



HOW THE PRESS COVERS CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATION

An Analysis of Articles and Journalists' Perspectives

Expanded Executive Summary

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The Intersector Project’s compelling look at how the press covers cross-sector collaboration raises critical questions about how journalists cover partnerships among the government, business, and non-profit sectors and recommends resources to help journalists become more aware of and adept at reporting on them. **Journalists are like most people. They are unlikely to know the ins and outs of the various sectors and need help in grasping the need for and understanding the process through which they partner to solve public problems** — a process that has a chance to be of real help to our modern world.

— Marvin Kalb, founding Director of the Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy

Interest in addressing public problems through collaboration among the government, business, and non-profit sectors is on the rise. Meanwhile, many journalists are searching to better understand the mechanics, benefits, and limitations of these relationships — partnerships that involve the “linking or sharing of information, resources, activities, and capabilities by organizations in two or more sectors to jointly achieve an outcome.”¹

While cross-sector collaboration is not a panacea, it is an important tool for solving complex problems in the 21st century. “Inward-looking cultures and operational models are particularly ill-suited to addressing problems that often transcend organizational boundaries,” write former Indianapolis Mayor Stephen Goldsmith and Deloitte’s head of government insights William Eggers, representing a position increasingly held by local leaders.²

The apparent increase in cross-sector collaboration has reverberating effects for journalism, as the topic transcends traditional beat systems and is relevant to the work of journalists covering local, regional, and national news. Many of the more than 30 journalists and supporters of journalism interviewed for this report told us they have observed increasing attention to cross-sector collaboration in their work. Journalists have a key role to play in covering cross-sector partnerships thoroughly, not only to fulfill the Fourth Estate’s mission of holding public officials and agencies accountable for their work in these collaborations, but also to educate the public about cross-sector collaboration as a potential model for addressing public problems. In fulfilling its more accountability-oriented, investigative role, journalism has the potential to increase public awareness of the risks, rewards, costs, and benefits of involving private organizations in what is traditionally considered “public work.” The resulting coverage can shape public levels of support, which ultimately has the potential to influence the actions of elected officials and policymaking. Thoughtful coverage of cross-sector collaboration also provides readers with knowledge of a potential model for addressing community challenges — both its benefits and limitations.



Quality coverage of cross-sector collaboration matters because journalists have the opportunity to:



Hold the public sector accountable



Highlight potential solutions to complex problems



Influence public opinion

Through 30 interviews with journalists and leaders of organizations that support journalism, as well as an analysis of nearly 250 stories of cross-sector collaboration from 10 newspapers across the country, this report explores how the press covers cross-sector collaboration in the United States and illuminates the difficulties journalists face in covering it well.

How Are Journalists Covering Cross-sector Collaboration?

While we found some excellent coverage, the articles we reviewed revealed the difficulty of covering cross-sector collaboration in a way that goes beyond the “who” and the “what” to more complicated and arguably more critical components, including partners’ contributions, the risks or limitations of collaboration, and more.

We assessed each of the news items we reviewed for a set of six “quality criteria” and scored them based on whether they met these criteria. The first two criteria are baseline expectations for coverage, addressing the “who” and the “what” of cross-sector collaboration, elements of “press release journalism.” These were weighted at half the value of the other criteria.



Does the news item name partners or potential partners or types of partners?



Does the news item describe the outcomes or potential outcomes of cross-sector collaboration?

The other four criteria represent elements of cross-sector collaboration that are not only more difficult to understand and convey, but also key to shaping the public’s understanding of cross-sector collaboration.



Does the news item describe the problem or challenge that cross-sector collaboration seeks/sought to address?



Does the news item describe the contributions of partners to cross-sector collaboration?

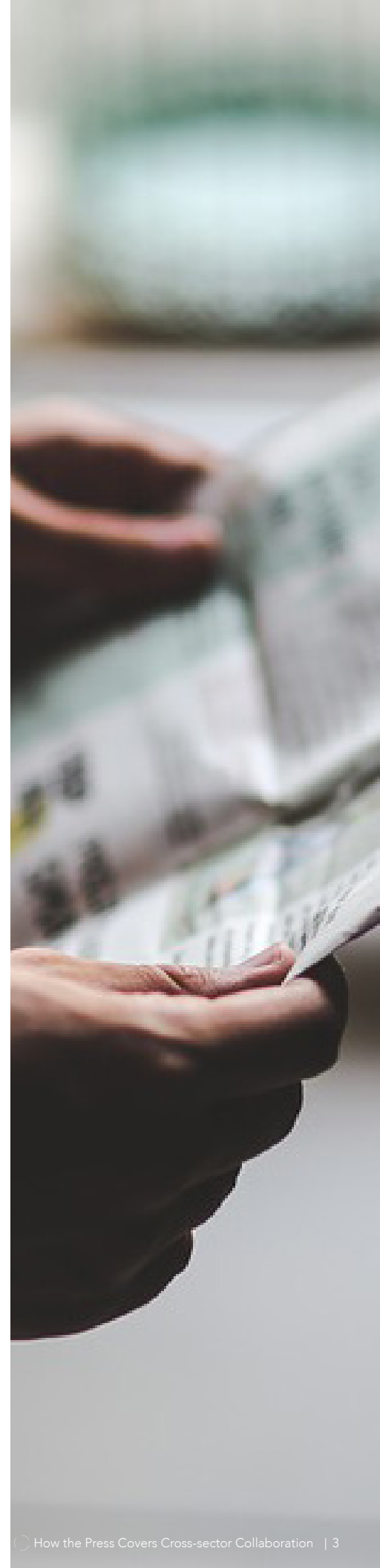


Does the news item discuss any challenge, limitation, risk, or downside to cross-sector collaboration?



Does the news item state that a collaboration accomplished or could accomplish what single-sector or single-organization efforts could not?

With our two baseline criteria assigned .5 points each and our remaining four criteria assigned 1 point each, the highest possible quality score each article could achieve was a 5 and the lowest a 0. On this scale, **the average score of our 249 articles was 2.78**, with a plurality of articles scoring a 3. A closer look at the frequency of individual quality variables suggests that communicating the problem the collaboration seeks to address, discussing challenges, limitations, or risks, and discussing the rationale for a multi-sector approach often are excluded from coverage of cross-sector collaboration.



What Challenges Do Journalists Face in Covering Cross-sector Collaboration?

Gathering information and reporting on cross-sector collaboration presents a particular challenge for journalists for several reasons.



Cross-sector collaboration can be complex and sometimes opaque, bringing together multiple stakeholders with differing institutional logics, motivations, and practices, who are often navigating ambiguous decision-making processes with varying formality. This, by nature, makes it difficult for journalists to gather information and tell stories in a nuanced and thorough way.



There is no such thing as a cross-sector collaboration beat. Cross-sector partnerships are employed in areas as diverse as local parks, statewide mass transit, and national counterterrorism efforts, through a proliferating array of partnering types, from contractual public-private partnerships to informal alliances. The practical result of this is that while journalists are charged with telling nuanced, compelling stories of cross-sector collaboration that effectively convey financing arrangements, partner motivations, and potential risks and rewards, very few have the opportunity to develop expertise on cross-sector collaboration.



Cross-sector collaboration can be more time-intensive to cover than single-sector initiatives, due to the number of actors and complexities of the relationships. The current media landscape isn't always conducive to these complexities, as there are often limited resources to invest in time-intensive stories. The limited resources also affect journalists' ability to write follow-up stories, as they often have little time to return to a cross-sector collaboration to report on whether or not it delivered promised results.



Practitioners sometimes make covering cross-sector collaboration difficult for journalists, whether due to a reliance on "press release journalism," a lack of consideration for news values when pitching stories to journalists, or the reluctance of business-sector partners to openly share information or data — potentially reducing the quality and breadth of coverage of a particular initiative.



Stories of cross-sector collaboration are difficult to cover in meaningful and understandable ways that align with the goals of "good" journalism — to tell clear, cohesive, interesting stories on topics that matter to readers. Journalism is fundamentally an audience-driven business, making stories about cross-sector collaboration, with their focus on process, multiple characters, and sometimes complex financing and governance mechanisms, not always deemed "newsworthy."



Our conversations with more than 30 journalists and supporters of journalism about the difficulties of covering cross-sector collaboration suggest there is a need for guidance on the topic.

These conversations inspired us to generate questions for journalists to consider when pursuing stories related to cross-sector collaboration — questions that can help journalists produce high-quality stories that provide the public with information they need to know, related to the risks and rewards of the collaboration for each partner; the authority and influence of each partner; whether the cross-sector initiative is really needed; the public sector's contributions; and more.

In creating this list of questions, we considered journalists' thoughts on what is important for the public to know about cross-sector collaboration and what's difficult to cover, along with our own familiarity with the complex processes involved in business, government, and non-profit collaboration.

Questions Journalists Should Consider When Covering Cross-sector Collaboration



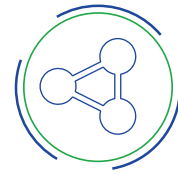
Who's Involved?

- ✚ What offices, agencies, organizations, and companies are partnering in this collaboration?
- ✚ Have the partners worked together previously? If so, were those relationships successful (e.g., were they characterized by trust and goodwill, and did they produce desired outcomes)?
- ✚ Have any of the partners participated in previous cross-sector collaborations? If so, were those efforts successful or not?
- ✚ Have any critical partners been left out? If so, who are they, why were they left out, and what are the potential downsides of their not being included?
- ✚ Has the public been consulted on this partnership's work in a meaningful way? If so, how (e.g., through public meetings or hearings, formal surveys, public comment periods, ballot measures)? If not, are partners considering a public consultation process of some kind?
- ✚ What signs of public support or opposition are observable, if any? What is the reason for this public support or opposition?



Why Was a Cross-sector Approach Chosen?

- ✚ What is the partnership's "genesis story"? When did it begin to take shape? What individual(s) or organization(s) initiated the partnership and what initial problem, issue, or event led them to do so? When and why did each partner get involved in the partnership?
- ✚ What other approaches were considered or attempted before choosing a cross-sector approach? Did an individual or organization consider or attempt addressing this problem on their own before pursuing a cross-sector solution? If not, why wasn't that attempted before involving cross-sector partners?
- ✚ Why was a cross-sector approach ultimately chosen over other potential approaches?
- ✚ What problem or issue is the collaboration aiming to address? Do all partners agree with how the problem is defined? If not, where are there differences?
- ✚ What program or initiative is the collaboration proposing to address the problem or issue?



What Resources Are Involved?

- ✚ What resources does each partner bring to the partnership, whether financial or non-financial (e.g., convening power, legal expertise, access to information, authority)?
- ✚ Does the partnership have the financial and non-financial resources to achieve its goals? If not, what steps will the collaboration take to ensure it obtains the resources to achieve its goals?
- ✚ Who is providing the funding necessary to accomplish the collaboration's aims, whether members of the collaboration or external parties? If each partnering organization has not provided financial resources to the partnership, why not?
- ✚ If there is a contract or memorandum of understanding (MOU) involved, who is negotiating on behalf of the public sector?
- ✚ What taxpayer resources are allocated to this project? How much does the partnership's work depend on these resources?

Questions Journalists Should Consider When Covering Cross-sector Collaboration (continued)



What Risks and Rewards Is Each Partner Taking On?

- ✚ What does each partner have to gain by joining the collaboration, whether financial or non-financial benefits (e.g., access to technical expertise, increased political influence, improved brand reputation or standing within the community, access to data)? Do these potential gains present conflicts of interest for any partners?
- ✚ Which partner has the most to gain if the partnership achieves its goals? Is that partner's contribution to the collaboration appropriate considering this potential gain?
- ✚ What risks is each partner taking on by joining the collaboration, whether financial, reputational, political, or otherwise?
- ✚ Which partner has the most to lose if the partnership does not achieve its goals? Is that partner's level of involvement and authority in the collaboration appropriate considering this potential loss?
- ✚ How will the partnership's work affect the public, in both the short and long term, either positively or negatively, both if it achieves its goals and if it does not?



How Are Partners Working Together?

- ✚ How are decisions made within the collaboration? (For example, do all partners make every decision together? Does a select group of partners or representatives from partnering organizations make decisions? Does the collaboration require absolute consensus among partners or some form of majority rule? Do certain partners have authority to make certain decisions without consulting others?)
- ✚ What responsibilities is each partner taking on through the partnership?
- ✚ How are partners accountable to one another, whether through formal mechanisms like contracts, MOUs, or partnership agreements, or informal mechanisms like the desire to protect organizational reputation or maintain key strategic relationships?
- ✚ What disputes have arisen during the partnership — whether about the partnership's processes, goals, or otherwise? How have they been resolved?
- ✚ What examples is the partnership learning from?



What Are the Potential or Actual Outcomes?

- ✚ How is the collaboration defining success?
- ✚ How is the collaboration measuring success? What data, whether quantitative or qualitative, are being used, and how are the data being collected?
- ✚ When will the partnership be able to assess whether it has been successful or is showing signs of success? Will it share interim signs of success or failure with the public or other stakeholders?
- ✚ What will the partnership do if it does not achieve its goals in the decided timeframe?
- ✚ How will the partnership be held accountable for its outcomes, whether by the public, funders, or other external and internal stakeholders?
- ✚ What would be the implications of failure for each partner?
- ✚ What would be the implications of failure for the public?
- ✚ Which partner will own what at the end of the partnership (e.g., assets such as physical infrastructure, data, or intellectual property)?

The Need for Media Education on Cross-sector Collaboration

While this report aims to support journalists who cover and might cover cross-sector collaboration, exploring the difficulties journalists face and providing them with some guidance, there are many additional areas to explore further in media education on this topic.

First, there is a need for more work that seeks to understand what leads to quality coverage of cross-sector collaboration. We believe there is much to be gained through studying outlets that do this well, with a focus on a few of these key areas: outlet ownership type, resources available, management practices, audience, and practices of individual journalists. Case studies would allow journalists and supporters of journalism to understand how to produce and encourage thoughtful coverage of the topic. In addition, a limitation of this study, as we've stated, is that our analysis of coverage was exclusive to traditional newspapers. It is important to examine how new media are covering the topic.

We recommend the following components be considered for inclusion in future resources to help journalists work through challenging aspects of covering this topic:

- ✿ Key facts related to cross-sector collaboration that help journalists better understand the practice
- ✿ A typology of cross-sector collaboration
- ✿ An explanation of how coverage of cross-sector collaboration employs common, current journalistic practices and techniques (e.g., investigative journalism, community journalism) and how it aligns with journalistic practices and values (e.g., holding public-sector leaders accountable, identifying potential solutions to complex problems)
- ✿ Examples of high quality, compelling coverage of cross-sector collaboration, including commentary on the practical effects of such coverage
- ✿ A critical review of low quality coverage of cross-sector collaboration
- ✿ Ideas for stories on cross-sector collaboration
- ✿ Techniques for creating interesting stories that focus on process
- ✿ Guidance on identifying expert sources that journalists can contact on the topic of cross-sector collaboration, including a list of nationally available experts
- ✿ Guidance on locating relevant statistics, including a list of nationally available statistical repositories and databases
- ✿ Guidance on identifying federal, state, and local legislation relevant to cross-sector collaboration

- ✿ A glossary of terms/jargon common in cross-sector collaboration
- ✿ A list of third party resources that journalists can turn to for assistance understanding and covering cross-sector collaboration

It's not realistic to expect that most journalists could be experts on the topic of cross-sector collaboration itself — But it is realistic to expect that a journalist could understand the dynamics often involved in this work and, together with application of typical good journalistic practices as well as knowledge of their particular beat, produce quality coverage. We hope this report provides a helpful starting point for that work.

We invite organizations and individuals that are interested in this topic to contact us at presscoverscollaboration@intersector.com.

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1. Bryson, J., Crosby, B., & Stone, M. (2015). Designing and implementing cross-sector collaborations: Needed and challenging. *Public Administration Review*, (75)5, 647-663.

2. Goldsmith, S., & Eggers W.D. (2004). *Governing by network: The new shape of the public sector*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.