

Martin Brunt

Crime correspondent, Sky News

Media Masters – March 7, 2019

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

Welcome to Media Masters, a series of one-to-one interviews with people at the top of the media game. Today I'm joined by Martin Brunt, crime correspondent for Sky News. Then the chief reporter for the Sunday Mirror, he joined the channel as part of their launch line-up in 1989. Since then, he's become one of the best-known faces in TV news, exposing fraudsters, covering criminal trials and investigating murderers and paedophiles across the globe, as well as reporting from the first Gulf War and the Balkan wars. His knowledge is often sought for crime documentaries, providing insight into cases such as Jack the Ripper, the Hatton Garden diamond heist and the disappearance of Madeleine McCann.

Martin, thank you for joining me.

A pleasure.

So, Martin, the crime beat must be a mixture of elation that your reporting is helping bring people to justice and seeing that justice is done, but also seeing humanity at its worst.

Well, you see humanity at all levels at its worst, of course, but sometimes at its best. I talk to lots of villains, I do stories about some awful people – but I also meet heroes, and people who are the heroes of some of those stories. But I always thought, when I chose to do crime, that I would be seeing all shades of life, all shades of people. And it's something I wouldn't get if I was covering the health beat or the education beat or the showbiz beat or, heaven forbid, the royal beat.

And what is it that interests you the most? Is it the villains, or is it the heroes?

Well, I suppose it's the villains. They tend to be more interesting. A few years ago, people like me sometimes had direct contact with villains. I'm talking about some of the Great Train Robbers who I got to know, and people from other famous crimes. And perpetrators of less famous crimes. But there was a time when people like that had an interest in talking to people like me. But I think as time has gone on, that's changed. And there is a notorious crime group in London known as the A-team, and

I couldn't imagine sitting down over a beer or a cup of coffee and shooting the breeze with somebody like that, or the leader of an Albanian people-trafficking gang. It's very seldom today that I do actually sit down and talk to anybody from that side of what I do.

Has the nature of villains changed over the decades that you've covered it? Are there kind of nice villains, if you could call them that, honourable villains within their world view? And you mentioned then about the Albanian traffickers. They just seem to be horrible nasty people with no redeeming qualities. Or are they all wrong 'uns of just different persuasions?

Well, I don't want to paint too rosy a picture. Even those people that I knew at one stage, I think I always believed that however much they were full of bonhomie, and happy to talk to me and share stories and share their experiences, and it would give me a fascinating insight into their life, I was always conscious that they were often people who'd done some very bad things – and when they were doing them, hadn't really thought too much about their victims. So it might have been easy to lose sight of that, but I like to think that I never did. And I never saw them as sometimes the way they saw themselves, as latter-day Robin Hoods. I don't think I was ever tempted to see them in that light. But it's always interesting, I think, to talk to villains, and find out what drives them, what they feel about their crimes, whether they have any sense of remorse. And they tend to be far more interesting to talk to than police officers or lawyers or judges or the many other people that I meet in this job.

Because society tends to romanticise certain types of villain, like the Great Train Robbers for example, and of course rightly condemns violent criminals, paedophiles, and so on.

Yes. I mentioned the Great Train Robbers, and I did get to know two or three of them. And as I said, they sometimes like to portray themselves as latter-day Robin Hoods. And of course, a lot of people argue that villains like them were glamorised in a string of movies, but I don't think that you could argue that they really were glamorous figures. And certainly in terms of the Great Train Robbers, one or more of them, many years after having served their time for the Great Train Robbery, turned to other sorts of crimes. One at least was convicted of drug offences, and I imagine embarked on that latter stage of their career without any real thought to the victims of the drug trade.

Has it coloured the way that you view humanity, in a sense, that you're immersed in covering wrongdoing for the wider public? I mean, I'm not scared when I'm in the house on my own, but if I've watched a horror film when I'm on my own then I'm convinced the demon nun is going to come and get me! I mean, if you are if you are immersed in all of that kind of wrongdoing all the time, does it colour your view of humanity? Are you slightly more cynical?

I'm not sure that I'm more cynical. I think it's important that people do understand that there are bad things going on. Most people don't have any experience of crime, and most people don't become the victims of crime. But I always think when I'm talking to my kids that I always tell them there's a very thin line between life and

death. Without trying to scare them, I do insist on telling them that they do have to be very thoughtful about where they go, what time of day or night they're out on their own, who they're with – because I do see the awful results of the kind of crimes that I worry about being inflicted on my children. You can look down the daily list at the Old Bailey, and I do this sometimes as an exercise. How many courts are there, 18 or 19 courts? And if you just look at a snapshot of each crime that's being investigated or being aired in each courtroom, you get an idea that there are terrible things happening all over London all the time – but for most people, they don't see it.

It's the whole kind of Nick Ross at the end of Crimewatch when he used to say, "Do sleep well, don't have nightmares."

Yes, well if you're in danger of having nightmares you shouldn't watch programmes like Crimewatch, or watch my reports on Sky News! But of course people aren't going to make that kind of decision, and crime films, crime series, have a huge audience. So I guess people do like to read and hear about those awful things, but probably mostly safe in the knowledge that they aren't going to be affected by them unless they're very, very unlucky.

I've got tons of questions, but one sprung to mind just then which is, do you think that in Britain that we have our approach to crime right in terms of our criminal justice process? I read a book by The Secret Barrister recently that said that we're chronically under-investing in representation, which is not doing anyone any favours.

Yes. I spend a lot of time looking at, or experiencing, the criminal justice system at work.

So for example, in Norway they invest heavily in reducing recidivism and educating prisoners, and they try to treat people when they're in prison with a genuine focus on rehabilitation, whereas here there's a bit more of a slightly Daily Mail focus about retribution, that that person must be punished. But if you are going to let someone out, then you have to invest properly in rehabilitating them.

Yes. Rehabilitation, of course, is a big part of sending people to prison. But I do believe there has to be an element of punishment, and I'm not sure whether the balance is always right. I sit through cases where I see somebody who yes, okay, I do accept the jury's verdict that they're guilty, and then I hear that they're being sent away to prison for far more years than I think is justified. But I think you have to judge these things on a case-by-case basis.

It must happen the other way of course, that someone's acquitted, and even though they're legally innocent, you must think when you're driving home, "They did it."

Well, my experience over the past few years is that juries tend to get things right. There was a time when it was very easy to get out of jury service. I've seen people waiting in the big jury panel at the Old Bailey, or any other court, waiting for the

selection of the 'twelve good men and true'. And then, when their name is called, going up to the judge and whispering in his ear. And in the past, some years ago, anybody who didn't want to serve on a jury for whatever reason, they had kids they had to take to school, or their job meant that they couldn't devote the time, or they had a holiday booked, we're often told, "Okay, that's fine, we'll just go through whoever's left." You ended up with jurors who were either the unemployed or the unemployable. Now the laws have been tightened up, the rules have been tightened up much more. It's very difficult to persuade a judge that you've got a good enough excuse to avoid jury service. So you tend to end up with pretty good-thinking jurors, and you don't have them nodding off like you used to. They seem to me, in the most part, very attentive. They're methodical, or they appear to be methodical, in how they go through stuff when I'm watching them in court. Of course, I don't have any insight into their deliberations in the jury room, but mostly I think the juries that I've observed over the past few years tend to get their verdicts right.

You've got an amazing reputation for getting inside information; the police often say, "Martin knows more than we do." How do you go about getting your stories? I'm obviously not asking you to name your sources, but what is a typical day for you? How do you go about your own personal news-gathering process?

Well, as a specialist reporter you are far more valuable to your news editors if you can bring in your own stories, and every correspondent, every specialist reporter, is encouraged to do that. And quite honestly, if you can spend more time doing your own stories than being spoon-fed a diary story, your life is much more interesting. You can't suddenly get into the job and find that there's a story here and a story there, or people out of the blue are going to phone you with ideas and tip-offs and so forth. You have to earn people's trust, and that generally means getting to know them over a long period to an extent that they will trust you. They will perhaps tell you something that you can't use at the moment, but it might be useful some way down the line. You need to stay in touch with your contacts. And I think one thing that I'm quite good at – and I think everybody should adopt this – it's not to phone up a contact when you need something or you want something, but to phone people as much as you can from time to time just to say hello, just to meet for a coffee, with no agenda. Because I think if people felt that you were simply milking them for stories and their knowledge all the time, just looking for a story all the time, then your relationship would probably peter out.

And presumably though, when someone's been arrested for example, there's a linear process that you can then follow. You're going to stay with that process where they're going to be bailed or not, and then put on trial or not, and the coverage of the trial, their subsequent acquittal and release, or conviction and appeal, that there's a process that you can kind of stay on board with. You must have multiple strands of activity at any one point where you're following say, 20 cases.

Yes, I try and pick and choose those that I stick with, and they tend to be the bigger stories. But yes, certainly if it's something that's got wide publicity, it's been a high-profile story, then I, as the crime reporter, should be covering that story from

beginning to end. But of course, that can take a very long time. Police investigations can take months or years. But if I have done a lot of work on the investigation, of course I'm interested if they make an arrest, and I want to find out who that person is, and I want to, if they're charged, I want to be in court for the first appearance, then there tends to be a bit of a lull. But if you've done the investigation, if you've done the first court appearance, you make an effort to get to know the lawyers involved. You inevitably will have got to know the cops during the investigation, and if they will take your calls – and increasingly they won't, particularly police officers – it's important to keep in contact and just get an idea of how quickly or otherwise the judicial process is moving, and know when key court dates are coming up, and try and get some idea of the evidence that's going to be presented at the trial. And then, as for trials, well, we tend at Sky News to blow a bit hot and cold on covering trials. They don't lend themselves to television.

They're not visual, are they?

No, they're not. And my boss, John Reilly, the head of Sky News, is a very keen supporter of the idea of getting cameras into court. Now, it's happened to a very small degree – supreme court judgements, appeal court judgments, in some rare cases are filmed – but I met the new DPP the other day, and he told me he wasn't a fan of cameras in court, and I think he said he'd told my boss that. So between them, the DPP and my boss probably aren't going to see cameras in court. Certainly not in my time, I'm in the twilight of my career, so I'm not going to see it – and, to be honest, I'm not a fan of them. Because I think it's my job, as a representative of the public, to go into court and come out and paint a picture, in my words, of what they can't see. I think that's very important, and I suppose if you had cameras in court routinely, then people like me to a degree would be put out of a job.

I've never smuggled anything into the country, but whenever I come back through customs, even though I'm innocent I still feel a tiny bit guilty that I'm being watched. And my worry would be, if I saw a murder or a fight in a pub and I was called as a witness, for me personally it would put a lot of stress on me if I knew not only was I in the witness box, but also Sky News was covering it live, and I would presumably be on some kind of split screen situation. That would possibly undermine my ability to give evidence. So that's the argument.

I've given evidence a couple of times, and it is quite stressful, because you're never quite sure what you're going to be asked, and of course one side is trying to trip you up. I mean, it wasn't a terribly comfortable experience, and I've got to do it again potentially later this year. So I don't look forward to it. But I did have one experience that resulted very positively, when I gave evidence on behalf of a friend of mine who'd been arrested and charged with bribery and corruption because of his relationship with a police officer, and it was a rather weird experience, because I gave evidence for the defence but I was treated more like an expert witness and was asked about relationships between police and journalists, and how that works, and how it should work, and the dangers, and the positive side of it. And my very old friend, who was in the dock, was acquitted. I was his only witness, and it was a badly put together prosecution, and I was asked some daft questions by the prosecutor,

and I pointed out two mistakes that she had made, and there was a danger of the jury thinking I was getting a bit cocky, so I had to be kind of conscious of that.

But if you don't correct the mistake, then it is therefore true.

Absolutely. They were glaring errors, and she had not done her homework, which I thought was quite appalling. Anyway, the great result was, when the jury came back, they acquitted my friend, and I was quite surprised but I was grateful for having played a part in his acquittal, and an hour later we were drinking champagne in our favourite dive bar in Blackfriars.

It could have gone the other way. The jury might have convicted your friend and then they might have been...

Yes. I could have said something out of turn, I could have got my facts wrong, but thankfully I didn't. But I think it's important to get involved on those rare occasions, because it does really give you an insight, as a court reporter, to what witnesses are going through. I've seen all sorts of courtroom dramas; people shouting and bawling, people in tears... there was a famous case at Croydon Magistrates Court, the young football fan who was being done for the punch-up with Eric Cantona – people with long memories will remember that. And this chap, whose name I can't remember, was convicted of assault and was told that he would have to spend a month in prison, and he made absolutely no response to that. But then the prosecutor got up and said all to the magistrates we also want a football ban. So the magistrate said, "You'll go to prison for a month and you will also be banned from football grounds for a year." And that's the thing that really annoyed him. And at this, he leapt out of the dock, ran across the benches in front of the magistrates and threw himself at the prosecutor. He got a grip around his neck and pulled him to the floor. The prosecutor managed to draw himself up and was straining to get away from this guy and pushing himself towards the press benches, pleading for our help. At which point the doors burst open in half a dozen cops came in and battered this guy to the floor.

A button will have been pressed under the desk.

Yes. And dragged him off. That's the most dramatic courtroom moment I've sat through. But there have been plenty of others. But fulfilling that role as a witness, god forbid I haven't been a defendant, but it does give you an insight into the job as a court reporter. You begin to understand better how people are behaving in court, and you can understand the stresses that they're going through, and perhaps realise why they're not as erudite as you think they might be, or their memory is failing them. It's a good insight.

I'm going to talk about the press's relationship with the police in particular in a second, but just to finish off on the court, what interests me is how you visualise it. Because obviously, I've been watching you on Sky for decades. When I think of you doing your job, I think of you stood outside the court talking to camera with the coat of arms, saying, "This is what's just happened." How do you actually manage your time? Because you physically

can't broadcast on a 24-hour rolling news channel if you're in court. I'm not sure whether you're allowed to tweet or whatever, but you're off air in court, and when you're outside the court, do you have someone else in court that's texting you updates? How does it actually work in terms of time management? You can't be in two places at once.

I can't. I often wish I could be!

That was quite a rambling question.

It's okay, I know what you're driving at. It's changed over the years. You are these days allowed to tweet in court. I mean, that was a battle that we had to fight, and we eventually won it. There are still a few occasions where I've been told that we can't. I can't remember the last time that happened, but it may have been about some very sensitive evidence that was being given by a particularly vulnerable witness, or something like that. I don't think it was it was a judge's order. I think the judge said, "Look, it would be very helpful if this didn't happen," and I think we tended to agree. We work under so many restrictions in court. We don't roll over if we're asked to restrict ourselves voluntarily, but there are occasions when I think it does make sense. But we challenge most restrictions to what we do, because there are so few things that you can do in court. But in terms of my time management, sometimes I will have a field producer with me, sometimes I won't. And it is a bit difficult to take note of what's being said, because sometimes it's being said very quickly. So I've kept my shorthand up to a reasonable degree, but I also have to kind of split my brain in half and make some bullet points. Because at some stage I'm going to be sent a message by my news desk, who perhaps are reading PA copy, and I'm going to be asked to dash out and do an instant live. And if your head is full of two hours of evidence, it can be very difficult to be precise about the points you want to get over. So half of my brain is writing my shorthand, following what witnesses and so forth are saying, the other half is writing bullet points so that I can run out if I have to, if I am asked to, and just do a brief summary of what's been said. It does help if I have a colleague with me, and one of the things that we have developed is the live blog where the person with me – and me to an extent, as far as I can – will tweet contemporaneously what's being said. But it has to be a big case that we think will attract lots of people on Twitter. At the end of the day, and I go back and I look at the 58 tweets that I've sent, I see that very few have been retweeted. I've got an old ex-cop friend of mine who is a big Twitter user, and if he's watching me bash out this stuff every two minutes from inside a court, he'll send me a yawn emoji or something. He says that people aren't that bothered. But we believe they are.

I disagree with him. I follow your live tweets, and just because I don't retweet you – because I don't want to spam my own followers if they're not interested in the live updates from this trial – it doesn't mean that I'm not interested in it. Just me viewing your tweets is a good service. But just on the time management thing, I know it's a particularly obscure point, but it actually cuts into the conflict that I have as a viewer, because let's say there's a guilty verdict, I want you to be in the press gallery of the court so that you can tell me how the defendant reacted as a viewer, but I also want you to be stood outside the court at that moment to bring me that news first. So how do you

reconcile those two frankly conflicting priorities? Is it then you watch the defendant and then there's that dash? But even in that seven-minute dash, another news channel might have got it to air quicker.

Yes. Yes we are often on the big cases in competition with our rivals, particularly BBC 24 hours and ITN don't have a 24-hour channel any more, so they've gone out of the picture. But we're still in competition with the BBC, and we all want to be right first with those big verdicts. I ideally would like to be in two places at once. I do want to see the reaction of the person in the dock on a big case, particularly on a big case where you feel the evidence could go either way in the jury's mind. I can't always work out what the verdict is going to be. On those occasions, if it's a very big thing, then I will be outside, plugged into our gallery, talking to them, and we will be waiting for my colleague to either tweet or to text message a number of us, including the news editor, the producer in the gallery, and me, and then I have to make sure that I've got my phone open.

You must have so many spare batteries that you carry.

Yes. And nobody is ringing me. You have to put it on a plane mode, and you have to make sure that it doesn't die on you and it is fully charged. And then I'll have all my notes from covering the trial. And so the text will come in, and I will get it roughly at the same time as the producer. And if they're really on the ball they will come straight to me. There have been times when we are so keen to be first that we will be in court, and will be told that the jury are coming back, and there's usually somebody, one of the lawyers, defence or prosecution or one of the ushers or the court clerk, who will tell you they're coming back with a verdict. Because juries come back all the time to ask questions without having made their decision. So when we know that they're coming back with a verdict, I will run out, I will call, or my colleague will call the gallery, and sometimes they will get the presenter to start talking to me live on air in the hope that I can keep talking until the text comes or the tweet comes that tells me what the verdict has been. And in most cases that will work. I'm the guy who stands outside a courtroom door waiting for somebody more interesting to come out while I rabbit on and fill the time. So yes, it's kind of juggling all these balls, but also making sure while you're talking that you've got one eye on the camera, one eye on your phone waiting for that verdict. But I think the simplest way of getting over any difficulty or awkwardness is to say to the presenter – Kay or John or whatever – that while we're talking I'm keeping an eye on my phone, because that verdict is going to come in shortly. So instead of the viewer thinking you're looking a bit shifty, looking from the camera to your phone, if you explain what you're doing it makes sense to the viewer and you can actually get on with what you're trying to do without deflecting people's attention.

And do you still get a thrill from breaking news? I was in the pub about four or five years ago with a friend of mine who works at Sky, and he got some trusted information via text, via a source that he trusted, and he rang the newsroom straight away and said, "I know this to be true, it's nailed on. But this is the case." And we were in the pub, and it had Sky News on, but on mute, like a lot of these pubs do. And within about ten seconds the ticker turned yellow, "Sky

sources, breaking news.” even I got a thrill, and I was just sat next to him! But I got a vicarious thrill from that thinking, “That’s us!”

Well, he probably wanted to be on the air delivering that news.

We were in a Wetherspoons at that point, so I don’t think they would have come live to him there!

Well, you can go live from anywhere in the world now. That’s one of the great developments I’ve seen over 30 years. But yes, breaking news is still the biggest thrill; popping up, ideally on camera from where something is happening. But even if you’re miles and miles away, thousands of miles away – and I’ve done this, I’ve gone on, on the phone and broken news – I mean, even when I’ve been on holiday many hundreds of miles away from Sky, if somebody rings me and tells me something important there’s no greater thrill than phoning the news desk and being put straight on air and delivering it.

It’s the old stock photograph of you and then a graphic of a phone isn’t there, that’s never changed in years.

Yes, we do have one of those, and that’s a timely reminder I must update my photograph because it doesn’t look like me now. But it is the biggest thrill. Telling people something they don’t know that’s important. I’m not really that interested in following up during my day at Sky News a newspaper story, and turning it into two and a half minutes of good TV by seven o’clock the same day, and essentially not really telling viewers much more than they could have read in the newspapers that morning.

And is it a challenge for you as a correspondent generally on TV news that most people know the news now before you’ve even gone to air? Because I second screen, I third screen sometimes. I’ve got my iPad and my iPhone and Sky News on, and I already know the facts of what you’re about to say, and I’m looking for your insight and your analysis and your take on it.

Yes. It is true that more and more we do become analysts, and that was something I kind of had to get used to, because the thrill for me is still the bog standard covering crime and what’s happened, and who’s done what to whom, and what the police are up to, and who they’re looking for. The very basic stuff, particularly when it’s news stuff and, as I said earlier, I am telling viewers something they don’t know. I’m never quite convinced how authoritative I am seen as an analyst and I don’t think I’m terribly knowledgeable about the criminal justice system.

Well speaking as your viewer, you’re Martin Brunt off of Sky News, and I believe anything you say.

Well, that could be rather dangerous, because of course we all get things wrong, particularly when we’re doing them in a hurry. But it’s live TV, and if you do make an error you can correct it pretty quickly.

You guys used to have that mantra, and I now know that you guys have distanced yourself from it, but decades ago it was “never wrong for long”.

Yes, my boss hates that.

I know.

But it's true. And okay, you're on the end of a live camera and you're given incredible licence, and you have to use that responsibly – but you can't expect everybody to get things right all the time. Nobody in any profession. Unfortunately, we are very high profile. We have a lot of viewers. And particularly my world where you're dealing with legal issues, it can be very problematic if you get things wrong. I don't know whether I've cost Sky News money because of what I've done and people have complained. I know certainly people have complained, and it may well be that the settlements have been done over something I've said that was wrong. I don't know. I think if it was something really important I would know.

But also you've been on the beat long enough to know what you can and can't do. If it's a sexual violence case, even if you do know the identity of the complainant and the victim that you just wouldn't... it's in your DNA, isn't it? There's no way you would ever possibly name that person.

Most of it is common sense, but it's common sense to me because I've been doing it a long time. I do occasionally have slightly strange experiences; I had one recently. And one many years ago, where a colleague came up to me – and this is just a reflection on the makeup of newsrooms today – a colleague came up to me and said, “Oh, I've got to go to the Old Bailey tomorrow. Is there anything I need to know, dos and don'ts, at the Bailey because I've not been there before.” I said, “No, security's a bit tighter but the restrictions on what you're allowed to do and what you're not allowed to do are the same as they are in any Crown Court.” And he said, “I've never been to any court.” And that kind of made me think, “Okay, I'm making an assumption.” And part of me thought, “Why have we got people who've never been to court?” But of course, people are becoming journalists, not just at Sky News but throughout the media, who haven't done that apprenticeship that I and my contemporaries have done by sitting in local courts, on local newspapers or news agencies, or even in Fleet Street. They are being plucked, the brightest of them, from media studies courses and being thrown in the deep end, and most of them are surviving – but they do hit a bit of a brick wall when they have to go and do something that is a very precise thing, which is covering a court case, and you do really need to know what you're doing. But good for him to come and ask me rather than just going in on a wing and a prayer. At least he had the good sense to ask me for some advice.

Presumably if this person's trained as a journalist, his lecturers at his college ought to have had the good sense to have trained him up on what's legal and what's not.

Well, yes – you'd have thought that, if you're doing a media studies course, then spending at least one day in court ought to be part of the curriculum. But clearly for him, that hadn't happened. But he may not have come from a media studies course.

I can't remember what his background was. You know, you judge these things on an individual basis.

Now, you've mentioned a couple of times already briefly about your relationship with the police. How was it changed over the decades in terms of post-Leveson? Is it that things used to be much cosier, which might have suited you as a correspondent, you got much more inside information, whereas now, as you hinted at earlier, do they hold you at arm's length more? And is that actually for the best?

The relationship is awful, when it used to be good. I mean, in very general terms. Since Leveson, which of course was on the back of the phone hacking stuff, it's become incredibly difficult to do that part of my job, which is to talk to police and find out what's going on. Leveson said the relationship was wrong. He said the relationship between journalists and police, and journalists and politicians, was far too cosy, and it was a bad relationship. Now, I'm not aware that anything has changed much between the way politicians give stories to political reporters. It's changed out of all proportion in the way that crime reporters deal with police officers.

So assuming what he said had any merit, which you might not accept, but it seems to have gone too far the other way now then?

Yes. I do accept that there were corrupt cops who would get paid for giving journalists information... and that, only in very rare circumstances I suppose, could be justified. But what flowed from Leveson was, particularly at the Metropolitan Police – and what the Met does today most other forces follow – the commissioner made it clear, and he actually said this to a meeting he had with crime reporters, that if any of his officers were caught giving out information that they weren't entitled to, then they would be pursued criminally and prosecuted. Or, he said, if we can't do that then we'll discipline them. And there were some very high-profile officers who either lost their jobs through disciplinary processes or were so badly treated that they left. And I can understand the commissioner's concerns about cops giving information about operations that they weren't working on, but I for many years used to talk to cops about their own stories, and particularly where you had press officers who weren't very good at selling the positive stories that were going on, I found it incredibly useful to talk to those officers. It gave me a step up. And what was the result? The force that officer was working for got rather better publicity for a job well done than they would have done otherwise, because there were lots of great stories in all police forces, successful stories that never see the light of day. And I can't remember a police officer ever telling me anything that reflected badly on their force. They almost to a man and woman would talk to me only about their own cases and give me some fascinating insight into successful stories. Whether they ended in convictions or acquittals was irrelevant, but they wanted to show me the great detective stuff that was going on – and as a crime reporter what you want in very basic terms is to hear good detective stories.

Someone was robbed. The detectives went to find them. They caught them and put them in the lockup.

Yes. There's extraordinary work being done at all forces, and in particular the Met. I have my closest relationships with the Met of course, because they're the biggest force and they do more interesting stories than anybody else. But there are so many stories that don't see the light of day. And one of my bugbears is the press officer who doesn't talk to his senior investigating officers on a regular basis to find out what's going on, what they're doing, what's coming up at court, and just alerting...

That seems to be the basics of their job.

Well, I appreciate they have other things to do than tell me the good stories coming up. But so much of the good stuff doesn't get told. And particularly at a time when police are being bashed all over the place. Their budgets are shrinking. They need to sell themselves better than they do at the moment. And I'm constantly telling press officers but then they'll turn around and say, "Well, the officers don't tell us what they're doing," and I say, "Well, go and badger them! Insist that they tell you." But getting back to the point, individual officers find it very difficult to talk to me. They've been told that they shouldn't talk to me without a press officer handy, and certainly the idea of meeting a cop in a pub for a drink is mostly something that doesn't happen today.

So presumably you've got extra free time! Have you taken up backgammon or something, to fill in the hours that you would have spent in the pub talking to your mole in the Met?

The thing is – and this isn't you – you mustn't rely on police officers to tell you things, or police press officers. There are more ways of skinning a cat. You know, you have to develop other sources. And I don't care where stories come from. They can come from anybody.

A story's a story.

Absolutely. And I talk to lawyers, I talk to court staff, I talk to prison officers, I talk to councillors, I talk to people in the health industry, and crime stories can come from anywhere. They come from your local newspaper. You might see a tiny thing in a local newspaper that you can see a way of projecting into something nationally. I don't care where those stories come from, as long as they keep coming. And the flow of stories has dried up as I get older. I mean, one of the things I have to contend with is people I've known for many years are retiring or they're dying. As I said earlier, I'm in the twilight of my career – and I wouldn't want to be a crime reporter embarking on a career now, because I think they would find it increasingly difficult to find original stories.

You've been at Sky News since its launch in 1989. That seems to me an amazing display of mutual loyalty. Is there only you and Kay Burley that's been on screen since the very beginning?

Adam Boulton.

Of course, Adam! He was political editor and he's now editor-at-large, and we've actually had him sitting in that chair.

Yes.

He's a great interviewee. But are you the only person that's remained as a correspondent through all these decades?

Yes. In my defence I wasn't the crime correspondent when I began. I had four or five years of doing general reporting, and then the crime reporter... we had two, they were both Fleet Street hacks, like was originally. Tim Miles from the Daily Mail was the first crime reporter. And Tim just found it a bit difficult to adjust, and was in a position where he didn't need to stick with it. He went off to do other things. And then a second colleague took over, and he did it for two or three years, and then he went on to do great things on the Cook Report. And we had a gap of two or three years, and I started getting some good sources and generating some crime stories. And I remember saying to my boss, "Why don't we have a crime reporter? Why haven't we got one?" And he said, "Do you fancy doing it?" So he went upstairs, and Kelvin MacKenzie, who I've known of old, was our boss at the time. And Kelvin, in true Kelvin style, said, "Yes, why not. I don't care who does it."

Nice ringing endorsement there!

Well, he probably wasn't too terribly aware of my role at Sky – he had bigger things to think of. But the message came down to my boss, and so suddenly I became the crime reporter.

And you're still here to this day.

Yes. And I am still here today because I love it. I can't think of a better job in journalism than being Sky News crime correspondent.

I agree! I'm jealous, and I'm a viewer. I'm literally one of your viewers over decades. I think you do a fantastic job.

Thank you. Not always, but I like to think that if I hadn't been doing a good job I probably still wouldn't be here. I mean, I've got reasonably good health as well, so that's important. But I just couldn't envisage being the health correspondent or the showbiz correspondent or the education correspondent or, god forbid, the royal correspondent.

Or news anchor. Have you ever been tempted to present Live at Five, for example?

Do you know, I was encouraged, and I was quite keen to try it out. In the very early days, I was going to do a bit of sports presenting. I don't know why I wanted to do it, just maybe try something different. It was only going to be a temporary thing.

And had Matt Lorenzo gone at this point? What year are we talking about?

No, Matt was still there and he probably wouldn't have enjoyed me joining those ranks. But this was when I was a general reporter, so it must have been the early 1990s. What I'm going to say now will show you the date. I was within about two hours of making my debut, and I was getting quite nervous. I wasn't sure how much I could rely on the gallery. And if you're the presenter you hold the programme together and there's no hiding place. If you're the reporter, out on a windswept street, you can kind of dry up, you can get things wrong and they can come back to the studio. But if you're the presenter, you've got to hold it together. So I was kind of nervous looking towards it, and then a call came in that John McCarthy, who was still captured in Lebanon, had been freed and was on a plane, or about to get on a plane, home.

He was captured and held in captivity with Terry Waite, wasn't he?

Yes, he was. Yes. So he'd been a prisoner for four or five years. And I'd done a lot of work on that story. I'd interviewed his dad, and I'd interviewed his girlfriend, and I was kind of the expert. So the call came in, and the news editor came over and said, "You're going to have to go to RAF Lyneham for the plane back and see McCarthy and do that story, and sorry but your presenting shift on Sky Sports News is not going to happen." And I kind of went off to Wiltshire with some relief, I think, and then never went back. And it's probably better for the viewers that I didn't, because the idea of sitting in a studio, combing your hair and making sure your tie's right, being rather clipped in the way you speak, and being terribly precise about what you do, and making everything flow neatly isn't really me. I much prefer to stand on a windswept street, flying by the seat of my pants, hopefully not getting things wrong or mucking things up, but introducing clips, coming back to me and filling in a bit and then going to something else or bringing in a live guest, and doing that on the hoof. That's quite exhilarating when you've got through it and come out the other side. Not quite as thrilling as breaking big stories, but that live stuff where, if you look a bit rough around the edges, or it looks a bit rough around the edges, that adds an immediacy and shows people that you are actually where something is happening, and it's live, and it's not perfect... I think that's much more me than sitting in a studio with my tie done up and my hair combed.

What are the big stories that have dominated your career? I know, for example, the Madeleine McCann case has been a huge story that you've covered. Is that more memorable than others? For example, did you ever get close do you think, to what really happened?

I suppose I've done more on the Madeleine McCann story than I've done on any other story. That must be true. And I've travelled more on that. You know, I know that part of the Algarve in Portugal incredibly well. I know lots of people. When I go out there now, ex-pats and locals greet me warmly, but behind their eyes there's that kind of, "Oh, god, not more Madeleine McCann." And I'm quite vociferous when people do... if they're open about that. You know, it's simple, isn't it? There's a girl still missing. Why would you get fed up with the reporting of it? It's a fascinating case for reporters, because it's the only case that I've ever covered – and it's not unique, I'm told, but it's the only case I ever covered – where there's not a shred of evidence

of anything. There's no trail of evidence. And coppers will talk about how, on their investigations, they follow the evidence. There's no evidence to follow. There's nothing that's ever been corroborated as firm evidence. So I know there's a theory that they are still pursuing which I have some insight into, and I don't know whether that will ever solve the puzzle. But it is a desperately sad story. I mean, it resonated like no other missing child story has ever done really, in my experience. And I think there are lots of reasons for that. I think principally, she disappeared in circumstances that we all recognise; on holiday in the sunshine. You know, we all take our young kids to those kind of places because we feel safe and you can let your kids off the leash a little bit, and you don't keep quite the eye on them that you might do at home. They are given more freedom. That's partly why you want to take them on those kind of holidays, so they can run around with a with a bit more freedom. They are a couple, Kate and Gerry, who haven't really had much engagement with the media, and there are obvious reasons for that, and there's no reason why we should expect them to. But they have been more vilified online particularly than anybody I can ever think of. I did an exposé of the sort of stuff that was said and written about them online, it was extraordinary.

I remember it well.

And it was compiled by some people who were very sympathetic, and although everybody knew that they were victims of this kind of bile, nobody quite had an idea of the extent of it. And when it was presented to me in this file it really was extraordinary. We did a big report on it and we encouraged the file to go to the police. Yes, the people who had compiled it sent it to the police, and the police took six months before deciding to take no action. And I just thought that was extraordinary. I don't know whether the McCanns themselves would have welcomed some police action. I think Gerry did say in one interview that he thought the police should look more closely at it. But when you consider since then, a footballer sends a racist or sexist tweet and suddenly there's a police investigation, I still can't quite understand why the death threats, the vile abuse that was heaped on the McCanns – and still is today – has not led to some kind of prosecution. And the story itself has dominated the last 12 or so years of my life, but when I did that report, and part of it was to expose a woman who was one of those, not the worst by any means, but one of those who had attacked the McCanns and criticised them, two or three days after my report this woman committed suicide. So that just gives you an indication of the tension, and what's involved... I can't think of the right words to describe it.

But she was clearly suffering from mental health problems.

Yes, she was, and I didn't know that at the time, and I couldn't pursue that side of it because we're not allowed to delve into medical records. I don't know whether I would have ever discovered that. Maybe I would have done. I mean, the enormity of that will always be with me. I hope it won't define my career as a crime reporter but it just shows you the passion and the horror of what's going on on social media around the McCanns. But of course it's happening around lots and lots of people. Some people can brush it off. I mean, I brush off the stuff that's written and said about me. Others of my colleagues engage with their antagonists on Twitter.

Kay is very good at that.

She does a lot of it, yes. And there's an argument that if you're putting stuff out there publicly, and people criticise you or praise you, then maybe you should engage. But I don't have the time or the inclination. And it's usually pretty horrible stuff. But it's all horrible online. If I meet people in the street who know who I am, almost 100 percent... it's all very good and friendly and supportive, and people say nice things. It's just that difference between face-to-face engagement and online engagement.

Yes, it's not just the abuse. The other question I had on social media is that everyone seems to be a crime expert now. There was a kerfuffle over your comment at a church in Weybridge, for example, about how easy a terrorist could gain access. What was all that about?

Yes, that was just... I didn't really think too much about what I said, and it was... there had been a shooting, I think in France, somebody had gone into a church. Was it France? I can't remember. But we just looked for a community that reflected the size of the community where this shooting had happened, and we settled on Weybridge. I think the population was similar. And we just went into the church, and I just wanted to illustrate how churches particularly, you can just walk in. There is no security, you can walk in and you'll find people generally worshipping, and they're completely concentrated on what they do, and if you wanted to do it at this church in Weybridge, you could just walk in and throw a bomb or open fire with a gun, and you would hit lots of people and probably kill lots of people, and it would be very, very easy. And I probably hadn't really thought through what I said – and it wasn't even live! I can't give you an excuse that I was live and I hadn't thought about it. I had thought about it to a degree, but not enough. And I just did a piece to camera and said, you know, I've just been in, there are 20 people there, and if I'd had a gun I could have killed them. And everybody said, "That's very Alan Partridge."

It's quite The Day Today, isn't it?

Yes. I just didn't think enough.

You've been on air for decades, you're going to make the odd slip. You are a human being, for God's sake.

I should have blamed my producer.

Let's take the opportunity to do that now.

Yes, okay. That producer, whoever it was, you got it wrong. You should not have let me off my leash quite so easily.

Final question then. You've been doing this for decades. There must have been some incredible highs and some incredible lows. Which are the two that stand out, high and low?

There are lots of highs. The lowest, of course, was the death of the woman who I'd exposed over her attacks on the McCanns. Nothing has been as low as that. That's quite obvious. Highs, there are lots to talk about. I could talk about the exhilaration of covering the Balkan Wars. Something that I got out of my system very quickly, and I'm glad I did. There are lots of memorable things. I think probably the most memorable, and this is a bit odd, I covered the Cromwell Street murders, and one day I walked into the pub, the local Cromwell Street pub, it was around the corner. And I was in the gents, the pub was deserted. It was during the Cheltenham races, and the clientele of the pub were mainly Irish that were at the races. They'd all gone off in a charabanc to Cheltenham races. So there were half a dozen of us in the pub, and I went into the gents, and I'm standing there doing my business, and I look to the side. And there's an old boy there, and I recognise him from his glasses, and it's Laurie Lee, who is one of my literary heroes – his novels, not so much his poetry. And we both went back out, and he was sitting at the table on his own. And I went over and I said, "Mr Lee?" And he said yes. And I told him who I was. I said, "Do you mind if I join you?" or he said, "Join me." And I spent half an hour in his company, I bought him a whiskey, and it was just fascinating to meet somebody like him. I'm such a fan of his novels. And I was curious why he was there. It was the Wellington Arms was the pub, it's not open any more. And he said that he'd been reading about the Cromwell Street murders. He lived in his old home, boyhood home, in Slad, a village up the road, 15 miles away. He'd been reading about the Cromwell Street murders, particularly about the pub, which was quite a colourful pub, and he had persuaded his wife, who was quite a bit younger than him, to drive him down to visit the pub and just soak up the atmosphere. And he was a bit disappointed that weren't more people in there. But he was very engaging with me, and I said, "Well, where's your wife?" He said, "Oh, she's sitting out in the car. I couldn't persuade her to come in." So he was interested about the investigation and I filled him in as much as I could. It was the early days. Must have been early March, about a month into the investigation. And he was absolutely fascinating, and fascinated in what I had to say. And I just thought it was incredible that I'm sitting here with Laurie Lee. So in the end we both had to go, and I helped him out. I think he took my arm and I let him out, and he introduced me to his wife, who was sitting in the car drumming her fingers on the dashboard. Said hello quite politely, but that was it. And we put him in the car and they drove off. And he died about two years later. But I got him to sign something for me, and something for my wife, who is also a Laurie Lee fan, but I just thought it was so incongruous to meet in the middle of this awful, awful investigation, a poet whose novels were so poetic. The juxtaposition was extraordinary, and something that that will live with me forever – as is the Cromwell Street murders, which is another thing people always say, "What's the grimmest story you've ever covered?" And it was at the time, in 1994, and it still is the grimmest crime story I've ever covered, the Cromwell Street murders. For lots and lots of reasons. And nothing has really lived up to the horror of that story.

Martin, thank you ever so much for an incredibly interesting conversation, and please keep up the great work.

Thank you. I've enjoyed it.