John Sweeney

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Welcome to Media Masters, a series of one to one interviews with those at the top of the media game. Today I'm joined by the writer and broadcaster John Sweeney. John is known for his in-depth investigative journalism and sometimes literally explosive documentaries. Now working with BBC Panorama, he reported for 12 years at the Observer, where he covered wars and chaos in more than 60 countries. His reports challenging the expert evidence of Professor Roy Meadow helped free cot death mum Sally Clark and six others, and led to him winning the first Paul Foot award. He has gone undercover in Chechnya, Zimbabwe and North Korea, where he posed as a professor. He famously lost his temper with the Church of Scientology after they harassed and spied on his team, and he challenged Vladimir Putin in Siberia over the war in Ukraine, and this year has reported on the refugee crisis and the Paris massacre.

John, thanks for joining me.

Hi, Paul.

Shall we go straight into the Paris massacre, then? Because you've just literally got back from there.

Well, yes. It's a Friday night, I'm in the pub, I've had a few beers. I'm not catatonically out of it with alcohol, but I'm pretty drunk.

Merry.

Merry. And the deputy editor of Panorama phones, there's been a lot dead in Paris… first train in the morning, couple of hours' sleep, and it's not proper sleep, and you hit it, and we go to this little… the Rue Alibert… and after I left LSE I worked for a photo agency in Paris for a month, so I don't know the city well, but I love it. I love Paris. And there's sawdust on the floor, on the pavement, and it's soaked in blood, and

they haven't done the sawdust job perfectly, and there's just bits of blood, pools of blood, and you can see the bullet holes. And the thing that's so awful for me is I've spent September and October telling the stories of the refugees, people running from the very killers who did this so-called Islamic State/ISIS… it sounds better in Arabic – "Daesh" – more contemptuous, I think, and the idea that haunts me is that within the refugee road, there were some lovely people, some fantastic, ordinary, extraordinary people, people suffering, and there were some killers too. And I actually asked one of the refugees for the Panorama we did called The Long Road, a guy called Sobby in Kos, about this, and I said, "Are you worried that amongst these refugees there will be some people from ISIS?" and he said, "Yes, I am worried about this. It's a nightmare, the idea that these people can destroy the reputations of hundreds of thousands of people." And one of the things I found deeply moving is, I had the privilege to do the first TV interview with a lovely couple of lovers, Michael O'Connor and Sarah Bedell, he is a – I can't say he's a Geordie, because he'll kill me, he is from South Shields – and she is from France, Lyon. They are lovers, and they came up from Lyon to see this band that she adores, and it's his first night in Paris. And the killers come in, and they're right at the front of the stage, and they hid amongst the dead. They both have got soaked in other people's blood and other bits of people. Everybody's quiet. Quiet as a grave. Because everybody is playing dead, and there are people who are gravely injured who are holding their blood and dying, but trying not to say anything. And gunfire is intense to begin with, Michael describes it, then it goes down and down and down, and news of the massacre rose, and loved ones' mums and dads are phoning, and the whole theatre hall is full of sulphur from the machine guns, pretty dark, the buzz from the amp – because the band had left but they didn't switch their amp off, obviously –and then 60 mobile phones ringing continuously.

From loved ones obviously wanting to know whether they're okay.

Yes. So he sets the scene, and he is, every now and then, somebody tries to answer their phone, and the killers shoot people. And they go up to the balcony and they shoot down. But he is jammed next to Sarah, and he kisses her and says, "I love you, and if I don't make it I want you to tell everybody at home I love them to." And I find this affirmation of the power of love in this hell beautiful and extraordinary. And the thing that really, really touched me was that Michael is a great fan of the BBC and has watched my documentary, The Long Road, and had seen this guy Sobby worry about exactly that, about ISIS hiding amongst the refugees, and he said, "The whole point of what ISIS is doing is to polarise us, to make us hate ordinary Muslins, to make us hate them, to polarise, and we shouldn't do that, because that's what they want us to do." And then he went on to say that we should carry on going to football matches and concerts and drinking wine and all of that, and I have to say – and BBC management might not like this – but they were spooked, and I said, right, after we'd done the interview, they wanted to fly somewhere, and they organised flying there, and I said, "Tonight, our driver," – because we had a driver with all the

kit, all the camera gear – "…is going to pick you up, and I'm going to take you to the restaurant." And I'm a big bloke, and my friend Dave Langhan who I've been to the Congo with, is the biggest cameraman in the whole of the BBC, 6'7", and there was another big camera man, there was this wall of big, fat BBC blokes, and we drank ourselves stupid.

Sounds like a great night!

It was a GREAT night. And these killers, the idea that they can snuff out Paris, the city of light, it felt like they almost succeeded on Saturday, I have to tell you, but by Sunday – no chance. Fat chance of that. We will defeat these people, but we must do it while retaining our humanity and our love of love, and our love of life.

You're clearly a human being, and you can't fail to be moved by this, as you are now, as you are telling it, it's deeply moving. But we have this kind of impression of what a journalist ought to be, you're supposed to stand there dispassionately and report on this. I mean, it made the news just yesterday that a BBC reporter briefly broke down on air, and I was reading a big screenshot of it in the Telegraph this morning on my way into this interview. I mean, we've got this picture of how journalists should behave. Do you think that needs to change?

We're human beings. I feel desperately sorry for my colleague, basically he does live, live, live. And what I do is kind of as live, then we race it back to edit suites and cut it or whatever. To be fair, I was dry-eyes throughout, 20 minutes on Panorama on Monday night… it's tough, because of the way our structures are…

The adrenaline's going, it's almost caught up with you now.

Listen, mate. Because of Scientology, psychiatrists adore me. I get fan mail… after I lost my temper with Scientology… one guy emailed, "Mr Sweeney, you're my hero," like a 16-year-old girl, "But then, I am the vice-president of the Royal College of psychiatry." So actually, I'm doing a gig next year for the World Convention of Psychiatrists in London, 2,500 psychiatrists, so if I want a psychiatrist, I can get one. I just want to go drinking with my mates tonight. But I was dry-eyed throughout, Saturday and Sunday, and then yesterday I was listening to the radio and there was some posh BBC reporter twit saying to some Brummy England fan, "Do you know the words to La Marseillaise?" and the Brummy England fan says, "No, I don't – but I can hum it, can't I?" *der-di-der-der-der-di-der-der-der*… and this poor… I was sitting in the kitchen with my dog, and I just cried my eyes out. And the thing is, I have been… I have walked through blood, and I have spoken to eyewitnesses, and what I wanted to do is to do it as dispassionately as I could. And I was talking to my son about it, he said, "You did that." I wanted to explain to people what happened, because the police were overwhelmed by the number of attacks, but it took them two

and a half hours to get where poor Michael and Sarah were playing dead amongst the dead, but… you've got to do two things: you've got to try and get the facts, you've got to try and tell the story fairly, properly and honestly. Honest news. There is a craving for that in places like North Korea, where I have been, and quite right too. At the same time, if you become conformist, bourgeois robots, you kind of lose something. And I try and say that… I have never cried on air, but that's in part because of the way I do it. I completely understand. And if anybody wants to criticise that colleague, and also my colleague from Sky, who cried when the Malaysian jet was shot down in the Ukraine, and then I tweeted in sympathy, if anybody out there wants to criticise those people for crying, then they should find me in a pub, and they should have a talk with me, but they would not like what happens next.

I don't think anyone would date criticise them, because we are all human beings. It wasn't fake, it was real.

Yes, but it's a kind of… yes, but also there is an over-projection of it. We're human beings, and the idea that you can easily plug in… if you do one story, that's fine, you do the next story, it's Paris, that's okay… it affects you, it affects you deeply. Michael and Sarah could by my kids – they're in their 20s now – or their friends, so I feel we've got to report this, we've got to understand it. I also feel that the poor people in Syria, there has been a major problem because the war in Syria, which is pitiless, a regime that uses poison gas, people say, against a terrorist group that beheads people in high definition video. And because people like me are afraid, and it's a reasonable fear, of having your heads chopped off and being weaponised by ISIS, it's become an under-reported war – and now the war has come to Europe. So what do you do? I think we should work harder at trying to report the war, and we should try hard to do this. Throughout this bit of my career, I am fascinated by brainwashing. Now, they are all different.

Conditioning, as it's known.

Well, I call it brainwashing. Church of Scientology – remember they say I'm psychotic, a liar and a bigot, and there are many enemies, but ex-members of the church say that when they were in it, they were brainwashed. North Korea. You see a nation which went through a famine and which maybe four million people died of starvation, adore the people, the regime that made them starve. You see this level of adoration…

So you think it's brainwashing.

I think it's brainwashing. And then the people, ISIS, the people who can gun down their fellow human beings, because they're what? Because they're pagans? It's brainwashing. It's brainwashing. And the great American expert on brainwashing is an American military psychiatrist called Lifton, and he treated American GIs that had

been brainwashed in the Korean War, and the number one thing for brainwashing is constriction of information – and as a journalist, I fight that. As a journalist, I passionately believe that information is light.

It sounds almost a trite or shallow question to ask, but it's a genuine one. How do you stay sane amidst all this insanity Because you've clearly immersed yourself in some quite crazy worlds, and you've just named them – Scientology, ISIS, North Korea – and you do get these people… there's something called the Stockholm Syndrome, isn't there, where people start to immerse themselves in so much insanity, and a little bit rubs off on them.

You're in the team, Paul. The reason I left the Observer was because newspaper economics were crumbling. And when I used to hit the road as a war reporter I would go with a photographer, and they have lots of banal conversations about light meters – 'F50' and all that stuff - I could never quite understand… but I like going to a war, if I had to, with the chaps who take snaps – good boy scouts, good company, great people, wonderful eye for stuff. Newspaper economics means that's cut, and I increasingly went, towards the end in the 90s, to dark places on my own – and it's far harder. Two friends of mine were killed in Sierra Leone, and I just cried and cried and cried, and I knew I had to get out, and I tended my resignation, and I left and I got a short-term contract with Radio 5 Live at the BBC in current affairs, and then I stayed at the BBC. So with *Scientology* I had the fantastically brilliant company of Sarah Mole, the producer, and Bill Brown, the cameraman. Bill Brown's a Northern Irish cameraman. who has seen more trouble than anybody in the bloody world, and so there's part of that kind of… wonderful how I never missed a shot, and Sarah's from Essex, and what she said was, "'Ere, you've seen Jurassic Park ain't ya?" – he actually talks posher than that, but it amuses me to rubbish her in that way.

I love all these accents that you're prepared to have a stab at! You get points for pluck.

Yes! But one out of 10 for competence! I am no Mike Yarwood, shut up John, and don't do it. "'Ere!" she says, Mole, "'Ere, you've seen Jurassic park, ain't ya? Right. Scientology's T-Rex, and you are the tethered goat." And that's for my job. "You can bleat, can't ya?" And that was for my job! In North Korea I went there with Tomiko Newson and a brilliant, funny cameraman, Alex Niakaris, who had a 5D, which looks like a normal stills camera, but it isn't – it was shooting high definition. And he spent the whole… Alex is like Dylan from The Magic Roundabout, a kind of hippy… so what happens is, what prevents you from going nuts? What prevents you from Stockholm Syndrome? It's a moment of darkness or comedy, and I would look at Alex, and I would look at Tomiko, and both of them would smile or laugh in their eyes, and there was one moment when there was just a sea of North Korean army coming at me, like hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of people, like a video game, and then I look at Tomiko, and Tomiko nods, and Alex is filming it, and he

looks as though he's at the secret garden party festival in Cambridge. He couldn't be more laid back, and I know he's shooting every single frame.

You need people like that.

So something like the stuff we do, the BBC, the other broadcasters, it's a wonderful team game, and one's colleagues, they're brilliant in Paris, I shot the stuff with great friends like Dave Langhan and Darius, and Steve Foote and they're so good, and then at the end of the day, in the evening, I have to say, I like to go for a drink, and then my colleagues…

Sounds like you've earned it, frankly…

I overdo it! And then my colleagues and I take the piss out of each other, and they just take the piss out of me relentlessly, and I take the piss out of them. For example, Dave Langhan is 6'7", and I… en Français, we went to the Congo together, and I called him 'le pygmy grotesquement deformé' – the grotesquely deformed pygmy! And he takes all this rubbish that I chuck at him, the kind of amused resignation, and so anyway, there is… we bring with us our own panto, which is of a kind of a bubble, which is when I said to… to Michael and Sarah, the lovers who survived the horrible siege in Bataclan, that they came in, and I said, "Come into our bubble," and they just spent the whole night laughing as we just relentlessly took the piss… well, they all take the piss out of me – that's what happens.

When have you felt in genuine physical jeopardy? Have you ever thought… you know, when that North Korean army was advancing towards you, it's likely that they could have just marched past, but they could have thought, "Who are you?", searched your camera and shot you.

I live in Lambeth. Lambeth is WAY more dangerous that North Korea. Literally, there was a rave riot outside our house. So North Korea…

So you would choose a Lambeth rave over North Korea?

I've never felt afraid in Pyongyang once. It's a horrible dark dictatorship if you're North Korean; they treat foreign visitors as if they are some kind of rock star royalty, and we knew we were completely safe – my view, the BBC might disagree – my view was there was no jeopardy we were there, and that's what our high-risk security people thought, all of that. The thing with me is, I think with most people, is physical fear is very short-lived – it's the psychological fear which gets you down the worst. So the most dangerous places I've been to I would say Chechnya and Yugoslavia, not just Sarajevo, but Sarajevo's one, where… and in Chechnya, I was a quarter of a mile away from a bomb. The bomb's a big damn thing, it drops and the whole ground shakes, and reverberation. In Yugoslavia I was shelled, a couple of times pretty

close… I am talking about 50ft, something like this, I have had a red spot – i.e. a sniper's red spot – in a hotel room on holiday in Sarajevo, so you hit the floor… I have been in a car, going into the Holiday Inn, with bullets flying over the car… it doesn't really get your mind. I did a radio documentary about the Russian use of torture against Chechens, some of whom would have been radicalised and will have entered the mindset that gets you towards ISIS – this is in 2000, before 9/11 – and it won an Amnesty prize, it's a radio thing called Victims of the Torture Train and I was interviewing these men mainly, and there was another part of the programme which was about a Russian bombing of a white flag convoy, and the only survivor in this one family, the car, it was a Volga car with seven people in the car, and the little girl was lying on the back seat, and the bomb explosion popped the back window and she survived, and everybody else was dead, pretty much. But as well as that, torture victims, and I got about 10 accounts, and they used things like… they called it The Elephant, which is a Russian gas mask, and they take the filter off, and the guy's got his hands tied behind his back, and he squirts Coronation Street gas up the nozzle of the gas mask, and these guys start to choke and die on their own snot and tears… and that's grim. And there's worst stuff. And I take it down, and we're doing a radio documentary, I've got a wonderful team, basically a translator, a Chechen Russian, a security guy, an incredibly brave driver and the guy who fixes it, who… the fixer subsequently disappears, presumably the Russians killed him, and I go back to the hotel, and there's me and the BBC producer, and then you try to go to bed, and all this dark stuff is going on in your head. Now, remember – I'd been in artillery shooters… okay, let's talk about artillery. You can kill 70 people, and I have seen the results of that in places like Sarajevo with a well-placed shell – that's less bad than directing the torture of one particular person, because it's so specific – and it's intelligently done, they are working out who are the right people to get to. People say I'm a bright guy, but the idea that there's somebody like me, with my kind of mind, doing this, and then I'm listening to an understanding what he's doing… I find the use and application of intelligence into the torture of another human being… I find it utterly barbaric, and it's the sort of thing, of all the things I've done, it's the thing that really, really gets to me. So what do I do? I anticipated this, and I brought seven copies of PG Wodehouse's books, and to get to sleep I would drink a bottle of vodka and go through Aunt Celia's milk creamer, and what's his name, thingy and Jeeves and Gutty Arbuthnot, and all that silly nonsense, and about three o'clock I could fall asleep. On the last day, lovely translator, beautiful woman, upstairs, all her books were destroyed when her flat was burnt down in Chechnya, and I said, "Here's my dictionary, and here's my seven PG Wodehouse books." One day maybe there's a new leadership in Chechnya, and I guess she might become the press secretary of the new leader of Chechnya, and I can just imagine her opening the press conference, and the world's press there, and she will just say, "Good morning, chaps! Tinkety-tonk!" And the idea – and this also I love – is, dark as this stuff is, that you can do things to counter it. So the other thing I do, as well as having a wonderful team, is I deliberately set out to find things that amuse me. In every film I like to try and do a moment of humour, and the film I did about finding Assam, in The Long

Road, there's a dreadful shot of me and my enormous fat belly, asleep on the ferry. But it's just there as a gag; even in awful, dark times, people have time to love and laugh.

What gets you out of bed in the morning? Is it that particular story, as it were? Like at the moment we're talking about Paris… you've got a litany of amazing things you've been involved with. Is it a kind of crusade, as it were? Do you seek out trouble, or does it find you?

It finds me!

I thought you might say that!

There's… I almost swore at you! Actually, I will. F**k you! It finds me. Right now, what I want to do is go home and fall asleep, and in the evening I go to the pub with my dog, and others, and the only thing that gets me out of the bed in the morning and gets me out of the pub at night is when somebody powerful says, "Shut up," to ordinary people. This is a story I, the powerful person, do not want told. With ISIS they are using the power of fear to supress proper argument and information; to kill information, and the killing of the givers and the gatherers of information. And with powerful… I've had a go at powerful billionaires, powerful organisations, very rich and powerful organisations, and they say to ordinary people, "This is a story we do not want told. You shut up, or things will not be good for you." That gets me out of bed, and that gets me out of the pub.

Well, let's go into a specific of whether trouble finds you or you find it. Let's look at Scientology, for example, because I was a huge fan of Panorama and the book that you wrote, and I actually watched Alex Gibney's documentary recently where the bloke that you shouted at, I forget his name, has actually come out of the church, and he is a good friend of yours now, I just think it's amazing.

So what happened in 2007 is, I lose my cool with a guy called Tommy Davis. Standing right next to him is a guy called Mike Rinder.

That's him.

And what happened was…

It's kind of become your trademark now, hasn't it?

It's a… you've got to live with it, Paul. I got into a cab the next day, the moment it went out, and I said to the cabbie, "I want to go to a wine bar." And he said, "Oh, is that the Scientology wine bar?" And I just… I took a sort of… inhales, and I thought,

“Leave it, John, you’re stuck with this for the rest of your life.” It’s… so what happened was that Scientology put the clip of me screaming out – thank you very much – without me…

Showing how they wound you up.

Exactly.

How did you find them? How did they come on your radar, where you thought these guys were a set of wrong ‘uns, we need to expose them.

Sarah Mole and I did a... and Callum Macrae brilliant good fun, we did a film about the Kabbalah Centre, which they say it’s wonderful; ex-members say that it’s Jewish Scientology, and having done the small monster, we said, “Okay, let’s go and do the big one – let’s go and do Scientology.” None of us had any idea just how barmy it was going to be.

Agreed.

My mum would say… they say that it’s a force for good… a thing I’ve got, which annoys me, is that Tom Cruise and John Travolta pop up on things like the Graham Norton show, and Jonathan Ross, Top Gear, as was, and no-one ever asks them about Scientology. Now, they don’t have to drill them or grill them, but just… some people think it’s controversial, and they’re never put on the spot about it. So, some men play golf, some men have model train sets, my hobby is annoying the Church of Scientology.

It’s a good hobby to have!

But I do feel that it can be dark, and people… this thing they have, this policy of disconnection, it means… they deny it…

It ruins families.

It splits up families, and I just want to say, “Hey…” if anybody says don’t talk… your mum and dad can be irritating or whatever, and your friends can be irritating, but when somebody says just don’t talk to your friends and family, that’s wrong. It’s simply wrong. So I posed that in a fundamental human way, when the programme went out – this was before Twitter, but there were dozens… the BBC press office phoned me up and said, “It’s all looking very bleak, John – it’s all against you.” And some of the messages were like, “Sweeney should pay for his crimes, his behaviour [sic] is disgraceful,” but ‘behaviour’ was spelt the American way, and I said, “No, no – this is that Scientology.” “Oh, they wouldn’t do that,” said the press officer. “Oh, yes they would!” And then BANG – Britain wakes up. Hundreds and hundreds and

hundreds, and then thousands of emails in my support, and I just love the fact that the great British public that currently pay my wages supported me *to the hilt*. My favourite – and I'm going to swear – absolutely favourite email was from the Green Watch of the Lambeth River bit of London Fire Brigade, and it went something like this: "Mr Sweeney, we're with you the whole way and when you lost it, we lost it with you. And frankly, we all thought you should have punched that c**t."

Did anyone criticise you?

No, no – I don't do lives… I'm currently being made redundant by the BBC. They gave me four redundancy letters and they've taken back three, but I'm out of the door at the end of December .

You're like the undead on Panorama, aren't you? You're not supposed to be there, but you're still there.

My colleagues on the programme, who I adore, call me Dead Man Drinking. And to be honest, I don't want to go on about this, but I found the BBC making me redundant, I found it bewildering. They are still thinking about it, and there is a possibility I might get redeployed.

DCF, as it's called. Delivering cuts first, rather than DQF.

Anyway, I might stay, I might go – it doesn't matter, it's not a big problem. I do feel that the BBC is, as Paxman said, a noble thing, and I think it would be crazy to take it apart. At the moment it seems, it feels to me as if it's being salami sliced, but something like the Paris attacks, it tells you, doesn't it, that this helps supply honest news, and the reporter who cried, it tells you the BBC isn't just a bunch of robots – we are a good organisation, funded by - for me, the most enlightened public in the world, and our job is to let nation unto nation – and when is that a bad idea? I genuinely, genuinely and passionately believe that the BBC is a good thing, and we as a country should pay for it – and also, I think, we should launch a service into North Korea, and broadcast into North Korea as we broadcast in Nazi-occupied Europe. And who here, right now, thinks it's a good idea in BBC Arabic? Why is that a good idea? I don't understand it. I don't understand it.

I'm a huge fan of the BBC – Jon Humphrys was sat in that chair a couple of months ago, and one of the things I'm most proud about as a BBC listener is that famous interview with him and George Entwistle on a Saturday morning – you wouldn't get any other journalist in any other news organisation that would have his very own chief executive, as it were, and completely hanging him. I just think that was tribute to the BBC's journalism and impartiality.

Yes. And I feel sorry for George, who's a decent guy, but it felt that that was a good and proper interview. We are a self-critical organisation, and that…

Well, if you want to watch criticism of the BBC you just need to turn on a news channel.

By the way, I've been on it, I've been on the news channel and criticised the lack of response to the Savile thing on the day of the Panorama thing going out – so yes, it's good. Listen, I'm fascinated with cults, brainwashing, mind control, the suppression of information. North Korea, Scientology, ISIS, the BBC… (chuckles)

There's a quote to be taken out of context!

Indeed! But the BBC isn't a cult, because, for example, we can criticise it. I would say the BBC isn't a cult because the employees are people like me – and I don't go with the flow. The best, most important thing I've ever done in my life is the stories criticising the expert evidence of Professor Sir Roy Meadow that led to the jailing for murder of Sally Clark, Angela Cannings and Donna Anthony, and basically his statistics were wrong, and his paediatrics were wrong, because he didn't factor in the importance of genetics in cot death. He said unless proven otherwise, one cot death is a tragedy, two suspicious and three is murder. Well, if it's genetic – and it is, because more baby boys die than baby girls, that means it's genetic – if it's genetic…

But you look back now, years later, in hindsight, and think, "How the hell did we even get it wrong in the first place?

Because some people – and I've seen this in Sarajevo – when a tragedy happens, a shell lands, 70 people die, their loved ones come, some people emote, scream, cry. You film and interview them. Some people turn to stone. Because they turn to stone, that moment of shock and crisis, does not mean they fired the bomb. So the problem is, and it felt this, at least some of the people I was looking at, although they were beautiful, warm and loving human beings, when faced with tragedy they emoted in a silent way, not in the "normal" way. Now, I have seen so much bloodshed, I understand that intuitively – but some people didn't. So the police, social services, investigators were saying, "She's a bit cold." Well, I know that happens, because I've seen it with my own eyes in Osijek and Dubrovnik and Chechnya and Sarajevo – some people react to horror by going silent, turning in on themselves – it doesn't mean they did the killing.

Speaking very personally as well, and there's a journalistic challenge to you here, is, as a viewer, sometimes the sheer complexity, geopolitically, of a situation, alienates me – like, for example the current situation in the Middle

East. I watched a two-minute explainer on the BBC News website yesterday, a video clip with some graphics that said, "These are the antagonists, these are the people fighting these people, and these people are fighting these people," and after two minutes of it I was genuinely none the wiser. And I wonder whether that's a difficulty for you as a journalist, when you've got to get across very emotive situations, but also incredibly politically complex. I mean, in a sense, one of the things that intrigues me with Jeremy Bowen, for example, with his reporting, is I never quite know what he thinks – and I think that's quite a compliment to his journalism, really. Because sometimes he's criticising the Israelis, other times it's the Palestinians, and you never quite get a handle on what his view is. But what he does do is he explains the situation very, very clearly.

Yes. Jeremy is… my two favourite reports are Jeremy Bowen and Allan Little. It's clear that they are empathetic human beings with tons of compassion for what they're looking at, for the ordinary people, and I would say that all of us are on the side of ordinary people, and yet trying to explain these complex things. But what's happening, surely, in the Middle East, is that there has been an astonishing rise in political Islam and Jihadism which is a reaction to Western globalisation, and all of us can feel… there are great upsides to globalisation; I drive a German car, I go on holiday in Italy, I drink French wine – lots of it right now, obviously – and I watch Hollywood movies. It's wonderful. In the car, diesel from the Middle East. We live so much better in the global world, but there are downsides. And the immense downside is this horrifying problem with Jihadism. My father fought in the Battle of the Atlantic. My grandfather fought in the First World War. They were blown up, gassed. My mum's dad was buried twice in the tunnel explosions at – the story of 'Birdsong'. Apparently that was worse than being gassed. Fighting Germany, Imperial Germany or Nazi Germany, is far, far worse than what we're going through now. We're going through asymmetrical terrorism, which is grim. It's nothing like as grim as what my dad had to put up with at the age of 19 going to the Battle of the Atlantic, and his generation, and still, depressing as all of the Paris events are, we should get a grip on that. The complexity of it, it is complex, but also it's an under-reported war, Syria, and whatever I do in the future, I want to try and understand it and explain it as best I can so that we can understand the difficulties. And to understand what's the logic here, what's going on. It's incredibly difficult, you're right, but because it's difficult doesn't mean we shouldn't not try to do it.

Here's a very real problem that journalists have at the moment, which is that you've got ISIS very graphically executing people in HD video, as you say, and they are putting their victims in orange jumpsuits so they can mimic Guantanamo Bay, and then you've also got psychologists now that are saying, in America, that these people that walk into schools and shoot as many people as they can, are doing it deliberately to gain publicity, and in fact psychologically they are saying that journalists now have to mitigate some of

the coverage, because actually it might drive more violence. So the argument may be…

That's bollocks. The reason these essentially paranoid schizophrenics can kill so many people in America is not because of the journalists overplaying the story, it's because they have access to sub-machine guns in a way that no other civilised society allows that to happen. So the fundamental problem is nothing whatsoever to do with an open society or its defenders – it's to do with an absurd and foolish access to sub-machine guns. And the problem of the American Constitution which means that there is a lock on that. So no other country has that.

It's institutional insanity, isn't it?

Well, you can call it that – but lets not blame journalists. It does, and you can see from the way I'm reacting, I have been to North Korea and it's not good. Somebody wrote beautifully, "There has never been a famine in a true democracy." So the great famines – I'm English, but obviously Sweeney of Irish ancestry, and I guess I don't know for a fact that my forefathers came over to Britain fleeing from the Irish potato famine – the famines that I know about, 1943 in Bengal, the famine in… I believe there was famine in Cambodia under Pol Pot, there was certainly famine in North Korea, famine in Ethiopia under Mengistu, these are all dictatorships, so people who talk about the problems of the media, okay, there has never been a famine in a proper democracy where the newspapers are working well.

And sunlight, of course, is the best disinfectant.

Indeed, yes. Sunlight is the best disinfectant. I'm in hot water a lot – good. Hot water keeps you clean.

What's next for you, then?

Ha – redundancy at the moment! But no – my colleagues, dead man walking, who knows? I've started writing. I've written a novel called Elephant Moon, which is about Burma. One of my heroes in life is Bill Slim, who went a thousand miles backwards, the greatest retreat in the history of the British Army, and then a thousands miles forwards. And the problem with fighting the Japanese in the jungle was immensely difficult, and he described it, I think, as 'de-plucking a porcupine, quill by quill' – and that's exactly what he did. And if he can do that, then we can do the same thing with ISIS.

Did you always want to be a novelist?

No, no, no. It took me 11 years to write this book. But basically there are refugees, kid refugees, they are on the run from the Japanese, they're going to die, and then they bump into a herd of working teak elephant in the jungles of Burma, also running

from the Japanese. Can the elephants get them across the river? The schoolteacher says, “Have you got a ferry?” and the elephant man, Bill – he’s Sam in my book – he says, “We don’t need a ferry, the elephants can give the kids a lift through the water.” But can the elephants climb the mountains, high mountains with snow on them, across into the safety of India? And I loved it. And I’m running a thriller at the moment - it’s exciting - but I also want to be a journalist, I want to report. I’ve made some… you could call them enemies…

If you can judge a man by the quality of his enemies, you’re doing rather well, actually!

What’s funny is, that if you listed my enemies, you might get sued.

If you got taken out on your way out of the studio now, literally the newsreader wouldn’t have time to report the suspects in a half-hour show!

(Laughs) There is… in Serbia, we had a wonderful Serbian fixer for The Long Road, he’s doing some stuff which some nasty people in Serbia have sort of said, “By the way, we might be following…” and I really did a double take and said, “You’re telling ME this?” Anyway, yes – I’ve got a lot of enemies, but part of the pleasures of life is that I’ve been granted the body of a Soviet tractor in that I keep on chugging away, and I want to… I do want to write novels, I want to write more thrillers, and I want that to work, but at the same time I still want to tell stories about ordinary, extraordinary people, and how they suffer, and yet still affirm love and life – and that’s all I want to do.

But who is putting resources into investigative journalism these days, I mean even globally? Because you’ve got newsrooms on the decline, people are looking for clickbait type stories – I mean, you’re an expensive luxury if you’re the managing editor of a newspaper, aren’t you? Don’t get me wrong, incredibly important to society etc., but you could be away for five months with a crew and come back with something, or come back with nothing.

I don’t think it’s ever been easy. I don’t think saying, “Oh, by the way, the first president of the Royal College of Paediatrics is talking rubbish,” and the moment you look at the BBC lawyer – who hates me with a passion - he tried to run me over once – that’s a joke! He has actually driven his car towards me when I was on my bicycle! That’s a joke!

There’s quite a lot for the Diary columns in this podcast…

His name is Roger Law! Mark Thompson, the previous Director General, when he saw me he used to run away, it was a joke, he used to run away. He would go, “Argh!” and run away – it was the Director General. The new one… who knows? It’s

never been easy, but it's a job worth doing. And when the BBC made the first announcement, and to be fair to them I'm still there and I'm still on staff for the moment, but when they first made the announcement, somebody from the UK Press Gazette said, "What does the future hold?" and I said, "I'm going to become a PR man for the Church of Scientology.

Oh, that would be so awesome if you did that.

And the bloke said, "Really?" and I said, "Of course not, you f**king idiot!" (Laughs) "I'm joking!"

They are absolutely insane, aren't they?

No, what it is, Paul, is that the people who are born into it, second and third generation, and their minds are captured from birth.

Like any religion, I suppose.

Well, it is and it isn't. I was brought up a Catholic and I'm not one now. I would not describe myself as brainwashed. I wouldn't. And my parents and our society were sufficiently open that you had enough information to question it. People have the right to believe in things, people do, and I defend that right. People have a right to believe in God if they wish and whatever, and I defend that right because in an open society that's fair and proper. The great challenge of our time is how do we defend our open society against people who seek to destroy it, while retaining the value… well, retaining the openness. And that's not easy – but at the same time, it's worth fighting for. But as Michael said, the guy who survived the massacre in Paris with his girlfriend Sarah, he said, "The way to fight this is to carry on going to football matches and concerts and drinking and having fun." I believe in an open society, properly defended, and you defend it because you want to keep it open, we want to have fun, we want to live.

And one of the advantages of doing this podcast is that very occasionally you get to interview your heroes. It's been an absolute delight – thank you.

Cheers.