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Cross-border collaborative journalism:
Why journalists and scholars should talk about an emerging method

By Brigitte Alfter, Editor Europe at Journalismfund.eu

Abstract
When politics, business and crime cross borders, journalism has to do the same in order to provide adequate coverage. Based upon this simple logic journalists have experimented with cross-border collaborative journalism for decades but more intensely so since the late 1990ies. Especially investigative journalists are establishing networks, while mainstreaming of networked journalism only emerges slowly. In this article I argue that it is time to attempt a methodology of cross-border collaborative journalism in order to more systematically develop the model, to share it with peers and the next generation and to open it for scholars to analyse and criticise it. The article is a practitioner's contribution based upon own experience and a series of interviews with cross-border journalism pioneers.

Key words: investigative journalism; cross-border journalism; collaborative journalism; practitioners; praxis; academics; future of journalism

Introduction

In the autumn of 2014 the new president of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, had barely come into office when the Lux Leaks story (ICIJ, 2014) broke: Based upon a data leak a team of more than 80 journalists in 26 countries simultaneously published stories on how the tax authorities in Luxembourg had granted major companies tax agreements, that allowed them to legally channel revenues out of Europe while paying an absolute minimum of taxes in Luxembourg. Through the arrangement they also avoided taxes in fellow EU member states. Juncker – after almost two decades as prime minister of Luxembourg – was widely blamed for eroding the tax base of his own EU partners and forced to comment and address the issue. The basis of the articles in the 26 countries was a shared set of documents and data, the stories told were further researched and prepared to national discourses and audiences by the team members. The impact achieved through the pooling of research power and the synchronised publications are obvious. Lux Leaks – coordinated by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, ICIJ, in Washington – is among the latest and most prominent but far from the only cross-border collaborative research. Journalists – particularly investigative journalists – and media have experimented with the method before the turn of the century, they have done increasingly so since the late 1990es, when also the ICIJ was founded as part of a non-profit investigative structure in the United States (Lewis 2009).

I turned to cross-border journalism out of necessity in 2004. At the time I was the Brussels correspondent of Danish newspaper Information. *If* I wanted to give my readers thorough reporting and set day-to-day news coverage into context, I *had* to collaborate with colleagues. The research that got me going was on the EU's agricultural policy. Colloquially dubbed *farm subsidies,* the Common Agricultural Policy or CAP governs half of the annual EU spending or – as of 2014 – about € 60 billion a year. Colleagues had obtained information on the spending for a fraction of the money: One data set for Denmark had emerged through a freedom of information request and indicated that the mainstream political narrative about supporting the poorest farmers was not carried out in Denmark. On the contrary: large landowners including royals and big industrialists got large sums of tax payers' money (Hansen & Mulvad, 2004).
To see whether this was a single case or a general trend I needed all EU data. But my request for access to information was turned down by the European Commission in 2004. The decision was deemed maladministration by the European Ombudsman in 2007 (European Ombudsman, 2007; European Ombudsman 2008); however being a news reporter I did not feel I had the time to wait that long. Instead we formed a network of journalists to share competences and compile the data country by country through collaboration. The founders of the network (Farmsubsidy.org, 2005) contributed with insights into the EU policies and legal basis, with data work, with networking coordination, with providing a website for the data and with fundraising. The national contacts – mostly journalists and occasional scholars and NGOs – carried out freedom of information requests to obtain the data. Country-by-country data were obtained and stories were published as they emerged. The national journalists had exclusive stories to make their editors happy, and the Farmsubsidy team was able to add yet more data on the way to the full picture. The European Union's most costly policy was put on the agenda throughout a range of member states. From the beginning and until now there was a clear need for coordination, specialised knowledge and footwork.
In the later years the core team invited journalists from all over Europe to annual gatherings to analyse fresh data. This meant 20 or so journalists and coders staying two days in Brussels, enclosed in a room with working tables, litres of coffee and piles of dry sandwiches. At the end we would be able to provide a wide range of stories based on the shared dataset and prepared for national or even local audiences, with the angles stretching as widely as covering unexpected beneficiaries such as skating clubs in one country to allegations of fraud in another. The fact that we were from different countries – and thus not direct competitors – not only allowed us to pool research power but also to address our own audiences in our diverse narrative traditions and political discourses prevalent in our countries at the moment of publication.
In the years to follow I applied cross-border journalism to subjects as different as the adverse effects of medicines, climate-change lobbyism and illegal fisheries. In my role as Editor-Europe at Journalismfund I assist teams of journalists doing similar work on a wide variety of themes (Journalismfund.eu, 2015a).

Taking a view over the various projects, a pattern appears to emerge.

Why a methodology

"But how," asked a senior and very experienced colleague covering national economy and politics, "how do you actually *do* it? How do you get ideas, for example?" An immensely valuable question. If senior colleagues didn't know where to start a cross border story, how would a less experienced one ever even dare think about it?

What to me had appeared as a useful solution to the journalistic challenges in my work, needed to be described more clearly. If indeed this is an efficient new method to cover a globalised reality, we must step from journalistic gut-feeling and start to define, describe and develop the method and – not least – pass it on to the next generation.

Of course I had experienced numerous problems in the various teams I participated in, and so had the other teams. We had had ethical and communication considerations, practical and even legal challenges. Following journalistic vocational tradition our teams strived to surmount obstacles as they appeared. Occasionally we would log our research steps and considerations to share with peers at investigative journalism conferences.

Conferences in the network of investigative journalism peers have been essential when it comes to developing and spreading journalistic methods in the past decades, for example computer assisted reporting and data journalism. This non-competitive collaboration on methodology was initially used in the US investigative community as of the 1970ies and since around 1990 spread to Europe and other parts of the world (Journalismfund.eu, 2015b; Houston, 2010).

The consistent focus on journalistic method as practiced in the global investigative journalism community was helpful. The IJ-community would not be afraid to invite for example police investigators or psychologists to learn about communication and interview techniques to their courses and conferences. When addressing a new task like collaborating across borders, it's an obvious first step to look to other professions such as business sociology or law or indeed psychology to contribute to journalists' methodology if suitable.

So what problems did I and others face in our cross border reporting, and could these be addressed systematically in the time to come? For this the purpose should be kept in mind.

My purpose here is twofold: Firstly to make the method accessible to young journalists and to scholars by describing it, and secondly to observe, analyse and improve it. Though both elements of the purpose should be considered equivalent in importance, a description for teaching purposes can serve as a first step in order to open up to more systematic analysis.

Main steps in the process of cross-border reporting

So what *is* cross-border journalism?

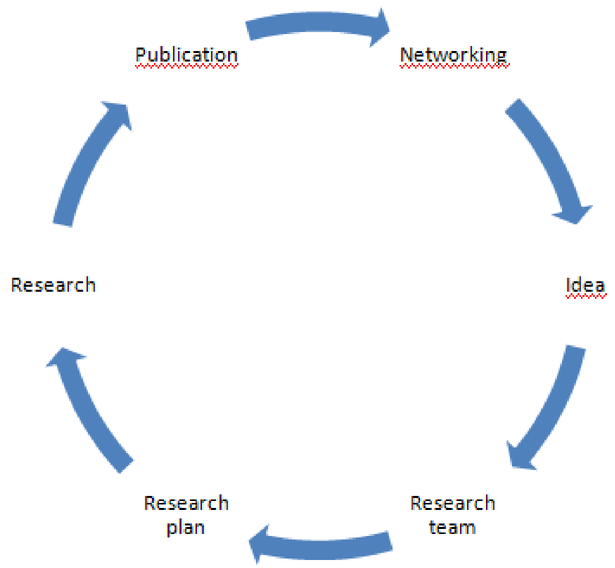
In short it could be boiled down to four elements:

1. Journalists from different countries…
2. ...collaborate to research a shared theme or story.
3. They compile, mutually cross check and merge their findings in order to...
4. ...fact check and tell these findings to their individual target groups on regional, national or local level.

A step-by-step description of the process in what could be considered a full-fledged cross border journalism project can be used as a guide to the elements of the method - minding the fact that not all elements will be present with the same prevalence in all researches.

This process can be divided into six steps from initial networking to publication. The follow up upon publication can lead to new networking and thus constitute the first steps for a repetition of the process with a new subject matter.

Cross border journalism process



Process step 1: Networking

Journalism is a competitive craft. Being first with the news means survival and respect in news journalism. I remember competition since the very first semester of journalism school. Luckily journalism school in Denmark in the early 1990s also included team work, thus not solely favouring lone-wolf attitude. Surmounting the competitive attitude is one of the first obstacles to cross-border collaboration. Ultimately, of course, each journalist in a collaborative team is responsible for his or her target group and works according to his or her national media legislation. The question of trust between the cooperating colleagues for cross border journalistic projects thus is paramount. Different levels of networking intensity can be distinguished and subdivided into five degrees of networking intensity:

1. Loose network
2. One-off assistance
3. Lead
4. Limited cooperation
5. Close collaboration

The loose network is 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, language areas. Networking on this non-binding level can spread from following each other's articles or broadcasts to actually exchanging small pieces of news assumedly of interest for the journalist in the other country. This kind of loose network can be a useful tool in day-to-day news reporting as well as lay a foundation for a closer cooperation at a later point in time.

When covering the EU this kind of networking is essential. Far too frequently national politicians would praise their own ideas for draft bills as being particularly inventive and seasonable, however simple networking then unveils this as hollow rhetoric since the course has already been set in the EU and decisions are simply being carried out on the national level.

The **one-off collaboration or assistance** would be an easy next step. This could be a request for a small service in another country, a short translation, a photo or footage of a particular name badge and bell button. This saved a Swedish freelance journalist a trip to the United States: Using a contact in the growing international community of research journalists it was possible to ask a US colleague for assistance in obtaining a short piece of easily accessible footage. In such cases we give support if at all possible in the trust that we are able to ask other members of the larger network for a similar service at some other point. It is important not to have unrealistic expectations to this level of networking and to be very respectful of colleagues' time as this is a one-way demand.

Giving an **exclusive tip-off** can be a way of networking. This type of information is valuable and a test on how the journalist, who receives the information, deals with it. Furthermore there is a chance the foreign colleague will unearth useful information. I once was the intermediary to such a tip-off. Danish journalists had systematically dug out information on who makes money on trafficked women working as prostitutes in Denmark. Analysing advertising for brothels they were able to translate terms like *Slavic Princess* or *Chocolate Pussy* to *likely trafficked from Eastern Europe or from Africa.* One of the backers appeared to be a prominent Belgian businessman. Danish police at the time seemed reluctant to open an investigation. The Danish authors of the research asked the Brussels correspondent – me – whether I knew a good journalist to look into the Belgian part of the story. They had no further use for this information, but indignation demanded them to pass on the information published in Denmark. The story made a front page in Belgium upon further research by the Belgian journalist – and could be quoted in Denmark, where politicians followed up by demanding the police to investigate.

On a methodological level this very loose contact between the journalists could – if need be – be a useful step on the way to a more obliging collaboration.

The fourth level of intensity in collaboration could be dubbed **limited cooperation**. 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. The afore mentioned farm subsidy project used this level of cooperation to share datasets obtained through freedom of information requests from national ministries.

The close collaboration can be compared to a research team in the newsroom of a newspaper or broadcaster. 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 particularly challenging task.

Networking – particularly across borders, languages etc – demands time and attention. For each journalistic research task the journalists involved have to select the right level of networking intensity in order to obtain the necessary information in a credible manner yet with the least effort spent on the networking.

Infrastructures for meetings and professional exchange among journalists have been established and are growing. In Europe the annual *European Dataharvest and Investigative Journalism Conference* can be mentioned as example of a regional hub for the cross-border collaborative network, on global level the Global Investigative Journalism Network with its bi-annual global conferences is the place to go. Also other infrastructure players are emerging such as document repositories, for example *DocumentCloud* (general document repository, mainly US) or *Wikileaks* (leaked documents and data sets, global), the latter was described as an "investigators' archive" by Lisa Lynch, who looked into the relation between Wikileaks and journalists (Lynch, 2010). These infrastructures are an important element of the networking activities.

Process step 2: Idea

Journalistic ideas either emerge acutely from day to day coverage or can be developed systematically to address important subjects. Developing and selecting story ideas is an integrated part of the journalistic craft. Particularly its effects are widely researched under the aspects of gate-keeping, agenda-setting and so forth.

The term *story idea* in the journalistic process could be translated into *working hypothesis* – as some journalists indeed do, such as for example the "hypothesis based inquiry" (Hunter, 2009).

What exactly gets a cross-border story going could be grouped into four:

1. **Acute stories** are news stories such as accidents, police raids or other sudden incidents, where journalists react to an occurrence of relevance for their audience and use the option for cross border journalism as part of their tool box. When a highly poisonous shipload of chemicals exploded in Norway, Norwegian journalists decided to do a cross-border follow up in a Norwegian, British, Dutch team to trace the global company owning the ship. When facing difficulties to publish in one country due to legal proceedings by the company, they were able to publish in another. Together they were able to unearth important information from a usually impenetrable corporation.
2. **Organisation stories** cover journalism about all matters concerning organisations such as the European Union or the World Trade Organisation. The discussion about and later the effect of decisions in such organisations is relevant in all member countries.
3. When goods or indeed humans are traded or trafficked from one country to another we could talk of **chain stories.** The trafficking or ownership relations connect the countries. Researching then demands knowledge of languages and sources in all involved countries and holds the potential for relevant stories to publish in all countries. This would usually be different angles – for example in the country of origin for trafficking potential victims would be warned, in the country of transit authorities would be alerted or held accountable and in the country of destination the victims of the trafficking would be traced and described as well as those forces paying for them.
4. Finally **comparative stories** concern incidents or phenomena in several countries but – at least at first sight – not necessarily interconnected. A student of mine eager to test the method compared upcoming legislation for Danish schools with similar school systems in Europe and traced a comparable reform implemented a few years earlier with very clear results and evaluations. A useful contribution to the Danish debate.

Each of these ways of getting ideas has a logic that allows journalists to figure out what options for cross-border journalism lie within a given story idea relevant for their audience. When it comes to developing ideas journalists may greatly benefit from the study of works of political science, economy, law, sociology, history as well as sector research relevant to a field of interest in order to grasp the larger patterns of current affairs before choosing a story idea to focus on. Once the subject is selected and the idea drafted, the next obvious step is to identify the journalistic competences that are necessary to document the story idea or hypothesis.

Process step 3: Research team

The first and most obvious criteria for composing a research team are the competences necessary to document the working hypothesis. Journalistic 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 organised crime and numerous others. Obviously language competences and well developed source contacts matter greatly. Already at this stage the publication should be considered, this includes a selection of countries and media desirable for publication in order to obtain impact. Also security through working in an international team is a consideration.

When contacting potential team members it is paramount to prepare for a win-win situation. All team members must have an obvious interest to participate in the research. When I set off to investigate side-effects of medicines marketed in Europe, I was a Brussels correspondent and new EU-legislation was on the way. I knew I had access to the reports about the existing practice via Danish freedom of information legislation but had no experience with covering health or the pharmaceutical industry. When I described the documents to one of the most experienced journalists in the field, he immediately agreed to embark on the collaboration.

The trade-off will vary from story to story but is important to keep in mind. If there is no mutual interest, it may be more efficient to hire a journalist or researcher rather than to attempt collaboration.

When composing the team the journalists, who are about to collaborate closely and trustfully, will have to consider personal relations as well as views on journalistic method, ethics, etc.

Process step 4: Research plan

Once the team is composed, team members may wish to physically meet for planning. A research plan includes a schedule, division of tasks such as data work, freedom of information requests or travelling – whatever is necessary to investigate the working hypothesis. The journalists have to find a way of communication comfortable for them all and include a level of security of communication appropriate to the subject to be researched. Also, the potential need to protect sources would be discussed and other predictable practical considerations.

As a starting point all team members meet on the same level of hierarchy, yet they may have to delegate tasks such as reporting, coordinating and editing and thus divide roles within the team if the number of reporters is large or the research expected to be complex.

Funding for team members as well as for travelling, translation and other expenses must be considered. A cross border team may consist of staff journalists and freelancers with different needs. External funding is not unusual in these non-profit journalism times (Houston, 2010), yet varying ethical views on such funding must be expected in different countries and included into the planning, so all team members are comfortable and credibility is not compromised in any of the countries for expected publication.

Not just the technological but also the cultural side of communication has to be considered, since well functioning communication within the team is paramount in the work phase. In law and business studies as

well as in psychology and sociology, communication is taught including intercultural communication. These insights can be useful for journalists within the team and in general to prepare interviews etc.
As many ethical and legal considerations as possible should be discussed at this stage as far as they can be foreseen. Publication should be agreed upon – several cross border teams mention tensions around the publication. Finally precautions for the security of reporters, their sources and their media should be discussed if relevant for the research.

Process step 5: Research – harvesting the fruit of collaboration
Only in the course of the work journalists will truly have to address the varying traditions of communication as well as varying views on journalism practice and ethical questions: is hidden camera a last resort when no other methods work, or is it a favourite tool; how are privacy issues viewed when it comes to research; fact checking traditions, storytelling traditions, additional research for individual audiences and so forth. Communication and the swift solution of such differences must be respected as part of the method rather than considered a problem.
Yet it is of course during the research period that the creative potential of working in multiple countries and on a well composed team can unfold. Documents or data may be easily accessible in one country and inaccessible in another. Sources may tell different stories in different languages and traditions and thus supplement each other. Political interests by governments may differ and allow different levels of openness. Insights only gained through the discussion within the team may provide the very keys to a deeper understanding.

Process step 6: Publication
When it comes to publication, minimum five points should be on the to-do-list:

1. Coordination of the publication date and formats
2. Storytelling
3. Target groups' ongoing discourse/actuality agenda
4. Fact checking
5. Legal checking

Having invested time and effort, journalists working in teams will be eager to see the reactions and – hopefully – the impact following publication. But prior to publishing, they will have to reach out to target groups. For this the result of the research must be adjusted to each target group individually. Story telling traditions vary widely; what is considered a well-told newsworthy piece in a Nordic-Anglosaxon tradition could be considered impolite elsewhere; what is considered a good read in Romania could be considered a soap opera in the US – as a colleague once put it - or it would be perceived as a research report in the Nordic countries. Anecdotal reports indicate that while Northern European readers are used to getting new information in the headline, South Eastern European readers would not bother buy a newspaper if the plot was unveiled on the front page rather than – like in a good crime story – at the very end.
Closely related to storytelling traditions is the national discourse, a given research is published into. In order to make the results of the common research relevant to a given target group at a given point in time, additional research may be necessary for this one publication. At this stage the individual team members' knowledge of their target groups is indispensable.

Fact checking of the common research is a common task. Far developed as part of the journalistic craft as it is in the US, journalists in other countries are also adapting to doing thorough fact checking these years. In a cross-border research fact checking is an obligatory task to be carried out by the entire team and for the individual publications.
Equally legal considerations would concern both the team as a whole and the individual journalists and ultimately their publishers, since media legislation as a starting point is a national matter, though lines are getting blurred and other countries' legislations may have to be taken into consideration due to libel tourism.

Process last step is the new Step 1: Follow up and new networking

In the investigative journalism community – be that on national, regional or international level – the tradition of sharing experiences is a central feature, for example at conferences and in the format of training classes. This is useful for cross border reporting in two ways:
If you log your work in order to later present a summary and analysis to your peers, you'll be more conscious of what you do and thus be able to react more swiftly as you go along.
During the presentation at a journalism conference with the overall aim to share experiences, peers will get an impression of the team's competences, ethics and fields of interest - with potential new contacts and new story ideas.

Summarising elements of the method

So what now?
The initial question was how to develop and spread this method – not least to the next generation. Developing through experimenting in the tradition of journalism as a craft is fine and well and one important route from here. But only one of two.
Given the interest in this kind of reporting, it would be good to speed up the development by analysing the method more systematically and seeking collaboration with scholars.
Journalists have the tendency to move on to the next story without much further ado. That's a reality of the craft and a reality of every day news reporting including investigative reporting. Once a good story is published, reactions have ticked into the mailbox, the story and "making-of" has been presented to peers at a conference journalists do not linger. Whether the next story has cross-border elements or not will depend on the subject – and gut feeling. To test the potential of cross-border journalism more systematically will thus be up to media scholars. Also teachers of journalism may find it helpful to take a closer look at some of the elements of the method. My own experience and that of fellow journalists indicates a bouffant to-do-list for scholars digging into aspects of the method. As a start focus could be on three aspects of the work process:

1. Journalism method – information gathering
2. Journalism method – story telling
3. Ethics and law

In the following I will comment on the elements and need as well as potential for further development based upon my own experiences and interviews with colleagues.

Information gathering

Networking, collaboration and intercultural communication: Journalism could profit from insights and practice in fields such as law, business, sociology or psychology. The emergence of networking infrastructures (Kaplan, 2013; Lynch, 2010) further demands for an analysis to systematically understand the logic of networks' power structures in order to maintain the overall editorial independence.
Conceiving and developing ideas for potential cross-border journalism stories: Journalism could profit from collaboration with political scientists, political economists, sociologists and so forth, while being aware of the potential danger of being instrumentalized.
Coordinating research teams: Management studies come to mind for inspiration in this regard.
Communication in potentially adverse surroundings: This appears to be mainly a training challenge, encryption and other methods are available already.
Entrepreneurial journalism like fundraising for a given research project: In times of media disruption, where the marriage between classic media and quality journalism is in crisis, individual journalists need to be capable of thinking entrepreneurial. This is another organisational challenge as experience can be pooled so journalists can focus on what they are best at: journalism. But it is also an educational challenge to stimulate journalists in using entrepreneurial techniques.
Technical capacity traditionally carried by publishers: This is an organisational challenge currently not solved systematically.
Fact checking becomes particularly important in cross-border journalism: An educational challenge in many countries outside the US.
Security of journalists: An organisational and legal challenge to further develop methods for security of journalists, media and their sources.

Storytelling

Story telling with respect to individual audiences' traditions: Insights into literary traditions and analysis on a given journalistic tradition as based upon this language groups' literary tradition needs to be understood in comparison to other such traditions in order to sharpen journalists' understanding when working in collaborative cross-border teams of reporters. Here both literature and marketing come to mind as potential sources of existing knowledge to translate to the needs of journalism.
Understanding a given national, regional or even local actuality agenda and knowing how to tell a story into that particular discourse.
Understanding different journalistic traditions from concept to publication: Understanding the deeper level of how journalists look at power and society – for example – can help the collaborating team from concept to storytelling (se for example a comparison on Nordic vs German traditions in Meyer & Brink Lund, 2008).

Ethics and law

Ethical standards for what makes a story credible or what damages credibility vary widely. Government funding - just to mention one of numerous examples – is a standard condition for Northern European broadcasters and a no-go in other parts of the world: In order to safeguard credibility of cross-border journalism, ethics in journalism should be addressed with a comparative approach.
Legal and security problems in the field of information gathering and publishing: This is a general problem becoming more visible in cross-border journalism.

Discussion

Stepping back and considering cross-border journalism as an emerging method in the larger context of journalism developments these years, knowledge sharing between journalists and scholars comes to mind. This may indeed be crucial to speed up the development from journalistic experimenting to a full-fledged and strong method.

Journalists in the past decades have strived to improve their research methods, for example in their regular national and international conferences for investigative journalism. The overall goals are to improve the craft and through that to achieve impact with the work we do – be that direct impact in the form of reactions to information unveiled or indirect impact by fulfilling the role of the watchdog in a given society i.e. to the benefit of this society.

In that spirit occasional collaborations between journalists and scholars have lead to interesting journalistic results, prominently worth mentioning may be the sociological analysis of the London Riots in collaboration between the Guardian and the London School of Economics (Lewis et al., 2012; Newburn et al. 2011) – as well as to improvement of journalists' methods by adapting scholars' methods to journalistic needs. Non-profit journalism centres and scholars in the US have picked up work analysing impact. The Center for Investigative Journalism in California – just to mention another example – employs a sociologist to assist in experiments with reaching out to new target groups (Alfter, 2014).

We, journalists, are striving to develop cross-border journalism in a developing-by-doing approach, some media are picking it up too. By applying the collaborative approach to not only journalists from other countries but also across professions, disciplines, we may well be able to speed up the development of this new journalistic method.

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TRANSPARENCY NOTE
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Note on the contributor

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http://ajour.dmjx.dk/shop/journalistik-over-graenser-532p.html

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