

**Farrah Storr**  
**Editor-in-Chief, Cosmopolitan UK**  
**Media Masters – December 14, 2017**  
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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 by Farrah Storr, editor-in-chief of Cosmopolitan UK, Britain's most widely read women's magazine. Farrah's career has seen her work for major publications such as Eve, Marie Claire and Glamour. She was launch editor of Women's Health UK from 2012, which became the most successful women's magazine launch of the last 10 years. She took over at Cosmopolitan in 2015, and has already transformed the brand and doubled their circulation in under two years. In 2014, she won the British Society for Magazine Editors award for new editor of the year, and in 2017 she was named on the Guardian's list of Britain's most powerful people.

Farrah, thank you for joining me.

You're welcome.

**Cosmopolitan is such a globally famous brand. What was it like getting the editor-in-chief role?**

Oh, very scary. I mean, look, this is something that I'd read for years. Everybody has an opinion on Cosmo.

**I read it!**

Right, okay. Well, you know what? We laugh, but actually there are a lot of male readers. And it was scary, because not only did I inherit a team who had been there for a really long time, but also it's a magazine which actually, I remember on my first day, I went into the office and had this hilarious office, it was like a kind of glass fishbowl. It was right in the middle, centre of this office and I kind of had everyone staring at me.

**So literally all eyes were on you.**

It literally was all eyes on me. And it was funny because I did this very unwise power move where I'd been given – or I had been lent, I should say – one of those stand up desks, and I was like, "Right, this is the year that I'm going to use it, and everyone's

going to think I'm really hard at the fact that I've got a stand up desk," and so everyone was staring at me, and I was in agony for weeks and weeks, standing in heels at this stand up desk. So I think they were actually staring at me thinking, "What an idiot." But it was hard, because the magazine was still full of all of these sacred cows which Cosmo been famous for for years. So I remember when I opened the magazine on day one and they still had the same agony aunts that I'd grown up with, they still had the naked centrefold, which I don't know if you're familiar with, Paul?

**No, I'm not.**

The naked centrefold was really important to Cosmo's DNA because it was Burt Reynolds had actually... he was the first ever naked Cosmo centrefold.

**It's a shame you've got rid of it because I was about to volunteer.**

Well, we were always looking, we were struggling. And at the time it was really iconic, I suppose is my point, and he was really in on the joke, but by the time I got there I always laugh and say, you know, we had some guy who came sixth in The Apprentice kind of four years ago. And also there was a feeling for me that the kind of point of objectifying men now, at a time when women, quite rightly, don't want to be objectified, it didn't feel right. And so actually, it was scary because my job was to come in, and actually one of the first things I did was get rid of a lot those sacred cows that we had been famous for a really long time.

**I imagine that was quite nerve racking.**

Yes, but I think because, as invariably happens when you... and it was a relaunch Cosmo, it was a kind of a rebrand, you know, my remit was to rethink what Cosmopolitan would be like for millennial women, you don't get a lot of time. And actually I think that's a really good thing; I work really well under pressure and I think if I'd have had a long time to second guess myself... you know, they say it's gut instinct. It's not really, it's pattern recognition, and I think because at Women's Health, which I'd launched prior to Cosmo, same thing, I had a very short amount of time in which to launch a product. And so by the time I got to Cosmo I just had these very instant gut reactions about naked centrefold has to go, all the sex columns has to go – in a world of online porn, people are not going to Cosmo for tips on how to give a blow job. And so, yes, it was scary but actually I didn't have time to think about the ramifications of it. It made it kind of easy in the end.

**Yes, but when you get rid of stuff that creates a vacuum and you have to put new content in there. I mean, that must have been quite a challenge as well, to decide what to replace all that stuff with.**

Yes. I mean, I remember I had a weekend, so I decided to get rid of the centrefold and a lot of the sex, kind of agony aunts at the back, not because they weren't any good, they just didn't feel relevant and cutting edge. And I remember, I live out in the country in pretty much a field surrounded by sheep, and I was walking the dogs a lot at the time, probably to get rid of the stress. And I remember I had a weekend and I

was like, “What am I going to replace all this sex content with?” Because I didn’t want to get rid of sex content, you know, career and sex have always been the kind of foundations of Cosmo. I remember thinking actually what we should do is, we should embrace sex, I’m not going to give any watered-down sex to replace what has gone. And so we replaced the centrefold with My Best Sex Ever, which is basically all non-fiction but it’s kind of the secret sex lives, the sort of sex everyone is having but nobody talks about. And I remember at the time thinking it was a really important thing to do, because Fifty Shades of Grey was kind of the bestselling book of all time.

### **Which is a great injustice, of course.**

Of course! But I was like, “There is a need for this.” The veneer of that page, it looks kind of like quite a sensible page, but actually it’s incredibly naughty. But also, my whole it was when I got rid of all the sex positions – the kind of left leg in, left leg out – what I wanted to replace it with was a new kind of sex content, and that was looking at the sort of sex – because sex is a great way to kind of to kind of judge what’s going on in the cultural ether – and so what I said to the team is I want to go back to long form Gonzo-style journalism, where we look at the types of sex people are having, and then as journalists we go in and we make a comment on this. And so actually, apart from My Best Sex Ever, which is still my favourite page, we do a lot of long-form journalism on sex and sex lives, and we did 24 hours in a sex sauna, and we sent a journalist in. We didn’t ask her to, but she did end up having sex on the story, but that’s the sort of kind of, for me, the confluence of brilliant journalism and sex coming together, and that’s basically what I filled the content with.

**I mean, I used to read FHM, for my sins, and when you were talking about that Gonzo sex journalism it reminds me of the column of Grub Smith, because he used to write a monthly column where he would throw himself into swingers’ parties and do all kinds of things, and you could clearly see that he’d really done it.**

Yes. And actually I think he did one for Arena, which was Travels with my Penis, which was kind of the next stage. Grub Smith is one of my favourite writers growing up; I used to love men’s magazines. And actually, it’s interesting because Cosmo, when it was kind of rebranded, because it used to be a kind of family magazine, but when it was rebranded under Helen Gurley Brown in the 60s, and she was the real pioneer Cosmo editor, she said she based it on Playboy magazine, so she based it on a men’s magazine, and again it was the confluence of sex with substance. And for me, I grew up reading... I mean, look, my brother-in-law was the editor of Loaded, my sister was the features director of Loaded, and my husband was the senior feature writer at Loaded. So I grew up reading Loaded, FHM, as well as all of the women’s mags. And one of the things that I’ve always loved about men’s mags, and I remember saying to my mother recently I always wished I’d ended up editing a men’s magazine, is that they made the journalist the centre of the story. So that Gonzo journalism, which of course Esquire invented, is really important. But the other thing, and this is what we’ve done at Cosmo, is they embrace the writer’s voice. There was not, and I’m kind of very anti-this after years of doing it, I don’t really believe in a women’s magazine style of voice. What I pay people for is their

voice. So Cosmo now, like men's mags, is a whole series of different voices. Some of them you'll like, some of them you won't – and that's the way I think to kind of keep and engage readers.

**I agree with you. I mean I've been a very big fan of Michael Hodges for many years. He wrote the Slice of Life column at Time Out. I used to read that for years, even before I moved to London, because it wasn't some sanitised, Time Out branded house style, it was very much him and his adventures. Some were mundane, some more incredibly amazing. But you just got this sense of you were looking forward to his writing and you didn't want it sanitised or standardised.**

No, and of course you're buying it for that person. I mean, when I joined, one of the things I said to the team at Cosmo is, "I want to make you guys famous." And there's two reasons. One is writers have incredible egos, and actually as an editor you should serve those egos, because your byline is everything. But also, a bit like you're talking about Michael Hodges, if you identify with just one writer in the magazine, the product that you are picking up, you will buy the magazine just for that person. I used to get the Guardian for Jon Ronson. A voice is so important, and I actually think I think we made a mistake in women's magazines, inventing this Cosmo voice, or Glamour voice, or Marie-Claire voice, because we know not all our friends speak in the same way. It's interesting, there's a brilliant ad campaign at the moment for the Times, and it says, "Don't read what you believe," and I totally, totally subscribe to that. And that means you don't always listen to the voices that you particularly agree with. That's the whole point of journalism.

**And that's the point of great writing isn't it? I mean, I often don't agree with Polly Toynbee, but I absolutely love how she says it.**

Right. And it all comes down to the writer, doesn't it? So I think if there, which I'm sure you are going to ask me about at some point, the future of magazines is really embracing what we do best, and that is that complete mix of voices – of brave voices, actually – and that's what we can never lose sight of.

**Well, I am going to ask you about that, you correctly predicted that, but I try to do this as a beginning, a middle and an end. So what I want to ask you now is how you came to the job, how you got it and what was top of your to do list, then we'll do your current working week, how that works, and then we're going to...**

Okay, so the story arc of crisis, struggle, resolution.

**Well, if that's the narrative, fair enough!**

Well, it was a bit of a struggle!

**How did you get the job, then? How did you come to do it and was it your vision that got you the job or did they have a vision that this needed doing and you were the person to do it?**

Yes, I'd like to think it was the latter. I mean, I joined Hearst a few years earlier to launch Women's Health. Incredibly small team. I mean, really small. We're talking like, you know, three people in a room.

**But unbelievably successful work, of course. I think the most successful in the UK, was it not?**

Yes. I mean, it was a massive success, but I remember when I joined, I didn't quite understand, I suppose, the amount of work which was needed, and also the vision that was required. I was just told, "Look, magazines are folding all around us, but we think there are legs in this magazine called Women's Health. Will you launch it?" And it was really trial by fire. I always say, it's one of the things I'm most successful about is launching that magazine, but again there was a lot of struggle with that. It was, again, done under a certain timeframe, minimal resources. But out of that, those constraints actually, we were able to be really creative. And I think again, it goes back to what I was saying earlier that pressure and constraint can really create things.

**Necessity is the mother of invention.**

Yes, I think so. I mean, we used to write filthy jokes at the gutter, and I'd go, "If only one per cent of people see that thing, that's a good thing." I still don't know if Hearst know that we did that. But anyway...

**It's amazing how much you can hide in plain sight, isn't it? Even from corporate bigwigs.**

Yes! But actually, when I was at Women's Health, I'd been there coming up to three years – and should not say this, I will probably get sacked now – but I always think if you are working on firing on all cylinders, particularly as an editor, I don't know if you should spend longer than four or five years somewhere, because I think – certainly I can only speak from my experience – after about three or four years you're pretty much rinsed of ideas, if you're giving it everything. And so I was coming up to three and a half years at Women's Health, and at that time, I remember saying to my husband, "I'm not sure if I'll be an editor again." Actually I think at the time I wanted to run a boutique fitness studio.

**That sounds awesome as well.**

Yes... I guess I still kind of have fantasies about that to be honest.

**You're right, though. Because I run a PR agency, and 18 months, two years into any client relationship, anything you could think of to do, you've done.**

Absolutely.

**Then it's like, "What are we going to do with this guy because we don't want to get fired but we've also got nothing left in the tank."**

That's it. And so actually, you got to keep moving on. I think you've just got to keep moving, as hard as that can be sometimes. But then Cosmo came up and it was a real challenge.

**Was your first instinct to do it, though?**

No. My first instinct was not to do it actually.

**I'm going to stop interrupting you, just carry on.**

No, that's quite all right. My first instinct incident was not, because it was kind of like there was a crossroads where my career was going to go, which was I'd built up all this expertise in the wellness industry, and I could see the path that the wellness industry was taking, which was it was growing, and we know that now, it's huge. I wanted to be part of that. I loved wellness, I found it a really interesting world. But at the same time, Cosmo, big round, the editorship doesn't come up very often. The problem was I think was that I didn't know... they wanted someone to rebrand Cosmo, and they wanted somebody to rethink it for 20-something, early 30-something women. And I think when I joined, the average age, rightly or wrongly, was kind of about 21. But it was interesting, when you dissected it, you had a lot of 16-year-olds, then you had a lot of Cosmo loyalists in their 50s, and so actually what was missing were those 20s and 30s, and I remember thinking, "That's going to be really hard to do." Like, really hard.

**The middle ground.**

It's the middle ground, yes, who are spoilt for content. I remember my boss at the time, who is a brilliant mentor, she went, "I think you know what women want." I was like, "Really?" She was like, "Yes, I do. And actually, what I want you to do is just get your head down and come up with a template that you think will work." And remember, the background to all of this is that there are kind of 40 or 50 Cosmo's globally who have all been following the same template for years and years. And so, what it meant was that Cosmo UK would have to go out alone and go, "Right, we're ditching all these things."

**Be a trailblazer.**

Yes. And I was very worried, because it was like, "If this is a complete dog's dinner, I can always go to open the fitness studio. That's how I will leave journalism, that's how I will be remembered, is that she went to Cosmo and she cocked it up." And I didn't want that, because actually I'd had such a nice run with Women's Health and launching something from scratch and building the team, I didn't want it. The other thing was, the team had been there a long time with a really beloved editor, who moved up in the company, and it's very hard to follow that. So I didn't have long to think about it, but I had quite a few sleepless nights. It wasn't one of those instant,

“Oh, my God, I want to be editor of Cosmo.” It wasn’t. But in the end, of course, I was like, “Well, if she thinks I know what women want, and I think there’s a track record with Women’s Health, then maybe I can make something work.” I’m just interested in women and women’s lives. I’m interested in men’s lives as well. And I’ve always been interested – this is going to make me sound terribly pervy – in people’s sex lives, because I think you find out a great deal about people through that.

**Everyone is interested in everyone’s sex lives. It’s just natural curiosity.**

Of course they are.

**And gossip and intrigue, and, “Am I normal?” We had Justine Roberts on a while ago who runs Mumsnet, and one of their biggest threads is, “Is this reasonable?” and “Is this normal?”**

The answer is probably yes! And so I decided, I was like, “Do you know what? If my career has often been about taking risk,” which of course sounds a terrible cliché now, “This is probably the best risk that I can take. And if it does work, then it’s going to be a brilliant stepping stone for whatever.” You know, whatever fitness studio I open next.

**There’s still time!**

Exercise.

**Did the idea of the ‘Cosmo woman’ change at that point? Had the magazine changed or had the readership changed? Because you mentioned the older loyal readers and the young people, but did you have a kind of typical middle ground person in mind that you were going to orient the content around? Which way was it, the magazine tailoring itself to that particular person or that you just needed to create the content and hope that person would be attracted by it?**

No, I thought about what is a 20-something, early 30-something woman like today, and I think she’s very different to what I was like. I mean, for example, a lot of young women I know... I mean, the big thing is, Cosmo has two things which it’s always been famous for. And I went through the archives a lot, and I remember before I joined I read the biography of Helen Gurley Brown, and it was never always about sex, actually it was about career. That’s really what Cosmo was about. And I remember, when I went in and talked to the team, I said, “Really, we are dealing with this, I call them the selfie-made generation.” I know that sounds quite flippant, but what I mean is, 20-something women today their main necessity is money. Money and relationships. And there’s a scarcity of both. And I think we live in a really highly individualistic age where everybody, they talk about social media, it’s full of narcissists, it’s not really. Now there is no hope of getting a mortgage, a pension, a job for life...

## **All we've got is Instagram.**

All you've got is Instagram.

## **It's our only source of joy.**

Yourself, you know, you have to be incredibly self-sufficient. And so actually, I also noticed at the time that entrepreneurs and founders were becoming a really interesting. One of my favourite magazines is Entrepreneur magazine; that was kind of becoming interesting and sexy, and it and it's what everybody wanted to do. So actually, I was like, "Okay, we've got two main tenets here. One is let's make career sexy and exciting, and let's rethink how we do sex." And the third thing was, I just had a belief that actually, if we offered long form journalism, if we made print 'printier', people would come. And that's pretty much it. I had a vague idea of who this woman was. Those are the three things I put out there, and they came. So I think the thing is, a lot of the time... it's interesting, isn't it, with journalists or creatives. You can't put any numbers next to what we do. It's the same with artists – nobody really quite understands what we do. But you have an instinct for actually what is in the cultural ether, and it's our job to kind of make sense of that. And hopefully that's what I did with Cosmo, because they came, they bought the magazine, and it became a success.

**And how with the team that you acquired? How responsive were they to these changes? A lot of editors leave with a knife in their back and a P45 and obviously you had the benefit of your predecessor being promoted and therefore it was a nice transition in a sense, and one that was planned. But on the other hand, you were a new broom, you've come with all these new ideas, they were used to doing it a certain way. Was there a cultural or a management issue? Quite apart from the editorial challenge, did you have a team challenge?**

It was hard, I think, for the team. I mean, look – and I am quite open about this – 80% of the team, original team, resigned, and people said, "Oh, did you get rid of anyone?" I didn't get rid of anyone.

## **They self-gotten rid of.**

Yes, they jumped, and actually they shouldn't have. But I remember going in, it was in the first week, and I gathered everyone around and I said, "Look, it's going to get really tough and there are going to be loads of changes, but what you have to think is, when it feels really tough, that's a really good sign because it means it's changing." And I don't know, I don't blame anyone for leaving. I don't know, maybe I didn't sell my vision to them, but I think it's very difficult if you've done something one way and suddenly you have this person with a treadmill desk coming in and going, "So, what we're going to do is..."

## **This interloper.**

This interloper in heels with a treadmill desk going, “So, we’re going to go back to doing what Esquire did.” It was quite an idealistic vision, and I knew that the team that we had could do it for sure. And I think it happens a lot, doesn’t it, with new bosses, I think people don’t know what their place is exactly, and it’s maybe I didn’t work hard enough to convince them, that I wasn’t very convincing, but it’s a shame, it’s a real shame. I see some of them now, and they’re brilliant, they’ve got brilliant careers, but we had to pretty much recruit a new team. Actually, interestingly, the five people that stayed, they’ve all gone on and won awards for excellence in journalism now, so that is really nice. They stuck it out, and I’m sure they thought, “God, who is this idiot?” but actually the kind of rewards are starting to come in now.

**Tell us about Cosmo today. What’s a typical week? How does that process work?**

Process is really different too. I think... when I grew up I thought being an editor would be, you know, you go in and you manage the team, you edit... my job is really different to that.

**I don’t know of any editor that actually does any editing, in the proper sense of the word.**

Well, you see, I do. Rightly or wrongly, I am kind of macro, but really, really micro, so what I’ve got in my bag today...

**Me as well. All my staff hate me.**

Really?

**Yes, all of them.**

But it’s the right thing to be actually, Paul, because actually I don’t think you can call yourself an editor if you don’t know what’s going on every single page. You’re not doing the job. I know that’s quite a hard line, but I think you have to. And so I’ve got a bagful of proofs with me now. I invariably read them, I have a long commute, I read them on the train home every single night. So really, in the olden days, you would be doing that in your day job. The editing is an add on, but it’s something that I have to do.

**I read a read a leadership book a couple of years ago, and one of the things that struck me, someone wrote, “When you are in a leadership role, never walk past a mistake.” If you see something that’s wrong, you have to deal with it, big or small, because if you don’t, you’ve effectively lowered the standards corporately, organisationally to that level.**

Yes. And the rot can start with the smallest detail that you pass over. You think, “It’ll be all right, it’s good enough,” you know? You hear it a lot in journalism and it makes me insane. “It’s good enough.” “It’s good to go.” But it’s not. it’s never good to go. It’s that whole Pixar thing, isn’t it? Even when they send it, it’s not finished. You could keep on working and working and working, and I know not everybody agrees with

me because they think you're a real Luddite for thinking, "Well, it's the quality of the paper and it's the first sentence." That's everything, actually. That is the main difference between you, and digital, and "content". So I'm going wildly off-topic here. So an average day for me. I start work as soon as I get on the train. I never get a seat, so I'm the person stood up on the high-speed train from Ashford, Kent reading proofs in the middle whilst trying to engage my core so I can stand up, and I know they all laugh at me and they wonder what the hell I do for a living. And then I get in the office, and a dream day for me is when I have a features meeting. Because I come from a features background, and my favourite thing is to have all the young men and women that we have and to go through feature ideas and then to nut out the feature ideas and go, "What's the specific angle? What makes it Cosmopolitan? How are we going to get a first person in there?" But a lot of my job now is working with the commercial teams, which I enjoy. It's looking for interesting joint ventures with other companies. It is expanding the Cosmo brand, so I can talk to you a bit more later, but we've got Cosmopolitan houses now, where we're housing young women, we've got a Cosmopolitan office, which is a joint venture with Second Home, we have a flourishing events side of the business. So a lot of my time goes into that as well.

**We've had a few magazine editors that say the magazine makes a huge loss, but it's the editorial platform upon which lots of profitable initiatives are based. Events and all kinds of such things.**

Yes. I mean, we make money but I agree, it is the beating heart. I said to someone recently, we have houses in central London for young girls who are coming from all over the country. Now, if you were – being facetious here – if it was a Playboy house, do you think their parents would let them move in? Because it's a Cosmopolitan house, their mothers have an innate understanding of what accommodation and what we are offering as a series of values in that house. That comes from the magazine. So you always, I think, with brands, heritage brands particularly, like Cosmo, the magazine is central to everything we do. All the tentacles spill out from that. But it's the real beating heart.

**But housing as a tentacle is quite unusual for a magazine brand. I mean, I've heard of podcasts that have events, and editorial, all kinds of things like that, and various things that you can buy, and branded merchandise, but never a house. That's new, even on me.**

Yes, well, the house. I mean, look, it's not it's not easy. I don't do it, it's not a money making venture. The reason the house came about was because it's houses, because as most things, good ideas come about from personal connections, don't they? And emotion. And again, when I joined Cosmo at the beginning, we were looking for an intern. All the CVs which were coming and landing on my desk, and there were about 800, were all the same sort of girl. And rightly or wrongly, they were white, middle class girls, university educated, all living in London or kind of Surrey or Kent. And that's fine, apart from if you are a kind of deeply commercial, mass market magazine like Cosmo, I found that to be slightly problematic. The fact that we weren't even getting applications from anyone else. And the reality is, as you well know, not just journalism, but the creative arts in general, is poorly paid. And so if you are a kid

living in Salford, Manchester, like I lived, your chance of starting a career down here is pretty much nil. You're going to have to go off and do something else. And so it was two things. So one, I was like, "Right, we need to get more bright kids from different backgrounds into journalism," but at the same time I did look around London and I was hearing this refrain from friends of mine and just seeing it for myself that London was starting to lose its creative heart. I mean, you only have to walk around Soho now, and the private equity companies have moved in opposite Hearst, and it's a sign of the times.

**PR people like me.**

PR people. Aren't they in the same boat as us? I think they get paid a bit more.

**Unfairly, in my view!**

Good to hear. And also I thought there was a question about London. London without it's vibrant creative scene, you can have a problem. We were going to become, it's kind of a cliché to say now, but we were going to become like a Geneva, a very moneyed capital.

**Sanitised.**

Very sanitised.

**Bland. Homogenous.**

And who wants that?

**No one.**

And so, I was like, "Wouldn't it be amazing if we had a house where the only passport to entry is that you come ideally from outside the south east, and that you have a job, ideally in the creative industries, to come down to. And if you are struggling to be able to take that job or pursue that career, you can come and live in the Cosmo house." Now it's a joint venture with a property guardianship company, Dot Dot Dot, and the reason we went with them, they are a brilliant company, but the women that are housed in our properties at the moment, what you have to commit to is you have to give a certain amount of hours volunteering to young men and women in the community in which you live. So if you're a writer, you have to teach young women how to be a journalist. So, in essence, it's the virtuous circle continues. And I remember...

**Pay it forward.**

Yes. Well, we haven't got any writers in there. Someone said to me recently, "So, is this where you're recruiting all your staff?" There are no writers in any of the houses. But there's like a videographer, and there's a model, there's a printmaker. They come from wildly different backgrounds, and most of them are from around the

country, and so it's not money making, it was just the right thing to do. If I had my commercial hat on, I would say it's the right thing to do, and I think as a brand, if you work with Cosmo, you can see what the brand values are very distinctly. Everyone talks about empowering women, you know? Empowering women through Instagram. Let's just put out these mottos going, "You go, girl!" Real empowerment of women is making a true difference to their life. And so I look at our houses and go, "If you want to empower women..."

### **Do it.**

That's how you do it. Literally do it. Literally do it.

### **Walk the talk.**

Yes, that's it. House them. And we have an office – again, it's a joint venture, with Second home – and we do an event every year called Self Made, which ties into the selfie-made generation I was talking about. The event is huge; the idea is, if you are a young woman and you've got a business idea, you come to this event you get everything from mentoring, you even go home with your business cards done and a monogrammed leather business card holder. There's a series of Ted style talks, but the brilliant thing is you can pitch your business idea and you can win an office in Second Home, which I think is the coolest workplace in London.

### **I've been.**

Have you been? So you've seen, plants everywhere, it's very cool. They wouldn't let me through the door, quite rightly, and we have an office in there, a Cosmo office, with Second Home, where one of our ladies who came to our event, she won it. And so that's empowerment again. It's like she probably would have stayed in her garage, and who knows whether she would have survived, but now she's connected to all these other brilliant people and she's got a business up and running. So that is true empowerment for me.

**Just before we go into the digital challenge, because obviously I want to ask you about that, in terms of a typical magazine, as a pie chart, what's the proportion? Do you have a formula in mind? Like a third of it it'll be sex, a third career, there might be a bit of celeb. Is there a formula?**

No. And I shouldn't say that, because I think... some editors have a formula, I don't. All I do is, when we have the features meeting, is ask, "Is it a brilliant read?" And so sometimes what that means is, I will look at an issue and go, "You know what? We probably don't have enough sex in there but we replaced it with this career feature and it's so brilliant..." So no, actually, I don't. Roughly in my head there should be a good relationship feature, which is either sex or relationship based, there should roughly be something about career, but it can be anything, so we did a piece recently which you may not class as a career piece, but it was about how companies, very cynically, across the capital, coffee shops, gyms, have got desks there, and they're going, "You could come in and you can work for free." So we got a writer to just turn up and spend the day there. She went to a gym and she spent all day there, and we

were phoning her at the gym reception going, “Hi, can we speak to Josie Copeson, please?” So it was like, what is the... so that was a career piece, but really it was a bit of a piss-take. But it was essentially a career piece.

### **Why would you want to work out of a gym? It’s sweaty and everyone smells.**

I suppose it’s for this new generation, isn’t it, of these freelancers who have no office, who are hanging out at coffee shops.

### **It’s what Starbucks is for.**

Well, well, if you don’t want Starbucks, the gym is like come in here and then do a spin class at the end. The reality is, I mean the gym were actually brilliant, they were very accommodating, but I was like, “Push it as far as you can.” My main thing for everything is, is it informative, does it offer service, can we make it funny, and is it entertaining. I mean, we did a piece on housing. Jeez, you know? Boring. And I was like, “I’m not going to do something on housing, even though we probably should, unless we can make someone read it from the beginning to the end, over 3,000 words.”

**Just because it’s extremely important – and we both agree that it is – doesn’t mean it’s going to be interesting, because there are loads of things are important in the world that are just... a lot of foreign news... it’s terrible of me, but I’ll just thumb past it.**

Your time is the biggest luxury you have. So are you going to read 3,000 words on the housing crisis? No, you’re not. But you might read, we got the shadow housing minister to pretend to be our junior writer’s dad, and they went house hunting together, and then they saw all these ridiculous things. So it was a funny piece.

### **Good angle as well.**

It was a good angle. I’m not sure he agreed with it, but it was a really good angle, and another one we did was sex for rent, so we’d found all these landlords who were advertising free rent for a pretty girl. And so again, same poor writer went and met all of these guys, she spent a whole week replying to these adverts and it was what transpired next. That is a story about housing essentially, but through this this kind of lens of sex, which goes back to what we said originally.

### **Proper Gonzo journalism.**

Gonzo journalism – and sex.

**My friend Rebecca Myers works at the Sunday Times and she did all the undercover stuff for the sugar daddy websites. She wrote about it in the Sunday Times so I’m not breaking any confidences, but basically I wouldn’t have done that, you know, flattering to go undercover with a lot of lechy blokes.**

It does take a certain type of journalist. I mean, that's one of the things that I find hard. I mean, we did a story, I wanted to do a story about male strippers. And I think 10 years ago we would have done a story which is just behind the scenes of male strippers, and actually because it has to be entertaining but it has to have a subtext, and I was like, "Look, we live in a time now where, quite rightly, men should not make advances, untoward advances, towards women. But it's interesting, because if you are a male stripper and a woman goes to grab your bits, what happens? Most people will laugh. You can't then go and complain.

**It's almost like we've been conditioned. It reminds me of when Michael Gove made that Harvey Weinstein joke on the Today programme. All the audience laughed and a lot of the panel did. Neil Kinnock laughed. But actually, if you look at it seven, eight hours later, you think, "Actually that was horrendously offensive."**

Yes, exactly. But the problem was, it's like the only way that you can tell this story is if you get a male writer to go undercover and be a male stripper, because that's the only way that we're going to find out. And anyway, we found this brilliant writer, and he trained as a stripper for I think about six weeks, he completely transformed. And then he went on tour with them. And so the story is, yes, it's entertaining, it's about strippers and how many women they sleep with, but also there was that there was there was a different layer underneath. Now, some people would say, "Well, you're a women's magazine, why are you covering the plight of men?" My whole thing is that Cosmo is a place – and I know that our readers love men – where where you can have different voices, and some of those voices should be male actually, and I don't think there's anything wrong with that. In fact, I think that's quite right. I've gone off topic again, haven't I?

**Gloriously so, and that's why I have not challenged any of it, because it's been very interesting. But actually, one of the questions I wanted to ask is about your interaction with your readers and how you do feedback, and that is effortlessly sliding onto that point. As you mentioned there, you get great feedback. How interactive are your readers? How do you communicate with them? How do you know whether you're doing a good job or not? What works and what doesn't?**

Instagram, every day. I've got I've got dozens and dozens of messages. Twitter. I go into a lot of universities and schools. We still get emails, but do you know what? Social media. So I always try to reply to every single person. The team will get messages. We meet them at events. I mean, remember there's so many opportunities now, so because the Cosmo world now, it's everything from one Snapchat Discover, to online, to the magazine, to events, to the houses, to Self Made. So actually, I think we're reaching like 11 million women a month now, at some point you will have a one on one interaction with them, whether it's at one of our events or most of the time through social media. And so, that's how we gauge what's going on. It's not about doing these focus groups, it's about having – and this is the role, I think, of an editor – to intuitively know what your readers want, but also to listen and engage with them, which I am more than happy to do actually.

**Well, you're doing my job for me because that segues into the next question I was going to ask. I know Cosmo remains the highest circulating young women's glossy, but digital has changed everything. When you think of a reader, are they buying the magazine or are they getting it on Readly, for example, where I read Cosmo, or is it website only? And how do you monetise that? Is it just advertising or can you subscribe online? When you think of a story, do you think, "We'll tease it online, but we'll give the full article in the magazine," or do you throw everything online and is all there?**

It's actually very different, Paul. I'm very unsentimental about it. I think all of us started with this idea of how are we going to get the print product in front of the people in digital, in front of the people on Snapchat? I'm actually at a point now where it's about brand recognition. So we have very different teams. So even though I am the brand steward of everything and I have to make sure that the values of Cosmo are disseminated through every platform we're on, it's very different. You will not find, very rarely you will find a print piece of journalism on the website, and it's a different audience. That is that is my belief. There will be some crossover, but actually Snapchat is much younger, that's kind of 16 to 19, the website will be early 20s. The magazine is kind of mid 20s, early 30s, events is even older, you see a lot of women in their early 30s up to 40s at the events.

**So the platform shapes the person, in a sense. Or the typical person.**

Well, it does, but actually an interesting thing that happens is, over time you do get this virtuous circle. So, for example, I have met so many younger women now at events we've had who have come with their mums who have said, "I read Cosmo every day," and I'm like, "Really?" And they're like, "Yes, I read it on Snapchat. And then when I saw there was a magazine and it was only £1..." They were like, "I recognised the brand." Like I said, I don't really mind about where they hear about the brand, as long as they hear about it and it's got the right values attached to it. So for example, I don't believe now in giving half of a story from the print product away on digital and then going, "For the rest of the story, buy the magazine." That's a really bad user experience.

**It's bad from both sides.**

Who wants that? But what I would do is I would give... so say we did, one of my favourite pieces of the year was we sent our amazing, award-winning intern out to Magaluf for the summer, she got a job and she uncovered this incredible story about how shocked girls were turning to prostitution. Very long story, but it's an excellent story. I would quite happily give that to the online team. They run the entire story. The best thing that is going to happen is that they're going to go, "Do you know what? The magazine does really good stuff. The next time I'm out and the next time I'm going into WH Smith Travel, I'm going to pick that up." They are different. Different content for different platforms. And I don't think anyone should be scared about that, because I think at some point it all starts to tie in together.

**It's amazing how the variety of approaches the different editors take. We had Jim Impoco sitting in that chair a couple of years ago. He's the editor-in-chief**

**of Newsweek. He said everything was about the website, and he viewed the paper magazine, which they discontinued then brought back, he said, “All I care about, I view that as a physical paper based version of a banner advert for the website.” I thought that was absolutely fascinating.**

Well, you won't hear that from me. Because I am a print person at heart. My interest is in human stories. Again, it's a cliché, but storytelling – and I think the best way to do that is through print products. And I think if you are interested in stories and people you've got to have the print magazine. Print offers two things: it's kind of like the glossy ribbon on the top, because it looks beautiful, it's a thing of beauty, but also it's the grit underneath. If you're doing it properly, by the way. I think a lot of magazines started to ape digital, I think that was a real downfall when we started seeing magazines where it was all this chunk size copy. Nobody wants that from their magazine. It's not satisfying I always say, when you're sat, and I do this every night when I go home, and I am reading my favourite websites, I sit kind of like a vulture. So you're still very active, and that is because the human mind is still not used to reading on a screen. You've got all these pop-ups happening and hyperlinks, do you click on it, do not click on it, it's a stressful experience. It doesn't mean it's not enjoyable, because I love getting my celebrity gossip online, it's how I choose to do it. But then when you look at someone how they read a magazine, it's more like a cat. So they people say it's a lean back, but it's kind of more like a curl in with the magazine. So your expectations of that are you going to stay much longer with it. So I think magazines are so important, but then I also think digital is incredibly important but it's different purposes. I always say, a magazine is like a really high end Michelin-starred meal, and online stuff is more like Nando's. Nando's is amazing and I love it. And in the moment I enjoy it so much.

**They stopped doing the vegetarian burger, which I'm gutted at.**

I'm devastated about that.

**It's ruined my life.**

Well, I'm still waiting for the Nando's black card, which has never arrived. But you going to Nando's, you know what you're going in for, you go in there, you know what you want, you want a chicken pitta and chips, you eat it, it's amazing, you leave. You never think about it again. You go into it, I don't know, L'Enclume, and you will pay a lot of money for that experience, and you expect, you want discovery, you want to come away and go, “God, I didn't know today I was going to taste that.”

**And you want increased dwell time, you want to savour it.**

You want increased dwell time. And a bit like an editor, you expect the chef is an expert. He is going to guide you through how you eat this meal. And it's the same with a magazine, isn't it? The editor, you trust them implicitly. This is the way the story should be read and should be enjoyed. I trust that there is something in here today that I didn't know I was going to learn about, but now I feel all the more enriched for reading it. So they are really different, but both of them are equally as important as the other.

**I read Empire magazine, have done ever since it started, but I also go to Empire online. But I'm incredibly discerning online, I'll skim read things and then decide that I don't want to watch it - it really has to stand out. Whereas with the magazine, I actually am prepared to trust the editor more, it's a linear experience. Like you say, it curls in. And there might be an article in the magazine that I would read because I trust the editor which I wouldn't have read purely online, because I think, "I can't be bothered with that."**

That's right, yes. And I think a lot of people... I think you obviously realise why you do that, but a lot of people don't realise the difference, only that they will read one thing on one platform and they'll read something on another. You don't read the same thing on both platforms. You just don't. But I think it's going to take a while for everybody to catch up with that. I think the world at the moment just thinks nobody reads print magazines. Of course they read print magazines. But I do think it is going to be a bit of a survival of the fittest. I think the strongest ones who stick to the core principles, like you were saying, you love to read a longer form feature, and you trust the editor has chosen the right thing. I think if people stick to what they know print does really well they'll survive. I think it's when they start getting out of their lane a bit, that's when the problems happen.

**Do you see yourself personally as a journalist or as an editor? Because some people would say, "Well, it's one and the same thing; I'm a journalist that just happens to be the editor." Other people say, "Oh, editing is very much a different job and sometimes journalists that become editors aren't necessarily good at it." The answers actually differ between the people that answer it. What's your view?**

I think... I would like to think, you'd have to ask my team to be honest, I am a journalist who became an editor, and I think I am a second rate journalist who became a very good editor. I think my skill is... my skill always was, actually I love writing and I'm not a bad writer. I'm not a brilliant writer.

**I'm not terrible but I don't enjoy it any more.**

Do you not?

**No. I used to do but now I can't be arsed.**

Really?!

**Everything that's published in my name is ghost written for me. They're my ideas and my sentiments, but I have a team of writers at my company. They write the stuff that appears in my name.**

Do you like the ideas?

**Yes, and I enjoy reading thing that I'm purported to have written.**

Excellent!

**There's a revelation.**

But as an editor I couldn't do that because I would be like, "Well, it's just not my voice, it's not good enough." So in answer to your question, I'm a second rate, I think, journalist, who became, hopefully, a first rate editor. Because my passion has always been ideas, you know? I wouldn't say I always executed them in the best way, but my ideas I think were always what I was good at. I also love managing people. I love coming up with a vision for projects. And so, I am both but I think I'm better at one than I am at the other.

**You recently wrote about embracing your British Asian heritage and covering up flesh in your clothing. That got a huge response.**

Yes, Julie Birchill wasn't very happy with me for that. It's a really interesting thing. I mean, look, the reason it had a lot of response is, what the hell is the editor of Cosmo doing telling women to cover up. The truth is, Paul, I was not telling women to cover up. I mean, God, women can walk down the street in a thong if they want. It's about choice, isn't it?

**Not in this whether, they can't.**

Not in this weather! That is true. And it's a long time since I've done it. It's about choice. And my choice, as I as I've become older, is to cover up more.

**Me too.**

Well, there are reasons for that. When your body's a bit like kind of pizza dough, you want to cover up.

**I wouldn't wear a pair of budgie smugglers at the swimming pool, I can assure you.**

Good to know! So, yes, it got a bit of pushback. Look, ultimately, I always say I am an equality feminist. It is totally about your choice to do whatever you want to do. But I do think that we should live in a world where you can wear what ever you want. Of course we do. But I think you have to realise that if you do, unfortunately, walk down the street in, I don't know, your budgie smugglers, you are going to get attention. And so I really subscribe to that whole ethos of, that's fine, but you've just got to be tough and you've got to learn how to tough it out. I don't think... the world doesn't owe any of us anything, but actually you can go out in whatever you want, but if people pick on you, you have got to be tough and fight back. I think that's it. You can wear whatever you want. When I wear my kind of long, modest clothing, I can see people commenting on it but I always have an answer for it, and that's my personal choice. I absolutely am not telling women to cover up; I do not believe in that at all. But it's interesting, whenever we bring clothes along for shoots it's interesting what the celebrities choose, and invariably they choose the clothes which are slightly more covered up. And I think that's just maybe where we are at the moment.

Whereas Cosmo is always about kind of having the small dresses and having the cleavage out, and at the time, in the 60s, when Helen Gurley Brown was editing Cosmo, that was really daring to be doing that. And it's interesting now, actually, that they are choosing to cover up. And I don't think we should judge women for wearing low cut tops or for wearing high cut tops. It is their choice.

**I think we're getting to the age, and rightly so, where people shouldn't be judging anyone for anything really, if it's legal and it's decent and you're not hurting anyone then you can do whatever the hell you like as far as I'm concerned.**

Yes, absolutely. And this goes back to the magazine. I think the point is, it's great that we don't all agree actually, and it's absolutely fine for people to disagree with my choice to cover up. That's brilliant. It's like, bring it on. I think the problem is where people feel silenced and scared, and that is a social media problem because, you know, this conversation I'm having with you now, and I'm sure it will get pushback, there will be people going, "I can't believe she said that," the whole point of good journalism is diversity of thought, and it's about having those conversations – otherwise you stand still. That's why we have left and right – you need both of them to move forward. And my worry at the moment is that it's a world where people are really scared. And I always say to my writers, because often we'll do quite controversial pieces, and you can tell for the younger writers, one of the things they're worried about is Twitter. What's the world going to say. And it's like, do you know what, if you want to be a journalist you can't care; you just have to have the belief that this is the right story to tell. And if people disagree with you, that's okay – but I think part of my job as an editor is actually to encourage young writers to not silence their voice. That's what you're paying for.

**What's your approach to plus size models?**

It's interesting. It comes up a lot. For Cosmo, we have always had plus size models in the magazine, always. We had Rebel Wilson on the cover, one of our best selling covers. Ashley Graham last year, the supermodel, again one of our best selling covers, so it doesn't actually make a difference to us at all. So I don't even think of it in terms of it's a plus size model, it's like, with Rebel and with Ashley, it's like, "Are these the hottest women, the most current women, that people are talking about this month?" So they happen to be a size 18. It doesn't really... and I think I am lucky maybe, but Cosmo is a really brilliant magazine, and I've learnt this through editing it, that diversity is never shoehorned into it. It's just there. That's just the way we have always been. So whenever I get asked about whether I push for more diversity, it's like breathing for us. It's always been there.

**It seems to me that Edward Enninful's arrival at Vogue has kind of reignited the debate, or it certainly seems like that from my point of view.**

Yes. And I think he's a really good appointment. From what I've heard, he's a really smart guy. Vogue looks great, I loved it under Alex. He's produced something very different. I also really like that, I'll be really interested to see where it goes next. Because of course, magazines take about a year until you start to see the true

vision, but I think he's done an excellent job. And I think he's a really good appointment. I mean, my whole thing on diversity, particularly in the media, is I always say it's more about equality of opportunity than equality of outcome, and what I mean by that is, and this is where it gets hard, it's that when I go back to talking about all the intern applications we got, it was really disappointing that there were no kids, not only from different ethnic backgrounds, but also class. Class is a real issue. You don't find many real working class people working in women's magazines sadly, quite frankly. And so for me, diversity covers everything, and I think we've done great pushes to think about getting people from different ethnic backgrounds in, but my thing has always been it's also about from the rest of the country. London, we're often told, women's magazines, they don't understand the real concerns of real women, because everybody lives down south in this kind of glossy bubble. And so that's why we've done things like set up the Cosmo homes. What I now need to do... I mean, later on the year we will be having a Cosmo scholarship. My job is to make sure that enough women from those backgrounds hear about it – and men, by the way, men can apply – so I've got to do a lot of work with the Media trust, with schools, to make sure that those kids hear about it, and that means I've got a great breadth of candidates from which to choose from.

#### **Penultimate question.**

Yes.

**Do you think that the printed version of the magazine will survive ultimately? I mean, some editors that we speak to say, "Well, I'll damn well make sure that there always will be, because even if we don't sell a lot, that's the core of our brand." Others will say, "No, if it becomes uneconomic and most of our readers are online, then that's where the brand is."**

I think because what we talked about earlier and this whole idea that everything is a tentacle... this is what I'm talking about with heritage brands, though. I have to say, I think Cosmo, I think you would rip out the heart if you ever lost the print product. And fortunately for us, we're doing really well. I do think there will be fewer magazines. But again, it goes back to what I said about natural selection. I think those people that hold very close to the values of magazine quality journalism, different points of view, diversity of topics within magazines, and on subjects which are really explored, then they will survive. But if you think you can just put a load of old content into a printed magazine I think you probably deserve to close down, to be honest. I think the only magazines that deserve to survive are those who go back to doing what magazines do brilliantly, and it's labour intensive to do that. So you've got to have a certain sort of editor and team who are prepared to do that.

**I said that was the penultimate question but I've actually thought of another question I wanted to ask, so I'll pretend it's all part of the same question in triplicate.**

Right...

**So, last question in three parts.**

Will you add another question after this?

**No, I promise, no. What's been the best day of your career so far, what's been the worst, and what advice would you give to someone who wants to be the next editor of Cosmo UK?**

Oh, my word! You should have prepped me for this, Paul! Okay, worst day of my career... do you know what? This is not a particular day but I had really tough job when I moved to Australia. I think I was over promoted too quickly. I'd moved jobs.

**You were features director at Marie-Claire, weren't you?**

Yes, I was features editor at Marie-Claire, and I think... I'm really candid about that job because you look back on your career, and I think this is right. That is one of the jobs I don't think I mastered. I think I was not as good an editor at the time as I thought I was, and I... I was okay at the job, but I wasn't brilliant. But it was really important that I did that because I struggled. And I think it's really important to know the difference between a tough job that challenges you and a job where you are struggling. And I think, because I was struggling, it kind of changed the colour of everything around me. And I remember I found it really tough and really dented my confidence, but it was a really important lesson for me because it taught me how to be a better editor, it taught me how to deal with writers properly. I think my mistake there was I would go and I would edit too heavily – and this all goes back to probably now why I am so devout about keeping people's voices – because actually I think I was too heavy-handed. I'm very honest about it, I was too heavy-handed. So that was probably not my favourite job. You know, nice team, I still see the editor sometimes, and I'm quite open with her that it was a really important job to have for me, because it is important to know the difference, like I said, between feeling tough but manageable, but actually just feeling like you're a little bit out of your depth. I think it's really important to know that. The best day of my career was probably when we found out the circulation results for issue one of Women's Health, which were 103,000, and we had to get to 100,000 I think, for it to be deemed a real success. And so we did it by the skin of our teeth. But yes, I think I cried.

**Congratulations!**

Thank you.

**So you can't be in a job forever, then. What advice do you have for your replacement, whenever he or she takes the job?**

Keep reading magazines. Whenever I interview people and I ask them what writers do they read and what magazines do they read, they give me people from online. And actually, if you want to edit Cosmopolitan magazine, not Cosmopolitan online, you've got to have some proof that you are reading magazines and you understand what it is that we do, because it's very different to what my peers do on the website.

**Farrah, that's been a blast. Thank you for your time.**

You're welcome. Thank you.