

Erin McCarthy

TitleVP & Editor-in-Chief, Mental Floss

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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 from New York by Erin McCarthy, Editor-in-Chief of Mental Floss, the intellectual trivia website for curious millennials. Erin joined Mental Floss in 2012, and hosts many of their incredibly popular shows on Youtube. She edited Mental Floss's book 'The Curious Reader,' and was the creator, executive producer, and host of the 'History Vs.' podcast. Erin previously covered everything from natural disasters to bridge engineering and even the science behind sci-fi movies for Popular Mechanics magazine. Her work has appeared in O: The Oprah Magazine, Town and Country, Parents, and Esquire, and when she's not editing or writing, you can find her singing karaoke, reading, or hanging out with her cats, Oliver and Pearl. Erin, thank you for joining me.

Thank you so much for having me. I'm so excited to be here.

Me too. I'm an absolutely massive fan of Mental Floss; as you know, I think I'm the number one fan, really. I mean, it's such a fascinating site. You can really disappear down the rabbit hole by discovering more amazing facts. You strike me as a curious person who's equally as excited about this as readers, viewers, and listeners.

Oh, a hundred percent. One of the best things about Mental Floss, when you visit the site, when you work there, is that you really get to follow your curiosity down the rabbit hole. And it makes it such a rewarding job. I learn something new every single day.

So every superhero has an origin story, don't they in these movies? Did you always envisage you were going to do this? How did you start on the journey? What did you want to do when you were younger? What did you study? Tell us the beginning. What were the first steps?

Yeah, so I think it all comes back to curiosity. I was a very, very curious kid. Maybe this is something that all kids do, but I would ask my mom questions, and she would answer, and then I would say, but why? And just drive her absolutely nuts. And my

parents really enabled my curiosity. I had a microscope growing up, and I put everything underneath that microscope to look at it. I was always outside, just kind of exploring the natural world and trying to learn new things. I read like crazy, and I still do. So I was just always wanting to learn new things. And because of that, for a while, I thought I was going to be a teacher. And then I thought I'm gonna be a Marine biologist. And then I realised there's a lot of science involved in that. And while I love science, am I good at things like maths and that kind of stuff? Absolutely not. So maybe not for me. And what I ended up deciding was a great way to indulge my curiosity was to go into journalism because the very nature of the job is you're just covering new and interesting things all the time. Initially, I felt like I wanted to be a celebrity reporter, specifically a music reporter, and work for Rolling Stone or something, but that is not where my career went, and I think that's okay.

So you were always going to be a science, factual based journalist as it were?

Yeah, I think so. So I went to university and got a degree in magazine editing. I was gonna move to the city without a job because way back in the day, they used to tell you, if you don't have a New York address on your resume, you're not getting hired in New York. So I actually moved in with my aunt and uncle on Staten Island to try to get a job in New York. And I ended up getting a job at Popular Mechanics magazine working on the print side, just like Mental Floss, Popular Mechanics is a place where you really do get to indulge in your curiosity. So I covered all kinds of things there, and became really passionate about things like rogue waves, which is a very weird and niche interest, things like engineering and all the developments there. We did a big package called rebuilding America, where I got to go see locks and dams in Kentucky.

That sounds absolutely awesome!

It was awesome. It was so cool. And then, because of that, you get to learn about all of the infrastructure of the country and how things like the nation's waterways heavily impact our supply chain and what we're able to do and if those locks and dams go down, all of that merchandise or supplies have to go onto trucks, which then stresses the roads, a domino effect. Anyway, I could go on forever.

It's fascinating. That could be a YouTube video.

Yes, exactly. I was there for six years. I worked my way up from assistant to editor-in-chief to associate editor. I was ready to do a little bit more, to have a little bit more responsibility, but there wasn't really a place for me to move up there. So I kind of started looking around for something that I thought would be similar, where I could just kind of again learn something new every day. And I came across Mental Floss, applied, got the job in 2012, I started as deputy editor and again, worked my way up. And I've been here ever since,

For those of our listeners that aren't familiar with Mental Floss, could you give them a 101?

So Mental Floss is a site for curious people; as we've been talking about, we really want our audience to follow their curiosity wherever it takes them on the site. And we also want our readers to be the smartest, most interesting people at the party. And so to that effect, there's a lot of digestible facts, but there are also answers to questions you might have been tempted to Google or stories you haven't heard or a fresh take on topics you thought you knew everything about. We envisioned Mental Floss as your really smart friend who knows a little bit about a lot of things.

The content is absolutely fascinating. I think I've been a fan of the brand name for perhaps longer than you have, even though you are the editor-in-chief which is incredible. What is your role as editor-in-chief involved? Because you obviously have the website, but one of the things that is doing incredibly well is the podcast, but also the YouTube content. You presenting almost limitless lists of amazingly fascinating trivia got my wife and I through lockdown, frankly, thank you for doing that, by the way.

Oh, I love to hear that. And it's also kind of strange to know that you, because of that, know what the inside of my apartment looks like along with a number of other people.

It could have been a studio mocked up to look like an apartment!

That was my house. So what does my job entail? It's a lot of different things. A lot of it is coming up with ideas for stories that we're gonna run, and editing stories. There's also a fair amount of fielding business opportunities that I think could be interesting for us, managing the team, occasionally writing. And then of course, YouTube takes up a big chunk of time as well. And that was never something that I thought I was ever gonna do. I'm glad that I really enjoy it. It's really fun to kind of get all gussied up and sit in the studio and use a teleprompter, which is surprisingly harder than you would think. So much respect to news reporters who have to do that in a studio live all the time because goodness knows I mess up pretty frequently.

Well, those mess up are edited out because what we see is a highly polished, amazing production values show. And it's fantastic. I was going to ask you about that, what's the litmus test for what you decide to include and not, is it your sort of, I was gonna say, subjective opinion, not to demean it, but like your view as editor. That's interesting or no, I'm not particularly bothered by that. Where do you get all this stuff from

Where we get our ideas is basically anywhere. I mean, it's an annoying answer, I think. But, really it's just from being in the world, and I think that was one thing that was maybe a little scary about lockdown for us is that we depend so much on going out and experiencing things to find ideas, whether that's going to a museum, traveling somewhere and just being somewhere new. That was maybe a little bit scary, we got through it. So one big source of ideas for us now is just reading. I'll often read a book, and there will be like a throwaway sentence in there. And I'm like that would be a really great story idea for us. And then we take that one kernel of an idea and just really dig into it to tell a fascinating story. So that's one place. And then just again, a

lot of times, and this is not just me, but everybody who works at Mental Floss will start researching one thing, and then you kind of get distracted by something else. And then you kind of follow that. And eventually, at the end of it, you have a story idea. So that aspect of the job is really fun. In terms of what is a Mental Floss story, it is kind of a gut feeling. And I feel like the team at this point understands, we call it Flossy, whether or not something is Flossy. And so you kind of just go with your gut, you can get a story idea, a pitch from a writer, and we will know immediately whether or not it's Flossy or we'll know that we could take it in a Flossy direction. So the thing about Mental Floss, and this has been true from the very beginning, Will Pearson and Mangesh Hattikudur, who founded Mental Floss, they did a selfish pursuit. They wanted to cover the things that they were interested in and find out more about the things that they were interested in. And that has not changed. I mean, Mental Floss has been around for 21 years, which is wild. And you know, we're still trying to find the things that we are interested in and curious and passionate about. And that's what guides our coverage.

I was trying to think of a media literate way of phrasing this question, but one of the problems you have on YouTube is it's full of crap. You watch a video that says 10 things you didn't know about X. And I don't know whether because I'm a trivial addict, but I always know about six or seven of them anyway. And one of the things that's amazing about your videos, this so-called Flossiness, which I'm interested in, is when you present the viewer and the listener with 10 facts, they're genuinely new. How do you work that out? Here's eight facts about something you think most Mental Floss readers will know four of those. Is there an interestingness threshold or I already vaguely knew that so we won't include that. How would you decide what's in and out?

Yeah. I mean, I think when we're reporting these things out and writing them, we'll kind of see what's available everywhere. And then, we set a goal for ourselves to go beyond that. And so we're always searching for that weird thing, that one fact where you're like this is a very weird and Flossy fact that probably isn't gonna be covered somewhere else. And then, if it is something that's out there in a broader sense, we will try to take a deeper dive on it. So we'll try to provide more context, more information so that we're just covering it on a surface level. So our goal is always to provide something new, even if we're covering something that is probably pretty well known.

And do you have a big team of people searching out for this sort of new and undiscovered trivia? I don't know whether my framing of this in terms of the way I picture it is colored by the fact I watched Star Trek First Contact recently, but I imagine you've got like 10 borgs in like a cube, like a hive mind seeking out the internet and you are the borg queen deciding what's in and out. You're about to tell me that that's not the case. Are they just normal people working beyond a desk?

Yes, I'm sad to say. But our team is maybe smaller than people might think. It's 13 people, including me, video and social. So we don't have a huge team of people who are looking for these facts, but I do think we have the right people. Every person who works at Mental Floss is, and I say this affectionately, a weirdo. They're weird. And

we love that. That's why they work at Mental Floss. Everybody has their own kind of weird niche thing that they're super into. And it can make brainstorming sessions really fun when we all get into a room or a zoom together, it just goes to some really bizarre places. And again, it all goes back to following that curiosity down the rabbit hole. It is basically like our main operational strategy is to follow our curiosity.

So do you have a little notepad with you wherever you go, because your inspiration could come from any moment, just taking a trip on the subway, looking around and being curious you could come up with 10 ideas.

Oh my gosh. My notes app on my phone is a mess and there are some things in there where I'm like, what was I even talking about? But yes, I have my notes app open constantly, and I'm just always jotting things down in there. For example, I was at, and this was quite a bit ago, but a museum in New York and they had a painting in it of a young boy with a squirrel as a pet. And I thought, oh my gosh, we should do a story about when squirrels were pets, which we haven't done yet. But that is still in my notes app on my phone. So like that's where I dump all my ideas. And then, inevitably, they'll come up at some point, and we'll turn them into a story.

Tell us about the book; compelling The Curious Reader must have been a huge challenge. Not to sort of decide what goes in, but frankly, what wouldn't make the cut because you've got the whole of the world of literature to decide what passes muster.

Oh my gosh. It was really hard. First we set parameters for ourselves because I think if you don't do that, you are gonna run into this problem where it's like we need to do this and we need to include this, and we must have this. So what we really tried to do was, have no novels before 1800, though I think make one exception and then we looked at best-of lists to kind of see if we were missing anything that felt really important or like someone was gonna email us and say, I can't believe you didn't include this book how dare you? Then we also looked at it from a diversity perspective. We wanted to make sure that we were not just including old white male authors, to be frank. So all of that helped us determine what we had, what was missing, and what we wanted to ultimately bring into it. And I'm really proud of it. I think it's just packed with information, all kinds of fun and interesting stories that will really surprise people.

What kind of feedback do you get from your readers, your listeners, your viewers, I don't what you would call it, are we users of Mental Floss? It's gone of the days when you would have a print magazine and I would read it on the underground, am I a user? And also do you have a typical user in mind when you're writing? Is it millennials? I imagine you've got demographics that tell you absolutely all of that details and all those metrics. Do you write with a particular person in mind?

We write for the curious person, so they could be a millennial, they could be gen Z. They could be whoever. In terms of what our demos are, they're all over the map. We have certainly a lot of millennials, a lot of gen Z readers. We also have older people

who come to the site a lot. And we find ourselves in Google classrooms. So there are obviously teachers and students who are making use of Mental Floss. So that's always kind of something we have in the back of our heads when we're determining what we're gonna cover or what angles we're gonna take. I guess you're a Mental Flosser. Maybe that's what we'd call you. That's what I'm gonna go with. You're a Mental Flosser. Our readers are Mental Flossers or just Flossers.

I like that. But of course, in keeping with most other media brands these days, there's multiple touchpoints. With users like me where there's the podcast, there's YouTube; there's the website, the mailing list. Do you have a way of interacting with people like me, like a process in mind? How do you monetize your relationship with someone like me? Is it that because my wife and I have watched every single video you've got, and there's adverts and so on, is it the Google checks and the YouTube checks?

Yeah. I mean, obviously that kind of stuff is important, but that's not what I think we think about when we're, or at least it's not like the biggest concern that we have. Our biggest concern is that we're telling an interesting story and we're presenting it in a way that is conversational, that doesn't feel like we're talking down to anyone, that is really interesting, that it's a story that people wanna tell their friends about. And I think when you do that, the rest of it follows. Of course, we're looking at things like SEO, we're using data. We do care about making money because, obviously, it's what keeps us going, but for me, I just think you start with the story and you go from there.

It's the field of dreams model, isn't it? If you build it, they will come, and it's right, isn't it because if you create a, I hate to use marketing phrases and product speak, but if you create that product and you get authentic engaged users, and their passion is real, and it comes in the grassroots, then ultimately it is gonna be sticky content. People are gonna come back, rather you contriving a show around ticking certain demographic boxes.

Exactly. And you know, I think we have a certain sense about what works for each of our platforms as well. YouTube is slightly different than maybe the site would be. Although we do find that there's a fair amount of crossover. So it's understanding the differences in your audiences for those particular platforms.

Well, that was going to be my next question actually. So you very eloquently moved us onto there, which is the different platforms. You've got the podcast, you've got the website, YouTube. How do you delineate and segment content, do you think that's ideal for the list show or do you think this is gonna be a longer piece on the website or do you try and do something that would cut across all of the platforms? How does it work?

Yeah, I mean, it all comes down to the idea. I think definitely for the podcast, it's something where you can take a single topic and really explore it at length. I mean really at length. And that's what's kind of really fun about it because it is spread out over however many hours, I was actually just looking back at 'History Vs' and I feel

like I did 21 episodes of that podcast, which is wild to think about. But it really allowed me to dig into a topic from a number of different angles. So maybe if you wanna do something that's more extensive, more in-depth, you go the podcast route. Maybe if you wanna do a quick hit list, you put that on YouTube, and frankly, the site we actually, part of our strategy is to cross-post that content. So anything that we do on YouTube will also end up in list form or in feature form on the site.

So no nugget of interestingness would ever go to waste.

Exactly, exactly. And because there is a fair amount of crossover, even if someone who's reading Mental Floss isn't necessarily watching the YouTube channel, they would still be interested in that content itself. So we make sure that we are making it available on as many platforms as we possibly can. And then there are short, digestible facts that we know are gonna be really great for Instagram or Twitter. And those tend to be the kind of things that we come across when we're editing and fact-checking pieces, we throw those into a Slack channel, and then our social team takes them and creates beautiful graphics around them or TikToks around them. We have a no-waste philosophy when it comes to our content and ideas.

I hate the word edutainment and however coined that phrase would obviously need to be savagely beaten, but I mean, Mental Floss has blurred the line, hasn't it between entertainment and education. I do feel that even though I'm having a good time, I'm also being intellectually stimulated.

Yeah. I mean, it's definitely true. I think Mental Floss' goal from the very beginning has always been to convey information in a way that hooks people and keeps them engaged. And then at the end of it they're like, oh I learned something, it's like a little bit of a surprise.

What kind of feedback do you get from the Flossers as it were, the users of the site and the listeners to the podcast and viewers, do they sort of tell you in the comments whether they feel that you're covering the right topics? Do you ever get people who try to do the whole you're wrong there? I'm absolutely right. Do you engage with those people because they could be right? But on the other hand, they're probably not. I imagine you've got very good due diligence and research verification processes.

I mean, we definitely get emails. People will comment on social media, and they'll comment on YouTube. I mean, the thing about our content is that we really do put things through a process where everything is edited. Everything is fact-checked. Multiple people are reading every single story that goes up on the site. There's not one piece of content that goes up on Mental Floss that hasn't been seen by multiple people, that said we are people, we don't always get it right. So when we get those emails or those comments, we take it very seriously. We look into every single one that we get. And often what we'll do is we'll forward the issue to an independent fact-checker. And he is not involved in our editorial process at all, so we'll send it to him and say, can you look into this? And sometimes people are right, and sometimes they're wrong. And we try to respond to everyone to let them know that we've gotten

their feedback, we're taking it seriously. We send it out to an independent person to take a look at what they said, thank you for reading Mental Floss.

What kind of content works best? It is obviously eclectic and it's a broad range and I like that. But is it history? Is it science? I think I watched a video with you a month or so ago that was like loads of random facts about American presidents. And it was just absolutely fascinating. And I wouldn't normally watch a sort of quote-unquote history video, but because you guys did it and I'm glad I did watch it cause it's very interesting. Or do you get people that pick and choose the bits where they wouldn't actually watch a science angle because they were much more concerned in say, anthropology or natural history or whatever?

Yeah. I mean, I think one of our biggest and most successful areas of coverage is entertainment. And that is just fun facts about movies that you might not have realized. Our animal coverage is huge. People love anything having to do with animals, not just pets but wild animals as well. History is obviously pretty big for us. The Royal family, anything involving any kind of royalty, is really big.

They're all lunatics, aren't they? I watched most of those.

I'm not gonna comment on that.

We don't want any international incidents. I agree.

But it's so much fun because in the process of doing these things, you learn as well. For me, it is just really cool. I know that's a little bit of a diversion, but I love working for Mental Floss.

I can hear the passion. It's great. I love reading it and being a Flosser. It's fantastic. Can we do a deep dive into what your role as editor-in-chief is? I'm trying to think of a polite way of saying what do you do? What is a typical week? And an interesting supplemental question is because you worked for Mental Floss before the pandemic, I'm interested in terms of what changed. You mentioned that we've got to see your apartment. I honestly thought it was a mocked-up apartment in a studio, but no wonder it had that authentic apartment-looking vibe, it was your apartment. What is a typical working week, and how did the pandemic change your working practices as a team?

Yeah, well before the pandemic, I went into the office every day, as did pretty much everyone who worked for Mental Floss. And I think the nice thing for us is that we did have some members of our team who were remote. So I think for us adjusting to that, quote-unquote new normal wasn't as hard as maybe it was for some teams who are in the office a hundred percent of the time, we already had a workflow that took place mostly over slack. So we really didn't have to make too many adjustments there. I will say we did have to make adjustments to our coverage because, obviously, we're not necessarily in the business of covering super heavy stuff. We're very conscious of if we are gonna be covering something that is heavy, that we are approaching it from

here's how you can help, here's something actionable you can do kind of approach. So a big pandemic hits, and everybody's super scared. How do you cover that when you're a site that generally considers itself a bit of an escape from the current news cycle? So what we ended up doing was, if there were big sort of actionable things, here's what you should be doing with your masks, tips for cleaning your house or your groceries or whatever. Those we would break out into separate pieces. And then sort of the harder news we would put in what we called our coronavirus digest and just provide links out to other resources that our readers could use. So we weren't necessarily covering all of that hard news stuff. We were trying to, again, approach it from here's what you can do, here's actionable steps that you can take. And then the other sort of adjustment that we made was we went, and we looked back at some of our older stories like museums you can visit virtually, and we updated all of those pieces and brought them back and made sure that they were current because people were looking for things to do. So our workflow didn't change that much, but certainly how we approached what we were doing changed a bit. So my weeks are very, very different depending on what I have on my plate. So I still edit a fair amount. It's really important to me that I never become a person who sits in meetings all day and doesn't actually read their own website or edit pieces on their own website. To me, that's the fun part of the job. And I would never wanna give that up. So I am editing several pieces a week. A lot of it is being in meetings, whether that's meetings with my team meetings, with outside folks, with business opportunities or things of that nature. And then a lot of it is also shooting YouTube videos, which depending on the length of the script and how many words I have trouble pronouncing are in them can sometimes take a few hours a week. But it's great because I really like to do different things and be challenged. And it definitely keeps me from getting bored, I would say.

How many takes do you have to do for the YouTube stuff?

Oh, it really depends. I feel like we could put together an entire YouTube video that's just me, like flubbing pronunciations.

That would be awesome. That could be premium as well, couldn't it? We'd have to pay a couple of bucks to see it because it's quality content.

Totally. And when we're in the studio, I think one of the nice things is because I did spend several months shooting in my house with my cats, and my husband was my cameraman, and we basically only saw each other. It's been so great to get back into the studio and hang out with the team. And we just have a lot of fun, we'll be talking about things, and I'll be giving a fact or something, and then that brings to mind something else, and we'll talk about it. And sometimes those things end up actually making the cut because we do find that some ad-libs are nice. We want you to know that we're in there having fun. It's not just all business, all facts all the time. We are weird, and we are enjoying ourselves while we're there. But, yeah the thing for me is I took French in high school and so French pronunciations I'm okay at. But any other language, I mean, just forget it, but it's important to us that we try, because I think you wanna be respectful of other languages of other cultures. Like I would not just wanna come in there and butcher someone's name. It's really important to us that we try. Do we always get it right? Oh, absolutely not. But we try, and that's the important thing.

I imagine, if you gave a talk about your job at the local kindergarten, this would be the question that they ask, because it's very obvious, but I'm itching to ask it of course, which is what is your favourite amazing fact that you've discovered through your work at Mental Floss?

This is a hard one because I could go on and on and on.

It's a seven-hour podcast, so there's plenty of time.

Oh yeah. If you ask anyone on staff what my favorite fact to pull out at a cocktail party is, they will know it right away. And it's that lobsters pee out of their faces. And why do I love this? I don't know. It's just so weird. It's so weird. I love to talk about that. People are always like, what?! I saw a Twitter feed where someone was like, is this true? And it's like you can pretty much divide your life between before you knew lobsters peed out of their faces and after, for whatever reason, it's just so bizarre. So I really like to drop that. I would not, however, recommend talking about how to tell the sex of a lobster at a clam bake; that doesn't go over well,

You have me at they pee out their faces, I've heard you say on the video. I mean, it's an eyebrow razor, is it not?

Oh yeah, it really is. But there, there are so many others. I will not laugh about the fact that parents in the 19th century put their babies in baby cages to get them fresh air if they lived in cities, a baby cage. I mean I guess the context of that is that those baby cages were literally wire cages that hung out of windows.

Seems perfectly sensible. I obviously condemn the moves to have that banned. It's health and safety gone mad, isn't it? All these bureaucrats in Washington are telling us we can't put our babies in cages, precariously balanced on a shelf. I mean, obviously it's crazy, isn't it?

I mean, I personally believe that we should bring back baby cages.

Absolutely. Me too. Here's a sort of corporate media question. Minute Media acquired Mental Floss in 2018. You're obviously growing the brand; it's been a website, there's now podcasts and so on. You've done incredibly well on YouTube. I hate the phrase do they have a vision for growing the brand, but will there be TV spin-offs, and more podcasts? What's the plan?

Yeah. I think we are always looking for new areas to expand into. And I think it's been really exciting for us to get into books, which was something that mental loss had done a fair amount of previously. But not anytime recently. And so that has been incredibly cool because there's just something about holding a product in your hand. I mean, I love digital media. You don't have to cut anything to fit, which was one of the things in my print life that I had a love-hate relationship with. There's something about holding a print product in your hand that I think is really incredible. So it's been very

exciting to do that again. We would love to do more magazines, in 2019 we did a special edition of the magazine that performed incredibly well. And so we would really, really, really like to do that again. Of course, I would love to do more podcasts. I would love to do a TV show of some kind, and we have had conversations in the past that nothing has come of them. What it all comes down to really is the matter of time, we're a small team and we care very, very much about how the brand is presented. So we are rarely handing anything off and just saying, all right, do what you want with it. So anything that we do, we really wanna be involved in, we wanna find people to work with who we can get our hands dirty with. So yeah, we have all kinds of things we're hoping to do. And I hope that some of those things come to fruition.

We have a lot of students that listen to this podcast and people that aspire to enter the media via journalism, being a producer, and lots of different ways up the mountain, as it were. Quite a few of them will be ambitious and really like what you're doing and will aspire to ultimately potentially be the editor-in-chief of Mental Floss. This is not Game of Thrones, of course; there's no vacancy. But what advice would you give to your punitive replacement, someone 10 years younger than you that is listening to this, thinking I'd like that job 10 years from now.

One, I think it's really important to diversify your skillset. So even when I was at Popular Mechanics, I was on the print side, but I wanted to work on the website because I knew that it would be a good idea to have that experience. So I made sure that as much as I was doing for the magazine, I was also doing for the website. I think it's incredibly important to not be afraid to advocate for yourself and for the things that you are passionate about and that you wanna do. Again, when I was at Popular Mechanics, I loved movies, and I loved movie-making technology, and I wanted to cover that. And a lot of people would ask me why Popular Mechanics is covering movies? And it's like do you understand that Popular Mechanics is a technology magazine, and technology enables movies to be made and there are people like James Cameron who are doing incredible things in that arena, and I would like to be covering that. And I was given the bandwidth to do that, which was incredible, but that was something that I advocated for. I would also say, I think it's really important to be open to new experiences. I never could've predicted that I would be hosting something on YouTube. And in fact it probably would've been terrified by it. And I was when I took it over because our audience really loves John Green, and it was intimidating to step into his shoes, but I was open to try, and it has been so rewarding for me. And then I think finally just follow your passion. It sounds so cheesy, but that really has gotten me to where I am today. I'm extremely curious and passionate about finding out things, learning new things, and sharing that with people. And just following that, using that as my north star, has really gotten me to where I am today.

I only put the good things of my life on Instagram. It's only partially the truth, because I don't put the boring bits on or the challenges could you share with our listeners, are there any downsides, is it other than sort of burnout and overwork, is there a challenge that's in front of you at the moment, a problem that you have to solve?

When it comes to my Instagram, the main challenge for me is not putting up so many photos of my cats. Because I think they're the most beautiful cats in the entire world and that everything they do is funny. I guess I'm talking about my cats like they're my kids, which they are in a way. So I'm always conscious like Erin; maybe don't put up another cat photo today.

Aren't you misrepresenting the position, though, because basically, in terms of Oliver and Pearl's point of view, you are their human; they own you, surely you wouldn't think that you are them.

Yeah, no, not at all. And in fact I call Oliver my meownager because he often sits in this room with me, and at the end of the day, he will come and sit right next to me on my desk and stare at me until I stop working and go and feed him and hang out with him. So he really keeps me on task, on time, on point, Oliver is the best meownager you could ever ask

I've never heard that word either, but that's even better than edutainment. I'll take that with me to the grave. I like that. I have mute my microphone when you're speaking because we have two dogs here, and whilst we adore them, they're also idiots, and they'll just bark at a bird flying past, and it always scares the hell out of me as well, even though we've had them for seven years as if it's new, you'd think I'd be used to it now. I like the police horses where they're, scared, often with loud noises so that they don't bolt. I wonder if I could train my dogs, probably not. How does it work in terms of engaging with your colleagues, then? Is it all over slack and zoom now? Some of our clients have this concept of silent meetings where you just sort of hang out on zoom and just work as if you sort of round the table virtually, but you don't have to have a facilitated meeting.

I don't know, to me that sounds like something my team would think was a nightmare. I would say a lot of our colleagues have many more meetings than we do. Our team is really about getting things done, leaving your work at the end of the day. And not just being online all the time. But we do have zoom brainstorms, and occasionally we do all get together in the same place and do brainstorms or meetings. But a lot of our conversations take place on slack, and we just razz each other a lot of times, we share fun or weird things that we've come across. So we're very attuned to like this new work environment. And then, from a managerial perspective, I meet with my direct reports once a month to talk things over directly so that they know that they have a time that they can come to me and bring up any issues or just to catch up and see how they're doing. And then with the people who don't report directly to me, I meet with them once a quarter, just to kind of see how they're doing, see if there's anything I can do to help them. But we try to keep as many meetings off the calendar as possible so that the team can get their work done.

Yeah. Because people are so busy. I mean, that's just the perils of the modern workplace, isn't it? Everyone's so busy talking about the work they're going to do that you never get time to do it. When I grew up in England, you chose one

media brand, you rather read The Sun or The Daily Mirror or The Times or The Guardian and so on. It was an either-or choice, in terms of being a Mental Flosser, I have other brands that I'm a fan of like QI, for example, but it's not to the detriment of what you guys are doing, a rising tide lifts all boats. I want to consume both content. Do you have rivals? Is it like that scene in Anchorman when they meet in the car park, the local news teams to fight each other and do you have an eye on what they're doing? Because if a fact is interesting, they might uncover it independently of you. It's not that you're copying each other, but surely there might be a bit of an overlap.

Yeah. I mean, I think for us we're definitely not meeting with any other media brands to fight.

You should do. Could I ask you to consider that at the next management meeting?

Yeah. I'll take it up with the people up top, but you know, I think one of the wild things about Mental Floss is that we cover so much, like the breadth of our coverage is truly wild. So certainly we have competitors, but I don't think that there's anyone out there who does exactly what we do, but you know I'm on other websites all the time, reading what they're doing and reading their coverage. Atlas Obscura is a site that I visit all the time. I think what they do is so, so smart, so engaging.

Big fans here; we've had Josh on actually.

Yes, it's a great site and I particularly love what they do with events that they plan. Like that's so cool. I'm definitely on those sites. I'm aware of them, but I don't really feel a sense of competition, which may be bad, may be I should. But I just think, because we do so much, even if they get one really good story, we're gonna get another one, there's room for us all.

You'll remember in First Blood; John Rambo just wanted to get on with his life in the first one. Whereas he then became adversarial in Rambo 2 onwards. And I think you are sort of halfway between the First Blood and Rambo 2. I'm probably taking that analogy to the wrong extent. You mentioned Flossers are weirdos and obviously that was meant as a compliment, but do you ever get not very nice weirdos because there are conspiracy theorists on the internet that we are convinced that coronavirus is a Chinese 5g, whatever, you're a woman presenting popular YouTube if you don't mind me asking, do you get weirdos hating on you? How do you deal with that as a public person? Do you just ignore them and do they deescalate? Personally, I don't want to present a YouTube channel, but there again I have no discernible talent.

In the beginning, it was definitely hard because, again, people were very attuned to John, they loved John. So I stepped in, and they were like, who is this person? Why is she here? Which I understand; I pretty much coped with that by not reading the comments.

It's always the way. All the actors say never read the reviews, darling.

Yeah, because I also just found that people do make comments about your appearance, and it's like, that is the least interesting thing about me. Talk about the content of the video. Also to me, it just doesn't matter. I don't take myself very seriously as a person, I take the quality of what we do very seriously. I want what we put out there to be very high quality, but I also think I have a fair amount of perspective. It's not rocket science; we're not operating on people. So I think we need to have a perspective about what we're doing.

Nobody died.

Yeah, no nobody's dying. I think the one thing that I feel very strongly about is language and the language that we use. And again, that goes back to trying to make sure I'm getting pronunciations right or as close as possible.

I never thought of that, that must be an absolute nightmare.

Oh, it's a nightmare but you know what, it's important to us because we don't wanna alienate anybody. We don't wanna make it seem like we're just like not thinking a person's culture is important or something, it's important for us to try to be as inclusive as possible and to be careful about the language that we use. So people will say sticks and stones can break my bones, but words will never hurt me, it's not true. Language is incredibly important, it has the power to inspire to alienate. And so we're very, very careful about that or we try to be.

For many years, he died recently, but there's a comedian in the UK called Bob Monkhouse, and he used to have a joke that said I was bullied at school and they'd call harsh names and so on, and I said to my body sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me, and from then on, it was just sticks and stones all the way.

Whoops, that backfired.

In terms of pronunciation, one of the things that's always fascinated me is this almost arbitrary way some foreign cities and words are pronounced properly and then others aren't. So no one says *pa-ree* when you're talking about Paris in France, like why? And yet in other places it's expected to pronounce it the way they would. Is it entirely arbitrary? Who would know?

Yeah, I don't really know, that's for sure. But there are some things that, like Budapest, comes to mind, it's *Budapest*, you know what I mean? And if you don't say that people are definitely gonna get on your case about it. So I don't know, maybe there are acceptable pronunciations for things. We just try really hard, we spend so much time looking up the pronunciations of things, but the poor editor phonetically spells them out for me so that I can try to get them. It's always a disaster.

There's me thinking your job was challenging in say three ways, but actually the more you think about it behind the scenes, you've got 11 different challenges to overcome including things that viewers and listeners and readers wouldn't even consider like that. It's absolutely fascinating. You might say that this is none of my business, but what's next for you? Do you have a career plan? Do you want to be president of the United States or merely governor?

No, definitely no politics for me. No, thank you. It's a tough question. Because I think Mental Floss is the most incredible place to work, in a lot of ways it's the perfect job for me personally, because I get to indulge my curiosity, I get to do things like, look at business opportunities for us and read contracts and do negotiations, which is again, not something I ever thought I would be doing. So every day I'm challenged and every day I'm so excited to come to work. I work with the best team. I love my team. I think they're the greatest people on the planet. And so to think about something beyond this is really hard. It's really hard. I think if we're talking about what I would like to do at Mental Floss, it would be so cool to do a TV show. I would love to do more podcasts. I'd loved making 'History Vs'. I thought it was so fun and so cool. And again, learning a new skill that I never thought I would be learning. And there are other ways I would like to expand too. So that was basically a non-answer wasn't it

Actually Erin, I was about to pay a compliment here. I've done 350 of these miserable podcasts. And that was the best answer I've ever had for that, because the one answer is it's none of your Goddamn business go away. You know, my boss could be listening to this. The other one could be, well, actually, I'm gonna hand my notice in tomorrow. And I thought that you handled that very well cause it was truthful and it was authentic. So absolutely not. So final question, if I may, your job is about learning, and you've done it for a long time; you were an editor at Popular Mechanics and doing the work that you're doing now at Mental Floss. You've learned a lot externally about the world as it were, but the whole cliché is 'lifes a journey.' I was going to ask as a final question. What have you learned about yourself over these years of doing this job, how have you changed? I'm basically the same me that I was 20 years ago, just with less energy and slightly more miserable. How about yourself?

I feel like I'm a lot different than I was when I started; just thinking about my first day as assistant to the editor-in-chief of Popular Mechanics, this is kind of a funny story. So I come in, it's my first day, at that point in time I had a PC, and the magazine industry largely uses Mac. I couldn't figure out how to turn on my computer. And I was too scared to ask somebody because I thought that they would think I was dumb. Eventually, someone did come and help me out, but I feel like even shortly after that I was doing all these things that I just, I never could have expected I was gonna do. And I was so scared to ask questions. And that wasn't because of anybody there. It was just because I didn't wanna seem stupid. And I think now I'm definitely not shy about asking questions. I'm definitely not shy about advocating for myself. And so I think I've definitely grown a lot. I've grown a lot since I started. And I wouldn't go back. I definitely would not go back.

Erin, this has been a hugely interesting conversation. You're a very interesting person. You've got an unbelievably interesting job as well. I wish you the very best of luck with it, carry on doing fantastic work, and I will be watching and reading everything you're doing with your team. Congratulations on your success. Thank you ever so much for your time.

Thank you so much for having me.