

On the importance of media freedom and protecting journalists

Delivered by Jeremy Bliss to the Society of Editors' 20th Anniversary Conference

12th November 2019, London

—

25th August, 2017 – march to attack - somewhere between Panyume and Kaya, South Sudan

The air pressure in the town seems to drop the day the attack is announced in the morning. The vacuum which once existed has been broken, but the spirit hasn't yet rushed in to fill it.

It went from daylight to darkness quickly and soon a sliver of moon had risen amongst heavy clouds. From dancing to darkness had taken only an hour. Now, we followed the silhouettes in front through the tall grass, down through the silent valleys with their heavy air and then up again where a cool breeze from the approaching storm made the grasses sway. It was silent except for the footsteps of 20 men. Dark, except for the moon, hidden now by clouds.

—

War is measured in absolutes. In men lost or killed, in towns taken or overrun. Politicians might play with the numbers - but we know the sadness of missing faces, the satisfaction of victory, the strength of sensations of a life lived on the cusp of death, a life that is itself immediate and of which we are conscious of the fatal absolutes that can always end it. We

also know the absoluteness of friendship forged in battle - the trust, and the absolute knowledge that you can turn for support to the person to your right or left.

In a world of absolutes, it's easy to lose sight of bigger truths. It's easy for politics to be more flexible than the ideals for which [people] fight.

—

Those words were written by my cousin, British-American journalist Christopher Allen, when he was embedded with the Sudan People's Liberation Movement in Opposition – the SPLM-IO. He was killed in the early hours of the next day, before he got the chance to file any reporting from South Sudan. Whilst Chris opined on the absolute nature of death and war, he neared his entry into the imprecise and obscure realm of politicised killings, the flexible politic about which he wrote.

Chris was only 26 when he was killed. He was a promising young freelance war reporter who had cut his teeth in Ukraine reporting post-Maidan. He was one of the first journalists at the site of the shooting down of the MH17 flight and snagged his first by-line in the Telegraph with his reporting there. He wrote variously for Al Jazeera, Vice News, the Independent, Le Monde Diplomatique and others.

South Sudan was the first conflict Chris was to cover in Africa, and when he was killed he was weeks into the longest embed any journalist had spent with the SPLM-IO. He wrote in-depth, slow news studies of war and he was likely ready to leave South Sudan after reporting on the battle in which he was killed.

Shortly before Chris was killed, two Reuters journalists joined the embed and they walked overnight to Kaya, one of the key border towns into Uganda. As the battle began, Chris followed one group of fighters, along with his appointed security person, and the Reuters journalists followed a different group.

The battle did not last long and Chris was killed probably less than forty minutes after it started. Chris appears to have been deliberately targeted despite being clearly unarmed and carrying only a camera. His deliberate targeting constitutes the basis of one of the war crimes for which we are now pursuing accountability.

Shortly after his killing, pictures appeared online of Chris dead and stripped naked in an affront to his dignity – evidence of a further war crime that must be prosecuted.

Chris' killing is one of many hundreds of thousands that have taken place in South Sudan, and he is one of at least 10 journalists who have been killed with impunity since the civil war broke out in December 2013. Chris is also one of 968 journalists that, according to Reporters Without Borders, have been killed globally over the past 10 years, with at least 415 of these killed in conflict zones, and at least 145 of these cases of freelance journalists.

When we campaign for justice for Chris, we are campaigning for all those he represents: those killed with impunity during South Sudan's ongoing civil war, which remains one of the world's most under-reported civil conflicts; the intrepid war reporters who continue to represent a high number of the journalists killed each year around the world; and the courageous freelancers who make up an increasing number of those reporting from conflict zones as media outlets become more risk-adverse about sending their own staff to such

places, but continue to benefit from reporting from those areas – reporting that remains in the public interest.

Chris' case is emblematic of the threats faced by journalists in many ways, but our campaign for justice has not been easy. Because he was a freelancer, no media organisation stepped in to assist our family or help campaign for justice. Because he was a dual national, he seems to have received less attention, not more, from either the US or UK governments. For more than two years, the very institutions that are meant to act for the protection of journalists and broader press freedom simply failed.

The killing was reported in the days that immediately followed, but quickly lost momentum. A year after his death I wrote about the difficulties in raising this case in the media or with governments. Only when Reporters Without Borders took on the case late last year, and subsequently enlisted the support of a team of barristers from Doughty Street Chambers, did the possibility of progressing our fight for justice become possible.

In the absence of an official investigation, the work of investigative journalists has proven crucial to our legal case and to the broader fight for justice. Sam Mednick and before her, Simona Foltyn, are the only two people to have investigated this killing. Ms Foltyn did an important job investigating the provable facts of what happened that day. Ms Mednick found soldiers involved in the firefight who confirmed they had seen that Chris was only taking pictures, and offered a convoluted argument about believing him to be a *white Congolese* and hence they shot and killed him. Ms Mednick had the autopsy report analysed and went to the area where Chris was killed – work that has been the most meaningful development in outlining the possible case for targeted killing. Recently, she herself was expelled from South Sudan – further indication of the dire state of press freedom in the country.

Media organisations have the capacity to guide this fight to end impunity – not least of all by pressuring governments to act in cases like this. However, it takes enormous work to pique the interest of editors in these stories; once in the door, there is perhaps some initial shock over the details of the story, and sympathetic overtures but then no replies -- and of course, no articles. Without the support of campaign groups like Reporters Without Borders, even getting a foot in the door can prove impossible.

Initially it was our family's responsibility to repatriate Chris' body. This was a massive challenge as we had no experience in South Sudan or East Africa generally, no experience repatriating bodies, and certainly no experience in orchestrating such an operation which required authorisations, lead-lined coffins, investigations, embalming and more. As reporting of the killing hit the New York Times and other big papers, the FBI eventually stepped in. This helped smooth the process of the return of the body.

Similarly, an increase in reporting on Chris' case around the two-year anniversary of his killing this past August – in direct response to our active pitching – helped us to gain traction with the FCO. But that brief increase in media interest has once again waned.

We are now constantly trying to raise the profile of Chris' killing in order that some official body steps in to investigate and then push the case forward to any relevant prosecution. The most galling and constant experience we have is talking to journalists and editors who have no idea about Chris' story, showing how far we have to go to make this a lasting agenda item.

If cases like Chris' disappear with no responsibility attached to them, there is little hope for journalists who are less connected to the Western media establishment and to countries that purportedly care about the protection of human rights and freedom of the press. The continued decline in these freedoms for journalists is an affront to our societies. If our media does not sustain attention to Chris' case, then his countries fail to pursue international justice, fail to investigate alleged war crimes and fail to sanction them when they are found to have occurred. The effect is that perpetrators can continue to kill as they please and we are less bound by our own rule of law. It becomes a natural outcome of this acceptance that journalist killings are somehow acceptable, that more follow, we have less truth, more dangerous governance and less freedom.

It is difficult to hear about cases like this; however, they represent the dire state of global media freedom. Here in the UK, we have the capacity to act. I am asking you to do so, to help our campaign for justice for Chris, and to ensure an end to impunity for the killings of journalists and better protection for them everywhere.