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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 down the line by Jamie Angus, Director of the BBC World Service Group. Jamie joined the BBC in 1999 and served as Acting Editor of Newsnight then Editor of The World at One and The World This Weekend, as well as heading the team behind daily news programs at the World Service. He went on to edit Radio 4's Today program during that period it achieved it's peak audience of more than 7 million listeners. And until recently he was Deputy Director of the World Service Group and Editorial Director for BBC Global News. In 2018, he was promoted to Director of the World Service, where he has oversights of the BBC World Service, BBC World News and bbc.com, as well as BBC Monitoring. Jamie, thank you for joining me.

Thanks for having me.

I'm getting a huge imposter syndrome listening to that biography. It's just a meteoric rise through the BBC ranks.

Well, thank you. That's very kind of. I mean, I feel like a BBC lifer and nowadays I think we're supposed to feel that, all media careers in multiple different organizations and going out across a large number of areas. But I'm afraid I do feel like a BBC lifer now because I found huge amounts of really fascinating and interesting things to do in one organization and I feel very lucky in that.

Let's start with some of the tough questions then. I mean, the value of a hugely trusted and accurate global source like the World Service Group, the BBC, the brand in terms of its integrity and its already worldwide, it's really coming to focus, hasn't it with the coronavirus crisis?

Well, that's absolutely right, Paul. And I think we've argued for a long time that the World Service is vital globally because of its incredible trusted nature, the very high level of trust in the organization because we are one of the few really independent and trusted global news voices left. And if that was a sort of theoretical argument before the start of 2020, it's now become absolutely clear how necessary that role is because we're all seeing an explosion of poor quality and ultimately downright dangerous misinformation about coronavirus, the COVID pandemic. And that is a global phenomenon, a global one-in-scale and it requires a global solution, not something that BBC or the BBC World Service can do on its own but as part of a wider alliance of organizations who are committed to helping tackle the COVID pandemic by providing free and trusted information. Public health information, in our case is part of news coverage, we feel that it's an incredibly important role, and actually one that's seen as, deliver really massively growing audiences. In the first part of this year we've seen huge increases in the audiences for BBC News globally, particularly interestingly for our language services, our digital platforms for our language services, the 42 languages other than English that we do the news in. Just seeing a massive, massive increase plus good increases also for BBC World News and bbc.com. That shows that the audiences are coming and I hope we can continue to fulfil that mission as the pandemic continues probably through the rest of this year.

What's top of your to-do list at the moment?

Well, I think it's a combination of things. I think internally as someone responsible for managing the World Service operation, it's a huge operational challenge, right? Because we've got bureaus that are shut, bureaus that can only be partially staffed because of social distancing rules. That's certainly true, of course, here in London in Broadcasting House. We've also got staff who are unable to work properly from home, particularly in countries other than the UK, but our mission to tell the story and a need to do the story has never been greater than before. There's a huge internal management challenge, but also externally there's this absolutely vital need to keep the services going, to keep the lights on, to keep the information flowing around the world in multiple languages and also to rise to the challenge of doing that in the distribution world. The world of digital news is vastly different to the way we first imagined the World Service when it was set up 80 years ago. And to take advantage of the ability to reach people at scale on digital platforms, that's a massive opportunity for us. But it's one that also brings enormous challenges because those same digital platforms that mean that you can reach almost anyone in the world with access to a mobile device at a very low cost, is of course one of the things that's driving this huge tidal wave of misinformation and poor quality content around coronavirus. The thing that is most exciting

about working in the media, I think globally now is also the thing that's making our lives most difficult and making life very difficult for audiences who just want to know who to trust and basic health information to help them survive.

Then, tell us in a bit more detail if you can, about the work you're doing to counter the COVID fake news and disinformation globally. I mean, obviously there's the editorial integrity of BBC journalism. You're going to fact check everything and everything you put out there you're going to stand by. But other than building on that, what more can you do to actually reduce the misinformation that's out there?

Well, I think it has to be on us and other organizations to work in partnership with us. It's true that editorially, some of the best performing contents are basic explainer information. So often if you like basic videos that explain what is the virus, what does it do if you wash your hands, how does social distancing work? These kinds of really basic information versioned into multiple languages, that's performing incredibly well for us as well as the kind of day to day news content. What's the number of deaths in your country or what's happening in the U.S. or what President Trump is saying, all of that's doing very well. But I think there's a challenge about how we get that information to audiences and I think this where social media platforms do need to step up and do more. We speak to them all the time and I think it's fair to say some of the digital media platforms have done really well in rising to the moments of the pandemic. And very often when you go on to Google or Facebook or YouTube, there you'll see, well, they offer what's called the Coronavirus Shelf. It will automatically suggest additional bits of trusted content for you about the coronavirus pandemic, whether that's what you've come on to search for or not. And I think that's a good thing and it's something that the BBC Sports and BBC News, BBC World Service content often sits in those spaces. But one of the things that I'm particularly worried about is the private end-to-end encrypted chat world. And I think that we don't pay enough attention to this relative to other bits of digital media, because of course, on a sort of web page or even indeed on Facebook and Twitter it's very easy to search and uncover bits of misinformation. It's discoverable. But I think one of the really difficult things about encrypted chat apps and particularly WhatsApp is that this material is end-to-end encrypted, it can't be searched. It's often very hard for us to find that something has been circulated until literally millions of people have seen it and that's something I'm very worried about. WhatsApp interestingly have done something for the World Health Organization which we've been asking them to do for BBC News and for other broadcasters for very many years. Which is to allow the WHO to publish trusted information directly into

the WhatsApp environment. So to have a kind of mass scale account that allows them to quickly attract millions of followers and to publish that information in WhatsApp. And to date WhatsApp has declined to do that for BBC News and others and I think that's a mistake. I think that the global COVID pandemic is a once in a generation challenge. The house is on fire and you want to open up the fire hose to the maximum capacity in those circumstances to saturate the environment that's out there with trusted and accurate news. And that's why one of the things that I'm very interested in is how we continue to work with tech platforms like WhatsApp, to encourage them to allow trusted news providers direct access into those platforms, and I think that's something that needs to change.

What do you think explains the reluctance off parent company Facebook and WhatsApp and all of these in terms of not wanting to give you that platform? Is it just commercial? I mean, is it the fact that they're not evil, it's just they don't want to upset NBC and CBS and ABC Australia who might be, they might have other commercial arrangements with? I mean, the BBC because of the unique way its funded only has to stand for good journalism but other platforms, other news platforms also have to turn a profit as well and maybe Facebook don't want to annoy them.

I don’t think it is commercial actually. I think for a long time tech platforms, I'm not just talking about Facebook and WhatsApp, it's to be clear just from the much wider point. I think all tech platforms for a long time have worked hard to avoid picking between different providers and making value judgments around who is trusted and who is not. And sometimes you get the argument played back to you, "Well, we would like to do this at the BBC, but of course we can't do it for you because then we'd also have to do it for Russia Today or CGTN, Chinese state news provider, and so on and so on. That's the way the argument plays out. I kind of listen respectfully to that, but I do think that the challenge, the global challenge we are currently at and means it's time to put all that aside and it's time for those tech platforms to really pick which side they're on. And to take them at their own words and their own face value, they are in favour of doing whatever it takes to ensure that the most trusted and the most accurate news content reaches the most eyeballs. And they have done a number of things to do that and we support them in that and of course we work collaboratively with them on that. But I think there is this part of the tech world that doesn't really want to... when you don't want to take on the responsibilities of a publisher and you don't want to be responsible for deciding who is trusted and who is not. And it's much easier just to say, "Well, all that is news and we don't really want to sort of pick winners." But I think the moment is bigger than that, I think the global challenge is bigger than that right now. And even if it were just for the duration of the pandemic, I think it's

incumbent on both news providers and tech platforms to do whatever it takes to make sure that information gets through.

Listening to your response just then it sounds like the crisis is almost like a global war for influence and information that the World Service is actually kind of fighting in. Do you feel that you're actually competing against stay back to propaganda outlets as well as other news organizations and people like David Icke who are just spewing out random but dangerous misinformation?

I do think that. I think we are in a global information war and it's one that's going to dominate the next decade of the world's development. I think partly that's to do with digital technology and the way that digital news publishing has kind of lowered the barriers for reaching people at almost infinite scale. But I also think because it's become a very cost effective way for states to manipulate global perceptions and I think we have to be really clear about that. The World Service has always been one of the great global influence exports of the UK. It's something that's brought immeasurable benefits to the other activities that the UK undertakes to our global aid and trade mission, but also just to the kind of safety and wellbeing and welcome of people from the UK who travel around the world. And I always say this as a joke. It's a fairly well worn one. But that if you're someone from the UK and you go abroad and you get into a scrape of some kind and you basically get treated well, it's probably quite likely that that's down to one of three UK institutions of global scale. And they are, the Royal Family, the Premier League and the BBC World Service. And I'm only half joking, really. I think that those are the three big global brands that do more heavy lifting than anything else for how the UK itself and its citizens are perceived and received when they travel. And I think that mission is no less relevant and pressing now than it was almost a century ago at BBC's inception, not least because of course coming out of the coronavirus crisis itself and of course having exited the EU, a large multilateral trade and influencing block just this year. The UK has got to figure out how it wants to project its values at global scale to the benefit of its citizens. And we think that the trusted provision of genuinely independent news for the world is probably one of the best value ways of doing that, and I was happy making that case now as my predecessors were 50 and 80 years ago.

Do you think the World Service can fulfil its mission if the foreign office funding is... I mean, is state funding a better long-term solution than license fee funding?

Well, the World Service has existed under a number of different funding models because it used to be wholly funded by the government. And only

as recently as 2014 did they become funded by the license fee and now it has a mixed funding model. Both we have a commercial new subsidiary that provides some funding for BBC World News and bbc.com and the rest is split between the government and the license fee payer. And I think the nature of the World Service is, we argue this, whoever is paying for bits of it you get the same standard and quality of output, you get the same guarantee of editorial independence. And I think in our arrangements with the government and the existence of the BBC Charter itself, of course, is at the heart of this. The BBC Charter guarantees that whatever the BBC produces is genuinely independent from the UK government and the government of the day, or the government structures and more widely than that. And that is why the World Service is most trusted. And we can point to real differences that show why that's true of us and not true with Russia today, right? The BBC has a genuinely open and accountable and independent editorial oversight here in the UK from Ofcom. It has a complaints process that genuinely upholds when we get things wrong, we admit when we get things wrong, we make corrections, which sets us apart from a large range of other broadcasters and, of course, we have the Royal Charter itself, which absolutely sets out in law, passed by Parliament, signed by the Queen, the independence of the BBC, no matter who's actually paying for parts of the service, and I'll stand by that. I'll fight my corner on that one with anyone who wants to come and argue the toss with me, because I think the line of argument that all news is a bit fake and the BBC is just a bit fake like Russia today, but it just happens to be influenced by the UK and not by Russia, that's nonsense. And I'll stand by it and demonstrate with evidence why it's nonsense, because I think it's really, really important that people understand that whatever they get from the BBC, whether they're watching CBBC in the UK or the UK News channel, or BBC World News, or reading bbc.com in Hong Kong, is equally independent and trusted.

What are the challenges that you're facing at the moment? I see, there's the struggle to get on the platform of WhatsApp to combat disinformation. But I also see, heroically, BBC journalists around the world getting beaten up by Chinese gangs, and I've had reports from North Korea where I'm thinking, "Wow, that journalist is genuinely putting his or her life at risk by doing this," that you must be fighting this war on multiple fronts?

Yes, I think that's true. And my colleagues who I most admire, I'm a cowardly media executive who sits mainly in London trying to help other people who are better at their jobs, to do the bits that I do very badly. The people I really admire are the people who are risking their lives, people covering the protests in Hong Kong, people particularly going into parts of Syria and Iraq. Other parts of the world are extremely dangerous to access

or indeed, parts of the world where the coronavirus challenge has been very dangerous, colleagues who bravely reported in Northern Italy, for example, at times of extreme uncertainty about the extent of the coronavirus challenge there. I just try and do what I can to back those people up so that they can do their best work. My job is to provide editorial and strategic leadership for this part of BBC News, which reaches 425 million people a week, broadcasts in 42 different languages plus English, has this immense variety of services. But you're right. The challenges operationally for journalists, have never been greater and actually respect globally for freedom of the press is taking a worrying dip in the wrong direction in a number of countries where we had hoped that things were heading in the right direction. So I think countries where we've seen genuine challenges to freedom of the press, particularly Iran, which is a huge issue for the BBC World Service, but where our Iranian journalist based in London is subject to very extensive harassment by the Iranian state, but also in other countries where you would have hoped that things were going better. Places like Turkey or Egypt, for example. Actually the press freedom climate there is getting worse, not better. Brazil is another one. Countries that you thought were probably on the road to being highly-developed and having very, very independent and robust media climates, doesn't feel like that quite so much anymore. And I think that's a huge challenge operationally for any news organization. It certainly is for us.

And you've also been brave enough to say that non-COVID stories should lead the World Service, like the Kabul militant attack on a maternity ward, which killed two babies.

I thought that was just an utterly shocking and transfixingly awful story. And you know, so many bad things happen in the world that often, particularly news people, get rather inured to it. And that was just something that genuinely, even having been in the BBC for 20 years, just brought me up in my tracks and I tweeted at the time saying, I thought this is the single most important consequential thing that has happened in the world on that day. And I think that is one of the risks, isn't it, of the all-dominating COVID pandemic story, is it can sometimes obscure peaks of the sub-ocean volcano that stick up above the waves, those extraordinary stories that actually aren't, as it happens, part of the global COVID narrative, that just demand to be covered. And I think under the surface, partly because of the COVID pandemic, but also sometimes in spite of it, there are huge global trends that a news organization needs to cover. So the rise of China, and particularly USA, Chinese relations, intergenerational fairness, you know, wealth amongst generations, the changing world of work, that's a massive one that's going to be affected by coronavirus in all kinds of ways. There are these huge global themes that news organizations still need to cover, and I think the risk of any totally dominant story, like COVID, vast and

significant though it is, you sometimes need to just know when it's not the lead and something else is.

You've worked your way up the traditional BBC ladder, being Editor to The Today program and having UK-centric programming. How has this global viewpoint, being Director of the World Service Group, how has that changed? Even as a child watching BBC News, if the Olympics were on, it would say, "Britain has done well at the Olympics," and the lens through which the BBC had to look through the world was there, you'd orient the news around a British viewpoint. How have you been surprised, opening up your editorial viewpoint to a truly international view, because you can't present a global news program with, "Britain's done well today in the Olympics."

Yeah. That's a very good challenge, and of course it's something that World Service teams have been used to dealing with for generations. This idea that we don't talk about our troops. We don't talk about England, us, in the football or Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. And so these are issues that teams are very used to dealing with, but I think it can be a real editorial challenge sometimes, because actually sometimes we do want to lead on a UK story and, sometimes the most consequential thing happening on COVID on any day has sometimes been happening in the UK. So we were very comfortable leading on that. But I think we've had an operational challenge actually through the coronavirus period. So, just to give you an example, we're running a single continuous TV channel now at weekends, because the coronavirus operational challenge has meant that we're able only to provide one channel for UK audiences and for global audiences at weekends. That's not something where we'd have wished to end up, but we're just making the best fist of it we can.
And that's a really interesting situation where you have to pick a dominant UK story that probably needs to lead for UK audiences, but you also need to make it relevant for someone who may be watching in Taipei or Bangladesh or in Nairobi or in Lagos. And I think you get used to making those editorial trade-offs in the BBC, but it can be perplexing sometimes, and a real challenge to us, particularly during this really, really important period where we need to make sure that the right COVID information is available to the right audiences.

My friend said to me the other day, "Why are the news anchors at BBC News channel now introducing the news differently where they're saying, you know, "Welcome to viewers in the UK, but also around the world." He said, "Why are we doing that?" And I said, "That's because it's one global channel now and they have to be inclusive." It must be a difficult balance to strike.

Yes. And to be clear, we're incredibly committed to the two separate channels, the World News channel, BBC World News, outside of the UK, and the UK News channel. But it is only at weekends and for a couple of hours on weekday mornings that we're doing the dual running. And that is purely for operational reasons. It's for the reasons of the numbers of TV galleries we can get working in the building at any one time, but the teams have risen to it admirably, but the BBC World News channel is one of the massive, sometimes unsung successes, of the World Services, funded entirely by commercial revenues. So it takes no UK license fee or government money, and it reaches over a hundred million people a week. It's the BBC's most-watched TV channel, and we're incredibly committed to continuing to reach that audience in that way. It's often said, just as the death of radio was repeatedly forecast, 40 years goes, as John Humphreys will never tire of telling you, the death of television, and the death of linear television is often talked about, but particularly outside the UK, also in the UK, we're seeing huge audiences for the coronavirus government briefings and for the 10 o'clock news and stuff, but particularly outside the UK, linear news television is in very, very robust health, and audiences are growing and not falling. And I think it's really, really important to remember that because just in terms of how we reach people at scale globally, I think the continued existence of BBC World News as a high quality commercially funded channel is absolutely central to that.

You mentioned then about the pooling of resources. I read that the World Service is collaborating with other internal BBC resources to investigate the disproportionate impact of COVID on BAME people. Can you tell us about that?

Yeah. This is a really interesting editorial theme that is just as relevant in the UK as it is around the world. Clearly there's a very specific set of questions in the UK about whether BAME audience members occupy disproportionate number of frontline medical positions and positions in places where they might disproportionately be likely to come into contact with coronavirus. And BBC News is doing a lot of work to try and get to the bottom of this, to what's the actual additional risk factors are and to what those risk factors are based on, but clearly that's massively relevant to anyone in other parts of the world. And if there are medical reasons why certain racial groups or ethnic groups are more susceptible to coronavirus, that is incredibly important information for global audiences. So it's just another way where we see that the specialist journalism that we do in the UK is also directly relevant to audiences around the world.

Tell us about the other things that the World Service are doing about coronavirus? You've got a daily coronavirus podcast, there's new

digital programming. It's not purely about linear television as you know, because your responsibilities are much broader than that.

That's absolutely right. And as I said right at the top of this, the digital audiences have performed exceptionally well, and because you can measure the digital audience very easily, it's very clear to see the linear relationship between the explosion of the COVID pandemic and the associated massive gains in audience reach online. But you're right, that again I mentioned at the top, these basic coronavirus explainers and the video material and the digital news that we produce in English and in multiple languages, and the investigations that we produce in those foreign languages, and then reversion back into English, this is incredibly, strongly appealing to audiences, and we have been incredibly proud to build this global expertise, because having the 42 language services, and we also have an organization, BBC Monitoring as part of the World Service, about 200 people who monitor open source media around the world in multiple languages and analyse it, and what they see broadcast on other country's broadcasters. This gives us a huge ability to see directly into dozens, scores of different language markets, markets that other broadcasters can't understand because they don't operate in multiple languages. I think this allows us to pull together straws in the wind globally, particularly around fake news and disinformation. So for example, it seems to me that there is a huge overlap between what were previously, you might call anti-vaxxers or people who are running online campaigns about vaccination, have massively crossed over into the COVID disinformation world, and this phenomenon of poor quality, what you might call quack medicine, snake oil medicine around coronavirus is something that we've been tracking for a number of years. It's just more come up previously in anti-vaccination campaigns online. And now just as with David Icke, but also in multiple other parts of the world, you see this immense outpouring of digital audience who are intensely sceptical about medical science and are intensely sceptical about anything they're told by figures in authority and mainstream broadcasters, and all of this is coming together in this toxic soup of disinformation, either suggesting cures, which won't work. And that's as true as the President suggesting you drink bleach, the President of Tanzania saying you should inhale steam. These are things being suggested by mainstream figures, world leaders, and celebrities, and they're coming together in this toxic mix with that kind of propensity to push these quack medicine solutions often on social media and chat apps. And the scale of that global challenge, I think, is something that I think the BBC is better placed to read out, analyse, and push back towards audiences than any other news organization on the planet. And I think that's the single biggest thing that I think has come out of COVID-19 pandemic for us, is this challenge. We can probably read this better than almost anyone else, possibly with the exception of the WHO and other multilateral clinical

medicine organizations, and it's really, really important moment for the BBC World Service. We've got to get it right.

How will COVID change news in the medium to long term. Even as a viewer, I'm used now to people Skyping in, and being fewer guests in the studio and so on, but are there any permanent changes that COVID will bring about?

Well, that's a very interesting question. We were talking about this privately amongst colleagues just the other week, about what would we keep? The things that we've been forced into doing, these very, very, profound changes the way we work in a short period of time. It feels to me inevitable now that much, much more distance working will be done than has been done before. And it also feels inevitable that the timescale for getting our newsrooms back to kind of full pre-COVID staffing will be significantly longer than we had initially thought. And I think both of those things will very much change the nature of the world of work globally anyway, not just in news broadcasting. It's also true as you say that the audience's appetite for news content which has been assembled under difficult conditions and therefore is imperfect by the standards of the pre-COVID world, the appetite of audiences seem undimmed and they seem remarkably and commendably untroubled by that. What they want is the content of the news and they seem less obsessed by the very polished way that news providers have obsessed about producing it over a number of years. Now, that's not to say of course, that we won't always be intensely proud of the highly produced and ambitious journalism that we do make and our investment in visual journalism, data analysis, graphics, award-winning foreign coverage, investigative journalism, uncovering important global stories, brave journalism in Iraq and Syria, and elsewhere, we'll always remain committed to that. I'm not suggesting for a moment we won't do those things. I think the way that we do them, the way that we do the analysis and the way that we put the material together, just as you are now putting your podcast together, down the line in a way that you would never have done before, but you're doing so brilliantly. I think we'll probably end up in the same place wont we. We'll be making news in a very, very different way to the way that we ever did before 2020.

Yes. I mean, as I said to you before we started my one golden rule with Media Masters was always to do them face to face if only for my own... because it's easier, but frankly to build my Rolodex as well, it was always nice to meet people and sort of start a relationship and to be honest, but for this changing that, and now doing it down the line, we would have dried up for content months ago. So we only had two or three in the hopper when it started. Now, actually that brings me to another question I wanted to ask, what initiatives have you sort of

shelved while this is happening that you might want to resurrect? What was top of your to-do-list before this kind of happened? I was reading that before COVID, you teamed up with Angelina Jolie, for example. So a world service show delivering news for younger viewers. Are there other kind of some unfulfilled ambitions that you're going to resurrect as soon as the world in theory, returns to normal?

Jamie Angus:
Well, actually My World, the young people's news program, is still going. It's mainly on the YouTube channel at the moment. So it's digital content rather than the full TV product, but yes, that's absolutely right. I mean, there are lots things that we were working on. I think one of the really big challenges for BBC news is that we have to reorganize and transform the way we make the news anyway, irrespective of coronavirus and Fran Unsworth, my boss, and I along with my management colleagues made set of announcements the start of this year about how we want to transform the way the BBC news makes its output, commissions its output to address the need to serve our future audiences and our younger audiences and our digital audiences more effectively. And we have to complete that work, even though it's almost impossible for us to practically do that right now, because very few of the teams are in the building and we're doing that partly because of the audience challenge and partly because of a savings challenge. BBC news has to make some significant savings in the years to come because of other pressures on the license fee. And that is the kind of important work and it touches on your previous question about how do we change the way we make news? That work is going to have to be completed at some point, but we can't complete it meaningfully in a period where we've only got 10%, 15% of our normal staff in the building on any given day. And so both for the editorial challenges and actually for the structural challenges about the way we work to serve disadvantaged and underserved audiences better, we are going to have to keep doing that. And as we start to put all this back together again, we want to put it back together in a way that serves us to the next 10 years, rather than exactly replicates the way we've just come off the last 10 years.

As you were saying that I was trying to think of the initiative that it was called and I came up with delivering more for less, but I think that's the fictionalized version of it isn't it from W1A? It just shows you the impact that show has had. Do you ever do that? You must have watched W1A through your fingers?

Well, it's very funny because there's a... Well firstly, one of my proudest moments of the last five years was walking through the back of shot in the opening of one of the episodes. Because of course they film them completely open in the building it's not a closed set at all. So I was

delighted to walk past with a grumpy expression on my face carrying a latte from Starbucks in one of the episodes that was a real claim to fame. But also they re-labelled one of the rooms. So the internal meeting rooms at the BBC tends to be named after well-known BBC broadcasters and they renamed one of them the Jeremy Paxman room and put a lovely transparency of Jeremy on the door looking really grumpy. And then when they left, they forgot to take it off and left it there and no one's ever pealed it off. So every time we go into that meeting room, it's a sort of longstanding legacy of the building of the wonderful legacy of W1A. And I think every one of us who works in BBC news has felt that there are moments in our lives that go beyond what even appears in W1A. And that is very much in the nature of large news organizations as part of the joys and occasional challenges of working for the BBC.

I'm very good friends with Sam Taylor actually who runs news channel and I texted about a year or two ago because I was watching Simon McCoy interview the fictional head of news channel the actor that plays, I think, I can't remember his name who was on the real news channel. And I just thought, this is more meta than I can actually cope with.
Yeah, I know. I think before we've all felt that. I particularly enjoyed, broadcasting house is amazing for moments like that. And I've seen some extraordinary things happen through that building and I think the moment when the queen came to open the building and Fran Unsworth and the queen appeared at the back of the news channel set and the news readers turned round to look at her. I remember President Sarkozy on a state visit to the United Kingdom came to broadcasting house to kind of commemorate the wartime broadcast from the free French in London to France and a colleague of mine, Liliane Landor, now Channel 4 news, gave a speech in fluent French, bilingual French speaker, to President Sarkozy in the reception of broadcasting house. It's a wonderful building like that. It is full of history and extraordinary quirks, extraordinary moments. I'm very lucky to work there, even though, as I say at the moment it's very odd because the building is almost entirely deserted and has a series of kind of one way corridors and sort of spaces in it to make sure that people don't cross within two meters of each other. And I very much hope that when the world starts to go back to normal, it'll be so lovely to see all my friends and colleagues back in that one place again.

Did you always want to be a BBC lifer? Could you walk us through your career when you went to university and you started out, what were your hopes, what were your dreams, what was the first rung on the ladder?

I used to work in politics actually a long time ago. I worked for the liberal Democrats actually for the first couple of years before I left, well, after I left university, rather. And I tried to join the BBC on the graduate training program and I just, I couldn't even get arrested. I couldn't even get a job interview for the BBC at that stage. I think it was a really good thing though because I did go off and do some other things for a couple of years and think it gave me a really, really important perspective of knowing a bit more about the rest of the world before I joined the BBC. So I was about 26 when I joined and I was a researcher on the Today program. And I remember my first day going in and sort of being compelled to do some rather thankless phone bashing. And at the end of it thinking, I just don't think this is going to work out. I don't think I'm going to like this. Unhappily I went back for day two and three and four. And I was very happy the first eight years of my career were on the Today program, initially as a researcher and a producer. And I don't think I've ever worked harder you know, actually. Well I think the most junior job I had on the Today program as a researcher, I worked longer hours in that job than I think I've ever worked since. And were often in the way of the news industry, the broadcasting industry, but it was an intensely interesting and happy time.

And when you eventually made editor of the Today program, did you sort of look fondly at the researchers and thinking I know how hard your job is and maybe you give them a slightly easier ride?

Yes, very much so. And I think one of the extraordinary thing about today's everyone works at the city, this outstanding tempo that never really lets up. There's a kind of, sort of a slack point of the day from about 9:30 in the morning to about 11:30. But other than that, oh yeah, in the office, there's no one in the office on a Saturday during the day. But other than that, it's just unrelenting around the clock and it never really stops, slows down, or gets easier. But at the same time, it was just a massively exciting and interesting job to do and I really, really enjoyed that period. It was also an intensely exciting news period the couple of years when I was the editor, three years, when I was the editor, it was the Scottish independence referendum, 2015 general election, the Brexit referendum, the election of President Trump. I gave everything to it and I enjoyed it enormously. It was a real privilege to have those kind of moments in the nation's ear at some of those really extraordinary moments of history. I remember sitting there on the morning of the Brexit referendum when David Cameron walked out of Downing street and conceded that the referendum was lost and said he was going to stand down as Prime Minister. Those are extraordinary moments that you have to really kind of treasure when they happen. And they're the really fun things that people really enjoy when they do daily news, the quiet days and the busy days are as interesting as each other. And there aren't many quiet days or I don't remember many quiet days

anyway.

Is it me or is there now more news than ever? There just seems to be so much news.

Yes, it felt like that at the time actually. I think I sort of felt like that after 9/11 actually. The first couple of years I was working on Today, the news was dominated by small, but quite sort of vocal rows about the then Labour government. And every day it seemed was essentially a row about the Labour government's policy on grammar schools or whatever it was. It's become such a cliché to say that the world changed in 9/11. But in fact it did in this incredibly important way that it became clear that UK audiences needed to focus on vastly important global trends that would directly affect their lives. And I think that became clear again in 2008, of course, in the global financial crisis, that things that happened in America or Japan or elsewhere around the globe could have this huge, tangible effect on the lives of UK audiences. And I think that's why it's been particularly interesting professionally for me in this period to work both in global broadcasting and in UK facing output to bring those two together, to bring those two audiences and sets of interests together.

What were some of the highs and lows of editing the Today program? John Humphrys was in his pomp, I'm a big fan of John by the way, he's been on the podcast. Where you're managing some very talented egos and you introduced Mishal Husain didn't you to the program? She was a huge success.

Yes. She's been brilliant and it was everything I had hoped it would be. And she takes all the credit for that and none to me really. But I'd worked with Mishal a bit on world news actually during a previous stint at world news. And I could never quite understand how Mishal hadn't already been snapped up to do UK output. And I think when I applied for the job, I was lucky in a way that when I applied for the Today editors job, it was generally accepted that there was going to be an additional female presenter appointed because at that period, this is at the beginning of a much longer conversation about fair representation of women and equal pay for women in the media. But there was an acceptance that there needed to be two women and two men presenting the Today program, there being only one woman presenter at that time. So, I kind of went into the job interview, it was very clear that there was going to be a set of questions about who the next presenter of the Today program should be. And I was actually very clear even in the interview that Mishal was the person who I thought should do it because I thought she had all of the skills and could make a really clear case for why she should do it. I was very pleased to get that over the line. I think it's been vindicated and she's done it brilliantly. I think also

because there's a kind of magic about the Today program that you can't really teach people how to do it. You can either do it or you can't. You can help people get better when they're doing it, but just the extraordinary sort of intimacy of the radio program, but also being in this unbelievably pressured cockpit around setting the daily news agenda and not everyone can do that and I just think she has done it fantastically well.

I mean, one of the biggest tributes to the BBC integrity of its journalism is that one of the most trusted sources for me when something goes terribly wrong for the BBC and it's in crisis, which seems to happen every two or three years, is the BBC's own coverage. I've never known a more impartial coverer of its own misfortune. I remember when George Entwistle was on the Today program on that Saturday morning and John was rightly holding his feet to the fire and I was thinking, I felt sorry for him. I thought this guy's finished, but I also thought, wow, where else, what other organization would actually hold their own in effect chief executive to account in that way in, in such a forensic manner.

Yes, I mean, interestingly, I'd worked on Today in 2003, 2004, so that was in a period around the death of David Kelly and the Hutton Inquiry. Although I was in a much more junior role on the program, I'd seen the program go through this extraordinary period where the program and its own coverage was the lead story for what like about six months. It was probably a lot less than that. And so I'd sort of seen what happens to a news program, a news organization when it becomes the story. And so when it happened at subsequent points during my career, I did feel a bit like at least I'd lived through it once in the past and had some idea of what a difficult challenge that was, and it's a really, it is a difficult point for Today. It happened again, it just happened again around and about the election during the period where the government didn't want to put people on the program. And suddenly, there's a whole series of stories about, "Oh, is there a crisis at Today?" And my own perspective on it is that you can always ride that story any day of any year, if you really feel like it and Today has to have, and does under Sarah after me, have a really clear sense of its own direction and you just have to tune all of that stuff out of it and just get on with the day job, because otherwise you just get massively distracted by this kind of noise and you end up making poor editorial judgements because of it.

We've had Sarah on about a year or so ago, and she'd only been in post a couple of months. She was obviously a fantastic interviewee and we actually got to go to the Today studio to interview her so I felt that was a pretty special day. I mean, you mentioned then about editorial calls that you have to make. You're always going to second

guess them afterwards, aren't you, but you have to make them in the moment. How do you go about doing that? For example, you let Nigel Lawson on, to defend his Climate Change denial. Now I don't think that would even be allowed under BBC rules, but as a listener, I actually quite, I quite liked the fact that someone was going to have him on. He's a former Chancellor of the Exchequer and it needed someone to say, "Look, Lord Lawson, what are you on about, son?" And yet you get people that say, you shouldn't have given him a platform. Climate science is not in doubt, you know, blah, blah, blah. How do you tackle something like that where you're just not going to win?

Yes, thanks for mentioning that one. I felt mixed feelings about that. So I entirely accept that it wasn't a great item. It didn't really go as we'd intended and we were quite rightly pulled up on it so I don't have a problem with that at all. And also I don't have a problem with the idea that, eminently sensible idea that climate science should be debated between qualified climate scientists and that a clear distinction should be drawn between the policy and economic implications of climate science which I think is, which something, it is perfectly legitimate for Lord Lawson to be interviewed on and the basic materiality of the science itself. And I think that, you know, where BBCs ended up with the guidelines now is it's been very well understood by its editors as eminently sensible, but at the same time, I do feel there's a bit of what you suggest, which is that it's okay for there to be a range of views aired on the BBC. Some of which some people will find irritating and Nick Robinson's been great on this actually, and Nick's really sort of taking the fight out on this subject, on social media all the time. During elections and other periods, we have to put views on air, which some people will violently disagree with. And the question is not, are they not put on air at all? But it's whether they're appropriately challenged and whether their appearance on air is proportionate to their sort of relevance in the overall debate. And I think as long as we hold onto those kinds of things we won’t go too far wrong.

I mean, you were parachuted in as acting editor of Newsnight after the Savile fiasco. How does that feel where you sort of, you're there to sort of "fix the problem" and what do you do roll your sleeves up? What was the first priority? Is it to sort of calm the staff down because they must have felt pretty shaken after what happened?

It was probably one of the most extraordinary periods of my career actually, it was a very odd time. Karen O'Connor, of course, was also with me. I should give her quite a lot of the credit. She was the Acting Editor for a bit and then, then it was me. And I think it was a period where, again, I just talked in the last answer about, you just need to focus on the next day's

program and then the next day's program, and then the next day's program after that, because if you got too obsessed with trying to manage this extraordinary, sort of roiling news story going on around you, you would just be unable to put any output out. It was an extraordinary period because there was genuinely a question for a while only for a short while I think as to whether the program would actually come back and whether it would be taken off air for a period, it was coming up to Christmas. So there was some suggestion that it might come off air for until after Christmas. And that was very, very difficult for the staff working on the program. Not least because the overwhelming majority of the staff on Newsnight at the time had had nothing to do at all either with the initial Jimmy Savile story, which didn't appear, nor the subsequent Lord McAlpine story, which did appear wrongly. And so these were just good journalists doing their jobs, News night's a fantastic institution. I was really, felt immensely proud to have played a bit part in its period. I was there for about nine months in the end. It was fascinating, and the sort of drama of putting out a once a day program, particularly late evening one is you don't get it elsewhere. It's very, very different from the rhythm of Today, actually, and then I went straight from the one to the other, I went straight from doing Newsnight back to Today. So the whole day is kind of back to front topsy turvy. So it was an extraordinary period, but looking at News night's success now, you know, extraordinary numbers they've been delivering in the, particularly in the COVID period now under Esme. I think it's a very good thing that's BBC kept the faith in it and backed it, because it was a really, really difficult time.

I mean, you're one of the BBC bigwigs now. You're at the top of the tree as it were, but what advice would you give to someone starting out now at the Today program as a researcher on the first rung of the last day that wants to be director general 30 years from now, what are the secrets to success to work their way up the ladder, as someone who's successfully done that within the BBC?

Well, I suppose from my own experience, I would say don't ever get too narrowly focused on one part of the BBCs activity or one part of its audiences. Because I think, what I've hugely benefited from is the ability to move around within news, to work on different output for different audiences. And actually I think that the culture in BBC News now, where we actually encouraged staff to do that, to move around between the World Service and Network News and in other parts of Network News is massively valuable. I also think that the ability of young, good journalists now to effectively kind of self-commission and self-publish in the digital world is a fantastic opportunity. And when I started my career 21 years ago, it was very difficult to produce certainly television, to a lesser extent radio, without quite a lot of sort of technical support. And it made it harder for our younger staff to sort of make their presence felt and to impose their own agenda and

understanding of the world on an older generation who kind of controlled all the output strings. And although there's still an element of that within BBC News, I do think it's a fantastic, exciting place. When I look at some of the younger staff in the World Service who have come on as essentially digital first journalists and are absolutely tearing up and putting the rest of us to shame because they don't see any constraints on being able to understand the world's commissioned digital content, knock it out relatively quickly, at really high standard almost as a sort of standalone journalism operation. I think that's a really exciting feature of being a young journalist now, one that certainly didn't exist 20 years ago.

What's the next move for you personally now? I was at Davos. He said, name dropping and I was at a party and I actually spoke to Tony Hall for about 25 minutes. And I was saying to him, "You know, he's been so close to coming on and then normally sort of cancels it with day's notice, because there's a crisis and he has to deal with it. Of course I get that, but I'm worried that he's going to end up standing down before I finally get him on. Are you going to be the first Director General of the BBC that I actually manage to get on the podcast?

No, I have no interested in that and actually looking at Tony over the last, what is it? Seven, seven years. Six years. So Tony's been doing it. I mean, goodness knows that was a tough job before, but I think the job of the Director General now actually I think requires an almost impossible mix of strategic skills, political smarts, diplomacy, an incredibly detailed and networked understanding of the kind of the broadcasting world and the digital world. And I think the climate in which you'll be doing it as Director General is going to be a really tough and challenging one. I'm not, you know, of course it was tough and challenging for Tony and for others before him. But I think it's just an extraordinary and immensely difficult job, and I'm, I think like everyone else, I'm interested to see who our new leader will be and to hopefully try to help them solve some of the problems of getting our massively important news content all around the world. And it's going to be a really exciting and interesting couple of years.

I was speaking to someone a couple of weeks ago, who's very high up in the BBC, and he was saying that the problem with the role of Director General is, and he likened it to being Governor of California, that it's almost ungovernable. It's almost, as you hinted out there by design an impossible job.

Yes, I think that's right, and you refer to the period where George Entwistle, a very short, short-lived Director General, and incredibly unfortunate because it's something that things can happen in the BBC that the Director General is almost inevitably unsighted on. It's just the nature of an

organization that produces so much output and it's something I face a bit myself in the World Service, you're trying to lead an organization strategically and editorially, but you cannot possibly keep cross it's linear output, in even one language. I mean, let alone the 42 language services that the world service operates in. And so there's an element of sort events can always derail you in a way that is unfair on the staff and unfair on you and distracting and so on. And imagine that multiplied all the way across the BBC. It's an unbelievably difficult job, but actually I'm an optimist, I'm a glass half full person, because I think that the case for the BBC over the coming years will be need to be made forcefully and with passion, but my personal belief is the case has never been stronger. And while there will be certainly be, you know, operational questions, funding questions, questions around the license fee and other areas, and you know, the changing world with Netflix and the video on demand players and so on. I actually believe that the basic case for a universally funded public broadcast has actually never been stronger than it is now. I think that the nature of the challenges we're facing, particularly around the multiplication of fake news and toxic news globally, as well as in the UK, I think the case for having a really stable and trusted public broadcaster is stronger and not weaker as the years go on. I really look forward to watching somebody make that case forcefully.

Jamie that was a hugely interesting conversation. Thank you ever so much for your time.

Thank you very much for having me.