

Collaborative investigative journalism networks: the Arena way

Abstract

Collaborative, cross-border journalism networks have evolved in response to a number of challenges facing the sector. More recently we have seen a trend for open-access networks and ad hoc teams, and a small sector has sprung up to support this activity. This paper is designed to guide those new to journalism networks through the process of figuring out what a network is and how different models might be used for different types of work. The paper is largely based upon the bundle of activities at one of these collaborative journalism support and infrastructure organisations: Arena for Journalism in Europe.

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Contents

Introduction	2
Arena's open-access networks	2
The Arena guide to open-access networks	5
Have you defined your outcome, or purpose?.....	5
How will your network be funded?	6
What will you use to communicate?.....	7
How will you keep the momentum?	7
When is it time to close the network?	11
Conclusion	11

Keywords

guide; open access; networks; funding; communication; cross-border investigative journalism; data; Europe; funded journalism; media systems; non-profit organisations



Introduction

Mark Schapiro was still in his twenties when Victor Navasky, the editor of the American magazine *The Nation*, came to him with a plan.¹ It was 1986, and Schapiro had just finished working on a book about the dumping of banned pesticides in developing nations – work that had taught him how to follow stories across borders and to find collaborators in countries far from his own. Navasky had seen corporations and criminal gangs working increasingly beyond national borders and wondered: what would it take to build a network of titles up to the task of following these new transnational forces? He wanted Schapiro to find out. There was a problem: the only way to meet and convince willing writers was to go out there and find them himself.

So Schapiro moved from the US to Paris and scheduled a series of meetings with editors, to explain Navasky's vision of "collaborative publication for stories of mutual interest". In the spring of 1987, those curious enough about the idea met at the offices of the Dutch weekly *Vrij Nederland* in Amsterdam, where Navasky delivered his welcoming speech. "Investigative journalists are by definition loners, non-cooperative, double agents, they don't share information," he said. "They have a talent for not letting anyone know what they're about. They are underfunded, they may not take well to directions." On the recording, the editors laugh nervously. And yet, they signed on. Within a year, a new network of collaborative investigators calling itself *InterNation* were turning up scoops. They found links between the American right and neo-fascist organisations in Europe. They discovered that the Reagan administration was pressuring European governments to deploy US nuclear missiles. And they followed the export of global hazardous wastes to developing countries. Communication used the technology of the time: letter, telephone, in-person meetings and a now extinct means of correspondence called the *Aerogramme*, which involves typing a message directly onto an air-mailed letter. But relationships between the reporters, even thousands of miles away and long before the advent of Zoom and Slack, were based on the exact same thing as in today's networks: trust.

This is a paper about the "how" of journalism networks: the evolving tools, skills and structures used for collaboration. But it's useful to think of it as a practical guide to all the ways journalists in our field can cultivate trust.

Arena's open-access networks

What do we mean by closed and open networks? The question is one of access. An invite-only network like the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists or ICIJ, which was deliberately recruited from Nieman fellows at Harvard and Knight fellows at Stanford University, seems pre-ordained for success. Indeed ICIJ, nearly two decades after it formed in 1997, went on to give us what is still perhaps the best known cross-border investigation, the Panama Papers. History shows us at least concerning the big leaks, ICIJ has got it covered.

But there are countless journalists that are unable to access the closed network of the ICIJ, and therefore

¹ Schapiro, M, *The Story of InterNation: The World's First (Maybe) Investigative Journalism Network*, September 13, 2023, accessed February 24, 2025



countless stories this network alone might miss. While many other reporting networks have emerged since ICIJ, including the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) in 2006 and the European Investigative Collaborations (EIC) network in 2015, most still involve closed circles of journalists working together with a combination of in-person and online meetings. In many cases the journalists are deliberately recruited or invited in processes that remain mysterious to those on the outside.

As the years pass and the original networks age, a growing pool of journalists outside of these closed networks is looking for alternative means to cultivate trust across borders for collaborative endeavours. Arena has been experimenting with ways to facilitate such collaborations through an open-access model. We define these as open networks, where in principle any journalist is able to join a thematic network for any period of time. I say “in principle”, because the reality is that these networks are only available to certain types of journalists: those with access to the internet and certain types of software (Signal, for example), those who speak English, and those who encounter Arena through one of our many activities. They are also limited to European journalists. Nonetheless, the idea is that they are more open than earlier networks, and this paper explores Arena’s many experiments in how to improve access. Indeed, the origins of Arena itself stem from one of these early experiments.

Arena emerged from a network of journalists who came together to work on an investigation into farm subsidies in Europe. In 2004, a young Danish journalist called Brigitte Alfter was on her way to Brussels to start working as an EU correspondent for the Danish daily Information, when she came across a story by two Danish journalists. Nils Mulvad and Kjeld Hansen had spent years filing freedom of information (FOI) requests to analyse whether EU subsidies really helped the bloc’s poorest farmers, as politicians claimed. After two years, they were finally able to show that the subsidies, at least in Denmark, were designed to help large landowners and to help European producers export globally. Alfter decided to file an FOI request to the EU for information on subsidies for the whole of Europe. When, several months later, she was turned down, Alfter contacted Mulvad and in 2005, they joined with Jack Thurston, a UK journalist, to start Farmsubsidy.org, a network of reporters compiling data and lobbying for transparency. With funding from sources including the German Marshall Fund and the William & Flora Hewlett Foundation the three founders of the network set up a website.

In 2009, journalists interested in working together on farm subsidy data agreed to meet in Brussels to harvest data and write stories for their home countries. This was the first iteration of Dataharvest, which from 2011 was hosted by the Belgian organisation Fonds Pascal Decroos (which became Journalismfund.eu in 2013). When Journalismfund.eu decided to concentrate on grants for journalists in 2019, Alfter, along with her Journalismfund.eu colleague Trine Smistrup, created the standalone entity Arena for Journalism in Europe, as a home for Dataharvest and a place for more open collaborative networks.

Though Arena supports cross-border, and therefore often remote, journalism, there exists at the heart of Arena an ethos that data and investigative journalism is best-served with in-person meetings. The conference is unlike other investigative journalism meet-ups, since it is planned like an editorial meeting. Participants are encouraged at the door to share story ideas, meet colleagues and work on datasets in an annual series of masterclasses exploring the most exciting innovations in practice. Many successful



investigations have emerged from Dataharvest.² Since 2011, Arena has also experimented with how to sustain interest from journalists around themes that have been popular at the conference. These experiments are explored at length in this paper.

One of these is the Housing Network (initially known as the Arena Housing Project), which started out of the Housing track at Dataharvest in May 2019. A funder had generously responded to [a blog post about housing by Alfter](#), and Brigitte and Trine were happy to bring in Jose Miguel Calatayud, who had identified housing as a “strategically ‘warm’ topic”. He noted that housing was covered extensively by experienced local reporters, that it was a fruitful subject for national investigations, that it was a topic influenced by national and EU-level decisions and that it touched several desks, from politics to society to finance and business. Calatayud had done extensive work on housing, journalism and civil society actors. Before the conference, he assembled a roundtable of speakers. That Dataharvest roundtable became the “official launch” of the network. Many participants then joined a mailing list, started by Calatayud and hosted on an Arena mail server, to stay connected after the conference ended.

Alfter’s experience raising money for the network by publishing or promoting it as an idea online suggests that this is one way open-access networks can be developed: by finding ways to share the need for them with foundations.

Right from the beginning Calatayud and Alfter discussed the strategic aim of planning and executing a cross-border investigation around the issue of housing. But the question was how to sustain interest before launching the investigation. The participants discussed several ideas: an online environment to communicate with a chat application and compile their knowledge in a Docuwiki (a kind of DIY encyclopaedia) and shared files. They also had the aim of meeting in person at least twice a year to, in Calatayud’s words, “make the network feel more real”. They planned to use Dataharvest for the first meeting and organise a second, later in 2019 in Athens, just for housing reporters, though the second meeting never materialised due to lack of funding. Calatayud said that from the beginning, the idea was to experiment with different ways of cultivating trust, with the idea that the network could become independent from Arena at some point in the future, either through raising funds to become self-sustaining, or to be hosted by another organisation or a collective of organisations.

The following guide has been based on Calatayud’s experience of setting up the Housing Network, and the experiences of other Arena contractors who set up subsequent networks.

2 Three examples: 1. In 2016, a team of journalists including Anna Alberts met at Dataharvest to complete a list of beneficiaries of EU Structural Investment Funds. They also used the conference to find a developer to work with and to run the first scrapers and analysis. The investigation was published in March 2017.

2. In 2014, the Italian journalists Sara Menafra and Cristian Giuliette met at Dataharvest. In 2020, they went on to publish a series of articles about [medical fraud during the Coronavirus pandemic](#).

3. At Dataharvest in 2019, the journalists Stéphane Horel, Nils Mulvad and Staffan Dahllöf started work on [an investigation into the toxic chemical Chlorpyrifos](#), published later that year.



The Arena guide to open-access networks

Have you defined your outcome, or purpose?

The outcome of an open-access network might be defined by your funder, by participants in the network, or by Arena. But it is a good idea to know what you want to achieve before you start.

Alfter and Calatayud had from the outset discussed the idea that the Arena Housing Project might result in a cross-border investigation. But they didn't take a direct route. The conversation started when the housing track at the 2019 Dataharvest conference brought together interested journalists around the issue of housing. Journalists who attended the track were invited to join a mailing list. Rather than embarking directly on a single research question, Alfter and Calatayud decided to experiment with different ways of engaging a network, including asking for and sharing information and contacts and ideas and building up collaborative databases. It is from these experiments that we are able to draw on some conclusions in this paper.

By contrast, the Arena Climate Network was able to define outcomes based on previous lessons from the Housing and Food and Water networks. It also began with a Dataharvest track at the 2020 conference, which was held online because of the pandemic, involving at least 19 sessions coordinated by Jelena Prtoric. Afterwards, Alfter and Prtoric came up with a list of fundamental network activities in order to secure funding, including a climate track at Dataharvest's 2021 online conference and an initial round of cross-border climate fellowships for climate journalists. The first fellowships took place in late 2021, with publications coming out early to mid-2022. However, due to the pandemic, the fellows never got to meet in person and all the training sessions took place online.

Alfter then developed a concept note for the Climate Network and secured further funding for some climate conferences: one pilot and one "official" conference in 2023, and a further conference in 2024. Originally, Alfter planned an investigation in 2023, but this was pushed back to 2024. A group on Signal, an encrypted, open source messaging app, already existed and was moderated by Jelena Prtoric.

The concept note stated that there would be "learning by doing" and that the network would attempt to provide some financial support for investigative work. When Zeynep Sentek was hired to run the network, she suggested these concepts were embedded in an overall "fellowship programme" to make it more coherent and "a bit more hip"!

But, Sentek reflected, these aspects were already predetermined during the fundraising phase, predating her hire. The fundamental elements of the network – conferences, an investigation and the principle of learning by doing – could not be changed as they were the major activities. As activities evolve and Arena moves to new fundraising, her experiences from the early years of the Climate Network and ambitions are translated into new goals for the next steps. Many of these experiences are discussed in more detail below.

The clearly defined outcomes, alongside Sentek's excellent leadership, have helped the Climate Network to win funding and therefore to grow steadily over two years, fulfilling its initial aims. This success indicates the benefits to having a defined outcome at the outset of an open-access network.



How many people will be in your network?

Arena's open access networks have always been accessible in principle to anyone from Europe who wants to join, in contrast to earlier closed-door networks such as ICIJ, newsrooms like Investigate Europe, or other selective networks for the immediate production of journalism.

The size of a network will inform all decisions that follow, from the platforms the network uses to communicate, to the amount of funding that organisers need to raise. Being a "member" of a network, in the Arena open-access definition, can be low- or high-intensity and include a range of different activities. This is the nature of the "open access in principle" arrangement, which defies hard categorisation in order to widen the pool.

The Arena Climate Network is primarily composed of hundreds of members of a Signal group. These might be considered the members of the Arena Climate network. The Signal group is regularly used to share resources, stories, requests for help and ideas. Not all members of the Signal group will come to the conferences, attend online events, or contribute in other opportunities to collaborate. During investigations, a completely different set of partners might be recruited, outside the ranks of the Signal group. The flexible nature of this model allows for a spectrum of engagement, with no prizes or penalties for being more or less involved.

The Arena Housing Network engaged hundreds of people in network-making activities, including the launch of a collaborative database of pandemic housing policies (also called a knowledge base), a newsletter and a mailing list receiving updates written by Calatayud and Prtoric. However, when the Housing Project launched an actual collaborative investigation, many of the journalists who participated in the investigation had not been part of these prior activities in the housing network. Some had not even heard of the network.

This learning suggests that not all networks need to be so broad in scope. Journalists might choose to set up a small network to do ad-hoc work on a single topic, for an indeterminate or fixed period. While the number of journalists does not need to be defined at the outset, it is useful to have an idea of whether the network will be fixed and closed, or flexible and open-access, or a combination, in order to make decisions about funding and communication. These two experiments also suggest that while an open-access network might contain hundreds or even thousands of members on communication platforms, the number involved in cross-border investigations has, in these examples, remained quite small. Arena is yet to experiment with a fully distributed, open-access cross-border investigation within one of the networks. This might be an interesting next step.

How will your network be funded?

All networks need funding. But the type and amount of funding required depends on the activities defined by the network at the outset. Equally, once funding comes to an end, networks often go dormant, morph into new entities or disband entirely, since they no longer have a dedicated coordinator to facilitate activities.

Thematic open-access networks can benefit if they hit on a zeitgeist. The Arena Climate Network, since it focussed on a hot topic, benefited from funding from the Laudes Foundation and European Climate Foundation, and was able to secure funding for two years of intense activities (three conferences, fellowships and an investigation).



The Housing Project was unfunded from June 2021, but Arena kept it going with its own means and a research grant. However it was able to raise some funding from IJ4EU for the Cities for Rent investigation. Once funding for the Cities for Rent investigation ran out, the Arena Housing Project could no longer be continued within Arena, however a smaller group of journalists continued to work on this theme using winnings from the European Press Prize, and later under the name the Urban Journalism Network, coordinated by Hendrik Lehmann at Tagesspiegel Berlin and Gaby Khazalová from Deník Referendum in the Czech Republic. They were able to continue to publish investigations with partners who initially worked together as part of the Arena project thanks to support from their newsrooms. The ties with Arena were maintained, and further developments are envisaged, now as partners with the new organisation.

What will you use to communicate?

Arena has found the simplest way to communicate with open-access network members at scale to be with Signal. Many of the Arena Networks have their own Signal groups. Members use the groups to share stories, ideas, opportunities and to seek team members for projects. Organisers use the Signal group to notify participants of fellowships, funding opportunities and conferences. Other climate networks from external organisations also use the group to post opportunities and news, since the group is open to anyone with the link. The Signal group therefore forms the backbone of network activities.

The decision to use Signal comes after experimentation in the Housing Project. Previously, the Housing Project used a mailing list to communicate with network members, however this required a lot of input and facilitation from Calatayud and Prtoric. The organisers built a suite of communication tools for the network, including chat channels on Rocket.Chat, a wiki environment, the knowledge base and the newsletter. Calatayud said these tools were mostly ignored by people in the network, even though during surveys they said they really valued them – especially the knowledge base, which in reality nobody seemed to use. He found that many journalists seemed to view the Housing Project and the resources it made available as services that Arena offered them for free, rather than as a place that required active engagement. It must be added that during the early years of Arena, little if any time was allocated for communication simply because the team was too small and the organisation not fully funded at that stage. One lesson learned is definitely that activities likely need resources in order come alive in the network community.

How will you keep the momentum?

This is a key question that might be defined in the outcomes section. But it bears further reflection here. Arena Networks have experimented with the following elements:

1. Knowledge base
2. Newsletter
3. Conferences
4. Fellowships
5. Investigations
6. Scaling
7. Signal

1. Knowledge base

For the Housing Project, Calatayud attempted to build a collaborative database around policy announcement and actual policies passed during the first weeks and months of the pandemic relating to housing.



This gathered interest and inputs at the beginning, then people stopped contributing very quickly, despite the fact that many continued to express an interest in the databases for some time afterwards. Prtoric also coordinated a forum on Discourse.org for people to discuss climate matters.

At the outset, the Climate Network was also going to include a knowledge base on Baserow, database software, and a forum on Discourse. But Sentek learned from talking to Prtoric and Sarah Pilz, a journalist who coordinated Arena's Food and Water Network, that these activities were very high effort, with low impact. She learned that the Discourse forum was underused, and that Calatayud and Prtoric had struggled to keep up with the workload of keeping a regular newsletter going alongside other network-building activities that had greater engagement.

Sarah Pilz became the coordinator of Arena's Food and Water Network in 2022, following a dedicated track on the subject at that year's Dataharvest. Over 50 journalists attended a meeting at the conference. Many went on to join a food and water mailing list and Signal group. Pilz coordinating these groups, alongside regular online meetings to network members with experts on different aspects of the topic. She also set up a dedicated knowledge base to keep track of food, water and climate stories.

While the meetings were successful in contributing to an [emerging investigation into PFAS chemicals](#) and updating the existing database of [EU farm subsidies](#), the knowledge base was a harder task. Pilz reported that keeping up with the knowledge base required significant amounts of time in order to collect links, summarise them and put them into the database. It was also not an unskilled task: in order to make the database searchable, some knowledge of data organisation was necessary. For quality control, she reported that articles in the knowledge base should be decided on by more than one coordinator, and checked editorially before posting. Then came the challenge around engagement: how to get participants to use the database when they don't know what's in there? Alfter had the idea of using the Signal chat or social media channels to regularly communicate about updates in the databases.

It is difficult to know whether this would have improved engagement, since the Food and Water Network ran out of time and funding before it could implement such synergies. However, this network became an important step in between the Housing Network and the Climate Network, with much of its activities eventually absorbed into the Climate Network. Sentek and the Arena Climate team decided not to include a knowledge base or a newsletter in the Climate Network activities. This allows for comparison between the two approaches.

2. Newsletter

Calatayud felt the housing network newsletter, had very little impact. The writers could see that many people failed to open it or click on any links. Recipients thought of the newsletter as a free service provided by Arena and that Calatayud was the manager of the service. As is perhaps true of all service-recipient relationships, almost none of the participants contributed their own time and effort for free. But most people seemed to like to know that the different resources offered by the Housing Network were there, even if then almost nobody used any of those resources apart from the mailing list, where people shared stories and ideas with others. Prtoric also reflected on the time and energy required to keep the housing newsletter going, stating that although people said they liked receiving them, they were not "useful" in a network-building sense.

When Sentek and her team set up the climate network, they considered starting a newsletter but decided against it. Sentek made a list of the English language climate-related newsletters. She stopped when she hit 50. Rather than send out a regular newsletter in a crowded marketplace, Sentek said that she would



send out emails to the mailing list only when there is something to say about a network-building activity: a conference, an investigation, or another opportunity to get involved – once again highlighting the usefulness of a mailing list for horizontal, ad hoc communication, over an official newsletter.

3. Fellowships

While the Arena Housing Project did not use fellowships because of lack of funding, Sentek developed the idea to include and finetune fellowships in the Climate Network to combine the two concepts of “learning by doing” and working towards actual journalism production and publication.

In August 2023, Arena advertised for fifteen fellows to receive mentorship and support to set up their own investigations, including a small amount of financial support for each fellow of up to €2000. Offering money to support journalistic work was a key part of the fellowships and responded to demand from network participants tired of being offered free workshops and training, when they lacked the funding and time to carry out their investigative work. In May 2024, Arena was again able to offer a fellowship programme for 15 participants including mentorship, a one-day workshop on the sidelines of the 2024 Climate Network Conference in Bologna, and funding to participate in the conference, alongside a small amount of financial support of up to €2000.

4. Conferences

While Calatayud and Alfter had planned to have two in-person meetings for the Housing Network a year, the idea of holding separate conferences for open-access networks was first practised by Sentek with two climate conferences in 2023, and a third in 2024, with the plan to have one annual event if funding allows.

In late April 2023, 55 journalists, scientists and civic tech researchers got together in Prague for a Climate Arena Conference pilot. This conference served to test the Climate Network’s adaptation of the Dataharvest working conference model to a thematic conference model. In November 2023, 168 people got together in Vienna for a 2-day conference of 30 sessions and topics ranging from greenwashing, lobbying, EU policies, carbon-offsetting, to innovative ways of telling climate stories. The participants’ group was diverse in age, experience and geography, coming from both small independent newsrooms and legacy media and with speakers from Portugal, Norway, Ukraine and Turkey.

Sentek said the conference is one of the most successful elements of the Climate Network, since it brings people together, face-to-face, to talk about each other’s work. The act of being in the same room for two days facilitates new relationships and ideas.

However, not all networks might be suited to a conference, particularly smaller networks with lower budgets. Rather than setting up a separate conference, Food and Water was integrated as a track at the Vienna Climate Conference in November 2023, which allowed this network to host specialist meetings within the broader climate context, without costing funds the network didn’t have. Arena’s Food and Water network also contributed to the [scaling of an investigation](#), the Forever Pollution Project, described in more detail below.

5. Investigations

All the Arena open-access networks have so far aimed to produce investigations. Whether or not they have succeeded has been a question of funding. But the investigations and the networks can be quite different entities. Calatayud reflected that while the Cities for Rent investigation might not have been possible without his prior work coordinating a housing network, it’s also true that the journalists in that



investigation did not necessarily come from or participate in the housing network. His work was key – he had an overview over who did what through his previous work and could handpick the team. The Arena Housing Project gave Calatayud a network through which to find journalists initially, and legitimacy when he contacted those outside this network.

Similarly, when the Climate Network decided to investigate groundwater, a small team was selected to participate in analysing the data. Some of these journalists came from the network and some were added later. It's therefore true to say that network building and collaborative investigations are two separate activities, and that while the latter can result from the former, many journalists who participate in open-access networks do not necessarily conduct collaborative investigations, even if they have an interest in doing so. Or collaborations might start years – even decades – after an initial meeting at a conference. One question might be, what more could network coordinators do to help people start investigations, if investigations are the goal?

6. Scaling

Investigations are one of the most exciting network-building activities that go on within the Arena networks. But even where Arena network has not been the principal instigator of an inquiry, it can step in towards the end to add partners ready for publication. We call this process scaling an investigation.

When a cross-border team came together to investigate “forever chemicals” called PFAS in Europe, Arena was able to draw on participants of the Food and Water network to find suitable journalists to scale the investigation from five to 12 countries. The investigation required journalists with expertise in environmental reporting and the ability to publish the results in a recognised outlet in a relatively concentrated period of time. Since those in the Food and Water network were already known to Arena, there existed relationships of trust that could provide the foundations for the work required. More on this methodology is available on the [investigation website](#).

7. Signal

Signal groups can outlast funding for networks. This is the case in the Arena Labour Network and the Arena Food and Water Network, which grew out of Dataharvest tracks in 2022 and 2023 respectively. While the Food and Water Network is described above, the Labour Network bears brief explanation here. In 2023, Dataharvest hosted a track to explore interest in a labour network. After the conference, Arena established a Signal group for participants to keep in touch. At the end of 2023, Pilz created an open call for journalists to work on compiling datasets that were missing on a European level, which might lead to other cross-border investigations into missing data, following the success of Farmsubsidy.org. But the open call received little attention and there was no direct outcome.

In 2024, Arena had no funding for these networks, and therefore no coordinators to stimulate collaboration. Participants continued to share ideas and opportunities in the Signal groups. These might therefore be considered “dormant” networks. But the relationship with interested journalists is useful, however loose, since they might later participate in fellowships, conferences or investigations if funding becomes available.

Sentek considers the Climate Signal group to be one of the more successful elements of the Climate Network, since it requires so little monitoring but allows for open, non-hierarchical communication.



When is it time to close the network?

While Arena has not closed any of its networks, some are dormant since they do not have funding, and some have morphed into new entities. The Arena Housing Project is now the Urban Journalism Network, coordinated by two leading journalists in Cities for Rent, Khazalová and Lehmann. The decision to continue the work investigating common challenges faced by European cities was taken after the Cities for Rent investigation won the 2022 European Press Prize for innovation, and partly thanks to the prize winnings, which funded ongoing work. The network was supported by Arena in its early stages, but operates mostly independently.

Similarly, the Arena Labour Network and the Arena Food and Water Network do not have active funding in 2024, and while the Signal groups continue to exist, there are no dedicated coordinators to manage activities. While some of the participants in the Food and Water group meet at the climate conferences, it is not clear how any ideas pertaining to this theme can be developed or supported without financial means.

The explicit aim of Arena is to offer network infrastructures in all the ways detailed above that support the exploration of important topics across borders, such as corporate money trails, environmental events and European regulation. Even though the thematic approach should not be too narrow, the number of potential networks is way beyond Arena's capacity to support. Arena and other ongoing organisations, like the traditional closed-door networks, might therefore consider the founding, funding and maintaining of open-access networks as one way to support a wider flourishing of knowledge, skills and investigative work among journalists in Europe and beyond.

Conclusion

Traditional “closed” investigative journalism networks such as the ICIJ and the OCCRP were created to handle large data leaks and share investigative work among reporters in many jurisdictions. This had several benefits, including tapping into local expertise and processing large amounts of data quickly. But the secretive nature of these leaks required the networks to be closed, which was necessarily exclusionary. Even when not working with leaks but developing investigations from scratch, such as for example ICIJ or EIC, the nature of editorial work often demands closed newsroom doors until publication.

Arena's open-access journalism networks are an experiment in whether a network of investigative journalists can be sustained without the immediate pressure and unifying activity of an investigation. Nonetheless, investigative work looms large in Arena's networks. Arena itself was in part born out of a collaborative, cross-border investigation, the farm subsidies investigation, which was the reason for the first iteration of the Dataharvest conference, putting in-person meetings at the heart of network activities.

The Housing Project was an experiment in turning this process around. Rather than starting the network with an investigation in mind, the network started at the Dataharvest conference. Its founders tried other ways of engaging interested journalists, including setting up a newsletter and a knowledge base. A separate conference was planned but never enacted, partly because of the pandemic. But the most successful outcome of the Housing Project is now considered to be the Cities for Rent investigation, which



lives on in the Urban Journalism Network. We might therefore consider the two experiments to have come to the same conclusion from different angles: that investigations are at the heart of network-making activities, whether or not the network is open-access. Although Calatayud built up his own knowledge and relationships in the housing sector by coordinating the Housing Network, not all journalists working on Cities for Rent came from the network. Indeed some had not even heard of it.

The Climate Network refines the model further: Sentek was able to conclude, given previous experiments, that a knowledge base and newsletter would have a low impact for the amount of resources and time they would require. The Climate Network centred on conferences with the promise of an investigation in the second year. With the benefit of secure, longer term funding, it was also able to offer money for 30 fellowships within two years, including supporting people to come to in-person meetings and working grants towards investigations.

Sentek said this differentiated the network from others in an environment where people were suffering fatigue from “yet another conference/training/fellowship”. And she felt the demand for more of this kind of network-making activity: “This is always a question for me, what I should be doing more. I wonder if this comes from the idea that we are a ‘network’ which maybe gives people expectation that there should be more on offer. I wish we had more funds to give more service to journalists, for example by giving them more money for their stories. We could coordinate, initiate and bring journalists together – and pay them for their labour.”

As Sentek reflects, funding is critical for open-access networks, since participants cannot always rely on newsrooms to pay them to attend conferences and conduct investigations, which can be long, time-consuming and stressful work. Funding is necessary for coordinators, conferences and the important work of training fellows and bringing journalists from underserved regions into networks.

It is the latter that distinguishes Arena’s open-access networks from earlier, closed networks. While all networks revolve around the promise of investigative work, it is only in Arena’s open-access model that operates on the principle that any European journalist, regardless of region and experience, has the opportunity to participate in that work. Even then, as we have seen, investigations often end up being conducted by targeted groups within a network, including journalists who might not have been part of the network in the first place. As such Arena’s open access networks can play a key role in strengthening investigative journalism in harder-to-reach regions, among underserved journalists and their audiences.

Strengthening the open-access model further might therefore focus on new ways to support diversity in networks, including fellowships targeting underserved regions, in line with previous Arena work training mid-career journalists in the field of collaboration. Or it might be about creating a truly open-access investigation using databases, in which any member of a Signal group is invited to participate. Here, too, Arena is conducting fresh experiments in “lowering the barrier” of access to such data, by creating databases on Aleph and training journalists to use them. This may form a new channel for collaboration in the future, and part of the essential infrastructure Arena offers to journalists of any experience, from any jurisdiction, as part of its continued experiments in the philosophy of open access.