

Alison Phillips

Editor, Daily Mirror

Media Masters – September 26, 2018

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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 here in Canary Wharf, London, and at the offices of the Daily Mirror, joined by their editor in chief, Alison Phillips. Previously in charge of the Sunday Mirror and Sunday People, she was also launch editor of New Day, the short-lived newspaper, in 2016. She also leads on addressing gender imbalance at Mirror publisher Reach, heading up their Women Together network, and is this year's Society of Editor's popular columnist of the year.

Alison, thank you for joining me.

Hi.

Alison, you were appointed in March. It must have been an incredibly proud moment for you, how is it going?

It's going really well, I think. I hope. It's been a busy few months, because obviously Reach has bought the Express as well, so there have been a lot of issues going on. But in terms of the actual paper at the Mirror, I hope, I feel, that we're reaching a point of sustained confidence, which is so important for a paper. We've had some real success on campaigns, which I think is really our lifeblood. And I think we're managing to energise the staff, which is absolutely essential for a well-functioning newspaper.

Is it more managerial at the moment with the organisational challenges that you've been dealing with? Because you must, as the leader of the business, as the editor, you've got so many things you could be doing, you've got to choose, having to prioritise.

Yes, well Lloyd Embley is editor-in-chief of Reach, so his time is taken up on all that management stuff. I am trying to focus as much of my time as I possibly can on the actual paper, because that's ultimately what matters. And that's the bit I enjoy doing most as well, so that's, I think, the key at the moment, because we need to get the paper absolutely solid and confident and out there in people's minds. And then, I can sort of maybe leave some of the other stuff for other people to do.

Because it's an incredible brand. The first ever paper I picked up as a kid was the Daily Mirror.

Was it really?

Yes, very much so.

Yes, it's an amazing brand. It's a fantastic part of the national fabric. What it's done over the years is truly amazing; I never cease to bore people on this. One of my favourite topics is that how, when after the Titanic went down, and there weren't enough lifeboats for the poorer people, the people that had been steerage, it was the Mirror that campaigned to have lifeboats for every member of a ship that was going out to sea. That was just an extraordinary sort of bit of social change, which the Mirror led. The really famous front-page image of seal clubbing back in the '60s was what sort of really led the way in the attitudes towards the fur trade, and then the Mirror was also at the front of creating the World Wildlife Fund as well. And that's just some of them, there's endless examples of how the Mirror has shaped this country, and that's, I think, its role as a brand. It can be an amazing force for good, and that's what I think we need to focus on.

Did you feel a kind of sense of august heritage that might weigh heavily on other people? Because in one sense, you're new in post, you've got to make some changes, but you don't want to pull on the string of the tapestry and the whole thing unravels. You've got to choose which bits to keep and which bits need attention.

Yes, and so in terms of did I feel that quite heavily, I feel it very heavily.

You seem quite jovial and jolly!

No. No, I feel it very heavily, and I'm a sort of a bit of an anorak about Mirror history as well. So you read all the old Cudlipp books, and you read the political history of the Mirror, and you see the role that it has played. And continuing to do that is vitally important, and I think perhaps now more than ever, there is a real need for a popular left of centre, open minded, big-hearted tabloid newspaper, because the concern is that you've got a lot of papers that either have been on the right or shifting to the right – which is fine, that's their prerogative – but then on this side of the debate, you've got, the concern is that press is really just becoming much more for the chattering, Islington classes, and they're the broadsheet readers.

The Guardian readers.

The Guardian readers, and the Observer, and the i, and all that, which is fine, but...

They're all very worthy.

Exactly, but essentially a little bit dull. But also who is creating news for people who haven't got a university education, who haven't got much time, who've got very busy

lives, because they're working, and they've got kids, or they just haven't got the time in their lives to be reading 2,000 words on something or other, who wants popular news done in an interesting and accessible fashion, but with a reasonableness and a sense of social conscience. Again, I sound a bit pompous, but I don't think you can ever underestimate the importance of the Daily Mirror in our national democracy.

Well, left of centre, left leaning working people that want to read a tabloid is an underserved market.

Massively, so that's why it's so important that not only do we do what we do every day, but we're kind of noisier about it, and we make sure people are coming to us. And that is our responsibility. It's not enough to say, "Well, we create a newspaper every day," but we've got to create that newspaper, and then we've got to get it into people's hands, and we've got to get it into people's heads.

Obviously, you're working sort of in the newspaper on a daily basis, getting out the door, but when you're kind of reflecting and steering in the right direction and working on the newspaper, which direction are you going to take it in? What changes are you going to make? What is kind of top of your to do list in the short to medium term?

To be noisier about what we do. I think what we do is good and has been good for a very long time. I think we need to pay as much attention as we can to breaking exclusive stories and creating a news agenda. It's not good enough any more just to rely on news of the day when that news of the day is already everywhere. Everybody knows the top line of every story, so you're either giving them something additional, some interpretation, some analysis, something behind the scenes, which a lot of our readers want, and they want sort of complicated issues around Brexit explained in an accessible fashion. So you're either doing that, you're giving them greater depth to that story, or you're creating new stories. We have to do that if we are to survive.

And is there a kind of Daily Mirror view on Brexit? Because a lot of these issues cut across families, cut across political parties? I've got many lefty friends that are Remainers and some that are Brexiteers. Corbyn, is obviously a Brexiteer dressed up as a Remainer. How do you have a Daily Mirror view on that? Because in a sense, you're going to have David Cameron's problem in that the minute you come out on one side, you're going to alienate the other half.

Yes. It's been really tricky for us in that our readers voted just about to remain, but by a fairly small margin, and we were very anxious that we didn't want to fall into this narrative that we've seen elsewhere where people who voted to leave were somehow demonised as racist, or stupid, or sort of parochial. So, we understand, or I feel I understand, why a lot of people did vote to leave. And you can get into long debates about whether that was reality they were voting on or whether it was emotion. In a way, that's almost irrelevant, because that is why they voted, and now, as we go through the Brexit negotiations, I think we have to keep those feelings at the forefront of our mind that that is why they voted, and we respect that. We are now sort of thinking, "Okay, so what would a second vote mean?" I am very nervous

about a second vote, only because I think that all the forces that we've seen in recent months and years around populism are fuelled by when people feel that they're ignored, and saying to all the people that voted to leave that actually that maybe that isn't going to happen after all, I think could have devastating impacts. I completely accept that lower-rated GDP and all the rest can have devastating impacts, but perhaps in the long term not so great as telling people that you don't want their input into our democracy.

You're going to have all the grief again, aren't you? My rule is, never try to get back into a nightclub that the bouncer's already thrown you out of.

Yes, or never reheat old pork cutlets.

That's even better!

As my old boss used to say. Yes.

Tell us, how do you actually get the paper out, then? What is a typical day? Are you in here at like the crack of sparrow, and you do 25 hours a day, you know, smoke filled rooms, dealing with union printing bosses?

Oh, no! Do you think I ought to be?

Just trying to come up with clichés of what a tabloid editor does.

No, unfortunately, it's not quite like that any more. It's a very clean office here in Canary Wharf.

I can attest to our listeners it is clean.

It is very clean. So, I normally start looking at papers first thing in the morning before I leave home, coming up with ideas. I'll get in touch with the news desk and say, "Do you think we should be doing this, we should take a look at that?" Or they'll be saying, "This is happening." It's a constant, and something about working at the Mirror is that it's a great family, so a lot of people have been here for a long time, and a lot of us have grown up together really, and so there's a constant sort of you'll be texting each other, or it's about, "Right, we should try this, do that." And then I take my children to school, and then I come into work, and then we sort of get things moving, and then we have conference at about 11.30, and that starts putting the planks together for the day. Then there are frequently meetings. There always seems to be meetings about something or other, but I think a lot of what I'm trying to do as well is place a lot of emphasis on story creation, campaign creation, and that requires time and head space, which is tricky, because we've lost a lot of people here over the years, and we're on a small staff.

So have most newspapers, in fairness.

They have, they have. What you have to do is work out, “Okay, how do we create the time in the day to be creative and interesting?” Because you can, in this job, as in, I guess, in almost any job, fall into a hamster’s wheel of just getting through the day, getting the paper out, but unless you have the time and the energy to look up and think, “Right. This is where we should be going,” then you will start to create a fairly mundane paper.

What’s conference like at 11:30? How do you chair? What’s your management style? Do you throw staplers at people, like Paul Dacre used to do?

Yes, no, I’ve never yet thrown a stapler.

You should try it.

I might do! We’ve got a great news desk, we’ve got a great features desk. It’s quite... I don’t know, is it informal? I don’t know. We still go round the table, and everyone has their lists, and they read them all out. I haven’t done the shouting and the swearing style of management.

But you’ve only been here a few months.

I think if I was going to do that, I’d have done it by now! I haven’t been on the wrong end of that, early stage of my career, although it does have benefits, because then it’s clear what’s required of you.

It’s from the ‘80s, isn’t it? And no one’s interested in shouting at anyone now.

I do think there’s some merit in discipline. I would never want to get to a stage where people aren’t functioning to their full... I think sometimes nowadays, people can be a bit too wishy-washy, so I think it’s very similar to bringing up kids, in that you’ve got to be quite clear in what your expectations are. That doesn’t really need to be done by shouting.

Carrot and stick.

Yes.

Or the threat of the stick.

Clear about what you require, and that if they don’t meet that expectation...

They’ll be beaten.

There’s a sense of disappointment that is clear.

And you express that disappointment through beating.

Only on a Friday!

So, just carrying on through the day then, because one of the things that interests me is, of course, you've got to get a paper, it's got to go off-stone and get to the printers, and then out to the shops and the distributors. But you also have a website, you know, in a sense there's never an end to it. Is there still a structure and a rhythm to the day? We've got to 11.30 so far, there's a conference.

There is very much a rhythm to print. We have another conference at 4.30, at which point we will go through any updates from the day. By that point we're kind of closing in on what we think the splash is going to be. But then, throughout the day, stories may be breaking online. So, at the Mirror, we all sit together and we work collaboratively, and some areas, there are people working across both, but there are still some levels of separation as well. Stories might be broken online, but some stories will be held for the exclusive. And the internet never stops, that always goes along, but to get a decent paper out, you still need to have structure, because the processes are in place to ensure that it's right at the end of the day.

Now, you mentioned some of the campaigns that you did before; clearly the Mirror is known and respected around the world for its campaigning. How do you decide what you're going to campaign on? Obviously the Titanic sinks, it's obvious that it's presented itself.

Yes. Well, sometimes I do think that is the answer, actually, to wait for a Titanic-style situation.

Wait for something to happen.

Yes. The hardest campaigns are ones where an editor wakes up in the middle of the night and goes, "Right, we must campaign on this."

On something.

Because if you're slightly out of kilter with the national mood, it's going to be like rowing a boat uphill. Whereas the ones that we've had real like... so this year, a big success has been our Change the Law for Life campaign, which was on organ donation, so people have to opt out of their organs being donated, rather than opting in. That had been sort of going on for a couple of years, but it just didn't really seem to be sticking in the national mind, and then I think we got real success. We had a little boy, Max Johnson, who was being treated up in Newcastle, who was desperately in need of a new heart, and he became the face of the campaign. And really, it's just by making that commitment to keep putting it in the paper day after day after day, that it really started to resonate, and we were at Labour Party conference last year and we had real success in terms of persuading the merits of that campaign to the leadership. Jeremy Corbyn mentioned it in his speech, and then the following week Theresa May mentioned it in her speech at the Tory Party conference and now, hopefully by the end of the year, it may well be legislation.

That is incredible.

Yes, it's great.

That is a reason to get out of bed in the morning.

Because that's a proper thing.

Rather than just getting the paper out.

Yes. That's going to save many lives over the course of, I don't know, from now on forever.

And obviously it's a very fawning question, but I do mean it, but you must be incredibly proud of that, to state the obvious.

Well, that's the whole... that was campaign that had been on the go for quite some time here, and I know it's a bit of a cliché to say it's a team effort, but it absolutely was a team effort, because Jeremy Armstrong, who's our regional reporter in the north east, did that story again and again and again. We had Andy Gregory, who was our health editor, now our political editor, kept coming back to it and kept applying pressure. We've got Kevin Maguire, we've got Martin Bagot at health... so there was a lot of people. The news desk – who I think are the unsung heroes of many newsrooms in that they're the ones that are constantly driving people on, they're the ones with the sticks – that made that happen. And the back bench who kept giving it prominence in the paper. So it's all very well, editors striding up and down the office saying this, that, and the other thing, but unless they get buy-in for an idea – and actually, it is a good idea, because if it's not a good idea then you're never going to get buy in for it – then that's the only way that it's going to really work. A lot of the job, I think, is about... it's a hearts and minds thing. It's about getting people to share the vision.

You mentioned earlier about the acquisition of the Express and all the kind of corporate transition that you've been through. How did all that come about? Did some of your executives get together and just think, you know, Richard Desmond just isn't rich enough and unpleasant enough already. Let's give him more money and let's rebrand as Reach. Because when you guys rebranded as Reach, and I don't mean this disrespectfully, but it reminded me of the Alan Partridge film where their radio station becomes Shape, do you know what I mean?

Well, so I think initially...

Or you could refuse, given how rude I've just been.

Well, Simon Fox, our chief executive, had been speaking to Richard Desmond I think for quite a while, I wasn't involved in that, that's way above my pay grade. And Richard Desmond is now a shareholder with us as well, he's actually a very nice man. So I think it's going to be good, it really going to be good for us, because

everybody knows that print sales are going down, and we need to think about consolidation and we need to think about new ways that we can keep breaking stories, or having the money to keep breaking stories, and to keep running the news agenda.

And that's a difficult challenge isn't it, to do more frankly with less, with fewer people?

It is and I think you either try to do the same as you've always done with fewer people, and just drive everybody into the ground, or you have to think about how you can do things differently. Differently doesn't always mean worse, which I think is sometimes people's natural assumption, it's just differently. And I think for that to succeed, you've got to be able to give the staff a really clear focus about what you need them to do and what matters and not to bore themselves too much about stuff that doesn't really matter.

So when you think of a typical Mirror reader, are they physically holding a copy of the paper or are they looking at the website? I have the app on my phone. I don't buy the Mirror paper copy, I haven't for years, but I am regular Mirror reader and it's all via my app. I suppose a lot of people call them different touch points, don't they? How do I touch point with a brand?

Yes. And so our online reader is slightly younger. The bulk of the content created by everybody here is done predominantly with that print reader in mind. That's not to say it's not of interest for other people, but I think we have to retain the strength of the Mirror brand in print because that's kind of the root. And from that root, you have that content going into people reading it online. But then there's other content that joins the online offering which might not be sort of core print Mirror. Because it's like a diffusion brand, I guess.

Will there always be a paper copy of the paper? Christian Broughton obviously is the editor of the Independent, and he's made quite a success of taking it online really. They've closed the printing presses, they've maintained that readership, and it's seems to be going reasonably well.

Yes, I think it's more problematic for tabloid papers because some of the lighter end, which you need to create the overall offering of tabloid, people might not necessarily want to pay for – and that's the issue with digital is paying for it, obviously. So I think the print version of Mirror will be around, yes. Because I think it offers something, as we said earlier, that no one else is offering.

Because no publisher really seems to have truly nailed the whole pay wall thing; how you monetise online, you guys have a website free to the point of use, the FT is a bullet-proof paywall, so is the Times. I subscribe to certain magazines, and read others where they'll give you three or four articles for free, and then it's, "Cough up, son."

I think it's really tricky, and it is tricky for a tabloid mass market popular paper; it's far easier if you're creating the New Statesman or something where you've got a very

defined audience, but clearly in the current form it's very difficult to monetise. But having said that, the Mirror is online, it's doing well, you know? It really is. And because we've got all the regional titles as well, it adds up to a huge amount of traffic.

So why is it doing well, then?

Because I think, in terms of the content, that's the interesting thing – there are still vast numbers of people out there who want popular journalism. They are the masses. It's really still only quite a small minority of people who are interested in, or have got the time or the attention, to read what the broadsheets are offering. And somehow, in the national debate, that gets completely overlooked, because all the people in that national debate are the ones reading the broadsheets.

I enjoy reading the Mirror, and after I finish reading it, I feel quite positive, unless I've read a miserable story, obviously. But in terms of the editorial, when I read the Mail, I actually come away feeling a bit dirty really, because it has a sneering, slightly misogynist, judgemental, negative tone really, which clearly works for them commercially, but you guys don't have that tone at all. Do you think that that's an important differentiation as well in terms of the tone of what you're putting out?

Yes, it's absolutely the lifeblood of what we do. So we would never a picture of somebody in print and say, "Ugh, look at the state of her," or dress that feeling up, which is what they may do, and we would hope, I would hope, that we'd never print anything which is racist, homophobic, misogynist, all of those other things, because that's not who our readers are. Vast numbers of the country aren't like that either and they don't want to be a part of that. And I think, again, a slight concern post-Brexit, is there's a mood amongst some of the sort of elite, that actually the masses are a little bit bigoted, a little bit vulgar, a little bit unkind.

It's why I think Remain lost, because they campaigned on that basis.

In my experience, they think that. But I think they think that about the media as well, and so therefore media has to represent that. And of course, there are people who have bits of that in them, but there's a lot of people that don't have those bits of them – and there's a lot of them who find their home in the Mirror.

And I think it's a bit of a kind of class issue, insofar as you mentioned the Titanic earlier, that they think Mirror readers are steerage people, and they're cleverer but they're certainly not relevant. There might be more of them, but they're not there to be engaged with it in a constructive way, because obviously that's deeply offensive and patronising.

Yes, I think there is a bit of that. I think there's always been a bit of that in this country, and I think when that continues, that's quite dangerous because you get a lot of people who feel very unrepresented and unlistened to. And therefore, it's vital that we don't just inform and champion those people in our paper, but we enable their voices and their views to be heard.

How does it work in terms of the Mirror's approach to engaging with the Labour Party? Because obviously under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn, he's had hundreds of thousands of new members that are attracted to that kind of much more strongly left of centre than, say, I am, and there's people like me that feel a little bit abandoned. Do you think a split is coming, and how do you actually engage with the fact that there's two sort of Labour Party audiences?

I think the first thing that we would keep at front and centre of mind is that a Tory government is bad for our readers, because they've been on the wrong end of austerity now for 10 years. And the concern about, in a post-Brexit world, what that's going to mean for their jobs and their conditions and their families, you know, we're constantly getting letters and calls from readers who are worried about their kids' schools, teaching assistants being got rid of, not enough books, not enough toilet paper, we've had, and in the NHS we come back to time again, because that continues to be a major concern. So that's our first point, is that Tories aren't going to help our readers, and that a Labour government would help our readers. In terms of that split within the Labour Party, there are clearly issues that divide the two sides of the party, but there's still an awful lot that unites them as well. And although I completely accept this summer in particular's been really bad...

It's been nasty on all sides.

It's been really, deeply unpleasant. I still sort of hold out this hope that they can actually come back from that. Because if you recall after there were all the front bench resignations – what was that, two autumns ago now? – they came back into an uneasy truce from there, and I think they can do that again. And I think, because a lot of what Jeremy Corbyn is saying, the actual policies, really appeal to a lot of our readers, things like his stance on the railways and anti austerity; there's a lot of good sense there, and it's a lot of things that I know are appealing to people on the doorsteps in the constituencies, even with the more sort of Labour MPs on the right of the party. So I don't think it's 'all is lost' at all, but I think both sides need to take some big grown-up decisions about how they can put those real, bad difficulties behind them and move forward.

You are right. I agree with his very strong, very vociferous criticisms of the policies of the Israeli government, for example. I'm not anti-Israel or anti-Jewish people; I agree with him on the policies and the criticisms that he's made, but it seems that he's got wrapped up in a completely different sideshow, which is about whether the party's anti-Semitic.

Yes.

And how has he allowed that? Because in a sense, he's lost an opportunity to make some legitimate criticisms by people just saying, "Well you're only an anti-Semite anyway."

Yes, and I don't think that he is at all.

I actually don't think that he is either.

But it is incredibly unfortunate what's gone on. And I think they've got to find a way back out of that, and the way out of a situation like that isn't to just sort of hunker down and put the defences up, it's to actually open the doors and try and re-engage, and just focus on policy, what really matters to a Labour voter or a Mirror reader in Rochdale – that's the thing. Keep that at the front of your mind, and then work forward from there.

It seems to me that there's just an issue on professionalism at the operation. When Tony was trying to become prime minister, Peter Mandelson had unit called the Rapid Rebuttal Unit, so the Tories would put out a press release saying they were going to triple National Insurance, and rather than letting that take root and fester, within sort of 30 minutes...

I sort of agree with you, but don't you also think that one of the reasons that we are where we are is because everything became too slick, too professional, and the management of politics is a lot of what I think what's turned a lot of ordinary people away from it, and the sense that they're just in it for their careers, they're in it for themselves, and actually there is something to be said for a bit of reality, a bit of authenticity, a bit of just trying to have real people doing the job.

It's one of the reasons why I think Donald Trump does so well on social media with his base. Obviously, I oppose the President and he's a horrible bloke etc. but I can see why people feel they've got a meaningful connection with him, because it is the real him on Twitter, warts and all, spelling mistakes, if he's angry you can tell.

That's right.

He's not that kind of over-polished, over-spun thing which people are clearly rebelling against.

It's a complicated thing, isn't it? Because on one hand you've got a real desire for authenticity, which I think is absolutely what Jeremy Corbyn offers, and has certainly offered. But at the same time, we're also moving to a time where truth doesn't seem to have the weight that it once did have, and Donald Trump obviously being the greatest example of that, a sort of man who's very comfortable dissembling all the time, and who knows what's going on with some of his tweets, but the perception is one of authenticity.

And yet, as you've just said that, the reality is that it's not based on a shared factual base. You and I might disagree on whether the railways need to be renationalised – I actually think they should – but at least we could agree on the number of trains that run between Kings Cross and Edinburgh, because that's a fact. Whereas he would say, "There's been none today," and you'd be like, "Er, there's been 22, there they are."

Yes.

And of course that doesn't even matter. It's almost that we can't even agree on the facts of the situation now.

I mean, that's really concerning. I think that's what worries me about Boris Johnson as well. I think that's the greatest concern there, is that you've got a man who is not overly concerned by fact. And it used to be, not so long ago, that the cabinet minister or anybody in a position of authority who wobbled off from the facts too much would stand down, or there would be some form of national outrage.

He's an admitted liar. there's that very famous interview with Eddie Mair on the Andrew Marr show where he said, "You're an admitted liar, Michael Howard fired you for lying, you can't deny it, you've cheated on your wife, you've done all these various things," people just go, "Yes, but Boris."

"Boris is Boris." That's their comeback.

"Boris is a legend," you know. "He's got ruffly hair."

And that is one of the things I really have thought a lot about recently. Because how do you say to readers, "Boris isn't Boris. Boris is a liar and a cheat," without them thinking, "Oh it's the establishment." Which, of course, it's a similar debate around Brexit.

Because actually he's the establishment, not you. You're the Daily Mirror.

He is, but as with Trump as well, he's the establishment but has managed to paint himself as an anti-establishment character. And it's actually the same with Boris. So I think the answer to this is we need like a popular left. What people like about people like Trump and Boris, and Jeremy Corbyn, is there is a sense that they say what they think, you get what you see. The reality of that might be something quite different, but that's the sense. Because they talk like normal people, think back to Peter Mandelson point, that's what people hated about Blair.

Because he spoke like Peter Mandelson.

Yes. And the whole Blairite project unravelled itself, because it was all just too slick. So I think what the left needs, both in print and in politics, is a sense that we understand real peoples lives, we talk like they do, we do the things they do, we shop in the shops they shop, obviously I'm sitting here now in Canary Wharf Tower so I can't pretend that that is exactly my life, but what I can do is ensure that I have enough people around me – and we've got quite a few people who still work across the country, I try to talk to them as much as I can – and so that we're getting a real sense of what normal people are feeling and thinking. And that's what we need. So that's how you counter those populists on the right, is by being popular on the left.

Because you personally have an especially privileged position in this. If we're going to have a resurgent left of centre that's populist and led by the masses,

if I was doing A-level politics and I had a blank sheet of paper in front of me thinking, “Who are going to be the key players come the revolution?” The editor of the Daily Mirror is clearly going to be someone who can bring a following and be certainly key to getting that message out. Do you feel that sense of responsibility?

I think, primarily, our job is to create news, tell news, explain news. But certainly, our role on the left I think is important, because it's what's in the best interest of our readers. Now, that's not to say that some of our readers, come the next election, will struggle with who to vote for, and so we need a government that's good for our readers.

You lead a group addressing gender inequality within Reach overall.

It's not just me, there's a few of us.

But you must feel, again, you look around, all the editors of most of the other papers, and they're all blokes.

Well, you've got Victoria Newton on the Sun on Sunday. You've got... let me think, you've got Kath Viner on the Guardian. It's not as good as it should be, but it's better than it has been in the past. I think what we need to do... well, obviously more women editors would be great, but I think what's even perhaps more important is more women in the middle area.

So you've got a pool to promote from?

Yes, got a pool to promote from, and also you've got a pool in that middle area who are the people that actually shape a lot of the day to day content, who create the news list, who create the features list, who create the pictures list, and who have their voices heard in conference. You know, we've got a long way to go on that here. We've got similar difficulties here, as I think lots of industries have. We have gender balance when people are starting out in their careers, and then quite often it's post parenthood that we have lost women. It's what you do to encourage those women to stay after they've had children, and how you then encourage a culture whereby every woman has the ability to fulfil her potential. Because I think historically...

It's always been a blokey environment, isn't it? Late nights, drink, swearing.

I'm good at all those things! But historically, I think women have had to be a certain type of woman to get to the top, whereas men, a lot of them just had to carry on turning up, and I think that's the difference. We've put an awful lot of hoops and things for women to have to crawl through.

It's been the key to my moderate success so far, is just turning up. It'll be all right in the night.

And that's what I think we mean by a level playing field, because I don't think anybody goes out of their way to make it harder for women to succeed, but you only have to look at the numbers to see that we're not really at gender equality.

But it's in your commercial interest to do that as well, because – shock, horror – women read newspapers as well.

And women buy a lot of things that we advertise in our newspapers, so it's absolutely in our interest. The key to being a good journalist is that you should be able to empathise with all sorts of different people from all sorts of different walks of life, so I'm not saying that men can't spot a good feature that a woman might be interested in, or vice versa. But I think a healthy creative environment has people from all different types of walks of life. There's a lot of talk about diversity now, and we need to think about true diversity, and men, women, I think the media generally has an issue around not enough working-class people. So there's an awful lot of work to be done there for it to be truly creative and interesting, rather than just a lot of people recycling ideas that they've seen other people that look a lot like them come up with previously.

Could you tell us a little bit about your career? Did you always want to be a journalist? I know that you've been deputy editor-in-chief of the Daily Mirror, the Sunday Mirror, and the Sunday People.

Been around a bit.

Is this something that, like do you like the food in the canteen here, or something? What's kept you in this building?

Why I actually went to journalism in the first place, I think... oh, this sounds... so my dad worked on the railways, and he used to work a lot of Sundays, and he used to do 12-hour Sundays. And he used to come home at night, and he'd have his big bag, his work bag. He would have every single Sunday newspaper in it, because you know people always leave them on the trains, don't they? So he would go through picking them all up, and so we would have the whole lot, from the News of the World through to the Sunday Times. And there was a smell about those papers then. I'm sure they put more ink in them than they do nowadays. They were blacker and dirtier and smellier, but there was a real sense of them. I used to like looking at them, touching them. I can remember our local newspaper. I would be drawing on it and saying, "That picture should be here," or "That should be like that." There was no journalism in our family or anything, so...

But you were already doing page layouts at eight years old!

I don't know where that came from! And then I was very lucky in that I got a job when I finished my A levels on a weekly newspaper.

So did you know at that point you wanted to be a journalist, and would do this?

Yes, I suppose I did, although I can't quite remember when the dawning moment was, but I must have been some time around my A levels, and then I went to university and I did student newspaper there, and then I did very traditional route – regional newspapers, agency, bit of magazine, Sunday People, Daily Mirror.

Wow. Now, when you look back, it seems to be... we have a lot of this with our guests, where they say, "Well, looking back, it just seems to be a sequence of promotions." But actually the reality is, is that often it's a bit of luck here, and serendipitous there.

Yes, a lot of luck. And also, just being incredibly fortunate in that I just love doing it. I really love it. I love stories, and I love... when you think about being an editor, it's literally the best job in the world. And you come into work in the morning, you have a chit-chat with people around you about stuff that's interesting, "Oh, did you see that in the papers?"

Then they have to do the work.

And then I sit in a room, I'm surrounded by really smart people, who say, "Well, there's this, this, this, or this, this, this." And I say, "Oh, I think we'll do this, that, and the other." It's literally... you are like a kid in a sweet shop, picking out your favourite bits.

Because George Bush, when he's president, he once said the job of president was to be the decider. And he was mocked for that, but I remember thinking at the time, "Actually that *is* leadership."

Yes, that is the thing – you've got to be able to make a decision. So when you are that kid in the sweet shop, you got to choose the sweets, the ones that taste the nicest. And you can't necessarily have all the sweets, because your bag's only a certain size. So then you have to decide on which one's most important. And you've got to be able to empathise with people, that the stories, or sweets, that you're choosing are the ones that they too are interested in.

And what are the perks of the job? And what is the negative stuff? Because it can't be nice if a columnist or a journalist isn't working out, and that you have to fire them. That's not pleasant for anyone.

No, that's horrible.

Do you get the best tickets to the opera?

Not that I've noticed!

Do you say, "I want to be upgraded to business class because I'm the editor of the Daily Mirror, don't you know?"

No, no. We don't... so all those kind of perks I think have faded away. And things like, there used to be drivers for the editors, there used to be butlers.

Do you not get that any more?

Oh, don't be ridiculous, no! But also, I think that's a good thing. I don't have an office. I sit on the floor. It's all a bit, sort of...

I've just realised, I don't want to be the editor of a newspaper any more. I want to be the editor of a newspaper in the '70s.

Yes, absolutely! So, no – it's not like that. Because I think also it's really important, if you are really trying to have some understanding into your readers' lives, there is some merit in trying to lead your life as close to their lives as possible.

What will the Daily Mirror look like, say, two or three years from now?

Bolder, and brighter, and it will be more comments, more analysis, more Q&As, more explanation, more debate. Everything we do... we need to reach a point whereby everything we do is taking the story beyond just the story.

You're right though, that when Huw Edwards reads the 10 o'clock News headlines, when I get in, I actually already know what he's going to say. I'm looking for something different. And it's the same when I read the Daily Mirror, or the Times, or whatever it is, and I'm on the train, of the 10 stories that are going to be presented to me, I already know eight of them. I'm just looking for some extra information. It's actually unusual to read a newspaper now and have a wholly new story. And they often come from the regions. You were saying you have strong regional coverage.

Yes. So, I think that's it. The emphasis is on breaking stories, breaking stories, breaking stories, or the analysis of what's behind the story. If you don't really tick either of those two boxes, you're sort of really not bringing much new to the party. With reduced staff, which we have, as I've said, we need people who can do one of those things – break stories, or create additional content about an existing story.

We have a lot of aspiring journalists and students that listen to this podcast, and they're ambitious. Some of these will be just finishing their degree, or just studying. And they'll think, I want to be the editor of the Daily Mirror 10, 15, 20 years from now. What advice would you give them listening to this right now? How do they become your successor?

They've got to love news. And news is what happens to people. It's having an interest in people's lives. It's being able to do what you're doing now, and have a conversation, keep asking questions, engage in what the answers are sufficiently to ask the next question. Because a lot of people say to me, "I want to be a journalist," but I think they... I think maybe they watched too much *Sex and the City* and they think that it's sitting in a room, writing about themselves. It's not. It's about writing about other people's lives, and enabling those other people's voices to be heard.

And I think if you really love doing that, you really love doing it, if you really love writing an obituary, or a... we used to have to do weddings when I was on a weekly paper. If you can find those interesting, because you're actually interested in other people and their lives, then you can be a great journalist. If not, you're probably in the wrong job.

There was a rumour that the producers of the BBC TV show, *Press*, came and had a look around here for a bit of background, and a bit of colour. Is that true? Do you recognise that... I don't know whether you've seen the show.

There is a mural in the... I can't remember. There's the Herald and the Post, is it, I think they've got.

That's right.

One of them's got a big mural on the wall, which is exactly the same as the one in Lloyd's office, which is of here in the... I think actually from about the 1960s when the Queen came to visit. Beyond that, the actual storylines... we were saying the other day, it's not half as much fun as it is here. We laugh all the time!

So it's better here than in the fictionalised version?

Oh, much better! I only watched the first episode, which I actually thought was really quite dull. There were so many inconsistencies and so many clichés, but they missed out on the fun.

It was amusing to watch journalist on twitter picking holes in it and saying, "We would never do that!"

Outraged! I know. A lot of it is absolute nonsense, but the overriding thing was that they all just took themselves terribly seriously.

So what is a good day here then? The last couple of questions then. What would be really enjoyable here for you as editor? Would there be some breaking news? And what would be a bad day?

A really great day is we've got a really good breaking story, or we've got a great exclusive. Like we had three days last week from Russell Myers, our investigations editor, who was in North Korea. It was fantastic, so we splashed on that.

I read it.

And that's a proper, great bit of journalism that he'd spent 18 months trying to set up.

And globally impactful. Genuinely making people sit up and take notice.

Yes. And then you've got that, and then you turn inside, and you've got an exclusive interview with one of the dancers from *Strictly*, or something. That's what tabloid

newspapers are about. All human life is here, and we love it, and we're not sneery about it. We don't come to things with a dark heart, we come with an openness, and bit of fun. Because actually I think that is our readers' lives. Although there's just so much emphasis about the dreadful stuff in the world, for most of our readers, if they're okay, and their kids are fit and healthy, and they've got money coming in at the end of the month, and they're getting a week in the sun, that life is good. Life is good, and they have a laugh. There's so much emphasis on the dark, that I think it's our role to magnify the light.

And that actually brings me to one of the final questions, which was about New Day. Because I was one of the people who actually bought it.

Thank you very much.

Because I wanted it to succeed.

Did you manage to find it in the shops?

I made sure that I found it! And you know, I went on to the website. In fact, when you launched, the website wasn't there. I remember.

No, but the whole idea was, it was to see whether there could be a last throw of dice really for a print-only product.

It wasn't even just that for me. It was the tone of it. It was upbeat and outward looking, forward looking. Not upbeat in a shallow way. I bought into the whole raison d'être for it. And even though it didn't... you could say it failed, I actually really appreciate the boldness of it. Because that's true leadership, it's actually the ability to risk failure.

Yes, the company was really good. And I think in a way, it was good that it had a short lifespan. Obviously we would've had liked more at the time, but it was good that after... I think it was 10 weeks, the plug was pulled because the experiment had failed. And you could make arguments around distribution and all the rest of it, but it, but I think what was interesting, there was a lot of lessons learnt from it. But what was really interesting was the bond that we created with the readers. Now, I don't know whether that was because it was a new product on the market, but it was extraordinary in that there was a real sense from those readers that we really understood their lives, and that we were giving them something they hadn't been able to get anywhere else. And I think part of that is... I would never go down the road of a Huw Edwards good news type thing, but I think there is a lot to be said, if you are truly trying to reflect your readers' lives, you have to reflect the optimism and the ambition of those lives, as well as the other stuff as well.

What's next for you? I obviously accept the stock start of the answer, which is you're going to be the editor of the Mirror for the next 20 years. But what will come next? Will they drag you out of here kicking and screaming? Are you going to go onto the Mail?

I'm quite happy to shuffle off and die. Oh, God. I'd definitely rather shuffle off and die than go to the Mail.

You could make it less evil. I mean, Geordie only been in the post in a couple of weeks now, and there's been a net 15 percent reduction in evil.

Well, and it's certainly... I'm not quite sure what all their readers think about the change of stance on Brexit. I think that must be slightly bewildering for them.

I think they'll think someone's poisoned their porridge, frankly.

For me, I would be really struggling to find a place to go to after this. Because I've never wanted to go to a broadsheet, have no desire to go to broadsheet, and there's no other tabloid I could go to. So I think I'm just going to have to try and wing it out here as long as possible.

So you're going to have to like... I mean, you don't even have an office. I was going to say, you have to like, fortify your office. You know, like these Americans that take into the woods to take on the federal government when they come for them.

Yes. I think I'll just have to sort of glue my feet to the floor.

That's less violent way of doing it, I agree.

Yes.

Well, Alison, it's been a huge pleasure speaking to you.

Thank you very much.

Thank you for your time.

Thank you.