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Mastermind, moderator or manager? The developing role of coordinator in cross-border investigations

Abstract

The cross-border investigative method is now a quarter of a century old. While the stories are well-known and the techniques openly taught, one essential ingredient of every successful investigation remains an enigma: the coordinator. But a consensus is beginning to emerge about the essential elements of coordination and how they apply to the tasks of an investigation, from idea, to publication, to the essential "special steps" of collaborative journalism: the process of sharing with peers and growing networks. This paper will analyse how the various tasks are handled by editorial coordinators within networks including the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, Investigate Europe and European Investigative Collaborations, alongside smaller ad hoc teams.

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Keywords

Cross-border journalism; investigative journalism; coordination; roles; collaboration; investigative reporting; Europe; funded journalism; media systems; non-profit organisations

Introduction

In her seminal text "Cross-Border Collaborative Journalism: A Step-By-Step Guide" (Routledge, 2019), Brigitte Alfter, co-founder of Arena for Journalism in Europe, set out the seven steps of cross-border journalism. I used these steps as a guide to coordinate my first cross-border investigation in 2020, an investigation into renewable energy subsidies called Money to Burn, which was later nominated for the European Press Prize for innovation. I have since trained many other young collaborators in the seven steps. In this paper, the I am using the steps to slice my analysis of the role of the editorial coordinator in collaborative investigations, taking us from investigation idea, through the research process, to publication and beyond. I will also draw on my previous Arena Paper on collaborative networks, alongside interviews with some of the luminaries of the cross-border method:

Jose Miguel Calatayud is a Spanish journalist based in Berlin since January 2020, interviewed February 8, 2024. He coordinated the Arena Housing Project, an open collaborative network for housing reporters and researchers hosted by Arena for Journalism in Europe. He launched and coordinated the collaborative investigation Cities for Rent: Investigating Corporate Landlords Across Europe, which won the Innovation Award at the European Press Prize, and received a special mention at the IJ4EU Impact Award.

Stefan Candea, a Romanian investigative journalist who in 2001 set up the Romanian Centre for Investigative Journalism, one of the first investigative non-profits, which became one of the founding members in the Global Investigative Journalism Network (GIJC) and the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP). In 2015, after collaborations with ICIJ, he co-founded European Investigative Collaborations, which works with major newsrooms across Europe. I interviewed Candea on February 14, 2024.

Alessia Cerantola, an Italian journalist and the editorial director of Investigate Europe. Before joining Investigate Europe, Alessia worked for four years as staff reporting and then as coordinating editor focussed on Big Tobacco with the Organised Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP). I am grateful to Alessia for our email correspondence on this subject in January 2025 and her prior analysis for Ordine dei Giornalisti.

Nicky Hager, investigative journalist from New Zealand and member of the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ), interviewed February 15, 2024, renowned for decades of investigative work on intelligence gathering, greenwashing by corporations, terrorism and nationalism both in New Zealand and beyond its borders.

Ludo Hekman, a Dutch investigative journalist and one of the founders of Lighthouse Reports, a media non-profit based in Amsterdam. Lighthouse Reports creates newsrooms around topics. Hekman now works as editor-in-chief for Pointer, a public broadcaster in the Netherlands. I interviewed Hekman on March 8, 2024.

Sandrine Rigaud, a French investigative journalist and the editor of Forbidden Stories from 2019-2024, interviewed on March 6, 2025. At Forbidden Stories, she coordinated many cross-border, award-winning projects, including the Pegasus Project, published in July 2021, and the Cartel Project, a massive cross-border collaboration to finish the investigations of a murdered Mexican journalist that won a George Polk Award and the Maria Moors Cabot Prize.

Gerard Ryle is executive director of the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ). He led the worldwide teams of journalists working on the Panama Papers, Paradise Papers and Pandora

Papers investigations, the biggest in journalism history. Before joining as ICIJ's first non-American director in September 2011, Ryle spent more than 20 years working as an investigative reporter and editor in Australia. Interviewed on March 4, 2025.

Elisa Simantke, senior editor for the German investigative newsroom Paper Trail Media, interviewed February 21, 2024. Simantke co-founded the cross-border journalism co-operative Investigate Europe in 2016 with colleagues from 8 different countries and served as its editorial director until 2024.

Marina Walker Guevara, an Argentinian investigative journalist serving as the executive editor of the Pulitzer Center in Washington DC, interviewed on February 16, 2024. Before joining the centre, Walker Guevara managed the Panama Papers (2016) the Paradise Papers (2017) and several other investigations for ICIJ, involving hundreds of journalists using technology to unravel stories of public interest from large quantities of leaked financial data. Walker Guevara sits on the board of directors of GIJN and co-founded the Latin American Center for Investigative Journalism (CLIP).

The coordinator during the life-cycle of an investigation

1. Network

With developments in digital technology from 2000 onwards, journalists, just like those in other professions, benefitted from an explosion in the availability of sources and colleagues. Suddenly it was no longer necessary to send reporters to remote locations to unlock a story. A reporter who uncovered a lead abroad could instantly communicate with contacts from conferences and wider networks. This development saved money, and co-opted the local reporter's own sources and knowledge, enriching stories. Sometimes, a partner in another country turned out to hold a crucial piece of information that could unlock an entire investigation. This happened during an early project of the ICIJ.

In the late nineties, ICIJ's US editor, Maud Beelman, and a British team member called Duncan Campbell were going through the internal files of a big tobacco company. They were trying to find evidence that managers knew about the company producing for the black market. Duncan came across a sales destination named "San Andresitos". It sounded like a place in Latin America, but he couldn't find it on any map. So Beelman and Campbell turned to a Colombian team member called Maria Teresa Ronderos. When she heard the name, she laughed. "San Andresitos" was in fact a local term for the black market. Neither Beelman nor Campbell could have known this alone. But with that key revelation the ICIJ team went on to show that smuggling was a key part of the sales strategy of big tobacco companies. In 2001, they even showed these companies were colluding with North American motorcycle gangs, the Italian mafia and Colombian drug cartels.

As journalists started working across borders, they realised that engaging colleagues in other countries allows for cheaper sourcing, richer research, mutual fact-checking, better security and wider audiences. Networks grew stronger as collaborative practice developed through the early 2000s, leading some editorial coordinators to harness the power of these networks for increasingly ambitious investigations involving large data leaks. Eventually, organisations like the ICIJ built their own platforms to share data and communicate more efficiently with partners.

The more in-depth and distributed an investigation, the greater the legal risk, fundraising and marketing involved. Initiators, coordinators and consortiums must make decisions early on about who takes

responsibility for these elements. These decisions set the scope of the investigation and what can be achieved. It's much simpler, from a legal, marketing and fundraising standpoint, to keep the investigation very small, involving just a handful of well-connected partners. But instant, global access to data in the cloud and constant communication through social networks makes it possible for cross-border investigations to grow to hundreds of reporters. The only way to keep investigations of this scale on track is with the skill of an experienced coordinator.

2. Idea

Ideas for cross-border stories can originate with an established co-ordinator in a permanent network. Some of the investigations into tax havens in the last decade have started with files acquired by coordinators in existing networks. Alternatively, a journalist with an idea for an investigation might find themselves taking the role of coordinator in order to execute their idea. The journalist who comes up with the idea is sometimes called "the initiator". The initiator has been described as "a player who has a particular say throughout".[1] In ongoing networks, ideas can emerge from reporters inside the organisation, as well as coming from the outside. Some such consortiums have processes for testing ideas before assembling a team and investing in pre-research.

At Investigate Europe, a reporter with an idea works with someone else on the team to develop their pitch and provide a second opinion. Successful ideas therefore have two "head investigators" (or initiators) who both write up the final report, as well as an editorial coordinator to manage the process.

At ICIJ, in which the flow of information is more centralised, the global office in Washington DC traditionally decides on the new investigation, often based on a leak. In the less centralised OCCRP model, ideas for investigations often come from regional centres. Member centres pitch their ideas to OCCRP editors based remotely. OCCRP then sets up the editorial coordination for that project. External partners can also bring stories to the consortium for consideration.

This more flexible model of ideas gathering has generally resulted in a higher turnover of stories. Alessia Cerantola notes that in 2021, OCCRP published about 130 projects of varying sizes. A couple came from leaks and the rest from ideas generated in the member centres or from freelancers. "In some cases, the coordinator is the main reporter of the same member centre, in other cases it's the editor who coordinates," Cerantola notes.

3. Team

Investigation ideas are powerful. They can be strong enough to bring a group of journalists together in an ad hoc team, dictating geographies, skills and experience of the teammates required, as well as the kind of editorial coordinator required. The coordinator might be involved in this recruitment process, or they might be hired by a reporter or initiator during the process.

My first experience coordinating a cross-border investigation was for one such ad-hoc team. Most of the teammates in this investigation met at a training programme for the cross-border method designed by Arena in partnership with the Toepfer Foundation in Germany. We added team members in the Netherlands, where a public broadcaster agreed to host our investigation and support our application for funding. Much later, we added publishing partners in relevant jurisdictions like Latvia and Portugal.

1 Alfter, B, Cross-border collaborative journalism: a step-by-step guide, Routledge, 2019, p. 153

Ongoing networks follow a similar track. At EIC, a process has evolved in which the initiator and the coordinator "form a fusion cell" at the centre of the investigation, assembling other teammates as the idea requires.[2] But in many networks, the initiator's role is less defined, and this reporter may fall into the flock of others working on the story without taking a special role.

At ICIJ, a journalist with a trove of leaked files typically turns the data over to the network. ICIJ then assembles a team of media partners around the leak, with a central office taking on project management duties. The partners either operate autonomously, resulting in different research trajectories and potentially different stories, or they are organised by coordinators by regional centres. In this case, the initiator is often far removed from the more institutionalised process of coordinating the investigation.

Even when they come up with an idea, some editorial coordinators caution against trying to coordinate and report at the same time. "I don't think it works without burning out," Elisa Simantke says. Only in very small, ad hoc teams might team members share out coordination responsibilities and reporting duties, rather than appointing a sole editorial coordinator.

Ludo Hekman co-founded Lighthouse Reports in the Netherlands in 2019. "Quite quickly, we made the decision that coordinators were no longer reporting," he says. Lighthouse Reports rapidly evolved its processes to free editorial coordinators from the demands of reporting and editing, allowing them to focus on project management and administration, including reporting to funders.

Nonetheless, many networks see the value in appointing an investigative journalist as coordinator, even though they may not be working as a journalist during the investigation. "You cannot coordinate an investigation if you are not yourself an investigative journalist because that's what gives you the authority that other journalists recognise," says Sandrine Rigaud, former editor of Forbidden Stories.

Walker Guevara has coordinated more than 25 investigations, including two of the largest cross-border investigations in history, the Panama Papers and the Paradise Papers, involving hundreds of journalists. She says the job of editorial coordinator is often undesirable for reporters, who simply want to report. At ICIJ, the core team realised that appointing an editorial coordinator was just as much art as science. As well as bringing together the right team, with the right guidelines and the right technology, the coordinator had to be able to navigate across cultural differences, to command the respect of their peers and care about the wellbeing of participants. "Don't underestimate the extent to which people want to be led," she says.

ICIJ learned the hard way about the importance of "soft competences" in the team, including the willingness of teammates to collaborate. Marina Guevara cautions about lone wolves. Research has found that ICIJ journalists share a great agreement on how the work should be done, including which research methods are appropriate and how sources should be dealt with, taking the public interest into account.[3]

Nicky Hager advocates for some independence of thought among collaborators, and against forcing "independent-minded stroppy journalists" to behave as "hired contract workers". "This is encouraging a really unhealthy culture," he says.

Gerard Ryle from ICIJ says that above all, journalists in an investigation must trust one another: "You

2 Alfter, B, Cross-border collaborative journalism: a step-by-step guide, Routledge, 2019, p. 153.

3 Lück, Julia & Schultz, Tanjev (2020). Investigative Data Journalism in a Globalized World – A Survey Study on ICIJ Journalists. Journalism Research 2019, Vol. 2 (2), pp. 93-114, ISSN 2569-152X, DOI: 10.1453/2569-152X-22019-9858-e p.111

have to work with a group of people you can trust."

By the end of this stage, a team has assembled around an idea. Excitement levels are high. But the investigation is fragile. To make it through to publication, the work needs to be funded, rigorously reported, written up and fact-checked, sometimes multiple times, as partners turn in different threads of the story. It is at this moment that the skills and experience of the editorial coordinator come to the fore.

4. Research plan

Every investigation has two make or break moments, according to Simantke. The first, and perhaps more obvious, comes at the end of the investigation, preparing for publication. But Simantke identifies a much earlier moment when the skill of a coordinator is crucial: the moment when the investigation is "put on track". This might otherwise be described as a research plan.

This is a busy time for the editorial coordinator. Depending on their role and the investigation, they might coordinate funding, choose a suite of communication and sharing tools, and help establish the "rules" of the investigation, including how regularly the team will meet and project deadlines. Much of these rules can be set out in a memorandum of understanding, signed by all members. At Arena, we freely distribute a template, drafted by Jose Miguel Calatayud, which covers many of the aspects that teams need to consider as part of their research plan. Other tools and templates collected by Arena for our cross-border campus can be accessed freely online. However, many networks have established their own proprietary processes after many years of experimentation.

"In my view, the best collaborations rely on few guidelines," says Walker Guevara. ICIJ guidelines steer clear of legal language wherever possible, to prevent an arms-race in which everyone gets lawyers involved. Instead, they set out an agreement around a few key elements: confidentiality, communication and crediting. Team members agree that they will each have editorial independence and therefore legal responsibility over their work and publications.

For Forbidden Stories, which continues the work of murdered or imprisoned journalists, the non-disclosure agreement is essential. "The NDA protects the partners but it also protects us –and this is really key in collaboration," says Rigaud. During the Pegasus investigation, so much was at stake that Forbidden Stories struggled even to broker the initial conversation about the investigation. Rigaud remembers initiating talks with journalists and editors without phones and laptops as a matter of security: "Some of them probably thought we were a bit too paranoid before knowing what the project was about. But we needed to make the rules and the protocol clear from the beginning."

In a similar vein, establishing secure methods to share information and communicate during the investigation is a key part of planning. Legacy networks often have proprietary systems that have evolved over time. When it was first established, ICIJ used Skype and email. Eventually, they developed an open-source platform that initially resembled Facebook. ICIJ also prepares data for collaborators ahead of recruiting them, wherever possible, to avoid frustrations that come when information has been promised but isn't made available.

At Arena, we have created a suite of secure, online tools to facilitate cross-border investigations for ad hoc or less established teams who might not have their own system. Called the Collaborative Desk, it offers a menu of open-source, encrypted software. This software includes file sharing and a data repository, to calendars, chat functions and meeting rooms. It is a state-of-the-art system, available for a small

fee alongside security advice, to teams that may be encountering the challenges of setting up a cross-border project for the first time.

Once agreements have been signed and technology established, reporting can begin. At this moment the coordinator moves from chief planner to chief collaborator, forming the glue as the investigation progresses.

5. Research

After the intense work of establishing an investigation, or putting it on track, the editorial coordinator passes the baton to reporters to get to work during the research phase. This phase lasts until an established deadline and is structured around calls, meetings, memos or other ways of communicating findings with teammates. Here, too, the coordinator plays a vital role in three aspects: holding people to their commitments, cheerleading for active collaboration and stepping in to resolve conflict.

Simantke says the coordinator has a role checking in with collaborators who may suffer from a crisis of confidence at some point during the research phase. “In between [planning and publication] you usually have the low point for reporters who fear they won’t find something or that their work won’t be good enough,” she says. The coordinator can take on the mental load of organising the research, communicating different angles and encouraging reporters in certain directions. And sometimes they might simply assure reporters of what the team already achieved. “The journalists were stressed about finding super scoops, but even in assembling the statistics you can sometimes reach the minimum goals of an investigation,” she explains.

Coordinators must also “coach collaboration all the way”, Walker Guevara says. This can be as simple as tagging people on the collaborative platform to try and encourage engagement, rather than messaging them privately on Signal. “Always bring them back to the community platform,” she advises. In some cases, a bilateral conversation with a slow or reluctant team member is needed to ask if they need more help getting started. “Collaborations are about helping each other,” Ryle says. “That doesn’t happen when everyone is in silence.”

Simantke agrees that the coordinator must “coach collaboration” – and relates to the difficulties of getting team members to share their findings on appropriate platforms, especially when those findings need translating or contextualising. Many journalists, in their solo work, keep researching during the writing phase of the investigation, while cross-border teams have to share research earlier in the process in order to collaborate effectively.[4]

Some collaborators might be shocked at the amount of information they are expected to share or at the amount of due diligence required. “If you explain that everyone has to do this – that people have to share everything, to communication very often –this helps the collaboration later on,” Rigaud says.

Then there’s the job of dealing with conflict. To avoid outright arguments, ICIJ monitors the language on its community platform very carefully. Any passive aggressive language is addressed swiftly by the coordinator in a private conversation. Walker Guevara says this usually solves any conflict before it begins, since ICIJ had learned to be more discriminating about the personality-types it includes in collaborations in earlier stages of the life cycle.

4 Global Teamwork: The Rise of Collaboration in Investigative Journalism, Sambrook, Richard;Lewis, Charles;Alfter, Brigitte;Kayser-Bril, Nicolas, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2018, p.55

In broader disagreements about the direction of an investigation, the coordinator might be responsible for collating different views, mediating discussions during meetings, or even taking the deciding vote on an issue. At EIC, the "fusion cell" of the initiator and the editorial coordinator has a final say in case the network can't reach a compromise, especially related to the publication schedule and the publication of source documents

6. Publication

Most editorial coordinators have learned the hard way that it pays to get publishing partners on board early. Indeed, EIC is built around the idea that the team should be built around publishing partners, securing their engagement at the very beginning of the process.

Candea says this avoids the problem in which major national newsrooms have just one or two investigative reporters who become a target for all the networks. "These people get burned out," he says. This targeting typically comes at odd points of the investigation: either at the beginning, when reporters hope to secure letters of intent in order to apply for funding, or at the end when they need somewhere to publish their findings. EIC, which defines itself not as an organisation but rather a "network by agreement" delegates some decision-making over publication to newsrooms through a document drawn up at the outset of the investigation, relieving the coordinator of some of the pressure that comes with this moment.

Even with buy-in from the outset, setting a publication day can be a fraught process. Coordinators might have to navigate national elections, football games, public holidays and other notable events in news calendars. "Everything is about finding compromises," says Rigaud of Forbidden Stories.

As publication approaches, partners will embark on the right to reply process. The editorial coordinator may have a role during right to reply in large or sensitive investigations, particularly when a very structured right to reply process can offer better legal protection to all those involved. Forbidden Stories, for example, has worked with UK partners bound to English media law, where right to reply emails are typically sent earlier on in the publishing process. In some investigations, these emails might be dangerous or exposing for journalists in the field. "These are times we have to find compromises and have discussions," Rigaud says.

Some coordinators choose to split duties as publication approaches. During the Cities for Rent investigation in Arena's Housing Network in 2019, Calatayud says duties were shared between three coordinators who took on editing, data management and visualisations. Nonetheless, Calatayud assumed the role of overall coordinator, with the deciding vote if the team ever got stuck.

Alongside the risk of burnout, publication can come with anxiety around embargos. Will everyone stick to the agreement and wait until publication day to set their stories free in the world? This anxiety can be particularly acute in very large investigations with multiple blockbuster partners, like those coordinated by ICIJ. Walker Guevara remembers only a couple of times partners went ahead of the crowd. During the Offshore Leaks, for example, the Guardian published in November 2012, while the rest of the team kept working until April 2013.

In most cases, editors threatening to publish early can be convinced otherwise by being reminded of the power of simultaneous publication, bringing out important information on known subjects at the same time as other outlets across the globe. This was especially the case in rolling stories like the FIFA scandal,

where one-off stories joined a chorus of articles about a running story, without the impact of a larger coordinated data leak.

In particularly sensitive investigations, simultaneous publication can offer protection. By publishing Wikileaks in the US at the same time as in London, for example, journalists at the Guardian were able to protect themselves from injunctions under domestic media law. However, the scale of cross-border work also offers protection to individual journalists doing dangerous work. “The journalists who are killed most often are isolated journalists,” says Rigaud. “Being in a big group of journalists brings protection. People tell us they feel more secure because of the existence of that group.”

7. Sharing with peers

All journalists are concerned with the impact of their reporting. But cross-border investigative work aims higher when it comes to impact, since the risks and the complexities of these investigations are so much greater. This can be a lonely moment for collaborators, who return from the camaraderie running up to publication to focus on the reaction in their domestic outlets, among colleagues who likely know little about what they have been through. Brigitte Alfter has written about the need for debriefing at this stage of the investigation, a process that could be led by the editorial coordinator.[5]

While many investigations do not yet include debriefing, most cross-border work contains a seventh special step after publication that involves sharing their work with peers. This includes attending awards ceremonies, speaking about the investigation at conferences and events, and even creating press releases and behind-the-scenes material to promote the work and the process behind it. The work of sharing the investigation also regularly falls to the coordinator to organise: a behind-the-scenes video needs to be commissioned and executed, a press release needs to be written, a conference needs to be attended –or an attendee needs to be appointed.

This part of the work can be extremely rewarding and generative. Many coordinators and reporters will find their next topics or teammates at events, while peers might be inspired to continue the work of a successful collaborative investigation into its next phase, resulting in a series of follow-up stories.

While technology has a very important place in cross-border investigations where everyone is based remotely, in person meetings can be enormously productive. Walker Guevara advises collaborators to use planned events, such as Dataharvest festival or the Global Investigative Journalism Conference, as opportunities to meet in person: “Stay an extra day to work with people.” Indeed, Dataharvest is set up to facilitate this kind of coworking, with scheduled time for participants to collaborate.

Conclusion

TThe role of editorial coordinator in cross-border investigations has evolved with the field in the last 25 years. Just as it is impossible to define static models of cross-border journalism, it is impossible to define with any permanence the job of coordination. However, certain characteristics, abilities and processes have emerged as key to the role. Many coordinators hone these over time and in dialogue with team members and their network. But most start with a background in journalism, if not as investigative reporters themselves. In larger investigations, however, most forego reporting in order to focus on the

5 Alfter, B, Cross-border collaborative journalism: a step-by-step guide, Routledge, 2019, p. 136

tasks of coordination, since these require a specialist set of energies and skills.

These skills are critical at two points in the investigation: during the planning stages and in the run up to publication. During planning, the coordinator might organise funding, establish the best suite of software for communication and file sharing and help to establish the "rules" of the investigation, including project deadlines. During publication, the coordinator may have oversight over the right to reply process and take care to keep publishing partners to deadlines, including talking down partners threatening to go ahead of an embargo. It is at this point burnout is highest among journalists and coordinators as so much is at stake.

In between planning and publication, coordinators hold people to their reporting commitments and support them through lulls in confidence. They also cheerlead for active collaboration online and they sometimes step in to resolve conflict. After publication, too, the coordinator might take a lead role writing press releases to promote published work, entering investigations into awards, coordinating speakers for events and updating project platforms and social media.

Not everyone suits this combination of dogsbody, confidante, cheerleader and editor. But those who fit the mould are increasingly recognised and prized in the growing field of cross-border investigations, since investigations of any scale require a skilled coordinator in order to succeed. "There's a public service or servant leader aspect to coordinators," says Walker Guevara, perhaps the most experienced coordinator interviewed for this paper. "We need to take care of them, pay them well and realise that this is an essential job."