No 'I' in Team or in Leadership: Manifesting Teamwork as Essential to Ethical News Leadership

By Gregory P. Perreault

Journalism has historically been perceived as a solo activity. The public mindset of journalism is often associated with celebrity solo reporters — Norah O'Donnell, Katie Couric, Lester Holt.

Journalists, after all, are hired individually, promoted individually, given raises individually and mostly awarded individually. Yet this doesn't negate the fact that teamwork is an increasingly essential aspect of news work.[1] Indeed, currently it may be most correct to say that *the most effective journalism* is done by teams.[2]

Leaders define teamwork as a newsroomwide effort, more than just a double byline. But how can leaders manifest great teamwork?

In a famous interview from 1985, Apple co-founder Steve Jobs commented on great leaders and offered a perhaps more radical implicit observation: that great leadership occurred through teamwork. Jobs reminisced on the growth of Apple from a Silicon Valley garage company to a large corporation, noting:

> "We went out and hired a bunch of professional management. It didn't work at all. Most of them were bozos. They knew how to manage, but they didn't know how to do anything. So, if you're a great person, why do you want to work for somebody you can't learn anything from? …You know who the best managers are? They're the great individual contributors who never ever want to be a manager but decide they *have to* be a manager because no one else is going to be able to do as good a job as them."[3]

The key word in Jobs' comments is *contributors*. This points toward the importance of leaders emerging from and manifesting innovative teams. Often journalists become leaders by just doing their jobs and forging new pathways. Research suggests that journalists, like those in the tech industry, prefer to be led by people who understand their work; they don't tend to innovate when led by nonjournalists.[4] They succeed when led by "player-coaches," leaders who have experience in journalism and are driven to manage their teams for pro-social means: to illuminate corruption and unrest and redefine the status quo.

In a NiemanLab prediction published in 2015, Marie Gilot, then-director of the City University of New York's journalism school, predicted three things around the release of "Spotlight," a dramatized but accurate depiction of The Boston Globe's investigation of the Catholic Church child abuse scandal[5]: (1) It would win an Oscar the following year (it did!); (2) the myth of the one-man-band journalist would be "shown the door" (not yet); (3) the age of the team would be ushered in (in progress). Gilot argued that "Spotlight" demonstrated the power of a gifted team in producing excellent journalism:

> "The Spotlight team (features) a small cast of people recruited for their complementary skills, not their meshing personalities, who hold one another accountable, and who have common purpose and a sense of urgency. Like the Avengers, but with FOIAgirl and Spreadsheetman…
> But the best thing about real teams is that they perform. They take down institutions as big as the Catholic Church. Real teams always win against corrupt groups because corruption is not real teamwork: It doesn't maximize the assets and skills of a group; it provides just enough incentive for individuals to cover their part in a scandal."[6]

Here we'll discuss two very different cases of effective teamwork: the Covering Climate Now team and the college newspaper The Appalachian's COVID-19 coverage. One of these teams is global and largely elite; the other regional and small, led by college students. Both teams took on tough topics that were

controversial in many Western countries and particularly within the U.S. Yet the ability of these teams to make meaningful contributions to society is a credit to their collaborative work and the vision of their leadership that made it happen.

Case Study: Covering Climate Now

Covering Climate Now began as an inclusive effort in both scope and team design. Founded in 2019 by Columbia Journalism Review and The Nation magazine, Covering Climate Now "supports, convenes and trains journalists and newsrooms to produce rigorous climate coverage that engages audiences."[7] It now represents the largest media collaborative across the globe, with 600 media partners and dissemination that reaches millions.

The concept is sensible — to make global changes requires global partnerships. And leadership modeled this in the structure of the organization. Founding partners Mark Hertsgaard and Kyle Pope both emerged from backgrounds in which they covered the environment. Hertsgaard continues to work as the environment correspondent for The Nation but founded Covering Climate Now as an unprecedented effort to unite press from across the globe. Pope helped launch the organization and formally joined it full time in 2023.

Pope and Hertsgaard have a shared vision for their work, united by a common sense of concern for global living conditions. As they put it in a 2019 Columbia Journalism Review contribution:

> "As the scientists have been telling us with increasing urgency, humanity's window to transform our world is shrinking fast. Transforming the news media is fundamental to achieving that goal."[8]

Achieving that goal, Hertsgaard and Pope argue, requires newsrooms to drop existing individual silos; "covering it well may require a bit of cooperation and collaboration that is antithetical to how we usually work."[9] What does this cooperation and collaboration look like?

First, they propose working across specialties given that "climate changes touch virtually every beat in the newsroom."[10] The siloed and incremental coverage often offered in news would not make an effective dent in the scope of the climate change problem, Hertsgaard and Pope argued, because "the failure of news organizations to adequately cover the story is structural rather than the fault of environmental-beat reporters or climate experts."

Among some partners, such as The Washington Post's climate team, this incorporates not just a range of specialties but also a range of types of journalism: written, visual, data. This is organized around timely initiatives. For example, in 2024, Covering Climate Now organized the Climate Elections project, which was designed to highlight the climate implications in the global 2024 election cycle. In order to empower journalists, the Covering Climate Now team created a reporting guide for U.S. elections, including a quick guide with a climate overview, questions to ask candidates, and story ideas; a sharing library so partners can share and amplify each other's stories; and a climate and elections calendar that focuses on events ranging from conferences to summits to election dates.

Covering Climate Now also sets aside weeks to focus on coverage of particular aspects of climate change. In 2024, from June 27 to July 1, it focused on the food and water implications of climate change, offering press briefings, social media events, and daily emails that included reporting resources as well as a roundup of reporting on the topic from the previous day.

An explicit aspect of Hertsgaard and Pope's leadership is vision: Their mission is driven by concern for global living conditions, which could deteriorate if not reported on with intentionality by the world's news media.

More implicitly, Hertsgaard and Pope's leadership is driven by altruism and inclusivity. Altruism is reflected in the "other's" orientation of their leadership, emphasizing partnership and expansive offerings

of resources. In discussion of progress on reporting climate change, noteworthy is that Hertsgaard and Pope rarely highlight themselves even as their work has proved essential to providing new avenues for journalists to work together on their coverage.[11] Rather, in penning their discussion on the "new beginning for climate change," the leaders give credit to Bill McKibben for ringing the initial warning bells about climate change in The New Yorker decades ago, to the news organizations where they worked for supporting their work, and to The Guardian for its genre-defining coverage of climate change.

Inclusivity is reflected in the range of ways in which the team seeks to amplify the work of other journalists, as through daily mailings and numerous awards competitions. The network created for enhancing climate change coverage is intentionally nonhierarchical — it relies upon an open Slack channel that currently hosts about 2,000 journalists from hundreds of newsrooms.[12]

Case Study: The Appalachian in rural Appalachia

Rural Appalachia has a long history of resource scarcity and inequities in access to news. The rural newsrooms in the region have long needed to exercise radical resourcefulness — the ability to make meaningful work out of very limited resources — in order to overcome the information challenges in the region.[13] Appalachia tends to be one of the more news-desert-heavy areas of the United States, and therefore the news organizations there rely on teamwork and collaboration in order to serve the populations of the region.[14]

Dissemination and audience outreach require as much emphasis as the reporting itself,[15] with journalists often traveling up precarious mountain roads in order to deliver stacks of newspapers — and given unequal access to broadband, there are many who still rely on newspapers for local information. This service-centered work, in many rural communities, falls to campus newspapers.[16]

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the in-person work of Appalachia's news reporters was jeopardized and nearly impossible to enact.[17] Here The Appalachian, a student newspaper from Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina, proved to have the vision necessary to be able to serve local communities.

Like many other college newspapers,[18] The Appalachian has an outsized impact on the people in the surrounding counties of Watauga, Catawba and Avery. At a time when the people of these counties were seeking information about COVID-19, The Appalachian created a COVID-19 tracker — updated weekly with rates of hospitalization and infection. At a time when people were scared and needed health information, The Appalachian reported on the changing expectations for contact and contact tracing.[19]

Two key traits written into the fabric of The Appalachian helped the news organization be effective in offering a human-centric approach to teamwork: providing space in team environments to recognize the achievements of fellow reporters, and providing flexibility for reporters to be late and even to fail, but to honor them with the opportunity to still receive the trust to try again.

During full staff meetings, the last item on the agenda was the same: "kudos." Separated across Zoom screens, the desk editors would each take the opportunity to highlight the work of their reporters or fellow editors. The remarks were often kept brief, but reporters' work and contributions were mentioned by name, and at the conclusion of each, the newsroom offered "snaps" with fingers lifted up to the screen or clap emojis in the Zoom room. It was inevitably the highlight of the sessions, with the pandemic-worn faces of the student reporters turning to grateful smiles. This was supplemented by an internal, weekly newsletter with a weekly staff spotlight, which highlighted reporters and amplified their contributions.

"Kudos" is a simple gesture but one with outsized implications: If you know your contributions are valuable and recognized, the contributions immediately gain value. In a culture of recognition, a team can innovate.

In addition, Editor-in-Chief Jackie Park privileged flexibility as the operating standard of the newsroom also affected by COVID-19, understanding that people needed grace perhaps more than ever. There

were times people turned content in late, or their projects didn't come together at all.[20] In other newsrooms, deadlines are often king, and missing one is grounds to lose faith within a news team. Instead, Park routinely offered to trust again.

It's taken for granted in teams that team members are offered trust in initial work,[21] but to be offered trust even after failure is powerful gift. And during COVID-19, it allowed a small collegiate news team to experiment, to innovate and to fail with the safety of knowing they were being viewed as humans rather than as content creators.

Taken together, The Appalachian offers a vision for leadership that recognizes the human at the center of the news reporting process. When journalists are humanized within a team, it has a ripple effect that offers the chance for reporting subjects to be treated in the same manner.

Do Not Fear Conflict

Journalism may be a not-so-obvious example of a profession in which working with others is often a prerequisite for success. And often when leaders are working to manifest teamwork, the specter of conflict encourages some to shy away. Bad conflict in the past understandably causes hesitancy to engage in future team-based work.[22] That said, conflict is unavoidable and in news work is an essential component of the process. These clashes are inevitable, given that effective teams often come to a news problem with nonoverlapping skills.[23] Actually, teams that can successfully work through conflict tend to be better at making decisions and working through the hard problems that arise in a newsroom.[24] Furthermore, journalists who can work together tend to display stronger professional integrity.[25]

How can newsroom leaders work to manifest successful teamwork? Leaders need to cast their vision through verbalizing the vital role and long-term benefits of teamwork, securing necessary resources, and fostering a culture of recognition within their organizations. For example, in Covering Culture Now, this team-based approach was noted in the mission statement and in public statements by leaders, but more importantly it was evidenced in the inclusive manner with which they approach the topic — offering amplification to fellow journalists. At The Appalachian, this inclusive approach was reflected in its culture of recognition. As we saw in these cases, successful teamwork reflected:

- Trust-building among partners, often established through prior working relationships and a shared commitment to the topic.
- Clear agreements on logistical elements such as publication schedules, editorial control and attribution.
- Agreement on objectives for success, ensuring that collaborators know what success means.

Individual siloing of journalists offers no benefits for journalists, no benefits for leaders and no benefits for the public. By embracing human-centered collaboration, newsroom leaders can enable their teams to tackle complex, transnational and regional teamwork that would be otherwise impossible, thereby strengthening accountability journalism and serving the public interest.

About the author:
Gregory P. Perreault is an associate professor of media literacy and analytics at The Zimmerman School, University of South Florida. His scholarship explores adaptation in journalism, focusing on journalistic epistemology, hostility in journalism and digital labor. He is the author of "Digital Journalism and the Facilitation of Hate" (Routledge, 2023). Additionally, he has managed special issue editing for the 2025 Digital Journalism issue "Epistemologies of Digital News Production" and the 2023 Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly 100th Anniversary "Mapping a Hundred Years of History in JMCQ."

[1] Sambrook, Richard, C. Lewis, B. Alfter, N. Kayser-Bril, A. Koch, and J. Clements. Global teamwork: The rise of collaboration in investigative journalism. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2018.

[2] Jenkins, Joy, and Lucas Graves. Case studies in collaborative local journalism. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2019.
[3] Carmichael, Evan. “Steve Jobs Interview: Managers, Marketing, and Continuous Process Improvement.” YouTube. Posted March 5, 2010. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rQKis2Cfpeo
[4] Perreault, Gregory P., and Samuel M. Tham. "Effective leadership in journalism: Field theory in how journalists evaluate newsroom leadership." Journalism, 2023: https://doi.org/10.1177/14648849231222694.
[5] Gilot, Marie. “Spotlight Shows the Power of True Teamwork.” Nieman Journalism Lab, Dec. 17, 2015. https://www.niemanlab.org/2015/12/spotlight-shows-the-power-of-true-teamwork/.
[6] Gilot, “Spotlight Shows the Power of True Teamwork,” 2015.
[7] Covering Climate Now. “About.” Covering Climate Now. https://coveringclimatenow.org/about/.
[8] Hertsgaard, Mark, and Kyle Pope. “A New Beginning for Climate Reporting.” Columbia Journalism Review, Sept. 16, 2019. https://www.cjr.org/covering_climate_now/climate-crisis-new-beginning.php
[9] Hertsgaard and Pope, “A New Beginning for Climate Reporting,” 2019.
[10] Hertsgaard, Mark, and Kyle Pope. “The Media Are Complacent While the World Burns.” Columbia Journalism Review, April 22, 2019. https://www.cjr.org/special_report/climate-change-media.php
[11] Hertsgaard and Pope, “The Media Are Complacent While the World Burns,” 2019.
[12] Covering Climate Now. “Partners.” Covering Climate Now, 2024. https://coveringclimatenow.org/partners/.
[13] Perreault, Mildred F., and Gregory Perreault. “Appalachian Social Cohesion: Interviewing, Engagement and Participant Observation in Rural Appalachian Media Markets.” In “Methods for the Marginalized: Reaching and Researching Vulnerable Populations.” Forthcoming, 2025.
[14] Perreault, Mildred F., Jessica Fargen Walsh, Louisa Lincoln, Gregory Perreault, and Ruth Moon. “‘Everything Else is Public Relations’: How Rural Journalists Draw the Boundary Between Journalism and Public Relations in Rural Communities." Mass Communication and Society 27, no. 2 (2024): 332-359
[15] Perreault, Mildred F., Jessica Walsh, Gregory Perreault, Louisa Lincoln, and Ruth Moon. "What is Rural Journalism? Occupational Precarity and Social Cohesion in US Rural Journalism Epistemology." Journalism Studies 25, no. 4 (2024): 421-439.
[16] Knight Foundation. Knight Foundation’s Investments in Local News Sustainability. Last modified Feb. 19, 2024. Accessed Sept. 26, 2024. https://knightfoundation.org/reports/knight-foundations-investments-in-local-news-sustainability/.
[17] Moon, Ruth, Mildred F. Perreault, Jessica Walsh, Gregory Perreault, and Louisa Lincoln. “‘Scooped by the Town Drunk’: Unpacking the Effects of COVID-19 on Rural Journalism Work." Digital Journalism (2024): 1-20.
[18] Richtel, Matt. “Coronavirus college newspapers: How student journalists are covering the pandemic.” The Washington Post. Last modified Sept. 19, 2020. https://www.washingtonpost.com/media/2020/09/19/coronavirus-college-newspapers/.
[19] Todd, Jan. “Moss Brennan breaks the news.” Appalachian Today. Last modified May 28, 2020. https://today.appstate.edu/2020/05/28/brennan.
[20] Park, Jackie. Interview by Gregory Perreault. COVID-19 Reporting. Sept. 24, 2024.
[21] Jones, Gareth R., and Jennifer M. George. "The experience and evolution of trust: Implications for cooperation and teamwork." Academy of Management Review 23, no. 3 (1998): 531-546.
[22] Sohmen, Victor S. "Leadership and teamwork: Two sides of the same coin." Journal of IT and Economic Development 4, no. 2 (2013): 1-18.
[23] Bachrach, Daniel G., Kyle Lewis, Youngsang Kim, Pankaj C. Patel, Michael C. Campion, and Sherry Thatcher. "Transactive memory systems in context: A meta-analytic examination of contextual factors in transactive memory systems development and team performance." Journal of Applied Psychology 104, no. 3 (2019): 464.
[24] Darko, Amos, Albert Ping Chuen Chan, Ernest Effah Ameyaw, Emmanuel Kingsford Owusu, Erika Pärn, and David John Edwards. "Review of application of analytic hierarchy process (AHP) in construction." International Journal of Construction Management 19, no. 5 (2019): 436-452.
[25] Wang, Cheng-Hui, Gloria Hui-Wen Liu, and Chia-Dai Yen. "Teamwork competence in journalism education: Evidence from TV organizations’ news team in Taiwan." Frontiers in Psychology 13 (2022): 864243.