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## Strengthening cross-border journalistic collaboration – Experiences and assessments of *Hostwriter* members

A study by Dr. Annett Heft

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Collaboration is one of the central future trends in journalism (Lewis 2016, Sambrook 2018). Especially journalistic collaboration across borders is an effective practice that is becoming increasingly relevant. In the specific form of transnational journalistic research and investigation networks, journalists and/or media organizations from different countries join forces to investigate a common topic in a collaborative way (Alfter 2016, 2019; Heft et al. 2017).

To promote such forms of cross-border journalistic work, pioneers within the journalistic field establish infrastructures that facilitate cross-border collaborations: Networking events such as the *Dataharvest - the European Investigative Journalism Conference (Dataharvest - the EIJC)* are an essential cornerstone in this regard. At this annual conference for investigative and data journalists in Europe, participants from all over Europe network and generate ideas that often lead to collaborative projects. In this respect, digital technologies offer additional, completely new networking opportunities. The entrepreneurs of *Hostwriter* use these possibilities: They established *Hostwriter*, a digital networking platform that helps journalists to collaborate across borders easily. Its overarching objective is to enable better reporting by facilitating cross border contacts between journalists worldwide, especially individual journalists that cannot rely on supporting infrastructures of large media organizations. Therefore, the platform connects colleagues to seek journalistic collaboration and advice of various types, but even to help with accommodation.

We asked *Hostwriter* members to share their experiences with the platform and cross-border collaboration in general to advance our understanding of cross-border journalistic work and to contribute to the platform's as well as the overall method's development. The findings, which we report below, are based on a standardized online survey<sup>2</sup> that, amongst other dimensions, included specific questions on the *Hostwriter* membership, platform usage and evaluation, as well as recommendations for the further development of the platform. Ninety-six respondents answered those questions. Interviewees joined *Hostwriter* between 2014 and 2019. The majority has

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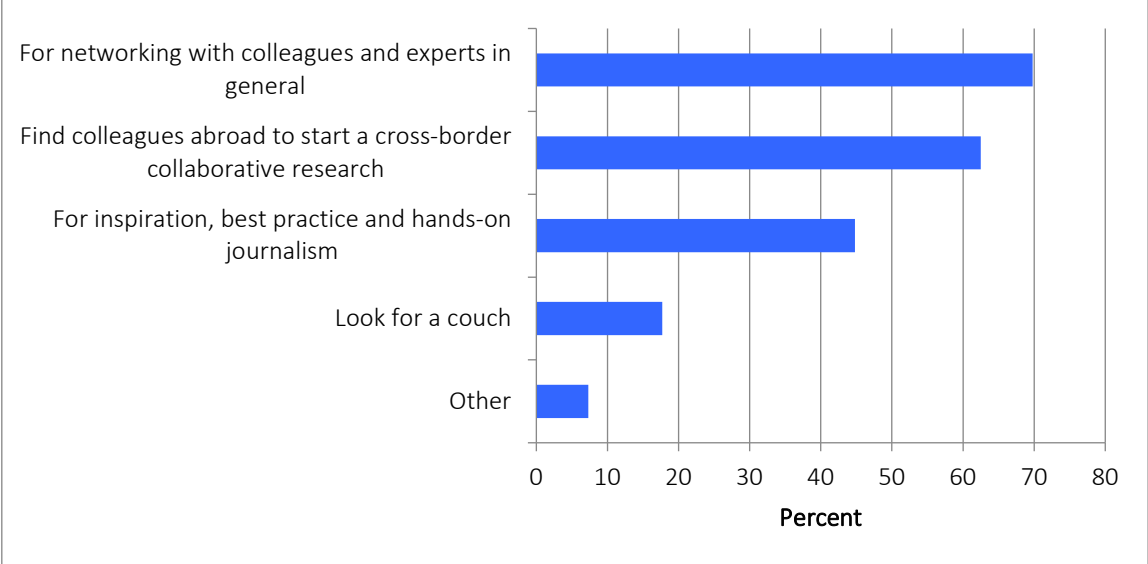
<sup>1</sup> This research project could only be realized in this form thanks to the generous support of Tabea Grzeszyk and the whole *Hostwriter* team as well as Brigitte Alfter from *Dataharvest - the EIJC*. We would like to thank them for their help, insights and inspiring exchange on cross-border collaboration.

<sup>2</sup> The overall online survey was conducted among *Hostwriter* members and *Dataharvest - the EIJC* participants. In the following report, we focus on questions specifically directed towards *Hostwriter* members. We thank all participants of the survey for sharing their personal experiences with us.

between one and two years of experience with the platform. Although their responses are not representative of all *Hostwriter* members, they provide valuable insights into members' experiences and assessments. Roughly one-third of respondents use the platform on a weekly basis, i.e., every day, nearly every day or more than once a week (28%). Another quarter accesses *Hostwriter* several times per month (21%), and 17 percent come to the platform at least once a month. Another third visits the platform less often (34%)<sup>3</sup>

When we ask about the **motives for using the platform**,<sup>4</sup> it becomes clear that *Hostwriter* fulfills its primary goal as a networking platform. Seventy percent of those surveyed use *Hostwriter* to *network with colleagues and experts in general*, and 63 percent use the platform to find *colleagues for specific cross-border research*. Beyond that, almost half of the respondents use the platform *for inspiration, best practice, and hands-on journalism* (45% approval). The practical aspect of *looking for a couch* is less relevant (18% approval), but might be a first step of establishing a connection with a foreign colleague. Other answers show that its members perceive *Hostwriter* as a platform that could help find good collaborative models, updates and information or work opportunities.

**Figure 1: Specific purposes to approach the platform (n=96)**

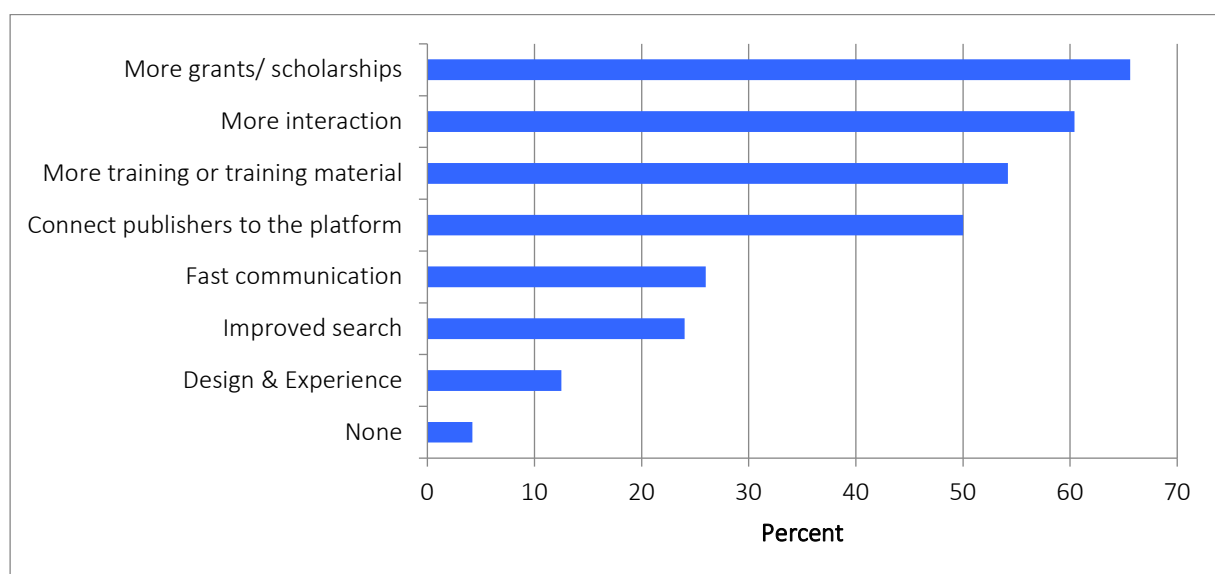


More than one-third of those who use the platform find the contacts they made via *Hostwriter* very (27%) or even extremely helpful (10%) for their journalistic work.<sup>5</sup> Another third indicated that these were somewhat helpful (35%). The remaining respondents see room for improvement as they rated the **helpfulness of the contacts** they made to be of little (21%) or no use (7%) for their journalistic practice. It appears that **overall satisfaction** with *Hostwriter*<sup>6</sup> is high. A majority of 46 percent were very satisfied (37%) or even extremely satisfied (9%) with the platform. A share of 37 percent responded being somewhat satisfied. There is again room for further advancement as 17 percent stated to be little (13%) or not satisfied with *Hostwriter* (4%).

<sup>3</sup> Question: How often do you access the platform?  
<sup>4</sup> Question: For what specific purposes did you approach the *Hostwriter* platform?  
<sup>5</sup> Question: How helpful are *Hostwriter* contacts for your journalistic work?  
<sup>6</sup> Question: Overall, how satisfied are you with *Hostwriter*?

To find out in which areas *Hostwriter* members can imagine **improvements** and additional offers in the near future, we asked them about their opinions.<sup>7</sup> It turns out that financing cross-border journalistic collaborations is a particular concern of the members as 66 percent wish *Hostwriter* could offer *more grants and scholarships* (Figure 2). *More interaction* is also considered relevant by the majority of respondents (60% approval), which could refer to the communication between the *Hostwriter* team and its members, but also to the wish that members may interact more with each other. The survey also shows that there is still a need for training in cross-border journalistic collaboration. The majority would welcome *more training or training material* (54% approval). Another strategic task to develop the platform further lies in developing *connections to publishers*. Half of the respondents agreed that such relationships should be improved. In this way, the platform could help to establish the link between innovative cross-border journalism and potential publishers of the resulting reports.

**Figure 2: Future tasks for Hostwriter (n=96)**



Proposals for improvements relating to the platform architecture or the staffing of the enterprise concern an *improved search* (24%), changes regarding *design and user experience* (12%), and the wish for *fast communication* (26% approval). In additional open answers, respondents proposed developing a smartphone app for more convenient use of the platform. A request for more meetups and regional exchanges highlights the continuing relevance of personal encounters in addition to digitally mediated communication. Members are also concerned with credibility and security as they ask for a higher emphasis on the verification of members.

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<sup>7</sup> Question: What improvements should *Hostwriter* address in the near future?