

Christian Broughton **Editor, The Independent**

Media Masters – April 5, 2018

Listen to the podcast online, visit www.mediamasters.fm

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 Christian Broughton, editor of the Independent. After spending years working for the Indie alongside the i, he became digital editor in 2012, launching the award winning Indy100 website along the way. In 2016, when the print edition closed, he became editor, taking the readership to a peak of 120 million a month.

Christian, thank you for joining me.

Thank you very much for having me here. Delighted.

Christian, in the six years you've been editor of The Independent digital, it's overtaken the Sun and the Mirror, with more than six million daily users. You must be pretty proud of that.

Yes. It's been quite a surprising thing for me even to see how the readership has grown, I have to admit.

It's a great opening question I've just asked, isn't it? "Tell me why you're so amazing."

(Laughs)

But it is an incredible feat!

Have we only got an hour? Let's get comfortable! But no, it's coming up actually for two years, in fact by the time this podcast airs it probably will have been two years since we closed the newspaper and decided to focus on the digital future. And that's been exhilarating, partly because of the growth of the readership within that time. Readership statistics, online particularly, don't stand still. I think you just credited us with having more readers than the Sun; I'd have to check up on the latest figures, but certainly we've gone from a newspaper that was selling in the kind of low tens of thousands to a news website that has more than 100 million monthly unique users, and we have as well more paying subscribers than the paper did, with our Daily

Edition app. That's been really exciting to bring the Independent, which is something that I care about and believe in deeply, to a whole new group of people.

Because two years ago, when it happened, the narrative many were saying was that it was about newspapers in print being in retreat. This was a story of decline rather than rebirth. And as you've just said, the figures are the opposite of that. Things are more prosperous and successful than ever.

Yes, it was a really hard moment to get the story right there actually. We're very good at telling other people's stories, and this time around we were the story, and we had to do as good a job as we could to ensure that people understood where we were going with it. I can see why people are naturally sceptical when you say, "Hey, we're having to close the thing that has been around for longest, but bear with us, we've got a plan for the future," so I can understand the scepticism there. The truth of the matter is that we had to close the paper because we love the Independent. It's a line that I've said before but it's a line that I really believe in. The economic model of print, paid-for national print news, in this country was really threatened, and is really threatened. All those circulations are almost universally going down. The whole philosophy of the Independent was very much at home online. I still think that the mission statement of the Independent is really suited to online. And I've been at the Independent for a number of years, and there were never any particularly easy years I remember in print. Not that I would ever begin to describe the past couple of years online as easy, but, yes. Print was a hard medium to be in for us.

Evgeny Lebedev has innovated twice, hasn't he, in so far as taking the Evening Standard free, people were saying that that was the beginning of the end, in fact it's turned out to be the rebirth; the Independent has gone online only and is an incredible success; in an area of the media that is in desperate need of innovation, he actually has innovated.

Yes. He is a passionate media owner. He has put an awful lot of money into the British media business, and I am very grateful that we are owned by an individual with ideas. Because you have to move quickly in this industry; digital changes the whole time, and for us we needed a bold idea to ensure that the Independent was there for the future. When you look at the tradition of the Independent, even back in 1986, people were questioning whether there was really a need for another quality newspaper in this market. And when we went compact, when we took the broadsheet compact, I remember those days too – people thought we were bad, people decried it as the death of long-read journalism, missing the point that you can go onto the next page, it is not that much of a coup. Really, I suppose, we could still do those long-reads, we could still showcase the great images that people loved. But people then thought that was an incredibly bold step, and it was a very short period of time afterwards that the Times went compact, or tabloid. Now, obviously, the Guardian has done the same. So that was a bold step, innovating it, producing two newspapers from one newsroom was a pretty bold step, that was under Evgeny's ownership, and now being the first big one to go digital was certainly... it was an exhilarating experience. We had no rule book, there was no one else who had done it before us. We had to find our way, we made some mistakes, we got some things right. I'm glad to say that on the whole we've got more right than wrong, and we're

still here, and were growing. It's really nice now to be, year on year, adding more people to our team, opening more reporter positions around the world – growing the international reporting of the Independent is hugely important to me – so yes, I think we've got a long way to go. We've still got more ideas than we have run through so far, but we're off to a good start.

Tell us about the Independent today, then. Who is its readership and how much of it is a historic legacy, loyal readership, and how much of it is new? How are you recruiting new readership? How are you growing the brand?

Well, it's interesting that you say that. I had a conversation with Andreas Whittam Smith last week. He popped into the office, and it was really great to see him. He's obviously the founding editor of The Independent, the man we owe it all to. And I was talking to him about subscription, and the rise in subscription recently, and the future direction of the Independent, and also about the constituency; who is the Independent reader now?

And where are they? Are they in the UK, are they international?

Well, they're about a third UK, they're about a third US, and the third is rest of the world. But he made a really important point to me then, which was that when he was setting up the Independent he had the marketing people in and they were describing, "Who is this person that we're trying to reach?" and often, what that means is you draw up this mythical person who represents everyone that you're going for, and it's all represented in these two or three people that you're targeting. And he stopped the conversation and said, "Actually, I want the Independent to be read by everyone that you know who you just think, "That person's really independent minded." And they could be ABC1 or they might not be ABC1. They might be living in Manchester, or... you know, nowadays we think that they might be living in Boston. So that's why it's been so good to take our journalism to new people, because you can't grow to an audience size of 100 million if you're really thinking in these reductive terms of 'this is the person we're targeting'. You have to believe in the values behind your news. You have to focus on why you do what you do, and then you just let people come to you. And digital is great for that. There are so many avenues you can discover the Independent on now.

And you've expanded hugely in terms of the staff. I don't know what your head count is now. Is it right you have more foreign and specialist reporters now than the old print Indy had?

Well, foreign reporters are particularly expensive to run for all businesses, and you can see that within TV, within print; people are laying off their foreign bureaus and shutting them down. So, sadly, towards the end of the print era, an awful lot of the great names weren't staff any more, they were either on some kind of retainer deal or technically freelance or whatever, so once you take that into account there weren't actually that many staff foreign correspondents. Looking at the sequence of events, we closed down two years ago. We had a huge political eruption about to happen with the Brexit vote, so the first thing that we paid attention to really, through necessity, was to rebuild and to strengthen the Westminster team and make that

ready for the future. But after that, and another thing that the Independent is just known for – around the world, I'm glad to say – is the quality of its foreign reporting. So we are still focusing on that now. We've got a team of about a dozen in the US, we have Brussels covered, we have Moscow covered – and a big shout out to Ollie Carroll, who's joined us to be our Moscow correspondent and has done a fantastic job in a short period of time. Fantastic recent run in the Russian elections and all the huge amount of news coming out of Russia. Next, we're looking to strengthen the Middle East and also to put a couple of people into India to act as an Asia hub. But the Independent has a way of trying to do things that others think is possible be slightly mad, and to invest in overseas reporting at a time when it's so difficult to make the books balance for publishers of all description at the moment. It's a challenge that we were very keen to take on.

As you've just alluded to there, making the books balance is a huge challenge because there are so many websites that you can choose from; you're almost spoilt for choice. How loyal is the readership, because it is so easy to unfollow you on Twitter or click unsubscribe to the daily email. You've not just got the pressure of getting the website out, the edition out, every day, but you've also got retention.

Yes, it's not been something that's kept awake at night. That side of it has gone really well. The Independent is in a very privileged position. Yes, we're a digital pure play, and we don't have that legacy outlet any more, but we do have history and we do mean something to people. And the fact that we've been around since 1986 does set us in a different category to most of the digital start-ups now, all the digital start ups now, because we've campaigned on these issues. We took the stance on Iraq. We were writing headlines about the environment in an era before that was suddenly the flavour of the month in Westminster, and we've got the scars to prove it. And I think that people realise that it's journalism that comes from a very good place. It's journalism that you can respect. We don't have any... we've never had any of the dodgier practices that have sadly happened in our industry. We've been very clean in that respect. It is very respectful journalism. We aim for the truth and we aim high. So people at the Independent feel like we represent something, and I think that our readers do too. So it's not just the case that if you might find an article on a site and you might think, "Hey, let's follow them." I think we've got a deeper connection with our audience. Or I'd like to think so.

What are the challenges at the moment? Anyone running a ship like yours is going to have a to-do list of things to improve that are working and challenges that need to be tackled. What's top of your stuff to sort out list?

Well, as I say, building the overseas team is taking up a lot of time, we're looking at new subscription models, and I think that one of the great things that's come out of the Donald Trump era is an appetite to pay for news, which we welcome wholeheartedly.

The so-called Trump Bump.

Yes, well, the Trump Bump was first seen in... you know, Facebook was very hot for news at the same time, you have these two huge things coming together, this massive platform that was part news and other things in Facebook, and you had this incredible news story that I think surprised everyone in the end. Well, not everyone, but I think most people.

It surprised him!

Maybe it surprised him too. So thanks to Donald Trump we now have the opportunity to build on our subscriber relationship with our audience as well. So we're thinking about that at the moment.

So how does that work in terms of in the old days there were two revenue streams for a newspaper; there was newsstand and then those advertisers. Now you've got people who can subscribe via iTunes, via the app, they can go on the website. How do you think about that in terms of different revenue streams? It's a challenge that a lot of online portals have. Do you allow five articles for free and have pop up reminders and then you have to £10. How does it work?

Well, it's interesting, isn't it? I'm glad to see that the industry has evolved its thinking. It's not so long ago that there were these two dominant thoughts. One was lock everything behind a paywall and you can't have anything unless you give us the money. The other idea was it's all about scale. It's all about reach. It's got to be free in order to conquer new markets, and there was kind of nothing in between, really. You may have, as you say, have had a couple of articles for free before the paywall hits, but now we can see with the Guardian, the membership scheme, that's a really interesting play. People, if they respect the news and they respect the quality, they appear to be happy to donate which is great.

We've had David Pemsel sitting in that chair, the CEO of the Guardian. He's been blown away just by how successful it is.

Absolutely, and I've listened to a podcast on that. I'm a big fan, so yes, absolutely. I can't really talk about it too much but I think there's a way of having these things sit next to each other. If you look at our offerings at the moment, we have the Independent Daily Edition, which is our one once a day hit, our "ersatz newspaper" as some people describe it, and it's on your iPad, on your tablet, on your phone. It doesn't update, it doesn't have live blogs, it doesn't have share buttons, because some people don't want that stuff.

They want that what I would call a curated linear experience of reading a traditional newspaper, albeit on an iPad.

Absolutely. And you asked earlier about the different sides to our audience, and that takes care of the people who have been incredibly brand loyal to us, and they've stuck with us, and they were still buying the paper when the paper closed, and that's picking up new people now who come into it and really enjoy the product. And within the office we love putting it together because we love that discipline of having to

have leader conference and having to have discussions about what's a splash that evening, those kinds of things that might not exist so much in digital-only newsrooms. But alongside that experience, you can also come to an awful lot of that content – not quite all of it, but an awful lot of that content – online, and there's a model there that also makes money for us. So the advertising model isn't quite as broken as sometimes people like to make it sound, it's still broadly working, and those two things can live alongside each other. So what we are looking for at the moment is are there any other iterations of that that we can where we can offer our consumers more, our readers more. We have to start from the readers. We have to think, "What do they want?"

If you take the typical Private Eye accusation that you're just chasing clickbaity headlines, frankly, that's a bad thing. Because I've clicked on stuff and if I feel the site has misled me I just never go back. But I often think people misconstrue clickbait, that if you're repeatedly offering interesting things for people to click on, it's not clickbait. Not in the pejorative sense, anyway.

It's amazing, we're always very proud of our chartbeat board, chartbeat being the ubiquitous leader board of articles that's on everyone's website. All newsrooms seem to have this now, you can get to see what readers are enjoying most, and I think it's how you deal with that information and the culture you create in your newsroom. Can it be a rush to the bottom? Well, for us, to be honest, what you see is that the more effort we put into things, the more we engage with really serious subjects that people actually care about, the higher on the board it goes. So if you have a great scoop about Brexit, Russia, Facebook, any of these big themes at the moment, it will be right at the top there. So once you've seen that great journalism attracts big readers – surprise, surprise – it just encourages you to go for it all the more. And as you say, the gains that some people make through pretty shallow stuff, they're going to be quite short-lived, aren't they? I would also say that lots of traditional news platforms have covered all kinds of journalism before, so you get some short articles, you get some long articles, you get some fun articles, you get some things that are designed to make you laugh, you get some columns, humour, satire... while we accept these things in print, sometimes people take issue with them online, which is slightly odd but I think that the industry is changing fast so people are coming along with us.

Is Facebook a frenemy? Because what are the things that interests me about Facebook is, in one sense, you know, I subscribe to the Independent page on Facebook, but you guys obviously populate that with content and have to pay journalists to do that, but they're getting all the advertising revenue. Do you see Facebook has it as a destination in its own right, or is it like a signpost? Do you want someone to see that there's an interesting story then click through to the Independent website?

Our relationship with Facebook is something that I often think about. Facebook is, let's face it, not popular in the media at the moment, and to sit here and claim it's some perfect platform for news would be absurd, and I don't think they're claiming it either. It is a social platform for all sorts of things, and for a while news is a big part of it. It is still a big part of it now, it was a bigger part of it then. And there was

actually a very exciting thing about getting your news to new people that way. If there is such a thing as this generation of people who only get their news through social media, I always wanted to make sure they were getting our news on social media. There was either a challenge to lean in and take on that platform and see how you can best work with it, or to sit back and highlight its failings and to slightly treat yourself as above it. I'm glad that we leant in. I'm still proud of the amazing reach and engagement that we had around the general election, for instance, where the Independent, our engagement metrics were... the charts were slightly absurd when you looked at them really, we were about the same total engagements as the rest of the top eight UK news publishers put together. We were just off the charts. We recognise that there were some readers out there that weren't being served, yes, some of it was probably related to the "youthquake" that may or may not have happened, depending on which of the statistics you believe...

Youthquake! I love all these words.

Youthquake¹ You know, there are lots of people who cared hugely about politics but were slightly glazed over by the very predictable, samey campaigning that the Westminster bubble rolls out, and the way that we get our political messages now, and the Independent, of course, started to get away from all that stuff. Those, at their worst, those kind of slavish followings of political parties by the big papers in this country. And that's why we're there. You know, the biggest stories we did in that period, there was one that had the headline: "Young people, here's what no one is telling you about the general election: you could swing it" and it was about voter registration, and we had a campaign at the time, because a huge section of society looked like it wasn't going to turn up and vote. So we helped to spread that message, and I think that was a very good thing to have done.

Isn't the duality though that you are the editor of the Independent, you look on the reach of the page, and you're proud of your journalism, and it's exciting, but you also think, "If that advert was on independent.co.uk, that would be money for us that I could invest in journalism," but that advert is on Facebook, and that means Mark Zuckerberg is getting the money not you.

Well, we still get some money from that. It's not a one-way street. Again, it's not quite as predictable and one-sided a story as people would think. There was a campaign in one of the industry titles that's had a campaign running for a while now against the duopoly, and they asked if I could get on board with it and back it. And I said I would find that really hard actually, because I love the Independent and I want Independent to continue. The Independent wasn't sustained by print, and I can't really think that we'd be here now if it weren't for – in some way – for Facebook and Google to play a part in that journey. Are we entirely dependent upon them? No. Do we have our own prospering, increasing level of traffic directly to our site? Yes, we do, and that's great. Are we offering more subscription products? Well, we hope to by the end of the year. Do we have a lot of direct subscribers? Yes, more than we did when we were in print. So those things are going well.

Going in the right direction.

You know, we do a good job in this industry sometimes of... I think it's a very good thing that we are an industry that that is there to hold power to account, and we don't exempt other people in our own industry from that. So we stand up where we see fair means for criticism, but I do think that at times we've kind of overplayed that. Around the time of the election, a lot of people held up the digital publishers as... it was all very suspicious, and we created this bogeyman called Digital, and everything was put into that bucket. And to have a story that picked up a huge number of readers, or to use a more toxic phrase "went viral", which seems to immediately deride the journalism and put it into the same category as pictures of cats or something, it was all slightly suspect. And now we find out some years later that actually it's the political class that were manipulating social media probably to... well, we'll find out. By the time you listen to this podcast all the headlines probably would have been written, but we're finding out now quite how deliberate and systemic and massive the scale of that social media manipulation was within political circles. And it's quite interesting to see that some of the politicians that were calling out the media some time on we're now realising that was a political class that were up to it.

Well, they're all wrong 'uns! They're all rogues.

Yes, so I just think that sometimes our industry can be a little too critical of itself. We're a little bit feudal. We're best when we're explaining the world and holding power to account, and we're not always great when we're kind of warring amongst ourselves.

Are you slightly jealous of the huge amount of resources that the BBC's online operation can throw at things, or like the Scott Trust sell Auto Trader and 4.22 million billion or whatever it is, and then suddenly that allows Alan Rusbridger to go off on one of these expansion phases and hire a million people. You have to face the commercial reality.

Yes, I mean, I guess other people say, "Aren't you lucky to have had a series of generous owners that have allowed you to lose money over the years?" I mean, we make profit at the moment, and we have done since we closed the papers, but there were a great many years when we didn't, and when we had our journalism underwritten very generously by proprietors who didn't interfere with our editorial was fantastic.

As most newspapers historically have had a proprietor, although ones that haven't been reluctant to interfere, they've often been quite active.

Yes, I mean, we have a proprietor who's active, he's a good campaigning voice, but when it came to the election, for instance, I wrote the leader where we came out with our stance on what we think people should do, it was worked on by John Rentoul, our chief political commentator, Joe Watts, our political editor, fed into it, David Marley, who was then head of news and is now deputy editor, he fed into it too. So we all kind of bought into it.

Huge admirer of John Rentoul's writing. Him and I are the two remaining Blairites!

(Laughs)

It will be me and him versus everyone else, a bit like an episode of The Walking Dead. We'll be there 'til the very end.

So, yes, and we decided that we wanted to send a message with our votes that the centre ground, we hope, but it wasn't interfered with from above. So that's a privileged position to be in. So maybe some of those people like the fact that we can both be outspoken and we can make our own minds up. With the BBC, the great focus on neutrality and their version of independence is very different from our version of independence. We are independent from business interests, we're independent from pressures of shareholders, but we can have strong opinions. It is some years now since your idol Tony Blair gave his Feral Beast speech.

I remember it well.

I remember it well as well. I was a lot younger then.

So was I!

But it was towards the end of Blair's time as prime minister and he called out the Independent quite directly, for people who don't know quite what were talking about now, but he gave a big speech about the relationship between the press and politics, and he held the Independent up as the symbol of everything that was wrong, effectively. And he said that the Independent was founded to get away from comment and opinion in the news space. There was a fantastic letter on the front of the Independent the next day. Simon Kelner was the editor back then I believe, and it had this fantastic line which I tell people about this quite a lot now at the office, and in fact I just shared this anecdote with some students from Sheffield University who came to see us today and who are working with us, and the answer back to why we have a kind of comment-heavy approach was that after a decade of spin and counter spin, dodgy dossiers, 45-minute warnings and "good days to bury bad news" that we felt that we needed to interpret and comment upon the official version of events more than ever, and I think that's a real strong guiding principle for our times too. You know, the more complex the efforts of politicians to tell their story, the further we've got to go in order to really get to the truth.

That was a very interesting comment that you said just then, and I've never really thought of it in those terms until you said it. But there are two different types of independence. Because the BBC is impartial but they're impartial in a way that means they don't have any opinions. They often will put two people on different sides of the argument and let them fight it out and to be honest we're none the wiser at the end of a 10-minute knockabout on the Today programme. But they don't have an opinion, whereas you guys are independent but you do have an opinion. It's just not one that's party political or advocating any one cause.

Yes, so we go out of our way to try to incorporate these, we've got the voices channel, which is a comment channel. At the election we had Dominic Raab, Chuka Umunna, Vince Cable. We recently did an edition of our Daily Edition which where we just asked the question, "Does Britain need a second referendum?" And we had all kinds of people, from Brexiteers such as Matthew Elliott, to Peter Mandelson who was quite the opposite. So we took great lengths to balance that. But at the same time, when I look back at the Independent's history, we weren't... it's not like we lacked an opinion on Iraq, we didn't lack an opinion on climate change before it was before it was fashionable to. We've always taken a stance where we think there's a stance to be taken, where there's clear evidence-based on facts to steer our opinion. And look at our stance on Brexit; I don't need to explain what that was, I'm guessing. But at the same time, it is independent of the worst kind of interference that happens in the media industry.

Let me ask you about fake news, because a lot of people sitting in that chair, I'll ask them about it and they'll say, "Well, it's about having the highest quality journalism, the high standards," and I accept all of that, but its nothing specific to actually attacking fake news itself, whereas you have actually set up a dedicated infact unit. Can you tell us about it?

Yes, sure. Its been going for some time now. So to describe it as a unit with vast resources would be overstating it.

So you're not like The A Team, you don't go around in a van.

Well, it's important that everyone feeds into it infact. So if you got somebody who is your science correspondent you want him to write about science, if you've got a piece about education to be written you want your education correspondent to be writing it, so they're not so much ring-fenced people who just are masters of all facts of the universe, but we do believe that facts are important. We can see that from Brexit, we can see that from political life, we can see that from all kinds of areas of the media and in our news at the moment. So it came out of a place where we realised that if you call out whether you called it fake news – I hate the phrase fake news – but if you call out manipulation and disinformation and spin it works, and it engages with readers. People are really interested in hearing that thing they were just being told was absolutely true, and not to doubt, not to challenge it; actually there's another side to that.

So it's the opposite of clickbait in a sense that it's tackling that but in a way that drives traffic to your site, so it's good journalism. It's also good business because those people are clicking on links.

Yes. I mean, there are very good reasons for journalists who want to get their message to a great number of people. If you believe in the journalism you are doing, you want people to hear your message, to hear your voice. So it's not always just about the business opportunity of it is important, and it's important that people have a counter voice, it's important that people realise that things that they're being told aren't always true, and actually it's a self-policing exercise as well, so we make mistakes, everyone makes mistakes, and we have infact explainers out there as well

that address some assumptions that our journalists have made. So it's a self policing and outward thing too.

So it's been two years now. What are the things that you look back on and think that was actually a stroke of luck, you got that bit right, and what were the things where you look back and you think, "We got that bit wrong."

One thing we did well was to ask lots of people who were coming across from the print side, and also people who were already on the digital team, as we were closing the paper, if we were launching the Independent afresh, what would it be? What would it look like?

So the innovation of actually listening to your readers, talking to them and finding out what's working.

Yes! And also listening to the staff. People had great ideas. People were very enthusiastic. So I think reconnecting it to what we all wanted to achieve, what we all thought it was about, was very important.

It sounds like an obvious thing to do but actually it's not. No one really does it. Truly listening.

Well, you've got to put it in the context of how the media played that story as well, because it was deemed as they're having to close the paper, which was true, but we also had this plan for the future. Did it feel like a fight for survival? I suppose at some point it probably did to an awful lot of people. So there could have been a tendency to only focus on things that profitable, and actually we also put the focus on things that we really wanted to do. And we continue to do that. I think while that's important, we've got to look after the business model because that's what's going to keep us here in another 30 years.

It's got to be sustainable.

Yes.

Was it a stressful time for you? Because it's all right now, two years later, saying how clever a lot of these decisions were and it's all played out, but it actually could have gone wrong. You could have been the last editor it ever had. You must have been quite mindful of that at the time.

No, I tried to stay focused on the positive things I think, genuinely, because the other side of it was quite scary. But as I was going to say, we also had to also focus on things that weren't motivated by a business plan. We had to remember who we were. We had to reconnect with those principles, why we came to work for the Independent and why we think there's a place for that now, and to really give people a little bit of space and time to think about things they wanted to do, projects they wanted to get up off the ground. We've just come from Adweek today where we had onstage a guy called Chris Hooton, who's on our culture team, who started a podcast a while ago which was podcast of the year 2017, thanks to The Drum

Awards, and he's had amazing list of people that he's interviewed on there, from Jessica Chastain to Matthew McConaughey, to all sorts of people.

Certainly sounds like the second best podcast out there.

(Laughs) Well, yes we can debate that one afterwards maybe. But with that, you know, there is no obvious way of making huge revenue off of that at the moment. It's a really fresh take on culture journalism, so not everything that we do has to be quite so mercenary as to immediately pay back with cash in the door. So you have got to be aware of it but you've also got to allow people some space to just be journalists.

Yes, because I think you have alluded to it there, that if there's a rush to monetise too quickly it's actually going to potentially compromise the integrity of the journalism.

Yes. We've got lucky to have some absolutely industry leading foreign correspondents at the Independent. When you're sending one of them to a war-torn nation, there's no chance you're going to be able to show on the P&L sheet that that specific exercise was hugely profitable to you. But you have to do it because it's what is what the Independent is all about. I can't really imagine the Independent without doing that kind of journalism. At the same time, if there's part of the Independent that works in a very commercially successful way, great, because it underpin everything. The way that I sometimes explain this to people in the office is through section of our site called IndyBest. IndyBest is consumer reviews. When I used to be features editor, many years ago, we had a features pull-out back in those days called Extra, and there was a page towards the back of extra that was called The 10 Best. And it would be the 10 best headphones, the 10 best... probably back then, MP3 players maybe, something cutting edge and digital like that! And it was a breath of fresh air because a lot of the Independent was serious subjects, and we have to be more than just a politics blog or an international affairs blog. We want to be a broad publisher still. So when that pull-out section sadly was no more, we decided to save that light spot for the brand and we put it online. Fast forward a couple of years, and suddenly we're all doing lots of shopping online, and what people want is somewhere where they can go and trust a review that's not going to be motivated by things that don't really buy into. And so that's now a very profitable thing. There's a little revenue, kind of a microscopic share of the cost of you buying your headphones or maybe your phone now rather than your MP3 player, but it's built on the trust and respect for our brand. How do you achieve the trust and respect for our brand? It's probably more through politics than the foreign affairs reporting, which is then underpinned by the revenue that we get from the consumer reviews. So you get these kind of virtuous cycles going on where if you are a broad, healthy publisher that offers all offers sport and culture and lifestyle and news and politics and foreign affairs, some parts are going to be more profitable than others. But it's important that you take everything seriously and remind yourself why you do it, and I really hope the answer is not always, "Because it makes money." Because if the answer to all these questions was because we make money doing it, I don't think any of us would be journalists.

You'd be running a betting shop in Grimsby.

Something like that! Maybe.

Tell us about your personal journey. What did you study, what degree did you do, did you always want to be a journalist? Give us a brief précis. When you started, how ambitious were you back then? Did you want to be editor of the Independent? Did you look at Andreas Whittam Smith and think, “I want to be in his chair.”

I was really excited about the Independent. I’m not sure I always wanted to be a journalist. I started off the Independent because I heard they were looking for work experience one summer. I would have been 18, maybe just turned 19, and I would have been at the end of my first year at Kings doing an English lit degree, and I went into the office and I made myself useful. And I was surrounded by this really interesting place.

The oldest trick in the book! Be useful, work hard.

Yes. I mean, they were really... I was overwhelmed by the really nice bunch of people. It was a really nice place to work, and around this fantastic room there were people doing all these hugely very different things. There were people who were on the culture desk over there, and they looked different, and their chat was different, and the way they were dressed was different from the politics thing who were over there. Well, not the politics team, they would have been in Westminster, but the commissioning editors or the comment desk or something.

A proper newsroom.

Yes. And it was pretty addictive pretty quickly. I wouldn’t say at that point that I had this burning ambition to go on and have a whole career in journalism, but you start doing one thing and then it leads to another. I started off opening post... actually, back in those days, in the rarefied world of the Independent, people expected all their post to be opened and all the obvious rubbish to be filtered out into the bin, and to have the important-looking stuff placed on the corner of the desk by the time they got there, which doesn’t seem like a very important job really and I’m sure it wasn’t.

Got your foot in the door.

Yes. And you make yourself useful. Something that I always say to people when they begin to find what you’ve got to offer. So I was in this room full of incredibly talented journalists and I was at the end of the first year of an English degree. But I worked out at some point that I was young, and a lot of them weren’t – some of them were, but not all of them – so the first couple of pieces I wrote for the Independent were about youth culture, I suppose you would say, which is not my specialism now because about 21 years have passed.

We’re both old giffers now, aren’t we?

Yes, exactly! But I would say that it’s about enjoying what you’re doing at that moment, not worrying too much that this job isn’t your perfect all time job. Take it.

Learn from it. Respect it. Respect the readers. Do it to the very best of your abilities. Learn from all the people around you. And if something else comes up, move on. I moved on around the paper many times; sport, features, weekend magazines, all kinds of things, before settling with news. And it's a blast. Journalism is a great industry to be in. You know, it's hard. I think it was always hard. I don't remember it being particularly easy to stroll through the door of a national newspaper and say, "Hey, have you got any jobs?" And it's really hard now. The whole route into journalism has been disrupted by what's happening with local journalism, which I think is the really sad thing.

It's completely decimated.

Yes. So an awful lot of those... well, as I say, we had some people from Sheffield University, some students who wanted to come and visit us, and they're working with us, and they were asking about how to get in to it. There's a lot of fear factor about our industry. Trouble is that if you concentrate only on things that give you that sense of fear, you're going to have anywhere near as much fun as you could have and you're probably going to be anywhere near as good a journalist as you could be. You've got to always look for the story, you've always got to look for what you can offer. You got to enjoy it, and execute it to the very best of your abilities. I have left the Independent a couple of times, went to the Mirror Group, and left and went to magazines, and worked at Time Out for a while, but I came back because the Independent is special, because they do give you a chance to spread your wings, it's a really nice newsroom. I think I got addicted to the Independent rather than the broader industry of journalism in some ways.

What have you learned about yourself along the way?

Gosh, that's a good question! I've learnt that there's always something to learn from the team you work with, just because you are the editor doesn't mean that you haven't got a huge amount to learn from the most junior reporter you just recruited. I've learnt that you should never underestimate the importance of what your readers think of you. You've got to take that very seriously.

But there's this image, isn't there, that the newsroom is a blokey, overly male environment.

Yes, there is. And I think in many ways it's an accurate observation of the news industry. It is too male. It is too middle class. It is too white. All those things are true. We try really hard at the Independent to start to put that right, and actually it's one of the many reasons why I'm very glad that we're recruiting. Because obviously you can change the demographic as you add more roles, otherwise you have to wait for people to leave, and changing that can be incredibly slow. We've made good progress on it.

So what's a typical week like for you? You mentioned there just then about deadlines but you are online only. So in the old days of a paper there would be a stone deadline and once it was off stone it was game over. Now, if you're five

or six minutes past deadline, presumably you got CMS and you can still stick it up there. Do you still work to deadlines?

We do still work to deadlines. The daily editions still effectively has to go to press, so to speak, so we still say things like, "Is it off stone yet?" I mean, the idea of... the metaphor has somewhat stretched over time. But we still have deadlines, that copy has to go down various feeds for syndication clients for instance, so we do have deadlines to hit. We don't get print fines from the guys at Watford who used to phone me up when I was night editor and start saying, "Are we going to get these pages yet?" We don't have that sense of deadlines but we do have morning conference. We do have 11:15 conference. We do have an evening news conference. So we still bookmark the same kinds of ways.

You mentioned a few times about how hard journalism is; it seems to me that not only is there a commercial sustainability issue, which we've already discussed, but journalism to me seems to be more under attack than ever before. You've got, I would say, a president of the United States who is utterly unhinged, who has poisoned the well of society itself, and crying out fake news, and he's deliberately turning legitimate fact-based criticism of him, and people are starting to believe that it's fake news. Do you feel even as a journalist that the truth matters less and less?

No, I don't think any journalist would feel that the truth matters less.

Not to you, but to the people who Trump is trying to influence.

Maybe, but they probably believe that they're getting the truth. I don't want to sound too much like journalism is this incredibly difficult thing. I think that we've got a great industry, I think it's a blast to be a journalist. It's relentless sometimes and it requires a lot of energy and a lot of being able to cope without much sleep sometimes, but it is a real treat to be a journalist, and I don't want to be too hirsute about that.

So if a young person came up to you, they were studying their A-levels and actively considering the various career options and said, "Christian, I want to be a journalist," what would you say?

I would love to be a journalist going into industry now. Sometimes I have to read over these job descriptions that we're putting up on Gorkana or somewhere that weren't available to me when I was younger, and you just think, "Oh, gosh, I'd love to do that. I would absolutely love to get stuck into that for six months, that would be great." There's a sense now, I think particularly the Indy, coming back to one of your earlier questions about what we got right, well, we didn't press the whole business case and the business model too much. We did instil a sense of entrepreneurship throughout our newsroom, and people can get something off the ground. I think that's a really exciting aspect of digital journalism is that if you've got an idea and you're passionate about it you will probably be able to connect with other people out there who are passionate about that subject too. I'm sure that when you started this fantastic podcast series, you maybe didn't expect it to get quite as big as it has got now. So you can build things up. And I think that's one of the great senses of reward that you get in journalism these days, and it's so diverse. Video editing jobs, maybe

video editing maybe. Would I like to be a video editor? I'd certainly like to go out there with a camera and shoot stuff, I think that's a really exciting dimension to what we do now. I know that people who are more involved in our podcast love doing podcasts because they find it much more relaxed, open, discursive space.

It's great – you're just having a conversation. And you're an interesting person.

And if you're on the radio it gets squeezed into a slot, we'd have a clock ticking and somebody shouting in our ears saying, "Okay, you've got 20 seconds, wrap it up." which we don't have now. And TV can be feel very heavyweight in production terms, whereas web video is very lightweight and you can really engage with people.

And broadcast TV is one of the biggest things that I'm always impacted by, when I do the small amount of broadcast that I do, is just how short a time you've got on air. I might get eight minutes on the Jeremy Vine Show but I'll get one and a half minutes on BBC News channel.

Yes. And the other thing that journalists have got these days is a direct relationship with their audience – whether they like it or not. And you can find people that really enjoyed your piece on Twitter or people who probably didn't enjoy your piece on Twitter. But either way it's quite exhilarating to be that close to people.

That's very politely put!

Well, you know, there are good sides to it too. Even in the dreaded comments underneath each article, sometimes you read through them and you get an absolute gem. I mean, we've had issues where we've had people that have left comments that have ended up going on to write comment pieces for us, because they clearly are very passionate about the subject. So there are all kinds of good things to being a journalist now that didn't exist in the era...

In the good old days.

Yes. In the pre-Christian era.

This fascinates me, I often ask this. Do you think if you are an aspiring journalist these days that it's actually harder now? Because in one sense, newsrooms are much more barren, there are fewer opportunities in terms of jobs, but in the other sense, there's many more opportunities to get noticed. You know, people can create their own podcast, their own video, blog and so on and so forth.

Yes, there are many ways to have fun in journalism, and there are many ways to brings in revenue in the door in journalism as well. Yes, it's a hard industry, and yes, it's not the best paid industry in the world, you know, we're hardly hedge fund managers, and it requires long hours, so it is a way of life. You have to sign up. It certainly doesn't stop for me at five o'clock, six o'clock, whatever. It doesn't stop at the weekends. Other people probably do more on the weekends now than I do, but

I'm always on call, I'm always there if they need me. But if you don't enjoy it, don't do it is my best advice, I suppose, but if you do enjoy it, or you think you're going to have a blast doing this, or if you just started out and you're at the end of six months, a year, and you think there are some things you love and some things you don't love so much, just try to surround yourself with the things that you really enjoy and just really show that enthusiasm, and you can build it around your interests, the things that are working for you. You can be much more in control of your career these days because of social media because if you're passionate about a subject you will find readers who are also passionate about that subject.

If it's not too personal a question, what's next for you? Will you be editor of the Independent forever? Do you have another plan where you might set up a completely different business and go into something completely different? Will you always be in journalism?

I've honestly never had a very organised kind of one-year, two-year, five-year plan. I'm not one of those people who goes home on the weekends to discuss my 10-year plan for my life or career with my wife or anything. It just... journalism has a habit of coming... I think before this job – this is the longest period I've been in a single job – I kind of tended to change every 18 months or so because there would be something else that comes up. I would think, "I am on top of this one now. I'm going to go and rush to that job now." This job keeps changing. And there's always a challenge around the corner. There are always new ideas, there's always a way of building it. I sort of exist in a state of slight frustration that we haven't got that idea done yet, or we haven't really built that thing that we've got and is really working. Why haven't we made it into what it could possibly be? So there's always something you can grow, there's always a new idea you can try. It's a medium that really encourages experiment, and new thoughts, and new ideas. It's so much easier to launch a new channel or website than it is to set out a case for launching a new weekly magazine or print product, which is very heavyweight and requires huge amounts of investment. You can experiment and grow things and constantly be improving things much better online.

Do you have a team of mentors? Who do you turn to help you?

Lots of people that I've worked with at the Indy down the years. Shall I mention some of them?

If you want to! If it's not breaking a confidence, of course.

There are some people who... I don't necessarily overtly go and ask them for advice, but whether they're aware of it or not, pretty much all my bosses down the years I have learnt something from, I've always made sure that I learned something from them. I certainly owe a huge amount to various previous deputy editors and editors of the Independent down the years. Absolutely.

What's been the best day of your career so far?

I always enjoy the days when people who work with us come just come up with something brilliant. There are many examples of that, because we've got a fantastic team, and sometimes it's from the saddest stories that you actually get the most positive and affirming response from your team. I remember there was a news editor who I worked with Stuart Henderson. I mean, such an incredibly sad story that always sticks with me with those pictures of the refugee boy, Alan Kurdi, who washed up dead on a beach.

I remember that. That was a very iconic front page of yours as well, because you splashed on the photo.

And he ran over to try and get to me before the managing editor got to me, because the managing editor was probably going to ask lots of questions about the ethics of showing such a shocking image to a great number of people. And Stuart came over and he said, as I came out of an office, he said, "There's this picture, we are going to have to use it, and I'll tell you how we're going to use it. We're going to run this headline." And it was a great headline that really captured what I hope was a positive response an incredibly sad story. And he said, "We're going to run the headline: If this image of a child washed up on your shores doesn't change your attitude to refugees, what will?" Incredibly powerful thing. Put it on top of the home page. We didn't pixelate the image.

I was going to say, I'm not understating this. It was a heartbreaking image, and one of the most iconic I can remember.

Yes. And we chose not to pixelate. We chose to show in its true horror because sometimes you can't filter the news like that. And we started a petition, and we got 400,000 signatures on it pretty much within four days, three days, something like that. And I think it did help to change the attitude towards the refugee situation in this country, and briefly it helped change government policy too. So sometimes the most rewarding days, they're not quite tough days too. It's not always, you know, we have to engage in some pretty upsetting stories but you look for some positives out of it. I'm glad to say that the thing that brings you back to working for the Independent is that... I think I speak for everyone when I say that we do feel that we are a force for good, and that's why were the Independent, that's why we do what we do. So, to be honest, that was one day. We recently had somebody who joined us from another publisher, who I won't mention, and she's worked at a number of publishers, and she shared with me a story about somebody who was going to be deported and then wasn't at the last minute, possibly because we'd made some enquiries and were running the story, possibly not – we'll never really know whether she would have been sent away on that aeroplane.

Almost certainly it will have been as a result of the media interest.

You know, some people who work with us think that had an impact, and she reflected to me – she's not been with us for too long – and she reflected to me that it reminded her why she made the choice to come work at the Independent. And I thought, "Yes!" We're still here, we're growing, and I really hope we're a force for good.

Christian, it's been a pleasure to talk to you. Thank you.
Thank you.