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Media Masters – November 7, 2019

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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 James Harding, co-founder and editor of Tortoise Media. Starting at the Financial Times, he became China editor in 1996, and subsequently became media editor and then their Washington bureau chief. He then became business editor at the Times, and a year later went on to edit the newspaper for five years, during which time it won the Press Awards Newspaper of the Year twice. In 2013, he became director of news and current affairs at the BBC, a position he held for five years before announcing his departure, shocking those who predicted him as the next Director General. Created with the aim of slowing down the news cycle, Tortoise is the biggest journalism project ever launched on Kickstarter.

James, thank you for joining me.

Thank you for having me, Paul, and forgive me for my croaky voice.

That's no problem at all. Forgive me for my imposter syndrome, reading out with that litany of achievements. I feel like a total loser.

I got my mum to write it.

Well, tell us about Tortoise then. The news cycle is accelerating by the minute and there's a demand for slow news clearly, that goes behind the headlines.

Yes. It started really in 2016. As you said, in 2016 I was at the BBC and if you remember that year you had both the referendum in the UK, but you also had the Trump election in the US. And there were these two big arguments happening around the news. One was that the BBC had an impartiality problem. You didn't like the side you perceived it was on, on the leave/remain argument. And then in the US, Donald Trump was really after the news around "fake news". And I remember sitting and thinking to myself, "Those are problems, but they're not the problem that I see, having spent a couple of decades in the news," and it was really this sense that the news is very samey. That we're all in a hell of a hurry. The news, as you say, is

accelerating. The volume of content is just more and more. And as a result of that, the news felt as though it was getting faster and faster, and thinner and thinner.

You're on the record as saying newsrooms produce too much news.

It's the newsrooms together are producing so much that's so similar, and as things get thinner, you tend to see news that gets more shrill or you tend to see news that feels like it's feeding a headline addiction, but not really helping you understand the world. And so it's not that I think that there's not a place for breaking news – I mean, heaven knows in the world we're in at the moment, you want to know what's just happened. It's just that when you look at the different providers of news, so many of them are doing the same thing. So many of them are about being first or being fastest. And the idea that Tortoise is really about is to say, "Well, let's not just be about reporting. Let's try and be about understanding." And to do that, it felt as though there were two really great heresies that we needed to embrace. One was that you could be slow and somehow get closer to what was really going on. And the other one was that you could be open, that you wouldn't necessarily just tell people the news, you'd have a system for listening. And so our thing is a slow newsroom and an open journalism and that's what we're trying to do.

And how is it going?

One of my editors said to me last week, he said, "Oh, I think it's going better than we deserve." Which I thought was a good description.

That's an apt compliment!

Yes, I think actually if you set a bunch of journalists off to start a new newsroom, a new business, 'better than we deserve' is as good as you can hope for, in that it's a start-up in a very fast changing environment in terms of economic model, but also appetite for information. And so you can't for a minute think that you're there. We went live in April. I left the BBC in January of last year, 2018, so it's very early days, but actually in our first six months, we've just got to the point where nearly 20,000 members signed up or paid for. We've got 20+ partners that we're working with. We're now just beginning to see that momentum around our ThinkIns. The central thing for us is that we have an open news meeting every day in our newsroom, and once a week out on the road, somewhere in the country or internationally, but mostly around the UK. And we're just beginning to see that too. In the last few weeks we've begun to have that nice problem of it selling out, and you don't know what to do when you don't have room and people are sending you an email saying, "Can I join?" So we feel like we've got some momentum. But I think that, as suggested by the name Tortoise, we know that this is a long, long race and it'll take us a while. So 'better than we deserve', I think is a good start.

I remember when you launched it. I thought I was a cynic and a media observer, and I was genuinely shocked because I thought you were going to be DG. And I think history is written by the victor, isn't it? Like for example, if this becomes an incredible success in the long term, people will say how clever

you were and how bold – but if it goes wrong, people will say, "He threw it all away to chase a pipe dream."

Yes. And look, I love the BBC. I'd been there for five years. It was incredibly interesting. And being through two general elections in that time, two referendums, Scotland and the EU, the US presidential election… and also the BBC is an extraordinary organisation, I think the greatest news organisation in the world. But you know, when you have those moments where you think, "Well, it's not really a question of where I'm trying to navigate my career. I know that if I don't do this now I'll never get the chance." There's a certain moment where you think actually having a go at being part of a start-up, and setting things up with a partnership of people in a small group that's going to have a go, there are certain moments you can do it – and once you missed it you've missed it. And I have lived, if you like, a very institutional life in journalism terms. I've been at the Financial Times, the Times and the BBC. And so for me it wasn't really a question of, "Well where does this take you?" It was really a question of, "If you don't do it now, you never will."

But it must've been a purposeful act of courage to do it because staying at the BBC would have been playing safe.

As I said, I was really excited. I was really excited by the prospect – and definitely frightened. Frightened that you wouldn't get a great group of people. And that's been, if anything, the most rewarding thing is this mix of people that we've got at Tortoise. Merope Mills who is out on the west coast for the Guardian, and Jon Hill, who was the creative designer at the Telegraph, and Chris Cook, who was on Newsnight, and Ravin Sampat, who'd been doing a lot of the BBC stories work online. And Giles Whittell from the Times, and Alexi Mostrous too, and Matt d'Ancona of course, the former editor of the Spectator. Arifa Akbar, who's just a brilliant writer on the arts. And then the sort of a co-editor Dave Taylor… this amazing gang of people. Bringing those people together is really fun. And then you're in a small office and you're not… the BBC, it's kind of unbelievable to say this, but the BBC is a newsroom of 8,000 people.

I've seen the establishing shot on the News at Ten. It's huge.

Exactly. It sweeps over and it was a, what you know I suppose once you get started is actually the answer to only one question, which is: do you like it? You don't know whether it's going to succeed or fail. You don't know how people are going to receive it. But you do know that on the Friday you walked out of a job and there were 8,000 people supposedly working together in this organisation that you were responsible for, and then the Monday you're in your kitchen thinking, "Oh, I'm doing a start-up." And you only find out by doing it whether you like it. And I found out I loved it.

And what have been the challenges along the way that you've expected? And what have been the challenges along the way that have been unforeseen?

The challenges that you expect are the ones that… the least interesting ones. What's your business model? What's your pricing? Technology says that it'll do X, but actually it only does the square root of X, and how are you going to make it work? The ones that I hadn't expected, I guess are two. The first is incredibly energising in

that you think you'll do a start-up, and you'll be kind of one of those kids in sneakers and jeans, and somehow you'll be young as a result. And actually you're old, because you're incredibly aware of tastes set by age. That the generation gap that we're living with at the moment is a real thing in a way in which it probably hasn't been since the late seventies, early eighties. That fundamental perception is not just about the way in which we consume media, but actually all the values that surround it about our politics, our business, our society is really evident to you, and in a way that really challenges the things that you're commissioning, the ThinkIns that we're holding. So that's a big, big change. And the second thing I also didn't expect, but I have to say I've loved, is that there's a mood around the news quite widely held. If you go to Washington DC it's almost palpable, but in London recently too, where people are just disillusioned with what's happening in the world where they're just like, "Just please, why don't I just switch off the news and tune into Classic FM? I don't want to listen to this any more."

Sky News Brexit free.

Exactly! Perfect example. Yes, and someone was saying to me over the weekend how brilliant it was not to have to go anywhere near that. And actually the thing that I didn't expect, which has been, if you like, a challenge, but also a liberation, was realising that there's a totally different way of taking what's happening, which is a spur to action and activism. And I didn't expect that at this age and stage I'd come out of this whole process thinking, "Hang on a second. There's a really happy lens through which we see all of this, which is, it's an incitement to do something." It's not an incitement to sort of switch off or tune out. Actually whether or not you are energised about the structure of our politics. So we've launched a series of ThinkIns about the rules, about whether or not the UK needs a written constitution, so we understand our individual rights and responsibilities in politics. If you're looking at things in our life, sort of scandals in plain sight that are just going unremarked, we can think differently about mental health or we can think differently about the way in which the state intervenes or disrupts the family. And actually I find that has been really energising. And so having thought that you'd spend a lot of time worrying about the business model of a new start-up, which I do, my co-founder and I, Katie Vanneck-Smith, who was at the Wall Street Journal. She and I spent a lot of time thinking about this. But also we spend a lot of time thinking about, "Well, what do we want to do about it? What do we want to do about the world as we find it?" And that's been a surprise.

Because if you buy the Guardian, or you take the Telegraph, you're choosing the lens through which you see the world in a sense. But one of the things that interests me greatly about Tortoise is these ThinkIns allow for it to be truly participatory.

Yes. So the model is that… yes, you're right. I think that there is an issue about the filter bubble that existed before the filter bubble, which is Fleet Street. But there's an opportunity I think, if you turn journalism around – which is a little, I don't want to over claim, but a little of what we're trying to do – which is to say instead of thinking that journalism is about journalists telling people what's going on, but starting with the idea that journalism can be about journalists listening to people. To find out different points of view, different experiences. And our ThinkIn is essentially that as a model.

So in the way in which Ted took the university lecture and said, “Hang on, we could set some rules here, we could digitise it and then we could open it up,” we tried to do the same with an editorial meeting with a news meeting and said, “Okay, imagine if we took a classic Times leader conference and instead of having journalists and editors draped over the sofas, we had our newsroom peopled by lots of different people who’ve got experience of different things and different points of view – and try, through the course of the hour of the ThinkIn, hear as many points of view, don’t come to a consensus. You can’t do that. But do try to use that as a way of finding leads that drive your journalism and do use it as a way of coming to a better-informed point of view.” And the thing that’s been thrilling about it is that that’s really happened. I’ve really found that I learn a set of stories from the people who come into our newsrooms, and I also find that I think differently as a result of what I hear.

It seems to have really opened up journalism and put an end hopefully to that kind of top-down, command and control journalism where Paul Dacre tells his readers what to think.

Well, I think that’s changing a lot in in lots of different ways and it’s silly to say that’s happening in a small newsroom in London when you’ve had Twitter and Insta and all of these new platforms which are giving us an amazing way to listen. But there is something different about what we hope, with a ThinkIn, is a system of organised listening. And one of the things that was really important to us was this idea that it’s not just listening, but it’s organised. That you’re trying to make sure you go into a ThinkIn having prepared the notes on the subject so you come at it well briefed and well informed. That when you come out the other side you come away with a Tortoise take, a point of view on it. But most importantly, in the course of the hour, you really make sure you listen to as many different views as possible. And we started off Paul, one of the things, you make lots and lots of mistakes, and some of the ones that you make are just tiny and then they open up a whole new world. And we did one early on about the future of the brain, and it was terrible. It was really boring and flat, and everyone was really nervous – partly because we had a Nobel prize winner in the room and no one wanted to speak. And so everyone was asking questions. And at the end of it we thought, Katie Vanneck-Smith, my co-founder and I, we went through it and thought, “What’s not working here?” And then we realised that we were recreating the panel discussion, which was exactly what we wanted to get rid of. And so we came up with a rule and a ThinkIn has this one rule, which is no questions. It’s the only rule we’ve got, is you’re not allowed to ask a question. You’ve got to say what you think or talk about your personal experience. And the result of that is that it forces everyone be much more direct about where they’re coming from. But also it’s an acknowledgement that you don’t think that the sages are on the stage. You think that there’s a collective wisdom in the room. And as far as possible, you’re going to tap into that.

Because, I don’t want to come across all Michael Gove and the death of experts and everything, but how do you reconcile that, then? Because you have got a Nobel prize winner, an expert professor about the brain, but you’ve also got laypeople like me. We’re clearly not equal.

Well no, no. We are! Actually, big news. We are. It’s a certain kind of equality under the law, equality of lived experience.

Oh, I like that.

But I think that what we're trying to do is make sure that you mix that technical expertise with the force of someone's experience. Actually if you take an example like the brain, absolutely there are people who've got a depth of expertise of what's happening in terms of medical research. You don't want me digging around in there, I don't know what I'm doing. But you also are going to have people in the room who've lived with people who've had dementia or different kinds of mental health issues, and I think that making sure that you can have the meeting of those minds is really important. I'll give a really simple example away from the brain. We did a ThinkIn, the very first one we did was on cryptocurrency. It's a perfect example I thought, because it was the time when Bitcoin was going crazy. Lots of people like me were talking about it as if we understood it.

I'm nodding now, hoping you don't ask me the questions.

We didn't understand it, but it was a classic thing where journalists would get together in a pile on something that we didn't fully understand. And we got a room of people together. And the question we asked was, "Should you ban, regulate or embrace cryptocurrency?" And so we had someone who was an economist, someone who understood how the Bank of England worked, someone who was up the wazoo in Bitcoin, someone else who was running a tech platform in cryptocurrency, and a whole room of people. And in the course of the conversation, someone made very sort of sensible point that you shouldn't ban, regulate or embrace cryptocurrency. It's not really a currency, it's an asset. It's like gold or something, and you should do with it what you do with other assets, which is you should tax it, and you should use the tax system as a way of punishing people who handle it badly and making sure that it's properly overseen. And it was one of those moments where you thought, "Oh, this wouldn't happen in a normal newsroom." It's only if you've got that mix of people testing their ideas against each other, talking about their experience, that you might get somewhere.

Because the problem you have on the Today programme and on news channels is it is in a sense of gladiatorial. "We're now joined by two people on this subject that vastly oppose each other, who are both dug in, and they're going to make their point in two minutes, disagree with each other and then our listener will be none the wiser."

I don't know how you deal with that problem because there are some arguments where the reality is that there are two fundamentally different points of view about the road to travel, and you can't create a false harmony there. And actually, as a citizen you kind of want to hear what the different points of view are. Actually I still think there's a lot of room for gladiatorial argument. It helps me understand better what I think and the choice that I might want to make. The difference is, what happens if you want to do a journalism that is – and again, I worry about sort of sounding like you've got an answer when we're scrambling around to get going – but what happens if you want to do a journalism that's constructive, where you're trying to come up with an answer? Actually, what's really useful then is to be able to listen to a group of people who do have different views, but also be alive to someone who might have an option,

a way of going forward. And if that's available to you, then you might try and build something from it. We started Tortoise on the back of a conversation I'd actually had at the BBC once about, could you do a programme that was the mirror image of Question Time called Answer Time? And of course you can't really do it at the BBC, because you can't have a publicly funded programme making policy recommendations. But you can, as a news organisation, do exactly that. And there's something about that that's quite interesting and constructive, and different from the 'he said, she said' model.

I don't watch Question Time any more now. Because although Fiona's doing a great job, my blood pressure can't stand it. I mean, not only is the panel arguing with each other, but then the audience are terrible as well.

Well, one of the things I tried to do, I said to Kate, my wife, when I left the BBC, "I've got to make sure I don't become one of those people who's throwing a shoe at the radio, because they're cross about X and Y." And of course it's quite hard in the last 18 months not to have had those moments. To be honest with you though, that's the politics we're in. And part of the reason why I think there's an option for a different kind of news organisation like Tortoise is that that world is super served. That world of what just happened, and who's got something immediate to say about it, is hugely served. The world of journalism where you're trying to understand not what's leading the news, but what's *driving* it. There's room I think for that kind of journalism.

Is there a Tortoise way of handling a subject like Brexit? Because as you've just said there, what I would really want as a listener and a viewer and a reader is, there are loathsome people that on the remain and the Brexit side. There are sneering Remainers, and there are closet racist Brexiteers. But there are also sensible people on each argument. And I'd love to actually hear from a non-shouty representative of both of those sides.

Well, we've tried to do two big things, if you like. One was, we asked Chris Cook just to try and take a good long time to understand what happened in the designing of the deal. And so he spent, I think it was about four months, and did a really in-depth piece of reporting into Whitehall. And while all the arguments were happening at Westminster, understand who were the civil servants that were designing the deal that we would live by, and why it had been so problematic. And why, if you like, Theresa May had become so unstuck. It was called Defeated by Brexit. And it did, I think, explain the choice that the government faced. And it did so by taking the time to listen to the people who were working on the small print. And I think that was really useful. But I suppose the more energising and more engaging thing that we did, was we stopped at the beginning of the year and thought, "Right. What's Tortoise's position going to be on Brexit?" And there's this wonderful moment where I was sitting with a group of other editors and thought, "Who cares? Who's really going to change their minds as a result of what a new little newsroom says? Most people are in their fixed positions anyway." And so we started thinking about how would we think about the lessons of the last few years, and get up and over the immediate leave-remain question, and think about how our politics needs to change as a result of it. And we started looking at questions like: why is it that it's so unclear who and how a general election is called, given the Fixed Term Parliament Act? Or why is it that we seem to have such a different understanding of what our democracy is in different

parts of the country? Not just between the four nations, but, given devolution… and why is it that we seem to have at the very heart of our system now an argument between direct democracy, the answer of a referendum, and representative democracy, the sovereignty of Parliament? We need to start ironing these things out. And we started looking at the fact that the UK is one of only five countries in the world without a written constitution. Actually one of only three democracies. And we thought, "There is a space that a slow newsroom with an approach to open journalism can actually make a difference if we start listening to people." You know, people with constitutional expertise, but citizens who care about the running of our politics. If we actually ran a series of ThinkIns that tried to say, "How would we shape the future of our politics on the back of this whole process?" And that's exactly what we're doing. And so we're running this series of ThinkIns called The Rules. Trying to work out what are the rules by which we want to live, so that we actually restore some confidence in our politics and in our democracy?

I mean, if I can remember my constitutional law module from my degree, we don't have a codified constitution, and what I took away from that ultimately is that it suits the government at the time to have it that way. Because every government that gets in quite likes the vagaries of it because it means they can get away with doing a bit more than they're allowed to.

I think, Paul, that felt like a system that we were rather proud of. Right? For a long time the beauty of the British system has been its pragmatism and its flexibility. I don't know. I think in the last five years you've begun to ask yourself, "Well, really? So you can have a referendum in Scotland where people of the age of 16 can vote, but not in the rest of the UK?" Or, "Okay. We decided to impose a Fixed Term Parliament Act." So suddenly you need to have a two-thirds majority to be able to get a general election, but only a 50% majority in order to have a vote of no confidence.

It's a pig's ear, isn't it?

And the whole thing feels really squeaky. Even, we started this before the Supreme Court ruling. But the truth is that you've now got a situation where the Supreme Court has ruled the Prime Minister's actions as unlawful. And the Prime Minister is saying he doesn't think the Supreme Court is right. It'd be quite nice to know that the rules were set, and that people understood them and they were respected.

I mean, I work a lot in America and they would say, "Does Tortoise have a mission statement?" But we're less favourable here in Britain and more brutal. And we'd say, "What's the point of it?" Why do you get out of bed to run this? Is it to reshape society? Is it to have an army of citizens that are better informed and more Socratic in their dialogue? Or is it a money-making opportunity? Is it both?

So the reason that we started it, and I think the reason that the sort of group of us got together to do this is that a) we thought that there was a different way of doing journalism and we needed an approach that was, as I said, slow and open. But there is also an element, if you like, our third heresy; slow rather than fast. Open rather than just telling. Our third heresy is that actually we do care about what happens

next. If you grew up in a newsroom as I did this, the sort of orthodoxy is, you go out and report the story. Bring in the information.

Get the paper out.

And the world will make a decision about what happens next. Actually, we started… on the day that we first published, I wrote a long piece – too long, probably – saying what we're for. And I think news organisations almost by instinct can tell you what they're against. They can be outraged by things. But actually, we were really keen to say, "Let's be a newsroom that will set out what we're for." And yes, we do want to come to a better-informed point of view, so that we address the problems that we face. So that you look at the 21st century and think, "Well, we're faced by politics that was basically forged in the 19th century. And we're facing a set of problems that are entirely different." So we organised ourselves around these themes, these big forces reshaping our society. They are technology, our planet, identity, wealth, and the 100-year life. And thought, "Okay, how are we going to understand those forces so that yes, we can come up with ideas that will help mend society where we can, and improve it where possible?" So it's deliberately constructive. We do care about the outcomes. We do care about what happens next. And it's the natural extension, if you like, of the campaigning nature of newspapers and certain news organisations. But it's intended to be one that we do with a community of members, with the people who sign up and become members of Tortoise. And we do that together.

And at the risk of being unkind, is it therefore a newsroom with a bit of think tank thrown in? Because you also have the problem that the minute you start to reach some conclusions, you've then got a position to advocate, have you not? I mean, I remember when George Entwistle was on the Today programme, for example. The BBC rightly challenged him, and that led to his resignation. Would there be an anti-Tortoise, where, once you had taken a position, invite people to challenge that?

Yes. We do that at all times with our journalism, with our ThinkIns, to make sure that we hear the counter point of view. I don't think it's a bit of think tank thrown in. It's more a bit of picnic, right? It's more, "Let's get everyone out and thinking together." And in a much more informal and less hierarchical way, figuring out a way that you understand different experiences of a problem. And then try and make the case for how you address it. So I'll give an example. We have done a series, a colleague of mine, Polly Curtis, one of our editors, has done a long series of reports for over the course of the year on family separation. How is it that the state separates mothers and children, or parents and children? The idea is to start with the recognition there's a problem. There's been a big increase in that level of family separation. Then try and understand the forces that make that happen. And then come to a set of proposals about what you do next. Now you definitely need to get that to be challenged at every step. But the reason that I say 'picnic' is that we try to bring everyone in, right? It's not a closed process. And one of the things that Polly's done is not only go off and do the traditional reporting, speaking to all the people involved. But make sure that our members, Tortoise members, join up as part of members panels to inform us of where we think we should be covering the story, and where we think we should be taking proposals for how to address the problem. So it's intended to be, as I said at the beginning, not just open, but organised. And in that sense it's

much more popular and more personal than something that's, if you like, kind of rarefied and behind closed doors.

Do you have a typical Tortoise member of reader in mind? I mean, because for example, I think it's a great organisation but I also want to read a review of the latest Terminator movie. So I'm still going to buy Empire magazine.

And I think one of the things you've got to do when you start these things off is make sure that you're clear about the things you're not going to do. Right? So I would really recommend Empire magazine. Go and do that. That's not our line of work. And there are a whole bunch of publications, broadcasters that are doing stuff that we're not doing, and not going to try to do. But in terms of who we appeal to, actually we've been really clear. And Katie, my co-founder, has been really focused on this idea that we've got to make sure we're open to as wide a variety of people as possible. Because frankly, if we get lots of people – and forgive me, Paul, this is going to be rude – but basically people like you and me sitting there sort of discussing the world's problems, we might very well end up with some rather samey thinking of our own. So we've started, as you said at the beginning, with a Kickstarter launch. We started the year with just over 40% of our members were under 30. They're now as we've grown, that number's changed a little bit. So it's just under 40% are under 30 years old. So we're skewing much younger. We launched a student programme in September, we've had a big signup of students. We've been really clear that we want to make sure we're not just speaking to people who are, if you like, living and working in around our newsroom in London. We take our ThinkIns on the road.

Outside the M25.

Wednesdays and Thursdays we're out travelling around the country. And then we've also set up a network to enable people who either couldn't afford or wouldn't probably think of joining Tortoise to get signed up and become part of our membership. And so I worked at the BBC and watched the way in which Question Time worked. And the most interesting thing to me about Question Time, other than the programme itself, was how carefully they thought about the audience. And actually if you want to build a news organisation that's driven by its membership, that's informed by its membership, you really want to make sure that not only is it big, but it's varied. And that's what we're working on.

What's next then? What's top of your to do list?

Well, editorially I'm really ambitious for it. I really want to make sure that journalistically we do things that everyone says, "Have you seen that? Did you watch that? Did you read that? And did you listen to it?" So we've got a series of investigative pieces that we're working on that I'm really excited by, and I believe we're going to start really landing those punches. That's a big thing to do. One thing that we've learnt is just quite how much our members love audio. So we're doing more and more that is audio, and we're building a sort of Tortoise podcast plan.

That will never take off. Podcasts are a waste of time!

Thank you so much. I knew that was the case! I can't believe what they're doing back there. No, exactly. So I'm excited about that. And then the real thing is that in the next year, what we want to do is show a new model of our journalism, what we call a case file, can really work. So taking a particular story and rather than just reporting it, if you like, prosecuting it. So we brought this idea of a story which is that it sits in, if you like, a Manila file, like a lawyer's file with a sort of pink ribbon wrapped around it. And you open it up and you just keep coming back at the same subject to properly understand it in full, until you get to the point that you know what you think needs to be done to address it. And so in the next six months, what you'll see also as rollout is a series of case files in the way in which we've done family separation but we're now looking at white collar crime, and a few other things.

How will you measure success?

I think our primary measurement is membership. We don't take advertising. We don't take your data or sell it, or do anything like that. What we do is invite you to become a member. And our membership is paid for. And so the real measure of success over time is going to be to build a solid membership that pays for Tortoise, because they want to be a part of it, they come and participate to our ThinkIns in the room or online, and they believe in and value the journalism that comes out of it.

So will there ever be a situation where, as I'm a paying member of Tortoise myself, you'll ask me to leave in a couple of years because I've not participated in any ThinkIns? I have not reacted to anything, I've just merely received. Are you looking for all of the members to be highly engaged?

I don't think at this stage, Paul, six months in, we're going to start expelling…

Can I be the first to be asked to leave? That would be awesome.

Exactly! Send to the door. Look, we want people to be engaged. But engagement happens in lots and lots of different ways. Some people really love coming to the ThinkIns. Some people email us a lot of the time. Some people actually share a lot of the pieces that we write or report. So we think that our members can do a huge amount, and participate in a host of ways. And so no, I don't think that there's a forced march here. The idea is much more that you actually celebrate being part of a community of people who are really interested in what's happening. And if you are happily and rewardingly consuming the stuff that we're producing, I'm delighted too.

So the Americans call them 'teaching moments'. But have there ever been any mistakes along the way? Have you dropped any clangers since leaving BBC News and starting Tortoise?

Plenty. Some of them are really small and internal, so not that interesting. But some of them are, I think, meaningful if you care about the media. One was… I think I massively underestimated podcasting. Not because I didn't realise that people were listening to it, but I thought the market would be hugely oversupplied, and so we should get up and running and then move into podcasting. The more I look at it, actually the more I realise there are not that many people doing what we're trying to

do. And we should try and move into it now. And do it in a way that's distinctive and different from what you might get elsewhere in the news. So that's been one of those, "Hang on, let's get our game together on that." The other one, which was an important lesson – and it's like a lot of the mistakes you make in life, they come with enormous good intentions – was we started off with this idea that everything would be run as a round table. That we would all participate in the decisions about everything. And actually what very quickly happened was this realisation that you were just bouncing issues and jobs around. And actually we very quickly had to get ourselves organised. I remember I was recruiting someone. It was Dave Taylor, in fact. He said, "What's it like working for a media organisation that people haven't heard of?" And I said, "Dave, it's much worse than that. Imagine working for a media organisation that doesn't have an organisation." And it was realising that that was something we needed to fix and get organised. And so from the beginning of the year to this, getting much more disciplined about who does what really, really matters. And I think it's one of those classic start-up things is that you go into it with a kind of idealism and an excitement, and then it's a wet Wednesday in October and you think, "Right, we actually have to get some things done here."

Did you always want to be a journalist? Did you always want to be an editor?

I didn't know what I wanted to be. You meet certain people who say, "And it was at the age of four I realised I wasn't like that at all." In fact, I had written bits and pieces for a student newspaper, I'd try to get something published in a newspaper, but more because I thought, "Well, that'll be interesting. Let's see if you could do that." And then I got a job interview at a newspaper. And I went in, I miraculously landed this job. And I remember walking in the newsroom that first day and thinking, "I love this." I love the people, the spirit, the way people talk to each other. And I should have known it about myself. I should have known that I am a deeply curious person who loves finding stuff out, who's really interested, who thinks that everyone's got a story. And I knew that about myself. I just never put two and two together and thought, "Oh, yes. Journalism might be a way of doing this for a living." And I remember thinking that, for years, thinking, "I can't believe I get to go around and ask people questions. And for some reason they all answer." Then after a period of time you realise they don't answer! But for a while I was delusional enough to think, "God, that's just amazing."

It's the thrill of being nosy and curious, but also the thrill of then telling people the news, telling them what's just happened.

I definitely think there's a hugely creative element to it, the way in which you tell a story. For me, it's writing. When I arrived at the BBC, it was learning or witnessing people who are real masters of the craft, of putting together a TV package or a radio package. But at the heart, I do think there's something really simple, which is you go along, you've got a notebook and a pencil, you ask someone some questions, you write down what they say, and as you walk back you think, "Well, I wonder what that all adds up to?" And it's the chance to put yourself in someone else's shoes. It's just an amazing thing to get to do.

So what came next then, after your first start in this newsroom?

So I started out, I was responsible for NIBs – news in briefs – on the European page. And I started out, I was very lucky. I started the FT and it was an amazing group of journalists with a really serious culture about what was happening in the world. And it was a chance to learn a lot, not just journalism, also things like, you know... I was about to claim that I'd learned some economics, but I'd been around people who understood economics, and that was great. And the big break I got was going to China. I think the FT had someone in mind to go and be their Shanghai correspondent, and open the new bureau in Shanghai. And then, for whatever reason, that person pulled out. And so I think they kind of looked down the list and there was only one other person left. And so that was me. And so I got to go off and cover China in the late nineties.

What an amazing adventure!

Just amazing. And it was, again, one of those things where the story literally would walk into the room. I mean, I rented a little flat off the Huaihai Road in the French Concession in Shanghai. I remember one day my landlady, who didn't have a great respect for personal privacy, walked into the flat, and then into my bedroom, and it was like seven o'clock in the morning, and she said, "I just wanted to let you know I'm going to be away for the next few days." And I was like, "Ah, okay, thank you for letting me know." And she said, "Yes, I'm leaving the country." I was like, "Great, have a good time." And she said, "Yes, I'm going to be abroad." I said, "Good." And suddenly the penny dropped. I said, "Mrs Chung, have you been away before? Have you left China before?" And she said, "No, I've never left the country. In fact, no one in my family has ever left the country." And she then explained that for the first time, Chinese citizens were able to get tourist visas to Thailand. And you suddenly thought, "Oh my goodness, the world is about to change." And that story had walked into my bedroom. I remember she left and I called the foreign desk. I said, "Maybe we should do a story about the coming wave of Chinese tourists." And they said, "Yes, great. Send us 850 words." And I thought, "That is what it is to be in a country at a time when such extraordinary change is happening, and you witness it, and it changes the way you think about the world."

What came after the China bureau?

So I did China, I came back, I covered the media. This beat.

Lucky you!

Yes, it was amazing actually. It was amazing because I'd gone from one thing, which was geopolitics and economics to this, you know... the thing that do Paul, which is so smart, is that as much as media is and should be this interplay of principles and technology, how does the public square work, what will digital platforms do, at the heart of it there are always these personalities and it's always been the case that for whatever reason, good and bad, probably mostly bad, you get these personalities attracted to the media. And so that was just a whole different experience in journalism was how do you report the Sumner Redstones and the Rupert Murdochs, and back in the day the bosses of Time Warner, not to mention the ones in the UK too. So I did that for a few years and then I went to Washington DC.

And how was that?

Well, that was post-9/11, so it was a country and a world, to an extent, that was traumatised. I arrived just as the George W. Bush administration was preparing the case to go to war in Iraq. And actually it was a very testing time in that you felt as though, as a journalist, you were required to report what the White House was saying, and yet of course what it was saying was an argument, but delivered by the White House as fact. And I think there's a lot of discussion still to be had about the way in which coverage of the White House in the run up to the Iraq War gave room to people to assess the arguments that were made by the Bush White House. The way they were presented and the role of the media in that. So it went from being, if you like, a business page story in the media to a genuinely life and death one in terms of the Iraq War, and the responsibilities of the executive in politics, but also the media that covers the presidency or any government.

It seems to me that at the time it also started the kernel of the whole 'are you for us or against us' type thing with the media that's now a writ large with Brexit and Trump, but you know, if the media was reporting something you agreed with then that was fine, but if not it wasn't that you were wrong on the facts, it's that you were against whatever the government was trying to do.

I think the old hands in the White House press corps would say that there's a long tradition of Republican presidents sort of leaning into the media, particularly the political press. And so that's not such a new thing, that there was an element of it with Reagan too, but that there was an element of it that stretches back pretty much for the last 50 years. And actually, I think if you go back, for all the criticism there was of George W. Bush, there was a courtesy in the White House in its relations with everyone really. It had a very particular political point of view. But it wasn't as personal and aggressive as anything that we see now.

How long were you at DC for?

I was there until 2005, and then I moved back to London and started at the Times in 2006.

So how does that work in terms of, did you have a career master plan or did you just say, "Well I'm happy in DC," and then are you poached by the Times? How does it work?

So there's no such thing as a... well, there are some people have a career master plan. I think they've designed it and written it after it's happened. I think it's really unlikely that that happens in real life. And particularly amongst journalists, you don't know where you're going to be at the end of the day often, or even the end of the week.

So did some head hunter ring you up and say, "Hey, do you want to be business editor at the Times?" And you go, "Yes."

No, I ran into the editor of The Times at a speech about China and he said, “By the way, what are you doing now,” in that rather ‘you’ve fallen off the grid and you’re useless’ kind of way, which always gets your attention. And he said, “Come and talk to me. I’ve got an idea.” And so that was how the conversation started about going to be business editor.

And so business editor of the Times, so were you the business editor for four years before you took the top job?

No, I was a business editor for just over a year.

Forgive me.

Yes, I arrived there 2006, and...

That’s a meteoric rise…

Well, again, it was not really to do with me. At the time, News Corp was buying the Wall Street Journal. So I arrived in 2006, and through the course of 2007 they were buying the Wall Street Journal. And Robert Thomson, who was the editor, went to go and become the editor of the Wall Street Journal, so they had a vacancy at the Times. And so that’s how it so happened that I became the editor of the Times in 2007.

Well, that’s very modest. But they’re not just going to hire any old sod, are they? I mean, clearly... there was a vacancy.

Well, some people might think that’s exactly what they did!

Other people might have gone for that job as well. And did you feel you’d arrived at that point? Because I mean that’s a hell of a job, isn’t it? Editor of the Times, you must’ve got offers for the best tickets at the opera and so on.

It’s an amazing thing to do. The truth is, the thing I really loved about it, and still hugely admire about the Times, is it’s an amazing group of people. So you’re suddenly in this group. The FT is kind of intellectual muscle, the Times is that too, but it’s also got this range. So I remember my first news conference at the Times thinking, “Oh, this is really exactly like the FT, right?” They’re sitting around, the first item was about unemployment figures and they were talking about what was happening in the labour market. I was thinking, “Oh this is exactly like the FT.” And then someone said, “Oh, I’ve got a story. There was a couple that went away on holiday for a week, and they’d left a window open, and a family of squirrels came in and ate their house.” And suddenly the whole room came alive with, “Really? How did that happen? What do you mean?” And there was pictures and we were going to do a recreation of what the sitting room looked like before the squirrels ate it. And then what they destroyed afterwards. And you suddenly thought, “Yes, there’s a sort of spirit of life here in this paper.”

Did you find the squirrels?

We had them all.

Did you put them in Gitmo?

Exactly! All trussed up with those wanted pictures. No, but it was a wonderful thing and there's something about, it really opened me to a journalism that is trying to be in touch with all parts of your life. And so you could have Mike Atherton telling you about cricket or one day and Catlin Moran, you know, defining a new feminism the next day, and both of them being hilarious and thinking, "I can't believe how lucky I am."

We've had a few former Murdoch editors on the podcast before and I always ask them, you know, there is this kind of conspiracy theory that the minute you become the editor of a Murdoch paper that you're flown to the hollowed-out volcano and then you're given the hard word and introduced to the rest of the Illuminati.

Yes.

Would you like to disavow our listeners of that?

No, not at all. I'd really like to do that, I'd like to paint that picture in technicolour! The thing is, it's a huge company, isn't it? Look, I was at the Times for seven years, and the five years that I was editing the paper were really extraordinary politically in the UK, but also obviously around the media – because the phone hacking story blew up, and it was very, very important time for the media in the UK to take a long look at itself. It was also a very painful time for people who'd worked closely together who were interrogating each other's behaviour and judgments. And at the end of it, I left the Times as I like to say, you know, if you fall out with the proprietor, it's not the proprietor who's leaving, right? The editor leaves. And the choice that we had to make was to how to report that story. I still think we reported the story as we would any other – you know, squarely and directly. But it was a period that was really difficult.

Stressful, frankly.

Yes, and as I suspect you can hear, I really loved the people I worked with at the Times. I believed in the journalism that we were doing. And I was really sorry to go, but I also know that that's the nature of those jobs. You do the job, and if the proprietor wants to get another editor, that's what they do.

Live by the sword, die by the sword.

And yes, although it's actually about what you think the job is. And so I think it is a really important thing that the proprietor has a clear role about the editor that she or he might want to put in place. And I felt as though as the editor, my job was really a responsibility to the reader. So without being sort of too grand about it, and it's hard

not to do this even at this distance, because it's whatever it is now, seven-odd years ago, it's still the case that I think that the job was to try and report out that story and come to a clear view about what was the problem and how it should best be resolved. And we did that. And I have to say to the huge credit of the newsroom of the Times when there was a massive amount of criticism, as you say, of the Murdoch media and this perception of the way in which Rupert Murdoch operated. Actually, what I saw was a newsroom that was enormously professional about saying, "Here's the story. We've got to report it out, investigate it, and try and give a clear analytical commentary of what's happened and why."

The Times is still my favourite newspaper. I've had a disproportionately large amount of people from the Times on this podcast, because I read it every day and I know all their names.

Email them. Email them.

Absolutely. But it's not as if you left the Times to go on sign on at Streatham Job Centre, you then went on to run BBC News, which, you know, I Googled it the other day and it's quite a big name.

It's quite big. It's quite big. And it's an amazing thing to do. And actually it was one of those things where you... when you leave a job like that, the Times, you do think, "Okay, well what am I going to do?" And it's painful, partly because of the relationships that you're leaving behind, the daily working ones, but also this sense of a mission of what you're about. And it just so happened that that blew up at exactly the time that the BBC had just come out of Jimmy Savile, and the team was changing at the top. And I got the chance to go and work for Tony Hall, as the director general. And there was a brilliant thing, which is, of course I'd never worked in television and radio. And you suddenly think, "Oh my goodness, not only am I going to get to work for the BBC," you know, the BBC…

As the big boss.

Yes. But even just saying, "Oh, I'm going to get a job at the BBC," felt rather exciting. But then this thing that you realise is, "Oh, I'm going to get to learn how TV and radio works." And I'm sure you feel this too. There's certain things where you get a chance to learn something, like a proper new set of tricks, and some of the stuff is absurd. I remember arriving at my first news conference on my first morning, and the news conference began at nine – and I am in a struggle with punctuality, which friends of mine will tell you I'm losing – and I showed up at sort of six minutes past nine for the nine o'clock meeting, and the whole room was there, and they looked at me as though I had done something unspeakable, which was be late for a meeting. And as I came out I was like, "Oh, I'm sorry I was a bit late." And someone just very politely said, "You'll notice that when the six o'clock news goes out, it goes out at six. Not six minutes past six." And I thought, "Oh, god." And you learn things about culture. And one of them was about respect for time in that place, and it makes a difference to the way in which that whole news operation works. In fact, the whole broadcasting operation works. But there was also something that I got there that I didn't see coming at all, which is working for an organisation that has a public service mission,

right? If you've worked in the FT or the Times, you understand that you've got a job, which is of course to be interesting, of course to be informative, and ideally to break news that makes people sit up and say, "This can't go on." But at the BBC, there's all of that – and then something, if you like, deeper – which is you're trying to enable people to have the information they need to make good choices in life. It's publicly funded in order that it should be a public good. And at the very heart of that is a really simple, beguilingly simple, idea, which is universality, that it should get to everyone. And that makes lots of people think, "Oh, well what are you going to do about social media? What are you going to do about radio?" Actually, it sort of misses the point. Universality means you need to think about how you're going to choose stories and tell stories that really will speak to everyone and engage everyone. And that was completely eye-opening to me.

It must've been a difficult balance to strike though, because Tony hired you because you'll bring new thinking and new energy to it. But on the other hand, you had no broadcast experience, so you were never sure whether, if you were going to ask a question, whether that was a very silly question to ask or whether you were incredibly profound and clever to ask it, you wouldn't know, would you?

Well, there's a certain amount of how I think when you're responsible for any organisation that you don't know because people go, "Oh great. Yes, that's a really thoughtful question." And you don't know whether that means that's extremely foolish or really wise. But the fact was that there was no question at all, and there is no question at all in the BBC, that it doesn't have the craft skills. It doesn't understand how to make great television and radio. It wasn't as though that was the question that was being put to the BBC at the time. The question was: what do you want to do editorially? What do you want that group of people to do and deliver journalistically? And so I think there are times in organisations where what you really need are people with the expertise in programme making and design. At that particular juncture in BBC history, that wasn't sort of top of the list, or at least I think Tony's top of the list, in terms of the people that he needed. But it changes; you'll find there'll be a moment where people say, "Look, let's stop focusing on that to get back to our core storytelling skills." So it changes over time.

Now, directors general always seem to go and do a big job somewhere else before they then come back. So obviously Tony ran the opera, Mark Thompson ran Channel 4, is this part of some evil plan so that you are going to be DG? Now is the time to come clean.

Paul, I love the fact you keep coming back to this as though there is some great org chart or, I don't know, a Gantt chart somewhere in the sky where everything's blocked out. I genuinely do think that the older I get, the less planning seems to make sense personally, and the more it makes sense organisationally. So strangely, one of the reasons going back to Tortoise that it really struck me there was room for a different kind of news organisation, was I could see how organisations like the BBC planned, but I didn't feel as though newsrooms were as well organised. So I think there's something about that personally that it's just not the way I think.

James, this has been a very, very enjoyable conversation. Thank you for your time.

Thank you so much for having me on.