

I want to thank you all for having me here. I live in Eastern Europe and It's always great to be in Amsterdam. It's like going back in time to an era where journalism was profitable and the news industry made money.

I want to congratulate this year's VVOJ finalists for their outstanding work. It's always heartening to come to an awards ceremony to see the best of a country's journalism on display. I think it helps us all reach a little deeper and do a little better on our stories.

I should warn you that some people consider my talks about journalism somewhat depressing. Because of that I've asked the venue to remove all sharp objects from the room before my talk and VVOJ has kindly provided grief counselors who are available after my speech in the back of the room.

But I do want to talk about something serious tonight. I want to talk about investigative journalism and where we are in 2018 and where we should be going over the next decade.

I also want to make a call for change.

I am going to make some predictions so let me preface my comments by saying, no matter how adamant I sound during this speech, I understand that whatever I say could turn out to be completely and totally wrong. It's happened many times in the past. I am an editor and that has made me adamant all the time. What I am trying to do, is make all of us think about how investigative reporting should change in the cataclysmic world we are living in. And maybe more about what it should be.

There is allegedly an old Chinese curse that says "May you be born in interesting times." This curse is wasted on journalists, who see interesting times less as a curse and more as a blessing. But we journalists are an odd bunch. We love interesting times and places. Who here would rather go to Pyongyang than Paris. Or choose Burundi over Brussels.

There is another old Chinese saying that the nail that sticks up will be pounded down. For journalists, that feels a little more appropriate.

In Eastern Europe, OCCRP is the nail that sticks up and we sometimes feel like we are pounded upon on a daily basis. In the mildest form, we are harassed by daily news stories by newspapers run by organized crime or government friendly oligarchs calling us spies, dilettantes, crime figures, and foreign mercenaries of the Soros army trying to undermine their glorious populist and nationalist governments at work in our region. We have more than a half-dozen lawsuits active against us. Governments are passing laws to make sure we cannot fund our partners in Russia, Hungary, Serbia and other places.

OCCRP has clearly been born in interesting times.

But in the more dire form, which seems to be becoming more common, it comes in attacks. Two weeks ago a journalist we were cooperating with in Slovakia was murdered. Jan Kuciak was a journalist all of us here would have loved. He was quiet man who preferred to listen rather than talk. But he never met a stack of public records or an online government database he did not like. He was a prolific filer of freedom of information requests to get what he needed for a story. We suspect the government gave one of his freedom of information requests to his targets and that led to his death. There was no other place they could have learned about what he was working on.

When his murder was announced most Slovaks did not know who he was. It's unlikely anyone here knew him either.

But he was one of us. Within hours of being told we were giving him access to the Panama Papers, he was on a bus to Prague to look through them. When he arrived, our editor noticed he not only forgot his toothbrush, but he didn't even bring spending money with him. He slept on the floor of our partners offices because he didn't have a hotel. To Jano, journalism was fun. He would have done it for free.

We need more Jano's – he was someone we really couldn't afford to lose.

We owed it to him to finish his work. We published two stories he was working on about the 'Ndrangheta mafia and their activities in Slovakia. But its not just a moral obligation to Jan – it's a survival tactic. We can't lose reporters so we need to discourage people who would kill us. When one journalist dies, we must replace him with 20 more. We must make it so painful that the people who would decide to kill us will back off for fear of being our latest two-year long project. As it is, we will now report on the 'Ndrangheta until those who he was reporting on are well understood.

The truth is, we are losing people left and right. Not from murder – thankfully that's still uncommon. But from declining add revenues in the media industry which has led to a lack of good reporting jobs and poor pay. Combine that with high stress and the inherent destructive nature of the job we all love, it's a recipe for burnout. You may not feel the poor state of the industry as badly here in the Netherlands, but you will. In truth, many of our problems in our industry are self-inflicted. The world is changing and we need to be changing too. But we haven't changed much or enough.

Marina Gorbis is a mentor of mine. She is director of the Institute for the Future in Silicon Valley. She says we are in a Guttenberg moment: a time of intense technological disruption much like the introduction of the printing press which, if you think about it, created our industry. The internet now threatens to destroy our industry or change it so fundamentally that we are unlikely to recognize it in a decade.

OCCRP is a manifestation of that change. We are the Uber of journalism – we have no reporters, just editors, researchers and technologists. But by borrowing reporters from partners, we produce and publish more investigative content than any organization on earth – more than 90 separate stories a year. Our stories were available to 11.8 billion people last year, giving us reach we could never dream of as a non-profit in the last generation.

But we are, as an industry, also stuck in the belief that news is event driven and two dimensional. We see news as waves that break on our news receptors like so many Trumpian tweets. And we often consign ourselves to reporting on the waves – because who doesn't like a really crazy tweet – but by focusing on the waves we miss the far more important tides that have changed our world.

What are the tides we have missed?

For one, we are in the midst of the largest transfer of wealth from the developing world to the developed world since the conquistadors sacked the cities of gold in the new world. Hundreds of billions of euros per month has been moving to London and Dubai and New York, often through Dutch shell companies. These are often funds stolen or looted from the public.

What we are missing is that this looting is a disaster for all of us. Stolen money means there is not enough disposable income in the system for entrepreneurs and businesses in Africa, Eurasia or Latin America. Access to capital is the engine of wealth creation. Instead developing world businesspersons end up with high priced loans and wealth creation is stunted. To countries like ours, we have the opposite problem: capital is so cheap it is used to kite huge debts and inflate our latest speculative bubble. Our city centers are inundated with high end real estate no one will ever live in, while most of the working people are relegated to increasingly farther flung suburbs where they can find affordable housing.

Against this massive tide of billions in stolen funds coming in, we send back millions in food aid just to keep people from starving.

Then we allow corrupt politicians and crime figures from places like Russia, China, Central Asia into our countries to buy western legitimacy, security, legal protection, good education for their children, land in our best neighborhoods and the other benefits of having a civil society. Meanwhile in their own countries, they are the architects of uncivil societies that jail journalists, fail to educate their masses and deprive their people of basic human rights. We are all complicit in this moral crime.

But this status quo poses a far greater danger for us. Opaque money is opaque power. These same countries and people are corrupting your politicians, supporting destructive nationalist and populist parties, funding racists, neo-Nazis and troublemakers that are undermining stability, the EU and democracy itself.

Another tidal force we have not seen is the move toward the plutocratization of our democracies. Money is now represented in our political systems rather than people. When it comes to activism, wealth is now the greatest predictor of whether change takes place – whether a law is changed, a candidate is elected or a grievance is settled. In the past decade in most democracies, campaign finance rules have been weakened, lobbying has grown in strength, the global criminal services industry has blossomed into a multi-billion global industry helping to perpetuate plutocracy. Increasingly our complicated political systems are under massive manipulation by monied interests.

That's why when 70 percent of the population in the United States want reasonable gun control laws, 70 percent of their representatives are against such laws. Other places where this plutocracy is evident is in tax laws which are slowly being rewritten to benefit corporations at the cost of the citizenry and the wealthy over the middle class. But you can also see it in Golden Visas where even one's inalienable birth right of citizenship is casually sold to people whose only qualification is they have enough money to buy a passport. And you can see it in the tolerance of offshore companies where those with money can do tax arbitrage to avoid paying taxes the rest of us must pay. Why do I pay more in taxes than many profitable international companies? This plutocratization has led to the highest disparity between the wealthy and the poor since the beginning of industrialization. The top 42 wealthiest people in the world hold the same wealth as half the people in the world.

Is this our fault as journalist?

Well, yeah, kind of.

We are not using the tools this Gutenberg moment has made available to us. Except for some small advances in data tools, investigative reporting is still being done the exact same way it was 100 years

ago – a bespoke, custom made research done by a specialist. Most investigative stories are still long, complex stories written for a narrow audience.

So how do we change it?

- 1) First, to capture the tide, we need to create a topographical map of the forces of money and power in our societies and help readers understand how this map work. If you were to map money and power in the Netherlands, you'd find it hasn't really changed all that much since last year. Or five years ago. Or a decade ago.
- 2) Money and power is pretty constant and yet how that money and power changes the world is effectively hidden in thousands of news stories. So let's redefine what constitutes a news story and help people by building tools that help them understand their world. This map could become the vital context that could be provided for every proposed tax change, tender or law.
- 3) Then let's make our stories interactive. We all have terabytes of data but we don't use it. Why don't we give readers or viewers that data in an interactive database embedded in our stories? Why not allow them to see the data geographically? As a timeline? As a social or financial network map? Or all of these?
- 4) Then, lets integrate the information we collect into people's lives so it's easier for them to use our findings. Maybe you can have your coders program an overlay to TripAdvisor or Google maps so that when your readers go to book a hotel, they can tell if that hotel is owned by a politician or an organized crime figure. That allows your readers to make a decision – do I want to give my money to organized crime or do I want to give it to a legitimate businessman or woman? Or when a new contract is given out, your website will allow readers to explore the connections between the people who run the agency and the people who won the contract.

There is another tidal force we are witnessing. I know you don't want to hear it but privacy is dead – at least your privacy is dead to people with money and power including big businesses and governments. We have a company that provides us free satellite photos. They told me the other day they will, within five years, be able to provide us high resolution, 24-hour a day satellite video surveillance of every single spot on earth.

That's scary. It's going to happen and there is nothing you can do about it. But unless you have a deal like we have, or a lot of money, you're not going to get it. But rest assured that governments and people with lots of money will have access to it.

This is one of the aspects of the future – the automated collection of data. If you think about it, Facebook's success was convincing people to willingly give up their social networks, their interests and their intimate details to a nameless company. More startups will start doing this in other ways. And so will we. Think about it. You can mount your own sensors around town and capture peoples license plates, phone locations, faces, whatever.

And when we get to 4-D printing, where we are printing circuitry into everything we print, your unique heat signature will be captured by the very walls of your home. Governments or businesses will know where most people on earth will be and what they are doing. In the Internet of Things, every device on earth becomes an information sensor, from your coffee pot to your pacemaker. And judging from our experience, if governments can use it, they will.

Governments will have this data. Wealthy businesses will have this data. The public will not. And that is what I find scary. If we could put the genie back into the bottle, most of us would. But that is not going to happen. So we need to prepare.

We are working on building a knowledge management system that will allow journalists and the public to have access to data that will help them understand how the world works and who controls their lives. OCCRP has collected 13 terabytes of data – some of it unique. We will make it available to journalists and those seeking to do public good. By using machine learning tools and artificial intelligence, the next big revolution, we will create models of corruption and our knowledge management system will alert us when it finds data that matches these models.

This is aggressive. In the end, this is an arms race. As we get better at working with data, government will shut off data. They we will learn to collect our own data and the governments will seek to control that.

I know this may make some of you uncomfortable. It scares me too. But it's the world we will live in and we need to find ways to report ethically and accurately in this new world. Let's embrace it and use it for opportunities to do good.

In the end, our job is to watch over power. That means that we have to be at least as good as those in power but without the resources. It's a hard task. But we need to starting thinking BIG right away.

We have had a slow start but we have one significant advantage. We can have the support of the people – the citizens of our country. REAL investigative reporting is still trusted and supported by the people. Journalism itself has lost many of them in the past few decades. We've been out of touch. But investigative reporting will get them back. What we need to do is dive deeply back into the heart of humanity and bring the people into our journalism. We need to create what I call the "Journalism Commons" where citizens and journalists reside side-by-side working to help each other. If we do that, I believe they will keep up from misusing these tools and we will always have their support – financial, moral and political.

And that's all we need.

I am just sorry Jan is not here to participate. He would have been damn good at all those databases and all those records.

Thank you.

Drew Sullivan, Amsterdam, April 6