

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

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# 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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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 journalismas-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 kindwrote 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 *bybrid* 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', 'individualdonation', '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 icebreaker, 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 practicedriven) 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

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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 are 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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