

Mark Thompson CEO, New York Times

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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 Mark Thompson, chief executive of the New York Times. Starting out as a BBC trainee, Mark's rise to work as editor of The Nine O'Clock News and Panorama, head of factual programming, control of BBC2, director of television, before leaving to become chief executive of Channel 4. He returned to the board in 2004 in the aftermath of the Hutton inquiry as director general, and in his eight years as DG reshaped the organisation to meet the challenges of the digital age, launching iPlayer, streamlining management, but also facing criticism for political bias where he admitted that the BBC did struggle with impartiality. He joined the New York Times in 2012 as president and chief executive, and under his leadership, the paper has invested in virtual reality and has become the first news organisation in the world to pass the one million digital-only subscriber mark. On top of all of that, he has just released a new book, Enough Said: What's gone wrong with the language of politics?

Mark, thank you for joining me.

Hi there.

That's quite an introduction, quite a list of jobs. Are you exhausted?

I mean, look, I mean, different personality types, I think, you know, if you want to work in modern media you'd better have pretty relentless energy because it's changing all the time, there's lot of work to be done and you're trying to make decisions with too little information, so not in a way I guess my slightly masochistic personality type probably suits this moment in media history.

And is it all masochism, as it were? Because one of the questions I was thinking on the way to the studio was, "What's the real question want to ask

him?” And this sounds really bland and a bit lame, but what was it like to be DG? I mean, is it a great privilege and all of that, or is it just a litany of woe and pressures from absolutely everyone?

I think one of the odd things about me, and I'm not alone in this, but I'm one of those people... I love the things that other people hate in some ways. What I mean by that is really difficult, knotty strategic problems, organisational complexity and, to some extent, political battling and all of that. I always have found that interesting and engaging, and it kind of gets me out of bed. You know, I was a news editor and I was a journalist, and you know the thing about journalists is you hear a loud report and you run towards it rather than run away from it. And I think I've got a bit of that as a manager as well, so... I mean to me, you know, it's about what do you fancy, and if you fancy a quiet life, 2016 is not the right moment to join the media, certainly not the newspaper industry. But for me it's been great. And I love the BBC, and I loved being director general of the BBC.

Were you always ambitious? I mean when you started with the BBC, did you think, “I'll end up DG.”?

I don't feel... look, I honestly don't feel ambitious. It's silly to... you know, I mean I've had some luck and I've had some senior jobs in the industry, [but] it doesn't play out in my head as ambition. Indeed, actually for much of my career I felt that often I was going for jobs where ... I mean, the hardest job interview, the hardest process, the greatest jeopardy was trying to become a graduate trainee at the BBC. Everything after that... everything follows after that and quite often, I felt I was not one of 10 candidates but one of two or one of three. And in a weird way, I think an awful lot of people in our industry, probably very sensibly, in the way don't want to become senior, don't want to have, you know, the job of trying to figure out what comes next and all of the kind of human consequences that goes with that. And so, in a strange way, I think actually slightly to people's surprise it's less to do with kind of, “It must be me, I must be the boss.” And more being tapped on the shoulder as the last person left in the room, in a way. Nobody believes that when I say that, but it's true.

Your job, both what you're doing now and as DG, it reminds me almost of being the home secretary, whereas if you do a good job no one will praise you but there's a litany of people queuing up the second you get anything wrong and you're attacked from all sides.

Yes, but I think with the BBC, it's a great public institution. Essentially every household in the country has to pay for it. They own it. They have a passion about it which often is actually, and fundamentally I think, in many households is loving it, relying on it, thinking of it as an essential part of their lives, but also often being annoyed, irritated, surprised. And – to state the obvious, as Mr Abraham Lincoln's meant to have said, probably didn't say but is meant to have said – you can't please

all of the people all of the time. And there are plenty of issues, one that happened after I left, but... the matter of Jeremy Clarkson and *Top Gear* comes to mind where you've got some passionate, loyal *Top Gear* fans who passionately believe the BBC should keep Jeremy Clarkson. Obviously you've got other people who quite understandably think when one person punches another on a production team, you know, actions have consequences – and that's a good example where whatever the BBC had done it would get criticised.

Do you think Tony Hall is doing a good job?

I do think he's doing a good job, and I think Tony and his colleagues, it must be said, with the government have achieved I think a really strong royal charter. It's going to guarantee the BBC is of real scale and scope, serving the British public for years to come, I hope with high quality programmes. The licensee settlement for the BBC is a tough one, by the way, it was it was tough in 2010 as well, and I think that all over the western world you can see governments and the commercial critics of public broadcasting tightening the purse strings and trying to limit the public broadcasters by reducing their spending. And I think that's a bad thing. I think commercial media faces so many challenges that it's a pity and a problem that the public's source – not just in the UK but in many other countries – the public source of high quality, independent and free journalism is probably going to diminish over the coming years, at the very time when the commercial players are less able to pay for it.

Do you keep an eye on what's happening back home? I mean, we're recording here in Manhattan, but I mean if you look at what's just happened with *Bake Off*, do you think that it was right that it moved to Channel 4? Do you kind of second guess it and think, "If I was still DG I would have done that."?

I mean, the wonderful thing about doing these jobs for a bit is you do get a lot of humility, and a more of a sense of what it's like to be in the middle of one of these things. And also I want to say something else, which is I live in New York and I'm 3,500 miles away and I have an experience of UK media stories which is much more like the experience of an ordinary kind of citizen in the UK i.e. I might catch it, I might not, if it catches my interest I might read a bit more. People pass through New York so sometimes I hear a bit more, but I don't hear that much more than an ordinary member of the public would in the UK, and just like an ordinary member of the public I often find myself scratching my head and I think *Bake Off* is a good example where in the end, if the answer is to public, not for profit public broadcasters, in a kind of Dutch auction and the kind of fighting over a hit show, when both of them by their charters and constitutions are meant to be putting money as far as they can into new talent, new ideas, it feels like something has gone wrong in the system.

It's one of the reasons why I asked about Bake Off was not to be kind of salacious but because you have seen it from both sides, both as DG but also you ran Channel 4, of course. Do you think they've kind of overstepped the mark a little bit in entering this bidding war and made themselves ripe for privatisation?

Well look, I haven't spoken to either the BBC or Channel 4 about this, and what I would say on Channel 4's behalf, I mean, I suppose essentially I'd need a bit of persuasion that it makes sense for Channel 4 to take a programme from the BBC and to spend what I think is going to be £25 million a year, which could be spent on new programming on an existing hit with existing talent. So I do need a bit of persuasion. I want to say though, that I've got a lot of sympathy with Channel 4. Channel 4 is a relatively small organisation, fighting for its life, and one of the things it has to do is it has to find a reservoir of money it can spend on new shows. You find that from, if you like, exploiting or 'harvesting' - harvesting is the right word - the advertising revenue that comes from existing hits. Existing hits are harder to come by, so the extra money you can then spend on experimentation on new talent is harder to come by, American shows used to be a great way in which Channel 4 could buy programs economically, make if you like, profits from them and then use the profits to pay for *Channel 4 News* and for experimentation; that's harder. The American shows don't perform as well, there are many more outlets for them, the price has gone up, so that's become harder. So I can understand from Channel 4's point of view why having one or two absolute anchors in the schedule with a kind of guaranteed audience makes sense. But of course, getting a guaranteed audience is sometimes harder than it looks and *Bake Off* with some key personalities taken out of the mix may, may not, but may prove hard to re-establish a hit show.

We'll go back to a few of these issues because obviously I've got loads to ask you about, but I wanted to ask about the move to New York. I mean, it must have been quite a thing, not only to kind of uproot your family, change career, move from broadcasting into newspapers... tell us how that happened, and was there a little bit of resistance, you know, people thinking, "Who was that limey, coming over here telling us what to do?"

I mean first, I have to say it's been the most wonderful experience for me and I think for my family as well, it's been a... and you know, I've got a transatlantic family; I have an American wife, my children have got both passports. Two of my children were already in the US college system when I arrived in New York, so in a sense, you know, some of the family... I was not the first member of my family to resettle in the US. And indeed, my youngest son has just started college in America as well, so all five of us are on this side of the Atlantic. And because of family connections and business, I've spent a lot of time in America and in New York and I lived here for nearly a year in the 1980s, where we have a mutual friend, I worked with the late, great Bob Friend, and I worked in this city with Bob...

He used to speak with great fondness of his drunken adventures with you.

Well, I had an amazing time with Bob, and Bob, as I walk around New York today, is like a friendly ghost. I mean, I remember him and the stories we did and some of the high jinks. I can't walk around this city without thinking about Bob.

I can only imagine.

So actually it was a very natural move for me as a kind of, if you like, as a family man and given the past, and I thought it was just... it was another... you know, the great common point with the BBC if you like, this is another of the world's great media brands, news brands in the case of the New York Times, but also I thought it was a worthy cause and I've had the great privilege with the BBC and Channel 4 and the New York Times of working for institutions whose content I believe in, whose brands I admire, and whose future, you know, if I can help at all to give them a better offer or to help them find a better rather than a worse future I think that's time well spent, and I'm very driven by that. And although when I initially got a phone call saying would I like to think about this job I thought, "Surely not." You know, for the obvious reasons; I'm a Brit, not an American. How will they react? I've not spent much time in thinking through media beyond television and radio, though I had done some work in digital. The New York Times' answer to that was, "Actually you've got a lot of international experience and we're very international. You know about video. You did some things at the BBC we thought were interesting in terms of developing digital smartphone and so forth, iPlayer being one of them, and I guess that's why the conversation became real and then they offered me the job.

I mean, iPlayer is a fabric of British life now isn't it? It's as much an institution as the cup of tea and the Queen, really. You couldn't not have iPlayer.

We spent a couple of years really wrestling with how to get it to work and with real dark night of the soul about whether we would ever get the product out of the door. And I have to say we launched it I think on Christmas Day, I want to say 2007. I went up, tried it and thought, "This isn't going to work," and it worked. It was all these great moments where I thought, you know, peak demand, Christmas Day, it won't work. It literally won't work, you will press the button and nothing will happen. It worked perfectly, and in a weird way it's one of those quite rare moments where something which feels at the time quite revolutionary, absolutely out there, surprisingly ahead of many digital insurgents and new players, works on day one and essentially has worked ever since. So that was a good moment.

But I mean, it's completely changed everything. I commute in from Milton Keynes every morning and gone are the days when people would read a

newspaper as you get on the train carriage; everyone has got their iPad out and their headphones on, and they're watching something they've downloaded on iPlayer – usually Bake Off.

Yes. And there's something deep there which is which is beyond iPlayer, which is that people's willingness to consume video, movies, TV, other kinds of video – and audio, podcasts like this one are absolutely coming back – on the move but crucially, not when a scheduler says, "You've got to watch or listen to this now," but when it suits them. I mean, the prevalence simply of earphones, smartphones and earphones, and the fact that people can hook up into radio, what used to be radio and TV, offline and online in dozens of different use cases, different environments, different lead states and all the rest of it, it really changes our business, I think. Of course, there will be some things, like live sport, like presidential debates in this country, where you kind of want to be there, you want to actually listen, watch and listen to it going out. And interestingly enough, this particular election cycle, I think Donald Trump in particular helps with this, because there's something, from a political point of view, fascinating about Trump, and in particularly the unpredictability of Donald Trump. You'd love to kind of be there live to find out what happens, what he says, how he reacts, so there'll be exceptions to it. But for much of audio-visual content – TV content, radio content and so on – actually doing it at your convenience and with as much as you want, the whole series, multiple episodes, and that change of power and control from it being in the hands of a handful of individuals and being handed to the public as a whole in America and Britain or elsewhere, that's a really striking change – and that's a change over not like 50 years, the guts of that have happened in the last 20 years and most of what happened the last 10 years. I mean, in 1996 I was I was made controller of BBC2. I literally, individually and personally chose all the programmes and decided where they went on that television network. I had some support, but it was literally I commissioned every single programme. One person. With 10% of all viewing of television in the UK. And we've moved to a world where no individual has that has that level of control, and I have to say in the end, although all of these changes are highly disruptive for the digital industry and they disrupt business models and they make careers much more difficult to navigate, it's hard not to feel that that's a good thing, not a bad thing.

A good thing. I mean, because no one ever built a statue or monument to a committee. Surely when BBC2 either succeeded or failed, there was one person to blame.

You've got some accountability, but I think that the interplay, I mean, if you like, the interplay of creative talent, new ideas, executives, absolutely executives play a part in this who have got the guts to back interesting new ideas, and then the empowered judgment of the public at large to figure out what's good, what's bad, what should give a second chance to, what should you just look at for five minutes and say, "Forget it, this is never going to work."? I think in the end that's a healthier world.

With one proviso, which is the US is a very big market and what that means is you can get a new daring piece of work, you can make that an economic success with a very small percentage of the population. It's harder in a smaller market like the UK, and I do think – I recently watched the BBC3 series *Fleabag*. It's really important that the British ecosystem is still able to put money behind projects like that. I mean, I think it's an absolutely spectacular piece of work.

I've heard good things. It's saved on my Sky+ box.

It's a wonderful piece of work. I guess it's a comedy drama, I guess, if you want to give it a... that always makes me laugh; 'comedy drama' always makes... it's like the kiss of death. Actually it's a wonderful, funny but kind of dark and interesting and deep piece of work. It's not clear to me that without Channel 4 with a public service mission and without a BBC with a public service mission you would get many programmes like that. Because of the scale of the market. Because in the end, you know, simply getting the economics, because particularly scripted comedy and drama, it costs money to do it to a standard. It costs money. And so I believe that in European markets – and when I talk about small markets I mean markets the size of the UK, which obviously by most people's standards is a big market – some level of enlightened subsidy or enlightened public involvement I think will increase creativity and will increase the room for new talent. And what I believe about the UK is the UK has got outsized talent, and if we think about where is growth for the UK economy going to come from, how is Britain's reputation going to grow around the world, I think making sure that your growing talent in TV and radio and in the sector, and figuring out intelligent ways of exporting it and getting audiences around the world used to seeing great British talent, remains really important.

But there's something to be said, is there not, about the kind of brutal commerciality that you have in the media here where shows are given five or six episodes to succeed, and then they're cancelled; you read about that all of the time. Was there a bit of a culture shock when you came here in so far as some of the, you know... you've held the senior leadership job in the UK media and one here. What are the kind of similarities, and what are the differences?

I think that's a complicated issue and I think that... I mean, I have many friends in American television and I have experience of American television, not as an employee but as a partner and a colleague and friend over many years. And then there's the American newspaper industry, and then there's the New York Times. American TV is very commercial but it must be said, I mean, creativity in this country comes from an extraordinarily expensive process of making many pilots many which are... many millions of dollars go into, out of which then shows are selected. And it's true that those shows are often, if they're if they're not performing, will be cut off in their prime after just a few weeks. However, many more shows get started and

actually complete episodes get made than would be true in the UK where a smaller number of things...

They try more things, don't they?

They try more things and maybe stick with them less hard. Now, I think you can make a case both ways. I mean, I passionately believed as a controller that, particularly with comedy, you just needed the courage to press on with comedies and accept that... the conundrum with comedies is you have to get to know the characters to find the situation funny. How do you get to know the characters? So you and the audience need to persevere for a bit and over time you hope that an audience will find a great show, will love it and the audience will build. I have to have to say, one's experience is that's true like one out of five or one out of 10 times. Most of the time when the audience don't come, they never come. So, you know, there's a Darwinian struggle going on with comedy, and I think one of the really troubling things about television in both the US and the UK is although there are some very funny shows on TV – John Oliver's having a great run on HBO – so there's some very funny shows I would argue, and there's quite a lot of quite good comedy drama with a lot of the emphasis on the word drama. I think classic scripted situation comedy, there's not as much great comedy today as it as would be true and as you as you would want for a healthy ecology, whereas drama, although I think you could argue that the television drama is not quite where it was in America let us say four or five years ago, that there's lots of very beautifully made, very professionally scripted fine pieces, that the kind of peaks of the *Sopranos* and of *Breaking Bad*, we've slightly come down from a peak in this country, both here and in the UK there's some great drama.

I don't think I've watched any US dramas since *Sons of Anarchy* a few years ago. I mean Kurt Sutter's fantastic but...

You're a braver man than me, I haven't got the stomach for *Sons of Anarchy*! That's quite strong material.

It's amazing. You've got to stick past the first season but then it gets incredibly good.

Yes.

Let's go a little bit more in terms of your day job now, because when you were DG obviously you had to be politically impartial, but now at the New York Times you can come out for a presidential candidate, for example. So I gather that you've obviously chosen to back Hillary Clinton? I mean, that must be a very easy decision to make.

Well... the biggest difference is, as chief executive of the Channel 4 and as director general of the BBC, I was not just the chief executive, I was also an editor-in-chief. I'm not the editor-in-chief of The New York Times. We have an executive editor, Dean Baquet, we have a editorial page editor who's in charge of the opinion pages, James Bennet, and we have a publisher who's a member of the Ochs Sulzberger family, Arthur Ochs Sulzberger Jr.. So I have to say I have the... I would say broadly, the considerable pleasure... of not having, after essentially 10 years of being an editor-in-chief in the UK, that's not no longer part of my responsibility. And I want to say, although I find editorial decision-making incredibly interesting still, I often hear about.. and on certain occasions you get asked advice about editorial decisions, in practice, I have to say one of the minor pleasures of being CEO of The New York Times is not having to worry about that, so I've not been involved in the decision to support Hillary Clinton. It shouldn't come as a great surprise to your listeners, the last Republican candidate the New York Times endorsed I think was Dwight Eisenhower, so the opinion pages and the editorial board of The New York Times absolutely have a tradition of supporting Democratic candidates and broadly liberal policies, but the newspaper and its digital assets in its news coverage, does aim to be impartial however, and to report the news as news.

But as a British media guy living here now, there must be a certain duality to... or I would see it if I were you that in one sense the sheer spectacle of having a candidate like Trump is going to sell newspapers, because what on earth has he done yesterday? You've got to read about it. But then the other thing is, presumably someone living here, are you worried about the prospect of a Trump victory?

Well I mean, I don't know... I don't have strong political leanings. I mean, in a way what happened to me is I joined the BBC and I actually decided in many ways that it made the most sense to focus on how you cover politics and how you think about politics than to be active in politics, and that's meant that in fact for much of my life I've not voted. I did actually vote in the referendum, but generally I have not voted. Because of that I didn't want to take sides, and I would argue strongly at the BBC that I was in favour of doing everything we could to strive for impartiality. I don't think you ever achieve perfect impartiality, certainly not in an organisation as big as the BBC, and I'm not even quite sure that it would be easy to define what perfect impartiality was.

Andrew Marr said there was an unconscious liberal bias, wasn't it? I can't remember the exact phrase he used.

Well, I think that the issue – and I have talked about this publicly before – is it's almost like world view and whether the world view of your journalists can be open enough that they can always understand issues from a range of perspectives, and I think that's what you strive for. And by the way, it helps to have Conservatives, people who tend to think as it were from a perspective which goes with the right

rather than the left, inside your newsroom, inside your decision-making bodies, inside your senior leadership. And I got one or two former colleagues who are in Her Majesty's Government at the moment, so over the years we have absolutely had a steady throughput of Conservatives in the BBC. But it's true that many media organisations, and journalists as a group, probably tend to, you know, in their personal politics tend to the left rather than the right.

It actually works the other way as well because I can also think of a prominent former cabinet minister who is now the BBC's director of radio.

This is James Purnell? So, look... I mean, it seems to me that, as a big media organisation, you know, and I think if Dean Baquet, the editor of the Times, was next to us, I think Dean would say, "You want a broad range of perspectives in your newsroom so that you can cover the news in a way which reflects the full range of opinions." But what we try and do at the Times, and what the BBC still tries to do, is to try and handle these things as objectively as it can. And again, I mean, we talked earlier about the BBC being criticised about most things, I mean, one of things that the BBC was criticised for during the referendum campaign was a kind of excessive fairness, if that's right, a kind of irresponsible level of fairness. I think what people have not noticed there is that during election campaigns, including referendum campaigns, the BBC is under an obligation to go for a much more strict form of impartiality in the matter of how you interview people, how much time different people get, which is not true when there isn't there isn't a referendum campaign.

When we're outside of purdah. But I mean, how influential is an editorial endorsement these days, in the days of social media and Twitter? You know, I imagine most Trump supporters – I mean, this might be prejudice on my part, but they don't seem like they can many of them can be reasoned with or move, they seem to be wholehearted supporters of him from an emotional centre rather than a kind of...

Well, I think we've got to be a bit careful about that. I mean, Trump's polling numbers have moved around a lot.

And is that...

What I mean is, there are people who are sometimes Trump supporters and sometimes not, when, you know... I mean, so there's a lot of volatility.

I mean, he may well have a hard core but his polling, and his polling it goes deep into the US population. I mean, I suspect this has shifted because he's actually fallen back a bit over the last week or so, and I think all of these pieces of volatility have to be taken with a pinch of salt, but two weeks ago the New York Times had some

polling analysis which showed that amongst American white women voters, Trump and Clinton were tied; they were a 50/50 amongst American white women voters.

My flabber is gasted! It really is.

I think you've really got to be careful about stereotyping Trump supporters in the same way I think in the UK, some commentators were guilty of stereotyping Brexit supporters as angry white working class racists – I'm putting that very crudely. And stereotyping in this country is very similar. You cannot get to a plurality or above a plurality in the UK on the basis of such a stereotype, and nor can Trump get to some of the numbers he has achieved, about 40%, on the basis of one narrow definition. And I think that both in the matter of Brexit and in the matter of Trump and his, if you like, surprising passage through the primaries and now to even if Hillary Clinton wins, and you know, as we speak the odds seem to favour her, though I would say, you know, be careful. Be careful. Many people were sure that Remain was going to win the Brexit campaign, so let's see what happens. I don't think you can explain it by one kind of group of people who won't change their minds. And as you know I've written a book, and one of the things the book is about, this is a book about political language, and one of the things the book is trying to get to the bottom of is what's going on and what gives politicians like Donald Trump the kind of power they've got right now.

What is going on, then? Tell us about the book. What conclusions do you reach?

So the book is called *Enough Said: What's gone wrong with the language of politics?* and in a way it's kind of come out of my career in the sense that I spent more than 30 years one way or another either reporting politics or editing news and current affairs shows which dealt with politics, or being an editor in chief for much of the time – and by the way, meeting politicians, sometimes being on the receiving end of political stories – and at least in my head, and this is what the book's about, seeing things changing, the way politicians spoke changing, the way the media covers politics changing. And I think in particular seeing what I think has been an exchange of explanatory power, the space to discuss issues, to explain public policy to the public, either directly or indirectly through the media, so a way from explanatory power towards impact, towards exaggeration, and towards, you know, something which I call authenticity, which is not necessarily being authentic but it's putting off focus on authenticity and making claims about your authenticity.

I'm me, I stand up for what I believe in.

Well, I think we've seen a shift away from explanatory power, the ability to discuss and explain public policy to the public either directly or through the media, and towards a desperation for impact, often accompanied by exaggeration, and

something in the book I call authenticity, which is a kind of slightly unnatural focus on “authenticity” – on being authentic. And almost the sense of some people are more real than others.

My reality is better than yours.

That’s right.

I’m more connected to reality than you are.

And so some examples, Michael Gove during the Brexit campaign. “I think people in this country have had enough of experts.” I think Michael Gove is an expert. He’s been a minister, he’s a very thoughtful minister, he’s very interested in statistics, and there he is saying people have got sick and tired of experts! And by the way, I think it’s a very astute thing to say in many ways, I think if you if you had a poll and said, “Are you sick and tired of experts?” I bet you get a resounding majority for that. But what does that mean? Isn’t our task, given that modern government is intrinsically, intrinsically, about expertise, I mean having won the vote, Brexit now means combing the entire world to try and find expert trade negotiators. They’ve got to fill a ministry with trade negotiators because they’ve got to exit the European Union. So the idea that voting Brexit means no more experts, on the contrary – it’s the beginning of a decade of kind of root canal in terms of experts, with incredibly complicated issues which have to be resolved. You know, for good or ill. So how did we get here? How do we get from the world I remember, just coming into the industry at the end of the 70s, the early 80s, Margaret Thatcher in power in the UK, and when I first came to America in 1983 Ronald Reagan here, that kind of world which... it’s beginning to change, you can feel it beginning to change, and you can feel the media beginning to change as well, but it still looks back. I mean, both Thatcher and Reagan also look back to the political language and the style of interviewing of the 50s, 60s and 70s, the kind of post-war consensus, and they’re trying to break it but they’re still part of it. How do we get from there to the world of Donald Trump? And the way Trump speaks is very... if you look at Trump and put Trump against Reagan, who’s also a great populist, they speak in a very different way. Reagan has still got moments of real kind of traditional eloquence. When he goes on television on the night of the Challenger disaster to talk about the dead astronauts, there’s a wonderful kind of Edwardian cadence and sort of stately quality to what he says. And Donald Trump... Donald Trump’s got a very distinct style of speaking but he couldn’t be further from that.

It seems to work though. It seems to resonate with his supporters.

I think the really important thing to say is, be careful of in a sense patronising this, because it’s working. But there’s a kind of... it’s very friendly, it’s very Twitter friendly, it’s very immediate, it works very well on social media – but often Trump is like a

man frantically circling something in a newspaper; it's like, you know, Barack Obama founded ISIS. He's the founder of ISIS. He founded it. He founded ISIS. His co-founder, well if you ask me, it's cheating Hillary Clinton.

Crooked Hillary, as he calls her.

And crooked Hillary. And this kind have recursive back to the same words, we've got to build a wall, have to build it folks, we've got to build a wall. Walls work.

What does it mean, work? I mean, you talked about Brexit earlier. I remember it was vote for Brexit and 'take back control'. I mean, Boris must have said that on the eve of the referendum poll maybe about 30 times in a big debate.

I think it took both sides a long time. And I think the Remain camp never found a language, they never found a positive language about Europe, they never really found any short phrases at all; the Brexiters found two. They found 'take back control' – its very simple, it's very attractive as well, that's a that's a kind of value proposition to a voter. You can take back control.

Sounds good, doesn't it?

It sounds very good. And by the way, let's not denigrate that – you may argue well it's not true, but take back control is a kind of offer. What was the offer from Remain? Essentially it was, "If you vote Brexit, the Ten Plagues of Egypt will descend on this land." It was a large number of very important people – the experts – have told you how terrible it's going to be, "You must pay attention to them because they know more than you do." That's not a particularly appealing message. 'Take back control' is a simple, clear proposition. The other thing was Independence Day; was voting day, the referendum day, can be Independence Day. Now, this is essentially borrowed from American sci fi movie, but again, it's a simple thing. You could be independent or you could remain under the heel of Brussels, or wherever the officers of independence were. I think whenever you think about the policies, whatever you think about the result, there's no question in the matter of finding simple clear language, the Brexiters won. But, you know, I would say – and the Electoral Reform Society has come out and said this in recent days – it was a terrible debate on both sides. Fear, you know competing fear, what are you more frightened of, are you more frightened about economic collapse or frightened of immigration? Very little sense of explanation of the actual issues involved, a blurring of EU immigration with non-EU immigration... I think it was a really... even compared to the Scottish referendum of two years earlier, the 2014 Scottish Referendum, I thought was a pretty squalid affair and I think... I hope I would have had the courage to say that if Remain had won. I think it was a dismal debate, and that's irrespective of the result.

Do you think there's a huge disconnect though? I've said this before, but I hesitate to use the phrase 'normal people', but they're so disconnected from the kind of political establishment of all colours, that they just want to... anything that kind of is a rejection of that, whether it be potentially independence for Scotland or Brexit, I mean, I thought... my friends who were Brexiteers, the more establishment figures came out supporting for Remain, even when Barack Obama flew in, it actually double their resolve not to change their mind; it made things worse. And I think that was a failure of communication on the Remain side. They didn't realise that everything they did make things worse and entrenched the opposition to the idea.

So I think one of the things that's happened, and I talk about this in the book, is that the language and the... again, the world view of the people who run the country, run Britain, run America, the lawyers, the economists, the planners, the politicians, the executives – and by the way you'd absolutely include people like the director general of the BBC and the chief executive New York Times, I'm not claiming I'm not one of these people – the way they think, the kind of planet PowerPoint, the ease with which you think about trade-offs and statistics and data, and the world of the majority of the population who don't do those things and don't think about those things very often, not because they're stupid because they just that's not part of their lives, and in particular of a group which one of the British political scientist calls the Left Behinds. They're left behind in the sense that these aren't people who have not seen palpable benefits from globalisation and from modernisation and digitisation. They've not really been winners in that they've seen greater job insecurity, they've seen the future of their children looking more troublesome and more difficult. They've got much more economic insecurity than they expected. They feel they're the first generation for maybe two generations, three generations, not to be sure of having as good a retirement as their predecessors, for that group, this talk, this kind of technocratic talk about the benefits of free trade, and the...

It's another world.

It's another world. And I think although... I think we've got to be careful about a kind of language of 'real' people or 'normal' people, ordinary decent citizens and the sort of scum who are the, you know, 1%... I mean, I think in a way we're on the brink of really divisive language when, you know, we know there's much more interplay between these groups, neither of my parents went to university, I don't come from, you know, aristocratic stock or anything like it. And I think my family on my father's side you can go back as far as four generations of somebody coming into Preston in Lancashire with a knapsack on their back and that's it. That's the grand family tree, sort of thing. And the extent to which people move between classes is greater than, certainly used to be greater than many people think, so I think we're all one species in the end. But it's become very divisive both here and in the UK, but crucially in other countries too. If you look at the Five Star movement and Beppe Grillo in Italy

for example, and the rather tricky referendum which Sr Renzi has to either win or lose and the risk of that referendum about constitutional change in Italy becomes an opportunity for a massive protest vote, with in this case the Five Star Movement led by a essentially a stand-up comedian, becoming the receivers of power in Italy, this is happening across the western world – and it's partly because the rate of change in our world, and the rate at which things which used to be taken for granted are changing is bewildering electorates everywhere.

To what extent is social media and rolling news... you know, you've got revolving headlines every 10 minutes, is contributing to that? You mentioned about the kind of increased dependence on impactful language, because a tweet is only 140 characters and even though News Channel is 24 hours the dwell time is going to be 10 minutes per viewing session, so you've got to cram a lot in. Is that the inevitable destination of where this is all going, or is it actually a huge agent of bringing it about more quickly?

So when I think about social media and the Internet more broadly, I think of one very big set of pluses and I think of some negatives as well. And the plus is an obvious one; it is genuinely democratising. Far more information is available to the public than ever before, and if you want to find out about public policy, if you want to find out about issues, there's never been a better moment in human history to just do that. And although not everyone's online, you know, most people are, and, you know, you can go to a public library. I think that's an incredible plus. Secondly, if you've got opinions you can share them. You can make your own content and you can distribute it to the entire planet at virtually nil personal additional cost. So incredible democratisation, both of knowledge and of opinion. Those are pluses. There are two big negatives, I think. One is an obvious one, which is Pandora's Box. Everything's on the Internet; the most thoughtful... we have a wonderful philosophy blog at The New York Times called The Stone, I'd recommend it to anyone. It's professional philosophers thinking about big issues, thinking about popular issues, helping, in a sense, ordinary thoughtful people to think through complex issues; it's the most magnificent thing, one of my favourite things about the New York Times. So there's lots of wonderful stuff. But the bad and the ugly and the psychotic and the murderous is all there as well. And unfortunately, some of the spirit of the bad part of social media, and of Twitter, and of the Dark Web, is filtering back into public life; vitriol and bullying isn't just restricted to... it's absolutely there. It's not restricted to internet trolls - it's coming into political mainstream. I mean the ugliness of what politicians say about each other, they don't really realise that they're talking their entire profession down, that when they accuse each other of lying, the public think, "Okay, fair enough, you're all liars." They don't really understand that. But the kind of leeching back of the poison from the anonymous web back into public life is obviously happening, and it's destroying the conventions of politeness and of... just the kind of reciprocal altruism, which means, "I'll shut up and let you make your point then I'll reply to you." That's all breaking down. And it's because the kind of

screaming, ranting form of argument of the Internet, quite a lot of public commentators and public figures are beginning to think that's normal, and it's becoming normal. So that's the first negative. I mean, the second negative for me is a more complicated one; I sort of feel... I felt this happening in the 1980s and it's the acceleration effect. It's the acceleration effect of the 24/7 news cycle and what it does to media, and what it does to stories. And so, I remember I was in charge of the BBC news operation in Tiananmen Square for much of the Tiananmen Square crisis in 1989, and by 1989, CNN has launched and it's becoming big, the internet exists but it's not.. there isn't really an internet yet. But certainly for the BBC, with BBC radio, BBC television, suddenly we were finding this quite big news operation, covering one of the biggest stories of the year and the decade, we were filing not one story a day or even 10 stories a day, but we were doing nearly between 25 and 30 cut television and radio stories, plus two ways, plus very quick down the line TV interviews...

That's a lot of content.

So suddenly... 24/7 literally, 24 hours a day, somebody's cutting something, somebody's feeding something. And I remember thinking very clearly, and again in the first Gulf War a couple of years later, "This is what the future looks like." It looks like you've got this practical problem, is you've got a journalist, do you want them to go out and find out what's going on or do you want them to stand in front of a microphone and a camera to say what's going on? How do you square that circle? How do you go on doing journalism? How do you go on having thinking time for trying to understand what a story is and actually then presenting that story? And frankly, if you think about, as it were, the difference between the volume and the intensity of the news cycle in 1989 or 1991, 1992 compared to today, we've got a kind of 10x intensification since then. So that's kind of some of the digital effects. What happened to media is that digital and the disruption through cable television, satellite television, and the disruption of newspapers through the Internet, media organisations came under immense competitive pressure, and that's when the temptation to try and find the strongest opinion, the shortest most punchy headline, the thing that's going to work well on Twitter, that's when that comes to the fore. And so you get this kind of intensification and acceleration of the news, and meanwhile something else is going on. I start my book with a phrase coined by Sarah Palin, which was the 'death panels' and this is 2009. It's American health care reform, it's Obamacare, and Sarah Palin has latched on to...

Another great phrase, 'death panels'.

Death panels, which essentially was about one subject, which was the proposal that essentially, the federal government and the federal medical programmes would pay for all people to have – very important to say, voluntary – counselling on end of life. You know, you are coming to the end of your life. How much care do you want?

Sarah Palin, in a single phrase, turns this into an Orwellian dystopia. There's going to be panels, a bit like the panels in concentration camps, Barack Obama's going to be behind the desk, there's going to be federal bureaucrats, and they will take... and she mentions in the original Facebook posting and tweet that she's worried about her son, who has Down's Syndrome, Trig is a Down's Syndrome person, child, and she's worried that she and Trig are going to be brought in in front of the death panel to decide whether Trig lives or dies. That's the implication. So death panels is an example... I mean, at one level it's a brilliant piece of rhetoric. It's a concentrated claim. It not saying, "Obamacare, it's not good faith. Barack Obama is not someone who is trying to do something good for the country. We happen to disagree with his policy," it's saying, "Barack Obama wants to kill your children." And yet the phrase is so powerful. It was picked up by everyone, you know, American network news behind that muscular, you know, or pulchritudinous anchor is a slide saying 'death panels', on a strap below CNN and Fox News, 'death panels'. And you don't even know whether... if you've got the sound down or you're walking through an airport and you see it, you don't even know whether the people on the TV are arguing in favour or against it or if you see it, you know, on somebody's home page or on your smartphone, you don't know which side you're on. You've heard... I mean, of over 80% of the US population within a few days had heard the phrase, and many people, particularly many Republicans, thought that it was that it was a piece of actual policy proposal, they actually literally thought that one of the proposals inside Obamacare was the institution of death panels.

And is that kind of loss of subtlety an issue when you think commercially for the New York Times? So for example you mentioned earlier about the philosophy writing that The New York Times has. How do you get exposure and gain readers for that in a kind of click-bait world where you are competing against pictures of cats on BuzzFeed, you're also trying to prioritise your philosophy postings on the Facebook news feed when its algorithm is prioritising commercially other interests... it must be incredibly difficult to do that really, because actually you've got the challenge editorial of reducing the incredibly nuanced philosophy posting into 140 characters to try and get that click.

Yes. So what I want to say is, we know what we stand for. I mean, I think one of the great things about the New York Times, and one of the great benefits of the New York Times relative in particular to the BBC, I mean the BBC has got this immensely interesting and exciting, but also tough, tough job of appealing to everyone; of offering something of value to every household on the land. Now the New York Times, we want to be influential and we want our audience to be very broad, but we are we are aiming to provide serious news, features and opinion. That's our job, that's our brand. And if you don't want serious news, features and opinion, we're not the right place to come. And so what I'm really proud of, we now have an audience of about 125 million people a month who come to us and we have a deeply engaged

audience in the tens of millions. Not everyone comes to us I'm claiming is deeply engaged, but we have a big deeply engaged audience as well. We have, as you said, we've got a very successful digital subscription model. I mean, for me that's because we're doubling down on seriousness and on, you know, trying to produce quality – and I think interestingly enough, when I think about my colleagues, the people I worry about are the legacy publishers and some of the new entrants who decided to go down the middle and try to be all things to all men, and to try and build vast, relatively thin audiences with click bait, and with sort of jolly, cheerful mainstream news because there's an awful lot of that available for nothing on the Internet. The kind of advertising which goes with that on the Internet. You're competing head to head with Facebook and Twitter and with Google for their advertising; those are tough guys to compete head to head with. And as it happens, I mean, we are by far the most successful digital business that I'm aware of in our space compared to our competitors new and old. We're going to make half a billion dollars of revenue out of digital this year. We've done that not by compromising, but by actually doubling down on investigations, great international news coverage, you know, really thoughtful commentary, and quality culture and lifestyle coverage as well.

You've been BBC DG, you're now chief executive of the New York Times, what's next? I mean, is there a bigger job? What's the next rung on the ladder up? Global domination?

I'm not looking for a bigger job. In many ways, one of the things I've really enjoyed about the New York Times is its size. It's a big organisation. It's a lot smaller than the BBC though, its 3,500 people rather than, I guess, 20,000 people. And what attracts me to the Times, and what has always really attracted me, is the mission. The idea of getting behind and finding a future for quality journalism, for journalism which really makes a difference in the world, and I'm not finished at the Times and I'm not looking for a new job.

Last question, then. What's been your best day of your career so far, and what's been the worst day?

Oh, the best day of my career is actually really easy. It's the day when Alan Johnson was released by his captors, or by the authorities in Gaza. Alan was a BBC correspondent who'd been kidnapped in Gaza.

I remember it well.

We were desperately worried about him, I think with good reason, for a long time, and there was a day when... I had always hoped that a political solution would be found, but it still came as a complete surprise and a very pleasant surprise.

What was the worst one? Lord Patton not backing you on all these various pay shenanigans? That can't have been nice.

Weirdly, I don't remember the bad days, I mean, literally... I mean, I think... I've been working in this area for more than 30 years. I scratch my head to think of... there was a day which I thought was going to be really a really bad day, and arguably, I guess, if you want to go for the 24 hour clock, it was a really bad day... there was a day in the autumn of 2010 where I thought the government was going to impose – this was the coalition government led by David Cameron – impose a settlement, a licence fee settlement, on the BBC having had no public discussion, no consultation, but impose a settlement against my express advice and against my wishes and the wishes of the BBC and the BBC Trust, which would have forced the BBC essentially to pay for the over 75s. And in my view, taken £750 million...

It was just a cut, in effect.

A gigantic cut, and moreover asking the BBC to take over a piece of... of kind of social policy in a way which I thought would be very difficult for the BBC ever to get out of. And I was told they'd made the decision, I got called by the secretary of state, called in to see him, said, "I'm sorry Mark." This was Jeremy Hunt, Jeremy I think was against this, or certainly said he was, and commiserated with me, and I was on the way home on a train and I wrote my resignation letter. I didn't think I should stay, I knew many members of the BBC Trust were also considering their position...

A media geek point – to whom to you address your resignation letters?

That's a very good point. To the chairman of the trust. I was composing that and trying to think about what I would say to my colleagues, and we were just going through, you know, just about to come into Slough station when I got a phone call from the government saying, you know, "We're thinking twice about this. Why don't you come back and have a further conversation?" So I got I kind of ran up the steps, over the footbridge, back down the other side, got on the next train back to London and got back probably to the Ministry of Culture, Media and Sport probably about, I don't know. 9.30-10pm, and was there until after lunchtime the next day.

Well, Mark, on that moment of high drama we've run out of metaphorical tape, so unfortunately we're going to have to leave it there, but it has been a fantastic podcast and a great interview. I could go on for hours longer. Thank you for your time.

Thank you.