

Philip Thomas **Chairman, Cannes Lions**

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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 here in New York, and joined by Philip Thomas, chairman of Cannes Lions International Festival of Creativity. This flagship five-day event celebrates the achievements of the creative communications industry. In 2019, more than 30,000 entries from 89 countries competed to win one of its coveted awards. Philip began his career as a journalist on magazines and newspapers in the UK, including a stint editing Empire, the UK's biggest-selling movie magazine. Moving into publishing, he served as managing director of FHM Worldwide, launching 30 country editions, and spent three years at Emap in Australia before returning to the UK in 2006 to take on his current role. Since 2016, he's also been president of the Cannes Lions parent company, Ascential Events, and oversees its stable of international festivals.

Phil, thank you for joining me.

Thank you very much, delighted to be here. Thanks for inviting me.

Phil, Cannes Lions has become the world's biggest get-together of people interested in creativity. Has its growth surprised you?

It has, really. It started 60 years ago, it was started shortly after the film festival. It was started by a bunch of cinema advertising folk, who felt that if we were going to have festivals for the movies, we should have a festival for the adverts that run before the movies.

Was Bob Pearl and Jim Dean there?

They were part of the launching team that did it, yes. Pearl and Dean, absolutely right.

Well, I'm not sure what their real names are, but I always used to love that intro music they did.

Oh, it was fantastic, yes. Yes, so they started way back in the '50s, and it has grown massively, particularly in the last 15 years or so. I think the reason it has grown is because advertising really no longer exists as a thing, and now you've got just about everybody trying to communicate with people in a completely different way. So, brands need to communicate in a very, very different way, so they come to our festival to learn about that, and try to win some of these awards.

When is it, what goes on, what's the typical rhythm of the year in terms of building up to it? How does it all happen?

Well, there are two parts of it. There's the Lions, that people enter. As you mentioned, 30,000 entries from all over the world, from about 110 countries. Really, I suppose that's about benchmarking creativity. If you think about it, if you're an agency, a creative agency, it's not like being a lawyer or banker. If you're a lawyer you can say, "I'm a really good lawyer, because I've won the last 10 cases that I took." Or, if you're a banker, "I'm a really good banker, because the last 10 deals I've done have been fantastic." The problem is, when you're in the creative industries, how do you... it's so subjective. How do you measure it, how do you prove you're any good? Creative agencies especially, but increasingly more and more types of organisations, they use the Lions as a benchmark. Like, if we've won a load of Lions, that means we must be good at our job. That helps them get new talent, it helps them get new business, it helps them with their branding. That's the one side, the competition side of it. Then, the other side is people come to the event in Cannes. It's a bit like the film festival, some people may know about the film festival. It's a bit like that, except it's for branded communications. So, people who come are the brands, like 80 or so of the top 100 brands in the world. Procter & Gamble, and Unilever, and Coke, and Nestlé, and all of that lot. All the platforms are there, so Google, Facebook, Twitter, Spotify, and everybody, TikTok. And the agencies as well. So, it's a big moment in the calendar for these guys.

It sounds to me like there's a lot of responsibility there, because you've the imperative to make it commercially sustainable in delivery. You've got mouths to feed, and mortgages to pay, but you're also, essentially, the de facto arbiter of excellence now, in the industry. Is there ever a conflict? How do you reconcile the two?

Well, the judging is done by their peers. So, we invite jury members, about 400 jury members every year from the industry, to judge the work, so we're not judging the work. That helps keep us neutral. The other thing about it is that we're running the event for the industry, so everyone in the industry feels like it's theirs. When that happens, you're not short of opinions. We just get the most phenomenal number of opinions about Cannes Lions. The good thing about that is we don't really have to have any ideas, because all our customers are actually really creative people. Just about all the good stuff we've done in the last 10 years has been an idea that somebody's brought to us, which is quite handy. The negative side of it is that you just get a lot of opinions, and it's always difficult handling that.

They say opinions are like arseholes, in that everyone has one.

They do, everyone does indeed have one, and they're not always correct.

What have been the big changes over the last few years? I know that one of them has been the involvement of the entertainment giants, from TV to music streaming.

So, brands... in the old days, really easy.

In the good old days.

In the good old days, you're a brand, say Coca-Cola. You want to sell more Coca-Cola, you go to an agency, they come up with a great idea. You go to a media agency, they say, "Let's stick that on TV, or put it in the newspaper." And then they buy the space. Unbelievably simple. Now, of course, it's anything but simple. So now you've got to navigate data, you've got to navigate digital, you've got to understand social, 100 million different things. So because of that, the number of people around the brands that want to try to help them has increased massively. The PR industry is there in large numbers. I don't know if you've been, Paul?

No, I've never been invited.

You really should go.

I'll take that as an invitation, and I'll come on your coattails.

Yes. I mean, there's a lot of PR people there. So the people who've come recently, so it started with the platforms like Google, Facebook, and Microsoft, and those guys. But, increasingly entertainment, like you say. So, all the music industry is there, all of the TV industry is there. Increasingly, the movie industry is there as well. What they're doing is they're saying to brands, "Look, we know how to tell stories, we know how to engage with people, we know how to enact an emotional connection with people, better than those over there, in the agencies can." That's what's really fuelled the interest in the whole event.

Winning a Lion remains the high watermark of creativity. Is it where art and commerce come together?

It is. We call it 'applied creativity'.

Oh, that's good.

Yes. Because there's two types of creativity, there's creativity for its own sake, that's fine.

I thought you were going to say terrible creativity.

No. Let's say you write a book, or you paint a picture. In a way, if it's pure creativity, you don't even mind if anyone really sees it, you're just enjoying the creative act. It

stands on its own, and that's fine. But we aren't about that, we're actually about what we call 'applied creativity'. We are about creativity that changes people's opinions, or changes their behaviour. That can be not just in a brand way, so it not could just be about selling more stuff. Increasingly, it's about changing people's ideas. So we have large numbers of organisations come to the festival from the United Nations downwards, trying to appeal to the storytellers that come to our event, to help them tell their stories. That's the kind of creativity that we're interested in, and are trying to foster. We know it makes a difference. Just about all the people involved also understand that these days especially, the only way to get anywhere in business, or in changing people's views, is through creativity.

You say it makes a difference. People who win Oscars, for example, they know that if they're nominated, it's a certain million dollar boost to their fee for a film, and if they win it, then there's a statistical correlation. Is there one here, between companies that win Lions, and greater innovation and business growth? Can you measure it, in terms of its impact on the bottom line?

Yes. It's been measured a lot, it's been measured a lot. To give you some examples, McDonald's measured the return on investment for their work that had won a Lion at Cannes, versus the stuff that hadn't won anything. That makes it creative versus not creative. The return on investment for the creative work was 54% higher.

Wow.

Heineken did the same thing, 45% higher. Mars have done it, Procter & Gamble have done it. See, because the thing is, these guys on the marketing team, they have to justify their actions, right? They have to say to the board, "We want to invest more in creativity." The board is going, "Yes, but why?" The marketing teams have to have proof, so they have developed, over the years – really, over the last 15 to 20 years – the most phenomenal amount of data, proving that creativity does drive business. I suppose it's not a surprise, is it? If you think about it, it's like should we do an ad that's really boring, and doesn't really affect anyone from an emotional level, and is forgettable? Or, should we do an ad that is truly connecting with people, and making them laugh, or making them cry, or whatever it might be? It's pretty obvious that the latter is going to have more impact.

The event's changing all the time. I know that Chinese films, like TenCent and Ali Baba are well represented this year?

Yes. The Chinese have come in the last five years or so. Ali Baba, JD.com, Ten Cent, as you say, who have WeChat. It's fascinating when you look at what they're doing, because they obviously dominate the market in China, and in a way that really Facebook and Google can only dream of, and they're looking now to internationalise, and they want to find ways to connect with people overseas. TikTok, especially, is doing that at pace. Ali Baba as well, Ten Cent as well. They're trying to find ways to internationalise, and that's again why they're coming to our festival.

The bigger it gets, sometimes it can attract more controversy. I know Extinction Rebellion tried to crash the beach party this year, did they not?

They did. What happened was Extinction Rebellion wrote an open letter to the ad industry in May this year, just before our festival, basically saying, "You lot just want to get us all to buy a load of shit we don't need, so we're coming for you."

Nice.

When I read that letter I thought, "Hello, they're *bound* to want to come to the festival."

Yes.

Because ours is the biggest event. I reached out to them, as they say, I tried to contact them, I didn't hear anything at all. When I got to Cannes, I got a phone call. I was hosting a dinner, and I got a phone call. It was about 9:30 at night. A voice said, "This is Will from Extinction Rebellion." I said, "I've been trying to contact you, because I imagine you want to talk." He said, "Well we want to talk to you, for sure." I said, "Right, let's meet." He said, "Can you meet now?" I said, "Well, I'm just hosting a dinner, but I could meet after that?" He said, "Right. Where are you staying?" I said, "I'm staying at the Majestic Hotel." He said, "Meet you there, then. We've got our bikes, we're in our campsite. We'll come down, we'll meet you at the Majestic Hotel." Now, the Majestic Hotel...

They seem threatening already.

Well, it's funny, because the Majestic Hotel in Cannes, I don't know if you know it, it is literally... I mean, the bar in the Majestic Hotel is basically made out of solid gold. It is the most bling place you are ever going to see in your life.

I always either do the Travelodge, or the Premier Inn.

Peopled by these perma-tanned southern Europeans, dripping in jewellery and whatnot.

I hate them all, because I'm jealous, basically. But it's born of jealousy, I admit.

It's funny. So I went to the bar in the hotel, which I don't really go to that much. Anyway, I'm sitting there thinking, "How am I going to know who they are?" Well, as soon as they walked in, I knew who they were. They were these young...

The great unwashed.

Exactly. Young people, there were four women and a guy. They had their bike helmets, I knew it was them. So they sat down and I said, "Would you like a drink?" They said, "Yes, we'll have some rosé." So I said, "Great." I felt like saying, "Do you want the €100 bottle, or do you want the €200 bottle?" Anyway, we talked about it. I said, "Look, I really want to give you a platform." So we talked about what I could

offer them, and I said, “Look, you’ve got a choice. You can either disrupt the festival, or you can take this offer of a platform. But I don’t want you to disrupt the festival if I’m going to give you this platform.” They got back to me the next day and they said, “Thank you very much, we’ll take the offer.” I’d offered them a speech on the stage, and various things like that. The problem that happened was that I had to tell the city authorities. Because of various things they wanted to do, I had to tell the city authorities.

Of course.

And they closed me down. So the city authorities basically said, “This is a political organisation, and we’re not giving you permission to allow them a platform.”

Wow.

I said to the Mayor, I said, “Look, you do realise I’m trying to *stop* trouble, don’t you?”

Yes. That’s pretty harsh, as well, it’s not for them to decide who can and can’t speak.

Well, he said, “Look, our hands are tied by Paris, and it’s all to do with the Yellow Jackets. If we let... you know, there’s a wedge in the door here, we can’t allow it.”

If we let them get away with it, then Les Jeunes is going to see it as an open door.

Yes. Then, I had to ring Extinction Rebellion and say, “Guys, you know all that stuff I promised you? I can’t deliver any of it.”

That went down like Liberace on an oil rig.

Yes. They were rightly quite angry, so they then disrupted the festival. But there was nothing I could do about it.

I mean, to be honest, I don’t endorse what they’re doing or the way they do it, but it’s still PR, isn’t it? It still gets them in the newspaper?

Yes, absolutely. You know, I did say to the Mayor as well, I said, “Look, it’s not *really* political. Don’t we all agree that the climate crisis is something that needs addressing?” The sad thing, the really sad thing about it was, all of the organisations who might be able to help, and actually do want to help – so, the manufacturers of *stuff*, Unilever, Procter & Gamble, and that lot – they’re all there, in Cannes. They were ready and willing to talk. But unfortunately, we couldn’t build that dialogue, so we’ll try again.

I know that you booked Alexander Nix, who’s the ex-boss of Cambridge Analytica, and he was booked to speak, but pulled out after criticism. I think he

would have offered quite an interesting perspective, really. What happened there?

Well, the greatest quote I ever heard about leadership was that leadership was “making decisions in the grey that are then judged in the black and white”.

Yes, absolutely.

I always thought that was brilliant.

20-20 hindsight.

So, there you've got a situation where I made the decision in the grey, which is we were offered Alexander Nix. I thought, “Here's a guy that, even a year ago, was getting praised for how brilliant he was at what he did.” Also, it's incredibly important for our industry to understand more about this whole thing. So, I felt he could add to the debate, so I made the call, I'm going to have him on the stage.

I think that's a good call.

Well, who knows? It was judged in the black and white anyway, and Twitter went crazy, and he actually pulled out. We didn't pull him out. He said, “Look, I just don't need this. I'm going to pull out.” So we never got him on the stage in the end, anyway.

I mean, Twitter is such a cesspit of horrendousness. I love it, but even I have to block loads of people.

Do you?

If you mention Julian Assange, or you mention anything, I'm a vegan, and various other things. I don't want to fall out with anyone, but you get a lot of grief.

I was talking to some people from Facebook yesterday, and they're teaming up with Twitter and others to try to do this work around... a campaign around, “Let's make the internet just a bit kinder.”

Civility.

Yes.

Obama once famously said, “We can disagree without being disagreeable.”

Yes, I like it.

He was always gentlemanly, even with his enemies, even people who opposed him, who were horrible. He would afford them human decency and respect. It's a mark of the man.

There's not a lot of them on Twitter really, is there?

Oh, there's not. I mean, it's not even just that. You voice anything about Jeremy Corbyn, for example. Here's an interesting question. I've thought of it a few times. Have people always been nasty, but because you meet people in person they've had to have this veneer of pleasantness? Or, is it that there's something about the anonymity of Twitter or Facebook that's brought out this nastiness, and therefore it's actually engendering this lack of civility, this bullying?

Well, I liken it a little bit to road rage. Because, if you think about how aggressive people can be when they're behind the wheel of the car, they would never be like that on the street, right? They would never be like that if they were pedestrians. So, I think it is about that anonymity. I think it's dehumanising, that people just don't think of other people as being human when they're one step removed. I think that's unfortunately a part of human nature.

I mean, do you think that this initiative that Facebook and the like are doing, do you think it has any chance of success? What's your view?

I think it's difficult, because I think, as you say, a lot of it is about human nature. But I think at least the platforms have got the power, they do hold the power to do something about it. There's a great podcast, I don't know if you listen to the podcast Making Sense?

I do.

Fantastic podcast. They had Jack Dorsey on that, and he went into quite a lot of detail about his view of whether you should close people down, how you manage it all versus free speech, and all of that. It's a really complicated area.

Back to the event. You've already set the themes for 2020, one of which is 'let's get back to brand'?

Yes, because there's a big debate at the moment about the tension between performance marketing, like sales-driven marketing, and brand-led work, short term versus long term. There's a great piece of work done this year looking at the value you can add on the long term, branded work using creativity, versus the much less value you can add using creativity around short term, performance work. In other words, really if you're going to do short term work, you might as well just say, "Here's 50p off, go and buy it." Put all your energy and creativity on long term brand building. A lot of brands, I think, are understanding that you've really got to do both, but if you do both very, very well, then you can drive the long-term value as well as keeping your sales up because sometimes marketing people do say, "What am I supposed to choose, sales or brand?" And of course, it's not actually as simple as that. You can actually have both.

You can, but it's also difficult to do. I mean I was thinking of Warburtons bread, that video that they did, the advert with Robert de Niro was really good and built their brand. But then you've also somehow got to sell actual loaves of bread that week. And some sales manager won't have had anything to do with that advert, but will be measured on the number of loaves sold each week and wants to see that figure go up next week, not next year.

It's an absolutely classic, constant tension. And the academics who write about these things, broadly speaking, say, "If you're spending about 60% on brand and about 40% on performance sales, you're probably getting it about right." So it's not a question of either/or, you've just got to do both and do it as well as you possibly can.

What does branding mean to you? Because in the old days it was just the look and feel of a product, it was the logo and the colour scheme. Whereas of course now, people would accept that it's about the values and the culture and so on. But a lot of it is unspoken. I think a lot of the good and the bad in my own business that clients point out is things that I've not actually given any thought to. Is there an element of branding that's actually unspoken, that's maybe unconscious?

I think there is and I think that builds up over time. One thing that we do at the festival each year is we actually look at the words that are used the most often and the themes that come out of the festival. You know this idea of brand purpose, right? So every brand has got to have a purpose of some kind. It's moved towards this idea of genuine activism. So activism is about taking a stand, and if you take a stand, there's a downside to that as well as an upside. And the best example this year was the Nike work. So Colin Kaepernick, for those that don't know, is a sportsman who refused to stand for the American National Anthem.

So, he knelt.

He knelt for the national anthem, right?

It's huge here, as you know, taking a knee.

Absolutely massive. And, of course, what he's doing is he's protesting about the way that people of colour are being treated in the States, right? So Nike made a decision, "We're going to back this guy." Now obviously, that is not an easy decision to make – because you're immediately going to alienate people. And the initial thing that happened was that people burnt their sneakers, they were doing public bonfires of Nike sneakers, and there will always be a large number of Americans who think that's wrong. But what Nike did was they said, "If you're going to take a stand, you've got to take the downside as well as the upside."

Otherwise, it's not really meaningful.

It's not really meaningful. Exactly. That's right. And there are more and more brands doing that. So I think it builds up a story, and a brand is really just a consistent

promise, so when I think in my head of Nike, what is the promise that I get from that brand? And that's what people are building when they're building brands.

And the need for culturally relevant storytelling to engage with consumers who frankly avoid advertising.

I mean, this is a huge thing, of course, because one of the unspoken... every now and again people say it, but the truth is people actually don't like advertising. Genuinely.

So how the hell do you square *that* circle?

You square it really, I suppose, by trying to create content that is of either entertainment value or information value. And that content can be on all sorts of different platforms, and it can be experiences, so Apple are amazing at that, it can be simple advertising, it can be storytelling online, it can be YouTube videos, it can be all sorts of different things, but it's about trying to create something. I mean, I think what brands understand more than ever, and this is one of the reasons why the entertainment companies come to Cannes Lions, what brands understand more than ever is they're actually competing with the best content in the entire world, they're competing with the BBC and Disney, because they're competing for people's attention, just like this podcast, just like people who've got a million things to do. So brands are starting to understand they've just got to compete with these, but they can't just put out a load of shit anymore because if it ever did work, it sure as hell doesn't work now.

I mean it just seems it's almost become overused, the word 'brand'. I have members of my own team that say, "My brand is this," as if... politicians have a... there's a party brand and then a regional brand and then individual politicians.

But you work in that though. That's in your heartland, isn't it? Managing personal brand for people, that's one of the things you do, isn't it?

I still can't articulate what branding is, really. I did a law degree and one of the modules we studied was cyber law, and it was all about the regulation of pornography in America, in terms of defining what pornography is and isn't. And it was absolutely fascinating because videos of people with foot fetishes, if there's a video of people's feet, the British Board of Film Classification certified it U, saying, "Well, it's just feet. But then they wanted it reclassified as Restricted 18 because it was a fetish site. So it was about intent." And the judge famously when asked to describe pornography said, "It's like an elephant. I can't describe one but I know one when I see one." And I thought that was really good.

Similar to that, in terms of the personal brand, your staff talking about that, and when I give advice to *young folk* about how to manage themselves in the workplace, I usually say, "Your personal brand is really what people say about you when you're not in the room."

That means I've got a toxic brand, then. Because I've got listening devices placed all over the office.

And they don't like you, do they? They don't like the... no, no. Yes, so I think that's one way of describing it, what conjures up in their head when they think about you or they think about a product or a brand.

So prior to your current role, you had a very successful journalistic career. I mean, editing Empire must've been a highlight.

Yes, it was amazing. I mean, I wasn't very good at school. I found some old reports recently, and they were very consistent. They basically said, "He seems reasonably bright, but he just doesn't work hard enough."

That was the impression I'm getting now, actually.

But the weird thing was that I just didn't know what they meant, because I was working as hard as I could. And of course, looking back on it now, I can see all sorts of reasons why that was the case.

What was it, the optics?

No. I had, at the time, dyslexia, I've probably still got mild dyslexia. You just think in a slightly different way. It was a very, very traditional school, so I just didn't fit in, really. So I went to art college, I did photography at art college, and I was traveling for a charity in Africa, and when I got back I thought, "I'm going to try and sell some of these pictures," but I couldn't sell any, and the main reason was I'm actually not that good a photographer. So I did three years at college and I realised I'm actually not that talented. To make a living as a photographer, you've got to be really good, it's so competitive.

Was that a painful realisation, or was it more quite workmanlike, like, "Okay, that's not worked out, onto the next thing"?

It started to dawn on me towards the end of college when some people were producing some really, really good work. And I just thought, "Oh, my god, mine's nowhere near as good as that." When I was in Africa, it was a very interesting time in Africa. At the time I was in East Africa, Tanzania and Kenya, and so I started writing some articles, trying to sell them. "If it can't sell my pictures, I'll try and write some articles," and I started to get them published. And actually the first one, you might know this, Tribune.

Oh yes, the lefty...

The very lefty magazine, newspaper. Chris Mullins was the editor, who became a cabinet minister, I think, eventually.

He did, he was a junior minister.

Junior minister, yes.

Chris Mullin, MP for Sunderland. He wrote a brilliant book called A View from the Foothills.

I want to read that.

It was brilliant, about just how miserable the life of a junior minister is. At the end of it, he said, “I set out when I started all this to achieve two things, and I didn’t achieve any of them.” And that was the summary of his entire political career.

Must be so frustrating. He’s not a politician anymore though.

No, he isn’t. In fact, his Twitter handle is @chrismullinexmp.

Is he?

Yes.

Well he was an ex-editor as well, and I remember going down to the phone box – there used to be phone boxes, kids! – and I *rang* him.

Well, there still is now.

I wrote this article about Tanzania, about Julius Nyerere. “Do you want my piece or not?” And I got through to Chris Mullin, and he goes, “Yes, we’re going to publish it in the next issue.” I nearly... I couldn’t believe it.

What did you get, £50?

I don’t think I even got... I don’t know, £20? I can’t even remember. I don’t think I got anything to be honest. But that was the first thing I ever got published. So then I started writing, I became a writer, ended up launching with Barry McIlheney, who I think has been on this very podcast, Empire magazine.

Empire. Barry’s an absolute legend.

I know. So, I was part of the team that launched Empire and then, as you say, I became the editor. It was great.

Were you the second editor there after Baz left?

I was, yes. I was the second editor, yes. He got booted upstairs to be publisher.

He did.

And I was the editor.

I've *always* loved Empire magazine, from the very first issue to now. I think you're our third editor of Empire magazine. We've had Terri on, the current editor.

I know, I listened to Terri's one. She's fantastic.

Oh, she's amazing.

She's just amazing. I was thinking about why Empire has managed to survive, and actually thrive, whereas so many magazines haven't. I think there are a couple of reasons. I think it's always been incredibly clear about what it stands for. And we had this thing blown up and stuck on the wall, it was a review from Time Out. And what it said was, I can't remember the film, but the review said, "This film is really difficult to dislike." So in other words, "We would if we could, really dislike it." Now, Empire was launched with a completely different point of view, which is, "Unless proven otherwise, films are brilliant. We love films." And so I think that enthusiasm and that clarity on what the magazine stands for has stood it in really good stead. And then you've got people like Terri, who is clearly so brilliant at all the other stuff – the podcasts, the social, the digital stuff – that has been part of... what is part of Empire now.

If you're going to buy Empire magazine, you clearly love movies. It doesn't mean you're going to like each and every one, but like you say, you want the default position to be one of praise. I mean, I grew up reading Philip French in the Observer, and he used to frustrate the hell out of me because I would read his reviews and I'd think, "Why are you doing this as a job? You literally hate everything. You must be clearly miserable. And why am I reading you?" He'd slag off every film, good and bad, so it was of no help. Whereas at least with Empire, they're prepared to give it a fair shake, even from issue number one. Sometimes you go and see Mission Impossible 4, you know you're not going to get your brain challenged, but you want to see Tom Cruise jumping off a building and then punching some guy in the face while you're eating some popcorn.

Exactly. And what is wrong with that?

It's still enjoyable. Exactly.

Dave Hepworth, who was part of the launch team as genius editorial director of Emap at the time, and he was very, very clear. It has to be some kind of sense of joy here, for god's sake. And so, I remember I got a review in once, Four Weddings and a Funeral, the guy gave it one star. And I thought, "Why are we employing this person? Because this is clearly going to be a massive hit." Hugh Grant, who wasn't very famous at the time, is clearly going to be an enormous star. It's quite good fun. This is a four-star movie. So I think that's part of the joy of Empire magazine, yes.

How did you get to Empire magazine then? Because so far we've got a piece speculatively submitted to a Tribune and now you're editor of Empire. There must have been an in-between bit.

I saw a job advertised in the Guardian for a writer on Practical Photography. So I thought, "Well, I know something about photography, and I know something about writing," so I went for that job – and that's how I got into magazines. I won a couple of awards actually, and then came to Barry's attention. And I was working for a local newspaper at the time, and I got a call from Barry McIlheney saying... I mean, we talk about it now, it's like, if I had not been in, because we didn't have mobile phones at that time, Barry has told me many times he gave me one phone call and if I hadn't been in, he would have just gone to the next person.

Absolutely amazing.

It was unbelievable. Just talk about luck! And so I said, "Yes, I will come down. I will definitely be in the office on Monday." And we cobbled it together from there.

About 10 years ago, I won one of our biggest clients at the time – we don't work with them anymore – a very prominent conservative politician, and I just happened to be in the corridor when two people walking past were discussing the fact that this politician had made an inquiry about PR. And I thought, "Well, I'm going to contact him myself and offer my services." And that was a big springboard for me. And if I just hadn't been in that corridor, I wouldn't have even thought to have offered him my services. Isn't it amazing how yes, you've got to have the qualifications, you've got to study and everything, but then ultimately a lot of it does come down to sheer luck?

I think it does. And then there's a whole argument about do you make your own luck, and a lot of it's about taking opportunities, isn't it?

But you do make your own luck. But also if you hadn't been there, because you could have been ill. I mean some of it is just genuine out and out luck, is it not?

Yes. And I do think on that particular occasion, as Barry reminds me on numerous occasions, it was *complete* luck that I got that call.

So what happened after Empire, then? Because you also were "kicked upstairs", were you not?

Yes, I was. So I became publisher of Empire. We launched a couple of doomed magazines, I don't know if you remember Neon?

I do remember Neon.

God, I loved Neon. Neon's a great example of actually some things can be brilliant but still fail, and that's a great example of that.

Like me, I'm a living embodiment of that.

If you remember, I mean, we had Graham Linehan write for it, I mean some of the writers, some of the ideas, it was...

Graham was brilliant. I loved Father Ted. He's gone crazy though.

Has he?

I've had to unfollow him.

I can't remember what, he's offended a load of people. Oh, it's about gender, isn't it?

It's gender and stuff.

Transgender, yes.

For me, people can use whatever toilet they want to do, in my view. It's none of my business. I wish them well.

He's upset a lot of people.

It strikes me, it's a bit like people looked down on gay people 30, 40 years ago, thought it was a disorder. Let them just get on with it, in my view. Anyway, that's another podcast.

No, that is another podcast. But Graham wrote this thing on the back page of Neon that was... I mean, seriously, we should have made it a book because it was just complete genius. But Neon failed. We had a magazine called Total Sport that had failed. So I became a publisher and then we bought FHM.

I loved FHM, I read every issue.

I became the managing director of FHM.

I loved FHM. I was in my late teens, early twenties, of course I wanted to see the pop stars in the bikinis, I get that, and that's dated very quickly. But I was never a Loaded or a lads' mag reader, but FHM did it with class and a bit of dignity, and was funny and engaging. I loved the true stories. I loved Grub Smith.

I could tell you a few stories about Grub Smith!

I think to be honest, most of them in his column, I mean if you actually read them, you think, "Holy hell, how was he commissioned to do this and why am I reading it?"

I mean, looking back, if you think about some of that... I mean, seriously... he would... I mean, I can't even say it on this podcast.

I know. I know.

The stuff that we did back then, and the expenses that I signed for Grub, really.

I don't doubt it.

I mean, it was *extraordinary*. But again, it was a little bit like Empire. Particularly in the media, I think it's unbelievably important you know exactly what you stand for and who you are writing for. And with FHM, as you might know, everything in it had to be funny, sexy, useful. When we bought it, it was a weird men's magazine that had men on the cover and it was available in clothes shops. But everything had to be funny, sexy, useful. And that was the lens through which all editorial went. And I think that clarity really helped it. I mean, at one point we had more female readers than Cosmopolitan.

It was a phenomenon. And you expanded it to how many countries?

So, we published it in about 30 countries.

Was there any ones where you expected it to do well and then it didn't, and it was obviously something to do with that territory or that nation?

Well, again, going back to brand, so we had a very clear process. So, we would say to people, "Here are the brand values, and this is what you can play in. This is how you are going to publish FHM in your country. And this, outside of that box, is what you're allowed to change. If you don't do what we say, it won't be successful." And most places did what we said, and it was successful.

So it's almost like a franchise, like if you get a Subway or a McDonald's, and you buy the franchisee, you have to do everything their way.

It was exactly like that. The most difficult country was France.

I'm not going to make a generalisation about our French friends, but yes, I can imagine.

I sat in a meeting with the French publishers and they said, "We see that you have an article in every issue about how to cook." I said, "Yes, yes, because 26-year-old guys, they need to learn how to cook. They want to cook something for their girlfriend." "French men do not need to learn how to cook." And then they said, "We also see that every issue you have an article about how to make love to a woman. French men do not need to be taught how to make love to a woman." They honestly said that.

I'd have to take their word for it.

I'm like, "You do know that young men are the same everywhere in the world, right?"

They are indeed.

"You do know that young men are experimenting and they're a bit fumbly." "No, no, no." So they were the only country that didn't, but everywhere else, it didn't matter. Turkey, Malaysia, South Africa, Brazil, it was a huge success. And now I don't think it actually exists. I don't think it exists anywhere now, I think it's closed everywhere.

Do you think that some of the attitudes to women have dated? Like for example there's a big backlash against Friends, I watched it back in the day and found it hilarious, but now when you re-watch it it's actually quite misogynist and particularly transphobic as well, making fun of Chandler's father because she became a woman. Actually, it's not funny now. It's not that I'm trying to be pious about it, but it isn't. It's based on this whole trope of transgender people are trying to trick men into bed to reveal they've still got a penis and stuff. It's ridiculous. But you look at FHM, I remember one of the columns that I used to enjoy hugely was pictures of men getting on at parties and maybe drunkenly cuddling a bit too close. And it was a ref, and the headline said, "Straight to Brokeback Mountain." Right? Now, I found that hilarious. Right?

At the time.

But you wouldn't get away with it now.

You wouldn't get away with it. And there's lots of things you wouldn't get away with it. Gail Porter, that was when I was running it as well. It was our PR company that did that, but we projected her onto the House of Commons and said, "Vote." and she was naked. You couldn't do that now. Of course, you couldn't do that, probably quite rightly actually. And I think, as you said before, some of the stuff that Grub did, it was of a time, and it's pretty cringeworthy now, looking back on it. I don't think it could possibly happen now.

Why do you think that FHM ultimately failed? Was it just of its time? We were chatting earlier about a lot of these brands have pivoted to social and online and they're eking out a profitable existence, albeit with a reduced audience online only with hugely reduced costs. As far as I'm aware, there's no FHM website.

No. Well, there were two reasons for that. So I think the first reason is FHM stood for funny, sexy, and useful. And you can hardly think of a better description of the internet than... the internet is, by definition, nearly everything on it is either funny, sexy, or useful. So I think that took a huge chunk away from... one of the things that changed everything for FHM was a thing called the Spanish chicken photo. This was before I took it over. But the editor at the time went to the publisher with a photograph of a man in Spain who was dead. He'd been hit by a boulder and he was lying dead. But the twist was that he was actually in the act of having sex with a chicken when he got killed. So there's a photo of a guy with his trousers down with a chicken dead.

The chicken also died then, presumably.

I think the chicken was definitely not very well.

I'm laughing, but it's highly inappropriate to laugh. But there's the genius of FHM already.

Right. So think about a time when the editor goes to the publishers and says, "Can we publish this or is this too much?" Publisher goes, "Let's publish it." It was...

Even though it's clearly 'fowl'.

Ha. But it was a moment in time. So then you wait, you send it to the printers, it goes to the printers, everybody buys their copy of FHM, and they're showing each other this photo of this guy. Right? Think about that now. If that happened now and a picture went viral, it would be in your inbox or on your Twitter before you had your breakfast. You would've forgotten about it by eleven o'clock, all over. We're talking about a *monthly* magazine. That's how long ago it was. So I think the world moved on rapidly.

And you got to start to think about the rights of the guy because he's dead. Is it demeaning him? Even though it's funny, isn't there arguably an element of cruelty there?

Yes, definitely. And again, of its time.

Yes, I agree. It's not a consideration any of us would have thought of at the time. He's dead, he was shagging a chicken.

Yes. It's funny. By definition, it's funny. Yes. So I think there was that. And then the internal thing for Emap, we spent I don't know how many tens of millions on digital. But – and this is a whole other podcast in itself – traditional media companies had a real trouble shifting onto digital. And one of the reasons, to be honest, was economic – because the magazine was getting so much revenue from the advertising. You've got... LADbible comes in. And LADbible, I just got so much respect for what they do. They come in, no legacy, no revenues on a page of dead wood, and they just start completely afresh. And basically, LADbible is moving a bit now. But when it launched, it was FHM digitally. And that's what killed it, and it killed it completely stone dead.

It's weird, because men's magazines seem to have died, and there's almost a sexist undertone that men shouldn't have their magazines. I know there are some notable exceptions like GQ and Esquire and so on, but there's a hugely booming women's magazines market. Is a weird delineation anywhere, like a segmentation? Because actually, as you said, lots of women read FHM and I know lots of my male friends read Cosmo and Harper's Bazaar and Prima and so on. I freely admit that I do as well. The whole concept of men's and women's magazines seems a bit ridiculous.

It does. Back in the day, there used to be a saying that men's magazines were about *things*, so cars, photography, fishing.

Yes, the good stuff.

And women's magazines were about life in general. And that was one of the reasons there wasn't a Loaded or an FHM for years. Cosmopolitan has been going hundreds of years, well, many decades. And that changed because we proved you can actually do a magazine that's just about life, for men. But I think that the death of those magazines, we've now gone back to how it was before. So there are still specialist magazines, but there aren't these generalist magazines for men any more. And I think that is a shame, because they would have moved on and developed, and they wouldn't be the archaeological things that they look like now. They would be different and they'd be addressing different issues. But there's no economic model for it. GQ is okay, it's very high end, it gets all the advertising – it's going to be okay. But for that mass mainstream, there's no economic model for it anymore.

So you've moved from magazines into events. How did that happen and why?

Well, looking back on it, I persuaded myself that I was very smart and I could see the death of magazines. But actually, when I did move, magazines were still actually quite successful and doing quite well. So I kid myself that I knew what was coming with magazines, but also I could see why events would sustain, where newspapers and magazines were going to have a really hard time. And I think there were a couple of reasons why events are so strong. The first reason is people are tribal by nature, and obviously there's good and there's bad to that. When you're running an event, it's good because people want to be in the gang that go to an event, whether it's Davos or Cannes Lions or whatever it might be. We are the gang that come together. So that's incredibly powerful. And then the other part, which you can never digitise away, is the human contact and the humanity of meeting someone, talking to them, bumping into someone, and having an unscheduled conversation and creating a relationship. You can't actually do that. You literally can't do that in any other way than being physically proximate to someone. So I thought to myself, I thought magazines were going to really have a tough time. I was a media person. Right. What media are there? I know sod all about TV; no one's going to give me a job at the BBC. How can I pivot? What can I do to move into something that I think is more sustainable? And I figured that events were those things.

Do you think Cannes Lions can get much bigger? Who's the speaker that you'd most like to attract? Other than, of course, me. And I am available, just so you know.

Definitely. Well, we've had a lot of famous... we've had Bill Clinton. We've had the secretary general of the United Nations. We've had lots of famous people.

Well, that's nothing. I've had Paul and Barry Chuckle. I've had Keith Chegwin.

Have you?

No, I'm only kidding.

Yes. We should have had them. And yes, we've had a lot of really, really big names.

It's like the Davos of advertising, isn't it?

Yes, it is a little bit. We're quite similar to Davos in some ways, but different in other ways. But yes, it is like that. I think I would like one or other of the Obamas. I've tried really hard to get the Obamas, and we haven't got them. So they're definitely on the list.

The key get would be Michelle, frankly.

Yes.

She's amazing.

That would be fantastic, yes.

He's amazing, of course, as well.

Yes. So there are some still out there, but...

When you think of how politics was 10, 15 years ago, it was almost boring because we had some really good leaders, where you didn't doubt their sincerity, and they might get a few things wrong, people like Blair, and Bill Clinton. And you look now at the politicians we have, and you think, "We have been complacent as a society, because look at who's running this show now."

Yes, it's just incredible. There's a mashup of Obama announcing about Osama bin Laden, and Trump announcing about al-Baghdadi.

And yet he still managed to make it mostly about him, didn't he?

Yes, yes.

Anyway, so I very rudely interrupted you then. So what is next then? You want one of the Obamas.

Yes. What we try and do is... the fame of the speaker actually, because we're a B2B business, and I moved from magazines into events and into B2B and there were some specific reasons why I did that, but we are a B2B event. And therefore, actually star power and star wattage is less interesting to people than actually what they can learn from these people. So somebody who's slightly less famous but has really got something interesting to say, and that might be a film director as opposed to a film star for instance, they tend to do much better and be much more appreciated by our delegates than somebody who's just there just because they're famous. So we're quite careful about making sure that they've got something to say, because otherwise

we're not a consumer. We're not about rock and roll. We're about trying to learn, and people to learn things from the speeches that we have there.

What's next for you? Will you be at Cannes Lions for the next 50 years? Will we have to prize you away from the top chair?

I'm chairman at the moment, so I'm involved in Cannes Lions to a certain extent. But I've got other businesses that I also run, and we are acquiring various things. I'm spending quite a lot of time in the US. We've got about 300 people here in the US. So, yes. So I think I'll just carry on and see what happens. I think what's happened in my career is, to your point earlier on about luck, things have popped up and I've just gone, "Okay then." The bit of advice that I give people about career, I do this presentation at work about career, how to manage your career. One of the things I say is, not in life necessarily, but at work, just say yes. Right? So don't say, "But that's not in my job description," or, "Am I going to get some more money for that?," or, "I'm working hard enough as it is." If somebody asks you to do something, just say yes, because you can actually unwind that later if it's a mistake.

You've actually got a stronger negotiating position to ask for more money having done it without asking for money, got the success, and then said politely, "Do you mind if I do it?" Whereas if you just say, "I want more money," from the beginning, it's just the wrong way to do it.

Totally. And it opens up so many opportunities. So I went out to Australia, Emap in Australia. It's just like, "Just say yes. Just go for it and see what happens." And that's definitely the best piece of advice I could give anybody about managing their career, is... maybe not in life, because all sorts of things can happen if you just say yes!

That was basically Grub's column, wasn't it?

It was Grub's column, yes!

And without making cultural generalisations, though, you must see how different countries handle the workplace differently. So you're lucky enough, like I am, to work in America, Britain and Australia. Well, I'm inviting you to generalise, but how is your team here different from the team in the UK? And do you manage them differently? Do you have to approach it differently thinking, "Well, I'll say it this way in Birmingham, but because I'm in New York, I'm going to say it this way?"

That's a great question. And what I try and do, and what I think we try and encourage people to do, is to be incredibly curious about other cultures, to admit and acknowledge that people are different in different cultures, and especially in Asia, and to be really curious about that and to actually ask them. So if you're working with a team in Hong Kong, you actually ask them, "How do you like to be communicated with? How do you want the meetings to run? How do you guys approach this or that or the other?" And be incredibly curious about that and to understand as much as you can about other cultures. But then to more or less forget about it and actually look for the common similarities in people, of which there are many of course. So you

are aware, but then you try to look for the similarities. And I think that if you do both of those things, I think you can come to the place where you're not offending people, and you're trying to get the best out of people. But we've got offices in 14 different countries, 38 different offices, and it can be a real... especially, as I say, especially in Asia. The Asian culture is, of course, very, very different.

How do you keep your eyes and ears open for new opportunities? Because you're on the hunt to acquire things. Do you have a company that does that? Do you just read as much as you can? How do you personally keep abreast of the opportunities pipeline?

We've got an M&A team who do that, but also we get a lot of people coming to us actually in our space saying, "We think we'd be good partners. Can we sell to you?" So we're looking at things all the time, and we've got certain criteria just like everybody does when we're assessing these things. Sometimes they get away, sometimes we really want to buy something and it just can't happen. Other times, maybe it's not big enough or it's not quite in the right space, so we say no. But probably at any given time we've got four or five we're looking at, anyway.

What's the thing you've done in your career of which you're most proud?

I think I'm most proud of what we are doing, and have done in the past, at Cannes Lions; bringing the organisations that need help, organisations that are trying to make the world a better place, such as the United Nations or the Gates Foundation or charities that we work with, bringing them together with people who can tell stories. So the people who come to Cannes Lions are brilliant at telling stories for brands, and they also have a real desire to help to tell bigger stories about the world. And so, when we bring those two groups together, it's incredibly satisfying and makes us proud. So I think that's probably the thing we're most proud of.

Phil, you're a legend. It's been an incredibly interesting conversation. Thank you for your time.

Thank you very much for having me.