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# Katy Searle

## Editor, BBC Westminster

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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 Katy Searle, head of BBC Westminster. Starting as a researcher and producer, she's been with the BBC for almost three decades, during which time she's worked for the World Service, Radio 4 and all three of their flagship daily news bulletins. She has reported on both domestic and international news, including the Jakarta riots and the elections in the US and Israel. As an editor, she's been responsible for the BBC's rolling news service, as well as leading programmes including Today and monthly current affairs programme, The Editors. She is also currently political news editor for BBC Westminster.**

**Katy, thank you for joining me.**

Thank you very much for having me.

**Katy, it's been quite a frantic time with Brexit, Trump and the Conservative leadership election. I'm surprised you've managed to find time to do this.**

Yes. It's been a pretty intense time and it's pretty tiring, but it's an incredible job to do, actually. And what you find, particularly in politics and talking to people that work both within the media and politics, but also, actually, politicians, is that it's pretty addictive. And you get used to that kind of intensity and that work rate. And the change of the media landscape over the last five years, I've been doing this job for about five years now, has just speeded up. And so it never really stops. But when it does stop, you kind of miss it.

**Is it quite an interesting time for you, then, as a journalist? Because all the old rules seems to have just been thrown out of the window, both here and in America. I suppose my real question to you is, what the hell is going on?**

Well, that's a very good question!

**It is.**

I think, yes, actually it's, well...

**We've got an hour, by the way, so carry on.**

Yes, yes, let's do this. Let's see if we can find an answer. I think, actually, that is the question that I've been asked the most over the last, particularly year, but even you could say going back three years. But in the last six months to a year, the most often-asked question is, "How's this going to end?" You could ask 20,000 people in Westminster and nobody would have the right answer – because the answer is, no one knows. And that was certainly true building up to the resignation of the current Prime Minister, Theresa May. And it will be true when the new leader takes over, because actually there are so many formulations of what happens now. And I'd say to any political student listening now, when you hear the current Tory leadership candidates saying, "This is what I'm going to do, and it's going to be no deal." Or, "It's going to be a deal on this basis or that basis," actually no one really knows what they'll be able to get. That's what's made it particularly interesting, because this story, no one really knows how it's going to end.

**When things happen at Westminster, is your first thought about covering it editorially and the angle and getting the right crew there and all the logistics? Or do you ever stop to think, what do I think as a human being? Or do you do that at the end of the day?**

Actually, I hardly ever do that. Yes. I always just think about it in story terms. And I suppose because I've been at the BBC for so long, what happens is you become kind of institutionalised, but I mean that in a good way. Because you're so used to judging things by the natural sense of what the BBC is, which is all about impartiality, telling the story right and getting a clear line on what you think the story is. That might sound quite boring, but actually it isn't. It's really, really exciting, because you don't have to follow a set of rules and regulations. They're already in-built in your judgment. So to answer your direct question, no. What you start thinking about is, what's the top line? I think that's probably always my first thought, is looking, "Right, what are we going to say the top line is?" And again, having done this job for as long as I've done it, it's quite instinctive. I tend to just go straight in, it's that. And I have quite a clear mind on that. And I might not be right all the time, and one of the great things about working at BBC Westminster is that I'm literally surrounded by massive political brains that actually have been doing politics for a lot longer than me. And what I really like, some of the big days is you get all the people round, so maybe it's Laura Kuenssberg, John Pienaar, Norman Smith, Vicki Young, everyone in the room with me.

**Big names.**

All the big names. And what's great fun is actually when we all disagree. And you'll have a genuine debate about what you think the top line is, where the story's going, what did that politician actually say? Because the other thing about politics, as you know, is actually a lot of the answers are quite grey, for the reasons they want them to be grey. You can try and work out actually what the story behind it is. But, yes. It's about first principle, it's about looking at where the top line is. And then also, of course, getting the camera to where that person is. Where are they? Can we find them? How many cameras do we need? Are there back entrances that you can get

to them? Thinking about the shots. The other real challenge, and I'm sure we'll talk about this more, is the pictures at Westminster.

**Because politics is showbusiness for ugly people.**

Yes, exactly! With the odd exception. Yes. And there are just no pictures, so there's not something that you can actually say, "Oh, that's a beautiful shot. Let's go and film that person doing this or that, or jumping off a mountain."

**It's like a person walking down a corridor, isn't it?**

Yes, exactly.

**Or reading a report and nodding.**

Yes. And what's really funny, actually, is when you look at really old reports from Westminster, say, so 20 years ago, that was what they did. And people just walked across College Green, as it's known, outside Westminster.

**I remember Roy Hattersley in a tracksuit, jogging, when he was standing for the deputy leadership, trying to convince people he was normal. He looked the least normal doing that. He should have been in a suit. Just sat drinking a cup of tea.**

Well, there's a lot of that. Yes. They're all jogging at the moment. Although we suspect a lot of them just jog round the corner and stop. That's something to watch out for. But, yes. It's thinking about how you can illustrate what's going on in Westminster with the pictures around it that you can play with. And that takes quite a lot of creative thought. Sometimes you can come up with something that you look back at it and think, "Oh, my god. That was just really cheesy and awful." And there's a lot of daffodils in spring. And there's a lot of autumn leaves on the ground in the autumn. We have debates about that. Or traffic lights to say stop, start the Brexit process. But there's a genuine challenge about that, and I hope that we get to a point where we try and tell the story through just little suggestions of odd picture. And that actually really relies on correspondents and people like Laura Kuenssberg looking for a moment and writing to that picture to bring it alive.

**Let me ask you, just on a personal note. I mean, it's none of our business, genuinely, how you vote. But there must be a moment when you're in the privacy of the polling booth when you're deciding for yourself, as a person, what to vote for. Are you the best informed voter? Or, in a sense, are you so overwhelmed with covering it day in, day out, that it's difficult to step back?**

Actually, that's a really good question. I think, yes, of course, we all have our own private political views. I think, as I said before, genuinely I've never had a moment where I feel that I bring any of those to work. And, as you mentioned at the start, I've worked for the BBC for 30 years and I genuinely have never met anyone that I think, "I know how you vote." Never. And that's actually quite an incredible achievement when you think of all the stories that are thrown at you. I mean, yes. To answer your

direct question, it's really great being this informed. When I think back on how I used to make political judgements or vote a few years ago, I thought, most people really don't know the detail. Well, of course they can't. Because who sits down and really reads the manifestos? But actually, that is also part of our job, to remember that. Because a massive challenge for us is to explain the voting, the lines, the political interviews, to people that aren't and shouldn't and cannot have the time to sit down and read manifestos. And a lot of what's interesting about politics, particularly now, actually, when people will be making their decision about the next prime minister, is how people actually mostly go on instinct. And you saw that during the EU referendum. And you see that at elections, too. And often the line is, can you see them on the steps at Downing Street? And it comes down to that kind of image in your head. And so I think as journalists and as political reporters, it's really important to remember that people do vote on instincts and emotion. Some people. A lot of people sit down and say, "No, well I've really looked at their economic policy," or, "I don't like their health policy," or whatever it is. But for most people, a lot of it is about instinct.

**Well, and maybe that's deservedly so, because I know it's often misattributed to Hannibal, but he has that famous saying, no battle plan ever survived contact with the enemy. If you're going to elect a leader of a party or a leader of a government, no one knows what's going to happen a year from now. And you do have to put your trust in that, the temperament of that person, their decision-making ability, their motivation, their honesty, all of those kind of things are incredibly important.**

Yes. I think that's right. And I think if you look back to when Theresa May was elected, first off, again, it was quite an instinctive thing, I think, in the end that it came down to a couple of choices. And a lot of people felt that she was reliable and had good decision-making skills. And certainly when she started, she had an agenda that she really wanted to put out. But unfortunately for her, she faced the biggest question we have had for decades and decades, of how to deal with Brexit when you have no majority. And of course, many people would say that her biggest mistake was calling another election and losing her majority. So you never know, when something starts looking strong at the beginning and how it's going to play out in the future as you deal with things. And of course, politics is famous for everything being chucked at you. And as a politician, it's how you deal with those unexpected problems that come at you, hurtling. And some of them can be predicted, and some of them are about policy decisions, but actually a lot of them are just natural events or events that happen. And how you deal with that, as a leader, is the real test.

**I worked in politics for over 10 years. I worked at Westminster, I stood for Parliament, I was a local councillor for six years, advisor to various people in the Labour Party. And I always thought it was quite unfair, the way that normal people perceive politicians, that they think they're all corrupt, or they're all as bad as each other. I know a lot of political activists and politicians of all parties. And yes, some of them are a bit vain and some of them are a bit lazy, but actually, largely they mean well. And I think the negativity that the public see them with is not deserved. So my question to you is, working with**

**politicians on a day-to-day basis, do you have some sympathy with their position?**

Oh, I completely agree with that. I think things like the expenses scandal, where there were genuine problems and real questions, and the Telegraph did some amazing journalism to get what they got, and it changed the systems, and some people even ended up in jail, didn't they?

**Rightly so.**

But actually, I agree with your point about individuals. Actually, if you look and talk to them, most of them, I would say the overwhelming majority of them, are there because they want to do good and make a difference. And what really came home to me, actually, is when we saw some of the debates around the war in Syria, and the terrible emotional struggle that some of those MPs stood up and made speeches about whether to back military action or not. And I think some of them were moved to tears in the chamber. And I don't think anyone could question the kind of heavy weight that some of them feel when they have to make those types of choices.

**There seems to be such an entrenched negativity, though, on both sides now. Taylor Swift, for example, used to get attacked for not getting involved in politics. But I actually, from her point of view, thought that that was quite clever. Because the minute she said anything, half of her audience were going to take upset at that. And it's always the negative people that are the most motivated. The issues now, where you look at Brexit, they seem to cut across party politics, they cut across family divides, and no side seems to be truly listening to the other. It seems quite a miserable moment, really.**

Yes. I think that's right. And I think Brexit has really changed politics. There's a general discussion in Westminster now that, whether once it's all over, if you like, once we're out or we stay in or whatever happens.

**Can we go back to normal?**

Can we go back to normal? The left-right divide?

**Same with Trump, in a sense.**

Yes, exactly. Yes. And that's a real debate. And actually, most people think that it's sort of gone forever, or many people think that it's gone forever. And it's because it's so binary, this choice of in or out. And as you've said, it crosses the party divide so much as well. actually, that's a genuine challenge in the reporting because before all of this, you'd say, "Well, I'd have a clip of the Labour Party, the Tory Party, the Lib Dems etc., SNP, on you go." But actually, it's just not as simple and straightforward as that. You've got to look at what their voting record is, are they supporting other people's vote, do they want to stay in, do they want a hard Brexit, do they want a soft Brexit? And really, one of our huge challenges over the last couple of years is to try and get that balance right. And it has been a real challenge and I think a lot of the parties have felt frustrations about that. And it's also true, actually, of Corbyn's

Labour Party. What we've seen with that is a real growth of a different kind of Labour and frontbench.

**That's why I resigned.**

Yes, right.

**Twenty-two years, I was a member. I've slung my hook.**

Right, right. Well, there you go. You're one of those.

**I'm one of the bitter former members, yes. I am.**

Well, there's a lot of people on the backbench that might agree with you there. And so you've got that struggle with who are you representing? Are you representing the backbench, which is a Labour backbench, Who may not reflect the same values or certain policies, say support policies, of the frontbench? That's another consideration. It's just got much more complicated in the last few years.

**And they all meant well. I mean, the Collins Review, Ray Collins was the former general secretary of the party, and he said, let's encourage more people to get involved in politics. So we'll make it easy to join the Labour Party, £3 online. And then when there's a leadership election, a couple of well-meaning MPs say, "Let's have Jeremy Corbyn on the ballot, just as a token lefty to make people feel included." Well, boy, did that backfire for us. Because he won. I don't know whether you've seen the news recently, but he's the leader.**

He is definitely the leader! And actually, Jeremy Corbyn would say he's overseen the biggest growth in the Labour Party ever, if not for decades. And it's been hugely successful to grow that movement.

**Yes. I mean, it's incredible. Do you think that there will be a general election soon?**

Oh, again, I'll go back to how is this going to end? Because you can ask lots of people and they'll all have different answers. I think if you look at where we're going and the choices, I think that has got to be a real consideration over the next year. And because essentially, the numbers aren't going to change, although you could argue that the supporters within those parties may change their allegiances. So you may see some shiftings there. But I think it's got to be a pretty good bet that there could well be one within the next year.

**Do you feel that your job as a journalist is more difficult? And as an editor? Because you've not only got the US President decrying fake news and attacking journalism itself and journalists, but also when Nick Robinson was political editor, there was a march on BBC Scotland where people were saying that he was biased. Now my view is, I was with Jeremy Bowen earlier today. If an equal number of Israelis and Palestinians attack his reporting as biased,**

**then you can kind of say, well, he's probably got it nailed, really. But now, it seems to be deeply personal. Laura Kuenssberg had to have bodyguards a couple of years ago at the Labour Party conference. It seems to be that journalism is under attack as never before.**

I moved to Westminster about five years ago, and I think there was a definite change. So within my job in that time I've covered two referendums and two general elections, which for any period is an extraordinary thing to land into. I think the intensity has grown because it's been such an unusual time. I mean, we've never seen a political time like this, or not since the Second World War. And so the stories are never-ending. The news cycle moves so quickly. And I think if we're going to look at what has changed the most, I think it's a combination of a hugely busy political period combined with a changing news cycle mostly driven by social media. And if you look at why I would say that, it's because everyone is a journalist now. Everyone can publish comments. And so you're no longer waiting for that kind of official statement or what does that person think or that person think. Everyone can publish what they think. Twitter has a huge body within Westminster and the Westminster Lobby, which are the group of journalists that report on Parliament. And so what happens with that is that stories that, I think when I started you could sort of expect about two news cycles, one for the morning, one for the afternoon.

**I dream of having two news cycles now. My nerves would be less shot.**

Exactly. Try being me! Yes. And yes, now you can get changes sometimes within minutes, sometimes within seconds, people say different things. And so you're always ready to jump to the next moment. And it makes it very exciting. Also, it's a challenge, because one of the things again, when I talked about judging what we think the top line is, it would be very easy to start saying, "Oh, let's do this now." Or, "Oh, that's the new exciting development." But for the BBC, especially for the end of the day, for the Six or Ten O'Clock News, you need to sit back and say, "Well, hang on a minute. What's the most significant thing that's happened today? Was it really that thing that looked terribly exciting a three o'clock this afternoon? Or was it actually where we started the day?" And so you have to keep trying to take a deep breath and think about where you think the political day is ending. And then, obviously get ready for the next development that's coming.

**I mean, you talked about the difficulty of pictures. But there's also the fact that brevity's an issue. Laura Kuenssberg will have a three-minute package on the Ten and then she'll be in the studio for what? 75 seconds to talk over it and talk around it. What do you include and what don't you include there? Because she could go on for 10 minutes. There must be 10 minutes' worth of stuff she could say. How do you chop seven minutes of that to make it three minutes long?**

Yes. Well, that's our daily challenge. But you could tell the editor of the Ten O'Clock News that we'll easily do 10 minutes every night. But it's about keeping the audiences focused and also, again, to go back to what we think the story is. If you include five or six lines in a 10-minute piece, are you really being disciplined enough with your own journalistic judgment to decide what you think the most important things of the day are? If you've only got three minutes, you can only get so many

facts and figures in. That's about deciding, "Right, this is the story today. This is how we're going to tell it. What do we need to tell the audience and what do we not need to bother them with?" Because the other challenge is parliamentary language, explaining Brexit to the audience. It's an incredibly complicated process. A lot of it…

**I don't understand it now. I just nod all the time and just hope no one asks me any follow-up questions. So far, they haven't.**

Good plan. So, it's trying to peel back to the basic message of what you're going to do. And actually it is, although it's sometimes a challenge to do that, and you'll often hear me on the phone at five o'clock in the evening saying to my colleagues on the Six O'Clock News, "Look, we're just going to need another minute to do this." Because it's not just about telling the story, it's also about the balance point that I've talked about.

**Does Paul Royall kind of shout, "You've got 30 seconds," and then slam the phone down like he's in some kind of early '90s film?**

We have a persuasive conversation. Regularly.

**I love that. Love the diplomatic language there. "Words were exchanged."**

Exactly. But I mean, one of the genuine challenges is, of course, that you can't just include two parties. So you need a certain amount of time to reflect all the positions. And again, for the live it's a discipline that all correspondents work to at that point in the evening. Particularly for Laura, at 10 o'clock at night, what is the thing that she wants to sum up about the day, which either summarises the day, or summarises the problem or challenge that will go into the next day.

**I mean, it seems utterly, almost impenetrably difficult and no one's grateful for what you're doing. Do you ever, I mean, do you get up on a morning and think, "I'm committed to impartial, bias-free journalism and that's going to get me through the day. And these 100 people that are lining up to punch me in the face, they won't get me down."**

I have that mantra every day.

**I mean, how do you get through the day without bursting into tears?**

I know. Actually, I'm sorry to sound like a cliché but I just feel incredibly lucky to have this job at this time. I mean, landing into politics in the last five years has been an extraordinary thing to witness. And I genuinely jump out of bed every day and think, "Right, let's do it. What's going to happen today?" And sometimes if you look at the stories in the last year or so, I mean, you genuinely couldn't make it up. And so there are things you just think, what has happened? Now, really? And what are we going to do with that, and how do we explain it to the audience? And so it's actually a huge privilege. It's a proper responsibility, and I take that responsibility very, very seriously. But it also can be really exciting and really good fun.

**And how do you guarantee the due impartiality? Because there's always these cries of, "You're biased." I mean, I'm a huge fan of the BBC's news coverage, obviously, and think you guys are doing a great job. And clearly, you're not biased. You are impartial.**

I mean, due impartiality really means the weight of argument. So, where are you going to land the number of people speaking? And the conversation that they are part of at that time? And how do you represent that? I mean, clearly there are rules and regulations around election periods and so there are really, really strict rules that we have to abide by, by law. But even outside of election periods, I think it's just about us being impartial and about us doing our job correctly. And I've spoken before about just having an in-built feeling about what we do and what's impartial. And it becomes a natural sense of looking at the language you're using and the phrasing you're using, the clips to make sure that you're not misrepresenting what people say, that's a really important point. And then of course within politics, the representations of the parties and how much support they've had either from the last election or the election cycle. And what, as I say, what the current story is now. So, to take Farage for example. He's won the European elections with the Brexit Party and so, of course, it's right to reflect that. But if the support for the Brexit Party falls over a period, those things change as well. It's about a weight system that you sum up and feel the way politics is going. And the amount of support the public has given to those parties.

**How do you deal with these so-called facts, whether they're right or wrong? I mean, I'm thinking of the bus, the 350 million for the NHS. What troubles me there is, is it's technically correct in so far as that's what we give the EU. But of course it, in my view disingenuously, ignores the rebate. And of course, even further disingenuously in my view, could never be earmarked for the NHS. So we end up on a debate about whether it's true or not, but the reality is that it's technically true, in my view, but not really true, morally true. I mean, they were clearly using a technicality, a technical truth, to mislead. That is already something that's incredibly difficult to explain, in my view. How on earth do you get that across? Because you end up reducing The Today Programme to two guests saying, "Well, that is true. That is what we write a check for, for the European Union." And then some other guy saying, "No, it isn't."**

Well, what the BBC has done over the last few years, but has done increasingly more of over the last couple of years, is something called Reality Check. Which a lot of the other, our media colleagues have got their own versions.

**They've nicked your idea, then, have they?**

Let's go with that. And it has actually, it's been absolutely crucial to that. Because one of the challenges for us on the Brexit story, and any kind of leadership story actually, about campaigns or anything, is that you need to report. And candidates or representations, representatives of parties absolutely have the right to hear their message said and aired, and that's part of democracy. But the public have the right to have those facts challenged and questioned. So we are doing more and more of

the use of Reality Check, where we have a team of very qualified and experienced journalists looking at what the claims are, and counterclaims. And whether it's online, on radio, or increasingly on the main bulletins, we try and say, "Okay. This is what they're claiming," as the first piece on the news, and then often follow up that with, "Well, let's just look at that in more detail." And that's been really, really important, I think, to the audience.

**Now, I know this isn't your personal fault, and I don't want to descend into an episode of W1A, but a lot of the titles at the BBC are kind of impenetrable. Laura Kuenssberg is the BBC's Political Editor, but you're head of Westminster and head of political newsgathering. Now, newsgathering, is that word? I imagine it is, because it's in your title. How does that work? What is the dynamic? Are you Laura's boss? Is she your boss? Are you now going to say the viewers and the listeners are the boss? Bet you do.**

They're always the boss. Well, I am Laura's boss and I manage a team at Westminster of about 80 to 90 journalists, and it ranges from online writers to reporters, to producers and all the rest. And I oversee everything that's going on at BBC Westminster. That's my direct role. I work really closely with Laura. I'm editor of political news, which means I edit that news, and so I'm responsible for that content.

**Are you the one that'll go to prison if you get it disastrously wrong?**

Let's hope not. Let's hope not. And I mean, I think probably most people wouldn't care or know about my job title. Laura is obviously the star of the show and really, the buck stops with her. So as political editor, we work really, really closely together and we'll be talking from very, very early in the morning to very, very late at night. And constantly, we all have little WhatsApp groups about how we're going to communicate and what we think, what the story is and what we need to chase, the stories, during the day.

**And does FOI make you do a double-think when you're on your WhatsApp and your emails? Because you might say something to Laura, say, "We need a bit more of Remain in that particular package." And then three years later, when it's shown in a newspaper out of context from some FOI request, you're going to get hit over the head by the Daily Mail saying, "There you are. There's proof."**

It's not something I really worry about, to be honest. We tend to have quite a professional conversation, so let's hope we stick to the script when we're texting.

**So you never say, "Laura, go a bit soft on Farage tonight"?**

Certainly not!

**Excellent! Now, Andrew Neil's perhaps the best forensic political interviewer. I mean, I love it when he sticks one on politicians of all parties, even some in the Labour Party. I think it's fantastic. And you'd be daft to go on his show and**

**have something to hide or something to try and sidestep, because he'll get you. And I really, really like that, as the viewer. Why is the BBC dropping The Week? It's hugely popular with the late-night audience.**

Oh, well, I think to be honest it's not something that I'm directly involved in.

**So you didn't say, "We've had enough of Andrew, he's fired"?**

Oh god, I completely agree with you. I think Andrew Neil is an incredible broadcaster and he is one of the best interviewers in this country. I think he's first class. Decisions about programmes, they just evolve. And I think it depends on what people, individuals want to do, but also audience rates. And actually looking at different offerings.

**I've done this podcast now for three years, so you end up picking up phrases like, "Due to the unique way the BBC's funded," and things like that. But you do have a special responsibility to reach out with all different types of audiences, more so than a commercial broadcaster. We had Debbie Ramsay in recently, who's the editor of BBC's Newsbeat, and it started to make me think about how the BBC can attract a younger audience to political news. Is that something that you have to bear in mind? How do you do that? Is that more engagement on social media? Do you have a way of doing that?**

I think it's really important, and it's the biggest challenge that the BBC faces at the moment. We really need to look at our younger audiences and bring them in. And I think, to an extent, we're still looking at how we best do that. There's been a huge, as Debbie referenced last week, I think there's been a huge growth in digital content at the BBC. At Westminster, I've recently set up a whole, new, specialised unit that's going to look specifically at this. And there's a real, live conversation about what that does and how do we target the younger audience? How do we get them interested in politics? If we all talk to young people, if I talk to my children, they're not really that interested. How do we address that? One of the things I think is worth saying is it's also a challenge because the story has been consistent, if you like. Brexit has been the story for three years, and actually more than that if you look at the campaign.

**I'm sick of it.**

Yes.

**And that's no disrespect to your journalism. I'm just sick of it.**

No. And I think actually, if you think about the normal audience, actually quite a lot of them are…

**I asked Katya Adler, she was sitting in that very chair about a year ago, and I said, "Are you sick of it?" And she obviously said no.**

No, no. None of us are sick of it because we're massive addicts. But also, I mean the audience, actually, figures are hugely high. Lots of people say, "Oh, well, I'm quite bored of it," but then you look at the figures and you're like, "They're all watching it."

**And they're still watching.**

And also, I find with my friends and family, if they're asking me about the story then I think they're probably quite interested. And they still ask me about Brexit and who's going to be the next prime minster. So I think we're still bringing them in. But it's a real question about serving all the audience. What we've done quite recently is appoint a new political correspondent that's based outside of London. And Alex Forsyth, who was one of our Westminster correspondents, is now based in Birmingham. And her specific role that we've designed is to try and report on other things.

**To get out in the real world.**

Yes, yes. She'll do a bit of Brexit and she'll do a bit of Westminster stuff outside of Westminster, but a lot of it is looking at challenges that face people up and down the country. And I thought about this a lot in the last couple of years and just thought, "Well actually, there's a huge amount in the political world that we're just not ever getting to." So we worked hard to create this post, and a lot of it will be about funding in social services, or people's education, or the growth of political parties from the grassroots. And she's been doing it for a few weeks and I'm really pleased with the results. And I think genuinely, we will start talking to a different audience as well in getting different views from across the country, rather than just being stuck in SW1. Because one of the challenges we face, there's a lot of people will say to me, "Why don't you get out of Westminster?" And the answer is always, "Because the story's in Westminster."

**Well, Parliament's kind of there, in SW1.**

Parliament's there. If I was to ask Laura to go and report on something that was in Westminster from Leeds, that not only would be a challenge, it would look quite weird. We are forever drawn to Westminster for the right reasons. But that doesn't mean that we shouldn't look for other ways, so I'm really excited that we've been able to create this post and hope to bring a new political reporting out of it.

**I know the BBC is trying to broaden the range of voices in its coverage. Does that mean giving a platform to commentators on the far left and on the far right of the political spectrum?**

Yes. I think we need to talk to politicians from across the spectrum.

**All and sundry.**

I mean, obviously there people that you're going to vet and think about. And you look at all individual voices and make a judgment about whether they are the right people to put on the air. But certainly, the BBC should not be banning people. We've got to

make judgements about whether they've got criminal activity, clearly. Or whether there's inciting any kind of violence, anything like that. Of course, that will be a consideration. But if you've accepted those, then I think it's really important to get a broad range. And as we've discussed, actually the political spectrum has widened both on the left and the right in the last few years. So those people have become part of the actual everyday debate, really, in many ways.

**It's difficult. It must pose a challenge for you to cover someone like Tommy Robinson, who's not only spewing hate and inciting racial hatred, but clearly has a huge political following, albeit on social media, or certainly until recently. He's clearly someone who's relevant in the political scene these days. But how do you decide whether to cover that? Because I know when he was on trial, for example, that was more of a crime story about whether he was in contempt or not.**

Yes. Yes. As you say, I think that was a quite specific news story, as opposed to a political story. I think, as we've been discussing, I think it's about making a judgment about whether that person has 'earned their place'. Do they have enough political support? Is there a story around them? Once you've gone through your checklist of your own internal questions, then there's another judgment about where you place that and how much prominence you give that person. And how much airtime that person, particularly, gets. And sometimes you decide that's the right thing, sometimes you'll decide that actually, you don't really want to give them very much at all. But it's true of lots of political decisions and lots of decisions around what you think the story is. It's how much weight overall, given due impartiality and all the other rules and regulations that we just naturally live by, does that person earn in the end?

**How does the actual day-to-day run? In terms of, what time do you start the day? And then is there a conference after an hour? And do people dial in? How do you plan the actual coverage of the day?**

Well, my day often starts one minute past six in the morning. Because as soon as the headlines have gone out on Radio 4, the phone starts ringing. And particularly during campaign times, election periods. Because the parties tend to ring me or start texting me if they've heard what story we're reporting on, what lines.

**Do you listen to The Today Programme to start your day?**

I do. My alarm goes off at one minute to six, and on the radio goes, and the phone will start ringing or text going quite soon after. Not every day, and it goes through different periods. But during the really intense times, particularly during the referendum, both sides of the argument are doing their jobs. They each have a director of communications for a reason, and they'll be very intent on making their point, trying to get their lines across. That will be the start of the day. And then I'll have a constant conversation with Laura Kuenssberg and we'll discuss where we think the day is going. And then we have our main conference at the BBC at nine o'clock in the morning, where I do a video link-in from Westminster and discuss what I think the main stories are to all the main editors at the BBC. And discuss what kind

of interviews we're trying to get and how I think the shape of the day will go. And then we'll talk amongst ourselves at Westminster, and it's great to have all these brains in the room. And what's wonderful about working in the Westminster newsroom is that it's like a sponge. You just hear different voices and different views and different opinions. And it really informs what you think as an editor. And it's fascinating. And also, the growth of blogs etc is very influential in the mornings. A lot of political blogs flying around from really, really early. And so you'll get a better sense of how the wider Westminster journalism is looking at the stories. And then, so quite early on, we'll make a decision what all our different correspondents will look at. And for Laura, looking towards the Six and Ten O'Clock News, it will be one thing. Norman Smith, who will go on the News Channel immediately...

**Great journalist.**

He's very hard working, as they all are. And he might have a slightly different take, because all the audiences are different as well, of course. So Laura's focus may be, as I said earlier, looking at how we get to the end of the day and summarise what the big moment of the day is. Norman may have moved on from that a little bit and is offering different things to the Radio 4 audience by the end of the day, for example. And that's also true of the digital content, 5 Live, the Channel, and all the other journalists. And also there's a real question about, what else are we going to chase? And I have a mixture of correspondents that have specialist subjects, if you like, and they'll be doing their own journalism in the background to try and find the next lines.

**Because what you don't want is Norman, Laura and John Pienaar and all these people producing three different versions of the same report. Do you sit down at the beginning and think, "Right, this development has three ingredients. Laura, you do ingredient one. Norman, you do ingredient two." Do you divvy that up? How does that work?**

Well, all discuss it as a wider group and individually. And actually, what Laura will do for a TV report will just naturally be quite different to what Norman would offer as a radio report. Because obviously, we're really reliant on pictures and telling that story through that. And so we'll have an individual discussion with Laura and her producing team, who are absolutely first class. And we'll look at what best pictures and what voices they can gather, because without the pictures, you've got nothing to put on. For radio, it's obviously just a different product, and so it's much more in the writing. And it does include, of course, interviews and sound, but it's a very different media product that Norman will then be writing for Radio 4 and others. But yes, in terms of overall splitting the stories, there could be on any one day a number of stories. Obviously you have a finite amount of people in the room, but you'll try and make a decision about which stories you think will develop and are really, really worth chasing. And then put those people on that and try and get it on the air from there.

**And how do you decide when a story might be bigger than the political brief? You might get a closure of a high street brand, and there's a political angle to it, but then also the BBC's business editor, Simon Jack, might want to do**

**something. How do you make sure, again, that both Laura and Simon aren't saying essentially the same thing?**

Yes. Well, I mean, it's fairly straightforward in that I think there's a political angle to everything, if you look at it. So we can be on all the time and our team are busy and on the news constantly. If there's a story about, well, it's got more of a business angle overall, actually, that's fine. Simon can do that. And we're busy enough with what we've got on to... yes, it's about a balance, really, in the end. Is it a story that is going to dominate Parliament, is real trouble for the Prime Minister? Then that's going to be, naturally, politics. If it's something that is about a high street, it's about customer services or costings, that's probably one for Simon.

**Do you ever feel sorry for politicians, in the moment? Or are you so busy trying to get stuff to air and hold them to account that you sometimes just forget, not in a horrible way, but you forget that they're human beings and they might be genuinely going through it? I remember when Ken Livingstone locked himself in that toilet for an hour and a half. I mean, don't get me wrong, I laughed at the time as well. But that must have been not very pleasant for him, to have to hide in the toilets.**

I think as a journalist, actually before I worked at Westminster, I edited the Six and Ten O'clock News for a very long time. And a lot of the stories, as people know just from watching the news, actually are really heart-breaking, and really difficult. And sometimes as journalists in the newsroom, you see pictures of things that you'd really rather not see. And you have to make a judgment about what you show to the public.

**It's like being on Twitter now, honestly. It's horrendous, some of the stuff that pops in your feed.**

Is it? Yes, there's a lot of stuff going on. And it's the same, I think, in any kind of journalism. You end up actually just having a bit of a natural emotional barrier, that I just see it as a story. And of course, there's moments. When the Prime Minster stood on the steps and resigned a couple of weeks ago, and her own emotion came out, of course, any human being feels that kind of emotion for another person.

**Actually, I felt sorry for her in the moment. And then I felt disgust at how mocked she was. Clearly, I think, she's ballsed the job up. But I respect her intent and I respect her as a professional. And she was clearly very emotional. And I felt a human moment then, and she was widely derided on social media. And I thought, "Don't people have humanity?"**

Yes. Yes. Well it's important, I think, not to completely forget that you're a human being.

**Yes. That will be the pull quote, by the way, for the whole podcast.**

But I do think, and maybe this is a problem for journalism. But actually I think you have to, to be able to do your job both independently but also to deal with some of

the horrible stories that you're faced with, actually just put up a bit of a barrier and see it as a story. And try not to think about it too much beyond that.

**We had Jeremy Vine on a couple of years ago and I'm a big fan of Jeremy's, he's a friend of mine. But before he did Newsnight, he was the BBC South Africa correspondent, and he was doing some big, important thing with Nelson Mandela at the time. And the news desk called him off and said, "Oh, there's been a helicopter crash in Johannesburg and we need you to go cover that urgently." And he was like, "Oh, right. Hundreds of people must have died, then, because of this, if you're pulling me off Nelson Mandela." And the news desk said, "Oh, it's only two." And he said, "Well, why am I being pulled off for that?" And he said, "Oh yes, someone filmed it. We've got imagery. It's going to lead the Ten." And that actually brings me to another question, really, which is if I'm a politically interested citizen, what is the best way for me to get political news from the BBC? Is it radio?**

Well, I think actually, increasingly people are looking towards digital. And I think it's a real challenge for us, because you're informed by your own personal actions, and I know that I look at my phone all the time for the latest developments. But I still very, very much go to the Ten O'Clock News to get the summary of the day. And we also get a very thought-about, well-constructed delivery of what the main experts, to take Laura for example, the top political journalist, I would say, in this country, is putting together her thoughts and summary in a very considered way. And that's quite different to what you might pick up on Twitter, or you might see online, or you see something breaking on the News Channel. So I think actually, it's part of the media landscape as it's changed so much, it's just about consuming much more. But I think the figures show us that there's still that appetite for all of it. Yes. It depends what you're looking for, really. But if you're interested in news, I think people are taking more news in.

**Do you ever get time to switch off? When you're not on duty, do you *not* check the news? Do you say, "I'm off duty this Saturday so I'm not going to read the newspapers"? Or are you such a political addict that you can't keep away?**

I'm a political addict and I can't keep away. Yes.

**When they eventually prise you out of the job, whenever that is in a few years, what would be next for you? Would it be something completely contrasting? Would you be the BBC's relaxation correspondent or something, they could send you to spas?**

Oh, I think we need to create that job. I don't know, actually. I think the thing about politics, as I said at the beginning, is that it is really, really addictive. And I do try and find times where I switch off. But actually, as we've talked about the news cycle, it's quite difficult to leave that behind. And for my job, I'm on call all the time. So if there is a tricky judgment to make about a tricky political story, that's my job to make it. So it's quite difficult to switch off and say, "Well, it's a Saturday, I'm not answering the phone," because the job is to always be available. I think the challenge, actually, is to find another job that is as exciting and addictive as this one.

**What's your personal journey? How did you even get into this lark? Did you always want to be a journalist? How did you start out?**

Well, I think I was really unusual because I knew I wanted to work in broadcasting from about 12 or 13. And I started working in hospital radio as a newsreader. I was very, very bad and I kept laughing, which probably means this is why I'm the other side of the mic.

**Yes. You're not air-side.**

Yes. And I did that for some time and then I used to work at Capital Radio in the holidays. And then I joined the BBC when I was 19, and I joined the World Service as a radio production assistant. The wonderful thing about working in the BBC is that you can go and work in lots of different departments. And so I went, as you referenced at the beginning, I went from there to Radio 4, the News Channel when it started. I worked across the One, Six and Ten O'Clock News and then went to Westminster five years ago. And it really is an incredible place to work in, actually, because there's so many different opportunities. I've been really very lucky. But I was a very odd person. When my children now ask me, worry that they don't know what they're going to do when they're age 13, because I did, I can say, "Well, I was just a bit strange."

**What might you do next? I know you'll refuse to answer.**

I genuinely don't know, actually. I think I've done a huge amount of different jobs in the BBC and I am genuinely puzzled, actually, about what can be more exciting. And every time, when I left the Six and Ten, I thought, "I'm not sure I'll find another job more enjoyable than that." And it was a wonderful job. But Westminster actually, for me, has been even more enjoyable. It will be a big decision when that time comes.

**I mean, Tony Hall can't go on forever.**

Well, you never know! He might move over, right? I can see myself in that chair...

**I didn't expect you to say that! That's pretty good. That'll be the pull quote. I like that. Are you calling on Tony to stand aside now? Is it like Game of Thrones, then? How do you actually become DG?**

I don't know. I think you have to be really clever.

**Well, so you qualify, then. What are the stories that you've covered recently that you're most proud of? That's a nice, tame question, isn't it?**

Yes... I think if you ask me, I mean, I'm really proud of what we've done over the last few years on Brexit. I think it's been a real challenge and I think the coverage has been genuinely fantastic. I think personally, for me, over the last five years I was really proud of what became known as The Kitchen Series, because it was to remind listeners…

**Was that the Ed Miliband one where he had two kitchens? I remember that.**

Two kitchens for Ed Miliband. And it was, for David Cameron, the moment he announced that he wasn't going to stand again for another election. And no one knew he was going to say that, not even his staff. The reason we got some good journalism out of it was because traditionally we'd always done quite formal interviews with party leaders. And I was actually just bored of watching them.

**If you were bored, we're in trouble.**

Yes. And it was always on trains. And I just said, we talked about it in the office and said, why don't we just see if we can put these people in different environments and get them more relaxed, and have different type of interview and different discussions?

**Isn't that doing them a favour as well, to make them more interesting?**

Well it does. Well, I think that's right except as we've seen, they actually got so relaxed they ended up saying things that perhaps they may not have done.

**Secret of this podcast.**

Yes. Exactly.

**To grind people down.**

And from the David Cameron perspective, it really changed the political story quite fundamentally. Because as soon as any leader says they're not going to stand again, the focus looks at who's next. And so that story went on. And that was probably my proudest achievement.

**When you eventually do move on to become director-general and your seat is vacant, what advice would you give to someone now starting out in journalism or that's maybe had a few years that is interested in taking your job? That wants to be head of BBC Westminster? What are the qualities? As someone who's actually achieved and secured the job, what do you think that is that you've got that makes you fit for it?**

I think you have to be really confident in your editorial view. And to any journalist, I would say, think about what you think the story is and argue your case. Because everyone in the room will have different views. On the politics, I think it's about knowing that if you're coming under pressure from political parties to use one line or use another line or swap stories around or whatever, is to again, know that they are doing their job. And they're not actually attacking you, they're just trying to have some influence. And to think about whether you're doing the right thing, take a breath and consider your judgment, and then stick to it. And again, that goes back to confidence and not feeling either bullied or intimidated; just stand your ground and be confident with your own views. It's all about confidence.

**When you're in normal social gatherings outside the BBC, you're at a neighbour's barbecue for example and everyone's having a good time, and then you tell someone that you're head of BBC Westminster, do normal people say, "Oh, I don't like the BBC, they're biased"? And how do you handle that in your normal social world?**

Yes...

**Do you just say, "Well, that's your view," and move on? Or do you say, "Well actually, Bob, you're wrong. We work bloody hard to deliver a balanced news programme and you're ungrateful"?**

It's a bit of a mixture of the two. Depends on my mood. Yes. I mean, it's actually surprising how many people feel that they can…

**Have a go at you.**

Yes. Have a go at you at a social situation.

**Like it's your fault.**

Yes. Well in many ways, they might hold me responsible.

**Well yes, if it were true.**

But if it was true. Yes. I mean, sometimes I just nod and walk away. But most of the time, I tend to engage people and just say, "Well, what particular thing are you thinking of?" And actually, what's quite revealing is once you explain the decision processes around stuff, or you explain, they didn't quite understand what they thought they understood, which is often just people get it wrong, right? A lot of people actually just end up saying, "Oh, right. Okay. I didn't realise that." I had that at a family party recently where the first person that I met, who I hadn't seen for 40 years, pulled apart some of our political coverage.

**God almighty.**

It was fun. It was really fun.

**I bet that was a great party.**

But actually, they just completely misunderstood what the decision-making process is around it. And by the end of the conversation, obviously, I'd won the argument.

**Does it depress you a little bit, though? I've been in politics for quite some years, and even if I disagree with someone, I don't have to be disagreeable, as Obama used to say. But people seem to be so quick to assume the worst of people now. Or is that me saying nostalgia isn't what it used to be, and it's**

**political coverage has always been robust? It just seem to be ever more vitriolic and quite nasty these days. Or am I wrong?**

I don't think it's nasty. I do think there is a lot of stuff on social media that is incredibly strong. And I think people feel that they can attack you in a way that they'd never to your face. I think that's been a huge change. I think mostly, people face-to-face are trying to not have that kind of fight with you. But I do think the politics in the last few years, for the referendum, has just been hugely divisive. And I think what's interesting, working in this field, is that politics is discussed in places that it wouldn't be discussed normally. Five, 10 years ago, you might go to a party and no one would discuss the big political issue of the time.

**Oh, they were the good old days, weren't they?**

Yes, exactly.

**When you could just have a few glasses of wine and enjoy yourself.**

Talk about the washing machine, yes. And now, actually, people have real debates. And we know this, don't we, these split families etc. But that's what's kind of, it's interesting, actually. And because I'm an addict, I quite like it because I can go in and I can get involved and I can also know what I'm talking about, which is an advantage at these times. But the great thing about politics, actually, I mean, I see it as a real positive, that people are genuinely engaged. They really care and it matters – and that's what democracy is all about.

**I mean, I oppose Jeremy Corbyn. I think he's a git. But he's clearly mobilised a load of new members that always existed that us Blairites either just took for granted that they'd been defeated, and they clearly were there, those real people that have had their passions ignited.**

Yes. I think supporters of Jeremy Corbyn would point to that, absolutely. I mean, there's been a huge growth in the party membership and it's fallen a little bit.

**Yes. It's side-lined people like us. Normal people. Blairites.**

It's fallen a little bit.

**People who want the best for Britain.**

Well, I wouldn't possibly comment about that, Paul, as you know. But, yes. I mean, he's had enormous success in that field.

**Last question, then. And this is genuinely not a question about their politics. But who are your favourite politicians? And I'm not suggesting there for one second that it would be an endorsement of their policies, but do you have MPs that you get along better with in all parties?**

It's not really about getting on, because I wouldn't say that MPs and politicians are friends of mine. I don't tend to socialise in that sense. But in terms of the work relationship, I think actually politicians are at their best when they're open and can discuss it. And I think there was, under the Blair era, a birth of scripted messaging. And that has continued, to a certain extent. But you get much more out of a politician, and they're just more interesting, more persuasive, I think, if they are able to relax into what they actually believe. And have a discussion on a level publicly, I mean, not just privately, about where they think their policies or opinions should go. Rather than trying just to stick to the script.

**Obviously, wouldn't expect you to betray a confidence, but do you ever get told things off the record where you think, "Wow, that was juicy, I wish I could put that to air"?**

Yes. All the time. Yes.

**That must be the best part of the job.**

It is really fascinating. I mean, there is a reason for it. It sounds, doesn't it, that we're having these secret conversations just for our own fun. But actually, to explain to the listeners, why politicians tell you stuff off the record is to inform the general currency of that story. So that you understand more, you can write it in a way that informs your judgment and helps the audience rather than just hearing the tittle-tattle. But it is also really interesting.

**Because you end up with Laura saying things on air like, "Sources close to the Home Secretary are of the view that X, Y and Z." And even as a viewer I think, well, that's obviously the Home Secretary that's said that and she has to respect that confidence. Or, "Someone who has great claim to know the Prime Minister's mind is of the view that X, Y and Z," you think, well, that's clearly the Prime Minister.**

Well, there's a range of sources, actually, so It's not always that. I wouldn't pretend to know, but I would say that sources come from a range of people. But if you're going to use that kind of quote or language, they would be people that are informed enough to allow you to say that on air.

**Well, Katy, it's been hugely enjoyable. Thank you ever so much for your time.**

Thanks for having me.