

Media Programme South East Europe



Don't copy & paste – investigate!

10. BIRN Summer School of Investigative Reporting: Trainer from Reuters, Süddeutsche Zeitung and Rundfunk Berlin-Brandenburg work together with journalists from South East Europe in Herceg Novi (Montenegro)

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30 investigative journalists from South East Europe, Belgium, the Netherlands, Slovenia, Hungary and the United States participated in the BIRN Summer School of Investigative Reporting, which celebrates its 10th anniversary this year. The event took place from 18th to 24th of August on the Adriatic coast of Montenegro – in Herceg Novi.

“Journalists must ask critical questions – that is their function in a democracy. They are observers, reporters and guardians of the social fabric.” With those words **Hendrik Sittig**, Head of the Media Programme South East Europe of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, opened this year's

Summer School and wished all the journalists a productive training. **Marija Ristić**, BIRN Regional Director, presented the programme and welcomed **Blake Morrison**, the lead trainer from Reuters, who is guiding the school for the fourth time. He motivated the participants: “Stay curious, think about dialogs and emotions in your job, not about quotations.”

Frame of the good investigative story and the necessary know-how

During the five days of training Morrison taught

the journalists about the basics of investigative work: drawing timelines, separating facts from suspicions, determining a standard of proof. “Challenge yourself to search for new stories and to experiment with new ways of writing”, said the trainer from Reuters and gave advices about how the journalists could create a greater impact with their work by choosing the proper format – online, print or video – for their story. Insights in the practice of visualisation were introduced by **Andrew Baker**, video journalist from New York. He showed different techniques of how investigative documentaries can be designed in a better way. “Use the power of usual storytelling, find a balance between powerful pictures and essential statements. Do not let them overlap.” A clear vision of the final result could help a lot during filming. A good introduction talk with the protagonists can be also helpful and warms up the atmosphere on set.

Süddeutsche Zeitung’s Insider: The Panama Papers and the Strache Video

The participants had the chance to talk to Pulitzer Prize winner **Frederik Obermaier**, Süddeutsche Zeitung. He reported about his work on the Panama Papers and how to investigate and verify big data. Furthermore, he explained the advantages of cooperation in the journalism field, like shared costs, more publicity and the exchange with colleagues, who offer different points of view. Another exciting topic was the publication about the scandal with the Vice Chancellor of Austria, Strache. To stay loyal to ethical principles and to reveal only the information of public interest was one of the rules that Obermaier’s team followed. “Investigative journalism is also about reputation”, said Obermaier whose book about the so-called Ibiza-affair was published recently.

How do I get information? The investigative journalists ask themselves this question often when they begin with a new story. At this year’s anniversary the BIRN team invited alumni who provided the participants with new skills in a practical manner. **Ivana Jeremić**, BIRN editor, imposed the relevance of fact-checking and systematisation of information.

Ivan Angelovski, award-winning investigative BIRN journalist, talked about online tracking of ships and planes – a topic that is particularly relevant for cross-border cooperation.



Blake Morrison, lead trainer of the BIRN Summer School, gave advices on how to do an investigative interview.
Source: MP SEE

Dragana Pećo from the Serbian research network KRIK gave a precise view of the unveiling of off-shore companies by searching for traces and suspicious contents in real cases together with the whole group. **Christo Buschek** presented the benefits of data mining. He is a programmer who helps investigative journalists from different countries to create an archive of digital memory. “It’s a big treasure to have the possibility to reuse information”, Buschek said. The participants also learned about open source basics from **Benjamin Strick**, journalist for BBC-Africa Eye and Bellingcat. With interactive exercises, he thought them how to use geo-locating of videos and photos. Strick explained that in fact everyone is able to make huge progress within an investigative story only by using open sources (for example satellite images or information from social networks).

Hot topics: right-wing extremism and organised crime

About right-wing extremists in politics – a hot topic all over Europe – talked **Olaf Sundermeyer**, investigative journalist for Rundfunk Berlin-Brandenburg (rbb) and book author. The number of supporters, voters and eventually the members of parliament from right-wing populist parties, is raising and citizens are confronted with

their messages and actions. Therefore, it became even more important to explain this content with qualitative reporting and not to omit the political context.



Olaf Sundermeyer talks about his research on right-wing extremism and organised crime.

Source: MP SEE

The participants were also very interested in Sundermeyer's investigative research on organised crime – how he approaches sources and whether he cooperates with other journalists. He underlined: “My name and credibility are my major tools”. But this is gained with a lot of practice and exercise. Sundermeyer advised not to be

shy and to get as much experience as possible. He also emphasised the relevance of the local journalistic network. “The best security for me is to work with people I trust. The greatest protection remains the public”, he answered when asked how he deals with his own safety.

New ideas, new stories and new cooperations

In line with the tradition of the BIRN Summer School, the best ideas of the participants for future stories were awarded. Among them were individual projects as well as cross-border stories in which journalists from three different countries will work together. The participants exchanged views with excellent trainers, learned new investigative techniques and took home many impressions.

The essentials in the profession repeatedly appeared in the words of all speakers: do not steal any content and do not accept superficiality. Write own, true and moving stories. Exactly as this year's motto says: Don't copy & paste – investigate!



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