



A Hybrid Investigative Ecology

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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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