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To cite this article: Joy Jenkins & Lucas Graves (2024) Do More with Less: Minimizing Competitive Tensions in Collaborative Local Journalism, Digital Journalism, 12:2, 101-120, DOI: [10.1080/21670811.2022.2026237](https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2022.2026237)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2022.2026237>



Published online: 08 Feb 2022.



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ARTICLE



Do More with Less: Minimizing Competitive Tensions in Collaborative Local Journalism

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ABSTRACT

Collaborative journalism has drawn mounting interest from both practitioners and researchers over the last decade. Partnerships among news outlets, and between journalists and civil-society groups, have been heralded as ways to leverage digital tools and technologies to produce in-depth, impactful reporting in the face of economic and professional challenges besetting the news industry. While collaboration is widely seen as a way to do more with less, few studies have focused on the mechanisms that allow successful collaborations to overcome competitive friction, particularly at the local level, where resources are most constrained and economic pressures most intense. We used qualitative case-study research, including in-depth interviews ($N = 29$) with leaders and participants involved with collaborations in three European countries, to examine the ways they minimize competitive friction through their approaches to developing reporting projects, coordinating activities, and distributing benefits in pursuit of producing high-quality local news. We use these findings to propose three ideal types of collaborative practices —here termed the co-op, contractor, and NGO models — which are specific to local news provision and potentially applicable to similar efforts around the world.

KEYWORDS

Local media; collaboration; comparative; case study; data journalism

Collaboration has been heralded as a solution for the challenges facing legacy media. Although examples of news organizations working together to share content, expertise, and resources have existed for decades, global collaborations like the Panama Papers — which united hundreds of journalists from news organizations in more than 75 countries — have drawn new attention to this phenomenon (Sambrook 2017). The “collaborative age,” enabled by digital platforms and tools, centers on networked approaches to producing, funding, and distributing news, involving different types of news organizations as well as educational institutions, nonprofit organizations, and the public (Martinez de la Serna 2018). Collaboration can also be seen as a means of “field repair” (Graves and Konieczna 2015), addressing the “vacuum left by the industrial decline of media and the constant erosion of the conditions for journalism” (Martinez de la Serna 2018, para. 5). Collaboration has been particularly embraced as a tool for

increasing the quality and quantity of investigative reporting and advancing multi-media, data, and crowdsourced journalism (Carson and Farhall 2018).

Although high-profile collaborations involving well-known news outlets draw the most attention, many smaller and more specialized organizations have embraced the shift. The Center for Cooperative Media (Stonbely 2017) tallied 44 collaborative projects, mostly in the U.S., finding participants ranging from local bloggers and newspapers to regional and national nonprofit news organizations to national newspapers and TV networks. As at the national and international levels, local collaborations are “driven by the ability to connect digitally” (19) and have often been led by emerging digital-native and nonprofit outlets not tied to legacy business models. Although these projects varied widely, they all represented “good-faith partnering” resulting from “an earnest desire to create better content with less or different resources than would be possible alone” (60). Journalists report that collaborative, particularly cross-border, opportunities fulfill practical needs, such as uniting local journalists with deep knowledge of a particular place with national collaborators who can broaden the perspective of an investigation and global collaborators who can extend its reach internationally (Konow-Lund and Olsson 2020). As Quackenbush (2020) noted, while this “is still a time of a high-stakes competition among news outlets, it’s also a time of high-reward collaboration,” providing opportunities and resources for local media to cover the coronavirus pandemic, Black Lives Matter, and other complex stories.

This emphasis on minimizing competition is particularly salient, as existing models for collaboration often suggest tactics for ensuring participants effectively manage their level of involvement, working arrangements, editorial standards, and expectations so that all benefit (Stonbely 2017). The potential to “do more with less” suggests that collaborative approaches hold particular appeal for local journalism, a sector which, in many countries, has faced severe economic and professional challenges, with sharp cuts to already limited resources for public-interest or accountability reporting. Despite evidence that local news organizations are, in fact, embracing collaboration, this area has seen little systematic attention from scholars, particularly through a comparative lens (but see, e.g. Ali et al. 2018; Jenkins and Graves 2019; Konow-Lund 2019).

We used qualitative case studies of collaborations in three European countries to examine the ways they manage competitive tensions in local journalism, including their strategies for developing reporting projects, coordinating activities, and distributing benefits. Each of these collaborations is enabled by common digital media and networking tools, but their approaches differ in fundamental ways. We use these findings to propose three ideal types of collaboration: a co-op model, in which newsrooms agree to work together on topics outside of their core focus; a contractor model, where roles and rewards are defined by a commercial contract; and an NGO model, with a shared data set managed and maintained by a coordinating nonprofit. We argue that these ideal types, while not exhaustive, reflect the types of collaborations emerging around Europe and complement and clarify existing taxonomies of collaboration by highlighting the mechanisms that enable cooperation at the local-news level.

Literature Review

Journalistic cooperation has taken a variety of forms historically, from the establishment of news wire services like the Associated Press in the 19th century to partnerships between public television stations to diversify their coverage in the early 1990s (Friedland 1995). In both Europe and the United States, the late 1990s and early 2000s saw intense interest in “media convergence” and “news convergence” spurred by new digital technologies, with competing media companies cooperating in specific ways to address a rapidly shifting market and regulatory environment (see, e.g. Dailey, Demo, and Spillman 2005; Deuze 2004). The influence of the Investigative Reporters and Editors organization, founded in 1976, is also key, as it invited journalists to share skills and form connections, a model that has spread around the world (Konow-Lund, Gearing, and Berglez 2019). Collaboration also occurs at an intra-organizational level, particularly in response to new technologies, such as efforts to facilitate inter-departmental content-sharing and collective decision-making (Plesner and Raviola 2016).

We focus on inter-organizational cooperative efforts among news organizations. Beginning in the late 2000s, growing attention to the “crisis” in journalism has fueled interest in collaborative journalism as a possible remedy, with rapidly proliferating examples of partnerships among different types of news organizations and across communities, regions, and countries, although scholarship has tended to emphasize U.S.-based and international efforts. Studies have chronicled collaborations uniting journalists and citizens (Ananny 2014; Konieczna, Hatcher, and Moore 2018; Palomo, Teruel, and Blanco-Castilla 2019) and journalists and technologists, such as hackers, developers, and data scientists (Boyles 2020; Hewett 2017; Lewis and Usher 2014; Porlezza and Splendore 2019).

Often led by nonprofit organizations rather than legacy outlets, collaboration has been seen as part of a larger shift in the journalistic field in which journalists engage with “journalistic strangers” (Belair-Gagnon and Holton 2018) who can challenge norms and call for improved practices, specifically related to technology. The broadening of journalistic networks disrupts a long-held emphasis on competition, an institutional characteristic of news organizations, particularly in market-driven journalistic cultures (Hanitzsch 2007). Deuze (2005) highlighted a focus on “speed, fast decision-making, hastiness, and working in accelerated real-time” (449) as part of the ideology of news. However, tight deadlines and competitive pressures can compromise accuracy and spur formulaic reporting; therefore, Juntanen (2010) suggests examining news competition as an economic and a social and cultural imperative.

Collaboration has been particularly embraced as a routine in investigative journalism, both at the domestic and global levels (Gearing 2014; Houston 2010). Much research has focused on international projects and specifically on the Panama Papers, a 2016 investigation led by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists through which hundreds of journalists and news organizations used a massive shared database to investigate offshore accounts and publish articles in multiple countries (e.g. Berglez and Gearing 2018; Buzenberg 2015; Sambrook 2017). Scholars highlight a culture of trust and sharing necessary for such efforts (Baack 2016; McGregor et al. 2017); the role of communications, networking, and security tools (Gearing and Berglez 2019; Bunce, Wright, and Scott 2018); and the enhanced impact that such

cooperative global investigations can have on the public and society (Sambrook 2017; Graves and Shabbir 2019).

Collaboration in Local News

Relatively few academic studies have focused on collaboration among local news outlets. This is despite the fact that “microcosm investigations” with a smaller budget can be easier to organize, manage, and carry out than large-scale investigations (Gearing and Berglez 2019), and reports have shown that locally based partnerships continue to grow, particularly in the U.S. (Green-Barber and Stonbely 2020; Kramer 2017; Stonbely 2017). Collaboration can help local news organizations fulfill critical roles affected by downsizing, depleted resources, and centralization. Participants in U.S.-based local collaborative efforts have cited benefits such as gaining expertise to cover complex stories; obtaining access to under-covered topics, geographic areas, and sources; achieving collective leverage; and spurring public discussions about key issues (Bryant 2017).

Several studies highlight ways that small, specialized outlets have “loosened the reins of ownership both editorially and commercially to accomplish a wider journalistic mission” (Graves and Konieczna 2015, 1967). Small outlets engage in “smart collaboration” to enhance their coverage and reach (Schaffer 2012, 543); participants include hyperlocal sites, metro startups covering larger cities, watchdog sites, niche news sites focused on particular topics, and university-led news startups (see also Hatcher and Thayer 2017). Latin American collaborations reflect ongoing and open initiatives in which small- and medium-sized outlets can investigate topics affecting their communities and access needed data, skills, tools, and sources (Mesquita & de-Lima Santos 2021). Ethnographic case studies of three collaborations in the U.K. found that when working with new types of actors and organizations, journalists had to renegotiate taken-for-granted routines and practices (Konow-Lund 2019). Assessing a newsroom collaboration in Philadelphia involving 16 organizations focused on prisoner reentry, Konieczna (2020) identified a “collaboration stepladder” in which each step in the collaboration process, from simple sharing to addressing a problem in the community, built on previous steps to encourage a more sustainable approach to cooperation built on members’ contributions.

Models for Collaboration

Several scholars have summarized the field of collaborative journalism, including efforts to define collaboration, identify motivations for engaging in collaborative work, and characterize the qualities of collaborative reporting. Konow-Lund, Gearing, and Berglez (2019) distinguished between collaboration and cooperation, addressing collaboration as “a shared effort toward a common end” and cooperation as “pooled resources and mutual assistance to reach individual ends” (1). The authors emphasized that while technology can help journalists manage expectations for journalistic practice across borders and cultures, collaboration also “requires a cosmopolitan and transnational mindset rather than a domestic mindset” (6).

Alfter (2021) examined collaborative investigative journalism in Europe, considering EU journalists’ shared interest in finding out “what *really happened* or what is *really going on*”

(192) while bringing distinctive research, storytelling, legal, and ethical traditions. Therefore, European collaborations tend to attract journalists with different priorities for stories, documents and reporting methods, and presentation modes. Cueva Chacón and Saldaña (2020) surveyed journalists from 20 countries in Latin America, finding that national and transnational collaboration is rare; although journalists recognized the value of collaborations for strengthening investigative journalism, they faced structural challenges in terms of agreeing on editorial goals, routines, political ideologies, management, and other areas.

A few studies have developed formal models of collaborative journalism projects and practices. These studies have focused on: (1) the types of actors involved in collaboration and the nature of their involvement, and (2) stages or strategies for establishing collaborations and working together in news production and distribution. These typologies or models may acknowledge the challenge of overcoming competitive frictions but do not center this problem in their analysis.

Thus, Alfter's (2016) study of "cross-border journalism" — in which journalists from different countries gather and share materials to publish to their own audiences — notes that "surmounting the competitive attitude is one of the first obstacles" (4) to such collaborations. As a result, the "networking intensity" must be worked out during the first of six key steps: networking, developing an idea, forming a research team, proposing a research plan, researching, and promoting stories and findings (see also Alfter and Căndea 2019). Similarly, using the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) as a model, Díaz-Struck and Cabra (2018) identified 10 steps for cross-national collaborations; the second step, immediately after identifying a project, is to cultivate a "collaborative state of mind" by establishing clear ground rules to which participants must agree upon joining the project.

Taking a broader view, Martínez de la Serna (2018) suggested that the rise in collaboration has led to the development of a journalism commons, or "an intricate resource system functioning under an open-access scheme and hosting critical technological and social components pertaining to journalism" (para. 6). This commons includes three layers: a technological commons spanning necessary infrastructure and tools for collaboration; a content commons comprising the material journalists produce together; and, mediating between these, a social commons that incorporates production routines and various cooperative arrangements. However, the need to cultivate cooperative practices and culture in this mediating layer is left implicit.

The clearest focus on competitive dynamics comes in Stonbely's (2017) influential taxonomy of 44 collaborative projects, yielding six models based on the duration of the partnership (temporary or permanent) and the degree of collaboration (from sharing content to fully integrated operations). These approaches require different levels of commitment and resources, and present distinct challenges in terms of managing competitive tensions; a premise of the model is that highly integrated projects yield the greatest potential rewards but face steeper hurdles in terms of power dynamics, newsroom cultures, and the need to gain widespread buy-in.

Stonbely argues that this is why temporary, integrated projects like the Panama Papers are relatively rare. However, this raises the question of what allows such a project to succeed — and, more generally, of how journalistic collaborations may be structured partly in response to the competitive tensions they invite.

Our study contributes to this conceptual landscape by centering mechanisms for resolving competitive tensions in collaborative projects and by focusing on local journalism, where collaborative approaches are arguably most needed but also particularly difficult. We should be careful not to extrapolate the strategies, motivations, and implications of high-profile collaborations by more resource-rich organizations to the challenges facing smaller local outlets seeking to collaborate; in particular, cross-border collaborations often involve outlets that are not competitors and do not face the hurdles that local or regional efforts do.

This study also builds on work examining U.S.-based collaboration to look at examples in the European context. We explicitly discuss the ways collaboration can be structured to minimize competitive tensions while allowing participants to preserve and share the values of in-depth, high-quality local journalism. Based on these aims, we pose the following research questions:

RQ1: How do local-news-focused collaborations manage competitive tensions journalistically?

RQ2: How do these collaborations manage competitive tensions economically?

RQ3: How do participants in these collaborations describe the sustainability of their approaches?

Method

This research used qualitative case studies to examine the benefits and challenges of collaboration for local media. Case-study research uses detailed investigations into phenomena to illuminate how behaviors and processes are influenced by and influence the real-life contexts in which they emerge (Cassell and Symon 2004). We identified three instrumental cases and analyzed them using multiple forms of qualitative data — interviews and textual analysis — to understand a specific issue or problem (Creswell and Poth 2016), in this case, how participants discuss production and distribution strategies that allow them to manage journalistic and economic competitive tensions.

We conducted 29 in-depth interviews between December 2018 and February 2019 with editors-in-chief, managing editors, newsroom and freelance reporters, data analysts, funders, and start-up founders associated with collaborative projects in three countries (see [Appendix](#)). We examined how the collaborative projects were developed, their editorial routines and processes, the nature of the content produced, how participants said audiences received the content, economic structures, how participants see the impact and future of their collaborative initiatives, and how the initiatives aim to address deficiencies in local news.

Sample and Procedure

This study emerges from a larger research project exploring changes in the local news landscape across Europe, based on interviews and site visits with more than 10 news organizations carried out over three years (Jenkins and Nielsen 2018; Jenkins and

Graves 2019; Jenkins 2020). That research yielded numerous references to and examples of collaborative efforts involving local newsrooms, covering a wide range of approaches. The three case studies included in this research were selected from more than 20 candidates as a purposive sample representing multiple media systems (Hallin and Mancini 2004) encompassing different media markets and landscapes for local news, as well as reflecting the types of collaborations emerging around Europe. Most important, initial data suggested each represented a distinct approach to collaboration focused on local journalism and involving different kinds of actors: (1) a collaboration of journalists and non-journalists (data scientists, academics, citizens, etc.) engaging in topic-driven reporting projects (the Bureau Local in the U.K.); (2) a collaboration among one legacy and two start-up news organizations focused on a single topic (“L’Italia Delle Slot” in Italy); and (3) a collaboration among regional news organizations through shared content production and distribution (Lännen Media in Finland).

We interviewed representatives from multiple levels of the collaborations, including those in leadership positions, those involved with the funding and community-development aspects of the projects, and members of the reporting teams and networks. The 29 interviews were all conducted in English and took place in person (11) and remotely by phone or Skype (18).

The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interview data were triangulated through analyzing news output produced through the collaborations, including articles, data visualizations, interactive features, and videos and other multimedia content. We also examined digital tools used to connect participants in the initiatives, such as Slack and social media, as well as organizational documents, including website content, press releases, and public presentations.

We used NVivo software to analyze the data. We conducted two cycles of coding. In the first cycle, we engaged in an initial immersion in the data and then proceeded with line-by-line coding, comparing each line to the previous one (Tracy 2013). During secondary-cycle coding, we began reorganizing and condensing first-cycle codes into categories, themes, and concepts (Saldana 2011). We discussed and compared the themes we identified, which we used to develop the three ideal types of collaboration outlined in the findings section.

Case Descriptions

The London-based Bureau for Investigative Journalism launched the Bureau Local in March 2017 with help from a Digital News Initiative grant. The Bureau Local encourages public-interest investigative journalism at the local level around the U.K. through facilitating a collaborative network of local journalists and providing access to data, as well as training members on how to incorporate data into their reporting. The Bureau Local includes more than 1,400 journalists, technologists, citizens, academics, and others “who care about local accountability, transparency and public interest journalism” (The Bureau Local 2020). Bureau Local investigations have included coverage of council budget spending, resources for domestic violence victims, local government spending, and homeless deaths. The Bureau Local has also made a blueprint of its model available to other journalists and news organizations.

Lännen Media, which translates to “Western Media,” is a joint national newsroom for 11 Finnish-language daily regional newspapers published across western and northern Finland. The production company, Lännen Media Oy, is owned by its participant media houses, for which a team of 40 journalists produces exclusive content, including national and international news, features, analyses, print pages, and exclusive online stories. Lännen Media has offices in 12 cities around Finland, including regional capitals and the national capital, Helsinki.

“L’Italia Delle Slot” is a partnership between Dataninja and Effecinqe, two data-journalism-focused start-ups, and GEDI media group, the largest newspaper publisher in Italy, specifically its Visual Lab, a hub for creating visual and interactive digital content. The project focuses on using data journalism to map the increasing popularity of the gambling industry across the country. Through two editions, published in 2017 and 2018, “L’Italia Delle Slot” addressed the prevalence and social consequences of gambling from a national perspective and within specific regions and local areas. The project is the first large-scale, data-driven investigation of gambling and slot-machine distribution, usage, and effects in Italy.

Findings

This analysis seeks to build on existing models and typologies for collaboration by considering not only the participants, longevity, routines, tools, and benefits of collaborative initiatives but also the ways they are structured journalistically, economically, and structurally to resolve competitive tensions among participating journalists and news organizations. That is, we focus on the ways that collaborations encourage participants to “loosen the reins” (Graves and Konieczna 2015, 1967) of editorial and commercial ownership of reporting practices and output in pursuit of a broader goal.

The analysis highlights three ideal-typical approaches to collaboration: a co-op model, in which similar news organizations agree to join forces only on specific topics where they don’t compete; a contractor model, in which collaboration is structured through a commercial contract among organizations specializing in different areas; and an NGO model, in which many kinds of outlets carve stories out of common data managed by a coordinating nonprofit. We also identify the primary level at which these tensions are assuaged in each project: the topic level, the role level, and the story level.

These three ideal-typical categories are neither exhaustive nor exclusive. Other models centered on managing competitive tensions can be identified, and a given case may combine elements of different approaches. At the same time, the set of collaborations analyzed here was selected for its diversity, and each case has analogues in local journalism and beyond. We believe the resulting models may be applied more widely and suggest further examples in the discussion.

The Co-Op Model: Lännen Media’s Partnership of Equals

Lännen Media formed in 2014 when 11 of Finland’s regional dailies joined forces to launch a collaborative news agency focused on national and international coverage.

Each newspaper contributes staff and financing according to its size; in all, the project has 40 full-time journalists, with 10 in the Helsinki bureau and the rest working out of member newsrooms around the country but reporting exclusively for Lännen Media. Overseen by four top editors and executives — the only staff paid directly out of Lännen Media's budget — the cooperative produces a 4- to 6-page section every day, available exclusively through member newspapers and which each can carry intact or edit as needed.

In this way, the structure of Lännen Media echoes other cooperative arrangements, from informal press pools to legal entities like the Associated Press, in which news organizations historically have worked together to augment coverage and find efficiencies in areas where they don't compete directly. The context for the collaboration is a Finnish newspaper industry dominated by subscription-driven regional dailies, which remain fairly healthy by global standards (in comparison with the U.S. or U.K., for example) but still face pressure to cut costs and "streamline" operations as audiences move online and market barriers disappear in a digital environment.

Against this backdrop, the collaboration offers members much stronger national and international coverage than any regional paper could manage alone, freeing them up to focus on the regional and local stories that represent their USPs. "Lännen Media gives us the chance to be good at our own area," explained the managing editor of *Turun Sanomat*, the leading daily in southwest Finland. "You have to have the whole package, you know? It's sort of that maybe you don't get any new customers, but you can lose the old customers if you don't have the domestic news and foreign news." Several participants noted that with 40 journalists representing the combined readership of a dozen newspapers, Lännen Media enjoys both better access and wider geographic coverage than any of the members individually. The *Turun Sanomat* editor put the formula in simple terms:

I think it's about cutting the costs. It's the biggest benefit all in all. But also, especially when you are dealing with national politics, politicians, for example, you get a bigger audience, so you can get more easily interviews, like presidents or prime minister interviews, and so that's a very big advantage. But in the Lännen Media, there's about 40 journalists [...] and the cost to us is about the cost of six journalists, so that's the mathematics behind it.

The success of that cooperative formula depends on providing coverage that does not cannibalize what any of the member newspapers see as their core offerings. Lännen Media has no website of its own and distributes only to members of the co-op; as the Lännen Media editor-in-chief explained, the effort "was built out of journalistic needs, but it's not something that would take over or pass by or become more important than the brands. We don't aim to be [a] brand for the customers, but we aim to strengthen the newspapers and their brands with good content." Lännen reporters have developed a short-hand for referring to this lack of geographic specificity, "faux locality," which they consider in writing and visualizing their stories. A features editor described "faux locality" in the context of a series called "Wedding Day," in which a reporter interviews multiple people involved with organizing a wedding. She said the reporter must consider whether the chosen couple will interest readers in multiple cities: "We have to be careful and then find those kinds of people that their

story is so interesting that they don't become that false locality, if you understand. I think we have been able to solve these problems, but we think of that every day."

To coordinate their coverage, Lännen Media reporters connect via regular video conferences, as well as Skype messaging with editors throughout the day. They also use a shared content management system to follow what other Lännen reporters are covering and keep member newspapers updated. Some reporters said that while they enjoy working in a newsroom setting, the physical disconnect with other Lännen Media colleagues can be challenging. As an international reporter said, "It's not as good as being in the same room. But in Helsinki [...] there are, like, seven, eight journalists there. Then it's easier to talk about ideas and suggest improvements."

Participants resolve competition journalistically at the topic level, with Lännen Media effectively supplanting the national and overseas news desks while avoiding local stories. "We tend to keep local news to ourselves; it's our core business," said the *Turun Sanomat* editor. "So we do a lot of cooperation and collaboration in national news and foreign news." Lännen Media reporters based in the member newsrooms have to find a national angle for any story ideas originating in their region. "The idea has to work around the country," said a journalist for Lännen Media Helsinki. Conversely, participating papers may do additional reporting around a local angle for one of the Lännen Media stories they receive but generally are encouraged to let the cooperative work independently. You don't want "too many cooks stirring the porridge," noted the editor-in-chief of *Kaleva*, a participating newspaper in northern Finland.

Interviews suggested that what might be called a partnership-of-equals ethic helps to resolve competitive tensions economically. While larger newspapers contribute more, all members share the costs of running Lännen Media and take an active role in staffing and governance. Journalists rotate into the cooperative from the regional newsrooms for a period of two or three years and then return to their original masthead; this helps to keep ties strong between the different newsrooms and has the added benefit of building valuable experience that journalists take back to their home newspapers, participants said. The editor-in-chief of Lännen Media explained,

It's a good glue to get those folks to be together, because, I mean, for us, it's that we are not someone who produces content and just tries to sell it and send it from the outside. It's something where everyone participates, and they have at least someone they know who is part of this newsroom. And we have had very good journalists from some of the smaller papers, so usually they are the proudest ones to send in the very best that they have because they really want to be on the same tables with the big guys and so on.

In terms of sustainability, difficulties in Lännen Media tend to involve assigning editorial value to stories in a consistent way. Asked what the greatest risk of the effort is, one editor noted that "there's a danger when you join forces that you produce content that doesn't answer to your readers' needs and interests," and indicated that this was a subject of ongoing discussions. Several participants mentioned that various member newspapers take more and less open approaches to their paywalls, which can pose a problem when choosing "star stories" — exclusive content marketed to drive new subscriptions. At the time of interviews, discussions were proceeding about how to devise a paywall strategy for Lännen Media stories that would satisfy all members, which would ensure that the collaboration remains sustainable even as the print product declines.

The Contractor Model: Harnessing Expertise through the ‘L’Italia Delle Slot’ Project

The “L’Italia Delle Slot” investigation’s contractor model for collaboration extends the traditional commercial model for local news production through uniting a large legacy news publisher with two data-journalism-focused start-ups. This collaboration began in 2013, when the founder of Effecinque, a start-up focused on developing innovative approaches to online journalism, started researching the rise of slot machines in Italy. No data yet existed chronicling the prevalence of slot machines and how they affected the country’s economy, so he filed an open-records request, which was denied. He then partnered with the co-founder of Dataninja, a grassroots data-journalism network, and they discovered a government-run online database listing every business in the country authorized to house slot machines. They used it to create data sets documenting the number of businesses per resident authorized to house slot machines and how the rise of slot machines corresponded to rates of gambling addiction. In 2017, after the passage of Italy’s Freedom of Information Act, the two accessed records outlining the number of slot machines for Italy’s nearly 8,000 municipalities and how much people spent on them.

This data set made Effecinque and Dataninja compelling partners and ensured they would play an active role in a collaboration with the GEDI Group. The founder of Effecinque said, “This is the first time you had the number of slot machines at such a local level. So they were interested in it.” GEDI contracted with Dataninja to provide the cleaned and analyzed data, as well as localized reports for use by the local newspapers and training on how to devise story ideas from the data and integrate them into their reporting. The localized reports included data about each city, tables with data for the top 20 cities in the region, interactive maps, and other elements the newsrooms could use, with the GEDI Visual Lab offering guidance and producing a web portal, data visualizations, videos, and other interactive content. While news values drew the two startups to the slot-machine story, the partnership positioned them as vendors to the newspaper group. The leader of the GEDI Visual Lab offered project oversight, communicating the needs of the GEDI Group and working alongside Effecinque and Dataninja to ensure all partners had a voice in the focus and direction of the investigation.

This approach resolved competitive tensions journalistically at the role level, in that participants — including the founders of the two start-up organizations, the head of the Visual Lab, and editors and reporters at the company’s 13 local newspapers — each had separate, well-defined responsibilities based on distinct areas of expertise. The head of the Visual Lab said that although GEDI’s newspapers had reported on the rise of slot machines in their areas, “If you can’t have a data set that proves to you, ‘Yes, we have a problem in our city,’ it’s not the same. I think that’s one of the great things about ‘L’Italia Delle Slot’ is that not only our 13 local newspapers use this project, but in the first week, we have found on the Web almost 50 articles written by very, very small titles that used this data set.”

Editors and reporters at local newsrooms also contributed local knowledge, using the data set to tell stories about their communities and reinforce the importance of the topic to readers. Interviewees said that although they did not have extensive experience with data-driven reporting, the localized reports from Effecinque and Dataninja eased the process. As a journalist at one local newspaper said, “Last year was so elaborate, but I

was working on that before, so it was quite easy, not easy as it takes a lot of time and this is one of the problems, but they [the data] were clear and clean.” Similarly, a deputy editor-in-chief overseeing four of GEDI’s local newspapers said the data allowed his newspapers to draw meaningful comparisons regarding gambling, resulting in “a network — this is a reachable experience which benefits from many points of view.”

Partnering with Italy’s largest newspaper publisher was economically beneficial for the two start-ups in that they could share their work and expertise in local and national newspapers, bringing visibility as well as an opportunity to address the national and local scale of the gambling issue. The founder of Dataninja said, “We have one data set, we worked only one time on this data set, and then we have all [these] stories from different perspectives.” The first investigation was such a success that the Visual Lab partnered with Effecinque and Dataninja for a second edition, through which they expanded the data to include all types of legal gaming around Italy. They did not provide localized reports for the second edition, as the local newsrooms had the experience to analyze and report on the data on their own.

The sustainability of this contractor-based approach was evident to participants. They cited the collaboration’s short-term model, which allowed for flexibility in structure, resource-sharing, and topic selection. Working with Effecinque and Datanina as freelance contractors allowed these organizations to maintain their identity and position in the data-journalism field and potentially collaborate with other partners, helping them “exit from the start-up phase,” as the Dataninja founder described. However, the founder of Effecinque said the trust the three organizations built in determining how to use, publish, and build public discussion around the data will shape future collaborations:

We don’t have any exclusive relationship with them [GEDI]. We can work with whomever we want, but not with this data or similar data; we wouldn’t do that. What we could do was if next year we have the data and they no longer want to use them, we can go to another newspaper. But they are the ones we have to ask first.

Because Effecinque and Datanina provided training for local newspapers, those journalists can use these skills after the formal relationship has ended and pursue their own data-driven investigations. The founder of Effecinque reinforced that collaborations like “L’Italia Delle Slot” are vital for news organizations to adapt to new technological tools and trends. He said, “Nowadays there is this idea, and everybody tends to accept this fact, that you need different people, because you need different skills, and all these skills cannot be within the same person anymore.”

The ability to apply these skills also enhances GEDI’s journalistic reputation for offering in-depth local investigations. A reporter with one of GEDI’s local newspapers said the experience of participating in “L’Italia Delle Slot” contributed to building trust with readers because “it’s going out of the ordinary. It’s like showing that we can also do something different from basic reporting on things that are happening.” The founder of Dataninja said the learning curve for incorporating data journalism into local newsrooms can be steep, but the result has been beneficial to Dataninja and to the other collaborators.

They are always interested in the story and in the news. The problems are after this step, so to organize the work, to extract stories from the data after quite long work on the data, to accept a way to do the things in an experimental way. So, we have no idea [...] of the findings when you start the work, or the starting [hypothesis] can be neglected, it

can be false at the end of the journey. This is quite difficult to understand from a journalist's point of view, but it's the soul of the experiment method and the investigation, a journalistic investigation.

The NGO Model: Managing Diversity under The Bureau Local

The Bureau Local is an offshoot of the London-based Bureau of Investigative Journalism, a nonprofit, foundation-backed newsroom focused on accountability or “watchdog” reporting in the public interest. Launched in 2017, The Bureau Local shares its parent organization's nonprofit status and public-service mission but with an explicit focus on enabling collaborative journalism across the U.K. as a way to strengthen local investigative reporting in the face of severe economic challenges.

The Bureau Local's project-based collaborative model rests on having a nonprofit to act as a central hub that coordinates and supports parallel investigations, and facilitates collaboration, across a wide range of participants. The Bureau Local's joint investigations have involved many kinds of news organizations across the U.K. — from regional BBC bureaus to commercial, chain-owned newspapers to independent local dailies, community-owned sites, and freelancers. As the Bureau Local's director explained, “When I was hired, this project was specifically to support journalism. It was, let's get journalists working together. It was aligned with the Panama Papers — very much, let's get a journalist in each of these areas and have them share knowledge.” The network also includes non-journalists: technologists, data scientists, designers, issue experts, academics, and others with specialized skills, as well as everyday volunteers and “activists and campaign-y type members,” according to one of The Bureau Local's “community organizers,” an experienced investigative journalist. She explained,

There'll be mentoring roles that people will take up. People ... with particular reporting skills will help people who perhaps don't have those skills. Or, indeed, people who aren't journalists, who have other sets of skills, will help others. There's very much a sense of collaborating also being about information sharing, journalism no longer being so much of a competitive sport.

What makes such diverse collaboration possible is the structure of The Bureau Local's investigations of multifaceted national issues like homelessness, immigration policy, and local government spending. Competitive tensions are resolved journalistically at the story level, because members can use the same shared database to slice off national, local, or even neighborhood stories. A news editor said this approach has allowed local journalists to enhance their data reporting through “coming together to use the resources, and we do things that 10 years ago we would all have done in house, separately in house, but now we're all working together and we're just working a bit more efficiently.” A good example is The Bureau Local's 2017 examination of cuts in funding for victims of domestic violence, which yielded national headlines (Channel 4 News was a partner) in parallel with 50 local stories on how cuts were managed and the consequences for local councils around the country. A data journalist on the project explained,

We did rounds of Freedom of Information Acts at the start, just internally to work out what was happening, and did see this big drop-off in funding. But [we] realized, quite

quickly, that because the funding was so reliant on individual council decision-making, while that would be a national story, what was much more interesting and relevant was how one council is doing this and another council is doing this. Or, this is what it actually means on the ground in Leeds or Manchester or wherever it might be.

The focus on multi-tiered, data-driven projects dovetails with The Bureau Local's volunteerist ethos, creating many different ways for people to contribute. In some cases, like the domestic violence investigation, local reporting feeds back into the national story as well. To coordinate efforts by participants with different experience levels, and to ensure data are consistent and reliable, The Bureau Local provides "reporting recipes" to follow; in the domestic violence story, the recipe called on journalists to ask councils about the size of local cuts, to use agencies to find case studies, to talk to the local Member of Parliament, and so on. The data journalist noted,

These really beautiful, deep, nuanced reports came out across the country that said that we managed to speak to these people, because they'd been working on it for months ... and they had the national context and what was happening in their local area.

A major benefit of coordinating investigations across national and local levels is to maximize attention and impact when the story is published, which has spurred discussion among local and national politicians and policymakers. However, this requires sacrificing control over the story; local outlets voluntarily agree to publish on a schedule set by The Bureau Local. (This mirrors the rules of international collaborations like the Panama Papers, which require participants to adhere to a strict reporting and publishing schedule set by the ICIJ.) Commenting on the release date for the domestic violence investigation, a news editor for the *Lancashire Post* said, "I think it got pushed back because they got some kind of deal with Channel 4, so it actually got pushed back, so I guess ... one of the disadvantages of it, it does mean that you can't control when stuff comes out, so that is a disadvantage, but suck it up."

The Bureau Local model resolves journalistic tensions economically through providing support for local investigations, including informal mentoring and skill-sharing among participants, as well as formal training mechanisms and, in some cases, direct cash grants to subsidize freelancers. The Bureau Local's Slack channel and Open Newsroom events are also important resources, offering spaces for network members to gather and share advice for navigating FOI requests, data analysis and visualizations, source and story tips, and other topics. This support also contributes to the sustainability of the program. "The link-up with trainers is quite important, because there's a lot of people involved with our network who just don't feel that they're quite ready to contribute," the community organizer noted. She added that training and skill-sharing also build long-term capacity, potentially seeding future investigations in each locality: "If we could just bring those people up over the line, that would be amazing." Because it is funded by multiple short-term grants and donations, The Bureau Local is exploring other financial models to ensure its long-term viability, including paid memberships.

Discussion and Conclusion

Although research has tended to favor high-profile multi-national collaborations like the Panama Papers, studying locally focused efforts can elucidate the distinctive

benefits these approaches offer. Like the collaborations involving their larger counterparts, local collaborations often focus on cultivating large shared data sets that journalists can use to bring local context to national issues, as well as offer the support and training to ensure participants feel confident to use them. None of these collaborations would be conceivable outside of the digital media environment; two focus on data journalism based on shared access to large datasets, and one creates a networked newsroom spanning multiple publications and spaces. What our analysis highlights is how these local collaborations have developed different structures allowing participants to manage competitive tensions and build trust, confidence, and a “collaborative attitude” (Konow-Lund, Gearing, and Berglez 2019).

We identified three ideal-typical models of collaboration and addressed how they achieved these aims: Lännen Media’s co-op model, in which regional newspapers joined forces to cover non-competing topics; “L’Italia Delle Slot’s” contractor model, in which organizations with specific expertise contract to produce a short-term investigation; and The Bureau Local’s NGO model, in which a coordinating nonprofit manages competing outlets engaging in shared data-driven investigations.

In particular, we examined how these initiatives manage competitive pressures — a defining institutional characteristic of news organizations (Hanitzsch 2007) — journalistically and economically, as well as how participants discussed the sustainability of their approaches. Attempts to address potential problems associated with competition were evident in how the leaders of these collaborations assigned roles and responsibilities, determined their working structures, recruited and coordinated with participants, established their editorial goals, and managed their communication.

This focus highlights and helps to explain differences in the structure of these collaborations, highlighting the social and organizational work that underlies the successful use of digital tools. Lännen Media functions as a news service for member newspapers, with journalists around the country reporting national and international news that is then made available across the partnership in print and online. Lännen Media’s “partnership of equals” structure emphasizes the creation of high-quality yet geographically neutral content that member newspapers can adapt to fit their needs while focusing on local reporting as their core business. The “L’Italia Delle Slot” project united the multimedia lab of a large legacy publisher and its local newspapers with two data-journalism-focused start-ups, all of which contributed specific expertise and resources. Through embracing each participant’s distinctive role, this contractor model allowed them to maintain their autonomy while meeting shared editorial and commercial goals. Finally, The Bureau Local operates a voluntary program through which participants freely access large national data sets on topics with national resonance while exploring local and regional implications. Network members commit to releasing their reporting simultaneously, but they maintain flexibility in which investigations they choose, and The Bureau Local’s growing profile — and funding from high-profile grants — offers enhanced visibility.

These three collaborations represent hybrid versions of the collaborative models identified by Stonbely (2017), helping to illuminate the rationale for different approaches. For example, The Bureau Local is temporary in that projects are discrete and time-limited but ongoing in providing a structure for repeated collaborations and

long-term skill-building; this is a key benefit of having a nonprofit like The Bureau Local (or the ICIJ internationally) coordinate collaboration among a diverse network of news organizations that can opt in or out of a given project. Similarly, the co-op model used by Lännen Media allows participants to contribute in ways that are both integrated (sharing resources and working together on projects) and separate (reporting stories independently). Meanwhile, the fee-for-service structure of “L’Italia Delle Slot” offers another way to balance a temporary commitment with deeply integrated local and national reporting and production teams.

The three structures detailed here have clear echoes in other collaborations, both in local reporting and beyond. For instance, the BBC’s Local Democracy Reporting Service, which funds nearly 150 reporters to cover local government, resembles Lännen Media in that it hinges on a cooperative content-sharing arrangement — with common editorial standards and a shared publishing system — among newspaper, online, and radio media companies around the U.K. (Other “partnership of equals” co-ops, such as the Associated Press, have a long history in journalism.) The ICIJ is perhaps the archetypical case of the NGO model and was a direct inspiration for The Bureau Local. ProPublica’s Electionland initiative in the U.S. offers another example, providing TV, radio, online, and print reporters around the country with data about elections, training for covering election administration, a Slack group to share tips and ideas, and promotion online and via social media. The contractor model is less common, but fee-for-service arrangements have been the basis for several fact-checking collaborations in the United States and in Europe; for instance, Italy’s Pagella Politica incorporated as a for-profit business so it could strike commercial partnerships with public broadcaster RAI. More recently, the fact-checking arms of media companies around the world have been paid on a fee-for-service basis for their work for major platforms, most notably through Facebook’s growing “Third-Party Fact-Checking Program” (Funke 2019).

The three cases’ innovation comes in the ways they have extended these strategies to engage former competitors in the shared aim of producing high-quality local journalism. The leaders of these collaborations did not explicitly organize around the need to address potential issues with competition, but they all began by identifying editorial goals, determining how to best use their shared resources, and ensuring buy-in from participants. They also developed management structures reflecting traditional journalistic roles (editors, researchers, reporters, designers) and created new positions to serve their specific projects (community organizers, data analysts, theme editors). They allowed for flexibility to adapt to changes among their participants and within the broader media environment, such as The Bureau Local offering more grassroots story-idea generation and Lännen Media considering how to evolve from a print-oriented partnership to one accommodating multiple approaches to online reader payments. Finally, they have focused on identifying strong leaders, communicating consistently with participants, establishing clear aims (Houston 2010), and using digital tools to unite networks and build team identity and culture (Bunce, Wright, and Scott 2018).

This study includes a few limitations. The research relies on three case studies, and although the cases were selected for their distinctiveness and characteristics reflecting the universe of collaborations occurring around Europe, these ideal types are not

exhaustive. Future research should explore how these collaborations continue to address shifts in the local-news landscape while examining emerging models. Scholars should also explore the experiences of non-journalist members of these networks, as well as local sources and audiences. Ethnographic research exploring the day-to-day work of organizing collaborative journalism is also needed.

This study adds nuance to existing models for collaboration, reinforcing the common goals uniting these projects, the needs they aim to address, how they build their networks, and their reporting and distribution strategies, while specifically analyzing the role of competition in these processes. Because newswork in the digital environment is driven by immediacy (Deuze 2005), understanding how these collaborations minimize competitive tensions in pursuit of producing in-depth, reliable reporting is vital. This type of coverage is particularly important for local media, for which cooperation can address diminished resources resulting from declining revenues, downsizing, and centralization. This willingness to “do more with less” suggests that local journalists recognize that the desirable market positions and large audiences they once enjoyed will likely not return, so they must renegotiate familiar routines and practices and explore more experimental and flexible approaches.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This work was supported by Google News Initiative.

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Appendix

Collaboration	Title at Time of Interview	Interview Length
Lännen Media	Theme Editor	55 min
Lännen Media	Managing Editor	56 min
Lännen Media	Editor-in-Chief	44 min
Lännen Media	Theme Reporter	41 min
Lännen Media	News Editor	1 h, 6 min
Lännen Media	International Reporter	44 min
Lännen Media	Editor-in-Chief	54 min
Lännen Media	International Reporter	12 min
Lännen Media	Editor-in-Chief	8 min
L'Italia Delle Slot	Visual Lab Head	1 h, 11 min
L'Italia Delle Slot	Deputy Editor-in-Chief	21 min
L'Italia Delle Slot	Start-Up Co-Founder	1 h, 13 min
L'Italia Delle Slot	Reporter	41 min
L'Italia Delle Slot	Start-Up Founder	2 h
Bureau Local	Freelance Journalist	38 min
Bureau Local	Professor	56 min
Bureau Local	Editor, Investigations Unit	34 min
Bureau Local	Assistant Features Editor	32 min
Bureau Local	Start-Up Co-Founder	36 min
Bureau Local	Freelance Journalist	37 min
Bureau Local	Community Organizer	1 h
Bureau Local	Freelance Journalist	1 h, 18 min
Bureau Local	Director	1 h
Bureau Local	Data Journalist	24 min
Bureau Local	News Editor	54 min
Bureau Local	Professor	26 min
Bureau Local	Developer and Data Analyst	19 min
Bureau Local	Special Correspondent	54 min
Bureau Local	Funder	1 h, 13 min