

Limelight.mp3

Jennifer Khakshouri: [00:00:04] Thanks for joining the ETH podcast. We're back in English after the summer break with me, Jennifer Khakshouri. In this episode, we will talk about what it's like to suddenly be in the limelight and how current politics influence or even shift the everyday life of scientists. I'm glad you're joining me and my two guests today. One of them is Névine Schepers and the other one is Benno Zogg. Please introduce yourselves and tell me what you do at ETH.

Névine Schepers: [00:00:33] Sure. Thank you for having us. I am a senior researcher in the Swiss and Euro-Atlantic security team at the Center for Security Studies, where I work mostly on nuclear arms control, nuclear non-proliferation, and nuclear disarmament issues.

Benno Zogg: [00:00:48] I am team head of the very team and senior researcher, and my own research is concerned with, particularly Eastern Europe, questions of European security, Western Russian relations. As you can imagine, it's been quite busy lately.

Jennifer Khakshouri: [00:01:05] Both of you aren't just scientists, as you've hinted already. You are experts in the media for big topics such as the war in Ukraine or danger of nuclear weapons. Benno, you're in the limelight and in the media a lot since February. Your statements are perfect, accessible for a broad audience. Are your natural talent or did you get media training?

Benno Zogg: [00:01:29] To be fair, that's probably quite an element of natural talent, if I may say that we didn't receive formal training for a variety of reasons. I guess. It's very hard to teach these kinds of things. And obviously media work and interviews are only a small part of our job. Most of it is research and analysis and political consultancy and the like. I've done media work in the past as well. Occasionally, whenever it made sense, whenever there was actual attention and demand for the kind of topics, we do research on and we worked for a think tank, essentially. So, giving brief and concise and understandable analysis on a wide range of complex topics has always been part of our job that kind of dictates how we frame our publications as well. So, in a way, this is just one more application of what has always been our goal to communicate, the kind of research that we do.

Jennifer Khakshouri: [00:02:17] And Névine, did you just learn it or are you also natural like Benno?

Névine Schepers: [00:02:22] No, I am definitely not a natural. A lot shyer and less confident about public speaking. But like Benno though, I have done media work in the past, particularly when I was working in London, as I've worked on topics that are quite, let's say, get a lot of media attention, notably the Iran nuclear agreement or North Korea's nuclear program. So, they're working in think tanks I did receive a little bit of training, but again, as Benno said, in the sort of mindset of how to communicate briefly and efficiently to a general audience. And so, I think I've tried to apply that when coming here as well and when approaching the issue of nuclear threats and nuclear dangers. But unlike Benno, I'm not as much in the limelight as my expertise mostly comes in when there's a new outrageous threat that's being made.

Jennifer Khakshouri: [00:03:13] Journalists, as well as the audiences usually want simple answers to very tough questions like: When will the war end? Or Who will win the war? Or: Is the nuclear threat really - how dangerous is it really? How do you cope with these kinds of questions?

Névine Schepers: [00:03:31] I do find it quite difficult because there are no, I think, in my opinion, silly questions when it comes to the risk of nuclear weapons use, whether it's a single nuclear weapon or the conflict that might escalate to a nuclear war. And so, sort of addressing every question genuinely without either downplaying or overstating the threat is quite difficult. I think throughout these last few months there's been an element of, yes, balancing the need to explain quite clearly what the risks are. And while myself and most, I think experts, believe that risk of the war escalating to, let's say, nuclear use is quite small, there's still a need to explain these risks. I need to explain how to react to them. But giving too much credibility to Wladimir Putin or his associates sort of nuclear threats is also kind of playing their game. And so, I think it's again, been a bit of a balancing act that sometimes for a radio show, when you have to say it in 2 minutes or less, it's quite difficult to strike that balance. But it's again, something I try and communicate across generally every time I have to discuss this, that particular balance.

Jennifer Khakshouri: [00:04:46] And Benno, how do you cope?

Benno Zogg: [00:04:48] You really are confronted with these existential questions and essentially predicting what Vladimir Putin might do tomorrow, which is absolutely impossible within one and a half minutes for a national TV news show or so, which is, incredible. But at the same time, I mean, that's the kind of analysis we all try to do. We can share as much of the information that we use for estimates, including the blind spots. And I think that's quite key. And rather, of course, when in doubt, when you don't have an actual comment, when you don't know the substance of it, when you are really unsure about the outcome, either you don't comment, or you share your doubts and say that you're concerned about that. And then there's very limited information. So, in a way, sharing that methodology that we apply to these questions can be helpful and gives us credibility as well. Even if it means that I cannot answer your question, I'm sorry about that, but I can tell you a bit of context and in the end that within one and a half minutes is a tough one. And media, particularly in these kind of crises in public audiences, really ask for the big answers because everyone was scared to quite an extent as well when it comes to war in Ukraine, particularly at the beginning. So, I felt that there was a lot of gravitas to these kinds of debates, which makes it really hard. But then even more, sharing your doubts and the uncertainties, I think, helps a lot.

Jennifer Khakshouri: [00:06:07] Can you give us an example like when it went wrong or when it went in a different direction than you actually wanted?

Benno Zogg: [00:06:14] Most of the time it's work quite well because there's also conversations that you have with journalists, with moderators before the talk where you share, quite frankly, where your limits are or the unknowns. So, they may not ask about it. And my experience has been that it's fairly trusting and good working relationship with media, particularly in Switzerland, but including the ones I've work with in Germany and elsewhere. So that really helps and gives confidence. I've received questions I was uncomfortable with, particularly what Névine hinted at, the sensationalist ones, as in: Will there be nuclear war tomorrow? There I deflect or refuse to comment outright, but it's happened fairly rarely. Once there was a surprise turn of events from when I was analysing the war in Ukraine on a live TV show, and then the question was: What does this mean for Switzerland? How should we react? And that's a whole other matter, which isn't my research focus. So there again, I deflected, and it was fine in the end.

You may answer a different question than it was asked to, but I must really say it happens quite rarely. You must be somewhat ready for it because people are interested. There are - obviously every single answer trigger five more questions. That's what you have to deal with.

Jennifer Khakshouri: [00:07:31] Both of you are very young. You're around 30. And up to now, the experts were senior, mostly retired men who gave their statements and expertise and analysis of situations. What's it like to be on podiums or in TV shows with the senior people? Like, do you struggle? Do you have to prove yourself? Do you have to be better than them or do they respect you by now?

Benno Zogg: [00:07:57] I don't think I've had to prove myself, particularly. Once you're in the studio you're there for a reason because you've proven yourself in the past. So, it's work. But it's made, it's been made quite clear to me that the field has been dominated by these old experts, particularly in the field like mine, which is Eastern Europe, Russia, a topic that hasn't been very sexy in the past decades. But there is, of course, a new generation of which I'm probably part of that has dealt with these questions. It's increasingly more female, including at our institute, and that's absolutely key. But I've heard feedback from listeners and so on who said: So glad to see a young face for once.

Névine Schepers: [00:08:37] But it can be quite intimidating when you are clearly the youngest person on a panel by 10, 20, 30 years, sometimes or sometimes also being the only woman. I think generally, as Benno said, once you have been asked, like there is an understanding that you can share your expertise, you can share your perspective, which is inherently different from those people who, let's say in my field, who generally have then lived through the Cold War and have a lot of this historical background, which is incredibly useful. And in most cases, it's been positive. I think there is there's two elements as well. One being where you do still have that feeling, you have to prove yourself and you do get comments. I think maybe that's a bit more common being a woman where your expertise is just then not recognized and that's it. And as the people who comment that, I don't think there's anything you can really say to that. The other element I say is you often sometimes feel that you're being approached because they're missing a woman on a panel, or because they realized belatedly that the whole, let's say, panel or people they've reached out to are all men. And so, you have that feeling

you're more like a checkbox than being approached for because they genuinely want to hear what you say. But I think at some point, setting aside those doubts and just responding generally has been my approach. Sure, maybe that's how they initially approached me, but in the future, they'll realise what I have to say was important and they'll come and reach out to me the next time. Not because I'm a woman, not because I'm young, but because they care about what I have to say.

Jennifer Khakshouri: [00:10:21] Both of you are experts in fields which are now in the spotlight. And I wanted to know what your research everyday work life looked like before the war in Ukraine.

Benno Zogg: [00:10:35] I think it's quite obvious that we didn't become think tankers for the fame and the limelight. If anything, it's been a fairly desk-based job. You do your research, you read a lot of papers. You make up your mind about questions that are quite remote from everyday debates or particularly people's minds. But some policymakers or people in the Foreign Ministry also may care about these topics. So that was part of our audience, has always been, of course, and that was fine. To have regular publications that are interesting to an interested few, that are relevant for certain policy makers. It's been much more quiet, a bit slower I guess, but we've at least to some extent, I've been used to. Occasionally something would happen, protests in Belarus or an uprising in Kazakhstan and a diplomatic crisis at the OSCE in Vienna when people called you up and for two or three days, there was a tiny bit of attention for these kind of topics in the media and elsewhere. And now it's just been much more intense at numbers that are unprecedented over the course of months, but already now it's somewhat eased of course, we've been more we've grown more used to that there's an actual war, a hot war going on in Europe, that Ukraine is the victim of incredible aggression. But it also means that the debate about it, a discourse has normalised to some extent. So, it's not as crazy as it was in back in March.

Jennifer Khakshouri: [00:12:01] And you, Névine, how did your work look like before the war?

Névine Schepers: [00:12:06] I think before and even now it's still mostly similar as Benno's described. Our work is analysis, providing analysis, whether written or spoken. So, it involves a lot of reading, a lot of speaking with fellow experts or with government

officials. A lot of writing and preparing briefings and presentations. I think because I started working in this field just as President Trump took office, for me, I think there has been a nuclear related crisis every few months or so. That's sort of, let's say, regulated my work. But it's been a bit of a mix of that so far. And I think even now, again, I'm not necessarily looking at the war on an everyday basis. I try and look at the longer-term implications on the global nuclear order. So already now I'm able to take, I think, a step or two back, but it's an order that was already in disarray before the war and that the war has aggravated a number of factors.

Jennifer Khakshouri: [00:13:16] And how do you balance I mean, especially, you know, Benno, how do you balance being a communicator and researcher now at the moment?

Benno Zogg: [00:13:23] At the moment, somewhat a right kind of balance is established as in maybe one or two conversations with journalists or interviews or so per week, max. And the rest is what's actually research. And I've communicated that, quite frankly, in, let's say May or so to journalists that have gotten in touch as well as in I've given so many interviews, I've neglected research to some extent. I need the actual basis information any time for that, because otherwise I'm just communicating. But there's no solid substance to actually communicate, and that kind of understanding has been quite obvious. I think it was understood. I emphasized that there's also a team that I'm heading, that there's management issues, just regular work that has piled up and so on. And with that kind of understanding and the general debate being less in a frenzy, less crazy around the war because we've gotten used to this sad reality, it's been quite fine, actually. So now this balance is really maintained and somewhat natural as it should be generally over the course of my job.

Jennifer Khakshouri: [00:14:28] And is your media work also important for scientific work? Like, do you take up stuff that you learn during your interviews for your scientific work or is it like a totally different thing?

Benno Zogg: [00:14:42] I would say that it is indeed quite different. Obviously when you're asked any kind of question by any kind of audience, it can be at a conference when you give a lecture, it inspires your thinking to some extent. You get a bit of a sense of what the discourse and concerns are, and this can inform or somewhat make

you reconsider what the framing of your analysis may be, what the hook may be, as in what's the actual real-life example to the kind of research we do. But otherwise, I think it's quite separate and to be honest, it should of course start with the kind of background analysis that we do with the kind of reading and studying and writing, and then using it and communicating it to a certain audience is the next step. It can't be the other way around. Substance goes first, analysis goes first. All these years that we've engaged with these kinds of topics is the kind of substance that gives us credibility to then go into interviews, communicate in very few minutes, in a very short time frame, the kind of kind of results that we've achieved in this research over the years. This is the natural order of things, and we should really be careful not to reverse it in any way.

Jennifer Khakshouri: [00:15:50] And does the media work you do, does that help a scientific career?

Névine Schepers: [00:15:55] I think working in thinktanks especially, it is useful because it forces you to engage with the topics that you work on an everyday life. Try and communicate with one of your audiences, which is a general public audience. It forces you to then think through these topics that are sometimes quite complex and rely on, you know, decades of history sometimes and sort of not boil it down necessarily but forces you to explain it in a different way. And I think that exercise is quite important and useful to do. I think as think tankers, part of our job is also sort of being a bridge between academia, the policy community, but also the general public. So again, the media work I think is an important part of it. Having a bit of name recognition is also useful because you might be writing a lot of very long reports here and there, but those are not always read by everyone. So having a bit of a different exercise in communication I think is important as well.

Benno Zogg: [00:17:01] I think the goal of our work is, after all, not face recognition or anything along those lines, but to reach the actual audience and not just the general public, but of course policymakers as well, whether that's officials in ministries or members of parliament. And do they read a monthly brief, for example, the CSS analysis on security policy? Some do, some don't, but many others may see some of our thoughts and our thinking in, let's say, a guest article in a newspaper or in a TV or in a radio show. So, you broaden your audience, and you may even make audience then read your underlying analysis in your underlying pieces. So, I think that's the actual goal

of it. And obviously that may advance your career as well if you broaden your audience. But it's really not about fame. We're in the wrong field for that.

Jennifer Khakshouri: [00:17:45] And the other way around - is journalism may be an alternative to what you're doing now that could you imagine changing the seat?

Benno Zogg: [00:17:53] To be fair, I may. I quite enjoy doing media work. I think it gives me a lot. I enjoy this kind of being in touch with an audience as well and seeing that what I've done at my desk in my office for years is relevant to people. So, but the roles are very different. To moderate, to ask the kind of question instead of giving the answers is entirely different. And I'm quite cognizant, particularly based on that experience, that these roles are very different. But I would be intrigued. I think to me I wouldn't rule it out at all. I've considered it. I've done regular media work for quite a while now, so have some insights. So, who knows? Depending on, I think our generation's career paths can be quite flexible at times. As a think tanker, you have quite a few skills in a variety of fields, including communicating. So, media work is possible. I wouldn't rule it out.

Névine Schepers: [00:18:44] And some of the best I think defence editors, journalists sometimes have worked in think tanks like I think The Economist in particular, their defence editor used to work in a think tank, and I think it generally does help. And other journalists again whose work I follow quite closely, have had stints as researchers. I myself considered it before going into think tanking. But it's a, I think the fast-paced environment is something I wouldn't particularly feel comfortable with. But you obviously have different forms of journalism as well.

Jennifer Khakshouri: [00:19:21] Yeah, I mean, The Economist is different than a radio show that needs an interview quickly now or information. I find it extremely important that scientists and researchers and think tankers communicate to the media or talk to the audience. What advice do you give to your fellow scientists? Researchers?

Benno Zogg: [00:19:44] Hmm, that's a tough one because obviously all kinds of research field and ways of doing research are very different. I mean, were I to work, in robotics, the questions would be very, very different from working in security policy, which is related to politics. It is part of public debates and it's not as technical. So, it's

very, very different. But given so many of the kind of research topics that people at ETH, for example, work on, are relevant to some extent that we are in the end publicly funded, very often are debates of where we cut funds. It starts very often with education, which is obviously a terrible decision. There is a tiny bit of a responsibility, I guess, to communicate what we do to make people understand what the value is of research without doing advertisement, without justifying every bit. Research can be research for its own sake, and I think that's key. It doesn't always have to have real life applications that are immediate and obvious. So, it's a bit of a tough one, but it certainly encourages anyone who is somewhat keen, who thinks they have something to say that can be of interest to use potential opportunities to it in a proper way. Get some training if you're interested as well. There's lots of ways to do that. So generally, my experience has been positive. So, I would hope that this is the same for others.

Jennifer Khakshouri: [00:21:06] Névine - you?

Névine Schepers: [00:21:07] I think in terms of advice, most people have something to gain from learning how to communicate better about their research, however complicated it is. And that's ranging from the, let's say, geopolitical issues we work on to scientists, engineers, others at ETH as well. And so, getting some practice, where possible, on how to communicate better, thinking sometimes about it, like you're speaking to a friend who has some knowledge but doesn't necessarily know exactly what you work on. And so having that audience in mind when trying to communicate, just being quite clear, avoiding jargon and also yeah, I think not considering any question you're being asked as silly and just genuinely trying to answer with best of your knowledge. And also, as Benno has mentioned previously, when you don't know, it's okay to say you don't know.

Jennifer Khakshouri: [00:22:07] And you feedback each other also? Do you do you watch and listen and read each other's work?

Névine Schepers: [00:22:13] Definitely, yes. I think it's - we approach I think interviews and media work quite differently and we write differently. We both are editors for the CSS Monthly Analysis and Security Policy. So, we're also used to editing written work and each other's written work. But having that kind of feedback is also very useful to

obviously get better not just at communicating, but at formulating opinions and also being told that sometimes maybe that's not right.

Jennifer Khakshouri: [00:22:48] Névine and Benno, why do you consider communication as such a vital part of your work?

Névine Schepers: [00:22:53] I think it's part of being a think tanker as well. It's just you apply a lot of the insights that you get. You spend a lot of time reading, analysing, thinking through some of the current questions that affect, I think, government policy for sometimes the near medium, long term, whether it's in terms of defence, in terms of defence procurements, and you try and think through that and provide some of the background, I think, to policymakers, to a general audience. And when world events also are related to this field, you can, I think, step in and provide that background in a way that's understandable.

Benno Zogg: [00:23:38] I would fully agree with that what had been said, but also maybe add that it's even a way, maybe of testing your assumptions or testing whether your conclusions actually work, whether there is a red thread or a logical connection between your arguments, the way you structure or answer these kinds of complex questions. So, in a way, if we in our short and brief and concise publications on, let's say, one or two pages or in a ten-minute interview or a ten-minute speech or lecture or so, can explain all this kind of conclusions that we've drawn from months or years or so of research. And it works and people understand it and can follow. Then this is a brilliant test of whether it all actually adds up somehow. So, in a way, we do get some benefit out of it as well.

Jennifer Khakshouri: [00:24:28] Thank you, Névine, thank you, Benno. Thank you, listeners, for joining us here at the ETH podcast. This is a production of the Audiobande. My name is Jennifer Khakshouri. Please share our podcast if you like it and join us next time again.