

# Conference Report

Tête- à-Tête

sef:

## Shifting powers and democratic accountability. The role of global investigative journalism

Mischa Hansel

Transnational investigative collaborations have made headlines in recent years. Think of the Panama Papers, Offshore Leaks or Paradise Papers. What is far from clear, however, is the impact of these stories on public discourses and politics. Have recent investigations truly exposed major “shadow elites” or only the small fry? Have they really prevented further corruption by politicians or business leaders? And does the public actually care about investigative stories? To address these questions, sef: hosted a discussion between anthropologist and political scientist Professor Janine Wedel (George Mason University) and Ilya Lozovsky (Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project) as part of the Deutsche Welle Global Media Forum 2019 in Bonn.

At the outset, the discussion took a closer look at the changing nature of societal power and how irresponsible elites have found new ways to escape media scrutiny and democratic accountability. Asked to elaborate on her concept of global shadow elites, Janine Wedel mentioned the example of a retired general who has access to insider information in his role as an advisory board member and who, at the same time, owns a consulting agency whose sole customer is the government. “No one knows where one role begins and the other ends,” Wedel explained. Another example would be a former minister who sits on the executive board of a liberal think tank and at the same time represents a Ukrainian oligarch with strong connections to Russian organised crime. These people engage in what she described as “representational juggling”, playing several roles simultaneously and using information gained in one position to their advantage in the other.

### The need for a systemic perspective

Emphasising the novelty of the phenomenon, Wedel compared it to the old “revolving door lobbyism” where politicians take up private business or think tank positions after (or before) their time in office. In contrast, people within the new power structures have both public roles and shadow roles at the same time. This should also not be conflated with traditional lobbyism from the outside since shadow elites partly work from the inside. The corruption of shadow elites, according to Wedel, is “legal AND systemic”. These features make it all the more impor-



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tant for journalists to understand the enabling global ecosystem. Furthermore, Wedel urged journalists not to reduce investigative stories to deviant personality traits, even though this might be tempting in order to



DW Global Media Forum 2019: Janine R. Wedel

increase news value. Directly responding to this plea for systemic perspectives and narratives, Ilya Lozovsky concurred that there should be less emphasis on personalities and more on the underlying structures. The mission of his organisation, he went on, is precisely this: to “go behind the scenes” and to “expose these ecosystems”. Its aim is to uncover global criminal networks or what he called the global “criminal service industry”. How do you do that? asked the moderator Frank Hofmann. Usually, one has to start with some kind of leak or whistleblower, Lozovsky replied. OCCRP was thus able to expose several money laundering systems which were used by corrupt politicians in Eastern Europe. The systems were heavily dependent on offshore companies that were operated by proxies to conceal their real beneficiaries.

### Follow the money or follow the people

Both participants also made the point that there is a universal pattern of illicit networks which are highly interconnected. Where they differ somewhat is with respect to the methods of concealment and exposure. Shadow elites “often work together in international networks” that support the creation and sustainment of blurred and ambiguous roles and responsibilities, according to Wedel. “You see the same architectures all over the world,” Lozovsky added with regard to money laundering schemes and the complex web of offshore companies. As a consequence, investigative journalists would be well advised to “follow the

money”. “A shadow elite”, after all, “is dark money and dark money is dark power.” Wedel agreed but added that it was also worth “following the people because the same players work together again and again”. Most importantly, one should try to identify official players and roles that help to legitimise the whole structures of “legal corruption”. Overall, Wedel seemed to be primarily interested in techniques of deception and concealment – the public facades of power brokers and other elite players – whereas Lozovsky was more concerned with the sophisticated architecture of illicit networks that his organisation is investigating.

### What role for journalists?

Then the discussion turned to the role of journalists themselves. Asked whether investigative journalism could be regarded as an antidote to the power of global shadow elites, Wedel was somewhat sceptical. She diagnosed a process of eroding public trust in professional journalism and rising competition from social media. If society as a whole does not improve media literacy and embrace critical thinking, journalists alone cannot fix the situation, she explained. That being said, she was convinced that “in living memory, there has never been a greater need for investigative journalism”. Lozovsky, for his part, emphasised the many ways in which journalistic practices and institutions have already adapted to the new world of shadow elites. Most importantly,



DW Global Media Forum 2019: Ilya Lozovsky

he highlighted the need for transnational collaboration. “To meet the challenge of this globalised world, journalism needs to become globalised too.” This is well reflected in the structure of his organisation,

which has ongoing partnerships with 45 non-profit investigative centres in 34 countries. Referring to the discussions in previous panels about diminish-



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ing press freedom in many countries, he furthermore explained that “we are often the only natural enemy” of corrupt authoritarian rulers. Finally, he pointed to the need for a new journalistic ethos. While it is true that partnerships with Transparency International and other political organisations deviate from the traditional understanding of journalistic impartiality, he said, journalists need to work in the interest of societies. We are not activists but we have a political position, we are against corruption, there is no denying, he explained.

#### Engaging with the public

Several people in the audience raised the question whether people actually care about the stories published by investigative journalists. More specifically, one participant highlighted the fact that corrupt politicians in so many countries are getting re-elected again and again. Is that not a strong signal of public ignorance? Another participant pointed to the way in which fabricated intelligence was currently being used to justify a possible invasion of Iran, much as it had been in the run-up to the Iraq War in 2003.

Was that not proof of a public that was unable to learn how better to withstand manipulation? A third participant highlighted the increase in governmental media controls as well as the tendency of some politicians to thrive on the general mistrust in all democratic institutions, including the free press. How can journalists expect to gain public attention and trust under these circumstances? Responding, Lozovsky mentioned the need to follow and communicate good journalistic standards such as being transparent and careful and conservative in your claims. Moreover, journalists should try to make stories human to make people care. At least occasionally, they should also practise constructive journalism (“showing what is right rather than wrong in the world”) to prevent a general erosion in all kinds of institutions that in the end would only serve the interests of the most irresponsible actors.

Wedel agreed with the notion that with regard to the Middle East, history was about to repeat itself and that the same players were using the same techniques to make the case for an invasion again. Yet to her, this did not mean that the public in general is disinterested and unwilling to hold their elected politicians accountable. On the contrary, it cares a lot about corruption, Wedel said. Unfortunately, such legitimate concerns are one of the key drivers for populist forces today, she argued. Thus, populist politicians campaign on the promise to “drain the swamp”. Once in power, however, they are the ones who create even more corruption. Taking up the issue of the way in which populism affects public discourses nowadays, another participant asked Lozovsky to reflect on his responsibility for reaching out to conservative milieus and for overcoming high levels of polarisation and fragmentation in society. OCCRP in many ways reaches out to readers from a diverse background, Lozovsky answered. For example, he emphasised the way in which his organisation makes primary sources accessible as much as possible and urges readers to analyse these documents and become co-investigators. Yet the role of readers does not end with that, he added, as the public is often our biggest ally. Perhaps one of the strongest reminders of this role was the major uprising in Slovakia after a young journalist was killed. “When a journalist is murdered in cold blood because he is trying to find the truth, people still care.”

#### Imprint

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