

A Collaboration in Name Only? Social Justice Implications of Prioritizing Journalistic Autonomy Over Solidarity in the 2016 San Francisco Homeless Project

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Abstract

The growing trend of collaborative journalism has been lauded as a sign of journalists and editors developing creative ways to provide communities with public service journalism on pressing social justice issues, despite dwindling resources for reporting. Cross-news outlet collaboration appears to signal strong solidarity among journalists, yet American journalists' value of individual autonomy may impede them from harnessing their collective power to challenge social injustice together. Through in-depth interviews with journalists and editors, we find that journalists who participated in the 2016 San Francisco Homeless Project viewed its decentralization as attractive for preserving their autonomy, but the lack of coordination and persistent undercurrent of competition between participants prevented the Project from developing a cohesive vision of what homelessness means and how to address it. Ultimately, the Project's fragmented coverage fatigued audiences instead of energizing them. We conclude by examining the normative implications of the tension between journalistic autonomy and solidarity.

Keywords: collaboration, autonomy, solidarity, journalism studies, American journalism ethics, semistructured interviews, San Francisco Homeless Project