

[00:00:00] **Swathi:** Hey, Tamsin.

[00:00:05] **Tamsin:** Hey, Swathi.

[00:00:06] **Swathi:** I was wondering, where do you get the news about what's happening around the world?

[00:00:10] **Tamsin:** Usually just places like TikTok, Instagram, occasionally Facebook, and sometimes I put on the news, but not very often.

[00:00:16] **Swathi:** Interesting. I get my news from Instagram, but I was just thinking, like, wherever you get your news from, like, have you ever stopped to think about, like, how those stories are told and the impact that might have on the way you think about the topic and the people involved?

[00:00:29] **Tamsin:** Not often, but our guest for this episode is someone who really thinks a lot about these things.

[00:00:35] **Dr Nour Halabi:** Hello, my name is Nour Halabi and I am a lecturer at the University of Aberdeen. I am in the School of Social Science, in PIR, which is Politics and International Relations. And I also do work on what's called political communication, so the sort of interplay between politics and media and journalism.

[00:00:56] **Swathi:** Welcome to Beyond Boundaries from the University of Aberdeen. I'm [00:01:00] Swathi.

[00:01:00] **Tamsin:** And I'm Tamsin. For this episode, I've been speaking to Dr Nour Halabi about her work researching the role that media plays in our everyday life.

[00:01:08] **Dr Nour Halabi:** One aspect of how I do that is studying how media portray the issue of immigration, how media play a role in informing the public, in educating the public, in talking about policies, in talking about who the immigrant is, because oftentimes in your daily life, you might not be encountering an immigrant or you might be encountering an immigrant and not knowing that they are an immigrant.

[00:01:35] And so a lot of what I work on is what does media do in your everyday life? What impact does it have? What sort of consequences are there for the way we do certain things in the media sphere, the way things are portrayed, whether it be entertainment - so some of the stuff I do looks at

television shows, specifically fictional television - or it [00:02:00] could be journalism.

[00:02:00] So some of the stuff I do looks at the top sort of newspapers of reference, um, in the United States and in the UK, and how they represent issues. Some of it is film. So it's really versatile in terms of how you think of media and its role.

[00:02:15] **Tamsin:** So it focuses on immigration. What does that actually mean? Who would be classed as an immigrant?

[00:02:21] **Dr Nour Halabi:** The definition of “immigrant” in immigration studies differs greatly from how it is treated in what we call vernacular, everyday life, right? So an immigrant technically in sort of legal and research terms is someone who arrives, intends to settle, is building a life, and there are many categories to immigration, so there's something called an economic immigrant.

[00:02:46] There's other ways of categorising immigration as well in terms of voluntary and involuntary. So you have the person who arrives of their own will and is coming in a very different sort of position and [00:03:00] degree of empowerment or disempowerment *vis a vis* the society they're entering versus when you are what's called an involuntary migrant or a forced migrant.

[00:03:09] And that includes asylum seekers and refugees. That's a category where you didn't choose to leave. Your push factor, what's called a push factor in migration, is something you couldn't control: aspects of your identity - it could be your religion, it could be your sexual orientation, uh, your race. You could be, for example, subject to a form of ethnic cleansing. So we see that, for example, with Rohingya refugees. So there are many push factors in involuntary migration, but they often do not have anything to do with anything the person has done themselves. Um, and so they have less control. And as a result, they're really dependent on how, what we call a host society, how they encounter them.

[00:03:55] I talk a lot about this issue of the power imbalance between a [00:04:00] population that lives in a place and the immigrant who arrives there, and how do we encounter this power imbalance? Do we abuse it or do we try to find ways to empower others and to mutually find ways to build each other and to work well with each other?

[00:04:19] **Tamsin:** How does the media play into that power balance?

[00:04:21] **Dr Nour Halabi:** We use these expressions in journalism around how scandal sells or how sensationalism sells. And so oftentimes a pattern that gets repeated is good news gets covered a lot less. We talk about that a lot in sort of journalism studies side of things: how, you know, if something positive happens in the world or the million times something goes well, we're not going to celebrate that and write a new story about it.

[00:04:50] And so oftentimes we are overly sort of engrossed in negativity because of what ends up [00:05:00] getting categorised as newsworthy.

[00:05:02] **Swathi:** I think personally, I, I do sense a bias in the media, like there's a lot of emphasis on the negative news. That's why I kind of specifically followed a page on Instagram that kind of has positive news, is because it's too much to be bombarded with a lot of negativity and the news around sometimes.

[00:05:19] **Tamsin:** So do you find that the news affects your mood?

[00:05:21] **Swathi:** I think it does because I get quite overwhelmed seeing all the news around. Sometimes there's a lot of events that happen and I can't even control any of that and that's quite overwhelming for me.

[00:05:31] **Tamsin:** Yeah, it feels like we have no power a lot of the time.

[00:05:34] **Dr Nour Halabi:** So media plays a role in that. There are patterns of exacerbating emphasis on difference, emphasis on "this group of people is distinct. They're not like us. One person amongst them did something negative, and that must mean that all their people are the same". Media plays a role as well in dehumanising people. [00:06:00] And what do we mean by dehumanisation?

[00:06:01] Because I think many people don't know what that term means. Think of your daily life. How do you like to be seen as a human? You would like people to address you by your name. You'd like people to know what you look like. You'd like people to understand your interests. Because then they understand you as a full human being.

[00:06:22] And we talk a lot in media studies about intra-group diversity versus inter-group diversity, meaning that within a group, the inner group is far more different than you would think. Think of a university campus. The students are very different from one another. They all have different interests.

[00:06:41] It's a whole vibrant world. But if you were to flatten them and dehumanise them into an "Aberdonian student", well, what does that mean? And so it erases that humanity of the individual. So oftentimes what happens with media is they are prone to the same patterns. And so there [00:07:00] is a lower likelihood of humanising the immigrant.

[00:07:04] **Tamsin:** And Nour believes that this lack of humanising stories about immigrants means that people often misunderstand what their reasons are for migrating, or for becoming a refugee.

[00:07:13] **Dr Nour Halabi:** No one wakes up in the morning and goes, "you know what I want to do? I want to make a very dangerous journey across the sea". No one does that because they want to. People do that because they have no other options. So it's important that we speak to them and understand and think about ways in which we can see ourselves in them as human beings. So your work branches into the hospitality that the immigrants, like, receive when they're here. Can you tell us more about that?

[00:07:42] I work on hospitality as an ethical concept, and what I try to do is ask the question, how would this conversation be different if we thought that ethically we would like to reframe it as a [00:08:00] conversation on hospitality? So for example, the starting point when I was writing my book was a presidential debate, where the very famous journalist was asking the two candidates, "how will you deal with the *issue* of immigration?"

[00:08:20] And if you think of the entire conversation reframed from a standpoint of hospitality, then this conversation of thinking about immigration as a problem that needs to be solved becomes entirely deconstructed, um, and instead I ask myself, what does the degree of hospitality that we show someone tell us about who we are, what the values of the receiving society are, what we stand for as a nation, what our definition of nationalism is, what our communities stand for, how our [00:09:00] community is held together.

[00:09:02] And it's really important because when you encounter difference, it reveals things about social cohesion that are really important for everybody involved to be healthy and our communities to be healthy, as we saw, for example, very recently with the events where a false anti-immigrant narrative resulted in riots that really harmed communities across the UK.

[00:09:30] And we see this exact manifestation of the degree of hospitality shown towards people who are seen as guests or outsiders reveals things about who we are as a nation, how our communities are held together, what we feel

we owe other human beings, regardless of where we come from. Do we feel that we have a responsibility to take care of each other?

[00:09:57] Do we feel like we have a responsibility to not harm [00:10:00] each other? Do we feel like we have a responsibility to not harm each other's property and belongings, not throw things at one another? These are really important aspects of one manifestation of how we encounter the other reveals these deeper things about us and who we are. And when it deteriorates, what it does is it reveals what we are willing to accept for another human being, and it reveals a very slippery slope of where we start to draw the lines of who is my "outsider"?

[00:10:34] And so if we accept a certain treatment for a certain human being, we slowly begin to justify that towards anyone who defends them. We slowly begin to justify that towards, um, anyone who stands in our way, in our opposition of them. Um, and so we saw, for example, um, a manifestation where, uh, police officers who are trying to [00:11:00] contain a very sort of visibly anti-immigrant but also violent protest were, um, attacked, and that reveals things about what happened there.

[00:11:12] **Tamsin:** In a way, it makes you wonder whether the people who were part of these riots have ever actually met a refugee or an immigrant and had the chance to talk to them as if they were human. That difference that Nour is highlighting, surely that would go out the window as soon as they actually got the chance to have a conversation, because they're all real people.

[00:11:31] So because of how the media are portraying these people. That's the opinions people are forming of them. So it's like a fed bias in a way.

[00:11:40] **Dr Nour Halabi:** Hannah Arendt, who's a very famous philosopher, who mostly worked on the aftermath of the Holocaust, had this really important idea of the moment we accept something for someone else, we accept it for anyone.

[00:11:56] There's a very slippery slope of when and where we begin [00:12:00] to draw the lines of who belongs in society and who doesn't. Her focus was, of course, on Jewish people in Germany, and how eventually the definition of what it meant to be German, uh, began to exclude Jewish people. And so that, that's sort of part of that dynamic and it really inspires my work is, what role does media play in emphasising difference?

[00:12:24] What role does it play in showing who we are, in portraying people who look different in a way that either evidences our welcome towards them and our understanding, or evidences our exclusion of them, and through the exclusion that we're showing what we expect is okay for anyone who we've drawn the line and thought, "okay, well, this the difference I'm not willing to accept".

[00:12:53] **Tamsin:** But the fact is that a lot of people *do* have concerns about immigration, and for lots of different reasons. Of course, there's some outright [00:13:00] racism which should never be condoned. But lots of people are also affected by issues like poor housing, poverty, unemployment, illness. Some people might say that it's just not fair to expect them to offer hospitality to people who migrate here, when they're already struggling themselves.

[00:13:15] **Swathi:** It's definitely a widely held concern, and it's something Nour thinks about a lot.

[00:13:20] **Dr Nour Halabi:** It's a very valid question. What you're bringing up is, A, this is all wishful thinking and really positive, you know, hunky dory, "the world is beautiful" kind of language. When I speak about hospitality, I'm not speaking about charity, which is different.

[00:13:38] But this idea of, how can you show hospitality to anyone coming in when the current population feels this besieged, this sort of, um, crunched? I think, um, the cost-of-living crisis across the UK and around the world, but to a greater extent here, objectively, if you look at the data, [00:14:00] is a very difficult circumstance to be going through.

[00:14:03] I think they have legitimate concerns around cost of living, around the sort of the overall difficulty of their lives, and the general sense of displeasure and unhappiness over where someone thought they would be at a certain stage in life and where they actually are. And I think coupled with that, there is a misunderstanding about immigration.

[00:14:28] There's what's called misinformation going around about immigrants coming in and receiving, you know, it's "land of milk and honey". Immigrants are coming in very often - especially, let's talk forced migrants at the very least - they're coming in and they're looking for safety. They're looking for what we call in research, "bare life".

[00:14:48] They're looking for the ability to live. And oftentimes, actually, the rules are very restrictive about what they are entitled to. They're entitled to just

enough to be able to stand [00:15:00] on their own two feet and figure out for themselves. They're coming from situations of war, of conflict, of ethnic cleansing, of, um, violence, whether gendered or, you know, all these different dynamics going on.

[00:15:16] Um, and so they're often just looking to live. They are not, in many ways, in competition with the population, although they are portrayed to be oftentimes by the media, because they're not really receiving the things that people think they are. That said, I do think that there's a missed opportunity here.

[00:15:36] Part of hospitality is that you receive your guest and think, what do you have to offer? What can I talk to you about? What can I learn from you? The research that we have points to the fact that when immigrants come, even refugees, over time they contribute more to the national economy than they take.

[00:15:56] The incoming sort of cohort of Syrian [00:16:00] refugees that were taken into Germany is about a decade old now. And Germany did a study of the impact on the GDP and it was enormous. They are a tax base. They are oftentimes coming in with their own skills and training. It could be as simple as language skills. It could be that they have training that we desperately need.

[00:16:21] We are in sort of dire need of skilled, um, workers in all sorts of ways. Not, not skilled in the ways that it is used in everyday parlance, but skilled in the sense of carpenters, or skilled in the sense of care work, skilled in the sense of factory workers. Any sort of tangible or intangible skill that they might have that may add to our economy.

[00:16:47] So when we are talking about hospitality, I don't necessarily say that because I'm saying refugees should come and we should give them money and things like that. We should say things like, well, what are the skills that you brought? [00:17:00] What are the things you could add to our economy that we might not have?

[00:17:04] **Tamsin:** Do you think that politics and the media are fueling the jealousy and the entitlement and aspects of that that aren't great with our society, but are they fueling that and in the frame of immigrants coming in and receiving hospitality?

[00:17:19] **Dr Nour Halabi:** Certainly, I think media bears part of the blame, but not all of it. Going back to the question, for example, of politicians. So

oftentimes these politicians are not impoverished. They are not poor, and they certainly, funny enough, do not belong to the same category of citizen that they purport to speak for and care about. But I think media can only take part of the blame.

[00:17:48] There is a question there, and when I say the degree of hospitality we show others tells us a lot about who we are, right? If the impediment to hospitality is the fact that our [00:18:00] population is incapable, embattled, poor, and struggling to survive. That does show us a lot about who we are as a society. And the question is, well, how do we begin to remedy things like economic inequality, poverty, overall sort of increasing stagnation?

[00:18:19] So do we need to think about different industries to invest in that are industries that are perhaps on the rise and so offer opportunities moving forward? So I do agree with you. Yes, oftentimes there is an issue there where the population really is feeling they're, they're hitting on difficult times.

[00:18:39] And that's not the best time to, you know, have a guest over, individually. Um, but then it raises questions about all sorts of other things about policy beyond, beyond the scope of like the individuals involved.

[00:18:54] **Tamsin:** Because if the media is there to, you know, tell us about the news, how can we help [00:19:00] reframe it so that we're changing that narrative and it's not quite so biased?

[00:19:06] **Dr Nour Halabi:** In media studies, we talk about something called "peace journalism". So we talk about journalism that first of all emphasises positive stories, emphasises social cohesion, and seeks to introduce you to different viewpoints and allow you to see the world in ways that humanise even populations you disagree with.

[00:19:26] So my shift would be to also think about journalism that is hospitable, journalism that exercises a form of hospitality, um, that thinks in same way that we talk about peace journalism, thinks in ways that are inclusive towards both host and guest population. The way I like to liken it is I don't think what we need specifically is a change of policy first and foremost, before we need a change of mindset.

[00:19:57] I like to wake up every day and [00:20:00] close my eyes and think of a flock of birds flying off and think in that moment of how we don't necessarily stop and go, "okay, and we need to do something about the bird



migration problem". And so oftentimes I talk about my research in the sense of naturalising migration.

[00:20:19] Humanity throughout our entire time on this earth, we have benefited from the ability to move around freely and to think about, well, I want to seek an education in this other place. And then I want to go to this other place and learn their language. And I want to go to this third place because I like their manga.

[00:20:41] And I want to go to this fourth place because they have this beautiful environment that I don't get to see. I'm thinking here of Japan and I'm thinking of Kenya and I'm thinking of India and I'm thinking of Spain or France. I'm just thinking about how it would really transform our [00:21:00] lives to go back to thinking not necessarily of migration and movement as this problem we need to solve, but think of it in the same way that when you close your eyes and you visualise a flock of birds, this moment of a burst of possibility, a burst of living together.

[00:21:19] As humans and as all other creatures in this world do, um, and encountering one another in ways that are exciting, um, you know, study abroad, learning a new language, encountering new people. So I think that needs to come before the policy is just thinking differently.

[00:21:37] **Swathi:** I think what she's trying to say is there's a lot of beauty in different parts of the world, and it would be amazing to think that you will be welcomed in different parts of the world.

[00:21:46] And you can just visit them and experience the beauty of the world as humans.

[00:21:52] **Tamsin:** You can learn from different cultures and different experiences and all these different countries.

[00:21:58] **Swathi:** Absolutely. And [00:22:00] I've been an immigrant all my life because I was born and brought up in UAE and then I went to India for my higher studies and now I'm in Aberdeen.

[00:22:07] And I think like she mentions about the hospitality, I find that people in Aberdeen are so warm and you feel welcomed and you feel like you're a part of the society, and that feels really good. I can kind of imagine how welcoming and warm my classmates were. So that kind of helped me adapt to the changes to coming to a new country.

[00:22:30] And I think that's really important.

[00:22:31] **Tamsin:** So you never felt that because you were an immigrant you stood out or you weren't welcome or... you, you've faced quite good hospitality from...

[00:22:39] **Swathi:** Yeah, the opposite of standing out. It was just being included. And, uh...

[00:22:43] **Tamsin:** Yeah.

[00:22:43] **Swathi:** Just, yeah. And just being there as my friend. And I think that that's the beauty of it.

[00:22:50] I think it's mainly about safety and knowing that you'd be just treated uh, fairly, like everyone else, that kind of reassures that you would be safe in another country. And I didn't feel [00:23:00] like I was moving to another country because I formed another group of community and friends and kind of, they held me in their hands and I think that was really, an amazing experience that I can think of.

[00:23:12] In all my transitions I've had amazing people around and I think it really is important how people think and the attitudes you, they have towards immigrants.

[00:23:23] **Tamsin:** So I wonder what it would be like if the media took on that same role of changing the mindset and how that would actually impact things.

[00:23:30] **Dr Nour Halabi:** Media, politicians, all sorts of different places, education. I think we don't stop and tell students all the time about how much movement allows us to learn. I mean, I come from a specific background where learning is almost a religious practice and you have to sort of move around to learn. It's almost a pilgrimage to learn something.

[00:23:56] I almost wanna stop and tell students, like, "notice [00:24:00] how much movement was needed for you to learn this particular thing. We had a scholar who was originally German and got displaced, and then they ended up here, and then they wrote this study that reflected on the experience of forced migration, and that this study would never have happened, and this key theory you use would never have happened if not for the experience there".

[00:24:25] And we talk about literature, and literature would never have happened if the, you know, the literary folks were not moving around and sitting in cafes in Paris at a certain time and, and encountering others and, and, enriching themselves with cultural creation beyond the boundaries of one space, but we don't stop and think about that.

[00:24:46] We don't valorize that. I wish we stopped and told someone when they had a dish of lasagna, how lasagna would never have existed if not for the migration that happened from China. Because they'd invented what we now call [00:25:00] pasta. And that moved around, around the world because of the Silk Road. And we ended up with these traditional dishes in every country that are made of something that we learned somewhere else.

[00:25:09] I wish we stopped and told people how, over the course of our entire existence as human beings, the reason we have all these beautiful things is because people moved and taught us about them. You know, encountering the other with joy would really transform things for us.

[00:25:27] **Tamsin:** That all feels really positive and quite inspiring, too. But how does all this actually relate to the work Nour does at the university?

[00:25:34] **Dr Nour Halabi:** I like to think my research is trying to operationalize hope. I try to think of ways in which we can think of hope as not only this wishful, fluffy thing, but actually a form of activism we can take in our lives and that we learn in order to find ways to practise that hope.

[00:25:56] We are very complex, beautiful [00:26:00] things, that each one of us has this whole world inside of them of complexity. And so each time a student comes into a classroom, they bring around this like constellation of interests and I always let, have them think, "okay, so here's what you're learning about how the media operates about theory, but also practice. Here are the skills you're building".

[00:26:21] **Swathi:** So it sounds like it's really not about teaching students *what* to think about these issues, but *how* to think: how to find, understand, analyse information and form an opinion.

[00:26:31] **Tamsin:** And is that learning, that open mindedness, what we teach to students here? Is that your goal, to, to give them that open-mindedness so they can go out into the world and learn and become more open people?

[00:26:43] **Dr Nour Halabi:** What you are really getting out of the experience is learning how to grow and learn things and be open to things as a person who is trying to navigate the world. You're getting someone at a very critical moment in their life, that we're trying to learn about the world. And this is [00:27:00] that sort of precious moment that you can stop and learn about things.

[00:27:04] You know, I'm mainly a media and comm and political science person, and they might not strictly go into those fields. They might go into something that is kind of social work. They might go into sort of all sorts of other fields. But what they have gotten is an understanding of sort of the core theories, the core issues that concern us, a critical mind and openness to the world.

[00:27:28] And there are things that might come up that wouldn't have existed. So chat GPT, for example, did not exist only three, four years ago when I was first teaching. But I certainly think the students that I taught came out and were prepared to meet that moment of this different world where we now have AI and we have all these different things there, um, because of the ability to cultivate this openness, because of the fact that we are certain that we're building the components of having [00:28:00] a very critical mind, um, an ability to assess situations, um, to seek knowledge, to know how to do research, as well.

[00:28:07] We teach research skills, um, all sorts of qualitative and quantitative, so that each time something else comes up, students think, "I know how I can dig up more information about this. And then I can make my own mind about what I should think".

[00:28:22] **Swathi:** I was thinking that she kind of mentioned something about a constellation, and if you see a person as coming with different qualities and aspects to it. So I think this kind of has given me a different perspective to seeing news. So maybe have my own opinion rather than just believing what's in the news. So kind of, that was really interesting to hear.

[00:28:42] **Tamsin:** Yeah, I think it might make me a bit more critical about what it says and not to take it as verbatim fact all the time, because some of it is angled to be popular. As she said, like, they're never going to cover every good news story. Like planes take off every day, but you're only ever going to hear about the one that [00:29:00] disappears or doesn't land. So it's that understanding of it's such a small window of what you are learning about and being told about the world. So why be so closed minded about it all?

[00:29:12] It's, yeah, hopefully we can sort of adopt more of her approach and be more open and mindful and aware of other people's special skills.

[00:29:24] **Swathi:** Thanks so much to Dr Nour Halabi for telling us about her work and about the kinds of critical thinking skills students learn here at Aberdeen.

[00:29:32] **Tamsin:** If you want to join the boundary breakers, you can come to one of our open days and see our historic campus.

[00:29:37] You can also download our digital prospectus at [www.abdn.ac.uk](http://www.abdn.ac.uk).

[00:29:44] **Swathi:** And to hear more, check out the rest of the podcast. Each episode discusses the groundbreaking research of one of Aberdeen's [00:30:00] academics.