

Income innovation: collaboratives get creative in the search for revenue

Collaboratives are going beyond traditional models to raise money for their programs



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As media companies continue to struggle financially, some of the most out-of-the-box ideas for how newsrooms can generate revenue are coming from collaboratives.

These include hosting events, consulting companies, selling data and technology, raising grassroots dollars — even tapping local arts funding. They are early experiments that are expanding possibilities for media companies and helping to sustain local news.

Nearly all collaboratives get off the ground with grant money from organizations like the Solutions Journalism Network, whose Local Media Project provides up to \$100,000 annually for two years to help media outlets come together and launch shared initiatives. Towards the end of that time, they are expected to explore business models that will enable them to sustain the work.

“We always encourage them not to put all their eggs in one basket — not to think that philanthropy will be there 100% of the time always and forever,” said Liza Gross, vice president of practice change at the Solutions Journalism Network.

One of its grant recipients, the Charlotte Journalism Collaborative, published a graphic novel last year by pairing together journalists and artists to tell local narratives about the pandemic. Although “The Pandemic: Stories of COVID-19” was created primarily for editorial purposes, it has also brought in money through sales and support from a local arts council.



The Charlotte Journalism Collaborative teamed up with local arts nonprofit BOOM Charlotte to create a graphic novel about the pandemic. (Courtesy of the Charlotte Journalism Collaborative)

“Most people wouldn’t think of a local news organization applying for a grant to support the arts, but through our graphic novel we are presenting something different,” Chris Rudisill, the collaborative’s director, said in an email. “We’re collaborating with artists to change the way we present the news. This is exciting and can hopefully lead to more.”

For the graphic novel, the North Carolina collaborative paired up with local arts nonprofit BOOM Charlotte. It is being distributed through area libraries and schools. One of the

collaborative's six media partners, local radio station WFAE 90.7, also purchased copies to use as part of its spring fundraising drive.

"For each copy that is purchased for a member donation to WFAE, at least one copy will be added to what we can distribute to area high school students," Rudisill said. "This example shows potential for increasing both the revenue of the collaborative and the fundraising of individual partners."

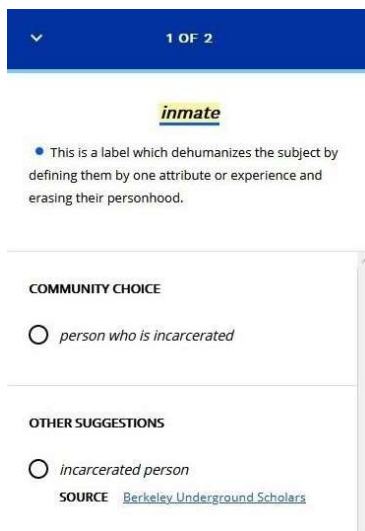
The collaborative's leaders are exploring other partnership opportunities as they develop a strategy to remain operating after seed money from the Solutions Journalism Network runs out in May 2022.

As they do, they are in conversation with other established collaboratives. Being part of a network has helped them "develop new ways to think about revenue," Rudisill said.

"We grow together. We share ideas and we're able to see what works best and apply those tools to our own work," he noted.

One role model for Rudisill's group is Resolve Philly, which has an operating budget of \$2.5 million that draws from a variety of sources — including grants, philanthropy, contracting and consulting services, and corporate underwriting and sponsorships.

Resolve Philly has also launched an initiative called Reframe that includes tools that may be licensed in the future. It draws on areas where the group has developed capacity — such as structural equity, community engagement, and language and framing — to help other journalists ensure their coverage is accurate and authentic. Reframe includes a text analysis tool that can offer real-time guidance on language and a source analysis tool that evaluates how accurately a news outlet represents its community.



*The Reframe Text Analysis Tool.
(Courtesy of Resolve Philly)*

“Reframe was an initiative that was created to generate revenue and will do so in the form of fee-for-service contracts around language and framing, source and content audits, engagement and the tool,” Jean Friedman-Rudovsky, co-executive of Resolve Philly, said in an email.

Collaboratives are also taking a cue from the nonprofit sector and attempting to raise money from individual donors by pitching local news as a cause worth backing. The Colorado Media Project, a citizen-led coalition, is running a grassroots fundraising campaign to raise \$250,000 for the Colorado News Collaborative, calling local journalism “an essential public good.”

The Solutions Journalism Network encourages collaboratives to think of fresh ways to generate income from their existing efforts. Gross suggested events such as trainings or community forums that tie into editorial content topics, as well as the monetization of data collected in the normal course of news gathering.

“Say a sector wants to invest in women business owners. We may have done a series and have stats on the number of business owners in Detroit,” Gross said. “I believe there is a good opportunity in monetizing data.”

She acknowledges that such models must be carefully designed to prevent undue influence on newsrooms. Media companies should think critically about any plan, she said, but they should also “get a little bit uncomfortable.”

“We need to get rid of some strategies and practices that have not helped lead us to survivability,” she added.

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***About the Center for Cooperative Media:** The Center is a grant-funded program of the School of Communication and Media at Montclair State University. Its mission is to grow and strengthen local journalism, and in doing so serve New Jersey residents. The Center is supported with funding from Montclair State University, 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.*

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