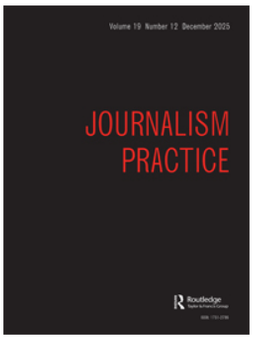

Journalism Practice

ISSN: 1751-2786 (Print) 1751-2794 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rjop20

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To cite this article: Kirsi Cheas (26 Nov 2025): Towards Transdisciplinary Integration in Global North–South Cooperation? Models for Investigative Collaboration Across the U.S.-Mexico Border, Journalism Practice, DOI: 10.1080/17512786.2025.2586051

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2025.2586051

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Towards Transdisciplinary Integration in Global North–South Cooperation? Models for Investigative Collaboration Across the U.S.-Mexico Border

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ABSTRACT

This paper builds on models of multi-, inter- and transdisciplinary collaboration to advance a typology of collaborations in investigative journalism. The article also builds on an empirical content analysis of collaborative investigative coverage across the U.S.-Mexico (Global North–South) border. The article argues that existing models of collaborative journalism are overly generic to capture the range of different dynamics and power relations shaping the North–South collaborations. The analysis found that half of the empirical collaborations examined were "interdisciplinary," integrating ideas and methods throughout the investigative process. However, these were limited to narrow interdisciplinarity, meaning integration of similar ideas between proximate fields, rather than broad interdisciplinarity, meaning the integration of vastly different ideas from distant fields. Half of the projects were situated in a continuum between broad interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity, featuring exemplary integration of diverse voices across the South and North and transforming practices and status quo, but failing to integrate local formats and indigenous and artistic reporting styles, or vice versa. The most transdisciplinary projects built on in-person collaboration in the South, suggesting the importance of cultural immersion for the successful integration and equality of Southern and Northern partners and perspectives.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 15 June 2024
Accepted 28 October 2025

KEYWORDS
Models of collaboration; cross-field collaboration; integration; global south; interdisciplinarity; transdisciplinarity

Introduction

Collaborative investigative journalism is a model of multiple media outlets across countries and regions sharing information to expose wrong-doing (Carson and Farhall 2018, 190). Collaborative investigative journalism remains under-researched (Carson 2021; Carson and Farhall 2018), and even fewer studies have examined collaborative investigative journalism in Latin America (see Mesquita and de Lima Santos 2021, 546).

This article extends the collaborative model of investigative journalism by building on models of multi-, inter- and transdisciplinary collaboration (e.g., Klein 2021). This

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development of collaborative models also draws from an empirical content analysis of collaborative investigative journalistic coverage, reaching across the U.S.-Mexico (Global North–South) border and exposing abuses against Central American asylum-seekers and root causes of their forced migration (see also Cheas 2023, 2024a, 2024b). This coverage was co-produced between Guatemalan, Salvadoran, Honduran, Mexican, and U.S. investigative journalists, many of whom are affiliated with non-profit organizations, along with activists and academic researchers with different backgrounds. Thereby the article also contributes to a model of *cross-field collaboration,* meaning collaboration between journalism and civil-society organizations and/or universities in a way that goes beyond serving as sources or providing funding (Stonbely and Siemaszko 2022).

Existing studies have identified many challenges inherent to investigative collaboration in journalism. In 2013, the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) tried to enforce an ethic of "true collaboration," insisting that it is not enough for reporters to divide up the data but rather, they also need to work together to analyze it (see Graves and Konieczna 2015, 1973). Existing research has also developed different models of collaborative journalism. According to the "convergence continuum" by Dailey, Demo, and Spillman (2005), cross-promotion carries the least cooperation and is limited to a reference to a partner's story. Cloning is the republication of a partner's story with little editing. Coopetition involves the organizations both competing and cooperating. Content sharing has the partners meeting and exchanging ideas, sharing costs, and independently publishing at the same time. Full convergence is a stage at which the partners cooperate in both gathering data and disseminating the story.

Stonbely (2017, 14–15) identified two most important elements by which journalistic collaborations are organized: the duration of time, and the degree of integration among partner organizations. Using these two variables, Stonbely (2017) identified six different models of collaborative journalism: (1) Temporary and separate; (2) Temporary and co-creating; (3) Temporary and integrated; (4) On-going and separate; (5) On-going and co-creating, and (6) On-going and integrated. While these models are useful for mapping different kinds of collaborations, the report mentions that models 2, 3, 4, and 5 require more attention as to managing unequal power dynamics. Moreover, the models are based on empirical analysis of collaborations realized mostly in the United States.

Collaboration in investigative journalism is especially important in regions where media freedom is weak, such as Central America and Mexico (see Koch 2018, 70). This is among the world's most dangerous regions for investigative journalists. Due to extraordinary levels of impunity and corruption, up to 99 percent of crimes remain unsolved (see Mitchell 2022, 6). Security is a key motivator for collaborators – by pooling resources and data across borders, violence against any individual journalist is unlikely to stop their investigative work from seeing the light of day (Mitra, Zárate Valderrama, and Krøvel 2025).

Due to constantly working together amidst difficult circumstances, professional identities of Central American and Mexican journalists, activists, and academics tend to be fluid (see Mesquita and de Lima Santos 2023). In the U.S. as well, many journalists have ended up working in the advocacy and non-profit sector (Powers 2018). In this process, editors who once held senior positions in legacy media transferred their skills, networks, and experience to nonprofit organizations. At the same time, editors in the investigative reporting sector in particular remained deeply skeptical about collaborating with anyone outside of their newsrooms (Birnbauer 2019, 7, 12).

According to past research, boundaries between journalism and activism, and commitment to "objective" reporting, are more pronounced on the U.S. side of the Mexico border (see Stonbely and Siemaszko 2022; see also Waisbord 2013, 7, 76). On the one hand, the norm of objectivity has been associated with the detached, watchdog, fact-checking, investigative approach (Hellmueller, Vos, and Poepsel 2012, 289). On the other hand, some authors have regarded objectivity as particularly inapplicable to investigative journalism (see Tong and Zuo 2021, 155). As explained by Schudson (2007, 68–69), the ideal of objectivity presumes that the world displays itself openly to the journalist, whose job is to describe that visible world without fear or favor. However, a lot of important information has been deliberately hidden. Rather than being evaluated by their neutrality or "objectivity," investigative journalists should be evaluated by their energy in detecting hidden realities and exposing them (see also Schudson 2001). This process underscores the active stance, rather than neutral observer, of the investigative reporter (Ettema and Glasser 1985, 190; see also Miraldi 1990, 14–19).

Recent research suggests that even in the U.S., many journalists no longer necessarily embrace objectivity as the most important journalistic principle. Instead, they prioritize norms such as transparency, involving openness to practices of gathering, organizing, and disseminating information (Hellmueller, Vos, and Poepsel 2012, 290; Tong and Zuo 2021, 155). At the same time, scholars such as McNair (2017, 1319) call for the revision of the concept of objectivity for the digital era, underlining its continued importance: "In the era of presidents Trump and Putin … we need … . some way of distinguishing truth from falsity, honest discourse from lies and fabrication."

In their analysis of 155 collaborations involving 1,010 entities across 125 countries around the world, Stonbely and Siemaszko (2022, 30) found that in places where there was a stronger tradition of objective journalism, such as the U.S., there was a greater tendency on the part of journalists to voice concerns about partnering with civil-society organizations than, for example, in Mexico. By examining collaborations across the U.S.-Mexico border, the study underlying this present article pays attention to ways in and degree to which different institutions remain separate and/or integrate their perspectives on the different sides of the border, and how these approaches can potentially inform global models of collaborative investigative journalism.

The U.S.-Mexico border also marks the border between the Global North and the South. Global North refers to the countries located primarily in the Northern hemisphere that have historically been identified as "the West" or "the first world" due to their relative wealth, technology, and global dominance (Graml, Meyer-Lee, and Peifer 2021). The Global South comprises countries in Latin America, Africa, and Asia negatively impacted by capitalist globalization (Mahler 2017).

Collaboration is crucial for journalists across the Global South, particularly in countries with high levels of anti-press violence (Mitra, Zárate Valderrama, and Krøvel 2025). In the 155 cross-field collaborations Stonbely and Siemaszko (2022) studied, 57% of the entities were located in Europe and North America, followed by 12% of the total in Central America, and 11% in Africa. Based on this extensive research, these authors concluded that " we increasingly felt we were just scratching the surface" (8). By being much more focused on a specific region, that is across the U.S., Mexico, and Central America, the study underlying this article aimed at a closer understanding about the particular ways and degree to which specific geopolitical and institutional entities remained

separated or became integrated in the collaborative investigative process. At the same time, this article does not intend to generalize findings throughout the Global South. The article hopes to encourage further research to focus on different regions in the Global South, and across the South and the North.

Bridging Research on Journalistic Media and Academia

Existing media scholarship has tried to create collaborative models of journalism from scratch. However, models of collaboration, integration, and convergence have already been developed in many academic fields beyond media and communication studies. It would be useful to try to learn from different fields, rather than reinventing the wheel (see also Dailey, Demo, and Spillman 2005, 15). The main contribution of this paper is to present a novel approach by building on existing models of multi-, inter- and transdisciplinary collaboration to advance a typology of collaborations in investigative journalism.[1] Rather than perceiving multi- inter- and transdisciplinarity as separate forms of knowledge production, this article conceptualizes these models as a continuum, ranging from no integration in multidisciplinarity to substantial integration across a range of societal and academic fields in transdisciplinarity (see Klein 2021).

Fields resemble disciplines given that they form specialized communities around shared topics, problems, and questions (see Klein 2018, 19; see also Waisbord 2019, 4). Why, then, have models of collaboration in investigative journalism and models of multi-, inter- and transdisciplinary collaboration not been integrated in the past? The most likely reason is that the latter have been developed in the area of higher education. It is generally assumed that investigations conducted between journalists and their partners cannot be compared with the level of investigations conducted by academic researchers, as the academic field is considered far more rigorous than the journalistic field. In reality, investigative journalism is often characterized by painstaking research techniques, large and complex data, and emphasis on producing new knowledge of public significance (Anuar 2015, 87, 90; Bacon 2011, 47).

This article argues that building this connection is meaningful, because multi-, inter- and transdisciplinary research and collaborative investigative journalism share many goals and challenges. First, multi-, inter- and transdisciplinary approaches are deemed fundamental for understanding complex challenges of our times such as climate change, global inequality, the Covid-19 pandemic, and so forth – too multifaceted to be tackled by any academic discipline alone (e.g., Klein 2021; Vienni Baptista 2024). These goals are not dissimilar from those of collaborative investigative journalism, which aims to provide depth and scale onto complex topics that none of the partners could match on their own (see Graves and Konieczna 2015).

Moreover, just as the models of professional journalism (see Waisbord 2013, 180) and models of collaborative journalism (Carson and Farhall 2018; Stonbely 2017), models of multi-, inter- and transdisciplinarity have been criticized for failing to account for practices and challenges in the Global South (e.g., Cole 2017; Klein 2021). Many academics and journalists are aware of these issues, striving for change. Heightened interest in transdisciplinarity is coupled by a push for socially robust knowledge that dismantles traditional hierarchies while fostering new partnerships between the academy and society (Klein 2021, 3, 43, 46). This intellectual shift has also given rise to "de-westernization" – a call

for embracing an anti-imperialist strategy, being loyal to local values, and rethinking conventional Western categories (see Waisbord and Mellado 2014, 363). Meanwhile, investigative journalism is increasingly concerned with societal impact and holding the powerful accountable (Carson and Farhall 2018), while scholars have also called for more inclusion and consideration of the Global South in collaborative journalism (e.g., Mesquita and de Lima Santos 2021; 2023; Stonbely and Siemaszko 2022) (Table 1).

Both academic research and investigative journalism are ultimately concerned with discovering and exposing the truth. Amidst the spread of misinformation, this task is increasingly important – and threatened. As phrased by Stonbely and Siemaszko (2022, 12), "there is no guarantee that journalism will remain the privileged truth-telling public narrative which it has claimed to be … unless it is able to engage positively with the multiplication of forms of public information." Likewise, Frodeman (2017, 5) describes how cultural transformation driven by information and communication technologies is leading to the displacement of the university from the center of knowledge production. This, he argues, "suggests the need to rethink the theoretical space of interdisciplinarity." This article aims to respond to this need by connecting the models of multi- inter- transdisciplinarity with models of collaborative investigative journalism, with the ultimate goal of supporting new configurations of investigations capable of wider and more inclusive production of reliable knowledge (see Klein 2021, 46; see also Cheas 2019; Lam et al. 2021).

The research questions and goals underlying this article can be summarized as follows:

1. How and to what extent do the existing models of collaborative journalism help to account for field dynamics and power relations in investigative collaborations across the U.S.-Mexico (Global North–South) border?
2. How and to what extent do the models of multi- inter- and transdisciplinary collaboration help to account for field dynamics and power relations in investigative collaborations across the U.S.-Mexico (Global North–South) border?
3. How can the future development of collaborative investigative journalism benefit from integrating models of collaborative journalism and multi- inter- and transdisciplinarity?

Table 1. Continuum from multi- to inter- to transdisciplinarity. Adopted from Klein (2017; 2021) and Nissani (1995).

Multidisciplinarity (MD)	Interdisciplinarity (ID)	Transdisciplinarity (TD)
← *Separation Integration* →		
Characterized by the involvement of multiple different disciplines, which remain separate and juxtaposed, rather than integrated, throughout the investigative process. Different disciplines often work separately and only combine their insights in the end.	Characterized by the integration of insights, methods etc. of different disciplines throughout the investigative process. More limited in scope than TD; successful ID does not imply collaboration / integration across different professions or regions.	Characterized by the integration of ideas from partners from a wide range of societal and professional institutions and regions. TD is also concerned with having an impact on society. Recent developments of TD place emphasis on the inclusion of vulnerable voices and views from the Global South.
Comparable to a fruit salad: the different fruits remain separate and distinguishable throughout the preparation and consumption process.	Comparable to a fruit smoothie: the different flavors are blended, i.e., impossible to tell where one fruit begins and another one ends. However, tends to be limited to one type of fruit (i.e., knowledge by academic disciplines)	Comparable to a smoothie involving fruit, vegetables and other diverse/ often unexpected ingredients, with a flavor that differs from traditional smoothies. I.e. integrates different types of ingredients (knowledge).

Materials and Methods

The empirical sample consisted of the following six investigative projects, produced and published in collaboration between U.S., Mexican, Guatemalan, Honduran, and Salvadoran partners between 2016 and 2022: (1) "Killers on a Shoestring: Inside the Gangs of El Salvador" (2016); (2) "From Migrants to Refugees: The New Plight of Central Americans" (2017), (3) "Zero Tolerance: Trump's Immigration Policy at the Border" (2018), (4) "Solitary Voices" (2019); (5) "Massacre in El Salvador" (2021) and (6) "Mining Secrets" (2022). This coverage investigated and exposed abuses against Central American asylum-seekers and human rights activists in the U.S., Mexico, and Central America.[2]

The sample was gathered from digital archives of media affiliated with the Global Investigative Journalism Network (GIJN) and other networks. The main criterion was that each project must involve investigators from both sides of the U.S.–Mexico border. All the collaborative projects that were identified with this criteria were included in the sample. Some of the projects are more strictly journalistic collaborations, others involve a broader range of investigators with different backgrounds. Some projects also involved partners elsewhere in Latin America and/or Europe; their coverage was examined as a secondary sample. Most projects consisted of multiple articles, audiovisual material, and investigative data, published in English and/or Spanish at different times. All the projects were funded and led by institutions in the Global North.

The content analysis of the sample is based on field theory (see Cheas 2024b), which offers a useful framework to analyze journalism in terms of its relations to other social actors (Waisbord 2013, 11; see also Benson 2013). The author first collected and organized the sample, then identified all the relevant fields and subfields, considering the positions and background information about each collaborating institution involved (see Bourdieu 2005). Within the journalistic field, the Central American and Mexican investigative outlets were considered to form a separate subfield, distinct and relatively distant from Central American and Mexican media owned and governed by the countries' elites and not committed to independent investigative journalism (see Mesquita and de Lima Santos 2023, 916–918; Palau-Sampio 2020, 6091). This subfield was further divided into smaller analytical categories to distinguish between each investigative outlet involved in the collaborations. Subfield categories were also formed to differentiate the U.S. non-profit organizations from commercial U.S. outlets.

To examine the separation and/or degree of integration between the perspectives of each field in the collaborative contents, the study combined field analysis with frame analysis (see Cheas 2024a). This is a fruitful approach for advancing models of cross-field collaboration involving journalists and academics, given that journalistic frames resemble perspectives of academic disciplines (see Cheas 2019), each providing selective, limited views on the world (see Benson 2013, 5). The coverage also produced investigative data that did not contain any interpretive frames, which was coded as frameless space.

The relevant frames were identified both deductively and inductively. The author then examined which particular fields, subfields, data, and frames were associated in the coverage. Those spaces where a particular frame or data was not attributed to any specific sponsoring field were examined as potentially integrating ideas from all the collaborating fields. To determine which field(s) contributed to each frame, the analysis was guided by explicit mentions of their involvement.

Based on this field and frame theoretical analysis, the author tested the relevance and shortcomings of existing models of collaborative journalism, i.e., whether and to what extent the collaborative contents contained cross-promotion, cloning, coopetition, sharing, and/or convergence (Dailey, Demo, and Spillman 2005), and whether the collaborations were temporary or on-going and separate, co-created, or integrated (Stonbely 2017). The author then explored whether and how the coverage contained characteristics associated with multidisciplinarity (juxtaposed perspectives), broad and narrow interdisciplinarity (integrated perspectives of distant and proximate fields) and transdisciplinarity (integrated perspectives of proximate and distant fields representing different regions and sectors of society).

Building this empirical study exclusively on content analysis imposes great limitations for this study. Namely, this research would have benefited significantly from interviews and ethnographic research, as the journalists themselves could have described the circumstances in which they worked, which factors enabled and inhibited the separation or integration of distinct ideas, and how power inequalities were manifested in different situations and affected particular journalists. Unfortunately, conducting interviews was not possible within this research project.

This article does not claim to comprehensively describe all the aspects of the examined collaborations nor offer a solid new model that can be applied to any collaboration. Rather, this article has been written with the hope that future researchers will further elaborate on these connections between collaborative investigative journalism and multi- inter- and transdisciplinarity through different methodologies across different regions.

Results

This section will first present results related to existing models of collaborative journalism, and whether and how these models are helpful or inadequate for describing the empirically examined collaborations across the U.S.-Mexico border. The article will then present findings related to models of multi- inter- and transdisciplinary collaboration vis-a-vis the examined collaborations.

The analyzed six projects at least formally met the criteria for "full convergence" – the most integrated model in Dailey, Demo, and Spillman's (2005, 154) continuum – as the partners cooperated in gathering the data and planning, reporting, and producing the stories. The projects in the sample also met the criteria of the "Temporary and integrated" collaboration model, as the partners shared data at the level of the organization and had regular contact for the duration of the project, which had a start and an end date (see Stonbely 2017). However, at least half of these projects also manifested deep divisions and hierarchies between the Northern and Southern partners, whereas half were characterized by relatively low hierarchies and a cross-cultural mixture of narrative styles. Most projects were a combination of persisting hierarchies, on the one hand, and transformative practices, diversity, and inclusion, on the other These findings suggest that "full convergence" and "temporary and integrated" are overly generic models to capture the range of different dynamics and power relations shaping these North–South collaborations.

For instance, the Solitary Voices project, coordinated by the International Consortium for Investigative Journalists, conducted an original analysis about placements of

immigrant detainees in isolation cells in the U.S. (see Hallman 2019). One of the stories is the article "Thousands of Immigrants Suffer in Solitary Confinement in ICE Detention," published in *The Intercept* on May 21, 2019 (Woodman et al. 2019). According to the article (para.11–12), "*The Intercept*'s and ICIJ's reporting, which included a groundbreaking review of more than 8400 reports describing placements of ICE detainees in solitary confinement, found that the immigration agency has used isolation cells to punish immigrants." Only in the 17th paragraph, it is briefly mentioned that "ICIJ's investigation was conducted over five months in collaboration with Grupo SIN in the Dominican Republic; *Plaza Pública* in Guatemala; Mexicanos Contra la Corrupción in Mexico; and *The Intercept*, NBC News, and Univision in the U.S."

On the same day as *The Intercept*'s story was published, NBC News published a story titled "Thousands of Immigrants Suffer in Solitary Confinement in U.S. Detention Centers" (Rappleye et al. 2019). The headline is very similar to *The Intercept*'s, and involves mostly the same authors. Just as *The* Intercept, NBC News claims much of the recognition of the investigation to itself, without specifying what particular contribution makes it more important than the other collaborators involved. In the description of the project on the main website (Hallman 2019, para 7, 10), the "more than 8,400 incident reports" are described as general data, and the finding that "ICE detention centers have used solitary confinement to isolate thousands of the most vulnerable immigrant detainees … and overusing solitary confinement as a form of punishment" is attributed to "ICIJ and its partners" rather than to *The Intercept* or NBC in particular. However, these media's own reporting clearly puts the other collaborators in a secondary role.

Guatemalan *Plaza Pública*, on the other hand, was quick to emphasize the collaboration in the very beginning of its stories, while refraining from claiming any special recognition for its own reporting. For instance, in the article "Silvio y los inhumanos" (see Garcia 2019), *Plaza Pública* describes the collaboration in the lead paragraph, without accentuating its own role anywhere in the story. The story is rich in local context, suggesting a high amount of local knowledge and work invested by this Guatemalan outlet itself. Why was this special effort not accentuated in its story? Considering that Central American independent media like *Plaza Pública* are heavily dependent on U.S. funding (Palau-Sampio 2020, 6105) to enable their critical reporting, it is hardly surprising that this Southern outlet would adopt a much more humble approach to the collaborative reporting than *The Intercept* and NBC News did (see also Cheas 2024a, 2024b).

However, it would be too simplistic to conclude that the North dominates the whole collaboration without any meaningful dialogue or integration with the Southern partners. The majority of the stories published within the Solitary Voices project were authored by journalist Tamoa Calzadilla, affiliated with Univision at the time of the collaboration. In *Plaza Pública*'s publications of stories co-authored between Calzadilla and *Plaza Pública*'s own reporter Suchit Chávez, such as "Me tuvieron encerrado hasta que me enfermé de la cabeza" (Calzadilla and Chávez 2019), Calzadilla has been integrated into the *Plaza Pública* staff, as though affiliated with this Guatemalan media outlet, rather than contributing to the story as a foreign reporter from across the border. Moreover, Univision's coverage seems more inclusive and considerate of the Southern partners than that of the other U.S. media involved in the collaboration. This could be because of Univision's general orientation towards Latinx publics and Spanish-language content in comparison with the purely Anglophone outlets.

Solitary Voices is certainly not the only project where the Central American and Mexican media showed more modesty towards their own contribution and more inclusion of collaborators from across the border than U.S. partners did. For instance, in The Zero Tolerance project, the U.S. partners repeatedly failed to mention their Central American and Mexican partners, whereas the latter were always inclusive of the former. These findings lead this author to concur with Stonbely (2017) that existing models of collaboration need more attention as to managing unequal power relations.

Integration Through Cultural Immersion

According to past research, the most important elements by which collaborations are organized are the duration of time and the degree of integration among partners – as both of these increase, the level of commitment required to make the collaboration work also increases (Stonbely 2017, 14–15). Admittedly, the sample analyzed in this article does not contain any "ongoing" projects – therefore, this study's possibilities for commenting on the Center for Cooperative Media's models 4–6 (on-going and separate; on-going and co-creating; on-going and integrated; Stonbely 2017) are limited.

However, the analysis suggests that the duration of time does not necessarily correlate with the level of integration in Global North–South collaborations. Rather, it seems it is the Northern partners' genuine openness and sensitivity to the cultural and socioeconomic context of the Southern partners, enabled by in-person investigative collaboration between the Southern and Northern partners in the Southern region, that leads to the most genuinely integrative reporting (see also Cheas 2024a, 2024b). Of course, in-person investigative collaboration takes time, as does acquainting oneself with a different culture in general. The point is, if the time is not invested in immersion in the local context, the duration may not have a significant impact on the level of integration and level of commitment to the collaboration.

Namely, the most integrated projects in the empirical sample include "Mining Secrets," coordinated by Forbidden Stories and focused on exposing human rights violations against indigenous activists in Guatemala, and "Massacre in El Salvador," exposing genocide and other atrocities committed during El Salvador's civil war and its aftermath. In both projects, the journalists traveled from the U.S. – and in Mining Secrets, from Europe as well – to pursue in-person investigations jointly with local colleagues in Central America, in addition to analyzing data online. The duration of the Mining Secrets project was six months. The start date of the Massacre in El Salvador project is uncertain.

In both projects, the journalists of the North made an effort to involve affected communities in the South into their investigation and reporting. For instance, in its article pertaining to the Mining Secrets project, *The Intercept* and other Northern partners seem to have integrated the ancestral council of the village of El Estor in Guatemala and its members into the collaborative investigation regardless of the fact that the council has taken to the streets to protest against the multinational mine and prevent the mine from functioning, adopting an explicitly advocacy role. In its own reporting, *The Intercept* also places the abuse against the activists in El Estor in a broader historical and geopolitical context, while openly sympathizing with social movements in Guatemala and condemning U.S.-funded military operations (see Cuffe 2022, para. 76)

Notable valorization of Southern investigative and reporting skills was also detectable in Univision's collaboration with Salvadoran *El Faro* in the "From Migrants to Refugees" project (e.g., Martínez 2017). Univision journalists did not travel to Central America in person but rather, the collaboration took place mostly online (see Juarez 2017). The project consists of four "books" authored exclusively by Salvadoran investigative journalists and integrated with audiovisual material produced by the Univision journalists but featuring voices and views of *El Faro* journalists.

Perhaps Univision's cultural proximity to the Spanish language allowed it to appreciate this local narrative style more than *The New York Times* did in its virtual collaboration with *El Faro*. This collaboration, titled "Killers on a Shoestring," focused on finances of violent gangs in El Salvador (see Martínez et al. 2016). Maslin (2016) describes how *El Faro*'s journalists "struggled to shorten scenes" and fit the story in the *Times's* traditional pyramid article model. Specific formats are the product of the logic shaping each journalistic field and subfield (Waisbord 2013, 136). In this case, the logic of the U.S. journalistic field was imposed on the logic of the field of Salvadoran investigative journalism (see also Cheas 2024a).

The duration of the "Killers in a Shoestring" project was seven months – longer than Mining Secrets, which featured a much greater degree of intercultural dialogue and integration. The "Killers in a Shoestring" collaboration still meets the criteria for the "full convergence" model. In short, existing models of collaboration fall short of considering the impact of cultural immersion on the degree of integration and inclusion.

Broad and Narrow Interdisciplinarity and Transdisciplinary Integration

This paper will now proceed to present further results of the empirical analysis vis-a-vis models of multi-, inter- and transdisciplinary collaboration. The analysis suggests that none of the collaborative projects examined was clearly "multidisciplinary." In multidisciplinary collaboration, each investigator/team uses its own field's methods, concepts, and skills to produce its own findings and limited interpretation of the complex reality, only to be brought together at the end of the project. Overall, multidisciplinarity lacks integration (e.g., Klein 2017, 4).

Three collaborations in the empirical sample were "interdisciplinary," in that different fields and subfields gathered and analyzed shared data while integrating ideas, tools, and methods throughout the investigative process. However, these projects were limited to *narrow interdisciplinarity*, meaning integration of ideas between proximate fields, rather than *broad interdisciplinarity*, meaning the integration of vastly different ideas from distant fields (Kelly 1996; Klein 2017, 23). In other words, interdisciplinarity in the three projects manifested as clusters of similar fields integrating ideas but keeping distance from other clusters with more distinct ideas (see Figure 1).

One of these was the fore-mentioned Solitary Voices project, where *The Intercept* and NBC published a nearly identical article produced by almost the same people on the same day (Rappleye et al. 2019; Woodman et al. 2019), suggesting they created it collectively, even if each medium was mostly crediting itself in their own publication. Within the same project, another cluster seemed to have formed between Univision and *Plaza Pública* (Calzadilla and Chávez 2019), which were from different sides of the U.S.–Mexico border and therefore more distant but still, culturally and linguistically proximate. Broad

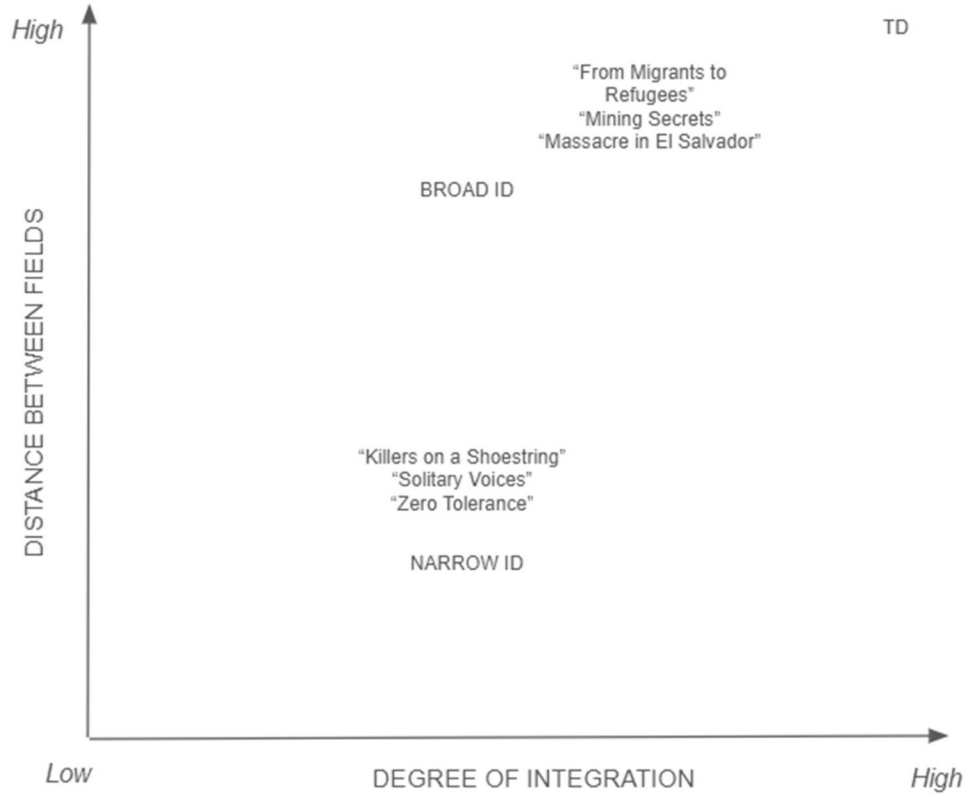

Figure 1. Analyzed projects on the continuum from multi- to transdisciplinarity.

interdisciplinarity seems to have been lacking from the Solitary Voices project. The same is true for the Zero Tolerance collaboration.

In "Killers on a Shoestring," *El Faro* was expected to conduct the demanding fieldwork, while *The Times* editors, who also funded the project, merely supervised the work from afar (Maslin 2016). That is, the collaborators were divided into clusters of proximate fields, working at a cultural and socioeconomic distance from one another. Moreover, a parallel analysis of this collaborative project, and the "From Migrants to Refugees" project involving *El Faro* and Univision, reveals the narrow interdisciplinarity underlying the former, and the much broader and more inclusive approach of the latter. As noted by Lam et al. (2021, 243), one of the important aspects of transdisciplinary research is the use of context-sensitive formats to foster knowledge integration of diverse epistemologies from heterogeneous actors – an expectation *The Times* failed to meet, by imposing its own format on *El Faro*. In "From Migrants to Refugees," on the other hand, *El Faro* was allowed to use its traditional narrative format, which was integrated with Univision's typical audiovisual reporting. However, the "From Migrants from Refugees" project is still quite limited to journalistic collaboration – without integrating diverse professional fields in the investigation. Thereby it does not meet the full criteria for transdisciplinarity and hence, is situated on the continuum between broad interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity (see Figure 1).

The "Mining Secrets" and "Massacre in El Salvador" projects did successfully integrate perspectives from partners across the collaborating fields. In both projects, the victims of abuse formed a bigger part of the investigation than just acting as sources – they were actively involved in the investigation itself, as in transdisciplinary "stakeholder" collaboration (Klein 2021). However, alongside this broad inclusion and integration, both of these projects also fell short of the full potential of the transdisciplinary model.

For instance, even as the Mining Secrets project devoted a lot of space for voices of the indigenous community in general and indigenous reporter Carlos Choc in particular, the collaborative reporting does not seem to reflect the reporting style of *Prensa Comunitaria* – the indigenous medium that Choc is affiliated with. According to its website, *Prensa Comunitaria* (n.d.) is a group of Mayan indigenous people who tell their stories in different formats and non-traditional production platforms combining art, testimony, journalism, and social sciences to create a more participatory and active community. As noted by Cole (2017, 127), indigenous people have ways and means of knowledge development that differ from those employed in the West. Lam et al. (2021, 245) emphasize that especially in the Global South and with indigenous communities, transdisciplinary research needs to adapt local formats. Otherwise, the collaboration might become yet another colonizing influence on indigenous peoples, perpetrating power asymmetries (see also Cole 2017, 128). However, apart from integrating indigenous voices and views in the investigation itself, the collaborative coverage published by Forbidden Stories, *The Intercept* (see Cuffe 2022) and other partners in the North does not seem stylistically very different from their regular investigative coverage. By being more considerate and inclusive of the indigenous forms of knowledge production, the Mining Secrets project could have made its collaborative coverage even much more diverse and transformative.

In the case of the "Massacre in El Salvador," it is curious that the collaborative coverage published by *Pro Publica,* Frontline PBS and *Retro Report*, all of which gives substantial space and emphasis to voices of journalists of *El Faro*, makes no mention of *El Faro'*s own documentary about the El Mozote Massacre, published in November 2019 – that is, almost two years prior to the airing of the collaborative documentary (Campos 2019). In this 31-minute documentary by *El Faro*, available with English subtitles on YouTube, five survivors of the massacre recall their escape from the U.S.-sponsored Atlacatl battalion. As the collaborative project, the *El Faro* documentary also describes the judicial process reopened in 2016. The *El Faro* documentary depicts masterful and even artistic use of image and audio, manifesting this local medium's exceptional capacity for telling an investigative story in this cultural context. By recognizing the value of this original work and building on it, rather than completely dismissing it, the "Massacre in El Salvador" project could have situated much further in the continuum towards transdisciplinary integration and inclusion (see Figure 1).

Discussion

The empirical analysis shows that the model of interdisciplinary collaboration has the same problem as the "Full convergence" model (Dailey, Demo, and Spillman 2005) and

the "Temporary and integrated" model (Stonbely 2017) – it is too all-encompassing. As a result, projects that feature genuinely broad integration, such as "From Migrants to Refugees," "Mining Secrets," and "Massacre in El Salvador," are characterized by the same umbrella term as projects such as "Killers on a Shoestring," "Zero Tolerance," and "Solitary Voices," which feature a much more limited scope of diverse voices and consisting mostly of clusters of proximate fields integrating ideas across relatively narrow areas of expertise. However, a distinction between broad and narrow interdisciplinarity helps to differentiate between projects. Moreover, expectations for transdisciplinarity serve to highlight room for improvement in the most integrated projects. By placing the collaborative projects on a continuum from multidisciplinarity towards transdisciplinarity, we can gain a more comprehensive and realistic view of their degree of inclusion and integration than based on the existing models of collaborative journalism.

In academia, interdisciplinarity has become a buzzword that is included in most solemn speeches, funding calls, and university strategies. Similarly, collaboration has become a very popular approach in journalism. In practice, however, many academic institutions have failed to accommodate new forms of knowledge production (Klein 2018, 22); there is a significant mismatch between interdisciplinarity-promoting policy and the prevailing norms of discipline-based scholarship (e.g., Salmela, Vienni-Baptista, and Cheas 2025). This article suggests that similarly as in academia, many journalistic collaborations barely reach beyond narrow integration of ideas, and fail to transform the status quo between the partners and their home regions. The vagueness of the meanings behind the commonly used terms interdisciplinarity, collaboration, convergence, and integration allow academics and journalists to use these terms without really needing to think about meanings behind them – how partnership should open them to different world views, methods, cultural traditions, and socioeconomic positions.

A big part of the problem is that institutions in the Global North still lead and fund the great majority of the collaborative projects – including all the projects examined in this article. Some of the loudest voices championing equitable partnerships are coming from Northern funders, institutions, and agencies. This "laying claim" to the language of empowerment, without putting into practice actions that can actually shift power dynamics within knowledge ecosystems, has been the subject of significant critiques (Ordóñez Llanos et al. 2024, 2) In reality, the Southern partners are often treated as objects of charity without having any legitimate expertise or skills of their own that could be learned from. Nothing changes in this exploitative and unequal system, albeit the impression that North–South cooperation is flourishing (see also Ordóñez Llanos et al. 2024).[3]

All the while, these collaborations are necessary for the survival of investigators in the South, who struggle amidst repression and very limited resources and freedom of speech. The Southern partners find themselves in a subordinate position, where they cannot easily argue against the rules of the game and practices imposed by their "helpful" partners in the North.

Rules of the game and conceptions of excellence rooted in the North ultimately shape how the partnerships are assessed and funded and what kinds of publications are legitimate and illegitimate (see also Ordóñez Llanos et al. 2024, 5). In this case, it is questionable whether the word "collaboration" can even be used – or whether these projects

actually manifest what field analysts would call *symbolic violence*; a form of invisible power that shapes individuals' perceptions about what is legitimate (see Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 112–113). Without tightening and defining the norms and criteria for cross-border collaboration and integration, the lack of proper recognition of Southern partners, while the Northern institutions applaud themselves, can continue unannounced.

Many scholars have argued that the heterogeneity of meanings behind concepts of multi-, inter- and transdisciplinarity is a positive thing (e.g., Vienni-Baptista 2023). As expressed by Klein (2021), terms are "rhetorical signposts of continuity and change, tradition and innovation" which "reassert, extend, interrogate, and reformulate existing classifications to address both ongoing and unmet needs." The author of this paper concurs, partly because it is precisely the heterogeneity of meanings associated with these terms that allowed their application from the sphere of higher education in this empirical study of collaborative investigative journalism.

However, there needs to be more communication and agreement about the normative standards for multi-, inter- and transdisciplinarity, convergence, and integration. As emphasized by Stonbely (2017, 61), given that collaborative journalism is still a nascent practice, and a relatively new area for scholars who study journalism, the line between "good" and "bad" is not yet clearly drawn. Mitchell (2022, 6) observes that it is not clear whether international support can also be problematic for Mexican and Central American journalists. Ordóñez Llanos et al. (2024, 5) find that Global North–South collaboration may indeed be extractive and increase dependence on Northern funding and expertise. In Stonbely's (2017, 61) words, "agreed-upon definitions will allow critics, philanthropists, and practitioners to see clearly when a collaboration is for the betterment of the communities being served" (see also Waisbord 2013, 220)

Conclusion

This article has found that the duration of time does not necessarily correlate with the level of integration in Global North–South collaborations, as existing models of collaborative journalism have claimed (Stonbely 2017). Rather, it is the Northern partners' genuine openness and sensitivity to the cultural and socioeconomic context of the Southern partners, enabled by in-person investigative collaboration, that leads to the most genuinely integrative reporting. In the cases of "Mining Secrets" and "Massacre in El Salvador," this sensitivity is achieved through in-person collaboration in Central America; in the case of Univision, through cultural and linguistic proximity between the collaborating outlets (see also Cheas 2024a, 2024b). Of course, in-person investigative collaboration takes time, as does familiarizing with a different culture in general. The point is, if the time is not invested in immersion in the local context, the duration may not have a significant impact on the level of integration and level of commitment to the collaboration.

The appeal of partnerships responds to the belief that the future of journalism is characterized by the journalistic outlets' extensive reach into communities, producing more comprehensive stories featuring citizens' demands and voices (Waisbord 2013, 208–209). In the most transdisciplinary projects underlying this research, the reporters from neither the North nor the South shied away from explicit stances against exploitation of Central American indigenous peoples, U.S. support to murderous militaries, and other abuses they detected in their investigation. Resembling Mexican and Central

American investigative journalism characterized by blurred boundaries between journalism, activism, and academia, while committed to factual and rigorous reporting, these projects were more likely to have an impact and be meaningful to the affected communities than the "interdisciplinary" projects where the journalists in the North barely left their comfort zones and imposed their rules of the game on their partners in the South.

However, demanding in-person involvement to enable wide-ranging inclusion from all collaborative projects may lead to unnecessary stress, and to even more dishonesty, depicting the projects as more ambitious and integrative than they actually are. A huge number of local collaborations are taking place in the Global North and South alike, for which a less ambitious approach and virtual collaboration may be much more convenient. What is more important than all projects reaching the full degree of transdisciplinary integration and related transformation is transparency and honesty about their practices, positions, and goals. In all cases, it would be important for the investigators to at least engage in critical self-reflexivity about their own potential complicity in the marginalization of knowledges from elsewhere, and use this increased awareness to avoid acts symbolic violence (see Waisbord and Mellado 2014, 365; see also Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992).

As academics no longer have sovereignty over knowledge production, the task of evaluating quality in transdisciplinary research has become not only disciplinary but also social, political, and economic (Klein 2018, 23). Likewise, Koch (2018, 66) observes that the relationship between advocacy and investigative journalism should be discussed more widely, made more transparent, and "with careful calibration there is greater room for cooperation." Amidst the spread of misinformation and xenophobic perspectives, it is fundamental for experts across these fields to work together and jointly develop new models for collaboration and integration to ensure the production of reliable and factual information in the future (see also Carson and Farhall 2018, 1909).

This article has aimed at building a new bridge across the journalistic media and academia by advancing models of collaborative investigative journalism through models of multi-, inter- and transdisciplinarity. Clearly, this article also has many shortcomings. First, the sample analyzed in this article does not contain any "ongoing" projects – therefore, this study's possibilities for commenting on some of Stonbely's (2017) collaborative models have been limited.

The second and most obvious limitation of this study is that it has built exclusively on a content analysis of the collaborations, without including interviews with the journalists themselves. Interviews and ethnographic research could have produced much more multifaceted and practical data about how and why different perspectives remained separate or were integrated in the course of the collaboration, and as to managing power inequalities in the collaborations. The main issue with this shortcoming is the way it excludes voices from the South at the same time as the article itself is concerned with transdisciplinarity and global inclusion. It is evident that this paper deserves the same kind of criticism it has offered to other institutions in the Global North: failing to incorporate voices from the Global South as equal partners in the investigative process.

Among other findings, this study highlighted the importance of learning from indigenous investigative outlets such as Guatemalan *Prensa Comunitaria,* which "combines art, testimony, journalism and social sciences to grow our audiences and create a more participatory and active community" (n.d.) Traveling to Guatemala and observing the journalists of this indigenous outlet, rather than just analyzing its

contents from afar, would have surely provided more insights as to what and how investigative outlets in the Global North can learn from this reporting and related practices. It is hoped that anyone reading this article while planning on limiting their own research about collaborations on content analysis, would reconsider and expand their methodological approach.

This study also built on concepts and theories rooted in the Global North: field; integration, convergence, and multi- inter- and transdisciplinarity. Even as these concepts are increasingly used and developed by scholars based in the Global South (e.g., Vienni Baptista, Vasen, and Villa Soto 2018; see also Benson 2015), future research should also examine North–South collaboration and integration through models and concepts that originate in the South, and essentially through methodologies that give a voice to the Southern actors themselves.

Notes

1. Other terms, such as cross-disciplinarity (e.g. Klein 2017) and post-disciplinarity (Waisbord 2019), are also commonly used. This article finds the concepts of multi- inter- and transdisciplinarity to be most fruitful for advancing models of collaborative journalism.
2. More details about the sample and background information about different collaborators can be found on the research project website, https://www.journalismbeyondthewall.org/en/data-and-sample/.
3. Dr. Leonardo Custódio elaborated on lived experiences relating to dismissal of the expertise of scholars and students from the Global South in his presentation "Benefits of International Diversity in Academia," during the seminar "Equity and Inclusion in Academic Careers at Finnish Universities" by the Consortium of Higher Education Researchers in Helsinki, Finland on June 6, 2024.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank the editor and anonymous reviewers for their highly valuable feedback. The author would like to dedicate this article to the loving memory of Professor Julie Thompson Klein, whose insights about inter- and transdisciplinarity and communication have inspired this article.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This article is funded by Research Council of Finland (decision no. 338834) and Kone Foundation.

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