

## **Martha Lane Fox**

### **Founder, Doteveryone**

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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 am joined by the dotcom pioneer, Martha Lane Fox. In 1998, she co-founded Lastminute.com, which eventually sold for £577 million in 2005, the same year she launched karaoke brand, Lucky Voice. In 2015, she founded Doteveryone, a charity which promotes social change through technology. Martha is patron of several charities, chancellor of the Open University, and is on the boards of Twitter, the Donmar Warehouse, and Chanel. She is also patron of Ability Net, making workplaces accessible for disabled people. A former UK digital champion for government, in 2013 she became the youngest female member of the House of Lords, and was also awarded a CBE for services to the digital economy and charity.**

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

My pleasure, thanks for coming here, and thanks for including Coley my cat in the podcast.

**Yes, in our setup we've had Coley the cat jump on all the various equipment, so we should apologise...**

Yes, I apologise for that.

**I think we should leave it in.**

If you can hear some purring, that's what it is, it's not me.

**It's not my amazing interview skills, is it? Let's start then, you said that your signature song is I'm Still Standing, which is appropriate; you've had amazing highs and incredible great personal adversity in your life.**

Yes, I'm Still Standing is particularly poignant for me, because in 2004 I had a very, very serious car accident. I fell out of a car in Morocco, spent nearly two years in hospital, broke 28 bones, had a stroke – my life changed forever. So, I'm Still Standing was practically the first song that I belted out when I was able to go to Lucky Voice, the Karaoke Bar that my friend Nick Thistleton and I started in 2005.

**We've got plenty of time in the podcast, so we can go through all of it, but if you don't mind me asking, do you see your life in terms of what happened before the accident and afterwards?**

Before Crash, and After Crash. Sort of, partly just because I've had so much morphine since 2004 that I can't remember very much before the accident, but partly also because it's so dominating, it's like another job in my head. So I have to kind of manage around it all the time, but you know, that's fine. I am lucky. I'm upright. I've got lots of help. I'm lucky I've got resources, so I can do a load more than many people who are in the same situation but much more afflicted than me. So I try and be thankful for what is going right, rather than focusing on what is not going right.

**Well, to that end, you said how busy you are. The intro that I read at the beginning was three times longer than most normal people.**

No, it's really embarrassing. None of them is actually a proper job. I have this strange portfolio lifestyle.

**It's incredible.**

Well, thanks, it's fascinating, because I get to be in the public sector and the private sector, which is something I enjoy a lot. And also sort of in the policy world a bit, through being in the Lords and some of the work I did in government. So I feel lucky. I'm a generalist, and I used to feel sort of embarrassed about that when people say, "Well, what do you do now?" And it's hard to answer that question when you've got so many different things in your life. But now I really just try to channel it, and own it, and think of it as a positive thing where you can say, "Hold on a minute, I can join up this dot over here with that dot over there that I never imagined might be connected."

**What is a typical week then? Perhaps we could discuss this panoply, this plethora of responsibilities that you have. How does it work?**

I think the first thing to say is that I've always been an entrepreneur, really. So in the first job I was in, I worked in a consulting company – it's practically the only proper job I've ever had. That's where I met Brent, who I went on to co-found Last Minute with. From then on, I've sort of been my own boss, which is an incredible luxury, and I realised that it enables you, if you get things in the way that you want them, to be able to construct your time as you want to. I mean, that's not essential to building and starting a business, but now at the grand old age of 45 with the life of an 85-year-old, I can say, "Okay, this week I don't really want to work on Tuesdays and Wednesdays. I want to write, or I want to think, or I want to hang out with my twin boys. So I'm going to organise my week in a particular way this week, when next week I might have to be in a flat-out for five days and doing five speeches." So I have a bit more autonomy than I think most people probably do. But typically, I try to be in The Lords when there's something that I can contribute to, so that's the sort of anchor in my week. I'm part of The Joint Committee for National Security Strategy, we have regular committee meetings, so that's something obviously I have to turn up for. I do quite a lot of public speaking. Tomorrow I'm doing a big event with Mishal

Husain, for example, we're talking about skills. She's written a book about skills, and young women, and confidence. On Thursday, I'm doing a big speech at The Royal Institution about climate crisis and change. So you know, you anchor your week in those events, and I've got to make sure I'm prepared and able to do that. So it does depend week by week, but there are some things that are sort of a bit more regular, and I try and deliver on what I'm meant to every week.

**I've never had a job. I've been self-employed ever since I was 17 years old. So you are right, there is that freedom, that autonomy. But you're driven like I am, so even though in theory you could take that Wednesday off, the reality is we're flat-out all the time, because you are very driven and you've got a lot of things to get on with.**

Yes, I am. I think it's important, especially if you've been lucky like me, and you have a voice in the world, or you have resources. You have to keep asking the question, "What am I contributing? Am I trying, even in a tiny way, to move things forward?" And that's my motivating factor, because I do feel as though I've had all this luck in my life and I want to try and use it. I don't want to give a false impression here, and I think it's really important, especially as a working parent, mother or father, "This afternoon I'm not going to work. I'm going to have a good four hours where I blocked out my diary, and I'm going to spend it with Felix and Milo, my two-year-olds." So I am lucky, and I can have that flexibility in my life. Now, it means I will be working late into tonight, because I want to prepare for something tomorrow, but that's a choice that I want to make. So I think it is just about working out what your priorities are, and then being quite rigorous and tough in enforcing them in your life.

**But also, that four hours that you've carved out for this afternoon is a chance for you to reflect. I don't know about you, but I have my best ideas...**

Possibly. I'm not sure that's true with two two-and-a-half-year-olds racing about!

**Yes, that's rare thing.**

I think that's a bit tricky. No, I have a different time where I block out in my diary to think, read, and that stuff. I try to be present when I'm with my kids, and not be thinking, "Oh, I should be doing this," when actually, I should be focusing on Peppa Pig.

**I always have my best ideas when I'm queuing to board a plane, or I'm in the shower, or I'm returning some shoes to the shop. You know, it's something that's just keeping me busy in the moment, but it's not using my brain. And then I think, "What would happen if I did that?"**

That's interesting, yes. I'm quite often asked, "Where do you get your inspiration?" People, expect me to say, "I've read all these business books," or, "I've read all this stuff from leading policy makers and politicians." Actually, I really love the theatre, and I really love reading. I was on the board of the Bailey's Prize for Fiction for a long time, now I'm on the board of the Donmar Warehouse. I often find that my best ideas come when I'm doing something completely different and often creative. So last

week, for example, I went to see Antony and Cleopatra at the National Theatre, and as I was watching this production a couple of things occurred to me about my speech for the next couple of days. I just thought, “Well, that’s interesting. Shakespeare has prompted me to rethink.” I think Shakespeare probably always prompts you to rethink everything. But yes, I’m with you. I find that inspiration comes by having a broad range of interests and focus; not narrowing it down, but opening it up.

**The phrase ‘portfolio career’ has almost become cliché, but I think that you have a portfolio career in the proper sense of the word. It seems to me that all of the various aspects of your career and your life actually feed into each other and all benefit each other.**

I hope so. I mean, I think that it would be really hard to do completely disparate things if didn’t feel as though they were in any way cohesive, and I think for a period of time actually after the accident, when I was still scrabbling to work out my brain, my body, what I was able to contribute to the world, I was a bit desperate and I was doing things that didn’t feel like they formed any kind of pattern. Now, I’m tougher with myself, and with the opportunities, so I always try and say, “Does this move forward something I really care about?” And at the minute, those things are around responsible technology and the work we’re doing at Doteveryone. Everything around women and equality to, “Am I using my voice in a way that will help, even if it’s just to symbolically show that women can have a different kind of role in the world to how they are perceived?” Or, “Is it something I need to do because it’s a business interest?” You know, clearly when you’re on boards, you have to be understanding of the worlds that you’re trying to contribute to through that board. So I have got a kind of decision tree that I go through, and obviously, having had that incredible experience of Lastminute.com so early in my life, there’s an underpinning of the digital world that I try and always bring to everything.

**If you don’t mind then, let’s go through your career briefly. What did you want to be when you grew up, when you were a kid, when you started out your career?**

I wanted to be an actress, but very quickly it became clear that that was not going to happen, because I was not as good as I was in my own head – although some people think that now, with all the public speaking I do, it’s sort of the B-Movie star’s role in doing a performance is doing public speaking.

**It is! Public speech is a performance.**

Well, it is a performance, and especially sometimes when you stand up in the Lords, it’s so intimidating. So I wanted to be an actress, and then I wanted to be a newspaper editor. I started my own newspaper when I was about nine, it was called Mondays to Saturdays. And then I wanted to be a prison governor, because I got very heavily interested in criminal justice later in my teenage years. And then I didn’t know what I wanted to do when I left university. So I didn’t have a kind of set career plan, I was just interested in different bits of the world and thought, “I don’t know. I’m kind of dossing about.”

**And that clear curiosity that you have, that's obviously been a thread that's moved things forward, moved the needle in everything that you've done.**

Thank you for saying that, that's a huge compliment to me. I think personally, there are two things that you should just keep at your core as a human being, and the first one is to keep your curiosity. Keep asking questions. That is as true of understanding the technical world as it is in any aspect of your life. I'm not a technologist, I can't code, but I do ask questions, and I am curious and interested in how it works, but also its role in the world. So I think curiosity is the first thing. And then I think kindness and generosity is the second thing. I think if you can anchor yourself in a couple of things, and for me they are those two, you probably can continue to be a good human being.

**I've read quite a few books on leadership, like you have, and some of them are good, some of them are not. I work with 40-odd global leaders, that's what I do in my day job, and one of the things that I've always found is the biggest motivating factor, isn't in these books, and that's temperament. You know, whether you're being told off, or whether it's been a good thing, you can just get a sense of whether someone's a pleasure to work with and work for.**

Yes, that's very interesting. Brent, my co-founder at Lastminute.com, the guy who came up with the idea, he's a fantastic person, a good friend, and he always said the same thing. He said, "When you interview people," and he still does it today, he's an investor, so he's looking at whether he should invest in someone, "It isn't: 'Is their business plan a good one?', or: 'Do they understand the cashflow?' It's actually: 'Would I want to work for this person?'" Because if you can imagine working for the person in whatever capacity, then they're likely to be somebody that can motivate other people and do a good job. And I think that's a really smart way of thinking about things.

**Ah, but let me do the interviewer's trick then and double that question back on you, because would you want to work for yourself? Because I don't like working for myself.**

I don't know!

**I'm a terrible boss, but a reasonably good employee of myself.**

I used to think that I was quite good at this kind of management stuff.

**Self-management thing.**

When I was 28 I thought, "Oh, this is what I'm really good at at Lastminute.com." You know, "These people are here because we're creating a good culture, and I'm quite jolly, and I'm quite good at giving feedback, and I'm quite good at firing people in a kind way," and all that stuff that you associate with "management" – and then recently I realised that I was absolutely useless. I don't think I was clear, and I think I basically managed through tequila. That was not a very effective way.

### **It's a good management style, I've got no problem with it.**

I think we had an incredible culture, but it was much less to do with me and a lot more to do with what we were trying to do, and the higher purpose of making Lastminute.com a success. So I'm not sure I'm as good at it as I thought I was. Hopefully the people who work with me would say that I'm inspiring, I work hard. I hope I don't ask them to do something that I wouldn't do myself. But I know I can be mercurial.

### **Can't we all!**

I can sort of suddenly jump and think, "Oh my God, we should be going over there and doing this thing." Or, "Oh my God, this is an amazing opportunity." I think the people that work with me, I'm sure, just need to keep pinning things down and saying, "No, no, just let's structure it like this." Which is funny, because actually, in myself, I'm quite a structured person, but if you ask my husband, he'd be like, "No, no, no, you're so annoying. You're all about the detail and not getting the stuff done."

### **You've got to be about both.**

I think it's both maybe, but I don't know? I hope I'm nice to work for. I hope they don't think I'm too ridiculous, but they probably do.

### **I don't want to ban all journalistic integrity and turn this into the Praise Martha podcast, but actually, in your defence, I think the very fact that you're prepared to doubt your own leadership style means that you're probably quite a good leader. I think that old type A, alpha male, commander control, tough level of leadership is, if not already dead, is close to death.**

I completely agree with you. When people talk to me about the digital world – and I have this debate with my best friend all the time, she's a lawyer who works with young people, youth justice – she was like, "And why go on about the internet?" and diss it. I'm sort of like, "It's not about the technology, it's about the cultural shifts that are happening." It's about the style which has been enabled more by technology. And I don't think it's the only reason, but I think it's part of the reason that the style you're talking about is slowly dying, because you just can't collaborate and work at scale and pace with that mechanism of leadership. And I find it really fascinating. There was an interview with Jack Ma, the Chinese founder of Alibaba – massive, huge, enormous Chinese eCommerce company – and he said in an interview that he thinks the most successful leaders have to use the empathetic part of their brain. Even just 10, 15 years ago, can you imagine boss of some big FTSE 100 or SMP 500 company saying that the most important thing in leadership was to be in touch with both your empathetic side? I think he also said empirical side. I don't think that's something that people talked about. So that feels like a very quick and rapid shift.

**Old leaders used to be praised for knowing their mind and getting on with it, whereas actually I think having a bit of self-doubt, and being flexible, and being a pragmatist is actually the mark of a good leader.**

Well, I completely agree with you, and I'm not sure I always get it right, but I try to end all the meetings with people I'm working with by saying, "What can I do? How can I help? What else can I do? How can I help you?" And I think, by just having that in your brain, it immediately deflates this attitude of, "I'm in charge, and you do stuff for me." It becomes more about, "We're working in this together. I'm here to help you. We've got to try and do a good job as a team." Not about my ego, or your ego, or anyone's ego. So that's just a trick to try and keep yourself a bit more humble, I think.

**So, how did lastminute.com start then? When did the entrepreneurial flame start to burn it in?**

Well, I think I have been always quite entrepreneurial. My parents were both entrepreneurs. My dad's an academic, but he did lots of self-publishing and started his own businesses on the side. My mum started a business with her best friend. But the reason lastminute.com came about is very simple. Brent Hoberman, you know, it's 20 years ago that we turned on the website, although we were business partners a little bit earlier. He's an incredible guy and an amazing entrepreneur. He does masses of stuff now for the tech entrepreneurial landscape. We'd worked together at this small consulting company, and he'd had the idea of lastminute.com and he asked me to come and help him start it. I said yes, and then off we went.

**It's quite an entrepreneurial leap there, because you had a job that you had to leave.**

Yes, I did, but I was lucky that I had...

**There was risk.**

There was risk, but I was lucky. I had a flat that I could rent a room out in so that I could earn a bit of money to just cover me over. So I hope I never forget all that stuff. You know, we had an incredible education. We both came from upper middle-class backgrounds; we were able to make that leap without thinking, "Oh, my God, I'm not going to be able to feed my family next week." I think it's a bit disingenuous if people like me say, "Oh we took this massive risk." Yes, we took a bit of risk, but we also had a huge safety net around us.

**It's one of those ideas that, in hindsight, seems breathtakingly simple, and I mean that as a compliment.**

More Brent's idea, but yes.

**But they're the best ideas, aren't they? Ones that are simple.**

They are, and everyone's like, "Are you sure that doesn't exist?" But the reason it was clever was because it used the internet for what it was most effectively built for at that time, right? It used it for immediacy, for being a sort of clearing house in a way that you just couldn't do in the offline world. You used to ring up Teletext to find out whether the product was still available.

**I'd go back to that if it was up to me.**

Exactly. So, the internet was being used for something so perfectly suited to its characteristics, and that's why Brent was so smart.

**What are your strongest memories of your time there? They can be about anything. That's a deliberately vague question. Do you have any kind of snapshots of learnings?**

Yes, I have. I've got so many things, as you can imagine. I think about when we were sitting in Brent's flat with the original business plan blaring out on his Bubble Jet printer with the endless noise of the *dit, dit, dit, dit, dit*, where we'd keep rewriting bits and so on, early on. Then, I think about our first office that was up six flights of stairs off Regent Street, and how we nearly killed our new chairman, who was the ex-boss of KLM Airlines. We'd done a big sell on him.

**What, because he just couldn't get up five flights of stairs?**

Yes. Because the lift broke and I could hear him panting. I thought, "Oh, my God. He's a 72-year-old man and in the first board meeting we've already killed him."

**He might have lived longer because of some of those stairs.**

We didn't actually kill him, just to be clear! I think about real excitement when people first started buying things and the product just started flying. And then, I think about the amazing team and the fun that we had when it became clear that the business really was building momentum. And then I think about the IPO, and the incredibly complex time that was, and how we went from being the world's darling to people assuming that we ruined the whole stock market because the stock market crashed. So I think about lots of moments, and they are actually more in my mind because of the 20-year anniversary. We had a party and got people together again from that founder era. Brent very generously gave us all a party, and the energy in the room, I was blown away. I thought, "How many people actually want to come and celebrate where they worked 20 years ago?" Well, it turns out a whole number of people from those early days, and it really felt enormously fun and nice to be back with those people.

**What were the biggest learnings from that time? Is there anything you would have done differently? I don't mean in terms of technicality where you might have floated a month later, or whatever. In terms of your personal learnings.**

We definitely wouldn't have floated a month later, because then the market had crashed from the month earlier. Personally, I think I learned from Brent all the time

about tenacity, about how to pursue opportunities, about how never to give up, how to chase people by calling their mobile phones endless times. I really did learn a lot about being a good entrepreneur from Brent. I learned a lot about myself, about where I was capable and where I wasn't, what I was good at and less good at. I was good at the inspiring thing. I wasn't sometimes good at the patience of the detail of really getting into the nitty gritty of why our customer service process had broken.

**I never trust people who are obsessed with detail. Those people, I'd fire them all.**

No, I think that's wrong. I think really great leaders can do both. They can go from the top to the micro, but I'm not sure that's my particular skill.

**That's the challenge of a leader is that because you can literally do anything in the business, you've got to choose where to put your focus. An immediate opportunity cost of if we're going to focus on sorting the accounts out today, that's at the expense of looking at the sales pipeline.**

Yes, exactly right. I think I learned a lot about just momentum building and PR. Integration of companies. There's lots of specific business things. But, as you can imagine, over those years, going from the age of 25 to 32, you learn everything. You learn everything about yourself, about the world because you know nothing before.

**Now, you want Britain to build a generation of women warriors in tech. How do we get that gender balance and level playing field, because it does seem to me to be quite a testosterone-filled platform.**

Well, it's not just testosterone-filled. When you look at the numbers, they're unbelievably disappointing and dispiriting. There are more women, as a percentage, in the House of Lords than there are in technology; a 1,000-year old institution versus something that didn't even exist 30, 40 years ago. So, I'm not sure we're ever actually going to get to a level playing field, because if you look at the trajectory now, we're actually going backwards, and yet this is a sector that's growing bigger and bigger and bigger. But it doesn't mean we shouldn't focus on it relentlessly. There are lots of initiatives happening, way more than I can ever remember. There's things like teaching girls to code, which is one part of it, about the pipeline. There are companies reflecting on how they can much better recruit women, the subconscious bias they might have within the company. And there are leaders coming out and supporting it and saying that they're going to really try and address the balance, whether it's Intel and the scale that they have, or whether it's smaller companies like the amazing organisation WeTransfer, a British start-up that lives in LA. So, there are lots of things happening. It's hard work. There's no one thing. It's got to be across every single axis of the entire career life cycle for both men and women. But, it's really, really important.

**Some progress is being made though, however small, and incrementally we are heading in the right direction...**

No, we're not actually. We're not.

**Why is that then? I mean, you mentioned earlier things are heading backwards, but how?**

We're not making progress. I am an optimist, but I think we have to be a realist. McKinsey did some work to show when there's going to be gender parity across various different axes, and I looked at the things which interested me. Politics was going to be about 75 years. Awful, but you can imagine I might still be alive if I take the right drugs and put the right face cream on. Business, I think a bit less, maybe 50 years, but then in STEM or anything to do with technology, never – because the trajectory's either flat or backwards. So I think we have to be realistic with that, and I think that's why it needs leadership at the governmental level as well to say, "Hold on a minute. These are the industries of the future." Whatever you think about the robots coming for our jobs, we're going to need to know how to navigate technology. And so, we might not all need to code, but we are all going to need to learn how to be a resilient human being in this world. That's got to be as true for men as for women. We need to focus on it at that kind of social infrastructure level.

**It's difficult, because even this podcast, only a third of the guests have been women. I really do try to get inspiring high-achieving women, but the reality is, in most of the top media jobs, they're all blokes.**

I'm very chuffed to be included, although I think it was a bit of a stitch up, in a list called the Inspiring Fifty, run by a programme that started in the Netherlands. It's 50 inspiring leaders from technology, 50 women leaders from technology. So, look at the 50 women in that list, because I guarantee you, you could pick three or four for your podcast. And you can help address the balance. Some of them are in media, whether they're Alex Mahon from Channel 4, Nicola Mendelsohn from Facebook or other women that you might not know so well. There are so many women out there. We need to help raise their voices, and help them also get seen more than perhaps they are at the minute.

**Is there anything more that government could be doing? Speaking uniquely as a member of the House of Lords, you're a member of the legislature, so you're uniquely placed to do something about it.**

Yes, I think there is more stuff for the government to do. Remember, the House of Lords doesn't make policy, we can only *suggest* things to the government. We're only really a recommending chamber. I think this has to be much more ingrained in government policy. I think we need a much better skills strategy, I think we need more incentives for corporates, I think we need to have a dedicated bunch of resources that go into this. It's not going to happen by chance. It has to be intentful.

**And building on the problems with gender, in terms of other forms of diversity, you're on the record as saying that is atrocious in tech as well.**

Yes, you're right. It's not just gender, it's also ethnic background and socioeconomic background. We're just not going to design good products and services if they come from a bunch of white men who are in their early 20s or 30s. It's just not going to be

the world that is going to serve the challenges that we're facing. So diversity is absolutely core to this.

**What can listeners to this podcast do, who want to be part of the change? What can they do practically? For example, I read recently, we've stopped asking female job applicants their salary, because even though it's a normal thing to do that you ask someone their current salary, and therefore you want to pay them a bit more to attract them, because women are historically underpaid, if you only pay them a tiny bit more of something that's 20% lower than what the man would be, you're actually perpetuating that, even though it's done with the best of intentions. The only way you can do it is to truly have salary and educational blindness.**

Yes, I think those are absolutely the questions to be asking. They've seen again and again, from so many angles, even if you just take the gender off job applications, you get different results. The order in which you interview in, job interviews, whether you see them man-man, man-woman, or woman-woman, it makes a difference to the perception of peoples' abilities. In appraisal systems, women underestimate how much they've achieved in a given year by 50%, and men overestimate by 50%, even on hard targets. This is the cultural shift that we need. Everyone can do something. If you're working in a business and you're appraising your team, think very carefully about how you're doing it for men and women because that then sets the bar in terms of bonus pay, promotion, all those things. Are you providing effective childcare, caring responsibilities across the board, so it's not just for women? My husband and I share childcare for our children and it's incredibly important that we enable and facilitate that, because it can't just always fall to women, because that means they're never going to get back into working the same ways. So, I think you've got to look at every single bit of the working lifecycle and re-imagine it from a much more shared process of equality, and bring women into that conversation. And then judge companies in performance on whether they're doing the things that they set out to do.

**Well, this podcast is about you, not me, but I will say I am very proud of my own business. Two thirds of my team are women and I'm very, very proud of that.**

There's you go, that's why you're so imminently successful.

**And the business is all the better for it. You've pre-empted me. Now, we're recording this, from the listener's point of view, a few weeks earlier, so your guest editorship of the Today programme is imminent. It's only days away, from the listener's point of view. Are you going to take that time in the editor's chair to highlight some of these issues? Can you give us a sneak preview of what you're going to do?**

Yes. I can give you...

**Or, do you know yet?**

I do know, yes, something. Obviously, most of the programme's agenda has to be determined by the news of the day, but hopefully, because it's Christmas, there won't be too many politicians screwing up anything. But you never know.

### **There'll still be Brexit.**

There probably will be some Brexit. I can't ban it from the programme completely! You know what? I have somewhat shifted how I imagined my programme over the course of the last two months, because it just feels as though we are staring at a huge black elephant in the room. I like this expression – I heard someone talk about it recently. We have white elephants that we can't see, or we haven't quite addressed, but there are also black elephants where we can see them, we know they're there, but we're still ignoring them. The climate crisis feels like the black elephant that we are all ignoring. I am really going to try to make a lot of my programme about why this is. Why have we got a failure of leadership? What are the things that are happening that are going to help innovate us out of this challenge, and how can we keep the conversation as part of all of our daily priorities?

**We had Alan Rusbridger on the podcast recently, and he's a very passionate climate advocate. He was saying the problem with climate, in terms of journalism, is it's not newsy. It's a cataclysmic threat to humanity itself, but it's not something that's going to come up with a news line on a Wednesday. So it's very difficult for journalists to focus it into terms of a story. It's a big challenge.**

Yes, maybe. I defer to Alan! Clearly, I've never edited a newspaper, despite my earlier attempts. I think that's right-ish, but if you think about even since Alan left the Guardian, I would argue the daily news cycle of the California fires, the tsunamis you're seeing in Southeast Asia, the rising water levels, there is always something. That's part of the point. There was another report yesterday, or the day before, I'm sure you saw, about the effect on the US economy. So, this is becoming news, because it is news. I think that, in a way, you have to take a moral view and say as a newspaper editor, or as a member of the House of Lords, or a board member, or whatever angle I'm coming at it from, and just say, "What can I do? What voice can I use? How can I re-engineer some of the stories that I'm telling, the messages I want to spin, the things that I want my organisations to do, in order to make sure that we have the best shot at being here in the next 50 years?"

**People are making changes. I recently bought a Tesla, so I'm doing my part as well. I'm also vegan.**

Yes, me too.

**And that was one of the reasons I wanted to mention that, because it's not just governments and corporations that need to change. Consumers need to change. Cheap chicken, factory-farmed meat, is one of the greatest threats to the environment, in terms of oil and water wastage, antibiotic overuse. But, people want their chicken wings six for £1.**

I'm with you. I'd say I'm 90% vegan. Sometimes I have a small amount of fish, but that's shifted a lot for me in the last year. I agree, but we can't put the onus just on individuals. It's got to be the tripartite piece of governments, businesses, and individuals like any major societal change. But I think the thing that I've begun to realise is, and my husband has given me confidence in this, I used to think, "Well, I can't really speak about the environment or get involved in this because I'm not an expert." You know, I'm not in the detail of the science. I couldn't tell you with absolute certainty what the Paris Climate Accord was. You know, all those things. I thought, "Screw that." I am very lucky to have this small voice in the world, even if it's quite marginal. I understand a bit about the digital world. Use your voice for the things that matter. And, to me, this is just increasingly the only thing that matters. From my angle, it's like, "Okay, how can I..." In the Twitter board, to keep saying, "What are we doing about the climate crisis?" How can I say, when I'm standing up in the Lords, "Talk about the climate crisis"? How can I, when I'm asked to give a speech about innovation and technology, say, "You need to keep innovating around the climate crisis"? So I think, you have to think about your own networks, your own influence, and how to make the shifts, to make sure that the next decade is as positive as possible.

**Are there any kind of existential conflicts, or conflicts in principle between the principles of free speech and those of, say, climate change? I have some friends that are climate change deniers, and Twitter's one of their biggest platforms. Even though what they're doing is completely factually, as well as morally, wrong, I don't want to deny them a platform for it. So, how do you reconcile that, being on the board of Twitter?**

Yes, it's really interesting. Of course, I have existential questions in lots of bits of my working life, whether it might be a conflict around things that I'm doing. You often feel it in the Lords. How do I vote on this particular thing? Or, where it's important to use your voice. And the same with Twitter. It's the most conflicting thing that I do – but I've made the decision that I would rather be in the conversation at this particular point in my career. Bear in mind, I'm only a non-executive director, I'm not an executive. My role there is to challenge and provoke, and I hope as long as I do that, I'm doing a good job, and I can sleep at night. If I feel like I'm just going there, ticking the boxes, not challenging them, then I wouldn't feel like I was doing a good job. I hope, if you asked any of my fellow board members, they'd say, "Yes, she tries to keep us honest as much as we listen to any of our board directors." We have this debate all the time. I might take a different view of freedom of speech, and I think it's really easy to underestimate the European culture around this versus the West Coast culture. I think it was one of the things I found most fascinating when I first went on the board. I came back and I said, "Oh, my God, there's a completely different view of what freedom of speech is." They don't actually think there are boundaries around it. Whereas I, as a European and a British citizen, think, "Of course there are boundaries!" Some things should just have a cliff edge. I think Twitter is moving in that direction more and more, but it's a journey, because they have this consecrated right in their amendments to their constitution, right?

**They're absolutely evangelical about it. They see it as parts of who they are, this first amendment rights of free speech at all costs.**

And what Jack would say to your point about climate deniers is, well, it's important that the platform surfaces these things...

### **So you can talk about them.**

So that journalists, academics, people can take them down. I think that's right to a degree. I think it's not my job to say, "This is how we should do it." My job is to say, "Okay, but have you thought about this side of it? Have you thought about this framework?" Whatever it might be. So that's what I'm trying to do. If I feel like I'm not contributing, then I would step away from that board.

**What fascinates me now is that, in terms of the globalised environment in which we operate, is the decreasing power of the nation states. I mean, when I was a kid, you could always complain to the local council or the national government about what was going wrong. Now if something is going wrong, it might be a problem with PayPal or it might be a problem with Twitter, you know, something's that is legal to say in the UK on Twitter or in America, about, say, Holocaust denial, would be criminally illegal in France and Germany. Some would say rightly so. That's why I do feel sorry for these globalised corporations, because ultimately they can't have varying standards or else it's going to be a nightmare.**

Well, I feel quite sorry for them, but I also think some of them are pretty big and can deal with this stuff. It's their job, and I think that what's interesting to think about. Are we going to have this sort of patchwork of regulation, or are we going to find that there's more value systems that sort of come together? Is the US going to move a bit closer to Europe over time? What's going to happen in Asia? And then one of the things I'm very interested in, partly because of the work I've been doing in security and defence, is... and then we've got this completely separate ecosystem about China, Russia, North Korea, Iran, which are building a whole different set of values, again in technology. That I think is also a very important backdrop to all this.

### **What's your next challenge? What haven't you achieved yet?**

Oh, my gosh! I don't feel like I've hardly achieved anything. You know, if I think about my next challenge, I break it down into chunks of stuff. I absolutely want to try and help Doteveryone build this movement for responsible technology. You know, I gave the Dimpleby Lecture in 2015 on BBC One, and I just talked about how I thought that the tide was turning a bit in our relationship with technology, and that people were feeling more anxious, and we needed to have some new organisations and institutions that were really fighting to still use technology, but use it in a responsible way, an inclusive way, and a fairer way, and Doteveryone is doing some amazing work helping think about what that looks like. What can corporates do when they build a responsible technology toolkit? How can you actually use it to build better technology in the future? We're working with legislators and government to think about, what does responsibility mean in terms of policy making. And we're encouraging individuals to think about how to feel more empowered by tech as opposed to overpowered by it.

### **That's an incredibly broad reach.**

It is, but we're a lobbying and influencing organisation. We're building some things to show what we mean by change, so then we hope partners will scale, and we're not trying to do massive operational and execution across all those different things. We work with partners to achieve the scale. So I really want to keep helping as much as I can for everyone to stay focused on that and do a good job. And I think the moment is now to make sure that technology is seen as a positive force, because it is helping people with the right things in their lives. We don't need more pizza delivery services, we need technology to be deployed for the most vulnerable people in situations that are going to make their lives feel marginally less cataclysmically bad than they might when they are living through them. So that's enormously motivating for me. Secondly, I want to continue to be a strong voice in surprising places. And I didn't specifically say about being a woman, but it often is about being that. You know, again to go back to this defence and security stuff, I feel that it has been completely fantastic to have the opportunity to learn a bit more about the defence and security world. It's not something that I thought I would naturally fall into. But very often, I am now the lone female voice speaking on these subjects in the environments I'm in, but also a voice that is saying different kinds of things about, maybe the world of aircraft carriers is going to be less important than the world of people who look a bit like me and can talk about coding. So that's important to just keep provoking and challenging around how we're making decisions about our safety and security. That's the second thing. And then on a personal level, as I said, I just feel as though, wherever I can, I want to make sure that in the next 10-15 years, when my kids look at me and say, "Mum, what did you do about the climate crisis?" That I can't stand in front of them and say, "I'm sorry. I screwed that one up." I just think we all have to think really carefully about how we are using our voices. Not at all difficult, any of those things, obviously!

### **I was going to say, yes, I kind of just accepted that really, given that you've got all these superhuman levels of goals.**

None of those things are easy, but I just want to make sure I am entreating myself in what I want to do.

### **I mean, people are inspired by your personal journey as well. Do you feel like more people, and particularly more women, have turned to enterprise and being an entrepreneur as a result of watching your journey, that power that you have to inspire?**

That's very kind. It's a bit hard to think about stuff like that when you're the person that's in the centre of it. I am always really overwhelmed and happy to meet people who say that they've taken anything from my story. It could be, you know, "You're a woman in technology, it made me not be frightened of it," through to, "You made me have a go on the internet," through to, "You helped me to start a business." Or, as people often come up to me, "I had a bad accident," or, "I hurt myself," or whatever it was. So, even if it's a tiny spark of something, I feel very privileged to be able to help people with that. And I think that... and again, I don't want to sound pompous or grand or arrogant, but if you can channel that positivity in your life, it's incredibly empowering. I used to think... I was a bit sort of frightened of it, or thought it made

me sound like a bit of a grand person to say, “Yes, I have this ability to inspire,” but if you can recognise that there are bits of what you’ve done that can help the next generation, or your peers, or whoever it might be, then it’s a really important thing to own and drive and not be scared of.

**I know you’re campaigning on accessible work places, and have been for a while since your accident. When I was on the City of York Council many years ago, Ken King was chair of the disability panel. Someone in the public gallery once challenged him to spend a day in a wheelchair, just go around the streets of York. And he did, to his credit. And he was shocked he couldn’t get in about 60% of the shops. This is the chair of the Disability Access Committee of the council, who assumed that every shop was accessible. Only when he actually got in a chair did he realise he couldn’t get into Boots. Do you think that what happened to you has given you that sense of empathy?**

Well, I hope I was always an empathetic person, but it’s definitely... you know, when you’re managing physical challenges all the time, it definitely gives you a different sense of space and physicality around you. And then also, obviously, hopefully you see things from a different end of the spectrum. Ability Net, the charity I am one of the patrons of, it’s not just about accessibility in the workplace – it’s about how to use technology to better enable people to work or be more effective in whatever they want to do. A piece of that is obviously using technology to help people be in work more. It’s a very different relationship you have with the outside world when you have to walk with a stick. I walk with a stick outside. Sometimes that can be quite a good thing, because you can whack people out of your way!

**I love whacking people!**

Yes, but most of the time it just makes you feel a bit more anxious and vulnerable. I don’t really like being in crowds. It’s much harder to go on the Tube. All that kind of stuff. And I’m lucky; I can walk. I can’t imagine what it feels like if you’re in a wheelchair and you get stuck in situations. So, yes, it definitely changes just your perspective on movement and moving around.

**I mean, it’s that lack of empathy if you don’t know what people are going through. I often see middle aged, white, successful men on the television saying, “Well, there’s no discrimination or challenges, because I’ve never suffered any.” And I’m thinking, “Well, duh.”**

Exactly. And to go back to Twitter for a minute, and I don’t think the original founding team would mind me saying this, because they’ve said it publicly themselves. But one of the reasons they just missed the idea that there was going to be trolling and abuse and all this nastiness on the platform is because they were four relatively young, white men who’d... not ‘had an easy time of it’, but they were nice people who were interested in punk rock and went to gigs and were great coders. They didn’t walk down the street like every single woman on the planet late at night feeling a bit vulnerable. And if you have that in your psyche, because that’s just the way the world is constructed, I think you build the world in a different way. That is why diversity is so important, because you cannot underestimate how much your own

bubble, whatever that bubble is, is hard to burst without having the other voices in the room.

**It's the old thing about what are your blind spots? You can't really answer that, because otherwise they wouldn't be blind spots.**

Exactly.

**Someone has to point them out to you.**

Absolutely. Or just different thinking. You cannot have all the ideas in the world, and you'll have better ideas if you involved a diverse set of voices.

**You mentioned trolling there, actually. It's an interesting question, again, a kind of existential one, that I don't know the answer to. There's obviously quite a bit of a sewer on Twitter and the Daily Mail comments, you know the below the line type stuff. And I've always wondered, I've always been fascinated with, has there always been unpleasant people that have just now been given a platform so that they can say horrible things about female celebrities on The Daily Mail online comments or troll people on Twitter? Or is it something that the technology itself has created?**

I don't believe human beings are nasty people. I don't really even believe in this idea of a nasty person. Clearly, some people have massive mental health challenges and some people have very sociopathic tendencies, whatever it might be. But fundamentally, I think the way you're brought up, your background, what you've faced, your lived experience tend to be the things that make you. And so I think we all start from a good place, not a bad place. I think that what's happened with technology is that it has enabled a very light touch way of getting rid of some of your anger, some of your kind of sometimes ignorance, sometimes arrogance, whatever it might be. And I think that, very often, the people that you find commenting brutally on online articles, or being so violent on social media, are people that you might find are rude to people in a shop or walk down the street and are a bit mean, but actually, in real life, I don't think they'd say those things face-to-face to people. The technology has allowed it to be a bit too easy to be unpleasant. I think the makers of that technology recognise it now. And I think we have to be very, very careful in how we're working with children around this stuff, and the kind of behaviours we're displaying. But I don't think it's too late. I think we can pull back from this. I think that the nature of human beings is still... I'm fundamentally optimistic about people. I think people have a huge capacity for kindness and goodness.

**There is an element, though, that technology does disconnect you from the consequences.**

Absolutely.

**I'm paraphrasing now, so I know our listeners will correct me. But the airman who dropped the bomb on Hiroshima, someone said, "How did he do it?" And he said, "Well, I just pressed the button."**

In his defence, he was trained to do that. And I'm sure he didn't sit lightly with the consequences. And the same is true that you don't face into the consequences of what you're doing very often online. It's easy to... you know, I find that sometimes if I'm firing off something, if someone's being a bit mean to me, I think, "Oh, just stand back. You're a board member of Twitter, you don't need to respond to this person. Be a grown up." But that's not the way that the technology has been facilitated, and I think that the people that are making this stuff are beginning to recognise that. Certainly, I speak from Twitter's point of view, you don't want things to be negative, because they just want things to be positive. So I think the next decade is going to be very important in realigning this stuff.

**There's that old cartoon, isn't there, where there's a husband burning the midnight oil. His wife's asking him to come to bed. He's like half eleven and he said, "I can't come to bed, because there's someone wrong on the internet." He's got to correct them.**

Yes, and I think it's a good kind of analogy for stuff. But again, I think it's just very important to put this in a longer term context. I studied ancient and modern history, so I try and look back to 500 BC sometimes when I'm thinking about this stuff.

**There wasn't Twitter then.**

There wasn't anything then, no!

**We can confirm that.**

There was definitely, no. But there were moments of huge change and shift. I think really in 1998, this was the beginning of the web in the UK. That's only 20 years ago. This is stuff that's going to take us a long time to work through and sort out. And I think the next 50-year timeframe, some things will not go so well, of course. And I'm not blindly naïve about what we have to do to change things, but I still believe in the enormous power of technology to be helpful in some of the biggest challenges that we face, if we deploy it in the right way and if we keep asking the right questions. So I think we've got to just recognise that, whoa, we're coming up now with some of the unintended consequences of some of the things we've built. So let's roll back from them, deal with them, and move forward in a positive way.

**Last question then, because I'm mindful that we're running out of time. We have a lot of younger listeners that are very ambitious. They're aspiring journalists and students, and so on and so forth. And a lot of them listening to this will be inspired by your journey and want to become the next you 20 years from now. What would your advice be to them?**

Well, firstly one not serious thing, but serious, wear your freaking seatbelt. I did not wear my seatbelt, which is why I ended up with broken bones in 28 places in my body. So I did say that. Please wear your seat belts if you've got a grain of ambition.

**It reminds me of that wear sunscreen song by Baz Luhrmann.**

No, not sunscreen. Wear your seat belt! But to your bigger point, you know, and it probably sounds absolutely absurd to a younger generation, because they're looking at me and thinking, "You dinosaur. You can remember life before the internet." But just because you can use it all the time doesn't mean you understand it. And I do really think that if I look to the world a generation below us will face, inevitably AI is going to be doing a lot more of the actual coding and building and the running of all of this stuff. What is it that is going to be valuable always? And to my mind, it's back to what we started talking about, which is being curious, learning about the world, showing resilience in the face of adversity, being able to cope with ambiguity, being kind to your fellow human beings. You know, robots are never going to be human. That's going to take an incredibly long time. I mean, even the most optimistic people worrying about AI think that's an if/perhaps/sometime in the next millennia. But what is definitely true is there are human bits of the world that will always need humans. So I think if I was young and I was ambitious, I'd double down on being a great human.

**Martha, it's been a hugely enjoyable podcast and a great chat. Thank you ever so much for your time.**

Thanks for having me. And the cat wasn't too noisy!