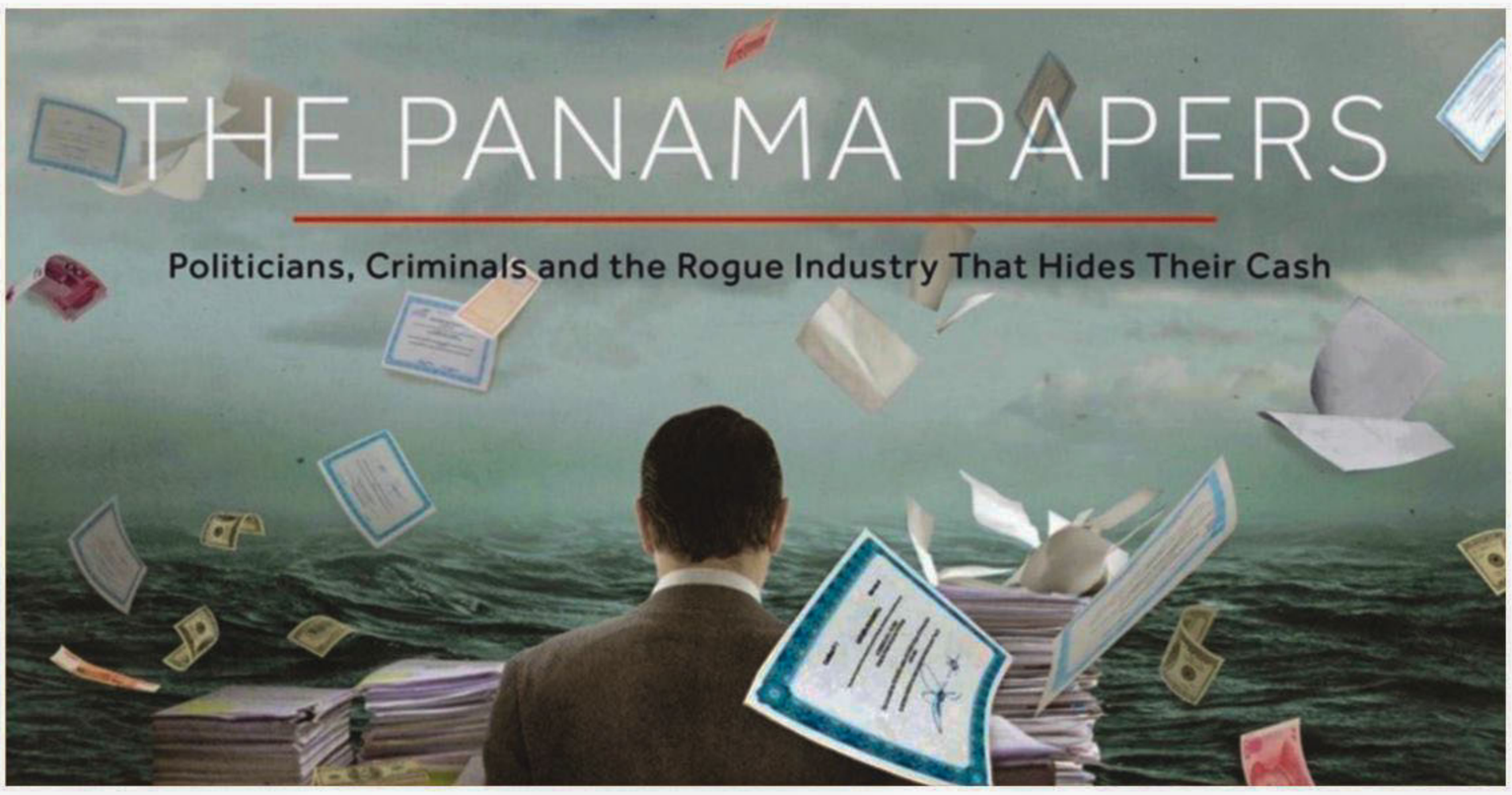
The Panama Papers leak is just the beginning

SHAKHAWAT LITON *and* TUHIN SHUBHRA ADHIKARY



THE Panama Papers, the biggest leak of classified documents in journalism's history, has led to a global investigative effort to untangle how fiscal paradises work. Under the leadership of Spanish journalist Mar Cabra, the global data team from the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) was the brain behind the investigation that required an analysis of millions of documents.

Cabra is head of the data and research unit of ICIJ, a global network of more than 190 investigative journalists in more than 65 countries who collaborate on in-depth investigative stories. She fell in love with data while being a Fulbright scholar and fellow at the Stabile Center for Investigative Journalism at Columbia University in 2009-2010. Since then, she's promoted data journalism.

In an interview with *The Daily Star* during the Second Asian Investigative Journalism Conference in Nepal last month, she spoke about the Panama Papers project.

TDS: How did it all begin?

MC: It all began with an email saying- "Hello, are you interested in data?" A German newspaper based in Munich received the email from an anonymous source. And the answer to the email led to the biggest leak in journalism history. The newspaper received 11.5 million files. They did not keep it to themselves, but shared them with the ICIJ and then what we did is share the information with more than hundred media organisations all around the world. It is the largest collaboration in journalism history with around 400 reporters in 80 countries.

Mar Cabra

TDS: How much time did it take to complete the investigation?

MC: We worked for around a year. We received 11.5 million files. It was a long process because there are many files. But of course we were able to make it in just one year, thanks to technology. If we had to have printed all the documents and read them one by one, it would basically take us decades to look at all the documents. Thanks to technology, we processed all those documents, put them in the cloud, on the internet, in a private website that all the reporters could access and anybody from anywhere in the world anytime could do research and find names connected to their countries.

TDS: How did you manage the data?

MC: For the Offshore Leaks, in 2013, we worked with 260 gigabytes of information, and for the Panama Papers there were 2.6 terabytes, so much more! Also, we created a transnational team with over 370 journalists, which required considerable coordination efforts and data management. This leak allowed us to understand the operation of fiscal paradises like never before, because Mossac-Fonseca is one of the main firms in the world creating offshore companies in fiscal paradises. And it had high-level clients. This also has made the content more interesting journalistically.

TDS: What made ICIJ involve journalists from different countries?

MC: It is impossible to deal with such a huge amount of information by yourself, even we had the most sophisticated technology to know how to analysis millions of documents. So the best way to tackle this is through collaboration. Which is why we have established ICIJ where we have been building trust between journalists and media organisations since 1997. So for the past 20 years we picked one or two media organisations in each country. This way they don't compete with each other: the media in Spain, for example, does not compete with the media in Bangladesh. So they bring local expertise and that's why we decided to share. It's a win-win situation basically.

TDS: Did you face any pressure following the release of the Panama Papers?

MC: Working in a team in collaboration actually works like a protective shield where it is very difficult to attack just one journalist. Because if one is attacked it will be considered as an attack on the whole team. So I think this has worked to the benefit of all the people who worked in the team. There have been some countries where working on the Panama Papers has been more complicated like Ecuador or Venezuela or Turkey, Russia, and some other countries. But in general, it really has helped to say 'I am not alone. I am a part of a big team of 400 journalists.'

TDS: Are there more such revelations from the Panama Papers in the pipeline?

MC: The good thing about the Panama Papers is that it is not over. It is a resource that journalists can use. We have around 500 journalists now using it. They are finding stories all the time. Sometimes, it happens that a name become news in the country, they look into the Panama Papers and they find actually more documents. So it's an ongoing research. We don't know if we missed those stories. So, it is not over yet. And the big part is going to come from the overlap of these leaks. ICIJ had published a leak, about the offshore world, a Swiss bank account and the connection between all these leaks.

TDS: What impact has the Panama Papers leak had in the way journalists go about doing stories? Has it changed you?

MC: I think the main change is not in me or my team. The main change has taken place in society. It is like now they are realising this is the way to go. We have been doing this in collaboration for the past four years. So the main change to me is that people come to me and say 'hey I want to do this'. And that is interesting.

TDS: It is said that the names of many Americans or American business organisations were mentioned in the list.

MC: There are names connected to more than two hundred countries including people from United States. The *New York Times* did a great front page story explaining all the connections of the people connected to the United States. However, it is true that the people that we found in United States are not people who are famous or politicians. They were not big profile cases. There were cases of, for example, criminals, there were people connected to court cases. So they were not well known. We have to bear in our mind that United States has their tax haven. So probably that is one of the reasons why there were not many names from the US in this leak. Remember, the Panama Papers is a leak about one, only one Panamanian law firm in offshore jurisdiction. So it was just the tip of the iceberg.

TDS: So what can we expect next from your team in the future?

MC: Let's see. I don't know but the reality is that we live in a new era where electronic leaks are neo-normal and we are getting more electronic leaks, faster and bigger and news organisations are getting used to receiving this. Many news organisations including ICIJ actually have a secure leaking platform where whistleblowers can leak documents securely, anonymously and perhaps we are yet to see the biggest leak in journalism history. This record that we hold right now with Panama papers will soon be over. But I am sure that we are all going to be dealing with big leaks in the near future.

The writers are journalists, *The Daily Star*.

Adverse effects of river dredging on the aquatic ecosystem

QUAMRUL HAIDER

IN response to UNESCO's concerns over dredging rivers near the Sundarbans in order to facilitate transportation of coal to the Rampal Power Plant, an influential member of the ruling party remarked: "It's not clear to me how rivers will get destroyed if dredging takes place there."

Of course dredging never destroys a river. Dredging is a necessary activity that is required to increase the depth of rivers and remove the unwanted deposits for safe passage of boats and ships. But by its very nature, the act of dredging will change the environment. Because of this, experts and green activists in Bangladesh and around the world are concerned about the geomorphic effects of dredging rivers flowing through the Sundarbans, a UNESCO World Heritage site.

The exact ramifications of river dredging upon the aquatic environment will depend on topology, sediment characteristics, the dredging technique employed, existing floodplain connectivity and antecedent environmental conditions. So, the effects discussed in this article are generic.

Dredging activities potentially affect not only the site itself, but also surrounding areas, through a large number of impact factors, such as turbidity, sedimentation, resuspension and release of contaminants. Effects can be immediate or develop over a longer time frame and they may be temporary or permanent.

The impacts of river dredging on the aquatic ecosystem and the life it supports have been relatively well-studied. The impacts are generally two-fold – firstly as a result of the dredging process itself and secondly as a result of the disposal of the dredged material. During the dredging process effects may arise due to the excavation of sediments at the bed, loss of material during transport to the surface, overflow from the dredger while loading and loss of material from the dredger and/or pipelines during transport.

Dredging will affect a river's composition, diversity and resiliency in a variety of ways. After a river is dredged, its banks will become prone to erosion. Eroded banks will stimulate further build-up of silt, exacerbating rather than improving problems with navigation. Moreover, disturbance of bank vegetation caused by erosion will remove cover and shade. This will increase light penetration and hence water temperature, which will cause fish to migrate. Besides, loss of soils will disturb the habitat of river bank fauna.

River dredging can have a number of impacts on local fish populations. Many fish species depend on structured habitats for refuge from the current. The loss of natural habitat can render new dredged habitats unsuitable for shallow-water fish. Furthermore, deeper habitats may make a river more vulnerable to exploitation by invasive non-native species.

Fish eggs, fry, larvae and juveniles can be sucked up and displaced by dredging, which will cause death. If they do survive, they will experience higher mortality rates due to injuries, physiological stressors, disorientation, abrasions and infections. Molluscs and amphibians which are important parts of the aquatic ecology can also suffer death from dredging equipment.

Dredging has significant impacts on fish and amphibians during reproduction. Spawning is a stressful period and fish are highly vulnerable to disturbance during this time. High levels of human activity can result in fewer fish eggs.

Dredging activities often disturb sediments, thereby reducing visibility and increasing the turbidity of water to the point where the amount of photosynthesis that can occur in the water is curtailed with the result that there will be an overall impairment of the function of the ecosystem. Consequently, growth of fish and other organisms will be affected since food supply will be reduced in the turbid conditions. Other adverse effects of turbidity include decrease in disease resistance, suffocation and death.

It's a fact that most of the rivers in Bangladesh are contaminated with toxic industrial wastes. If the contaminants are particulates, they eventually settle as sediments in the riverbed. Hence, there's an increased likelihood that soils will contain cancer-causing dioxin, PCBs and mercury. Since dredging loosens up the soil, these carcinogens will find their way into the water and will cause substantial degradation of the environment.

One of the potential consequences of dredging is a change in the water transport and circulation patterns in the area. In an estuarine situation, such as the Sundarbans, the dredged river can allow saltwater from the Bay of Bengal to move further into the estuary than would occur otherwise.

> *After a river is dredged, its banks will become prone to erosion. Eroded banks will stimulate further build-up of silt, exacerbating rather than improving problems with navigation.*

This will have grave consequences on freshwater marine life.

Finally, there are documented evidences showing clearly that rivers which have been dredged, silt-up more frequently and return to their pre-dredged state. Thus, dredging is an unsustainable activity since it needs to be repeated frequently. That's why there is a growing awareness among environmentalists that artificially deepening a river may not be helpful after all and may even be counter-productive.

Since the remark about dredging was made with regard to Rampal Power Plant, a few words about the plant are in order. The government of Bangladesh could have avoided the controversies surrounding Rampal if the policy makers had shed their anthropocentric view of the environment and, instead, were guided by the principle of "sustainable revolution" in choosing a site for the power plant.

Sustainable revolution is being waged worldwide to reshape our society so that we can reverse the Earth-threatening changes now occurring due to human activities. Its goal is not to revert to antiquated ways but to create a new synthesis – a new way of life that utilises modern technology and knowledge to protect the Earth's environment from destruction.

Of course the Earth is not in immediate jeopardy because of river dredging and Rampal. It is the Sundarbans and its aquatic environment that face almost certain destruction. The power plant should, therefore, be relocated to an ecologically less sensitive area. Otherwise, Rampal will be the last straw that broke the camel's back.

The writer is Professor of Physics at Fordham University, New York.

QUOTABLE *Quote*

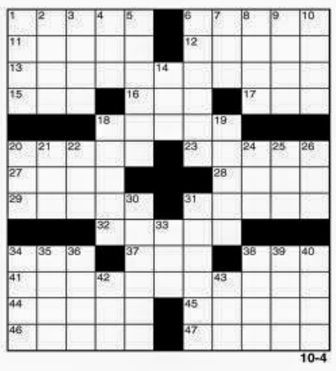
ALICE WALKER

Activism is my rent for living on the planet.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS
1 Dorian Gray's creator
6 Put into boxes
11 Figure of speech
12 Blackjack call
13 "It wasn't my fault!"
15 Yellow-stone grazer
16 Pet perch
17 Kids' card game
18 Perennial battlers
20 Photo collection
23 Walker's line
27 Abacus piece
28 Entreaty
29 Backpack part
31 Like some athletes' wrists
32 Fleet-based
34 Bordeaux buddy
37 Knight's address
38 Express despair
41 "Careful -- I might take you up on that"
44 "Tomorrow" singer
45 Zodiac ram
46 Exodus figure
47 Woes on toes

DOWN
1 Broad
2 Fan's favorite
3 Chain unit
4 Morse E
5 Symbol
6 Wedding site
7 Objective
8 Hearty dish
9 Jane Austen book
10 Forest grazers
14 Not strict
18 Neighbor of Egypt
19 Flower part
20 Sit-up targets
21 Rent out
22 Butter unit
24 Swiss peak
25 Spot
26 Owned
30 Sticks, in a way
31 Runway material
33 Compete
34 First father
35 Stereo forerunner
36 Travel stops
38 Mix up
39 Foreboding sign
40 Porgy's love
42 Suit accessory
43 Expert



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YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

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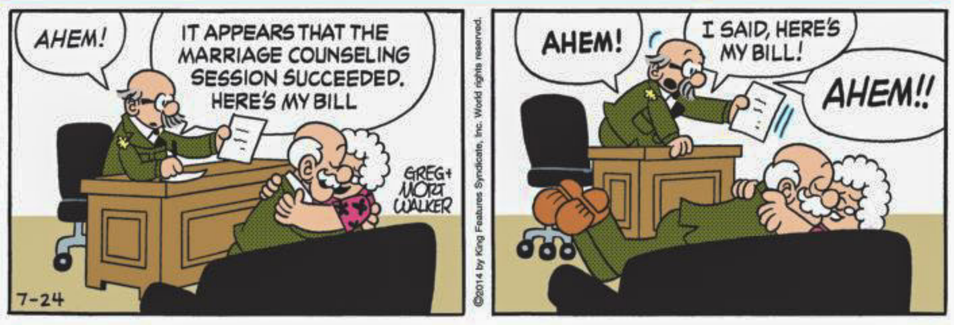
BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker



BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott