

## *New models of collaboration in investigating corruption – a help or a hindrance?*

European Corruption Observatory Workshop Minutes / Report

London, United Kingdom

December 11, 2015



## Agenda

**09.15 – 09.45: Registration**

**09.45 – 10.00: Welcome and Introduction**

**10.00 – 10.20**

**10.20 – 12.00: Panel Discussion New models of collaboration in investigating corruption – a help or a hindrance?**

- **Deborah Unger**

Manager Rapid Response Unit, Transparency International

- **Staffan Dahllöf**

Staffan is a freelance reporter based in Copenhagen. Staffan runs the website wobbing.eu and previously worked on Farmsubsidy.org. He is currently involved in the **MEPs project** – the first time ever journalists representing all 28 European member states have teamed up to file complaints with the European Court of Justice against the European Parliament

- **Andrew Feinstein**

Andrew is Executive Director of Corruption Watch, a London based NGO which details and exposes the impact of bribery and corruption on democracy, governance and development. Andrew is a former African National Congress Member of Parliament. He resigned when the government refused to allow an unfettered investigation into the South African arms deal, which was tainted by allegations of significant, high level corruption.

- **Nick Mathiason, Finance Uncovered**

Nick, former Guardian reporter, now with the London Bureau of Investigative Journalism and Finance Uncovered, regularly conducts training in how to cover finance. His main themes are global financial flows, with a particular focus on tax abuse, corruption and money laundering.

**12.00 – 12.30: General Discussion**

**12.30 – 2.00: Lunch**



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## **Introduction and Welcome**

Alison Coleman of Transparency International EU welcomed the participants and introduced the European Corruption Observatory. This was an interactive session that showed the functionality of the online database and discussed the aim of creating an informal network of investigative journalists and civil society actors in Europe focused on the issue of corruption. She highlighted that mainstream media continues to back away from funding long-form investigative journalism and are instead broadening link ups with organisations like ICIJ and 100Reporters. These new models are often in collaboration with civil society and other actors and cross border collaborations are also on the increase. Collaborations can broaden the scope of corruption reporting in a positive way. Alison outlined the aim of today's session was to explore and discuss both the sustainability of this model for investigative journalism and the potential difficulties with this approach. She asked that the following questions be considered during the discussions:

- Is this a golden age for investigative journalists uncovering corruption?
- How can civil activists and the media work together to tackle corruption
- Will working with CSOs, and other stakeholders who have their own agendas, skew journalism?
- Are there ground rules that foundations/CSOs need to respect when they collaborate with investigative journalists?
- What support structure and tools are needed

## **Panel Discussion**

### **Staffan Dahlöf, MEPs Project and Farmsubsidy**

Staffan began his intervention with his work on the MEPs project. Journalists have throughout the years repeatedly reported alleged misuse of allowances such as MEPs using EU money for national campaigns or having family members employed as staff. But the overall picture has been lacking. Anuška Delić, a reporter at the Slovenian daily Delo took initiative to form the Project MEP after she had tried herself to get access to records of how Slovenian MEPs use their allowances. On top of their salaries the MEPs receive:

- Reimbursements for travel expenses, business class airfare, first class rail or €0.5 per km for driving own car up to 1,000 km – paid against documented costs.

- Daily subsistence allowance (meals and overnight stay) after proved attendance at meetings – €306 per day.
- Expenditure allowance (phone costs, computers et cetera) – €4,320 per month.
- Staffing arrangements (assistants in Brussels, Strasbourg and in home country other than staff employed by the Parliament) – up to €21,379 per month, whereof €5,344.75 can be used for consultancies, and other service providers.

Teaming up with 28 other journalists they have each asked for documentation relating to these claimed costs. All in all the accounts for 751 parliamentarians' allowances have been requested. The European Parliament's administration rejected all the requests on the same three grounds:

- It is a matter of privacy how the money is spent, information cannot be revealed on the ground of data protection.
- The request would be too cumbersome to process, referred to as "excessive workload".
- The Parliament is actually not in the possession of relevant documents.

The journalists have now brought a complaint to the European Court of Justice in Luxembourg, the group are being represented in Court by Slovenia's former Information Commissioner. The case is based on the issue of privacy versus transparency.

For many years Staffan has also worked on Farmsubsidy, a group of EU programmers, hackers and activists working to obtain detailed information to payments and recipients of farm subsidies in every EU member state.

Using citizens' rights to access government information we try to obtain detailed information to payments and recipients of farm subsidies in every EU member state.

Working together in collaborations such as these require members to have a variety of skills, knowledge, experience and professionalism.

What do journalists bring to these collaborations? Journalists can channel the story to a broader audience, they can often be more experienced in talking and questioning different people, and they also bring credibility to the project.

What are risks for civil society in working with journalists? When working on a collaborative investigation a prepared campaign can get out of hand, there is also a chance that their

message will get diluted by the time the story reaches its audiences, there is also a risk that their reputation will be weakened.

What are the risks for journalists when working with civil society? There is a risk that reporters can be downgraded to messenger boys within the collaboration, only being used to spread the story. There is a risk that their credibility can be diluted and as with most collaborations there can be disagreements about who does what.

#### **Andrew Feinstein, Corruption Watch**

Andrew talked about longer term corruption and collaboration. Andrew began his career as an activist in South Africa. Andrew was a former African National Congress Member of Parliament, he resigned when the government refused to allow an unfettered investigation into the South African arms deal, which was tainted by allegations of significant, high level corruption. On a 10 billion pound arms deal there were 300 million pounds with one bribe alone of 115 million pounds. There were 172 counts against Jacob Zuma but the case was dropped when the prosecutor became a judge.

When chasing an investigation small organisations have to be very careful as there are many risks to consider including both social and economic. When working in collaboration with others it is important to make clear there is no competition between the journalists and civil society actors and to partner with each other early as this makes things easier. Tensions can arise between civil society and journalists as often journalists like an exclusive but campaigners want mass appeal so these issues need to be discussed and agreed on early. Also tensions can arise as often campaigners want to bring a court case after the investigation which means that everything has to be 100% fact checked to create an air tight case. But overall journalists and campaigners need each other as they bring different skill sets to the table and it is important to deepen relations between these two groups.

#### **Nick Mathiason, Finance Uncovered**

Nick introduced the Bureau for Investigative Journalism, the first not for profit investigative journalism outfit in the United Kingdom. Nick highlighted that there is good investigative journalism in the UK and highlighted media outlets such as Buzz Feed and the Guardian and even the Daily Mail. Elsewhere in Europe there are also good examples of successful investigative outlets such as Mediapart in France which has over 110,000 subscribers. There are civil society organisations doing good investigative work as well such as Greenpeace. It's

certainly not a fair reflection to say that investigative journalism is dying when you look at these examples. There is an interest in investigative stories but the real issue is financial sustainability

Investigative journalism is also changing, the number of journalists is decreasing and for those that are left they need ever increasing technological skills to conduct complex investigations. Finance Uncovered, which is similar to the Organised Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, aims to provide journalists with the key skills needed to track money laundering and unravel complicated business structures and financial accounts. So far Finance Uncovered has trained 161 journalists and campaigners in these skills. 20% were from Africa, a further 50% from developing countries on other continents and the rest from the western world. Finance Uncovered started as a project of the Tax Justice Network but it will soon become independent so as to become more credible.

Nick highlighted that often civil society and journalists have had an uncomfortable relationship due to the need for journalists to remain independent. However there can be collaboration and it should be encouraged. It can increase the impact of an investigation and impact is something that they both need so it makes sense to work together. Nick felt that there were no general principles for working together in collaboration as every partnership is different but that highlighted that the need for independence is paramount.

## **General Discussion**

Mark Cridge introduced the work of mySociety, a not-for-profit social enterprise, based in the UK and working internationally. The organisation builds online technologies that give people the power to get things changed, and they share these technologies so that they can be used anywhere. They build tools relating to democracy, freedom of information and better cities. These tools can be used by journalists and campaigners alike. Mark underscored the importance of having strong collaboration and that this was important for the work mySociety does.

Deborah Unger from Transparency International explained the aim of Transparency International's Advocacy and Legal Advice Centres (ALACs) which provide free and confidential legal advice to witnesses and victims of corruption. One of the aims of Transparency International was to build a network of journalists, whistleblowers and civil society. However it didn't really work. When exposing corruption it is often the whistleblowers who suffer the most if a story makes it into the media – and so this created conflicts in working with the journalists.

Andrew Feinstein explained that his organisation Corruption Watch was obviously not an unbiased organisation, it has a clear remit. However in his experience he didn't feel that journalists had a problem with working with organisations were not unbiased. Andrew however pointed out that civil society and other partners need to invest time with journalists, as it requires a significant amount of time to build trust etc. and this was the basis for any working relationship.

Staffan Dahllof pointed out that bias can also depend on the publication or journalist that you partner with. He felt that a presumption of bias is important but good detailed research can help offset any bias to an investigation. Staffan also highlighted that opening up access to data will also be critical for investigations.

George Turner from Finance Uncovered pointed out that bias is nothing new - newspapers have always had agendas in the past. And even now there are many examples of media outlets that are not unbiased such as Outlaw a legal reporting website which is funded by the law firm Pinsent Masons.

Alison Coleman outlined her experience from working on the European Corruption Observatory and from meeting journalists and civil society throughout Europe is that one key issue is the need for common tech platforms. There are pockets of people doing great work throughout the EU but there is a lack of awareness of the platforms being built, the investigations that are happening or the experts available. There is a need to map global information on databases and tools and to spread this information to a wider audience. The ability to replicate these online tools will also be crucial. Communication of these platforms and initiatives will be key to save other actors precious resources when conducting similar investigations.