

John Humphrys **BBC Journalist and Presenter**

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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 journalist and presenter John Humphrys. Born in Cardiff, John left school at 15 and became a reporter at the Penarth Times. In 1966 he joined the BBC, covering initially Liverpool, and then the North West. Rapidly rising through the ranks, he went on to open the BBC's news bureaux in the USA and South Africa, and was responsible for their coverage of many high profile global events. He became a familiar face in 1991 when he was selected to anchor the BBC's flagship Nine O'Clock News, and in 1986, he was unexpectedly offered a job as one of the presenters of the Today programme – and, of course, immediately accepted. Staying with the show ever since, he has brought countless stories, interviewed global leaders, and talked with many famous faces. On top of that, John has written seven books, presents the BBC quiz show Mastermind and has won Broadcaster of the Year at the Sony Radio Awards.

John – an enviable career. Thank you for joining me.

Pleasure.

The first question is, why would any sane human being get up at such an ungodly hour?

They wouldn't if they were sane, so therefore by definition, I'm not of that clan! I am a bit bonkers, obviously. "Driven" is the expression people use. But then, you see, I don't regard this as a job, and I'm always mildly surprised when I get paid at the end of the month, because it always seems to me to be the sort of thing that most people would want to do anyway, because it's good fun – and that's the point really. And that, I suppose, is the slightly serious answer to your question about why you get up

in the middle of the night – it's not early in the morning, it's the middle of the night, let's be clear about that.

What time is it?

Well, in my case it's half past three. I am the last – I'm the sluggard. The others get up rather earlier, and come in rather earlier. But I exercise my authority – well, my age, anyway! – by coming in slightly later than everybody else. So I get up at the ludicrously late hour of 3.30am.

What does the average day at the Today programme entail?

There's no such thing as an average day! This morning, for instance, as I speak to you, we've just come off the air, we went in with a programme that was, as always, there was a complete running order, every slot is filled, three hours of air time is allocated to this, that and the other. Occasionally there'll be the odd little gap, but usually it's all filled. And this morning we had a pretty tight one, because I pre-recorded a couple of important interviews yesterday, so they were already slotted in, and then all the other live stuff and all the rest of it. But then, literally as we were going on air at a minute past six, and we were reading the headlines and getting going, we learned that Charles Kennedy had died, which of course changed everything. So right from the very top of the programme, it becomes as if it were a different programme, and instead of doing lots of things that we had planned to do, we do, I think, six different things on Charles Kennedy, talking to people like Paddy Ashdown, who knew him well, and various other stuff. So inevitably, when something like that happens during the course of the programme and you've just gone on air, you have to change.

So you throw the schedule out of the window.

You just throw stuff out, yes. It's very sad, a lot of wasted effort, a lot of people put to a lot of trouble, but it's news.

In terms of when that's happening in the moment, presumably a producer says, "Right – we've got Paddy Ashdown coming on air in three minutes," and you're just left to busk it, based on your knowledge and your years of experience as a journalist.

It'll sometimes be 30 seconds. I got literally – I don't know if you can split seconds in broadcasting – a second's warning of something I had to do this morning, and that happens all the time. The studio producer once came into my headphones – and this was at 6:40am – and said, "Margaret Thatcher's on the phone." She was prime minister at the time.

I remember that, famously!

And obviously I acted with huge professionalism, I assumed that he was winding me up, so I gave him the appropriate sign through the glass, because we were on air and I couldn't speak, and I indicated with two fingers what I thought of this silly joke of his, and then seconds after that I heard the voice of Margaret Thatcher saying, "Good morning, Mr Humphries." And she was indeed on the phone. And again, something like that happens – she had rung to complain about something or other, she was in the kitchen at Downing Street.

She was, famously, yes.

And anyway, I said to her, "Since I've got you now..." We had dealt with whatever it was she phoned up about, and I said, "Since we've got you, I suppose we should do a proper interview." She said, "Yes, I rather thought you might say that." So we did. So again, the programme changed, because that then made the news at 8.10am and all that. So that sort of thing happens. Not all the time – it doesn't happen all the time that the prime minister rings you up, in fact it's never happened since – but it's very, very rare. I doubt that there's ever been an edition of the Today programme that's gone on air as planned – and I'd be rather disappointed if it did. It's a live programme and things happen, and so you reflect them.

And clearly you're reporting the news and interviewing the news makers, but do you ever feel in the moment that you know that you're going to make the news as a result of what your interviewee is saying?

Well, if you didn't, you wouldn't be a journalist. You couldn't conduct a proper interview if you weren't aware of what's important, because what makes the news is that which is important and changes things. And if you weren't aware of that, then you shouldn't be doing the job – so yes, of course you are. When you hear somebody say something – and it doesn't have to be like, "I'm resigning." – but you know pretty much what is going to make the papers the next day, if anything.

And do you ever feel, as you're interviewing them, in the moment, that you are the final nail in their coffin, that their days are numbered? I remember you famously interviewed George Entwistle on a Saturday morning...

Yes...

You could almost hear his resignation in his voice.

I think I realised... well, no – it wouldn't be true to say that I knew that he was going to resign, certainly not within a matter of hours of that interview, but I could tell as I was doing the interview – he was sitting opposite me in the studio – and I could see, from his eyes I think, that he knew he was in desperately deep trouble and that

probably the game was up for him. How that would play out, of course, I had no idea. But yes, I could tell, during the course... it started out fairly routinely, and then after about five or six minutes, when he was being... I have to say, due credit to him, he was being entirely honest with me, he was not ducking or dodging or diving or weaving, he was answering the questions honestly, and I'm afraid he did sign his own death warrant at that point.

Were you aware of that in that moment?

I think so. I think it was fairly obviously that he was going to find it difficult to carry on, but I didn't know that he was on the point of resigning. I don't know whether he did or not, of course.

You mentioned about Margaret Thatcher. Clearly, Number 10 has a vast array of PR people now that would advise the prime minister...

Too many!

... never to just ring the Today programme and demand that they go on air!

Oh! On the contrary – they do it all the time.

But in such an impromptu manner?

Oh, not like that. No, no.

For example, one of my questions would be, “What advice would you give to one of your own interviewees if you were to ever retire and become a media trainer?”

God forbid! I used to do media training of some people – never politicians – but I stopped doing that maybe 20 years ago, I think.

Presumably, you'd have said to George, “Don't do it.”

Well, you know what? In that case I wouldn't, because the BBC, above all, has a responsibility to be transparent. We work for the licence payer – they pay our wages, and they are absolutely entitled to hear the director-general of the BBC being called to account if it's big enough, important enough and serious enough – and that was. It was about as important as it gets! The future of the BBC was literally at stake. If we had gone any further down that road, the road that we were going, it would have been the end of BBC news as we know it. Just as with Iraq, that was a serious, existential crisis for the BBC. But my serious advice, if I were ever to do the job, which I won't, but if I were, my serious advice to politicians would be, “Respect the

audience.” Forget about the interviewer. Forget about Humprys or (??8:19), or whoever it happens to be – you’re talking to a few million people out there who want to know what you think about this, that or the other – and they want straight answers. And if you do the ducking and dodging and say, “No, no, no – I think the question people really want to ask is…” and then deliver your party political broadcast, you lose the faith of the audience. The thing I get endlessly from the audience, I speak to them a lot in various formats, the thing I get endlessly is not, “Why do you interrupt them so much?” – it’s, “Why do you let them get away without answering the questions? Why don’t you just say: ‘All right then, we’ll stop it. Go away then if you don’t want to answer.’?” The answer to that is you can’t. You have to go through with it, and you have to trust that even if they are failing to answer the question, to put it politely, the audience will spot it, and therefore the interview hasn’t been wasted, because the audience has got something from it.

Have there ever been difficult moments in interviews beyond politicians ducking and diving the questions?

Oh, yes – many. I had a frightful hangover once – once, you’ll notice, once! – and it was about a month after I had started on the programme, 30 years ago nearly, and I thought it would be possible to go out the night before and have a few drinks before doing the show the following morning. It isn’t – or certainly not to have as many drinks as I’d had that night. And I found myself... everything was fine when I went into the programme, I was feeling on top of the world – I was still drunk, I think – and right up until the point where I was doing an interview down the line with a senior politician, and the hangover hit me, or whatever it was, and I realised that I could think of no more questions for him – and much worse than that, I had actually forgotten who he was!

Can you remember who he was now?

I can, but I’m not going to tell you because he mightn’t know.

Have there been any particular highlights? Who have been your favourite interviewees?

Well actually, no politicians really. I mean, that’s not true, I love interviewing politicians, and I’ve had lots of them that I’ve done that I’ve hugely enjoyed, though I’m not here to enjoy myself, but nonetheless... but no, I’m tempted to use the phrase ‘real people’, which suggests that politicians aren’t, and of course they are, but it’s people who don’t expect to perform in a particular way that gives you particular satisfaction. I mean, I did an interview at great length with a woman last year who was a survivor of the concentration camps, and dealt with her story in such a way that it left you at the end just gasping in admiration at the strength of the human spirit. I will always remember an interview I did in South Africa when Nelson

Mandela was elected president, the first black elections, and I had gone out to Soweto the day before the election was due to take place because they were allowing some people to vote early – people who were very old, pregnant women, disabled people and so on – and masses and masses of them turned out. That itself was a humbling experience, to see them in Soweto. And the 8.10am slot was me, London had told me they wanted to hear me talking to people queuing up to vote, what it meant to them and all that. And it was a difficult call, but anyway, we decided on a very old lady who was standing next to a young, very pregnant, woman, and I wanted something powerful. The old woman said some diatribe against apartheid and I said to her – we were live on air, obviously – and I said, “You’re about to vote for the first time in your life. What does it mean to you?” and she said, “For me, it will mean nothing,” and I’m thinking, “Oh, God – this is not what I want to hear!” And then she paused, and I kept my nerve and waited. And she leaned across and she tapped the stomach of the young woman standing next to her and said, “But for this young man in this woman’s stomach, it will mean everything – because he will be able to do something that has been denied to me all my life. He will have the dignity that has been denied to me.” And it was just... the way she said it, and the dignity with which she said it, and the powerful way she said it... it’s things like that that you remember.

Did you always want to be a journalist?

Always! Boring story, from the age of about six I used to read Superman comics because we got them cheap after the war, second hand ones from America, and Superman was, of course, Clark Kent, in the human world.

Still is!

Of course! Absolutely. And he was a journalist. And so from the age of five, I wanted to work for the Daily Planet! I wanted to wear one of those things, I wanted to fly and save the world – and the way to do that, or so I thought, was to become a journalist. Fine for a five-year-old kid, but by the time you get to be 50... you know. Oh, dear! I still dream of it. It hasn’t worked out like that.

I spoke to Torin Douglas a few weeks ago, and he did this interview, and he said that what got him into journalism was he played that board game called Scoop.

Oh!

It was like Monopoly but... so yes, it’s strange things that inspires people into journalism.

Quite! Well, nobody sane would do it now! No, it’s a great job.

Well, that actually brings me to my next question, which is young people inspiring to be in the industry now, be that newspapers or broadcasting, do you think they've got it more difficult now, or do you think it's easier with the likes of Twitter and social media to make a name for yourself?

No – I think it's infinitely more difficult. I left school at 15, got a job at a local paper, got a job on a bigger paper, then a bigger paper, then I worked for ITV and *bom-bom-bom* – it just went on like that. Easy. Now, it isn't like that. For a start you've got to have a decent degree before you'll even be considered, I imagine. And then the competition is staggering. If you ask me, as I dare say you will, if I had any advice to offer young people who want to become journalists...

You've anticipated my next question.

Well, I would say what the principal of a music college once said to my oldest son, when he auditioned to be a cellist, to go to the Royal College of Music, and he heard him play, and he said, "I would advice you not to be a cellist." And his jaw dropped and he looked very sad, and then the principal, who was a wise man, said, "Unless, of course, doing anything else would make you desperately unhappy." And that's what I would say to anybody who wanted to be a journalist – because it's very tough to get in, it's very tough to survive. You can grub along, no doubt, doing all sorts of stuff on the internet and social media and all the rest of it, but actually getting a job anywhere like the BBC or a decent newspaper is terribly difficult. Not well paid, and the competition is breathtaking. So I would say think of something else, and if you can't think of anything else that you want at all, then give it a go – but boy, get loads and loads and loads of experience. Before you even write to a newspaper or the BBC, get something to tell them that you have, you know... and be curious.

I was going to ask what your second career choice would be.

There wouldn't have been one. I never even remotely considered for a millisecond doing anything else. Ever. Ever. That's it. I mean, I have done other things – I've been a farmer, for instance. I was absolutely crap at being a farmer, and I'd done all sorts of other stuff. I run a charity now, which I set up a few years ago, I'm not terribly good at that, but actually I got – people are only volunteers, we don't pay any wages, it's called the [Kitchen Table Charities Trust](#), that is the plug, and it helps young kids go to school in Africa and things like that – but no, I never wanted to be anything else, and it's a bit late to change career now, probably.

But you can't present the Today programme for 100 years, you must have some kind of semi-retirement...

Why not? Do you know anything I don't know?!

I most certainly don't!

No, 100 years might be pushing it a bit. I'll tell you what – I'll give it up either when they tell me to give it up, of course, which is the most probable outcome, or when I wake up in the morning and think, "I really don't want to go into work this morning." It's never happened to me yet, and the morning it does, and it's only going to happen once, and that'll make me think, "Yes, time to stop."

How does it work when you have a particularly difficult interview? A politician who you've managed to coax some information out of who didn't want to give it. How are they after the interview? I've always wondered.

It depends on the interview.

Are they friendly, or...?

Mostly completely friendly. They recognise that I'm doing my job, they're doing theirs and that's it. You get one or two who are not...

I'll invite you to name them at this point, but you of course won't.

I won't, obviously. The one that I'm thinking of in particular caused a bit of a fuss because the BBC was attacked by Number 10 as a result of that particular interview, and it was suggested, and I quote from the letter, "something should be done about the John Humprys problem" and the interviewee in question, the politician in question, who was a cabinet minister at the time, stopped being a cabinet minister fairly soon after that. But anyway, I'm afraid that particular person was not nice to me. We found ourselves sitting next to each other at dinner some time later, and not a word was exchanged between us. Not my fault, by the way, I tried to chat but...

A real chatty guy, obviously.

Well, there you are.

I know the phrase is 'the unique way the BBC is funded' and we always have to say it that way, but do you think the BBC gets a kicking internally and externally? When the BBC has crises, to me, the biggest compliment I can pay to the BBC's journalism is that I turn to the BBC's coverage of its own troubles. I can't imagine ITN giving their own chief exec a kicking in the same way that you did.

Well, if you didn't, we'd be massively failing in our job, and we'd have no right to exist. But I hope that's the case, I believe that's the case, and when we want to do something on the BBC and they don't want to do it, I always insist on empty chairing them, if you know what I mean by that.

Of course.

“We tried to talk to someone at the BBC but they didn’t want to talk,” and all that. But mostly, on the important things, on the really big things, they do come out, as obviously George on that occasion – and so they should. They’ve absolutely no defence against it. I mean, they get things wrong, of course, every organisation gets things wrong, but we are all answerable to the licence payer.

I’ll test your media training skills now, but in terms of the new culture secretary, John Whittingdale, what do you think his priorities are going to be for the licence fee review?

I’m going to duck it – you’ll have to ask him! I don’t know. I mean, I’ve interviewed him – because he was chairman of the select committee of course, and I interviewed him in that capacity, and he was at that time sympathetic to the idea of some sort of subscription policy for the BBC, funding system for the BBC. Whether he sticks with that or whether he becomes persuaded the licence fee is the best way, I don’t know. I simply don’t know what he’s going to do. I don’t suppose he does either at the moment, because they’re doing all sorts of reviews, and the licence is up for renewal as we all know. So we’ll see.

What’s your view on how journalists are trying to innovate in terms of their funding model. I mean, newspapers, the print press, are dying in the long term, we’ve got crowd-funded journalism... might it be that I have to pay 70p when I listen to the Today programme a few years from now and there’s no licence fee... how do you think that journalism per se is going to react?

Well, you could argue that it doesn’t matter who pays for it – after all, we pay for our newspapers and we’re not surprised to be doing that. We pay for the Today programme – we pay a licence fee. We pay £145 a year! So it’s not as if you’re getting it for free, you are paying for it. I don’t like the idea, personally, of the sort of subscription you describe. I lived in the United States for years, and the public service network that they have there was nothing like as good as we have here, in spite of the size of power and wealth of the United States, because it was done on subscription, and every so often they would have a sort of telethon thing, pleading for people to give money to PBS. So I’m not personally a fan, certainly as far as news is concerned. News, I think, has to be funded independently – well, you could argue, and some people do argue, that it’s a tax, I don’t think it’s a tax –

I don’t either.

But on the other hand, if you’ve got a telly you’ve got to pay it – and of course there are worries about what’s going to happen in the future. I don’t like the idea of having

to put a shilling in the slot to be able to listen to the Today programme – but then I would say that, wouldn't I?

One final question that springs to mind about the Beeb is, do you think they're damned if they do, damned if they don't? I'm happy to pay for news, but then again, maybe Sherlock and Doctor Who and all of these crowd-pleasing shows could be made in the independent sector.

Well, they could, but then that calls into question the whole future. The BBC is a universal provider, so some people who pay the licence fee don't listen to the Today programme. I'm appalled and outraged that that should be the case, but apparently it is! Quite a few, but some don't, and they much prefer to watch Strictly. They're entitled to that for their £145. And the idea that the BBC should be the exclusive preserve of the chatterati, I find repugnant.

You said you're going to stay at the Today programme forever.

Not quite!

But tell us about some of your other activities. You're a prolific author.

Well, I write books, as you said, and I run a charity, which is the most important thing I do, and I have children ranging in age from 15 to nearly 50, and...

I always know how busy someone is, because if you ask to interview them and it's four months from now, you get a sense of how busy they are.

Well, and I sort of renovate houses, I've just finished renovating an old ruin in West Wales. I've been a farmer. I just do lots and lots of stuff, really.

And you stay local to London?

Oh, no – I go all over the place. I've got a place in Greece as well.

Have you ever presented the Today programme from there? Have you got an ISDN line?

From Greece? Three times, I think. Four times. Several.

Well, John – thank you very much for your time. It's been a very interesting and engaging interview and we're hugely grateful. Thank you.

Great pleasure.

