Working Together: The Rise of Collaboration as a Newsroom Norm

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Abstract

The idea of a collaborative press refers to two related but broadly distinguishable conceptions of collaboration. One concerns collaboration as a press role; the other concerns collaboration as a newsroom norm. A longstanding, though seldom celebrated, role for a democratic press, collaboration of the first kind typically manifests itself as an ad hoc partnership between the press and usually, but not always, the state, a relationship aimed at averting conflict or disagreement by identifying mutually agreeable means and ends. An example of this type of collaboration, courtesy of Christians and his colleagues (Christians et al, 2009, pp. 206-211), would be the press and the state working in concert to develop and implement criteria for censorship at a time of war. In contrast, collaboration of the second kind involves a partnership between or among journalists, within but mostly across newsrooms, a relationship driven by the need to deal with the unplanned consequences of the recent and rapid computerization of communication.

Understood as a new newsroom norm, collaboration emerged in response to the need to

both mitigate the collapse in many parts of the world of an old and dependable business model, viable for nearly two centuries, in which the publication of advertisements subsidized the production of news; and cope with new and widely available communication technology, mainly the internet, and the avalanche of information, new and old, it made available (ergo, the phenomenon of "big data" and the advent of computational journalism). If competition remains a cherished value — a "respectful rivalry," as *The New York Times* editor Dean Baquet (2017) recently described his newspaper's relationship with *The Washington Post,* "makes for good journalism" — collaboration promises what Charles Lewis (2016), founder of the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, describes as a future of "important work that was neither feasible nor fathomable in the last century." The title of Lewis's article, published two years ago in *The Guardian:* "The future of journalism in three words: collaboration, collaboration, collaboration."

We examine collaborative journalism in the context of what Michael Schudson (2010) calls "the emerging ecology of public information," which he traces to the pre-internet "proliferation of data-gathering and data-assembling institutions in the 1970s" (p. 100). We are particularly interested in — to shift to the work of John Nerone (2012) — the relationship between collaboration as a newsroom norm and "journalists' capacity for independence"; we want to understand what collaboration contributes "the rise of a new news environment with new news practices" (p. 446). Ultimately, we want to decide whether collaborative practices are among the changes in journalism that "have opened the possibility of the redefinition of journalism, along with a rethinking of the relationship between journalism and democracy" (Nerone, 2012, p. 446).

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