

Pushing for Social Change: How Collaborations Are Recalibrating the Journalistic Mission

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Abstract

This qualitative study examines the extent to which journalistic collaborations involving non-journalistic partners may be altering the overall mission of the field. Drawing from literature on boundaries, as well as reciprocal or networked approaches to journalism, the study uses ethnographic methods, in-depth interviews and textual analysis to examine two diverse collaborative efforts: the Dallas Media Collaborative in Dallas, Texas, and the Credible Messenger Reporting Project in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. These collaborations involve a broad array of partners – including legacy and non-legacy media, citizen journalists, universities, creative groups, think tanks, and nonprofits. The findings provide evidence that non-journalistic partners play a critical role in trying to better connect these efforts with the communities they cover. Furthermore, they suggest non-journalistic partners are helping to recalibrate the journalistic mission in such a way that its primary goal is not just informing the public, but giving citizens more input into the journalistic conversation while empowering them with tools to effect social change.

Keywords: Journalism, journalistic collaboration, solutions, boundaries, reciprocal journalism.

1. Introduction

The journalistic field has a long history of collaboration, efforts in which combinations of different actors work together to produce news content. One of the foremost examples in the United States came in 1846 when a group of rival newspapers agreed to work together to cover the Mexican War. This collaboration became The Associated Press, eventually expanding its effort to news gathering across the United States (The Associated Press, 2007). This approach also had roots in the earliest newspapers in Europe and the United States, many of which routinely borrowed freely from one another (Starr, 2004). Collaboration has come in many different forms since those early beginnings.

More recently, the Newspaper Act of 1970 allowed struggling newspapers operating in the same city to collaborate via joint-operating agreements, exempting them from parts of anti-trust law (Baker, 2006; Ryfe, 2012). The 20th century also saw the normalization of pool reports as a means for news organizations to share resources (Breed, 1952; Crouse, 1973). In some cases, as in the development of the AP, collaboration has been hindered by competitive or predatory actions of certain members. Nevertheless, collaborative approaches have often served to increase the scope of information available to the public.

Collaborative efforts have evolved tremendously in the 21st century, especially with western journalism characterized as being in a state of “crisis” or “collapse” (Wahl-Jorgensen and Hanitzsch, 2019, p. 14). Journalists have sought new models amid economic, societal and technological upheaval. Financial pressures made partnerships between newspapers and TV stations more common in the early 2000s (Lowrey, 2005). Print advertising losses also encouraged large chains to share more content among their newspapers (Graham & Smart, 2010). Sometimes, these approaches – especially when fueled by cost-savings motivations – have led to the homogenization of news, or a “spiral of sameness” (Boczkowski, 2010, p. 173). But, overall, collaborations have helped journalism to thrive in adverse conditions, sustaining news organizations and enriching the information ecosystem.

In the past, collaborative efforts most often involved similar organizations with similar missions. As recently as the early 2000s, traditional news organizations resisted collaborating with different types of partners due to questions of who was a “journalist” and concerns over whether collaboratively produced news would be reported in a traditional way (Anderson, 2013, pp. 154-166). But today there are signs that resistance is softening as journalists are joining forces with a wider range of both journalistic and non-journalistic actors. These include not only legacy news organizations and digital startups, but foundations (Benson, 2017), computer programmers

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and hackers (Usher, 2016), nonprofits (Konieczna, 2018), advocacy groups (Konieczna, 2020), and others. As collaboratives have grown in number (Carson, 2020), they now involve a diverse array of actors. This paper explores the extent to which new types of partners may be impacting not only journalistic processes, but the field's core values and mission.

2. Collaboration, boundaries and reciprocal journalism

Collaborations get to the very heart of who does – and who does not – get to take part in conversations about what is news and how news content should be produced. The tensions involved frequently revolve around identity and boundaries, as collaboration highlights the extent to which different actors can influence both conceptual definitions of news and journalistic practice itself. Previous research on collaborative efforts has explored the varying degrees to which organizations do or do not work together in the planning, creation and distribution of news coverage (Anderson, 2013; Benson, 2017; Ferrucci et al., 2017; Lewis & Usher, 2016; Lowery, 2005). This project aims to take the next step and focus on the priorities and values imbued in those processes, especially how non-journalistic partners influence the ways these groups characterize their core mission.

Diverse collaborations lead to natural questions of how the involvement of new types of partners might impact journalistic boundaries (Gieryn, 1983; Carlson & Lewis, 2015; Carlson & Lewis, 2020) and the extent to which journalists have sought to defend their field against “incursions from non-journalists” (Carlson & Lewis, 2015, p. 9). At the most practical level, this involves the question of “who should rightfully gather and disseminate news – and who should not” (Carlson, 2015, p. 3). Journalists often cite professional norms and ethics when distinguishing themselves from new actors in the field, especially amid new technological developments (Singer, 2015; Walters, 2021).

Whenever traditional boundaries are redrawn, it has the potential to lead to newly renegotiated values and views of the field's end goals. Traditional journalism was rooted in a more one-directional model in which reporters and editors acted as gatekeepers (Lewin, 1947; White, 1950) for a more passive audience. In today's environment of “networked gatekeeping,” however, the process has become far more dynamic, involving interconnected partners who are constructing and curating narratives together (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 135).

In this way, the field today often takes the form of a mediated conversation that involves a give and take with the audience and other community members that has been dubbed “reciprocal journalism” (Lewis et al., 2014). As this process has become more dynamic and collaborative, it frequently involves groups from outside the journalistic sphere. Increasingly, these partners include “peripheral actors” such as investigative non-profits, special-interest groups, aggregators and citizen journalists (Schapals, 2022) or fact-checking groups (Cheruiyot & Ferrer-Conill, 2018). These partners are often motivated by dissatisfaction with the current state of journalism.

As journalism becomes more of an interactive conversation (Marchionni, 2015), collaborations provide a window into the ways new types of participants may be influencing the mission of the field. Journalists have long considered a key part of their duty as democratic, providing citizens with information they need to make decisions in their daily lives, while prioritizing values such as verification and independence (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014). New types of collaborative partners have the potential to impact the definition not only of what constitutes journalism, but of what its ultimate purpose is.

To that end, this project centers around a central research question as it attempts to advance scholarly knowledge about how diverse collaborations are influencing our understanding of journalism's purpose and goals: **(RQ1)** To what extent do diverse collaborations, those featuring both journalistic and non-journalistic partners, impact the traditional understanding of journalism's core mission?

3. Methods

In order to answer this question, I sought out collaborations that involved a wide variety of partners and were in the very early stages. Working with guidance from Temple University's Institutional Review Board, I assembled two separate consent forms – one for in-person research and one for virtual research – to be shared with potential subjects, along with a basic research project description; I also assembled a list of semi-structured interview questions. These materials were shared with the IRB, along with a formal IRB protocol and application, on April 8, 2021; the IRB approved the research as exempt and minimal risk on May 14, 2021, and approved a modification on Aug. 5, 2021.

In order to find budding collaborations to be studied, I contacted the Center for Cooperative Media at Montclair State University and the Solutions Journalism Network, as well as individual news organizations (both legacy and start-up), in search of

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collaborations that would both be in the fetal stages in late spring of 2021 and involve a diverse array of partners from both inside and outside the traditional journalistic sphere. In total, 19 different groups were contacted. A half-dozen expressed some degree of interest, but logistical issues prevented some from working as research sites for the project. The first collaboration selected for the research was the Dallas Media Collaborative, a project being guided and funded through the Solutions Journalism Network as part of the group’s Local Media Project, a five-year initiative supported by the Knight Foundation that is seeking to bolster local news ecosystems. The funding for the project ends at the end of 2023 (A. Maestas, personal communication, November 19, 2021).

The Dallas effort began developing in 2020, but was in its preliminary stages in spring 2021. The stated goal of the project, based on written guidance from the Solutions Journalism Network’s Local Media Project, which is providing \$100,000 in annual funding for two years, is to select a “pressing challenge” in the community and report on it through a “solutions journalism” lens (Solutions Journalism Network, September 20, 2020). Solutions journalism has been described as a paradigm that “guides journalists to examine what is working to fix a particular problem instead of solely writing about society’s problems” (McIntyre et al., 2018, p. 1). The project aims to develop a sustainable effort that turns into a “permanent news hub” that can address the particular community challenge and become a partner in a network of such hubs sponsored by other SJN efforts (including existing ones in Charlotte, N.C., and Philadelphia, as well as efforts in New Hampshire and Ohio, among other locations). The Dallas collaboration involved 14 partners, including start-up and legacy news organizations, several colleges and universities, a non-profit community group, a choral group, a non-profit seeking to end child poverty, and other members (see **Table 1**). This collaborative was selected because it had diverse types of partners – both journalistic and non-journalistic groups.

Table 1: Dallas Media Collaborative partners

<i>Partner</i>	<i>Description</i>
<i>Advocate magazines</i>	Local magazines (print and online)
<i>Al Dia Dallas</i>	Spanish newspaper language (print and online)
Child Poverty Action Lab	Nonprofit focused on fighting child poverty
<i>D Magazine</i>	Magazine (print and online)
Dallas Doing Good	Nonprofit

<i>Dallas Free Press</i>	Digital journalism startup
<i>Dallas Morning News</i>	Daily newspaper (print and online)
<i>Dallas Weekly</i>	Newspaper (print and online)
KERA	Public broadcast station
Southern Methodist University	Private university
<i>Texas Metro News</i>	Newspaper (print and online)
University of North Texas	Public university
University of North Texas at Dallas	Public university
Verdigris Ensemble	Choral arts group

The research also focuses on a second collaboration, the Credible Messenger Reporting Project, which is organized by the Philadelphia Center for Gun Violence Reporting. The nonprofit center is housed at the Community College of Philadelphia and run by longtime multimedia journalist Jim MacMillan, who worked as a photographer at the *Philadelphia Daily News* and other newspapers for nearly 30 years, and was on a team that won the Pulitzer Prize for breaking news photography in 2005 – work done while he was on special assignment for The Associated Press in Baghdad. The Credible Messenger project, which pairs community journalists with traditional journalists from mainstream news organizations, aims to produce stories that explore root causes of gun violence, and identify potential solutions; the project seeks to produce stories “according to professional practices and to distribute the reports through mainstream and social media channels” (The Philadelphia Center for Gun Violence Reporting, November 6, 2020). The pairings produced audio, video and text stories about the impact of gun violence in Philadelphia; they had completed most of their reporting at the time this research began. This project was selected because it, too, involved diverse partners from inside and outside journalism.

3.1 Ethnographic observation

In studying journalism, ethnographic methods have been found useful for researchers asking questions about processes or culture, key elements of journalistic mission. This method has the advantage of being able to *show* researchers what is actually happening as they are trying to understand the sociology of journalism in various contexts (Anderson, 2013; Boczkowski, 2010; Gans, 2004; Konieczna, 2018; Ryfe, 2012; Tuchman, 1978; Usher, 2016). Ethnographic methods were selected for this project due to their ability to interpret observable

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relationships between social practices and systems of meaning (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019, p. 174).

Data was collected through attending meetings, joining conference calls and observing online and in-person discussions, as well as observing group work on written goals and policies, and actual journalistic work. This aspect of the research involved face-to-face interaction with informants that occurred in real time in the subject's natural setting when possible (Warren & Karner, 2015, pp. 53-70), but more often through observation of both live and asynchronous interactions of participants in digital or virtual spaces (for example, Bird, 2003; Boellstorff et al., 2012). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the research subjects were conducting meetings and discussions almost exclusively via email, shared public documents, Slack channels, and Zoom meetings.

The research also included a week of intensive in-person ethnographic observations and interviews at the Dallas Media Collaborative's sites in Dallas from Nov. 15, 2021, through Nov. 19, 2021. I visited the offices of different partners and observed field reporting – some done by individual members and some done collaboratively with multiple partners. Some of this reporting took place virtually or over the phone from offices; I observed other reporting in person at sites in Dallas. I also attended a full collaborative trust-building and brainstorming meeting held at the offices of *D Magazine*, and attended a dress rehearsal of a performance by the Verdigris Ensemble at an arts center. This aspect of the research also included tours of neighborhoods throughout Dallas that illustrated the affordable housing crisis that is the collaborative's stated focus.

During these ethnographic observations, I took field notes that recorded observations and impressions, with some "thick description" of the people and spaces in the interactions (Warren & Karner, 2015, pp. 101-118). I recorded basic descriptions in field notes, following accepted guidance for such qualitative research (for example, Lindlof & Taylor, 2019, pp. 119-218; Warren & Karner, 2015, pp. 101-118). After recording the field notes, I wrote up detailed memos that included more thick description, in-depth analysis, and thinking about theoretical concepts that emerged in the observations. I used an open coding method to identify the emergent themes, connecting these observations and analyses to existing literature when appropriate (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

3.2 Interviews

In concert with ethnographic observations, the project utilized qualitative interviews as a means of developing a complete understanding of participants'

experiences through their accounts and explanations (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019, pp. 223-225). The method of semi-structured, in-depth interviews was selected for its value in eliciting detailed narratives and explanations from subjects (Warren & Karner, 2015; Wengraf, 2001). In utilizing this method, I considered the limitations of interviews as a research tool, especially since subjects' accounts often differ from their actual actions (for example, see Jerolmack & Kahn, 2014). However, this project utilized them in conjunction with ethnographic observation as a means of gaining additional insight on the collaborative process. The combination of ethnographic observations and interviews draws on what Nikki Usher (2016) has characterized "hybrid ethnography."

In total, 17 interviews were conducted with both organizers and participating members of collaborating organizations. I used a semi-structured interview method in which general topics and questions were chosen ahead of time, but related follow-up questions were raised as needed (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, pp. 38-39). The questions asked were guided by a set of "theory questions" derived from the study's central research questions; these questions govern the development of the actual interview questions, which sought – in this case – to have participants reflect on their work and their experiences (Wengraf, 2001, pp. 61-64). Interviews were conducted in person, over the phone, or through Zoom, depending on the circumstances, and lasted anywhere from 30 minutes to more than an hour and a half each. Many interviews were recorded and then transcribed using notes typed during the interviews, or with the aid of an online transcription program; when interviews could not be recorded or typed, I took detailed, handwritten notes and used them to formulate field notes. As with the ethnographic observations, I analyzed the transcripts and notes, using an open coding method to identify emergent patterns (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

3.3 Textual analysis

Textual analysis was employed because of the ways it allows a researcher to get at rich description of content and helps determine latent meanings (Fürsich, 2009, pp. 240-241). In viewing texts as a "mediated reality," this method served to help address how stated values and purposes reflected the projects' missions. In some circumstances, textual analysis served as a subset of the ethnographic work, specifically when these methods were used to examine documents that established the policies and procedures of the collaborations. In other circumstances, textual analysis was used to examine journalistic content itself – in the form of text, videos, photos and audio clips. Having

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established these theoretical frameworks and methods, the next section turns to the study's findings.

4. Findings

Several key themes emerged in the data in relation to how the journalistic mission was characterized in these efforts. First, led by new types of partners, these collaborations described journalism's mission as one that must be centered around the needs of communities, especially those of marginalized groups that have been underserved by journalism. Second, those involved in these collaborations described a field in which the core mission centers around not just informing communities, but providing citizens with information that enables them to effect change. Third, these collaborations sought to more closely align journalism's core mission with that of education.

4.1 Embracing community-centered work that better serves marginalized groups

Non-journalistic partners, in particular, emphasized the need for journalistic operations to be a part of the community they cover, rather than distanced or separate from it. In the 20th century, newsroom ethnographers found journalists routinely dismissive of their audiences (Gans, 2004; Tuchman, 1978). That has changed somewhat in the 21st century, especially amid the rise of social media and the heightened attention to metrics that give the audience more influence on the gatekeeping process (Nelson, 2021). The findings in this study show collaborations taking that a step further: Those studied here sought to answer to people in their communities above all, especially those underserved by existing media. "I really think this work must be done in partnership with communities, not *to* communities," said Ashley Flores, of the Child Poverty Action Lab, a nonprofit research partner in the Dallas Media Collaborative (A. Flores, personal communication, August 16, 2021). This characterization represents the overarching way that these diverse collaborations reflect an effort to recalibrate the field's mission.

Those taking part in these collaborative partnerships were willing to do so in large part because they wanted to place a higher value on the community they were covering. They spoke of the audience as the end responsibility of their work, rather than as a means for making a profit. Collaborators observed in this project almost never discussed how many clicks or shares a story might get; instead, they spoke of meeting the community's needs. Subjects characterized the responsibilities of journalism in terms of engendering the trust of the community and

of treating both news subjects and the audience with openness and compassion. In one discussion about their mission statement, members of the Dallas Media Collaborative hit on this issue when debating the advantages and disadvantages of the phrase "marginalized communities." One partner emphasized trying to get at the challenges faced by less privileged communities, referring to "what's been done to them." In response to those challenges, collaborative partners routinely spoke of wanting to help and empower the people they cover.

As part of this community-centered approach, these collaborations prioritized the importance of their work speaking to and representing a diverse community – one featuring people of many different backgrounds and cultures. Partners spoke of their efforts as a type of corrective to mainstream media in this way – and sought to give the community more agency. During a lunch meeting with a source at an Indian restaurant, I observed *Dallas Free Press* journalist Keri Mitchell asking questions for a story, which centered around a museum dedicated to a local civil rights leader who was the second Black woman to serve on Dallas' city council. But the meeting was as much community listening as it was reporting. "I'm starting to start interviews with, 'Do you have any questions of me?'" said Mitchell, who later characterized the meeting as a blend of community engagement and reporting. The interview reflected a community-centered approach to journalism, with relaxed body language, laughs and shoulder-shimmies reflecting a conversation between equals. It showed a desire to understand people in the community. "Candace, remind me, did you grow up here?" Mitchell asked. The source answered that she was born in Baylor University hospital, and recounted the struggles of integration. "I integrated Red Oak before they were ready," she said. "That was like where all the Black folks lived, where they are allowed to live." In the interview, Mitchell rarely interrupted and spent most of her time listening, sometimes laughing along. This showed evidence of an effort to not only engage *with* the community, but to be more a part *of* the community. It offers additional support for what Andrea Wenzel (2020) has observed – journalists collaborating with different types of groups in an effort to repair community storytelling networks in ways that can help better connect with the community and lead to positive change. This exchange embodied the collaborative approach of the Dallas partners.

This type of push to be more community-centered, and to highlight underrepresented cultures, was evident throughout the findings. A community journalist involved in the Credible Messenger project described wanting to counter the typical image of

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Black men in the media in a way that would “invert the image of the mugshot” and show them as part of the fabric of their diverse communities (Campbell, personal communication, October 1, 2021). In a separate context, the Dallas Media Collaborative also demonstrated this type of priority throughout its search for a project manager, continually seeking a more diverse pool of candidates and placing higher value on candidates who were from traditionally marginalized groups. After the group interviewed one candidate, a partner commented in an anonymous Google response form about the advantages of having a female, bilingual person of color in the position: “We have not had a candidate who understands the people we’re trying to reach in the way that (the candidate) seems to,” the person wrote. “I am eager to see the strategies she will drive to reach these readers and eliminate our own blind spots.”

Furthermore, the participants in this study embraced this community-centered approach by broadening the scope of what constitutes journalism. They emphasized that the very idea of audience engagement, in all its various forms, is not just a means to attract more readers, viewers, listeners or subscribers. It is a function of journalists’ responsibility to be involved in the fabric of a community, to connect with citizens, and work with them in the search for solutions to societal problems – be that gun violence, the need for more affordable housing, or other social plagues. These groups characterized such audience engagement as being *journalism in and of itself*. In doing this, they prioritized what Jacob Nelson has dubbed “production-oriented” engagement, in which the audience is brought into journalistic processes; that stands in contrast with the “reception-oriented” engagement, which measures how the audience interacts with content (Nelson, 2021, pp. 32-33).

The partnerships studied here gave top priority to civic responsibility in their characterization of the mission of journalism. They reflected this in concrete ways that show both the expansion of traditional boundaries and a fresh look at journalism’s core responsibilities; these involved round table discussions, community listening, empowering citizen journalists, and even creative performances that sought to engage citizens in fresh, emotionally impactful ways. In doing this, they not only recharacterized the mission of journalism, but expanded the ideas of what kind of work could be considered journalism altogether.

4.2 Revamping journalism’s public service role, seeking to effect social change

Beyond recharacterizing the journalist-community relationship, the collaborations studied here also highlight evidence of efforts to redefine the public service function of the press. One way that duty has long been characterized is as providing the public with the information they need to make informed decisions and, in doing so, helping to create sovereignty (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014, pp. 20-21). However, collaborative members in this study took that a step further. They consistently described their responsibility as not just informing the audience about what is going on in society, but, more importantly, exploring and interrogating potential solutions to community problems.

At the most basic level, this reflected the goals of solutions journalism and the ways that the organizers of collaborations can reinforce those goals. Amy Maestas, of the Solutions Journalism Network, constantly emphasized SJN’s four “pillars” of a solutions journalism story; these include a focus on the response to a problem, and how that response has or hasn’t worked; insight on that response that makes it relevant to others; evidence on the effectiveness of the response; and emphasis on the limitations of the response (The Solutions Journalism Network, December 9, 2020). The Credible Messenger project, which did not have a direct affiliation with SJN, nevertheless also exhibited some of these same values – giving voice to the victims of gun violence in a way that highlighted possible solutions rooted in the communities. The groups studied here – led by their non-journalistic partners – appeared to go beyond just reflecting those goals of exploring and interrogating solutions; they characterized their preeminent duty as providing community members with informational tools that enable them to effect meaningful change.

In a *Dallas Morning News* story on the Dallas Media Collaborative, partners who were interviewed described its goal as having a big “impact,” “solving those problems” related to affordable housing, and serving as a “constant drumbeat” that draws attention to systemic issues in Dallas (Moreno, 2021). In planning meetings, partners routinely described their goal as wanting to “move the needle” on affordable housing in Dallas, to have a measurable impact. These characterizations were echoed in individual interviews and in observations during this research, demonstrating evidence that collaborative efforts often place greater emphasis on solving problems, rather than just explaining them. But the work of the collaboratives studied here seemed to illustrate a paradox: Journalists were in some ways advocating for change while still actively patrolling the boundaries between their work and the work of activists. The findings here exist amid the context that, with the

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growth of solutions journalism, concerns over advocacy have inspired some in the field to try to clarify the boundaries. That includes the view that, while a line separates news and advocacy, “helping solve problems is different from advocacy” (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014, p. 29). These tensions become starker when collaborative partners come from both inside and outside the field’s traditional boundaries.

Some Dallas Media Collaborative members, for example, expressed concern about including a potential member who was seen as more of an “advocate.” Journalistic partners also expressed concern about a candidate applying for the job of project manager because he had been more activist in his published writing. However, the group responded positively to a project manager candidate who spoke in her interview of how solutions journalism can be a “space (that) ... can be so powerful” when it comes to promoting equity work in the community, of addressing inequality. In another instance, a non-journalistic partner who is part of the choral group, wondered how the group could possibly write about the crisis of affordable housing *without* advocating for better policies: “I wonder how you write about affordable housing if you are not coming at it from a stance of housing justice” (M. Bottari, personal communication, August 13, 2021). These findings show the influence that non-journalistic partners have in reshaping the field’s mission. They are also consistent with the recent findings of Andrea Wenzel (2020) that suggest journalists still sometimes have reservations about working with community groups, especially activist organizations.

The collaborations studied here often prioritized a focus on specific tools to address the root causes of social ills – including poverty, addiction and policies and socioeconomic factors that make life more difficult for people of color. As examples, partners emphasized voting rights, redlining, urban planning policy, government funding priorities, mental health issues, problems with conflict resolution, and inadequate education and health care policies, as being factors that their work needed to help change. They continually described their end goal not as identifying problems in their communities, but as actually helping communities fix those problems.

On a 90-minute driving tour of residential neighborhoods in West Dallas, *D Magazine*’s Matt Goodman noted how interstates, transit infrastructure and zoning policies had significant impacts on whether an area thrived, as well as whether it was accessible to people of different incomes. The challenges were evident in the yards of homes, too, where competing “Vote in Favor of Zoning Changes” and “Stop Zoning Changes” signs popped up on many blocks. In a

different neighborhood, which had shifted more upscale in recent years and featured trendy restaurants and bars, Goodman identified the challenge as: “My family grew up here. I can’t afford to live here.” But rather than see his journalistic duty as explaining this problem, he characterized his work as being geared toward helping to find ways to make housing more affordable, whether through zoning changes or other possible solutions. He saw himself as part of the effort to solve the problem, saying at one point: “How do you create a mixed-income neighborhood?” is something we’ve got to look into.” This showed evidence of collaborative partners’ emphasis on being a part of the effort to address root causes of social ills. As another Dallas Media Collaborative member stated, “It’s not enough to admire the problem” (A. Flores, personal communication, November 18, 2021).

These types of social goals drive collaborative efforts, as they seek to prioritize positive changes in the community over the traditional goal of profit. The content produced by the Credible Messenger project demonstrated this in a tangible way. The consistent emphasis on treating gun violence as a public health crisis was emblematic of this solutions-based approach; citizen journalists and community partners, in particular, framed the main goal as not just giving voice to victims, but inspiring change. In the video and audio stories produced by the project, partners challenged journalistic conventions in how they worked to highlight root causes and possible solutions, rather than just detailing the problem. An interviewee in one video pointed out, for example, that his database of unsolved crimes was eventually copied by the city of Philadelphia, something about which he was very proud. Another participant described the need for the content to be “alarming” in an effort to raise awareness of the crisis (A. Laws, personal communication, October 4, 2021). At first, this intent does not appear unique, since traditional news coverage often seeks to be alarming in the interest of earning viewers and, therefore, profits. However, collaborative partners – especially non-journalistic ones – spoke of this desired emotional effect in the context of ultimately inspiring changes in policies and attitudes.

4.3 Re-imagining journalism’s core mission as an educational one

With its goal of informing the audience, journalism has always had an understood educational role. But a final way these collaborations appeared to be recalibrating journalism’s responsibilities and goals was by seeking to more explicitly align the field’s mission with that of education. This was reflected in two ways.

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First, these partnerships characterized their role as educating the public by providing them with quality information as a tool to solve problems. Both journalistic and non-journalistic partners prioritized informing their audiences in the name of improving civic discourse. In crafting its mission statement, the Dallas Media Collaborative used language often associated with the social responsibility of education – such as “encourage civil discourse that leads to civic engagement.” Members also often spoke of educating the audience on policies, programs and laws.

However, non-journalistic partners, in particular, emphasized how the press itself needs to be better informed in order to be able to provide this more educational content. In the Dallas Media Collaborative, the Child Poverty Action Lab’s Ashley Flores reflects these educational priorities: She holds a master’s degree in educational policy and management, spent four years working for the Dallas school district, and spent two years with Teach For America. Flores routinely mentioned the importance of housing stories that have “more nuance,” ones produced by journalists with a fuller understanding of the affordable housing issues. At one staff meeting, I observed CPAL staff discussing how they wanted to see more “good eviction stories,” which they defined as “ones that highlight the challenges.” CPAL also emphasized the importance of democratizing data, making it more readily available to the public, so that citizens could more easily educate themselves. CPAL staff discussed how they have worked to make daily eviction records publicly available, information that one organization was going to charge \$200,000 to provide. This shows evidence of how collaborations, led by new types of non-journalistic partners, emphasize the press’ role in educating the public and providing citizens with the tools to effect change.

Second, on a more practical level, the collaborations characterized this educational role as teaching current and future journalists about best practices. In doing this, the partnerships studied here show how collaborations seek to involve students in the journalistic process. These group efforts reflect a move toward a teaching hospital approach to journalism – where members often seek to involve students in the creation of news content. This sometimes came with uncertainty, as members debated what roles they were willing to entrust to undergraduate students affiliated with university partners, as well as the degree to which student work would need additional vetting. At one Dallas Media Collaborative meeting, non-university partners expressed concern about letting students have too much responsibility, especially when it came to the idea of them being involved with the collaborative’s

website or its social media channels. One journalistic partner argued that students “cannot be in charge of social media.” These collaboratives showed a desire to get students involved, but non-university partners expressed concerns about giving students too much responsibility. Nevertheless, these collaborations were clearly working to more closely align journalism’s mission with that of education.

In seeking more emphasis on education and social change, these findings suggest, diverse collaborations try to *de-emphasize* competition and incremental news coverage. They emphasized providing big-picture coverage that is lacking in their news ecosystems. They sought to leave the minutiae of day-to-day coverage to individual media outlets. This shows a collaborative approach prioritizing coverage that takes a step back to examine a problem more deeply, moving away from turn-of-the-screw developments to focus on giving the community informational tools they can use to help create change.

5. Discussion

Amid times of great cultural and technological change, journalists are desperately trying to make a case to the audience that their work still matters (Zelizer et al., 2021). They understand the need to re-envision the field’s mission, re-connect with citizens and re-establish journalistic authority and *legitimacy* with their publics (Carlson, 2017; Nelson, 2021). They are increasingly realizing, however, that they can’t do this alone. Therefore, they are not only banding together with one another but expanding boundaries and bringing in non-journalistic entities as partners in their mission. Journalists are re-defining the field’s membership boundaries in the hope that this will bolster its standing in society. To this end, these findings suggest that the new, less traditional types of partners joining these collaborations are influencing how the goals and priorities of journalism are characterized – and recalibrating the field’s mission.

First, these collaborations are re-envisioning the mission and purpose of community engagement. They see engagement efforts as *journalism*, rather than as means to reach new eyes and ears. Inspired by their non-journalistic partners, these collaborations see audience engagement as an end goal. The findings suggest non-journalistic partners push collaboratives toward finding creative ways to engage the public. In doing so, these partners are expanding the definition of what journalism is – including things as diverse as organizing community meetings, taking part in choral performances and making public databanks; these are areas that most likely would not be explored in collaborations comprised only of journalistic partners.

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Furthermore, they are doing this in ways that characterize journalism as a reciprocal conversation with all parts of the public.

This is a significant shift in the mission, one highlighted in collaborations that feature partners who don't operate under the traditional assumptions of the field. Thus, this represents a key part of how these efforts are seeking to repair the field. Rather than just seeking to get the audience to engage with content, these collaborations seek to interact with the community in much more creative ways that expand the boundaries of journalism – from public performances and community listening events to a more artistic approach to content that seeks to emotionally involve the consumer. Non-journalistic partners, in particular, are helping to characterize creative types of engagement as acts of journalism.

These collaborations also reflect an effort to align the journalistic mission much more closely with that of education. Journalism has long had an educational mission, going back to its role in creating an informed public. But news organizations have typically considered their duties fulfilled once information has been provided to the audience. These collaborations seek to re-envision that educational mission in a way that focuses on a greater democratic goal: providing citizens with tools meant to help them better society.

Rather than simply prioritizing audience empathy as a goal, these collaborative partners are focused on building solidarity in the community (Varma, 2015) as a means to motivate and enable citizens to solve problems via additional resources and programs. In doing so, collaborations show journalists seeking a more community-based approach (see Wenzel, 2020) that invites diverse partners into the process of co-creating news. Thus, they are working to redistribute power over who sets the informational curriculum.

The collaborations studied here provide evidence that diverse partnerships are working to recharacterize the traditional public service role of the press. They envision this role as being more than just providing citizens with information with which to make informed decisions and helping to create sovereignty. These diverse efforts appear to be building on individual, solution-focused work that some journalistic partners have started to do on their own. Inspired particularly by non-journalistic partners, however, these collaborations seek to make that kind of work the norm. They want to push solutions journalism to a new level: They see their public service duty as a mandate not just to identify and critically evaluate solutions to problems – but to involve new kinds of community groups and arm citizens with information that will enable them to tackle the root causes of societal ills. Both in how they describe their

goals and in how they measure success, therefore, collaborations are recharacterizing journalism's public service mission as one that prioritizes giving citizens agency and solving societal problems, rather than just creating better-informed publics.

6. Limitations and future research

As a qualitative study, these findings provide rich insight into journalistic practices, but they are not necessarily suitable for broad generalization. This study does not claim to make predictions or generalize about the behavior of collaboratives, overall. Furthermore, the study would have been bolstered with a larger number of collaborations studied, especially ones outside of the United States.

Given the increasing number of collaborations in the U.S. and beyond, further research in this area is needed. Such work especially needs to focus on how collaborative processes and arrangements evolve over time, and explore what the work they produce demonstrates about their values. Such longitudinal work would help further the understanding of how these values are manifested in news content.

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