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Collaboration shows a way forward for local journalism with impact

- Journalists and newsrooms are collaborating in a variety of ways to enhance local journalism, a study of collaborative initiatives across Europe finds
- Collaboration has led local journalists to more comprehensively cover topics, use better forms of data and multimedia in their reporting, and deepen their engagement with local communities
- Case studies in the UK, Italy and Finland demonstrate clear political, social and economic impacts, with co-ordinated, multi-channel distribution across local and national outlets
- Report considers three distinct forms of collaboration, each of which is designed to achieve unique editorial and organisational goals, facilitate resource sharing and reduce competitive friction

Under pressure from declining revenues and in some cases limited resources, local journalism is seeing a variety of collaborative efforts which are having clear benefits in the quality of reporting, resource sharing, and engagement with communities, a new study finds.

The report, [Case Studies in Collaborative Local Journalism](#), by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, examines three distinct forms of collaboration, each with its own style of network building, project development and distribution, designed to achieve particular editorial and commercial goals. Though not without challenges, these collaborative efforts serve as examples for how local journalism can make the most of limited resources, and for how local reporters are prepared to collectively experiment to cultivate quality journalism with local impact.

Lead author of the report, Dr Joy Jenkins, said: “Collaboration has emerged as an important strategy allowing journalists to work together to report on important issues facing their communities while also benefiting from knowledge-sharing, pooled resources, mentorship, and enhanced reach. Although many challenges for local journalism remain, these initiatives demonstrate a willingness among participants to embrace innovative strategies that reach across geographic and organisational lines.”

The report considers three case studies: The Bureau Local (UK), an investigation-driven network of almost 1,000 journalists, data scientists, academics and others; ‘L’Italia Delle Slot’ (Italy), an investigative effort between journalism start-ups and an established national and regional publisher, GEDI; and Lännen Media (Finland), a joint newsroom for 12 regional newspapers. (See table below for an overview of each collaboration.)

These collaborations have generated reporting which has had clear social and political implications. The Bureau Local oversaw in-depth investigations on the plight of homeless people dying in the streets across a number of areas across the UK. The Bureau Local provided cash grants which allowed local reporting teams to spend extended periods in the affected communities to build up

relationships with key sources. To date, the Bureau Local has generated 10 investigations, and 350 local stories.

'L'Italia Delle Slot' shone a light on the growth of gambling machines across Italy, and grew out of a data set obtained by two start-up outlets who then worked with GEDI's data visualisation arm, Visual Lab. The investigation led to locally-specific reporting across GEDI's titles. Findings from 'L'Italia Delle Slot' were shared at the Italian parliament with lawmakers and advocacy groups, and the investigation's success spawned a follow-up investigation on wider forms of legal gambling.

Each collaboration has found its own way to organise a diverse and dispersed network. Lännen Media's 40 reporters are distributed across the 12 participating regional outlets as well as a dedicated Helsinki newsroom. The four editors are also geographically dispersed, and host daily teleconferences with the reporters. A content management system, used for sharing stories with participating newsrooms, allows everyone to stay connected and updated on reporting efforts. The Bureau Local shares data and reporting guides with its participants via multiple communications channels. A Slack channel – including the use of 'open newsrooms' - and 'hack days' are also used to bring people together.

The report finds there are significant challenges that remain. Building a shared culture and a collective mission when bringing journalists together from a wide range of newsrooms, organisations and locations is identified by some interviewees as difficult, as is trusting that network participants from competitor organisations are equally invested in the projects.

Financial sustainability was also a concern, with the Bureau Local being dependent on grants and donations while Lännen Media and 'L'Italia Delle Slot' continue to rely on standard commercial approaches, each with their own challenges.

Selected quotations

"It had an immediate, powerful impact because it was being reported everywhere, and it wasn't 'There's been 15 deaths in Bristol,' it was, 'There has been 500 deaths, and look at all these local case studies of what's going on across the country.' So, it had that immediate hit basically. It kind of entered the public consciousness a bit more than perhaps previous ones that we've done." Chris Burn, Assistant Features Editor at the Yorkshire Post, Bureau Local member on impact of homeless deaths project

"We bring people together who represent different locations, different skillsets, different knowledge, different expertise, with the common goal of investigating stories that are of interest. Telling stories that matter to communities, digging into things that aren't being told, holding local and national power to account, solving problems that journalists need to face. That's why our community comes together and collaborates." Megan Lucero, Director, Bureau Local

"It's something that is really appreciated because it's going out of the ordinary. It's showing that we can also do something different from basic reporting on things that are happening. The fact that this is something that we do altogether with tools, instruments, and energy from outside but in the end also writing about our territory." Anna Ghezzi, Journalist, La Provincia Pavese ('L'Italia Delle Slot' contributor)

“When there are larger newsrooms and smaller newsrooms in the same partnership, not always the best journalists are in the biggest media. Sometimes there are really great journalists in the smaller media, and now they can have this opportunity to also advance their career and take a different angle. It’s also a project for educating journalists.” Matti Posio, Editor-in-Chief, Lännen Media

Case studies

Collaboration	Country	Founded	Participants	Content approach	Funding model
The Bureau Local 	UK	2017	Staff of 6 (director, 2 community organisers, 3 investigative journalists); reporting network of 966 journalists, data analysts, designers, academics, citizens, and others	Data-driven investigations typically developed by the central staff and shared with a network; projects usually include a national article published on the Bureau Local website and content produced by national and local partners; 10 investigations and 350 local stories published as of April 2019	Funded by grants from Google News Initiative (first funder; \$660,000, two-year grant), Open Society Foundations (local reporting fund grants awarded to network members), Lankelly Chase, and European Journalism Centre’s Engaged Journalism Fund
‘L’Italia Delle Slot’ 	Italy	2017	Partnership between two data journalism start-ups (Dataninja and Effecinque) and newspaper chain the GEDI Group (publisher of <i>La Repubblica</i>)	Two data-driven investigations into the prevalence of slot machines and other forms of gambling in Italy, consisting of an interactive online presentation and reporting from local newspapers	Contract-based payments made by the GEDI Group; newspapers rely on memberships, advertising, and a mix between a freemium and metered paywall model online
Lännen Media 	Finland	2014	12 regional newspapers from 8 parent companies; almost 40 reporters working across the 12 newsrooms, including a team of 10 based in a joint Helsinki newsroom	Joint news agency of a rotating slate of journalists producing national and international news, background articles, weekend features, theme pages, and commentary and analysis for print and online distribution	Reporters paid by newspapers where they are based. Member newspapers rely on subscriptions, advertising, and mixed online paywall models

Sources: Interviewees; Bureau Local website, www.thebureauinvestigates.com/local

Methodology

The study is based on interviews with 31 subjects in the collaborations studied, from those in leadership roles to those in the reporting teams and networks to those in community-development aspects of the projects. Interviews took place in English in person and via Skype. The study examined the various organisation and communication tools used by the projects, as well as web content, press releases and presentations.

Ends.

For further information please contact Matthew Leake, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford, +44 (0)1865 611099, matthew.leake@politics.ox.ac.uk. Note: Link to report will go live when embargo is lifted.

About the Authors

Joy Jenkins is a postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. Her research focuses on the sociology of news, particularly changing organisational structures and roles in newsrooms, the potential for news organisations to spur public engagement, and gender and media. She earned her doctorate in journalism from the University of Missouri in 2017, where she taught courses in news writing and reporting, magazine reporting, news and media literacy, and qualitative research methods. Her work has been published in multiple academic journals. She previously worked as a copy editor and reporter at an alternative newsweekly in Oklahoma City and as senior editor at a city magazine in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Lucas Graves is acting Director of Research and a Senior Research Fellow at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. He studies how news and news organisations are changing in the contemporary media ecosystem; his book *Deciding What's True: The Rise of Political Fact Checking in American Journalism* (2016) was the first in-depth look at this rapidly growing genre of accountability reporting. He is also an Associate Professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where he has written extensively on the economic, professional, and technological currents shaping news production today.

About the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism

The Thomson Reuters Foundation is the core funder of the RISJ, based in the Department of Politics and International Relations at the University of Oxford. The RISJ was launched in November 2006 and developed from the Reuters Fellowship Programme, established at Oxford 35 years ago. An international research centre in the comparative study of journalism, the RISJ aims to be global in its perspective and provides a leading forum for scholars from a wide range of disciplines to engage with journalists from around the world. See <http://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/>