

## 9 Collaborative-investigative journalism

From the “lonely wolf” to the  
“power of the pack”

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From the perspective of normative democratic theory, one of the core tasks of journalism is to critique and control powerful actors, particularly from the arenas of politics and the economy (Meier 2019). However, exposing grievances in society and initiating a social debate about them is not a new assignment but has been considered constitutive of journalism since the dawn of modern democracy at the beginning of the 20th century. The role was institutionalized as “a strong alternative to event focused journalism” in the form of investigative teams since the 1960s (Aucoin 2007, 18).

In the past decade, however, investigative journalism has experienced a quantum leap. The digital transformation has improved the possibilities of global networking via a digital communication infrastructure, as well as data exchange and data evaluation. Journalists are in contact across media houses in national as well as international contexts; exchange information; do research together; and take on their role as guardians of democracy as a global unit (Alfter 2016). Whereas this networking offers manifold possibilities on the product level, the journalistic offering also has an impact at the organizational level (Buschow and Suhr 2022).

The revelations in the context of the Panama Papers, which were published in 2016, are one of the best-known examples of this kind of collaboration between journalistic entities. About 400 journalists from 80 countries were involved in the disclosures about corruption, money laundering, and tax evasion and received several awards, including the prestigious Pulitzer Prize (Gamperl 2017). The research was initiated by the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, and the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) coordinated the international data and document analysis.

### Case studies

In the Journalism Innovations in Democratic Societies (JoIn-DemoS) project, “collaborative-investigative journalism” was identified as one of the 20 most relevant innovations in all five countries (see Chapter 2 on methodology).

The following media were selected as case studies because of either their importance or pioneering role in the respective country for this innovation or both. The interesting aspect in this context is the range of investigative media, which involves start-ups, investigative platforms, and legacy media.

- Austria: The investigative platform *Dossier* was founded in 2012 by journalist Florian Skrabal to do research and stories for which traditional newsrooms lacked the time and resources. From the outset, this advertisement-free medium considered collaboration with national and international media an indispensable requirement and thus a key element in all projects. The team members (11 in total, as of 2023) work extensively on national and international topics related to corruption and crime, which are then published as “Dossiers” online and in print. The medium is financed by the audience through various subscription models and by journalism training programs. In 2018, a crowdfunding campaign was carried out successfully (see Chapter 21). In its form, *Dossier* is unique in Austria to this day and, along with a few other media such as *Der Falter* or *Der Standard*, has contributed significantly to the development of collaborative-investigative journalism in the country. The interview was conducted with the founder and editor in chief of *Dossier*, Florian Skrabal.
- Germany: The investigative research department of the legacy media *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (SZ) was selected as one of the first and, to date, most important departments for collaborative-investigative journalism in Germany. Since 2012, a SZ team (7 members in 2022) has been working in international research alliances. Back in 2012, SZ approached the ICIJ with vast amounts of leaked data on shell companies, and two SZ journalists, Frederik Obermaier and Bastian Obermayer, were allowed to try their hand at international cooperation. The two had to learn on the job how to analyze such large volumes of data. In 2016, they had a breakthrough with the journalistic processing and reporting of the Panama Papers for Germany. The JoIn-DemoS project interviewed Frederik Obermaier, then deputy head of the investigative research department, and Elisabeth Gamperl, managing editor visual desk.
- Spain: The selected case study *Civio* is a digital native medium committed to monitoring government and public authorities and was founded in 2012. Three years later, *Civio* began forming short-term partnerships for its projects with international media outlets with a similar philosophy, such as *Correctiv* in Germany. Since then, international collaboration has become a foundation of the work of the *Civio* team (10 members in 2022). In 2019, *Civio* was one of very few news outlets in Spain to join the European Data Journalism Network (EDJNet). The interview was conducted with Olalla Tuñas, community and participation officer.
- Switzerland: The research desk of *Tamedia/TX Group* was chosen as one of the most representative examples of collaborative-investigative journalism in Switzerland. The research desk is a collaboration with a bicultural

and bilingual approach. The editorial department was founded to create capacity for stories that otherwise no one would investigate. The desk edits and publishes major investigative leaked stories in German and French, initially for the two Sunday newspapers *SonntagsZeitung* and *Le Matin Dimanche*, and then later for other media in the *Tamedia* group. Since 2014, the team of 9–12 journalists has repeatedly participated in international cooperation on major leak investigations. In part, the data journalism department is integrated into the research desk. The interviews were conducted with two managing editors of the *Tamedia* research desk.<sup>1</sup>

- United Kingdom: *Bellingcat* is the most important and best-known investigative medium. The company, which today has about 40 employees and is active worldwide, started from a personal blog by Eliot Higgins. From this individual initiative, a research network of various journalists with various expertise emerged. Higgins achieved international attention for the first time with an important investigation on weapon trafficking in Syria and consequently created *Bellingcat* in 2014. Since then, *Bellingcat* has earned a worldwide reputation as an international research collective consisting of researchers and investigative and citizen journalists who conduct open-source intelligence investigations on a wide range of human rights issues. The interview was conducted with Eliot Higgins, founder of *Bellingcat*.

### Aims of the innovation

In all five projects, the claim to monitor and critique powerful actors from politics and economy through network research is clearly formulated in their respective objectives. In addition, there is the aim to stand out from other media through this comprehensive investigative work.

*Dossier* wants to offer something that conventional media cannot provide: to focus exclusively on investigative journalism. The necessity for publishers in the digital era to cut costs, reduce staff, and make available ever fewer resources for research was, according to Skrabal, the reason he established *Dossier*. Skrabal sees the investigative platform's fact-based journalism as acting as a counterweight to the traditional strongly opinion-oriented journalism in Austria. Data journalism has always played a major role in the ability to counter fake news with facts. The truly innovative aspect of *Dossier's* work, Skrabal said, is returning to investigative journalism's roots: "Classic research is a classic craft." Today, international cooperation is an indispensable part of this kind of research because as Skrabal said, "crime does not stop at the national border."

International cooperation should make it possible to "keep up with crime," as Frederik Obermaier, deputy head of SZ's investigative team in Germany, puts it in similar terms. From the beginning, the visual presentation of investigative journalism in the digital world also played an important role at SZ. The aim of these considerations was to make it easier for the audience to understand and to build a brand. "One should know pretty

quickly that this is an investigative project by the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*,” says visual desk editor Elisabeth Gamperl. Thus, individuality is also retained in global cooperation. The collaboration serves pragmatic purposes, such as distributing the workload when dealing with huge amounts of data, and substantive goals, such as improving journalism by drawing on the expertise of journalists across countries. A new role model has emerged from this, in that the investigative journalist used to be a “lonely wolf,” Obermaier observed, “now we talk about the power of the pack mentality.”

The objectives of the Swiss *Tamedia* research desk have social and commercial components. The interviewees explained that part of the founding role of the research desk is to offer social added value, to draw attention to grievances, and to get the process of bottom-up change moving. By producing such socially relevant stories through international cooperation, the research desk will contribute to the reputation of the medium and create a unique selling point compared to other Sunday newspapers on the market. From both an economic and social perspective, it was also innovative to address two Swiss language groups and to publish in French and German. The department is independent, which means it can remain removed from the day-to-day business but has the resources to do major research working closely with the data journalism team. However, this journalistic freedom has pragmatic limits: “As long as we deliver such lighthouse stories, we will be funded,” one of the interviewed managing editors said.

*Civio*’s main goal in collaborating with other media companies has been to achieve a wider reach in terms of both research and audience. From 2015 on, the agreements ranged from the publication of their entire research or of data in other Spanish media, such as *El Confidencial* and *El Mundo*, to ad hoc cooperations with international news outlets. *Civio* joined the EDJNet in 2019; the agreements for media collaborations should be put on a more solid basis, which should extend the reach even more but save costs. Media from 14 nations (as of 2022) work together at EDJNet, especially in translations and finding opportunities for republishing: “It’s not a super organization, but it obviously helps you to reach places that would otherwise be more expensive,” says Olalla Tuñas. Moreover, only the collaboration allows a comprehensive view of research topics.

*Bellingcat*’s mission is to publish transparent and accountable information on human rights issues. They work as an open-source investigative network “because we want to show to everyone our work,” said Eliot Higgins. The company was founded to provide a place for people who were already doing open-source investigation, which means gathering information from freely available sources for their investigative work, as well as for those who still wanted to learn how to do it. Cooperation is crucial, not only with other media but particularly with citizens who are experts on a specific issue. *Bellingcat* does not necessarily correspond to the role of the journalistic gatekeeper but sees itself rather as a loudspeaker, as Eliot Higgins explained: “We’re amplifying out to a huge audience of journalists, policymakers and people working on human rights issues.”

### Supportive conditions

In terms of supportive conditions, the projects belonging to large media companies pointed to internal factors such as management support. Those organizations that were founded as independent investigative media saw external factors as supportive conditions. Moreover, as the evaluation of the data showed, the need for such a service became evident.

Apart from a lack of, but a growing demand for, investigative journalism in Austria, Skrabal did not see any supportive conditions at the level of the Austrian media system when founding *Dossier*. The few funding programs, such as the Vienna Media Initiative, did not even exist in *Dossier's* early years. At the corporate level, Skrabal identified advantages compared to large, traditional media houses. Many things would be easier because the company is an innovative project that does not have any historically grown structures and, therefore, “does not need to carry any ballast.”

The SZ investigative journalists consider the good atmosphere in the company to be decisive, particularly in the context of the importance of having the support and backing from the management, along with an open-minded editorial team. The whole SZ editorial team has “always [been] very free-spirited,” says Obermaier, “so that people were always willing to try out new things.” In addition, the personal level played a key role in setting up SZ's investigative research department. The contact person in the chief editorial office was Wolfgang Krach, who had been an investigative journalist and knew the job holistically. The owners also appreciated the investigative team and stood behind it journalistically, as well as seeing the economic advantages of investigative journalism as a unique selling point.

The editors of the *Tamedia* research desk see the fundamental willingness of the management and the start of the project at the right time as the most important supportive framework conditions. The publisher TX Group supports the investigative project, enabling the team to do research free from the daily routine and over long periods. The need to research such in-depth stories arose quickly and timely, “some leaks came at just the right time for us,” one interviewee explained. The international cooperation and networks, such as with the ICIJ, which became necessary with the major databased leak research, have in turn improved their own image and facilitated the work.

For the digital native *Civio*, joining EDJNet was an important step in consolidating collaboration and, thus, the company both journalistically and economically. *Civio* found in the EDJNet an infrastructure and an organization in which they could participate. In the network, they were no longer “a small media that goes knocking on doors all over the world,” Tuñas explained. While Spain does not have subsidies for innovations in journalism, the EDJNet does receive European Union funding. In addition to these pragmatic economic benefits, there is the exchange with journalists from other countries and even from their own. “These European meetings are very good even to meet people from Spanish media, because here [in Spain] you don't have

those formats,” Tuñas pointed out. Only through comparison with others was *Civio* able to have an overview of a problem and of the possibilities to change things in their own territory.

The investigative platform *Bellingcat*, which built up an international network from the United Kingdom, was able to take advantage of technical progress, in particular smartphone technology. Global smartphone growth and the development of (social media) apps for mobile platforms made it easy to share videos and photographs and connect everyone together. “That then gave us an access to a huge amount of information coming from the ground,” *Bellingcat* founder Higgins explained. This became really significant in the Arab Spring in the early 2010s. Furthermore, the digital measurement of the planet and programs like Google Earth and Google Maps, enabling satellite imagery available to reach people, and Google reverse image search were “very useful for open-source investigation, even though they weren’t intended for that [purpose].”

### **Obstructive conditions**

The lack of resources is a common complaint. As with the supporting conditions, projects in legacy media houses tend to see internal factors such as shortages of money and time as obstacles to the development of the innovation. By contrast, independent media organizations attribute their resource constraints to external factors.

In Austria, the high level of dependence of news companies on politics “distorts the media market,” said Skrabal. Thus, the allocation of advertisements from public institutions and the government to mainly traditional media and the lack of transparency in doing so was a negative framework condition. On the other hand, this grievance with the media system made the advertisement-free *Dossier* project both necessary and possible.

Within the structures of a large legacy media house, the SZ investigative research team sometimes struggles with the allocation of resources within the company. Although the team is “complaining at a very high level,” staff resources had been tight from time to time due to financial restrictions, explained Obermaier. From Gamperl’s perspective, the tight time frame inhibits an innovative approach to the visual presentation of any revelations.

For the *Tamedia* research desk, the great support and preference on the part of the management proved to be the precise reason for the pressure on the young team within the editorial office and triggered internal animosities. However, after the first major leaks, when colleagues saw the results of the months of hard work, their standing improved. However, the research desk was experiencing a new obstacle from outside. Since about 2017, organized and professionalized resistance by both lawyers of companies and individuals that appear in data leaks made it much more difficult to publish such stories. That resistance increased the workload, and additionally, there was more financial pressure from the company, as *Tamedia* also had to cut jobs.

In general, the media in Spain suffer from a “brutal lack of resources,” Tuñas complained. As a young, small, medium enterprise, not only is funding not secured in the long term, but this also brings disadvantages to the still youthful journalistic practice of cooperation. “Collaboration has a counterpart, which is very difficult, and that is having to cede your own work,” Tuñas pointed out. The traditional media would find it much more difficult to share, to give in, and to listen. Some of the media with which *Civio* sometimes collaborated did not automatically provide the data, but the exchange had to be agreed anew in each case. Often, it was only personal acquaintance that facilitated cooperation.

For *Bellingcat* founder Higgins, “the main limitation is people’s trust” because funding depends on it. However, from the outside it is difficult to understand the work of *Bellingcat*. The platform is funded by foundations, among others, that know common media types, but “it is very hard to categorize what we do,” Higgins says. *Bellingcat* is not an ordinary news organization. Thus, fundraising had often been very difficult despite the open-source investigation and the associated requirement for transparency.

### Societal impact

All the interviewees see societal impact as an integral part of collaborative-investigative journalism. The focus is on informing people so comprehensively that they can make their own decisions.

In accordance with the formulated objective of the monitoring and critique, *Dossier* selects only topics of public interest. Through comprehensive research and fact-based, balanced presentation, the team seeks to contribute to diversity of opinion and strengthen media competence in Austria. To serve the public, as *Dossier* claims, journalistic networks are indispensable for researching corrupt or criminal networks. The results of the research should make it easier for people to make decisions in the democratic process. As a small news organization, *Dossier* understands itself as a complement to traditional media and a contribution to media diversity in Austria.

With its investigative work, the *SZ* investigative research department wants to contribute to social change. Providing information from a critical view in a comprehensible form is intended to make the public “capable of taking action,” as Gamperl put it. Collaboration plays an increasingly important role in investigative journalism and in society. By joining networks and working in cooperation, the *SZ* investigative team was able to do better research and thus better journalism with a bigger impact. International reporting increases the pressure on the powerful and is more likely to lead to investigations and subsequently to legislative changes, as scandals can no longer be ignored so easily on the national level, Obermaier explained. Furthermore, such global stories like the Panama Papers reach not only the usual *SZ* audience, but broader segments of the population.

*Tamedia's* research desk wants to “bring light into the darkness” and do so with the necessary tenacity. The interviewees were convinced that the investigative work of recent years from *Tamedia*, achieved through both international cooperation and with other Swiss media on global and national topics, based on massive data, has left its mark on the Swiss population. They have had to realize that even they do not live in a paradise where public institutions function perfectly.

Tuñas succinctly formulated the essence of *Civio's* journalistic mission: “Give the right information to the people who need it.” Making information available, however, does not simply mean providing the raw data, but processing and translating it to make it understandable is the essential aspect. Collaboration improves *Civio's* journalistic work because it captures many perspectives and expertise. In this way, *Civio's* research contributes to the improvement of the quality of democracy, as the organization's guidelines state. *Civio's* work enables people to make their own informed decisions about their lives and, beyond that, about society and democracy.

*Bellingcat's* key claims of accuracy and transparency represent a benefit both to the industry and to the democratic function of journalism. Assessing the work of the network, Higgins claimed, “Bellingcat has certainly improved the trust, both inside and outside journalism.” Citizens, journalists, and experts who work together at *Bellingcat* learn from each other how to identify, verify, interpret, and share information. This collaborative model is about building a community of people who want to work with each other on equal terms. The more people, the better because the Bellingcat perspective is that diversity of sources and people is the strong point of their editorial work.

## Conclusion

As the case studies in the JoIn-DemoS project show, investigative journalism is not a journalistic novelty. Rather, the innovation lies in the establishment of supporting structures for permanent activity in the investigative field, especially through the cooperation of various media houses across national borders. The democratic political role of journalism is in the foreground. Though the case studies vary widely in terms of media type, from legacy media and start-ups to open-source platforms with a strong civil journalistic element, they share similar goals: the claim to the best possible, transparent research by networking to comply with the basic journalistic tasks critique and monitoring to enable people to make informed decisions.

This cultural change is precisely the point that the societal impact of the innovation becomes clear. In an increasingly fragmented media market, within which journalistic and nonjournalistic content fight for the limited attention of the audience, several major international investigative research projects have gained renown in the recent decade. They have, through great risk of detection, made the machinations of criminal networks more difficult. Despite enormous successes and global recognition, these investigative

collaborations are anything but permanently secure. All the interviewees saw limited (financial) resources as a hindering factor. While for large legacy media, the implementation of investigative projects is linked to the (economic) strengthening of the media brand, for small investigative media, the link is pragmatically about the survival of the brand. Hope for sustainability, nevertheless, does seem justified. Collaborative-investigative research is a unique selling point of journalism in the fragmented media market, which publishers and their management teams recognize according to our case studies. As such, collaborative-investigative research contributes significantly to sharpening the unique selling proposition of journalism in the digital media world and strengthening journalism's role as a pillar of democracy.

## Note

- 1 Anonymity was agreed with the Swiss interviewees.

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