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Palm Papers

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Rookie Investigative Reporter's Notebook

I changed careers to journalism because of my love for writing and storytelling. I wanted to tell stories that empowered communities with truth and that held the powerful accountable. From my first published story about the [43 disappeared student-teachers in Ayotzinapa](#) in Mexico to detailing how the [LGBTQ community navigates Israel and the West Bank](#), I realized quickly that I needed more than a passion for storytelling. I needed investigative tools and cross-border collaboration, and that is exactly what I committed to for my capstone in my final semester at CUNY Graduate School of Journalism.

Back in September of 2017, the [Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project](#) (OCCRP) secretly obtained a dataset of property owners for the Palm Islands, the elite high-end artificial islands on the coast of Dubai. I became one of the journalists from 60 different journalism organizations from 60 different countries, that was entrusted to background each individual and company based in 173 countries.

The task? To dig up any leads of corruption, money laundering and criminal acts to find just exactly *who* can afford to be - and *how* they can afford to be - Palm Island property owners. I, along with two of my CUNY colleagues, was assigned two different lists: a list of approximately 900 individuals and companies affiliated with the United States; and, a list of approximately 700 individuals and companies affiliated with Canada.

Cross-border investigative journalism is critical. But it is not without its challenges. Detailed below is my methodology and lessons learned over the past five months.

Do maintain secure and consistent cross-border and internal newsroom communication.
By October, I was shared a Google folder with both datasets. Though at this time I did not know much context. I was aware it was a list of real estate properties and owners in Dubai, but that was about it. It was not until November that I learned the properties were linked to the posh Palm Island real estate. My professor, Andy Lehren, told us via email: "And for now you are sworn to secrecy" in bold, underlined font.

If you think about the hundreds of journalists who worked on the Panama Papers not knowing the source of the leaked documents, this is not uncommon. I think part of international collaborative investigations is trusting the process and utilizing the resources and context you have, even if limited. Of course, for this to succeed necessitates working with trustworthy professional journalists who have a proven track record.

It can be hard enough to get your message across to someone in the same room as you, so communicating across borders with different time zones is tough. Our OCCRP contact was based in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, which is six hours ahead of New York. Coordinating between four busy journalists - three of us in graduate school - and one busy editor, meant that it could take us a month of emailing back and forth just to schedule one thirty-minute video call. But making time for those video or phone conversations, is important. It helps clarify context and resolves issues, and ultimately push the investigation forward.

Just as important is the internal newsroom communication. My two colleagues and I would email or text to alert each other of good finds, or companies to lookout for. We shared our weekly story memos with both our professors and each other. With a mostly cross-border

project, it was nice to have colleagues to sit down with in-person to brainstorm and problem-solve with.

But communication must be secure. For example, we used Jitsi, a secure open-source video call service, for our video call. OCCRP also had an additional - even more sensitive and secretive - dataset to share with us, that could not be sent simply through Google Drive. So, my colleague helped me PGPify ("Pretty Good Privacy") my email, or encrypting and protecting messages via FlowCrypt.

Don't get enchanted by mysterious data: Clean...then find the needle in the haystack.
My colleagues and I were eager to get started. We started backgrounding the names one by one. But about a month into reporting, we realized our mistake. The dataset was full of duplicates. We knew this to a certain extent since we saw some names were listed more than once sequentially. But we made the inaccurate assumption (never make assumptions with data!) that the dataset was already sorted and those were the *only* duplicates. A simple "sort" of the data could have done the trick, except that some names appeared more than once with variations. We realized that we had been duplicating each other's work and swiftly searched for a remedy.

First, we did the old-fashioned "Control-Find" and labeled each person we had backgrounded. But that wasted time that we did not have. We tried, albeit unsuccessfully, joining our dataset with the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) sanctions list. Then we used an imperfect-but-better-than-nothing pivot table that pulled out the unique names. After not finding any other solution, we decided this was the cleanest dataset we had. We divided up the new list and continued to push through backgrounding.

Our professor, Ben Lesser, had warned us to always clean the data first. It is easy to get excited by a secret dataset and completely forget your common sense. Moving forward, I will always follow Lesser's steps: identify what is in the spreadsheet; figure out what each column, row and the language means; create a key and verify with your source; and finally, get information on the methodology of data collection.

With an anonymous dataset, all these steps may not always be possible. But before you get too deep into the data assessment, these are the priorities.

Don't let the details derail. Tell a story.
Of course, the details are important. But when you have hundreds to thousands of names to background in a limited time window, then getting bogged down in the details can push you off track. I learned this the hard way. I thought - and I think my colleagues did too - that the more time we spent backgrounding each person, the more likely we were to find the dirt. But this kind of mentality slowed our progress down. Lehren continued to stress that we were finding the needles in the haystack; that such a small percentage of this dataset would actually *be* a story. Yet I continued to fret over missing the story.

It took me a month to work out a methodology that worked for me. I had my list of names and for each one I searched - no more than 10 minutes per person - Google, Pipl and Spokeo, the OFAC sanctions list, LexisNexis clip search and LinkedIn. I would also search each person's affiliated email address and company. I would detail my findings in my weekly memos. The truth is it is not too difficult to know when it is time to move on, or when it is time to pause and dig deeper.

Once I found my prospective money launderers or corrupt individuals, I started reporting out. I did a more extensive clip search, used the Public Access to Court Electronic Records (PACER) to look up court cases and started making calls to potential sources. But I easily found myself distracted by the details again. I found myself reading case dockets about federal healthcare fraud to disputes between federal military contracts abroad and wondering, "What is the connection to money laundering?" Or, "What does this have to do with the Palm Islands?" Or, essentially: "What is the story?" I was so lost in the details that I could not even decipher if I had a story or not.

This is when the guidance of an editor is key. They help pull you out from the detail-haze and look at the big picture. Someone convicted of federal healthcare fraud fled the United States! Someone else who led a company with suspect business practices has made enough money off government (military!) contracts to buy property in Palm Islands! These are the stories.

The details are important, but make sure to zoom out to critically think about the story: what is the narrative and the chronology; who are the characters; and most importantly, what and who was harmed by these actions.

The Panama Papers in 2016 changed the game of investigative journalism. Hundreds of journalists in over 70 countries reported out stories of offshore entities discreetly for over a year. Charles Lewis, the founder of Center for Public Integrity and the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, said the future of journalism is, "collaboration, collaboration, collaboration." I believe that indeed is the case. I hope that as more international investigative projects are embarked on, that us journalists continue to get better at cross-border collaboration. I believe much is at stake, if we do not.

I am humbled to have been part of the international investigation so early in my career. I will not be careless with my lessons learned. Please check out my findings from this investigation and read OCCRP's coverage.

Palm Papers

In Sept. 2017, the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) secretly obtained a dataset of property owners of the Palm Islands, the elite high-end artificial islands on the coast of Dubai.

Palm Islands join a host of other artificial archipelagos, like The World and The Universe, in the Persian Gulf along 42 miles of the Dubai Coast. Three separate groups of floating islands make up Palm Islands: Palm Jebel Ali, Palm Jumeirah and Deira Islands. The artificial islands, consisting of multi-million dollar residential and entertainment developments, add over 300 miles to Dubai's coastline of mostly private beaches.

"Where vision inspires humanity," is the slogan of Nakheel, one of the world's largest real estate developers and the lead developer of Dubai's waterfront including the Palm Islands project and The World floating islands.

Dubai is preparing to host the World Expo 2020, the first to do so in the Middle East. Currently there are 16 hospitality development projects in the works, reports The National. Nakheel also

partnered with the government of Dubai for "Brand Dubai," a beautification project for the city, according to Construction Week Online. Around the world, 27,000 investors have spent 110 billion AED on Nakheel's properties since its first sale in 2002, reported Dubai Government Media Office. Nakheel reported a record year of 1.1 billion dollars in net profit in 2017, a hike from the previous year, and at least 2 billion dollars of construction contracts awarded to the company.

But the waterfront properties have had their share of setbacks from the economic crisis to sustainability issues, allegations of infringement on construction workers' rights and environmental concerns.

Jan deRoos, Ph.D., Professor of Hotel Finance and Real Estate at Cornell University and former board member of Jumeirah Hotels in Dubai, said that some buildings are dealing with subsidence, or sinking, and that the human-made islands have disrupted the local ecology by changing the water circulation.

With over 250 planned communities on Dubai's waterfront, OCCRP embarked on a year-long investigation of who were these individuals that could afford the posh and pricey real estate. While most fall into the uber-rich category, some also have corrupt to criminal backgrounds leading to questions such as if the Palm Islands are truly a real-estate paradise, or instead a refuge for the crooked.

Dubai is no stranger to money laundering. In 2010, The New York Times reported that it was vulnerable to money laundering for its free trade zones and that money laundering was embedded into its informal economy. Perhaps regulations are starting to tighten. Starting on Jan. 1 of this year, the United Arab Emirates imposed its first tax in the region. Still, real estate can be a prime vulnerability to converting funds.

"In principle, real estate agents are required to follow anti-money laundering procedures and effectively know their customers," Edwin Truman, senior fellow with the Peterson Institute for International Economics, said.

Truman warns that in some jurisdictions, it can be easy to violate these regulations.

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Fraud Ex-Con in Palm Islands
The Federal Bureau of Investigation and a criminal case found that Adnan Khamis Abuzanat, a local Minnesota business owner, was involved in a healthcare fraud scheme from 2000 through 2004. Abuzanat defrauded the state healthcare system, Minnesota Care (MNCare), and the state of Minnesota 120,000 dollars.

FBI agent, Timothy Bisswurm, helped lead an investigation of Abuzanat and his businesses: Frogtown Meat and Groceries and Dayton Bluff APW Meats and Groceries, in St. Paul, Minnesota. Evidence, including audio and video footage, showed that Abuzanat falsified documents to get medical benefits from MNCare, which is a federally subsidized healthcare program for people who do not qualify for Medicaid. From 2003 through 2004, Abuzanat illegally earned 16,000 dollars in benefits from MNCare.

Abuzanat also showed other signs of questionable character. He allegedly told his employees not to charge sales tax on taxable items and to change the price of non-taxable items. He also took out 400 dollars a day from the cash register and never documented this on his tax returns.

Abuzanat under-reported his income and did not report all his assets, or that he was self-employed. The FBI found that in reality, Abuzanat had over a million dollars in multiple bank accounts.

In 2005, Abuzanat plead guilty to conspiracy to commit mail fraud and health care fraud. The court sentenced Abuzanat to one year and one day in prison and three years of supervised release following that. Abuzanat was also ordered to pay 121,935 dollars in restitution.

A year after pleading guilty, Abuzanat filed a habeas corpus petition to end his supervised released sooner than the three years sentenced.

Defense and prosecution attorneys were not immediately available for comment.

Abuzanat owns the Address Dubai Marina hotel property, labeled as a high-end luxury hotel.

U.S. Tax Dollars Potentially Diverted to Real Estate in Dubai
Mazin Khalid Sadiq is the former CEO of United Infrastructure Projects (UIP), a global construction contractor registered and based out of Dubai, UAE. The company has partnered with U.S. agencies to build a military training center in Kabul, Afghanistan and partnered with the U.S. Corps of Engineers for counter narcotics projects across Afghanistan. UIP has also partnered with USAID, World Bank, among other agencies.

However, UIP has been tied to irregularities with its military contracts. Even Palm Islands' developer, Nakheel, grappled with its own legal battles over its former CEO's breach of contract and pocketing of funds. However, Sadiq's company went up against Department of Defense contractor, Gilbane Federal, in a civil court case.

Gilbane won a prime contract with the U.S. Navy to upgrade power plants at Camp Lemonnier in the Republic of Djibouti, Africa. UIP was subcontracted by Gilbane for a little over 11 million dollars to complete the project within the year, by the end of 2014.

After significant delays and other breaches of the subcontract, on Jun. 12, 2014 Gilbane sent a warning letter to UIP requiring a response within 10 days. But in the final hours, prior to the full tenth day, Gilbane sent notice of termination. UIP sent its response just minutes after getting this message from Gilbane.

Gilbane later filed a lawsuit for seven million dollars against UIP that resulted in a nearly four-year-long courtroom battle. UIP's sister companies, UIP Lebanon and UIP Djibouti, also became entangled. Gilbane alleged that UIP Djibouti filed a lawsuit in Djibouti, but they denied this. UIP Lebanon had filed a lawsuit against both Gilbane and UIP (the Dubai-based company, in question), but both suits were eventually dropped.

The court found that UIP was at fault for the project's delays, but not guilty of oppression, fraud or malice. The court also determined that Gilbane could not recover all its losses since some had already been paid by the Bank of Beirut. Additionally, the court found that UIP Lebanon and UIP Djibouti had violated the contract.

On Aug. 11, 2017, the court ordered UIP to pay Gilbane 8,328,784 dollars and for UIP Lebanon to pay Gilbane 73,722.80 dollars.

The case attorneys were not immediately available for comment.

Sadiq owns at least three properties and one plot at the Al Sahab and at least one property within The Meadows Community, owned by Emaar Properties.

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There were a number of other Palm Islands' property owners, affiliated with the U.S. and Canada, with history of corruption. Out of every 100 names examined, one to three raised questions since they were charged with fraud, faced allegations of business or US contract irregularities or were affiliated with federally sanctioned companies. At least 15 property owners are on the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) sanctions list.

A Staten Island pharmacist, Nasir Yousuf Gore, had his license suspended in 1997 for unlawful dispensing. An ophthalmologist in Connecticut, Nauman Alam Chaudry, is listed as the top biller for Medicare in the state earning five million dollars. Chaudry was also arrested for shoplifting at a local retail store. Noorullah Delawari served as the former senior advisor to ex-president of Afghanistan advising on banking and the private sector. Delawari also served as Governor of the International Monetary Fund in Afghanistan. In 2011, he was arrested for corruption but was released at Karzai's request.

All three of these individuals own property on the ritzy Dubai waterfront.

In 2009, criminals around the world laundered 1.6 trillion dollars making up nearly 3 percent of the global GDP, reported the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. This money helps to fund illicit activities like drug trafficking, terrorism and other crimes.

This is an ongoing international investigation with OCCRP.