

Stephen Wright

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Welcome to Media Masters, a series of one-to-one interviews with people at the top of the media game. Today I'm joined by Stephen Wright, multi-award winning journalist and crime and investigations editor at the Daily Mail. After joining the paper's crime desk in 1996, he became crime editor, and in 2010, associate news editor. During this time, he reported on a number of high-profile cases, including the Soham murders and the Harold Shipman case. His career has been dominated by the death of Stephen Lawrence, the then unsolved murder he first covered in 1997. He spearheaded the Daily Mail's Justice for Stephen Lawrence campaign, and his dogged reporting became central for the inquiry into the case and also the killer's convictions in 2012.

Stephen, thank you for joining me.

Pleasure, glad to be here.

Well Stephen, let's start with Stephen Lawrence then, if we may. Tell us about how that whole case came to be on your radar, and walk us through the whole journey.

Well in 1996, I joined a crime desk, as you just spelled out in the opening there. And I was looking at the murder of a doctor called Joan Francisco in North London, it happened a year or so earlier, and I got to know the lawyer for the family for the victim, and they were disappointed with how the Met had handled her murder. The lawyer for the family, she was a partner of Imran Khan, the lawyer for the Lawrence family at the time. I wasn't taking any close interest in the Lawrence case at that time, but Imran kept telling me, "You should really look at the case." So I did my own research and investigations, and fast-forward to January, I think it was, in January or February 1997, and there was the inquest into Stephen's murder where the five prime suspects basically put two fingers up at justice and said nothing, and off the back of that, our editor did our famous front page. That campaign was launched the next day, basically.

So you presumably shared your editor's huge sense of outrage that these guys had got away with it.

Yes, I think any decent person would. Obviously, it didn't have the profile then. The inquest was high-profile, but I got involved, the profile of the case went tenfold up thereafter, and the outrage of the public was there to see.

What came next then?

Well, the day after the famous front page, Daily Mail front page calling them murderers, I got called into the executive's office, and was told basically, "We want to keep this going. We're going to launch a campaign." To be a young reporter, asked, or told basically, "This is your story," was a great opportunity. So we, day after day, for weeks, we were running stories about Stephen's murder, the injustice of it. We obtained some video of two of the suspects, two or three of the suspects, on the police video, which was horrifying. And of course, there was the danger that there might be some legal action against the paper, The editor, Paul Dacre, had previously spoken about that, that was a very real fear. Thankfully that didn't happen, there was no action, and the campaign went on. We obviously forged a close relationship with the family.

And at that moment, did you have a sense of just how far this was going to go and just how deep it went, because you got, to say the least, pushback from all sides really didn't you?

Yes.

Not least including the Met.

No, I didn't know what was going to happen, I don't think, you know, I'm not going to reinvent history. It was a campaign for justice initially, and you go where the story takes you. Like in any story, you go where the story takes you, and it took us into areas which I wasn't expecting us to go into. I was basically a new crime reporter at the time, but I'd only been in the job a year, and I was trying to get contacts, the police federation weren't happy with my reporting, they thought that it was unfair, they thought I was someone not to be trusted, that the police had got it right. And that was difficult. That was difficult. I looked at one of the prime suspects who was ultimately convicted of the murder, David Norris. His dad was a notorious gangster, Clifford Norris. And I remember someone calling me late at night, I was looking at a court case where he had been controversially acquitted. I got a call from someone who'd witnessed that court case, and it was something really bad had happened, that you know, he should have been convicted of attempted murder, he hadn't been. And I basically got a warning just to be careful about Clifford Norris. He was in jail, I think, at the time, but just to be careful about upsetting the family too much. I don't think, looking back, that was anything to be scared of, but that night, I do recall my car was parked on the fifth floor of the multi-storey next to the Daily Mail. And it was like a scene from All the President's Men, sort of, I don't want to sound overdramatic. But I was alone, about half past 10, my car was on the top floor, and I suddenly thought about what that person had told me a couple hours earlier to be careful. And it was quite a chilling moment really and... probably an overreaction, but it's the risk you take. But they were bad people, and they were surrounded by bad people.

And you must have had a really strong sense of justice that you had to stand up for Stephen's memory on this.

Yes, of course. I mean, we wanted to, as a paper and as a journalist, we wanted to do all we could. And there were others, it wasn't just about the Daily Mail, you know?

Do you think the Met just did a half-arsed job? I know there's the claims of institutional racism and so-on, but what do you think was the fundamental problem?

I think it was a very poor investigation.

Because Stephen was black?

That's a thing I've thought about many times over the years. There was an element... clearly there was an element of that, I would agree, but also I think it was a very poor investigation. And I wouldn't dispute the findings of the Macpherson inquiry later, no way. I don't think it was just about Stephen being black, I think it was just an appalling investigation. And to put that in context, I would say that there have been worse investigations where the police have got justice. I think it was... a lot of good came out of Stephen's terrible, terrible murder. The Met were very sloppy, and in the aftermath of that case, they were in denial about what they'd got wrong, how sloppy they were, how poor they were to the family, and senior police officers going ahead with weekends off, handing over the batons to another officer. No one took ownership of that case in the early days. I agree with Doreen Neville, the lawyers, it was an eminently solvable case, but for those terrible errors in the early days of the inquiry. So yes, it was shocking. And I should also, just coming back to me now, Paul, that I remember, in late 1997, Kent police did an investigation into the Lawrence case on behalf of the police watchdog, I think the Police Complaints Authority at the time, and I was called up to meet Paul Condon, the then commissioner, and had a one-to-one with him. Paul was really shocked. Previously there had been a whitewash into the report into the Lawrence case, which was giving the Met and senior officers a clean bill of health. I think he was really, really shocked about how bad it was. I think that's the first time he really got it, and the Met got it, and of course, what came out in the Macpherson inquiry was even worse.

And you became close to the Lawrence family over the years?

Well, I think I've got a good professional relationship with them. I mean, we got on well, and I think they're appreciative of what the paper's done. As far as I'm concerned, we're just doing our jobs. Some of my colleagues enjoy good relations, have done over the years, you know, we have a real respect for their dignity, courage and strength. It hasn't been easy for them. So, yes. Good relationship and good professional relationship, that's what I hope, and I hope that continues.

Do you think the Met have learned from this now, do you think they'd make the same mistake now or do you think that things have genuinely improved?

I think the police is a better place in terms of how they deal with issues of race and diversity as a result of the Lawrence case. So yes, I would say they are better, and it's a bit of a cliché, but I think it's very true when successive commissioners say that the Metropolitan Police today is far more representative of London and Londoners. And it is, and that is one of the benefits or the positive things which has come out of the Lawrence case. The Met and other police forces are far more modern and much more sensitive to the needs of different communities, and that's a real positive.

Do you enjoy writing about crime, if that's not a silly question? How did you get into this? I mean, we've had Mark Williams-Thomas sitting there, we've got Martin Brunt coming on soon. You know, we've got a run at the moment of crime reporters! But what you do is incredibly important; you're dealing with human tragedy on a moment-by-moment basis.

I mean I stumbled into it, really. I was a young reporter, I joined the staff of the Mail in November 1993, so...

It's a long time ago.

Yes, a few months, I mean I got offered the job, I'd been sent down as a reporter to Southend, gay serial killer Colin Ireland had just been caught, and I was sent down there as the legman for our distinguished crime correspondent Peter Rose, and I was perceived to have done well on that job, doing background on the case, and got a job offer a few months later. I was about to leave the paper because I didn't really want to carry on shifting or doing contracts.

So Daily Mail man and boy?

Oh, yes! A few months later, February 1994, got a call at midnight from the news desk. "Can you go down to Gloucester tomorrow? A couple of bodies have been found in the garden." And I went down there, and I came back about six weeks later to London. Obviously, it was the Fred and Rose West case. So when I went down there, and the story just got bigger and bigger. It was an extraordinary case to cover as a young reporter.

Did you meet Fred and Rose?

No, I mean... Fred was already in custody, Rose was in a safe house for a few weeks.

Because the police initially believed at that point that she might have been innocent?

Yes, they wanted to gather the evidence, I mean, she was in a safe house. I mean, clearly it was bugged to hell and they were taking their time to gather the evidence to lay charges on her. But you went from being a few days, three bodies found, then suddenly it went up to nine bodies, or nine confessions from Fred, and the story just got bigger and bigger. So I covered the West case, other reporters came and went, I

was fascinated by it, as a young reporter, you want to work on big stories, and the following... I mean, Fred killed himself on January 1, 1995.

That was right, that was New Year's Day wasn't it?

New Year's Day, yes. I remember, I'd been to the West End with my wife the night before, and I was sitting on a doorstep in Sussex with one of our photographers on another job. And I got a call from one of the people on the news desk saying, "Fred West has killed himself," and I said "What?" And I rang one of the senior detectives on the case – we were allowed to ring detectives in those days –

I'll come to that shortly.

And he was just having his New Year's Day roast. I mean, thankfully he took my call. And he said, "Yes, it's true." I had to rush back to London, and... anyway, fast-forward a few months, I covered the trial at Winchester in the autumn of 1995. A couple of weeks after that, there was a vacancy on the Daily Mail crime desk. I was the only person who applied. I'm glad about that, because I might not have got the job.

And how has it affected you as a person to cover all these quite horrible people doing quite horrible things? Because you don't strike me as a serial killer yourself, so I imagine you're not?

It's funny you should say that, because I did cover the case of a serial killer Steve Wright.

Another Steve Wright?

Another Steve Wright, yes. No, no, it can be, I... with the West case... let me just talk through three cases. The West Case. Pre-internet, and there was a lot of self-censorship going on. There was stuff we heard at that trial which no-one should have to hear, let alone someone have to go through it, needless to say. It was disgusting. It was as vile and horrific as one can imagine. And I do think sometimes, on the West case, what would happen now. Would some sort of freelance working for a website go down to court and just put everything up and it go round the world? So that was horrible, I remember there was some sniggering because the local council left some leaflets in the press room. "If you're affected by this trial, this is the number to call for counselling."

That's quite caring of them.

I thought it was, yes. It's like the macho thing of Fleet Street. So, we're down the pub. "Did you see that leaflet, who on earth would take that up?" And I thought... and I've got two daughters now who are the sort of age that the Wests would have targeted. That one didn't affect me, as horrific as it was. The two cases which have affected me over the years, and I went to New York for 9/11. New York wasn't really a crime story. New York was a war zone. And I'm not a war reporter. I dropped my eldest daughter off at nursery, got one of the first planes to New York after we were

allowed to fly directly into JFK, and then you're suddenly into this bloody war zone. And it was horrific. And I remember being grabbed by a woman who was looking for her husband, and she was holding up a picture of him with a child, similar age to my younger daughter. And I found that very difficult to deal with. You're there to report, but you're there as a human being as well. And I found that really difficult, it affected me for a long, long time afterwards. And you know, if you go to a big story like that, you're jet lagged, you know, Manhattan, I remember being awake at night, the fire engines going everywhere, alarms going off around, it was really tough. And it took me many years to really be quite open about that. Because we work in a business where it's difficult to be open sometimes, actually the best thing to do is talk about it. When you belatedly realise that, it's much easier. So taking my own experience, it was a difficult case to cover. And two years ago I was in Hong Kong for the trial of Rurik Jutting, Cambridge-educated banker who murdered two prostitutes in the most horrific circumstances. I would call it the murder trial of the digital age, because I had been out to cover the Jutting murders when he was first arrested two years earlier – but we didn't know just what those girls had gone through. I did something in that trial I'd never done before. There were agency reporters there from AFP and Reuters. The opening of the prosecution was so disgusting, I put my pen down for two minutes. I couldn't... I mean, I'd been a journalist for 30-odd years, covering crime for a quarter of a century. I could not believe that a human being was capable of doing what he did to those girls. And I remember some distinguished Daily Mail reporters, writers in the past, when they used to go and do colour, the descriptions of court cases. They often used to look at the defendant in the dock. And that's what I did then, and I subsequently... we had a 45 minute audio of him torturing a woman. And that was played to court. Luckily, we only heard it. The poor jurors had to watch it. Thereafter, there were about 40 selfie videos of him glorifying in death. Sorry if I'm a bit macabre here, but the point I'm going to make is that that was difficult, and there were reporters from the international media who were in tears, but it was horrific. But the important thing was to talk about it afterwards. And people were calling me saying, "That's bloody horrific." I said, "Yes. It was actually."

You were there.

"I was there. It was horrific." So yes, it can be difficult. But there's a lot of professional joy you can get out of covering the crime cases as well.

We had Mark Williams-Thomas in that chair a couple of weeks ago. And I asked him, at this kind of moment, hearing some horrific things that he'd said, it just struck me, are there just some straight-up evil people in the world? And he said, "Yes there is." But do you ever feel sorry for the people in the doc? Obviously, you feel sorry for the victims as well. How do you deal with that psychologically?

Yes, I am struggling to think of a case where I've felt sorry for a psychopath or someone who's inflicted real horror on someone. There are times when you think, "Oh, I wonder if..." – and I hope I don't sound like some sort of stereotypical Daily Mail reporter here – that you do sometimes think, I wonder if that person had a different upbringing, if they had a stable family, other things might have turned out differently. There was a case I covered in the late 1990s, a girl called Sharon Carr,

who was Britain's youngest murderess. She murdered and mutilated a hairdresser age 16, when she was just 12. And she was brought up in Belize and was killing animals and drinking blood, and her mum just wasn't... the evidence was, and our own research in Belize, was that her mum wasn't really engaged with being a mother. So, I mean, something obviously... for a 12-year-old to murder and mutilate someone... well, it was unprecedented, and still is. She is Britain's youngest murderess. I mean, Mary Bell was not convicted of murder.

So you look at something like the Bulger killers...

Yes.

And I feel desperately sorry for poor Jamie's...

Yes, of course.

She took her eyes off him for like three seconds. It could happen to anyone. Poor David Cameron left Nancy in the pub, it does happen.

Yes, of course.

Some of my friends have said, lock them up, throw away the key. And then, some of my other friends are like, what they did was horrific, but they were themselves 10 and 11.

Yes, they were 10 when they...

That still troubles me to this day, the Bulger case. Even now, decades later, I still think of poor Jamie.

I wasn't involved in that one, but obviously, I've written about the case since.

And do you go into journalist mode then when you're writing about it? How does that work, in terms of... because you are a human being, you are going to be affected by it. Or do you kind of put that to one side for a few hours while you get the copy done? And then, do you kind of reflect when you're in the shower or driving home?

No, I think it depends what type of story it is. I use the injustice of a case as one of my motivating factors. So, if I feel... I think on big stories, big cases, you want to feel the adrenaline and you want to feel passionate about it, but you have to do that in a professional sense. If you don't do it in that way, then you're at risk of not doing the job properly. It's trying to get that balance right between being a human being and doing a professional job.

Do you get contacted by the killers and by the people that are in the dock because they want to put their side forward? I don't even know what the ethics

are of that. Some guy goes down for armed robbery and killing someone, and then writes to you from prison saying, "I want to put my side of the story." Do you go and see them?

To do an interview in prison, I think the convicted person... then there have to be certain rules to do that. So, they have to be not whinging about what it's like in prison. They have to have the... this is what I believe to be the case, it certainly was in the old days, that they think they've been the victim of a miscarriage of justice, and you can go and talk to them about that. Some sneaky journalists sometimes go in and interview people, not revealing that they're journalists. I haven't done that, I might add. But I was doing an investigation in the mid 1990s into the head teacher Philip Lawrence who was murdered outside school gates, very high profile case.

I remember it well.

Yes.

Poor Mr Lawrence.

And yes. So, I was looking at his killer, Learco Chindamo, and did a lot of work on that. And I think, actually, it's the only time I've been into prison to see someone. I went to see his dad, Massimo Chindamo, in Viterbo prison north of Rome. I found out his dad had gangland links and was a very dangerous man, and he was known as the acid man, because he threw acid over people's faces who he didn't like.

Sounds a charming gentleman.

He was a lovely man, yes. So he was happy to... the Italian justice minister approved a request for me to go and see him in prison, because Chindamo was boasting his dad was in the mafia and all that. So, we went up there and he was like Hannibal Lecter. And he had four guards come with him to meet me in the room.

To protect him, or to protect you?

That's why, I beg your pardon. Yes, I don't know. To protect me, I suppose, yes. He was flanked by two, two guards in each side. He came into a special interview room and he demanded half a million Lira...

Idiot.

Yes, for his interview. And I said, well...

No, sir.

"No, you're not going to have that." And I interviewed him for about one minute, enough to get front page splash. "I'm proud of my son," all that. Anyway, and I sent him on his way. And in two days, the trial ended. He liked the attention. His lawyer rang me from Rome. "Mr Chindamo is now happy to do the interview for free." I said, "Sorry, too late." And he got let out of prison later, three or four years later, the phone

editor called me over. He said, "You know that bloke Chindamo you interviewed in prison three or four years ago?" He said, "Yes. He's been let out of prison." I said, "Oh, yes. And?" "Oh, he has just been arrested for murder in Spain."

Jesus.

Yes, he's a dangerous man. I'd better keep an eye on him.

Does that ever weigh heavy on you in a sense that sometimes in just doing straight coverage of what these criminals are doing that in a sense they want that? There's a strong movement in America that says the kind of rolling news reporting of school shootings is one of the things that actually the school shooters want. They want to see their name live on the CNN ticker, and that's one of the reasons why they do it. And they're talking about dialling down the coverage of these kinds of school shootings because that's the very thing that they want. You mentioned there, you covered the guy's father and he actually quite liked the fact that he was a splash.

Yes. And that was not something I intended. And I went in there for good journalistic reasons, hopefully.

I'm not suggesting otherwise.

No, no, I'm just saying, but no, but I think it's a valid point. There are some killers...

Because the Krays loved it. I remember reading about the Krays when I was a kid, that they loved being in the paper and being seen as celebrity gangsters of the East End.

Yes. I'm always wary of us writing stories which might prompt copycat attacks. I think in particular, with terrorism at the moment, you've got very young, easy to be influenced, potential Jihadis out there, who get an idea of how to do something from what's in the papers or what have you. So I think we've got a real responsibility around that. Not giving ideas. There's a limit to... we want to get the story out, but I think we've got responsibility. I'm struggling at the moment, Paul, to think about particular cases I've done, but it's something in the back of my mind, because I'm an experienced journalist. It's up to people like me to raise those concerns, in particular cases.

Do you cover terrorism differently to any other crime? Because if you've got acquisitive crime, like some lad that tries to rob the local Metro Bank and goes in there with a shooter and he gets caught and he does 15 years, fair enough. But when people are ideologically driven by religion, do you have to cover that differently because the killer might say, "Well, it's because Tony Blair invaded Iraq that I'm killing all of these people"? Or do you just treat it as a straight crime story?

I think I treat it as a crime story.

Because they're still murderers.

Yes. I led the Daily Mail's coverage of the 2005 terror attacks, and I remember there was a lot of hostile reaction. One of the assistant commissioners at the Met did a statement which was perceived by some, I will not comment, as being a bit woolly and not really describing them as what they were, which is murderous bastards. There's no justice. And I think the public and Daily Mail readers, dare I say it, what they wanted to hear was, "We're going to catch these..." Well, we can't catch them because, at that stage, we didn't know that they had blown themselves up. So, they didn't do it alone, there was a support network. And then, there was another round of attacks which, mercifully, weren't successful, two weeks later. But no, I think the terrorists are murderers. There's no justification for it. That's the bottom line, in my opinion.

Have you become a bit more fearful in your kind of personal dealings, given that you've been exposed to the dark side of humanity? I know you mentioned earlier about the car park incident as you were going up to the car park. But we've had Nick Ross in that chair a couple of years ago, and he used to present Crimewatch. And, at the end of it he used to say, do sleep well, don't have nightmares. And I'd be like, "Cheers Nick. I am going to have a lot of nightmares, thanks. Because you've just told me there's 20 killers and armed robbers on the loose, and they're probably going to come and get me."

Yes. Well, yes. I'm mindful of that. I am very much of the view that it's my choice to do the job. It's a job I enjoy, a job I have enjoyed. A lot of professional satisfaction to be got out of it, if you do it well. That's always what I try to do. But there are risks, and you have to use your judgement about what risks are worth taking. A few years ago I got a call out the blue from a literary agent saying, "I've got a great idea for a book. I'd really would like to talk to you about a book idea." Nothing in my contract says I can't go and talk to a literary agent about a potential book.

Doing the Mail's PR for them.

Yes. He said, the idea is that you write the unauthorised biography of Terry Adams and the Adams family. Ah. Right. That's an interesting proposal, isn't it? No, I won't do that one. And I subsequently found out that other people had turned down that offer. So that one was not worth it. More recently, a couple of years ago, I did a series exposing Albanian murder fugitives. The first one, I went to Albania for the news desk to cover a high court case here, a chap who was fighting – I say 'chap', murderer, a double murderer – who was fighting extradition back to Albania. I did a big two-page spread on him. While I was in Albania, I got called aside by someone very senior in government who said, "We've got a real problem with Albanian murder fugitives in London and Scotland Yard aren't sending them back to us." So, I was given a name. And a couple of weeks later, myself and David James, a very experienced and very good colleague of mine from features, we found the notorious eye-gouger, double murder fugitive. He'd been on the Interpol wanted list for 20 years.

Jesus, you found him?

We found him. We found him in Borehamwood.

And the Met couldn't?

No, they couldn't. Now, that was probably the most terrifying doorstep I've ever done, and I videoed it. At the last minute, I had a camera put on me. So, we were 95% certain the eye-gouger was in Borehamwood. And David and I parked our cars down the end of the road. And it was a long walk.

I bet.

And I was thinking, "Oh, God."

Figuratively as well as literally.

I thought, "I didn't bring my..."

It's like the green mile.

Yes, I think we were a bit nervous. They had been staking out the address for a few days.

This is the chap who had the knife in his hall, isn't he?

Yes, so he came to the door, he opened the door, and there were two kitchen knives next to him. He pretended to be a Kosovan refugee, so I played along. "No, no, no, it's not me. It's not me. You got the wrong person," he said. And it was a very dramatic doorstep.

I can imagine.

But I will say this, that it was our decision to do it. We're two experienced journalists, very experienced journalists, and we walked out there and we knocked on the door. One of the reasons I did that, I've got distinguished colleagues who duck bullets in Afghanistan and Iraq, and I took the decision it was a risk worth taking. If I'd lost my arm, whatever, or worse, in it – then that would have been my fault. I wouldn't have blamed anyone for it. So, that was... if you're in the front line, on the front line, on those types of stories – and my adrenaline was certainly pumping then –

I used to watch Roger Cook doorstep people on World In Action, and all these kind of things in my heart was in my mouth. I was a teenager thinking, "Don't knock on the door, Roger."

I like doorstepping people. I think it's a really underappreciated skill.

Well, you can't get the story just sending emails from your desk, can you?

No, you can't. And you can't get good stories from data leaks and data dumps, all that, I think. So, I mean, just to finish out, he was arrested a couple of days later. And he's actually... someone wrote some churlish piece in another paper about this front page. It's a very dramatic front page. His wife, who waived her anonymity to the paper, she had been raped by him in the UK, and it was a horrific case. And she was very glad that he was off the streets, and so were his victims' families over in Albania.

And society is. I am, as a citizen.

Yes. It's nothing against Albanians or whatever.

No, it was against him.

But it was a...

He's an eye-gouging murderous git.

Yes, exactly. So, he had been convicted in his absence. He's gone back to Albania now. Then I did another Albanian murder story which embarrassed the Home Office a few weeks later. I mean, people have said – and I'm not criticising Albanians or, I don't want to be seen like that – but in terms of your original question about risks...

I can't remember that question, your answer has been that interesting. I got lost in this!

No, what I'm saying is, I think people will say that to me, in the police, just be careful with Albanian organised crime. You mentioned the Krays. The Krays and some of those old big time villains wouldn't go for journalists. I am told, not the same with some of those gangsters.

It's the same with ISIS, isn't it?

Yes.

The so-called Islamic State.

Yes, exactly. So, we have to assess the risk.

We had Rageh Omaar in that chair a couple of weeks ago and he was saying, "If you had a flak jacket with PRESS on it a decade ago, you'd have been all right. No one would have shot you. Now it's a target." People that want to kidnap you, to put you in an orange jumpsuit, to torture you live on YouTube.

I think I need body armour! I mean, after that Albanian doorstep in Borehamwood, an ex-Met commander rang me. He said, "I saw that video online. You weren't wearing body armour." I said, "No." He said, "Well, for God's sake, the next time you can do anything like that, give me a call. I've got some old kit you can have." He works in

private security now, so... but yes, it's dangerous. But I take my hat off to war reporters who put themselves far more in the firing line than I do.

You mentioned earlier in the conversation very briefly about how there was a time when you could ring police officers. And that brings me to my next question, which is about Leveson. How has the job changed pre-Leveson to how it is now, post-Leveson?

Right. Well, I was crime editor of the Mail right up to about a year before Leveson. Informal contact, obviously, went on. We all know that.

Seems to me to be quite healthy.

I would say so, but it was frowned upon, to put it mildly. Let me just tell you what I did. I would call police officers, police officers would call me. Sometimes I would bring them information about cases I was working on. Sometimes, can you believe it, I'd even ring them to say, "You're going to get a kicking from me tomorrow."

This all seems quite gentlemanly so far.

"You're going to get to kicking from me tomorrow, and you might want to work out a strategy." I'm not here to score cheap points. So, I would say, and this is what I said to the Leveson inquiry. Clearly some things were wrong, and there was overfamiliarity, and worse in some relationships, I won't defend all the relationships I had with people. I think I expected most would fear or dislike me. I don't really mind that. You're not here to make people you hold to account like you.

It's not a popularity contest really.

No, it's not, no.

Can't make an omelette without breaking a few eggs.

So, I mean, I got some... blowing my own trumpet, I got some terrific stories which made a difference. People got sacked, corrupt police officers went to jail. I'm proud of that, my contribution to that.

But what's your role post-Leveson, then?

But now...

Can you not ring police now and say...

Well, I think... I'm disappointed. Post-Leveson, the drawbridge went up and all informal contact was frowned upon, banned. I know a crime correspondent who bumped into a detective on the tube who suddenly got all panicky in cases, some CCTV of them having a conversation. In my own experience...

It seems to be an excessive overcorrection.

I will not name the individual, but where I live in London, a very senior London police officer lives. And during the Leveson inquiry, he was walking down the street on the Sunday morning, coming back from the newsagents, as I was going to pick up the papers – and he went to the other side of the street to avoid walking past me. And I thought, “You prat.” I mean, for God’s sake, has it come to this is? Has it come to this?

It seems it has come to this though.

Well, it did. It did in that particular... I think it’s better now. And my colleague Chris Green, the chief crime correspondent, chair of the Crime Reporters' Association, which is trying to build bridges. It will never be the same as it was before. But what I would argue is, and on the occasions when I do ring the police or press officers, you... and I hope I’m not being too unkind, you do get too many ‘computer says no’ type responses these days. And, “Can you look at our Twitter account?” “Can you look at our website?” And the famous one a few months ago during one of the terror attacks, “We’re not here to answer questions.” Something like that. It was just really... these terror attacks, they can be very frenzied and very busy for press officers, but they’ve got to remember that they’re paid by the taxpayer. They’re there to, of course, defend their organisations. They’re also there to help journalists as well. So, I’d say the balance is, in a very waffly way, the balance is still wrong. And that’s disappointing, because I think that things... I mean, my hunch is, there’s a lot that’s gone on in police and police forces which journalists don’t know about in these last few years because of the chilling effect of Leveson. I don’t think that’s right. I don’t think that’s right. I think, you know, a few years ago the commissioner, Bernard Hogan-Howe, said if staff have got a concern about an issue in the force, they should ring a hotline. As if someone is going to do that. They’re not going to grass up a colleague who’s corrupt or who they think is doing something wrong. They’re not going to do that, are they?

That’s ridiculous.

And they’re not going to ring journalists now either. So, I just don’t think the balance is... the pendulum is still too far the wrong side. So, I feel quite passionately about that as a journalist.

But in terms of Leveson, the Soham murders, Milly Dowler, they were pre-Leveson. Do you think you’d be able to expose as much of the wrongdoing and the incompetence in the investigation, where it was found, post-Leveson? Would you be as free as you would before?

Well, I don’t think I would be. And I hope that that’s not sounding like someone who’s trying to make excuses for not being able to get information in the present day. I covered, in 2002, the Soham murders of Holly and Jessica, and the appalling police investigation. It was so bad. It was so bad. It was difficult. They’re a small force, half the world’s media literally turned up, and it was a complete fiasco.

I remember them being on Sky News...

Yes, I was at the press conference, the most bizarre press conference I've ever been to. They had some psychic going in the hedge next to the school where the press conference was looking for clues about where Holly and Jessica were. And then the senior officer in the case did a look into the camera and a direct appeal to the abductor. I mean, sadly, obviously they were found dead a few days later. It was complete chaos. I rang a very senior officer in London and said, "This is completely mad. They're completely overwhelmed, haven't got a clue what's going on. The chief constable is on holiday..." Within the next day... I'm not saying it's a direct consequence of me, but you could have that contact. I could give an opinion.

And Milly Dowler, though.

Milly Dowler.

That was one of the things that lead to Leveson, of course.

Yes, Milly Dowler, they were dreadfully let down by the police. I mean, the hacking scandal obviously is dreadful, what happened, what emerged. But what people forget, Paul, is that it was an appalling police investigation and very basic door-to-door inquiries weren't done, and they had fatal consequences. Look, policing is difficult, and you mustn't rush to condemn. But, in the cold light of day, that was an appalling police investigation. And, I'm sorry... when the real killer, Levi Bellfield – he's on trial for the murders he carried out after Milly – I'm going to say, I was really annoyed that Surrey Police were doing a spin operation with certain journalists. Taking us out and trying to say that we did a good investigation on Milly. And I said, "Well..." I had an hour with a senior officer and a press officer. And I said, "Look, I've heard what you've said, but I'm sorry, I've done my own investigation into this. This is a shocking inquiry." And I did a very hard hitting – I think that's probably a polite way of putting it – piece in the paper when Bellfield went down for the other murders. Subsequently, he was charged and convicted of Milly's murder, which is good, but I wouldn't have been able to write that if all the information I had was from a press officer and a senior officer. So, you know...

It's not anti-police to point out their shortcomings on a case by case basis. In fact, it's healthy for a democracy and a society that they can be held to account.

I would say so. I would say so. With the police, with a notorious corrupt commander who I wrote about for 10 years.

I know exactly who you mean.

Yes, I mean, he was... the police...

He was a wrong 'un.

He was a wrong 'un. Police were terrified of him. They were terrified of him, and no way could I have done that campaign – I say campaign, but those series of articles exposing him – if all the information I could get would be from a press officer. No way at all. And anyone who doesn't think my reporting on the Ali Dizaei case wasn't a force for good, well, sorry. I think it was, and I'm proud of that, proud of that. He's a difficult person to take on. Post-Macpherson inquiry into Lawrence, you know, he played the race card. He was corrupt. He went to jail twice. And I said this to Leveson: I don't think I could have done that with the press banned from talking unofficially to police officers. And I still don't think you could. If there was a modern day Dizaei in the police they could get away with it at the moment, in my opinion.

You know, these instant demands of social media. Does it make it harder for newspapers like the Mail to commit to longer-term crime investigations, the deep stuff? Because it costs a lot of money, it takes a long time. And also, is it changing the way that crime has been reported itself? I mean, look at that idiot Tommy Robinson, stood outside the court calling people rapists as they walk, clearly in contempt.

Yes.

These guys are not only not doing proper journalism, but also putting justice at risk.

Yes. I think the nature of a lot of the newspaper websites is to get it out quickly. So, I'm not condemning our paper's website, not at all. But we live in an era where things happen, news spreads very quickly, and it's an instant demand for news. And I think that, going back to your original question, yes, I have a concern, but I think it's not just about crime. I think my view is the websites and internet are still finding themselves, and at the moment, our website is different to the newspaper. I imagine there's going to be some merging in due course, not merging as in website and the paper physically, but I mean in terms of how investigations are covered, and for the benefit of both the paper and the website.

Do you think that Daily Mail is an easy target? What is the biggest public misconception about the way the Mail conducts its journalism? You must know that the Daily Mail gets attacked more vociferously than any other newspaper in the UK. Is some of that unfair? Is all of it unfair?

And, going back to the point I made a few minutes ago, we're not here, journalists, to please everyone. You can't do that. The paper has got bite, continues to have bite, and you're going to upset some people. I will defend it. I've been at the paper 25 years, so it's not surprising that I would say that some of the criticism is unfair, exaggerated. But you have to look at where it's coming from.

No newspaper is perfect.

No, but I would say...

The biggest tribute I could pay is that I buy the Daily Mail every day. I run a PR agency. We buy a lot of the papers. I always read the Mail. It's ubiquitous.

Yes. Some of the criticism is irritating, because I don't think it's deserved – but there are people who, you know, we could... sometimes I think some of the people who criticise the paper, we could save the world from World War III, and they would still find a way to criticise it, such is their dislike of the paper. There's nothing you can do about that. Just... there's nothing you can do about that. And I think the paper has done some very positive things, has done during my time. Of course, there will be occasions when the paper gets it wrong, judgements wrong – it would be silly to say otherwise. But I think... I'm a very loyal member of staff, and we've got some terrific, terrific journalists – young, middle aged, and old – and they're really hardworking professional journalists, and it's a terrific team. And people who could, in my opinion – and I'm not talking about myself, definitely not talking about myself – walk into jobs in most other newspapers because they're that good. They are that good, that bright, and that driven.

What's the newsroom like now that Paul Dacre is gone? I mean, he was an institution. He was there years, and years, and years.

Business as usual. I don't...

Come on, spill the beans!

No! It may be a bit quieter. Some people say, I will not pass comment.

Do you have to dodge any staplers now, or is that apocryphal? Was that myth? Was that a legend?

I have no knowledge of such instances. He certainly never threw anything at me. He could have thrown a few more plaudits on occasions, possibly. But the Daily Mail, to get to base camp is not to be criticised. Anything thereafter is a bonus.

So, that was very well-handled. If I had the skill of Paxman and you were Michael Howard, I'd ask you the same question seven times. No, but in one sense though, I think for all of his faults, Paul Dacre was an incredibly tough editor, and he delivered a product that was widely admired by its readership, to the point where they actually bought it consistently, daily, for decades.

I would say this. Two things, on that issue. Firstly, it doesn't matter how tough your boss is. If your boss knows what he wants, it's a lot easier than a demanding boss who doesn't know what he wants. So, in that respect, I'm not saying it has been easy to work for him or his regime, but he knew what he wanted. He assembled a very good team. One of the successes of the paper, and I'm stating the obvious here, is it knows its market. And that's another thing which annoys me when the usual suspects criticise the paper. Because our readership is big, and people love the paper, and they love the website. Some person who's got an axe to grind against the paper, is slagging off the paper, is slagging off our readership. So.

But it must be – and this applies to any newspaper – but when you get a new editor, is it a bit like a tapestry where you pull on one of the strings and the whole thing could unravel because, already, some are saying there’s a softening on Brexit. I doubt you’d run the splash calling the supreme court lords ‘traitors in ermine’ and things like this. Maybe these changes might be for the better.

I am going to bottle that question.

“You might think that, but I couldn’t possibly comment.”

Yes. No. It’s not my position to comment on that. I think all papers evolve. The previous editor was very demanding, wanted to be successful. The new editor will have his own way of doing it. What I can say is having been there so long, he’s got to have a terrific team around him, and everyone will be supporting him. So, business as usual as far as I’m concerned.

I don’t blame you for taking the fifth. I also know that I get a lot of grief on social media if I didn’t at least try a couple of times to get you to...

You can try again if you want! Try in a different way. It’s the truth.

What’s next for you? I mean, you’ve been doing this job a long time. You might be about to say, “I’ve no plans to change. I want to do it for another 25 years.”

I don’t know. I mean, I still get a buzz off getting a great story.

Well, you’re in the wrong trade if you don’t.

Yes, I do. So, I’m always looking ahead, and don’t like to live in the past. Some years ago, after the Lawrence case, a few people said, “Oh, you can dine out on this one for the rest of your life now.” I said, “Absolutely no chance.” No chance at all. Nothing worse in journalism than arrogance and complacency. No chance of that. You look to the future. So, there are things that I want to do in the future, but I’m happy, in what’s a more difficult environment to work in than it ever has been because of privacy laws, libel, strict libel laws, data protection laws, the odds are stacked against us, if you want to take on bad people, but that makes it more challenging.

Stephen, it’s been an incredible conversation. I could honestly have gone for another two or three more hours, but we’re going to get thrown out of the studio. So, I just wanted to say thank you ever so much for your time. It’s been amazing.

Thank you. I hope you enjoyed it.