

A glimpse into the work and life of Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative journalist Mar Cabra

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On April 8, 2024, eight years after the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) and over 100 media partners worldwide broke the tax evasion exposé known as “The Panama Papers,” a landmark money-laundering trial linked to the revelations began in a Panamanian criminal court. Twenty-seven people faced charges, including Jürgen Mossack and Ramón Fonseca Mora, the founders of the now-defunct law firm Mossack & Fonseca, which was at the heart of the scandal.

The 2016 Panama Papers investigation, built on a massive leak of more than 11.5 million financial and legal records, remains one of the most significant cross-border journalistic collaborations in history. It has become synonymous with financial misconduct and political corruption, shedding light on a system that facilitates crime, bribery, and wrongdoing, all concealed by secretive offshore companies. The investigation exposed the offshore financial secrets of world leaders and other powerful public figures and sparked protests, government investigations, and even the resignation of Iceland’s prime minister.

Mar Cabra, an investigative journalist and former head of the Data & Research Unit at the ICIJ, shared her experiences at the Understanding Media seminar at UW/H during the summer semester of 2023. She discussed the challenges of transnational investigative journalism and the immense pressure she and her colleagues faced. Her team had previously set up the technical infrastructure for groundbreaking investigations like “Offshore Leaks”, “Lux Leaks” and “Swiss Leaks” making the Panama Papers documents accessible and searchable for journalists globally.

In 2017, Cabra’s work on the Panama Papers earned her the Pulitzer Prize. However, in the seminar, she revealed the immense toll that the investigation took on her well-being. She spoke candidly about the constant pressure and fear that she and many of her investigative colleagues endure as they work to expose societal injustices and hold perpetrators accountable. The strain of the workload, the high demands for secrecy, and the ever-present danger from concrete threats created an environment of intense stress. Cabra also highlighted the widespread issue of underfunding in investigative journalism and the pressing need for support and financial backing for independent investigations.

The grueling demands of the Panama Papers investigation eventually led to Cabra’s burnout, forcing her to leave journalism shortly after receiving the Pulitzer Prize. During her recovery, she co-founded **The Self-Investigation**, an organization dedicated to promoting healthier work practices in newsrooms around the world. The organization addresses the mental health challenges faced by journalists under intense pressure.

A sobering conclusion to this chapter: On September 28, 2024, all 28 individuals charged with money laundering in connection with the Panama Papers scandal (of whom Ramón Fonseca died on 8 May 2024 at the age of 71) were acquitted, bringing the case to a close. This outcome underscores the ongoing complexities and challenges faced by those who strive to hold power to account in the pursuit of truth and justice.



→ Learn more about the Panama Papers investigations and the money laundering trial on these ICIJ Web-sites.



→ Listen to Mar Cabra talking about the challenges of working across borders and in countries that lack transparency, as in her native Spain.



→ The Self Investigation



BURNING PRESSURE