



Bristol Cable: A Local Hybrid Organisation

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I'm not interested in writing for the sake of writing; I'm interested in writing for the sake of trying to hold power to account.
—Informant, Bristol Cable, 2018

Investigative journalism has long been described as ‘in decline’ thanks to aspects such as layoffs and faltering business models (Carson, 2020; Konieczna, 2018), and local journalism has faced similar financial difficulties as well as downsizing in its newsrooms (Franklin, 2013; Williams et al., 2015).¹ The consequences for journalistic practice of the media industry’s prioritising of economic efficiency have been obvious as well—for one thing, individual reporters’ workloads have increased significantly, with a corresponding decline in the quality of the news. The watchdog

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function of local newsrooms—that is, their ‘democracy-enabling role’ of holding the powerful to account (Williams et al., 2015, p. 204)—has been undermined as well. The present study addresses the fact that, despite the persistence of what Rachel Howells (2015) calls ‘black holes’ in local news coverage, some of the most interesting entrepreneurial actors in UK investigative journalism have chosen the local market in which to establish themselves, including the two cases discussed below, Bristol Cable and the Bureau Local (our next chapter). Although we would argue that such recent start-ups remain under-investigated, some studies do exist (Konow-Lund, 2019, 2020, Birnbauer, 2019; Colbran, 2022; Konieczna, 2018; Price, 2017). Colbran, for example, focuses on ‘how the non-profits are challenging journalistic “norms” and expanding the Fourth Estate role of the investigative journalist’ (Colbran, 2022, p. 115). Here, we are interested in how these actors respond to their local contexts and construct their production practices in hybrid and innovative ways in relation to organisational structure as well as technology. Hybridisation is here understood as the blending of traditional practices with new methods within journalism, or, as Chadwick writes, what happens when ‘older and newer media logics in the field of media and politics blend, overlap, intermesh, and coevolve’ (2013, p. 4).

The empirical data for the first case combines semi-structured qualitative interviews with notes from field observation on location at Bristol Cable, and the analysis refers to both in turn.

HYBRID INVESTIGATIVE INNOVATORS

The Bristol Cable actors distinguished themselves by taking a particular interest in the endemic news gap at the community or local level and seeking to raise citizen awareness and interest in participation through proactive journalistic events. While the production of investigative journalism is as costly and time consuming as ever, its impact on society in the long run makes it worth the effort (Hamilton, 2016). When they founded Bristol Cable in Bristol in 2014, the three recent college graduates embarked on a meticulous research process, meeting with hundreds of citizens as well as community groups. They asked people in detail about their expectations and needs regarding a local news organisation (informant, Bristol Cable, November 2017) and how it might best speak for them. Underpinning this work was the founders’ initial conviction that a local news

organisation should engage the public and offer people the ability to participate in strategic decisions. The recent graduates and some friends decided to empower new professionals to operate the organisation on a daily basis, and its start-up period in 2014 was filled with public journalism training sessions for the staff involving professional journalists from other news organisations who offered their help with pursuits including photography, feature writing and interactive media. These professionals included John Henley from the *Guardian* and other veteran reporters, and the over 300 regular citizens who benefited from their perspective went on to form the working groups which produced the content for the first edition of the Bristol Cable. By drawing upon the legacy media and traditional investigative journalism to teach citizens how to be involved in production, Bristol Cable not only paved the way for the co-op but also introduced a new form of journalism into the local context. In these early days, everyone at the start-up saw local journalism as a vehicle of community empowerment rather than a profession or craft as such. This emphasis, however, would change as the organisation's founders and new staff members came to appreciate and respect journalism in and of itself (informant, Bristol Cable, 2018). These actors gained this respect through attending conferences and seminars and consulting with investigative journalists who volunteered to share their professional knowledge.

From 2014 onward, the organisation produced a quarterly print publication and continuously updated its website with new content. Among other things, it has covered such stories as the investment portfolio of Bristol University (<https://thebristolcable.org/2015/06/exclusive-interactive-bristol-unis-not-so-ethical-investments/>) and the property market in Bristol (<https://thebristolcable.org/2015/04/housing-problems-unviable-solutions/>). Both the website and the quarterly newspaper offered a mix of in-depth investigative stories and regular news bulletins concerning activities in the community.

Bristol Cable's business model involved attracting members of the Bristol public to the organisation for a fee of three pounds per week. The organisation was, in effect, a co-op owned by its community members, and in a few years the three founders applied for a small grant from Co-ops UK, a federation of UK cooperatives, for about three thousand pounds (informant, Bristol Cable, 26 January 2018). The grant was intended to stimulate and initiate the creation of media cooperatives, and Bristol Cable was awarded a runner-up prize of fifteen hundred pounds, which allowed its work to really get underway, as we will see in what follows.

ORGANISATION OF PRODUCTION AT A CO-OP

It has elsewhere been argued that emerging actors within investigative journalism do not need to have a background in traditional journalism school or years of experience with legacy media organisations (Aviram, 2020), and the genesis of the Bristol Cable co-op supports this observation. During field observation in 2017 and 2018, the actors' investment in the Bristol Cable organisation was clear. One reason for establishing the co-op in the first place was that so many media outlets in Britain were owned by so few big companies, and journalistic independence was therefore in short supply. Another reason was that a hierarchical editorial chain of command excluded or limited opinions, engagement and involvement. One of the founders noted that he met his cofounders during their first year at university in their classes in international relations. During that time, they were also involved in various campaigns 'ranging from Palestine solidarity groups to anti-cuts movements as well, on campus and nationally, which saw us do a lot of activism' (founder, Bristol Cable, November 2017). Their growing friendship was propelled by their shared political interests and inclination toward engagement and entrepreneurship:

We became good friends like that and then interacted on a friendly basis as well as on a political level. These two aspects were always enmeshed. In our relationship, our political positions led us to be close, with life experience at university, as well as engaging intellectually as part of the formal curriculum and through the activism that we were doing. There was that side but there was also a friendly side. We liked to party together. (Founder, Bristol Cable, 22 December 2017)

The idea for a local journalism co-op emerged from their political convictions concerning holding power to account but also their interest in escaping their university bubble and testing out all their theories in practice. One of the founders recalled:

So, there was always that element of, okay, we can be full of ideas and theories that we've read in books. We can really engage with that and speak in an academic way and be eloquent in that way. But we didn't really connect with the lives of people who are kind of struggling on a day-to-day necessarily, or at least felt like we needed to create more connection. (Founder, Bristol Cable, 22 December 2017)

According to this informant, they all saw media as having a vital role to play in society, in terms of enabling citizens to engage at their journalistic level and try to understand the problems with how society operates:

Media and journalism in particular came to light as being one of the key cornerstones for engagement with society at large. As a kind of conduit for effecting social change. So, from that level of understanding, it was like, okay, let's try and do something that is media related, looking into what was going on in this sector. (Founder, Bristol Cable, 22 December 2017)

Two of the founders also specifically mentioned that the local media in the Bristol area was suffering from the recession at the time:

Local media was under strain, and there were a lot of closures of publications. So, the idea of rooting a media outlet that could scrutinise what was going on at a local level was hugely important. Because it is one thing to think about change on an international scale within and across societies, but it's important to understand where the locus of power and change really can come from and how to inspire people organising for that. That's where the local focus really came forward. So, rather than a critique of the mainstream media, it was about really understanding how we can leverage media and journalism to effect change in our immediate surroundings, hence a local media focus. (Founder, Bristol Cable, 22 December 2017)

It would appear that the practice of investigative journalism affords hybridity in its ready combination of traditional forms with new practices. As suggested in the quote above, it also readily shifts between an international perspective and a local one. Tax havens, trafficking, drug, organised crime, environmental crimes and corruption all have international, national and local implications.

It soon became clear to each of the founders that the *organisation* of their Bristol Cable co-op would be critical to its success. In this case, 'organisation' meant instigating and coordinating horizontal communication across collaborators who were all considered equal, from the founders to the staff and members. Furthermore, such a flat structure asked all staff to be equally responsible for the work of production and the product itself—work that included being very proactive with the community and trying to involve citizens at every turn through public events, knocking on doors and asking questions, and soliciting ideas.

In order to convey the scope of these activities on a daily basis, I will rely upon field notes taken during my participation in some of this outreach, starting with my first meeting at the co-op:

When I first arrived at Bristol Cable in 2017, I was greeted by one of the founders outside a graffiti-covered blue building. I had been looking for the name Bristol Cable on the door, to no avail, when the Bristol Cable reporter appeared out of nowhere. I had met him before, in Oslo, when, at my invitation, he had presented with one of the other founders at a conference. We took a walk through a neighbourhood filled with graffiti art, and the reporter from Bristol Cable seemed to know everyone as we travelled along the narrow streets and old houses. At one point, the reporter started talking about the gentrification that might accompany the rumoured development of a highspeed train between London and Temple Meads, Bristol. Such a train would open up Bristol to Londoners who were tired of the expense and hassle of the big city. (Edited field notes, fall 2017)

Also, during my field observation (13 November 2017), informants explained to me that they were going to arrange an event at Knowles Media Center in West Knowles, Filwood, a depressed area of Bristol. Instead of contenting themselves with some idealised notion of who their readers might be, they planned to meet with them directly, starting by going door-to-door and talking to people about their concerns and the goals of the Bristol Cable co-op. At the same time, they would invite these people to the event.

A few days later, I found myself sitting in a cab with three of my Bristol Cable informants,² talking about the importance of reaching out to people in depressed areas: ‘I was here doing door-knocking on Sunday’, one of them said, ‘but it was not the best time’. ‘How so?’ asked one of the others in the cab. ‘It was Sunday at 4 pm, and people were not happy when I showed up’. The founders all praised the work of this young informant, who ‘singlehandedly changed the organisation’ through the work she was doing (edited field notes, November 2017). These observations demonstrate both Bristol Cable’s ambitions for citizen engagement and the difficulty and hardship of actually doing so. In areas where people do physical work and sometimes work nightshifts, weekends are not necessarily the

²I paid for the cab trip; if I had not been there in my capacity as a researcher, the staff would have taken the bus or cycled.

best time to engage. Conducting such work at location required a lot of effort for the staff at Bristol Cable.

Of course, resources were also an issue for Bristol Cable and its staff. Staff members barely survived on the small salary and, particularly at the beginning, some needed to take on extra work as waiters or caterers. (Founder, Bristol Cable, 22 December 2017)

The vision of a truly horizontal organisation—and one that offered many outreach events—came with a cost. It demanded both resourcefulness and independence, particularly when one was faced with relatively unsympathetic audiences, as I noted at the time:

As I joined one of the door knockers in Filwood, I carried as many copies of the Bristol Cable quarterly as I could. The streets were narrow, and some buildings appeared abandoned. Finally, we got to a house where someone opened the door – a man half asleep in pyjamas who said he only read the *Sun*.³ When we asked what newspaper he would read if not for the *Sun*, he said the *Daily Mail*.⁴ The man then slammed the door in our faces. A bit further down the street, a young woman answered the door with her mother behind her, watching attentively. As we spoke, the young woman's eyes brightened at certain words and concepts such as 'free', 'community journalism' and 'what people care about – how to shed light on what really matters to people'. A few houses down, another door opened for us [...] a tanned, middle-aged man with tattoos on his muscular arms, which were due to very hard work, he explained a little later: 'I start at 3 in the morning that day and get home at 4 in the afternoon'. 'So, you are probably wasted', the reporter replied. He did not answer but his facial expression said yes. Then he attacked the Bristol Cable reporter for what the 'media is doing'. 'Look at this', he said, 'it is all political'. 'Not this newspaper', the reporter replied. 'All the others are. They are exaggerating and creating angles, but we are not'. (Edited fieldnotes, November 2017)

³The *Sun* is a British tabloid newspaper, founded in 1964. It is published by the News Group Newspapers division of News UK. The latter is owned by Rupert Murdoch's News Corp.

⁴The *Daily Mail* is a British daily tabloid newspaper, founded in 1896. It is the highest-circulated daily newspaper. In 2017, the *Guardian* wrote that Wikipedia banned the newspaper as an 'unreliable source' (Jackson, 2017) (<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/feb/08/wikipedia-bans-daily-mail-as-unreliable-source-for-website>).

These situations indicate how vulnerable the Bristol Cable people were as they went about on their own to promote their work. Not all of the interactions were bad, of course. One woman chose to recall issues during Brexit and the media coverage which accompanied them:

During Brexit, the woman said, the media had this huge focus on immigration. However, she added, ‘I have a number of topics I can think about which I wanted the media to cover, but it never happened. It was always about immigration, again and again’. The reporter listened to this woman and thanked her for her perspectives on news and told her that Bristol Cable was a newspaper co-op owned by the community. ‘We are going to arrange a meeting on Monday, November 13’, the journalist added. ‘It would be great if you could come. We want to write about what the community cares about’. She promised to have a look at the newspaper and maybe even consider attending the meeting. (Edited fieldnotes, November 2017)

This exchange demonstrates how the actors at Bristol Cable combined an activist approach with their journalistic ideals. According to my informants, they always listened to the personal experiences and stories of the community members with whom they met.

THE HYBRID WAY OF HOLDING LOCAL POWER TO ACCOUNT

As mentioned, events with the aim of motivating and involving citizens had been important to Bristol Cable since its establishment. Door-knocking was the first part of Bristol Cable’s outreach activities, and the events themselves were the second part. On the day of the event, I took a cab with Bristol Cable staff to the community house where the event would take place. Below is a description of what followed:

The coordinators on the staff had brought cameras and equipment in order to share the event online. The Bristol Cable community organiser informed everyone about the co-op’s recent work, then asked everyone to turn to the person sitting next to them and introduce themselves. After the room had buzzed with conversation for a while, the organiser asked everyone to participate in a brainstorm to generate ideas for forthcoming stories. (Edited fieldnotes, November 2017)

While traditional investigative journalism relies on a systematic approach to sources (Alfter, 2019; Leigh, 2019), Bristol Cable actively looked to citizens not only as sources but as contributors.

At a particular event, for example, a journalist talked about his work on prisons and how prisoners used drugs. Then two adult parents raised their hands to talk about drugs and prisons. They mentioned that they did have experience with the topic but never went into detail. The journalist and the other Bristol Cable staff members listened. Then a conversation followed on variations of the same topic. Others also raised their hands, and it became clear that what happens in a traditional newsroom among professionals was also taking place here with citizens who had the power to suggest ideas for upcoming stories. (Edited fieldnotes, November 2017)

One of the goals of the whole Bristol Cable initiative was to demonstrate that holding power to account does not require a hierarchical journalistic organisational structure; instead, shared values and goals alone might sustain an organisation which was capable of accommodating the input of the people themselves in the work to be done. In keeping with this approach, everyone who was involved in the organisation received the same compensation, which at the beginning was the minimum wage. One informant therefore lamented, ‘I’m not earning enough money to live off the Cable. It costs me to work for the Cable, in some ways, not even thinking about lost potential earnings’ (informant, Bristol Cable, 21 December 2017).⁵

⁵This informant circled back to this comment in 2019: ‘We’re now paid enough to get by, though the salary is far from competitive, and love of the mission and work is the main motivator. But getting paid has been vital both for valuing our work and for allowing us to give time to the Cable rather than needing to work another job or draw on savings. As we grow older, with years of experience behind us and some [of us] anticipating having children, we will need to further increase our salaries to remain sustainable or lose the staff who can’t afford to stay on a minimum wage’ (informant, Bristol Cable, 7 August 2019). When looking at this quote again in 2023 for this book, the informant noted that the policy regarding salaries had changed since 2019: ‘Salaries at the Cable have gradually increased every year, though remain low compared to salaries that staff could be paid elsewhere. To address needs for recognition, retention, diversity and recruitment, the Cable team co-designed a new pay structure which aimed to be transparent, objective, and equitable in how salaries are decided, moving away from a flat pay structure. The maximum salary, £27,000, is 20 percent higher than the lowest salary. Being able to pay staff and raise salaries has been essential to retaining essential staff for longer. However, especially for key roles and staff members with skills and experience which are very difficult to replace, the salaries are not very competitive compared to comparable roles elsewhere, which contributes to challenges in retaining staff’.

Early on, in fact, everyone had to find additional ways to support themselves—two of the founders worked in the catering business, and other staff members lived on their savings (informant, Bristol Cable, 21 December 2018).

Position titles were deliberately chosen to avoid hierarchical implications, though the journalistic work had certain inherent demands regarding organisational structure (Tuchman, 1978), meaning that even when everyone in the room was called a media coordinator, they were doing different things. My fieldwork at Bristol Cable also uncovered other fractures in the ideal of the flat organisational structure, as a positional hierarchy had begun to emerge simply to enable the allocation of tasks to avoid redundancy and maximise efficiency. One of the main issues faced by staff at Bristol Cable was how to live up to their various norms and ideals. Initially, they aimed for a horizontal and inclusive organisation. Then, over time, they realized that actual journalistic work required management and leadership in terms of who was doing what (edited fieldnotes, November 2017). Several years after Bristol Cable's 2014 founding, staff confronted the need to negotiate the discourses of organisational professionalism and occupational professionalism during the fall of 2017 through workshops involving core actors. As one informant explained, the co-op ultimately had to differentiate the managers from the managed. Because they all wanted a very horizontal organisation, however, some individuals found it 'insulting' to report on their writing to a media coordinator or someone otherwise defined as a 'boss'.

My informants were at this time actively seeking to restructure the co-op based on this positional evolution, using daylong meetings to work toward a shared set of values, norms and practices to inform the organisation. These meetings were meant to coordinate communication and articulate shared goals in order to develop routines, practices and roles which would mitigate potential tension and conflict. During these meetings, there was always a demonstration of mutual respect, but there were also honest discussions about how to remain 'horizontal' while actually doing the work in a directed fashion. One informant pointed to the need to juggle a variety of roles, which was both challenging and constructive:

I'm a sub-editor and a co-editor and a commissioning editor and a journalist and a sort of production manager, like, just having all the different things [...] It's very challenging. I wish I had more time to do bigger pieces of journalism, but it makes for an interesting job. If I were in mainstream media as a journalist, I wouldn't have the choice about what I went and

covered and investigated and stuff, so that's a massive plus. Having the freedom to choose what you do and how you do it is different. And not just being told what to do, having a say in what we do, and how, is totally different from any mainstream media. (Informant, Bristol Cable, 26 January 2018)

Various interviews with Bristol Cable actors, as well as my 2017 fieldwork, revealed contradictions and tensions when it came to who should do what at the co-op. One reason for this might be that most of my informants at Bristol Cable had started there with little journalistic experience. The informant above refers disparagingly to mainstream journalism but in fact knew very little about it; one of the founders admitted that they themselves had very little professional experience in journalism and no idea how traditional newsrooms operated as such (founder, Bristol Cable, 2017). Interestingly, while the Bristol Cable actors were well aware of their lack of experience with actual investigative journalism, they did not shy away from taking on the challenges. In place of experience, they pursued experimentation:

There wasn't anything really to compare this model to. So, it was very much done on an experimental level but with a sensitivity to what felt right, in terms of being able to deliver the idea that we had for the project [...] Organisational development is obviously a key focus: how do we manage the organisation, how do we register an organisation and turn it into a proper company, which we had to do? All of that, from the administrative, bureaucratic aspects of the work to the front end, the public-facing output, which is the journalism [...] We delved into all that as co-founders. We had our fingers in all the pies, so to speak, learning to manage things as we went along. We were just day-by-day taking it a step at a time, just outlining what needed to be done for us to be able to deliver on the vision we had in mind, for what this organisation should achieve, to comply legally and all that. Yes, we did a lot of stuff. (Informant, Bristol Cable, 22 December 2017)

Instead of seeking funding and assembling a team of professionals with journalistic experience, the founders and early staffers worked on what they *believed* to be journalistic practice. Ideas were bounced around collectively, and the team asked itself a lot of questions:

We had these editorial meetings where we reviewed story ideas. It was very much like, this looks like an interesting angle, let's do some more research. And then we were involved in the editorial process, did the initial research and reporting. When looking at data-driven stories, it was about pulling the data and then trying to make sense of the numbers. Then we were involved

also in the narrative storytelling around what the data showed. But, yes, we were very much operating across the board. (Informant, Bristol Cable, 22 December 2017)

In lieu of actual experience, my informants told me that they were learning by doing, and some of them were also picking up ideas and suggestions at journalism conferences or from local professional journalists (edited field-notes, November 2017). The process was every bit as important as the product, they emphasised.

Through their practice, Bristol Cable demonstrates the inherently hybridising potential of covering local topics with global resonance and vice versa, including offshore companies and tax havens, local police using mass surveillance, local companies with links to arms deals, poor working conditions, racial bias in immigration enforcement, and so on. Actors at Bristol Cable brought global issues to local people and local problems to a global audience, all with the investment of the public itself:

- They organised ten weeks of practical media training so that citizens could be involved in production.
- Citizens were co-owners of the co-op by paying a membership fee of one pound per month (later increased to three pounds).
- Citizens were actively involved in events and programs together with the coordinators at Bristol Cable.
- Citizens sat on the Bristol Cable board.
- By participating in meetings and events, citizens could inform the co-op's choice of topics to cover.
- Bristol Cable chose a proactive manner of engaging citizens by hosting public events and knocking on doors.
- The staff at Bristol Cable, in turn, took on a variety of editorial roles to turn the people's ideas into stories.

In these ways, the audience for the news co-produces the news organisation it wants.

THE RISE OF A COLLABORATIVE ECOLOGY

As the informants put it during field observation, the Bristol Cable organisation was inspired not so much by the media as by politics. Initially, the three founders were frustrated by the concentration of power and wealth

in society, and by the way in which ‘exploitative employers and politicians could get away scot-free without much scrutiny’ (edited fieldnotes, November 2017). The three friends had worked in the catering and service sectors and had continuously witnessed how inequitable organisations could be ‘in terms of decision-making power, in terms of wealth distribution and everything else’ (edited fieldnotes, November 2017). Bristol Cable was intended to represent an alternative to this model based on democratic ideals and new and different types of collaboration—with outside professional journalists, among co-op members, with the public and with other media organisations such as the Bureau Local and the *Guardian*.

The journalism produced by Bristol Cable was intended to make an impact not only at the local level but also at the national and even international levels, taking inspiration less from other local news organisations with scarce resources than from innovative international peers such as the *New York Times*, Vice, De Correspondent, ProPublica and the Bureau of Investigative Journalism. During my fieldwork, it became clear that Bristol Cable staff members would carefully examine this quality journalism to ‘strip it back and turn it into our purposes, whether that’s through video work or through podcasts or getting ideas for investigations that we should be doing here’ (edited fieldnotes, November 2017). Some of the founders and staff members had backgrounds in international relations and saw clear connections among these levels of impact and among organisations dedicated to investigative journalism. One informant applauded the generally collaborative atmosphere and ‘cooperative movement’, wherein it was possible to ‘work towards mutual aims without undermining one’s own objectives’ (edited fieldnotes, November 2017).

The work of the organisation behind the 2016 Panama Papers investigation, the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, was acknowledged as a model here, and the Bureau of Investigative Journalism was also mentioned for the ways in which it brought together local UK media groups to work on investigations. The Bristol Cable staff found all this work inspiring and even suggested that the Bureau of Investigative Journalism had picked up a few ideas from them as well, such as their community organising and liberal approach to story sourcing. One informant hoped that the days of the lone-wolf reporter were over ‘because we increasingly rely on readers to be not just passive consumers of what we produce but also active participants, and to make sure we can produce news that is most relevant to them and make sure that we cover the stories that are of importance’ (edited fieldnotes, November 2017). Bristol Cable

collaborations with other peer organisations, that is, not only empowered citizens further but also created journalistic networks which went well beyond their own newsroom.

This is not a traditional way of thinking about journalistic collaboration or transparency, as one Bristol Cable staff member indicated:

Journalists are working a lot more with developers now – they’re getting more exposed to the development culture or the tech culture of sharing, of open source. [...] A data journalist at the [collaborating organisation] was talking with one of his old lecturers. I was sitting with them and the guy from the other organisation, who is a techie journalist, was like, ‘No, we have to make everything open, we have to be fearless about it’, and the old hat was saying, ‘No, you’ll get burned, people will steal your stories and you won’t do it again’. But the tech guy was like, ‘No, this is the future’. I think I would like to try and have stories which are open and collaborative, where people are able to work on them together online. (Informant, Bristol Cable, 21 December 2017)⁶

⁶When reviewing at this quote in 2023, the informant asked to add a comment concerning technology and culture and how it has developed over time at Bristol Cable: ‘Collaboration has been a key to the Cable’s ability to do things differently, working without pretensions about “how things are meant to be done” in journalism and just trying things. A key achievement the Cable pioneered is a Community Relationship Management system (CRM), essential for engaging members and the wider community. There was no CRM that fit our needs, so we developed our own. We knew other community-centered newsrooms needed this too, so we partnered with CORRECTIV, the Bureau of Investigative Journalism and Vereniging Veronica to further develop it to allow others to use it, and it has grown into Beabee (<https://beabee.io/en/home/>). This is a crucial part of the infrastructure we believe is needed for community-driven media, and we’re passionate about sharing what we have learnt and built. Regarding involving communities and stories being open, we have developed ways that are clear and easy for people to participate (for example, events or call-out surveys inviting experiences, opinions or questions). Most stories are not developed “in the open”, but the journalists understand that community engagement is a powerful tool they can draw on to help their reporting, and that they can get better stories and more engaged audiences and active citizens when communities are able to be involved in stories. There’s a good number of stories that draw on community engagement. There are definitely challenges: meaningful engagement is often time-consuming, certain stories are sensitive, and journalists are of course concerned with protecting sources and avoiding getting “scooped”. That can result in a more traditional approach to reporting being taken, and we have found that openness and engagement should be different for different stories. But there’s still a lot of potential in developing how communities can engage with stories’ (26 March 2023).

SUMMARY

For this chapter, we chose to draw upon an ethnographic methodology otherwise rarely used when it comes to studies of investigative journalism. The researcher was present in the field and saw the ways in which the roles of management and staff overlapped. Bristol Cable's few staff members undertook several roles at the same time, so managers, for example, both coordinated other staff members and arranged events and programs. While studies of legacy media organisations have already looked at the overlap of ideals, norms and values in those places, start-ups like Bristol Cable represent more extreme examples of both overlapping and inherently hybrid roles. Such roles introduce tensions, of course, as the structure of the organisation becomes harder to parse for those within it as well as those working with it from the outside. In addition, newer organisations favour flat as opposed to hierarchical structuring, which also produces confusion at times.

This study's field observation and field interviews found that while 'horizontal values' are important, a hierarchical distribution of practices and routines is critical to mitigating organisational tension. During our field observation, the Bristol Cable founders managed this distribution by conducting workshops and negotiating values and norms related to both horizontal and hierarchical structures.

Our informants also emphasised that digital technology should not introduce extra distance between the start-up, its members and the general public. The whole point of Bristol Cable was to journalistically engage local citizens in new ways. The staff wanted to build bridges, not introduce distance, no matter how effective digital media was in doing their work.

As this chapter demonstrates, innovative and untraditional forms of journalistic collaboration might range from citizen involvement to media organisations collaborating together to the innovative application of technology to bring sources or content together rather than keep them apart. Bristol Cable staff, for example, sought to develop a bottom-up collaboration model wherein organisational 'ownership' extended beyond the funding of this co-op to the practices and content produced there. The founders of Bristol Cable wanted to address the 'black holes' in local journalism that followed the centralising of legacy media and resume holding local and regional power to account via the direct involvement of community voices. Their cultivation of these hybrid forms of collaboration

transcended lone-wolf journalism in favour of a practice with much greater possibility and impact.

Regarding Bureau Local and KCIJ, technology played a much larger part in the hybridised collaboration they cultivated among professional organisations, as we will see.

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