the bureau of investigative journalism

Agnès Villette in conversation with Meirion Jones

Its name sounds fictive, as if taken from a thriller novel, or a 70s noir movie. But the work the Bureau of Investigative Journalism is conducting seems more important than ever before, in a time particularly suffused with what has been dubbed 'fake news'. The journalism landscape has moved from broadsheet, in-depth articles to fast-spinning Internet news; the 16 writers of the Bureau, however, search for stories that have become difficult to investigate only with mainstream media. Their stories take time and money to research and develop, antithetical to the turning roulette of click-bait headlines. Created in 2010 by former Sunday Times reporter Elaine Potter and her husband David Potter, founder of the software company Psion, the Bureau was inspired by New York ProPublica, a non-profit news organisation founded by philanthropists. It's an independent, non-profit organization based in London, publishing stories in collaboration with mainstream media. Articles written by Bureau members can be republished without charge for non-commercial purposes, and have uncovered and unpacked incidents ranging from vulture funds siphoning money out of poor countries, to the US drone war against Islamists, death by antibiotics resistance, Europe's missing millions, and binary options fraud. Their stories speak of a complex world in which truth is ever more difficult to establish, reportage so often dovetailing with the craft of fiction – which, for DUST 11, is just what we speak about with Investigations Editor Meirion Jones.

Agnès Villette / Do you see the Bureau as a form of resistance in a world where fake news, misinformation and data manipulation are getting more common?
Meirion Jones / We would not see ourselves as part of the resistance, but as producing the objective facts that can be used by the people for resistance. Our agenda is to uncover what is secret, what is going on behind the scenes, to put in light the wrongdoings of companies and governments. Regarding being part of the resistance, I don't think it's a journalist's job to do that. Our way to resist is to find and tell the truth.

How does the Bureau of Investigative Journalism distinguish itself from mainstream media? I understand it has to do with how you're funded, and how you approach investigative journalism.
We are not under commercial pressure to deliver content quickly and at all cost. Because we are funded by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust and other donors, we've got time to work on stories, and really develop them properly. In particular, we are very strong on what we call 'the right to reply'. We put out allegations and leave plenty of time to the people, companies, or governments we are accusing of wrongdoing to respond. We think that, by acting this way, we can find out more. Independent non-profit journalism is much more common in America than in Europe. Over there, organizations like ours have been going for a number of years. Frankly, there are far more internet billionaires who are looking for toys to put some money into. In any case, it's not going to replace the mainstream media. It's just hopefully boosting the merit of investigative work that can be done. It's mainly about sharing information with mainstream or international media, broadcasters or national newspaper, in order to get the right audience.

Money is at the core of the game for independent journalism, more so now that so many newspapers have disappeared. Would you agree?
Yes. Mainstream media are under terrible pressure, as Google and Facebook take all the advertising and put a huge squeeze on the rest of journalism. The trouble with investigative journalism is that it's risky and potentially expensive. You cannot be sure that every story is going to bring something solid. You can waste a lot of effort. Therefore, it's the first thing which is dropped by papers. We have been developing some stories for several years. Particularly the drone project which has been going on since 2010: we have people with huge expertise on those areas, and the Bureau has been investigating the US's drone wars, distinguished from and subsequent to the drone hunting of al Qaeda and its allies around the world. It soon became clear that, in the absence of official transparency on where and when the drones were striking, and who they were killing, the Bureau was going to have to build its own datasets of strikes and casualties from scratch. In 2011, we released our Pakistan database, compiled from thousands of news and NGO reports, government documents, and interviews with sources on the ground. Our Yemen and Somalia datasets came the following year, and, in 2015, we started tracking US air and drone attacks in Afghanistan. In June 2016, there came a long-awaited announcement by the White House. Figures revealing the number of people killed by drone strikes were released – a move towards transparency, which US government insiders said was a direct response to continued pressure from the Bureau and other organisations that used our data.

How do you get people to understand what you are doing, which is different from mainstream media?
Currently, we do it through our website. At the moment our objective is to increase

our profile through newspapers, so that people come across our name and hopefully click through the link to the Bureau to see what we're up to. Gradually, we are getting the message out there.

I read several stories on your website, about health and care centers in Britain, military contracting, and the antibiotics scandal. How do you decide on a specific story?
The huge fraud we have been looking at in recent months, for instance, on binary options trading, started with a contact from a whistleblower. Basically, binary option trading is sold as a quick and simple investment opportunity promising average returns of up to 90%; thousands of Brits are pouring money into it. But industry data and legal documents seen by the Bureau show more than three quarters of those who sign up lose all their money – and as little as 3% of investors make any profit at all. The whistleblower came to us with tremendous contacts, huge files and an enormous amount of information. We had to decide if we would go after the story, and we went for it. Sometimes it's an opportunity that just comes up like that. Obviously we built expertise over time. The story about the Yemen drones has been appealing to us, as it broke just after President Trump came to power. It was the first raid on Yemen during which a US Navy Seal officer was killed, and a $70 million Osprey aircraft was destroyed, though the narrative served by the Trump government insisted it was a success. But we were able to show that nine children under the age of 13 have died, and we were able to name them. The raid was on a village in rural Yemen, reportedly aimed to capture or kill Qasim al Raymi, one of the world's most high-profile terrorists, and deliver a stinging blow to al Qaeda in the Arab Peninsula. But there are far more stories coming to us that we end up having to turn down.

As a lot of these informants and whistleblowers are being prosecuted, how do you protect your sources?
We have an absolute commitment that we would rather go to prison than betray our source. We are very careful to protect them. I have been an investigative journalist for years; before joining the Bureau, I worked at the BBC, so I'm used to dealing with sources. In fact, it's a policy not so different than that followed by much mainstream media. Unfortunately, a lot of alternative media have been very naive in how they deal with whistleblowers, and have exposed them to risks. From that point of view, we are coming from an older culture, in which you absolutely protect your source, at any cost.

What is the difference in ethics and spirit between the Bureau and mainstream media?
The greatest difference is the management structure: I have a Managing Editor, Rachel Oldroyd; myself, I am the Head of Investigations. It's a very short management structure. In contrast, the BBC has massive amounts of management. When I was making the film about the fake sheikh [Mazher Mahmood] for Panorama in 2014, there were four people above the level of the editor for the program, who were all interfering with the script, trying to change things. It's just very difficult to change working methods in that climate. The story was about the ex-*News of the World* undercover reporter Mazher Mahmood, whose investigations had been dishonest. Mahmood unsuccessfully tried to get an injunction to stop Panorama broadcasting, and the program was delayed twice before finally being transmitted on November 12th, 2014. Following

the program, the Crown Prosecution Service announced that they would reinvestigate 25 cases where people were convicted on Mahmood's evidence, and he was convicted in October 2016 of conspiring to pervert the course of justice. Ultimately, he was sentenced to 15 months in prison. Also, one thing that's different is that we have a sharing culture. All our information is free of access, open data, and can be used by other media. But this has always been in the DNA of journalism. When I researched the oil company Trafigura, which was poisoning people in Ivory Coast by dumping toxic waste, I worked with the Guardian, Norwegian broadcasters, Dutch campaigners, and a whole range of people. We all got together and traded information between ourselves in order to put a much bigger picture out there.

The BBC is also tied by the way it's funded, by a licensing fee, correct?
People often say the BBC is biased. I would say the underlying bias of the BBC is in favor of whoever is in government. It's the government that sets the license fee; so whether it's conscious or unconscious, the BBC tends to support the British government at that time, whoever it is.

The financial independence of the Bureau seems quite vital in this time of fake news. In a recent conference you held, the former Sunday Times editor Sir Harry Evans said there's no such thing as 'fake news' – rather, the stories are just straight-up lies.
The underlying current at the moment is to say that all news are just opinions, that facts that have been carefully established are no more important than a viewpoint. Take the chemicals weapons attack in Syria for instance, to which the American retributed with the bombing of a governmental army base. I think anyone who looked at this would come to the conclusion that it was an attack by the Syrian government dropping sarin on a town. Yet there is an alternative version: it was an ordinary bomb hitting a warehouse full of chemical weapons that had been made by the rebels. Both versions were given as much credence, providing them with an equivalent level of truth. And that's happening more often than ever, such as the story about Trump's inaugural speech and the number of people in the audience. It was very obvious from pictures that not many people turned up compared to Obama's inauguration. And yet, it was stated as a fact that there were more supporters. It is this ability to ignore concrete proof, and to put out an opinion that takes on the equivalent strength of a proven fact, that is so troubling.

In an era where the vehicles of information-sharing have moved from content and text to images and shallow opinions, it seems really difficult to educate the readership on distinguishing between truth and lies. How can one address this problem?
We're trying to bring back trust in information and media, but there are huge commercial pressures working in the opposite direction. In local journalism in Britain for instance, most of the smaller papers were taken over by big centralised outlets, who are telling journalists to just get more clicks. Unless they produce 17 stories a day and people click on those stories, they get sacked. So the journalists are being pushed towards stories that have immediate appeal, and they may not be so worried whether the story is exactly true or not. This is having a damaging effect, and it's spreading through the national media, too. Regarding the election of Trump, and Brexit, expert opinions were rejected in favor of simplistic stories.

It is a Kafkaesque story that brings us back to the issue of funding.
One of the problems is that newspapers should have set up their own platforms to share revenue amongst themselves from the number of readers who came to their news stories. Instead, it's Google and Facebook who are in charge of advertising. News stories are being used to generate advertising, but none of that revenue is going to the newspapers.

I understand that Google counts as one of your grant donors though.
Yes, we received £500,000 for three years towards the Bureaus local journalism project in the UK. We are trying to finance data journalism that can be made available to local journalists. It's in its very early days, with a team of four writers tackling stories about the health system, the police, and public services.

It's very clear that you want to initiate change. Therefore, assessing the impact your stories might have seems to be of real importance to you.
We are actually just developing a tool to help us assess impact, which is totally new. We do it through data tracking. The BBC was also known for how its journalistic investigation had impact. For instance, I did a story about fake bomb detectors that were sold to Iraq and probably killed 2,000 people. Eventually, we got them banned, and we got the British businessman who made them imprisoned. One person is still in prison now. On subjects like vulture funds, which were suing the world's poorest countries, we initiated laws to be changed through the courts. I do not think it's enough to just publicise stories, you have to create the ammunition people can use to take on that injustice or wrongdoing.

Concerning the drone story, I understand that it requires a specific method of research, and time-consuming attention to data and military encrypted information. Is this moving journalism away from the more traditional approach of people on the ground conducting interviews?
It's a combination of skills. During the Iraq war, we researched illegal CIA bases in Europe where prisoners were secretly moved in order to get interrogated and sometimes tortured. The Iraq war logs were 391,832 classified US army field reports leaked to WikiLeaks. Crofton Black, one of our investigative journalists, created a database that tracked Pentagon spending and army planes. When the army released the information, it was done in a way that was incomprehensible; Crofton designed a program that made sense of it, and we could then corner Bell Portinger PR company, which offers lobbying services to governments and rich individuals. Bell Portinger was hired by the Pentagon to work in Iraq against the interests of al Qaeda for the sum of $540 million. We were able to prove that it made fake terror- and news-style-videos, but to do so we had to approach lots of people who worked for the PR company to persuade them to speak. It's the combination of database skills and old-fashioned personal skills that actually persuades people to trust you and tell you their story.

Data being now more important than ever, the sheer amount of it gets problematic to store and difficult to access. Does it make your work more difficult?
Yes, but as we know, there are leaks: Panama papers, WikiLeaks, and so on. So there is potential for huge swaths of data to leak in one go. It's all swings and roundabouts, it works both ways.