
**The Civic
Journalism
Coalition**

Working the story together: a practical guide to joint investigations.

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This guide gathers the collective principles and practical lessons for journalists and civil society organisations (CSOs) engaging in joint projects, including investigations, advocacy, and campaigns. Its content is based on the experiences of the members of the [Civic Journalism Coalition](#).

The aim is to help new partnerships start off strong, and ensure they are built on mutual understanding, clear expectations, and shared respect for each partner's independence, expertise, and audience.

We extend our deepest gratitude to the civil society organisations and journalistic outlets who shared their experience, insight, and hard-earned lessons in shaping this guide.

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Shaping the topic

Why this stage matters



Everything starts here. An investigation objective and angle that's agreed among the partners is key to set up the expectations and avoid challenges further down the process. Also, an in-depth conversation at this stage helps prepare for the other phases, like dividing the work or planning communication outputs.

Common pitfalls



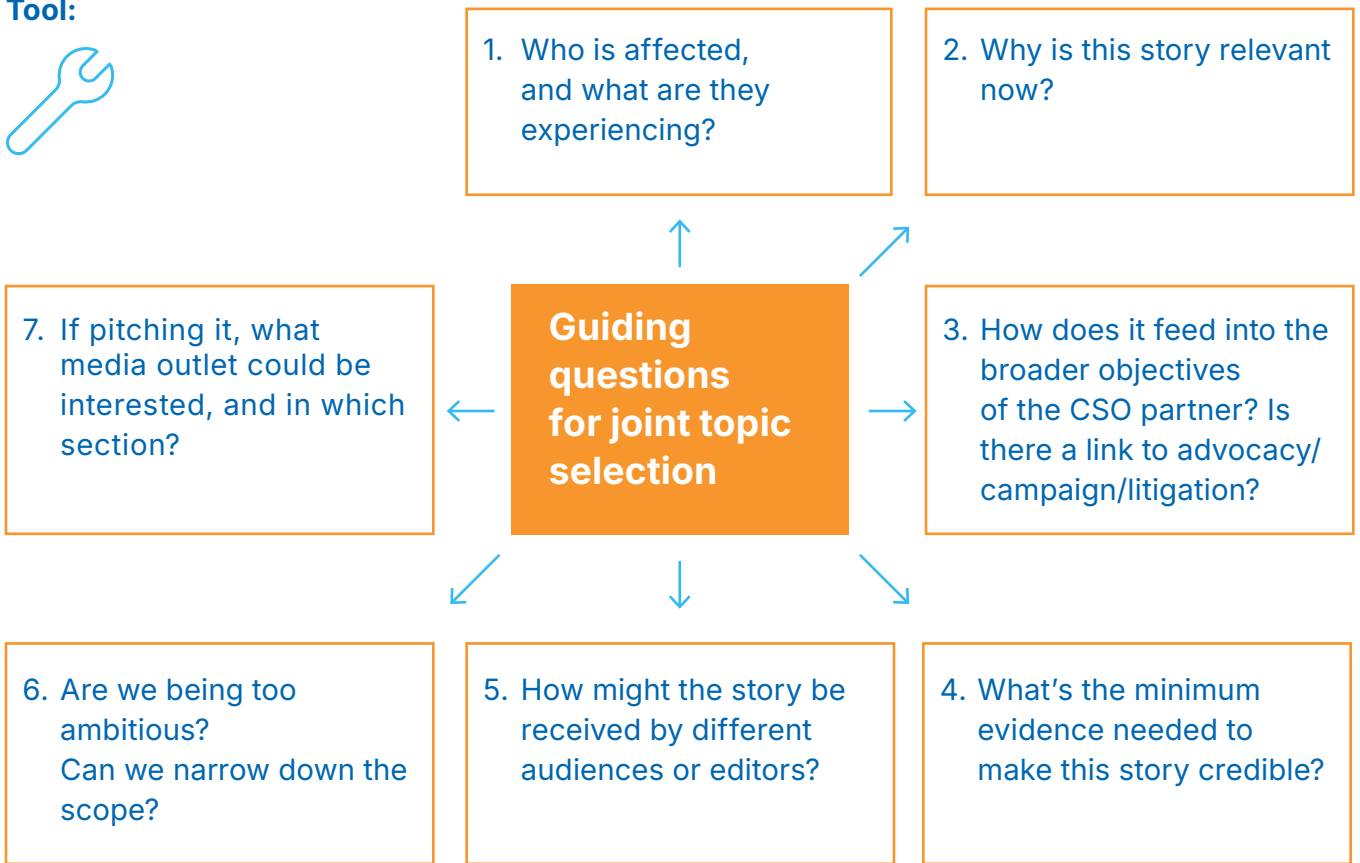
- A story idea from a CSO is rejected because editors see it as "advocacy."
 - In international projects, there can be accusations of being a "foreign agent" or acting out of a particular interest.
 - The investigation depends on the willingness of media outlets to publish.
 - The scope targets too many audiences at once or uses inaccessible jargon for some of the partners (i.e. a very technical investigation on algorithms).
 - Difficulty finding where the story fits within a newspaper (in which section?) or platform.
 - Topics that become too ambitious to realistically be feasible.
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Good practices



- **Assess relevance and angle.** Before starting the investigation, consult stakeholders to test resonance and accuracy of your topic and your approach.
 - **Engage affected communities from the beginning.** This is a must to keep the story grounded and human, and respectful/useful to the affected people.
 - **Dedicate time to proper scoping.** Avoid "megalomaniac" projects. Keep it feasible.
 - **Be ready to reshape your initial idea with your partner.** Narrowing or shifting focus isn't a failure, but how strong investigations evolve.
 - **Cross-check CSOs' and journalists' networks knowledge.** Each brings something essential, and not relying only on the partners of the project, but also on their broader networks, to pursue meaningful, well worked stories.
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Tool:



Field insights



“Flexibility is key in the collaboration between journalists and CSOs: while having an initial set of research questions proved to be useful to set the context of the research, we also had to adjust our expectations once the actual investigation started. Goals and objectives can vary and other interesting information can be unveiled along the way. Having an open mind towards possible forks in the path sets the mood for a successful collaboration”.

Naiara Bellio
AlgorithmWatch

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Dividing the roles

Why this stage matters



Clarity around who does what is central to avoid any misunderstandings. Journalists, CSOs, researchers and other potential partners (lawyers, affected communities...) operate under different work styles, timelines, and pressures. Defining roles early ensures collaboration without confusion, and is to keep journalistic independence and CSO credibility intact.

Common pitfalls



- Sources are reluctant to share testimony with non-journalistic organisations.
 - Reluctance of journalists regarding the risk of conflating activism and journalism.
 - Unclear definition of the CSO's role in the investigation and evidence gathering process.
 - Disagreement on credit and attribution.
 - If one partner initiated or funded the work: who frames the story?
 - Lack of formalisation of the collaboration leading to misunderstandings or false assumptions.
 - Partners work in very different ways (for example, journalists vs. legal groups).
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What works



- **Consider the national context.** Adapt to each others' realities: processes and societal roles are not the same in every country.
 - **Be transparent about funding and independence.** Clarify who pays for what, with what money and why.
 - **Acknowledge positionality and risks.** Understand each partner's perspectives and vulnerabilities and try to collectively shield yourselves from potential harms.
 - **Keep journalism's watchdog role distinct.** Advocacy and reporting serve different but complementary purposes. When journalists are recognised as independent professionals, it can help maintain credibility and open access that may not always be available to advocacy actors.
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- **Adapt collaboration to strengths.** Each organisation contributes what it does best, so not all tasks must be shared.
- **Define protocols and processes early.** Who contacts sources? Who verifies? Who publishes?
- **Agree from an early stage on attribution and time-frames.** Who is signing the pieces? How will research support be acknowledged? Will the date of publication be agreed, or is it at the discretion of the outlet?
- **Formalise lightly but clearly.** Even a simple written or email agreement builds accountability.

Tool:



Checklist for defining roles:

- ✓ Have we agreed on how information is shared and verified?
- ✓ Do we understand each other's internal review and legal processes?
- ✓ Have we decided how to handle potential conflicts?
- ✓ Have we written down basic agreements on principles, attribution and coordination?

Field insights



“Having different roles means to have different ways to look at the world, to reflect on the things we observe. At times, it has been difficult to make these different approaches among journalists, lawyers and activists coexist. But when we communicated our visions, and explain in depth our points, our difference became a valuable resource that only enriched the project”

Federica Rossi
Freelance journalist

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Setting the objectives

Why this stage matters



Journalists, CSOs, researchers often share broader values, but pursue different forms of impact. One might aim for visibility and public awareness, another for policy change and accountability, others for long-term data gathering. Aligning these objectives ensures the collaboration leads to complementary outcomes rather than conflicting ones.

Common pitfalls



- Different expectations of what “impact” means: visibility vs. advocacy vs. legal change.
- Journalistic reporting might not satisfy policy or legal needs: for example, sometimes journalistic investigations are good for raising awareness, but not detailed enough to be usable for strategic litigation.
- Researchers and journalists often work on very different timelines.

What works



- **Identify goals explicitly.** Ask yourselves: What change are we trying to achieve? If more than one, can these goals be complementary?
If too many, do we need to allocate them to different investigations?
- **Agree on outputs.** Will this collaboration produce an article, a report, a series of outputs, a toolkit, database, or all of these?
- **Possibility of generating parallel outputs.** It’s fine if partners produce separate outputs, as long as they align on evidence and basic framing.
- **Be honest about what you can achieve.** A media story can trigger debate, and advocacy based on this can be instrumental to achieve policy change, but it is not always the case. Be clear on what you need to achieve your objectives and how the story feeds into the broader strategy.

Tool:**Objectives mapping exercise:**

- 1 Each partner lists their top three expected outcomes/goals.
- 2 Compare overlaps and differences.
- 3 Define a shared "core objective" that serves to all the partners.
- 4 Set timelines that accommodate each partner's working rhythm.

Field insights

"From the very beginning, we agreed that the outcomes would include both journalistic pieces, signed by the journalist, and dissemination activities, such as webinars and campaign, led by our organisation. This approach allowed us to preserve clear authorship and editorial independence, while working together toward our shared objective: raising awareness about the algorithms operating in Catalan prisons."

Judith Membrives i Llorens
Algorights

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Agreeing on the communications output

Why this stage matters



The way findings are presented determines how far, and to whom, the investigation reaches, which is crucial to achieve the determined objectives. Agreeing on format, tone, and timing prevents tension between visibility and strategic impact.

Common pitfalls



- Difficulty reaching cross-border audiences or publishing in multiple languages.
 - Trouble identifying affected individuals willing to be featured safely.
 - Tokenisation of affected individuals and lack of concern for their experiences or the way they would like the story to be framed.
 - Disagreement on where and how to publish.
 - Problems on choosing the right platform to gain visibility among the target audience.
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What works



- **Choose formats strategically.** Match form to audience: media feature, report, briefing, video, or all combined.
 - **Choose channels strategically.** To raise public awareness, social media might be indispensable; to target politicians, legacy newspapers still work. So, match the channel to the audience.
 - **Translate content.** Make findings accessible to communities directly affected.
 - **Consult with affected individuals prior to publication.** As best practice, make sure that affected individuals can consult and provide input to the framing of the story and their testimonies prior to publication. This will help you ensure that the story remains relevant to their needs and expectations.
 - **Negotiate publication terms.** Ensure conditions (timing, remuneration, exclusivity, control over content) are acceptable to all those involved.
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- **Adapt to external timings and combine platforms.** If a debate in Parliament is scheduled on your topic, you might want to adapt the timing of your publication to it make it more impactful. You can publish something on the same day as a journalistic piece, in the outlet's page, and as a report, on the CSOs website, to target politicians. Use your shared knowledge to make the most out of it!

Tool:



Publication planning template:

- ✓ Target audiences and media outlets.
- ✓ Decide format and channels.
- ✓ Choose desired languages and translators.
- ✓ Shared embargo/publication schedule, if possible matching it with relevant political moments.
- ✓ Consent and protection protocols for affected individuals.

Field insights



“Journalists are usually able to communicate with larger audiences than CSOs. This provides specialised CSOs a privileged connection to the general public and to population groups that they would otherwise approach with greater difficulties or not manage to reach at all. On the other hand, journalists benefit from the networks of people and affected communities CSOs usually work with. The content and the format can (and should) be adapted to each audience, depending on whether you are publishing on a mainstream media or on the CSO's platform”.

Naiara Bellio
AlgorithmWatch

Including affected communities

Why this matters



The people whose lives are at the centre of the story should not be treated merely as sources or case studies. Their participation and agency is crucial, and it requires time, care, and humility.

Common pitfalls



- Including or contacting affected individuals only after the story and the angle are already defined.
- Tokenistic participation: people “featured” but not meaningfully involved.
- Retraumatization of participants through repeated questioning or exposure.
- Speaking about communities rather than with them.
- Overreliance on “go-to” sources or spokespersons who are not necessarily the best-positioned people to speak on the matter.

What works



- **Connect early.** Involve affected communities already when conceptualising the project. Make sure that you create the conditions for shaping the project collectively and be open to changes, rather than present the project as a “done deal”.
- **Reflect on privilege.** Consider how your position, identity, and access shape your narrative. Is there a part of the story that you are not seeing? Are the solutions you’re proposing aligned with the needs of the communities affected?
- **Build trust patiently.** Transparency about motives and expectations is key.
- **Empower storytelling.** Support communities in telling their own stories, not just through providing testimony. For example, you can agree on a joint publication, select distribution methods based on the needs of the communities.
- **Diversify voices.** Avoid narrow or repetitive representation.

Tool:**Guiding self-reflecting questions:**

- 1 Have we included those affected meaningfully, connected early, and let them be part of the storytelling?
- 2 Have we shared how the investigation will be used and where it will appear and made sure that it addresses the needs of affected communities?
- 3 Are participants comfortable with visibility and identifiable details?
- 4 Have we created opportunities for affected people who provided testimonials to consult the story before publication and share feedback regarding the framing?
- 5 Have we considered potential emotional or social harm?
- 6 Are we compensating or acknowledging participants fairly?

Field insight

“Building trust with affected communities needs time and patience, two things that are not very common in the journalism field today. Both are crucial though if you want to put people’s lives at the centre of your story in a respectful and responsible manner”

Pablo Jiménez Arandía
Freelance investigative reporter

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