

Reports and Analysis
for
PMBA Session
Collaborations that Worked

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EarthFix – Collaboration Summary
Prepared by Richard Tait

and

What the Northwest reporting hub can tell flocks of newcomers
Commentary by Colin Fogarty
published in *Current*, June 13, 2011

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EarthFix – Collaboration Summary (rev 4/27/16)

Prepared by Richard Tait

Description of Collaboration:

The *EarthFix* is Local Journalism Center (LJC) focused on environmental issues in the US Pacific Northwest. It was launched as part of a CPB-funded initiative. Oregon Public Broadcasting (Portland) provides project leadership, with full partner stations Idaho Public Television, Boise, ID; KCTS9 Seattle, WA; KUOW-FM, Seattle, WA; Puget Sound Public Radio, Seattle, WA; and affiliate partners Jefferson Public Radio in (Ashland, OR/Redding, CA and KLCC in Eugene, OR. The collaboration has journalists based in Oregon, Washington and Idaho who present their stories across radio, TV, the web and social media. Its evolution has been strongly influenced by the experience of the Northwest News Network (N3) a collaborative news reporting project involving 8 public radio station in Oregon, Washington state, and Idaho, started in 1991 and revised/reformed in 2003.¹



Mission:

EarthFix uses the tagline “news fixed on the environment.” Its YouTube page describes EarthFix as:

“... an innovative partnership of public media institutions in the Pacific Northwest established to expand environmental news coverage in the region with journalists based in Oregon, Washington and Idaho. EarthFix creates media across multiple platforms, helping citizens examine environmental issues unfolding in their own backyards and to explore how local actions intersect with national issues.”

Background/History

- Jan 2006 – Steve Bass takes over as CEO of OPB. He says will focus on creating/sharing “content” and wants to expand relationships with other public broadcasting entities in the region.
- Jun 2009 – CPB issues an RFP for groups of 3-6 stations to form collaborations to create multimedia coverage on a *single news topic of strong local interest*. (Local Journalism Centers, LJC)
- Mar 2010 – CPB announces awards \$10.5 MM to seven regionally-based LJC’s. Five are named with two additional to be added later in 2010.
- Oct 2010 – CPB awards the “Northwest LJC” \$1.4 MM, initially, to cover two years of a collaboration headed by OPB. The Northwest LJC will focus on environmental issues *in the US Northwest*. NB: In late 2012 CPB awards *EarthFix* a third year of funding to support it through early CY 2014.
- 2010 – 2011 – *EarthFix* builds out its staff across the partner sites and launches operations across radio, TV and the web. The name *EarthFix* was adopted in spring 2011.
- 2014 – Two of the founding stations, Boise State Public Radio and Southern Oregon Public TV, drop out due to station funding constraints associated with ending of the CPB grant. Those partners have been replaced by Jefferson Public Radio in southern Oregon and KLCC-FM in Eugene, OR.
- 2015 – CPB awards \$2 MM of additional grant funding to five continuing LJC’s (including *EarthFix*) to develop *video reporting units*. OPB will serve as the financial agent for the *EarthFix* piece (\$350K) but KCTS-TV in Seattle will house the video unit manager and take the operational lead.

¹ See <http://current.org/files/archive-site/news/news1112northwesthub.html>

Structure and leadership/governance

- *EarthFix* was formally established as a contractually-based collaboration with OPB as the lead station and fiscal agent for the initial CPB grant. Morgan Holm, OPB Chief Content Officer, was named as Executive Supervisor (a term used to identify the executive heading a CPB-funded journalistic collaboration.)
- Following the grant award, OPB obtained signed “partner agreements” with the participating stations. These agreements specified the commitment each partner would make to the collaboration. When the original CPB grant expired in early CY 2014, these agreements expired.
- From the expiration of the original agreements, OPB has continued to be the lead station in the collaboration with signed individualized “production agreements” with each partner, laying the partner’s ongoing commitments and obligations.
- The *EarthFix* news team is led/managed on an ongoing basis by Dave Steves, who is editor of *EarthFix*, based at OPB in Portland. Steves provides editorial continuity for the collaboration, serving in this role since its creation in early 2011. Note: all the *station-based* reporters are employees of their respective stations, but the reporters still receive their daily editorial direction from Steves.
- There is an informal, on-going “Executive Committee” made up of the GM’s of the partner stations. Steve Bass serves as unofficial “chair” of the group. Morgan Holm acts as convener. This committee meets face-to-face once a year; they consult via quarterly conference calls. This committee is responsible for overall resource/investment decisions and provide leadership guidance.
- The overall approach to *EarthFix* governance is relatively informal. We heard: “We did not want to put a layer of formality that isn’t needed...although you need some. Its’ a fine line to walk.”

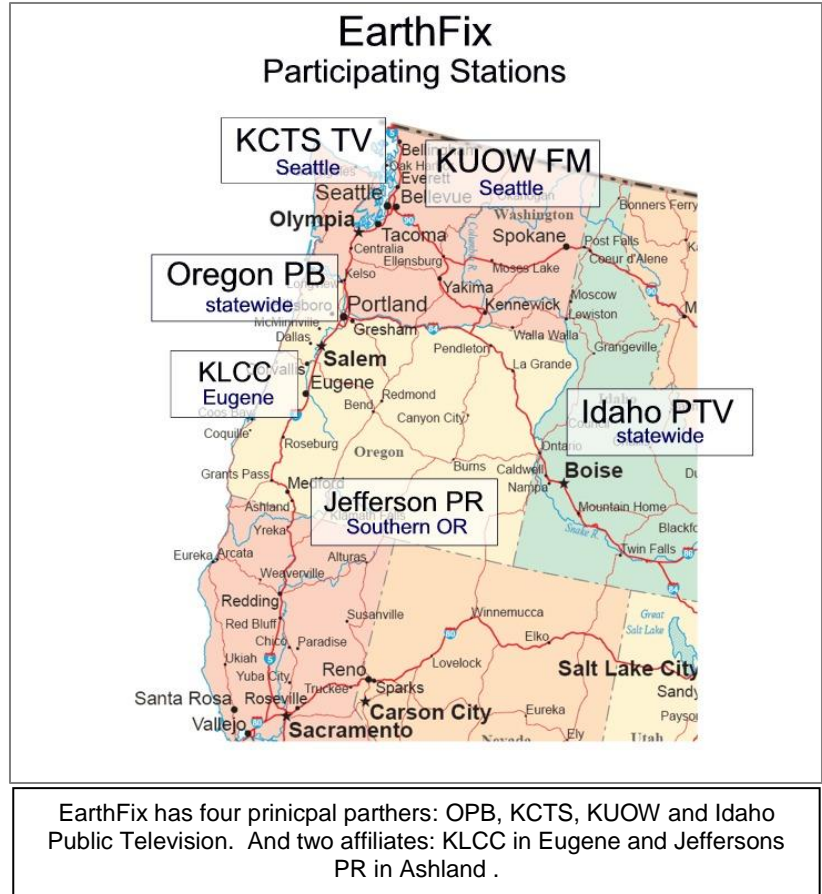
Operating Model

- *EarthFix* was designed from the start to be an “integrated multi-platform” effort. The collaboration platforms include radio, television and web with a strong presence on social media (YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and numerous (mostly short) podcasts available at the iTunes store.)
- When *EarthFix* staff thinks about delivering content they approach this in a systematic way using these categories:
 - *Immediate*: delivered on-line
 - *Quick*: often delivered on the radio in a newscast
 - *Longer term*: often delivered via TV as a documentary or a spot
 - *Holding a story for a while*: usually focused on-line
- Each station independently determines what *EarthFix* content to present and where/how/when to present it. CPB originally required a separate *EarthFix* website connected to each station with a “common-skin” (standard template). That requirement is no longer in force, and the partner stations now incorporate *EarthFix* content into their station websites and social media feeds.
- The total staffing level across all partner stations peaked at 9 FTEs in 2012/2013. It dropped to (about) 6 due to funding challenges across the collaboration, such as partners dropping out and other partner decisions. The staffing rose again, this time to 7 FTEs, with the latest CPB video grant.
- The multi-station *EarthFix* staff co-ordinates their through frequent information exchanges/e-mails, a once-a-week conference call and a once-a-week video conference.
- The partner stations’ news directors now hold a monthly conference call around *EarthFix*.

- The various *EarthFix* reporters are all fully embedded in the newsrooms of the stations where they are in residence – i.e. they are not at off-site non-station locations as are the N3 (*Northwest News Network*) reporters and editor.

Financial Model

- Each partner station is responsible for funding the staff they have assigned to an *EarthFix* role.
- Each partner station has its own “financial model” for providing the necessary funds, with most funding drawn from the various stations’ general operating budgets.
- Currently, partner stations contribute approx. \$140K/yr that is used to support central collaboration staffing (i.e. editor Steves and half the salary of the collaboration’s investigative reporter.) OPB’s partner share in that total is \$35K.2



- The total operational cost for *EarthFix* staff on OPB payroll is approx. \$250-300K/yr of which \$140K is paid for collectively by the partners (with.) []
- The current staffing levels at the various stations are:
 - OPB: 4 FTE (3 reporter-producers plus the *EarthFix* editor). One of the OPB reporter-producers works out of Jefferson Public Radio’s facility in Ashland OR.
 - KUOW: 1 FTE reporter-producer
 - Idaho Public Television: 0
 - KCTS9 Seattle: 2 FTE (1 video producer, funded by new CPB grant; 1 video unit manager)
 - Jefferson Public Radio – affiliate partner paying to access/distribute *EarthFix* content: 0
 - KLCC – affiliate partner paying to access/distribute *EarthFix* content: 0

Key Elements of the Collaboration Story

What were the motivating conditions that led to the decision to establish the collaboration?

Under the leadership of Steve Bass, who became CEO of OPB in early 2006, OPB has continuously looked for opportunities to increase the quantity/breadth/quality/impact of content – particularly for news/information – it can create and distribute across multiple platforms, in fulfillment of its mission:

2 Note that OPB’s annual operating budget is about \$30M, so the *EarthFix* investment, while substantial, is a modest portion of total operations.

“giving voice to the community, connecting Oregon and its neighbors, illuminating a wider world.” This led OPB to seek out grant funding opportunities that fit this mission. The 2009 CPB Local Journalism Center RFP clearly provided one such opportunity.

As important, by 2009 OPB had a long history of effectively managing regional news production through the *Northwest News Network (N3)*, with a board comprised of the GMs the partner stations. (More information on N3, attached.) N3 and the N3 board had gone through several structural/support changes, but N3 settled down after a three-year grant from CPB in 2003 that funded its current configuration.

What was the internal process that led to collaboration?

When OPB leadership became aware of LJC funding RFP coming from CPB, Morgan Holm, then VP of News and Public Affairs, took the lead with support from Steve Bass to develop the LJC proposal and assemble the partner network, drawn from the active group of N3 partner stations, who had a long history of working together collaboratively on this shared news service. This experience was important. As Morgan Holm said, “We started with an existing bond... So [*EarthFix*] was an extension of what we were already doing (N3).”

That the LJC topic area, environmental issues in the US Pacific Northwest, was, Holm said, “going with the obvious” given the regional interests. OPB’s already had a long history of outdoor/environmental reporting based in the 25-year track record of PTV’s *Oregon Field Guide*. Idaho Public Television also has a long-standing outdoors/environmental series. And all stations shared an interest in enhanced environmental coverage, which is truly the “master narrative” of the region.

What problems emerged in the negotiations and in the early-stage implementation?

The negotiations and early-stage implementation of *EarthFix* went smoothly (and on schedule). This reflected the collaborative spirit of the initial stations, the leadership of OPB and the shared experience of the N3 partner stations. The first real issue came when CPB declined to fund the initial *EarthFix*-LJC proposal, as “too radio focused” (according to Holm). With CPB guidance OPB expanded the network to include KCTS TV9 in Seattle. The revised LJC proposal was accepted for funding. After the grant was awarded, operations moved smoothly and on schedule with staff added as expected and the various platform operations coming on-line on-time as planned.

What has been the impact of the collaboration on the financial picture?

The investment responsibilities for *EarthFix* for each of the partner stations is clearly identifiable but the *financial return* (excluding the initial and follow-on CPB grants) is not clear. There have been some donations and foundation grants (for example, at KUOW) specifically for this initiative. There has been some modest project-specific underwriting. But **the main positive financial impact has been whatever it has accomplished to enhance the community standing/profile of the individual stations, which is viewed (even without clear evidence) as a stimulus for local station membership revenue and major gifts.** This may explain why two original partners dropped out, citing local station funding constraints, after the initial CPB-funding expired. .

Has the reorganization substantially affected the sustainability and service capacity of the partners?

Executives at OPB are confident that *EarthFix* has been instrumental in substantially increasing the depth and quality of environmental reporting building on the strong foundation originally established with *Oregon Field Guide*. In addition *EarthFix* – although not seen as a large-scale driver of OPB’s digital presence/traffic – has built a “solid following” on the web and is viewed regionally as a “go-to” online source for environmental news.

Also, OPB used *EarthFix* as an innovation laboratory, testing several initiatives, including new approaches to social media, video reporting, blogging and pod-casting among others.

Other Items of Note

Steve Bass has stated: “When I was interviewing with the OPB Board in the summer of 2005 I told them that I saw OPB’s future mission as being much more *about content* than the broadcast distribution of content via television and radio. The Board and I shared a view that OPB’s future was rooted in our ability to cover, create, curate and share stories that matter to Oregonians.” Others have said that by hiring Bass the OPB board was all about “putting the ‘Oregon’ back in Oregon Public Broadcasting.”

The OPB *Project Argo* environmentally-focused *Ecotrope* blog was conceptualized and funded around the same time as *EarthFix*. After several years of stand-alone operation the *Ecotrope* blog was ended in mid-2013 and the *Ecotrope* blogger (Cassandra Profita) moved over to become a reporter/producer for *EarthFix* at OPB.

EarthFix reporters write for a regional vs. a national audience. The choice of topics are ones that are of highest interest to residents in the Northwest and the articles/reports/posts are written assuming a basic knowledge of these issues on the part of the audience. Occasionally a story will elicit national interest but that is a by-product not the intent.

The GMs at three of the founding partner stations (KUOW, KCTS and Idaho Public Television) have all changed since the launch of *EarthFix* creating a major challenge for OPB (as lead station) to maintain continuing support through the transition. [Morgan Holm has said that this partner station senior leadership turnover has been his “biggest challenge” – i.e. “getting them up to speed to sustain the project...to make sure they understand the value of the relationship.”

Conclusions and Key Learnings

Collaborative relationships are complex and demanding, requiring a high level of "emotional intelligence" and attention.

Maintaining effective communications is critical. Chief Content Officer Morgan Holm told us: “Once [regular communication] is gone you’ve got to work hard to get it back.”

Effective news collaborations require a “meeting of the minds” around editorial standards and institutional decision-making.

The partners must develop a working understanding of: What is acceptable content? What is the editorial review process? In the case of an error, what is the “correction” process? In cases of public controversy, what is the organizational response to external “demands,” such as “we want to see all your tapes and notes?” Have all legal issues been considered, such as, open records laws and source protections. Who, ultimately, is the editorial decision maker?

Internal collaborations (between divisions) can take as much work as external collaborations, in part because there are deep “natural rhythms” in any content production that vary by medium and project-production methods.

Eg: The effort to integrate Oregon Field Guide’s output (regional environmental feature production) into *EarthFix*. OFG staff spend 25 weeks in the field each year; when they return they focus on editing and post production, which take place in studio facilities set up for that purpose. OPB’s *EarthFix* reporters and editors are housed in a part of the OPB newsroom. The production cycles of OFG and daily/weekly news reporting are so different there is very little “natural opportunity” for interaction between OFG staff and *EarthFix* staff. In contrast, OPB experienced an soother, though still incomplete, integration of *TV and Radio arts reporting*. The radio and TV feature reporters had similar work cycles; they were housed in the same physical space; in their section of the newsroom, they often would chat informally about stories and methods.

Here as in other cases, leadership matters.

EarthFix evolved with the continuous, active support of the station leadership, at OPB and at the partner stations. This was especially true for the role played by CEO Steve Bass and CCO Morgan Holm.

Without their attention and experienced leadership, the collaboration may never have happened (Holm drew up many of the proposal plans). After EarthFix formed, it could have collapsed, and it had to be adjusted or re-negotiated whenever there was turnover in partner-station GM ranks.

Key Players interviewed:

- Steve Bass – OPB CEO/President
- David Steves – Editor of *EarthFix*
- Morgan Holm – OPB Chief Content Officer

What the Northwest reporting hub can tell flocks of newcomers

Commentary by Colin Fogarty published in *Current*, June 13, 2011

They used to call us “hubs.” Now, local journalism centers (LJCs) and regional collaborations are springing up all over the country. These initiatives are changing public radio news as we know it.

The Northwest News Network dates back to 1991. Its current iteration came about in 2003, like the LJC’s, with the help of a CPB grant. Now 12 stations, large and small, in Washington, Oregon and Idaho rely on us for much of their daily spot news and features. Our stations have found that regional collaboration allows them to cost-effectively extend their reporting reach, to go deeper and farther.

Here are six lessons we learned from that experience that could spark some conversation with and among journalists at the new generation of hubs.

1. Grow organically

No, I don’t mean pesticide-free. I mean grow and evolve a newsroom in ways that make sense on the ground — not as dictated by some high-minded design from outside. One reason the Northwest News Network is so ensconced in our stations is that our structure developed from a series of small decisions that simply made sense at the time.

Here’s an example of what I mean: Why in the world would we put a correspondent in the small resort town of Coeur d’Alene, Idaho? On the face of it, this seems like an odd decision. Yet each station has its own practical reasons for supporting this position. For Spokane Public Radio, the bureau helps solidify a local presence across the state line.

The same correspondent gives Boise State Public Radio a voice from the north end of what is a very tall state on the map. And stations west of the Cascades get stories relevant to the Inland Northwest — about forestry, the reintroduction of wild wolves, the rural economy and a distinct inland culture. The coverage rounds out a view of the Northwest. Stories from our correspondent Jessica Robinson get surprisingly wide airing, even though she’s based in a small town in the Idaho Panhandle.

2. Share the costs/ Share your stuff

Everyone gets more out of a regional sharing arrangement than they put into it. That’s obviously true for costs. It’s also true for sharing stories.

Let’s talk costs first: The Northwest News Network is funded by station fees, set on a sliding scale. Larger stations pay more than smaller ones, but even the biggest pays much less than the cost of adding as many journalists to its own staff. Example: One of our big stations pays for roughly the equivalent of one and a half full-time employees, but in return it gets the work of five correspondents and an editor. The fees for a station are also adjusted to reflect its proximity to each bureau. That way station executives feel they’re getting their money’s worth and not paying for stories that are too far afield for their listeners.



At the same time, our stations have developed a healthy economy of sharing spots and features. In most every daybook to member stations, I include thank-yous for one to four spots and features shared with the region. Sharing regionally relevant stories has developed a momentum and become an everyday part of our newsroom cultures.

Yet our tracking reports show most of our stations air more stories shared from other stations than they contribute to the region. Example: In the first three months of this year, KUOW shared 41 of its reporters' spots and features and aired 105 from reporters at other stations.

3. Build the virtual newsroom

Three technologies newer than the Network are now integral to everything we do: Skype, Google Docs and PRX Networks.

When I started this job in 2008, my long-distance phone bill was \$150 a month. In 2009, it dropped to \$15 per month. The main reason: Skype. It allows me to stay in close contact with reporters, including easy texting, all for free. The sound quality is more akin to FM radio than a scratchy phone line. It makes our team feel like we're all in the same newsroom even though we're scattered across three states. Skype has plenty of dropped calls and other technical challenges. As we say when a glitch occurs, we get what we pay for — and we don't pay a dime. I often sound like Darth Vader to the reporters, but that's not always a bad thing.

Google Docs allows the reporters and me to literally be on the same page as we edit. I can suggest a change in a script (as we talk on Skype), and I'll see the reporter make that change in real time. Each reporter has his or her own Google Doc and simply pastes in another script for each editing session. Again, for free!

PRX Networks is Public Radio Exchange's password-protected server for sharing text, WAV files and pictures with the stations. We regularly hear our stories on the air minutes after posting them. The system automatically makes an MP3 version of the WAV file for stations to post on the Web. PRX Networks converts the radio copy into web-friendly scripts and sends the sound, copy and pictures into the NPR API. (There are other options for reaching stations that I'm not familiar with.)

Some tools haven't panned out. We once started an internal blog that only our team could see — the Idea Bank, where we could offer up creative possibilities as they arose. But the venue never earned much interest, and the bank closed. Regardless, creating the virtual news room is easier and cheaper than ever.

4. Edit well

This isn't meant to refer to my own editing skills. I certainly have a lot to learn on that front. My point is that stations demand high-quality work from us every day. Our stories have to reach the highest common denominator every time. We all know that news is a subjective enterprise in which smart people can disagree about what and how we should report. For the relationship to work, each station newsroom has to trust the skills and judgment of journalists who could be perceived as outsiders. What we give them has to be as good as what they can produce themselves. No matter how talented reporters are, everyone needs an editor, and a news collaboration can't live without a good one.

N3 MISSION

*N3's job is to report the news that's significant to the people of the entire Pacific Northwest. Our aim is also to give voice to the **people who aren't usually heard in the news media**. Our reporters are determined to tell the stories of **everyday people**, their interests, their lives, their problems and their successes. Historically, public radio stations serve the places where they are located. Yet many of the issues that affect the lives of listeners are shared across the region. People in remote areas of the Northwest have stories to tell that are just as important as those in the cities where major media outlets are often focused. We measure every element of N3's strategic plan by our guiding principle: We tell **stories about the issues that matter to the region**, from the Pacific Coast to the Northern Rockies, and the places "in between."*

5. Over-communicate

I send so many emails I sometimes wonder if a station's spam filter will start tossing them out. But if we don't go overboard trying to reach station hosts, editors and reporters, I've found that key information gets lost in the shuffle. We're all busy. So we send out a regular schedule of daily emails: early morning spot possibilities mapping out how the day might unfold, a midmorning daybook of everything we're doing, and then an update of the daybook before afternoon newscasts. We have a Listserv that includes station hosts, programmers, news directors and reporters. We also maintain the daybook as a Google Doc so that anyone in our system can see what we're up at the moment. This helps us avoid duplicated efforts and tells hosts and producers what to expect from us and when.

6. Ditch the extra branding

Listeners very rarely, if ever, hear the name Northwest News Network. Each station introduces us as its own or simply as a "correspondent." Our outcues are generic: "I'm Tom Banse reporting" or "I'm Anna King in Richland." We don't hide who we are, but we don't call attention to the arrangement on the air.

I know this is an approach many stations and collaborations reject. I can understand why they want to tout their innovative enterprises to listeners. Branding can be important, especially to potential funders. But here's the case for keeping the collaboration invisible: Listeners don't care. All they want is high-quality news, not a highfalutin' moniker vying for brand identity. With stations and NPR working hard to maintain their own brands, we think it would be confusing to try to enter that fray.

We do copyright our stories and identify ourselves on the Web as the source of our stories. But on the radio, we sound like we're part of our stations' news teams. That's fitting because that's exactly what we are.

Colin Fogarty is regional editor of the Northwest News Network, which serves stations in Washington, Oregon and Idaho. Staff photos by Steve Scardina.

EARLIER STORIES

Fogarty refers to a new breed of multistation collaborations for reporting, the [Local Journalism Centers](#) funded by CPB in 2010.

Louisville Public Media led the establishment of a regional reporting unit [covering the Ohio River Basin](#).

RELATED LINKS

[Northwest News Network](#) site.