

## **Nick Ross**

### **Broadcaster**

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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 and broadcaster Nick Ross. Nick found his way into journalism almost by chance, reporting regularly for BBC Northern Ireland on the political turmoil and bloodshed during The Troubles.**

**He moved back to London to complete his PhD but found himself pulled back into journalism, and while still in his 20s, presented programmes such as The World Tonight and The World at One. Over the coming years he would go on to present many documentaries and political shows, but became a household name for launching BBC breakfast television, Watchdog and, of course, Crimewatch, a show he presented for 23 years.**

**On top of all of this, Nick is also the author of Crime: How To Solve It, and Why So Much of What We're Told Is Wrong, the chairman of the chairman of the UCL Jill Dando Institute of Crime Science and also a trustee and supporter of many charities, including Sense about Science.**

**Nick, that's quite a list of responsibilities. Thank you for coming on.**

Thank you. Well, it's been a long time.

**It has! How long have you been doing this now?**

Well, I still think of myself as young, but I can't be! Because I started broadcasting in 1971, and you say that a lot of people and it's way before they were born.

**I wasn't even a glint in my father's eye at that point, I think! What's been the highlight for you?**

Well, I think there have been so many it's pretty hard to pick them out. It's been such a privilege, it's an incredible privilege to work in broadcasting. Maybe less now,

because the budgets are tighter, the commissioning process is more difficult, it's much more competitive. When I was there starting and in the 70s it was... other people had invented the protocols, the syntax, the grammar of how you did it, other people provided all the money, it was a fantastic thing. If you had a great idea you went to a controller and said, "I've got an idea, what do you think?" he or she would commission it, and off you went. It was absolutely glorious. As somebody said before, I went round the world on your behalf – and at your expense – and had a fantastic time doing it.

**Do you still get recognised in the street? Do people come up to and ask for your autograph?**

Yes, which is slightly intimidating, because when I was regularly on TV you just got used to the fact that you were recognised; now you never know whether people know who you are or not. So you have to be... you still can't pick your nose in public.

**Let's go through your career in a kind of hotchpotch sense, as it were. Let's start with Crimewatch. Because that was 23 years; that's how I first came to know your work and you became a household name really.**

That happened because I was presenting a law program on BBC2. Somebody had come to the BBC with a German idea which roughly translates as 'case unsolved X Y' where they took Police Five and turned it into a proper television program with reconstructions, and we had a brilliant executive producer called Peter Chafer who immediately saw its benefits. To be honest, he saw it as a public service programme, but he also saw his potential for audience and he doggedly banged on people's doors and eventually got the controller of BBC1 to allow us to make three programmes, which is fine except that then the police wouldn't take part because they didn't trust the BBC, and frankly we as journalists didn't really trust the police.

**That's not a good start!**

Again, Peter Chafer banging on doors and eventually we got one or two police officers, police chiefs to say, "Okay, you can go ahead." So we made the first program not knowing whether anybody would pick up a telephone. I mean, we take it for granted now about phone-ins; people ring television and radio programs all the time. We had these police officers behind us – incidentally in television, as you may know, it's called the pigpen, it was rather embarrassing for the police officers – and we had no idea if the phones would ring. And indeed, the first 10 minutes they didn't, and we thought, "This is going to be a disaster."

**And was the formula of the very first one the kind of formula as they are now with reconstructions and all of these kind of various asides, rogues gallery etc.?**

Yes, it was – and it was a real challenge getting it on air at all because the BBC was suffering interminable strikes at the time. We forget how much industrial disputes – and I'll come back to that later – which were just a part of life then. And the scenery people were on strike, and so the scenery wasn't completed. And just behind us – Sue Cooke was my co-presenter – was a huge sheet, or double sheet of glass to insulate us from the sound of the calls behind should any calls come, and it was perilously about to fall on our heads. The scenery people hadn't finished it and they still had to, with 10 minutes to go, no rehearsal, eventually the director said, "Right, everybody out – let's get on with the show," and so we went pretty well unrehearsed on the on the first Crimewatch.

**So I imagine when you go on air your adrenaline's going anyway, but was it kind of doubly going at that point because anything could have gone wrong.**

Yes. Firstly, because we haven't properly researched it. Secondly, because we were acutely conscious of the legal minefield we were in. We got something wrong we could be in contempt of court let alone be sued for defamation. And then whether the glass was going to fall on our heads, and then would anybody call in anyway.

**And did the police quickly realise that this was an incredible tool for them as a detection tool, as it were? Because we've had Martin Fewell on, the director of media at the Metropolitan Police, on this podcast and he says that the media is one of their biggest ways of catching criminals.**

Of course it is. We hadn't realised that at the time, the police hadn't really cottoned on to that time. The first programme was such a success that by the end of... pretty much by the end of the programme I think our run of three had already been extended. When the audience figures came in everybody was blown away. I mean, this was commissioned as a public service television. The audience was so big, everybody frankly thought had been commissioned as a cynical way of just getting more bums on seats – it was extraordinary, just was a palpable hit, and immediately we found it easier to get the police on board. But not all of them, and as I recall it still took a year, possibly two years, for the Metropolitan Police, for example, would agree to come on Crimewatch.

**And how would it work in terms of putting a show together, then? Would you literally write to the Chief Constables of the forces and say, "What have you got? What can we help you with?" Did they come to you? How did it work? What was the dynamic?**

Well, it was a bit of both. I mean, I had to go out and producers had to go out, and researchers had to go out and talk to the police. I remember several times going to speak to the Association of Chief Police Officers or to detectives' meetings, trying to encourage them to come to us. Part of it was that they wanted to solve these things themselves, they thought we would steal the glory, and I was always adamant that we must never, ever exaggerate our role. It was always the public, as you say most crimes are solved because the public tells the police who did it, or because the detectives who did it. We must always make sure that we don't steal the glory from the cops. It was always an uphill battle though.

**And how long did you present with Sue Cook?**

Well, Sue left after us seven years, was it? I don't know why she left. I knew Sue very well, because I'd worked with her...

**Great presenter.**

She'd always been a bit uncomfortable being a sort of copper's nark. You muse ask her yourself! She would be a fascinating interviewee.

**And was Jill Dando always going to be the kind of... was she the heir apparent as it were?**

Well, she was the one I wanted as the heir apparent desperately, because she was such a consummate broadcaster, and so I was sort of pushing for that and I think the producers also saw that as a great thing, and I remember meeting Jill saying if offered, would she? Not knowing if she'd say yes or not. Actually, her eyes opened wide. She said, "I can't think of anything," she said, "That I'd prefer to do." She was really keen.

**She was an incredible broadcaster because she had she was accessible but had real gravitas as well.**

She was also a hugely nice person in every sense. I mean I'm only five foot eight, five foot nine and Jill in high heels was five foot nine, five foot ten. So in the opening shot or in the closing shot, it wasn't so bad in the opening shot...

**You had to wear high heels as well.**

Well, exactly! What she did in the closing shot was where we stood side by side was she quietly kicked her heels off so she didn't dominate me.

**That's lovely.**

I mean that... presenters can be pretty catty. She was the opposite. I mean it was such a charming thing to do .

**And how long did Jill present it, obviously until her untimely death?**

Yes. Until 1999. So I'm trying to work out... it was a long time.

**What was that like, to have to open a show with a reconstruction of the murder of one of your own show's presenters?**

Some of the press afterwards made it sound as though Jill and I were sort of very, very close friends which we weren't. We used to go out to dinner with our respective spouses, in her case, fiancé, every now and then, but we were colleagues. On other hand we were very close colleagues, we liked each other a lot.

**You could see that on screen.**

But we really liked each other. It was very difficult. I mean, oddly enough, when I got the phone call, a friend of mine who was the editor of a national newspaper rang me and said, "Are you sitting down?" And you know, when people say that... and then she told me that Jill had been shot. It's a terrible thing to say, but my first sensation was relief, because I thought she was going to say something about my wife or my children. "Oh, it's Jill." And that's a... when I look back on that it's just awful, but that honestly was my first reaction. And then in the next few minutes it really sunk in, and it was obviously a terrible shock. Doing that first programme, I had to ask the producer, the first time I'd ever asked, can we do the introduction pre-record. I wasn't sure I could do it.

**Yes, because you would break down.**

Yes.

**Terrible. And did you get any useful leads from that show?**

It was difficult but it's also frustrating. By this stage. you've got to bear in mind I had been doing Crimewatch for 15 years, when I started I didn't have any interest in crime at all, and certainly no knowledge about crime. After 15 years, I had interviewed so many senior officers, so many detectives, I knew quite a bit – and one thing was pretty clear to me is that you follow the evidence, you don't follow your hunch. The Sherlock Holmes stuff was absolute Horlicks. And the evidence here right from the start did not point to where the public clamour was pointing. The public clamour was pointed to this being a conspiracy and everybody first says because of Crimewatch.

**Yes, that Jill would have presented some segment on some underworld gang lord or something that wanted to wreak revenge.**

Now look, you don't have to be a fellow of the Statistical Society, just do a bit of maths. We haven't had any judges been murdered for sending people down. We haven't had senior investigating officers murdered for sending people down for catching people. We haven't even had police sergeants murdered, or police constables, or for that matter PCSOs since. It's not what happens in this country. So the idea that a television presenter who was merely, if you like, articulating an appeal would be shot... it just didn't make sense, it didn't make statistical sense... you know that phrase that scientists know called Ockham's Razor? You never go for a more complicated explanation if there's a simple one. Well, everybody was going for the complicated explanations.

**Because it had a sense of drama, didn't it, and sense of fancy.**

Yes, it did. And the other things. As soon as... I mean, I knew where Jill lived, I knew that she didn't actually live there, she was staying with her boyfriend, so anybody who'd done this conspiratorially was terribly badly prepared because it was pure chance she went there. We then found whoever had done it had been seen hanging around for a long time, which was pretty stupid, didn't have a getaway vehicle, and shot Jill in a street called Gowan Avenue, which is a long, long straight street with virtually no turn-offs. Now, come on. A professional killer wouldn't think to walk away down a long street with no... I mean, there were so many other things, I'm going to go through them all, but there was so many other things right from the beginning. Well, for example, when we knew she had her key in the door when she was shot. But instead of pushing her inside, shooting her there to muffle the sound, he'd shot her on the doorstep where she'd be seen, where the sound was heard, and all that. Everything conspired to this not being a professional hit. And yet in that first programme it was quite clear that the police were following, as they so often do, the public clamour. It was one of the many occasions when I realised that the police are not sort of forensically independent of public opinion. They are part of public opinion, they're pushed and manoeuvred by public opinion just as the rest of us are. So it was difficult.

**But within a few weeks they feel that they had their man at that point, didn't they, Barry George?**

Well, no they didn't. It wasn't a few weeks, and that was the frustrating thing. There was a detective who was on the trail of Barry George, two witnesses had rung again and again and again saying this man was around at the time, had come to them with trying to get false alibis thereafter, was behaving very oddly and they must look at him. They were really concerned so much they kept bringing back. But the team, including when they had reviews from Scotland Yard, kept going after conspiracy

theories. So this detective knew that the... he was basically put off, and it was a year, after every other lead had gone into the sand, it was a year later while that they went back to this.

**Wow. It's amazing that you look back and you get these things wrong. I just assumed he emerged as the first suspect, but a year? That's just unbelievable. And he was therefore at large for a year.**

And one of the frustrating things is, I don't think there's a reason why I shouldn't say this now, because I did Crimewatch I knew and a lot had fantastic contacts with forensic scientists, with forensic psychologists. And I rang a forensic psychologist on the case and I said, "I think this is a declarable Syndrome, in other words I think this is somebody with a personality disorder. This is... the nearest thing to this is the John Lennon shooting. And he said, confidentially, this is exactly what he told the police. And yet they had ignored him for a year. Only after a year they come back to this. So it was a frustrating year.

**And when Barry George was convicted you clearly thought justice was done. Was it frustrating to see him cleared?**

It was astonishing to see him convicted. I mean, I'll be honest about that. I thought that the evidence against him was very compelling indeed, as long as you think of evidence not in the way than English court thinks of evidence.

**In other words it was largely circumstantial.**

Exactly.

**There was an overwhelming mass of circumstantial evidence.**

Overwhelming evidence of things where the arrows pointed at his guilt.

**And they had just one particle, didn't they?**

Well, that was the frustrating, I mean, really irritating thing actually. The Crown Prosecution Service... people got so used to forensic evidence, which of course we virtually didn't have for most of the last century, but now unless there's forensic evidence, the Crown Prosecution Service is often very reluctant to prosecute, and so they wouldn't unless there was some evidence. They found this ridiculous little speck of firearms discharge residue in one of his pockets.

**Because this has been a year later by the time he was arrested.**

Yes, absolutely. Now, it may have been relevant, it may not have been relevant, but even at the time I was hoping they wouldn't present it because I thought it would just divert from all the other stuff. It's odd that we talk about circumstantial evidence, laypeople do, as though that's secondary evidence. But actually it's what scientists would say it's the best evidence. If you go and talk to people at the Erickson Investigation Bureau for example, it is their best evidence, it's a circumstantial evidence, that's how they put cases together. So we shouldn't diminish it in a way that is often talked about, as I say, rather pejoratively. That evidence would seem very strong, and it seemed to me that if they used this firearms discharge residue they were on a loser to nothing. So I was amazed it was convicted to be honest. Amazed.

### **But glad.**

I thought he did it. And indeed, then as you may be aware, there were several other court appearances, and several appeals rejected, and it went on and on and on and on, and eventually it went to... I can't remember how long, many years afterwards, he managed to get a retrial. At this point some of the witnesses – I mean, it was years later – weren't prepared to give evidence, some of the others had forgotten, and without the... we know that the case fell apart. Interestingly, when Barry George's solicitors then applied for recompense because he had been sent to prison...

### **It was denied.**

Yes. Recompense was denied on the basis that a jury might reasonably have come to the conclusion that he did it. Even so, many people who haven't read all the reams of evidence, who weren't in court, and just go on sort of bits and pieces they read in the media, it's amazing how many of them still think he was set up by the police as though he was the fall guy. I mean, he didn't do it in English law, that was the end of it. But the police aren't looking for anybody else.

### **Did you consider leaving the show after Jill passed away?**

No, never, because firmly I never believed it was anything to do with Crimewatch, and I've always rejected the conspiracy theories. And I happen to know about the most ludicrous conspiracy theory of all. I mean, it's almost infantile. It's so... it's risible. And yet it was actually used seriously in the Old Bailey. And this was that it was to do with the Yugoslav war. And I'll tell you how this story came about. Alison Lewis is, or was, Jill's great confidante, she was her agent, she was a friend of mine, I know Alison, knew Alison well. Alison been asked by the police, who had got anything against Jill. She couldn't think of anything. Weeks later... we had had a letter from somebody, it wasn't a green ink letter, it was a sort of... "Well, I don't think you are very fair in that appeal about Yugoslavia because the Serbs had been

victims as well.” And she mentioned this to her boss. He got quite excited about it and told it to some journalists, and all of a sudden this story emerged that Slobodan Milošević, in the middle of a civil war hundreds and hundreds of miles away, had decided the civil war could be resolved by going and shooting an English television presenter. I mean...

**Insane.**

I mean, God, it's just incredible how these things gather momentum.

**How many years did you present Crimewatch after that, then? Because obviously Fiona joined...**

Yes, so that was another eight years after that.

**And then you didn't really want to leave, did you?**

Well, I did but I didn't want to leave in 2007. I wanted to leave after 25 years, it was then 23 and a half, and it was made pretty clear to me, we had a new... one of things I prided myself on is always getting along famously with producers, partly because I've produced and directed stuff myself, partly because I knew... it's pretty difficult for people behind the scenes because it's often, usually, whoever is in front of the camera or the microphone that gets all the credit for all of their hard work. I'd always prided myself on actually really getting on well with producers and directors. I could think of, in my career of 30, 40 years... I can hardly think of any I didn't really get along with well, maybe one or two. But towards the end of Crimewatch it was quite clear things were falling apart. Maybe it was my fault, I don't know. But what happened is Fiona and I were taken out to lunch by a new executive producer, who said – virtually his first words were, “Well I'm in charge of the show, I write the scripts.” Well, I'd been a journalist for I don't know how long... I mean...

**You kind of knew a thing or two more about that than he did.**

You know, I said... if you want an actor to read out lines then you need to hire an actor but we don't... we write our own stuff. I've always written my own scripts. Anyway this was clearly a source of friction, and I think the feeling was that after 20 whatever years on the show, they couldn't change the show without changing me. That was really the issue. And so it was made clear they'd like me to not have a two-year contract but a one-year contract, that was the writing on the wall, and I said, “Look, if you don't want me I'd rather walk.” And they offered me some other work and I said, “I don't want to be foisted on a producer because you are moving me.” So if people want to hire me, they hire me, but you know, I'll go, and I want to go as soon as I can. But I'll hang on until you find somebody else to replace me.

**But clearly your time on Crimewatch changed you in terms of piquing your interest. The book that I'd like to move on to discuss, *Crime: How To Solve It, and Why So Much of What We're Told Is Wrong*, and you've started the Institute of Crime Science, for example, that's something that presumably you didn't consider at the start of your career but was an interest that you discovered.**

I didn't consider any of this. I mean, I got into television because of Northern Ireland, I was covering the conflict there. I saw myself more as a war correspondent than anything else.

**Did you always want to be a journalist?**

No, absolutely not! I'll tell you about that in a moment. But then after that I was a political journalist, in fact I was a pleasant correspondent at one stage, so the idea of being involved in crime had never occurred to me. And it was just extraordinary. But if there is any issue which shows how bad, how poorly equipped journalism is to cover the world, crime seems to epitomise it. I mean, I just discovered that we the public were being given impressions which were so out of kilter with reality that I became interested in crime as an issue in itself. But just to go back to your earlier question did I want to be a journalist, no. I was involved in student politics. David Montgomery, who went on to very serious big things at the Mirror Group, was in charge of *Gown*, the student newspaper, and I always thought, "Oh my gosh, I'd much rather do it than just report on people who did it."

**Did you want to be prime minister then, at that point?**

I'm not sure I wanted to be Prime Minister!

**I did! I spent 10 years in politics, working with local government and all that, and that the only thing that kept me going was, "One day you'll be Prime Minister, son!"**

Good for you! No, the things I wanted to do, I'm not sure that I felt – or see done – changes I wanted to see made, I'm not sure I wanted to make them myself, I just wanted to help them be made, and I got very much involved the civil rights movement. I was at University in Belfast, Queen's University Belfast, which in those days wasn't that unusual for an English student, but going there I found that this was a time warp. I was with other students, and their parents, who regarded themselves oddly as more British than I was. And yet, lived in a Britain, a sort of a 19th century concept of Britain, where all sorts of voting reforms had not yet taken place, where the bigotries of, well frankly, the religious bigotries of almost Tudor times, still seem to rankle people. It was very, very weird. And after my father died I came across some letters which I'd written in my first year at Queen's, this would have been in

1966, 67, saying, “I think there’s going to be a civil war here,” which I completely have got in writing, but it’s stark how obvious it was if you went there as an outsider, how serious the tensions were. And so was I interested in journalism? No, I was frankly furious with journalism. I realised that journalists know no more than their readers, listeners and viewers; that when the detritus hit the propeller in Northern Ireland, they came across, they hadn’t forewarned anybody, they weren’t interested. They were like sheep; they go with a story because that’s where the story is, that’s what the news agenda is.

### **It’s the spectacle.**

They hadn’t forewarned us. They knew nothing. And the first few months of journalists being there, actually the first few years, they were really trying to learn about the place. I subsequently discovered the government was in exactly the same state too incidentally, which was another story that equally fascinated me. So, far from wanting to go into journalism, I was really cynical about it, and I started doing it to earn some money to supplement my very mediocre amount of cash to see me through university. I found it actually really fascinating. I always promised myself when I grew up I’d go and get a proper job though.

**And why do you think it was fascinating? Is that a kind of natural curiosity in you? I mean, I interview a lot of journalists on this very podcast and some of the motivations are similar and some of them aren’t; there is a natural curiosity, some of them have a campaigning element, they want to change the world. Others just like the fact that the stories are out there and they like getting them.**

Yes. You’ve mentioned the two big elements. Firstly, we’re all nosy bastards. And the second is we all want to change the world. Actually, it’s not true I do know some journalists don’t want to change the world, and in a way I rather admire that.

### **Do they work for the Telegraph?**

I don’t know what they work for! But certainly for me I saw journalism as a means of procuring change, but also it didn’t half let me indulge in – particularly in Northern Ireland – I mean, I could actually go to where somebody’s been shot, I could go to where bombs were going off, and go not just to gawk but actually professionally to report – and I don’t pretend that it is it that there isn’t a buzz following the blue lights.

**Did you think at that time that the problems of Northern Ireland were completely intractable? Because when I grew up as a youngster in York one of the things that was just a political reality is that there would never, ever be peace in Northern Ireland, that the two sides could never reconcile, no party**

**would ever kind of “win, and only an idiot would think that peace would ever be brought to the island of Ireland.**

The two broadcasting events of which I am most proud. No one really knows about any more because they're all so long ago. One was about road accidents, which I'll come to if you ask later on, but the other was an autobiographical documentary commissioned by BBC Northern Ireland about me and The Troubles, and I was there from The Troubles really beginning right up to the point where they got to their worst, and what's fascinating is virtually all the stories that people were told were wrong. You know, most people think it was sort of an IRA problem. Actually, it was Protestants who set the first bombs. It was Protestants who killed the first police officer. It was Protestants who, when we had a student march asking for the sort of voting rights which had been commonplace in the rest of the United Kingdom for the better part of a century, who tried to stop us. Oddly enough, it was the English who largely sided with the Catholics. Since most of us would have come from a Protestant environment that was a rather odd thing. Now I'm not saying the IRA didn't then hijack the agenda, which they did, but it wasn't the IRA that caused it. Oddly enough, what caused it was what was sweeping the rest of the world at the time. Remember, there was the Paris uprising of 1968, there was the Czechs uprising in Prague. There were the civil rights demonstrations rocking America, there was the Grosvenor Square demonstrations in London. It was this liberal, and to some extent lefty, uprising that started it. And if you want to look for the individuals that actually fermented the first problems, they were actually Marxists – they certainly weren't IRA, they weren't nationalists at all.

**Did you think then that the problem would never be fixed at that point? How kind of cynical, how kind of negative were you at that point?**

I was very excited when, at the beginning, when the army moved in... I think it was the general officer commander called Freeland if I remember correctly, who I thought made a brilliant, brilliant point. He warned politicians that all the history of military incursions into civilian areas showed that you had six months to solve this. If not, he said, the army that has today been greeted by people with trestle tables, cups of tea and cakes, will be seen as the army of oppressors, the army of occupation. And boy was he right. And were the politicians awful. Awful, awful. One reason they were so awful is that they knew nothing about Northern Ireland. It was the responsibility of the Home Office, as were the Channel Islands the Isle of Man, indeed the one person who was responsible for Northern Ireland at the Home Office who had his own office in the attic of the Home Office and was responsible for all these far flung places, when there was trouble and he was summoned in on a Sunday, he refused to come until he was told the Home Secretary himself wanted him to go. I think he had been to Northern Ireland once in his life.

**Incredible.**

The government knew nothing. They thought that the settlement in the 1920s which divided Ireland had eventually solved the Irish problem, that the Protestants ruled the north, the Catholics ruled the south and that was the end of it. And they were completely unprepared.

**I've always been shocked. I mean, I've had dealings with the government behind the scenes from time to time, and I've always been shocked anew with how thin it is behind the scenes, we assume these people know what they're doing and they're competent and they're not winging it and chasing headlines, but they are.**

They were winging it on a desperate scale and they were then doing – oh! – they were doing things which were so thoughtless. First of all because they didn't know much they looked to the government in Northern Ireland to bail them out of trouble, it was the government in Northern Ireland got them into this trouble in the first place and they didn't really realise that. And they didn't quite understand that this government in Northern Ireland didn't have the consensual support of the public, so when the government in Northern Ireland said, "I think we should introduce internment," they had no idea that they were actually now about to set fire to the powder keg itself; it just didn't occur to them. It was just... so you asked at the beginning was I confident at the beginning this could end or did I think it would go on forever. It was only when – and I wasn't in Northern Ireland when they introduced internment – but when first I heard about that I thought OMG this is intractable now.

**Going back to your career as it were. You must have attracted attention from the kind of bigwigs at the BBC in London, because clearly your career started to become quite meteoric then, you moved to London and started presenting some major shows. You mentioned earlier that you actually abandoned your PhD rather than carrying on.**

I went to see my prof. All right, rather he called to see me and said, "Look you're supposed to be six months in and we haven't got a bloody thesis title from you, what are you doing?" and I said, "Well, I've been offered all this work from the BBC and I don't know what to do," and he said, "Well, you're mad! You can always come back to do PhD; how often are you going to be offered this before?" So I did. And I moved to London, to my astonishment, and I was, as you say, in my 20s, I was, I thought, a very junior reporter for The World Tonight, and they asked me if I present one of the shows and I was gobsmacked. And I did.

**And presumably elated as well, what a great opportunity!**

It was fantastic, absolutely fantastic. I couldn't believe it. I mean, it was quite intimidating at the beginning. And then I presented a programme called Newsdesk at seven o'clock, and then went on to The World at One and PM. So I was given a...

**How long were you presenter at PM? I always thought Eddie Mair has presented it for 50 years, but of course he hasn't, has he? There was previous presenters.**

Yes, but a long time ago. Shows how old I am! Eddie Mair's been there ever since. Yes, and I loved radio. I absolutely love...

**I still do.**

And so when I was asked to go back to television, because in Northern Ireland I did more television than radio I suppose, to do *Man Alive*, although it was later at that too, I was... I didn't want to leave radio, and it was quite a wrench in some ways. Though I did then go back quite a lot as it happens. But I suppose if there was a turning point, I was a director, or at least I was given 'my Heads', and I said, "I like to make a film." And we had a meeting with her, just lunch in the canteen, a place called Kensington House, and we had developed an argument about the future of the BBC. Oh, times change! Oh, yes. And I was banging on about the BBC ought to make up for market failure, it ought to do the things that commercial didn't do, and we were just romping along doing too many populist things, and they had a bet that I would go get the coffees, they would come up with something we ought to do but it was so difficult to get commissioned I wouldn't be able to get it commissioned. So I got the coffees and came back and I have to say my heart sank because they came up with road safety. But actually it transformed my career. Because that was a programme when I started looking at it, I realised again that journalism, journalists knew virtually no more than their readers, viewers and listeners, that actually if you started doing serious research, there were solutions. And we made a programme which was almost pornographic in its violence, in its reality, the first television programme ever to follow a man dying on camera, being taken and put into the fridge in the morgue, going with the sergeant in the middle of the night to tell his wife she was now a widow... I mean, it was a really very, very strong program called *The Biggest Epidemic of our Time*, which indeed road accidents were at the time; you were more likely to die from the age of four or five until the age of middle age by being killed in a road traffic accident, which killed over 6,000 people a year. Not only did that have a huge impact, because it did get commissioned by BBC2, it was commissioned 50 minutes, it ran for 90 minutes, it was then repeated. It was then put on BBC1 and then repeated on BBC1 several more times, then turned to a schools programme, and ran and ran for years – but it got me in front of Peter Bottomley, who was the roads minister. And I don't know what... he was fantastically receptive, a very courageous man. I said, "You ought to set targets for road safety, this is ridiculous, we're killing 6,000 people a year. These are not accidents, they're consequences."

## **They're avoidable.**

They are consequences of public policy. They're not just consequences of individuals. Because if they were we would have kept it to 6,000 deaths for roughly speaking 40 years. And what happens is like driving a car, you go past an accident, you drive more cautiously and then you forget and you drive faster. And that's what happened. The accident rate went up, so the home secretary Belisha would put in zebra crossings and then we solved it a bit, and we had this homeostasis. To his eternal credit he accepted this, we set targets and Britain led the world in road safety and accident reduction. It's incredible if you think, for all that time we killed 6,000 people. We now kill way, way below 2,000.

**I think one of the earliest kind of media memories I had as a kid was watching Breakfast Time and I think, hadn't the seatbelt law just been introduced? Because I remember either you or Frank Bough or someone was kind of doing vox pops, and I remember a taxi driver being interviewed and someone saying, you know, "Are you happy to wear a seat belt for now?" and he was like, "Oh, the government shouldn't tell me what to do," and I remember, even as a young person, thinking, "Yeah, they should, because you should wear seatbelts. They know better than you, shut up."**

One of the greatest illustrations we had is that the state doesn't have to know best, that you just have to show people the facts. And one of things we did in this documentary *The Biggest Epidemic* is we set up a slide with a car seat on it, and you sat in the car seat and as it slid down this ramp it got up to three miles an hour and then it stopped. And we said to people, "Would you sit in there without a seat belt?" and everybody said, "Yes, it only goes to three miles an hour, of course I would." and then we said, "Before you do, just watch it." And then we showed it. Nobody – nobody – would get in a car or a seat that would stop at three miles an hour to zero very quickly without a seatbelt, because you'd be thrown several yards off the end. The idea that you could survive an impact of 20 or 30 miles an hour without a seat belt was ludicrous. Ludicrous. So all you need to do is show people the evidence. People aren't stupid.

**And has this been a pattern with your journalism, as it were? Because you obviously don't just want to cover the story, the spectacle, get in and get out, you've clearly been moved by that the patches that you've covered; whether it be road safety, you've got involved with a minister, whether it be crime, you've written a book, we'll go on to talk about that in a second... it's not as if you'd just gone in, covered it and then gone out on to the next thing.**

But I think that's true of a lot of journalists. You know, the editor says, "Go and do this story," and you really get fascinated by it. I mean, I can think of another one. We went to cover Mugabe in the early days, and we were making a film called *Portrait of*

a Terrorist. And actually when we realised just how awful the Ian Smith regime was in Rhodesia and how well-educated most of the ZANU-PF people were... I mean, as the story has unfolded, that's another issue, but there was no question that virtually everybody who knew Mugabe and the people around him were extraordinarily impressed. And in the end this became an ironic title, and we went back and did a programme called Portrait of a Prime Minister. We forget that the early days of Mugabe weren't that different than what unfolded later in South Africa. With Mandela. It was only when his wife died and he picked up with his new wife that things really began to unroll and unravel in a very bad way. But you know, there, I got huge involved in Rhodesian and then Zimbabwean politics, and I think that's true of a lot of journalism. You're given a story and you absolutely get swept away in it.

**Let me let me ask you about the BBC, because obviously you've been quite outspoken on it, you're a long time presenter with the BBC. Most people say, "Oh, because of the unique way the BBC is funded it's fantastic, it's amazing, it's always got to have distinctive programming for hard to reach audiences," blah, blah, blah. You have the opposite view, don't you, you think that the licence fee should be abolished and that they should earn their keep via a kind of subscription or pay per view model?**

Let me make it clear first of all I am a passionate advocate, passionate advocate of the BBC not only because it's given me the most wonderful, wonderful career – and I have worked for ITV and I've worked for Channel 4 as well – but my heart, my home, is with the BBC and I love the concept of the BBC – and that's why I am so appalled that it's heading for the rocks, and it's heading for the rocks because the captains – and not just the captains, all the admirals and the armchair admirals – are all telling it to maintain the course it set out on in the 1920s. Everything has changed. *Everything* has changed. Even if you take what Tony Hall is now saying. It's going to be a diminished BBC. Everybody, even the advocates of the BBC, seem to have given up and said, "Oh well, okay, it's just going to be smaller and smaller," and they don't seem to realise that thereby lies ruin. If I go through why things have changed... I mean, none of this really bears a lot of analysis because it's so bloody obvious. Firstly, when the BBC started, if you wanted to make a programme it would have been a radio programme in the early days then television, spectrum was rare. That's why the BBC got a monopoly, and there was a row which was do we give some of the spectrum to independent, to commercial television, and then to Channel 4 and so on.

**And we've got 600 channels now.**

It's not just we got 600 ordinary broadcast channels, but I can take my phone out and I've got almost infinite bandwidth now. I mean it's not entirely literally true, but it means anybody can transmit programmes. I could take my phone out now – I mean, if I turned it on that would probably go *beep-beep-beep* across the microphone – but

I could record this conversation in video and upload it to YouTube. I can edit it on my phone and upload it. When I started in television, to edit television took... it was a really expensive process involving vast machines in the bowels of Television Centre if you wanted to edit video. If you wanted to edit a film then you had to do it with razor blades on steam-backed machines, it was a really complicated issue. Now, anybody can now make programmes. We need to understand that. Anybody can now transmit programs. The idea that the BBC should still have a licence as though it was a monopoly to do these things, to me just doesn't make... I mean, I just think it's risible. It just doesn't make sense.

**But just to play devil's advocate, I mean, I do think your argument has some merit, but doesn't the unique way the BBC is funded guarantee that impartiality? In fact, we had John Humphrys on here a while ago; when George Entwistle was very memorably being interviewed by him on that Saturday morning, I thought he was finished, as a listener. And John subsequently admitted in the interview that he thought he was finished while he was doing the interview. You would get Tom Bradby at News at Ten holding the ITV chief executive's feet to the fire in that level of intensity and accusing her of the things he was accused of. So isn't that what makes the BBC great?**

Absolutely it is. Absolutely. That's why I want... I want the BBC to survive and I don't want it to shrink, I don't want to be battered, but just follow the logic of the argument that's going at the moment. The logic of the argument is the BBC has to shrink. It hasn't got the resources to do everything. So what should it not do? Well, what it should not do, we're told, is that it should not compete with things that the commercial sector should do. And what is the commercial sector do? The commercial sector makes popular programmes. So what should the BBC do? It should make unpopular programmes!

**That no one wants to watch!**

And if it makes unpopular programmes that nobody wants to watch, how is it going to sustain public funding? The whole thing seems to me so ill-thought through.

**What's the answer?**

Well, I think firstly the answer is to accept that the model is broken, because unless you do you're not really going to get anywhere.

**I agree it's in trouble.**

It's not just in trouble; I think the model is broken. What we want from the BBC, I think what I want from the BBC, is two fundamental things. Firstly, I think the BBC projects British values – you've just spoken about one of them, incidentally – and it

does this not just in this country, but across the world. That unfortunately has been a process of retrenchment because it used to come out of the Foreign Office funding and that's been withdrawn, I think really ill-advisedly, and I want to see the BBC as one of our great British brands, I want it to survive and prosper as a *brand* – and that brand is impartiality. That brand is non-advertising, non-commercial. That means that on the BBC, I can talk about Ford Motor cars, I can talk about whatever it is, Elastoplast, Hovis bread, and everybody knows I'm not being paid for it everybody knows I can criticise them as well as say positive things about them – that's the wonderful thing about the BBC. So firstly, that it's the brand itself that's really important. But the other thing is market failure. Journalism in particular has always had massive market failure. We follow the news agenda, as I said earlier, because we are populist. We need to be. We don't call it 'importance', we call it 'news'. We don't call it 'the daily significance', it's the novelty, it's the drama. What the BBC can do is make up for market failure. Now, there's no point just making up for market failure by making unpopular programmes, so I see it more as moving towards an Arts Council of the air, where it has a huge amount of money – and I really want it to have a lot of money – but I don't think it has to make the programmes itself. That shouldn't sound controversial, because already it doesn't take a huge amount of the programmes itself, that was bitterly fought off by the BBC but actually they're getting wonderful programmes made by indies as well. Why not? It's the source of funding that's important. Other people can make the programmes. Indeed, other people can transmit the programmes – but you're right, it's where that money comes from. It's not tainted money. It's not commercial money. It's not money that has to follow a market, what the market is doing, every now and then. So we need to find a method of getting lots of money in. Then should that be the licence fee? Well, I've been a great supporter of the licence fee as a means of getting that money, but I think that's past its sell by date too.

**I agree with you. I'm not a massive fan of the licence fee; I don't like the fact that whether you're poor or very rich you have to pay the same, or even whether you watch hundreds of shows or nothing you have to pay the same. I agree with you. To me just seems the least worst of the of the various funding methods.**

I'm not sure it is the least worst. I think in many ways there are there are things that could be worse, but it has many, many flaws, another of which of course is that even if you take away the criminal sanctions it is a burden on people, it's a hassle. There are lots of things that's wrong with it but the cost of collecting it is huge. I'm just doing a house up at the moment so I've been in temporary accommodation. In the couple of years we've been getting permission and doing up the house I must have had at least 40 letters from the TV Licence people.

**Which of course are the BBC. I mean, people don't realise this but TV Licencing is actually the BBC, it's the BBC that has the statutory duty to collect the licence fee.**

And the main argument for the licence fee is that the source of revenue is independent of government, but it's nonsense. Just look at the political decisions that are made every time, and the in-fighting that there is, every time the licence fee renewal comes up and charter renewal comes up; the fact is politicians make these decisions. There's no reason why they shouldn't be part of general taxation just like the health service. Yes, politicians could cut the budget on the health service. Let them try. Yes, they could cut the amount going to the BBC. Let them try.

**You have kind of said quite a few controversial topics around your crime book and I wanted to talk to you about that, because having read what you've said in context I think clearly the media furore was just out for blood really, and I think you were reasonably unfairly treated; but there were some quite robust and quite eyebrow-raising observations in your book, wasn't there?**

Well, I hope so! Otherwise it wouldn't make much point in writing it. But they weren't written to raise eyebrows, they certainly weren't written to cause outrage, they were written because there are things that we needed to know, that the public needed to know.

**So what was the motivation for writing the book?**

Well, the first motivation was when I was doing Crimewatch – remember at the end of the first programme, I can't remember if it was the first programme or the first pilot we did – after this great litany of appalling events that we were all cramming into an hour, I finished the programme by ad libbing. You know, crime isn't quite as bad, we've condensed it all into tonight, so don't have nightmares, do sleep well.

**I remember when you decided to stop saying that for a couple of episodes and then you basically hundreds of people wrote in and said, "What the hell?" And you even said on air, "I've been basically compelled by you, the viewers, to start to say this again," and resume it.**

Well, Peter Chafer was this brilliant exact producer who got the show on the air, insisted that I said in the second program as well as the first, and I said, "Don't be ridiculous, it will become a cliché." And it was an instruction. So I did, rather half-heartedly, and it did become a cliché of course.

**It was a catchphrase! I don't think was a cliché. People warmed to it.**

Well, it did make me worry that we in the media were... crime is very entertaining; just go into any bookshop, go to a movie, look at all the detective stuff on television.

And it does tend to distort our perceptions of our own risk. When crime started to go down, which it did about 10 years after I started with Crimewatch, two things became apparent to me. One is that Crimewatch, finding and detecting and putting in prison more people, wasn't stopping crime going up. And something happened to start it going down. But more importantly, the press – and by that I mean television and radio as well – were not reflecting the fact that crime was going down. When I wrote the book, that was nearly 20 years later, one could reflect on the fact that crime had been going down faster than it rose from the 60s, 70s and 80s. And yet the media had not reported that fact. One of the greatest stories in front of our noses is that the river had stopped flowing, had reversed and was now flowing uphill. Wasn't that a fantastic, dramatic story? But whenever I tried to say this I was howled down as though this is the most outrageous, naïve thing to say. There isn't a single statistician... talk to the president of the Royal Statistical Society. Talk to the professors of Public Understanding of Science. Talk to anybody who really understands these things now, and of course they know we've had this massive drop. It's not just little; burglaries, domestic burglaries, down 80%. Vehicle crime down, you know, theft of motor vehicles, down 77-78%. Homicides down to the lowest levels recorded in 15-20 years. This is very real! Go to accident and emergency centres; all the hospitals are reporting that woundings are going down. But still, even now, that doesn't make a great story. I wrote the book to correct so many misapprehensions. One of the other misapprehensions – I mean, there are hundreds. Hundreds. I used to believe when I started Crimewatch that a crime was caused by the quantum of evil in society, and that if we caught these evil people and put them away then crime would go down. And I suddenly realised that that's not true. Crime is largely dictated, of course there are always going to be these terrible people in society, and of course there are always going to be the saints who will whatever temptation will never do anything wrong. But on the whole crime surges or goes down depending on how more of us are sucked into it by temptation, opportunity. So if things are easier to steal, if things tempt us into doing bad things, more of us do it. If expenses in the House of Commons are so easy to fiddle, you'll find that even the Prime Minister has to pay stuff back, and some people at the extremes go to prison. Well, it's quite iconic actually, that. Of what happens to the rest of us. It's easy not to pay tax, we don't pay tax. If we get away with not paying our train fare, most of us don't pay the train fare. Some will actually queue up after the train has arrived at the station at the ticket office and say, "Well I wasn't charged for that, I want to pay," but most of us won't. And that runs the whole spectrum. It runs all the way through from child pornography, it's availability. You can demonstrate that. It was almost extinct in the 1980s and then along comes the opportunity and temptation from the Internet, and all of a sudden it surges again. You can see that through homicide, in fact if homicide is a very good example. If you take the United States homicide rate and our homicide rate, you strip firearms from both. You find that the Americans are slightly less likely to kill each other than the Scots, and only slightly more likely to kill each other than the English and Welsh.

**But it's the availability and readiness of firearms that are there in the drawer.**

That's what makes the difference. Yes.

**Did the furore over some of these comments – like for example, rape isn't always rape, and the fact you mentioned in a subsequent interview that you might even be tempted to look at child pornography, as indeed as you made it the point that many people would as well if it was available – did that help with the debate, or do you think the media kind of just seized on yet another furore and kind of used that as a stick to beat you with?**

Well, it wasn't the media, it was the Mail on Sunday, it was a particular cynical editor of The Mail on Sunday, it was still a cynical editor of The Mail on Sunday, they had serialised the book, they ran out of serialisation rights, they wanted to do one more and then they want to create something out of it. And in the chapter about sex and crime, gender and crime, I had observed from academic studies that the majority of women – well, if women were asked, "Have you have penetrative sex against your wishes?" quite a lot said yes.

**It's shockingly high, isn't it?**

If you then ask those same women later, separately, "Have you ever been raped?" the majority of those who have had penetrative sex against will say no, they haven't been raped. Now, the point I was making that even the people who have had these experiences don't see this in slogan terms. Rape isn't always rape in their view. Well, this was published on the front page of The Mail on Sunday without that bit 'in their view', as though this wasn't academic research I was quoting. Nick Ross says, "Rape isn't always rape." Well, I mean, come on.

**And they were doing that just a bit just did deliberately be cynical and manipulative to get a splash.**

Even the journalist... well, the journalist who had edited my book for The Mail on Sunday was frankly appalled, and I think even the journalist who was interviewing me to try and get some rabid quotes was embarrassed. It was one of those extraordinary stories, as happen now and then, where something is blown up. But what was fascinating is how the rest of the press reacted, that most of the rest of the press then couldn't resist following this story.

**Jumping on the bandwagon.**

Even though they've got the chapter – we put out the whole chapter, they could see the thing in context - and I spoke to other journalists afterwards who said, as you

have said, “Come on, this is ridiculous,” but it was. The other quote you raised about looking at child pornography, now that was more my mistake. I was at the Cheltenham, or was it Hay, book festival, I can’t remember which. I was quoting some research which – interesting, really interesting research – where some people put up a website offering free software. When you clicked onto that website you got the choice of free software, but you also got the choice of pornography. The majority of people who clicked looking for free software went for the pornography.

### **Availability.**

The point they were making, is it normal, and I meant to say that I too would be tempted, and actually we’ve been talking about a child pornography earlier and it was my fault that I actually didn’t change the context, so it sounded as though I would look at child pornography. In fact, I then found it even more difficult because I had looked at child pornography.

### **Whilst working on Crimewatch.**

Professionally, yes. We’d had people in from – I can’t remember what it was called, one of the departments – and we’d been looking at the issue and how we tackled it, and whether we could. So I couldn’t even deny that I had looked at child pornography!

### **But in a professional capacity.**

But what is so fascinating about this, and this is one of the awful tawdry things about our profession, is that do we want to give a balanced, proportionate view of the world? No we don’t. We want to sell a bloody good yarn. So it doesn’t matter a few people get trampled, it doesn’t matter a few facts get trampled, it doesn’t matter if our if our readers and viewers don’t quite get the right impression, well what the hell, come on, butch up.

### **What are you up to now, and what’s next?**

What I’m up to now, I mean mostly now I’m being able to... I mean, I’m in a wonderfully privileged position of doing things I just want to do, which is mostly voluntary organisations, it’s campaigns and working for charities. Too many to list but I’m attracted to Cinderella charities, those that don’t get a lot of publicity normally, don’t get a lot of support, and I’m fascinated by health care and very much involved with evidence-based medicine, promoting that, and science generally. A whole bunch of stuff which keeps me pretty well occupied.

### **Never tempted to go back into a kind of mainstream TV presenting role?**

When I left I promised that wild horses wouldn't drag me back. Now, no one would want to drag me back! Because I'm now well into my late 60s, and it's a young person's game, frankly. When I left Crimewatch there were headlines whether or not this was ageist, and there was undoubtedly there was a question, an element of ageism to it. A lot of other elements as well. Of course, that's become unfashionable. It was very fashionable to talk about females and ageism, but no one's interested in males and ageism! But I made the point at the time that I don't object to it, oddly enough. Look, I was in my 20s and presenting The World Tonight, and I pushed out a guy who was certainly in his 60s, maybe late 60s, possibly even early 70s. How can I now complain if somebody in their 20s wants to come in and say. "Hey! You've been there for 40 years! Get out of it! Get out of it!" So, you know, I'm very happy. It was a wonderful career. I don't regret anything.

**I think that's a great moment to end the podcast on. Nick, it's been an absolute pleasure and thank you ever so much.**

Thank you.