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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 Kate Ward, international president of Refinery29. Previously head of commercial at production company Shine TV, she started her career at the digital media business in 2015 as senior vice president. Aimed at women, Refinery29 has over 450 employees with offices in New York, Los Angeles, London and Berlin. It reaches a global audience of over 250 million through editorial and video programming, live events, and social content. Kate's successes include the launch of their UK and German editions, and their marketing and creative arm, The29th, which helps brands appeal to women by creating video, events and influencer activity. In 2017, she was named one of Management Today's 35 Women Under 35, the UK's longest-running list of young female business talent.

Kate, thank you for joining me.

Thank you very much.

I have huge imposter syndrome reading that. I've done absolutely nothing compared to that. Are you incredibly driven? What is it? What's the secret?

I'm flattered, but I think the truth is I've been incredibly lucky to have two very, very formative experiences in terms of my career so far, working in companies at the top of their game. First to have an experience, a varied experience, with a few different jobs along the way at the Shine Group under Liz Murdoch and Alex Mahon, and then to more recently be at Refinery29, which is representing something that is so important for women and this moment in culture, but also really at the cutting edge of the definition of a new type of media and entertainment company. Lucky me, I would say, as opposed to lucky them.

And lucky us for having you as a guest at the moment! Let's do your career shortly if we can, and actually just talk about Refinery29. For our listeners that have never heard of it, there might be a few of them, or that don't have a sufficient grasp, could you just talk us through what it is?

Refinery29 is a media and entertainment company for women. We have a really clear mission to represent, progress, inspire, and entertain women, and we do that through really simply telling stories and creating experiences. We really were founded in 2005 in North America by four friends, and they built a best in class digital publishing business, writing articles and creating content. We've since moved into video, live events. We're in the feature film business. We have a creative agency now. Now we're really a fully diversified media company, really creating this very mission-focused, purpose-driven content for women.

And what's the genesis of the name?

Actually, Refinery29 is called Refinery29 because we began life actually as a shopping product. It was a kind of curate your own mall, curating independent retailers, and there were 29 spaces in this mall, and so it was Refinery29, and you could filter by different types of shops, you could also filter men and women. It wasn't just for women. And what actually happened is a really interesting story, is our four co-founders, Philippe von Borries, Justin Stefano, Christene Barberich, Piera Gelardi – all four of whom are still in the Refinery business today, by the way – they started creating content about these shops, and the audience just flocked to the content. And it took off more than actually the e-commerce solution. That's our pivot into becoming a media company.

Because the name stuck at that point, and you were bound by it?

That was it. It became an iconic name. And a lot of people ask me why Refinery29, and that's the real story. I'm sure that there's some myths and legends out there, but that's the story.

And 450 staff and a reach of over 250 million. I mean, those are incredible numbers. How did you get to that?

There's a lot of sophistication that comes with building a huge digital audience, but I think there's sort of three things really going on that have been the secret to Refinery's success. I think the first and the most important by far is that we have a very, very clear mission. We're a mission-driven company with a very, very specific audience segment of talking to young women, really our kind of core audience is sort of 16 to 35-40. And that real focus has given us a huge amount of brand power. Refinery means something to the people that read us. It's not just about reach, it's reach and *engagement*, holding hands to actually create that true influence.

With the right group of people.

Hundred percent.

A very targeted, very niche group of people?

Absolutely. You're really building a long lasting, meaningful relationship with them that's direct to consumer.

There aren't many 44-year-old chubby blokes going on the website, like me?

Listen, I'm sure that there are, and we welcome them too, and I'm sure that there's content we cover that might be interesting, but I think who do we get out of bed for every day? We're in service to that core audience. I think the second thing, how do you get to that scale is, you know, Refinery's been going since 2005. This hasn't been built overnight. This isn't a kind of a flash in the pan story. This has been years and years of honing craft and skill, diversification, and it's kind of been a long road to get us there. And every single year that we've been there feels like we've done five or six big new innovations and jumps forward. I think it's a bit like dog years actually, probably, at Refinery.

And what are the touch points for your readers?

What's important about our business, and something that we've really focused on, is that we still have a really, really huge, really, really significant dot com business. Our own website is still a really, really important part of our product. And of course, we also publish in a multitude of other places, so all the social channels, we were one of the original Snapchat discover partners, of course Facebook, Twitter, an amazing Pinterest community and Pinterest board, of course a really thriving Instagram. But we've also taken that direct consumer approach and taken it further, so events is a huge part of what we do. We have an amazing email product. We have over two million email subscribers. Really, we're creating a super diverse set of touchpoints. You might find us initially through Snapchat, but then you'll end up subscribing to the newsletter, or you might be a real fan of one of our live events, and from that you start following us on Instagram, and that leads you back to the dot com.

The so-called stickiness, keeping you coming back.

Yes. And also, because we're really programming all those places individually, you're always thinking about what is the right story for the right platform? How does that match to the audience when they want to get it? Really building those connection moments in a platform-specific way, or a channel-specific way, and really the storytelling then is the thing that elevates and creates that deep, next level of engagement.

We've seen high profile digital magazines like The Pool go under in the UK. What does it do you think that makes kind of Refinery29 a success? What makes the fact that you can stay afloat, and they sadly couldn't?

I don't think there is anyone who is in women's media that didn't feel very sad to see what happened at The Pool, and lots of great people there, and lots of great content that came from that team, and it's obviously not the kind of thing you want to read in media, but also in women's media. That's a sad story, but I would say Refinery, our point of difference, I think we're just at a completely different scale in terms of our reach, in terms of the size of our audience. Because we're part of a sort of global network we're able to benefit from creating content globally. We share content between our editions in Germany, the UK, and in the US, and soon we're going to be

launching in France as well. We're really able to kind of maximise the impact of our global network and global storytelling. We're able to be really strategic about big moments, and then have the kind of always on diet of media cycle and news breaking stuff, actually really kind of well-organised between our international offices. I think it gives us a lot of strength. I think what also gives us a lot of strength commercially is that we have a very, very significant business in North America. We've been going, as I've said already, for many years, and so we have a long, credible history with the world's biggest advertisers. They were chomping at the bit for us to launch internationally. It's one of the reasons that Phillippe and Justin really embarked on this process, and that I came in, was because we just had so much demand. I think we've had great support from our partners, we've had great support from our audience, and we have a kind of operation that really is at scale – and I think that that all gives us a great advantage.

And how do you monetise your relationship with your readers? Is it purely the great relationship you have with advertisers? We've seen lots of other digital brands diversify into having events and apps. Cosmopolitan even do houses.

Yes. The story of our revenue really is definitely one of diversification, but before we talk about diversification, probably it's good to spend a bit of time on the business that is still the majority of what we do, which is the advertising business, and the branded content and successful partnerships with brands. It's absolutely the primary revenue driver of Refinery. Why do I think we are able to do really well in that space? I mean, the international business, you know, we grew a hundred percent last year in terms of revenue. We're going to do the same again this year or more. I think really brand trust is a big thing. People are really looking for those trusted partners, quality content, brand-safe environments. But also I think as a product, editorially, our origins are in shopping. We've always had that mixture of culture, commerce, of style and substance. People come to Refinery to discover. They read about new products, new businesses, stories of female success, and so branded content that is authentically and natively created for them with the Refinery tone of voice, which is absolutely what we do, is really, really seamless for our audience. It's not as if they shy away from it – in fact, they really lean into it. We have been successful, I think, because we created that really powerful brand-safe place to be, and we super-serve our audience with content they're actually going to love and that they just happen to be supercharged by these brand partners. Outside of our advertising business, we have done a lot of diversification in all sorts of different ways. Video has been a big thing. Of course, the move into video has been well-trodden by media companies, but I think what Refinery has done is taken it to a whole new level. I'm thinking about these big, bold, original programming strategies. We have this amazing series called Chatterbox, which is really a platform for young female filmmakers, short films. We've won awards at Cannes and Sundance, and we've had films going into film festivals all over the world. We now have two feature films in development based on those shorts.

I've got zero feature films in development.

Yes, I know. Me too! Very much cleverer people than me actually do this. But I think that ambition, we're here to create culture-defining content, and so original, premium television, film, video programming is absolutely something that we've been like

supercharging out of our business in North America, and I hope we'll be able to do the same here too. Events too has just become a huge part of our story. Both are important, because events really are content creation moments now. I don't know if you see this or you think about this, but we think at Refinery about events as URL to IRL. How do you bring that digital into real life? How do you bring the online into the real world?

IRL is about the only acronym I actually understand.

URL to IRL. It's so catchy.

Of young people.

I think the thing is you sort of don't want to use it, but then once you've heard it you can't ever unhear it. It's so clever.

You can't unhear it?

Yes, URL to IRL and back again. That's super important and really inspiring and exciting, because we do these community events. We do at least one a month, if not more, in the UK, and tons in the US, everything from comedy nights to... we did an amazing week of content about female pleasure and sex, and we had this amazing event where people came and they learnt about technology, and sex, and cool sex toys. It was incredible to see the audience. They're talking, sharing openly... a completely different thing. We might have a panel discussion about skin, and skin positivity, through our recurring series Skin Deep. This is a chance for us to talk to our audience, to see them, for them to see us, for us to build those direct relationships. And on a completely different scale to that, in North America we launched 29Rooms, which is like our kind of 'experiential Superbowl', I guess you'd call it.

Is this an IRL thing?

This is like a huge thing. It began actually as our 10th anniversary party. We took a warehouse in Brooklyn and we carved it up into 29 rooms, and each room was a different experience created by an artist, some of them with brand partners, some not. And we ended up saying to our audience, "Come along." We had queues round the block. Last year we did it in four cities in North America, sold over 100,000 tickets, it reached one in two users on Instagram, and really has defined the kind of immersive, experiential trend that you're seeing all over the world. And now we've just actually done a partnership with IMG, so we're going to be bringing it to the international market hopefully very soon next year. It's really, really exciting.

Who do you regard as your competitors? I mean who's competing for attention in the same space as you? You mentioned there for example, Instagram and Facebook. We've had lots of people in that chair that say that they have a relationship akin to a frenemy, that you're populating your Facebook page with content, but Facebook are getting the advert revenue. How does that work? If

someone likes something that you've done on Instagram, how do you monetise that?

Well...

There were about eight questions in one there, wasn't there?

Yes, there's a couple of questions. Let's start with the first one about competitive set. I think it's a really interesting one, and it's something that we talk about a lot, and I think it's one of the things that is really important and unique about Refinery. I think we sort of sit... I like to think of us as a sort of category on our own. We come from the digital first, digital publisher, nimble start-up culture world. You know, we built our own tech stack. We grew like a start-up. That's what it feels like. That's the buzz and the culture, what attracts the great talent. And in that sense you have a few competitors that are the sort of digital players. Maybe it's BuzzFeed, or Vice, or some of those names. At the same time, we've built a brand that has this sort of brand power, the weight, and the credibility of a traditional media company, whether it's a kind of broadcaster or whether it's a glossy magazine, a Vogue, or a Glamour, or maybe a Wired, or whatever. And so we sit in the middle of those two things, and so I think probably we've got competitors everywhere. Yet I sort of also feel we have not got competitors, because what Refinery has done, and been doing over many, many years, is really delivering this very focused, very mission driven, totally unique message about women, a positive, optimistic perspective where we champion their individuality. We're the catalyst for them to claim their power, as opposed to dishing out the media gift of empowerment, where we've been consistent in working with the best talent in championing diversity, in challenging ideas of representation. And so on that level I feel that that we stand alone. All's to say on competitive set, that the other thing I would say is that I think the media world probably likes to think that it's all sort of handbags at dawn, but we have... all of us who work in the media industry, and it's an industry full of mates and friends. And so we have friends, pals that work in all companies, so I think we're all very much more friends than frenemies at the end of the day. On the social media side, the frenemy dilemma, look, I think it's really clear that there's no media company that isn't using all the channels to build and connect with audiences that are out there. Of course, Facebook, and Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, Snapchat, they're all important parts of our audience's behaviours, where they seek and consume content.

But Facebook's getting the money for the adverts on that Facebook page.

What I would say is that clearly it's not a surprise to hear that we're less focused in some ways, in terms of our audience profile, there than we have been before. Our own operating environment on the dot com has always been super, super important to us, but in terms of revenue, we just outlined a diversification story, thinking about video, thinking about our events business. We haven't really touched on our creative consultancy practice, The29th, but what I'm trying to build here is a picture of a diversified media and entertainment company, not one that is super focused on one platform.

You have that agility, because frankly you haven't got a printing press. You've emerged as a truly digital proposition.

Yes. I think that digital first start-up mindset, the idea to be true creative entrepreneurs, absolutely in service of our audience. That is really just a huge, huge part of our culture, and part of our success.

What's your job, then? What do you actually do?

What do I do all day? I mean, it is a good question! My role, I'm president of our international business, so that means that I oversee all aspects of the business outside the US.

International from a US point of view?

International to ex-North America, basically.

Because I'd say they're international of course, sitting in London.

Yes.

But I know what you mean.

Indeed.

We have clients as well, where...

If the HQ is in New York, I'm sort of not in HQ. Really, my role is that I oversee all of the different departments at Refinery29. Amazing revenue, commercial teams, our incredible editorial, and content, marketing, and PR, and operations, and I do that with an amazing team who we've been lucky enough to build over the last three and a half years. Really the question of what I do all day is, I think, about three things for Refinery: reach, revenue and relevance. How do I bring those three R's together to expand and grow our business?

Because the three R's used to be reading, writing, and arithmetic.

Yes, or the three F's. What are the three R's? Fun, fame, and fortune.

Those are the three things I only ever wanted!

You've got to be having two out of three, I think.

Yes.

Yes. I think otherwise it's not going ... no, but three R's: reach, revenue, relevance. That's what I think about all day long.

Well, can we actually go through all three of them? Because that's interesting.
Sure.

I mean, let's start with reach then. How would you do that?

Reach...

How do you do that? How do you do that? That was the most basic of questions, wasn't it?

Well, when we're thinking about reach, what we're really thinking about is how do we take the mission and the content of Refinery, build that audience connection, and expand it.

Getting more eyeballs.

More eyeballs, more people coming to events, more relationships, more engagement, more loyalty.

How would you do that, then? Because I'm listening, I want to grow this podcast.

One of the ways that we do that is...

We've only got about five listeners.

Five listeners, very influential listeners. Listeners, do not be offended! One of the ways we're doing that at Refinery is international editions. We've launched in Germany with the German language edition. We're soon to be launching in France with a French language edition. Then, of course, we have our UK edition, and we hope to have more coming soon.

Will that be truly localized content, that they'll actually be French people writing French content, in French, in France?

We will have French people, speakers, trans-creating. What they do is they curate from our global content pool, if you like, our library. We have an amazing team in the UK and the US that are creating a huge amount of content, and our German and French teams, they work together to use data and social listening to identify the stories that the audiences in those countries are most interested in, and we trans-create them.

Trans-create?

Trans-creation.

That's a new word for me.

Translation...

You're giving them what they want, of course, by using the metrics, that's actually helping curate an experience that's relevant to them, because you know that's what they want.

One hundred percent. And then the reason trans-creation, rather than translation, is because we're tweaking. We're localising. I used to talk about the difference between roommates and flatmates, and that's in the English language. We always make sure that the tone is completely right. This isn't just a case of automated translation. This is really amazing writers and journalists who are really putting in the tone that is relevant for that audience.

Trans-creation. I love it.

Yes. It's super cool, and they are so talented. I mean, Ray, our head of trans-creation, is just unbelievably passionate, and a talented writer and journalist who just happens to be the most brilliant linguist as well. That's a really important part of super-serving those audiences. If you're in Germany, you want to be able to read Refinery29 in your native language because it deepens your understanding, and the richness, and your experience, and that experience is then rewarded with your loyalty. That really is what that kind of reach expansion is about. I guess it's also about thinking about new channels, new partnerships in the UK. We've been doing some amazing work with Flipboard recently, which you might not expect, but we've just had a really, really great partnership with them. We're using that to reach new people. We're always thinking about partnerships, and how do we get our mission and our content further.

Revenue.

Revenue, really simple.

The big one. Without revenue there's no business.

Right, and how do we grow our business, right?

How do you? I'm all ears.

I think we grow our business... we've been really, really successful at growing the international business, as I say. Triple digit growth last year, more to come this year.

What's the secret, then? I mean, if we could get down to brass tacks, what is it you're doing, and what is it you're not doing?

I think probably you guys, from the outside, you might assume that our business is very much focused exclusively on brands, that you might think, "Oh, it must be just fashion and beauty brands that want to advertise with Refinery." The reality is, what we are here to do is to show advertisers around the world that building powerful

relationships with women moves their business forward. Our advertising partners are massively diverse. We've done amazing work in the tech space, in the finance space. I'm really excited about some developments in auto. We have a 12-month partnership with Rightmove. It's been incredible for them to understand how talking to women specifically can drive massive results for them, as well as creating content that frankly our audience just love and flock to organically. At the same time, we're really building, legacy building, branded content so that we're having long and returning relationships with our partners. Adidas, we've done everything from running clubs to creating content. Braun, we just did a fantastic campaign about hair removal, and we featured Paris Lees, who's one of the UKs most influential trans activists and voices. The honesty with which she spoke, the response that the community gave that content was just incredibly powerful. How are we growing our revenue business? One, we're growing it because we're really trying to say to the advertising community, "It makes great business sense to talk to women with purposeful communications." In fact, I would go as far as to argue that for brands today, it's going to be a determination of relevance for you, and the future of your brand. Women drive 85% of purchasing decisions, yet 54% of our audience say that they feel that advertising gets it wrong when talking to them. How can we be that gap? How can we create the environment, the quality content with deep cultural resonance, to be that partner to advertisers?

When you say partner, then, you're educating your advertisers as well. You're not just taking a cheque from them, but you're also telling them how to spend it more wisely with you.

One hundred percent. The way that I think we have always done business at Refinery; we see these as true partnerships. Because for it to be fantastic branded content, we recognise that the brands are going to have to go a bit outside their comfort zone, and they're going to be coming into the Refinery world, but it's also a true partnership. It really is being that guiding partner, being that sounding board, and ultimately helping them move their businesses forward, because that's really what we want to do. We want to help them build their businesses and their brands, and we want to do that through helping them win with women, this influential and really, really important audience who by the way have a very... am I allowed to swear on the podcast?

You are.

Yes, a very high bullshit radar, so actually you can't go into this and get it wrong. It's really, really important that they come to us to get that right. I think we also do really clever things with data and insights, and trend reporting that give that an extra layer where it's not just about great content, it's about what's behind that in terms of understanding of that consumer, their behaviour.

The third R was relevance.

Hundred percent. Because I think building the reach and the revenue of the business, it all sits on the mission of Refinery29.

And being relevant.

And the ability of us to drive that relevance as *the* place that is accelerating and elevating women's stories, that's really truly progressing and representing women. I mean, in the UK we've done some incredible work. We did this big campaign called Stop Skirting the Issue, about upskirting, working with Gina Martin, supporting her from the very start of her campaign all the way through to seeing the law get changed in the House of Lords.

Congratulations.

Amazing. And take no credit from ... it's Gillian Orr and the team that did it, they're incredible, and that really is creating real world change. Right? We did another brilliant piece of programming earlier this year called Lonely Girls' Club. It was basically talking about millennial female loneliness and how the internet, it could be this double-edged sword. On the one hand, social media provides these actual havens of building community, on the other hand, it's what makes some people feel further away from reality and their friendships. An incredible week-long programming moment for us. Interestingly started from one story that we wrote, and the response was so huge, we went further, created a week. Off the back of that, the response has been huge, and now we know that people are having Lonely Girl meetups around the country, and actually starting to build those connections with each other. Actually, it really is about that legacy of creating content that really inspires people, that is brutally honest, that sometimes is painful, that makes you think and question, and challenges your perception, but ultimately this voice of optimism about this moment in culture for women that is so powerful and really inspires.

How do you hear from your readers, then? How would you connect with them? You've got the metrics, you know what people are clicking on and what drove them there, but do you have any kind of qualitative relationship with them as well as quantitative?

Yes, we do. I think it's one of the things that... secrets to success for Refinery is we understand our audience incredibly well. Obviously, we have comments and that community moment when you publish content, but we also have our own comp panel. We have about 15,000 women around the world that we talk to every single day.

Wow.

We talk to them about everything, from creative ideas and what they want to hear from us, to what they think about areas of opportunity, whether it's brand work or what they think about their relationships. We've done really interesting things with some of our partners around product testing. It really becomes a very, very rich first party data source. What's really cool, I should say, is that all of the people that are on this platform, we call it Mad Chatter, don't ask me why it's called that because that I don't have a clever story for, is that they all opt in themselves. It's completely super fans of Refinery. It's the people that love the brand, that love the mission, and they want to feel like they're part of shaping it. It's not a 'sign up and we'll send you gifts or

discounts'. It's truly an organic conversation that we're having direct to the audience in their thousands.

That insight flows both ways, doesn't it, because you're now sharing that with clients. You've created a marketing and creative consultancy called The29th, which specifically helps brands by creating videos, and events, and so-called 'influencer activity'. How does that work?

The29th really has been born from this idea that we had relationships that wanted to go beyond kind of co-branded content on Refinery29, that wanted to really understand how we could be their partners in creating different kinds of content and experiences, and also strategic platforms really for them. We'd done a range of different projects. I think one of the first things that we did, which was really exciting, was that we worked with Aline Santos at Unilever and UN women to create the visual identity for the Unstereotype Alliance, which is an amazing cross-brand group alliance that's all about ridding advertising from stereotypes. They came to us and we worked with an amazing artist, Jessica Walsh, to kind of create their visual identity and their launch moment in Cannes a couple of years ago, including flying the Unstereotype Alliance flag above the Palais as they judge the Glass Lions, which was super, super cool. Recently we've been working with Walgreens Boots Alliance. We are working with them as their agency across some of their brands, including their cosmetics and skincare brands, Sleek being one of them. We're super, super proud of that work. In that we're really helping them with content creation, but also kind of helping them, giving that publisher mindset and that really thinking of behaving like a publisher, and have been able to do some really, really exciting creative work with them that as part of Walgreens Boots Alliance is seen in store, as well as digitally. It's been an incredible partnership that we're really, really proud of. We've also done some really interesting work with Samsung this year. They came to us for the 10th anniversary of the Galaxy, the S10, to think about how could we really be their partners in their own experiential strategy? We created a whole experiential toolkit for them and that event, which was in Westfield recently, it's going to go to 10 markets around the world. That builds from our sort of 29Rooms experience. Really what we're here to do is to give our brand partners the tools that we use for ourselves, as well as our specific audience focus. And really giving them those big strategic platforms that they can own and have that conversation, and we're proud to be their partners in doing that. And in doing so, creating better, more diverse, more representative content for women.

How important is the backing of the WPP giant to helping Refinery29 move into areas like video on demand?

We've got WPP, Turner, Discovery, Stripes Group and many, many others. We've got an amazing board of brilliant partners, I think. Personally, I feel extremely lucky to have great relationships with our board members and benefit from their insight. I think the reality is that WPP have invested in many businesses and there's no commercial impact. We go out there and we compete alongside any other media publisher. Sadly, I don't think it can make a significant difference in that respect. What I think it does is I think it builds great connections. Personally speaking, I've always had an amazing relationship with them, and so many inspiring people, and also incredible inspiring women that work in that organisation. Lindsay Paterson,

Karen Blackett and Sue Inniman, to name a few. And always been very, very grateful for their support.

Now, you spent eight years at the Shine Group working across commercial and strategy roles. What was Elisabeth Murdoch like to work with?

Liz is inspirational. She's an incredible leader, taught me a huge amount about championing creativity. I am not lucky enough to be creative, a creator on my own. I wish that I was talented enough to write an amazing film script, or produce an amazing drama, or make MasterChef, and be an editor on MasterChef, but that was not my particular fate. But Liz was the champion of great ideas. She was, she's an absolute believer in big ideas. The ability for them to travel. She talked passionately about this idea of creativity without borders, and building Shine as this global network of production companies that we could share IP and ideas irrespective of geography, of language. I'm not concerned about our own micro P&Ls, but thinking about how we could collaborate and build massive franchises. And that remains a kind of guiding inspiration for me as we think about, as I think about building brands and the power of big ideas. She's huge, huge, huge. And I should say as is Alex Mahon, who I was also very, very lucky. I worked for Alex for years and years and years and years and it has been, and remains, a kind of great teacher and friend and taught me a huge amount about business and management.

We've been trying to get her on the podcast ever since she took the job at Channel 4, so if you could put a word in, we would be grateful.

Really? I'm seeing her tomorrow, so I will let her know!

Excellent.

But I could not have been more lucky to have worked for them and to be part of the journey of that company, which was so special and to... I remain so proud of being a tiny, tiny, tiny cog in a wheel of a moment of something like MasterChef, because it's one in a generation, having a big hit like that.

But it sounds like throughout your career you've had an incredible array of female mentors and role models that have inspired you during your career, and enabled you.

Yes, I think that's true. Though I would say, the whole time I've been at Refinery, I've reported to two men. Philippe and Justin our co-founders and co-CEOs.

Are they not as good as women then, having been managed by women?

You know what, I actually think, I think that's just a really interesting point and this is why we talk about men all the time, and this idea of female leadership and men... it's not a female issue getting female talent to lead businesses. It's actually about allyship and sponsorship and belief, right? I've had amazing female leaders and seen great, do amazing things at Shine. I share that at Refinery29 where I work in a predominantly female environment and I'm inspired by our staff, our co-founders,

Piera and Christene, our CFO, our chief content officer and president of North America Amy, Mel our CFO. We have amazing female role models, right? And I certainly when I went off and had my baby. I was so lucky that I could call and say, “Oh God, what’s it going to be like and am I going to be okay,” and to have that honesty. But I would also say that I’ve worked for Philippe and Justin, they have been very proud of what I’ve achieved, and they are my biggest champions – and so I don’t think it has anything to do with gender. I think it’s just good luck and great people and working with people you really like and really respect. I think that’s probably, for me anyway, that that’s really been the key.

Well, I mean, good looks certainly played a part in it, but you’re clearly very bright, very able, and very hard working. What would you say has been the major career turning points then? How did you start off on this journey? What did you want to do when you finished your studies?

When I finished my studies, I was going to go and do a PhD.

Wow that’s real brain work.

Yes, yes. And I read history and I was going to go and be an academic. And then I realized that the thing that I was interested in, I might be the only person in the world that was interested in, and there was a potential that I’d have to go and learn medieval German, which I didn’t even speak normal German. So that was a bit of a stretch! And then I didn’t really know what else to do, but I really knew that I loved telly and I really liked popular culture. I’m a real kind of high-low, kind of person.

So, from medieval Germany to Jeremy Kyle.

Yes, yes. Love Island.

Yes, Love Island.

Something like that. Yes, exactly.

That’s quite a mix.

I just applied for about a million jobs and I thought that I would want to go to the BBC and present history documentaries. That’s what I wanted to do. And I applied for so many jobs at the BBC, I did not get any of them and I was devastated. And anyway, I found myself at TVF where I realised that I thought I was doing one thing, but actually it turns out I was doing sales, and I was a sales executive and sold the international rights to documentaries to cable channels in eastern Europe. And that was my beat, and that’s what I did for a year and a bit.

How did you, do you just cold call cable channels and say, “Do you want to buy a documentary?”

It wasn't quite cold calling, but it wasn't like a huge amount more sophisticated than that. I would say I had some amazing teachers there as well. So, I learnt a lot about selling, and about rights, and about this idea of ideas traveling to different countries and changing as they do. And so that was the education. But I think ultimately when I read about this idea of what Liz was building from a cultural perspective, that was really what made me desperate to go and pretty much stalked Alex Mahon until she gave me a job. I think the big change for me was that move from traditional TV to digital. It was quite a brave thing to do because to be honest, I had no background at all in publishing and a pretty limited background in digital. I mean, I had experience of YouTube, but I hadn't ever been on the publishing side. So, in some ways it was quite a kind of a risky thing to do, and certainly probably riskier for my bosses than for me to be fair. But what connected me to it was that the mission of Refinery was so unique and so powerful and so meaningful to me. And that I'd always felt that at Shine I'd been successful because I was just a fan. I was a super fan of television. I was a super fan of what we made. I'd never missed an episode of MasterChef literally, ever.

Even though you made it?

Even though I made it. I was obsessed with it, and I used to kind of literally send fan-girl emails to producers being like, "I just loved it last night when you did that cut and it was like this," and I loved it, and I felt exactly the same way about Refinery. I'd been following them for a really, really long time. I had been reading Refinery since 2009, so really early on in their journey, because I lived for a period in Los Angeles and my friends there were reading it. That's how I found out about it. So then, years and years later, to get a phone call saying, "I don't suppose you've heard of Refinery29?" "Have I heard of them? I get the email!" I love this brand. I love it. I love it. I love it. Tell me it's coming to London. How can I be involved? I think that's probably the leap of faith, is love the thing that you're working on and love, love, love what you do. Which I do.

You spent quite a bit of time in America, didn't you? Because you, didn't you study there?

I did. I've done bits of study there and I lived in LA on and off for kind of 12-18 months and I loved LA actually. It was my... I kind of liked LA...

I love LA. I go there every other week. Which is quite a trek.

Actually?

Yes. Like, literally every other week.

I did every six weeks for quite a long time.

What, six weeks on, six weeks off?

Six weeks ... yes, well, I would do six weeks in LA, a week in London, and then back and forth. And it was quite a lot. But I... because the thing is, New York, obviously

love New York, Refinery's headquartered in New York, love New York. But New York is a bit like London but like without your mates. But LA is like a different world.

Oh, I know.

And drove down sunset every day to get to work and you're like, "This is it, I've made it." And then you realise you haven't, and you're stuck in a traffic jam. But for that moment it's quite nice to have your Pretty Woman moment.

LA traffic is something to behold.

It is. I mean, I don't think it's got any, I don't think it's getting any better, sadly.

No, I don't even hire cars now. I just ... because you just end up paying so much in valet charges. I just Uber everywhere.

See, I was there before Uber existed. That's how long ago I was there. I understand that that has transformed LA.

Yes, you can get an Uber within two minutes. Whereas in New York, if even if the Uber's a block away, you think, "Oh that'll be 15 minutes, I might as well walk."

You've just got to walk or take the subway, I think. You've got to walk it.

Yes, exactly. what's next for you? I mean, you've launched Refinery29 in Germany. Are there any future expansion plans in the works?

Yes, I think we're going to be continuing that addition strategy, we're going to be launching France soon, and hopefully more from that. I think we want to continue that story of growing, that diversification of our video business and that premium original content. More clients for The29th, and lots of exciting conversations there. And then 29Rooms. Super excited. We're going to be working with IMG to bring that to Europe and beyond next year. I think there's a lot going on. I think, ask me what will get me super excited, it will be a story or an article or the team. They're what really gets me excited. This incredible group of people we've assembled. When I first started at Refinery, it was literally me in my house. We had no staff, no office, nothing. And now I look around nearly 70 people in London, and we've got 15 or so in Berlin, and it is, it's mad. We moved offices at the beginning of this year. And I'm not afraid to say it, but I sort of walked in and had a bit of a blub because I just couldn't believe it. That's what excites me really.

What's a typical week then, in terms of your role? Because I mean you mentioned the three Rs, but if it was more of a traditional newspaper, you would have an editor-in-chief on the content side, and then you would have a managing director or managing editor on the business side. Do you kind of do both?

Yes, so I definitely wear both hats. But really the truth is that I look after, I manage, hopefully support, and add to the people that fulfil those roles. In the UK we've got Gillian Orr, who's our head of content, incredible, oversees all of our editorial, and really sets the tone in a sort of editorial sense. We got Jacqui Kavanagh who is unbelievable commercial leader, who really oversees our revenue group. George Mitchell, brilliant and looks after all of our operations and legal, and Tamar Riley, who looks after audience and that global publishing strategy I talked about. My job really, is to work with them, to be their sounding board, to be their partner, to set the strategy and help them execute it. How I spend my day is with clients, meeting people, talking about Refinery, meeting talent, because we're always hiring great talent into the business. And with those leaders, really being their sounding board and helping them move things forward. I think alongside that, it's great to have opportunities to spend time with the rest of the team. And so I try and impose myself as much as possible on team meetings, sneaking into an editorial meeting or the sales meeting, and trying to make sure that as we grow, I'm also staying close to all the business and the talent that we have in it. And then of course, outside of that, I've got a toddler, and...

A life.

Do all the juggle that everyone else does, right? that's always fun as well.

Here's an existential question.

Oh, go on.

If all brands put empowered women at the centre of their content and advertising, would Refinery29 need to exist? Because it's the whole problem/opportunity. Because they don't...

Interesting. Right? Like if brands did that, would they cease to exist? Well no, because we do what we do for our audience, right?

Because you're unique, because the need is there.

Yes. Because the audience is the boss of us. I'm in service to the audience. I'm partner to brands, but our mission and what we're here to do in terms of culture and society isn't, that's not what it's purpose is. What's interesting I guess, is I sometimes think about, Refinery is a bit like the stone that drops in the puddle. What we do is we talk to young women, but we create the ripples that can impact everyone. That can change everything, whether it's marketing, communications, and how people think about talking to women, or whether it's like experiential, and what we've done with 29Rooms that's inspired so many things from that. Or whether it's content that we create and stories that we tell, or talent that we champion, or writers that get their first job with us and go on to write amazing books. That's the kind of wider contribution, right? Would we fail to exist? I hope not. I don't think we would fail to exist, no. I hope not.

Well, on that existential note, thank you ever so much for your time. It's been a hugely enjoyable conversation.

Thank you very much for having me. An absolute pleasure.