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# Alan Hunter

## Head of Digital, The Times

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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 Alan Hunter, head of digital at the Times and Sunday Times. Beginning at the ST, he went from assistant chief sub-editor to News Review editor, leading their coverage of the London Olympics, and the killing of Osama bin Laden. From there, he became executive managing editor of the Times and Sunday Times, before taking his current role. Alan has since introduced changes to the model, which have resulted in 20% annual increase in digital subscriptions. He has also launched the award-winning Red Box Newsletter, and the Walking the Dog Podcast.**

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

My pleasure.

**So, Alan, the great challenge for today's media is to get people to actually pay for quality journalism. I mean, there's so much free stuff out there. How many subscribers does the Times and the Sunday Times now have?**

We tend to talk about the headline number, which is print and digital combined, which is about 535,000 now.

**That's incredible. Of course, I am one of those paying subscribers. I love the product.**

Excellent. That's great to hear. Of that number, 286,000 are digital only, about 200,000 are print, and there's a portion in the middle, who get both print and digital.

**I have read the Sunday Times every Sunday for well over two decades. I have not picked up a physical copy of the Sunday Times in four years. Isn't that incredible?**

It's funny, because actually this weekend, I picked up a print copy of the Sunday Times. There's something about…

**Weren't your fingers all dirty?**

No! There's something about the weekends, and spreading out the papers over the kitchen table that still works, and I think that's something that will be around for quite a long time.

**I much prefer the curated version on my iPad, than what I would call a 'sandbox environment' via the website, where you can click on anything you like, really. I like to scroll through it, that someone has decided the importance and the order.**

Yes, absolutely. I think that's something that people really like about our tablet edition, and increasingly about our smartphone edition, where there's a real hierarchy of stories. I think that's something that's really difficult in digital, to replicate that experience in print, where you instantly know, on turning a page, which story is the most important on the page, and which one might be less important, and you might want to move away from. Replicating that on digital is very difficult. It's hard to say if any site has perfected this, the idea of hierarchy and telling you what's important. Because you don't have that experience of flicking through a website. I think one of the reasons our iPad app was initially so popular in moving people from print to digital was that it really does replicate a newspaper experience – and, as we look to develop it, that's something we really need to be aware of.

**It's amazing how, when you challenge the conventional wisdom, how the so-called "experts" of the day always say that you're committing a grave error. I remember writing an op-ed for somewhere when the Times introduced its paywall, saying, "This is ridiculous. No one's ever going to read it." I'd got used to reading the Times for free. I read it maybe once or twice a week. Then the paywall came in and I thought, "I'm never going to read it ever again," and then within three months I'd subscribed, and because I now pay, I read it every day. So I couldn't have been more wrong.**

Well, you weren't the only one to be wrong, to be fair. It must be said, that when it was announced that we were going to be going paid…

**There were a few naysayers.**

There were a few sceptics.

**Including my good self.**

There were a few sceptics, even within the newsroom. People had got used to the idea that journalism should be open to all, that somehow the internet wanted to be free – which is, of course, crazy when you think about it.

**It's just unsustainable. Someone has to pay for good journalism.**

Yes. I remember someone said that it was trying to put a 19th century business model into the 21st century, when actually I think Rupert Murdoch deserves great

credit for saying, “Look, this is costing money to produce, people should pay for it.” I think people said exactly the same thing when Sky was launched. They said, “Well, no one’s ever going to pay for TV.” And now, of course, they have 10 million subscribers in the UK.

**We’ve had Jeremy Darroch sitting in that very chair.**

Indeed, very recently, yes. So I think people are starting to come around to the idea that you should pay. What is particularly notable is that, from our perspective, a lot of younger people are starting to come around to paying. So I think there’s a middle generation perhaps, of people in their 30s, early 40s, who had the golden years where everything was free, and as a younger generation who’ve grown up with Netflix, with Spotify, who realised that, and are used to paying for things. I know from speaking to people in other countries, other digital news providers, they have found that when Netflix comes to their country, they see a spike in people who are willing to pay, because instinctively people recognise the value of content, and that if it’s good you need to pay for it.

**I think it acknowledges the marginal costs though, of virtually zero, because in the old days I would buy a Bros CD, and then if I wanted a Level 42 CD, that would cost me double, because I’d have to go to Woolworths and buy that. Whereas now, yes you do pay for Netflix and Spotify, but once you’ve paid your fee for the month, everything else is then “free”.**

Yes, and then it just comes down to how often you use it, and that’s the great puzzle that all digital news providers are trying to solve, is how do you get people to get that ingrained habit that I think older generations had with buying the paper every day on their way to work, or when they were going for a dog walk or something. That habit of buying the newspaper was there. How do you get the habit of getting people to fire up their apps, or load the website? And that habitual use is the key, I think, to digital news.

**One of the things I really liked about the comments on the Times website is because they were registered users that were paying actual money, it seemed to be a more orderliness, a more collegiate, pleasant discussion, that you’d go on the Guardian, the Telegraph or the Mail, and there’d be the most horrendous comments.**

Yes, I think that’s definitely something about our comments. I mean, we like to think that the Times and Sunday Times are quite an elevated bunch, but I think the fact that people are paying, they expect the highest standard debate. We have moderators who go in and talk to people if they are misbehaving, if you like. And I think the fact that people know that we know their names, even if they’re using a screen name, we know who they are, that they’re real people and we know that they’re real people, makes a difference. And actually recently we started to encourage our journalists to get involved in comments, which we know has a massive influence on readers, because the second they get involved with a journalist, they’re hooked. They’re like, “Oh my God, I’m getting a free...” One reader said he was getting a free tutorial on cricket from Mike Atherton in a kind of one to

one, because Mike Atherton got involved in comments on one of his cricket articles in the Times, and people love that experience. I think that really does help to elevate the standard of discussion. We're always looking to make it better, to make it more valuable to people, but when people comment on stories, they're much more likely to read another story. Even when people read comments, and I know this is a conversation I have with my younger brother every time I meet him, he says, "I just love the comments on the Times website, they're fantastic." I say, "Well, do you comment?" He said, "No, no, I never comment."

**He's a lurker.**

He's a lurker, he just likes to read. Although I wouldn't like to characterise my dear brother as that. But people like to read the debate that's going on, especially if it's not just vile abuse. And I know a lot of publishers have decided they're going to turn off comments, or limit comments to a small number of stories so they can really police things. And I think it's a great benefit of our subscription, and to our subscribers, that we've not had to do that. We've been able to keep comments open on pretty much every story, unless there are legal restrictions.

**There's a leisure activity now where, if there's a Daily Mail article where celebrities put on weight, people will dive into the comments, knowing they're going to be horrendous. And they're doing it as a kind of sport, just to see the depths of human depravity.**

Yes. Well, I mean, that's fine for them to do, I wouldn't criticise them for that. But yes, we're trying to operate at the other end of human endeavour.

**Do you have topics, or even individual journalists, that play better digitally? Does Hugo Rifkind or Giles Coren, someone like that, do they have a primarily online audience? Someone like, not to disparage Matthew Parris, who's a fine writer, but are his readers people who engage in a more traditional way, and would be more print based? Can you see that in the interaction?**

The simple answer is no. What we have found, and it's very gratifying, particularly to print editors who have spent many years relying on their judgment, is that when you transfer it into a digital sphere, the same instincts of their editorial choices are proved to be correct. So in terms of our columnists, you mentioned Matthew Parris. Matthew regularly gets huge interaction online. I mean, when you look at the number of comments below his pieces, sometimes it's up to 3,000. Now, a lot of people may say, "You're a Remainiac," and so on, but he's getting a lot of  interactions there.

**He's disgustingly reasonable, Matthew. I read his columns, and I think, "I agree with every single thing you've said, and have ever said."**

Well, yes, indeed, but we have plenty of readers who would say *precisely* the opposite.

**Well, David Aaronovitch is very good for that as well.**

Yes, so one of the things that's really working for us digitally is that we are a broad church, in that people see some of our rivals as being very, have moved to the left, some have moved to the right, and we're seen as being much more in the centre ground. So we have the likes of David Aaronovitch, and Philip Collins, and Janice Turner.

**I love Phil Collins, and Janice Turner. And David. I like it when they're arguing with their readers as well.**

Indeed, they argue.

**David Aaronovitch, I wouldn't take him on. I mean he's very respectful, but he's very robust. You know exactly where you are with David; if you're going to challenge him, you'd better know what you're talking about.**

Now, if you think of the move to digital, it allows this participation in the public debate by readers, and clearly they relish it. I have one good friend who said he buys the Sunday Times because of one columnist in particular who outrages him, and it's the first thing he reads every day.

**Is it Sarah Baxter?**

I'm not going to say which one it is.

**She's brilliant. We've had her in the podcast.**

Indeed, yes.

**I'm a huge fun of Sarah, personally as well as a journalist. I think she's absolutely great. Again, I agree with 95% of what she says. There's still news organisations happy to give away their content for free, though. Are they kidding themselves in the long term? I accept it was a clever move of Rupert Murdoch to do this. But there are other organisations that aren't doing that. Are they ultimately doomed? I mean, the advertising surely can't support them.**

Well, I don't think so. I mean, if you look at our organisation, News UK, we also have the Sun, which is free, so it provides its content for free. It relies on advertising. It is looking, on the back of that advertising, to make reader revenue from affiliate sales. So there are different models. I think there will always be a free media out there. I mean, in the UK of course, our market is slightly skewed by the fact that you have... well, very skewed, by the fact that you have the BBC, which is *apparently* free, although of course everyone pays their license fee.

**It's free at the point of use, that's what they say.**

Free at the point of use, indeed. But it *feels* free. So you will always, I think, have free news. So we accept that's always going to be there. I don't think they're kidding

themselves. Some of them make very good money, and digital advertising is a very difficult area. I think it's well documented, the amount of fraud involved in digital advertising. I think people will look to reputable advertisers, or reputable publishers, in the next few years to seek real audiences. So I wouldn't say they're doomed. I think it's a different model, and you have to do different things in that area than we do in ours. But that's one of the exciting things, is that there are always different models to try out. I mean, we just happened to come to paid earlier than most general interest newspapers. For many years, people thought we were the crazy ones, and that we were doomed to fail, and now lots of people are following us. So that's encouraging for us, but it's a good place to be.

**Can you tell us about the evolution of the digital product itself? I mean, we've talked about the paywall, but there have obviously been many iterations and developments along the way. For example, you recently moved to publishing digital editions of the Times, rather than chasing breaking news. So could you talk us through the genesis of it?**

Sure, sure. I mean, I think the editions on our smartphone and web came originally from our observations about our tablet edition, which we launched with the iPad in the UK in 2010. And that had a sudden burst of users. It went very quickly up to 50-60,000 users a day. And has since grown to about 80,000 users a day. And what we noticed from that is that we only published once a day. We never updated it, we still don't. And yet people keep coming back to it over and over again. And what they really liked was the idea of an edition that was finite and finishable. So when they read it, predominantly first thing in the morning, and we see the data, our peak readership on our tablet is 6am-7am. On the weekends we know our readers have a lie in, because it's an hour later, both on Saturday and Sunday.

**Is that all, an hour later? I'm opening up about half 10, 11am, I can assure you. We're rock and roll.**

Yes, we can see you in the data.

**Ooh, have you been monitoring my usage in preparation?**

Heaven forbid. I'm sure there's all sorts of GDPR things about that! Anyway, so yes, we noticed that people liked the idea of a finite and finishable edition, where they could read it and then think, "Okay, I don't need to worry about it, I'm done with the news for the day." Or, if they wanted to come back for features, or some comment later in a day, they would. And we looked at that and frankly we had a website and smartphone app that people didn't really much like, the approval ratings were frankly poor. And we were doing what everyone else was doing, we were putting up stories all the time. We were trying to do breaking news without the resources of the BBC. And frankly, we did it quite poorly. And so what we did is, we went and talked to our readers, and we said, "Look, what is it you want from us? How do we fit in your world?"

**We want the Times.**

Indeed, yes, but also, they said what they liked from us is the authority of what we do. They didn't want breaking news from us, because they get that from Twitter if they're under 40, or the BBC, if they're over 40. And they wanted the authority, they wanted the opinion, they wanted things that were unique to the Times and the Sunday Times. And so we also looked at our usage data, and we saw there were big peaks of the day at certain times. So there was a peak first thing in the morning. People get up, they want to get an idea of what they need to know for the day. There was another peak at lunchtime, when they're having a lunch break, and they want to look at their apps, or the website, just to catch up with what's new. And we also saw a little peak, well a little bump, really, at 5pm, a little bump in users at 5pm, which is obviously going home time. So we looked at this, and we tested this with readers. We said, "Look, what happens if we just publish our overnight edition, and then we'll update it at 9am, so we'll get the latest from the Far East, and we'll get the stock market announcements for our business readers" – of which we have a lot – "and we'll update to that noon, when you'll get the best of what's happened in the morning, and we'll update it at 5pm when you'll get really what's happened in the day, and you'll get a briefing on that for the journey home." And we put this in in March, 2016, it's fair to say that, like with the paywall, a lot of people said, "That's crazy. Why are you only publishing a few times a day? Because you can publish the whole time, so why aren't you doing it?" And we said, "Well..."

**Well, 'is' is not 'ought', is it?**

Yes, indeed. And just because you can do something doesn't mean you necessarily should. And we found that some readers said, "You're a bit crazy." But not many. And very quickly they got used to it, and very quickly the usage increased. So despite the fact we were publishing less, they started coming to us more often.

**Less is more.**

Indeed. And reading more when they came, because there wasn't the feeling of, "I don't know where I am, I don't know what I should be reading." It was like, "Okay, right." We marked clearly the news stories at the various update times, and we mark what's been updated as well. And so they got a very clear... if they'd been there in the morning, they knew what to look at, and they seemed to like it. Usage is up, satisfaction is up, subscriber numbers are up as well. So we think it really works. There are many, many things we want to do to keep improving that experience. And we're talking to readers the whole time to say, "Look, how about if we did this? How about if we did that?" And that's a really positive process. But I think it was very interesting, because the idea of giving up breaking news goes against every journalistic instinct. And I had to moderate the way I explained to my colleagues that, "Look, we're not real people. We're journalists."

**You're in the bubble, you're in the goldfish bowl.**

Saying we're not real people didn't go down so well. So I said, "We're atypical. We're sitting in a newsroom where you have screens with Sky up, with BBC, with Al Jazeera, with all types of 24-hour news channels. This is not how most people live

their lives." Also, we all have two screens, and one screen's always on a news site, and we're always checking for push alerts, we all sign up to push alerts from every single…

**That sounds like our office actually, we're as abnormal as you, I think.**

Well, yes, but we're not like normal users who are not checking their phones every five minutes for news.

**This is why Remain lost, I think. Because, it's people like us that didn't vote Brexit.**

Possibly, yes.

**Very good. Deftly handled, I thought, there.**

But no. So I think we had to come to terms with the fact that we have a different experience of news from most of our readers.

**But you're right though, because most people get their breaking news from Twitter. We had Paul Royall sitting in that chair some time ago, he's the editor of the BBC Ten O'Clock News, and he said the problem they have is that before Huw Edwards has even opened his gob, everyone already knows the news. They've got to do something different. And it's the same when I open the Times, or even as a digital edition, I already know what the top five stories are, but I'm looking for the Times' take on it, as it were. What I also like is going deeper into the app where you get to the general news pages, and then there's stuff in there that isn't on the other sites; stuff that's happening in the courts and the tribunals, and things like that, that's just as important. Because I do get a lot of my news from the Times that I don't get elsewhere, because it's not elsewhere.**

Yes. I think this is a really interesting area for us. So, we recently did a full content review. We looked into all the data surrounding six months' worth of stories from across both newspapers, digitally, of course, and we were looking at what types of stories do well in terms of getting new readers, in terms of satisfying existing readers. And what we found was that it was the things that only the Times and the Sunday Times could do by the choices that we made. So, if we sent Christina Lamb to Zimbabwe…

**Another excellent journalist.**

Indeed. If we sent Anthony Lloyd to Syria. These were choices only we really would make. And so they would come back with unique stories. If we got Danny Finkelstein from the Times to write about something, if we got…

**Another guest on the podcast. Danny's brilliant.**

… if we got Camilla Long for the Sunday Times to write that thing, these unique voices, the unique stories, their unique take on things were the things that did absolutely the best for us. In terms of engagement of new readers and old readers and so on. When we did stories that everyone else has, they just did nothing. So we have a balancing act between being kind of a general newspaper, if you like, certainly in print, where the editor of the Times says he wants to be a "desert island newspaper", where if you had to take one newspaper to a desert island, you would choose to have the Times. Well of course, in digital, desert islands these days all have Wi-Fi, so you have many different sources. So most people are getting all these... I wouldn't say 'vanilla', but run-of-the-mill stories that everyone else has, from everywhere, and they get them quickly and for free. So we have to provide stories that are original and different, or give a fresh take on a running story. So increasingly, we're starting to promote those kind of stories at the expense of just doing the stories everyone else has. Again, sometimes it's really difficult to say, "Oh, we should lead the site with an analysis of Theresa May's resignation, rather than the fact of her resignation." The story that everyone else will have. Again, this goes against journalistic instincts, but when we look at the data, emphatically those are the stories that people read and engage with and share and comment under, as well.

**Well, we know she's resigned and we already know the basics of how she did it and etc., etc.. So like you said, we don't need you to retell us that. We've got that from Twitter or a breaking news alert.**

Absolutely. We think about internally, with a view to our readers, we have different readership groups who are coming to us in different ways. So you have readers of the print product who will expect the stories that everyone knows still to be there because that's what they've been used to for many years. You have a digital audience then, which is very different because they're getting stories from everywhere, and they expect something slightly different. So as a newsroom, we're now coping with many different audiences, and I think this is a fundamental shift we're undergoing at the moment, I think everyone else is as well, where you're looking at different audiences rather than different products.

**And has the digital audience helped shape the print product in any way? Have you made any changes to the print products as a result of any insights that you've gained from this digital journey that you've been on?**

I think it's happening, but slowly. I think the most obvious thing is we're having stories that originate in digital, are moving to print. Or some things we see have worked really well in digital, that move over to the print side. But I think that will happen over time. I mean, one of the things that's started to occur to me, and this is quite technical, but if you think about print headlines they're often quite playful, they're quite oblique in a way, because they rely on the fact that you have a picture on the page and you can get the contents of what the story's about. In digital, obviously you have headlines that are optimized for search engines – SEO headlines as we call them, of course – and they're a totally different beast. And I wonder whether audiences will start to get used to the fact that you have headlines that explain, rather than just kind of... May, it's Theresa May, the prime minister, etc., etc.. – you name every bit of it. I think that will happen over time.

**It's SEO optimised.**

I think you might have SEO-optimised print headlines over time, because people have got used to them.

**Actually, it'd be SE optimised, because the O is optimisation! Scratch that. And where's the future of the product going? I mean, if you had brought your crystal ball with you now, what's going to... what are you working on at the moment? Or are you not allowed to say? Just tell us anyway.**

I think we have made the editions work really well for us, and I think we'll continue with that. I think we feel there are lots of different types of products we can offer to different audiences, whether that be in lifestyle areas where it's not so much based on a day-to-day kind of cadence of news, of delivery, but also younger audiences. So we're already experimenting with how we can reach, talk to audiences in a different way. So I think one of the interesting lessons we've learnt in the last few years from talking to people, is that actually younger audiences are not some kind of great, mythical collection of creatures who want something completely different. They often want exactly the same things that we deliver, but we're just not delivering them in the right way. So we're taking perhaps a slightly different tone. We've recently launched a newsletter, which is called Times Tea, which is aimed at younger readers. It's called Tea because of 'spilling the tea', which is talking about gossiping about subjects, as I'm sure you know, Paul.

**Of course.**

We're all very down with millennial speak. Actually, pre-millennial speak.

**I'm not down with *post*-millennial speak! I'm 44 miserable years old now.**

But anyway, so you can read this and get a whole new insight. Basically we've presented the same stories but in a slightly different way, pulling out different aspects of the story that might be interesting to a younger audience. And I know this is a trick – not a trick, sorry – this is a method that other publishers have used, where I've talked to them about their new products and I've said, "Where are your journalists? You're talking about having designers on this, and product people, and engineers, but you don't talk about journalists?" They say, "Oh no, we use the journalism of the core product. We just package it in a different way and sell it in a different way." So I think that's something you're going to see a lot more of from us in the next little while, as well as moving more towards, if you like, a multimedia product.

**Which brings me to my next question really, in terms of the different ways you can interact with it. I have the app, so I read it in that way, but sometimes when I'm too busy to read it, I actually subscribe to all of the newsletters, so I get the general one and the business one and so on. Sometimes I'll just skim that and see if there's anything that's piquing my interest, and I find the email itself**

**quite useful. Obviously, the Times Red Box Podcast, so you're obviously trying to expand the different ways through which you connect with your audience. Now, I am a subscriber, so I don't know the answer to this, but can you get The Red Box Podcast on iTunes? Can you just listen to it?**

Yes.

**So it's a free product to anyone at that point?**

Yes, so at the moment all our podcasts are free. We are clearly, I think like many publishers, looking at how you monetise podcasts. I think you've got to advertise it.

**If you find out, will you let me know?**

We'll let everyone know! But I think there's an ambition to be able to put some podcasts…

**Behind the paywall?**

Behind the paywall.

**Not unreasonably.**

But I think it's all about trying to reach people in different ways, in ways that are suitable for them. We're not just a broadcast media any more. We want to interact with people in the way they live their lives. So I know that when I've finished my working day, on the way home I will listen to a podcast, because frankly I've had enough of reading. So I want to listen rather than read.

**I've had enough of *life* by the end of the day.**

But I think it's not an uncommon experience and we should be... I mean, we are talking to people about what fits them at certain times of the day.

**Tell us about Red Box. Tell us about Walking The Dog.**

Red Box was interesting, and it came out of an experiment, really, in 2014 for the Scottish referendum, when the editor of the Times, John Witherow, came to me and said, "Look, we've got the Scottish referendum next year, we've got the general election the year after. These are the biggest two years of politics we're ever going to have." Little did we know! And he said, "We need to promote our political coverage. What can we do?" At that time, there was loads of talk about doing a separate app for politics, doing a separate website. We experimented a bit with a separate website, but eventually we came down to doing an email, which was immediately well received by the Westminster cognoscenti. They instantly liked the fact that they had someone in the shape of Philip Webster, who knew what they were talking about, and he was writing it in a daily email.

**I read that email, loved it.**

And very quickly, we decided that we would need to expand Red Box – because it immediately became a good brand, and politics became crazier and crazier – into a podcast. I think under Matt Chorley, who does both the email and the podcast now, it has become, we say it, but it is required reading in Westminster.

**It's the second best podcast out there!**

So what's the first?

**Peter Crouch's podcast, obviously! 5 Live.**

We'll talk about that in a minute, yes. So that was the way the podcast almost came organically out of the email, it was it was a kind of, as they like to say in digital, 'iterative product development'. So we had one thing, and then we kind of slowly think, "Okay, we'll try this and see if it works, then we'll try another thing." But the email still works really well, it's got a great open rate. The podcast is great, he's been doing fantastic interviews with the leadership contenders for the Tory… for prime minister, as it turns out, in the last few weeks. Notably going running with Jeremy Hunt the other day, and having ice cream with Andrea Leadsom. So that's Red Box. Walking The Dog really came out of the fact that my family got a puppy, and I noticed that when I took Parker, our Tibetan terrier, for a walk, people would talk to me in a way that if I was just walking around, people would never talk to me. And there was something about... the dog would disarm people, and you'd talk to them in a different way. I spoke to Emily Dean, who we know at the Times, about this, and she took it up. She also was about to buy a dog, and essentially she turned this into a series where she interviews predominantly comedians and gets a different kind of interview, I think, because there's the *foil* of the dog. And it's one of our best performing podcasts. It continues to attract interest, and great names. Ricky Gervais was on it very recently, we've had other big names on throughout its run, and Emily does a great job, and it is a different kind of interview. So I think that's one of the things about podcasts, is they reward uniqueness. As you say, Peter Crouch's podcast, this podcast. Unlike any others.

**Thank you for your kind words. Who do you consider your competitors to be? And it's a deliberately vague question, because it might not necessarily be other media brands like the New York Times or whatever. It could be Netflix, it could be Angry Birds 2. The Times app icon is just one of a number of app icons on my phone, each of which is clamouring for my attention. So how do you stand out? How do you 'cut through the noise', as they say?**

So yes, I think in your question, you've almost answered the question! I think it's a very good one. We often reflexively think of the likes of the Guardian, the Telegraph, the Mail and so on as our competitors. Now, I think they really are our competitors for stories – we want to beat them to get the best stories across both papers, in every section. So I think they are our competitors for stories. But in terms of attention, as you say, there are apps everywhere that are just calling out to you. Netflix is saying, "Oh, why don't you just catch up with that last episode?" There's Spotify, as well, and there's iTunes with podcasts. So we're competing in that area,

where people have their leisure time and they want to get some value out of it. So we're competing against every subscription business out there. Everything that occupies people's free time. Like you said, Angry Birds, or Candy Crush, or whatever people are playing now, we're competing against them, as much as we're competing against the Telegraph, in terms of the time they have. So I think people used to set aside time to read the papers. I don't think they do that so much any more, and we have to make sure that when they come to us they get real value from it, and feel it's worthwhile, and it's a worthwhile way of spending the time other than listening to a podcast, other than watching a show on Netflix, other than just listening to music and so on.

**How will you extend the monetisation of it? I mean, at the moment you've got the paywall, I pay my £20 a month or whatever it is, but other websites have a smart paywall, others have micropayments where you pay 20p per article. Might you offer other payment solutions, or will you always have the kind of, you pay the money and then that's it, you've got the key?**

So I think we've already looked at relaxing the paywall, a bit. We have registration now by which you can get two free articles a week by giving your email address. So they're not really free because there's an exchange there where you give us your email address, and obviously we market you a subscription to that point of view.

**That's what got me, all those years ago.**

So it's a way of getting people to look at the Times content, become familiar with it, and really see what they're buying, because I think that was the tricky thing, you were asking people to... With the way our paywall was previously constructed, that you're asking people to buy a subscription without having looked at the content – which, if you think about it, is quite a difficult thing to do if you're wanting to charge them £26 a month. I mean, it was rational at the time, because you wanted everyone who was paying to see they were getting value for it and you didn't want to see people being free. But I think people are more sophisticated now about what a subscription entails. I think there's been a trend in the news business, where you had some subscription models where they were giving too much away free. I know there were some people at various conferences who were saying, "Look, we have 20 free articles a month and no one ever pays." And so the solution was obvious, is that you kind of cut down the numbers, and I know a number of people have done that, the New York Times has famously gone from... I think it was 15 or 20 and it's now down to five, or three even, free articles a month. They moved to become locked up, whereas we were completely locked up, and we're moving to becoming a little bit freer. And I think over time, we will become more flexible in what we offer to people, and how we meter the paywall.

**The Times obviously is a commercial operation, but there are many ways to monetise these things. We had David Pemsel sitting in that chair many, many moons ago, the chief executive of the Guardian, and they give everything away for free, but they have a supporters' network. That was another thing that I scoffed at at the time, thinking, "Well, why would you give everything away for**

**free and then say at the bottom: 'But can we have £8 a month as a donation?'" And frankly, again, I've been proved wrong. It's been an incredible success.**

Yes. I think fair play to them.

**I clearly don't have a clue what I'm talking about, really!**

Well again, it's something I don't think anyone really suspected would succeed, and they've done very well in the first couple of years. I guess, you know, from an outside perspective, the challenge will be asking people to donate again next year. But I think we want news companies, our competitors, if you will, to thrive, because it helps us as a group. And it helps us to have lots of different ideas as to how you can sustain journalism, which I think is fundamentally a good thing.

**People say 20-somethings won't pay for news that they can get for free elsewhere. You mentioned the BBC earlier. How do you get that demographic to sign up? Because they are used to things being free at the point of use, and they know that they can get quality journalism on the Guardian's website, or the BBC. They must be quite a difficult market to target, surely?**

Well, as I was saying earlier, I think the younger generation, 20-somethings, are now getting used to paying for things, and I think they will pay for things if they see the worth in it for them. From our perspective, we have to provide something that's different, so different from what they can get for free. Because, you know, that's the whole basis of what we're doing is that we don't want to be just the same as the free sites. We have to give you something more, something that's more worthwhile – and I think we need to market that to them, and reach them where they are, and encourage them to subscribe on that basis. And frankly we've had quite a bit of success through targeting them on different social networks. You know, the obvious ones, Facebook. Twitter is also very good for us, I think it's... often a lot of other publishers don't get a lot of referral traffic but we do, I think probably because a lot of our political coverage. And also, we're starting to target the younger groups on Instagram, which is, I think, more lifestyle focused. It's not predominately a news channel, but again, it's interesting.

**Are the journalists on the Times encouraged to write differently to engage an online readership?**

No. We offer advice on how to form stories to work best digitally.

**Is that advice with you kind of stood over them, menacingly?**

No, not at all. Predominantly at the moment, we're looking at post-publication, so we're looking at how we write the best headlines for search engines and so on and so forth, and how we promote things on social networks. But I think over time we're starting to explain how writing stories about things, that we know there is a need for, because we've seen the search data. So people reveal what they're interested in by what they search for on Google, and we see that data like everyone else does, and we're starting to say, "Look, you might want to angle your story this way. It's still the

same subject matter, and you're still looking at it in the same kind of rigorous way that you always would, but you might want to look at answering this question that people are focusing on."

**How important is using News UK's radio stations, like Virgin Radio and talkSPORT, in promoting the Times' content? Is there an editorial partnership there?**

So yes, I mean we are absolutely encouraged to talk to our colleagues at talkRADIO and Virgin Radio and talkSPORT and so on, and providing our talent as well to go on and promote what they're doing and also provide their expertise, which really helps, on those stations too. And I think it's a real signal of intent of buying radio stations. We think there's real growth in radio as a company, clearly…

**And you're in the same physical building, of course.**

Absolutely, yes. So they're close by, there have been great collaborations recently on various events between the newspapers and the radio stations, and I think that's only going to become closer. We've already started working with our colleagues at Wireless, which is the parent company for those radio stations, on podcasts, because clearly they have great expertise, great studios as well. We're working with them on how we can develop our podcast offerings because clearly this is a great way of reaching new audiences, and they're the experts at it. So we're working with them on new strands and developing our existing podcasts. So we've seen great growth in them over the last year, just from the basis of using their expertise, you know, expanding some, cutting back on others, to be fair. So yes, we're definitely working with our colleagues there.

**I mean, you're the Times' and the Sunday Times' digital guru, but you come to this role from what I would call a "proper" professional journalist background. You know, you're not some kind of way out there, Silicon Valley digital type. How important is that in terms of shaping your day-to-day priorities? I know that you edited the News Review in the Sunday Times, and the features. I mean, for me, they were the best reads, frankly.**

Oh, well thank you very much! So, yes, it's true. I came to digital about five years ago, and I acknowledge that when I started in digital I didn't know that much about it. I said to the editors, I said, "Look, I can't tell my team what to do in digital, because they know more than me." And they said, "No, we're appointing you because you know about journalism." And I think that's a key thing; we want to keep journalism at the heart of what we do everywhere, and even on digital. I think it was actually quite useful for me to come to somewhere where I knew less than people, because I think one of the things about running digital operations is you have to delegate because it is so multifaceted. You have hundreds of tweets going out every day. You have dozens of Facebook posts, you have podcasts, you have videos, you have more content on the smartphone and web and the tablet app than you do in the print newspaper. One person can't *possibly* keep on top of that as well as all the other things we're doing in data journalism, and development, and interactive, and so on. One person can't keep on top of that, so you have to delegate. I think it was actually

quite useful, that when I came in, I wasn't able to kind of go and say, "You do this, you do that, I'll micromanage this, I'll micromanage that," because they knew more than me. So I said, "Look, my role here is to act as your bridge to the newsrooms." Because the newsrooms are 230-year-old institutions, and at that time they were very much focused on print.

**Do you know more than them now? Actually, that's a no-win question, isn't it? What is the polite way to answer that?**

No. I like to think I have learnt an awful lot about this.

**You should be in politics! You have very deftly handled some of these awkward questions. You are up against an amateur though, so…**

No. So I've learned an awful lot about the sort of finer technical aspects. Sometimes I still need to go to my team and say, "Look, when we're talking about this, what exactly does this mean? What is a render engine? And then how exactly does it work?"

**We all know what a render engine is. I can't believe you didn't know what one of those is…**

These are very technical things that...

**What is one?**

I don't think any… it is a... oh, I won't get into that stuff here.

**You can tell me afterwards.**

I'll tell you afterwards, yes. I don't want to bore your listeners.

**But a genuine question, what have been the big learnings? Not in terms of the technical side, but in terms of like operationally in the whole approach. What have been the big eyebrow raisers in your five years doing digital?**

So I think the main thing is that you really can learn very quickly what your customers want, and that the data can be really… empowering, if you like.

**Because, you're not guessing at that point. You actually know.**

You're still going on your instinct, but then you have data to back it up, which makes it much more powerful.

**Because in the old days you literally just had the newsstand number, and you had no idea what was making it work and what was undermining it.**

Newsstand number, ad revenue and this idea of the postbag. And I remember talking to people many years ago and saying, “Oh, we had a massive postbag on this,” and you enquire further and it was about a dozen letters. And now you’re thinking, “Well, we get 3,000 comments on the story,” we really know this resonates with people. So I think learning to kind of understand that the data is hugely important. We like to think about being data informed rather than data led, because I think being data led can blunt your journalistic instincts, which are really important still. There are some stories that data would never tell you to do.

**Such as?**

Well I think, the Times’ investigation into Oxfam. It took a long time. It wasn’t clear that stories about charities did particularly well, but nonetheless you might not follow that unless you had a journalistic hunch, and the data might not show you that you should do that. But I think nonetheless it is incredibly interesting to follow that. And it does kind of make you realise that the customers are often telling you different things than what you perhaps thought. Quite often they confirm what you thought, which is great. But it is a very... it kind of teaches an element of humility, which I think is quite a useful thing. And also I think another thing fundamentally is that, and this is something I found with my team, that my seniority compared to them does not necessarily mean that I’m right.

**It does. You’ve got that wrong, son. You just stand over them menacingly. It’s what I do.**

I mean, they pretend quite well, but I think it’s really important for not just newsrooms but probably for organisations generally to realise that they have a lot of talent there, a lot of people who may be junior, but who may know an awful lot more than you will ever know about  render engines.

**It’s what I call ‘The Ben Cooper Problem’, because Ben’s a great guy, the controller of Radio 1, but he’s a 49-year-old white guy. So what does he know what some 19-year-old is watching? We had Debbie Ramsay on recently, the editor of BBC Newsbeat, and it was an interesting question for us to talk about, because she’s done every job in Newsbeat over 15 years. So does that mean that she’s more qualified than ever to know what a Newsbeat story is? Or actually does it mean that she’s done it for so long, she’s now an old giffer and shouldn’t be editing a news programme for young people? It’s a fascinating discussion. I’m not sure what the right answer is.**

Yes, well I’m certainly going to rail against the...

**Other than that she’s genuinely doing an excellent job.**

I’m not going to rail against white guys in their late 40s, for obvious reasons. Although our listeners can’t see me.

**We should just inform our listeners that we're white guys in our mid to late-40s.**

But nonetheless, I think it comes down to can you empathise with your customers? Can you try and understand what their needs are when they're coming to you? And that's not dependent on your age, that's dependent on can you think yourself into their needs? There's a whole train of Silicon Valley-based thinking around this called 'design thinking', which is really about getting deep into your kind of the both implicit and explicit needs of your customers by talking to them and trying to...

**Customer centricity, they call it.**

Ugh, that's a terrible expression, but still, it is a hugely important.

**It's what used to be called 'market research', isn't it?**

Indeed, but they've given a Silicon Valley spin.

**It's like insolvency practitioners are now 'business recovery specialists', litigators are 'dispute resolution lawyers', and all this. There seems to be huge rebranding away from all of the conflict. You mentioned there about the demographics though, about us being sort of mid-40s guys. What are the demographics of the typical Times reader now? You've got these hundreds of thousands of readers now; on a pie chart, how does it actually look?**

Well, actually now we have, if you look at the totality of print and digital, obviously the print audience is skewed to be kind of older. The digital audience is roughly in the middle – I'm roughly the typical age of one of our digital-only subscribers – and then you have a younger audience who are coming. So we have kind of a good funnel of people coming in. So it's a fairly reasonable dispersion. I mean, we have some who are kind of mid-teenagers, shall we say, and we have some people who are over 100. So there is a very wide range of people. So I go home, and my son, who's 13, reads the Times on his smartphone.

**I hope you don't make him pay full price!**

It comes out of his pocket money, and he's happy to pay it. Likewise, my dad, who's in his mid-70s, he also reads the Times.

**And he also pays full price, does he? Are you on commission? Do you get £1.50 for family signups per month?**

Sadly not! But the point is, it is a broad range of people, and I think we need to work to broaden that range, and we're more heavy at the top end, and we need to work harder to bring younger people to the Times and the Sunday Times. But I think it's very much within our grasp. And I think that's work we're very much going to focus on in the next year or two.

**Tell us about your personal journey, if we may, in terms of how you got started out in journalism. Did you always want to be a journalist? And tell us, before you did the digital side, you were involved in some of the newspaper's coverage of the 2012 Olympics, the killing of Osama Bin Laden, some huge stories.**

So yes, I did always want to be a journalist, but to be honest I didn't do that much about it at university.

**Does anyone do anything at university? You're supposed to just get drunk, aren't you?**

Well, increasingly, we see graduate trainees who have done an awful lot of journalism, of people applying for our graduate scheme, awful of journalism, which is great. And we encourage that. This was a different time when I was at university, and I didn't do much, or indeed anything. But after I left, I applied for all the various trainee schemes and so on. But I think my lack of experience did work… I got very lucky. I chanced across a job in a kind of niche financial publishers in north London. Two guys who took a chance on me. And I think essentially I got the job because they said, "Why do you want to be a financial journalist?" And I said, "I *don't* want to be a financial journalist." And it turned out that they didn't really want to be financial journalists anyway, but that was their job. And so they took a chance on me. And I worked there for a few years and learned how to write about things that perhaps weren't kind of the things I was most interested in, shall we say? Institutional banking and reinsurance. I got to know a bit more about that than I ever imagined. But then I knew that wasn't, as I'd said in my interview, what I really wanted to do. And so, after a few years I took a chance and went freelance. I ended up at a sports magazine called Inside Sport, which lasted for nine months and then folded. And then I had the good fortune of, and I think often luck plays a role in these things, one of my friends was a due to do some shifts at Tatler, of all places, and he couldn't do them because he got the job as the editor of MixMag, which was a dance music mag back in the days. And they took me on to do that, and I stayed there for a couple of years working as a subeditor, and from there… I had a weird routine. Because of my sports experience, I thought this was a way to get into national papers, which I always wanted to do. And I applied to the Sunday Times to be a Saturday sports sub. And so I was working on Tattler, the society magazine, in the week, subbing copy about posh restaurants in Knightsbridge, and doing captions on watch supplements, and also weekends writing, subbing football copy from match reports from the Premiership, and rugby reports and so on. So it was quite a strange experience. I worked six days a week, and eventually the Sunday Times decided that they'd keep me on for a little while. And so I worked first of all in sport, which was always my first love, which is why I got the gig of looking after the 2012 Olympics across the paper. So I was working very closely with the sports editor, Alex Butler, who is still the sports editor, and we had to argue about which pictures were going on the front of which sections, and what stories would go to news, and which stories would stay in sport. But it was a great couple of weeks. Very, very enjoyable indeed, if quite chaotic at times. But yes, it was a fantastic experience. And I also did... one of the jobs I did was as focus editor, which is essentially looking after the big stories…

**My favourite section.**

… of the week in the Sunday Times, and obviously the killing of Osama Bin Laden was one of those. And I knew, it was on a Monday morning, I think very early, the news broke in the UK. And as soon as I heard, I thought, “Well, I know what my week’s going to involve.” And it involved working with the fantastic Christina Lamb, and we worked very close together that week. And she produced an amazing 3,000 word piece on...

**She’s an incredible journalist, and she’s been on this podcast many, many years ago. And that was great.**

Yes. And the instruction from the editor at the time, who was John Witherow, who’s now the editor of the Times, was, “This has got to be the first draft of history.” And I think Christina did some amazing work, and I was really proud of that. But I am of lots of other stories that we did a huge investment of time and efforts to kind of really try and tell that first draft on a Sunday, which is a great day to do that, as Tim Shipman does every week with his political team.

**Tim’s a legend, another podcast guest. I’ve basically had on everyone, as you can see, from the Times and Sunday Times, other than Martin and John. So, if you can get me... I’ve had Emma and Sarah on, so I have had their deputies. But yes, I think you’re the last person from the entire building.**

I’ll take that as a compliment. We can work that out.

**Actually that came across somewhat disrespectful, didn't it? How long have you been actually working for the paper in total?**
So I did my first shift in 1998, so 21 years. I was very young when I started, of course.

**Man and boy. And what’s next for you, then? If you don’t mind me asking, will you eventually become editor? How does it work? What’s the career path? This will be another question that you’ll definitely side step.**

Of course that’s another question. It’s not up to me, but no, I think, the digital is such an amazing landscape and such a challenge, and it’s different every day, and every year we have different things to think about. And if I think about what people were talking about when I first started on digital, they were talking about having a different app for every subject. And they were saying, “Oh, it’s all about putting all your content on Facebook, and that’s what publishing is going to be in the future.” And now it’s completely different. And that’s what makes digital so exciting. So, I think there are so many challenges in this area, and I think they’re becoming the challenges that the whole of both newsrooms are facing. Where we’re all looking at how we become digital publishers. We shift towards digital publishing at the same time as making sure we have the best print products in the country. So that is a fundamental and very interesting subject to get our heads around.

**It's amazing how we change and evolve our relationships with digital platforms. When Facebook first came out, I had thousands of friends and was on it all the time. And years later, I actually closed it down. Whereas, now I'm in what I call my 'zombie relationship' with Facebook. I've unliked every page. I've gone from having thousands of friends to like 60 and yes, I am on it and I do go on it a couple of times a week, but my relationship has complete changed. It's one of more of a necessary evil now, I think.**

Well, yes, I think people generally have had a similar relationship with Facebook. I mean, it's still absolutely huge in terms of number of users, and active users as well. But I think individuals have... there are different options now, and I think it is telling that Facebook are shifting towards a kind of person-to-person messaging as their kind of focus now.

**And the acquisition of Instagram was a stroke of genius.**

And WhatsApp too. It's fascinating that one company owns… you know, you're worried about kind of, "Oh, well, Facebook is perhaps in a bit of decline in the Western world," But what's coming up in its place? Well, Instagram and WhatsApp, which are owned by Facebook. So they're in a very, very nice position.

**Last question then, in two parts, and we'll end on a high note. So part one, what's been the worst day of your career so far and ending on a high note, part two, what's been the best day?**

So I think the worst day is quite an easy one to say. So I was working as News Review editor from the Sunday Times in 2012 when Marie Colvin was killed in Homs. And Marie was...

**Deliberately murdered.**

Yes. Deliberately murdered by Assad's forces. And she was a huge character in the newsroom. She was in regularly; I had worked with her on a number of stories when I was Focus editor…

**I would love to have had her on the podcast.**

… she was just…

**What a sad loss.**

… such a brave figure and to know that she had been murdered in that way, it was just a terrible day. And I'm sure you can imagine what it was like in the newsroom.

**It's still an incredibly heartbreakingly tragic thing to think about, even now.**

Yes.

**Absolute loss.**

Absolutely. And it was a loss we still feel; there are pictures of Marie in the newsroom, and we still kind of see her and remember her, and it's a real reminder of what journalists do, and particularly brave ones to go into conflict areas like Marie did. It seems almost glib moving to a kind of a good day.

**Blame the interviewer. It was me that asked the question in that way.**

But no, I mean, we mentioned earlier the 2012 Olympics.

**You can't repeat yourself! We might cut that.**

Whatever, I had to say the kind of… I think it was the middle Saturday of the Olympics was the most chaotic day of my working life. And I just remember the gold medals were flooding in. We had, about halfway through the day – and this was a very much a print operation – we suddenly went up from, I think it was 24 to 28 pages. We had suddenly four more pages to fill. And I was sitting with the editor watching, I think it was the rowing finals, and we won another gold medal, and he was like, "Take it up another two!" And it was a kind of classic old-school journalistic day when you're running around left and right, and didn't know what you were doing, and there was pictures here, and everyone was kind of… copy flying in, and poor journalists writing thousands and thousands of words. But it was exhilarating. And that was kind of… I'd always been interested in sport, I'd always been interested in the Olympic sports, and it was just an exhilarating day. And I think I slept for three days afterwards. But that's the kind of thing I think that really gets you going as a journalist,"" when events are happening, and you have to respond to them. So yes, that's probably my most kind of positive, memorable day. But there have been many others, and I hope there'll be many more to come.

**Alan, you've been a hugely interesting guest. Thank you ever so much for your time.**

My pleasure. Thank you.