



Heidi Blake

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Media Masters – September 22, 2016

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Welcome to Media Masters, a series of one-to-one interviews with people at the top of the media game. Today I'm joined by the investigative journalist Heidi Blake. Starting out as a trainee reporter at the Telegraph, Heidi quickly found her passion for breaking scandals and became the paper's investigations reporter.

She moved to the insight team at the Sunday Times in 2011, going on to become their assistant editor, and was responsible for exposing bribery and corruption at the top of FIFA, which eventually led to the downfall of Sepp Blatter.

Since joining BuzzFeed as investigations editor in 2015, she has revealed match fixing at the top of tennis, alleged money laundering at Lycamobile, and illegal raids by the National Crime Agency.

Winner of Scoop of the Year, Investigation of the Year, and the Paul Foot Award for Campaigning Journalism, she is also author of The Ugly Game: The Qatari Plot to Buy The World Cup.

Heidi, thank you for joining me.

Thanks so much for having me!

A very impressive CV so far.

Thank you so much! I should actually just say that I can't take personal credit for revealing the illegal raids by the National Crime Agency, that was one of the reporters on my team, Tom Warren, who broke that story. But we all worked together as an investigations unit. And yes that was fantastic work that he did.

Absolutely. Very impressive indeed. Did you always want to be an investigative journalist or did you kind of slip into that? Did you always want to be a journalist? How did you start your career?

I actually wanted to be a poet!

That's an unusual one!

Yes, which isn't the most natural transition. But that was sort of what I wanted to do as an angsty teenager and it was sort of pointed out to me by more sensible people that I was never going to make any money doing that. And so I misguidedly thought that maybe if I was a journalist that might be a way of making money, which of course given the climate of the industry is a kind of misguided scheme too.

It's not a prosperous industry is it?

It's not the most, no! But yes, I decided I wanted to do something that involved writing, and so when I went to university I joined the student newspaper there. And really because I wanted to be a writer but I quickly, totally fell in love with the cut and thrust of being out there trying to break stories on campus and cause trouble for the university authority, then we had a rival newspaper in my university – I was at York and I worked for the student newspaper News which of course was the best student newspaper on campus.

I agree! I'm from York originally, I used to live in Heslington. I used to read that newspaper actually.

Oh, you are in my good books forever in that case! But there was a rival newspaper which was York Vision, and that rivalry was absolutely visceral. So we were constantly you trying to scoop each other and break into each other's offices and steal each other's news lists and just generally kind of ruin each other's day as much as we possibly could.

It's like a scene from a film or something! Genuine, absolute rivalry.

Just like kind of Lord Of The Flies. Or Fleet Street! It was that kind of feel. So I just I just really fell in love with that. And yes and kind of quickly realised this was what I wanted to do.

What kind of journalist did you want to be at then? You realised you wanted to be a journalist but what type, or was it anything at that point?

At that point... I started off writing news and actually then I got into writing kind of investigative type features, but they were more kind of long form exploratory features. I wrote about students who were driven into sex work to pay their loans and kind of did a quite deep dive series about transgender students on campus and what that was like, and about kind of refugee communities in York. And so I got really into that kind of deep dive long form type journalism. And it was actually when I joined the Telegraph – they run a fantastic trainee scheme for graduates – and I when I joined that I got sent on a secondment to the Yorkshire Post and worked for really fantastic news editor there called Hannah Start, who was the first woman I worked for and the last woman I worked for, for quite a long time in journalism until recently, and she was brilliant and she basically kind of carved me out of the newsroom and

just said, "Go and spend time working on exclusives." Just go and see what you can get, what you can reveal.

What a dream opportunity!

It was amazing, yes. And so she just kind of let me go off diary for two or three weeks at a time and I started to actually kind of break some stories and to kind of find stuff out that people didn't want me to know about. And I broke a story about the government had a database of every child in the UK called Contact Point which was really controversial for security reasons. And I found out that it was really riddled with security glitches and actually had had to be taken completely offline as a result. So I broke that story and that kind of went national and lots of the national papers covered it, and that was my first taste of breaking news and having other people follow it. And having dug something up that powerful people didn't want anybody to know about and like little old me had found out about it! And that kind of funny thing about being a bit of a thorn in the side of the establishment kind of captured my imagination. So that was the point at which I thought I like the deep dive stuff, but I really like breaking exclusive stories too – and so investigative journalism kind of beckoned at that point.

And presumably you'd already watched All the President's Men and you thought Woodward and Bernstein, you know, that you were going to be the next one?

Yes! Yes. That was kind of the idea.

Do you learn investigative journalism techniques as you go along, or is there like a course or a set of methodologies that you can use?

I think that there are definitely methodologies you can use, but I kind of have pieced that together as I've gone along. I've been lucky enough to work with some really superb investigative journalists. When I was at the Telegraph I managed to wangle my way onto the paper's investigations unit, and I joined just as they were breaking the MP's expenses scandal.

So was that after your secondment to the Yorkshire Post had ended?

That's right, yes. I then went into the newsroom and after the end of the training scheme which lasted about 15 months, I got a job as a general news reporter just kind of going out knocking on doors, just covering breaking stories. But I because I wanted to be an investigative journalist I'd kind of sidled up to the then investigations editor Robert Winnett, who was a great mentor and had just led the MP's expenses investigation. And so it was a huge kind of privilege to get to know him, and I persuaded him to give me a chance on his team. And so eventually, after about a year and a half of general news, joined the investigations team, and so I learnt a huge amount working for Rob and then I moved to the Sunday Times and worked

with Jonathan Calvert who's the Insight editor there, the investigations team, and was again just an incredible person to work with and to learn from.

I mean Insight is the investigative journalism brand isn't it? Prior to BuzzFeed and another kind of new media stuff it was the Sunday Times insight team that was always breaking the stories.

That's right, yes. The Sunday Times Insight team is kind of the oldest and most established and most venerable investigations unit on Fleet Street, it's been going for more than 50 years now and it's broken some crazy stories. It revealed Israel's nuclear plans, it revealed that Kim Philby was an MI6 and KGB double agent, it revealed the whole thalidomide scandal...

Under Harry Evans tenure. We are interviewing him shortly, actually.

Oh really? Well, there you go. Yes, he was a real leading light of investigative journalism.

And an amazing editor, and a genuine legend.

A real legend of the industry, yes, absolutely. And so to get a chance to go and work for such a kind of illustrious storied institution was really amazing. But it was kind of funny actually, because the Insight team has its reputation for being as big investigative juggernaut, and actually when I was there it was just two of us. It was just me and Jonathan kind of plugging away on our own, and people would often meet us and be like, "Where's the team?" We were kind of like, "We are the team! This is it."

What would a typical week for you be when you and Jonathan were doing that? I imagine there's tales of derring-do and deep undercover things and all of this kind of thing, but was it slightly less glamorous than that?

It kind of really depended on the week that you would choose to have a look at. I mean, a lot of the time investigative journalism is really about just kind of casting your net, just going out there, talking to people, trying to get tips trying to figure out what your next big investigation might be, trawling through public records or government reports, or trying to send out speculative Freedom of Information requests, or whatever it might be, and that stuff isn't necessarily particularly glamorous. But then there is the kind of more high-octane end of it. So quite a lot of what I did with Jonathan at the Sunday Times was undercover investigative journalism, and there's definitely an extent of kind of derring-do about that, that can be really exciting and quite fast-paced and really nerve-wracking. And so yes, week to week I might be sort of sitting in an office trawling through documents or I might be, in a lunch meeting at the Goring Hotel with a couple of generals who are offering to fix up arms deals for cash wearing a wig and coloured contact lenses, and mastering the art of disguise. It just kind of really depended.

**Do you enjoy things like that, or is it quite nerve-wracking in the moment?
Because you could be in danger if you get it wrong.**

I mean, you definitely kind of live on your adrenaline a little bit at those kind of more intense moments in any investigation. I mean, I think I haven't been in that many situations where I've really felt that I might be in any kind of danger. There was a notable occasion at the Sunday Times when Jonathan and I were investigating the black market and Olympic tickets in the run up to London 2012 and there was an outcry in the UK because very few British people had actually managed to get tickets to the Olympics, and the London 2012 organising committee had made this unprecedented decision to give away a much bigger allocation of the tickets to other international Olympic committees around the world, and what we were tipped off to was that the officials from those foreign Olympic committees were just selling off their bulk ticket allocation on the black market and that was why there were no tickets for British fans. So we were going around talking to Olympic officials overseas and trying to find out whether they were willing to sell tickets on the black market. And we got about I think it's about 50 countries were just flogging their ticket allocation to touts, but we were following through with those meetings and we ended up in in Serbia, going to a meeting with the people that the Olympic officials, the Serbian Olympic officials, had directed us to meet. And we got ushered into this this travel agency, because ostensibly they'd sold the tickets to this ticket to this hospitality company, we got ushered into this sort of travel and hospitality agency, and then downstairs and into a basement room where was this chap who looked like some kind of mob boss sitting there in a leather jacket drinking a whiskey, smoking a cigar.

And presumably you were wearing a wire at this point?

Yes, absolutely. And we were both wired up, cameras rolling, and he had these two kind of muscle-bound kind of henchmen type characters on either side of him. And we sat down and he said, "First question: you're not from the BBC, are you?"

Well you could quite truthfully say no!

And we quite happily said, "No, no, we're not the BBC." But they closed the door behind us and we kind of thought, "Actually, nobody's going to hear us scream if anything goes wrong down here." I mean, nothing like that happened, it was completely fine, but there are moments like that where you sort of think, "If we get rumbled at this particular point it's going to be quite tasty."

I mean I'm not an international criminal of any sort but...

Glad to hear it!

Well, I could be, I could just be denying it. It could be the cover story of this podcast! But sometimes you think, “Why were they so silly?” You know, if there’s that big heavy-set henchmen there in the basement, in a sense, how was he not on guard that you might be an undercover reporter? I mean, it’s great that you turned him over because he deserved it, but on the other hand, what an idiot!

Well, I mean... I guess to an extent he was on guard in that he did ask us if we were from the BBC. And actually, quite often in these undercover meetings we’d have them say, “Haha, you’re not undercover journalists are you?!” And we’d say, “No.”

A fib.

And they’d say, “Well, thanks! That’s put my mind at rest,” kind of thing. And yes, and that was that. I mean, I think it’s something that never failed to fascinate me in all the undercover work that I did that people continued to, I guess, fall for it. But I think people are... if they’re greedy enough, to be honest, and kind of corrupt enough and willing to do the bad thing, they get a little bit blasé and they kind of start to be willing to... you know, once you’ve made that first transgression, you are willing to make more transgressions and then you kind of go further and further down the path, and I guess you get to a point where they feel bulletproof, like you’re never gonna get caught.

So the primary motivation for these wrongdoers then is complacency and profit, then? To generalise, is that what it is? This heavy-set guy that I’m becoming increasingly concerned with in the basement, he just wanted to make some money and he was blinded by that.

Yes. I mean, I think a lot of the time when somebody gets caught out doing something seriously wrong it tends to be a combination of greed and kind of... arrogance and stupidity a lot of the time. And yes, I think if people are greedy enough that does tend to kind of compel them to push boundaries further and further, and get more and more kind of risk tolerant. And that’s what tends to drive people either to be sloppy and to leave a paper trail that you later come along and find as an investigative journalist, or to be willing to brag to people unguardedly about their misdemeanours, and that’s I guess that’s how you get caught.

Actually it reminds me of an anecdote. Many years ago I learned to jump out of planes using a parachute. And the safety instructor said that no one ever gets killed in the first 100 or 200 jumps that they do because they pack their parachute well. But anyone whose parachute doesn’t open properly has usually done about 200-300 jumps before without any incident and has got complacent and has started to take shortcuts in packing their parachute. I wonder whether that’s a similar analogy that they think, “Well, I’ve not been caught for 15 years so I’m not going to get got caught now.”

Yes, I think that's a really fascinating little insight into human psychology. Yes, I think that's definitely the case. You know, once you've got away with it once you think, "Well, I can relax a little bit," and then you get a bit more brazen and a bit more blasé and eventually kind of overstep the mark.

But again, so you weren't in any danger when you were in the basement but don't you worry that when the story comes out that this heavy-set guy is going to hang around outside the offices of the Sunday Times and look for someone of your build, albeit with different coloured eyes and different coloured hair? Clearly people are annoyed that they've been turned over, but do they get aggressive? Is Mazher Mahmood right when he says he has to have all these bodyguards, or was that part of the PR?

I mean I genuinely never had any trouble with anything like that and maybe if I ever had had any difficulty of that sort I'd be more nervous, but I tend to think it doesn't tend to happen in this country. We're lucky enough to work in an environment as journalists which is pretty safe really. I mean, if I were working in Russia, or actually if I were actually working all the time in Serbia maybe I'd be a bit more nervous, but you feel pretty safe operating in the UK.

Just before we move on from your time out the Sunday Times, what are the stories we working on there that you particularly proud of?

Well, the biggest scoop that Jonathan and I worked on together was the investigation we did into corruption in FIFA and in particular we obtained a large cache of documents – literally hundreds of millions of documents – which ultimately helped us to prove that Qatar had effectively bought the World Cup.

Which we all knew anyway. I mean, that's a great investigative story when you guys prove what we all suspected long ago.

It was one of those funny things. I think sometimes those are the best stories actually, where you're able finally to find the missing piece of the jigsaw which incontrovertibly proves something that people have long suspected.

The smoking gun.

That's the one! And I think with Qatar, you know, that decision... I mean that was that was the moment where FIFA overstepped, a little bit like we were just talking about. They had been lining their pockets for a long time and they allowed their various processes by which they made their decisions to become increasingly corrupted over time. But I think with that decision they just lost all sense of what the fans are actually going to think about this ridiculous decision you've taken. And when they announced that they had decided to award the rights to host the 2022 World Cup, the world's biggest sporting tournament, and that the absolute, you know, the jewel in the crown of FIFA, it's this beloved tournament the world over, they've

decided to award that to Qatar, a country where it's prohibitively hot in the summer with temperatures of 50 degrees centigrade making it physically impossible actually to play football safely at the level at which you would be required to in a World Cup, a country with no football infrastructure to speak of, no football tradition, no real professional league... there's absolutely no sensible reason to award the World Cup to Qatar. So the minute they announced it, the whole world kind of in one voice just said, "Well, you got paid."

Are you off your meds.

Yes. I mean, how did they do that? It's got to be a corrupt decision.

How did they think they could even get away with it though?

I think again, I just think that they had got away with it for decades, you know, one corrupt decision after another. We're increasingly seeing now as the FBI investigation flushes out more and more evidence of corruption, that FIFA decisions had been being seriously corrupted almost as far back as anyone can remember. But I think the reason why the Qatar decision was the one that really turned the full glare of media attention on FIFA was that it was so patently preposterous, there was just no explanation that was viable apart from it was a corrupt decision, and so everybody sort of set about trying to prove that. So it was very satisfying, because they'd actually covered their tracks relatively well, it was satisfying to finally get hold of the documentary evidence that inducements had been paid to buy up support for that World Cup bid.

How do you get these stories and how do you come up with the ideas of what stories to pursue? So for example, you mentioned that your time of the Telegraph that you did the MPs expenses thing. Well, that was a bloke who was selling a CD of a scan of all of this stuff, and he kind of sent it round a number of newspapers didn't he, as I recall.

Yes. I mean, to clarify, I came into the Telegraph right at the very tail end of the MPs expenses scandal, I really can't claim any credit for it at all.

It was a great story though.

It was an absolutely, yes, it was a kind of totally transformative moment for British journalism I think, that was one of the first really big data dump...

And they handled it so well as well, the kind of daily updates that you know, this Wednesday we're doing Labour and then tomorrow it was the Tories. But the Lib Dems are Friday and all this. It was just never ending.

Yes, I mean it absolutely dominated the whole news agenda for that entire summer and it was so masterfully done I think because it was such a wonderful mixture of

light and shade. So you had your serious kind of fraud, you know, you had this issue of like flipping and declaring one home and...

Second homes and all this nonsense.

Second homes and all that sort of thing.

And the duck tower, or whatever it was.

Right. And people went to prison for that more serious end of the actual accounting for, but then at the lighter end you've got the duck house and the MP who paid for a moat and all of that kind of silly stuff, and that just made it such a lively, entertaining read as well as being really genuinely shocking. So that was brilliant, I mean, again I just came in at the very end of it but it was really inspirational to watch that team kind of pull that scoop together and just dominate the news agenda.

I mean, it's a great story and I applaud the fact that it was done, but I also know Jacqui Smith and she's been a guest on this podcast, and I also see it from the other side that her husband watched a couple of soft porn films late at night – I mean, I'm not defending what he did, but due to a genuine admin error it got included in her home bill, which was paid by her assistant... and she took responsibility for that and she paid a terrible price, deservedly so in many people's opinion, but did you ever feel sorry for some of the people maybe in that story, or indeed others?

I think often doing this sort of job occasionally there are people who kind of get caught in the crosshairs of the investigation, and you do feel empathy. You know, you feel sorry that a person has been humiliated at times. I think in the case of Jacqui Smith though, and in most of those cases, you would have to say where somebody is a public official you really do have to hold yourself to a higher standard in that position. And so to have allowed porn bills to end up going through her expenses just was a really kind of negligent...

She should have stronger systems.

She really should.

I agree.

Obviously I can empathise, and you can imagine being in that situation yourself and thinking, "God that's..." you know, just imagining the humiliation she went through, but yes, I think that it's important that public officials hold themselves to that high standard, and I think that what we do is so important in this country, I think the reason why actually our politics in this country and public life in this country is really fairly clean actually, and fairly transparent, is that is that we have a very aggressive media here who will not let politicians get away with it and we hold them to account.

And so I think I think that kind of investigative journalism is a really important function of our democracy.

No, I agree with you. I mean, when I was elected to York Council well over a decade ago, the editor of the local paper Kevin Booth – who has since become a good friend of mine – he kind of gave a induction talk to the new councillors and he said, you know, “I’m the editor of the local paper; don’t ever be in any doubt about whether the local paper is out to get you. We are. We’re here to expose things that you do wrong.” You know, “The council not doing a good job is going to make news; we’re not here just to do your PR.” I took that as a quite a healthy relationship really.

Absolutely, yes. I think that that’s totally what it’s all about. And that’s not to say that journalism can’t recognise good work when good work has taken place, but I do think the most important function is as a watchdog and to make sure that public officials know they’re just not going to get away with it.

I’m fascinated still by the previous question if we can just dwell on it a little more, because we’ve obviously done the Telegraph and the expenses, but how do you get your stories? Do you talk to taxi drivers and they say, “Oh, I think this is dodgy,” or do you kind of come in and pitch ideas? And then also there must be terms or you suspect wrongdoing and have to put some energy and some time and resource into investigating it and then you might not come up with anything, and that might be because they’re innocent of any wrongdoing or it’s just buried too deeply, as it were. Do you often get that, where you think, “There is there is a set of wrong ‘uns here, but we don’t know what the next move is.”

Yes, absolutely. I mean, in terms of how we get stories I think for me, all stories really are about people, and there are a number of different ways that you can find stories. Maybe you will find stories through data journalism. I mean, at BuzzFeed we broke a story, made a story, about match fixing right at the top of world tennis, and that was all initiated because my brilliant colleague in New York, John Templon, did an incredibly sophisticated data analysis which pinpointed players who were involved in suspicious matches.

Incredible.

And that was... basically the data was kind of the tipster for that story, it pointed us in a particular direction. But I think a lot of the time you get your tips just by going out and talking to people, and yes, you’re right, it might be taxi drivers maybe it’s your friends down the pub, or maybe it’s... a big part of our job is going out and cultivating networks of contacts and sources and people who will give us information and being on the lookout for people who are in interesting positions with interesting documents and information coming across their desks who might be able to tell us something and you kind of need to let those people know that you were there and that your job

is to investigate anything that might ever give them cause for concern. And hopefully people start tipping you off.

And do have a kind of network of Deep Throats, then? Do you meet people in multi-storey car parks wearing trench coats and all this kind of thing, or is it all just done over email and SMS now?

I mean it really depends. I don't think I've ever quite had the meeting in the underground car park!

You should do. That would be awesome.

I think it's definitely a career goal, yes! But I have sources of all kinds that have lots of sources who are totally above board and might just sort of send me a direct message on Twitter and say, "Hey, have you seen this?" And I have sources who are really secretive, and sometimes you have people ring you up from pay phones and not even disclose their identity to you, and give you a tip off about something. And obviously you then got to go and see whether you can actually find any credible evidence to support it.

Yes, because it could be a serious accusation that warrants investigation, but it could also be some crazy person or some spiteful person is out to stitch someone up.

That's right yes. I mean, a lot of the time the tips that we get, I would say most of the tips that we get come to nothing to be honest, and sometimes that's because you really have a good crack at proving it and you know you can see that there's something there but you just don't have any evidence quite hard enough to stand it up. A lot of the time you get people come to you with information and then you quickly realise that unfortunately they're not very well...

That's a polite way of putting it!

Right, or that they have an axe to grind. There are all sorts of reasons why stories don't necessarily stand up. But you kind of have to assess the credibility of the information and then go out there and see whether you can independently verify it and whether there is documentary proof or whether you can find enough other independent sources to corroborate it in order to make it stand up and to be able to write about it.

It really does sound like one of the most exciting journalism jobs there is. I'm sure that was a question but it just seems to be incredibly exciting.

It really is. It's super exciting, and it's kind of so exciting and so much of an adventure that I just sort of pinch myself quite a lot and think like this isn't really a very grown-up job. It's just too much like going off and a series of adventures all the

time! And obviously it's deeply serious in lots of ways and I really take that public interest duty that we have to be a public watchdog and to represent the public and expose wrongdoing and to go out there and try to find out what secrets people in power are trying to keep from the everyday man and woman on the street, at the same time that process is very, very exciting, you know, trying to uncover secrets is exciting and it's a lot of fun for sure.

I mean, clearly what you do is very important for society as well. And I don't blame the Sunday Times for say, under investing in their Insight team, that it was just you and Jonathan, they're a business, they probably cannot afford legions of investigative journalists, but it seems to me that as a society we have a huge lack of investigative journalists, and all power to BuzzFeed's elbow for hiring you and investing in this. But you can almost see from a business management point of view, if you're the managing editor of a newspaper and you're trying to cut costs, the investigations team is an easy cut, isn't it?

That's right, yes. And investigative journalism is expensive. You know, it's really time consuming and it's risky – and it's not just risky in terms of the actual work that you're doing but there are huge legal risks associated with it as well. And so you really have to not only be able to fund the journalism, but actually to have a fairly vast war chest to pay for any legal actions that might result out of out of the work that you've done. And that's something the Sunday Times did, Jonathan I were backed up through two huge libel cases which we fought, and successfully defended our journalism. Yes. So it's an expensive endeavour and you have to be willing to put your money where your mouth is. And I the Sunday Times has invested admirably over many decades in first class investigative journalism, but it's definitely hugely exciting for me to be at BuzzFeed, and one of the reasons, and possibly the definitive reason, why I decided to make the leap from the Sunday Times to BuzzFeed because I was incredibly excited to discover that this incredibly dynamic new media organisation which had built this vast audience, and an audience of young people at BuzzFeed, had actually found a way to monetise the Internet which is something which the industry has really struggled with the whole time I've been a journalist, but also having done that I actually wanted to spend that money investing in serious investigative journalism. That was a great surprise and a delight to me and it is why I'm so excited to be where I am now.

I think from their point of view, I mean we've had Luke Lewis in that chair, and Luke's a great guy, but they could have just stuck to LOLCats and 20 things you didn't know about Rachel from Friends, and all the kind of things, you know, the click-bait stuff that they do very well, but they really have transformed that site into an amazing portal of news of actual high quality journalism. And investing in investigative journalism of the type... I mean, like you say your very expensive, it seems an incredibly altruistic thing to do.

Yes. I mean, I know from working there, and from conversations with Jonah Peretti, our owner and founder, and Ben Smith, our editor in chief, that BuzzFeed's leadership is incredibly committed to making it the defining media organisation of this century; that really is the vision. And while entertainment has always been a bigger business than news for sure, news is how you get impact. News is actually how you start to change the world, and genuinely kind of, you hope, change things for the better. And that's very much a part of what BuzzFeed wants to do. So while we've put an enormous audience at producing high quality entertainment content...

Very on message. I like that. You get a point.

Well, yes – and the entertainment side of what we do, I really think is totally fantastic.

It's world-leading as well, and fantastic in its own right.

That's right! I think we have some of the best, cleverest, funniest most kind of genuinely brilliant content available in terms of our entertainment side. But I also think that in terms of actually sort of driving a real conversation and trying to shape a media narrative and trying to make change in the world and to have that kind of impact, you do need a serious, hard-hitting news operation, and so that is what BuzzFeed is building.

But I think it also works because they have eyeballs, don't they? I mean you could be hired by some incredibly august website with four staff and very few visitors and whilst you wouldn't have anywhere near the impact that you would have working for someone with BuzzFeed that has many millions of eyeballs every day.

That's right, yes. I mean, so BuzzFeed is now getting seven billion monthly content views, which is just kind of mind boggling. And the other thing that's really exciting about being at BuzzFeed is that our audience is young, so our audiences predominantly skews under 35, that kind of demographic referred to somewhat pejoratively perhaps, as millennials, and we reach 60% of the world's millennials, which I find totally extraordinary. But what we do, and that's a demographic group that most media organisations find incredibly difficult to reach. And BuzzFeed has really successfully engaged those people by building this global network for entertainment content which people are sharing and really enjoying, and wanted to help us disseminate. And so we have that network in that audience. And now we can use that to engage people with news content, and I'm finding it really exciting to see that people in that demographic group are willing to spend a long time reading really deeply reported long form investigative pieces. You know, our tennis racket investigation was 9,000 words long and it reached an audience of millions of people and they spent upwards of half an hour, 40 minutes reading it, and then shared it vociferously with their friends. And so that's a really, really exciting trend to see beginning to develop.

How strongly do you look at the metrics now that your work is online? Because when you used to write for traditional newspapers there would be an amount of newsstand sales, and on the website you might see how many eyeballs, but BuzzFeed we already know from having Luke and a few other people from BuzzFeed on the podcast, the level of sophistication in terms of the data, you can see where they've come from, the dwell time, how they got there where they left, all of these kind of things. Do you yourself kind of immerse yourself in those metrics to find out what works and what doesn't?

I do. I try to, for sure. I mean, I think a big part of my job and my team's job at BuzzFeed is to get impact really. So we are definitely not being told like you have to get a certain number of people to read your articles and if you don't get this when it clicks then its not a success, like we kind of measure success a little bit differently. It's more about kind of, what change did this article make? But I definitely am fascinated, like everybody at BuzzFeed, with the dynamics of what makes people share. And I think actually what drives people to share an investigative piece is very similar to what drives people to share an entertainment piece. People share what moves them. And so if you read something and you have an emotional response to that, whether it's that you were amused by it or you are shocked by it or it makes you sad, or it makes you happy, or you find an uplifting, or it makes you furious, whatever it is, people tend to experience strong emotions and then want their friends to experience what they're experiencing, and so they will share it. And actually, investigative journalism at its best really should provoke those strong human emotive reactions. And so, we're fascinated by that. And that definitely shapes the way that we think about framing stories and how we tell them, how we pitched them to the reader.

Who's doing investigative journalism well these days, in both in this country and beyond? Not necessarily individual journalists but also which newspapers, which websites. Who do you admire and respect?

Well, I mean, I actually think this is a bit of a golden age for investigative journalism, which is not necessarily the common view, but I think in this country since the Leveson inquiry, which was obviously a real kind of rock bottom moment for the media industry, editors were called upon to think about what is it that we're proud of when we have to go in front of this judge-led public inquiry? What can we point to and say, "Look, this is the point in us. This is why you shouldn't curtail our freedoms. This is why we shouldn't be over-regulated, because we do this kind of good work." And what people often say is that it has found themselves talking about investigative journalism, and I think that a lot of them realise, "Well, why aren't we doing more of that, when that's the thing that we want to point to when we're kind of called to explain what's our purpose in the world?" And so since then I think lots of papers are investing in really great investigative journalism more and more. I mean, obviously BuzzFeed has built a team of around 20 journalists now in the UK.

How big is your own team?

My team in London is four people but we're part of...

So double the size of when you were at the Sunday Times.

That's right, just in London and then globally there are 20 and we're all part of one team. So that's really, really exciting. But in this country, I mean, you know, there's lots of other places that are doing great work. Obviously the Sunday Times Insights team is still superb, The Times has brilliant investigations team doing some great work, the Guardian does great investigative work, the Telegraph still has a great investigations team, you know, not to mention some of the work being done by the broadcasters, Vice's investigations reporters too.

Globally?

Globally, I mean, I think that clearly there are the kind of great institutions like the New York Times and The Wall Street Journal, The Washington Post, that do fantastic work. There's also this real flowering of not for profit journalism, so you have organisations like ProPublica and the Center for Investigative Journalism and in this country the Bureau for Investigative Journalism, and those organisations are actually changing the way that investigative journalism is done, they're more stand alone, independent organisations which are able to spend, you know, a year and more sometimes, digging into a particular topic in the public interest. And that's really exciting to see too. So I think there's a real proliferation of different kind of investigative forms, and then obviously you've also got some really exciting new developments like care like Serial, the podcast, which is a new kind of investigative journalism...

Or Making a Murderer is the other one.

Absolutely, which has had an incredible impact in terms of recently Brendan Dassey having his conviction overturned. Adnan Syed from the Serial podcast now has a retrial, so great impact. And actually, I mean Serial was interesting because it was a different kind mode of investigative journalism, much less didactic than the kind of conventional 'we will bring you the news down from the mountain top and tell you this is our top line, this is what you have to think'. It was a much more kind of exploratory, there's this big mystery, and hi I'm Sarah Kane and we're going to solve this together.

Kind of sandbox journalism, wasn't it? It was quite immersive.

It was very immersive. It's like the listener is taken on that investigative journey, and like you say investigations are really, really exciting – and trying to piece something together is really fascinating. And so I think it's interesting to explore ways that as investigative journalists we can actually share some of that thrill with the reader and say, "Come along with us and help us try to figure this out, or figure it out alongside

us.” So yes, Serial was a kind of game changing in that sense. I just think it’s a really, really exciting time to be doing this.

What’s your view of the making a murderer series? Because I mean I watched that over Christmas last year and my blood pressure tripled with every single episode. I thought, “How is this guy still in prison?” But there’s been quite a kickback and various books have been written that say that no, that Steven is a wrong ‘un and he deserves to be in prison, and the truth is I wasn’t there, I don’t know. But clearly, the police have not done a proper job.

Yes, I mean clearly that series raised some searing questions about their conduct.

It’s unbelievable.

The Sheriff Department, Yes. I mean it was really, really staggering and I know that there have been some questions raised about Stephen Avery’s character subsequently. I think he killed a cat or something?

Yes. Which they referred to in the very first episode.

Obviously at BuzzFeed we take a very dim view of that sort of thing!

Yes, reduce the number of cat pictures with fewer cats!

But yes, I mean and clearly those are legitimate questions. I mean, I think it was a polemical piece of work. I think the filmmakers, although they’ve said that they didn’t have a view, I think you know you don’t spend 10 years investigating something and not form a view, and that’s okay. I think that they clearly had taken a view that there was something very seriously wrong with that conviction, and I think most people watching it would concur with that. Whether or not you know you’d say that he was innocent is another question, but actually what a jury is asked to decide is not whether someone is innocent, it is whether there’s enough evidence to find them guilty. And I certainly think on the basis of that programme there are some questions there to be asked, and I think the filmmakers did a superb job of telling that story in a very compelling way. And I think again, one of the things that the internet has taught us in terms of the way that we tell stories, is that we don’t have to bring the news down from the mountain top in this very didactic way, and we don’t have to dictate to that reader in stentorian tones and tell them this is what you have to think. Actually we shouldn’t be afraid of the fact that news and investigative journalism is entertaining, it’s fascinating, and we can tell it in an entertaining way and it can still be absolutely true and fair and accurate. And I think that the Making a Murderer series is a great example of that, Serial is a great example of that, we’re really trying at BuzzFeed to find entertaining, compelling absorbing, immersive ways of telling investigative stories.

Do you think the written word is the best way to do investigative journalism? Because we have to Sir Trevor McDonald in that chair a few months ago now and he said the problem with television news and television investigations is there this what he called it the obsession with balance, that you know you can quite easily say, “Here’s some wrong ‘uns, here’s the evidence, we’ve got them bank to rights guv,” whereas on telly they’d say, “Here’s some wrong ‘uns but here’s the opposing view, we’ve now joined by someone else who is going to defend it,” and then the view was not left with any particular view that they’ve been told.

Yes, I mean I think that we certainly try, and are obliged to try to make sure that our reports are balanced, so we always go to the person we’re writing about for comment. We will always reflect their view. We’re always very careful to add that balance. But I think that’s much easier to do when you have 9,000 words to play with than it is when you have a three-minute TV package to play with. You end up having to devote half the package to the balance, and like you say then that leaves the reader the viewer feeling a little bit unsure.

‘The global cooperation denied all the allegations’ or something like that. You think, “Well okay, they’re bound to.”

Quite, exactly. But it’s really important to put that denial in because sometimes people do get accused of things that they haven’t done, and so you have to be fair and balanced. I mean, I think that the correct medium really depends on the story. There are some stories that really are best told in pictures. You know, you just need to see the people, or you need to see the damage that was done with your own eyes. And there are some stories where there’s a lot of very complicated information and actually you need a long read to take the reader by the hand and just walk them through what happened here. And you can’t do that, even in an hour-long TV documentary. You know, there just isn’t enough room. So I think that yes, I think that both media are equally powerful in different ways when it comes to telling investigative stories. I personally love the written word as a medium just because, as much as anything else, I mean, apart from what is to be a poet obviously as I said before, originally before I got into this industry, I think that the written word is great because basically all you need to go out there and be an investigative journalist is a pen and a notebook, and you can go out there and report the hell out of any story. You don’t need a huge great big camera crew and sound guys and lighting technicians and all of that traipsing around after you, that kind of... you know, I’d find that kind of cumbersome. So I like the agility of the written word. But yes I think TV has a real place for investigative journalism.

Do you think there’s any area of life in society that’s been under-investigated, that’s ripe for you doing a deep dive?

Well, if I did I wouldn’t be able to tell you about it! It would be like pointing everybody else in that direction. I mean, we’re always on the lookout for unreported little corners of the world, you know, because it’s a cliché isn’t it, but sunlight is the best

disinfectant. And if you can find a little a little dark, shadowy corner where nobody else is looking, you're likely to find secrets lurking. And also, it's much more fun to be digging where nobody else is digging, you know, so yes, we're always on the lookout for those for those areas – but I'm not going to tell you, because then everybody else would be digging there too, and that would spoil our fun.

Tell us about the time that you and Jonathan Calvert posed a couple to buy a baby in Bulgaria.

I mean, probably not our finest hour, to be fair – but it was enormously amusing, even at the time.

The Stingers were stung themselves.

We were. I mean, it was definitely element of hubris about that particular moment.

Talk us through it then.

So basically, Jonathan and I were investigating a global trade in babies. We were looking into this phenomenon whereby Western couples who are having difficulty conceiving, very understandably want to find an alternative. And it's quite difficult to get IVF on the NHS over here, and it's quite difficult to adopt over here, so they will turn to the developing world, and increasing numbers are basically paying money, either to bear children for them as surrogates – paid surrogacy is illegal in this country, and it's illegal to pay someone abroad to have a baby for you too – or they'll pay to adopt a baby from overseas, and there are various ways that you can kind of cover that up and get the children back into the country without anyone realising there's been an illicit transaction there. So that's what we were investigating.

Which is already horrific. We just need to take a moment to say that no wonder you wanted to look into that.

Right. And there was there was quite a lot of evidence that was happening, and it was really, really fascinating story. So what we'd done was we were posing as a couple. I think we were Heidi and Richie or something like that. And we were having fertility difficulties, and we were looking around online for people who might be willing to set us up with a baby.

Already like the set up for a sitcom or something.

I know, we should have seen it coming. So we had actually already had a number of meetings with people in Eastern Europe who were prepared to sell children, but we'd gone on a forum, a Bulgarian forum, and we posted an advert saying, "Hello, we're basically in the market for a baby, has anyone got any to offer." And we were contacted by a woman who replied saying, "I read you want to buy baby. How big

you want baby?" And we sort of replied that size wasn't very important, any sort of baby would do.

That's utterly insane.

And we arranged a meeting with this women at a Hotel in Sofia, and we went over there and basically within about sort of two minutes of her arriving, we realised there was something very wrong because she arrived with a chap, they were both very well turned out, which wasn't what we were expecting for people flogging their own children...

So your spidey sense was already tingling.

Yes, there was definitely something rotten in Bulgaria. And they kind of sat there and basically they immediately said, "Well, why is it that you want to buy this baby, because you realise it's illegal to buy babies?" And we were saying, "Well, why do you want to sell this baby? Do you realise it's illegal to sell babies?" And we had this kind of game of ping-pong with the blame where we were both trying to shift it onto each other, and it was just weird and clearly like, wrong. And so about halfway through, Jonathan leaned over and said, "They're either police or investigative journalists, I don't know what's going on here." But what was kind of baffling me was that I couldn't spot the camera. I was thinking, "If this is a sting, they've got to be filming us." But I thought we were familiar with every kind of hidden camera under the sun having used them ourselves, and you know, I was looking for...

Presumably you had hidden cameras on you then.

We both had our hidden cameras on, so I had the buttonhole camera, I was looking for buttonhole cameras on them, but you can tell a buttonhole camera because it doesn't have any thread through the button, so there were no threadless buttons. The other thing... actually I'm not going to go through all the tradecraft of investigative journalism because that would spoil it, but I couldn't see any of the other sorts of cameras that we would use, so I was kind of baffled about that. And I said, "I can't see the camera." And then eventually, I realised that the chap she was with was wearing this pair of glasses which were like great big comedy clown glasses, they were absolutely enormous great big thick black rims.

Like Harry Hill type glasses.

Like Harry Hill type glasses, but you know, times a hundred. And I realised then, "Oh God, the camera in the glasses, isn't it?" and like, "Lets get out of here." So we kind of made our excuses and left, and they left too, and we kind of followed them out of the the building and tried to tail them for as far as we could, and they seemed... the minute they left they were kind of like intensely debriefing, and obviously sort of talking too earnestly, and we just thought that was definitely a sting. So we went online and we were googling spyglasses, and we basically found the exact pair of

glasses that this guy had been wearing. And so we thought, "Okay, right. Definitely a sting." So we rang them up and we said, "Listen, cards on the table here. We were filming you in that meeting, we know you were filming us too. We're investigative journalists, who are you? What's going on?" And they said, "We're journalists too." And it turned out we were a British journalists investigating Bulgarian couples selling babies to British couples, and they were Bulgarian journalists investigating British couples buying babies from Bulgaria.

So their intentions were noble as well.

Right. We were all basically kind of, you know, on the same page here. So I said, "Great. I tell you what..."

Call it a draw.

We've got some really interesting stuff, you've probably got interesting stuff too. Shall we just share?" Let's just share what we've both got. And we agreed to do that. We were in the process of sharing all of our information, and then the two of them decided that actually, rather than doing a story about British couples buying Bulgarian babies, it would be much funnier to do a story about British journalists trying to catch out Bulgarian couples out buying babies, or selling babies, so they decided instead to just do a package about the stingers getting stung, and just aired the footage of us in the meeting on Bulgarian in TV.

But without being pious about it that was actually incredibly short-sighted and selfish of them to do that, given that both of you had altruistic noble aims, and there was an opportunity then missed to make a serious point about this.

I mean, I won't lie we were pretty peeved at the time they did that to us because I mean, genuinely because it ruined our investigation in that, you know, the whole thing was kind of scuppered and we genuinely thought this was important, and it presumably ruined their investigation. And it was kind of a little bit dishonourable because we were the ones that rang them and rumbled them and came clean. So for them to present it the other way around was a little bit irritating. But you know, to be honest it was all quite amusing. I'm not sure we'll ever live it down! And actually, it just so happened that the week that it aired on Bulgarian TV, we might have got away with it, but it turned out that Mazher Mahmood, more commonly known as the Fake Sheikh, who at the time was working for the Sunday Times, happened to be in Bulgaria investigating something or other that week. And Clare Newell, who is a former colleague both me and Jonathan's, who was the investigations editor at the Telegraph, was also in Bulgaria and it was on TV. So both Mazher and Clare saw it, rang us up said, "What on earth is going on?" And look, you know, if you're in this sort of business of writing about other people in embarrassing situations, you can't possibly complain when people do that about you. So it was amusing, slightly frustrating, shame about the investigation, but, you know, a good story for the grandkids.

This sounds an incredibly kind of mansplaining question straight away, but what's it like to be a woman doing this job? And what's it like working for a woman? Janine Gibson is obviously very well-respected editor-in-chief. Does it does it change something about the journalism and the way you're managed, and the way you work?

Some of the most inspirational editors I've worked for have been women. Janine Gibson is superb editor with an amazing track record, having blown open the whole NSA/Snowden leak story at The Guardian. And also, when I started out I worked for Hannah Start, who was a news editor at the Yorkshire Post, and was also a really inspirational woman to work for, and actually in between that very start of my career and now, I've really not worked for women. All of the men in senior editorial positions I've worked for, well, have been men, all the editors have been men.

Is the newsroom environment still quite a kind of butch, type A, alpha male type going on?

I would say it is, yes, at the newspapers I've worked for. BuzzFeed is not, and that is one of the things that is incredibly refreshing about BuzzFeed; it's a really diverse working environment in all senses. I think actually minorities are generally overrepresented at BuzzFeed, which really makes it a wonderful, exciting place to work.

I was going to say, what a great thing to do.

Yes, we have more women in editorial than men. Marginally, but still more. And yes, that makes it incredibly exciting. And I think it really gives it a kind of a fresh, dynamic, vibrant feel because those are voices which is so seldom heard in the media industry. And I think that can make some of them more, you know, some of the legacy organisations feel a little bit stale at times, and it does affect editorial decisions. I mean, for example, you know, the Sunday Times where I used to work recently got itself into a bit of a pickle with this panel it ran on childless politicians, all of whom were women, alongside an interview with Nicola Sturgeon talking about her miscarriage.

And here's six women that also haven't had kids. Not pictured, several men who have not had kids.

Exactly. And you look at that sort of decision and it's disappointing to see that sort of thing still happening in the 21st century. And I do think that women need to be much better represented at newspapers and conventional broadcasters, but it's certainly really, really exciting to work for a totally agenda-setting editor-in-chief in Janine, and in an organisation at BuzzFeed where women are really in the ascendant – and that's really, really exciting.

Here's a trick question in a sense. Is there anyone that you wouldn't turn over if you felt there was a story? Like a friend, or a friend's business, or the management of BuzzFeed, or... are you like The Terminator as it were, that you'll go with the story? Because I do trust BuzzFeed's editorial judgment. I trust them sufficiently to think if there was a problem at BuzzFeed they'd probably run a story on it themselves. You know, the Guardian and the BBC are often kicking themselves in print and online. BuzzFeed would do the same? Or is it that you almost lack the resources to take someone on? I found this when I was at the local council for many years, is that in planning decisions, sometimes you wouldn't turn down something or approve something in fear of a big corporation, but it would be a consideration that they would put a big barrister on you and incur 20 grand's worth of costs if they didn't like the decision. You did have it in the back of your mind.

Yes, I mean... well, so to take your question in two parts. First of all I think...

It was a terrible rambling question, wasn't it?

No, no! I mean, it's a great question and covering all sorts of things I love to talk about. But yes, I mean, I wouldn't write a story exposing a friend or a member of my family because that would be conflicted out of doing that, it would be inappropriate me to do that because I couldn't come to it impartially, so I would just have to say to BuzzFeed, "Listen, I can't I've got to step aside from this." Certainly though, if BuzzFeed were investigating somebody, you know, in my family or a friend, I would not try to interfere with that because I think we all have to be held up to the same standards.

And presumably, rightly I would think, they wouldn't tell you, because you know that will put you in a terrible bind anyway, ethically.

Yes, I guess not. I mean, thankfully I've never been in that position. But you know, certainly you can't be a hypocrite in this game. I mean, so much of what we do is about exposing hypocrisy, so you have to be willing to be held to the same standard and for the people that you love to be held up to those standards too. The second part of your question, do we ever demure from investigating, you know, super rich corporations or powerful wealthy people, I mean, no – because actually this whole job is about seeking out areas where power is being abused, and that's almost always by the wealthy, the powerful; it's almost always by people who have limitless resources to try to crush you if they want to. And this job is about kind of being bold enough to stand up to those people. And yes, for sure, you have to make absolutely sure that your facts are bulletproof; you know, your story is completely copper-bottomed in every aspect, because if there's a single chink in your armour those people will go for you. But you can't possibly stand down from the fight with those people otherwise we'd be punching down; we'd be going for people who were less powerful, and what would be the point in that?

Without sounding too sycophantic, how proud are you of what you do? Because not only is it very good in terms of the enjoyment of the job, but when your head hits the pillow at night, you perform an incredibly important function in society, holding truth to power, almost like a societal safety net that you're actually there to seek out wrongdoing. You must be incredibly proud of that.

It's kind of you to say! I mean, I think I really passionately believe in the importance of investigative journalism as a function of any kind of working democracy, and I would defend my profession to the death. On a personal level, I actually just feel like my job is just so much fun, and I'm just so lucky to have this job, that I kind of go to bed feeling really, really lucky. I don't necessarily congratulate myself on a great public service.

Get a little pious about it.

No, because it's just like, I love it. You know, I do it because I love it. I can't say I'm only actuated by some driving sense of social justice or public interest. I mean, I am but I am also totally driven to work because I just love what I do, and it's so exciting and so much fun. So I don't feel enormously virtuous about that. But I do really believe that for the industry as a whole, you've got to be investing in this kind of journalism. It is what keeps our public life clean in this country.

Last question then. Quick question in two parts. One, what's the thing that you've done that's made you most proud? And the final question, what's next for you?

Oh, good, really good questions. I mean... you know what actually, I think the thing that I am most proud of that I've done so far is building this little team of investigative journalists in London for BuzzFeed. My team are just totally incredible. I have Jane Bradley, who came over from the BBC, who is just stunning natural reporter on the doorstep, she can make anybody talk to her. She's incredible at tracking people down and asking them the tough questions and somehow making them answer, and she's just relentless in pursuit of a story. She's totally inspirational, I learn from her all the time. I also learn from Tom Warren, who is also on my team, and is an incredibly talented forensic journalist; he's brilliant with the most complicated and arcane financial documents or court documents, also wonderful at getting people to talk. And then we also have Richard Holmes, who's another reporter on the team. He joined us as a graduate and is just a natural born investigative journalist. He's just so good, so young, and I really do learn from all three of them every day, just watching the ways that they approach stories. And it's really been such a privilege and so exciting to kind of bring them all together and work with them, and kind of create something brand new. And I feel like that opportunity to make a contribution, to add something to investigative journalism in this country, because it is something I care so much about, that has been a real privilege and something I can say I am proud of.

And what's next? Deliberately vague question.

That is a super hard question to answer because I am so happy where I am. I would love to continue to be part of building a new way of doing investigative journalism at BuzzFeed. It's such a fast growing place. It's such an incredibly exciting place to be. I kind of want to stick around here and just see what happens. And one of the thrilling things about being at BuzzFeed is it's kind of impossible to tell what's going to happen next. Like the company changes and morphs into something new, like every five minutes it feels like. And so we have to adapt with that. And so it's a bit of a like thrill-seeking magic carpet ride but it's a great place to be. So I kind of don't want to know what's next. I just want to keep going with the journey and see what happens.

Heidi, we've run out of metaphorical tape. It has been an absolute blast – thank you.

Thanks so much!