



# Hybrid Investigative Journalism

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*Edited by*  
Maria Konow-Lund · Michelle Park ·  
Saba Bebawi

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# Hybrid Investigative Journalism

“New forms of collaboration are driving investigations around the world. The authors analyse what’s behind these new approaches, the professional and cultural benefits, and offer compelling global case studies. It is essential reading for anyone who believes in the importance of investigative journalism in holding the powerful to account.”

—Richard Sambrook, Emeritus Professor, *Cardiff University, UK and Co-Chair of The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, UK*

“A fantastic, timely and comprehensive look at the current state and challenges of investigative journalism. The authors characterize contemporary investigative journalism as marked by hybridity across the board: in terms of funding strategies, working practices, and content presentation. The authors apply this perspective to several innovative and original analyses of instances of investigative journalism from across the globe. A highly recommended book for anyone interested in the state and future of investigative journalism.”

—Henrik Örnebring, *Professor of Media and Communication, Karlstad University, Sweden and winner of the 2023 AEJMC James A. Tankard Book Award*

“Judging from the extensive fieldwork in this volume, the reports of journalism’s demise have been premature. Perhaps we weren’t looking in the right places, where emerging hybrid forms of investigation were enlisting new players—professionals, citizens, activists—and forming new collaborative relationships. From this geographically diverse selection of case studies, one can take heart that innovation often comes bottom-up, from the inexperienced, who take inspiration from each other—demonstrating journalism’s ability to adapt and transform as it revitalizes its watchdog function.”

—Stephen D. Reese, *School of Journalism & Media, The University of Texas, USA*

Maria Konow-Lund • Michelle Park  
Saba Bebawi  
Editors

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## PREFACE

In 2024, it will be 50 years since President Nixon resigned because of (among other things) the work of two reporters: Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein. Over time, their scoop became legendary, as two journalist-authors of a handbook on the practice recall: ‘Watergate was our generation’s symbol for investigative journalism—and the story created myths’ (Østlyngen & Øvrebø, 2000, p. 323). The Watergate story had such a ripple effect, they continue, that even stand-up comedians would use it as a topic.

This book looks behind those myths and renowned reporters to the workings of the field in an era informed first by the explosion of digital technology and second by a global pandemic. Its empirical studies of various forms of entrepreneurship by investigative journalists, might, but do not necessarily involve either legacy media organisations or traditional practices of investigative journalism. The people interviewed included students of the craft, media professionals trying new technologies in new, ‘nonprofit’ contexts, or reporters experimenting with new finance models or safe ways for their peers to publish their controversial stories. A common denominator of these cases is their hybridity—that is, their purposeful combination of tradition with innovation to produce alternative organisational structures or practices. This book also seeks to normalise everyday investigative journalism in less-resourced newsrooms and during times of societal or industry crisis when resources grow scarce. Serendipitously, this

book ended up being written by exclusively female scholars as well—an additional indication, alongside the various focuses of this book, of the increasing diversity of the field.

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## REFERENCE

Østlyngen, T. and Øvrebø, T. (2000) *Journalistikk. Metode og fag*. 2 utgave. Gyldendal Akademisk. Oslo.

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PART I

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# Towards a Changing Mindset During Crisis



## CHAPTER 1

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# Hybrid Investigative Journalism During Times of Crisis

*Maria Konow-Lund, Michelle Park, and Saba Bebawi*

### INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK

In pursuit of its continued focus on holding power to account—locally, nationally and globally—investigative journalism<sup>1</sup> as a practice has actively incorporated various digital skills and capabilities. The embrace of digital journalism has led to collages of skillsets that have come together in new ways to complement one another or merge into something unprecedented. These processes of hybridisation are regularly discussed in relation to how journalism is undergoing riveting change; as a concept, hybridity

<sup>1</sup>We are using the term investigative journalism interchangeably with investigative journalism in this book.

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challenges traditional notions of how journalism is being produced and by whom. Domingo (2016, p. 145), for example, points out that hybridisation is taking place within journalistic practices both overtly and covertly amongst a range of (new and traditional) actors, platforms and organisations. The hybrid combination of digital and traditional physical forms of journalistic collaboration has also given rise to new horizontal processes (Russel, 2016, p. 149).

While much has been written about various types of investigative journalism, few researchers have looked at how the practice of investigative journalism adapts to hybrid organisations, hybrid technology and hybrid professional cultures. Chadwick (2013) is recognised as the scholar who has most increased our awareness of how traditional ways of creating media are blending and fusing with new ways. Chadwick uses an historical approach to conclude that ‘older and newer media logics in the field of media and politics blend, overlap, intermesh, and coevolve’ (2013, p. 4). In this book we are specifically interested in how such blending, overlapping, intermeshing and coevolving take place in new forms of investigative journalism in relation to new units, organisations, actors and technologies. Hamilton emphasises the impact of hybridisation upon journalistic practices, products and forms (Hamilton, 2016, p. 164) while cautioning against adversarial conceptualisations of journalistic practices such as ‘mainstream’ versus ‘alternative’ (Domingo, 2016, p. 145). Here, we draw upon the concept of hybridity in several ways. Investigative journalism is, after all, a very expensive form of journalistic practice (Hamilton, 2016) whose production already typically involves professional journalists, non-journalists, editorial developers and activists; it boasts a unique ability to *be* hybrid in this sense. It also engages with crises, which compel further novel combinations of skillsets and actors.

Recent studies have already acknowledged variations on the theme of hybridisation, engaging with collaborative journalism (Carson, 2020; Carson & Farhall, 2018), open-source investigations (Müller & Wiik, 2021) and cross-border collaborative journalism (Alfter, 2019; Konow-Lund et al., 2019). All of these types of investigative journalism revolve

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around the individual or institutional initiative to hold power to account by exposing and documenting questionable activity (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021, p. 205; Negrine, 1996)<sup>2</sup>—think, for example, of the reporter-driven American investigation of Watergate in 1970s, the interactive data maps created by Adrian Holovaty (see Anderson, 2018),<sup>3</sup> or data-driven transnational investigative projects such as the Panama Papers (Konieczna, 2018). New forms of investigative journalism often arise in bottom-up organisations for investigative journalism or local, national or international journalist networks, and they tend to be hybrid in the sense that they integrate new insights or opportunities into established, traditional forms of practice.

Whether these investigations are conducted via street-level reporting or expanded into cross-border collaborations unpacking big data on a global scale, they all demand insight, initiative and adaptability from both reporters and editors. While investigative journalism has often been thought of as the practice of lone wolves, particularly in the Western part of the world (De Burgh & Lashmar, 2021, p. 3), such a working style seems less efficient and less productive in the wake of the kinds of financial, climatological and pandemic-related crises which now accompany daily life around the world. Increasingly, therefore, books on investigative journalism begin by emphasising the importance of systematic collaboration in the field, locally, nationally and internationally (Alfter, 2019; Candea, 2020; Carson, 2020; Melgar, 2019; Sambrook, 2018). Collaboration is important because it accommodates the ‘many-to-many’ connections recognised as necessary by Castells (1996). Berglez and Gearing (2018, p. 4574) point out that ‘collaboration has long been recognized as a technique for achieving synergistic results in the fields of scientific and medical research’ and go on to state that ‘collaboration between reporters and media outlets is beginning to emerge as an important tool for carrying out routine journalism in the networked media environment’.

Here, we will exchange the abiding scholarly tendency to categorise new journalistic practices (as ‘cross-border’ or ‘cross-disciplinary’, for example) for an operative notion of ‘hybridity’ which we feel better

<sup>2</sup> See Kovach and Rosenstiel (2021, pp. 196–224) for a recent overview of research in the field.

<sup>3</sup> Adrian Holovaty was a computer programmer and part-time journalist who created an influential map of crime scenes in Chicago in 2005. C. W. Anderson (2018, pp. 135–136) notes Holovaty’s impact upon the development of interactivity in investigative journalism despite the fact that he soon departed the field for the music industry.



captures the conditions in the field at the moment. Chadwick (2017, p. 18) defines hybridisation as ‘a process of simultaneous integration and fragmentation. Competing and contradictory elements may constitute a meaningful whole, but their meaning is never reducible to, nor ever fully resolved by, the whole’. Through hybridisation, each element contributes to the creation of something new, even as its individual nature remains intact. Chadwick adds that traditional forms of investigative practice are increasingly comfortable existing side-by-side with new ways of organising this work using technology and incorporating different actors, including bloggers, technologists and ordinary citizens. Hybridity best characterises today’s complex investigations across borders, for example, which involve both freelance and institutional reporters in projects driven from the bottom up as well as the top down. In such cases, reporters and managers within professional regional or global networks can have an impact equal to that of the top editors at legacy media organisations.

Hybridity in investigative journalism seems to thrive most during crises. The COVID-19 pandemic, for example, put investigative journalism to the test yet again, clearly demonstrating the need for increased journalistic interconnectedness and interdependence—that is, hybridity—during crisis coverage. The pandemic’s global impact demanded that journalists collaborate across borders and entire continents in order to develop the most knowledgeable sources and secure the best possible information. The latest edition of the foundational book on investigative journalism by Hugo de Burgh and Paul Lashmar (2021) indeed begins by discussing the profound (crisis-driven) globalisation of journalism, though other studies have also remarked upon the inverse—that crises can also generate increased nationalism and less transnational interdependence among journalists.

While there are many different crises which might trigger an investigative journalistic response from legacy organisations, professional assemblages of individuals working together (Reese, 2021, p. 110), networks or individuals, we will focus on three types in this book: (1) organisational crises in the practice of journalism itself, (2) sudden societal crises referred to as critical events, such as terror attacks (Tandoc et al., 2021), and (3) the comparatively new types of crisis distinguished as ‘global’ in nature, such as the pandemic (Cottle, 2022). Before we go on to characterise the various journalistic responses to these respective crisis types, we will elaborate upon our understanding of investigative journalism in general.

### *Investigative Journalism, Transformation and Innovation During Crises*

The interplay among emerging forms of journalistic practice, structural factors such as how work and practices are organised, technological innovations and changing professional roles has long attracted academic attention. Still, such studies of innovation in journalism have generally addressed normal or typical news production situations rather than what happens during breaking news moments, crises or catastrophes—times when, it must be said, academics are often unable to negotiate access to the newsroom but the work there changes profoundly (Solvoll & Olsen, 2024). When researchers discuss innovation, they tend to dwell upon its ‘newness’, Steensen notes: ‘Innovation research tends to emphasize newness. Whether it is a new idea, a new technology, a new commodity or a new combination of existing ideas, technologies or commodities, it is the newness and its consequences that are under scrutiny’ (Steensen, 2013, pp. 45ff). In addition, Western scholars tend to emphasise journalistic “rebuilding”, “reconsidering”, “remaking”, “reconstructing”, “rethinking” and “reinventing” (Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch, 2020a, p. 14), but these words are much less descriptive of burgeoning global practices, which demand a more all-encompassing perspective, especially regarding the impact of crises (Zelizer, 2015).

Investigative journalism itself affords a unique opportunity to study journalistic responses to crises at the micro, meso and macro levels (Reese, 2021). Whereas normal journalism remains generally reactive (Schlesinger, 1978) in that reporters tend to wait for something newsworthy to happen, investigative journalism seeks to initiate stories which will hopefully produce social change (Bebawi, 2016). This inherent proactivity brings with it an openness to change and new possibilities—one which proves very useful during crises. The work that investigative reporters do can also coincide in unanticipated ways with the needs of the public when times are especially turbulent or confusing (Creech & Nadler, 2018). When the COVID-19 pandemic emerged in December 2019, it quickly turned into a global health crisis which was unprecedented in modern times, and which led to a greatly increased demand for information at the local, national and international levels simultaneously.

Responding to this need for guidance and perspective quickly supplanted any abiding allegiance to either profit or tradition. In fact, the credibility of journalism itself came to rely upon how investigative

journalists would adjust and succeed in their trade. So, while some studies of innovation in journalism have associated it with business needs or the furtherance of existing institutional values (see, for example, Pavlik, 2013, p. 183; Solvoll & Olsen, 2024; Storsul & Krumsvik, 2013), we have found that public service-oriented innovation also takes place from the bottom up, as mentioned earlier (Konow-Lund et al., 2022). For example, as we will see in a later chapter, Rachel Oldroyd, former managing editor and CEO of the Bureau of Investigative Journalism in London, created a local news unit called the ‘Bureau Local’ to extend the purview of her existing organisation. The unit built up a network of professional journalists, students, digital developers and members of the public which has since organised local digital collaboration projects in a cross-disciplinary manner. These projects are not for commercial gain but instead pursued in the public interest, specifically in terms of the rejuvenation of local news in Britain. The Bureau Local’s nonprofit model of collaboration for the public good was also inspired by the global journalistic work on the Panama Papers project. We agree with other academics that Schumpeter’s notion of ‘creative destruction’ is useful to these kinds of inquiries (Schlesinger & Doyle, 2015) because it emphasises the fact that innovation in journalism is less a self-contained means to an end than an ongoing process—a ‘series of dynamics, mechanisms, means, and changes that lead to a particular outcome’ (Siles & Boczkowski, 2012, p. 306). In short, innovation propels a transformation toward a ‘less bounded’ and more ‘fluid’ journalistic practice (Anderson, 2016; Kantola, 2016; Ryfe, 2016; Vos, 2016) with huge implications for the profession and especially the ways in which it is organised.

Ultimately, investigative journalism is taking a hybrid turn in every sense. Open-source investigative platforms such as Bellingcat, Airwars, Forensic Architecture, the Syrian Archive (Müller & Wiik, 2021) and others accommodate a high incidence of cross-disciplinary collaboration among actors with very different backgrounds in journalism at, for example, the Global Investigative Journalist Network. Within investigative journalism, in particular, hybridity and fluidity characterise the ways in which global networks thrive (Berglez & Gearing, 2018) through both virtual and physical interactions (see Alfter, 2019, for an extensive consideration of cross-border journalistic collaboration). Paulussen (2016) associates newsroom innovation with digitisation and virtual activity in particular.

In this book, we focus on the many ways in which investigative journalists and news workers adapt their practices to challenging or unfamiliar circumstances, studying such initiatives at the organisational level, the individual level and the micro level (that is, ‘zooming in’ on the work; see Hartley, 2011). Referring to Chadwick’s (2013) *hybrid media system*, Reese (2021) derives a useful model of the *hybrid institution* in turn. Chadwick looks at how traditional ways of operating come to incorporate ‘newer’ logics (see Reese, 2021, p. 17) through processes characterised by ‘integration and fragmentation’, so, for example, a traditional broadcast might also be tweeted or blogged about. Reese, on the other hand, sees hybridity as an end in itself rather than a by-product of these historical dynamics (Reese, 2021, pp. 108ff). As outlined in the previous section, this book focuses on three types of crises that trigger an investigative journalistic response: (1) organisational crises in the practice of journalism itself, such as the struggles of the institutional press (Reese, 2021); (2) sudden crises (or ‘critical events’), such as the founding of the Forbidden Stories following the Charlie Hedbo attack; (3) and the comparatively new ‘global’ crises, such as the pandemic and its spurring of journalistic innovation around the world.

Hybridity resides in the journalism sector’s *practices*, which are the focus of our empirical studies. While arguing that ‘new practices have always been hybrid’, Hamilton (2016, p. 164) encourages researchers to pay more attention to three nexuses of hybridisation: (1) ‘social formation and use’, (2) ‘technology and form’ and (3) ‘news and marketing’. Hamilton’s example involving these nexuses is the *Guardian*’s investigation of NSA eavesdropping, which directly challenged the authorities within otherwise democratic and liberal societies and hence lived up to the organisation’s ideal. Like Hamilton (2016) and Reese (2021), we suggest that these notions are particularly fruitful at a time of fieldwide transition wherein the traditional both coexists alongside the new (Steensen, 2013) and merges with it into something different. This ongoing negotiation within investigative journalism touches upon culture-specific professional traditions, such as when local UK journalists experiment with US data journalism; the adaptation of traditional tools to new types of digital technology, such as when data leaks become powerful news stories; and the extension of collaborative projects beyond journalists themselves to individuals with very different experiences, including bloggers as well as experts in artificial intelligence. Unlike general journalists, who are often assigned projects by editors and therefore have less individual autonomy,

investigative journalists typically enjoy the freedom to decide what stories to pursue. Still, relatively few academic studies have looked in depth at what it takes to practice investigative journalism in the world today, as we will see below.

### INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM AND WHAT IT IS—AGAIN!

Most studies of investigative journalism begin with a definition of the field or practice (Alfter, 2019; Carson, 2020; Grøndahl Larsen, 2017; Protesse et al., 1991; Stetka & Örnebring, 2013; Van Eijk, 2005) but usually also caution us that ‘investigative journalism comes in so many shapes and sizes that it is not easy to generalise’ (de Burgh, 2008, pp. 14–15). Despite its elusive nature, this practice is exalted both in the newsroom and in society and can be both professionally and culturally rewarding. Of course, not everyone believes that investigative journalism is fundamentally different from regular reporting. In an interview with the author Hugo de Burgh, Alan Rusbridger, then editor-in-chief of the *Guardian*, tried to articulate the difference between them as he saw it: ‘All journalism is investigative to a greater or lesser extent, but investigative journalism – though it is a bit of a tautology – is that because it requires more, it’s where the investigative element is more pronounced’ (quoted in de Burgh, 2008, p. 17). The Investigative Reporters and Editors organisation understands the practice to be ‘the reporting, through one’s own initiative and work product, of matters of importance to readers, viewers and listeners. In many cases, the subjects of the reporting wish the matters under scrutiny to remain undisclosed’ (Houston, 2009). This phrasing resonates with another description of investigative journalism as a ‘social practice’ which is ‘sustained [by] the efforts of practitioners to meet and extend the practice’s standards of excellence’ (Aucoin, 2005, p 5). Certainly, its practitioners like to compare notes and discuss how best to conduct it, as our cases will demonstrate (see also Alfter, 2019; Carson, 2020; de Burgh, 2008; de Burgh & Lashmar, 2021; Leigh, 2019). Scholars likewise favour studying the best and brightest in the business, based on awards and investigative renown, to glean insights into their working methods (Alfter, 2019; Carson, 2020; Ettema & Glasser, 1998; Gearing, 2016; Leigh, 2019). On the other hand, studies of the everyday practice of investigative journalism remain relatively rare—a gap this book tries to fill, particularly regarding journalism as, in the end, work (see also Örnebring, 2016).

Equally rare are studies involving access to investigative projects and workplaces in an ethnographic mode, save for those researchers who have applied various autoethnographic techniques to reflections upon their own experiences in the field (Alfter, 2019; Candea, 2020; de Burgh, 2008; de Burgh & Lashmar, 2021; Krøvel & Thowsen, 2018; Sambrook, 2018). Some former journalists have written dissertations interrogating their own first-hand experiences as well (Candea, 2020; Melgar, 2019). These autoethnographic efforts offer a unique inside perspective upon the practice of investigative journalism but do not substitute for more empirical methodological approaches. In addition, many former journalists grapple with loyalties to their colleagues and organisations that might prevent them from being entirely neutral in their scholarly approach. One of the very few non-autoethnographic studies of investigative journalism in the newsroom is Park's doctoral thesis (2022); her research likewise informs parts of this book. Here, we appreciate the value of production studies and saw the ethnographic method as the optimal approach to our topic and themes. While it is seldom offered to researchers, we were able to negotiate access to our various target newsrooms, and part 2 of this book is primarily the result of our direct participant observation and in-depth interviews while there.

### *Investigative Journalism: Reporter-Driven or Source-Driven?*

Most books on investigative journalism include a section on where and how the practice originated and survey those moments when it expanded in some way. They also offer ruminations on whether and how it has changed in recent times:

Journalism is getting better, but in many ways, it hasn't changed [...] Many of the people who are making decisions on what deserves scarce reporting resources are white men and they are not as likely, I don't think, to immediately identify some of the issues that are most challenging to [undeserved communities], for example, black women. (Wendy Thomas, creator of non-profit news site MLK50, quoted in Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021, p. 214)

Most histories of investigative journalism do focus on Western, generally male reporters and presuppose that the practice is a Global North phenomenon; only recently have female academic authors taken an interest in investigative journalism (Bebawi, 2016; Carson, 2020; Konow-Lund,

2019; Melgar, 2019; Park, 2022; Wang, 2016). Nonetheless, there are studies of investigative reporting practices in the Global South. For example, Haiyan Wang (2016) addresses the emergence of investigative journalism in China in relation to social change. She argues that, as part of Chinese journalists' promise to be socially responsible, they 'need to mix journalism with activism' (Wang, 2016, p. 10), something that is frowned upon by many journalists in the Western world. Yet, at a time when opposition to activist journalism is growing in Western countries, other parts of the world are decidedly moving towards it. Wang acknowledges that investigative journalism in China, as elsewhere, was largely modelled on Western practices (2016, p. 2). Yet, this approach was not sustainable in the long run due to the friction between the government-run economy in China and the 'enterprise nature of journalistic professionalism' (2016, p. 9).

Saba Bebawi (2016) discusses the practice of investigative journalism in Arab cultural contexts as a hybrid phenomenon blending Western forms of investigative reporting with ingrained local practices. Despite extensive training in Western models of reporting as an ideal of practice, these reporters find it necessary to shape what they learn to the conditions on the ground. The results of this invention and adaptation, in both Arab contexts and elsewhere, merit further research.

Working in the Global South, Silvio Waisbord (2000) uses his extensive study of watchdog journalism in Latin America to criticise, among other things, the way in which US research on investigative journalism tends to focus exclusively on the methods 'that reporters use to get information' rather than its overall watchdog character in relation to autocratic political systems, for example (Waisbord, 2000, p. xv). According to Waisbord, South American journalists are less interested in this distinction:

South American journalists reject the understanding of investigative reporting in terms of specific methodological requirements that set it apart from other forms of journalism. They are sceptical about making newsgathering methods one of the salient characteristics of investigative journalism. Investigation is what journalism *is* anyway, they observe, so why make it a unique attribute of some journalists and reports? (Waisbord, 2000, p. xvi)

Ultimately, Waisbord wonders why definitions of investigative journalism often exclude source-driven investigations—an observation which evokes the WikiLeaks discourse. Ever since WikiLeaks published a video showing

a US helicopter attacking journalists on the ground in Iraq—what was known as ‘Collateral Murder’ (Owen, 2016, pp. 27–28)—journalists and researchers, as well as the authorities, have debated whether WikiLeaks is an activist group or a real source of viable information. In 2010, after all, WikiLeaks began to insist, to the frustration of certain media organisations (Leigh & Harding, 2011), that it was a ‘legitimate journalistic enterprise’ (Owen, 2016, p. 27). The question of its actual motivations felt even more urgent during its famous collaboration with the *New York Times*, *Der Spiegel* and the *Guardian* on the ‘War Logs’ files in 2011, when there was much discussion regarding how to define these organisations’ cross-disciplinary engagement with Julian Assange. Should he be considered a collaborator or a source? Keller, then editor of the *New York Times*, clearly considered Assange the latter:

As for our relationship with WikiLeaks, Julian Assange has been heard to boast that he was a kind of puppet master, who recruited several news organizations, forced them to work in concert, and choreographed their work. This is characteristic braggadocio – or, as my *Guardian* colleagues would say, bollocks. Throughout this experience we have treated Julian Assange, and his merry band, as a source. I will not say ‘a source, pure and simple,’ because as any reporter or editor can attest, sources are rarely pure and simple, and Assange was no exception. But the relationship with sources is straightforward: You don’t necessarily endorse their agenda, echo their rhetoric, take anything they say at face value, applaud their methods or, most important, allow them to shape or censor your journalism. Your obligation, as an independent news organization, is to verify the material, to supply context, to exercise responsible judgment about what to publish and what not, and to make sense of it. That is what we did. (Keller, 2011, p. 20)

Ultimately, Keller concluded that Assange was not exactly a partner and WikiLeaks was not journalism as such. Still, WikiLeaks did serve as a collaborator in a form of journalistic hybridity that proved amenable to the mainstream media (Chadwick, 2017). This book will explore such alternative hybrid production strategies in terms of the organisation sponsoring them and the individuals carrying them out through their practice, use of technology and adaptation of roles. And it will do so while investing in the particular character and context of investigative journalism, which is, in fact, qualitatively different from other kinds of journalism (Carson, 2020).



*Revisiting the Cyclical History of Investigative Journalism  
and Its Relation to Crisis*

The history of investigative journalism usually begins with an account of various national efforts to hold power to account (Carson, 2020; de Burgh, 2008; Leigh, 2019) which is usually centred upon the United States and the Global North. Such discussions engage with the practice's effects rather than, in Feldstein's words, the 'historical *causes* of investigative reporting' (Feldstein, 2006, p. 3). Feldstein laments the dearth of efforts to systematically analyse how investigative journalism has evolved over time in the interests of predicting its future. In an interesting account of how a method-focused practice in investigative journalism has spread, Baggi (2011) looks at investigative journalism in Europe early in the new millennium (see also Van Eijk, 2005). While all of this work concentrates on Global North investigative journalism, this book looks elsewhere in the world as well to understand the origins, traditions and innovations that inform the field today.

There are three historical phases of investigative journalism from its emergence in the United States to its ascendance around the world:

1. The muckraker phase
2. The re-emergence of investigative journalism in the 1960s and 1970s
3. The rise of global investigative journalism

Each of these phases was triggered by specific crises. The term 'muckrake' was coined by US President Theodore Roosevelt (Feldstein, 2006, p. 5) to describe the work done by journalists confronting systemic problems such as political or economic corruption, incidents of malpractice, and social issues and inequality in the muckraker phase which lasted about from 1902 until WWI emerged (Ibid. p. 6) In the 'new muckraking age' of the 1960s and 1970s (2006, p. 7), investigative journalism re-emerged to produce stories about the Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal, and the Arizona Project,<sup>4</sup> the last of which was triggered by the murder of a journalist in the United States. Regarding this new era, Feldstein (2006, p. 9)

<sup>4</sup>When investigative reporter Don Bolles was killed by a car bomb just before the establishment of the Investigative Reporters and Editors organisation, his death inspired an unprecedented display of solidarity among reporters in that network (Konicieczna, 2018). Seeking to deliver a message to the killers that you can kill the messenger but never the message, 36 reporters from 28 different media outlets gathered in Arizona to continue Bolles' work.

observes that both the ‘supply’ of investigative news from media organisations and the public’s ‘demand’ for such ‘accountability journalism’ increased. The recent rise of *global* investigative journalism started within the various crises suffered by the institutional press, one of which Reese (2021) describes as the decline in public trust in certain longstanding media organisations. In this book, we will concentrate upon this last phase (see also Konow-Lund et al., 2019) and the changes it has brought about.

### *Investigative Journalism, Western Bias and Research Questions*

In recent overviews of journalism studies, academics consistently point to the Western bias of the research (Paulussen, 2016; Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch, 2020a, b; Waisbord, 2000; Zelizer, 2013). Wahl-Jorgensen and Hanitzsch (2020a, b, p. 14) observe:

Most of the studies typically considered groundbreaking or field-defining have been authored by scholars from the West. The paucity of recognition of non-Western scholarship is also reflected in the way journalism scholars distribute scholarly prestige. Between 2011 and 2018, the Journalism Studies Division of the International Communication Association has given all of its 20 book, dissertation, and outstanding article awards to scholars from universities located in the West, with 11 of these going to researchers based or trained in the US.

This state of affairs, of course, recalls Chalaby’s (1996) insistence that journalism is an ‘Anglo-American invention’, especially in its presumed alignment with democratic values and the ‘fourth estate’. In the mid-1990s, James Carey (1996) was able to claim, ‘Journalism is another name for democracy or, better, you cannot have journalism without democracy’. Since then, such a position has been critiqued by many, including journalist-scholar Barbie Zelizer, who dryly notes that ‘democracy in journalism scholarship has over-extended its shelf life’ (2013, p. 1). She adds, ‘circumstances show that democracy has not been necessary for journalism, and the idea that democracy is the lifeline of journalism has not been supported on the ground’ (p. 7). According to Wahl-Jorgensen and Hanitzsch (2020a, b, p. 9), the association of journalism with democracy is principally a ‘Western imposition’ which ignores the fact that journalism in ‘many countries around the world [...] remains a central institution in the *absence* of democracy’. In terms of investigative journalism, it is

likewise the case that the mythos of the Watergate investigation and US muckraking tends to overshadow the many alternative types of journalism in places where democracy is absent. Nowadays, the Internet allows for transnational and cross-disciplinary collaboration around the globe, transcending local conditions of practice including the possibility of retribution meted out to the journalists themselves. The need to include more of the world's journalistic practices in any comprehensive understanding of contemporary investigative journalism has recently been addressed by Hugo de Burgh and colleagues (2021), and we echo their call here.

There are, of course, always exceptions to the traditional alignment between investigative journalism and the defence of democracy wherein local practices in the Global South, for example, must reckon with local media ecologies and their attendant limitations (Waisbord, 2000). Therefore, the relation between investigative journalism and democracy must be studied and situated within those local mediascapes and conditions (Bebawi, 2016). One emerging attempt to localise journalistic practice in the context of the Global South and 'decolonise data journalism' (European Journalism Centre, 2020) involves the work of Eva Constantaras and her team to train and support journalists in Kenya. Among other things, the team offered datasets and a 'data story recipe' (a step-by-step guide to exploring data and producing stories) to local reporters to help them thrive within their own local context. Constantaras highlights the questions her work addresses about local data journalism:

How do we make it more representative of communities; how do we make sure people from those communities can actually enter data journalism; and how do we make sure audiences actually read the data journalism that's been produced about them? (European Journalism Centre, 2020, 1:50)

As a result of this work, data journalism involving COVID-19 was published by local journalists in local languages for local Kenyan communities. We will look at other such projects in the Global South later in this book.

## PLAN OF THE BOOK

In *The Crisis of the Institutional Press*, Stephen Reese (2021, p. 175) calls for a better understanding of hybrid journalistic institutions:

The hybrid institution has taken on new forms beyond the traditional news organization, which has led me to rethink where the institution still lies in the myriad new networks and assemblages where journalism happens, and how it can be identified in the essential values that characterize this form of civic scepticism.

As outlined at the start of this chapter, this book is structured to discuss the growth of hybridity in investigative journalism through three different types of crises that trigger investigations: (1) organisational crises in the practice of journalism itself; (2) sudden crises or ‘critical events’; (3) and ‘global’ crises. Part 2 focuses on organisational crises, and Part 3 focuses on both sudden crises and global crises. The individual chapters within these parts consist of both theoretical and practical explorations featuring different structural and methodological approaches. This range represents a deliberate attempt to fashion a holistic scientific approach to understanding hybridity in investigative reporting practices.

Following the present chapter, which maps relevant literature and considers the state of investigative journalism during a time of great transformation, Part 2 presents three case studies where hybridity is being formed and negotiated within organisational structures. Chapter 2 introduces the various hybrid elements of investigative journalism and the types of crises which supplied our cases. Chapter 3 discusses Bristol Cable, which sought to fill the ‘black holes’ in local journalism left by the departure of certain media organisations via the direct involvement of community voices. Chapter 4 investigates Bureau Local, which developed various kinds of local collaborations spearheaded by the hybridised roles of new actors. Chapter 5 looks at the various hybrid initiatives adopted by the Korea Center for Investigative Journalism, including its international collaborations with global organisations such as the ICIJ. Chapter 6 presents further discussion of the cases and concludes Part 2.

Part 3 of the book includes three independently published articles engaging with the ways in which investigative journalism has been reconstructed in the context of a crisis such as the Charlie Hebdo 2015 terror attack in Paris, which resulted in the founding of the Forbidden Stories, or the COVID-prompted innovations in data-journalism practice at VG. In this part of the book, we explore what we call ‘hybrid elements’ in emerging organisations which are focused on investigative journalism and holding power to account. Chapter 7 looks at how investigative cross-border collaboration has grown in the digital era through the case study of

Forbidden Stories. Chapter 8 traces the implementation of a COVID-19 live tracker at VG and the innovative investigative reporting which accompanied it. Chapter 9 extends this discussion by looking into the respective impacts of COVID-19 on the practice of investigative journalism in Norway and China. Chapter 10 offers a concluding discussion addressing the different manifestations of hybridity we encountered in our studies of the practice of investigative journalism today. The book ends with a call to raise the awareness of both professionals and academics of the promise of hybridisation for the ongoing development of investigative journalism.

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PART II

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The Practice of a New Mindset



## Making Investigative Journalism in a Hybrid Manner

*Maria Konow-Lund and Michelle Park*

It is easy to forget that, historically, hybridity has always been a part of journalism (Hamilton, 2016). For example, ethnographer and sociologist Gaye Tuchman (1978) first engaged with the ‘hybrid’ context of the television newsroom in the 1970s, unpacking its use of sound, moving images, still images, and lighting in relation to the traditional newspaper newsroom, which she had studied for her 1969 dissertation research. That ten-year production study relied upon the direct observation of news workers, editors, and their workplaces and led her to the powerful conclusion that journalism was in fact socially constructed or ‘made’ (Tuchman, 1969). She would develop her thinking about the news across media in her book *Making news: A study of the construction of reality* in 1978. Her work

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remains a model of scholarly engagement with journalism and its various platforms and practices even today.

Such production studies typically looked upon the news media as a ‘social institution’ which enables citizens to acquire information *and* as ‘an ally of [other] institutions’ (Tuchman, 1978, p. 4) due to the ease with which these institutions and authorities could access newsrooms and act as sources for them (whereas regular citizens had a much harder time doing so). Nowadays, the link between the news media as a social institution and as an ally of other institutions has weakened. In a recent book on the ‘institutional press’, Reese (2021, p. vi) first laments the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic enfeebled civil social institutions in China (‘including journalism’) which help provide accountability with regard to the government. We might suggest, instead, that the institutional situation has taken a hybrid turn, in that journalism now incorporates new actors, units and organisational structures, and technology into its traditional investigative practices and methods. Hybridisation has been described as ‘a process of simultaneous integration and fragmentation’ (Chadwick, 2017, p. 18), and it has changed the media’s relationship to other institutions in society as well. Chadwick (2017) identifies a ‘hybrid media system’ which encompasses ‘all relevant media’, news as well as non-news, professional but also social, featuring practices beyond those typical of traditional media organisations. Reese (2021) likewise describes a ‘hybrid institution’ as the developer of diverse ways of producing news extending ‘beyond the news organization and newsroom, [and] based on news assemblages of professional, civic society, and technological elements’. While ‘first wave’ news ethnographers in the 1960s and 1970s argued that the news was not only constructed or ‘made’ but also negotiated with other institutions (Tuchman, 1978), we would reposition that negotiation today within the field itself. At present, investigative journalism combines the skillsets of developers, statisticians, activists and street reporters as they work together while integrating various new media platforms into their traditional ones (Chadwick, 2017). Since the days when television began encroaching upon the newspaper’s turf, such negotiation has taken place, but today it has become a question of survival as journalism faces greater and greater odds of authoritarian resistance. In what follows, we will draw upon hybrid-related practices in the media ecosystem to better understand changes in news workplaces in the digital era.

## HYBRID INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM DURING CRISES

Is journalism in crisis? Or should we align ourselves instead with those academics who prefer to think in terms of ‘transformations’ (Quandt & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2021) in journalistic practice? Breese (2012) points out that a ‘crisis’ is by definition an exceptional moment which demands a quick, even dire response:

‘Crisis’, like ‘revolution’, implies a break between past and present social conditions. During a crisis, the present is a time of upheaval, and the future is characterized by uncertainty, instability, danger and deterioration. (Breese, 2012, pp. 6–7)

While journalism has long faced such crises in terms of what it covers, it is less clear whether journalism is itself in a crisis. Nielsen (2016, p. 77), a director at Reuters Oxford, thinks so and discerns an economic crisis, a professional crisis, and a crisis of confidence within the field. Investigative journalism, an especially resource-demanding area, takes a particular toll on resources and perhaps feels these crises more than other areas.

With the rise of the Internet and advanced digital technologies, legacy media organisations such as newspapers, radio and television saw a decline in their advertising revenues as advertisers turned to new digital platforms such as Google, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. In response, those organisations instituted layoffs of both news reporters and investigative journalists. Over time, however, a hybrid type of organisation arose to fill these gaps, bringing with it opportunity in the field and profound changes to practice (Hamilton, 2016). Simultaneously, that is, we can find teams of professional reporters at the *Guardian*, the BBC or the *New York Times* working on traditional investigations as well as activists collaborating on open-source platforms like Bellingcat<sup>1</sup> toward the same ends. In this book, we argue that traditional investigative methodologies can persist alongside hybrid variations upon watchdog journalism, and Part 2 features three

<sup>1</sup> Bellingcat is a Netherlandish group of investigative reporters who are experts on checking facts and using open-source intelligence, or OSINT. Open-source intelligence refers to the way in which data is gathered as well as analysed from open sources with the aim of generating intelligence. Here, open-source means publicly accessible. Although Bellingcat is presently located in the Netherlands, it was originally created by British blogger Eliot Higgins in 2014. Higgins took a particular interest in investigating the weapons being used in the Syrian civil war at that time. See Müller and Wiik (2021) for more.

cases which reflect journalistic hybridity in their organisations and their practices. Other studies have already begun this inquiry into hybridity in journalism. Olsen (2020) looks at the ways in which journalism education can prepare future professionals for a hybridised field. Chadwick (2017, p. 4) even uses the term ‘hybrid media system’ to highlight how newer logics and practices can permeate older ones, and vice versa. Talk shows which incorporate public engagement, for example, demonstrate hybridity in their mingling of news and entertainment (p. 15).

The notion of the hybrid media system has become particularly pertinent in the wake of the Internet’s expansion of the temporal and spatial boundaries of journalism. Today’s media ecology has become much more complex, with diverse actors, aspects and circumstances now informing the work of otherwise ‘conventional’ journalism. Things are changing quickly there as well: the public’s participation in journalism via citizen journalism or User-Generated Content (UGC) was an extremely new logic in 2000 but has become very familiar in 2022. Instagram Live and YouTube streaming have supplanted television as the conventional media for consuming culture among young people. As the new becomes old, hybridity must evolve as well, supplying academics with a rich context for empirical studies of contemporary investigative journalism.

Vital to this process are those digital technologies which have ‘powered social and organizational networks in ways that allowed their endless expansion and reconfiguration’ (Castells, 2010, p. xviii). Castells’ focus on the digitally networked society emphasises the connectivity which is now inherent to journalistic practice, driving hybridised collaboration via advanced technological infrastructures such as big data and computational skillsets; interdisciplinary engagements among journalists, computer programmers, students and academics; and financial support for projects via public donation. Digitised networking has opened up a virtual space for reporters to share but also profoundly accelerated the rate of information flow and expanded its reach. This has been a boon to the work of journalism but an occasional bane to society, as fake news—including misconceptions but also disinformation, misinformation and lies—has travelled just as quickly as real news. To tackle these kinds of societal challenges, watchdog journalism must be more exacting and effective than ever.

To engage with this industry turbulence, we draw upon several theoretical approaches derived from the ways in which journalism has transformed and adjusted to the new media ecology (Anderson, 2016); investigative journalists have networked in the public sphere (Reese,

2021); and news organisations have increasingly engaged in collaboration (Anderson et al., 2014). Our news production studies frame our empirical data in relation to organisations, technology and roles and responsibilities to ask, in the end, how journalistic hybridity is being *negotiated* in the unprecedented political, economic and technological conditions of the twenty-first century. In particular, we rely upon a theoretical framework of journalism-as-institution and journalism-as-work (Örnebring, 2009, 2016).

While journalism scholars have conducted plenty of news production studies over the past 70 years (Westlund & Ekström, 2020, p. 75), studies focusing on the emergence of hybridity in investigative journalism remain scarce. Yet, they are more important than ever, due to the faltering business models of legacy media organisations and the many changes in professionalism within journalism, to say nothing of journalism's restructured relationship with its audiences (Nielsen, 2016). Despite well-documented legacy media struggles, we do not align with those academics who believe that traditional media is on its deathbed (Bromley, 1997; Ryfe, 2012). This oversimplified view fails to account for hybridity as the linchpin to investigative journalism in the twenty-first century and a supplier of win-win opportunities for both traditional and new media participants (Olsen, 2020).

The empirical cases we chose for this study are all emerging situations which capture the processes of negotiation underpinning hybridity and what we think of as 'investigative-journalism-as-work'. In each, various hybrid elements are being implemented and organised. They are Bristol Cable, the Korea Center for Investigative Journalism (KCIJ), and the Bureau Local in the Bureau of Investigative Journalism (a smaller unit within a larger organisation).

## TOWARD THE HYBRID ELEMENTS OF INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM

To understand how hybrid investigative journalism is negotiated and organised, we draw upon the aforementioned analytical framework of 'journalism-as-institution' and 'journalism-as-work' (Örnebring, 2016). Örnebring describes the former as 'the *shared norms and routines* of news production as created and maintained by *a set of organizations*' and the latter as '*the everyday practical activities undertaken by individuals who*

*produce journalistic content*' (2016, p. 15). While journalism-as-institution encompasses management concerns such as economy, standardisation, predictability and infrastructure, journalism-as-work encompasses the reporter's need for peer recognition and effective practices and routines which help gain and maintain status in the field. This framework draws upon sociologist Julia Evetts' (2003, 2006) model of a dual discourse of professionalism, which distinguishes between organisational and occupational professionalism. The former is 'a discourse of control used increasingly by managers in work organizations. It incorporates rational-legal forms of decision-making, hierarchical structures of authority, the standardization of work practices, accountability, target-setting and performance review' (Evetts, 2006, pp. 140–141). In journalism, this discourse would encompass formalised aspects of organisations such as editorial decision-making process, top-down bureaucratic systems, and the managerial level of the staff.

Occupational professionalism, on the other hand, is a discourse constructed within professional groups themselves that involves discretionary decision-making in complex cases, collegial authority, [and] the occupational control of the work and [it] is based on trust in the practitioner by both clients and employers. It is operationalized and controlled by practitioners themselves and is based on shared education and training, a strong socialization process, work culture and occupational identity, and codes of ethics that are monitored and operationalized by professional institutes and associations. (Evetts, 2006, p. 141)

In journalism, it would encompass journalistic practices, and especially those developed in a bottom-up manner among the journalists themselves (including various conventions, roles, norms and values of practice, and editorial codes of conduct).

Evetts frames these professionalisms as oppositional, but Örnebring (2009) emphasises that antagonism between management and practitioner is avoidable because they share important interests. For example, both want their reported content to reach as many consumers as possible for the benefit of the organisation (in the form of profits or the fulfilment of a public interest mandate) and the journalists responsible for it (in the form of success in the field and in their careers). How, though, do these respective profiles combine for success?



As uncovered by the news production studies of the 1970s and 1980s, journalism-as-institution appears to gravitate toward standardised procedures and practices—that is, ways to control and organise the work among organisations regardless of nation or culture. Waisbord (2013, pp. 1–2) notes that reporters with different backgrounds often share their values and norms:

I worked in international aid during a five-year ‘sabbatical’ from academia. As part of my responsibilities, I designed and participated in programs with journalists from Africa, Asia and Latin America. [...] News values, routines, complaints were no different than those common in the West yet production styles, ethics, working conditions, and visions of journalism were entirely different.

Here, then, we see the outcome of the combination of organisational and occupational professionalism: shared ideals, and even shared routines, despite very different professional and cultural contexts. Both profiles must be accounted for in an academic analysis.

Waisbord (2013, p. 10) notes that this engagement between the two profiles evokes the larger engagement of institutions with each other in society, describing professionalism in general as ‘the ability of a field of practice to settle boundaries and avoid intrusion from external actors. Professions do not exist in isolation; they are permanently engaged in relations with other social fields’. He finds this interaction across fields to be particularly important to journalism, and we would add that this is even more true of investigative journalism and its unique shared ‘mindset’.

For our analyses, we developed a simple model of the relations among determinants of journalistic hybridity. The determinants are the role of the organisation in which the journalistic practices are embedded; the role of (changing) technology in daily journalistic activities; and the professional duty of journalists regarding the Fourth Estate’s function in society. We will elaborate upon each aspect of the model in the following sections.

### *The Role of Organisation*

The production of investigative journalism is organised and regulated in various ways across one-off projects, the ongoing work of an in-house investigative unit and the larger priorities and structures of the organisation itself. Within our overarching framework of journalism-as-institution

and journalism-as-work, we take a special interest in whether power tends to move in a hierarchical (up and down) or a horizontal (side to side) manner, and how this flow comes about. In this context, a horizontal way of working means that journalistic practices, routines and decision-making processes are determined by news workers rather than management, and they manifest as their shared norms and values. In a comparative study of newsroom practices in Europe, Örnebring (2016) finds that, as discourses, both journalism-as-institution and journalism-as-work inform practice positively and negatively. While management-driven news work might lead to ‘workplace transparency and fairness, make professionals more accountable to the public, [and] act as a check on group-type workplace behaviour’, for example, it might also lead to ‘labour, increasing workplace surveillance, and edging out public favours’ in the name of profit (p. 21). He also argues that while these two discourses compete at the institutional level, they must be empirically understood and assessed at the workplace level. Nevertheless, given their persistent lack of resources, investigative organisations, networks and teams must pool their people skills, technology and collaborators. This blurs the distinction between organisational and occupational discourses, as Hamilton (2016) points out. While news production studies have long focused on the organisational and political aspects of news work (e.g., Epstein, 1973; Gans, 1980; Gitlin, 1980; Schlesinger, 1978), there has been less focus on its technological dimensions. Boczkowski (2004) looks at innovation in journalism through the lens of interactivity and multimedia and introduces an analytical framework for analysing the adaptation of technology in a given field using organisational structures, work practices and the representation of users. Drawing upon these research findings and others, we will argue that emergent technological (and professional) environments are always shaped via a host of dynamics, mechanisms and negotiations, as our cases will show.

### *The Role of Technology*

Journalism is perpetually changing, but the speed of change has been accelerated by an explosion of technological advances in recent decades. Technology is often at the core of professional discussions about the future of journalism, and some academic studies have confirmed that journalists tend to be relatively deterministic in their position. Örnebring (2010, pp. 57–58), for example, wonders: ‘Why is technological determinism so popular among journalists?’ The rapid rise of online journalism and the

Internet's inherent interconnectedness have brought great opportunity to reporters locally, nationally and internationally, and academic studies have tracked the subsequent upheaval in their work practices (Aviles et al., 2004; Boczkowski, 2001, 2005; Deuze & Paulussen, 2002; Duhe et al., 2004). Örnebring (2010) also notes that technology is clearly a source of tension between journalism-as-institution and journalism-as-work. For example, Hardt (1990) observes that technology is a tool with which managers can both discipline and control their workforces (see also Cottle & Ashton, 1999; Marjoribanks, 2000a, b). In traditional media organisations, in particular, organisational professionalism can have an outsized role in the implementation and negotiation of new technology in the workplace.

Nevertheless, the arrival of the Internet and networked society in general have had profound consequences for occupational professionalism as well, especially in terms of its relation to the organisational hierarchy. Writing about networked journalism, Heinrich (2011, p. 67) points out that the Internet and other digital technologies have 'shaken up' journalism's traditional top-down gatekeeping functions and made content more generally accessible. Heinrich also observes that if the legacy media had taken an interest in the Internet from the beginning, it would have had a greater impact upon how the news is shaped today (Heinrich, 2012). Studies such as these clearly indicate that the relationship between journalistic professionalism and technology continues to evolve. One important example of technology's impact on the field is the work of the International Consortium for Investigative Journalism (ICIJ), an American nonprofit organisation with the resources to undertake massive projects such as the Panama Papers (Baack, 2016), which encompassed the development of software that collaborators around the world can readily use to search and study such large data dumps (Sambrook, 2018).

Even in the digital age, that is, some actors have far more resources and power than others, but collaborations across all levels and types of organisations allow for the unprecedented pooling of these resources in the interests of holding power to account (Alfter, 2019).

### *Practices and Routines in Emerging Organisations*

Previous research on journalism has stressed the importance of an improved understanding of how practices and routines arise in the first place, and how they are adapted to change (Ryfe, 2011, p. 165). Journalism

is primarily developed and shared through its practice rather than its ideologies, norms and values (Ryfe 2017), and ‘researchers know very little about how some journalists are processing [...] changes and how little journalists understand the changes that routines and practices undergo’ (Ryfe, 2011, p. 165). Routines—or ‘patterned, routinized, repeated practices and forms that media workers use to do their jobs’ (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996, p. 100)—can also be used to justify actions. Recently, scholars have tried to develop a more in-depth understanding of routines (Westlund & Ekström, 2019). By conducting field observation and semi-structured interviews at our three cases, we sought a better understanding of change in routines, work practices and the organisation of work as well.

### INTRODUCTION OF CASE STUDIES AND A BRIEF NOTE ON THE RESEARCH

Our three cases—Bristol Cable and the Bureau Local in the United Kingdom and the Korea Center for Investigative Journalism (KCIJ) in South Korea—encompass different types of hybridity in their production work while sharing a general interest in the possibilities therein. They also cast their journalistic net very widely, addressing local, national and international issues in their attempts to hold power to account.

Bristol Cable, based in Bristol in the United Kingdom, was founded by three university graduates and amateur journalists using a co-op model which encouraged participants to share in the work. The Bureau Local, a unit of the Bureau of Investigative Journalism in London, was established as a British outpost of the ICIJ, the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, to promote local journalism through a public collaboration network which was opened to local journalists, data scientists, programmers, academics, students and others. The KCIJ, located in Seoul, reflects multiple layers of hybridity in that it is financially supported by bottom-up, community-centred public memberships and cultivates cross-border collaboration with partners around the world.

These three cases are interesting in and of themselves but also linked within a national and even global media ecology (Anderson, 2016) fundamentally underpinned by networked journalism (Reese, 2021). Some have collaborated with one another and pooled resources (Bristol Cable and the Bureau Local). They have also shared staff and sent representatives to the same conferences, such as the Global Investigative Journalism Network

conference. Bristol Cable and the Bureau Local are also partly financed by the same foundations.

We collaborated on the discussion which follows in Part 2 of this book after individually conducting ethnographic research at the following organisations: Maria Konow-Lund at Bristol Cable and the Bureau Local, and Michelle Park at the Bureau Local and the KCIJ. We generated our data after accessing the organisations for weeks to conduct field observation, field interviews and semi-structured qualitative interviews between 2017 and 2019.<sup>2</sup>

As background to this work, Maria Konow-Lund spent several years doing research on investigative journalism in the UK, building contacts and connections (2014–2016). In 2017, she received a prestigious EU-funded Marie Curie Skłodowska fellowship to the UK for two full years. The UK cases selected for this book emerged from Konow-Lund’s UK research and board participation with the Investigative Journalists of Norway for five years (2003–2008) and also the Global Investigative Journalist Conference at Lillehammer in 2008.

Michelle Park has studied investigative journalism in the UK and South Korea since she started research for her master’s degree in 2013 (Park, 2014), which became the pilot research for her doctoral thesis (Park, 2022) at Cardiff University, UK. Her particular focus was on rejuvenating investigative journalism at emergent media organisations with nonprofit funding models, and this drew her to the foundation-funding model of the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, within which the Bureau Local is located, as well as the membership-funding model of the KCIJ. Although Park did not have a network in the journalism sector of both countries, she persevered and eventually obtained permission to conduct her newsroom fieldwork in 2018.

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<sup>2</sup>For details on the approach to all three cases, see the methodological appendix.

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## Bristol Cable: A Local Hybrid Organisation

*Maria Konow-Lund*

*I'm not interested in writing for the sake of writing; I'm interested in writing for the sake of trying to hold power to account.*  
—Informant, Bristol Cable, 2018

Investigative journalism has long been described as ‘in decline’ thanks to aspects such as layoffs and faltering business models (Carson, 2020; Konieczna, 2018), and local journalism has faced similar financial difficulties as well as downsizing in its newsrooms (Franklin, 2013; Williams et al., 2015).<sup>1</sup> The consequences for journalistic practice of the media industry’s prioritising of economic efficiency have been obvious as well—for one thing, individual reporters’ workloads have increased significantly, with a corresponding decline in the quality of the news. The watchdog

<sup>1</sup> Parts of this chapter were first published in the *Journal of Media Innovation*: see Konow-Lund (2020) and in Konow-Lund (2019). Parts of this chapter has in addition been published in the *Journal of Media Innovations*: See Konow-Lund (2020).

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function of local newsrooms—that is, their ‘democracy-enabling role’ of holding the powerful to account (Williams et al., 2015, p. 204)—has been undermined as well. The present study addresses the fact that, despite the persistence of what Rachel Howells (2015) calls ‘black holes’ in local news coverage, some of the most interesting entrepreneurial actors in UK investigative journalism have chosen the local market in which to establish themselves, including the two cases discussed below, Bristol Cable and the Bureau Local (our next chapter). Although we would argue that such recent start-ups remain under-investigated, some studies do exist (Konow-Lund, 2019, 2020, Birnbauer, 2019; Colbran, 2022; Konieczna, 2018; Price, 2017). Colbran, for example, focuses on ‘how the non-profits are challenging journalistic “norms” and expanding the Fourth Estate role of the investigative journalist’ (Colbran, 2022, p. 115). Here, we are interested in how these actors respond to their local contexts and construct their production practices in hybrid and innovative ways in relation to organisational structure as well as technology. Hybridisation is here understood as the blending of traditional practices with new methods within journalism, or, as Chadwick writes, what happens when ‘older and newer media logics in the field of media and politics blend, overlap, intermesh, and coevolve’ (2013, p. 4).

The empirical data for the first case combines semi-structured qualitative interviews with notes from field observation on location at Bristol Cable, and the analysis refers to both in turn.

### HYBRID INVESTIGATIVE INNOVATORS

The Bristol Cable actors distinguished themselves by taking a particular interest in the endemic news gap at the community or local level and seeking to raise citizen awareness and interest in participation through proactive journalistic events. While the production of investigative journalism is as costly and time consuming as ever, its impact on society in the long run makes it worth the effort (Hamilton, 2016). When they founded Bristol Cable in Bristol in 2014, the three recent college graduates embarked on a meticulous research process, meeting with hundreds of citizens as well as community groups. They asked people in detail about their expectations and needs regarding a local news organisation (informant, Bristol Cable, November 2017) and how it might best speak for them. Underpinning this work was the founders’ initial conviction that a local news

organisation should engage the public and offer people the ability to participate in strategic decisions. The recent graduates and some friends decided to empower new professionals to operate the organisation on a daily basis, and its start-up period in 2014 was filled with public journalism training sessions for the staff involving professional journalists from other news organisations who offered their help with pursuits including photography, feature writing and interactive media. These professionals included John Henley from the *Guardian* and other veteran reporters, and the over 300 regular citizens who benefited from their perspective went on to form the working groups which produced the content for the first edition of the Bristol Cable. By drawing upon the legacy media and traditional investigative journalism to teach citizens how to be involved in production, Bristol Cable not only paved the way for the co-op but also introduced a new form of journalism into the local context. In these early days, everyone at the start-up saw local journalism as a vehicle of community empowerment rather than a profession or craft as such. This emphasis, however, would change as the organisation's founders and new staff members came to appreciate and respect journalism in and of itself (informant, Bristol Cable, 2018). These actors gained this respect through attending conferences and seminars and consulting with investigative journalists who volunteered to share their professional knowledge.

From 2014 onward, the organisation produced a quarterly print publication and continuously updated its website with new content. Among other things, it has covered such stories as the investment portfolio of Bristol University (<https://thebristolcable.org/2015/06/exclusive-interactive-bristol-unis-not-so-ethical-investments/>) and the property market in Bristol (<https://thebristolcable.org/2015/04/housing-problems-unviable-solutions/>). Both the website and the quarterly newspaper offered a mix of in-depth investigative stories and regular news bulletins concerning activities in the community.

Bristol Cable's business model involved attracting members of the Bristol public to the organisation for a fee of three pounds per week. The organisation was, in effect, a co-op owned by its community members, and in a few years the three founders applied for a small grant from Co-ops UK, a federation of UK cooperatives, for about three thousand pounds (informant, Bristol Cable, 26 January 2018). The grant was intended to stimulate and initiate the creation of media cooperatives, and Bristol Cable was awarded a runner-up prize of fifteen hundred pounds, which allowed its work to really get underway, as we will see in what follows.

## ORGANISATION OF PRODUCTION AT A CO-OP

It has elsewhere been argued that emerging actors within investigative journalism do not need to have a background in traditional journalism school or years of experience with legacy media organisations (Aviram, 2020), and the genesis of the Bristol Cable co-op supports this observation. During field observation in 2017 and 2018, the actors' investment in the Bristol Cable organisation was clear. One reason for establishing the co-op in the first place was that so many media outlets in Britain were owned by so few big companies, and journalistic independence was therefore in short supply. Another reason was that a hierarchical editorial chain of command excluded or limited opinions, engagement and involvement. One of the founders noted that he met his cofounders during their first year at university in their classes in international relations. During that time, they were also involved in various campaigns 'ranging from Palestine solidarity groups to anti-cuts movements as well, on campus and nationally, which saw us do a lot of activism' (founder, Bristol Cable, November 2017). Their growing friendship was propelled by their shared political interests and inclination toward engagement and entrepreneurship:

We became good friends like that and then interacted on a friendly basis as well as on a political level. These two aspects were always enmeshed. In our relationship, our political positions led us to be close, with life experience at university, as well as engaging intellectually as part of the formal curriculum and through the activism that we were doing. There was that side but there was also a friendly side. We liked to party together. (Founder, Bristol Cable, 22 December 2017)

The idea for a local journalism co-op emerged from their political convictions concerning holding power to account but also their interest in escaping their university bubble and testing out all their theories in practice. One of the founders recalled:

So, there was always that element of, okay, we can be full of ideas and theories that we've read in books. We can really engage with that and speak in an academic way and be eloquent in that way. But we didn't really connect with the lives of people who are kind of struggling on a day-to-day necessarily, or at least felt like we needed to create more connection. (Founder, Bristol Cable, 22 December 2017)

According to this informant, they all saw media as having a vital role to play in society, in terms of enabling citizens to engage at their journalistic level and try to understand the problems with how society operates:

Media and journalism in particular came to light as being one of the key cornerstones for engagement with society at large. As a kind of conduit for effecting social change. So, from that level of understanding, it was like, okay, let's try and do something that is media related, looking into what was going on in this sector. (Founder, Bristol Cable, 22 December 2017)

Two of the founders also specifically mentioned that the local media in the Bristol area was suffering from the recession at the time:

Local media was under strain, and there were a lot of closures of publications. So, the idea of rooting a media outlet that could scrutinise what was going on at a local level was hugely important. Because it is one thing to think about change on an international scale within and across societies, but it's important to understand where the locus of power and change really can come from and how to inspire people organising for that. That's where the local focus really came forward. So, rather than a critique of the mainstream media, it was about really understanding how we can leverage media and journalism to effect change in our immediate surroundings, hence a local media focus. (Founder, Bristol Cable, 22 December 2017)

It would appear that the practice of investigative journalism affords hybridity in its ready combination of traditional forms with new practices. As suggested in the quote above, it also readily shifts between an international perspective and a local one. Tax havens, trafficking, drug, organised crime, environmental crimes and corruption all have international, national and local implications.

It soon became clear to each of the founders that the *organisation* of their Bristol Cable co-op would be critical to its success. In this case, 'organisation' meant instigating and coordinating horizontal communication across collaborators who were all considered equal, from the founders to the staff and members. Furthermore, such a flat structure asked all staff to be equally responsible for the work of production and the product itself—work that included being very proactive with the community and trying to involve citizens at every turn through public events, knocking on doors and asking questions, and soliciting ideas.

In order to convey the scope of these activities on a daily basis, I will rely upon field notes taken during my participation in some of this outreach, starting with my first meeting at the co-op:

When I first arrived at Bristol Cable in 2017, I was greeted by one of the founders outside a graffiti-covered blue building. I had been looking for the name Bristol Cable on the door, to no avail, when the Bristol Cable reporter appeared out of nowhere. I had met him before, in Oslo, when, at my invitation, he had presented with one of the other founders at a conference. We took a walk through a neighbourhood filled with graffiti art, and the reporter from Bristol Cable seemed to know everyone as we travelled along the narrow streets and old houses. At one point, the reporter started talking about the gentrification that might accompany the rumoured development of a highspeed train between London and Temple Meads, Bristol. Such a train would open up Bristol to Londoners who were tired of the expense and hassle of the big city. (Edited field notes, fall 2017)

Also, during my field observation (13 November 2017), informants explained to me that they were going to arrange an event at Knowles Media Center in West Knowles, Filwood, a depressed area of Bristol. Instead of contenting themselves with some idealised notion of who their readers might be, they planned to meet with them directly, starting by going door-to-door and talking to people about their concerns and the goals of the Bristol Cable co-op. At the same time, they would invite these people to the event.

A few days later, I found myself sitting in a cab with three of my Bristol Cable informants,<sup>2</sup> talking about the importance of reaching out to people in depressed areas: ‘I was here doing door-knocking on Sunday’, one of them said, ‘but it was not the best time’. ‘How so?’ asked one of the others in the cab. ‘It was Sunday at 4 pm, and people were not happy when I showed up’. The founders all praised the work of this young informant, who ‘singlehandedly changed the organisation’ through the work she was doing (edited field notes, November 2017). These observations demonstrate both Bristol Cable’s ambitions for citizen engagement and the difficulty and hardship of actually doing so. In areas where people do physical work and sometimes work nightshifts, weekends are not necessarily the

<sup>2</sup>I paid for the cab trip; if I had not been there in my capacity as a researcher, the staff would have taken the bus or cycled.

best time to engage. Conducting such work at location required a lot of effort for the staff at Bristol Cable.

Of course, resources were also an issue for Bristol Cable and its staff. Staff members barely survived on the small salary and, particularly at the beginning, some needed to take on extra work as waiters or caterers. (Founder, Bristol Cable, 22 December 2017)

The vision of a truly horizontal organisation—and one that offered many outreach events—came with a cost. It demanded both resourcefulness and independence, particularly when one was faced with relatively unsympathetic audiences, as I noted at the time:

As I joined one of the door knockers in Filwood, I carried as many copies of the Bristol Cable quarterly as I could. The streets were narrow, and some buildings appeared abandoned. Finally, we got to a house where someone opened the door – a man half asleep in pyjamas who said he only read the *Sun*.<sup>3</sup> When we asked what newspaper he would read if not for the *Sun*, he said the *Daily Mail*.<sup>4</sup> The man then slammed the door in our faces. A bit further down the street, a young woman answered the door with her mother behind her, watching attentively. As we spoke, the young woman's eyes brightened at certain words and concepts such as 'free', 'community journalism' and 'what people care about – how to shed light on what really matters to people'. A few houses down, another door opened for us [...] a tanned, middle-aged man with tattoos on his muscular arms, which were due to very hard work, he explained a little later: 'I start at 3 in the morning that day and get home at 4 in the afternoon'. 'So, you are probably wasted', the reporter replied. He did not answer but his facial expression said yes. Then he attacked the Bristol Cable reporter for what the 'media is doing'. 'Look at this', he said, 'it is all political'. 'Not this newspaper', the reporter replied. 'All the others are. They are exaggerating and creating angles, but we are not'. (Edited fieldnotes, November 2017)

<sup>3</sup>The *Sun* is a British tabloid newspaper, founded in 1964. It is published by the News Group Newspapers division of News UK. The latter is owned by Rupert Murdoch's News Corp.

<sup>4</sup>The *Daily Mail* is a British daily tabloid newspaper, founded in 1896. It is the highest-circulated daily newspaper. In 2017, the *Guardian* wrote that Wikipedia banned the newspaper as an 'unreliable source' (Jackson, 2017) (<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/feb/08/wikipedia-bans-daily-mail-as-unreliable-source-for-website>).

These situations indicate how vulnerable the Bristol Cable people were as they went about on their own to promote their work. Not all of the interactions were bad, of course. One woman chose to recall issues during Brexit and the media coverage which accompanied them:

During Brexit, the woman said, the media had this huge focus on immigration. However, she added, ‘I have a number of topics I can think about which I wanted the media to cover, but it never happened. It was always about immigration, again and again’. The reporter listened to this woman and thanked her for her perspectives on news and told her that Bristol Cable was a newspaper co-op owned by the community. ‘We are going to arrange a meeting on Monday, November 13’, the journalist added. ‘It would be great if you could come. We want to write about what the community cares about’. She promised to have a look at the newspaper and maybe even consider attending the meeting. (Edited fieldnotes, November 2017)

This exchange demonstrates how the actors at Bristol Cable combined an activist approach with their journalistic ideals. According to my informants, they always listened to the personal experiences and stories of the community members with whom they met.

### THE HYBRID WAY OF HOLDING LOCAL POWER TO ACCOUNT

As mentioned, events with the aim of motivating and involving citizens had been important to Bristol Cable since its establishment. Door-knocking was the first part of Bristol Cable’s outreach activities, and the events themselves were the second part. On the day of the event, I took a cab with Bristol Cable staff to the community house where the event would take place. Below is a description of what followed:

The coordinators on the staff had brought cameras and equipment in order to share the event online. The Bristol Cable community organiser informed everyone about the co-op’s recent work, then asked everyone to turn to the person sitting next to them and introduce themselves. After the room had buzzed with conversation for a while, the organiser asked everyone to participate in a brainstorm to generate ideas for forthcoming stories. (Edited fieldnotes, November 2017)



While traditional investigative journalism relies on a systematic approach to sources (Alfter, 2019; Leigh, 2019), Bristol Cable actively looked to citizens not only as sources but as contributors.

At a particular event, for example, a journalist talked about his work on prisons and how prisoners used drugs. Then two adult parents raised their hands to talk about drugs and prisons. They mentioned that they did have experience with the topic but never went into detail. The journalist and the other Bristol Cable staff members listened. Then a conversation followed on variations of the same topic. Others also raised their hands, and it became clear that what happens in a traditional newsroom among professionals was also taking place here with citizens who had the power to suggest ideas for upcoming stories. (Edited fieldnotes, November 2017)

One of the goals of the whole Bristol Cable initiative was to demonstrate that holding power to account does not require a hierarchical journalistic organisational structure; instead, shared values and goals alone might sustain an organisation which was capable of accommodating the input of the people themselves in the work to be done. In keeping with this approach, everyone who was involved in the organisation received the same compensation, which at the beginning was the minimum wage. One informant therefore lamented, ‘I’m not earning enough money to live off the Cable. It costs me to work for the Cable, in some ways, not even thinking about lost potential earnings’ (informant, Bristol Cable, 21 December 2017).<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup>This informant circled back to this comment in 2019: ‘We’re now paid enough to get by, though the salary is far from competitive, and love of the mission and work is the main motivator. But getting paid has been vital both for valuing our work and for allowing us to give time to the Cable rather than needing to work another job or draw on savings. As we grow older, with years of experience behind us and some [of us] anticipating having children, we will need to further increase our salaries to remain sustainable or lose the staff who can’t afford to stay on a minimum wage’ (informant, Bristol Cable, 7 August 2019). When looking at this quote again in 2023 for this book, the informant noted that the policy regarding salaries had changed since 2019: ‘Salaries at the Cable have gradually increased every year, though remain low compared to salaries that staff could be paid elsewhere. To address needs for recognition, retention, diversity and recruitment, the Cable team co-designed a new pay structure which aimed to be transparent, objective, and equitable in how salaries are decided, moving away from a flat pay structure. The maximum salary, £27,000, is 20 percent higher than the lowest salary. Being able to pay staff and raise salaries has been essential to retaining essential staff for longer. However, especially for key roles and staff members with skills and experience which are very difficult to replace, the salaries are not very competitive compared to comparable roles elsewhere, which contributes to challenges in retaining staff’.

Early on, in fact, everyone had to find additional ways to support themselves—two of the founders worked in the catering business, and other staff members lived on their savings (informant, Bristol Cable, 21 December 2018).

Position titles were deliberately chosen to avoid hierarchical implications, though the journalistic work had certain inherent demands regarding organisational structure (Tuchman, 1978), meaning that even when everyone in the room was called a media coordinator, they were doing different things. My fieldwork at Bristol Cable also uncovered other fractures in the ideal of the flat organisational structure, as a positional hierarchy had begun to emerge simply to enable the allocation of tasks to avoid redundancy and maximise efficiency. One of the main issues faced by staff at Bristol Cable was how to live up to their various norms and ideals. Initially, they aimed for a horizontal and inclusive organisation. Then, over time, they realized that actual journalistic work required management and leadership in terms of who was doing what (edited fieldnotes, November 2017). Several years after Bristol Cable's 2014 founding, staff confronted the need to negotiate the discourses of organisational professionalism and occupational professionalism during the fall of 2017 through workshops involving core actors. As one informant explained, the co-op ultimately had to differentiate the managers from the managed. Because they all wanted a very horizontal organisation, however, some individuals found it 'insulting' to report on their writing to a media coordinator or someone otherwise defined as a 'boss'.

My informants were at this time actively seeking to restructure the co-op based on this positional evolution, using daylong meetings to work toward a shared set of values, norms and practices to inform the organisation. These meetings were meant to coordinate communication and articulate shared goals in order to develop routines, practices and roles which would mitigate potential tension and conflict. During these meetings, there was always a demonstration of mutual respect, but there were also honest discussions about how to remain 'horizontal' while actually doing the work in a directed fashion. One informant pointed to the need to juggle a variety of roles, which was both challenging and constructive:

I'm a sub-editor and a co-editor and a commissioning editor and a journalist and a sort of production manager, like, just having all the different things [...] It's very challenging. I wish I had more time to do bigger pieces of journalism, but it makes for an interesting job. If I were in mainstream media as a journalist, I wouldn't have the choice about what I went and

covered and investigated and stuff, so that's a massive plus. Having the freedom to choose what you do and how you do it is different. And not just being told what to do, having a say in what we do, and how, is totally different from any mainstream media. (Informant, Bristol Cable, 26 January 2018)

Various interviews with Bristol Cable actors, as well as my 2017 fieldwork, revealed contradictions and tensions when it came to who should do what at the co-op. One reason for this might be that most of my informants at Bristol Cable had started there with little journalistic experience. The informant above refers disparagingly to mainstream journalism but in fact knew very little about it; one of the founders admitted that they themselves had very little professional experience in journalism and no idea how traditional newsrooms operated as such (founder, Bristol Cable, 2017). Interestingly, while the Bristol Cable actors were well aware of their lack of experience with actual investigative journalism, they did not shy away from taking on the challenges. In place of experience, they pursued experimentation:

There wasn't anything really to compare this model to. So, it was very much done on an experimental level but with a sensitivity to what felt right, in terms of being able to deliver the idea that we had for the project [...] Organisational development is obviously a key focus: how do we manage the organisation, how do we register an organisation and turn it into a proper company, which we had to do? All of that, from the administrative, bureaucratic aspects of the work to the front end, the public-facing output, which is the journalism [...] We delved into all that as co-founders. We had our fingers in all the pies, so to speak, learning to manage things as we went along. We were just day-by-day taking it a step at a time, just outlining what needed to be done for us to be able to deliver on the vision we had in mind, for what this organisation should achieve, to comply legally and all that. Yes, we did a lot of stuff. (Informant, Bristol Cable, 22 December 2017)

Instead of seeking funding and assembling a team of professionals with journalistic experience, the founders and early staffers worked on what they *believed* to be journalistic practice. Ideas were bounced around collectively, and the team asked itself a lot of questions:

We had these editorial meetings where we reviewed story ideas. It was very much like, this looks like an interesting angle, let's do some more research. And then we were involved in the editorial process, did the initial research and reporting. When looking at data-driven stories, it was about pulling the data and then trying to make sense of the numbers. Then we were involved

also in the narrative storytelling around what the data showed. But, yes, we were very much operating across the board. (Informant, Bristol Cable, 22 December 2017)

In lieu of actual experience, my informants told me that they were learning by doing, and some of them were also picking up ideas and suggestions at journalism conferences or from local professional journalists (edited field-notes, November 2017). The process was every bit as important as the product, they emphasised.

Through their practice, Bristol Cable demonstrates the inherently hybridising potential of covering local topics with global resonance and vice versa, including offshore companies and tax havens, local police using mass surveillance, local companies with links to arms deals, poor working conditions, racial bias in immigration enforcement, and so on. Actors at Bristol Cable brought global issues to local people and local problems to a global audience, all with the investment of the public itself:

- They organised ten weeks of practical media training so that citizens could be involved in production.
- Citizens were co-owners of the co-op by paying a membership fee of one pound per month (later increased to three pounds).
- Citizens were actively involved in events and programs together with the coordinators at Bristol Cable.
- Citizens sat on the Bristol Cable board.
- By participating in meetings and events, citizens could inform the co-op's choice of topics to cover.
- Bristol Cable chose a proactive manner of engaging citizens by hosting public events and knocking on doors.
- The staff at Bristol Cable, in turn, took on a variety of editorial roles to turn the people's ideas into stories.

In these ways, the audience for the news co-produces the news organisation it wants.

### THE RISE OF A COLLABORATIVE ECOLOGY

As the informants put it during field observation, the Bristol Cable organisation was inspired not so much by the media as by politics. Initially, the three founders were frustrated by the concentration of power and wealth

in society, and by the way in which ‘exploitative employers and politicians could get away scot-free without much scrutiny’ (edited fieldnotes, November 2017). The three friends had worked in the catering and service sectors and had continuously witnessed how inequitable organisations could be ‘in terms of decision-making power, in terms of wealth distribution and everything else’ (edited fieldnotes, November 2017). Bristol Cable was intended to represent an alternative to this model based on democratic ideals and new and different types of collaboration—with outside professional journalists, among co-op members, with the public and with other media organisations such as the Bureau Local and the *Guardian*.

The journalism produced by Bristol Cable was intended to make an impact not only at the local level but also at the national and even international levels, taking inspiration less from other local news organisations with scarce resources than from innovative international peers such as the *New York Times*, Vice, De Correspondent, ProPublica and the Bureau of Investigative Journalism. During my fieldwork, it became clear that Bristol Cable staff members would carefully examine this quality journalism to ‘strip it back and turn it into our purposes, whether that’s through video work or through podcasts or getting ideas for investigations that we should be doing here’ (edited fieldnotes, November 2017). Some of the founders and staff members had backgrounds in international relations and saw clear connections among these levels of impact and among organisations dedicated to investigative journalism. One informant applauded the generally collaborative atmosphere and ‘cooperative movement’, wherein it was possible to ‘work towards mutual aims without undermining one’s own objectives’ (edited fieldnotes, November 2017).

The work of the organisation behind the 2016 Panama Papers investigation, the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, was acknowledged as a model here, and the Bureau of Investigative Journalism was also mentioned for the ways in which it brought together local UK media groups to work on investigations. The Bristol Cable staff found all this work inspiring and even suggested that the Bureau of Investigative Journalism had picked up a few ideas from them as well, such as their community organising and liberal approach to story sourcing. One informant hoped that the days of the lone-wolf reporter were over ‘because we increasingly rely on readers to be not just passive consumers of what we produce but also active participants, and to make sure we can produce news that is most relevant to them and make sure that we cover the stories that are of importance’ (edited fieldnotes, November 2017). Bristol Cable

collaborations with other peer organisations, that is, not only empowered citizens further but also created journalistic networks which went well beyond their own newsroom.

This is not a traditional way of thinking about journalistic collaboration or transparency, as one Bristol Cable staff member indicated:

Journalists are working a lot more with developers now – they’re getting more exposed to the development culture or the tech culture of sharing, of open source. [...] A data journalist at the [collaborating organisation] was talking with one of his old lecturers. I was sitting with them and the guy from the other organisation, who is a techie journalist, was like, ‘No, we have to make everything open, we have to be fearless about it’, and the old hat was saying, ‘No, you’ll get burned, people will steal your stories and you won’t do it again’. But the tech guy was like, ‘No, this is the future’. I think I would like to try and have stories which are open and collaborative, where people are able to work on them together online. (Informant, Bristol Cable, 21 December 2017)<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup>When reviewing at this quote in 2023, the informant asked to add a comment concerning technology and culture and how it has developed over time at Bristol Cable: ‘Collaboration has been a key to the Cable’s ability to do things differently, working without pretensions about “how things are meant to be done” in journalism and just trying things. A key achievement the Cable pioneered is a Community Relationship Management system (CRM), essential for engaging members and the wider community. There was no CRM that fit our needs, so we developed our own. We knew other community-centered newsrooms needed this too, so we partnered with CORRECTIV, the Bureau of Investigative Journalism and Vereniging Veronica to further develop it to allow others to use it, and it has grown into Beabee (<https://beabee.io/en/home/>). This is a crucial part of the infrastructure we believe is needed for community-driven media, and we’re passionate about sharing what we have learnt and built. Regarding involving communities and stories being open, we have developed ways that are clear and easy for people to participate (for example, events or call-out surveys inviting experiences, opinions or questions). Most stories are not developed “in the open”, but the journalists understand that community engagement is a powerful tool they can draw on to help their reporting, and that they can get better stories and more engaged audiences and active citizens when communities are able to be involved in stories. There’s a good number of stories that draw on community engagement. There are definitely challenges: meaningful engagement is often time-consuming, certain stories are sensitive, and journalists are of course concerned with protecting sources and avoiding getting “scooped”. That can result in a more traditional approach to reporting being taken, and we have found that openness and engagement should be different for different stories. But there’s still a lot of potential in developing how communities can engage with stories’ (26 March 2023).

## SUMMARY

For this chapter, we chose to draw upon an ethnographic methodology otherwise rarely used when it comes to studies of investigative journalism. The researcher was present in the field and saw the ways in which the roles of management and staff overlapped. Bristol Cable's few staff members undertook several roles at the same time, so managers, for example, both coordinated other staff members and arranged events and programs. While studies of legacy media organisations have already looked at the overlap of ideals, norms and values in those places, start-ups like Bristol Cable represent more extreme examples of both overlapping and inherently hybrid roles. Such roles introduce tensions, of course, as the structure of the organisation becomes harder to parse for those within it as well as those working with it from the outside. In addition, newer organisations favour flat as opposed to hierarchical structuring, which also produces confusion at times.

This study's field observation and field interviews found that while 'horizontal values' are important, a hierarchical distribution of practices and routines is critical to mitigating organisational tension. During our field observation, the Bristol Cable founders managed this distribution by conducting workshops and negotiating values and norms related to both horizontal and hierarchical structures.

Our informants also emphasised that digital technology should not introduce extra distance between the start-up, its members and the general public. The whole point of Bristol Cable was to journalistically engage local citizens in new ways. The staff wanted to build bridges, not introduce distance, no matter how effective digital media was in doing their work.

As this chapter demonstrates, innovative and untraditional forms of journalistic collaboration might range from citizen involvement to media organisations collaborating together to the innovative application of technology to bring sources or content together rather than keep them apart. Bristol Cable staff, for example, sought to develop a bottom-up collaboration model wherein organisational 'ownership' extended beyond the funding of this co-op to the practices and content produced there. The founders of Bristol Cable wanted to address the 'black holes' in local journalism that followed the centralising of legacy media and resume holding local and regional power to account via the direct involvement of community voices. Their cultivation of these hybrid forms of collaboration

transcended lone-wolf journalism in favour of a practice with much greater possibility and impact.

Regarding Bureau Local and KCIJ, technology played a much larger part in the hybridised collaboration they cultivated among professional organisations, as we will see.

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## CHAPTER 4

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# The Bureau Local: A Hybrid Network for Local Collaborative Investigative Journalism

*Michelle Park and Maria Konow-Lund*

### INTRODUCTION

Collaborative journalistic investigations rose to new prominence with the Panama Papers (2016) and Paradise Papers (2017) projects, both of which involved enormous amounts of data shared amongst an international network of journalists who coordinated their analyses. Whereas many are

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Parts of this chapter were first written in Michelle Park's PhD thesis (see Park (2022)). Her doctoral research was entirely self-funded without receiving any external funding.

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familiar with these cross-national collaborations when they are led by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, for example, it is less widely recognised that similar processes have been undertaken among local communities and cities as well. This chapter focuses on one such initiative: the implementation of the Bureau Local, a local unit dedicated to various kinds of local journalistic collaborations spearheaded by the hybridised roles of new actors and how such roles are being negotiated (Konow-Lund, 2019). As discussed in Chap. 2, Chadwick (2017, p. 4) highlights the ‘hybrid media system’ wherein older (more traditional) norms and practices merge with newer ones, and vice versa. While existing global journalistic collaborations inspired the founding of the Bureau Local, its collaborators are somewhat different from those involved in larger efforts. Instead of relying upon journalists from traditional legacy media organisations for such cross-national collaborations (Carson, 2020; Reese, 2021), the Bureau Local engages both professional and amateur reporters from many walks of life for its diverse activities.

The Bureau Local has orchestrated numerous local collaborative projects since its founding, including the 2017 release of 40 investigative news stories originating with more than ten local media organisations across the UK (<https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/projects/refuges/local-stories>). The investigation focused on the failure of UK policy to protect refugees from domestic violence in these various local communities. This simultaneous publication of geographically targeted investigative projects served to contest the national narratives on this systemic policy breakdown and sparked further government action. In what follows, we will look at the establishment and development of the Bureau Local as it sought to rejuvenate local news by introducing hybrid elements into its practice of investigative journalism. Like the other empirical studies in Part 2, this chapter relies upon the analytic framework of journalism-as-institution versus journalism-as-work (Örnebring, 2016) to unpack the motivations and solutions which propelled this localised investigative unit.

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## ESTABLISHING A LOCAL UNIT FOR HYBRID INTRA-NATIONAL LOCAL COLLABORATION

Before we delve into the Bureau Local, we will introduce its parent organisation, the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, a nonprofit newsroom based in London. This nonprofit was initially funded by the David and Elaine Potter Foundation and founded in 2010 to shore up British investigative journalism's ability to hold power to account in that country (Potter, n.d.). David was an IT industry professional, and Elaine used to be a member of the Insight team, an investigative journalism unit at the *Sunday Times* in the United Kingdom. Over the decade-plus since its launch, the Bureau of Investigative Journalism has built its reputation by publishing hard-hitting original investigations of issues ranging from domestic violence to global antibiotic use. The managing editor of the Bureau of Investigative Journalism at the time of our field research, oversaw work which was primarily focused on national and international issues.

The Bureau of Investigative Journalism was established amid a crisis in investigative journalism then taking place in national and local UK media organisations (Barclay et al., 2022; Franklin, 2013; Howells, 2015; Williams et al., 2015). Howells (2015, pp. 1–2) describes the local journalistic 'black holes' which appeared following the demise of many local media organisations. Cairncross (2019, p. 79) adds, 'Local publishers face a tougher financial challenge than nationals' in the UK due to the public's transition to digital news platforms. The managing editor of the Bureau of Investigative Journalism spoke to us about other challenges in the British local media environment as well:

Surely, it is much better, if the story is relevant to Blackpool, to tell the story in Blackpool, because that's where the change happens. And at the same time, the same crisis that had happened to our national media in 2010 was happening at a local level because the classified advertising disappeared overnight. Car advertising, housing advertising, job advertising – all moving to new companies [such as] Rightmove. All the recruitment companies online. I was thinking, how can we partner in a better way with local media? (Managing editor, Bureau of Investigative Journalism, 23 August 2018)

The managing editor noted that the migration of advertising revenues from local newspapers to online websites, such as, a British house property website, Rightmove, caused the crisis in local journalism but insisted upon the importance of local news by local people. While the Bureau of

Investigative Journalism was already collaborating with national media organisations such as the *Guardian* or the BBC, the managing editor realised that ‘a lot of our stories had a huge relevance on a local level’ (Managing editor, Bureau of Investigative Journalism, 23 August 2018). She had been following large international projects by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists such as the Offshore Leaks and wondered whether this particular type of collaboration, organised around a data hub, would work for newsrooms on the local level as well (managing editor, Bureau of Investigative Journalism, 23 August 2018). This was a novel proposition, as collaborations between newsrooms or among journalists in the UK were still relatively uncommon at this time—through an analysis of British Investigative Journalism Award winners from 2007 to 2016, for example, Carson (2020, p. 161) found that ‘these cross-media collaborative trends are barely observable in the British Press Awards’. Nevertheless, the managing editor began to study these collaborative media systems in 2015 in terms of their potential local impacts, consulting with experts and preparing a business plan for what would become the Bureau Local to address the hardship facing local UK journalism in the digital age.

At the heart of the Bureau Local’s journalistic practices is one fundamental requirement, and it is written on a whiteboard in their office area within the Bureau of Investigative Journalism: ‘A Bureau Local story should have the potential for national AND local stories (and local journos would want it)’. If an issue is found to affect diverse local towns across the UK, that is, Bureau Local reporters should always be looking towards a national narrative which could potentially engage the central government alongside local governments. The key to this effort is data, which is vital to tracking issues across towns and cities to uncover stories with greater relevance which otherwise would have been neglected or missed.

The initial idea for the Bureau Local platform was to be a network for journalists to collaborate across localities and distribute their data. The Bureau of Investigative Journalism recruited a director for the Bureau Local, Megan Lucero, who was serving as the data editor at the legacy newspaper *The Times* and *The Sunday Times* in the UK. According to Lucero, their way of work has changed over time:

At the beginning, it was very focused on news outlets and technologists – how can those things work together? – but obviously by marketing it as not just about journalists, it opened up the door to a lot of other people, and we

have people from all kinds of different organisations, different backgrounds, participating in it and that's only grown and that's something we're focusing on now. It's much more [centred] around the community development. (Director, Bureau Local, 26 April 2018)

Hiring a data journalism specialist as a director was critical to Bureau Local's hybridising effort to incorporate digital technology into traditional journalistic practice; in turn, she promptly focused on the hybridised deployment of diverse actors as well.

The Bureau Local team functioned both as a group of coordinators for other local journalists and as an editorial newsroom staff conducting their own research for certain stories. One informant noted that when outside collaborators from the extended Bureau Local network sought help from the main office, they would always receive advice and instructions (informant, Bureau Local, 15 December 2017). Early on, as well, Lucero presented a strategy for evaluating organisational norms and values with her staff, approaching these issues in a bottom-up manner while making it clear that she would make the ultimate decisions as director. Having by now reinvigorated journalism at the local level in the UK while inspiring similar efforts elsewhere such as the Corrective Lokal (<https://correctiv.org/lokal/>) in Germany and the Norwegian Center for Investigative Journalism in Bergen (SUJO, <https://sujo.no/>), the Bureau Local represents a productive case study for innovative hybridised practices, as we will see below.

## INVITING NEW ACTORS INTO A NETWORK OF DATA-DRIVEN LOCAL INVESTIGATIVE COLLABORATIONS

Investigative journalism projects are much more demanding than daily or even breaking-news stories. The reason is that such in-depth, often protracted news work brings with it high evidential standards requiring a significant investment in human and material resources. Mainstream media organisations boast the resources necessary for this work, but small newsrooms are much less likely to manage it. With the development of new technologies, data and computational journalism are leading means of improving the quality of news stories, but they have also widened the gap between those who can afford expensive data-related staff positions and those who cannot. The Bureau Local closes this gap through its sharing of

journalistic knowledge and technology using ‘intra-national local collaboration’ (Park, 2022).

In the interests of collaborating directly with the public, as well, the Bureau Local bills itself as ‘a people-powered network setting the news agenda and sparking change from the ground up’ and asks everyone to ‘Join the Network’ by filling out a membership form online (<https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/explainers/join-our-network>). As of May 2023, its total Network encompassed 1492 individuals (<https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/local>), including not only various local reporters but also other experts, activists, bloggers, hackers, academics and students. The Network has its own Slack channel to accommodate member communication, announce upcoming collaborative projects and recruit participants. (Slack (<https://slack.com/intl/en-gb>) is an online communication tool where people can easily share information and audio or video files and discuss their work wherever they are.) This online public sphere hosts dynamic and enthusiastic discussions regarding investigative projects and bridges a wide range of network members in a hybrid manner.

The catchphrase ‘make the available accessible’ epitomises the Bureau Local’s journalistic activities. Like its role model, the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, the Bureau Local bases its own intra-national local collaborations on data and computational journalism, a widely used digital-era investigative technique originating in computer-assisted reporting (CAR). The Bureau Local dedicates itself to the pioneering adoption of advanced technologies in the UK journalistic field and constantly trawls for information online or through the Freedom of Information Act. Its team uses its expertise to refine these datasets to support local reporters and the public on stories focused on local communities. It then activates its network members in two ways: ‘Reporting Recipes’ and invitations to collaboration.

Reporting Recipes are guides to investigation using datasets generated by the Bureau Local. The instructions to someone looking into the work of their local council might read: ‘Look at this spreadsheet. Look at this column. Find the name of your council across XYZ. Basically, there’s the story’ (informant, Bureau Local, 24 July 2018). In this case, most of the work would be done by the Bureau Local:

The core work in the Bureau Local is done by our team, who are all professional journalists, and many of the journalists they work with are professional, longstanding local reporters. In each story investigation they have

done, there have been a couple of people who are not what you would call traditional journalists, but they benefit from the information, from our data, from our Reporting Recipes, from support that is available at the Bureau Local. (Managing editor, Bureau of Investigative Journalism, 18 April 2018)

In terms of the Bureau Local's particular brand of innovative hybridisation, the resources and journalistic techniques involved in the Reporting Recipes are relatively traditional. However, their circulation, for free, among new actors including non-professional journalists and the general public represents an unprecedented extension of the practice in the interests of better holding (local and regional) power to account. Though they lack the years of experience and time necessary to work on datasets, these new actors can develop stories using these professionally processed datasets and the investigative instruction of practicing reporters at the Bureau Local. The journalistic result is the hybrid product of this mingling of the purely traditional and the purely innovative. In a larger context, the innovation in watchdog journalism as it takes place in emerging newsrooms is so far understudied despite some recent academic contributions (Konow-Lund, 2020).

In addition, the local collaborations cultivated by the Bureau Local incorporate the active participation of external partners into collaborative projects from the start. Regarding the aforementioned collaborative project on domestic violence, for example, the Bureau Local team put a bulletin on its Slack channel for Network members to recruit partners—in this case, mainly professional local journalists. The lead Bureau Local journalist then followed up by creating a private Slack channel for collaborators to share ideas, information and resources on the story in question. Here, new angles and connections were uncovered and a collaborative ethos was shared:

It was interesting to see them digging into that and doing things like talking to each other, saying, 'I just had this thing from somebody about something happening in East London. It's not really relevant to my reporting, but if somebody else wanted it, I can share it'. (Informant, Bureau Local, 24 July 2018)

During the collaboration, collaborative participants on the Bureau Local Slack channel were actively sharing information they gathered. This is a stark contrast to the processes of conventional commercial media



organisations, which tend to maximise profits by closing off their staffs and hoarding information and resources to better compete with other newsrooms.

Whereas cross-border investigative journalism had employed some of these tactics for several decades by now, this model of collaboration was relatively new on the local level. The Bureau Local team was working hard to shift journalistic practice away from its lone wolf or competitive stereotypes and welcome a range of analytical perspectives. One informant defined ‘collaborative’ in the Bureau Local context:

‘Collaborative’ is when we had that spreadsheet on immigration where all the local reporters who were working on the investigation were inputting all the great quotes from the interviews they did. So, there was the name of the reporter, the people they interviewed, what’s the job of the people interviewed. Is it a member of Parliament? Is it a lawyer? Is it a community organiser? Is it a person from a campaign organisation? An academic? And then these are the questions I asked, and these were the answers. (Informant, Bureau Local, 15 December 2017)

The Bureau Local’s professional ideals included high standards for its journalistic practice and product—goals they thought were best achieved through interdisciplinary collaboration amongst different actors with the professional assistance of the organisation.

While the Bureau Local provides the Reporting Recipes and orchestrates the requisite local collaborations, the ownership of the stories themselves, and hence the editorial responsibility for those stories, remains with the individual collaborators. This was a critical aspect of the arrangement:

That’s the kind of interesting thing about the model, the ownership and responsibility element, because we don’t own the stories that those local people are putting out and, in a way, we can’t be responsible for everyone [...] I think it should be [the case] that those people are responsible in their own way for what they do, and that they’re aware of the consequences of getting it wrong. If we make a mistake and we give them bad information, [on the other hand,] then absolutely that’s our fault. (Informant, Bureau Local, 15 December 2017)

Despite enabling so many different actors in society, the Bureau Local staff remained entirely focused on journalistic professionalism and required their collaborators to be responsible for their own work.

Cross-institutional collaboration is one of several structural changes revitalising local and national watchdog journalism. What some of our interviewees called the ‘new news ecology’ of investigative journalism involves not only reaching a nimble and various audience with one’s journalistic products but also engaging a variety of inter-professional actors in the creation of those products. The Bureau Local has taken giant steps in this regard, and once-peripheral roles have become normalised in the process—roles both within the organisation and beyond it.

As a strong example of what Reese (2021) calls a ‘hybrid institution’, then, the Bureau Local relies upon its collaborative model to fulfil its organisational purposes and conduct its daily journalistic activities. A decade earlier, Örnebring (2010) was able to argue that the new technologies adopted by the journalism sector were creating tension between the managerial and editorial levels in the newsroom because managers could use them to better control their workers. Yet, this was never the case at the Bureau Local, where technology underpinned and even enabled its innovations in practice.

### AN INNOVATIVE HYBRID FORM OF NEWS: INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM THEATRE TOUR

The Bureau Local staff was always innovative and interested in experimentation, continuously developing new ways to hybridise actor relationships and professional practices in order to rejuvenate local journalism. These efforts in the public interest even included a 2018 theatre tour of a play based on the nationwide collaborative story about domestic violence and budget cuts at places of refuge for victims in the UK. In all, 20 network members participated in the project, and 50 local stories, including follow-up stories, were published across the country. The theatre tour went to some of the towns and cities where this local reporting was published.

According to our Bureau Local informants, the story originated in the events of a single weekend when the roof collapsed at a domestic violence refuge centre in the local authority borough of Kensington and Chelsea, one of the most affluent areas of London. A Bureau Local reporter who started working on the story contacted women in residence at the refuge and stayed in touch with them throughout the subsequent three-month investigation. One of the women turned out to be a competent writer as well, the reporter recalled:

She told me she was doing some stand-up comedy about her experience. She was developing elements of what happened to her into a kind of work for theatre – but a fictionalised show. So, she did a ten-minute scratch performance. I went to see it and thought it was so good that I came back to the office and said to Rachel [the managing editor of the Bureau of Investigative Journalism] and Megan [the Bureau Local director], ‘You know, she’s telling this important story, and maybe we should help her take it on the road, and take it to the places where our local journalists did their stories around the country’. (Informant, Bureau Local, 24 July 2018)

The lead journalist of the Bureau Local investigation saw the potential in the performance, and the managers liked the idea of supporting the theatre tour. This represents a further extension of the Bureau Local’s interest in non-professional actors. Furthermore, the relationship between ‘journalism-as-institution’ and ‘journalism-as-work’ (Örnebring, 2016) can be addressed here since we can observe that the managerial levels’ decision-making processes bases on their workers’ practices. Here, the refugee resident, who initially participated in the investigation passively as an interviewee, became an active participant through her performance, again demonstrating the Bureau Local’s unwavering commitment to both acknowledging and incorporating citizens into their hybrid investigative practice.

The national theatre tour launched on 14 July 2018 in Norwich. At a plenary meeting on the following Monday (16 July), the Bureau Local team reported to the whole newsroom that the performance had been successful. All were proud of their work in terms of the quality of the play as well as the new means of sharing the investigation with the public. The team was especially happy with the positive feedback and participation during a panel discussion with attendees following the show.

As a part of our fieldwork and personal interest in the Bureau Local’s experiment, we went to the play when it came to Bristol on 3 August 2018. The venue was located on the first floor above a local pub in a residential area. Two community organisers from the Bureau Local and the Bureau Local reporter who organised the project welcomed people at the entrance. By showtime, the small theatre was filled for the one-woman monologue. In it, she spoke about experiencing the event in question but also the journalistic coverage which followed it, some of which sounded both superficial and inadequately engaged in the victims or the situation.

An open discussion between audience members, local reporters and Bureau Local staff followed the performance.

In all, this play demonstrates the paradigm shift in journalistic practice enabled by the Bureau Local's commitment to collaboration and innovation: a news source became a key actor in publishing the investigation; audiences had a chance to experience the investigation through the medium of a theatre play; everyone involved—local journalists, the writer/actor and the audiences—came together to talk about the content afterward. Such moments have rarely arisen in the journalism sector, even in the new media ecology, but it is clear that this form of 'live journalism' can impact communities directly, particularly at the local level. While the overall collaborative investigation into domestic violence in the UK was hard-hitting and sparked parliament inquiries, many people still had not caught up to the issue. The Bureau Local managed to reach many of them through the novel and unique medium of a journalistic play. Rachel Oldroyd, the managing editor at the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, emphasised the importance of reaching out to the public in such diverse ways:

What we are thinking about more and more is how we get our stories to the right people. So, traditionally, we've worked with traditional media with big newspapers and big TV people, but you know that doesn't necessarily mean the right people get to read our stories. So, how can we ensure that our stories are seen, read and understood and information is disseminated way beyond the bubble of the elite who read papers and watch TV? So, that was totally about a new platform. (Managing editor, Bureau of Investigative Journalism, 23 August 2018)

The Bureau Local and its parent institution, the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, are continuously developing ways to meet wider audiences both online and, most importantly, in person. While Bristol Cable, as discussed in the previous chapter, arranges events to encourage audience participation in what reporters write about, the Bureau Local presents programs such as 'Hack Days' or 'Collaborative Reporting Days' to allow the team to share journalistic knowledge and skillsets with the public and to create the most productive environment for collaboration on data journalism projects.

While there is plenty of academic research into how digital technology and data journalism have changed journalistic practice in general, few studies have looked at how live events and the physical presence of an

audience might contribute to the new media ecosystem as well. The Bureau Local's theatre tour broadened the range of possibilities and argues for other forms of hybridisation in the practices and the people involved in investigative journalism today.

### SUMMARY

During our field observation in 2017 and 2018, the Bureau Local staff collaborated actively with a carefully cultivated network of both professionals and amateurs or other interested members of the public. In this way, the organisation helped establish what Chadwick (2017) calls the 'hybrid media system' in the UK. This pioneering model merges relatively traditional norms and practices—that is, time-consuming and resource-intensive investigative techniques—with newer forms of collaboration with the broader public. Cross-border journalistic collaborations based on data and computational journalism have played a significant role in exposing hidden truths about those in power in many countries. The Bureau Local, on the other hand, orchestrated intra-national local collaborations among newsrooms across the UK by offering guidance in investigative techniques via platforms such as the Reporting Recipes. They offered this support to anyone, including non-professionals, so that all could avail themselves of the digital methods and news resources generated by the professional journalists at the Bureau Local. It made the *available* information *accessible* by everyone trying to hold power to account in their towns and regions.

The theatre tour represented another dimension of hybrid investigative journalism in terms of both the actors who participated in it and the theatrical platform promoted by the Bureau Local to share the story with the public. As a pioneer in the field, the Bureau Local heralds many new possibilities for hybrid investigative journalism at the local level in the UK, especially for organisations which prioritise practice over profit or power as such.

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## CHAPTER 5

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# The Korea Center for Investigative Journalism: A Hybrid Nonprofit Funding Model

*Michelle Park and Maria Konow-Lund*

### INTRODUCTION

In 2013, the world-shaking collaborative investigative-journalism project confronting tax avoidance known as the ‘Offshore Leaks’—orchestrated by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ)—published its stories around the world. The investigation exposed the reality of international tax fraud and the related use of paper companies by

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Parts of this chapter were first written in Michelle Park’s PhD thesis (see Park (2022)). Her doctoral research was entirely self-funded without receiving any external funding.

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high-profile figures. South Korea was among the nations which participated in this global collaboration, and its citizens were as astonished as the rest of the world by the scale of the investigations. Another surprise for the South Korean public was that the only South Korean partner in the ICIJ's investigation was the just-established Korea Center for Investigative Journalism (KCIJ). The participation of such a young and relatively small newsroom stood out because most of the ICIJ's partners around the world were considered to be 'traditional media outlets' (Carson, 2020, p. 101) or 'traditional media organizations' (Reese, 2021, p. 116). The KCIJ, however, had earned this opportunity for reasons to be elaborated upon later in this chapter.

As an organisation, the KCIJ is both practically and academically unique and valuable. In addition to its partnership with the ICIJ, it has seen much success related to its particular cultivation of investigative journalism and its membership-funded nonprofit model (that is, its funding comes from its public members). This membership model was innovative in that it was not implemented in a top-down manner, whereby the newsroom sets up a donation apparatus and asks the public for funding, but rather in a bottom-up manner, whereby its supporters in the public expressed their desire to help and, in turn, asked KCIJ journalists how best to do so. KCIJ's membership model is also the key to understanding how and why it always shares its journalistic investigations, which are freely available online.

This chapter explores the ways in which this emerging organisation both adopted and established hybrid news-production practices in the specific contexts of its bottom-up membership model and the digital-era explosion in collaborative journalistic projects. Like our other empirical studies in Part 2, this chapter adopts the analytical framework of journalism-as-institution versus journalism-as-work (Örnebring, 2016) to examine KCIJ's various hybrid initiatives. We first address nonprofit financial streams for funding the news media in general, then trace the evolution of this membership-driven newsroom and unpack the uniqueness and implications of KCIJ's funding model in particular. Lastly, we explore its international collaborations with global organisations such as the ICIJ in the context of its journalistic practices.

## THE EMERGING NONPROFIT SECTOR IN JOURNALISM

Before delving into the KCIJ, we need to discuss nonprofit news organisations in the context of the journalism sector, where ‘the real distinction is between “for-profit” and “not-for-profit”’ (Shaver, 2010, p. 17). Such organisations are usually funded by philanthropists and donations, but some nonprofits are able to rely upon subscription fees or advertising as well, provided they do not try to generate revenues for their stakeholders along the way (Shaver, 2010, p. 17). Given the ongoing need to ensure the sustainability of their funding, nonprofits draw upon diverse financial streams such as foundations, individual donations, subscription systems, advertising revenue and programmes and events (Roseman et al., 2021). The ‘nonprofit newsroom’, then, relies upon a certain funding model to preserve the organisational independence to produce its journalism.

Nonprofit funding now appears to be one of the few options available to investigative journalism following the financial upheaval in the media industry, particularly since 2008 (McChesney & Nichols, 2010). Over the last decade or two, nonprofits have been established ‘with the aim of filling the void left by editorial layoffs and shrinking news holes’ (Konieczna & Robinson, 2014, pp. 968–969). In addition, most of the early staff members at the KCIJ included journalists ‘who were fired or voluntarily resigned from mainstream media’ in South Korea (Shin, 2015, p. 692). The shift by veteran investigative journalists from mainstream media organisations to nonprofit ones is not uncommon (Birnbauer, 2019). For instance, Charles Lewis (2014), a founder of the Center for Public Integrity (CPI) in the United States of America—the pioneer of its kind—wrote an article titled ‘Why I left *60 Minutes*: The big networks say they care about uncovering the truth. That’s not what I saw’ in which he insists that the mainstream media organisation was no longer ‘interested in investigative reporting’. To continue investigative journalism, he had to be somewhere else, so he launched the Center for Public Integrity (CPI) in 1989 (Lewis, 2007). More recent examples of this shift among seasoned professionals include Paul Steiger, the former president of ProPublica in the United States of America, who had previously worked for the *Wall Street Journal*, and Rachel Oldroyd, the former managing editor and CEO of the Bureau of Investigative Journalism in the United Kingdom, who had previously worked for the British newspaper *The Mail on Sunday*.

These investigative journalists bring their traditional journalistic norms and practices to their new nonprofit organisations and in this way force the

development of truly *hybrid* media systems wherein older practices merge with or transition to more innovative or newer ones (Chadwick, 2017), as we discussed in Chap. 2. Hamilton (2016) concludes that the decline in support of traditional investigative journalism derives from a range of political, economic, societal and vocational challenges and changes. According to the American Institution for Nonprofit News, 80 percent of the 244 American nonprofit newsrooms in their survey had arisen since 2008 (Roseman et al., 2021, p. 5), many of them including investigative journalism among their goals—or, in short, ‘saving accountability and investigative reporting considered essential to democracy’ (Roseman et al., 2021, p. 3).

The KCIJ is a unique organisation even among these media nonprofits because, as mentioned, citizens’ donations constitute its main funding stream. These citizen donors are often called ‘members’, and therefore this study uses the model descriptors ‘membership-funded’, ‘individual-donation’, ‘citizen-funded’ and ‘audience-funded’ interchangeably. In the field, foundation-funded nonprofits also often use individual donations as a supplementary revenue stream (Roseman et al., 2021). Whereas many studies of nonprofit funding models for journalistic organisations focus on foundation funding streams (see Birnbauer, 2019; Konieczna, 2018), little attention has been paid to the membership model. One early attempt to do so was the Membership Puzzle Project (May 2017 to August 2021, <https://membershipguide.org>), which consisted of shared ideas and materials such as case studies and other tools involving membership funding models. For instance, the project provided a guide on how to start, develop and maintain such membership funding models so newsrooms seeking alternative sources of funding could adopt the process.

A news organisation with a membership funding model such as the KCIJ is especially relevant to the present study because it operationalises its public members as agents of hybridity in its practice. Typically, a news organisation consists of professional people such as journalists, editors, publishers, PR professionals and funders (owners or advertisers). With the KCIJ, however, the audience is part of the organisation, supplanting profit-driven funders and introducing new twist on hybridity in investigative journalism.

## HYBRID FUNDING: AUDIENCES SUPPORTING INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM AT THE KCIJ

It is, in fact, not all that surprising to encounter profound public involvement in the South Korean news ecology. South Korea has been described as “the most wired country in the world”, and as such one of the world’s leading “webocracies” (Allan, 2006, p. 129). This ready online accessibility has offered national audiences the opportunity to participate in the country’s news production since the turn of the millennium. For example, OhmyNews, one of the earliest citizen journalism organisations in the world, was founded in South Korea in 2000 with a stated ‘commitment to investigative reporting, which partly explains its appeal to South Koreans, who see on its pages an array of stories otherwise being ignored or downplayed by the mainstream media’ (Allan, 2006, p. 132). This newsroom, that is, privileges in-depth accountability journalism in a way which resonated with its audiences and allowed it to realise ‘the possibility of a citizen-led communication network developing into an alternative journalistic model’ (Chang, 2009, p. 147) early in the digital era. Whereas the public’s participation in OhmyNews involved people *working* directly in news production as journalists for the news organisation, the KCIJ represents a different stream of participatory journalism because its public participation involves financially *supporting* news production indirectly as a funder. It is crucial to point out that the citizen donors are not involved in editorial decision-making at the KCIJ, which leaves the organisation’s professional news workers with the ability to be autonomous in their work.

In what follows, we will examine the empirical evidence concerning how KCIJ’s hybrid funding system came to define its particular practice of investigative journalism.

### *From a One-Off Project to an Institution for Investigative Journalism*

As elsewhere around the globe, the journalism sector in South Korea has faced various crises which have been perceived as undermining its watchdog capacity. The KCIJ editor-in-chief states:

The principal problems in the Korean press could be summarised as partisanship and commercialisation [...] It is undeniable that there is a limit on newsroom autonomy, where governments or capital own media. Therefore,

we believe that we need an independent newsroom. (Editor-in-chief, KCIJ, 8 March 2018)

Along those lines, the KCIJ was officially founded in 2013 in the interests of freeing the press from its political and commercial obligations and (re) developing newsroom autonomy free from any special interests.

It arose out of an initiative which had taken shape early in the previous year. In January 2012, a journalistic project called ‘Newstapa’ began to produce quality journalism for the South Korean public. ‘News’ means the same thing in Korean and English, and ‘tapa’ means ‘to tear down’ in Korean, meaning that this project (and, later, the KCIJ) sought to cultivate metacritical journalism which supplied alternative takes on the stories of the day. Newstapa was initiated by roughly eight individuals, including ex-employees of mainstream media outlets and volunteer university students. It aired its reporting on YouTube, which offered some relief for its production budget. In addition, an original staff member at Newstapa once spoke about the project’s limited budget with a South Korean writer (The writer remained anonymous purposely) who then donated enough funds to buy the group a laptop (informant, KCIJ, 9 March 2018), which represented the very first step towards KCIJ’s unique public-driven funding model. The Newstapa project gained a public following thanks to its hard-hitting news stories, and, over time, people started contacting the Newstapa team to ask how to support its work. By July 2012, the Newstapa project team had set up a system through which citizens were able to donate (informant, KCIJ, 9 March 2018).

With the financial backing Newstapa had received by the end of 2012, the team decided to establish a proper news organisation and began to recruit new staff, including veteran investigative journalists and, interestingly, data journalists. In February 2013, they successfully launched the Korea Center for Investigative Journalism, the proudly bottom-up, community-centred response to the overwhelming public interest in supporting this work (for the entire history of the KCIJ, see <https://kcij.org/history>). According to the KCIJ editor-in-chief, such donations to media organisations were not common in South Korea at the time of KCIJ’s establishment (donations to charities and live aid were much more common), indicating how pathbreaking its membership funding model truly was (editor-in-chief, KCIJ, 8 March 2018).

Throughout the journey from Newstapa to the KCIJ, two hybrid elements drove the news team’s work: the innovative use of technology and

the public's active participation in the organisation's wellbeing. Of course, the two were related. First of all, through the Internet, the public enjoyed ready access to the newsroom and an easy means of supporting it. Likewise, KCIJ's Internet-based news system (through its broadcasts on YouTube and its website) allowed it to work cheaper than traditional newspapers or broadcasters while pursuing equally involved investigations. Second, KCIJ audience members were utterly engaged in the news organisation's financial viability, which has been crucial to the organisation's operation.

Importantly, these hybrid elements led to an important change in the practice of investigative journalism at the KCIJ. Conventional for-profit news organisations with discrete management and newsroom areas readily reflect the distinction between 'journalism-as-institution' and 'journalism-as-work' (Örnebring, 2016). Thanks to the KCIJ's independent source of funding, however, it was able to merge its managerial and editorial responsibilities. Once upon a time, talk shows with live studio audiences represented audience 'hybridity' in news production (Chadwick, 2017, p. 15). With the advent of the KCIJ, however, audiences became critical to the viability of the work itself.

### *Membership Engagement at the KCIJ*

As mentioned, individual member-donors are not involved in the KCIJ news production as such. Still, the KCIJ interacts with its audience (some of whom are donors) in diverse ways as part of its commitment to the larger implications of its membership funding model. Uniquely, the KCIJ offers exclusive events and programmes to its members, including a monthly 'Membership Premiere' and an annual 'Member's Night'. The February 2018 Membership Premiere took place during the newsroom ethnography conducted as part of this study and offered further insight into the organisation's relationship with the public. Two managers from the KCIJ Membership Engagement team welcomed people at the door with a name tag and various KCIJ souvenirs. The meeting room was filled with about 30 member-donors by 7:00 PM, when the KCIJ director of Finance, Administration and Security began the programme. As an ice-breaker, the members stood in turn to introduce themselves and give their reasons for supporting the KCIJ. From there, KCIJ staff previewed two investigative news stories, followed by a question-and-answer session with the journalists who worked on them. Many of the members raised their hands to offer feedback and ask questions. One donor observed, 'This

investigation was powerful, and I had not heard this before. Probably it is something that only the KCIJ can do’.

It is indeed a rare scene within the South Korean media ecology when journalists and audiences sit together to discuss the issues covered by an organisation’s reporting. Unlike actual citizen journalism, where the public writes and produces the stories, KCIJ’s membership funding model preserves the boundary between professionals and funders. As we have seen, both the Bureau Local (with the theatre play) and the KCIJ strive to engage with the public to boost the position and impact of investigative journalism in their respective societies. Along the way, these organisations’ practices shift and hybridise to accommodate their ideals and priorities.

### THE COLLABORATIVE JOURNALISM BROUGHT ABOUT BY A HYBRID FUNDING MODEL

There is no single way to produce investigative journalism, as we discuss elsewhere in this book. The practice is ever-evolving, amorphous, flexible and open to adaptation even as it consistently pursues certain universal journalistic norms and values. The arrival of hybridising elements such as KCIJ’s membership funding model has been accelerated, as well, by developing technologies, including those powering data and computational journalism itself. We live at a time when everything is being digitised, broadening the scope and scale of potential news sources as well as the types of journalistic techniques used to uncover and analyse this data. This situation has given rise to important international collaborations such as the Panama Papers investigation led by the ICIJ, which involved 11.5 million financial records, or 2.6 terabytes of information (ICIJ, 2017). As stated earlier, the KCIJ began participating in cross-border collaborations upon its founding as the only South Korean partner of the ICIJ.

Whereas some research has been carried out on cross-border journalistic collaboration (see, in particular, Gearing, 2021; Sambrook, 2018a), very little is known about its implications for a relatively small and emerging newsroom, and especially one whose membership funding model informs the work it does. The KCIJ editor-in-chief describes how the partnership with the ICIJ came about:

In 2013, we sent a proposal to the ICIJ to work together after seeing an official announcement from the ICIJ that they were looking for a partner. We highlighted that we were a nonprofit and independent newsroom. And

although we were a small organisation, we could devote our full capacity to an investigation which could last one to two years. We have more capacity to allocate staff onto one project for a longer period than other news outlets. Our reporters are very experienced and skilful investigative journalists. Although there were many large news outlets that wanted to partner with the ICIJ as well, in the end, we became the only South Korean partner of the ICIJ and have been working with them since then. (Editor-in-chief, KCIJ, 8 March 2018)

Clearly, KCIJ's organisational culture impressed the ICIJ. At the time in 2013, the KCIJ was smaller and younger than most mainstream media organisations. However, its high-skilled and experienced staff, fourth estate-oriented journalistic purpose and dedication to investigative journalism and the public as sponsors and audiences seemed to set it apart. Indeed, the ICIJ's deputy director at the time in 2013 once published an article about the procedure on the ICIJ's website: 'We did not pick journalists based solely on their media affiliation—we were much more interested in choosing the right people, the real diggers and the most trustworthy colleagues' (Guevara, 2013). The KCIJ was not a legacy media organisation in South Korea in 2013 and was less well known around the world than its national peers, but the advantages of its hybridised organisation were clear to the ICIJ. As discussed in Chap. 2, Evetts (2006) uncovers great tension in the field of journalism between organisational and occupational professionalism, respectively, though later Örnebring (2009) foresaw the mitigation of such tension through organisations such as the KCIJ which cultivate a common (and even practice-driven) interest in holding power to account across the entire professional staff.

The KCIJ has collaborated with the ICIJ since 2013, starting with the aforementioned Offshore Leaks investigations, which one informant describes as follows:

During the first stage, the level of security for a project is very intense. Not even anyone within the KCIJ knows [about it] except for the editor-in-chief. The editor-in-chief leaves on a business trip without a specific reason. Then, he obtains information about the project, such as the kind of data that was leaked and the plan for the collaborative project [X]. After returning, he then organises a team for the project and lets the ICIJ know who will work on it. We are then given access to the datasets. We need to examine them and discuss them with the ICIJ. Following this, we either meet with



the ICIJ, discuss through emails, or talk over the phone. This is how the work is conducted. (Informant, KCIJ, 9 March 2018)

Investigative journalism demands high-level security and confidentiality, especially when a project crosses the borders of potentially hundreds of countries. It also asks the media organisation to negotiate huge amounts of digital information, and a newsroom cannot hope to manage, research, analyse and work with data securely without journalists who are specifically trained in data and computational literacy. In short, this underlying hybrid element (digital technology) reinforces the larger hybrid journalistic practice (collaborative journalism). Sambrook (2018b, p. 39) concludes: ‘Technology expertise is a crucial component of collaborations’. While not all media organisations can afford to undertake data-heavy investigations owing to the expense of hiring developers and data journalists, the KCIJ saw the need to devote the resources necessary to establishing and staffing a tech-savvy Data Journalism Unit. This investment in hybridised practice paid off handsomely in KCIJ’s partnership with the ICIJ, among other things.

Another advantage to technology in such journalistic collaborations is its enhancement of journalist security via encryption (Alfter, 2019; Sambrook, 2018b). A journalist in the KCIJ Global Task Force notes:

All of the participants [in cross-border collaboration] use conference calls [...] We use Signal because its encryption system is well established. Also, we use a call programme with well-established encryption. We have to upload data such as video clips on an encrypted cloud server to share them. Or alternatively we send it through the messenger. (Informant, KCIJ, 2 April 2018)

Throughout such high-profile collaborative projects, as mentioned, journalists employ encryption as a ‘defensive technology’ (Sambrook, 2018b, p. 36) to ensure confidentiality when communicating and sharing data. This is another example of daily-practice hybridity in the technological realm of journalism.

These global collaborations raised the profile of the KCIJ within the international news sector, says the KCIJ Global Task Force journalist:

A collaboration request sometimes comes as a project. Sometimes, it is offered through the ICIJ, or through the editor-in-chief [...] Sometimes, it

is offered not as a group [undertaking] but instead [is] one-to-one – to ask for help and to write a story together: ‘We are reporting about this. There is something in South Korea. Could you please find this out? How about writing the story together?’ If we think it is newsworthy from our perspective, we do it. And vice versa – we need to ask about collaborations with newsrooms in other countries a lot of the time. (Informant, KCIJ, 2 April 2018)

Clearly, such collaborations have now become part of daily journalistic activities. As we discussed in Chap. 2, one of hybridity’s characteristics is the merging of one element into another (Chadwick, 2017), and Boczkowski (2004) encourages academics to pay more attention to how technology interacts and merges with established journalistic activities. KCIJ’s technologically informed and driven global collaborations comprise one example of hybridised progress at an emerging investigative journalism organisation.

### RETURN TO SOCIETY BY BOOSTING INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM

KCIJ’s hybridised imperative to collaborate is not limited to its journalistic peers around the world. It has always tried to give back to its public and contribute to society by sharing its journalistic knowledge and skillset with its members—a sharing ethos which, according to our informants, arose directly from its membership funding model. Ultimately, the KCIJ hopes to attract diverse actors in society to the field in the interests of advancing its new hybrid media ecology. One informant emphasises the value of such social contributions by nonprofit organisations:

I believe that a nonprofit organisation needs to do more with social contribution programmes. The KCIJ needs to have a justification for its role of a ‘key centre’ for supporting and encouraging the whole sector of South Korean investigative journalism, as shown in its name [...] [Contributions] such as open-data projects, education and collaboration between newsrooms. I thought that the KCIJ could be respected by conducting these projects. (Informant, KCIJ, 13 April 2018)

In short, the KCIJ does not limit its role to that of a media organisation but expands it into that of an agent developing and nurturing the South Korean journalism sector.

The KCIJ has long conducted diverse training programmes for the public (donor-members or otherwise) to learn about investigative journalism, including its Data Journalism School. This programme offers lectures and workshops about how to adopt data journalism in news production with computer tools for analysis and visualisation, among other things. During the 2018 ethnographic fieldwork at the KCIJ, Data Journalism School classes were in session which included attendees ranging from university students to experienced journalists. Hands-on classes included a lecture from a KCIJ data journalist and a workshop relying on participants' own laptops. The school covered not only technical skills including software such as Excel and Carto but also journalistic skills such as ways to find and understand data to generate a story. At the end of the programme, the participants had all published data-driven investigations on KCIJ's website.

More recently, the KCIJ broadened its engagement with the public with the 2019 founding of the '뉴스타파함께센터 (With Newstapa)'. The KCIJ initiated fundraising for this specific project which was distinct from the funding for the KCIJ newsroom itself. Its website (<https://with-newstapa.org/about/#PURPOSE>) announced the purpose:

This foundation proposes to contribute to the benefit of society by establishing the foundation of the development of journalism: by supporting independent journalism organisations such as the KCIJ; by conducting training programmes on investigative journalism and data journalism; by researching and publishing; and by conducting collaborations and the solidarity of independent newsrooms.

'With Newstapa' represented a shared space wherein the KCIJ and its citizen supporters could make South Korean society better by transforming its media ecosystem. This space sought to be a hub of investigative journalism by fostering collaboration among independent media organisations; by training journalists; by leading in cross-national collaborations; and by engaging with KCIJ members (KCIJ, 2019).

In February 2022, the KCIJ also announced the launch of the Newstapa Journalism School (Newschool). According to its statement of purpose (<https://kcij.org/notice/u/v9y6x>), the school aims to improve an otherwise unhealthy media ecology by incubating nonprofit independent newsrooms like the KCIJ. Its free course of study consists of three stages: (1) investigative journalism theories and practices; (2) a six- to

twelve-month fellowship at the KCIJ newsroom; and (3) the provision of infrastructures and solutions for start-up newsrooms and financial support for a year for selected programme fellows.

The KCIJ grew out of its audience's active participation and eagerness to support investigative journalism. In return, it has produced in-depth investigations in its role as a watchdog in South Korean society. In addition, through initiatives such as the Data Journalism School, With Newstapa and the Newschool, it has also facilitated its audience's participation in investigative journalism in various ways. The hope behind all this work is that these participants come to represent another hybrid element in the South Korean investigative journalism ecology along the lines of the KCIJ itself.

### SUMMARY

This chapter looked at the impact upon investigative journalistic practices of the specifically hybrid elements of an emerging news organisation. The KCIJ benefited from early editorial contributions by experienced journalists from legacy media organisations, even as those journalists adapted their traditional journalistic norms and practices to KCIJ's innovative hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2017). The official launch of the KCIJ likewise depended upon the donations of citizens who recognised both the innovation and the expertise of its work. Importantly, these supporters are not involved in editorial decision-making processes as such, which allows the newsroom to remain autonomous. Citizens—new actors in the journalism sector—enable this organisation's work but remain distinct from what is actually done by the traditional journalists who labour there. The new and the traditional coexist to constitute this newsroom—a condition we describe as hybridity.

What is more, KCIJ's hybrid form of funding encouraged another hybrid element of its collaborative investigative reporting: sharing, across colleagues and organisations and even nations. Competition used to be the norm in the journalism sector, but the digital era has given rise to such collaborative successes as the Panama Papers, and the KCIJ has actively embraced the pooling of investigative journalism norms and mindsets as the only South Korea partner of the ICIJ. The intentional embrace of digital technology is yet another hybrid aspect of the organisation, in that KCIJ's Data Journalism Unit represents the introduction of new tools into an old enterprise: watchdog journalism.

Whereas organisational and occupational professionalism often considered as oppositional (Evetts, 2006), it is suggested that they can be reconciled (Örnebring, 2009). At the KCIJ, the two aspects overlap largely, where journalistic norms and routines are primarily influenced by journalism-oriented purposes of the organisation. According to the staff, this organisational aim is possible due to their hybrid funding from the public, making the KCIJ independent from any external forces, so that both managerial and editorial level staff can focus mainly on carrying out investigative journalism.

Thanks to its unique hybrid practices, the KCIJ has played a significant role in boosting South Korean journalism and sharing stories directly with society. KCIJ staff considers their social-contribution programmes to be a critical aspect of their practice—in short, a means of giving back to the audience that supports them. In all, the KCIJ case represents an innovative reckoning of the traditional with the new that embraces the hybrid nature of the digital and global era as well as the renewed idealism of the Fourth Estate in this pandemic-informed decade in particular.

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## A Hybrid Investigative Ecology

*Maria Konow-Lund and Michelle Park*

In Part 2, we have looked at what we called ‘hybrid elements’ in emerging organisations focused on investigative journalism and holding power to account. Since the turn of the millennium, scholars have generally focused on how the institution of the press has begun to crumble in the face of a paradigmatic change in its relationship to audience, thanks to the impact of digitisation and especially social media and big technology companies (Deuze & Witschge, 2020; Hermida, 2016; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021). In his conclusion to *The crisis of the institutional press*, Reese (2021) nevertheless strikes a hopeful chord in applauding the emergence of ‘hybrid institutions’ (p. 161) around investigative projects such as the Panama Papers and the work of the International Consortium for Investigative Journalists to promote collaboration among its actors (pp. 116–117). Still, he does not define investigative journalism as a hybrid practice as such.

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Here, we have responded to Reese's call for 'a more explicitly *aspirational* view of journalism among those who conduct empirical research' (p. 163) in our engagement with cases which differ in geographical scope but present important instances of innovative hybridity in the work they do: Bristol Cable on a local level; the Bureau Local on a local and national level; and the Korea Center for Investigative Journalism (KCIJ) on a national and international level. All three cases experiment with alternative organisational structures and actors, and they present alternative blends of or relationships between occupational and organisational professionalism. For instance, traditional roles such as editorial manager and staff reporter are no longer kept apart, and organisational members are given the ability to participate in decision making, share criticism of the journalistic product and even propose subjects for stories (Bristol Cable). At various times, founders, editors, journalists and technological developers will take on multiple roles within flexible structures which support the organisation's larger goals and values (Bristol Cable). Managerial levels will prioritise the journalistic values and practices of newswriters over other organisational interests in their decision-making processes (Bureau Local, KCIJ). Perhaps these new alignments and opportunities are not such a surprise, as both occupational and organisational professionalism continue to put significant emphasis on the watchdog role of journalism in society (Bureau Local, KCIJ).

Our cases uncovered unique practices which have not been discussed in previous research. For example, we found that Bristol Cable utilises both in-person reporting *and* technological support in their news production, whereas earlier discussions have focused on their technological use alone (see Colbran, 2022). By participating in door-to-door visits with Bristol Cable reporters in the more deprived areas of the city, we saw first-hand that they did not want to hide behind their computers. Instead, as one informant stated, they sought to connect with their audience where they were via face-to-face interactions. While the Bristol Cable staff did not shy away from generating or drawing upon complex data sets to conduct their investigations, they understood that this remained only part of the work they had to do. Legacy media organisations, on the other hand, tend to exploit the fact that news work becomes much less expensive when it is conducted entirely at a desk rather than out in the field.

In our work with Bureau Local, we also encountered an acute awareness of the importance of in-person meetings at certain locations, via programming such as workshops on data journalism or the news story-based

theatre tour. Both Bristol Cable and Bureau Local journalists were always trying to create events wherein professional staff, organisational members and the public could meet in person. In all the three of the cases, we saw a desire to ‘detox’ from exclusively digital collaboration and move back to live, in-person engagement.

The three cases also represented alternative ways of combining traditional and new forms of investigative journalism in emerging and hybridised organisations. Bristol Cable is a co-op collaboration with citizen members in Bristol. The Bureau Local team shares its professional journalistic knowledge via intra-national collaboration within their network from their headquarters at the Bureau of Investigative Journalism in London. The Korea Center for Investigative Journalism of South Korea was founded mainly by veteran investigative journalists from traditional newsrooms but is fully funded by citizens’ donations.

For these investigations, again, we followed Chadwick’s understanding of hybridisation as ‘a process of simultaneous integration and fragmentation’ (Chadwick, 2017, p. 18). We were careful to look at not only journalistic practice but also organisational structure with regard to how investigative journalism has steered itself into the digital era. In each case, traditional and innovative norms and practices are inter-merged into what we call the hybrid elements of news production, as we will discuss further below.

## ELEMENTS OF THE HYBRID ORGANISATION

Among the most critical hybrid elements in the organisations we studied were new actors. Bristol Cable was established by university graduates without journalism backgrounds, and citizens are directly engaged in its editorial decision making. Although the editorial work of the Bureau Local remains mostly within its newsroom, the team encourages the participation of the public in news production through intra-national local collaborations in which non-professional journalists can participate. Lastly, audience members as funders (but not journalists) play a significant role in the Korea Center for Investigative Journalism. Without these individual donations and the societal commitment they imply, the newsroom would simply cease to operate. All these new actors are a crucial part of the viability of these emerging media organisations.

In the case of Bristol Cable, in addition, the co-op model meant that its citizen members actually owned the organisation and had the right to hold

both founders and staff members accountable. Professional journalists from the *Guardian* and elsewhere offered their services for free and arranged workshops for members and staff in journalistic working methods, leading to the joining of traditional journalism with Bristol Cable's new form of participation to produce its hybrid organisation, use of technology, and professional practices. Over time, as well, this overlap of traditional and alternative media production became normalised, until the co-op's originally non-journalistic founders reclaimed the mantle of journalist (for example, on Twitter), and the organisation's cultivation of hybridity became simply its practice of journalism.

Inspired by international collaborations led by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, the Bureau Local sought to boost local journalism in the United Kingdom through collaborative work with the local population. This local unit incorporates this wider public into their news production through intra-national local collaborations among non-professional 'journalists' such tech experts, academics, students and whoever else is interested.

The Korea Center for Investigative Journalism merged traditional journalistic practices and values with a newer form of organisation achieved via membership funding. Veteran investigative journalists from the mainstream media brought their traditional investigative journalistic norms and practices to this newsroom's innovative financial foundation.

Recently, Marianne Colbran (2022) agreed with Konieczna (2018) that nonprofit organisations such as our three cases are transforming investigative journalism by cultivating the participation of citizens as well as members in a range of ways.

## TECHNOLOGY AND HYBRIDITY

As pointed out by Örnebring (2010), journalists have traditionally expressed a deterministic view of technology and its profound impact upon their practice. Looking at our three cases, we see professionals and organisations working hard to combine new digital tools (and digital collaborators) with traditional practices to integrate digital possibilities with in-person engagement.

Compared to Bureau Local and KCIJ, Bristol Cable staff were especially concerned about technology introducing an ungovernable separation between the professionals and the people. Both the founders and the staff members at Bristol Cable stressed that the mainstream media was

distancing itself from its audience by working remotely, and one of the main motivations for the establishment of Bristol Cable itself was to close that growing gap. This was why one of our informants preferred to begin our fieldwork there by introducing us to the neighbourhoods in Bristol and the concerns and troubles of its citizenry as content for investigative stories.

In the case of Bureau Local, digital technology was among the hybrid elements which connected professionals and non-professionals. The Bureau Local uses digital technology actively in their intra-national local collaborations, dividing datasets according to communities and helping stakeholders develop data and computational skillsets. The Bureau Local also set up a Slack channel for their ‘Network’ of collaborators through which all interested parties could communicate.

The hybrid element of technology is deeply integrated into journalists’ work at the Korea Center for Investigative Journalism, where its Data Journalism Unit is entirely dedicated to data finding, data analysis and data visualisation with computer software such as Excel and Python. Without this data and computational expertise, the newsroom would be unable to participate in cross-border collaborations such as the Panama Papers, which are based on a gigantic amount of data. KCIJ’s cultivation of data journalism is among the priorities which are applauded by its citizen funders.

## HYBRID PRACTICES AND ROUTINES

Our three hybrid journalistic start-ups could not have arisen outside of the presently thriving investigative media ecology, which complements traditional newsroom interactions with actor collaborations at events, seminars, workshops and conferences. Bristol Cable, for example, is known for inviting investigative journalists to workshops for non-professionals to teach investigative skills and traditional journalism. Its team also brings the public to programs and asks them for help with project topics. While the Bureau Local’s local collaborations mainly take place among professional journalists, the staff continues to experiment with engaging citizens via programs such as the news-based theatre tour. And the Korea Center for Investigative Journalism fills the void in investigative journalism left by departing legacy media organisations by actively promoting its in-depth news projects to its donor-members. The team also offers training and workshops where ordinary citizens are invited to explore the new practices

developed by this emerging newsroom. According to KCIJ staff, that is, these efforts seek to give something back to the people who support their work.

## CONCLUSION

Thus far in the book, we have argued that investigative journalism consists of *both* a traditional mindset *and* an openness to alternative ways of organising work, technology and practices. By looking at particular hybrid start-ups as our cases, we have explored the potential of this new media ecology. While watchdog journalism has deep roots in established media organisations and among highly professionalised reporters, nonprofit investigative journalism is now seen as one way to ‘repair’ the field (Konieczna, 2018). It has also been suggested that hybridity can help the news media conduct in-depth investigations (Reese, 2021), and that universities and media organisations might collaborate in a hybrid fashion (Olsen, 2020). Our case studies consolidate the possibility of journalistic hybridisation into certain particular elements and actions in the interests of rehabilitating the practice of investigative journalism in our pandemic-informed digital era.

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PART III

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## Globalising Mindsets



## Global Investigative Collaboration

*Maria Konow-Lund and Saba Bebawi*

In this chapter, we focus on how investigative cross-border collaboration has arisen and developed in the digital era by drawing upon our relatively unprecedented access to several news workers at the *Forbidden Stories* organisation in Paris during its formative phase. This collaborative network grew out of the desire of a professional journalists' collective to defend their freedom of speech following the Charlie Hebdo terror attack in 2015. Forbidden Stories seeks to protect and redistribute investigative projects where the journalists who initiated them are either imprisoned or endangered and does this by organising transnational and investigative collaborations in Europe and, more recently, in a broader Global North and Global South context. We conducted our interviews with informants at the organisation, as well as some of its networks, in 2018 and 2019. We were especially interested in the hybrid aspects of these global

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collaborations with respect to technology, culture-specific modes of communication, and professional practices and standards. Rather than perpetuating the fraught divide and binaries between ‘mainstream and alternative, digital and non- or pre-digital journalism’ (Witschge et al., 2016, p. 2), we studied the ways in which they mixed and combined various methods that led to the common goal of holding power to account around the world.

This is captured in Chadwick’s observation that ‘hybridity alerts us to the unusual things that happen when distinct entities come together to create something new that nevertheless has continued with the old’ (Chadwick, 2017, p. 4). Chadwick’s historical approach to this notion goes back to the seventeenth century, when hybridity carried ‘a racial meaning as a label for mixed racial inheritance’, but extends into the present context, where it implies that something traditional is merging with something new to create ‘a mixed character’ (Chadwick, 2017, pp. 10–11). Given the sheer scale of the ongoing dispersion and hybridisation of journalistic activity, both obvious and less so (Domingo, 2016, p. 145), the term hybrid might appear too general or all-encompassing to be useful as an approach, yet academics have relied on it nevertheless. It has been applied in journalism studies to entire institutions (Reese, 2021), media systems (Chadwick, 2017), and professional cultures in a global context (Waisbord, 2013). Yet, such studies tend to often overlook exactly how their subjects became hybridised.

Arjun Appadurai (1990) talks about how hybridity takes place in global flows, where ‘sameness’ and ‘difference’ blend to produce the ‘triumphantly universal and the resiliently particular’ (Appadurai, 1990, pp. 307–308). This quality, Appadurai suggests, emerges as a consequence of disjunctive flows of people, technologies, money, ideologies and media within what he describes as the ‘global cultural economy’, which is marked by a ‘tension between cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization’ (Appadurai, 1990, p. 295). This tension has been exemplified through the empirical study in this chapter, where investigative collaborations exhibit shared elements as well as elements that are unique to individual iterations, reflecting the fact that ‘sameness’ and ‘difference’ can exist simultaneously. Furthermore, and as a result of the simultaneous flow of homogenisation and heterogenisation, Appadurai suggests that this new global cultural economy ‘cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing center-periphery models (even those that might account for multiple centers and peripheries)’ (Appadurai, 1990, p. 296). Because

new media ecologies and networks continue to emerge, we will use the present study to engage with how hybridisation is both negotiated and, ultimately, normalised (Örnebring, 2016).

This trend is particularly evident in the current practice wherein investigative reporters who are working on open-source investigations, for example, must collaborate with non-journalistic emerging actors who are tech savvy, such as Airwars, Bellingcat, Forensic Architecture and Syrian Archive (Müller & Wiik, 2021). There is clearly increasing awareness of the need for hybrid collaborations across disciplines, across cultures, and across investigative reporters themselves in a more globalised world. In a strategy report on the global diffusion of the practice of investigative journalism, Kaplan (2013) considers globalisation critical to the ways in which watchdog reporting had transformed and points to the related need for public accountability, particularly when journalists are targeting crime and corruption. One of his main concerns is the lack of financial support for non-profit investigative groups, though he ultimately concludes:

Global and regional networks of investigative journalists backed by donors and fuelled by globalization and an explosion in data and communications technology are growing increasingly effective and sophisticated. Journalists are linking up as never before to collaborate on stories involving international crime, unaccountable businesses, environmental degradation, safety, and health problems. (Kaplan, 2013)

This rise of a ‘Global Fourth Estate’ (Berglez & Gearing, 2018) is also obvious in the response to global criminal networks and organised crime presented by the work of the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), which insists, ‘With the help of a “criminal service industry” – corrupt banks, law firms, registration agents, and lobbyists – criminal networks have steadily grown their markets, and the world’s most corrupt officials and tycoons look, launder and hide stolen money for future use [...] OCCRP believes in a network to fight a network’ (from the OCCRP website). In this sense, insight into the rise and diffusion of investigative global collaborations and networks could not be more relevant.

## DIFFUSION OF INVESTIGATIVE GLOBAL COLLABORATIONS AND NETWORKS

Pioneering American initiatives such as the Global Investigative Journalist Conference and the Global Investigative Journalist Network (GIJN) paved the way for world-spanning collaborations. According to David Kaplan, the GIJN executive director, the idea of cross-border journalistic collaboration was initially slow to take root (personal communication, 17 July 2019). The first Global Investigative Journalism Conference, at Lillehammer in 2016, arose through the efforts of the executive director of the Investigative Editors and Reporters (IRE) organisation, Brant Houston, and Danish investigative reporter Nils Mulvad. According to Kaplan, Houston was a guest at Mulvad's home in Aarhus, Denmark, in the spring of 2000 to host a program for journalists about computer-assisted reporting (CAR), and he suggested that the next time they offered the program, they should 'invite the world' (Kaplan, 2016). By the time the Lillehammer conference took place, the GIJN<sup>1</sup> network had grown to 138 members in 62 countries (Kaplan, 2016).

In what follows, we will explore the hybrid aspects of the work at Forbidden Stories following a description of the origins of the organisation, focusing on the roles played by digital technology, communication and hybrid professionalism in its collaborations. It is worth noting that most of our Forbidden Stories informants were still recovering from the traumatic experience of being first at the scene of the terror attack at Charlie Hebdo in 2015. This event inspired the Forbidden Stories founder, Laurent Richard, to propose a professional collaborative network which could publish the projects of endangered journalists for free, both in Europe and elsewhere. Forbidden Stories has also coordinated cross-border collaborations involving unfinished projects by killed, imprisoned or persecuted reporters, evoking, in turn, the equally spontaneous response of Dan Bolles' journalist colleagues following his murder in 1976 in Arizona by resentful subjects of his reporting. This response became known among watchdog reporters as the Arizona project (Grey, 2021), and it involved people taking time away from their own media organisations and projects to complete Bolles' unfinished investigative

<sup>1</sup>The Global Investigative Journalism Network is a hub for reporters around the globe. The aim of the network is to build and strengthen watchdog journalism around the world with a specific focus on the parts of the world where journalism is repressed by regimes.

stories. Like the Arizona project, Forbidden Stories underlined the message that killing the journalist will not kill the story. By using technology to connect reporters across borders and cultures, Forbidden Stories is able to digitise the ideological reaction of its ‘custodians of conscience’ and realise important progress in the practice of investigative journalism.

### CONSTRUCTING A GLOBAL INVESTIGATIVE COLLABORATION AND NEGOTIATING HYBRID ELEMENTS

One scholarly approach to journalism positions its norms and practices as the means through which its work (and perspective on actual events) is constructed and shaped (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Tuchman, 1978). In line with Paterson and Domingo (2008), we hold that understanding the actual production process of journalism is essential to a broader view of the field, but one must discern between it and the sponsoring organisation’s ideals (Paterson & Domingo, 2008, p. 2). As Schlesinger memorably wrote, ethnographic methodology opens the black box of production by seeking out ‘basic information about the working ideologies and practices of cultural producers’. Production studies have long revealed a rather one-sided focus on the physical newsroom, whereas the emergence of a hybrid media ecology (Reese, 2021) has now forced the consideration of virtual spaces and engagements as well. Unlike the first and second ‘waves’ of journalism studies (Cottle, 2000), then, we now find researchers more interested in bottom-up collaborations and online networks than top-down organisational strategy and tactics (Berglez & Gearing, 2018; Heinrich, 2011).

As an analytical device, hybridity naturally undermines the typically dichotomous approach of many studies—an approach which views the profession of journalism as either unified *or* divided in terms of practitioners’ attitudes and goals (Waisbord, 2013, p. 229), but rarely both at once. When hybridity is used as a lens through which to view cross-border collaboration, though, its value is even more evident in the context of a world which has increasingly become more networked in terms of geography but also professional (and academic) discipline.

## METHOD AND EMPIRICAL DATA

For this chapter, we draw upon semi-structured qualitative interviews that took place in person in London and Paris and on Skype in 2018 and 2019. We engaged our informants in three dedicated phases related to (1) how the Forbidden Stories global network was first established, (2) how its practices were implemented and organised, and (3) what the salient experiences, challenges and benefits related to cross-border collaboration were, particularly in terms of the Global South and Global North. In the first phase, we focused on interviewing reporters, managers and a developer-reporter at Forbidden Stories. Next, we conducted follow-up interviews with the founders and original team at Forbidden Stories a year later, as well as a network collaborator based in the Global South and several others who had a lot of experience with cross-border collaboration between the Global North and the Global South. In the third phase, we again interviewed experienced cross-border collaborators.

As background to our research here, it is important to note that we came across the newly established Forbidden Stories while conducting a different study. One of our informants told us that the platform was positioning itself to impact the field in terms of overcoming journalist endangerment, and we were able to secure unprecedented access to the professionals who were most involved in putting it together. Since that time, other scholars have taken an interest in Forbidden Stories (Grey, 2021), but no one else was there when it first came together. At that time, it had only a few employees, but they all possessed unique knowledge and insight into its entrepreneurial phase, making them ‘elite informants’ (Figenschou, 2010). We also saw Forbidden Stories as particularly interesting because it was a direct and constructive response to a critical event (the Charlie Hebdo attack) (Konow-Lund & Olsson, 2021), and its first cross-border collaborative investigation focused on another critical event—the killing of Maltese blogger and investigative reporter Daphne Caruana Galizia. As a result of this event, 45 reporters from 18 different news organisations and 15 different countries joined a collaboration led by Forbidden Stories called the ‘Daphne Project’, which produced articles in the *Guardian* and the *New York Times*, among other places.

After our initial round of interviews with the Forbidden Stories founders, we returned to Paris in 2019 to ask follow-up questions concerning the organisation of work at the platform. The core team was very small, originally consisting of four people, including war correspondent and

experienced foreign correspondent Laurent Richard. He was supported by a documentary producer and two reporters; before long, the platform took on another experienced reporter and another documentary maker, plus an editorial manager. In 2018, Forbidden Stories also hired an experienced tech reporter and developer. We conducted two interviews in Paris in the summer of 2018 and one on Skype in the early fall of 2018, as well as several interviews in London with reporters who had taken part in Forbidden Stories collaborations but also worked with the European Investigative Network (EIC), the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), and the Global Investigative Journalist Network (GIJN). The Global Investigative Journalism Network is a hub for reporters around the globe and it aims to build and strengthen watchdog journalism around the world with a specific focus on the parts of the world where journalism is repressed by regimes.

Ultimately, again, our study relied upon the qualitative research methodology known as ‘elite’ interviews, which tend to involve top-ranking executives (Giddens, 1972), skilled professionals (McDowell, 1998), or experts with unique insights and knowledge (Richard, 1996; Vaughan, 2013). While this is not a new research methodology, it remains relatively rare in the field (Figenschou, 2010); still, it suited our available informants, especially given their pivotal roles in Forbidden Stories from the start. The interviews lasted from 50 to 90 minutes, which allowed for productive depth regarding certain details.

## HOW A TERROR ATTACK LED TO A GLOBAL INVESTIGATIVE COLLABORATION

Through our interviews, it became clear that the establishment of the Forbidden Stories network arose out of certain professionals’ anger at how the Charlie Hebdo attack tried to undermine basic journalistic norms and values, as one informant told us:

We were the first ones to go in there. They [the colleagues at Charlie Hebdo] were working on the same hallway as us, so we saw the two brothers coming in the building, we heard everything, and we were the first ones to try to give help. So, we saw them, we arrived, and it was already too late. They were motionless, they were already dead, but it had a huge impact on us, obviously, because they were killed because of their drawings. (Informant, Forbidden Stories, 20 August 2018)

According to this informant, the terror attack led to a desire to do meaningful work to protect both journalism as a form of freedom of speech as well as the journalists themselves. After all, the informant stressed, there are ‘dozens of journalists killed every year’ due to their work:

A lot of them, they’re all working on global public interest issues. Several of these journalists are also covering wars – that’s information we need – but a lot of them are also working on local issues that are also global issues because they’re involving a lot of companies or businesses that are today global. They’re all working on human rights violations. There’s different topics – environmental issues, corruption, tax evasion. (Informant, Forbidden Stories, 20 August 2018)

Several informants we interviewed noted that the establishment of Forbidden Stories also pointed back to a tragic event which took place in Arizona in 1976:

The idea [of the platform] is not new, actually. Don Bolles was killed in the USA in Phoenix, Arizona, in a car bomb. He was working on local political corruption but a few days after he was murdered, 38 journalists from 28 major organisations gathered to pursue his work and publish it’. (Informant, Forbidden Stories, 20 August 2018)

While this informant insisted that the work at Forbidden Stories was not therapeutic as such, he still believed that the experience of finding their slain colleagues motivated the organisation’s establishment.

Another informant had a lot of experience as a war correspondent and had even been badly injured while working. He covered challenging global issues such as money laundering, corruption within the medical sector, and terrorism. He was quick to acknowledge that journalists living in a democratic state and enjoying freedom of speech could use their privilege to help journalists who were less fortunate in this regard:

I arrived [at Charlie Hebdo] just after the terrorist escaped the building, and then it was really an extremely difficult situation where we saw some friends or colleagues die and many of them were already killed some minutes before our arrival. That day changed my life, and I really decided to think about what we can do – what I can do personally as a journalist to keep stories alive, to capture the work of assassinated reporters. As my skill is investigative, my question was how can I do journalism to defend journalism? The

other questions are how can collaborative journalism defeat censorship, and how can we send a powerful signal to enemies of the press that you tried to kill the messenger but you will never kill the message. (Informant, Forbidden Stories, 19 July 2019)

The quotes above demonstrate how two professional journalists sought to make something useful out of the destruction wrought by an act of terror, yet Forbidden Stories also owes its establishment to the larger investigative-journalistic ecology. After the terror attack, the organisation's main proponent secured a useful scholarship at MIT in the United States, where he met key people who had been involved in the organisation of the Panama and Paradise Papers collaborations and even reached out to Edward Snowden to discuss the creation of a safe drop box for leaks. It was during his MIT fellowship that the Forbidden Stories founder fully worked out the idea of his network as a gateway for stories which were thought too dangerous to publish in the mainstream media.

After having worked on investigative projects for years, the founder had concluded that the most efficient way to work on international investigative journalism was to collaborate with other journalists but also incorporate well-known media organisations. This was to counter several types of global threat to the practice:

The collaboration is a natural way of seeing journalism evolving because the threats are global, the traffic is global, the crimes are global. So, we need a global answer, and the global answer can come from that kind of collaboration, and if you show that [alignment], then you can fight all this conspiracy [theorising] you get, like 'CNN is a fake news corporation'. But if CNN is collaborating with the *Guardian*, with *Le Monde*, then we cannot blame them if they are driven by some corporate interests or some political agenda, because collaboration is a multiple interest. So, you cannot be accused of playing just for the interests of the owners of *Le Monde* if you're also collaborating with the *Guardian*. So, I think that's a first good way to break this kind of argument. I think that when you are collaborating regarding these kinds of fake news issues, collaboration brings protection, of course – brings much more precise information because when you are 20 journalists working on one sentence and how to factcheck it, these guys say, okay, this minister is corrupted, how can we say that? So, you will have the lawyers of the *Guardian*, the lawyers of *Le Monde*, they will debate all together about can we say that? In the end, the information we are producing and delivering to the consumer, to the readers, is something that is way more processed



[...] So, I think this makes sense too, and the third thing that kind of collaboration can also explain is for whom and for what we are working. We are working for the public interest when we are investigating environmental crimes. (Informant, *Forbidden Stories*, 11 July 2019)

What this means is that media organisations can come together to empower each other as well as journalists, and this holds for traditional efforts but especially for cross-border investigative collaborations operating across the Global North and Global South. This is not only a means of pooling resources and syndication in line with the original establishment of the Associated Press (Gramling, 1940) but also a means of reinforcing one another's brand and credibility. From our first round of interviews, then, we were seeing the impact of hybrid thinking on journalistic practice at *Forbidden Stories*.

#### GLOBAL INVESTIGATIVE COLLABORATION AND ORGANISATION

When we returned to our informants in the summer of 2019, *Forbidden Stories* was launching an investigative collaborative project devoted to environmental crime and corruption. Like the *Daphne Project*, it sought to pool resources among reporters and certain legacy media companies. Individual reporters would be encouraged to contribute their specific skills and experience to the field investigations (informant, *Forbidden Stories*, 10 July 2019). When cross-border collaboration is involved as well, we have what Waisbord calls 'hybrid professional cultures', where 'Journalistic cultures have always been sensitive and permeable to ideas from other countries. Yet the particular dynamics of the contemporary globalized, networked journalism accelerate the blinding of occupational cultures' (Waisbord, 2013, p. 229). This sort of exchange is only possible via what former *Guardian* investigative editor David Leigh calls a mutual journalistic mindset—one that can be absent in some collaborations, such as those between reporters and various hackers:

The WikiLeaks collaboration was very interesting for that reason, and one of the conclusions to which it was tempting to come was to think hackers and journalists don't really mix because their mindset is so different. And the mindset of somebody like Julian [Assange], who is basically a hacker, is completely different from ours, and it came to a head over the quarrels about

whether everything should be published or whether we should keep things out because they might harm people or endanger people. My personal feeling is that there will never be a meeting of minds because hackers are people who get a sense of power and satisfaction from basically stealing material, and they don't have any journalistic values. Their values are they want to be able to acquire stuff to show their skills and then they think they should publish it because they've got these rather simple-minded ideas that information should be free and transparency is a good thing. It's all just shallow. Whereas journalism is all about selection – selection according to your values of what you think is ethical or not ethical and, indeed, what you think is relevant or not relevant. (David Leigh, Former Head of investigations, *The Guardian*, Former Professor of Journalism at City University, 24 April 2018)

From the data we acquired, it appears that there are at least three prerequisites for a 'global collaboration': (1) an investigative journalistic mindset, (2) agreement on the ethical aspects and (3) an agreement to disagree. In addition, the dimensions of global, national and local must be able to coexist. These conditions involve both what the investigation is about and who is involved in it:

For instance, in Africa, in Tanzania, we did an investigation on a gold mine. It was essential for us to also have an African journalist who knows the field better. He can find his way in an area where there's not a lot of journalists and not a lot of white people as well. But that's one example. Another example is, for instance, this year, since we were working on environmental issues, we had the chance to work with the *Guardian's* reporter who was in charge of their environmental desk. (Informant, Forbidden Stories, 10 July 2019)

Another important aspect of global collaborative investigation is reporter recruitment. One informant noted that the Forbidden Stories team had to 'explain how collaboration works' to those who had never done it and generally preferred to engage with 'journalists who are used to working on collaborative journalism' (informant, Forbidden Stories, 10 July 2019). This is because the circumstances of such hybridised collaborations are relatively unique:

That's something new – that, I would say, five years ago it was more of a professional mistake to share information with another reporter. Now it's becoming a model to bring more and more skills and force to an investigation'. (Informant, Forbidden Stories, 10 July 2019)

## GLOBAL INVESTIGATIVE COLLABORATION AND HYBRID TECHNOLOGY

Like the ICIJ's Panama Papers cross-border collaboration, which had to develop technological applications for the purpose of searching the leaked data (Baack, 2016),<sup>2</sup> Forbidden Stories boasted an advanced digital technology strategy already in its very first collaborative investigative project, following the work-related murder of Maltese blogger and investigative reporter Daphne Caruana Galizia, who focused on corruption, nepotism, patronage and money laundering, and who was killed via car bomb on 16 October 2017 (Konow-Lund & Olsson, 2021). Forbidden Stories responded with a cross-border collaboration involving 45 reporters from 18 outlets around the world, as well as powerful media organisations such as the *New York Times*, the *Guardian*, and Reuters. The work on Galizia's unfinished stories demanded a nuanced approach to technology-related tools such as Signal<sup>3</sup> and Telegram,<sup>4</sup> for example:

We use Signal because it is the opposite of Telegram – everything is open source with regard to the Signal encrypted protocol, which is not entirely the case with Telegram. If I'm not mistaken, what's happening inside the server of Telegram – like the end-to-end communication – is okay, but what is happening inside the servers is not open source, so we don't know. And Signal has not been broken yet. There's no stories about any leak or information breach in Signal. So that's one way. There are also other ways, and I'm not going to tell [you about] every way we talk with sources and journalists, but [...] Signal is a great tool. You can create threads regarding stories, chats [...] it works well, but it's not perfect. On the Daphne Project, we had a problem with the number of messages we were putting on Signal, so that's a problem. When you're investigating on a collaborative project [and] you receive 400 notifications a day, it's hard to follow everything, and, to ensure security, we set up disappearing messages on Signal. [The timeframe] goes from a few minutes to a week, depending on how sensitive the

<sup>2</sup> See <https://medium.com/@sbaack?p=9c6b5eafa7d3>

<sup>3</sup> This is a communication app which supports messaging, voice, and video calls. Signal is free and open source, and it is also characterized by end-to-end encryption.

<sup>4</sup> While end-to-end is offered by default on Signal, this is not the case for Telegram, another communication app, which only provides it for secret chats.

information is. So, if you go, for instance, on a vacation for a week and you come back, you can't catch up on everything. So Signal is a great tool to communicate, to exchange information quickly and globally, but for the Daphne Project we also needed a tool to gather all the information we had. That's why we reached out to OCCRP. They provided us with an encrypted Wikipage which they developed themselves. It's a platform where we were able to put everything. (Reporter, Forbidden Stories, 20 August 2018)

As mentioned earlier, Forbidden Stories projects were not like those which responded to a major data leak, for example. Instead of being reactive, they sought to be proactive (Konow-Lund, 2013). One interviewee explained that some of the reporters associated with the platform had experience with investigative television documentaries, which required them to travel to certain locations and produce sources by working in the field. They combined this physical travel with their virtual research and collaboration when developing their own hybridised journalistic practices:

I think the most challenging thing in collaborative journalism is that collaborative journalism, so far, is based on data journalism and [...] on receiving a leak. So, the Panama Papers is foremost a leak. So [...] you're receiving a leak – it's big, and you have a lot of data – and then you call some friends or ICIJ and say, okay, let's share and let's split the work. With Forbidden Stories, we don't have any leak. We sometimes don't have any sources. But we think and we feel that there is a good and important investigation to be done – important because someone has been killed for the story. And the story is important for not only the local community but the entire world, because it's about the minerals, for instance, [or] about money laundering. (Informant, Forbidden Stories, 11 July 2019)

Forbidden Stories embraced these new practice models despite their costs and risks in the interests of advancing investigative journalism in a global and digital age.

### HYBRID PROFESSIONAL CULTURES IN THE FIELD

In 2018–2019, Forbidden Stories took on a 'wide-ranging investigation called the Green Blood Project, for journalists killed or silenced for environmental reporting' (Grey, 2021, p. 83). A particular priority of this project was the ability to factcheck by 'adding different databases of different groups', among other things:

We started to work on the supply chain of the different minerals we were working on to check the names of the companies we did investigate, and we asked partners to check in on the Panama Papers and the Paradise Papers. (Informant, Forbidden Stories, 10 July 2019)

In the global collaborative investigative ecology, that is, databases once pored over for tax haven abuses remain available to future investigations of other issues as well. Additionally, those future investigations might use different methods to produce different outcomes:

I think that where our collaboration is different is because we are not working based on the leaked documents, where you start with the documents and investigate them for the participants to find the story they want to pursue. What we do is different because we investigate the same story but with a lot of different journalists at the same time. So, you do not want to step on someone's toes, particularly when you want to meet someone or locate a source. You do not want the journalists to call the same people at the same time, otherwise you risk revealing the work of the consortium at the start of the project. You do not want to reveal that. That is one of the strengths of a consortium – to have journalists collaborating without making too much noise. (Informant, Forbidden Stories, 10 July 2019)

Another strength of these collaborative arrangements involves the way in which legacy media organisations or prominent existing cross-border collaborations can reinforce the work of individuals or organisations with fewer resources. According to the study informants at Forbidden Stories, there are many media organisations which do not have the resources to launch field investigations lasting months. Better-endowed peers can enable such organisations to concentrate their work on angles most relevant to their own interests or market.

The Green Blood Project, for example, extended its focus to what has been called the 'Sand Mafia' which was illegally controlling the Indian market for sand and gravel (<https://forbiddenstories.org/sand-mafias-silence-journalists-in-india/>). Two Forbidden Stories reporters travelled to the Indian state of Tamil Nadu in autumn of 2018 to conduct interviews and collaborate with a local investigative reporter who had published several stories on the environmental impact of mining sand. We reached out to this reporter as part of our research in Paris on the Forbidden Stories platform, and she told us about how a chain of decisions and coincidences led to a dangerous situation, not only for the two

Forbidden Stories reporters who had gone to India but also for her. One of those Forbidden Stories reporters described her predicament from his perspective:

[She] cannot go back to Tamil Nadu to investigate. She's been working on it for the last five years. But she cannot go in the field or in the villages because it's too dangerous for her. She's been targeted. I mean, a campaign of communication against her has been organized by some miners. She cannot go down. So that's a direct impact in terms of how harassment affects a journalist. (Informant, Forbidden Stories, 10 July 2019)

The other reporter framed the situation in relation to the general journalistic practice which had emerged at Forbidden Stories. He noted that the local investigative reporter was already at risk, and the French reporters collaborating with her could not go with her to the region they were investigating. Her safety was their responsibility while they were there, so they could not tell anyone who they knew or why. In general, during investigations abroad they would always be very cautious about sharing information. He added that they kept in touch with the local reporters with whom they collaborated in the aftermath of the investigation, which offered some degree of protection as well, because so many journalists were involved in the work. He concluded by emphasising that 'we are very cautious in the field to try to not make any moves that can put the local people in danger' (informant, Forbidden Stories, 11 July 2019). The visiting reporters faced risks themselves too—after visiting a site run by a national mining agency, for example, they found themselves branded on posters as 'spies', and the local reporter had to help them get out of India as fast as possible. All three of these reporters emphasised to us that cross-border collaborations involve significant cultural challenges including different languages, different codes of conduct, different journalistic norms and values, and above all different cultural characteristics. Developing ways to capitalise on these variations and differences was vital to the success of Forbidden Stories.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

This chapter addresses a gap in the literature regarding how professional investigative journalists develop global investigative collaborations in response to literal and figurative attacks upon their stories and colleagues.

The nonprofit collaborative Forbidden Stories network harnessed bottom-up innovation to hold power to account even when its journalism was under threat, leveraging hybridised physical and virtual practices to collaborate upon and publish their stories. Such reporter- and editor-driven horizontal networks are forced to develop hybrid ways of pooling resources and safeguarding professionals to advance projects across the Global South and Global North among organisations with very different levels of resources.

Bregtje van der Haak, Michael Parks and Manuel Castells (2012) argue that ‘the notion of the isolated journalist working alone, whether toiling at his desk in a newsroom or reporting from a crime scene or a disaster, is obsolete’, thus supporting the notion that networked practices of journalism can be regarded as the future of journalism based on ‘networked information-gathering and fact-checking’ (p. 2927). They observe, ‘The actual product of journalistic practice now usually involves networks of various professionals and citizens collaborating, corroborating, correcting, and ultimately distilling the essence of the story that will be told’ (van der Haak et al., 2012, p. 2927). Particularly evident in the case of Forbidden Stories is how ‘as a network, we can optimize resources and generate synergy, and new creativity will emerge from our sharing’ (van der Haak et al., 2012, p. 2935) as a direct result of all the resources and talent brought together by the organisation. In all, the practices developed at Forbidden Stories evoke Appadurai’s description of a global culture where ‘sameness’ and ‘difference’ blend to produce the ‘triumphantly universal and the resiliently particular’ (Appadurai, 1990, pp. 307–308). New applications of the traditional and traditional applications of the new at Forbidden Stories add up to a hybrid form of journalism which may represent the very future of the field.

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## How a COVID-19 Live Tracker Led to Innovation in Investigative Journalism

*Maria Konow-Lund and Jenny Wiik*

The practice of investigative journalism is constantly pushing the boundaries of what journalism can do and should be. While certain core values remain intact, professionals readily experiment with new methods, forms of collaboration and technological solutions. In times of crisis, this inherent innovative power can be further accelerated and amplified. In this chapter, we explore the intersection of crisis, innovation and journalistic boundaries, as progress in this field inevitably produces questions and negotiations concerning both boundaries and definitions. Research on the ways in which journalists adapt or innovate during (and due to) crises is scarce, but the COVID-19 pandemic offered a unique opportunity to fill this gap. In the midst of the pandemic, a team of Norwegian researchers managed to gain access to the ongoing implementation of an

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infection-related data tracker at the most-read online newspaper in Norway. Team members were able to explore how this new tool impacted journalistic autonomy, cross-disciplinary work, and the relationship between staff and management (Konow-Lund et al., 2022).

In what follows, we will engage with these questions via our case study of VG Online's COVID-19 Live Tracker, a digital representation of facts including number of infections, vaccination rates, and actions implemented by government officials both locally and nationally. The aim of the live tracker was to update the audience with the best available information in real time. While such live trackers have been developed and implemented by many news organisations around the world, they remain poorly understood as examples of journalistic innovation. At VG Online, the COVID-19 Live Tracker gained over 472 million unique clicks in a country with a population of under 5.5 million citizens between 2020 and the fall of 2022.<sup>1</sup>

VG Online's COVID-19 Live Tracker is an example of a crisis-driven genre innovation which merged technological affordances with audience needs and journalistic curiosity. It also represented a site of professional boundary work and negotiation. In fact, VG itself nominated the live tracker for the SKUP—the highest award in investigative journalism in Norway—based on the innovation that underpinned the project. This annual award recognises initiatives which have dominated the news agenda, emerged from new working methods and impacted society (Strømme, 2020). As VG argued in its nomination narrative, the COVID-19 Live Tracker aligned with those criteria because it involved much more than computational news production—many sources, for example, had to be contacted manually to supplement the data on the tracker. The award's emphasis on collaboration across areas and practices derives from the Old Norse concept of 'dugnad' *dugnaðr*, which means 'help, support'. It especially emphasises the importance of journalists sharing their investigative methodologies to pool knowledge and collaborate on ways to overcome obstacles, and VG saw all that possibility in its live tracker as a fundamentally crisis-driven innovation in journalistic practice.

When the COVID-19 virus first began to surface all over the world in February and early March 2020, media organisations and the rest of the society hurried to catch up to it. Months later, on 9 July 2020, WHO Director General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus was still wondering:

<sup>1</sup>Source of click total: a senior editorial developer at VG on 18 October 2022.

“How is it difficult for humans to unite to fight a common enemy that’s killing people indiscriminately?” (Picheta, 2020). Societal challenges persisted, even though, by that point, 11.8 million cases of the virus had been reported to the WHO and 544,000 lives had been lost (Picheta, 2020). A particular characteristic of the first phase of the pandemic was the uncertainty—nobody really knew the consequences of the virus in any of life’s arenas. For journalism, however, it had a dramatic impact on routines, work practices and audience behaviour. In the introduction to a special issue of *Digital Journalism*, Quandt and Wahl-Jorgensen (2021) suggest that the pandemic represented a critical moment in the ongoing transformation of journalistic practice. While much has been written and said about the impact of the pandemic on journalism, there remain relatively few studies which focus on investigative journalism in particular.

### INNOVATING INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISTIC PRACTICE IN A CRISIS

As argued elsewhere in this book, the genre of investigative journalism seeks above all to hold power to account, and this mission lends both depth and relevance to crisis communications in the newsroom. Stetka and Örnebring (2013, p. 3) define it as ‘sustained news coverage of moral and legal transgressions of persons in positions of power [...] that requires more time and resources than regular news reporting’. Other definitions of investigative journalism note that certain transgressions might also be concealed by the powerful behind turbulence of events and actions. (This aspect of things is especially relevant in times of crisis, when the authorities may want to do what is right but lack the knowledge or ability to do so.) In our historical overview in this book, we suggested that traditional gumshoe investigative journalism is related to precision journalism (Meyer, 2002 [1973]), which may be regarded as a precursor to computational journalism. ‘Precision journalism’ was coined by Philip Meyer to label his conviction that journalists can learn much from the research methods used by scientists—in short, he wanted ‘to encourage my colleagues in journalism to apply the principles of scientific method to their task of gathering and presenting the news’ (Meyer, 2002 [1973], p. vii). Computational journalism promotes what Jeanette M. Wing calls ‘computational thinking’, or a way of ‘solving problems, designing systems and understanding human behaviour that draws on the concepts fundamental to computer

science' (Wing, 2006, p. 33). According to Wing, this approach comes with a 'universally applicable attitude and skillset everyone, not just computer scientists, would be eager to learn and use' (p. 33). Astrid Gynnild pulls the two approaches together in her notion of 'computational exploration in journalism (CEJ)', which captures 'the multifaceted development of algorithms, data, and social science methods in reporting and storytelling' (Gynnild, 2014, p. 1). She stresses that CEJ does not abandon actual human intervention or the characteristics of traditional journalistic practice, which are rather 'taken for granted' (p. 7). As an example, Gynnild points to the work of the cross-disciplinary 'Toxic Waters' team at the *New York Times*, which employed CEJ but did not require every team member to be equally versed in data-journalistic methods (p. 8). Similarly, the implementation of VG's COVID-19 Live Tracker combined computational scope and human skills, but in this case during a time of considerable duress beginning in March 2020. Its data was generated via the acquisition of official datasets as well as traditional reporting methods and even legwork. The audience was given the ability to click through the data and offer feedback. The tracker data was also used in VG's reporting and graphics.

While they are not antithetical as such, the relationship between regular journalists and editorial technical developers has earned academic attention (Karlsen & Stavelin, 2014). However, the pandemic placed new demands upon such collaborations even as it forced many parts of society to accelerate a general trend toward organisational digitisation (Konow-Lund et al., 2022; McKinsey Report, 2020). Journalistic renewal often arrives from the side and finds its way to the centre when these 'newcomers' bring added value to news production in the form of their innovative practices and approaches. Holton and Belair-Gagnon (2018) state that 'strangers' to the journalistic field (such as web developers and programmers) are 'importing qualities to it that do not originally stem from the journalistic profession' and have thus 'helped to introduce new ways of identifying what news is, how to deliver it more effectively, and how to better engage with news audiences' (Holton & Belair-Gagnon, 2018, p. 72). While studies exist addressing how technologists contribute their tools to journalism (Cohen et al., 2011), few researchers have looked at how the collaboration between technologists and journalists develops in the midst of the negotiation of occupational norms and values. One exception is the work of Lewis and Usher (2013, 2014) on the transnational hacker network. They write: 'Most research has looked at the potential

tools that hackers might create for journalists [...] rather than examine the actual relationships between these two groups' (Lewis & Usher, 2014, p. 385). The present chapter seeks to remedy this situation by engaging with the ways in which such innovation propels transformation in practices related to editorial decision making and management, media strategy and journalistic production.

Clearly, VG Online's COVID-19 Live Tracker both arose from and occasioned further innovation in that newsroom's journalistic practice, engagement with its audience, and cross-disciplinary collaborations, especially between developers and journalists. Nevertheless, researchers observe that many media organisations continue to link innovation to business and commercial success rather than the work of journalism itself. Creech and Nadler (2018) argue that this myopic view overlooks the impact of innovation on various historical, structural and cultural aspects of journalism. Storsul and Krumsvik (2013, pp. 16–17) argue that innovation is not only important to the platforms, processes and external promotion of brands but also a potential driver of paradigmatic change in the 'organization's mindset, values and business model'. More recently, Krumsvik et al. (2019) added that journalistic innovation could even be related to the news media's social purposes (see also Ní Bhroin, 2015). New combinations of media products and services—and existing combinations of them used in new ways—might improve the quality of life of citizens and drive positive change in society (Mulgan 2007).

Media innovations appear to accompany the audience's changed or intensified need for information in a crisis, and the main task for both journalists and their editors is to accommodate this need via whatever collaborations are necessary between individuals and departments and practices. Pavlik (2013, p. 183) defines news media innovation as 'the process of taking a new approach to media practices and forms while maintaining a commitment to quality and high ethical standards', arguing that innovation is a prerequisite for achieving a 'viable revenue model for the twenty-first century'. He associates innovation with four aspects of journalistic practice: (1) creating, delivering and presenting news content; (2) engaging the public in an interactive news discourse; (3) employing new methods of reporting optimised for the digital, networked age; and (4) developing new management and organisational strategies for a digital, networked and mobile environment (2013, p. 183).

During crises, though, innovation is not only implemented but also negotiated based upon the occupational norms and values of the

newsroom (Lewis & Usher, 2014), and this process inevitably challenges existing journalistic boundaries, genres and identities. The professional identity of the journalist is increasingly fluid in character, but at the same time stable and in some ways resistant to change (Wiik, 2010). The anthology *Boundaries of journalism* (Carlson & Lewis, 2015) applies Thomas Gieryn's sociological concept of 'boundary work' to a range of situations in journalism impacted by the constant negotiation of professional boundaries. Such negotiation can take place with external actors and fields of practice—recall Meyer's discussion of the boundaries between science and journalism. It can also take place when new actors, or 'strangers', bring alternative logics and mindsets with them into their journalistic practice (see, for example, Eldridge II, 2018; Holton & Belair-Gagnon, 2018). Inter-professional collaborations on innovative projects demand boundary work around issues such as jurisdiction within a certain field, or 'questions as to who may possess – and act on – legitimate knowledge' (Carlson & Lewis, 2015, p. 3). The impact of these negotiations lies in their 'epistemic authority', which 'binds knowledge and power together as authority carries concomitant rewards of prestige, autonomy, and material benefits' (Carlson & Lewis, 2015, p. 3). At times of crisis-driven innovation, existing understandings and arrangements become subject to interrogation, and new possibilities arise. The VG COVID-19 Live Tracker supplies an excellent case of such real-time boundary work and the ways in which our expectations for journalistic products and practices can shift.

### METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The methodology for this chapter involves a single case study—the implementation of VG's COVID-19 Live Tracker—as a window into the complexities of journalistic practice during the first pandemic in a century. Here, the case methodology will enable the depth of inquiry that we need to understand the impact of a crisis on a media organisation in terms of its structure, routines and processes (Yin, 2017). The COVID-19 pandemic was a collective traumatic event which challenged journalists to fulfil their roles as professionals even while suffering its consequences along with everyone else. There have been few such occasions in modern history where journalists have themselves struggled to make sense of the critical event on which they are reporting (Konow-Lund & Olsson, 2016). As the pandemic spread, journalists had to quickly adapt to new routines, such as working remotely, and researchers had to adapt as well. The methods

report from the VG team, submitted for the SKUP award, sheds light on the actual tools which were developed and deployed, but to grasp the subtle negotiations and situated experiences of the journalists and editors involved, we opted for several additional methodological approaches: (1) We conducted semi-structured qualitative one-on-one interviews using videoconferencing software. (2) We sought out informants in three distinct groups: those comfortable with meta-journalistic discourse and trained to analyse journalism itself in contexts such as the pandemic (this group included informants from the Norwegian Journalist Union, the Association of Norwegian Editors, and Faktisk.no [Norwegian Factcheckers]); regular news workers across disciplines; and editors and managers. (3) We interviewed informants both during the lockdown and afterward.

Regarding the first group of informants, Carlson (2016, p. 350) has defined meta-journalistic discourse as a ‘site in which actors publicly engage in processes of establishing definitions, setting boundaries, and rendering judgments about journalism’s legitimacy’. In this sense, it captures the ways in which journalists themselves frame the conversation about their work (Perreault & Vos, 2019; Vos & Perreault, 2020). While some aspects of the meta-journalistic discourse address the extended COVID-19 media ecology, other aspects look inward to the journalistic community itself. By reaching out to actors who may not have had first-hand experience with producing journalism during the pandemic, we hoped to secure an institutional perspective regarding the pandemic’s impact on journalism as an industry. These informants included managers at media organisations, editors, senior journalists, and a technological expert, and our first six interviews took place in January 2021. The next round of interviews took place in April and May and involved mostly regular news workers—that is, breaking-news journalists, investigative reporters and editorial developers. The last group of interviews returned us to managers and editors and concerned mostly decision making. The interviews lasted from 50 minutes to one hour. The interview guide focused specifically on topics such as innovation in practice, digital technology, the implementation of the COVID-19 Live Tracker, reflections on the various roles in the newsroom, and collaboration and tension between occupational and organisational professional discourses. All the interviews were transcribed and manually coded and categorised.

This chapter, then, aligns itself with Pavlik’s four aspects of innovation and structure: (1) the creation/delivery of a product; (2) how methods



are optimised; (3) how to engage the public; and (4) the development of management and strategies. Using these distinctions as our point of departure, we then ask how journalistic innovation takes place through new methods of reporting, how audiences are being engaged and whether new management and organisational strategies are arising as well. These three aspects will be balanced against the ongoing negotiation of professional and genre boundary work in the newsroom.

### VG'S COVID-19 GROUP: CREATING, DELIVERING AND PRESENTING EXCLUSIVE DATA

On 26 February 2020, the Norwegian Institute for Public Health announced that someone had tested positive for COVID-19 (Nilsen & Skjetne, 2020). In their methodology report to the Association of Investigative Journalists of Norway, the VG journalists recalled that their news organisation had been taken by surprise and lamented the fact that ‘a global pandemic constitutes a perfect basis for the rise of disinformation and conspiracies’ (Nilsen & Skjetne, 2020). As it had done during other critical events, VG began to look for opportunities for change and success in their practice despite the pandemic—opportunities based on responding to whatever needs for information would arise (Barland, 2012; Konow-Lund, 2013). In short, VG managers and journalists took a twofold approach. (1) They tried to understand what VG users needed, even if those users did not know it yet, and prepare a response or solution.<sup>2</sup> For example, when the Icelandic volcanic dust grounded planes in Europe in 2010, VG developed a ‘hitchhiker central’ service to help people get around; this kind of adaptation has also been referred to as ‘service news’ (Konow-Lund, 2013). (2) They tried to rise to the occasion and reinvent their organisation, processes and products to serve people better and improve their practice along the way.

Though news workers had heard and read about the pandemic, they were not particularly aware of it even as late as March 2020—most of VG’s newsroom staff, in fact, had travelled to New Orleans to attend the annual National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting (NICAR) conference only the week before Norway went into lockdown on 12 March. The first person to discern a potential need to implement a COVID-19 Live Tracker was an editorial developer with extensive newsroom experience. He

<sup>2</sup>National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting (NICAR).

explained that he was visiting his in-laws in the southern part of Norway and decided to switch on his computer, and his online searches convinced him of the importance of developing better tools for the coverage of the virus. This informant as well as others noted that world-class media organisations like the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* are considered trustworthy and reliable as sources, particularly during times of crisis. How might VG earn that reputation for itself?

During VG's development of the pandemic live tracker, the organisation's potential in terms of distributed autonomy was realised in a completely new way. While most of the editorial developers were at the NICAR conference in the United States, the one remaining developer and a reporter colleague initiated the project because the authorities did not have an aggregator of numbers and facts about COVID-19. These two staff members asked themselves three essential questions: (1) What information did VG already have concerning cases? (2) What other information could VG turn up? (3) How should VG share this information as meaningful statistics? Clearly, the public (and the VG staff) wanted help with very basic survival questions: How many people are infected in my neighbourhood? How many people can I have in my house? How do I protect myself and my family? How do I travel safely? When the editorial developers and data reporters rejoined the team after the New Orleans conference, the sole focus at VG became a technical solution to accommodate this need for information.

Almost immediately, a small VG staff group—two breaking-news reporters and two developers—was granted full autonomy free of management oversight to figure out how to develop the system. Some of them worked from home, and most of their internal communication was via Slack. The group started with a Google Sheet spreadsheet because this cloud-based system was set up to readily combine columns and cells into existing graphic design templates at [vg.no](http://vg.no) and allowed multiple people to work on it at the same time (Method report, SKUP, 2020). To begin with, the VG spreadsheet had 19 rows, and each row included information on a single case. Each registered case had its own number, the name and number of the municipality, the county, the date, and the outcome of the infection, as well as the gender of the infected person. Early on, there was little information available from the authorities; even the Norwegian Institute for Public Health did not indicate where infected people were located geographically. It was this kind of missing information which the news workers wanted to obtain and share, so they first set about mapping all the

cases and determining how many infected cases were arising in each municipality. This investigative work was undertaken by both reporters and developers, who checked the municipalities' webpages, then called the local doctors and compared what they found against the local newspapers as well. In this sense, the COVID-19 Live Tracker represented a sort of 'all-in-one' news graphic which gave the audience the ability to locate whatever statistic they sought but also served the internal news production process. Live tracker-generated data and numbers would turn into online breaking-news stories. Ultimately, the COVID-19 Live Tracker was not only a database which conveyed numbers and statistics acquired from authorities but also a source of exclusive news content. The latter, of course, relied on legwork and traditional investigative efforts like calling community doctors or expert sources directly to ask about the unique and exclusive data. The live tracker became a news hub for both newsroom staff and the audience.

### NEW METHODS OF REPORTING OPTIMISED

As pointed out previously, what is 'new' here is not the COVID-19 Live Tracker itself but the innovative workings of this media organisation, and, in particular, the ways in which the various departments of VG came together during a crisis and optimised existing production methods using new combinations of positions and skills. By enabling cross-disciplinary collaboration through the allocation of developers, breaking-news journalists and experienced investigative journalists, this project's negotiations led to alternative ways of doing things.

While the initial idea of the live tracker was pushed forward by two individuals under autonomous conditions, it gained its organisational traction because editorial managers embraced it. Likewise, both workers and managers overcame the traditional tension between a breaking-news focus on speed (Konow-Lund, 2013; Schlesinger, 1978) and a watchdog-journalism focus on long-term investigations (Hamilton, 2016), as well as the gap between computational and editorial mindsets. These kinds of negotiations allowed VG to respond to the audience's need for credible facts related to the pandemic to be published as soon as possible; VG would also enjoy a certain amount of exclusivity in its coverage if it managed to succeed. The departments which pooled their resources included breaking news and the relatively new digital content development area, while the project coordinator was an editor from the investigative

journalism area. The initial team consisted of two breaking-news journalists and two technical developers; within six months (by fall 2020), the group had increased to over 30 members.<sup>3</sup> No one was sure how to classify the group's practice and enormously successful product:

We were really uncertain whether this was investigative journalism or not when we submitted the methodology report to the investigative journalists of Norway. We told ourselves that the COVID-19 Live Tracker methodology report would be a dark horse in the competition for the investigative award. It would either win the best award for investigative journalism, or it would get nothing at all. Because it might not fulfil the conditions for receiving the award, right? Because it is difficult to pinpoint the contribution of the live tracker. (Editor-in-chief Gard Steiro, VG, 23 July 2021)

This lack of certainty regarding how to categorise the live tracker demonstrates how innovative it was as journalistic practice. When asked about their innovation, both the editor-in-chief and the journalists emphasised that nothing comes from nothing, and the practice and production associated with the COVID-19 Live Tracker in fact emerged directly from previous experience: 'This means that the COVID-19 Live Tracker is based on parts of what we have done before in computer-assisted journalism when we have aimed to publish huge amounts of data as well as systemizing the data. If we did not have the experience with such work from before, we would not have managed' (Editor-in-chief Gard Steiro, VG, July 2021). That organisational and individual experience also allowed VG to move forward quickly and efficiently:

VG's strategy is to take the lead, and that we claim that position [...] so that the users find what they need and that we have the information they're looking for, because that will be the reason for them to not go anywhere else. I think that's the most important issue, that we're ahead [...] So, this project is a bit different – this is about building a service that will exist for a long time. I think that to be able to get in early and take that lead position is strategically sound, although why that is so isn't something I've given much thought. (Editorial developer, VG, 5 May 2021)

<sup>3</sup> See <https://journalisten.no/korona-kortnytt-oda-leraan-skjetne/vgs-koronaspesial-harpassert-250-millionersidevisninger/435322>

The demands of the pandemic for new and accurate information overrode cross-disciplinary differences in journalistic practice; everyone was motivated to contribute. Journalistic culture has long been considered ‘a particular set of ideas and practices by which journalists, consciously and unconsciously, legitimate their role in society and render their work meaningful for themselves and others’ (Hanitzsch, 2007, p. 369). With the arrival of the pandemic, though, this set of ideas and practices (and the ways in which people used it) changed—developers, for example, began to negotiate with sources and authorities for access to information, which they had never done before.

### ENGAGING THE PUBLIC IN INTERACTIVE NEWS DISCOURSE

According to Pavlik, news innovation often involves finding new ways to engage the audience. In relation to the COVID-19 Live Tracker, this goal was partly about finding the most relevant topics and creating a database of information which was readily accessible to all. It was also about asking for feedback from the audience and adjusting the tracker along the way. According to our informants, there were lots of tips from the public which contributed to the statistics on the live tracker. Success proved to be a challenge all its own: as the number of unique clicks on the tracker increased, production was slowed by downloads and became more difficult to manage. In time, the risk of human error increased as well—if someone wrote in the county code instead of the municipality code, for example, the system could not correct the error. Despite ongoing technological improvements to the mechanisms involved in the live tracker, one reporter pointed out what an intense and enormous job it was to keep track of each infected person: ‘We could not call one hundred community doctors each day. So, in April [2020], while still manually registering, we installed an automatic import from MSIS, a surveillance system for communicable diseases. But we kept registering manually’ (reporter, VG, 14 April 2021).

The COVID-19 Live Tracker team also set up an email for tips from the audience: [coronavirus@vg.no](mailto:coronavirus@vg.no). Data discovered online was always carefully cross-checked as well:

When the first virus cases emerged, most of us felt that we had no control. We lacked an overview of the situation [...] Several of us wanted to gather information in a systematic manner to attain an overview [...] As journalists

we had a specific graphic design software available to us, and we started by developing the first graphics, showing the number of cases. (Reporter, VG, 12 May 2021)

These strategies clearly worked, and the unique clicks kept increasing—that year, for example, the live tracker surpassed 400 million unique clicks.

### DEVELOPING ORGANISATIONAL STRATEGIES FOR A DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT

The editor-in-chief recognised that the implementation of the COVID-19 Live Tracker meant involving new actors in new types of production, and our informants also remarked upon the cultural shift which went along with the project. The live tracker occasioned a hybrid professional model which relied on open communication and exchange between the online and traditional journalism camps. According to our informants, management responded well by both stepping back from the day-to-day development of the tool and agreeing to supply what the team needed to do its work. Additional newsroom roles also became involved over time, including researchers, developers, extra breaking-news reporters, and digital graphics reporters, all of whom required rather complicated training. The original reporter who established the initial pilot of the live tracker was made responsible for this training, which combined computational and traditional journalistic mindsets in very innovative ways, according to the editor-in-chief:

The product ... was innovative. It represented the first time we had managed to combine so many different sources of data which were hard to work with [...] everything from pdf documents to other sources that we managed to combine. We were also updating 24/7, and this meant that it was not a dataset you create one time but [one you] generate continuously into a database. It was the very first time we had done this to such an extent. This is one part [...] where the innovation is located. Then I would say that there was innovation involved in how the data was being visualised. There were no other media [out there at the time] which managed to visualise data live in this manner. Then there was also an obvious innovation in the start-up phase of the COVID-19 Live Tracker when traditional journalistic methods were combined with data journalism. We need to remember that, in the beginning, the data was not accessible. Official public authorities did not have this data, so we methodically called both infection control doctors and

municipalities to acquire data to build our database. So, I believe there is an interesting aspect which nobody, or few people, has talked about: the fact that, along the way, we also created a new journalistic tool [...] a new content management system for journalists to aggregate data, and this was crucial for us to manage to update [the live tracker] so quickly. (Editor-in-chief Gard Steiro, VG, 23 June 2021)

The editor-in-chief summarised the variety of innovations he discerned in the implementation of the COVID-19 Live Tracker across disciplines, as well as the different styles and speeds of newsroom work: (1) breaking-news speed, which allowed VG to position itself as first; (2) regular-news speed, which allowed the audience to locate what they needed on demand at their convenience; and (3) in-depth-news speed, which produced the exclusive news content which was circulated among VG's several platforms.

Eventually, professional distinctions among the team members faded altogether, along with a sense of hierarchy beyond what was necessary to organise and coordinate the team's work. When errors and technical challenges occurred, the VG team knew it had to listen to the users. Several informants pointed out that audience feedback had a big impact on the tracker and its services. As the team expanded, however, the need to train colleagues in the live-tracker system became something of a burden, our informants recalled (developer, VG, 5 May 2021; reporter, VG, 12 May 2021). One developer said that it was one thing to innovate a new process and tool through hybridised newsroom collaboration and another to sustain it in its later phases by painstakingly sharing the specialised knowledge required by the involvement of an increasing number of staff members (developer, VG, 5 May 2021). The later phases of a project like this, then, are all about systemising this knowledge:

By letting the computer, or robots, take over manual tasks, the journalists will be able to do more. This will free up resources to develop new projects. Without data journalism we wouldn't have been able to do that. We wouldn't have achieved what we have today. (Reporter, VG, 12 May 2021)

By June 2021, the COVID-19 Live Tracker team needed more resources as well, and their request to management was straightforward in this regard. Ultimately, the autonomy of the live-tracker team produced new practices which derived from fewer distinctions in newsroom roles and the organisation's embrace of informal decision-making based on practical

needs and challenges. This autonomy itself had three phases which paralleled the progress of the live tracker: (1) an entrepreneurial phase which established the group, system and practice; (2) a middle phase involving things like travel advice and hope concerning an end to the pandemic itself; and (3) a long final phase, including a lockdown which ultimately lasted from fall 2020 to summer 2021. Following that final phase, in fall 2021, the team was given a news editor to relieve some of the ongoing burden of work and to help organise communication between the core group and the extended members of the newsroom who were assigned to the tracker. While several informants recalled that they were anticipating the end of the lockdown phase already in fall 2020, the numbers of infected and hospitalized patients instead began to increase, and the Norwegian government reinstated a strict lockdown, so the need for pandemic-related information became greater than ever. All the way through spring 2021, the live-tracker team members mostly worked from home, though one individual was allowed to work from the newsroom. She stated: ‘The whole year has felt like a long weekend shift, because there were just as few people at work over the year as during the regular weekend shifts’ (reporter, VG, 14 April 2021). A developer from the team also pointed out that these phases in the project and the pandemic sometimes tended to blend together: ‘It feels like one specific long phase [...] It has been a non-stop rush’ (developer, VG, 5 May 2021). Others described the project as eighteen months of a single breaking-news story. This developer did acknowledge, however, that the arrival of the vaccines in early 2021 brought about a new phase of generating data for the live tracker.

## CONCLUSION

Crises sharpen our shared need for information, and the pandemic was no exception, forcing changes to many professional practices, including those of the newsroom. At such times, people demand accurate and detailed information when the systems which supply and disseminate it are under the greatest stress, and responding to this demand requires both diligence and, perhaps most importantly, innovation. An event such as a pandemic, that is, makes those in the media revisit their notions of ‘the hows and the whys of journalistic practice’ (Zelizer, 1992, p. 67).

Crises become ‘discursive opportunities for journalists to ensure the wellbeing of their interpretive community by reconsidering, rearticulating and reinforcing their boundaries and authority’ (Tandoc & Jenkins, 2018,



p. 676). In its sheer duration and global sprawl, the pandemic challenged the modern newsroom like few other events. At the same time, newsrooms were not starting from scratch in their responses to it; as Konow-Lund and Olsson (2016) observe, journalists always build on previous experiences with breaking news or critical incidents when they face new challenges in these contexts. Likewise, management knows that audience attention (such as unique clicks, for example) jumps during a crisis and often does not recede afterward (Barland, 2012; Konow-Lund, 2013). Newsroom strategy, particularly when it involves innovation, must remain cognizant of the opportunity such times offer.

In terms of the pandemic's impact upon the practice of investigative journalism, one critical question was how to share the most accurate possible overview of the number of people impacted—the infected, those who survived, and those who died—at the local, national and even global levels. Elsewhere in this book we demonstrate how investigative journalism rises to the occasion when people need it most, even innovating ways to practice within expanding international networks which encompass unsafe or unstable societies or communities (Berglez & Gearing, 2018). This chapter explored the case of VG's live tracker as a crisis-driven technological innovation which led to organisational and methodological changes. In the interests of supplying people with information in real time, both the process and the organisation must be credible and innovative. Clearly, VG Online filled a public need for information by developing and launching its live tracker. The question is, did it also point toward a new understanding of journalism as such, and investigative journalism in particular?

During this project, VG enabled its reporters, editorial developers, and newsroom managers to harness resources from the respective practices and areas of breaking news, data journalism and systematic/traditional investigative journalism to speed its way to what would become Norway's only online COVID-19 Live Tracker. By allowing its news workers to organise themselves for months in the interests of the most innovative possible outcome, VG accomplished its goal while encouraging unprecedented cross-disciplinary collaboration within its staff. In all, the extended crisis of the global pandemic spurred creativity and dedication among VG staff members which promoted both organisational goals and professional interests and made the live-tracker team into a model of VG initiative. A key factor of success was the already innovative organisational culture:

The secret behind this is that the process doesn't need to be management-led. There is something in VG's work culture and the organisation which makes it part of our work environment to intuitively look for solutions when critical events arise [...] I believe that some of the advantages at VG which facilitate this sort of organisation come from effective decision-making as well as high mobility (in the newsroom). So, what happened when the Covid-19 Live Tracker emerged was that there were already existing relationships in place between (software) designers and journalists which led them to understand each other's languages and needs in a case like this. (Editor-in-chief Gard Steiro, VG, 23 June 2021)

Beyond its obvious success in gaining audience attention via new technological advances, the COVID-19 Live Tracker case also demonstrates that investigative journalism is becoming increasingly fluid in relation to adjacent areas such as data journalism, science and the liberal arts. In its quest for truth and the exposure of transgression, this area of the journalistic field constantly challenges established professional and genre boundaries. What our study also shows is the importance of organisational culture and structures, as well as leadership, in spurring innovation. During crises and other unforeseen scenarios, the ability to be flexible and adapt can depend on the strength and viability of existing structures and relationships. When these are in place, the inter-professional character of cross-cutting collaborative teams is not seen as a threat but as an opportunity for growth. Thus, the merging of competencies in a case like VG's live tracker has the potential to drive both journalistic innovation and the expansion of journalistic boundaries.

The insights generated by this study have useful implications for newsroom practice during future crises in three ways, in line with the aspects stressed by Pavlik (2013). First, the crisis *is* the product. While journalists always try to respond to the needs of the audience, the COVID-19 pandemic pushed aside other news criteria in favour of developing ways to disseminate information which would help citizens to survive and thrive. Second, innovative production practices can not only disseminate the news but also generate it, often very quickly. Third, it is easier to engage the audience during a crisis to help journalists shape new tools through advice and feedback. In all, of course, news workers rise to the occasion during crises and take the initiative for themselves (with the support and guidance of management).

In sum, we argue that looking specifically at crisis-driven newsroom innovation increases our understanding of the transformative force of the legacy news media. Our present case, the VG COVID-19 Live Tracker, addresses questions about genre definitions, organisational preconditions and interprofessional collaborations, and the ways in which these entities can marry in the development of new journalistic methods and interactions with the audience. Challenges to society will always arise, and the lessons learned from our VG case may shed some light on how to prepare for them going forward.

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## CHAPTER 9

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# How COVID-19 Affected the Practice of Investigative Journalism in Norway and China

*Maria Konow-Lund, Lin Pan,  
and Eva-Karin Olsson Gardell*

### INTRODUCTION

Unlike other global crises, the COVID-19 pandemic offered researchers a unique opportunity to better understand the ways in which journalistic practices in the digital era could be adapted to handle new challenges. In

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this chapter, we are concerned with practices related to investigative journalism and social media use among journalists.

By engaging with the very different cultural settings of China and Norway, this chapter will elaborate upon the global pandemic's impact on investigative practices, routines and roles. It relies on interviews with journalists, editors and other stakeholders in the field to capture thick descriptions of present conditions and shed new light upon investigative journalism's ability to meet new crises going forward. The choice of national settings for this inquiry is a response to the calls of some academics for more comparative approaches to journalistic practices between democratic countries and those that are not considered democratic (Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch, 2020; Zelizer, 2013), especially given investigative journalism's abiding interest in holding power to account. Exploring investigative journalism in China has its difficulties, however. De Burgh (2003), an expert on investigative journalism in China, advocates for simply asking reporters how they *perceive* their role as investigative journalists. This is especially relevant in a society such as China's with its strict censorship and limitations upon the criticism of authority in relation to its Western counterparts. This consideration is reflected in the approach taken in the interviews conducted for this inquiry. Despite the differences between the countries studied and the contexts in which journalism takes place, we found that productive comparisons could still be drawn.

## CRISIS JOURNALISM

Information is crucial in times of crisis, which are characterised by profound uncertainty regarding what happened, how it happened and how it can be resolved (Rosenthal et al., 1989). In people's quest for understanding and meaning, journalism is a vital ally, and the various roles of journalism in crises have been explored in relation to certain media rituals (Durham, 2008), community recovery (Frances Perreault, 2021), and the stress suffered by journalists during crisis reporting (Himmelstein & Faithorn, 2002). Another aspect of this relation is the crisis's impact upon journalistic practice, which requires the researcher to go beyond the exploration of the routines in journalistic production (Berkowitz, 1992; Tuchman, 1973) to understand instead how journalists handle the disruption of those routines.

Previous research has shown that journalistic organisations are often able to cope with even major disruptions of this type. For example, Norwegian journalists were able to carry on with their work in the midst of a terror event in Oslo even when their newsroom was seriously



damaged by a bomb blast (Konow-Lund & Olsson, 2016). The ability of the newsroom to improvise in a crisis depends on its ability to quickly grasp new situations, as well as the organisation's history and culture (Olsson, 2009). The nature of the crisis also makes a difference (for example, is it long term, like a pandemic, or immediate and abrupt, like a terror attack?). COVID-19 is an interesting example because, relative to most other crisis events, it stretched over a number of years, which made it possible for journalists to learn and adjust practices as it unfolded. During the pandemic, as well, we saw managers trying to reshape existing practices rather than start anew (García-Avilés, 2021; Mare & Santos, 2021).

When exploring journalistic practices, one cannot ignore the use and impact of social media. Thus, a salient issue in the past decade's research on those practices has been the impact of social media and new information technologies. Hermida (2010), for example, introduces the concept of 'ambient journalism' to capture the ways in which new information technologies are transforming journalism into an 'awareness system' aimed at facilitating and regulating flows of information. In this new landscape of digital information, audiences' relationships with journalism have changed in many ways. For example, new processes of verification have emerged that derive from the tendency of social media users to question the individualistic, top-down ideology of traditional journalism and instead engage with outside networks of expertise and authority. Research shows that related calls for transparency and verification mostly involve the correction of factual errors, while more substantive aspects of news production remain beyond this audience's purview (Chadha & Koliska, 2015). Belair-Gagnon (2015) argues that social media has posed a real challenge to the BBC in this regard, especially in terms of striking a balance between connecting with the audience and maintaining the organisation's traditional authority over content. Social media also handed tech-interested journalists a more central role in the newsroom.

In this chapter, we are concerned with journalistic practices related to social media during crisis events. Based on a study of the BBC's coverage of the Mumbai terror attacks in 2008 and the Norway attack in 2011, Bennett (2016) concludes that social media use is unlikely to lead to any substantial increase in the use of nonofficial sources. Likewise, based on an examination of journalism surrounding the Norway attack in 2011, Konow-Lund and Olsson (2016) found that local journalists integrated social media to some extent but insisted throughout that traditional practices related to objectivity, autonomy and immediacy continued to guide

their work. During the COVID-19 pandemic, in turn, data-driven journalism came to represent a new way for journalists and journalistic institutions to regain or restore their authority (Wu, 2021).

When it comes to investigative journalism, we know from previous research that it is resource intensive (Hamilton, 2016) in terms of not only funding but also staffing, skillsets, experience and time spent. Yet there is limited knowledge concerning investigative journalism in times of crises. Societal reliance on government sources increases during a crisis, which means that journalists tend to report crises in a way that favours those in power (Falkheimer & Olsson, 2015). Starkman (2014) attributes the shortcomings of the business press in reporting on the financial crisis of 2008 to an overreliance on access reporting over accountability reporting, the latter of which is the traditional approach of investigative journalism. In another study of the 2011 Oslo terror attacks, Thorbjørnsrud and Figenschou (2018) show how crisis journalism shied away from its critical remit in favour of presenting a consensus-based rally-around-the-flag national crisis discourse. In their study on the COVID-19 pandemic, Johansson et al. (2023) demonstrates instances of rally-around-the-flag effects in all Nordic countries. Yet, these effects were rather short lived and disappeared within a few months.

### INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM AND PERCEIVED INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM IN TWO VERY DIFFERENT COUNTRIES

To understand how to engage with the practices, routines and roles of investigative journalism during a crisis, we must first highlight some of the literature on investigative journalism in general. Waisbord (2000) observes that many South American journalists do not have the same resources as their American colleagues to dedicate to systematic and technological investigations but nevertheless consider all their work to be ‘watchdog’ rather than thoroughly objective in nature. Here, we will identify other perspectives on investigative journalism, following de Burgh, who writes: ‘My premise is that we may learn something of value from listening to how journalists (one category of media producers) characterise their activities and see how they reflect and perhaps influence social change’ (de Burgh, 2003, p. 801). This inquiry’s point of departure encompasses two very different countries with disparate political systems and information environments. For example, Norway has consistently ranked first in the RSF’s

World Press Freedom Index during the pandemic since 2020, while China has ranked at the very bottom of the index (Reporters Without Borders, 2022). Chinese investigative journalists have also faced unique challenges since 2000 regarding fast-developing technology such as the Internet, an ever-more-restrictive political environment, growing economic difficulties, and the lack of a legal system (Dong, 2009; Haiyan & Jichen, 2021; Li & Sparks, 2018; Liu, 2016; Xiao, 2017; Zhang & Cao, 2017). While other parts of this book have focused on how new forms of investigative practice arise within a Western or Global North/Global South media ecology, this chapter extends its geographical remit to the East as well.

While investigative reporters in the West strive to hold power to account, Chinese investigative journalism serves as an extension of state power to monitor or control local influence and enhance ‘socialist democracy’ by helping the party gain the public’s trust (Su, 2002; Wang & Lee, 2014). Interestingly, these journalists also see themselves as the conscience of Chinese society (Li, 2007; Wang & Lee, 2014), ‘finding aspects of society that had remained hidden; exposing them to surprise the audience and win its sympathy; using their findings to extend the moral horizons of that audience’ (de Burgh, 2003, p. 815). Chinese scholars point out that investigative journalism has a special role in Chinese society, shouldering the responsibilities of leading public opinion and propagating party ideology (Li, 2016), and that Chinese investigative journalists have a duty to maintain social stability, deliver reliable information, hinder the spread of rumours, and explain and analyse complex problems, especially in the digital age (Zhang & Cao, 2017). Ultimately, this kind of journalism reminds society of its values and signals to individuals and institutions that they are betraying those values (de Burgh, 2003). While investigative journalism in China is a fraught notion at best, reporters do view their work as investigative, especially since the 1990s (de Burgh, 2003; Wang & Lee, 2014). Therefore, we are indeed able to conduct this inquiry as a comparison between the professional perspectives of investigative journalists in Norway and China, especially in the context of the pandemic and the use of social media to spread disinformation during that time.

## A SHORT HISTORICAL ACCOUNT OF INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM IN NORWAY AND CHINA

Investigative journalism in Norway borrows its practices and methods of gathering information from the American ‘watchdog’ journalistic tradition (Houston, 2009; Waisbord, 2000). It was therefore no coincidence that when the Foundation for Investigative Journalists was established in 1990 at Norwegian Broadcasting, a leading speaker at the event was the American editor and investigative journalist Robert W. Greene (Lindholm, 2015). Greene (<https://www.skup.no/om-skup>) worked for 37 years as editor of *Newsday*, a newspaper that won several Pulitzer Prizes for its stories. Another source of inspiration for Scandinavian journalists in general was the US organisation known as the Investigative Reporters and Editors (IRE), established in 1976, and the coordinators of the seminar that hosted Greene were Swedish members of IRE (Lindholm, 2015, p. 286). One attendee at Greene’s lecture described the atmosphere as a revival meeting, and another remarked upon the collaborative turn in journalism which was then underway (p. 286). Importantly, Greene had just finished leading a team of volunteer investigative reporters who had come together to continue the work of a colleague who had been murdered by organised crime because of his work. By inviting Green to their seminar, the Norwegian journalists hoped to infuse some of that collaborative spirit into their own foundation.

While the diffusion of American investigative journalism into European practices has been studied by several scholars over the last two decades (Baggi, 2011; van Eijk, 2005), its impact on China is much less clear (Chi, 2016). For example, Chinese investigative journalism is not too concerned with democratic rights but instead complies with traditional Chinese values (de Burgh, 2003), meaning that its social functions and definitions are quite different from the liberal model. Nevertheless, de Burgh (2008) traces the practice back to 700 CE in China, when inspectors submitted reports to the government about the economic and social conditions they encountered on their travels around the country. Other academics locate the origin of investigative journalism in the history of the early modern press in China (Wang & Lee, 2014). Dong (2009) traces investigative journalism to *Shen Bao*, which is regarded as the ‘first modern newspaper’ in China: ‘in the 1870s Chinese journalists did not know what might be called “investigative journalism”, but in fact, their practice already constituted investigative reporting’ (Dong, 2009, p. 64).

## METHODOLOGY

The methodology for this chapter involves semi-structured qualitative interviews with informants from both China and Norway undertaken during COVID-19 between 2021 and 2022. The first interviews in Norway took place early in 2021, approximately 10 months after the first pandemic-related lockdown. At this time, it remained very difficult to connect with reporters due to their preoccupation with the extra work which emerged during the crisis, especially because they were equally impacted by the crisis and often worked from home rather than in the office. Interaction was also hindered by the lack of vaccines and accompanying fear of infection, and, in the end, all the interviews for this chapter were conducted via videoconferences. We chose reporters, managers, developers and designers according to their work during COVID-19 or other experiences with investigative journalism. We had access to informants involved in ongoing research projects and selected new informants by asking the existing informants to refer us to others. Some had won national awards for their investigations, and they all came from different organisations, both national and local in scope. We conducted our interviews in two broad phases encompassing January and February 2021, the fall of 2021 and the winter of 2022. In the first phase, we focused on informants who could contribute to our understanding of the situation and context. In the second phase, we focused on journalistic practices which included the use of social media and raised the issue of verification of and access to sources.

In our Chinese context, we engaged with 12 informants who were producing investigative reporting during the pandemic, including eight current investigative journalists, two current editors and two former (and very experienced) investigative journalists who had departed their legacy media organisations but were still actively pursuing investigations in a non-traditional way, such as via we-media or ‘online news sources operated by individuals or collectives, who are often amateurs’ (Gao, 2018). All the participants were interviewed initially in 2021 and then asked to participate in follow-up interviews in 2022 to shed light upon shifts in their practice over the course of the pandemic. Only five of our Chinese informants agreed to participate in the follow-up interviews; the others refused, insisting that their practice had remained relatively unchanged or that the sensitive cultural and political context around COVID-19 restrictions, especially in 2022, was too threatening. In our Norwegian context, we interviewed 14 informants, including 10 investigative journalists who

were working during the pandemic, as well as three senior managers (an editor-in-chief, a news editor and a director) and one editorial developer. There were no follow-up interviews in Norway.

We initially planned to reach out to potential Chinese study participants via Weibo messages, WeChat, email or an introduction from a mutual acquaintance, but we ran into problems; for one thing, little contact information for investigative journalists in China was available online, and so many had left the industry that it became a struggle to find anyone still working. Additionally, many investigative journalists' Weibo accounts and WeChat public accounts had been shut down. Many journalists, especially the working investigative journalists, were very concerned about the risks of participating in the interviews, so they refused the requests. Thus, we eventually resorted to snowball sampling, which suited the Chinese cultural context's emphasis on existing relationships (*guanxi*)—people more readily opened up to referrals from people they trusted. The pandemic removed the possibility of face-to-face interviews with our Chinese informants, who then chose WeChat over phone calls because it was more secure. Only one informant requested a phone call, and another requested Let's Talk, an encrypted app for communication.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### *Norway*

#### *Changing Practices and Roles During COVID-19*

In Norway, the practices of investigative journalism were challenged by a pandemic-driven lack of access to information, exacerbated by the difficulty of drawing upon the Freedom of Information Act. Authorities were reluctant to share information which they considered to be too sensitive, and they were overwhelmed by the sheer amount of work and were unable to follow up on reporters' requests for information. These conditions did change from one phase to the next during COVID-19, and from one governmental authority to the next. As explained in the earlier discussion of VG's COVID-19 Live Tracker, VG reporters and developers were able to receive data from the Norwegian Institute of Public Health but in such a way that they had to manually enter the numbers into new forms to make use of the data digitally. Over time, VG organised and structured the data from the authorities so well that it reversed the flow, so that actors at

the Norwegian Institute for Public Health reached out to the VG developers to ask whether VG would share its data on COVID-19 with them. This was an unprecedented situation involving a media organisation which had generated data of value to the authorities. According to normal ethical standards, of course, sources should never ask to obtain information from journalists, but the Norwegian Institute of Public Health was different. This novel impact of data-generated investigative reporting during the pandemic has also been pointed out by other scholars (Wu, 2021). As we will see below, the ability to engage in data-driven journalism was to a large extent a matter of resources.

Norwegian investigative reporters did not consider their practices to have changed significantly during the pandemic. Nevertheless, their ability to work was clearly dependent upon the capabilities and resources of their respective newsrooms and media organisations (as would be the case in a non-pandemic setting as well). Through conversations with national, regional and local reporters, we soon uncovered salient differences between well-resourced and under-resourced newsrooms. For example, when pandemic-related travel restrictions and remote working arrangements limited reporters' access to sources, well-resourced legacy media organisations were able to shift to data journalism and train or hire the staff to implement it. One informant from such a newsroom also lamented how difficult it was to convince sources to engage face-to-face due to the risk of transmitting the virus. He recalled a time when his newspaper sent a team a long way to get a source on camera, but the source insisted on doing the interview online instead. The informant associated such developments with the pandemic-driven challenge of getting close enough on location—and to sources—to document a scene or verify information. Due to regulations concerning privacy, it was difficult for photographers or reporters to obtain the access they needed to do their work with, for example, photographs of hospitalised victims or even statistics about a given area or outbreak (informant, 30 March 2021). This senior reporter, for example, stressed how frustrating it could be when the authorities referred to personal data privacy regulations 'even when it came to statistics'. In other words, during a crisis such as the global pandemic, it became even easier for the authorities to deny the press access to information due to personal data privacy regulations.

In newsrooms with fewer resources, such as local media organisations, our informants confessed that they had generally held to the traditional ways of doing things because they lacked the opportunity to do anything

else. In some communities, as well, the pandemic did not even produce restrictions such as wearing masks. Reporters could go to meet sources in person, conduct their research and produce stories just like they always had. When we talked to editorial managers on a national level, they also acknowledged the distinction between exclusively digital story production and the cultivation of physical networking with sources. Their main question was whether something important had been lost in the journalistic production process during the pandemic. One editorial manager for a national newspaper, for example, stated that while many stories worked perfectly well digitally, the journalists' ability to extend their source networks suffered during the pandemic; he concluded that the digital shift, coupled with the restrictions of the times, led to the loss of information which could only arise through in-person contact in actual physical locations (editorial manager, 22 October 2021). In general, travel restrictions limited work among towns and cities but had little impact on more remote regions.

Early in the pandemic, several informants suggested that restrictions on travel and access to sources had limited their ability to access the documents which explained the government's decisions about pandemic policy (informants, 22 November 2021, 30 March 2021). One informant stated that the secrecy of the authorities in general represented the main challenge for the press.

There are many things which are kept secret. I'm not sure why. Maybe there is something to the idea that the authorities don't believe the press can handle the information in a responsible manner before a decision is made. Or perhaps the government does not want political discussions surfacing prior to decisions being made, and they want to gather as much information about the situation as possible before arriving at a decision and making it known. So, they keep the background material secret. Basically, this means that the Norwegian Directorate of Health is asked to investigate, for instance, the vaccination of children. Then, everything – like what the professionals think about it – is kept under wraps, super-secret, until the government has reached its decision on the topic. The result is that citizens are not party to the decision-making process but are simply told what the authorities decided. So, this secrecy has been a challenge for the press and still is. (Informant, 17 December 2021)

Reporters even distinguished between phases of the pandemic based on level of access to and quality of information. One informant characterised



the first phase according to the way in which authorities based their decisions on information typically coming from other countries. The second phase, in turn, still found that the general public was having great difficulty verifying research reports and scientific data, although by April and May of 2020, testing had finally produced more data (informant, 22 November 2021). Several informants independently defined the phases of the pandemic as spring and summer 2020 (first phase), fall to spring 2020–2021 (second phase) and late spring to fall 2021 (third and fourth phases). The first phase was, in general, characterised by the highest degree of uncertainty and secrecy.

*From a National and Local Focus  
to International Interdependence*

Another influence on Norwegian reporters' views of their roles as watchdogs was their degree of familiarity with working on an international level. One informant who had always preferred a national or local focus during crises suddenly found himself embracing a truly global perspective and called out several international press conferences over the course of the pandemic (informant, 21 October 2021). Some informants with experience as both investigative journalists and foreign correspondents (informants, 21 October 2021, 22 November 2022) could draw upon existing networks to fact-check information on the spread of the virus, vaccination, number of hospitalisations, pandemic-related decisions and so on. The reporters at larger newsrooms all stressed the importance of generating international sources and tapping specific and well-known institutions and experts within the field for information.

Other experienced reporters at small local newspapers likewise became interested in international issues and sources during the pandemic but found themselves limited by the local or national market of their media organisations. One local reporter pointed out that his newspaper had replaced its international news desk some years before with a desk for investigative journalism: 'You win some and you lose some', he added (informant, 21 October 2021).

The pandemic-driven reliance on data journalism was initially inspired by legacy media organisations such as the *New York Times* and *South China Morning Post*, which had long traditions of practice in this area. Well-resourced Norwegian newsrooms such as VG.no and NRK were typically able to pivot to a range of digital means of covering the pandemic's

progress and track the number of infected or hospitalised patients. On the other hand, investigative reporters at local newspapers actively relied upon the country's Right to Information Act to access information.

During the first phase of the pandemic, several reporters expressed an ongoing interest in understanding the challenges faced by the authorities, who were doing a lot of 'good' nevertheless. However, access to documents and sources was very limited at this time. One informant regretted the tension between the audience's need to know and the authorities' desire to save lives, which led to an occasional lack of transparency concerning official decisions about enormous disruptions such as going into lockdown (informant, 21 October 2021). Another informant thought that the first phase of the pandemic generally discouraged reporters and led them to be less inquisitive (informant, 22 November 2021). Still another compared the pandemic to the Norwegian domestic terror attack in 2011 in terms of how awkward it was for reporters to criticise authorities at such sensitive times:

In an ongoing crisis it is hard to partake in critical journalism delving into how the authorities have handled things. Now, we have established this investigation committee looking into how the authorities tackled the COVID-19 crisis, and these efforts will result in a report. This could trigger a new debate – when, for example, you analyse the discussions between political authorities and specialist health authorities and the choices that were made and their costs. Closures were costly in terms of money, health and the consequences for businesses and so on. You will be getting all that journalism, but it entails information we have little access to today. (Informant, 18 February 2021)

During the initial phase of the crisis, reporters stressed that one of their main dilemmas was how to generate information about a situation that required specialist medical competence and, in particular, where to locate those sources. This is one of the reasons for the aforementioned embrace of an international perspective because, they stated, much of what happened with COVID-19 in Norway was happening elsewhere in the world as well. In addition, political and expert decisions in Norway would often be based upon international data and analyses (informant, 22 November 2021). One senior investigative reporter, for example, pointed to the time he spent during the pandemic studying international reports and statistics and browsing various international websites to read about COVID-19.

He drew upon facts from websites in England, the United States, Denmark, Sweden and Germany for his own work and noted that his newspaper followed the European Centers for Disease Prevention and Control as an additional international source of important information (informant, 22 November 2021). Both investigative reporters and an advisor and researcher for the Norwegian Union of Journalists emphasised that there was less critical journalism practised and fewer critical debates conducted during the first year of the pandemic (informant, 18 February 2021).

In the interest of journalistic evidence gathering, travel (or at least some degree of professional mobility) is often needed. Early in the pandemic, however, there were many restrictions upon moving around geographically. This undermined the investigative environment in general, as it proved very difficult to mimic a real-world creative and social environment online (Olsen, Asker & Konow-Lund, 2023). One exception to this rule was VG.no's COVID-19 Live Tracker (see the previous chapter in this book), which was the result of a small expert team's fully autonomous initiative to develop a database that the audience could access itself. VG, its journalists, and its developers all thought of the live tracker as investigative journalism and submitted it for the field's annual award in 2021 as an integral part of a systematic effort to hold power to account (informant, 18 June 2021). It also led the way for other interdisciplinary, data-driven journalistic initiatives (see also Pentzhold et al., 2021):

It has been a huge boost for the newsroom, building internal competence. The authorities have held press conferences where they have presented information that, well, what they said – it was incorrect. We have the numbers to prove the errors in their information. We have also witnessed how other media organisations released news on the number of infected, etc., but their numbers haven't tallied with ours. We had to withstand pressure. Later, we received confirmation that other media organisations, relying on press conferences, got their numbers wrong. For us as a media organisation, this has been retaliation in the aftermath of Trump and all the issues concerning fake news. There is no doubt, according to my overview, that legacy media has had their comeuppance by getting their facts straight. There's no doubt that the pandemic has contributed to bolstering traditional media. Of course, there are many ways to look at this, and surely the media's coverage of the pandemic left room for improvement. But no one can fault the media for not bringing facts into the public discourse. I feel this applies on behalf of Norway; but I certainly think, too, a lot of good work has been done internationally. (Informant, 18 October 2021)

While data journalism was not new to Norway as such, the pandemic asked much more of the practice in terms of informing the audience, especially when both travelling and physical contact were so restricted early on. While the Norwegian Institute for Public Health collected data on the number of infected individuals admitted to hospitals, the authorities were not able to keep up with the public's increasing demand for information (Konow-Lund et al., 2022). Several informants considered social media to lack credibility, so they stayed away from it or simply observed rather than participated in it. One senior investigative reporter said he had dropped Facebook because it did not offer enough journalistic value, and he could find other ways of connecting with relevant users elsewhere (informant, 21 November 2021). He also pointed out that social media uses up too much time which could be better spent on developing stories themselves. He considered social media to be a place to gauge the effect of investigative stories, not a place to find stories.

Another informant agreed:

Yes, I think so. First, chaos really grabs hold on social media during such crises. So much weird stuff is written, and everyone claims to be an expert, and there is so much deliberate disinformation too, from actors trying to spread it [...] Due to this, I think that the readers fall back to reliable media. With the overview we made in our newsroom, basically consisting of numbers and graphs, we gave users opportunities to make up their own minds. That said, even then, some of the readers were sceptical, even about graphs. And typical feedback could be things like [...] 'Can the spike in known infections be attributed to a surge of people getting tested for COVID-19? Is that why we see higher numbers?' So, we see the need for more data. And since we compile massive data, what sorts of samples do we have? For instance, at the beginning of the pandemic, we informed [our audience] about how many people had been afflicted, but the readers also wanted to know how many had recovered from the virus. However, there were no such statistics stipulating the number of recovered persons in Norway, individuals off the sick list after having corona. You were either automatically declared cured after two weeks or you [...] you died apparently. That's how it was. We didn't have these numbers. So, there has been a lot of fuss about the numbers and statistics which aren't collected in Norway, which readers want from us (at VG). Yet I do think that, if we can provide the public with an overview of numbers so they can make their own considerations, it boosts our credibility, as these are fact-based numbers. Absolutely no interpretations, just pure numbers. It bolsters our credibility. (Informant, VG, 30 March 2021)

Due to the abiding presence of disinformation in social media, users and the public in general have become more sceptical of ‘processed’ information. One way to address this scepticism during a crisis is to offer the audience unprocessed information, which is what data journalism can provide. Through cross-disciplinary initiatives undertaken by reporters, developers, web designers and managers, the audience can gain access to data generated not only by authorities such as the Norwegian Institute for Public Health but also by manual and traditional methods such as calls to possible sources by reporters themselves (informant, 21 October 2022).

In Norway, it was never a problem for reporters to request information; instead, the difficulty lay in whether the authorities could handle the increasing number of those requests. An informant from the Association for Editors, for example, recalled being contacted early in the pandemic by other members concerning such practicalities as how to attend virtual meetings in various locations around the country:

Reflecting upon the beginning of the pandemic, editors reached out to us and asked us to communicate with municipalities as to whether news reporters could participate in digital meetings. Particularly at the level of municipalities, digital meetings had been introduced, which also offered the possibility of closing such meetings to the public. We negotiated with mayors and managed to open the meetings to the public. (Associate director, Association of Editors, 25 January 2021)

The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the authorities’ lack of preparation, particularly in the municipalities and local areas, regarding the question of access to information during a global crisis. Norwegians, in particular, are very invested in the ways in which their officials handle freedom of speech and accommodate reporters and others.

### *Investigative Journalism and Social Media: Or Not*

Some of our interviews took place approximately one week after the 6 January attack on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC, and the topic of disinformation and fake news naturally emerged. One informant who worked as a factchecker in Norway emphasised that the pandemic proceeded in a cyclical manner, as did the information surrounding it. When professional journalists are able to identify those cycles, they can anticipate the related forms of disinformation to come. This informant also found that

disinformation was frequently imported from the United States to Europe, such as the notorious viral video known as the ‘Plandemic’, which was watched by millions before being removed by YouTube and Facebook. This video spread to Norway just hours after it was published in the United States, demonstrating the global digital ecology of conspiracy theories (informant, 11 January 2021). While the pandemic was itself global, the nations of the world responded very differently, politically and strategically, in terms of how to handle it and manage information about it. One informant thought that, following the Capitol Hill attack on 6 January, the United States might better be described as an anocratic society rather than a democratic one (informant, 11 January 2021):

There is no doubt that a small minority in society is highly focused on fake news and disinformation. They are deeply engaged in conspiracy theories and misleading [story] content which is negative about immigration and the authorities. We see examples of it daily. And things do happen, like in the USA, in Facebook groups and so on. Some of the Facebook groups generate more buzz than, for example, that which the Norwegian prime minister musters. So, primarily, it’s an intense fringe which is engaged in this. But they are very energized and contribute to the fake news, deceptive content and faulty information being disseminated in social media. The hype creates more visibility and impact. Upon consideration, we are convinced that this is a real problem in Norway even though we aren’t on the level seen in the USA [...] Of course, this involves some speculation, but we see in the data there is a substantial increase in activity around alternative media in 2020 compared with the year before, prior to the pandemic. This would be partly due to the algorithms at Facebook and how they are continuously evolving. It seems logical, at least on an intuitive level, that people have more time to spend on the internet because the pandemic has so many [of them] working from home. (Factchecker, 11 January 2021)

Our informant emphasised that it is not so much the number of people partaking in social media debates and conspiracy theories as it is the intensity of their engagement that worsens the severity of the ecology of disinformation. One of the things this informant’s factchecking company did during the pandemic was to investigate new ways of monitoring social media. They also spent more time on the analysis of social media content. In the interview, it became clear that this media company had gained a new awareness of ecosystems of disinformation: ‘We have a far better overview of this ecosystem today than what we had when the pandemic first

emerged' (factchecker, 11 January 2021). Ultimately, empirical data from Norway demonstrate the stumbling blocks around information access due to the chaos and lack of perspective during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## CHINA

### *The Experience in China*

Our Chinese informants did not perceive their roles as journalists much differently during the pandemic than they did before it. They readily acknowledged that investigative journalists need to hold power to account, expose hidden information, and present the truth to protect the public interest. They also acknowledged that what they were able to do in real life in China was quite limited, especially in terms of criticising the central authorities. Several informants used a provocative phrase to describe their situation: 'dancing with shackles within the red line' (investigative journalist, 28 November 2021). This applied to their investigations as well as their publishing projects.

During the pandemic itself, the extent to which Chinese investigative journalists could work productively depended on the phase in question. At the very beginning of COVID-19 (that is, the first half of 2020), it was impossible to perform any investigative reporting because of the national lockdown. According to one informant, only a few journalists were permitted to even enter Wuhan City, where the virus initially appeared, so most interviews could only be conducted by phone (investigative journalist, 18 August 2022). Another informant recalled: 'Most investigative reporting requires on-site interviews and travelling to other places, and at that time these were quite limited. I was in Beijing then, and there was a policy that everyone returning to Beijing was asked to quarantine at home for two weeks, no exceptions' (investigative journalist, 15 August 2022).

When conditions finally started to loosen (from July 2020 into 2021), journalists' watchdog role returned but faced many limitations. China's dynamic zero-COVID policy meant that a city could be shut down any-time cases were discovered. This made it hard to travel to places without any guarantee of access. One informant described travelling to Shanghai just before it was locked down; when he returned to Beijing, the Centre for Disease Prevention and Control swiftly tracked his travel and required him to quarantine for seven days. He also noted that many of his peers had the same experience (investigative journalist, 17 August 2022). In

addition, he stated that it was quite challenging for journalists to follow the changing policies across the various regions of the country, which forced them to adjust their strategies for, reschedule or even sometimes abandon investigations (investigative journalist, 17 August 2022). One significant characteristic of Chinese investigative journalism is that most reporting is cross-regional (Guan et al., 2017), which in fact helped our informants to mitigate the interference of any particular set of local authorities. Nevertheless, they all relied on on-site interviews for investigation and verification because going to the scene of an event is a way to build trust with sources, curb misinformation, maintain the media's credibility and keep sources safe. Therefore, the changing bans on cross-regional travelling and partial lockdowns represented a heavy blow to the production of investigative journalism. One of our informants said:

I travelled to Inner Mongolia in April, but it was impossible to do any interviews when I got there because the epidemic situation was quite bad there, and it was almost impossible to go anywhere. Many places were shut down. So, you could not do any interviews even when you arrived at the site, and when you returned, you needed to do the quarantine at home. (Investigative journalist, 15 August 2022)

Furthermore, as indicated, many local authorities took advantage of pandemic policies to interfere with journalists' work by restricting or monitoring unwanted activity. For example, China began using health QR codes to battle COVID-19, which record the results of PCR tests and one's travel history, including access to certain public places or forms of transportation. This makes it harder for journalists to have secret investigations or secret meetings with their sources when dealing with sensitive topics. As the previous informant observed, some work even requires journalists to hide their identities during the investigation, but that became virtually impossible:

The control over personal information was unprecedented, so at the time, everyone in China was transparent to each other because no secret would be hidden between people. Wherever you travelled, you would need to scan the QR code or be asked to check the travel history. For example, if I travel from Beijing to one place to do the interview, I would rather it not be known by others where I come from, but the travelling records will show it. Another thing is if we want to hide our identity and use a fake name but are asked to



scan the health QR code that is linked to our ID, it would be impossible to hide. (Investigative journalist, 15 August 2022)

Another informant added that as the rules around the pandemic grew more rigid, it became riskier for journalists to pursue certain topics because they could be leaked so easily, bringing more interference from bans or even the local authorities:

As the possibilities of the topics being leaked increase, it greatly increases your uncertainties and sense of insecurity because you never know in what phase the work could be shut down. (Investigative journalist, 29 August 2022)

Most of our participants agreed that bans issued by the Publicity Department of the CPC had the greatest influence on the news production process. They went directly to the media to tell them what they could and could not cover. One informant mentioned that the bans were frequently issued during sensitive periods to maximise the impact of government propaganda and control the possible themes and areas of ‘public opinion supervision’ (that is, negative journalism) (investigative journalist, 28 November 2021). This broad prohibition against pandemic-related stories gave rise to journalists’ self-censorship as well. For example, one informant investigated a case of fake vaccines that most of his peers considered very sensitive. There was concern over whether the reporting could be published at all, whether it would be deleted right away, and whether he would suffer any sort of pressure once it was published. When none of that came to pass, he realised that many topics probably could be taken on, but journalists were restricting themselves even more than the government was restricting them:

I always insisted that all kinds of controls and constraints consistently existed. The key thing is whether or not you want to do it. I never thought constraints were an important reason [for limiting the available space for investigative journalism]. (Investigative journalist, 15 August 2022)

Aside from its direct impact on their ability to do their work, most of our informants also pointed to the pandemic’s downward pressure on their salaries (and hence their initiative). One informant revealed that the basic salary in most Chinese media organisations was quite low, but the

payment for articles was relatively good; thus, the more stories journalists wrote, the more money they would get. Given their reduced opportunities to conduct investigations as well as the increasing number of sensitive topics, investigative journalists saw their pay drop precipitously (investigative journalist, 29 August 2022).

Later in the pandemic, policies became routinised, such as taking PCR tests regularly, especially to gain entrance to large cities; requiring the health QR code in circumstances such as cross-regional travelling; and adapting to varying quarantine policies in different regions. What made this phase different from the previous ones is that people became more concerned or frightened about the policies and punishments than about the virus itself. One informant noted:

The fear of the virus did exist at the beginning, but now it is almost forgotten. It is an infectious disease, and people certainly were afraid of it because it is deadly, especially those in Wuhan. However, when the virus became less deadly, people were afraid of being socially ‘dead’ if they were infected. That means once you got infected, people around you would show you a look of spite. Your organisation and all your colleagues would be unable to work for two weeks because of you, so they would criticise you. Your leader would circulate a notice of criticism within the organisation. For example, if you left Beijing without reporting the journey to your organisation, your leader would get punished. It has become a very terrible thing. Therefore, the situation has shifted from that you might die because of getting infected to that you might socially die because of getting infected, and it has ended up that you would be punished if you violated any policies for the pandemic. The announcements do not come from the enforcement agencies but from some measures from the organisations. Every organisation is talking about politics, your leader might be punished, and you might be fired and lose the job. I have forgotten the pure fear of the virus [alone]. (Investigative journalist, 18 August 2022)

One informant said that the government usually takes time to react to the outbreak of a catastrophe, which brings with it a buffer and creates some room for media to do related reporting, but eventually controls will be installed, leaving very limited opportunity for the media to reflect upon and criticise what the government has done (investigative journalist, 29 August 2022). Two informants thought that the effects of China’s pandemic policies and controls over journalism are becoming irreversible, at least for a long time to come, involving the news events that journalists

can cover and spurring their audience's loss of faith in the media due to the limits on their work (and therefore their impact). One informant added that the media is now more like a part of the administrative system, and politics is always the priority, so it is hard to imagine that the controls on the media would ever be lifted again (investigative journalist, 18 August 2022).

### *The Utilisation of Social Media During the Pandemic*

Chinese investigative journalists relied more on social media than their counterparts in Norway both during the pandemic and long before it. The social media platforms which they considered most useful included WeChat, which offers multifaceted functions ranging from instant messaging to daily payment, and Weibo, a Twitter-like service. During the pandemic, WeChat was used on a daily basis for four main reasons. First, it served as an essential communications tool which was safer than the phone. Additionally, one informant said, 'You can use it to send documents, which is impossible to do through phone calls' (investigative journalist, 10 November 2021). Due to this functionality, several journalists also used WeChat for interviews via audio messages (which can be transferred immediately to texts) (investigative journalist, 3 April 2021). This platform allows for an accurate record of what sources said, although this meant that the interviews done via WeChat were restricted to less risky topics. WeChat did have limitations in terms of the ability to contact sources, one informant pointed out: 'WeChat is less useful when you are trying to contact someone you do not know. You need to add him/her as a friend, but if he/she doesn't accept your request, then communication wouldn't happen' (editor, 15 March 2021). On the other hand, limitations such as this on WeChat lead to sources with better credibility, another informant said:

Regarding the WeChat public account, relatively speaking, its dissemination relies on the chain between acquaintances, unlike Weibo, where anyone can comment or attack someone randomly. Generally, I think dissemination on WeChat is more reliable, whereas Weibo spreads a lot of disinformation, and the number of views has been false for a long time. I tend to communicate by WeChat public accounts because sources are relatively highly credible. Whoever you can chat with on WeChat, in most circumstances, their

identities have been verified, or you probably know what kind of people they are. (Past investigative journalist, 22 November 2021)

Next, WeChat was useful for locating initial story ideas and clues. The functions investigative journalists used most on WeChat were WeChat Groups, WeChat moments and WeChat Public accounts. Almost all the informants relied upon the many chat groups on their WeChat, including a group containing journalists, a group containing leaks and a group containing lawyers, all of which were filled with various clues and leaks every day. Therefore, they did not need to seek out leaks on Weibo, as they once had (investigative journalist, 10 November 2021). One informant claimed that he spent ten hours per day on average browsing different clue-sharing groups on WeChat (investigative journalist, 8 April 2021). Another informant added:

We have some WeChat clue-sharing groups, and there are many reporters in these groups. For example, I have a group, and there is a person who will share various clues from Weibo every day. Now that our cooperation model has been significantly refined, different reporters from some media organisations allowed to do the newsgathering and production were gathered in a group of 500 people by some platforms, such as Tencent and TopBuzz (Toutiao, a Chinese news and information content platform), which are responsible for content distribution. The staff responsible for WeChat operation from these platforms will share clues from other social media platforms every day in the group. Basically, in my Tencent group, this staff shared clues about some trending topics from Weibo, so I don't use Weibo anymore now except for some significant catastrophic events such as epidemics or floods when many people ask for help on Weibo. When this kind of disaster occurs, I'll need to contact those victims, yet the contact details, such as phone numbers posted by many victims on Weibo, would also be shared in the group, so I just need to call them by phone directly. (Investigative journalist, 19 April 2021)

WeChat Moments was also often helpful to our informants. For example, according to one informant (investigative journalist, 10 November 2021), many lawyers posted the case they had presented, the court verdict and related documents on Moments: 'If a lawyer posted a court verdict on Moments, we would find more from it. That is the common way we find initial stories'. The WeChat Public Account, on the other hand, is sometimes used to publish long, in-depth articles and local news features and is

easy to retweet on Moments, so journalists followed some articles there to do further investigation. Additionally, some sources approached journalists on the backend of the WeChat Official Account. According to one informant, those who did not dare to call journalists directly might leave a message there (investigative journalist, 8 April 2021). Finally, WeChat was used as a search engine, which might produce different results from Baidu (the main search engine in China).

Interestingly, WeChat was also used as a platform for crowdsourcing during the pandemic, although not often among the investigative journalists we interviewed. They crowdsourced clues, key sources or contact details of some sources. The problem was that using WeChat this way undermined the exclusiveness of their reporting. Once a topic was known to the public at large, according to one informant (investigative journalist, 25 September 2021), the competition from other journalists might increase, the investigation might be interfered with, or the safety of the journalist could be compromised (investigative journalist, 28 November 2021). In addition, the effectiveness of WeChat crowdsourcing was relatively low (investigative journalists, 3 April, 25 September, 20 November 2021).

### *Disinformation*

Social media brought with it an information (and disinformation) overload, informants admitted. Nevertheless, their attitude toward this disinformation was unexpectedly blasé. They believed that they could recognise it easily, and they relied heavily on cross-checking and objective evidence in any case. The biggest problem with disinformation was the time it took to verify or disprove, particularly when video was involved. One informant said:

It is easy to use incorrect pictures and videos, especially on-site pictures and videos. It is difficult to verify the materials of an explosion – for example, a similar explosion might have happened before – especially when there are no buildings around the site for reference. It is common to see some reporters report an explosion but use video and pictures from previous years. Doesn't it increase the workload for reporters? (Investigative journalist, 20 November 2021)

With regard to trusted sources during the pandemic, our informants were hard-pressed to name one, mainly because they still relied on traditional ways of conducting verification, such as cross-checking and going to the scene themselves. However, almost all of them explicitly claimed that they trusted nonhuman sources (that is, ‘written or objective evidence’) over human sources (‘verbal evidence’). One informant claimed the written evidence was the most significant and reliable form—not an online screenshot but a legal document or medical record, for example (editor, 22 September 2021). Other informants also appreciated the objectivity of written or audio-visual evidence (investigative journalist, 8 April 2021). One informant added that verbal evidence was the weakest kind because some people would fabricate or hide things, and written evidence was a more reliable ally in court (investigative journalist, 25 September 2021).

One informant voiced the concern that some material evidence could contain errors as well (investigative journalist, 28 November 2021), and several informants (investigative journalists, 3 April, 25 September, 10 November, 20 November, 22 November, 28 November 2021) expressed their doubts about some of the written evidence provided by the authorities. One informant said it was common to discover that the authorities had lied. Another informant added that credibility would be higher if the information released by the government was not judgmental but rather descriptive and supported by the evidence (investigative journalist, 25 September 2021). One informant advocated for using different sources to verify and support these kinds of materials and for making one’s sources very clear so audience members could judge for themselves (investigative journalist, 3 April 2021). In all, our informants emphasised the necessity of cross-checking (with at least three different parties) before sharing information, governmental or otherwise.

## CONCLUSION

In line with previous research on journalism in general and crisis journalism in particular, we can conclude that journalistic practices tend to follow established patterns of everyday news work. That is, journalists tended to modify rather than radically change their practices to meet the situation. In turn, differences in crisis reporting in China and Norway can be explained, to a large extent, by their everyday context and routines. Investigative reporting was rather slow to restart at the beginning of the crisis; when it did, new challenges and demands compelled new routines.

The main problem faced by our Chinese informants was their inability to criticise the government, which was also a struggle for Chinese journalists in their everyday work. During the pandemic, the Chinese authorities imposed new regulations which made investigative work even harder, such as the (frequently changing) bans on cross-regional travel. These policies also allowed local governments to undermine the journalist's role as watchdog and erode the profession's independence. In contrast, it appears that the Norwegian journalists were instead self-limiting in their analyses and criticism of the government's crisis measures due to their rally-around-the-flag syndrome, even though they also confronted challenges in both securing reliable information and physically moving around the country. The lack of investigative reporting in crisis is a real concern, as it keeps people in the dark and makes it harder for them to hold decision makers accountable.

There was also a difference between Chinese and Norwegian journalists in relation to their use of social media. In this regard, we can see how everyday practices informed crisis reporting. The Chinese journalists relied on social media much more than their Norwegian counterparts, thanks to the versatility and daily impact of WeChat in China. The journalists benefited from the convenient communication and immediate interaction with their sources, though topics had to remain generally less sensitive in this public forum. WeChat represented a means of avoiding political control and censorship in an everyday setting as well as a crisis.

In all, investigative journalism in Norway changed in character and became more data-driven in the interests of providing better information to the public. This tendency has arisen elsewhere as well (Pentzhold et al., 2021; Wu, 2021). According to Pentzhold et al. (2021), Norwegian journalists became 'knowledge brokers' during the pandemic thanks to their focus on data and visual presentations. Chinese journalists, on the other hand, lacked the same opportunity to collect and work with reliable data, which hampered this form of adaptation to the demands of the pandemic in their case.

This study underlines the larger need for joint transnational efforts in investigative journalism in times of global crisis. It was clear that the limitations upon access to information in China, which saw the first outbreak of COVID-19 in the world, impacted Norwegian journalists' ability to do their jobs as well. This, in turn, recalls the SARS outbreak in 2004, when China's initial stonewalling hindered information flow and responses at the global level (Buus & Olsson, 2006). As a global practice in

investigative collaboration takes shape, journalists will be better able to hold decision makers accountable for their management of crises at every level.

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## Toward a Hybrid Future for Investigative Journalism

*Maria Konow-Lund, Michelle Park, and Saba Bebawi*

In this book, we have reflected upon alternative ways forward for investigative journalism—ways which demand hybridisation, innovation and entrepreneurship. In doing so, we have also addressed a gap in the existing academic research. We deliberately considered cases which, while generally run by professional journalists, go well beyond traditional investigative journalism. These cross-disciplinary efforts in the field draw upon some traditional practices but at the same time dedicate themselves to productive and purposeful collaborations among journalists, activists,

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technologists, editorial developers, citizens, community coordinators and others. Such innovation within journalism, we argued, depends upon innovation at every level—locally, nationally and globally.

The promising entrepreneurial work now underway in the field of investigative journalism proves the truism that necessity is the mother of invention. While news journalism generally traffics in nonexclusive or shared content, investigative journalism has long focused on producing exclusive stories for which journalists who aim to hold power to account are specifically trained. While watchdog journalism was traditionally the purview of individual reporters working in competition with their peers and colleagues, such a model is both demanding and expensive for both practitioners and their sponsoring organisations. Alan Rusbridger, long-time editor-in-chief at the *Guardian*, famously claimed he had ‘seen the future and it’s mutual’ (Rusbridger, 2009, p. 23). Our cases here indicate that this ‘mutuality’ extends well past professional investigative journalists to a host of other people collaborating in local, national and global contexts, often at the same time. Their mingling of the traditional and the innovative has shed light upon the extent and promise of hybridisation in the field and in our future networked societies more generally (Heinrich, 2011). As the traditional institution of the press erodes, it becomes increasingly important to develop alternative modes of watchdog journalism involving a different cast of contributors.

In *The crisis of the institutional press*, Steven Reese sees professional journalism as under direct attack and advocates for collaboration and coordination within the field: ‘An institutionally organized forum is needed more than ever to resist the dark side of the internet and provide a centripetal force against the scattered and increasingly polarized factions in society, pulling apart from economic dislocation, tribalism and fear’ (Reese, 2021, p. 1). Despite the inherent challenges of doing this work, Reese insists upon the redemptive possibilities of ‘a complex social structure’ which ‘works together [...] to sustain its coherence, endurance and value’ (pp. 160ff). Reese applauds the journalistic institution’s general and multifarious turn toward hybridity through collaborations such as those coordinated by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ): ‘This kind of collaborative ethos among international professionals has been successful in producing award-winning results for the participants and worked to broaden the *institutional* leverage of a more distinctly globalized press’ (p. 116).

In this context, our work for this book has demonstrated, as well, investigative journalism's intensive demand for resources and the enormous risks sometimes taken by its practitioners (see also Hamilton's *Democracy's detectives*, 2016).<sup>1</sup> While much has been written about how journalism is now being forced to confront its faltering business models, the spread of digital technology, and new production networks and ecologies (see Anderson, 2018; Nielsen, 2016), little has been done to connect this upheaval to investigative journalism and its unique potential to adapt and transform—a potential we have seen arise repeatedly in our cases here. Existing studies have focused on award-winning investigative journalism completed by veterans with experience in watchdog journalism (Berglez & Gearing, 2018; Carson, 2020; Konieczna, 2018), but we sought out cases which reflected new organisational models and structures, roles, routines, funding sources and uses of technology working at local, national and international levels. We generated empirical data on the ways in which such start-ups arise and adapt in news 'deserts' to address the lack of publicly available information there. For reporters, funding is also a persistent question, but we did *not* focus on the collapse of traditional finance models for journalism, as this area has been covered by other academic work (Cagé, 2016; Konieczna, 2018; Olsen, 2020).

More importantly, research on how investigative journalism is being normalised from 'below' (Heft, 2021) also remains scarce. Our involvement of Bristol Cable, whose three founders started out as activists rather than journalists, sheds helpful light on the process of turning engaged citizens into watchdog journalists. Over time, of course, actors at Bristol Cable incorporated established journalistic techniques into alternative practices such as creating news-centred events, knocking on doors to better understand the public, and offering workshops for their citizen-members to help them contribute. The case of Bristol Cable demonstrates how start-ups and entrepreneurs (along with legacy media organisations) have *responded* to change and even crises. During the latter crises, in particular, there is an abundance of fake news and misinformation to be countered in whatever way possible (Quandt & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2021), which in turn demands innovation, or 'the process by which an idea or invention is translated into a good or service for which people will pay, or something that results from this process. To be called an innovation, an idea must be replicable at an economical cost and must satisfy a specific need' (Pavlik,

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, our chapter on the Forbidden Stories in this book.

2013, p. 183). Bristol Cable, as a nonprofit (and idealistic) organisation, developed the means of engaging citizens who were still willing to pay a member fee for the newspaper via the possibility of participation in its courses and other activities.

Like our other cases, Bristol Cable moves journalistic practice forward by addressing the unmet needs of the public and the field at the same time. Recent accounts (Waterson, 2022) and media reports (Abernathy, 2020; Barclay et al., 2022) indicate the increasing number of ‘black holes’ (Howells, 2016, pp. 1–2) in local and regional news coverage. Some blame this on the overall centralisation of the industry (Mathews, 2022). According to Christensen and Overdorf, the disruptive change now plaguing the media industry requires organisations to adapt their resources, processes and values. In this case, ‘resources’ encompass staff, technology, money and branding, among other things. ‘Processes’ include interactions, communication and decision making. And ‘values’ represent ‘standards by which employees set priorities that enable them to judge whether an order is attractive or unattractive, whether a customer is attractive or unattractive’ (Christensen & Overdorf, 2000, p. 4).

To sum up, our case studies for this book included the following:

- Bristol Cable, a journalistic co-op established by former students who had little to no previous experience as actual journalists but were frustrated with the lack of transparency and monopolised ownership of the media and the decline in quality of local news in particular.
- The Bureau Local, a unit of the Bureau of Investigative Journalism which was founded to localise the collaborative work model and data journalism of the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists to boost local British news coverage. The unit consists of traditional professional journalists in tandem with new actors such as community organisers, and it collaborates regularly with external actors such as bloggers, citizens, students, editorial developers and local reporters.
- The Korea Center for Investigative Journalism, a South Korean nonprofit investigative journalism organisation which is financially supported by membership funding—that is, individual citizen donations. It is the only South Korean partner in cross-border collaborative projects such as the Panama Papers led by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists.

- The Forbidden Stories, a start-up nonprofit dedicated to spreading the stories of reporters who have been imprisoned, placed in danger or even killed; it emerged as a direct result of the Charlie Hebdo terror attack in France.
- The VG COVID-19 Live Tracker, a legacy media case in Norway which involves one way in which a group of data journalists and others at VG adapted during the pandemic to better hold power to account.
- The responses of investigative reporters in Norway and China to the global health crisis of COVID-19 with regard to collaboration and social media use.

At the core of these cases is a professional investigative mindset, however it comes about among the interactions of both experienced and novice or outside contributors to the cause. This mindset informs the ‘mutual future’ which best characterises the way forward for investigative journalism today.

### HYBRID COLLABORATION AND INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM

Recent research in journalism and media studies has analysed diverse actors who are organising collaborations across borders, whether they are individual journalists, the entire legacy media field or non-traditional reporters (see Heft, 2021; Müller & Wiik, 2021). Still, ethnographic studies based on production and practices remain rare, which is why we conducted observational research directly at emerging organisations with a particular focus on the network in hybridised investigative journalism. For example, the Bureau Local established its pool of collaborators as the ‘Network’ to emphasise its interest in hybrid collaboration, recalling Castells’ ‘network society’, wherein ‘the diffusion of networking logic substantially modifies the operation and outcomes in processes of production, experience, power, and culture’ (Castells, 2010, p. 500). The Global Investigative Journalism Network (<https://gijn.org/>) now has become the significant pool of global watchdogs and provides webinars for journalists around the world to learn about up-to-date journalistic practices including data analysis. As our case studies have shown, such new network-based practices and routines are merging with traditional journalistic practices and ushering the field into the future.



As societies everywhere become more complex and digital, the effort to hold power to account within them requires additional competences. One recent study of cross-border collaboration such as the Panama and Paradise Papers found digital technology itself to be propelling the emergence of ‘global network journalism’: ‘a networked and discursive journalistic practice that is geared toward the global world for domestic purposes’ (Berglez & Gearing, 2018, p. 4581). This remains rooted in the collaborative investigative work of the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists but embraces Castells’ ‘network society’ and the ‘leak culture’ (think WikiLeaks) facilitated by the march of technological development. While global network journalism is often based on leaked sources, we found that local hybrid collaboration, such as that orchestrated by the Bureau Local, mainly relies upon its own data sources, shared according to the motto ‘make the available accessible’. In general, that is, whistleblowers are not always around when you need them, so the Bureau Local’s cultivation of its own datasets using open sources represents an alternative basis for networked investigative journalism. This is, of course, an auspicious development for other places, nations and even cross-border groups hoping to conduct hybrid collaboration in the absence of leaked news sources.

### THE POTENTIAL OF HYBRID GLOBAL INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM

The broad spectrum, reach and nature of investigative journalism mean that the hybridity of its sources, networks and technologies are at the heart of its growth and, in turn, its potential. One thing the world learned from the pandemic is the accuracy of Ulrich Beck’s (2013) description of a ‘risk society’ as the world globalises in a crisis. Also prior to the pandemic, Volkmer and Sharif (2018) called for journalism to become more cosmopolitan in its practices and actors as the field of global journalism began to take shape (see also Berglez, 2013; Heinrich, 2011). The last three chapters of this book demonstrated the increasing need for journalists to work across borders in cross-disciplinary collaborations as well as their abiding reluctance to do so given the many cultural obstacles which must be overcome. The push for hybridity emerged in the context of the three types of crisis that trigger an investigative journalistic response: (1) organisational crises in the practice of journalism itself; (2) sudden crises, referred to as

‘critical events’; (3) and the comparatively new crises distinguished as ‘global’ in nature. Hybrid collaboration, in particular, has been accelerated by the ascendance of data and computational journalism (see Chaps. 4, 5, 8, and 9). The news industry has already adopted Artificial intelligence (AI), and its impact is accelerating (see Pavlik, 2023; Roberts, 2023; Sirén-Heikel et al., 2023). Data and computational journalism is expected to increasingly support the watchdog efforts of an otherwise struggling local media (Arias-Robles & López López, 2021). While advanced technologies clearly help journalists to gather and analyse data for their stories, the power of the digital lends itself to abuse as well such as the artifices of authenticity, dis/misinformation and the impact of AI-operation, both within and outside of the field.

Likewise, not all newsrooms boast the digital literacy needed to deal with state-of-the-art technology. There is a profound digital divide at the local level owing to ‘the small number of local journalists with specific training for data processing’ (Arias-Robles & López López, 2021, p. 644) despite the fact that big data, data-driven journalism and computer-assisted reporting (CAR) first emerged decades ago. Hopefully, nonprofit organisations like the Bureau Local can be increasingly critical resources for educating and training whoever is interested while sharing professionally prepared datasets and investigating and publishing stories following a hybridised collaborative model.

## CONCLUSION: BEYOND THE MYTH OF INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM AND TOWARD ITS HYBRID FUTURE

One of the most essential underpinnings of the practice of investigative journalism is the need to establish trust between its actors and their sources, as well as among the often-disparate actors themselves. When people do not share a language or a set of cultural and social patterns, it can be difficult to do this. Some of these challenges also accompany the establishment of relationships between established organisations or journalists and new organisations or journalists (as well as actors who come from outside the field).

In 2024, it will be exactly 50 years since US President Richard M. Nixon resigned following pressure brought about by, among other things, the Watergate-related work of two intrepid *Washington Post* reporters, Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward (Winthrop, 2020). A debate persists among

journalists and academics over the actual impact of Bernstein and Woodward upon the president's resignation in relation to the ongoing investigations of the FBI and other authorities (Lanosga, 2022). At the heart of these discussions is whether these reporters have been credited with more involvement in Nixon's fate than they deserve, or, taking another step back, whether the reality of investigative journalism lives up to its most popular myths.

It is worth asking whether the production of classic investigative projects such as the Watergate work was in fact more hybridised than initially assumed. To what degree have sources or experts well outside the field of journalism contributed in fundamental ways to the success of investigative stories in legacy media organisations? Few members of those organisations have been willing to discuss this, given the overbearing weight of lone-wolf characterisations of such work. The cases discussed in this book, on the other hand, provide clear evidence of the existence and ongoing expansion of hybrid collaboration and cooperation in the field, where technology and shared global interests have carried the day.

Variou attempts to define investigative journalism have wrestled with the question of whether it is essentially equivalent to journalism in general or possesses particular traits and characteristics which distinguish it. In addition, some academics have pointed to how little is known about investigative journalism as a *social* practice (Aucoin, 2005; Konow-Lund et al., 2019). This book has shown that, in fact, many actors can undertake this work, and that the many relationships and intersections which result will ultimately ensure its success. Hybridisation, as much as specialisation, is now the coin of this new realm.

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# APPENDIX

## METHODOLOGY PART 2

Michelle Park and Maria Konow-Lund

### *Empirical Studies of Cases to Counter the Crisis in Investigative Journalism*

This book focuses on emerging media organisations which rely upon new forms of organisations, technologies, and practices and routines, responding to this call by Örnebring (2016, p. 9): ‘There is still a need for empirical data on journalistic work and work practices in the face of institutional change’. Investigative journalism is a costly and resource-intensive practice which, correspondingly, lost the support of many mainstream news organisations during the various financial crises of the digital age. Hamilton (2016) highlights the importance of this kind of news, however, by calculating the hypothetical *economic* returns upon investment of these investigations for society. One of his examples involves a 2008 investigation about the probation system by the *News and Observer* located in the US state of North Carolina. While its six-month investigation cost approximately ‘\$200,000 (equivalent to \$216,500 in 2013\$)’ (Hamilton, 2016, p. 113), the societal return from the probation system reforms sparked by

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Parts of this chapter were first written in Michelle Park’s PhD thesis (see Park (2022)). Her doctoral research was entirely self-funded without receiving any external funding.

the investigative reporting hypothetically implied ‘net benefits of \$62.1 million’ (p. 119). This work, though expensive to conduct, is crucial to our society so it needs to develop new ways to sustain.

This appendix specifically concerns the methodology of Part 2. As journalistic practice comes to encompass more diverse elements, such as new actors and new digital technologies, the operations of newsrooms have been impacted. To better understand this evolving situation, we hoped to study aspects of three distinct case studies: Bristol Cable and the Bureau Local in the United Kingdom and the Korea Center for Investigative Journalism (KCIJ) in South Korea. These emerging organisations represent experimental journalistic models brought about in a bottom-up manner—for example, the KCIJ’s membership-funding model was suggested by its audience in the interests of supporting its investigative journalism (see the KCIJ chapter).

When choosing the three cases, we tried to move beyond the Western focus of most investigative journalism studies. Additionally, we followed a comparative strategy evocative of system design (Przeworski & Teune, 1970, p. 31ff). Though two cases are based in the UK and one in South Korea, they share certain critical aspects: (1) they are emerging (or even experimental) alternatives to traditional organisations; (2) they are entirely focused on holding power to account at the local, national and/or international level; and (3) they aim to provide quality investigative journalism to fill a void in their respective media ecologies. Each one’s experimental journalistic practices merge traditional investigative journalism with alternative tools and approaches. Each organisation is focused on how to engage new actors in their work. And each stands out as a relatively rare example of a willingness to collaborate and innovate in the interests of responding to the changing times.

### *Ethnographic Field Observation at Newsrooms*

In our discussions of these cases, we thought of hybridisation as ‘a process of simultaneous integration and fragmentation’ (Chadwick, 2017, p. 18). An important outcome of the ethnographic approach in general is to generate insight into ‘*how the members of the group/culture being studied understand things, the meanings they attach to happenings, the way they perceive their reality*’ (Denscombe, 2021, p.120). In terms of journalism studies, Zelizer (2004, p. 65) points out that the ethnographic approach helps us to observe the procedures and rationales of news production and journalistic norms and practices through the lens of insiders. Newsroom ethnography can expose the complex impacts of political, economic,

institutional and technological elements on the profession of journalism (see Boczkowski, 2004; Cottle & Ashton, 1999; Usher, 2014). It is also, in short, ‘an opportunity to investigate, through direct observation, the lived experience of journalists’ (Williams et al., 2011, p. 118). For our three cases, as well, an ethnographic approach ‘generates a *holistic* description of culture’s material existence and symbolic codes, and depicts how its members develop their social status’ (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019, p. 174).

Ethnographic field research has been rare in journalism studies due to its practical difficulties, but the few studies which exist have yielded many important insights (see Gans, 1979; Tuchman, 1978). Very few researchers, then, have actually gone into the newsroom to observe meetings, practices, routines and challenges. Ryfe (2009, p. 198) concludes, ‘Little is known about how the routines and practices of news production are changing (if at all), how journalists understand these changes, and what all of this means for the production of news or the self-conception of journalists’.

### *Negotiating Access to the Newsrooms and Conducting Observations*

One of the biggest challenges of fieldwork in journalism studies remains access to newsrooms (Denscombe, 2021). Unsurprisingly, we had to work hard to arrange our own opportunities to observe news workers directly. In the case of Bristol Cable, Maria Konow-Lund reached out to the organisation’s two founders and invited them to a two-day seminar in Norway on local investigations and cross-border collaboration. Coincidentally, the seminar took place on the very same day that the Panama Papers investigation appeared on front pages around the world. Konow-Lund then won a two-year scholarship to the United Kingdom to conduct academic research on investigative journalism in Britain. Once she was settled as a researcher there, she reconnected with the Bristol Cable founders and discussed her access to their organisation. She engaged in field observation at Bristol Cable for approximately three weeks during the fall of 2017 while conducting semi-structured qualitative interviews and field interviews at the same time. Simultaneously, she contacted the editor-in-chief of the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, Rachel Oldroyd, who invited her to a meeting in London and enabled her access to that organisation as well.

For Michelle Park, negotiating access to investigative journalism newsrooms as a PhD student was one of the most difficult challenges she faced, as she lacked a network in both the British and the South Korean journalism sectors. The first step she took was to familiarise herself with the field



by attending conferences and training workshops, such as the CIJ Summer Conference offered by the Centre for Investigative Journalism in London, where she was able to meet some of the staff at the Bureau Local and the KCIJ. Through several years of such efforts, she eventually connected with the editor-in-chief and CEO of the KCIJ, in 2017. Soon thereafter, she was invited to the Seoul office to negotiate her access, including five weeks of field study in 2018. Following her ethnographic research at the KCIJ, Park also contacted the managing editor and CEO of the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, and was invited to the London office, where she negotiated two weeks of newsroom access in the summer of 2018.

In terms of fieldwork, both researchers' daily activities included general observation of the work of individual journalists, editorial meetings and plenary meetings, as well as 'shadowing' (Usher, 2014, p. 244) a specific staff member for a day. In line with traditional production studies (see Tuchman, 1978), the researchers wrote fieldnotes while observing journalistic practices in and outside of the newsrooms, then addressed certain aspects of their notes during semi-structured qualitative interviews.

### *In-Depth Interviews With Practitioners*

In addition to observation, this study adopted semi-structured in-depth interviews in its methodology. Interviews are useful for accessing shared insider norms and practices (Denscombe, 2021; Silverman, 2013) which are otherwise often invisible to external observers. The findings from the interviews were also useful lenses through which to view our observations in the field.

Two types of interviews were conducted throughout the fieldwork of both researchers. One was casual and unstructured, the product of on-the-spot conversation during observation. For example, researchers would ask ad hoc questions about things happening in the newsroom. These field interviews and fieldnotes then shaped the individual semi-structured interviews which were conducted later on, both inside and outside the newsroom.

While the fieldwork of Konow-Lund (2017–spring 2018) and Park (spring–summer 2018) was conducted independently at the three cases, both researchers encountered similar hybrid elements in their innovative forms of investigative journalism, strengthening the general validity of the study.

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