



CHAPTER 4

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

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.

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

M. Park (✉)

School of Journalism, Media and Culture, Cardiff University, Cardiff, UK
e-mail: parka2@cardiff.ac.uk

© The Author(s) 2024

M. Konow-Lund et al. (eds.), *Hybrid Investigative Journalism*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-41939-3_4

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.

M. Konow-Lund

Department of Journalism and Media Studies, OsloMet – Oslo Metropolitan University, Oslo, Norway

e-mail: mkl@oslomet.no

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.

REFERENCES

- Barclay, S., Barnett, S., Moore, M., & Towned, J. (2022). *Local news deserts in the UK: What effect is the decline in provision of local news and information having on communities?* Charitable Journalism Project. <https://publicbenefitnews.files.wordpress.com/2022/06/local-news-deserts-in-the-uk.pdf>

- Cairncross, F. (2019). *The Cairncross review: A sustainable future for journalism*. Government report. Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport, United Kingdom. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/779882/021919_DCMS_Cairncross_Review_.pdf
- Carson, A. (2020). *Investigative journalism, democracy and the digital age*. Routledge.
- Chadwick, A. (2017). *The hybrid media system: Politics and power* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Franklin, B. (2013). *Local journalism and local media making the local news* (2nd ed.). Taylor and Francis.
- Howells, R. (2015). *Journey to the centre of a news black hole: Examining the democratic deficit in a town with no newspaper*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Cardiff University.
- Konow-Lund, M. (2019). Negotiating roles and routines in collaborative investigative journalism. *Media and Communication*, 7(4), 103–111.
- Konow-Lund, M. (2020). Reconstructing investigative journalism at emerging organisations. *The Journal of Media Innovations*, 6(1), 9–22. <https://doi.org/10.5617/jomi.7830>
- Örnebring, H. (2010). Technology and journalism-as-labour: Historical perspectives. *Journalism*, 11(1), 57–74.
- Örnebring, H. (2016). *Newsworkers: A comparative European perspective*. Bloomsbury.
- Park, M. (2022). *Rejuvenating investigative journalism at nonprofit news organisations in South Korea and the United Kingdom*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Cardiff University.
- Potter, E. (n.d.). *About us – From our Founder*. The Bureau of Investigative Journalism. <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/about-us>
- Reese, S. (2021). *The crisis of the institutional press*. Polity.
- Williams, A., Harte, D., & Turner, J. (2015). Filling the news hole? UK community news and the crisis in local journalism. In R. K. Nielsen (Ed.), *Local journalism: The decline of newspapers and the rise of digital media* (pp. 203–223). I. B. Tauris.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

