



Photo by Austin Distel on Unsplash

## To stay connected, collaborative journalism managers keep it simple

Weekly Zoom meetings, newsletters and phone calls are just some of the ways collaboratives are keeping partners in the loop



*Ambreen Ali*  
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After the riot at the U.S. Capitol in January, Melanie Plenda started a text chain.

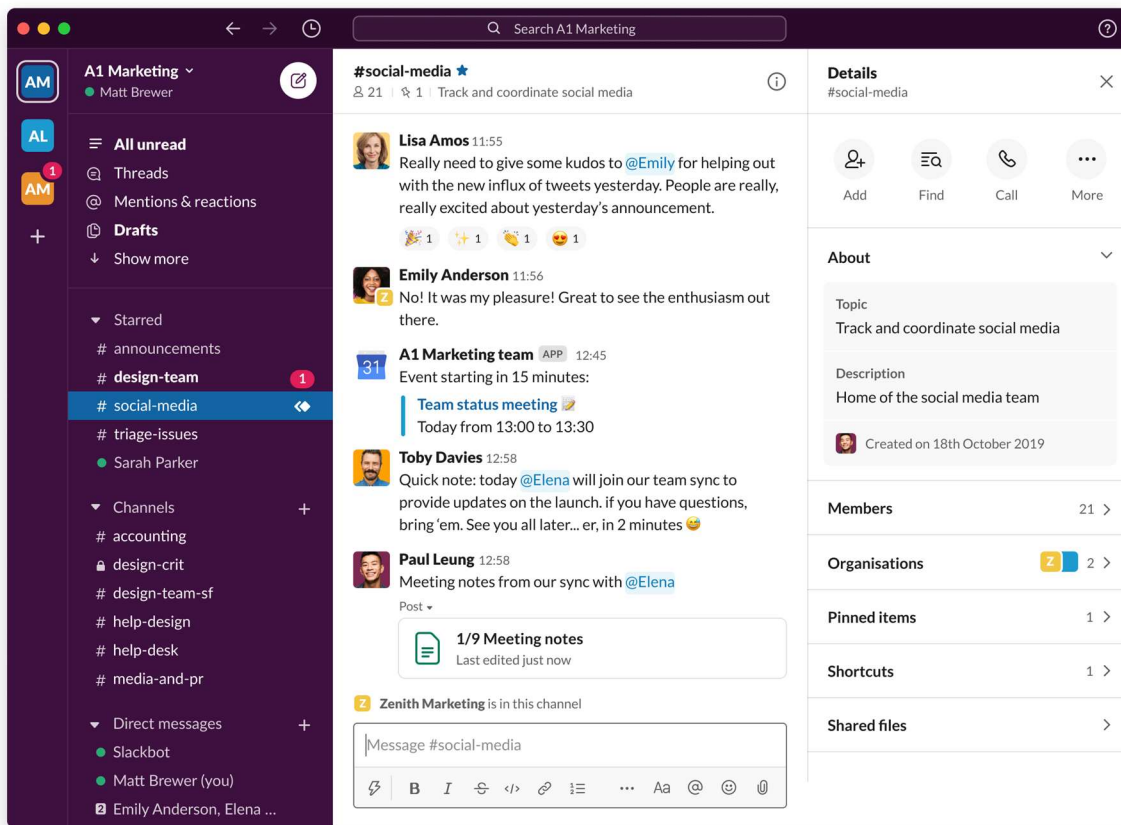
As director of the Granite State News Collaborative, she keeps the 17 news outlets and several community partners involved on the same page. She sends daily email updates and holds monthly virtual meetings, but the possibility of pre-inauguration unrest at the New Hampshire State House called for more immediate communication.

“We wanted to coordinate and make sure we got the content,” Plenda said, noting that working together helped the outlets—many of whom had to furlough or lay off staff over the last year—cover the breaking news event.

Collaboratives often get creative about how to communicate, choosing the tools and methods that suit their membership and needs. While text messaging worked well in that moment, Plenda said she has otherwise opted to minimize communication to avoid taxing newsrooms running on thin staff. Other collaboratives have embraced hypercommunication tools such as Slack or even built custom systems.

There are as many ways to communicate as there are types of collaboratives, but there’s one thing they all agree on: Communication is instrumental to their success.

“You have to over-communicate,” said Dave Rosenthal, managing editor of Side Effects Public Media, a collaboration of eight public radio stations in the Midwest that focuses on public health. “You need to make sure you understand what everybody’s priorities are and you talk through them at the very beginning. That’s the most important communication you can have.”



Courtesy: Slack

Rosenthal said Slack has been useful for sharing resources and stories, but that he still picks up the phone when editing a story. And while he said the many apps and tools available to communicate can be “dizzying,” he urges collaboratives to make extra efforts during the pandemic.

“When you’re separated, you have to be very, very deliberative about communications and follow up relentlessly,” he said. “You’re not going to meet at the water cooler.”

That can mean delivering the same information in multiple ways, noted Sharon Broussard, project coordinator for the Northeast Ohio Solutions Journalism Collaborative, which has nearly two dozen members. Since launching last year, they have held weekly Zoom meetings that include “office hours” with Broussard.

“I’m hanging out until the last person leaves,” she said. “Having the visual [of the virtual meeting] to go along with the flurry of emails is essential. I often repeat, ‘I sent an email about this.’”

Sharon McGowan, who leads the Amplify News Project at the Institute for Nonprofit News, also prefers email communication paired with regular video conference calls. The half-hour Zoom meeting every other week is “incredibly important,” she said.

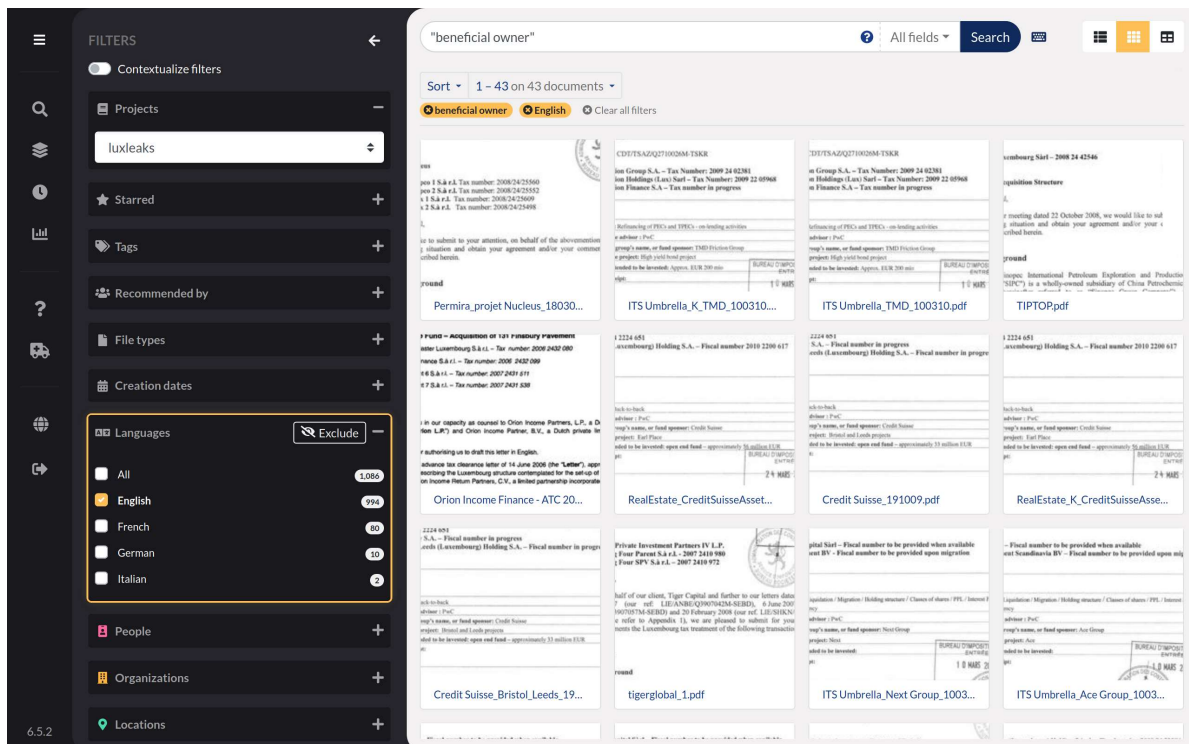
“You hear about sources that might be relevant to more than one newsroom. Often, ideas are shared. That kind of interaction does not usually happen by email,” she noted.

Great Lakes Now, a broadcast collaborative housed at Detroit Public Television, doesn’t hold regular meetings with all their writers or content producers. Instead, Program Director Sandra Svoboda prefers to hold direct phone calls to flesh out ideas with partners.

“We do not have a shortage of ideas,” she said, adding that they are still small enough that email and Slack work well. “If we were to grow, we know we’d have to adjust our process.”

With projects that can involve upwards of 400 reporters across dozens of countries, the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists has to coordinate communication at scale — and address the security concerns that arise with investigative work. The group has developed an in-house communication system to facilitate that.

“The iHub is like a Facebook,” Managing Editor Fergus Shiel explained. People can message each other secretly, chat in forums and track the development of stories that may take 18 months to complete. Another proprietary tool, Datashare, allows the collaborative to share millions of documents and make them accessible around the world.



ICIJ's Datashare software allows journalists the ability to share and search documents. (Courtesy: ICIJ)

Smaller scale collaboratives that want to keep communication secure can issue PGP keys and use encrypted platforms such as Signal and WhatsApp, Shiel suggested.

His team is constantly available to overcome the challenges of being a global collaborative, but Shiel said he wouldn't have it any other way.

"It's a lot of work, but it's so important that we are communicating nonstop," he said. "Make it your job to reach out to people and listen and care."

**Ambreen Ali** is a freelance writer and editor based in New Jersey. She was formerly an editor at SmartBrief covering media and technology news and a political reporter at CQ Roll Call in Washington, D.C.

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