

How Can Investigative Journalists and Researchers Work Together?

An Account of an Experimental Hybrid Project



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About the Investigation

"The fact that many were involved in the project made me comfortable and gave me a sense of security. [...] I am often writing about corruption cases, which provides only one perspective. One more easily removes one's subjectivity if there are many in the project. So, it is good to place these stories in a broader context. This is the essence, to demonstrate what role corruption plays in people's lives. Coupling journalists with anthropologists is very good for that, although they seem to be different professions."

Gabi, a Hungarian journalist working on the Black Waters project

Gabi summed up her experience working within a hybrid academic-investigative journalist project when she was writing about the results of a mixed-method research. She had been part of the Hungarian team of investigative journalists and academic researchers working along with a similar Romanian team. Both teams looked into the causes and social consequences of environmental damage along the Danube. The two-sited investigation within the framework of the Black Waters project[1] allowed to look at regional similarities and national differences in corruption-fueled environmental damage cases.

One of the teams was investigating the role of the state in managing environmental damage in the Danube Delta, Romania, specifically poaching of severely endangered sturgeon. The other team was uncovering the context of toxic waste mixing at the red mud reservoirs in Almásfüzitő, a small settlement in Hungary. Even though the investigations were conducted separately, the team managers regularly communicated and coordinated their activities.



[1] [The Black Waters](#): A Collaborative Investigative Journalism Project into Corruption and the Environment, run by the [Center for Media, Data and Society](#) at Central European University in partnership with [Átlátszó](#) and [Balkan Investigative Reporting Network](#), is funded by the Open Society Initiative for Europe.

Eight project members[2] came together in the Black Waters project: four journalists, two anthropologists, a sociologist, an audio assistant and a natural scientist. Given the combination of various disciplines, the project could benefit from expertise that brought different knowledge together.

Multimodal, mixed methodologies, therefore, were as an experiment developed along the investigation process. Multimodal refers to an approach to representation and communication mobilizing new media. Collected data and the analysis itself takes textual, visual and aural forms and the combination of these modes of expression. In light of this, the two teams have disseminated their findings in form of journalistic articles, an audio-documentary and drone recordings in three languages: English, Romanian and Hungarian. This multi-lingual mixed methodology enabled the teams to share local knowledge, journalistic representation of the cases and expert interpretation of the findings at the same time with a wider audience. This article offers a synthesis of how journalists and academic researchers combined their professional expertise and merged different methodologies within the Black Waters project.

In the first phase of the project, I participated in the Almásfüzitő investigation conducting ethnographic fieldwork and interviewing residents of the settlement. In the second half, I conducted individual interviews with the five contributors of the two investigation teams: Ana-Maria and Gabi (journalists), Márta (natural scientist), Dumí (sociologist) and Ian (anthropologist). Additionally,



we jointly recorded a round-robin series of mini-group discussions, which was mediated by researchers at CMDS. The quotes used in this article are drawn from the interviews and discussions but have been edited for length and clarity. Certain quotes have been translated from Hungarian to English. From these materials, along the reflexive discussions, several learning points emerged. As Gabi put it above, through the coupling of different professionals' perspectives, we jointly negotiated and expressed the crucial points of investigations. These include:

[2] Ana-Maria Luca, Journalist at the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network;
 Dumitrita Holdis, Researcher at Center for Media, Data and Society (CMDS) at Central European University (CEU);
 Eva Bogнар, Senior Program Officer and Researcher at CMDS;
 Gabi Horn, Journalist at Átlátszó;
 Ian M. Cook, Research Fellow at CMDS and Anthropologist;
 Marius Dragomir, Director of CMDS;
 Márta Vetier, Natural scientist and PhD Candidate at CEU;
 Mihaela Groza, Program Coordinator at CMDS

- Co-learning of context-driven investigation
- Ethical considerations in gathering data
- Tension in temporality due to different methodologies
- The need for a natural scientist in the environmental-corruption project
- Enriching experience of working across disciplinary and professional boundaries
- Concluding remarks on the process and future investigation

Co-learning: Contextualizing the Case

Close collaboration with academic researchers allows investigative journalists to not only mediate and further distribute expert knowledge but also integrate it into their investigative work along locals' perspectives. As Ana-Maria, the journalist of the Romanian investigation, explained,

“What we have done was pretty much in parallel. [...] And we realized we were interested in the same thing. [...] We tried to take the anthropological perspective like looking at the structural causes. Maybe there is something in there that people are not talking about. Then, we found out that this [not talking] is due to the lack of competence from the administration combined with a history of exploitation.”

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Here, she referred to the process of data collection, interpretation of data, and the historical interrogation of the field which has transformed and provided a broader context to approach writing stories differently. Journalists, this way, could contextualize and historicize the interweaving of corruption and environmental problems. Instead of only consulting with academic researchers and scientists, the journalists have often formulated questions with the researchers demarcating novel directions and focus in their writings.

In the Danube Delta case, power dynamics have been unfolding. Hierarchical relations between the state and locals in the illegal poaching practices were highlighted by the cooperative investigation. It was fundamental to uncover that local fisherfolks were criminalized by police forces, while paradoxically poaching has remained persistent and overlooked by the authorities due to the remarkable caviar market demand. Thus, the investigation revealed that both locals and state authorities have had a financial interest in maintaining illegal sturgeon fishing. Furthermore, locals turned out to not exclusively be victims of poaching but beneficiaries as well.

In Almásfüzitő, the investigation questioned the scientific “environmental” expertise that the local company used to justify remediation with hazardous waste at the red mud reservoirs. The company has developed a communication strategy to justify its remediation process as beneficial for the local environment leading to the apathy of local citizens. The



investigation also made local histories more understandable. The settlement once accommodated the center of alumina production in the Eastern Bloc. Nowadays, residents are nostalgic about the remnants of their industry-driven past rather than questioning the management of nature in their neighborhood.

The cooperation was also beneficial for the expansion of academic research by pushing the publications to be precise and to the point. As Gabi, the Hungarian journalist commented,

“A journalist acts as an amateur representing a great pool of readers. [...] I know my readers have a life, they are working, and they have a little gap time during the evening to read some things.”

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One of the critiques of academic publishing is that most social science journal articles are not referenced by others, with some suggesting almost ninety per cent of academic articles not getting cited by other academics.[3] More importantly, when academic research gets published in a journal article, it often remains inaccessible to a broader audience due to the impenetrability of disciplinary jargon and the publishers' paywalls for those without affiliation with research institutions. Journalistic writings, with democratizing endeavor, may directly reach those who live with corruption-fueled environmental problems, something that academic articles rarely, if ever, do.

Combining investigative journalistic investigation with academic knowledge production set the grounds for transparent and accessible communication about the complexities of corrupted networks and how they capitalize on environmental degradation. However,

[3] Dahlia Remler (2014): Are 90% of academic papers really never cited? Searching citations about academic citations reveals the good, the bad and the ugly, Dahlia Remler's personal blog (available at: <https://dahliaremler.com/2014/04/09/are-90-of-academic-papers-really-never-cited-searching-citations-about-academic-citations-reveals-the-good-the-bad-and-the-ugly/>, accessed on: 28.03.2020).

the journalists and social scientists involved in the project continually negotiated to what can and cannot be used as data, and how such data can be published. This discrepancy emerged due to difference in professional practices and disciplinary-based ethical standards.

Ethical Considerations

“Investigative journalism is the boogiemane of public institutions. It is like when we [journalists] are asking for information, something must be wrong, or they [officials] must have done something wrong so [...] they [officials] run away [from investigative journalists]. Producing an investigative piece is something that one cannot hide. But when you conduct [social scientific] research, you anonymize most of your sources and informants; it is much easier to get people to talk,”

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Ana-Maria pointed out how the crucial difference in working ethics could be advantageous to research. As she suggests, working together revealed how investigative journalists can face difficulties in gathering data due to journalist’s reputation and working practices whilst, in some cases, anthropologists might be granted access.

However, when seen from a different angle, the rarity of anonymity within the journalistic output creates ethics of accountability, which is realized differently within social sciences. As Dumitru, the sociologist of the Romanian team further explained,

“The journalist needs to talk to the authorities for content. They get knowledge from somewhere else. They use documents published by the police and administration. They like a lot of these [sources] because they are accountable in ways we are not. If they publish something, it needs to be provable with hard evidence, something that is on the record. [...] While I would rather have things off the record. That’s why a journalist can’t really use my research. My interviews are not sources for them.”

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For the most part, the journalist’s compunction to work with unnamed sources left them feeling uneasy when faced with anthropological or sociological data. As Gabi commented,

“I was only left with one worry, which was that everything [coming from the researchers] was off the record. What am I going to do with it? How am I going to use it? Then I was not sure when I can be part of [the process] as a journalist. The research helped me because often in Hungary, you just can’t approach people as a journalist in 80% of the cases. You don’t even get a `no`. When the anthropologist wrote to the environmental company, they answered after a few weeks.”

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Indeed, working on a pollution case in a small Hungarian village brought several challenges that journalists and anthropologists were able to solve together.

In Almásfüzitő, locals were reluctant to talk on the record. Even when anthropologists explained their research in detail, locals remained suspicious and often asked about the purpose of the interviews. They forged a mistrusted relationship with the media portraying their settlements in a negative way, especially following the 2010 red mud disaster near Ajka.

Hungarian TV channels and YouTube videos depicted Almásfüzitő’s inhabitants as victims of the red mud pollution, which negatively affected the community’s life, including decreasing the value

of their property. In this case, rebuilding trust with locals was necessary for both the journalists and researchers.



Conducting ethnographic fieldwork prior to the journalist’s visit was crucial to build trust. Spending months in the field is about creating the condition for more trusting interview settings. As Dumi pointed out,

“By having somebody in the field, you can create a relationship with the community, and a journalist can use this person to empathize with the community. The material is richer like this, but also it confronts their [journalists’] concepts of objectivity. They can use me in a way. I intermediate a bit. [...] I was the journalist’s source.”

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Although the journalists can't exactly quote what researchers have gathered with the assurance of anonymity, the expert-analysis can be mobilized in their story.

For example, in the Danube Delta investigation, Dumi as the only researcher became the expert-source quoted by Ana-Maria. She could thus protect the identity of her informants and assure they won't receive direct media visibility. In the Almásfüzitő investigation, some locals also contributed as interviewees with their name in a journalistic piece. They offered their insights about settlement history and socio-economic conditions reflecting on the red mud reservoirs' case. This way, the journalist's compunction with anonymous sources was partly taken away.

The researcher's interpretation of the data collected in the field became essential when the informants requested anonymity and did not give consent to be directly quoted. Also, not forgetting about the "nothing about us without us" guiding lines of an ethnographic research, informants who agreed on talking on record were included in an audio-documentary. This model of gathering and utilizing data, however, was not pre-planned and structured but rather crystallized during the fieldwork, as a mixed methodology.

Tension in Temporalities

"Journalists are going and leaving the field to write, exploratory research does not take place. They do not have time to do research,"

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said Ana-Maria. Journalists have a couple of days to work on their story. In contrast, in some cases, anthropologists spend months in the field and might spend years publishing their findings. Journalists do not usually operate with such an expanded timeframe in mind, particularly when they have multiple stories to investigate at the same time; or when they gain access to confidential information, they need to immediately inform the public. Differences became more obvious in practice when the team as a whole arrived in the field. As Gabi explained,

"I wanted to foresee my role. Of course, academic work is a long-term process. As a journalist, deadlines are more frequent. It was new to plan for longer-term. [...] It was almost a luxury to spend that much time in the field, although I was comfortable to spend time there and follow local events and to be flexible in organizing meetings with the locals. Academic research created a dynamic that does not urge the journalist to put an article together. [...] It was strange to spend so much time with one topic. But it helps to chew it over time."

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Given the experimental form of the investigations, in the beginning deadlines were not fixed, ideas of stories and other publications, such as this article, emerged later. This process also generated self-reflexive dialogue to better comprehend the difference in utilizing time.

Ian, the anthropologist of the Almásfüzitő investigation, described,

“Maybe we do not know enough about each other’s discipline, about how we are investigating a story. There is definitely a difference between doing research and investigating a case. [...] This is about slowing down and speeding up.”

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Joining academic research with modes of investigative journalism was, in part, a matter of co-learning and balancing the time spent with the investigated cases. The tension that emerged in adjusting journalistic and academic working tempos speaks to a different way of knowing. Although there were several conversations about settling deadlines and pausing the writing phase, it turned out, after all, to be a positive and productive tension in practice.

Ian continued,

“When we went back to interview somebody, I saw the type of interviews that Gabi does. The interview itself had a real tempo because there was something she wanted to find out. She was very sharp. Usually, in anthropology, we wait for something, keep a note of it and come back to it in twenty minutes, because we do not want to push questions too hard at the beginning.”

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It was in the field that journalists and academic researchers had witnessed their colleague’s methodological practices. These clashes in working tempos enabled both: academic researchers to ask villagers structured questions and, in later phase of the investigation, journalists to interview in a more spontaneous style. This method-matching resulted in differing responses from the people we spoke with.



The interview that Ian described above was conducted when one of the informants in Almásfüzitő, who previously talked to us, anthropologists, agreed to meet the team's journalist as well. Gabi's journalistic curiosity displayed through a series of questions about the toxic waste mixing encouraged the informant to take the team to the hotspot of the case. The smell of chemicals surrounded us whilst the environmental company's guard aggressively warned us against getting closer to the part of the reservoir which was left uncovered. The investigative journalistic dynamic took us directly to the scene of corruption, to the red mud reservoir. The team arrived to the spot with a minimum scientific knowledge to reconstruct what is going on. It was not only the combination of social scientists and journalists that benefited the research but also the addition of natural scientists to the team, who could help with transferring scientific knowledge, shaping the direction of the investigation and in the crafting of valid questions.

Seeking Natural Scientists

"I did a few interviews and went to a scientific conference [on Conversation of Danube Sturgeon[4]], but I think it wasn't enough. I feel I am missing a person in the team who would fully be on top of this. [...] Talking to scientists is making you confront your preconceived ideas,"

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pointed out the Romanian team's researcher, Dumi, when we were discussing the future needs of a cross-disciplinary investigative project, although our colleague, Márta who has both a natural and social science background, was available for both teams. The Romanian team felt they might have benefitted from working closely with a sturgeon expert. Dumi continued explaining her encounter with sturgeon scientists at the conference,

"When you talk to scientists, they tend to propose their own opinion as the accepted solution.[...] Sometimes there is a discrepancy between what the [scientific] results and what the solutions are, which seems to be partly motivated politically.[...] The idea that the Delta should be exploited influences their [scientists'] scientific studies and their scientifically supported [policy] recommendation. The idea of not exploiting the Delta does not appear often. Rather, [they ask] the question of how to bring the sturgeon back in order to fish it more. The idea of economic exploitation of nature was not really contested in this scientific filed [at the conference]."

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[4] She participated in an international conference on "Conservation of Danube Sturgeons - a challenge or a burden?" in Galati, Romania (28/29/30 October 2019) (available at <http://www.sturgeon.ugal.ro/index.php/en/> accessed on 24.05.2020).

Here, she called the attention to the politicized networks that could potentially hijack scientist's objectivity. Political authorities tend to take the scientific focus away from protecting nature in the Danube Delta. Ana-Maria, Dumí's journalist colleague, also mentioned that independent scientists could better contribute to map the sturgeon-related research networks. An independent scientist involved in the investigation might better tease out to what extent scientific knowledge production and political motives in case of the sturgeon fishing are intertwined.



In the Almásfüzitő case, Márta, with her natural science background, could assist the team members in understanding how toxic waste treatment works in Hungary. Further to that, she could critically analyze the company's scientific opinions about environmental remediation explaining to us that the artificial soil – which the company produces by mixing of non-biodegradable materials and the red mud – is not harmless as they claim. She interpreted the data to demonstrate the potential danger of the permitted high concentration of hazardous components such as arsenic. Also, she mobilized her networks in the environmental science circle, including Greenpeace Hungary, to supply the investigation with reliable scientific information. By doing so, she directed the team toward viable questions when it came to talking to scientists.

Combining journalistic, social and natural science ways of knowing the cases further increased the scope of the investigation. As Dumí further reflected,

“It makes you understand there are other structures of the physical, biological and chemical worlds that create this whole setting we are living in. It definitely added another dimension to the research.”

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The possibility for fruitful coexistence of natural and social science perspectives became clear through research practices, suggesting the importance of collaboration across academic disciplines, when one investigates environmental problems. Different knowledge and way of knowing the world, as we see above, could unsettle our disciplinary boundaries. But after all, the benefits of collaborations were not only methodological.

Enriching Experience through Collaboration

When working alone, either as an investigative journalist or social scientist, anxiety does not perish in the field. Approaching people with the intention to record them might be uncomfortable, even for the experienced researchers.

“Being alone with our feelings, sometimes with unanswered questions and running thoughts regarding the field, is a recurring moment,”

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reflected Dumi. Although some of us were in the field alone, there was always a team to speak with. The two investigative teams kept on communicating, and it was possible to contact one another in case of being unsure about the process in a particular phase of the research.

“It was an enriching experience [and] we cross-fertilized one another’s work,”

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explained Márta. It was a learning process and, as such, teaming up was not only about experimenting with the collaborative form, but also making one another comfortable with different knowledge and ways of knowing. As Gabi said,

“You [anthropologists] brought me and introduced me to the field. I felt safe joining the team and not to have to start from scratch.”

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By the time she arrived in the settlement, we, the anthropologists had already gathered data on local histories and been informed about local politics. In doing ethnographic research, we were in the position to offer her a “walking tour” in the settlement. Further to this, potential interviewees were identified together to meet our journalist colleague.

“Sometimes, one of us was present as a shadow,”

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Márta explained. Following the anthropologist’s guidance in the field was one way to uncover the local complexities. For instance, in Almásfüzitő present-day spatial segregation relates to how the settlement was managed during socialism with the upper

more affluent part of the settlement run by the alumina factory. The divide in delivering services remained even after the 1990s when the local government took over the management of the settlement. The toxic waste remediation takes place in the lower part of Almásfüzitő which is neglected in terms of basic infrastructure (school, health services and well-equipped shops).

On another occasion, Márta came forward to explain numeric data, and the measurement technics used to detect hazardous components in the lower settlement. Meanwhile, Gabi collected information on the company and the ongoing EU infringement case.[5] This way, the team investigated the Almásfüzitő case throughout molecular, local and international levels. It was possible to do so by harmonizing disciplinary and methodological knowledge around one specific case.

Concluding Remarks

“It was quite a process to dive into the [investigated] problem,”

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Gabi concluded. The contributors have different educational backgrounds, research interests, and different levels of experience in previous investigations. What rendered the investigation demanding was the experimental form of combining various perspectives and approaches to research environmental pollution and corruption. Without pre-established steps on how one should proceed with one's work in an interdisciplinary team, to develop a common working ethics of such a collaboration requires time and coordination. The institutional framework and infrastructure of Central European University (CEU) facilitated the team-building phase and assisted the investigation. Journalists and academic researchers alike had access to the database and other researchers to consult with. This institutional framework renders the process smooth and comfortable as many of the team members had previous professional connection via CEU.

As the first step toward forming a successful investigative team, journalists and researchers met several times to discuss multiple potential cases that were worth investigating within the project's framework. Disciplinary knowledge, accessibility of information in relation to the cases were considered and discussed after several meetings. It was a crucial phase in the project since the journalists and researchers could evaluate in terms of their expertise. Once the case was approved, the team members could mobilize their disciplinary knowledge to gather data. In doing preliminary desk research, the teams could contour the case they had investigated in details, followed by fieldworks.

[5] Gabi Horn (2020): Hazardous waste deposit at the red sludge reservoirs in Almásfüzitő was issued a new permit, Átlátszó. (available at: <https://english.atlatszo.hu/2020/03/04/hazardous-waste-deposit-at-the-red-sludge-reservoirs-in-almasfuzito-was-issued-a-new-permit/> accessed on 05.04.2020).

In this article, I showed how journalists and academics came to forge a collaborative investigative process.

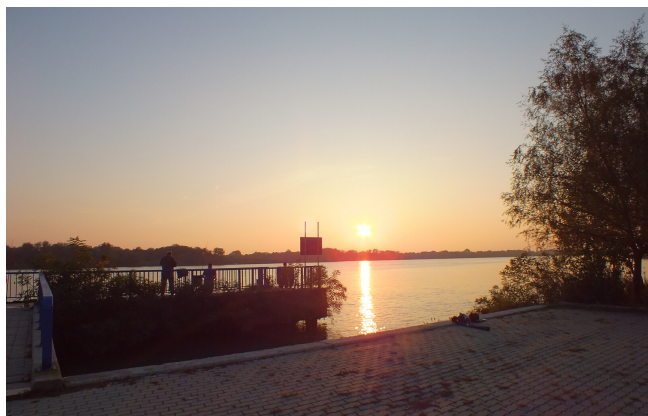
Sociological and anthropological methods were mobilized to contextualize the environmental conflict by gathering qualitative data.

Journalistic methods become valuable when they had to carve out the networks and modes of corruption around the cases.

Although this kind of labor division in knowledge

production was smooth and

needed to foster the investigation, the combination of methodologies and jointly interpreting the data worked out in the teams. Diving into the investigation, as Gabi pointed out, with all the challenges, seemed to be the only way to experiment with different methodologies.



The investigations were closed by realizing most of the formulated objectives in terms of outputs and dissemination, however, there was one phase in the investigation that had not been accomplished. In the Almásfüzitő investigation, the team could not tighten and build relations with civil organizations that could further foster local environmental justice. It could be explained by the minimal presence of local environmental initiatives that the team came to uncover during the investigation. Drawing on this research experience, local and regional civil initiatives are worth being mapped and contacted prior to the investigations. Involving civil groups in the investigation would facilitate locally embedded actions and outputs reaching out directly to the participants of the investigation.

Even though gaps have remained in collaborating with local initiatives, the Black Waters project successfully accumulated knowledge and established a good foundation for a structured collaboration in between journalists and academics in investigating and reporting about corruption-fueled environmental cases. The proof for the successful collaboration is that the teams adapted well the multi-modal methodology inasmuch as the publications and recordings have taken creative formats that go beyond conventional journalistic and academics publishing practices. One of the most valuable takeaways of the investigations, I believe, is the elaboration of combined journalistic and academic methodologies, research ethics and setting up timeframes. The outcomes of the project can be disseminated and further developed in offering trainings to journalist and academics for future investigations.

About the Black Waters project

Black Waters, run by the Center for Media, Data and Society in partnership with Átlátszó and Balkan Investigative Reporting Network, and funded by Open Society Initiative for Europe, is a hybrid investigative-research and advocacy project that responds to the need for engaging reporting on environmental damage, corruption and the consequences for social justice in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). Over twelve months, a team of researchers, journalists and audio-visual artists developed novel multimodal methodologies, conducted mixed-methods research, and reported their findings. From the beginning, the project's team worked with affected communities and local experts.

For more information, visit the project's pages:

- on [CMDS' website](#),
- on [Environmental Injustices](#),
- on [Balkan Insight](#).

About CMDS

The Center for Media, Data and Society (CMDS) is a research center for the study of media, communication, and information policy and its impact on society and practice. CMDS is part of Central European University's School of Public Policy and serves as a focal point for an international network of acclaimed scholars, research institutions and activists.



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