

Institute for
Nonprofit News



from The Center for Investigative Reporting

Slammed: Accomplishments, impact and areas for improvement

Introduction

At the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, INN member Reveal recognized that rural communities were particularly vulnerable to the ravages of the disease. As the number of COVID-19 cases increased, the already financially strapped health care systems and medical professionals were under extreme pressure. Reveal reached out to INN to see whether the partners in INN's rural hospital collaboration, "[Seeking a Cure: The quest to save rural hospitals](#)," would be interested in partnering with Reveal, with INN's support, to do a follow-up. The result was "[Slammed: Rural health care and COVID-19](#)."

The stories were published as part of an ongoing series over six months from March 18, 2020, to October 16, 2020.

Organically, text-based stories from Slammed reached more than 28,500 unique visitors across four states from participating publications. Additionally, Side Effects Public Media saw additional reach through their audio story — while it's challenging to estimate unique listeners, Side Effects' station, WFYI, has 152,000 weekly listeners. A Facebook Live event about this reporting had an audience of 1.2K viewers. These pieces resulted in opinion pieces from other news media and hospital industry officials. Stories from Slammed were also published by an additional 51 outlets in 10 states as well as seven national outlets. In addition, we found 91 instances of social promotion and/or other forms of sharing these stories from stakeholders, including external media, community news groups, blogs, advocacy groups and more.

How did we find this data?

For organic reach, we asked participants to provide engagement data from their sites and social accounts.

For content distribution, we searched [Meltwater](#), a media monitoring service, for mentions of "Slammed" and variations of the series attribution: "examining the effect of COVID-19 on rural health care," "Institute for Nonprofit News members and Reveal from the Center for Investigative Reporting examining" and "Slammed: Rural Health Care and COVID-19." We also searched for the first sentence of each story.

For social distribution results, we searched Meltwater's social feature using the same search terms as well as the first sentence of each story. Additionally, we searched for social captures from each story through the CrowdTangle browser extension. We also asked participants to provide engagement data for their organization's accounts.

For collaborators' feedback, we sent out a survey and requested specific data from a participant at each organization.

Why did we do this collaboration?

We believe that collaboration can help lead to greater attention, reach and impact. And by bringing journalists together, we help create a bigger pot of resources to tell complex stories in a detailed and responsible way. This was also a natural expansion of and follow-up to a very [successful earlier collaboration](#).

Rural communities are often undercovered by news outlets. Rural communities are nuanced and often underserved. We want nonprofit newsrooms to have as few barriers to entry as possible for editorial collaborations. For more, read our [blog post here](#).

How did we do this collaboration?

The collaboration started in spring 2020, at the outset of the pandemic in the U.S.

The phases of the project:

- Identify and reach out to potential members
- Arrange regular communications with partners
- Prepare, reach agreement and sign MOU outlining terms of partnership
- Reach consensus on title and logo
- Draft editorial calendar
- Create distribution plan
- Create social media and promotion plan
- Share content with distribution partners
- Publish

How was this collaboration funded?

The Slammed project was funded by Reveal, INN's Amplify News Project and the project partners, with additional funding from the Solutions Journalism Network. Amplify — which provided support for project management and organization, as well as cash stipends for reporting and editing — is funded with support from the Joyce Foundation in the Midwest and the Robert R. McCormick Foundation in Chicago.

Content Reach & Distribution

Content reach — Original audiences

INN members Reveal, Iowa Watch, Wisconsin Watch and WFYI's Side Effects Public Media were the partners in the Slammed collaboration.

In June, Reveal asked INN members to submit stories related to rural healthcare during the pandemic to be featured on the Slammed series landing page. Stories from Carolina Public Press, The Daily Yonder, Bridge Michigan, South Dakota News Watch, The Conversation and Midwest Center for Investigative Reporting are included as external links. These stories were included on the landing page as complementary work to this collaboration that related to the topic, meant to support further coverage of this issue. However, these stories were not part of the Slammed reporting and are not included in the reach report.

Estimated organic digital reach for each outlet is below, though not all outlets could report average engaged time on story pages:

Outlet	# of stories in collab	Cumulative unique page views	Average active/engaged time on the story page	Cumulative Facebook shares	Cumulative Facebook comments
Wisconsin Watch	2	556	1:44	180	67
Side Effects Public Media	6	<3,000 (plus ~152,000 audio listeners)	n/a	70	1
Reveal	1	216	n/a	82	12
Iowa Watch	12	24,913	2:50	113	49

Additionally, Side Effects Public Media saw additional reach through their audio story — while it's challenging to estimate unique listeners, Side Effects' station, WFYI, has 152,000 weekly listeners. Wisconsin Watch and Reveal also reported 850 and 400 impressions on cumulative Twitter promotion of their stories, respectively. Stories from Iowa Watch and Wisconsin Watch appeared in print as well, through external distribution.

Additional Reach & Engagement

In addition to the traditional text-based and audio storytelling, Side Effects Public Media also hosted a [Facebook Live](#) in late May to answer community questions. Side Effects' story covered the outbreak of COVID-19 at meatpacking plants across the Midwest and the consequent rise of cases in rural communities. The livestream, which had more than 1.2K viewers and was produced in partnership with Ohio Valley ReSource, also touched on other stories from the series.

After the livestream, a summary article was written by a Side Effects reporter, [summarizing the event](#) through a text-based story — and was one of the most republished stories of the collaboration.

We're well aware that the collaborative space is saturated with excellent projects across the spectrum of journalism. We're proud that the Slammed collaboration, INN's fourth collaborative effort, was listed as [one of the top 10 collaborations of 2020](#) by the [Center for Cooperative Media](#), the premiere source on journalism collaborations.

Content distribution — Republication

For the 21 stories from Iowa Watch, Wisconsin Watch, Side Effects Public Media and Reveal published as part of this collaboration, we found that 51 outlets in 10 states and 7 national/niche outlets republished at least one story from Slammed.

Additionally, the stories in this series triggered opinion pieces and additional reporting/commentary from multiple news organizations. The Wisconsin public radio station, [WORT 89.9 FM](#), featured the collaboration during a noon-hour program, bringing together Iowa Watch's Lyle Muller and Rural Wisconsin Health Cooperative's Executive Director, Tim Size, to discuss the future of rural hospitals in Wisconsin.

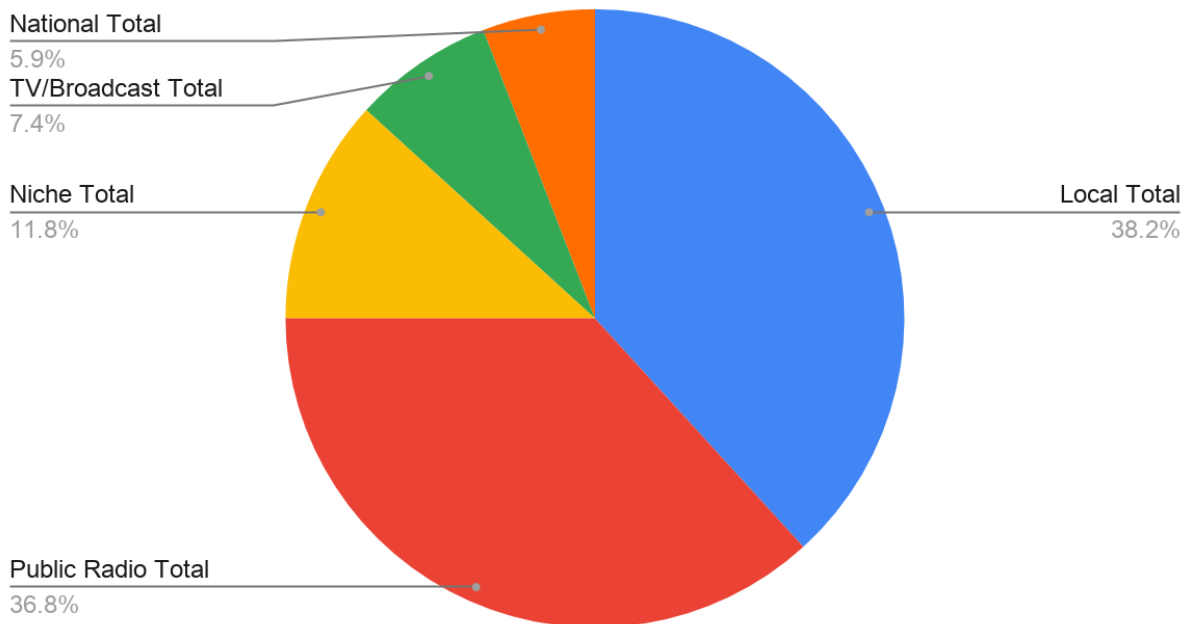
Iowa Watch reported that hospital industry officials were gracious about the accuracy and authenticity of the stories: Curt Coleman, president of Critical Access Hospitals at Genesis Health System, used Iowa Watch's reporting in his opinion piece, "[The Observer's "COVID-19 putting stress on community hospitals](#)," which calls for more support for community hospitals. The Globe Gazette used Iowa Watch reporting to localize how its community hospital is [facing severe financial impacts](#) due to the pandemic. Additionally, a local news website in Cherokee, IA — News Patriot — used part of the "More than \$500M in federal aid heading to Iowa hospitals would cover only half their COVID-19 losses" to report its own localized story.,

More than \$500M in federal aid heading to Iowa hospitals would cover only half their COVID-19 losses" reporting in for its own localized story. Iowa's Des Moines Business Record Columnist

Dave Elbert cited Iowa Watch reporting as not only evidence of broken health care systems, but the need for [reliable, innovative reporting](#).

This collaboration served primarily public radio outlets across the U.S., closely followed by local news outlets. This is a first for our collaborations — most often, local print (often for-profit) papers are the outlets that largely recirculate content. This is also the first collaboration for which we've had significant republication by TV/Broadcast outlets, showing the broad appeal of the content.

Type of media republication



The national/niche outlets are primarily aggregation sites: MSN and Truthout are the most notable, followed by HealthLeaders Media, fooshya.com, Ex Bulletin, OLTNEWS and Ways 2 Rock.

Using Meltwater, we can estimate the number of unique visitors to a website per month. The sites that recirculated content from the partnership have a total monthly audience of close to 12 million unique visitors. While it's certain that nowhere near that many people saw these stories, even 1% of that audience would mean 120,000 people outside of our members' own audience could have seen these stories.

An overview of where the stories were distributed is below. Full distribution findings [can be found here](#).

Story	Outlet	# of unique outlets that recirculated	# of unique states where the story was recirculated
Cash-strapped and volunteer-dependent, Wisconsin's rural EMS providers scramble to keep responders safe	Wisconsin Watch	9	1
Wisconsin's rural hospitals weather pandemic better than most, but warning signs remain	Wisconsin Watch	7	3
You Asked: How Is COVID Affecting Meat Processing Workers	Side Effects Public Media	6	3
'Pure Hell' As COVID-19 Hits Meat Processing Plants in Rural Missouri	Side Effects Public Media	5	5
COVID-19 Crisis Puts Pressure On Farmers' Mental Health	Side Effects Public Media	4	3
Why Rural Health Clinics Are Cutting Staff, Services Amid COVID-19 Outbreak	Side Effects Public Media	3	3
Many Rural Residents See Little Threat From COVID-19	Side Effect Public Media	3	3
Industry leaders expect COVID-19 to take some Iowa hospitals down	Iowa Watch	7	1

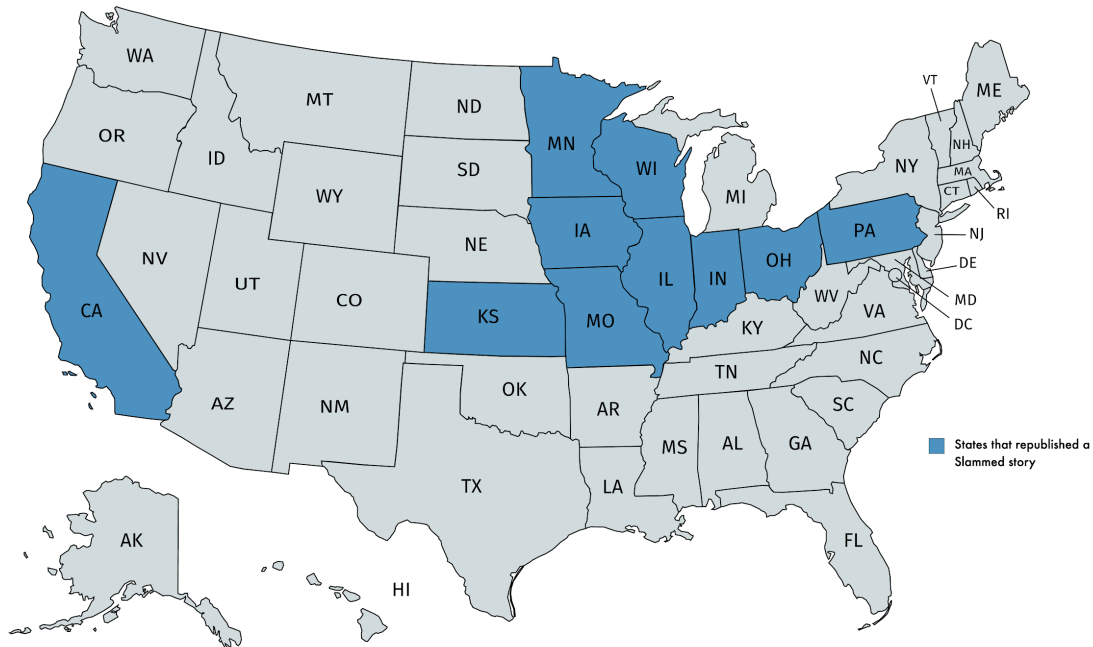
More than \$500M in federal aid heading to Iowa hospitals would cover only half their COVID-19 losses	Iowa Watch	4	1
Bill keeping government open gives hospitals new COVID-19 related Medicare payback rules, but no loan forgiveness	Iowa Watch	2	2
Deep concern for some Iowa hospitals' viability after COVID-19 crisis	Iowa Watch	2	1
Iowa hospitals drew almost \$1B in Medicare advances to deal with COVID-19	Iowa Watch	7	1
Lessons learned in real time at rural hospitals during pandemic	Iowa Watch	1	1
Stimulus money was only a short-term fix as rural hospitals brace for the next COVID-19 surges (National overview story)	Reveal / Iowa Watch	6	4

Fifteen out of 21 stories in this series were republished by an external outlet. Side Effects republished the national overview, and linked to the Slammed landing page. While Iowa Watch didn't republish other stories, IowaWatch had links to the other stories published by partners on each of the project's four IowaWatch stories published on Oct. 16.

Most of the recirculations were from non-INN members. Only three INN members picked up at least one story: St. Louis Public Radio, Wausau Pilot and Review and WFYI, the home of Side

Effects Public Media. However, these partners proved to be some of the most committed in republishing: Wausau and WFYI picked up three and four stories, respectively.

As three out of the four partner outlets are based in the Midwest, the distribution of republication fell primarily in the region: 38 out of the outlets that republished a Slammed story serve the Midwest; three serve the Atlantic; and seven serve national and/or niche audiences.



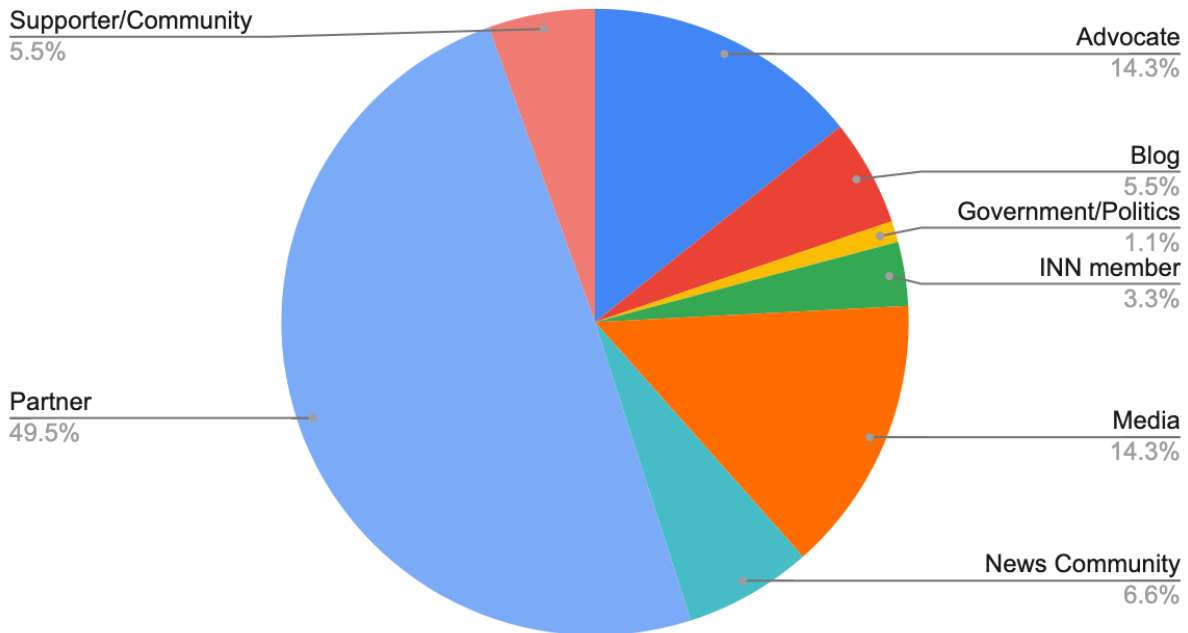
Created with mapchart.net

Social media distribution

Promotion came from all partners, including INN. INN promoted the series through multiple tweets throughout the series, which reached over 6,500 users cumulatively, according to Twitter analytics. We posted on Facebook and LinkedIn as well, where we have smaller audiences: we reached 352 users and 244 users, respectively.

For this collaboration, partner stakeholders generated the most attention, contributing almost half of the social promotion. Iowa Watch promoted stories and the series about 12 times on Facebook and Twitter; Wisconsin Watch promoted about three times on both platforms; Side Effects Public Media promoted about 22 times.

Social media stakeholders for Slammed collaboration



An exciting finding was the distribution of these stories in online news communities, including Reddit subreddits and Facebook community groups. Demonstrating the support for the content on a hyperlocal level, the stories were shared in six Facebook groups focused on community news and updates for multiple states. Often, stories posted in these forums have higher engagement as posts are curated by community members. Stories from Iowa Watch appeared on Reddit in r/Iowa and r/Health, with 34.3K and 1.3 million subscribers, respectively.

External media — media outlets or reporters outside of the INN network — also recirculated stories from this collaboration, such as Amery Free Press, Baldwin Bulletin, Iowa Public Radio, Waterloo-Cedar Falls Courier and WTIU Public Television. The external media outlets have a combined audience of 127,703 followers, putting these stories in front of audiences who wouldn't have otherwise seen this reporting.

This reporting reached the advocate community: Health network providers and advocates One Nebula Health, Covensure Brokerage, Institute for Senior Living and Acute Care all shared at least one story.

INN members Wausau Pilot & Review, Investigate West and a reporter from member Crosscut shared this series or stories from this series through their Twitter accounts.

In the political and government sector, the Lyons Township Fire Department — shared a Wisconsin Watch story from this collaboration, potentially reaching users who may not turn to official news pages or sites for their information.

For a full look into the social distribution we found, [dive in here](#).

Collaboration feedback

When the collaboration concluded we asked the partners to rank their experiences from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent) on different aspects of the project management, from quality of journalism produced to the editing process to likelihood of participating in an INN collaboration in the future. A breakdown of what we found:

Generally very positive feedback on how the collaboration was managed. The average responses from our four editorial partners:

Overall success of this collaboration for your newsroom: 4.375

Quality of journalism overall: 4.75

Quality of journalism produced by your newsroom: 4.75

Communication process (Zoom calls, emails, one-on-one calls, etc.): 4.875

Ability to get questions answered: 4.875

Ability to get concerns resolved: 4.875

Editing process: 4.75

Distribution process: 4.375

Pickup by news organizations outside the collaboration: 3.75

Likelihood that you will follow up on this story: 4

Likelihood of participating in another INN collaboration in the future: 4.5

The lowest point of feedback was in the pickup by outside news organizations (see below).

Below is some verbatim feedback from our participants:

“The project went deeper than we anticipated at the start. It generated republishing by other news media, opinion pieces in other news media, thoughtful information and good grounding for a national Zoom conversation.”

“I recommend asking one media outlet to be responsible for crafting social media posts for each story for consistency and to help those outlets that may have few resources to do so. Another option would be to have all the social media posts go to a specific Google doc for all to use. I'd love to see the outlets work together to produce a virtual event or some audience engagement piece together.”

“I think the collaboration worked well. There was a pretty long lag time between the start of the collaboration and publication but as it turns out, the story became more timely over time instead of less.”

“More updates have been made since the collaboration ended. Also, we have done three follow-up stories since the collaboration ended and have plans for more going into 2021.”

“Really enjoyed working with everyone - great camaraderie!”

Challenges & Observations for the Future

Despite encouraging reach and impact of the local stories, including opinion pieces by healthcare experts and radio talk shows in impacted communities, we were surprised the project itself didn't get wider reach. In particular, the lack of external distribution of the national investigative piece was disappointing. After the story was published, INN reached out to more than 270 outlets in 18 states across the country, in particular targeting outlets impacted by layoffs due to the pandemic that may otherwise be unable to cover this topic as well as newsrooms in the most rural states across the country. We also included this series in our industry-wide newsletter, with more than 5,000 subscribers, and our internal member newsletter, with more than 750 subscribers, to promote circulation. Additionally, we directly reached out to 77 INN members that cover rural issues or that are based in the states that were covered and 10 outlets that serve a national audience. From that outreach, we only heard back from two outlets, neither of which republished a story.

From a stakeholder perspective, we shared this series with advocacy groups that mentioned the Seeking a Cure collaboration, also to no avail. We're also surprised that Reveal's network of local reporters weren't interested in any of the stories from this collaboration, including the national overview. While this is a challenge for projects across the industry, not exclusive to this collaboration, it is certainly an area of exploration for us moving forward. We look forward to the Center for Cooperative Media's upcoming research on this topic.

Additionally, we're disappointed but not surprised, due to the local nature of the participants, that more collaborating members did not pick up other stories from this collaboration. We'd like to explore this more as we move forward with other collaborations, and have begun reframing some launch conversations to try and seed the idea of great co-publishing and promotion.

For reporting purposes, another challenge we ran into was the timeline and the evolving nature of the collaboration. As expected, this subject evolved over time, and deadlines had to be adjusted in order to accommodate new information.

Moving forward, we're excited to see additional reporting on this topic from these partners, especially those based in the Midwest who are experts on rural healthcare.