



Journalist Fellowship Paper

Rethinking values and systems in traditional newsrooms

By **Frida Sandgren**

December 2022

Michaelmas Term

Sponsor: Dagens Nyheter

Contents

Introduction	3
The Convergence Era	5
Newsrooms adapt slowly	7
Media institutional factors	8
The Panama paradigm shift	10
Why share when you can go it alone and take all the credit?	11
The traits of a good collaborator	12
The case for collaboration in big newsrooms	14
Benefits and challenges	17
Lessons in reorganisation from Paris	18
Conclusion	20

Introduction

An energy crisis, COVID-19 and war in Ukraine: three major events have forced us to reckon with how we survive the news cycle in the past 12 months.

Look back 12 years, and you'll find a global financial crisis, a refugee crisis, and an escalating climate crisis that affects the globe in uncountable ways.

In the same timeframe, in traditional newsrooms, we continue to feel our way through a digital revolution that's shaken journalism to its foundations. Through trial and error, we've adapted from copy-pasting our printed newspaper online to retraining staff with a multitude of digital-first, cross-media, mobile-centric skills. We've introduced paywalls and subscription tiers and wrung our hands through earnest conversations about declining trust and increasing polarisation.

Let's not forget the introduction of new business models – with subscription drives and added value – and performance metrics that reveal consumption of traditional media is declining across the board.¹

The mission of journalism is to provide citizens with accurate information to be able to make well-informed decisions. But in the face of all the crises and challenges outlined above, it's clear that no journalist can do that alone. We need entire newsrooms working together to do justice to audience needs.

That is why this paper raises the question: have traditional news adapted enough to adequately cover the complex events of the 21st century?

¹ Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2022, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, p10–11 https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2022-06/Digital_News-Report_2022.pdf

As a breaking news editor at Swedish newspaper [Dagens Nyheter](#) I found myself on the editorial frontline during the COVID-19: struggling to hold a team together via Google Meets and Slack messages. To meet the challenges, I relied on the old familiar structure to get us through the day. In hindsight, I wish my newsroom and I had been even more prepared to work cross-editorially and support each other as a collective.

During my time as a fellow at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism I used that experience as a starting point to investigate how we prepare for and cover complex events in a traditional newsroom.

My findings are based on a literature review and interviews conducted between November and December 2022 with journalism academics and practitioners, mainly from a Western perspective.

My main motive was to develop my own thoughts about improving collaboration around complex stories in the newsroom, and I drew lessons from ICIJ's collaborative model as well as a reorganisation of the AFP newsroom. I hope it is useful to others.

The Convergence Era

When I started my career a little over a decade ago, the newsroom was full of talk about digital transformation. But when it comes down to it, news is pretty much done as it has been for centuries: daily deadlines and defined sections.

And that's despite radical shifts in output required when you compare a printed newspaper to a digital platform with social channels that all require original content updates several times a day – or minute-to-minute in the case of breaking news.²

A frequently used word at this time, both in the newsroom and by media scholars, was “convergence”.³

Biologically, it's the term used to describe the tendency of animals and plants to evolve superficially similar characteristics under similar conditions. In the case of the news media, it was used (maybe generously, given how little has evolved) to refer to a growing focus on how to make content for multiple platforms, how to reorganise newsrooms, and how to adapt business models in a post-print ads era.

To this end, several studies were conducted around the early days of the transition, with heavy use of terms like digital first, cross-media and multi-skilling.^{4,5}

² Boczkowski, Pablo J *et al.* (2004, 51–72) *Digitizing the news: innovation in online newspapers*. Cambridge: MIT Press, pp. 51–72.

³ Deuze, Mark (2007) “Convergence culture in the creative industries,” *International journal of cultural studies*, 10(2), pp. 243–263.

⁴ Erdal, Ivar John (2011) “Coming to Terms with Convergence Journalism: Cross-Media as a Theoretical and Analytical Concept,” *Convergence (London, England)*, 17(2), pp. 213–223.

⁵ García-Avilés, José A., Kaltenbrunner, Andy and Meier, Klaus (2014) “Media Convergence Revisited,” *Journalism practice*, 8(5), pp. 573–584.

It's hard to define the exact moment attention shifted to digital journalism, but in my own experience it was perhaps best illustrated by how the online desk moved from a couple of desks in the far corner to a central pulsating hub in the newsroom.

Something that hasn't changed as rapidly is the underlying structure: reporters are still organised by beats or specialty into teams reporting to a managing or assigning editor.⁶ My question is whether this structure is fit for purpose when it comes to covering complex events that affects every level of society.

It's not a new question: my own newsroom in Sweden has addressed it, and I found several other examples of newsrooms that have re-organised and re-structured their workflows to be better prepared. We can learn lessons from them.

But before we dig into two examples, let's have a short review of the media research on this topic over the past three decades.

⁶ Grubenmann, Stephanie (2017) "Matrix Organisation," *Journalism practice*, 11(4), pp. 458–476.

Newsrooms adapt slowly

Newsrooms say they want new workflow ideas. But when presented with them, the idea is either tweaked to fit old patterns or outright rejected.⁷ That's the conclusion of Arne H. Krumsvik, Professor of Media and Communication at Kristiania University College in Norway, who studies media innovation.

He is not alone in that finding: the argument that newsrooms have been slow to innovate has been put forward by many researchers.⁸

To be fair, traditional media institutions have adapted in many ways: they are doing better, more quickly, for less, according to Krumsvik – but not *differently*. The old hierarchies are still very much present.

“One of the things I've been puzzled by is [the tendency of] business models online to replicate the order of the paper, or the traditional business model,” he told me.⁹ One explanation for this might be that the framework for online news developed at the start of the digital era was shaped by senior members of the newsroom and their background in traditional media – the dominative culture.

In his research, he has addressed several key influences on innovation in the media that are helpful when talking about change. If we want to change how things are done in the day-to-day workflow, Krumsvik's list of influences can help us

⁷ Interview Arne H. Krumsvik, Professor of Media and Communication at Kristiania University College in Oslo, November 30 2022.

⁸ Belair-Gagnon, Valerie and Steinke, Allison J. (2020) “Capturing Digital News Innovation Research in Organizations, 1990-2018,” *Journalism studies (London, England)*, 21(12), pp. 1724–1743.

⁹ Interview Arne H. Krumsvik, Professor of Media and Communication at Kristiania University College in Oslo, November 30 2022.

understand the different aspects of a traditional newsroom and how it adapts to new ideas and innovations:¹⁰

Media institutional factors

- Market opportunities
- User, and competitor behaviour
- Company strategy
- Leadership and vision
- Organisational structure
- Capacity and resources
- Industry norms
- Culture and creativity

Arne H. Krumsvik points specifically to the “Culture and creativity” factor when talking about changing how things are done at a news desk. In the article *What is media innovation?* he and his co-author write:

“The shared unconscious assumptions of members of an organisation can result in inertia and can represent a hindrance to change, at the same time as the culture of a company or network can also facilitate creativity and innovation.”¹¹

Another researcher who has examined technical changes, innovations and leadership in the Swedish media industry is Ester Appelgren, head of school at Natural Sciences, Technology and Environmental Studies at Södertörn University in Sweden and Associate Professor in Journalism.

¹⁰ Seminar Arne H. Krumsvik, Professor of Media and Communication at Kristiania University College in Oslo, November 23 2022.

¹¹ Storsul, Tanja and Krumsvik, Arne H (2013) *What is Media Innovation?* Nordicom.

She agrees many things have changed in newsrooms when it comes to technical solutions, new formats, and different platforms for publications. But how journalists view themselves – and what they do – remains roughly the same.

Under the headline *Tröga processer i en snabb medievärld (Slow processes in a fast-moving media industry)* she examined why change in newsrooms takes time.¹²

She told me: “In the media industry you try out many new things, but you’re also traditional in a way: where you hold onto a traditional view of what journalism is and what the ethical guidelines are for journalism.

“That is why journalism tends to be slow if you look at it from outside. This is where the newsroom perspective may collide with the scholarly perspective. For those in the newsroom, I would say things are moving fast; if you look at the final outcome, it is more or less the same over time.”¹³

Appelgren argues that journalistic change *needs* to be slow: “The risks for journalism may be too high if changed too quickly.”

¹² Appelgren, Ester and Leckner, Sara (2019) “Tröga processer i en snabb medievärld,” in *På väg mot medievärlden 2030*, p. 31.

¹³ Interview Ester Appelgren, Head of school at Natural Sciences, Technology and Environmental Studies at Södertörn University in Sweden, November 22 2022

The Panama paradigm shift

“In journalism, competition has often been seen as a stronger force than collaboration.” This quote, [from an article](#) about collaboration by Magda Konieczna, is one that many in the industry can probably relate to.¹⁴

In news, bylines are our bread and butter: how you perform as a reporter is important, and having your work splashed on the frontpage is still a big deal. Yet, regrettably, these prestigious markers do little to ignite the fires of collaboration.

That’s why it is so impressive that in 2016, more than 370 journalists from 76 news organisations worked together to produce the first global cross-border investigation known as The Panama Papers.

This groundbreaking series was no ordinary exposé: it unmasked the dark underbelly of the offshore financial system, laying bare the grim spectre of political corruption. Its ripple effects? Protests erupting, criminal investigations launched, and political figures falling from grace like a house of cards. None of this would have been possible without the symbiotic collaboration of journalists and newsrooms spanning the globe.

In view of that triumph, and the challenges we face in the Convergence Era, what lessons can newsrooms glean from series coordinator [International Consortium of Investigative Journalists](#) (ICIJ) and their model of collaboration?¹⁵

¹⁴ Konieczna, Magda (2020) “The Collaboration Stepladder: How One Organization Built a Solid Foundation for a Community-Focused Cross-newsroom Collaboration,” *Journalism studies (London, England)*, 21(6), pp. 802–819.

¹⁵ <https://www.icij.org/investigations/panama-papers/five-years-later-panama-papers-still-having-a-big-impact/>

Why share when you can go it alone and take all the credit?

The leaked 2.6 terabytes of data that made Panama Papers possible were initially sent to two journalists at the German daily *Süddeutsche Zeitung*: Frederik Obermaier and Bastian Obermayer. For them it was clear from the beginning that the story was bigger than Germany, but they had a hill to climb.

“...We already had done some collaborations with ICIJ before the Panama Papers and we saw the potential, but our newsroom and our investigative department was not equipped for doing such collaborations. Neither did it have the mindset. So when the Panama Papers were leaked we internally discussed how we could convince our bosses. The two of us were convinced that we needed to do it in an international collaboration because the story was too big. It was a lifetime’s work for the two of us alone,” Frederik Obermaier said in an interview.¹⁶

The duo argued that the leaked documents were relevant and affected countries and societies beyond their region and readers, therefore they wanted to team up with reporters from all around the world.

“We already knew we had the ingredients to make an amazing cake but if we shared these ingredients with other journalists all around the world, they would put more of their best ingredients into it. And in the end it would be a gigantic cake.”

Management was convinced of the benefits that *Süddeutsche Zeitung* would gain from a collaboration. Next step: share the files with ICIJ.

¹⁶ Interview Frederik Obermaier, Investigative Journalist , November 29 2022. [Paper Trail Media](#), November 29 2022.

The traits of a good collaborator

At its core, the ICIJ-model of collaboration boils down to a simple yet powerful formula: the sharing of knowledge and research among newsrooms and journalists, the division of bylines, and synchronized publication. Each newsroom retains full responsibility for its editorial and legal verifications, ensuring a robust and independent process. This collaborative approach enables a collective pursuit of truth while upholding the autonomy and integrity of individual journalistic entities.

According to Will Fitzgibbon, former senior ICIJ reporter and ICIJ's Africa and Middle East partnership coordinator, there is one question that must be addressed by both journalists and newsrooms first: what's in it for me?

“Journalists don't believe in it and editors don't trust in it until they see the value of it. And that value might not always be immediate: it is a model that is understood by the reporters and editors and publishers who have seen it work in practice. That is why it can take a while sometimes to bring new partners onboard, because you do have to give up lots of your own ego. You have to share resources. You have to do all of those things that we're not trained to do. [...] The proof of the pudding is in the eating,” he said.¹⁷

Even for an already-convinced journalist like Frederik Obermaier, there were doubts. The fear of losing credit or being outplayed by more senior names in bigger newsrooms, and the worry of losing control or exposing a source who had put their life on the line made sharing details outside the group a risky proposition.

“I think ICIJ did a very clever job on this one because they addressed our fears. So the first meetings were a very closed group. I think it was like 20 or

¹⁷ Interview Will Fitzgibbon, Senior reporter and Africa and Middle East partnership coordinator at International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, November 25 2022.

30 journalists meeting in Washington, and it was either journalists that we had already worked with in the past on investigations like Swiss Leaks or Luxembourg Leaks, or big names that impressed me.”

The group blossomed from there, and for each new journalist welcomed into the fold, certain criteria were laid out, according to Frederik Obermaier. Solidarity and a team-player mindset emerged as two pivotal traits needed for participation in the investigation.

Fitzgibbon reflected more on how to build a strong team:

“Address as many of the potential conflicts as early as possible because nothing makes journalists angrier or more stressed than last-minute surprises. Things like credit, for example. Should the journalists who provided the documents have a byline on someone’s story or are they going to be in the contributor’s line? Or when a journalist in one country has worked on a topic for three months and then is surprised that another journalist is working on that same story and they plan on either publishing the same day or even worse, one journalist wants to publish one day earlier? That’s when all hell breaks loose because trust is broken down.”

Fitzgibbon said he had seen some positive changes when it comes to collaboration over the past five years. More and more newsrooms believe in it.

“It’s been really satisfying to see the embrace of collaborative, radical sharing that is now occurring. And I think that’s true in terms of cross-border relationships as well. I see now how it’s much more natural and instinctive [among] so many reporters to reach out to another colleague, not only next door, but on another continent, for example. And I think that’s really great.”

Obermaier also believes there's been a generational shift in how journalists look at teamwork and collaboration.

“In the Panama Papers it was mainly the younger ones who really collaborated: always talking, always exchanging ideas. And because of that bringing this investigation to a new level. And I think because of that editors understand what collaboration brings, what the benefits are.”

Today, Obermaier is the co-founder of the startup [Paper Trail Media](#) and manages eight investigative journalists. When they hire a new journalist to the team, questions about collaboration, working across borders, sharing bylines and giving credit to others are always asked.

“We don't have to teach them about collaboration. Even on low-level investigations and local reporting they are always trying to team up with others, and that's great. And I think, especially in times that I fear are lying ahead of us – with financial restraints and minimising the abilities and capabilities of media outlets to do bigger scale investigations – I think we need to collaborate. Otherwise we will not be able to cope with all these problems out there.”

The case for collaboration in big newsrooms

British newspaper the [Guardian](#) reached 1 million digital subscriptions last year, with more than half of their digital readers from outside the UK.¹⁸ As an esteemed international publication with abundant resources and expertise, the *Guardian* can conduct impactful investigations independently. So why have they opted to

¹⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/gnm-press-office/2021/dec/14/the-guardian-reaches-one-million-digital-subscriptions-milestone>

collaborate with ICIJ on several projects, including the Panama Papers and the [Pegasus Project](#)?

I asked Paul Lewis, head of investigations, about [Uber files](#): a project in which the *Guardian* shared data with ICIJ. He said the final decision to share the files was made by several senior editors at the newspaper.¹⁹

“It is true that we had the resources to handle the investigation internally and we would have done a fine job if this had been produced entirely in-house. But there were several reasons why it made sense for the *Guardian* [to share] – and, just as importantly, it made sense for the story itself. The data was sprawling and covered dozens of countries, including some in which we don’t have permanent foreign correspondents. There was a lot to gain from drawing on the expertise of investigative reporters who knew these countries really well and could help advance the story.

“There was also the potential for increasing the reach and impact of the project – when there’s simultaneous publication across multiple continents, the world really does take notice. I think there’s also a moral case on some occasions for sharing – the leak constituted a massive resource that could shed light on the questionable corporate activities of a Silicon Valley giant all over the world. As journalists operating in the public interest, wanting to see important revelatory journalism emanating from the cache of data, maximising the prospect of that happening makes sense.”

¹⁹ Interview Paul Lewis, Head of investigations Guardian News & Media, December 21 2022.

Lewis continued:

“In the process of working on these initiatives we’ve learned the value of sharing and working collaboratively, and we’ve developed a sense of the kind of big data leaks that are most suited to joint projects. The Uber Files fit the mould. [...] When you share like this you lose some control, [you] lose some ownership and ‘exclusivity’. You need to be willing to compromise and give ground and realise that the interests of the collective wider group also matter. But there are also considerable upsides and I think when you do the balancing exercise the benefits outweigh the downsides.”

Lewis believes that the principles and dynamics inherent in collaborative projects can hold valuable lessons for the wider newsroom. One such example is the collective decision-making process, which he finds to be atypical in news organisations that often operate under top-down hierarchies.

“[Collective decision- making] can slow things down but it can also mean that all voices are heard, and everyone feels they have a stake – even when the decisions are not their preferred outcome. There is also the concept of radical sharing, which may not be applicable in every newsroom scenario but could be useful in some circumstances. This is the idea that journalists should share everything they learn and discover as they proceed, never holding anything back. It is a very open philosophy that I think is useful for all team-based journalistic projects where full transparency helps foster trust.”

Benefits and challenges

There has been plenty of praise for the ICIJ model – some researchers go so far as to dub it “The rise of a Global Fourth Estate”.²⁰ But it’s important that we examine both the values and the challenges.

After interviews with the journalists above, I see the main values as:

- Increased impact and visibility for both newsrooms and journalists – the story makes more noise when several outlets publish at the same time.
- Financial sustainability – newsrooms can spread the cost of handling millions of files and data, and a single source can feed multiple outlets.
- Publications with more details – different audiences, countries and contexts require different angles. With cross border-collaboration the outcome becomes more nuanced.
- Better protection for journalists and their sources – a wide range of journalists and outlets reduces the risk of a single journalist being targeted.

The main challenges to address in this approach:

- The time, skill and effort required to convince journalists that it’s worthwhile: building trust and addressing fears early in the process is an art.
- Radical sharing – journalists will need to be transparent and communicative about their work from the outset. This is no place for lone wolves.
- Cultural understanding – different countries and regions have different media traditions. It is not always the loudest voice in the room that has the most important thing to say.
- Coordination – it takes time to communicate with a big team and hold it together. Make sure to set aside time for this.

²⁰ Berglez, Peter and Gearing, Amanda (2018) “The Panama and Paradise Papers: The Rise of a Global Fourth Estate,” *International journal of communication*, 12, p. 4573.

Lessons in reorganisation from Paris

In early 2022 international news agency *AFP* reorganised its Paris newsroom into specialised hubs.²¹ The aim of the reorganisation was to strengthen their coverage of prioritised themes: for example, the future of the planet, and the digital world.

Ursula Hyzy is head of the new Planet Hub, which groups together some 20 journalists with different specialities who were once split between the society department and the economic department.

The Planet Hub apply their knowledge to cover prioritised sectors: industry, transport and agriculture. Asked why these sectors were selected and prioritised, Hyzy said, “[they] are the largest greenhouse emitters and the most under pressure, and capable of coming up with solutions for that”.²²

At its core, the revolution here is to group specialities around addressing key societal challenges, instead of key economic concerns.

These specialist journalists in Paris are empowered to share more of their expertise with their colleagues throughout *AFP*'s international bureau network. One of the main advantages, Hyzy said, is the simple fact of proximity: beat journalists who once worked across different departments with different managers are now in the same team, in the same room, and at the same meetings, which improves discussions and collaboration. “If we would have kept all this together in the same department it would have been a huge department. With smaller teams we can be more agile,” she said.

²¹ <https://www.afp.com/en/agency/press-releases-newsletter/afp-reorganises-its-paris-newsroom-specialised-hub>

²² Interview Ursula Hyzy, Head of the Planet Hub AFP, December 1 2022

Another notable benefit following the reorganisation is the emergence of vibrant discussions within the newsroom. These discussions have resulted in an increased focus on stories highlighting potential solutions for the ongoing transformation, rather than solely focusing on the impacts of climate change. Hyzy also highlights the significance of AFP being a news agency that serves other outlets with news. Collaborating and sharing bylines is not a novel concept within their realm. “It is a company where the atmosphere is nice, we depend on each other and teamwork is essential,” she said.

Conclusion

At the start of this paper, I asked whether traditional news had adapted enough when it comes to covering complex events of the 21st century. Despite the radical transformation news has undergone from printed newspaper to smartphones and endless digital possibilities, many of us still deal with the ghost in the machine: the traditional newsroom structure.

At a time when we are still struggling to find a sustainable financing model, it's natural to feel hesitant about disrupting the established day-to-day workflow, dismantling silos, and fostering collaboration. And we know from media researchers like Krumsvik and Appelgren that media organisations are loath to embrace systemic change.

However, considering the potential results – journalism marked by heightened impact, visibility, financial sustainability, and enhanced safeguards for journalists and their sources – isn't it time for us to have a serious discussion about reinventing the wheel?

ICIJ and AFP are only two examples of impressive initiatives embracing change to better serve the audience. For me, the conclusion is clear: if we put aside our ego, embrace radical sharing and listen to each other across real and imagined borders, we can do better work.

Pulitzer Prize winning Frederik Obermayer summed it up best: “Give credit, get credit. It helps you so much to give credit to colleagues who helped you on some aspects of your story. And it doesn't cost you anything.”²³

²³ Interview Frederik Obermaier, Investigative Journalist [Paper Trail Media](#), November 29 2022.