

Global Journalist: How a Sports Reporter Challenged Romania's Oligarchy

Abstract: In 2015, victims of a fire in a Romanian nightclub began to dying of infections in hospitals where they were being treated for their burns. Sports reporter Catalin Tolontan and his team investigated the government-run health care system to discover corruption, dark money and cover-ups. This program features interviews with Tolontan, the director of a documentary film about his investigation and two journalism professors who discuss the future of investigative journalism.

Hosts: [Kassidy Arena](#) and [Tawnie Wilson](#)

Guests:

- [Alexander Nanau](#)
- [Catalin Tolontan](#)
- [Damon Kiesow](#)
- [Mark Horvit](#)

Translator: [Dima Stoianov](#)

Producers: [Samantha Waigand](#) and [Minna Tian](#)

Executive Producer/Director: [Kathy Kiely](#)

Mentioned: Catalin Tolontan, investigative journalism, journalist, investigation, sports reporter, Romania, public health, public information, government

Kassidy Arena: Welcome to Global Journalist. A program for journalists, by journalists and about journalists and the people who depend on our work. It's produced by the Missouri School of Journalism in collaboration with the Reynolds Journalism Institute and K-B-I-A, mid-Missouri's public radio. I'm Kassidy Arena.

Tawnie Wilson: And I'm Tawnie Wilson. In this episode, we're talking about public health and the role investigative reporting can play in protecting it.

KA: We'll be hearing about and from Catalin Tolontan, a sports reporter —

TW: Like, someone who reports on sports did this.

KA: Whose investigative reporting exposed the corruption that literally cost lives in his native Romania. Before we hear from him though, we'll talk to a filmmaker who made a documentary about the scandal and Tolontan's role in exposing it. Alexander Nanau visited the studios of KBIA during the 2020 True/False film festival, where his movie drew big crowds and strong responses. The three showings of the movie at True/False were sponsored by MU's Kinder Institute on Constitutional Democracy. That says a lot about the watchdog journalism's role in preserving the health of democratic systems.

TW: And speaking of health, this podcast was produced during the COVID-19 pandemic. So if we sound a little different than usual, it's because many of our interviews had to be conducted over the videoconferencing tool Zoom..

Part 1: Interview with Director

[sounds from the movie/chanting]

KA: The protesting Romanians are shouting applause for the journalists who uncovered this story, along with the last name of a famous journalist: Catalin Tolontan.

Alexander Nanau: "It starts from a fire that erupted in a club in Bucharest at the end of 2015."

KA That's Alexander Nanau. He's the movie director who made a documentary film about an investigative journalist uncovering the wrongdoings in the Romanian healthcare system. It's called Collective.

Nanau: "So our movie starts actually after the fire when 37 people started dying in hospitals that were not supposed to die, and it was what we call now a kind of a 'Romanian Chernobyl' because the Romanian authorities manipulated and lied to the whole nation that they can treat burn patients, although Romania had no possibilities to treat burn patients, and they refused to fly out these burn patients."

TW Nanau says there were around 180 burn victims who could not fly out of the country for treatment. They began to die from infection and the onset of bacteria due to poor health care. Kathy Kiely, the Lee Hills chair in Free Press Studies at the Missouri School of Journalism, interviewed him in the studios of KBIA while he was at True/False.

Kiely: “So the scandal here was, or at least the scandal that your movie is about is not the fire itself, but the aftermath.”

Nanau: “Right. It's about the aftermath and about how journalists, investigative journalists, really uncover all the lies and manipulation of the healthcare system.”

Kiely: “So is there a hero?”

[music]

TW: Nanau says he's not a journalist. He's a storyteller who's curious about the way journalists do things, and how we do them. He says he's not the superhero here, he just observed the risks reporters take to help people know the truth. One of the main heroes in Nanau's movie was actually the investigative journalist who covered the story.

Nanau: “Um, it's, as a matter of fact, actually the journalists that should have taken care of the healthcare system failed. In Romania after the fire, they were not able to disclose the manipulation. And it was a team around Catalin Tolontan, from a sports newspaper. It was the Sports Gazette. And Catalin Tolontan and his team Mirella Lanag, and Razvan Lutac, who was 21 at a time I think.”

KA: A sports reporter. It sounds crazy, we know. But Nanau said the journalists who might have been expected to jump on this story didn't because they were in the pay of Romanian oligarchs who are part of the corrupt social structure.

Nanau: many journalists work for media outlets that belong to moguls that are quite close to the power.

KA: It's enough to make any journalist paranoid and Catalin Tolontan's team was. At first, they suspected Nanau of being a spy.

[music]

Nanau: “Funnily enough, they even thought — I just saw an interview that was given by Mira Lanag, the woman journalist in Catalin's team. And she said, you know, in the beginning, we were laughing because we thought, 'Man, the Secret Service got really interesting ways of infiltrating, you know, different fields like sending out a director, that's new.’”

[music]

TW: While they may not be the Secret Service, journalists do share similar traits. They dig into information to uncover the truth.

Nanau: “ I wanted to really understand what it means. What the journalistic work means. From the moment the journalist gets the information to the, you know, to the, when he starts checking on information when he meets whistleblowers at night, or in secret. So I wanted to just understand the whole process of how a journalist gets the information until the moment he puts it in to text and it gets printed on paper. And that's what I tried to do as the film, to really make it clear for viewer what a complex process that is, and also, what a big what a big risk — a responsibility lies actually on the shoulders of a journalist when he gets an information. It's so heavy and so important for a whole society.

KA: But sometimes Nanau talked about how that integral role in society, ironically, can actually be pretty dangerous to perform.

Kiely: Do you feel the journalists you depicted are in any danger?

Alexander Nanau

Um, they are but in the same way, I mean, they are, let's say there are threats like a car accelerating too fast next to the kids or, you know, things like that, or cars following them trying to intimidate them. But I think as I said, it's still a European Union country. And we are not living times like in Russia where I mean, in Russia, as we know, a filmmaker like me would be in jail. . . . But it's not Russia, fortunately. Not yet. And I think in the European Union, we can still, you know, do our job and tell stories, filmmakers and journalists without being menaced.

Kiely

Do you feel that could change?

Alexander Nanau

The world we're living in is very — it changes very fast. And the fact that our democracies are all taken over by populists that every time give the signal out to everybody that anything is allowed. That law is not something we have to abide to. Uh, I think that yes, it can change and all our lives are threatened in a way by, by leaders, let's say, or governments that you know, give out the signal that law is not something — our you know, we have to follow. And if you know how and if you're powerful anything is allowed. And that's something we feel in a lot of liberal democracies.

Kiely

You call the movie Collective. Why did you call it that?

Alexander Nanau

It was a very strange coincidence that the club that burned down was called Collective. And for us the title, we also write it with a with a small C in Romania, which means the collective. It's not a name. But the collective.

...

Alexander Nanau

Yeah, it's us. It's all Yeah, well, we're all in it together, in a way. It's whether we take our community or society in our own hands and confront the power that is trying to destroy it. Or we're doomed you know, yeah.

[music]

Part 2: Interview with Journalist

Introduction:

KA: Thanks for listening to this special episode of Global Journalist. I'm Cassidy Arena here with Tawnie Wilson. We're about to talk to producer Sam Waigand about her interview with investigative journalist Catalin Tolontan. Sam interviewed Catalin over Zoom while she and I were in Columbia, Missouri. Catalin was in Romania and our interpreter was in Moldova.

[nat sound from interview]

TW: Catalin can speak some English, but we thought we'd be able to get a better interview with the help from Dima Stoianov, our translator, who is also an investigative journalist. Dima spent part of last year at Mizzou and part at the newsroom of Pro Publica, in New York City, on an Alfred Friendly Fellowship. He was pretty excited when we told him about this episode:

Dima: "He's not just a journalist, he's a super star of Romanian sports media actually."

TW: Here's Sam and Cassidy with the highlights of the interview.

Kassidy Arena

So Sam, what was Catalin's first impression of Alexander Nanau?

Samantha Waigand

Well when Catalin was first approached by Alexander Nanau and his team, he thought they were crazy. He was very skeptical and thought it would be insane to bring cameras and microphones and everything into his work.

Tolontan

This is impossible. But after some weeks we were thinking... about their proposal... I am an old guy in journalist terms. I am in a print newspaper and our work is accessible to some generations but it is not so appealing to younger generations..

Samantha cont,

But after some consideration, Catalin thought that the documentary would help engage people more broadly. And it worked. Catalin went from receiving 40 tips a day to more than 100 after the film aired in Romania.

He says the film was excellent and much needed. However, he describes Alexander as an artist, rather than a journalist, which is an important distinction.

Tolontan: "If you are a journalist, your target, your goal is not to change the world. If you are a journalist, you are not involved in a political movement. Even if you are against...you have a duty to remain in between."

Kassidy Arena

What was your first impression of Catalin?

Samantha Waigand

He's a surprising character. You know, he's won 10 Journalist of The Year awards in the past 12 years, which might get to the head of any journalist. But fame didn't seem to influence his work at all. In fact, he described fame and popularity as the antithesis of his motivation. He said that ego is what destroys journalists.

Kassidy Arena

So a journalist's own ego is one of the biggest risks that he or she faces, but were there any other risks that Catalin talked about with you?

Samantha Waigand

So Romania's communist period ended in 1989. However, the country has been plagued by corruption and revolving door governments despite their becoming a representative in democratic republic. Catalin says that dark money and power and even the mob are in the center of Romanian sports because there's so much public money there. And when you go poking around in those areas, he said it's normal to operate under government pressure, especially when the government finds themselves at the wrong side of the story. But the number one obstacle to investigation is fear of opposition. And in a country that's so polarized by politics, it's important that you stay dedicated to the public and unbiased, otherwise, you're just working for popularity sake.

Tolontan: "This is a public information. And the public information means literally it's not our information. We only found it. We are not the owner of the information. And because we are not the owner, we have to give it back to the original owner. And the original owner is the public. So simple."

Samantha Waigand

Certain news outlets can be an echo chamber of ideas. And depending on your personal beliefs, you might watch CNN or Fox, but Catalin said the advantage of being

a sports journalist is that they have an unpolarized audience base. You know, everyone watches ESPN, regardless of which other news outlets they go to for information.

Tolontan: "If you are a sports newspaper, your public is not so cynical. You have trust and engagement with the public and you are perceived like a nonpartisan newspaper which is a huge advantage..."

Kassidy Arena

And so with balancing all of those things that you just talked about how on earth did he make sure that all of this information was actually factual and there was nobody just pulling his leg or trying to lie to him?

Samantha Waigand

He said there was a lot of doubt, sources would give them contradictory information. But in interviews, he would have people explain their answers as though they were fourth graders. And that kind of breaks down to complex ideas and allows for greater transparency. You'll know if you ever tried to explain something to a child, it's very easy to lead on more than you're supposed to. And then you fall back on the old "Because I said so". But that just wouldn't hold up so they knew where to keep looking. There were some internal debates though, within his team that questioned what information they use and when they should use it. So finding a balance between getting public information they needed to know and maintaining its accuracy is difficult to find. Especially when the stakes were so high in this investigation.

Kassidy Arena

And I would just imagine I'm just spitballing here, but I'm pretty sure some people weren't very happy with what Catalin's team was doing in the investigation. What happened in that sense?

Samantha Waigand

Well, political polarization is common in many countries, especially in a country with as much political turmoil as Romania. So when Romania's government found themselves at the wrong side of this investigation, there were a lot of supporters that were quite angry of how the government was being portrayed. Catalin said threats are normal and within anonymity of the internet, it can happen often. However, the biggest threat to journalism isn't what's written online. But how what is written influences his work. It's easy to write things that people want to read, but it's much harder to do it when people keep telling you not to. In that respect, I guess Catalin said it's important to maintain an

objective field of vision with social media. So, an investigative journalism you simply can't be popular with everyone, otherwise you wouldn't be investigating much.

Kassidy Arena

So that's kind of what Nanau's film really captured it. It increased the attention on Catalin and his team. But what did the film do for overall investigative journalism?

Samantha Waigand

The beautiful thing about documentaries is it's a synopsis of events. Catalin's investigation took years and incorporated hundreds if not thousands of detailed reports. But the documentary takes a reflective approach and really decisively points to the importance of investigation. It points to government transparency, public health, institutional injustice, which are all matters that can be understood on a much wider scale than just the diluted disinfectant and Romanian hospitals. And in the world that's all sharing in the fear of the Coronavirus, Catalin believes everyone should be feeling a similar degree of concern regarding the state of the healthcare system.

Kassidy Arena

So we'll talk about how Catalin's team actually changed themselves in a second. But what did Catalin have to say about just the future of journalism in general? Where did he see it going?

Samantha Waigand

Catalin says he believes the future of journalism relies on having a representative and diverse coverage. The world we live in today has become so globalized that we need to respect and understand that any action can have implications for so many other people. And we need the field of journalism to have a collection of diverse voices to hear from. He said that he believes that a big problem that we need to face is the salary for a journalist. For my peers and I, a low salary is something that we're willing to settle with because we have our love for the job. But it's populations of people that can't afford to settle that need to be heard most.

Kassidy Arena

So did he have any advice for us journalists going into our careers?

Samantha Waigand

When I asked him about this, he said he was both honored and afraid of the question. But his answer was to be curious and to be humble. He says that everyone wants to change the world to be the first to break a story or to be the best in the field. But he encourages journalists to remember that the role is not to be the hero, but to serve the

real heroes by giving them the best information possible. And I think by doing this, we can change the world.

Catalin: "We are not heroes. "I think it's a very good lesson for us. We are just gatekeepers. This is fine, to be like this."

Kassidy Arena

So moving on to Catalin's own future what's in store for him?

Samantha Waigand

Well, Catalin's paper, this sports because that was bought by a Swiss company by the name of well, Catalin's paper, the sports because that was bought by a Swiss company by the name of Ringier two years ago. And this company is investing in the paper's investigative journalism. So that's really good news, especially in a time when so many outlets are pulling away from investigative work because of all the time and energy required to do it. He says that this acquisition has and will provide a great deal of resources. However, this doesn't matter as much as one might think when it comes to his work. He says that the public always gives editorial independence. ownership of the paper doesn't change who He works for. He says that the people give him his license and his motivation to discover the truth.

Part 3: The Business of Investigative Journalism

Introduction:

TW: We're nearing the end of this special segment of Global Journalist now. I'm Tawnie Wilson here with Kassidy Arena.

KA: We've heard from investigative journalists and the artists who use them as subjects. Sam talked about the product investigative journalists create, but now we want to talk about how that product affects us and the rest of society.

TW: For that, Kassidy and I spoke with Damon Kiesow. He's the Knight Chair in Digital Editing and Producing at the University of Missouri School of Journalism in Columbia. He's basically a professor for the journalism profession. He talked with us not only about journalism as a business, but also as a public good.

DK: Journalism as a product is a public good. I think we would agree, especially these days, it's something that people need to have, they need to share, they need to make use of in their daily lives...(:30) We typically haven't treated journalism as a business in that sense, which has kind of let us down that garden path of the the market is failing journalism in terms of revenues coming in from advertising, or subscriptions aren't currently meeting the needs of having ongoing operation in many cities and towns. So we've traditionally treated it as a business, but the whole time it was something closer to a public good than a commodity.

KA: What are some factors that go into solving this failure, as you mentioned?

DK: I think we have to first admit--and we haven't really fully admitted--that it is a public good. That doesn't mean a media organization can't be run as a profitable enterprise--it doesn't have to be nonprofit or grant-supported--but we just have to recognize that the market isn't always gonna support it in the way it had back in the day when newspapers specifically had monopolies or semi-monopolies in a given market or community.

TW: Journalism as a public good. That means journalism is basically a commodity for the entire population. But someone needs to pay for it, which means we need investors.

MH: I think it's important to define investigative reporting broadly, the idea is just digging for information and finding stories that otherwise wouldn't be found. I think there's a broad definition you can use for investors to get journalism but in general, that kind of reporting is vitally important.

KA: That's Mark Horvit. He's an investigative reporting professor at the University of Missouri, Columbia. He's worked in newsrooms for almost 20 years and has run entire investigative teams. He's also worked with Investigative Reporters and Editors, or IRE, an international nonprofit organization dedicated to helping investigative reporters. Tawnie, with producer Minna Tian, had the chance to talk to him over Zoom about investigative reporting.

MH: Without journalists digging for the truth and looking into programs and looking into where money is spent, and looking into human and civil rights, human rights issues, civil rights issues, justice issues, nobody else is going to do that.

TW: So, investigative reporting is really important for the public, yet sometimes the public doesn't provide the funding for it. Professor Kiesow analyzed the problem and offered possible solutions.

DK: It's really realizing that the market isn't always going to solve that problem, and if the problem as we've been approaching it is we do narrative journalism and we either sell it to advertisers in terms of attracting eyeballs in the community, or we sell it to the community in terms of bundling and packaging the news for their convenience, if those combined isn't enough, that's a pretty typical public good problem, because you have a diffusion of responsibility. Everyone wants the benefit from the good, but not everyone necessarily wants to pay for it directly. (8:49) And also playing on the fact that journalism is a public good. Playing on that fact to the community and showing and proving to the community that you have their best interests at heart, which allows them to be more willing to either subscribe or become a member or support you in some other way. (9:40) But you also need to make it possible for people to feel like they do have an ownership stake in some sense or another in your success.

KA: This sounds a lot like what we've been told before: journalism is owned by the public. But, Tawnie and I wanted to know if people care what kinds of journalists provide their information.

TW: In collective, like I said previously, a sports reporter was actually the one who ended up breaking the story. And what do you think this says about the nature of investigation and reporting in general and how it doesn't necessarily have to be an investigative reporter that is the one telling the world about these kind of issues?

MH: Some of the best investigative journalism is not done by somebody whose title is investigative reporting. But as it comes from beaters or reporters who are already regularly covering an organization or an agency or region of the world, and they're the ones who often find out what's really going on and know what's happening. And start digging. And so sometimes what you find is journalism, it's not. It might actually come from rolling reporting, right, we found this, then we found this then we found this from somebody who was on a beat. And before it's done, it's become a big investigation, but it didn't start that way. So it's absolutely not necessary for somebody to have their job title labeled investigative reporter to do great investigative reporting. I also think it's important to know that there aren't any individual sections of a news organization that focus on this work...I don't think there are categories that matter. And I don't think there are job titles that matter. There are certain journalists who are sort of programmed to dig and to ask difficult questions and to look for more. And regardless of what your job title is, if you do that kind of work, what you end up doing typically becomes investigative.

KA: Interesting! So an expert investigative reporter doesn't think you have to be an expert to investigate.

TW: It turns out some of the best investigations come out of old-fashioned beat reporting.

KA: But what does this mean for us? For the ones not currently investigative reporting or reporting at all?

TW: Funny, I asked Professor Horvit that exact question.

TW: What do you think are some of the benefits that we can get from doing things like that bringing stories from across the world to home? And even though the story might not necessarily pertain exactly to where we are here in Columbia?

MH: I think all stories everywhere pertain to people no matter where they are, right?... One thing that does is broaden Your understanding not only of what's happening in other countries, but your understanding of sort of, I guess, the human condition and the way people act. You can learn so much by an investigative work that's done in another country and apply those rules to something you're looking at in your own country. Everything's interconnected, right? Everything travels, everything crosses borders, more and more things become International. So having an understanding of the way the world works and the way systems work in other countries can be beneficial not just in understanding those countries but in understanding your own and thinking about how issues that happened here might have reached or tentacles that go into other places.

[Music]

KA: Well, I can't think of a better way to wrap up this edition of Global Journalist. I'm Cassidy Arena.

TW: And I'm Tawnie Wilson. Global Journalist is produced by the Missouri School of Journalism in collaboration with the Reynolds Journalism Institute and K-B-I-A, mid-Missouri's public radio.

KA: This whole program was created during the COVID-19 pandemic and produced almost entirely remotely during stay at home orders, with help from producers Samantha Waigand and Minna Tian and executive producer Kathy Kiely. We'd also like to thank Dima Stoianov, the translator for our interview with Catalin Tolontan, and Trevor Hook, the audio engineer for our interview with Alexander Nanau. Some of the music used on our program came from DeWolf Music.

TW: We appreciate you listening during this unusual time. Stay tuned for more episodes like this one by following us on social media @GlobalJournalist.

KA: That's it for this edition of Global Journalist. We hope you stay healthy — and support journalism

[Music]