

# From competition to collaboration: How an evolving media landscape influences teamwork in the newsroom, classroom

Five local reporters crowd into a large tent to listen to the Rockford mayor announce the city's newest low-income housing development; three work for TV stations, one for the local daily newspaper and one for the alt-weekly across town. We each return to our respective newsrooms and file daily stories, [including this one](#) I wrote for the Register Star. But what about the more impactful, long-term news regarding this housing complex? What if we could answer questions like, what happens to surrounding property values? Does the crime rate increase? Do these residents have access to public transit, or a grocery store? Do they have to find new jobs?

It would be hard to cover those topics in depth, with few resources, especially on a deadline. But what if we could? What if our newsrooms teamed up to provide community members with the information that came after the press conference, or city council meeting, or protest in the downtown street. What if instead of competing, we collaborated?



This is just one example of a moment I recall as a local news reporter when there were several different news outlets covering a story; the same went for city council meetings, holiday celebrations, municipal elections or major crimes. In the end, we all produced the same news content, and sent our community members down an internet search hole in order to find it.

Journalism has no doubt adopted its share of catchy phrases over the years in order to explain various ways of practicing the craft, many of which have turned into full blown departments or even college majors, be it watchdog, engaged, participatory, social, solutions, community, Within each of those can live another umbrella term: collaborative.

To get a better understanding of how collaborative journalism works, and furthermore, how we can teach it to current journalism students, GJR spoke to three former journalists whose roles are now all journalism-adjacent. They are:

Stefanie Murray, director for the Center for Cooperative Media, housed at Montclair State University; Amy Maestas, region collaborative manager and local media project director for the Solutions Journalism Network; and Patrick Ferrucci, associate professor and interim chair of the Journalism Department at University of Colorado Boulder. Their insights are below.

## **Q: How do we define collaborative journalism, or how should we?**

**Murray:** So at its core, collaborative journalism can be defined as two journalism entities working together to produce a piece of journalistic content. It is organizations that are not related to each other i.e. not owned by the same companies that are working together in pursuit of something of journalistic value. But more and more we are running across those that have more partners than just news organizations and those often are the ones that can be the most impactful, when you have a few news orgs, a library, a university, etc. That can go a lot further.

## **What are the benefits of collaboration and why is it important in today's media landscape?**

**Ferrucci:** It's a matter of resources. Newsrooms, even in just 20 years have shrunk considerably. So the amount of time that people can work on real investigative, not necessarily watchdog, but real resource-heavy journalism is not as easy and so therefore, when places can collaborate, it not only helps fray the cost of not just money, but time, and people. It also helps, I would argue, with a diversity of viewpoint. A lot of non-legacy newsrooms collaborate a ton. What that collaboration means is different in different places. Digitally-native news entities are more likely to collaborate because their model isn't as entrenched in an old model like a legacy newsroom, whose whole model is for profit, and

advertising driven. We can say “Oh, well why don’t you change things up a bit?” but it’s not that easy because everything they do is essentially built around those structures from the 1930s.

**Maestas:** As communities and funders look for ways to rebuild and strengthen local news, helping [journalists] understand that collaboration helps with diversity and equitable coverage, it helps them be more inclusive in their coverage of a specific topic. They’re able to deepen their relationships with people in the local media, but they’re also deepening their relationships with their audiences in the community and helping with change in their communities. That’s not to say that collaborations need to be advocative. It’s not advocacy journalism. But when it comes to solutions journalism, working on collaborative solutions journalism is telling the whole story. So when you have those shared values of wanting to strengthen your journalism by being collaborative, that increases trust with the communities in the media organizations. And it helps do journalism that might not be done because of lack of resources. So if you pull your resources you can do more honestly.

**Q: In the college journalism classroom where we also teach breaking news and scoops and being first, is collaboration more important than competition?**

**Murray:** I don’t think competition is something I would ever teach. I just think it’s not the way that the information ecosystem works today. It’s just not how people consume information. What we see is that many journalists in the United States still have this mindset that their competition is other professional journalists. And that’s just patently false. It’s just not the way the world works. And so that’s an outdated mindset. On a national level, is competition

important to motivate journalists to want to get something first or get something better, sure. I would give you that. Competition can be a healthy motivating factor for some journalists, but the vast majority of journalists in this country are not national reporters. They're local reporters. I'd be hard pressed to be convinced that journalists must be motivated by fear of missing out, to want to serve their communities' information needs. There are many other motivators for it to produce good work.

The way the information ecosystem works today, is that consumers have so many choices, and so many platforms to get information. Your motivation should be, who is your audience? What are you trying to provide to them? What are the information needs in the community you're trying to serve? And serving those needs as best as you can, should be the ultimate motivating factor for every journalist in this country. Often what you're competing against is for attention and also against misinformation. And so I envision courses where you're taught breaking news, and how to cover something that's breaking from the perspective of community information needs, and best serving and best getting information out on whatever platforms that you need to but also, there's elements of collaboration that can be pulled through all sorts of different courses.

**Maestas:** I think competition is good and needs to exist where there are multiple news outlets, to an extent. Our theory is not that the whole industry needs to collaborate on everything all the time, but that where there are opportunities about an issue that's really affecting the community. Our belief is that there's strength in numbers, which is cliché, but it's true because you are able to have collective work, that's not duplicated. In a time when almost every newsroom is struggling with resources, from finances to person power, to the staffing issues. Is it in the best interest of the practices of these newsrooms to have five people doing the same story? When

resources are shrinking, and by working together, you're able to do deeper work, you're able to reach audiences that no single entity can reach across all audiences.

It's really as basic as we believe that it strengthens the local media ecosystem when you do deeper work that's not about the horse race every day. And that's not to say that competition can't exist in some form or fashion. But when it comes to collaborations which generally work best when there is a more narrow scope, we're saying it helps for challenges, and for solutions journalism, responses to social problems. There's the strength in numbers to do deeper, more meaningful, more engaging work when you're able to put all of your resources together, maximize your time and resources and move beyond status quo journalism.

**Q: It sounds like it's not so much a matter of how to teach collaborative journalism, as much as it is, how do we teach students to be collaborative regardless of the style of journalism they practice. So what can journalism schools do to incorporate collaboration into their classrooms or even their curriculum?**

**Murray:** A lot of the academic literature has focused on case studies and looking at different models and dissecting how projects are done. And that's probably what I would teach, is showing some examples to students about how news organizations can pair up and work together to produce impact and talking about some of the skills that are needed to work collaboratively with other professionals. Things like trust, shared decision making, talking about working on stories together, how you might divide up work, editing procedures,

ethical concerns, thinking about ownership of work, project management. We need to get them to think through that because that's usually where that's where the rubber meets the road.

I've seen many examples of journalists who have an idea of a project they want to tackle together, and it could produce some really amazing journalism, but then they don't know how to work together and don't trust each other. They have always been taught to do things like, not share sources. And, and that's where collaborations often fall apart. And so if you have people who are trained from the beginning, that "No, this is a normal part of your work, and here are some things that you should keep in mind and consider as you go out to the professional world you're going to run into these issues" that can make a big difference.

**Ferrucci:** Every university makes departments go through, like an accreditation sort of every six or seven years, so you're intentionally thinking about your curriculum, or forced to reevaluate it. Almost every department of journalism that I've ever heard of including our own college, has their own advisory boards that are mixed with alums and people in the industry and things of that sort. So you're always in constant conversation with them to try to make the classroom better reflect what a newsroom looks like.

I think when we romanticize journalism, we think of the dogged reporter going out there and you know, going through obstacles to get a big story, which is obviously what happens a lot, but when it comes to what we do in terms of classrooms, often we would just, here's the story assignment, go get us a story then come back. But journalism doesn't work that way. Classrooms could teach [collaboration] just in general, because the classroom itself can be a kind of collaborative laboratory. If you're making them just do stuff, pass it in and giving them feedback, well that's great, but you could actually take those things and take stories that people do and actually critique them together and make it something where

everybody is kind of involved in pitches together. You can make it so it's an actual, collaborative environment, even if they're working on their own work.

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Collaborative journalism is less about competing and more about serving your audience. Yes, breaking news still happens and being first can be beneficial, but in a world of shrinking resources, where news consumers are inundated with information at all hours of the day, multiple different news outlets delivering the same surface level information does not effectively serve their community in the long run. And serving our communities with factual, well sourced information, is what we need to teach our students, the journalists of tomorrow, how to do.

If you're interested in learning more about how to help students collaborate, or see what sorts of collaboratives are currently in progress, check out <https://collaborativejournalism.org/> which features best practices as well as tools to help facilitate collaboration in the classroom and newsroom. You can also visit the <https://www.solutionsjournalism.org/storytracker> and filter for "Cultivating Collaborations" as a critical success factor.

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