Global Media Journal
German Edition

Essay

# The Story of the Vanished Project. Challenges and Coping Strategies in International Comparative and Collaborative Research Projects

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**Abstract:** The essay discusses the challenges that can occur in communication and media research projects with an international comparative and collaborative scope. The author uses her own research experience and auto-ethnographic reflections derived from an international comparative and collaborative media project to illustrate different considerations that researchers need to reflect upon in the implementation of such projects. The essay focuses not only on the “frontstage” of research projects (e.g., workplan, publications, presentations, established networks) but also sheds light on the “backstage” (Goffman), i.e., the project implementation, including conceptual, operational, interpretative, and social considerations, decisions, and procedures. It lists challenges that may arise and recommends conceptual, operational, interpretative, and social strategies that researchers may apply to confront them. The outlined experiences are not a rare phenomenon but are part of the “normal process and life cycle” of such projects. Researchers therefore should embrace them, reflect upon them, and acquire suitable coping strategies to assure a successful project implementation and knowledge production.

**Keywords:** International comparative research, international research collaboration, comparative research methodology, academic communication, scientific teamwork, team science, autoethnographic reflections

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**To cite this article:** Wöhlert, Romy (2022). The story of the vanished project.
Challenges and coping strategies in international comparative and collaborative research projects. *Global Media Journal – German Edition, 12*(1), DOI: https://doi.org/10.22032/dbt.53031

### The vanished research project

I once had a research project. It did not involve a huge budget, it only lasted 12 months, but it was my first international collaboration project, and the first one, for which I acquired third-party funding. It had an international comparative research design, in which I intended to analyze media data in the compared countries. Following the program guidelines of the funding scheme, the project was also supposed to establish and strengthen my academic networks with media and communication scholars in those countries. As a post-doctoral researcher, I oversaw writing the funding application, finding collaboration partners, developing the research design, implementing the project, managing the collaboration process, and disseminating the research results. So much for the theory.

Things did not quite turn out the way they were planned, and my little research project slowly but steadily slipped out of my control and vanished before my eyes. I felt miserable, and back then, I thought, that I simply had not been ready and skilled enough to take on the responsibility for such an endeavor. I did not tell anyone about my struggles. My fear was that if I admitted my challenges, the funding agency would cut back or even demand the return of the budget, my home institution would not extend my work contract, and the scientific community would not allow me to present or publish my research results. So, I kept up the façade and presented the project as a success story as much as possible.

Until one day, I ran into a scholar at a conference reception who, after sharing a drink, confided in me that she was currently struggling with her first large-scale international collaborative research project. She told me that just a few weeks back, one of her Japanese collaboration partners had literally vanished, by ghosting the whole team, not answering emails or phone calls anymore, and not delivering her share of the data analysis. I was baffled and thought, "wait a minute, this sounds exactly like my story!" We spent the rest of the evening exchanging the "horror stories" of our project experiences, and I went home from this conference wondering whether maybe, I was not alone in my project failure?

This encounter marked the beginning of my new research focus – on the benefits and challenges of research projects with an international comparative and collaborative scope. Throughout the last few years, I have spoken to many scholars about their experiences in such projects and have come across a few publications addressing diverse challenges of international comparative and collaborative research. I learned that those challenges could become major stumbling blocks when researchers shy away from addressing them, do not reflect upon them, or do not know how to handle them. Still, not many communication and media researchers are talking about them openly in journal articles or conference contributions yet (Volk[1], 2021).

[1] For a review of Volk (2021), see this issue, DOI: https://doi.org/10.22032/dbt.53032.

Therefore, this essay presents some auto-ethnographic reflections derived from my "vanished project" to illustrate different challenges in the life cycle of comparative and collaborative research projects. It lifts the curtain to the "backstage" of my project (Goffman) and looks at the research implementation, and my conceptual, operational, interpretative, and social considerations and decisions, following the steps of the empirical research process in the social sciences (Kosmützky & Wöhlert, 2015, p. 502). The essay also looks at social challenges that may arise in the team collaboration. Based on my own project experience, I argue that the outlined experiences are part of the "normal process and life cycle" of such projects, and that media and communication researchers may acquire different coping strategies to address them during the implementation of their projects.

## How a research project comes to life

A research project usually starts with a research question or idea, and I developed mine in my post-doc phase: I planned to carry out an international comparative analysis of political communication, by looking at national media discourses and the communicated reciprocal perceptions of candidate states and member states of the *European Union* (EU) against the backdrop of the EU enlargement process. At that time, I worked as a freelance research assistant at an Austrian research institution. If I was to find funding for my project idea, the institution could offer me a part-time position as a junior post-doc researcher.

While looking for funding, a call for proposals was announced by the Austrian *Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research*, which offered a good opportunity to fund my project. It aimed at funding projects which focused on research cooperation and networking between institutions in Austria and the Western Balkans[2], a region with countries that were still predominantly EU candidate states at that time. However, the call had its limitations: It funded the establishment of academic networks and co-operations, and preliminary studies, but not full-scale empirical research projects and data analyses. Also, it only funded short-term projects (up to 12 months duration) and provided only a small funding budget of 20.000 Euros. Third, with a very specific geographical focus (Southeastern Europe), it did not fund the participation of other EU member states except for Austria and Slovenia. Thus, I needed to make some compromises and adjust my research ideas to the funding conditions.

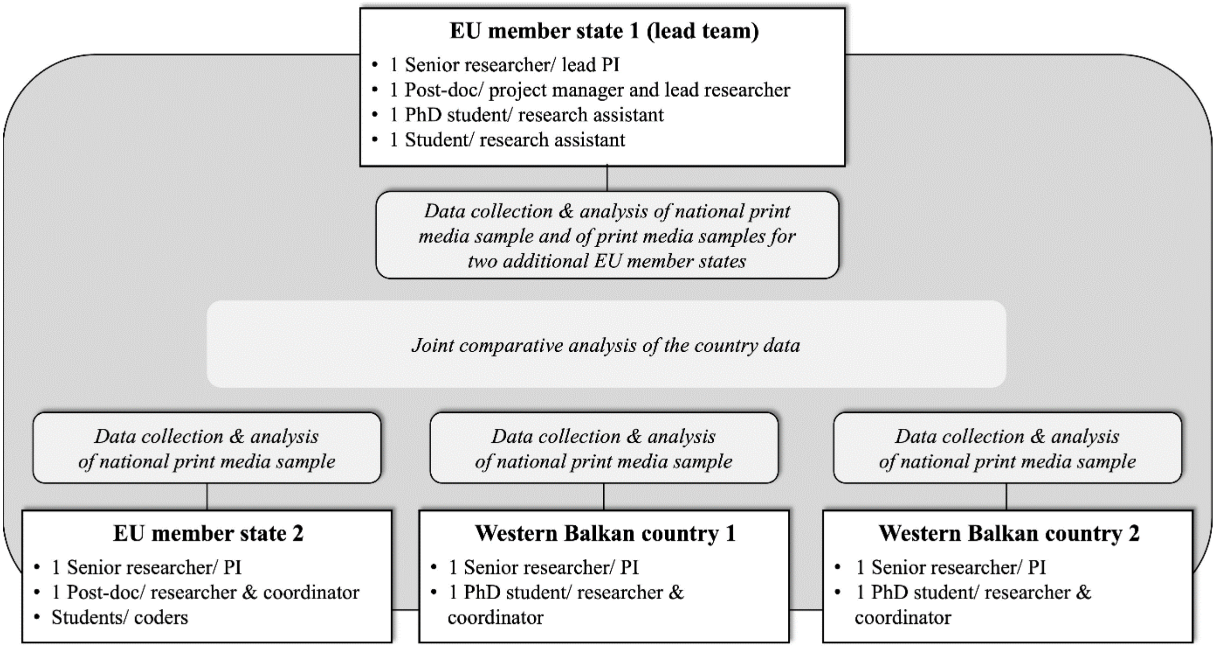
Nevertheless, the call offered potential on three dimensions: On a research dimension, it allowed me to carry out a preliminary study to develop an international comparative research design, and to gain an overview of the potential availability of, access to, and comparability of Western Balkan media data. On a

[2] The political term Western Balkan Countries is used by the EU to place all the ex-Yugoslav successor states, not including Slovenia, plus Albania under a common umbrella. It includes the countries Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia.

social dimension, it allowed me to establish and extend a research network with scholars in the observed region, which I hoped to win for future research projects. On a personal dimension, I hoped for additional expertise and insight knowledge in a geographical region not familiar to me, and for an extension of my methodological skills, working methods, and theoretical knowledge assets. Also, I planned to increase my academic reputation and international visibility by producing (co-)publications and conference presentations, which would secure my work position at my home institution.

Due to the short application deadline, a major challenge was to find appropriate collaboration partners in the requested region in a very short time. I went for a closed collaboration, i.e., purposively selecting partners that fit the project topic based on their publication output and CVs. I used a “snowball system”, first approaching and recruiting one senior scientist in one country, who then functioned as a gatekeeper and interconnected me with scholars of his own network in the two other countries. The major risk with this strategy was, that I had no previous work experience with the recruited scholars, but I hoped to compensate for that with a clear-cut precise research design.

**Image 1. The project matrix**




The final project consisted of four teams from four countries: Austria, Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia. My own Austrian team acted as the lead partner and consisted of four researchers (see Image 1), while the three partner teams each consisted of two researchers. My role as a post-doc was that of a project manager, collaboration coordinator, and lead researcher. Each country team received a similar share of the project budget. In a first analytical step, each country team was to carry out their national data analysis. In a second step, all teams were to jointly contribute to the comparative analysis of the country data.

## Conceptual challenges: Vanishing concepts and conceptual equivalences

As indicated in the previous section, I had to adapt my project design to the funding guidelines and focus of the funding program: Geographically, this required a collaborative project with an Austrian lead partner and a minimum of two country partners from the Western Balkan region. Partner institutions or scholars from other EU member states (except for Slovenia) were not funded.

I also had to focus on networking and co-operation rather than thorough research, only offering a small budget funding projects with a maximum time frame of one year. Since I already had a research design ready to use when I prepared the funding application, I used a correspondence model for my collaboration (Esser & Hanitzsch, 2012a) and did not consult my collaborating partners about the overall research design. When we had our first kick-off meeting to discuss the project implementation after the funding approval, some minor adjustments were made based on the partners' feedback, but only regarding the media selection, the analyzed time frame, and the codebook for the media content analysis. My theoretical approach, conceptual framework, and methodological approach were not up for debate, and I did not want to compromise on making major changes in the research design. This led to (hidden) frustration on behalf of some of my partners, since I did not acknowledge and equally integrate their specific methodological and theoretical skills, expertise, and ideas. It diminished their motivation right from the beginning, but since those partners did not communicate their skepticism to me openly, I assumed that they left the meeting being in consent with my project design.

I faced a second challenge in finding a scientifically plausible and (peer-review)-proof rationale for the country selection. In an international comparative project design, the compared countries should be adequate for answering the research questions or hypotheses, either as the explanatory units for an analyzed phenomenon, or also as the observational/analytical units (Ragin 1987/2014; Kohn, 1989). In my project, I aimed for a representative sample for both the Western Balkan region and the EU based on criteria like the variety of political positions and public opinions regarding EU enlargement, a future EU membership for Western Balkan countries, and the political relevance of countries in both regions.

However, this sampling strategy was not fully compatible with the outlined restrictive guidelines of the funding scheme. This was problematic, since having an EU sample that only included Austria and Slovenia (i.e., two small, rather new, and neighboring EU member states) did not make for a representative EU perspective in the context of my research question. My solution was to include two additional EU member states (Germany and United Kingdom) in my sample to make it more representative and thus avoid methodological criticism. However, this decision came with no extra funding to finance research partners in the added countries, who would carry out the analysis. Fortunately, my home institution was able to invest the additional budget to cover for the personnel costs to analyze the additional data and, luckily, my team members also had the additional foreign language skills.

A third conceptual challenge was to find equivalent print media in rather different national media markets and political contexts. To analyze the news coverage in each country, I had planned to look at three daily nation-wide newspapers – one leading tabloid and two leading quality newspapers, with the latter also covering different areas of the political spectrum in the respective country. Two problems occurred here: First, the distinction of tabloids and quality newspapers did not work in all national contexts I observed, since the layout and publication style of some quality and tabloid newspapers in Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as Serbia were rather similar. Second, the Bosnian print media market is unevenly structured due to ethno-political divisions. This affects the regional circulation range of newspapers and finding leading newspapers with a national availability was difficult. Consequently, I had to level-down my equivalence criteria, selecting newspapers only based on the criterion of covering different areas of the political spectrum as the least common denominator.

## Operational and interpretative challenges: vanishing data, time capacities, and results

The empirical analysis of my project was designed in two analytical steps: First, using a committee approach (Hantrais, 2009), each partner was supposed to identify and collect relevant newspaper articles for the analyzed time frame, and to carry out a quantitative and qualitative content analysis of the news coverage on the EU and EU enlargement (with the Austrian team also analyzing the data in the two additional EU member states). All teams used the same English codebook and filled in the coding results in an *Excel* sheet provided by the lead team. After completion, each team was asked to write a short English summary report of the main country results. Subsequently, in a second project meeting, all teams were supposed to jointly develop an analytical procedure for the comparative analysis of the identified news frames and all partners were supposed to cross-examine and complete the comparative analysis from their country perspectives.

In the operational implementation of the outlined analysis, I faced several challenges: For some of the newspapers and publication days, no archived copies were available, or the digital copies could not be accessed online via library/newspaper databases. Also, since the newspapers were archived in different data formats (i.e., digital, print copy, microfilm), the time expenditure for scanning the newspaper copies and identifying relevant articles differed significantly. The different data formats were also accompanied by different financial costs for the data access. While printed copies and some newspaper databases were free to access via local libraries, accessing the tabloids via commercial databases offered by the respective newspaper publisher cost more than our budget allowed. In two country cases, we therefore had to eliminate the respective tabloids from our sample. Also, the country partners did not use equivalent search strategies: While the print copies were scanned page by page, with each article being checked for relevance based on the agreed keywords in the headlines, sub-headlines, and the first paragraph, the database search was done via keyword search in whole articles. Here, one country partner only searched through the headlines and did not use all search keywords that we had agreed upon.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as Serbia, the identified samples of relevant articles were five times as large as in the other countries, which I had not anticipated in my time and budget calculations, because I had predicted the sample sizes based on my pre-test sampling of the Austrian news coverage. We decided to reduce the two country samples by only analyzing every second article, which meant a diminished operational and interpretative equivalence, especially of the quantitative results of our content analysis. Also, the reduced samples were still larger than expected, and the data coding in the two countries used up most of the time resources in the respective teams.

Additional challenges occurred during the data analysis: One partner carried out the analysis in the scope of a student class, which led to a significant time delay and affected the quality of the data analysis, since the students had less to no experience in quantitative and qualitative content analysis. The data subsequently had to be cleaned up by the researchers of the respective team, using up their time capacities and personnel budget. As a result, the country team decided to skip the qualitative part of the content analysis and did not contribute to the comparative analysis. Also, the junior researcher of the Serbian team left the project after the content analysis due to time constraints as she had to finish her PhD thesis, and the senior researcher was unable to find a replacement on such short notice. Luckily, my home institution provided me with the extra budget to hire an additional research assistant with the necessary foreign language skills, which allowed me to include this country sample in the qualitative comparative analysis after all. Nevertheless, I had lost two country experts and their national context knowledge and expertise.

## Social challenges: vanishing motivations and project partners

As outlined above, I started out the project with several motivations: to carry out a preliminary study to develop an international comparative research design; to gain an overview of the potential media data; to establish and extend my research network with scholars in the observed region; to acquire additional regional expertise and insight knowledge in this region; to extend my methodological skills, working methods, and theoretical knowledge assets; and to increase my academic reputation and international visibility. On a personal note, I also looked forward to travelling to the countries of my project and learn more about their cultures, peoples, and tourist attractions. I did not know that those goals would come with some collaboration costs (Cummings & Kiesler, 2007):

One challenge I faced was the project coordination and management. Many project coordinators of research projects usually acquire their project management skills on the job (Hantrais, 2009). This clearly was the case for me. I was overwhelmed by the unexpected workload and time capacities spent on the negotiation of collaboration agreements, reimbursement procedures for my partners, budget controlling, email correspondence, and reporting for the funding agency. Some of my research goals were not precise enough, my time and resource calculations were too low, and my risk analysis did not foresee most of the previously outlined challenges.

Also, some of the collaborating senior researchers were not used to following instructions by a junior researcher, and thus questioned my leadership role. Here, the funding structure of the project added to the frustration, since the funding guidelines asked for the lead team to manage the project budget, while the country partners had to sign subcontracts for their personnel costs and directly apply for reimbursement of travel expenses with the lead team. Some partners felt too controlled by the lead team in their own spending and budget management. Consequently, the senior PIs of the three other country teams vanished; they attended the kick-off meeting, but after the contracts were signed and the project kicked off, they handed over the work contribution to their respective research assistants.

Another challenge was managing successful communication and bridging the geographical distance, with partners operating in different countries. Two face-to-face project meetings with the whole project team were not enough to establish an open and regular communication culture. Here, closer-knit regular working sessions via Skype or face-to-face may have helped to bring issues to the table early on. We also struggled to find a commonly shared language. Using English as a joint project language had its disadvantages: We spent a lot of time on translating all project documents, and the quality of our academic discourse on key terms, research procedures, or the interpretation of data and results suffered due to different English language skills, giving some researchers an advantage over others, and resulting in a less open communication of criticism and challenges.

Finally, a common language not only has a linguistic dimension but also a semantic and intercultural one. I did not reflect enough upon the diverse individual collaboration interests and motivations in our team, or the diverse organizational, disciplinary, academic, and national cultures (Wöhlert, 2020). They manifested themselves in different theoretical and methodological traditions, use of methods and techniques, academic language styles and forms of presenting knowledge, and work methods and habits of interaction. For example, when we discussed dissemination goals in our kick-off meeting, some partners argued for book publications, since they are valued much higher in their national research communities, but I decided for peer-reviewed journal articles, since I expected more visibility and reputation from those formats in the academic community. In the end, not all partners contributed to the publications as co-authors. Consequently, the outlined communication and intercultural barriers, and the resulting team dynamics further contributed to the steady vanishing of my project.

## Conclusion

One major take-away from my project experience is that in a collaborative comparative research project, it is not only crucial to balance out the methodological precision and the degree of possible equivalence, but also the research goals and the social coherence in the collaborative team. Here, the outlined challenges are not a rare phenomenon but are part and parcel of such projects (Volk, 2021). Despite the challenges, media and communication researchers should not shy away from such projects. Rather, they should embrace and reflect upon them, and should find strategies that assure a successful project implementation and knowledge production. Based on my own project experience, I hereby particularly recommend the following strategies:

When preparing a project:

- … *be strategically ready*, i.e., have a project idea at hand to be able to react quickly when funding calls are announced, and know your (research and career) goals, since they will help you identify suitable funding sources (see, e.g., Kosmützky & Wöhlert, 2021).
- … *stay open for adaptations*, i.e., stay flexible to adjust your project idea to funding calls and guidelines, because you rarely will find the "perfect match."
- … *establish collaboration networks in advance*, because with tight funding application deadlines, finding partners at short notice is risky, and knowing your collaboration partners in advance allows you to successfully integrate their views and expertise in the project design and ensure a sense of ownership to the project from all participants (see, e.g., Bozeman & Boardman, 2014).

In the conceptual design:

- … *be open for other theoretical perspectives*, i.e., listen to the inputs of your collaboration partners, and be flexible and willing to integrate their ideas, theoretical, and methodological perspectives (see, e.g., Swanson, 1992).
- … *aim for a theoretically based country selection*, i.e., do not select countries based on "other circumstances" such as a funding scheme's pre-defined geographical focus; if necessary, find additional funding sources and collaboration partners, or use secondary data sources in additional countries to strengthen the theoretical rigor of your project (see, e.g., Esser & Hanitzsch, 2012b).
- … *aim for the best possible conceptual equivalence*, but remember, that in social research equivalence cannot always be fully achieved; as a compromise, aim for partial equivalence and adequacy, but be transparent about it and reflect on the possible limitations, since this will help you interpreting,

contextualizing, and evaluating your data and research results (see, e.g. Wirth & Kolb, 2004).

In the operational implementation:

- … *adapt your data collection strategies to the national conditions*, consulting your collaboration partners for their national expertise early on in that process, to avoid implementation problems and to calculate how much time, budget, and effort you will need for the collection process (see, e.g., Wirth & Kolb, 2012).
- … *be precise in your methods but also open for adaptations*, i.e., ideally you develop your analytical tools and methods in close cooperation with your partners, which improves the prospect that all partners implement them correctly; if country sampling requires it, stay flexible and adapt methods and tools, but be transparent about your adaptations and reflect on their limitations for the comparative analysis (see, e.g., Lynn, 2003).
- … *balance out asymmetric context knowledge*, i.e., reflect upon the limits of your own (nationally imprinted) perspective and balance it out with the national context knowledge of your collaboration partners or of secondary "expert sources" (see, e.g., Wilke & Heimprecht, 2012).

In the project administration and teamwork:

- … *acquire project management competences*, since as the lead or coordinator of a collaborative research project, you not only need research skills, but also management and coordination skills to keep track of all aspects of the project like research, workplan, budget, reporting, team dynamics (see, e.g., Hantrais, 2009).
- … *acquire team leadership skills*, so you can understand and handle the hierarchies and dynamics in your collaborative team, integrate the team diversity and different academic and social motivations, expectations, and goals of all team members, avoid frustrations, and address and solve conflicts (see, e.g., Bammer, 2008).
- … *invest time and effort in successful communication*, by holding face-to-face meetings as often as possible, using online tools to support virtual meetings, and finding techniques to translate not just words but also theoretical and methodological views and meanings (see, e.g., Wöhlert, 2020).

Overall, media and communication scholars in international comparative and collaborative research projects need to *practice awareness and reflexivity,* i.e., constantly reflecting upon the diversity of their collaborative team and the diverse organizational, disciplinary, academic, and national backgrounds of their team members, being aware of their individual collaboration motivations, and allowing room for their team to exchange and getting across their views (Krause, 2021). One key factor here is the establishment of *swift trust* among the project partners, especially if the team does not consist of long-time collaboration partners, who have worked together in similar constellations before (Burke & Morley, 2016).

Finally, I strongly recommend, that media and communication researchers who face challenges in their international comparative and collaborative projects, should consult other scholars with collaborative experience. Like some of their communication and media scholars have already done (e.g., Wilke & Heimprecht, 2012), they should share their own stories and experiences in conference talks, in publications, or in workshops, and they should talk about them in personal conversations or when advising young scholars. This open discourse will enhance their own reflexivity, may offer them new perspectives and strategies to deal with those challenges, and eventually may help them improve their comparative and collaborative skills and their research.

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