

# Cross-border Journalism as a Method

“Cross-border journalism isn’t just for superstars. It can be learned and practiced by any journalist interested in the method.”



**Brigitte Alfter**

Journalist and author of ‘*Cross-Border Collaborative Journalism: A Step-By-Step Guide*’

@hackette7

**Global migration, climate change, transnational crime.** Today, many stories have effects around the globe. Journalists need to collaborate across borders if they want to fulfill the watchdog function of the press.

The “**Panama Papers**” investigation is a great example of how cross-border journalism holds the powerful to account. One year after the investigation into tax-evasion practices of the global elite, the publication had historic global effects: States collected a total of 100 million dollars in taxes and initiated at least 150 inquiries, audits or investigations by police, tax authorities, mafia prosecutors, etc. in 80 countries.\*

Based on her own journalistic experience as a Brussels correspondent, ICIJ member and cross-border pioneer, investigative journalist **Brigitte Alfter** developed a step-by-step guide to teaching the method of cross-border journalism.

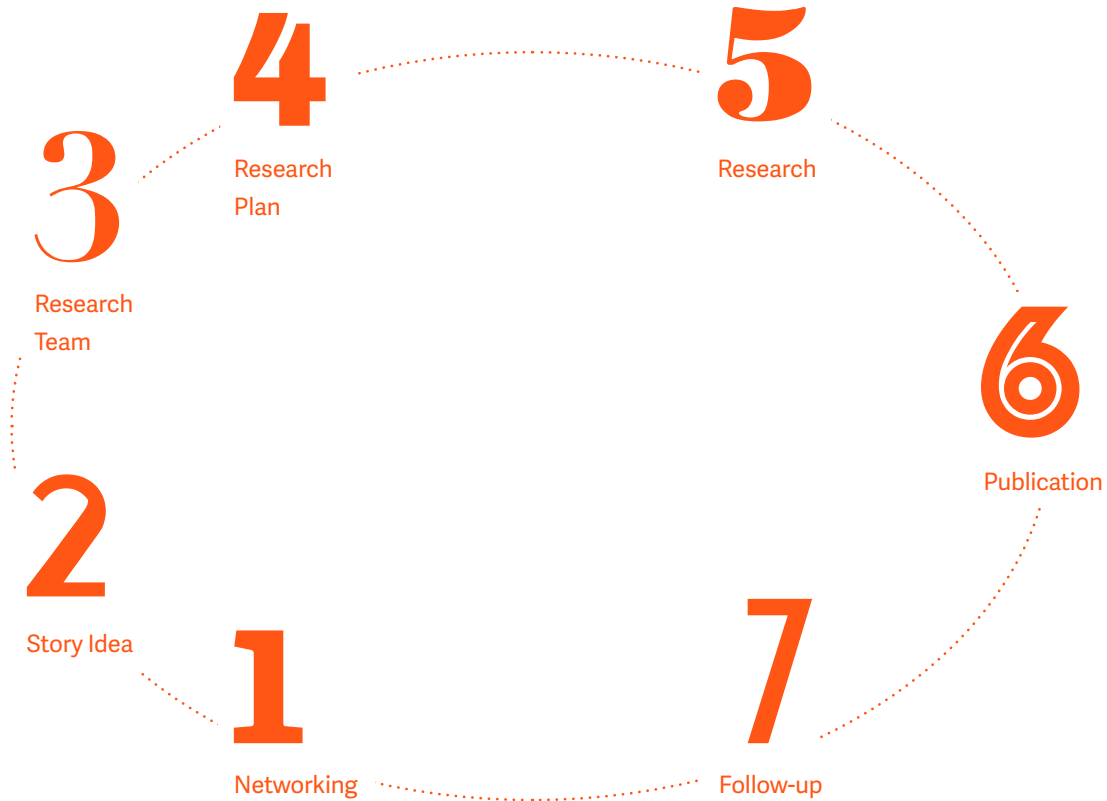
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\* <https://panamapapers.sueddeutsche.de/articles/e329109/>

“Cross-border journalism  
is a process.”

— says Brigitte Alfter

This booklet summarizes the basics of **Brigitte Alfter’s method** and gives an overview of the seven process steps of cross-border journalism:



# What is cross-border journalism?

Journalists from different countries ...

... collaborate to research a shared theme or story.

They compile, mutually cross-check and merge their findings in order to ...

... fact check and tell these findings to their individual audiences on a national, regional or local level.



# Networking

Overcoming the competitive attitude is one of the first obstacles to cross-border collaboration.

Journalism is a competitive craft. Choosing collaboration over competition takes a deliberate effort by all colleagues involved. **The question of trust** is key for successful cross-border journalistic projects.

**Networking takes time**, especially when you collaborate across borders, languages and cultures.

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**Hostwriter** was built to help journalists find colleagues with similar research interests worldwide. Finding a common ground and establishing trust are the best ways to start a collaboration.

Choose the right level of networking intensity that grants maximum information for the least effort and time spent.

#### Four degrees of networking:

1. **Loose network** Useful for journalists in different countries working with similar fields of interest such as the environment, business, consumers, finance and so forth. They function as each other's eyes and ears in relevant countries and language areas.
2. **One-off assistance** This could be a request for a small service in another country, like a short translation or verification of a quote, a photo or footage of a particular name badge or bell button. The idea behind it is "what goes around, comes around": Supporting one colleague means trusting the larger network to help you for a similar service at some other point.
3. **Loose collaboration** The information to be exchanged or the common tasks are limited and clearly defined. Altering information is impossible or unlikely, so the level of trust does not require more than trust in competence and usual integrity.



4. **Close collaboration** can be compared to a research team in a newsroom. It is an obliging consortium sharing a variety of information and working with a high level of mutual trust, particularly when it comes to sensitive sources – just to mention one especially challenging task.

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**Please note:** Loose networks and one-off assistance are one-way demands. Don't have unrealistic expectations at this level of networking, and be very respectful of your colleague's time.

Examples of  
**loose networks**

Annual Data Harvest  
Conference  
[www.dataharvest.eu](http://www.dataharvest.eu)

The Agora Project  
[agora.hostwriter.org](http://agora.hostwriter.org)

Examples of  
**close collaborations**

ICIJ  
International Consortium  
of Investigative Journalists  
[www.icij.org](http://www.icij.org)

OCCRP  
Organized Crime and Cor-  
ruption Reporting Project  
[www.occrp.org](http://www.occrp.org)

EIC  
European Investigative  
Collaborations  
[www.eic.network](http://www.eic.network)

Investigate Europe  
[www.investigate-europe.eu](http://www.investigate-europe.eu)

# Story Idea

Once you start looking for them, you might find plenty of potential cross-border stories in the news! Search for story angles that are relevant for your audience.

1. **Breaking News** – a cross-border approach to current events such as accidents, police raids or other sudden incidents.
2. **Organization stories** – stories related to entities like the European Union or the World Trade Organization, whose decisions are relevant in all member countries.
3. **Chain stories** – when goods are traded or humans are trafficked from one country to another.
4. **Comparative stories** – similar stories occurring in several countries, such as public transportation, health reforms, etc.

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**Win-win or nothing!** All team members must have an **obvious interest** in participating in the research. If there is no mutual interest, it may be more efficient to **hire a journalist or researcher** rather than to attempt collaboration.



# Research Team

Choose diversity when you gather your research team.

**Language skills** and well-developed source contacts matter greatly. Other **competences** can include insight into a certain theme, a journalistic research method such as using freedom of information laws to obtain documents, data journalism, experience covering organized crime and numerous others.

At this stage, the publication should already be considered; this includes a **selection of countries and media desirable for publication in order to obtain impact**. Also consider **security** for working in an international team.

# Research Plan

It helps to develop the research plan together in a physical meeting. Pick a location that is easily accessible for all team members, keeping in mind that visa restrictions may apply.

As a starting point, all team members should meet at eye level. The more colleagues involved and the more complex the research gets, it's important to delegate tasks – such as reporting or editing – and **divide roles within the team**. It's specifically useful to choose one team member as **coordinator**.

**Fundraising** might be another important task to cover the work of freelance team members, travel costs, translations, etc. Agree on sources of funding that are acceptable for all colleagues involved to make sure that credibility is not compromised in any of the countries for expected publication.

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## A research plan includes: You should also agree on:

- a time schedule
- deadlines and milestones, leading to a shared publication date
- a clear division of tasks
- a team coordinator
- communication tools that include a level of security appropriate to the research subject
- a common ground regarding the journalistic methods used

# Research

During the research phase, varying traditions of communication, journalism practices and ethical questions are likely to arise.

Is a hidden camera a last resort when no other methods work, or is it a favorite tool? How are privacy issues viewed? Are there different fact-checking or storytelling traditions?

While these differences may cause heated discussions within the group, they may also provide the **very keys to a deeper understanding**. Sources may tell different stories in different languages and traditions and thus supplement each other. Documents or data may be easily accessible in one country and inaccessible in another. The political interests of governments may differ and permit different levels of openness.

Allow **time for discussion** within the group to enable such insights and unleash the power of cross-border investigations in diverse teams.

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Be prepared to **encounter different views** regarding journalism practices, ethical questions, etc. Respecting diversity is part of the method. Try to find a common ground instead of seeing such differences as a problem.

# Publication

There's no one-size-fits-all when it comes to cross-border reporting! While the research is shared among all team members, the stories must be adjusted to each target group individually.

Storytelling traditions vary widely: what might be considered a "soap opera" in one country is considered a "newsworthy piece" in another.

At this stage, the **individual team members' knowledge of their target audience** and ongoing national discourse are indispensable and should be respected. In order to make the results of the common research relevant to different target groups at a given point in time, **additional research** may be necessary to connect the story to a national or local discourse.

**Fact checking** is an obligatory task in a cross-border research project and needs to be carried out by the entire team and for the individual publications. Also, legal considerations concern both the team as a whole and the individual journalists and, ultimately, their publishers.



# Follow-up

Cross-border journalism works best in circles: The last step is the new Step 1: Follow-up and new networking!

The tradition of sharing experiences is a central feature in the investigative journalism community. This is useful for cross-border reporting in two ways.

**If you log your work** in order to later share your experience and present a summary to your colleagues, you'll be more conscious of what you do and, thus, be better able to react swiftly as you go along.

During the presentation at a journalism conference, other journalists will get an impression of your team's competences, ethics and fields of interest – with **potential new contacts and new story ideas** to start a new cross-border investigation!

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# Recommended Reading

**Alfter, Brigitte** (forthcoming), *Cross-Border Collaborative Journalism: A Step-By-Step Guide*

**Alfter, Brigitte** (2017), *Grenzüberschreitender Journalismus, Handbuch zum Cross-Border-Journalismus*, Köln, Herbert-von-Halem-Verlag (in German language)

**Alfter, Brigitte** (2016), "Cross-border collaborative journalism: Why journalists and scholars should talk about an emerging method," *Journal of Applied Journalism & Media Studies* 5: 2, pp. 301–315, doi: 10.1386/ajms.5.2.301\_1

**Alfter, Brigitte** (2015), *Journalistik over grænser : håndbog i cross border journalistik*, Århus, Forlaget Ajour (in Danish language)

**Sambrook, Richard** (2018), *Global Teamwork. The Rise of Collaboration in Investigative Journalism*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford

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## Author

Tabea Grzeszyk

## Contribution

Brigitte Alfter

## Layout

Andy Wilke  
[andy@hostwriter.org](mailto:andy@hostwriter.org)

## Photo Credits

Thomas Tolstrup

## Contact

[www.hostwriter.org](http://www.hostwriter.org)  
[fb.com/ hostwriter.org](https://fb.com/hostwriter.org)  
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