Speaking of Research

South Coast Doctoral Training Partnership Podcast

Series 1 – Episode 10 – Toby Meredith

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SPEAKERS
Toby Meredith, Catherine McDonald

Catherine McDonald 00:03
Hello and welcome to Speaking of Research, a podcast from the South Coast Doctoral Training Partnership. I'm Catherine McDonald, and in this first series of our podcast, we're talking about impact and how researchers can achieve it. We're recording at the amazing Cumberland Lodge, and we're speaking to doctoral researchers about their research, who might benefit from it, and how they hope it will make a difference. In this episode, I'm joined by Toby Meredith from the University of Portsmouth, and Toby is researching the use of drones for search and rescue, and sea border surveillance in the English Channel. Toby, that sounds really interesting. Tell us a little bit more about what it is you're looking into and why you wanted to look into that.

Toby Meredith 00:49
Sure thing. And thanks for having me on Catherine. So, I've been working with drones for disaster management purposes for about six years now. So, I've been involved in projects where, with academics, got over to Dominica post 2017 massive hurricane, we've been using drones as part of the mapping process so that we can inform the government to build back better. From then, I've sort of moved on to the use of drones for search and rescue following sort of wide scale disasters like flooding and things like that, and I managed to, I was very fortunate to start collaborating with the World Food Program, United Nations agency, and was working on a wide scale project investigating the best practices of using drones for search and rescue. So, I was very much in that using what's termed drones for good, it's very easy to when people hear the word drones, it's very easy to go to that sort of more military connotation, the sort of long range Reaper drones. And even now, drones are being used to deliver drugs and mobile phones to prisons. And obviously the conflict in Ukraine has just seen a huge proliferation of modifying kind of commercial off the shelf drones for military purposes. In the UK and across the world, these sort of commercial off the shelf drones are being used more and more for search and rescue, whether that's in the wilderness, in mountains or at sea as well. So I was been really interested in kind of the best practices of using the drones. When the funding call came up with the South Coast Doctoral Training partnership, I started working with an academic who's an expert in immigration for migration, especially post Brexit migration to the UK. So we were sort of talking about how those two areas could could marry up. At the same time, myself and uh, two academics, were just having some preliminary conversation with the Coast Guard, the UK Coast Guard, about how they were trialing long range drones in the English Channel for the purpose of identifying boats in distress,

identifying people in distress. During the period of the small boat crisis, as it was termed, from 2018 and still ongoing now. The level of crossings was just going up and up, and then the number of people who were sadly dying was going up as well. So we have a tool now, a way of increasing the efficiency of rescue operations basically. But at the same time, we have a tool that can be used as a surveillance tool, and so I've been really interested in what that sort of intersection looks like, and how the organisations and also NGOs might want to use this technology. But do we need sort of more robust policies to say if you're using it for search and rescue purposes, then it can't be used as surveillance data or vice versa sort of thing. And it might, it might be that, well, there is middle ground there. People do need rescue; boarders do need controlling. So, it's possible that the findings of it might kind of reflect that slightly. But to kind of investigate this, I'm going to be speaking with various practitioners, whether it's from the Coast Guard, the home office, RNLI, The Lifeboat Institution, and also NGOs, who work with the asylum seekers who come over on the small boats as well to find out what their perceptions of the use of drones are, with particular emphasis on, does this technology have any impact on securitization of asylum seekers, of refugees crossing, because it's, it's a huge, huge issue that started in the Mediterranean in 2015 when that crisis began there. So, they've had a lot more experience with it. The EU border control agency called Frontex, they've been using drones in the Mediterranean for this sort of surveillance purposes, there's some academic literature which says they are neglecting human rights basically, because there's the laws of the sea for search and rescue, which says that if you see someone in distress at sea, then you must do everything you can to rescue that person and take them to the nearest, safest port of call. And there's a debate about whether a drone is if they're seeing someone, that drone can't actually do anything about it, apart from inform someone else. Personally, I think that's a little bit of a stretch, saying they're neglecting their obligations and responsibilities. But I understand that that sort of argument, and the current literature about the English Channel was very much focusing on, you know, what are the causes of the small boat crisis? What can be done to prevent these tragedies continuing than occurring. But I didn't find anything about the drone technology specifically. Really, I've been very fortunate to have built up lots of decent contacts, I had lots of preliminary chats with people from The Lifeboats Institution, from the Coast Guard, from the Home Office as well. I just want to sort of get more into that actually digging a bit deeper and finding out what these expert opinions and perspectives are.

Catherine McDonald 06:26
And so, you mentioned the interviews you're going to conduct with practitioners and sort of people on the front line. Any other research methods that you're going to use within your PhD? Or will it all be based around the interviews?

Toby Meredith 06:40
Yeah, so be looking at that sort of semi structured interview process, like what we're doing right here, right now, and then afterwards, going through thematic analysis of the transcripts as well, and sort of trying to identify what the people from the different agencies are thinking, feeling and seeing where those dots start joining up.

Catherine McDonald 07:02
And again, you've touched on this, obviously already in that really interesting explanation about the broad spectrum of your research. But what insights specifically do you think your PhD will provide, and who will most benefit from those insights do you think?

Toby Meredith 07:18
I'd like to think that the home office, because that's where Border Control sits underneath, would be interested in the findings from it. Department for Transports as well, that's the Coast Guard sits underneath that government department. So, it could be policy writers within there, it could be the practitioners, the people who are actually using the technology. So, they could potentially say I don't think we should be using drones in this way, because we've looked at some of the evidence that's been presented from this academic study, and it shows it's not the best practice, basically. So that's kind of where I would like it to be targeted. And then there is that sort of role on if

it is improving search and rescue practices. Ultimately, then that could benefit people who are in distress in the small boats as well.

Catherine McDonald 08:07
And so what are you going to do to try and ensure that your PhD has this impact and reaches the people it needs to reach?

Toby Meredith 08:16
The people that I'm going to be interviewing, I've sort of developed relationships outside of the PhD, so I'm sort of not directly working with them, but I've been on working groups with some of them. It's all been around drone technology, and whether that's sort of the development of the drone industry as a whole in the UK, or whether it's more specific for the emergency services. One thing that I I don't have, really at the moment I'm looking at building up relationships with, is international partners. Fortunately, I've just started doing some work with a doctor at the University of Portsmouth, whose study is in the naval capacity and capabilities of the Senegalese military. But she's also, very handily, is tied in quite nicely with the French Admiralty, and so with the development of the agreements with the UK and France, then it could potentially, sort of engage with people in that in that way.

Catherine McDonald 09:18
It's about making those new contacts, but also taking the people who you're collaborating with now on the journey with you, and hopefully they play a massive part on the impact at the end as well. Toby, thank you very much for talking to us. Really appreciate it, and thanks to you for listening to this episode of Speaking of Research from the South Coast Doctoral Training Partnership. To find out more, please visit southcoastdtp.ac.uk. Don't forget to subscribe wherever you get your podcast to access earlier and forthcoming episodes. This was a Research Podcast production.