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Welcome to Media Masters, a series of one to one interviews with people at the very top of their game. Today I'm joined by David Cohen. David started his career in banking, working briefly in the City of London before moving into journalism. After a brief stint as a freelance writer at the Independent and the Guardian, he joined the London Evening Standard in 2002 as a senior features writer and has stayed at the paper ever since. He is now chief features writer and campaigns editor, and in that role he has spearheaded a number of award-winning campaigns, including The Dispossessed, Get London Reading and Ladder for London. In 2013, he won the Paul Foot award for investigative campaigning journalism for his Frontline London campaign that helped former gang members form social enterprises. He is the author of three books – Chasing the Red, White and Blue, People Who Have Stolen From Me and Calling London – and in between all of this he has also managed to run the London Marathon three times and climb Mount Kilimanjaro.

David, thanks for joining me.
That's quite an introduction!

It was! Yet again, I've got impostor syndrome.
It's a real pleasure to be here.

So you started in banking, but didn't last long there. Tell us what happened there.
I actually was working at Rothschilds Bank, and I left on the day I was promoted. I decided to pursue journalism on the plan that if I could be successful at something that I didn't want to do, hopefully I could succeed at something I was really passionate about.

So you always wanted to be a journalist?
I wouldn't say always, but I met a young woman in my early 20s – who is now my wife – and she was the assistant correspondent for ITN in Johannesburg. And when I looked at what she did, I thought, "This is too much fun for it to be a real job," and I just became more and more intrigued. I wanted to write, and at that point I got a job in a newspaper in South Africa called Business Day, which was sort of South Africa's Financial Times. Then I came over here, because I was quite politically involved and I had to either go to jail or leave the country and so I came and did a PPE at Oxford and then was faced by the same dilemma – do I go back into the world of finance or

do I go into journalism? And I decided to go into the world of finance and lasted about 18 months. I remember the MD, the CEO of Rothschilds Bank at the time, because I had a beard and I used to wear these very thin, colourful leather ties, and he had told me off for doing this, and on the day that I became Rothschilds' very first downwardly mobile professional – by leaving – he said to me, "Was this because I asked you to shave your beard? Or the ties that you wore?" I said, "No, it's just that I want to do journalism." And I think he and some fellow directors at the bank thought that they would see me selling newspapers, or some sort of downtrodden member of the Fourth Estate, and I did, I left, I left to go to nothing except to work... I started out as a freelancer.

A bold, and some would say courageous, move at that point, then?
Probably. If I'd have known... I had no idea really what it would take in terms of to make a living. My daughter was six months old, my wife was very supportive, but there was one month I made £20, I remember. But I very quickly got on board and made contacts at the Independent, as it was in the 90s, which was a great paper for freelancers. And I started to make my name writing about men's issues, at a time when no-one had really done that. So I would typically take the kind of subject you would find in a woman's magazine – be it miscarriage or the lack of sex after your child was born – and I would ask men: what did you go through when your wife miscarried, or when your girlfriend decided to have an abortion? And these were questions that had never been asked of men really; they were a typical fare of women's magazines.

Clearly had emotional implications for men, things like that.
Exactly. And I remember the story The baby came but the sex went, which made quite a big impact on a lot of my friends and a lot of people, because these were things that people were feeling and talking about, but no-one was writing about at the time. So I think I was quite lucky, I think one thing that helps is to find something where you become the go-to guy, in a sense, of editors.

A niche.
A little bit of a niche.

But when you started doing freelancing, and being a stringer for the Independent, would you have taken anything that came through the door at that time? Any commission?
No – my first rule, I think, was to... I wanted to write for papers that I loved to read and those, for me, were particularly The Independent then and also The Guardian. And I also at that time, slightly later, got a contributing editor position at GQ magazine. So I was very much... I would sort of meet up with the editors, come up with ideas, and I work very closely with a friend of mine who was my photographer, and we really did some fantastic stories; we travelled to Kenya, to Thailand, to America, to South Africa, doing features for Guardian Weekend magazine, for the Saturday Independent magazine, and in some ways, those were great days. The weekend magazines then were slightly different to the way they are now, I think they are much more celebrity-driven. There they were much more into sort of... reportage.

Real articles!

I remember the first time I started doing 4,000-word pieces as opposed to sort of 1,500-word double-page spreads – a full page in the Independent was a big sort of step up for me. But that took some time, it was about a seven-year build up, over seven years.

So when you were working at the independent, you had some other roles as well. Do you think they wanted you ultimately to work full-time, or was freelancing always the way?
You know, I would have bitten their hand off for them to take me full-time, but at that time, for various reasons, as I was about to get that position, the editor changed, or they were shedding positions... and then I had a big slice of luck, because I applied for, and got, a Harkness Fellowship, which took me to America for a year, and I ended up staying three years and writing my first book, and that sort of transformed my fortunes, in a sense, and that was the first book you referred to, called Chasing the Red, White and Blue, which was a journey in Alexis de Tocqueville's footsteps through America, a sort of social travelogue, comparing... looking at the relationship between rich and poor, black and white, and looking at how America had changed since the 1830s when Tocqueville, the French philosopher, had gone there and written Democracy in America, which was the greatest enunciation of America by a foreigner that has ever been written, still to this day. And that was a wonderful privilege to a) travel through America, but also to have him as my sort of back seat driver. And when I came back to the UK I think I was just much more... it gave me a lot more confidence, and soon after that I was approached by the Evening Standard, and became there a much more sort of hardcore investigative... amongst the various things I did, I had to do some quite tough investigative journalism, which was also something I really enjoyed.

So in effect you were head-hunted by the Standard at that point.
Yes, and the strange thing was that the people that came to me... I had never worked for them before, and because I was writing a book – I was writing my second book at the time – I started off three weeks on at the Standard, one week off writing my book, and that continued for about eight months until I had finished the book, and thereafter I went pretty much full time at the Standard. And I've been there longer than I've been anywhere else. I've been there 12 or 13 years.

Quite a journey! How do you see your career progressing within the Standard, then? Has the work led you, as it were, or have you deliberately sought out this incredibly impressive yet unique activism niche that you have at the moment?
Very interesting, Paul. It's been very much organic. I couldn't have dreamed up the current role that I've had as campaigns editor, I was feature writer, I was senior feature writer, Keith Dovkants was the chief writer, but we were both doing very similar stuff, then Andrew Gilligan joined, and we had quite a strong team actually. My top moment was probably when I was sent to America to cover the primary between Hillary Clinton and Obama, and I'd also, earlier in the year, covered Kenya and Zimbabwe. I remember being one of the first journalists to call that first primary correctly that Obama would win, and I was feeling pretty chuffed about how things were going, it was a great story, it was very cold – I was in America – and I had to fly on to the next primary which I think was New Hampshire. And you know in America you have to fly via the hub airport, so I got to the hub and I got a call from features

saying, “Listen, trouble has erupted in Kenya – you’ve got to divert to Kenya.” And so I now had to fly to the next hub airport, which was New York, and then to Kenya. By the time I got to New York, the message was, “No, divert back to New Hampshire and you’ll go to Kenya afterwards.” And for one glorious moment, I thought of myself as the world correspondent of the Evening Standard, with Africa on the one hand and America on the other, and I’d always wanted to be a foreign correspondent, and of course the Evening Standard in some ways was a great paper to work for in that sense, because it had no foreign correspondents, so they would send us feature writers to the big stories around the world, and I got to cover some fascinating stuff. Then we had a new editor come on board at the Standard, around about 2009, that was Geordie Greig, when the paper was bought out by Evgeny Lebedev and his father, and Geordie asked me to look into poverty in London, given that the paper, some 15 years before, had done a big exposé of poverty in London’s East End. And unbeknown to Geordie I had developed a lot of contacts in that area in the 10 years that I had been at the Standard, and also my book, Chasing the Red, White and Blue was all about looking at poverty – and I knew what a hard sell poverty was, and I wondered if this was, in fact, a poison chalice or a huge opportunity. And as it turned out, the series of features that I wrote and that emerged from that, which also included an exposé of mass pauper’s graves...

I remember that clearly.
... it led to the Dispossessed series investigation, which at the time wasn’t... there was no thought of it being a campaign, and it was only later that we realised, in response to this overwhelming response of readers to try and raise £1m, which the Evening Standard had never done, the most we had ever raised was a quarter of a million. We tried to raise a million, and we did it in 20 working days.

Incredible.
And we’ve gone on, Paul, it’s not standing at, I think, £12.2m (as of July 2014), so that was the beginning.

That’s genuinely flabbergasting, isn’t it, when you think of it? I mean, it’s quite an achievement. Very impressive.
I think what my... I am very much see myself as spearheading, or part of, a team and I have been very, very lucky in that we get front pages, we get double page spreads, when we launch a campaign, we launched Get London Reading as well, it was the first five or six pages of the paper – no adverts, just spreads, because ultimately at the end of the day, it’s human stories that pull people in and make them want to do something. It’s the journalism that drives it.

I wanted to ask you about some of those very memorable campaigns in a second, but just from a newspaper point of view, do you know of any other newspaper that splashes so regularly on activism-led stories, campaigning on things? It clearly goes beyond the mere reporting of these things; you are actively encouraging the readers to become emotionally and financially involved and commit to being part of the solution.
I think that the conventional wisdom about campaigns used to be – and we used to do it at the Standard too – you would have them for Christmas. So you would have a Christmas campaign that would typically start at the end of November and be over by the end of January. All the papers do it, and the readers got a sense of... well,

they would get involved or not to some extent and the idea was that people would get bored if you kept on with something. Well, with the Standard we've sort of turned that on its head, because we kept going long past the point at which people thought readers would get bored, but the result was that people thought, "Wow – these people are actually genuine about it," and it started to have a really powerful effect, and I started to notice this as somebody out there doing interviews with young people, because initially, in the early 'noughties', there was a lot of feeling amongst Londoners that the Standard was perhaps a little bit too right-wing for London, London being a fairly liberal city, I would say, and you would get quite a lot of resistance amongst some young people to being interviewed – but suddenly the Standard was seem as 'cool' and the coolest paper to be interviewed by – because not only were we depicting the problem, but we were also attempting to be part of the solution.

You were genuinely on their side.
Exactly. And I think things changed; the paper changed at that point, to the credit of the editors, they really sort of were led by readers, and readers spoke out and we listened, and we're now into the fifth campaign – every year I wonder what the hell I'm going to do next. The latest one is using football as an agent for social change, it's called London United, and it's also... it's been very exciting.

Share with us some memorable moments. What's the one that strikes the deepest chord with you?
I think the toughest one, and maybe the one that strikes the deepest chord, was the one I launched last year called Frontline London, and this is the one that I'd been thinking about for a number of years, it's the one that tackles gang members in London, and the problem with tackling gang members – this is a very hardcore, chaotic crew – you can't go into a campaign and not have an idea what your end game is. So how are you going to... my initial idea was maybe if we could find two warring gangs and try and get them to make peace, that would be, even if you do it with just two, and we got the right change agents in, that could signal the way forward for all these other postcode gang rivalries that are generating all these needless deaths, but you pretty soon realise that if you go into something like that and a mistake gets made, not only could you get shot but someone else could get shot, and the whole thing could spiral out of control pretty quickly – and there's no guarantee as to which way that could go, so I shelved that for a while and we tacked youth unemployment that year, that was the Ladder for London campaign.

Another excellent campaign.
I think we came back to it, and the interesting thing was we tapped into essentially the entrepreneurial extinct of some of these gang members, who are very adept at selling/supplying drugs, knowing how to market it, how to price it...

Quite apart from the ethics, they are quite sophisticated business people, entrepreneurs.
Exactly.

They have supply chain logistics problems, supply and demand marketing... ethics aside, it's no different from any other business.

Exactly. Exactly. So tapping into that, we decided to partner with Kids Company, who are really brilliant, really at the sharp end, just help set up social enterprises, just for a few pilot groups, and my favourite one was two former armed robbers, and we helped them form a removals company, and the headline was, referring to these armed robbers: “They’ll take away your stuff, but only if you pay them.”

Did you write that, or did the subs?
No, that was the subs! That was a great headline. And these guys... we started with three, and I knew that if we just had one that succeeded, that would be brilliant, it would lead to the next step. And these two guys have gone on to make £100,000 of turnover in their first year. The other two are struggling more, but that itself led to... and what we gave them, we gave them a £10,000 start-up grant, which we funded from the Dispossessed fund, and we gave them some mentoring, some people who would help mentor them. But out of that came a partnership that I set up with the school for social entrepreneurs, we’ve got Lloyds Bank and the Cabinet Office to fund it, a £150,000 scheme where we had a Dragons’ Den-style panel of experts, we put out a call for former gang members who had the right business ideas, who were under the age of 30, to contact us, contact the School of Social Entrepreneurs. We shortlisted 20 and we interviewed them, and we chose 10 – and those 10 became... from tattoo artists to young people, a juiceologist, to a guy who is wanting to start a boxercise gym, each of them got an £8,000 start-up grant, a mentor from Lloyds and a course at the School for Social Entrepreneurs. So we now have 13 that we’ve funded, but the interesting thing is, the word of this has really spread into the sort of gang community, and the last I heard, somebody who works in Wormwood Scrubs said, “You do realise that your campaign’s very popular in Scrubs, that you’re trending in Scrubs?” And I thought, “Well, that says it all – that’s just brilliant.”

But by showcasing how these people are changing their lives for the better, that is raising awareness. As you said earlier, crime isn’t the way forward, that there is an alternative for these people, and just by inspiring them and making them aware of it, you are making a huge change in the wider community.
I agree. And the thing is that what I was trying to do in the series of articles about the gang members was to humanise them, without shrinking from really what some of them had become and what they had done.

Because it’s easy to just label people, or the stereotype, there’s a generic gang member living in South East London – it’s not a particularly savoury thing, but people do do it, and I think that’s a very strong part of what you’ve done is actually bring alive these people as what they are – real people.
The thing is, when you look at the coverage, most of the time we write about gang members is when somebody has been killed, and so in that moment there’s just a lot of finger-pointing, and there’s a lot of heat but not much light. And what I try to do is spend some time with these guys. I went to their house from the moment they wake up, their room, if you like, they may have houses, but... and just saw how their day stretches endlessly... for someone who had just been let out of prison three weeks before, and I could see it was just a matter of time before he was going to go back; the lack of support... there was no support for someone who had mental health problems, who basically didn’t want to get out of bed or start his day because the day stretches so long in front of him, and it was so much time to do, as he called it, “To do madness.” And he didn’t want to go back inside, but you really could see that

without proper intervention, that was just a no-brainer – and you've got sort of 75% re-offending rate within the first year with a certain age group. I thought, "We must be able to do better than this."

Do you think it's because the criminal justice system is almost like a sausage factory, it just processes people? It might give them a fair trial and a jury, but at the end of the day they are just put in prison, they are warehoused away, they are given no educational training that is going to equip them, or indeed inspire them, to a better life, and then they're just released.
Yes, it's a revolving door, and it's terribly sad because these people need proper support. Groups like Kids Company do it, but even that... you look at... some of these people are released with something like £35 and a probation officer. Now, the probation officer is someone who is seen as... someone who visits just to get round to have done, to get it done as quickly as possible.

Box-ticker. To tick a box.
Yes. Ten minutes, it's someone who could also send you back to prison, so they have a sort of dual role. So there is so much more that needs to be done on that front, and it just seems, you know, here we are, we've just come through a period where the teenage murder rate in London... and each time it's just a disaster not only for the young people but for their families as well, and I just think that, as London's newspaper, I am proud that we have been able to think creatively and do... in a small way, come up with something that is hopefully helping the problem, rather than just finger-pointing and just exacerbating.

So you've clearly worked on quite a number of systemic societal problems, as it were. Do you have a kind of list in a black book somewhere of the next things that you are going to tackle? So three years from now you might tackle this subject, and so on? Is it like a conveyor belt of just causes, of society's ills that you are going to solve?
I wondered what we were going to do after gangs. I thought gangs was the deepest-reaching; that was sort of a milestone. But then, the football campaign, which was Sarah Sands' idea, the editor, was a brilliant idea, and it's also really galvanised... it really is an area that can galvanise a lot of young people in the year of the World Cup, and there's this grass roots side of football which can be so powerfully diverting, and help give young people who are potentially otherwise pulled towards gangs, give them another sort of team – teams not gangs, if you like. But if I analyse the campaigns, they are all about social exclusion. And if you look at Dispossessed, what we set out to do, and we set out the different categories that we would help right at the beginning, somewhat presciently and effectively, the other campaigns have all been... that's been like the 'daddy' campaign and they all have been tackling some form of social exclusion. Get London Reading was people excluded through literacy. Ladder Through London was unemployment and getting people apprenticeships. Gangs, guns and knife crime was a another specific mention in the Dispossessed of groups we would tackle, and football, we are again bringing people in on some of the roughest estates, getting them football coaches as their sort of pied pipers towards something positive. So I don't know – they all involve people rather than issues based, and they're not sort of medical, you can have campaigns that look to... Bette Midler's campaign to bring gardens to New York, or medical campaigns... the problem with those campaigns is you've really... our campaigns

have all focused on and been driven by great people's stories, and they have all focused on social exclusion. But between now and March, I will be, I guess, thinking about what the next campaign will be – and I do know what the next sort of... how the... Frontline London has got some great things that are happening in January that will evolve, it will... that we will release then, and the Dispossessed also has more to come, Get London Reading, we've just had the three-year anniversary, and we are about to pass 1,500 apprenticeships created through Ladder for London. So they all continue apace, but we've got five, and if I'm still in this job in just under a year's time, who knows? We may launch something early in the year or... but I don't know at this point genuinely what it is.

If you don't mind me asking, how long do you see yourself doing this? Do you think five, six years from now you might be still working on a very important yet different campaign, or do you fancy something completely different, like you end up the TV reviewer or something? You know, what was on Strictly last week? I'm just trying to think of the total opposite of your worthy journalism, really.
You know, I don't really think that far ahead. I just... I've really enjoyed what I've done; it's sort of involved organically, I've always loved writing. I was very happy being chief feature writer and not being an editor, so the campaigns editor role happened... I think that I would still like to write more books; I would love to... there's a particular play that I would like to write, so it might be that I'm able to do some other things as well, but I don't really see myself... I've never really been a huge... I'm not sure whether I would be great on television. I like radio, though. Who knows? Who knows?

Well, David, we're running out of metaphorical tape, so unfortunately we are going to have to bring the interview to a close. And I'm not just saying this, but if I was only allowed one hand to count the number of journalists who I am not only hugely inspired by but also really enjoy reading their work, you would be on that hand and it's been a great pleasure and a privilege to interview you.
Thank you.