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Andy Coulson

Reputation & communications strategist

Media Masters – February 11, 2021

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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 Andy Coulson, the former newspaper editor and now strategy advisor to global chief executives who is, himself, a survivor of crises.

As editor of the market-leading News of the World Andy brought readers award-winning campaigns and agenda setting scoops. In 2007 David Cameron hired him - later appointing him as government communications director.
He chose to resign from that role, and later faced charges of conspiring to intercept communications, which resulted in a conviction and a five month spell in prison.
Andy apologised for the significant mistakes he made as editor but denied - and still denies - breaking the law.

He has since launched his own consultancy, advising leading entrepreneurs and presenting ‘Crisis What Crisis?! a podcast in which leading figures discuss life-changing experiences.

Andy, thank you for joining me.

Andy Coulson:

Thanks for having me Paul.

Paul Blanchard:

Well, there's plenty to get through. Let's start with the podcast. I mean, I'm slightly annoyed that it's a better podcast than the one you're on now, actually.

Andy Coulson:

That's very nice of you to say so.

Paul Blanchard:

It is a fascinating listen. I mean, especially over the last year, I've listened to about seven or eight of them now, and it's great to hear that life affirming stories of resilience and frankly, you're the guy to present it because of what you've been

through. Could you take our listeners through the whole reason why you set it up and how it's going, et cetera, et cetera.

Andy Coulson:

It was really kind of out of lockdown in truth. I live down in Kent. I work mainly in London and suddenly I found myself with all this commuting time I'd saved all that time each day. And I thought, I could very easily see that time just kind of being wasted away. And so I'd always been interested in podcasting, but never actually had the time to do anything about it. I think it's a brilliant medium. And when I thought about that, the subject that I am fascinated by, partly because I lived it myself for a while, is crisis. And of course with the situation that we're in right now, I guess it kind of resonates more widely. We're all in that state right now. Crisis is, I have the expression, but crisis is the new norm.

And I thought, well, actually, let's see if we can get some interesting conversations going. And more important than anything else, can we get some useful conversations going? Can we actually kind of sit with people who've been through crisis in all its forms. And we've been really lucky, Paul, we've managed to get some really brilliant people to come and spend some time with us and to talk very openly and frankly. Sometimes with humor, sometimes with real emotion about their experiences. And the range has been, that's the thing I'm really pleased with, I suppose, is that the range has been so mixed, from Jeremy Bowen, who is our first guest, talking about not just his experience as a journalist, but also grief and his own kind of challenges with cancer, which thankfully he's through.

Martha Lane Fox was an early guest. I think she's been a guest of yours at one point so you'll know how amazing she is in terms of her resilience. Following her car crash. Payzee Mahmod, who is an incredible young woman who has faced unbelievable trauma in her life and has come through it in such an impressive way and has got such an incredible perspective on all crises, having lost her sister and having faced so much trauma herself. Through to Nile Rogers, who's a bit of a hero of mine. I am a man from Essex, Paul, as you know, and so I love a bit of Chic, and he's had an incredible life, which, I'm a fan of, I had no idea the kind of things he's been through in his life, right the way through to this week. I start the podcast with him and the first thing he says to me is, "Well, let's talk about crisis. I lost my mom a month ago and she's still in a refrigerated van out the back of a hospital because of coronavirus. I can't organize the funeral." Live crisis that he was happy to sit and talk to us about, and that I suspect resonated with a lot of people. So, I've just thoroughly enjoyed it. And the most important thing to me is, is it useful? Are we able to have a kind of meaningful conversation? And I'm delighted that so far, that's how it's worked out.

Paul Blanchard:

It's a crisis of all sorts, isn't it really? Because I thought it might be a sort of corporate crisis thing, which might be interesting, but I was pleasantly surprised and fell in love with it because as you said, you've got such a wide range of guests from figures like Sir Kim Darroch and Ruby Wax. People who are actually, they're talking about

bereavement, as you mentioned. It's not just some bland corporate crisis thing is it, it's actually about very, very deep, and possibly the deepest human emotions.

Andy Coulson:

Yes. That's been the joy of it and the fascination of it really. And for people to be prepared to kind of talk about those kinds of subjects is a bit of a privilege, not to get too grand about it. And I'm learning from it myself. I've been through a crisis in my own way so I have a particular view on it. I took a particular view to get through it. I've got certain, a kind of philosophy. Again, not to be grand about it, but I've got my thoughts on how you get through a crisis, but I'm learning.

And I mentioned Payzee Mahmod. I mean, her attitude when facing, she was in a forced marriage. Her sister was in a forced marriage. It was a subject of a TV drama very recently so it's a well-known story. And her sister ended up being very brutally killed by her family actually. It was just a shocking, shocking story. And here's this young woman who is just finding perspective by focusing on the things that she's got control over and trying not to worry too much about the things that she doesn't have control of. And that I completely agree with as a crisis philosophy, but just to hear someone who's been through something that is... My crisis, it doesn't compare at all to what she's been through and just so impressive. And so I love that about it.

And the business side of Crisis, I'm obviously fascinated by, and I'm involved in a professional point of view, and we've heard one or two guests who talk about that. Mark Hix, who was the chef who had an incredibly successful restaurant empire across London, lost his business and ended up kind of running a food truck selling prawn sandwiches. He's a podcast I've found fascinating because his attitude was, just keep going. Yes, I had this magnificent empire with celebrities pouring in and out of my restaurants, but actually when it went wrong, what's the thing that I decided to do? I decided to get on the internet, buy a food truck and stick it in a car park down on the coast and start doing what I do, which is make fantastic seafood. And he's now on his way back. In its own way as well, I found that kind of inspiring.

Paul Blanchard:

What I like as well is the episodes are designed to give people some sort of practical landing lights to help their way through their toughest moments. But you mentioned in your answer that you've learned a philosophy or you've acquired one, or did you have it before? I suppose my question is, what have you got out of the podcast itself? I think of the five miserable years of doing Media Masters, I can point to 5 or 10 sort of nuggets of insight that'll go with me. Someone said something, an aside here and there, and I've really sort of learned from that. And it's an incredible privilege to do this podcast, but out of 260 episodes, I've probably learnt 10 things, but they've been life-changing things. What about yourself?

Andy Coulson:

Well some of them, absolutely. Yeah. And some of them have been sort of reinforcing what I felt before. Some of them have been completely kind of new to me. You mentioned Crisis beforehand, I've seen crisis from a number of different angles. I kind of created them as a journalist. I managed them in politics and that's what I'm doing to an extent now in my work. A lot of what we do isn't about crisis, but some of it is. And of course I lived it because that's where my life took me.

And the main sort of elements of the approach that I think are valuable, which have absolutely come through in this podcast, is first and foremost, you've got to accept where you are, and sort of attached to that is the danger of the kind of, what if? And also why me? And I think, what if, is utterly useless words really. You've got to accept where you are and you've got to be sort of present in your crisis. Then you've got to start to make a plan. And I'm a campaigner at heart so with my situation, I set about my campaign. And my perspective on campaigning is the first thing you've got to do is work out who is it you want to be, where do you want to be at the end of all this? And although I didn't know when the end of my crisis would come, because it was so multifaceted and long running, I was certainly very clear on who I wanted to be at the end of it. And that informed, to a very great extent how I handled it.

Andy Coulson:

And then, and this really does shine through pretty much in every interview we've done in this podcast is, you've got to work out what you have control over and what you don't, because that's where the anxiety comes. If you spend time trying to affect things that you don't actually have any control over then that's where... Anxiety loves that space and it will absolutely breed and if you're not careful take you over. So you've got to focus on the bits that you have control over. And that I think is a constant.

The other element I think is perspective. What things are valuable to you when you're in crisis? I think perspective is critical. I lent a perspective pretty swiftly actually when all my stuff started and everyone can find perspective in their lives. Situations that are worse for others or developments in your situation that could be worse for you. That's been another constant through the podcast. And also smaller things. The importance of humor. I'm not suggesting for a second that I laughed my way through my problems. I can tell you that I absolutely did not. But there were moments and those moments are really important. And I think that humor as a crisis cure is massively underrated. It's really, really important to be able to do that from a mental health point of view. So there's a whole bunch of stuff really.

And from the guests, as I say, the other element that kind of comes through that I'm always fascinated by is where does resilience come from? Is it kind of genetic, or does it come from sort of muscle memory, from trauma in your life that you're able to build over a period of time, or is it just luck? I'm always fascinated by where the resilience comes from in people. And more often than not, there's a clue in your past, obviously. I think it is partly genetic actually, but I think it's largely about your experience about the kind of life that you've led and tracing that back in a conversation is a joy for me. There's been a couple of occasions, which is wonderful when it happens, when the guests themselves hadn't quite joined those dots. And then you find yourself in the most amazing conversation with someone who is saying, "Actually, I've not thought about that before." And that's wonderful.

Paul Blanchard:

It's interesting because I think I've inherited genetic resilience, but I learnt a lot of it and it was reinforced at my mother's knee. And my father's always been very

resilient. I've got that sort of never, ever give up mentality. And whenever I've had ups and downs in life, giving in to someone who's been trying to either coerce me to do something or bully me has never been an option. I wouldn't even game plan in my mind what might happen if I was to give in to that person because it was just utterly unthinkable.

Andy Coulson:

Yeah. And I look at my own situation, I look at my mom, she's had times in her life some really difficult moments and she's an incredibly resilient lady. And the same with my father. I think I'm sort of blessed in that regard. But I also think, because I spent so much time professionally in and around crisis from the different angles that I mentioned earlier, I think that when crisis sort of came to me and sort of took over my life for a while, I think I was in a better position to be able to handle it as a result. I'm sure that that's the case.

Paul Blanchard:

I listen to your podcast and it's like a form of therapy, isn't it? Some of the things you say and some of the things that the guest says is incredibly insightful. I think if you're sort of a lazy Twitter person who wants to accuse you of reputation laundering and views it cynically, I think frankly, that says more about them than it does about you because if they listened to it, they'd realize the truth of it. Is part of getting through the crisis learning to respect the views of people you respect and just ignoring the people that you don't. Because I've had that. People call me a name on Twitter and it hurts briefly. And then a couple of years ago, I thought, why do I care what a load of twats think of me? Someone once said to me, "You should never measure your own life through the eyes of the joyless." I've always liked that phrase as well.

Andy Coulson:

It's wonderful. No, it's another crisis point really. You spend time worrying about what other people think of you, you'll go mad pretty swiftly. And I learned that lesson a long time ago. I've got no control over what other people think about me. All I can do is live my life as best as I can live it and be as positive and productive as I can be and take care of the people I love and look after my friends and move forward. And if people take a certain view of me, then it's theirs to own and I've got no control over it. I'm really clear on that and have been for quite some time because obviously there have been a fair number of people who've taken a view.

And I also think Paul, I was a tabloid newspaper editor. I was also the director of communications for a conservative prime minister. No one put a gun to my head and said, "Andy, you've got to go and do those jobs." That was my choice and those jobs come with the risk that people are going to form a certain view of you. And that's fine by me. I've got no issue with that whatsoever. And I think if you're going to take those kinds of jobs, it sort of goes with it. It goes with the territory, really. So you're not really in a position to moan about it. Then also, particularly as a newspaper editor, I took a view on others. We took a public view on others. So I'm not really in a position to moan and groan about it now. But I think from a personal point of view, it's really important in Crisis that you do not spend your time worrying about what other people think about you because it's theirs to own, it's not yours.

Paul Blanchard:

I mean, guests like Vicky Pryce talk openly about their incarceration. You must obviously have huge empathy given what you went through. You obviously dispute the charges. I don't want to really discuss them in the podcast because they've been discussed ad infinitum. It's not about the case really, it's more about how you changed. Prison must've been an unpleasant experience, but did you learn anything from it? Not in terms of like, I've learnt my lesson, but just in terms of any life lessons? We had Jeffrey Archer on a couple of years ago, and he's now a prison reform campaigner because he said they just wrote people off, put them in prison. He said to me, he said, "Paul, we're going to let most people in prison, out of prison at some point. And therefore we have to rehabilitate them and treat them with dignity otherwise they're going to come out and re-offend." He said, Quite apart from the ethics of treating people with dignity, it's in our interest. If we're going to send a burglar to prison, we have to stop him being a burglar while he's there."

Andy Coulson:

Yeah. I totally agree. On one level I can tell you that that prison is profoundly depressing. It's also mind numbingly dull, but there were also proper moments of fascination for me because I'm a journalist at heart, I went into observation mode, and then to be inside a system like that was at times fascinating. And certainly I would agree that being around that environment; and I should say by the way, I was in prison for just under five months, it wasn't exactly Papillon, so I'm no world expert. But being around a system, being around individuals who by the way, a lot of them particularly in Belmarsh were on considerably longer sentences than me, young men who were facing 20 years in prison was...

Well, I learned a tremendous amount from that, and I certainly formed views about the value of prison that I'll happily admit don't sit particularly comfortable with my professional past as a red-top editor. I mean, how much time did I really spend as an editor pondering the impact of prison on people's lives? Not much is the truth. How much time did I spend as a red-top editor pondering the impact in particular on the lives of children of prisoners, which is a particular area that I'm interested in? Not much. And the truth is about prison, the most depressing statistic for me is the number of children of male prisoners who then end up in prison themselves. And it's a depressingly high statistic that's over 70%.

And that for me is the key stat. Because that tells you very clearly that prison doesn't really work for a large majority of people. I should say that one view that I had as a newspaper editor that hasn't changed, that if someone is dangerous, they should be in prison. That is a purpose of prison that I absolutely agree with and I don't think I'll ever change. But we put an awful lot of people in prison who aren't dangerous. And that's where the debate should be, I think. And I've not taken the view that I have something to offer as a prison campaigner, because I wasn't there long enough, is my view of it. I was in Belmarsh for too long, I was in Belmarsh for about two months. And that's a high security prison. And then I was in an open prison in Suffolk called Hollesley Bay, which was a resettlement prison.

Which in itself was fascinating because I was able to work there and I was able to actually prepare other prisoners, some of whom were on light sentences, I was able

to play a part in helping them prepare for their release. Helping them trying to get their CVs organized and doing mock job interviews with them. They even sort of Dragon's Den presentations, where they would pitch their idea for what they would do when they would leave prison. It's fascinating work, Paul. It really was. But I don't take the view that I'm the person to go out with a particularly loud voice on prison reform, because I think there are people better placed than me.

Paul Blanchard:

I stood for parliament for the Labour Party in 2005, and I'll never forget some of the things that I learned in my parliamentary candidate training. We had three or four sessions with Tony Blair when he was Prime Minister, closed sessions for an hour. We were talking about all these issues, and that was obviously incredibly flattering, because there I am with the Prime Minister. And I asked him this question about crime, because recidivism fascinates me. And the way that the Daily Mail and the red-top culture contribute toward it about locking up offenders, they're caged and so on. And he said something really interesting.

He said, "Paul, the problem is that as human beings, we have a duality to crime." He said, "Everyone, the whole public are in favor of having a Norwegian prison system that spends much more money, focuses on rehabilitation, literacy rates, all of these things. So you're infinitely less likely, when that person is released, you're going to be a victim of crime or burglary, acquisitive crime, whatever it might be. Their crime rates are massively lower than ours." He said, "The problem is, human nature is you want there to be fewer burglars and therefore you want them to treat their drug addiction. But if you yourself get burgled, you want that particular burglar to be baseball batted in the face until they're dead. There's that vengeance element and how justice is not vengeance."

He said, "That's why there's the tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime thing, because I'm not going to be able to persuade people that it's not about vengeance, but we still have to rehabilitate people in the meantime." I'm fascinated as to, you mentioned there in that article, the previous answer you gave there, that you felt that you didn't give a lot of time to it. Is there something about the tabloid culture in the media in the UK that actually contributes to this? A home secretary that said let's increase 20 times the amount of money we're putting into prisons would presumably have to resign within 24 hours after seeing the front pages the next day.

Andy Coulson:

Yeah, I mean, I think it's complex because the problem isn't just for the media, the problem is for the politicians as well. And to have the kind of discussion that you just described requires political bravery, because there are votes attached to law and order, but only in certain elements. And there aren't many votes, some politicians take the view, there aren't many votes in rehabilitation, is the political reality of it. And so it becomes sort of retail, if you like, from a political point of view. Where are we going to find those votes? Where are we going to win an election on the topic of law and order? And will that ever change? I think it might, but I think it only ever changes when you've got a very comfortable majority.

And that's the interesting thing to me. And when I ended up working in politics, it wasn't without ideas. David, instinctively, I think was in a pretty good place on law and order, but he was also trying to win an election. And so if you remember, that was around the time of broken Britain and there were some appalling high profile cases running at that stage, there'd been some terrible murders. And the loudest voice in the room, if you like, from a media perspective at that point was really at the sharp end of violent crime, knife crime in particular. And so that's where the focus was. There wasn't really much room to start talking about recidivism and the long-term impacts on families.

That's the bit I'm interested in; you asked me what I learned. That I did not appreciate, and I have absolutely learned, is the absolute link between prison and family. And if you break that link, then you are just setting yourself up for another problem. And even if you're not interested in the individual involved there; either the father in prison, invariably father in prison, or the child at home, even if you're not interested in your individual, it's a disaster for society. Because all we're doing is just running around the same circuit with an unbelievably expensive and inefficient system.

Paul Blanchard:

I mean, I remember "Hug a Hoodie", where David was basically ridiculed for what he was basically saying is that we should feel compassion for the perpetrators of crime and trying to help them turn over a new leaf. I mean, what could be more profoundly obvious and compassionate than that? And yet he was ridiculed.

Andy Coulson:

You've hit on a great example, because do you know who published the headline "Hug a Hoodie"?

Paul Blanchard:

I think you're about to reveal it. Shall I get the drum roll on?

Andy Coulson:

No, no. I did.

Paul Blanchard:

Of course.

Andy Coulson:

And I remember it very well. I was editing the news of the world. The speech that day was previewed and landed on the political editor's desk. We looked at it and there it was. "Hug a Hoodie". And maybe we'll get onto it, but when David was considering “who do I want as my director of communications,” it's interesting, isn't it, that he considered me. And I think his view was, "Well, look, you identified the problem. You can see the problem that we've got here with this kind of stuff. And we need to find a way to better communicate it." Because there's a good example actually, is that the speech was a good speech. It made a lot of very good points. But it had a couple of really naive lines in it that allowed an editor like me to say, "Hug a Hoodie".

Paul Blanchard:

Well, you've got a job to do as editor. I don't blame you for that. You weren't inciting a riot or anything like that. You were just capitalizing on a politician's misspoken words, that as you've just said, he should have had better advisors that would have slightly perfected the speech a bit more, that would have ruled out your understandable mischief in trying to do that. You weren't putting words in his mouth. You weren't pretending he hadn't said something. You were doing your job.

Andy Coulson:

Oh, no, not at all. Not at all. It was an entirely justified headline. That's the job I was doing at the time. And he recognized that, he absolutely acknowledged that. I think we had a conversation about it once we started working together and his view was that it was a mistake to make.

Paul Blanchard:

To his credit though, he doesn't bear grudges. I mean, he could have blamed you and said, "Oh, I don't like that Andy Coulson, he stitched me up a few years ago," whatever, but instead he thought, "Actually, what can I learn from this guy? And how can I serve the country better?" I mean, it's admirable. You could spin it as a godfather-esque strictly business thing, but actually I think it's just about doing something in the best interest of the country and not carrying grudges.

Andy Coulson:

I think it was an element that was in his mind when he hired me. But I think it went to the same central point really is that the party at that stage just needed to communicate better. I wasn't there for policy, that wasn't my job. I'd always have a view because I was a voice in the room like everyone else, but my job was not to design policy. There were people far better equipped to do that around the place. My job was to say, "Look, this is how I think this will play. And this is how I think you should communicate it." And one of the issues when I took the job, one of the key issues was David himself, because you'll remember that there was... The Labour Party's Gordon Brown in particular, his line of attack on David was, "This guy's a toff."

Paul Blanchard:

It was a ridiculous, and plus class-based, attack.

Andy Coulson:

No, but for a while, which is easy to say now; and I obviously agree with you, but at the time it was getting proper traction, right? It was getting a lot of coverage. And there was real concern about it, and a lot of debate within the group around David is to how on earth we try to deal with it. And obviously there'd been some moments before I arrived where David had... Not David, but there'd been an attempt perhaps to present David in a different way. I remember that story about him riding his bike to Parliament while his…

Paul Blanchard:

While his driver was behind him with…

Andy Coulson:

While his bag and his suit was in the back of a car.

Paul Blanchard:

And the huskies, I remember that one as well, with him cracking the whip.

Andy Coulson:

Yeah, exactly. And although I think that actually on the husky stuff, I thought that was good communications because it was a real gear change for the party, and people started looking at the Conservative Party in a different way. And I think as we see it now…

Paul Blanchard:

The image was there, wasn't it? Whether he thought he was cynically or not, you thought, "Well, he's gone there, there's the image. He can't not deliver on what he's implying he's going to do now." So in a sense whether you looked at it through a cynical or a positive lens, you thought, "Well, at least it's showing him going in the right direction."

Andy Coulson:

Yeah, definitely. And as we sit here now and say, "Was it right to shine a bit more of a light from a conservative point of view on the environment?" I think it's very hard to say that it wasn't the right thing to do, considering where we're all heading. But no, my attitude was look, the best communication is authentic communication, and what's the truth? The truth is, you are posh. The truth is, you did go to fantastic schools and you had an incredibly privileged upbringing. That is a truth of your life, but it is not the most important truth in this context. The most important truth in this context is, are you any good at your job? Because that's how I view people. I'm not from that kind of background, but I couldn't care less where you're from. It's just not how I think.

Now I do care whether or not you're any good at what you do, and I do care whether or not you're competent and consistent and that you're good at your job. And he was all those things. And so my view was, don't try and pretend to be something that you're not, let's lean into it. So on the subject of education, for example, don't try and hide the fact that you went to Eton, it's a positive. You know what a good education looks like better than most. So that's a good thing. That's not a bad thing. So don't shy away from it. There was also this idea with David that he sort of lived in a castle, had 10 butlers drawing the curtains in the morning, all the rest of it. It was all nonsense. He's a lucky man, he's a relatively wealthy man, was then, even more so now. But he wasn't what people thought. He wasn't wandering around with a top hat and cane.

So we invited the journalists in. One of the first things I did was to say, "Right, let's get some of the most important journalists in the country, let's get them round for dinner. They can come round, they can see your house, they can see how you live,

and they can chat to you over dinner and a glass of wine and then they'll walk away with an opinion of you." And I'll tell you, that worked brilliantly, because it did cause people to think, "Oh, hang on. He's not living in a shoe box, but nor is he living on some estate buried away in the country. He's actually working quite hard at this."

And also I think; and this is my view of politicians generally, because I think there are some politicians where it is all about ego and there are some politicians obviously that perhaps shouldn't be in the job. But there are an awful lot that are in the job who could be frankly earning an awful lot more money and having a much easier life doing other things, very bright people who could be spending their time and effort on other issues. And they don't get much credit for that. And that is absolutely the case with David Cameron. Yes, he had ambition. Yes, he wanted to be Prime Minister, of course. But if it's about money, he could have made an awful lot more a lot earlier in his life doing other things. Because he was bright enough.

Paul Blanchard:

I've been at Davos, and I can see the people flock much more readily and surround the billionaires there and the hedge funders than they do the Prime Minister of Finland, without any disrespect to who he or she is. You can see where the power is, it's the money, clearly. I mean, that was one of the questions I was going to ask you really, is what was your own journey within Downing Street in terms of, did you feel slightly sorry for politicians or did you have more empathy of just how difficult it is to get anything done in any government? And that's not a criticism of any Prime Minister. I did 12 years at various levels in politics, and I was shocked at just how thin things were behind the scenes. You'd read the Sunday papers and you'd see the gossip about the Prime Minister's having difficulties with X, Y, and Z. But when you're actually in it trying to get something happening, like with your own company, it's infinitely more difficult, isn't it, to actually try and get these things done.

Andy Coulson:

It is. Because it's a human process like any other. And I think we've learnt we've it, and this has now been, I think, exposed more viscerally than it's ever been through COVID, right? That what we've learned is that there isn't a magic room that's full of all knowing, all seeing geniuses where certain switches can be flicked and a crisis can be resolved. It doesn't exist. It's a bunch of people with different views in a room arguing. That's often what politics comes down to. And then it's a Prime Minister who has to decide, "That's what we're going to do, that's what we're not going to do." And it's therefore a human and therefore an entirely imperfect process. I think if there's a criticism of politicians that I think is valid, is this disease of "don't know". And by that, I mean the unwillingness to never... never used the phrase, "I don't know." And I think we've learned that as well in COVID. I think there should have been much more of that much earlier, instead of this continual attempt to convince us that they have all the answers, because they don't. And by the way, this crisis is of a different order to anything that I was ever involved in. So being an armchair advisor from the outside on this, I think you got to hesitate before doing so, because it's incredibly difficult, but if there is a criticism, it's to stop telling us you got the answers. Stop setting us up for failure. And there's been too much of that.

I'm a bit worried, if I'm honest. I love the positivity around the vaccine program. I think it's an incredible success. It's undeniably a success. But I think if I were in the center of that now, I'd be very cautious about the level of optimism being applied to it, because it will be a bumpy road. It has to be a bumpy road because at the moment we're in the easy demographics in terms of this program. It's going to get harder and harder, the younger the people are that you are wanting to take the jab. And you're seeing that already in the states and elsewhere. So just, you got to find that balance between giving people a road out showing fundamentally positive, which Boris, I think has absolutely got the power to do, but be prepared to say, "I don't know at this stage. There are things we know with certainty, there are things that we absolutely don't know, and then we're dealing with this massive material in the middle that's in the gray, that we're trying our best with. And my job as Prime Minister is to decide what we do with that mix of things in front of us." I think that's the approach that I would be advocating.

Paul Blanchard:

I'm a member of the Labour party, but party politics aside, I want any government to succeed, especially in the time of a national crisis. I'm 100% behind this government, and I don't doubt their intent. I think they made a lot of mistakes, but I want to see them succeed. But I wanted to ask you as a communications professional and someone who's run the government communications department, to what extent do you feel the government communication has failed over this? I mean, for example, I have friends and family members that, the minute he didn't fire Dominic Cummings, people then genuinely just started to do less and thought, "Well, if he can get away with it, I can." And I always felt that if Boris had just said, "Look, I need the guy. He's a genius. I've given him a verbal warning and said if he does it again, he's out, but let's give him the benefit of the doubt."

Paul Blanchard:

But they contrived this nonsense about him testing his eyesight and stuff, which no one believed, and that to me was the bit that angered most people, because if he'd just coughed to it, they probably wouldn't have been angry. It was the fact that they tried to weasel their way out of it that caused genuine damage. And then the other thing I wanted to say in terms of communication is, every government announcement, these Downing street briefings, Peston... To his credit, he's a bloody good journalist, but 20 minutes beforehand he's said it all on a tweet because someone's leaked it to him. We surely can't be running a government communications strategy like this, because it's actually undermining what the government is trying to do, is it not?

Andy Coulson:

Yeah, it is. It's one of the most difficult things in government. Right? And it's certainly one of the most difficult things in crisis. I mean, there's the basic lesson of who do you listen to, which is very difficult in politics because everyone thinks that they have a voice that matters, and we're seeing that played out almost on a daily basis in terms of the differences of opinion that's growing now within the party, between a group of MPs and the scientific community, for example. So you've got to work out, who am I actually going to listen to here? Who's important to me?

And I think that there was a mistake quite early on in that we... And I'm pro-science and I'm pro-scientists, and the answer to this problem is going to be science in the end. It isn't a political answer to this crisis. It's only going to be a scientific answer. But I love the old Churchill line that the scientists should be on tap and not on top. And I think that we put too much power in the hands, from a communications point of view, into the sort of scientific community, because they're just another bunch of human beings, super-bright and brilliant and nothing but net-positive. But that's another group of individuals who, by the way, are pretty competitive. There's a fair amount of commercial stuff that runs in the back of that. There's certainly a lot of ego in the scientific world, right? So you're just passing it on, in my view. I would have liked to have seen Number 10 taking more of a grip early on. I think everyone would agree with that. I suspect Boris would too.

And the other thing that I think maybe they got wrong, still I think on occasions get wrong, is language. And you and I are fascinated by communications. Language, obviously, is a fundamental part of that. And when I started seeing the comparisons to war, which you still hear pop up from time to time, that this was the wartime-Britain-like attitude, which I get... There's a lot to be drawn from that kind of patriotic national project, national problem instinct that you can get. But for me, in crisis, using language of war only makes your problem worse. You're escalating it. You're not getting it into a better place.

You've got to use authentic language, because this has undoubtedly been such a tragic situation for so many families and for so many people, but for me, the war comparison is wrong strategically. I also think it's wrong tactically, right? Because again, not to keep quoting Churchill, and Boris, as we know, is a great student of Churchill. Look at what happened to him. Ran an amazing wartime campaign and as soon as people could see a future without war, they ditched him. And I think there's a danger for the Tory party if they turn this into too much of a wartime-like scenario. They could end up with the same result. The gap in this current period, really, for me, is the next generation. I'm not hearing nearly enough about what is going to be done for the next generation, and that's the area that I worry about. Obviously we have to worry about the people who are most at risk now, but I think we've also got to think much harder and create a much stronger sense of urgency around the impact that this situation is going to have on the next generation.

Paul Blanchard:

I'm fascinated by new beginnings. And there you are, you're editor, the News of the World, one of the most widely-respected, biggest newspaper brands in the world, top job. You then go into another top job, Director of Communications of the government, you then go to prison and then you're released, right? I mean, in a sense, life's not without challenges, but what a fresh start you've got there. You've got incredible skills. You've proven that in multiple areas. It's a great opportunity to think, well, what is next? What are you going to do? And I'm fascinated by how you began the journey. Did you come out of prison and think, "Right, I'm going to set up a consultancy"? Did you consider other things? You were obviously working with chief executives and global leaders. How did he get into that? And tell our listeners about what you do for a living now.

Andy Coulson:

Yeah, I mean, funnily enough, my plan was always to start a business. The people that I've always admired most are the people who have created something out of nothing. And until I came through what I came through, I was certainly not one of those people. I was an employee for Rupert Murdoch for many years, and then for the conservative party and then in government. So only ever an employee, but my plan was absolutely, as much as I had a plan, my plan was that I would not stay in politics for long. In actual fact, I told David and promised my wife that I'd never go into Number 10, and then got persuaded otherwise by David himself.

And so when I then found myself dealing with my own crisis for five years, I'm quite stubborn among other things, and I decided, "I'm going to keep to my original plan and it's going to be harder, and it's going to be a much tougher exercise, but that's what I want to do." Because I'd worked out by that stage when I was in Number 10, that I love... It is important to do what you love, and I love giving advice. I love being in that room. There is nothing like sitting in a room with someone of influence, or of just real interest, who's trying to do something brilliant, and being part of their advisory team. It's a privileged and wonderful position to be in. And that's what I decided, that's what I want to spend my time doing, because I get a tremendous amount of satisfaction from it. I was reasonably good at it.

And then I thought to myself, does this situation make me a better or worse advisor? And I think it absolutely makes me a more valuable person in the room because I hold to the view that you want people around you without an agenda, but with a view and who've been up and down the hill a few times. And I've been up and down the hill. And so that's the offer, really. The business. That's what I do. It's a part-conciliary service. It's counsel at the highest levels with CEOs, chairmen, founders. It's that campaigning piece. I know how to turn a good idea into something meaningful and valuable. And it's that crisis piece as well, which as I say, I've been a poacher of gamekeeper and game, so I've seen that I've seen that from all angles. But the thing that crisis gives you, the grand prize of crisis, is total clarity on your life. And my five years of crisis... I can't sit here, Paul, and tell you that I'm glad it happened, because I'm not, obviously, for a whole bunch of reasons, but I can't tell you that it didn't create positives for me. And the biggest positive is the absolute clarity that it gives you on who you are and what you want your life to be. And if you can grab that out of crisis, it's such a fantastic place to find yourself.

Paul Blanchard:

Never let a crisis go to waste, as they say.

Andy Coulson:

Yeah, it is don't let it go to waste, in a tactical perspective. But from a... Again, I don't want to sound too airy-fairy about it, but to be able to reach a point in your life where you can get that view on yourself and who you want to be, is just fantastic. It's a real positive. And I often say that to people that are in the middle of a problem, is that there are real gems to be dug out as you go through a crisis. You've just got to keep your eyes and ears on.

Paul Blanchard:

So it's love of "being in the room when it happens", to quote Hamilton. That's the joy.

Andy Coulson:

Yeah, it is in part, but listen, there's nothing like politics. You can't really match that element of it, because that's the amazing thing about politics is that you are in the middle of it. You've got a seat in the front row. But business, you'll know this, because you're in a similar game, you can meet... Honestly, I get a tremendous amount of satisfaction from being with a businessman who is just trying to disrupt his sector, or a businesswoman who has decided, "I want to build out my profile. I want to build on a foundation. I want to be able to do positive things with my life and put the assets that I have to good use." I still find that fascinating. As long as the individual is engaged and interested and wants to listen to your advice, it's terrific.

And also that they understand that you want advisors who are afraid to get things wrong as well. That's really important. That's really important in politics. David, that was one of the really smart attributes that David had, is that he allowed his advisors to get it wrong. But what I say now in business is you got to let me get it wrong, but if I'm wrong more than I'm right, I'm not much use to you. So that's the measure of my value, really, is that I'm there to give you a view. I'll always give you a view. And as you know, the world is full of advisors who won't give you a view. You'll always get an opinion from me and I'll be right more than I'm wrong. If I do that, I'm valuable to you.

Paul Blanchard:

I think the most difficult bit about what I do is if you're in politics or you're dealing with a crisis, it's usually because the spotlight is on you. There's a tension that's inbound, that's relentless, and will happen come what may. So you've got to persuade the client not to bury their head in the sand and so on, but there's an opportunity to shape the way the journalists might cover it by saying, "Well, that's not true, and our position is that we're relying on that," and so on. The difficult bit actually, whilst that has its own stresses, the most stressful part of my job is actually when you're trying to engender some interest in what a client's doing.

So a client will have a lot of money and they'll rebrand themselves in their own mind as an environmentalist, but they've got no hinterland. They've got no credibility to have done that. And it's genuine. But they think, "Well, I've got money and my desire is real. Why isn't the News of the World wanting to publish my op-ed?" And that's always been the worst bit about what I do. I wondered whether you could teach me how to engender it, really, or whether you just give up. A few PR people I've spoken to say, "Well, just don't try and do that." But having an op-ed or a story that you're then trying to persuade a very time-poor attention-deficit journalist, who's used to receiving 300 pictures a day, how can I persuade them that my client is worth even listening to? Because sometimes I don't even think they are as well.

Andy Coulson:

Well, I see reputation as a tool, right? I don't think that a reputation is in and of itself necessarily valuable. And that's why I don't actually do much PR as a result. My work is much more on the strategic end. Who are you? What is it that you're trying to

achieve? Where are you trying to get to? That point that I mentioned earlier in the conversation is that, never mind in crisis, in life, you've just got to be clear on what it is you're trying to achieve. Identify the obstacles, and we will help you with the obstacles because we're very good problem-solvers. I work with brilliant people. Jon Steafel, who was the deputy editor of the Daily Mail for 10 years and an amazing advisor, Susan Adams, who was the Head of Strategy in the Rothschild Family Office for a while, brilliant thinker. And together, we're very, very good problem solvers, but we're equally interested in helping you identify your opportunity and get there as quickly as possible.

But I don't necessarily hold to the view that an op-ed in the News of the World, which of course would be very difficult to achieve these days, but in any newspaper, is necessarily the answer to that. Right? I think that a reputation is rooted and grounded in a whole range of different things, and some of those will require executional PR, and there are some brilliant executional PRs out there. I hear that there's this bloke, Paul Blanchard, who's not bad. But there are other means to a fully-rounded, useful reputation. So I see reputation much more in that, "Is it going to drive my objectives? Is it going to drive my life?" Much more than, "Is it going to get me known and famous?"

Paul Blanchard:

What type of an editor were you when you were in the chair? Because the one thing I remember about you is that you were a man of mystery. You didn't really give many press interviews. And I think that added [inaudible 00:50:21]. I think the more anyone says about anything, the more you can feel that you know them and then resent them. And I'm just fascinated, because Piers Morgan is a bit of a showman. We had David Yelland on the podcast a couple of years ago, and he said that he was too much of a lily-livered liberal to be a great editor. He said you had to have no friends. What's it actually like to sit in the chair?

Andy Coulson:

Well, from the profile point of view, I was not interested in profile. It just wasn't, and isn't, actually, what I'm about. And I was pretty low profile, or at least tried to be, in the political job as well. I failed miserably, obviously... For all the wrong reasons on both counts. But that was the way I sort of saw the job. My job as an editor was to produce a brilliant newspaper and to sell as many copies as I could. When I was an editor, it was a very competitive time. When I first took over, we were still sort of nudging around the 4 million mark in terms of sales. It was an interesting period as well.

I was thinking about this the other day, that when you start to chart where newspapers have gone and the challenge that newspapers still face now, this battle to convince people that content should be paid for... I was thinking that when I was editor, 2005 let's say, I was editor from 2003 to 2007. I was editor for four years and spent five years talking about it. We're in the midst of the CD and DVD giveaway years. I don't know if you remember those. We would produce a newspaper. We would sell it for 50p and we would tell the reader very clearly, "This product is only worth this money to you if we give you Tom Hanks, Big for free-"

Paul Blanchard:

Without self-devaluing in a sense.

Andy Coulson:

And it became this kind of arms war between us and the mail on Sunday and other than The daily were doing it. We're all giving away films and CDs and basically training the reader that this thing is not actually worth much, unless you get a Hollywood film free with it. Bonkers, absolutely bonkers. Then we sort of felt it at the time. We realized that it was like a crack, right? It was a circulation crack, but it was so difficult to get out of. And so I spent a lot of my time. Ask me what I spent time doing as an editor. I spent a tremendous amount of time trying to solve that and failing to solve that conundrum.

And also when I was editor, we were going through a very important phase of changing the printing process, which sounds very boring, but actually was all consuming because the news of the world was not the loudest voice to use that phrase again, was certainly not the loudest voice in the room at news, right? Although it was a big newspaper and it was actually Rupert's first newspaper here. It was bottom of the pile news in terms of commercial clout. And as a result, I spent a lot of my time fighting the paper's corner with management over a whole bunch of different reasons. From, are we going to get enough money for the marketing budget for the problem that I just explained, or to write the way through to how many editions are you going to let me have so that if I live in Ipswich, I'm going to get the right football result in the paper when I pick it up.These things are all part of an editor's life, quite aside from trying to produce a brilliant paper with a fantastic front page that will drive conversation for a week.

Paul Blanchard:

And Newspapers knackered in the long term. I mean, we've got The Independent close. Papers like the Express, once highly respected, were bought by Reaches. They're now known. And look at the pandemic. I mean, I haven't physically read the Sunday Times in about three or four years anyway, but I do pay for the app. It is the whole concept of what a newspaper is dead.

Andy Coulson:

I don't think print's dead. I think that there will be a sort of almost, this is probably the wrong comparison, but I kind of almost as sort of a vinyl record value to print, because it's a different experience, right?

Paul Blanchard:

I was going to say, my wife spends about a 1000 pounds a year on vinyl. She's obsessed with it.

Andy Coulson:

Yeah. But there's a different experience, right? I think this is probably more of a positive point for magazines than it is for newspapers. They can be a thing of sort of a physical value to you. I think that newspapers are incredibly important. I think that they are vital for our democracy. I think that it is largely down to newspapers in this

country to hold our politicians to account. They can do it in a different way than the broadcasters ever can. I think they're fundamentally important, but they obviously face as a print product, not in terms of their content that they produce, but as a print product, they face an an existential problem.

Or anything I would say is that I left newspapers in 2007, right? So I'm not up to date by any means. But the end of newspapers was being discussed still very loudly, even in 2007, that we're on a slippery slope. Circulations are falling. You're going to see titles closing in the next five years. Hasn't happened. They're incredibly resilient. They're incredibly robust. And on a low, I think it is a slide that won't be stopped. I suspect it will be slower than people even now are predicting. The most important thing is, are newspaper companies continuing to produce valuable, important, entertaining content? And the answer to that is undeniably, yes. If you take The Times as an example, which I'm a big fan of. What a product. What a product and very happy to pay for it.

I think The Sun where I spent the vast majority of my career is still a fantastic product. It has existential problems. Of course it does, right? And there's so many different things that are important to The Sun. Sports, humor, all of these things have become so much more difficult to stay relevant in because of technology. But the jabs campaign that The Sun's running right now, I think is fundamentally brilliant and fundamentally important. And I don't really see which online or digital brand is thinking in those terms. The Mail's campaign for laptops right now, also fantastic. Who else is doing that? Who's got the sort of brains where they can drive those kinds of campaigns? So they're still brilliant in my view, brilliant stuff coming out of those kinds of brands.

Paul Blanchard:

Rupert Murdoch, Les Hinton, David Cameron, all of these sort of great leaders you've worked for a lot of them. Was there anything that they had in common, like a thread of sort of good leadership? Because if you're in a unique position to compare and contrast with real leaders, what works and what doesn't. In particular with your consultancy now you're working with leaders. Are you on good terms with them? What have you learnt? I've learned so much from working with leaders, not just in terms of what to do, but also what not to do. What we had like that a lot of it is about in my view is about temperance.

Andy Coulson:

No, I've been incredibly lucky right from the start of my career. There's a bloke called, it's a bloke. Who's the deputy Peter Rowan, who is the deputy editor of The Evening Echo newspaper in basil and he gave me my first job when I was 18 years old. How lucky was I to have been led by him for a while? And there are things that he said to me when I was a kid that I still remember now. Just a brilliant individual, right the way through. Yes, through newspapers. Absolutely. And through politics.

I think in the news that the kind of common thread was driven. That's the example that Rupert set internally was I never stood in front of Rupert and listened to him deliver a speech. It was an example. It was his life, the example was his attitude to business and the progress that he drove himself. That was the kind of... That's what

set the mood for me anyway. That, and also this idea that I touched on earlier, because it's my view, but it's also, I think also that it was also part of the view and the business. Are you any good at your job? And can you contribute to whatever mission we're on? And that sort of sense of mission was absolutely there. It was there with Kelvin who's the editor of The Sun when I joined.

Stuart Higgins, who I worked under for many years. And then as an editor, I suppose I carried that same kind of idea really, at least tried to say that you just got to work hard. And there's this idea, I think that newspapers back then were somehow putting a paper together is a simple exercise. It is not. It is unbelievably complex and it is unbelievably hard work. And that actually, if you don't mind me saying because we've touched on it earlier, that's one of the things that still bothers me, I suppose, about the news of the world, and the way it gets talked about now. Never mind me. People will say what they say enough, and I've given you my view on that. But it does bother me that the vast majority of people in that newspaper and the news of the world were brilliant, hardworking, talent.

Paul Blanchard:

It was an amazing newspaper.

Andy Coulson:

They were fantastic people, Paul. So please do not include myself in this at all, right? But for them to be continually thrown into the pot of everything that went wrong at the news of the world and a lot did by the way go wrong. And a lot for which I take responsibility for, because I was the boss, but I do feel that the people need to remember that there were some brilliant people who worked on that paper.

Paul Blanchard:

We've talked a lot about some of the painful experiences and the Americans call them teaching moments, but it's still there. And I think we've done that, but I know you've only got a few minutes left because you're busy and we've already had, well over an hour. I'm very grateful actually. But ending on a positive note, we've talked about regrets and all that good beans, but you must have some incredible memories, large and small. What have been the highlights over the years? What are the things that you've done that you're most proud of?

Andy Coulson:

I think that's a really good point, because when you go through a crisis, the other danger is that everything becomes the past... Two things happen in crisis, right? One is that the kind of relationships and friendships, it twists all of those if you're not careful. That's what crisis does and scandal does to people, it really twists all those things, bends them out of shape. The other thing it can do if you're not careful, is that it kind of rewrites your own history and that, because my time at the news of the world ended... My time in newspapers ended very badly undeniably, but I had a fantastic time in newspapers as well.

I got a tremendous amount wrong, as I've just said, but honestly, my '20s were fantastic. My '30s largely were just... I became editor when I was 35. It was fantastic.

I was a showbiz reporter as a young man. I was flying around the world interviewing every star in Hollywood and in the UK, almost on a weekly basis. I have my own column. I had tremendous fun. And I worked with brilliant people. The mood at The Sun during those years was very kind of high energy dynamic. People that I was working with were just a great bunch of individuals and I loved it and I'm very lucky and I'm determined not to forget all that because those years when you're the good years, you mustn't let them fade when you... Those were some bad years. You've got to remember them because they're just as valid in my view. I had a fantastic time for which I remain grateful. The same with politics as well because that obviously ended badly for me because as you know I'm a resigning recidivist, but I had a fantastic time in politics, brilliant people, right? Great bunch of talented... Some of them are very young advisors finding their way who have gone on to do brilliant things in politics and our politics. What a ride to be able to be in the center of all that and have some degree of influence over it is a privilege and it's professionally fascinating. And I'm determined not to forget that as well. Remember the positives.

I think you should take it again, not to get too philosophical about it. I try to take the same approach to my sort of life as I take to the relationships that I have. I hope people who meet me will take the view that you shouldn't just judge someone by their mistakes. You should try and form a fuller view. Don't just judge people by their mistakes. Look at the big picture. And I try and do that in my relationships and the people that I work with and that I'm around. And I try to take that attitude towards my career, really because there've been some undeniably really negative periods, some of them very long.

Paul Blanchard:

It's the lens through which you look at these things. So for example, we're presuming that the lens is that some objective camera's looking at your life saying, well, you've got that bit wrong, got that bit right. There must be people like me though, that thing you were a bit of a legend. We always had huge respect for you and you're on the highs. And the humble way that you've dealt with the lows and you've learnt from it actually means that I respect you and think you're even more of a legend now than before, because of those lows, not necessarily. It's not like you were a hundred pounds in credit, in the emotional bank account with me and now you're only 50 quid. I think you're 150 because of the way that you've done it. There must be people that see the cumulative total of what you've been through in life as a net positive.

Andy Coulson:

I said to you before, in a way I can't really influence it. It's very nice of you to say so, by the way, but I can't influence it. You can't spend your time worrying about that for the reasons that I explained earlier. But it's undeniably, I think the case, because the business is booming and we're doing really well. We're working with some fantastic people who I think have reached precisely that conclusion that we're of use and a bit like the podcast, it's exactly the same. So that's enough carried through my life. I think from my parents is that if you make yourself useful, you'll be just fine in the end. And I think as an advisor, I make myself pretty useful. And hopefully again, I guess I think it's actually only just occurred to me. I think that's why I love the podcast because I think it can be useful.

Paul Blanchard:

I mean, I don't know whether it's a useful delusion or whether it's true, but I've always fundamentally believed that my best years are still ahead of me. And it sounds to me like, you've really got yourself in a good position and you believe that too.

Andy Coulson:

Absolutely. Yeah. Yeah. I think that's the only way to look at life, isn't it? I've got a natural kind of if I've got this, I've got some resilience, certainly. We've talked about that. But the other thing I have is an ability to kind of reboot, right? I have a natural kind of, I want momentum that can cause me to be quite impatient at times, but I know I always want to be moving forward. And even when I was undeniably moving backwards, I still believed all the way through it. You know what, there'll be a moment when I can start to change direction again and things will move forward for me. That's absolutely how I see things. And sometimes if someone's in crisis and you've been there as an advisor as well, it's one of the jobs of an advisor I think, is to convince the person is in the center. Do you know it will end? It will end and you have to be ready to get going again when it does. So, spend some time thinking about how's it going to be at the end of all this? Who do you want to be? Where do you want to get to? I think that's critical.

Paul Blanchard:

And I've been badgering you for what seems like years to come on this podcast. I was so grateful that you agreed to do it, and I'm incredibly grateful that we've done it. This has been frankly one of the best ones we've done. I've been really inspired by it. I've learned a huge amount. Thank you ever so much for your time.

Andy Coulson:

Paul, thanks for having me. I really appreciate it.