



QUESTIONS FOR RICHARD MURRELL

**** MAY I OFFER A DISCLAIMER FIRST ****

**** I AM WRITING MY ANSWERS AS AN INDIVIDUAL, AND PLEASE DON'T TAKE THESE REPLIES AS BBC POLICY ****

1. Is directing BBC News harder during the situation we are in?

When you have to deal with a National and International crisis, yes it can be a difficult time for everyone.

There are two main strands to this:-

1/ The practical – we are just like you .. we need to think about “Social distancing” within the BBC building – from places to sit, work and eat .. I would say over half the workforces is now working from home.

In our output galleries, we’ve had to reduce the number of people inside the room to the minimum, and ensure we are all at safe working distances – whilst still making sure the viewer gets to see all the right things.

Presenters are doing their own make up and hair, and all the guests to interview are via Skype etc

2/ The Information

All main broadcast networks wish to ensure they are broadcasting factual and useful information, and we need to rely on expert guests:- medical, statistical, cultural – whilst ensuring we are not distracting the audience with false information.

Other than that, it is important to remember most News broadcasting is about bad news (It’s rare to get a good news story) .. so we have to practice “Detachment” from the information we are broadcasting – otherwise the sadness with things like the “1 Minute Silence” would be hard to cope with.

2. Which event during your career would you recognize as your proudest moment?

Strangely enough, it’s one which was never broadcast. I have worked in BBC Radio and Television. You can work with the most famous people: Actors, Politicians and all manner of public figures.... Eventually, being “Starstruck” is a very rare thing.

My own directing experience has only been in News, but there was an occasion where the BBC wanted to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the first British “Satire” programme called “That Was The Week That Was”. The celebration was meant to be a party held inside one of the largest Television studios in Europe. With less than a week to go, a half hour comedy script had been produced by several cast members.

The leading figure of the programme was Sir David Frost – and as his News Programme series director, I was asked if I would direct this comedy programme (I had never directed comedy or music at that time).



Those of you who have performed on stage will know this one ... NEVER take a look at the audience through the stage curtain ... for it will make you VERY nervous

Well, I did look at the faces of the people sitting in our studio – every famous comedy performer (From John Cleese to Ronnie Barker), Politician and television face of mid 2000's television was sitting there – and my directing would be projected for all of them to watch.

My heart was in my mouth .. my fingers shook .. but we made the programme without a problem.

The thing that made it such a good feeling for me – I was able to bring my Mum and Dad to the audience .. they got to see me work – they saw my world .. and at the end of the evening is was wonderful to hear their reactions .

3. Have you made any mistakes while live? And how did you resolve it?

Yes I have – though not too many

The Director is the last person to have control of what is going to be broadcast. One slip of a finger and the picture from the wrong camera goes out, or the picture of a guest waiting to talk is cut up just as they are yawning.

Behind the scenes, a lot of work has gone into a script, but occasionally the presenter stops speaking to take a breath (But it sounds like they have finished speaking) so the director can push a button that plays the video report... but sadly, the video plays at the wrong time – I have done that a few times !

Or, the computer system fails (That has happened quite a lot over the past year because we have changed our computer system .. and we are still getting used to it).

To get out of such things:-

1/ Don't panic ...

2/ Plan – look at what has happened .. use training and memory of things which have worked in the past to get you back to where you need to be.

3/ Act – sometimes that can mean don't do anything else (For instance if the video report is running, keep it running).

4/ Apologise ... if you've cut off the presenter – then saying sorry always settles them

.. take responsibility – A Director is in charge, and if someone else has made a mistake, ask yourself if you briefed them correctly

.. always make the discussion about “Why something went wrong” constructive – what lessons can be learned to make sure it doesn't happen again :- More training? More information? More sleep the night before?



5/ Blame is foolish .. in a professional arena, individuals feel bad about making mistakes – publicly blaming someone achieves nothing other than embarrassing them in front of everyone – be more constructive

4. How do you keep everything going with all that going on - how do you stay focused?

That's a really fascinating question

The simple answer is – the more time you spend in the directing seat, the more you get used to processing lots of information quickly. You discard what is not important and concentrate on what you need to think about.

Think of it this way

On a break from class, have you stood in a small group of people .. chatting, and you notice just beside you, is another group having a juicy gossip session.

If you stare at the group, your brain can focus in on what is being said .. even though you are not standing with them.

The same happens in the control gallery where I sit. There is the sound of the programme, discussions behind and to the side of me about production. Adding to it, my directing colleagues are setting up guests on Skype for interviews .. there are a lot of distractions.

Somehow, when in the Directing chair, you can zone out the distractions and concentrate on the sound from the presenter microphone.

In my world of news – the second hand of the clock is the enemy (A Friendly one) – for our programmes are of a fixed duration. The programme Director, along with the Output Producer need to make sure everything fits the time slot duration of programme – that tends to focus the attention !

Oh, and the computer automation system we use to play the videos and move the cameras has a display panel which can flag up a problem is approaching.

5. How do you prevent propaganda from taking place?

Oh my goodness, I could write pages in answer to this, but for the moment, let me boil it down to ..

Define Propaganda

.. I don't mean to be facetious, but even ten years ago we would have a very fixed idea of the definition.

Since 2016, it almost appears that Propaganda could be defined as any information the beholder does not like – and this applies to ALL SIDES of ANY discussion.

In the almost one hundred years of existence, the guiding principles of the BBC have been rooted in the need to “Inform, Educate and Entertain” – buried within that is a pride in the historical legacy within the broadcast industry – the BBC is one of the most trusted sources of information.

Side Issue – In the United States, President Ronald Reagan (In the 1980’s) removed legislation which required broadcast networks to be impartial - and therefore there has been a slide into one political side or the other have their own “Friendly media”, and all other voices are to be ignored.

In the UK, there is legislation in place to ensure broadcasters are fair and balanced.

This is especially important when reporting foreign news – take the Middle East for instance.

Language matters, and a misplaced word in a script can lead to unintended angry crowds on streets – protesting about “Evil foreign interference”.

The role of the journalist is to stay impartial, but you have to be sensitive to the way in which all sides in disputed regions listen to the descriptive language used in reporting.

I pose a question back at you for discussion when you do get back to the classroom –

In the quest to be seen as fair to all sides of the argument, my employer can often ask both sides of a debate to send representatives to the studio.

Are we right?

There have been occasions where we have invited a Climate Scientist, and a Global Warming Denier to discuss the issues?

Should we equate both sides there?

It’s known as “False Equiveillance” and it is a problem which is proving tough to get the right balance on.

6. What are the selection criteria when choosing presenters?

Great question with a myriad of answers:-

- The station manager will have a “Look” in their head, do you fit?
- Some broadcasters need their presenters to be “Zany, Crazy and Wild” whilst others want a clear voice, and a solid personality
- Is it a subject that requires specialist knowledge (Science/Financial etc)
- Some “On-Air” presenters got their lucky break because the named presenter called in sick (Yep, I have scrambled a newsroom producer onto set (Via Makeup) to take on the role of presenter because of sickness)



- You need to be confident without being over confident, a reassuring presence to the audience.
- You need to be confident at interviewing guests with the minimal amount of information on THEIR specialist subject, and be empathetic, sympathetic or at the other end of the scale – deal with their evasiveness

I don't think I have worked with a presenter who has not put in time as a producer – though that may only be applicable to News broadcasting

7. How important is ethnic representation?

It is vital in multicultural Britain that we address this.

I am a mere director, and therefore I can only offer an opinion, but that IS based upon what I have seen and observed.

On the technical side of broadcasting, Gender and Ethnic balances have followed the track of industry – too few BAME and Non-Male faces have been seen.

Similarly, on the Production and Journalism front, the main resource for young people coming into the industry has been via a few elite Universities.

Change happens slowly, but I am proud to say change is happening.

From BAME representatives on the Editorial Board, to a female Head of News and female/BAME heads of all major departments.

At the other end, there are now many schemes to encourage new fresh talent in all forms to come into the technical/production side.

Not perfect yet, but moving in the right direction.

8. How do you train presenters to handle sensitive topics? and what is the most challenging topic to present in your opinion?

This is one area where you cannot train someone to be empathetic – you would get found out every time.

The pathway to being a presenter (In News) is almost exclusively via production jobs – therefore you will be used to dealing with sensitive subjects.

From the other direction, no presenter would wish to be known as the crass one who gets it wrong all the time.

Suffering, poverty, war and inhumanity are all incredibly difficult subjects in their own right.

Sadly, most news programmes are full of stories on each and every one of those subjects. It can be emotionally draining to see the same report several times - and as you saw in the final clip of the talk – we often use joke telling as a distraction from the awfulness of what we are seeing.

9. How long does it take to produce a script and how much of this is improvised?

There are various ways in which we script things, it breaks down like this:-

Planned Events

There are things like the G8 Meeting, European Conferences, Commonwealth Heads of Government meetings that are known as Diary events – here the dates have been set, attendees can be researched, and background video reports can be pre-made.

The “Planning Producer” will create everything for the presenter to read out - those scripts come pre-prepared

On the day events

At 07:00 there is a big editorial meeting, and again at 11:00, 14:00 and 19:00

This is where senior managers give the younger journalists tasks. That could be finding pictures to match a voice track which has been sent to us from one of the reporters, to writing a who script for what we call a video “Package” – the pre-recorded video report

An example of this

(PRES)

We begin in the US -- the global epicentre of the coronavirus outbreak -- where more than 58-thousand people have died. Over a million people have been infected with the virus. And there's more bad news expected on the economic front for the world's biggest economy. Shortly, the latest gross domestic product figures will be released and, if current indicators are anything to go by, the outlook isn't good.

Think about the language used, think about the way in which the sentences switch between important elements of information.

I spoke to the producer who wrote the script – it took a total of 20 minutes to check all the elements and publish this script into the newsroom computer system.

The script was then looked at by the presenter and they made sure it fitted with their vocal style.



Breaking News

Here, script writing is totally unpredictable – you may only get a few minutes to write up what you are hearing – usually starting with

“There are reports coming in to us .. (Usually at this point attribute where from), that ...

2 minutes at most

Technical Breakdown

From a presenters point of view, the most hated moment – where the director says

“It’s gone wrong, we have 2 minutes left on the programme – fill !

Then the poor presenter has to earn their money by talking sensibly.

10. How many precautions are taken before recording a report on the streets?

Safety is the number 1 consideration, along with checking to see if you need any permits from the local council.

So

Don’t block access to public walkways, shops or any public access.

Just because you have a camera, it doesn’t make you invincible, and sometimes cables need to be draped in public areas – you need to ensure there are no trip hazards.

Once you start filming, is it likely there will be a crowd watching, and if so, what will you do if they interrupt you – do you need someone for “Crowd control”

Ensure you have a good wind shield on the microphone.

The sun is the best light source know to humans, but it does it’s own thing – do you have sufficient lighting “Bounce boards to ensure



11. Have you ever filmed from a dangerous situation? Such as during riots and warzone.

I have been very lucky, and only been in two difficult situations: -

- We were covering a carnival in Bristol, and during the afternoon a number of people decided to protest about Police brutality .. the crowd started to fracture – and we pulled all our equipment out before an evening of rioting started.
- I was making a programme in Dhaka, Bangladesh with a small production team. On the second morning, just before we left the hotel to go to the recording site, we heard the army had decided to protest their pay rise by taking over the capital. This involved tanks on the streets. Whenever I direct a programme away from the UK, I always plot a route from the crew hotel AND the recording venue to the local British Consulate - and in fact on that day, we spent 6 hours in the Embassy until it was safe to leave.

12. What is the best route to get into organisations like the BBC? An apprenticeship? University? What should I take at GCSEs, A levels and Degrees?

I was fascinated to listen to Marco Bertozzi from Spotify, who observed something really interesting. Yes, a degree is a wonderful thing, but if you measure job progression after a number of years, the direct entry/apprenticeship candidate may well be at a more advanced level within the company just because they have been working their longer.

Ask yourself “What is the unique thing about me, that will make me stand out”
and thinking about the place to wish to work .. “What is is about THAT company which makes you want to work with them”

If you wish to get into the technical side of broadcasting, then subjects at school which reflect an appreciation of technology are good. You would also need to show practical understanding of microphones, lighting and camera lenses.

The are “Dreams come true” stories of people making it big, though I suspect every success story starts with a determined person, pushing their education to the best it can be (Everyone is different and so don’t measure yourself against others) – just achieve the best YOU can do,

That does mean start point is GCSE’s and then onward.

Keep an eye on work experience pages at

- <http://www.bbc.co.uk/careers/trainee-schemes-and-apprenticeships>
- <http://www.itvjobs.com/business-areas/entry-careers/>
- <https://careers.sky.com/earlycareers/>



13. Is it harder to get into the industry without a degree? Would you recommend doing a degree first or going straight into work?

Great question, and time for an evasive answer.

A Degree is a mighty fine thing – it shows the world you have the ability to learn and retain complex information in ways previously unseen in your educational history. Plus, you get to build an amazing social network and events.

It gives you theory in a particular subject.

I have to tell you though, some years down the line of seeing someone working in our studios, it's impossible to tell the difference between the degree entry person and the individual who built their own editing studio, made short videos for YouTube, and then saw something online and applied. If you are educationally brilliant, then you will have such a life affirming time – especially if you get into one of the “Red Brick” institutions.

Online broadcasting is fast, reactive and utterly inventive. There ARE pathways in without the degree, for the person who has the right practical experience.

The one thing you can guarantee on whichever path you take – there will be knock backs, disappointments and rejections. The only positive answer to that being – perseverance and self belief.

Take each knock back as a building block – get feedback and stand upon the experience to move on and up.

Sorry it's evasive, but there are many ways in which you can get in – you just need to keep going until someone says “Yes”.

14. Is studying languages going to benefit someone aiming for a career in journalism?

Yes

Yes

And Yes again

Being multilingual is such an advantage.

It empowers you with the greatest tool you need - the love of language to describe what you are seeing/feeling/knowing and observing. Remember the basics of journalism are:-

Who, Why, What, When and How?

To be able to express that in several languages is a gift worthy of the role.

Oh,

and it allows you to push to be the person sent to cover a big story somewhere around the globe.



15. If you had to work in a different profession, what would you pick???

Congratulations – you win the “I’ve set him the hardest question” tag !

Yours is a generation where 50% of you will have jobs that have not been invented yet.

When you find something that “Fits” perfectly with you – you know it in an instant.

I can answer you with slightly different roles in the same profession (Would love to direct the Graham Norton show ..or Produce something like the Harry Potter series of films), but I am in my “Happy place” with this job –

Wish I had a passion for something else, but the fire within me is broadcasting I’m afraid.

16. As you almost certainly know, some of us now have a very long summer - is there anything you would recommend doing at the moment that will help us in the future?

What is your passion?

Remember a time before Covid-19? The war on plastic was started by individuals your age.

All it takes is a blog that is viewed . Do you have passion for a subject .. then make sure you spend your time writing and recording about it. Start a podcast, or make videos for TikTok.

I have a aspiring journalist friend who started a financial blog on Instagram – her passion is for Financial Journalism. Through learning her subject, posing information in an accessible way, she is building a following. Her observations have a loyal following – and her writing is propelling her to the career aspirations she holds.

All rules that applied years ago have been swept away – this is an amazing time to sell yourself towards the career you wish you have – blog/film make/podcast and get noticed.

You don’t need expensive professional equipment – phone cameras or audio recording will do – the thing that actually defines it – Is the idea great?

Get making your films or podcasts !

17. Do you still wish you continued working in radio stations or do you believed it was the right thing to move onto television?

Life is a journey and though I LOVED my time in Radio, the creative part of my brain knew I would be better suited to making television programmes. Put it this way .. I could tell in my mind, the jigsaw pieces of programme making fitted better when in TV than Radio

Back then, PODCASTS did not exist, and to be honest, right now the world of audio broadcasting is exciting, thrilling and challenging – if you are going to make a career in broadcasting, you have to find the place where you feel most “At home”.

18. Since the news is always changing, how do does the BBC prepare for the unexpected news that must be covered?

Throughout Great Britain, and around the world there are reporters who are exclusively or freelance hired by the BBC to report from the area where they are based. The international staff may have to move around the entire country where they are based.

The freelance staff are known as “Stringers” and they may work for British and/or American and/or European broadcasters – paid for each individual story they cover.

In unexpected or “Breaking News” – it is a “Tickle effect” ... we may hear a rumour of something happening. This starts a chain reaction of checking the story from a number of sources, phone calls to the reporter to will need to speak to sources they trust.

They also have to send a basic voice track for use by all BBC Radio, and what is know as a “Piece to Camera” which is a basic recorded video report that can be used by TV and BBC Online.

It develops from there.

The nation often mourns a death of a famous person – so there are a team of journalists who prepare video and audio obituaries (Known as “Obits”) – they are held in storage areas so we can quickly respond to any sad news.

19. If I make a video documentary on my own how do I get it to be seen by the BBC? Or even noticed?

Social Media has been the biggest game-changer for creative individuals.

YouTube, TikTok offer a platform to film and documentary makers unlike anything seen before. All it takes is finding the right name on BBC, Sky or ITV online sites, and tag them in – if your material is unique, challenging or interesting .. it will get seen.

20. Do you think people will still watch the BBC or news in general in 25 to 50 years’ time?

I give a qualified YES to the question.

For more than three years the narrative in the general press is of how linear tv is dying.

Additionally, how the public have fallen out of love with the BBC.

Then something of the epic proportion of Covid-19 comes along, and 80% of all viewers to the address by the Queen turn to the BBC.

No matter how technology changes, there appears to be a social need for humans to group together in some form for big public occasions. The BBC plays that role, and has been part of British life for nearly 100 years.

Change IS happening, but I will think you will see the BBC will evolve with that change.