

Torin Douglas

Media Masters - November 13, 2014

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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 Torin Douglas. Torin started his career as a trainee journalist at DC Thomson before joining Campaign magazine as a media writer. After a brief stint at the IBA – the then commercial broadcast regulator – he returned to journalism, editing Marketing Week and then Creative Review. Over the next decade he reported on the media industry for The Times, The Economist and The Independent and presented his own media show on LBC. He then joined the BBC. Their media correspondent for 24 years until his retirement last year, he covered the work of six director generals, the birth of BskyB and the growth of the Murdoch empire, the ongoing debate over press and privacy, the ITV licence auction – and subsequent mergers – and the matter of Jimmy Savile. Having spent a whopping 40 years covering the press, he is now a visiting professor at the University of Bedfordshire, a regular media columnist and director of the Chiswick Book Festival. And, I'm pleased to say, was recently awarded an MBE.

Torin, congratulations!

Thank you very much!

And thank you for joining us.

Thank you.

Well, where on earth do we start with that? Did you always want to be a journalist?

I genuinely did. From the age of about eight I wanted to be a journalist, and I think it was probably that board game, Scoop, which some people might remember, where you had a great big telephone and you turned it, and you got stories to put on the

page, and little ads. And I then discovered, not that long ago, that Marl Easton, the home editor of the BBC, also believes that Scoop was what got him into journalism – so it's got a lot to answer for.

How did you get into it?

As a child, I was making newspapers at school, my father lent me an old office typewriter...

So you really did start early!

... I then edited the school newspaper, I edited the university newspaper... my father was incredibly supportive until I was about to leave university and he realised that I was still serious; I hadn't grown out of journalism, and that was a bit of a worry to him, so he encouraged me to go on the milk round, and fortunately I failed to get onto any of these traineeships at companies like Tube Investments and De La Roux, and really boring companies – if anybody is out there I apologise, but to me that was not what I wanted to do. So having failed to do that, I then had carte blanche to go and look for a job in journalism, and you mentioned DC Thomson, I applied to a very, very small ad in The Daily Telegraph for a trainee journalist. I think I actually got the job because I actually went through the door, because DC Thomson were a Scottish company who really kept an eye on the pounds and the pennies. The building was in New Fetter Lane, it was condemned, the buildings on either side had been knocked down and there was a big steel band holding it in one place, and it looked like a tradesman's entrance of some really not very good company – and I did go in, and I got the job.

So did you always have a sense of destiny, then, when you were at school and college and so on, that you were never going to consider anything else other than journalism?

I was fortunate from that point of view in that many people get as far as university and still don't know what they want to do. For whatever reason, I was totally focused on that, I was really interested in newspapers and the media from a young age. DC Thomson was a great starting point, because it was a very downmarket paper, so we all had high aspirations of working for The Times and proper places, and this was not that at all. If you go into WH Smiths, you will find The Weekly News, which is what I was working on, and it's a really C2-D publication, but sold almost a million in those days, I'm not sure what it does now, but it was always stories about the stars, stories about problems... one of the things we always did was My Problem – we would write a really horrendous problem of a reader in their own words, and I had to go and

interview them, and then you'd try and turn it into a story. You'd give them the right to look at it and approve it, but it always had to have an optimistic ending, which was quite difficult on some of these. So there was a woman who was agoraphobic, a man who lost his sight overnight... so this was real journalism, but with a human heart – you had to, in the end, sort of look on the bright side.

Well the man who lost his sight couldn't have done that, surely? How did you give him an optimistic ending?

Well, because there is life after blindness. And so you were always looking for that. But again, it was foot-in-the-door journalism; it was very useful training for me, because often these people didn't really want to talk in the first place, and you had to encourage them to do so. The saving grace was always that they would have to sign the piece in the end, so I always knew that they would have to approve it, and that's why... you never went in forcefully, but you knew – it was the days that you had a news editor who, if you came back without a story, would not be very pleased.

So did you... that was your foot in the door, but did you always want to be a media journalist, or was that something that developed throughout your career? How did that present itself?

That happened because Campaign magazine, which was the advertising... it called itself in those days, 'the newspaper of the communications business'. It was actually about advertising, pretty much, and it had taken over from the old World's Press News. And it was a really trailblazing publication. This was Haymarket, Michael Heseltine's company, and it looked nothing like a trade paper. Trade papers used to be really boring and dull, and used not to say boo to a goose, and certainly didn't bite the hand that fed them. Whereas Campaign absolutely bit the ad industry on the behind, and wrote lots of stories that they didn't like, but was absolutely compulsive reading, because it said who was moving where, both the individuals and also the advertising accounts, so it became required reading. And I was very fortunate that I got there just as three people above me left in the month after I joined, so promotion was almost instantaneous because there were great big gaps at the top, and that was just luck.

It is often just luck, isn't it? Right place at the right time.

Exactly. And I was given the media brief, and of course media and advertising is very important, so I got to know the business side of television, newspapers, magazines, outdoor, so it was fantastic training in how the media works, how they pay for all of these newspapers and all of the commercial television and so on.

And when you were handed the media brief, as it were – because clearly that was unexpected, you didn't know what you were going to get – what were your thoughts at the time? Was it, "I'll give this a go..."?

No – I was really pleased, because it meant that I could actually get my teeth into, and in those days, advertising itself – even though I wrote a book about it later, and I've covered advertising, and I enjoy the whole process of advertising and advertising people – at the time, advertising seemed slightly off-centre, whereas the media and journalism was actually what I was interested in. But Haymarket had this policy in those days, they'd take on bright young people from university, pay them a pittance, if they were able to get another job elsewhere, good for them, there were plenty more where they came from – if not, they'd still got them there on a pittance. So it was a very good business model. So I left...

Good for business, but not particularly good for morale.

It wasn't great for morale, but it was a fun business to be in, and my luck was that in being the media writer for Campaign, I met people at the Independent Broadcasting Authority as well as all the commercial television stations. And the IBA had a job for what they called an information officer – most people would call a press officer – and they nudged me and said would you like to apply for it. They couldn't guarantee I would get it, but they would like me to apply – and sure enough, I got it and I ended up at the broadcasting regulator, which taught me an awful lot about how broadcasting works and was really useful in all of my subsequent career.

So in a sense, I don't know if that's poacher turned gamekeeper, as it were, but did you find sitting on the other side of the fence taught you quite a bit in terms of looking at it from their point of view?

It did, but it also pretty quickly told me that I wanted to go back to journalism – so I used it to learn a lot, I discovered how... I mean, if you've not worked at one of the regulators, it's quite hard to get under the skin of how it works – and of course the first thing I discovered is that everybody hates the regulator.

Of course.

So all of the broadcasters think that they're overpaid, they don't do any work, they stop them doing things that creative companies want to do and so on – and I was actively advised not to go there by various broadcasting people, but they were going

to double my salary, and therefore I thought this would be a useful experience, and it's twice as much money. But as I say, it quickly became clear – and that was a very useful lesson early on – that actually I really prefer journalism.

Did you start to look for something while you were at the IBA, or did another opportunity present itself?

What happened then, 18 months after I joined – and there was a breakaway from Campaign – the editor of Campaign, Michael Chamberlain, left and wanted to set up a rival called Marketing Week. What had happened, and again it's like all trade papers, the publishers and the ad people would love to have a monopoly, and Campaign had killed its rival, Ad Week, and I remember the day that happened, that all of the publishers and the ad staff were absolutely delighted, and all the journalists were morose, because they knew a lot of journalists' jobs had gone and their mates on the other paper had lost their jobs. But it's no fun if you've got a monopoly. Who are you measuring yourself against? Who are you competing against? So anyway, Marketing Week was being set up as Campaign's first rival in 18 months, and it was really useful for me because Michael approached me, and it was the move I needed to get back into journalism. And even if it didn't work, even if it failed, I had got back on the other side.

How long were you there for?

Marketing Week nearly died very, very quickly because it wasn't very good, and Campaign threw everything but the kitchen sink at it. We were very fortunate that I managed to persuade four of the Campaign staff to join us, and there's a huge lesson here – it's about knowing the market. And even though it meant that my position within Marketing Week, which was number two or three, would move down a bit, because some of these people were coming over from Campaign, I just felt that we needed that expertise. So we had launched in 1978 in the march, and by September we had pinched four of Campaign's staff. And at that stage, we started to move. And the great thing about Marketing Week was that it hit that zeitgeist. Margaret Thatcher was leader of the Conservatives, but nobody still believed she could actually become prime minister. But 1978 was the year when Saatchi and Saatchi produced their Labour Isn't Working poster, and that frightened Jim Callaghan, the prime minister, into not going to the country that autumn, the autumn of 1978, when most people expected him to do; he suddenly lost his nerve. And then, the winter of 1978/79 was the winter of discontent, which meant that by 1979, the Conservatives were in a position to win. And of course we then rode that whole Thatcherism wave, and we were there at the right time to cover all of that – so it was a fantastic time to be there.

Internally, did you inherit or carry on the tone of Campaign that you weren't afraid to challenge the industry and be robust with them rather than just kind of being a shrinking violet?

We did, but in a different way, because they were very much advertising – they were the paper of the advertising agency, Marketing Week was the paper of the client. The advertiser, the business people – none of this what some people would call the fripperies of advertising, this was actually how you make money out of campaigns, and the broader side of marketing.

So it was more business-like, more workman-like.

It was certainly business-like, and we pinched the red border of Time magazine, which they hated, and kept trying to sue us about, but it made it look authoritative. And of course, advertisers and marketing people wanted a paper that took them seriously – so you took them seriously, but you still stood up to them, and one of the things that happened there was that I took my media knowledge and expertise to Marketing Week and made it as well as a marketing publication, a media publication. So we wrote a lot about the media, and we challenged the TV companies – who had a monopoly, the ITV companies, 15 regional monopolies – and they were some of our biggest advertisers. And one of the biggest lessons I got was when Thames Television and Trident, the two biggest ITV groupings, both threatened to pull out their advertising from Marketing Week because of stories I was writing about how advertising agencies were angered by their sales practices and things like that.

If you were an A-level student writing an essay, clearly you'd say there's Chinese walls, editorial independence etc. but how did you handle that in that situation, in the real world? Because clearly that would have been a substantial loss in revenue that would have put the magazine itself at risk, but on the other hand, you can't have the independence of your journalism challenged.

Exactly – but it wasn't my decision; I was the journalist, and the brave thing that the editor and the publisher did was to back my journalism and say, "You pull out your ads if you want to." And in fact they didn't, the threat went away, but it was a huge lesson that advertisers using their power to threaten journalism is wrong, and the journalists – if they can afford it, and if the publication can afford it – must stand up to it. And again, that was a big lesson, and I was very, very proud of our publishers for doing that. And after that, Marketing Week established itself more strongly, I then went and launched a sister paper called Creative Review, which meant that we were

able to look at the advertising side and all of those things, and then the big break that I got was that the Times invited me to do a weekly column on advertising, marketing and the media in their business section, so I went freelance – because it was only a three days a week job – and went to work for Harry Evans, which was quite fantastic.

Wow! How long did you work for Harry?

It was how long he worked for Murdoch actually, that was the real issue, because...

You were at the Harry dinner last year, weren't you?

I was. I went up to him and reminded him of what we did at the Times, because...

A genuinely lovely man.

Absolutely fantastic – but you can imagine the interview I was preparing for at the time I was told that he wanted to see me, and I prepped and prepped and prepped. This was going to be the biggest job interview ever, as far as I was concerned. I walked in, and it was not an interview at all – he wanted me, he knew what I'd written for Marketing Week, he liked what I'd written... he particularly liked a piece, and this may explain why he really wanted me, in that I'd written a very flattering piece about him.

That's the way, is it?!

And there were no two ways about it; he had taken over The Times, having been a legendary editor of The Sunday Times, and he wasn't fitting in very well there – Sunday paper journalism is totally different, he was a great one for great front pages and design, and all those books he's edited and written about newspapers, everybody still ought to read those, pictures on a page and all of those books, and I, who had read those books, spotted that the day President Reagan got shot, there were two different front pages of The Times. There was the first edition, which was very sober, and then the second edition had three pictures across the front, showing the moments when he got shot, so you got an idea of him going down and clutching his stomach and so on, and it looked very, very dramatic. So I wrote a piece in my Marketing Week media column saying Harold Evans had really got his feet under the desk, this was the first front page that you could see was his. So I'm not entirely surprised that he then might want to see me, but it was fantastic. I didn't have to be interviewed; we immediately got on to talking about the sorts of media issues that would make good copy – and he was the first to spot that advertising, marketing and

the media were a real subject for national newspapers, not just for trade papers. This was three years before the Guardian media page, before it became a Guardian Media supplement, so again, Harry Evans really ahead of the game and we had a great time for a few weeks, and I can't remember exactly how many it was, but then of course he fell out with Rupert Murdoch and left very hurriedly, and the following day, the Murdoch accountants went through all of his appointments and cancelled them. So I was on three months' notice, having gone freelance to take this great opportunity, suddenly it was looking a bit precarious. So after the three months I carried on doing the weekly column, then on the day my last column was due, they said, "Can you do it again next week?" and then they kept me on one weeks' notice – i.e. no notice – for another 18 months, so I really established that column and it went very well. And the great irony of ironies is that Sarah Hogg arrived as the economics editor, and decided she wanted my space for her space, and so she just dropped the column and took it over for an economics page, just at the time when everybody else thought, "The Times has got something here," and the Guardian started the media page, and others followed suit – but The Times, who had been first in the field, dropped it.

What a ridiculously short-sighted and missed opportunity.

You can say that – I could not possibly comment.

Having created the actual space for people to...

I was very fortunate in that that Times column had led me to write for The Economist, The Economist had seen the articles and said, "That's interesting, we'd like some of that, can you do it for us as well?" and of course, The Economist articles aren't signed, so I was not working for The Times and The Economist, and then LBC Radio decided they wanted a media ad advertising programme. And they could either have trained somebody who was already a radio journalist in advertising, or they could train somebody who knew about advertising in how to do radio, and that's what they did, and they asked me whether I would present this programme, and we did it as a two-hander with John Perkins for about six months, and then I took it over and did it for about five years up until the BBC job came up.

So LBC was your first foray into broadcasting, rather than the written word.

That's right. I had been interviewed before; I had done interviews on various radio stations, BBC and commercial radio, about the media as a sort of "expert", I had also done television – I was on ITN and various things explaining media issues when

something came up and they wanted somebody that they could... again, they wanted a by-line that they could say 'expert'.

A talking head.

Yes – but I'd never been a broadcaster myself.

Were you excited at this opportunity?

Oh, totally. LBC trained me, and I am very grateful to commercial radio for doing that, and last year was the 40th anniversary of commercial radio and of LBC, and I did a lecture for the University of West London about the influence of commercial radio on the BBC and what it had achieved, and so I feel very warmly to commercial radio before I ever got to the BBC.

So you did five years at LBC?

That's right – and I'd have stayed longer, but suddenly the BBC job came up. So what it was, was a weekly programme, it used to go out... it was called Advertising World, it went out at seven o'clock on a Wednesday evening, do it was drive time, and I still, literally still, meet people who say, "I still remember Advertising World, I absolutely loved that programme." And what we would do is have about five items, a couple of new campaigns, and we'd play the ads and so on, and a couple of issues, and then a big interview with somebody who is in the news, and it became a formula that worked very well. And I'd go on the breakfast programme in the morning, quite often with Douglas Cameron, and talk about media issues, and with Brian Hayes in the mid-morning show. I felt very much part of LBC, which I just thought the original LBC was a great station.

So tell us about your move to the BBC, then, your most iconic role, if I can put it like that. Were you head-hunted? Did you apply? What was the position you were offered? How did that start?

I applied. They'd already advertised the job of media correspondent for television, which Nick Higham got, and I did not apply for that – I much prefer radio as a medium to television, and I thought that radio was much more of a medium that could handle media stories, which aren't often the big, big stories, although more recently they have become the big, big stories. But it struck me that they were more broadsheet newspaper type stories, and Radio 4 was much more a media where you could explore all that.

It gives you the space and the depth, doesn't it, radio? Whereas television is very much quite soundbitey.

Absolutely. And so I didn't apply for the television job. When the radio one came up, I rang them up. Because I was a freelance, and I enjoy my freelance life, I was doing a column for Marketing Week about the media still, I was doing the programme for LBC, and by then I was doing a column for The Independent about advertising, called Ad Watch, who had stepped in when The Times didn't want it. So I got a very nice life, but obviously the BBC is the BBC, so I rang the number on the ad, and said, "Can I do this as a freelance?" and they said, "We don't really think so, but why don't you come in and have a chat?" And then I had a formal interview, and I was appointed.

As a freelancer?

No – freelance was never going to work for them, it had to be a staff job. So I gave up my Independent column, I gave up LBC, and I was allowed to keep the Marketing Week column, but only if I did it once a fortnight. I'm not a great negotiator, but I was going to be earning less money at the BBC than my freelance life, because on top of the columns and so on I chaired conferences and gave lectures and so on, so I was giving up quite a bit, but the BBC was obviously a great place to be. So I said, "I really need a bit more income than you're giving me," so the deal was that I would write my column once a fortnight for Marketing Week, so Marketing Week gave Nick Higham the other column. So there was a certain serendipity to all of that.

How old were you at this point?

It would have been 1989, so I would have been 39. Almost 40. It was a great opportunity except that nobody in the BBC news department apart from John Burke, the director-general, seemed to want a media correspondent. It was really strange.

Were you media correspondent for BBC radio?

For BBC radio news, yes.

So you weren't attached to any particular show or department.

No, across... and what happened was... the department is now called news-gathering in the BBC, it was called intake in those days and so on... but basically they run the correspondents and the bureaus around the world, and the programmes are the output, and you are offering – almost like a freelance, some of the time – your wares to the news bulletins and to the programmes, whereas the programmes themselves had their own reporters as well, so there was a real tension there – and basically people didn't want what I had to offer. On the first day, I was shown round the programmes I'd be working for, and I was introduced to the legendary Brian Redhead on the Today programme, and he was told that I was the media correspondent. He said, "Oh well, I hope you get a proper job one day."

Typical! What a legend.

That was my welcome to the BBC! And then Val Singleton on PM, I was then introduced to her. "What is a media correspondent?" she asked. So I explained that a) every national newspaper had one, b) it was like a health correspondent or an education correspondent, except you were specialising in the media – broadcasting, newspapers and so on – and she obviously wasn't convinced either, and for a long time I found it incredibly hard to get on the air. And then two things happened – one was Sky merged with BSB...

Creating BskyB.

Creating BskyB. But they'd had this really bloody battle – haemorrhaging red ink, as Ted Turner of CNN put it – I mean, losing billions. And they merged very suddenly.

I still remember my squaretail.

You should have kept it! It's a collector's item.

I'd be a millionaire now, no doubt.

Well, I'm not sure about that, but at least it would have been a conversation piece! So that happened, then Robert Maxwell fell off, or was pushed off, or jumped off, his boat – and again, this was a huge, huge story, and suddenly these were two big running... because obviously the follow-up after Maxwell's death and so on, suddenly these were two big media stories, and people could understand, yes these were proper stories – and I was the person covering them. So that's what got me through. At one stage, after a year, I was actively thinking of leaving. I thought, "This

hasn't worked, they don't really want me – I'll go back to the freelance life." And then those stories saved me.

So obviously that was the darkest hour before the dawn, as it were, but how did it work in those days, when things started to take off? Were you asked to go on PM or Today as a talking head, or would they say, "We need a package from you on this story." How did it actually work?

All of that. So sometimes it would be a package, sometimes it would be a piece in the news bulletin at the top of the programme, at other times you would be on there being interviewed by the presenters – and that's the way it still is, that a correspondent is all of those things. There are fewer packages these days, because packages are more time-consuming, and there was no Five Live in those days, so actually the time was quite constrained, even though you had Today and The World at One, and PM, and The World Tonight, and you had the Six O'clock News, there was still quite a constraint, and they had more people jockeying for stories and the air time, than space. And then of course what happened was the Gulf War, Scud FM, suddenly a rolling news service for the first time, and it became clear that was a possibility, what you could do with that, and it was then up to the BBC to try and get the airwaves for it to do a news service, and of course you will remember that originally they wanted to put Radio 4 long wave, stop the Radio 4 service on there and turn it into a news service. And there was absolute outrage from middle England and they marched on Broadcasting house – and I covered that march on Broadcasting House, and it was the politest march you ever did see.

Was it like a scene from Father Ted? 'Down with this sort of thing'?

It was, "What do we want? Radio 4! Where do we want it? Long wave! What do we say? Please!" But it was just one of those... and that clip, which I recorded, is still in the BBC archive, and it was on Feedback not that long ago. And they won that battle, so Radio 4 long wave survived, but they turned Radio 5 into the news and sport channel, and I started working for that, and again that was a wonderful place to work for, because it was a different tone from Radio 4.

It's still a great station.

And still a great station. And for the BBC to be able to do two speech stations and still prosper in terms of audiences without cannibalising each other, is a great achievement. The sadness is that it left commercial radio without a national speech station to call... really worthy of the name. So Talk Sport was a sport station, and it's only now that LBC is coming back again and has a national frequency n digital and

so on that it's beginning to do a great job again. But that's partly because the BBC has been doing such a good job on those two networks.

When was the first BBC crisis that you were given where you had to talk about the BBC in the third person, as it were, even though you were technically were the BBC?

There was a leak of the Queen's Christmas message by the BBC's royal correspondent, who had been given an advance copy so that they could prepare their reports ahead of Christmas day. And there had been a Christmas lunch of all of the royal correspondents, and he'd let out the fact that the Queen was going to talk about the IRA for the first time, and The Sun decided to run the story. So the question was how had the BBC allowed this to happen, and you might have thought that this was a story for the royal correspondent, but they didn't want to dignify it with the royal correspondent – either that, or the royal correspondent had run a mile, the radio royal correspondent – so it became a media story. And I found myself at 6.30am, on the Today programme, trying to say what I knew about it, which wasn't very much, and very fortunately, somebody listening to it within the BBC knew a bit more about it than I did and rang me up, so that by seven o'clock, my news broadcast actually was a lot more accurate than the two-way I had done at 6.30am. So that was the very first one, and from then on, you were always aware that BBC stories were sensitive, but you had to cover them robustly and fairly, and as you say, in the third person.

And how did it work in terms of the story workload as things started to heat up, as it were? Was 60% of these stories always about the BBC? How did it work in terms of the overall pie chart?

It's hard to believe it now, but there were whole periods when the BBC wasn't in crisis!

I do not believe that!

I mean, we had five years! And in fact the royals kept me in a lot of good stories. Before Andrew Morton's book, which showed that actually a lot of the stories in the tabloids had been true, they didn't want to dignify them with the BBC royal correspondent covering them because if the BBC covered them, it would give added weight to those stories. So what they did was they covered them as media stories, and they could talk about the 'nasty, tabloid, red-top press', and by the way, this is what they're saying. But everyone could see that this was a roundabout way of the BBC managing to cover the story, but actually doing it in an oblique way. So I had an

awful lot of the toe-sucking and the annus horribilis, all of those stories I would be covering – and sometimes the royal correspondent would be in there as well, but they were very much ‘here is the tabloid press, exposing the royal family’, and as I say, when they became seen to be true, it was less of a media story – but then of course there was Diana’s death. That was very much a media story, because by then she was a cover star who sold millions of copies all around the world. She had been on holiday with Dodi Fayed all around the Mediterranean, being followed by the paparazzi, so for all sorts of reasons that was a huge, huge media story.

And indeed because the Royal Family arguably mismanaged the PR of that, at least initially, didn’t they? And you covered that in some depth.

Very much they did. You’ll remember that the Queen was up at Balmoral, and in fact there is a wonderful film – The Queen – that shows exactly what happened. They had misjudged the mood, and it was a very new prime minister, Tony Blair, and Alastair Campbell who actually got them through it, and they did a very good job at that stage. It was a weird time, with the nation wearing its heart on its sleeve, very un-British, all of the flowers up and down the Mall, the crowds and so on, and flowers at Kensington Palace and at Buckingham Palace and so on...

The royals must have felt they were on another planet.

Yes. It was very, very strange. And for me, as the journalist who was covering that week – or one of the journalists covering that week – I was on the Today programme every morning at 6.30am with Paul Reynolds, the royal correspondent, and every day we would be looking at it from the two angles, right up until the funeral on the Saturday. And then, after the funeral, Paul could actually relax a bit, everybody else could relax, but you may remember that Earl Spencer gave this ringing attack on the press, accusing them of hunting down his sister, and calling for press controls. Suddenly I was now the lead for another whole week, and again, back on the Today programme at 6.30am.

Did you get any sleep?

It was one of the times in my career – and there have been a few- when you’re not sleeping a lot, because what happens is, you’re working up to the midnight news, and the papers are coming out at 10.30pm, and then you’re preparing your piece for the following morning so that you’ve got morning bulletins piece that will go out at 6am or 7am, and then they want you live on Today and Five Live. So when those stories really roll, you don’t get a lot of sleep.

What was the next crisis then, if I can put it like that?

That was Hutton.

So there was a relative period of calm then, between Diana's death and Hutton.

There was. I mean, obviously there were big issues about press control and the PCC, and the future of the PCC, but the other thing that happened was that the National Lottery came along, and I spotted that as a media story because there was an awful lot about the media in it. Media companies bid for the contract – there were eight people bidding for the licence to run the National Lottery – there was going to be a huge amount of advertising on television for the lottery, and the newspapers would be full of it. So from the moment the National Lottery was conceived, I grabbed that as a story, Ray Snoddy did the same for the Financial Times, and it kept us in stories for years – because it became so controversial and such a big, big issue, whether it was the fat cats at Camelot paying themselves too much, or the misregulation by the director-general of the National Lottery who was spotted going on helicopter flights around the States, paid for by GTech, who were part of the consortium, and then of course, behind the scenes – and then in front of the scenes – Richard Branson constantly banging on about how unfair it was that Camelot had got it and how he was going to do it for no profit and so on, and of course the next time the licence came up he was back there again, so that story just ran and ran, at a time when the BBC was relatively quiet.

Because the spotlight went off the Beeb for a while.

And kept me in stories – because otherwise, if there are no media stories around, a media correspondent can feel very vulnerable.

I was quite politically active at the time that Hutton came out, and I remember speaking to a senior MP a couple of days before it came out, and they were convinced it was going to completely obliterate the government. I remember this person saying that everyone trusts Hutton, he's going to completely kill us etc. etc., and the day that it came out, clearly, shall we say, a different conclusion was reached.

The reason everybody thought that Lord Hutton was going to produce a reasoned, reasonable report, was because the whole of the enquiry had been done in such a brilliant, open way. When he was appointed, everybody said, "He's a hanging judge,

he's not going to let the BBC off the hook; he will do what the government wants." That was what people said at the time, and that was published. Then, when we had this very open enquiry, where it was all in front of the cameras, every transcript was on the web, everybody could read it...

We're used to it now, with Leveson and so on.

Absolutely – but there was a big tent at the law courts, hundreds of seats for journalists and so on, and again, it was a weird time. For 12 weeks or so, every day, that Hutton enquiry led the news – and there were revelations after revelations, and everybody was giving evidence from Greg Dyke, the director-general, politicians, Tony Blair... it was because a man had died, and it was an amazing enquiry. And at that stage I think everybody thought, "This has been so well-handled that the report itself will be well-handled as well," and of course it wasn't, it absolutely blamed the BBC and virtually nobody else. And again, that was an amazing day because we were obviously gearing ourselves up for covering it the following day, and presuming that we were going to have to read all these hundreds of pages to find out what actually the conclusion was – and the BBC had got all sorts of correspondence in different bits at Westminster, who were going to be reading it and making sure we hadn't missed a particular line...

I suppose it had two challenges, the Beeb, at that point, because it had to handle it corporately. In fact, didn't it get an advance copy by 24 hours, as I recall?

It would have done, though they never admitted it.

You weren't allowed to see that?

Absolutely not – and that is one of the strictest rules, and it still remains so, that the BBC corporately will not give BBC News information and so on, and certainly not give the correspondence. But what then happened is it was leaked to the Sun.

It was – famously, of course.

So I actually started covering the story at 10.30 that night, which is when The Sun came out, and of course you are preparing for the following day and suddenly you are knocked back, because it seems to be all there. Now, you don't know it's true at that stage, and it wasn't going to be published until the lunchtime, so from that

moment on, from the midnight news, for the breakfast, for Today – everybody was saying, “The Sun is saying this, we don’t know if it’s true.”

But they were stating it as fact though.

No – absolutely. They were saying it as fact and it was totally one-sided. Now this at least had the advantage that when the report came out, I only had to look at a couple of references and I knew that the Sun story was absolutely true, which meant actually I was much better prepared when the report came out – I knew what was in it because The Sun had told me so, and The Sun had it right.

It’s easy to focus on the crises, as it were, but would you say that the next big crisis that you dealt with was Savile?

Yes, it was. In terms of those really big stories that I have covered over my career, Diana’s death, and then the Hutton debacle, and then Jimmy Savile and the mishandling of that whole Jimmy Savile story.

How did it first come on your radar? Did you know that Savile was a wrong ‘un? You must have heard a few rumours here and there.

Certainly I had heard nothing about paedophilia. We all thought he was odd, but I hadn’t heard anything really serious about it. The story really became public after Newsnight had already dropped its story, because that wasn’t public at the time that they’d done it, or not particularly public, none of the national newspapers were doing much about it, the Oldie magazine had stories about that Newsnight had been looking into it and then it had been dropped allegedly because the BBC wanted to run its tributes and so on, but it took quite a long time for that to emerge, and it only really emerged when ITV picked up the story through the same investigator that the BBC had been using, he went over to ITV, and they devoted a gull hour to a programme which the BBC was going to devote 10 minutes too – and that’s why I have sympathy with those who say Newsnight should not have run it at the time they originally considering it – I don’t think they’d done enough work, I don’t think they had enough interviews, it was not going to be easy that this great figure, who was much loved by many people still in those days, I don’t think they had enough. So what they should have done was kept digging – and that was where it went wrong, that the editor just took people off the story rather than saying, “There’s something here, let’s keep going.” And then ITV picked it up – and everyone forgets, everyone was very nervous about that ITV programme.

It's an incredible accusation to make against someone.

It is, absolutely – and also he'd had great lawyers, and of course he was dead now and the legal constraints weren't quite as strong, obviously, as they had been. But he'd always put lawyers... I mean, national newspapers had tried to expose him and had failed, so there was knowledge there and so on, but of course what nobody knew until that ITV programme went out, and other people started coming forward – because even the ITV programme didn't have that many people – suddenly the waves broke, and it became clear what this was. And then, of course, Newsnight went exactly the wrong way...

And tried to over-compensate.

Yes, exactly. On the back foot, let's try and do something different, and... no, and so it all went very, very badly wrong.

But even that was strange, wasn't it, how they didn't name the other person, shall we say, and left it to people like Sally Bercow and people like this.

Well, they thought – and again, it is still not clear exactly what happened, despite all the various reports and so on – that by not naming the politician on Newsnight, they were therefore in the clear – and they also thought they had the right man, because other BBC programmes using the same journalist had covered it. So they relaxed, but it was very, very poor journalistic practice, and in the end, the director-general went as a result of it.

Final question on the BBC, then. Because I am fascinated by this, which is why we've spoken for so long! What's your fondest memory of your time there?

I really enjoyed the whole period. It sounds a cliché, but it was a great privilege to work for the BBC, to be able to speak to the nation... it was Brian Redhead who said, very pompously, 'you can have a word in the ear of the nation'. But it is absolutely true; those seven o'clock and eight o'clock bulletins on the Today programme, or a two-way, you know you are talking to all the important people, and you can say what you want to say without fear or favour. So those would have been my best moments – being on the Today programme, telling people something they didn't know, and explaining them, because the other thing that the journalist has to do is to make sense of things, and often the media is quite complex, and what I've

always tried to do is to make it accessible without dumbing down; you can actually tell people what is going on and why it's going on.

And what are you up to now, then?

I speak, I write, I chair events, I really enjoy chairing conferences, often about eh media but also about community issues as well. I advise people either formally or informally, I do a lot of pro bono stuff for charities, there's something called The Clore Leadership Programme, which trains the arts leaders of the future, I do a media training day for them, which is the only media training I really do, which is great.

That's fantastic. I would kill for your contact book. You must be aware of the commercial value of that! I mean, I think I've got a fiver on me now, but do you get people who approach you because, clearly, you must be still a really strong influencer, a connector, a door-opener, whatever you want to call it?

I like networking, and I use those contacts that I have partly for commercial gain – I did a conference at Bafta for Broadcast magazine where we decided what we want is chief executives as speakers. And once we had decided on that goal, I set out to get chief executives. We had Adam Crozier of ITV, and we had David Abraham of Channel 4, and we had Simon Fox of Trinity Mirror... we had an array of chief executives. So occasionally, that contact book can be very, very useful.

How do people follow you on Twitter and keep up to date with what you're doing?

It's @TorinDouglas on Twitter, I've got 16,000 followers, which is partly because I was at the BBC, and I persuaded them when I left that if I told all of my followers who was my successor at the BBC on Twitter, they would allow me to keep my followers. So I do that, I also tweet as Chiswick Book Festival (@W4BookFest), I'm on a trust that runs the awards for religious broadcasting, the Sandford St Martin Trust, so I tweet as that (@sandfordawards), and one of the great things you can do about Twitter is you can retweet yourself if you have all these different personas! I'm not sure you're meant to, but it works well. Twitter is a fascinating medium; it is a medium in itself, and because all of the media owners now use it to promote their stories, that's why it's become the great clearing house for stories, and why often news will break there first. But it's partly also because other people can now break news in exactly the same way that the BBC, ITN or anyone else does. So those charities that I work for and those arts organisations that I help, it's all free – and if you use Twitter properly, it can be of great benefit.

Indeed. And on that final note, Torin, thank you so much for doing this podcast – it's been a genuine pleasure and a huge privilege, and I've learnt a huge amount.

Thanks, Paul – I've enjoyed it.

Ever been tempted to go into politics?

Funnily enough, I would never have said I'd be interested in that, but actually, the part of the job that surprised me the most probably is, I do quite enjoy the political side of it, political both in terms of our dealings with the government, and political I guess also in the sense with 220 competing publishers as your membership base, you have to tread quite a diplomatic line, and the medals only take you so far. Yes, it helps, of course, that most of them would know who I am, and have some acknowledgement of quite a good career, but that only gets you so far. If you start to get it wrong, or to favour one lot of people over another, you would soon get yourself into trouble.

It's very difficult.

So I don't know... I don't think I'm perhaps cut out for the Westminster world...

Should I speculatively register barrymcilheneyforpm.com?

Well, you could do! I suspect you might be wasting your money...

I could sell it back to you 10 years from now!

You can sell it back to me when I'm hobbling around looking for a job! I don't think I'm sufficiently interested in party politics. I'm really interested in promoting media, within that magazine, literacy, all the things that you need to consume and to produce quality – as I regard it – editorial, which I think finds its most beautiful form in a magazine.

Barry, it's been a pleasure to take you through this swashbuckling adventure of your career! We've been chatting for ages, I've really, really enjoyed it. So thank you very much, Barry.

Thank you very much.

