



## **Ian Burrell**

### **Media Journalist**

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**Welcome to Media Masters, a series of one to one interviews with people at the top of the media game. Today I'm joined by the journalist Ian Burrell, former media editor of The Independent. Ian began his career at the Birmingham Post and Mail before joining the investigative journalism team at The Sunday Times. He then moved to the Independent, where he worked his way up to become media editor. He remained there for 20 years, and is now a columnist at i and The Drum, and the ghost-writer of the best selling autobiography of the DJ David Rodigan.**

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

An absolute pleasure. Thank you, Paul.

**Ian, you've been one of the go-to media journalists for as long as I can remember, for as long as I've been in this game, 25 years. What do you see your role as being now?**

Well, I'm a media writer and a consultant as well outside of the journalism. My main two columns that I write, one is for the i paper, the other one is for The Drum. So it's a nice mix. The i paper column is right across the media spectrum, The Drum one is specifically on the news business. The funding of the future of journalism is a subject which all journalists are fascinated by, and hopefully all consumers of news too.

**We're fascinated by it, and we're going to talk about it for an hour! That's why we've got you on here. I think it's fascinating. Let's just go through your career though, before we get into the meat and bones of your analysis of the current situation and where the media's headed. Did you always want to be a media journalist?**

I didn't, no. In fact I didn't really know what a journalist was when I started out, I had a bit of an inauspicious start I suppose. There was an auntie of mine thought that

being a journalist would be something suited to me, and she worked as a secretary at a further education college where I had a course and I applied for a place on that course, didn't get it. But she happened to know that I was third reserve on the list and if I hung on in there for a year and temped in various sort of dead end jobs for 12 months I would get a place, and I decided to do that. And from there I got into the local newspapers, which was a great grounding, one that many other people have had that have gone on to work in the national press.

**And how ambitious were you at this point? Did you think you were going to kind of turn over a prime minister in the future, a kind of Woodward and Bernstein-esque levels of intrigue?**

Well, I did start out with more of a sort of an investigative journalism interest, and it still does fascinate me even though I'm a media commentator. I think it's the most important end of journalism. It's where the really big stories get broken. And I'm very considerate as to how that is going to pan out. How we are going to be able to fund that expensive and difficult form of journalism. And I did go towards that end when I was working in local papers on the Birmingham Post and Mail, that was the thing that I did try to do. And subsequently I did that on the Sunday Times, I went there and worked on the Insight team further on in my career, which is obviously the pinnacle in investigative journalism, particularly at that period in the 1980s and 90s.

**Heidi sat in that very chair of course, she was on the Insight team for many years and now runs BuzzFeed's investigative team. So at that point did you think investigative journalism was the career path?**

Yes. I still think it's a very good thing for young journalists to aspire to. It's easier said than done, and there's not many news outlets – BuzzFeed News you mentioned is a very good exception – who were prepared to put in the resources and give the backing, give people the time, to do the work that's necessary. But I think for an aspiration it's something that all young journalists and media studies students that are interested in going into journalism should aim for.

**How did you end up at the Independent?**

That was a very long story! I went up from college for some work experience. First of all I went to the Coventry Telegraph, where I had a sort of baptism of fire, that was a fantastic newsroom at that time, but they put me on a story... it wasn't exactly Watergate. It was it was out covering the opening of a local housing estate for the free weekly paper. And when I got up there, it turned out the housing estate was being overrun by frogs, and the photographer who I was with was really experienced, and he noticed this and took a few pictures. I didn't really capture the significance of what was happening, so I came back with various quotes about this new housing estate and the Coventry Telegraph editor decided that the pictures were something it

was going to splash the paper on. So I was in complete panic mode and had to get on the phone getting all these quotes about frogs, but that was a kind of baptism of fire for me that really helped me when I went on to do my next placement which was at the Birmingham Post and Mail. I got to the Birmingham Post and Mail, and this was a place where I really felt at home. It was a massive aircraft hangar of a newsroom. I think it was the biggest news in the whole of the UK at the time, and it was a real pulsating, big city newspaper, multi edition, you hit deadlines from the first thing in the morning and consistently through the day, it was a really exciting place to be. And during my time there they gave me a great opportunity, which was to look into the subject of crack cocaine and its existence in Birmingham and the West Midlands, and that was my real gateway to getting into the national press because...

**I thought you were going to say it was your real gateway to crack cocaine! I thought this is going to take an interesting turn...**

(Laughs) I knew you were going to say that! But I did actually sit around a number of people who were using it at the time...

**And then you left the newsroom and went to see the dealer? Yeah, etc etc...**

Well, it did give me the opportunity to go to the United States to cover the effects that the drug was having there, it had really taken off, and seeing mothers who had given birth to babies with addictions, visiting young mothers in units who had addictions themselves. It was a pretty sort of distressing picture, but one that hadn't really taken off in the UK, it was it was just starting to get a hold. Ironically, the Independent at the time took a very hostile view of predictions by American police that it was going to become a big problem in the UK, and they took a very different editorial line to the Birmingham Mail that I was working on, which was quite ironic in the fact that I ended up working there for many, many years much later on. But I was able to show that in Birmingham, there were there were significant early problems with people using it, people finding themselves in prostitution because they'd acquired addictions, and as a result of that I won the UK Press Gazette Regional Reporter of the Year Award of the back of that journalism, and that that helped me to get to London Weekend Television where I went to work for the Six O'Clock Live programme, which was presented by Danny Baker. It was a fantastic London magazine programme. Danny Baker and Frank Bough.

**Wow, Frank Bough – what a legend.**

Yes, he was the king of magazine TV, really. And those two in combination...

**I used to watch Breakfast Time with him and Selena Scott was there, wasn't she, and Nick Ross, and Francis did the weather, didn't he?**

Yes. Well, this was slightly after Frank's fall, he got into a bit of a pickle with the tabloid press, and this was him coming back from that. Danny Baker was totally in his element, such a brilliant London character, fabulous presenter. That was a great experience. London Weekend then was the place, the ITV Television Centre as it is now, I mean, it was the place of Saturday night TV with Cilla Black and Jeremy Beadle, and that kind of ethos of entertainment. It was everywhere; it was even in the current affairs department. So we did news with a twist. It was always kind of entertainment driven, if you like.

**Did you like the move to telly? Did you feel that your background as a press journalist had helped?**

I found it really interesting, and it's been really helpful subsequently for me to know about the production process, and know how television gets made, and to understand the culture from within. Ultimately, I was happier in newspapers. I like to write. I preferred compiling stories through written medium, but it was extremely useful for me. I mean, I partly took the job because there was such an incredible interview process. I ended up coming down from Birmingham to London for three interviews by train. They'd advertised for this one position in the Media Guardian, which was everything in those days, and they had 1,000 applicants for the job, so I felt after this three or four months process of being interviewed for it, when they offered it to me I thought, well, I had to take it anyway.

**That's your obligation.**

Yes, I felt that I really had to. But luckily for me, I kept in touch with the Sunday Times, which I'd done some shifting on, I was shifting on the Times and The Sunday Times. In fact, when I was shifting on the Times, I was almost a bit reckless because I was working on the seven o'clock in the morning shift at the Birmingham Post and Mail, finishing at three o'clock, jumping in the car to drive down to London on the M1, starting at five o'clock in the Times newsroom at Wapping, finishing about one o'clock in the morning, jumping back in the car, driving back up to Birmingham, getting about three hours' sleep and getting back in for the early shift.

**It's amazing you didn't fall asleep at the wheel.**

Yes, I needed that once or twice. Looking back, it was probably pretty stupid.

**Burnt out.**

Yes, but it was the way that you got into Fleet Street. You had to kind of show...

**You were a grafter.**

... your dedication. You know, those graveyard shifts were that way you go in – if you didn't take those, you didn't get asked again. But I'd also done a few shifts at the Sunday Times and got to know the Insight team.

**Who was running the Insight team then?**

It was Nick Rufford and David Leppard, who were known as the two doctors because they both had PhDs, and they worked as a team, and I think it's pretty fair to say they were quite difficult to work with.

**That's been said.**

A few other people had tried and failed, and I managed to get on. They're both brilliant journalists, and it was an extraordinary place to work. It was slightly strange because we were tucked away in the corner of the Sunday Times newsroom. I was basically... you felt almost as if you were handcuffed to the radiator. You know, you didn't get out. You didn't really talk to the rest of the newsroom, even your own colleagues, because everything we did was so super secret, and there was a little bit of a paranoia about the people that you were investigating getting to hear that you were on their case.

**That would have ruined everything.**

Well, it would have done, it would have been months' work potentially down the drain. So we'd work away for weeks and weeks and weeks into these investigations, into things like the Iraqi supergun, Saddam's supergun, how we put that together through British engineering companies like Matrix Churchill, and how the UK government gave a nod and a wink to that.

**Wow. I remember all that. It was really big.**

It was. We did the BA dirty tricks campaign against Richard Branson and Virgin, and uncovered the whole network of private eyes that they'd used to basically try to undermine the reputation of Virgin, which was the young upstart that was causing BA so many problems at the time. And we did a lot of work on Tory party funding, which was even more of a murky area than it is now, party political funding. Very little was known about where the money was coming from, and we were able to make some early inroads into that. A lot of money was coming in from overseas and it helped, I think, to clean up that system.

**Sunlight is the best disinfectant.**

(Laughs) Yes!

**It's unthinkable now, isn't it, that you could take money from random foreigners that don't have to be registered and all of this. I mean, there's a general election on now, I donated to a friend of mine who's standing for the Labour Party in the northwest, and of course, the party had to check that I was on the electoral roll, as is proper, and I am glad that they are doing that. But back then, you just do whatever you like.**

Yes. Well, when you think about what we're learning about recent elections, particularly the US election that's just gone, and how Facebook was so important as the main media platform where that was fought out, and the amount of money that the Republican Party in particular but both of the parties put into those campaigns, you know, money is everything and knowing where it comes from is so important. And if we're if we're to keep our system as clean as possible, we need to know where the money's coming from. And subsequently, some of that work led I think to some of the brilliant insight investigations that came after my time there through brilliant people like Jonathan Calvert, who's still there now looking into cash for questions and the willingness of MPs to make themselves available for hire, and we've had brilliant work done by various other media outlets in television and newspapers subsequently, which I think have kept our politicians in line up to a degree.

**I mean, look at Malcolm Rifkind and Jack Straw when Channel 4 did that undercover sting. What idiots! After everything that had gone on, how on earth did they fall for it? Men of their seniority! That was what annoyed me the most.**

Yes.

**Quite apart from the propriety issues.**

Yes, and even in that particular case, quite worryingly I thought, some of the parliamentary authorities leant towards the idea that they hadn't really done anything wrong, whereas fortunately not only was there a newspaper investigation, I think the Daily Telegraph in that case, Channel 4 had done that jointly with them, everything was on film. We could all see and make up our own minds as to whether or not a line had been crossed. And that's a vital role that our journalists play in our society, and one that we should value and that I don't think that the media gets enough credit for.

**So what came next?**

While I was at the Sunday Times I worked in the Insight team for two and a half years. I subsequently came out into the newsroom itself, which was a real breath of fresh air. I could write under my own by-line and had freedom to cover diverse

subjects, one of which was quite unusual was I did a piece on road rage which I can claim was the first in the UK media on that subject, which has now become part of everyday conversation and the bane of many of our lives. It was a term that was being used in America, because I spent about a day trying to find a nice sort of catchall expression which would cover all these many examples that I'd gathered together of people using violence on the roads.

### **So you coined the term 'road rage'.**

Yes, in a UK media sense. As I say, it had been used a few times in the States, along with other names symbolising the same type of behaviour. But within days of that Sunday Times piece coming out, everyone was talking about it. Loads of radio shows, everyone was talking about road rage, because so many people had experienced it and it really rang true for them. And as well as doing general news in the Sunday Times, I did Home Affairs, which was the first time I'd gone into that beat. Stephen Lawrence was happening at that time, looked into related matters around that tragic murder, but I did a lot of work on the crime gangs of the UK at the time with a colleague Adrian Levy, who's now a very successful author, and we looked at all the crime gangs that were operating in the shadows, running basically the drug networks at the top end in the UK, in cities like Glasgow and Liverpool and Newcastle and London. We did actually reference the Adams family, who hadn't been mentioned up until that point, who are now infamous in London, and have been written about several times since. Yes, that was a very exciting period. From The Sunday Times, I briefly worked at the Sunday Express, and Susan Douglas, who was the first female national newspaper editor. And that was an expedition really. There were about 12 Sunday Times journalists, including myself, who went across that fabulous flatiron-shaped building on Blackfriars Bridge, where the Sunday Express or the Express Newspapers were, and we wanted to take the battle to the Mail on Sunday. That was the brief. And for a very short period of time, we had a lot of fun. It was it was probably less than seven months that I was there, but we really got the paper and noticed and the people that I worked with were fantastic; it was a great mix of top Sunday broadsheet Journalists and tabloid journalists working alongside each other. But newspaper management being what they are, they always come up with ideas for supposedly making progress by saving money.

### **Which involves sacking people.**

Yes, the great idea that so many of the bean counters in newspapers had at that time was the seven-day operation, where you put the staffs of the daily and the Sunday together, and you saved a lot of money. And to that end, Susan Douglas, our editor, came in one morning and her pass didn't work, and suddenly we were leaderless and the whole project that we had to take on the Mail on Sunday lost all its momentum.

### **So brutal, isn't it. So inhuman.**

It felt it at the time, and so I decided I didn't want to stay there. And I went straight to the Independent from there, and it was one of the best things I ever did.

### **How long were you at the independent for?**

For 20 years. Under seven different editors. So it was probably about two thirds of the life of the print newspaper.

### **Seven editors! Talk us through all of them. What was your brief initially, when you first started to work there?**

Well, when I first went there I was slightly in awe of it. It still had a reputation as being very, very serious, and my background at the Sunday Times... people who worked at the Sunday Times was slight bunker mentality, I felt that the Sunday Times wasn't liked by the rest of Fleet Street, but actually my experience was quite different from that in that there was a lot of respect for people who worked there, and certainly that was the case among people at the Independent who were welcoming of me. And I was grateful for that. And my first editor there was Andrew Marr.

### **Never heard of him!**

Well, he'd been the political editor there. And yes, it was a real memorable thing, being interviewed by him looking out over the window from 1 Canada Square on the 21st floor, I think it was, 18th or the 21<sup>st</sup>, very high, looking down over the winding Thames in that part of East London. And yes, he got me on board, and it was an exciting time because he tried to do some pretty innovative things with the newspaper. If anything, he probably he probably tried too much too soon and he was a little bit too radical in his vision, and it was a bit too much for people to take, within the newspaper, and possibly some of the readers felt that way too. He came up with these ideas like little digest intros for stories, and a huge front page pictures, both of which you could say were ahead of their time. One of those, the digests, spoke to people having increased pressures on their time. The big pictures, single issue front pages, later became a thing, and a successful one, particularly for the Independent. But a lot of the ideas that Andrew had, they seemed to jar a bit with some of the readers and subsequent editors didn't pursue them, at least not immediately. He had one idea of putting news on a non-facing page, i.e. heading up the page as news. All the pages were themed, so the left hand page would be news, suggesting if you like that the right hand page wasn't news, even though obviously it was news stories. It's very confusing for a reader, and that right hand page would have to be themed up, so if it was a story about a balloon that had gone down, an air balloon, we had to find a second air balloon crash story to go in underneath it because he wanted two

stories on the broadsheet page, which is a strange way of running the newsroom. But as I say, a lot of his ideas were quite prescient. You know, they were ahead of their time.

**And what were you covering at this point? What was your beat?**

So I started off as general news for about a year, and then I became the home affairs editor of the Independent, which I did for I think it's four years, and that was a massive time for the Home Office. Jack Straw was home secretary, he was trying to shake up the police force, which was in the grip of institutional racism, as it was termed, or at least trying to shake off some of its failings of the past, and Chief Constables were having to bite the bullet on that and take on some of the entrenched and slightly backward attitudes in some corners; the police Federation; the prisons were in a really bad way, much as they are now. They were experiencing very similar problems with overcrowding. I went into lots of the high security prisons, which was a really extraordinary experience. I went into Brixton prison with Neville Lawrence, the father of Stephen Lawrence, and to see him close up in that environment was really quite something. He was a man who was able to forgive others who had taken lives, even as the father of a murder victim himself. And to see him walking around Brixton Prison along the landings, talking to people serving life sentences for killing, giving them a certain amount of respect and showing compassion for them, was a very memorable thing. But yes, it was a time of great upheaval in the Home Office and subsequently David Blunkett became home secretary, and I covered his time in the department as well.

**The only thing I can really remember about him being Home Secretary is when Harold Shipman killed himself and he said his first thought was to open up a bottle. I mean, how on earth could he get away with saying that now?**

(Laughs) David Blunkett was an extraordinary home secretary. I mean, you have to express admiration for him being able to do the job with his disability, but what one thing to remember in terms of his relationship with the media at the time, was they said that he was always read his stories each day. The headlines would be read out to him and the stories would be read out to him. And I always felt that that was very difficult for him to get a grasp on the scale of the stories, because that was in a print media era. I always imagined that some of the smaller stories, which perhaps were carried inside the paper, and didn't carry anything like the prominence of a big front page splash, would assume much greater importance and be a lot more annoying to a home secretary, and he was one that tended to react very badly to his negative media coverage – and I always thought that that was partly because he went through this daily ritual of having all the stories read out to him, he wasn't able to read them himself.

**I mean, nowadays of course I imagine he's got a screen or braille reader, and he could just do himself. But yes, it must have been awful to have just heard people reading aloud what a terrible home secretary you were, and how badly you were thought out by the Police Federation and the Prison Officers Association and all the litany of people that don't like the Home Secretary in any one moment.**

Yes, it was a difficult time for four Labour Home Secretaries because they were under so much pressure to be tougher on law and order than Michael Howard and the previous conservative occupants of that job, which didn't always play very well with the groups that were wanting for more humane conditions in prisons, wanting perhaps a softer approach to things like immigration. The natural labour constituency didn't always feel as comfortable with the rhetoric that the Labour home secretaries felt obliged to talk, because they were being given a particularly hard time by the right-wing papers.

**What came next then? Was there a moment where you thought, "Right, I've done enough of home affairs now, it's been four years, I'm going to do something else," or do these things kind of just evolve and emerge?**

To be quite honest about it, the appeal of switching beats to something like media, and what I did originally was media and culture correspondent, which was almost like a dream job, which I managed to write for myself, which enabled me to cover off a lot of arts areas, particularly music which I was always really interested in, and go to lots of very glamorous events, awards ceremonies, all this kind of thing. It was just a completely different world from immigration centres, young offenders' institutions, prisons and police stations, which had been my beat for many years before.

**An austere but decent beat, to quote Michael Howard. But not fun.**

Yes. It's decent and important and it's an area that I'm still extremely interested in reading about. Some of the people, like Richard Ford at the Times, still cover that patch. I worked with him for many years. The doyen of the home affairs editors, still hugely important, doesn't get as much coverage as it deserves, because it lacks the glamour of some of the other journalism beats.

**So at this point you'd created a role for yourself in doing arts and media. And was that was that something that you'd overtly decided that that's the direction that you wanted to take in terms of that your beat?**

Yes, I was drawn to it and Simon Kelner gave me that opportunity. He was the editor of the Independent that I probably look back on as fondly, particularly his first stint as editor of The Independent, was a great time to be there. It was the period when the Independent reinvented itself yet again, it switched from broadsheet to

compact/tabloid, and in actual fact for a little while it was being produced in both formats. We had two piles of papers when we came into the office each morning – a pile of broadsheets and a pile of tabloids – because we weren't quite sure if it was going to work or not, so we were kind of hedging our bets for a little while, but Simon, bravely and all credit to him, made this judgment call and went for the compact and it was a runaway success. And just for a relatively short period of time, the Independent was back to being as confident as I imagine it probably was in its very first years when it was the coolest thing on the newsstand. And we felt we were setting the pace for the whole of the national newspaper industry for a short time, certainly in the quality sector anyway. But Rupert Murdoch, being the fox of the news industry that he is, immediately centred that something was up and changed the Times to that compact format as well. So we lost that distinction that we had momentarily which led to an increase in sales, and because I covered it I know it changed the culture of newspapers across Europe, around the world in fact. Scores and scores of titles switched shape to this more convenient, smaller format, recognising that you could still be serious but being this more handy shape that is easier to read on a train, easier to carry around, and has become accepted. And the Guardian too felt the need to react.

**So it launched the Berliner format.**

And it launched in the Berliner shape, which required it to buy new presses, and produced very stylish newspapers as a result.

**At the cost of squillions and squillions of the Scott Trust's money.**

That's true.

**Never to be topped up again, apparently – unless we pay them £4 a month or something. I don't know what it is.**

Hmm.

**Did you realise then that this was the beat for you? I mean, I'm not just saying this to flatter you, but you are one of the experts on the business of news and the mechanics of the media industry. You're one of the two or three people I will turn to when I want some serious analysis of what's going on.**

Yes, the media has, during the time that I've been covering it, become more and more important story, fortuitously for me. The public as a whole have become, in this Internet era, far more interested in what goes on underneath the bonnet. They've become more media savvy as a whole, with that has come a certain cynicism but certainly there is the interest there. They want to know how things work; they won't just take the news handed down to them as tablets of stone. They want to know

exactly how it works, and that is critical to the future of journalism. People are going to have to be more transparent about how they get their stories, how to present them, who the sources are, where they can be revealed, and just to be more open and to accept that that's the world we live in. I did an interview, interestingly, with the editor in chief of Reuters, who said that that's exactly the path that they would be going down. And I think he's right.

**Let me ask you a few kind of open, broad brush questions, then. Because I suppose I'm trying to think of a more articulate way to say this, but really what I'm trying to say is, is the news business doomed? You know, you read constantly now if you read the industry journals – Hold the Front Page, Press Gazette – because it's always about mass sackings. Every two or three months you learn that the Telegraph has let another 20 people go, and I think, "Wow, was there 20 people even there?" You know, I didn't realise there was anyone one left to sack! How do we make the business of news work now, be profitable, particularly the stuff that lacks glamour? You talked about the Sunday Times Insight team. Good quality investigative journalism is incredibly expensive and no one seemingly wants to pay for it any more. Or am I wrong?**

No, I mean you broadly right, but I don't think it's doomed. There are successful models out there but there are not many of them. So the way things are panning out at the moment is that there is a demand for very high end serious journalism, which people are prepared to pay subscriptions for. And a lot of the pioneering work in terms of finding successful pay models is happening in the United States, where you have the New York Times, The Washington Post – with the help of Jeff Bezos's Amazon fortune – you have the Atlantic, The New Yorker, all finding strong subscription models. But in the case of most of those titles, they also have strong digital presence as well. That's at the very high end. And then for specialist business publications, most notably of course in the UK the Financial Times but also the Wall Street Journal and The Economist, they are also building businesses that will survive and prosper, based on people being prepared to get their credit cards out and pay for journalism over a long period of time and make that real commitment. For the others, it does look pretty desperate because people have to pursue this very, very difficult model of scale, especially in the tabloid space. And that means you are sacrificing distribution, you're sacrificing monetisation, to the big platforms – most obviously Facebook – who are just hoovering up all the advertising money, and the digital platforms – Google, Facebook, Apple to a degree – are keeping all the data to themselves, or at least the vast majority of it. The publishers are not getting what they want, and that is critical. We know how Facebook's business works. They know everything about their users, so they're able to serve advertisers in an incredibly bespoke way, and publishers would really like to do that as well. The Financial Times is one of the most successful news businesses, is built on data. Every decision they make is informed by data. They want to know exactly how we use their product and how you move around their site, and serve you with what you want. It's the same

principle as Facebook and Amazon, but if the publishers don't have that data they can't offer their advertisers those same services. So there are still some signs of hope for other publishers in the free space, obviously the Mail Online has a vast audience, it's difficult to translate that into the money they would expect for this size audience that they've got, but you mentioned the Independent, which having slashed its costs, does produce a very impressive audience for the number of people there have working in the newsroom. I don't think it's the same as it was at the height of its ambitions as a newspaper, but it turns a profit.

**And in terms of bang for its buck, I agree with you. Given how few people are in their actual newsroom, it still has a semblance of a paper online, hasn't it?**

It does, yes. But as you rightly say, there are lots of other really sort of depressing signs, particularly in the local press, and I think people need to recognise the importance of what their local newspapers can do before they lose them, because they're under such intense pressure.

**Do you find that, given that you know and understand so well the business of news, journalism has the most unbelievably precious place in a healthy society? Do you ever just kind of feel a little bit communist at times where you just think, "Well, forget the money, we should have a vibrant news media and it's terribly unjust that it has to pay for itself" Because I feel that as a citizen. I understand that news brands are businesses, I understand how it works. But then, whenever you see newsrooms shed yet more journalists, you can't help as a citizen thinking, "That's a bit terrible."**

Yes, I always wince when the public, when they're being critical of the news media, say, "Well, they're just trying to sell papers. They're just trying to sell a story." Because most journalists in my experience, they don't really have that commercial approach at all. They came into the trade to make the world a better place or to have excitement and adventures. They came to do stories, they were not thinking about making money for a corporate enterprise.

**Or working on clickbaity headlines.**

Hmm. That wasn't their motivation at all. And it doesn't really become so unless you become maybe an editor, where you do have the owner breathing down your neck over how many copies you've sold, or more pertinently in this day and age, how much traffic you're generating and how much advertising is coming into the building.

**We've had a few editors in the very chair that you're sitting in now, and you do get a mixed bag of results in terms of whether they enjoyed it. I remember very memorably one of our early guests, two or three years ago, was Chris**

**Blackhurst, who was obviously the editor for a time of the Independent on Sunday.**

And the Independent.

**Indeed! And he basically said – I'm paraphrasing now – but he basically said being editor was a totally miserable affair, and that it was full of HR issues and legal issues, and you might have got the best tickets to the opera once a year but other than that it was a litany of HR issues.**

Well, to be fair to Chris Blackhurst, he is a very good investigative journalist, a good business commentator...

**He's a tiny bit curmudgeonly, which I've said to his face.**

He probably missed doing all those fun jobs, and a lot of the fun stuff is not necessarily the kind of thing that the editor does. He has the power, or she has the power, but they're not necessarily going out and doing the writing, and meeting the interesting people to interview them, which is what I got to do as a media editor, particularly when we launched the media weekly supplement under Simon Kelner, which was a really exciting time.

**Brilliant read. I think that's when your writing kind of came on my radar, really. It was essential reading.**

Yes. We were producing 36 pages on the media. How much navel gazing we were doing at that time! But surprisingly, there's so much going on in the UK media, I mean, it is a world centre for the media industry. We are, and were, so strong across newspapers, television, advertising, all sectors, PR...

**I should nick your rolodex on the way out of the studio, shouldn't I? There could be a hundred guest suggestions and their mobile phones in your rolodex.**

Well, we had so many names every week when we launched that. We started with Lord Rothermere, Richard Desmond, Piers Morgan...

**All three of them have turned this podcast down so far! Carry on listing people that won't come on...**

Right. I don't think Lord Rothermere had done an interview for years. But we had Greg Dyke writing a column for us, who was the person everyone wanted to read when talking about the television industry, recently at that point, the director general of the BBC obviously lost his position over the fallout from the Hutton inquiry... yes, it

was a wonderful time. And I got to make pretty much everybody at the top of the media industry and interview them.

**Yes, if you could just unlock your phone on the way out and just leave it there I'd be very grateful! Why did you come to leave the Independent, if you don't mind me kind of fast forwarding. Did you feel that your time had come to leave? Did it feel the right moment?**

Yes. I mean, there were part partly personal considerations in my own particular set-up, but I thought it was a good time to do something different with the print version of the Independent closing. I've maintained a connection with the Independent brand, albeit slightly tenuous, because I've continued to write for the i paper, which was obviously a sister paper of the Independent, it's now owned by Johnson Press. But it gave me the opportunity to broaden out into the wider UK media, and I found it actually quite refreshing. Even though I've been writing about the news business, which is a very challenging environment, to go and work for somebody like The Drum, which is a very progressive, exciting, expanding organisation in the marketing/media field, and just to be a part of that wider media sector in the UK was actually very energising and invigorating, because there are so many exciting things happening, typically in London and the UK in media. And what whereas the newspaper industry and the newspaper world finds it very difficult, and continues to do so, more generally it's a very positive environment. Pretty much every company is a publisher now, they're all looking to journalists and media professionals for their expertise. Everybody has an awareness of the importance of communication. There are newsrooms in all sorts of businesses and institutions that never had them before. They're content creators, and they're looking for experienced journalists to come and head up those operations. And that's one of the areas that I've moved into is giving consultancy, so I consult to an organisation, which I find very exciting, called One Young World which is a global NGO set up by two amazing UK advertising figures, David Jones and Kate Robertson, and it's supported by Kofi Annan and Bob Geldof, and it's in its 10th year and has a pool of 8,000 brilliant young leaders from 196 countries around the world.

**It's an incredible thing. I was looking into this when researching for this very podcast. What do you think marks these young people out as special?**

Well, they've done all sorts of things. I mean for example there's Yolanda from Micronesia, who is helping people in her homeland to transfer to sustainable agricultural practices in order to ensure that the entire country that they live in doesn't become covered by the ocean to save their very country. There's Thinzar in Myanmar, who's bringing the various races and cultures there together to try to end what is effectively a very long running civil war there. There's Hussain Manawer, who is a brilliant spoken word artist who is raising the profile of mental health. Some other people work for corporate enterprises, they work in government. These are the

people that in a generation's time will be running countries all around the world, and they're forming important networks and they're engaging with the big questions around climate change, finding jobs for young people, addressing things like peace building initiatives, and they offer hope for the future. And the connections they make, the contacts they make, are going to be extremely important for everyone in building a better world. That's the thinking behind the organisation, and it's a very empowering environment to be in.

**You've just co-written the autobiography of reggae DJ David Rodigan as well. Tell us about that.**

Well David Rodigan is one of the most fascinating people in the whole of British broadcasting. He works on BBC Radio 2 and BBC Radio 1 Xtra, but he's also previously been on Capital Radio and Kiss FM for many years, and he is synonymous with reggae music. He's the ultimate fan, and his journey has been the journey of reggae music. It's a story of British multiculturalism, because he discovered reggae music as a 14-year-old living in rural Oxfordshire when he heard Millie Small singing My Boy Lollipop, and he fell in love with the music and he's dedicated his life to it, even though he's actually a trained repertory actor who's performed in lots of television programmes, including BBC drama. He was in Doctor Who, he's been in adaptations of the Sherlock Holmes stories, he's done Shakespearean work around the country on the stage, but reggae has always been his love. So he's been able to combine this theatrical talent with the ultimate fans obsession with a genre of music. So he travels the world, playing reggae music, being an ambassador for it, and he's been very influential in spawning big reggae movements in countries like Italy and Germany, where he's played many, many times, and in Jamaica he's extremely well thought of as an ambassador for their culture.

**Penultimate question. What advice would you give to someone starting out in their career now that wants to be the next Ian Burrell?**

You have to have a sense of vocation for journalism. I think it's become harder to get into now than when I went into it. I say that regretfully, I think to be able to go from the local press up to the national press is much more difficult. It used to be a well-worn path; I think that road has sort of crumbled a bit and grassed over, and I think that's a real shame. I think that people still need to want to go into this with the desire to uncover things that are not in the public domain. There are many big advantages now in terms of the gateways to getting published in the first place. Literally anyone can go up there and write, in actual fact we pretty much are all publishers, whether it's just updating our statuses on social media or writing a blog.

**Or knocking up a media podcast such as this.**

We can all do that. So the opportunities to get into it are much easier than before. The opportunities to get paid for what you do are much more difficult. That's the big test. So you need to have a real sense of willpower that this is what you were born to do – it's much more pertinent than it was a generation ago. But I think that even if the traditional newspapers that your parents may have grown up with are not going to be there for the length of your career, or maybe to offer you the kinds of career you might have hoped for had you gone into this industry 20 years ago, there are all sorts of new publishing opportunities now where people do not incur the legacy costs that existed before the distribution costs, the costs of newsprint – all of those things are gone. What I say to young students, media students and young journalism students who ask me how they should go about getting a start, is there are no barriers to entry if you just have a smartphone. You can go out there and record your own interviews, you can do your own reporting. If you're into sports, your local sports team, if it's an amateur club, will not have any coverage very likely, and there's nothing to stop you going along and interviewing the players. Filming in the matches, if it's just you, one man and the dog watching. That team, those players, would only be too delighted to get the attention. And you can use that as your training ground to build that up, to gain your experience on the job, to build up your expertise. You have to be a multimedia player. You have to be able to do all forms of communication, and have a very wide skillset.

**So, last question, then. Share with us some of the more memorable interviews you've had. What have been the best people that you've had on? And also, just in closing, what's been the worst day of your journalistic life?**

Well, the most memorable interview I did which I always come back to is the Bill Gates interview which took place at Times Square, the Reuters building, No 3 Times Square, and that was most memorable partly because of what I ended up not writing, which was the story behind the interview, because I'd flown 7,000 miles out to do it and I was expecting 40 minutes with the man who was then the richest man in the world. When I got there, I was told it was 30 minutes, then it went down to 20 minutes. I started cutting down the list of questions I had to ask him, and just before I went into the room – I was the only British journalist to interview him at that time – they cut me down to 10 minutes, and there was literally one of his assistants in the room with me holding a stopwatch counting me down, and I had two dictaphones just to make sure everything was properly recorded. And I think I asked him six questions, which is going to be enough to cover off such a wide area that I'd get a two and a half thousand word interview out of it once I had written around it, and the assistant he had with him literally shouted out nine minutes one minute to go. When I got to that point and I just jammed in a final supplementary question, and that was an amazing experience because I knew when I got that seventh question in that I had enough to do it. But yes, I think one of the most memorable people that I've interviewed would probably be Felix Dennis, the publisher.

### **What a legend.**

He was such a legend.

### **I love Felix Dennis, I've read all of his books. Such a legend.**

Yes, he was such a great person to be around, but when I first met him, which was in his pied-à-terre in Soho, he started swearing at me because of the Independent. The first words he said to me were, "Hypocritical bastards, holier than thou bastards, yeah?" He was screaming at me, I thought, "This isn't going to go very well," but we ended up having hours and hours of conversation, he got the wine out, he was a great guy, and he invited me up to his estate in Warwickshire for a subsequent interview, when unfortunately he was less well and obviously we've lost him subsequently...

### **Very sadly missed.**

... but I had a wonderful day in his company among all the fabulous statues, life-sized statues that he's got in his garden of heroes and villains in his Warwickshire estate. And it's been such a force in British magazine publishing, obviously done such wonderful things with The Week in particular, and he was so loved by the people that worked in Dennis Publishing. He'd make his Villa in Mustique available to some of them for honeymoons, or he'd provide his luxury vintage motor cars to them on their wedding days, that sort of thing. When you think of some of the media moguls and barons out there and how distant they are, and hard people they are to work with, he was such an exception I think.

**Ian, we've run out of metaphorical tape, so it just remains for me to say thank you ever so much time, I really enjoyed that.**

Thank you.