

## **Alan Rusbridger**

### **Former Editor-in-Chief, the Guardian**

**Media Masters – September 13, 2018**

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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 Alan Rusbridger, former editor-in-chief of the Guardian. An alumni of Magdalene College, Cambridge, he landed his first reporter role at the Guardian in 1979, followed by a brief departure to Observer and a stint as US editor of the London Daily News in Washington. On his return to the Guardian, he held the post of editor for two decades. He pioneered the launch of G2 and Weekend, and took the paper to the Berliner format in 2005. After writing three children's books, his latest book, *Breaking News: The Remaking of Journalism and Why It Matters Now*, is a timely examination of the past, present and future of the press.**

**Alan, thank you for joining me.**

I'm pleased to be here.

**Alan, let's start with the new book, *Breaking News*. The question of who controls our news, and what is truth, and what is fake is more vital than ever to our democracy.**

Yes. I wanted to describe what it felt like to be at the heart of this digital revolution, that is still with us and will be with us for a long time yet, so that's part of the purpose of the book, but another bit of the book was a sense, perhaps accentuated by Brexit, by Donald Trump, by Facebook, that we are living in a society which is finding it harder and harder to access true news, to be sure what is true and what isn't. I think that really plays to the subheading of the book, *The Remaking of Journalism*, and whether journalism can just go on as it has been for 200 years, or whether it is actually going to have to rethink some of the things that it does.

**What do you think are some of the things that need to be rethought?**

Well, I had a very strong image in my mind as I was writing this book of a world that was arranged vertically. If you had a printing press, you were in a position of tremendous power, really, and influence. You had almost sole access to the news, and you passed it down to your readers, who passed their money up to you. It wasn't just newspapers that were arranged like that. There were all kinds of institutions and bits of society that were arranged vertically. What's happened in the last 10 years is

that the world has fallen over onto its side. You now have four billion people who are connected who can publish, talk to each other, distribute. I think the challenge for journalism today is to work out how it fits into this new arrangement of society. Journalism is not greatly trusted, sadly. Mainstream media score very lowly, and so how is it that we can re-win trust, rebuild trust, and convince people that journalism is actually a very good way of sorting out truth from fiction, and lies from things that matter and are true? I think that probably does require a rethinking of what journalism is.

**Well, we'll come on to that in a second, but what do you think are some of the causes of that breakdown in trust of mainstream journalism? Because it's easy, from my point of view, to look at Trump. He's clearly a liar and a wrong 'un, as my Nanna would have said, and it's in his interest to traduce the news, but are there any other causes, or is it just blatant self-interest?**

Well, I think, for 200 years, when we had that monopoly, we didn't really care. I often thought the sort of Millwall chant, "No one like us. We don't care," I think a lot of journalists thought that. We don't go into the profession to be loved. If everybody hates us equally, then we're probably doing something right, that kind of attitude. The trouble is there are too many, now, alternatives, too many critiques, too many other sources to be that careless about whether people trust us or not. There are things about new media. We can spend part of this discussion slagging on Facebook, and I can do that as well as anybody else, but that doesn't explain why two billion people have signed up to Facebook, and why something like 1.3 billion a day are using it. So they're obviously doing something right, and there's a sense in which that peer-to-peer conversation is more trusted than these journalists who we don't know anything about. Part of it is to do, I think, with what the technology now allows you to do, so certainly on my Twitter feed, bullshit is challenged within seconds. You don't have to wait for 35 days to get IPSO to come in and correct something on your behalf; a lie doesn't last very long. You can link to things. You can say, "Don't trust my word for it. Here is my source." And so there are things about the way that people now live their lives digitally that I think lead to trust, and there are things that mainstream media do which are a bit stuck in the 19th and 20th centuries.

**Can my friends and family be trusted to give me the impartial news in my news feed? For example, I have a few American friends, and one of them is a nice person, well meaning, posted a link where Obama was allegedly admitting that he wasn't born in America. It was clearly doctored, but of course my friend either posted it to raise awareness of it... he didn't actually comment on it, or he might have believed it, but no one really challenged him on it. In that sense, he's not a trusted source of news, even though I trust him as a friend.**

No, you're quite right. And all the surveys show that people don't trust a lot of what they read on social media. Social media is such an unsatisfactory term in itself, because Twitter is very different from Google, which is very different from Facebook. But nevertheless, you would expect, wouldn't you, that journalism, which is supposed to be a system which is staffed by professional people whose only purpose in life is to sort truth from lies, you would expect us to be much more trusted than social media. Depending on which bit of social media you use, that's not

necessarily true. So in a way, to say, “Well, social media is a bit rubbish, and my friends, I can’t really trust them,” is a fairly low bar to set if we are staking our future on being able to claim that we are so much better.

**There seems to be such a plurality of outlets now that, in a sense, everyone’s clamouring for clicks and clamouring for attention. I remember, in the old days, 20 years ago, I would buy a copy of the Guardian, and I’d also buy a copy of the Telegraph for balance, because if you buy a copy of the Guardian, that’s a lens through which you want to look through the world. That’s the Guardian’s interpretation of what they hold out to be true, but it’s nice to have a counterbalance from time to time. They’re not necessarily alternative facts, though.**

No, and I think one of the good things about social media, certainly my experience of social media, is that I can get the Guardian, and the Telegraph, and the New York Times, and the Wall Street Journal, and the Sun all in the same news feed, and I have... people sometimes talk about a ‘filter bubble’ that new media creates. I’m sure that’s true of some people, but a lot of the research actually suggests that people are much more eclectic now with their news sources, and, a bit like you, they might not want to trust one source, but they might want to trust five or six different sources. That seems to be a healthy thing. I also think that a lot of teenagers are struggling, and that the idea of some kind of media literacy education is something really worth visiting to try and make people sceptical about sources, and try and work out where things are coming from and what the motive might be of people who are telling you stuff.

**Do you think, in a sense, that this is an emergence of the old model, where you own the printing press, and you can say what you like, and the readers trusted whatever you said? Now it all seems to have broken down.**

I think it has broken down, and that’s a big crisis. I don’t want to overdo it, because I think there are lots of people who like this, actually find this very liberating, very democratic, like the fact that anybody can have a voice, anybody can challenge anybody. It’s a much flatter arrangement of society, so there’s lots of things that are positive, and there are some very, very, I find, you know, on a subject like Brexit, I find, in a way, there are more expert views on Brexit in my Twitter feed than I read in some newspapers. So we’re in a revolution where everything is very new, very complicated, and the voices who are shouting at us to do something about it, I think, need to be resisted. We need to give it a bit of time to see where this revolution is going.

**But there’s almost like a cafeteria approach to journalism now where you can pick and choose the sources that you want for good and for ill. I’ll give you an example. When the Guardian, 15 years ago, whenever their website allowed me to not have sport on my curated homepage, I think sport, all of it, is a waste of time, so I deliberately don’t want to read sport, a controversial view. My point is that it allowed me to self-censor myself from certain areas of society, which you don’t get in the curated experience of reading a newspaper. But there are**

**also people on Facebook, they don't read any newspaper and only subscribe to, say, Katie Hopkins and Tommy Robinson.**

Well, yes, that's the reality of today. It would be lovely if you were a journalist, because it was great being a journalist in those days, to be able to turn the clock back and say, "Well, look, we want to be back on the pedestal. We were the trusted experts, and we want to get back to that time." I think lots of journalists think that, and I understand that, but that's not the world we live in, and I can't imagine that we're ever going to go back to those times. So the challenge for journalism is to work out how we fit into this new ecosystem, and ensure, I think, we just have to be better. We have to think, "What is the public interest that we're trying to serve with our journalism? Why should people trust us? How can we make them trust us, and how can we be really excellent in providing a guide to the world and the things that matter?" That sounds really basic, and you might think, "Why don't journalists do that anyway?"

**I read the Guardian, and there's a corrections and clarifications column. There's a readers' editor. I know that, if you get something wrong, that you'll correct it. There's a sense that you're doing this for a cause for the greater good. How can you improve upon that?**

Well, I think that's a very good system. I started that when I was at the Guardian because I was very conscious of the fallibility of journalism. There's a great quote that I'm always wheeling out by a man called David Broder, who was at the Washington Post. His description of a newspaper was, I'm paraphrasing, but it was 'an incomplete, inaccurate, somewhat partial account of the events that we were able to produce, but we will be back tomorrow with a better version'. That seems to be a good account of what journalism is trying to do. Journalism is not the truth. It's not history. It's not wholly writ. Journalists work in difficult circumstances, sometimes dangerous circumstances, often with people trying to put us off the scent, and I think we do pretty bloody well in terms of producing that first draft of history, but I think we should be honest with the readers and say, "Look, you don't believe this is the truth and nothing but the truth," and we will make mistakes, and if we don't admit them in our own pages, they're going to be splattered all over Twitter, so let's be more modest and honest about what journalism is – but at the same time, acknowledge that journalism, at its best, is a very good system for guiding people to true facts.

**How optimistic are you, though? Journalism seems to be under attack as never before. The president is crying, fake news all the time. Journalists' newsrooms seem to be emptier than ever before. There are fewer journalists in most national newspapers. Do you think that a change is coming?**

I think all things are true at the moment. I really do. It's possible... I could sit here and give you the very pessimistic speech about how the economic model of journalism is collapsing, how very few people want to pay for news, how people seem... they're opting out of news. I think there was a recent survey that showed 50% of people in Britain are essentially saying, "Actually, I'm fed up with news."

**Like me with sport.**

Quite. So there's a gloomy version of events, and then there's an optimistic version of events that says, "Well, actually, Twitter is the most amazing and democratic democratising force, and the involvement of millions of people is a healthy thing in society." And when you look back on the days in which a few rich men owned the printing presses and had a disproportionate influence on politics, and science, and international relations, and war, that wasn't very healthy either, so I think all things are true at the moment, and it's a mistake to fall into one narrative or another.

**There seems to be different ways to innovate in terms of financing journalism as well. We had David Pemsel, the Guardian CEO, sitting in that chair a couple of months ago, and the success of the Guardian's sponsor/membership programme seems to be going incredibly well. You've got the traditional paywalls of the FT. We had Mark Thompson, the CEO of the New York Times, on a few months ago, and he was saying that, as a citizen of America, he obviously feels appalled at what's happening with Trump in the White House, but as the chief executive of the New York Times, subscriber numbers have gone through the roof as people rush to support their journalism financially.**

Yes. Again, I think there will be multiple models. If I was editing the FT, I'm sure I'd have a paywall. When I was editing the Guardian, I didn't think it was the time to put up a paywall, and I didn't know what would happen when I left the Guardian, whether they would put up a paywall or not, and I'm pleased to see that they haven't really altered the financial model that we set up five or six years ago. I'm not against paywalls, and sometimes they are a necessary way of sustaining journalism, but if you do put up a paywall, what you're doing is essentially putting your news into a gated community of people who can afford to pay for it. So the New York Times is a great newspaper, great newspaper, but something like 97% of Americans can't access it, or can't afford to access it, or don't access it. I'm very glad the New York Times is there, but that's a very polarised country you've got at the moment. If the really good purveyors of news say, "Well, we're over here, but you can't read us unless you pay," you are, in a sense, vacating the playing field for all the people who are going to be there, including Fox News, who are going to pump out their version of events. That's got a downside, a big downside, as well as an upside.

**The Guardian, in a sense, has a unique funding model, because of the Scott Trust and the sale of assets, which is Auto Trader and so on. It's a bit like the BBC that it had the resources to make that very noble initiative to make the website free. Some of your commercial competitors have struggled to make it work financially, which has resulted in fewer journalists, empty newsrooms.**

Yes. The Guardian has... it was very clever. People think of the Guardian as a charity. It's not a charity. It's got a very hard-nosed element to it, and over the years we built up an endowment of about a billion quid. Then we said, "Well, that is there to sustain Guardian journalism."

**To be spent.**

To be spent. Quite. At the moment, I think the losses are greater than the amount that it would be wise to draw down from the endowment, but from what I hear it's

getting to the point of break-even. They've been very patient about their strategy, but their strategy is working. Would that work for the Daily Mail or the Sun? I don't know. The Guardian has tremendously loyal readers who love it. Some revere it. I think as long as the journalism is doing something that people feel a real need for and really trust, people will pay for it. If they want to do that on a voluntary basis, then that's good. There are other models like that: National Public Radio in America, Wikipedia. There are papers like the Texas Tribune or there's a Dutch paper called De Correspondent in which, increasingly, they are going to readers and saying, "Our journalism is, in a sense, a kind of public service. Do you want to pay for it, not only so that you can benefit from it, but so that society at large can?"

**As a citizen and as a journalist, do you not despair that we don't even seem to agree on the facts of something now as a society? At least there could be a disagreement before with our politicians and across families about what ought to be done about something, but now with the advent of alternative facts, we can't even agree on the actual reality of what we're dealing with. Society seems more polarised than ever around certain subjects which don't cut across party lines like Brexit, like Trump.**

Yes. I think that is true, and maybe Donald Trump has done us all a favour by so regularly pointing to one of the best news organisations in the world and saying, "Well, that's all fake."

**Because it isn't fake, and they can prove it.**

Well, it's not fake, and there are patient journalists in America who are counting up all his, let's call them 'alternative facts', or you could call them lies, and I think the Washington Post has now got a tally of something like 4,000 since he came into office.

**I've seen the list. Some of them are incredible.**

Incredible. Just complete gall to think that he can get away with it. But nevertheless, I think people are waking up and thinking, "Oh, I remember why we need journalists." It's actually rather frightening to try and think of a society without news. Of course, you've got lots of towns now that used to have a newspaper, that either have a very poor newspaper now or no newspaper at all. You're right that society can't advance, I think, unless you have an agreed basis of facts. If every debate is just people making up their own facts and are unable to agree on the reality of a situation, then I think politics grinds to a halt.

**I've never known a situation where the president will attack CNN itself as saying that they're anti-American, that they're part of the problem, and the sense of hostility towards journalism, that they're actually an 'enemy of the state', as he says. This is unprecedented.**

Yes. It's a terrible development, and it's an attempt to delegitimize journalism which, of course, you've seen in lots of countries around the world, but it is alarming and dismaying to find the same language being used in America, of all places. But Trump

is not the only one to fling words like that around. When the Daily Mail called judges the enemies of the people, that was also an attempt to de-legitimise institutions. And that is something ugly and new, I think, in society in which these culture wars become more important than the truth.

**Who should be the arbiter of those facts? Because at the moment, for example, Snopes do a very good job if there's a meme goes around on Twitter that says we didn't really land on the moon, they've usually got a page that says, "Did we land on the moon?" and the answer is, "Yes, we did – and here's the evidence." Should Facebook or Twitter be the arbiter? Should there be some kind of check mark, or do we have to have a diffuse framework where the Guardian, CNN, ABC News and the Daily Mail all work together to try and verify it? Because otherwise, people are going to get lost. How do they know whether a story is true, or even whether the entire website has been created as a confection to look legitimate. This so-called deep fake news, where the whole site is fake.**

Wow, we could talk about this for the rest of the week, it's a very profound question.

**This is a seven-hour podcast, we're okay.**

Oh, good! Well, journalists are private citizens, so we have no constitutional position that determines that we are, or have to be, the arbiters of the truth. Journalism can't even agree on whether there is such a thing as objective truth or subjective truth; there's a different view depending on which side of the Atlantic you live. So journalism as a system of getting at the truth is an imperfect one, and the ground rules are unsettled. Nevertheless, it is not a bad way, in my view, of getting at truths. But we're not the only ones, and governments can put information to the public domain, backed by statistics and...

**Spin. PR people.**

PR people can. Citizens can. This mantra that our readers know more than we do is true in a way. If I'm writing about the health service, I'm not a brain surgeon, I'm not a nurse, I'm not a GP. There will be readers out there who will know more about this than I do. So you can have many different lenses on the truth, but I think we need to be careful not to go down the full Trump road of saying, "Well, my alternative truth is as good as your truth."

**Yes, because it's not actually a fair use of the word 'truth', is it? Implying, like you said there, that there's two truths is clearly nonsensical.**

Well, that's why I think truth is a difficult word for journalists to be batting around, to say, "I have established the truth." The facts, yes, you can establish the facts, and if you're lucky, you can get near the truth. You can certainly be truthful and you can be balanced; can you be impartial? I don't know. There are all these words that you kick around if you go to journalism school, but I think we, as a profession, are going to have to start thinking harder about how we frame what journalism is, because in 2018, is Steve Bannon a journalist? Is Julian Assange a journalist? Is Boris Johnson

a journalist? Is the bloke with a You Tube channel whose work is promoted by Fox News and then Donald Trump watches, is he a journalist? Do you see what I mean? That somehow we have to rise above this ocean of what is there, and find some agreed ways of describing journalism *in the public interest*. And those are the crucial words.

**How optimistic are you that that will even happen? Because as you were explaining that then, I was just filled with a mounting sense of despair! I mean, don't get me wrong, I agree with every word you said, but it just felt increasingly unrealistic. And yet obviously very necessary.**

I found the book a little harder to write than I thought it would be, because I thought, well, I've been a journalist for 40 years, so this is going to be an easy book to write because the answer is, "More journalism." We need more journalism. And I was writing it during the run into Brexit, so I was no longer editing, I was just a reader. And I had my instinctive feeling about Brexit, but nevertheless, I thought, "I would like this explained to me. I would like both sides explained to me." If somebody wants to tell me their opinion of what should happen, that's fine – I will read that with interest too. But my instinct is this is a fantastically complicated question, so don't do me the disservice of pretending this is a really easy question and there's only one side to it. That's what you want from journalism, I think. That's how journalism would say, "Well actually, we're better than that sea of rubbish out there because that's what we do." But, in fact, that's not what most of the British press did. Most of the British press started by saying, "Well we're out, we're Brexit." Some of them were even paid up Brexit campaigners, like the Sun and the Express. And all the academic research since has shown that it was very one sided in favour of Brexit. I think now, almost regardless of which side you were originally on, most people are thinking, "Oh gosh, this really was much more complicated than we were told at the time."

**It's turned into a bit of a pig's ear, hasn't it, really?**

That's a concrete example of how journalism could be better than the mass of information that's out there, by saying, "Actually, our job is this – and that's different from what you get on the internet." But that's not what happened, so there's a concrete example of how journalists might take that as a test case of how they could do better.

**Aren't the readers complicit though, in that, because I'm in the newsagent, there's the Guardian, there's the Sun on the shelf, and I choose to pick up the Sun. In a sense, the job's already done at that point, isn't it? I know what I'm buying.**

Of course, I think we all bear responsibility. And every time your finger retweets something that you haven't read...

**Which is often, I confess.**

Which is often, yes. And if you haven't done that business of checking to see if it's true, then you are purveying fake news yourself. You can't blame all this on



journalists. The journalists live in a society; there's a context to what journalism is and how it's done. But I think if we want journalism to survive, we have to understand that it's doing a very different kind of job. Another example I use in the book is climate change. On any rational measure, climate change is probably – I use the word 'probably', but almost certainly – the most important issue of our lifetimes and our children's lifetimes.

### **We're seeing the effects of it right now.**

Almost certainly, yes. So you would expect, in a system of news, for climate change to be there almost every day. Because it's not just about the weather, it's about security, it's about immigration, it's about the economy, it's about the food we eat. It's an incredibly important subject. But not only is it missing from much of the news, but quite often, when it is in the news, it's written by people who don't actually believe in it. So again, if what we're saying as journalists is we want to be the reliable guide to your lives, your families' lives, your children's lives, then why do we either ignore climate change, underplay it, or deny it? That doesn't seem to be a very useful way of persuading people that journalism is something set apart from the internet, which has a rigorous system that we should trust.

### **And why do you think that is then? Is that because journalists know that their readers and listeners will tire of continuous climate change stories and therefore they give the audience what they want?**

I think with climate change it's very complicated. I think it's a difficult subject for news people to do because it doesn't change much from day to day. There's a sense that readers are frightened of the truth. It's too big a subject. Some of it is due to ideological prejudice at a proprietor or editor level. I think there are many different contributory factors, but I use it as an example of how I don't think the news business is differentiating itself. There's a quote in the book from a man called James Delingpole, who is an entertaining enough writer, who is the climate change correspondent of Breitbart. He's completely frank in saying that he doesn't believe in it. It's a hoax, in his view. Well, fair enough. If he wants to say that on Breitbart...

### **Of course, it's not a question of belief, it's a question of the evidence supports...**

Yes, quite. And Delingpole is an English graduate, as far as I know he's got no science background beyond a couple of O-levels, and yet if you tap his name into a database of mainstream media, I counted six newspapers he's written for on climate change. He's the go-to guy for climate change and you think, well, why? Why would you do that if you're trying to say we deal in the world as it is, we deal in the truth? Why would you use an entertaining clown who's going to write stuff that certainly belongs on Breitbart or the internet, but that's not positioning newspapers differently and saying, "Well, we're better than that." So there are these things that I think journalists are going to have start asking themselves and saying, "We got away with that for 200 years, but we're not going to get away with that in future."

**But didn't you answer your own question then, calling him 'an entertaining clown'? Because if you're the producer of a television chat show that's topical and talking about current affairs, you're going to want a couple of guests on when it's climate change that are going to have a vehement disagreement, and he's going to be a bit chatty. I'm sure what he says is total lunacy, but from a TV director's point of view in a studio, he might be great telly.**

Yes, and he writes amusingly. And I suspect that's part of the answer, that he gives good copy. He's a controversialist, newspapers like controversy. They like not to be seen as being politically correct and all that. But is that our function, or is our function that we try to tell the general public that we are different? The confusion is rife. So you've got one bit of the Murdoch operation, the Times, at the moment is very down on social media and holding it to account and saying, "You can't believe any of this stuff and it's a disgrace that people can publish this rubbish." Well, good for them. And then you've got Fox News in America that is regularly publishing the work of people who don't deserve to be, in my view, categorised as mainstream media. That's all within one company. You've got one bit saying, "Look, journalism is different," and the other bit saying, "Actually, we'll publish any old rubbish by people, and we know that President Trump swears by Fox and watches that." So this is journalism that doesn't... it's not without consequences. So if you just think that it's a giant game, or, "I went into journalism because I have firm ideological beliefs, and it's a bit of a game really," or it makes money, or it gets viewers, I think that's a very dangerous game. And I think the public can see through it, and it's not good for journalism and the general image of, or necessity for, journalism.

**Is Sean Hannity, on Fox News, a journalist? And I know you just said there about lots of people are wising up, they don't believe them, but clearly they have a huge base of supporters who do believe what they see on Fox News. It's a pity.**

Yes, because we're in this world of culture wars, where people seem to be less interested in what the truth is than, "What does my side believe?" I wrote a little bit about a strange speech that Donald Trump gave in Florida about Sweden. He suddenly said this thing, "Look what happened in Sweden this weekend."

**Nothing had happened in Sweden.**

No, nothing had happened. And there were people making jokes about ABBA and so forth, but it turned out he had seen something on Fox News and what he had seen was a kind of Gonzo journalist – I use the word 'journalist' loosely – who's got his own YouTube channel and who goes around doing, I think they're called 'mockumentaries', entertainment meets journalism. And I watched this guy's documentary, which had been broadcast on Fox News, and it was a very shoddy piece of work. It didn't belong on Fox News, or any reputable news channel.

**It didn't belong anywhere.**

And so, there you had Fox News amplifying the work of another clown, and saying, "Look, here is what happens when you get Muslim immigration into a country. They go around raping women," basically. That was the message of this film. And Donald

Trump saw it, and suddenly he's using this as an example. So you suddenly go from a YouTube channel with maybe 10,000 viewers to tens of millions of people, thanks to Rupert Murdoch's Fox News. Let's get serious about this! Either we are better than that, or we are tying ourselves to it and saying, "Well, actually, if this guy is saying roughly he's in the same political ballpark that we are, then it doesn't matter if it's not good journalism, we're going to put it out as entertainment."

**Do you think there's a chance that the people who have been arguably reckless and allowed this to happen, and maybe negligent, are going to learn from this? For example, the Democrats. Hillary said in her own book that there was a sense of complacency that she thought she was going to be president, and therefore didn't campaign as hard as necessary in some of those states where she lost. Do you think that there is an element of, with the advent of Brexit and Trump and the breakdown in all of these problems in journalism, that certain people are going to sit up and take notice? Like yourself, and something is going to be done.**

I think people have been too complacent for too long. There's a sense in which the unsticking of the economic model is going to focus people's minds. Now, I don't know, you don't know what is going to happen to the economics of news, let's pray that it all comes good. At the broadsheet end of the market, actually the readers never paid for news, it was the advertising that paid for the news. It was famously the Walmart advertising pays for the New York Times' Baghdad bureau. What's happening, this is obvious enough, is that this accident by which advertising stuck itself onto news, because they both came in a printed product, and we know that they're becoming unstuck now, and that classified advertising is going somewhere else and quite a lot of the display advertising is going somewhere else. So what happens if all that advertising does detach itself from news? Then you've got a big problem. I think that is focusing people's minds, and people are saying, "Well, what if the market cannot supply really good news, really serious news?" We're not talking about clicks and entertainment, we're not talking about the stuff we've been talking about with Fox News.

### **Investigative journalism.**

Investigative journalism.

**Is incredibly expensive. Which commercial organisation, just looking at it as a business, it doesn't seem a good ROI in terms of investment. Of course it's important that politicians and the powers that be are held to account, but I pity the entrepreneur that decides to set up a website doing that, because he or she is going to lose money.**

Yes. So therefore, what? Where does that sentence end? You say, well, okay, you can't expect shareholders or entrepreneurs or the market to support investigative journalism, proposition one. Proposition two is, we need investigative journalism because we need people to find stuff out.

**We want politicians to be in favour of journalists, rightly so.**

Yes. So who's going to fund that? Same thing about local news. If a local newspaper which used to keep afloat because it had car advertising and house advertising and job advertising no longer has any of that advertising and can't afford to keep a proper newsroom going, but nevertheless a society needs news, we need to know what's happening in a council, and what's happening in the courts.

**Because we don't want what the local councils do in a lot of areas, which is produce their own newspaper now.**

No, we don't want that. So can we reach an agreement that says news is a public service? It is in our public interest as a society that we have journalists finding stuff out and telling us what is true and what is not. It's like an ambulance service, it's like a police service. You can't run a society without an agreed factual basis. It's that important. So if we frame it like that – and I am hoping this Cairncross review into the economics of news will look into this – are there new kinds of organisations or new kinds of companies which could do that? And we're beginning to see that. We're beginning to see non-profit organisations in America, these 501(c)(3) organisations, which are almost like charities, treating news like a public good that is in the public interest and that will get charitable relief. There are B Corporations in America, there are things called social enterprise companies, which have a social mission first and profit second. Are there tax breaks or incentives that you could give companies that work and produce news in the public interest? That, I think, is where the discussion will lead.

**Tell us about your years at the Guardian. This is only a one-hour podcast, so it could be four-hour thing, and to be honest I'd listen to that, it'd be great. But what have been the highlights and the lowlights, for you? I was thinking about what specific aspects to ask you about in the decades that you were there, but there's so many, that I'd rather you select. What are the strongest memories?**

Wow. The big picture was it's an amazing newspaper full of the cleverest, most delightful, moral, ethical, fun people. It was just a great community. We didn't have a proprietor. The Guardian is owned by no one, so our only relationship was with each other. And being on that journey with them, of not only producing cracking stories, and amazing investigations that ricocheted around the world, but also this business of reinventing journalism from a standing start was the best possible fun.

**What was the highlight, then, for you?**

Well...

**Or are there too many to mention?**

I think towards the end, we had a really good investigative muscle at the paper. And if you have a good investigative muscle, then people bring stories to you. If people see that you've got the guts to run stories, and take people on in powerful positions, then that almost becomes an invitation for other people to bring stories to you. So we

had this amazing run of writing about torture, about toxic oil dumping, about tax avoidance, about phone hacking, about slavery, about the whole Wikileaks saga, the whole Snowden saga. We ended up winning the Pulitzer prize in America, which is as good as it gets.

**Incredible. Congratulations.**

And it was incredible. It was an incredible time.

**If this isn't too simplistic a question, how much courage was involved? One of my earliest memories of your editorship was Jonathan Aitken saying, you know, the sword of truth, taking you on. You risked so much in standing up for what was right.**

Well, those huge libel battles.

**It was two million pounds, wasn't it?**

Yes. It would have been two million, if we'd lost. We had Neil Hamilton. We had the Police Federation. There was a fake pill salesman in South Africa who sued us, and that cost us half a million quid. So there were these gigantic actions, which I felt we had to fight, if you believed in journalism.

**Trafigura.**

Trafigura, yes.

**Your tweet. I remember reading it, at the time, when you tweeted it saying, "For un-reportable reasons." All hell broke loose.**

For listeners who remember that, that was a trading company that had been dumping toxic oil off the coast of Africa, which had been poisoning people.

**They had a so-called super injunction.**

And they got a super injunction. So they got an injunction to stop you reporting it, and also you were prevented from reporting the fact of the injunction. We were a bit mischievous on twitter about saying there's something... I did it on the front page. "Here is a story about something that we can't tell you about, involving a company we can't name, in a court action we can't reveal."

**Were you worried about jigsaw identification, though?**

I think I thought that, in the end, it would just be too embarrassing for them. As it was. After about a week, they lifted it because they realised they were looking ridiculous.

**So, the whole notion of super injunction seems Draconian.**

Well, you could see why they have them in privacy cases. If you are a public figure, and somebody's investigating your private life, and you feel actually, "That is my private life and it's got nothing to do with anybody else," and you try to get an injunction to prevent that from coming into the public domain. Well, that's up to a judge to decide whether there's a public interest in it, but if the judge decides there is no public interest, then you can see why you don't want the smoke without a fire business of... so I can see an argument for super injunctions in privacy cases, but what we had here was a trading company, and a story about people being poisoned. It was clearly a public matter, not a private matter. I think that was a complete misuse of a super injunction.

**You mentioned just briefly, Edward Snowden, and the revelations there. Julian Assange must have been quite a slippery character to deal with. You've had quite the conveyor belt of characters that have come through your life in this amazing career in journalism.**

Well, they're very different people, Snowden and Assange. They were both, in sense, kind of whistle-blowers. Assange wasn't actually a whistle blower himself, he was this chameleon figure in which he was not quite a source, but in touch with a source. He was a publisher. He wanted to be thought of as a journalist, but also he wanted to be thought of as a kind of information anarchist, I suppose the word is.

**Some kind of superstar, as well, was definitely a taste of that in there.**

Yes. He was an impresario. I'm talking about the past tense, because he's still living in London.

**He's what my Nanna would have called 'a wrong 'un'.**

He's complicated. He's many, many things. I think I would defend the stories we published together, though of course at some point he went off and dumped a load of documents, because he didn't really believe in editing.

**Which is ridiculous, because you put people at risk, if you don't redact the documents and people's addresses, or whatever that makes them identifiable. It puts them at risk.**

That's certainly the view we took, and that's the view we took with the Snowden documents. There is an issue there, in this new world, I think, about gatekeepers. So, when we had the printing presses, we were the gatekeepers. We were the arbiters of what people got to read, and what they didn't. Assange, I think, always thought that was ridiculous. "Who said you're the gatekeepers?" And I must admit, there was a moment again recently, when I was a reader, not an editor, that was the Christopher Steele dossier about Trump and the Russians, which you may remember BuzzFeed eventually published.

**They did.**

I thought, “Well, good for them.” Because as a reader, why are these people sitting on this information? I think I would like to be considered grown up enough to look at the source.

### **Decide for yourself.**

So who are these gatekeepers who are sitting on these documents? Especially at a time, when they were publishing all this stuff about Hillary Clinton, but not about Trump. There is, obviously, a completely counter-argument that says, “Well, hold on a minute. That’s what journalism is for. Journalism isn’t for spraying stuff out into the internet. It’s there to try and reach a judgement on what’s true and what isn’t true, and only produce the truth.” These are the discussions that we’re now getting into.

### **We’re back to needing a 12-hour podcast, I’m thinking.**

Yes! And what an interesting time to be teaching journalism, or to be studying journalism, or to be coming into journalism, and having all these ethical issues. I sometimes felt we needed kind of a moral philosopher in the newsroom to help us think through some of these issues.

### **One of the images that came to mind when I was thinking about your years at the Guardian was the NSA revelations, and you being forced to kind of dramatically destroy the hard drives in the Guardian office, rather than hand them over to the security services. How did that happen?**

Well, the state wasn’t happy. You can understand that. And they ran out of patience, and said, “We think you’ve done enough, and you have to stop.” Well, you know, pause there. Is it for the state to tell journalists you’ve done enough and you have to stop, or is journalism an independent realm that should be free to make up its own mind? So, we felt actually, it wasn’t for the state to tell us to stop publishing. And we felt we hadn’t explored this archive enough. So we made sure that there was a copy in New York, and we were working with the New York Times and with ProPublica, because I thought there might come a point in Britain when they would try and injunct us. Almost impossible in America after the Daniel Ellsberg case of 1972, the Pentagon papers, almost impossible for a government to march into a newsroom and stop it from publishing. So we were more protected in America, than we were in Britain. True enough, there came a moment where the British government said, “If you don’t stop, we will stop you.” My dilemma as editor was did I want to wait until that moment came and fight a legal case, which would have essentially taken us out of the action? We would not have been able to publish anything. Glenn Greenwald, who was working for us, would have resigned. He would have published from Brazil. The New York Times and the Washington Post would have published, and the Guardian would have been silenced. That didn’t seem like a good option. So I told the British government, “Look, I have copies of this in New York. You can do what you like in London, but it’s not going to stop us.” They said, “Okay. Well, we will do what we like.”

### **I’ve seen Spooks. I know how it works!**

Yes, yes.

**Did you feel quite vulnerable, at that moment, almost physically vulnerable, because you had, presumably, burly men coming over to try, and take these hard drives back?**

We did have burly men. We thought, “Actually, if anybody’s going to destroy them, we will.”

**Presumably, they wouldn’t come by to destroy them by appointment.**

No. They came by appointment.

**That seems very civil.**

They had drills. They had... they’re called degaussing machines. So we had an appointment for them to come, and smash up our computers.

**They must also have been aware of the futility of that, given that you had copies of them. It seems almost quaint, now, that you would destroy a physical drive, given that a file can be in the cloud.**

I think there was a kind of visual symbolism that they wanted, or maybe they needed to be able to tell other people at Whitehall that they had behaved really toughly with the Guardian, or maybe they thought they were going to slow us down by doing that. I’ve never been really sure what they thought they were going to achieve. I think the point that I found that I couldn’t really convince them on was that they were incredibly lucky to be dealing with the Guardian, and the New York Times, and the Washington Post. Three fantastic newspapers who were prepared to talk to them. We were keeping up a dialogue throughout in which we were saying, “Look, here’s this document. Is there anything there that you think is super sensitive?”

**Incredibly reasonable of you.**

Well, I thought so. I can see why, from their point of view, they just didn’t want anything published, but the alternative in 2013-14 was not nothing. It was that the internet would publish it. So Glenn Greenwald, who lived in Rio de Janeiro, was outside the jurisdiction of the British state, and he was certainly going to publish it. And there were people who were outflanking Glenn, so sort of ‘information anarchists’, if I can put it like that, in other countries who had parts of this dossier. They weren’t going to ring up the British government, and say, “Look, would you like a conversation about...” There was a risk that they could, like Assange, just dump the whole lot out there. So, I thought, actually, a better way to have proceeded would have been to just keep up the dialogue with the Guardian and say, “Look, we don’t like you having this, but we recognise that you have it, and if you’ve got it, we would really like to stay close to you, and talk to you.” That seemed to me a better way of doing it.



**Tell us about the final few months of your time in the editor's chair of the Guardian. How did it come to an end? Did you know it was coming? Was it timed? Did it feel the right moment?**

Yes. I'd done 20 years, and that's enough for anybody. And I was young enough that there were other things I wanted to do in my life. So I had a chat with Liz Forgan, who was running the Scott Trust, and said, "Look, I think the time may be coming." She said, "Well, look, can you stay on until after the next election?" That was 2015. During the last six months, I did a really big thing on climate change because I just thought... it's not that we haven't done climate change. I think we were pretty good on climate change, but I did think, if I was going to look back on my career, was there anything I would regret. I think, I thought, we could have something more dramatic on climate change. So, we did a big 'keep it in the ground' campaign about fossil fuels.

**What's it like being a reader, when you were the editor for two decades? Do you find yourself second-guessing what Kath Viner, your successor, does? What's your relationship with her like? Are you like a backseat driver, like Mrs Thatcher once famously said about John Major?**

No, I'm not. I have no wish to edit; I'm very relieved not to be editing any longer. It's a very demanding and nerve-shredding job, sometimes. So I couldn't be more pleased not to have to think about not only the daily news, but the big questions that we've been talking about today. I mean, I find them fascinating questions, I'm chairing the Reuters Institute in Oxford, and lots of journalists come through Oxford to think about these things, but I'm very glad not to be doing it on a daily basis.

**So what are you doing day to day? What is a typical week, now? I know you did Fields of Gold on BBC One all that time ago. Do you have any more film, TV writing ambitions? How's the piano playing going?**

Well, my day job now is running an Oxford college, Lady Margret Hall in Oxford.

**Is that full time?**

That is most of the year. There are three terms of 10 weeks, and quite a lot of stuff to be done in between those vacations. We're working, very actively, on how to broaden access to Oxford University for the kinds of people who might think it's not for them, or who have not had the start in life that other people have. So that's preoccupying me a lot on the educational front, but this book is 150,000 words long – that took me a lot of time to think, research, write. And that's sort of, as it was, that I couldn't have done my research activities at Oxford.

**Have you slowed down a little bit, though?**

Doesn't feel like it!

**It sounds to me that you're almost as busy as you were.**

Well, I'm on the board of the National Theatre, I'm on the board of the Committee to Protect Journalists in New York. People are kind enough to ask me to go and talk about these issues, so it feels like a very busy life, and a very enjoyable life, but I don't have that business of having to get up at seven o'clock in the morning.

**Well, you do when the Today programme want you on.**

Well, that was this morning. That was an exception, but trying to think of 20 different things to do by 10 o'clock in the morning, and that sinking feeling when a libel writ comes in, or some awful situation of a journalist being held hostage in some God-forsaken part of the world. Those things that used to keep you awake, at night. Editors never, I think, sleep well. There are too many things that could go wrong, and do go wrong. I don't miss that at all.

**Clearly, the book is spearheading an incredibly worthy and very important initiative, but do you have any unfulfilled ambitions? What's going to be next to you in the medium to long term? Or is there no next, are you going to put your feet up?**

Well, when I was young, I thought I would open the bowling for England, or conduct the London Symphony Orchestra – I think I've left both those a little too late. I play music, and I do still tinker away writing things like screenplays and plays, because I enjoy that. Nothing has recently been put on, but I live in hope. I don't know. I also enjoy writing books. The bit of this book that I enjoyed most perhaps, there are bits of reporting in it, and I love reporting. There's no better fun than getting your teeth into a really meaty issue, and just gnawing at a particular bone, to mix a metaphor. So actually going back and reporting would make me very happy.

**Alan, it's been a great honour, thank you ever so much.**

It's been lovely to talk.