



# Toward a Hybrid Future for Investigative Journalism

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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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