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James Ball

Investigative Journalist and Author

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Welcome to Media Masters, a series of one-to-one interviews with people at the top of the media game. Today I'm joined by James Ball, investigative journalist and author. Perhaps best known for his involvement in WikiLeaks, he has reported for a wealth of broadcast and print outlets including Channel 4, the BBC, Al Jazeera, ITN, the Guardian, BuzzFeed and the New European. In 2013, after two years on the Guardian's investigations team, he became their data editor, and reported on the global surveillance scandal prompted by NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden. James has earned a number of accolades throughout his career, including a Pulitzer Prize and a Paul Foot Award.

James, thank you for joining me.

Thanks for having me.

A Pulitzer Prize! That's amazing. I've never won anything.

Yes, I was...

How do you win one?

Well, you've got to move to America first! They're a bit picky like that. It was a big team of us that got it, but really it was for...

But it was your insight, your general genius that was the killer?

I think everyone would agree it was that, yes! But no, it was the nice easy matter of spending about 18 months of our lives going through the Edward Snowden files, so it was a doddle, really...

Let's go straight to that then. Tell us about those 18 months. How did the name Edward Snowden come on your radar? One minute you were sitting at a bus stop having never heard of him. Start at the beginning.

So I'd had a bit of a chewy week at The Guardian. I'd had a slightly well-deserved rollicking for something, and had sloped off to the pub at about half four on a Friday.

Seems reasonable, you're a journalist. That's every journalist's right.

Exactly! And I get a phone call about quarter past five, and I look at my phone and it's Alan Rusbridger.

Heard of him.

Then the editor-in-chief.

Former Media Masters guest.

Exactly, he's been in this very chair. And that's not a call that you usually get at that time, so...

Did it pop up and say Alan on your phone, or did it just say...

Oh no, Alan Rusbridger. It's always the full name.

Oh, God. Even I wouldn't answer that.

So I tried to run outside the pub so it sounded less pubby. "James, are you still in the office?" "Oh, I've just left, but I'm so nearby I could come back if I needed to." I expected him to say no, it can wait until Monday. He says, "Can you come back in?" And I'm thinking, was I in more trouble than I realised earlier this week? So I get up into his office and essentially he says, "Right, what's the earliest you can jump on a plane to New York to sort out your team's rotas for a week or two? I think we might have a little story and we can't talk about it on the phone." He said, "Basically, Ewan McCaskill and Glenn Greenwald are on a plane to Hong Kong. I want you to fly to New York to be ready to report out of there as well." So a day and a half later, I was on a plane to New York. I can remember one of the news editors said, "Ah, you'll be back in three or four days. Try and finish off a couple of pieces while you're out there, will you?" Because I was working on some projects before. I ended up moving there for two years.

That's a long three days.

Yes. So we knew from day one, from the Monday in the office, that we had to try and launch the first story within a day or two, and that within a week we were going to name Edward Snowden. We initially knew that was the timetable we were working on, or we would lose the story. So it was really quite intense. No time to get over the jet lag.

Given that you didn't have any time to get over the jet lag, what was the first thing you did when you touched down?

First thing is you're trying to find out what's the story? Is it as big as they think? Are we being pranked? What am I looking at? The thing with these leaks is they're always immensely complicated. People think you just get passed something and then...

Like a USB drive, like in Mission Impossible Fallout?

I mean, you do get passed a USB drive. It's great. I've had USB drives with 300,000 classified documents on them. It's surreal. But they're not writing 'here's our evil master plan' on them.

Why don't evil people do that?

It's really frustrating.

Why can't they just do an executive summary, like, "Here's the master evil plan?"

So they're referencing a whole ton of stuff that they know what means and you don't, so you've got to try and get your head round all the classified stuff, all the quite advanced technological stuff, and sort of go, "What's really happening here?" So you're trying to get your head round it, and also trying to do all the various stuff to authenticate it. Ewan McCaskill, who was then the Washington editor, had gone down to Hong Kong, and we were trying to think of all sorts of extra questions to give him for Snowden to help him verify it.

Was he in Hong Kong at this point?

Yes. So he was down there with Glenn Greenwald, and Ewan's job was, "Is this guy who he says he is?" So he obviously had his staff passes from the contractor jobs, all of this stuff. We're like, "Does he have a car parking pass from two years ago?" We were just trying to go, "What's something he might not think of if he's got to fake ID card?" Because your biggest thought is surely, surely, surely...

Are you being had?

There's never been a top secret document published by a media outlet in the modern era, not since the Pentagon papers. So we either have a huge story or we're going to fall for a fraud and never work again.

Or worse, end up in Guantanamo.

Yes, well that was quite a real possibility.

I'm sure they would have put you in some other, more convenient super max...

I mean, much more comfortable... but yes, that got quite real quite quickly actually.

I can imagine.

We knew we needed legal advice. We'd taken legal advice before publishing. I can remember the very first document we published was a court order for Verizon, and we did it because it was a court order, not an operational document. It was a simple story. We were kind of like, "It's nowhere near the best thing in here." I can remember me and Stuart Miller, one of the news editors, went, "Compared to the rest of this stuff, this is a bit seven out of 10. Do we think it will make enough of a splash?" Of course, within an hour of it being up, it was leading every news network and we were both looking at each other. "Seven out of 10? We're not very good at this, are we?" But we did the first few stories, so Prism, about how they were tapping into the big tech companies, and then various others. We got about four stories in four days, and then we were getting ready to name Edward. Essentially what we did then was we'd had our usual lawyers advising us. The very first day, I can remember Janine Gibson, our editor, was on a conference call, and she'd done the request for comment thing and ended up on a conference call with the deputy directors of the FBI, the CIA, the NSA. Every sort of major agency. They were really trying to put on the, "You don't understand how this works. Come down to the White House in two weeks. We'll have a meeting. We'll discuss it then." She went, "I'm publishing it in two hours, so you need to comment by then." They went, "No, that's not how it goes." She went, "Well, I'm the one with the document and the news outlet, so it's not really for you to tell me how it's done." She went, "It's a court order. It doesn't name any people. It doesn't do this. It's people's right to know. There's a very strong public interest. Why can't we publish it? What possible safety reason do you have?" They went, "Oh, we'll discuss it with you later." She went, "Well, we're talking now." In the end, they did all sorts to try and find someone to get rid of this annoying woman, this British woman. So they started getting MI5 press people to call reporters in the UK to say, "Who does this woman answer to?" And the answer was, of course, only the editor-in-chief, who was on a plane out of contact, and had given her absolute discretion to publish the first story. They just couldn't get that this one British woman was the person making the decision. Sexism, quite probably. So we're a few days into this quite fraught relationship, and we got this quite well-known first amendment lawyer. He basically said, "Well, they've never brought a case like this. We don't think they would, but given they don't know how much you have..." He's like, "I don't know how much you have. Do you have another two stories?" We kind of were shaking heads. "Okay, so if they keep coming, you could easily be said to be in breach of the Espionage Act, and the penalties of that, of course, go all the way up to death." Everyone starts looking a bit worried. "Well, no, no, I'm sure that wouldn't happen," he said, "But we're in unchartered territory." The key thing he said was, "Look, if this does go down the legal route, you could all be searched, you could all be subpoenaed, you've got to go in and see a grand jury," he said. "So you can't widen out your reporting team. Your group of people who are inside and know all the gory details of the story will have to stay as it is now." So the five or six of us who worked on it in the US in week one, that was it. That was the reporters and the editors right the way through to the end. So that was quite a strange thing. That was the meeting where it's like, "I'm probably not going home very soon, am I?" And of course, I ended up moving there formally about three weeks later.

I'm surprised they gave you a permit, like a visa, given the trouble that you were...

We did think that could be an issue, but fair play to the US, they've... I'm just back from a reporting trip there now. But they, for about two years, every single time I flew into America, I got secondary security screening, which is where a fairly ill-tempered person walks you over to another room, and you've got to sit there for about two hours. Then they do a bag search. They'd ask me some really inane questions, nothing particularly related to reporting, and then let me in. So it would always take two, two and a half hours. They won't let you look in your bag or look at your phone.

That's just boring. If I'm not on Twitter every 20 minutes, I've lost the will to live.

Well, the trick I learned is if you had a book in your hand, they let you read it. So I still always cross every border with a book in my hand.

You should get global entry. That's the best thing I've ever done. For years, I walked past these people at the global entry kiosk thinking, "Why aren't I one of those people?" Then it suddenly struck me I could apply. It took me about six months to pass whatever security checks, and now I just breeze in.

Yes, I've heard it's brilliant.

Oh, it's the best thing since sliced bread.

But no, when I went into the States last month, I didn't get secondary screened.

It's amazing.

So I got through airport security in 20 minutes.

Were you holding the Pulitzer aloft? I don't know even what it physically looks like. It could be anything.

It's like a little gold medal. It looks like a chocolate coin, in all honesty.

Ah, it's not worth it then. The whole thing's been in vain.

Frankly. Well, for all the other ones... so it's the medal for public service, which is meant to be the big one.

I want one.

All the others, though, you get 10 grand for.

Oh, could this podcast get the Pulitzer?

You never know!

It won't. Let's be honest. You're just being polite.

Of course I'm being polite! But you never know. They might radically change their standards...

Anyway, let's move on from my misplaced vanity and move the story along! So you went there for three days. You must, as you've just said there, you knew already that this was going to take a lot longer.

Yes. So we had that first flurry, and then we ended up with just an immensely complicated reporting job to do, because we had a lot more documents than we ever published. People acted as if we were spraying classified material all over the place; I think we published extracts of about 35 documents. We had tens of thousands – that's public record, I'm not breaking anything to say that. We were looking through for the stuff that was in the public interest that didn't cause danger, and we talked with the agencies every time to see if they had specific concerns. Sometimes they'd go, "Look, if you really must publish this, and of course we'd never condone anything, it's all wildly irresponsible, you shouldn't do any of it. But while you shouldn't do any of it, if you particularly could not do that one sentence for this reason..." and they'd give you a vague but actual reason, that was reasonable. We'd listen to that quite often. Not giving out specific locations, not naming staff. We were very happy to do that kind of stuff, but we essentially... we were trying to publish on GCHQ, the UK's spying agency, initially out of London. We were reporting on the NSA out of New York, and then Glenn Greenwald wouldn't come in to America – the reporter who Snowden contacted, the lead guy on the story. He lives in Rio and would only report there. You could have some limited encrypted chats and emails and stuff like that, but for any proper conversation, you had to fly and meet face to face.

Well, I can think of worse things.

It's the only way to do it securely. I swear, I got about 200,000 air miles out of it. The downside is I flew about 200,000 miles.

The environment is a problem that our grandchildren can solve. That's my view.

Well, the campaign we did straight after Snowden was a climate change campaign, which I'm absolutely sure was conscience-salving before Alan retired.

So globally relevant, earth shatteringly important campaigning investigative journalism with frequent trips to Rio, isn't this literally every journalist's wet dream?

I know I will get no sympathy, but it was winter in Rio, so it was constant thunderstorms. It's an 11-hour flight from New York, and it's a rubbish airline. It's really cold. Funnily enough – and you might not be shocked to hear this – the Guardian flies you economy.

Or ‘coach’, as they call it there.

Yes. So 11 hours in coach when you’ve flown two times already that week. All the people who no way are going are like, “Oh, you’re in Rio. You bastard.” You’re like, “Yes, and I’ll see the inside of a Marriott room and a computer screen in Glenn’s house. And it will be thunder all the time.”

And all these CIA leadership teams that you’re going up against, they’re all flying on private jets that they’re doing their illegal renditions on.

Yes, exactly! They’re getting a much nicer time of it. So no, you are aware that you’re doing it on shoestrings. We were having to... we were going out and buying laptops in cash from Best Buys for $300 and then literally burning through their Wi-Fi chips so we knew they would be secure and not calling out to anyone.

It’s a bit like some kind of spy movie.

It is a lot like spy movies. We played with burner phones, we were pretty sure our own phones were getting hacked all the time. It was really funny because of course, I’d come from WikiLeaks, so I’d done a bit of this spy v spy nonsense before.

Oh, we’re going to ask you about that later, don’t worry.

So in the first day or two of doing it, I would ask quite... almost a bit gingerly, “Look, I know you all think I’m paranoid and mad. Can we not have any phones in the room while we’re doing this?” And everyone would really roll their eyes at me. Within about a week...

There was just Alexa and the home pods?

Within about a week, when any of the senior editors involved walked in a room, they’d unplug every electronic device. The phones would be outside, like, well outside. The curtains would be closed. They went from, “James, you’re mad,” to, because they were reading about what the surveillance capabilities were, to, “Oh my God,” you know? Ripping out the conference call systems in tables.

I don’t want anyone surreptitiously surveilling my conversations, but only because I’m frightened of the truth coming out, which is what a dreadfully dull life I lead, at home and at work.

Well, this is the weird thing I’ve noticed with a lot of surveillance obsessives. They’re the last people anyone would want to listen to!

Yes, exactly.

But no, it was quite funny managing to make paranoid conspiracy theorists out of all of my bosses. I was proud of that one.

So how did the story move on? Because you've already described the kind of intensity that it built up. What came next?

So in a lot of ways, the reveal of Snowden, and then essentially sort of almost the soap opera of him ending up stranded in Russia was a huge story for a lot of people. But we immediately moved on from it. Obviously the Guardian carried on following it strongly, stayed in touch with him, all of that. I know Alan, Janine, everyone kept in touch with Snowden over the years as well.

Because it wasn't like deep throat where you're meeting someone in a trench coat in a car park that wanted to remain anonymous for decades?

Yes.

This is someone who has got a global media profile in his own right?

Yes. He knew that he wouldn't be able to avoid being picked up by them, and so he thought the best protection for him was being known to the world, which I think was exactly right. It's telling, somebody who knew as much about security as he did, just didn't think he could not be traced, correctly. So there was that drama on one side. But then what we had at that stage was we'd had a little set of documents to begin with to show that we'd actually publish them, and then he gave us everything else. So we went from trying to do the, "Hey, what's the stories in these two dozen documents?" to, "Holy hell, what's in these thousands of them?"

What's in the rest of them.

So setting up ways to look at that, to separate them out, to work out what hit the threshold for a story. So some of them we really worked and prepped up. So we found... we tried to do UK reporting and US reporting, and I worked on both. So in the UK we found a programme called Tempora, which makes everyone think of the batter. But spelled differently. That was like Sky+, but for the internet. They were keeping three days of internet traffic in and out of the UK so they could dip in and search it and check out what was going on. So we revealed that. And we revealed a bunch of other stuff. And then we started getting into the more complex ones. So the early stories were often one document would give us a story, but then some of the more complex stuff on what they were doing, and the most classified stuff, there would be a little reference in one document and another somewhere else.

You had to piece it together?

It would be immensely technical and confusing, and there's almost no one you can consult because it's all classified. So the people who know what it means are legally forbidden from telling you. So we did a massive one on them, really working to undermine encryption. That sounds really geeky, but it's the main security for all of us online. It's what stops hackers, it's what stops ID theft, it makes the global economy work. They'd been undermining the standards for it. That was the only story throughout the whole thing that they asked us not to run at all. Other ones, they talked about redactions or this kind of stuff. The US government asked the New York

Times and the Guardian not to run it, and Jill Abramson, who was the editor of the New York times at the time just went, “We’re running it, and we’re running it on A1, front page.” So that was a really contentious one. And then literally, you’d just spend some days... you’d be searching and looking for specific stuff, and then sometimes you’d just commit yourself to sit and read a few hundred documents over the course of a day to see what you could see. I remember stumbling, about seven in the evening when I was just about to give up and get a beer, that a senior US diplomat had been meeting with the NSA and tossed her phone over and said, “Oh, do you want to see if there’s anyone on there that you’re not targeting?” There were 35 world leaders on there, direct phone numbers for them, and their aides, and so they added a whole couple dozen more world leaders’ offices to their targeting database.

Incredible. In such a cavalier way.

Yes, literally, tossed their phone at the end of a meeting to them to sort of do that. We have our suspicions over here. It didn’t name the official, but to have 35 world leaders on the phone, you started to think, “Well, this is one of about three people,” which was quite fun. But that one, sort of we could do ‘NSA spied on 35 friendly world leaders’, because if they’re in your diplomats’ phones as well, including Angela Merkel... she was one of the ones targeted...

I remember that. And was that one of the biggest eyebrow-raising moments, or were there even bigger ones?

I mean, that sort of didn’t necessarily shock me, but that was the one that had big diplomatic fallout, because essentially I think it was partly just how cavalier the tone of it was.

We shouldn’t have to spy on our friends. They’re our friends.

Yes. And so that they were doing it quite that brazenly, and that the diplomats were facilitating it. That sort of caused a lot of the anger. In terms of international impact, that had the biggest diplomatic impact. With the tech companies, the encryption one was one of the biggest. There’s been a lot of changes in how they do things off the back of that one, and then in terms of America, it was the ones about domestic collection, that they were hoovering up lots of information from US-based people. That actually caused a few law changes in the US. Over here, the atmosphere was incredibly different because in America, this stuff was being absolutely fated, and everywhere else was trying to follow up what we were reporting, and doing really good work with it. And, of course, the Washington Post had some access to it of their own. In the UK, pretty much every single other media outlet was just attacking us, sort of saying, “This isn’t journalism, this is enabling terrorism. This is undermining the freedom of...” All of this stuff. Every paper.

As if the security services shouldn’t be held to account.

Yes.

And what do you think the motivation was for that? Wasn't that just straight up jealousy? You'd scooped these guys. You got a good story, and it was just...

I think that's a little bit of the British press. There is a sort of habit of...

Pro-establishment...

If you can't run with the pack, if you can't have it as your story...

They're wrong 'uns.

You shoot it down. But I think most of the press sort of knows, is quite pro-establishment. A lot of the journalists that cover the intelligence agencies do like being mates with the sort of spies. They like the little tours that you get, the nice cup of tea briefings with very serious men.

And they're not going to put that at risk by writing anything that might be remotely critical, or might annoy them.

Oh, yes. Yes. And they have the thinnest skin of anyone you cover because they tend to get away without being covered. I just tend to think, we spend quite a lot of money on these guys. They do a lot of quite important work. You know, there's a lot of good people in these services. I'm not of the view that they're out there trying to destroy freedom and hate us, and working for sinister government plots. They're doing important work, but they do it with no scrutiny at all.

I would describe myself as pro-police; the police do an incredibly difficult job, and I support them. But that also means that I want to hold to account any rotten apples that spoil the barrel.

Yes, and there's just such inadequate scrutiny of the intelligence agencies that we would never tolerate anywhere else in government. And so you have papers that usually treat every single civil servant as an idiot who can't be trusted with a paperclip. The second they're in security, they must be a genius who we must not ever disagree with or question in any way.

It's a James Bond-type person, putting their lives on the line every day.

Yes. Quite a lot of these... it's sort of civil servants, the same way with everything else. Most intelligence work is quite safe and often quite boring.

But important.

It's very important.

Was there anything that you came across during that period that increased your respect for these guys? Was there anything where your eyebrows were raised in a different way, where you thought, "Wow, we've dodged that bullet!"

Yes, lots of it. Lots of it just makes it harder to sleep at night. These guys are keeping an eye on quite a lot of threats, and quite a lot of stuff that's bubbling under the surface. If you're trying to go, "We need to pay attention to this one, but not this one, but not this one," because you've only got so many resources...

You'd say they're prioritising threats?

Yes. And you start thinking, "Well, there's missiles moving in this country, and we think there's more terror threats coming up here, and there's chatter among this network of an attack in a western country," which of those three do you pay attention to?

I'd just bomb all of them, and then we're safe.

Exactly! That would work. Why aren't you doing this?!

That was basically Blair's third term anyway, if I'm honest!

But of course we couldn't really report that stuff out, because it's operational, firstly. If we say they're tracking a missile site in X, I mean, we've just tipped them off. And also, secondly, if they're doing their job right, what justification do we have for breaking top secret publications? So there was lots of stuff in there that showed them doing the job that they say they're doing, and working or not, but clearly trying to predict what's happening in the entire world. You know, trying to predict what's happening tomorrow. I can't. So there was a lot of stuff in there where it's like, "No, this is completely fair enough," but we'd published where we thought it raised questions.

And actually we've talked about the stereotypes of the kind of people in the security services, but also there's the stereotypical characterization of yourself, in terms of just you're gung-ho, you publish anything, a few bits of redaction here and there. And as you've said then, you took the job extremely seriously, but were there any moments where you had to kind of genuinely weigh up what the public good was on a kind of case-by-case, document-by-document basis?

Pretty much every single story.

That's a hell of a responsibility for anyone, frankly.

Yes. And thankfully, the final decisions wouldn't be mine. They'd be with either Janine Gibson or Alan Rusbridger, but often, the team would be divided, and so people would be sort of pushing actually, "Do we think this one meets the threshold? Do we think there's enough to it?" I'd often be on the side of, yes, we should publish this one, and so people would sort of in the closed room litigate their reasons to run it or not to run it, and eventually Alan would take the decision. And then you walk out, and if it's to publish, everyone backs the story. But now, I think people sort of thought we were just mining it for scoops. I'm sure, if I hadn't worked on it, that would be what I would have thought we'd done, too. But there was really serious consideration

went on, and other people might have made different decisions, but I still find it quite easy to defend any of the individual stories if people point them out, because we did have the conversation in advance. I mean, Alan was pulled in front of Parliament, in front of a select committee, and asked if he loved his country, which was a great moment.

I remember it. I mean, that question itself is ridiculous.

I genuinely think that they were trying to help him, and sort of give him a chance to say he was patriotic. I don't think they were sort of going for him.

You know what Alan's like.

Yes. He was never going to take that.

He's too thoughtful and studious for his own good. He's basically a brain in a jar, isn't he?

Of course, we'd sort of...

All thoughtful.

We'd prepared and sort of thought about this stuff for so long, because it's such a big thing. Alan wants to know does he have the answers? What were the reasons for doing this? And so we drilled, and drilled, and drilled, and so I was told I wasn't allowed to be anywhere near people because if he fluffed an answer, I'd get cross. So I was sort of shut with one or two other people who'd helped in a meeting room well away from the newsroom to shout at the TV. I had a moment of outrageous smugness when a question I'd insisted on briefing him for, and everyone had told me wouldn't come up, came up – and it was whether we'd outed officers as being gay. Because one of the stories mentioned that there was an LGBT club in GCHQ.

Why shouldn't there be?

Which is a good thing. Very in favour of that. And they'd sort of turned that into us outing officers, and I'd caught this MP making that point on TV. I just thought, "He's going to ask the question." It's the sort of thing that, if you're not expecting it, will totally throw you, because you might think, "Well, what if we did that?" And so I'd looked into it and found that they listed this on their own public website because Stonewall backed them. And so it was like, "Well, we revealed some information that was on GCHQ's website. Do you have an issue?" So all this stuff came up that we thought would. Alan did really well, and then about to questions at from the end, he got asked if I'd been – me, personally, by name – had been breaking security and taking documents home, based on something I'd said in an interview to do with Wikileaks a few years before, where they'd actually fluffed my quote. I'd been talking about not taking documents home.

So the omission of the word 'not' kind of changes the tone.

A little bit. A little bit. And also it was from a totally different story from a totally different organisation.

But the spotlight's on him. What happened?

He was completely baffled and sort of just patted the question off, and sort of said, "No, we have lots of precautions." At the time, because I was moving to a new country, I was homeless. I was sofa surfing, and staying in hotel rooms when I was in New York, and so I really, really tried to get the press office to put out a statement saying I definitely hadn't been taking documents home because I didn't have one.

"No, because he's homeless."

And it got vetoed because they decided it wasn't a very professional look for a news organisation!

Exactly. Sleeping in shop doorways and things.

I mean, quite reasonably, I think.

Were you aware of... this might even be a silly question, but were you aware of just how important this would be, and almost career defining? You won a Pulitzer for it. Did you think, "Actually this is the best thing I'm going to work on, and from now on, I'm going to be writing local newspaper nibs about the Rugby Club in Leicester"?

I had this sort of... thanks to a very strange set of quirks, and let's be honest, quite a lot of luck, I worked for Wikileaks when I was 23, and so we did the biggest ever leak of military documents with the Iraq war logs, and then the biggest ever diplomatic leak in history two months later with the state cables. And so I left Wikileaks sort of just turning 24, and kind of thought, "Well, that's the biggest stories I'll ever work on. I'm just starting my first national newspaper job." And so I'd had two or three years of just sort of quite merrily going, "Oh, I'm on the down slope, mate," while sort of everyone else is going, oh, I just got a new promotion. I'm actually just going, you know, "Forty-six years until I can retire."

Exactly.

And then Snowden happened, which I hadn't expected, and which sort of again, happy set of circumstances.

What could come next? Jesus himself would have to appear incarnate in front of you.

It's funny you should mention that! I mean, you know... I'd quite like to take down a government or a president. I haven't done that yet, you know? There's bigger worlds ahead. Yes, so given that lightning struck twice, you sort of feel like, "Well, probably I will never work on anything that size again," but you never quite know. And, I mean,

I've been fairly lucky with what I've been working on since. I worked on quite a lot of the offshore leaks that kind of culminated with the Panama papers, and that sort of stuff. I've been working on some of the Russia misinformation, and the Trump-Russia stories. There's always sort of more stuff to dig into.

Has it changed your politics?

A little bit.

You seem to me frustratingly reasonable about all of this. Dare I say, agreeable?

I think the key thing, especially if you're talking about privacy and surveillance, is it's really, really easy to sound like a tin foil hat lunatic, and kind of go, "Oh, no, the government are listening to everything, and they want to control your minds, and spiders, aliens..."

I'm up for it. I for one welcome our robot overlords.

I mean, same. Just in case. But if you can start sounding like a normal human being that cares about lots of other things too, and do I think the surveillance is the most important story in the world? No, not necessarily. If the country's going to collapse from whoever you believe if we get Brexit wrong enough, or all that kind of stuff, people want food on the table. They want a job. They want a fair society. But our privacy and the strength of our government is a massive issue in the middle of that, and I think one of the frustrations with the Snowden story, especially in America, was people sort of... Barack Obama being the guy ultimately with these powers, and felt fine about it. And now Donald Trump's the one with them. You sort of start to see the benefits of having checks, and balances, and controls. And we don't have as good checks, balances, and controls as we could do. That's become very obvious with Trump's presidency. And so, if we'd not just thought about, "Well, I like the current government. I trust the current government, so this stuff's all okay," that would've done us better really. And if we started thinking about this stuff in connection to what the government can do, it might also have alerted us to what other people can do, because we do now all worry about how our data's used for political campaigns, or Russian disinformation, or all of this stuff. It is all connected to it.

And even as a society, when the "fappening" thing happened, when a lot of the Hollywood actors had their personal iClouds hacked and intimate pictures came out, society was divided. I mean, I have my own friends that say, "Well, you shouldn't have taken intimate pictures of yourself because you might get hacked," and other people are saying, "Excuse me, I can do whatever I like in the privacy of my own home. If someone had broken in, a burglar, into my house and stolen intimate pictures, it's the same thing."

Yes, and it is the same thing, and essentially just because it's got a lot easier to do stuff, we've sort of almost allowed that to make it normal. It used to be that you just never could've searched through someone's messages. They would've all been written or typed letters. Now, a five second search, if you're standing in front of your

friend's phone or a computer, you could search your name on it and see everything they'd ever said about you. If you wouldn't break into their house and search through all their cupboards for what they'd written about you in their diary, you probably shouldn't do that on someone's phone. But it feels different to us because it's easier.

But it's still a violation.

It is, and it's right that that stuff's a crime, and that's why we do need to think about sort of rights online and security online. And when part of this stuff is that they were undermining the security that protects this stuff, they left us all more vulnerable to being hacked in that way, or hacked financially, or in all sorts of other ways.

And the concern is not only governments, but also 14-year-old obese kids in their parents' basement that are brute force hacking these iCloud accounts. The threats aren't just coming from government. They're coming from our fellow citizens.

Exactly, and that's sort of why strong online security matters, and that's sort of the point we were trying to do. It's also there is a difference between stuff being sort of private and secret. Secret suggests you've got some sort of massive shame about it, or that kind of thing. It's not really. It's all sorts of stuff that's fine, but people don't want to put publicly. And there's all sorts of people who kind of go, "Well, I don't do anything wrong. I don't really care about it," and, "One day, this trick won't work, but it's worked every single time I've ever done it." Because obviously in the wake of Snowden we did endless panels and shows sort of defending the reporting, and talking about why it mattered. As soon as someone said that, I just said, "Unlock your phone and give it to me." And they're like, "Why?" I said, "You don't mind about privacy. Just might share some things on your phone with the nice audience."

I'll do that now, but there is a picture of me wearing a pair of Speedos. It's quite unflattering, if you don't mind me saying.

But of course, no one ever handed the phone over. It's that thing of, "Well, you just said you don't care."

We work for loads of global leaders, chief executives, in my day job, and all of them have just sent one-liners. They're incredibly polite and engaging in real life, but they just don't discuss anything over email. I'll send them a question that could be awkward, the phone will ring. It's just routine, because I think everyone's aware of this now, that years later, when there's a dispute, once the emails are dragged up, you look at them and think, "Why the hell did even I write that?"

I mean, one of my absolute sort of favourite bits of self-reporting that I've done is – this does tie to this, I promise – almost everyone has kind of learned that trick, especially senior management, because they know those paper trails matter so much. You're spot on with it. Government does it all the time because of Freedom of Information, so civil servants never put anything on email, and now have even more endless meetings. Intelligence agencies haven't really learned this, because they've

got high secure systems, and they're not subject to FOI or court disclosure, so they can be quite sort of chatty and gossipy. And so Shell hired two former MI6 agents to help it get an oil deal through in Nigeria, and essentially, they paid what looked a lot like a billion-dollar bribe. It's alleged to have been a bribe to a former oil minister there for an offshore drilling site.

I mean, obviously, I condemn that, but part of me wishes that I was also a former oil minister, and in receipt of said money.

Everyone else is being incredibly careful with how they refer to this contract, and paying for it, and all of this.

And they were like, "Oh, don't worry about it. Make the cheque payable to cash."

So one of these former MI6 agents that she just goes, "Mrs. E," so the guy who was the sort of alleged recipient of it was a guy called Etete, "Mrs. E on the phone again. Very unhappy. She says they need at least five million now because he's got to pay off his own people too, and they can't keep delaying these bribes." And you're kind of like, "A little bit giving the game away there." So it was just great fun. So that sort of turned up, and we got about 3,000 pages of prosecutor documents leaked from an Italian prosecutor's office, and we sort of came across these emails in there. And you know when you're like, "Well, that's the story!" It's like, "We are going to be able to get this story over the line." But most other people there are very clipped and very careful, and you know where you're sort of thinking, "How are we going to make this colourful, and how are we actually going to explain what we think is going on here?" And then suddenly, these MI6 guys are just blundering in because they never learned that thing of not...

Discipline.

Yes.

Did you always want to be an investigative journalist? Because you kind of did it as soon as you left university, didn't you?

I did. So I kind of fell into it slightly by accident on one level. I was going to do Teach First. I'd sort of never quite known what I wanted to do. I was first in my family to go to uni. My brother and sister didn't go, and so, did I maybe want to do law? Then it turns out that's really expensive, because you've got to do a law course. Yes, so I was enrolled on Teach First, it was coming up to my final exam and I was still editing a student magazine. I nearly missed the exam, because I was waiting for copy from Richard Griffiths, of all people. The actor. He faxed it over, handwritten, about 10 minutes before we went to stone. I'm typing, transcribing in, his handwritten article. Lovely article, as I recall it. And just trying to shout to the people doing the paper, if they would send off the magazine for me. They were like, "Yes, get out. Get to your exam, you idiot." I was telling my mum about it, and she saw an advert in the Guardian for the investigative journalism course at City. She went, "Look, you clearly like that much more than anything else you're doing. You care about it more than

your degree, so why don't you try this course?" It was the only one that was still open at City. It was like a trial year for it, so they had extended the applications. I had no idea how to pay for it, didn't know bursaries existed, basically. Yes, borderline scammed to fund my way through that year, worked the entire year while doing a full-time degree, but thought, "Well, let's chuck an application in." No one had bothered to tell the people who ran the application site at City – I should disclose, I lecture on this course now, so it's not meant to be a promotion for it – but no one had told them that this course had an extended deadline, and so it was refusing to let you apply. I was trying to mess about with the web address, because sometimes you can skip the denial thing, so I messed with the web address a bit and it suddenly dropped me into this database with the names, addresses, and private information of everyone who's applied to City that year. Somehow, I've just accidentally found this security fault, so I was sitting and thinking, what do I do about this then? Is it a good enough story if I tipped off the Guardian or someone? I thought, "Maybe, but do I just email their IT guy?" I thought, No, I've got to find out who runs the journalism course at City and get in touch with them." I found the director of journalism at City, who at the time was a guy called Adrian Monck...

Adrian's sat in that very chair. He's the MD at the World Economic Forum now.

He is. He runs capitalism now.

He does!

Yes, stepped up. So I dropped him an email and said, "Look, I've found this vulnerability in your thing," and then, "PS, this won't be important to you, but it is to me, I was trying to apply for your investigative journalism course when I discovered this." He sent me an email back, going, "I don't think that happened," so I sent him a step-by-step. He went, "Oh dear." He went, "Thanks for letting us know. We'll fix this urgently." He was clearly quite panicked. And copied in was the director of the investigative journalism course, and...

You kind of proved your investigative abilities there.

He went, "I've copied in Rosie, who runs the investigations course. I'm sure she'll be very eager to interview you." So yes, I think that probably did me quite a few favours in getting a place on it.

What came after the course? How did you end up at WikiLeaks?

I went within a year, from working on The Grocer, covering food manufacturing, to working at WikiLeaks, covering the state cables. I was flat broke and I had about another three days on my lease before I would have needed to move back up to Yorkshire, and job interviews had got really expensive.

You're on The Grocer, you're covering leeks of the type that might be on sale in Waitrose.

I didn't used to cover them. No, this...

I couldn't resist that.

... this is to get in to The Grocer. Friday afternoon, job interview. I was 21, so you don't know what's going on with them.

It's like the graveyard shift of interviewing slots.

I had my interview with this guy, then he goes, "I want you to write a story please, and then four questions that you'd ask the CEO." It was Sainsburys' quarterly results. I write it up and he comes back in. He was asking me more questions, more interview stuff. Looks at the story, tells me I've totally screwed up the story. "The lead should be here. It's well written enough," he says, "But you completely missed the point. Paragraph seven should be para one. This is about what's next. There's a lot of work to do with you. You're clearly very raw material." He looked at the questions and said, "The questions aren't bad." He went, "Oh, that one's actually quite good," and then proceeded at length, to tell me all the reasons not to hire me, and then immediately offered me the job.

Sounds sensible.

Now, being offered a job at interview, I might have done a better job of negotiating. He said only if I said yes there and then, and only if I started Monday.

Can I think about it please, Bob?

He was like, "What were you thinking salary wise?" I went, "Well, I couldn't go below the minimum you advertised it at, because I literally don't think I could live on it." He went, "Okay then. You can have the minimum." Really slick negotiating! His name was Adam Leyland, he's still the editor there. But he was a great first boss. It's a good B2B magazine. It knew its beat, it wanted exclusives. It turns out people really care about supermarkets, so if you break a good story, you get on the BBC, the newspapers pick it up, and so it was great fun. They were quite happy to have this annoying, precocious 21-year-old, and just keep promoting me to keep me. I think they made me chief reporter when I was 22, and the youngest on the team, and so I got absolutely sarcastically called Chief, by everyone, for the entirety of my time there. But they would let you break scoops and have fun, and annoy the supermarkets, even. My editor would have the chief exec of one of the supermarkets screaming down the phone at him. He'd go, "Oh yes, he'll be very seriously disciplined. Don't worry." I'd just get a, "Wind it back a bit, James, could you?" So they let me freelance for the nationals at the weekends, so I'd sell into the Times or the Sunday Telegraph, or that kind of stuff. The Bureau of Investigative Journalism launched way back in 2010, and basically, I still suspect it was my City tutor, David Lee, who was my editor at the Guardian for a while, told them I was someone to interview. So I moved there, and they, of course, someone on their board knew Julian Assange, and so they got hold of the Iraq material, and then Assange poached me from the Bureau. So I went from being a business reporter in Crawley – although I do recommend The Grocer to anyone starting out, it was a great place to work – but I went from being a business reporter in Crawley to development

producer. I still barely know what development producers are, but I was one for a year.

Is he as loathsome in person as people say he is?

He can be. Assange is very charismatic. There was always something odd about him, but investigative journalists, and the people around investigative journalism, and whistleblowers, all tend to be weird. Except me, obviously.

I can confirm to our listeners that you're not weird.

Just wait until you get to know me! But you have to be. Whistleblowers are people who are going against the grain of an organisation, and most of us don't like doing that. We don't like going against people who are friends or colleagues too much. Investigative journalists, you've got to be really obsessive. You've got to really wade through tons and tons of boring stuff, and just keep going, and keep going, long past the point when any normal person would want to get on with their life. And so you tend to find lots of people in this area are strange.

As much of a megalomaniac as Julian is?

No, well... the thing is, it's easy to see why Julian would at least get benefit of the doubt, because he is worse. He is a narcissist. He is a liar. I mean, a serial liar. And there's quite good reasons to think he did some really quite potentially serious crimes...

He's a wrong 'un.

... in Sweden, and those women will never get their day in court.

And the whole logic is just ridiculous. It's like trying to reason with Trump supporters. Richard Dawkins once famously said, "You can't reason someone out of a position that they've not reasoned themselves into," and for me, the fact that he seems to believe that he's under house arrest, but he isn't, of course. He's a fugitive.

He's one of these people who will tell you a lie about something you were there for.

Gaslighting, they call it.

Yes. And he'll genuinely not seem to know whether he's trying to just get you to say the lie, or whether he's come to really believe it. All the best liars believe their own stuff, and so I think sometimes Julian knows he's lying when he starts, but then just eventually forgets that detail. The day we're talking, he's just released a 5,000 word 'confidential, not for publication' statement to dozens of media outlets around the world, on about 140 statements that you can't say about Julian Assange, because they're libellous. It's just this long, long list of stuff. It says it's libellous to call him a hacker. He's *literally* been to prison for hacking. He's a convicted hacker.

The biggest tragedy of all of it, is I'm a vegan. I'm a big fan of Pamela Anderson, because she's an animal rights activist, and I once criticised Julian Assange on Twitter, and she blocked me because of it. I'm now blocked by Pamela Anderson off of Baywatch. That is genuinely terrible!

I don't think she's got round to blocking me. I'm going to have to check this now! WikiLeaks has blocked me, and has said that I work for MI5, which I imagine, MI5, if they are still paying my pay cheques, they're probably a bit ticked off over the Snowden thing. I haven't been to the Christmas party.

There are some MI5 handlers outside the studio. They're wearing big MI5 hats.

They will make you edit that out though, unless cutbacks have meant they just slipped up.

You've got a book out, haven't you? Should I Stay or Should I Go? where you've used data facts and science to answer the most questions on pop songs, and in fact, it's called Pop Science in the US, is it not?

It will be when it's out, yes.

Tell our listeners about your latest book. I feel like I'm Parkinson, interviewing Robert Redford.

Well, it's a little bit less investigative than most of the stuff I do.

It's good, though.

I think, just especially covering Brexit most of the last year, I did Brexit and two big Russia investigations, and I just needed something...

Light as well as shade.

... and so I used to be the data editor of the Guardian, and so maths, numbers, stats all of that stuff, I tend to get a little bit overly into, and so we did a whole book premised on me having no sense of humour! Basically, it just takes questions in songs immensely literally, and either tries to answer them or fact-checks them.

I'm going to buy this.

And so, it came off one late night tweet from a friend of mine, Nicky Woolf, given that he claims I nicked the book off him, because it's from his drunken tweet. I should namecheck him, at least. He was going home from a party in San Francisco, so just as I was waking up, and he decided to fact-check the song, Ms. Jackson. "I'm sorry, Ms. Jackson. I am for real," and he says he apologises a trillion times. He tried to do the maths on how long it would take to apologise a trillion times. As a slight spoiler:

he didn't. He is not for real. He is lying to Ms Jackson. He apologised way fewer times than that.

Unless he meant it figuratively.

No. We don't make sense of that.

I don't accept that. Remember, technically correct is the best form of correct.

Exactly! And so, unfortunately for Nicky, because he was drunk, he made an error in his maths by forgetting that weeks have seven days in them, not one.

This guy needs to be fired.

Exactly. I fact-checked him and then other people just started asking me questions from songs, and so I was just messing around on Twitter doing one-line answers from them. And then Janine Gibson, her again, was then my boss at BuzzFeed, where I worked at the time, and she basically just shouted across the office and then tweeted, "Well, James. I know you're not this blatantly pissing around on work time, so I assume you're doing these to collect them together for a piece, aren't you?" I was like, "Yes, of course."

Of course, Janine.

This was essentially her giving me a morning doing a much lighter story than I usually work on.

Death, destruction, intelligence services.

It was two days before Christmas, so it was a bit of a treat. And a publisher got in touch, literally Christmas Eve, and said, "We really like this. Do you think you could do it book length?" And so I sort of ended up going really excessive on it. The thing is, it's properly researched, in a way that it really doesn't need to be.

That's the whole point of it, I imagine. Just the sheer needlessness of it all.

Looking through medical journals for the volume of a human tear. There are academic psychology studies in it, and we actually ended up commissioning original YouGov polling for some of the questions.

This really is disproportionately excessive.

At one point we used the 1981 census to look up populations. That's for The Pina Colada Song. It was really good fun just to do something a bit lighter, but because it's a shorter book, because it's a Christmas book, kind of thing, I thought it would be less work than a normal one.

But it wasn't.

No. By over-researching...

It was an opus, if not a magnum one.

Yes, it was still really excessive on the effort.

What are you doing now and what do you want to do next?

Well, I guess they're the same question really. I am getting ready to finish another bloody book! Which I can't properly talk about yet, but...

Well, that's useless then, for the podcast, isn't it?

It's about who controls the internet, and how the internet controls us. It's got bits and pieces of stuff I've been working on for years.

What's next then, after the book? What do you want to do? Because like you said after... well, after the Pulitzer, the only way is down. It's like an inverse Yazz and the Plastic Population, isn't it?

Yes, exactly. Well, frankly, paying the bills, keeping my cats in the lifestyle to which they're accustomed.

Are the cats in the pay of the NSA? Are they part of the surveillance... ?

Oh, almost definitely. They're both pretty malevolent.

Well, they are cats. That's their cover.

Anyone who sees them on Twitter knows they are menacing creatures, my cats.

You mustn't have been short of offers, given that you've done some pretty amazing things.

Yes, I get one or two, thankfully.

And you don't go now and say, "Yes, I'll take the job, but I'll work for a minimum wage."

Yes, funnily enough, I try not to do that too much, no! I think once the book's done, that's the interesting thing of do I want to go back into a newsroom full-time, or do I want to carry on with the freelancing thing? I haven't actually decided that one yet, but I've got a few months to do it, because I do have to finish the bloody book, and then presumably, hopefully, do some promotion for it. But yes, it's a nice set of options to have at the moment. It's not like we're short of things to investigate either, is it?

Well, the world is not short of wrong 'uns.

No. No, it's not. It's the key thing for investigative journalism is when things are good for investigative journalists, it's awful for everyone else. So, yes, sorry about that, everyone.

Would you do some kind of corporate investigative journalism? Like for example, if KFC are claiming that it's seven herbs and spices? Maybe it's just six? What is the secret formula for Coca-Cola, etc?

I wouldn't do it working for the corporates, but I've done plenty of stuff looking into business – that's much more fun. HSBC's offshore, or Shell's bribery, or all that kind of stuff I quite like. There might be one or two investigations I'm working on as well, so... yes, we might have a bit of fun with some of those soon.

Are you ever tempted with the old Groucho Marx aphorism, where he says, "Look these are my principles, madam, but if you don't like them I have others"? You're covering all these extremely rich people in business and commerce, that are doing all these bribes. Do you ever think, "Well, actually, I don't want to beat them, I want to join them"?

I had one very misplaced attempt to bribe me when I was in... actually, when I was in WikiLeaks. I have to keep the details vague for legal reasons, but we were having this meeting and we were pretty... getting more and more sure. This guy kept asking, "Well, what would make you happy? What could we do?" He said, "Well, next time we meet, why don't you come out to meet us in Dubai? We'll put you up in a seven-star hotel, lots of nice food, lots of nice things, lots of nice girls." It's like, "You have not done your research, guys." It's like, a swing and a miss there. I was always taught that if someone was trying to bribe you, suggest that you're not happy with the price. Never suggest that you're incorruptible, because that's a bit dangerous. But no, if you look on the internet, you'll find plenty of people who are supporters of WikiLeaks, or various far-right or far-left groups, who really don't like me. They will tell you I'm easily bought, and I've been bought and sold dozens of times, but in reality, I just... I think I'm too stubborn. It just doesn't motivate me. It's a shame really. I mean, I'd have a much nicer house.

James, you're a legend. Thank you ever so much for your time.

Thanks very much for having me.