

Audio file

[Reportercast February 2026 with Jack Adamovic Davies.mp3](#)

Transcript

00:00:08 Speaker 1

Hello, people. This is Martin Rosca, the owner of the investigative journalism website Reporter.London. It's been two years since I've done a podcast because I've been tied up in other projects and it's nice to be back doing this. And as Jane Austen said, it is a truth universally acknowledged that two men in possession of beers

00:00:29 Speaker 1

must be in want of a podcast. So my guest and I have had a number of BAs together since Reporter Cast went on its hiatus a while ago. And so the guy sitting next to me is really an extraordinary person, a journalist who I think I can also call a friend. He has brilliant stories to tell and is himself, to the extent we can get him to reveal it, a man of unique and epic personal background, no pressure. Jack Adamovich Davies,

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an investigative reporter most recently with Radio Free Asia, who also spent some time in Serbia before that. He's here with us. He's a native of London. He's exceptionally well-travelled, well-read. He will tell us a lot of amazing things, such as all about the scams and the fraud industry in Cambodia, what it means to be a reporter writing critically about the authoritarian government there.

00:01:25 Speaker 1

about the ongoing military conflict with Thailand and so forth, about Serbia and about Radio Free Asia and Radio Free Europe, and whatever he has cooking for the near future as well. Welcome, Jack.

00:01:40 Speaker 2

Hi, thanks a lot for having me, Mati.

00:01:42 Speaker 1

Thank you. So let's start from the present and work our way backwards. You were the reporter who revealed the story of the prince, the Cambodian Chinese,

00:01:53 Speaker 1

scams/organized crime, alleged multinational gang. Now it's under sanctions, two years later, was it two or three years?

00:02:06 Speaker 2

I started reporting on them five years ago, so it's kind of been a five-year journey. But yeah, my big sort of expose of them was February 2024. So we're two years, almost to the day, two years later now.

00:02:18 Speaker 1

Right, and now they're under global sanctions, everyone knows about them.

00:02:22 Speaker 1

The US and UK governments have accused them of running massive scam compounds, money laundering, organized crime, serious violence. The stories are all available online, so we don't have to go through all of them. I want to go behind the notebook here a little bit. So can you tell us how it was for you to be the only one covering this stuff in the early days and the stories that you did and how it built up?

00:02:49 Speaker 1

How do things move from one journalist covering a story to it becoming a global phenomenon?

00:02:55 Speaker 2

Sure, yeah. I mean, it was quite lonely at first, I think. You know, you have the sense of being this lone lunatic. You have, and the very interesting thing about the Pritz group, at least for me, what I found very interesting is that they, most organized crime build companies in order to have a cover for their

00:03:18 Speaker 2

for their operations. What was interesting about Prince is they built an entire conglomerate. This wasn't a few petrol stations. This was a true multinational, multi-billion dollar conglomerate. And they controlled, they had their own airline, they controlled companies on stock exchanges, they had their own bank. And when you're telling people, no, this

00:03:43 Speaker 2

I've been reporting on this and what I'm finding is this is not a conglomerate. This is an organized crime group. You sound like a lunatic. And yeah, so it was, I started in September 2020 looking into them. And it was a slow burn at first. You know, I didn't know what they were. All I knew was that there was something that didn't quite add up. They were claiming to be Cambodia's first ever sort of truly homegrown multinational conglomerate.

00:04:11 Speaker 2

and yet no one's putting their hands up and saying, I was the first in the door to invest in this, which was super sketchy, right? the idea is...

00:04:21 Speaker 1

So the money has to come from somewhere.

00:04:23 Speaker 2

The money had to come from somewhere, and it seemed ludicrous to me that no one wanted to put their hand up and say they were where it came from, because you'd want the world to know. You'd want the world to know that you were this visionary who saw promise when no one else did.

00:04:36 Speaker 1

You know, logically, when you make an investment, you want to advertise it so that other people want to make that investment.

00:04:41 Speaker 1

so that it increases the price of your investment.

00:04:44 Speaker 2

Yeah, exactly, exactly. And I think there's just so much ego in that world that it made no sense to me. So the first question I had was, where's the money coming from? And it took a really long time to answer that question. I think the longer it took, the more I felt like I was on the right path, if you get what I mean. But yeah, so there was, started September 20, and then the next thing that let me know I was on the right path was,

00:05:10 Speaker 2

As soon as I put out the first story, which was quite mild, you know, it just said here's a politically connected conglomerate. They seem to have ties to these political figures in China as well as Cambodia. They responded by retaining a PR firm called Hill & Knowlton,

which actually doesn't exist under that name anymore. Oh, wow. But they have this really long pedigree. In the 1950s, when the US government and kind of medical community discovered that cigarettes were bad for you,

00:05:39 Speaker 2

Hill and Noton were the people that the tobacco industry turned to in order to develop the strategy, which was kind of the why don't you think for yourself strategy. It was very clever and it later got used by the fossil fuel industry, this notion of, okay, we can't really challenge the facts because they are what they are, but we can suggest in the mind of the public that maybe they shouldn't let themselves be hectored and lectured to by a bunch of experts. So they did that in the 50s, then you fast forward to the late 1980s.

00:06:10 Speaker 2

And I don't know if you're familiar with a bank called Bank of Credit and Commerce International.

00:06:14 Speaker 1

Oh yeah. So yeah, they used to call it the Bank of Crooks.

00:06:19 Speaker 2

And criminals and incorporated.

00:06:20 Speaker 1

Yeah, exactly.

00:06:21 Speaker 2

Yeah, this was sort of BCCI. Yeah, there have been movies made about this. But yeah, when law enforcement started closing in on them and when sort of US Congress started investigating,

00:06:36 Speaker 2

Who did BCCI, the bank of, all manner of drug dealers, terrorists, you name it, who did they turn to? They turned to Hill Norton. Hill Norton started putting about this, their strategy was to sow doubts in the mind of the public and in Congress of the sort of validity of law enforcement. And once again, they were fighting a losing battle, BCCI gets shut down. Around about the same time, the Kuwaiti government is very keen for

00:07:06 Speaker 2

the US government to invade Iraq. This is the early 1990s. And there's that memorable moment where a young Kuwaiti girl testifies before one of the US houses of government, I can't remember if it was Congress or Senate, but this young girl testifies about these atrocities she's seen. It later turns out that she's either the daughter or the niece of the Kuwaiti ambassador.

00:07:27 Speaker 2

And who coached her in her testimony? Hill and Knowlton. And time and time again throughout their history, this PR firm is the people you turn to when you know that your case is evil and there's almost no chance of succeeding.

00:07:42 Speaker 1

Well, the archetypal ruthless PR firm. And you were one guy in Cambodia working for a, I mean, big, but still relatively obscure media outlet. Certainly not the BBC or the New York Times.

00:07:57 Speaker 1

And you had to deal with them.

00:08:00 Speaker 2

and it was, it was, it was like it was the first indication that these guys were serious, because I, I've been reporting on sort of corrupt business people in Cambodia since early 2016, and also corrupt politicians in Cambodia. And normally,

00:08:21 Speaker 2

there's this sense of like, look, man, say what you want. I'm in Cambodia. What do I care? And so it was kind of safe. You know, it sounds very scary, like always, you know, out there muckraking these scary dudes who do scary things, but they're scary dudes in a fairly closed loop ecosystem. And so it didn't really matter. And so it was interesting to me that the prints were

00:08:44 Speaker 2

were concerned about their reputation in that way, and that they were going to take such strong measures and that they saw fit to hire this PR firm that's kind of the PR firm of last resort. And yet, so to cut a five-year story slightly short, over time, start building up sources, both people connected to Prince, people who used to work for them, stuff like that.

00:09:09 Speaker 2

but also start amassing quite a lot of documentation about what's going on and eventually travel to Eastern Cambodia to a scam compound operated by prints. And scam compounds become shorthand for people like you and I who work on these subjects, but I think it's still not a very well-known term. And essentially, it's an enormous business park.

00:09:34 Speaker 2

somewhere in the middle of nowhere with three metre high concrete walls, razor wire at the top. And inside are thousands, if not 10s of thousands of people held against their will, forced to perpetrate essentially romance frauds against people around the world. And if they don't meet their targets, they're tortured, they're electrocuted, sometimes they're killed, sometimes they're forced into prostitution. They're just horrible. And when they try to escape, they'll be tasered and beaten until they're black and blue.

00:10:04 Speaker 2

And so, as you said, the stories are out there. If people want to read them, they can. But they put together this package of three fairly hard-hitting stories, the first of which sort of looked at the criminal allegations against the company and their political connections in Cambodia. The second one looked at their money laundering routes, particularly focusing on one that went through the Isle of Man that

00:10:31 Speaker 2

allegedly laundered around about \$100 million at the very least. And then the third was looking at this scam center and the human trafficking allegations. And I expected that when we put out these stories saying that a man, so the chairman of the Prince Group, a man named Chen Ge, he held the rank equivalent to that of a minister in the Cambodian government. So we thought, when we put out a story that said,

00:10:58 Speaker 2

essentially minister in Cambodian government is running multi-billion dollar international crime.

00:11:03 Speaker 1

This is someone who was deeply involved in politics, deeply involved in legitimate business, and deeply involved in organized crime.

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Yeah, and some of the worst organized crime. You know, there's really like depths of brutality that I think are hard for most people to fathom. They were certainly hard for me to fathom.

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But there was sort of crickets in response. You know, no one picked up, well, that's not entirely true. One or two small outlets picked up the story, but everyone else didn't want to touch it. And it felt for a while, like I was the lone lunatic, you know, sort of, you know, is the Prince group in the room with us now? Can it speak to us?

00:11:43 Speaker 1

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

00:11:45 Speaker 2

And yeah, that lasted...

00:11:47 Speaker 2

For 18 months, until last October, as you mentioned, bringing us close to the present, the US and UK sanctioned the Prince Group, they indicted the chairman, Chen Zhe, and they seized what at the time was \$15 billion worth of Bitcoin, but it's now close to \$8 or \$7 billion.

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Well, because the Bitcoin price declined. But this is a good moment to ask you to talk a little bit about the presence in the West, right, because it's not just

00:12:15 Speaker 1

American PR firms with a sinister background. They have lots of assets. These assets are supposed to make them one of the biggest or richest organized crime groups in history. So am I right to say that they're, but in terms of riches, they're dwarfing even the Italian or the Russian mafia or the Mexican cartel. That we know of.

00:12:40 Speaker 2

Yeah, no, I had a very good source

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former fairly senior Prince Group executive, who told me that circa 2020, Chen Zhe bragged to him about having a personal net worth of 60 billion US dollars, six zero.

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Six zero billion. This is GDP level money for a criminal group.

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Yeah, you know, it's astonishing. And I looked up the exact question you were asking, I was looking up, you know, net worths of

00:13:13 Speaker 2

criminals past and present. I couldn't find anyone, but I think it was El Chapo, I think, he had 12 and a half billion dollars seized from him. We can assume he probably had more, but probably not much more.

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And yeah, you look at like Sam Bankman-Fried, it's I think around about \$25 billion.

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And it's worth, you know, I mean, it's worth saying also Bankman-Fried was sentenced for fraud, but he was not really a gangster.

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Yeah, no, he wasn't talking to people.

00:13:43 Speaker 1

A corporate fraudster.

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Yeah, which is a slightly different category. But yeah, in terms of classic crime, it seems like, and you know, I think the cyber fraud ecosystem in Southeast Asia is so diverse and plentiful now.

00:13:58 Speaker 2

that it's entirely possible that there are other groups like Prince that have kept a lower profile and have more money, which is so frightening. You know, we're not just talking about one organized criminal group with the GDP of a small to mid-sized country. We're talking about an entire ecosystem of people who may or may not have equivalent amounts of

00:14:20 Speaker 1

wealth and power accumulated. It's transcendental, right? It transcends crime, violence, politics.

00:14:26 Speaker 1

business, it's really, truly all-encompassing. I mean, we live in dystopia in a way, with groups like this sort of having political power, having levels of resource and influence that were unimaginable even a generation ago. We are in a new world, aren't we?

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are, we are indeed, and I think we, I think we're fools if we think it can only happen over there. You know, I think, you know, you look at a place like Cambodia, but everywhere these

00:14:55 Speaker 2

these criminals have touched, they're corrupt. For instance.

00:15:00 Speaker 1

Yeah, sorry to interrupt, but we're in the city of London, just in Furniture Street, which is probably 5 minutes from where we are now. There's a building, yes. Yeah, I was going to say, it's

00:15:09 Speaker 2

one block over in that direction. Ginger had or had where he still technically owns it, it's just frozen by the British government, but it has a \$100 million office block just one street over from where we are now.

00:15:24 Speaker 2

But I think, what's really interesting to me is that this form of fraud, this form of crime, is sort of, it's a license to print money because it's so frictionless. whereas with drugs, for example, there's turf wars. You know, you're fighting over who gets the channel to move the drugs across. With fraud,

00:15:44 Speaker 2

Who cares? I'll be in this office building, you be in that office building, we can eat at the same takeaway restaurants. What does it matter to us? You know, there's an infinite number, there's 7 billion people on the planet to defraud. And because of that, it's sort of a license to print money so long as you have the political protection not to be stopped. And

the trouble is, it's so lucrative that whatever political system you enter, even if there are honest, legitimate politicians,

00:16:11 Speaker 2

You can bankroll the dishonest ones to such a degree that the honest ones can't compete.

00:16:17 Speaker 1

Sorry, can I just say one thing? Please. Because you did a story, which to me was fascinating, in foreign policy, where you suggested that scamming fraud is such a core part of the Cambodian economy now that it's too big to fail, like banking was in 2007 in the UK. Can you expand on that?

00:16:37 Speaker 2

Sure. So I think

00:16:40 Speaker 2

A lot of people came away from that story with the same perception as you, that I was saying that for the economy it was too big to fail. But what I was really arguing was that for the political system in Cambodia it was too big to fail. Cambodia is, it's a patronage politics system. You know, everyone pays up the line to have their place in the patron pyramid and in turn they get doled out rent seeking opportunities, whether that's through

00:17:07 Speaker 2

positions where they can seek bribes or land concessions or land concessions. And the thing is that this surge of criminal capital coming into the Cambodian political system, combined with the fact that the Cambodian economy never really recovered from the coronavirus pandemic.

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during coronavirus, I remember speaking to a very well-placed source who was telling me that various army units were borrowing money from each other to make payroll because they couldn't afford to pay the troops. And Cambodia is one of, like, has one of the highest like soldier per capita rates. Yeah. And not in a sense, and we'll get to this later, not in a sense that their military is particularly efficient, but it's, you know, it's so interwoven

00:17:58 Speaker 2

in sort of the political structure of the country. And so, you inject all of this illicit capital, it's all bribes going into the system. Everyone gets very accustomed to being able to cover all

of their expenses through the kickbacks they're receiving. If you remove that, you take a system that's held together. I was talking to an analyst at an embassy in Cambodia recently, and

00:18:26 Speaker 2

we were sort of tossing around the question of why is Cambodia so spectacularly corrupt when Vietnam next door isn't to the same degree and nor is China. And I think one of the things is that among many other factors, China and Vietnam both have sort of core driving ideologies that legitimize their state. We are the state and it's important we're the state because we do X, we provide X, we

00:18:54 Speaker 2

You know, we are marching towards this common goal and we're the unifying frame. Cambodia doesn't have that. You know, there is no real unifying ideology. There's just, and I'm talking purely about the political elite here. I don't want to tarnish a very beautiful country's sort of character, but the ruling political elite of Cambodia are bound together.

00:19:20 Speaker 2

purely by an acquisitiveness for wealth and power. And I think there's a closed loop system where everyone, once you're in the club, everyone you speak to is in the club. No one's going to mention the elephant in the room, which is that you're screwing over your 20 odd million compatriots just for the sake of being able to drive a Rolls Royce in

00:19:43 Speaker 2

and to live in a mansion and fly suites class on Singapore Airlines.

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And what makes this, just to say, you know, what makes this really cyberpunk is that you combine this sort of enclave of corruption and free-for-all sort of political and criminal protection with the opportunities afforded by the internet.

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Yeah.

00:20:05 Speaker 1

And globalized technology and all of that.

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So between these two, it's a really explosive and sort of mind-bending

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cocktail of crime, isn't it?

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It is.

00:20:14 Speaker 2

And I think, you know, it really tests sort of the boundaries of the norms of international law.

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And in ways that actually sometimes it's not just the internet that tests these boundaries.

00:20:28 Speaker 2

There was a really interesting case I followed during the pandemic.

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So obviously there was this race around the world to produce vaccines.

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And in order to produce vaccines, you need to test them.

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And most of, more often than not, vaccines are first tested on long-tailed macaques.

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Very small, very cute form of monkey.

00:20:52 Speaker 2

Back in late 2022, my wife and I were in Cambodia, and one weekend I took her on a behind-the-scenes tour of a wildlife sanctuary, and we're touring the monkey enclosure, and the lady showing us around, just in passing, says,

00:21:10 Speaker 2

yeah, they're very cute, but it's so sad because, senior politicians in this country are smuggling them.

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I like, it's my weekend.

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I wasn't working in my head.

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I was like, well, that's a great story.

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I should look into that sometime.

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Fast forward three or four days later, I wake up and the DOJ's put out a press release.

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They've just arrested in John F.

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Kennedy Airport, a fairly senior figure in the...

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What's it called?

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Essentially the Agriculture Ministry of Cambodia, who's in charge or responsible for the certifying of exports of endangered species, of which the long-tailed macaque is one.

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And it turns out that he'd been on his way to a conference in Panama about the protection of species when the Fish and Wildlife Agency, which is the US government's law enforcement agency for wildlife crime,

00:22:08 Speaker 2

They collar him at the airport and it turns out that they indict him for being part of a ring smuggling millions and millions of dollars worth of monkeys.

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Turns out that up until the beginning of the pandemic, the primary source for the world's long-tailed macaque for research was China.

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But China put up the walls at the beginning of the pandemic and they said, There's no way we're giving you guys our monkeys, we want to make our vaccines.

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So then the world started looking for a good place from which to procure vaccines.

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And Cambodia stepped up and said, We got monkeys.

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But there was a hitch, which is that they had lots of monkeys.

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They didn't have very many that were bred in captivity.

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It's very important for vaccine development that the monkeys are bred in captivity.

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So you know that there's no...

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Well, they're exposed to what sort of bugs and things that they're exposed to.

00:23:04 Speaker 2

But in order to procure these monkeys,

00:23:08 Speaker 2

Essentially, the Cambodian government started certifying wild caught monkeys as captive bred in order that they could export, to meet demand essentially.

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What this meant was that any medicine developed sort of between about 2020 and 2024,

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No one wants to talk about it.

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The research is compromised.

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Yeah, it undermines the integrity of global pharmaceutical research.

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Yeah.

00:23:39 Speaker 1

Because they got into business with this Cambodian, you know, less than straightforward Cambodian politicians.

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But here's the kicker.

00:23:49 Speaker 2

The guy got off because the Cambodian government wrote a letter where they said, Look, we ordered him to go do this.

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And I'm not a lawyer, but essentially what it boils down to is some version of the acts of state doctrine, which says, look, if a government does something, it's a legitimate act of state and therefore is not for a foreign court to judge.

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And so basically his acquittal came down to that.

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They even had him on camera outside of a farm he was supposed to be inspecting saying, you should build a road here, it'll be better for your smuggling.

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But because it was an act of state, he couldn't be found guilty.

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And so there's this fascinating thing in this hyper-connected, globalized world.

00:24:30 Speaker 2

Yes, through the internet, through fraud, but also on these very fundamental levels that, you know, if laws can't be guaranteed to be enforced around the world, but we live in a globalized economy,

00:24:42 Speaker 2

the integrity of everything vanishes and these black holes for money to sink into will pop up ever more frequently around the world.

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Well, that's a scary thought, but I think you're absolutely correct in that because you see it more and more these days.

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Now, look, let's go back to you a little bit.

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Can you give us a sort of analysis of what might be coming down the line for the Prince Group?

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And whether you're doing a book or not on them, is that, can you talk about that?

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Sure.

00:25:14 Speaker 1

I heard you're doing a book, yeah.

00:25:16 Speaker 2

I would like to.

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I'm in the process of putting together a pitch.

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Right.

00:25:21 Speaker 2

Sort of, somewhere along the way, from 2020 when I first started poking into them, to five years later when they'd taken up half a decade of my life, causing me enormous amounts of stress and worry and sleepless nights, I...

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It's one of those strange things about journalism that you start out as a complete ignoramus about something and you wake up one day and realize that people are calling you up to explain it because no one else has looked at it as much as you have.

00:25:53 Speaker 2

And yeah, so I'd love to do a book on it.

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I think in terms of what's next for the Prince Group, you know, they're gonna fight really hard and their lawyers are gonna fight really hard because there's this, you know, \$8 to \$15 billion up for grabs in New York.

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They're not going to go down without a fight.

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Their chairman is currently in a Chinese jail.

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It seems very unlikely he'll ever see Daylight again.

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I think his lawyers are very, very keen to get him out.

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But I think China made such a big stink.

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They put a black bag over his head.

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They used this elite SWAT team to nab him.

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They filmed it all quite cinematically.

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They were making a point.

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Chen is toast.

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Meanwhile, you have the remainders of the Prince Group, which is this huge octopoid creature around the world, and it's still fighting its corner.

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I think the brand is so clear and toxic, it's going to disappear.

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And even before the indictments and sanctions came down, Prince were already rebranding lots of their projects around the world to try and avoid the association.

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I think what we'll see, if anyone pays close enough attention, is that

00:27:02 Speaker 2

sort of some of Chen's top lieutenants are going to spin off and do their own thing.

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I think there's no appetite, either in London or Washington, to chase down and prosecute every single senior member of the Prince group.

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You know, there's a diminishing return on that.

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So I think, yeah, we'll see them cropping up in other places.

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We're already starting to see them cropping up in other places.

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And, you know, they'll find somewhere else to operate.

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I think some of them will continue to operate in Cambodia.

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Cambodia's made a big stink

00:27:31 Speaker 2

Ever since they allowed Chen to be extradited to China, they've made this big 180 flip, and now they're all about eradicating cybercrime.

00:27:41 Speaker 2

As I argued in the foreign policy piece, I don't think that they can.

00:27:47 Speaker 2

I think politically, it's just not secure for them to do that.

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But I think we saw this in 2019.

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when China tapped then Prime Minister Hun Sen on the shoulder and said, look, we're sick of online casinos targeting our citizens in China operating out of Cambodia.

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And Hun Sen announced that the online gambling industry was over in Cambodia.

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Overnight, 200 to 400,000 Chinese workers find themselves unemployed on the streets trying to get back home.

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But it didn't put an end to the online gambling industry, it just rationalized it.

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You know, Prince Group was among

00:28:23 Speaker 2

you know, one of the biggest players in that industry.

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And they continue to operate for another five years after all.

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Yeah.

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So, yeah, no, no, no.

00:28:32 Speaker 1

I mean, this is all fascinating.

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And so you mentioned security.

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I wanted to ask also, for a time, I think Chen Zhe and his top guys were here in London, in a mansion, in Northwest London, with all the sort of trappings of the oligarchy.

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And the lawyers and the consultants, and we know, as investigative reporters, some of these people get up to nefarious tactics.

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So, how did you feel being in London and investigating a global empire, which...

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It was also for a while run out of the same city you were in.

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What kind of pressure did you feel you were under?

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I'm sorry, I think I slept a lot better after the indictment and the sanctions were published because it felt then like there was definitely a bigger fish to fry than me, you know, if you're the prince group.

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But it was frightening, you know, I mean, when, first of all, when I was in Cambodia,

00:29:35 Speaker 2

Someone associated with the Prince Group told me that if I didn't drop the story, I should consider myself in physical danger, which was a frightening.

00:29:44 Speaker 2

They were quite drunk, but, and I remember at the time being terrified.

00:29:52 Speaker 2

I came home that evening and my wife looked at me and just before I even said anything, she just went, what's wrong?

00:29:58 Speaker 2

Because I was white as a ghost, you know.

00:30:00 Speaker 2

Of course.

00:30:01 Speaker 2

But keep working, keep going.

00:30:03 Speaker 2

You didn't drop it.

00:30:04 Speaker 2

I didn't drop it.

00:30:05 Speaker 2

No, that would have been either late 2022 or early 2023.

00:30:08 Speaker 2

I kept going.

00:30:09 Speaker 2

Then we put the stories out in, the big stories out in February 2024.

00:30:16 Speaker 2

And first of all, I got this very dodgy call from a source of mine close to the Cambodian Interior Ministry, which was very closely aligned with Prince.

00:30:29 Speaker 2

And

00:30:30 Speaker 2

The source who'd always been very cordial, very encouraging of my work, all of a sudden is yelling at me, I can't believe you did this.

00:30:37 Speaker 2

And then kept trying to lure me to Cambodia, saying, When do you come to Cambodia?

00:30:41 Speaker 2

I've got a great story for you.

00:30:42 Speaker 2

You have to come to Cambodia.

00:30:43 Speaker 2

I thought, Oh, wow.

00:30:44 Speaker 1

It felt setting you off for a kidnapping.

00:30:47 Speaker 2

Potentially.

00:30:47 Speaker 2

Yeah, potentially.

00:30:48 Speaker 2

I can't say for sure, 'cause I know the violence of blame, but it felt ominous.

00:30:54 Speaker 2

And then at the same time,

00:30:58 Speaker 2

The Prince Group retained a law firm called Duane Morris, which is a big American law firm, but they retained the Singaporean franchise.

00:31:05 Speaker 1

It's heartening that it seems that the worst of these law firms and PR companies are in America now, because for a while, they used to be British.

00:31:15 Speaker 2

I'm sorry to burst you above.

00:31:17 Speaker 2

I've got to be careful

00:31:25 Speaker 2

how I say this, but my experience tells me that there's also a lot of British law firms still making a lot of money off this kind of work.

00:31:35 Speaker 2

That's for sure.

00:31:36 Speaker 1

More of that soon.

00:31:37 Speaker 2

And, you know, for instance, just before Christmas just been, I had a story out in the Times about how Mishcon Deraya, who I think are notorious amongst people in our lineup, you know, they

00:31:54 Speaker 2

They did a lot of conveyancing work for Chen for.

00:31:57 Speaker 1

Conveyancing means property contracts.

00:31:59 Speaker 2

Yeah, transferring properties on his behalf, worth 10s of millions of pounds.

00:32:03 Speaker 2

That's something I can talk about.

00:32:05 Speaker 2

But yeah, you know, so they hired this big multinational law firm.

00:32:11 Speaker 2

to take out adverts in newspapers in Cambodia, including the newspaper I used to work for, which was very disheartening, calling me a racist, a liar, lacking integrity, all these horrible things.

00:32:21 Speaker 1

So you didn't consider hiring a libel law firm to protect you at that time?

00:32:24 Speaker 2

I considered it.

00:32:25 Speaker 2

But at the same time that this was happening, an editor at RFA got a bunch of messages from people close to the Prince Group.

00:32:34 Speaker 2

where this editor wrote to me, and they wrote to me from a WhatsApp number I didn't recognize, but it was from Southeast Asia, the week this was happening.

00:32:42 Speaker 2

And the message was something like, good job you've kicked the ***** hornet's nest.

00:32:49 Speaker 2

And I thought, oh God, this is a threat.

00:32:51 Speaker 2

And I said, I'm sorry, who the hell is this?

00:32:53 Speaker 2

no, sorry, it's me, and it's the exile.

00:32:55 Speaker 2

I was like, oh, thank God, you'd be terrified.

00:32:57 Speaker 2

I said, well, no, listen, I've been getting lots of messages from folks close to the Prince group, and they're all telling me versions of, if you come to Cambodia, you're a dead man.

00:33:06 Speaker 2

And so, you know, it was the mixture of, we're going to hire this big, respectable law firm, and there are going to be these backdoor messages coming.

00:33:13 Speaker 2

I was scared.

00:33:14 Speaker 1

So they used the whole range of tactics, legal, endless legal.

00:33:16 Speaker 2

Yeah, and it was all in the end.

00:33:19 Speaker 2

You know, it was one of those things you can't be sure

00:33:22 Speaker 2

in the moment, am I really under threat or is this all blowing smoke?

00:33:27 Speaker 2

And I think it was interesting with the law firm.

00:33:30 Speaker 2

The law firm never contacted me or my employer.

00:33:33 Speaker 2

They just took out the adverts that were phrased and designed to look exactly like a letter from the lawyers to me, but was never delivered.

00:33:41 Speaker 2

And I think that should have been the warning sign that Prince's Bark was much worse than their bite when it came to intimidation.

00:33:49 Speaker 2

But yeah, at the time you can't know that.

00:33:51 Speaker 1

Of course, you have a duty, you have a duty to assume they're capable of what they say.

00:33:59 Speaker 1

Now, amid all of this, as though all of this wasn't already quite enough on your plate, Radio Free Asia starts losing funding, there's a new administration in Washington, they want to do things in a new way, it's for the job.

00:34:17 Speaker 1

Your job is for the job.

00:34:20 Speaker 1

So how did that feel like to work for a newsroom that was disintegrating while you were writing the biggest story of global organized crime in the world at the time?

00:34:35 Speaker 2

I'm in a word, terrible, but in two words, ***** terrible.

00:34:40 Speaker 2

Yeah, it was, you know, by the time this was happening, it'd been a year since those stories had come out.

00:34:48 Speaker 2

But there was always this looming thing hanging over.

00:34:51 Speaker 2

The great thing about working for a big news organization is if you get sued, they get sued.

00:34:56 Speaker 2

And you're shackled to this organization that will do anything to defend itself.

00:35:00 Speaker 2

And if defending you will defend their reputation, then great.

00:35:06 Speaker 2

So my biggest worry when, it became clear, I think almost as soon as Trump was elected, that Radio Free Asia was, it was just so obviously dogeable, like, oh, bring free press to authoritarian nations, it just sounds like.

00:35:25 Speaker 1

It's an idealistic thing which doesn't quite fit with the new world we live in.

00:35:30 Speaker 2

Yeah, and it was a tiny budget line.

00:35:32 Speaker 2

It was \$60 million a year, which in the US government-.

00:35:36 Speaker 1

For the US government, it's really nothing.

00:35:37 Speaker 2

It's nothing.

00:35:39 Speaker 2

But yeah, it became clear that for ideological reasons, we would be for the job.

00:35:44 Speaker 2

And that was my biggest panic was, what am I going to do when I get sued?

00:35:52 Speaker 2

But there was one nice thing, which was my final story before we got shut down was the Isle of Man police raiding Chen's offices in the Isle of Man.

00:36:04 Speaker 2

And it was nice to go out on that note because it let me know that I wasn't now going to become not only Jack the lone quack,

00:36:17 Speaker 2

working for Radio Free.

00:36:19 Speaker 2

It would just be, oh, the quack.

00:36:21 Speaker 1

After a while, law enforcement actually started investigating and they had fines, so it became a matter for law enforcement.

00:36:27 Speaker 2

Exactly, yeah.

00:36:29 Speaker 2

And so that was nice, but it was definitely, you know, in the six months between getting fired and the indictment coming, you know, I think

00:36:42 Speaker 2

As a profession, we're often hesitant to talk about this because it feels sort of cowardly to admit, but I was, you know, my heart was racing a lot.

00:36:53 Speaker 2

You know, I'd walk along a dark alley and sort of the thought would flash through my head.

00:36:57 Speaker 2

The irrational thought I should stress, but like the irrational thought was like, something could get me here.

00:37:03 Speaker 2

Yeah.

00:37:03 Speaker 2

Because you get into this, you know.

00:37:08 Speaker 1

It's not like it hasn't happened before in Europe.

00:37:10 Speaker 1

That's another thing.

00:37:11 Speaker 1

So, it is unfortunately, even in developed Europe, it's a thing that still happens to journalists.

00:37:20 Speaker 2

Yeah, it is.

00:37:22 Speaker 1

You weren't irrational, actually.

00:37:24 Speaker 1

I'm sorry to say.

00:37:25 Speaker 2

Yeah, no, it's the, and it is also the classic joke, I'm not paranoid, they really are out together.

00:37:31 Speaker 1

Just because you're paranoid, it doesn't mean they're not out.

00:37:33 Speaker 1

Yeah, exactly.

00:37:34 Speaker 1

Both can be true.

00:37:36 Speaker 1

So, yeah, adding pressure and adding pressure all the time with everything.

00:37:43 Speaker 1

Now, look, so let's leave that there for now because it's tough enough.

00:37:52 Speaker 1

Let's go back to the happier days of pre-Cambodia.

00:37:56 Speaker 1

You were in Serbia, right, for a while.

00:37:59 Speaker 2

So pre-Cambodia, I was primarily in Kosovo.

00:38:02 Speaker 2

Oh, right, Kosovo.

00:38:04 Speaker 2

which was a really interesting place to be.

00:38:06 Speaker 2

And it was funny actually, when I first moved to Cambodia to take a job with Phnom Penh Post, a Cambodian colleague of mine, we went to some press conference together and on the way back, he said, Hey, where'd you say you were living before this?

00:38:20 Speaker 2

And I said, Oh, a small place called Kosovo.

00:38:24 Speaker 2

And he cracked up and I said, Oh, what's so funny?

00:38:25 Speaker 2

He said, Oh, well, you know, in Khmer,

00:38:28 Speaker 2

When we say that someone's gone a really long way away, we say, Oh, he's gone to Kosovo.

00:38:32 Speaker 2

Oh, no.

00:38:34 Speaker 2

That's amazing.

00:38:36 Speaker 2

Which, you know, I think, you know, Cambodia was the sort of the original post-Cold War nation-building project, and Kosovo was where sort of the international community, whatever the phrase means, in this day and age, did a far better job at that than they did in Cambodia.

00:38:55 Speaker 2

Imperfect for sure, but like, you know, a much more admirable effort.

00:38:58 Speaker 2

It was a very interesting place.

00:39:00 Speaker 2

I got there in late 2013.

00:39:04 Speaker 2

The country itself was just five years old.

00:39:07 Speaker 2

Like I remember the street party for the sixth birthday of Kosovo, and it was one of the best parties I ever went to in my life.

00:39:12 Speaker 1

Still, yeah.

00:39:13 Speaker 2

Yeah, oh, it was fantastic.

00:39:14 Speaker 2

It was so cool.

00:39:16 Speaker 2

And so it was a great place to work.

00:39:18 Speaker 2

It was...

00:39:19 Speaker 2

It was a very affordable place to be while trying to carry out one's own apprenticeship in the news business.

00:39:29 Speaker 2

It was a place that had sort of more news per capita than anywhere else in the world at that time.

00:39:36 Speaker 1

Yes, it's a fish in a barrel, isn't it?

00:39:38 Speaker 2

Fish in a barrel, and you know, there was also, you know, you had this interesting hybrid thing where, you know, when I first got there, there was still

00:39:47 Speaker 2

and I can't remember off the top of my head what the exact sort of constitutional setup was, but it was still that there was like an international presence that was sort of keeping an eye on things in a way that was quite sort of neo-colonial and uncomfortable, but it created these dynamics where there were lots of people to talk to.

00:40:04 Speaker 2

There were two sides to every story kind of that, you know, and that was really-- Yeah, no, it was very, very interesting, interesting work to be had there.

00:40:16 Speaker 1

And Serbia, you spent some time in Belgrade as well.

00:40:19 Speaker 2

Yeah.

00:40:20 Speaker 2

So from 2018 through until April of 2024, I lived in Belgrade.

00:40:28 Speaker 2

It's my wife's hometown.

00:40:29 Speaker 1

Oh, amazing.

00:40:31 Speaker 2

And it's a wonderful place.

00:40:33 Speaker 2

It's a place that, you know, Serbia, I think,

00:40:41 Speaker 2

I was going to say.

00:40:44 Speaker 1

But just in case we have anyone who is looking at the news about Serbia or watching, can I get you to speculate a bit about what these protests actually mean for Serbia and for President Vucic, who was in power a long time now, has been in?

00:41:02 Speaker 2

Power a long time now?

00:41:03 Speaker 2

Yeah, he came into power around about the time I first

00:41:08 Speaker 2

passed through Serbia on my way to Kosovo, which was, I think he was elected either 2012 or 2013.

00:41:14 Speaker 2

And I should stress, I'm not really a Serbia expert.

00:41:18 Speaker 2

My wife, very reasonably when we first met.

00:41:22 Speaker 2

said to me, look, I love that you're an investigative journalist, but I really don't want anyone hammering on my front door.

00:41:28 Speaker 2

So if you're going to live with me, can you not write about Serbia?

00:41:31 Speaker 2

And so, I sort of, I, you know, of course I have family there and so I, yeah, look, what's going on in Serbia is in many ways beyond the pale.

00:41:44 Speaker 2

You know, I think there's been for a very long time

00:41:48 Speaker 2

a tendency by Brussels, but also by Washington and London, to treat the Vucic government as what political scientists call a stableocracy.

00:41:58 Speaker 2

He may be a prick, but he's our prick kind of thing.

00:42:01 Speaker 2

And I think that's only been heightened by the discovery of large amounts of lithium underneath Serbia, which with the green transition, everyone's very keen to get their hands on.

00:42:12 Speaker 2

And Vucic, his pedigree is disgusting.

00:42:18 Speaker 2

You know, he spent the first half of the 1990s traveling around Bosnia with murderous thugs, with a human skull attached to the car bonnet, you know.

00:42:30 Speaker 2

And then he ended up being information minister for Slobodan Milosevic, during which time, you know, he was just a cheerleader and apologist for some of the worst atrocities, thinkable.

00:42:46 Speaker 2

And you kind of think that after the Serbian people get rid of Milosevic, that anyone in his government would be persona non grata.

00:42:53 Speaker 2

But actually, within about 10 years, elements of the US government and sort of European politics have decided that now he's rebranded from being a radical to he's calling himself progressive now.

00:43:07 Speaker 2

Maybe it's just the thing Serbia needs.

00:43:09 Speaker 2

And, you know, obviously Serbia has elections.

00:43:11 Speaker 1

European values.

00:43:12 Speaker 2

Exactly.

00:43:13 Speaker 1

These are the same people who are trying to tell us about European values all the time.

00:43:18 Speaker 2

Yeah, yeah, I forget the European parliamentary bloc that Serbia's ruling party is an associate member of, but it's like it's one of the fairly respectable center-right ones that, you know, a lot...

00:43:36 Speaker 2

Essentially, the long story short.

00:43:40 Speaker 1

Of how they completely rehabilitated him.

00:43:42 Speaker 2

They completely rehabilitated him.

00:43:44 Speaker 2

You know, he can get away with almost anything he wants.

00:43:49 Speaker 2

And yet, the last couple of years, these street protests started merging that have just been the largest that Serbia's ever seen.

00:43:58 Speaker 2

People are completely fed up and they're completely disillusioned

00:44:03 Speaker 2

with the complete absence of any cavalry coming from Brussels.

00:44:07 Speaker 2

In fact, the weekend of the biggest protests last year, all the foreign ministers of Europe kind of came to town to do photo ops of Vucic, almost as though to say, look, we're still on your side, even if your people hate you.

00:44:24 Speaker 2

And so the question of what happens next for Vucic, I think he must--

00:44:31 Speaker 2

know that the game he's playing sort of only ends one way and it's not nicely for him.

00:44:39 Speaker 2

You know, he's constructing this enormous expo arena, he calls it, sort of like a World's Fair thing out in the middle of nowhere, just outside the capital.

00:44:48 Speaker 2

And he keeps telling everyone, look, I'm not going to go until I've built the expo.

00:44:52 Speaker 2

It's important for Survey.

00:44:52 Speaker 2

And it's just, it's so...

00:44:57 Speaker 1

It's becoming a little bit, a little bit of a, he's becoming a little bit of a tragic Shakespearean character.

00:45:04 Speaker 2

Yeah, totally, totally.

00:45:05 Speaker 2

And I think, but I think it's also quite clear that constructing something big like that, far away from anyone else's prying eyes, sort of allows you to issue contracts to whoever you want, for whatever you want, 'cause who's gonna know the difference?

00:45:22 Speaker 2

Especially if it's a project of national importance.

00:45:25 Speaker 1

He's feathering his nest for retirement.

00:45:27 Speaker 2

We would assume so.

00:45:28 Speaker 2

You know, if the conduct of his colleagues is anything to go by, it would be a reasonable assumption for someone to draw as an opinion.

00:45:37 Speaker 1

Right, right.

00:45:39 Speaker 1

And so before Belgrade, you were in Birmingham.

00:45:42 Speaker 1

Birmingham to Belgrade.

00:45:44 Speaker 1

And this is a question I ask all journalists who I interview for my little podcast.

00:45:50 Speaker 1

You were in marketing.

00:45:51 Speaker 1

You didn't take the sort of, obviously, if it's not obvious by now, you didn't take the sort of classic route into media.

00:46:00 Speaker 1

And you know, how would you sort of advise anyone looking to get into this wretched, godforsaken business of investigative journalism?

00:46:10 Speaker 1

You know, you're a young guy in marketing in Birmingham.

00:46:14 Speaker 1

You know, it's not quite the flavor you're looking for.

00:46:17 Speaker 1

You can write.

00:46:18 Speaker 1

You have an inquiring mind.

00:46:22 Speaker 2

And I think, you know, the first thing to think of is survivorship bias, right?

00:46:26 Speaker 2

That for, you know, like the classic thing of the bombers coming back from Europe during World War II, everyone's looking at the parts where the wings are getting shot and they're putting more armor on there.

00:46:40 Speaker 1

Absolutely, I love that.

00:46:41 Speaker 2

Yeah, it's a wonderful analogy.

00:46:44 Speaker 2

And what actually they should have been doing is armoring the bits where there are no bullet holes because they're the ones that didn't come home.

00:46:50 Speaker 2

And I think it's very easy to look at one's own career or the careers of others and say, ah, well, they did this and they did that.

00:46:55 Speaker 2

And that must be the way to succeed.

00:46:56 Speaker 2

And so often, that's just not the case.

00:47:01 Speaker 2

I think I was very lucky that very early on, someone sent me a little essay by George Monbiot,

00:47:10 Speaker 2

which is sort of advice to the young reporter in Oxford.

00:47:13 Speaker 2

Yeah, yeah.

00:47:14 Speaker 2

And they said, look, if you're going to do this work, you should check this out.

00:47:17 Speaker 2

And it's his advice to a young reporter.

00:47:19 Speaker 2

And it basically boils down to like, don't go and work for, you know, the Salisbury Gazette writing about village fates for five years in the hope that someone will notice you.

00:47:32 Speaker 2

You get hired by a national newspaper and then eventually, hopefully they'll let you onto the foreign desk.

00:47:37 Speaker 2

He said, look, if you want to be

00:47:39 Speaker 2

His example was if you want to report on Zapatistas in Mexico, go to Mexico, teach English, learn Spanish, and learn everything you can about the Zapatistas, and then start pitching.

00:47:50 Speaker 2

And, you know, to say that worked out well for me sort of obscures the first couple of years of my career where I was literally hungry, like stomach pains, hungry for most of those two years.

00:48:05 Speaker 2

And I don't think in good conscience, I can recommend that as a business plan to anyone, especially because even though the media industry looked bleak in 2013, when I was stepping into it.

00:48:18 Speaker 1

Somehow it's a lot worse now.

00:48:20 Speaker 2

It's infinitely worse, you know, like, you know, so the freelance fees are the same or less than they were in 2013, if you're in sort of the, you know, when you're at the beginning of your career and you're taking what you can get.

00:48:34 Speaker 2

But, you know, cost of living is infinitely more even in the places that sort of.

00:48:39 Speaker 2

I was going to say.

00:48:40 Speaker 1

You know, East Asia now is not hugely cheaper than provincial England, for example.

00:48:45 Speaker 2

Exactly.

00:48:46 Speaker 2

Exactly.

00:48:46 Speaker 2

So, you know, I don't want to be.

00:48:49 Speaker 2

I also don't want to pull up the ladder and say, oh, my advice is don't.

00:48:53 Speaker 2

But I do think my advice.

00:48:58 Speaker 2

My advice would be, look,

00:49:01 Speaker 2

even if or when someone gives you a job, it's going to be underpaid and it's probably not going to be doing the thing you're really interested in.

00:49:13 Speaker 2

My advice would be, look, do what you have to do to pay the rent, you know, and then figure out what you're really, really interested in and just report that beat, with or without a job, report that beat.

00:49:28 Speaker 1

Not to love it.

00:49:28 Speaker 1

If it doesn't, if you don't, if you don't love it, doesn't, it doesn't work.

00:49:33 Speaker 2

And that's very true.

00:49:34 Speaker 2

But I think as well, what I was driving at is, you know, in this era where AI is replicating more and more of the easily replicable functions of human beings, I think specialist knowledge, specialist sources, you know, if you're thinking about what is

00:49:51 Speaker 2

You know, what can a computer not do?

00:49:53 Speaker 2

A computer can't sit in a cafe or a bar, look someone in the eyes and get them to tell their deepest secrets.

00:50:01 Speaker 2

You know, for essentially the ideology of truth.

00:50:03 Speaker 2

You know, you can't offer them any money, right?

00:50:06 Speaker 1

And so I think learn to relate to people.

00:50:09 Speaker 2

Learn to relate to people and like build a network of sources that no one else has.

00:50:14 Speaker 2

You know, I think it's easy when you start in this business to think.

00:50:17 Speaker 2

okay, what I need to do is somehow find a way to get the phone number of a cabinet minister, and then I'll have great stories.

00:50:23 Speaker 2

And actually, the opposite is true.

00:50:25 Speaker 2

Like, start with the people on the total fringes that no one else wants to listen to, and then you can, you know, and then like, you're the person who's listening to them.

00:50:37 Speaker 2

You know, it's almost a friendship, and that way you'll get stories no one else has, because you're talking to the guy that no one else thinks is worth talking to.

00:50:45 Speaker 2

And that guy always knows stuff 'cause no one thinks he's listening or paying attention or smart enough to understand what's going on in front of him.

00:50:52 Speaker 1

I like that a lot.

00:50:53 Speaker 1

I like that a lot, John.

00:50:54 Speaker 1

Do you remember the headline of your first story?

00:50:58 Speaker 1

My first ever story.

00:50:59 Speaker 2

Oh, okay, so that's tough.

00:51:01 Speaker 2

I can't remember.

00:51:02 Speaker 2

So when I was working at the marketing agency, I first started getting into journalism.

00:51:09 Speaker 2

There was a news website.

00:51:11 Speaker 2

that was starting up that basically just needed content.

00:51:13 Speaker 2

So they'd sent me a couple of press releases at lunchtime.

00:51:16 Speaker 2

It was my job to rewrite them.

00:51:17 Speaker 2

So I can't remember them.

00:51:18 Speaker 2

It'd be like, you know, you know, iron ore production up 7% in Northwest England or something.

00:51:25 Speaker 2

But the first...

00:51:26 Speaker 2

Proportant story.

00:51:29 Speaker 2

Yeah, let's call it important is maybe doing myself more credit than I deserve.

00:51:34 Speaker 2

But the first feature I did for a known publication was for Vice back when it was...

00:51:41 Speaker 2

Back before it decided it wanted to be like young CNN slash New York Times and when it was still sort of fun, albeit sometimes in ways that were not fun.

00:51:53 Speaker 2

But it was, the headline was, I lived

00:52:00 Speaker 2

in a Romanian sex camp studio.

00:52:04 Speaker 2

I'm sorry, you asked the question.

00:52:06 Speaker 1

Yeah, well, that's fine.

00:52:07 Speaker 1

I didn't expect that.

00:52:08 Speaker 1

I mean, I'm Romanian.

00:52:10 Speaker 1

And, you know, if that's what it was, that's what it was.

00:52:16 Speaker 1

What can I say?

00:52:18 Speaker 2

It was...

00:52:18 Speaker 2

I mean, the story behind getting the story was quite funny as well, which was that...

00:52:23 Speaker 2

When I'd made the decision to leave marketing and become a writer, I realized that I was going to be going from making a bad salary to making next to no salary.

00:52:32 Speaker 2

So I immediately cut my expenses.

00:52:33 Speaker 2

I moved from the flat I was living in to Birmingham into a room in a flat with these two guys from South America.

00:52:41 Speaker 2

I feel terrible.

00:52:42 Speaker 2

I can't remember their nationalities now, but they were just working in hotels and stuff.

00:52:47 Speaker 2

And then, yeah,

00:52:49 Speaker 2

A couple months later, I left having saved a couple of grand to build my career with.

00:52:56 Speaker 2

And I said to them, well, guys, I'm really sorry to leave you on the lurch, but I'm going to go off and seek my fortune in Europe.

00:53:01 Speaker 2

And I said, oh, it's no problem.

00:53:03 Speaker 2

We're also leaving soon.

00:53:04 Speaker 2

So where are you going?

00:53:05 Speaker 2

So we're going to Romania.

00:53:07 Speaker 2

Oh, wow, what are you going to do there?

00:53:09 Speaker 2

Oh, well, we're going to start a catering business.

00:53:13 Speaker 2

I was like, guys, I don't want to rain on your parade, but are you sure that's going to be a highly lucrative operation?

00:53:18 Speaker 2

They said, oh yeah, we've got friends who have catering businesses in Romania.

00:53:21 Speaker 2

They're making real money.

00:53:22 Speaker 2

I said, oh, that's interesting.

00:53:25 Speaker 2

A few months later, they write to me and they're like, hey, you used to work in marketing, right?

00:53:29 Speaker 2

I said, yeah, I said, oh look, could you do some sales copy for our business?

00:53:33 Speaker 2

And I said, sure, tell me about it.

00:53:35 Speaker 2

It's kind of a secret.

00:53:37 Speaker 2

I said, look, I can't advertise a secret.

00:53:39 Speaker 2

What is it?

00:53:40 Speaker 2

And they explained to me.

00:53:42 Speaker 2

this business model like never heard of before.

00:53:45 Speaker 2

But they bought or rented a house in Bucharest and they were staffing it with young men and women who between the hours of, I think it was like 11 p.m.

00:54:00 Speaker 2

and 5 a.m.

00:54:01 Speaker 2

would sit in these rooms whose corners had been dressed up to look like teenagers bedrooms.

00:54:09 Speaker 2

And then there'd be like a little media console table with a screen, a keyboard and a mouse and like a bottle of sanitizer and some tissues.

00:54:20 Speaker 2

And yeah, so I said, look--.

00:54:23 Speaker 1

That was the webcam business.

00:54:25 Speaker 1

Yes.

00:54:25 Speaker 1

The sexy webcam business.

00:54:27 Speaker 1

Well, I mean, by the way of that, I covered Andrew Tate and his brother for doing exactly the same type of business in Romania.

00:54:36 Speaker 1

three years ago, and while I was doing that, my employer went bankrupt, which was at the time BuzzFeed.

00:54:41 Speaker 1

I was freelancing for that.

00:54:45 Speaker 2

Did you ever meet either of the Tate brothers?

00:54:47 Speaker 1

No, never.

00:54:48 Speaker 1

I had a few conversations on the phone, not very comfortable ones, with the PR agent, who is otherwise a very polite and professional lady.

00:54:57 Speaker 1

But.

00:54:58 Speaker 2

They always are, and I think we need to stop pretending that lawyers and PR agents

00:55:04 Speaker 2

who work for these vile human beings and make their very well-feathered nest from these vile human beings, we need to stop pretending they're nice people.

00:55:14 Speaker 2

Like, just because, you know, they have some Oxbridge manners.

00:55:17 Speaker 1

Well, she was professional.

00:55:18 Speaker 1

She was professional.

00:55:20 Speaker 1

She was talking nicely.

00:55:21 Speaker 1

But, yeah, I mean, what can you do?

00:55:25 Speaker 1

To be honest, I don't blame the PRs necessarily.

00:55:28 Speaker 1

No, not really.

00:55:28 Speaker 1

I mean,

00:55:31 Speaker 1

Ultimately, if I had my way, we'd have a lot more law enforcement, a lot stronger law enforcement.

00:55:38 Speaker 1

Because without that, you have young people who go into PR and they think, you know, it's just a job, and they end up working for nefarious people, and because the law doesn't interfere with them, it seems to be legitimate.

00:55:53 Speaker 1

I don't think you can expect the average person on the bus

00:55:57 Speaker 1

to have such moral clarity that goes beyond what the government is able to provide.

00:56:03 Speaker 2

Maybe I'm naive, but I feel like, the average person on the bus knows when something doesn't pass the sniff test.

00:56:12 Speaker 2

You know, and like the Tate brothers do not pass the sniff test.

00:56:15 Speaker 2

You know, like...

00:56:18 Speaker 2

there's an element, even if you, and I was thinking about this question with sort of the role of lawyers, particularly in England, but also, as you mentioned earlier, in America.

00:56:28 Speaker 2

And their line is always the same, oh, I'm doing nothing illegal.

00:56:31 Speaker 2

I'm just doing right by my client.

00:56:33 Speaker 2

And I think as reporters, one of the traps we fall into is we only treat it as newsworthy when their conduct is illegal or in violation of regulation.

00:56:43 Speaker 2

And actually, I think we should start saying,

00:56:46 Speaker 2

Look, we're happy to put right at the top of the story we're not alleging any illegal conduct, but we think a man on the street would be disgusted.

00:56:53 Speaker 1

No, absolutely.

00:56:54 Speaker 1

I mean, that's completely legitimate.

00:56:57 Speaker 1

It's completely legitimate for you as a perspective in a news article.

00:57:01 Speaker 1

But in my experience, I've written stories about, you know, gangsters and oligarchs and all sorts with fabulous fortunes.

00:57:11 Speaker 1

And in my experience, there's a good portion of readers who would read that story and think, I wish I had the opportunity to get into that lucrative business.

00:57:20 Speaker 1

So yeah, I think, ultimately the government does need to step up a bit.

00:57:25 Speaker 2

You know, I told you, we need regulation on this stuff, but I also think as a society, we need to start having, you know, like the law is important, but there's also an element of, you know, the society we live in

00:57:40 Speaker 2

is one that not only tolerates this way of making money, but celebrates it to a degree.

00:57:48 Speaker 2

And that makes me a little bit sick.

00:57:51 Speaker 1

Yeah, makes me sad for sure.

00:57:53 Speaker 1

And on that bombshell, Jack, pleasure.

00:57:58 Speaker 1

Thank you so much.