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Enhancing efficiency in investigation through cooperation

Collaborative investigative journalism across the U.S.-Mexico border

Abstract

This article examines how cross-border collaboration between investigative journalists, activists, and academic researchers enhances the efficiency of journalism. The article builds on the field and frame analysis of collaborative coverage investigating abuses against Mexican and Central American migrants seeking to cross the U.S.-Mexico border. The article argues that collaboration enables journalists to avoid wasting any time or energy in the investigative process. The article shows that collaboration also enhances journalistic efficiency in that it captures the complexity of realities in different regional contexts of the Global North and the South. Another form of efficiency is manifested in how collaborative coverage holds abusers accountable for their actions. This article concurs with previous studies that collaboration helps to increase the security of the investigators involved, which enables them to work more efficiently. Finally, this article examines the formation of new global investigative fields and their strategies for enhancing efficiency.

1 Introduction

The Cambridge Dictionary Online (n. d.) defines *efficiency* as “the good use of time and energy in a way that does not waste any.” Accordingly, the Merriam-Webster Dictionary Online (n. d.) defines *efficiency* as “the ability to do something or produce something without wasting materials, time, or energy; the quality or degree of being efficient”. This article builds on field and frame analysis to examine how cross-border collaboration between journalistic, activist, and academic fields across regions of the Global North and the South enhances the efficiency of journalism. This article¹ also analyzes the formation of new global investigative fields and their strategies to enhance efficiency.

Journalism as a profession is essentially associated with efficiency. Producing “breaking news” implies that journalists are able to observe and report about developments in our surroundings so that the relevant information reaches the news audiences as promptly as possible. There is always something happening in the world. We rely on

¹ This research has been funded by the Helsingin Sanomat Foundation and the Research Council of Finland.

journalists to produce accurate stories in a timely manner so that we are constantly aware of changing situations and circumstances and how those might affect us. Given the news media's central role in informing people about important matters, the efficiency of journalists' actions in many ways determines the efficiency with which citizens can operate in their daily lives.

The efficiency of journalistic reporting depends on communicative efficiency in the newsroom and the people involved in the news production. Editors need to be constantly on top of everything that is going on in the newsrooms that they lead, vis-a-vis complex developments in the real world that their reporting concerns, and decide what stories and angles are worthy of attention at different times, what gets published under what section, and how much visibility and emphasis should be given to particular topics. Journalists and editors need to communicate efficiently about whom to interview and what sources, angles, and expressions to use so that the contents are as precise, trustworthy, and neutral as possible, meeting the normative standards of journalism (e. g., Christians et al. 2009).

Throughout the 21st century, new technologies have taken the expectations of efficiency in journalism to a whole new level: beyond the previous pressure to get everything published in the print paper to be delivered early in the morning and the hourly news broadcasts on television, producing news in the digital era implies not wasting a second, updating the stories and creating new content nonstop. Simultaneously, digitization of information and the distribution of free content online has dramatically declined newsrooms' revenues from advertising and paying subscribers, causing an unforeseen economic crisis especially during the years 2007–2009, when newsrooms were forced to lay off substantial proportions of their staff. Those reporters who were lucky enough to keep their jobs were expected to demonstrate extraordinary efficiency to justify their position and their employer's existence in the increasingly competitive and fragile news media market (e. g., McChesney/Nichols 2010; Ryfe 2012).

These criteria of journalistic efficiency coupled with digitalization – the expectation of producing click-worthy online stories at lightning speed – were deemed as having highly adverse effects on investigative journalism (e. g., Birnbauer 2019: 5). According to the Global Investigative Journalism Network (GIJN), the significant components of investigative journalism are systematic, in-depth, and original research and reporting, often involving the unearthing of secrets. As explained by Sheila Coronel:

Daily journalism is mainly about events that reporters have witnessed or interviewed witnesses about – a train collision, a demonstration, a criminal being arrested. There is no digging beyond what has been said or what has been seen. Daily news reporting is seldom investigative, it is mostly reactive. (Coronel 2009: 13)

Investigative journalism is a form of slow journalism, as its meticulous methods and inquiries can take days, weeks, months, or even years – without necessarily even leading to a revelation of any secret which would enable captivating headlines to attract paying audiences. While investigative journalism has always been considered a form of exceptionally rigorous reporting that few newsrooms can afford to do, the digital era's

standards of efficiency have seemed to make investigative journalism an even more unattainable genre for most newsrooms.

And yet, investigative journalism is considered fundamental for maintaining journalism's watchdog function. In Coronel's words, "investigative journalism aims to check the abuses of those who have wealth and power" (Coronel 2009: 15). It hence seems that the efforts to enhance journalistic efficiency in the era of digitization have, in fact, lowered the bar as to what counts as "successful" journalism, dismissing journalism's potential to conduct in-depth investigations to carefully investigate and expose abuses to protect the state of our democracies.

In addition to investigative journalism, another branch of journalism that has been severely affected by the increased pace in the newsrooms and their lack of resources is foreign reporting. While media scholars have always lamented the simplicity and ethnocentricity of Western foreign reporting especially concerning regions of the Global South, the economic crisis following the digitization of news led most Western newsrooms to close down or at least significantly shrink their foreign bureaus (e. g., Hamilton 2009; Cheas 2018; Powers 2018). And yet, the significant challenges of our times, such as climate change or the Covid-19 pandemic, are essentially global and cannot be solved without sufficient understanding of different cultures, regions, and careful investigations about power inequalities and abuses between privileged and less privileged regions, nations, institutions, and individuals (e. g., Klein 2021). The rapid spread of misinformation over the internet has further complicated this task, as without reliable and accurate foreign reporting, people are increasingly susceptible to becoming exposed to erroneous, prejudiced, and racist claims about different places and peoples, further affecting the state of our democracies.

But if digitization in many ways caused this crisis, it has also created entirely new opportunities for investigative journalism and foreign reporting. Scholars and journalists have found that collaboration enabled by new digital technologies helps mitigate economic pressures in journalism while allowing for comprehensive and critical reporting on a global scale. Stonbely and Siemaszko (2022) observe that some of the most important and impactful investigative journalism now come out of cross-field collaborations. In their words, "cross-field collaboration occurs when journalism organizations work with civil society organizations such as NGOs, civic-tech groups, and/or universities in a way that goes beyond serving as sources or providing funding" (Stonbely/Siemaszko 2022: 8). Birnbauer cites former *New York Times*' executive editor Bill Keller, according to whom "collaboration is maybe the most dramatic change I have seen in newsroom culture in my lifetime" (Birnbauer 2019: 2). But collaborative investigative journalism still remains under-researched (Carson/Farhall 2018; Lewis 2018: 24-25; Carson 2021). This article contributes to this gap in research.

This article specifically argues that cross-border collaboration helps reporters to meet the definition of the Collins dictionary (n. d.) about efficiency in that the cross-border collaboration avoids wasting any time or energy in the investigative process. The collaborative coverage is also successful in that it captures complex realities in different

regional contexts, exposes how such realities have been shaped by powerful actors currently and historically, and holds abusers accountable for their actions, thereby complying with the original watchdog function of journalism.

This article builds on field and frame analysis of collaborative investigative journalism conducted across the U.S.-Mexico border, investigating abuses against Mexican and Central American migrants attempting to cross the U.S.-Mexico border. It is a timely topic, as Mexican and Central American migrants have become objects of increasing hate speech and discrimination in the U.S., following former President Trump's campaigns, the spread of xenophobic views and misinformation, and determination to build a wall on the U.S.-Mexico border. Hate speech has continued during President Biden's current era. The Biden administration has also failed in its immigration reforms, while keeping many of Trump's abusive immigration policies in place.

The U.S.-Mexico border also marks a historical, geopolitical, and symbolic boundary between regions characterized as the Global North and the Global South, with the former representing privileged, hegemonic forces that threaten the autonomy and development of the latter (e. g., Cheas 2018). The U.S. government has been deemed responsible for numerous human rights abuses against migrants in the region. The CIA's military interventions in Central America during the Cold War provoked a cycle of violence in the region, which has been deemed the primary cause of the forced migrations today (Andersen 2020). This article forms part of a broader research project by this author, which seeks to extend the collaborative model of investigative journalism by examining how collaboration between investigators from both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border helps to expose concealed crimes committed by powerful actors in the North against vulnerable populations from the South.

Considering the work of NGOs in the area of investigative journalism is especially important in regions where media freedom is weak, such as Central America and Mexico (e. g., Koch 2018: 70). Security is a strong reason for investigative collaboration (Konow-Lund/Gearing/Berglez 2019). For this reason, this article is concerned with investigative collaboration that is not limited to journalistic outlets but also includes contributions from advocacy and activist groups and academic researchers.

This article aims to answer the following specific research questions: R.Q. 1. How does collaboration between journalistic, activist, and academic fields across the U.S.-Mexico (North-South) border enhance the efficiency of journalistic reporting on Central American and Mexican (Southern) migration? And R.Q. 2. What kinds of new global investigative fields and strategies to enhance efficiency are formed in the cross-border and cross-field collaborative process?

2 Theoretical and methodological framework and sample

This article and research build on field theory, tapping into its unexplored potential for understanding processes of trans-nationalizing journalism beyond the Global North and

the “Western world” of Anglo-American and continental European contexts (Benson 2015: 275). The premise of field theory is that societies are composed of semi-autonomous fields, such as the political field, the economic field, the journalistic field, the advocacy field, the academic field, and so forth. Each field is constituted of sub-fields. Their particular rules of the game differentiate fields, the kinds of capital that are valued therein, and the fields’ relative degree of autonomy from each other and from the dominant economic and political fields (Benson 1999: 464; Bourdieu 2005). The notion of field is useful for considering global convergences and dynamic borders of fields (Bourdieu/Wacquant 1992: 104), relevant for this article’s emphasis on the formation of new investigative fields and related strategies for enhancing efficiency. According to Bourdieu, to think in terms of a field is to think relationally. Habitus means socialized subjectivity (Bourdieu/Wacquant 1992: 96, 126). The more similar the habitus and positions of the institutions and agents involved in the collaborative investigative process, the more proximate I deemed their fields and subfields to be in the empirical analysis.

This article connects field analysis with frame analysis (as in Benson 2013). Framing is about selective perception (Benson 2013: 5). The key idea of framing is one of strategic communication: to gain attention to one’s views and to win public support for one’s positions (Sheafer/Shenhav/Amsalem 2018). Past President Trump and his supporters have repeatedly insisted that Central American and Mexican migrants are terrorists and rapists, causing “threat frames” depicting migrants as a menace to the U.S. society and economy to gain prominence in the U.S. news media (Andersen 2020). The frame and field analysis relevant for this article is concerned with how efficiently collaborators from different fields are able to construct new frames transcending institutional, regional, and epistemological boundaries, countering the narrow, xenophobic frames imposed by the Trump administration and its supporters and exposing the public on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border to a greater plurality of informed perspectives on this complex topic of migration and related human rights violations.

Frames exert their first and most uncontested level of influence at the manifest level, whereas latent frames are more susceptible to the researcher’s overinterpretation (Benson 2013: 5). Therefore, I examined frames at their manifest level, identified by particular words or phrases designed in the preparative phase of the analysis building on the sample and previous research on immigration news. I created specific codes to account for (1) references to pre-existing xenophobic and threat frames, (2) extensions of pre-existing frames such as the “Humanitarian frame” and the “Human rights frame” or the “Victim frame” commonly used in U.S. immigration coverage presenting migrants less negatively than xenophobic or “Threat” frames but still falling short of fully covering these complex situations, (3) new investigative frames that emerged from the cross-regional collaborative investigative coverage examined, and (4) frameless space (graphs and other factual information lacking information).

The sample analyzed in this article consists of investigative coverage conducted and published in collaboration between U.S., Mexican, and Central American journalists, activists, and academics between the years 2015 and 2021, that is, from the launch of

Trump's presidential campaign during the Obama administration through to President Joe Biden's first year in office. This media sample investigates abuses against Central American migrants aiming to cross the U.S.-Mexico border. The sample was gathered with the help of the Lexis Uni database as well as digital archives of media affiliated with the Global Investigative Journalism Network (GIJN), the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ), and others. The coverage to be analyzed was published in English, in Spanish, or both. To get a comprehensive view of the collaboratively created coverages, I analyzed all the multimedia elements used from text to images, videos, graphics, and audio. The sample includes both individual investigative stories and broader investigative projects encompassing several stories. The main criterion was that each story/project was collaboratively produced.

In the first phase, the sample was collected and organized with the help of the Atlas.ti software, useful for the simultaneous analysis of textual, visual, audiovisual, graphic, and other types of data. The sample was first analyzed to identify the range of relevant fields and frames. After identifying all the relevant fields and frames, I coded the whole sample to detect interconnections between the different fields and how their collaborations or individual contributions led to the formation or countering of specific frames. For the systematic coding, the sample was divided into small but meaningful units of analysis, depending on the format that they were produced in (e. g., paragraphs in a text, individual images with captions, graphs and figures representing investigative data, specific angle in a video, etc.). I advanced unit by unit, carefully coding for all the fields and frames detached in each unit. Those units that were clearly attributed to some specific field(s) were closely examined to detect the particular investigative logic(s) shaping that investigative coverage and frames and how it differed from the logics found in units attributed to other fields. Those spaces where a specific frame or data is attributed to no particular sponsoring field were examined as investigative content created by new global investigative fields, merging methods and approaches of the collaborators involved. Through a closer analysis of such collaborative coverage, I examined what strategies were used to enhance efficiency of the investigative coverage.

3 Findings

I will start this findings section by providing three examples from my investigative media sample, which illustrate different ways in which collaboration between journalistic, activist, and academic fields across the North-South border enhances the efficiency of the investigative coverage on migration (R.Q. 1). I will then examine new global investigative fields formed during the investigative processes and related strategies for enhancing efficiency (R.Q. 2).

The first example relates to investigative coverage titled "Zero Tolerance," investigating the abuses following the Trump administration's decision to separate asylum-seeking families as they entered the U.S., sending children to faraway detention centers away from their parents. The investigations began when the U.S.-based non-profit

investigative outlet ProPublica gained access to a tape revealing a separated child's grief (ProPublica 2023). After verifying the authenticity of the tape, while protecting its original source, ProPublica published the tape, which gained widespread attention, replacing the dominant "National security" frame with more humanitarian frames in public discourse. In addition to countering erroneous frames, the coverage was efficient in that it pushed President Trump to formally end the family separation policy within days from the tape's publication. However, thousands of families had already been separated, and numerous abuses occurred in this process, which had not been brought to daylight. Even as the separation ended, the reunification of the families did not proceed even nearly as smoothly as the Trump government claimed it would, as the government had failed to document the separations properly.

To efficiently expose abuses that occurred in the process, ProPublica invited newsrooms across the U.S., Mexico and Central America to contribute to the investigations, leading to substantial collaborative investigation involving ProPublica (USA), Animal Político (Mexico), BuzzFeed News (USA), El Faro (El Salvador), Frontline (USA), The Intercept (USA), Plaza Pública (Guatemala), The Texas Tribune (USA), Univision News (USA), El Periódico (Guatemala) and Prensa Libre (Guatemala). U.S., Mexican, and Central American activist citizens soon also became engaged in the investigative process. This happened as the media on both sides of the border invited the audience to report any missing migrant child that they were aware of or any misbehavior that they had observed in the surroundings of the detention centers in the U.S. As a result, serious damage toward the children was reported, including sexual abuse in the detention centers, leading these to be closed down for further investigation. Clues revealed by the collaborative examination enabled the reunification of several families. All these developments reflect the kind of societal impact that efficient watchdog journalism is supposed to have (Coronel 2009; Christians et al. 2009; GIJN).

Had ProPublica or any of the media outlets involved tried to pursue such an effort on their own, it would likely have had a much smaller, geographically limited impact, and the investigations would have proceeded less efficiently overall. Through the collaborative investigative journalism, the U.S., Mexican, and Central American reporters were able to conduct a vast investigation across a broad and complex landscape rapidly, potentially preventing more separations and abuses. By publishing content in both Spanish and English and sharing sources in this process, the information spread rapidly, enabling citizens with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds to comprehend what was happening and contribute to the investigations as soon as they were exposed to the coverage. The aforementioned example illustrates how the involvement of citizen activists – in addition to journalists – can enhance the efficiency of the coverage. The following examples further illustrate how cross-border collaborations between activists, academic researchers, and investigative journalists strengthen the efficiency of the investigations.

The second example focuses on Israel Ticas – a Salvadoran self-learned forensic investigator, who is famous for finding corpses of the disappeared, and investigating

them to identify them and their causes of death. The murders he examines are closely linked with gang and cartel violence, a primary motive for many Central American and Mexican people to flee from their homelands to the U.S. as they fear for their lives (e. g., Martínez 2016). Many corrupted authorities are connected with the gangs and drug lords, so seeking protection from authorities does not help protect Ticas. In other words, Israel Ticas is an activist whose life is in constant danger. By killing him, both gangs and corrupted officials would get rid of someone determined to expose their abuses. “I believe that I will not die a natural death,” Ticas is cited saying to the camera, “Instead, I will be murdered.” Together with him in his office in El Salvador, viewing his collection of bones, samples of blood, and ruthless witness photos, is Jason Motlagh, a U.S.-based investigative journalist reporting for Dateline (Motlagh 2017).

Based on my analysis, I concur with Konow-Lund, Gearing and Berglez (2019: 3) that security is a strong reason for investigative collaboration. Through his cross-border collaboration with Motlagh, Israel Ticas is able to showcase his work, findings, and the Salvadoran context to a broad global audience, with subtitles translating his experiences and fears into the English language. If Ticas were to disappear during or after this cross-border collaboration with Motlagh, the U.S. public and authorities would be quick to ask, “What happened to Israel Ticas, the Salvadoran activist who worked with the American journalist whom we saw in our American news?” Such critical global attention would likely affect the drug trade and other activities of the criminals accustomed to the tradition of impunity in Mexico and Central America, as international observers would add pressure to these countries to identify the abusers and to hold them accountable. Hence, by collaborating with Ticas in his investigative coverage in El Salvador, Motlagh contributed to the efficiency of Ticas’ work investigating the hidden corpses, because the criminals, wanting to avoid international attention, would at least temporarily leave him alone. Simultaneously, collaboration with Ticas enhanced Motlagh’s reporting efficiency, as he did not need to start from scratch to verify and tell American audiences why so many people run away from everyday life in El Salvador. Instead, the investigative coverage depicts Motlagh integrating his own observations with those of his Salvadoran activist colleague, creating a more multifaceted story for the public on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border. My sample contained numerous other similar collaborations, which protected the safety of both the “Northern” (U.S.) and “Southern” (Mexican/Central American) journalist and activist while bridging their work in ways that captured the complexity of the realities on both sides of the border.

Media scholars have argued that U.S. mainstream news media fails to incorporate relevant background context in their coverage on Central American migration. In contrast, frames that generally dominate U.S. mainstream media coverage tend to be limited to emphasizing U.S. national security issues or framing the migrants as gold-digging opportunists merely after a luxurious life (e. g., Andersen 2020). However efficient in the sense of not wasting any time or energy, the coverage cannot be considered successful if the outcome does not enable citizens and policy makers to understand the causes of this migration.

My third example shows that through the U.S. journalists' collaboration with Central American and Mexican journalistic colleagues as well as activists and academics in the region, the coverage published by the U.S. journalistic media contains deep historical context, challenging and broadening the narrow frames generally used by the individual U.S. newsrooms. My example is an investigative article conducted in collaboration between the The New York Times and the Salvadoran digital outlet El Faro, titled "Killers on a Shoestring: Inside the Gangs of El Salvador" (Martínez et al. 2016). The story provides a rare inside view to gang life in this Central American country, and how gangs force people to seek refuge in the U.S. and how it affects those who are deported back to El Salvador. Throughout the story, the problems of inequality and violence are connected in ways that help the media audience to capture the context:

When his employees are killed, he hires private detectives to investigate, because 'the state does not have the capacity to protect witnesses.' 'They use you,' Mr. Miranda continued, 'and they abandon you.' Resisting the gangs is not an option for small-business owners, however. Many of them live in gang-controlled neighborhoods themselves and cannot escape the pressure to pay. That was the situation for the bus owner killed in the summer of 2015.'

(Martínez et al. 2016)

Likewise, this collaborative coverage between The New York Times and Faro manifests the difficulty of reporting about the issues due to people's fear:

Like most businessmen who recounted their experiences with shakedowns, the man spoke on the condition of anonymity. His father was one of 154 transportation workers who lost their lives to gang-run extortion rings in 2015. To talk is to risk becoming another statistic.

(Martínez et al. 2016)

Most Central American and Mexican citizens, fearing for their lives, are not likely to trust a foreign reporter who does not necessarily understand the local context and how dangerous exposing one's experiences can be. Instead, they are likely only to trust those few local journalists or activists whose work they are already familiar with. If these journalists trust foreign journalists, it is more likely that their confidential sources might, too. In this way, cross-border collaboration contributes to broader networks of trust, which again contributes to more reliable, contextual, and critical coverage, enhancing the efficiency of the investigation as a whole.

4 New global investigative fields and strategies to enhance efficiency

Journalism has been long characterized by competition, with each media outlet wanting to get the best story and angle with which they would guarantee paying subscribers and advertisers, without wanting to share sources or ideas with others (see Birnbauer 2019). Likewise, Bourdieu (2005) has insisted that fields and their boundaries are characterized by struggle. However, based on the analysis of the collaborative spaces in my sample, I would argue that the strategy of the new global investigative fields is to emphasize humility over superiority and collaboration over competition. For instance, it is striking how

openly and explicitly the U.S. journalists discuss the limits of their own knowledge in their coverage, giving credit to their Central American and Mexican colleagues as to understanding the local Central American and Mexican context, the migrants' motives and suffering on both sides of the border. The investigators also speak openly about their fears while reporting on the field, readily recognizing the courage of their peers as they pursue their dangerous jobs. In short, the collaborators seem to have arrived at a collective conclusion that by recognizing the strengths of colleagues in what was previously perceived as "rival" newsrooms, the investigative and journalistic process will be more efficient and successful, benefiting everyone. In other words, the collaborators seem to comprehend that "the good use of time and energy in a way that does not waste any" (Cambridge Dictionary Online) is by working together.

The journalists, activists, and academics involved in the collaborations I examined are also not clearly identifying with one or another profession but rather display multiple investigative identities, integrating them. This suggests the creation of global investigative fields, transcending boundaries between the fields that constituted them. This is especially interesting at the intersection between the journalistic media and activism. For a long time, U.S. journalism was known for its strict commitment to the values of objectivity and neutrality, denouncing collaborations with any advocacy groups. In recent years, more collaboration between the journalistic media and activism have occurred, partly because during the recession, many journalists who lost their jobs in the newsrooms transferred to the advocacy sector, while continuing to collaborate with their journalistic colleagues (see e. g., Powers 2018).

In the new global investigative fields, efforts to prove the objectivity of the investigators involved seems to have been replaced with efforts to be completely transparent about their positions, motives, and methods. This is clear, for instance, in the investigative coverage concerning the prosecution of Scott Warren, an academic researcher specialized in geography who simultaneously worked for the non-profit organization No More Deaths, which provides water and care for migrants trying to cross the deadly Arizona desert to reach the U.S. side of the border. After the No More Deaths organization published videos revealing Border Patrol agents emptying the water tanks the organization had left out in the desert, Warren along with some other activists was detained and prosecuted. Instead of seeking to cover Warren's prosecution with a neutral tone and balance it with a perspective from the government officials who chose to arrest and prosecute him, *The Intercept* takes an explicit stance in support of Warren's activism. The following citation is from the *Intercept* article titled "Bodies in the borderlands" by U.S.-based journalist Ryan Devereaux:

In the last six years, Warren has communed with the dead no fewer than 16 times in the desert outside Ajo, the tiny Arizona border town he calls home. Those bodies and fragmented sets of human remains have served as his window into the slow-motion disaster unfolding in the borderlands, one in which U.S. government policy funnels migrants into the desert, creating a black hole of disappearance and death of historic proportions. In response, Warren has helped convene a network of Arizona humanitarian aid volunteers with roots that go back decades. Through sweat-drenched marches deep into the Sonoran Desert, this collective

has expanded access to water and medical aid in one of the border's deadliest and most remote corridors, and fueled a historic increase in the number of bodies accounted for there. Even for those who can't be saved, the finding of human remains opens the door for bodies to be returned to grief-stricken families, providing answers to painful questions. In an alternate universe, one could imagine the efforts of Warren and his cohort being the kind of thing a society might actively support, or even prioritize. But that's not what is happening in Arizona right now. (Devereaux 2019)

In other words, the journalist does not pretend to be objective, instead he explicitly argues that the Trump administration is in the wrong by prosecuting Warren rather than recognizing and supporting his and his organization's efforts to prevent more deaths of innocent people. Hence, my study suggests that in the newly forming global field of investigative journalism, boundaries between activism, journalism, and academia have become more blurred. By not having to devote energy and resources to appearing neutral, the investigators have more time and energy to focus on their investigative task and justify the positions that they explicitly and transparently take. At the same time, the investigators show profound commitment to facts, carefully detailing their sources and the methods by which they arrive at their conclusions and activist positions.

In Latin America, this kind of merging of professional boundaries has historically been more common than in the U.S. Reasons leading to the blurring boundaries between these professions have also been practical: due to the dangerousness of the investigative jobs and the prevailing tradition of impunity in the region, Latin American journalists, activists and academics dedicated to defending human rights have learned to work together over the centuries. In general, this kind of blurring of investigative identities has led Western media scholars and journalists to deem Latin American journalism as inferior to U.S. journalism. However, the analysis of the sample I analyze suggests that the U.S. journalistic field has not imposed its ideals of objectivity and neutrality upon those of its collaborators in the new global investigative fields, but rather, it is the Latin American collaborative model that is being elaborated as a strategy for survival in the new investigative fields. Hence, the new global investigative fields also seem to appreciate knowhow from the Global South more than the Northern journalistic and academic fields have.

Through the investigative coverage analyzed here, the U.S. journalists and their partners have been able to distinguish themselves from those journalists who continue to produce immigration coverage that lacks context and uncritically repeats the frames imposed by powerful politicians without ability to challenge and counter them. The Zero Tolerance coverage analyzed in this article was a finalist for a Pulitzer prize. In this way, the collaborators operating in the Global Investigative fields are slowly pushing to change the rules of the game in the U.S. journalistic field, making more and more colleagues aware of the benefits of collaborative investigative journalism and global communication. But this journalistic field is polarized and divided, and media in the U.S. ultra-right can collaborate, too, helping to distribute each other's hate speech against Central American and Mexican migrants. Hence, my argument here is not that the collaborating fields are not involved in any struggles for superiority and distinction. The struggles are not likely to disappear, but the analysis here demonstrates how some of the fields and subfields

involved are merging and transforming, and changing both global and local standards of efficiency in the process.

5 Conclusion

This article has argued that cross-border collaboration between journalists, activists and academics is fundamental to ensure efficiency of the investigations concerning abuses against migrants in the U.S., Mexico and Central America. At the same time, the collaborative process is transforming the idea of what is meant by efficiency in journalism and how it can be achieved. This article has also aimed to show how, through collaborative efforts, investigative journalists, human rights activists, and academic researchers can avoid reinventing the wheel and conducting similar investigations parallel to one another. The collaborative investigative coverage analyzed in this article is able to capture the complex realities and sensitive situations on both sides of the border simultaneously. The collaboration also helps to protect the investigators involved, thereby allowing them to work more efficiently, rather than having to devote most of their energy to being scared for their lives. This article has also shown how investigative collaboration across the journalistic, activist, and academic fields in the Global North and South enables the publishing of the investigative findings across a wide range of culturally and linguistically diverse audiences, thereby also enhancing efficiency with which the public on both sides of the North-South border can react and contribute to the investigations, as manifested in the Zero Tolerance coverage. This article has also shown how the new global investigative fields are transforming journalism by emphasizing collaboration over competition, transparency about the investigators' positions over pretending to be objective and neutral, and humility and openness about one's own limitations over need to show superiority – values which also have an impact on how efficiency is perceived in the journalistic field.

Scholars have emphasized that cross-border collaborative investigative journalism remains an under-researched topic of study (Carson/Farhall 2018; Carson 2021). The broader research project of which this article forms a part seeks to combine the field and frame theoretical content analysis with interviews with the collaborating journalists, activists, and academics on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border. In this way, I hope to discover any insights that the content analysis was not able to reveal. Further research should also consider challenges in communicative efficiency in collaborative investigative journalism. When newsrooms, advocacy organizations and academic researchers from several countries in the Global North and the South come together to work on the same investigative project, communicative issues are likely to occur, resulting in lowered efficiency. Another important question that is beyond the scope of this article and related project but needs to be examined is what kind of funding allows the investigative collaborators to be more efficient, on the one hand, and what strings are attached to specific fundings and how this undermines the researchers' efficiency, transparency and reliability, on the other hand.

I will conclude this article by noting that to conduct such needed studies on collaborative investigative journalism, academic scholars must adopt a transdisciplinary approach, remaining open to a range of relevant fields and professions and the local context central to the reporting. The media studies field has been deemed to remain divided between humanistic and social scientific orientations, with scarce collaboration between them (Briggle/Christians 2017). Moreover, investigative journalism has been deemed as a form of secondary academic citizenship, despite the rigorous methods applied in the field (e. g., Bacon 2011). Media scholars have often failed to take journalism seriously (Zelizer 2004). Media scholars routinely lament the news media's shortcomings, but then fail to come up with suggestions as to what exactly can be done to create more efficient and high-quality reporting. If the scholars themselves are not accustomed to collaborations and not appreciating different investigative fields in their own research, it will be difficult for them to assess the meaning of collaboration in the media coverage they would examine. Hence, in addition to devoting more attention to collaborative investigative journalism as a research topic in general, academia – and not only the news media – needs to rethink cross-border collaboration and related possibilities. Only in this way can such investigative endeavors be efficient and successful.

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ISSN 1867-4844

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