



Dan Horn, Cara Owsley, Carrie Cochran, Liz Dufour and Amanda Rossmann look at photos in The Cincinnati Enquirer newsroom.

MEG VOGEL/  
THE ENQUIRER

*Sometimes your best resources  
are inside your own newsroom*

# The Home Team

By **Taylor Blatchford**,  
IRE & NICAR

Collaborations are a great way to extend your investigative reach. From the two-newsroom team to sprawling global alliances, we've seen plenty of examples of the power of partnerships. But the next time you think your story is too big for one or two reporters, consider a different kind of partnership model: the internal newsroom collaboration.

The Cincinnati Enquirer published "Seven Days of Heroin: This is what an epidemic looks like" in September with more than 60 reporter, photographer and editor bylines. The project aimed to look at the scope of the epidemic around Cincinnati by intensely reporting on one week in July. To do that, the paper used its entire news staff.

The result was a comprehensive package made up of short anecdotes, photos and videos from around the city, organized chronologically over the week with timestamps. At the end of each day's section, a graphic showed the number of overdoses and deaths. The total at the end of the week: 180 overdoses and 18 deaths.

The format of the story demanded much more

than one reporter, editor Amy Wilson said. Reporter Terry DeMio had covered the heroin epidemic full-time for two years, but she couldn't do this alone. Reporters and photographers fanned out around Cincinnati, editors kept the operation organized and data journalists called agencies every day for overdose statistics.

Mobilizing the whole newsroom took planning and strategy, Wilson said. The lessons they learned can help a newsroom of any size carry out similar projects.

## Define the format of your project

It's hard for an entire newsroom to write a cohesive story, but thinking beyond conventional project formats opens up more options.

Defining the structure of the project early on was crucial to future planning, Wilson said. They drew inspiration from The New York Times' "A Weekend in Chicago" project, which documented three days of gun violence in the city.

When it came to the heroin project, Wilson



said, “we didn’t have a beginning, middle and end because that was also the point. We wanted to give the idea of the grind. This is day in and day out. I think a traditional narrative would have missed that point entirely.”

After they settled on a structure, it was easier for editors to prep staff members on the content they wanted. Setting limitations on the project’s scope was also helpful, Wilson said. In this case, they kept all the scenes within one week in July.

### Use your newsroom’s strengths

Assignments for a large project can be broken down based on existing reporting beats. That way, reporters are covering areas where they have expertise. In the Enquirer’s case, the court reporter paid special attention to heroin-related cases that week. The health reporter covered hospitals.

Communicating with pre-existing contacts was also helpful, Wilson said. The fire and police departments were familiar with reporters riding along with them, and they agreed to accommodate them when DeMio reached out and explained the project.

Wilson and DeMio also met with reporters beforehand to explain the type of reporting they wanted: observations of what they saw and heard, like they were taking notes on movie scenes. They wanted to show readers the epidemic rather than telling them about it or asking experts to explain it.

“We tried to give (reporters) as much freedom as possible to go out there and learn,” Wilson said. “I think people came back from their own beats with new eyes.”

Stephanie Gaffney holds her 8-month-old baby at the Cincinnati Children’s Hospital Medical Center.

CARA OWSLEY/  
THE ENQUIRER

*Taylor Blatchford is a senior at the Missouri School of Journalism studying investigative and international reporting. She works as an editorial assistant at IRE.*

### Plan ahead and stay organized

The reporting staff covered 129 individual assignments during the week of the project, DeMio said. It took several brainstorming meetings starting in May to lay out the week of coverage in July. Reporters spread out to courtrooms, jails and treatment facilities, and talked with addicts on the streets and families who’d lost loved ones.

After reporters returned from an assignment, they had to check in within three hours and turn in their notes within three days. DeMio and reporter Dan Horn sorted through the raw notes and asked reporters additional questions. Then they put each scene on a 3x5 note card and taped them on the wall in chronological order. After cutting scenes they thought were repetitive, they split up the pile of note cards and turned them into dozens of vignettes.

“I thought it was very seamless when it came to the reporting and writing efforts,” DeMio said. “I knew the content was there, and I felt like we’d placed people in the right locations. I learned we could do this, and it’s quite doable.”

### Spread out responsibilities

Most of the 60 staff members who contributed weren’t working on the project full time. After all, Wilson said, they still had a daily paper to produce.

Reporters typically worked on one or two heroin assignments each day for a few hours, and a staff of seven summer interns helped keep up with daily coverage while reporters were pulled away for the project.

Most of the response to the project was positive, DeMio said. She and Horn spoke at community meetings, with university students and on public radio.

“Some were surprised at how entrenched heroin is in our communities,” she said. “Others, especially those who have felt the heroin epidemic personally with loved ones addicted, were not surprised, but they expressed thoughts that people needed to see the impact of heroin and other opioids in our communities.”

The project wasn’t easy, Wilson said. Even after all the planning, miscommunications led to problems, and she’s sure they’d make different mistakes if they tried it again. But overall, she said, the common goal brought the staff together.

“It’s exhausting, but I also can’t tell you how rewarding it’s been,” Wilson said. “We’re a better newsroom because we did it.” ♦