# Dr Richard Stupart Researcher in Focus podcast transcript

Dr Richard Stupart

If one could get an audience to really understand how horrible war is, war would stop tomorrow. But it's it's a wickedly hard problem in communication, and maybe insoluble of how would I explain a reality? How would I put a reality into text or word or images such that you could ever even like approximate an experience that you've never had? That's the I mean, if someone could fix that problem, they're making people care about injustice and atrocity problem I think I'd be out of a job, but I would also be delighted with that outcome.

Nick Jones

Welcome everybody to this edition of the Researcher in Focus podcast from the Faculty of Humanitiea and Social Sciences here at the University of Liverpool, I'm Nick Jones, part of the research and impact team. And today I'm joined by Doctor Richard Stupart, a lecturer in our Communications and Media Department. Today, Richard will be talking to us about his work on media, war and ethics, and the role that emotions can play in journalism, amongst many other fascinating things. So Richard, Lovely to meet you. Thank you so much for.

RS

Thanks for having me.

NJ

Good, good. And to get us going off, just as a first question, why this subject, what drew you to this area of research?

RS

Yeah, thanks. Uh, that's a hard question. I I mean one thing I would maybe point to if so, my accent will very quickly make clear I am South African and I'm a South African who grew up I think in this sort of for my country like Golden age of sort of post 1994 kind of end of apartheid period. And for me, I think this doesn't explain everything of my interest, but I think substantially part of being a teenager in in South Africa in that time, there were a whole bunch of questions as you might imagine, about kind of who knew what and who said what. Certainly amongst White, South Africa. And I think sort of politically maybe part of me has always kind of and when I. You might work around like witnessing that kind of thing, and it's called this question of OK, when we know certain things, are we obligated to tell others, you know, what is what are we complicit in? If we pretend we don't know things, you know, when are we entitled to ignorance? When is ignorance thing we can we get punished for these are. In academic correct now fairly abstract concerns, but I think for me as a sort of teenage early 20 something in that period, we're kind of very practical things around like how do you have conversations with parents at the dinner table, you know, you know, when you ask your grandpa about his sort of history and his politics. And so that was, I think, the thin end of a wedge that ultimately ended up for me. Having me to think about the particular things like witnessing these obligations of knowing and saying that kind of. Thing and then it was a very windy route I suppose from there to connecting it to other sorts of interests and things like conflict, things like journalism, perhaps as a paradigm case of a profession that is about knowing and.

NJ

OK, so a very much kind of lived experience then and then turning that into academic interest.

RS

Yeah. No, absolutely.

NJ

And so can you tell us a little bit about your academic journey before you joined us here at the University of Liverpool?

RS

Yeah, so I'm a bit of an odd duck. I mean, media connects odd ducks in the sense that we're a field that has everyone from historians to psychologists to statisticians. I think by those standards I've I fit in well. So originally as an undergrad I was never a media person. I went into computer science and archaeology archaeology because I didn't want to be the kind of person that you turned into. If you do computer science and maths as your majors, and it was an excuse to kind of get out to see sunlight. And so I was one of these people that came around to sort of. Post grad studies PhD much, much later in life where I'd gone out and worked as a programmer, I had that. Universe decided you know, the money's great, but existentially, what am I doing? Like, what is, what is the meaning? Of this went. I swear this is relevant how the sort of you know, career crisis, I suppose, sold out and went backpacking from Cape Town to Cairo and public transport and the kind of the thing that the penny that dropped in that journey was this idea that I'd. Been lied to my whole life. About what Africa was like, so sort of going from Cape Town all the way up to east. Africa. Everything I've read basically had told me this was a universe of people with AK-47s, danger of famine, because when when these things, when Africa generally made the news, that was the kind of image that we saw and then the. World that I encountered was very, very different to that. And that was the sort of OK thinking of a witch that drove me to wanting to kind of think more about this. So I I went to. Did a Masters degree in. Media studies trying to to kind of understand what was this mismatch between what I was told the world was like and how the world. Kind of actually was and then again. Not perhaps my own. Kind of design as much as life just happening. I followed my partner from South Africa to the UK when she did her PhD. This is, I think again a familiar story from any Academy. And ended up doing another masters in conflict studies in Germany, which was sticking around kind of literally armed conflict and how how policymakers deal with questions of armed conflict. And so coming to, you know, trying to find a PhD, trying to study onward from there was really this question of, like, what does one do when the two areas that we're interested in are medium? Communications and conflict studies, which is not a kind of common peering really and one thing to another, and I did so I did my PhD at the London School of Economics, specifically looking at journalists who work in South Sudan. So this was this was the place I found that kind of allowed me to to match this pairing. Say, let's look at sort of the role that the people who make the media we consume the news media, we consume in an actual armed conflict. How do they go about doing their work? Why do they do this work? It's dangerous. It's poorly paid. All these sorts of. Things. And and then off the back of that, I finished under COVID. I was a COVID PhD, which meant that my viver was a very unceremonious zoom call with some really great examiners. But but the zoom call nonetheless. And so I the first bit of my academic life, life as an academic academic was really just zoom teaching. So I was a postdoc at the University of Pennsylvania, so they have a centre there called the Centre for Media at risk that looks at the work of journalists around the world and the challenges they face. I really enjoyed it, but never actually went to Pennsylvania. Was slowly disappointed. I had I had in preparation for the job I. Had watched all of I think it was season 5 of Queer Eye, where they've gone to Philadelphia. This was like oh wow, now I I know Philadelphia. It didn't happen. And then after that I was a the current of lecturers, an assistant professor at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands. Again, this was the thing I took up at the very. Snowy at the tail. End of COVID. I've never been to the Netherlands. The interview was done on zoom. I sort of packed my bags, went off to to this university and gosh, I hope this works. And it was a wonderful place. And then the job in Liverpool came up and partly their their colleagues here at Liverpool, who was who worked on this kind of stuff and trying to find people who work on the inception of your journalism and persecution at risk is quite hard. But also my partner as a philosopher here at the university. And so this was the sort of. Academic, you know Willy Wonka ticket of like, maybe I can actually work at the same institution and live in the same city as my partner. And so I arrived at Liverpool, I think about a year and a half ago. And yeah, it's been a lovely time since.

NJ

Ohh, good, good. Well, welcome aboard. Yes, a lot of the people that we speak to on on this podcast have very similar kind of circuitous routes to to getting here, so nothing unusual there so.

RS

Oh good.

NJ

We always post the blog to go alongside these podcasts and in the blog for for you, Richard, you sent us some great action shots of you armed with cameras in what looked like some very far-flung locations, you know with lorries and trucks behind you. So does that mean you've worked as a reporter in some difficult places and situations, or where you're there, visiting in your role as an academic?

RS

A little bit of both. So it it is a perk if I suppose working in this sort of field that you get nice headshots almost over over. Lisa, my PhD research I as I mentioned involved going to South. So part of that was spent in South Sudan doing field work. So that was talking to journalists, foreign journalists, but also Sudanese journalists who were working in that place. Asking them about the work they were doing, but it also included and this was where those photographs were taken. Some work following a team of reporters who were going to an area of the north of the. Country to investigate war crimes that the government has been perpetrating in an area called Malakal. And so that's a whole interesting Side Story, but that those photos were were part of that and involved navigating this sort of UN infrastructure of flats, military escorts, these UN base in the north of the country. There was a period much, much. Earlier so during my days as a Masters student, we're headed in my head. That actually what I wanted to do was be a photojournalist. And so I have before. I mean, I've travelled to places like the Democratic Republic of Congo. This place called Itori in the east there where a lot of illegal gold mining and timber obviously happens. And we're in Uganda, where I did some work for Uganda, NGOs, media work there, but it's. The pivot out of journalism was partly, I think I discovered I was as interested in thinking about the work as actually doing it. On the one hand, but also that. And again, this is a larger conversation, but journalism in general is not in a good place economically, structurally, otherwise, and things like photojournalism and foreign reporting, particularly our careers that. If you think I can hear me as a hard place to crack it as a long term career in photojournalism, this particular foreign reporting is infinitely harder. And so I sort of ended up transitioning out of the journalism media world into kind of the thinking about journalism media. World.

NJ

Yes, you talk a little bit about that in the blog as well about the precarity of, you know, becoming a, a jobbing journalist. You know, this kind of thing. Now, you mentioned that you kind of touched it a little bit earlier on, but you talk about the obligation by journalists and others to share testimonies of injustice and suffering. What is it you mean by that? That phrase? Obligation.

RS

Yeah, I mean, I suppose it's it's a, it's an overwrought way of saying at its core that there's this idea that if you know, if you have certain knowledge. So if you know things about for example, injustice, that knowledge obligates you to tell others, that's the kind of nutshell. Yeah. There's certain things that if we know them, they put duties. On us to speak. Out a good example of this I came across. As I think this is from a a philosophy called Andrew Linklater talks about said. Yeah, so he's referring off a a thought experiment that's much older about a a drowning child. And he says, look, if I'm walking by, say, a lake or sea one day and I see someone in his version of this, this thought experiment, I see someone throwing children off. Which into a pond and they're drowning and I am on the the seashore. I could jump in and I could say maybe one or two or three children, but at some point the scale of the problem is one that that. Is beyond my ability to. Fix what I can do is I can tell other people what I've seen so I can run and find a lifeguard, or I could. Run and find the police. Or I could run. I can. Because I am the only person or one of a few people on this, the seashore, seeing the wrongdoing this happened. I am able to go and tell others who have a capacity to act like the police or the lifeguard. I can tell them look, there's a thing that urgently requires your attention. You have the ability to help. You should go and help, right? So he says. This is a. This is a positive way of understanding. Sometimes if you're in a position and you see an injustice or suffering happening, you have this capacity beyond whatever you could do. Person, you have this capacity to tell others and this capacity to tell others can can help to. Fix the problem, he, he. Also points though that there's a sort of negative aspect to this, right? So it's not just about well, I can help. There's a question of complicity here. So if I'm one of if I'm the only person on the ocean shore, and I see these children being thrown off a bridge and drowning, and then I don't tell anyone. So I take that knowledge that I I have privileged access to, and I just go about my my day, then the next day, the next month, whenever when the police are trying to reconstruct, why did so many children drown that day? The fact that I was on the Ocean shore, I knew what was happening, and then I didn't tell any. One is important causal part of why children started drowning from that point onward, so I'm not responsible for children who are in trouble up to that point. But for the suffering injustice that continues after I knew about it and I chose not to say anything that I'm on the hook for because I could have done something to sort of subtly alter the situation. And so this idea of obligation, I think it's interesting to me because it has a sort of twofold dimension to if I if I am one of a few people who knows about an injustice, or I'm one of few people who knows that someone is suffering, I can do. I can be good or virtuous by telling others that who have. Capacity to help, but. I also, if I choose not to do that, if I keep the knowledge to myself and I don't try and speak out, I'm I'm part of the problem. From that point onward. So it's a very interesting sort of moral problem. And journalism, and particularly journalism that deals in investigative reporting or war and conflict reporting, is a very obvious case of, I think. This kind of work.

NJ

That's an interesting, interesting idea of, you know, of that kind of thought experiment. And do you think that obligation extends to people who are not journalists, people who are maybe living in in those places where you know atrocities or war or injustice might be happening?

RS

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, I think so. If we look at any. Good examples maybe would be what's happening in Gaza at the moment, or Ukraine. These are situations where much, possibly most of what we see or know about what's happening may not come to us through formal journalism prior to people coming, especially in places like Gaza where access to the international press exception of Al Jazeera is largely impossible at the moment, so much of the the kind of testimony, so much of the sort of people speaking out about what they see as average. There was with a with a mobile phone, and there was. There was a period in the late 90s, early 2000s where there was this kind of other sort of naive euphoria that the mobile phone was going to change, conflict and and more reporting because now anyone could be a witness. Anyone could talk about what's happening. On the one hand, it's it's kind of, you know, there's still wars, there's still crises. So clearly it hasn't been the sort of panacea that we hope for. But we do see that that people who are not journalists test giving testimony, showing what they've seen can can change things, right, the the, again, a paradigm example of this might be something like the George Floyd protests in the US where that was quite literally someone who was not a journalist who happened to record something on their phone, circulated it into kind of a social media environment, and then it snowballs to the point that you have sort of maybe not enough, but major policy changes, certainly huge political action around those killings, and so. It's certainly possible for people who are not formally employed as journalists to act as witnesses, and I think the obligations, so if you or I happen to see a thing and we had some evidence or we had some some ability that if we spoke out, we'd be believed, we would definitely be on the hook. I think for the things that we saw the the kind of caveat to this obviously is that if for people who are journalists. They come often with a position that is trusted more than sort of you. Alright, so if you arise or something happened, then we we circulated cell phone footage. There would be this question. OK, well, you know, cool story, Nick. Who are you? Whereas if you are Christiane Amanpour for CNN and you said, look, here's a thing I saw. Here's a photograph you have already made. Audience that is enormous that is primed to act that believes you. So and this. Question of kind of witnessing this question of being believed starts to become a lot more complicated when you ask these questions. OK, sure. I'm sitting on the seashore and I see. Children drowning. If I speak out, would I be believed, right? That's not obvious. Some people will be more believed than others. Some people might have what we would consider good evidence to show others. So persuading people by your testimony would work differently. And if there's a distinction to be made for me between journalists and sort of average journal, part of this is that journalists are perhaps more inclined to be believed and have access to an infrastructure that will take their stories and disseminate them much more widely than. Say you or I could do.

NJ

OK, lovely. Thank you. And you use the word witnessing there and and you again in the blog you talk about witnessing being one of the two main pillars of your research at the moment. So is that the general idea, do you think of people being there to report on what? I see.

RS

Yeah, absolutely. So I think you know, to talk about witnessing. So there's the word shades into different kinds of meanings, so witnessing can mean both the sense of eyewitness something. So I'm in a position where I saw a thing. We can also talk about, like, bearing witness. So the sense of after I've seen the thing I I speak on to others. So I act it kind of as a witness on behalf. Of other people. But witnessing. Yeah, so is sort of, I suppose the theoretical name for the bundle of ideas that are around this this question of. What is this relationship between knowing and saying right? Does knowing imply that I should say what are the hard questions? How do I get believed? Who do I get to speak to what counts as evidence those sorts of things?

NJ

Now and again you touched on it in your previous answer just then, but I wanted to kind of ask a little bit more about maybe the role of digital technology and people becoming witnesses. And you talked about the mobile phone and the possible democratising, if you like, of of capturing what's happening. But how do you think ideas around you know, the Internet as a place to disseminate this information and the rise of AI and deep fakes and things like that. So how's that gonna change things?

RS

I'm cautious to say this will be the end of witnessing because I feel like people have said this before you know for every new technology that comes up but one of the basic, you know, cornerstones of being able to bear witness is an idea that if I I give you testimony and or evidence of a thing, I say look, this this horrible thing has happened. Here's a photograph of this horrible thing has happened. Please believe me, all this horrible thing has happened. Here's a video recording. Historically, videos recordings photographs. Yes, they've been fakeable, but in general, culturally we've tended to accept these things as evidence of the thing we're talking about, right? Again, possibly the most interesting for me, a case of this goes all the way back to the Holocaust, where I think there's a story about General Eisenhower discovering the first of the camps. Already was at was was aware that what what his troops had come across was something that was so out of the ordinary. So horrifying. That it would be difficult to make people believe or appreciate the true horror of what was happening, and already at that point, some journalists, I think from the BBC have written about the camps and had their their written texts rejected by the BBC desk on the grounds of, So basically you're being hysterical. It can't possibly be that bad. So Eisenhower requisitioned basically every army person who had a photographer, the signal corps or anyone had video or photographic abilities and. Meant to go to the camps and just create this enormous archive of photographs. And the idea was that at that time, if there was photographs, if there was video, this would become undeniable. You can't say this didn't happen. You can't deny it. Right? And this is. You know, over time the authority of of video and photos perhaps has rodent slightly, but. For a long time, that basic case is if I can show you a photograph of the thing, or if I can show of the view of the thing in support of my testimony, I'm more inclined to be believed. That's kind of helped to famous images of famine, for example. It's Kevin Carter's image of a vulture stalking a child in South Sudan. All the George Floyd videos.

All cases where someone was talking about a thing that we might be disinclined to believe, and then when they show us a video or they show us a photograph, that evidence kind of boosts their testimony. He helps them be believed. And so my concern in all of this is that in a world where increasingly we can be less and less sure of what we're seeing is, you know, really a true thing, it might be AI generated. For example, if that becomes ubiquitous it becomes much easier for people who are disinclined to believe testimony to to turn around and say, well, you know, how can I trust your image? Sorry. And if you look at conflicts that are highly polarised to Israel, Gaza would be one Russia, Ukraine certainly, you know, in many in the West have their view on it, but many in you know other countries don't follow the same idea of like who's good, who's bad, who's the victim, who's the perpetrator. And so when you have those sorts of conflicts where we don't agree on who the victim is and who the perpetrator is, it's important to have video audio, visual evidence to say, look, this testimony shows that this person, this party, is behaving badly. We lose that in a in an in an era where AI stuff starts to become kind of commonplace, starts to kind of give sceptics another tool to turn around and say, OK, cool, that's that's an interesting image. I have no way to know that that wasn't there. I generated. So that's that's kind of, I suppose really my my concern is what this does for cultures of how we choose to believe who we choose to believe.

It's it's not a complete pessimism, because I think sometimes we choose to believe testimony not because of the images of photographs, but because of who it comes from. Right? So if there are certain journalists, for example, that we trust that John Simpson from the BBC made his career reporting war and conflict around the world, if John Simpson says X large numbers of people would trust his testimony. Purely because it's from John Simpson, right? So. Sometimes, sometimes you know credibility rests on evidence, but other times credibility rests on like trusting people. One of those two pillars, I think, starts to erode in an era where images and video can, but increasingly convincingly faked.

NJ

Yeah. I mean, there's that whole idea that they don't have to absolutely convince you something is not true. They just have to make you doubt it. It is to question it a little bit and it becomes it's becoming increasingly more successful than that by by my experience of being online. Anyway, now one of the other things you talk about is the role of emotions in reporting so. When you look at that and how the role of motions play in conflict journalism, it's interesting that, you know, not just fear, which is what many of us would expect, but also emotions such as excitement and anger, for example. What have you found so far in your research into that?

RS

Yeah, and emotion for me it was the sort of fascinating surprise in my PhD work side gone started down having read a whole bunch about journalism and the dangers of working as journalists like war and conflict. None of that literature spoken all about kind of emotion at all, so I was. Naively surprised to discover that emotion was everywhere, right in general, things like anger at what you see, for example, the state doing fear, paranoia, but also other things that are the academic languages for this would be ethic. So their feelings that are not quite emotions. And by this I mean things like just being tired or being too hot or being exhausted. They're not kind of classically emotions, but they kind of get in the way of doing the work and so on. Returning from the PhD, I asked my supervisor. We sat down and she said look. You know what is it that stands out from your field work that you think is the most interesting thing that you didn't anticipate? I was like, oh, my God, feelings. Feelings are just literally everyone. So that was at the end of the, you know, wage for me into thinking about emotion, thinking about effects and the role of journalists have. So. Stuff that that I've kind of found with you know, where I sit on this at the moment. I think there's two things that stand out for me. The one is this idea that emotions aren't always irrational, so there's often this sort of pop cultural idea that to be emotional is to be irrational or if you're angry, you know, you're irrational. We shouldn't trust you, right? There's a a really great philosopher called Romeo Paoli at Oxford, I think. Who who talks about this idea? And she says she points particularly to something like anger. And she says, look, you know, anger actually sort of tracks something. So if I'm angry, I'm I'm angry at something, right. Or if I if sometimes I'll have something that appears to be at willpower failure and that willpower. Failure isn't irrational. It's kind of pointing me to things that I I didn't realise I valued and she gives us an example of what she calls Sam, the student who Sam wants to do really well and. His exams, and so Sam decides. I mean to cut off all contact with my friends and I'm just going to study. That's it. That's what I'm going to retreat to this monastic life of actually doing. My readings and writing the essay. And see and then when Sam gets sad, depressed eventually ends up caving and going to hang out with his friends. She would probably would say, the normal interpretation of this was, well, sounds emotions cause seem to be irrational, and she's like, no, that's the wrong interpretation. Actually. What happens is that Sam values things other than his work. Sam doesn't just value his academic work, he values his social life. He values his relationships with his friends. And so. What Sam thinks is a failure is actually his emotions pushing him in the direction of things that he values, like the company of his friends. That he hadn't realised he valued at the time. There's a guy called uh Jeff Strawson, who talks as well about anger, particularly shame these sorts of things is what he calls reactive attitudes. If I'm angry anger, it always comes out of a moral judgement. So if I'm angry at you, it's because you've done something you shouldn't have done or you haven't done something that you should have done right. No one has ever angry for literally no reason. There's always an object or a judgement. Kind of behind it. And So what was interesting to me was looking at journalists and the role that anger plays in their lives is that. Despite the sort of cultural idea that you know, it's journalists, you need to be kind of emotionally neutral. You have to keep yourself. You know, inside. Actually, anger can be very useful because it can point journalists to moral judgments. If I'm angry at you, there's a clue in there. It's like, why am I angry at you? What have you done or not done? Right? What? Are you guilty of? What is this so? This is this can be very, very helpful and it can also be kind of practically useful, right? So as anyone who has ever done anything out of anger, sort of hatred, something or. Hates domino task anger can be in power like incredibly motivated, right and small doses. When appropriately use the fact that I'm angry at you for something can give me the fuel I need to work extra hard or to pursue something or to do something. So anger has a practical value. It's not irrational. These are. This is kind of interesting to me. The the second thing is also this idea that. This is again drawing work by a woman called Hochschild. Arlie Hochschild, who talks about emotional work so emotional, and then the idea with this and this was very true of journalists working in South Sudan is that. When? When I'm in a situation where I'm feeling lots of things, say we're working in the case of the journalists who are doing the war crimes investigation, you're working in a sort of very tiring environment, long days. You're not eating enough, you're very thirsty. You're, you know, it's exhausted. The state is kind of you're paranoid about the, you know, whether the state knows. What you're doing? Emotionally, that's a very difficult set of work to do, and so a lot of actually what we do, what they did and what we do every day is we do emotional work both on ourselves and on others. So those journalists working in those tough conditions. We do work on each other, you know, making jokes, sort of breaking the atmosphere, checking in with each other, the small things. But the value of those small things is to make sure that the emotions of the group as a whole don't end up spiralling. So no one sort of breaks down. No one becomes overly terrified. No one sort of gets depressed. But also we do emotional work on ourselves, right? So concealing emotions when we. Encounter again in the the example of journalists working in conference situations when you encounter an official or you get pulled over by a policeman for a check, those sorts of things. Fear would be the obvious kind of emotion that surfaces, but fear is not very helpful if it becomes legible on your face, right, that would change. The sort of the the. The form of the encounter that you're having with this authority figure and so being able to maintain a poker face or pretend to be friendly or make you know emotional banter with someone while keeping you know your own actual feelings, illegible. It actually is a fairly sophisticated kind of emotional work that is nowhere to be found in the average journalism curriculum.

NJ

So lots and lots going on in terms of both acknowledging and managing their emotional responses. Then now you talk about it being a surprise to find the, you know, the emotional responses not being discussed much in academia, but in in more popular culture it seems to be something that that, that it is acknowledged. I mean the example that I'm leaning towards here is Michael Herr book Despatches about his time in Vietnam. It's full of emotion from the minute he arrives in country, so to speak. He's he talks about how it feels and then the impact it has on not just the soldiers, but his fellow journalists. And I'm kind of fishing for any other book recommendations here. Who do you think talks about this emotional impact? Well, at the moment.

RS

So. As an academic mode I don't think there's anyone in the sense that journalism studies is going through itself, what they call an emotional terms of. They've sort of rediscovered, discovered that journalists are not, in fact, rational actors who, you know, I don't know how this was a surprise, but apparently this was a. Surprise. And so you know, you should check back with me in 5 to 10 years of who knows more. I mean more sort of books that fit that are popular, more books. I think people would enjoy to read if this is not your direct, like focused interest. I think I have 3 suggestions. So 1 is a book called War Stories by Mark Pedelty. And his is. Ethnography of journalists reporting in El Salvador in 1995. So I mean, that's what almost it's almost 30 years old, but there's a lot there that I think still kind of resonates. And he talks about hanging out with journalists and El Salvador travelling with them to go to remote areas, to do assignments, navigating roadblocks. Emotion isn't his, like, direct concern, but it there's so much ethnographic writing of. Of what he does in the day, who he does it with, the kind of it's the emotion is, is there as kind of. There's a really good book as well Reporting the Siege of Sarajevo by Kenneth Morrison and Paul Lowe and they they tell the story of the Siege Sarajevo well and particularly the the work of journalists there. And partly it's the kind of main story, one of the main threads of the book is actually not emotion. It's it's looking at this idea of why the journalism. Come in their words, Ahmed. So Yugoslavia was the war where journalists before that war, you would just go into mostly without Kevlar vest. You wouldn't travel in an armoured car. And after that war something has changed and journalists are just wearing armour and protection in a way they didn't used to. But it's the vignettes and that are just full of emotion. So. Journalists being superstitious about, you know, which walking in one direction around the floor of their hotel room first because they felt that it would attract bad luck if they didn't. There's a whole bunch of stuff there. And then the third isn't journalists, strictly speaking. But in my work often you come across this idea that many journalists, particularly foreign journalists working in in war and conflict. And often cohabit with humanitarians, so your doctors Without Borders, Oxfam, these sorts of people, and so they circulate in a kind of bizarre social bubble that some people have called aid land as a reference to like Alice in Wonderland through the Aidland universe, these people. Living and there's a book called Emergency Sex by Heidi Postlewait, Kenneth Kane and Andrew Thompson. And they were UN they volunteered to go and eventually came work workers in the United Nations system in the 90s through and they that travels from the kind of the end of genocide in Cambodia through to Yugoslavia through to, I think like the Rwandan genocide and it's of what the life is like socially for humanitarian circulating through these different spaces, living in compounds dealing with journalists. And while it's not journalists specifically, a lot of the same kind of pressures occur. So you know you're you're dealing with hostile environment. You don't have enough food, you know, luxuries are hard to come by. And so that is, it's probably in turn the closest thing to Herr’s dispatches. Except it's talking about humanitarians. But it's a. Very sort of like. Uncut kind of stream of consciousness. This is what that world looks like. And of course, Dispatches. This is a book I would highly recommend to.

NJ

Yeah, I've, I mean, I've read it several times. You know, my copy is a bit dog-eared. Now it's such a a great book in terms of a guy quite often doesn't want to be there, but he's doing the job that he he feels. He has to do so. What's been the most powerful thing that you've come across in your research, the thing that's stopped you in your tracks so far?

RS

I mean, I thought about this a lot. It's it's hard to pick one thing, which is it's not, it's the copper. One thing I I mean that does has lingered with me, which is interesting is is. What humanitarians would call context switching, but there isn't really a word for this journalism. It's this idea that, like, particularly for foreign journalists who work in war and conflict reporting. There there's a case here. I think it's maybe John Simpson in one of his books talks about journalists going to report on the war in Yugoslavia and Yugoslavia was an interesting war for journalists. Because it was just so accessible. If you were like a British or European journalist, it was like a 2 hour Ryanair flight and bang, you were within driving distance of a like full on armed conflict. And so so lots of people would just do that. And it was it was a war that that cost a lot of journalists their lives precisely because it was so accessible. But he talks about it partly from this context. Which idea that it is? Just. Almost like unreconcilably weird that you could have a coffee at like Costa or something in Heathrow. Take a flight for a few hours and then you would arrive in a country that is kind of absolutely and for example like Ukraine country where missiles are falling out the sky and killing people and it's in humanitarian universe. They call this context switching and there's a whole like technological apparatus around it, because people will come back from working and living in these these places where your daily concerns are just so basic and kind of morally important. And then you will come back to a world where you know no one really cares that much about what you did or what you saw, that it's like, oh, tell me about. How things were in the east of Ukraine and the North Germanic people shift off to talking about a movie or something else. And there there are cases of journalists who have, like, just broken down in supermarkets crying at the sight of a wall of like soft drinks. And it's this sort of, it's this really interesting psychological phenomenon that. Journalists and counter humanitarians and counter academics who do field work in between these two different places encounter and and. And it's a puzzle that's kind of every time I feel like I I travel or I do. And you sort of work in this vein. It always kind of comes back to hit me as sort of you arrive back from from a strange place in. I mean this these days. Manchester. Airport and it's just how. How is the world possible where you know this can exist at the same time as like what happens in the east of Ukraine can exist or. Gaza can exist. Well, like how do I make sense of that? How do I decide? Like, you know what's important to me, where one day the things that are important to me are obviously highly morally important. Things about like life and death and testimony and investigative reporting. And then the next day, the things that are important to me are, I don't know. Yeah. Filing the minutes of a meeting or sending an e-mail. And like, how did? How do you reconcile that? And it's it's a very hard and difficult psychological phenomenon to sort of like smack like a. Hammer, every time you you. Put between these two universes.

NJ

It must bring home the fragility of the world in which we're living right now. You know, here in the UK, Liverpool in a peaceful society that it can on on the. Or the turn of a dial that. Can just disappear.

RS

Absolutely. I mean, I was I as a PhD student, I was at at LC. They had a speaker come in to talk about what was there in Syria. So the war in Syria. And it was relatively early in its duration, as you're talking about how if you lived in Damascus pre-war, it was a kind of, yeah, it was an authoritarian regime. But for, you know, in law, in many other respects, it was a a happy little middle class bubble where you're worried about, I don't know, if the new iPhone coming out or whatever else. And her point was that issue of saying said, look, this, this really can't happen. Anyway, and someone laughed in the audience and she turned around. And it's just like you think, you know, because you live in Europe, that this doesn't happen. You know, just because your generation hasn't had a memory of kind of major armed conflict, you just love it, notwithstanding in a generation. She's she made exactly this point, she says. Look, it it turns on a dime. You know, one day it's this way. The next way it's another. Do you think anyone in Damascus ever thought that that Syria would, would would become what it became? And it was? Yeah. So it's not just that these two worlds exist that they are like far, I mean, as Ukraine has discovered in many Baltic states, are now kind of worrying about these two worlds are. Far, far closer than we're comfortable with.

NJ

Yeah, through the looking glass. Indeed, as you say, like a Alice in Wonderland world. And so our final question, as we're from the research and impact team, what do you think you would like to see as the single most significant change to come about as your research, the impact out there in the real world?

RS

So the I think. You know, the Golden Fleece, the sort of silver bullet they pick your metric, but the thing that I think would be world changing out of the stuff that I think about and I'm I'm by no means claiming to solve this problem, is when when we think about testimony particularly, we talk about testimony of like war, conflict, injustice. At its core is this is this basic question of if you are for example in Syria or if you are in Gaza how do I get people in the kind of wealthy, privileged West to care about what's happening. So. What do I need to say? How do I need to say it? Who do I need to say it to such that we could sort of get people to care and it's there are moments where sometimes we seem to crack this so the the photograph I was talking about earlier by Kevin Carter in Sudan. I mean since like you'd have to be my age or older to know this image but he. Went to what is now South Sudan. Took this image of a child starving an aid station with a vulture behind it. It circulated around the world and caused it. Didn't end the famine, but it produced an enormous tidal wave of public money donations. People trying to help. And sometimes we see that sometimes we see that images have the sort of effect and other times images just sort of like fall into the wayside. So the image of Alan Kurdi that, that child from the Kurdish child who drowned on the the beach, the Mediterranean, that image produced a huge amount of shock. But you know, European boat pushbacks, the kind of the policing of them is none of the basic problems have changed, and there's not great, you know, humanitarian funding is in crisis. It's it's always been in crisis, but it's, it's seems slightly more crisis at the moment than is historically the case. And so this question is always is this like how do I need to communicate my testimony? How do I need to tell you about something that's happening in a way that will kind of make you care and care not just in a financial sense, but care politically, right? What would I need to say to make people appreciate? And it's it's a wickedly hard problem. Part of it is kind of for the people. Speaking to what would I need to say to move you? What would I need to say this? You know what I said? Change your mind, and affect your conscience. But it's also there's a kind of fundamental communication question here as well, and this is back to that thing about context switch. Is that if? You are in Ukraine, right? And you're in the situation of of your villages being bombed or Russian artillery is destroying buildings so. How on earth would I ever communicate that to someone who has never had an experience of armed conflict, who may never have had an experience of personal violence? Really. Are there any words I could tell you that would kind of bring home the heart? Because there's this sort of, I suppose. I would say Pollyannaish, but the sort of the hope is that if one could get an audience to really understand how horrible war is, war would stop tomorrow. But it's it's a wickedly hard problem in communication, and maybe insoluble of how would I explain the reality? How would I put a reality into text or word or images such that you could ever even like approximate experience that you've never had. That's the, I mean, if someone could fix that problem, they're making people care about injustice and atrocity problem. I think I'd be out of a job, but I would also be delighted at that outcome.

NJ

I guess I. Suppose coming back to the emotional question of how to transfer the emotions experienced by people in in the field, so to speak, to people who are not.

RS

Exactly. Exactly.

NJ

Doctor Richard Stupart, thank you so much. That's been really fascinating and interesting topic and hopefully we'll hear a lot more from you here at the university. Thank you so much for that. It's a pleasure. Thank you so much for joining us. And thank you everybody for.

RS

Thanks.

NJ

Listening to this. Edition of research and focus, and hopefully you'll join us for the next one soon. Thank you and goodbye.