

## **Jeremy Vine**

### **BBC journalist and Presenter**

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**Welcome to Media Masters, a series of one-to-one interviews with those at the top of the media game.**

**Today, I'm joined by the journalist, writer and presenter Jeremy Vine. Jeremy got his start in journalism as a cub reporter at the Coventry Evening Telegraph. In 1987 he moved to the BBC. He was soon made a political correspondent at the Beeb and rose to prominence in the 1997 election. After that, he was made the BBC's Africa correspondent. He famously reported from conflict zones in the region and secured an exclusive interview with Robert Mugabe. By now well known as presenter of the BBC's Newsnight, in 2003 Jeremy was chosen to present their newly launched politics show on Sunday, and at the same time he started to present his eponymous show on BBC Radio 2. The Jeremy Vine Show is now Britain's most popular radio news programme. In 2006, he replaced Peter Snow at the Swingometer, and presented the BBC's election night graphics. In addition to his radio programme, he presents Points of View, Panorama and the quiz show, Eggheads. On top of all of this, he's written two comic novels, is a columnist for the Radio Times, has won four Sony Radio Awards – including the best speech broadcaster of the year award twice.**

Okay!

**Jeremy...**

I don't get interviewed very often, so fire away!

**What's it like to be an interviewee, then? You must be so used to asking the questions. What's it like to have the tables turned?**

It's strange. I've got this paranoia about quizzes. I host a quiz – *Eggheads* – and I keep getting asked to take part in charity quizzes, to sit at a table and answer questions, and I'm just useless, because I've only got three subjects – Elvis Costello's first five albums, anything recent politics I'm good on, and there's another subject I can't remember. Probably Elvis Costello's second five albums, actually! Then that's it. A bit of history maybe, but not much else.

**Have you done *Mastermind*?**

No, I haven't. So I've got this thing of I don't want to be a quizzee, I want to be a quizzer. I don't want to be an interviewee; I want to be an interviewer. So now I'm sitting here, I'm scared!

**In terms of a quiz though, that's about whether you know certain things. But being an interviewee – I mean, you've recently written your excellent book – you must want a little bit of attention for that? Because the more stories and anecdotes you share in your career, and the adventures and scripts you've been involved with, the more sales of your book you'll hit, surely?**

Er, yes...

**If I can put it so brutally.**

No, no – you're saying that we're all show-offs, and we are. Of course there's a performance gene, there's no doubt. I see it in my family – my brother's a stand-up comedian, my sister is an actress. Where does it come from? I don't know, we think it might be my mum, because we were on holiday once in the 70s and there was a poetry competition and she won, we then thought, "That's the performance gene." We've always wondered, but her generation of women weren't allowed to show off, sadly, so... and I see it around this organisation. I think that the two sides of the BBC, the two sides of any broadcasting organisation are the power and the glory – people go into it either because they want to run it or because they want to appear in it, and in this organisation there is a really big brick wall between the two.

**So air side and... what would you call the one that's...**

Check in!

**Of course! What about people like Alan Yentob are there, who happen to be both?**

Very few. He's an interesting one, Alan, he's definitely a broadcaster, he's got the gene – because you need a gene for it. The other very interesting example is Nick Robinson, who was a really high-ranking producer and was deputy editor of

Panorama at an obscenely young age, and then just blew the whistle and said, "This is no fun," and came to Westminster, where I was then a correspondent, we all looked round and thought, "What's the deputy editor of Panorama doing here?" The answer is, he wants to be on the air, he wants to show off. So he comes and becomes a fantastically successful broadcaster, but he had to almost start on the shop floor, so when I look around – and here we are in this studio that I broadcast in, the microphone is here, I speak into it every day, it gives the appearance of power, but I have no power. In the corner of the room you can see the thermostat that controls the heating. I have now, for five days running, said to the guy on the other side of the glass, "Could you please give me control over that thermostat?" Because every time I change the temperature, it flashes up a message that says CENTRALLY CONTROLLED, which means somebody in another building. So the answer is, I can't even control the heating in my own studio. I have no power. I just have the glory.

**You very memorably said in your book that it's the receptionists that have a lot of the power, because if you don't have a pass, you are quoting someone's name to get into the building, they're the people who decide whether you get in or not.**

It's true! One of the very first experiences I had here at the BBC was maybe 1988 and I was coming in, I was 23 years old, I was so excited. There was a guy in front of me who was much older, probably late 60s, and was furious, and I just came closer to hear the argument, and I heard him say the phrase, "Why won't you let me in the building? I've been broadcasting for 40 years!" And they didn't know who he was, because in a sense he was not important. People who are important are the people who run reception.

**But showbiz and life in the public eye can be quite brutal, can't it? There's nothing sadder than a celebrity who was once something. It's all about momentum in a sense. It doesn't matter where you are on the ladder, as long as you're going up a rung.**

It's more complicated than that. The ladder is something I associate with the production end, with the editors and the producers. They even have grades – they actually had numbered grades; Grade 1, Grade 2, Grade 3 –

**All the way up to 87, presumably.**

Oh, my goodness! It's that mathematical. But you can't put a number on Jim Naughtie, John Humphrys, Evan Davis, you don't know where they are. So that constellation of presenters have a different way of ranking themselves. For me it's simple – where is the red light? The red light is on, as it happens, in the studio – we might be on the air, I don't know! – but as long as the red light is on and there's a

microphone, I know I'm employed. So I have a very simple presenter's brain on that. And as to your thing about faded stars, yes it's true, the Walter Cronkite story about someone coming up to him in the street and saying, "Hey, you look just like Water Cronkite did before he died," sort of strikes terror into the hearts of all of us. But on that basis why would Taylor Swift bother doing what she's doing, she's going to one day not sell as many records as she does, and the answer is you do it for the fun of the now, you know? Let's not worry too much about tomorrow.

**Do you think there are different manifestations of this gene, this extroversion? Obviously you're a broadcaster, Tim is a very, very funny comedian – and to declare an interest I find him hilarious – and you said your sister (Sonya Vine) was a singer?**

She's an actress and painter. She's mainly mumming now, but she's been very stagey.

**I enjoy doing a bit of this, if I'm honest, and I don't mind a bit of public speaking, but the idea of cracking a joke on stage? I would rather die. What happens when no one laughs? Do you think that Tim has a harder job, as it were? Do you think that's more brutal?**

Oh, yes. Oh, for goodness sake!

**You don't pretend to laugh to humour a comedian, do you?**

No! And my brother, I went to see him on stage recently and I was blown away. I came back home and said to my 11-year-old – all his jokes are new, I want to bring you to see him." She said, "Yeah?" I said, "We've got to go tomorrow, I want you to go and see exactly how good he is." So I had that thing of I couldn't believe how good he was, you know? And the answer is I think there's a spectrum of creative artists, and the most creative artist, right on the far end of the spectrum, is the poet, I mean, it's virtually impossible to make a living as a poet, then you've got quite close, you've got comedy and painting, very, very difficult, and then right at the other end you've got the much more stable forms of artistic endeavour, which are less creative – and among them is journalism. So journalism is a much less creative artistic endeavour, and it's much more stable. So I'm the coward.

**That's the denigrate the role of presenter, really. It's actually exceptionally difficult. If you look at your show, I think it's the most listened to radio show in Europe, isn't it?**

It's the most listened to radio news show in Europe, or the UK, I can't remember which. But anyway.

**It must be incredibly difficult to balance that light and shade. There are very few presenters who can have the prime minister on and then do a kind of gardening thing. I know Tim's made jokes about it in the past, but without over-flattering you, it must be quite a difficult balance to get, and you either have that ability or you don't.**

Well, when I listen to Ken Bruce, I always think he is doing a harder job, because he doesn't have a piece of paper in front of him. Yes, Ken is amazing – now, he's done 35 years on the air without a piece of paper. I have pieces of paper that say things. So my job must be easier – you come in the studio, I interview you. I've got *content*. Content makes it easier. With Ken, it all comes out of his head. So I'm full of admiration for those guys, Chris Evans, Sara Cox and so on, but the other point you make is an important one about my show, which is once you start playing music with the news, you've got all kinds of potential problems, and tonal issues to do with the serious story and the light story are constantly coming up. We had a story a few months ago, where it was about a zoo that was transporting a giraffe on a motorway and they went under a low bridge... then I played... and I shouldn't have, I just didn't think about it, and I played *Bits and Pieces* by Dave, Dee, Dozy Beaky, Mick and Titch.

**I feel terrible for the giraffe, but I have to stifle a laugh.**

It can happen a lot, and we've tried to get processes in place. We had a thing where...

**Do people ring in and say, "That's a disgrace."?**

Well, Twitter's full of, "Oh, my God, what's he done now?" We had an item about contact lenses and have you ever got up in the night and put superglue in your eye instead of contact lens solution – incredibly, four people had. And then we played a song by Keane called *Disconnected*, which looks fine, and the producer says it's fine, then the first line is, 'I can't speak because my eyes are hurting'. So it's just a disastrous... and it constantly happens. And there would be more serious ones that I won't even say, because it would be terrible to laugh at them, but we forgot to closely monitor the music. But that speaks to the wider thing, which is a news show on an entertainment network, and to avoid the crashing of gears is the most difficult bit of my job, probably.

**Have you ever done that, where you've played an inappropriate record and you've done the whole Mike Reid thing when he realised that Frankie Goes to Hollywood's *Relax* was about something a bit rude, and then he kind of very dramatically lifted the needle off the record and threw it at his producer? Presumably you can't do that now, once you've committed to playing it.**

I always remember somebody saying, “Don’t ever say you don’t like a record, because if you’re listening to the radio, you’re listening to the radio because the DJ thinks this is the best record for 5,000 miles, north, south, east and west, and if I say I don’t like it, or like Mike Reid did, if I take it off the turntable, then everyone is confused. Why were you playing it in the first place? And the answer is because the bloke down the corridor chose it yesterday when he was drawing up the plot for the programme. So... I mean, I love the music and we don’t have too many problems with it; when they do they are often slightly amusing. I’m just trying to think whether we’ve done a... I played the thing about the Diana memorial fountain being in trouble, or a conspiracy theory that Diana was bumped off by the Royal Family, and I play *Killer Queen*. No, that wasn’t good either, and Kevin, your producer, enjoyed that.

**Indeed he did! He’s never been mentioned before in these podcasts, Kevin.**

If I can make Kev laugh – it’s Kev, right? –

**Yes, it is.**

Then we’ve done it.

**I’ve been thinking about this, because obviously the BBC Charter is coming up for renewal, the BBC ‘s mission is to inform, educate and entertain, the BBC have got to try and have very popular shows to educate people a little bit, and it’s very difficult to think of many other programmes other than yours that actually manage to tick all of the BBC’s boxes. It’s entertaining, accessible and popular, but also thoughtful and educational. How many other shows, across the whole of the BBC’s output, actually do tick those boxes? Not all of them.**

I always think that one show that does tick all the boxes is *Crimewatch*. It informs – it tells you who’s a criminal – it educates – it tells you to keep your windows locked – and it entertains.

**It scares the hell out of me, if I’m honest.**

Yes, it does – but there is also definitely an entertainment element to *Crimewatch* in that it’s a BBC1 programme, and we are feasting on these stories of whatever... but it’s very kind of you to say that, and I had to make a speech in the House of Commons recently to some MPs about the BBC, and I thought, “I mustn’t do any special pleading here,” because there were commercial people there as well. And obviously this is a hard time for the BBC, and somebody wrote, brilliantly, in the Guardian recently, “We don’t know what the BBC has done wrong, but we know it has to be punished.” That kind of sums it up! So I just said to these MPs, very gently, I said, “Look at my show; the fact that I have Ken Bruce before me and Steve Wright after is sort of analogous to the whole organisation now.” It’s true, you can say the

BBC shouldn't be doing Ken's show and Steve's show because they are primarily entertainment, but then where does that leave my show? Because the only reason my show works is that Ken leads into me and Steve leads out of me! And you can't just say, "We'll have Radio 2 without all the entertainment." It doesn't make any sense! So then you lose my show, then you lose Radio 2, and then we're back with this big, bizarre argument where, are we closing the stuff that's popular because it's popular, or are we closing the stuff that people don't listen to because people don't listen to it? So when 6 Music was in trouble, the argument was not enough people listened. Now Radio 2 is in trouble because too many people listen.

### **So you're damned if you do and you're damned if you don't.**

Yes, and I'm going to sound kind of desperate talking like this, because of course I've got a vested interest because I work here, and they pay me and everything, so I would say this, but all I want to do is just work out what the argument is for this apparent punishment that the BBC has got coming! And then we can work out how to address it. But I don't know what the argument is at the moment, because the licence fee issue has been sorted, because they've decided how much we're getting. So it's not a money thing; it must be something else.

**I know it's almost a cliché to criticise the BBC being over-resourced sometimes, but when I used to work at Parliament, you'd look over to College Green, and you'd see Sky News with one producer and a presenter, and you'd look at the BBC and they'd have like eight people there. An MP actually said, "There's your problem, straight away – why can't it be done with four people?"**

It's a fair comment, that – and there are some systems issues inside the BBC which are very, very complex. I don't know if it was eight or it was six, because that's probably quite relevant, if it was eight or six. If it's six, we could say, "Hang on, the BBC has got six channels – Sky's only got one." That might be just a straightforward defence. But secondly, I remember when I was a correspondent, somebody – a relative of my parents – was at a party and he said to me, "When you go to a foreign story," because I was South Africa at the time, "Who sends you?" And I said, "Do you know what, with that question, you have gone to the heart of the BBC's problem – because I don't know who sends me." Because there were two places that could send me – one of them was the 10 O'Clock News, which wants to get me on the 10 O'Clock News the following night from Botswana. The other one is the foreign planning desk, which has an oversight of all the correspondents and thinks at some point we should do something from Botswana because we haven't done it yet. If the foreign planning desk sends me, arguably that's more efficient, because they are sending all the correspondents. But the 10 O'Clock News then think, "But we don't want that piece, so we're not going to run it." If the 10 O'Clock News send me, that's fine – but then you end up with your 'eight correspondents all in Botswana' problem.

And, do you know what? Over the years and years, the 28 years we have been here, we still haven't solved the fundamental answer to that question: Who sends you?

**It's interesting, because we had Torin Douglas on the podcast a few months ago, actually he was one of the first guests actually. I've known Torin for a long time – he's a really nice guy, as I'm sure you know. And he said that it's quite difficult when you're a correspondent, because in a sense you're quite peripatetic; you're there at the beck and call of all of the programmes, maybe World at One, PM, the 10, or the news channel. But sometimes, when there wasn't a kind of media driven crisis – I mean, obviously a lot of the time he was stood outside Broadcasting House reporting on the BBC's latest crisis or whatever it is – he would almost sell himself in. He would produce a package and sell it around.**

Well, of course. So you're looking into the mind of the reporter here – and I was a reporter for years, so this is totally how I'm built – is your only desire is you want your granny to see you on TV. That's what you want to do. Or hear you on the radio, but preferably TV, for whatever reason.

**Because you were a political correspondent. Based at Millbank?**

Yes, so I was one of those eight.

**With Huw Edwards and all of the others?**

Well, I was one of the eight who were on the green who the Tory MP was cross about, presumably. The team was Huw Edwards, Jon Sopel, Mark Mardell, Nick Robinson, Gavin Hewitt...

**You've all done so well, surely your collective grannies are proud.**

John Sergeant, I should say, was there as well, and... it was a brilliant, brilliant team, not including me.

**How did it work? Was it quite competitive?**

Yes.

**Because there's Huw as well, you've got a similar selection of contacts, I'd imagine, there's only a finite number of MPs and SPADs there, isn't there?**

Yes.



## **So how would it actually work in practice?**

It was fiercely competitive.

## **But not brutal?**

No, it was brutal. Yes, as I think Gore Vidal said, “It’s not enough to succeed; friends must fail.” I remember there was one particular thing where there was a story in *The Times* and I opened the paper and it was just brilliant – it was something about the next general election, which would have been the 1997 election, “is not a battle between John Major and Tony Blair, it’s a battle between Jon Sopel and Jeremy Vine over who becomes the political editor succeeding Robin Oakley.” I just thought, “This is absolutely brilliant.” By the time I got into the office, both of us – both me and Sopel – had been completely filleted by our colleague. So I remember someone saying Huw Edwards had said to all of them something like, “I think this article is very damaging to all concerned. The BBC does not like this kind of vulgarity.” And then just a few feet away from him, John Sergeant was moving around the office saying, “Oh, well – the person I feel most sorry for is Huw – not even mentioned.” So it was like a little sit-com in there, but it was also... I must say, on a serious point, we are, slept, drank, breathed politics completely – all day long. Somebody came in once, and they came in from outside, and said, “When Mrs Thatcher became Tory leader, were they in power or in opposition?” And we just immediately looked up and thought, “Well, you’re not going to work here.” Because we were *steeped* in it. And we were, despite what I say about all the rivalry, we were a team, and it was great. And I learnt so much on the team, but the funny thing is that I think the BBC looked... after 1997 we were all kind of having nervous breakdowns, because the amount of politic on the air was just unbelievable – and that was before our news channel and everything. And they put this all in different places, and it was the last sort of paternalistic act I can remember, in a way, in the BBC, where the BBC said to me, “Look – I know you love politics, Jeremy, and I know you think it all goes on in SW1, but there is a world out there and we want you to go and discover the world, so we want you to be Africa correspondent.” And I said, “I’ve only been to Cape Town on holiday for two weeks, you know, I’ve never even been to Africa before apart from that,” and they just said, “No, you must go.” And it honestly changed my life – it was the most amazing three years that I’d ever spent because it made me realise that news isn’t what comes off a press release, politicians are no more important than somebody playing in the street in Malawi, and the real world is when somebody holds your microphone and they’ve never held a microphone before. And yet, so much of it is process-driven, and it’s process-driven from London and so on. So it made me really quite revolutionary about what news is.

## **Your book came out two years ago or something.**

Yes.

**I read it two years ago, but I remember there was an anecdote about your maid. Didn't her dog die or something? I remember being deeply moved by that.**

It was complicated, but I had a dog and I gave it to the maid, and then someone borrowed the dog and took it back to England, and she lost the dog, and it was post-Apartheid South Africa, and the maid was a poor black woman called Paulina, to whom I was very close.

**And she was beside herself with grief, wasn't she?**

Yes, for all kinds of reasons. But it just became... it sort of... we tried to get legal advice, and we just thought, "Blimey, is this how it works in the world now, is that the maid loses her dog because the other guy's got all the money, and he's just kind of spirited it away through quarantine without her even having a view on it? I was furious. It's funny, because with Paulina, she was... I have to couch this slightly, she was the BBC's maid, but we all paid for her privately, and the traditional thing, she had been working in the BBC correspondents' house for a long time, so please, anyone listening to this, don't think that we all had maids, we don't, and she doesn't work for us any more.

**I love all these disclaimers!**

In capital letters, now BBC correspondents have maids! Anyway... the very last day, I was leaving, it had been an amazing time for me, and she'd had a terrible bereavement where her son had died actually, in a car crash, which was the sort of post-Apartheid way of dying in South Africa, and I was being driven to the airport and I just said to this colleague, Milton, "You've got to take me back, Milton – I've just got to say goodbye to Paulina again," so I come into the house again, she was standing in the kitchen, she was in tears, and I said, "I'm really going to miss you, this has been an incredible experience, the dog was only a small part of it, but it's been an incredible experience for me, Paulina, meeting you," and she just said, "You have become my father and my son." I thought, "That's the most powerful thing." And it's interesting that the person... she wasn't really able to read and write, but she had the most incredible... that sentence is the most powerful sentence.

**I have learnt a lot from your book actually, because you can learn the theory of it – and I work in the media as well – and one of the things I learnt from your African experience as told in the book was, a helicopter had crashed, and no-one was in it of any note, but someone just happened to film it, and because it's telly, the news channel led on it, didn't it?**

Exactly, it was a classic... when you think about this, it's all so obvious; but at the time, even for me as a journalist, it was a bit surprising in a bad way, because I was in...

### **You were teeing up some quite important political stories...**

I was in the back of beyond, doing... and it was a Boer War place, where would it have been? Mafeking, or somewhere like that. Anyway, I was miles away – this was two or three hours away from Cape Town, and I got a call at 5am saying, “You’ve got to go to Cape Town straight away.” And I said, “We’re doing this big piece about the history of Mafeking, and... what is it?” And they said, “There’s been a helicopter crash.” And I said, “Okay...” You never want to argue down a story, you want to be on the air, so I’m just trying to feel my way here. “Okay, so a helicopter crash. Okay. Is there a lot of interest in it? Is it sports people on board?” No, there’s no sports people. “Alright, politicians?” No, not politicians. “Famous person on board?” No. The two people on board were involved with repairing the roof of a hotel. “Okay, so you’re saying I’ve got to drive three hours to Cape Town to do a helicopter crash that killed, very sadly, two workmen who are not well-known outside South Africa, let’s put it like that, let me just ask bluntly, why is this a story?” And the news editor in London said, “Because somebody filmed it.” And this is going back 15 years, so it was unusual, a guy standing at his hotel window, he’s got a camcorder, he’s trying it out, he’s got this moment, the helicopter lands, the tail hits a billboard and breaks, and then the whole thing goes up in a fireball, and it’s very dramatic. And that’s why it was on the news – it was on the news because someone filmed it. The two people who died mattered because somebody filmed them dying – and of course, that is grossly unfair, and it’s why we’ve seen no pictures of the war in Congo, which has claimed more than a million lives, and it’s why every time there’s a shooting spree in America, we get that in the top of our news. Why? Because they invented cameras and microphones. It’s a shame, isn’t it, the platform and the mechanism is important to the telling of news.

### **It drives the content.**

It does.

**I’ve always thought you get much more considered, more intimate content on the radio. I would rather get my political news from the *Today* programme, or listening to your show than a news channel really, because it’s always that same... it’s like someone like yourself narrating a picture of someone walking down a corridor or perusing a dossier.**

I never know why, I just don’t know why... I had a period when I came back from South Africa and I was staying in a little flat, and I didn’t have a TV for three or four months, and I was better informed, and I just had the radio on. And I honestly still

don't know the reason for that. It might be the way you pay attention, or it might be that a lot of pictures on television are distracting, but the one thing you would say is that if you're covering 9/11, you've got to cover that on TV. So the really, really big story is the TV story.

**But do you think it's difficult for the editors? If you're the editor of the 10, and ISIS or ISIL, or whatever we're calling them now, have a hostage, the sheer brutal, spectacle nature of that, the impactful nature of it, means that you're going to want to put it on air – but in a sense, there is this debate now, isn't there, whether you are actually doing the terrorists' PR for them, because that's what they want, and the very reason they've got someone in Guantanamo, orange base, you know, jumpsuit, and about to cut their throat, is because *The 10 O'Clock News* will run those images.**

And of course the film *Network* in the 1970s is all about is where Peter Finch plays this guy who his told, old duffer newsreader, is told it's over for him, he's only doing a week's more broadcasting and he comes on the air and he says, "I want you to open your windows and say: 'I'm as mad as hell and I'm not going to take any more.'" And people start to watch this, and then he says, "I'm going to kill myself live on TV in two weeks' time." And of course, the news division say, "We've got to take him off the air NOW, this is making a mockery of us," and then there's this brilliant Faye Dunaway character, who plays the entertainment division, who goes around saying, "We've hit the motherload!" And people are leaning out of their windows in Florida, in Maine, in Oregon, shouting, "I'm as mad as hell and I'm not going to take any more!" There are bad ways of getting lots of people to watch, that's the bottom line isn't it, and we don't show public executions and we don't show newsreaders going crazy for that reason.

**Is it as brutal within the BBC now for someone who is trying to climb the ladder and get ahead as it was before? Because you mentioned earlier about this hidden paternal hand where you thought someone might, or even overt, where they would say, "Now it's time for you to go to Africa," or whatever. I've got a few peers and friends who are climbing the BBC correspondent's ladder as it were, I won't name any of them, but I get the sense that they're almost on their own – they're only as good as their own contacts and their own following on Twitter, you know, it just seems quite challenging.**

Yes... that's interesting. I'd be interested to know what stage they're at. I think that when I said for me it was the last – maybe I should say 'maternalistic' stroke – that the BBC pulled, I was probably being unfair to the Beeb because I think that putting me here at Radio 2 from *Newsnight* was something that hadn't occurred to me. But I do think that the BBC's guiding hand has gone a bit now, because I think the core of it has been shaken by so much technological and political change, fundamentally. Or challenge, I should say. So yes, your friends are sink or swim – they're on their own,

they're not going to be in a job for life – that's all gone, it's gone outside the organisation – and it may be actually all that's happened is that we've caught up with the world outside. Because when I joined in '87 I had a two-year training course and I was then taken on by the *Today* programme; quite soon I was on the staff, and that was a sort of guarantee that I would be employed until I was 62 and I'd have a pension. I remember at Westminster, somebody saying, "It actually might be in your benefit to think about stopping working, because the pension scheme is so generous that if you go beyond about 52 you start losing money." Now, what we didn't appreciate at that point was that this pension scheme can go up and down, and obviously it was hit then by all the vicissitudes of the market and so on, and then anyway it changed for all the obvious factors that you can't expect licence fee payers to pay for people to do nothing in their gardens when they're 70. So it's tough for your colleagues, is the bottom line – and I'm not complaining, I think that's probably a good thing.

**I mean, clearly there's a minimum threshold of talent and personableness if you're going to get on air in the first place, but I worked with a lot of media trainers, and they are all people who have been on Sky for 10 or 15 years that, for whatever reason, their contract has come to an end, they've not been rehired, and they're not doing media training, and I just wonder if any of it is down to luck really, that you've done exceptionally well, but does part of you think, "Well, I could have been one of those; I could have been a jobbing media trainer now."**

Haha.

**Because these things happen, don't they?**

Well, I don't know...

**I don't know if I'd be as brutal as that.**

No, I would resist that description because I know some of them and they may be having far more fun than they had inside here or Sky.

**Some of them are, but some of them aren't. Again, I won't name names, but I do know people who would love to be on air and present this show, but are doing media training because that's what they've got left.**

Yes, it's just luck, isn't it? I can't really analyse it – I just think I come in every day and I do my show and I love it, and I don't want to do anything else, and I do *Eggheads* and I do the election graphics and stuff, but... and *Points of View*... but fundamentally it's just about loving what you do, and maybe... for me to get here to Radio 2 was a weird snakes and ladders thing where I was on *Newsnight*, and I

could have become a media trainer at some point because I was the other Jerry! So it's not like... and I think I was probably... I couldn't see it myself, but I was in the ante-room towards the end of my career had something not changed, because I don't think they would ever have said, "Okay, Paxman's gone now, we'll go for Vine," – that's not how it works. And I only looked back and thought, "Ooh, that was professionally a near-death experience there." So I was just lucky. What can I say? I was just lucky, and it's also fundamentally lucky to work for the BBC where we have food on the table before we've made a programme, and lucky to work for Radio 2, which has got this weird, accidental monopoly, which is almost like Radio 1 in the 70s, we can't work it out.

**It's a beloved monopoly though, without being too sycophantic. I wouldn't want Radio 2 to change, it's fantastic. I'm not even a closet Radio 2 listener any more, though I was in my late 20s and early 30s, but now I'm out.**

Well, the defining controller was a guy called Jim Moir in the 90s, who worked out that there were 500 records that everyone loves, and we just play them on rotation. That's slightly the glassy-eye way of looking at it. There has obviously been a real collapse in commercial radio, which is sad to the point of tragic, where they just can't sell the advertising in the way that they used to, so Capital Radio has not got the turnover that they had...

**Or the resources.**

No, and so therefore Capital's not as strong, it can't then bring on the presenters, it can't do the cookery programme and the kind of stuff that we can do, the speech-based programme we can do here, and that we need to keep doing – so we're very, very lucky. But it does turn out that people like it, so then the question is – this is the really, really odd question – is commercial radio weak because Radio 2 is strong, or are they weak because they're not doing what we're doing. I don't know what the answer is.

**Is there another argument to be made, that because the BBC does certain things so well, like Radio 4 is fantastic, we all listen to the *Today* programme, that stifles commercial rivals' ability to prosper. Look at LBC – it's doing very well under James Rea, but maybe it could have been doing spectacularly well if it wasn't for Five Live and Radio 4.**

Definitely, there is that argument. That's the biggest argument against the BBC...

**I mean, would *Sherlock* be made by ITV? It's a similar argument.**

That's a separate thing. The question is, number one, is commercial weak because the BBC is strong, that's a very powerful argument, but number two, if you then take

the BBC out of the picture, or make us commercial, does commercial get stronger and do the stuff we're doing now? I would argue that no one except Radio 2 and Radio 4 would do *The Organist Entertains*. It's a great show, I'm not knocking it, Nigel Ogden, you've probably heard it, you know...

**I'm not a committed and regular listener, I admit.**

Yes, but if you every tuned in it's an amazing show. I was sitting once, we had Radiohead on here in the Radio Theatre playing live, Jonny Greenwood is... they're amazing guys, you know, and then they had to, at the end, announce, "And now, *The Organist Entertains*." And I thought... Radiohead off at 10, Nigel on at 10 with the organs, and I thought, "THAT is Radio 2." I can't imagine a commercial station ever allowing past any of its sponsors. So the first point is, I don't think if we stopped operating that all of these stations would be replicated by the market, because some of them can't be supported by the market. The second one though is, if we got off out of everything that is sort of popular/populist, would that help commercial? And the answer is I don't know, it might. But of course, the other option is that we start selling advertising space on our breakfast show, and we know what that would do – it would kill commercial radio.

**It would kill commercial radio, but wouldn't it kill you editorially as well? I mean, I'm a BBC evangelist, and I said this to John Humphries when he was on a few weeks ago, is that you wouldn't get... George Entwistle on the *Today* programme, you wouldn't get that on any other network. You wouldn't imagine the chief executive of ITV getting completely crucified by Mark Edwards on *News at Ten*. It's just... you know, because of the unique way the BBC is funded, I said this to Torin a while ago, is that actually the most trusted source of anti-BBC criticism that I would turn to is the BBC!**

Yes, true. I remember talking to some senior bod a few years ago and saying... and I just, in a rare moment, expressed an opinion about our output, and I said, "I'm just so sick of hearing things without the definite article." He said, "It drives me nuts as well." This guy was really serious. He says, "Like we get Sunday Times journalists, 'Pete Clark'... or NHS chiefs... why don't you say: 'The head of the NHS, name.?' " So I said, "Why don't you put out some edict?" and he said, "You know what, in this organisation, if I put out an edict saying we need to bring back the definite article, people will deliberately leave it out just to annoy me. That's how ungovernable it is."

**And leak the memo.**

And leak the memo...

**It'd be five minutes before it would be on Mail Online.**

The best memo I saw was in the 80s and it went up on the wall of the *Today* programme office, and it just said, "No one must ever travel on Concorde." Obviously someone had done it on expenses, so...

**How does it work? You're obviously the on-air talent. How does it work in terms of the BBC's ownership of you as it were? Insofar as like your Twitter for example, that's your personal Twitter, you mention it on air, people follow you personally, they listen to *The Jeremy Vine Show* because it's presented by Jeremy Vine, they don't listen to the Radio 2 lunchtime show. So when people mention you on Twitter, they're going to mention you personally, which is your Twitter.**

Yes.

**They're never going to mention @R2lunchtime, because no one would do that. In a sense my question is how does the social media marry up to this traditional media output? They don't seem aligned.**

The answer is that it's been a bit of a mess actually. They started off thinking they had to embrace it, so everyone had a kind of BBC Twitter feed and they were all mentioned on the air, and they then realised that the Twitter feed is an intensely personal thing, so you had a particular presenter launched a range of underwear on her Twitter feed. So you can imagine the BBC bods saying, "Wait a second here, this presenter has been given the BBC's platform, we've allowed her to amplify her Twitter address, and now she's launched underwear? We can't allow this. so they then said, "No one must mention their Twitter feed." And I don't actually ever mention my Twitter handle.

**You say, "Search online for."**

No, I just say, "I'm on Twitter if you want to catch me." Of course people can, but the crazy ruling they came to... and by the way, I'm only allowed to say that once, so I can only say...

**It's mad, isn't it?**

Er... it's a way of trying to do Twitter but not do Twitter.

**Irreconcilable.**

So if you accept that we can't just all give out Twitter addresses because then people will use them for commercial purposes, you then go to the other extreme, which is never mention a Twitter address – but then Robert Peston, I saw him on the



Budget programme, and it flashes up a graphic saying 'Follow @BBCPeston', or I think he's just @Peston, isn't he?

**Yes.**

And so, how would you do that? This is the classic BBC thing – if you were running the BBC, how the hell would you deal with this? So you could say to me, Radio 2 could say to me, "Okay, we want to take ownership of your Twitter handle and we're going to use it on the air and you're going to get more and more followers, we're going to mention it a lot, but only use it for the programme." And then the controller looks at it one night, and I just said, "I'm just watching a football game – I love Chelsea." and the controller says, "Why are you tweeting about Chelsea?" I would say, "Come off it!" So there isn't a solution here.

**But people don't want to follow some kind of robotic Jeremy Vine corporate Twitter, they want to follow the real you, and the fact that you're tweeting about a football team...**

Or cycling, yes.

**... is the authentic you – and that's why people follow you on Twitter, I would say.**

Yes, and I think is it this... well, again, it's new world, new age stuff for the BBC, and it's probably analogous to all kinds of other things about how this lovely, lovely organisation that we call Auntie is being, bless her, with all her sort of blouses flowing, is being dragged into this digital age, and it's one bloody challenge after another. I mean, when Apollo 11 was launched, they said, "Every single problem we had created a new science," and it's just like that here. The Beeb is... it's got so many rules, and it's governed by... it's so accountable. We throw the windows open because we thought that's the way to make sure people feel they own us, and all that happens is that people complain louder and louder and louder, and we have to be so careful with what they do. So all of this stuff gets thought about a lot, and they may not... the Twitter thing is a great question, because there may not be a solution. Impartiality is another one. Okay, we're impartial, we don't have views – but hang on, I've just given views on the potential closure of my own organisation, I think I've probably got a view on that actually, I might have a view if this country was invaded by France, you know, do we really not have views? Do we have views if, let's say, you know, a child murder happens on the news? Are we saying we don't have views on that? So I always think you can have values, but you can't have views.

**Some subjects are intractable. I remember once reading one of the political memoirs, I can't remember what it was, and Derry Irvine – I don't know if you know him, he was Tony Blair's mentor –**

The wallpaper, yeah...

**There was all this talk – yes, that was a story – but there was all this talk, and still is of course, of this co-called 'West Lothian question', and he said... he presented to cabinet and he said, "I've finally worked out a way that we can once and for all solve the West Lothian Question, which is just all of us agree that we will just never ask it again."**

That worked!

**Well, it did indeed! But I actually thought that some of these things are just going to have to muddle on.**

It's funny, because that West Lothian thing is so fascinating because, I agree, they said, "Oh, it's just technical." And I remember George Robertson, the former labour minister, saying, "It's just a technical question, Jeremy, I don't know why you keep asking." And now actually, it's come back to bite us with knobs on. So it might be that if you leave... if you say, "Oh, it's technical, it doesn't matter," unless you resolve them, they do come back at you.

**Clearly you've been presenting the show for...**

12 years.

**Has it been 12 years now?**

Yes.

**How long did Jimmy do it for?**

Jimmy did it for 29.

**Wow. I remember, again reading your book when I was on holiday a couple of years ago, that you said, "I predict that the next presenter, 20 years from now, will graduate from Sunderland Media College," or something like that.**

That sounds a bit dismissive! I said they will be graduating from a university in the north of England – as, by the way, I did. When did I... what time... quick, help me! Like about now?

**Yes, it was about now.**

Well, that's very optimistic thinking by me. There are days when I come out of the building and I think the next presenter of this show is probably working downstairs!

**So my question is, what is your advice to the person who wants to replace you at a time of your choosing? And I declare an interest as someone who might want to do that in future...**

Well, assuming they're a journalist-y person, I would say that you can't learn about the world sitting in this room – it's got too many windows and doors. So you need to get outside the studio, you need to get outside the building, you need to get outside the M25, you need to get outside the country, and you need to find news that other people can't access and bring it back – and until you've done that, then you're not a journalist. And it does annoy me when we have presenters – and I will not name any – who have spent their whole life in a studio and think that it qualified them to do anything. It qualifies them to do precisely nothing. So people who are technically great presenters but who have never been reporters, I just find... I'm sorry, just annoying actually.

**They don't know the news value of a story because they've never had to report one?**

Well, have they ever met one of their interviewees outside the studio? All the great presenters... Peter Snow is my hero, he was on the road until he was 40-something, you know? And you could see the dust on his shoes when he came into the *Newsnight* office.

**You could hear it in his voice when he would introduce things, that he was real.**

Absolutely. He'd done the whole world. The whole world. He put his life on the line for things. Look at the great correspondents like Michael Buerk, for example, Martin Bell and so on. I suppose this is an old analogue model I am referring to, and this person who is graduating from the university now doesn't have to listen to any of this, but I would just say, you could present with much more conviction if you've been to the places you're talking about, and the joy of journalism is... I used to think it's a holiday at high speed, but I now think it is proper engagement with the world, and not just the media world, the Westminster world, but beyond that. So I would just say – and it may not work, this – but try to find what's real.

**Do you think it's easier for someone entering journalism now, or harder? Because you've got the ability to do podcasts like this, and Twitter, and to build a name up for yourself, to break stories via a blog, but on the other hand**

**there's fewer people in newsrooms, you know, if you want to be a radio presenter, there's a hundred radio stations and they're diluting the audience between them all – there are very few impactful, big audience, big name stations like this, Radio 2.**

I think it's impossible almost to be a journalist now. It's going to be like becoming a... what were those people who used to bang on your upstairs window with a pole with a bit of cloth on the end, they were called 'knocker-uppers', before the invention of alarm clocks.

**I could do with one of them now, if I'm honest!**

So we have a lot of people who come in here and they want to work on Radio 2 and stuff, and I just want to say, "Just find something else," because the newspaper I started on, the Coventry Evening Telegraph, when I was there, had 86 editorial staff, never mind the guy who was a personnel officer, who had an assistant, and the person who ran the pension scheme... this is the Coventry Evening Telegraph... the typesetters, the advertising staff, I'm not talking about them, I'm just talking about journalists. 86. They took on three trainees a year. They now have seven, and a website, in as much as they print a paper, it's printed in Birmingham the day before. Now, that is what's happened, and it's a horrifying thing, and it's happened because... in newspapers it's happened because people got computers and they went elsewhere for news, but there's a more general thing, and I'm guilty of this, which is that I think news is free, and I'm afraid...

**And it should be paid for?**

Well, if journalists are going to earn a salary, then someone has to monetise it somehow.

**So Murdoch in a sense was quite far-sighted. To be honest, I criticised Murdoch when he put the Times behind a paywall, because I thought I can look at the Guardian, I can look at the BBC etc., but I missed the Times and within a month I had signed up to their £9.99 a month direct debit. And in fact, I used to read the times maybe twice a week, but because I was now paying for it I was reading it every day – and now I read the Times every day when I come into work.**

That's very interesting. Well, I do a little bit the same with the Telegraph, but I think they are £2 a week, so they're much cheaper – but I'm also not quite sure how that works. I mean, the Mail Online is the classic one. Someone told me that Mail Online is the most successful news site in America, which is incredible, it's obviously free at the point of supply...

**It's the most successful news website in the world.**

Is it?

**Yes, it's over a billion readers.**

But someone told me that the money they make from the newspaper in the UK is three or four times greater than from the website, which is the most successful news website in the world – so that shows you how hard it is to make money out of online. And that figure may now be out of date because I was told it a year ago. So I feel for journalism and journalists, and your aspiring graduate or whoever it is, I just think it's a different world now. Do you know, the first job I had at the Coventry Evening Telegraph, literally it was sold on the street corners as I walked out of the office by a bloke who was shouting, with a billboard, with a sign...

**Was that the paper you worked for where they ran the splash where a car had been mysteriously speeding away from a fire, and that was actually you?**

Yes!

**You'd gone to cover the fire?**

Yes, because we'd been to the pub, we then saw the fire – well, we saw the remains of the fire because the fire engines were there, we were all in a black mini, we got out of the mini and asked what was going on, and they told us, and it wasn't much so we didn't think any more of it, but the following day a different reporter came into the office and rang the fire brigade and said, "What's the news?" and they said, "Well, there's been a fire, it's serious, we think it was deliberate, and a black mini was seen speeding away from the blaze." This all goes in the paper until it was pointed out it was our mini, so then we had to take it out! But the fun we had on that paper... I mean, the very first day, I had to go to Coventry Railway Station – and do you know what, as I say this I can remember it so vividly, and I just think how lucky I was – I didn't realise the golden age of newspapers was just before they all shut, which was shocking. 15 years ago the Milwaukee Journal had a full-time ballet correspondent on staff, that's how dramatic it is. But the very first day, I was sent to Coventry Railway Station to interview a group of students who were dressed as bears who were raising money for a local hospital, and I was so nervous, I brought my notepad and pen, asked them everything, their names, their heights, the hospital, how much they were trying to raise, the wards, why they were doing it, came back, the deputy news editor Jeff Grimmer – terrifying guy, bless him, died recently – I gave him the story and he just said to me, "Right – okay, why were they dressed as bears?" I said, "I don't know." The one question I hadn't asked. And he said, "Well, go back to the station and ask them." So I went all the way back to the station, they were still there, but they didn't know why they were dressed as bears, but I always

think, “Why were they dressed as bears?” is the key question in journalism. It’s the question no one else has asked, and it’s the key question.

**By the way, I apologise for misremembering most of your book!**

No, I quite enjoy hearing my book narrated differently.

**It’s from someone who genuinely bought it and read it!**

I can tell! Don’t worry! No offence is taken.

**What’s next for you? Because again, when I spoke to John Humphrys, you know, he presents *Mastermind*, he’s got the *Today* programme, he’s got his house in Greece, you know, he’s got that portfolio, and you do *Eggheads* and the *Swingometer*, and you do this... these are all major things. If it’s not too personal a question, will there be a kind of moving on in x umber of years, or will there be extra things added on, and certain pieces in the jigsaw taken away? If you don’t mind me asking, is there a master plan of where you’re going to be five or 10 years from now?**

I think that... I’m just remembering this controller, Jim Moir, who came in once, and I said to him, “You’ve timed it well!” The station had taken a hit in the audience figures – it had gone down by half a million – and he had just announced his retirement. He was a very big, dramatic guy. And he said, “Jeremy, I know when to twist, and I know when to stick.” And I would say that myself. I think that in television, you get famous from one programme, and in radio you get famous from 10,000 – and I’ve only done about 5,000 so far. In fact, I worked out the other day I’ve now taken my 25,000<sup>th</sup> call from a listener, so I’d like to take another 25,000, yes.

**Do you ever get nervous when they ring? Because when I’m in the studio with you, I always think, “What happens if this goes into a rant or start swearing?” It was amazing, having been on your show just today, how you skilfully edited that person on air. Like, “Just move it on, what was the next bit?” and you did it really politely.**

Oh, before? Yes, he was...

**He was starting to ramble.**

Yes, I know... on-air editing is difficult, but I have got a button just here, which allows me to end the call.

**Do you do that?**

I do. I do it three or four times a day, because I just think at some point they've said everything, and I want to spare them the feeling that they need to carry on when they don't have to.

**Clearly you must expertly do that quite well, because I've never known you actually doing it. You must say, "Thank you ever so much," after you've already cut them off!**

Maybe... I shouldn't... it's probably like magic, you probably shouldn't ever sort of draw the veil on it. But undoubtedly, when you said, "Do you worry that they'll rant?" I worry that they don't rant, because the key energy for my show is the listeners, so the key revelation for me as a journalist, as being in this organisation since, you know, 1750, is that on *Newsnight*, we used to decide what the stories were and tell them. On this show, they tell us. And I suddenly realised, they know what the news is, we don't – and this whole 'top down' thing has got to go. So all we do, we start with an idea of what the news is, and they tell us. And I see these other shows now that do the top down thing and I just think it looks quite old-fashioned now, actually. But in order for it to work, you need a return path – and that's what radio gives you so easily. Someone can pick up their phone, people can get on the air through this mixing desk here within two minutes of having the reaction, whereas in TV you've got to get lights to the house.

**Agreed.**

And when Jimmy did it – actually, Jimmy didn't ever have calls, funnily enough – so 29 years and not a single voice of a listener on the radio, because that wasn't the way the show was done. But they did still have this thing where call comments were brought through on pieces of paper, and there was a kind of collectors moment where Ian Duncan-Smith was being interviewed by Jimmy Young many years ago, and Ian Duncan-Smith suddenly said, "Oh, we've got a bit of a strange moment here, a piece of paper is being brought through." And Jimmy said, "It's one of the comments." And I thought at the time, "Gosh, this show is so old-fashioned!" And it's exactly what I do - you've seen it.

**You hide it though, don't you? I've seen the editor come in.**

He comes in with bits of paper!

**Jeremy, final question – how's it been? The tables have turned, you know?**

I've loved it! I'll tell you what, anything that shows somebody, how they're perceived, which questions do, is always really interesting to see what you latch on to, and I am chuffed that you read my book, so thank you.

**I did, and it's been a great pleasure. You're a great inspiration.**

Thanks, Paul.

**Thanks, Jeremy – I really appreciate it.**