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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 Sarah Baxter, deputy editor of the Sunday Times. Sarah joined the paper as editor of News Review before being appointed Washington correspondent in 2005. She then edited the Sunday Times magazine until 2015. As deputy editor of the Sunday title, she also writes a column in which she's taking aim at sexism in Westminster, the Uber behemoth and the far left's attack on the free press. Before her successful journalism career, she worked in publishing, first as a copywriter and then as a press officer, and has held senior positions at Time Out, the New Statesman and the Observer.

Sarah, thank you for joining me.

You're welcome! Good to be here.

So, Sarah, if we can, let's walk through your career. You started out in publishing, did you not? How did the move to journalism come about?

Well, I decided I was sitting on the wrong side of the table. I was, as you rightly say, a press officer. I worked for Virago Press, a Feminist Press in the 1980s, and I was constantly setting up interviews with great writers – Maya Angelou, Pat Barker, Margaret Atwood. They had a terrific stable of women writers, but I suddenly realised I'd rather be asking the questions than sitting on the side waiting for people to come out and offering them cups of tea and things like that. So I thought I'd take a chance and I left the job at Virago without another job to go to.

Brave!

And I thought I'd freelance, and I fell into a bit of work for Time Out magazine.

Great magazine.

And it's a wonderful place to start, because they're not so much interested in what have you done before, they're like, "What are your ideas? What can you bring to the table?" And then they'd say, "Well, have a go." And I still use that with people today. I

say, “Well, have a go. If I like the idea, have a go. I don’t promise to publish it.” But we’re all about the ideas in the news business, so why not just try? So I tried one thing, I tried another thing. Then they wanted a woman to go and report on this new trend – new trend, would you believe, this was years ago – of women boxing, and I went to a pub on the Old Kent Road. And that was my first commission for Time Out. And then, miraculously, someone left and I became a news reporter.

So you were there watching the boxing match, being paid to do that and writing it up?

Yes! And I loved it.

What was that like?

Well, I loved it. It was a sweaty room with women with their breasts bandaged. I mean, I really didn’t know what to make of it.

Enough about the Time Out newsroom, what about the boxing match?!

Yes, I was a bit too close to the action! I mean, now we’re a bit more used to it. Muhammad Ali’s daughter Laila Ali boxes, but then it was very much in its infancy. And I just thought, “Isn’t it wonderful being a journalist?” And I particularly liked the kind of journalism that means you knock on doors and you peer behind them, not actually interviewing authors, despite my background in publishing! I admire people who do a good author interview, but my desire was the thrill of the chase really. Not so much writing it up, as finding out what’s going on in places other people don’t get to.

Can I take you back to the boxing match for a second, though? Because what was that like as your first journalism gig, where a normal spectator would merely watch the boxing match and enjoy it? Did you have to steel yourself to have an objectivity to write about the things that you were experiencing, and look at it in a different way?

Yes, definitely. I remember thinking, “What does the reader need to know?” I was so inexperienced. But I thought, “Well, they’ll certainly want to know what it’s like to be punched in the breast. That’s number one. Secondly, how can they withstand the pain? That’s number two. And then from then on, what’s the atmosphere like? Who goes to these matches? What are the spectators? And finally, when the girls came bloodied but unbowed out of the ring, why on earth would they want to do it? That was the other question. Once you’ve got those ingredients, I suppose you’ve got the basics of an article.

So what was Time Out like to work for, then? Was this was your first proper job in the newsroom?

First proper job, and it was tremendous. First of all, we only had two news reporters, and we were covering the whole of London, so that was great. And the guy I worked with actually, the news editor, was a terrific investigative journalist called Andy Bell,

who went on to work for Panorama. Had a lot of friends at World in Action. So I was quickly introduced to the thrill of investigative journalism, and the satisfaction of hunting somebody down and exposing them. And I thought that was tremendous. I wasn't necessarily sure that that was my métier, that was going to be my path, but it meant early on I got very good experience of dealing with complicated stories with issues of libel, working closely with lawyers – who I still love today, because they are great enablers, they're not preventers when they work on newspapers – so it was a great place to learn the tools of the trade without going to journalism school. And the fact that I'd worked in publishing meant that I did know at least how to get in touch, even if I didn't actually know them, I knew how to get in touch with some quite good names, well-known authors who I could approach, and that, I suppose, is the beginning of feeling like a commissioning editor.

So at this point you knew already that journalism was the career for you, because this was your dipping your toe in the water, as it were?

Oh, I just fell in love with it.

And what is it that you think that makes a successful journalist? Is it that sense of curiosity? Some people have said it's just sheer nosiness.

Yes. I'm not the nosiest person about people's private lives, but I am nosy about how the world works and what goes on. And I'm curious for experiences, both for myself and to tell the reader about them. So one of the great privileges of being a journalist is going to cover great stories, big stories. I mean, when I was at Time Out, the Berlin Wall came down, and I'd lived in Berlin when I was about 18, just for a few months, so I talked Time Out into giving me time to go and watch the wall come down, and at the same time, I said, "If I have two weeks off, I could do a week of finding out where the trendy spots are in East Berlin, I'll do you a quick guide to East Berlin, but meanwhile can I report on the wall for somebody else?" I didn't know who, but I wanted to go and I wanted to see it.

Well, that's what the management would call proactive. Did you manage to sell that piece in somewhere then?

I did! I went with my boyfriend, who was a photographer, and now my husband. It was one of the stories that gave me confidence that maybe I could do this game, because obviously the world's media is there at the wall. How on earth are you going to find another angle? I had no idea.

David Hasselhoff was there at the wall as I remember, singing Looking for Freedom. Honestly, the minute you said Berlin Wall I had images of David Hasselhoff stood at the top of it!

Now, if only I'd known that, I'd definitely have tried to find him! But, anyway. So I had picked up a very small wire story saying that the Stasi were being sent to the brown coal mines in order to keep the country rolling, because although it was freezing, all the miners had walked off into West Berlin, and I thought that could look quite symbolic. Although they thought they were helping the country, it would look like

they're the ones that were sent to go back to Siberia to dig coal. I got someone to tell me where the headquarters of the Stasi was. I knocked on the door and I said, "Can I speak to a press officer please?"

For the Stasi, I love that.

They slammed the door in my face! It's a bit like going to the door of the Pentagon or something. Anyway, in the end, somebody came out, and they were in such a state because they didn't know what was happening. The Stasi being the secret police. They said, "Okay, come on in."

Wow.

And they wanted to present a good story about what good citizens they were being, and they said, "Yes, you and your photographer friend can go to the coal mines." These horrible brown coal mines, which are the worst environmental disasters you've ever seen.

Great story, though.

Freezing cold, and we sold words and pictures to the Independent, which then had wonderful pictures. It was mainly a photo story, to be honest. My husband did better out of it than I did, but I had 1,000 words of copy and I was really proud of it.

Almost images of Hart to Hart came to light there. Some of our younger listeners won't remember Robert Wagner and Stefanie Powers, but there you are, a kind of couple team. Words and pictures.

Well, I think it gave me the confidence to go, because I had a friend, and ditto, he had someone who could write the words. And sometimes I think we should go off again on our adventures, because I love working with him.

I really admire that sense of pluck, the fact that you just went and made it happen and you were rewarded with an incredible story.

But people are doing that all the time. We have wonderful young reporters now at the Sunday Times. Louise Callahan, who was in Turkey for the Turkish coup. She had taken herself to Turkey. She said, "I think you need somebody in Turkey."

I've asked Louise to come on this podcast.

She's fantastic. She was there for the Turkish coup, really rose to the occasion, became Young Journalist of the Year, has since written marvellous stories. She's now our Middle East correspondent. Super brave, very talented, but just with the nerve to go places – and there are people who are a lot more plucky and brave than me. Christina Lamb took herself off to Pakistan and Afghanistan as a young reporter.

Amazing journalist. She's been in the chair.

Amazing. Amazing. So if you're a young journalist or you're thinking of being one, why not just try something – it might work.

We will get your advice for people starting out their career toward the end. So, while we're walking through her career, talk to me about what came after Time Out.

Much to my surprise, I was asked by the New Statesman if I wanted to write about politics. I have loved politics all my life.

You can tell that from your columns. I am a genuine reader of your column every Sunday.

Thank you! Anyway, politics is my hobby, passion, and I think some of that probably came through Time Out, even though it wasn't the most political of magazines, and they said would I like to join the New Statesman and I thought, "Hell, yes!" Didn't have a lot of photographs in it, so not so much scope for heading off to Berlin in that sense, but I just thought, "Yes, I'd love to do that." And I arrived at Westminster and had a terrific grounding in what it's like to be in the lobby.

And has that given you a little bit more sympathy for politicians, or has it made you harder or them knowing the behind the scenes thing? I worked at Westminster for many years. One of the things that shocked me going into it was just what a complete shambles it was behind the scenes. Now, everyone says on Twitter what a shambles, but it to me was a shock going in, because everything seemed to be reasonably professionally run as an outsider.

It was a shambles. I was there during the Maastricht Treaty, so all this Brexit stuff feels like I'm reliving my life! And John Major was prime minister, Tony Blair was on the march. So New Labour was coming along, but hadn't yet won the election. So it was a very interesting time. Actually, my respect for politicians went up, not down, because I had been very partisan – and I realised there was good and bad on both sides. And actually, that was an important step to being a better journalist, I think.

I desperately wanted Tony to win, but I remember when John Major gave his concession speech on the steps of the Conservative Central Office. He did it with such dignity that I actually felt sorry for him and had a huge amount of respect for him. And his autobiography was one of the first political big books I ever read, and it made me realise just how hard things are for any prime minister behind the scenes, of any colour.

Absolutely. And he then sort of became the forgotten man, didn't he, because he didn't want to be a backseat driver. He's re-emerged recently because of the Brexit debate, but really, he was always very dignified, but people did laugh at him. They thought he was not posh enough, I think, on the Tory side, basically. And not enough O-levels, hadn't had the education that today's politicians seem to have, you know, the Camerons, the Boris Johnsons etc..

The Tories now would kill for some kind of working class done-good guy. Look at Sajid Javid, for example. They love the fact that he's the son of a bus driver and all that. They love that heritage.

That's right.

How things change!

Exactly, yes.

He'll be the next Tory prime minister because of that.

Well, it certainly is doing his career no harm whatsoever.

I think he'll be great. I'll join the Conservatives as soon as he's leader. I'm kidding. How long were you at the New Statesman for?

I was there for four years.

Oh, a long time, then.

Yes. And I found it fascinating, because it was an interesting time in politics; it was a very male-dominated world, both within the chamber and the lobby. You didn't even have the Blair's Babes – all-women shortlists were only just coming in, so nobody had been elected under that system until 1997.

It was the old saying, wasn't it, at the time, that there were more members of Parliament called John than there were women.

Yes, absolutely. And yet, at the same time, I did feel like I was part of a new wave of women arriving, and trying in our different ways to do a good job. And there was always the fear that you weren't getting the best stories because the blokes were in the bars swapping tips, and the male politicians were chatting you up, which is why I did get very interested in the Pestminster scandal, because I was rather dismayed to find it was still going on all these years on.

It seems to me that Westminster is almost a perfect formula for creating loneliness and mental ill health. I had a pass for three or four years and used to work there, and you've got all of these MPs that have nothing else to do other than be lobby fodder. They've got to stay there in the evenings so that they can be called to vote, and there's 10 bars and it's 70p a pint, and there's no one nothing else to do other than stand and get drunk.

Yes, and it was even worse then, because you had the late parliamentary hours, which did get somewhat reformed. So people never saw their wives, affairs were rife. Sexual harassment was pretty intense, frankly, and not just for me and other women

journalists, but particularly for the support staff. That was the appalling thing. And I'm glad to say that people have finally woken up to all that.

Well, there's been so many incremental scandals for good and for bad, like the expenses scandal, for example, when the Telegraph famously bought the CD of all of the expenses claims that was half-inched. I mean, great for democracy, of course, and a great story.

Yes, the expenses scandal was really shocking, and even I was shocked by it, and I'd been working at Westminster before. I just thought, "Are people really claiming for duck houses and moats?"

And 8p for a bit of petrol! I wouldn't claim 8p from anyone – I've got more dignity than that.

I couldn't agree more. But of course, when I was there, was also a series of sex scandals, because John Major had launched his Back to Basics campaign, which was just an open invitation.

Even at the time as a young person with no experience I thought, "Why have you done that?"

I know. Just put a bull's eye on every Tory MP's back! Yes. One by one, all the stories came out.

Why do you think – I mean, this is just chair's provocative, as it were, as an interesting aside – why do you think we are more pious and more obsessed with the private lives of politicians? Is it because the old cliché if he'd lie to his wife then he'd lie to us? Because we seem to hold politicians to a higher sexual standard in their marital fidelity. For example, if I had a colleague that had an affair, I'd say it's obviously a terrible tragedy, I hope him and his wife work it out, but it's none of my business. Why is it our business if the chief secretary to the treasury has had an affair?

Because they're always lecturing us about how to live our lives! Well, sod that, frankly.

And there always seems to be a power imbalance as well – I'm answering my own question here – but it's the whole Bill Clinton/Monica Lewinsky thing, isn't it? She even said herself that, at the time, she thought it was consensual, but only a decade or so later it's really just sunk in, the gravity of the power imbalance.

Well, times have really changed. One my favourite writers, screenwriters, Nora Ephron, who's just wonderful, had worked as an intern in Jack Kennedy's office in the White House, and she lamented in her memoirs that she was the only intern that Kennedy hadn't hit on. And was there something wrong with her! You know, you were just expecting JFK to misbehave. I think, funnily enough, some of the problems that came out of that perceived Camelot in America, where you had the glamorous

JFK and his gorgeous wife, Jackie, and then you lift the lid and you find that it's a seething mass of infidelity, that did change people's perceptions, I think, about dignity in the office.

But also the truth underneath the hood, as it were. Because I remember the famous television debate where Kennedy was the picture of health, and Nixon had a cold or something, and he looked shifty. People listening to it on the radio thought that Nixon had won, but people watching on television thought that Kennedy had won. But of course, Kennedy was suffering from huge health problems.

That's right. But he wasn't sweating away like Nixon, and looking like the used car salesman that people described. Tricky Dicky. Yes.

Yes, it's odd, isn't it? Because I'm sure Teresa May is a very competent prime minister, but a lot of people I know – so-called "normal" people – just don't like the that the way she walks, for example, or the way she might gesture in a TV interview. It's amazing how powerful and persuasive things like that are, the unspoken things. Almost no one seems to be interested in actual policy these days.

No, and she is kind of awkward in her demeanour, and I think underneath it all she's quite shy, and has steeled herself to be this leader. But I did think, I mean, when she had that very bad election campaign, as I'm sure you remember…

When Amber Rudd deputised for her in the prime minister's debate! When the prime minister wasn't there.

Well, that was just foolish. But I also remember the London Bridge attacks happened right outside our office at the Sunday Times at about 10 o'clock on a Saturday night. So we are all there. It was all very emotional. And I noticed, in the days that followed, people are putting post-it stickers and flowers down. They weren't talking about hating the terrorists, they were talking about what we need is love. And she couldn't emote at all. She couldn't feel or share the pain, and come out with something noble that would make us feel better and bigger about the attacks, and I think that's what you look to in a leader. And I thought it was very disappointing, because in many ways she's an admirable figure, but you have to be able to communicate your ideas, your emotions, and your sense of leadership to the public – and I think that election campaign was so awful for her, because she couldn't adapt, she couldn't change, and she couldn't display more than she was capable of.

I used to hero-worship Lynton Crosby, he's sat in that chair. We had a really long conversation with him a couple of years ago. But he made a huge mistake to orient a presidential-style campaign around someone who was so deeply uncomfortable with the media. Just from my own history of prime ministers, being a citizen, there are some, like Tony Blair and David Cameron, that just seemed at ease in front of the camera and it was effortless, and then like Gordon Brown and Theresa May just seemed to have…

Yes. They were the awkward squad. It doesn't mean they are better or worse as prime minister, but they're much less effective at communicating their ideas to the public. I mean, when Tony Blair came out and declared that Diana was the People's Princess, that was smart.

It was incredibly smart. But anyway, let's carry on going through your career, if we may. So you did four years at New Statesman, then what happened?

Then I decided that it might be a good moment to move. I think I was a little bit in a hurry to get national experience, and I was also doing quite a lot of broadcasting at the time, and the Sunday Times approached me and said would I like to write for them on contract, and I thought four years at the New Statesman, that's probably enough. And I guess it was clear that New Labour was on the up, so they were interested in someone from the New Statesman, not necessarily the hunting ground… Andrew Neil was still editor. By the time I arrived, John Witherow was in place as editor. And we did have a good relationship. The only thing is, I wasn't quite sure what I was doing there. And after a year, I got offered a senior editing job at the Observer. I thought, "Well, the Observer…" And a proper staff job. I thought, "Give it a go." And I've always sort of been, "Well, let's see what happens, I'll be up for it." So I went off to the Observer.

It's a good attitude to have!

It wasn't the best year of my life at the Observer, but it taught me an awful lot about editing.

Oh, you can't say something like that and not expect a follow up question! Come on then, spill the beans.

All right. Well, I was hired by the late, great Peter Preston who had just become editor-in-chief.

I would have loved to have got him on this podcast

Marvellous man. He was editor-in-chief, and he said, "We've got this fantastic new editor coming from Scotland, and you must meet him and it's all going to be great."

Is that Andrew Jaspan?

Andrew Jaspan. What I didn't know is that Alan Rusbridger was already preparing to sort of kick Peter Preston upstairs and, if he could, to get rid of Andrew Jaspan.

It's all politics isn't it?

It was all politics.

David Rose was home affairs correspondent at the time, as I remember.

He was.

That's right, because he's been in the chair. He's a friend of mine.

Yes, me too, actually. We were at university together.

Small world.

Yes. And I entered into quite a viper's nest of internal politics. And I just tried to keep my head above ground. I hadn't been an editor before, but I set about it with as much gusto as I could, and tried to disguise my lack of experience.

Through graft and commitment.

Yes. And I kept being given extra new jobs on top. So I was supposed to be comment editor. Nobody told me there was already a comment editor there, but I carried on commissioning pieces for comment. I was then going to be running a new review section, but there was going to be another person overseeing the arts, but they never got that person, so then it was like, "Can you also oversee the arts?" And then, "Actually, can you do Focus as well?" I thought, "Oh, okay, I'll do Focus." "Oh, and by the way, you're also writing the leaders in between." And at one stage I was not only writing the leaders, doing focus, overseeing the review section…

Chief cook and bottle washer.

I even used to compile Pendennis at one stage, the diary.

Did you get any sleep at this time? No wonder you wanted to go.

No! I was getting quite burnt out.

Well, that's no fun.

And then at the end of the year, I was fired, along with Andrew Jaspan and a host of other senior editors, in a mass clear out.

Ungrateful buggers!

I mean, you know, in that sense, it wasn't personal, it was business.

So you nearly killed yourself for them, and they rewarded you with a, "Thanks ever so much. Off you go."

Exactly.

What lovely people.

Anyway, I got quite a nice pay-off, so it wasn't all bad, and the Sunday Times got in touch with me very fast and said, "Well, we like what you're doing, do you want to come back?" And I went to edit News Review. And then I was much more experienced by the time I got there.

And you've been there ever since.

I've been at the Sunday Times ever since. I've had a wonderful career with the Sunday Times, which is sort of instructive really, I think. Because in my early days, I kept leaving sort of centrist publications for more left-wing ones, and in the end, I thought, "You know what? I've done enough of that. I'm sticking with the Sunday Times."

I'm a huge fan of the Sunday Times, I've read it for 20 years. I haven't bought a physical copy for years and years now, I read it on my iPad. But I am a loyal Sunday Times reader. One of the things I really like about it, and this might even sound inane, but it's got stuff in it. There's interesting things to read. And I did actually slightly disparage the Observer a couple of podcasts ago, and quite a few of the Observer staff got in touch, and said, "You're being very unfair," which is fair enough, so I apologised to them, but I do like the fact that it's an interesting, engaging read, whereas sometimes in other newspapers you're kind of just wading through lots of pages looking for something to jump out at you, and there isn't anything.

I know. I think I'm very proud of the Sunday Times. I mean, there's always something to read in every section, but there's also always a section that's on fire. I mean, the whole thing, I'd like to say, is on fire non-stop, but you know that's not true. Sections can have a fantastic week one week, a pretty good one the next week, but there's always one that's really rocking, and so there's always something that's just fantastic to read. I love it.

So what is a typical week for you, then, now that we're onto your years at the Sunday Times? I asked this of Emma actually, the deputy editor of the Times. What does a deputy editor do?

Well, right now, the deputy editor is editing the paper, because the boss is away! My editor, Martin Ivens, is away this week, so I'm in charge, and it really is like conducting an orchestra, they say. I mean, especially with the multi-section Sunday Times, and there is nothing more fun than trying to bring it all together.

That would genuinely scare me, being the editor of The Sunday Times. That'd be the job I couldn't do.

The good thing about it is that you have really great section editors, who are all doing their bit. So then it's just a question of harmonising it.

So what do you do when you edit? Because we had Chris Blackhurst sitting there a couple of years ago, and he said – he was the editor of the Independent

on Sunday – and he said that he actually loved being a business editor, and he loved being a columnist, but when he was made editor he actually hated it because there was a lot of HR and legal and management stuff that he just wasn't interested in. He wanted to write stuff, or shape and contribute to stuff that had been written by people, like an editor.

There is a lot of that, but there's still just a lot of what are you going to put on the front page, what are you going to do that's going to stand out this week? However, I, of course, am not always in charge, so while I enjoy it for now, then I go back to being first violin. So one day you conduct the orchestra, then you're more like first violin, it's like, "Is everybody on the same page? Are we holding the tune? Are we coming along together?" And you really do deputise. I brainstorm, I troubleshoot.

I'm being slightly unkind here, but I suppose even whether it's you or Martin doing it, it tends to be Tim Shipman who has the splash every Sunday. He's an incredible journalist.

Tim is brilliant.

But there's stuff happening, and there's stuff involving Brexit and everything. He's bound to take it.

Yes. Every time we think, "Let's not have Tim on the cover for once," he brings in another belter. And so he's an unstoppable force. And actually, Tim and I worked together on rival newspapers in Washington, and I knew how good he was because he kept me on my toes.

We've had Tim sitting there a few weeks ago and he gave a brilliant interview. And I think one of the things I said to him, is what I enjoy about his writing is he not only does he tell you what's happened, but he gives you a real sense of the kind of bloodsport behind the scenes as well. It's riveting.

Yes. And Brexit is all about the bloodsport. It ought to be maybe about what deal, but that bores the pants off everybody.

It really does.

What people really want to know is the fierce rivalries, the enmities, the showdowns. It's a great narrative, and he's playing it for all it's worth, and he's a great writer, Tim, and he's doing a wonderful job. But don't tell him I said so!

Absolutely not! Actually, when I think about it, this podcast, my bias runs through it, because I've had loads of people from the Sunday Times on.

A very good thing too!

What kind of dialogue do you have with your readers? Because I imagine as an editor, or deputy editor, that you have to make sure that what's in the paper is

relevant to your readers. How do you improve it? Because in the old days, of course, the only measurement you had, the only metric, was newsstand, how many did you sell. You were really guessing about what worked and what didn't work. Whereas now, with digital, you can tell the dwell time of people on certain articles, how they've got to that article and where they leave toward, and so on. Is there almost too much information?

Well, it's very interesting, because I think our digital team has won awards for this thing called INCA that they've set up, which, as somebody who writes for the paper as a columnist, can be quite scary, because I can see my own figures as well as everybody else's, and it's all about that combination of how long people spend reading your article, how many comments, how many shares, and you even get what the proportion of male to female readers are. And obviously, like every newspaper, we want to make sure that women are well represented too. And the metrics really do tell you something. Although they give you a fine detail every day on the actual article – here's the INCA report, that's how many people read it, etc. etc. – you can get lost in the weeds of that. And you don't want your life to be ruled by the fact that everybody read the story about sex, because they do. Or everybody reads the story about the royals, because they do.

I'd read the sex story but I won't read the royals. I'm bored with the royals. I admit I'm the only person in the world with that opinion. I'm weird.

Well, also we have our moments, we have our ups and downs, everyone read about the royal wedding, but they won't necessarily read about the aftermath now. But what I was going to say is what you can see is, a pattern is emerging, and the patterns that emerge is people are very interested in one, front page scoops by Tim Shipman, by Insight, these have high engagement. They really work, so you want those big powerful scoops on the front page.

The internet team, doing an incredible job.

Exactly. And then, what they like is stories about people, stories that engage. They can be moving, they can be funny, but they're about the art of life really, and the curiosities of life, and the funny things that happen, and the silly things that happen, and people really do want people stories. They want stories with warmth, humour, sometimes they want to be a little bit mean, you know, jab a bit, but you can see what emerges and what engages people from those figures. And I think it's important to think of the different elements of the paper as a whole that people respond to on digital, and that can guide you. What you mustn't do is say, "Oh, because X million people read that story about Meghan Markle, we're going to run a story about Meghan Markle every week." That would bore the pants off everyone.

What's it like to be a columnist? Because I occasionally write a column, and I find it agonizing to decide what I'm going to write about, what's my opinion. How do you do it every week? And also, do you read the comments below the fold? I see you get grief on Twitter as well, because you're very strident – in a good way, that's what you want from a columnist – I want an opinion, rather than just an academic discussion of the pros and cons of something. You

always take a stand, and I admire your writing hugely for that, but it seems to me an invitation for just opening the floodgates to a load of grief.

Yes! I mean… it's interesting. I think that you have to have a hard skin, particularly at first. I haven't been doing the column that long, a couple of years, but some people have been columnists for decades. And it was interesting, the first few columns, I remember them because somebody would say something like, "I can't believe you're getting paid to write this drivel. You just think, "Help!" But then your readers get used to you, and then they start to engage with you, and then you can banter a bit with them. And I do reply. I don't reply invariably, but I do reply a bit.

And is the rule… because I've dealt with other columnists on this podcast, and sometimes they'll say if it's a reasonably put objection and it's politely put, and it's constructive, then of course I'll go into a dialogue, but if it's as you've just said, "How do you get paid to write this drivel," that's not constructive, is it?

I wouldn't reply to that.

What's the percentage of polite people and rude people?

One thing about having subscriber access is that our subscribers want to like you. They also want to disagree with you, but they're not coming to you in a sort of bait determined to be hostile. On Twitter, that's a different thing – you can set something going, get under someone's skin and before it there's a pile-on. So I don't mind, I do want my articles to be discussed, and I think you just have to take it. If you're going to dish it out, which I do in the column, you've got to be able to take it. But I don't say it's always comfortable.

So how do you put a column together, then? Are you in the shower on a Tuesday and then suddenly a thought will come to you, and then you'll turn that into a column, or is it that something happens on a Friday evening and you're watching the news and you say, "I'm going to write about that." Or do you get a steer from Martin?

Yes, well, the funny thing is, I also co-edit the comment pages with Martin, and so he'll talk to the columnists, I'll talk to the columnists, we'll find out what my colleagues are writing about. I do tend to stand back and give them first dibs. And so sometimes I'll think, "Oh, I'd really like to do that. But Dominic Lawson or Rod or Camilla or Niall Ferguson are stepping in.

Rod winds me up. I know that's his job.

Yes. I mean…

It's like Piers Morgan. The fact that I'm wound up would be welcome to him, and therefore I don't want to admit it.

Yes, well, I would love to have the reader engagement, shall we say, that Rod has. But without having to wind people up to such an extent!

Does he believe everything he reads? I'm sure he must be like Richard Littlejohn in a sense that he does overegg it a bit, just because he knows it's going to get the clicks.

Well, he's humorous, so he knows, he can take the piss out of himself a bit, frankly. But he also believes in what he's saying; it's authentic. If he was a phony, people wouldn't like Rod.

Do you ever change your mind? Because I've read some of your columns that are quite strident, and then you get a lot of criticism, and some of it I've agreed with you, and then I've looked to the comments and thought, "Well, actually there's some merit there in the opposing view." Have you ever changed your mind either writing a column or as a result of the feedback that you've got?

I did change my mind over Pestminster. Not drastically. I was always sympathetic to some of the charges, and thought it was… but I was also like, "Oh, it's only a hand on the knee," etc. But as it went on, I got more and more annoyed that, in all these years, nothing had changed since my time in the 90s, and I suddenly thought before I get all indignant about how 'in my day what we used to put up with', and 'this is nothing', I felt more engaged and I felt very angry about it. And I decided to go all in on that issue, and that was reading other people as well, and listening to their experiences, and thinking, "Before I jump in with my own big two feet and start talking about my own experiences, maybe I should listen to what's really going on." And that's important.

It would be difficult to think of who could oppose you on that, but what did you get any pushback?

Yes, because a lot of people think that women were making something out of nothing, that the Me Too movement was just one long big whinge. I get why people say that, but it's not true. That's the thing.

I've always found it incredibly frustrating when you get old white men lecturing minority ethnic people, women about how they've never suffered any discrimination. It happens on Twitter it's like, "Well, I've never had any problems." Well, durr.

Exactly.

There just seems to be zero empathy.

I think you should write the column!

Oh, I'd be an awesome columnist! But I'd be fired within a few weeks. Without being overly pompous about it, do you feel like an august sense of

responsibility when you're writing a column? Because you are going to make an impact with whatever you say, you're going to cause a stir. What is your motivation, as you're actually writing the words? Is it just to finish it?

I certainly don't feel an august sense of responsibility.

That was me overblowing it, wasn't it? Yes.

The one thing I would really hate to be is pompous in my column, so do tell me if you detect traces of vainglory and pomposity.

I absolutely don't!

What do I want to do in the column? Same as I want to do in the newspaper. Inform, entertain, provoke. I don't mind anti reaction. I don't mind people disagreeing with me. I expect people to disagree with me, and I dare say I have changed my mind on many things in my life. I started out a lot more left wing than I am today, so it's all horses for courses.

Do you look back at your old columns and you can see how you've moved in your own opinions, or are they fairly steadfast?

Well, the ones at the Sunday Times, I think it was more question of finding the right sort of voice and the right style, and it's not easy – a column doesn't spring fully formed. It develops and matures, and in some ways I'm still feeling my way and trying out different topics. But I do love the privilege of having my say, and it is very alluring and quite tempting.

Is there an equivalent in the columnist world of a slow news day where, like you say, you've very graciously given all the best topics to your other columnists?

Well, I haven't necessarily!

What can I write about this week?

There's always something. I mean, my daughter, when she was very young, she used to come up to me and she'd say, "What if nothing's happening?" So how do you fill the newspaper? She was genuinely… like, she'd be about eight.

She would do a better job on this podcast asking the questions! That was a better question than mine.

"Say there was nothing to write about, nothing happened." I said, "There's always something." She said, "But no, what if there's nothing?" I said, "There's always something – I'd write about you." You know, there's always… what have you been doing today? There's always something that someone wants to find out about. And if they are good writers, which the Sunday Times have, who know how to tell a story, they can spin magic.

Are there writers that you miss? Like AA Gill? I miss him.

Terribly, yes. We had a combination of sort a memorial-cum-celebration of Adrian at a West End theatre that I was very involved in setting up. There was a special performance of The Jungle which AA Gill had visited as a reporter, and he's even in the play, he's even mentioned; this strange character in tweeds turns up in the middle of the Calais jungle. And he was, in addition to being an awesome TV critic and restaurant critic, he was very, very interested in the story of refugees. And as his editor at the magazine in years gone by, I had commissioned a few of those, and it was very moving to be at this special performance of The Jungle with Nicola Formby, a.k.a. the Blonde, whose idea it was, with the great director Stephen Daldry was there, and said some nice words about Adrian. And it was a really wonderful occasion. And yes, go see The Jungle, folks, it's terrific. And think of Adrian. AA Gill.

An incredible writer. And I didn't agree with him on everything. I think one of the things I liked about him as a restaurant reviewer was of course because he suffered from alcoholism earlier, he didn't drink. I don't drink either, and I used to like the fact that he would go to a restaurant and review the food without getting distracted by all the wines.

Yes, I think he appreciated that himself. The other thing is that I loved his philosophy of the table; it wasn't just about the food. It was about his whole approach to life.

Just before we move on, I wanted to ask you about your time as Washington correspondent. Because we didn't mention that. You did politics for the New Statesman; you were Washington correspondent for how many years?

Well, actually I was first sent to New York, and that's really where I wanted to go originally. And I went to New York, and I arrived New York in July 2001, and about six weeks later, 9/11 happened.

Wow, what a time to be there.

Yes.

Where were you when it happened?

I was in Battery Park.

Wow.

And I just missed seeing it, but I heard the boom. Basically, I was supposed to be… I had agreed to make a Radio 4 programme about my grandmother. I'm half American, and my grandmother had come through Ellis Island, and I was going to make a programme for Radio 4's The Archive Hour, about Ellis Island, and I was waiting to get on the ferry, so I was literally right there. Because I was living in Brooklyn, and otherwise I probably would have been at my desk in Brooklyn, and then the bridge would have shut, and I'd have been on the other side of the river.

Battery Park is yards away.

It was yards away, and it was the most terrifying experience of my life. And when those buildings came down I couldn't believe I wasn't going to get crushed by them. I definitely got covered in dust and all the debris. It was really scary, and it was just so upsetting to see the whole thing pretty much from start to finish.

When this was happening, did you manage to stand aside, as it were, from the human reaction to think objectively as a journalist to cover the detail? Because presumably you were going to have to write this up fairly quickly.

Yes, it actually happened on Tuesday. So for Sunday journalist, if anything I had a frustrating gap, because I was so full of things I wanted to say. It was such a shocking sensory experience, and I remember finally finding… nobody's mobiles worked. I finally found a landline where I could ring the desk to tell them I was there, because I was sure they would be trying to raise me, and say, "I'm here, I'm downtown, I'm watching it all." And I got through to the Sunday Times to the deputy foreign editor there, and he told me – I didn't know it for myself, I was in the fog of war in downtown Manhattan – he told me that home a plane had just hit the Pentagon. At that point I thought, "My God, this is World War Three."

I felt that.

And didn't know what to make of it, because I'd just seen the worst scenes of my life, and just had this idea that maybe what was happening in Washington was even worse. Anyway, the first building came down. I had to basically leg it, and I felt this overwhelming desire to see my family. And I lived on the other side of a bridge in Brooklyn Heights, and we were in any case being evacuated that way.

Over the east river?

Yes, over the east river. And as we were walking as fast as we could away from the Trade Center, you know, huge crowds being moved, the second building came down.

The second building hadn't even come down at this point?

No.

Wow.

And then a sort of further huge dust cloud. I kept thinking it was going to sort of topple on me, but it actually went straight down, if you can remember. But I was thinking I might have to swim for it or something. Anyway, I got home to my family, embraced my young children, and then thought, "I'm now on the wrong side of the river!" and had to hitchhike back over with the emergency services. Because of course, a reporter should have not gone home to embrace their children. But I think I was in such a daze, and yes, I did eventually manage to get back. And I think that's

why I was much more engaged in the whole war on terror as well, because I really felt it, it nearly got me and my nearest and dearest. Anyway, I went to Washington in 2004, basically I did a bit of reporting on the election, and then moved to Washington immediately after the 2004 election.

Because George W. Bush at the time before 9/11 was widely regarded to be an idiot one-term president at best, and a forgotten footnote. And then, of course, 9/11 happened, and his incredibly strong response, whether you support it or not, clearly meant that he had the country united behind him.

Yes, there was a moment when everybody was united. Obviously, that dissipated as the war became more and more of a tricky proposition. But at that time, the whole of America felt united.

But you've not been afraid to take those controversial positions. Like you backed George W. Bush in 2004, because you said he was the president best placed for the war on terror.

I did. I mean, his opponent then John Kerry was talking about withdrawing troops from Afghanistan. I thought that would just undo everything that had been done. And in fact, the surge that happened a bit later under George Bush was helpful, I think. So even if the war had been mismanaged, there was that feeling of, "Well, don't just throw it all away." And in fact, I think we did see, with the rise of ISIS, how dangerous it is to pull out and leave a vacuum. And I was concerned about that. I also didn't think John Kerry was… I wasn't a big fan, put it that way, but you say it's a controversial position, but if you think about it, George Bush won, Tony Blair won three elections here, it wasn't controversial then in a way. What's happened since is that people have rewritten history, pretended that they never voted for any of that or didn't support it.

I'll never do that. I'm the last remaining Blairite, and always will be.

Yes, well, if you've written an article saying, "I'm supporting George Bush," it's going to be there in the records, and for some reason, the person who writes my Wikipedia entry – over which, I should say, I have no control – has decided that's one of my most important articles, and it is there forever.

When the Chilcot Report came out, I was the only person in the British media to write an article called In Defence of Tony Blair. And I remember posting it saying to my colleague, "I'm going to put my tin hat on now." Actually, Tony wrote me a little note a couple of days later thanking me, which again is just showing how classy he is.

He's probably got it on his wall after all the pelting that he's been receiving since.

I know, it's ridiculous. You mentioned ISIS there. It made me think of a question about journalists being in more danger than ever now in the theatre of war, because ISIS deliberately, when they take prisoners, they dress them in

those fluorescent orange Guantanamo Bay suits, they execute them live streaming, they don't even respect the fact that if you wearing a flak jacket that says PRESS on it; that would give them more reason to kidnap you. It just seems to me now that even the old rules covering war as a journalist seem to have been set aside and just cast aside.

It's so dangerous. On my foreign escapades, when I was still at Time Out, I went off to Gaza to report on the rise of this little known group called Hamas. I would not be doing that on my own now as a freelance journalist, just for fun! You have to be careful. And you talked about people that we miss like AA Gill. Well, I also miss Marie Colvin.

What an amazing journalist.

Yes, amazing.

Very, very sadly missed.

And such an inspiration.

Killed doing what she loved doing.

Yes, but not just killed, but targeted. That's what we now know.

There are no words, it's so awful.

Yes. Specifically targeted by President Assad and his hideous henchmen, and murdered for doing her job.

Do you feel that sense of responsibility though, that when you do send someone to cover a dangerous story, it could be someone on the Insight team that's going after a gangster. It could be someone going to cover Syria. They might not come back.

Always. You always worry about it. You know, our systems have been beefed up since Marie's death, and I remember as the magazine editor, having to sign off people's assignments if they were going anywhere dangerous, and you'd go through with the security consultant what are the risks, what's the roots, what's the escape plan should one be necessary, and you'd try and look at it from every degree. But undoubtedly, the nature of journalism has changed. I mean, there still scope for fantastic foreign reporting, but I do feel that dictators like Assad are getting away with a hell of a lot, because of the lack of reporters in the field. Now, in some ways, the arrival of citizen journalists with their cell phones, people on the ground are able to record things, smuggle out stuff to the world outside, but it's much harder to verify that kind of information, and nothing beats sending a professional journalist, an experienced person, to a war zone to tell the truth about what's going on. It's incredibly hard now, particularly in various locations.

In your column, you've warned about these so-called 'clicktivists' that are trying to muzzle the free press, as you call it. How big a threat is this this Stop Funding Hate campaign?

In themselves, the Stop Funding Hate campaign are pipsqueaks; they really don't have a lot of power. But there are a lot of different forces trying to muzzle the press, and they've hit on this clicktivism, which is all very easy because you just get people to like, share, retweet, right through the Internet. I mean, it's virtue signalling, it costs nothing. It's so easy. And what they do is they write to an advertiser, they pretend to love them, they say, "I am a genuine customer," which usually like my eye they are, and say, "I love your product but sadly I won't be able to buy it any more because you advertise with…" You know, fill in the blanks, Daily Mail, usually, sometimes The Sun.

I don't really like what Tim Martin says about Brexit, but I'll still go there on a Sunday morning for my fry up. I love Wetherspoons!

Exactly. And basically a free press depends on advertising.

Of course.

It's never just depended on the honest pound in your pocket. Good though that is as well, and I've always argued against a pure advertising model for the press. So it's a mixture of people paying for the news and advertisers chipping in, and so to try and pretend to people like Paperchase or Lego or whoever they attack, that there's an army of people against them who are going to stop using their products is frankly ridiculous and usually a lie. But it has had its brief moment of glory in getting people to boycott the Mail and other products. I think they're a menace, but I think in the order of things there are worse things going on with the press at the moment.

Agreed, and like you were saying, there's good and bad in all political parties, there is good and bad in all newspapers. You know, Dacre, at his worst, is not particularly pleasant, but there's a lot that the Daily Mail does incredibly well. You only have to look at the campaign for justice for Stephen Lawrence's killers.

And it's not just that they do well on campaigns that we approve of. There's a huge section of the population that wants to read the Daily Mail, just as there a huge section of the population wants to read the Sunday Times or the Guardian. Let people choose the publication of their choice – why is it up to Stop Funding Hate to try and say what people ought to be reading? I mean, normally what they basically think is that everybody ought to be reading the Guardian.

When you started out, there were very few women in newspapers. Has that been a big change now?

It's changing, and there's definitely a difference. When I was starting out, there was literally a phrase called 'the shallow end' where a lot of the women were concentrated, in features. The very term 'the shallow end' tells you everything you

need to know about how women were seen as second-class citizens. Not any more. One, there's a proper appreciation anyway of the importance of lifestyle journalism. So it's not shallow in any way, and contains some of the very best writing in newspapers. The idea that people were only reading a Sunday newspaper, or any newspaper, for the ins and outs of Brexit it would be wrong. So, yes, women have been moving up into the newsroom, we've got a wonderful news editor, she'd be great on your programme, called Becky Barrow, and we have many more female writers, female commenters, even a few creeping into the sports desk.

Rebecca Myers is a friend of mine. She actually listens to this podcast so I know she'll appreciate the shout-out. I won't tip her off, so that she can get a mention.

Exactly. So even the last bastions are beginning to fall, and a good thing too. But as we talked about Marie Colvin, always a legend and an inspiration to me when I became a journalist, there have always been brilliant women journalists who I have hero worshipped in my time.

Well, you're deputy editor of the Sunday Times, we recently had Emma Tucker on, deputy editor of the Times. Both of you doing incredibly well, but there's Martin Ivens, John Witherow, both of them are men… can there be some kind of revolution? Will the next editor of both of them be you and Emma?

Well, I'm sure that Emma and I would love that, but we'd also like to be chosen on merit. I certainly would, and I doubt she'd say anything different. And there's no Buggins' turn in journalism. Never. And there are always very talented people coming along behind you. So nothing is guaranteed in life, but of course I would love there to be a woman editor of the Sunday Times. And yes, I'm sure it's time for it.

Last couple of questions then, and this one follows on directly from what you said then, is what is next? Do you think you will remain at the Sunday Times for quite some time? No one's ever really answered that anyway, because they always say, "Who knows?" No one's going to say, "Well, actually I'm going to hand my notice in tomorrow."

Okay, no one knows what the future holds, that's for sure in journalism. One thing I've found at the Sunday Times is that I've loved changing jobs there. I've done a lot of different jobs at the Sunday Times, and when I think I've been there a long time, I think, well, yes, but I've worked on News Review, I've worked in New York, Washington, Magazine, now deputy editor, and frankly there are still jobs at the Sunday Times that I would like to do that aren't even the editorship, although I'd love that as well. Sometimes I hear us talking about who should we send to be foreign correspondent somewhere, because I am involved in the recruiting process, and I almost want to put my hand up and say, "Oh, I'd love to do that!" There are so many great jobs, so many interesting parts of the world to cover, so many things going on in Britain that are exciting, or at least important. And so, as long as you've got an appetite for finding out the news, there'll always be something interesting to do in journalism.

Last question, then, to end on a high note. What's been the best day of your career so far? What's been the thing that you've done in your journalism career of which you're most proud?

Do you know, I think it was celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Sunday Times Magazine. That wasn't a personal triumph, but I did feel it was an important milestone. Sunday Times Magazine had been the first colour supplement in Britain.

It's a great magazine. We've had Ellie sitting in that chair.

Yes. And I had known the daughter of the legendary Godfrey Smith as a young girl, and he had been editor of The Sunday Times Magazine, and I thought, "What a fantastic job!" I didn't know anybody else who was doing such an interesting thing. But there was always a big legacy issue with the magazine. There were always people who said, almost from the very day it was launched, it was always better in the past. There was always that sort of, "Oh, it was great in the 60s."

Nostalgia ain't what it used to be, and all that.

Yes. But, working with my colleagues, we put on a terrific exhibition at the Saachi Gallery that ran right up to the present day, from the beginning to the present. Amazing photographs, 300,000 people came to see it, and the Saatchi Gallery kept extending the length of time it was open for because they loved it so much, and people were coming in such huge numbers. And we had so many good writers, and we put their names on the wall, and I thought it had such a good feeling, and I felt like in 50 years it had always been great. And it was great now, it was great then, and it just is a wonderful product. And I felt so proud of everything that had happened and accomplished, and I felt so proud to be editing it. Now, it wasn't in itself my dream job – as I say, I've always been interested in news, politics, lots of things besides features – but there was that sense of a real feeling of accomplishment and sense of standing on the shoulders of giants, and history, and it all blended into one that night, and lots of my friends were there, and the legends we've talked about, like Marie. I think it was the last time I saw her, in fact.

Well, Sarah, we're running out of metaphorical tape, unfortunately, and it's a compliment to you that I feel that we're really only about halfway through – I could go on for another hour and a quarter really. But unfortunately we're going to have to leave it there. Thank you ever so much for an amazing conversation, I really appreciate it.

You're very welcome.