

Peter Bowes

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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 BBC correspondent Peter Bowes. Peter started out in scientific research before moving into broadcasting through local radio. He joined the BBC in 1988, working for Radio 4 on PM, The World at One and the Today programme, before moving to Radio 1 where he worked on the breakfast show and presented Newsbeat. He moved to the US in 1996.

Based in Los Angeles, he has since covered a huge number of stories for viewers back home, and interviewed almost every Hollywood star. He became a US citizen in 2008, and is currently covering the US presidential election.

Peter, thank you for joining me.

It's great to be here, thank you.

And very kind that you're a bit of a fan of the podcast before you agreed to come on!

I love the podcast, yes! I'm a bit of a media geek, so I love hearing the stories and I especially like hearing people that I know and that I worked with. Peter Dixon was great, we worked on Steve Wright, of course, many moons ago.

He's a legend, isn't he?

He is a legend. They're both legends.

And Torin Douglas as well, that was one of the ones you listened to.

Yes, I mean, the media talk especially and the insider stuff, of course the BBC stuff, dealing with stories, and we all have these things in common; how we interact with people in the real world and Hollywood and deadlines and all that kind of thing.

So my first question to you really is an indulgent one really, which is what is life like on the west coast? What's it like dealing with Hollywood celebs?

It's probably like dealing with celebrities here in London. It's not that different. Hollywood of course is a huge media factory. As you probably know, it's full of studios, most the studios are actually not inside Hollywood any more, it's only Paramount, the last remaining, the oldest Hollywood studio physically within Hollywood, the rest are just outside. But dealing with celebrities, dealing with the junket circuit that we often have to do where celebrities sit in front of you for three minutes and then move on to the next journalist, it becomes quite mechanical in a way, and that's how celebrities deal with their studios and their managers and people above them manage them, it's a 5:30 start in the morning – it is a factory like environment. Yes we're in Los Angeles and the sun shines most of the time, but it's just this entertainment industry, and of course it's much broader than movies and television these days. And it's thrilling, it's exciting, but once you get down to the nitty-gritty I suspect it's just the same as if you're making a movie or a television show in London or Los Angeles.

So there's a lot of logistics. Like you will get Robert Downey Jr and you'll have him at 12 minutes past three on Wednesday the 22nd or something, and then if you miss it you miss it.

Well they'll say it's 12 minutes past three, it might be 12 minutes past four before he actually arrives, or if it's Cher she's probably going to be three or four hours late – that was my experience with her. But yes, I mean, you have your slot, you turn up usually at one of the posh hotels in Beverly Hills and you do your little interview. If you're lucky you might get a 30 minute slot, and if you're really lucky you'll get it outside of the hotel setting, or outside of the studio setting, so for example I interviewed Glen Campbell which is probably the most memorable celebrity interview that I think I've ever done, and spent a day with him. This was just after he had announced that he was suffering from Alzheimer's. And I got to go and play golf with him – I don't play golf but he tried to show me, I was terrible at it but he was still pretty good –

Good kind of relationship-building stuff, then.

Excellent relationship-building stuff. Went to his home, met his wife, met his family, went to his studio – which is actually a garage studio at home – with a couple of his children because at that time they were in his band, they were his backing group. And you really get to know... it's only a day, but you really get to know a person

certainly a lot better than that two and a half minute encounter in a hotel, and it certainly makes a mark on you. So that's the kind of thing I really enjoy doing.

As a journalist you must try and build up a beat. Is there some kind of midway point between the extremes of spending a whole day with Glen Campbell and getting three minutes with, say, Robert Downey Jr? Do you have like a list of celebrities you can go to for comment that you have some kind of relationship with?

It's actually very difficult. When something happens that you need celebrity comment – I mean, what we do these days is go to social media, and that has really changed the game. I mean, usually it's a major celebrity death that you want reaction from other well-known people who perhaps have worked with that person, and previous times you would go to the publicist, and eventually several hours and maybe even a day or two later, you get to that person and do the interview. Now of course, they just react if they want to react in social media, Facebook, Twitter, whatever they choose, and they don't necessarily feel the need to speak to us. If they've been particularly close to that person they might not want to sit in front of a camera and share their views, but they're quite happy in a couple of lines or a few words to express their feelings. So that has changed the game in terms of going to celebrities for comment. If you want their reaction to a financial story or some sort of merger story in the entertainment industry, very difficult to get – because generally they will speak when the studios want them to talk to promote their next product, their next movie, their next television show. So a go-to list of celebrities? Don't really have that.

We had Simon McCoy in that chair a while ago and he said that a lot of the job now is when someone dies is that they're literally reading out tweets – you know, this person reacted – and it just comes straight from Twitter.

Yes. And that's pretty much what we do. I mean this year of course as you know, of all years, has been a particularly tough year in terms of major celebrities dying. Prince was the most recent example where I was involved in the coverage, and of course that was a much bigger story than most, largely because of the circumstances. But it was similar in that people were reacting on social media and you would go on television... you try to make sense of the situation as to how he died and how sudden it was and the logistics of what happened, at the same time as paying respect and reporting on what people were saying, and yes, generally those views come through social media.

And do you have to kind of mirror UK time? Because we've got one client in LA which basically means we have to stay up very late when we want to deal with them. If you're going to do the 10 or are you going to do breakfast television, that's going to have to play havoc with your body clock.

Yes, it does. We are on call pretty much 24 hours a day, so breakfast for us is late at night. So 10pm is 6am here in the UK, so if something happens and breakfast want a live at the top of every hour, you're up at 10, 11, 12, one o'clock in the morning to do that. Then of course if it's big story it rolls on until later in the day, maybe the six or the 10, which is early tomorrow morning as far as we're concerned in Los Angeles. So you've just got to roll with it. And luckily, those huge stories don't happen every day but when they do – Michael Jackson for example, the death of Michael Jackson, I mean, that was a story that went on for weeks and weeks and weeks – but yes, for the first few days we hardly slept at all because there was something new to say. And it was increasingly a bigger team, people coming into town to help us, but you just go with it and there's no way around that. I think Los Angeles is probably one of the worst, or the most difficult, time zones. We're minus eight hours. There's never really a great time; it's either early in the morning – for peak time bulletins here – it's either early in the morning or late at night.

Do you get a sense of the scale of the broadcast in terms of the number of viewers that you're going live to? So if you do the 10 O'Clock News... when I've done a news channel I think, "Well, there's millions of people watching," but when I've done things at the other side of the world somehow there's like a slight disconnect and it's almost just a lens at that point. Are you still aware that you're about to go on the 10 O'Clock News?

Yes. I think certainly with the 10 O'Clock News, like with Prince, you are... there was an extra edge to the situation that you probably have slightly less time, maybe, "Okay, Peter, we want you to do this in a minute," to wrap up everything you have to say, so you have to be pretty concise and focused. You might get three or four minutes on the news channel and it's a more conversational style of course, it might be a longer two-way, so yes, I think there's a certain edge to being on the big bulletins, but that said you're still on the air whether you're on Five Live, One Xtra or the news channel, or local radio. It's still a broadcast. People are still listening and of course, these days they can listen back. Pretty much most of it goes onto the Internet so it's not just a one hit wonder if you like, it you can be heard again, and so you've got to be careful what you say. You've got to try and get it right.

So how does it work in terms of living as a kind of Brit working for a British news organisation but living in LA? A few years ago you got US citizenship, so are you aware of a kind of duality there? How does it work?

You are... and I mean, I'm always British. I'm still British and I've still got a British passport as well as an American passport. I was born in this country, I was born in Sedgefield in the north east of England, and I still have family here and still have lots of friends here, and visit the UK a lot so you never lose that. But I think you become Americanised to a point. I haven't acquired the accent. Everyone remarks on that, which some people from Britain do pretty quickly, but I haven't gone down that road.

But you make yourself understood, you adopt the lifestyle to a certain extent to get through the day, as I say, to make people understand what you are all about. But your brain is kind of split. It's kind of a split personality thing that you go into British mode when you need to and you're more American if the situation calls for it.

And just being British open up a lot of doors for you? Do people say, “Oh, you're a Brit, that's great!”

It does a little bit. Certainly the BBC opens doors; you say you're from the BBC, you'd like to speak to so-and-so, you'd like a comment about whatever, you'd like to do an interview. And many people are still in awe of ,quite rightly, in awe of the BBC, and it certainly carries across America, and of course with the Internet people are much more aware of the BBC. There was a time, certainly when I first went to Los Angeles 20 years ago, some people – and even publicists for major studios – would say, “The what? What's the BBC?” I mean, you look surprised.

Wow.

But even then people would say, and publicists for major institutions, universities, that kind of thing, weren't as aware of the BBC then certainly as they are now. And yes, it certainly helps to open doors, and I think the whole British thing, well, the Americans always say, “You must be intelligent, then.” This old accent of ours makes us sound more intelligent than certainly in my case I really am. That helps.

Well, I think you're a reasonably intelligent bloke, Peter! How did you end up in America, then? Because clearly you were working at Newsbeat, you did Radio 4 and Radio 2 as well, as you mentioned earlier, you had a big career here as a BBC broadcaster in the UK. Did someone email you, or I imagine phone you back, and said, “Hey Peter, do you want to go to LA?” How did it happen?

Not quite like that! As you say, my last big job in the UK was working on the breakfast show with Steve Wright, and I did that little bit with Simon Mayo towards the end of his run. I was reading the news, and just reading the news really with Simon, but then of course with Steve Wright you were part of the whole posse and you were much more of an integral part of the show. We did roadshows together, which for a news journalist was surreal.

Wow, the Radio 1 Roadshow!

Yes, on the south coast.

I remember that.

That was it was fun. I mean, it was a lot of fun.

He still is a lot of fun now, I mean he's not changed the formula. I still listen to it on Radio 2 in the afternoon, it's still a good show.

It's still a great show. I'm still on it sometimes. We usually cover the Oscars together so I know the shtick, I know the formula, and as you know he pre-records most of those interviews, and for good reason; it makes for a much slicker final edit I think, and ultimately that's what it's all about, to make it sound good on the air, and Steve knows me I know him, I know what he wants and he's a great presenter as well as producer of that segment and of the show. So that's what I was doing in '95, '94. Steve finished on the breakfast show and generally what happened then, I think it still happens today, is that when the presenter finishes everyone finishes, newsreader finishes, and everyone moves on to something else. So I'd been working for Radio 1 since 1990 at that point, I'd been presenting Newsbeat before that as you say, the Today programme, the Radio 4 programmes, and I just came to that point where I thought, "Let's do something different." And we on the breakfast show had sometimes a few problems getting good, solid entertainment coverage out of Los Angeles; there was a BBC correspondent there who didn't necessarily do – not his fault, it wasn't his job – a lot of entertainment, and I just kind of saw a little niche that I quite liked to get into. I'd been to Los Angeles a couple of times to cover the aftermath to the riots, the Los Angeles riots – the Rodney King riots, as they are sometimes referred to – and that of course is not long after the earthquake in Los Angeles as well, I covered a bit of that, and I covered the end of the OJ Simpson trial in '95, and it was during that time I had began thinking about LA as a possible place to live and work, I'd had a little scout around and thought, "Yes, this could work."

Yes, because I used to watch you when Vivian Krieger over on Sky News, she used to anchor all the OJ coverage, it was nightly! Do you remember, it was like three hours a night covering the OJ trial, it was unbelievable!

Oh, it was amazing, and to this day I remember that the final day of that trial, standing – I was actually outside the court in the crowd, there was a huge vast crowd in downtown Los Angeles waiting for the verdict to come in – and of course it was a very, very quick verdict which surprised...

The jury were only out for about an hour, weren't they?

I think about four hours.

Yes. It was momentary though.

It was momentary. And it was enough to make people think, "Well, could they really consider all of that evidence, a year's worth of evidence in four hours?" But they had made up their minds, now famously of course, that he was not guilty.

Incredible.

It was amazing, still looking back, and it's a story that isn't over.

I know, I watched all the recent re-enactment of it all.

Yes, which was really good.

And a lot of the jurors have spoken since, and I can see it from their point of view; the prosecution just didn't accept that once the jury concluded Mark Furman was a liar and had planted evidence before, then they thought, "Well, there's reasonable doubt there."

Yes, exactly. And so that was a verdict that surprised everyone, and of course there was the civil trial and he was found liable for the deaths during that civil trial. But no jail time with that, but events moved on and he was eventually found guilty of something completely unrelated, a bizarre crime, essentially in a hotel in Las Vegas...

He'd gone to retrieve what he considered his medals or something.

His sporting memorabilia.

Yes, but they clearly thought he was a wrong 'un and tried to get him on something else.

Yes. I mean, they, I'm sure, would deny that but you can only imagine what was going through the minds of the jurors, and indeed the judge, on that trial. So yes, I mean, he is still in jail to this day, he's coming up for parole so he could potentially be released at some point.

I hope he's not, frankly.

Well, you can say that but I couldn't possibly comment! But yes, so it's a story that isn't dead. So all of that, and that background to Los Angeles, I thought, "This is a great place to be," managed to persuade Radio 1, and I was already freelance but kind of full-time contract freelance as a presenter/reporter at Radio 1, so they gave me a freelance contract...

So that gave you a bit more freedom to actually suggest that, then. Had you been fully on staff as it were there would have been layers of BBC bureaucracy to go through.

Absolutely, yes, and it probably wouldn't have worked out this way that I could essentially go to Los Angeles as a freelance, with a very sort of minimal guarantee of some work, but then it was up to me to make it work. I mean, luckily it did, and it didn't just work for Radio 1, I also work a lot for Five Live, and as more of the online outlets came on board, and then there's Radio 4 and there's television as well. So there's a lot to go after.

So you've never been short of work.

Thankfully not. And I'm incredibly lucky in that respect, that I haven't been short of work. It's a great place to be of course, there's always something happening, it's not just Los Angeles, it's the west coast of America...

I love the west coast! I'm so jealous. You've got the best job in the BBC other than Director General, I would say!

I wouldn't want that job! Would you?

Well, I'd probably take yours over his... well, maybe. Maybe. Clearly... I think I've done you a slight disservice by asking you about Hollywood from the outset, because your beat is much wider than that, isn't it? It isn't just merely Hollywood, you're there to cover everything that happens on the west coast.

Yes, exactly – and in that sense there isn't... I mean, there's a geographical beat. But there isn't a subject beat, so I don't focus just on Hollywood. I particularly enjoy doing science stories, health stories, I'm really interested, fascinated, by human longevity and have made a couple of documentaries. I'm interested in diet and exercise and all those good LA type things that go into that.

I'm a vegan and a teetotaler; I would do well in LA, wouldn't I?

You'd love it. Yes, you wouldn't be short of new restaurants, though travelling outside of Los Angeles is a bit of a struggle, but certainly on the vegan side you do great. Teetotal, well, you can be teetotal anywhere I suppose.

They're into that health, aren't they? I mean, that's interesting... have you developed this interest in longevity and health since you moved to LA? Because it might be a kind of generalisation, a bit a bit kind of cliché, but they are quite health conscious in LA, aren't they?

Oh, yes. I mean, some to a sort of lunatic level, but others I think quite sensibly. And I've been looking at some of the research from USC – University of Southern California – and looking at diet research. I mean, it's a long sort of complicated story. But looking at the comparison that has been made between a group of people in

Ecuador with something called Laron syndrome, that they lack a certain growth hormone, that seems to make them protected, not necessarily 100% immune, but certainly protected from cancer and diabetes. This is a genetic defect. USC are looking at a diet which is largely a fasting diet, a periodic fasting diet, that also causes a drop in that hormone that could possibly long-term protect people, and it has certainly been proven in mice, rats, other organisms, it could protect you and I from cancer.

Lots of people do the fasting thing, I mean, I do it two days a week, the whole Michael Mosley thing, fewer than 600 calories on your fasting day.

Yes, this is similar, it's more a periodic diet, and it's five fasting days consecutively so it's five of those... the two days out of the seven for the five two days, it's five of those back to back so you're having five days of maybe 700 calories, which is doable. It's absolutely doable. And it certainly puts you into this state where if you continue it long term, and that's what I'm experimenting with myself, it could protect you from cancer. So that's at the serious end of science; this isn't loony LA, this is serious science.

You've got quite a breadth of subjects there, haven't you? Like you say, science, human longevity type stuff to interviewing Hollywood stars.

Yes, I love it, and I'm privileged to do that. And I think largely because I am to some extent my own boss and I can pick and choose stories a little bit, I would never say no to a news story, because they happen and you do it. But in terms of the features, I've become more particular over the years as to what I want to do, and this area interests me so I go ahead and do it.

So on the pie chart of what you proactively generate in terms of stories and then stuff you react to – people dying, earthquakes or whatever – how does that work? What's a typical week for you? How much of it is planned where you think, "Right, I'm going to do this, I'm going to do that, and then so much of it is like Prince dies for example, and then all bets are off, you've got 23 inquiries coming through from London and you need to deal with them.

Usually what happens is you have a well-planned week – your feature week, your documentary week, you're travelling to X Y and Z, travelling to San Diego, San Francisco, to do these big interviews you've been working on for ages to secure – and something happens. So there's a news story, you can't ignore it, you've got to do it. You make a quick round of calls to cancel everything you've organised. It doesn't happen every week but it does happen quite a lot, so in that respect there isn't a typical week. You try to fit in the features when you can make time for them, and if they are so crucially important you still go ahead and do it and someone else will look over the news. But a typical week might involve covering let's say a middle

ranking news story that doesn't absorb you completely for the entire week in the morning, and then the afternoon you might go off and do a feature-related interview or edit something.

Because then the time zone benefits you, doesn't it? Because we're asleep when you can get your productive time in.

Yes. exactly. so the busy news times are in the morning till 10 or 11 o'clock. Let's say until two o'clock in the afternoon, so that's 10pm here. Then there's a bit of a lull, night time, there's still plenty of night time outlets and I often do overnight television interviews that kind of thing, but if you manage your time you can try to fit in other things around it. But you can't predict, you can't stop those news stories happening so you've got to be ultimately very, very flexible.

Just in terms of the lifestyle of how it works, one of the other things I'm interested in is how you how you in effect stay British? How do you keep up to date with... because I mean, it's an issue for you, you work for a British broadcaster and you're broadcasting to British people, so how do what's happening? How do who's won The X Factor or who the government of the day is, and how do you also know who the presenters are? Because sometimes do you get asked to do a show and you've no idea who this person is or where they've come from, and yet they're still there presenting the Six O'Clock news?

Yes, absolutely! And sometimes that will happen at short notice, and you don't know the presenter. You just avoid saying their name, that's what you do. You just get on and do the interview. But it's much easier to stay in touch now as it was 20 years ago; I can read multiple websites and find out what's happening in the news, there are things that interest me particularly that are happening in the UK, I follow UK politics still. You've got to know because you don't know whenever something that's going to happen in London is going to impinge on American coverage. They overlap more often than you would think, so you just make sure that you're well-read into British and American stories and you try to stay across the culture. Of course you've got friends here, family here I come here to visit quite a lot, so you do stay in touch, and it's almost instinctive. I don't really have to make the effort to do that because I want to know what's happening. A kind of natural curiosity.

Yes, but is there a system? I mean, do you read the Telegraph leader every day or do you kind of... what is the system to stay in touch?

The system is to read as much as I can. I don't have a... yes, I read the Telegraph and the Guardian and the BBC website in that order. I usually pick and choose stories, I think like all of us these days, you dot around a lot, so you might be on the BBC website but then you'll see a link to something that's outside of the BBC

website and off you go to the Guardian or whatever it is, or to the LA Times, and you just absorb information from everywhere. I think that one of the big things – and I was just waiting to speak to reading the Sun. In paper. I don't read paper coverage any more, newspapers, and that's a big difference. And I notice when I come back to the UK more people still read newspapers – at least it seems like that that. Certainly in the office in Los Angeles we don't get any papers any more, it's all online – and I kind of miss that and I don't, I don't miss the cumbersome aspect of broadsheets any more, but then there's a sort of nostalgic factor there that on a Sunday I still like reading the papers in this country.

I don't know what the name of the local paper for Sedgefield is, but you read that? I mean, I'm from York originally, have not lived there for many, many years. I live in London now. I work in London I should say, but I do still read the York paper online, if not every day, most days.

Yes. It's the Northern Echo. It doesn't just cover Sedgefield, of course, it's a vast regional newspaper. I don't read it every day but I do dip into it, yes, and I know one or two people who work there and I've talked to them and they've quoted me on a few stories. There is a great story recently they were trying to... I was born in Sedgefield at a hospital that is no longer a hospital it's now a hotel.

Typical.

Yes, typical. And they were looking back and trying to figure out who was the last person to be born at the hospital, and it was I think it was the late 1960s, and I just happened to be reading it online one day and spotted this, and just mentioned it to the person I know who works there, then of course they asked me about my story and then they quoted me and my mum's experiences at that particular hospital, so it's nice to stay in touch like that.

Final question before we start to talk about US politics and some of the other stuff that you cover which is quite interesting, is how does it work logistically in terms of the BBC requesting you? Because you're a freelancer, aren't you? So if something happens you'll get 30 inbound enquiries, do you have to log them and then charge separately for them? I mean, I don't want to disclose your salary, of course, but is it like you get a fixed amount of money and then you're just there whenever you're needed?

You were right in the first instance; it's pretty much logging everything I do and charging for it, and I'm not that unusual in that respect – there are plenty of people like me around the world for the BBC who work in exactly the same way in places, far flung places that there isn't necessarily a staff person, although there is a staff reporter in Los Angeles as well.

You can't bill BBC Three Counties radio for six minutes on a Wednesday, can you? Is there a spreadsheet?

There is a spreadsheet, yes! There's a rate card, essentially it's similar to any other sort of freelance rate card that according to what you've done and who you've done it for and how long it is, or how many days you spent doing it. Every story is slightly different so there is... it's not like I make it up as I go along, "Oh, I'll charge this for that," depending on which outlet it is.

That would be good!

It'd be fantastic wouldn't it? But it's not like that. So there is a rate card and you just stick to the rate card.

Last question, because I am a media geek... is there a hierarchy, even if it's not official, in your mind? Like the Six and the 10 is top and then maybe The World Tonight and PM, the Today programme and then the Jeremy Vine show I would imagine would be fairly high up, but then you might get to the more local shows that are slightly further down the list and you do have to prioritise.

I'd love to be on the Jeremy Vine show, but I think it's three o'clock in the morning for me is. He's on at 11 o'clock, is that right?

12 til two.

Okay, so...

It's the show I go on the most actually.

Well, drop in a word! I would get up early for that but it's four o'clock in the morning.

Yes.

There is a hierarchy in terms... I mean obviously, the 10 is very important, and the Today programme on Radio 4, which I do quite a lot of, is late at night for me. But you generally don't get to pick and choose; the story happens and whichever programmes are on the air in the window that the story breaks you will do first, and then later in the day if it's one of those big stories that overlaps into the next day, well you may stay up late and do the breakfast and the Today programme. But I don't pick and choose. It's not really up to me. I am asked to do stories, I don't say, "Oh, I'd like to do this but only for the Today programme because I like that, and not for this show." You don't pick and choose like that. You just cover for all of the BBC.

But you are literally one person, so if Five Live want you at just after eight and so to the Today programme, you have to be able to at least say to one of the producers and schedule it in. I often think of it, because you're one of the people I think is a bit a tiny bit like the prime minister – and I mean this like a compliment – when he's got a big announcement, he does the Today programme, then he does Good Morning Britain, and then BBC Breakfast, then Sky News, then he's on Five Live... and he's only one person but you can tell he's had that 20 minutes of live media very carefully choreographed. And if you've got a big story and you are the man in situ, you do have to do a bit of management.

You do a little bit of management, yes, and if it's a huge story – it's not just me, of course, in Los Angeles, there's James Cook who is the Los Angeles staff correspondent, great guy, excellent reporter – he will do a lot of the big coverage as well and he will generally do those big set piece items, the package that goes onto the 10 or maybe the package for the Today programme, whatever the story requires, and I'm doing maybe... we might both be on the same programme; the Today programme might want a live two-way in the first 30 minutes and they might follow it up with a package later in the morning. So we're both working on the same show, and it's often split and we're getting into those sort of geeky areas again, but it could be split between the person doing the packaging job and the person doing the live and continuous job, or you're just bouncing from one live outlet to the next one. Mixing the two is quite difficult because producing a package takes much more time; you're trying to craft a script, and jumping out of that to do the live can be a little problematic.

Which do you prefer?

I enjoy doing the lives. I enjoy the adrenaline of being live, of telling the story, not quite knowing what you're going to be asked by the presenter. Generally most presenters on those kind of breaking stories will ask the same questions and you're trying to give the same answer but make it a little bit different according to the outlet, so I really enjoy that. If I'm doing the packaging, it's a different discipline and perhaps ultimately you've got something that you can go back to and look at, and a nicely finely crafted piece is something that you can look back on and say, "There's a good job done." So they both have an appeal, but I think if I had to choose between the two I enjoy going live.

Do you get recognised in America for your work with the BBC? I mean, clearly people might recognise you here, people like me that follow the BBC as well as follow your work. You get recognised walking down the streets of London as it were, but do you ever get recognised in LA by your LA friends?

I've never been recognised in the streets of London or Los Angeles! No is the answer. I've never been recognised. I mean, people... well, sometimes people will say, "Oh yes, I think I know your name," and maybe they say your voice, but I don't always necessarily believe that. I mean, the BBC can be seen and heard as in American public television, public radio uses different strands of the BBC...

The iPlayer Radio app works in America. When I'm there I still listen to the show.

Well, exactly. There's two ways you can listen. You can listen obviously using the iPlayer but also some of the public outlets will carry the BBC.

NPR and things like that.

NPR especially. And public television as well, at certain times of the day. So people will... avid viewers of those outlets might recognise you because they prick up their ears when they hear a Los Angeles story on their local station but covered by the BBC, so they might know you from that. But no, it's actually quite nice to be anonymous.

Is there a particular challenge when covering an English-speaking foreign country like America where, I've done this before, where there's a bit of culture shock; you go then you think that they're exactly the same as us and they're not. If you were the correspondent in Paris, we would understand it's a foreign country but do you have to have a little bit of nuance in your reports to say that things are slightly different there? How do you carry that across?

Yes and no. I mean, certainly America is different and Americans understanding of some of the everyday things that you and I would talk about, it can be a little bit challenging. And I'm generally broadcasting to a British audience, I mean yes, sometimes I'm on BBC World which is a global audience, it's not specifically, most times of the day, for an American audience, and there's World News America which is part of BBC World, which is broadcast at certain times of the day on cable in the United States, but you've got to think that you're doing that alongside doing it for a global audience as well, so my mind isn't focused on the American audience, it's more focussed on a global audience. And sometimes the language that you use, it's the same with the World Service, you might have to simplify things a little. You don't use too much jargon, colloquial language. You try to keep it simple, to the facts. That all sounds a little condescending but I mean you don't use phrases that would only be understood in the West End of London or in certain geographical areas.

Have you picked up any LA based phrases, idioms that you would use over there with your LA friends that you have to consciously not say? Like I'm a

Yorkshire man, but I would never say, “Ay-up.” I might have said, “Now then,” a few years ago, but given that was Jimmy Savile catchphrase you never say that again.

I mean, it's... I suppose it's all the obvious ones. You stand in line in America, you don't queue for something. But I think increasingly...

They got Obama on that recently with the Brexit speech.

Exactly yes, but I think increasingly Americans do get it. Again, thanks to the Internet, people are much more aware of other nations' ways of doing things and I think by and large you can get away with most things in America and be understood. I mean, as I say, certain little turns of phrase that you would maybe think twice about. “Can I get a sandwich?” I would like a sandwich. Little things like that... use of certain words that maybe 10 years ago 20 years ago I was more aware of; actually these days it doesn't really matter so much.

Is Trump a godsend to you as a journalist, or does it worry you? I mean, do you see it as a story like any other?

It's certainly a godsend, yes, because it's a great, unpredictable story. I've been covering American elections since actually before I moved to the US... '92 was the first year of convention coverage for me, I went to Houston to cover the Republicans that year – this is when George Bush Sr was trying to be re-elected and it was the year that Bill Clinton was elected – and as part of that trip I actually managed to doorstep Bill Clinton outside the Los Angeles Times.

What was he like?

He was great. I think he was a little surprised, it was one of those impromptu moments, he was actually there to do – as they often do – an interview, I think it was with the editorial board of The Los Angeles Times. It wasn't a big press event; I had been there covering some other things and just happened to be walking past the building, and saw – obviously the car stop and the secret service come out, and out gets Bill Clinton, and there was just a fairly small crowd, there weren't many media there, and I just happened to have my radio kit with me so I managed to push the microphone in. You know, a few bristles, secret service people at the time, but they let me ask a few questions.

He was just a candidate at this point, of course, he wasn't the president.

Absolutely, he was just a candidate, yes, and he'd been having a tough time during that campaign, but he was doing all right. I think he knew that he was he was on the up, it was a very unpredictable election as everyone knows, but I got a sense from his demeanour that he was pretty confident.

I met Bill Clinton for about 20 seconds once in Blackpool, him and Kevin Spacey bizarrely, and I was introduced him by name and then he was introduced to another five or six people, and then he came to me and said, “So Paul, how is it going?” after... and he held on to my name for 20 seconds, and that was the greatest thing that’s ever happened to me, I thought it was absolutely brilliant. Have you ever been starstruck by anyone else?

Oh, the more I do this – and a lot of people say this – the less starstruck you become. There are not that many people really that you walk into the room and starstruck, speechless whatever. I think I mentioned Cher a little earlier. She was... when you sort of interview these icons who you’ve watched for years and you’re suddenly in the same room together, there is a little moment where you think, “My goodness, that really is her,” and she was amazing. It was just, “Hello, Cher.” “Hello, dear.”

Amazing.

Set the tone. And she was actually very late, but she was... and it was quite a long interview, 20 minutes I got with her, and she was great and chatty and honest... I mean, I think it’s the interviewees that are honest, and you can tell they’re being honest and not just putting on a show for the camera, that I like a lot. I mean, Harrison Ford earlier this year, a very different character Maybe not quite starstruck but he is still Harrison Ford, for goodness sake!

Exactly. The Fugitive was his best film, I still love that film.

Yes, yes. And of course we were talking about Star Wars mostly. And he’s... I don’t think he likes being interviewed, he’s pretty stoic in terms of his answers, fairly short answers, not particularly colourful, and he doesn’t get particularly emotional about things, so I think I asked him which of his characters was the favourite that he has performed. “I don’t have favourites.”

It’s an obvious question but it’s the one you want to ask, isn’t it? And he didn’t have favourites?

“I don’t have favourites. I don’t have favourite children, I don’t have favourite food,” or whatever his answer was, it was quite a stoic, fairly tedious answer, but that’s him. That’s the guy. He was he was charming otherwise, he was great.

I mean, I’ve done quite a few of these podcasts as well and I prefer interviewees like yourself that where you just kind of ask a question and then they go off on one and they conduct the interview themselves, really. It’s always difficult when people answer with kind of closed, short answers that

you are constantly having to think of new things to think about, because really my question the beginning was, “What’s life like in America?” I mean, we’re still talking about that now really.

We could, I mean the best interviews are interviews that are conversations, and that you can go off on these tangents. I prefer not to have a list of questions in front of me, I will have a few notes usually or bullet points that I want to hear...

I have bullet points, as you can see.

Much the same as yourself! And then be prepared to go off at a tangent. And clearly interviews are different; if it’s a news interview there are certain areas that you really have to cover, certain questions that have to be asked, but then if it’s a more... a larger scope to the interview, a celebrity interview, and you can leave room for the anecdotes and the stories that you don’t expect, I think that’s what makes a great interview. I mean, oftentimes I will see people, especially celebrity interviews, they do have the key questions and it’s as if they’re not listening to the answer previously and they just go straight on to the next question.

I think that’s difficult.

Which is awful, and sometimes you’ve got to be careful in the edit that you don’t... you can make a good interview not a good interview by not listening to what’s actually being said in the edit, and you leave something out that kind of explains what’s just gone, so it’s not just the doing of the interview it’s the editing of the interview as well.

And do you find that there’s some pressure from beastly PR people like me that might sit in the room and agree in advance what you can and can’t say? Because there’s always a tension there.

There is, and I mean generally I haven’t had too many problems. I mean, a few occasions when the PR person has said, “You can not ask about X Y and Z.” And sometimes you pretend not to hear them and you go ahead and you ask the questions anyway, and to my surprise, sometimes the interviewee, the celebrity, will just go ahead an answer – they don’t really care. They’re not even aware sometimes that the publicist has asked you not to ask the question. They are blissfully unaware, and almost expecting that difficult question, that awkward question that at the back of their mind they know they might have to answer, and they’ve got an answer. Sometimes if it’s a controversy... Sly Stallone for example, this is quite a few years ago, he was involved in a sort of minor drug controversy.

He was trying to bring steroids into Australia, wasn’t he?

Exactly, yes. And I just happened to be interviewing him the next week about whatever project it was at the time...

It was Rocky Balboa at the time.

You've got a better memory than me!

I just love the Rocky films.

Exactly. So I wasn't told not to ask about it, but there were lots and lots of publicists around that day, I mean, in the room very close to where we were sitting.

It's kind of physically intimidating a little bit.

Yes, it is. They're more... Sly was less intimidating than they were. And so I had to ask the question about what he'd been doing and what his response was, and as soon as I asked the question the publicist – I mean stepped in, right in, in front of the camera as if to say, "No, you can't." – and he said, to his credit, "No, it's okay," and kind of ushered them away. "Go ahead, ask a question." I asked the question and he gave a perfectly good answer. He wanted to address the issue. And I find that a lot of times that people actually do want to talk, they don't need necessarily protecting from the media.

It's interesting because I am at one of those beastly PR people and I would never do that, but I think there's two reasons why it might happen. One is they're trying to justify their fee, they think that you journalist types shouldn't be asking that, so they're going to try and do it because they mistakenly believe it's in their client's interest. Or they want the client to have deniability, where... that's why they've never raised it with Sylvester Stallone because, as you could see in his answer, he hadn't instructed his PR people but they were just playing safe on his behalf.

Yes, exactly and what I don't see, and what you're probably more aware of, is the relationship between the celebrity and the publicist, and what is said in the room before you walk in, and that conversation about the scope of the interview and what can be asked, what can't be asked, what sort of arrangements have been made, what sort of pressure is on – and clearly there is, I mean, you will know better than me – but what sort of pressure is on the publicist to rein in the journalists, if that is the role. I mean, I'm blissfully unaware of that side of things. Thankfully, I just go in and do the interview but I am well aware that it is a bigger game, if you like, between all of the people involved, it's not just the publicists in the room sometimes. Very often I'm going into an interview that's been arranged by a publicist in the UK because it's for the UK market, but it's the publicist in the US who is actually masterminding it on the day, and there have been clearly conversations between

those publicists and their counterparts in the UK, they might have reached a certain agreement – you’ve got to make sure that journalist doesn’t ask this, this and this and they can only have four minutes or whatever the deal is – so it’s a big jigsaw of lots of people involved, lots of vested interests involved and maybe a lot of jobs involved as well.

I always find the Hollywood media machine fascinating, because if I had a teapot manufacturer that I was trying to PR, I couldn’t get the managing director on the Graham Norton Show, and yet because – and it might be human nature, of course that we want to hear from the latest Superman actor and Steven Spielberg and so on – but there seems to be an open door for any Hollywood celebs to kind of get in the media because we’re interested in it, in a way that we’re not in in other sectors.

Yes. I mean, Hollywood celebrity, it drives interest. You’ve just got to look at websites; you have a major celebrity saying something, doing something... generally if it’s not promoting the film and it’s about something else and if it’s... if there’s a certain misfortune aspect to the story, well people look at it even more. I mean celebrity sells. Big time. And whether they are promoting themselves or something else that they are maybe even being paid to publicise, that’s the name of the game.

It’s odd though, because celebrities are selling something, they’re a business like any other whether it be a film or their latest vitamin tablet or whatever. You’ve got to balance that, haven’t you? And that might be a particular challenge for you as an LA-based correspondent really because people have to be interested in the package anyway because you’ve got Sylvester Stallone there, but you’ve also got to tease out of him why he brought those steroids into Australia.

Yes, exactly, and especially if the celebrity... and that was a situation where he was involved in a news story as well as publicising something. Sometimes it is a pure publicity event, and it’s a star promoting his next movie, so the challenge for me is how to make this interview really interesting, to bring something else to it, to try to tease out of the celebrity a story that has nothing to do with the film. And sometimes that’s very challenging because they don’t want to go down that road, the publicity machinery around them has instilled in them that they talk about the character and how great the director is, which to me is usually pretty dull.

It’s boring! Even as a viewer and a listener I think that. I know they think their colleagues are great and the director had a vision. Tell us about the drugs.

Exactly. They’re always going to think about that, and sometimes there isn’t another story; there isn’t always a drug story to get into. There isn’t always a marriage break-up or whatever scandal *du jour*, so you’ve just got to try to tease something out

about themselves, maybe something about their own personality that they've brought to the film, maybe there's a little story there that you could bring out of them. Every interview is different and you don't often know till you get into it. The huge frustration for me doing these things is, especially these junket scenarios, is the lack of time to develop. We've been talking for a long time which is great...

It's great so far.

Thank you! It's been fun. But you'll get two and a half minutes! There's not much you can do in two and a half minutes. You need to sort of ease into it to warm up the celebrity and then get into the real meat of the story.

Particularly the first two questions are going to have to be what you would consider the obvious ones, like what was it like to play Han Solo again.

Yes, exactly. There are certain obvious questions you've got to ask. I mean, as a little anecdote, that reminds me of sort of red carpet situations which again are very different, and you might get a minute as the person walks past you, and they are answering the same question from every journalist from every country along that red carpet and I've known a couple of times celebrities get irritated – and they should know – but they get irritated because they're being asked the same question, and on one occasion someone, I can't remember who it was, he said, "Well, I just answered that to that guy down there." "Well, that was fine for him but it didn't go into my microphone, it didn't go into my camera, so I need it again from you," and they should know that.

Do you get blacklisted? Do you get trouble? I mean, we've had John Sweeney sitting in that chair and he's had some terrible trouble with the Scientologists, most of which he freely admits he has brought on himself, he loves bashing them. But do you get that kind of thing where people say, "Right, you weren't very good with Sylvester Stallone so you're on a blacklist now, you're never getting Sly again."

If it's happened to me I'm not aware of it. There's always that sort of subliminal threat of being not invited back again if you overstep the line. I don't think it's happened to me, and generally – and for good reason – there are rules. You've got to behave yourself on a red carpet, and I don't believe in sort of overstepping the mark for the sake of doing it, and I think you've got to show respect to the people that you're interviewing as well, so I'm not aware of any sort of blacklist situation with me. I think I would know about it if it had happened, but I think as long as you show you due reverence to the person that you're interviewing and the subject and the scenario and the situation, after all you're invited to be there and you're there for a reason, and I think you've both got to kind of play the game to some extent.

So tell me what's next for you? You've been doing this now for 20 years... do you want to do it for another 20 years? Or are you going to go into space or Antarctica...?

Well, doing it in Los Angeles for 20 years and much longer of course in local radio before I even joined the BBC, and we haven't had time to talk about working at radio...

It should be a two-hour podcast!

We should have a sequel!

We will! The early years.

Indeed, the Radio Tees years and all of that, which was great fun. What's next, I would like to continue doing what I'm doing. I'd like to do more of my little passion project, and that is the longevity story, which is a big story, it's linked to the obesity crisis around the world...

Tell us about it. How did you get into it?

I've always been... I've been a runner. I enjoy the exercise, I enjoy... I'm a pescatarian, I'm not quite a vegan, but over the last few years I think I've come to understand...

You're a vegequarian.

Something like that. Yes. That... it's a healthier way of life. And I know this is hugely controversial to a lot of people, but I don't believe necessarily that eating too much protein in the form of red meat basically is a good way to live. I think that the science is... it's a little bit like climate change, there's always going to be someone who will argue with you, quite rightly, but that's the way I'm thinking and I'd like to continue to see that debate through, and look at whatever the science tells us and certainly follow this particular project that I'm looking at, the Ecuadorians dwarfs and what we can learn from them in terms of diet and perhaps prevention of cancer and that kind of thing, so I think that's a hugely fascinating area. I should do more documentaries, there might be a book in that as well... so there's a lot to go at.

So what advice would you give to someone who wants to be the next you, who is just starting out in their media career?

I would say be open minded, be interested. I mean, if I'm talking to students I always say... I think you started this interview by saying I started in science, and I did, I

started in science. I was interested in that area, I was interested in medicine and health and animals, and I thought that's what my career had in store for me. I was also interested in radio and television. The two were competing for a while and eventually went to the radio and television side, but I've always been interested in science and continue to draw upon that knowledge and that experience of working in medical research for a while in this country. And so I would say you might be 19 years old, 21 years old, at university... pursue your geography degree, pursue your biology degree or whatever you doing, and if you're interested in media that will come in time. I think it's... maybe even work in a different field; work out of journalism for a while and do something different because it just gives you a breadth of knowledge I think that you can then draw upon in later life when... your mind changes, your philosophy and your interests change as you get older. So I think that the more varied an experience that you have that isn't necessarily journalism, is for the better. And I think that's the main advice that I would give people, is just be very open-minded to things.

Last question then, because I'm hugely interested in science as well. Do you think it's portrayed fairly in the mainstream news media in a kind of balanced way? Because some of it, some of the constraints are in the fact that the 10 O'Clock News will have someone who says, "Climate change is happening, this is real," but then in the interest of balance they have to put someone else on, but that's presenting a kind of an imbalance because most of the mainstream science supports manmade climate change. And while I also think of the creationist debate in America where they would say teach the debate, as if there was a debate, when in fact there isn't one.

It's a fascinating area and I think you still need to reflect all sides. I think something like climate change, well, where the vast body of opinion is that climate change is real, I think you need to... in terms of the weight of your coverage, you need to reflect that. And I don't necessarily think with something like that, that you need to give 50 :50 time because I don't think— and I hesitate to use the word reasonable — most reasonable people looking at the debate would think that it was equal in terms of those who are for and against that particular subject, so I think you need to give it the weight that most right-thinking people give it, I think, looking across the board. That said, there are detractors and there are those who have a contrary view. I mean, look at Donald Trump for example. He shrugs his shoulders and laughs when people talk about climate change to him; he doesn't see it as a big issue for the future. He thinks there are much bigger threats to humanity than climate change. And you've got to reflect that, and you've got to give due respect to people who have that argument, I mean I hesitate on any issue to give my own personal opinion, but I think you can probably tell from what I'm saying what I think of that particular issue. But it doesn't mean to say that I can't be open-minded and look at the most extreme of arguments on the other side.

Peter, we've definitely run out of tape now, thank you ever so much for your time, I have hugely enjoyed it.

It's been a great pleasure, thank you.