

“Flexibility is key”: lessons from a decade of experimentation in collaborative journalism

Abstract

Alessia Cerantola is an Italian journalist and the editorial director of Investigate Europe. In this opinion piece, she explores a decade of experimentation in collaborative investigative journalism, drawing on her time working with the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) and as a coordinator with the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP). While the many evolving models of collaboration defy hard categorisation, some values have emerged as vital to the form. These include defining your goals for an investigation about the beginning – and remaining flexible about much else.

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When I first came across the world of collaborative journalism, the word “collaboration” was often looked upon with some suspicion. It was especially hard to be trusted by the journalists in legacy media, who were used to working only with their own newsroom. Collaborative journalism disrupted the foundations of this approach and the borders of traditional journalism by bringing together competing titles to work on a common theme.

Over the past two decades this way of working, which started in the US back in the 1970s, has spread to many parts of the world, including Europe. But collaboration has grown so much in the non-profit and in the legacy media world, and with so many different models, that industry insiders themselves struggle to understand all the models and methods. Ignorance creates misinformation that undermines those at all levels who believe in teamwork.

I often get this question when I put together teams of journalists for a new investigation: “But how will this collaboration work?” It’s a good question. You have to understand how much work is required of each party, the goals of the project, and the responsibilities of the parties. And, last but not least, you need to agree on the financial aspect.

In 2011, I covered the aftermath of the earthquake, tsunami and nuclear disaster in Fukushima, Japan, for Italian newspapers and the BBC World Service. I remember being in the middle of debris with the smell of rotten fish. I was alone with my recording tools and my camera. Before the trip, some friends had briefed me on the local dialect spoken in the northeast area of Japan, and I added some new words to my Japanese vocabulary.

It was the kind of work I’d been reading about in my journalism classes: the romantic image of the foreign correspondent, travelling the world alone. But I couldn’t shake the feeling that something was missing.

My perspective shifted during the Investigative Reporters and Editors conference that year in Orlando, and later at the Global Investigative Journalism Network Conference (GIJC) in Kiev. I met and talked for the first time with pioneers of the collaborative model. They later became my inspiration: people like John Bones, Brigitte Alfter, Paul Radu and Brant Houston.

Collaboration became my mantra. I started seeing it everywhere. Today, journalists joining efforts and working together in different ways is a sign the collaborative model is grown up and, overall, healthy. Over the last decades, it has embodied many forms.

One model – one I have worked with many times – is when journalists, either freelancers or staffers, group together to focus on a story supported by grant funding. This type of collaboration ends upon publication.

My first collaborative investigations were other freelance journalists from Italy and Europe. We were united by an idea and secured funding with a grant, for example those offered by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, or Journalismfund.eu. Inside the team, we rotated roles and shared tasks like collecting information, creating folders, updating one another and reporting to funders. By sharing the duties, each one of us pushed the project forward. It was an extra job, apart from the reporting itself. It was not always successful, but it was a great experience of what to do in a cross-border team – and what not to do.

Other models are more formal. We’ve seen non-profits blossoming at the local level (like KRIK in Serbia, Fundacja Reporterów in Poland), or at a regional level (like BIRN in the Balkans). These investigative



centres coordinate with other media in the country or those in other geographical areas connected to the story.

We've also seen centres that specialise in creating and coordinating teams of reporters focusing on a specific topics (ICIJ). Others combine regional coverage and specialised coordination, as well as other elements like editorial and legal support, and research (OCCRP).

We've seen ad hoc collectives, where journalists from different media pull together their resources and skills to cover a specific topic or story. The recent investigation Lost In Europe, into minors without documents, is a good example.

Each of these models has different editorial lines, different funding and different ideas about coordination. They add diversity and a sense of freedom in the world of collaborative journalism. This diversity fosters a multicultural and multi-narrative approach guaranteed by all the voices of the different media partners. These approaches go far beyond the traditional, monolithic methods of much of the legacy media.

In all of these cases, it is necessary to have a person who can keep the team together and facilitate the sharing of information. The more structured the project is and the more partners involved, the higher the level of responsibilities and tasks for the coordinator. The person in charge swings from a simple traffic controller – encouraging the partners of each project to share findings with other members – to a skilled editor, finding data and other information specific to each country. The coordinator may also need to act a bit like a therapist, trying to motivate the team when the project is dragging on and there seems to be no way out.

When I joined the Panama Papers investigation, I experienced the benefits of a specialised coordination from the ICIJ (the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists), which helped hundreds of journalists in communicating and sharing their findings in a secure space. It guaranteed complete editorial independence in the final reporting. At that time, I was a freelancer focusing on Japan. But I wasn't lonely. Instead of the traditional newsroom, I had the mutual support of my collaborators on the project. In addition, a few editors helped coordinate the data, putting all the findings in order. They helped connect the dots, finding common patterns in all the countries.

It was when I joined OCCRP (the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project) that I could really take on the role of coordinator. After being hired as a staff reporter covering big tobacco, I decided to turn my stories into a collaborative project. I had a full decision-making power on how to organise my work and who to partner up with.

I leaned on what I had learned before and tapped into the power of a network of media partners from Japan to Mexico, and Cambodia to Ukraine. But I also had the support of a data and research team provided by OCCRP, and their protection against legal and physical threats to my safety. That's the beauty of OCCRP's approach. It provides support to other journalists, even those outside the network.

Flexible structures in organisations like OCCRP allow a mix of journalists, from inside and outside the network, to focus on the needs of the investigation. In my case, I added new partners from Japan. Working with new partners is challenging, but it guarantees a richer narrative and a diversity of perspectives.

In all these experiments with the collaborative method, my biggest lesson has been that the kind of



relationship you establish with your journalists will determine the nature of the investigation. So, it's important to define your goal at the beginning. Do you want a team to produce an investigation, then offer it to different media to publish? Or do you want to expand your team and pull in those newsrooms at the start, embracing them as partners instead of just publishers?

At Investigate Europe, where I work now, we mainly stick to our team of reporters in 11 countries across Europe. Most of the time, we produce the investigation ourselves and share it with publishing partners. In this way we ensure that our stories are cross-border, and that they get published in local languages with local angles.

Investigate Europe has the resources to execute that model. But what about smaller centres that don't have journalists in different countries? They might partner with a looser network like OCCRP. Looser networks might add value in the kinds of outlets they attract, including radio and television. We are also changing our approach at Investigate Europe when it comes to certain stories, by opening up to a media partnership structure, with journalists from other organisations involved in our projects from the start.

There are many variations of the models, and collaborations evolve and change to suit different stories or different partners. But flexibility is key. That's one of the most exciting parts of collaboration — along with the results.