While journalism for ages has been considered as a profession of ‘lone wolfs’, the present and future of journalism is shaped by practices of collaboration of various kinds. Collaboration has been researched as a profound change in journalistic practice in contexts such as citizen and participatory journalism (Abbott, 2017), digital co-production (Handley, 2014) and with respect to cross-border collaborative journalism (Chadwick & Collister 2014; Sambrook 2018). The paper focusses on collabor-ative undertakings in the form of transnational journalism networks (Heft, Alfter, & Pfetsch, 2017). In such research and investigation networks, journalists and/or media organizations from different countries join forces in order to investigate a common topic in a collaborative effort. This practice, described by Alfter (2016) as the method of cross-border journalism, not only transcends national borders, but potentially also reduces the influence of nation states or national cultures on journalistic practice and the outcome of journalistic work. Since the late 1990s such cross-border research collaborations increasingly emerged all over the world, especially within the fields of investigative reporting and data driven journalism (Lewis, 2016b).

The Panama Papers project, which went public in 2016, by then was the most impressive example of such journalistic cross-border research collaboration. Journalists and media organizations from nearly 80 countries participated in a yearlong, discreet investigative collaboration (International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, 2017; Obermayer & Obermaier, 2016). The project was of “unprecedented scale in terms of data, documents, number of participating journalists and co-publishing news organizations and its overall public impact and potential policy reverberations” (Lewis, 2016a). Participating journalists came from countries and media organizations in Europe, Asia, North- and South America, Africa and Oceania. For Lewis, collaboration of this kind marks the future of journalism (Lewis, 2016a). Beyond single – while spectacular – projects such as the Panama Papers, scholars observe a “significant shift in the way journalism is now practiced” (Houston, 2016) which cannot remain without consequences for the structures of the emerging public spheres.

The work presented here focusses on the impact of such cross-border journalism projects on the transnationalization of public communication in digital media environments. It addresses the question, whether these shifts in journalistic practice translate into the structures of the resulting public communication. More specifically, we ask how transnational the networked public sphere the Panama Papers revelation created was – exemplified by the communication structures that evolved on the networking platform Twitter.

We conceptualize the transnationality of public spheres as vertical and horizontal communicative linkages (Koopmans & Erbe, 2004). The vertical dimension captures linkages between national and supranational entities. The horizontal dimension consists of linkages
between nation states. We argue that cross-border collaborative journalism could be particularly conducive with respect to the horizontal interlacing of public spheres (Heft et al., 2017). One form of such horizontal interlacing is the simultaneity of issue attention and debate across countries and publics (Eder 2000). Second, a transnationally networked public sphere can be established via direct flows of communication and interaction. Especially digital media technologies has been attributed the capacity to enable and increase such interconnections. Twitter is among the technologies used to achieve attention of certain issues and enabling interactive communication, horizontally through cross-national networks and vertically across different layers of communication (Benkler, 2006).

We trace, whether the transnational collaborative Panama Papers investigation - the journalistic network - paved the way for a networked public sphere characterized by (1) transnational issue attention and (2) transnational interconnections through Twitter users interacting across countries and language bounds. The paper brings together research on cross-border journalistic collaboration, transnationalization and digitally networked public spheres. It outlines main characteristics of the Panama Papers cross-border investigation. We then analyze the issue-specific networked public sphere on Twitter during the first half year after the Panama Papers revelation. The study relies on Twitter data automatically retrieved via the Twitter Collection and Analysis Toolkit (TCAT) at Boston University (Groshek, 2014) and processed by automatic and manual content analysis. We assess transnationality analyzing a) the synchronicity of user activity and thus issue salience across country borders and b) the actual scope and boundaries of users’ horizontal interconnections through digital linking structures.

References


