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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 Rebecca Whittington, online safety editor at Reach, the leading newspaper, magazine and digital publisher. The first role of its kind in the UK, Rebecca's job is to support Reach staff receiving online abuse and to work with social media platforms to help prevent harassment. Previously head of news at Yorkshire Post newspaper, she's also been the program leader for Leeds Trinity University's journalism degree, and wrote her PhD on the digital revolution sweeping local newspapers. Rebecca, thank you for joining me.

Great to be here. Thanks for having me.

You have the most interesting job in journalism. I mean, it is disgraceful that journalism and journalists are under attackers as never before, but this is where the fight back begins.

Yeah, so the job that I do, which is online safety editor for Reach, was the first of its kind in industry. Since then I think Thomson Reuters has maybe advertised for a similar role. There's other people doing similar kinds of things, other organisations, but this was the first role of its kind established specifically to support journalists and to work with journalists and to create policy and procedure around managing hate and online abuse against journalists. And it is a fascinating role. When I saw the job advertised, which was probably around a year ago now, when I first saw the job advertised, I just thought it looked absolutely fascinating and it ticked so many boxes for me because it really brought together the interest and passion that I have for journalism, the passion that I have for working with people and for teaching people and for developing people within an organisation. And then also it offers so much research potential as well, which obviously my PhD has given me some great skills around research and I wanted to continue to be able to use those. So it was the dream job really for me, which sounds awful because actually it's not a dream job because obviously it is working with people who are facing online harm and who quite often are at a point of crisis when I'm working with them. But actually being able to help those people and actually helping them to move forwards and make Reach a

safer organisation for journalists and the online spheres that we use safer places for journalists is a real privilege and I love doing it.

I mean, people might think that journalists have thick skins, but online harassment can seriously impact on their mental health. Can it not?

Yes, it can. In the past I think industry as a whole has had that kind of, you've got to have a thick skin to be a journalist kind of culture, which I think is seriously changing now and Reach is massively leading the way in terms of actually investing in mental health and welfare and wellbeing for its journalists, but also obviously appointing people like me to actually help journalists with very specific things as well around mental health and wellbeing. I don't think it's acceptable for people to say you need to have a thicker skin because I feel like something for example, like an online harm, online abuse for one person they will take it in a completely different way to the person that would either be sitting with them in the newsroom or working with them from their home because obviously a lot of us work from home now. And it is multifaceted. It's often set by context. It often is grounded by what goes before within that individual's life as well. So if you're having a bad day and then somebody drops into your direct messages and starts robustly abusing you, that can feel very different for a day where you're having a really good day and if the same thing happened. So, so much of it is set by context by what's gone before and what experiences that journalist has had. And I don't think there's a right or a wrong way to feel about this kind of thing when it happens. I often see people kind of saying, oh, I don't want to make a fuss. And I kind of think, well, you're not making a fuss. There's somebody who is being absolutely vile and abusive to you online. That is unacceptable. It wouldn't happen face to face in public. And if it did happen face to face in public, it would be shocking and upsetting. You are well within your rights to feel shocked and upset that this has happened to you. And quite often it'll happen. Like I say, direct messages, they can come into your home, they can kind of be seen when you are off duty potentially. So it is really important that in my role that I'm kind of thinking about the individual as well as offering grounded advice that actually is grounded in what we've done before, what's worked for a person, what's maybe the way that they can then approach making themselves safe online and also feeling safe online. And I think those are two slightly different things as well.

I'm trying to think of an articulate way to say this. I mean, a woman was sentenced last year for sending an email containing death threats to a journalist, which is one of your regional news brands. I'm just trying to think of an articulate way to say this, but what is wrong with people?

I mean that particular case happened before I joined Reach. I do think it's really good that an organisation like Reach supports journalists all the way through to court and beyond. So obviously if something like that happens, we want to make sure that people are fully supported when it happens at the point in time that it takes place at. And also if there is police action, if there is further action down the line that they're receiving that support as that happens, my job's very much part of that. So it's really good to actually see Reach leading the way in terms of the way that we approach these things. So like I said, that happened before my time, but we do see people making death threats. We see people sending all sorts of vile, violent, abusive

messages that are threatening. And then sometimes we also see very kind of subtle threatening behaviours online as well. I think there are definitely people out there who will go out of their way to be threatening online because they know that making a threat towards somebody online can make them feel unsafe not just online, but also in their physical space as well. If, for example, you live in a small community in Wales as a journalist and you receive threats of that nature online, you can feel like you're looking over your shoulder all the time, a little bit because everybody in the community knows who you are, knows where you live, can make you feel quite exposed.

Could be quite debilitating and very, very stressful to say the least.

Yeah, definitely. And actually what I've really found in the job that I'm doing is that we see, I would say three different types of threat. We see threats being made online against somebody in real life. So they'll say I'm gonna be waiting outside court for you, you better watch out, next time you go to report an inquest, I'll be there waiting. If that's coming from a faceless account or an account that isn't clearly named to somebody or doesn't have a clear picture or whatever, you might not even know what that person looks like. And even if there is a photograph that goes with it, you can't necessarily trust that that's what the person looks like. So that can make you feel very physically threatened within your physical space. And then we also see people making threats in real life towards journalists saying if you publish that I'm going to spread loads of stuff about you online. So actually kind of making threats about somebody in person, but about what they will then do to them in the online space, which I think is maybe something that I hadn't anticipated quite so much before I started the job. And actually it becomes apparent that that is the case. And then we also see when threats take place online and there's a legitimising of violent language towards people online. So it might be like an online backlash against somebody. And we saw a lot of this during the pandemic and in connection to the pandemic and in connection to the vaccinations that were brought out for the COVID vaccines. There was a lot of legitimising of violence against journalists who were reporting on this particular issue and that legitimisation of violence there is then that fear that that could then spill out into the physical world, perhaps by a perpetrator that isn't necessarily conducting specific violence against some of the online, but feels validated to do that in the real world because they have seen so much language that makes it sound like it's okay to be abusive and violent towards a journalist in the online space. If that makes sense.

No, it absolutely does. Cause I was gonna say people see the abuse on Twitter and then they somehow think that it legitimises that journalists are legitimate targets, that they can be abusive because everyone else is. I wonder whether there's something about social media that brings out the worst in people.

It's really interesting because we often hear criticism of social media and I think that social media can be absolutely wonderful. It makes news more democratic. It offers the opportunity for more voices to be heard. It creates a platform that actually can spread information far and wide and when it's verified factual information that is of public interest and of use to people and of interest to people because entertainment is important in journalism as well as factual hard news, social media can be a

wonderful thing for those functions. It can bring people into a conversation and you see amazing communities being built in online spaces by journalism. But then obviously the downside to social media is that it can sometimes create toxic conversations as well. And quite often the tone of the conversation will be set and then actually that's what then can decide whether that conversation continues to be and builds upon toxicity or whether actually it's a positive conversation that actually then builds on that positive vibe as well. And so I think social media can be a brilliant vehicle and, and it can really offer great opportunities for people. But I think it's always a double edged sword that it then opens up doorways for people to be abused as well and to be abusive. So I think maybe more, this is actually a societal issue that we are living in a society that communicates in a vast number of ways and that perhaps as adults who are digital migrants rather than digital natives, so those of us who didn't grow up with social media. We are all learning just as much as the digital native of today are learning as well. So we are kind of in our youth of social media use. And I do think that sometimes you see society using social media and online platforms in quite naive ways without necessarily thinking about the long term impacts, the consequences, the person that's sitting at the other end or the receiving end of the messages that they send. I do feel like there is a lot of education that needs to be done and a lot of understanding about the impacts of negative social media interactions. Because when I see a lot of the personal abuse, personal comments being made against journalists, this will be made by people who probably have chucked it into the conversation and then moved on with their day without thinking about the impact on the individual. And obviously one personal comment might not have that sting, but if you have 17 personal comments that week about your appearance, about the way you speak, about the way you look, then actually that starts to have a really long term negative impact on an individual. And the people who are throwing those comments in there, won't be thinking about that cumulative effect. Won't be thinking about the impact that they're having necessarily. And they also won't be applying it to the people that are in their own lives. So it could be somebody who's got teenage or young female daughters who actually is being abusive towards a young female journalist and they won't necessarily make the connection that that could be their daughter on the receiving end of that abuse. I also feel like industry and journalism is very much exposed to online abuse and journalists receive it exponentially. We know that journalists are receiving increasing levels of online abuse all the time, but we also see that kind of online dialogue and that hate taking place in other platforms online that isn't connected to journalism necessarily. So if you look at your local village Facebook page, for example, sometimes you will see the equivalent of a pile on, when somebody might have posted something and then you see the comments that come in beneath, and this is actually a community of people in a physical space, a lot of them who are then being abusive towards somebody within the online space, but also the physical community, because then they might walk past them in the street later on. So I do think that it is a societal issue that we are looking at here. And that's why I'm so pleased that when I'm leading on this job for Reach that I'm not leading it alone. I have people that I'm looking at in terms of politics, in terms of academia, in terms of other organisations, who are actually looking very closely at the issues of online abuse and online harms of journalism, but also more widely as well. Because I think that we need to be taking a collective stance, working out collective pathways to actually make positive change.

You have an absolutely fascinating job. I've got tons of questions. I mean, as you say, rightly it's a societal issue. There's the issues to do with the platform and all of these kinds of things. But if you are the person being targeted, what basic advice do you give to a journalist? Did you have an open door policy? Do they come to you? I mean some of my friends have come under attack and indeed I have from time to time and some say, just mute them and move on, others say you should block them and then people say, no, you shouldn't block them because that then makes them feel like they've won, as if they just want to draw blood. Do you have a kind of toolkit or a checklist for someone who's coming to who is under attack?

Yeah, I mean, I do have and I've been building this, really, I would say over the last six months, this kind of checklist and toolkit and it needs to be adapted for the individual because as I mentioned before, individual cases need to be treated individually. So one person might come to me who is facing a Twitter backlash because of something that they've published and they might feel really exposed, really vulnerable, very upset, wounded really by what's taking place on their Twitter account. And then somebody else might come to me with a very similar kind of backlash situation and they might have dealt with it and almost moved on and they're just coming to tell me about it and to see if there's anything else I can offer. And sometimes people don't want me to take action necessarily, they just want to have a conversation about it and actually talk it through. So I think it is very much guided and led by the individual. So it's really important that I am there for the individuals that are making these reports and that I'm there for them at that moment of crisis. But also that I'm checking in with them later on and that actually, I make sure that they have a point of closure on their report that they've made, because I feel like that is important for them to then be able to put that down and move on and know that actually we've dealt with that, we can come back to it if you want to, but actually that that's up to you as the individual. In terms of blocking and muting and all the rest of it, I think it does depend on the individual situation, but I would always recommend blocking if somebody is being abusive to you online. They may know that then means that they have hit home, that they've hit their target. But what it does also mean is that they can't hit that target again, unless they go out of their way to do so by setting up another account, for example or coming in via another pathway or another door. So they might have abused you on Twitter, you blocked them on Twitter, then if they send an email, we can start building a case of harassment at that point. If somebody's going out of their way because you have blocked them and made it clear that you don't want that contact with them. And then they go out of their way to actually have that contact that starts to be harassing behaviour. So I would say always block them and people are sometimes worried to block because they know that that person will maybe take a screenshot of their 'you have been blocked.' It doesn't pop up automatically, but obviously if you go to their account and look at it, it will say you've been blocked by that user and that you can't see their account and they might screen grab that and be like, "they've blocked me, must have been something I said" or whatever. But actually quite often they will be talking to a group of people who have moved on from that situation, who've moved on from that conversation. And actually it reflects badly on them and doesn't then have an impact on the person that they were originally targeting because that person has blocked them and doesn't need to know that they are saying those things.

I think openly boasting that someone has blocked you as well says something about you as a person, does it not?

It really does. It really does. I also think that those people get boring quite quickly. So how many times are you going to boast that you've been blocked by people? What does that then reflect upon you? Does that enrich your life? It probably doesn't enrich the lives of the people that follow you on that social platform. So I feel like you are essentially nipping the energy out of the situation if you block them, because they know that they can't nigger you and that they can't get to you unless they go out of their way to do that. And so you've kind of got rid of their oxygen if that makes sense. So I would quite often, and not always, but quite often I would advise to block and I have to say I tend, this is probably red rag to a ball now, I tend not to block because I need to be across accounts that are being abusive to our journalists. And so that if I get any abuse from those accounts, I tend not to block them. But there have been a couple of times when I have muted accounts because they have been a bit of a thorn in my side and it has made my life so much better. So not having those people dragging you all the time actually enriches your life and means that you can get on without them spoiling your day. And so I would actually thoroughly recommend it.

I've blocked a couple of thousand people over the 15 years I have been on Twitter, and I never give them a second thought. I think sometimes people confuse abuse with robust disagreement. I think you can basically tell can't you, I'm happy for someone to strenuously argue with me about anything as long as it's done respectfully and in a non-threatening manner. But you can kind of tell from the first tweet can't you, if someone's just gonna be horrible. I was going to ask about that then, in the last question, in terms of dealing with individual abusers, is there ever a case for confronting these people? I've seen these TV documentaries where someone will actually find out who their Twitter troll is and go and talk to them. And of course they're always really sorry and staring at the floor and it's just been an avatar to them and they haven't really thought of it as a real person that's getting hurt or do you think it is better just to block? Would confronting an abuser actually make them think again, perhaps?

I think it really depends on the situation and I would never advise anybody to get into an argument or a spat with a Twitter troll, for example. I think that there are more constructive ways for us to challenge these people. I think that quite often, if you do get into a challenging situation, quite often you will find that you are just giving them the oxygen that they want, that fuels their hate, essentially fuels the harm that they're creating. So I would, most of the time just say, don't even give them the time of day, just ignore them because actually that, like I said, stifles their oxygen, but I do think that there are ways that we can challenge and that we should be challenging. So obviously working with social media platforms is really important, making sure that we are reporting abusers, that they are having accounts shut down. That's inconvenient for somebody, particularly if they have a lot of followers. If they are being abusive and harassing, and then they have their account shut down, but actually they then have to start from scratch to build up those followers again, that is really kind of limiting for them and actually takes away their platform and their power. That is one way of challenging it. Then there are other ways of challenging it. So

there's been a couple of times where we've involved the police and the police have actually paid a visit to somebody and actually said to them, "your behaviour is harassing. You need to stop it. Otherwise we'll be bringing charges." And every time that's happened has had a positive impact, they've stopped being harassing and we've then seen an improvement to the journalist that's being targeted and that person that was being harassed also knows that they are committing a crime. And then also I think that there are cases where if an individual is representing an organisation or a company, where they need to be upstanding within their community, but they're being abusive behind closed doors. So they might be abusive on private messages, for example. Then at times I have written to organisations, such as a PR firm, which had somebody who messaged one of our journalists and used very foul language against them and accused them of racism. And it was completely without foundation. We wrote to that PR firm.

And called out on it, rightly so. Well, they wouldn't want a member of their team to be abusing journalists or indeed anyone in that way, just on a human level, but certainly their vicariously liable and it brings their own reputation into disrepute.

Yes, exactly. And actually, I didn't say I'm calling for them to be sacked or whatever. I think that, like I said before, it's a learning process quite often. Maybe people don't consider the implications of their actions. Maybe they don't actually realise how serious it can be for them as well as for the person that's being targeted. But I do think it's important that we are calling it out and actually saying, this is not acceptable. And you need to think about your actions and you need to think about the actions of your staff because we are all playing a part in this society and society is not just in the physical world, it is an online world as well that we are operating in and we need to play by the rules essentially.

Absolutely. I mean, we've done individuals, as it were. I think I'd like to widen the discussion now to the platforms themselves, as you mentioned, you're working with platforms and audiences to prevent and protect. What response have you had from the likes of Twitter, from the likes of Meta who do Facebook and Instagram, do you feel that they're box ticking? Do they genuinely believe it? They say they're neutral platforms and not publishers, is that to resolve themselves from responsibility from what's posted? I had the former head of marketing for Twitter on last year. And I said you could solve all this Twitch abuse in a heartbeat by just making people prove who they are and stop having anonymous bots. And he passionately said, no, absolutely not, we need people to be able to be whistleblowers and the whole point of it is anonymity. I genuinely believed him that he absolutely did not want people to register it, but then you see these thousands of bots and all this abuse and he think if you just had to scan your credit card and do a KYC like you do if you start a banking app, I imagine that would cut a lot of abuse, would it not? Sorry, that was a very long and rambling question, wasn't it?

I think this is actually one of the crucial issues in terms of verification. And I conducted some research earlier this year, it was casual research. It sounds very impressive, but actually it was going around the organisation, speaking to people,

asking them about the particular issues that they had faced and were facing, what their main concerns were, this was so that I could actually kind of work out the scale and the scope of the issue when I was first in the role. I would say that there were three key things that came out of those listening sessions. The three main things that really bothered people, or that were the majority of issues raised, were harassment, personal comments, trolling, and then accountability was the fourth and accountability that of the platforms, as well as of the individual perpetrators was what came through in that. I don't think we're gonna solve that issue anytime soon, because I think there is a great deal of pushback from Meta and from Twitter for that call for verification. But I also don't think it's a conversation that will be put to bed even if those platforms would like it to be put to bed, because I do think that it is a conversation we need to keep having, how can we make it safer online? And I think verification quite clearly is one way that we could actually make it a safer place, but there are obviously the risks that come with that in terms of freedom of speech, other things that have been raised in objection towards the online safety bill that's going through the UK government at the moment as well. In terms of the work that I do with those platforms, I would say that Meta and Twitter are the two major ones that we probably have reported on a regular basis by journalists who are facing online abuse. And they are, I would say two platforms out of a multitude of platforms that get reported to me. So we see abuse on email. We see abuse by phone call, by text and that kind of thing as well. There's multiple ways that people are experiencing these things, but Twitter and Facebook are consistently reported, Instagram slightly less so, and it's really, really important that I have a good working relationship with those platforms, that we continue to talk to them about the issues that our journalists are facing, that we press for change where change is needed. And that we have that open dialogue with them. And we have partners at both Twitter and Meta who we have regular meetings with. I have regular meetings with them, I would say on a monthly basis. And we talk about issues reports that might have been made as well as talking about new safety functions that they might be bringing in, new tools that we can use as journalists to keep our journalists safer online. So it is a two way dialogue. I know that the people I've spoken to that are working on those platforms are interested and invested in making those platforms safer for journalists. And in fact, we've got somebody from Meta actually coming to do a Q & A with our team across Reach, led by me actually looking at some of the safety functions, but also allowing journalists to ask any questions that they want of that person about safety for journalists on Facebook in an internal event. And I think that that's really important that we are actually allowing that kind of communication from the ground up because there will be people asking questions at that event that will then help me identify issues that perhaps I don't know about at the moment, for example. Those dialogues are really important. And it's also important that I'm a critical friend in those situations. Because I do feel like there is definitely room for improvement in terms of keeping journalists safe at the moment as well and keeping people generally safe on those platforms. And so we need to continue to keep pushing, keep pointing out the issues, keep evidencing them and actually work with those platforms to help them make those platforms safer places to be.

They say if you dance with the devil, the devil doesn't change, the devil changes you. And I was thinking about how has this changed you? Have you become more cynical, more hardhearted? Don't get me wrong, you're standing up for free speech. You're defending your colleagues and doing a great job, but

you're also amongst quite horrible people saying horrible things. And you must be constantly reading quite nasty things, that must be stressful for you personally, is it not?

Yeah, it can be sometimes. I'm really lucky that I have some really great colleagues around me. So if I'm having a day where actually, maybe it has gotten to me a little bit, I can drop a colleague a line and we can have a chat. So that's really nice and that's really important. And the other thing that I would say is that I learned quite early on in this role, how important it is for me to connect with other people doing similar roles. So I've made some very good alliances and I would say friendships with people who are doing similar kinds of roles or looking at online harms and abusive journalists internationally. And I think that really helps me because I can say this happened, has anybody else experienced this? And we can have a conversation about how they dealt with it, perhaps, or I can give advice about how I've dealt with something else. It's useful to be useful sometimes in those situations. So those alliances for me have been really important. And I also think they are really important in that collective approach that I talked about earlier. And then also there are some great mental health and wellbeing services offered by Reach, the employee assistance program. And we have a kind of coaching service as well. So I know that if I needed to reach out to those, I could. And there've been times where I've actually thought I need to drop the employee assistance program line because I'm having a difficult day. And that is something I would endorse. When I talk to colleagues, I say, if you are struggling with something, we have this amazing program that you can use. And I would use it too, and we'll use it I'm sure in the future to actually support me if I need it. And I would say that it's probably made me take care of my mental health and wellbeing. It's made me think more carefully about what I need to do to protect that. So if I go on holiday, I might put my Twitter account into protected mode. So that when I get back, I don't come back to a plethora of things from people who I don't follow that are there to greet me when I go back into Twitter, after being away.

Welcome back! Here's hundreds of abusive messages!

Exactly. Yeah. So, I've got to make sure that I do that. And just that I follow the advice I give other people, which is take a break, get out into the fresh air, move away from your screen for a bit, take care of your mental health and wellbeing, talk to other people. I've got to make sure I'm taking my own medicine. But the other thing that I would say is that in situations where, I mean dealing with other people's experiences, it's sometimes shocking with things that people experience. And I think that when I have then experienced hate online myself, or abuse online myself, that's really helped me identify how those people might be feeling. And I think that actually probably makes me better at my job. I am on the frontline and leading the conversation around online abuse and therefore I am obviously a target for it. But actually having knowledge of what that then feels means I'm probably in a better place to actually support colleagues who are going through the same thing.

I mean, the vast majority of people and the vast majority of exchanges on social media are actually quite pleasant and warm. I was reminded just then that we had Nick Ross on the podcast a few years ago, who used to present Crime Watch and I used to watch that as a kid. And until that last minute, I'll be

convinced that that noise outside was actually the stealthy footfall of a mad axeman because that poor elderly couple had just been axed to death in the reconstruction. And then Nick Ross would then say at the last minute, don't forget that violent crimes of this nature are incredibly rare, do sleep well, don't have nightmares and he would reframe it. Do you have to do that sometimes yourself where you actually might think, wow, I'm waiting through all of this treakle of all this hate, but actually the vast majority of people are actually quite nice and community focused and warm.

Yeah and I think it's really important for me to remind people of that as well, that we have this vast silent majority who actually appreciate the work that's being done by our journalists and by our organisation, who value that input that those people have in their lives, that are essentially getting everything out of the content that's being produced by our journalists, that our journalists have the intent for them to get out of it and they don't come and give us a pat on the back every time they read something that they like or they don't kind of comment on it in a positive way all the time. But then it means that there's this kind of minority who has a loud voice and quite often is anonymous that will wade in and kind of shout and be unpleasant like the playground bully. The playground bully is quite often one person out of a hundred. And I would say that that's the same online, that the majority of people are probably cracking on getting on with it, might see something take place online that actually makes them feel distinctly uncomfortable or might see something they really enjoy, but don't necessarily tell you that. And that is the network that we are working within. And then there is this minority that's actually causing the problem. And I think it's really important that I remind people of that and that actually part of my job is about people feeling more confident in online spaces and actually helping people feel more confident in online spaces because you can feel very vulnerable and exposed, but it is quite often just that small minority and actually a lot of people would really deplore the abuse and the hate that journalists get. They wouldn't endorse it. They wouldn't think that it was a good thing to do, and they would want to protect people if they knew how to.

I'd go further than that. I think it's utterly despicable behaviour.

Yeah, it is. It is. And I think a lot of people will feel that way. So my role is about actually helping people feel more confident in the online space. And actually one thing that I've done while I've been at Reach is set up an online swarm called Reach Hive. And it is essentially employees from across Reach, who are led by me and if somebody's facing an online backlash on Twitter, then we deploy the hive to actually pepper that person's Twitter account with positive messages, nothing to do with the backlash that they faced.

What a great idea.

It's honestly so nice. And it is such a nice thing to be part of.

It's like the Care Bear Stare. Do you remember the cartoon from Saturday mornings?

Exactly. So it's nice to be part of it because like you say, sometimes my job comes be like, I'll open my inbox in the morning and I'm just like, oh, good. This is a rather horrible morning I'm facing.

I wouldn't want your job and I say that with respect and friendship and absolute admiration, because I'm glad you are doing it. It needs to be done. But I personally wouldn't have the wherewithal to do it. And I think you're doing a fantastic job. If I may widen the discussion, because we've obviously done the platforms, we've done individuals, we haven't spoken about the government yet. I mean, they recently published an "action plan" to better protect journalists from intimidation. Has any of it actually been implemented?

Yes, it has. So earlier this year I presented the work that I'm doing to the National Committee for the Safety of Journalists. And that committee is made up of bodies, including industry bodies. So the BBC is represented there. Obviously Reach was represented at that particular one, various other members from across industry, but also it is led by the government. So it's led by the department for culture, media, sport, and digital. It has membership from the police in England, Scotland and northern Ireland, which is obviously really important. And then also academics who are working in the field among others. It is a vast committee and among that we have then seen recommendations and actions from that committee advising industry. So I think my role actually is off the back of that action plan, partly because it was advised that the industry needed to start taking more accountability for the safety of journalists online. And I know that that advice was given around the same time that Reach actually did an internal survey of journalists asking them about their experiences. And then my role was advertised as a kind of cumulative impact of that. So the NUJ is taking quite an active role within this all as well. And actually kind of feeding down from that committee across its membership. And then also we see, for example, the NCTJ, the National Council with the Training of Journalists putting together toolkits for journalists and training centres to actually then deploy across the UK to actually help people and find what tools they need to actually make them safer online, to have safer approaches, but also know what to do when something happens. And I'm feeding into that but also I know that academic colleagues that I've worked with in the past are also feeding into that and that it is really a collective effort. And so I would say that the national action plan has been a good way of bringing together some of the key issues and identifying the key issues, and then working collectively to actually kind of think how we can approach those. And I do think that that has also then fed into the structure of the online safety bill, which is obviously a huge bill within massive remit, but that particular action plan and committee has fed into that as well. And so I think it's really important that we keep having these conversations though, because obviously just in the six months I've been in this role, I've seen things change, new trends emerging, other things happening less. So it is important that we keep having these conversations and as new technology comes out, new platforms emerge, new tools come out, there will be new ways to abuse and to harass, and we need to be making sure that we're kind of getting ahead of those as much as possible.

How optimistic are you that this problem will be solved over the coming years? And dare I say decades? For example, drink driving was almost socially acceptable in the seventies and early eighties, whereas now it will be thought of rightly as despicable and morally wrong. Is there going to be a generational shift that this kind of thing will not just be frowned on as seen as merely unfortunate, but actually hereness and bullying. And do you think ultimately this will be something that will be minimised in the years to come?

I really like to think so. I think that we are at the starting point of that, and I think that it's gonna be quite a long journey if I'm being honest, but I do look at my children who are learning about online safety in school and talking about the impact that cyber bullying can have. And that is a lesson that I wouldn't have had when I was at primary school, because those things didn't exist. We are talking about it from that young generation upwards now. And like I said before, the digital migrants are learning alongside the digital natives, but by the time my children become adults, I would like to think that we are collectively better as a society at knowing the acceptability of being abusive online. And I think that the platforms have a huge role to play in this as well. If they don't clamp down on harassment and abuse, then we are never going to see that change because it's giving a platform for people who want to behave in that way. So I do think we need to continue to have these conversations. I need to continue to push, other people in my position need to continue to push and to call for change. And also hopefully our younger generation will actually take the lead on this as well, and actually be better online in the future and actually teach the next generation after that to be better online. But of course with that kind of rosy glow, there are the issues of new emerging technologies, new ways of communicating. We have the metaverse, which obviously is a whole new ball game in the way that people interact online. I don't work with gaming particularly, but journalism may well go into virtual reality futures where again these kinds of things will take place and we need to think about how we get ahead of that. So I do think that the regular challenge of change and digital evolution is probably one of the biggest challenges in making the internet a safer place.

What's the biggest challenge? What's the biggest blockage? What keeps you up at night?

Some days it can feel like a lot. And it can feel like I'm one person working to make change. And I've heard criticism of my role and of the role that I'm doing and of the job that I'm trying to do, criticising and basically suggesting that I'm a fig leaf and it's a decorative role, that's there to look good. And I would absolutely hands down say that is not the case. I think I've probably made really positive changes while I've been at Reach. And I think that is not just within the organisation, but also externally because actually working collaboratively with other people has meant that I can see those patterns. We can see what joins the dots and we can actually start taking really positive action to make change. We're sharing tools and resources, we're sharing knowledge about what's worked well. I've shared the model for the hive with somebody who's doing a similar role to me in Australia who is now looking at whether they deploy the hive and set up a hive of their own in Australia for their organisation. I think that it is definitely not a fig leaf role, but sometimes it can feel like a lot. And I think that making sure that we continue to have the strength of focus on the

challenges that we are facing collectively, both within reach and as an industry is really important because as something new comes along, it's easy to lose focus and actually to shift on something else. And I really, really need to bring people along with me and I think probably that is one of the challenges that keeps me awake at night because I kind of think some days the avalanche gonna get me? Am I going to drown in this sea of reports that I see, but a lot of days I would say, I feel empowered, I feel like I'm making positive changes. And I feel like I'm doing that collectively with colleagues and with people externally as well. So I do feel positive. So I'm not kept awake too much at night because it's just an odd occasion.

Who are your heroes?

I was very privileged to host a panel in the week of international women's day earlier this year, which had women who are leading the way in terms of challenging hate online against journalists and journalists of all genders and all different descriptions. So Hannah Storm is absolutely inspirational. She founded headlines network and she has done loads of work around journalism and safety in the physical world and the online world, and continues to bring people together to have important and interesting conversations that then actually spark real change. Jenny Keen, who I used to work with at Leeds Trinity University has done some really pioneering work in this area as well. She's a hero of mine. And then we have some amazing people such as Maria Ressa, who is a global figure who has actually experienced extreme online hatred and backlash, and who has not let that silence her. UNESCO did a really interesting report into what she'd experienced and how she's now responded to that and she won the Nobel Peace Prize, not all that long ago for her work in creating freedom of expression and freedom of speech for journalists in the Philippines. It's hard to mention all the people that inspire me in this particular field because there are a lot of people doing some really amazing work. But yeah, I would say that those women I've just named are some of my heroes.

What's next?

It's quite a good point in time for me to reflect on the past six months and what's been achieved within the role I'm doing and then look forward to the next six months coming up. And for me, at Reach the big challenges are finishing off and finalising our new reporting system, which will then help make it easier for people to make reports of online safety issues and which will automate it and start really compiling a very thorough database that actually can evidence hopefully not only the platforms that abuse takes place on, but also the category of abuse that is taking place and also the characteristics of the person reporting that abuse, which is gonna be really important in helping us demonstrate, for example, specific issues of racism and misogyny taking place on Twitter, for example. So that's gonna be happening, I'm hoping in the coming month and then at the same time I'm looking at running a campaign, that probably won't be until the back end of the next six months. So maybe in 2023, which I'm hoping again, will actually just really sharpen the focus from the public point of view on what our journalists are doing, who they are, the people that they are and the impact that online abuse can have on them. And I'm really hoping that that will actually start paving the way for not only our journalists

feeling like we are recognising what they're doing, but also our audiences recognising that and hopefully giving a platform for that silent majority that I mentioned earlier to actually really offer value and reinforcement and support. Because I do think the hive, that kind of campaign, the work that I'm doing across the organisation is a way of building that supportive community that actually then makes online spaces feel safer for everyone. And that's our audience, as well as our staff.

Rebecca, that was a hugely interesting conversation. I think you have a hugely interesting job and you are doing an absolutely fantastic job. I wish you every success. Thank you ever so much for your time.

Thank you.