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Profile in Public Integrity: Drew Sullivan

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Profile in Public Integrity:

Drew Sullivan

Co-Founder, Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Program



Drew Sullivan is currently an advising editor at the [Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Program](#) (OCCRP) in Sarajevo, which he co-founded in 2006. Previously, he founded the [Center for Investigative Reporting in Bosnia-Herzegovina](#) and the [Journalism Development Network](#). He has received many honors for his investigative reporting on issues of transnational crime and corruption, including the Global Shining Light Award and the Online Journalism Award. To read about Sullivan's unusual path from aerospace engineering to stand-up comedy to journalism, [click here](#).

In 2006, you co-founded the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), a consortium of investigative journalists and non-profits in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. The OCCRP now conducts more than 60 cross-border investigations per year and reaches millions of readers. What challenges did you face in getting this ambitious effort off the ground, and how did you overcome them?

It's funny—we didn't mean to start OCCRP. But the reporters needed it and the Balkans needed it. Nobody was doing cross-border reporting. We didn't even think of OCCRP as an organization, more of a group of journalists. Too often, media development is a solution looking for a problem. OCCRP grew organically to address real needs.

The Balkans were a tough place then. Still are. We immediately faced problems, starting with money. Back then, donors funded projects on a country-by-country basis. It was hard to convince people to fund a regional project. Fortunately we ran across some forward-thinking donors who took a chance on us.

I was excited about covering regional crime and corruption. We thought we had better hurry and get something started before other people showed up and took our beat. But the reason nobody had done it before was because nobody *wanted* to do it. Covering organized crime in Eastern Europe was a crazy thing to try. Organized crime and corruption are endemic in the Balkans and post-Soviet countries. In countries like Kosovo and Montenegro, criminals control whole governments. In others like Russia and Serbia, they are integral to state foreign policy. That nexus of government and organized crime is a dangerous area for a reporter to work in. Fortunately, some very brave journalists chose this beat before us. We gathered some of them together to work and learn from each other.

Safety was our first concern. It was 2006 and I looked for a safety plan or helpful information from organizations supporting imperiled journalists, but safety training in journalism was (and still largely is) war zone training. Nobody really knew how to keep reporters safe when they report on dangerous people. So we had to figure it out ourselves. We had to learn who might kill you or hurt you and how and under what conditions. After studying every case in which a journalist was murdered, we realized that the process of reporting and writing a story was critical to personal security. We had to talk face-to-face with organized crime figures and be fair and honest with them. We needed a very high standard of accuracy so they would never think we had been paid to attack them. Eventually, we became accepted by the police and crime figures as part of the landscape and it became easier.

There are also challenges any time you work in so many countries, with so many cultural differences. We work in 30 countries using 15 languages. It's easy to misunderstand people. Journalists from each country have different histories, standards, and ways of operating to sort out.

Crime and corruption is a unique beat and we needed to know our beat. It has taken a decade, but we have painfully learned step-by-step how privatization fraud works, how the state can be robbed, how VAT fraud works and how money is laundered. Then we had to teach it to a new generation of journalists. That's our challenge now. We've minted about a dozen editors and maybe a hundred investigative reporters, but more are needed—especially in Russia and Central Asia. We're working hard to improve the capacity of journalism organizations.

My real heroes are the local journalists who comprise OCCRP. They risk everything working for us. It's hard to understand what it means to make yourself an outsider in Azerbaijan and what that does to your life. Our reporter and editor Khadija Ismayilova spent a year and a half in prison for reporting she did with us. That changes your life. It's hard to understand what it means when the Serbian government calls you a traitor and an enemy of the state and you still have to walk down the street in Belgrade. Our journalists have been jailed, slandered, and threatened, yet they keep reporting. I am always in awe of their commitment, professionalism, and courage.

The OCCRP helped lead the investigation of the “Panama Papers” that exposed a high-level global network of apparent tax evasion and money laundering. The implications of this investigation are still developing, but are there any lessons we can draw already?

The Panama Papers provided some great new stories, but from a larger perspective the documents didn't tell us something that we didn't know. We know there are two global economic systems. There is the system in democratic countries with the rule of law, and then there is the economic system of developing countries and corrupt governments, which is based on offshore companies. The economies of these countries rely extensively on offshore activities to steal money, launder ill-gotten gains, illegally transfer money to the West, hide assets, and a host of other criminal activities. Some of the largest trade partners with Ukraine are Cyprus and the British Virgin Islands—none of which is legal. The problem is that this system helps the political and financial elite – the people who control the politics of these countries. And that will cause poverty, war and instability for years to come. While they steal tens of billions, we send back tens of millions in assistance. It's a broken system that must be fixed.

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The two systems are not all that integrated but they come together in places like London, Dubai, Panama, and the Cayman Islands that are hubs of the criminal services industry—ethically challenged lawyers, registration agents, and business intelligence companies that make their money from the misery of billions of people.

What we saw in Panama Papers was a massive flow of money from corrupt countries like China, Russia, Brazil, and many African nations to places where assets are safe like Dubai, New York, London, and Switzerland. Estimated at \$50 trillion, it's perhaps the largest proportionate transfer of wealth from the developing to the developed world since the Spanish conquistadors looted Latin America. It is one of the great crimes of the 20th and 21st centuries.

Many Americans want to fight against corruption in emerging democracies, but the problems can seem intimidating and intractable. What advice do you have for those who want to get involved?

Americans need to start at home. The U.S. does exactly what the developing world is doing, but more subtly. The difference is that America has legalized corruption, for the benefit of the rich and corporations. Try to explain a

“super PAC” to a Nigerian or a Russian. They will laugh and call it bribery. Or explain the *Citizens United* decision, or the difference between tax mitigation and tax evasion through offshore accounts. You can’t.

Apple, Google, and dozens of other U.S. companies have hundreds of billions stashed offshore. They evade taxes exactly as the Russian oligarchs do. The corrupt intent is the same, but the system is legalized. Now Apple and Google and all these American companies want a tax amnesty to repatriate the funds so they can “invest in America.” If they wanted to invest in America, they could have paid their taxes in the first place. And they are spending their money lobbying and giving campaign donations to get what they want. Isn’t that corruption?

The result of corruption is an electorate so angry that people are willing to destroy the system in many places around the world. Whether it’s corruption by corporations and special interests or by dictators stealing the assets of the people, it causes instability. In the Middle East, even religious terrorism is a response directly tied to anger against corrupt governments. If systems aren’t changed, there will be continued instability, violence, and death. The anger may be directed at globalization or the EU or immigrants but corruption is at its heart.

Those within the system have been part of it for too long to see it, let alone change it. There is no political will to change decades of corruption so slow and insidious and so deeply ingrained. Those outside the system may be too destructive to bring the improvements they promise. We are having some of the right conversations, but we need a new, more constructive vision. I fear we have entered a period of bad times. I know because in my part of the world, we’ve been there for a decade.

After more than a dozen years of corruption investigation, what is one thing you wish more people understood about corruption or how to fight it?

A long time ago, I was talking to some reporters who had found out that money was stolen but in a way that was technically legal. Thus, they said there was no story. I argued that it doesn’t matter whether the act was legal or illegal, if it was still wrong. It’s a better story that it’s actually legal to steal. I left them unconvinced. And that’s the problem with corruption. It’s deeply tied to local culture and history. To my reporters, *corruption* was another word for *illegal*. And in this part of the world, laws can be, and are, manipulated all the time.

Corruption is hard to grapple with. It’s not so clear. It’s part legal, part moral, part political, part financial, and all about power. As long as people fight about power, you will have some form of corruption. We need to be better at recognizing corruption in all its forms so we are not hypocrites.

The longer I’ve done this, the more I have seen that the world of corruption is not black and white. For instance, among the most honorable people I have met in my work are actually the organized crime figures. They are more honest about their livelihood than politicians and often follow complex ethical and moral guidelines, although their ideas will likely never be accepted by most people. Granted, many are psychopaths and do very bad things. But every once in a while you meet one who you realize is not so different from you. The gangsters know the system is rigged by those in power, and they form their own power base to deal with it. They reject society’s rules, and they see the people as sheep who are too weak to break free as they have. They believe sheep can be sheared, and what they do is more honest and less corrupt than what the politicians do. They may be right. On the other hand, corrupt politicians who are often admired by society are some of the most odious people I have met—real scumbags. I have never found one for whom I could muster any respect.

I am ultimately not asked to judge, but to tell stories that contain the complexities of the truth. In the end, citizens and those in power will act, and drive the stories forward. Their stories are damn good, and I am glad to tell them.