

**Katya Adler**  
**Europe Editor, BBC**  
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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 here at the BBC's New Broadcasting House and joined by their Europe editor, Katya Adler. With over 20 years at the Beeb, Katya has reported from all over the world, has covered the deaths of major figures such as Pope John Paul II and Yasser Arafat, and released several documentaries including the award winning Children of War, Child Migrants and After Brexit: The Battle for Europe. These days, of course, you'll find are regularly leading all flagship BBC news programmes covering the constant twists and turns of Brexit. But let's not forget that she also leads their coverage for everything else that happens on the continent as well.**

**Katya, thank you for joining me.**

Well, thank you for having me.

**So Katya, before we started recording the podcast, we were having a bit of chit chat and you said that you took the BBC's Europe editor job and then everything went a bit bonkers. I think that's actually a great first question. Discuss!**

Yes, that's a very intellectual question! Well, I think at the time, although I was very interested in Europe, I started my career at the BBC in European programmes. I've lived in many different countries across Europe, I feel I know it very well, so it was a natural glove to put on. But at the same time, having spent so many years in the Middle East, doing documentaries like covering Mexico's drug wars and the impact on just normal society there, you know, children who live there and mums trying to take their kids to school, I just thought, "Europe? Really? Is it going to be all about pensions? Really?" I probably shouldn't say that, but anyway, that was knocking at the back of my mind, and then it started and it did go bonkers. I mean, we had the Greek debt crisis, the migration crisis, the calling of the Brexit referendum, and of course the result of the referendum, and populism sweeping across Europe. I'd argue that it's not finished by any means, and so it's been extremely busy and continues to be very busy indeed.

**It is the single defining political issue of the generation now, Brexit, isn't it? And I get the feeling no one quite knows what the hell's going on. I tune into BBC news programmes for you to tell me what's happening, frankly.**

I think we will look back and to see how big this really was. But I think you come across different attitudes, so those who think it's very important and you care very much about it, and definitely if you dip your toes in the Twittersphere then you get those reactions, and that might include people saying, "You're just part of the Brexit Broadcasting Corporation," or "You're just part of the Brussels Broadcasting Corporation," because people feel so very strongly about this issue. On the other hand, there are also those who just say, "Haven't we left yet? Why are we still talking about it? And why aren't we talking about the health service more, and why are we still talking about Brexit?" So I'm aware of all of those attitudes, but my hat also is what's going on on the other side of the channel and in the Irish Republic as well. So although this is domestically a huge issue – I'm British, this is the British Broadcasting Corporation – I'm very much following what the Europeans are thinking about it, what they're writing about it and what they're saying off the record – and I think from a broadcasting point of view what's been frustrating for me in these most recent phases, is that before the official negotiations began, the so-called Article 15 negotiations as it's called in Euro-speak, the Europeans, so prime ministers and members of the commission, were extremely keen to be interviewed and now they don't want to. So I talk to them all the time, and it means keeping in very good contact. But when I'm package making for television, they don't want to go on air so it's off the record. So you end up saying things like, "My sources," or this or that. And of course, in this era that we live in where there's a lot of talk of fake news, and mistrust in news, and is news just part of the establishment, and that debate that we're really living now, that's a problem. Because people are like, "What sources? You're making it all up, it's all opinion."

**That's quite insulting, frankly.**

Okay, it's my job, partly, to be insulted. If you go out to a public figure and say something... I mean, when I lived in the Middle East, I once received excrement in the post, I have to say that was really the highlight of my career. Insulting? I think when you go out in public and talk about controversial issues, such as I did in the Middle East and now obviously with Brexit, you expect a certain kind of backlash. It doesn't mean you like it, and it also doesn't mean that you dismiss it out of hand. I think it's very important that I do, I mean, apart from the things that are just insane that are thrown at you, but if there is criticism of your coverage, I look at it and think, "Do they have a point?" and then carry on. But recently the Financial Times compared Brexit supporters and detractors to football fans. You know, others would say it's almost like a religious fervour at times, and I think in that fevered atmosphere I and other colleagues covering the issue, we're just in the wave.

**The issue of Brexit itself cuts across political parties, it cuts across families... like you say, it is quite a tribal thing. Do you take some comfort in the fact that you seem to be equally criticised for being pro-Brexit and pro-Remain, and if both sides are having a go at you for bias, that tends to me to seem that you're actually doing a pretty good job of remaining neutral and impartial.**

I think that's generally what one said. I mean, definitely when I was in the Middle East we said, "Well, if we're getting flak from both sides we must be doing a good job." I think with Brexit, it changes so much from day to day, and as you say, this affects British society so deeply, I don't think I can afford to be flip about it. So it's not like I look at my Twitter feed and think, "Oh, I've got hate mail from Remainers and Leavers, therefore it's all okay." I don't feel that. So I have a look and I listen, I do not engage actually, because I made a decision that again - sorry to keep referring back to the Middle East, but for me it's comparable in the barrage of accusations that might be thrown at you – but at the time it was very much our policy to answer each and every complaint, apart from the letter I received with excrement in the post.

**You wouldn't have time to do that now.**

I wouldn't have time to do that, and also I think on the Twittersphere you can just get involved in an endless debate, and I don't think that's productive. So I only engage in tweets where a question is asked, like a factual question – in other words, whether it's positive or negative I don't engage, but I do read and I take on board, and think, "Do they have a point? Do they not have a point?" and then move on.

**Do you do block or mute people who just consistently abuse you? It is literally a waste of your time.**

I have had some things investigated, but I would also say that there are other colleagues who suffer more on this point than I do. That's not an invitation, by the way, for anyone who wants to take to Twitter against me! But I think this is part and parcel. And as a journalist, why am I doing this job? I do it with conviction, and I do it because I think that the coverage that I'm giving of any particular story is the correct and balanced one. I think BBC objectivity is something that we do strive for. The editor role is an interesting one, because you are supposed to reach conclusions. That's what this job grade is about. It's about not saying 'on the one hand, on the other hand', and anyway that's kind of bland reporting. So I think that comes very much... we have this book, I'm sure you've seen, you've done so many BBC interviews that we've got this massive tome, you know, the editorial guidelines. So we do want to be balanced, we want to be fair, we want to be objective, and I know that there are many who are listening to this who feel that the BBC is not. But this is something that we do strive to be. But yes, again, part of my role is really taking a call like I did with the Greek debt crisis, like I will do about Brexit negotiations, and so on.

**These are incredibly important issues, and it's right that you've got such a commitment to report them as you do. But do you not feel that journalism is under attack more than ever? First of all you've got Donald Trump and the whole fake news agenda, but you've also got demonstrations in Scotland against Nick Robinson, Laura Kuenssberg having to have a bodyguard at the Labour conference – this is new. This seems to be more intense than ever now, the threat to journalism.**

Yes I think there is. There is partly a threat to journalism, and also sometimes I feel very deflated by it, to be honest.

### **I do, as a viewer and listener.**

I just think, “What’s the point? Because if people will tend more and more now to just go in search of news that supports their already-made opinions, then what’s the point of carrying on and trying to be balanced and informative and so on?” But then I give myself good old slap in the face and say, “Come on, Adler, pull yourself together,” and actually that’s not the case, and I think the BBC is always trying to think how to get to that younger audience – and when we say young, it’s not that young, it’s under-40s, under-35s – and how can we reach out to them? But I actually have faith, and I have brothers-in-law on whom I base my faith, that the younger audience appreciate quality. And I don’t think it’s just everybody’s in the echo chamber and nobody cares about quality. I think that’s just as dismissive as we are with Trump, that all his supporters are stupid or all Leavers are like this and all Remainers are like that. I think that’s exactly what my job is to say. That’s the kind of dismissive attitude or the labelling that we have to get away from, because that’s not a story. It’s not helpful but it’s actually not realistic either, and it’s not true. It’s not true. Amongst Leavers you’ll find all sorts of people, amongst Remainers you’ll find all sorts of people, amongst migrants, refugees, whatever group you want to talk about, you will find nuances and different categories of people and opinion. So I think just to say, “Oh, journalism’s over,” I don’t think that’s actually really looking or listening to people. And one of the most – I use the word exciting – points so far of being Europe editor has been that wave of, for want of a better word, populism that’s swept across Europe, and you could say that there was an anti-establishment element also to the Brexit debate here as well. And I think, again, it’s irrelevant whether you agree or disagree. But the fact that in Germany, Italy, Sweden I’ve met people who said, “I haven’t bothered voting for years. I just haven’t bothered voting because nobody was listening, and now I’ve got a party that listens to me,” or, “Now I feel that I can make my views understood.” And I think that’s important for democracy, and I think as a journalist that’s exciting. So is society more polarised now in Europe than we’ve seen for years? Yes, it is. But sometimes that’s not necessarily a bad thing, because complacency is dangerous. And I remember when I was covering European politics in the early 2000s for the BBC, it was like, “Yes, and another European election, yawn,” whether it would be Italy or Germany or wherever, it’s like, “Boring!” It was the same because you knew who was going to win.

### **It’s not boring now.**

Not only is it not boring, because it shouldn’t be entertaining, but there is change happening in society and people, not just politicians who are paid to do it, people are making their voices heard. And they’re angry or they’re frustrated, and you could say, I believe of this, a lot of this goes back to the 2008 economic crisis. I’m not saying that that’s the reason we voted for Brexit, not at all. But I’m saying this anti-establishment feeling that we’ve seen right across Europe, including in the UK, has a lot to do with that, and the fact that the powers that be failed to protect the people, and that centre left parties failed to protect the people who are their traditional base, and I think that impact, and also arguably the Iraq war as well. Weapons of mass destruction, it was a lie. Why should we believe the powers that be? I think these are very impactful events, and I think we’re seeing reverberations of that still, and that as a journalist to see all of that happening and to talk to the decision makers right at the

top, some of whom have been completely unseated now in all of this, and people who are just going out to vote, or choosing not to vote, and hearing their opinions. That's exciting as a journalist, even my grand old age. And thank you for pointing out I've been here for more than 20 years, I now feel really old!

**Well, I do too. Is there a flip side to that, the excitement of all of the things that you've covered? Like the Greek debt crisis, migrant crisis, Brexit and so on, that it can almost pull focus? Because as you rightly pointed out at the beginning, Europe editor is not just Brexit, it's quite a big continent with a lot of countries where other stuff is happening. Do you feel though that Brexit has stolen all the attention, that it's the elephant in the room, the person that's shouting the loudest, and you have to struggle to cover anything else?**

I think there's a balance to that. One thing that always makes me laugh now, is that whichever prime minister I ask for an interview now, or if it's a European summit in Brussels, and the prime ministers from all over the EU are there, whenever I come near them or another UK journalist, you can see them thinking, "Oh, great. It's going to be a question about Brexit."

**It will be, frankly! They're right!**

Because that's our thing. You know, German elections. What does it mean for Brexit? Italian elections. What does it mean for Brexit? Migrant crisis. What does it mean for Brexit? So yes, there is an element of that, but I take my job very seriously in that it is multifaceted, and although Brexit sucks up a lot of energy and time, I also cover it when I'm away in Italy now, doing coverage ahead of the election there, or in Germany at the time. So I can do a weekly podcast on Brexit where we try to be more informal and talk about things at length, which I think is important with Brexit actually, because you can't be flip about it, and it's hard to cram it always into 50 seconds. But that's something that I'll do whichever country I'm in, in Europe. So I continue to cover all the stories but it is true I don't cover as many of those as I would have done without this whole Brexit debate and all the negotiations going on. I can't just say, "Wow, Poland is looking very interesting now, I'll go straight there," because there may be some important part of the negotiations for Brexit going on at the moment. So it is a juggle.

**In terms of your own journalism, do you have a more deliberate lens now when you reporting things that happen in Europe? For example, when you're in the Middle East, you know, the Palestinians did this, the Israelis did that, you're reporting stuff as it happened and giving your interpretation, whereas now, when you're reporting on Brexit, you can't just say, "This happened." You also have to say, "This happened, and this is what it means for you as the British viewer." Is there a deliberate effort on that part?**

I would be very, very disappointed in the 17 years that preceded the three years of this job if I only started giving context now. Context is *always* important. And also with Israeli Palestinian crisis, one famous example that I give, if I go to universities or whatever and talk to students about journalism, again is that pinch of salt I was talking about when you deal with authority, or you interview heads of state or

something like that as a young journalist. I remember when I first came to Israel and the papers were full of the fact that Israel was going to go to war with Syria, and Lebanon, and Jordan, and there was going to be a new intifada of the Palestinians, and it was all going to happen at one time. I said, "This sounds a bit apocalyptic." And a friend of mine pointed out to me, he said, "Don't you know that the Ministry of Defence is just up for a budget review?" So it's good to always have a stand back approach where you see the big picture, and in Brexit that's hugely important as well. Because again, from day to day it's like. "Well, Michel Barnier said that, and David Davis said that," but what's the big picture? Well, if you ask me, the big picture is a deal will be done. It will be done, because just as in the EU terms, France is allowed to break financial rules, Germany breaks financial rules, Italy breaks financial rules, but the little countries are not allowed to. Why? Because the big ones are too big to fail. And it's hypocritical and all sorts. But that is the actual reality of it. And the UK is too big to fail in its attempt to make an agreement with the EU. The EU will not let it happen, because the EU is looking out for its own interests – and it's in its interest to make a deal with the UK. What kind of deal and what element of cherry picking will be allowed – that famous phrase, or as some of the Europeans like to call it, sherry picking – that is not yet clear, because that will come further down in the negotiations. But I would be amazed if there is no deal, because it is in both sides' interest, and therefore, despite all the rhetoric, there's always rhetoric, and it's always, you know, at the beginning in a boxing ring, each boxer is going, "I'm going to knock you out," – here's me, trying to look tough in my shoulder pads –

### **I was intimidated...**

Exactly! But you're going to try and look as mean and as tough as you can. But when it comes to Brexit, they're not trying to knock each other out in the end, because both sides want to have a deal. But for their own constituents, they also have to look tough, and from the EU's perspective it wants a deal with the UK, but it cannot be seen to be giving in too quickly. Because otherwise, the more Euro-sceptic countries like Sweden or Hungary, will say, "I'll do that, then. If I can have the good bits and I don't have to do the annoying bits, I'll leave as well." So the EU cannot afford to give in now, but there will be give and take – this is me putting my... you can play this back to me when I am the scrap heap of journalistic history – but that's what I would say.

**I'm sure that many decades away! Actually, even that sounds terrible. This sounds almost like a trite and inane question, but you've covered war zones, both figuratively and literally. When you choose a different beat, when you move on from Europe, do you want to do something a bit less stressful and dramatic? Could you be the BBC's mindfulness correspondent or something? Relaxation correspondent. It seems to be such incredible drama!**

Well, maybe I'm a drama queen! No, I think if it's not intense it's not my bag, really. So I enjoy the intensity of a story and I like becoming, you know, intellectually involved. If it's just bland for me, then I'm not interested. I'm not saying mindfulness is bland, but I think I do like to be in the thick of things. But just about me as a person, I tend to get really interested in whatever I do, that doesn't always result in

good cooking unfortunately in my kitchen, ask my children, but it means I'll try and throw myself into whatever project it is, and I enjoy doing that.

**And when you've been reporting from the theatre of war in the war zone itself, how do you cope with being in physical danger?**

I mean, it's my choice to go. I'm not a fan of the kind of journalism where you throw yourself in the line of fire hoping to win some award with some fantastic piece to camera, but if you choose to go into a war zone then you know that you are putting yourself into physical danger. The first time I went into a war zone was before I joined the BBC, I was working for the Austrian Broadcasting Corporation, '99. I think I was freelancing for the BBC then, but I was working for the RF, and I went to Kosovo in '99. Well and I still remember it because I was so scared. And I went for radio, and it was just me and my recording equipment, and they got me to sign a piece of paper that said that if I was killed as we went through the Republic of Srpska it wasn't their fault.

**Nice!**

And I was scared because I hadn't, up until that time in my life, been surrounded with people with guns, and gunfire, and obviously it stuck very much in my mind. I spent some time with the Austrian army then, they were neutral, and so there was a lot with refugees, a lot of work with refugees as well. So I got to see all aspects of it, and it made a very stark impression. So I really found... you know, you can't say you enjoy war reporting, but I've found working in conflict zones extremely interesting, and it fired my brain on so many levels. And I think also, early on in my career, why did you go into journalism? I have this idea, and you mustn't guffaw, but I wanted to tell the truth. I watched Kate Adie as I was growing up, and I just thought how brave she was. I just thought, you know, she is shining light on suffering, and that sounds so trite really, and I am almost embarrassed to say that now, but I think if I went...

**But if it's not seen and it's not heard, then it's going to carry on.**

And then you didn't have the cynicism that you do now in social media I think, but I think it took to going to war zones for me to realise there is no absolute truth. And that I remember that too was shocking. So there was one particular Gaza siege which was just... it's devastating. But I remember having a very big argument at the time, as the BBC like to deal with itself about terminology, and at the time the UN was saying that there was a humanitarian disaster, it was the beginning of the siege, and I was arguing it wasn't a humanitarian disaster – yet. I said, "If we use the word 'humanitarian disaster' now, what do we say in a month if the siege is still going on?" There's a million adjectives you could use to describe what was going on, and none of them very complimentary to the situation. But was it yet a humanitarian disaster? Why would the UN use that? The UN uses that because it wants to raise the alarm. The UN has a reason for using words like that when it did – it wanted to raise the alarm and make the international community aware, and all the things the UN might want to do. Should a journalist just accept the words from an organisation, or do you go on the ground and judge it? And I felt at the time that was a very important role to

have. So at the time I was seeing suffering and seeing a situation that was unjust for the average man, woman and child living in the Gaza Strip. At the same time, the importance of using words, and how you use them, I felt was the reason why a journalist would be there in order to accurately describe the situation. And I think that since – I mean, I have three children now – and with each child I felt, “Hmm, I don’t really think I can justify so much, maybe doing the reporting that still in my heart I would still like to do, because I’m somebody’s mum, and therefore do I think it’s okay to just risk my life regularly?” So that those are the questions that journalists have to make for themselves, and I think it’s unfair when people say it’s selfish. It’s a serious judgment that each journalist makes. But if you do go to a war zone, of course you are putting your life at risk, and you make the judgment call on that. And that’s one of the rules here, is that the BBC will not tell you have to go and put your life in danger. And the worry these days when there’s more and more freelance journalists out there is that they feel they have to put themselves into danger because that’s how they’re going to get known, and that’s how they’re going to get paid for a story. But there’s no organisation behind them to rescue them if they’re in trouble, to pay for their medical aid, or to negotiate if they’re kidnapped. So I think it’s a more frightening world out there for journalists in a way actually, with so many freelancers about.

**Yes. I can also see that it’s brave of you to go into a war zone, but it’s brave of the commissioning editor who sent you there as well, because if you had died, they’d be at your funeral, literally feeling that they’d sent you to your death. I would take the coward’s way out, I wouldn’t dare send anyone to the theatre of war because what happens if they got shot?**

That’s for your podcast editor! One of those kind of editors, not this editor.

**So here’s another question that’s probably my ignorance more than anything else, but I stood for parliament in 2005 in an unwinnable seat. I had this vision that I wanted to be an MP, which thankfully decades later I have got rid of. But there were some issues that the more I read into it, and the more I knew about it, the less I knew, frankly. And it’s the same with, for example, the Middle East conflict and with Brexit, Part of me is thinking, well, it might be confirmation bias, but I have deeply read into both issues and frankly I am none the wiser. And what I do reject is this, if you take the Middle East, you know, Israel’s at fault or Palestine, and clearly it’s an incredibly complicated, nuanced situation, and either side that says they’re wrong or they’re in the right frankly is going to alienate me. But is there a little bit of that that the more you throw yourself into the situation that actually it reinforces your existing perhaps personal view, or has it changed as a result of your coverage?**

I think the biggest challenge... I thought about going into law before I decided to go into journalism, and in a way – I think it’s because I watched too many legal dramas as a student – and I thought it would be quite nice to have a whole load of rules and then be able to manipulate those rules to win an argument. So I’m a big reader, and sometimes before I’m going on air I have to stop myself reading. And it’s not because I don’t want to know any more, it’s because I’ve already read so much. And actually, what my job is, is to distil information and to make things clear. So if you



don't know anything about Brexit or the Middle East I've obviously done a really rubbish job!

### **Or maybe I know too much.**

But the idea I think is that, yes, you can keep reading. I think as a student, I remember when I was at school and university, the only part of essay writing I enjoyed was the reading you did around it, and the fact that I would try to find books or essays that contradicted each other, and then make up my mind from that. And I enjoyed doing that. And there's a large element of that in my job, so for example, when it comes to Brexit and all of my background sources, as I told you, are now refusing to go on camera, but I will obviously get lots of different points of view. And sometimes you can say, "Well, that's the French," or "That's the Danes," and they would be like that or whatever, but you're kind of amassing. I let it all come at me. It all comes at me and I take it all in, and then I stand back and I think. And that's also the joy of being an editor role, because I don't have to do this, "Well, they say this, and they said that, and they said that," I can say, "This is what's been happening." We know that anyway, I have brilliant colleagues, brilliant correspondents, who are telling you about the news and what's happening, and I get to stand back and say, "Well, this is the context."

### **This is what it means.**

This is what it means. This is why it's happening now. This is why it's happening at this particular level at this time. This is the statement that was made but you have to understand the background. A bit like I was saying to you earlier, when the prime minister goes to Florence to give a speech on Brexit, the context is, "Who is she talking to?" Because the assumption is she said she wanted to talk to the European partners because they kept clamouring for what kind of Brexit do you want. But actually that speech was very much aimed at a domestic audience and at her own political party. So that's the context that I think one can bring. And you need to read and read and read and read and read and read, and experience, and learn in order to be able to provide that context. So no, I think carry on reading, and of course I understand if you felt you reading and you got more and more confused. But I think then you have to just say, "I'm confused," and then *you* have to find a trusted source. And I suppose that's the thing about the media world that we live in. As the BBC, I would hope that you would come to the BBC and say, "This is somewhere that can help me sort some of my thoughts out," because they're impartial, right? You're nodding. I'm so glad. But you will find a trusted source and say, "I'm confused because there's this and there's that and there's that and I cannot make head or tail of it." And what I do like very much with my colleagues here, and I enjoyed that so much when I was in the Middle East, we had a bureau full of lively debate, and that was so important. At the time – the Israeli-Palestinian conflict now has disappeared largely from the airwaves actually, it doesn't get the attention that it used to – but while I was there it was still front and centre. We had Palestinian producers in the office, we had Israeli producers in the office, we had staff that had come from London, people who were more experienced in the Middle East, people who were less experienced in the Middle East, and we would have these huge debates about coverage, and about words, because if you remember when Israel built a barrier

between Israel and the West Bank, what do you call it? Do you call it a fence? What do the people of Bethlehem say when they've got great huge concrete wall in front of them? That's not a fence, that's a wall. Is it a wall in its entirety? No, it's not. Okay, is it a barrier, then? Ah, okay, so maybe barrier is a more neutral word. Then the Israelis would call it a security barrier. But then that gives a certain...

**It's emotionally loaded.**

Very much. So I found that discussion intellectually very interesting, just as much as I thought I would have enjoyed being a lawyer trying to have those rules and use them to the argument you want to make. And my role in the Middle East was what we call live and continuous, and that is a minefield in the Middle East. That's a very tricky job to have in the Middle East, because every word is scrutinised. It really is what you say and how you say it, and there are websites dedicated to the BBC and what we say. And so to go live when something just happened in Lebanon or Syria or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a risk. But it was thrilling, because I had to know my stuff. I had to know it.

**We also have to memorise the vocabulary, because even if you're just on air, you can't just say 'Islamic State', you would have to say 'So-called Islamic State'. Do you remember the vocabulary that you just use...**

That's my job. It's my job. I shouldn't be in this job if I couldn't do those things. You have to know what you're saying and why you're saying it. You need to know the context. You need to do your homework. And you can't just sit back and say, for example, "With me covering Europe for so many years, I know what Germany is like." Well, look at the recent election. Do we know what Germany is like? No. Haven't we been surprised – that's what we were talking about right at the beginning – haven't we been surprised by Europe so much over these last three years?

**The Prime Minister called a referendum thinking he would win, and was surprised.**

And look at the United States now. There's so many things. We cannot take polls for granted, I cannot take my knowledge for granted. And as you say, yes, 20 years, so 20 years, and then before that for the Austrian Broadcasting Corporation and so on, but at no point, and that's what I love about this job, you can't just say, "I know it, I've seen it, and therefore on a personal view it's just boring because I just trot out the same," it's always changing and I'm always learning. And so, contrary to what you said, I am always reading.

**And do you always get the time to reflect as you need to do? Because I won't point out how many decades you've been doing this again, but the nature of newsgathering has changed. You mentioned Theresa May giving a speech abroad but being mindful of the fact that her audience was back home. I work for chief executives and do their PR, and in the olden days, 20 years ago, they could segment audiences. So they'd write a little piece for the customer newsletter, something separate for their shareholders, something for their**

**staff newsletter, something for their suppliers, and they'd be able to segment the audiences and optimise the message. Now, if you are a CEO on Twitter, or a leader like Theresa May, if you tweet or you give a speech, yes, it might be aimed at one particular audience but all the other audiences are seeing it as well and can weigh in. And then there's also the impact of rolling news as well. The spectacle element and the fact that you have to keep providing the news channel with content. Has that curtailed your ability to give you the reflection time that you need?**

I think it's interesting. We've had a debate about that at the BBC over the years, and I think because the foreign news department at the BBC is called news gathering – I rather like that, it makes me think of someone galloping on a horse with a bow and arrow or something, which I've never done – but the argument was with rolling news at the time, when it first started, can you gather if you're permanently – not such a nice phrase – a dish bunny. Basically standing there doing live and continuous news, rolling news, wherever you are, be at here, the Westminster, the Middle East or wherever. So I think, do I have the chance in my job? Yes, I do – because it's a different job also, and as an editor you're not on air all the time. We have at the BBC lots of correspondents, fantastic correspondents, and some things are seen as an editor story and some aren't. I might write a blog rather than be on a breaking news story. If I don't think it's an editor's story, there's not analysis to be put in it, I might be writing a blog and putting something into context, so there is... I wouldn't say there's lots of time, because the honest truth is I feel like there's loads of being on planes and covering stories in different parts of Europe, plus your own personal life, Brexit, keeping across all of British domestic politics as well, because I can't cover Brexit from the European perspective without fully understanding what's going on in the UK as well. So it's a massive job. Time? No. But I think you learn to... you know there's power napping? I think there's power reflecting. And you learn to do it while folding laundry at three in the morning or on another plane. So I use... and sometimes my kids will say to me, "Mum, you're not listening!" and it's true. It's not because I'm on my phone but it's because in my head I'm thinking, "Hmm, that's an interesting angle on this part of Brexit." Literally I'm as sad as that. But your brain, or my brain anyway, is permanently playing with the ideas, and those reflections are there, and often at ridiculous times of night.

**Do you ever get time to switch off at all? Because I'm a news addict, I'm on Twitter 24/7, I'm addicted to wanting to know everything that's going on, the latest everything, I follow thousands of people on Twitter, ridiculously so. Do you get time to switch off? Do you have downtime?**

I think the summer holiday is something that I love, and European politics – I'm sorry, I do laugh about Brussels, because holidays are very important - in August, Nothing Happens, with a capital N and a capital H. So even if something happens it doesn't happen because everybody thinks they have to go down to the seaside. Obviously, as a journalist it's not the same as a European politician and we would have to cover breaking news, but there are certain times a year such as August whereas I will try and take that time with my family, because so many other family times I have to disappoint because I have to go away. And I think that's one leveller. Having children stops you from ever taking yourself too seriously, and it stops me from turning into a complete news head. So although I am passionate about my job and my subject –

and many other aspects of journalism besides, not just the ones that I cover – I have three very small people who are pulling and prodding and jumping on my head and demanding my attention. And I think that's made my journalism better, actually – although I would have to say that, wouldn't I? – but I hope so, because it's that very important step back that I was talking about. You know, when you're too up close to your story – it's not my job to be emotional about my story, not even when you're in a war zone – and that's harder if you're in a war zone, not to feel emotional about it, but even if you are you have to sit on it, it's not supposed to come into the kind of reporting the BBC does for news coverage, it doesn't belong there. And so I think having something as strong as offspring pulling you helps me do that, and I do think that's important.

**Do you have coping strategies for that? So when you're in the war zone and you see someone shot or injured, you do the impartial dispassionate piece to camera, and then you reflect on it personally and maybe get upset because you are a human being and you've seen someone injured? That must affect anyone.**

It does. And we're all more aware than ever of post-traumatic stress. And again, this goes back to what I was saying about freelancers earlier who are often on their own. I would be very concerned, in those cases, for PTSD, and not just physical safety, because I think with the BBC you're travelling at least with a producer if it's for radio, if it's for TV you've got a camera person, if it's a war zone the BBC will send a security advisor with you as well. And there's a lot to be said for de-stressing with your team. And I think the BBC, like many organisations, in recent years has become much more aware of those kinds of situations and there is counselling offered if people need it, trauma counselling. So yes, it's taken very seriously by the organisation and I think whereas not even that long ago really, as a journalist in a war zone you had to be hard and not be affected. I think you are allowed to be affected by it and that's okay. But camaraderie, I think if you talk to soldiers they say very much the same thing, that they're with mates and you chat about stuff. And I'm NOT comparing journalists to soldiers in any way, but what I'm saying is that if you're in a stressful situation and a traumatic situation, you don't just have to be in a war zone, if you think about journalists who cover very traumatic court cases such as when it comes to child abuse, that can cause PTSD very easily.

**It's distressing to watch the report.**

And also, just as, of course, famously, September 11th. Those in news who were just watching the news feeds come in and just seeing all of those distressing images, PTSD once again, you don't have to be physically in a war zone. And I think the news industry recognises that now very, very, very clearly. And I think that having colleagues around you who are sharing your experience is just invaluable then. You talk things through afterwards, you'll probably make some silly jokes. Black humour, black humour is always very useful, I think, in terrible situations.

**But journalists seem to be in more danger than ever before in the war zone. Gone are the old rules of respecting the impartiality of journalism, and you are,**

**I would say, much more likely to take a bullet now in a war zone than someone 30 years ago was going to do. That is a real risk.**

Yes, it's not just a bullet but it's the kidnap threat. Again, as I say, my role as Europe editor does not involve me going into war zones now, but when I was there, it was towards the end of my time there, probably the last two years, where the kidnap threat shot up and where we used to, on that Jeep that we travel around in to different areas of the Middle East, you have a sign that said PRESS that you would put on the front of the car in English or in Arabic or whatever, and then we learnt in certain cases to take that down, because that would mean you're a target. Our flak jackets would say PRESS, then we were given flak jackets without PRESS on it. So while I was there I saw things change, but I was not working in the Middle East after the appearance of so-called Islamic State, and that was an absolute game-changer, and that that was not one that I was part of.

**Do you think the BBC has a duty not to purchase spectacular videos that a freelancer might have shot in the theatre of war? Because they're going to want to get something that's quite visually spectacular so that someone in newsgathering will buy it from them. Fox News arguably encourage these freelancers to put themselves in danger because they buy them. We're back to whether the BBC has a duty not to cover it, but of course, as a reporter, you must feel a temptation that if you've got footage of the thing you're reporting on happening that's available, why wouldn't you want to put it to air?**

What we have internally as journalists, the debate is what footage is acceptable to show for the audience, and we have famous watershed, you know, what can you show at certain times of night, depending what time of night it was. And I think some time recently, another colleague was in a part of the Middle East and had witnessed some terrible suffering of children, and there was a big argument about how much could be shown. And often, I think, then the journalist who is on the spot will typically want to show more than perhaps a programme editor in London who's looking at things from a different point of view. And that's again why I talk about the emotion. Because if you've seen something and you want the world to know, because you want the world to stop it, but then it's also the duty of the BBC to have a more dispassionate editor somewhere else in the organisation who can say, "Understood. But can we show that without showing perhaps the full horror?" And so those are the kind of debates that the BBC has. And I think when it comes to war coverage, an organisation like the BBC, that tries not to be sensationalist but more factual in its news reporting, it's important that you do have bigger groups like that, because it's what kind of news do you want? Is this an organisation that permanently has a breaking news strap on it? No. Will it become that one day? Who knows where news is going. But that's not the BBC that I am in at the moment or that I have worked with, and therefore those are the kind of debates that you will see between journalists and editors. "I feel really strongly we need to put that in, but I don't think it's..." and so on. And in the end somebody will have to take a call, and it will be referred up. If it gets difficult and it's something very controversial, that will get referred up through the various branches of management. Sometimes the public will judge the BBC to have been right, and other times, as we know with recent scandals, not the case. So it's an ongoing debate.

**It's difficult as well to know where the line is, even as a viewer. I remember when Saddam Hussein was executed, I think the BBC showed him being led up the gallows, paused before the noose was put on him, but then continued the audio for another few seconds, which seems to happen a lot of times now when there's imagery of offensive things and horrendous things happening. But I remember at the time being very disturbed even by that.**

There's so many different arguments in here. It's like, are you going to disturb the viewers, is one question. The other thing is are you going to desensitise viewers. So that's another question. Because if it's all gore and horror, I remember when I was in Italy as a student, and I was working for different news organisations and just jobbing, basically. And I remember Italian TV, the news was shocking really, with mafia murders. There was one particular day that sticks in my mind where one mafia group gunned down the family of a rival group who'd come to a funeral. In the graveyard when they were at the funeral. And it was just shown in full multicolour on the news, and I just thought, "Wow." And I wasn't working for the BBC or anything like that yet, but it really stuck in my mind. Did it help me understand the story better? No. And if I saw that every day, I'd get desensitised to that and I wouldn't be shocked. So I think those are the two arguments. Are you going to shock people too much, or are you going to desensitise them? And if you actually want to make people aware of the situation. If it's just commonplace, then the thought is also people might switch off – after all, we do see that with humanitarian disasters. If you look at public viewing figures, for example, there may be what's called 'fatigue', which seems very cruel, perhaps, but it's just human nature. I think at the beginning of a disaster, or the beginning of a humanitarian crisis, there might be a peak of audience interest – but if the same pictures are shown on the news night after night after night after night, and we're not talking about whether they're gory or not, but it's pictures showing humanitarian disasters, then audience interest drops. So these are healthy debates, I think. One very key debate, of course, is about if there are extremist groups such as so-called Islamic State beheading videos, do you show any of it?

**I hope not.**

I mean, not even the beheading. But do you even show the beginning of it or anything like that.

**Because they deliberately dress them in Guantanamo Bay jumpsuits.**

That's right. Or do news organisations say, "Well, our rivals are showing it, and then if we don't show it..." or do you take a stand and say, "They don't deserve any publicity at all." So these are very live debates, and they should always be reopened. I think that's again going back to never sitting on your laurels. Those are editorial decisions that are made in news organisations, and the book should never be shut, because there's always reason to open again and discuss again.

**Katya, you're multilingual; you speak five languages fluently, as well as Hebrew and Arabic. That must be a huge asset to what you do in your role.**

I love that actually, because I remember when I first started at the BBC I didn't feel it was valued actually, and I felt – I mean, no one said this – almost as if there was a

slight suspicion that if you could speak a language really well you're kind of one of them. And again, I have to say this, that no one ever said that to me, but that was the feeling I got. I think now it's very different, and I know that I've always felt that languages are very important. I don't speak Hebrew and Arabic well, but I think what you do speak opens so many doors because people just appreciate so much when you make an effort. And what always worried me in the Middle East is that in the end you have to rely on an interpreter, and you have to know that that interpreter hasn't got any bias themselves. So in Europe now, and especially with Brexit, so when I have all of my, as I say, frustratedly off the record talks rather than on camera many times now, I often hold those conversations in people's own language, and the Germans will be more candid. And the Italians will be more candid. The Austrians, people... you know, I don't speak Danish but people are generally more open to you if they can speak their own language. And also, I think especially when we were talking earlier about this anti-establishment sentiment, where do you feel, not just by talking to people but by looking at graffiti or being able to go on Twitter and reading, not just in English but in different languages, what's being said, with Brexit, how it's being interpreted abroad. I mean, can I understand political cartoons in different languages and different papers? That's useful for me.

**And also Twitter's translation algorithm, whilst I'm sure it means well, can't get the subtleties of sarcasm or nuance. It's just it's just an algorithmic translation of a tweet in German that I'm reading, and you don't really get a lot.**

No, and Google Translate is not very helpful either sometimes! I remember when I was doing this documentary about Spain's stolen babies, and there was a match, a possible match, between a man who'd been adopted and ended up in the United States and this Spanish family with this woman who thought that her baby had been stolen while she was in hospital just after giving birth. Extremely powerful. But anyway, he didn't speak Spanish, and they didn't speak any English, and I was filming all of this, and also before he came to meet them in Spain and before they did the DNA test and all of this, but all this huge emotion and history and pain was done through Google Translate, and it was still powerful for them but of course it lost a lot of the poignancy of the actual wording through Google Translate. So I still would love to learn many more languages. Really, I'd love to do it actually, because I love languages. But I'm grateful for the ones that I do speak and I do like to use them.

**Do you think it's almost unlucky, us Brits, that the rest of the world speaks our language as their second language? Because it almost encourages a tiny bit of laziness. My wife makes an effort to learn a lot of languages, but I was in Paris with her a few months ago and she was trying to speak French, and the people she was speaking with spoke back to her in English – not to patronise her, but to be polite. They thought they were being nice, but actually it was unhelpful. And I wonder whether there's a slight element of Brexit there where we are an island nation and by accident more than anything else everyone speaks our language. We don't have to learn theirs.**

I think it's very lucky. I think it's an absolute gift. Of course it is, because it means that if you're a native English speaker, you can work anywhere in the world you want or you can stay in the UK and work with companies all over the world. And it is a gift,

because everybody else struggles to learn your language, and meetings will be held in your language, and therefore you have the upper hand. So I think English speakers should feel very blessed. And you could argue what's the point in me speaking German or Italian. How many people speak German and Italian these days? But I love my languages, it happens to be very useful for my job, and it's also just related to my personal history, having moved around to different countries and being able to make very close friendships, also with people in different languages, so I am not a proselytising language learner. It's just a passion of mine, and a passion that happens to be very useful in my career.

**Do you think in German when you're speaking German to a person? So this person you're speaking with is speaking German to you. Are you thinking about what they're saying in German or are you translating it into English for your thought process?**

You know, I think in German, actually! So partly during my studies, but also just after university, I went to Vienna. And my aim in the first year, I said I'm not going to get a job in an international company, and I'm not going to go back to the English language radio station I'd been before as a student, because I wanted to learn German well, to speak it well, and I wanted to understand the Austrians. So what I did in all of those years that I spent in Austria is that I saw all these American soap operas in German, because they're dubbed into German. I can't remember what there was, I think Beverly Hills 90210 at the time, or whatever it was.

**Great show.**

A great show! Intellectual show, good for the Europe editor to watch. But anyway, all of that was in German. So when I then heard them later in life speaking American, American English, it was like, "No, no, no! Those aren't supposed to be their voices!" I think my German is so fluent that when I speak German I think in German, and its language has become more or less rusty. So I don't get to use Italian as much as I'd like to, and so I think at the moment I tend to think in English very quickly before I speak Italian, and after I've been there a couple of days then that comes back. So it's a familiarity thing. What always helps me to get back into a language is to read, so I'll read a newspaper, put on the radio. And that's how I learnt Spanish.

(Whispers) I lied at the BBC to get a job as Madrid correspondent. So they said to me, "Do you speak Spanish?" I said, "Yes, of course I do! But I didn't. I spoke Italian and French. So the first thing that I did was, there was no BBC office at the time then, there was my 36 square metre apartment, which was my apartment and the BBC office apparently, and I sat there and I had the TV on with Mexican soap operas. Wall to wall, all day, and the radio on in Spanish, news channel in Spanish. So I learned this bizarre mixture of Mexican soap opera Spanish and Spanish news Spanish, and that's how I very quickly... I just shut myself in and learnt it.

**Katya, this has been such an interesting conversation, we could go on for another hour or two, but we are running out of metaphorical tape so were going to have to leave it there. Thank you ever so much.**

You're welcome.