

## **Jon Sopel** **North America Correspondent, BBC**

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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 John Sopel, the BBC's North America editor. John has had a front row seat during the explosive Trump presidency reporting every twist and turn from the White House and beyond. As a member of the White House press corp, he's accompanied both President Trump and Obama on Air Force One and interviewed President Obama at the White House. He joined the BBC in 1983 and soon garnered national acclaim in his extensive reporting across UK politics. John has reported from Paris, presented the politics show Newsnight, and anchored the BBC News Channel. He's travelled extensively across the US and recently rode a Harley Davidson down the West Coast. He's the author of several books, including *If Only They Didn't Speak English: Notes from Trump's America*. John, thank you for joining me.**

A great pleasure to be with you.

**So with a bitter presidential election on the horizon, Coronavirus sweeping the US, have you ever known a news cycle as crazy as this?**

No, I've never known anything like this, but I suspect we're all in the same boat in whatever life we lead. I'm in a situation now where I'm speaking to you from Washington, DC. If my wife wanted to come out and join me here, she couldn't get into the country. If I went back to the UK, it's far from clear whether I would be able to get back into the US. I had imagined that I would spend this year barely in my apartment at all, traveling non-stop and the reverse is true. I'm staying in my apartment and traveling very little and I can't quite imagine what the presidential campaign is going to look like. I've done US presidential campaigns before, this is going to be nothing like anything that has happened.

**My flabber is gasted about what happens on a daily basis. Just when I think that Trump couldn't shock me anymore and has lost the capacity to shock me, the very next day, he then shocks me with something else. Are you just constantly flabbergasted yourself?**

Yes, it's a very good way of putting it. I thought I had got a steel reinforced jaw, but it

still at times is capable of hitting the floor with something that the President will tweet or say and we've had instance of it this week, where he went after America's only black top tier NASCAR driver. NASCAR is the very popular motor racing sport, very beloved of white Americans, dare I say redneck. And he went after this driver, after a noose was found in his garage. There was a noose found in his garage. The FBI investigated, found it had been there a little while ago, but Donald Trump tweeted at the beginning of this week, 'when is Bubba Wallace going to apologize?' Even Donald Trump's most ardent followers said, what does he got to apologize for? And so you get things like that, or today we've had a tweet about, the only reason that Coronavirus is rising, the numbers are rising is because we're doing more testing and that's just not objectively true. The testing has broadly been similar for the past two to three months, but in the past 28 days, America has had a million more Coronavirus cases. I don't want to be on air every day saying liar, liar, pants on fire, halfway up the telephone wire, because I think that that is rude, discourteous. But at the same time, I think that if there is obvious falsehood, if we don't point that out, if statements are said that are untrue, then I think we are failing in our job. And that is the real challenge that we have. People have said to me, do you mind when Donald Trump is rude to you and calls you "another beauty" or whatever it was after a famous encounter we had in the White House? I say, absolutely not. He can call us fake news, he can call us the enemy of the people. I think we've got to be polite and scrupulous and fair and balanced in the way we report. But if we see things that are not true, then I think we are letting down the public, if we don't point that out.

**Does it trouble you that, even here in the UK, in terms of Brexit and in terms of Trump with his supporters, that sometimes they don't even care that he's lying? That's one of the things that dismays me the most is that it doesn't seem to be about the truth anymore. There's that old cliché isn't there, that Trump's supporters take him seriously, but not literally and his opponents take him literally, but not seriously. I've got friends who support Trump in America, and they'll say, yeah you wouldn't have him over to dinner and he's a salesman, that involves a bit of BS. And I feel like saying, no, he's the President of the United States, you're supposed to leave the BS at the door.**

Look, Donald Trump has got his job to do as he sees fit. I think there was a view that predominated between November 2016 and January 2017, when he was inaugurated, that the presidency would change Donald Trump. I think it's been the other way round, Donald Trump has changed the presidency. And so immediately we got the claim on day one, day two, he was inaugurated on a Friday, Saturday he goes to CIA headquarters and proclaims that the audience for his inauguration was the biggest ever. And you just say, well, it wasn't, there were far more people at the Obama inauguration, in his first inauguration. You just look at the photos from the Washington Monument and you can see that that is absolutely true. And so we've had to call this stuff out because I think that if you let things go, then you are letting falsehoods seep into the coverage. Then we are fake news. We are participating and willing accomplices in fake news. And I think that's a very, very bad place to be. I had this extraordinary incident when Donald Trump came over to London and there was a new joint news conference that he and Theresa May were having at Chequers. And Donald Trump made a claim about how he had been at his golf course in Scotland the day before the Brexit vote, June the 22nd. And that he had held a news conference at his golf course at Turnberry, sitting on the ninth tee and how he had

predicted the result of Brexit and what was going to happen the next day. And he said, "The journalist didn't believe me, but I told them it was going to happen, I was convinced that Britain would vote for his independence, just like America wants a new start". And he went on like this. So I tweeted, how bizarre, the President says that he was there the day before Brexit. I was there with him. It was the day after Brexit. And I didn't think that this was a big deal at all, but I was just pointing out in a slightly jovial manner that what the President was claiming bore no relation to reality. But then a woman called Stephanie Grisham tweeted me back and said, "Yes, he was, and I was there with him". Stephanie Grisham at that time was the Director of Communications to Melania Trump, to the First Lady. So a White House official, who knew this not to be the case, was prepared to efficiently state on the record that he was there. So I produced Donald Trump's tweet from the 24th of June saying, "Just arrived in Scotland, place going mad, Britain's voted for Brexit". That's the bit of it I can't understand, where people knowingly, willingly support a falsehood because they expect that to be what the President wants and no attempt at telling the truth even though there are such things as objective and verifiable facts. And that at times I find a bewildering.

**Why do you think they do it then, do you think it is that mafia style, just blind loyalty that their boss has said this so it's my job to back them up? Or do you think that when she's writing that she's being deliberately dual minded and not checking, just blindly asserting that to be true, and obviously clearly having a duty to have checked first and didn't. Do you think that she actually believes that in the moment when she's replying to you or do you think she knows it to be an outright lie?**

Paul, you're asking me to be a psychiatrist now and a psychologist and a mind reader. I have a limited skillset and that isn't one of them. I find it hard to put into words why people do some of the things that they're doing. It's interesting, the people that have flourished most from the Trump White House, who've left, are the people who've tended to stay away from the camera and not said anything. So Sean Spicer is now doing Dancing with the Stars and there's a sideshow after he had to defend the President. But Hope Hicks, who was a very influential figure in Trump's White House, never, ever spoke on camera. And I think largely because of that, she's done very well on the outside because obviously if you have to go in and defend something that's not true, it ends up casting doubt on your own integrity. And so I know someone who was asked to be the Director of Communications at the White House, an American, a Patriot, a Republican, would do anything to help his country, and he just couldn't see a way of doing that job and emerging with his integrity intact. And so, although Donald Trump has repeatedly boasted that he picks the best people, actually an awful lot of people who think it would be great to be in Donald Trump's orbit end up getting burnt up when they try to leave the Trump atmosphere and they're cast into outer space in a thousand different pieces.

**One of my clients is Anthony Scaramucci and he obviously lasted 11 days. Although he says 12 days, but I'll have to be careful because I know he'll be listening, but he tried his best to be as loyal as possible. Tried to defend Trump but attacked some of his policies, which he thought was a fair and reasonable way to do it. And then after he went on the Bill Maher show and Trump started attacking Deidre, his wife, he obviously has realized that he's not a very nice**

**guy and has now become a vociferous critic. But again, it's one of these things that you're either in the tent or you're not and the minute you're cast out then your persona non grata. And I always worry about even how short sighted that management style is. Why would he be loyal to Trump now, knowing that if you leave you're then going to be called all kinds of horrible names at the end? How could it possibly engender loyalty?**

Well, there is fear and actually, do you know what I was with some people the other day, and we were talking about some of the people that have been and gone from the Trump administration. They still do feel loyal. There is a charm to Donald Trump, as well as a menace to Donald Trump. And so I think we tend to see the menace and there are times when it's like a drive by killing that someone falls out of favour and bang! The dogs of war are unleashed on that poor particular person and they have no idea what is hitting them. So I think that it's a very odd relationship that he has with his staff, but ultimately what people say, and you don't need to read just journalist accounts. Look at the Bolton book about the way decisions are made in the White House. It is dysfunctional. It is disorganized. It is capricious. It is subject to presidential whim in a way that we've not seen in any of our lifetimes before. People make the comparison with Nixon. Nixon was a very clever, meticulous politician. Look, he was undone by Watergate, but there were elements that were similar. His relationship with the media, his paranoia. But Nixon was a very thoughtful, careful politician, whereas you sense with Donald Trump and if you look at the accounts of some of the people that have worked most closely with him, and I'm thinking of Jim Mattis, the former Defence Secretary, I'm thinking of John Bolton, the former National Security Advisor, Rex Tillerson, the former Secretary of State, just so that you don't think that this is fake news, that they say that, out of nowhere, Donald Trump will make an announcement of this or that, or the other, nobody knew it was coming. And then there's this sudden scramble to block it, to stop it or to undo it. And so that is what is so unique. We started the conversation talking about what it's like being called fake news and whatever else. There's never been a worst time to be a journalist in terms of the abuse you get. But in terms of the stories, there's never been a better time. As we're sitting doing this recording, I've just seen that the Supreme Court has ruled against Donald Trump and that the Southern District of New York courts are entitled to seek Donald Trump's taxes. He will be seething about this. It is an endless show. It is relentless. It is 24/7 of things coming at you. And sometimes I think, Jon Sopel, how have you changed in the six years that you've been in Washington? I sometimes think I've now got attention deficit disorder because I sit at my laptop and I write, this is the most momentous thing to have happened in American history since the founding fathers. And three days later, I can't remember what it was that I was writing about because the speed at which things are happening, and that is the bewildering, astonishing thing about the beat that I'm on at the moment, which honestly, I was sat in the Rose Garden yesterday and sweated and sweated because there was no shade and it was 34 degrees. And we were waiting for a press conference with the Mexican president and Donald Trump. We waited for an hour. They came out, the Mexican president made a long speech and they didn't take a single question, I think, oh my Lord. What is this for? This is agony. Why am I doing this? But you wouldn't miss it for the world.

**To what extent do you think the American people know what they're doing here? Some Trump supporters would say it's a corrective that Washington had**

**got too polluted or too polished, too disconnected from the so-called flyover States, if I could disparage the middle of America like that. That they've done this deliberately as a cost correction?**

Oh, I think there's a good deal of truth in that. I think that they love the fact that Donald Trump was able to come along. Just little things, Donald Trump married three times, five children from those three marriages. Could Barack Obama have stood for an election if he had been married three times with five children from three different...? Not a chance. The narrative would have been completely different, but with Donald Trump, it became a positive. The fact that he takes shortcut on his taxes, the fact that he lies a bit, the fact that he's a bit of a womanizer, that he enters into locker room talk. Who would have ever imagined in America, where actually religion plays a much, much bigger part in public life and political life than it does in the UK, who would have imagined that Donald Trump would emerge with 83% of the vote of white evangelicals in 2016. A character less likely to appeal to evangelicals it would be hard to imagine, and yet he did that, and so you kind of think that Donald Trump is given a latitude that no other politician that I've ever reported on has been given. And the fact that he paid off a porn star just before the election, \$130,000, you carry on and on and on, and I can list endless examples, and people shrug their shoulders. And that is because they never expected Donald Trump to be a conventional politician. If Joe Biden did those things, if Mitch McConnell did those things, if any number of kind of senior American political figures that I could name now -

**They'd be finished, wouldn't they? It'd be game over.**

Yeah, it'd be game over, and Donald Trump just sails through it, and he has got a coating of perma-tan and Teflon, and it chips a bit, but it's not really gone wrong yet.

**I mean I remember during the presidential campaign, I gave Donald Trump about 5% chance, and then when grab them by the pussy came out, I danced a jig because I thought, "Well, obviously no self-respecting American would vote for someone like that. That 5% chance has now gone down to zero. So congratulations president Hillary." The conventional wisdom that this man has turned on its head, I freely admit now that I obviously don't know anything, because are there any rules to learn and live by now in politics? Because it seems to me that all bets are off.**

I'll tell you what I saw during the campaign, and it became very clear to me. I went to see Donald Trump give his first rally and it was August of 2015. So 15 months before the election, and he did this rally in Dallas, Texas, and there were thousands and thousands and thousands of people who turned up, who'd made costumes for Donald Trump, who ... it was like they were going to the final of Strictly Come Dancing and they were all getting in the mood for it. It was the sort of Rocky Horror Show meets politics, where they were kind of wanting to be part of the entertainment, the show, the performance, and so it was a really amazing moment, and that enthusiasm for Donald Trump I saw wherever I travelled around the country, and I never saw any of it for Hillary Clinton. People turned up, but you'd see for a mile going towards the arena where Donald Trump would be speaking, there would be people selling flags and MAGA hats and you name it, all the paraphernalia of elections, and they were doing a roaring trade, and with Hillary Clinton, there was

next to nothing. I just thought there was an enthusiasm that this guy is generating that conventional politics is not quite getting yet, and so was I surprised that Donald Trump won the election? No. I didn't quite see it the way it happened, but it was obvious to me that he was connecting, and there was also something you know about ... and it said something about America as well, that there was misogyny. There was undoubtedly misogyny towards Hillary Clinton. There was an anti-Clinton sentiment, which I think was a more general sentiment, that Donald Trump was against the conventional politics, the established sort of families of the Bush's and the Clintons who almost sort of seemed to have hereditary status when it came to the inheritance of the presidency. And there was something else that Trump, the way he spoke, I can't tell you how many ... and you can translate this into whatever English you want to put it into. The number of people who said to me, "Donald Trump says what I'm thinking but I'm not allowed to say." I think that's a sort of ... so when Donald Trump attacks Mexicans, Muslims, black people, whatever, a lot of Americans felt, "I can't do that. I can't say those things, white Americans, but Donald Trump can, and he does it and he gets away with it and he's my guy," and so I think he connected with a lot of blue collar America in a way that conventional politics fail to see. I also think he ran ... for all the chaos, for all the pussy gate, for everything else, his campaign had fantastically clear messages. He wanted to build a wall. He wanted to keep Muslims out. He wanted to renegotiate trade deals. He wanted to bring back manufacturing jobs. Now whether he's succeeded on any of those things ... a bit of the wall is built, fewer Muslims have been let in. He's stayed pretty true to those pledges. You may not like those pledges. I'm not saying that they are the most ... but his message was clear. I found it very easy to go on the 10 o'clock news during the 2016 campaign and say what it was that Donald Trump wanted. I found it much more difficult to try to explain and articulate what it was that Hillary Clinton wanted to do if she won the presidency.

**To what extent has he changed the Republican party though? Because if you look at say Jeremy Corbyn, he had the grass roots, he had quite a populist message really from a reasonably left of centre point of view, but he never really got the parliamentary labour party. He never won them over. You could tell that the rank and file labour MPs opposed Corbyn, didn't want him as leader and wanted rid of him. It seems to be different with Trump though, that not only is he tapped into this blue collar worker mentality that you've been talking about, but he's also turned the Republican party to bend to his will as well. When you look at the impeachment, the Senate ruled that they wouldn't even hear any evidence, and I was in LA one night while that was going on and a Senator went on CNN to say, "Well, we've not seen any evidence of any wrongdoing," and I was nearly shouting at the television saying, "Well you deliberately chose not to hear any evidence. So how can you possibly go on the television saying you've not seen any?" It was just utterly ridiculous.**

Yes. So it's a very interesting question. The Republican party today is a wholly owned subsidiary of Trump Enterprises, no doubt about that. They are terrified of him, and the main difference that you have from British politics to US politics are the primaries. So if once you get a congressional seat or a Senate seat, they tend to be pretty safe. There's been so much gerrymandering that your district is a pretty safe place to be, but speak against Donald Trump, and for a start, your money might dry up to start funding a campaign, because Donald Trump will say, "Don't fund this guy.

He's against me," and the other thing that will happen is that you will be primaried, as they say in America. A candidate will be put up to challenge whether you have the right to represent the Republican party. So it's like a selection process for an MP seat. The conservative party will meet, and although you've won ... in the conservative party, by and large, if you've won your constituency, you will fight the next election unless there's major scandal. In the US system, there's a system of primaries every time around, and Donald Trump could intervene in that and Donald Trump, the power that he has, that because he commands such support within the Republican party among the grassroots members, if Donald Trump says, "Get rid of the congressmen from Illinois district seven," the chances are that the Congressman from Illinois district seven will be got rid of. So there is a huge impetus to toe the line and not say anything out of turn about Donald Trump. I just want to talk about the flip side of that, because you raised a really interesting question, which is the loyalty that the Republican party feels towards him. I saw some very interesting polling research the other week, and we're going to talk about negative partisanship, and it's this: two thirds of the Trump voters who are going to vote this November are doing so because they're really enthusiastic for Donald Trump. Only a third are voting for him because they're frightened of Joe Biden. Joe Biden doesn't seem to represent a very scary figure to many Republicans. That is a huge problem for Donald Trump. In the last election, there was a huge negative sentiment towards Hillary Clinton, and that just seems to be absent this time round, and he was able to motivate an awful lot of Americans. I always thought that the detestation of Hillary Clinton, to me as a British person who'd seen her as being a secretary of state, who'd seen her as a junior Senator for New York, always seemed to be out of proportion to anything that she'd done, but by God, there was a loathing of Hillary Clinton. There is none of that sentiment towards Joe Biden, and I think that poses a major problem to Donald Trump among many other problems, that he's facing an election during a pandemic, during an economic turndown when there are cries for much more racial justice. So I think that November will be very difficult for him.

**We've spoken about how president Trump has changed the presidency in the Republican party, but what about the American media? You're on the record as saying that the media has actually been made mad by Trump with his daily outrage, sackings, and crazy tweets. Has he changed the media forever as well?**

My guess is that if Donald Trump loses the election in November and Biden becomes the 46th president of the United States of America, hundreds, if not thousands of journalists will lose their jobs, because newsrooms have been fattened with investigative departments, with following the Trump White House and all the doings of this administration, and that there will be less appetite for all of that were Donald Trump to lose in November. I do think they've been made mad, and you choose your TV channel and you know what you're going to get. I really do think it is a strength of British broadcasting that I can turn on ITV, I can turn on SKY, I can turn on BBC and I will get a pretty fair and balanced view. We're not perfect by any means, but we're not in anyone's pockets. I turn on CNN or MSNBC, two of the cable channels here, they have been driven mad by Trump. They detest him, they loathe him. The anchors can barely conceal their contempt for him as a human being, and there is no attempt at giving impartial news by a lot of the anchors. They are there to be agitators for or against, and then you turn over to Fox News and you will see Sean Hannity or

whoever else, Tucker Carlson, and they are there to attack the liberal establishment and to defend Donald Trump, and I don't think that people are best served by that, because what's started to happen in America now, but increasingly in Britain, is that people live in echo chambers. People are not exposing themselves to any other viewpoint than the one that they feel comfortable with. So everyone's got their own fact, everyone's got their own talking points, and God forbid you should ever find a viewpoint that you disagree with. I was amazed. I did an interview with Steve Bannon on the Mexican border last summer. I did it for the Today program and I hope it was a rigorous interview, pushing back on whether Donald Trump was racist in the way that he was conducting various things. Thousands and thousands of people went after me on social media saying, "Why are you giving a fascist a platform? Why are you giving him a platform?" Well, Steve Bannon happened to be the chief strategist of the Trump campaign. He happened to be put on par with the chief of staff in the White House during the first year of the Trump administration. You might not like him, but he's not a nobody. We have to hear the arguments of other people, and it's not giving a platform. I think it was challenging and fair, but people are -

### **Holding him to account.**

Yes, holding him to account, and I think that people are closing their minds to alternative viewpoints, and I don't like the viewpoints of an awful lot of people that I have to interview, but I hope I will interview them fairly, scrupulously, and in a challenging manner and in a way that holds people's viewpoints to account, and I think that there is a mentality that has taken over that says, "Let's only interview people we agree with," and I just think that that is mad and dangerous, and also I think if I was advising professional politicians, I saw the wailing and gnashing of teeth of the Corbyn supporters after they ... the people who were genuine Corbynistas, very firmly for Corbyn who could not believe the election result, because on social media they had just been getting so many likes for the things that they'd been posting. Well, welcome to the reality world. A small minority of people are posting regularly on Twitter. I'm one of those abnormal people. Most of the time I think everyone's against me, and then I'm back in Britain and people are being absolutely charming to me. Now, I just think that social media, just because you get a lot of clicks and a lot of likes does not mean that that is reality.

**Too many tweets to make a twat then, because I'm a guilty tweeter. That's what David Cameron said at the time, wasn't it? You're right, it isn't ... I mean it's one of the things ... I actually had Lynton Crosby on a couple of years ago and he said the problem is with a lot of political communicators now, and the reason why Leave won is cause I'll all political communicators are all in the echo chamber of Twitter and they're all reinforcing each other. They're all slightly left of centre. He said his secret to his success was going to a working men's club in Sunderland and talking to real people, read a regional newspaper. Don't read the standard broadsheet papers in the UK, because it's all much of a muchness and largely the same thing.**

Yes, and I think that's right. I kind of try to stay tuned into British politics as well, and I heard the Chancellor of the Exchequer being interviewed and people having a go at him in the interview about the fact that he'd done some stuff on social media? I think the politicians should be trying every means possible to get their message out, and



whether that's on social media, whether it is going to pubs in wherever, unfashionable places that are not part of the London metropolitan elite land. Of course, we all need to be doing that. We all need to get out as much as possible because otherwise we are just living in a bubble where we hear our own views played back to us. And that is the great danger for political coverage and for politicians, that there is a whole lot of people out there. But I do worry that if you are living in Trumpland, say, the only diet of news you're ever going to be exposed to is Fox, right-wing, Christian radio stations. And if you're living on the east coast or the west coast, all you're going to be exposed to are those cable channels that are very anti-Trump, newspapers that are critical of Trump, and you live in your own echo chamber. And I think that that is a very bad thing because it ends up with a very, very divided country.

**What's it like to be the BBC's man in Washington, in a sense? I mean, other than the obviously very serious issues we've discussed. It's more about in terms of what's a typical week look like? Do you have a daily routine? Is Kellyanne Conway nice to you when you pass her in the corridor of The White House and at various things? What's the actual rhythm of the job like?**

Well, there's the COVID rhythm of the job, which is slightly different from the pre-COVID rhythm of the job. COVID rhythm of the job means that I spend the summer in shorts and T-shirts going for very long walks to try and clear my head, trying to maintain social distancing. So, I walk along the River Potomac, which is more or less outside my front door, and back along the canal that runs alongside it. So, that's plenty of exercise. I tend to wake up very early because, largely, I want to see if Trump has been tweeting, and also, I want to see what London is thinking, because you're five hours ahead. So, if I don't get up until, say, eight o'clock in the morning, it's already lunchtime in London and they may have already decided what my day looks like and I like to intervene. So, I will tend to, wake up 5:30, 6:00, look at my phone, look at the emails, look at what might be buzzing on Twitter. Then I tend to plug into a bit of the Today program on Radio 4. You're getting really granular detail, you're going to wish you hadn't asked this question. And I sit-

**I'm absolutely loving it, please carry on.**

If I wake up at 6:45, using the BBC Sounds app, I will put the Today program on at 6:45, which means that when they do a time check, it's the right time for me here in Washington. So whatever time I wake up-

**I do that. I actually listen to Wake Up to Money on 5 Live, and I time it so that I start it at 5:00 AM, so the time takes my turn. And you're the only other person in my life that's ever done that as well, so there you are.**

I think it's very important if you're a foreign correspondent to be in tune with what the host nation is going through. So, for example, when Sunak is doing his budget, it will be pointless me ringing up the news desk and saying, "Oh, I've got this piece. It might make a nice two and a half minutes for the 10 o'clock news." Broadly speaking, if you're going to bother the editor, make sure it's with something that is really big because you're going to be fighting to get on a day when you've got huge news. My priorities are servicing the Today program, morning bulletins, Radio 4, 18:00, the PM

program, the six o'clock TV news and the 10 o'clock news. Those are the things that are the main parts of my day. So, I get up early. In pre-COVID times, I would then go into the office, discuss what we're going to do, what filming we might be able to do. I think my job has changed from my predecessors in that because of Donald Trump. Every time I have got near to going to Reagan National Airport, to fly off to do a pretty piece from Wyoming or Montana or somewhere gorgeous, Idaho, I'm invariably called to go back because Donald Trump has just said this or that and the six o'clock news want it live from The White House. So, I've tended to get out of Washington probably less than my predecessors because of that. And then it's a question of meeting the various different demands. So, at the moment, yesterday, the day before, they were lives for the 10 o'clock news, there's a podcast I'm now doing with Emily Maitlis, there are the radio bulletin dispatches. So, there's a lot of churning stuff around. And you're also trying to talk to people and meet people. In terms of being the BBC's man in Washington, I think that compared to American networks we are way down the pecking order as almost a single-celled amoeba. But in terms of foreign press, I think the BBC still carries more clout than any other foreign media organization. I did a sit-down interview with Obama because Obama wanted to do an interview for the BBC and he saw the advantage. I've nearly landed an interview with Donald Trump when he came over for the state visit, but a guy, I don't know, I think he's called Piers Morgan, might have got there before me.

**He won't get there before you next time, I can assure you.**

Yeah, exactly. That relationship thing's well and truly over. So, the people at the state department cares about the BBC because they know that about the global reach of the BBC. When I did the Obama interview, he was just about to go off to Africa, he knew that we had different services, different languages, different language services within Africa, and that the interview would put out there, and they saw the advantage of the BBC being a global player. And so I think that the BBC is held in high esteem in this city. But this administration is unique and there are some people who are very leaky and they're who got it inveterately. It's sort of changeable. My problem has always been that the people I've got to know, and you think, "Oh, this is a great contact. Fantastic. I'm going to cultivate this," they're gone within... they'll get blown out. The turnover is fast of people who are holding senior positions. I was told that the deputy chief of staff in The White House is a New Zealander, or was New Zealand-born, and from the tech industry, and that he is the only person still there from the beginning, aside from Kellyanne Conway and Jared and Ivanka. That's it, four from three and a half years ago. Now, if you think of the hundreds who went in, there are four left standing. That's amazing.

**It's just absolutely incredible in so many ways. You mentioned Emily Maitlis, because I wanted to talk about Americast. Obviously, I'm a keen listener. Before we go onto that, I wanted to close off how you deal with people on social media that are abusing you. Because Emily's come under huge attack on social media. Look at Laura Kuenssberg who does a fantastic job, who not only has to deal with trolls on a daily basis, but even needed a bodyguard a couple of years ago at the Labour Party conference. How do you deal with that? Do you get off a bit easier being a bloke?**

I suspect I probably do. I suspect it is a bit easier. I think that some of the stuff that

Laura gets, and Emily, is just ghastly. So much of it seems to be so threadbare that it is just anti-women. I don't know. And also, I mean, I remember Laura getting a whole heap of abuse over when she tweeted something about Dominic Cummings and Downing street says, "Dot, dot, dot, dot, dot." People took that as Laura trying to undermine the story that Pippa Crerar from The Mirror had broken. Journalism is we add facts when we get a new fact. And in social media, "Oh, I've just heard this, I'm going to put it on social media." It's not Laura casting an opinion. That's not Laura trying to stick up for Dominic Cummings or this administration-

### **It's Laura doing her job.**

It's Laura doing her job. And I think that people are so stupid and infuriating. And even if you disagree, what's happened to just being able to say, "I'm not sure that's quite right, Laura, maybe it's this." Instead of which, it's poke you in the eye, it's, "You are the slime of the universe, you're disgusting, you're vile." Where did all this hatred come from? I'm old enough to remember the punk era. You'd get these people who would turn up at concerts in Camden Town to see the Sex Pistols in the mid '70s. They would dye their hair blue and they would have safety pins everywhere. And then come Sunday night, they would get rid of all the hair dye and they would go back to being quantity surveyors and accountants on Monday. And I just think that social media has become this place where people just think, "Let the vilest me emerge." And that, I think, is horrible and corrosive. Look, Laura's big and tough and so is Emily. They can look after themselves. But I think some of what they are subject to is totally disproportionate and really, really ghastly.

**I came under a lot of grief recently on Twitter. I periodically cause some trouble once every couple of years. I reflect on this, deeply sometimes, and I think were people always quite horrible, but just held their tongue, because you couldn't be rude to someone's face and Twitter's just helped bring out the innate nastiness in some people? Or has it actually been transformative? Has it been a catalyst? Has it actually created a culture of nastiness and people that would have been quite pleasant and reasonable pre-Twitter have now been turned? What's your view?**

I think that Twitter would be a different place if people couldn't hide behind pseudonyms. I think that the fact that people can make up a name, you have no idea who that person is, where they live, I think, one, it gives rise to the bots, which I think are really menacing. And there are times when I've seen suddenly I get 50 tweets to me about, "What are you going to do about X or Y?" And I don't even know what X or Y is. And you realize that this is bot-generated traffic trying to sew division. And I've seen some of that during the Trump years, Pfizer warrants and stuff, conspiracy theories are being promulgated. So, I think anonymity, the cloak of anonymity, has been awful because it means that people can just say what they like. If you knew that it was Bill Smith and he lived at 14 Prichard Close, I bet Bill Smith would be a lot more circumspect in what he said than when it's DarthVader1, and you have no idea where DarthVader1 is. And that is the stuff I think that is kind of corrosive and I would love that there could be some correction on that. Because, look, I've got a verified account, BBCJonSopel, people know that it's me. So I can't do anything anonymously, I'll do it with my name on it, and yet I get these attacks from people, I'm sure if I looked at my Twitter feed now I could find you any number of examples of

that, where people that just got completely made-up names and it's just nonsense.

**Do you mute them or do you block them? I mean, I've got a blue tick as well. As you know, as a fellow blue-ticker, when you have one, there's a verified filter that says, "Only show me interactions and likes and retweets from other blue-tickers." But, of course, you're then closing off a lot of things. Your feed must be full of abuse then, surely.**

Well, it's interesting. And also, a lot of people guess at my email address. And if it's just pure abuse, if it's just, "You're a wanker," or, "You're this," or, "That," then I don't reply because I just think, "Screw you." I got an email last night with someone who wanted to take me to task for something I've done on the Today program about the Trump campaign and the way it's developing for 2020, and I wrote back a very long email last night. I don't know whether I'll hear from this person again, but I try to reply if people make civil points. When people are just... it's just personal abuse, I'll block them. You've got 74 followers and you're hoping that I respond so that you can leverage my platform with however many followers I've got on Twitter. And I think, "You know what? I don't want to play that game." If you are just going to be abusive, I'm sorry, I'm blocking you. I don't block many people, but if people are persistently offensive, I just think, "Oh, goodbye."

**I think that's sensible.**

**Tell us about Americast. I mean, I would say that it's probably the second best podcast ever created, after this one. It's hugely enjoyable. It shines a light on a lot of things, but the tone of it is sort of warm and friendly in a way that I think really sort of... it's an enjoyable listen as well. Sometimes you watch the 10 o'clock news and, with the greatest of respect to Paul Royall and Hugh Edwards and all of the team on there, if they're reporting 40 minutes of abject misery, there's nothing really they could do about that other than call it as they see it. But Americast, to me, seems... is there a deliberate tone for it to be sort of accessible or distinctive or, dare I say, sort of light-hearted? How did you conceive of it and how do you run it?**

There were various iterations before we settled on the format and we did various trial runs. And there was one format we tried where there were four of us involved and it had all the warmth of a dinner party where you haven't met any of the guests and you're yet to have a glass of wine. It was just so stilted and everyone was trying to prove themselves. Chemistry, there was none. Maitlis and I have known each other for years and used to present together on the News Channel, and sometimes, occasionally, we weren't as attentive to what we should have been doing on air. And so, there would be times where we would collapse in giggles and be utterly unprofessional. And we do tend to rib each other. And I think she's a superb broadcaster and incredibly well-informed and knowledgeable and well-read, I've obviously got a bit ... I'm here all the time, so I'm able to share experiences. I think that what we wanted to do was to do a podcast, which is not the super granular detail of one aspect of the Affordable Care Act. There are American podcasts that can do that. An American audience, what we're trying to do is to say right, for an American audience, we're the outside outsiders looking at your country with a degree of knowledge. But for the non-American audience listening in Europe, we want to tell

you what's happening and why these issues are interesting, but also some of the fun aspects of it. With light, with anecdotes or teasing each other. I just hope that Americast will just be, I haven't got time every day to follow the intricacies of who has said what at which rally, what the latest poll says about Biden in Arizona compared to Trump and what it means in Ohio and etc, but people who want to dip in feel actually I've got some of the debate, the intellectual conversation that is going on in America. That we convey some of that, with a bit of humour, with a bit of levity, but also with a bit of depth as well. Listen, if we can achieve that, then great. We're trying to do it and I think we're quite harsh on ourselves, on each one we do. Did that work? What could we have done better? Did we use enough sound? Did that interview go on too long? Look, I want it to be enjoyable and not people thinking, oh, I ought to take today's medicine. It's Americast, I suppose I ought to listen. I really don't want that. I've wanted it to be fun, informative and engaging.

**Well, I mean, this is the issue that you have with The Today Program. I mean, I've listened to it for 25 years and more, and I love it, but I put it on because that's what I do. It's just part of my routine. I don't have a routine to listen to Americast. It's on the BBC Sounds app and I have to choose to click the play button. There's something, it's almost an infinitely higher bar to do that, to deliberately opt in. Clearly, you're getting people in their many, many thousands doing so, because it's worthy of doing that. I mean, it's incredible.**

Well, that's kind of you to say. There are a lot of podcasts out there. We know that there's a lot of competition for people's time. I've always taken the view in my broadcast career that I don't have the right to be boring. If people have got options of what they could be doing, do I want to listen to John Sopel or am I going to go and make a cup of tea? Say something interesting. Or how can I tell this story in the most interesting way that will command your attention? Just come on, give me your eyes and give me your ears for the next 20 seconds, because actually what I'm going to try and convey to you is something that is really important, actually really interesting, and is relevant. That's how I've tried to, I suppose, build my journalistic career. What stayed with me. I just try and engage people, try and engage people with good storytelling. The good storytellers on TV, the great packages like Matt Fry, for example, or Jeremy Bowen or Alan Little, these are people that are just wonderful storytellers. They're raconteurs. Maitlis is brilliant. When Laura comes on, Laura Kuenssberg comes on, I want to turn up the volume. I want to hear what she's got to say. So I think that having good storytelling and trusting the person that you're listening to, so you think actually, I really want to hear what they've got to say about what Trump has done, what's happening in the Middle East, what's happening at Westminster. You've got to have people who you, not only trust, but who can engage you as well. That's what we're trying to do.

**This question sounds a bit rude, actually, but it's not meant to be, but do you have any more clue what's going to happen at the election, at the presidential election than anyone else? Because in some senses, all bets are off.**

I have no clue what's going to happen in the next 24 hours.

**Wow.**

You look at the trajectory of this presidency. We have had the Mueller report into

whether there was collusion between the Russians and the Trump campaign and whether there was obstruction of justice. No one even talks about the Mueller report. That is so far in the rear view mirror.

### **I'd forgotten about it.**

Exactly. Then I remember being at a dinner in January at the home of the EU ambassador in Washington. There was a table of very senior American journalists and we were all talking about impeachment and whether this would be ... and the vote on impeachment hadn't happened yet, but surely this will be the defining moment of Donald Trump's presidency. Who's even talking about impeachment anymore? That seems like so last year. It was only a few months ago. We've had Coronavirus. We've had George Floyd. It goes back to something I was saying earlier about my worry that I've developed attention deficit disorder as a result of covering this presidency, is that I think that people's memories are so short. So at the moment people are saying, "How can Trump win an election? There have been a million new Coronavirus cases in the past 28 days in America. What a shocking record." Maybe, but may be forgotten about by November. Who knows what, but something else might have come along that will be distracting everybody. I think our ability to be distracted is immense. Therefore to try and say, now what is likely to unfold in November, I think it's a brave person who says that. Look, there are indicators. The polls are undoubtedly very, very bad for Donald Trump at the moment. He is spending money in places that he didn't think he would have to spend money in terms of advertising. Ohio, which he won easily. I know it's traditionally a swing state, but Ohio, he won by a country mile four years ago. There is advertising there. There's advertising going on in Texas. Texas. He's advertising in Arizona. That tells you where they think they've got vulnerabilities, in the six key swing States. I'll try and remember them, but I'll probably leave one out. Well, let's say it's Florida, North Carolina, Arizona, Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania. There's the six. Well done, John Sopel. In those six states the current sway of the polls suggest that Biden is well ahead. So look, we can say that Trump has got a difficult time come November, but for anyone to predict or extrapolate today, that Trump is going to lose definitively or win definitively, I think you need your head examining. We do not know.

**No one seems to been able to land the glove on him. I love Last Week Tonight with John Oliver on Sunday nights, HBO. He has that joke where he bangs the buzzer on his desk that says, we got him, and all the confetti comes down and the banner comes down as if they've finally got Trump. Just to sort of mock the fact that no one's ever really got him.**

Yes. There are things that are changing. I think that the handling of Coronavirus has been a big deal. The fact that Donald Trump set the bar so high on what he thought would happen, that there'd only be a dozen or so cases and then they would disappear. The fact that you've got outbreaks now taking place in largely Republican areas, Arizona, Texas, Florida, were large because they opened early and too quickly and you've suddenly got this upsurge in cases. The fact that he held a rally in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and he thought the place would be packed with 19,000 people and only 6,000 turned up suggests that although Donald Trump may be saying, Coronavirus, there's nothing to worry about, clearly a lot of his supporters are worried about it, and the elderly where he's drawn his support from strongly are concerned

about it. So there are things where I think that have stuck to him. There are interesting little things, like I don't know whether you've seen, there's this group of disaffected Republicans called the Lincoln Project who've set up this Twitter-

**Yes, I've seen them.**

Very effective, and they are really getting under Donald Trump's skin. So I think that there are things that are changing. But look, Joe Biden is an old man. If he wins the election, he will go into the White House next January older than Ronald Reagan was when he left office at the end of two terms. It's an old man, and he's a bit gaff prone, and he's a bit fumbling. His campaign are being brilliant at the moment in that they're hardly exposing him to daylight. It's the first political campaign I've seen where you see it as a positive merit to stay out of the way. Normally campaigns and candidates are fighting, jostling to be on the television. Biden isn't. Biden is deciding to stay in the background, and the phrase that I heard brilliantly from a Republican strategist was that, we had dinner the other night, he said he was despairing at the self-harm that Trump was doing while sort of grudgingly admiring the discipline of the Biden campaign to keep him out of the way. He said, it's the old maximum politics. There's no need to murder someone who's committing suicide. That was what he said about Trump.

**Yes, it's the old, the political aphorism, isn't it? That it's governments that lose elections, not oppositions that win them.**

Exactly. I think that there is still a long way to go, but Donald Trump, it's all about Donald Trump. Everything's always been about Donald Trump. That worked very well for him in 2016 where Hillary Clinton was his opponent. I think he's having more trouble defining Biden. Sleepy Joe, they've abandoned that slogan. It's now, corrupt Joe. Does corrupt Joe work? We'll see. So I think that it's going to be a fascinating election.

**So the 22nd amendment to the Constitution means that even if he wins, he'll only get another term. What are you going to do afterwards? Are you going to be like a drug addict who won't have this daily fix? Do you envisage your life for yourself post-Trump?**

It's going to be methadone. It's going to be cold Turkey. I think that I'll have probably done six and a half, seven years in Washington. That's probably time to come back to London. What I do when I get back to London, who knows? My two favourite phrases, aphorisms if you like, from my time in the BBC was, first one, is if you want to make God laugh, tell him you've got a plan. The second one, which John Sergeant used to use, which I always thought was brilliant for a BBC career, which is about when you're frustrated in your career. He said, it's an old Chinese proverb that if you stand by the riverbank long enough, the body of your enemy will eventually float past. So I think I've got to be patient and see what turns up.

**John, that was a hugely interesting conversation. Thank you ever so much for your time.**

Great pleasure. Lovely to be with you.