

Papers

Julia Lück / Tanjev Schultz

Investigative Data Journalism in a Globalized World

A Survey Study on ICIJ Journalists

Abstract: The study explores the work of journalists who were engaged in the Panama and Paradise Papers investigations of the *International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ)*, which uncovered dubious financial transactions on a global scale. An online survey was conducted in March 2018 (N=67). It comprised aspects of working routines, division of labor, personal networks, challenges, and obstacles, as well as assessments concerning journalistic methods and anonymous sources. Quantitative and qualitative answers give descriptive insights into the mechanisms of global investigative data journalism. Despite diverse backgrounds (42 countries, different types of media), the journalists have much in common when it comes to professional norms and working routines. At the same time, the strict rules of the organization and a lack of access to material and knowledge also pose challenges for members of the network.

Due to far-reaching political deregulation, financial transactions now flow independently of geographical borders and nation-states. The need for journalism that acts as a global watchdog, holding the powerful accountable – not only in the political but also in the business world – therefore appears greater than ever. At the same time, technological developments support new forms of digital investigative journalism and enable journalists to process huge amounts of (leaked) data (Felle 2015). Two of the most famous and recent examples of this kind of global disclosure are the *Panama* and *Paradise Papers* by the *International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ)*, which publicized tax avoidance strategies and criminal financial activities (Obermayer /Obermaier 2016; Bernstein 2017; Woodall 2017).

These projects are highly relevant examples of a global investigative data journalism that facilitates the emergence of a vigilant transnational public sphere. Such projects and organizations like the ICIJ are examples of new forms of journalistic collaboration that make it possible to carry out cost and time-intensive investigative research despite the tense economic situation of many media companies. To comprehend how these collaborations work, we ask: How is the work organized in a transnational network such as the ICIJ? What are the working routines and practices? And finally, which challenges and limits to their work do ICIJ journalists face? To answer these questions, we contextualized the work of the ICIJ within the scholarly literature on investigative data journalism and conducted an online survey among those ICIJ journalists who participated in the *Panama* and/or *Paradise Papers* projects. Our results give an insight into the current state of global investigative data journalism.

Developments in investigative journalism

By its own account, the ICIJ is a »unique organization, [a] US-based non-profit [...] global network« in which »249 of the best investigative reporters from more than 90 countries and territories [...] collaborate on groundbreaking investigations that expose the truth and hold the powerful accountable, while also adhering to the highest standards of fairness and accuracy.¹⁾ It positions itself in the field of investigative journalism and emphasizes its purpose as a watchdog. This notion of journalism's watchdog role is deeply embedded in Western journalism culture (Hantzsch 2011) and closely connected to the idea of ›the press‹ being the Fourth Estate that controls those in power and holds them accountable (Ettema 2007; Hampton 2012). There are, however, different conceptions of how journalism can achieve this, as pointed out by Starkman (2015), who distinguishes between access reporting and accountability reporting: »Access reporting emphasizes gaining inside information about the actions or intentions of powerful actors before they are widely known. [...] Accountability reporting, in contrast, seeks to gather information not from but about powerful actors« (Starkman 2015: 10). Investigative reporting (such as the work of the ICIJ) is an example of accountability reporting and, according to Abdenour (2018), can be characterized by three main attributes: (1) It comprises original work that (2) reveals concealed information that is (3) of public interest.

Compared to the regular news business, investigative reporting usually requires more time and resources (Stetka/Önebring 2013) and is, therefore, often considered economically risky (Abdenour 2018; Hamilton 2016). With the collapse of advertising revenues and a decline in the numbers of full-time journalists, many news

1 <https://www.icij.org/about/> [June 14, 2019]

organizations struggle to maintain the quality of their journalistic products. At the same time, digital technologies create new opportunities for journalists. They offer numerous ways to cooperate and communicate and also allow for efficient analyses of big data volumes. In this context, associations such as the ICIJ can help to carry out elaborate investigative projects despite low budgets in single newsrooms.

The potential of the connected society for investigative journalism

The connected society holds huge potential for investigative journalism (Gearing 2014). Journalists benefit from the use of web-based communication in many ways: It makes it easier to find stories, get into contact with sources, and collaborate with other journalists. These opportunities have facilitated the rise of investigative networks on an international level. The various forms of such networks differ from one to another, e.g., according to the degree of organization and control, or the degree of collaboration within the network (Heft/Alfter/Pfetsch 2017). Following this distinction, the ICIJ is a highly structured organization with fairly intense collaborations.

Working in international organizations and teams like this can help to address the problems resulting from increasing interconnection between causes and effects around the world (Alfter 2017). The digital media environment enables a shift from competitive single newsroom investigations to a collaborative model in which multiple newsrooms from different countries and regions share information (Carson/Farhall 2018). International networks can be especially helpful for journalists from countries with weak journalistic structures, e.g., when there are only very few investigative reporters in a country. Team members with different national backgrounds may contribute context and inside knowledge for specific parts of the world. Technical skills may also vary, which can initiate a professional division of labor (Alfter 2017; Matzat 2016).

However, working in international teams also presents challenges. Diverse journalistic cultures, political traditions, and economic systems shape the working conditions and routines of journalists and can lead to different perceptions of how work can or should be done (Alfter 2017; Higgins Joyce et al. 2017). Besides, investigative journalism and the notion of a watchdog role are closely tied to liberal media systems that offer sufficient freedom of the press and journalistic autonomy (Gerli et al. 2018; Svensson 2016). Gerli et al. (2018) identify three main forms of interference that journalists face in non-liberal media systems: the influence of partisan publishers, state influence (e.g., on advertising), and intelligence operations. It is particularly challenging to work under constraints of press freedom, but participation in international networks may help to overcome (or at least attenuate) limits imposed by national political systems (Kaplan 2013).

The spread of data journalism

A second important development is the rapid spread of data journalism and, specifically, the possibilities for handling, investigating, and visualizing large quantities of data (Coddington 2014; Boyles/Meyer 2016; Felle 2015). Investigative journalists are especially interested in classified or otherwise concealed data provided by leaks or whistleblowers (Wahl-Jorgensen/Hunt 2012). Using such data has certain advantages for investigative reporters. Woodall (2017) argues that journalists are usually highly dependent on official sources, which can jeopardize their autonomy. Woodall speaks of a »media capture«: journalists may hold back information or report less critically because they do not want to fall out with their sources. Woodall took a closer look at the three »megaleaks« by Chelsea Manning (and WikiLeaks), Edward Snowden, and »John Doe« (Panama Papers), concluding that they were able to disrupt »media capture.« The Panama Papers followed a leak of 11.5 million documents by an anonymous source to the German newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung* in 2015. The Paradise Papers were based on another leak of 13.4 million financial and legal documents to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* in 2016.

Of course, most day-to-day data journalism is not based on such exceptional leaks and still relies heavily on official sources (Stalph 2017). Nevertheless, Castell et al. (2018) showed that many data journalists are highly engaged within a wider data community. They work with experts outside of journalism (like scientists and software programmers) and are in constant contact with journalists from other media organizations. This way, data journalists can be seen as pioneers of journalistic networks and new styles of collaborative newsroom work.

Our study contributes to the understanding of how networks such as the ICIJ operate and how they facilitate high-end investigative data journalism. Specifically, we will go into detail on how the work is organized within different teams, what networks are formed within the greater network, and which purpose they serve, along with what kind of challenges journalists face in their work.

Method

We directed an online survey at journalists on the ICIJ mailing list who worked on the Panama and/or Paradise Papers. Journalists who contributed to these projects did not necessarily have to be official members of the ICIJ. The mailing lists, therefore, contained more people than the actual number of ICIJ members. The study was conducted between March 13 and April 10, 2018 using the platform *soscsurvey.de*. The initial invitation was forwarded by ICIJ headquarters, who approved our request. Two reminders were sent via members of the mailing list who were known personally to the authors.

The questionnaire was split into two parts. This preserved anonymity in the part that concerned assessments and attitudes, while enabling identification by name for the other part (personal network). The first part covered the journalists' personal and professional background, division of labor, working routines, assessments concerning challenges and limits of their work, and perceived threats and harassment (open questions). Several items were drawn from the Worlds of Journalism project (Hanusch/Hanitzsch 2017), such as role perceptions, as well as attitudes on the handling of sources, ethical standards, and appropriate research methods. Other questions were drafted according to our research interest, e.g., whether journalists had faced threats. Several questions allowed open text input, e.g., for thoughts about leaks and sources, threats, and harassment. We use these qualitative data to further contextualize the quantitative answers and quote parts to illustrate and highlight either typical or special aspects that we came across.

The second part of the questionnaire could be reached via an external link at the end of the first questionnaire. In this part, people were asked to identify themselves by name, country, and media organization and then name up to five people with whom they worked together closely during the Panama/Paradise Papers investigation. Respondents were also asked to attribute countries and media organizations to every person named and provide specifics on how the cooperation looked.

We gathered 67 completed datasets for the general part and 50 datasets for the network part. There were 569 email addresses registered on the Panama and Paradise Papers mailing lists, which means a response rate of 11.78 percent for our survey. This does not seem particularly high, but since journalists are generally a difficult group to get a hold of for research (investigative reporters are even more suspicious of sharing information on themselves), we find that 67 completed datasets will at least give us some meaningful insights. Beyond that, our respondents come from 42 different countries, which is a fairly good share of the countries involved in the investigations (about 90 in the Panama Papers and about 70 in the Paradise Papers). Since we allowed respondents to comment freely on several aspects in the questionnaire, we also gathered insightful qualitative data.

Results

In the general part, 22 of the respondents are female, and 42 are male (3 people did not respond to this question). Respondents are 43.8 years on average and have an average of 18.9 years of professional experience (min: 4 years, max: 52 years). About 39 percent of the journalists in the sample work for a daily newspaper, followed by online outlets (20.9 percent) and television (19.4). When asked for their position in the newsroom, most respondents (41.8 percent) indicated that they were reporters, followed by senior editors (13.4 percent), department heads

(11.9 percent), and editors in chief (7.5 percent). Most of the respondents work in investigative departments (80.6 percent). They could check more than one answer, so we know that usually they are associated with other beats as well: About 37 percent work for political beats, 35 percent for economy, business, finance, followed by news/current affairs (29.9 percent), law and crime (28.4 percent), foreign politics (22.4 percent), and domestic politics (19.4 percent).

55 people worked on both projects; 7 worked only on the Panama Papers, 5 only on the Paradise Papers. Most respondents have experience of investigative reporting: 54 indicated that they had worked on other projects before (most of them in more than one), of which Offshore Leaks, Swiss Leaks, and Lux Leaks were the ones most often named. About one third of our respondents indicated that they were not ICIJ members (as mentioned, journalists participating in ICIJ projects do not necessarily have to be members). 60 percent are (also) members of other investigative organizations or networks on a national level (e.g., Brazilian Association for Investigative Journalism, Asociación de Periodismo de Investigación, Bulgarian Center for Investigative Reporting) or an international level (e.g., European Investigative Collaboration, Global Investigative Journalism Network, Watchdog Asia). Two-thirds had received special training in data journalism.

Teamwork and division of labor

One of the key interests of this paper is to offer more insights into how the investigative data journalists organized their work within their network, – which, after all, comprises hundreds of people. Working in teams on investigations like the Panama and Paradise Papers is clearly the rule due to the great amounts of data that must be processed. However, team sizes vary a lot: between 2 and 30 people are involved within one media outlet. According to the answers we received, the most common group size was between 3 and 5 people working together in one media outlet. Some respondents explained that team sizes grew during the investigation. About 70 percent responded that they had some kind of division of labor in their teams. In their open answers, we detect two patterns: teams that divided work (1) by stories, and those that use (2) (technical) tasks and aspects. Those that divided teams by stories usually split the team according to people or businesses or according to countries/regions.

Division of work according to different tasks that arise throughout the process is common, too, for example doing »research, writing, editing, fact-checking, infographics, video, podcast.«

Two very important tasks are emphasized by several respondents, independently of from a division of work by (technical tasks) or subjects/stories. The first is »digging up stories.« Obviously, this is one of the most important tasks. Several respondents pointed out that they had coworkers responsible for finding people

in the data and revealing connected misbehavior. To do so, the data had to be made accessible – a typical task of data-driven journalism:

»I am a data journalist and my job was to 1) gather and run lists of people through the system, 2) work with the structured part of the data, and 3) find other small parts of the data and structure those.«

One important first step in digging up stories is to compose lists of potential people to find in the data, e.g., political and economic elites or celebrities of a country. Here, the international network has a clear advantage since journalists from different countries can bring in their expertise when composing such lists. Working with these lists of names required utmost care, accuracy, and double-checking:

»Three other colleagues checked every name I had provided through Italian companies' databases, in order to match dates of birth and managers' positions or ownership of companies. Our aim was to avoid coming across homonyms.«

Finding people in the data is one thing. Getting further proof from outside the data and collecting people's statements is another important part of the investigative work:

»[...] confront the facts found in the data with local financial and business information related to the names that appear in the papers leaked.«

»[I] found experts, conducted interviews, confronted the subjects of our investigations.«

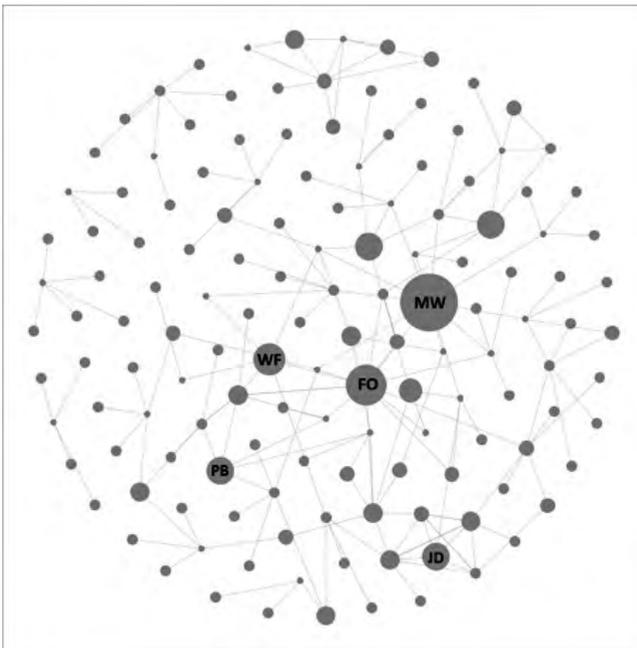
Several respondents indicated that they were responsible for the whole investigation process as lead investigator or coordinator. This job is usually all-encompassing and also includes maintaining contact with other project partners and especially with ICIJ headquarters, as this example illustrates:

»I was the main reporter on the Panama Papers and one of the main reporters on the Paradise Papers [...]. I spent months in the data digging up stories, did the research along with my colleagues, found experts, conducted interviews, confronted the subjects of our investigations, wrote TV documentaries, TV and radio news stories, long form online features, did dozens of live broadcasts in English and French, and was the main liaison with the ICIJ and other colleagues.«

Roles within the network

The importance of the ICIJ as a central instance of coordination becomes even more obvious when people are asked for the most important contact partners they had during the investigation. Figure 1 outlines the network of our respondents. The size of a node indicates a person’s importance based on how often they have been named.

Figure 1
Network of ICIJ journalists



Note: 55 ICIJ journalists, directed network (people were asked to name up to five of their most important contacts in the network); node size according to income degree (the bigger the node the more often the person was named as a contact by others)

Five people stand out in particular. (1) Not surprisingly, Marina Walker as the ICIJ’s Deputy Director had a central role in the network. Respondents indicated that coordinating articles and the exchange of information is her main contribution besides collaborative writing. In addition to Walker, (2) Will Fitzgibbon and (3) Petra Blum were also important contact persons for the ICIJ. Both support

people in their research and facilitate the exchange of information. (4) Frederik Obermaier from the German newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung* – that was the first newspaper to be approached by the leak offering the data to start the Panama Paper investigations – also holds a central position in the network. His role is more content related. People emphasized his importance for exchanging information and collaborating on research. As one person put it: He contributed »high level exchange of information and context, guidance.« At *Süddeutsche Zeitung* a larger team was involved, however. Obermaier worked closely together with Bastian Obermayer, who had the first contact with the Panama Papers' anonymous source. The German paper decided to share the data with the ICIJ. Finally, (5) Joachim Dyfvermark from Swedish Television was an important partner for several respondents who worked closely with him researching a specific aspect or person and exchanging the information gathered.

Journalistic research methods

Working with whistleblowers and leaked data is a sensitive affair. We wanted to know what investigative journalists think about various research methods. Table 1 shows the approval of certain methods and highlights where the respondents particularly agree.

Respondents are unanimous in their strict rejection of altering quotes and photographs, but also in the rejection of accepting money from sources or publishing unverified content. Another interesting agreement is that most respondents strictly disapprove of paying people for information. Although investigative reporters depend on explosive information, they only accept this when a source offers it without seeking personal enrichment (which does not exclude the possibility that a source may also try to sell information to other actors).

Some methods meet with partial approval. Most of the respondents agree that, under certain circumstances, it is acceptable to make use of personal documents such as letters and pictures without permission, to gain employment at a firm or organization to gain inside information, or to use hidden microphones or cameras. These three situations are typical methods of investigative journalism.

Other methods are more controversial, e.g., whether or not using confidential business or government documents without authorization is always justified, or only under certain circumstances. Half of the respondents would not give their absolute approval to that method, showing that they tend to think about what kind of information to use for investigative purposes. Whether or not it is acceptable to use unauthorized material (e.g., from interviews) or to give information to NGOs is also a controversial aspect for many.

Table 1
Approval of research methods

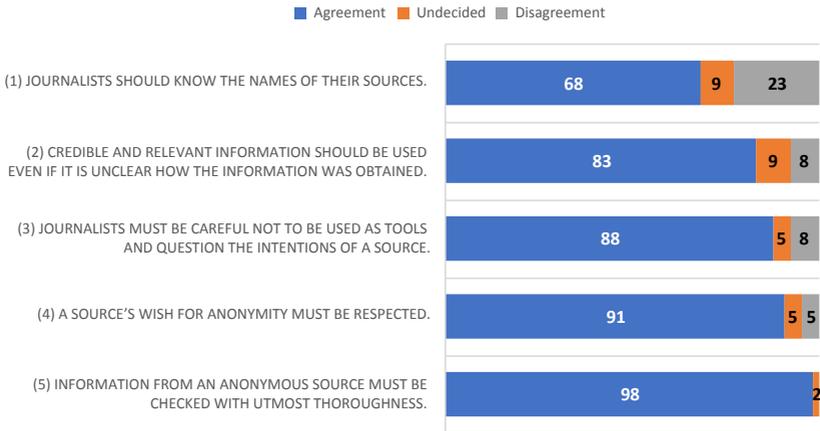
	Always justified	Justified on occasion	Not approved under any circumstances	n	M	SD
Paying people for confidential information	0	15	50	65	2.77	.43
Using confidential business or government documents without authorization	26	36	3	65	1.65	.57
Claiming to be somebody else	0	41	24	65	2.37	.49
Exerting pressure on unwilling informants to get a story	1	23	41	65	2.62	.52
Making use of personal documents such as letters and pictures without permission	3	48	14	65	2.17	.49
Getting employed in a firm or organization to gain inside information	2	41	18	61	2.26	.51
Using hidden microphones or cameras	0	59	6	65	2.09	.29
Using re-creations or dramatizations of news by actors	2	33	23	58	2.36	.55
Publishing stories with unverified content	2	4	60	66	2.88	.41
Accepting money from sources	2	0	64	66	2.94	.35
Altering or fabricating quotes from sources	2	1	63	66	2.92	.36
Altering photographs	2	1	63	66	2.92	.36
Use unauthorized material (e.g. from interviews)	2	37	24	63	2.35	.54
Give sensitive information to NGOs	4	29	27	60	2.38	.61

Note: absolute frequencies, means and standard deviation of item agreement on a 3-point scale, shading of cells indicate the strength of the agreement: the darker the coloring the more people coincide in their assessment.

Working with leaks and sources

Figure 2 displays the journalists' views concerning the handling of leaks and sources. More context information about how the respondents deal with leaks and sources can also be drawn from the open responses.

Figure 2
Leaks and sources



Note: N = 66, relative agreement (rounded figures, numbers may add up to more than 100 percent due to automatic rounding), items displayed were phrased in more detail in the questionnaire and people were asked to respond on a 5-point scale from 1 = completely disagree to 5 = completely agree. Agreement and disagreement answers were combined for reasons of clarity.

The answers reveal a high sensitivity towards working with anonymous leaks and sources. Though it is mostly undisputed that leaked information should be used if it is credible and relevant (item 2), it is clear to almost everybody that this information needs rigorous checking (item 5). Sources' wish for anonymity is widely accepted (item 4), although most of the respondents still prefer that the source is at least known to the journalist (item 1). The two sides of working with anonymous sources are shown in the following quote:

»You can even see it is an advantage when you do not know the identity of the source, because then you are sure not to reveal the source, even if there is a gun pointing at your head. The disadvantage is, of course, that it makes it much more difficult to guess the source's motivation for revealing the stuff, and thus you have to work even harder to make sure that the data are genuine, that they are not distorted or sorted out from a larger bundle to alter the understanding.«

Journalists are aware that sources and whistleblowers may have their own agenda, which journalists have to take into account when working with that source (item 3). Several respondents have commented on this issue of sources' own motivations and emphasized that it is necessary but difficult to always retrace these motivations.

»Any source has a motivation; the specificity of journalism is to check and cross-check the information revealed by the source. The sources often speak to a journalist because they have an interest in doing so. Others have also spoken to us because of some idea of the common good, to help us in a case that we consider serious. My purpose as a journalist is to understand the interests of the sources, but what matters to me is whether the documents are authentic. Then see if what they say is of public interest or not.«

However, some journalists would even accept unknown or bad intentions when the information that is disclosed is relevant to the public:

»Sometimes sources have a personal interest in providing documents but I don't care. For me it's important to cover a story in public interest.«

»We are used by people all the time with either good or bad intent. I can't police their intentions. I also deal with organized crime. I have to take and use information from people who are bad. I just have to mitigate the harm.«

The public interest element is emphasized in several comments and therefore seems to be a leading principle against which other aspects such as source anonymity must be weighed. But, as one respondent put it: »Journalistic cooperation is based on trust [...] and we have to have a basic trust in each other.« How mutual trust between source and journalist is gradually established in a mega leak case such as the Panama Papers is described well by Obermayer and Obermaier (2016), who were the first to be approached by John Doe, the anonymous source that leaked the Panama Papers. In this case, upholding the anonymity of the source is vital, not only for reasons of trust but also for safety reasons. Obermayer and Obermaier admit that, of course, they would have liked to know the source and how it got a hold of such a huge amount of data. They also emphasize that, in the end, it is more relevant that the data is of public interest and can be proved valid and credible (Obermayer/Obermaier 2016: 69).

How journalists deal with leaks and sources also distinguishes their own role perception from that of other actors, such as the platform WikiLeaks and its founder Julian Assange. Asked whether they agreed that WikiLeaks makes an important contribution to society on a scale from 1 (=completely disagree) to 5 (=completely agree), respondents mostly agree ($M=3.85$; $SD=1.06$), but they also see Julian Assange as a

political activist ($M=4.39$; $SD=.81$) and clearly not as a journalist ($M=1.69$; $SD=.93$). They do, however, agree that Assange should not be punished for his revelations ($M=4.16$; $SD=1.16$). The open answers that respondents gave regarding Assange point to important aspects: Many wrote that they do not approve the unfiltered publication of leaked information because not all information is of public interest (and it is the journalists' task to reveal what is of public interest). Besides, many criticize that certain people are needlessly endangered or harmed by publishing all kinds of private information. Also, some respondents suspected Assange of having dubious interests and questioned his selection of material.

»Under JA [Julian Assange], WL [WikiLeaks] slowly morphed into a dangerous tool used to misinform/propagandize. As a reporter, I personally met with some people whose lives were directly threatened when WL released the State Department cables unredacted. It should be noted that the same cables redacted and curated by reporters were of great interest without having the same very negative consequences.«

For investigative reporters, the distinction between journalism and activism is subtle and controversial. Some argue that the boundaries have become porous (see Russell 2016: 109-142), but the label »journalist« is still crucial if one wants to be protected against prosecution for treason or something similar.

Most ICIJ journalists in the survey perceive Edward Snowden differently than Assange. Respondents agreed unequivocally that he made an important contribution to society ($M=4.71$; $SD=.68$). They perceive him slightly less as a political activist ($M=3.87$; $SD=1.02$), but not as a journalist either ($M=1.63$; $SD=1.02$). They also agree more strongly that he should not be punished for his revelations ($M=4.63$; $S=.87$). Snowden's work is highly appreciated by those commenting on the case in our study:

»Edward Snowden seems to be the classic whistle blower who acts in the interest of the public. He did a very radical and brave thing by leaking data from the NSA at a high personal cost.«

Challenges and obstacles

To get a better understanding of the work of the investigative data journalists, we also wanted to know what it is that they struggle with and what they perceive to be the greatest obstacles to their work. We also asked if the journalists had experienced any threats or harassment and let them describe their experiences. When asked about the challenges of working within a project such as the Panama or Paradise Papers, several aspects frequently came up:

- Large amounts of data

The first and most frequently mentioned challenge by far was handling the complexity of the issue and the data. »Finding the needle in the haystack« – that means finding those hidden stories about people, businesses, and activities in the data that are most relevant to the public. Reducing complexity also requires digging into the convoluted offshore structures that had to be built up to hide activities in the first place. Journalists had to understand this system themselves and then explain it to their audience.

»In both cases the main challenges were the size of the leaks and the difficult content – it was even more difficult to understand in Paradise Papers. In fact, some of the schemes were so complicated that not even the experts we consulted could help.«

Concerns that something important could be missed or overlooked always play a role when dealing with such a large amount of data.

- Secrecy

The ICIJ's strict rules for secrecy were a challenge for several journalists, who had to refrain from approaching experts to help them understand what was hidden in the data. Furthermore, the reporters had to wait patiently until they were able to confront people with findings from the leaks.

»The high level of secrecy was the main challenge – it was weird to be uncertain what was going to work as a story until very near to the end of the project – I found it difficult that I couldn't approach lots of people at the outset to get comment and context.«

- Finding a way to publish

It is not inevitable that highly relevant information such as the Panama and Paradise Papers find their way to the public of a country. Not every journalist involved in the investigation had a natural medium to publish his or her stories. This could especially be the case for journalists from countries with a lack of press freedom.

»Finding a medium that would publish the stories. Found one! Had to change jobs though...«

»For the Panama Papers, the major challenge was to find a medium to publish my investigations. The newspaper where I worked had backtracked and I had to find another, just five days from the agreed date with the consortium colleagues to publish the investigations. I published them in a foreign medium. I resigned from the newspaper where I worked just after the publication of the first Panama Papers.«

Both examples show how the work could have personal consequences for the journalists.

- Time pressure and late start

It is not unusual in journalism to have a strict deadline. The central deadline for releasing all publications was, nevertheless, a challenge for several people in our survey. People who were not part of the Panama Papers investigations but joined the Paradise Papers later, for example, had to quickly learn the trade of handling the data and catch up with the knowledge others had gained before.

»I was invited to join Panama Papers much later than the team had started. This deprived me of months of valuable research. At the end I was working 16 hours per day to catch up before the deadline and the parallel international publications.«

Several respondents also commented that they were either not included in the first rounds of data releases or struggled to get information relevant for their investigations released at a later point. The time pressure to meet the deadline of the publication date was especially tough for them:

»Another big problem was that the material was uploaded in parts, so we got lots of new data to investigate just a couple of months before publishing. This happened in the Paradise Papers, where the best stories for us came from a list of names in a business registry – this data came just a couple of months before publishing. At that stage we changed our previous plan radically and started on new stories.«

- Coordination with other journalists

About 400 people were involved in the Panama Papers and Paradise Papers projects. They were all working with the same data pursuing a similar goal: finding stories in the data and exposing the wrongdoings of the powerful. Everyone had their own focus, but they also had to keep track of what others in the network

were doing so that they did not miss important developments or lose sight of the big picture. As we have seen above, the ICIJ headquarters in Washington, D.C. did a great deal of coordination work. Still, not losing the oversight over who was working on which aspect could be quite a challenge. Sharing all the findings and checking the work of the colleagues was a tedious task.

The second aspect of coordination plays an important role: Direct collaboration with journalists from outside one's newsroom can be particularly challenging. When journalists have to not only keep track of what others are doing but work together on a specific story, even more aspects must be considered:

»Maintaining good communication with partner journalists was always a challenge, especially how/whether to approach people in question, when/whether to publish particular stories, etc. Each newsroom has its own values and, more than that, its own culture.«

- Finding additional information and people/experts as sources to use beyond the data

For stories to unravel the whole picture, information beyond the data had to be collected. First and foremost, journalists needed credible sources that could explain and classify what was found in the data, e.g., experts for financial transactions, tax evasion or fraud.

»We had to find credible experts willing to take several days to look into the thousands of pages of documents linked to specific cases – and agree not to say anything about it until publication. They had to be willing to go on the record raising questions about powerful billionaires.«

Beyond that, information from the data did not always speak for itself. More context was required to draw a complete picture. Information from the leaks had to be complemented with and compared to external sources and databases (e.g., land charge registers).

Lack of resources and access to information

Several aspects were mentioned frequently when asked about obstacles for investigative reporting. The most frequently mentioned was a lack of financial resources. This underlines what we know about the financial difficulties facing media organizations and the specific difficulty of investing in investigative journalism as one of the most expensive and time-consuming beats. Lack of money

often comes with a lack of staff that would be needed to handle projects comprehensively. Accordingly, time is generally a profound issue for many respondents.

Access to information is another critical point for investigative journalists. Open government policies are not yet standard in most countries. On the contrary, non-transparent government activities and a lack of freedom of information laws hinder the work of many journalists. If they try to get the information anyway, journalists can face legal threats and even persecution. Libel suits have been mentioned by several respondents as an example of legal threats with which they have been confronted.

Threats and harassment

29 people in our survey reported that they have faced threats or harassment during or due to their work. One respondent's statement reminded us how real the danger is; not long before, a colleague from Malta, who was associated with the ICIJ and worked in the Panama Papers project, had been murdered.

The journalists who indicated the experience of threats and harassment mentioned various aspects. One was pressure from legal authorities against the publishing media outlet.

»We were threatened by the tax authorities in our country. They demanded the Panama Papers and our editorial material. The authorities threatened to raid our offices and homes after publishing. The case went to administrative court. We won the case in autumn 2017, but the authorities took it to the last resort. That process is still ongoing.«

In another case, media outlets could also be threatened with the withdrawal of advertising money. Fear of such repercussions may have also been the reason why some had such trouble finding an outlet to publish their work about the leaks in the first place.

Closely connected to the obstacles and challenges, journalists also mentioned the threat of legal proceedings or prosecution. Some journalists have had personal experience of this, for example:

»I have been criminally prosecuted for more than two years by the Luxembourg authorities, along with my sources in the Lux Leaks story.«

Threats of violence or even death threats (not always directly connected to their Panama or Paradise Papers investigations) were also mentioned by a couple of journalists in our survey. They have received such threats by email, mail, phone,

or social media (e.g., Twitter or WhatsApp). One respondent indicated that not only he but also members of his family were threatened.

Finally, respondents gave several examples of how they became victims of smear campaigns and public defamation:

»I was lynched by media close to personalities compromised by investigations based on the Panama Papers. These media accused me of working on behalf of a foreign power that aims to destabilize the country and its government.«

»One of my subjects in the Paradise Papers has been running a discreditation campaign against me for months. It included writing to the ICIJ and [the media outlet] to kick me out of the network. He is spreading lies, falsehoods, and complete fabrications.«

These examples emphasize that working on projects such as the Panama and Paradise Papers can put journalists at personal risk and – according to the respondents' comments – this is even true for people working in countries that would be considered to have full freedom of the press. The 29 people who reported experiences of threats and harassment come from countries all over the world, including Western and Northern Europe (e.g., Germany, France, Spain, Sweden, Norway, Finland). Those journalists mostly complain about raids at their homes and offices, and about authorities that try to enforce legal measures to reveal sources and material, but they also face harassment via social media, for example. Experience of violence against them is mostly reported by journalists from outside Western Europe.

Discussion and conclusion

From our combination of quantitative survey data and qualitative supplements, we were able to gain insights into the work of journalists who were engaged in the in-depth investigations of the Panama and/or Paradise Papers projects of the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ). The ICIJ is a remarkable network of investigative journalists worldwide and an interesting object for journalism studies. Gaining an understanding of journalists' work within this network can help us to further track developments in the changing field of journalism.

In a time in which many media outlets worldwide are facing economic difficulties, combined with political pushback against the freedom of the press even in democratic countries, keeping up a watchdog function to hold political and

economic elites to account appears even more challenging. While societal problems have become increasingly global – be it climate change, financial crises, terrorism, etc. – journalism is in many respects still a national matter fixated on national public spheres. But to keep up with processes of globalization, intertwined developments and events, journalistic working routines and structures must be adjusted accordingly. Transnational cooperation such as that under the umbrella of the ICIJ offers a solution by building an international infrastructure and support system for investigative journalism. As we have seen, the network structure can help journalists handle great amounts of information, find stories within hidden systems, and understand background mechanisms and contexts in which deficiencies can grow. In international teams, skills and knowledge can be shared for the common good.

Nevertheless, working in such structures is challenging. Cross-border collaborations are easier to maintain today through modern communication devices, but coordinating and organizing shared work still requires a lot of effort. The structure of the ICIJ, with headquarters that provide the infrastructure of the projects and offer support to the involved journalists and media outlets, facilitates cooperation on this scale. Shared professional norms on which collaboration can be built bind journalists together. Our results support these impressions: Central people from ICIJ headquarters are important coordinators and contact persons even for the actual production of journalistic products. The people working together in the projects also share a great agreement on how the work should be done, i.e. which research methods are appropriate and how sources should be dealt with, taking the public interest into account. Those shared norms may then also be helpful in balancing difficulties that arise in mixed teams due to different editorial requirements or a medium's editorial line.

Nevertheless, the ICIJ as a »highly structured organization with intense collaborations« (Heft/Alfter/Pfetsch 2017) also has strict rules that members must follow. This is not always easy for everyone. Examples from our study showed that several people had problems that they were not allowed to talk to external experts about, nor confront the accused in the run-up to their reporting. Central people within such a network can help to coordinate the project, keep it together, and monitor it. In the network analysis, we have seen that there are a few people – three of them in at ICIJ headquarters – in very central positions. But it is important not to overlook the fact that such positions go hand in hand with power differences and advantages of superior knowledge of certain people as well. Besides, the democratic structures of the ICIJ are rather opaque, e.g., the appointment of the board. It is hard to see through the processes of admission into the organization (Candea/Krüger 2018). People cannot simply join the organization; they need to be proposed and appointed. It is hard to find public information about the selection criteria and decision-makers. An organization such as

the ICIJ depends on a great deal of trust between the members in general and the participants of specific projects in particular. It has to make sure that the journalists share the same or at least very similar professional norms and that aspects of competition between different journalists and media organizations do not harm the collaboration.

Obviously, the journalistic success of networks such as the ICIJ is linked to their apparent advantages: Investigative journalism is a risky and time-consuming business. The more (well trained) journalists work together, the more likely it is that they will find relevant stories – and the more effectively they can act as watchdogs. As our study shows, investigative reporters face many challenges and see themselves at risk of threats and harassment. Revealing the criminal activities of powerful people puts the messenger on the line. This becomes apparent not only when remembering the murder of the Maltese journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia in 2017, but also when reviewing the numerous answers in our survey that indicate journalists' personal experience of repression and law enforcement that directly aim at impeding independent journalistic work. Even though international cooperation cannot take away the risk completely, it at least diminishes it to a certain degree by ensuring that relevant information is not only held in one hand.

About the authors

Dr. Julia Lück (*1986) is a research associate at the Department of Journalism, Department of Communication, Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz. Her research and teaching interests are focused on (comparative) journalism research; political communication; international and transnational communication; and the public and media-communicated deliberation. She gained her doctorate at the University of Mannheim with a thesis on the deliberative quality of narrative news stories in Germany, the USA, and Brazil. Contact: jlueck@uni-mainz.de

Dr. Tanjev Schultz (*1974) has been a Professor of Journalism at the Department of Journalism/Department of Communication at Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz since 2016. Before this, he spent more than ten years as a journalist at the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, writing on topics including security policy, secret services, and terrorism. The focuses of his research include investigative journalism, journalistic forms of expression, and democratic theory. He studied Philosophy, Psychology, Communication Studies, and German Studies in Berlin, Hagen, and Bloomington (USA) and completed his doctorate in Political Science at the University of Bremen. contact: tanjev.schultz@uni-mainz.de

Copy-Editing: Sophie Costella

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