

At the Crossroads: Building better ways to engage, represent Indigenous communities through collaboration



Forrest Funmaker, right, Ho-Chunk Department of Natural Resources agriculture research and education manager speaks at “Share your voice: How to build a stronger economy for Ho-Chunk Nation,” a discussion Wisconsin Watch held on May 12, 2022, at the Ho-Chunk Nation District 1 Community Center in Black River Falls, Wis. (Ilana Bar-av for Wisconsin Watch)

Introduction

In May 2022, Wisconsin Watch convened [a forum of Ho-Chunk Nation citizens](#) with tribal officials and journalists to discuss their reporting for the [At the Crossroads collaborative series](#) on the state of the economy in rural Indian Country.

At one point, Forrest Funmaker, Ho-Chunk Department of Natural Resources agriculture

research and education manager, said the tribal government newsletter doesn't provide the same level of reporting as [Wisconsin Watch's story](#) on the tribal economy's reliance on casinos.

"How is it that we're supposed to understand what's going on in the government?" Funmaker asked. "I think that creates a lot of these silos or barriers to our people understanding what's going on with legislation. ... How do we get the better reporting?"

Funmaker raised the fundamental question at the heart of the collaboration: how can nonprofit and tribal media better serve the information needs of Indigenous communities?

In April 2022, a collaboration of seven Institute for Nonprofit News members and three tribal outlets published the [At the Crossroads series](#), the first pilot project for the [Rural News Network](#) consortium reporting on rural America. This project was made possible by a grant from the Walton Family Foundation.

The pilot project was designed to explore how project-based collaboration could lead to innovative, community-centered journalism serving Indigenous communities. It was also the first time an INN collaboration designated an editorial lead for the series. Senior Editor Dianna Hunt of ICT (formerly Indian Country Today) met with participating newsrooms and edited their stories before publication.

The series examined significant issues facing rural Indigenous communities from the perspective of those most directly impacted, including [the well-kept secret of how much tribes contribute to regional economies](#); [tribal leaders confronting their economy's outsized reliance on casinos](#); [Oklahoma's first tribally owned sports team](#); and [tribal citizens confronting the reality that a job can cost more than not having one](#).

The series generated several meaningful results:

- **Surfacing significant issues across Indian Country through audience engagement:** Each collaboration participant shared out a survey on jobs in the early stage of the project. The survey received responses from 268 people representing more than 130 tribal affiliations across 39 states and informed the development of the series.
- **National reach and republication:** Series stories were republished by 41 external outlets, and discussions on the reporting were hosted by [All Things Considered](#), [Native America Calling](#) and [Ciporoke](#).
- **Building relationships for the future.** Collaboration participants collectively explored methods to better reach and represent Indigenous communities in their coverage. Wisconsin Watch [hired a consultant to help them connect with Ho-Chunk officials and community members](#) for their reporting. Because of the collaboration, three participating outlets planned a listening session to better understand the information needs of the

Indigenous communities they serve, with one reporting, “We believe this was the first step in creating a viable media ecosystem for Indigenous communities.”

The collaboration was managed under the editorial leadership of Indian Country Today, with project management support from Member Collaborations Editor Bridget Thoreson of INN. The participants were INN members [Buffalo's Fire](#), [InvestigateWest](#), [KOSU](#), [New Mexico In Depth](#), [Underscore](#) and [Wisconsin Watch](#), as well as tribal media outlets [Mvskoke Media](#), [Osage News](#) and [Rawhide Press](#). All outlets either employ Native staff or hired Native professionals for the series. Additional support was provided by the Native American Journalists Association.

Content reach

All series stories were featured by ICT, and collaboration partners republished selected series stories online and in print.

For five of the collaboration participants, their At the Crossroads story was the highest-ranking story for unique pageviews on their sites the week of publication, with several participants also noting they received high social media engagement for these stories. Metrics reporting by outlet is available in the [appendix](#).

The reach of the story extended far beyond the participant outlets, with 41 outlets republishing stories from the series (full list available in the appendix). In addition, several outlets conducted interviews with participating journalists, including:

- [All Things Considered](#), which interviewed Mark Trahan of ICT about his reporting on the hidden economy of Indian Country.
- [Native America Calling](#), which airs daily episodes on dozens of radio stations across the country, dedicated an hour episode to [New Mexico In Depth's uranium mine story](#). The reporter was also interviewed by KUNM in Albuquerque.
- [Ciporoke](#), a podcast on issues concerning the Wisconsin Ho-Chunk Nation, interviewed Wisconsin Watch staff and followed up with coverage of their forum discussing the future of the gaming industry.
- [ICT](#), which featured interviews with collaboration participants on their [daily international broadcast](#).

On social, collaboration participants' stories received more than 112,000 shares and comments on Facebook and more than 2,000 interactions on Twitter, with significant additional reach from posts by republishing partners.

Project outcomes

When the collaboration concluded we asked the partners to provide feedback on their experience through a survey and exit interviews. Several important themes emerged:

- **Trust starts with listening.** Several newsrooms generated additional story ideas from engaging with communities, and reported positive feedback from officials and community members following publication, such as this note from ICT reader Dave Castillo: “No one else is doing this level of quality reporting on issues important across a majority of the US where tribes ... could be critical to long-term economic relevance.” One outlet said they were “wildly successful” in achieving their project goal of connecting with tribal communities in their area. Tribal outlets with deep community connections reported the value of exploring new methods of reporting: “It was good for the community because they felt like they were finally heard.”
- **Editing leadership is key.** Participants universally spoke highly of Hunt’s editorial leadership, citing her guidance as a key benefit of participating. By having an outlet setting the course for the series and keeping the reporting on track, local stories were spotlighted for a national audience and shared widely. Partners also praised the leadership of Bridget Thoreson and INN on the administrative handling and oversight of the project.
- **Collaboration sparks conversations.** Many outlets identified shared questions around their coverage, and because they were connected to others were able to explore and learn as a group. “We know so little about the information needs of Indigenous communities,” one participant noted. “It was a conversation with other outlets that would have never happened without this collaboration. We were all together in a Zoom room, and it was just so natural for us to continue the conversation right then.”

Challenges & Looking Ahead

The continuing COVID-19 pandemic represented a significant challenge to outlets’ plans to conduct in-person community engagement, with one planned event canceled due to the Omicron surge and others shifted to digital. Some outlets found that tribal citizens were reluctant to participate in the online survey, and experienced challenges connecting with sources.

Outlets also said they found the group meetings to be a significant time commitment and suggested shifting to less frequent meetings as the project progresses.

Even with the challenges, when asked whether they would participate in such a project again, every participant selected “very likely.”

“This project has been an invaluable learning experience, both in the content that we gathered and also learning about what it takes to report sensitively on tribal nations,” said Wisconsin Watch Investigative Reporter Mario Koran.

Appendix

Story performance by outlet:

Outlet	# of unique page views on original site	Average active/engaged time on the story page	Cumulative Facebook shares	Cumulative Facebook comments	Twitter interactions
ICT	4,502	1:14	9,655	4,116	375
Osage News	7,100	1:48	7,863	3,764	57
Mvskoke Media	570	5:13	6,460	5,127	104
Rawhide Press	1,439	n/a	5,996	1,767	63
Underscore	121	4:32	9,469	4,453	155
InvestigateWest	1,998	6:11	3,005	1,143	154
KOSU	3,303	3:52	9,361	6,002	489
New Mexico In Depth	364	:47	2,848	916	599
Wisconsin Watch	1,229	3:08	8,293	4,728	124
Buffalo’s Fire	Not available	Not available	19,757	11,385	25

Outlets that republished stories:

A total of 41 outlets, including digital, newspapers, radio and TV, republished stories from the At the Crossroads series.

National

Belt magazine
GreenBiz
Pechanga.net
Our Community Now
Yahoo! news
Yes! magazine

Regional***Midwest***

Great Lakes Now
Investigate Midwest

West

Boise State Public Radio
Crosscut
High Country News
Mountain West News Bureau

State/Local***Arizona***

Tucson Sentinel

Minnesota

Red Lake Nation News

New Mexico

Albuquerque Journal
KUNM
New Mexico Political Report
Santa Fe Reporter
Source NM
The Gallup Independent

Oregon

Salem Statesman Journal
The Oregonian

Wisconsin

107.1
Channel 3000
Chippewa Herald
Colfax Messenger

DeForest Times-Tribune
Isthmus
Kaukauna Community News
La Crosse Tribune
Madison 365
PBS Wisconsin
The Capital Times
TMJ4
Urban Milwaukee
Wausau Pilot & Review
WGLR
WISC-TV
Wisconsin Newspaper Association
Wisconsin Public Radio
WUWM

How did we find this data?

We asked participants to provide engagement data from their sites and social accounts for web metrics and qualitative feedback via a survey.

For content distribution, we communicated directly with publishing partners and searched Google News alerts for variations of the series attribution and the first sentence of each story.

For social distribution results, we searched for social captures from CrowdTangle and Meltwater for the original stories posted on ICT and collaboration participant sites.

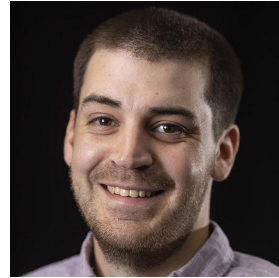
Collaboration participants



Dianna Hunt
ICT



Monica Peone
Rawhide Press



Chris Aadland
Underscore



Liz Gray
Mvskoke Media



Morgan Taylor
Mvskoke Media



Ted McDermott
InvestigateWest



Jason Begay
InvestigateWest



Cody Hammer
Osage News



Shannon Shaw-Duty
Osage News



Allison Herrera
KOSU



Rachel Hubbard
KOSU



Anne Thundercloud
Consultant



Mario Koran
Wisconsin Watch



Bridget Thoreson
INN

Not pictured: Jodi Rave Spotted Bear, Buffalo's Fire; Jacob Fries, InvestigateWest, Trip Jennings and Marjorie Childress, New Mexico In Depth.