

POWER IN NUMBERS

By Jacob Kushner
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Reporters unite in one city to cover health care access

“All Together Now” was the optimistic name coined for an experiment that would test a new model of journalism in Madison, Wis.

The plan was ambitious: Organize competing news media to collectively investigate access to health care. The project offers journalists a narrow but important insight into what collective journalism can accomplish.

Initiated by the editors of two Madison print publications, “All Together Now” sought to create a community impact greater than the sum of its parts.

Its parts were many. Twenty Madison news organizations ranging from local radio and TV stations to magazines and student newspapers to the city’s homeless-issue newspaper bombarded the Madison news scene this past October with more than 40 stories on local health care access. All of the content was aggregated to a Web site created for the project: www.atnmadison.org.

Reviewing the journalism produced, it’s clear the project succeeded in involving a wide range of Madison’s media and produced important stories. But can other markets replicate Madison’s model to collectively produce journalism that is increasingly difficult to produce individually?

“The biggest strength is that everybody can do it,” says project co-founder Bill Lueders, news editor of the weekly city paper *Isthmus*.

But there’s no denying that Madison is an anomaly when it comes to friendliness among competing news media. The progressive state capital is home to an equally progressive media scene – one with a history of collaborations between companies.

The fact that more than 30 journalists from at least 20 companies showed up to the preliminary meeting speaks more to pre-existing relationships than to the project’s unifying nature.

To be sure, collective journalism isn’t for everyone. Missing from the action were a couple of the city’s biggest players, including its daily newspaper, *The Wisconsin State Journal*.

What about a collective project didn’t appeal to the biggest outlet in town? The paper’s editor, John Smalley, said because the project was collective rather than collaborative, it didn’t lend itself well to a publication going through a “tremulous” time of newsroom layoffs.

“I think it’s a good and useful model for the community and for the marketplace to be exposed to that sort of full-pronged approach, but I don’t know that there’s any great gain individually for any individual outlet.”

Lueders understands the hesitation by some media to participate but believes the success of “All Together Now” should ease those fears.

“I think it’s harder for larger publications like the *State Journal* to make a leap like this when it still seems sort of new and risky,” Lueders said. “They probably had some

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well-founded fear. I think they were worried that they would be seen as part of an advocacy effort and that the reporting of all these other publications would somehow reflect on their publication.”

The model allowed each outlet to play to its respective strengths rather than conform to a particular style. A local radio station broadcast the voices

of local people telling their struggles accessing health care. College newspapers reported how their university's health insurance program serves the rising number of students no longer insured by their parents' plans. And a number of media produced investigative work, exposing the reasons for a shortage in primary care physicians, the ineffectiveness of a state

insurance overseer and the obstacles to mental health care for depressed mothers.

Collective reporting certainly has some kinks to work out, most notably balancing cooperation with competition and answering the question of whether it can bring significant changes and solutions.

One participant wrote in a post-project survey that “Healthy competition is at the core of what drives a journalism community forward,” warning “we cannot lose sight of the fact that competition produces better journalism.”

But Brennan Nardi, ATN co-founder and editor of *Madison Magazine*,

says if anything, “All Together Now” sparked competition among local media in health care reporting. “You can be competitive under this model,” Nardi said. “You want your story to be the best because it’s going to be held to the standard (of) the other media at the time.”

Despite the project’s scope, it’s difficult to gauge what tangible effects it had on access to health care in Madison. “I think we effected change for the better in journalism. I’m not sure the same could be said for health care access,” Nardi said.

So if success through impact isn’t guaranteed, what do collective projects like “All Together Now” offer journalists?

For the reporters, it’s an opportunity to give their stories more publicity and more punch by providing a context into which their work fits and receiving cross-promotion in other media.

For editors, it answers what Lueders calls the “why now?” question – justifying ever-present topics such as health care because the collective effort *makes* it timely.

And for everyone involved, collective reporting can create a comprehensive treatment of an issue that no single outlet could ever accomplish alone.

“It afforded journalists the opportunity to sort of get out of the chasing of the deadline ... to stop and say, ‘Let’s decide on a subject that’s really important to a community, and let’s go after it hard core,’” Nardi said. “That does make it greater than the sum of its individual parts.”

Nardi and Lueders say they hope to launch a second All Together Now project this May, reaching out to players who didn’t participate in the first. This time, they won’t expect participants to collaborate on stories. Instead, they will encourage outlets to use their individual expertise to achieve novel, collective journalism.

Jacob Kushner participated in the project as an undergraduate at the University of Wisconsin-Madison journalism school and as a reporting intern for the Wisconsin Center for Investigative Journalism (www.wisconsinwatch.org). His study of “All Together Now” was advised by UW-Madison journalism professor Jack Mitchell.

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