

'Publishers can only do so much by themselves'

Growing up in rural Iowa, Becky Vonnahme didn't have access to many local news sources. Now, as part-time executive director of the Western Iowa Journalism Foundation, Vonnahme has discovered why. Small publications, like small businesses, have a hard time getting funded. After all, ad sales alone just don't support local journalism anymore.

The foundation works to target specific counties in Western Iowa to help raise money for publications to fund projects – both big and small.



Photo by Phil Roeder via Flickr

"In rural areas especially, our mission right now is that you just need to have a valid news source; so many parts of the country in rural areas have lost their newspaper and we really feel, at the foundation that it is leading to the misinformation and the disinformation, peoples reliance on social media ... because there isn't a valid news source,"

Vonnahme said. "The gapping news desert is just huge all around the country."

Vonnahme said if a publication cannot support itself financially, the platform cannot invest in investigative or watchdog reporting, as they have to focus on basic news first.

Vonnahme added that when publications cannot fund bigger projects, they often turn to grant funding or philanthropic donations.

Many of these collaborative efforts, like what Western Iowa does to connect smaller news outlets with funding, are relatively new, starting in just the last five to seven years, said Leah Todd Lin, a collaborative manager with the Solutions Journalism Network.

One of the many ways news publications finance their projects is through applying for grants through non-profits, paid partnerships and through journalism-driven organizations such as the Pulitzer Center.

The Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting is a news organization which sponsors independent reporting and reporters that other news media outlets are less willing or unable to take on and fund on their own.

In 2021, the Pulitzer Center financially supported over 200 reporting projects, 332 working journalists in 84 different countries.

Some of these projects included reporting on toxic chemicals in Texas' air quality, the cost of labor in post-coup Thailand and menstrual health of Kashmiri women.

(Editor's note: GJR partnered with the Pulitzer Center on two recent special issues, one focused on police accountability and the other on race in St. Louis).

The Gateway Journalism Review is among many U.S. publications to partner with the [Pulitzer Center](#). The two reported on police accountability and race in St. Louis.

Andrew Ramsammy is the chief Content and Collaboration Officer for Local Media, an association that focuses on the business side of local media in over 3,000 newspapers around the country.

Ramsammy said many of the public service reporting projects that he oversees are through newsroom grants, including many projects highlighting caregivers of color through AARP, which would not have been possible without external contributions.

Ramsammy said one of the collaborative campaigns he worked on funded by a grant found the minimal diagnoses of Alzheimer's given to the Black community. Ramsammy added that each [campaign costs](#) more than \$100,000.

"This would not be able to happen if these collaborations didn't come together," Ramsammy said. "Publishers can only do so much by themselves but with a collaboration of 10 on a nationwide scale, we are talking big dollars and big opportunities to partner with brands that align with our mission."

Ramsammy's publication also works in tandem with philanthropic initiatives to fund journalism projects, specifically the sustainability of publishers of color. Ramsammy said the Local Media Association strives to help local media companies not only with their journalism endeavors but also in developing "cutting edge" programs, conferences, webinars, research, and training within the realm of journalism.

The topic of fundraising and fiscal health in newsrooms was discussed during the 2022 Collaborative Journalism Summit in Chicago last month.

Cassie Haynes is co-founder and co-executive director at

Resolve Philadelphia, a journalism organization that seeks to build collaborative relationships between journalists to forge strong research.

Haynes said learning to extend collaborations outside the newsrooms is ever-evolving and a skill that even she is still practicing, noting that creating Resolve Philly's initiative projects was like "building a plane while flying it."

"In our experience, we are experts in what we have gone through as a team, as an organization over the past several years and we are absolutely still learning every single day to make [collaboration] a part of our process."

Resolve Philly's main initiative projects include "Broke In Philly," a reporting project with over 20 newsrooms working to expand economic mobility; "Reframe," which reports on both under- and misrepresented communities in Philadelphia; "Equally Informed," Resolve Philly's direct response to COVID-19; and "Shake the Table," a reporting initiative that works to hold Philadelphia's elected officials accountable.

Haynes added that for external collaborations to be successful, an organization must work to integrate both existing and new practices around community engagement.

"Whatever your investment is in building structures, workflow and process is, just double-down on it," Haynes said when asked how journalists could avoid hurdles when entering the collaborative space. "The process: How we think about building trust and how we think about engaging with communities, that shifts, but how you work together as a team and the steps of that process, the pieces of that puzzle... that doesn't change."

Olivia Cohen is a Chicago-based journalist who is currently earning her bachelor's degree in journalism at Columbia College Chicago. Cohen's work includes published reporting in the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel and the Chicago Sun-Times. She

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