

Stephen Cole

Writer and broadcaster

Media Masters – August 3, 2017

Listen to the podcast online, visit www.mediamasters.fm

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 international broadcast journalist Stephen Cole, chairman of the Institute of Diplomacy and Business, and CEO of communications business Cole Productions. Stephen has been part of the launch presenting team for four major news networks – Sky News, CNN International, BBC World and Al-Jazeera English. He also worked at the BBC where he founded the technology programme Click Online, and stepped into the breach to cover the nightly news during the staff strike action in 2005.

Stephen, thank you for joining me.

Thank you Paul. Good to see you.

You're the consummate TV News anchorman. Can you beat that rush of breaking a story on air? Do you miss it?

No I don't, because I've done it for a long time. But I don't think there's any real buzz that I get that is the same as when a story starts to break and you're on your own in a studio. You don't have a script. You don't know where you're going, because you don't know where the story's going, and nobody in the gallery can help you. You are exposed; you are in the headlights, you are on your own. And that I find so exciting. And the first time I knew I could do that was at Sky News in '89. Remember, Sky News was the first time people had seen 24 hour news. They might have caught a glimpse of CNN but Sky News broke the mould, and Mr Murdoch bet the entire house on Sky, and it's paid him a lot of dividends. But Sky News was the most exciting venture in Britain at the time. And I knew soon as a very big story broke – I mean, if you remember it was the Bosnian War at the time and also the lead up to the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Berlin Wall – I could anchor without any help, and that I really enjoyed. I suddenly knew after what, then 15, 16 years of journalism, this was what I did. This was my metier. And that's why I stayed in 24 hour news for so long.

I can remember you presenting Sky News back in the day. It was you, Martin Stanford, Kay Burley, Bob Friend. You were the stalwarts of Sky. You must have built up quite a large following.

There was a very large following even though there weren't that many satellite dishes on people's houses. Satellite dishes on houses were common! "I'm not having a dish on my house, for heaven's sake!" But of course things change, and I think Sky News now is the best news service in Britain. To be honest. I mean, I can talk about Al-Jazeera later, but Sky News, it broke the mould – and it was just fantastic. It was a fantastic feeling to be able to not stop after two and a half minutes, which is what of course terrestrial broadcasters have to do. It was a feeling that you could carry on with the story, you didn't have to stop. And the first time I realised you could do that was when I was living in New York. I think the pope was shot.

I remember that too.

Yes a local television channel, I thought, kept with the story for ages and ages. I thought, "How have they managed to do that? Where are the ads? I've never seen anything like this before." and of course it was CNN, which originally was Chicken Noodle News until, you know, the first Gulf War when it came of age. And I think with the war in Bosnia, Sky News came of age. And then, of course, you had all the other big stories that we had just after launch like Hillsborough, the tragedy of Hillsborough, and many other big stories. They came one after another. The Waco siege. There were so many.

Do you think the skills of being a news anchor came to fruition and crystallised in that moment of the era of 24 hour news? Because in your old days – you know, we've had Sir Trevor McDonald on his podcast, amazing journalist – but his job reading the News at Ten was to speak for two minutes, introduce a package and then speak the next thing. You stuck with the story and had to narrate this story as it was breaking live on air.

That's right. And Sir Trevor, Sandy Gall, Alistair Burnett...

Legends.

These were giants of the broadcasting industry, and I think often they must have been very bored because they were great journalists and they were very big intellects. And I remember, because I worked on News At Ten and I used to sit behind Sir Trevor – or Trevor, as he was then – and Sandy Gall and Alistair Barnett or Selena and think, "Wow, what a great job! You turn up after dinner, you might have a cigar, you've had a drink at dinner and then you work for 30 minutes and then you go home. I can do this!" And that's what made me think, "I want to go in front." and then, the tragedy of 24 hour news happened which meant you couldn't go home and you couldn't have a drink! You had to stay on air for hours. But it was their leadership that I saw. It's brilliant.

Did you enjoy every minute of it, being on air?

Yes, absolutely. I have been blessed with my career. I've launched four, or been in the launch line up, of four international 24-hour news channels. I was in the launch line up in 1989 at Sky. Five years later I was headhunted to CNN International, went to live in America...

Wow. We'll talk about that in a second.

... and launched CNN International. Then came back because my wife wanted to come back from America to London after three years to launch BBC World, and other programs in BBC World, or relaunch it. And then, the most exciting perhaps of all, I had to lead the launch of Al-Jazeera in London and then Doha.

Well let's go back a little bit further before I even Sky. Did you always want to be a journalist? Tell us about the pre-Sky days.

Well, I went to occupational guidance at 19 and after 5,000 silly questions they came up with Customs and Excise, agriculture and journalism.

Which one did you choose?

And strangely, about a week later – life is full of these things – an advert came up for a trainee journalist at Caters News Agency in Birmingham, and I applied and I got it. The only downside of that for me was I had to give up my rugby days because I was in the stand almost immediately, although at first they put me in a stand to cover a football match, and I know nothing about football. So I was using all the clichés – floating high crosses, volleying to backs of nets, game of two halves, sick as a parrot, you name it. And of course, I knew nothing. So they said, “You don't know anything about football, do you?” I'd written two pieces! I said, “No, I don't.” I said, “Rugby is my game,” so immediately I was in the stand doing thousands of words on a Saturday. And after that kind of three and a half years of training, of writing for every type of newspaper and magazine from the Daily Mirror to Farming Today, I then went into telly, to BBC nationwide.

And was that a deliberate choice that you wanted to be on air?

Yes. Well, not on air – I was a writer.

So you wanted to be behind the camera, but write for telly.

Yes. I had a choice of going to Fleet Street – and I was one of the youngest to be chosen to have a job in Fleet Street, I won't tell you which newspaper, it's a pop newspaper, red top – or the job at nationwide in Cardiff. And the reason I went into telly was I really liked the idea of another dimension – of pictures and words, rather than doing doorsteps or some of the nefarious things that the redtops were doing at the time. It wasn't a snobbish thing, it was just I liked the idea of the extra dimension of television. And I went to BBC Nationwide in Cardiff, at Lime Grove, where I had the most fantastic editor, John Gough, and I thoroughly enjoyed it. It was so exciting. Everything was new. They were very patient with me because I knew nothing about telly, but straight away I had to direct films, three or four minute films. I knew nothing. And they were very patient. But, oh, great people.

It sounds like you learned a lot.

I learnt a load. Especially how to treat people coming into the business, and be patient and helpful and mentor them. And there were two big characters at BBC Wales and in London at the time, and they were so patient with me because I made mistake after mistake after mistake, and learned from them, and they were brilliant. It was a great experience.

What came next?

Well, then I decided I wanted to try and do national and harder news. I couldn't get to ITN then because I thought ITN was the best in the world, in my world anyway, and I went off to New York to freelance and play a bit as well, I have to say. And then I managed to land a job at LBC where I produced the AM programme with Bobby and Dougie, and this was 1980 so the sad big story was John Lennon's death, and I was producing the AM programme one morning and I had a one line from Reuters saying 'John Lennon shot'. December 8, I think. And I didn't overreact.

Because you didn't know that he was dead.

Yes. But then a few minutes later I had a two liner: 'John Lennon shot and killed'. Oh, boy. And I changed everything. I mean, the presenters did not like it. And this is quite interesting. Again, part of my training, about reacting to stories.

Can you imagine that now?

Well, they said I was overreacting, or one of them did.

The ticker would have already turned yellow by now, breaking news.

I was getting a Imagine over from Capitol straightaway. I was really shaking, and it was wonderful. Incredible experience.

A lot of adrenaline.

Huge adrenaline, and of course I wasn't bothered about the death until I left the studio. I was walking back to the tube and I suddenly thought, "This is terrible. That is such a tragedy, John Lennon dying." You know, an icon then and now. And it was only later that you can afford to feel an emotion.

We've heard that a few times from anchors that are on air. Maxine Mawhinney was on the podcast a few weeks ago and she said that watching the news as a normal person, as a viewer, she feels emotions. But when you're in the seat and you having to break the news, you can't afford to be emotional.

No way. You've got to think about the research you've done. You've got to think about where you're taking the story. You've got to think about the questions – because nobody is helping you. And after LBC, ITN asked me to join them as a writer, and then I had my first war, which was the Falklands War, and I helped produce the fleet coming back. And again, I've been very blessed with my editors in

television and journalism throughout my career. I've had some outstanding editors. And at the time it was David Nicholas who was editor of ITN, Sir David Nicholas, and again probably the best news director he'd be called now of anywhere that I've been, and such a lovely manner, and he built such a wonderful team. And I was talking earlier with you about leadership. And David Nicholas was a classic example of a great leader building a great team, an organisation, and a new service. And after a couple of years, I was flogging my guts out as a writer on News at 10, and was absolutely appalling. I couldn't write those lead-ins to save my life. I don't know why, I wasn't what I did. And very kindly, I went to see him and I said, "This isn't working." And he said, "Listen, what you need to do is start reporting, because you're not a writer of lead-ins, you want to report." So he said, "I've got a friend who needs a reporter for Anglia Television." And I said, "Oh, okay." So I went over and they gave me the job straight away because if David Nicholas, you know, says, "He's good," then you take it. And so I had my own crew and I did sex, drugs and rock and roll in Essex.

Did you also report on them as well?

No, nothing to do with reporting.

Excellent.

So I did sex, drugs and rock and roll in Essex, I did farming in Suffolk, and I did politics in London. Because you know, with a base at Chelmsford you can go all over the place. I had my own crew, and we'd two stories a day written in the back of the Volvo as you were driving around chasing the stories.

And did you know at that point that that was the thing to do.

Oh, yes. Oh, gosh, that was fantastic, because what I enjoyed about reporting was the anarchy. The pictures, the disjointed words, the jottings in the notebook – you don't know where it's going to come to until eventually you write it, and you can see it coming together, and you're thinking in the other dimension, because as you're writing in the back of the Volvo, you know, having a fag, as I did then, with a biro, you were thinking about which pictures you've shot, so you're having to think about not only the story but you're having to think visually. And that I enjoyed. I scooped ITN several times on some big busts – the Bambi murder for a start. Dr Death, who killed his wife. There were quite a few. It was rich pickings in Essex. And then softer stuff obviously, in Suffolk. And then you'd come to London if there were any MPs from the region in London. Jeffrey Archer I think was one I did, I remember the interview I did with Jeffrey Archer. I went up to his place and had the glass of a non-vintage cru...

Turn left at the Picasso, and all that.

Exactly. He shook hands with me and he said, "Stephen, that was the best interview I've done all day."

He makes you feel so special, doesn't he? He's been on this podcast. He's a legend.

And I got into the lift and I suddenly thought, "He's said that to every single guy that's interviewed him today!"

He said we were the best podcast interview ever!

Yes! My ego was hoisted for a moment, and then it came down to earth again very quickly. But anyway, a great variety.

You can't help falling in love with Jeffrey Archer in person, even though you know he's a rogue.

Oh, he's very seductive.

He is. He's a brilliant conversationalist.

Yes. As long as you don't believe anything!

Yes, but you get the feeling that he is just conversing with you in that moment. A lot of people say that about Tony Blair and Bill Clinton, people like that.

Well, I had dinner with Bill Clinton.

I knew that actually, because obviously you and I have known each other for a long time.

Yes. No, I launched the Global IT Forum with him in Adelaide and I was lucky enough...

You sat next to him for a long dinner, didn't you?

Yes, we sat next to each other.

I've met Bill Clinton, I had 20 seconds of conversation with him.

You're lucky to get 20 seconds, that's pretty good. That's very good. But four hours, that was great access. And I won't go into all the conversation, but I started off as the silly reporter sitting at dinner. Like, "I'm sitting next to the President!" and very excited...

Was he president at the time?

No. This was post-president. And so I asked him all the aggressive stupid questions, about Monica and so forth...

Did he handle that with grace?

Oh, absolute grace. Absolute grace. And then after about half an hour I thought, “Stephen, relax. We’re having dinner here. Leave him alone. Let’s talk.” And I relaxed, and I think that sent a signal somehow, and I said, “I’m not going to use any of this Mr. President...” – because you still call them Mr. President – and then we talked. And we talked for about... literally three hours I suppose, over a very long dinner. And the conversation got more and more interesting as more and more glasses arrived!

I can imagine!

But he is somebody who makes you feel special.

He’s a legend.

I mean, even bone-hard feminists go a little bit weak at the knees.

We’re all pro-Bill on this podcast.

Well, I’m a big fan.

Me too. But let’s go back to leafy Surrey, and go back to Chelmsford.

Oh yes, Chelmsford. So that was fun. And so that’s reporting. And I suddenly thought, “Okay, I’ve got to learn how to present now.” And so a former ITN newsreader was head of news at Central Television and I said, you know, I’d like to come and anchor. He said, “Great, come and anchor.” So moved from Fulham – because I wasn’t living in Chelmsford, I was still living in Fulham, my wife refused to move to Chelmsford –

Sensible wife.

Well, you know, thank heavens property-wise, anyway. But we then sort of had two places in Henley-in-Arden in Warwickshire and London, and I went to Central and I anchored for two years. And gosh, I was bad! Oh, terrible! I was so nervous. And I didn’t know why.

Throughout the whole two years?

Yes! I don’t know why. I was swallowing, I was burbling... it was awful. And I had no idea why.

Why weren’t you fired if you were that bad?

Well, I got away with it!

Story of my life.

Ha. And one night, and I remember it so well, the director was being a real a-hole. He was so aggressive, and he was not very nice, and I lost my temper, and I sort of spat out that bulletin. And then next morning, he said, "Gosh, you were very good last night. Is it all coming together now?" And I said, "Yes, it seems to be." And I thought, "Well, do I have to get that angry to be good?" And the following day, John O'Loan, the guy was putting together Sky News, rang me up and said, "We'd like you to come and be in the launch line up for Sky News."

Who was on the launch line-up?

Well, there was Miss Burley...

Still there now of course, famously. Is she the only one left now?

I think she is.

Because I remember people like Vivian Krieger, Linda Duberley...

Linda Duberley, I had lunch with this week.

She's lovely, isn't she?

Oh, lovely. And I listened to Linda at lunch this week. I'm only kidding, I mean, Linda knows I'm kidding, because I spent a few years sitting next to Linda and listened a lot.

Penny Smith?

Penny, I had drinks with...

Alistair Yates?

... in Notting Hill very recently.

Is there some kind of old school, launch line-up, Sky News meetup dot com?

There is, but you know as well as I do, when you like somebody, you know, you want to keep in contact. And it doesn't matter how many gaps in time, you can see each other again and remember. And I like Penny, I mean a lot of oomph, and Linda has lots of oomph, and they're both brilliant talents.

I used to knock about with Bob Friend many years ago.

Bob Friend...

Sadly missed. When he stood down from Sky I employed him in all our media training.

Did you?!

He played the role of the news anchor.

Oh, blimey! I'd hate to see the people he trained!

He liked a drink afterwards, did old Bob.

Not just before and during? Haha.

An absolute gentleman.

Oh, yes. A true gent. Good fun.

And of course he was a megastar newsreader at the time because he'd been in Mission Impossible and Independence Day playing the newsreader.

Yes, he did a gig, because I think it was a Sony film.

That's right. He used to get about £300 a month residuals just from two films!

Oh! I can't tell you how jealous that made me! I was furious! You hate it when anybody... schadenfreude, that's what's really good for newsreaders.

It's Simon McCoy now, isn't it, that does them all. He goes in the real BBC News studio.

I did one or two when I was there, but nothing as big as Mission Impossible. But yes, Bob wasn't there I don't think when I was at the beginning; he was joined when I was there.

And of course people like Scott Chisholm, legends.

Yes.

So how long we were Sky for? Because you were literally making it up corporately as you went along.

Yes. Five years. Just over five years. I would have stayed for longer but I get bored quite quickly, like hopefully any decent journalist not at the BBC for 40 years. But I get bored quite easily and when this came along I thought it was so exciting, the thought of living in America and launching another channel, because it's nothing like being there at the beginning. And so we upped sticks. The family didn't – I had two young children, two young boys then – but there was a considerable resistance domestically to this move.

Just put them in an orphanage. That's what I always tell my clients when they have domestic concerns.

Well, they're still there! Haha. Except they're both running them now. Nut, no. They've both done very well, I'm glad to say. One's a doctor, one's a soldier. But so we went and I found a house, which my other half didn't like at all – because I found it, I suspect – but I had a good time. I enjoyed it. I learned to play tennis.

How long were you there for?

I was there for about three years. My wife was there for about 18 months, two years.

And what was the role?

Anchor for CNN International. And it was quite a tough environment, because there was a big language difference between English and American, and also you had to operate your own autocue.

How do you do that?

With great difficulty, because I'm not a very good technically. And you did, you had to sort of, you know, you had a separate computer, so you had two computers on your desk, one was the autocue and one was something else, and you had to keep operating it. So not only did you have to look at the camera, think of questions and keep the time and try and translate what you were reading, but you had to operate autocue as well, which frequently went down. It was a really sort of bad tech organisation, even though this was a brand new facility that Bill Clinton came and opened.

Wow. We had Anna Williams sitting in your chair a few weeks ago. She's head of international news for the BBC. And she was saying what's interesting is, in terms of when you cover news for a domestic channel like the BBC or Sky News where there's clearly an audience, you can look at certain subjects like Brexit clearly through a lens, what does this mean for Britain. Did you have kind of internationalise your journalism, because one is CNN is obviously based in America, but it's an international channel so you can't cover any story through the lens of one particular party.

That's a very good question. No, I just chased the story. I didn't care whether it was local, national or international. But you'll have a sense of my views of local news by the fact that I gave it up very early on. Because it's dull. It's a repeat. You do one year and then you do the same year. You know, it really is déjà vu all over again. National news, pretty much the same, but international news is completely different. Every single day. And I think it's a great shame the BBC now is not so international, mainly through cost, but mainly because of the people leading the BBC. I mean, the two big changes I've seen in my career is the loss of political independence at the BBC, which is quite clear now they're not politically independent – and it's a great shame, and I think they're shooting themselves in the foot by doing that – and the sort of rather limited national or international agenda of the news. I don't watch news

any more. It bores me stiff. And I know where they're heading and what they're trying to achieve.

Where do you get your news from, then?

Well, bits and pieces here and there. I mainly read analysis.

That's a sad indictment of the news.

Yes.

That you, as the consumer news man, don't watch the news yourself.

No, I don't. I can't stand it. One, I think a lot of the presenters aren't really camera friendly. They're there through perhaps, you know, other internal reasons more than their news talent, except for people like George Alagiah who I think comes straight through the lens. I think he's brilliant. And I think Fiona Bruce is the best and the most sophisticated female broadcaster in this country, personally. But everything is subjective. But I think it's a terrible indictment that I'm not watching it. The only channel I would watch would be Al-Jazeera, because I think it's a global agenda. The BBC I think is very, very poor.

Let's just go back to CNN for a second. This was your second start-up. You'd done Sky, CNN International. Did you feel that even inside your own mind, your reputation was a kind of start-up anchor?

It was beginning, and I was getting interviews and doing newspaper articles about start-ups.

You're kind of niche. You're the anchor for start-up channels.

Yes, exactly. In fact somebody asked me recently to do one, and I said no for various political reasons. But yes, the train of thought was beginning. And I enjoyed CNN, but I did find the language difference difficult. I'll give you an example. One day somebody wrote, "The Israeli PM is back on the road again trying to fix things back home." And I said, "What does this mean?" And he said, "If you don't know what it means, you shouldn't be here." Very lofty, very aggressive. So when I put him down, I said, "Well what about if you say: 'The Israeli prime minister is in Washington trying to restart a stalled Middle East peace process.'?"

Because even the phrase 'home' is relative. It's slightly confusing.

Exactly. Well, the whole thing is confusing, because it doesn't tell you anything.

Yes, there's also that.

That's the point – it's not telling you anything. And a lot of American news don't tell you the full facts and they lack clarity. And so I found the increasingly... and I was

translating as I was trying to read. And that helped me to busk news – and frequently I wouldn't stick to scripts, which used to drive them mad – but try and make it more colloquial and understandable.

Because actually what you want from a news anchor is not just to tell me what's happened but also what it means.

Yes, spot on. Well, that's why with 24-hour news you have the time to do that. And that's why now I don't watch news, because it's not telling me what it means, apart from obvious politicising of the news, you know, for Brexit or Trump. You can tell they're anti-Brexit, you can tell they're anti-Trump. Oh! I get so bored with Trump and Brexit on the BBC. Yes, okay, we know, you don't like either.

I don't like either.

Yes, but turn the page, change the record, BBC, especially so-called BBC comics. They're not comics any more, everybody is a satirist. And they're not funny.

Some of them are.

Tell me one that's funny! I mean, every single remark is anti-Trump or anti... I'm not a defender. He's a reality game show host, you know, who happens to be leading a country.

I think he's loathsome but I'm also bored with finding him loathsome.

So am I. And I'm bored with Brexit. You know, after Brexit everybody was full of hysteria. I went to what I would consider to be quite an intelligent dinner party on the Saturday after Brexit and the subject of Brexit was banned from conversation.

And rightly so.

And I thought, "What a shame. Why aren't people allowed to discuss this rationally and logically?" And do you know why they're not able to?

Oh, I see. I'd have banned it because I think it's been discussed to death.

No, no, no. Because people weren't talking about it, they were shouting at each other. There was hysteria, and this British way now of changing to instant hysteria and anger. And what I did with Brexit was I didn't listen to anything, because it was all pants on radio and television in newspapers. It was all rhetoric and it was all meaningless.

That's interesting that you say that because in my real life I don't know anyone that's ever had their mind changed by either a referendum campaign or an election campaign. They were going to vote one way at the beginning, there's

five weeks of endless news where nothing else is spoken about, and no one changes their mind.

No.

And then we all vote, the pollsters are proved wrong, as is the usual these days, and then that's it – we all move on.

You know, if I had been director of news and current affairs at the BBC or Sky, I would say, "Okay, Tuesdays are Brexit free days in the lead up to the referendum. We're going to do news everywhere around the world except Brexit." And I bet the figures would have gone up. People were fed up with it and it was all nonsense. The people they had on, they had on to start a row not to explain or analyse.

Well, that's the spectacle of it.

And it's this – and again, this goes back to why I don't watch television news any more - there's no real serious independent analysis. Everybody's got an axe to grind.

So I used to watch you on Sky, and we didn't know each other then, I was a humble viewer. But when you moved to CNN international, this was the first time where I started to associate you with hotel rooms.

Haha!

And working abroad where there was BBC World, CNN International or Al-Jazeera. You mentioned that when we had lunch in the past, that you're the hotel room TV guy.

My wife says I'm best known in people's hotel rooms! In the nicest possible way.

That was the start of it for me. So how long were you at CNN for? Did you become bored? How did Al-Jazeera come about?

Basically I needed to come home for domestic reasons. And so I resigned. And the person I resigned to went berserk – he started hitting the wall saying, "Nobody leaves this company! Look at our footprint!" And he pointed at the map on the wall and said, "Nobody leaves. You'll never work again."

You obviously did. You went to the BBC after that, not Al-Jazeera. Forgive me.

The BBC, yes. Ten years, yes. So the BBC called me because they knew I was back from CNN.

Did they not hear the other guy that said you'd never work again? Surely you'd have been blackballed at that point.

I'm quite surprised they didn't, because he was shouting quite loudly from Atlanta.

They never got the memo, though.

They never got the memo, yes. Exactly. And so they hired me to relaunch the channel because it was pretty much World Service news at that point and they wanted to try and expand it. And we had a great studio, and again...

Was this at White City?

Yes. It was great fun. Enjoyed it. Then... I mean, the BBC had a sort of strange relationship with World News.

They still do now.

They still do now, yes. They weren't quite sure whether they liked the idea or not. So we went from a very big studio and a lot of resources down to a small studio and we were sort of basically News 24 cast-offs.

Did you come out of the BBC World Service budget at this point? Who was paying for it? Is that why there was fewer resources?

There was some money from World Service but the main income came from worldwide BBC, the commercial end. And that worked very well for me because they made me a global ambassador.

So you were presenting a BBC News channel that broke for adverts?

In places, yes.

Amazing.

And that's why I went across Asia and had an absolute ball selling the channel.

“You're watching the BBC, and now after the commercial break, we'll be doing this.”

No, no – you never had to do that. But it was different times. I don't know quite how it worked in some of these countries.

So you weren't always studio bound. You were often in situ?

Yes, well they would send me off to launch the channel, launch a programme, and what I did in the end, when I came up with the idea for Click Online, from no budget, I came back from Moscow and there were two programmes they wanted me to do; either business programme, and I said, “No, I'm not really ready for a business programme because I don't think business works on television.”

Unless you're Michael Wilson, of course, who's a legend.

Never heard of him. And IT. And I said, "Well, IT is really the future." And I said, you know, a name, and sort of said, "Okay, we're never going to show a computer in this show," and so no budget. So what I would do is Worldwide would say, "Stephen, can you go to Japan to launch this or do some marketing," and I said, "Yes, fine." So I'd go to Japan, and that would be paid for by marketing. Then I'd do some PR, so that would be paid for by PR. And then, on the piggyback of all of their budget, I would take a producer and a cameraman and shoot two Click Onlines.

Wow. It just shows you that if you determined enough you can make things happen.

Yes. And it was great fun.

It was a great show.

Well, the editor was a guy called Richard Taylor, who was very ambitious for the show and for himself, and that worked. And he was such a good guy to work with and he knew so much more than I did about IT. You know, at that point my idea of a hard drive was, you know, in the car up to Birmingham. I didn't know what a hard drive was. But the point was...

Some of our younger listeners won't even know what a hard drive is now! It's all solid state.

The point is, none of the CEOs or CFOs or chairman of organisations knew, and were too embarrassed to ask. That's why so many geeks went to these companies and did the most appalling things for so much money, didn't achieve anything, because nobody knew how IT worked.

But that must have been quite a buzz for you as well.

Oh, it was fantastic.

Because you're still on air but you're actually creating a new strand, a new show.

It was brilliant. And Richard, working with Richard was a dream. It was so much fun.

Gemma Morris presents Sky News Swipe, which is their equivalent of Click, and she's been on the podcast before, I've known it for many years. And she tells a similar story about how Sky said to her, "Well, there's no budget, if you want to present a consumer show..." and originally it started on the red button and online and then moved. Of course, you wouldn't have had the luxury of that at that point, so it would have been a...

No. Everything I did, I had to remember long links, complex links, you know? No autocue, no sort of idiot cards, really serious, long links to camera. Gosh, it was amazing.

And remembering technical details.

And technical details. I had to be sober all the time.

That sounds like a nightmare.

It was. But we created... Bill Gates banned me for about two years I think after an interview, when I took him to the cleaners in Vegas, because we used to go to Vegas every year in January for the new...

Is that for the CES?

Yes. And unfortunately it always coincided with the biggest pornography show in the world, which was next door. So we both used to come out at the same time, all the pornographers and all the geeks. And of course Vegas loved the pornographers because they would go and party. The geeks they disliked, because they'd all stay in their rooms.

Of course.

And if there's one thing you don't do in Vegas, it's stay in your room – they want you to spend. But a lot of fun. And I remember driving a 1960s pink Cadillac convertible down the strip in Vegas doing a link, and I thought, "This is pretty cool."

There's worse ways to earn a living.

There's worse ways to earn a living than this. And we went off to see Larry Ellison oracle, his best friend is Bill Clinton.

He's about 8'2", isn't he?

He's like a very tall ferret. And his toys, his MiG jet, which he plays in, and he came in, all macho and testosterone, and said, "Yeah, Mr Cole. You've got 10 minutes. What do you want to know?" And I said, well first of all, Larry, I want to know where you get your suits from. You look fantastic, you're so well-dressed."

That would have buttered him up...

Twenty minutes later, after stories about his tailor, he said, "What do you want to know?" So I carried on. And after another 40 minutes, "I said, "I think that's okay, Larry. We're done here." And so, you know, as a way of handling interviewees... Bill Gates was the most difficult though, because he's one-dimensional. He's aggressive. He's dry. He's suspicious. And what you do with him, you don't take a crew in. He

has the crew set up. He has control of the day, you go in, you ask your questions, they take the cassette out, give it to you, you go.

He's redeemed himself somewhat now because he's married Melissa, he seems to be saving hundreds of millions of people's lives...

Great. It's good for tax, certainly. And who can deny anybody's money if it's saving lives?

Absolutely.

So you can't criticise that.

How were you ten years overall at the BBC? Because you're not a very BBC-like person to me – and that's meant as a compliment.

Well, I'm not ready for an institution.

Any institution?

Any institution. And so in the end I sort of lost a bit of patience with the way it was going.

Because you see someone like Simon McCoy, who is a good friend of both of ours, who was amazing as the royal correspondent at Sky anchoring Sunrise, and has effortlessly moved to the BBC and is very BBC-like now in his demeanour and manner. He seems to have been one of the few people that's actually done well in both.

Well, he knows which side his bread is buttered. I mean, there are some people who are chameleons and there are some people who aren't. I'm not. I'm myself – good or bad, I don't know – but it's made for an interesting ride. I could have sat there; a lot of people sit at the BBC, and you not tested very hard. You know? I mean, look at look at Paxman. He sat there and yawned his way through, you know, the worst programme in the world, Newsnight.

They were great yawns though.

Great yawns. £1m a yawn, I think he got a year. And then, you know, his big interview is asking the same question seven times. Oh! That's hard to do! Asking the same question seven times or eight times or 11 times, whatever. We could all do that every interview! What's the big deal?

Who do you respect, then? I mean, you mentioned Sandy Gall, Trevor McDonald... who are your journalistic heroes?

Well, Alistair Burnett was I think probably the cleverest man I ever worked with. I thought he was brilliant. Absolutely brilliant. I like Andrew Neil very much. Andrew Neil is the classic example of somebody who can refute your answer...

In seconds.

... because he knows.

You can't outwit him and you can't bullshit him.

No. I mean, the skill with interviewing is to have the knowledge to refute what they're saying. When you say something to me very fast or sort of, you know, very complex, I can then say, "Actually, Paul, that's not right. What is right is..." and put you on the spot.

Because it is annoying in any situation where you forget the killer question or it comes to you five minutes after you've gone off air.

Well, if that's what you do for a living, that's unforgivable.

It is.

And that's what I did for a living, so hopefully it never happened. But Andrew Neil I like a lot; John Humphrys and Andrew Neil are perhaps the last two standing.

John's a legend.

And I was very, very proud to have known Sir David Frost and worked with him at Sky News and Al-Jazeera. And in fact, when he sadly passed on, they asked me to go on set as an interviewee to talk about him, which was a very strange position to be in, on the other side of the camera, the other side of the anchor. I learnt an awful lot from him about how to handle people. And how nice he was to people, and how skilled he was with people, because it's all about people. So yes, he's a hero, Alistair Burnett, Andrew Neil, John Humphrys. I'll probably think of others.

You used to cover the news during strike action. Did that cause some problems with your colleagues?

Not really. I didn't believe in that strike, because I didn't believe it was achieving anything. And I thought people were paying lip service to socialism and to strike action, you know, they went back in. If they really were intent on getting a pay rise they should have said, "Okay, we've got to lose 30% of all the media managers, or all the managers of this organisation," but they didn't. They just took the easy way, just a one-day strike.

No one shouted, "Scab!" at you as you walked into Television Centre.

No. The BBC are a polite lot.

Did they politely say, “You scab.”

No, no. There was nothing. They were extremely pleasant and very civilised.

That’s always the way forward, since we’re English.

Well, I think that’s, thank heavens, that is hopefully sort of the way we progress as a nation.

But 10 years at the BBC is a compliment to them, is it not, because you lasted longer there than you did at, say, CNN or Sky.

I don’t think it’s a compliment to them. I think it’s a compliment to me that I stayed for 10 years, and a compliment to my patience. I maybe should have left a few years earlier to go to, I don’t know, something interim to break the chain of channels that I launched. But anyway, it was a good time to go because with Al-Jazeera...

How did they come calling?

Well, it was a guy who was head of news at Central East, Steve. He asked me... I wanted to go to be deputy director of news.

So not on air.

Not on air. Because I felt I’d done it, you know, launched three channels, and I really thought I could make a difference and show what I knew about the news in front and behind as deputy director. And I went to see Steve, and Al Anstey got the job, by the way, from ITN in the end. Lovely guy. And I went to see Steve, and he said, “No, you’d hate it – it’s all paper. It’s boring. You’d get bored stiff. No, I want you to anchor. I want you to launch it in London.” I said, “All right.” So that great idea went out the window! And so we launched it in London. And of course we had ‘Terror TV’ at that time. Rumsfeld and Cheney, two disgraceful gentlemen, and they called it ‘Terror TV’.

A lot of people called it Terror TV.

They called it Terror TV, because... I don’t know why it was called it, because it wasn’t. It was Al-Jazeera Arabic that was called Terror TV, and the only reason it was called Terror TV is because we wouldn’t do as were told by Rumsfeld and Cheney. And we were attacked, you know? The Americans tried to attack Al-Jazeera bureaus. I mean, with bombs and rockets. In Afghanistan and in Baghdad.

There seemed to be some network though, for Osama bin Laden to get the tapes to you guys. Is that why you fell under suspicion?

No.

That was his choice of preferred outlet.

Well, it's the same as the BBC getting the tapes from the IRA, isn't it?

Well, yes. Absolutely.

So we had, obviously, a lot of information coming from different sources, because it was a Middle East based channel. And we are journalists. And if we didn't make use of them, then what are we doing?

You wouldn't be doing your job.

Exactly. It was very... because I like to be on the wrong side of it. And there is only one story in my lifetime, and that is the Middle East. There is no other story. It is the Middle East.

It seems to be the root cause of a lot of global instability.

Of course. It's Muslim extremism. And that is a fact. And it's happening in front of our very eyes, and we've got to be very careful. I've written several speeches – *Third World War Sunni versus Shia?*, *ISIS: The Shadow of the Caliphate*, *The Tragedy of the Arabs* – in fact, I've written about half a dozen 45-minute speeches, and the more work I do... I update them every single day. It is fascinating. And it's these subjects that people should be learning about, because this is the story in front of their very eyes. This is the story behind us. This is a story why, you know, you're being searched like mad at airports. You know, this is the story about bombs and knife attacks.

Would ultimately the solution be some kind of messy compromise between Israel and Palestine, a bit like Northern Ireland really, no side is going to win.

That's not entirely the reason. It's not a question of winning, either. And I think Israel and Palestine is maybe a separate issue to the troubles we're seeing at the moment in this country and around the world. You're looking at the beginning or the hopes for a Caliphate. That's what you're looking at. We're not talking about Palestine and Israel, that's a separate religious and political and geopolitical story. Again, fascinating in itself. And I don't mean to diminish it at all, but another story has superseded that, and it's a bigger story, and it's a more dangerous story – and people should be looking all the time for analysis on this story, and getting different voices, hearing different sides, so they make up their own mind, because this is a very, very important story for not just our lives, for our children's lives as well.

And you give a lot of talks on this subject now that you're a communications professional. Because I've got a few minutes left, we need to talk about what you're doing now. One of the things they this is that you give talks to groups and even people on ships and things where you talk in detail about these kind of topics.

Yes.

Do you enjoy that?

I enjoy it very much. A lot of people these days, especially wealthy people, have their heads down. Because if you're going to get wealthy, if you're going to work very hard, you tend to put blinkers on because you can't afford to try and understand other stories. So people come to me when they've made a lot of money, because that's the only way they can afford me, and say, "So what's happening in the Middle East? Should we be friends with Iran or not? Why did Obama get a Nobel Peace Prize within five minutes? What was the point of that?"

I think even he was embarrassed by that, frankly.

I don't think so. "And why is Trump deporting all these people?" And you say, "Well, in fact he's deporting the same number of people as Obama," but nobody allows anybody to say that. Exactly the same. He's done nothing different from what Obama did. So you're explaining things they don't know, because they've only seen one take on a story, or they've seen a headline on CNN, or they've seen somebody shouting somewhere.

So that's quite a change of agency for you, in terms of before you used to be in front of the camera, explaining things, whereas now are you actually advocating something.

Well, I'm not... what I'm advocating is analysis and understanding, so that if you look at the European Union and Brexit, it's to explain all the things that you're hearing and seeing and put it in some kind of context, being apolitical, you know, so you're not being a Theresa May, a Nigel Farage, a Jeremy Corbyn. You're just saying, "This is what is happening, and this is the reason it's happening, and why it's happening." The old, you know, journalistic how, where, why, what, who. And I get a lot of satisfaction from that, because the people I'm speaking to are genuinely curious. And if there's one thing that separates all of us, it's those who are curious and those who aren't. And most people earning a living don't have time to be curious.

I fly to America a lot. I'm there every other week, and I actually love that long flight because it means I can read a newspaper.

I don't read newspapers too often.

I read something.

I read The Economist and I read Foreign Affairs Magazine. I read The Spectator. Occasionally, if I want a bit of fantasy, dip into the New Statesman and Polly Toynbee or whatever her name is, absolute fantasist. She should be a non-reality star. And so I read a whole cross-section until I come to my own conclusion. And what I'm trying to do with talks, and also with the Institute, with Diplomacy, which is working with Iran and other things I can't talk about, is try to get to the root of the story and then explain it carefully. Because you can't explain a story unless you truly understand it. Just finally, when I used to come home from LBC, I used to nick a

couple of papers, obviously as soon as you finish, early morning, and I used to take home the Times and The Mirror.

I haven't read the Daily Mirror in a decade.

I know, that's the problem, isn't it? It was so brilliant. And I would often find a column in The Times had been summarised in the Mirror to a paragraph, and that paragraph was all I needed to know, because it was so well written. And a lot of people these days are writing swathes and swathes and swathes, which is easy to do. But to write it in short form, to understand it, to boil it down, to analyse it, is very different.

I recently published a book on everything I know in PR and I thought it would take me a year to write. And what I wrote in a year was five times bigger. And then it took another three years to condense it because shortening things, keeping it concise, is actually hard work. Keep the meaning and make every line count.

Yes.

It's exactly the same information but a quarter of the length.

And it's therefore more powerful. Actually, when I first started my career, I bought PR books that I meant to read, and put them on the shelf, and because they were big, like you just said, I never actually could be arsed to get around to reading them. So I thought, "When I write my book, I don't want it to be the book that sits on someone else's shelf unread."

Tell us about the Institute. I know you said there were some things you couldn't discuss, which obviously we will respect, but what is it?

It's basically... the top line is it helps diplomats when they're moving countries and their families to assimilate into a different culture. It's also putting various businessmen together from different countries. A Korean might be lost, in London, about contacts and etiquette and protocol of a business meeting here, and vice versa. I remember, Japan and Korea four or five trips, and the mistakes I made at dinner, you know, sort of where you put your chopsticks and that kind of thing, little things but they can send messages.

Mentioning Brexit.

Yes. But they can send messages, like, "Here's a dimwit, because he doesn't even know how we eat here or what we say." So etiquette and protocol.

I remember when I first went to China. I used to do some work out there, and the guides used to say if you're offered an alcoholic drink it's absolutely rude to say no.

Yes.

And you have to lie and say you're on antibiotics or something. Which is what I used to say, because I don't drink. But even being a teetotaler was not considered a good enough excuse.

You can order, but maybe not drink. I mean, I ordered, at a do, I said, "Have you got any Asahi?" Because I really fancied an Asahi. And he said, "I'll check." And they sent runners out to various outlets to find a bottle of Asahi. And that was stupid of me to ask for that. I should have known. I've got a very long story – which I won't share now, you'll be relieved to hear – about what happened in a trip in Japan once. But yes, so etiquette, protocol, moving diplomats' families, and businessmen coming here or going there, helping them.

Do you like the portfolio aspect of your career now?

Yes. Well, that's what is great fun, because as I said earlier, I get bored pretty quickly, and go from different... I mean, I'm helping somebody at the moment with their profile, which is the sort of thing you do.

You'd probably do it well though.

Well, your client list is expanding faster than my stomach! What I'm doing with her is quite interesting. You will get to know her name.

I hope so, if she's hired you to do her publicity.

And so with her, I was... I'm a governor at a secondary school in Southall, which is very testing indeed, with the Institute and with the speeches, and one or two other strings, including the Global Thinkers Forum, I'm on the board of the Global Thinkers Forum now, and we've just come back from Belfast to do digitalisation, which is, if you like, a hangover from Click days, but going to Belfast again was fascinating because the murals are still there from the days of... my first story when I was 19 was the Birmingham bombings, and I was in the city the night 21 died.

Wow.

You know, in 1974, and I covered all the trials of the prison officers. Baptism of fire or what?

Does it help your portfolio career now that you're off of the telly? You know, that people recognise you?

Sometimes.

Or does it count against you sometimes?

Both.

People think, “I’ve seen him for 25 years, he’s clearly has been,” when clearly that’s not the case.

Yes. It’s... my sons think I’m a has-been, but I haven’t had anybody else say that apart from you, Paul! But thanks very much for that remark, this interview ends now, and I’ll take my fee, please. Good night and good luck.

You mentioned Paxman, so I thought I would try and channel his performance.

No, I just... I was annoyed because Newsnight now is the Guardian on television, with even fewer listeners, viewers or readers. I mean, it’s so unbalanced. You know, why did the BBC, if they’re going to do that, have a programme that’s the right? I mean, everything at the the BBC, you know, it’s left is right and right is wrong. And, oh! Yawn.

I was just thinking about your recognisability, I obviously knew you from Sky. I mean, you must be recognised all around the world.

Well, yes, that’s true.

I mean, even Huw Edwards who presents the Ten, millions of viewers, they’re all millions of viewers based here. Yes. No one would know who he is in Korea or Australia or anything like that.

My wife says I’m very big in Bangalore. Because I used to go to Bangalore a lot. Although we weren’t allowed to film, we were taken off the streets because a Bollywood film star had been kidnapped by a jungle bandit in the Bangalore Silicon Valley. I’ve got so many stories, so much happened.

We actually have about three minutes left, so let me ask the final question. What’s been your best day so far, and what’s been the worst?

I think one of the best was meeting Aung San Suu Kyi, one of my last set piece interviews at Al-Jazeera, in Doha. That was wonderful to meet her, and a fascinating half hour.

Inspiring in real life?

Yes, I think so.

She’s quite understated, isn’t she?

Yes! That’s very clever of you. Yes, that’s exactly the emotion I was going to say. Spot on. Although she couldn’t understand why she was being castigated about the Rohingya in the south, which was the issue why Doha wanted me to... she said, “What’s wrong with them? Why are these people always so angry?” which was against all kinds of Guardianistas view. So that was a surprise, Aung San Suu Kyi, and made me laugh afterwards. But meeting her, having dinner with Bill Clinton, this

involvement in the Middle East, has been just so fascinating and so interesting. Every day.

You can speak about it with much more credibility because you've been there.

Yes, I hope so. And I've met a lot of the people.

Whereas I've just read about it in the Guardian.

Yes. Well, you've got to broaden your reading for a start. You know, when you are real journalist, you read...

We're trading trivial insults now, aren't we?

Well, not trivial insults, just insults! You've got to read the Daily Mail and The Times and the Gridiron. You know, read them all.

Last one. Worst day?

Worst day? Oh, golly. I think when I forgot to go in. I got a little bit, um, Brahms, one night at a party.

That's quite a good euphemism.

And then Reagan decided to invade Grenada.

What happens then? They because can't empty chair the news studio.

A packet of Lard.

Like Roy Hattersley on Have I Got News for You.

That's right.

Do they requisition a runner, or is there a backup anchor? Does someone get a call saying, "Stephen's not turned up."

It was a note in a cleft stick and a runner was sent to find me. Oh, it was terrible. You wake up, and that sick feeling in your stomach. "AAAAH! Oh, no..." I won't forget that. Eventually I got in, and sort of make-up coming in between links.

Like Eamonn Holmes doing Sunrise at 6am.

Yes, except not as attractive as that. So you can imagine how bad that was. Oh, boy! That was frightening. That was really, really frightening. And then the other one was, I think, the day I left Al Jazeera. I got very emotional because I thought I'm not going to do any more anchoring. I thought, "No, I'm going to take up this chairmanship of

the Institute.” But I had so many e-mails from different people from all over the place. And it was very gratifying. And worst day, best day, all in one day. And I was very sorry to leave, not least for the weather and the money, but it’s been good since I came back to London. Really good. And I’m happy now I’ve made the move. Decisions aren’t always right at the time, but sometimes they are proved to be right at the time. And that was one of them, I think.

Stephen, it’s been a hugely enjoyable conversation. Thank you ever so much for your time.

Thanks, Paul.