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Amelia Gentleman

Guardian Journalist and Author "The Windrush Betrayal"

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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 The Guardian journalist Amelia Gentleman. In 2018, she brought the story of the Windrush scandal, which ultimately led to the resignation of Home Secretary Amber Rudd.
Her work on the story earned her the Paul Foot Award. She was named journalist of the year by the Political Studies Association and the British Journalism Awards and her recent book, The Windrush Betrayal exposing the hostile environment has been shortlisted for the Orwell Prize.
Amelia, thank you for joining me.

Thank you for having me.

Let's start with the flattering question then if we may. I mean you've won more awards quite rightly so than any other guest I've had on. You must have a very well-stocked mantelpiece at home.

I'm sure that's not true. I'm sure that's not true. The thing about journalism as an industry is that we have a lot of award ceremonies. I'm sure we have more than most other professions. So that probably explains it.

Well, let's start if we may with the Windrush expose which shocked the nation. When did you first sense that there was a big story here that needed pursuing?

It took a long time actually to realize that it was something systematic that was affecting lots of people. Because when I first became aware of it, it was just really an issue affecting one woman, which I thought was a terrible mistake that had been made on the part of the Home Office.
So that was in November of 2017 when a charity in Wolverhampton got in touch because they were very concerned about one of the people that they'd been trying to

help, a woman called Paulette Wilson who was 61, and who at the time that they got in touch with me, had just been arrested and taken to Yarl's Wood Detention Centre, which is a fairly notorious immigration removal centre. And the reason why they were concerned was that she was a grandmother. She was somebody who'd lived in Britain for over 50 years, and had never broken the law, had worked, paid taxes all her life. Had worked in the House of Commons for a while and they just couldn't understand why she'd been arrested and why the Home Office was telling her that she was going to be deported back to Jamaica, a country that she'd left as a small child and a country she hadn't visited since then.

You must've been absolutely flabbergasted to hear that at first blush.

Yeah. So on this very, very raw analysis of is this a story for the newspaper, because the bare bones of it were so extraordinary. The idea that somebody who'd lived here for that long was being deported was very, very, very hard to understand. So I spoke to a news editor and we agreed obviously that it was worth pursuing, but it took a while because she was first of all in immigration detention, and then she was released with the assistance of her local MP and this charity, the Wolverhampton Refugee and Migrant Centre. So although the Home Office had let her out just before she was deported, they were still telling her that she was living in the UK illegally and that she was liable to arrest again and future deportation. So it took a few weeks before she felt, sort of, together enough I suppose, to want to talk about it because it's obviously quite a traumatic experience to be arrested and detained, particularly when you haven't done anything wrong. But her daughter was very anxious that she should talk about it because it was such an outrageous thing.
Anyway, we did a piece in The Guardian about what had happened to her, and it seemed initially that it was just something that had happened to her.
We published it and really within hours of publication, I began to get phone calls and emails from other people who knew about similar problems being experienced by people who had come to the UK as children in the 1950s and '60s, and who just as they approached retirement age, were being told by the Home Office that they were here illegally, and were experiencing a whole range of different problems.
Some of them had been detained or threatened with deportations, but many, many more had been sacked from their jobs or been evicted from their homes or denied healthcare or access to unemployment benefits.

You must've got a sense even then just how big this story was going to get, but already, you must be dealing with heartbreak on a huge scale. I mean, this must have been incredibly stressful for you to hear because I'm stressed out listening to that. These are human beings that have lived here all their lives, and I just can't believe that anyone would treat them so abysmally.

Yeah, it really was a stressful thing to report on. It did take a long time though, I suppose before it became clear the scale of the problem. So really for the first few weeks and months, I was trying to interview as many people as possible who'd been affected by this problem.
But to begin with, it was quite hard to persuade people to go on the record because I

suppose we've got a fairly toxic narrative around immigration in this country. And so asking somebody to be interviewed and have their picture taken in The Guardian and to talk about the fact that they've been branded an illegal immigrant, is quite a lot to ask. And many of the people who I was told about, initially really didn't want to talk about it.
So for a couple of months, I had a very, very frustrating time, kind of increasingly aware that there was a systemic problem, but finding it quite hard to pursue it journalistically.
But gradually people did come forward. Law centres put forward people that they'd been trying to help and charities put forward some people who they'd been trying to help, but nobody really saw this as a, there wasn't really a kind of a name for this as a phenomenon.
So it was really difficult initially to explain, even to the news editors and then to explain in a headline what the problem was because it was such a complicated thing. So in every article, I'd have to explain that this was a problem that was affecting people who were approaching retirement. People who had been born in Commonwealth countries, who had travelled to the UK in the 1950s and '60s.

Everything asked of them, been great citizens.

That's right, but people who had come here entirely legally and had lived blameless lives, being branded illegal immigrants 50 years later.
So, as you can hear it doesn't make a headline. It's very hard even in a first paragraph of an article to explain what that problem was. So initially it was difficult to express, I suppose, to get a handle on what the problem was and to explain to people what the problem was.

What came next?

There was this kind of real interesting difference in response from Guardian readers and political response. So every time we published a piece in The Guardian, the response from our readers was one of total outrage. So we had a piece, for example, about a man who had been denied cancer treatment, even though he'd paid taxes for decades, come here legally as a teenager in the very early 1970s. And he went to hospital and was told that unless he could prove that he was British or bring a British passport, he would either not be able to have the radiotherapy that he was meant to be having urgently for prostate cancer, or he would have to pay £54,000. And that story unsurprisingly triggered an enormous amount of outrage from our readers. But interestingly, again, there was no real response from the Government, and very kind of peculiar response from the Home Office to his situation and really to all of the people that we wrote about. And they would say, this is a problem that's come about because they haven't filled in the right forms. These people need to get legal advice and sort out their application forms.
And it was really hard to explain to the Home Office officials, to the press office that actually you couldn't get legal advice if you'd been sacked from your job as this person had and evicted from your home as this person had, as well as having been denied cancer treatment, because you needed money for that. There was no legal aid for immigration cases because legal aid had really largely been cancelled.
So it was curious that the Home Office appeared to blame a lot of the individuals

themselves. And yet the interesting thing was that every time I'd go to the Home Office and say, we're writing about this person, they've been sacked from their job although they've been here for 50 years, they would make this point.
But curiously, within a matter of days, sometimes even before the article was published, the individual would have a phone call from the Home Office or papers couriered to their house from the Home Office, suddenly resolving this very intractable immigration problem that they've been trying to resolve for years.

Amazing.

So it became obvious that the Home Office was trying to sort out these cases one by one, rather than acknowledging that there was a systemic problem.

And what was the nature of this systemic problem then? Was it a manifestation of the Government's so-called hostile environment immigration policy? To me, it seems our politicians have just become completely disconnected from the impact of their decisions.
Or was this an administrative thing where some bureaucrat in the Home Office just was rubber stamping things and not looking into it? I mean, what is the root cause of the problem?

So this took a long time for me to understand, and I mean, it's complex and it's in two stages really.
The first stage is a historical one whereby from kind of 1948 to 1971, there was a system of effectively free movement from Britain's former colonies, from Commonwealth countries, whereby you could come to Britain entirely legally to work in many cases, as so many of these people themselves explained to me, that they themselves or their parents have been invited to work in the NHS, had been specifically recruited to work here for London Transport or in the building sector. So there was this enormous migration of around 500,000 people from Caribbean countries to the UK before 1971. When the law changed, that principle of free movement became very much tightened up and immigration into the UK became much harder. But if you'd arrived, as 500,000 people did, before that legislation came into place, you were here entirely legally.
The problem was that the home office didn't keep records of who they'd let in. It wasn't absolutely clear that you needed to keep those records yourself. You might have a stamp in your passport, but it was only really until the hostile environment began to be put in place under Theresa May's Home Office from 2012 onwards. Because of course, Theresa May was Home Secretary before she became Prime Minister. It was only with this building of a hostile environment against illegal immigration that checks began to be done in a much more rigorous way than we've ever been familiar with in this country on people's right to be in the UK.
There was this coalition government commitment to get net migration down to the tens of thousands. In order to do that, one of the things that ministers decided was that anybody who wanted to rent an apartment would have to have their immigration status checked. Anybody who wanted to access health care would have to show that they were in the UK legally, or equally, if they were to take a job, again you had to

prove your immigration status. For a lot of people who didn't have passports, that suddenly became very, very difficult. So gradually we began to see lots of people who were here entirely legally, unable to prove it. That's when these really catastrophic problems began to happen.

How did people react to this? I mean, obviously the first person who contacted you, she was initially in a detention centre. But were people hiring lawyers? Were some people just trying to sort of correspond with them? I mean, it must have been an incredibly unbelievably stressful time for them with these looming deadlines.

Yes. Then you asked me was this a kind of stressful thing to report on? I think that was the thing that I found most upsetting was that the number of people who were trying to fight this very, very difficult to combat Home Office classification, that you are here illegally, that the number of people who were trying to do that by themselves, at home, with no access to legal support, and often so frightened by the very alarming consequences that were spelled out in the letters from the Home Office, that they didn't even tell their family, or they didn't tell their friends. They were trying to kind of deal with this themselves.

I met some people who did nothing, but who just decided that they would sort of live under the radar, trying to avoid any contact with any state body. They decided not to claim pensions. That was very upsetting that you kind of just have to withdraw yourself from the state, even though you hadn't done anything wrong.

I met other people whose immediate close family joined in trying to embark on an extraordinarily difficult detective process whereby they would be going to local historical archives to try and get records of their entry in the 1960s. They would be trying to visit their old primary school and get records to show that they were actually here in the 1960s. Because the key thing is that you had to show that you were here before the law changed in 1971, but also that you were here every year from then onwards. Because if you leave the country for more than two years, your immigration status gets invalidated.

The burden of proof that the Home Office required was incredibly high, but people did spend a lot of time and money that they didn't have trying to sort out. And yet really upsettingly, often this still didn't prove to be enough.

I met one woman who sent something like 75 different pieces of evidence proving that she had come here in the 1960s from Grenada as a four-year old, proving that she'd lived here all her life, worked as a chambermaid in the Ritz for a while, worked for the Hilton, all of the medical documents and payslips that she could get together she sent to the Home Office and the Home Office said it still wasn't enough. She was so upset by the threatening correspondence she was having from the Home Office, telling her that she was liable for the detention and deportation that she took the extraordinary step of deciding to accept an offer from the Home Office of being voluntarily returned to Grenada, a country she left at the age of four, something like 56 years after she'd left that country. So she went back to a country where she had no close relatives, no job, no money, simply because she was frightened by the Home Officers' classification of her as an illegal immigrant. It was immensely difficult for everybody got this notification and really, really difficult for them to extract themselves from the problems.

I'm absolutely disgusted and appalled to hear that, as a citizen of this country, that my government acted this way. I mean, just to ask a basic question, I run a small business. I understand how I have to take responsibility for it. I know ultimately your work contributed to the resignation of the then Home Secretary Amber Rudd. But was this more of a cock-up at the beginning, where it was a kind of a computer-says-no mentality, no one, no middle manager or anyone, because of a cultural reason or whatever it might be, joined up the dots and thought, "Guys, this is absolutely unconscionable what we're doing here."

I think there are two elements. I think that was part of it. What had happened was at this same period, from 2010 onwards, there'd been quite a lot of reform at the Home Office. There'd been of removal of a layer of staff within the Home Office who would previously have done face-to-face meetings with people. In an efficiency-savings drive that a lot of those people were removed and a lot of the processes became automated so that there is a system, if you've got an uncertain immigration status, whereby you have to go and report on a monthly basis to a Home Office reporting centre to show that you're complying with Home Office regulations whilst your status gets resolved.

So many of the people affected by this thought, "Well, that's fine. I've had this letter saying that I'm an illegal immigrant. They're asking me to report every week or every month at their reporting centre. I'll just go and I'll sort it out with the officials there." But the problem is that there was, exactly as you say, a kind of computer-says-no response, because the people at the reporting centre weren't authorized to listen to what people were telling them and somehow didn't escalate up to their superiors that there was a problem with individuals who'd lived here all their lives being told that they were here illegally.

So in a way, yes, there was a horrific, large-scale bureaucratic cock-up. But it can't be excused only by that because when ministers were thinking about these hostile-environment policies that they wanted to introduce from 2012 onwards, there was a real, concerted drive by David Cameron and Theresa May to think up all of the different ways that you could kind of outsource border guard responsibilities to landlords and to employers and to doctors. There was a real desire to be seen to be acting on immigration, because as you remember, around the time of 2012, 2013, that was a time when UKIP was becoming more and more successful in the polls. The government wanted to be seen to be acting tough on immigration.

At this time, all of the thoughtful lawyers and legal charities and immigration charities were examining the possible consequences of some of the legislation that the government was putting through. They warned that there could be exactly this kind of problem as a result of these measures and the government decided not to pay attention. So I think it goes beyond there being a bureaucratic mess up, there was definitely a kind of willful negligence amongst ministers, who were told that problems could arise and chose, for whatever reason, not to worry too much about those potential problems.

Not in terms of Amber Rudd personally, but did you regard the resignation of the Home Secretary as a result of this story that you broke as a kind of fit and proper result of the magnitude of what you were reporting on? Did you get to speak to her at all, either during or after her resignation?

So before her resignation, I didn't get to talk to her. That was one of the really frustrating things was that for six months I was writing pieces about this, contacted the Home Office on a weekly or fortnightly basis, saying that we'd be publishing another story and could we have some kind of comment from the Home Secretary? The issue really was ignored until April, 2018 when the Commonwealth Heads of Government Summit came to London. Suddenly all of the leaders of the Caribbean countries got together and ahead of the meeting discussed for the first time that they could see that this was a real problem and decided that they wanted to have a meeting with Theresa May during the summit in London, requested this meeting and were told by Downing Street that Theresa May couldn't accommodate that request in the timetable for this event.
One of the high commissioners told me that their request had been refused. I wrote a piece and we put that on the front page of the Guardian on the day that the Commonwealth Heads of Government Summit was to open. That was the moment at which this story went from being an issue that the Guardian was concerned about and our readers were concerned about, to something of national and for a while, an international scandal.

It went mega didn't it? It was everywhere, and deservedly so.

Yes. Because I think that the Caribbean leaders felt that they had been snubbed, felt that perhaps there were racist undertones to that snub. Downing Street had obviously made a real tactical error and, within hours, Amber Rudd, who previously hadn't commented on this, was coming to the dispatch box in the House of Commons to apologize for the appalling treatment of all of these people who'd been affected even though 24 hours, 48 hours before, no one within the Home Office was acknowledging that anybody had been treated appallingly.

She couldn't do anything else though, could she? I mean sunlight is the best disinfectant.

Yes. I felt kind of ambivalent about her resignation because she wasn't, herself, responsible for the bits of legislation. It was perhaps a good way for the government to try and close down this whole issue by saying, "Well, look, the Home Secretary has resigned. We've apologized. Now, it's time to move on." One of my colleagues emailed me when the news of her resignation came through and said, "What an amazing scalp," and I just thought that was quite weird. I mean, yeah, I think I felt worried by her resignation that it was just going to be an opportunity for the government to shut down the whole issue.

Yes, because your intent was never for a scalp, was it? It was to highlight the plight of these incredibly poorly treated people, to understate the matter significantly.

I mean I suppose my job is, as a reporter, is just to do the reporting. I was obviously thrilled at that time at the prospect that the issue was going to be resolved because

there were a lot of promises to do right by the Windrush generation. Yes, for a while in the kind of early summer 2018, I felt very optimistic that these things were going to be sorted out.

Was that optimism well-placed? I mean did the government honour its responsibilities? What came next?

To a certain extent, yes. I think two years on, it is really amazing that 12,000 people who didn't previously have documentation stating that they were living in the UK legally now have it. That means that 12,000 people and their families are no longer worried about the Home Office immigration enforcement vans coming, knocking on the doors in the middle of the night to arrest them. That is, in itself, a huge thing. Lots of people have been given their jobs back having been wrongly sacked. People who lost their homes have been rehoused. A number of people who were stuck in the Caribbean who were wrongly removed, like the woman, Jocelyn John, who went back to Grenada, they were flown back at the government's expense and have begun to restart their life in the UK.
There was a parallel very generous promise of compensation with a compensation fund set up that was due to pay out somewhere between 200 and 500 million pounds to whoever felt that they had been adversely affected by the scandal. Two years on, the latest figures show that so far 36 people have received money from that compensation fund and only £63,000 has been paid out so far. I'm not quite sure that the government has yet fully done right by those affected. Priti Patel is the new Home Secretary, she has also apologized as Sajid Javid did before her. She's also made commitment to do right by those affected.

The thing I think for me that is really upsetting is that a number of those people who I interviewed whose lives were really shattered by what had happened to them have, in the last two years, have died as they've waited to get citizenship and as they've waited to get compensation. A man called Hubert Howard, who was a caretaker for the Peabody Trust, the housing association, who lost his job after being accused of being here illegally, despite the fact that he'd arrived as a baby from Jamaica in the 1960s, he was somebody who spoke to The Guardian a lot about what he'd been going through. I was even able to go with him to the Home Office building in Croydon to watch as the Home Office tried to kind of sort out his situation in the weeks after that apology from the government.
Unfortunately he died in the autumn before he'd had any compensation. He was only granted citizenship on his death bed by the Home Office because a lawyer explained that if they didn't grant it very quickly, he was going to die without it. I suppose what I'm trying to say is it feels like there still isn't a real sense of urgency about how quickly justice needs to be handed out to those affected.

I mean there was discussion at the time that your reports deservedly embarrassed the government because your husband, Jo Johnson, was then a prominent Conservative minister. If you don't mind me asking, was that an easy situation to manage?

It was quite complicated, but I think the situation had been the same for a while in that he had been a Conservative MP for almost a decade and I've been working for

The Guardian for a long time. My job at The Guardian for years has been to look at government policy, to look at the way that government policy impacts on the people it's written for, so looking at policy away from Westminster. For years, what my job has been has been looking at the real difficulties that bits of legislation cause for those who are affected by them.
What I'm trying to say is it wasn't really anything new. I'd spent years writing about how welfare reform under the Coalition Government and under the Conservative Government was causing real difficulties for many people who were seeing their disability benefits cut or who were seeing their housing benefits cut under the benefit cap and under the bedroom tax. There had always been this kind of area of potential tension that we just had to navigate by being very professional about it and trying not to talk about work too much at home.

Chinese walls, I suppose. I mean, to be honest, if I was a government minister, I wouldn't want to talk about work at home anyway because you do it 24/7 and the same for you.

Yes

I'm a citizen of the UK. Can I regard the Windrush Scandal as fixed now and sorted? I mean it doesn't seem to be over for many of the victims. Do you regard the story as done now or are there still some issues unresolved?

I think that this came about in large part because of a series of hostile environment policies that were introduced in 2014 and 2016 Immigration Acts. Although Sajid Javid, when he was Home Secretary, was very careful to say that he didn't like the term the hostile environment, he wanted to refer to it as the compliance environment, there was this kind of linguistic change, but the legislation all remains in place. If you want to rent an apartment now, you still have to prove that you are here legally and you have to persuade the landlord that you're here legally.
The problem with that, for example, is that it makes it very difficult if you're somebody who looks like you might be an immigrant to be sure that a landlord is going to treat you on a level playing field with somebody who perhaps has a very British name, or is white and doesn't have an accent. This has come up this week or last week because there's a legal action been going against the government for a few years now on whether or not this piece of hostile environment policy is racially discriminatory. The High Court found that it was racially discriminatory, because landlords were likely to discriminate against people who they thought might be migrants just in order to kind of save themselves the headache of a potential fine. The Appeal Court this week, last week rather, said that although it was potentially discriminatory, the Home Office couldn't be blamed for that. At the heart of all of this is this series of bits of policy and legislation, of which that right to rent policy is just one, which all remain in place to date. I suppose the idea that we have moved on from it isn't quite right. There is this parallel concern about whether or not there could be an echo of all of these difficulties for EU citizens who are currently going through the process of getting EU settled status so that once Brexit has been realized, once we've left the European Union, that they have the right to remain in the UK.

And although that process looks like it's going relatively smoothly, there is real

concern amongst lawyers who are looking at it closely that there may well be other pockets of people who could find themselves similarly undocumented and similarly thrown into the arms of the hostile environment. Because the numbers of EU citizens living in the UK are so huge, it's something like 3.6 million, even if you have kind of 10% of those people having difficulties with their documentation, it's a huge number of people.

Tell us about the book that you wrote on the subject.

The Guardian gave me a few months off last year and I wrote a book called The Windrush Betrayal: Exposing the Hostile Environment, which is published by Faber, which really raises the curtain a bit on the journalistic investigation, but also on how the government got it all so wrong

And hasn't it been long listed for the Orwell Prize?

Yes, it was long listed last month, and it's a great read.

Congratulations. I shall be purchasing a copy and reading it myself. Annoyingly, I didn't have time to read it before this interview took place, but it's certainly on the reading list. Is investigative journalism in a healthy state in Britain? I mean, surely we need it now more than ever when governments around the world are redefining the notion of truth itself.

I think it is. I think within The Guardian, we've got a whole team of investigative journalists who are currently working night and day to look at everything around the provision of PPE for doctors and nurses, looking at the decision making behind our response to COVID-19. I think we can be quite positive about the state of investigative journalism here. I'm not sure that I describe myself as an investigative journalist, particularly because, in a way, it's what all journalists do. You kind of write about things and try and find things out. I'm not quite sure what the extra cache of being an investigative journalist summarizes.

Maybe being extra nosy rather than just being nosy.

I'm not sure. Yes

Before your current Guardian role, you were an award winning foreign correspondent working in Delhi, Paris, Moscow, and so on. Did you ever feel an undercurrent of danger when working in Moscow?

In Moscow, I didn't, but when I looked back at it now, I kind of can't quite believe that I didn't, because I was there, I've studied Russian and I lived there as a student in the early 1990s, and then I was there for The Guardian and The Observer just as Putin came to power around the turn of the century. And it was quite an anarchic time in Moscow. They weren't taxis, I didn't have a car. If you wanted to get around in the city, you just waved down any car that was passing and paid for a taxi service. The

idea of doing that now just makes my blood freeze. I mean, it's just such a crazily risky way of getting around, but people did it.
I worked in Chechnya quite a lot, which was in the midst of a really violent conflict, and I slightly shudder at the memory of traveling on Russian tanks into the capital, Grozny. I'm not sure I particularly want to do that again. But I went back to Russia maybe four years ago and found it in many ways a more alarming place to be reporting now than it was then, because there was a period of relative media freedom in the nineties and at the beginning of Putin's time in power. I think that really has disappeared and I tremendously admire the Russian journalist, Anna Politkovskaya, who was assassinated, and so many investigative Russian journalists have either died or had attempts on their lives. So I think it's a much more perilous place to be a reporter now than it was then.

How did you actually get started on your journalism career?

So I studied Russian at university and I really wanted to work in Russia and spent some time as a student when I was living in St. Petersburg in the early 1990s translating for a kind of local newspaper there, which was called The Neva News, and I really liked doing that work. I did some student journalism and then I applied for a number of jobs after leaving university. I didn't get any of them, so I started the postgraduate course at City University, which was great, but I dropped out after a term. I got a job with The Press Association and I started with them as a trainee. So I'm always a bit ashamed if people ask about did I have a proper journalistic training? Because I didn't, and my shorthand is still very ropy as a result.

And as your journalism career started to take shape, was there a particular direction that you wanted to take it in? I know as a social affairs correspondent, you identified the left behind people in Britain suffering from cuts. Is changing policy something that's front of mind with your reports?

Well, I've really enjoyed working abroad, and so it was amazing to have all of that time in Russia, in France, in India. And when I came back to the UK in 2010, I thought it might be really boring to be writing about Britain, and actually the reverse has been the case. It's obviously, I think the key thing about enjoying your job as a journalist is making sure that you're finding areas that you are fascinated by, and in a way that's not that difficult. I mean, there is just so much going on that it's sometimes hard to decide where to focus your gaze. I think I'm really lucky at The Guardian because I don't have a job title, so I'm not really responsible for anything, and that gives a certain freedom to decide really from one day to the next what to focus on.

I'm sure you obviously couldn't tell us the things that you're working on at the moment, but I mean, how is a typical week for you? How do you go about organizing it? How do you get your stories? Is a lot of it where you're digging away and following leads or do people come to you know that you have a much bigger name in light of all of these stories?

Since writing about the Windrush issue, definitely my inbox is overflowing all the time with really upsetting and worrying immigration related cases, and that's something that's really hard to deal, because we're not an immigration journal. We can only write about issues. You have the sense that this is something that is affecting a lot of people, so that does remain a bit problematic.

When I worked for the New York Times and the International Herald Tribune in Delhi, they had a quite different way of requiring journalists to work, and we had to send a WIP list every week to the editors, and that's a work in progress list. That's a quite a helpful discipline, because on it you had the things that you're doing today or tomorrow, the things that you want to do this week or next week, and then at the bottom, the things that you really, really want to do, which you think are completely not realistic or not very feasible. The most ambitious things that you really want to do, and they stick around at the bottom of that list forever until sometimes you can actually find that you can organize them.

What's next for you? Will you be a Guardian lifer? Do you want a beat, a specialist topic area, or could you take your work to Netflix or another streamer and move into television?

I really like working for The Guardian. I don't like the thought of being a lifer, but I can imagine that I might be. I'd like to work in Russia again at some point. I think on my list of totally unrealistic things that I would really like to have time to think about, the most unrealistic would be to think about Putin and to get the bottom of how he's pulling all of the levers of power and where he's put all of his money. That would be an exciting thing to work out.

So what's top of your to-do list at the moment, work wise?

One of the things I really like doing at work is trying to get access to places that reporters and readers don't normally get allowed to see. So going into Britain's prisons, or going to the Dignitas house in Switzerland, or spending time inside Britain's care homes, just spending time and looking at things that it's sometimes hard to get access to. At the moment, I'm really, really hoping that one of the big supermarkets will let me spend time in one of their abattoirs, because that's something that we never get to see clearly, and yet it's such a massive part of our life.
And I really am hoping that Google will let me go and spend time in their moderation centres that they've got around the world, where they're looking at what people are posting on YouTube and on their other platforms. But it's amazing, because both of those projects seem fairly straightforward, and yet I've been trying for years to persuade them. So yes, that's what I'm going to continue working on.

What advice would you give someone starting out on their career in journalism?

I think that they have to be really, really sure that they want to do it, because as we know, it's a hugely financially unstable profession at the moment with real worries about what the long term prospects are. So you shouldn't consider doing it unless you really are quite determined, because there are easier places to earn a living. But I think if you do want to do it, you just have to be incredibly persistent and curious about everything.

Amelia, that's been a hugely interesting conversation. Thank you ever so much for your time.

Thank you for asking me. It's been great to talk to you.