Journalism Project](#), LMA partnered with [Crosstown](#) to equip newsrooms at [WRAL-TV](#) and [NOLA.com/The Advocate](#) with data storytelling technology developed at the University of Southern California in a collaboration between the Annenberg School of Journalism and the Viterbi School of Engineering.



'Building a sustainable model for local news is an all-hands-on-deck effort. ... The LMA/Crosstown Data Pilot can make this kind of sophisticated data-driven journalism accessible to even small newsrooms.'

Gabriel Kahn, professor of professional practice
USC Annenberg School of Journalism

The technical team at Crosstown helped each newsroom create searchable data sets in the Metabase tool, and provided ongoing training and dataset management.

The result of this journalism/technology partnership was to make

'data journalism' far more accessible across the entire newsrooms. Outcomes included more than 50 stories powered with data, both direct data journalism as well as other 'data-informed' stories. The collaboration illustrated how newsrooms can improve their journalism through partnership with those more expert in the technology tools newsrooms increasingly rely on for reporting.

Revenue collaboration

Companies participate at the top level to bring in revenue through shared revenue and partnerships

Word In Black provides scalable revenue model

By Nancy Lane

From Day One, Word In Black focused on revenue.

Early on, the group submitted an application to the Google News Initiative Innovation Challenge for funding to launch a world-class website, newsletter and fundraising strategy via reader revenue. The \$300,000 investment was approved in late 2020 and proved to be game-changing.

By June 2021, the new website had been live for three months and the weekly newsletter launched. Less than a year later, there are nearly 40,000 newsletter subscribers and hundreds of financial supporters (many with recurring monthly donations).

In addition to reader revenue, the group quickly focused on three other revenue streams:

- Journalism funded by philanthropy
- Sponsorships
- Branded content

Philanthropy

On the journalism side, the [Walton Family Foundation](#) and [Chan Zuckerberg Initiative](#) stepped up to fund education reporting with a specific emphasis on the impact of COVID-19 on K-12 in Black communities. That has since led to two renewals from CZI. In 2022, [Robert Wood Johnson Foundation](#) and [The Commonwealth Fund](#) came on board to support health reporting.

These projects involved both Word In Black, the national brand, and the 10 publishers. It allowed the members to establish mini education and health beats – something they never had before this funding was secured. In 2021,



'Doing this alone would have been impossible but by combining forces with 10 Black-owned publishers, we stand to create a new business model for the future that has attracted the attention and respect of major funders and corporations that our community of Black newspapers has deservedly earned.'

Denise Barnes, publisher and owner
The Washington Informer

Word In Black publishers produced over 250 education stories focused on the impact of COVID-19. That helped pay for newsrooms' expenses related to education reporting and improved the quality of their content. The funding also enabled the hiring of an education data journalist who produces

original content for Word In Black and also supports the local publishers. That funding continues this year, with the addition of an education reporter, and throughout 2023.

In 2022, the new funding for health-related journalism allowed for the addition of a health reporter and a health data journalist. Like the education funding, it also provided stipends to the 10 publishers to produce health stories focused on inequalities in Black communities. In May, a weekly health newsletter was launched. The [SNPA Foundation](#) partially funded this newsletter, along with Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and The Commonwealth Fund. The total raised to date from philanthropic support for journalism projects is \$1,025,000.

Sponsorships

Sponsorships included [McKinsey](#) for the Friday newsletter and [Meta Journalism Project](#) for [growth of the newsletter](#) via significant ad credits. The credits boosted the newsletter by tens of thousands of subscribers, and the size of the subscriber list is directly attributable to this sponsorship.

Branded content

Branded content has proven to be very effective. [AARP](#), [Biogen](#) and, soon, [Deloitte](#) are all participating. In total, that revenue is approaching \$900,000. AARP is [focused on caregivers](#) and the Biogen campaign focuses on [early warning signs of Alzheimer's](#). The content is produced by a Word In Black freelancer and is not controlled in any way by the client. It is intentionally

public-service driven content with the goal of informing and educating Black communities on important issues.

Total revenue from these major sources along with GNI and other donors is more than \$3.1 million, with about half of that going directly to the publishers and the other half supporting the infrastructure of Word In Black as a national brand.

It might be easy to say that Word In Black is not a scalable example. We disagree. There is no reason other collaboratives can't adopt this model.

The big takeaway is: find funders who are passionate about the topic you are covering. Funders can be philanthropic organizations, large brands, private donors and local businesses. When collaboratives make revenue a top priority, great things will happen.

Oklahoma Media Center finds new funding by reporting on underreported issues

By Penny Riordan and Rob Collins

The initial funder for OMC was the Oklahoma City-based [Inasmuch Foundation](#). The foundation supports other journalism organizations in the state and initiatives across the United States, and wanted to help launch a collaboration to strengthen and support the news ecosystem in Oklahoma.

The second funder to support the collaborative was the [Walton Family Foundation](#), which provided \$50,000 in funding for [coverage of education issues](#) related to COVID-19. This was the first project the group tackled after forming.

After OMC chose its second topic, [Promised Land](#), other funders started taking notice. They were interested because it was the first time that tribal media outlets and mainstream media outlets were working together to cover an issue that affected Indigenous and non-Indigenous Oklahomans.

OMC received [\\$20,000 in funds](#) from the [Kirkpatrick Foundation](#) to help pay for a contracted data journalist to assist newsrooms with data reporting related to this topic. The data journalist worked for seven months and collaborated on several projects with multiple OMC newsrooms. The Democracy Fund provided \$25,000 in funding, which helped pay for OMC's strategic planning.

As mentioned earlier, the OMC also did training and unprecedented resource sharing for reporting on the Promised Land topic, including [several trainings with NAJA](#). In an expanded partnership, NAJA provided OMC a \$40,000 project fee to measure the impact of the collaborative's training and show how Indigenous coverage in mainstream media was impacted as a result of Promised Land. OMC is distributing stipends back into the ecosystem to support the collaborative work of more under-reported topics in the state.

The collaborative also provided \$72,000 in stipends, funded by Inasmuch, to spur innovation in newsrooms to assist them with reinventing business models for news. In 2021, collaborative members were invited to apply for an Innovation Fund grant to work on experiments that reached new audiences or assisted them with their sustainability efforts.

[The funded projects](#) included a rural listening tour, a media literacy curriculum, and an augmented reality tour that could be sponsored. Participants were encouraged to share updates on their proposals in several meetings and be as transparent as possible about the projects so other newsrooms could adapt them.

As collaboratives mature, it's important to have at the very least several other funders to support its work. Having donor diversity leads to long-term sustainability, and also allows for a variety of projects to be funded.



Members of the Oklahoma Media Center collaborative attend their monthly virtual meeting in June where they discussed fundraising best practices.

Ways to form an organization

Companies form a new entity that sets the collaborative up for long term sustainability. Models range from nonprofit to for-profit.

For-profits can be formed out of collaborations

By Nancy Lane

While many industry collaborations aspire to become nonprofit entities, that was not the case for Word In Black. The group viewed this as a business opportunity, and in the next 6-12 months, participants will organize as a for-profit corporation, with exact structure to be determined.

A two-day strategic planning process last fall helped the members of the collaborative crystalize their goals.

There is no playbook for a group of 10 legacy publishers coming together to launch a national news site. Early on, the group wanted to diversify their revenue by being part of this startup. The facilitator asked the publishers if they thought Word In Black could be a \$50 or \$100 million business. Many said yes. We certainly agree at LMA.

The publishers also wanted to learn from the experience and apply those learnings to their own digital transformation strategies. That has been a huge success. Larry Lee, publisher of the Sacramento Observer, had five FTEs a year ago. Now he has 12 and is hiring three more. In 14 months, he has tripled the size of his staff. Some of the credit (not all) goes to what he has learned from being part of the Word In Black collaboration and the funding he has received.

When a collaborative organizes as a business, everything changes. There is more ownership, buy-in and results. While this model is not for everyone, there is something really compelling about it. The LMA Queer Media Collaborative, News is Out, is now following the path of Word In Black. Those participants have not yet decided on business structure, but they will certainly be watching and learning from this unique case study.

Oklahoma Media Center becomes a nonprofit organization

By Rob Collins

Two years ago, the Oklahoma Media Center's initial funder, the Inasmuch Foundation, was talking with the Local Media Association/Local Media Foundation about doing a statewide collaborative in Oklahoma. When the pandemic was at its height, OMC was launched in the spring of 2020. LMF has served as OMC's fiscal sponsor/managing partner and offers staff support.

As OMC's fiscal sponsor, the staff of LMA/LMF were able to guide OMC through the process of applying for 501(c)(3) status. The IRS approved OMC's nonprofit status in early 2022.

The steps the group took to become a nonprofit included consulting with legal counsel referred by LMF to complete the application and develop bylaws. Board members were identified long before the application was filed, so the group could start planning for the long term. The board is a mix of media professionals and non-media professionals who care about the mission of OMC.

It is important to find an attorney that specializes in nonprofit work. In this case, the attorney had extensive experience in filing for 501 (c)(3) status for hundreds of clients over the years. She was able to make the process manageable and offered helpful advice.

The bylaws required some thought. It was helpful to review other bylaws and talk to other nonprofit executives during this process.

Identifying potential board members took some time. The process was thoughtful. In the end, the lead funder accepted a seat on the board and was named board chair. This was met with great support and enthusiasm given their commitment and funding of the OMC. We learned that it is a very common practice. Going forward, the board will likely expand beyond five initial members.

The collaborative aims to amplify resources to move the journalism needle for the greater good, which is crucial as a nonprofit entity.

By breaking old habits, OMC news orgs are learning to align resources and maximize their collaborative impact to help the embattled journalism industry.

OMC's strategic goals underscore its mission to support and strengthen Oklahoma's journalism ecosystem and spur innovation through statewide collaboration that benefits diverse audiences.

OMC hopes to review the Oklahoma media ecosystem, including



'Journalism has always worked closely with innovation. Whether it's through techniques or technology, journalism thrives when we adapt. The formation of OMC is helping ensure that journalism thrives in Oklahoma.'

Angel Ellis, Mvskoke Media director,
independent tribal news
Muscogee (Creek) Nation in Oklahoma;
Member, OMC Board of Directors

consumption behaviors, dissemination practices, creation and sourcing of local stories, and how media influences the public in behaviors and decision-making. The collaborative plans to continue developing capacity-building

programming for media organizations and individual media and journalism professionals to empower locally sourced media and enrich the journalistic landscape.

OMC embraces equity and inclusion best practices to promote better news reports, featuring marginalized voices, historically excluded areas and news organizations serving those populations. We want to continue expanding our engagement with ethnic media in underserved areas in various ways through training and ethnic media outreach. We can engage with diverse audiences through surveys and events, inviting these outlets to participate fully and provide training around diversity issues. And we'll apply best practices for equity and inclusion to promote better news featuring marginalized voices and previously excluded stakeholders.

With all of these goals in mind, it was a no brainer for OMC to become a nonprofit organization. That business structure will serve the stakeholders well for many years to come.

Closing thoughts

Collaboration is hard; you get what you put in

By Nancy Lane

Bottom line: Nothing is easy about being part of an industry collaborative. So why do it?

It's like anything else in life: you get out what you put in. The successful collaboratives we featured share a passion for the work they are doing. The gatherings are fun and productive, even when there are differences of opinion. It is a joy to attend the meeting and participate. Everyone in the group benefits by being part of the collaborative because they learn from each other.

The collaboratives that are not successful are defensive in nature. The meetings are not productive as more time is dedicated to individual concerns vs. true collaboration. Oftentimes, the people on the call were assigned to be there from someone else in the company. That never works. Many times it's just the newsroom staff that attends, and not the revenue folks. That strategy produces great journalism, but will not sustain the collaborative for the long-term.

Buy-in at the top is the most important ingredient. When the publisher, general manager, corporate executive, etc. show up and take an interest, the collaborative blossoms. They then bring in their top editors/reporters to work on the journalism side while they work on the revenue side. It's the secret sauce.

Not all collaboratives are meant to last forever

By Penny Riordan

If news organizations take the menu approach to collaboration, leadership may find a time when it makes sense to leave a collaborative. If a collaboration is formed solely to report on a specific topic, the group may not have a desire to take it to the next level and organize around a shared mission or vision. If a

collaborative tackles training and outside resources, they may feel that they have gotten to the point that they are subject-level experts and less training is needed going forward. And very few collaboratives have yet moved to the stage of forming separate organizations, whether it be for-profit or nonprofit. Many are still receiving support as fiscal sponsors, including the [New York and Michigan Solutions Journalism Collaborative](#) and [Solving Sacramento](#).

How do you know when it's time to move on? Here are some examples the LMA team has found that are signs the group is waning. If there is no executive buy-in for the collaborative, or if that executive buy-in changes, participants from that news organization will likely struggle to continue to meet the requirements. This struggle is understandable, as their commitment to the collaborative is a second priority to what is happening at the top of the organization. Collaboratives sometimes struggle to find funders that are interested in supporting a group for several years, which means funding could dry up after a year or two. Collaboratives need several years to get organized, trust each other and learn to work together. Some funders may not want to make a long-term commitment to see the group come to fruition.

As our CEO Nancy Lane said in the introduction, collaboration is hard, and we at LMA have learned a lot of things, but we are also still learning in this emerging space in journalism. What matters most is that news organizations strive to operate in a collaborative posture with their peers in the place they are in or the topic they cover. Our industry needs more collaboration, not less.

About Local Media Association/Local Media Foundation

Local Media Association works with 3,000+ newspapers, broadcasters, digital news sites and R&D partners to help achieve their business goals. As a 501(c)(6) trade association, LMA is focused on the business side of local media. Its programs and labs focus on revenue growth and new business models. LMA helps local media companies develop their strategies via cutting-edge programs, conferences, webinars, research and training.

Local Media Foundation, a 501(c)(3) charitable trust affiliated with LMA, serves as the innovation and transformation affiliate of LMA. More than 2,000 local media executives have participated in progressive and innovative LMF programs. Incorporating our four [strategic pillars](#) – [business transformation](#), [journalism funded by philanthropy](#), [industry collaboration](#), and [sustainability for publishers of color](#) – LMF helps provide local media companies the strategies and resources for meaningful innovation and impactful journalism projects.