

Conference 2014 Speaker Series: An Interview with Alice Ross

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Ahead of the Polis Annual Journalism Conference on Friday March 28th, we are interviewing some of our speakers. Alice Ross leads [The Bureau for Investigative Journalism's](#) work on drones. The [Covert Drone War project](#) is based on [a database](#) of all known US drone attacks in Pakistan, Somalia and Yemen, providing details of the number of strikes in each country and estimate numbers of those killed, including civilians.

Alice will speak in a session on investigative journalism today. Free tickets, as well as information on our line-up, are available [here](#). Our keynote speakers are Alan Rusbridger, Editor of the Guardian, and Ian Katz, Editor of Newsnight.

Interview by Polis reporter Emma Goodman.

Do you think that transparency could be described as the “new objectivity”?

One thing that I would say about transparency is that it's easier to measure: it's easier for people to assess how transparent you than it is for them to assess really how objective you are. And it's certainly a more obtainable goal than objectivity, because objectivity is a concept, whereas transparency is more of a process. I would say it's certainly more realistic for human beings to be transparent than to be truly objective.

I imagine it's hard to be objective about the kind of work that you do?

You can aim to be balanced. At the end of the day, with the drones project, we are writing about targeted killing, and you are going to have opinions about that one way or another. You're going to have opinions about whether you think that is a proportionate and necessary response to the threats, and whether you think that it is an acceptable response for a government to make. But, you can certainly aim for balance and you can certainly acknowledge the circumstances and the fact that these are hard decisions that governments take.

There are also certain aspects of the way drone warfare is portrayed that we would contest, for example this notion you hear a lot that it's video game warfare: that pilots are just sat playing video games. Even though our work is widely viewed as being anti-drone, there are aspects of anti-drone rhetoric, like this, that we would contest.

Is transparency even more important because of this?

Yes, we absolutely strive to be transparent in terms of demonstrating where we've obtained our information. Particularly because the drones database is at its foundation a project of aggregation, so we start understanding drone strikes and drone warfare by gathering together everything that we can about each specific incident that has been reported. We are not there observing the drone strikes ourselves, and actually very few journalists are there, so it's absolutely critical that we demonstrate to people where the information has come from, and how we've reached the conclusions that we've reached. It's also important to us that other people could replicate our findings if they wanted to by looking at all of our sources and replicating that with our counts and our tallies. Transparency is really important for all of that: it's a key aim for us.

You are working in an inherently non-transparent area: what are the particular challenges that come with this?

The lack of official transparency is one of the core reasons that we do what we do. As a journalist, I wouldn't regard the work we do as campaigning, except that we find it completely legitimate to campaign for official transparency



about these deaths and so on and that's completely key to the drones project. If we were going to lobby for anything, it would be transparency.

With regards to issues around that in our own work, it's not always straightforward: it's not always as simple as putting everything you can into the public domain. We've had long conversations about redactions in particular. So for example, there was [a document we published a couple of months ago showing the Pakistani government's own estimates of a number of drone strikes](#). We had previously published a section of this document, from 2006 – 2009, in full. We then obtained the rest of the document when I was in Pakistan, up to September 2013, and this had a number of people's names in it – names of homeowners – and we thought very long and hard about whether we should publish those. In the end, after discussing it with a number of local journalists and researchers, we ended up coming to the conclusion that although there's clearly a transparency benefit to putting the information out in full, at the same time, publishing the names of people whose houses have been hit, might, for example, give local military groups the idea that these people had been speaking to the government and therefore put them in danger.

It's a balancing act from the point of view of the need to be transparent, and the need to protect people. And we came down on the side of protecting people. We went back and redacted the previous document as well – they were cases that had happened a long time ago so we were more comfortable with it, but once you start redacting, you redact all of the names.

When you think about accountability in your work, who do you think about yourselves as accountable to?

We are accountable to our readers who follow and share our work. We are accountable to the people whose stories we tell, the people we report on. We are also accountable to our sources, to represent their views fairly and accurately. Those would be the key groups.

Do you believe that online comments and social media are increasing transparency and accountability in journalism?

Yes, I would say that they certainly help to keep this at the front of reporters' minds. There was a time when you would publish a story and you might hear about it in the letters page a couple of days later, but now, you publish a story and people can – and will – tweet directly to you with comments and critiques, questions and accusations (or compliments – people are extremely generous as well.) That immediate response, and the fact that that response comes directly to you, reminds you very strongly that your work doesn't exist in a vacuum.

We respond to people on social media, we engage with people. It's really important to engage with people who get in touch.

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