

## **Mark Frankel**

### **Social Media Editor, BBC News**

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**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 Mark Frankel, social media editor at BBC News. Mark first worked for the BBC as a producer for political and news programmes before joining the main newsroom in 2009. As editor, Mark oversees all social media output. In 2016, they were voted best publisher to Facebook and are an industry leader on Facebook live. The department has also won several awards, including an Online Media Award for best feed three years in a row for the BBC Breaking Twitter account, a Webby award for social video for BBC News, and an award for the BBC politics Brexit bot.**

**Mark, thank you for joining me.**

Good to be here.

**So Mark, social media is obviously hugely important for the BBC, but what exactly does the social media editor for BBC News do? And please, start at the beginning.**

Well, I'd like to say I just have my feet on the desk and I have a talented crew of people who look at everything that is fantastically exciting to the public and they just push it out without my needing to do anything. I mean, the reality is the audiences that we serve are fantastically interested in a range of subjects. We're very good at covering diarised events, scheduled events, things that are going on that we know about that opinion formers tell us about. My job is really to look at what the audiences that we're serving are most interested in hour to hour, day to day, when it comes to social media. So that may not be what is on the front of our website or leading a bulletin on a television or radio programme. I manage a team of really talented people who are very good at spotting those kinds of stories, and know how to share them and write them for audiences that are on those particular platforms, be it on Facebook, Twitter or Instagram. And I also manage a team which we call the UGC team, user generated content team, or hub, and they are a bunch of equally talented individuals who are looking at what the audience is telling us. Hour to hour, minute to minute. What is it about the stories that are most intriguing our audiences? Where are they most wanting to go with those stories? What contributions could they give us? Are they eye witness to events that are happening on the ground, breaking news, developing news? What can they serve us in terms of video, audio, images?

Are they able to tell us things about stories that dispute what we already know about them? Because that really enables us to both get closer to those audiences and to illustrate to our audiences at the same time that we really understand what concerns them and most moves them.

**Because it's the ultimate in kind of bi-directional newsroom communication, isn't it? You've got Huw Edwards presenting the 10 O'Clock News, which I watch every night, it's a great show, but ultimately, you're just you're sitting there. You've got the website, which is a slightly more interactive in terms of I can choose what I want to read, but again I can't interact with it. But social media is where can I talk back.**

Yes. And that fact really is the nub of the challenge here, because it's very easy for us to keep publishing stories onto Facebook or Twitter for example, we could go all day long, all night long, all weekend long, publishing an endless display of high-quality stories from our news website or television radio programmes with links to iPlayer and so on. But from an audience perspective, as you say, this is an opportunity to talk back. It's the commenting around those stories and how they can get closer to the correspondents and reporters. So one of the things that I'm working with colleagues in the BBC to do is to get them to understand that the publishing of the story really is the first stage, and it's actually how that conversation then evolves and develops that's critically important, which is where live streaming comes in, where joining different groups comes in, where Twitter Q&A's come in, where the ability that you might have as a consumer, not just to see a story on a Facebook page, but actually end up in a two-way conversation with a reporter, is hugely influential. It works both ways really, it helps the audience feel that they are able to deliver something that they are able to contribute to BBC News. It also actually helps us because if you're a Huw Edwards or even a Laura Kuenssberg or Mishal Husain, or whoever you are at the BBC, a top presenter, and you're writing cue material for your programmes, it's actually quite useful to know what your audience genuinely thinks about those stories. It can help to inform those cues, it might actually help you with your two-ways with guests, with your interviews with people who come on your programmes, the discussions that you're having. And if you don't have that capacity, you're really only working with the information that you already have and that you already know.

**I mean, social media is becoming the story in and of itself now. In terms of editing, as you said, often when a celebrity dies the newsreader is on air reading out effectively tweets from other celebrities paying tribute to that person, so that there's certainly that. But there's also an element of like, for example, President Trump who is largely driving the mainstream news agenda via social media.**

Yes. I mean I think President Trump and certain politicians and opinion formers have taken to Twitter and to social media more generally almost to bypass a conversation in another way. It's a very direct way of being able to talk to people because you don't have the filter of a press conference, you don't have the filter of a team of people around you. You can talk in a very clear and direct way, and you get immediate feedback because people retweet, like, comment, share. You've got a

focus group at your disposal. So there is a clear benefit in doing so. I think that there are potentially some risks associated with that too, and we've seen some of them in terms of it can start to become an emotional crutch to some extent, people tend to use Twitter in some ways as a means to try and talk about something without necessarily always thinking through what their arguments are or testing them with other people, understanding how you can spawn a whole series of other conversations as a consequence. We've seen some of that in the United States with the tweets that the President has issued, in that you can end up in a whole series of arguments over the way in which news is evolving or emerging, which actually have nothing to do with the story. And so I think it's a very direct way of communication but there are all sorts of risks associated with only doing it in that way.

**Got plenty of questions for you, but my first question is a technical one. What are you editorially responsible for? Because you mentioned Laura Kuennsberg there, Huw Edwards, Nick Robinson, all of these great correspondents. I follow them. Presumably you're not a bot tweeting for them, so when I follow Nick Robinson that's the real Nick Robinson.**

Absolutely.

**But I imagine you're about to tell me you are responsible for BBC News branded content, and I want to talk about how that works. Because sometimes the two can slightly overlap. So for example, the Today programme recently celebrated its 60th birthday. Michael Gove said something that was incredibly inappropriate, Nick Robinson simply tweeted what he'd said, there was no comment at all, and of course he then had to start to defend himself because people mistakenly assumed it was an endorsement, and he took a huge amount of incoming fire. So do you deal with that kind of thing as well?**

Yes. I'm absolutely not looking over Nick Robinson's shoulder every time he sends a tweet. He has his own line manager. We have a number of very talented journalists who have their own Twitter accounts and will tweet in an official capacity on behalf of the BBC, on behalf of their programmes, their output. My role is to look at the branded account, so BBC Breaking, BBC News, BBC World on Twitter, the BBC News Facebook page, the accounts that are there to curate the best of the BBC's news content, if you like. I also have an advisory role though when it comes to correspondents' and reporters' news content more generally on social media at the BBC. So it could be that Nick phones me up and goes, "I've got a problem. This person is harassing me," or, "How do you think I should deal with this because this thing that I've tweeted has ended up going nuts and I need to close it down," or, "We need to find a way of moving away from this." So I do play some part in helping both our press office and our correspondents deal with some of the issues that may arise as a consequence of trolling or people being badgered on social media in a way that isn't particularly helpful to them.

**We'll come back to that in a second because there's a lot of interesting areas to discuss there. But in terms of the BBC Breaking Twitter account, how does that work? Do you receive the news in the same way that say the person running news channel would and then the ticker will turn into breaking news**

**and you'll issue a tweet at the same time? Is that an automated playout system? How does it work from a technical point of view?**

So from a technical point of view, we have a team of journalists who sit in our main newsroom in London, and they sit alongside website journalists, who themselves are controlling what goes on the front page of our websites. And the reason for that is we want to make sure that every breaking news tweet is accompanied by a breaking news story, and there isn't a disassociation there. Now, on certain occasions if the website has a story at the ready at the moment that we want to send a tweet, we might automate that system and we might end up sending a tweet that also appears online as a push alert on somebody's phone simultaneously. There are occasions though that we want to do that in isolation. In other words, you have a writer who will send out a tweet and another writer who will actually publish the story. And the reason for that is sometimes the story requires additional hashtags or there are reasons for fleshing out a tweet with images and video in a way that wouldn't work in an automated fashion quite the same way for our website. So they would work separately, but they're sitting together. And crucially, everything that we're doing, that we're breaking to social media, is also breaking to our other digital services.

**So they're held to the same high editorial standards of the BBC as all the other departments. So for example, you would never tweet something to get it out first if you weren't quite sure that it was accurate. At Sky, they've have moved on from this now, but they used to have that phrase 'never wrong for long'.**

Yes, well we won't get into that! But no, that is absolutely right. I mean, I remember I was part of the pilot team that first took on these social media accounts in BBC news, because it wasn't actually that long ago that we had a simple automated system that published to BBC Breaking, and there was no manual human curation in it whatsoever. And we decided to build the accounts up and introduce human curation. And I remember conversations at the time about, "This is all going to be about rumour and hearsay and it could damage the BBC brand and its association with the audience and the audience mindset around trust. And that's so important to us," and so forth. And so we drew up some very stringent rules about how we would operate, and said that on no accounts would we send anything to BBC Breaking but didn't involve two sets of eyes, that we would make sure that we sourced things correctly and we attributed things correctly and then if we needed to make a clarification or correction that we'd be fully transparent about those, and we started setting about writing a whole series of guidelines which are now part of our editorial guidelines and publicly available in that sense. And I think it's been very effective because, in a way, what we were able to avoid was building a social media presence and a series of platforms and activity on those platforms that was in many ways disassociated from the trust that audiences have in BBC News. It was there to amplify what we were doing on other BBC platforms that people already trust and respected. So in other words, you should be able to go to any of our branded Twitter accounts and see any of the things that we are publishing on our website in exactly the same form. The tone might be slightly different, and we can get into that, because some of the things that we'll write on Twitter and Facebook, we'll introduce emojis, and the language we will use will be more informal than some on some of our other services. But critically, we will not take on stories that we don't feel confident about, and we certainly won't start reporting things where we're unclear

about the facts or where the facts are in any way disputed. And if the situation is hazy, we'll always attribute what we know to the people that are saying it. So if we then need to correct ourselves or say anything additionally, we can say, "Well, that first bit of information came from this individual or that organisation."

**Well that kind of dovetails into the next point that I wanted to make there in terms of how the breaking news system works from a technical point of view, because you mentioned that it might push to iPhones and Android phones as well as tweeting. Is it all unified? Because you mentioned there that there are different social media platforms. So you've got Pinterest, you've got Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, and they're not just technically different, they also have different audiences. So do you differentiate the way that you break these stories and cover these stories on a per platform basis, and is there ever anything that's so important that you just push it out with the same language? Can you pick and choose? How does it actually work?**

Yes, we do. People's response to social media will depend on the platform that they're on. Absolutely. So we know for a fact, and there's nothing particularly secretive about this, all our competitors look at this in similar ways, that Twitter is largely an ecosystem with opinion-formers and people who want to shout about breaking news and things that are happening in real time. Facebook tends to be more of a platform that lends itself to the sharing of stories that people find evocative, emotional, that they can relate to on a human level. Now that might cut across breaking news on some stories, but it won't always cut across breaking news. So to give you an example, a decision on interest rates is a simple piece of breaking news. The Bank of England decided to raise interest rates by a quarter of a point is a news moment. That may not be something that we want to reflect in quite the same way on Facebook. That's not to say that we won't report it on Facebook, in fact we did report it on Facebook, but we know for a fact that the priority that we will have will be to break that news on Twitter. Instagram tends to be a more visual platform, so people are often looking for stories that are very visually rich, that talk about things that are happening in the world, in their lives, or in their parts of the world where pictures play a larger part in the story. So we will often look for stories where the visual component, the pictures and the video, comes alive in those terms. So yes, we do look at stories in different ways depending on the platform.

**And are your producers, and the people that work in your team, do they work across all of the different platforms or do you have an Instagram team and a Twitter team and so on, and they get to know their audience quite well? So in the same way that you have BBC News but you also have a dedicated Newsround team and a Newsbeat team and then people who work on the One, the Six and the 10?**

Yes, it's an interesting one, that. Because I have a YouTube editor and she is entirely focused on YouTube. But for the rest of the team, they actually work across platform, and what we try to do is to think of this in terms of the story rather than the platform. So we start with what is the story, how are people going to be interested in this story, where are they most likely to respond to it best, and then work from there to the platform. So if we think that this story is going to lend itself entirely to Twitter

they work on that platform, if we think it cuts across they'll start to work cross platform. But we don't have a team that is only dedicated to one or another platform, we work story to story.

**How does the BBC prioritise social media in terms of newsgathering? I imagine at the beginning you would tweet a link to the news website and it was seen as a signpost. I mean, now, many people just get their news purely from Twitter. They're not interested in going on websites or looking at linear television, so you are the sole source of BBC News. Is that well acknowledged and dealt with within the BBC that you are you are a destination in your own right?**

I think there's a cultural shift that's going on. I think you would find this in lots of newsrooms, that as the digital transformation in people's lives has really taken root and that kind of atomisation of news, people using mobile phones, and not switching on a television set at a particular time of the day or the night in order to watch a bulletin programme because on demand is there for them. I think social media has grown in influence alongside that. And in a sense, the way that our news staff have had to respond to this is to think about it in a very different kind of way to the way that they would have looked at news, say 30 years ago. And I think this is still evolving. So we still have a watershed, which is interesting, but we still put the same stories on Facebook. So the other day, we had a very powerful story that Ed Thomas produced for us about knife crime, and another the following night about gun crime. And both of those stories we ran at length on the News at 10 on television, and both were cut for digital consumption, so we had digital video versions of the same and we put them on to the BBC News Facebook page.

**And they were cut for editorial reasons or for length reasons?**

No, they were cut for editorial reasons at that length. We wanted to let the story breathe and we thought it was powerful and worked at that length, but what was interesting to me is there was still a conversation in our newsroom about the need for the videos to go out at the same time as the 10 O'Clock News, partly because they were commissioned for the 10 and that makes perfect sense.

**You didn't want to kind of steal the content from your colleagues.**

But on the other hand, they're different platforms. And the idea that somebody will watch something on a Facebook page, and then switch on the 10 O'Clock News an hour later or two hours later, I think is a bit of a misnomer in people's minds. So in a way what we need to try and work on is this idea that somehow social media in a broadcasting environment exists as a marketing tool for a television or radio programme, or as an extension of that television or radio programme, I think they very much exist in their own right as a kind of forth arm of broadcasting, and news organisations need to look at it in those terms. And so, in a way, if I had had that piece at two o'clock in the afternoon and put it on Facebook eight hours before it was broadcast on the 10 O'Clock News, I can only think that that would be a good thing for the BBC. But this is something that we need to sort of invest, in cultural terms, in because the staff both at the BBC, and frankly across any newsroom, need to

understand that they're not giving something away, they're not losing competitive advantage in doing that. And the other thing to say is if we are going to put it on a Facebook page or Twitter account, there is no watershed there. As I said a moment ago, there is no sense that you're able to protect a 13-year-old or a 14-year-old from seeing graphic images. You can put a warning at the top of that video, but if somebody wants to see that video in their own time whenever they want to see it, the fact is they're going to do that. If they're going to want to share it with their friends and comment around it and talk about it as they would any piece of content down the pub or with their mates in a park or whatever, it's going to happen. So we need to get away from this slightly, I think, old-fashioned assumption that social media is just a series of platforms that exist to amplify conversations that are happening elsewhere.

**But also I'm not sure the watershed works, because ultimately you're relying on the self-control of people to kind of regulate themselves. I remember when I was a child, The Young Ones was on BBC Two post-watershed and I was ordered to bed at nine o'clock, and then I secretly watched it on my pocket television in bed because I thought it was hilarious. Now of course, I wasn't old enough to watch it but I deliberately chose to. So in that sense, do you do you deliberately sanitise some of the stronger content, knowing that it will be seen by younger people, or is that something that you just have to still have that powerful journalism intact and you don't repurpose it as such for social media?**

No, we don't sanitise. But what we do do is think about how our audience will respond to it on social media. So for example, if we had, as we did other day with a very powerful piece involving a woman talking about heroin and her experience of living with the habit, of being a user, and having family and so forth, there were a large number of conversations that we needed to have about how that would play out when the video was posted to a social media platform. And I think these are really important editorial considerations we need to think about, because we're no longer living in a world where people will only see these films on a one-off basis if they happen to switch on the television at a particular time. Not only can they see them in an on demand setting by going to iPlayer and repeatedly watching, but even if they don't want to do that they can see it on a social media platform and it will live there forever more. Unless we decide to take it down. So there's an educational process here, both for our own staff and in how we present it to our audiences – because we have to be able to explain to staff who are going out collecting these stories, and constructing these stories, that they will not only appear in in a linear form in the way that they used to, but they will actually be commented around and they could become quite disruptive. And those people contributing in them, and whose faces appear in these films, may subsequently be trolled. They might be attacked, they might they might find themselves suffering a whole host of comments, and some of which will be quite unhelpful and potentially quite destructive. So we have a duty of care and we need to think about how those contributors may or may not suffer as a consequence.

**Which actually, you keep bringing me on to my next question in the end of your answers, which is very helpful indeed. But in terms of that duty of care, how does that work? Because you have the BBC News website, that's on your**

**server, you can completely control the content. If you put out a tweet or something on Facebook then you're not in control of that platform. I've clicked on BBC News tweets and then seen the responses, and many of them are horrendous. But that's not your fault; you're not Twitter and you can't control what people are saying. To what extent do you get involved with that, where I'll see something on Facebook with the BBC news story there'll be some horrendous comments underneath. Do you try and sanitise them, delete offensive posts, or do you say that that's Facebook remit to deal with that?**

It's very difficult. I mean, when you are dealing with an account with millions of followers, as these accounts do, you know, upwards of 35 million on BBC Breaking, you simply cannot control the responses. There are filters that you can apply on social media platforms that deal with some of the abuse. You can certainly, if you've got repeated offenders who are repeatedly spamming you, obstructing the account in different ways, you can block them. As we all know, the social media platforms have a number of things that they've introduced. But ultimately if somebody wants to keep changing their profile and keep attacking you, there's very little that you can do. And I think we just need to take a bit of a step back and say there are enough sensible people out there who want to see this stuff and will respond to it sensibly, either by not abusing us or by retweeting or just by seeing the content. Yes, I think we get very fixated with the numbers of attacks that happen. If you imagine that most people will see a tweet or see a post and do absolutely nothing with it, and it won't be that they don't like it or that they have a problem with it.

**It's that the tweet has done its job. It's let me know that someone's died.**

Precisely. Precisely.

**And I then know that.**

And I think that there's a lot of... I mean, what really fascinates me at the moment is that there's a huge amount of press coverage around the disruptive nature of social media, and I think social media can be disruptive. But frankly, television was disruptive when it was first introduced. Radio which is disruptive when it was first introduced. Social media is simply a modern means of communication. Yes, it gives you, the citizen, a degree of power that perhaps you didn't have before because you can be both journalist and eye witness on events. You can respond directly to people in a way perhaps you didn't. But there's no reason why we need to reply to these people. There's no reason why it needs to be a completely destructive experience. I think that there's a lot of press time and coverage, and acres of print has been spent talking about how Facebook, how Twitter, how Instagram have become platforms filled with hate. Filled with all sorts of ways in which people can be abused and misinformed and so forth. Yes, there is misinformation. Yes, there is abuse. Yes, these platforms are quite new to this, and frankly are trying their best to learn, and making a lot of mistakes along the way, I think by their own admission. But alongside all the abuse, all the misinformation, is a great deal of access to real information and access to things that people would not potentially have read, seen and consumed. And that's what interests me, is – and I am working for an organisation that has been around for a very long time and is very good at serving the audiences that it knows, and those are particularly middle age and older audiences – we have struggled to

interest and enthuse younger audiences in more recent times, and I think a large part of that is because those younger audiences are spending more and more of their time on platforms that the BBC didn't have a voice or didn't have a voice that chimed with their experiences. So actually being in those spaces, and giving them the kind of information that might interest them, enhances our reputation with them and enables us to be able to talk to them in a way that we weren't able to talk to them before. And so, yes, there are these disruptive influences, but we've got to put this in some kind of context and look at it in a much, much bigger picture. Because the social media channels that we work with are huge opportunities for us too.

**And the BBC has a duty to serve all audiences. So if you're reaching difficult to serve audiences via social media, then frankly you're doing your job.**

We are doing our job, and I think the challenge is doing it in a way that is of the right tone. I mean, one of the other things that I was struck with, when I started doing the job that I'm doing now, is I would come into the BBC, and it was almost as if people would put a mask on because they'd think to themselves, "Now I'm working for the BBC I need to speak in sort of Estuary English and in a way that only chimes with the sort of 18:00 bulletin, and everything that goes out on a Twitter account or Facebook page needs to be written in a formal tone and in a formal way." I've tried with the team that I worked with, all of whom are very creative and skilled in lots of different ways, to say to them, "No, if we're going to work on these platforms, we take the stories that we know to be interesting and important and we adjust them linguistically..."

**To the authenticity of that platform.**

Exactly. Exactly. And that's where I think we can make the biggest in road.

**And that is at the cutting edge of how the BBC's voice develops really, because you could just do the normal tweet of the breaking news and then add a smiley face emoji on, but of course its not as simple as that.**

No.

**You've got to try and move the brand forward and make it authentic to that platform without demeaning the integrity of the journalism and the overall tone of the BBC News brand.**

Yes.

**That's quite difficult!**

It is extremely difficult, and we've made mistakes. I mean, there have been stories that we've published that have been quite emotive, quite powerful, often around breaking news where the wrong emoji has slipped in, frankly, or the wrong phrase, we've been too colloquial, we've been a little too familiar, you know, some of the commenting on Facebook has slipped into slightly subjective tones and so forth. You know, it's going to happen and I've been very quick to work with the team to point out

when these things occur, and we've looked at them again and edited and corrected, and fessed up to things. But I think we've got to keep working at that, because if it is simply a sort of feed of everything else that's going on elsewhere, it's just not going to chime with people's experience and there's no reason for them to follow us.

**Let's talk about fake news, if we may. I had Simon McCoy, who presents Afternoon Live sitting in that very chair a couple of months ago, and we were talking about one of the ways to tackle fake news of course is to be true to the BBC's editorial values in getting it right, and not necessarily first. And we discussed when Cilla Black died, that Twitter was awash for hours saying, "Cilla Black's died, why aren't the BBC News covering it?" And he was on air at the time and he said, "Well, because her agent hadn't confirmed it, and we're not going to tweet that she'd died if we haven't had it double sourced." And I thought that was absolutely fair enough. Of course, every other journalist had done so. Yes, that's the way to tackle fake news that you've got to maintain your own integrity, but do you see a wider duty? You've called for more collaboration between mainstream news outlets like the BBC and Facebook to tackle this more assertively, rather than just merely making sure your own journalism is spot on?**

I'm glad you brought this up, because fake news for me is an issue in lots of different ways. And the first thing is, the word 'fake news'.

**It's crap, isn't it? It's an awful phrase.**

Yes, it's a terrible phrase. And it's become so deeply politicised and so... it's unhelpful to us.

**I think of Donald Trump every time someone says it.**

Well, there's that, and there's also the fact that it hides a myriad of all sorts of different kinds of falsehood. I mean, I prefer to think of this as kind of false news, or misinformation, or misinformed news, because you've got misinformation, you've got disinformation, you've got news that's deliberately planted, you've got news where people are taking things out of context. You've got situations of satire and parody. I mean, there is a whole range of different things going on here, all of which have happened, by the way, since the dawn of time. But our interest in them, and the fact that it's now kind of the word of the year, is simply because of the politicisation and the fact that social media has amplified it to such a degree that it's become a 'thing' in society. How does the BBC respond to it? Well, yes, we have to be accurate but I think we also have a responsibility not to do stories about every falsehood that occurs. I don't want to give the oxygen of publicity to any story that comes along that is doing a certain degree of traffic on the Internet, because I didn't sign up to work at the BBC in order to be an Internet journalist.

**To jump on a hashtag to get traffic.**

Precisely. that's not why I'm doing the work that I'm doing in a public service setting. However, if a story ends up getting a certain degree of attention and there is a public

service interest, then clearly we need to be there. Going back to the Cilla Black example, and why the BBC was slow or not slow, I mean, I think it's absolutely important to make sure that you understand when something is occurring before you say it. There are going to be instances when you might be able to say something before you have all the facts, provided that you are very clear to ascribe it to a particular organisation. But I think a celebrity death is something you really don't want to jump the gun on. So there may be a situation where there is something occurring; it could be an attack, it could be an event unfolding that involves lots of people, or protest or whatever, and you don't have eyes on the ground, but you have enough ears from social media and other sources to be able to say, "We think something is going on here," and attribute it to it to a number of sources. So it is a little bit more nuanced, but if you're dealing with somebody who has died, or allegedly has died, or something of a magnitude of that kind of order, you really need to get it right.

**How does social media reinforce the BBC's slow news initiative? Because it's not just about getting it right and that delay just to double source it, it's more a way to give people a more in-depth analysis of the news, and how do you do that in 140 characters?**

Well, one of the things that we've launched, or relaunched, recently is a thing called Reality Check which is part of our response to this sort of false information ecosystem that's grown up and politicised itself over time, in recent times. And what I think is that James Harding said when he talked about this not that long ago, was that he saw Reality Check as a means by which we would be able to do stories on things that we could talk to our audience about in an authoritative way, and in a trust-inducing way, that would enable our audiences to feel like they were getting something back from the BBC on a story that was disputed. But critically, this isn't, as I said a moment ago, about every falsehood that is out there. So one of the things that the Reality Check team are doing is looking at things that politicians are saying, disputed facts around statistics. But we're also looking at things that the audiences are saying to us, so if they're raising questions with us about why something is a certain way, or why somebody has said something when they could have said it in a different way, or presented a case in one way when their experience of it is something quite different. We will look at those. But our cue will be, is this something that is in the public interest. Is it something that involves picking apart statistics that are out there, information that is out there, that we think is unreliable, and what can we add to this that would add to the sum of human knowledge. It isn't just about saying, "Somebody's put a meme onto the Internet which is getting a lot of traction and we need to sort of check it out and make sure that the audience knows it to be fake."

**And how do you listen from a technical point of view? You mentioned the importance of hearing from the audience. But you've got Twitter accounts under your direct management that have many millions of followers and hundreds of thousands of responses. How do you technically manage that to work out whether there's a critical mass of people correcting you or talking about it in a certain way? Because otherwise you'd be walking into a room with a 100,000 people just shouting at you. How can you hear those individual**

**voices? Do you get some kind of automated digest as to how the tweet has gone down?**

Well, it would be good if I could sort of have a big balloon and sort of float over a series of people and see if they could send signals to me.

**Or a bot that analyses the language and then emails you a précis of this is how it's gone.**

Yes. Direct line. No, we've got some dashboards and things that we use, and tools that we use in the BBC that are quite helpful in sending signals to us about news that is breaking, news that is trending, news that people are sharing more of and less of. So there are a number of things that we've brought into the BBC to help our journalists to both see what the audience is finding most interesting, where there are trending hashtags, where some of the activity on Twitter is gaining momentum, where some of our stories are perhaps over-performing or under-performing with audiences on social media. So we use things like Chartbeat and CrowdTangle and Spredfast. I mean, I won't go through the whole list of them, but there are a number of different...

**Third party apps.**

Third party tools and dashboards and apps and things that we can associate with our digital content and allow our journalists to be able to monitor in real time what's going on.

**Who do you see as your competition online, and in terms of social media as well? What other news organisations do you look at and you can see that they've got some good practice going on, and you think, "Right, we'll that for the BBC." There must be an element of... you know, I do that in my own business. I see another business, one of my competitors, doing something better than my business in a certain area and I'm clearly going to copy that idea. Why would I labour under this current way of doing it if I know it to not be as good?**

Well, it's an interesting question, because the competitors that we have will be slightly different dependent on the platform and what we're trying to do. So in my world, Vice and Vox and HuffPost and BuzzFeed and so on are big players, and I take a lot of interest in them and what they're doing and what they're publishing on social media channels. You know, if you were to talk to some of my colleagues on the website, they'd be looking more at maybe the New York Times, The Washington Post, The Guardian. They're looking at the bigger brands that have websites and very strong, powerful, credible, popular sites to see how their stories are performing there and how they're doing the same story differently. So it will somewhat depend on who you're talking to and on what basis.

**But things must be changing in terms of you can afford, from a physical point of view, to have an abundance mentality. Because in the old days you either watched ITV News at Ten or BBC News at 10, you either bought The Sun or**

**The Mirror, and you tended to be one or the other. I can quite easily go on The Washington Post website, and BBC News and The New York Times and ITV.**

You can, and I think you should!

**Thank you very much!**

Yes...

**So I mean, they're not they're not kind of straight competitors, are they? You either watch Dynasty or Dallas.**

No, they're not straight competitors. And I think one of the dangers that we've got actually, which is interesting, is that as we become more and more aware of what our audiences are sharing and consuming and where there is potential for traffic expansion, you know, optimising our content. So we all, like bees to the honey, start to head in the same direction. And it's something that I started to discuss with colleagues at the BBC is that some of these tools that we use to try and determine where we should be writing stories or what we should be prioritising only really help us insofar as they give us a signal of an initial interest. But if we all end up writing the same story, you the consumer then start to see exactly the same story appear six different times in your news feed. Imagine you open your Facebook app on your phone and you saw the Guardian, BuzzFeed, HuffPost, Al-Jazeera and the BBC all effectively writing the same story and all appearing in your news feed within minutes of each other, you just... it's like being spammed. So we need to sort of work harder at differentiation. But the difficulty there is, how do we do that if we're all chasing the same kinds of stories?

**Or a bomb goes off, and the city went off in, and how many people have died, and that's all at that moment because you can only be tweeting the same thing as everyone else.**

Yes. So you need to think about angles and you need to think about how you can find either an angle on the same story that is going to be more interesting, more emotionally appealing, to your audience than your rival, or you need to find a way of presenting the same news in a more shareable way, in a way that chimes, again, with their own experience or presents it in a user friendly way, or the way that you've written the headline is more interesting than your competitors. The writing of the same headline. But it's challenging sometimes.

**I remember recently George Alagiah was presenting the Six O'Clock News and Facebook did a Facebook Live where there was an hour and a half of behind the scenes running parallel to it, which was absolutely fascinating to watch, it was basically in the gallery. Were you involved with that? Is that a way of bringing different audiences to supplement the watching of traditional television? I mean, for example, on election night – I don't even agree with people who double screen – I was triple screening. I have my phone, my iPad, and the television on during all of the elections.**

Yes, I think this is a really big new thing for us. We've been very good on Facebook live, we've spent a lot of time and energy trying to think about how we can use the live streaming opportunity there to reach our audiences and interest them in a way that isn't simply supplementing a television experience. And the George Alagiah Behind the Six O'Clock News programme that we did, I think it was a good example of that.

**It was fantastic. It was absolutely superlative.**

Yes. We got very positive feedback, actually. There were lots of sort of media journalism students who were commenting, "This is fantastic insight and we never thought we could see this on Facebook live," and it was a great experience for us.

**Truly behind the scenes.**

Yes. And we've done lots of other things. We did the eclipse the other day where we brought in specialists and we showed pictures from around the US as we unpicked the science. We've done live demonstrations, we've brought in reporters who've been to different parts of the world to talk about their reporting in those parts of the world and run clips through a gallery, and then they've taken questions from the audience, so we're trying to think about how we can use the power of live on social to supplement in a different way what you would see on television. In other words, to say to our audiences, "Okay, if you're going to be on social media but you're not going to be on television, we're going to come to you, give you the story in your own ecosystem, and give you the experience of having that direct contact." And it has worked pretty well for us. During the election actually, we trialled live streaming on Twitter as well, which was interesting, partly to see if we could reach a younger demographic by taking the debate programmes and the overnight TV special that David Dimbleby presents, and streaming it live on Twitter alongside curated tweets from BBC correspondents and brands. And again, it was really interesting to see; we got a huge volume of traffic on Twitter during that period, particularly on the Election night, of people who were clearly watching it and responding to the tweets. And obviously we don't know how many of these people would have been sitting there watching it on Twitter with a television screen in the background doing that sort of double screen experience, but what was interesting to me was that the engagement that we got was very healthy. The younger audiences were very interested in it to a large degree, and it enabled us to be able to say that there is an audience out there for BBC News on serious news events, provided we think creatively about how to present that news to them and go to where they inhabit, and don't presume that we just need to accept that they're going to switch on a television screen and we are going to stick a bunch of tweets on a television screen and hope that that's the way that they'll become interested, because it won't. It won't work.

**I mean, clearly the BBC is predicated and has evolved from a television news studio and the Today programme. It's a broadcast organisation, and you guys are emerging, but do you see a point coming soon where you guys are going to actually overtake the traditional television and radio output, and then you'll be the primary destination where people interact with BBC News?**

I don't know. That's a good question. I think that the audiences for television at the moment are relatively stable. Obviously people in their 40s, 50s, 60s are still watching television to a great extent, the younger audiences that we have, we know that we've got an issue with and we know that social media and our digital platforms are an opportunity for us. Whether we get to a stage where they actually overtake those television audiences, time will tell. I think it's a mixed economy. I think television still has some way to travel, but I think that we need to think about television and the digital personality that television can have, and this is partly about thinking about how those personalities who front television programmes can have digital profiles, it's partly about thinking... some of the things I said earlier about taking some of the best of our television content and repurposing it, or thinking about it differently with digital and social media platforms in mind, and not simply seeing social media as an exercise in marketing for broadcasting or for television programmes.

**Are there particular stories that work best for social media, types of stories, and others that work traditionally better for, say, regular television? I mean, I think, for example, Prime Minister's Questions, you know, Huw Edwards on the 10 will do a kind of a package from Laura where there will be like three minutes of a bit of knockabout. It doesn't tend to translate into Twitter even if it's live. And also those audiences might, it seems to me, be turned off by that kind of Punch and Judy PMQ thing anyway, so they're not even interested in it. Is there something where, from a journalistic point of view, you think this is going to play best on social media?**

I think it's got to be a story that people feel they could do something with. And I think you're absolutely right; just taking a bit of television knockabout and sticking it onto social media channel feels quite spammy, frankly. It feels like the kind of thing that you could take or leave. The tweets and the Facebook posts and the Instagram posts that we have tended to have more success with have tended to be the kind of things that people have felt compelled to watch, because they felt, "I need to get to the end of this clip," or, "I need to tell somebody about this," or, "It will make me look really good if I share this with my friends and my family, because I'll look clever or I'll be proving to them that I know something that they may not have seen or will witness." But you've got to give them something that encourages them actively to do something.

**You've worked on BBC News's early social media output before becoming their first social media producer in 2010. Has the speed of development surprised you? And also, where's it going? Because we could have done this podcast 15 years ago and you could have talked about Friends Reunited, Netscape, all of these kind of things, Bebo, that are all dead. The platforms that we have now, do you think that they're fairly stable in terms of they'll always be a Facebook or Twitter and a Pinterest and an Instagram, and do you start to plan for these things in the medium to long term?**

I think that the platforms will go through an enormous amount of change. I mean, who knows, will Twitter be here in five years' time? Will Facebook be forced to take on more media responsibilities, will it be more closely regulated? Will that therefore

create a different kind of Facebook experience? Will we see all sorts of other platforms evolve that give the consumer and the citizen much more of a say in what they see and what they can consume? At the moment, social media platforms are powered by algorithms that themselves have been created and invented and developed by those social media companies, and there's a huge backlash going on by consumers and people working in my world, in the social media world, about how people need to have both more responsibility and more of a say in how those algorithms select what they choose to see and consume and share and so forth. So I think that's got a long way to work. I think AI is a big subject, which we haven't touched on, but I think it's a very, very big question mark in the social media landscape. How much will AI revolutionise social media? How much will we become a society that relies more and more on automation and robotics and the way in which content is served to us based on our previous choices, activities and so forth?

**There are bot journalists now. I mean, some of these sports results, some of the financial reporting on some websites is curated by an algorithm.**

Exactly.

**And presented straight to the website by a bot.**

Yes, and I think that a lot of what we've been talking about, it involves human beings tapping into machines and sending content. But what we're really talking about here is talking to machines, waving at machines, looking at machines, and getting back an experience of the world. Getting back information, being able to consume information at different speeds and different locations, being able to look at buildings and see information coming back at you based on your experience of where you're walking, or the direction that you're travelling, and so forth. I mean, there are all sorts of things that we haven't even begun to imagine yet. So iteration of social media, I think there's a long way to travel. I think the one thing that is absolutely clear in my mind is that the platforms that we have today will not look the same in 10 years' time, and there will almost certainly be new platforms that we haven't even imagined.

**Well, I for one am scared of the future, I've seen Terminator 2 several times and I've seen what Sky Net can do when they want to kill us. So I am rightly sceptical of all of this kind of thing. Last couple of questions, then. What's the most challenging story that you've ever worked on?**

I think probably one of the most challenging stories that I've worked on... I was doing this job, but in my former capacity, when Nelson Mandela was dying and then subsequently died, and one of the things... you know, it was rather like the situation that we're in today with the Queen and Prince Philip in that we know that there will come a day when this will be a big news moment for us. And we knew that when Nelson Mandela went into hospital, and of course he was in and out of hospital a number of times, that we knew that this was coming. And you knew that the moment that the breaking news tweet was going to be sent that it would, you know, that was going to be the beginning of something. But you also knew you had a very, very limited moment to get that right. Because how many pictures are there of this man, this great man, and how many times would people want to share a breaking news

tweet on something that they knew to happen? And so we had to work very, very, very hard and we went through enormous amount of subbing to figure out what is the line that we would want as our first line on this story, and what would the picture be that would be the first picture?

### **What was it? What was the line and what was the picture?**

So do you go with South Africa's first black president? Do you go with the former ANC president? Do you go with Nelson Mandela? You've got a limited number of tweets.

### **Yes, you can't do both because you've only got 140 characters.**

Yes. And you know that every news organisation under the sun is going to be looking to tell the same story, so you've got to get it out quickly. But you've also got to get it out in a way that resonates, and the picture is absolutely essential. So we went through literally hundreds of different images of the man. As a young man, in prison, on Robben Island, when he'd come out of prison, when he had become president, as an elder statesman, and we ended up going for a picture of him as an elder statesman and then it was, well, do we have him holding his fists up in a sort of ANC salute, or do we have him in a sitting in a chair? What is the pose that you would share? There was a huge amount of discussion. Luckily, I think we got it right. And it's still, even to this day, and this was a few years ago now, our most ever retweeted tweet – it was retweeted nearly 80,000 times.

### **Wow.**

And we got it out ahead of all the opposition. But I just remember it being a very challenging time, because I was thinking, "This is just something I do not want to get wrong." And I'm sure we're going to have that again quite soon.

### **Last question, then. What advice would you give to an aspiring journalist who has just left college in terms of where they put their focus? Because there's so many different types of ways that they can be a journalist now – in print, on radio or television, online, social media, podcasting – there's almost the agony of choice, really. Where should someone direct their energies?**

I think that if you are fascinated in news, and in social media and digital media – my world, if you like – the thing that you should really think about most is how you can develop the skills and the experiences to be able to get closer to your audiences with the news stories that matter to them. And that might seem a little glib, because you think, well, every journalist wants to do stories that people are interested in. But actually, this is about understanding how people relate to news in the first instance. So I would say get involved in Facebook groups, go onto Reddit, talk to people who are involved in private social spaces. Look at the way in which news travels in a digital environment, and how people choose to share it, and what they choose to discuss, and how they choose to discuss it. Look at the stories that people are not discussing, and think about the reasons why those stories are not being as discussed as you might think. Because I think the big danger we have as journalists

today is we assume an enormous amount of knowledge. We know that the things that are breaking in the news are important to us. We know, for example, that current scandals around sexual harassment are fascinating to lots of people. But do we really know what our audience thinks of these stories? I mean, we know that certain politicians have resigned. Other politicians may need to resign. Other celebrities have had to seek treatment or have been censored in different ways. But what's our audience's experience of the same story? How are they talking about those same stories in digital spaces? Because if we always look at news in terms of opinion formers and their experience of it, we will always have that distance between ourselves and the audiences we seek to serve.

**Mark, it's been an absolutely fascinating discussion. Thank you for your time.**

Well, thank you.