

## **Matt Tee**

### Press Regulator

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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 Matt Tee, chief executive of press regulator IPSO. Set up in 2014 in the aftermath of Leveson and the closure of the Press Complaints Commission, IPSO is now the largest independent regulator in the UK, covering more than 2,500 publications including the Times, the Telegraph and the Daily Mail.**

**Matt himself joined IPSO after a career in PR and government; his many roles included director of general communications at the Department of Health, chief executive of NHS Direct, and chief operating officer at the NHS Confederation. He was also memorably permanent secretary of government communications at the Cabinet Office, an important role that manages comms across the whole of the civil service.**

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

Thank you for inviting me.

**Well, that's quite a career so far, very impressive indeed. We'll go through it later if we may. I want to start with your current role in terms of IPSO. Could you outline a typical week for us? What do you get up to?**

So one of the things I very much love about doing this job which I've nearly been doing for two years now, is that it gives me the opportunity to go out and visit newspapers, to meet editors, to spend time with them. So at least every other week I'll spend the day in a newspaper or magazine office. And so, week before last I was in Brighton, last week I was in Norwich, and that'll be arriving at 9.30. You have a coffee with the editor, moving into sitting in to the news conference on a daily newspaper, listening to the sort of stories they're generating, and then I spend some time sitting on the news desk just watching journalists doing what they do, taking calls, following up stories and so on, through to late afternoon where they're pretty

confident what the paper looks like for the next day, the conversation's been had about what the splash might be, those sort of things. And I love watching the production of newspapers in that way, but also just spending time with those people putting that newspaper together, the passion that people have for what they do, the sense they have - particularly at local newspapers but it is also true at nationals - that what they do matters to the community they serve. So that's a real privilege. The rest of the time I guess I split about 50:50 between being in the office and working with the staff on processing complaints and looking at standards work. We've got 20 staff, it's not it's not a huge operation, we've got an open plan office. It's a very friendly place to work. Between doing that and then meeting with external stakeholders, it might be politicians, it might be interest groups who are interested in the way their group is covered in the press, and things like that, so a mixture.

**And what's the rationale between actively embedding yourself in the newsrooms as it were? Is it to increase the knowledge that journalists have so that they can operate within a code?**

So I'd say it's probably three things. First which is, I'm not a newspaper man by background, so the first time that I did a visit to a newspaper was the first time I'd actually been in a newsroom and sat in a news conference, and while it would be wrong for me to be getting too close to the people I regulate, I do think it's important that I understand the processes by which newspapers are put together, magazines for that matter as well, so that when it comes to dealing with complaints or standards issues I've got a sense of how those decisions are taken, how a decision is made to include an article in a newspaper or not, the different roles that people play in newsrooms in order for that to happen, I think that's important. I think the second reason it's important is, I think it's important that the people we regulate have a chance to hold me to account personally. So one of the things I'll always do is have a Q&A with the editor and their staff where people can ask me about individual rulings that we've made, or how we apply different parts of the editors' code and those sorts of things. I think the third bit of it for me is going out and talking about why the editors' code is important, how we how we hold people to account for it and emphasising the importance of it. I'd have to say, in many ways I thought the last of those, the sort of emphasising how important the editors code is, would be one of the main reasons for going out. I think my experience is that editorial offices take the editors' code very seriously; when I go out you'll see copies of it pinned up around the newsroom. An awful lot of journalists carry a fold up copy of it in their wallets or in their pockets and so on.

**A few of my journalist friends used to have a folded up copy of the PCC editors' code in their wallet. It was like a credit card sized thing in a concertina, wasn't it?**

That's exactly right. We get we do exactly the same, except it's now IPSO branded and the editors' code has changed a bit, but any journalist who would like a copy they're free available from us any time.

**And do you think that it's right that there should be a bit of tension between IPSO and the journalists that you regulate, or is it more a question of that, as you say, they kind of buy into it morally and practically, and therefore it's our question of educating them on what you should be doing and not be doing?**

I think that editors and journalists are bought into the idea of them having a code of professional standards, and that's what the editors' code is intended to be. One of the criticisms we get is that the editors' code committee, which makes up the code, is made up of a majority of editors of newspapers. And I think, before I started the job, I wasn't sure if that was troubling or not, and it was certainly one of the questions I asked myself about going into it. Since I've started the job I think I'm much more reassured that it's actually very important that editors and journalists feel that they own the code. If this was a code that some people who've never worked in newspapers were imposing upon them...

**Or the state, for example.**

Or the state for example, then I think editors would take it less seriously because it is a professional code made for editors by editors with independent input, then I think they take it very seriously. So I do think the code is taken very seriously. I think people respect IPSO's role in holding them to account over the code. There are times where they'll disagree with our judgments, unquestionably. And given that when our complaints committee adjudicates on complaints, it's not always a unanimous majority of the committee that believes it one way or the other; there is always scope for a discussion about which side of the line a complaint fell, but I'm always open for that discussion.

**the Sun memorably was furious wasn't it, because they did a splash saying that 'The Queen backs Brexit' and you guys stamped them down reasonably quickly.**

We stamped them down reasonably quickly. We've given them a due time to respond to the complaint, and the Sun weren't happy, the Sun didn't feel they breached the editors' code, but they accepted our judgement and did what we told them to in terms of publishing the adjudication and the headline on the front page, and actually what they did was to say they disagreed with us. What they didn't do was to say that they questioned our authority or our place in being able to make a determination on that.

**So tell us a little bit about how IPSO came to be formed, because clearly there was a complete nightmare, political mess, at the time, wasn't it? Things seem to have calmed down now, but at the time no one really had a clue what was going on as far as I was aware.**

It's a series of steps. So the terrible news came out that a journalist may have hacked the phone of Millie Dowler, the dead teenager.

**And the Guardian memorably splashed on it.**

And the Guardian memorably splashed on it. And I think that revelation was the trigger that moved people from being concerned about phone hacking into a position where I think the government felt it had no option but to call a public inquiry. Called a public inquiry led by Justice Lord Justice Leveson into the ethics and practices of the press, a quite wide ranging inquiry, and Leveson took evidence from an awful lot of people, produced a long report with lots of very good analysis about some of the practices that the gone on. I think from my point of view, and I was recently out of working in the civil service when Leveson was conducting his inquiry, actually the Leveson Report being triggered changed practices immediately. The relationship between ministers and the press changed, I think the relationship between the police and the press changed at the same time. So to some degree just having the inquiry caused a change in practices.

**Relationships were put at arms length, everything was a bit altogether less cosy.**

Yes. I think that's a fair way of describing it. Leveson then reported, and actually what Leveson said he wanted was for the press to form their own regulator or regulators, but that there should be some sort of accrediting body, a sort of overall umbrella that would certify regulators. And his suggestion was that it should be Ofcom. The problem with that was that there was no appetite for the state being involved in that, and Ofcom is a public body.

**Even if it was a kind of one line of legislation from that.**

I think I think the idea that a statutory regulator, which Ofcom is for broadcasting, might oversee the press was unacceptable, not just to the press but I think to a lot of people who campaign for freedom of expression for example, who are not necessarily friends of the press at all, but actually just believe in freedom of expression, and I think it caused considerable consternation within parts of Parliament as well, particularly the House of Lords. So I think the government at the time was in a difficulty. Leveson's suggestion in principle I think everybody accepted; the practice of it with Ofcom overseeing I think was not acceptable to a lot of people. And then the government tried very hard to find a solution that would meet cross-

party approval, but would enact Leveson as good as, and that the mechanism they came up with was a thing called a Royal Charter, under which they established a press recognition panel which would be this accrediting body that would recognise press regulators. And I think the problem for the government was that as soon as – I mean, in this instance Alan Rusbridger of The Guardian said, “No, that’s a step too close as far as we’re concerned,” for Parliament being involved in the regulation of the press – as soon as that happened it was going to be very difficult for the machinery that that came out of Leveson to survive. What happened as a result of that was the press said about trying to establish a new regulator, which very specifically would not apply for recognition from the press recognition panel.

### **On a point of principle.**

On a point of principle, absolutely. On a point of principle, which was agreed by all editors. That discussion involved all of the national newspapers although I think it became clear early on that the Financial Times probably wasn’t going to join a UK regulator, sees itself as a global publication, and although they were involved in the discussions, later down the line the Guardian the Independent decided not to get involved and join at the beginning. But what did happen was that all of the rest of the national newspapers, covering nearly 95% of the circulation of national newspapers, agreed to sign up. All of the big and medium-sized local newspaper groups signed up, and the big magazine groups signed up – so the vast majority of people who were in membership of the previous regulators were now part of this regulator, certainly covering the vast majority of content that people were reading in a printed or related online format.

### **So in terms of the pie chart of UK media, print media as it were, how much do you cover and how much does Impress cover?**

If you’re going to talk about print media, then the pie chart that we cover is 90% plus.

### **That’s huge.**

The part that is not covered by anybody is very small but it’s the next chunk, and the part covered by Impress is so thin as to be invisible.

### **It’s incredible. Forgive my ignorance, but if I now have a problem with the way the Guardian or the Independent as has depicted me – luckily I don’t – but to whom would I go?**

In both instances, your only recourse is to the newspaper concerned.

**So but if the Sun decided to have a go at me I could have a go at them as well, but then I could also if I was unhappy with their adjudication I could then go to you.**

Yes.

**So effectively I've got one more right of appeal with members of IPSO that I don't have with those that aren't.**

Yes. You have an independent body which will take a view on your complaints about the Sun. The Guardian would say that they've put in place an appeal mechanism if people don't like what their readers' editor comes up with a determination, they've got a sort of semi-independent panel that will look at an appeal to that. But I don't think it's got the same degree of independence that IPSO has when we're dealing with our subscribing newspapers.

**So I appreciate you can't break a confidence, I wouldn't ask you to, but on the other hand, the PCC despite all of its faults at least had those newspapers as members as well and was an industry-run, industry-led organisation. You guys are in a sense the successor to PCC. Why is it in the Guardian and The Independent and the rest of their's interest to stand aside from that?**

So I think what happened at the time was there was a sense of urgency about getting this regulator established, and in doing that, you had some big newspaper groups around the table trying to reach compromises on different parts of the rules and regulations that would govern it. And I think in the end, the Guardian and the Independent's concerns about how much influence the big newspaper groups might have over IPSO with our independence was sufficiently enshrined in the rules, was what led them to just tilt the other side. And let's remember, certainly in the in the in the Guardian's case as you mentioned before, the Guardian has a reputation as the newspaper that uncovered phone hacking. Certainly I think the Guardian saw some of the campaigners, for example in Hacked Off, as being part of its constituency. I think it might have felt uncomfortable for the Guardian to be joining the same regulator as the Sun and the Mail and the Times and the Telegraph in the first instance. So I think I think it was some in reserve at the Guardian, some caution at the Guardian, a bit of 'wait and see'. And I think now, we're nearly two years on, I would hope that there will come a time where the Guardian will feel it's in their interests more than it's not in their interests to become a member of IPSO. The Independent is now in a somewhat different place, the i now is regulated by it so because it was bought by Johnson Press so one of our members, but we still have... the Independent website and the Evening Standard are still owned by the ESI group, and I'm very hopeful that they will come on board in the not too distant future.

**And given that things have calmed down now, do you think it's made your job as chief executive easier because you can kind of get on with the job now and all the kind of 'capital P' Politics has kind of come down a bit.**

Certainly, I think in the first year, my view was that we should keep a fairly low profile, get on with doing the job and trying to be as competent as we could at that, and after a while let the results of what we were doing speak for themselves. So counter-intuitively for me – and I know will come on and talk a bit about my career – but I'm a man who has promoted things, I'm a man who's done reputation management, and in most instances I'd be looking for a soapbox to stand on. And in this instance I wasn't. I was looking to... so we turned down some media requests because we didn't feel we've done enough work yet to have a story about what we were achieving. So after the first year and a bit we began doing a bit more of that because I think we have a story to tell about how we were doing and what we were doing. But in the early days, there was a distinct risk that any time we got up to say something we'd be shouted down by some of the people from Hacked Off. And that didn't make for a very constructive discussion about press regulation and how we were doing.

**Do you think the government has given up on its initiative now to try and penalise people through the libel courts and if they're not members of the state-backed regulator that somehow newspapers are still going to have to be responsible for costs of complaints even if they win?**

The difficulty with this conversation is that it's already become very technical and arcane. You've done a very good job of summarising what it is. If we were to try and actually have this conversation in a way that all of your listeners would understand, and we talk about Section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act and we get into all the detail of it, everybody would either go home in desperation or switch off the podcast, and I don't want that to happen!

**Neither do I!**

And so unless you are an obsessive about these things, this thing is a fairly technical detail in many ways. Now, I know that Evan Harris of Hacked Off would be jumping up and down if he could hear me saying that, because he doesn't think it is a technical detail. The idea was that if you were part of a recognised regulator, if somebody sued you, even if they were successful they might have their costs awarded against them. And the idea was that it was a... you were protected from that if you were a member of a recognised regulator...

**A state-recognised...**

State-recognised regulator, but under the Press Recognition Panel, and so there would be an incentive for people to join in this recognised regulator.

**But it's not an incentive is it? It's more of a kind of bullying strong-arm tactic in my view.**

We are never going to seek... we are not going to seek recognition. So it's sort of irrelevant.

**Yeah.**

Certainly my impression from our members is that they don't see it as... even if the government was to decide to enact it, they don't see it as certainly not a strong enough incentive to want to join a regulator which is recognised by the recognition panel. Your question was do I think the government have abandoned it, and John Whittingdale, who was the previous Secretary of State, said that he wasn't minded to enact it now, he didn't think that the circumstances that Parliament has envisaged existed now, and I don't think Parliament envisaged that the vast majority by circulation of the national press would belong to a regulator that wasn't recognised. I think if you if Parliament had known at the time that the recognised – and we haven't actually got a recognised regulator yet – but the recognised regulator if it happened would be overseeing fewer than 40 publishers, most of whom are micro-blogs in quite small localities.

**Yes, they're quite obscure, aren't they?**

I mean, I love some of these publications. I live just outside Brixton and the Brixton Bugle and Brixton Buzz, I think they're great and they're really a good forum for what's going on in the local community, but they're not what caused Leveson to happen. They are still not... I mean, when you talk to people about what causes them concerns about what's in the press, they talk about, if they do talk about, they talk about publications that are regulated.

**I mean, do you think the PCC was a kind of manifest failure then? Because it is in a sense it failed to prevent phone hacking. You started this podcast by saying you were going and embedding yourself in newsrooms and taking part in editorial conferences. I think there was a little bit with your predecessor, the PCC, where they would just be a body to receive and investigate complaints. It doesn't seem to me to be anywhere near as proactive as you are, for example.**

I think the example of phone hacking was a very difficult one for the Press Complaints Commission. The Press Complaints Commission didn't have the powers that IPSO now has. But in some ways I think when presented with a question about whether there was phone hacking, there's an issue there which is that even at the

time, phone hacking was an illegal act and you have a difficulty there of what is essentially a complaints organisation, firstly dealing with something which is against the law and actually that's what the police force are for, the police as opposed to deal with things that are against the law.

### **Absolutely.**

And I think if we were to be in a similar situation, we would be very public about saying that we had written to the Metropolitan Commissioner of Police to say, "There appears to be evidence of this, we think you should investigate it." But I think that the problem then for the PCC was that it tried to do what it could within its powers, which were all informal, to try and reassure people that there wasn't much of this going on or whatever.

### **That something was being done.**

That something was being done. And very clearly, since it had no investigatory or enforcement powers, it was nigh on impossible for the PCC to do anything effective. Now, I think in retrospect you might ask whether it should have tried to do something when it didn't have powers to either investigate or to enforce anything, and I think it was in a difficult position. Where do you think is true regardless, is that by the time you get anywhere close to Leveson, the Press Complaints Commission's reputation was sufficiently tarnished that it needed to be replaced. There needed to be another regulator.

**You mentioned earlier about waiting a little bit on the PR front before you had more of a story to tell about what you are and what you do. Can we just go into a bit of detail about that in terms of what is the bread and butter of the complaints that you get? Is it footballers who don't want their mistresses outed or they're annoyed at the Sun, or is it more... do you get like immobilised political complaints? There seems to be a lot of this now, doesn't there? I mean, I remember 10, 15 years ago where you might get two or three complaints, whereas now I remember when Andrew Sachs very famously... Russell Brand left a lewd voicemail message about his granddaughter, the Daily Mail whipped up a kind of complaint and you're used to receiving now many dozens of thousands of complaints already.**

Yes. I mean, so... because of social media particularly, where there is an article in a newspaper which causes people to be affronted and cross, it's quite often that we will get hundreds, if not thousands of complaints, about that issue.

**Are they kind of templatised emails?**

Some of them are completely templatised emails. I mean, there are some where it's almost, and it may even be, that somebody has managed to find an automated way of dropping a complaint into our complaints system. So you go to a website where it says 'click here to complain about this article' and it appears to drop standard text into our website form, so all of that creates quite a lot of work.

**I mean, this year I've been dealing with all that.**

But I shouldn't in saying that, take away from the fact that people feel that something has been published in a newspaper that shouldn't have been published, and sometimes we will find and agree with them and sometimes we won't. So it last year the Sun ran a front page which said that one in five Muslim supported Jihad. We had nearly 3,000 maybe slightly more than 3,000 complaints about that article. Actually, we found that was – on balance – a breach of the code.

**Because the poll they ran wasn't sufficiently clear, wasn't it?**

The question that the statement was on wasn't clear that it was talking about Jihadis fighting in Syria or whatever. I mean, the case the Sun made, and they made a good case for it, was that in the context of the other questions in the survey, that people answering the survey on that question would have from the previous questions taken it to mean that. And on balance the complaints committee found against them. So we had 3,000 complaints on that. That was immediate. As soon as it was published. And these days we get the front pages or on social media the night before, so we start getting complaints through that, or I'll arrive in the office at nine in the morning, and my admin team, who get in generally before everyone else, will be watching the numbers totting up in the inbox and knowing they've got to they've got to process all of those. But it is important that people, even if in the end we don't find that there has been a breach of the code, that people have got somewhere to come to complain about those things. So the bread and butter is a real mixture. So last year we received about 12,000 complaints and inquiries, so that's about 1,000 a month. Of those a relatively small number are well-founded complaints that we will take forward to a proper investigation of the newspaper. And there are lots and lots of reasons for that, so we get quite a lot of complaints about the Guardian and the Independent, which we can't which we can't deal with.

**Do they get a standard response, then?**

Well, they get a standard response which says, "They're not members of ours, you'll need to approach the newspaper itself," and give people contact details and all those sort of things. We have quite a lot of complaints about things which aren't covered by the editors' code. So a lot of people think that newspapers should be fair, and actually newspapers are allowed to be biased. So when we get complaints about those things we have to dismiss them, we try to do it in a constructive way, but if you

want to complain that a newspaper has been biased one way or another in something, that's not something we can take. Taste and decency is also not something covered by the newspaper or by the print editors' code. Now one of the reasons I think people – I was going to say get confused, and I don't think it's getting confused – people feel they should be able to complain about those things, about newspapers, is that they can about broadcasters. So the Broadcasting Code does have a requirement of fairness, it does cover taste and decency, and our code doesn't cover fairness. And where taste and decency is concerned, they're a matter for the editor's judgment and the law.

**So the Sun's Page 3, for example, might offend in innumerable people but you can't do anything about it.**

Yes. And the Sun's Page 3 doesn't exist in the way it used to. And I've had conversations with people about the Sun objectifying women, but in terms of taste and decency that is a judgment for the Sun. The courts never considered that Page 3 was indecent in a criminal sense, and so that's outside of my remit as it were. So quite a large number of complaints fall in that. We also get a lot of complaints from what we call third parties. So people who aren't directly affected by the content of the article. Now, if you're complaining to me about accuracy, then you can be a third party – provided you've got a basis for feeling that something is inaccurate. But on all the other elements of the code, so whether it's privacy or harassment or any of those sort of things, you have to be either the person concerned or acting on behalf of the person concerned in order to make a complaint. And we do get quite a lot of people who will complain that somebody's privacy has been breached or that somebody's children should not have been identified in the way they were, and we won't take those complaints forward unless they are taken forward by somebody who has a right to complain on behalf of those people. So there's a fair number that that don't come in. There's then, I mean about third, that get taken forward properly and they are again a mixture. We get an awful lot of complaints from what you might call ordinary people; they're not celebrities, they're not they are unhappy about a story that's been written about them or about an inaccuracy they've seen in a newspaper. And sometimes that is about quite local stuff, like court reports and those sort of things, and sometimes it's about the way that national newspapers portray things. So we get a fair number of complaints about the way national newspapers present statistics, for example, and those might come from... sometimes from academics but they quite often just from people who read the paper who think that isn't presented as it should be, it's not presented accurately in the context of the story. We do get complaints from politicians and royalty about things that have appeared in the newspaper, sometimes from celebrities as well. Often with those, they are people who do also have lawyers, so sometimes they'll get their lawyers to write to the newspaper, but sometimes I think they like the fact that our processes are public, as it were. So when Buckingham Palace complained to us about the Sun front page, they don't do it anonymously. They know that at the end of that complaint we will

publish our adjudication on it, whether we found in favour of them or not. And so sometimes for people like the monarchy or politicians, slightly less so celebrities sometimes, I think the public vindication is something that they value about how we do what we do, and we're happy to take complaints from anybody. If you're Her Majesty The Queen or you're Mrs Jones from Nuneaton, your complaint gets dealt with in exactly the same way.

**You must receive some pretty heart-breaking e-mails really. I mean quite apart from the rights and wrongs of whether journalists have the right to report something etc. etc. there must be some very touching emails of, as you've just said, ordinary people have been caught up in criminality, relatives of family members that have gone to prison and feel very upset at the way the court reporting's gone, even though it may well have turned out to be accurate.**

The one that I'd always give as an example is the reporting of inquests, particularly in cases of suicide, where often I think families don't realise and aren't told by the court system well enough that an inquest is a public hearing and so I think sometimes families – and I've got personal experience of it – are quite surprised that there's a reporter in court. It's sort of... this is a very personal thing. A member of your family's died or committed suicide, and there you are in court hearing the coroner give a verdict about what happened, and there's a journalist sat there. Now, actually there's a very good reason why we have public coroner's courts.

Open justice.

It's to do with justice. And I think when you explain to people why we have open coroner's courts they understand that. But I do think when you've had a member of your family commit suicide, possibly in very tragic circumstances, that appearing in a story in the newspaper, particularly if there are some elements of the story behind it which are embarrassing to the family or cause offence, or that the method or any of those things...

They would expect it to remain private even though...

I can absolutely... and you do you get quite heart-rending emails from people about that. And the editors' code has a specific clause on suicide which talks about a having to balance the detail, even if it's given in court, because partly because of the risk of the imitation effect, but it also recognises that an inquest is a public hearing. It's one of the very few cases where the press is asked to exercise restraint, even though something is given as public information in court that any member of the public could have heard. But yes, in those cases you do get really quite traumatised emails from people. The same is sometimes true of breach of privilege or cases where people have been convicted, particularly if they were convicted of child pornography cases, those sort of things, where the family ring cutely embarrassed

by what happens and feel that it reflects on the rest of the family. But actually it's... the court's public and it's a public record of what happened in court.

**I suppose that like everyone you want a free and fair accountable press that exposes everyone's misdeeds, unless it's your own family, in which case you would quite rather they moved on as quickly as possible! That's just human nature unfortunately, but they don't understand the legal position that IPSO has on that.**

No, I think that's right. I think they also find it... so okay, fair enough, report that our uncle was convicted of x, but why do you have to go into the details about who else is part of the family, who he is married to and so on. And I get that it must be a very difficult thing for a family to go through, having a member of the family tried and convicted. We're often talking about small towns where everybody knows everything and the story will be around the town and they'll be whispering behind hands going on long before the local newspaper runs a thing about the trial. And that that must be very difficult. But we do also have to do protect the newspaper's right to report what happens.

**Do you get involved in the kind of the granularity on the actual language that should be used, so for example when someone kills themselves, nowadays it's inappropriate to say they 'committed suicide'. Because that came from the fact that suicide used to be a criminal offence. Do you issue guidance to your reporters and members about what language they should and shouldn't use?**

So always in this, we have to remember that the decisions about this are taken by editors in newsrooms and I wouldn't ever want to be in a position where an editor felt they were being second-guessed by IPSO. We may disagree with the judgment they make, but they never, ever want to feel that. And it is a matter of editorial judgment as to what excessive detail is, say in the in the case of a suicide. If a member of the public was to complain to us about something being excessive detail, what I would expect is that the editor was able to give a good account of himself and the decisions that were made, that led to their judgement that that wasn't excessive detail, and some of that might involve why it was in the public interest for that degree of detail to be part to be in the newspaper. And I think we generally take the view that where we disagree with an editor about the decision they've taken, that is about a matter of judgement. It's not saying that the editor's judgment was wrong and they shouldn't have made that decision, it's saying, "We've looked at it and we fall on the different side of the line." And in that sort of instance, we would write almost certainly in the adjudication that while the editor had taken care to consider the issues carefully, in this instance the complaints committee decided that the judgment that the editor came to, that we disagreed with it and that the detail was excessive in that particular case.

**How does it work when you have someone controversial, like for example Katie Hopkins who's been on this very podcast, she very famously referred to migrants as cockroaches. Now we've challenged her directly on that and in this podcast and I'm personally of two minds because whilst I find it incredibly unpleasant and unhelpful and downright nasty, I also as a free speech advocate want to uphold our right to say that; she wasn't actually advocating violence against a group of people. So whilst it's very unpleasant, I also don't want to silence her right to say it, and also not to silence her critics, but at your own chair, Alan Moses, said that he was very frustrated with the fact that nothing much could be done about that.**

My chair is a lovely man who uses wonderfully impactful language at times. The straight thing on the Katie Hopkins thing was that migrants as such are not a group that can be discriminated against, and actually in our terms for it to have been discrimination we would have been able to... the complainant would have had to show that an individual or a group of individuals were discriminated against by that phrase. I felt that the phrase was in very bad taste, but bad taste is not something that's covered by the editors' code.

**No, I agree with you.**

From that point of view I think it is important that columnists particularly where it is very clear that this is a personal opinion, it's a column, in Katie Hopkins terms... little Johnny, whoever, the people who cause mass offence, it is very clearly, their picture is at the top of this column, it is very clearly a column which is their view, their opinion. And there were suggestions with the Katie Hopkins piece that it was an incitement to racial hatred – that's a legal matter, I don't think the commissioner of the Metropolitan Police has taken any action over that – but in terms of the editors' code it didn't... there wasn't anything there that would lead to a successful complaint against that column.

**How quickly can you act? Because for example, I know that Mail Online come under a lot of stick sometimes for failing to pixelate the faces of children of celebrities sometimes. I understand that it's a fast paced environment, clearly sometimes they're just trying to get the images up as quickly as possible, because by the time someone said, "Ah they've not pixelated these and I've had a look," they already are pixelated. Does that work then, in terms of you might go straight to Martin Clark and say, "You've forgotten to press the pixelation button here."**

So it's not quite as direct as me talking directly to Martin Clark, the editor of Mail Online, but if we received a complaint, provided the complaint is well stated, so it doesn't say which article of the code it's under, we do, at the beginning of the

process, ask people if they've complained to the journal concerned and my staff who are on the front end who receive the phone calls, and who do get the web queries and complaints in at the front end, will often say to a complainant, "Have you tried ringing Mail Online about that?"

**Because it's in everyone's interests to resolve it as quickly as possible, including the publisher.**

Yes. Exactly so. And our experience is that the majority of publishers, but certainly the big publishers, can be very quick off the mark where there is a complaint which they feel is well founded, and a little bit further down the line. So often in those cases, an immediate approach from a member of the public to the publication will be enough to get something changed, and it never materialises as a full complaint to its own in many cases. Sometimes, where we'll get to is the complainant will come to us, the complaint will be well-founded, and the beginning of our process is that the complaint then goes to the publication for an attempt at resolution for up to 28 days with the complainant, and sometimes we're involved in mediation in that, and sometimes we're not. At that point very often, it's one of the changes that we've seen under the IPSO system, a lot of complaints are concluded a lot more quickly than they sometimes were under the Press Complaints Commission format, because you have that process where the complainant is speaking directly to the newspaper, the newspaper knows that if they resolve it with the complainant that it then doesn't formally into the IPSO system and doesn't get adjudicated.

**So there's an incentive there.**

There's a strong incentive for them to do that. Now, there are people who will criticise that and say, "Ah, but that means you've never got a proper tally of how many times the editors' code has been breached," because they might have breached the code but because they've resolved it directly with the complainant it doesn't enter our system as a breach of the code. And there is a degree with which I would sympathise with that, but my concern for first and foremost is with the complainant, and if a member of the public feels that a newspaper or website has done something they shouldn't have done, and is able to achieve a resolution which they are happy with, then I think that's good enough. And I'd much rather that that was happening in a matter of hours or days than that I was saying, "No, the most important thing is we adjudicate on whether this is a breach of the code or not." And because to get that adjudication we have to investigate properly, we must give everybody the chance to have... usually two rounds of correspondence...

**You're getting into the whole bureaucracy of it.**

You're getting into the whole bureaucracy of it, and rather than have what you might get now, which is a publisher pixelates something or publishes a correction the next

day or whatever it is, rather than that happening in hours or days, you're waiting... a complainant who might have been quite happy with that is waiting eight weeks...

**Needlessly waiting eight weeks.**

... when they would have been happy with the resolution there, so there is a trade-off there, but I think we've got the trade-off in roughly the right place.

**Final question then, on your work. You've never done a standards investigation so far. Do you want to tell our listeners what they would involve, had you done one, and why you haven't so far?**

So a standards investigation is intended where we feel that there are serious and systemic breaches of the code happening, and it's meant to be at the extreme end of things that are happening; this is not editors making a judgment that we disagree with, this is editors where either something is happening deliberately to breach the code, or perhaps there is negligence in breaching the code, it's sort of almost, "I don't really care about it," and we haven't done one. And this is where it could lead to a fine, and some people criticise us for not bringing one of those and bringing a fine. What I would say to the critics is, "Show me where you think we should have done that." Because actually, my view looking across the work we've done, and I look at all of the serious complaints that we get in, is that I've seen very few cases where I've looked at an article and thought, "That's a flagrant breach of the editors' code." I've seen plenty where I can see that an editor could make a case for it even if I disagree with it, but actually a flagrant breach of the code, I haven't seen it. Where that is repeated, or I would say it was serious and systemic, I haven't seen that. I'm very open to doing a standards investigation, but I'm not going to do one unless the circumstances warrant it.

**So, Matt, moving on to your personal career if we can, how does one end up chief executive of IPSO? Presumably went to university... talk us through your career.**

I went to university, I got a first class honours degree in running a student union and a rather less good honours degree in mathematics!

**In maths? Wow.**

In maths. And I became a maths teacher. And the London Education Authority came to an end, and they were my employer, and I was last in so I was first out and I thought, "What do I do now?" and I went initially into training and I ran training courses for young adults on setting up businesses, some of which was about marketing and public relations – I have to confess it was often me reading the chapter the day before doing the training course for them – and that lead into doing

presentation skills training, I joined a start-up public relations company that was looking for somebody to do presentation skills training as an extra onto the bow, as it were. The more I worked with them the more I liked the PR side and began to move over to doing general PR, so at the time a fair number of our clients were health service organisations, I'd been with the PR company for I guess about five years, and I saw an advert for the head of communications at Guy's and St Thomas's hospitals, and I thought, "I'll give that a punt. I probably won't get, it's my local hospital," gave it a punt and got it and spent five years at guys and St Thomas's, loved it. I fancied doing a national job, so we're talking very late 90s, the Labour government had been elected a couple of years before, and there was a lot of churn going on in the government communications set up. I applied for the job of the head of the press office, head of news, at the Department of Trade Industry and got that. Having now recruited quite a lot of directors and heads of news and directors of communication, I think I was fortunate to get that. I'm not sure I'd have appointed myself to it, but I got it and I absolutely loved working in the civil service, loved being that close to where the decisions were being taken, working with politicians, very much enjoyed working with other civil servants, found it really stimulating environment, the government created the first NHS inspector at the Commission for Health Improvement, and they advertised a director of communications job which was a promotion for me, so I went and was director of communications there for a bit. That was my first National Health job.

**You clearly wouldn't be getting all these promotions if you weren't very good at what you do, frankly.**

Very kind of you to say so, and I hope that that's true! I think there is... there's a bit of it, which is when you hold senior roles you're taken seriously for other senior roles, but you do have to have something of a reputation of doing them competently.

**And delivering.**

And delivering. So I went... I spent some time at the Department of Health being the director general communications there, I then took a little step outside communications became chief executive NHS Direct, the telephone and internet service.

**When I went through a career at the beginning that was the bit that was slightly odd to me, because that's not just comms, that's running the whole shebang.**

Running the whole shebang, three and a half thousand staff, you know, £150m budget, all of that. One of things I think about being a comms person is that it's great, but you're always a support act – and I just fancied running the thing. And because it

was around digital and around... quite a lot of it was around comms and marketing and so on.

**Yes, because you could go on the NHS Direct website and put your symptoms in and it would come up with, “This is what you should consider.”**

And so I felt it had a fit with my skills and experience.

**What was your head of comms like at NHS Direct? Were you a great boss or a terrible boss? I don’t know whether you knowing their job makes it a good thing or a bad thing.**

In the chief executives I’ve done I’ve always tried very hard not to do my director of communications job. It’s quite tricky at times! And I would stayed at NHS Direct for longer but the job which I guess I saw as the pinnacle of the public service communications career came up, which was the Permanent Secretary for Government Communication job in the Cabinet Office, in Number 10, and I went, applied for that and got it.

**Who was Prime Minister then, was it Tony?**

No, so this is... my time at the Department of Health was when Blair was Prime Minister. As Prime Minister, he was a man who really took a brief really well; I remember doing a session on NHS finances and being in Downing Street at 7.30 in the morning, and Blair sitting there and saying, “What’s the up sum on this?” and I said, “It’s this, this, this and this.” And he sat through the session and he chaired the session, and he was great. We got to the end and he said, “Right, I think to sum up on this...” *bang, bang, bang, bang, bang*. It was like he just retained it. So that was Blair, but then Gordon Brown was Prime Minister when I was doing... again doing the permanent secretary job...

**Did you have to dodge any mobile phones hurled at you?**

No.

**We’ve had Damian McBride on this podcast, so we know that Gordon had a bit of a temper.**

You know, and Damian was much closer to Gordon central than I was. I was the man who was trying to make sure that the communications profession across government was fit for purpose and that each of the secretaries of state had good communicators working for them, so almost a sort of managing editor role.

### **But incredible challenge nonetheless.**

Yes, it was it was an incredible challenge. I was also responsible for the Government's advertising at the time, we were the biggest advertiser in the country. So it was a big job, and I was there when the 2010 general election happened, and saw it through into the coalition. So I was behind the green doors in the Cabinet Office when all the negotiations were taking place and all that sort of thing, so an absolutely fascinating time to be there, and then getting a coalition government, the...

### **Did you coordinate that kind of... the stroll, the famous stroll of Nick Clegg and David Cameron walking down the rose garden, and all the mutual backslapping?**

One of the things that I think you find working in those sort of jobs in government is handling the press is a job in itself. So I tried, when I was a permanent secretary, to yes, get involved in the strategy of it, but not get involved in the immediate media handling of it – there's too many people already trying to do that. You've got you've got your political press handlers and your civil service press handlers, having me mixing myself into that is another person that isn't adding an awful lot of value, so I tried to step back a bit from it. But I thought the symbolism of it, I remember when they were doing that bit in the rose garden, you remember somebody asking David Cameron about when he said...

### **The biggest joke ever, and he said, "Nick Clegg."**

And Clegg turns to Cameron and says, "Is that true?" And Cameron says, "I'm afraid it is."

### **That was actually great telly.**

It was fantastic telly. And I remember telling somebody as I was watching it and saying, "You couldn't get a fag paper between these two," it's like, you know, "I bet you, somewhere along the line they snogged the same girl at a 16-year-old party." They were quite similar people, you got you got that sense, and it was no surprise to me – I know people were – but it's no surprise to me the coalition lasted the full five years.

### **So tell us how many years you were at the Cabinet Office, how did it come to and how did IPSO come calling?**

So I did two and a half years as a cabinet office Number 10.

### **Was that enough? Were you a complete mess by the end of it?**

It wasn't quite that I'd had enough of it. But what happened, when the coalition got in, the new government was looking to save money wherever it could. The new government believed that the government spent too much money on advertising. I would be the first to say that at times under the previous government there were advertising campaigns we ran that I didn't feel were the best value for money. But I didn't have full control over that. Under the new government it became clear that they wanted to cut those budgets very significantly. So Francis Maude said to me – the minister for the cabinet office with whom I got on very well – said, "I'm not going to set a target for what we're cutting the budget by, I want to call it an advertising freeze." And I said, "Francis, the danger with that is that the civil service will take that's a very simple instruction; they'll just stop." And actually the advertising budget fell by about 85% in the first year.

### **Wow.**

It wasn't like driving a car in the fast lane of a motorway and gently pulling over to the hard shoulder, it was like putting all the brakes on and throwing out an anchor, and it coming to a shuddering smoking halt. It wasn't quite no advertising, but it was...

### **Dramatic.**

To make a case for doing advertising you really had to have a good case for doing it. And the thing that went with that was that the size of communication staff started reducing very significantly, so between 35-40% of professional communicators in government left or got different jobs. By the time we'd done a year and a half of that I just felt it was quite difficult for me to justify doing this permanent secretary job when the budget I was overseeing for advertising was 15% of what it had been, and the number of staff that came under me professionally was also significantly lower than it was. And we amicably agreed that I would part company with the civil service at that point.

### **Did you then register with hundreds of headhunters or whatever? How did the next thing happen?**

I mean, part of the problem of coming out of doing a job that senior is that there are very strict rules about what you can go on to do, and that was quite difficult for me because of the strict rules said that it related to any government department that I'd had workings with, and since I'd worked across all government departments that meant it was quite difficult, and particularly the sort of jobs that communicators go on to do are the sort of jobs where having influence over government is seen as part of those jobs, so it was quite difficult. One of the reasons that I went freelance and set up my very little comms agency, Reputate, at the time...

**So you were left with so few options, could you maybe sell scrap metal?**

Haha. If I could have found any scrap metal I might have sold it! No... one of the things I could do was to establish myself as a small communications agency and it was a good thing to do, I enjoyed it, I found clients reasonably easily, it was nice to get back to doing some hands on comms work. Sometimes the tail end of the Cabinet Office it felt like you were managing change and shrinking budgets more than you were dealing with communication, and it was nice to get back to sort of hands on advising CEOs on comm stuff and doing some strategy and things, so I enjoyed that, and then I got the opportunity to go back into a health service role so I did some time at the NHS Confederation. By then I was in my 50s just, and knowing that I was running out of road with the NHS and with the civil service, and looking around for something else to do that I could make a good case for doing but wasn't either of those places where I'd been employed for most of my career, and I saw the IPSO job advertised and I thought, "That's the junction between the public, the media and politics, and that's a place I've worked before." You know, I may not have worked in a newspaper office but I've dealt with an awful lot of journalists. I understand and how that thing works; pitch for it and see. I also had a fair amount of exposure to the Leveson thing because I was freelance at the point where Leveson was doing most of his stuff and tweeting a bit about it, and what I discovered was if you tweet about it you get the BBC and Sky producers coming onto you saying, "Any chance you could just be a talking head?" And certainly the day that Cameron was up in front of Leveson I spent most of that day stood on College Green outside Parliament just doing...

**Vox pops and commentary.**

Absolutely. So I kept quite up to date with what Leveson was doing, so I was interested in the whole area. So yes, applied for the job and got it and absolutely no regrets.

**Matt, you've had an absolutely, hugely interesting career and what you're doing now is also hugely interesting, and I've learned an awful lot. Thank you ever so much for your time.**

My pleasure.