5150: Enhanced transnationalization through investigative journalistic networks? A survey study on ICIJ journalists

Due to far reaching political deregulations, global capital and financial transactions flow independently from geographical borders and nation states. Hence, the need for a global watchdog journalism that disentangles global grievances, provides transparency and holds leaders accountable seems 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 to make formerly hidden information accessible for the public (Felle, 2015). Two of the most famous and recent examples for such a global investigative revelation were the Panama and Paradise Papers by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalism (ICIJ) which drew attention to tax avoidance strategies and criminal financial activities of hundreds of people in high societal positions worldwide (Obermayer & Obermaier, 2016; Woodall, 2017). Our overall research interest is concerned with the contribution of events such as these mega leak publications to the emergence of a transnational journalism culture with shared values and journalistic practices. Specifically, we want to contribute to the understanding of global journalism by examining the transnational cooperation of journalists within the ICIJ who have been working together on the Panama and/ or Paradise Paper investigations. We want to gain insights to their working conditions and routines as well as experiences and attitudes in order to examine whether the cooperation facilitates the emergence of a shared mode of operation and journalistic working culture.

Examining investigative networks such as the ICIJ may also contribute theoretically to the understanding of transnationalization of the public sphere since these – as networks consisting of members from national media outlets – also expand existing typologies of transnational media (e.g, Brüggemann & Schulz-Forberg, 2009). It seems worthwhile to explore how these networks can facilitate what Berglez (2008) calls the “global outlook” that “produces information of the intercontinental kind, potentially including both international relations (between nation-states) and transnational processes” (Berglez, 2008, p. 847). Heft, Alfter and Pfetsch (2017) argue that investigative networks can facilitate the transnationalization of public spheres, especially on the horizontal dimension – that is the observation of political actors in other countries. Beyond that, investigative networks pool resources and are able to deal with great amounts of information. Handley and Ismail (2012) and Woodall (2017) also point to the greater independence from official sources and lower vulnerability to political pressure of these networks as a particular characteristic that enhances transnational orientation.

The ICIJ is an example for such a global network and consists of about 200 journalists in 70 countries who work together on global investigative projects. The Panama Papers were an extraordinary in-depth investigation that followed a leak of 11.5 million documents by an anonymous source to the German newspaper Süddeutsche Zeitung in 2015 (Obermayer & Obermaier, 2016). The files revealed hidden off-shore activities of “world political leaders, links to global scandals, and details of the hidden financial dealings of fraudsters, drug traffickers, billionaires, celebrities, sports stars and more.” The Paradise Papers built on another leak of 13.4 million financial and legal documents to the Süddeutsche Zeitung in 2016.
We conducted an online survey that was directed at journalists on the ICIJ mailing list who worked on the Panama and/or Paradise Papers. The questionnaire covered journalists’ personal and professional background, matters of cooperation and working routines, the strategic focus of their coverage (global or national outreach), assessments concerning challenges and limits of their work, role perceptions, as well as attitudes on the handling of sources, ethical standards, appropriate research methods and their main contacts within the network.

The study was conducted between March 13 and April 10, 2018. We could gather 84 datasets (of which 69 were completed). 67 people responded that they worked in both projects; merely five people were only involved in the Paradise Papers, nine only participated in the Panama Papers project.

Preliminary descriptive results give a first overview. Our respondents come from 43 different countries. One third is female, the overall age average is about 44 years. Respondents’ working experience in journalism is about 18 years on average. 51 participants are members of the ICIJ and most of the respondents were also part in other ICIJ investigations (e.g., LuxLeaks, Offshore Leaks and SwissLeaks). About two thirds had received some kind of data journalism training. Most respondents worked in teams (with very different group sizes) and had some kind of division of labor.

The transnational orientation of journalists is one of the main focuses of the study. We asked people about the share of products with a rather domestic/ national outlook versus a non-domestic/ international outlook. A majority responded that their coverage focused mainly on non-domestic/ international actors (politicians, public authorities, celebrities etc.). 34 respondents (n=56) rated the share of their journalistic products with an international outlook higher than 50 percent. This global perspective is connected to the national audiences they produce their pieces for. 64 respondents agreed to the statement that they try to present how events affect the lives of their audiences (M=4.4, SD=.85, n=68). They also most often try to illustrate how events on the global level are connected (M=4.34, SD=.86, n=68). These two points are both important aspects of Berglez’ (2007) idea of global journalism. Beyond that, the approval of statements that concern the perspective of people living elsewhere (M=3.88, SD=.97, n=68) and events that do not directly relate to audiences (M=3.82, SD=.87, n=67) is also quite high while the approval for the statement concerning a focus on events and people that directly concern the lives of the own audience is somewhat lower and more controversial (M=3.79, SD=1.18, n=68).

These first insights will be complemented by further analysis that will also take journalistic role perceptions, views on ethical standards and further assessments of their work and experiences in the projects into account. Here we can compare our results with major international surveys (Willnat, Weaver & Wilhoit 2017; Hanitzsch et al., 2011).

References