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Short Paper

# **Conditions to Strengthen Future Cross-Border Journalism**

Annett Heft

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# **Conditions to Strengthen Future Cross-Border Journalism**

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# Collaborative Journalism Across Borders

Collaboration is one of the central future trends in journalism. It is practiced within the profession in newsroom partnerships (Edmonds/Mitchell 2014), in collaborations between legacy and entrepreneurial news organizations (Graves/Konieczna 2015) as well as in new arrangements that link actors from journalism's periphery to the journalistic field (Eldridge 2018). A specific form and impressive practice that is becoming increasingly relevant is journalistic collaboration across borders. News start-ups experiment with the method (Keinert et al. 2019). Established news organizations practice it on a broader scale (Simon 2016); and for Charles Lewis, founder of the Center for Public Integrity and the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ), collaboration is *the* future of journalism (Lewis 2016).

While the concept of cross-border journalism, in general, is used in literature with differing meanings, here we focus on the specific form of cross-border journalistic research and investigation networks. In such journalism networks across borders, journalists and/or media organizations from different countries join forces in order to investigate a common topic in a collaborative way (Alfter 2016, 2019; Heft et al. 2017). The intensity of collaboration in such cross-border networks might vary from case to case, yet collaboration is a defining element of this journalistic practice. Researchers have already started to analyze the rise of global teamwork in investigative journalism (Sambrook 2018). They have dealt with large-scale examples of such collaborations – such as the *Panama Papers* and *Paradise Papers* investigations led by the ICIJ (Berglez/Gearing 2018, Lück/Schultz 2019, Heft 2019) – which are widely known and had global effects (Graves/Shabbir 2019). Yet, we can observe many other cases where such cross-border research collaborations are practiced on a smaller scale but potentially as a more day-to-day routine. Thus, we are especially interested in how journalists with experiences in small-scale collaborations initiated beyond large media organizations assess the method. To learn more about the conditions that are crucial to facilitate and sustainably practice cross-border journalistic research collaborations in the future, we asked journalists with interest in the method about their experiences and opinions. The following short report on our findings is geared towards all those pioneers and practitioners of cross-border collaborative journalism, their supporters and scientific observers, whose concern is to enhance the method as well as to reflect on changes and advances of journalism in the networked society. It is not yet a comprehensive scientific analysis, but a sharing of knowledge and findings between science

and practice, in the very sense of the “collaborative spirit” (Alfter 2019: 26) that the community embraces.

## **Hostwriter and Dataharvest – The EIJC: Our Gateway to the Field**

Our study had two starting points to approach practitioners with our questions: *Hostwriter* as well as *Dataharvest - the European Investigative Journalism Conference (Dataharvest - the EIJC)*. *Hostwriter* is a digital networking platform that helps journalists to collaborate across borders easily. Its overarching objective is to enable better reporting by facilitating cross border contacts between journalists worldwide. Therefore, the platform connects colleagues to seek journalistic collaboration and advice of various types. Networking events of the journalistic community are crucial to foster cross-border collaboration. *Dataharvest – the EIJC* is one of the relevant networking events for investigative and data journalists in Europe. At this annual conference, journalists, data collectors, and other stakeholders from all over Europe network and generate ideas that often lead to collaborative projects. Both, *Hostwriter* and *Dataharvest – the EIJC* have been established by pioneers from within the journalistic community to facilitate cross-border collaborations ‘from below’, i.e. collaborations initiated by individual journalists beyond large media organizations and supporting infrastructures.

The basis for our exploratory insights is a standardized online survey that, amongst other dimensions, included questions on respondents’ experience with transnational collaborative projects and on the future of cross-border collaboration. Sixty-five respondents answered our questions on the relevance and future conditions for cross-border journalistic work. Their ages range from 20 to over 60 years old and there is a slight tilt to males over females. The vast majority of interviewees have a university degree and a specialization in journalism. More than half of them are freelancers. Overall, the following results are not representative of all *Hostwriter* members or all *Dataharvest – the EIJC* participants. Yet we believe they provide valuable insights into the experiences with cross-border collaboration of this emerging community.

## Relevance of and Preparedness for Cross-Border Collaboration

The answers of our interview participants confirm suggestions in other contributions by practitioners, the observation of emerging journalistic initiatives as well as the discourse in journalism research. Asked about their perception of the **general relevance of cross-border collaboration**<sup>1</sup>, the answers show a clear trend: The majority of the respondents consider it very important. Over a third of the 65 respondents (35%) assessed the relevance of cross-border collaboration for their journalistic work in the future as extremely important, another third (35%) as very important. Only 7% of the interviewees stated that this practice is not essential for their future journalistic work.

Cross-border collaborative work has only recently received more attention and is only one of several specific methods of journalism, such as data journalism or investigative journalism. It is, thus, unsurprising that research on universities' journalism education shows that specific courses on cross-border journalism are so far rather rare (Betels-Schwabbauer et al. 2018). This impression can also be observed in our findings. In terms of **cross-border journalism training**,<sup>2</sup> it was striking that out of 65 respondents only 14 ever had special cross-border journalism training. The majority never received explicit training for collaborative transnational journalism projects.

## Conditions to Facilitate Cross-Border Journalism

While specific training is still a field of development, our findings indicate a need for and interest in the transfer of know-how. When asked what conditions would be essential to **facilitate cross-border journalism** in the future<sup>3</sup>, organizational and structural aspects were mentioned. The respondents agreed that the *exchange of knowledge about cross-border methods* (77% approval) is of central significance. Another area, in which more information transfer is considered necessary by the vast majority of respondents, is *knowledge about funding opportunities* (66% approval). However, not only the mere knowledge of financing possibilities but also the actual funding (55%

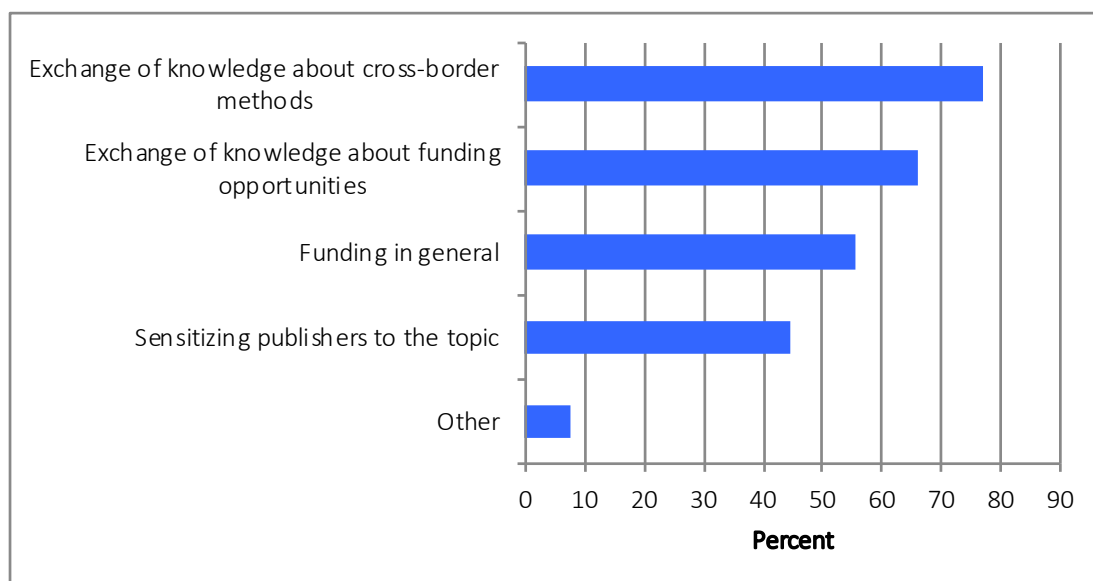
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1 Question: How would you assess the relevance of cross-border collaboration for your journalistic work in the future?

2 Question: Have you ever had any special cross-border journalism training?

3 Question: In your opinion, what conditions would be important to facilitate cross-border journalism in the future?

approval) are essential determinants for cross-border collaboration. As a further relevant requirement for transnational journalism collaborations, 45% of the respondents agreed that sensitizing publishers to the topic is an important task (Figure 1). Other aspects mentioned in this respect were the need for a multi-language platform and a cross-border infrastructure (i.e. meeting places). Training, especially the education of journalism students, as well as a ‘just-do-it-attitude’ were also identified as conditions to facilitate the method.



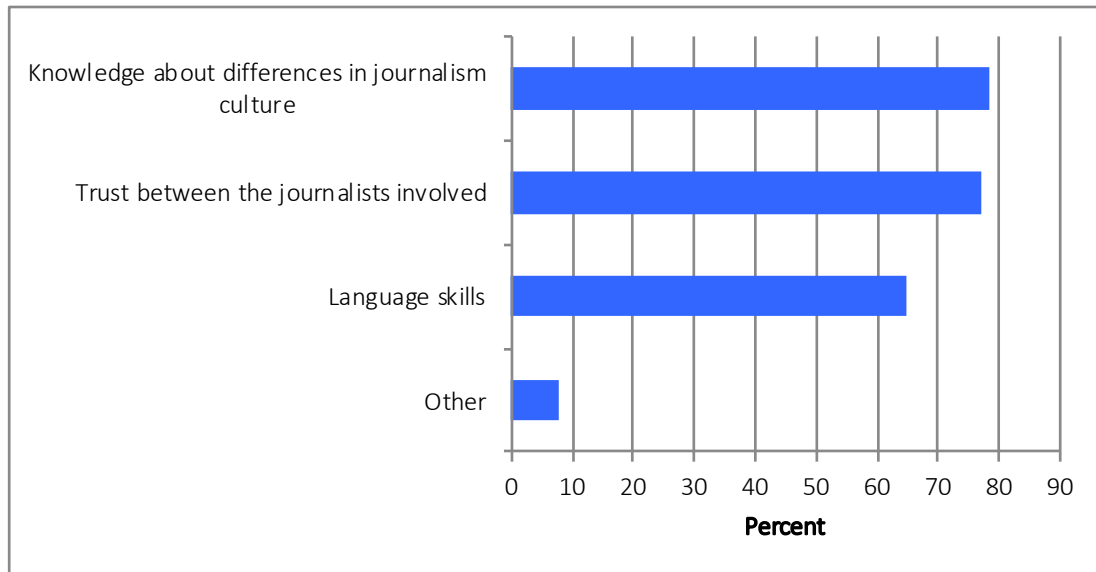
**Figure 1.** Conditions to facilitate cross-border journalism (n=65).

## Practicing Cross-Border Journalism Sustainably

In addition, we asked respondents what they consider critical contextual factors to **practice cross-border journalism sustainably**.<sup>4</sup> Here, personal factors have proven to be particularly relevant. For the majority of the journalists surveyed, the most important prerequisite to sustainably practice cross-border journalism in the future is *knowledge about differences in journalism cultures* (78% approval). Likewise, *trust between the journalists involved* (77% approval) turned out as highly relevant for most respondents. Another factor is *language skills* (65%), which are also considered important for future cross-border collaborations (Figure 2). Apart from that, a way to publicly review the performance of international colleagues during collaborations (i.e. to advise them), a common platform like *Hostwriter*, decent payment (also during

<sup>4</sup> Question: And what other conditions would be important to sustainably practise cross-border journalism in the future?

projects), interest in similar topics, and openness of editors for a cross-cultural, multi-national journalistic perspective were highlighted as additional prerequisites.



**Figure 2.** Conditions to sustainably practice cross-border journalism (n=65).

## Outlook

As the approach evolves, researchers incorporate cross-border journalistic collaborations in their analyses of the changing practices and methods of the journalistic profession. Educators have also turned their attention to the topic, developing networks of cross-border journalism education across universities (Alfter et al. 2019). Our findings highlight essential aspects where existing platforms, practitioners, educators, and funders, as well as researchers with interest in cross-border collaboration can take action to develop the practice of cross-border collaborative journalism further and to enhance our understanding of its effects.

## Acknowledgment

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