Looking back at 2020

ARENA FOR JOURNALISM IN EUROPE – ANNUAL REPORT

All engines running, lift-off … and then corona

2020 was supposed to be a consolidation year for Arena for Journalism in Europe. The organisation was founded in January 2019, we had managed to arrange a successful Dataharvest conference in May 2019, and our first open network – The Arena Housing Project – was steadily growing. For 2020, the conference was on track, our call for proposals had received more submissions than we would ever be able to fit into a 4-day conference, tickets were selling overwhelmingly well. We had a plethora of ideas for new networks, and we also got the first requests from the journalism community in Europe asking for our help with their networking.

Then the coronavirus came. Borders closed. Conferences and seminars were cancelled. We hoped for a short while that the Dataharvest conference, initially planned for May 16-19 2020, could go ahead. But as we all know now, the virus spread, and on March 16 we had to announce that the conference was postponed to November. Over the following months, realisation came that no responsible organisation could arrange an international gathering in 2020, and we decided to take the conference online.

Looking back at 2020, it became a year of doubts and hardship but also of creativity and innovation. The international lockdown forced and allowed us to think and work in new ways, and it taught us how much Arena for Journalism in Europe is an organization made for the digital world. We as a team already work remotely and collaborate digitally. The community around Arena and Dataharvest is highly digitized and defined by thinking across borders. The travel restrictions made us conscious of how to build and nurture connections without meeting and forced us onto a steep learning curve of new communication tools.

We managed to change the usual 4-days Dataharvest conference into a 13-weeks online event with almost 600 participants from all over the world. Arena's second open network, the Arena Climate Network, was created at the end of 2020, following Dataharvest conference, and by now counts over 120 members, communicating via its online fora. We have taught, written and talked at universities and conferences, and we have started our mentoring activities.

Though we had to follow alternative routes, we managed to fulfil our mission of stimulating and supporting cross-border collaborative and investigative journalism in Europe as well as taking the next steps in Arena for Journalism in Europe's development.

This report details our activities and deliberations, as we adjusted to the ever-changing situation. We managed and are proud that so many people supported the conference and other activities. That being said, we do look forward to a more normal 2021!

The Arena team and board, February 2021

Organisation

INCORPORATION, MISSION, KEY ACTIVITIES

Arena for Journalism in Europe was founded as a 'Stichting', a foundation under Dutch law, on January 22nd 2019 and registered in the official registry, KvK, on January 24th. We have the ANBI-non-profit status under the Dutch tax regime, which also has been recognised by supporting foundations outside of the Netherlands.

Our mission is unchanged:

"The foundation has as its purpose to stimulate and support cross-border collaborative and investigative journalism in Europe, including collaboration with other professions, proceeding from the belief that such journalism contributes to information exchange, critical thought, mutual understanding and democracy in Europe. The foundation fulfils its goal by organising, supporting or financing anything related or conducive to it, such as online and offline meetings and fora, presentations, publications and advisory services."

The main activities for Arena for Journalism in Europe have been further consolidated and are now:

- Dataharvest – the European Investigative Journalism Conference
  The annual meeting place for in-depth journalism in Europe
- Arena Networks
  Initiating, running, facilitating specialised networks for journalists in Europe
- Arena Academy
  Teaching, training, mentoring, writing and analysis

BOARD

The board members in 2020 are as in the founding year:

- Nils Hanson, chairman
- Elisabetta Tola, secretary
- Daniel Simons, treasurer

The board has held three formal meetings in 2020 in March, May and November. Further, during the spring of 2020, a close cooperation between management and board was needed to navigate the consequences of the developing coronavirus crisis with ad-hoc meetings.

All three board members are actively involved not only in the overall perspective and oversight, but also in the actual work of the organisation, for example as speakers and moderators during Dataharvest Digital 2020.

THE TEAM

Arena has a highly committed team. It is quite European in itself - from east, west, south, and north in Europe. Four of seven team members are living in another country than the one in which they were born. Among us, we speak German, French, Spanish, Italian, Slovakian, Dutch, Croatian, Danish, Swedish,

Norwegian - and English, which is our working language, even though it is not the mother tongue of either of us. The team consists of (in alphabetical order):

- **Brigitte Alfter**, director of Arena, Danish/German journalist. Tireless organizer, involved in most activities, with a special eye on European affairs, on algorithms and on the meta-level of journalism.
- **Ruben Brugnera**, project manager, Belgian investigative journalist and teacher at Thomas More Hogeschool, the usual venue of the conference.
- **Jose M. Calatayud**, project director, Spanish journalist, based in Berlin. Coordinator of the Arena Housing Project, also has a special eye on the network of independent media in Europe, entrepreneurship and digital security.
- **Benedikt Hebeisen**, IT, tech and digital security manager, German, based in Berlin, long experience in advising cross-border collaboration teams, his research was essential for our choices of software for the online conference and for troubleshooting.
- **Adriana Homolova**, Slovak/Dutch journalist, coordinated and moderated all data skills sessions at the Dataharvest Digital 2020, while in her other job analysing and unveiling fraud with public COVID-19 tenders in Europe.
- **Jelena Prtoric**, project director, Croatian journalist based in Berlin. She joined the team to coordinate the Arena Climate Project and assists Jose with the Arena Housing Project.
- **Trine Smistrup**, program director for Dataharvest, Danish journalist, managed communication, registration and the overall program for the Dataharvest conference, also involved in the general management of Arena.

The team collaborated online even prior to the pandemic. We all have skills in cross-border digital coordination and work with weekly video calls, encrypted chat and a Nextcloud environment for file sharing, shared calendar, project management tools etc.

All team members are currently paid on a part-time and time-limited basis adjusted to funds available, though several team members do work full time or even more than 40 hours per week. It is paramount for the organisation to ensure continuity within the team in the coming years.

FINANCES

The total income of 2020 was €252.000, mostly in support from foundations. Nine foundations from six different countries contributed core as well as earmarked funding and were wonderfully supportive as we had to adjust activities to the reality of the coronavirus crisis.

We are grateful for the support from:

- Adessium Foundation - Netherlands
- Augstein Stiftung - Germany
- Digital Whistleblower Fund - Italy
- Fondation Charles Léopold Mayer pour le progrès de l'homme - Switzerland/France
- Fritt Ord - Norway
- OSIFE - US/Spain
- Reva and David Logan Foundation - US
- Stichting Democratie en Media – Netherlands
- Zeit Stiftung - Germany

We had looked forward to bringing all our funders together in Mechelen for the 2020 conference. In-person meetings are now postponed to 2022, and we look forward to meeting all our funders again. The dialogue with them is a constructive one helping Arena to develop Dataharvest-EIJC, our networks, our activities and ourselves as an organisation.

A minor part of our income comes directly from our community, predominantly in the shape of participation fees for the conference and fees for teaching, training, mentoring.

- In 2019, 19 percent of the organisation's total income derived from participation fees for the Dataharvest European Investigative Journalism. This figure has potential for development once we get back to in-person conferences.
- In 2020, the income from the conference was significantly lower, as we charged a lower participation fee for the Dataharvest Digital than for the in-person conference. Many other conferences offered participation in online seminars for free in 2020, but we consider meetings and trainings to be too valuable and the mid-career training structures too well-functioning to shortcut that system via free online seminars. We communicated about this in a blog post and it was welcomed by the community that was willing to pay for participation.

Overall, we aim for a diverse income stream when it comes to type of income and geographically. Given the circumstances of the corona-year, we are happy for the support from our funders and our community in 2020.

Arena activities in 2020

Arena's main focus and 'raison d'être' is to develop and facilitate a networking infrastructure for investigative collaborative journalism in Europe. We do this in three interconnected activities – all in the field of collaborative, investigative and data journalism:

- Dataharvest – the European Investigative Journalism Conference
  The annual meeting place for in-depth journalism in Europe
- Arena Networks
  Initiating, running, facilitating specialised networks for journalists in Europe
- Arena Academy
  Teaching, training, mentoring, writing and analysis

DATAHARVEST
– THE EUROPEAN INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM CONFERENCE

Dataharvest – the European Investigative Journalism Conference is Arena's flagship activity and usually gathers 4-500 journalists in Mechelen, Belgium.

In 2020, the coronavirus forced us to first postpone the conference from May to November, then we decided to change it to an online only conference. We were ambitious: We wanted to give participants the same offer as they would have in a regular conference in Mechelen, but now spread out in time so that no sessions overlapped. This meant that instead of a 4-day conference with around 150 sessions in 10-13

parallel tracks, we had an online festival with 13 thematic weeks combined with data skills training and a total of 149 sessions.

The content of the weeks was:

1. Investigative method (4 weeks)
2. Cross-border journalism (2 weeks)
3. Climate and energy (2 weeks)
4. Public health (1 week)
5. Algorithmic accountability (1 week)
6. Digital security (1 week)
7. Data journalism (1 week)
8. Entrepreneurial (1 week)
9. Investigate and thrive (1 week plus a series of sessions on mental wellbeing for investigative journalists)

Additionally, there was continuous data skills training, coordinated by Adriana Homolova and carried out by data journalism trainers from all over Europe. The immense popularity of these sessions took us by surprise, and we had to allow for more participants per sessions and repeat several sessions in order to accommodate as many as possible. We are immensely grateful to all our data journalism trainers for donating time, competence, effort and special adjustment to online training!

At the Dataharvest website, one can find a week-by-week overview and the full program.

A total of 590 journalists, editors, specialists, and data developers from 55 countries participated in the conference, making it the largest Dataharvest ever. We had participants from China and New Zealand to Suriname and Mexico, morning check-ins would come from Banja Luka, Barcelona or Berlin. Of course the overwhelming majority of participants was European with Germany and the Netherlands forming the biggest national groups with 86 and 83 participants respectively. A pleasant surprise was that Russia formed the fifth largest group, in part because of generous donations for participation grants for colleagues from Eastern Europe.

Overall, the Dataharvest Digital 2020 was an achievement! New participants registered until the last month, and feedback was overly positive. Though longing for in-person meetings was expressed repeatedly, we experienced a willingness to experiment with digital gatherings among participants, which allowed us not only to work with open-access video conference software in line with our digital security and ethics ambitions. We also began working on digital collaboration and training formats that we can apply in the future as an enriching supplement to the in-person conferences.

ARENA NETWORKS

Since 2018, the Dataharvest conferences have focused on a selected topic that we deemed editorially relevant for journalists in different countries. Typically, such topics where covered in several countries without connecting among each other or without covering the transnational aspects of a story. Based upon these topics, we have attempted to initiate networks of journalists from all over Europe in order to foster in-depth research on that particular topic. In 2018, the topic was algorithm accountability, in 2019 the housing crisis and in 2020 it was energy and climate.

The Algorithm network

The Algorithm network was set up for the 2018 conference in cooperation with the Berlin-based NGO Algorithmwatch. In the autumn of 2018, Arena-director-to-be Brigitte Alfter assisted Algorithmwatch in composing and coordinating a Europe-wide network of journalists and scholars to compile a report on automated decision making in Europe. In 2019, Algorithmwatch found its own coordinator for the second report and a journalist for ongoing reporting, Brigitte Alfter and Jose Calatayud from Arena contributed with chapters. Several speakers of the Algorithmwatch network presented findings and methodology at the Dataharvest Digital 2020.

The Arena Housing Project

After being launched in 2019, following up on that year's Dataharvest focus topic, 2020 was the year of consolidation for the Arena Housing Project. It is developed by Jose Miguel Calatayud with the assistance of Jelena Prtoric.

The overall aim of the Arena Housing Project is to allow journalists with an interest in housing to connect. It consists of an open networking and knowledge sharing environment and also offers a password protected co-working environment for journalists doing investigations.

After consolidating the mailing list, which now counts over 240 members, most of them journalists with also a fair number of academic researchers and other housing experts from the policy and advocacy fields, in June the Housing Project launched several more public resources, the Knowledge Base, a Twitter account and a newsletter:

– The Arena Housing Knowledge Base is as comprehensive repository of different kinds of resources regarding housing. It is divided into seven topics:

- Access to housing
- Big landlords
- Empty homes
- Homelessness
- Land ownership
- Short-term rentals and
- Social and public housing.

Within each topic, different kinds of resources can be found including media, academic and other reports; data sets and visualisations; public policy and court cases; as well as notes on what kind of data and information is missing, and on research and reporting opportunities.

– The Arena Housing Twitter account, which has over 330 followers.

– The "Follow the Housing" newsletter, which has over 220 subscribers. Sent out twice a month, each issue focuses on one particular issue and aims at inspiring people to do their own research.

In June 2020, the Housing Project launched its secure online collaborative environment: the Arena Housing Cloud and Office, the Arena Housing Wiki, and the Arena Housing Chat. It replicates the infrastructure of collaborative investigative networks, and can be adapted to different collaborations: from sharing a data set to planning complex cross-border collaborations. This is a trusted working environment; members are allowed in via a chain of trust.

Since September the Housing Project is supporting a cross-border collaborative investigation into 'corporate landlords', involving 17 countries and coordinated by Jose Miguel Calatayud. Research and data

work are supported by an IJ4EU grant which is managed by Arena. The first stories from this investigation are planned for April 2021.

During the tense early months of the pandemic, April and May, Jose launched the effort of compiling announcements and measures about housing taken by different governments in response to the Covid-19 crisis. This showed that there was an interest in using such European overviews, yet, there was not enough community effort to keep them up to date. An important lesson to be learnt.

In November, Jose summarised the emerging network in the prominent Nieman Reports at Harvard University under the headline Journalists Across Europe Collaborate to Cover Airbnb and Other Housing Issues.

Overall, the work on the Housing Project shows the potential of topic-based open networks to promote and facilitate journalistic collaborations across borders and disciplines. Another lesson learnt is that keeping the network alive and developing actual collaborations requires a dedicated editorial coordinator.

In late 2020, Arena decided to start exploring the possibility of opening up the day-to-day coordination of the Housing Project to a consortium of journalistic organisations with expertise in investigations, in order to make the Housing Project more robust for its further development.

The Arena Housing Project in 2019 received seed-funding from the Nicolas Puëch Foundation and in 2020-21 project funding from OSIFE.

The Arena Climate Network

On November 12th 2020 and as the culmination of two full weeks of climate- and energy related conference activities, we launched the Arena Climate Network. It is currently growing to be a community of investigative journalists and researchers covering climate change at the local, national and EU level. Climate change and the energy sector's role in the climate crisis was the thematic focus of Dataharvest Digital 2020.

Under the motto "Follow the pipeline", we dedicated two weeks and overall 24 sessions to climate, energy and environmental policies, and different aspects of investigative, in-depth, data and cross-border coverage of the topic. We have looked into the lobbying mechanisms and their impact on the European and the UK climate policies; we tracked climate deniers in Europe and beyond; we explored the world of the VAT fraudsters on the energy market and zeroed in fraudulent carbon credits. Our speakers shared the methodology they employed in their investigations on fossil fuel subsidies, pension funds or aviation industry, and data scientists from European institutions opened their datasets for us and explained us how to make the best use of them.

Currently, the network is centered around the Arena Climate forum, an online meeting point for journalists and researchers where they can share relevant research, reports and important databases, get in touch with the colleagues in other countries, and look for sources, information and partners in a cross-border research. After a month of activity, the forum gathers over 120 members. The Arena Climate Network is also present on Twitter.

New features to the Arena Climate Network have been lined up:

- **The Climate Knowledge Base,** an open-access library that will be easily searchable and contain a list of "must-reads" for everyone researching/covering climate as well as newly published

investigations. The library will contain media and academic reports and articles, datasets, databases and visualisations, as well as contacts of relevant institutions, researchers and data providers.
  – **Secure leak infrastructure:** Arena for Journalism in Europe is a recipient of Digital Whistleblowing Fund grant, supporting grassroots organisations in the process of integration of a secure leak infrastructure to their online platforms. This means that the Arena Climate Network will be able to confidentially and anonymously receive leaks and confidential documents that can serve as basis for future investigations.

Overall, the Arena Climate Network is following our experience with setting up thematic networks with the purpose of connecting journalists across Europe. Each time with slightly different and/or additional features. Consolidation, further development, and longer-term planning are foreseen for 2021.

ARENA ACADEMY

The main purpose of Arena for Journalism in Europe is to facilitate the networking, sharing of experience and cross-border collaboration for European journalists. An important part of this is our work to collect and systematize methods and lessons learned and passing them to others in the form of teaching, training, mentoring, designing of activities in the field as well as articles, books etc.

The European Collaborative Journalism Programme

Since the autumn of 2019, the German Alfred Töpfer Foundation (an operative foundation) has partnered with Arena to set up the European Collaborative Journalism Programme. Once a year, a cohort of 18 journalists from all over Europe are invited to the Foundation's seminar centre near the Baltic Sea coast to learn about cross-border collaborative journalism, connect and possibly develop story ideas. The entire group then participates in the Dataharvest conference and can get individual support from the Töpfer/Arena team.

In February 2020, just before the lockdown, the first cohort met at the Siggen Estate seminar centre, developed story ideas and met a series of speakers. Later, they all participated in the Dataharvest Digital 2020. Brigitte Alfter assisted several of the teams with fundraising applications, and two examples merit further mention.

The "Money to burn" investigation looked into the effects of Western European governments' subsidies to so-called "green energy" on Estonian deforestation. It was suggested by an Estonian colleague, Piret Reiljan, during the Siggen seminar. It was coordinated by Hazel Sheffield from London. For this investigation, Arena's team assisted on several levels: Jose Calatayud and Benedikt Hebeisen advised on the secure digital work environment, where the team used a dedicated part of Arena's environment. Brigitte Alfter acted as mentor to Hazel Sheffield, who functioned as editorial coordinator for a cross-border team for the first time.

The Atlatszo Erdely investigative team had been working in a set up of three colleagues for five years. In 2020, they decided to consolidate the organisation. Over the spring and summer 2020, Brigitte Alfter stepped in as a mentor for the organisation with the purpose of developing a work plan and to obtain funding for the organisational development. In the autumn, a three-year development grant was obtained for the development to begin as of 2021.

The Gothenburg Master Investigative Journalism

Though not directly a project with or by Arena, we would like to mention Brigitte Alfter's involvement with the University of Gothenburg. Several years ago, Gothenburg reached out to Brigitte with the purpose to develop a collaborative education model with what was initially dubbed a "Dataharvest Student Edition". The model would include multiple comparable journalism schools at MA-level and offer a coordinated collaborative effort. Due to lack of funding, this did not materialise. However since the summer of 2020, Brigitte has worked for Gothenburg University on a part time basis, dedicating her efforts to the MIJ-course lead by Ulla Sätereie, a course focusing on investigative, data and indeed cross-border journalism. MIJ students have participated in the Dataharvest and are entering the investigative networks.

Arena representatives speaking:

February: Greek Incubator for Media and Development, iMEdD in Athens.

September: Festival de l'Info locale France (on collaborative journalism and on the housing project)

November: EBU Investigative Journalism: How to cover international news stories

December: The Ukrainian Conference for Investigative Journalism

Arena representatives teaching/training:

Gothenburg University, Sweden: International master's program of investigative journalism

Thomas More Hogeschool, Belgium: International journalism program

Töpfer Stiftung, Germany: European Journalism program

Central European University: Cross-Border Investigative Journalism Training for the Western Balkans

Arena Team publications:

Airbnb flats become long-term rentals in coronavirus fix. EUobserver, 14 April 2020

Journalists across Europe collaborate to cover Airbnb and other housing issues. Nieman Reports, 17 November 2020