

Keeping Track of News about Corruption

European Corruption Observatory Workshop Minutes

Belgium May 08th 2015



The first regional workshop for the European Corruption Observatory was held in Brussels at the [Dataharvest Conference](#). Dataharvest/EIJC, the European Investigative and Data Journalism Conference organised by Journalismfund.eu, is the most relevant networking event for investigative and data journalists in Europe. The EIJC & Dataharvest was first organised in 2011, when some 30 journalists gathered in Brussels to exchange best practices and story ideas by 2015 there were 270 participants.

The keynote speech by Marina Walker from the [International Consortium of Investigative Journalists \(ICIJ\)](#) reflected the overall slant of the conference with a strong focus on why cross-border journalism matters. Journalism is moving from the lone wolf approach to that of a team - working together in a cross-border journalism team amplifies and intensifies information gathering, analysis and dissemination.

The recent Luxleaks and Swissleaks stories by the ICIJ have highlighted how increasing globalization naturally requires a more globalized type of journalism and revealed how cross border journalism is an efficient and dynamic tool to reveal transnational stories. Beyond reporting on transnational stories the conference also looked at how journalists are important watchdogs when it comes to issues of anti-corruption.

Directly after the key note speech the [European Corruption Observatory \(ECO\)](#) was introduced which marries these two key themes of cross-border cooperation and anti-corruption. The database will gather EU media articles concerning corruption in a searchable database that categorises stories based on sectors, types of corruption and countries involved. At a dedicated workshop attendees were guided through the working method behind the system and the current challenges of optimizing the database while still in the beta phase of development.



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Report

Transparency International is a global movement that shares a single vision: a world in which government, business, civil society and the daily lives of people are free from corruption. It was started in 1993 by a few individuals when corruption was not really on the political agenda. Now just over 20 years later Transparency International is present in more than 100 countries. The international secretariat is based in Berlin while the 100 plus national chapters are locally established, independent organisations who are fighting corruption in their respective countries.

Although much remains to be done to stop corruption – much has also been achieved since 1993 including:

- The creation of international anti-corruption conventions
- The prosecution of corrupt leaders and seizures of their illicitly gained riches
- National elections won and lost on tackling corruption
- Companies being held accountable for their behaviour both at home and abroad

The key corruption topics that Transparency International works in include:

- Forestry
- Public procurement
- Sport
- Health
- Whistleblowing
- Intergovernmental bodies
- Judiciary
- Humanitarian assistance
- Poverty and development
- Water
- Politics and government
- Oil and gas
- Access to information
- Defence and security
- Education
- Private sector
- Climate Change

Transparency International is particularly known for its Corruption Perceptions Index, the Global Corruption Barometer, national integrity assessments, the bribe payers index and Advocacy and Legal Advice Centres (ALACS) that provide free and confidential legal advice to witnesses and victims of corruption.

The TI-EU office is the Brussels arm of the TI secretariat – and the first regional office. The role of TI EU is to coordinate Transparency's EU-relevant anti-corruption work. TI EU engages with officials and politicians from European Union institutions and a range of other stakeholders in Brussels and Europe, trying to influence decisions made at the EU level. The focus of TI EU is on EU integrity, EU justice and home affairs, EU as a global actor and the private sector.

In particular TI EU works on lobbying in Brussels, the anti-money laundering directive, whistleblowing, country by country reporting, Redd+ (climate change), EU funds and levels of corruption in the EU.

Why work with journalists?

Transparency International recognises the importance of a free press and the valuable work of investigative journalists. Greater collaboration is needed between the media and civil society to both detect and raise awareness of corruption. The media is a key pillar in a nation's integrity system and the press has an important role to play in strengthening democratic governance, promoting awareness and keeping a check on corrupt practices and the misuse of government power.

Investigative journalism and high quality reporting on corruption are vital components in raising awareness among the public and policy makers not only by investigating high quality individual cases but by highlighting systemic risks and trends. In most countries surveyed more people believed in the effectiveness of journalists than in national anti-bribery laws. Journalism and its possible effect of naming and shaming is apparently seen as a very effective deterrent to corruption.

Transboundary movements

Corruption and the problems it causes don't respect borders. Increasingly we live in a world in which capital, people, information and enterprises move freely and rapidly from place to place making accountability more difficult. Agents of cross border corruption are capable of doing business almost everywhere so it is difficult to hold them accountable anywhere. As international business grows along with the globalisation of markets – then hand in hand with this cross border corruption is becoming increasingly significant.

The cross border dimension of corruption in the EU is an increasing trend particularly in the areas of public procurement, political party financing and lobbying. For example transnational organisations can evade the rules governing funding of European political parties by donating to the same party in different countries.

Journalism is changing

Journalists are now sharing their methods and skills and are working together to break stories. Alongside this, access to information is also increasing and data journalism is on the rise. Data analysis and data visualisation are helping investigative journalists transform enormous amounts of information into easily accessible and compelling stories.

While collaboration and the use of technology are undeniably leading this revival in investigative journalism other external trends are also playing their part. In a world where people, money, and businesses can quickly and freely move across borders it means that crime and corruption are also going global.

Investigating international corruption cases, following illicit flows of money across borders or just swathing through huge amounts of data files takes cooperation, technological expertise and many other skill sets.

There are many examples of these new kinds investigations such as [Swissleaks](#), [Luxleaks](#), [NSA leaks](#) and [Yanukovychleaks](#), there have been stories about [shell companies](#) buying up New York, [Petrobras bribery investigations](#) and [politicians](#) laundering their money.

What is needed?

Data: There is a missing evidence base for EU policy making in the field of corruption – particularly the transnational elements. More information and access to compelling data is needed to help inform policy. There is also a need to provide evidence of the implementation or lack of implementation of anti-corruption measures throughout the EU. A central database of corruption stories from the EU could support this.

Investigations: The EU recognises the need for the promotion of investigative centres and more cooperation between journalists and officials at EU and national levels. Investigative journalism is one method of increasing the evidence base regarding corruption.

Skills: Media needs support to strengthen their knowledge in specific areas relevant for the detection of corruption (such as money laundering, political party financing, banking, stock exchange markets etc)

Cooperation: It's also clear that journalists have to learn to co-operate also across borders in order to be able to tackle vast projects in times of scarce resources.

The European Corruption Observatory

The aim of the European Corruption observatory was to create a pilot database that will be an easily accessible "one stop shop" for corruption related news in Europe for journalists, civil society, policy makers, law enforcement officials and the wider public. ECO will be an online tool and method for transnational learning on corruption trends and news stories enabling best practice in reporting corruption to be exchanged. It will also serve as an educational tool informing journalists, law enforcement and policy makers about EU corruption news and deepening their knowledge of current corruption issues. The database will also facilitate analysis and identification of trends in corruption across Europe and in specific EU member states as well as facilitating the identification of cross border cases of corruption. There are two main objectives to the project:

- To structure the content of the observatory to facilitate analysis and identification of corruption trends by journalists and anti-corruption professionals.
- To establish a pilot journalist network with the aim of supporting cross border investigative journalism on transnational corruption cases and the sharing of insights and reports on specific corruption topics across Europe. THE aim of the pilot network of EU journalists initiated through this project will be to foster greater collaboration in investigations and contribute towards greater reporting of cross-border corruption cases.

Currently there is no investigative journalist network dedicated to corruption issues that covers the whole of the EU. Sustaining such a network over the length of time required to complete complex transnational investigations and prepare them for publication will require greater resources than are available for this project. The hope is that this project will form the foundation for such a durable EU

wide network, by creating an embryonic network of journalists linking them with other anti-corruption actors with complementary skills and resources.

The observatory will also help Transparency International and other civil society organisations to validate their findings of both Transparency International assessments and the EU anti-corruption report in assessing corruption risks in Europe.

How will the European Corruption Observatory Work

After an initial focus group and desk research it was decided to track RSS feeds of a limited number of key media sites in each of the 28 member states. The aim is to take the top 3-5 online media sites in each country and using Open Calais - which utilises natural language processing – the RSS feeds are fed into the extraction engine which examines the text and locates key words that have been selected on different types of corruption. Open Calais then processes the information extracted from the text and returns more focused news articles. These articles are then fed into different queues waiting to be processed by an administrator.

An administrator will then add additional tags – such as names, organisations, type of corruption, sector and the countries involved - along with a short summary of the article in English, no more than one or two sentences. On the public side of the database user can see the title of the article (in the original language), a link to the original article, a short summary and its relevant tags. The project is still in the beta phase and there is a lot of development work to be completed. However currently the database allows users to search articles by the location, sector, issue and latest added.

Feedback from Workshop Participants

Participants provided feedback on important aspects to consider when collaborating on investigations and also on the technological development of the European Corruption Observatory database. Here we summarize their comments.

Collaboration

What works when making a collaboration? It is important to choose the members of the team very carefully. It's not enough to just look for a set of complementary skills but project managers have to think about the whole person and consider how they will fit into wider team and think about the different personalities. Trust is a key component for a successful collaboration but trust takes time to build it is important that members of the team show responsibility for their own pieces of work. Team members must also learn to be a giver (sharing information etc) and learn to reciprocate. Good project management and sharing tools are essential for large collaborations and safety and security issues should be considered.

Collaborations of investigative journalists is at its heart a network of individuals. So although they much learn to work together it is also important to allow them space to be themselves and this can be a balancing act for the project managers. But good project managers know what to delegate within the team and they understand that their key function is data management.

Globally and throughout Europe there are many organisations and centres working on investigations into corruption. These should be considered as potential participants to the pilot network of journalists and include:

- The Global Investigative Journalism Network (GIJN) who are also creating start up investigative networks
- The Romanian Centre for Investigative Journalism
- Re:baltica an investigative journalism centre based in Estonia
- Direkt 36 in Hungary
- The Italian Centre for Investigative Journalism
- Correctiv in Germany
- The Story

An overview of such investigative journalism initiatives involved in the networks is provided by Journalismfund.eu on this page <http://journalismfund.eu/investigative-journalism-europe>

A 2012 study commissioned by the EP Budget Control Committee and carried out by Journalismfund.eu also gives an insight into these considerations <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/document/activities/cont/201210/20121002ATT52809/20121002ATT52809EN.pdf>

Technological Development of the European Corruption Observatory

Overall the participants were interested and supportive of the European Corruption Observatory database. However they did question the scope of the project especially in terms of development and the number of people available to work on the project as administrators. Looking at the current development it was suggested that trying to roll out a database that could track media stories across all 28 EU member states might be overly ambitious and participants asked if it would be possible to restrict the project to a smaller number of countries. The advantages of this would include allowing the developers to perfect the media tracking in one language first before replicating the process across other countries.

The participants working on the Beta version of the tool and with access to curator system also highlighted the number of returned searches from each RSS feed. This they also felt was excessive as not all the media articles were relevant as some of the key search terms (such as fraud) may often be used in other contexts than a type of corruption. Participants suggested also restricting the number of search terms which in turn would lower the number of returned articles making it easier for one editor to administrate.

Some of the participants with skills in technology put forward the idea of machine learning. Machine learning is a type of artificial intelligence (AI) that provides computers with the ability to learn without being explicitly programmed. Machine learning focuses on the development of computer programs that can teach themselves to grow and change when exposed to new data. By working with a machine learning algorithm it might be possible for the system to continually refine itself ultimately weeding out those articles that are not suitable for the database and thus helping to reduce the work for administrators. This could be run on one language first before being replicated across other languages.

Participants also looked at the current automated translation of articles and queried whether automated translation was advanced enough across all EU languages.

Finally the participants felt the current search function was felt to be very limited, participants highlighted that an advanced search function would be much more useful particularly for those users conducting research.