

Stig Abell

Editor and Broadcaster

Media Masters – October 20, 2016

Listen to the podcast online, visit www.mediafocus.org.uk

Welcome to Media Masters, a series of one to one interviews with people at the top of the media game. Today, I'm joined by the editor and broadcaster Stig Abell. Starting out at the Press Complaints Commission, Stig held a variety of roles including press officer, assistant director and deputy director before being chosen to lead the organisation in 2010. After a stint in corporate PR at Pagefield Communications, he moved into frontline journalism, becoming managing editor of The Sun and also starting to present prime-time on LBC Radio. Now editor of The Times Literary Supplement, he also hosts the Sunday afternoon show on LBC, regularly previews the news for Sky and writes for a range of publications including The New York Times and The Sunday Times.

Stig, thank you for joining me.

Great pleasure, Paul.

What's it like to be the interviewee rather than the interviewer?

Well, we've actually had a conversation, you've come on my show to talk about your defence of Tony Blair.

And rightly so.

Rightly so.

God love him.

I got a lot of calls. Tony Blair is one of the most divisive figures, and so short of friends now that because you wrote a very nice piece about him and he sent you a letter, didn't he?

He did indeed.

I thought it was very kind of him, but probably shows the number of friends he has is reducible to the number of people he can now send letters to.

I just think it just shows he is a class act. My only criticism of Tony's is that we didn't invade enough countries.

You definitely have to come back on now! That's LBC's audience's catnip! Praising Tony Blair for being a warmonger is catnip to LBC audiences. No, so we've had this conversation where I've been asking you questions rather the other way around, and it is nice to talk to you. I don't mind which way round we are Paul, it's nice to be in the same room talking.

But I mean, seriously, that is something I wanted to ask you, because this is just a chat really, on a podcast. But you are presenting LBC now, and you've only just started doing it relatively recently. What was the learning curve there?

I've been doing it for two years, and one of things... I ended up, after a bit of a journey, I ended up doing a breakfast show with Petrie Hosken – who is a long-term... she's left now, but she was at LBC for a long time – and I find learning on the job of talk radio was easier, as I was doing a breakfast show with someone else who could do junctions really well, who could... the whole point I think on LBC is starting a conversation where you get people to call in, and it's quite daunting. So my Sunday afternoon show now, you start talking, top of an hour, talk to someone like you and then start talking, and then you see the switchboard in front of you and either it lights up because people want to talk back to you, or it stays resolutely silent if you're not making any sense or saying anything interesting or provocative.

Which would be the nightmare scenario, of course.

Which is the nightmare scenario. But it's such a such a clear measurement of what you're saying, it's a really good discipline. And so I found the learning curve was easier because I was doing it with someone who was an old hand at it, who is very generous in helping me, and then once you get... it's like any job, it's like you doing this, once you get the furniture in your mind and once you do it a bit of time in which you sit there and think what you want it to sound like, and you do it regularly, so you're coming back every week, and hopefully you build an audience of people who either like you or like being annoyed by you.

And listen as a listener.

Yes. And they come back to you, and they feedback on text, and they feedback on Twitter and by calling in. It becomes very comfortable and although it means I end up

working six days a week – so I do my job at the TLS for five days and then on a Sunday I go in to LBC at 11 o'clock and come back at seven o'clock, so it's another day's work more or less – it's a real pleasure still, because it's challenging, it's interesting and you get to talk about interesting topics, topics that interest you, and you kind of hope other people would like to talk about. And you have to think about what those are, so it's a really honest place, LBC, as you'll know it's not a whole lot of frills, if you go at the weekends it's pretty quiet, it's you and two or three or four other really keen, really clever young kids very often, don't get paid very much, and so it feels... it reminds me a bit of like the old days of the Press Complaints Commission where not very many people there, and so you build a team spirit. I mean, my daughter bakes a cake once a week on Saturday night or Sunday morning for the production team at LBC, that's kind of become a thing every week, I bring in a different cake that my daughter's made, and it feels very much like home in that respect. And it feels like it's kind of worth doing.

Do you just like the thrill of being on air? I mean, we had Jeremy Vine in that chair many, many moons ago now and he said that you've either got the show off gene or you haven't, and he just admits that he has. He loves the thrill of being on air.

I think I have the show off gene. I mean, nothing like the talent or the success of Jeremy Vine. I think I have a show off gene in one way; I really like doing broadcasts and expressing my opinion, I don't particularly like being the centre of attention in a room. So the idea of like a birthday party with 30 people there sends a shiver down my spine, or an event for me, I wouldn't be interested in showing off at something like that. But if you said, "Hey, do you want to go and blather on for three hours every Sunday on national radio?" I'll say yes and really enjoy doing it. So I have a show off gene but it's a slightly sort of crippled and twisted one

I have quite a few friends at LBC – I'm thinking of people like yourself, Ian Collins, Ian Dale – and it's not something I would want to do, because I would be worried that I wouldn't know enough to challenge people. I enjoy this podcast because I can get people on like yourself, and I'm genuinely interested in your career and we can have a bit of a chat, but to be provocative and deal with the public, and like you say you live and die on whether those the lights on the screen light up with incoming callers, it seems to be quite stressful.

It's good discipline though, because I think we all talk all the time with a certain level of knowledge, and if you know you're going to be talking on the television or the radio you've got to make sure you've read stuff. But people who like reading and like thinking do that anyway, so I think you find that it's actually quite a good check every week for me, and for people like Ian Dale and Ian Collins, they do it every day. It's that sense of doing it every day or every week, you've got to make sure you know

what you're talking about – and a lot of people would say I don't know I'm talking about, you know, a lot of people will, and do, text in, call in, say I am a sort of dreadful moaning liberal who has no sense and is completely cut off from the reality of the world. So people are very free with their criticisms! But you need to know the facts. But anyone who is interested in the world knows that anyway; you find places to read stuff, you read newspapers, you read websites, you listen to other radio stations or watch television, and there's a suite of places you can get information. Now, the fear for anyone who likes journalism is we all use those sources of information all the time and it's getting increasingly hard for the places that produced them to make any money. And while we're living in the age I think of where the distribution of information you can make tons of money, if you look at the big companies now, they don't make anything really apart from Apple. They're distribution networks. So you've got Google, Facebook, Amazon. Why did they make so much money? Because they don't produce anything. They just create stuff, and they're brilliant at it. And other than Apple, which obviously is a proper manufacturer and makes things, eBay's another good example...

Apple don't make anything of course, they outsource it all to Foxcon in China, which is a completely separate company. Entirely third party.

So maybe they carry the same sort of the same sort of principles. But there's an interesting question, the sort of cliff we're driving off here, which is what happens when there's no longer places where people are producing decent content, where the Guardian goes out of business because it's losing £70m a year.

But for the Scott Trust and Auto Trader sale it would have closed down years ago.

Well, even with the sale of Auto Trader, you know, when Alan Rusbridger left, it was sitting on a cash pile of whatever it was, nearly £1bn, and it looked like it would last forever, and they've cut through it really quickly...

It's gone already!

... £70m a year, and you think... and whatever arguments one might have with the Guardian over the years, you want it to exist.

Of course you do.

And you want it to be successful. And people who bemoan the Daily Mail or the Sun or any of these places, I don't think you want to live in a country where they don't exist. And with all mass media, with all media, there are very, very few places that make money. I mean, the Daily Mail is cutting £30-40m of cost and is going to lose 400 people across both arms.

And every three or four months when I read that the Telegraph is shedding, you know, haemorrhaging a load of jobs, I always think to myself, “Well, how have they got anyone left to let go?”

Yes, and they still make money though. But it's reducing. And I think for anyone in the business of journalism and the business of talking about news and being interested in it, there's a bit of a fear here that Twitter and Facebook are great for the world probably, although I think you can easily articulate the downsides of both of them, you know, Twitter being a prime example of that, but they are effectively, although it sounds harsh and it may be intended, a parasitic medium; they're reliant on people producing stuff for them for free. And what happens when that supply dries up? What happens when there's no real journalists being trained? I mean, would you advise... if someone came to you, an 18-year-old, and said to you, “Should I get into journalism?” would you say that was a good idea?

Well, I mean, it depends really. I mean, if they want to do it for the love of it... we had Heidi Blake on recently. She's an amazing investigative journalist. You do some of these things, you don't do for the money, but if you want to have a few bob then don't go into journalism, go into PR, really.

And there's more PRs in London than there are journalists now. The same is true in the United States of America. Look at BuzzFeed. BuzzFeed is a fantastic site. They invest money in things like Heidi Blake and her investigative journalism, which I suspect a very small proportion of people of their audience read, and it's still not making any money. BuzzFeed cut their profitability prediction by half. This notion of people clicking, seeing an ad as a way of paying for journalism doesn't seem like it's actually ever going to fully work out for people. And if that's the case, and you know, basic economics tell you if there's an unlimited supply of places where adverts can go and an unlimited supply of adverts, effectively, their yield is never going to go up, it's only going to go down. So you can chase the biggest numbers in the world. They're never going to turn into the sorts of levels of income that we've historically seen in traditional media. And that's a big, big problem.

I see LBC as an incredible brand. I follow it on Twitter and Facebook and every so often it'll come up saying, “Here's a 30-second clip of James or Brian arguing eloquently with some idiot.” You know, “Here's a clip of Stig Abell arguing with someone.” It's great. I like it when they take you on, it's great radio. But of course they can't monetise that. I imagine they want me to then click on the link so I'm then on LBC's website, and they're trying to recruit me as a listener to your show.

I think that's probably right, and I think what people are now looking at generally in the business is you have an audience, you make them like you, and then over time

you find different ways to make money through them. You sell them different things. I mean the one area of potential growth which is where I am now, you know, more by luck than my judgment, there seems to be... you can argue that in niche, high end journalism, subscription-based journalism, there is a future, because people... because of the great democratisation, the great flattening out, the great cheapening of the Internet, anyone can get news and gossip anywhere for free. So there is now a premium on long form expertise, although Michael Gove wouldn't agree with this, expertise and decent, thoughtful journalism – and you're willing to pay a subscription for it. So, you know, I'm at a paper, the TLS, which has been going for 114 years. It's probably come back into fashion actually now, it's now part of the Zeitgeist, because we can have an online and print business together, so you can buy a subscription and get online and a print version of the paper, the print's probably the hero of that, and you're willing to have a relationship, as we do a podcast, we do a newsletter, we engage people like that, but this is in growth, you know? I've been here three or four months and we've seen sales go up by 20% over that period. It is a part of the business that is in growth. Look at the Spectator, The New Statesman, The Economist, the Times; they're all in growth, because they fit this idea of a niche, high end subscription business – and that side of journalism actually feels in quite a healthy state. The breadth of journalism, the range of journalism, is the thing I think that is under threat.

And do you think that we'll have as many newspapers 10 years from now as we do now? Can the Star and the Express exist?

No.

Even the Daily Mirror. for goodness sake! I mean, it can't be making money, surely?

They probably are making money, but they're making money by cutting. And so you can easily enter the cycle of decline where you were making less money, advertising is now moving away from print. So you make less money so you cut more so your products work but is less attractive and has less quality, so fewer people read it, so you cut more, so it becomes less attractive, and the quality is reduced, so fewer people engage with it, so you cut more. And that's a dangerous cycle to get into. That's happened with the Express and the Star, it's happened with the Mirror arguably as well. So I think there will be fewer newspapers. I think the Guardian will try and prop itself up, but the Guardian should have introduced a paywall. And the Guardian really, Guardian writers and Guardian editors, heralded by the Harry Potter-like figure at the top, Alan Rusbridger, really looked down on the Times. The Times don't understand the Internet. The Times don't understand the modern world, because they're behind the paywall, and it's ridiculous; they've lost their influence. And you do trade with a paywall, I think, influence versus money in some respects

because you are reducing your range, but the Guardian is now living in this world where they say, "Oh, can you please give us £50 a year?"

For what? To be called a friend?

To become a friend. We say, "Well, if you value your journalism, and it's very good, then put it behind a paywall." But they're so locked into that that I don't think they can do now, and you know, the Telegraph should be behind a harder paywall because, you know, the Telegraph, you're supposed to pay if you hit a certain number of articles. I've never once hit my limit.

You can just go into Incognito mode.

Yes, or go on your phone, and it doesn't seem to recognise your phone or a different device, so you could do that forever. So again, it's almost like a sort of Wikipedia model.

The FT are good though. We subscribe in my agency to the FT. But if you do log out and forget to log back in it is very good, you get three articles and then it can tell.

Yes, and we do it at the TLS. So we do... so 40 articles in the paper a week, we probably make three or four of them free. We then do some free articles that aren't in the paper but relate to that, we do this podcast which is free, we do a newsletter which is free, so we're constantly saying, "Come and look at us, come and see us, see if you like us," but ultimately, if you want to have a deep relationship with the product, and you might not, but if you do then you'll have to pay a subscription.

And are people willing to pay it then?

Yes, I think so. I hope so. I mean, my experience of TLS readers is once you get them and they like it, they really like it. I was in Brooklyn at a literary festival – a this is nothing to do with me, this is a longstanding relationship with the paper – and this guy, probably was 85, this guy from Brooklyn... I was sitting by the stand, we had a stand and we were giving out stuff, and he came over and said, "Oh, you're the editor of TLS?" He had sort of very papery hands and sort of... he was very old, and said, "I love the TLS, I read it every week." And he started talking to me about a piece that we'd had in the paper two weeks before about how OJ Simpson was like a fellow, written by a woman from Berkeley on the West Coast, but he was... "I just loved that," he said, "I loved that piece, it was so interesting, this what I think about it." And actually having that experience of talking to people who care about a product because it's defined, it knows what it is, I think that's why I'm very keen on... with the TLS, I do think we've kind of come back into fashion again which is great, but we kind of know what we are. Just as how the fast food of the 80s created the slow food

movement, I really believe we're living now in a culture where sort of slow culture is the sort of counterculture; it's really clearly defined. We live in a culture I think where people are autodidact so really... you sort of say about people wanting to know have greater depth of information, people want to learn about stuff again because they get loads of quick, crap information fired at them the whole time. The whole modern world is a sort of deluge of bite-sized crap.

The price of everything and the value of nothing.

Yes. And what the response that is you might say is occasionally I want to sit back and read 3,000 words about something written by someone who knows exactly what they're talking about, and I will enjoy that as an experience, because it's very different from my daily life which is much more commoditised, much more sort of quick-firing.

And what is a typical week for you then? Because you have the very definition of a portfolio career now, and you've mentioned your LBC show, you're editing the TLS, you're doing the press preview on Sky, you're tweeting away – I think you're one of the best tweeters there are, actually.

Oh, God bless you!

I do follow you.

Do you?

Yes, I think your tweets are quite interesting actually. I've got a short private list on my Twitter that's called 'interesting' and you're one of the 10 people who is on it.

Who else is on it?

Well, discretion is the better part of valour.

I came to Twitter very late, in fact you and I spoke about it when... probably three or four years ago. And I hated it, and I kind of still... I have an abusive relationship with Twitter I think, because I do hate the narcissism of it, I hate what it makes me as a narcissist, but what I do like about it is it's a chance to offer comment and banter with people – I hate the word banter – but offer comments and jokes with people, and it's a kind of test of wit, isn't it? It's a kind of test of skill to convey a funny idea in 140 characters; I don't think it's a terrible discipline in itself to try and be clear and concise and funny... I'm not saying I am, but that's the aim of the game, isn't it?

The notifications button is basically the ME button, isn't it?

Awful!

If I tweet something and then I go back an hour later and it says 82 or whatever – it never really is, it's usually about 10 or 20 – but I'm like, "Ooh! I've annoyed someone!"

And on one level you know how crass and cheap and pathetic it is.

It's awful.

My wife, quite correctly, sort of looks at me and just says, "What are you doing?" and I think it's really dangerous, because you're sitting with your family and your phones over there and it's sort of burbling away and you think, "I should look at that," and you think, "Why? Why am I doing this? Why am I exchanging real life communication for a load of..."

To argue with a load of idiots and trolls.

To try and show off to them, even worse! I mean, it's not even to argue with them, it's to be validated. Please validate me! Like me! Retweet me! It's the kind of worst... it's the worst of narcissism, so I don't. But it's quite fun as well, and I think probably as you build your business and what you do, there's a value in being out there a little bit and people knowing who you are. And I have also have this phenomenon which I think is nice where you meet someone you only ever previously met on Twitter. A Twitter friend. And you immediately say, "I really like you! I don't know why I really like you, but I've just seen you, and we some form of rapport, even over that distance," and that's kind of charming to set against the vile-based narcissism of the rest of it. There is that moment of sort of charming reflection where you go, "Oh, I never knew that person, but now I do kind of know them at one remove."

Do you get a lot of grief? Because you do have a reasonably high profile doing the sky press preview for example, and LBC. You know, you're much more public facing than I am. I run a PR business and present an obscure podcast, but you have thousands of people listening to you. Do they interact with you?

Yes! I mean, a lot... I mean, sometimes it's in a negative way obviously, and you know I've worked at the Sun and I do stuff on Sky, so there's the whole people who don't like Murdoch have a view of me and LBC, and on LBC I've articulated various views of what I think of UKIP, or what I think of Brexit, and you have people say, "You're a dreadful person." I don't know if you can swear on this podcast...

We can't – Apple will ban us. We're frightened of the ghost of Steve Jobs.

Fine... you're really sticking it to the machine there, are you?

Absolutely!

So... but you know, people say all sorts of things and there's definitely been moments when I was at the Sun. I've had death threats, I've had rape threats against my 7-year-old daughter, who they name...

That's awful.

But that's the nature of today. It's an interesting question actually, which I have not entirely formulated an answer to, is whether human beings have always been this unpleasant, and Twitter is merely a more visible way of seeing it. So it's revealing what people always have been, or has the medium actually created that characteristic? Is this a new development of humanity which is a negative one, or is it just... I mean, if you'd had insight into the minds of people 20 years ago in the way that social media does, would they have been thinking the sort of things that people say now and people write, or is that kind of new development?

It's never even crossed my mind to send someone a horrible tweet. I'll challenge someone robustly, but I would I would never be rude. I just think it's frightfully... well, it's just awful. I don't understand why people do it.

So is it new, or is it how people always have been?

The psychologists have come up with – I forget the exact term, it's something like dissociative syndrome, isn't it, where you're sitting in your attic and you just think he can say horrible things to people because it's just a Twitter account.

It's not real.

But of course it is real, but they somehow excuse their behaviour that way. It's weird.

I mean you can shrug it... I mean, none of it's the end of the world is it? And some of it's actually good. I mean, one of the things I think has changed the business that I've been in in whatever form over the last few years, is that newspapers particularly were very monolithic institutions. It was all pushed out. They were completely in control. This is what you're going to listen to. This is what you're going to read. Lump it. Here it is. And you'll want it because there's a massive restriction in terms of what people can read or listen to. If you think 20 years ago you wanted news, you listened to the Radio 4 news or whatever station you liked, and there's LBC news, and you could watch the six o'clock or the 10 o'clock news, and you could read newspapers.

And so this gigantic monopoly happened. And to get in trouble, to be in reputational danger, so you know, your line of work, you had to do something really bad to get on the front page of a newspaper or to go on the six o'clock news. Now of course, everything is immediate, 24-hour responsive, and so reactions come back instantly. And so you are much more closely connected to people otherwise you would have just been talking at. And so the value I see in something like LBC where you're talking to people who call back to you, has actually now extended across the whole of the media – and newspapers, who've had a monopoly for 250 years of telling it how they want it to be told and saying to people, "Buy it." I mean, you've got to have a relationship such that people will pay money for it, but it's a passive one that they're after. We are telling you stuff and you've got to consume it. That's been turned on its head. Now, newspapers are the same as any other brand, the same as any other person, anything they say and do is immediately dissected, analysed, mocked, criticised, campaigned against – and that changes the whole feel of it. In some ways it's healthy because it means the status quo is never accepted; you can't get away with saying something because someone else will say, "Hang on a second, that's not true," or, "We object to that," or, "We are going to formulate our objection, we're going to congregate and make our objection." And that's a completely different world than it would have been 20 years ago.

Tell us about your time at the Sun. Because you got your double first at Cambridge, you eventually rose through the ranks to become director of the PCC, you then don't go into corporate PR communications at Pagefield, and then you take a job as managing editor of the Sun. It saved quite a left field... in fact, when I saw you appointed on LinkedIn, because we're connected, I thought, "That's a left-field step!"

Yes. Although as director of the Press Complaints Commission and the previous years, I basically spent five years not being able to turn my phone off because I was always the middleman between someone who's being reported on by a newspaper and the newspaper itself. I'd have to give advice to editors.

We've had Matt Tee in that very chair.

Yes. And we kind of developed that kind of responsive idea. And it was only sort of six of us. And so you're always on call and at any time of the day or night, people would call you at midnight and say, "This has gone into the paper today, now what can we do about it?"

I imagine that was quite a stressful job.

It was! And it was lovely in lots of ways, because people didn't really value us, you know, people always sort of had a go at the PCC.

Damned if you do, damned if you don't.

And what that led to was a group of people who were all in their 20s and 30s, all working really hard – thanklessly – but that formulates a real bond of people. You know, I met my wife at the Press Complaints Commission, I interviewed her for a job.

Is that your way to meet women, then?!

No! I wouldn't recommend it. It's an incredibly stressful way of meeting women!

You're not kidding.

But it was actually a place where you really valued the colleagues you working with because it was quite a hard job.

Stood in the trenches.

You kind of 'regulated' something that should also be free, so you are effectively on a... bestriding a paradox the whole time. This should be free but it also should be responsible – and that's quite difficult. So my role there was often advising newspapers, so I got a call from the then new editor of the Sun, David Dinsmore, who said I'm coming in. I had all sorts of difficulties with people being arrested and prosecuted for paying public officials, the whole industry was still suffering the after-effects of Leveson, and there had been a sort of loss of confidence and a loss of ability for people to make decisions. David Dinsmore, very, very good man who's now the COO of the company, brought me in to try and help people make better decisions, try and make sure the business was run properly, to make sure that employee relations were proper, to make sure that the processes were in place that we were paying people in the correct way.

So the managing editor of the newspaper, we should explain to our listeners, there is a little bit like being the managing director of the business off the newspaper. Is that fair?

It is, except there's people above you running the whole business, so you're less autonomous than a managing director of a business, but you're doing a lot of the day to day...

You're the business guy.

Yes. It's HR, it's making sure you're on budget, it's dealing with complaints, it's dealing with lawyers, and it's trying to make sure... I mean, newspapers... and then you have... I mean, the Sun makes its fair share of mistakes, and it did when I was

there, but the principle we always used to say is try and do things the right way and understand why you're doing them – and if you're going to do something that's going to be controversial, make sure you don't do accidentally. And – people don't believe this, but you'll know this from your time in PR – most of the really egregious things that newspapers do are cockups.

Every scandal I've ever been involved in trying to fix behind the scenes in 20 years in PR has largely been cockup rather than conspiracy. People are busy. They haven't got time to conspire to do anything! You can't even get them in the same room.

I mean, newspapers, if you ever go to a daily newspaper at seven o'clock, eight o'clock at night as it's being put to bed – the Sun used to go off stone at sort of 10.30 – it's a shambles. I mean, it's an exhilarating shambles, and it's a shambles undertaken by often very hard-working and very talented people, but you're trying to balance together all sorts of, you know, there's hundreds of stories going in a paper, they're moving left right and centre, information is coming in, you have to make very quick judgments, the editor is often having to make very quick judgments, and newspapers always point upwards. So one of the issues I think that exists with a newspaper culture is it's always someone above you's decision because of the way they're structured, and the problem is that people lose a bit of the ability to make decisions for themselves in that way. Often they make very good ones. And so it's a very hard thing to do, a newspaper, and that's why things go wrong in them very often, and sometimes they can go systemically wrong and some of them there can be problems of culture, but my time at the Sun – which was predominantly under David Dinsmore as the editor – it knew what it was, it knew what it was trying to do, it was trying to be a fun, exclusive-driven, informative product that its readers wanted. It knew what it wanted to be. And it makes mistakes, and it makes bad decisions, and judgments are sometimes wrong, but its purpose in the end as a paper is a benign one, I think at the time when I was there.

And unlike many managing editors, you were the actual editor weren't you, once a week on a Sunday night for Monday's paper, is that right?

No, not once a week... you've got to remember, all papers have a Sunday for Monday editing rota, because no editor...

In their right mind wants to come in.

... wants to do that. And so it's a kind of... it's the B Team. So I was part of the B Team, and when I was doing it, it was two or three people who shared it out over the course of the month.

That must have been a real thrill.

It was such good fun because, you know, I wasn't a journalist, I'm never quite sure when people say journalist whether I am a journalist actually at all.

Same here. I've got a press card, I do this podcast, people say that this is journalism but I actually genuinely don't know.

Is it journalism? I don't know. Maybe its not worth worrying about because it's just it's whatever it is.

I always say no in case I miss a really obvious question.

Haha – you try and get away with it.

I had Mark Thompson on for an hour and a bit in New York last week and I forgot to ask him about Savile. I literally forgot. That's a pretty big thing to forget! He was Director General!

He would have been prepared for it. I am not sure what you would have got out of him.

Well, exactly.

So yes, so on a Sunday I you'd go in, and I had a breakfast show at that point, so I'd leave the house at six in the morning, go and do LBC till 10 and then get on the tube to the Sun for sort of quarter to 11 and go straight to the conferences of the day.

Which is like the media dream lifestyle.

And then you then stick around till nine or 10 at night to sort of put the paper to bed. What was great about it was that it was... and it's what I enjoy about being an editor, that its creative and fun. And again, working with really... I mean, my experience of the Sun – and people have a negative view of the Sun in lots of ways – my experience of the Sun, you know, lots of the people there, almost everybody I could think of, were just a real genuine pleasure to be around. And when you're putting a paper together on a Sunday for Monday, it's a skeleton staff – again, it's a bit like LBC, I'm spotting a pattern here that I'm always around on the unwanted, skeleton days –

On a film you'd be the first assistant director, wouldn't you?

Exactly. I'd be the third friend who dies in painful circumstances after 32 minutes. No, but on a Sunday, you sit there and then you get to come up with headlines and you get to work out what the order should be and it's all about hopefully changes of

pace and light and shade and making stories put together. And the one lesson I've taken from the Sun to the TLS, which are on the face of it very different papers, a thing that that David and I used to say, and he said it first and I used to say it there afterwards, "What are going to be remembered for today?" And in a daily paper that could be a story, it could be a headline, it could be a picture. And actually it's more important for a weekly paper like the TLS, which is you've only got one week, one shot really to make people care. And you know, I say this to the people at the TLS – what's the thing we're going to be remembered for this week? What's the great thing we've got? And that might be a lovely long piece about Marx, or it might be a couple of very interesting travel pieces, or it might be a review of the Turner Prize or it might be any sort of thing. It doesn't really matter what it is, but what's the thing? It might be our woman from Berkeley writing about OJ Simpson saying why he's like Othello. I remember that now, and this guy from New York, this 80-year-old guy from New York, remembered it three weeks later.

I'm going to read that on the train home! My wife is a TLS subscriber.

That it, yes. I'll send you the link anyway, we made that one free for people to get into. It's a really interesting...

Ah, I was about to falsely use her login credentials to get it!

Outrageous. So that principle I think extends for everything. It's a really good motto I think. What are we being remembered for today or this week, and that's true in any form of sort of media expression – you want to try and hit something that people will go, "Oh, you need to check that out."

But do you get any kind of emotional baggage – last question on the Sun – is there kind of emotional baggage, you know, like Hillsborough? I mean, there's been tons of editors between Kelvin and yourself and David and so on and yet there's obviously a huge boycott in Liverpool, loads of people seem to be anti the Sun. I mean, Ed Miliband got vilified for posing...

Yes, I was there then.

And yet Nick Clegg and David Cameron and all the other people did it, and no one gave them any grief. It seemed weird.

It's very difficult because on the one hand anyone who works at the Sun will tell you, I mean I was nine when Hillsborough happened. Anyone who knows anything about the Sun who works there will say it's the worst thing that the Sun ever did. It is absolute, you know, that that front page was a disgrace. It was outrageous. It was wrong. It was shameful.

Now, the Sun has numerous... people say, "Why haven't you done a front page apology?" The Sun has done two front-page apologies about Hillsborough. It's very difficult, and in some ways it's not a matter for us. The way I was dealt with it was that anyone who wants to have an opinion about the Sun and Hillsborough when I was there, particularly anyone from Liverpool, particularly anyone who's who knows people who suffered at Hillsborough, they're perfectly entitled to that opinion, I wouldn't want to try and persuade them otherwise. It's a matter entirely for them, and I understand it. But all I can say is there's not one single person at the Sun who doesn't regret that that happened. It's apologised numerous times, and I think we all feel that it was a disastrous decision, but it wasn't a decision that the people who were in the news desk or on the features desk or who were reporters made, and most of them would have been children when that happened, or they would have been working on other papers or doing something else completely. But you do, you carry that baggage. Also the other thing I would say is if you were in the business of being an opinionated, colourful thing like the Sun or like anything in newspapers, you can't really begrudge people having an opinionated, colourful response to you, because it's kind of hypocritical to say that. So if people are going to be anti-the Sun I think it's a shame, and particularly when I was there I think they overlooked a lot of the good that the Sun did, not least in terms of campaigns and charities, and trying to cheer people up, I think there's a lot of good in the heart of the Sun but I understand it when you mentioned Hillsborough, it's an indefensible thing that took place and I wouldn't try and defend it, but I think critically, no one else who I know at the Sun would try and defend it either.

What was the best thing you did at the Sun? Because I remember your double page Shakespeare spread.

I loved that, yes!

I mean, it genuinely was impressive. The Sun's audience is difficult to write for.

It is, although the point is to try and write something that's interesting and you think people will grab.

Because Sun readers are not idiots.

Of course they're not.

Well, it's the cliché, isn't it, that you have to dumb it down, but actually you don't. You just make the language accessible and less opaque.

I think the danger is, and the BBC gets criticised for this sometimes, rightly, where you can underestimate the intelligence of the audience. I remember when I worked

on... do you remember the Queen's Jubilee flotilla thing? I remember the BBC's production of that, and instead of like showing what the boats were and the history of them, they had sort of Tess Daly knighting a transvestite in a park, because they thought, "Whoa, hang on, there's too many facts here, people won't be interested in facts!" I fundamentally disagree with that. I think people are interested in, as I said, self-learning. They want... it's why popular history is popular, because people want to know. But the Shakespeare thing is a really good example I think of the Sun at its best. I wandered in to the features conference, and we'd been talking about this because it was St. George's day, and it was the day which is Shakespeare's birth and death day, and it was the 450th anniversary, so I said, "For St. George's Day, why don't we do the complete works of Shakespeare?" and the deputy editor was there, and he's this great production guy, and he got his pencil out and went, "Oh, yes – here's how we'll do it, we'll do all 38, you write the summaries of all 38 of them," – because I'd just read all of them on the commute, I'd done a thing for the Sun, how you could read all of Shakespeare on the commute. So he said, "You can write all of them, and then what we'll do is we'll do front pages of some of them." And he just got his pencil out and drew how 38 different plays would fit on a page if eight of them were turned into some front pages and everything else was a summary. So the front pages were absolutely brilliant, you know, there was *Fat Man and Robbin'* for Henry IV part 1, there was Massacre at the Palace for Hamlet, and the Hamlet massacre at the palace in the front and the little blurb in the corner of the page said 'Free cigar for every reader', there were little gags in it. Then we did Much Ado About Nothing, so I wrote this laborious summary of Much Ado About Nothing, and the sub looked at it and went, "Let's just cut it entirely, so Much Ado about Nothing had nothing underneath it as a description.

That's quite witty.

Yes, so that was an example of something I look back on with great pride, because it's found in on the front page of the Sun. Here's an example of high and low culture meeting. David Moyes had just been fired from Man United, and so the front page was some convoluted pun which the editor came up with about back me, back, sack and crack...

I remember that splash.

Do you?

I do.

Back sack and crack, but in the corner, it said, 'Free complete works of Shakespeare for every reader', and that to me is probably what the Sun should be doing.

So how did you move to the TLS, then? Because it is quite a quite a change.

It is, but my first job in journalism was writing for the TLS. So one of the wonderful things about the TLS, a tradition I'm trying to continue, is people write to you and say, "Can I write book reviews?" And I remember I wrote to the fiction editor then, a woman called Lindsay Duguid, who still writes for the paper, and I had just left university...

Is she evil? Because she's got a great surname. It would be such a twist if she was evil.

No, she's lovely. The whole point is how lovely she is. So Lindsay does do good! So I emailed her and said, "I've just left university, can I write a book review?" and she's slightly surprised and said, "Fine," and then a book came and she said, "Can I have 600 words by three weeks' time, or a month's time?" So I wrote 600 words and sent them off. They printed it and then I got regular gigs from them, and then once you write for the TLS other papers pick you up, so the Spectator and the Telegraph and even American papers will use you. So for 10 years or 12 years, even while I was at the PCC, I used to write book reviews for the TLS.

And presumably you never had to adjudicate on a complaint against the TLS.

No, thank God! That would have been really awkward. But no, I never did. So it was a kind of little cottage industry that I had. It became sort of known that there might be an opportunity, and so I wrote a two-page document that said 'This is what I'd do with the TLS if I got to run it', so if I become the editor and the publisher, so I kind of run the business side and the paper, and that sort of bounced around the company and it has to be approved by various higher up people and then they said, "Okay, why don't you do it?" And it's not quite as crazy as it sounds, like some guy from the Sun going to TLS, because it's some guy who is probably... you'd have had exactly the same conversation, "Why is he at the Sun, anyway?" "Why is he at the TLS?" So lots of people always say, in all the jobs I've done, why the hell is he doing that, which I do understand, but I had written for the TLS for 10 years, so I had a connection to it. I had a love of reading and books and this autodidact thing, which I think is really important. You know, I think all of life is about trying to stretch yourself to try and, you know... it's a great feeling I think to read an article about something you know nothing about, and then even if you just know a little bit about it afterwards I think that's a real progress. And the more you can do that... and now my job is very often reading articles where I'm constantly teaching myself, so it's a great thrill for me. But it wasn't quite as strange as it sounds, I had a clear plan for it, I've got a clear vision for it. As I said, I think it's got its place in the world now. It's got a place in America... you know, a third of our subscribers are American, so I think the growth potential for it in this niche world of high quality subscription, is really there. So I have

stumbled into it, but I've been sort of stumbling around it for sort of 20 years, and so it's not a terrible thing to sort of come back to.

Has there any been any kind of consistent thread through your career? Because you know, there you are with your double first. What do you want to do when you when you first left university?

Well I had a... I nearly went to Harvard.

I was in Harvard last week, but it was only to buy a hot dog.

Nice, isn't it?

It's beautiful, yes.

In the manner all sort of foolish 21-year-olds, I don't want to be in academia, I'm tired, I don't want to be in academic institutions, ivory towers and so on, so I said I'll go to London to make my fortune.

Sounds good! It's what I did about 10 years ago, and I'm still seeking it!

Well, yes! We're on the road at least. And I live in Loughborough, and I thought, "I'm not living in Loughborough," growing up there I wanted to try something different. So I saw an ad in the Guardian which said, "Entry level PCC complaints officers." No money, come to London, so I did that. I really just followed my nose. I mean, there has always been writing really, at the PCC I had to write a lot of decisions. But it's been connected to journalism and ideas I suppose, because part of the reason I did the PR stuff was because I'd been used to advising editors and people about how to manage their problems. There's a bit of problem solving, but no, I'm just like anybody really, just followed my nose and seen where it got me to.

We've had loads of really successful people in that chair, and they always say, you know, when you look back at the career it looks like there was a narrative and actually at the time it's just I've gone from one thing to the next, and I've met a certain person and they've opened a door, you know, and you've made your own luck as you've gone along.

And I think that's hopefully encouraging to anyone, that, because it's slightly terrifying as well, because you know, I'm 36, so I've got no idea what I'm doing when I'm 46, and just because something has worked up until now, there's no guarantee that will work in the future, so it's daunting I think to say, "Well, I don't really have a plan." But like you say, hopefully, if you put the effort out, I think a lot of it's about putting the effort in, making sure that you're willing to, you know, work hard, to try things, to give it a go and to keep pushing. So at some point, hopefully you'll get a

point where you no longer need to keep pushing. I imagine a lot of people you speak to on this have got to that point they no longer need to keep pushing because they've got they've got such a level where they're fine. I'm not at that level yet. I don't know if I ever will be. My wife always looks at me and says, "You'll never be satisfied with anything," you know?

Why should you be?

"The first time you get something you're always looking to see how you can make it better."

There's no shame in that.

But there is probably a level that people get to. But you're right, I don't think there's ever a plan, and if you had a plan it wouldn't come off anyway so it's probably better just to keep going at everything and see what comes off.

I don't expect you to answer this but I'll have a go anyways. What would be next for you? Or is it a question of you're not going to give up, you know, move on from say, the TLS or LBC, but you're looking to kind of expand the opportunities to be on air more, and that you might want to do a show on 5 Live alongside LBC and the TLS and Sky's preview and all the other stuff you do.

At the minute, I'm four months into the TLS and I've got a big plan for it, so I'm really committed to that. I want to write a book at some point, and I've got various ideas for that. So I don't know. And you know, particularly the business we're in, the business of the media, who knows? I mean, we had a piece in the paper last week I think, which was talking about technology, and I think actually how technology is going to impact the world over the next 30 years is fascinating, and I think the automation of the world is almost the biggest issue facing the world that most people don't think about, including the government And there's this terrifying...

My fridge is genuinely connected to the Internet. We moved house a few months ago and I got a new fridge and it's got an IP address.

Yep. And what happens when, you know, driverless cars, what happens when robots effectively take over everything? On the one hand, the utopian vision is that people will no longer be defined by their jobs. They'll have more free time and therefore humanity will improve. Downside, the dystopian view, is the economy will suffer. People will not have jobs and we'll have a real big problem with this, and the government have to think about doing things like universal basic income and ideas that hitherto have been impossible. So we had a piece about this, but one of the things that came in it which was terrifying to me, was that in future people will learn

Shakespeare by having a nanobot injected into their bloodstream or communicate to its brain at the level of the neuron.

I'm up for that.

It's terrifying! The humanist in me is sort of terrified by that notion. So that's a very long way of saying Christ only knows what the media or what any part of it will look like in 20 or 30 years.

But the joy of discovery is part of it; success is a journey, not just the destination. I'll give you an example. I did A-level English literature, which had a terribly at.

What did you read?

We did Measure for Measure.

That's one of my favourite plays.

It's a play of many mixed emotions, isn't it?

Yes.

It's not quite a comedy or a tragedy or whatever, but I remember reading it thinking, "This is impenetrable nonsense." But then as we went through it across the time I started to get behind the characters and the language, I thought, "This is genuinely genius."

Yes, and that's the great joy of Shakespeare; he combines being a hack, and he churned it out with a genius, and no one really has ever reached that same level as him in his ability to do that, so he wasn't some rarefied person chiselling out four words every two years of genius, he was someone hacking this stuff out for a popular audience. Every time he wrote something, he wrote something beautiful and previously unimaginable using words that he'd invented in sentences that made perfect sense and fit a perfect rhythm. I mean, he's an extraordinary, unrepeatable figure, Shakespeare, and one of the things I found when I read them on the tube – and for your listeners, I honestly would recommend doing this as a thing – six months, you can read 38 plays by Shakespeare on the tube.

I've still got Ed Balls' biography I'm half way through that, I've got Nick Clegg after that...

Oh, don't read that! Oh, come on. Honestly, read Measure for Measure again before you read Ed Balls.

We've got Nick Clegg coming on in a few weeks so I have to.

Oh, so you have to at least pretend to have read it.

I have to read it. It's worse than that – I want to read it.

Oh, God. Well, I would recommend, if you have a choice between Ed Balls' self-serving platitudes about his political career or reading Shakespeare, read Shakespeare. What you find actually by doing it is then you get in the rhythm and you, as you said with school but also more if you do it yourself, you get the rhythm of it and it becomes easier and easier and easier, because you get the sense of what's happening. How did we get onto Shakespeare there?

I asked you about the kind of double page piece that you did. It was fantastic.

Oh, yes. And, you know, I still very often would grab a Shakespeare and take on the tube. I now I now allow myself, in an act of vanity, to review Shakespeare plays for the TLS. I never really went to see them. Because I saw a terrible Mark Rylance Macbeth which had Jane Horrocks, you know Bubbles from Ab Fab?

I do – she was in Little Voice, which was directed and written by a friend of mine.

Well, she did this terrible... it's a famously awful Macbeth which has kind of scarred my Shakespeare watching...

Deliberately awful, or just awful?

It was just awful. And she was Lady Macbeth, and she wandered around stage, and during the sleepwalking scene she wet herself live on stage, and it was set in a sort of strange commune, and Mark Rylance – who was the director and played Macbeth – was wearing sort of a Harry Krishna outfit.

Sounds great!

It was terrible!

At which point did it become bad?

Honestly. And it was so it was just so awful, it kind of was this symbol of how Shakespeare can be sort of battered and pushed into horrible concepts. But it had Bubbles from Ab Fab weeing on the stage every night.

I met her in real life. I was lucky enough to go to the premiere of Little Voice actually, and I met Michael Caine and I sat next to Ian Rush!

Haha. Which of the three did you most like?

Michael Caine was nice. I'd love him on the podcast.

He's a rabid Brexiteer, isn't he? I don't know if I'm doing him a disservice. I've got a feeling he's popped up in that that sort of pre-Brexit fervour of everyone asking anyone, "What do you think about Brexit?" I've got a feeling he wanted to take his country back. I could be wrong.

Do you think that the media is at risk, or the kind of rolling news is at risk, of disappearing up its own backside, as it were? Because, you know, I watch you and lots of people like Isabel Oakeshott and people that I've worked with for many years doing the paper reviews, and my first thought is the papers don't really set the agenda any more. If I watch the paper review it's because a) because it's on, but b) it's because what you guys are chatting about. The papers are just the springboard to the chat really.

Yes, it's their best-ranked show, the Sky paper Review.

You can tell, because they do loads of them.

And then the evening one, the 11.30 one, often is the best of the whole day. But I think you're right, I mean, I think the papers do set the agenda in the sense that they do a lot of digging on stories. They still get people talking. And I think it serves the broadcast media, I think it serves social media, but I mean it's a mistake for any paper and any institution to get above itself, and I think historically as a medium, newspapers have done that, they've got cocky – and there's been an element of hubris as technology has come and sort of bitten them on the arse. So I think you're right. You don't want to overstate the value of papers but papers do start a conversation, and I think you don't want to become self-indulgent about all of this nonsense but the Sky papers thing works simply because it's just like a radio show or a TV show where two or three people who you either like or not like have a chat about things, and you will either agree with them or disagree with them, but you might have a profitable disagreement in your own mind, and you want to be careful that you don't pitch it too highly... more highly than that. You know, there's nothing worse than sort of journalists congratulating themselves and saying how wonderful they are and how wonderful journalism is, because they've done that for 250 years and it's not really helped them an awful lot.

But its the only time, even on news channels and Sky, that you actually get some opinion being discussed, because when its the wheel and they're just

doing the straight headlines, to it's live at 5:00 or whatever, it is that traditional news show where you've got a package, the next package is teed up, and then there's the advert, the weather and then it's game over.

But the question is... I mean, that's a regulatory thing as much as anything else, that we live in in a world where we have allegedly an impartial media. Now obviously that's a fiction, because anyone... if we dropped an alien onto the planet and made them watch Sky News, Channel 4 News and BBC News and say they're all acting equally impartially, no one would possibly agree with them. Every human being brings with them an aspect of partiality – it's part of being human. They try to be balanced, I think they generally do a lot of criticism of a news show like Channel 4. It's a very, very well produced, I think provocative, edgy, opinionated news programme – it's not impartial. The beliefs of the people who make it seep out from every pore as they're doing it.

Consciously and unconsciously, I imagine.

Exactly right. I don't think it's anything to be ashamed of. And I think that will change in the end because I think we live in a world of the Internet where there is no regulation, where people are free to be opinionated.

But even newspapers, you know, if you read Times or Telegraph or a Sun or a Guardian reader, you are picking the lens through which they're going to look at the news.

Yes. And it's obvious as well. I don't think it's anything to be ashamed of, I think that's the way... and if you're a Channel 4 viewer, you watch Channel 4 news rather than the BBC news because you want something that has a little bit, I would suspect, of a liberal left edge to it. And it's kind of folly to pretend that that's not what's going on here. And I wonder actually, as more TV as I watched online, that very old-fashioned view that you need a license to produce TV news – which goes back to the fact that you once had a spectrum that was narrowly defined and you had to apply for a place on the spectrum to be able to broadcast – that is of course going to be exploded. It's already exploded, but it will be exploded to smithereens over the next few years.

Well, the BBC are shedding channels themselves. BBC 3 now is online only.

Yes, and online only they're not actually subject to regulation. Channel 4 News website, although it probably thinks it is, is not actually subject to Ofcom because the act that empowered Ofcom, such as it was back in 2003, didn't mention websites. So I think we are going to live in a world where there's more strident journalism. Now, some people are fighting that because they think it will make everything too opinionated, but I think there is still a market for balanced journalism, but it's folly to

pretend that you'll always be able to get impartial because human beings aren't impartial, and the people who present these shows and direct them and edit them a human beings.

Where do you get your news from? Because if I am honest, most of my news, I just goes straight to Twitter straight away. If I want to know what's happened, I'll go on Twitter, and if I want some kind of digestion of it I'll read the paper the next day and I go on the BBC News website.

Yes, I'm the same really. So when I woke up this morning, Trump debate, I go on Twitter to find the best place I think if someone will do the highlights of it well. It might bounce me to a website, but I think the best websites... I think for long-form reading I think the Times is very good, but the Guardian website is brilliant. It's an incredible thing. You can see why it loses so much money because it's just...

It's incredibly well resourced, and just a thing of beauty.

Yes, so the BBC news, Guardian news, the two websites arguably that have distorted the market so much for newspapers, I think they're very good. I think the Times, which is not trying to do that but to try and be an edition feel, I think has its place in it, so I look at that. But generally speaking, like I think a lot of people, I'm plugged in to Twitter, and hopefully follow enough of a range of people that I don't just hear one set of beliefs shouted back at me. I also don't really have one set of beliefs, so I'm not... I've never voted for a political party. I'm kind of sceptical of a lot of politicians, so I'm not tribal in that sense, I don't want to just follow Labour people or Tory people, so I hope the people I follow at least sort of...

I'm trying to unfollow Labour people at the moment because they're just talking a load of nonsense.

Well, it's not your party any more. I was doing a TV thing today and someone said, "Could Tony Blair come back?"

Oh, yes please.

And I said, "If Tony Blair comes back, he'll have to start his own party."

I'll join.

I know you'd join.

I'd be his John Prescott.

Oh! Well, you're not left wing enough to be his useful idiot like that, are you?

No... and I was disappointed at John actually, if I'm honest, over Chilcott, when he said, "Yes, I think it is illegal." I mean, it was just to get a headline. You know, fancy doing that after all these years. Anyway, I'm not an LBC presenter, I'm not here to opine!

I was going to say! What do you *really* think of Tony Blair, Paul?

Well, interestingly, I don't agree with him on some things, and I agree with Corbyn on a few things. I would I would abolish Trident, for example. I just think nuclear weapons are profoundly evil, and for me that's that settles the argument.

I agree with him. I think Corbyn... the problem with Corbyn is, there's still little parts of what he says, there's lots of liberal left people would agree with it, it's the baggage that comes...

He surrounds himself with horrible people who are quite bullying, anti-Semitic, just nasty people. He himself looks like a retired geography teacher, and he's got the same level of competence. And that's my criticism of him in a nutshell.

Yes.

You're listening to LBC...

Haha! It's not an audition! If, as a result of this podcast, you take my job, I'm going to be deeply, unsettled.

Well, James is coming on in a few weeks...

Haha.

Well, Stig, it's been a real education. Thank you ever so much for your time.

Great pleasure.