GLOBAL INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM CONFERENCE

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Tipsheet: *Cross-border undercover investigations to expose attacks to women and LGTBQ people*

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Introduction to the Topic (2-3 sentences)

Coordinated cross-border and well-planned undercover reporting has been a valuable, though not unique, tool for our team to understand and reveal the scale and reach of global campaigns against equal rights for women and LGBTQ people.

We relied on going undercover when we found it a last resort to confirm our suspicions on wrongdoing at a global or international scale in cases of campaigns of deception and misinformation by anti-abortion groups (known as “crisis pregnancy centres” or CPCs); and the provision and promotion of harmful so-called “conversion therapies” by anti-LGBTQ organisations which aim to “correct” or “cure” the gender identity or sexual orientation of queer people.

In both cases, these activities or campaigns originated in the US, by organisations and individuals well-known for their conservative Christian beliefs; and we were able to track down and reveal how these organisations inspired, provided support (including financial) to affiliated groups in four continents.

The key tool was the undercover work of our journalists posing as potential target/víctims/clients of these “services” (CPCs or “conversion therapies”).

List of Reporting Tips:

- Details of the methods and techniques you used to report your stories:

To learn and understand the cross-border connection we used: a) follow-the-money techniques, analysing financial filings (990 forms) disclosed to the US internal Revenue Service; b) desk and social media research.

A pilot phase of undercover reporting in a small number of countries to collect the first round of evidence and gauge our collecting capability.

Assemble a team with staff journalists and freelancers; be strategic in both the selection of countries and personal profiles the reporters could pick to pose as potential targets of these activities.

Pre-reporting, including common forms which every reporter had to fill, from the legal background in their country to the most specific details of the background and site where reporting would take place.

Undercover reporting conducted in several countries simultaneously, or within weeks, by journalists who previously prepared their cover stories - including their online presence.

Recording of all the conversations, interviews, sessions or interactions between the undercover reporters and the people they encountered in their assignment. When possible, pictures and some video.

Analysis and curation of their findings (as briefed in the forms mentioned above), fact-checking of audios and other materials.

- What kinds of documents, data and sources did you use? How did you find them?

Detailed transcriptions of our undercover reporters;
US IRS 990 forms, publicly available.
Annual reports published by the targeted organisations (generally available on their websites or some special publications).
Online directories, maps and phone numbers.
Online training and/or other related materials by the targeted organisations. In the case of the anti-abortion misinformation scheme, we gained access to this content by sending two reporters posing as anti-abortion young people willing to volunteer and who were able to take the training course online.
Rosters or online platforms of mental health staff promoted by organisations that provide “conversion therapy”.
Interviews with experts in the field (for example, abortion and “crisis pregnancy centres”, mental health and LGBTQ issues; human rights lawyers, health and patients rights advocates);

Testimonies of survivors when available.

- Lessons learned, what would you recommend to journalists doing a similar project?

Full reading and analysis of what has been previously published.

Examples/Case Studies of investigative stories (if relevant)

Assorted CPCs pieces:
https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/trump-linked-religious-extremists-global-disinformation-pregnant-women/

https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/revealed-us-linked-anti-abortion-centres-lie-and-scare-women-across-latin-america/

https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/inside-italian-public-hospitals-i-saw-how-a-us-linked-anti-abortion-network-is-humiliating-women/

https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/you-could-die-and-turn-your-husband-gay-how-i-learned-to-talk-women-out-of-legal-abortions/

https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/ecuador-and-costa-rica-promise-to-probe-us-backed-crisis-pregnancy-centres/

https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/revealed-us-linked-anti-abortion-centres-violating-the-law-in-south-africa/

“Conversion therapy” investigations:

https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/us-christian-right-conversion-therapy-despite-bans/

https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/therapists-costa-ricans-homosexuality-wrong/

https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/psychologists-investigated-conversion-therapy-costa-rica/

https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/homosexuality-distortion-caused-by-satan/

https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/give-up-sex-priest-and-psychologist-lgbtq-guatemala/

Further Reading/Resources

Additional Information