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Under-Secretary-General for Global Communications, United Nations

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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 here in New York and joined by Melissa Fleming, Under-Secretary-General for Global Communications for the United Nations. Previously head of Global Communications at the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, she led their multimedia news service and coordinated global campaigns in the press and on social media. Before this, she was head of media and outreach at the International Atomic Energy Agency when they won the Nobel Peace Prize. And her award-winning book, *A Hope More Powerful Than the Sea*, charts 16-year-old Doaa Al-Zamel's harrowing escape from war on Syria and is due to be made into a Hollywood film.

Melissa, thank you for joining me.

Great to be with you, Paul.

That was a real tongue twisting CV and quite a lot of it. There's a lot of initialisms, a lot of agencies there.

I don't know how you pronounced all those names, of all these UN organisations, but you managed.

Well, what we should tell our listeners is that I probably had about three or four goes at doing it, during which you very patiently waited. So thank you. Thank you for sparing my blushes. How did you start this journey then? What an incredible career you've had.

Yes, well I was always interested in foreign affairs and communications and journalism, so I started as a journalist. And I was working in Europe for Radio Free Europe actually, broadcasting over the Iron Curtain, and then got into the international organisation scene. I just found it fascinating to be working with so many nations on real issues, and then kind of move from journalism into communications.

And how did you make the move? What were the circumstances? How did it come about?

I was in Munich. This dates me, because it was 1989 and the Berlin Wall had just fallen down and I had been working for this radio station that was broadcasting across the Iron Curtain and had kind of been waiting for this day. But then I was offered a job at an organisation that was also working across East and West. It was called The Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe. And it was a communications job, and it was a fascinating organisation because it was dealing with human rights, but also building democratic institutions in countries that had never been democracies, and trying to prevent wars. But then the Bosnian War happened and I found myself kind of on the front line of media communications then.

And now you've just been appointed Under-Secretary General for Global Communications for the UN. Is that role as all-encompassing as it sounds?

It is. It's kind of daunting. Yes.

It's like a proper job! I don't have the courage to do that job.

Well, yes, I don't know if I do either! I started a couple of months ago, but in a way I feel like in a way my career path probably led me to this, because I'd been working on so many angles of the UN – human rights, conflict prevention – and I was the spokesperson for the International Atomic Energy Agency in the lead up to the Iraq War, so nuclear non-proliferation, nuclear security. And then I was working on refugee issues, which also became one of the top headline news issues of our time, but also, you know, captured my heart. And now I'm coming to the seat of the United Nations. It's kind of like, where the government sits, and the seat of the Security Council, the General Assembly, but also communicating on everything that the UN does, all over the world. And really with a focus on climate, a focus on peace and security and on the sustainable development goals, which I hope all of you listeners have heard of, if not, happy to give a little synopsis.

An incredible amount of stakeholders, as you've just said, and a huge amount of responsibility. What is your day to day then? How big is your team and what does your job involve? Well, what is a typical week?

Well, there are 700 people on my team. That sounds like a lot, but if you...

It sounds like a lot because it is a lot!

It is a lot. But we have a library, we do audio visual services, basically bringing the meetings of the UN to the outside world. So it's all broadcast live and recorded. But more for the press and the public audiences. We have websites and social media and we do video that we distribute to broadcasters. We have information centres all over the world in 59 countries. So, we're trying to communicate not just what the UN is doing, but also the values we stand for. And in this world that is becoming much more isolated, countries becoming more inward looking; nationalistic, we're really

trying to promote what we call ‘multilateralism’, which is, you know, global cooperation. We’re dealing with some of the biggest issues that threaten our planet. Whether it’s wars that definitely cross borders and need international cooperation to solve, or to resolve, whether it’s climate change, which is affecting all of us in the world. There’s so many cross-cutting issues that we believe cannot be solved by any one country individually. We need the United Nations and the countries to agree to solve them together.

And what’s top of your to do list within your job? You’ve mentioned the issues that are obviously incredibly important, but in terms of what’s top of your to-do list within the job?

Well, I’m developing now a communication strategy, which is, I really feel strongly, and I did at my previous job as well, that we as communicators, we’re communicating for a cause. I have so many colleagues who are just amazing, they have journalistic backgrounds, they worked for news organisations from around the world, but I am trying to impress on all of us that we are working for a cause. Which means we’re not just about providing information, we’re about capturing people’s imagination. So I have in my strategic approach to communications three W’s of communications, rather than the five W’s of journalism, who, what, when, where, and why. My three W’s are these, one is what, obviously we have to lead the narrative by providing authoritative information, data, statistics. We have all of that. However, there is this saying, statistics are human beings with the tears dried off.

Oh, I like that.

Yes, it really resonates and I always have it in... Because, so if we’re throwing statistics at people, what happens is that they either react by feeling numb, in fact, psychologists call this state psychic numbing, or populous politicians can actually take those numbers like some of them did in the lead up to, what’s known as, Brexit in your country. And feed on the fears of their populations by saying, masses of people are coming to our country. My second W is ‘why care’? And that is challenging my colleagues to do the exercise. If we’re going to be communicating, who are we communicating to? Why? And why should they care?

Because you don’t want to preach to the choir, do you? If someone’s already convinced...

We don’t want to preach to the choir. But even the choir sometimes, there’s just so much doom and gloom out there, we need to feel moved. We need to feel like, “Wow, this involves me.”

Because there’s a thing called compassion fatigue, isn’t there?

There really is. My final W is ‘what now’? So once you get people to care, we need to try to mobilise them, ask them to do something. But in that why care part, what’s really important for me is storytelling. Everybody goes home in the evening and turns on Netflix and watches stories. So we can’t think as communicators that we can just throw press releases at people and they’re going to be interested. All humans have

always been attracted to stories. And what social psychologists will tell you is that, if you even present a situation of human suffering, and maybe let's say starving children, if you presented them with two children, they'd be much less likely to give to those children than if you presented only one. So the one is extremely important in storytelling. Stories of one are accessible. They allow people to feel like, "This is a story I want to hear, but it's also a problem that potentially I could help out with." It's not so overwhelming. So, I don't know, have you ever read Nick Kristof in the New York Times?

Yes, absolutely.

He's kind of a role model for me, in terms of his formula. And he's actually told me... he's a columnist for the New York Times who really writes about some of the worst human suffering around the world or diseases, calamities. And he said to me, he always spends more time trying to find the character, the person who is going to represent that situation than he does actually researching the story, because that character is going to get people to care. It's going to get his readers to care. And there's another ingredient though to that character. And these are all true characters. They've gone through hell, but they've emerged. So, that ingredient is hope. And this is why some organisations have also adopted, like Amnesty International, what they call 'hope-based communications'. And that's something that I think I've been doing instinctively as well. Don't just leave people feeling like, "The situation is just so terrible, so awful, so big, so hopeless, that I hope somebody is taking care of it, but I'm going to click and turn away."

Well, that's the whole raison d'etre of the UN. They're there to make a difference and to do something about this. Surely?

That's right. And we do need... part of my job is to communicate the good work that the UN is doing. I just came from an organisation that I think represents the best of the UN, and that is UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency. I worked there for ten years, travelled to war zones and vast refugee camps and saw people who had just escaped war with just the clothes on their back, desperation like you couldn't believe, but also just the resilience of the human spirit, which was really very inspiring. But I think one of the things that I thought people needed to know and didn't know, was who was delivering the aid that was keeping these most vulnerable people on earth alive and helping them to thrive. So these are the humanitarians who work in some of the most dangerous places on earth. They not only are witness to atrocities, but they also listen to stories of people who've gone through the horrors and hell of war. And they take those stories in over and over and over again. And so they suffer their own trauma but they keep going, they find this work so compelling, and they sacrifice the peace of sitting in an outdoor cafe or just being with family. And they do this because they just feel that it's their duty to serve others. So I just found them so inspiring. And actually I started a podcast – because you do a podcast, I did a podcast – that was, the goal of it, it's called Awake at Night, was to interview these humanitarians. Not about what their work is all about, but the effect of this work on them, and it's quite compelling.

Well, because I could ask you about the effect that that work has had on you. You've seen the best of humanity and the worst of humanity. It must be both inspiring and almost borderline debilitating. You must've seen some horrendous things. How do you reconcile it? Because you can't unsee that.

That's right. Yes. No, it's really hard sometimes to see what human beings can do to others and to walk through... I've gone to Syria many times, and even just to see cities that I had been to before the war that were just absolutely spectacular, stunning, beautiful, where restaurants were, I'd eaten the most delicious food and...

Reduced to rubble.

Reduced to just complete rubble. Of course when you see that, then you really feel the destruction, but you know that in those buildings, people were living. And I remember coming across once, walking through the city of Homs, which was an UNESCO World Heritage Site, and was just completely destroyed. And there are almost no people. And I remember just the absence of sound, not even birds, even though it was springtime. And I came across this little boy, he must've been about ten, looking very earnest and just standing alone. And he was standing next to a missile. And I had a colleague who spoke Arabic next to me so I could understand what he said. And he just looked at me and pointed to the missile and said, "This missile killed my father." And then just kept looking at me. And that has haunted me ever since. I actually took a picture of him and the missile and I've used it to just bring home just the absolute devastating effect of war and how important it is for us to help the survivors, the victims of war. Because not only is it the right thing to do, but it's also, if we want to bring about peace, we have to help those who've survived the war, because they can be the agents of change and the architects of a new and better society after the war.

It seems that geopolitics is infinitely more complicated now than it used to be. In wars, when I was a child watching the television news, you would kind of show who the competence were and which side was the bad side. Whereas, now there's multiple actors and different politics on either side. Is Russia our ally in Syria or is it not? Honestly, it seems to get ever more complicated. Do you sometimes struggle to understand the geopolitical complexities yourself? Or is that something that you've tried to stay away from and focus on the humanitarian agenda?

Well, certainly at my previous job, UNACR, we were totally aware of the geopolitics, but we were focused entirely on relieving human suffering and providing impartial humanitarian aid. Here in New York, this is the political seat of the UN. So we have to try to understand and navigate the geopolitics and the Secretary-General, that's also his role, is to also facilitate peace talks, put parties together and try to create the conditions for peaceful resolution of conflicts. But it is, you're absolutely right, it's gotten so much more complicated, and it's also become much more dangerous for UN staff to operate on the ground. It used to be that the UN flag, just like the press badge and the sign of the Red Cross, were untouchable. Like if you saw those signs and you had a gun, you were going to aim the other way, or a bomb you are not going to hit. But now, because of just all different types of armed groups involved in these conflicts, it's not black and white anymore, militants and terrorists. It's very,

very dangerous to work in war zones and they're more and more humanitarian workers, peacekeepers who are losing their lives in the line of duty.

If you look at what al-Assad has done in Syria, he's deliberately killing journalists to allow him to get away with more crimes. Because sunlight is the best disinfectant, and fewer journalists covering his atrocities means he's going to get away with more. There's evidence that he'd deliberately targeted Marie Colvin of the Sunday Times.

Right. Well, it's very, very difficult for journalists and it has been to work in Syria and that has resulted in... dangerous, and there have been deaths, and absolute terrible sad losses of our amazing journalists' lives there.

It must give you an incredible feeling of pride though, to know that the UN is part of the solution. Sometimes it has more influence than not, and sometimes it has incredible successes and other times not. Like any organisation, it has ups and downs. But you clearly are the good guys that are trying to bring about a better world.

That's right. We really are trying, and sometimes it's hard because we know that there are people in need and we can't access them, or a war has been going on, like the Syria one for nine years and it's still unresolved. But that's not for lack of trying, and the UN does stand, and it was founded almost 75 years ago in order to make sure that we live in a planet that is not engulfed in war. And we work towards peace, we work towards the dignity of every human being. And yes, it's very inspiring to work for an organisation that has those values.

How closely do you work with Secretary General António Guterres?

Oh, very closely. In fact, he was my boss at UNHCR. He was, for ten years, he was the High Commissioner for Refugees before he became Secretary General. So that's how I got to know him, and he lured me here, somehow. No, I actually applied for the job and luckily I got it.

Incredibly inspiring guy.

He is an amazing inspiring man, he's actually brilliant. And he also really gets the need to communicate, really gets the need to use all means of modern and traditional media and communications to get our messages out. So it's a very supportive environment to work for.

When you look at the scale of what you were doing at the UNHCR... I was doing some research for this podcast, you were driving attention and generating support for the world's 70 million refugees and displaced people. That number is almost beyond comprehension.

It is beyond comprehension. And again, back to that saying, statistics are human beings with the tears dried off. Try explaining to people what that means, 70 million people. It's like, I think, the size of the UK.

Well, the UK is about 65 million, so it's more than my entire country.

Yes, so it's bigger. It's more than your entire country. And these are people who have been forced to flee their homes because of conflict or persecution. So this is different. And people, there's a lot of conflation in the media and deliberate conflation by politicians of the terms, refugees and migrants. Refugees are people who have been forced to flee and cannot return home because of the dangers they would face. So they're protected under international law, but unfortunately not always protected the way they should be.

It's about choice in a sense, isn't it? Because particularly with Brexit in our country, there's seems to be a lack of tolerance for anyone that comes from another country, whether it be an economic migrant or a refugee. To be honest, whether you want to come to our country because you've got no choice, or you want to come through an economic gain for yourself, both should be welcome in my view. I don't understand why there is this 'othering'.

Yes, well it seems to be very convenient, because it plays on fears of people and unfortunately it seems to work to win votes, but not necessarily. You know, we have had examples of politicians who, for example, Justin Trudeau campaigned at the time on the platform of, "I am going to bring 30,000 Syrian refugees to Canada," and he won. And you know, the population of Canada came out and cheered these refugees as they were arriving at the airports. And they have one of the biggest programmes of private sponsorship of refugees anywhere in the world, it's become a model for other countries. That is, individuals and communities get together and they sponsor refugee families to come over, and then they're in charge of taking care of that family for at least one year so that they can get on their feet. And it's an extremely successful way to also integrate. I think it's really how the narrative is built. It's interesting when you do surveys, even in the UK, and you ask people, would you be willing, or do you think your country should allow people who are fleeing war and persecution to come into Britain? The majority will say yes.

Because the majority are decent people.

The majority are decent people – and it depends on how it's framed.

Of course.

There's very often a 'but', and they have worries. There's been a lot of propaganda linking refugees with terrorists, or migrants as coming to steal jobs. So this is what needs to be addressed. And one needs to take these fears seriously, and just try to work on them.

You spoke earlier about the power of telling the story of individuals, like the Syrian woman who would survive in the boat wreck with the baby. It can be very powerful. And obviously you turned that into a book. Could you tell us about that journey?

Yes. Well, I first told this story on the TED stage, and it's a story of a teenage Syrian refugee, a young woman named Doaa. And Doaa is 19 years old, falls in love, major love story. Her fiancé tells he, "This refugee life, it's no life for us. Let's get on one of those boats and go to Europe." And Doaa couldn't swim, she put her life in danger because of the hope. That's why the book is called *A Hope More Powerful Than the Sea*. Very long story short, the boat ended up sinking. There were 500 passengers on board, including 100 children. And on day two in the water, she was floating on this little child's floating ring, the kind that toddlers use in swimming pools. And you know, the love of her life, just drowned before her eyes, just saying, "Doaa, I can't survive anymore." And people were drowning all around her. And when she was rescued after four days and four nights in the water, she had two little babies on her chest who were not her own. One had been entrusted to her by a grandfather who had said, "I just lost 27 members of my family. Please take this child, my grandchild. I will not survive." And another mother who gave her little two-and-a-half-year-old daughter because she was drowning. And one of those babies pulled through. Doaa was rescued and so did Doaa. And both of them have been resettled to Sweden and they've restarted their lives there, thanks to a UNHCR programme. This became people in the audience when I told it on the TED stage were silent and crying. And I realised... and they all came up to me afterwards and said, "Why?" And they were asking all these questions about the war in Syria, the refugee situation, and why people were suffering so much. What compelled them to take those boats. The notorious smuggler business. What are solutions for refugee problems? And I said, "Yes, it's obvious this is the formula." And then I turned it into a book and the book has done very well. It's translated in all kinds of languages and there's a young readers' edition that's being used for teaching in schools here in the US, and...

It's been optioned for a Hollywood movie, hasn't it? Steven Spielberg and JJ Abrams.

Which is very exciting. Yes.

Well, it's going to popularise the story yet further, and imprint it on the minds of many more people, which I imagine is something you would hugely welcome.

Yes. You know, I think it will bring a different perspective to people on the Syrian war, why people flee, the Muslim faith. Even Doaa is a very faithful young Muslim girl, woman.

Are you still in touch with her?

Oh, yes. Very close. Very close in touch with her. We talk a lot, and she's also consulting for the movie. So hoping very much that it actually gets made.

But it's interesting, isn't it? Because when we were talking about the 70 million displaced people, I managed to rattle that off very, very easily. But then when you speak very powerfully and so compellingly about Doaa, one person, I'm incredibly moved by that. That does prove your point, that you've got to

personalise it because that's a real... you can't fail to be moved by that, that poor woman.

But the thing is, is if I told the story of one of the refugees who drowned, I don't think it would have resonated as much. So it's again, there has to be some hope so that people can just don't feel like, "Oh." Of course I told within Doaa's story is the tragedy of losing her fiancé, of all the people who drowned around, her of losing little Malak – finally after they had been rescued, she died on the ship that rescued them all. And all of this is just devastating and tragic, but at least there's some happy news and hopeful news at the end that allows people to also just feel a little bit of optimism, a little bit of, "Okay, there are things that we can do." So yes, it's storytelling that in a way, it's kind of like most Hollywood narratives are. There's an individual who faces a serious, evil conflict, a horror, and manages to overcome, perhaps has some help along the way, and then emerges somehow resilient with a message.

How helpful is it for the involvement of celebrities such as Angelina Jolie in raising awareness of the UN's work for refugees? I personally think it's very effective in many ways because you get all that extra attention. But some people are quite cynical of celebrities' involvement. Do you get a backlash?

Well, as long as it's not the only way that we're reaching out to people. We've always used celebrities I think very, very effectively. If you're very aware of who their fan base is, these are often people we will never reach. Never. So with Angelina Jolie, she devoted her humanitarian side to UNHCR and the refugee cause for well over 10 years...

Well, she clearly genuinely cares. That's beyond doubt.

She genuinely cares. And she comes back, and you know, maybe people click because it's the photograph of her. But then they see her with a refugee child in her arms, or speaking to a refugee family. And that sends a secondary message. "Well, if Angelina thinks that refugees are okay, then I can think that too." So it's extremely helpful in that way. And we had a number of celebrity supporters who have incredible numbers of fans. But also, for example, we have two Goodwill ambassadors at UNHCR who are writers, very popular writers, like Khalid Hosseini, the author of The Kite Runner. He has a completely different audience than Angelina Jolie would. So his work tends to involve writing about what he's witnessed and seen, and introducing that to his audiences. And that's extremely helpful. Neil Gaiman, the writer, is also a supporter of UNHCR and refugees and he does remarkable, stirring work. You know, after he's visited a refugee situation, and he comes back and he publishes. And obviously they can publish in any place they want. So I think it is enormously helpful. It's not the only tool that we need to use, but it's enormously helpful to extend our reach and to move people.

Another criticism that you get, which again I don't agree with, but some people in some quarters are saying that they're "white saviours". Is that helpful to people who are trying to help the world's poorest? It seems to me to be an unfair criticism. But how do you deal with that?

Yes. I've been also accused of being a white saviour.

But you can't help the fact that you're white, and that you're working in trying to make the world a better place.

Exactly. I feel a complete sympathy with whatever colour of the person is suffering. And yes, we're all doing our best to help.

Just seems especially churlish, because who in their right mind would want to help people and then decline to do so on the basis of their ethnicity or race?

I don't know a single humanitarian who would. No. I think it's sometimes the pictures that go out with a white person, they assume that this means that the white person thinks that they're so much better. I don't know. But frankly we haven't gotten it very much. I think it's not a huge issue, and we just... with the advent of social media, of course we get much more criticism. The criticism that disturbs me the most is from the haters. And it's just... it's really shocking sometimes.

It is. I get it sometimes.

You do too?

Yes.

Mostly on Twitter, yes.

And it's interesting because it is a bit of a, well, it's a huge cesspit in many ways. And what fascinates me, and I've asked this endlessly is, were people always horrible, but because you have to meet face to face you went along with the social niceties. Or is it that Twitter has brought out the horribleness of some people, or they weren't like that, because you actually you see female celebrities and politicians routinely threatened with murder and death and rape, and quite horrendous things. That is just unconscionable.

I know. Sometimes I think crowds bring out the worst in people, or can. So if somebody has a hateful thought, generally they'll keep it to themselves. But if they feel that they have others who are thinking the same hateful thoughts, then they feel like they have a community, and it gives them a bit of protection and licence, I think. So I think that's one of the problems with social media is people don't feel isolated in their hatred.

Is life harder than ever at the UN, in a sense? Because geopolitically it seems to me – I'm making a very broad analysis here, of course – but it seems to be that we're actually stepping back in some ways. You know, we've got president Trump who's clearly hostile to multinational institutions working together. We've got Brexit and Boris Johnson, our prime minister elected on a Brexit platform. You look at Turkey, a country that I hugely admire their people with a horrible president. It just seems to me that there's the rise of these kind of "strong" men leaders, and we seem to be electing them.

Well, at the UN we try to work with everybody.

Of course.

It has definitely become more difficult. The Security Council is much more divided than ever before. We're seeing though the rise of lots of small countries and groups saying that actually, we believe in multilateralism. We believe in global cooperation. We want the UN to work. The UN is important for us. We don't want to be isolated and to stand alone. So while some big countries might be moving away, others are filling the void. So it's an interesting time. Some could say it might be one of the most challenging times in the world, with all of the concerns that we face, you know, with climate change, maybe on cybersecurity, all kinds of, you know... but there's some hope that countries are taking these issues seriously. Their citizens are starting to rise up and tell them that it's important.

You have alluded there to the sheer... I was going to say almost lawlessness, the amount of stuff that's happening in the world at the moment. Do you have any stability in your day-to-day, week-to-week job, or are you at the mercy of events as they happen? What is a typical day and a typical week for you? Or is there literally no such thing?

Well, the good thing is that I'm not the spokesperson for the organisation. I've been in that role and I've done... And that is when it's a really unpredictable function, because you're driven so much by outside events and needing to respond to the media. So my colleagues are dealing with the day-to-day with the media. So yes, I think I have a kind of hybrid role where I am working on the strategy, I'm managing, I'm receiving ambassadors and diplomats, I'm going to, and moderating, events. In a way, sometimes I end the week and I think, "Oh, what did I do?"

I think that every week.

"What did I accomplish this week?" So yes, I think it's just the beginning. I've been at this job for two months and...

Wow.

Yes. I'm really trying to work with the team mostly on developing a global strategy so that we can be really effective at communicating, not just information, but as I said, capturing people's imagination with content that gets people to care.

It's difficult. I plan my day at the beginning, early morning when I get up and I always try to set three things I want to achieve. And for me, most days I struggle to get onto the front foot, because it's usually two or three o'clock in the afternoon by the time I finished reacting to things before I can then start to do the things I intended to start at nine o'clock that morning. And maybe it's just poor management on my side.

I remember the days before emails. Yes.

I know.

I know.

And Slack momentarily solved the problem, but even that's gone bananas now. You know, we have hundreds of channels in the company. And yes, everyone seems to just be reacting to everything. And I suppose that's a communications challenge for you as well because I prefer reading articles now in Entrepreneur magazine where it says right at the beginning, "This is a four minute read."

Right.

And if it weren't for that, I wouldn't read it because I think, "Oh, that would be ten minutes." And not only have I not got time, but I also, sadly, don't have the attention span anymore.

I know. Well, I still like a long read, I have to say. And I try to build that in. Of course, it's frustrating when I see how much there is that I would like to read and I'm not able to. But I find podcasts really help me, because when I'm doing things in the morning I can listen to, well either I'd listened to NPR on the radio so I can still do other things and be informed, or I very proactively listened to the Newshour podcast on the BBC. But when I run, I listen to podcasts that kind of fill me in. And some of them are very long-form interviews, like this one.

Yes. I hope Media Masters is your favourite podcast, but I won't ask whether it is or not because I'd be frightened that the answer's no.

It's one of them.

That was very kind. You lie very benevolently, very well. Thank you.

It's true.

Do you find that a lot of people are interested in your role, because it is so all-encompassing. It is such a huge amount of responsibility.

I have to get better at describing what I do. But the role is really to lead communications for the United Nations and to inspire the best kind of storytelling about what the United Nations does and what it stands for. So how do you do that? Yes.

But with the greatest of respect to whoever's in charge of communications for say, the Kellogg's cereal company or BASF, or IBM or whatever, I'm sure they're very important jobs and they're very dedicated, but yours is an order of magnitude in terms of importance. We're trying to bring about global peace here and quell global suffering.

Well, I'm trying to use communications strategically to help realise these goals. First of all, to communicate that there is a problem. Like there is a terrible war in Yemen for example, and there's suffering on a human scale beyond belief. How can people access that through storytelling? How are we going to get to such a remote place and the imaginations of people? And then what do we want them to do? So yes, these are issues of war and peace, of the survival of our planet. But also stories of incredible ingenuity, of innovation, of mediation, of humanity, human kindness that I think we also need to be told to demonstrate that we are actually, while in many places we're going backwards, in some areas we're moving forwards in others. And these kinds of stories of solutions also have a ripple effect. Actually, there is a new line of journalism that I'm hoping to adopt. It's called 'solutions journalism'. Have you heard of that?

I have not. And therefore I assume some of our listeners at least might not have heard of it either. Would you like to tell us?

Yes. It's two New York Times journalists, David Bornstein and Tina Rosenberg, who actually were just starting to think they were all we're doing is uncovering the problems. And they were frustrated and thinking, is there a way that we could still be credible, not do advocacy or fluff, but do a kind of journalism, or create a new formula where journalism is actually helping to resolve problems. And they've found...

Above and beyond solely raising awareness.

Right. So it's called... If you go to solutionsjournalism.org you can read about it. They've started actually kind of like an academy. They've trained thousands of journalists. They are around the world too, not just in the U.S. And there are a lot of newspapers and television stations that are actually adopting this approach. It is having an effect. And they're proving it is. So in Denmark, a similar approach was started several years ago and it's called 'constructive journalism'. And they've even surveyed readers and viewers and listeners of the pieces that have gone out and have found that people feel after they're reading them, they feel, while they do feel informed, they feel much more hopeful, more optimistic, more willing to become involved themselves. And so this is a new line of journalism. If you look in a lot of newspaper pages, for example the Guardian, they have a whole section that is devoted to, it's not really positive news, but it's news of things that are working.

It's non-terrible news.

It's upside, I think, non-terrible upside, and there's The Optimist in another newspaper, there's Inspired Life in the Washington Post.

In The Week magazine, one of their columns is headlined, 'It wasn't all bad'.

It wasn't all bad.

There's like three NIBs, three little news in brief things that say the good things that's happened in the world.

Fantastic. The BBC has a programme called My Perfect Country where they go around to countries where, you know, aspects, like the prison system in Norway, which is a model for the world. So it's interesting. This is coming because of demand, too. It's not just that the journalists and the news organisations feel we need to do more stories about solutions and things that have been resolved and positive. It's actually audience driven.

I've mentioned this anecdote a couple of times, but in my former hometown of York in the North of England, I used to serve on the local city council, I did six years there. And when we first got elected, the editor of the local newspaper, of the Yorkshire Evening Press was a guy called Kevin Booth, a very nice man who you really wanted the best for the city and was a really good journalist and a really good editor. He gave us a brief that said, "We will never splash on 'local council does good job' because it's human nature." He said, "I have to have a viable business that sells newspapers, and local council makes another mistake and messes up again, unfortunately it's going to sell newspapers. So it's not that I'm against you and want to see you fail, but you have to acknowledge that the negative stories are always going to be more prominent than any successes." And he was saying that that's the facet of human nature, as evidenced by the newsstand sales. If he puts a negative story on page one, it's going to sell more peppers. Can you blame him?

It's true. But then how do you explain this latest study that more and more people are actually avoiding the news entirely? I have some friends here, it's a couple, Michael Rosenblum and Lisa Landon, and they've actually... they teach video. They've trained print journalists all over the world, and radio journalists at the BBC, the Guardian, to use their iPhone to... but anyway, their work, I think it was with Verizon on a number of TV stations around the US, and there are no fires, no weather, no traffic, none of that usual local news. Instead, they're doing only storytelling, and following the story over time. So for example, they had a homeless family, and that reporter who was doing the story spent overnight with the family, followed for days, then they come back week after week. And it's becoming a model that is being replicated across the US, because people are fed up with this traditional bad news, bad news, bad news, bad news.

And before this role with the UN, you worked with the International Atomic Energy Agency during its inspection working in Iraq, Iran, and North Korea. How do you navigate those kind of incredibly sensitive environments, if we would call it that?

Oh, my. Well, first of all, that was a tough job because I was the chief spokesperson of the IAEA. And so I was having to communicate on – and this was when the entire press attention was on us, because we were the inspectors in Iraq in the lead up to the Iraq war. And we were basically making the determination of whether Iraq had restarted its nuclear weapons program. So they were interested in every detail. At the same time Iran was under scrutiny about its nuclear weapons programme, North Korea had kicked out the inspectors and had started its nuclear uranium enrichment. And so I come in there as a spokesperson, and I have zero technical background, or certainly no nuclear background. But in the end, it turned out to be kind of an asset

because I was like a translator. I had to go and really get briefed and really get through my head. I'd usually forget it after five minutes, but no...

You'd already communicated it, so just as well.

But at least know a bit more than the journalists. Exactly.

You don't want your brain to leak, do you? Fluid coming out the ear.

But at least it was comprehensible, because when the nuclear scientists were speaking, nobody would understand them, and plus they were so reluctant to speak. And we needed to be out there. We needed to be communicating. These were matters of war and peace. There was a lot of manipulation among those with interest. And so we needed to be the neutral voice out there and saying, "There is no evidence of a nuclear weapons programme in Iraq." And it didn't really work. But I remember I was coming on US networks at the time and causing a lot of waves, because I was basically contradicting the Bush administration who was saying that there was a weapons programme.

I'm a supporter of Tony Blair, but it was inevitable at the time. Even Tony's basically said that.

They've also said that they were wrong. So in the end because we communicated actually on the findings that you probably would have only found if you really scrutinised resolutions, we really made a point of being out there in the media and communicating this. Yes, the drumbeat of war was louder.

It's interesting though, because I remember at the time that when Saddam kicked out the weapons inspectors, I saw that as evidence of that he clearly must be guilty and have it. Whereas of course, he kicked them out because he wanted to give that impression. Whereas he actually didn't have them. So in a sense, he was doing Bush's work for him.

But we were back in at that time. So that was a few years before, and of course that raised a lot of suspicion. And of course the accusation was that he had both nuclear and chemical, and chemical was much harder to prove the non-existence of. With nuclear...

We gassed the Kurds, of course.

Well, that's... yes. With nuclear we knew all the sites and it's very complicated to build a nuclear weapons programme. You need so many components.

I tried recently and I failed beyond mainly Googling it.

The work you're doing is much more suited to you, I'd say. Yes.

Indeed. Have you ever... I say this with slight trepidation, but have you ever fancied an easy job? Because these seem to be the most incredibly globally impactful jobs. Do you ever just want to kick back and flip burgers for a couple of years? Because these are almost borderline existential conflicting priorities of geopolitics. Your head must spin.

Yes. It's very compelling though.

I can imagine. Is it addictive?

In a way. Yes. When you work for a cause and the greater good, it just really, it fuels you. It keeps you going. It can also frustrate you, because you always feel like you never doing enough. But I do find it compelling. I have dreamt of life on a Greek Island.

There's still time.

There is still time!

If you could hurry up bringing about global peace, then I'd be happy to stump up some money on gofundme.com and we could let you have a little island, and you could enjoy your retirement.

I don't need the island, just a little stone house with my husband and my kids being able to visit and yes, but that's for the future. And this work is so compelling. It's so important, and it just feels inspiring to wake up in the morning and know that you're making some contribution to the greater good.

What's your relationship like with all the stakeholders in this ecosphere, as it were? Like what's your relationship like with David Miliband's International Rescue Committee? Are you friends? Are you friendly rivals? Because you guys are the UN. You eclipse everything. You're so big or is it that you have to pull together a coalition of everyone who can be part of the solution.

No, absolutely. And you know, David Miliband's organisation, IRC, does fantastic work and works with UNHCR in many places in 'the field', as we call it. There's no way the UN can solve the problems of the world alone. It needs the other great organisation, which we call NGOs, you know, charities out there who are associated the UN and work in partnership. And we need we need governments, we need individuals, we need civil society. So, you know, the UN is of course doing, depending on where we are, much of the work, but also...

Much of the heavy lifting.

Much of the heavy lifting, especially in places that are dangerous. I remember at UNHCR we had this, this model, like we were the first to come and the last to leave. And you know, you see some refugee situations where the average time a refugee will be an exile is like 20 years.

It's just unthinkable.

And you know, you'll see three generations of refugees sitting there in this in limbo because the war hasn't stopped. And this UNHCR colleagues sticking with them, being by their side the whole time, trying to raise money for them, trying to make sure there are schools, and there's some hope.

I was getting a burrito for lunch today and the guy in front of me was complaining because someone to put too much sauce on his taco and he was very dreadfully upset.

How annoying.

I know. It just makes you think just how futile it is given the depth of despair that's going on in the world.

It's true. But of course sometimes I used to feel that I'd be coming out of a war zone and I'd go back home. I was living in Vienna, in Austria, which is such a beautiful city.

Indeed.

And I would be walking through the town and seeing all these people's gossiping unperturbed, or you know, children running in a park. And I'd be saying, "Oh, my god. You know, I just saw these children who were in basements, and that's where they had to live, and even do their class work and they only had one change of clothes and their ribs were sticking out because they were so hungry." And then I started to think, "You know what, we should aspire to those scenes that I was seeing in Vienna." No one should have to live like that. Everybody should have the chance to feel that their child is running through a park and there's no danger, and that I can sit in the café, and there's not going to be a bomb falling on me. So actually the guy with the burrito and worried about the hot sauce, let him worry about his hot sauce.

Couple of final questions. And you worked on the transition team for the new UN Secretary-General António Guterres in 2017. Is it a huge change over like the coronation of a king or a new president. How does it actually work?

It was funny because we were a team of like... we started out and we were only about six people.

Incredible.

I know and it grew a little bit, but it was a very lean team.

I want to be secretary general of the UN now.

He has a much bigger team then, but it was exciting. It was trying to learn a lot. You know, what is he going into and what does he want to adopt, what does he want to improve? So it was exciting. I thought it was leading to, this was a two and a half

years ago, to me joining the team. But then I got sick. So during that time I was diagnosed with breast cancer, and I went through the toughest times in my life.

I can imagine. I'm sorry to hear that.

You know, I'm fine. So I learned a lot. And it was also about the value of my own life.

And incredibly stressful for your family. I had a relative who went through breast cancer recently, of course it was a huge stress for her but also for us as the wider family who cared about her, and she was worried about us as well.

That's the thing. You know, you're worried about yourself but you're also worried about the people who are worried about you. And I know that in particular my husband, who was doing so much for me, and my kids, who were just of course when they heard... all they knew, they knew cancer from Hollywood, and there are people when you get cancer you die. So I was often having to be the strong one and provide assurances. But you know, it gives you a lot of perspective because when you have a life threatening disease, you start thinking about what's really important, who is important, and you start to prioritise more the things in your life and value. And what it comes down to, it's interesting because it's a parallel. I probably wasn't recognising it myself. You know, it was when refugees flee and they lose everything... the only thing important to them are their loved ones, and that's basically, you know, stripped of everything, you don't think about material goods, but you do think about the human beings who are the most important to you.

I read a book, Clayton Christensen's book recently, and he was talking about the differentiation between material values that you think you're judged on, like your salary and how many cars you have and what model it is and so on, and what he calls 'funeral values' about no one says at someone's funeral, "Oh, he had three cars." And they say, "He was an honourable man. He cared for his family. He was always on time. He enjoyed working in the community." That people never talk about the things that people dwell on, you know, the things that they think are important.

Is that what it's called? Funeral values.

Funeral values versus value versus material values. No one would say, "Oh, he had a big house with eight bedrooms."

Exactly.

Who cares? They'd say, "He loved his family very much and he was dedicated to them."

Yes. Or, "He did good things for other people." Yes. I think it's really important to have that perspective. It really is. And if you can choose a profession where you're also doing something that helps others and if you can't choose that profession, if you could just do something that helps others, I always say that even if you just do one thing once a week to help somebody who's in need, or you know, donating is also

really helpful. But sometimes even that human contact, because you learn a lot, too. So it makes a difference. One little thing, or one action to mitigate climate change, one change of lifestyle. We're all part of the human family and I think we feel better if we're doing things for others.

The problem that you have as a communicator when you tackle an existential threat to humanity itself like climate change, is although it's a huge threat to humanity itself, it doesn't create news stories on a daily basis that can be run in a paper. You know, obviously there's climate and weather events and so on, but it doesn't fit into a daily news agenda. And I wonder how we can deal with that as a communicator. Because you know, I acknowledge in one side of my brain that climate change is a huge threat to us, but another side of my brain is just consumed about what I'm doing today and this week and my diary and short-term commitments that don't necessarily mean anything.

That's right. It's interesting. I think the New York Times has decided, I think they were thinking the same thing, and they decided to devote much more resource and journalistic talent towards covering climate change. And so they, you'll see a lot more stories in the New York Times and they have a newsletter that's just about climate coming out. So you're seeing, I think more and more news organisations covering it proactively and not just waiting until the flood happens or the fires burn. But for us, we try to work around milestones that are important, like releases of seminal reports that will put new perspective and new gauges into what's happening in the world, the latest scientific discovery, and rally around that and find different angles that we can look at. So less daily news, but you know, every couple of months, come up with something big that we can really push out to generate attention.

You know, this sounds almost fawning, but you know, of the multitude, the litany of things that you've done that you can be incredibly proud of, what's the one thing you've done in your career that you are most proud of?

I think the book that I wrote, *A Hope More Powerful Than the Sea*.

The TED talk had millions of views. That was incredible.

It's true, but that really was amazing in the way it reached people. But also it really helped me in my own public speaking capabilities. A TED talk really makes you focus on...

I wouldn't know, but I'm guessing.

Oh, no, it's such a fantastic exercise in learning the most effective way to deliver a speech. So, yes, I've organised TED events too, and even trained refugees to be TED speakers. So I'm a big fan of the formula, but a book has something lasting that is it was really daunting. I thought I would... I'm good at tweets and, you know, maybe a speech, but I really didn't think I was up to writing a book.

Are you up to writing other books?

You know, I really enjoyed it, and I enjoyed that I can keep telling the story, that it doesn't just go away. And so yes, I would be if I had some more time. Yes. Time is an issue.

Melissa, it's been an honour and a privilege, and an incredibly interesting conversation. Thank you for your time.

Thank you so much for having me, Paul.