**Introduction**

In recent years, the news industry has been faced with an increasingly global and digital news climate. This tumultuous change has caused many longstanding news organizations to cease or reduce print production – or close their doors entirely. However, virtual newsrooms and non-profit news organizations pose innovative solutions that help journalists adapt to these systematic changes, even improving the quality and spread of journalism worldwide. A recent example of the fusion of these two strategies led to perhaps the most successful global news event in history: The Panama Papers. What began as a leak of documents from Panamanian law firm Mossack Fonseca to the German newspaper Süddeutsche Zeitung became a global investigation led by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ). The project coordinated the efforts of nearly 400 journalists in 80 countries (Uberti) to implicate, at present, persons from more than 200 countries (Bowen). The hurdles that the traditional news industry has faced come down to two categories: digital disruption and globalization. However, throughout recent years the industry has subverted these challenges and used digital and global resources as tools to recreate journalism – bigger and better than ever.

**Facing Challenges**

Digital disruption has caused profit models for newspapers to dry up: Bowen cites “rising newsprint prices, falling ad sales, loss of much classified advertising” as factors commonly blamed for the demise of traditional news. He continues: “A popular whipping boy is the Internet, which, we moan, has bred a new generation of information consumers who are more likely to get their news bits from Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and the like than from ‘the dead-tree press.’” These news platforms which offer content for free, along with the shift to a 24-hour news cycle made possible by the Internet, has caused many news organizations to decide that investigative reporting is no longer a worthwhile endeavor (García-Avilés).

The Internet and other technologies of the information age have also connected people on a global scale like never before. The core of this globalization is characterized by the “*creation* of new social networks”; “*multiplication* of existing connections that cut across traditional political, economic, social, cultural, and geographical boundaries”; “the *expansion* and the *stretching* of social relations, activities, and connections”; and “the *intensification* and *acceleration* of social exchanges and activities” (Steger 14, emphasis original). The news industry has felt the reverberations of all of these components: respectively, the distribution of news via social media, an increase in international news reporting and readership, the growth of global organizations which must be reported on, and the expectation of increased speed of reporting by news organizations.

**Turning Challenges into Opportunities**

These challenges, however, have been turned into solutions. In 2013, the Knight Foundation released *Finding a Foothold*, a report on the national state of nonprofit journalism. The report listed traits which were exhibited in the most successful organizations; among them was “*Move to where your audience is*” (qtd. in McGrath 37). At a time when the audience of major news institutions is increasingly online and global, those organizations which will succeed will be those who follow their audience’s lead and embrace digital platforms and a global perspective. This paradigm shift must be threefold in the implementation of digital information gathering, virtual collaboration between journalists, and updated revenue models that allow journalists to pursue stories of large scale and impact.

In the gathering of information on which to report, García-Avilés found in his interviews with digital media professionals that they often use social media and email, but are conscious of the fact that this information must be checked thoroughly. One of the editors he interviewed said: “We check the information we receive on Twitter, go to the source that can confirm this information, and then publish it” (qtd. in García-Avilés). With increased diligence, journalists can utilize the wealth of information and connections available through the Internet to report on stories that would not have been possible prior to the Information Age.

Digital platforms can also help journalists communicate more efficiently during the reporting and editing process. Hendrickson studied the effects of instant messaging (IM) at the online magazine Jezebel. The staff of Jezebel do not have an office and telecommute, so nearly all communication at the magazine is done over IM. This made the publication’s newsroom a virtual environment rather than a brick-and-mortar office. Hendrickson found that “[i]nstant messaging implies a shared space and the sensation of affinity that accompanies it” and that “regular informal communication enhances the common ground … between the editors and helps increase their social bonding, which works to enrich the overall shared knowledge of staffers.” While the term “telecommuting” does not usually imply a global scale, systems that use platforms like IM break down national and temporal boundaries to make it easy to create highly collaborative and productive global workgroups.

Finally, the Internet’s negative impact on newspaper revenue has caused a decrease in the amount of costly investigative and public-interest reporting. Coates Nee, in her investigation of innovations in digitally native news nonprofits, found that when it comes to privately owned news organizations, “their investment in public service journalism has been questioned by scholars who worry that decisions being made by media managers are driven by economic motivations, not the public interest.” Nonprofit news organizations are not a new idea (the Associated Press was founded in 1846), but they avoid this 21st-century problem altogether by putting their revenue streams in the hands of the public they serve and foundations interested in encouraging in-depth journalism. Powers and Yaros (2013) affirm that “[i]nformation produced from nonprofit news organizations is a public good.” While it is unclear whether individual donations or foundation grants provide a larger portion of the revenue for nonprofit news organizations (see Powers and Yaros 2012 and 2013), financial support from the organization’s audience is based on a sense of community and trust and, most significantly, an interest in supporting quality journalism, according to the research of Powers and Yaros in 2013. They conclude that “the extent to which an individual shares a nonprofit’s beliefs, identifies with its goals and how to achieve them and feels a strong personal connection are primary determinants of the degree of commitment.” Over half of individual donors in their study cited “independence from the influence of private ownership” as a reason they support a nonprofit news organization.

**NPR: A Success in Digital Nonprofit Journalism**

An example of a successful fusion of digital and nonprofit journalism is National Public Radio (NPR), which began its digital overhaul in 2008 (Usher 66) but has been nonprofit since its inception in 1970. The senior vice-president of programming at the beginning of the transition to digital, Jay Kernis, described “the NPR of tomorrow” as a “single/editorial production line – one, digital newsroom, where editors, reporters and producers can access a single system to coordinate, approve and edit content for multiple platforms” (qtd. in Usher 68). The transition to NPR’s version of a virtual newsroom was rocky but culminated in “an organization able to embrace ambiguity” (74). Now, NPR is the public broadcasting outlet in the United States with the largest weekly audience – about 32 million (66), and it maintains a focus on public-interest reporting.

**The Panama Papers: Digital Nonprofit Journalism on a Global Scale**

Coates Nee stated that “[d]uring a period of discontinuous change, industry leaders may be threatened by entrepreneurs who run smaller, leaner operations.” While massive media organizations have been shaken by the paradigm shifts taking place in the industry, smaller community news organizations have been able to innovate as digital nonprofits. That small-scale innovation has opened new pathways and has been taking hold of larger and larger organizations in recent years. While NPR’s national reach makes it a significant example of a digital nonprofit news organization, its scale pales in comparison to the global effort that led to the break of the Panama Papers.

The new twist that the ICIJ brought to the reporting of the Panama Papers was that they used their global network of partnering organizations to create a massive collaboration. While the ICIJ is no stranger to collaboration, this kind of undertaking was unheard of but necessary, considering that the amount of leaked information the journalists had access to was over 1,000 times larger than that of WikiLeaks in 2010, amounting to 2.6 terabytes (Greenberg). McGrath’s study of I-News, an investigative nonprofit in Colorado, concluded that the collaboration of many news outlets statewide “has the potential for a broader impact, especially considering the tendency of some journalists to ignore a story broken by another newspaper or outlet because it’s ‘not their story.’” In the case of the Panama Papers, scaling up the collaboration to a global level also scaled up the story’s impact.

The ICIJ, a Washington, D.C.-based organization founded in 1997 by the Center for Public Integrity (CPI), makes maximizing impact a priority, and as such has become “a go-to facilitator for such massive international leaks,” including that involving Swiss banks in 2015 (Uberti). “So many stories aren’t just state stories or local stories. They’re national and international stories. And if you can create a coalition, or a consortium, to tackle it using the same data, you can have a much bigger impact and do a better job,” said Bill Buzenberg of CPI (qtd. in Uberti).

**What Made the Panama Papers Work?**

According to Kristen Hare of Poynter, the components that make up a collaboration of such massive scale include:

* “Patience and teamwork” and the “ability to see the big picture”
* “A place to gather” and the “ability to share”
* “A willingness to devote the resources”

Using digital and nonprofit innovations, the ICIJ was able to meet these requirements and pull off a year-long research collaboration, a nearly simultaneous worldwide news break, and a historical journalistic event with massive impact.

In order to cultivate patience, teamwork, and big-picture thinking in the journalists involved in the project, the ICIJ had to create a global journalistic community. Many news organizations operate in a competitive environment in order to avoid getting “scooped” by other outlets, so the ICIJ made it a condition of working on the project that journalists adhere to the Consortium’s set publishing date.

Besides reducing competition, this requirement increased the impact of the story once it did break. When trying to get news outlets involved in Colorado’s I-News collaboration, Laura Frank, the journalist behind the effort, said: “What I was selling was the idea of impact. If their story is everywhere at once, people were more likely to hear about it. I argued that it would benefit them to be on the inside of this conversation instead of the outside looking in, and they agreed to it” (qtd. in McGrath). She said that their strategy, smaller than that used in the Panama Papers but sharing the same philosophy, generated “a statewide conversation about these issues that hadn’t happened before” (qtd. in McGrath). An indeed, once the Panama Papers did break, the story was everywhere and generating protests and deep discussions about corruption and tax-evasion worldwide.

This strong, collaborative, multi-national journalistic community was also an environment conducive to upholding ethical practices, according to García-Avilés. His study concluded that “[i]n digital newsrooms, journalists make decisions every day based on the professional standards formulated in their communities of practice. A healthy practice would constitute a viable ethical community capable of inspiring real solidarity among journalists.” While small murmurs did escape that something was up, the community of journalists (nearly 400 in total) managed to keep the Papers a secret for over a year until the ICIJ’s scheduled break in April 2016 – putting the good of exposing many over the good of exposing one implicated person in a journalist’s home country. In addition, while the ICIJ has released some of the leaked information, they have kept journalistic ethics about the privacy of non-public figures in mind by not dumping the files online wholesale à la WikiLeaks.

The collaboration also required the ability to share information and a place to gather. These were requirements for both the gathering of data from the source and the searching and reporting of the journalists involved. In the first interaction the initial journalist from Süddeutsche Zeitung had with the source, who called himself John Doe, over encrypted chat, Doe said: “There are a couple of conditions. My life is in danger. We will only chat over encrypted files. No meeting, ever” (qtd. in Fox-Brewster). The hack was possible due to Mossack Fonseca’s outdated security measures (Fox-Brewster), but the source and his collaborators at Süddeutsche Zeitung and the ICIJ did not make the same mistake. Therefore, all communications were carried out in secure digital environments, including the transfers of leaked data, which came in batches due to the enormous quantity. The identity protection afforded by online communication is what allowed the source to come forward at all; without Süddeutsche Zeitung’s willingness to embrace the digital realm, the data – and its implications – may never have come out.

When it came to sorting through the data, the journalists also needed a virtual newsroom in which to share, collaborate, and communicate. While some of the journalists met occasionally, the vast majority of communications took place via tools built by the ICIJ with free, open source, secure software. According to Greenberg: “The ICIJ’s developers … built a two-factor-authentication-protected search engine for the leaked documents, the URL for which they shared via encrypted email with scores of news outlets … The site even featured a real-time chat system, so that reporters could exchange tips and find translation for documents in languages they couldn’t read.” This system, which has been compared to Facebook in its chat and “newsfeed” capabilities (for sharing journalists’ latest findings), was known as iHub (Fox-Brewster). Gerard Ryle, the director of the ICIJ, said that “[i]f someone was interested in drug dealers or diamond dealers, or, say, a country like Iceland or Brazil, they could form their own groups and then have chats and searches and links to documents and other findings in [iHub]” (qtd. in Bowen).

The final, essential component to the collaboration was a willingness to devote the resources to such a massive undertaking by all 100 news organizations and nearly 400 reporters involved. While the ICIJ is a nonprofit organization dedicated to these kinds of large-scale and long-term projects, their for-profit news partners were harder to convince. According to Jensen: “Media owners rarely have much interest in funding and promoting such reporting, unless there are social movements demanding it.” Such coverage is labor- and time-intensive, and media organizations need to know what the return will be on their investment. Fortunately, ICIJ director Ryle has a strategy: “We tend to work with reporters, rather than the bosses. Once you get the reporter excited about the story, then they will advocate for it with their bosses” (qtd. in Kutchinshy). While not all organizations which were approached decided to participate (a notable example is the *New York Times*), the nonprofit’s strategy managed to gain enough momentum in the for-profit sector.

**Conclusion**

Despite challenges faced by the journalism industry, the international collaboration of the team behind the Panama Papers and the impact of the project following the story’s break is a success that was only possible because of a willingness to embrace the very factors that journalists felt were working against them: globalization and digital technology. As efforts like these have grown in recent years from the statewide collaboration of I-News in Colorado, to the national efforts of NPR, to the global consortium of ICIJ in the Panama Papers, the journalism industry as a whole continues to learn what it is capable of in the Information Age.

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