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What counts as qualitative research? Episode 3

Speaker information

- Sohail Jannesari (Interviewer) (Sohail)
- Andrew Picken (Speaker) (Andrew)

[Start of recording]

[downtempo electronic music 00:00:00—00:00:10]

- 00:00:10 Sohail Hi. I'm Sohail Jannesari, a migrant rights researcher and activist. At the Qualitative Applied Health Research Centre, mercifully shortened QUAHRC, we aim to inspire debates on qualitative methods and practice. In this podcast series, we talk to people in other fields, such as philosophy, film, and journalism about the parallels and contrasts between their work and qualitative research. In doing so, we hope to broaden and challenge understandings of what qualitative research is and can be. Today we're very lucky to have with us Andrew Picken, a reporter from the BBC. Andrew, would you like to introduce yourself?
- 00:00:57 Andrew Hi. How's it going? Yeah, my name's Andrew. I am a reporter with the BBC. I primarily write for the Scotland page of the BBC website, but I also occasionally make documentaries and news items for television as well.
- 00:01:14 Sohail Thanks. And what are some of the more interesting—I'm sure they're all interesting, but what are some of the more interesting jobs you worked on?
- 00:01:23 Andrew Well, in the last—what? Eighteen months or so, I made a radio documentary about people who die with no known family and what happens to them in terms of their estate and their backstory and all of that. I also did a TV documentary about the Ibrox Stadium disaster. It was the fiftieth anniversary of that where sixty-six people died leaving a football stadium, and we told that through the families and the survivors. And my last big one, I guess, was bike crime. Big increase in bike crime in Scotland and across the UK, actually. So, it's quite sort of varied. Previously I spent about eight, nine years covering politics in Scotland.
- 00:02:08 Sohail And how do you choose what stories to look at? Is it something that is personally relevant to you or what's the criteria?
- 00:02:20 Andrew Well, I mean, I suppose the number one criteria, if you're writing for the BBC or a local paper, it's got to be interesting and informative, really. Personally, I suppose I have a couple of areas of interest and moving away from politics has allowed me to write about lots of different areas rather than being in a particular specialism as such. But you're always thinking, you know, will this be of wider interest as well? Not just obviously to yourself.
- 00:02:50 Sohail So why—you've got an audience in mind when you pick a research topic and you want that audience to care about it?
- 00:02:56 Andrew Yeah. And at the BBC we're kind of acutely aware of underserved audiences as well, so that is a big part of the thinking as well. In terms of, you know, we have obviously a different remit to—of our media outlets, so the underserved audiences are key as well.
- 00:03:15 Sohail So you pick the audiences based on—well, no, you have an audience in mind, particularly underrepresented audiences, and then you try and tailor a story that will interest them. So I want to get into the details of a couple of these stories. So, for instance, you talked about the story you did about the Ibrox tragedy.
- 00:03:37 Andrew Mhm.
- 00:03:37 Sohail And you said that you told it through families and survivors. So, I'd really be interested to see how did you get in touch with families and survivors and how did you tell it? So that's a really specific phrase. You didn't just report on it, you told it through people.

- 00:03:57 Andrew It was interesting because it happened at a football match, it's a story that had been told mostly through the back pages rather than the front pages. If you know what I mean, it was sort of seen as a football story and in my mind it was—you know, it was this horrific disaster in the same way that, you know, a train crash or a mining disaster would be. It was in that sort of field. And I was looking through the coverage, particularly at the time actually, and it just didn't feel like it had been told in the same way you treat, you know, a train crash and the likes. So it was I was very conscious that I didn't want any footballers in it or kind of football people in it. I just wanted the people that had been there and had survived, or the people that lived with it the kind of longest. Because there was a lot of children caught up in it as well. There was quite a few children. So it was that—I guess that was the starting point, really. It was trying to work out, you know, who'd been there and had a story to tell, or their story hadn't been told properly as such. So that process, the start of that process, there was a lot of reading and working out, you know, who'd been written about before. But also that a lot of people that had spoken before were the sort of gateway to other people that had never spoken about it. And it was quite—it was interesting, actually. The culture in Scotland, I guess the whole of the UK at the time, you know, there wasn't an outpouring of grief in the same way you might see today. Obviously there was no social media and the like. You know, they were playing a football again the next weekend. So that actually lent itself. That supported the story because a lot of people just hadn't spoken about it before. So I guess that was the starting point, really.
- 00:05:44 Sohail So you feel like you approaching people gave them an opportunity to talk about it and an opportunity they didn't otherwise have?
- 00:05:54 Andrew Yeah. Because a lot of families felt that it'd been forgotten about and their experiences chimed with my thoughts in terms of, it was a football thing. You know, and not swept under the carpet as such, but just not—yeah. And also there's a passage of time. These things do get forgotten about as well.
- 00:06:15 Sohail How did you start talking to people? Did you go to their houses? Did you—how did you make them comfortable enough to talk about something where they've had a—there's a sort of social taboo around expressing grief?
- 00:06:30 Andrew So, it was a mixture of approaches or methods rather: telephone, email, Facebook Messenger. Obviously it was during the pandemic as well when I was filming it, so that kind of added an extra complication. But it was all the approaches by the nature of it were very sort of softly, softly, I suppose. And it wasn't—you wouldn't necessarily ask someone straight out five minutes into the conversation if they want to go on camera, and there was at least two or three people and it was maybe three or four conversations before they were sort of comfortable with who you were, where you were coming from and what it might involve. But then I suppose, yeah, one, we had an expert, like a crowd safety expert in the piece. And, you know, he's been doing media for twenty years so he knew straight away what I was—what I wanted from him and what sort of he could bring to the table as such. So that was more—that was probably the most straightforward contributor, really.
- 00:07:37 Sohail And so did you tailor your approach to the sorts of people you were talking to? So did you have a different method for the crowd safety person than someone who has, has a family member who died?
- 00:07:53 Andrew Yeah, absolutely. Because obviously the crowd safety expert is used to speaking to journalists, but is also used to the demands of television. In terms of, you know, location, where we need to speak to him, the fact that we would go and speak to him for best part of two hours but we'd use two minutes of him in the actual film. And whereas a lot of the people, the sort of punters as such we were speaking to, have no experience of speaking to journalists. Most people don't speak to journalists and certainly have no experience of going on television. So a lot of that process is explained, "Well, this is what will happen." And also explaining that, you know, "It's not live, so if you're not comfortable, we can stop." And there is quite a lot of sort of hold—handholding, rather, in that kind of process.

00:08:45 Sohail Yeah. It looks like you went through a somewhat similar process to what we do in research, especially with the thinking about, “You can stop at any time. You can withdraw,” and trying not to coerce people into it. Another thing that happens in a lot of qualitative health research is that people—we talk about difficult issues, like the one you are describing. You know, having lost a family member is not something easy to talk about. And it’s likely, and people do become upset during those interviews. So I wondered, what did you do in that situation? Did it happen and how did you react?

00:09:27 Andrew Yeah. There’s one interview with a lady, an older lady who was talking and, yeah, she sort of broke down and we just stopped, really. That’s what happened at that point. We just sort of let her get her composure together. And then there was—I think there was one other occasion where we started and then you could just tell the person wasn’t quite ready. So, it was some sort of like, “Oh, they need to go and check a piece of equipment or something.” Like, you know, just sort of rather than making a big deal of it, just thought, well, we’d just give them a bit more time to sort of get themselves together. Because I suppose it was fifty years on so obviously that perhaps makes it easier to talk about. But then when you’re actually in that moment, for a lot of people they were saying, “Oh, this is—you know, this is taking me right back to that day.” But I think it’s important. My own approach is probably not to make too big a deal of it. In terms of, so you give people enough space but you just continue asking the questions until—yeah, keep asking the questions sensitively. But I think it’s important to keep going and I think that can sometimes help the person as well if you sort of move things on to perhaps the next item that you want to talk about. Yeah.

00:10:53 Sohail And was there any support that people could access after having this conversation with you? Did you—were you linked with any sort of groups? Maybe there was a—or maybe they are already linked with groups. I don’t know.

00:11:05 Andrew Well, I mean this lady, she had a daughter there actually, so that was really helpful. And certainly—well, in terms of the actual disaster, the—and this was one of the interesting things that came out in the research, actually. There is a sort of community among the Rangers fans who have sort of taken it on upon themselves to ensure that the disaster’s not forgotten about. And to the extent where they sort of fundraised to clean up the graves of a lot of the people that died in the disaster, and then they’ll always do things on the anniversary as well. So there is—a lot of the people I spoke to were sort of plugged into that network as such, and I think they find that really useful to know that there is a place that they can go and kind of reflect on what happened with people that were either there or had sort of family members that were affected.

00:11:59 Sohail What happened afterwards? How did you keep in touch with the people you spoke to?

00:12:05 Andrew So—I mean, I suppose this must have happened in a lot of fields. There was a bit of a—it was quite a gap between some of the interviews and then the program actually going out, so that period is, you know, I just basically kept in touch with people and let them know, you know, when the program was going out. And then when it was confirmed when it was going out, I got in touch with them as well. And I suppose most of them, because now we—you know, now that we are in sort of mobile phone contact it was—on the day and the days after, it was mostly sort of text messages and WhatsApp and the like. There was one person—and this happens a lot in—particularly in TV, where not—basically not everything can make the cut. And that’s not anything to do with a contributor, it’s just trying to make it work as a piece of television. Not everything can fit in. So there was one person that I interviewed who didn’t make the cut, so I had to obviously have that conversation. And that was quite difficult because, you know, you’ve asked a lot of people to sort of share that story and then to tell them that it’s not in its—yeah, it was—that was quite difficult.

00:13:19 Sohail Is there anything else you can do with the material you got? Is there any other ways it can be used?

00:13:23 Andrew Well, so the story was on TV and there was also a website version as well, but it didn't actually fit—this didn't fit in with what we were doing on the website either. So then there was an option that we were going to do a radio piece and we could have used it, and then—but then that didn't happen even, so. Usually there are—obviously the BBC has sort of multi-platforms, so there usually is a way you can use this material on another platform.

00:13:54 Sohail And I'm just curious, like what were the sort of conversations you were having on WhatsApp with people? Were you preparing them for what was coming out? Were you sort of having a back and forth about how they were feeling about it? What did that look like?

00:14:11 S Well, I think in terms of preparing people, that was probably earlier in the process. Certainly preparing them for what will happen in an interview. Because there's a curious thing when you're filming for television whereby you have to ask the same questions twice because you'll need to have two different angles of that. So then that's quite a sort of natural thing for people to be doing. Because then they start to answer, but you don't need to do the full answer. So you need to sort talk them through the kind of technical process of that. And I was also quite open about the structure of the program and the online article as well. Because the worst thing, I suppose, in this job is people getting a kind of nasty surprise about how things turn out when they—you know, basically they think the article's about one thing and then it turns into another thing. And quite often that's outwith the control of the actual journalist that's written it. But it's, yeah, for this particular issue, because it was so sensitive, it was important to sort of talk people through. But yeah, in terms of closer to the time, it was just, "Well, look, it's coming out. It's going to be this long. Your section is maybe a couple of minutes and it comes after this." Just basically telling people, you know, what was coming up.

00:15:34 Sohail I think that's really nice and something that we could probably do in research. We don't really prep people for exactly where the, you know, quote is going to be and how, and we don't maybe—at least I don't go back to people and say, "Look, this is where you were quoted. Have a look and have a look at what you think of it as well." So, that sounds really nice. Are you—do you feel like the work you did had an impact? And if it did, how did you make sure it had an impact? Were there things you did with promotion, with publicising it, with perhaps working with this group of Rangers fans that really helped make this meaningful?

00:16:26 Andrew Yeah. It certainly got—it got good viewing figures and the online version was read by—I think it was one point four million people in the end. So I was—we were really happy with the impact that it had. And the [sighs] how to put this. And the relationship between the BBC and Rangers Football Club has been quite difficult in recent years, so that was another factor. I mean, that shouldn't matter in terms of the kind of doing the piece, but I suppose it was perhaps a nervousness about how it would be perceived. But it seemed to be perceived quite well within that world.

00:17:04 Sohail Was there anything that the people you talked to wanted to change? I guess it was quite a long way after the tragedy so presumably some safety protocols had already changed.

00:17:17 Andrew That was a part of the documentary. Was talking about how dramatically things have changed since then. Because it was the precursor to a lot of safety legislation and that section of the documentary was—actually we got a 3D model. Well, it was more of an animation, rather, of what went wrong and sort of explained how that couldn't happen now because of the changes in the legislation. You know, there are still crushes in sports grounds, but not the way that this one happened essentially.

00:17:50 Sohail Great. And I was just wondering, is this—when you do a bit of journalism around a particular topic, is it something then you want to build on? Did this then spark thoughts about other pieces you could do and other ways you could sort of bring some underrepresented stories to light?

00:18:13 Andrew I would say probably this was reasonably self-contained because, you know, it was centred around anniversary date of a story that we knew, well, and, you know, we told it in a different way. But more generally, if you pick up an issue and you report on that, you tend to sort of stick with it and see it through. So for example, I've been following a historic sexual abuse allegation case for probably three, four years now, and, you know, I will see that through to the end day when it comes to court and, yeah, obviously built the relationship with the person who's made the allegation in that case as well.

00:18:52 Sohail And is that time period you spend with that person particularly important in this context because it's such a sensitive matter?

00:19:00 Andrew Yeah, I would say so. I mean, that's [sighs] so you could have reported on her case solely on, you know, what's being said in court, but there's a sort of backstory as well to that particular case which I think is important to know, because potentially in the future you might report on that and you've got to build this sort of confidence and trust of that person if they were going to tell their sort of full story as such. Yeah. It's sort of—duty of care is the overarching kind of phrase and that is what we were talking about before in terms of speaking to people and really explaining how the story will be presented to them as well. Because, yeah, again—and I mentioned this earlier, people don't tend to have interactions with journalists a lot. We don't always have the greatest of reputations [chuckles] with a lot of people. And I think that, you know, there's a particular onus on the BBC to do it properly and do it right.

00:20:03 Sohail Final question, and I'm going to hit you with a slightly tricky one. On that reputation matter, so there is an idea—you know, I've worked in a lot of charities and activists' groups, and when a journalist approaches us it's often, "Can you come at this really unsociable hour, do this thing which will cost you time and resources and ultimately won't make much change. And goodbye, we'll never talk to you again." And so we are very, very sceptical. Especially in the context of migration where people are telling quite difficult stories. So there's this exploitative aspect, which is also something which is a criticism that can be levelled at qualitative health research. We talk about very sensitive things. We go in, we go out. So is this something you've grappled with in your time as a journalist? Is this something where—which you've learned some lessons on or changed your approach in any way?

00:21:02 Andrew It's really difficult and I recognise what you're describing because, yeah, it does happen. And often it's the way that people communicate is half the problem as well, and I think—which is a part of my reasoning for explaining, "This is the story I'm doing and this is how I'm doing it." Is trying to relay to people that, you know, not necessarily in a documentary but day-to-day news, you know, particularly television news, "Well, I've got two and a half minutes to tell this really complicated story. And I need—you know, I need someone like you to explain it to the people at home, but you'll only get twenty, thirty seconds of that. Yeah. And, you know, after I've done that, I've got another story to do as well." So it's, you know, in an ideal world you would spend the right amount of time with people and not necessarily—you know, you go and see someone, meet them, find out about it, and then go back and film like another time, if you know what I mean. And you can do that in some circumstances but not every time. And I suppose, yeah, with an issue like migration, that's a good example. It's a kind of—this sort of lighthouse thing where, you know, the media, all of a sudden it's the big issue of the day and then, you know, six days later you wouldn't get a journalist to return your call on the same topic, would you? But it's the news agenda. It's a really difficult balance.

00:22:25 Sohail Do you think there's anything you would change about how—about that balance or how the media works if you had—I don't know, if you could had a million pounds—not a million, that's nothing, is it? [chuckles] If you had a hundred million pounds and you could start up a news organisation?

00:22:41 Andrew I think you would probably have to forego doing as many stories and as quickly, but potentially you're just doing fewer better stories, if you know what I mean. And then—but then if you were in that space, then you would definitely have the time to go and

meet people properly and understand what's going on. And, you know, there are media organisations and publications and TV programs that do that very well. It's just, I suppose in reality, not everyone can do that. Yeah. And some people can't do that and handle it badly in terms of explaining why they can't do that, if that makes any sense.

00:23:19 Sohail Yeah. No, that makes sense. And just to clarify, so what is the underlying reason why people can't do it? What's—why isn't there this time?

00:23:28 Andrew Because there's just so much news out there, really. [chuckles] If you're doing a daily news program, some days you could fill it, you know, five times over and, you know, the audiences don't want to watch, you know, seven, eight minutes on every single item. You know, it's—yeah, I don't think there's one single reason why that is the case.

00:23:50 Sohail Great. Well, thank you. That's all we've got time for. That was really interesting. And I would just like to end by asking you, where can people see your work? Is there a website you have where everything's easily accessible? Because you've talked about some really interesting stories.

00:24:06 Andrew Well, I suppose I share everything on my Twitter page, which is just @BBCAndrewPicken, P-I-C-K-E-N. But I mean, most of my stuff is just on the BBC news website, primarily on the Scotland page.

00:24:23 Sohail Great. Thank you so much. I'll be visiting the Scotland page right now, basically.

00:24:27 Andrew [laughs]

00:24:29 Sohail Brilliant. Thanks and have a lovely day.

[End of recording]