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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 down the line by Lorraine Heggessey. Educated at Durham University and initially starting in newspaper journalism, she began her TV career joining the BBC in 1979 as a news trainee. After five years, she left for a stint in the commercial sector, working on ITV's This Week and various programs for Channel 4. She returned to the BBC in 1993, working in the science department, editing QED and executive producing Animal Hospital and The Human Body. In 1997, she became head of children's BBC, memorably firing Blue Peter presenter, Richard Bacon, for taking cocaine. In 2000 Lorraine was appointed the first female controller of BBC One, commissioning Strictly Come Dancing and bringing back Dr. Who. In 2005 she left the Beeb and was appointed Chief Executive of Talkback Thames, responsible for over 800 hours of tele a year, including The X Factor and Britain's Got Talent. In 2017 she left the broadcast world and became Chief Executive of The Royal Foundation, the charity for the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge and Prince Harry. She moved on two years later when the Sussex's set up their own charitable initiative. Today she works as a media consultant, public speaker, advisor to Channel 4's Growth Fund, and is also chair of the Grierson Trust, which helps young people from diverse backgrounds get into documentary making. Lorraine, thank you for joining me.

It's a pleasure to be here, Paul.

So how has lockdown been for you?

Actually, it's not been too bad for me. I'm lucky enough, I guess, I suppose in one way, I'm relieved I'm not running anything anymore, because I think for people running things, there've been so many decisions to make in very quick succession without having a clear view of what the future holds. And that has been very difficult, so I haven't had that pressure on me. My daughters are grown up so I don't have the worries about they're just leaving university and trying to find a job or they're taking A Levels or anything like that. And I live in a house with a lovely garden, so we've all been healthy. So I feel pretty lucky. The best thing I did was to buy one of those Peloton exercise bikes just as lockdown started. So I've become completely fanatical

about that. And now I'm fitter than I've ever been because I do Peloton every day. I do yoga when I can and I go for a walk with my husband every day. So, I've actually benefited from it, weirdly

Aren't those Peloton bikes basically a normal bike with an iPod and an extra sort of three grand added onto the price tag?
Not three grand, but yeah, they've got a screen attached, but they are really cleverly done, you feel like you're actually in a studio cycling class when you're doing it. And you can either do live classes or you can do them on demand. It's quite a clever model.

It is because it's quite a miserable affair if you're just sort of sitting in a room on your own biking, just a bit of music, isn't it? I imagine there's a sense of camaraderie and so on?

There is a real sense of community, the instructors are very motivating. You can pick the kind of music you like. So if hip hop was your thing or 1980's music or whatever, you could just choose whatever you want, and there will be a class that suits you. And I'm not doing a commercial for them.

I was going to say. I actually, that was my fault. This interview has been poorly directed so far because I got side-tracked by Peloton.

Can we go back to the start of your career? Did you always want to be a high powered media executive? What did you actually want to be when you went to university? And what did you envisage doing ultimately?

Well, when I first went to university, because I was studying English and my dad didn't really want me to study English, I said, "Oh, don't worry, I'll do a law conversion course afterwards and I'll become a lawyer." But when I was at university, I got involved in student journalism and was working on the paper, which interesting enough George Alagiah was the editor of, and that made me decide I wanted to be a journalist and ideally to be a journalist in TV, preferably making current affairs programs. But when I applied to the BBC and when I was at university, I got rejected without even an interview. And I think it's important for people to remember that in those days there was only the BBC and ITV. There was no multichannel world, there were no independent production companies. The BBC had two channels, BBC One and BBC Two, and ITV had ITV. And that was it, so there were relatively few ways in.

So that must've been earth shatteringly depressing at that point? There was your one big ticket to the start of your career and they turned you down. Why did they do that? That seems incredibly short-sighted of them, retrospectively.

Well, it was very competitive then as now, and I guess for whatever reason, I didn't fit the bill. I was very irritated because I didn't even get an interview, but I applied to lots of local newspaper groups as well and eventually some months after I left university, I got accepted by Westminster Press onto their graduate trainee scheme. And I went to work on the Acton Gazette as a junior reporter.

Did you enjoy your time there?

I loved it. Yeah, it was great. I mean, it's quite nice working on a local paper and getting to know the patch and you learn a lot of skills. I used to have to go to the police station twice a week and to the fire station and cover whatever major incidents they'd covered. And then on the other hand, you do things like the school crossing man, the lollipop man's retiring. And because you're catering to the local community, you have to make sure that you get all your facts right. And learning to write to a deadline, all those things were very useful. And the following year I reapplied to the BBC and I also used to do hospital radio, because I guess I wanted to show how enthusiastic I was about broadcasting. And the following year I got accepted onto the news trainee course. And I'd had to go onto this journalism training course at Harlow Tech. You used to have to do what was called the NCTJ training course then, the National Council for the Training of Journalists. And also once you'd done six months on the local paper, you signed indentures, which would have committed me for another two years. And as it happened, I got the offer from the BBC one week before I had to sign my indentures, and one week before the end of my course at Harlow Tech. So I thought my editor would be delighted and I rushed down to London to tell him, and he uttered the memorable words, "You will never work for the Acton Gazette again."

Was he right?

He was right, I never did

Oh well, it was their loss. So you finally got on the first rung of the ladder of the BBC, what came next?

Well, you do two years of training. A lot of it was on the job training and it was at the time when Newsnight was just about to start, they were about to launch it. And in those days, news and current affairs were very separate at the BBC. And this was a joint venture between the news department and the current affairs department. So it was seen as quite forward thinking and controversial in some ways. So I got an attachment onto Newsnight and I ended up staying there for about two years and in a variety of capacities. I had to apply for a job there, which I got. And then, because I had applied for a news job and I really wanted to work in current affairs, I then had to apply for a current affairs job. These are the kind of wonderful ways in which big organizations work, but I was actually doing the same thing. And then the founding editor of Newsnight, George Carey had moved to become the editor of Panorama. And he asked for me to go and work on Panorama. So, I suddenly realized in my mid-twenties, I had my dream job, which was to be making major current affairs programs. And I had lots of adventures. The Falklands War had just happened. I got to go to the Falklands War and we were the first current affairs crew to be allowed into, and I went filming secretly behind the Iron Curtain when there was a divide or even more of a divide than there is now between East and West. And Richard Lindley, a reporter on Panorama, and I, went undercover posing as an engaged couple on an interest package holiday to Moscow and Leningrad and did a film about the way that Jews were being persecuted.

Wow. I mean, they're obviously incredibly serious top people until you said what it was about. I had sort of connotations in my mind's eye of it being some

kind of screwball comedy movie type thing, pretending to be a married couple. How did you do that then? Just literally just go around together? Did it work?

It did work, we got away with it, thank goodness. Because otherwise we would have been sent so the Gulag. I mean, it was quite interesting because when I was doing the research for this program, I met a group of women who were based in Hampstead. I think they were called the 35's and they were the ones who said I really should go to the Soviet Union, as it was then called, and get interviews with women whose sons and husbands had been sent to the Gulag just for practicing their religion. And they said to me, "Whatever you do, do not go alone because it's quite likely that the KGB will come to your room in the middle of the night and you might get arrested." And they recommended that I went with a man. And I went to the editor of Panorama and I said, "Well, this is what they said." And he just looked at me and went, "Well, take your pick." And I chose Richard Lindley because I thought he was definitely going to be honourable and that I wouldn't have any issues. So Richard and I then went to Laura Ashley where I bought a night dress that looked like something out of The Railway Children. It was very demure, it went literally up to under my chin and right down to below my feet, so that my modesty would be protected at all times, even though we were having to share a bedroom.

Yes, it's addictive that kind of daring do or did he find it stressful? I mean, I suppose it was obviously stressful, but was it stressful in a good way that you wanted to do to more of that type of work? Or was it when you got back to safety, were you thinking, "I'm glad that's all over." ?

I'm an optimist so I think I just assumed to be able to get away with it. It was stressful because by day we were tourists and by night we would sneak out of the hotel and crunch through the snow. We'd have to use public transport because if we used a taxi, they might have tracked us, so we would use public transport and we'd have to find our way to these apartments on the outskirts of Moscow or Leningrad, as it was then called, now called St. Petersburg. So that was scary, because you were always seeing the net curtains twitching and wondering whether anybody was onto us. And there was in each lift lobby in these massive hotels, a woman would be sitting down and she would write down every time you went in and every time you came out, so you knew that you were being clocked. But I felt that Richard was very experienced and he had done those kind of things before, and I guess I felt safe with him and I also felt a bit invincible. But going through customs on the way out when we were going to get on the plane, that was the most nerve wracking moment in case, you know, if they had tracked us, they then confiscated all our tapes. But luckily they hadn't, they hadn't cottoned on to us.

And at this point, did you want your future to be that of an investigative journalist then?

Yeah, I mean, I think I did like the adrenaline. I wasn't addicted to it in the way I've seen some war reporters sort of get a bit addicted to danger. It wasn't like that for me, I think I always wanted to kind of protect myself. But I took maybe calculated risks that I thought I could get away with.

What came next?

I left the BBC and went to work on This Week, which was ITV's current affairs program. And Roger Bolton who used to be at the BBC and the former editor of Panorama, was trying to reinvent This Week. So that seemed like a good opportunity. Yeah, it was similar kind of work, making programs that uncovered what was happening in British society or globally.

And is that something that you always wanted to do at that stage? Did you see yourself involved in the production of television journalism in a sense, because I'm tempted as to why you then ultimately joined the dark side and became an executive, which has plenty of questions to discuss there. But, how did that happen in terms of your career? Did it happened in the increments? Were you offered a big opportunity to turn to management? How did it work?

Well, I loved program making and unlike many of my contemporaries I've resisted climbing up the career ladder because I wanted to stay very close to production. And I went freelance precisely because that would give me that opportunity, because it would be up to me to choose what I was going to do. And obviously I had to make sure that I got work, but I would be able to work as a producer or a series producer on a range of documentaries, current affairs, all sorts of things. And then after I had my first child, I suppose I thought rather than being on the road all the time, I'd rather take an editorial job, because at least I would get home at the end of the evening. And I took a job as Deputy Editor on a program called Hard News that used to take the press to task really, for publishing false stories. So it was investigative, it was made on a shoe string for Channel 4, so although I was based in London, I was working horrendous hours. I didn't get to see my baby a huge amount, but it was good. And that started me really on the editorial route, working as either a program editor or an executive producer. And then I decided that I don't want to go any further than that, I'm still close enough to program making. Directly I'm going into the cutting room, I'm effectively commissioning things. And I ended up in the science department at the BBC as an executive producer. We launched Animal Hospital and I also got a role as editor of QED. And I was exec producing a major landmark series with Lord Robert Winston, which was on The Human Body. So it was a fascinating portfolio of work, and I loved it in the science department. I didn't really know much about science, but I knew how to tell stories in an accessible way. And there were plenty of people in that department who did know about science, so I could always make sure that the scientific aspects of the story stood up to scrutiny, I suppose. And after I'd been there for a couple of years, I guess I got itchy feet and was actually going to leave the BBC again and go and work for Mentorn, which is an independent production company, as their head of factual. And the BBC tried to dissuade me from leaving and said, "Well, how about becoming a head of department?" I was like, "No way do I want to be a head of department, I love program making." And you know, going to this indie, even though it's a kind of head off job, you're still very close to the process. Whereas in the BBC, the head of departments involved a lot of their jobs, as far as I could see at that stage, involved a lot of management and didn't look very attractive. So I'd resigned, I'd even had my leaving party and I got a call out of the blue from the then chief executive of BBC production, Ron Neil, and he said, "How about becoming head of the children's department?" I was like, "Children's? I have no experience whatsoever in making children's programs." And he said, "Well, that doesn't matter, you've got expertise in making programs. You've got expertise in

leadership. We're looking for somebody to revitalize the department and I think you would be a good person for that job." And for some reason, it just immediately appealed to me. I had young children, short of me taking over Hamley's, it was probably the next best job that I could have. And it was a challenge to do something completely different. So, I didn't leave the BBC, I had to tell Mentorn that I wasn't going to join them, which was quite a difficult conversation, particularly because, again, it was George Carey who'd been my first editor on Newsnight and giving me chances, given me the chance again to join Panorama. I'd worked for him subsequently at his independent production company, and then he offered me this job. And George told me in nice letter, but sort of saying basically he thought I was making a big mistake. And then he said, "But you'll probably prove me wrong," which I feel shows the kind of man he is really. He's a very, very nice man. And I guess I did prove him wrong.

What did the job involve?

Well, obviously running the children's department. It's a multi-genre department and it's a bit like having a channel in microcosm because you do every genre, you do drama, you do comedy, you do entertainment. I mean, Live and Kicking was on the air in those days, a big live Saturday morning entertainment show. You have Blue Peter, which is your magazine show so your One Show equivalent. You have Newsround, which is your own news bulletin. So it's a very wide ranging job. And in those days we had preschool as well within the department and Teletubbies had just come on the air, which was a huge sensation. And I discovered much to my amazement, I loved running a department. It was about 300 people and I think you can get to know 300 people. They were all passionate about serving that young audience. And it was just a lot of fun. And because it was a bit of a change management job because they were trying to, I guess, unleash creativity from the department and they wanted me to encourage the development and launch of new titles. It was just a great job and a great opportunity. And I think for me, it became, in lots of ways, the springboard to me going to BBC One, because it was that multi-genre experience. It meant I had a bit of experience of drama and comedy, which I wouldn't have had without doing that. And it showed that I could motivate and lead a large group of creative people.

I mean, you were the first female controller of BBC One. Did that weigh heavily on you when you were appointed? Because I mean, it's described as the toughest job in broadcasting anywhere, or did you feel that you just wanted to bring your own set of sensibilities? What was top of your to do list when you got in post?

Well, Greg Dyke was Director General, then and Mark Thompson was Director of Television and they wanted BBC One to be revitalized. It had been under-invested in the past. So the BBC had put a lot of money into preparing for the digital future, which was very prescient of them. They set up websites, they had a couple of new channels, I think it was called BBC Choice and BBC Knowledge, but they took money away from BBC One and BBC One is like the shop window of the BBC. And if you don't get BBC One right satisfaction levels overall with the BBC fall. So it is disproportionately important and my job was to turn it round. Multichannel was just starting to emerge in the UK to really take root and starting to gather audiences. So I

was tasked with stopping that decline. So it was quite a challenge. And I didn't really have time to think about the fact that I was the first woman. It meant that I got a lot more scrutiny in the press and a lot more attention, which could be a bit of a burden at times, but that goes with the territory and I found it the most exhilarating, wonderful, fascinating job. I had a fantastic team. I had great support from both Mark Thompson and Greg Dyke to get on and do the job. A great group of commissioners that I was working with, all of whom had fantastic expertise in their genre and it was just a brilliant, exhilarating, roller coaster ride.

Did you ever raise one of those mini signs that said cut the crap or were they apocryphal? Were they something that everyone said was done under Greg's Director Generalship or were they real?

I don't remember seeing a sign, but there was just a general attitude of cut the crap. And you know there could be a lot of crap at the BBC. There could be a lot of wading through treacle done by people who, with the best of intentions, but when I was editor of a program called Biteback, which was made by an independent production company, but it was a right to reply program for the BBC. We had a name for those people and we used to call them the program prevention department. And sometimes when you're at the BBC, it can feel like the program prevention department is very large. But part of your job as a creative leader is to bust through all that and make things happen. And Greg really embraced that spirit of, this is a great place to work and it is a great place to work. Let's make it a fabulous place to work. Let's enjoy ourselves, let's make wonderful programs, let's celebrate those programs. So it was a very positive time.

I mean, so many successes there under your tenure, the biggest gamble must have surely been bringing back Dr Who. People always said it was a cult Sci-Fi show, that it just had its day.

I think the biggest gamble was launching Strictly Come Dancing actually. Dr Who was a risk, but at least it was a bit more of a known quantity. Strictly Come Dancing I can tell you the idea of putting ballroom dancing at prime time on a Saturday night was not a no brainer. And Jane Lush, who was the Commissioner for Entertainment and I both believed in it, but we did have quite a lot of opposition, quite a lot of questioning of that decision, quite rightly. And you never know whether something like that is going to be a success or not. You never really know whether any program is going to be a success or not. I mean, you can believe it's going to be, so it was a big gamble, but it was something that was completely different. We had to revitalize Saturday nights, we had to reinvent Saturday nights, ITV had first of all, Pop Idol and then later X Factor and they were hoovering up the audience. BBC One had one game show after another, all of which were perfectly okay in their own right but once you had three or four of them stacked, they lost their impact. So, we had to do something different and we knew we wanted it to be live. We knew we wanted it to be entertaining. Ideally we wanted an audience vote. We wanted glamor and we knew it couldn't be singing. So we sent out this brief and Jane Lush came into my office one day with her deputy, Fenia Vardanis and they said, "We've got the idea for you Lorraine." And I said, "Well, what is it?" And they said, "Pro Celebrity Come Dancing." And I, just from that title, I could understand what it was. And I just went, "I love it." And it was as simple as that. And from then on, we decided we were going to

do it. I had a big battle over the title because BBC One was always getting accused of dumbing down, which is something that I refute, strongly. But if we had the word celebrity in the title, it would have been a real hostage to fortune. And the team kept saying to me, "Lorraine, but it is what it says on the tin, it is Pro Celebrity Come Dancing, professionals dancing with celebrities." I said, "I know that, but we need a different title." And they did that thing that people do when they don't really want to do what you're asking them to do. So they kept sending me titles that were so preposterous I couldn't possibly pick them. And I kept digging my heels in and saying, "We're still not going to have Pro Celebrity Come Dancing." And I don't even know who came up with the idea, but somebody merged Strictly Ballroom, which had been a cult movie success with Come Dancing and came up with Strictly Come Dancing. And that was the title. And who knows, if it hadn't been, maybe history would have been different.

Is it existentially stressful though, to commission a show like that? Because like you said, you don't actually know whether it's going to succeed or not. I mean, it could easily, all of the best, the bravest decisions could also have been turned out to have been a humiliating failure, could they not?

Absolutely, and it is stressful and it's particularly stressful because you do it in public view. So most people have a job which nobody who they meet knows whether they are any good at or not. If you work as a lawyer-

I've been using that to my advantage for 25 years.

You can go to a dinner party and you can sit next to somebody and they will not have an opinion on how well you do your job. When you run BBC One, everyone, you meet has an opinion of how well you do your job, whether they'd like this program or that program, whether it's on at the right time, whether you should have commissioned it or shouldn't have commissioned it. How funny or not funny the comedy is and they tell you. And because BBC is paid for by the public, you have a duty to listen and a responsibility to listen and to take those points seriously. But I can tell you when you're trying to relax on a Saturday night or something, the last thing you want is something bending your ear about a commissioning decision you've made. And when we went on holiday, I used to say to my husband and children, "Please, do not tell anybody that I run BBC One." And the interesting thing is that as a woman, people often don't ask you what you do. So we'd meet other families and they'd ask my husband what he did and they'd chat but if I didn't volunteer what I did, nobody would actually ask me because they would just assume maybe that I was a housewife. Obviously I was permanently on the phone to the office.

Did you have a fake job so that if anyone ever asked you what you did, you could say I'm a geography teacher or something.

I probably should have done that. I hadn't really thought about that. I mean, there was one year when I was Head of Children's, we got on the plane to go on holiday. It was the autumn half term and it was the day after I'd sacked Richard Bacon and on every single seat on the plane was a copy of the Daily Express. And it had Richard's photograph on the front with the word sacked and my daughter started going, "Mummy, mummy," and I said, "Shh, do not say a word." And it was touch and go

sometimes about whether I would be able to keep my cover, but I did manage to, usually.

Do you ever get sick of that clip that they always inevitably show about you when it's your onscreen opponents explaining Blue Peter sacking Richard Bacon, I've seen it about a million times myself.

I know, and when I was controller of BBC One, Have I Got News For You used to contrive to get it into the show about once a series.

I remember that.

I mean I'd like to think I would do the broadcast better now, I did sound a bit like the Queen and I looked very wooden, but I still think it was the right decision to do that broadcast because my job and duty as Head of Children's was to explain to children in words that they could understand what had happened. And the persona on screen of Blue Peter presenters was that we were all friends, but actually they were all friends and it wasn't one of them that took the decision. So somebody else had to explain it.

But that must have been a very difficult thing to do anyway. I mean, I agree that I thought your decision was the correct one, but it's still tough to sack someone in those circumstances, is it not?

It's very tough, but it was particularly tough because Richard was a very talented broadcaster and we saw a bright future for him, but unequivocally we had to send the message to children that it's not a good idea to take cocaine. And the News of the World had the story. Richard had actually been introduced by a friend of his. So he had had a night out with a friend. He had taken cocaine, the friend subsequently rang him and was like, "Didn't we have an amazing time. Wasn't the Coke, fantastic, blah, blah, blah." And he recorded the conversation and he sold that conversation to the News of the World.

Disgusting.

It was terrible.

It's very disreputable behaviour. I mean, at the end of the day, what he does in his own private life is up to him. I thought the whole thing was a tawdry affair and I felt very sorry for him. I think it was unfortunate that it came to light, but I don't think that you had any other choice, really.

I didn't have any choice. And Richard recognized that I didn't have any choice. I mean, his father was a police officer. Richard used to go and talk to school children about the perils of taking drugs and being a Blue Peter presenter is a huge privilege and you get to pretty much do anything you want to do. You want to jump out of the plane and sky dive, you can do that. You want to scuba dive, you can do that. You know, it's a young person's dream that job, but there are certain responsibilities that go with it in terms of the behaviour that you can have on or off screen and Richard crossed the line. And sadly, that had to be that for him at that stage.

I thought you made some excellent decisions as Controller of BBC One, but one of the things I remember from your time there is that there did tend to be a lot of sexist grumbling. You were always mentioned as the female controller of BBC One. Why do you think it's taken the BBC so long to deal with equality in terms of pay and opportunities for women or is it a wider societal thing? Has the BBC been held up as an exemplar, perhaps unfairly because society itself is sexist.

It pains me really the gender pay gap controversy at the BBC because the BBC has actually done a huge amount to advance the careers of women in the media. And when I joined in the dark ages in 1979, as a news trainee, that was part of them making a positive effort to get more women into the BBC. So before that the news training course had been almost exclusively male and almost exclusively Oxbridge. And they changed that. And the year that I got in, there were five women and three men. And it took a long time, obviously for us to come through the system to get into the senior jobs. It takes about 20 years, but myself and Jana Bennett, who was a news trainee with me, she became Director of TV and I became Controller of BBC One. And I never felt at the BBC that being a woman held me back, if anything, quite the opposite, I was often being offered opportunities, I didn't even want such as, why don't you start applying to be a Head of Department? When I didn't want to be a Head of Department. So, on the one hand, they've done all this work to advance women and then on the other, they had obviously not looked at pay parity, which was a major oversight. And they knew that they were going to have to reveal the salaries of everybody. And they must've known that women were being underpaid and they didn't address it. And they had time to address it. And yes, it is a reflection of what happens in wider society. We now know that across the board women are underpaid and they don't get the same money for doing the same job. And it's being addressed and organizations are having to report on the gender pay gap. So there's two issues really, one is the gender pay gap and the other is equal pay for equal work. They're not quite the same thing. I mean, the gender pay gap tends to be when you look at all the women in an organization and you compare the average salary for all the women, with the average salary for all the men and the average salary for all the women is often much lower. And that's because women tend not to be in the more senior roles where they would earn more money or all the senior roles are still dominated by men. But those issues need addressing as does diversity in its broadest sense as does the advancement of people from all ethnic minorities and all socio-economic backgrounds as well. Because if you work in a mass medium, which is supposed to appeal to a mass audience, you need to reflect the society that you are broadcasting to. And you are only going to get all those multiple perspectives if you have a truly diverse workforce.

It's also agonizingly subjective, isn't it? When it comes to whether one program's the same as another. I remember when Samira Ahmed took the BBC to the tribunal and it was revealed she got 450 quid for 15 minute Newswatch. Whereas Jeremy Vine got three grand for Points of View, which was also 15 minutes. I mean, that to me seems unfair, but I also have to acknowledge that Points of View is a mainstream BBC One show. But it seemed to me that the reality of that is that Jeremy was perhaps slightly overpaid with the greatest of respect to him and Samira was definitely underpaid. I can see it from both

sides, but it's ridiculous and unedifying that she had to take the BBC to a tribunal.

Yes. I mean, there's your premier league footballers aren't there and then there are the ones, actually I'm not very good at footballing analogies, but anyway, whoever plays in the lower leagues and they don't all get paid the same, even though they're all footballers, and even footballers within the same team don't all get paid the same. I think with on screen talent, because they have their fees negotiated by agents, and agents also have a responsibility here, because they tend to represent men as well as women, so they must know when the men are getting paid more than the women, a lot of it is about what your agent can negotiate for you. The higher your profile the more you tend to get paid. But things have maybe got out of control and out of kilter. It'd be interesting to know actually what Anne Robinson got paid before Jeremy vine, because she was also a very well paid presenter and she used to present Points of View, so maybe it went with the program. I don't know.

In preparing for this chat, I was remembering some of the things that I could recall myself from your tenure as controller of BBC One. I remember there have been controversies over programs being moved. For example, you moved the news from nine o'clock to ten. I mean, it was a huge furore at the time because it was described as opportunistic. I know you were making space for dramas like Spooks and so forth. Even the controversy over moving Panorama. Do you remember all that?

Oh yes. I mean, pretty much everything I did was seen as controversial. The move of the news from nine to ten was a hugely significant structural move for the channel. We had our news at nine, just when every other channel was starting their main program of the night. On the whole, people don't choose what they're going to watch by which news they want to watch, they choose which drama or documentary or whatever else. So the money that we were investing in primetime drama was, to some extent, being wasted because our drama started at half past nine when people were halfway through watching a program on another channel. We'd never been able to move our news to ten because ITV had their news at ten, and it was known as The News at Ten. It was an iconic program and there were the bongs and everybody knew about it, the bongs of Big Ben that started off that bulletin. Anyway, ITV decided they wanted to extend prime time so they moved their News at Ten, they moved it to half past ten some nights, to eleven o'clock others, so much so that it became known as the news at when.

I remember that.

Greg Dyke was determined that BBC One should become a very strong channel and, ideally, beat ITV in the ratings. He and Mark, and the board of governors, myself, everybody was involved in the decision to move the news from nine to ten. But we knew we had to do it quickly, and in that sense it was opportunistic, because if anybody got wind of the fact that we were doing it, then ITV probably would have moved their news back to ten and we wouldn't have been able to move our news to compete against their news, so we had to take advantage of that vacated slot. We actually did it in three weeks, which is incredibly fast for a decision like that, and presented me with all sorts of logistical problems, because when we started our

programs at nine thirty, off the back of the news, they were of varying durations, and most of them were 50 minutes. But when we were going to start them at nine o'clock, to fill the gap between nine o'clock and the news starting at ten, I had an hour to fill. So for a long time I had 50 minute programs that needed to fill an hour long slot. We had to come up with all sorts of ideas. We started cutting down Alistair McGowan's big impressions into 10 minute segments. We did all sorts of other things, comedy outtakes, to fill the gap. We asked dramas that were still in production, "Could you shoot a bit more?" And we had to find other ingenious ways around it. When you talk about necessity being the mother of invention, one of the programs that was in production at that time was Blue Planet. The producers of that show used to come and see me from time to time, I guess, to whet my appetite and excite me about what was coming up, and would tell me about how the camera man had had to sit on the beach in South Africa for, effectively, three years to get the shot of the blue whale's tail coming up out of the ocean. Then he'd finally got what we would call the money shot, this sensational image. One day I said to them, "Do you record any of the behind the scenes footage?" And they said, "Oh yeah, yeah, we do that for the DVD extras."

It's always the best bit.

So I said, "Could you possibly add 10 minutes onto the end of each program and make it into a making of which would then give me the hour I needed?" And they said, "Yeah, of course." From that day on ‘making ofs’ became a fixture at the end of every natural history program. As you just said, for lots of people, those are the best bits and enhance the viewer's enjoyment of it. So that was just one of the things that came out of our decision to move the news.

How long were you controller of BBC One for? What came next?

I was controller for five years, which was longer than anybody had done it since the sixties.

Long time.

I think it just shows how much I loved it really. And I would happily have stayed, but I got offered the chance to become the chief executive of Talkback Thames. Up until that stage, nobody from outside an independent production company had ever gone to run one, they were run by the people who had set them up. Talkback had been bought by Fremantle and merged with Thames TV. Peter Fincham, who had set up Talkback, was running the combined entity, but he had decided that he'd done that for a long time and he wanted to change what he was doing with his life, have a bit of a break and think about what next. So I was approached about that and I thought, "Look, I would love to stay doing BBC One for another year, but being realistic, I'm probably not going to get to do it for much longer than a year. And an opportunity like this won't come up again so I've just got to take this opportunity." Talkback Thames was a fantastic production company, at that stage they had X-Factor, they'd launched The Apprentice, they made QI and Grand Designs. So lots of great programs. And again multi-run , which is what I suppose I'd got used to and what I loved. So yeah, I went there and I ran Talkback for five years.

What was that like then sitting in the chief executives chair, having to consider absolutely everything? Legal, HR, hiring and firing your team of people reporting to you, but also the profitability, the balance sheet, profit and loss, staying ahead of your competition. How was it different in terms of the rhythm of the day to day job running BBC One?

Well, it was a steep learning curve because I'd not run a commercial company before. My association with commercial companies had been working as a freelance producer, which is very, very different. But I like steep learning curves and I like challenges and I think I'm one of those people who's always got to be a little bit outside her comfort zone, just about keeping my head above water with the water occasionally going up above my nose. So I enjoyed that side of it. I remember saying to somebody when they said, "Well, what's the difference between being at the BBC and here?" And I said, "Well, at the BBC, I got to spend money and here I've got to make money." It's not really rocket science, you have to bring in more than you spend. You have to make sure that you keep the margins on your production so that your company is profitable. I suppose you're much less supported in the independent sector. When you work for a broadcaster you've got research departments, you've got strategy, you've got marketing, you've got everything, all sorts of different expertise at your fingertips. In the independent sector, in those days certainly, even at the bigger indies, and Talkback was a big indie at that time, you didn't have all those resources, so you had to do everything yourself really. But again, it was fantastic. I mean, we were Simon Cowell's production partner and it was at the time that we developed Britain's Got Talent. Simon had had this idea that we had to bring, British television was ready to bring the talent show back, and nobody had really reinvented it for a long time. He was great at that, just having this view of what would appeal to the British public and then supersizing it. With his team, our entertainment team developed Britain's Got Talent and we took it to ITV and persuaded them to commission a pilot. And when I say persuaded them, it did take quite a lot of persuasion, and in the end we had to co-fund it. I had to put our profitable money into the pilot, we funded it half and half. It was one of the best pilots I've ever sat through, I mean, it was absolutely hilarious. We had one guy come on whose act was to balance a cement mixer on his head, which was just hysterically funny. I just thought, "Well, where else on British TV would you see this kind of eccentricity and this weird and wonderful act." But ITV turned it down and none of us could believe it. Even though Simon Cowell was one of their biggest stars, he couldn't persuade them to take it. But we didn't give up. We kept on at them and eventually they did commission it. Then the BBC had developed their own talent show and they rushed it out, with Graham Norton hosting it, and it was a flop. So ITV then tried to cancel our commission and we managed to talk them out of it, well, Simon managed to just about talk them out of it. But he said that if, at the end of our first week of recordings, we felt it wasn't going to work, we would then cancel it. I was thinking, "Please, don't say that." Anyway, at the end of the first week, Simon rang the controller of ITV and said, "You know what? It's going to be a hit." And he was so right. It did become one of the biggest hits on British television, and indeed globally, because the format sold all around the world.

That five years at Talkback Thames must have been incredibly enjoyable. As you've said, working with some iconic brands, like the X-Factor, Britain's Got Talent and so on. Were there any other highlights?

Yes. It was really enjoyable. I love launching new shows, or being involved in the launch of new shows, and the development of new shows. One of the things we launched was Take Me Out, which was a new dating show and it became a big hit for ITV, but it was hugely difficult to sell. I think by the time we eventually got it onto ITV, we'd done run throughs for BBC Three, and possibly a pilot for BBC Three. We'd done run throughs and a pilot for Channel 4, who didn't want it. Almost as a last resort we thought, "Oh, well, we'll just see whether ITV would be interested in it." And they loved it and put it on the air and that became a hit as well, and Paddy McGuinness was a fantastic host. At the time, Channel 4 felt that... Because we thought coming up with Paddy McGuinness as a host was a great idea, and would make it very Channel 4, and Channel 4 were like, "Well, we don't really see him as a host of an entertainment show." Whereas ITV said, "Oh, it's great to have some new talent presenting an entertainment show." So you do have to be incredibly persistent, and I think back your instincts and back the talent that you believe in, and the program makers that you believe in, and the ideas that you believe in. And, in a way, just never give up, because I've just given you the story of two big hits, both Britain's Got Talent and Take Me Out, that very nearly didn't get on the air at all.

You must look back at that time though with some pride for all that you've achieved.

Yes, I suppose so. I mean, in television, it's never about what you achieve, it's really all about what your team achieves. I've been lucky enough to work with some of the most talented people in the industry, and to have the support of a lot of very talented teams. So, for me, it's always been about that team effort. Nobody can do it on their own, even if they think they can, they are not doing it on their own.

After that then had you got fed up of telly and you thought, "Right, that's it now. What's next?"

Yes, I suppose I thought, "What's the next challenge for me?" The thing I'd never done was set up my own company so I decided that I'd like to set up my own production company. That took me about two years to get it off the ground but eventually I did set up Boom Pictures. I got private equity backing and we bought a production company that was based in Cardiff, a Welsh production company called Boomerang Plus, and used that as the launch pad to build a much bigger company that became Boom Pictures. I did that for a couple of years. It didn't quite end the way, for me, that I thought it would end, and I ended up leaving somewhat abruptly, but the company eventually sold to ITV and I got a good financial result from it so it was all right in the end.

Tell us how the Royal Foundation came calling then. I mean, that must've been a very different challenge from the TV world.

It was totally bizarre. I just got this call out of the blue one day from a head-hunter who said to me, "Lorraine, this is a totally left of field idea for you. But the Royal Foundation is looking for somebody different. They don't want somebody with a charity background. They want a chief executive who's going to bring a different approach and we just thought of you." And so my first question is, "Well, what's the

Royal Foundation?" Because I don't think it was particularly well known at that time. So they explained that it was the charity for the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge and Prince Harry, and I agreed to throw my hat into the ring because I thought, "Well, it's the chance to make a difference with people who really can make a difference. And it's also the chance for me, at the age of 60, to do something completely different." But of course, there was an extensive recruitment process. I think it was probably one of the most elaborate recruitment processes I've ever had in my life, where I was interviewed by a total of 17 people, and my final interview was with their Royal Highnesses in Kensington Palace. And I thought, "Well, you know what, if nothing else I will have something to tell my grandchildren, if I'm lucky enough to ever have any."

What was that like? If you're allowed to say.

It was just totally surreal. I mean, they were very nice and they did their best to put me at my ease. I knew they were seeing me and one other candidate. But I also thought there is no point me pretending to be anything I'm not. So either I am right for this job and they will like me for what I am and what I bring to the table or they won't. And if I'm not right for the job, then I shouldn't be doing it. I was quite relaxed, if a little bit overawed by being in their presence, because I'd never met any of them before.

How did you feel when you heard that you got the job? What happened next?

I think I was amazed and delighted. So yeah, it was fantastic.

Having the future King of England on speed dial on your mobile phone. That must be pretty exciting.

You don't quite get him on speed dial. You get his private secretary on speed dial.

Oh, so you couldn't just ring him up and say, "Your Royal Highness I need you to sign this off", or, "Could you respond to that email?" So there is an element, still, of formality then, presumably?

There's an element of formality. I mean, I could email them directly, but I would always copy in the private secretaries because their lives are quite complicated and they have a lot of commitments so it's just easier to do that. They would sometimes ring me, but I wouldn't ring them.

What was top of your to-do list then, when you were in the post?

Well, it was really about professionalizing the foundation, which had grown from nothing, as a start-up, and because it served all three of them, covered a really wide range of issues. Everything from conservation to working with veterans, and they were just building up to Heads Together and the launch of all their mental health work. So it was just getting some structure in place. In start-ups, everybody tends to multitask and multi skill, and as you get bigger and you have more to do, you need to get a bit more structure in place. You need to get people who are more expert at doing one thing. So it was professionalizing it. It was coming up with, I guess, a

vision and a strategy for it, and starting to raise its public profile.

You must have been impressed though with the energy, the commitment that the young Royals have shown in raising profiles of issues like mental health. They seem quite down to earth and media savvy, really.

I was so impressed by them, by their passion and commitment to make a difference, to tackle really difficult social problems. Whether that's mental health, to go to areas that other people were afraid to go into and to take a long-term view, to realize that what they really wanted to do was bring about systemic change and that would take a long time. And if you're trying to de-stigmatize something like mental health and make it okay to say, make it okay for people to talk about their mental health, to not feel that they have to suffer in silence. That's going to take time to change a stigma that's been building up for decades. And to be prepared to talk openly about their own mental health issues. When Prince Harry spoke about how losing his mother at a young age had severely affected him, and he'd never really dealt with the grief. The Duke of Cambridge, Prince William spoke about the impact of being an air ambulance pilot, and seeing so many suicides and terrible accidents. And the Duchess of Cambridge talked about how difficult it could be to be a new mother. And that was a new way of seeing the Royal family and of them opening up and had the most tremendous impact in ways, the ripple effect from it was enormous. And so I think they therefore have to be very careful about how they use that impact. They're very aware of that. And so they need somebody used to say, we have to build strong platforms for them to stand on. So we had to make sure that everything was very well researched and that everybody we were dealing with was very reputable. Then Their Royal Highnesses were able to get out and do what they do so well. And they're all able to connect brilliantly with ordinary members of the public. They have a real empathy and a real down to earthiness that is amazing when you witness it up close and first-hand, which I was privileged to be able to do. And also I think it's totally authentic. They genuinely care about all the issues that they're involved in. And it was the Royal Foundation prior to my time there, that incubated the Invictus Games, and you look at what a huge thing that has become for disabled veterans globally and how it's helped to change the perception of the way we view disability. And the same with the mental health work and the work that the Duchess of Cambridge is doing now on early years, and trying to say, the way we treat babies really from conception through their very early years is going to disproportionately affect the way, their life chances, the way their happiness is for the rest of their life. And we need to focus on supporting parents and babies and young children through those years, because anything that we invest in that will be repaid several times over.

I mean, I'm a reluctant Republican. I would prefer we had an elected head of state, but I think one of the biggest contradictions to that argument and the challenges is that our Royal family do such a great job. I mean, there are huge advantages to having a Royal family knowing that the Queen and the Dukes are above party politics. That the problem that you have with someone like Taylor Swift is everyone encourages her to get involved in politics for years, and she stays out of it. And the minute she says, well, this way, she alienates half of her audience that say, how dare you tell me what to think and so on. And I think one of the things that works very well with the Royal family is, I'm sure they've got their own private opinions, but I'm quite pleased that I don't know what

they are because at the end of the day, they represent the best in all of us. And they're not about sort of grubby political disputes that might even be forgotten about a few years later.

I mean, what I would say as well is that they are probably the only people who can take a really long-term view because they know they are going to be there for decades. Politicians are prey to the next electoral cycle. If they're lucky, they might be there five years, they might be less. As we see it, there's constant...

Reminds me of the Robin Day interview. Do you remember that where he says, here today, gone tomorrow minister. The minster, I forget his name, he gets his microphone off his tie. He throws it down and walks out, doesn't he?

So we're here today, gone tomorrow, politician, CEOs come and go. If they're lucky, they might last five years, but rarely do they last longer than that. Whereas the Royal family and that generation of the Royal family that I worked with, thinks in terms of decades so they can plan. They can think about the change that they want to bring about and that they want to see, and they can commit to things for the long term. And that's a very unique thing in the modern world and a very valuable thing that we only have because we have that family.

I mean, for a period of many years, you have the so-called Fab Four jointly fronting the Foundation, Meghan of course how their background in charity work which they used to profile very effectively to advance.

Yes, yes. We did the Grenfell Tower cookbook from the women of the Hubb Community Kitchen with the Duchess of Sussex, and she brought great energy and passion to that. It was her idea and it helped that group of women, it helped that kitchen become a sustainable entity, which is still going. And again, she had a passionate commitment to bringing about social change and to helping those who were less fortunate than herself.

And you left after the Foundation became the exclusive focus for the Cambridge's work. Did you think that was the right time that it was a big change and that someone else should take over at that point?

Absolutely. I felt that I'd done the job of building it. I'd put in place all the transition plans to enable the Duke and Duchess of Sussex to go their way and the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge to continue with the Royal Foundation. And it felt like the end of a cycle and therefore absolutely the right time to move on.

And then just as you became available, the BBC are looking for a new director-general. I mean, I would have gone into Ladbrokes and put a hundred quid on you. I think you'd have been a fantastic director-general. You still may well be. Were you not tempted to apply, if you don't mind me asking?

No. It's totally not my kind of job. It was not ever my ambition. It's a hugely demanding and challenging job. It's quite a political job.

It's almost a thankless job, isn't it?

And I think I'm better when I'm closer to the creative process, that's what I like. So, I'd rather run the creative bit than the whole thing. And I think Tim Davie will do a fantastic job and you've got to have the appetite to take on all those fights, and I'm not at my best in a highly politicized environment. I mean, one of the things is I tend not to spot danger to myself and I tend to take everybody at face value, and you can't do that when you're director-general of the BBC.

You've got our political antenna, haven't you? It's almost a thankless job, isn't it? It's a bit like Home Secretary that no one cares about the job until someone escapes from prison or the police are too heavy-handed with someone. You're just there to take a kicking really, aren't you?

It's a hard job to do well, and you are constantly subject to public scrutiny. But again, I think everybody in those jobs is trying to do their best, and the BBC is at a critical juncture now. The on-demand world is here and how the organization changes to accommodate that further. The money that it has is getting less. Its competitors have like Netflix and Amazon, they have more than ever. So how you position yourself is really important. And I think what the COVID crisis has shown is how central the BBC still is to the lives of people in Britain. What an incredibly valuable role it plays. So I'm hoping that that will keep some of the politicians, who let's face it, were gunning for the BBC a few months ago. I'm hoping that that will keep them at bay.

So tell our listeners what you're up to now. Would you describe yourself as having a portfolio career?

Yes. I do have a portfolio career. I have fun. I have a bit more time in my life, so I'm a passionate skier. And my main thing is I like to be able to go skiing during those months of the year when there's snow, so I've got a lot of flexible work, which means that I can fit that in. So I'm the advisor to Channel Four's Growth Fund, which I've been doing for about five years. I continued doing it while I was at the Royal Foundation. It's not a full time job. It's a certain number of days a month. And I help Channel Four assess the creative potential of companies that they're thinking of investing in, and when they do invest in those production companies, I'm then available to help and support the companies themselves. So you get to work with a wide range of people. It's all about building, so I am really a build person. I am not a slash and burn person. I'm the person who likes to energize and drive things forward. So I've worked with a range of very talented chief executives and love the work and fascinated by what they're doing with their companies and get great pleasure out of seeing them thrive.

Any unfulfilled ambitions? What's next for you?

One of the things I was going to be doing had the pandemic not struck was to be building my public speaking career. I like motivational speaking. I speak on a range of topics from leadership to change management, managing talent, but obviously people aren't having big corporate events at the moment or even dinners. So that's on pause for the moment. And I've got plans to write a book, but I'm just thinking about the positioning of that and what exactly I want it to say. So I've had a bit of time

to think about that. I chair the Grierson Trust, which is a charity that champions the art of the documentary. We have our big awards every year, known as the BAFTAs or the Oscars of the documentary world. So I'm busy viewing some of this year's entries. This year, I'm chairing the science category. And we also run an outreach program that helps young people from a range of diverse backgrounds, take their first steps into the field of documentary making. So I've just been helping to recruit this year's doc lab cohort, and I mentor various people, including doc lab trainees.

Last question, then. What advice would you give to someone starting out on their media career now in terms of things they ought to pay particular attention to, or things that they shouldn't be worrying about? Do you have a kind of killer piece of advice when someone asks you for secrets of success?

I think the most important thing is not to give up. If a career in media is what you really want, persist. Persistence pays off. There are so many different ways in, so find your way in one way or another, and then work your way over to what you want to do. But if you're really passionate about it as well, you just consume media day and night. You watch TV day and night. You're completely up to date with everything. So some people say they want to work in media, but when you scratch below the surface, do they really? Do they really know what that means? And I would also say that it can be the most amazingly fulfilling and enjoyable career. My view is that we should all be doing things we love all the time, because we spend so much of our time at work and life is too short not to be enjoying it. So if you love it, do it. If you don't love it, get out of it.

Lorraine, that was an absolutely hugely interesting conversation. Thank you ever so much for your time.

Thank you. It's been a pleasure to talk to you, Paul.