

Justine Roberts **CEO, Mumsnet**

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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 Justine Roberts, founder and CEO of Mumsnet, the international online forum with over 10 million users. After previous careers in the city and sports journalism, Justine founded the site in 2000 after a disastrous family holiday with her young twins. Today, the platform has over 120 million monthly viewers, and after the success of Mumsnet she also launched Gransnet, the most popular social network site for the over 50s. In 2010, Justine was featured in the Media Guardian's Power 100, and in 2017 she was awarded a CBE for services to the economy.

Justine, thank you for joining me.

It's my pleasure.

Justine, Mumsnet was conceived, it says here, after a disastrous family holiday. What happened?

Well, what didn't happen really? It was my first holiday with my kids, so it's a whole different experience when you suddenly go on holiday with children. I had one-year-old twins, and you can always tell the parents because they have a tiny little bit of hand luggage for themselves and then trolley loads of paraphernalia for the kids, and that's what we had. And we got on this flight and from the first moment we got on the flight the kids started to... well, they were ill, put it like that, and the poor guy next to me had to continually pass me cups to catch them vomiting. And when we turned up we realised we chose the wrong resort and the wrong hotel, and quite frankly we'd brought the wrong children.

Can't send them back, can you?

Yes! And all the parents were sitting round this pool bemoaning their choice, thinking why on earth have we chosen this disaster of a destination. We were in the wrong time zone, they woke us up at 2am every morning on the dot... it was just stuff that really now I would look back and I'd think I never pick that holiday. But then, I knew nothing. And I knew nothing about that, and I knew nothing about parenting in general, and the simple idea really was to connect with people who did know. Who did know about family holidays, who did know about how to get their kids to sleep,

and who did know how to deal with mother-in-laws. And there was this thing called the Internet, it wasn't very old, quite new on the scene, but it seemed like a great way to allow people to connect. So I got home and thought I'd give it a crack.

I don't think this Internet thing will take off really. I'm suspicious of it if I'm honest.

Well, lots of people were at the time – it was met with a lot of scepticism, my plan.

What was the scale of the ambition at that point? Was it a hobby, were you going to do it as a business? Did you realise it would literally be this globally dominant website? I mean, I normally joke about global domination is the extent of ambition of a lot of guests, but actually you really are globally dominant with your brand already.

Well, I suppose back in whenever it was, 1999, it was the start of the Internet gold rush and everyone had sort of crazy ideas about their web start-up. I don't know, you're probably too young to remember, but you couldn't really bump into anyone without them regaling you with their brilliant new idea for a web start-up that was going to, you know, dominate and make millions. And so it was sort of slightly fantasy land but very ambitious at the same time. I knew it was a long shot, but you know, I still went around with this business plan in hand, trying to raise four and a half million quid just because that's what everyone was at that time, so I thought I'd give it a go. Unfortunately my timing was a little bit off because the dot.com crash happened and there was no chance of any cash, which in the long run probably was a good thing but in the short term felt like terrible timing.

So what came next?

Well, so we raised no money and basically had to grow the site on a shoestring from a back bedroom with very cheap, inadequate childcare looking after my kids. But that was the right model really for growing an online community, it needed to be organic.

Grass roots.

Yes, word of mouth. And what the crash did for us really was it stopped other new, very well funded entrants from coming in and spending a fortune on branding and advertising, and allowed us to get on with growing something real, where real people used it and spread the word themselves. It took a while, but remember those were the days of dial up. I mean, not everyone was on the Internet. My co-founder, who started with me, she didn't even have a laptop, she hadn't owned a computer, she didn't really know what the Internet was. So it was very early days and it took a while, but it was done in the right way with a solid base. But the idea of earning money seemed a long prospect away, and it took us many years really to even pay a proper salary.

What made you stick at it in those early months? Because there you are, there's all your so-called competition that have already given up before they've

even got the starting blocks because they couldn't get any money. You tried to get some money, got none... why bother?

Well, I think because very early on it was proving to be quite useful. You know, I used to get letters from people saying, "Mumsnet saved my life," "I was feeling suicidal," or "I was so depressed with this baby and had no one to talk to." And those letters were incredibly encouraging, and actually our users in the early days used to send us cash to keep going. They, you know, literally it was like NPR without asking. I used to open the mail and get £100 quid in the post, in a cheque. So it just felt like it was... a) that it was doing some good, and quite frankly that was a pretty good use of my time. But b) that it would have to be a business one day, because it was so useful to people that one way or another, you know, even it wasn't me, someone was going to work out how to make this thing turn a buck or two.

What was the next milestone then, when did you feel it had taken a leap forward?

I think... so we rambled on, really doing very little, making very little money, certainly having very little media attention, until about 2006 which seemed to be the turning point. Now, bear in mind in that time, Facebook launched in 2004, so there was a sort of bubbling up of suddenly everyone was talking about Web 2.0 and the social web. But what happened for us was two things really. One is, and I'm not quite sure of the order but there were round about the same time, David Cameron decided to come and do a web chat.

I remember that.

And he sort of wanted to be seen as a very modern guy who is in touch with the Internet, and he did it just after he became Tory leader. He'd gone on paternity leave and he came straight back and the first thing he did...

And he had Web Cameron, didn't he?

Yes, that's right. He was totally trendy and all that kind of stuff. And the second, which was less enjoyable really, was we were sued. There was a kind of high profile case, the UK's biggest selling author, otherwise known as a child care guru of parenting books, decided to try and shut us down and wrote very threatening letters to our service provider and threatened to shut them down unless they shut us down. So that became a bit of a cause célèbre for freedom of speech on the Internet because it was really just a case she didn't like some of the opinions, and it was very polarised, that were being said about her on the web. And, you know, in those days people still treated websites as publishers and it was a misunderstanding really about what the nature of an Internet publisher was.

So she tried to bully you out of existence.

Yes. And you know, lots of lawyer's letters, tons of unlimited cash spent.

And a lot of wasted time, no doubt.

Yes, a lot of wasted... I mean, it becomes like one of these things. You see it when people get divorced, they really can't talk about anything else. And for a year I could talk about nothing but this court case, and I could see my friends' eyes glazing over, you know, "Oh, she's banging on about that again." But you become absolutely absorbed and obsessed. And it was an important thing, because the laws did need to change. You know, we were sort of in a print law age for a digital world, and they did need updating. We became active members of the Libel Reform Campaign and got the definition at, you know, with others, with lots of others who did lots of work, got it changed for the better, I think, to allow more freedom of speech. So that was a good thing. But it at the time it felt miserable.

Did it also feel like a step forward though in terms of the noteworthiness that it gave the site? You mentioned that as one of two examples of why you felt it was a step forward.

Yes. I think it certainly... well, I wouldn't say 'put us on the map' but it definitely raised our profile. We were, I remember, leading the news on Channel 4 News. You know, the story of 'childcare guru tried to get a mums website shut down'. So it was definitely... it brought a lot of new people to the site. It didn't bring us any money really, but that the world was changing anyway. As I say, Facebook started, Twitter launched in 2006, and suddenly everyone was getting excited. Now, for a long time brands and advertisers had run very scared of the social web with no real wish to put their brand out there, somewhere where it was sort of unmediated and the message wasn't controlled. And they were gradually moving on from that as well, so all that meant eventually we could afford to actually, you know, move into an office and hire someone, and that came in 2008 really. And I think the notoriety plus the change in the environment helped that.

But you must already have been quite a recognised brand if David Cameron's media advisers thought that your website was worth him going on.

Well, we were we were definitely attracting more visitors, and people were using the site because it was very useful. I mean, being able to tap in to an incredibly wide and large crowd about stuff that possibly is the most important thing you'll ever do, raising kids, something you receive very little training for, is a useful thing. And so the numbers were growing, yes. And yes, I'd done a bit of journalism around it so we had a little bit of profile, but it sort of felt like a sea change in 2006.

What came next, then? I'll just keep asking that all the time! This is a great story.

So we got our office and we started to hire a few people, we got we did a few deals, I guess. Yes, we had a book deal with Bloomsbury to produce six books, and that just allowed us to expand. You know, I'd lived through almost eight years, definitely six years, of absolute impecunity really, of not being able to pay myself, not being able to hire anyone.

Impecunity is a great word, I'm going to start to use that! Skint is what I would say.

So it took me a while to sort of get out of that mindset of having to watch every single penny.

It would still be quite useful even now, I think.

Yes. Well, it is useful but also you need to also recognise when the tide has changed a little bit. And if anything was a bit slow, but... so what really changed was, you know, we carried on doing what we were doing but with more people and a bit more professionalism, and then I guess what happened, it was 2010 and the election became known as the Mumsnet election. I think it was dubbed by Rachel Sylvester in the Times, was the first person to call it that. Because we were absolutely inundated by politicians, and prime ministers, and aspiring prime ministers, to come and talk to our users. It was the first sort of social media election really. And they picked Mumsnet as a sort of safe territory, they thought, to come and show that they were modern.

I mean, quite apart from you know how flattering that is, for you to be the platform upon which a lot of the election debate is held, how did you kind of leverage that as a business opportunity? And also, in terms of your... I mean, clearly you were a media outlet at that point, you were driving the news.

Yes. I never really felt like we were sort of competing with other news providers, it more felt that we were doing a service to our users and allowing them a voice, which kind of really was our mission, to give our users a voice and to make parents' lives easier. So the real outcome was that we started campaigning on stuff. So we hadn't really started as a campaigning organisation, but when you have a prime minister kind of in the room, they're ready to talk turkey on issues that matter to you. And especially just before election time, it's the time to get things into manifesto, so we realised we had a certain amount of influence. And we started campaigning on issues that mattered to our users, like better miscarriage care and libel reform and stuff like that. So that was the real change after that election, rather than things sort of too businessy. I mean, clearly we've got lots more users and therefore the advertising world was easier for us, but what felt a bit different was we had a position of influence that we ought to use for the benefit of our users.

Yes, because if the prime minister is interviewed by a news website or a newspaper, yes, clearly they're either left or right leaning, but it's a kind of straight interview. They're not asked issues that they're campaigning on so prominently.

They're not generally trying to get something into the manifesto.

Absolutely.

Well, not usually anyway. So yes, so it did feel a bit different to that. And we hopefully, we carried on doing and campaigning on things that our users care about

and we do especially at election time, just before elections, seem to get some traction.

Did you think in terms of editorially how we would handle the interview? Because at that point you must have known that you've got the prime minister coming on. What were you thinking in terms of how you would structure the interview? Was it like a kind of Reddit AMA, like ask me anything, where questions will come through and you were a kind of moderator of a filter, or did you pre-agree the questions? And how did you manage the expectations of your own users?

So we don't pre-agree. I mean, the Mumsnet webchat is... I wouldn't say it was a free for all, but its definitely not... the politicians aren't really shielded in any way beyond our normal rules which is all about civility we have a rule about only one question and one follow up each; it can't be dominated by a sort of single issue. And we asked people to behave as they would if you were talking to someone face to face and they came round for a cup of tea, so you know, that cuts quite a lot of abuse. And we close it so it's only for signed up members who've been signed up for a little while, so that stops sort of non-Mumsnetters coming on and hijacking the thing. So it's as simple as that, really.

So it's authentically Mumsnet, still.

Yes. I mean, obviously there are a lot more questions asked than a politician would have time to answer, but we do encourage them not to avoid the questions which are asked multiple times, which often are the most difficult ones. And if they do, then they will end up in a bit of trouble I think. So you can't really hide from a Mumsnet webchat, that's what I think is so interesting about it. Very often I think we've been underestimated because people think, "Oh, they're a bunch of mums." And Gordon Brown, classic...

A bunch of voters.

A bunch of voters, but you know, with narrow interests, because that's the way politicians think about mums, they think they have to come on and talk about childcare issues and tax credits, but not about the economy or Trident. And you know, Gordon Brown classically did that when he came on in 2010. He almost had a script, and he was very anxious to get the point across about child care tax credits, and he wasn't really engaging with the questions that were coming in. So famously, you know, our users cottoned on to the fact he wasn't really answering the questions and asked him 12 times what his favourite biscuit was in a sort of Paxman type way. But it wasn't really because they wanted to know what his favourite biscuit was, it was, "We want to see if this man will actually answer a direct question that we're asking." So he sort of misinterpreted the Mumsnet webchat. He was still in old media language, treating it as a broadcaster not an engagement. And that's where people go wrong if they do that.

I think they also go wrong if they're completely shy away from it because they're so scared. I mean, Theresa May famously turned down your invite, didn't she? She seemed to not want anything to do with any form of engagement.

She didn't actually ever turn it down, but they kept saying that she was very keen to do it but she never turned up, put it like that.

A sort of de facto turning down!

But I mean, you know, Theresa May turned down most invites in the last election, I think, didn't she – and arguably that didn't do her any services because, you know, she was so on message, and she was so in broadcast mode, that in the end, in this day and age, I don't think voters want that any more and they won't put up with it.

That whole kind of gladiatorial, Today programme, Newsnight type battle between Humphrys and Paxman and a politician of the day when nothing gets answered, I think no one wants to watch any more, even politicians. It's just a waste of everyone's time, isn't it?

Yes, when they're trying, just the whole interview, to get them to edge over onto one line that you know that they want the interviewee to say, but actually in the end it's just a very dull interview because of that because they're not going to budge. No, I mean, Mumsnet is much more free flowing; it's a test, I think, of authenticity. The people who do well are the ones who show a bit of leg, and can have a bit of a joke, but also don't shy away from the difficult questions.

Didn't Jeremy Corbyn do a runner after 20 minutes?

Well, he's been on a few times, so the third time unfortunately, yes he did. He left very quickly. They didn't tell us he was only going to stay for 20 minutes until he got there. But I don't think it was because of the tricky questions, I just think the schedule was incredibly tight, too tight really, so our users weren't entirely happy with just getting 20 minutes out of him.

Well, not unreasonably. We can go back to the story later, because there's quite a few years left in it, but you mentioned the campaigning element there. What's the greatest victory you guys ever had? Because you did get the billboard removed that said 'career women make bad mothers'. That was one of them, wasn't it? What was all that about?

Well, so it was a weird one, that. It was a kind of provocative campaign to prove that outdoor advertising works, so it was messaging on the sides of buses that were deliberately provocative. But they were... you can imagine that you've just dropped your screaming, you know, one-year-old at nursery and you're feeling very guilty, and you're heading off to work, and you're confronted by this billboard that tells you that you're a bad mother. You know, our users would come straight on to Mumsnet and wail, really, about how awful it made them feel. So we thought this was a bad way to go about proving that advertising works, and we voiced that, and we did get

them to change it. I think they ended up replacing it with something like 'sexist ads are bad for everyone' or something like that, which was less offensive, I thought. So yes, that received lots of complaints, and was I think removed... I think it was the Advertising Standards Authority that intervened. But yes, I mean, we've moved the dial a bit on miscarriage care, which we're really pleased about. It got in the Labour manifesto, and it was really about better, sensible, joined up care for people who miscarry, not putting them in maternity wards. That practice has largely stopped, although whenever you do anything with the NHS, you know, you're talking to 350 trusts, it's not one policy generally. So lots moved on there. Libel reform, you know, we think we've got a much better law in place that's fit for a digital age, we were part of that campaign with other people, as I say. We had a really good campaign called Let Girls be Girls, where we got retailers to sign up to a pledge not to sell clothing and goods that prematurely sexualise young girls, so like, you know, the high heels for seven-year-olds, which was something that our members were increasingly knowing and caring about. So we got masses of the big retailers to sign up to that and still be part of that, which is a great thing. I mean, you never know what's round the corner. I mean, I can go on and on actually, probably don't want to bore you with it, but there are several around the corner and several others that were that we've had some success with, like getting Bounty off of maternity wards. You know, they're basically collecting people's data. Only on maternity wards do the NHS allow people to disturb you, you know, hours after giving birth with a form getting you to fill in data for a private company, it's absolutely crazy.

It just sounds insane.

It beggars belief! And it's not as if Bounty give the NHS much money for it either, so... so, yes. That's another one where we've got a lot of trusts to sign up to say they'll review that practice. But we never know what's coming, because it's what our users notice. They are like a barometer for this stuff, an early warning system, and ideally we'll work with organisations to change stuff, you know, we don't necessarily want to go on the attack. We'd rather actually just get the change done, so we'll approach whoever it is and say, you know, "We've noticed this. We're like the canary in the coal mine here, you need to do something about it."

What's the psychology of a Mumsnet user when they go to the site? I mean, if I go to the BBC News website I'm looking to find out what Donald Trump's done and whether North Korea is going to kill us all – I'm looking for the news, really. But when you go to a community forum, are they looking for information, are they looking to be heard? Is it a mixture of the two? What's a typical user?

It is a mixture. It's a good question, because there are a few different what we call 'user journeys'. The largest reason people gave for coming onto Mumsnet is advice. They're looking for advice about all kinds of things, whether it's parenting stuff or it's about how to deal with this major fallout you've had with your best friend. Or often it's about whether they're being reasonable or not. So our biggest forum now is a forum called 'Am I being unreasonable?' And it is basically women looking for validation of their emotions. So they've fallen out, they don't like their boss, their husband's behaving badly, but they're just checking in to see whether, you know, the anger, the

guilt, even the happiness they're feeling, is justified – and they want a wise crowd to tell them that.

And how does it work in terms of the wisdom of crowds? When they're go and post something, saying, "Am I being reasonable about this?" I imagine there's a spirited debate, is there? Because some people would disagree with them.

Often you will get a range of opinions. Occasionally you'll get 300 people telling you the same thing, in which case I think that's pretty good evidence that you either are or aren't being unreasonable. But no, I mean generally, what people also forget about Mumsnet is it's full of professionals. So, you know, we do have experts in various subjects. We do have lots of doctors, we do have lots of teachers, we do have lots of scientists. So it's very rare – almost never, and this has been scientifically proven – that bad advice will slip through for long, because it's not only that the crowd is big, it's also that there's some real expertise in there as well.

And what's the motivation for the experts to hang around in the forums, then? Are they financially incentivised? Are they doing it for altruism?

Well, the experts are mums, so they're just giving back what they've taken. You know, that's the beauty of this thing. People do forget that mums can be experts too, so they're hanging out doing their stuff, finding out about other subjects and then they're answering questions too.

So really the site is an enabler then, of a community of people that are helping themselves.

Yes. I mean, it's a platform for people to swap wisdom and ideas. We obviously do quite a lot of our own content now as well, but largely that's the heart of Mumsnet – it's a platform for people to be able to anonymously give advice. So they can answer really in-depth, difficult questions, say the stuff you couldn't say on Facebook, or to your best friend, or even to your husband, and get real truthful wise immediate answers.

It sounds a utopia, actually! Genuine advice.

Well, only if you want the truth. You don't always want the truth! No, I mean, look, we have our share of bun fights too, and there are some polarising issues, but in general it's a place where people get answers and that's why they come.

Let's go back to the journey, then. So you mentioned the book deal and you've mentioned the election, and we still sort of – I have to think of what year were in now. We've still got seven years to go. What happened between then and now?

Oh, God! Time starts passing very quickly as we get older, have you noticed that?

Because at this point you've got resources, you've got a huge brand...

Yes. I think what's happened, the last five or so years have been a story of building out what we do, making a more professional business, as it were, in terms of, you know, when you go from a very small start up to something that employs 100 people, there's various challenges with that and you can choose to either sort of vacate at that point or to professionalise. It's a challenge, you know, if you're used to making every decision yourself; you have to learn to delegate, get managers in place and have systems and all that stuff.

I've been through all of that with my own business, it's horrendous.

Yes. And lots of entrepreneurs really, really don't like that.

You lose the will to live!

Yes! About whether this was for me or not. But I decided it was.

Me too.

So there's a lot of professionalisation I think, that goes on. And, you know, the product has evolved. We've got lots of apps, clearly we're mobile first and all that kind of stuff. So the brilliant thing is that I think, you know, in this digital world, when you think of about how much has changed, I mean, the smartphone has come along in that, you always feel like you're running a race, a race to the top, and you've got to keep going and you have to keep your head above the parapet and see what's coming and see what's out there, and that's the challenge. So we've done a lot more of that, and continue to do the stuff we always did before as well.

So what's a typical week for you now? Do you see yourself as a as a chief executive and a business manager who runs a website, or do you see yourself as a moderator and an editor of the site that you're then trying to monetise? I'm interested in the psychology of how you approach it.

Well, I think I think it is a bit of both, but my role I think is to empower the people who worked for Mumsnet and be the sort of keeper of the flame with what we stand for and what we believe in. Because we have always put purpose before profit, it's just you know partly by accident at the beginning, but it's always been part of what we believe in. And I think, you know, going back to your earlier question about why did you carry on doing it when there was clearly so little money in it, was entirely because it was purposeful. So my job is to basically make sure everyone understands that purpose, understands the vision and the values, and then enables them to go and do a better job than I would do at the things they're doing. And to look after the community, and make sure their interests are always at the heart of what we do.

And tell us about Mumsnet today. Because we said in the intro, there's millions upon millions of users, and you know, posts and so on. You must be incredibly proud of what you've achieved.

I'm really proud of the community and what they've achieved. I mean, they're the ones doing the hard work and answering the questions and putting themselves out there, taking their time, taking their time out, in the middle of the night sometimes, to answer questions and to be generous. So I'm proud that there is such a thing as society and community and all that kind of stuff, and you see it every day on Mumsnet forums. So that's the thing that's sort of... it's kind of heart warming, more than proud.

You mentioned that courtesy was an important part earlier. How do you deal with discourteous users? Because trolls come in all kinds of shapes and sizes, and really any forum doesn't want to be poisoned by idiots or people who are horrible. How do you deal with that?

Well, it's an issue. It is an issue. I mean, civility is what we ask for, but we do spend a lot of time, effort and money on community management, and I think one of the reasons why Mumsnet grew when other communities didn't was because we always had professional community managers, we paid our staff. They weren't volunteers just doing it, you know, for when they fancied and for the love of it, they were paid and trained, basically. So they're paid and trained to sort of weed out trolls as well, and to and to keep the thing on track. So for a forum that most people think of as self-policed and lightly moderated, I think the art is managing it and making it feel like that.

Yes, light touch policing but there's still uniform there if necessary.

Yes, exactly. And I do think that's where communities go wrong. But sometimes you get what I call 'aggressive orthodoxies' springing up, which is where there is just a prevailing opinion and no other will be tracked. Now, it might be a right or wrong opinion, but we believe very strongly in being a place where diverse opinions can reign, you know, in this world of Facebook and filters and all that kind of stuff. You know, it's even more important I think to be able to see contrary opinion, and potentially have your mind changed. So we work incredibly hard at allowing diverse opinion, and that is hard work because there are people who give an awful lot to the site, and large numbers of members who really don't want to see certain things on the site, but in the end we say what must prevail is civilised debate, because with civilised debate you then grow and you learn, and you may need your mind changing sometimes.

Well, absolutely. I think its right to go to these forums and have an open mind and you go to engage. Otherwise why are you doing it?

Yes. And I think, you know, we want to be welcoming to new people, not just to have, you know, every Mumsnet conversation is dictated by these rules. Yes, sometimes people have unpleasant opinions in my view, but they have the right to express them as long as they don't break the law.

Do you have the kind of existential angst that a lot of entrepreneurs have as they have a maturing business, where they think, "Well, actually we've got to

where we need to do now, what's next?" So for example, you've launched Gransnet. But you could have not done that and done something else. Has there ever been any kind of doubt in your mind as to where you are going to take the business and the brand?

I suppose yes, I mean, it would be wrong to say that one didn't have doubts. And certainly I do feel like, you know, I have to keep sprinting or we'll get surpassed or usurped or, you know, we'll miss a trick. So I think that's probably true of almost every entrepreneur. They have this sort of almost monkey on their back about this stuff. And it's partly because there are no set hours to this job, right? I could work four times the hours I work, and I still probably wouldn't cover every bit of ground that it's possible to cover or I'd want to cover. So it's slightly never ending. Having said that, I think we are slightly different because we don't have shareholders – well, we do have shareholders – but we don't have outside shareholders, we don't have a certain set of profit thing we have to hit every quarter.

You don't have a venture capital partner that's constantly looking at the numbers.

Exactly. And so we can actually say. "You know what? We want to do something at a loss here, because we want to do it and it's the right thing to do," or, "We want to take our time over this," or, you know, "We're actually just going to invest in the business for two years and change the technology and not worry too much about the profits," which is a great place to be, and a real luxury. And it means you can build for the long term and sustainably, which lets me sleep better at night for sure.

So what about the launch of Gransnet, then? Because that is a change of brand, isn't it? It's one that emerges out of the parent brand, if you can call it that. But that is a risk, that was something you could have had a Gran's area within Mumsnet, you decided to launch as a separate brand. What was the thinking behind that?

I suppose I just thought the one thing Mumsnet had done really, had given, you know, women of a certain age a voice, and there was a need for that for an older generation. As I approach that older generation, I am feeling that even more; I think there is the sort of invisibility thing that happens, and there is quite a sort of patronising attitude towards older women. So I think there's even more need for it. And actually Gransnet has developed into its own very different vibe and community. And it would surprise you, if you spent any time on it, there is an awful lot of discussion about current affairs and politics, more than there is on Mumsnet. And there's quite a lot of discussion about sex actually, as well. But the one thing they don't do is they don't swear on Gransnet, which again was involved by the community themselves; they didn't want to have a site where you could swear, whereas on Mumsnet you can say anything you like, really.

And to that end, there's been criticism of Mumsnet users over the years that some of them have been called moralising, and even bullying from time to time. Does the tone of their input sometimes surprise you? Because clearly, you're trying to set, as you've said there, a level playing field of civility and

courtesy, but you can't control every single user. And if they're going in with a kind of bullying or a hostile tone, that would disappoint you. How do you manage it?

Well, if it was really bullying we would ban people. I mean, that's what our community management team do. There is a danger that, if you ask a question saying something on the lines of, "Am I so unreasonable to feed my child chocolate 17 times a day?" that 700 people respond saying, "Yes. Don't be an idiot." And that can feel... I've seen those conversations where it can feel overwhelming and like you're being bullied, but actually it's just 760 people all disagreeing with you.

And being quite robust.

And yes, being robust. I mean, I think robust is the right word. It's nothing like the sort of meanness that I've seen below the Line on newspaper websites.

Which is horrendous.

I mean, nothing like the Guardian forums used to be.

Or the Mail Online.

Or the Mail Online is now, where people are attacked on personal grounds, they're viciously attacked, you know, not necessarily about what they're saying, but about who they are and what they look like, and what their political affiliation is. So I would say it's pretty mild by comparison to most forums I've seen out there, and certainly to the below the line comments in some of the media.

I suppose it's when you have to balance the commerciality of a website operation with having an open policy where people can contribute. I mean, some websites have had advertisers actually pull back because of inappropriate comments. But whether it be below the line or in a user forum, have you ever come under that kind of pressure where you have to balance advertising interests with the tone of comments?

Well, advertisers will always want you to put out a cheesy message saying their product is the best thing that you've ever seen, and it's fully endorsed by Mumsnet – so it's very easy for us, we just don't do that. We don't do stuff that advertisers, you know, the line is not too hard to judge to be honest, we just say no. Because in the long run it won't help them, it certainly won't help us, and it would pee off our users. So those kind of decisions – in the end we're always on the side of the users, and that's the decision we make. We want to work really closely with advertisers so they don't want to put out silly messages. They want to do something that's useful for our audience instead, and the ones that do well really get that. They really want to go native but in a sensible way where they allow a bit of engagement and real people. Because in the end, everyone's after authenticity; I just think that's so key to advertising messages now, and you can't get that if you're putting out cheesy messages, controlling the conversation, and Mumsnet is where you will get that. So if they want to be surrounded, and in a place where people are discussing things that

are true and real, and having fun too, than they need to just, you know, suck it up really. And the best ones do – and it really works because it doesn't feel like cheesy advertising. So it's just the new world, and I think we're there to help people do it well, actually. But we don't want it if they don't want to do it well.

I mean, you're clearly a trailblazer at this – I'm going to mix up my metaphors now – and at the cutting edge of creating a forum of this size with this many users. How do you deepen your relationship and engagement with your users? Because really no one else is doing this to the level that you're doing it, so there's no easy answers that you can give. There's no playbook that you can copy.

I think, well again, it comes down to, you know, you need to have purpose before profits. You need to do things organically; you can't go out and buy thousands and thousands of likes or followers. That stuff just doesn't work. And you need to be able to engage 24/7 with what their opinions are, with what the community wants. You need to be able to change and listen and all that kind of stuff. And it's hard – and that's why traditional businesses find it hard, because in the end it puts an awful lot of constraints on what you can do. But there are constraints that will make you a sustainable thing in the long run.

And some of your constraints, of course, aren't constrained by geography. So have you ever thought of taking the business global and launching new territories and in different languages?

Well, so we do have users, you know, 20% of our users are non-UK, so we have users from all around the world, actually.

Actually, I am surprised some kind of, say, French entrepreneur hasn't come to you and said, "I want to launch mumsnet.fr," and buy the brand for the entire country of France and then...

I mean, they have. But in the end it comes back to how do you grow communities? You grow them bottom up, not top down. So I'm not sure a Mumsnet brand in France is going to add a lot of value. I mean, clearly, we have a bit of expertise, we've been doing it for a while – but I would suggest it's not quite the same as taking your fantastic whatever it is, fridge freezer, and launching it in another country.

So I suppose the big open question now is what is next for you?

Well, so I think we want to be a relevant platform that helps parents tap into the wisdom of others for, you know, young mums, new mums, pregnant mums and dads too – and that means we've got to stay relevant and deliver something where and how they want it that feels relevant to them. Because I think people will always want advice. I think parenting is going to be hard, but also relationships are hard and day-to-day life is hard, and being able to tap into a wise crowd is a brilliant thing to be able to do. So we just need to make sure we're fit for the next generation, and that they want to use our platform, and we're making sure we deliver it in the way they want it.

Do you think of yourself as having competition? Do you think of certain brands and websites where you want to make sure they don't steal a march on you?

Yes, I mean, there are some obvious names in the parenting space, and I think there are overlaps in other places. You know, some of the bigger publishers are doing stuff around parents like Huff Post and BuzzFeed. And obviously, you know, Facebook offers something... Facebook swamps everyone but it offers something slightly different in the end I think, in the end, because it doesn't allow anonymity and it doesn't major on advice necessarily, so I do think we offer an alternative to Facebook in a world where Facebook could eat everything up, you know, and I clutch on to that hope that we do!

But also like the forum that you mentioned about whether someone's being reasonable, if you had to name yourself then clearly the shame might stop some people asking what they consider to be a potentially stupid question.

I think that's right. I think that's right. People want to, you know, can't say the truth necessarily on Facebook. If the truth is something like, "I really don't like my middle child," you can't really put that out on Facebook. Or my mother-in-law, because she's probably watching. So it does help in that sense. But so, yes, I mean, there is an awful lot of competition, it's a tough world, but in the end there's nothing quite the same. I don't think.

What do you say to people when they say, "I don't like my middle child." I wouldn't know how to respond to that!

Well, what you want is to have a bunch of other people who say, "I felt like that too, it didn't last," or, "This is a great way to..."

I made an effort to reconnect...

Yes, exactly.

All of that kind of thing.

You need people who've been there and can give you some useful advice about feeling that way.

If you don't mind me asking, do you person have ambitions beyond Mumsnet? Would you ever consider like moving into politics?

No, I sort of am a natural rebel, I think. I like being outside lobbying in, rather than inside the tent. So I'm not sure it would suit me. I think I'd feel a bit constrained by having to stick to a party line. But you know, I never say never.

Did that awful swatting attack make you want to kind of retreat from a high-profile public role?

It did a little bit actually. For very briefly I felt, yes, "Why the hell am I doing this?"

Can you share with our listeners what happened? If you don't mind, of course!

Yes. So I think I am possibly... I think I am, my claim to fame is being the first person in Britain to be swatted, which is where people make hoax calls and cause a SWAT team to come around to your house.

Incredibly unpleasant.

Yes, not very nice. So my house, we had five armed policemen with machine guns and another three in the street with dogs in the middle of the night. Now, I have to caveat this with saying I wasn't actually there. My poor au pair was there, and had the shock of her life.

I'm not surprised.

But also, you know, they also did the same to a Mumsnet user whose husband, in the middle of the night, was handcuffed and taken away in front of the kids, so pretty horrific stuff. In my case they said that I had been murdered and there was a man, you know, who was in the house attacking me, so the police come and they sort of try and break down your door and stuff like that.

Of course, they're acting on a complaint and they have to take it seriously, so in one sense it's not the police's fault.

No, no, it's not the police's fault. And, you know, what a waste of public money as well.

Of course.

And it's kind of a thing in America, apparently the gaming community do it to each other.

The first stage of it is docsing, isn't it, where they release documents where your home address is on some publicly available, albeit obscure, document and then they publish that so everyone knows where you live, which is in itself of course very threatening.

Yes. And in our case it was on top of a DDoS attack, and then sort of hack or phishing where some information was taken, so it was a kind of three-way attack.

Why would someone bother to go to such horrendous, horrible lengths?

You know, I think we've always been a bit of a target for that slightly disgruntled, angry male, because... I mean, my theory is, and I don't know this, but my theory is

they've got a thing about their mothers and they just connect Mumsnet with that. There is also another theory that, you know, people don't like women who have a voice. Some people don't like it, and they want to shut that voice down. So who knows? But we've had a series of stuff actually, over the years. But the worst was the swatting, that kind of, you know, made me feel a little bit uneasy in my bed.

Well, I think you deserve a medal for being so reasonable about it! I'd be absolutely hopping mad. I'm sure you were at the time.

Yes, I'm not sure I was reasonable! But anyway, in the end it was a chance for our community to rally round and be brilliant. And that's, you know, it's the people you work with, and the Mumsnetters who got me through that, really.

But there's plenty of forums where men can share their outrageous views. Do you think Mumsnet has been a victim of sexism?

Yes. I mean, I've had... Fathers 4 Justice used to send me dirty underpants through the post, although not very many because there aren't many members. But in the end, you see it all the time.

I'm a Yorkshireman, I wouldn't want to get rid of the underpants!

I'll tell you what, they weren't much cop. They had seen a lot of use!

I'm laughing because it's horrendous.

Yes. I think we do excite a certain type of angry male. You can see it on Twitter. You know, there's the, "Shut up your old crone," "Who let these people away from the kitchen sink," type of comments. It's always much better when you look at how many followers these people have, and then you realise not to worry too much.

It can be quite an unpleasant place, the Internet, particularly Twitter.

Yes, it definitely can. And they are, I have to say, I mean, they might be better, but my experience of complaining to Twitter, you're lucky if you get an auto response, you know, a week later. I think it's something they're looking at and getting better at, but it didn't feel as if they really had your back as a user of Twitter.

I think the issue – I'm not defending them at all although I do I do know Bruce Daisley reasonably well, who is the European V.P. – they are just overwhelmed with the sheer numbers, and just in the hundreds of millions of tweets every hour. It's just that they would need an army of moderators, and they just don't have the manpower.

Well, you don't premoderate, you just you do what's reported, right? I mean, we couldn't premoderate. We have, you know, 30,000 messages a day on our boards, there's no way we're going to read them all. But if someone reports something, I

think you need to look at it. You need to have a system where you look at it, at least within 24 hours.

What's been the best day that Mumsnet has had, and what's been the worst day? Other than that swatting, which is horrendous.

Yes, I mean, the worst days were definitely around the hacking attempt, without question.

Do you know who did it, if you don't mind me asking?

Well, it was more than one.

What, like an organised group of losers?

Well, we uncovered a kind of 4Chan type forum where it was all being discussed and it was a pretty unpleasant place actually, I don't want to go back there in a hurry.

I don't blame you.

So it was a group of people. I think the person who organised the swatting was in America, and the police said they could do nothing about that. One of the blokes who hacked us was actually charged, and he was at the time 17. So, you know, there was not a lot to be done there. And I hope he's just learned his lesson by being charged, and can put his obvious skills to better use. Maybe he should come and get a job at Mumsnet. Serve the people! The best day, you know, it's just brilliant, being part of something where, you know, every day people go out of their way to be helpful, and funny. Hilarious. That's the other thing; people think mums aren't funny, and Mumsnet is hilariously funny. And all times with just hilarious stories that happen to people, and that sort of gallows humour that parents and mothers in particular have to have to get through the day.

I mean, clearly it's enjoyable day-to-day. I get that, but come on, give us some hooks! What have been some really good wins you've had over the years when you've gone home that day and thought , "Wow, that was a good day."

Yes, okay. So, I'll give you an example of there was a Mumsnetter who went on holiday and she was in Glasgow Airport, and she'd realised that her two-year-olds, maybe three-year-olds, you know, a beloved toy they'd left at home and it was going to ruin the holiday. And she posted on Mumsnet about it with a picture, and within an hour, a Mumsnetter had gone to the airport and delivered one of those toys that she happened to have, and sorted out that kid til then... you know, things like that are just amazing. You know, it was fun when it was dubbed the Mumsnet Election, it was busy and mad, but you know, just to be at the centre of that kind of media storm, to see that and it not being about being sued or hacked was fun.

Did you feel that you were of influence at that point, that you'd arrived in terms of your impact? Because there's no other website that could have claimed to have been that influential.

Well, I mean, look – the reason we were called that was for a valid reason, the politicians were falling all over us. I mean, we had 12 ministers, leaders or shadows on in the space of six weeks. And I think I only invited two just for balance, the rest invited themselves, as it were. We had all the leaders of all the parties more than once. You know, I felt that it was warranted in that sense. But I also felt there was a reason for it. You know, the women's vote was viewed to be more up for grabs than the male vote. They needed to do social media to show they were modern, you know, it's quite scary doing probably Twitter or Facebook, you don't know who you're talking to. In politician's heads. They're talking to mums, so that's easier, they can navigate that better, and they probably thought it was a bit like the Good Morning sofa, and a few of them learnt pretty quickly it wasn't quite like that.

But do you think you've become a kind of standard thing that politicians have to do now? And this is credit to you, that they have to do the Good Morning Britain sofa, BBC Breakfast, they have to go on Mumsnet; and that is de rigueur now for any politician seeking high office.

Yes, I think its a bit of a rite of passage! There are one or two notable exceptions – George Osbourne's one of them. I mean, it doesn't apply so much any more, but I remember you did promise to do it, and I saw him later at something and said, "You promised to come on, Mr Osbourne, what happened?" He said, "I'm not stupid." Which is probably true! So, no, I think it is true. Lots of politicians, almost without question, really enjoy doing it at the time. They don't always enjoy the press afterwards, but they love engaging.

Connecting with real people.

They love it, and they love it being unmediated by a professional interviewer and all that kind of stuff. So, you know, Hillary Clinton's done it and loved it. I mean, people love doing a Mumsnet webchat. So I think on the whole politicians love talking to voters, and so, you know, hopefully long may it last.

Who are the big names that have done it other than politicians then? And also what are the big numbers that you haven't done it yet that you want on?

Who would we most want... yes, well the shopping list, I'd love to get Michelle Obama on, and the Pope - those are kind of two big aspirations. We have had people – I mean, Meryl Streep, oh God – amazing people. You know, David Beckham... pretty much everyone actually apart from Michelle, and I'd quite like Barack now as well.

He'd be awesome, wouldn't he?

He'd be awesome. There was a debate recently about whether we have Donald Trump or not, to which my answer is yes, but lots of our users would probably be very cross and very angry indeed.

It's very difficult isn't it, when you give someone a platform? Like we had Katie Hopkins a year or so ago now, and lots of people said, "You shouldn't even have her on." And I thought, "Well, no one's actually challenged her robustly in a respectful way, but actually held her to account," and I thought that is the job of a podcast like this, so we had her on.

Yes, I agree. I agree to an extent. I don't think I'd have Katie Hopkins on Mumsnet, just because I think she's a troll, and we don't encourage trolls.

I think it's also of the moment. I mean, I'm not seeking to defend the decision to have her on, but it was about a year and a half ago. And she seems to have got even crazier since then. And that is the problem the minute you were a troll, of course, you have to shout louder and increase the outrageousness or the intensity of the things she's saying just to stay relevant, because otherwise you just end up... the minute you start to say the same thing that you've said before you commit the worst media sin, which is to be boring and dull and repetitive. I wouldn't have her on now actually, but I'm glad I had her on at the time.

Yes, I think I think there's a case for trying to understand, but did you feel you got somewhere or not.

Yes. I mean, there was some good feedback. I felt that you kind of got the sense that she wasn't anywhere near as strongly reactionary as she said, and that she was deliberately using certain words that were inflammatory because she knew that it would get clicks.

So we have a rule, one of our rules to exclude people, to ban them, is if you're deliberately inflammatory, so it would be a bit bizarre to invite Katie Hopkins on, I think, given we have that rule.

Is there anyone else on the blacklist?

I don't think we'd have anyone from the BNP.

I don't think they even exist any more, do they?

Do they not? Well, any kind of overtly racist organisation.

But you've got to the point now where you have to be quite august in the way that you decide these things, because you have a significant platform and you have to be mindful of that when you decide to have people on. Do you actually feel a kind of, not in a pompous way, but do you feel quite a sense of

responsibility now that you have to have these things thought through in advance?

Yes, well I think we do try and make an effort to be balanced around election time, but it's as much because our users would notice and, you know, they would be the ones complaining and articulating that for us. They are like the conscience of what we do anyway. So it's not because I think were particularly grand and august, I think it is because our users are on the case and demand fairness, and so we try to be fair.

Do you ever feel sorry for traditional broadcasters where, you know, Newsnight has to stick on someone from the Liberal Democrats, someone from Labour and someone from the Conservative Party, and really someone only wants the minister on but they have to because of broadcasting law, which is anchored in the political settlement of 40 years ago, for this balance, whereas you can just do whatever you like.

I haven't really thought about that. You see, I don't really compare us to that, I think we're something different. We're about engaging with real people as opposed to a news channel, that's an intermediary, that is trying to do their own questions and answers. But on balance, I think it is good that they try and be fair. So if there are a few odd situations and a few boring shows because of it, I think they'll put up with that.

Last question then, is there anything that you would do again? Is there anything over the years where you think, "Right, I've dropped that clanger, we wouldn't have done it that strongly," or, "We've ignored that thing." Is there anything where you thought, "Right, if I had a time machine, that's the decision I'd redo."

I think there are lots of small decisions, but I think the biggest lesson is to... I mean, we once redesigned the website and we had a much better design we thought was much slicker and nicer, and we introduced it with a kind of *ta-da* moment, "Here you go, guys!" and it was as if we'd gone in and changed everyone's wallpaper, and you know...

No one likes change, do they?

No! And it had to go back, you know, after months of work, and the real lesson of that is something which I think people now appreciate you have to do, is you take people on very tiny steps along the journey if you want to avoid having to tear everything up and put it back again. So I think those kind of lessons. I think, as I said, if I had my time again I would go faster when the world sort of environment changed for websites in around 2006, 2007, I probably would go faster and be a bit less cautious. But you know, you learn stuff every day. That's what keeps you fresh, right? It's all an education. Hopefully I'll still be learning lessons for a few more years, because then you feel you're alive.

Do you ever kind of, not get recognised in the street, but are you ever kind of you know, at a barbecue in the local village or whatever and then you tell someone what you do, and then it turns out that a huge Mumsnet user and then ends up burning your ear for half an hour? Do you get quite positive feedback when people realise what you do?

Yes, I have. You know, it's really kind of weird. You're in a lift and someone says, "I just have to say thank you so much, you saved my life," you know. And of course, everyone assumes that you know their story. They say, you know, "I'm Mrs Doubtfire from Mumsnet," and you know, "Remember when my garden hose went..." (Laughs)

"No, I don't remember that at all, Mrs Doubtfire."

Yes, but no, I do get lots of lovely feedback in the most surprising places, so it's nice, but you know, clearly I think that people don't want to give me lovely feedback probably don't approach me' so that's fine.

Justine, we're running out of metaphorical tape. It's been hugely interesting conversation, thank you ever so much for your time.

Oh, it's been a pleasure.