



Jess Hurd / Reportdigital.co.uk  
Migrant protest demands that the UK open the border at the Eurostar Calais Terminal on August 7, 2015.

## Reporting on Refugees: Tips on Covering the Crisis

By Jeanny Gering

**Journalists Alex Hannaford, Jess Hurd, Jason Parkinson and Raniah Salloum spoke with the Dart Center about the reporting challenges in covering stories of migration and refugees, and clinical psychologist Katy Robjant shared techniques for interviewing victims of trauma, as well as self-care tips for those covering the on-going crisis.**

There are 59.5 million forcibly displaced people worldwide – the highest number ever recorded. Half of the world's refugees are children. The war in Syria alone has caused the greatest mass movement of people since World War II. Numbers of this scale can be difficult to grasp, and make reporting on this international refugee crisis all the more challenging.

The Dart Centre's **Jeanny Gering** spoke with visual journalists **Jess Hurd** and **Jason Parkinson**, Spiegel Online's **Raniah Salloum**, freelance journalist **Alex Hannaford** and clinical psychologist **Katy Robjant** about the challenges of reporting stories about refugees and migration, among them, building trust, humanizing statistics and grappling with the role of being a journalist in the height of crisis. Below is a lightly edited version of their conversations.

**Jeanny Gering: How do you prepare yourself for these assignments?**

**Raniah Salloum:** I always try to imagine what might be particularly difficult about a story. Before my first assignment on the “refugee road” this summer, I assumed I would encounter desperate people in need of aid and I wouldn’t necessarily be in a position to do much. In the face of this, I feared the situation might become aggressive. But it turned out to be rather different.

People on the road have a goal in mind and despite all the hardships, they have hope. Sometimes difficulty brings out the best in people, and most were happy to chat with journalists. For them it was a moment of being seen as a fellow human being – not simply a “refugee.”

**Alex Hannaford:** I didn’t prepare especially in an emotional or mental way. The only preparation I recall was my past work. Reporting the migrant story in Mexico, for example. In terms of safety considerations, finding an interpreter and arranging access are key.

**Jason Parkinson:** I think it’s important to be aware of the immigration law in your own country, the countries you operate in and most importantly the countries where your material will be published. An innocent interview or photo could lead to the refusal of someone’s asylum application or worse – they could face violence or even be killed. Always make sure the interviewee knows where your footage will be aired and understands what the implications may be.

It is also worth reading up on any disease outbreaks so you can take precautions to minimise contraction or the chance that you’ll pass something onto others. Skin infections, influenza and diarrhoea are most common.

Always have a set timetable, even if you only plan the night before or the morning of. It helps to ensure you allocate time for yourself, to eat and to hydrate – carry enough water, rehydration tablets to replace lost salts, and high-energy food.

While on the job, it helps me to skip drinking alcohol. Given the trauma you absorb and how much of yourself you’re giving to the story, drinking even small amounts can increase exhaustion and depression.

**Jess Hurd:** We know that it’s going to be tough. We meditate, try to eat and sleep well. Stay alert, balanced and positive.

**JG: Katy, are there ways that journalists can prepare for covering a refugee story?**

**Katy Robjant:** A lot of it is common sense. If you’re healthy and looking after yourself, you will be able to better handle the situation. Knowing roughly what kind of stories you are going to encounter is also helpful. Bear in mind that what might upset you is likely to be a small detail that resonates with you very personally, rather than the overall magnitude of a story or its most severe feature. At that point, you should call someone you can talk to or check in with a colleague for support.

**JG: And how can we best support a colleague who has had a tough time on an assignment?**

**KR:** It’s about listening to people and being a genuine and empathetic person. You don’t take on the responsibility for that person, but it’s about lending them your ear. Most of the time that’s all they need.

It’s possible for a colleague to start to mirror symptoms of those they have been interviewing and get what’s called a “vicarious traumatisation.” They might withdraw from others, and become avoidant of any situation or conversation related to trauma. So check in with a colleague if you know that person is covering very difficult material.

**JG: Is there a difference between reporting on refugee stories and covering other stories?**

**RS:** More than in other stories, you will be a part of it. You won't be able to pretend you don't exist – especially if you have the language skills to communicate directly with people. Think about this beforehand: What is your role? What are your limits? When the time comes, it's important to be able to explain what you can and can't do for people.

Of course it's impossible to anticipate every situation. I try to keep an open mind when in the midst of it – and when in doubt I ask myself: What's the human thing to do? I don't want to be the person who didn't buy an exhausted family a few bottles of water because I convinced myself that this would be in conflict with my job.

**AH:** Reporting on refugee stories absolutely demands a higher level of understanding of trauma. A high number of refugees suffer from some degree of PTSD or mental health problems due to their trauma. So knowing a bit more about the effects and signs of traumatisation has been incredibly helpful for my storytelling.

**JP:** Refugee stories should be treated the same as any vulnerable person story. I have found that maintaining complete respect, showing kindness and knowing just a few simple words and customs of people's language can make all the difference.

**JH:** You cannot avoid the human tragedy when covering refugee stories. This is especially pronounced with the mass migrations we have seen across Europe, where we're covering what looked like biblical scenes.

The humanity that people retain in the face of such hardship – the compassion, generosity and humour – is inspiring. When we were on the Serbia-Croatia border, people were exhausted but so friendly and optimistic. In this context, it is difficult to see the counter position of authorities and the attitudes of some of our colleagues in the media.

**JG: Katy, from your point of view as a clinical psychologist, is there something different about the refugee story from other conflict stories?**

**KR:** The people you speak to as refugees could have been the people you were interviewing in a conflict zone several weeks or months earlier, so in many ways it's the same person just at a different stage of their journey. Refugees often show a greater level of resilience than those who are left behind and haven't managed to make it out of the conflict zone. Many are smuggled out of war situations or trafficked or have near-death experiences along the way, and I think there lies the difference in refugee stories; the journey in itself is likely to have included some form of trauma. A lot of our clients have PTSD because of what happened on their journeys. Many people we talk to have lost loved ones, which significantly increases the level of distress.

The other difference is that when refugees arrive here in the UK, or to other countries in Europe, they have the expectation that they are going to be safe. But that's not always the case. For example, if refugees are put in immigration detention centres, they are denied liberty and may experience trauma there, too.

Government processes to control immigration can also cause huge emotional distress. Processes related to claiming asylum – like Home Office interviews, giving evidence in court, reading refusal letters, not being believed and being housed in inadequate accommodations with little money – all of these things can contribute to the uncertainty of whether they will be allowed to stay, and when their fate will be decided.

**JG: What advice do you have for journalists interviewing someone who may have been traumatised during their journey?**

**KR:** A journalist should make every effort to give some control to the person being interviewed – interviewees should understand that they don't have to answer questions they don't want to answer, and that they can end the interview at any time. It's important to reiterate this as it can be difficult for traumatised people to trust others.

People who suffer from PTSD or similar mental health issues may be reluctant to talk about events that contributed to their trauma. This may mean that journalists won't get all the information they were hoping for.

Traumatised individuals will be more likely to talk about their experiences if they are given time to develop a sense of trust with the journalist. If possible, it is always better to arrange the interview over more than one session, or to give the interviewee the opportunity to follow up later.

During an interview you may touch on a detail that triggers a flashback or other intrusive memories. They might become distressed or dissociate and become unresponsive. You shouldn't expect yourself to know when this might happen – even as a clinician it can be hard to predict.

So if your interviewee has a strong reaction, you need to give them time to recover. In the interim, try to stay calm and keep your actions predictable. For example, don't jump up to open a window, fetch water, or try to help immediately. Instead, reassure the person that they are safe, remind them where they are and who you are, and ask what you can do to help. It's always best to ask permission or let the person know what you're going to do next.

**JG: Can you give an example of what it means to give my interviewee a sense of control?**

**KR:** Rather than asking open-ended questions about general events, establish with your interviewee that there is something specific you hope to speak about. Then ask them to tell you as much as they can about that event or topic. After they've given you all the information they feel comfortable sharing, it becomes your job to extract the salient parts. This is one way to avoid forcing your interviewee to talk about details they don't want to share or think about.

Interview people in a context that is very different from the situation they were in when they experienced a traumatic event, and keep bringing those differences to their attention, by saying, for example, "That was when you were back in Syria, and now we are here together in Greece." If you are in a room with them, it could be as simple as keeping the lights bright and making sure they have enough water to drink. Even strong smells, like fresh coffee, can help place them in the here and now. This helps with handling emotions and managing the interview

**JG: Are there signs of traumatisation that journalists can look out for when doing an interview?**

**KR:** Signs of emotional distress can be quite obvious. If they start to cry, if their breathing quickens, or if you notice they're looking at the door or around the room, it might be a sign that they don't feel safe. Or that what you are talking about is reminding them of the trauma in a negative way. You have to take a step back and ask them if they are okay to continue the interview, or if you can do anything to make them feel safer.

If your interviewee starts to complain that they're feeling very hot for no reason, or if they are zoning out and stop responding to your questions, that may be a sign that they are dissociating. So the best thing to do is to quickly try to reorient them. Keep talking. Ask things about the here and now such as, "Can you tell me where you are? Can you describe what the room looks like?" Those kinds of questions will be more helpful than general questions like, "Are you ok?"

**JG: What's been the most challenging experience you had reporting on a refugee story?**

**RS:** Witnessing flagrant human rights abuses and not being able to do anything but document the situation. Macedonian police were hitting refugees, including pregnant women. One of the women approached me furiously and started blaming me for not being able to stop the violence, for the ways the refugees were being treated.

She needed to vent and I was the only non-refugee around. Other refugees intervened, telling her that I was a journalist, not a government or UN representative, so there wasn't much I could do. Fortunately, her family came and comforted her and that calmed things down.

**AH:** Reporting on Robiel Habtom's story—a young Eritrean man who tragically drowned in the waters of the English Channel while trying to swim to a ferry in Calais. His journey was so difficult; crossing the desert he was detained in Libya and found love, only to lose his life on the last leg of his journey. I wanted to retrace his steps by speaking to friends, relatives, his girlfriend – all of whom helped me humanize someone who would otherwise have just become a statistic.

**JP:** The most difficult and time consuming challenge is to get people to trust you and to speak on camera. It's not a job like others, where you can just set up a camera, hit record and get your shots and sound bites. On any refugee story, 80 percent of my time is spent speaking with people and sharing some of myself with them so they understand that I see them as more than just a sound bite.

I want people to know I am reporting on this issue because I care. I find that this method takes a lot out of you personally, because you are dropping that barrier between you and the subject. It is mentally exhausting, which in turn leads to physical exhaustion. That is something to watch out for.

**JH:** It has been a tragic story to cover – you feel like you absorb so many traumatic stories.

There is an understandable distrust of the media, so you have to give a lot of yourself to gain trust, respect and access. For many years it felt like, apart from a few dedicated UK and local French activists, nobody cared. My partner Jason Parkinson and I were in Calais last summer during the peak of negative reporting about “swarms of migrants” entering the UK – language which deliberately dehumanised the refugees. For me that was very depressing. Having tried to bring the human rights issue to the attention of the British public for positive action and change, the story was now being told by journalists with an entirely different agenda. Refugees were pleading with us to help them, “Shoot me, or put me in your trunk,” one Syrian doctor said to me. I sought out positive stories from the “Jungle” and we were lucky enough to catch some collective actions which challenged the fortress that is the UK. But on your return, you are still left feeling a hollow despair. The media narrative did finally change with the tragic photograph of Aylan Kurdi, the child washed up on the Greek shore, and the explosion of solidarity towards the Calais refugees.

**JG: Katy, how can journalists balance the expectations of the people they meet and report on? How can we best handle the relationship between reporter and interviewee in tough situations?**

**KR:** The key thing is to be clear about what you can do and cannot do. It's helpful to set this frame for yourself before you are pulled into the distress of others to the point that you can't do your job anymore.

With psychologists this situation is well recognised – we take the aspect of how our work affects us to clinical supervision. You don't have that kind of setup within journalism, which is why it's so important to identify a peer group or even just a colleague who works in a similar area, and make the time to talk about your experiences.

**JG: What advice would you share with other journalists covering stories on migration and refugees?**

**RS:** See people, not “refugees.” Remember that the fundamentals of your job don’t change. Work with empathy and respect, not with pity or condescension. Reflect on your own biases. Don’t assume, ask. And don’t shy away from hard questions.

And pack lightly. You will be on the move a lot.

**AH:** Speak with other reporters who have covered the refugee crisis extensively, particularly those who have experience in interviewing refugees. Most importantly, have empathy.

**JP:** Treat refugees as you would want them to treat your family. Be polite, and compassionate. Don’t believe everything you read in the newspapers. Always keep an open mind and find out for yourself. That’s what journalism is all about, reporting your own findings, no matter what the public or government wants to hear. Anything else is just PR and propaganda.

**JH:** Read up on resources for ethical reporting and dealing with trauma. Treat people with compassion. Meet with like-minded colleagues to share experiences.

**JG: Katy, what else do you think journalists should look out for when covering refugee and migration stories?**

**KR:** Something that can be distressing for people being reported on is when terms like “refugee,” “asylum-seeker” and “migrant” are confused or conflated. Those situations are all very different – be aware that labels can be damaging and offensive.

Also, headlines like “Victims have been raped thousands of times” are obviously shocking, but don’t say anything helpful about the event or the people involved. This often happens with stories about trafficked women, for example. The focus becomes sexual exploitation, rather than a story about the complexity of the person, his or her experiences and the broader context.

For me, the more interesting story would be about recovery, how they might try to make meaning of what happened to them and their hopes for the future. Reporters should make an effort to focus on aspects that make a person stand out as unique, rather than one of a million who suffer. Those stories are more valuable for an audience, don’t fuel stereotypes and are more respectful to the person or people you are reporting on.

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**CONTRIBUTORS****Alex Hannaford  
2012 Ochberg Fellow**

Alex Hannaford is a British journalist based in Texas. He has written about the death penalty, crime, harsh sentencing, religion, culture and human rights issues for the Sunday Times and Sunday Telegraph magazines, The Guardian, GQ, Esquire, The Atlantic, The Nation, and the Texas Observer. He is a 2012 Dart Center Ochberg Fellow.

**Jess Hurd**

Jess Hurd is a photojournalist and campaigning photographer, supplying images and photo-essays to international newspapers, magazines, trade union journals and NGO's both commissioned and through her library Report Digital since the 90's. She has been a London

based freelancer since 2001, working with a broad range of campaigning organisations on social issues often inadequately covered by the mainstream press.

In the international sphere, she has worked at the global political grassroots – the uprising in Egypt, the Bolivarian revolution in Venezuela, the Zapatistas in Mexico and urban social movements in Brazil, India, China and Africa. Hurd is a passionate advocate of press freedom which has come under increasing threat in the UK. She is one of the founders of 'I'm a Photographer Not a Terrorist', a campaign against police repression.

She is a member of the National Union of Journalists and the International Federation of Journalists

***On the Refugee Beat:***

I've reported on the refugee situation in Calais since the mid 90's when there was a Red Cross camp at Sangatte. Initially I was working for a newspaper, then from 2001 as a freelance photojournalist. I covered the stories of refugees, why they fled their countries and their treatment by the authorities. Over the years different nationalities arrived, usually from corresponding wars. From an organised camp at Sangatte I have seen the situation deteriorate for refugees trying to enter the UK. Makeshift camps, living under bridges, squatting, evicted and beaten. I've also covered refugee stories in the UK and in other countries, including internally displaced people in Ugandan refugee camps and the vigilantes on the US and Mexican border.

**Jason Parkinson**

Jason Parkinson has been filming protests and unrest for the past ten years, with work spanning issues from anti-war, refugees, human and civil rights and press freedom to immigration, racism, fascism and terrorism. In 2011 and 2012, Parkinson was nominated news finalist in the Rory Peck Awards for coverage of the Egyptian revolution and the London riots. He also continues to write news features and opinion pieces. Parkinson studied at the London School of Journalism from 2001 to 2004.

***On the Refugee Beat:***

I have been reporting on the refugee situation in Calais, France, since 2007. In 2015, as the Hungarian border was due to be closed in September, I decided to travel and report on the refugee crisis from there and traveled through Serbia and Croatia to document where refugees would travel next. I have also covered refugee stories here in the UK since 2006, reporting on situations inside Immigration Detention Centres, including violence against detainees and on occasion the deaths of detainees.

**Katy Robjant**

Dr Katy Robjant is a Consultant Clinical Psychologist and is currently the Head of Therapy Services at the Helen Bamber Foundation, an organisation which supports survivors of human rights violations. She provides specialist psychological therapies for the treatment of mental health problems in asylum seekers and refugees. Her research interests include the psychological impact of immigration detention on asylum seekers. She is a member of VIVO International and conducts trainings in Narrative Exposure Therapy both within the UK and internationally including in Sri Lanka, Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda and Ukraine.

**Raniah Salloum**

Raniah Salloum joined Spiegel Online as Political Editor in May 2012. Prior to joining Spiegel, she was Political and Foreign News Editor at the Financial Times Deutschland. Salloum studied politics and economics at Sciences Po and Cornell University, before attending the Henri-

Nannen Journalism School. She has also worked at Taz and Sueddeutsche.de.

***On the Refugee Beat:***

I've mostly been covering the Middle East since 2011, which quickly meant reporting on refugees. First, the situation of Syrians in the neighboring countries, and then the stories of Syrians coming to Germany. In 2015, I was covering the situation on the Greek islands of Kos and Lesbos. I also followed refugees, mostly from Syria and Iraq, on their way from Greece to their final destinations via the Balkans.