

# Teaching Guide

# Cross-Border Investigative Journalism

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# **Cross-Border Investigative Journalism**

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## 1. About the Journalist in Residence Program

In today's interconnected world, cross-border, collaborative investigations have become a new norm in journalism (Sambrook, 2018). They are oftentimes led by international media organisations such as the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) and the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) and today, there is hardly any large media outlet that has not been involved in such projects (Sambrook, 2018). These investigations help uncover corruption, financial crime, human rights violations, environmental misconduct, and other issues that transcend national borders and might otherwise remain unnoticed.

Cross-border investigations have fundamentally changed the traditional paradigm of journalism, in which reporters worked independently and rarely shared information with colleagues (Berglez and Gearing, 2018; Konow-Lund, 2019). Instead, they now foster a collaborative environment where journalists from different countries pool their resources, expertise, and information. This approach is crucial when reporting on global phenomena like climate change, money laundering, or abuses of power, where isolated national efforts would fall short. By revealing hidden information and holding those in power accountable, cross-border journalism helps promote transparency, democratic oversight, and good governance (Berglez and Gearing, 2018; Næss, 2024).

Despite its significance, cross-border journalism is a relatively new phenomenon that has not yet been comprehensively addressed in journalism education (Bettels-Schwabbauer et al., 2023). Many journalists have limited experience working with colleagues from other countries and may not be familiar with the legal, ethical, and practical aspects of cross-border collaboration. This can hinder effective cooperation and lead to misunderstandings or conflicts. Journalism training programs must therefore adapt to this evolving media landscape and equip aspiring jour-

nalists with the knowledge and skills necessary for effective transnational investigative work.

Addressing this gap, the Institute of Journalism at TU Dortmund University hosted the Journalist in Residence program titled “Grenzenlos investigativ” (“Investigative Without Borders”) from the summer semester 2024 to the summer semester 2025. Over the course of three semesters, renowned investigative journalist Jelena Cosic from the ICIJ shared her expertise in cross-border investigative journalism with students as well as with interested members of the public. The Journalist in Residence program was made possible through generous funding from the Brost Foundation (<https://broststiftung.ruhr/>). The program’s goal was to strengthen journalism education in the Ruhr region and to equip young journalists with core skills in cross-border and investigative reporting, thereby supporting and sustaining global investigative journalism.

To achieve this goal, the Institute of Journalism collaborated with the ICIJ, an independent, donor-supported investigative reporting network that represents a new model of journalism. It brings together both large and small media organisations around the world to carry out investigations that would be difficult or impossible for any single newsroom to tackle on its own. The ICIJ has worked with more than 140 newspapers, television and radio broadcasters, and online media outlets, including The Washington Post, Le Monde, BBC, El País, The Guardian, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, as well as small, regional nonprofit journalism organisations in Europe, North America, Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

To ensure the project’s lasting impact, cross-border journalism training will continue at the Institute of Journalism after the conclusion of the program and the development of the curricular content. In addition, this publication serves as a guide for educators and institutions seeking to integrate cross-border investigative journalism into their own curricula. It

compiles materials, methodologies, and practical insights developed during the program and will be made available to partners in the European Journalism Training Association (EJTA).

## 2. About the Brost Foundation

The Brost Foundation, established in 2011 and based in Essen, is a non-profit organisation dedicated to supporting innovative and impactful projects in the Ruhr region — home to its founder, Anneliese Brost. Guided by her vision of social responsibility, the foundation promotes initiatives that strengthen civil society and improve the quality of life for people in the region.

Its funding priorities include arts and culture, youth and elderly care, public health, education, and welfare. The foundation operates both as a grant-making and an active institution, often initiating its own projects.

## 3. About the Authors

Jelena Cosic looks back on a long career as an investigative journalist, during which she has already worked on well-known, award-winning, and influential projects such as the Pandora Papers, Deforestation Inc., FinCEN Files, and more of ICIJ's projects. She is currently working as a data journalist and training manager for the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) and coordinates the organisation's project partnerships in Eastern Europe.

Julian Welz is a research assistant and doctorate candidate at the Institute of Journalism at TU Dortmund University. His research focuses on the role of generative artificial intelligence in journalism, with particular emphasis on questions of transparency and trust.

## 4. Who Is This Course For?

This course is designed for journalism students at both the bachelor's and master's levels who are interested in developing strong skills in investigative and cross-border reporting. The course is particularly relevant for those who aim to pursue careers in investigative journalism, data journalism, or international reporting. Therefore, the course may be most suitable for students of Journalism, Communication Studies, Media Studies, or adjacent disciplines.

## 5. Course Objectives

As the field of investigative journalism continues to evolve through digital innovation, data-driven storytelling, Big Data and Artificial Intelligence, journalists must learn to work across borders, to navigate complex cultural contexts, and to make use of a large variety of investigative techniques. Therefore, the aim of this course is to equip students with the practical skills, conceptual frameworks, and ethical awareness required for effective cross-border investigative journalism.

By the end of the course, students will be able to:

- understand the fundamentals of cross-border investigative journalism, including its purpose, challenges, and potential for social impact.
- identify and develop investigative story ideas with cross-border relevance and international scope.
- apply fundamental investigative techniques such as source development, public records research, data analysis, and financial document analysis.
- use digital tools and databases to gather and verify information, and

understand the role of data journalism in uncovering connections that would otherwise remain hidden.

- conduct secure and ethical interviews with human sources, including anonymous and vulnerable individuals.
- evaluate the risks involved in investigative reporting and apply safety protocols for themselves, their teams, sources, and information.

Over the duration of this course, students will pursue one investigative idea of their choosing and, in doing so, they will apply certain investigative techniques. As these projects progress with the course and to capture the spirit of collaboration as an essential aspect of investigative, cross-border reporting, students will be asked to work on certain tasks as a team. The goal is for them to be able to present the topic and their investigation as an elaborate, gradable pitch at the end of the seminar.

## 6. Course Structure

### Week 1

*Introduction to Cross-Border Reporting: Sharing the investigative mindset and the idea of collaboration.*

During the first lecture, participants are introduced to the basics of cross-border reporting. First and foremost, they will learn how to develop an investigative mindset and will find out why this mindset is a crucial thing to have in regular reporting and investigations. Having an investigative mindset “involves a commitment to remain open-minded and dispassionate despite the circumstances and a requirement to look at [all] sides of an incident or allegation” (Noone, 2020, p. 6). Students need to learn that in cross-border investigations, or rather in any kind of investigation, they need to be able to pay “attention to details”, to generate “alternative

hypotheses and explanations”, and they need the ability to “investigate rather than construct” their case, without bias (Noone, 2020, p. 6).

In the first session, students are also informed about the most essential criteria journalists need to use to assess whether an idea is suitable for an investigation. Using these criteria, they are encouraged to think and prepare at least three topic ideas that they find interesting and that they would like to investigate further. These ideas serve as the basis for the investigative projects that they are to work on during the course. In the seminars conducted in the context of the Journalist in Residence program, student projects included an investigation into CO2 emissions trading in Germany, an investigation into how large corporations use illegal wells in Spain, as well as an investigation into the question of whether the Gold Standard for corporate climate targets is failing.

For the next session, students are asked to select one of their three topic ideas to use as the basis for a short project pitch.

## **Week 2**

*Cross-Border Processes: What are the rules, phases, mistakes, and structures necessary for cross-border investigation? How do investigative journalists build international teams to successfully work on global or local cross-border projects?*

In the second week, students will explore how successful cross-border investigations are planned, structured, and coordinated. Using some of the most significant cross-border projects of the past decades as examples, they will find out about the most important ingredients for successful investigations and fertile collaborations, but also about potential mistakes journalists may make during such projects. The projects that can be named here include the Panama Papers, the FinCEN Files, Cyprus Confidential, the Pandora Papers and other projects. Additionally, students will

be asked to list some of the projects they have heard of themselves.

Using these projects as examples, students will be introduced to the basic phases of cross-border investigations:

- Start
  - > Story selection
  - > Initial plan
  - > Pre-reporting
  - > Balancing the topic
  - > ...
- Teambuilding
  - > Finding partners
  - > Structuring the team
  - > Sharing skills and knowledge
  - > ...
- Research and Reporting
  - > Reporting
  - > Documental search
  - > Data analysis
  - > Verification
  - > Collaboration
  - > Requests for comment
  - > ...
- Reaching the audience
  - > Publication
  - > Impact
  - > Follow-up

To further develop their investigative projects, students are asked to pitch their chosen idea. Using the feedback they received by their peers and their lecturer as well as the content from the lecture, participants are

asked to continue working on their ideas until the next week, for example by thinking about how they can handle the next steps in their investigation.

### Week 3

*Data Analysis: The importance of data and data analyses, how to read data, how to structure it and why data is “rocket fuel to investigation”.*

This session introduces students to the central role that data can play in cross-border investigative journalism. While journalism has always relied on documents and records, modern investigations demand a more sophisticated engagement with potentially enormous amounts of data. From identity documents over financial records to environmental databases, data is oftentimes not just supporting evidence, but the story itself.

Participants will learn what kinds of data are relevant to investigative work and how data was used in known projects such as the Pandora Papers. They will get to know databases such as the ICIJ’s Offshore Leaks Database (<https://offshoreleaks.icij.org/>), but they will also learn about other sources of data such as court cases, land registries or corporate registries.

In the context of their own projects, students are asked to reflect on the role of data in their investigations and to find potential data sources until the next session. Additionally, they are given an article about a past investigation with the task of listing all potential data sources that were used for the investigation.

## Week 4

*Sources: Identifying, evaluating, and working with human and documentary sources, both online and offline.*

Sources of information are the focal points of great investigative reporting. They are essential for the verification of information and the building of trust and credibility. This session focuses on the different source types available to investigative journalists and how they were used in the reports for some of the best-known investigations. A special focus is placed on public records and databases, often offline sources of information.

To advance their projects, students will list all of the sources and source types for their stories, both online and offline. Until week 5, they are asked to continue working on their projects with a focus on the identification of sources.

## Week 5

*Interviews: Why they are important, how journalists can ask the right questions, and how they can feel confident in doing so.*

Week 5 focuses on the topic of interviews, more precisely on how they can be used most efficiently for cross-border investigations. Participants will learn how human sources need to be treated, especially if these sources find themselves in vulnerable positions and want to remain anonymous. Participants will be taught how they can establish trust and frame questions effectively, so that they may obtain useful information.

In order to give students some practice, they will participate in a role-playing scenario in which their lecturer takes on the role of a reserved and uncooperative source on the telephone. Students take turns in partaking in this scenario. The goal is to gradually move closer to a suitable strategy for finding out the necessary information from the source.

## Week 6

### *Following the money: Investigating financial flows and corporate structures*

Understanding money trails is one of the most critical skills in investigative journalism. Following financial flows can give information about the people who profit from corruption, harmful business practices, or political decisions. Money trails can reveal structures of power, ownership, and responsibility.

The session begins with an overview of why following the money across countries is essential. Students will learn where to find the necessary financial documents, what different types of financial documents may look like, and how they need to be read.

In preparation for the next session, students are asked to find and assess company records and financial documents related to their individual investigative projects.

## Week 7

### *Safety: How to keep yourself, colleagues, sources, and documents safe*

This session focuses on the fundamentals of physical and digital security. Students will be equipped with practical frameworks to reduce risk and plan for safety. The participants will be given examples of high risk scenarios that arose in well-known investigations and how the risk in these scenarios could be mitigated.

In another hypothetical exercise, students are presented with a scenario in which a team member must travel to another country to conduct an investigation. They are tasked with identifying all relevant steps to ensure their colleague's safety, including aspects such as travel planning

and maintaining secure ways of communication for all team members involved.

With a focus on their own projects, students are asked to conduct a project-specific risk assessment. They will list possible risks for them, their team, and their projects, and they will develop creative, realistic solutions to address these challenges.

## **Week 8**

### *AI for investigations: How to use AI ethically for the public good*

Over recent years, Artificial Intelligence (AI) has become increasingly powerful. Cross-border investigations can benefit from this technology heavily, particularly when they involve large piles of documents that would otherwise need to be painstakingly analysed by hand. Some media organisations, for example the ICIJ, are even working with tech developers on custom AI tools that help investigative journalists search, classify, and make sense of large leaks (Reuter, n.d.).

In order to prepare students for the use of this new technology, week 8 focuses on the practical uses of AI in investigative journalism. Participants will be presented with real-world examples of how AI tools can support cross-border investigations. At TU Dortmund University, these examples focused on ICIJ investigations such as the Pandora Papers. For this investigation, the ICIJ used, for instance, supervised learning to cluster documents into different categories and machine learning to extract structured data from unstructured documents (Reuter, n.d.).

## Week 9

### *Fact-Checking: Why Fact-Checking Is Non-Negotiable in Cross-Border Journalism?*

Fact-checking is an indispensable part of investigative journalism, especially in cross-border contexts where information can be complex, incomplete, or deliberately misleading. No matter how much or little time journalists have, fact checking is essential to maintaining credibility, to avoid legal consequences, and to ensure the truthfulness of the publication.

During week 9 of the course, students will engage in a practical fact-checking task designed to sharpen their attention to detail and their understanding of the verification process. In this session, the students are presented with a story and are asked to identify all factual claims that require fact-checking. The task emphasises that even small and “known” information must be confirmed, as overlooking these can lead to significant errors and damage a media outlet’s credibility.

Students are asked to apply what they have learned about fact-checking to their ongoing investigative projects. In the process, they are to pay attention to any difficulties and solutions they find.

## Week 10

### *Trust: The glue that holds cross-border projects together.*

Trust is a foundational element of any investigative project. This is especially the case in cross-border teams that must often rely on one another across distances, time zones, and organisational cultures (Sambrook, 2018). Despite its importance, trust is rarely discussed directly within investigative teams and is oftentimes “simply founded on a newsroom handshake” (Sambrook, 2018, p. 27). A lack of trust in such a collaboration, however, can be very detrimental, for example when it affects how

team members share important information (Sambrook, 2018).

This session invites students to reflect on how trust is built and nurtured among colleagues, audiences, and sources. Through examples and discussion, students are guided through the different conditions necessary for the fostering of trust. These conditions may include transparent communication within the team, confidentiality, and reliability (Sambrook, 2018). In the context of their own investigative projects, they are asked to suggest ways in which trust plays a role and which particular methods can be used to develop it.

As the course nears its conclusion, students are asked to prepare their final presentations in the form of a short, 10-minute pitch. These presentations will be held in the final session.

## **Week 11**

### *Pitching Session: Presenting investigative ideas to a professional audience*

The final session of the seminar is dedicated to the students' investigative story pitches. Over the course of the semester, participants have developed cross-border investigative ideas, researched relevant data and documents, identified potential sources, evaluated risks, and applied methods of verification and ethical reporting. Now, they are asked to bring all of these elements together.

For this pitch, teams and individuals are asked to present their pitch for a maximum of ten minutes with another five to ten minutes allocated for feedback and the answering of questions. The presentations will be held in front of the lecturer and the other course participants, but additional guest experts may be invited to give feedback on certain aspects of the investigation project.

Within the short time frame of this course, it can be expected that

some or many of the investigative projects the students have worked on are not finished completely. If students want to continue working on their projects independently after finishing the course, they should be encouraged to do so. The lecturer can use the last session to answer students' questions about how to proceed, they can give hints about finding partners, and they can suggest possible avenues for publication, collaboration, and further development.

## 7. Guest Experts

During the seminars that were held in the context of the Journalist in Residence program at TU Dortmund University, some sessions were supplemented by the presence of guest experts in the field of investigative journalism. These guests either joined the sessions digitally via videoconferencing software or they travelled to Dortmund to be with the students in person. The experts held presentations on specific topics and stayed for Q&A exchanges with students. Within the three semesters the seminar was conducted at TU Dortmund University, guests included Petra Blum from Norddeutscher Rundfunk (“North German Broadcasting”, NDR), Frederik Obermaier, investigative journalist and co-director of Paper Trail Media, Delphine Reuter, ICIJ data editor, Miranda Patrucic, OCCRP editor-in-chief, and Karina Shedrofsky, Co-Founder and Director of Research at Data and Research Center — DARC.

Inviting experienced and well-known journalists and editors to the seminar sessions offers several advantages. It gives students the opportunity to learn directly from professionals with specialised experience in particular aspects of cross-border investigative work. They can ask questions about their own investigative projects and benefit from the advice of industry experts. In addition, guest lectures allow students to connect with professionals in the field and to gain insights into possible career

paths within investigative journalism. They can ask for career advice directly and potentially even inquire about possible internship positions.

## 8. What Worked

Reflecting on the courses that were held for the Journalist in Residence program, we believe that there are a few aspects of the course that were particularly beneficial to students. First, instead of relying on traditional exams or long, academic papers, the courses focused on practical work, mainly in the form of investigative projects the students could work on in teams. This proved to be a more engaging and effective approach that allowed students to pick projects according to their perceived skill level. These projects took participants out of their comfort zones and placed them in situations that were oftentimes unknown to them, which, we believe, benefited students of all levels of experience.

Second, students appeared to benefit greatly from the various guests we invited, so much so that in the summer semester of 2025, the third semester of the project, the course took the form of an “expert seminar” for which we invited one guest per session. Invited experts held in-depth guest lectures on various topics, oftentimes delving into the finer details of cross-border investigation and even introducing the students to more advanced methods and tools. Sourcing experts from various international media organisations allowed for the incorporation of diverse perspectives on the lives of investigative journalists.

Lastly, it was crucial for seminar students to see and hear details about some of the investigative projects we listed earlier in this teaching guide. Slides that were used during the sessions included sensible material that would not be shown to the public in any other scenario.

## 9. Suggested Tools and Materials

Bellingcat's resources:

<https://www.bellingcat.com/resources/>

Brigitte Alfter's book "Cross-Border Collaborative Journalism: A Step-By-Step Guide",

ISBN: 9781138613638

<https://www.routledge.com/Cross-Border-Collaborative-Journalism-A-Step-By-Step-Guide-1st-Edition/Alfter/p/book/9781138613638>

Exposing the Invisible - The Kit:

<https://kit.exposingtheinvisible.org/>

Google Pinpoint for document collection:

<https://journaliststudio.google.com/pinpoint/about/>

ICIJ's site on tools and training:

<https://www.icij.org/tags/tools-and-training/>

ICIJ's Datashare platform:

<https://datashare.icij.org/>

OCCRP Aleph:

<https://aleph.occrp.org/>

Open Corporates:

<https://opencorporates.com/>

OCCRP's Online Resources:

<https://id.occrp.org/>

PimEyes for facial recognition:

<https://pimeyes.com/>

The Global Investigative Journalism Network's Resource Center:

<https://gijn.org/resource/>

WhatsMyName username search:

<https://whatsmyname.app/>

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