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Matt Kelly

Editor, The New European

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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 Matt Kelly, chief content officer at Archant and editor of the New European. Archant is a publisher of newspapers and magazines with around 1,300 staff. They publish four daily newspapers and around 50 weeklies. He joined the company in 2016 from local world media. He's editor of the New European, launched in 2016, as a national newspaper for the 48% who voted to remain in the European Union. In 2017, Matt was awarded Pioneer of the Year by the Society of Editors for his work on the paper. He's also a contributing editor at GQ and a board member of the Global Editors Network.

Matt, thank you for joining me.

It is an absolute pleasure.

Let's start with the New European. It was originally launched as a four-edition pop up. How surprised have you been by its success?

Very surprised, to answer you. As you say, we launched it very, very quickly, nine days after the referendum vote. There was no plan beforehand to do anything; it was literally a spur of the moment idea, and I sent it to Jeff Henry, my boss, and said, "You know what? If ever there was a time for a new national newspaper it's right now." Because you've got this enormous constituency of people who are suddenly galvanized by a great emotion, and transcending the usual suspects in terms of politics, right across the board, and suddenly you could label them one thing: the 48%. They all knew who they were. So I sent this email off to Jeff, expecting him to dismiss it, but he didn't. He said, "Sounds interesting, let's talk about it."

Genuine enterprise and actual entrepreneurialism in a big company!

Well, I have to say, without self-aggrandizing or aggrandising Archant too much, I cannot think of another media organisation of the right size; big enough to do it and small enough to do it as well.

That has the agility and the drive.

Yes.

I think it's very impressive.

So Jeff said, "Let's talk about it." Every Tuesday we have an executive meeting where the six or seven of us come together and discuss the events. We had this very long exec meeting that week, and it was quite a depressing meeting because we were talking about the negative impacts of Brexit, the cost a paper, of ink, advertising being diminished etc. and I entirely forgot about the idea of the newspaper until the end of the meeting when Jeff said, "Well, has anyone got any positive ideas?" and looked at me, and I went, "Oh, yes! What about doing a new newspaper?" And again, expected everybody to shake their heads and dismiss it as a stupid idea. But people seemed to get the idea that there was this new body of people we could talk to. We came back 24 hours later with a business case, which seemed to make sense, and we thought, "We've got to go for it now. We've really got to seize the zeitgeist because it's not going to last for long," because people are going to get very bored of Brexit very quickly.

I'm bored with it now.

Well, 18 months later people are starting to get bored of it, but we thought it would go in a matter of weeks. Of course it didn't. We launched it nine days after the referendum, it was on the streets that Friday, a Berliner format, the Guardian printed it for us, very distinct looking newspaper. And I think the suspicion was – I don't have to think it, I know the suspicion was – that it was going to be rubbish. Because what were little old Archant doing in the business of national newspaper launches? But I was determined it was going to be the opposite; it was going to be brilliant. And there wasn't a single word of PA copy in it, there was no sort of wire rip-off stuff, everything in it was original. A big breakthrough for me was getting Jonathan Freedland from the Guardian to write the big Opus Magnus for the opening edition, because I knew if I had someone of Johnny's calibre writing the first piece people would pay attention to it.

Sam Bourne himself.

Yes, exactly. And Johnny's an old friend of mine, I used to be his editor at the Daily Mirror.

It's always who you know, isn't it?

It is who you know! It absolutely is. And for Johnny to agree to do it, sight unseen, was a real… I still feel a debt of gratitude to him, because how did he know it was not going to be a piece of junk? Anyway.

Alistair Campbell, a big writer as well.

Alistair came in the week after, and he dialled in and phoned us and said, "Who the hell are you guys? What is it? What are you trying to do?" And we explained it to him, and he said, "Right, okay, I want to be part of this." and Alastair has been

absolutely superb for us ever since. He's on the phone constantly, maybe five or six emails a day, great ideas, introducing us to all sorts of people, and both of those guys are at the far edge of a common experience with this newspaper, which is people really being passionate about it and wanting it to succeed. And I think that's not just the writers, it's the readers as well. And the most joyful experience really in my career – I've been a journalist now for nearly 30 years – and this newspaper, by an order of magnitude, has been the best thing I've ever done. Because the reflection of passion from people who get it, and are engaged with it, and understand it, and want it to succeed, is unlike anything I've ever experienced before. So I feel like I've just been kind of strapped in, in the passenger seat of something that's taken on a life of its own. It's been a wonderful experience.

So how's it going now?

It's going really well. We called it a pop-up publishing experiment when we launched because we sincerely thought we'll do it for four weeks, and the likelihood is it will be interesting but unsuccessful, and we'll be able to close it.

An honourable failure.

Yes, if you like. Or even a short term success. That was really the only ambition. But that first issue sold more than 40,000 copies and it still has a high cover price – it was £2, it's now £2.50 but it started life as £2 – and sales started at 40,000, and then the next week… my recollection was something like 32,000 and then 28,000, and you could see it diminishing. And over the summer there was a point where I think it hit less than 17,000, something like this, and I thought, "Well, it's going to run out of steam." Which was fine, but then the summer came, people came back from holiday, the topic was as interesting as it has been, and people started buying it again. And today it sells around 23,000 copies.

That's incredible for a paper that didn't exist.

It is the most incredible thing. It's up year-on-year 25%. So I think we're the only newspaper in Europe probably that is demonstrating material growth. Having said all of that, I am ever conscious that things could wane again, and it's profitable, but it doesn't make millions of pounds, it makes a six-figure profit. But all it would take would be for a couple of thousand people to switch off and it would start making a loss, in which case we would live up to our initial promise and close it. I have no ambition or expectation that it's going to become a full-time sustainable magazine or a newspaper. I think it's going to have a shelf life, and when that expires we'll move on and do something more interesting instead.

Do you get much engagement from Brexiteers who buy it because they enjoy it, and they are a comradely in polite disagreement? What's the engagement with them like?

I suspect are audience is 100% hardcore Remainers. I think you'd have to be a particularly sadomasochistic Brexiteer to buy the New European. That said, we get plenty of engagement on social media - of course, because we've now got a very

vibrant social media activity – and some are very abusive, some are very polite. One thing, apart from a few obvious throwaway remarks like, “Oh, it’s bog roll,” or, “It’s fish and chip paper,” most sensible people…

All newspapers are fish and chip paper!

Well, exactly!

What are we supposed to do, hoard them?

Exactly.

That’s not an insult.

So 99% of the opinion on the newspaper is positive. Whether you’re Brexiteer or a Leaver. In fact, people like Arron Banks tweeted the other day, “I disagree with every single thing you say, but I admire your get up and go to launch that newspaper, it’s an amazing achievement.” All the awards we won last year as well, again without trying to blow a trumpet, it’s just nice recognition that it’s a quality product, and I feel very lucky personally that my journey through journalism led up to, almost like the perfect triangulation, for launching a newspaper like the New European. Because I did have a great contacts book, I learned at the feet of tabloid masters around how to demonstrate a story or an opinion vividly and with passion, and I learned from my parents, who are both journalists, about the importance of really engaging an audience on their terms, and being honest, and having a great deal of integrity in what you try and do in journalism, which I think are factors that have made the New European a success with the people who buy into it.

Clearly, as a professional journalist you’re dedicated to the truth, you’re dedicated to get the story accurate, but I also see it as even more honest that you are open about the arguments you are trying to put forward; it’s not a hidden agenda, it is an overt agenda.

Well, I think you are 100% right, and I’d challenge slightly the proposition “clearly because you a professional journalist you are interested in integrity and truth”. I don’t think that necessarily is a given. In fact, I think a lot of professional journalists use that word professional as mitigation for not being in pursuit of accuracy and the truth. They see it almost as, “It’s my job and that’s what we do.” I’ve never been like that. The reason I worked for the Daily Mirror for so long was that it was an honest paper. Even though the paper makes mistakes and holds opinions, it is what it is.

It doesn’t try to be anything it’s not.

And it tries to be a force for good. And you used the word about being overtly partisan, and that to me is the justification when people talk about the New European in being part of the problem. Nick Robinson said to people that the New European, like The Canary and like Breitbart and stuff like this, was part of a new movement of hyper-partisan news media that were somehow distorting public opinion. And he was talking about especially around the BBC. Now, my shot back to that is that we’re not

anything other than what we say on the tin, you know, we are very clear about what we do.

You're not The Canary, in any event.

So there's no effort to subvert facts to present a false view of the world. Now, I would suggest some of those sites do – Breitbart is definitely right down that end of the spectrum – but also the Daily Mail, for instance, I would say, is an expert at infiltrating a hidden agenda through otherwise…

I deleted the app from my phone, it was part of my New Years resolutions because I just felt awful after I'd read it. Who cares if a celebrity has put n half a stone?

Yes, yes.

Do you know what I mean? Why am I reading all these articles?

So that to me… I think journalism can be a tremendous force for good in society, but the flipside is it can be a tremendous force for bad and for getting across people's hidden agendas. There's no hidden agenda about the New European. We are absolutely clear that we believe Brexit is a bad idea and that's our unfiltered message. End of story.

It does seem to me that politics has become so polarised generally. I mean, the deference that you had with party politics seems to have gone now. I've worked and been friends with for many years with John Mills, who was a prominent Brexiteer on the left. I worked with people who were prominent Remainers on the right. It does seem to me now that people disagree over issues now rather than that classic left right divide, but also the thing that shocks me now is the depth to which people are rude to one another. Like Brexit, whichever side you're on, seems to have split families up. I mean, you would never have that if you had a Labour son and a Tory dad.

That's right. It is quite disturbing at times to just think about what we've normalised as a society in the last two years. The kind of behaviours that we've normalised, which are disturbing in parts, and the aggression that is seen to be a valid response to people having an opinion. My view is that, in a democracy, it's healthy to have a lot of different opinions, and it's healthy to have very vibrant debate and discussion around those opinions. But the minute you take it personal you've lost something. You've lost the argument, I think. It seems like we've normalised this, that we're now used to it. The other thing I think we've normalised is a level of incompetence in Westminster; that you look back at any other era in British life, probably since the Suez crisis.

And there was competence.

And there was always thought and the application of reason. Now it seems to me to be almost the opposite, where it's the application of misreason where people are

actively pursuing strategies they think are going to have a detrimental effect on the country, but they're doing it for a hidden agenda – the hidden agenda being the unity of the Conservative Party and the retention of power, which I think is just morally bankrupt, what's going on now. And you can see it in the language that that's used all the time where it's, you know, keep the Tory party together, let's get this Brexit done, because the alternative is a Marxist in Number 10. So the logic is that if you don't vote for me, you're going to get a Marxist in Number 10. To have that as your only real proposition to retain power seems to me to be completely morally bankrupt, and there's no presentation of positive argument about how they're going to take the country forward. Everything now is dealt with almost exclusively in negatives, and that is tremendously worrying – especially when we've got a time in this society where we are facing real concrete problems around the NHS, around the infrastructure, the North-South divide, the size of classrooms, waiting times at A&E, and some of the real issues that made people angry in the referendum about immigration problems in parts of the country and how we're managing those things. So real concrete issues now getting swept under the carpet while we deal with these abstract notions of sovereignty, taking back control.

It's a dotted line on a map.

It's nothing.

When you think about the idea of a nation state, it is a ridiculous idea.

Especially in this age of globalisation where we are so co-dependent, and the argument being we'll be better off alone is just to me absolutely nuts. If ever there was a time where we needed the security and the bolstering of a significant bunch of players, such as the EU 27 for instance, it's right now. The idea that we will be a significant stronger player on our own in this increasingly globalised world economy seems to me to be almost deranged.

And I agree with you about it putting the Marxist back into Number 10, because the irony is, of course, is Corbyn is actually a Brexiteer really in all but name. I mean, he called for the invocation of Article 50 the day after. If you listen to any of his speeches during the referendum campaign, and they were Brexit speeches, and then in the end he'd finish it off with, "Vote remain." So there's like layers of irony here.

Yes.

One of the things I wanted to ask you though, you alluded to how most decisions are made via emotion these days as well, and I agree with you. I was active in Labour Party politics for 20 years, and it was a lot of tribalism. I stood in Heworth ward in York, which you could put a monkey up with a red rosette on, and it would get in, and luckily I did, twice in succession! But nowadays, like for example during the referendum campaign, all of my friends who were Remainers, and my other friends and family that were Brexiteers, none of them would even think of changing our mind the minute the referendum was

chosen, and it was an emotional decision whether to remain or to leave. It just seemed to me that there seems to be devoid of reason on both sides of the argument.

I think it's a very human response we're seeing now to this issue, and there's a lot of boredom. Boredom is a massive factor now, there's a lot of lethargy. We can talk about it all day long and retain an interest in it, but if you go to a motorway service station down the M6 and ask everybody in it what they feel about Brexit, they'll either walk out of the room or they'll just say, "For God's sake just get on with it, we're bored of talking about it." So boredom's a massive factor. And then there's also the issue around, I feel, about people wanting to save face. That they've made a decision, and even as evidence piles up that that decision can substantially damage if not their future, certainly their kids' futures, no one wants to say, "We screwed up, we got this wrong." I perfectly accept that. But I do think that, as time goes on, and the evidence starts to mount up that perhaps Brexit was a mistake, with the caveat that everybody understands the reasons for that mistake, it's only respectful that people have the chance to sit back and say, "Okay, we should have another say on the deal that is brought back." That's all that's what I think. Whether or not another referendum would solve anything I'm highly sceptical about, because say Remain won it 52-48, what would change apart from the row being turned on its head?

It's a shame, whichever side won, that it was won so thinly.

Yes.

Do you feel sorry for Theresa May a bit? Because there is the argument, I'm not here to present a Brexiteer's argument, but there was a referendum of the populace that was honestly held, and the majority voted to leave, albeit by a slim margin. She is faced with having to deliver that, even if she doesn't want to. She openly advocated the Remain position. She's leveraged that to her advantage, she's now the prime minister, but she's got to reluctantly get on with it. I actually feel sorry for her. When Blair was prime minister I was full of envy and thinking I'd love that job, but now I look at Theresa May on the telly, and even Gordon Brown, I think what idiot would ever want to be prime minister, because he's just a no-win situation.

I feel very sorry for her on a personal level; I look at her – and it's presumptuous to say this – but I look at her and she looks exhausted.

She looks knackered, she does, yes. And she looks miserable as well.

She does!

Even more miserable! At least when she was home secretary, you want a miserable person there, locking people up.

I mean, I don't think she's the warmest person anyway. I've never met her, but from people who have, they say she's got zero small talk, she's straight onto the issue, and doesn't seem to have a great sense of humour, which the sense of humour

tends to get you through torrid times like this, so I don't think she's got those in her kit bag.

Frankie Boyle says she looks like she's emerged from a haunted mirror.

(Laughs) That's just terrible.

That is terrible. But I did laugh.

Terrible, but true. And she does look intimidated, nervous, scared even, of where she's at, and she's acting like somebody who's intimidated, nervous and scared. So where I don't feel sorry for is that she put herself into this position, she's made what have been catastrophic political mistakes by calling the general election…

Which I thought was a stroke of genius at a time, like many people did.

Don't forget, Paul, this is what gives me great encouragement in the fact that everything we have thought of as a given – i.e. the Tories winning a landslide, Remain winning, the whole rush towards a hard Brexit – everything we have at some point thought of as an absolute given has been turned on its head completely. So if anybody asks me what's going to happen in the next six to 12 months, I have absolutely no idea, but I'll do my best to influence it in any positive way I can. But all I do know is that nobody knows anything right now, and that anything is possible. But where I don't feel sorry for Theresa May, to get back to your question, is that she has an opportunity, if she wants, to demonstrate leadership, and I think she is conspicuously failing to do that. She's acting like somebody who is listening to whoever spoke to her last, and is being influenced in that regard. Very few areas of consistency. Very few demonstrations of any sense of value or principle in the way she's carrying on. And I speak to a lot of journalists and politicians in Europe, and I can tell you, they're laughing at us. They cannot believe what has happened to the UK that they thought they knew. You know, this absolute scion of consistency and discipline and high politics, and the mother of all parliaments, they can't believe the circus we've become. And to me that is down to the disunity in the Tory party, and Theresa May's woeful attempts to keep the Tory party stitched together somehow, which weakens them chronically, but also weakens the nation over a period of time, and we're in a sad state. The miracle to me, and the big question to me, is why isn't Jeremy Corbyn 20 points ahead in the polls?

Just on the referendum there, because there's so much to discuss, I am very firmly of the view that Leave didn't win, actually, is that Remain lost. As a communications professional, I am appalled at how Remain didn't motivate people to get off their arses and vote for what they believed in.

Yes.

Because there was a lot of soft support for either side, and it just seemed to me… you know, like we mentioned that we both have a friend, Kevin Booth, who used to be the editor of the Yorkshire Evening Press, or The Press as it

then was, and when I got elected as a councillor, he did a talk for us all, and he said, "Look, 'York Council does an amazing job at something' is never going to sell papers, but when but when you guys mess up there's a negativity to the motivation that sells newspapers." And I think it's the same with what motivated Leave voters, is they seemed to be more motivated on the day to make their mark than Remainers did; we just utterly failed to connect. You know, wheeling out expert after expert, Obama… for me, if you look at this through the lens of an establishment stitch-up, every single expert they additionally wheeled out made it look more and more of an establishment stitch-up.

I agree completely.

How on earth were these clever communications people in charge of Remain? How could they be so stupid?

I think they were just utterly complacent. And I don't think they were particularly clever, the people. If you look about the cast of characters who were leading the Remain cause, I don't think they were brilliant. I think some of the media was weaker than it could have been. If you look at the great left wing newspapers in the UK – the Mirror and The Guardian in particular – could they have both been stronger and more campaigning around the Remain cause? Absolutely they could have been. And they would be today if they could go back in time. So I think that's self evidential.

Do you think we've learned that as an electorate as well? Because a lot of Hillary voters assumed it was obvious Trump was going to lose, and therefore didn't vote in sufficient numbers. I wonder whether… I mean, there was a long-term narrative of participation elections declining, whereas I think now because all bets are off, you've got to get out and vote for your side because otherwise the underdogs might win.

Well, I think the sense of jeopardy is certainly much sharper now, and to that point, the electorate and their engagement in the campaign, I think was very interesting, and a great shame. For instance, I'm from Liverpool, as you can probably tell. A great shame that the people of Liverpool couldn't go and speak to the people of Sunderland, for instance, about the benefits of European Union investment and the capital of culture programme, which will no longer be…

You don't want to be slumming it in Sunderland. Somewhere like York!

But Liverpool, which voted to remain by quite a high proportion, had seen the work that the European Union could do to repair the damage that the Thatcher government did in Liverpool. So that was there was a great sense of Europe is a good thing in Liverpool. Ironically, in Sunderland and the Northeast, very similar problems, very similar demographics, voted in almost the opposite way because I think they saw Europe as a problem that had caused all of these domestic issues, whereas actually the truth is it was another Tory government's austerity campaign that was causing their problems. So again, I think the European Union, in truth, for a lot of people, was almost incidental to how they voted. They voted because they were angry about domestic politics and the domestic failure of politics in their areas.

So yes, it's a shame that that people in Merseyside couldn't articulate to people in Sunderland about why it was in their self-interest to vote to remain.

It just shows you how ridiculous the whole thing is, because, on my view, I thought that Cameron, when he called the election, assumed he'd be in coalition with the Lib Dems again, and just threw the manifesto commitment to a referendum just as a kind of patsy, because it was obvious that he would never get a majority and therefore could just abandon it during the coalition. He then unexpectedly wins, and then he goes off to Europe saying, "I am going to negotiate all these things," and all the people I know from my family and friends, when he came back and said, what, phased benefits, he says that that's a victory. Everyone knew that that was utterly ridiculous. In hindsight, you can see how it's just obvious, how there's like a series of assumptions that very clever people made that have horrendously backfired.

Arrogance, isn't it? Isn't it arrogance to be so playful with all of our futures? You know, to make these fine calculations based on the opportunity for political gain? The reason he threw out the opportunity for a referendum was to appease the Conservative Party on the basis, as you say, that actually never get the opportunity to put it into practice because he'd end up in another coalition government.

Which actually I think he quite liked, secretly.

Yes. Why not? You always got someone to beat up, you've always got someone to blame for your own inadequacies.

At the end of the referendum when the polls closed, the philosopher AC Grayling tweeted, and I'll never forget it, he said, "I think we can all agree one thing; whatever the result is, what a stupid idea this was."

Yes.

I'll never forget that.

Yes.

I mean, almost criminal, you know? And then he did one! Within a couple of days. I think it was the next day, wasn't it, he walked out with Samantha and said, "That's it, thank you very much, I'm off." And as I recall, sort of whistled on his way back in, like the old Etonian he is. Job done, move on. Next, please.

And the irony is, of course, is that everyone on every side at the moment thinks they're the underdog. Even though Leave won, they're painting themselves now as the kind of upholders of democracy. The line is, "Well, we would have respected the referendum, and so should you." So everyone seems to feel that they're the victim. The cleverest of them all, and I hate to say it, but the guy who's most in touch with them all, is Nigel Farage. And when Nigel Farage sits down and says maybe, just maybe, I'm coming round to the idea of a second referendum, it's the biggest lie of all. He is the most desperate man in Britain for a second referendum, because he

wants to get back onto the national stage, he wants that platform again, but also, he knows that actually, what he thought he won on June 23rd has long been sold down the river, because no one's getting what they want, because everything is now a fudge. And in some ways, I would sooner Brexit didn't happen at all; second, I'd sooner stay in a single market in the Customs Union because that might as well amount to being in the European Union, but I hate this idea of this, "Let's pay them 40 billion, but let's also not have a seat at the table. Let's not be able to make new trade deals, let's have none of the benefits that we're paying for."

Norway minus.

That's Norway minus, minus, minus! But that's what we're walking into, you know, through sheer cowardice and incompetence.

The problem I have with Nigel Farage is when you watch them on TV you end up agreeing with him before you check yourself. The cadence of his voice, that faux chumminess, afterwards I end up thinking, "Well, I agree with you." Afterwards, I end up critically analysing it and thinking, "Actually, no because it was based on that presumption and I don't accept that." He's a very good media performer, and unfortunately that's what the news media wants.

He's a pro. The antidote to him I think is Alastair Campbell, who equally is as passionate and as articulate and as intelligent, and he's right – unlike Farage.

Anyway, let's get back to the paper then, before we talk about the other things. What gets you out of be on a morning now? What's its raison d'être? Are you trying to mobilise the 48% to grow beyond that, to campaign against Brexit? What's the reason for the New European to exist?

To give people hope, really. To be a concrete rallying point for people who otherwise may feel that there isn't anything there to hold on to. One of the most oft asked questions is, "Why launch it as a newspaper and not a website?" and there are several reasons for that. One of the core reasons was we literally wanted to be able to give people something that they could carry around, as a visible demonstration of the fact that they are one of the 48%. If you think about it, there are very few ways to visibly demonstrate that. You could wear a badge, you could go on a march…

If you wear a badge, you're a weirdo.

Exactly. Or you can carry the New European, and be even weirder.

It's a bit like the Socialist Workers paper, isn't it? At least that is an identifier. I'm not suggesting that you are in any way as lunatic as them, but it's the same thing, isn't it?

Definitely. And we also wanted people to notice it as well. It was such a crazy story about launching a new newspaper that that was another real reason to do it in print. But yes, the reason we carry on doing it is to keep on being a stone in the shoe of people like Paul Dacre, and if we can irritate the guys at the Mail, job done, fantastic.

In terms of circulation numbers, we are nothing – an absolute drop in the ocean. But in terms of share of voice, we can be an irritant. And we can just be an outlet for the other side of the coin that has less well been told. And one of the reasons I think that at some point the New European will run out of space is that, when we started, we were pretty much the only paper which was that vehement about the situation. Fabulously, a lot of news media are coming round to that opinion now, or to the opinions that were seen to be extreme, like there should be a second referendum, or like the parliament should overturn this. Those were *verboten* opinions 12 months ago, now oft discussed from the Times to the Guardian to any media you like. So or uniqueness in that sense, in terms of the content we're carrying, is reducing, but the package I think has become more interesting. We try very hard to make it an interesting newspaper, so we've got a great European cultural section at the back which I love putting together each week. It's totally eclectic and random, whatever we just happen to be interested in. And then the front half is this progressive first draft of history, if you like. We've got some terrific people putting in analysis on a weekly basis that I know keeps people in touch, keeps them feeling that the flame is alive, and even if they're not buying the paper, or they're just seeing the website, or they're just sharing a tweet, it's another body of anti-Brexit opinion in the in the media environment that I think just adds to the plurality of media – and that's why, when we won the big award at the Society of Editors last year, and Paul Dacre followed us on stage to win national newspaper of the year, he was very complimentary to us afterwards about the product we were producing. Because even Paul Dacre recognises that plurality of media is a good thing.

And the writers that you are getting are fantastic. We've mentioned Alastair Campbell. but the likes of Steve Coogan.

Yes.

Where are you going to take the paper over the next few months in terms of the actual editorial and the content in it?

Well, it keeps getting broader and broader, and we keep looking for new voices. We've been trying to bring on some new writers that maybe haven't been in the mainstream national press a lot, also to give fantastic writers like Bonnie Greer, Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, Mike White, who was the political editor, who I think still is one of the best political editors in the country for generations, and it's our great privilege now to be the home of Michael White's political editorship, you know, so that that but that seems to me to be a really good thing to do journalistically, and trying to broaden it out, make it more interesting, and get away from this idea that it's just a one issue paper. So we have Paul Connew writing about America each week, we have just signed up Tim Walker from the Daily Telegraph, Mandrake column, which were stolen completely! And if the Daily Telegraph are listening to this, a message: I was really disappointed you didn't try to sue us, because that was the plan.

No one's listening to this, I can assure you.

We thought, “We’ll run Mandrake, it’ll be great, the Telegraph will send us a cease and desist letter and it’ll be huge publicity.” Anyway, the Telegraph didn’t say anything, so that was a disappointment. But the column is great and the readers really like it.

You’ve showcased a lot of female writers, but you were personally attacked over one front cover by, shall we say, an influential tweeter and her followers.

Yes.

Did that experience shock you?

It was Caroline Criado-Perez, who was the woman who campaigned for Jane Austen to go on to the banknotes. Somebody who I admire immensely, and I am completely supportive of her cause.

She herself came to fame because she herself was utterly trolled by all these losers.

A hundred per cent. And so we were absolutely on Caroline’s side right up until the point where she…

Up to the point where she disagreed with you!

Well, it wasn’t just a disagreement; she tweeted a picture of the New European, which had a bunch of writers on the front cover, and said, “New European, same as the old European, just a bunch of white men.” And okay, now of the seven people on that cover, six were men. There was a woman on the cover, so pedantically she was wrong. However, I felt really offended that she had attacked us, of all people, for misogyny or sexism, when we’ve gone to great strides to make it very diverse. Our balance is practically 50:50. We’ve got a lot of ethnic minorities writing in the paper. We cover all sorts of issues.

So it was a factually inaccurate criticism.

So that’s what annoyed me. And I said, “What an absolute…” I responded and said it was an inaccurate slur and offensive, and then it was interesting what happened. There was a few people, and more high profile writers, who jumped on against me and said astonishing that I should be so defensive when what I should do is appreciate what Caroline is telling me about my newspaper. And I responded saying, “If any of you read the newspaper, you’d understand that it’s a nonsense what she’s saying.” So Zoe Williams, who’s one of the writers, a brilliant, brilliant writer, came in to the into the fray on Twitter and said, “It’s not defensive to defend yourself against something that’s wholly unfair, as this is.” It got out of hand. I offered Caroline an opportunity to write in the paper to say what she wants – which is something we’ve done before, by the way, when people have criticised us – we have said, “Just say what you like. I am interested in open debate. I don’t think I’m right about everything or anything. Say what you want. Come on to our paper and let’s have a good discussion about it.” Caroline refused, and I thought was very rude actually, and

quite offensive, in the way she dealt with me, called me a sexist – doesn't know me from Adam – but was quite offensive about me in a laughably inaccurate way. So that's why I haven't taken it any more seriously than I am at the moment. But it was very interesting, and it gave us cause, typically, in New European style, to make a big deal of it the next week, and we commissioned a load of women writers and we said, "Is this newspaper sexist?" We didn't think it was but we've asked Zoe Williams and Liz Gerard and Bonnie Greer to double check, and we made an issue of it. So, in a sense, what was a quite ugly spat on Twitter, actually there was a greater good where we had a discussion about sexism in the media, and we ran the number of front page bylines on national newspapers between 2012 and this year, and there is an issue, there's no doubt about it. Caroline is absolutely right. There is an issue about representation of women on the front pages of national newspapers, so that's something we are completely aligned about. It was just an unfortunately ill-informed attack on us really, I feel.

I mean, you're Archant's chief content officer. Are you one of these horrendous parents that has a favourite child and just gives that favoured child all their attentions? Because how do you manage to pull yourself away from what is clearly a beloved, something that you've set up? Because you have much wider responsibilities.

I do, yes.

How do you divide your time between that? Are you this evil parent?

So I give the New European all my weekend and about half a day of a working day. We go to press at 11:30am on Wednesday, and so I spend Wednesday morning on it and Tuesday evening – we work really late hours on Tuesday.

Because it must have given you renewed confidence in the rest of the print portfolio.

This is this is the point. I'm not suggesting that the New European is like a Formula 1 car or anything, but it is something where we try out new ideas that then work their way into the rest of the portfolio.

In business consulting, you'd call it an incubator unit, wouldn't you?

Exactly that. And so we've learned how to produce fantastic designs in the New European that we can recycle all the time, and a new way of producing the paper and keeping it looking good. I think, I *hope*, it's given the guys that we work with – there are a fantastic team of journalists at Archant, and we produce brilliant magazines and brilliant newspapers – I hope that those people who work with me look at the New European and say, "Well, that's good journalism." So I have some confidence in the guy who is leading us in terms of content at Archant. And I'd like to think that the New European, if it doesn't have anything else, it has a certain sense of swagger and voice, a very distinctive voice, that I think is very important in any kind of media. And I think it's never been more important than it is today for media brands to be very clear about what they think is important. I think in the past, before

we were completely knocked sideways by digital, you could get away with being quite boring, passive, quite ill-defined about what your core audience was, what your core proposition was – not any more. I think you have to be ruthlessly clear about who your community is, about how you are representing them, about why people should be part of your community. And I've been doing… since the New European launch, I've been doing a lot of thinking – too much, some would say – but a lot of thinking about what makes good media powerful, and I've gone back and thought about things that Hagel said about almost a religious quality of reading a newspaper, and there's something in that about you do something in isolation, but in the knowledge that it's being done by tens of thousands of other people, and *that* is the community that you've created. And that the act of printing a newspaper is the act of creating a community. You're not serving a community, you're building a community. And I think if you start to think about media as the creation of community, rather than the serving of community, it's a wholly different perspective. Much more powerful. It gives you much more permission to really drive the passions in that community, much less apologetic for how you might deal with that community. And that's something I feel that, as newspapers 50 years ago had it inherently, this strong sense of what they were, and they were passionate, and they felt they could take risks. You look at the great Daily Mirror under Hugh Cudlipp – this will be contentious, I would also say under Piers Morgan as well – a paper that had an absolute sense of itself, and self-confidence, and swagger, and gave itself permission to challenge its readership. Now, I think, if you look at practically all the papers today now, that confidence about being able to challenge its readership has diminished significantly through fear of collapsing circulation. It takes a very brave editor now to splash on something that is going to irritate or annoys its readership, because if you lose three or four per cent of your readership over a short period of time, you get fired. Now, I think, in that fear of editing, and a lot of papers are edited fearfully, it's not a resource issue, it's a journalism issue. And if they if they edit with greater boldness…

It's a courage issue.

The readers can sense it, and it solidifies the readership, and it gives the readership a real sense of community and belonging, and I think the New European does that very clearly, and I'm incredibly gratified that I'm seeing more and more of that in the Eastern Daily Press, or the East Anglian Daily Times, which are our two big dailies, or the Islington Gazette, or the Hackney Gazette, which has been transformed in the last 18 months from a paper that I think wasn't speaking to its constituency, but now really, under a really good young editor, is now producing a newspaper that speaks to that community very strongly and passionately. And people are really buying into it. So the New European, if it takes some of my time, it has a benefit, I think, for everything else we do in Archant as well.

Isn't the issue though, with the other newspapers, is that you can't come down on either side of an issue like Europe, because you're going to alienate a group of people? It's one of the reasons why a lot of papers have ended up this insipid kind of paper that's inoffensive, literally. Because even in Hackney there will be a substantial minority of people that voted Brexit, and they want to buy their local newspaper to get the local news.

So you don't have to talk to them about Brexit in the Hackney Gazette, but let's talk to them with passion about the local football leagues, or the darts leagues, or people dropping dog poo on the streets, or whatever it is that is really infuriating that community. Let's do that. And another thing that I think is something important in media, especially local media, is that over a period of generations we've all been handed down a set of rules from editor to editor, and news editor to news editor, about what constitutes journalism. And meanwhile, audiences, our readers, their lives have expanded and expanded and now cover all sorts of different elements of content that we don't consider to be journalism. I'll give you a great example, is mixed martial arts. So if you go to any sports desk in the UK and say, "Mixed martial arts versus boxing, which is more important?" Almost certainly the sport editor will say boxing, because boxing is considered to be a real sport. But the truth is, MMA has got a huge following, absolutely massive. Now, maybe today that's not so true, but five years ago MMA was considered like old-fashioned wrestling, like Giant Haystacks or something – a non-sport, and wouldn't be covered in newspapers.

It's bigger than boxing now.

Much bigger than boxing.

Boxing seems a little bit out-dated, Queensberry Rules and all that nonsense.

Absolutely much bigger, and a huge opportunity as well for the media to get involved. But I think it just demonstrates that people are hard-wired into thinking that is disconnected from the reality of what audiences are actually passionate about. And if only we can find a way of bringing the audience back into the media somehow, they will infect us with their broader lives, and we'll become more relevant, more engaging, we'll become closer to those communities, and we'll be more successful.

A couple of questions on your career, but let's just close off the whole Europe thing. A final question on this is, if you did have a crystal ball in front of you, what do you think is ultimately going to happen? As distinct from what you want to happen, what you think is the reality of what is actually going to… how the situation is going end up?

Honestly, I'm not lying when I say I genuinely don't think Brexit is going to happen. This may sound absolutely barking, but I feel we are in the middle of like, a movie, screenplay, and the only way this narrative makes any sense is if the people come to their senses at the end of the film, you know, there's this reversal. And I feel that public sentiment is shifting away. You spoke earlier about the risk of offending a large constituency, and that's I think Jeremy Corbyn's problem. He actually, accidentally, came and knocked on my door just before the general election, didn't know I lived there, but came on his own. Amazing, admirable actually, it was just three weeks before the election, he was walking up and down Highbury where I live, and he knocked on the door, and we ended up having this conversation.

That's insane, the leader of the opposition, knocking on your door.

I thought… do you know, it was a moment that made me start to understand his appeal. At the same time, that same day, Theresa May was up in the north east somewhere with bus loads of rosette-wearing Conservatives.

A media confection.

Total construct. And Corbyn was on his own, walking up and down his constituency in Islington, spending a lot of time speaking to people on the doorstep. Fascinating, I thought. Anyway, we have this conversation.

I'd have kidnapped him. I'd have locked him in the basement.

(Laughs) I can't imagine that!

He probably had a GPS tracker or something, I'd have only had him for a few hours.

But I said to him, "Why, when so many Labour supporters are against Brexit, why are you maintaining this position of absolute ambiguity?" And he said, "How do I explain to the third of Labour supporters, who represent two thirds of the seats that my MPs are in, that we are anti-Brexit? Because it will cost us the election." And okay, I appreciate that that's a difficulty, but…

That whole triangulation thing is what they condemned Blair for.

Yes, totally. So this is Jeremy getting pragmatic now. At the moment that's a bad thing, but if pragmatic means following a shift in public opinion, which I believe is happening, away from Brexit, then possibly, Jeremy Corbyn, Diane Abbott, Emily Thornberry, Keir Starmer, will start articulating a position that gives us a route out.

I quite like Kier Starmer, actually. I haven't got a lot of time for Emily Thornberry.

I mean, very… yes, both those guys are, I think, influential and challenging for different reasons. Keir, if he has a fault, it's because he's too lawyerly, you know, and articulates these quite complex positions as though he's making a case in front of the high court. What we really need is somebody like, well, it's often said, isn't it? Like a Macron figure, who can articulate with passion the benefits of the European Union, and why we as a nation should think again.

The problem with us Blairites though is that we've all buggered off. Even look at Andy Burnham, he's gone up to be Mayor of Manchester up near your neck of the woods, and there's a dearth of talent on the opposition benches, in my view.

Yes, I think that's a reasonable observation. And I think whether there's a dearth of talent or not, there's certainly a dearth of willingness to be contradictory. The irony is

that the guy, Jeremy Corbyn, who voted against his own whip 400-odd times is now leading the most authoritarian…

It was the same when IDS became leader of the Tories, is he asked for loyalty. And quite rightly, people went, "Where was your loyalty when John Major was running the show?

And again, to cut back, all of that would be forgivable if Labour were 15, 20 points ahead in the polls. But they nip and tuck. With the worst Tory government in living memory.

I know. This has been such an interesting podcast that we haven't even had a chance to go through your career! We've got hijacked by all this interesting stuff that you said. So we've only got a few minutes left. So, in a few minutes, tell us about your 18 years at the Daily Mirror.

Well, I was very lucky that I joined six months before Piers Morgan arrived. And whatever people think about Piers…

He's a ledge.

He is an absolute journalistic genius.

I don't agree with half of… in fact, I unfollowed him recently on Twitter, because he retweets all the people having a go at him, and it's just a little dull, actually. But I am a closet supporter.

Yes. And he came in and he shook the paper up, inside out. I was a young guy who, my proficiency, I think, that he noticed was that I was quick on the Macintosh drawing pages, and I could write headlines as well. So that was really in that great reshaping of newspaper production, because I started out as a sub. I started on the Liverpool Echo, and then graduated through to the Daily Record, ended up at the mirror in 1996. Piers arrived either that year or soon after, and it was very quickly afterwards, you know, the big story that happened, the tragedy, of course, was Princess Diana dying, and that really, the Mirror did fantastically well in its response to that story, and we then won, as I recall, something like four or five Newspaper of the Years over a 10-year period, so we were at the top of our game. It was a terrific newspaper. Didn't stop sales declining, but that's the environment.

Sales decline everywhere, unless you're the New European, of course.

Of course! And I went from being production editor through to being head of features. I actually wrote a column about new technology for a little period called Kelly's Eye.

I actually vaguely remember that, although I hadn't connected it to you.

It was it was the first daily Internet column in British newspapers. That was a huge amount of fun. And then I went to be head of features at the Mirror for a long time, and then I took over the digital business. Ran the digital side of Mirror Group nationals for a while, first as content director…

Pete Pickton's doing that job now, isn't he?

So Pete followed me.

He's been on this podcast. He's a good lad, is Pete.

He's retired now. I say retired, he's gone into acting, which is a terrific, bold career choice.

Absolutely. A lovely fellow, Peter. And then I left in 2012 because I didn't really agree with the direction that the paper was taking in terms of investment, and I don't think my new boss agreed with the direction I wanted to go, so took the chance to leave, and joined a Spanish design agency called Cases i Associats, and had the most wonderful two years working largely in Argentina with Clarin, which is the number one newspaper in Argentina. I did their newsroom transformation there for 18 months.

Do you speak Spanish? Well, you must do now!

A little bit! I can swear very well in Argentinian, but my Spanish… they all speak English so well.

That's always been a problem, actually. Because I work all around the world and everyone speaks our language. It like, encourages laziness.

But the lovely thing about working in Argentina, you wouldn't think it with the Falklands, but they love the English, they really love the Brits, and I think that's why they were so hurt over the Falklands crisis, because they felt like they were one of us. There's a great piece of graffiti outside the airport in Buenos Aires, and in English it says, "British go home." And then in brackets underneath it says, "And take us with you." But I had a great time there, and then my wife and I got our third child, so I had to come home.

So there was no television out in Argentina, then.

Well, she was over here, I was scuttling back and forth. So Oscar, my youngest, was conceived, and I had to come back to the UK, and was very lucky to get a job with David Montgomery, another contentious newspaper…

This could be a five-hour podcast, really.

Yes, but that was a very interesting spell. Eighteen months at Local World as digital content director there. And then, of course, local world was sold to Trinity Mirror. Didn't really want to go back to Trinity Mirror at the time; it felt like it would be going back. And Jeff Henry gave me a call at Archant, and said, "Look, I'm looking got a chief content officer, would you be interested?" And it was a great, great blessing. Been a really great two years.

A final question, because again this is something else that we could take another hour discussing, but we've only got a few minutes. You're chairman of the Global Editor's Network Annual Summit, and that tries to define "a vision for the future of journalism". What do you think that future looks like?

Interesting and challenging. I think we are in the middle of a great reshaping of journalism. I have never been more excited about the opportunities for journalism, not just for new digital forms of journalism which I spent the last 15 years really now immersed in, so it's slightly ironic that I am more associated with this newspaper than I am digital, but just across the board, the opportunities now to break free of legacy brands, or to remake legacy brands, and to reconnect with audiences who are… what's changed is that the audiences are more connected than ever before. The media, the output, is pretty much the same, but what's coming back at you is so extraordinary. The ability to remake platforms based on that new phenomenon I think is incredibly exciting. But the idea that quality journalism is under threat, I don't buy into. I think, if anything, quality journalism is rising higher and higher and higher up on an ocean of detritus and nothingness, and people are being drawn more and more frequently to high quality journalism. And that will be rewarded. So if I was talking to my son, for instance, my eldest is 12 years old, and if he was asking me about journalism, maybe five years ago and I'd have said, "Don't do it; journalism is in a crisis." Now, I've changed my mind completely. I think for quality journalism it's never been a better time. You know, the opportunity to build your own brand, to reach people, to work across multiple platforms, multiple media, and to really, if you've got something to say and you can say it well, it couldn't be a better time to be alive.

Matt, on that hugely optimistic note, we'll have to leave it there. Thank you ever so much for your time. You're a legend, and I'm a big fan of your work and have huge respect for what you're doing. Thank you.

That's very, very kind of you to say. Thank you.