



Networked News Lab

The Networked News Lab's Collaborative Model

The Networked News Lab, an experimental research project based in Kenya, has developed a model for doing media research that can bridge the gap between theory and practice. Like a think-tank, the Networked News Lab carries out high-quality social science research on media, old and new, but all of its research directly involves leading journalists, bloggers, activists and other creative individuals. The Networked News Lab also supports its collaborators to put their ideas into practice, providing a real-world test of the research. This way, it closes the loop. Investigate. Discuss. Experiment. Learn. Repeat.

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The last decade has seen the proliferation of media think tanks: organizations that aim to build mutual understanding between media researchers, policy-makers and practitioners amid the uncertainties of the digital age.

The focus of these institutions varies. Some, like the Nieman Journalism Lab and J-Lab, are principally concerned with the advancement of news reporting. The MIT Media Lab, Brown Institute for Media Innovation, PBS Idea Lab and others examine the future of media broadly.

The assumption underlying all of these initiatives, as diverse as they may be, is that scholars can influence the nature of public discourse. To this end, they represent a repurposing of journalism studies and media research towards understanding and facilitating **change** (technological, social, cultural...). This shift has brought a greater emphasis on applied research, experimentation, and the co-production of knowledge.

The Networked News Lab, which has worked with journalists in Kenya to do collaborative research and to support innovative reporting, has followed this tradition with the aim to address two major problems. The first is that media research in Kenya, for various reasons, has become disjointed from current challenges in the sector. And the media sector, for reasons that include its alienation from research, lacks spaces for learning and reflection. Modest though the scale of its efforts may be, the Networked News Lab has placed unique emphasis on the form of collaboration it uses to address these issues.

The Networked News Lab's approach has been informed by Paolo Freire's notion of praxis, a term that describes cycles of action and reflection, and by participatory research methods. This briefing, however, describes the work in more practical terms with the aim of sharing its insights with others who wish to do media research that matters.

SIDE STORY

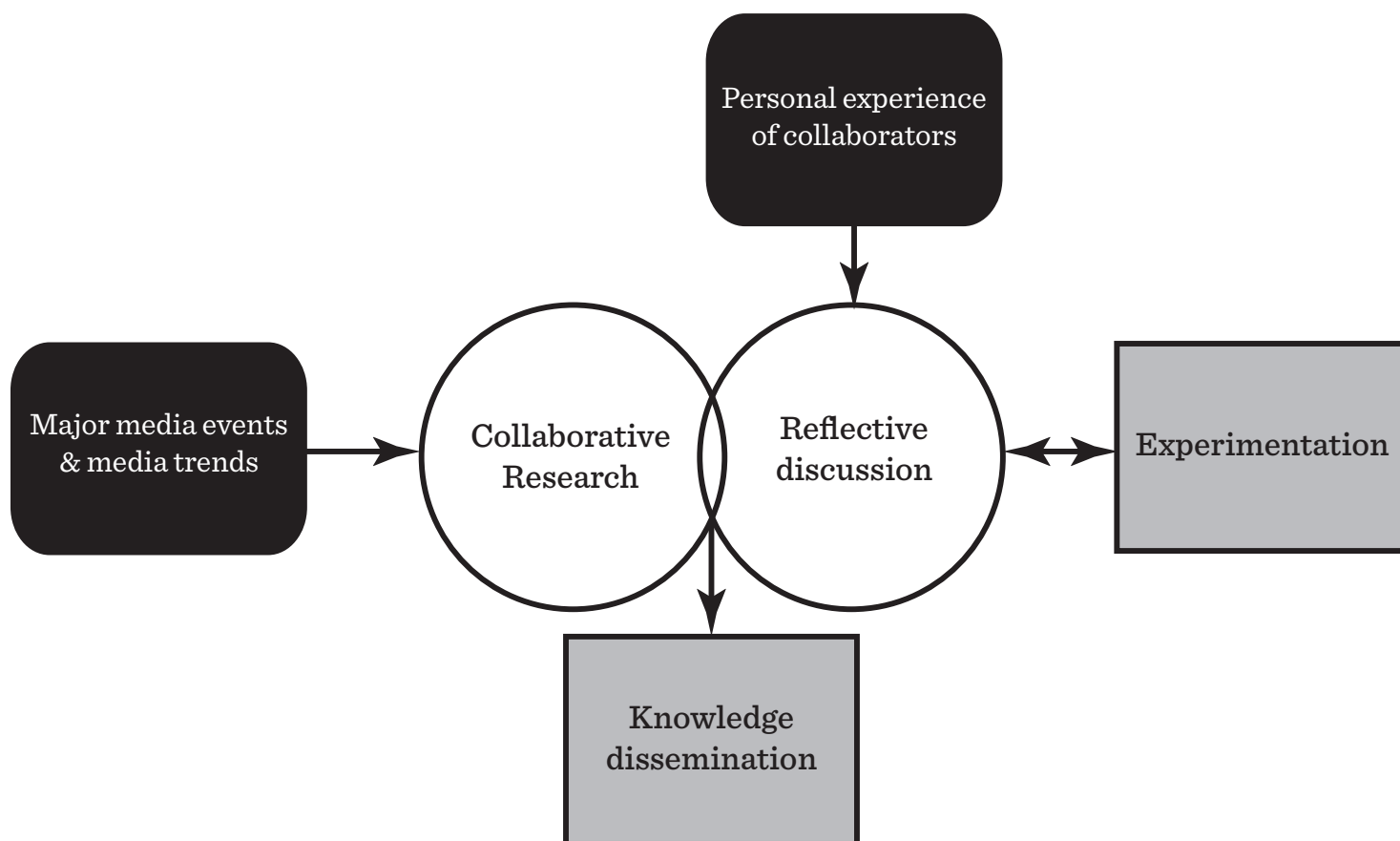
Working with Journalists to Understand Electoral Coverage

Did the Kenyan media sacrifice truth for peace in the coverage of the 2013 elections? Even a casual observer of Kenyan media will know how important this question has been to the Kenyan public and to the media fraternity. The Networked News Lab used its collaborative approach to research to examine the coverage and the decisions that shaped it. Researcher Nicholas Benequista met individually with members of the Networked News Lab and asked for their input on interview questions and on the most appropriate respondents from among the senior journalists and editors at their respective media houses. This initial input helped the researcher to sharpen the questions so that they would cut deeper into the issues confronting

newsrooms during the elections. The researcher then conducted the interviews with more than 20 journalists and senior editors: a sample from almost all the major media houses. They were asked to be very specific about the editorial instructions that they gave or received for coverage of the elections, about the choices that they made, and about what, if anything, they would have done differently. They were asked for their views on peace, truth and justice, and about how the politics played out in the newsroom during these elections, as compared with the 2007 vote. The researcher presented preliminary findings back to the members of the Networked News Lab in a format that protected the anonymity of respondents. Not only did this workshop provide invaluable insight for the final

analysis, it generated ideas for action. One of the reporters present, Bertha Kang'ong'oi, was particularly struck by the challenge of covering politically polarizing topics like the elections. It was observed that in honoring the "right to reply," journalists easily fell into a trap of allowing politicians to write the overarching narrative on these issues. Bertha resolved to attempt a more independent frame on just such a polarizing issue, the resettlement of people displaced by the post-electoral violence of 2007 and 2008. That article, which was published in South Africa's Mail & Guardian, generated further insight into the challenge that journalists face on politicized issues in Kenya. And the research and experimentation on this topic will surely continue.

Networked News Lab's Model for Collaborative Media Research and Support



INVESTIGATE. EXPERIMENT. LEARN.

The Networked News Lab has found two good entry points for its work.

The first is merely to begin with the experiences and aspirations of those who participate in the network. Asking the journalists to critically reflect on their current work or on their most significant achievements is important for several reasons.

These discussions – which have taken place one-on-one, in groups and through blog postings – have helped to shape the Networked News Lab's agenda by building personal bonds and identifying the common interests between researcher and journalist, and amongst the journalists themselves. These reflections have also helped members to sharpen their sense of purpose, to re-evaluate the value of their own work and to consider new directions for their projects. This has also enabled the Networked News Lab to provide more targeted and purposeful support to its members. For instance, the Networked News Lab has supported journalist James Smart by providing him with the assistance of a developer to strengthen the role of social media on his political talk shows. This was not done just for

the sake of innovation. The support for James has been part of an on-going discussion about how social media can be used to democratize news, and each increment of support is expected to yield new knowledge on the topic. There is a simple value proposition inherent in this model: support in exchange for learning. Their commitment to making their work a living laboratory is the main way that network members give back.

A second starting point, which eventually intersects with these individual projects, is to take a recent media event or trend that concerns members of the network and to conduct collaborative research on the topic. The Networked News Lab has worked with its journalists, for example, to investigate the coverage of the 2013 elections in Kenya (described in the box to the left) and to examine the reporting on Kenya's military incursion into Somalia.

Collaborative research can take many forms. At a minimum, it implies that the journalists help to shape the research questions. Going further, the journalists might help to collect the data – interviewing colleagues or practicing participant observation. They can also contribute to the data analysis in important ways too.

The simplest way that they can contribute to the analysis is by providing their feedback on preliminary conclusions. As the overlapping circles in the diagram above imply, reflective dialogue can also be an important component of collaborative research and analysis. When driven by a set of research questions and informed by a conceptual framework, these conversations have greater structure and purpose. For example, the Networked News Lab worked with Somali-speaking journalists to help them to delve deeply in the text of news stories about Operation Linda Nchi, Kenya's 2011 incursion into Somalia. They were then asked to relate their analysis of the text to what they witnessed behind the story: in the newsroom, amongst their friends and family members, in the mosque, in government offices and amongst civil society leaders. The analysis of the coverage produced at the workshop is a mutual creation of researcher and participants.

This kind of collaborative research inspires ideas for action: ideas for how to do journalism differently, for how to change newsrooms, for how civil society groups can work to change the story. At the best of times, these ideas resonate with what an individual journalist is already trying to achieve. As a collaborative research process concludes, it is often enough to ask the simple question, "Does anyone here have any ideas for something they would like to do on this topic?"

Journalists participating in the Networked News Lab have been inspired to produce imaginative feature stories, to alter the procedures of their work and to organize events aimed at changing the mindset of other journalists and editors.

When knowledge is translated into action, the Networked News Lab has an impact. But even when the experiments fail, which they often do, there is still an opportunity to learn.

One of the major strengths of the model comes from this emphasis on learning, rather than on influence. We know that the pressure to demonstrate results can obscure the lessons that we should learn from our failures. The model also relies almost purely on the enthusiasm of its members. This is both a positive and a negative. It forces the Networked News Lab to find projects that truly inspire. It ensures that the initiative's working agenda is democratic. But it can also mean many false starts, and abandoned projects.

The Networked News Lab also has an obligation to share its learning beyond the small group of individuals who participate in its activities. This briefing represents one of the Networked News Lab's efforts at this. The website and social media accounts are other platforms. The Networked News Lab encourages and supports its members to speak at events. Should the Networked News Lab continue, it would certainly expand this aspect of its work, including by doing more to communicate other interesting research projects and journalistic innovations from around the world to audiences in eastern Africa.

The Networked News Lab's approach, like all of its projects, is a constant work in progress, and not set in stone - so long as it continues to learn from its mistakes. The Networked News Lab is currently exploring new members and partnerships to strengthen its work, and invites anyone reading this to get in touch with ideas for future collaboration.



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The Networked News Lab brings together journalists, scholars, developers and other thought-leaders in Kenya to support research, dialogue and innovation in news media. Our Briefing Note series is intended to help communicate our knowledge and insight to a broad range of media stakeholders. Visit www.networkednews.org

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