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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 down the line by Jon Connell, the journalist turned entrepreneur behind the hugely successful global magazine, The Week, whose new venture, The Knowledge is a news digest for the digital era. A newspaperman who worked for the Sunday Times, rising to deputy editor of the Sunday Telegraph, Jon quit to launch The Week in 1994. The weekly digestive essential news and opinion became an international phenomenon, spawning American and Australian editions. Jon is aiming to repeat the trick with The Knowledge, a subscription app backed by Lord Rothermere, which promises to deliver everything you need to know about the world in an entertaining form. Jon, thank you for joining me.

Nice to be with you.

Let's start. Congratulations on The Knowledge, in a crowded online news world I read it aims to deliver all the wisdom of the week in one place.

Well, that's the idea. Yes, we do it daily, we try to do it in five minutes a day, so we don't take too much of your time and we have a little catchphrase at the end “that's it, you’re done” because so many things in life are very hard to finish. And so much media is very hard to finish once you're in, it's very hard to get out. So we try to do everything, like The Week, with the knowledge it's the same, we try to be brisk and concise and just get across to you all you need to know and maybe a few things you don’t.

Because I remember growing up in the sort of eighties where you'd be bored, whereas now no one's bored. It's the opposite, isn't it? We've got an overload of information. I've got hundreds of apps on my phone, tiles and squares vying for my attention, whether it be podcasts, Netflix, magazines, newspapers. That is the thing isn't it, how do you stand out from that crowd?

Well, I think that's it. And I think you've actually hit the nail on the head. I mean, in a way what we are doing, I suppose it's a bit counterintuitive, but we are saying, look, there's a mass of content out there, vastly more than there ever was when I started The Week 25, 28 years ago. So now we're not gonna try and add to that noise of lots of original content. We're gonna try and bring you the best, the best content from all over the world. From media websites, from podcasts, from videos, from every other source. So the idea is that we are a digest, but we say, hey, there's far too much out there. We'll make it easy for you. We'll bring you just the best.

How's it going?

Well so far so good. It's very early days. The newsletter's very popular among those who read it. We've got to put some more marketing behind it, which we will do. That's all planned for the new year. And as I say, it's already established a rhythm. I've got a very talented little team, I'm working with my daughter, Flora who used to be a musician. But the pandemic rather put paid to that, she did one of the last performances in the Albert Hall as the warmup act for Brian Ferry. And then that was it, lockdown. So she thought maybe she should switch careers. So she and I dreamt at The Knowledge during lockdown.

So is she there to bring a sense of cool to help you connect with the younger generation? I might need some of her help myself.

No, you've got it entirely. I may know that there were bodies unbowed on the streets in the 1970s, but she knows all about the modern film stars and she keeps me right on all the stuff in the present day. So it's a good combination between my long perspective on things and her fresh and more youthful one.

I was talking with some of my colleagues yesterday and I referenced Hart To Hart. Do you remember with Robert Wagner and Stephanie Powers?

I do.

And that was a big moment for me because a lot of my colleagues looked at me and went “what?” And then I suddenly realised that I'm 20 years older than them and less relevant.

Yes but the odd thing is we do have a little section from the archives and although that is true, actually bringing some of these highlights from the past is quite fun for the younger generation. So one thing we do is we do desert island discs, but we find somebody who may have been in the news or somebody who for example, when the bond film came out, we did Ian Flemmings desert island discs. And so it's quite interesting for people to be cast back into an age when they weren't around and see what people thought and did then.

Walk us through the journey of starting The Knowledge if you can, because you moved on from The Week, incredibly successful. I assume that you were financially looked after and therefore didn't need to take a minimum wage job at the local chip shop or indeed start something new. And yet there you are getting stuck back into it, is this because you've sort of got the bug?

Yes, I'm sort of encourageable and I can't really stay still. So a few years ago I started something called Connell Guides and they were little books aimed at helping students get good grades in exams, really English and history. And again, doing much like The Week did, which is pulling the most interesting critics say on Hamlet together in one little book with a clever academic doing it. So that in an hour's reading, you get all the most fascinating insights into Hamlet or the Great Gatsby or whatever it is. So I've got 80 of those and I've got a new other series of books called All You Need To Know. So, I did that which took up some of my time. Then I thought up another idea, which was, I felt that busy chief executives have too little time to read newspapers and what they need to know is the trends that are shaping the world. So I created something called Sunday Briefing, which is aimed at CEOs and is in a way the opposite of the week in the sense that it tries to give you the stuff you can't read about in the papers. And that's really aimed at just a very small group and it's quite an expensive subscription. So I launched that business three years ago. And so that's now up and running and then two things happened first, The Week was sold to Exponent, the private equity firm. I wasn't wild about working for private equity really, and that they probably weren't wild about keeping me. So I left The Week a couple of years ago and chatted among others to Jonathan Rothermere and felt maybe it would be fun to start something new. So the second thing that happened of course was the lockdown when we were all a thrust together with our families. And I was lucky to be with most of my family. And I started chatting to my oldest daughter, Flora about the news and whether one might do something new. Cause it seemed to me that 30 years ago it was a world of new newspapers. And literally when we started The Week, the little converted garage I started The Week in, it was just a wash of newspapers all over the place. I used to have a retired army officer called Brigadier Kendon Jolks and he used to make sure the room was tidy because it was so full of newspapers. Well, that's that world, now the world is so different. It's a world, as you were saying, just so full of all kinds of media, almost all of it online. And it just struck me that there was a gap here for something which addressed that world, not the world of newspapers and moreover something which did it daily rather than weekly. I think people's rhythm has changed. I think young people, particularly, want something every day and they want something also which is a bit more multimedia. So if there's a good little snippet on the today program or a good podcast from you or someone, we try to highlight it or a fun video. And also maybe finally a little bit more internationally minded. So we very much mix up stuff from The Wall Street Journal or The Sydney Morning Herald with stuff from the Daily Mail or The Times or the FT or indeed from many of the brilliant blogs or stuff on Substack. So we just conceived this very different animal to The Week. And I suppose one linking thing is that I always feel these things have to have a character. They have to have a bit of edge to them. You can't just do a straight digest, The Times said this, the FT says that. I think it's got to have a bit of edge. And that's what we've tried to do with The Knowledge.

Well, I'm flattered that you think there might be some good content from my podcast, that's very kind of you! Someone's obviously brief to you that I'm susceptible to flattery for which I'm grateful. Tell me about the vote of confidence from Lord Rothermere, he's supported the majority stake through DMG media. That's an incredible vote of confidence in you, Flora and the concept, frankly.

Well, he's always been interested in The Week and he's always been interested in this kind of journalism. So I suppose it is, and I've known him for a long time and I think that he sort of sees that this is an important developing market and it's very different to anything else that he does. So I think we are moving into a world where, I mean, it's a cliche now, but where newsletters are the new newspapers. Once upon a time, as I said, we all read newspapers, but the great thing about newsletters is there they are in your email every morning or every afternoon, you don't have to make an effort. You don't even have to go into your app. So it's that I think, and I think Jonathan Rothermere sees the world is moving on and this is where I think we are going and the growth of newspapers in my view will be exponential. That's point one and there's one other point, which is I think that what we're also going to do is launch some more specific newsletters. Because I think that people are after niche stuff more now than they used to be. I think that's another point.

I'm interested in your goals, short, medium, long term editorially but also business wise. Do you have financial targets, if you don't mind me asking, do you have a target for subscriber numbers? I mean clearly like The Week, this has global potential as you say.

Yes it does. I think we don't really have a specific financial target. It's very difficult with things like this. It was the same, I think with digital companies. In the very early days, the aim must be to get eyeballs on it, to get people to see it, the monetisation comes later. And it'll probably be as with others, with us a combination of some advertising, some sponsorship and some subscription revenue. I think the first thing is to try and grow the numbers. We would love to reach a hundred thousand readers of The Knowledge within the next couple of years.

And how are you gonna go about doing that? Because as you say it's difficult to stand out from the crowd now. Do you have a marketing plan or is it more like the field of dreams approach where you would say, we've built this, it's a quality product and let it sort of get some grassroots support and build some momentum naturally like The Week did back in the day.

Yes. I think if you don't have that word of mouth still in this age of social media, you're not gonna fly. So I think it does need that, you're right. With The Week, it was really word of mouth that did it. And I think with The Knowledge, word of mouth will be very important. Obviously we will do all kinds of Facebook ads and Instagram and all the rest of it and all the social media. And we will have as good a marketing campaign as

we possibly can. And I'll get around the place and try to spread the word. But I think in the end, word of mouth is very important. And as I say, word of mouth, interestingly enough, particularly among women was what sort of swung The Week I think. Women are very good at talking about things that interest them in this way, probably better than men. And I found so many women I used to meet at parties and elsewhere, who would say you ought to be giving me a free subscription to The Week, I've sold so many subscriptions for you. You don't get quite so many men doing that.

You're nearly 70 but you're as enthusiastic as ever about your work. Are you a workaholic? Working with your daughter, are you going to change your working style with this business and do a bit less?

No, I don't think I can do a bit less. I suppose I am a workaholic, but I'm lucky like you are. I'm doing something that I enjoy and I think if you're doing something that you enjoy, you keep going at it. It's fun working with my daughter and it's fun doing something new. And so long as I have the energy and so long as I'm fit enough, I'll keep bashing on.

And what feedback have you been getting from your, do I call them readers? What would you call them, customers? It's interesting.

I mean, they are subscribers although they're not paying but I suppose readers at this stage. They just say, this is just what we want, don't change the tone at all, that's it, you are done, I love that phrase, it's the only thing in the day that I feel I've really finished. So we've got a whole host of quotes like that. I think it is something that people like, because it's quite quirky and it mixes interesting, original, arresting thoughts about the world with sort of quirky stories and quotes. I love quotes. We're always looking for jokes too. There aren't enough jokes around.

Everyone seems to be miserable these days don't they? There seems to be a litany of woe.

And in a way I think something, and again, this was true of The Week and I want to make it even more so of The Knowledge. I mean, I don't want to be pollyannaish about it, but I do think that we are a bit of a gloomy bunch of journos. And I think that looking for brighter stories which will cheer people up is no bad thing. And so I do think we do look for positive stuff, positive ideas. I mean, one of our items is called "The Case For" where we often put a case for something slightly controversial. So we even did the case for the Taliban, for example, because after a lot of people in Afghanistan like the Taliban, so there must be a case for them. And this week we're doing the case for America. Everyone is writing America off. They're saying the empire's over, a combination of the pandemic, social inequality, et cetera, which killed off previous empires. Biden, Trump was hopeless. And we are actually saying, well, hang on a moment. You know, people have a habit of writing off America and then back it comes and you do it at your peril as Saddam Hassein among others found.

So that's the other thing we try to do is not always look for the gloom and doom. And I think surveys which editors do show that the two things readers get rather fed up on is one, the sheer length of stuff, endless long pieces everywhere. And secondly, the endless diet of gloom and doom.

Well, you mentioned about subscribers turning into paying subscribers, I'm a paying subscriber. So I've certainly put my money where my mouth is, but one of the things I really like about The Knowledge is, as you've just alluded to there, is what I would call the long reads shortened section. Because I do want the long read, I like the depth, but I also like someone that I trust to have read it for me and just summarise it because my attention span is shocking these days.

Yeah. And mine too, you say I'm very busy and I'm working hard, but I'm also fantastically lazy, you know? And it's partly out of laziness that The Week arose and this arose, I can't really be bothered to read too much of this stuff. I want someone guiding me. So we were discussing yesterday a long piece by Ferman Mount in the London Review of Books. And he's a very clever man and we will do that piece, but we'll do it in a short version. And then if you wanna read the original, off you go and buy the London Review of Books. So yeah, I think that's something which has driven me a bit impatience and slightly laziness, I don't don't really want to spend all my I'm going through this stuff.

I'm what I call constructively lazy. I want to do the minimum amount of work possible, but I am driven and want to achieve so I won't shy away from the work that needs to be done but I don't fetishise it either.

I'm like you and I like to build treats in my day. So we were talking before this, I like a good breakfast with my porridge and I like to have tea. So I do build in sort of little treats in the day, which I think everyone should, things that you can look forward to where you make yourself have a break. I'm not an obsessive meditator, but I do think there is something in this meditating once or twice a day for 20 minutes. Because I think that people who are busy need to also have the capacity to relax and enjoy themselves and you'll do your work better if you do.

Do you have any enemies? And obviously I don't mean that in a sort of James Bond sense, people you would regard commercially as competitors, I'd be interested in your view on The Week or do you have the view sort of an abundance mentality where rising tide lifts all boats? Should I cancel my subscription to The Week to read The Knowledge? Is that what you want?

No, I wouldn't. I love The Week, obviously it's part of my DNA and it's part of me and I don't think I have enemies. Funny enough, oddly, when started The Week or in the early days, Boris Johnson was editing The Spectator and he used to say to me, "you are taking my readers away" and I'd say, "no, I'm not," I might have been taking a few but there's a competition for people's time. You're right. So up to a point, everyone

out there is competing with me, all thoses spectators and new statesmen and blogs and other newsletters. But I don't see any of them as rivals. I see them for me as just fascinating sources of content and if I can digest them and highlight them for people in some ways, that's a good thing. And indeed, you know, in the early days of The Week, journalists loved being in the best articles page of The Week. And some of them used to ring me up and say, “why am I not in there more?” I'm not sure necessarily their bosses were wild about it once it started being successful, but the journalists themselves, it was a showcase, I didn't know The Guardian had such interesting pieces of thought.

Well, the only thing worse than being talked about of course is not being talked about, all attention is good when you're trying to build your career. Actually, I'd like to talk through your career if we can in a moment, but I'd be interested to sort of learn about how you've changed over the years as a leader, as an editor. You've obviously acquired some skills and some insight, but in my journey, I've also learned a lot about myself along the way. How have you changed over the years?

That's a very good question. I'm not sure how introspective I am about that kind of thing. In some ways I think I've probably got more broad minded in the sense if you're exposed constantly to different points of view and if you're not a sort of naturally very what my old colleague, Frank Johnson called “viewy person” with lots of fixed ideas and you are exposed to all these different viewpoints, you'd become possibly less certain about the world rather than more certain about the world. As you get older, which is partly why I like working with young people and I've got a very good young gang on The Knowledge and I had indeed in the early days of The Week, a very good young gang there, because I think there is always a danger as you get older that you become a bit ossified and you don't really stop thinking and you stop adapting.

I've given up on thinking if I'm honest, it's ahide into nothing. I tried it and I've tried it for many decades, but now I'm just quite happy to just exist and meander through life.

I think that's a good point. Depends what you mean by thinking, but in a funny way, I don't think many of us think very much, we think about obviously what we’re going to have for breakfast or we think about, ooh, that's interesting. I walk every day and I make myself think so The Knowledge or the Sunday Briefing or The Guides came out of thinking about stuff. Sorry, we're diving about a bit, but the guides came out of my daughter Flora saying “help, I need to get a better result in my mock a level on the Tempest. I don't know anything about it.” So I read the Tempest and found it pretty difficult to understand and basically rang up a friend of mine, an academic, the man who taught me, he taught me through it. I wrote her a paper, she got her A and then I thought whilst going for my walk, well, Flora can't understand this play. If Flora’s at sea and doesn't know which critics to read, then lots of other people must be like her. So I think what I do is I make myself try and stand back from the world and think

about what is it that people want,what are they missing? And that's one example and I suppose The Knowledge is another.

What keeps you at night?

Oh, I'm a very bad sleeper, so nothing and everything. It's just a busy brain really. I've done as you say enough things and work is work so I try not to let work worry me. You just have to get on with it. There are always problems every day. Any new business, it's a sort of nightmare because there's so many different logistical angles to pull together. You're wrestling with so many different things. I think that if I made a big mistake over the week, it was that I thought too much like a journalist and not enough like a businessman. And I go on doing that I have to say, even although I tell myself not to. So when Felix Dennis came along to help me on The Week, I was still too worried probably about what should be on the cover and which stories we should do and not nearly worried enough about how we drive the business, what could kind of a deal I should do with Felix, et cetera, et cetera.

I was going to ask actually, what advice would you give your younger self? You know, if you could sort of quantum leap back into you aged 25, would you give yourself some pieces of advice? Some people say actually I'm glad I made the mistakes I made because it made me who I am today. But what would you tell your younger self?

That thing about you always learn from your mistakes, it's better and a way to learn from the mistakes of others. I would absolutely tell myself that I have to learn about money and understand it and I have to learn about business and understand it. And you know, if you're going into a world like the world I went to and you went to in journalism, it'll last for a bit, but there's so many opportunities to start something new. But to do that, you really do need to have a feel for how the business world works, and how you bring all this stuff together. And I think that I didn't really put much effort into that. So I would've just paid more attention and I would give that advice to any young person if they're at all entrepreneurial, which is to study how other entrepreneurs did it or find a friend who's very good at numbers and talk to them a lot and I think that really matters.

Do you think that a young person now starting their career in journalism today has it easier or harder? Because in one sense it's easy, there's blogging podcasting, you can make a name for yourself and then be acquired by a major media brand but on the other hand, newsrooms that used to have 80 people in them now have like four people in them. It seems that there's no money in journalism and why would you bother? Would you even tell someone considering what career they should do to turn away from journalism?

I think I probably would. You know, although I don't think I would tell them to go and work for a newspaper and if they did want to starting out, I would say go abroad to some interesting country and file from there, or find a niche area that you are really

good at and then develop that area and suggest pieces on that particular area. But, I think it is a hard area, it's quite hard to get into newspapers and it always has been, it was very hard for me too, but on the other hand, as you say, there are all these opportunities in doing your own blog or starting new websites. And I think in that sense, if your skill is writing and you're quite entrepreneurial, then maybe this is a good profession to be in. As I say, I think we're at the beginning of a trend here, the newsletter trend is well established, but it's got a long way to go. So just day by day, we see just how successful some of these are, look at Lad Bible, it's grown out of Facebook. Look how successful that is. There are plenty of opportunities. So I wouldn't be too dispiriting to people who wanna do it.

Who were your journalist and media heroes, what journalists do you admire? Are there any media entrepreneurs that you have a soft spot for?

Well, I mean, Felix was a bit of an old rogue in a way, but I had a soft spot for Felix Dennis. He was great. He came along, he saw what I was, he realised I was probably a bit of a soft touch but very good at what I did, he realised also that he could bring the kind of marketing and skills, we were doing the right thing, but we weren't doing it quite in the right way. And he lent us a publisher for six months to train up the person we had there. And he was always very supportive and I kept talking to him right through. So I suppose on the media entrepreneur side, he would've been somebody, I absolutely respected. And on the journalism side, well, I'd have to say Harry Evans because he was the first person really, I worked briefly on the Aberdeen Press Journal, but he was the man who took me onto the Sunday Times.

I had the great pleasure of knowing Sir Harry Evans. I mean, he was a man of impeccable integrity, but also a bloody good editor, they don't make them like that anymore, do they?

You're right. They don't. And he just was a total integrity and total focus and you're right, he was fun to be with. I used to have quite jolly dinners with him in Washington or New York when I went over sometimes in his latter days. And it was a tremendous thrill to join his Sunday Times. I mean, he was a good editor because he was always throwing out ideas and he was clever enough to be surrounded by good people who would filter out the bad ones and know how to run with the good ones. So, the Sunday Times I joined in 1978 was absolutely buzzing with life and with good people. And I really was fantastically lucky to join that ship.

I had Sir Harry on this podcast a few years ago, a couple years before he died. And it was great fun. He attacked me immediately for being from Yorkshire, which I thought was great given that we were both sitting in a New York studio. And we did a bit of work together afterwards, actually we were going to potentially launch a podcast, but obviously that ended with his untimely death, very, very sad about that. In fact, I was going to ask you then, given that you've mentioned a few points in your career, could you talk to our listeners through your career? Did you always want to be a journalist and what were the first steps that you took along the way?

No, I don't think it was as logical as that, I was at St. Andrews University. I did my degree and towards the end of it, I thought I have to find a job and writers sent me an application and it was so long I threw it in the bin. I said, I just don't think I can fill all this out. And then the Thompson organisation who then used to own, not just the Times and Sunday Times, but also a lot of local papers, they were recruiting and they came and they interviewed me and they offered me a job as a graduate trainee. And I was sort of vaguely interested in journalism and I hadn't really got any other ideas as to what I would do apart from possibly directing plays but I was turned down by a couple of directing courses so I forgot about that. So I ended up as a graduate trainee doing the graduate training scheme in Newcastle. There were ten of us. It was a four month course, it was a brilliant course and we learned all about newspaper law, shorthand, public administration. We wrote pieces for the Newcastle journal along the way and that's really where my grounding was. And then I was shipped off to Aberdeen as a Scott. I seemed unable to escape Scotland, I wound up in Aberdeen, writing about golden weddings and flower shows and learning how to spell people's names correctly, et cetera. And it was a good experience, but I was quite restless, pretty early. And I managed to get some time off to write a book and in the course of doing that, the editor rather reluctantly gave me some time off. And I came to London and I chatted to people from the Sunday Times insight team who knew all about this guy. And we were in the pub opposite the Sunday Times building in Grayson road. And they said, there's a job going at the Sunday Times, why don't you apply. It's for the chief sub of business news. So I rang up after a couple of pints and got hold of the business news deputy editor, went across and saw him and he said, it's perfectly clear to me that you know nothing about business so why are you here? And I said, well, I just wanna write. And he said, well, if you give up your job and come down here, I'll squeeze you in for two or three days a week and give you work on Sunday Times business news. So I said, fine. So I get back up to Aberdeen and go and see Peter Watson. And I say, the sunny times have offered me this possible writing job. And he said, well, I suppose it's one of our sister papers and I'm not supposed to let you go for another year, but okay. And then the next day he bumped into me again and he said, John, I think you ought to get in writing. So I wrote a letter to the guy I'd seen, Peter saying, could you possibly just give it to me in writing? And I got this ferocious letter back saying dear Mr. Connell, there is no job on a Sunday times. Don't think of coming south to trial because we're completely full Yours sincerely Kenneth Fleet, editor, business news. So I thought help, what do I do now? I've just been turned down but I've resigned. So I thought I'm gonna go. So I left the press and journal. I went to London, I rang up Peter who'd been having a back operation and he said, I'll quietly get you into the building. So for the first two or three weeks, I would slip into the Sunday times and write the odd piece for their business news and slip out again. And in the course of that time, I met Magnus Linklater, who was then the news editor of the Sunday times. And he got me to do a piece for the newsroom. And then I discovered that The Observer were doing a big investigation into corruption in Blackpool. So I went to Magnus and I said, why don't I go up there? See if I can get that story first. And so he said, okay. So I went up to Blackpool, spent three weeks at a boarding house in Blackpool. And I got the story first. And I got the story of the corruption. And the chief reporter of the Sunday Times, Will Ellsworth-Jones came up, met me in a hotel, just outside Blackpool and we wrote it up and I got back to London and the next week the phone rang on my desk and it

was Harry Evans' secretary asking me to come up. And Harry said, okay, John, I'll give you a job. I'll pay you as little as possible. It was 2000 a year, and I'm sure you'll be coming back asking for more soon and that's how I got my job on the Sunday times.

That is typical of Sir Harry, isn't it? I can imagine him in his sort of Lancaster manner saying that really. But what an incredible opportunity.

Well, it was. And then of course, five minutes later, I get this letter saying that the Sunday Times and times are gonna close for a year because Lord Thompson was going to try and deal with the print unions, which were then a big problem. There was no new technology in those days. And the print printers were always causing trouble. If they didn't like a story, they would pull the paper and we'd have to adjust it. So, you know, it was very, very difficult and Lord Thompson had enough. So I then found myself having a year off, although we wrote a book about the French mafia, me and the insight team. So that was a really rather odd way of starting on the Sunday Times. I then joined the insight team, and worked for them for a couple of years. And then I became quite luckily a defence correspondent.

What came next?

So I was defence correspondent, again, the guy who was doing it, Tony Garrity, went off to write a book on the SAS. Amazingly Frank Giles who had taken over as editor agreed to appoint me to that job. And it was a great time to be a defence correspondent, because it was the time of CND and the marches and we were buying Trident and there was the defence review and so on and the Falklands War, of course. So after the Falklands War, I signed up to do a book on the defence of Europe. So I thought I'd go to Scotland for six weeks and take a rather cheekly, six weeks sabbatical. And when I got back from the sabbatical, the Sunday times was absolutely in uproar because Henry Brandon, who had been the Washington correspondent since 1947, sent there by Ian Fleming, the bond author who was foreign manager of the Sunday Times after the war had resigned. Finally, he'd gone. So all of these stars on the Sunday Times on the sixth floor, these feature writers, they all wanted his job. So there were lots of applications. And the whole place was in uproar. Well, I discovered that Frank wanted to give the job to Steven Fay, who was one of the feature writers, but he was writing a book on Peter Hall's production of Wagner's The Ring and wouldn't be available for six months. So you can sort of guess what I did next, which was via the deputy. I suggested that if I was happy to decamp to Washington for six months and fill the gap. So Frank summoned me up and said, well, I'll give you a bonus, you could have a flat and you could keep your job, but go and hold the fort in Washington for six months. So I did, and it was in the time of Reagan. And my last piece there was written from California saying that Reagan would run again for president. It was a long piece. I was quite proud of it. And I just got back to my hotel room and Santa Barbara and the phone rang, and it was Andrew Neil saying, hello, I've taken over as editor of the Sunday Times. So I'll see you when you get back. So, anyway, to cut a long story short, Steven Fay went out, but he didn't really fit in the new Sunday Times. And he didn't really like it very

much. And so I was then the automatic candidate having been the sort of rank outsider who didn't even really want to go. So I became the Washington correspondent of the Sunday Times.

I bet that was an incredible adventure.

It was an incredible adventure, fantastic job to do. I had a wonderful time. I had a house in Georgetown. I was a bachelor and in Washington the proportion of women to men is huge so I was always being invited as a spare man to dinners all over the place. The embassy was very, very good to me. It's the key for any foreign correspondent, the tip I would give, make friends with your embassy because they will have interesting people to dinner with, make friends with your ambassador, if you can. That was really important to me in Washington. So I just had a really good time for three or four years.

When it came to an end was that the right moment?

Yes, it was the right moment. I didn't wanna live there. When I came back, I took a year off, which I'd rather enjoyed. Cause as I've said to you earlier I was meant to write a book, but I just had a good time really for a year, went back to the Sunday Times as diplomatic editor and then was quite quickly poached by a new newspaper called the Sunday Correspondent, which was just starting, which you may remember, didn't have a very long life. It was supposed to be the Sunday answer to the Independent before the independent launched their own Sunday paper. So I was hired as foreign editor of that. So I moved from being a writer to a bureaucrat and I really enjoyed putting together a team and I had a great time. And interestingly, I couldn't have done the week without that experience because in the second half of the correspondence life, the editor was somebody called John Bryant and he came from The Mail and he taught me things i'd never really learned on kind of the posher papers about how to lay out a story, how to make a story work with a picture, the importance of headlines, captions, all that kind of thing, which stood me in such good stead when I launched The Week. So I did that. The paper collapsed, I was out of work. I considered becoming an academic for a bit and wondered what to do next, got rehad by John brand onto the European to reshape their features and their magazine. And then through Max Hasting became deputy of the Sunday Telegraph. For most of the time with somebody I knew well, which was Charles Moore.

Did you enjoy being an editor? Cause like I have a few journalist friends that see it as the natural progression and their career, they're ambitious, but then like I had Chris Blackhurst on many, many years ago when he made editor of the independent, he hated it. He said, I'm actually a journalist, I want to write a column, I want to be having lunch with contacts and I'm tinkering with other people's words and sitting in HR and legal meetings.

I hate writing. I've always hated writing.

Right. Okay then.

Absolutely hate it. I used to hate it when I had to sit down and write. I still do. I mean you're quite pleased when you've done it, but no, rewriting is fine, but no I vastly prefer editing to writing.

I'm the same actually. I mean, I run a small PR practice with about 20 people and I don't want to do the doing of it anymore. I used to lay the bricks myself, but now I want to stand over a team of bricklayers and I can help them and give them the benefit of my experience and mistakes, but I don't wanna do that myself.

No, no, that's exactly. It's a very good analogy. That's how I feel too.

It's interesting as you get bigger though, because I was chatting with one of my friends the other day and he said, yes, but the next progression is that you're not even standing over the team of bricklayers, you are in the portacabin on the building site, but you're 300 metres away or a couple of hundred yards away where you can't see what's been doing as it's happening. And therefore by the time it then comes to you, if something goes wrong, it's often already too late.

Yes. And I think that's a less attractive stage. I mean, I think this sort of hands-on editing is much more fun. And I think when you're sort of really involved in the copy and so on, and so you don't wanna be too far from the brick lane.

Obviously we've come to the point where we talk about The Week. What was the genesis of it? What a rollercoaster that has been.

The genesis of that was I had a very happy time on the Sunday Times. And that was partly because Charles Moore is very funny, he may not always come across as such, and Frank Johnson who was the former sketch writer on The Times was very funny. So it was just a very amusing, interesting time I had on the Sunday Telegraph. And also obviously cause I was editing the paper quite a lot and Charles was away. It was very good for me to do it, but I didn't think I wanted to do it forever. And I didn't think anyone would ever move. Max seemed to be settled as editor of the Daily, Charles in the Sunday. And then what happened was that in early 1994, my father died and Charles said, you must go to Scotland and spend some time with your mother. So I went up. Now, Pitlochry in January, there's not an awful lot to do up there. One day I went for a very long walk across the hill, which our house looks out over and it's way over an hour. And during that walk, I thought, well there I am every day reading these papers and I go into a conference and someone says, did you see that piece in The Mail? And I often say, no, I didn't see it. And I think if we journalists, editors whose job it is to read this stuff, if we can't read anything, think about the poor reader, people out there, how can they possibly cope? Newspapers are getting bigger and bigger. The magazines are exploding on Saturdays, as well as on

Sundays. And you know, we can't get through all this stuff. Secondly, people seem to be getting busier, not just with their work, but with their hobbies. So they've got less time. So these two things mean that must be scope for someone doing a kind of digest of the best stuff, because that column in the middle of the Sunday, the Daily Telegraph or The Times where it's always the same length, you may only have one little thought, but you've gotta spill it out over 1200 words. And I don't think, you know, you need all those words necessarily to get across the point that these people are often making. And then I thought, well, it'll have to have a bit of character to it. It'll have to be fun and it'll have to have some pictures, but we could do the best houses. So we get pictures of houses for free. We could do a bit for radio, The Arches might be fun. And Desert Island Discs, of course. So I got back to the house and weirdly, The Observer was there and there was a piece by Alan Watkins on the tabloids having too much power. So I took it and wrote it up and found 190 words. I could summarise it with a few quotes. There was a piece in The Mail on Sunday, even back then that hunting was an issue and John Mortimer was defending hunting, so I did the same for that. So I satisfied myself, this could be done. And I guessed, although legally I had to get a lawyer to tell me I was right, that fair dealing would mean that was perfectly okay to do this kind of thing. So what I did then what every journalist did, which is very little, but talk about it, think about it and go back to the office and continue with my job. And then one day I woke up and I thought, I can't, I just gotta take the plunge. So I went in to see Charles and I said, “Charles, I'm afraid I'm gonna leave. I've got a project. I'm a bit superstitious about talking about it too much, but it's a magazine and I just wanna do it.” And Charles said, “well, you can't leave now.” And I said, “no, six months I'll stay, I'll stay.” And so I ended up leaving six months later. He actually rang me up in the summer and said, I've left Frank Johnson editing, come and stay with me for a day or two. So suddenly there I am, we moved to the country to the house I'm in now in Wilshire, we sold our house in London. I had no money. I had one young child and another one on the way. And I trailed back and forth to London to see venture capitalists who didn't seem to be very adventurous and certainly didn't want to back me. But I was trying to raise an awkward sum, which was basically a million and a half. It was too small for them and too big for my friends in those days.

It's like an awkward middle.

It was exactly. I didn't really realise that if you'd asked for 50 million, then venture capitalists might look up, but asking for one or not two, not enough. So I, in the end, was put in touch with somebody called John Gordon who ran a company called The Register Group. He was quite interested. I did a dummy in his office. He suggested I go and meet a friend of his called Jeremy O’Grady, who wasn't doing very much sort of semi-academic. And I did meet Jeremy and he proved to be a great asset to me, a wonderful writer and helped with his personality and the stamp he put on the writing, so we did the dummy together. Meanwhile, I began recruiting people. I then basically plunged in with half my money from the house we'd sold in London, put a hundred thousand in and another a hundred thousand from friends and off we went. I rented a converted garage near Paddington, so I could come into Paddington station and walk to the office. And we just launched. And I remember going on the first night to the

printers, in the middle of the night who were up in Bista and waiting for the first copies off the press, putting them into my car, driving to London. I got all my friends together in the Compton Club in Fulham.

How did that feel?

Well, I was quite tired by then, but I gave them all coffee and everything and told them they had to get out their dress books and send The Week to everybody they knew. And I then sat back waiting for the subscriptions to roll in and about three people subscribed. And so the whole thing, people don't believe it at first, they see this and think that's not gonna last. A friend of a friend of mine said, “I'd give it three.” “Three what?” said my friend. “I'd give it three months.” But we went off charging along and then as you mentioned earlier, I got this card through the post and it said, “Dear Jon, I've discovered your magazine. Someone put it in my briefcase. I think it's very good. If you are looking for money, would you like to have a drink one day, Yours Felix Dennis.” So I talked to our office manager and he said, “the numbers are getting a bit low.” So I rang up Felix. I went to see him. And to cut a long story short. He took a stake and I went and sat in a lovely summer, 1995 in the garden of his house, near Stratford. And we came up with a deal. Wasn't a very well thought out one from my point of view, but he snapped it up. And from then on there he was. And it took longer than most people imagined, it was a success esteem long before it was a proper success. It really took six, seven years to be really successful. But we did it in the end.

I'm a massive admirer of Felix Dennis. I do a bit of work with Dennis Publishing, have done for many years. I've read How To Get Rich so many times. And he talks very fondly of his relationship with you and how he helped the magazine. He takes credit for instructing, or maybe suggesting you had a recap of the week's weather.

Yes, oddly, I think he may have suggested it, but I also was rather obsessed with the weather. He and I share an obsession. I mean, we used to have this rather dotty map. I'm afraid it's been dropped now. Where we would show the warmest place last week, the wettest place, the windiest place and so on. And actually we liked that kind of thing. Yes, I do remember him mentioning it and I'm rather glad we had it.

I'll tell you how one of the phrases that I picked up for, I'm a very long term reader of The Week. I look forward to arriving in the letter box every, every week. We have a weekly catchup in my own business, and one of the headlines for our agenda is “boring, but important.”

Yes, it's so important, boring but important. It's slightly been dropped now after I've left, but I actually believe strongly and I must resurrect it because it's a very good headline because there was an awful lot of stuff, which is boring, but important. I was pleased with that one and the other one I was pleased with, which wasn't my idea, but a friend of mine was, it must be true, I read it in the tabloids.

Yes absolutely. I've always done that. And I condemn that column because it's just tittle tattle and gossip, but boy, do I read it every week.

Well, that's the point. You need a bit of tittle tattle and gossip.

Imagine that we'll be adding some violin music now when we do the edit, do you have any regrets?

Yes, I suppose I have lots of regrets, but I'd have to think hard about what they were. I'm not very good with money and I never have been and I should have been a lot better and cannier in the early days of the week, less cavalier put it that way. I mean, Felix would chime me a bit about it afterwards. I was too cavalier and I tend to be a little over hasty and plunge into things without always thinking the business side through. I would say that I'm quite a good entrepreneur, but I'm really not a very good businessman. And I would always need to be alongside someone who steadies the ship in that sense.

That sounds like me.

But I definitely need a steady pair of hands alongside. I'm fascinated by the process of making money and I really admire small entrepreneurs and small businessmen and know how hard it is and business women and I slightly wish that I was better at business. So I suppose that's one of my regrets.

I work with ultra successful people, many of them are billionaires, serial entrepreneurs and it fascinates me. I run my business reasonably, but I'm not a serial entrepreneur like they are, where they could own a bowling alley and a newspaper and a hotel and they can look at a balance sheet and a P and L and know what to look at, they just seem like numbers to me.

Yeah. Well I'm like you, and I'm afraid my eyes glaze over, which they shouldn't.

It's fascinating. Isn't it?

Yeah.

So, do you have any sort of big unticked boxes on life's to-do list? I mean, clearly you've got this to see through over the next few years, so it can fulfil its potential. Will you ever slow down or will you be sort of editing this app and this website as they lower you into the coffin?

Probably. Yes. I'd like to not slow down, I think the key is holidays. I think everyone should have good holidays and not stint themselves on them. And I think that's

important, it has always been a key part of my life. I'm trying to go away tomorrow to the Caribbean for Christmas and I'm rather looking forward to it and I think you need a good break. You need to get away from the daily grind, apart from anything else, that's where you can think when you're in a different environment. So, as long as I'm able to go on having nice holidays and see interesting places and sit in the sun sometimes I'm quite happy to keep bashing on on the work front.

I always have my best ideas when I'm in the shower or when I'm driving or something where I need to be awake, but I'm basically not staring at my inbox waiting for something to go wrong or to react. Because you don't get that quality time to actually reflect. And you don't get that space for an idea to just pop in there.

No, and I think with me, it's probably more when I'm walking or possibly just waking up in the night. But it definitely isn't when you are running along day by day, because most of the time, most of us just do the same things over and over again, don't we? And you have to deliberately break out of that.

Are you an optimist overall?

Yes. I think I'm a bit of a pessimist of the intellect and an optimist of the will. In other words, I can see all that's wrong with the world. But I always believe that things I do are gonna work out somehow and I think you have to believe that. And going back to something we talked about earlier, I think that ought to infuse the knowledge too, that, yeah, the world's a difficult place, but somehow or other we'll muddle through

A friend of mine, I dunno where he stole it from, but he mentioned the phrase tough minded optimism, which I quite like really. It's not about running away from reality, but neither is it allowing it to get you down. His view is that the way to solve your problems in life is to go about solving your problems.

Well, I mean, that's partly why I do this thing for CEOs Sunday Briefing, which is very well edited. But capitalists on the whole, CEOs on the whole are optimists, they have to be. They're running big companies. They're trying to make them successful. They've got to see the trends which are gonna work in their favour and how they use them. So they are optimist, successful people on the whole are. And I think it's a very important trait and on the whole happy people are optimists.

Jon, that was a hugely interesting conversation. I have long admired you as an editor, as a journalist, I've read The Week for years. I wish you the very best of luck with The Knowledge I am a paying subscriber. I'll be reading every week. Thank you ever so much for your time.

Thank you. I really enjoyed it.