

## **Gideon Lichfield**

**Global Editorial Director, WIRED**

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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 Gideon Lichfield, global editorial director of WIRED, the world's leading technology magazine. Editor-in-chief of all additions of the Conde Nast owned WIRED, Gideon took over the titles last year, promising to hold tech power accountable while celebrating science's role in solving global problems. He was previously editor-in-chief of MIT Technology Review, one of the founding editors at Quartz and a contributor to the Economist. A student of physics and philosophy, Gideon left the UK in 1988 and has since lived in Mexico City, Moscow and Jerusalem before moving to the US. Gideon, thank you for joining me.**

Thank you very much. Great to be here, Paul.

**You have had an incredible life and an incredible journey so far, just from that introduction.**

You summarised it very well. I don't think I've got anything to add.

**Well, I had someone else summarise it for me, so I can't claim credit for it. I mean, let's start if we can, with WIRED, you've had some fantastic exclusives and interviews in your first year at the editor's chair, not least this month with an exclusive one-to-one with the president of Ukraine. Tell us about it.**

We have a journalist, a freelance writer who was in Ukraine for a couple of months doing reporting, and he got in touch with us and said, I've got an interview with the president. Do you want it? And so we said yes. And we thought it was a great opportunity because Zelensky has been interviewed a million times, but we wanted to talk to him specifically about the role that technology has played in the conflict in Ukraine. And it has been really surprising how Ukraine has done really well and partly because the Russian army has been so 20th century about everything, frankly. And the role that social media have played in helping Ukraine get the message out, it has been using Elon Musks' satellite internet network as a way to keep up its communications when the Russians were bombing Ukraine's own infrastructure. It's obviously been using these Turkish drones to target the Russian columns and disable them. So we were just interested in talking about how a much weaker country

was able to bring in technology in various ways to help it defeat this much more powerful adversary.

**I'm a massive fan of WIRED. I've been reading it for years. It's quite a difficult magazine to summarise to someone who's never heard of it. When WIRED began in 1993, it preached a kind of techno-utopianism. Now more people are sceptical of the influence of big tech over our lives. How would you define what WIRED is? And what's the proposition? And what's the outlook?**

You know, it's been very interesting to try to get my head around this because people still think of it as a tech publication and the truth is it was always much more than that. And when I was trying to decide whether to apply for the job, I was talking about this with a friend of mine, a guy called Tom Coats who's been in the tech industry for a long time. And he said, look, you're thinking of wired the wrong way if you think about it as a tech publication, it was always about the possibility of a better future. The thing was that back in the nineties, when it was founded, the belief was a better future will come around through embracing technology. And obviously today we think about it a little bit differently. We're more sceptical as you pointed out, we see all of the harmful effects that technology can also have, but I firmly believe that both blaming technology for the problems we have or talking about it as the solution to everything, are both wrong, right? Technology is just a tool that we use and pretty much any technology that we invent can be used in both beneficial and harmful ways. So especially today, since there are so many technology publications out there and so many just mainstream publications also covering tech, I think for us to stand out, it's even more important that we stop thinking of WIRED as a tech publication and the way that I like to talk about it is it is about a better future and it's really a publication about the world's biggest problems, like climate change and the erosion of democracy and cybersecurity threats, but security threats more generally, and the changing nature of work and how we're going to have our lives and careers in the future and the changing nature of health and the future of healthcare and how we look after ourselves. These are the world's big challenges. And what WIRED is about is how we tackle those big challenges and the role that technology plays in that because technology plays a role in everything. But technology is just a thread, really the people who solve these problems are people. And what we are trying to do is tell the stories of the people who are working on these big problems, how they use tech, but ultimately how they are tackling these problems. And the reason for that is that if the WIRED reader of the 1990s was archetypally the tech nerd who really wanted to be in on the latest advances, what I think of our readership as today is broader than that. It's more inclusive and it's really anyone who cares about these big challenges that the world faces, and doesn't want to just sit on their hands, but wants to make a difference. So what we want you as a WIRED reader or listener or whatever member of our audience, what we want you to get out of it is to feel like you can learn from the experiences of people who are trying to make a difference, whether they succeed or they fail. And a lot of our stories are about people who fail, but we want you to learn from those experiences so that you can think about what difference you can make in the world and where your possible lines of action are.

**I mean, what an incredibly fascinating job for you to marshal all of the biggest challenges to humanity that you have, how do you go about doing that?**

**Because you've still got to get an issue out, you've got a website to update. How do you choose what to cover? In a sense, the scope is so broad that you've got to choose what not to include. Have you not?**

Yes. I mean, that is the perpetual problem I think for any news organisations, what do you ignore? So the way that we think about it is, as I've said, we outline our key areas, which are the most important ones, such as climate health, the future of work, security, democracy, and a couple of other things. And then we say, all right, what in each of these areas is really important right now. So we have journalists who specialise in different beats. And what we're always talking about is what should you be focusing on in the next three months? What's an important field, an important issue within your enormous beat that matters right now. So someone who covers AI might say, well, right now the thing that really matters is the way that governments are using facial recognition to track their citizens, I'm going to focus on that for a while, right? Or someone who talks about climate might say, well, I'm really interested in the advances that are being made right now in carbon capture technology, I'm gonna focus on that for a while. And it doesn't mean that's the only thing they do, but the idea, and I think this applies for any news organisation as it's really helpful for your journalists to identify not only what their beat is, but what you might call their micro beats are, or their lanes within that beat and say the important story right now, because this is where the trends are shifting, or what people are talking about is X. And for the next three to six months, I'm going to, especially not exclusively, but especially focus on X. And that means I'm going to think about what are the stories that I can do week in and week out that keep this conversation moving on that and get me to news, to things that other people have not discovered by reporting more deeply. And then also what are the one or two really big stories that I could do that nobody has covered yet in this field? What's the story behind how this company came to be, or who is the mysterious entrepreneur who's trying to change this, those sorts of those sorts of big swings. And so, if every journalist is keeping in mind two or three important areas that they wanna focus on for a period of time, I think that helps them sort out what is noise and what is the thing to focus on. And it also helps them go deeper into the particular subject that they're covering and tell stories that nobody else is telling.

**What are your favourite subjects? For me, it's physics and philosophy, which I know you studied academically. I love to study and read articles about the big bang and when it says, what came before the big bang physicists say, well, that's a philosophical issue potentially, but I'll read the philosophy on it as well. So how can something come from nothing?**

I mean, that's the stuff for thinking about late at night with a few glasses of whiskey, the things that I'm interested in right now. So I think the future of cryptocurrency and web 3.0 and where it's all going is fascinating. I consider myself a pretty big sceptic. I am fairly convinced that 99%, if not more of the crypto enterprises and coins and web 3.0 ventures and blockchain experiments and so forth that we're seeing today are going to disappear. There are too many of them are ponzi schemes, too many of them don't really have any particular use, almost anything that someone tells you they're building with a blockchain. You can ask the question, why do you need a blockchain to do that? Why can't you do it without a blockchain? And it's very hard to

get a clear answer. Nonetheless, there is so much effort going into this. There is so much investment. There is so much excitement that you know something is going to be left behind. And the big question, which we are trying to answer in our reporting, and that I'm trying to understand is what is that 1% or half of 1% or something that is going to be left behind? What are the interesting applications going to be? And for me I think maybe what's most interesting about this movement is that as I said, WIRED is not just a tech magazine, the whole blockchain explosion, the whole web 3.0 enthusiasm in some ways is not actually about blockchain technology. Sure, people are using blockchains as ways to do everything from rethinking the way that organisations function to obviously to create currencies and stores of value, to manage supply chains, to manage land registries. I mean, people are applying this in all sorts of ways, but the thing that is driving this is at least in part, not the tech itself, it's just an interest in different forms of decision-making and social organisation, what blockchain in principle allows you to do is to distribute ownership or distribute decision making around a large group of people and have it happen in a more collective way. And it's not that you can't do things like that. It's not that you can't do collective decision-making without blockchains, but the interest in technology is driving the interest in the new forms of social organisation. And so where I see this trend going is that even if a lot of the technology doesn't pan out, even if a lot of the projects fall by the wayside, it seems to be sparking an interest in people thinking about how do we organise ourselves better? How do we make decisions in a different way? How do we make people more accountable? And I think that that's really important. And that for me, ties into another of the obsession areas for me with WIRED, which is the future of democracy. And again, you might say a traditional tech publication, what has that got to do with democracy? Well, I believe we're living in a world in which the systems of governance that we invented, which were invented three centuries or so ago, were invented in a very different time. It was a world that was smaller. Things moved more slowly. It was far less interconnected. Information was much less abundant. Everything could happen at a more gradual pace. Today the world is far more complex, far faster technology is changing much more. Everything is much more interdependent. And the kinds of decision-making systems and governance systems that were created three centuries ago just don't seem to be very up to the task today and we're seeing that in so many ways, and we're seeing it in terms of the loss of trust in government and in institutions. And we're seeing it in the difficulty of decision-making and the amount of political gridlock around a lot of things. And so I think that the future of democracy is a really important social, but also a technological question. How do we rethink the way that we govern ourselves and run countries?

**I agree. It's absolutely fascinating. I hold no cryptocurrency, but the blockchain fascinates me because as you said, the old way was if you had a currency, you needed a central bank to warrant that the note was valid, now with cryptocurrency and say the algorithm self evidently verifies. So you don't need a central bank and therefore you don't necessarily need a nation-state. Do we actually need dotted lines on a map if we're all going to have self-verifying promissory notes?**

Yeah. So look, I'm a bit of a sceptic about blockchain tech. I think that the idea that you could simply replace institutions with algorithms is probably pretty far fetched because this happens across the technology sector, tech solutions tend to think, I'll

invent a tech that does this, and then it will replace all of these other creaky human institutions and norms that we have built, right. Blockchain is supposed to function especially well for situations where there is a lack of trust, where you don't want to place too much trust in people or institutions so you place it in an algorithm. And I think that in reality, it turns out that actual systems of trust that we've built up over the centuries often naturally work quite well in many ways, or the problem of trust that you have is not solved by technology, right? The technology solves a little part of it, but the system is much more complicated than you can fix by just putting a blockchain in there. So I don't know that central banks are going to go away. I also think it's generally the case that powerful institutions in our society have a habit of reasserting their power over whatever new technology comes along. So I don't think it's ever gonna be black and white, that we abandon central banks and motor crypto guarantees or anything like that. But every one of these new technologies adds a new, interesting feature into the mix and seeing how those play out and seeing what determines which ones succeed and which ones fail. I think that's part of the job of the journalism of a publication like WIRED is to, again, not take the technology at face value, not assume that it's going to fix anything, but look at what are the human beings who use it doing? How are they deciding things and what determines which projects succeed that have nothing to do with the tech itself, but have to do with human decisions or power structures or economic power. That's that really messy complexity. That's what I find fascinating.

**And it's interesting how technology has changed us as well. I can't go on holiday without thinking about how I'm gonna Instagram it. We're all brands now. You only need to look at those societal changes as well as the fact that it's changing us.**

It is, but it's changing us in all sorts of directions, both positive and negative. And once again, I think this is why, when you say the tech does this, the tech changes us. That's missing the point. Tech is a tool that we use, and it has the effect of amplifying things that are already in our society. So when people worry about kids using Instagram and getting body dysmorphia, you could blame Instagram for that, but really what you need to blame is our social norms around beauty and the way that we discuss them and the expectations that we put on them. And so tech almost can have that ability of holding a lens or a mirror up to us and saying, these are the problems that you as a society need to be thinking about.

**Tell us about the job at WIRED. How's it going? I mean, from a team's point of view, you merged the UK and US editions into one site. Has that allowed for more in-depth reporting? Is it reflecting the increasing globalisation and what's a typical week for you? Could you share with our listeners what the editor of WIRED actually does?**

Someone asked me to summarise my job for an internal Conde Nast thing kind of in a jokey way. And so I said that my job is one part hostage negotiation, one part therapy, one part spreadsheets, and one part talking to the smartest people in the world and pretending to be as smart as they are. So you are juggling a job that is a large complicated company. That's undergoing a lot of change. We are a publication that is on the web, in print. We have a couple of podcasts in the works. We have a lot

of videos. We have a lot of social platforms. We do events. We're thinking about where we can expand our businesses. WIRED has the US and UK editions, which have merged as you pointed out. And we have Japan and Italy and we're looking at maybe other markets where we could expand. So a lot of it is trying to think about how does this complex network of things function together as a single brand, as a single organisation. And how can we make sure that these bits work in sync instead of just operating as little independent operations, which up to now, frankly, has often been the case. So some of it is just trying to integrate that and trying to figure out how I can get the resources that I need and the support that I need from different parts of the company in order to make this happen. So that's the hostage negotiation part or conflict resolution or alliance-building, it's very political, but it's also very satisfying because it really involves just getting a lot of people on board with a vision and then figuring out how to accomplish that. So that's one part. The other part is therapy because you are working with a large team and everybody is trying to solve problems and sometimes running into difficulties or running into conflicts. And so a lot of the job is just being a listener. Some of it is spreadsheets, inevitably, I think, any executive job at spreadsheets. And then, the bit of the job that is the most fun that I really enjoy is going out and meeting really some of the most brilliant people in the world and hearing about their ideas. And every time I do that, I feel like my mind gets reconfigured a little bit and I think differently about the world. You know, I had a meeting this morning with an investor who was talking to me about the future of mental health and psychedelics, and was also trying to make the case to me that Bitcoin and cryptocurrency is not actually bad for the environment. And I got into a nice little debate with him. But it really kind of made me think again about these things. So the opportunity to just have those conversations and have people take me seriously, even though I only know a tiny bit about a lot of things, that feels like the most fun part of the job.

**Despite having the most interesting job in the world, you're also incredibly successful at it. Despite COVID, WIRED's digital subscription jumped by 170,000 last year. What's the secret? And what's the ambition to take things to the next level?**

We've just been gradually getting better I think at figuring out what is the value that we offer to our readers. One of the key things that we've discovered and maybe this would not have been a surprise is that the long-form stories that we tell, the really in-depth reporting, that does really well at getting people to subscribe, because those stories are things you cannot read anywhere else. And these in particular are the kinds of stories that I was talking about earlier. The ones that tell people stories of someone who has tried to solve a problem. One of my favourite stories that we've done during my time there was last year, and it was about some researchers who figured out that there was this fundamental misunderstanding of how COVID spread. We've all heard of droplets versus aerosols. And there was this idea at the beginning of the pandemic that COVID viruses spread in little droplets, basically of liquid that you sneeze and then the droplets fall to the ground pretty quickly. And therefore it was thought that the way to protect yourself against COVID was to keep a decent distance from people. So if someone breathes out or sneezes, the virus particles they inject will pretty soon fall to the ground and so if you're a distance away, you won't really be infected. What we have since learned is that actually, it's more on aerosols, virus particles float around, they're light enough, or the things that they're in are light

enough that they circulate and therefore rooms need good ventilation. Why was this misunderstanding? Well, it turned out to be based on a 60-year-old misconception that had become the medical canon that had been so accepted into literature that people almost even forgot. It was an assumption. And so the story that we published, which was called the scientific mess up that helped COVID kill, was a group of researchers who went back into the literature, discovered this misconception and then they, then they had to convince the medical establishment that it had been wrong for decades, about the way that virus particles spread. And that was a terrific tale of scientific forensic detective work and then it was also the work of convincing the establishment to change its mind. And that was an example of somebody bringing about a really important change because it transformed how we deal with the virus. So those kinds of stories that we can tell in-depth, those are the ones that really resonate well with WIRED readers. And that's what we've been focusing on as we try to build up our subscriptions. We're also doing well in other areas, we review a lot of gear and products and we write guides and evergreen content that people come back to understand how to live their lives better. And we make a decent amount of money now on those, we have a couple of podcasts and that are in the works. Conde Nast did not do a lot of podcasting before, but it now has a wonderful new head of podcasts, Christopher Bannon and he's bringing together all of these different efforts to do better shows. So we have some of that going on, our video areas actually going very well. People really love the kind of stuff that wide does on video. So yeah, all of these efforts are starting to come together in a single way.

**You left the UK for Mexico city and have “mostly avoided the place since” your biography says, what started you out on the journey of global travel?**

I mean, the thing that sent me off on this trip around the world was that I was working at The Economist. I'd been on the science desk for a couple of years. I knew I wanted to work abroad. I didn't really have a particularly strong conception of where. And then they came along one day and said the Mexico City job is open and nobody else seems to want it, do you want to go? And I thought, well, might as well, I was 28. It seemed like too good an opportunity to pass up. So I went and I had the most wonderful time. It was four years of living in Latin America, travelling around, getting to report on really, really interesting things. And so once I got the taste for that, I decided I wanted to carry on exploring for a while. So I went from Mexico City to Moscow, spent a couple of years there from there to Jerusalem. And yes, this opportunity to live in different places, understand how different societies worked, and challenge all my own assumptions about what was normal. I think that was tremendously valuable. What's been interesting for us in bringing the UK and US editions of WIRED together is, first of all, this is something that probably should have happened years ago when we're talking obviously to two English-speaking audiences for subjects that are basically global, the role of technology in solving the world's big problems. These are the same problems everywhere, in different forms. And the technology that's being applied is also the same tech in different forms. So it only makes sense, I think to have them as one addition. What's been really nice about it, I think apart from the fact that we now have a larger team that combines the US and UK and crosses multiple time zones, is there is a different perspective from the journalists here in the UK. They see the world more globally. They have a different kind of news sense. They pay attention to things that the American writers don't. I'm really enjoying the mix of stories that we're now getting as stories from the UK appear

on the US site. We're getting obviously more about things like European tech policy, but we're also just seeing more global stories about how tech is being applied to all sorts of different issues. And I think that really enriches what WIRED is doing and it makes it more into the kind of publication that I want it to be, which is really a global publication about global issues and global solutions were the stories that you tell could come from anywhere, but they're going to be interesting to people everywhere.

**You're fairly new in post, do you have a direction of travel to take the WIRED brand? You mentioned podcasting. I'd be interested to see whether they'll still be a print edition 5, 10, or 15 years from now. What kind of interaction do you have with your audience? Do you have a big list of to-dos that you're going to do as editor over the next few years?**

I have a big list of questions. Some of which are going to turn into to-dos. So yes, we clearly want to expand into podcasting because even though the market is very developed now, there's still clearly a huge amount of appetite for audio. And what we're working on is shows that explore particular niches of technology or social issues that we want to go deeper on. We're already making a fair amount of video. We need to, I think, understand that our future audience is probably going to be much more video and audio oriented than it is text-oriented. And so one of my big questions is what does that look like? What does it look like to be WIRED in different forms of video on platforms like TikTok, which we fairly recently got into? What are the people who are now in their teens and twenties going to be using, to consume content, to understand the world and where can we meet them? And I think there's a lot for us to explore there. It's clear that people are spending more and more of their time in-game environments. And a friend I was talking to recently used this phrase, which like so many smart things seems very banal, but he said, games are the media environment of the future. And what he meant by that was that people are spending hours a day already in games and games, unlike films and TV or podcasts games are an interactive experience. You aren't just consuming what the game developer provides. You are participating in it yourself. You are creating things within the game. You're moving things around within the game. You are communicating with other players. And so games are a place where media happens, where communities form, and there are political movements, sometimes extremist movements that are born in games. There are economies happening in games. There is harassment in games. There is a lot that happens within those worlds. And that means that I think any media brand has to think about what it is doing, and what can it do in a game environment? And there are some games probably where media brands have no place, but I think that we will increasingly start to see companies trying to figure out what role can they play or what can they do to meet people where they are, where they increasingly are in the next few years. And when people start to talk about the metaverse, I think it's a very overhyped term, but to the extent that a metaverse already exists, it is in the form of a game world, like Roblox or like Minecraft, again, places where people spend a lot of their time and are creating things. So I am trying to think about what it will look like 10 or 15 years from now when people are spending an even greater proportion of their time in these virtual environments, what does a media company do there? I don't have the answers at all, but that's asking those kinds of questions now I think it is essential for anyone who's trying to think about how to keep their media brand relevant in the future.

**What are the problems that technology could present to us over the next few years? So, for example, you've raised concerns about Elon Musks' proposed Twitter purchase. You don't want Trump and other, as you call them "crazies," spreading hate on the platform. And I agree with you, but do we have some bumps along the way before we reach technological nirvana,**

We're never gonna reach technological nirvana. It's gonna be bumps all the way down. So I think about the problems of how we get our information, what social media platforms provide and what the effects of those platforms are on political discourse. That's a problem we have already, and it's going to continue. And I don't immediately see us finding a solution. I think potentially the most interesting outcome is that new platforms come along and do some disruption of the existing ones. And Elon Musk buying Twitter could have terrible consequences, or it could maybe open the door to some alternative platform that comes along and is actually a better space for public conversation. So I think we will see developments like that. I think another area that is fascinating to watch right now, and we still don't really understand what the consequences will be is generative AI. So by that, I mean, things that you've probably seen, like GPT3, which is this AI text generator, you know, you type in a sentence and it will write out an entire story for you based on that first sentence or Dolly, which is an image generator. You type in a few words like Paul Blanchard in the style of Van Gogh and it'll draw a portrait of view in the style of Van Gogh. So these kinds of things really have the potential to transform media generation and particularly the image stuff. So when people can just instantly create images by typing a few sentences or words, that changes the nature of media generation. I think the next version of that is that you type a few words and you can create a video. So, here's an idea, if you go and report a story and then you are worried that your audience is not gonna read the text because your audience is 18-year-olds. But if you had a piece of software that took those words from that story, or a script that you wrote and just generated an artificial video out of it, then you would have a way to reach those people in a medium that they appreciate and enjoy. So obviously this raises all sorts of questions, including ethical questions, which is if it's really easy to generate synthetic video, then how do people tell what is true and what is false, or even if your story is based on real reporting and you make a video of it, what details or quirks does the software insert that don't actually correspond to anything you wrote in the script, but that feel real anyway. And those become then accepted as truth, even though they weren't based on anything. I think it raises a huge number of questions. It also raises a huge amount of potential, again, like with any technology. But I think that synthetic media, which is kind of the overall blanket term for what I've been talking about, as well as for things like deep fakes, we are still only just beginning to grasp what impacts that is going to have in the next few years. And it's gonna be soon because this tech, in particular, is advancing really, really quickly.

**Well, that actually brings me to my next question because I loved Tomorrow's World when I was growing up as a kid in the UK. And I love WIRED for the same reason because it's telling me things I don't know. That's one of the reasons why I envy your job because it must be a fascinating journey of discovery. When was the last time you were truly surprised?**

I mean, honestly, when I saw these images from Dolly, this image generation software, I was surprised, and this was only a couple of months ago. I knew that there was AI. I knew that there were deep fakes. I knew that you could all these things, but to see that it is so simple to just type in a sentence and have an AI come up with a really convincing picture, it shows that it sort of seems to, I don't wanna use the word understand because AI is not a brain, it's not a mind, it's not a consciousness. The word "understand" doesn't apply to it, but to see that it has the capability to take human concepts and merge them together in ways that the output still makes sense to the humans. That is really astonishing. Somebody tweeted yesterday, some images from Dolly and they had typed in cucumber connect four, right? So, you know, connect four games where you have little pieces of plastic and you put them in rows and so imagine doing that, but slices of cucumber instead. Now, if I describe that to you as a human being, you can form a picture in your mind of what a connect four of cucumbers might look like, but who would've thought that you could just save those words to an AI and it would generate pictures of a cucumber connect four. It boggles the mind, and yet there they are. And in 15 different variations, right. Or another of the images that were posted was Freddie mercury eating noodles inside a washing machine. Sounds completely ridiculous. But as soon as I said those words, you've got a mental image, this computer can generate an image like that too. And that, to me, boggles the mind. It doesn't mean these things are intelligent. Again this is still a very long way from anything that we would call intelligence. I'm not sure that it can ever be actual intelligence in the way that you and I understand it, but what it is is showing us that this very dumb software has the capacity to do things that we didn't think it could do before. And that forces us to really revise our assumptions of what the role of humans is going to be in, for instance, creative industries or how we generate ideas or how we build things. That kind of stuff really does bring you up short.

**Well, as a student in philosophy, you would know that many people would say that we're just wet computers, that their brain is just a computer-based in flesh. Do you think that AI will evolve to the point where they ought to be considered in terms of their rights?**

I mean, I don't feel myself qualified to judge on whether that is actually gonna happen because it's a very live debate in AI research and in consciousness research and people have pointed out that our metaphor for how the mind works tends to match whatever the prevailing technology of the time is. And there was a time when people thought the mind worked like pneumatic tubes with messages flying back and forth or like a mechanical engine. And then there are people who think the mind works like a quantum computer rather than a classical computer. So whether we actually are going to get to the point where there are machines that we can call conscious. I mean, I don't know. I assume that somewhere along the line, it has to happen because yes, ultimately our brains are just collections of atoms and chemicals, doing things. And unless you believe in a disembodied spirit, then you have to assume that we can, at some point, build something that does the same things or similar things to a brain, or at least has the same level of complexity and therefore has sentience and identity and consciousness. And therefore we have to treat it like a sentient creature. I've no idea how far off that is. I read plenty of science fiction stories that imagine what happens when that takes place. And I do think that, yeah, at some point we will have to wrestle with those questions, but in many ways, those will be no different

from the ethical questions that we have today, whether it's about the rights of animals or about the rights of humans. Our world is so full of ethical challenges already. This is gonna be just another one of them.

**Well, I know the military's increasingly computerised. I know that many people are frightened of James Cameron's vision in Terminator 2, where Skynet tries to kill humanity. But the reality in a sense is even more scary because it's autonomous drones, you can fly a drone, program it with facial recognition for your proposed target, arm it with a grenade and it will fly to that specific person and then kill them. I mean, there's some seriously negative consequences to come, are there not?**

Absolutely. And the thing I think that is important to think about is, the vision of Skynet in the Terminator films was of this AI consciousness that decided to eliminate humanity. And I think one of the big misconceptions about AI is that at least as it's currently set up, it can make decisions like that. It can't, we can build systems that can be incredibly sophisticated, but they don't have the ability to decide their own parameters. We, as humans developed that ability, we evolved it over billions of years of evolution, but an AI system, however smart it is, or however capable it is, we as humans define what an AI wants to do if you can even use the word want. So we can program an autonomous drone and we can give it facial recognition technology. And we can say go after these targets, but it's not gonna independently decide to do that unless we've programmed it to do that. Now that has lots of potentially negative consequences, which is, that it makes the power of killing very easy for a human to access. And it takes decisions about killing largely out of human hands. You set some parameters and then the thing goes often and follows your instructions and you have no idea really how well it's going to follow them or what mistakes it might make. That's where I think the real risk is that we are disconnecting human beings from the direct consequences of their actions because we're making it so much easier for them to operate through these autonomous systems. But what we're not doing is creating autonomous systems that will suddenly wake up one day and decide that they want to kill somebody else.

**You've learned so much about the world in your job as a journalist and editor. What have you learned about yourself along the way? Have there been any insights in terms of what you like, what you don't like, what you are good at, and how have you changed over the years?**

Oh, I've changed a lot. You know, I think when I started out, I just wanted to be a writer, a journalist. I wanted to go around the world meeting weird and wonderful people writing about them. And I think in some ways, my most underlying motivation was that I knew the world was a complex, messy place with people from very different backgrounds that had trouble understanding one another. I wanted to be able to write the kinds of stories that would let you sit in your living room in London, and really understand the mindset of let's say, a Palestinian militant or a shaman in Mexico. And see them as a human being and understand where their motivations came from. I didn't ever think that I wanted to run an organisation or be a manager, and there's still a part of me that misses going out and reporting and telling stories myself. But I think what I've discovered is that I'm good at helping other people do

what they do better. I'm good at listening to them and trying to figure out what are the obstacles to them getting to the best at what they're capable of and the ability to bring together a large group of people and create something collectively with them and help them achieve their ambitions is something that I'm finding really very satisfying. And that's the best bit about being a manager. The worst bit about being a manager is the spreadsheets and the bureaucracy and so on, but that ability to work with people and help them realise their potential. That's the unexpected thing that I've discovered I actually really like, and I'm not too bad at

**What, in your view, makes a successful journalist or editor. What are the qualities?**

I think you have to be very open-minded. All humans have our narratives about the world that we tend to fall into. And then we fit the fact that we encounter to the narratives that we have. So I think a good journalist is someone who is always aware of their biases and narratives and always questioning them and always open to new information. You know, it's someone who's very fair. Someone who ultimately, I think is compassionate. They have to care about human beings. They have to be able to see every human being as a human being and understand where they're coming from so that they can really understand what the truth is. And they have to be just relentlessly curious about everything. You can never be too curious. You have to be, if not polyman, you have to at least want to understand as much as you can about every field in the world because you can say to yourself, well, I care about physics or I care about economic policy, or I care about prison policy let's say, you know whatever your field of specialism is, and I'm gonna ask my interviewee only about those things. But I think if you limit yourself to that, and you don't ask about the environment that somebody grew up in, or you don't ask about the nature of their work relationships or about even the sports that they play, then you're potentially missing out on information that could actually turn out to be really insightful and useful for the story that you're telling. So that relentless curiosity, desire to know everything, I think is a really powerful factor.

**There are plenty of young people listening to this that would love to be the global editor-in-chief of WIRED. Do you think that people starting out in journalism have it harder now or easier? Because in a sense as the whole antagonism to our journalism, fake news and so on, there are fewer journalist jobs than ever. But on the other hand, it's easy to make a piece yourself these days, if you're starting out with podcasting and blogging and so on.**

I would say, don't start out setting your sights on being the global editorial director of WIRED, because who knows what, what there will be by the time you get to that point. What I think is maybe different in journalism from when I started out was when I started out, it was much more career-focused and institution-focused. And you could say, I want to be the editor of WIRED, or I want to be the editor of the Economist, or I want to be the chief political correspondent of the Guardian, or whatever those things are. And the future is much more uncertain now. The ways in which people will receive and, and understand the information in the future are much more uncertain. The institutions or the companies that will exist, who knows. So I think that where you have to come into journalism today is just with a clearer sense

of yourself. What matters to you? What is your perspective on the world? What are the big underlying questions that you want to try to get at, through reporting, whatever subject that takes you into? So, as I said, for me, I feel like the big underlying question that's driven me is why do people find it so hard to see the same situation in the same way? Why do perspectives differ so much? Why do people from different parts of the world conceive of things and understand things so differently? And how can you bridge those gaps? That, for me, feels like my motivating question. So even if you're just starting out, try to think about what really drives you in the world. What have been your formative experiences? What do you care about so much that you just want to try to understand it better and better through the process of reporting? And then let that be a guiding light, figure out subject areas that you want to specialise in knowing that maybe you don't specialise in this forever, but something that really drives you, that you are interested enough in it, that you are willing to work hard and potentially for not very much money for a while in order that you can get good at this subject area. And then the next thing is to really rely on your network of peers. So I think a lot of people starting out in any industry say, well, I've got to meet the editor of wide, or I've got to meet the top people in this area so that I can network with them so that I can have a path into those organisations. The people who are gonna be most useful to you are actually your peers. They're the people who are going through the same experiences as you are, or who are a couple of years older and have just gone through those experiences who know much more than I do for sure about what it is to be a freelance journalist today, and about navigating the industry and about making connections. Those people are going to be your most useful source of information right now on how to advance. And also as you all get older, as you all advance in your careers, you are gonna be each other's support group, and you're gonna be each other's contact, and you're gonna be each other's collaborators. And when they get jobs at WIRED or the Guardian or the New York Times, or wherever it is, they'll be the ones who are telling you, oh, there's this other job opening that's opened up here that you might be interested in. So form those connections with your own local group. I think having connections with those people and having some clearer idea of what you're doing, what interests you and pursuing the things that you care about that ultimately leads you to wherever you get to go, and it may be completely something that you didn't expect, just like I did not expect to end up as editor of WIRED. But that is much more true to yourself and a more productive way, I think, to advance than setting your sites on some goal that you may not even exist 20 years from now.

**We've talked about podcasting, but we haven't mentioned events. Tell us about RE:WIRED.**

RE:WIRED is an event that we did last year, which was actually essentially a relabeling of an event we'd done for the previous three years called the WIRED 25, which was started for the 25th anniversary. We wanted to highlight 25 people making a really big difference in the world. And what we have decided and this is part of, I think is kind of the general shift in strategy. For us, at least it no longer makes sense to have a big event that covers everything that tries to be on all topics to all people. We want to specialise more. So RE:WIRED this year is going to be focused on sustainability and on clean tech, it's RE:WIRED Green. And maybe that's something that we will continue in future years, or maybe it isn't, maybe we will shift it in different

directions, or maybe we'll have a whole bunch of RE:WIRED on different subjects. Same thing with podcasts. The things that we're developing now are all focused on very particular topics, rather than being a single kind of grab bag. Like the previous podcast that we had in the US called Get WIRED. So events for us, are an interesting way to go deeper on certain subjects. And for me in particular, I think events are a part of what I talked about earlier on this idea that WIRED is supposed to be a place that helps you understand what difference you want to make in the world. In my ideal fantasy, I would love WIRED to be a place that is good at convening communities of people who are trying to make a difference on particular topics that might be climate change, it might be reinventing democracy, it might be reinventing labour organising, or the relationship between workers and employers personal health, any of these things where I think there are problems to be solved, and there are communities of people around those problems and especially where there are communities of people from different disciplines that don't necessarily always interact, but we're all working on aspects of the same problem. So in the case of health, for instance, it could be medical researchers and doctors and patient advocates and policy officials who might not necessarily always get together in one room. If WIRED can be the place where those people come to find common ground and work on solutions to a big issue that's affecting their subject. Then I think that would be my ideal of where we can actually make a useful contribution in the world. And events for me are one of the ways that we could do that.

**We've heard about Gideon the editor and journalists, but we haven't heard about Gideon, the human being. It's got here in my notes that you collect and I quote "languages, silver rings and obscure cocktail ingredients." This is meant as a compliment, but are you a bit of a geek?**

I don't think I'm enough of a geek. I hugely admire geeks. I hugely admire people, some of my best friends who can get really interested in the subject and just go really, really deep on it and try and learn everything there is to know about it. I tend to get interested in the subject, learn a certain amount, and then I sort of run out of steam and go off in a different direction. But yes, I got into making cocktails because I started making drinks for everybody at work at the place I worked about 10 years ago. And then apprentice to a friend who has a bar and learned just enough to be slightly dangerous behind a bar. I like to study cocktail ingredients on how to mix them together, but I wouldn't call myself that much of a nerd. Maybe one day I will take a course and actually go deeper into it. I like silver jewellery. I have a fair number of rings. Maybe one day I would like to learn to make jewellery, but that's, again, not something that I'm doing right now. Language is probably my geekiest thing because I just have a brain that seems to absorb language as well. And when I lived in these different countries, I picked up the language of the place and it felt very natural to me to just go and start doing interviews with people and having conversations in the language, even when I didn't speak it very well. And that was the way that I learned it. And so I really love languages and I love the way that they express the same thing in different forms and how your conception of the world can be in some ways altered by the language that you are speaking. So that's probably my geekiest thing.

**Gideon, that was a hugely interesting conversation. I think you're doing an absolutely fantastic job and I wish you every success. Thank you ever so much for your time.**

Thank you so much for talking to me, Paul.