

Committing to Collaboration

How Two Freelancers Pulled Off A Cross-Pacific Partnership

By WINIFRED BIRD and JANE BRAXTON LITTLE



Fukushima / Chernobyl project collaborators Winifred Bird (left) and Jane Braxton Little. Photo courtesy of Jane Braxton Little

Winnie started freelancing the way every book on the subject advises you not to: without ever having stepped foot in the office of a newspaper, magazine, or even her high school yearbook. This caused her considerable anxiety and envy, in particular each time she read a newspaper article with shared bylines. Oh to be on that collaborative team, with counterparts writing from New York and Paris while she reported from her desk in Japan!

She put in a good three or four years of solitary toil before SEJ's Elizabeth Grossman tipped her off that freelancers can cooperate, too. Lizzie suggested teaming up to investigate the damage to chemical factories caused by Japan's 2011 tsunami and earthquake. They pulled it off successfully and published the story in *Environmental Health Perspectives*. Since then they've done two more major collaborations, each of which has been eye-opening, challenging, and – most of the time – a lot of fun.

If every freelancer works in a self-created vacuum, virtual or otherwise, Jane's is also geographic. The closest colleagues – and bookstores, lattes and brewpubs – are two hours away on a treacherous two-lane mountain road. So when SEJ's Dawn Stover asked her to collaborate on a case study about conservation in Tanzania and other equatorial sites, she welcomed the opportunity. This was not her first partnership as a writer but it inspired the confidence that she could tackle a major undertaking with another journalist. She was hooked on the synergy that generates a result greater than the sum of the individual contributors. She still is.

The Fukushima/Chernobyl project

Neither of us remembers exactly when we committed to collaboration. We were friends and a former SEJ mentor pair (Jane as mentor, Winnie as mentee) with a shared interest in how the Fukushima disaster was affecting forest ecosystems and rural communities.

As we email-mused about turning this focus into separate pitches for magazines we had both worked with, our ideas expanded to include Chernobyl and the effect of radiation, then 25 years after that disaster. At some point it was clear that the scope of the project we were envisioning was more than either

one of us wanted to take on alone. We agreed to team up. That was the first of a series of decisions that evolved almost organically – a process that became the hallmark of our working relationship.

Early on, we addressed our separate concerns about collaborating. We were honest about our insecurities, each believing that the other could write the story alone. That led to a frank discussion of what we thought we could bring to the effort individually and how we could each benefit by collaborating.

While we never spelled out an agreement establishing boundaries or responsibilities, these initial discussions helped create a trust that served us well throughout the process of writing and revising a total of almost 13,000 words together. Our joint stories appeared in *Environmental Health Perspectives*, *Earth Island Journal*, and the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*; one long essay never found a home.

Collaboration 101

1) Planning your symbiosis: What are you missing? What can you contribute? Try to think beyond the givens of cross-fertilized ideas, editing and companionship to more practical benefits before you plunge in:

- If you want to write about a story happening far away but don't have the travel budget to go there, teaming up can get on-the-ground reporting into your article.

- Consider your language skills and local knowledge. For multi-country stories, a partner can sometimes do interviews and research that would otherwise be impossible, or save you the expense of a translator.

- Collaboration can bring the project computer skills, data manipulation and math or science expertise that you lack. We both learned how to quickly convert miles into kilometers and hourly radiation exposure into annual dosages.

- Your strengths may be developing a narrative and bringing characters to life. Look for a partner whose writing skills contrast with and complement your own.

- Does your partner have a foot in the door at your dream publication? Those connections can land

Jane Braxton Little
Comment (2): Surely not us!

Winifred Bird 8/23/14 11:57pm
Comment (3): and rewriting & rewriting

Winifred Bird 8/23/14 11:57pm
Comment (4): What do you think about "mutually parasitic relationship" here?

Jane Braxton Little
Comment (5): Honest! But appropriate?

Jane Braxton Little
Comment (6): And there went my heart's desire trip to Japan!

Jane Braxton Little
Comment (7): Like learning how to spell Chernobyl?

Comment (8): Winnie Queen of Footnotes

Winifred Bird 8/23/14 11:57pm
Comment (9): Wait a second, I thought we were relying on YOUR footnoting expertise . . .

Jane Braxton Little
Comment (10): Once I figured out the difference between milli- and micro-sieverts.

Winifred Bird 8/23/14 11:57pm
Comment (1): Nice phrase, Jane.

you assignments for your collaborative project as well as future stand-alone stories.

- What time commitments does your project require? Working together lets you share the challenge of extensive interviews and research you might find daunting on your own.

2) Making it work financially:

- Make sure the project is big and meaty enough to make it worth your while to split the income.

- Consider doing a series of stories on the topic. We did four together.

- Get at least one assignment from a well-paying publication. Our per-word payment ranged from “paid in exposure” to \$2/word.

- Think about individual projects to spin off from the shared reporting. We each did newspaper, magazine and online pieces inspired by the larger shared project.

3) Tools:

- Dropbox or other cloud-based file-sharing services are essential. Establish a system of folders and sub-folders each partner can access. We stored scientific documents, interview transcriptions, notes and working drafts in separate folders. It's important to avoid working on the same file simultaneously. Dramatically different time zones helped us.

- Track changes allows you to edit one another's drafts. We commented liberally – often humorously – on one another's notes and edits.

4) Process:

- Be clear up front about how and what each person will contribute.

- Develop a system for feedback. How much and how often is a personal preference. We both like a lot of back-and-forth. Having one another comment on notes was not only entertaining and thought-provoking. It motivated us to write better and funnier.

- Sharing typed transcripts and notes is critical. So is keeping your files well organized. Since we are

both equally anal that wasn't a problem for us.

- Decide how to divide up tasks and writing. We used the obvious geographic division: Jane reported on Chernobyl and Winnie on Fukushima. We co-wrote ledes, transitions and conclusions. And we heavily edited one another's separate contributions. Another option is to delegate the first draft to one person and then edit together.

- Don't forget to pick up the phone, hold a Skype conference, or meet in person now and then if you can. One of the big benefits here is increased human contact.

- Disagreements are inevitable. It's critical to acknowledge and resolve them. Our biggest? Whether to use past tense or present.

5) Handholding: The obvious and perhaps most welcome part of working together. The advice about another set of eyes extends to the heart. There's nothing like a partner to belay those middle-of-the-night moments of self-doubt and celebrate the thrill of publication.

Winfred Bird is a freelance journalist and translator focusing on the environment and architecture. From 2005 to 2014 she lived in rural Japan, where she covered the 2011 tsunami, earthquake, and nuclear disaster for publications including the Japan Times, Christian Science Monitor, and Yale Environment 360. When she's not writing she can usually be found in her vegetable garden. She currently lives in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Freelance journalist Jane Braxton Little is based in California's northern Sierra Nevada, where she has worked as a U.S. Forest Service lookout, raced sled dogs and raised two fine sons. She writes about natural resources and the environment for publications that include Scientific American, Popular Science and Audubon, where she is a contributing editor. She is drawn to places on the edge and whatever lives there.

Jane Braxton Little

Comment (17): Thanks for not killing me for all those last-minute tweaks.

Winfred Bird 8/23/14 11:57pm

Comment (18): Ditto.

Jane Braxton Little

Comment (19): Wonderful surprises just when I needed them the most!

Winfred Bird 8/23/14 11:57pm

Comment (20): Nice try Jane.

Winfred Bird 8/23/14 11:57pm

Comment (21): Cause let's face it – not even a spouse or editor cares about a story as much as the person who wrote it with you.

Jane Braxton Little

Comment (11): That 1 p.m. Dropbox click told me you were awake and at work across the Pacific.

Winfred Bird 8/23/14 11:57pm

Comment (12): Bright eyed and bushy tailed at 6 a.m. Japan Time!

Jane Braxton Little

Comment (13): Your lips actually sweat in that nuke protection suit?

Winfred Bird 8/23/14 11:57pm

Comment (14): I've got anxiety and writer's block covered. What are you bringing to the table?

Winfred Bird 8/23/14 11:57pm

Comment (15): Jane, you're turning us into the reincarnation of Ernest Hemingway with all these short sentences!

Jane Braxton Little

Comment (16): You prefer Faulkner?

Inside Story: Hogue...continued

microbeads mentioned a professor at the State University of New York in passing. I looked her up and found she was a chemistry professor – a gig my audience relates to. I interviewed her four or six times, in part because the research hasn't been published yet and I had no source document to reference to get the technical details right. I asked her who else I should talk to and she led me to others working on the microbead issues.

She also mentioned she was doing further work checking for microbeads in sewage plant effluent – yet one company using microbeads had claimed that wastewater treatment plants remove these plastic bits. So I called the National Association of Clean Water Agencies, which represents publicly owned treatment plants, for their view. My source there wasn't aware – until I told him – that consumer products that are designed to be washed down the drain contain tiny

Hogue: One early story in another publication about

plastic spheres. Sewage plants weren't designed to remove microbeads – which is actionable information for my audience.

Some of my readers actually help develop personal care products and they might now bring up the issue of sewage plant treatability when companies consider new ingredients. Plus, most readers use toothpaste or facial washes and some might decide not to use products with microbeads.

SEJournal: What advice would you give to a young journalist starting out?

Hogue: Keep asking questions until you understand whatever it is you are reporting on. And strengthen your numeracy. You don't need calculus but build confidence in doing basic calculations.

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