

CHRIS DAVIS: Welcome to the career and academic research center podcast. I am your host, Chris Davis, associate director of the Career and Academic Research Center here at the Harvard Extension School. And today it is my great pleasure to have as my guest in studio John D. Sutter. John is an Emmy nominated director, producer. He's won the Peabody Award, Maura Award, Livingston Award for young journalists and others. He's a senior investigative reporter, and now climate change analyst for CNN. And he created CNN's 2 Degrees and Vanishing series. And led the network's investigative work on uncounted deaths in Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria.

We'll link to several examples of his work in the description below. John is working on a multi-year documentary titled *Baseline 2020* that will show climate change unfolding in four key communities over coming generations. This project will be an intergenerational time lapse that seeks to make tangible the gradual but critical toll that climate change is taking worldwide. It's being made with support from the National Geographic Society, the Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard, and the New York based not-for-profit Union Docs Center for Documentary Art.

I hope this is all accurate, by the way.

JOHN D You've got it. Thanks for having me.

SUTTER:

CHRIS DAVIS: So I wanted to take the opportunity to chat with John while he's currently in town to hear more about Baseline, and we'll talk about a few things. And to ask him also about the contributions to that project of several Harvard Extension students who have worked as faculty aides in performing research. You'll recall the faculty aid program, which has been the subject from the faculty and from the student perspective in a couple of our recent podcasts. So John, welcome. Welcome to Cambridge. Thank you very much for being here.

JOHN D Of course. Thanks for having me.

SUTTER:

CHRIS DAVIS: Yeah. But yeah, before we get started on anything, I wanted to get a little bit from-- in your words, your background, where your interests lie.

JOHN D Yeah I mean, as you mentioned, I'm a journalist who's worked in various mediums at different points in time. I

SUTTER: started my career at a newspaper as a newspaper writer covering a variety of things, including the environment. When I started at CNN in 2009, I was a feature writer, but also produced a lot of multimedia stories. Some stories that were on social media first.

And I've always been interested in trying to combine different types of media into a story. And lately, that shift has gone further into the video documentary direction for this Baseline series on the climate crisis. But I think I'm a person who likes to experiment with different story forms. And that's what is exciting to me, in part, about this very long term, intergenerational story about the climate crisis. And I'm a person who's been passionate for a very long time about the environment and climate in particular.

It's come up in my work consistently over a long period of time. And I think climate change is the number one threat that we face as a society right now. And so I'm trying to dedicate a lot of my time towards telling stories in that area in hopes that it just helps us see more clearly the changes that are happening in the world, and that we might wake up and do something more about it.

CHRIS DAVIS: So you're still doing work with CNN. Earlier this year, just so we also get a little context about how we made the connection. So you were a knight, a visiting fellow at the Nieman Foundation for Journalism here at Harvard. And I think the reason why you were here for that was to start work on the Baseline project, am I correct?

JOHN D SUTTER: Yeah so I guess I can tell you a little bit about how the Baseline project originated. So over the years for CNN, I've gone all around the world to look really close up at the climate crisis. About this time last year I was in Honduras talking with people whose crops had been failing in a fairly unprecedented drought in the dry corridor of Central America. And some of whom had been leaving in the caravans headed north for the United States. I've been to the Marshall Islands, which is a country that its existence is threatened by rising seas that are caused by global warming. And as you mentioned, I spent a lot of time a year, year and a half going back and forth to Puerto Rico in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria.

And so I'm very tuned to the great suffering, really, that is happening on the front lines of the climate crisis, and that I do think goes unseen sometimes. But I started to think that the way that I was telling that story at CNN, and the way that a lot of us journalists are doing this is-- it's not that it was wrong, just certainly not enough. And I think that because of the time element. Climate change is happening on Earth time. We're living our lives on human time. Journalists are living their lives on this hyper Tweetified, accelerated version of human time.

And because of that disconnect, I think that we miss the true magnitude of the changes that are happening all around us. And I started reading about various academics, including Daniel Pauly who in the 1990s coined the term shifting baseline syndrome to refer to this idea that because environmental change is happening relatively slow to the way that we experience the world, that we just don't notice the real magnitude of it.

And there are lots of examples of that happening. And I think, OK, what are ways that media or documentary, in particular, might be part of the solution or an antidote. And that resulted in this idea for baseline, which is visiting four communities on the front lines of the climate crisis every five years until the year 2050, which to some people sounds like an absurd and ambitious goal. But I think something on that scale is needed to try to eliminate the real human saga that is unfolding.

So it's modeled in terms of film on--

CHRIS DAVIS: The Seven Up series?

JOHN D SUTTER: Exactly. Yeah, so on Seven Up or the Up series, which is a project by Michael Apted, yeah, who I met recently and who is the loveliest person.

CHRIS DAVIS: And that series has been ongoing for--

**JOHN D
SUTTER:**

Yeah, so he started in the mid 60s. He was 21 when they started the first installment. And the framework of the series is he interviewed a bunch of seven-year-old kids in and around London. And it was a film about class structure and inequality. Then, he's gone back every seven years to talk to those same kids wherever they are in the world, whatever circumstance, and updated it. The subjects of the film are now 63. He was 21 when he started. He is now 77.

So it's a pretty monumental work, and one that was definitely revolutionary at that moment. It's the model for a longitudinal film series. And so when I was on the fellowship here at Harvard, the one thing I tried to do was to hang out with a lot of scientists who do longitudinal work, who study subjects in ecology or medicine over long periods of time. But I've also been studying the ways in which film has been used in that way.

And what I think is compelling for me about Seven Up, among many things, is I think that there's a real kind of nostalgic emotional punch that happens when you watch someone age on film. And there's a level of empathy with these characters, these people, and a sense of caring about their future that is different from a lot of other media that I've seen at least. And I'm hoping that I'm modeling Baseline with permission on that Seven Up series. And my hope is that same sort of thinking about the future is triggered by this idea of revisiting places every five years.

CHRIS DAVIS: Are you in the process of production? Have you guys started filming?

**JOHN D
SUTTER:**

Yeah, Nieman here at Harvard really gave me the first opening to explore this. And I mean, when I was here at Harvard, it was the more conceptual phase, right? Like I mentioned, I was talking to scientists and people in other traditions of academia who had followed subjects over the long haul, and trying to think how could that be applied to journalism or to film. And I'm an explorer with the National Geographic Society, so they gave me a grant to visit all four of the locations this year in 2019.

We're doing some serious filming there, but partly it's to get to know people there. It's to look into archival research because I think that's important because we're not starting at baseline zero. A lot has changed in some of these places. And to figure out the structure of the film. And I've been, so far, to two of the locations. I went to a community in Alaska that's near the Arctic Circle, and I went to a community in rural Utah, actually, where people are very highly skeptical about climate science and where coal and fossil fuels are a big driver of the economy. But there also have been big changes in drought patterns and wildfire. So it's an interesting mix of things.

And then, the next two locations, and again, there are four in total, I'll go to basically by the end of this year. But my plan is for the first installment of the series, which is called Baseline 2020, to be based on the year 2020. So to go back to each of these places once-- next year, and it's once per season. Alaska in spring, Utah in summer. And to have the calendar year 2020 be the arc of the first film.

The landscape in the natural world and all these places is like a character too. It's what's changing and what is driving certain problems in these places. But I'm most interested in following people and seeing how they react and adapt or change or don't because of what's going on. And I mean, in the community in Alaska, for example, it's a place that I went to twice for CNN. It's called Shishmaref. And they have a relocation plan roughly in place, or they call it expansion because they don't like to think about leaving the community entirely. But maybe having a satellite community that's safer and away from the coast where the permafrost is dying very rapidly, where the ground is destabilized. A house fell off the edge of the land there several years ago. The sea ice is melting much earlier.

So it's about people and how they cope. And a cross-section of people. It's not about one person or one family, it's really about the community and how people are wrestling with these changes.

CHRIS DAVIS: I was struck by one of the pieces that you had done for CNN a couple of years ago. It was, I believe, a reservation in southern Montana, northern Wyoming. And heavily dependent on coal. And I remember interviewed one of the community members who basically said, that community is economically ravaged to begin with. But you asked her if she would want coal production to continue, and she said something to the effect of even if it would help bring jobs to this area, it's such a beautiful location. It's our home. I wouldn't want it for that reason, even though it would help us economically.

JOHN D SUTTER: Yeah, that's a striking place. That's the Northern Cheyenne reservation, and it's next to the Crow nation. And the Crow have been more open to coal development on their land. And it's pretty obvious, just going from one place to the next, wealthier because of that. And there's a lot of controversy in among people who live in the land owned by Northern Cheyenne about what should happen. But there are some people who have taken that very strong kind of environmentalist. And a generational stand that this has more value if we care for it and keep an intact rather than letting this extractive industry come through. But they've paid a price economically in terms of economic development for doing that.

Yeah, so I mean, I've always been a person who's interested in place stories, honestly. And about how people are wrestling with environmental change. I grew up in Oklahoma, and my grandparents were in Western Oklahoma for part of the Dust Bowl. And so I remember hearing stories about my grandma running back to get her laundry off the line as a massive dust cloud came and blew through. And that was, of course, a human created environmental tragedy because the plains were over plowed. The land just blew away and caused this catastrophic event. Hundreds of thousands of people left.

And I don't know. It's not like I went into environmental journalism with that front of mind, but in recent years, I've started to think more about that and the ways in which those sorts of stories influenced me. But I think that we can't extract ourselves from the natural world. We're part of it. And I think it's interesting the ways that that relationship-- the way it works when it breaks down, when it's healthy, I just think it's really fascinating and important area.

CHRIS DAVIS: One of our students work with you in the spring, and there are two students who are working with you in the fall. Can you tell us a little bit about what they have brought to the research that you're doing? I think they've been doing different things.

JOHN D SUTTER: Yeah, it's been amazingly helpful just to start off to work with graduate students from this program. Because it helps to get outside your own head on this, right? And they each brought an incredible expertise to it. So the last semester when I was here on campus, Paola who was the person helping in that period, she's a climate scientist, right? She knows this research backwards and forwards. And so as I was selecting the communities, she was really instrumental in trying to help connect me with scientists and the actual research that would tell me what we're expecting to happen in various parts of the world.

Because I really did a global survey of what are the key issues related to the climate crisis, whether it's sea level rise or the melting of the Arctic or wildfires. What are the key human and natural impacts. And then, which locations would be interesting to feature. So she helped me immensely in terms of that global survey of things.

And then now, there are two people Meredith and Saoirse who are working with me, who both have very different but complementary skill sets. Saoirse has a background in non-profit fundraising in particular. And so that's something that I'm working on right now is raising funds for some of the production costs in 2020, and she's really helped me hone a strategy on that.

Meredith has a range of skills and is interested in filmmaking, and has been helping with some of the pre-production that goes into the trips that are coming up, as well as reviewing some of the interviews that we have been conducting already this year. Also helping with a digital presence for the project. So it's just been enormously helpful to have these people on my side who have incredible skills that I lack. There's certain things I can do well, but it's nice to bring in people with different academic backgrounds and expertise to help the project succeed.

CHRIS DAVIS: And I think I mentioned before, but I'll say it again, to not only your CNN work, but the Baseline project's website I'll link to in the description, and people should definitely check it out. You even have, at this point, a very nice video trailer.

JOHN D SUTTER: Yeah, the projects become a public-- just really recently. But yeah, there's a website. There's a newsletter. It's baselinefilm.com is the website. And linked to that, there's a newsletter, which is probably the best way to just keep a behind-the-scenes look at where I'm going, what I'm doing, what thoughts are coming into my head. There's a link to fundraising page too if you are so inclined. And in a trailer from Alaska, one scene of a family that I really care about and have gotten to over a number of years.

CHRIS DAVIS: So I wanted to ask you, I mean, this is early days, so you will probably have a different answer to this 10 years from now or however long. But is there anything to this date that you have learned as a result of this project that has surprised you?

JOHN D SUTTER: Well, I will mention that there are lots of things that surprised me when I was talking to scientists, in particular, who do longitudinal research. And I was asking them how they approach things. And it surprised me how often some of the most interesting work came out of an accident almost. I'm going into this Baseline series with some degree of intentionality, right?

But I met a guy at Harvard Forest, which is a research station in Western Massachusetts. John O'Keefe, who 30 years ago just decided kind of on a whim, is almost the way he tells it, to start taking a lot of detailed notes about a certain set of trees that he-- on a path that he walks. And he just kept doing that and doing that and doing that. And the climate crisis emerged during that note taking exercise.

And so his notes became the best record in that forest of the ways in which the seasons were changing, and how that was affecting these particular trees and certain trees species. I learned one, that sometimes things take an unusual turn that you can't expect, and so I'm open.

CHRIS DAVIS: Did you talk about this with Michael Apter, by the way?

JOHN D SUTTER: I did a little bit, yeah. He also suggested the film-- a wide selection of people just because you don't know exactly where an individual's story is going to go, or where the story of a place will go. And I expect to be very surprised by how people react in all different parts of the world. One of the locations is in a low lying country in the Pacific. And sea level rise is an existential threat. But perhaps there are ways in which technology and design-- there are efforts to solicit tech companies to work on floating islands, for example.

So there may be ways in which these stories take turns that I'm not, necessarily, envisioning. But what I learned overall from people who watch things over long periods of time is that you have to have a certain level of dedication to continuing with it, even if it's unclear exactly where it's going to go. And watching in detail is really important. You have to really know the subject, and try to check in in a certain type of way. And then, stick with it. Trust that what you've put in motion that it will be interesting, even if it takes various turns that you may not expect.

CHRIS DAVIS: So I'll ask you-- I know your time in Boston is limited, so I don't want to take too much of it. But I have to ask, through the work that you've done over the past however many number of years, now is there anything that you would say as a takeaway or a suggestion as someone who has studied the field quite a bit, or the effects of it certainly, globally? Is there anything that you would say to students? Like we need more people in this industry, or this is an area that is underrepresented, or there are these kinds of challenges that are facing us that we need more people focused on x, y, or z?

JOHN D SUTTER: I think we need everybody doing everything, and I give a couple examples of things I think that are needed. But I mean, I've been moved by some of the young people in the climate activists movement doing school walkouts and whatnot, who almost are saying there is nothing else that matters.

CHRIS DAVIS: Do you mean the Sunrise Movement in particular?

JOHN D SUTTER: Sunrise, or other groups and just the efforts worldwide for young people to make a stand and say, this is not OK. You're wrecking our future. And I think that's what's happening. I think that's true. I think it's a little-- it's interesting to me, and a little bit sad in some ways, but the degree to which people are having to say, I'm pausing my education or my thinking about my career because this moment in activism is so important. And I think it's admirable what young people are doing. I think it's an indictment of what we adults are in general indifference in the situation that we put them in and all of us.

I think tons of things are needed. I mean, I'm passionate about storytelling and journalism. I think there needs to be more and better reporting on the climate crisis. I think that we have to have people working in renewable energy, and R&D on new technologies. It's true that we have a lot of the technologies and tools. We need to fix the energy system to move it away from fossil fuels, which are polluting and warming the atmosphere to cleaner technologies like wind and solar. But that has to happen really quickly, and the enormity of that expansion is mind boggling. So that needs a lot of work there. Obviously, policy levers that can be pulled to try to accelerate that. So that's an important area.

And recently, it's just become radically apparent that regardless of what we do to reduce the pollution that we're putting in the atmosphere, which I think is the number one priority, and we must do as quickly as possible, the world is different because of us already. Seas are rising. Storms are getting more dangerous. Areas are flooding that didn't before. Heatwaves have become far more intense. And we have to adapt to that, right?

There a lot of people here at Harvard who are making proposals about retreat from the coast in a lot of places. That we have to start planning our cities differently. When a storm hits, we can't respond to it the way that we always have, which is to rebuild, quote unquote, rebuild better in the same place. Maybe rebuilding better is not rebuilding in that place if it's become too hazardous.

And I think all of that has to be happening while we're in a very direct conversation with people who are-- really all of us at this point, but who are living through these changes, and sense of home and place and identity are really shaken by this massive unfolding that I wish weren't the case. But it just is happening now. And even if we shut off all pollution immediately, it would be happening for some time.

And so I guess my bottom line message is you don't have to be a climate-- an atmospheric scientist or an environmental scientist even to be part of this, and to be part of the solution. And it cuts across everything.

CHRIS DAVIS: Well John, I want to say thank you so much for taking the time to talk about this. I really hope that people do check out your work. And I'm going to do my best to put it out there, and see that people do. So again, I hope that the work that our students have been doing and are doing now will continue to help you. I can't wait to see the results of this. I do hope it's an American ecological version of the Seven Up series, and it gets that kind of recognition. So I look forward to seeing your work.

JOHN D SUTTER: Thank you so much, Chris. And thank you for all the help that you've given to this project.

CHRIS DAVIS: You have listened to the CARC podcast. This is the podcast for the Career and Academic Research Center here at Harvard Extension School, and I hope you will join us again.