Researcher in Focus podcast, November 2023 with Dr Vera Slavtcheva-Petkova, Reader in Global Journalism and Media in the Department of Communication and Media.

# Transcript

NJ

Welcome everybody to this edition of the Researcher Focus Podcast from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences here at the University of Liverpool. My name's Nick Jones and I'm part of the Research and Impact team at the Faculty. And today I'm very pleased to be joined by Doctor Vera Slavtcheva-Petkova, who is a reader in global journalism and media in the Department of Communications and Media here at the Faculty. Today Vera is going to be taking us through some of her work and research on global journalism, its current state, the safety of journalists around the world, and how young people can become more involved and influencing the world of politics. So Vera, thank you very much for joining us, it's nice to meet you.

V S-P

Thank you for having me.

NJ

So first of all, just to get a general idea of what was it that got you interested in studying global journalism.

V S-P

Well, I used to work as a journalist myself in in Bulgaria and I also was the European editor, so. I I I did a lot of kind of travelling. So when I started my academic work, I felt that our field is very much dominated by a very kind of Western perspective on on journalism. Even when I was an MBA student. After having worked as a journalist, I was taken aback by some of the theories which did not talk account for the conditions in which journalists work, the challenges that they face. And we're very kind of normative, so I felt it is it was important for me to try in in my work to build our inclusive as possible and to really genuinely take into account the different contexts and also to try and bring on board colleagues from around the world, and the perspective of of journalists themselves, from the very start of any kind of research study, because we can only learn from that, rather than try to impose existing theoretical frameworks on context that are very, very different. We can actually enhance this by being more open minded to the situations on the ground and also the kind of the not just culturally, socially, politically, but also theoretically the potential for us to be in a better position to explain how journalists work, what role they play, and I, as I keep saying to my students, we have to always bear in mind that only 13% of people in the world live in countries where there is freedom of expression, so we cannot really understand what role they play in their societies or how their societies operate without taking all these circumstances into account. And this is what I've tried to do In all in all my work, both teaching and research.

NJ

So you mentioned you kind of inferred then you know like to de-westernise journalism studies. Could you tell us a bit more about what that means in practice?

V S-P

For me, uh, it means uh on one level, uh, to ensure that we do not see journalism as US UK journalism, but we we look at indeed the world of journalism. And that means empirically, obviously, looking at different practices and perceptions of journalism around the world, theoretically, being open to more kind of grounded theory approaches which accounts for these differences and build theory from the ground up. UM. And as I say in terms of uh scholarship and and teaching, ensuring that our students and our younger colleagues ae very well aware of this and when they work, be it on an essay or on a PhD thesis, they are able to provide this very well-rounded perspective, which is for the benefit of the whole academic community and beyond.

NJ

So to see things not just through the lens of our Western experience of how what journalism is and how news is made.

V S-P

Yes, exactly. And because we can. Or we would read very limited and very boring, if you want, findings, if we just take a framework that has been used for many years in in only certain parts of the world and try to impose it on a context. Say if I take the example of the journalist in Russia that I worked with, so I I did ethnographic work at Novaya Gazette, which is the newspaper with the highest number of killed journalists in Russia. And the editor, Dmitry Murata for a couple of years ago received the Nobel Peace Prize. As for the work that they do, so if you if you just go in there, talk to the journalists and look at them from the perspective of are they detached Watch Dogs? Well, the answer will be no, they're not. They don't want to be detached watch dogs. They believe that they would serve their country by being what we have conceptualised as critical change agents, which is basically journalists who want to see a different Russia to the one their political leader wants to have, so for that they have worked all their lives for the democratisation of of Russia, and that means, as many of them say, that for them this has become not a living but a way of life. They now cannot even do that anymore because they they run the risk of of being sent to prison straight away for just reporting the war in relation to the war in Ukraine. So that's why in a project like that for me it was more important to listen to, to to see what is going on and how we can conceptualise it rather than going on there, with the kind of normative view of journalism. Which might work perfectly well or not in a country like the UK. And then read the rather predictable conclusion that this is not the case in Russia. What does this adds to our understanding of the role of these journalists? Not much. So this is where it becomes important to to drive this effort to de-westernise the field.

NJ

OK. Thank you very much. You touched on it there in terms of journalism can be a deadly pursuit for lots of these people around the world and very dangerous depending on where they live or what they're reporting on and and currently at the moment, you know, with like you mentioned Ukraine and then what's happening in Israel and Gaza. There's a an escalation of conflict and perhaps slightly raised awareness for people who watch the news that it is journalists themselves, quite often in the front line as much as anybody else, though. Could you tell us more about the work you're doing in this around the safety of journalists?

V S-P

Yes. So my whole work in that area started with my work in in Russia, because where one of the things that was really striking there is that these journalists and this newspaper in particular, every day they would meet under the portraits of of their murdered colleagues because they felt that despite the danger that they were experiencing, the job that they were doing was important and worthwhile, but what struck me during that time is that every one of them had been subjected to various threats or physical attack beating letters. Online messages or or what have you, so I I. Started it when I. Started presenting this work. I started presenting it to UNESCO World Press Freedom Day events. Uh, and uh. When I joined a few years later, the world of journalism study what we realised is that the world of journalism study is the cross-National collaborative project involving currently over 300 academics in 120 countries. And it has been running since, from 2009, this is the third wave now, but up until this wave, we did not have any safety questions because when we say safety, many colleagues in this part of the world would say, well, this is not relevant to us. Journalists don't get killed here, they don't get beaten up. So why would we study this our argument? And I led this effort as part of the world journalism study as a working group that started working on the design of questions to be included in this representative survey. With, listen, we did that in collaboration with UNESCO, because our argument is that safety is not just about killing though that is important, as these are, it is, especially in this day and age, about online threats. It is about psychological, safety, mental health. Those are very significant and it is also about financial safety. So we argue that we need to be able to in order to kind of map what we call the hostile environment that journalists everywhere work in, we have to be in a position to to study there. The experiences of these kinds of threats, the support that they receive or do not receive and their coping mechanisms. So this is what I worked on and we are now at the stage where we will complete the data collection by the end of this year and we'll be able to present data across all countries taking part in in the study. And this is how I I started working with UNESCO. And we also realised that there is a lot going on in journalism research and there are also lots of NGO's working in that respect but it's very hard to find information in one place. It's very hard. Academics don't necessarily talk to people outside of academia, civil society organisation very often act upon anecdotal evidence that rather than kind of thorough research evidence, so we decided that it would be worthwhile to launch a one stop platform on journalist safety, which aims to bridge the gap between. All these different people and organisations that are all ultimately working to improve the safety of journalists worldwide, so we we did that, I lead that new platform which is called <https://safetyofjournalists.org/>, it is a joint project between us at Liverpool and the World Journalism Study and in collaboration with UNESCO and it, it has been very well received. We have over, I think, 150 civil society organisations that have shared their resources with on the website over 100 academics. So we have over 200 resources and when I say. It's worth it. What I mean is, anything from safety, for journalists to databases of killings and attacks, to academic studies on specific safety related issues, which many of them are in a language, translate it in a language that makes sense to non-academics.

NJ

Yes, and and part of that is are you briefly mentioned it there, you worked with UNESCO to create a index on journalist safety. So you mentioned some things there in terms of you know, either threats to life or financial issues or being abused online are those things that go towards the make up the index? That is what is, is that how you measure that that index?

V S-P

Yes. So this this work is in progress at the minute because the the whole idea behind the index came out of of the the the work we do as part of the world of journalism study through the representative service, we journalists in these 120 countries. So as part of that we developed the new conceptualization of safety, which is more holistic and which includes all of these elements. So we have 4 dimensions that we are measuring, which are the digital safety, physical safety, psychological safety and financial safety. And once we have the data at the end of this year, we we are aiming to compile this index across those four. And to be able to compare so run countries on the basis of their role kind of safety environment and on the basis of these dimensions because we also have quite a few questions on precarity in journalism. Which will go towards the financial safety aspect. We have questions on stream. On concern for physical and psychological well-being, things like that. So this is what we are working on at the moment, but obviously we cannot complete that until we have the data later this year or beginning of next year.

NJ

Exciting. Earlier you dropped the quite frankly boggling fact that only 13% of people around the world living countries have freedom of expression, which is incredibly low when you come to think about it. Now here in the UK, we like to think that we have a very free press. And I understand that we are much lucky, luckier than many others. But as someone who studies these things, where do you think the UK actually ranks? Are we as good as we think? Or perhaps not.

V S-P

Well, it depends who you compare yourself with, but if you look at the press freedom index that one of the big global NGO's compiles with input from some of my colleagues from the world, which is the Reporters Without Borders Press Freedom index. And the UK, I think it's currently 28th or some somewhere like that. So it's it's it's never been in the top ten as far as I can recall, it's usually between 25th and 30th place in the top. You have usually the Scandinavian countries, the Benelux countries and the environment there for journalism is much better. So there is much more transparency of in the availability of public information, the ethical codes work so the whole self-regulation system works like. I mean in the UK there have been so many issues as we know that kind of comments in the phone hacking scandal, but also when you read the Reporters Without Borders. Annual report about the UK they talk about the kind of the increase in legislation, restrictive legislation, which has been a trend in other countries as well on the grounds of national security. They talk about the high volume of complaints against the BBC and the kind of the questioning the impartiality of the BBC, which I think now, especially with the the current conflict in in those that would probably not again would would play a role in in that respect. So as I say, when you look at the comparison with countries from Eastern Europe or Africa, Asia. Some countries not all, of course. Of course, the UK fare is much better, but when you compare with European countries in particular. It does not fare that well.

NJ

Interesting. Yes. I had a feeling that Scandinavia were going to come out quite near the top of that list and lo and behold, they did yes so. Moving on slightly, could you tell us a little bit about your upcoming monograph, which is ‘young people, media and politics in the digital age’? And I think that looks a little bit how the role that media plays in young people's political socialisation.

V S-P

Yes, this is. This is based on a longitudinal study that I did over well, a 13 year period. So what I did this was very much inspired initially by my eldest daughter. I have four children myself, so that my daughter, who is now 23. I was sick at the time and she just said to me we have just arrived in the UK. And I was studying, I was doing an MA in the European Union of all topics, media, politics and society. And she said to me one day online and that was 2000 and six, 2007, she said, Mom is the European, is the UK in the European Union and and I said yes they are and she said, but how come they have a queen? And I thought, Oh, this is this is not something you would think about. You wouldn't think that the fact that the country is a monarchy would be in conflict with the the EU membership. And I thought it's. Really fascinating how how children can think differently and and make sense of the world in a different way. So this is what inspired my interest in in children and and and young people as citizens and the role that the media has in these perceptions, because when I questioned her on how she how she saw the European Union she was seeing, I think it's not very popular in in the UK, but in Bulgaria it was. It's a kind of drama about lawyers. And she was using an image from that kind of room where they meet as an illustration of what you felt the European Union was about. So this is how I thanked my work with, with, with young people, with children, there were 9-10 years old at the time and I thought. I then repeated the study to subsequent times with the same group of young people. So I started working with them when they were 9-10 years old. And then after Brexit happened, I went back to them and and did the same study, basically. And then when they became officially told a few years later, well, last year, actually, I did the the third one because I wanted to see first time how their political perceptions, how their perceptions of their nation of other nations, how their collective identities national European change with time, and how the media influence these perceptions, identities, knowledge in relation to also all the other factors and socialisation agents in in their lives. School, peers. Et cetera. So this is this is the thought is trying to provide a kind of again a more holistic look into moving away from this very linear explanation of how children and young people engage with the media to a more holistic, yet obviously complicated look at at the process.

NJ

Do you think the ever-increasing use of algorithm driven platforms like TikTok and Twitter and Instagram is shaping young people's political awareness or allegiances maybe?

V S-P

Everything plays a part in the process and it also depends what age they are, because when when they're young, like when I started with them at the age of 9, even though there there has been a lot of kind of Internet use already, it was highly unlikely that a young person would encounter much political content even, I mean, you know how the algorithms work. They wouldn't necessarily come across anything like that. So television was still the main way in which they would get political information. And this is very much mediated by their parents. Depends what the parents put on, whether they watch themselves, the news or any kind of current affairs programmes, what they put on the radio as well when they drive them to school. But with age, of course, these these changes. And and you you can see the role of TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, it's. And and and that's why I'm saying. It it is really, you cannot oversimplify how this process happens and let alone how it transforms into political engagement or participation from coming across certain content online in most cases inadvertently to deciding that you're interested in this topic and you would want to find out more about. To actually becoming active politically so it it it, it is quite a a process and I think it requires more work and I my one of my next ambitions is to launch an international project on this topic. About this link between media use and and political participation among young people with colleagues from from different countries, I started the new network a few months ago. With colleagues from 14 countries and we would be looking at how to best capture all that as well as the power of algorithms in the process.

NJ

A huge undertaking, I'm sure definitel. Now, I've been looking after online content for a long time and ‘never read the comments’ has been law for as long as I can remember but it appears for your next book coming out that you've done just that and gone and read the comments. Not just any comments, but comments about Trump himself. So could you tell us a bit more about that and what you found?

V S-P

Yeah, and now that was really fascinating for me because we I wanted to look again at countries where you wouldn't find many, if any, studies on online comments that's just about Trump. So I've had a few research assistants working with me and reading through comments about online about, first of all, Trump's election victory and then so some of the comments were from China, so they would be looking also at the trade comments about the trade war between China and the US, some were from Mexico there the issue was the the building of the Mexican Wall, which he made a big deal in his election campaign about. And then Russia, of course, where they started off with very high expectations about the reinvigoration of the relationship if you can call it that. And then there were lots of issues around the US meddling in, sorry, the Russian meddling in the US elections. So uh, it was interesting to see the different reactions in the different countries. And and how People talk to each other online. So in China, as you would expect, most of these were on message with depending on what the official line was and the official line with regards to Trump wasn't that clear up to a point, but it was also, for me, one of the most fascinating things is how people didn't did not talk to each other. So what you would see when you study online comments in this part of the world is a lot of kind of uncivil comments. People swearing at each other, attacking each other in China. They were not even acknowledging that somebody else has said something. They were just making their own points in relation to the article or to the issue without addressing the other commenters. At all, which to me was quite interesting and also puzzling. In Mexico, as you would expect, there was a lot of arguing. There was a lot of a lot of comparisons drawn and a lot of abuse at their own politicians and the way they have behaved, that have subserviently in the views of commenters towards Trump and Trump received a fair deal of support even in Mexico, which surprised me. There were lots of people who were saying, well, he knows what he's doing. He's a strong politician. Why aren't our politicians like? Him, things like that. So it was very interesting overall.

NJ

Well, thank you for doing something that I'm not sure I would have been able to do, but it's very interesting. Yes, the difference is in, in, in how these people talk to each other if not only just about the subject. Because I wonder if it's about, uh, perhaps, a fear of being observed maybe or monitored in China I suspect.

V S-P

Yeah, that that would play a big role. And you, you we saw Russia was kind of in the middle of of that with a degree of confrontation, a degree of potential deliberation. But also a lot of staying on on message as well. So yeah, we can, we can only establish as much by just looking at at the comment. But it was interesting because you could see some trends of trying to when there was the policy and the the official position was not clear. There was a lot more scope for commentators to kind of express their own opinion and and test it. I think in a way I don't know whether the Chinese state makes any use of that. But in a way. I saw it just kind of public opinion a a way of gauging public opinion to to an extent, before the finalising policy, so there was again, this is in the framework because we cannot, if we just dismiss them. Has living in an authoritarian state. What's the point of looking at them? We know what we would expect. Why study them? If we look through the these these lens, we are missing a trick there because there is still a lot going on and it's interesting to study and and try and conceptualise it.

NJ

Absolutely yes. If we don't look, we'll never know, yes. So across your research career, what do you think has been the most interesting thing that you've come across? The thing that's really stopped you in your tracks and made you do a double take?

V S-P

Yeah, I. Everything that I do feel feels interesting to me, but one thing that completely struck me is after we launched the safety of journalists platform, maybe within a week or so, I received an e-mail from a journalist, which was basically saying ‘save me’. So this is a journalist who has worked in Afghanistan, has written a lot about the Taliban and of course he could not stay in Afghanistan because it was too dangerous for him. So he flew. To Iran and is now seeking seeking help to basically, find safe refuge for himself and his family, and I managed through my kind of contacts with the NGO's to within hours to find a way to help him basically. So that was quite revealing. It wasn't what the platform was for. This wasn't the I've. I've never kind of even. When even when we were writing the press release about it and and and and our colleague asked me, what do you think would be the impact on for example, during this, the next time I felt very sceptical because I didn't think it will have such an impact because this was it was aimed at serving a different name really. So it was quite striking to me. And then when I thought about it, I thought, yeah, why wouldn't he? Because it's it. It's actually very difficult. In even in in that world, resources go into pressing issues and conflicts, so I can imagine now there would be resource invested and there has been for a while in in terms of supporting journalists from Ukraine or Russia, and now that would probably be a case of supporting journalists from Gaza, Israel, etcetera. But when a conflict like that, or when it's due to like the one in Afghanistan, is not in the public domain for a while. Or the political regime is not in the public domain. The reason it's not that easy for people to find support so that that was quite revealing to me.

NJ

Incredible. Yes. And I mean, you said it yourself as a piece of, you know, real world impact. It doesn't get much more life changing than that to be able to, you know, help an individual perhaps literally get away from a life threatening situation, which leads me nicely onto my final question. So thank you very much for that, Vera. What do you think you'd like to be the single most significant change to you'd like to see as a result of your research and the impact it might have?

V S-P

Yeah, improving the safety of journalists would be a very welcome change and I think also in terms of, I would probably pick two actually as the second one I would say if further down the line.

NJ

You can have two, that's fine.

V S-P

To realise the need to include the perspective of young people in everything that they do from the onset, that would also be very welcome change because what we have seen over the years is how much they struggle to find sustainable business models. They struggle to find ways to target the young people basically, especially to make political content relevant for them, and this is so important because we want young people to be involved, engaged in politics. It it it, it has been one of these things where the most simple solution has never really occurred to to people. So I think with more kind of my future ambition and looking into this cross National project again with both the academic and industry partners. I think it would be really good to to see about change.

NJ

Fabulous. Thank you so much. Vera. That's been really, really fascinating. And research that couldn't perhaps be more timely and pertinent to the things that happening at the moment. So thank you very much for joining me today. It's been a real privilege to talk to you. Thank you.

V S-P

Thanks very. Much for inviting me, it has been a pleasure.

NJ

Absolutely. My pleasure. So and thank you everybody to listening to us on our podcast today and I look forward to having you join us again soon for our next instalment of our Researcher in Focus podcast. Thank you and goodbye.