



Minna Salami

Journalist, Writer, TED Speaker

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Welcome to Media Masters, a series on one to one interviews with people at the top of the media game. Today I'm joined by Minna Salami, journalist and founder of msafropolitan.com. Minna began a career as a marketing business executive. She founded her blog in 2010 and since then has spoken across the globe on feminism, activism and the African Diaspora. Named as one of Elle Magazine's 12 women changing the world, Minna writes for The Guardian and The Huffington Post and has been referred to as one of the key feminist voices of our time.

Minna, thank you for joining me.

Thank you so much for having me, Paul. I'm delighted to be here.

So Minna, of you were named by Elle Magazine as one of 12 women changing the world alongside Michelle Obama and Angelina Jolie. That's quite a lot to live up to.

That's a whole lot to live up to! That kind of acknowledgement is tremendously reassuring, and in a way I don't imagine that I'm quite where Michelle Obama or Angelina Jolie is. I do believe I was in the right company in that list with women who, like me, are adamant about women's rights and everything that they do. And I hope that the editor picked me for that reason. But yes, it was very flattering and very encouraging in terms of acknowledgment.

Tell me how the blog came into being. What was the genesis behind it, and talk us through the journey so far.

How did the blog come into being? You know, my parents tend to joke that I was a blogger already as a child. Of course, blogs that didn't exist when I was growing up but I think that I had a quality which I think bloggers in the original sense of the meaning blogger, which is writing articles and musings and posts, have – and that is a restless mind. And as a child, I certainly suffered from a restless mind. I was very curious and questioning about everything around me, and most children are, but I guess as an adult in retrospect I see that I was curious about things which perhaps

not all children are. So family structure, and society, and political structures. Clearly I couldn't articulate my curiosity in the way that I can today, but I had a very curious mind, and I also had a curious and restless mind in terms of my own inner world, in a way that was perhaps not completely common. So I enjoyed solitude quite a lot as a child, and during my times of solitude I would kind of... it was the early beginnings of somebody who is interested in exploring their own mind and their own thoughts. I would engage with that very much. And so I think that blogging was a way for me to cater to the restlessness of my mind, and just so happens that in our modern times blogs are the tool which I believe that... you know, most people with restless minds in this way are actually bloggers, you will find that they have blogs. And had I lived a hundred years ago, I might be one of those people who would constantly be writing letters to the editors of newspapers or something like that. So that's how, at the time when blogs started to appear and this tool became more readily available, which is sort of the mid 2000s, because prior to that blogs did exist but they were you needed to have technical expertise in order to set one up. But around that time you started having MySpace and MSM blogs and things like spaces or something like that it was called, I started reading a few of them and pretty much instantly started expressing myself on a blog. My first one was the MySpace platform – actually I'm unsure whether it was the MySpace or the MSM that came first, but it doesn't matter.

We're really dating ourselves now, aren't we?

Yes, we are!

MySpace. My what?

Yes, exactly. And the restlessness of mind basically means... what I mean by that to be clear is that you're a person who is kind of over analytical, you know, you think about things too much, and having a space in which you can put these ideas down... because as an overthinker, what tends to happen is I'll have a moment in which I really understand a particular thing that has been preoccupying my thoughts.

A moment of clarity.

A moment of clarity, an a-ha moment. And that's when I can put it down on a blog. And having that opportunity to share an a-ha moment which has brought me such great joy that I now understand this very, you know, sometimes it's not a complex thing but in my mind it seems complex, and then wanting to be able to share in my mind very valuable insight with initially it was just with friends but blogs have grown, you know, with a wider audience, is really at the core to what drives me; it's what drove me to start a blog and it still drives me to write blogs today.

Did you have any idea back then of the sense of impact ultimately that your blog would have, say today, and just how impactful it is?

Definitely not. I had absolutely no idea whatsoever where it was going to go. I didn't even imagine that it could go anywhere because blogs weren't what they are today. So there was no prospect of this is how I can start a speaking career and so on and so forth. I guess that pretty quickly did change within the space of just a year or two, and more and more people started reading my blogs, people who weren't friends of mine, as well. And I started to realise the power of the medium in being able to connect with people from around the world, with people of diverse backgrounds. And I also started to become more clear about the kind of message that I wanted to put out there, and the combination of those two things, it was as though as a seed had been planted in me which wouldn't manifest in MsAfropolitan until four or five years into my blogging journey. But the seed was planted pretty early on that the tool was more powerful than what I had thought when I had just initially started sharing random musings.

And what kind of impact do you have now, and what kind of engagement do you get from readers of your blog?

The impact of my blog has been quite tremendous. For almost a decade now, my blog has been a platform through which I have written for several publications, and through which I am kind of constantly travelling to different countries, and also doing a lot of talks in the UK. The impact... that I've become a thought leader in this particular field, or a niche of mine, which I guess I would best describe as an unconventional feminist way of looking at the world and the times that we live in from specifically and intentionally an African perspective, it has been a big impact but it's also a very understandable one for me because I think that there was certainly a gap to fill. You know, people want to hear alternative views. People want views that challenge the status quo. They want to make sense of the times that we live in, and for so long we have looked at the world from one, or a few select, spectrums, and there is a thing that there is a growing need for us to understand the world more wholly.

I mean, you were born in Finland but grew up in Nigeria. Do you think that that sense of physical perspective has brought something to your writing, and do you feel a kinship with the African culture, or the Scandinavian culture, or both?

Yes...

How does it work? Because really, you know, lots of people are kind of born in one place and lived their whole lives in that place, and inevitably they're going to miss out on seeing a more internationalist world view.

To answer that question, I'm going to just give you a metaphor, an example. Imagine that you had a book in front of you and the title is called The World. And you open it up and then you look at the chapters. Let's say that the book is chaptered; the world according to male people, the world according to white people, the world according

to female people, the world according to Asian people, the world according to African people, and then also the world according to, say, white female people, and so on and so forth, you get the picture. So when it comes to defining the world, the most prominent thinkers, innovators, non-fiction writers, Nobel Prize winners, you name it, we are only reading the chapter which is the world according to white male people.

It's the lens through which most people view the world unfortunately, because of intrinsic bias of the media.

Precisely. And so it's as though we are not even barely opening other chapters in this book called The World.

I'm hardly even aware of those other chapters.

Exactly. And we are, you know, we just sort of skim through them for some keywords and then try to be politically correct. And what that means, it's not that the world according to white male people is a wrong world necessarily, or that it's not a brilliant world. It's just that it's not the full story.

It's disproportionately dominant.

It's disproportionately dominant, and it means that we're missing out on great ideas and creative expression.

Plurality of ideas and voices.

Yes. Which means that the world is not as evolved and beautiful as it could be. And yes, so to go back to this the multiplicity of identities, there could certainly also be a chapter which would be the world according to African and European female people who have lived in the UK for 12 years, you know? And that is my chapter. And certainly in that chapter which I'm composing, I'm very much influenced by my both my heritages, my triple citizenship – I am Nigerian, Finnish and Swedish –

My family would say they're British and Yorkshire. Yorkshire first, I would say.

That's really cosmopolitan! Yes, and I increasingly feel British too, although I don't have a British passport. You know, I feel very grateful to have multiple identities in that sense because again, sticking to this metaphor, it is just a way for me to be able to see things, to understand people and the world from several different lenses, which is certainly more of a positive than a negative thing. However, it can also be a very complex reality, and a frustrating one, because in many ways I am privy to understanding the humanity in both, at least in my case, the two countries that I come from, Finland and Nigeria, and understanding that that is how it goes across the board globally, but then seeing that there are so many prejudices between diverse groups, even within my family, so yes, it comes with its with its complexities as well.

At the beginning of your TED talk, you spoke very movingly about your grandmother in Nigeria, how she didn't have much English, she didn't speak English very well, but you had lots of really kind of intimate family time with her where she would hold you, and... it was a very moving introduction, I though.

Thank you.

Do you want to tell us a little bit about that and in terms of what you went on to talk about in the TED Talk?

Yes. You know, it's funny that... or no, it's not funny, but I'm glad you bring up my grandmother, especially in the context of what we are talking about.

She sounded a formidable woman.

She was! And yes, she wasn't educated in the western way but she was...

Wise.

... wise, and she was definitely like a professor emeritus in the School of Life. And she was a thinker. You know, she had ideas about how things are and how they should be, and why they weren't that way. I guess what you could... you could almost put the message in the TED talk into that into one sentence. You know, I can completely imagine an NGO or some kind of research group going to study, let's say, uneducated market women in West Africa, and including my very erudite, confident...

In that class of people.

In that class of people that are now seen as like, unable to contribute to wider society, and this is the huge problem that we have in this world, because someone like my grandmother, she was an Iyalaja, which is in Yoruba means a chief market woman. The market place in many African societies is one which is so completely misunderstood by the western media whenever it's written about or depicted in documentaries and so on. The marketplace and in African societies is really similar to, say, the Greek Agora, a marketplace of ideas; it's not just somewhere that goods are sold. It's a place where people exchange thoughts and ideas about values and ethics and society at large.

I've spent some time in Tanzania and Uganda. One of my businesses clients is a microfinance bank who are very active across the kind of Pearl of Africa, and I agree with you that they're much more than just merely marketplaces of goods and services, they're marketplaces of ideas.

They really are.

Incredibly vibrant, in every sense of the word. They're exciting.

Yes. You go to an African market and you, as you would have witnessed yourself, you're going to see people getting into a heated discussion and people just sitting under a tree and having a long chat about this, that or the other, people debating politics. They're very vibrant spaces, and I have to say its not just the western gaze that has missed that – I think even we as Africans have not fully analysed and examined the place as a marketplace of ideas. But perhaps there's also something to be said about the notion here that we have as the marketplace of ideas as something indeed very marketable. It has become quite commodified, and we exchange ideas in a capitalist way in which, generally speaking, the white men are the version of the Iyalaja that my grandmother was, and they get to be the chiefs of the marketplace of ideas. And what I am very... what I try to do is... you know, blogging and writing and speaking has been so useful for me personally, is to connect these marketplaces, if you like, and to show women like my grandmother and myself as someone who is, you know, she is my ancestor. If we are also combining and taking part in this marketplace of ideas, these Agoras, then we just are going to end up with a much richer understanding of ideas. In my ideal world, there is certainly internationalism, there is cosmopolitanism, and people exchange goods, ideas, services and so on and so forth, and culture and arts as well are important to include there. But this notion of a whole segment of people from one part of the world constantly feeling a need or a desire to go and help a whole other segment that is a part of the world, there's something very unevolved about in my view.

Patriarchal.

It's patriarchal, it's patronising, yes – and it's also quite ridiculous when you really think about it. I mean, it's quite telling that we clearly have a structure in the world that is immature, because there shouldn't be a need for that. And so, to respond to that question, I'm more interested in strategies that can take us away from that rather than how can we ensure that people that go to help have so-and-so type of views or openness, or how can we ensure that people who are in need of help don't have to cater to certain stereotypes. I think we need to really seriously start looking into how can we create societies that are self-sufficient but can still intermingle. And learn from each other and help each other out, but not because of inequality in the world.

Your blog must be an important piece in the jigsaw for that in terms of breaking down those stereotypes.

It is, because my blog is a space in the digital sphere in which those kinds of stereotypes are not being catered to. My worldview is one in which Africa is such a phenomenal continent with such great contributions to make. Let me quickly add that we have a lot of problems in the African continent, many of which we didn't create

ourselves, but which we certainly perpetuate. When I'm writing, when I'm talking, I'm not sort of trying to dispute something that western people might have said about Africa, or to constantly be challenging views; I am writing from a place in which I just know. I am just aware of the greatness of African culture, African philosophy, African in scientific research, African art. There are so many things, so many incredible things, that the whole world can learn from Africa. So my intention, and I think an intention that is important, is to simply showcase those things that simply speak from a place of that awareness rather than a kind of constant need to challenge prejudices, which is an endless and tiresome task because it really never ends. I think we need to focus less on the oppressor, and the same goes for women when it comes to male oppression, and focus more on our greatness, which there certainly is a lot of.

Who are your readers and what kind of interaction do you have with them?

My readers are people who are intellectually curious about the world. That's the general statement that I would say about my readers. But if I look at the demographics of my readers, they tend to be... the biggest group are women of African heritage. Probably between 25 and 45 or so, based in urban cities in the US, in the UK, in Europe, and in Africa. But a huge group, a huge amount of my readers, are also men, white men, African men, white women, people from all walks of life really. My blog is widely read by students and scholars as well as, of course, other feminists, global feminists of diverse backgrounds. And being such a broad and varied group, my interactions with my readers are also quite varied. So there are people who come to my blog to disagree with what I have to say...

And I imagine you welcome respectful disagreement.

I not only welcome it, I am heartened by it! It means that what I am saying is not, you know, *meh*. It has some value. And whether someone agrees or disagrees, I value their feedback equally. Sometimes I may even concede that I was wrong in a point of view, and then we can discuss that. Yes, of course there's also a lot of people with prejudices who like to come and point out, particularly when it comes to gender, that there are certain valid reasons to the way the world is the way that it is, and we get into heated discussions about these things.

Because in one sense, I was going ask almost from a time management point of view as how actively you take on your detractors, particularly if they're kind of negatively motivated or disrespectful. I used to do a little bit with Richard Dawkins over the years and the Humanist Association, and he wouldn't argue with any individual person because he just said, "It's just not worth it, and frankly it's not going to change their mind."

I tend to disagree with that view. I mean, first of all because I feel stimulated to respond when somebody says something obnoxious on a space that is mine that I pay for and then I put effort into creating. And I don't want them to sort of have the

last word where there are other people who might be susceptible to their message. So I tend to have a visceral reaction to responding. However, that said, certainly I distinguish between a troll and someone who is a valid commenter but who would have, in my view, an erroneous point of view about something. I also think that it's generally part of what we do as people who put ideas out there. There is a certain responsibility to...

Have a kind of Socratic dialogue with your readers?

Yes. I don't want to just sit on a throne and say, "This is what I think."

Dispense the wisdom.

Exactly. Of course there are time restrictions to this and sometimes I just don't have the time to respond to people, which I'll say if I can, you know, I'll make a point to say that. But as much as possible I do try to interact with those people who are kind enough to spend time reading me.

So what's the typical week in the life of the blog? How do you, you know, what are the genesis for the articles? Do you react to events or is it a combination of pre-planned articles on certain subjects and themes? How do you manage the blog editorially?

So a typical day in managing my blog and my work is that I tend to do a lot of my admin, work, research and stuff like that during the day, and being a night owl I enjoy writing and coming up with my ideas in the evenings.

It's the time when the phone's not beeping and you can actually be alone with your thoughts.

Exactly. And I really cherish that silence and people disappearing from your vicinity. Sometimes I will write a blog post in two hours in an evening, and then there are other blog posts which I think of as slow pieces, if you like.

Long reads.

Long reads are usually also the ones that people don't read as much or don't interact with! But I can spend days and weeks, an hour here or there, but I allow the idea to grow, if you like. And so I guess there's not really a typical day or a typical week, also because I have been doing a lot of travelling, and depending on what projects I'm working on you know I may or I may not have a lot of time for actually blogging. So it depends. But on a general notion, on a general level, I would be writing in the evenings and at night, and doing my admin work and emails during the day. But I have to say I'm also, I think, you know, as a thinker and a writer I'm always working and I'm always thinking about what to write about next, what am I interested in. It's one of the things that I love the most about what I do, is those moments where I

have an idea about something that I want to discuss. I have one of those a-ha moments. But I guess it's also one of the most challenging things about what I do, because it also means that I'm going to have to do a lot of work, polishing the idea and researching it. You know, sometimes I have read a whole number of dense books, and the result is one sentence in a blog post. You know, so it takes on a lot of shapes and forms.

Sometimes, I don't know about you, but I try to be so even-handed in my research when I look into things, that after two hours of reading about something I'm actually none the wiser, because I'm convinced of both sides of the arguments, and you end up just going with your gut feeling two hours earlier.

Right!

Do you ever have that?

All the time! Or when you discover that the first draft was the best one. That definitely happens, and I guess it's healthy in many ways that you can see two sides of an argument. It doesn't make for great reading though.

On the one hand and on the other hand, and all that kind of thing.

Exactly. So it is important to take one position, but it's not because now I'm going to omit the other side of the story. It's out of... I think the commitment to integrity, when you really deeply go into that you do end up having a favoured position. Often times I might write something and then leave it to brew for a few days, and I might have imagined that I saw two sides to the story and then I realised that actually I probably lean more towards this, and then that is what I should express.

Do you write with a certain... not necessarily audience in mind, but even a certain vehicle? Do you think, "Right, I'm going to write this piece for my blog," or do you think this might end up in the Huffington Post or The Guardian, because you do have a variety of choices of where you could place that writing.

Yes, I do write with different vehicles in mind. Often, if I'm writing for say, the Guardian, I would have pitched an idea, so I wouldn't have written that article yet and then once I start writing I actually know that okay, this is going to be published on so-and-so platform. Whereas one of the beauties with owning a blog is that you can instantly just put down a thought that comes to your mind, so that often happens with my blog. And sometimes there's also... I mean, writing as I do about society in a dissident way, I also evaluate platforms in terms of their audiences. So for instance, I may not want to discuss something which I think is of critical importance to people of African heritage on a platform like the Huffington Post, or even the Guardian, because their audience may not really grasp what I'm getting at; it might even end up

reinforcing certain prejudices. So I would either publish something like that on my blog or my column in a Nigerian newspaper, the Nigerian Guardian or something equivalent. And yes, similarly with my feminist articles, which all of my articles are really, but I also gauge where, which editor I might want to pitch a feminist piece about relationships or one about psychology and behavioural patterns or a one about a political issue based on their audience and their tone and their reputation.

Do you enjoy the process of writing? I only say that because I read a piece by Owen Jones the other week, and he said that whilst he's very passionate about the issues and making a case for them, when it actually comes to sitting down at the screen and tapping away at the keyboard, he physically doesn't enjoy writing, which is quite an unusual thing. It raised an eyebrow with me because he's a writer! One would presume you enjoy it, otherwise you wouldn't do it. And it was quite a revelation for him to say that he didn't actually enjoy it.

It's tedious!

Oh, another one! Right.

All right completely agree with Owen. It's really quite a remarkable profession that we have, you know, because it goes back to that thing that when you have this idea, you know what you're going to write, you have that a-ha moment, you have your opinion, then actually putting that down onto a piece of paper or onto a screen is one of the most challenging things ever, because you have it, you know, you are clear about what you're thinking, it's there in your mind, but then you're reading what you're writing, and you become very aware that what you what you're thinking is not what you're saying. You know, words and language are consciousness; there are so many words to express one single thing, so if you think just for instance of yourself, you can use the word me, ego, psyche, I. And that is what makes writing so bloody difficult, is because you have to find the right word to express the consciousness of an idea, and an opinion that you have. And when you start, if you're anything like me and you start deliberating on each and every word, and wanting perfection in a sentence and in paragraphs, it becomes a very bothersome task. However, as tedious as it is, it's also the most satisfying feeling when you do find the right words to express that consciousness. I'm pretty sure that if a neuroscientist were to examine what was happening in my body when I have gotten my piece ready and am happy with it, or even when I've just found the right word for one particular sentence, it would be endorphins and serotonin and oxytocin and all this.

Sounds great!

Well, I am so convinced of that because you really do get a rush, and so therefore writing is also tremendously pleasurable. But it's about finding that sweet spot with it.

Do you prefer speaking? And also is it a way to reach out to different audiences as well in terms of the different medium? Your TED Talk has had, when I looked at it, well over 100,000 views. Do you think that's reaching a different audience of people than your writing?

Yes. I can't say that I prefer speaking, I probably always will prefer writing because I am so passionate about words. But I love speaking, precisely because it does provide an opportunity to connect with people in a different manner. It's more direct, you can have more of a dialogue than when you're sitting behind a screen and, you know, on that throne again, deciding what's right and what's wrong, and it's also a way to expand your ideas. I find sometimes, you know, you go into a talk thinking one thing and you come out of it, maybe not thinking a completely different thing, but at least you've really expanded your view because you're being pushed to explain it further by the audience. So yes, speaking is... it's an art form just like writing is. I really think that when you find the right words, if they have a certain rhythm... so it's almost like singing a song, you know, like if you have found the right rhythm, if there is a cadence and passion, then it can have a huge impact and ripple into the mainstream in the way that a good song can.

Would you ever go into politics? You were named as one of Nigeria's 100 most influential women. Do you think you could be president or prime minister?

That's er... that question has just thrown me, because it's not something that I think I've ever really considered!

I'd vote for you! I'd vote for myself first, I admit.

Haha, yes. For Nigeria's prime minister?

I'm just desperate to become prime minister of any country.

I mean, you know, if such an opportunity came up I would probably find it very difficult to say no, although it's certainly not an aspiration of mine. Maybe not president or prime minister, but going into politics would be... I mean, I studied political science so it's not an entirely alien thought in that sense, but it would be something to think about very carefully.

Is your blog the kind of platform upon which all of your activism and all of the kind of things that you get involved in is built upon? So in the sense of you mentioned at the beginning of the podcast, that you travel the world a lot. Are those invites because of the impact that your blog is making?

Definitely. My blog is at the centre of my work, so it's the platform through which I receive requests to go and speak somewhere or attend a conference or be a panellist, or write for other publications or do consultancy work. What else do I get to do through my blog... research projects, and to give advice and expertise on gender issues, either in other media or to think tanks and organisations, charities etc. So my

blog is like a CV, but it's... because you have people who have a website and they literally kind of place their CV on there.

And it's like a brochure, one-pager.

Exactly, with a bio and 'this is what I do', and I wouldn't dispute that that can also get you a lot of work. But I do encourage those people with restless minds like mine, or with just with good ideas or a good profile, to blog because it's kind of like a living CV, a CV that gives so much more to potential recruiters or clients.

And what's been the highlight of your journey so far on the blog in terms of experiences you've had, people you've met, changes you've made? When you look back upon your journey from that very first MySpace post to where you are now, what are the things that really resonate with you so far?

The blogging journey has taught me so much. I have learnt about the topics that I write about, and I don't think that I would have gone back to do a master's degree had I not started blogging, at least not in gender studies, and at least not in gender studies with... I went to SOAS (University of London, School of Oriental and African Studies) particularly because I wanted to look at gender and feminism in African contexts. That's thanks to my blog. Also, because as I said earlier, the two things that are really important to me with blogging is commitment to integrity and compassion. And so having those as guides has meant that I have learned a lot about how to not only have integrity in my work, but to have integrity in my life. So blogging has changed me personally in a fundamental way, because in order to write about the things that I do and advocate or challenge the status quo and for feminist revolution, I have to be speaking from a position in which I am challenging those same things in my life. And so, yes, I mean it's always hard to know what you would have done if you hadn't done this, and so on and so forth. But I am quite confident that it's thanks to my blog that I have become someone who can not only express and consolidate the restless ideas in my mind, but also to bring peace to my mind, you know, and be the person who I am freely and openly.

And you must get positive communication from your readers in terms of how impactful your writing is with them, you know, beyond merely compliments that I really enjoyed that. Do you get quite a lot of quite expressive feedback in terms of how your blog has changed people, or even changed the way that they think about something?

I'm terribly moved by how much of that kind of feedback I get. I get a lot of emails from young girls or young women, teenagers, who will write me emails about how they feel encouraged to do this, that or the other because they've been reading my blogs, many asking me to mentor them. I get emails from students specifically, I get a lot of emails from students saying how much my work has helped them in writing their papers or their theses and sometimes they ask me if they can quote my blog. You know, I clearly really tell them yes or no to that, I can't see why not, but... yes,

it's really touching how much of that I've gotten and how much meaning my expression seems to have given other people, especially people who, like me, are women of African heritage.

Do you ever kind of work on the blog, rather than say, in it? And what I mean by that is how have you grown your impact and your audience? Has it been purely organically, or have you ever, whenever you've posted an article, do you then start to then kind of put on Linked In and tweet it and Facebook and so on in an effort, which is not unreasonable of course, to actively generate traffic to that post?

Both. And combined. So if it is a very organic process for me. You know, you've written something and you want to share it, and it just so happens that, again in this day and age, you know, we use social media to share things. So it comes as a very natural thing to want to share it on Linked In Facebook etc. It's a form of marketing strategy and PR, but it doesn't feel like that's what I'm doing if that makes sense.

You're just kind of raising awareness of what you doing.

Yes.

You're not actively hustling in a kind of 'I'm marketing this blog' time frame of mind.

Exactly. But I do think that the two worlds really kind of merge eventually, and I can, for instance, use key words in a title without consciously thinking that I'm doing that, but because I have a background in marketing and branding, I'm really intrigued and fascinated by that world. I think it's psychology; it's very interesting what makes people want to read this and not that. So I have an awareness of those things in my writing and in my blogging, but it doesn't feel like, "Oh, now I'm going to sit down and put together a marketing plan." Increasingly... because I don't say that to condescend on any blogger who does that, in fact I think perhaps I am being a little bit naive in not doing that, I guess that because that world is so linked to the financial world and to ideologies as capitalism and patriarchy, I think over the years I've had a tendency to shy away from it in a way that I have only recently really started to question and to examine why do I feel this way, why don't I feel entitled to "aggressively" – in quotation marks, that's the term that is often used – but to "aggressively" market my blog and aim to monetise and things like that. But yes, I have had a bit of a reluctant relationship to that element of blogging.

Would it be fair to characterise your blog as a journey of self-discovery as well as you learning about the world and commenting on what you're thinking, feeling and observing?

Absolutely. In fact, one of my blogs before MsAfropolitan was called RevealingMe, and MsAfropolitan is a kind of continuation of that blog. And I was, you know, I use

the word RevealingMe intentionally because... to reveal, it's a very ambiguous term, it's both positive and negative. We associate sometimes shame with revelation, so if you reveal the truth about yourself it can be quite...

Or an attempt to hide something. You think of a magician revealing something in a top hat exactly and pulling away the handkerchief.

Exactly. So there's like an exposure of something which is often, when it comes to human beings, a vulnerability or something like that. At the same time, revealing the truth is a very positive phrase in the sense of it's something that certainly everyone is attracted to. What is the truth behind this or that? And I enjoyed that play with the word RevealingMe. And yes, I think my blogs today are a continuation of that process of revealing me, but with MsAfropolitan, compared to that blog, there is a more... I have a clearer vision of how political that process of revealing me is, because we don't live in a world where the kinds of politics that my life imbues, whether I want to or not, is at the centre of the world's narrative. So in revealing me I'm revealing a different world, in a sense.

Do you ever feel a sense of vulnerability though, when you're revealing the sense of you? It almost seems kind of patronising to say it's brave to do that, but that is genuinely the word that springs to mind.

I used to feel an element of vulnerability, and I am sure that I will in the future as well, but less than less... because as somebody who changes values, that's really what my work is, it's about changing values, when it comes especially to our moral and ethical worlds. I guess I've come to understand over the years that that is a task in which you have to be all right with vulnerability. You have to be okay with sometimes being seen as an outcast. You have to be okay with people disagreeing with you, even sometimes, you know, they're mentally liking you. And I guess I've grown a thick skin in that sense, so that I can put my vulnerabilities out there and almost detach myself from them, because they are a tool in this process of changing values. And I should emphasise that the changing of values is something that I think is important to do with a rapture for life. I know that this all sounds very heavy, but by contrast I think that we're so accustomed to looking at things in really abstract ways; we have so much theory and binary ideas, boxes. And the biggest value that I am trying to change is to get people to... is to contaminate that abstract theoretical world with a rapture for life and a desire to understand more and to be more curious about the so-called 'other', rather than to push them away, because that's how you enrich your life.

And in one sense, the Internet is really bringing people together and breaking down stereotypes and encouraging us all to be much more thoughtful. But in terms of the geopolitical narrative, how miserable are you when you look at Brexit and you look at the victory of Donald Trump, you know, there's no nuance or subtlety there. He speaks in blunt nouns. You mentioned there

about the sense of the other; even though he might outwardly be respectfully saying, you know, we're going to ban these people, it's all about that sense of the other and a creeping sense of, frankly, intolerance. How do you reconcile that with still trying to get out of bed every day and being positive, and doing the blog when someone horrible, you know, a vain bully like Donald Trump can win the presidency?

Well, you know, Donald Trump...

That's a loaded question, isn't it? I enjoyed asking that.

Yes, I can tell you're really getting into it! We don't like Donald Trump on this podcast.

We don't... nobody likes Donald Trump! How the hell did he end up where he is?

There are people around him at these rallies that have these signs. I mean I actually do believe they're real!

They are real, and you know, I was in Hong Kong – this was a bit of a detour – when he won the presidency, and the part of Hong Kong where I lived wasn't English speaking, and I was so desperate to hear what people were saying about Donald Trump's victory, and so I went to this mall which typically has a lot of westerners and Americans there, and I went and I sat down for dinner, and this American family, sure enough, comes and sits next to me. And just as they sat down, their little son, you know, he's just a child, started jubilating about, "Yes! Donald Trump has won! I'm so happy!"

A child.

Yes. A child. And you know, so they do exist.

Shall we just pack up now?

Sometimes you do feel that way. But no, I think to answer your question, that Donald Trump is not a new phenomenon. You know, the world has had many Trumps and will have, and you know, this is part of the reason why things don't change, is because we don't see fluctuation; our theories do not allow for a circular movement. We see things in a very linear way, and so we're either going to utopia or a dystopia. And that's not reality. Reality is that we have... the world is always a mix of positive and negative, and the change lies in really in the awareness of that. And so, yes, I think with new technology and living in the information age, it's very exciting. We have never been in this kind of situation before.

Do you think that your blog is one of the things that's accelerating the pace of change? You look at the Arab Spring, you look at the way that the sheer ability to share information more easily is making changes to the planet geopolitically.

It is. It certainly aims to be, and it certainly is part of the acceleration of change. My writing has been able to put its finger on a lot of the contemporary African zeitgeist as well as the contemporary feminist zeitgeist. And I think that change is always about knowledge. If you can help people gain knowledge, then you are helping them to change. We tend to look at it as, you know, change in policy and this and that – and I don't mean to downplay that for a second, it's very important to change policy – but changing knowledge, changing social relations, is even more important because when our social relations change, so do our institutions, automatically – they are, after all, made up of human beings. So if, within an institution, people can see each other as full human beings, they're far less likely to create policy that dehumanises another person.

What's the thing that you've done, from when you started the blog to date, that's made you the most proud?

There truly are so many things that have made me proud, but if I had to pick one, I am very proud about the connections that I've made with people. Readers, people that I've become friends with through my blog. It brings me pride... more than pride, it brings me joy to know that I've said something that really has made an impact in somebody's life.

Minna, it's been an incredible conversation, I've learnt a huge amount. Thank you ever so much for your time.

Thank you.