

Reflection on the Asian Investigative Journalism Conference in Seoul

By Aliya Uteuova



On Oct. 4-7, I got the chance to attend the Uncovering Asia conference in Seoul, South Korea. It is the largest investigative journalism gathering in Asia hosted by the Global Investigative Journalism Network Conference (GIJN). I was lucky enough to attend this conference as a GIJN fellow. For more information, please visit gijn.org.

It's worth pointing out that I was the only 21-year-old, recent university graduate from Kazakhstan to attend Uncovering Asia. The scale of the conference didn't hit me until the opening reception. More than 300 reporters from all over the world were gathered in one

place. The beauty of this conference was the sharing of news ideas, pitches, career advice, and assistance with ongoing stories. In a more cliché term, this was a hub for communication, and we journalists need that. The force that comes from bringing journalists together is so powerful it can produce major revelations like Panama Papers, which was a result of cross-border reporting that can take action at events like Uncovering Asia. In fact, the very reporters who worked on Panama Papers were at the conference, and I got to speak to them.

The most valuable aspect of this conference was just that — speaking to reporters. The amount of business cards I accumulated was impressive. So to put these networking treasures to use, I'll mention some of the memorable people I've met at the conference.

And I also met great people. In the market I met a South Korean who took me on a tour of Korean Market and showed me the local places.

On the very first day of the conference, I met Kimiko Aoki, a Japanese journalist who branched out to do media research. Throughout the conference, we exchanged our thoughts on workshops and sessions, and on the final day we were able to go to the National Museum of Korea. She insisted on starting the experience from the paleolithic area whilst I drifted toward the Renaissance exhibits. I thought that Kimiko's chronological approach to the museum was very telling of her reporting background, and there is definitely a lot I learned from our brief time together at the conference.

There was also the time when I bumped into Zunar Cartoonist at the elevator. He was the keynote speaker of Uncovering Asia, and on our way up, he said that journalists' tools, pen and paper, are way more powerful than the weapons of police. His openness was so contagious that I had to skip my floor and hold the elevator for a few more seconds in order to finish our conversation.

During the lunch sessions, I sat at vegetarian tables and one day, Australian psychologist, Dr. Cait McMahon, said: "I wonder what conversations people are having based on their dietary table assignments." Dr. McMahon later



moderated a panel titled “Investigating War Crimes & Historical Trauma.” This was my favorite session. It included gripping stories from Martha Mendoza of Associated Press, Allan Clarke of Australian Broadcasting Corporation, and Kunda Dixit of Nepali Times. My second favorite panel at the conference was titled “Following Ships, Smugglers & Supply Chains.” Presented by Bryan Christy, an investigative journalist, Martha Mendoza of AP, and Giannina Segnini of Columbia University, this panel demonstrated how a seed of information can grow into a year-long investigation with the help of data.

The most notable takeaway from this Uncovering Asia is that, these following issues affect every society: human rights abuses, corruption, and environmental damages. All of them can be linked across the globe because of cross-border trade. A simple shirt in your local clothing shop can be traced to cotton fields in Uzbekistan, the jeans could be made in Indonesia, where chemicals from clothing factories pollute rivers and air.

So in a whirlwind, my first investigative journalism conference was over. What did I get out of it? Connections, knowledge, and most importantly, a reignited drive to chase stories. I want to thank the Global Investigative Journalism Network for making my visit to Korea possible. Thank you/Gomabseumnida/고맙습니다