

# Gordon Craigie

*This month, I'm in conversation with Professor Eamonn O'Neill – journalist, broadcaster, author, academic and co-host of the Talk Media podcast...*

THE GREAT SCOTTISH historian, the late Professor Geoffrey Barrow, once observed that “the failure to establish a Scottish organisation for public service broadcasting was the greatest cultural disaster that Scotland suffered in the twentieth century”. Yet, although power over broadcasting is still reserved to Westminster, there are positive signs that things are changing in Scotland, facilitated by technology and the entrepreneurial spirit of individuals who are living the “be the change you want to see” mantra. One outstanding example of this is *The Big Light*, a podcast network which launched in February last year, just as the coronavirus pandemic was really starting to occupy everyone's thoughts. In the same way as we've all become more dependent on digital streaming services, like Netflix and Amazon Prime, for our televisual entertainment, the co-founders, Janice Forsyth and Fiona White, saw

the potential for a similar digital spin on the traditional radio offerings. The underlying ethos of *The Big Light* lies in “creating high-quality audio and connecting an international community of listeners to the very best of contemporary Scottish culture” which is “aimed at the rapidly growing global audience for audio-on-demand”. One of its first ventures was *Talk Media*, an hour-long weekly podcast co-hosted by Stuart Cosgrove and Eamonn O'Neill, which aims to provide “a forensic analysis of the media” from a Scottish perspective.

Much of that “forensic analysis” is provided by Eamonn O'Neill, an award-winning investigative journalist, accomplished author, Associate Professor in Journalism at Napier University, and the butt of an endless stream of good-natured jibes from Stuart Cosgrove during the podcast! “Stuart and I are extremely good pals, but we meet on this strange Venn diagram of our relationship. He's passionate about things I couldn't give two hoots about, notably football and northern soul music – I couldn't tell you the first thing about either of them – and I'm passionate about things that he couldn't care less about. He winds me up endlessly about my love for Ernest Hemingway and my investigative work, and my lack of knowledge about football almost fascinates him. He'll say things like, ‘you do know that Pele was a football player, don't you?’ and I'll say, ‘was he, I thought he was an actor in a Sylvester Stallone film set in the Second World War!’ That kind of stuff winds him up, but we meet in the middle because we love the media, and we also have a quite united world view on many things. We've both been heavily influenced by the United States and popular culture – in his case music and in my case journalism and writing – so we both know America intimately and we understand it at a kind of level that would bore most people to death! And we've got a similar sense of humour, so I can't express how much esteem I hold him in, but the rare times I say that are like gold dust, so...!”

That chemistry between the two friends sets the tone

*Eamonn O'Neill, an award-winning investigative journalist, accomplished author, Associate Professor in Journalism at Napier University, and the butt of an endless stream of good-natured jibes from Stuart Cosgrove during the podcast!*

Eamonn O'Neill





## *An independent mind...*

for the *Talk Media* programme. Each week, Eamonn and Stuart are joined by a guest to discuss and analyse some major stories that have featured in the media that week, and their mix of professional insight and good humour almost compel the guest to enter into the spirit. At least, that's my take – full disclosure, I'm clearly and obviously a fan of the programme! – but it's also borne out by the steadily growing audience figures, with *Talk Media* currently sitting at number 3 in the all-time Apple Podcast News Commentary Chart (Great Britain). Eamonn explains the background to *Talk Media* and how it evolved from a short slot on a mainstream radio lunchtime programme into the flagship show on *The Big Light* network: "It wasn't a show in itself, it was always just a segment on the Radio Scotland lunchtime show on a Thursday. Sometimes Stuart and I would only chat for about 15 minutes because the news would run over or there was a breaking story or John Beattie would be talking about something – John was a very good host, and he gave us a lot of breathing space. After the segment run was finished we just sort of shrugged and said, 'well, that might be it'. But there was such a great response that we decided we should carry on. We wanted to maintain the innovative side of it, because Stuart and I had talked and cheered on endlessly the idea of a growing digital media landscape in Scotland, and we were approached by about six outlets after the Radio Scotland run had ended. When Janice and Fiona from *The Big Light* approached us – we both knew Janice, I knew Fiona but not as well, and we'd all worked together at Scottish Television in the 1990s – I liked the pitch that they made to us and I liked the fact that they were women, because I'm a great supporter of breaking the glass ceiling in journalism and broadcasting. Most importantly, they had great plans and they knew what direction they wanted to go in, so that's why we went with them."

For me, one of the great things about *Talk Media* is that the guest contributors come from a range of backgrounds and are not at all the typical 'talking heads' that are traditionally relied on by the more mainstream organisations. Eamonn confirms that this is quite deliberate and is very much a theme he's happily borrowed from elsewhere: "What they often do in television is this thing called 'vox pop', where they randomly stop people in the street and get your granny to tell them what they think about nuclear submarines or something. It's hard because the average person in the street hasn't a clue about these things, therefore you're

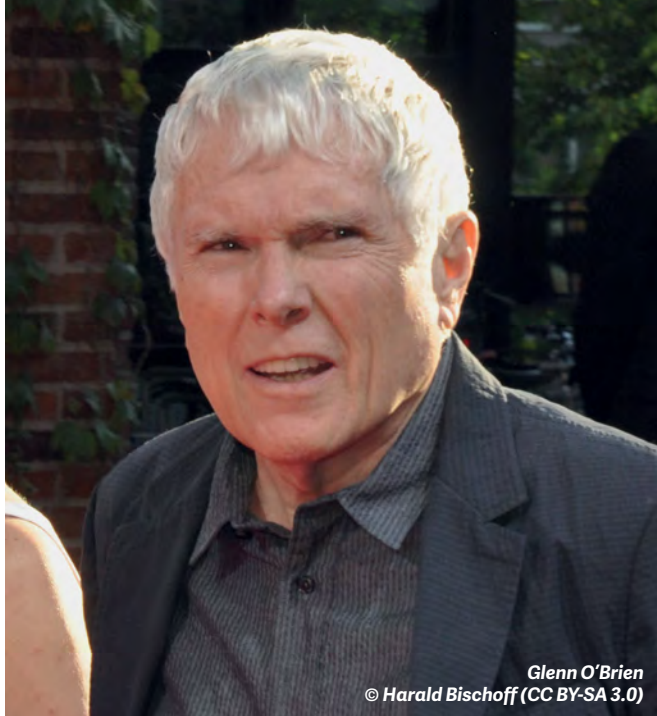
representing them as being clueless. If your only objective is balance, then you'll always get someone who says this is great and someone else who'll say this is terrible – it's a lazy trope and a lazy practice. I hate it, I always have done. I've always thought there's other ways you can do this, other ways you can talk to people. One of the areas which had a huge impact on me was American journalism, particularly long-form writing in magazines. I loved *Esquire*, *GQ*, *The Atlantic* – which I ended up writing for – and *Vanity Fair*, who I had good connections with. They all came out of New York City, where I was lucky enough to work for a wee while – I actually lived around three hours away in Apalachin, a town in Upstate New York, which is mostly famous for being the remote sight of an infamous mafia meeting in the 1950s that was accidentally busted by a local cop who spotted a lot of dodgy out-of-state number plates on fancy cars!"

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Ernest Hemingway





Glenn O'Brien  
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From his time in the States, Eamonn singles out writers like Tom Junod and the veteran war correspondent Scott Anderson as having influenced him greatly: "These guys helped me with my own writing, they inspired and encouraged me, they read my stuff and 'put a word in' for me, and thus opened doors that usually remain closed because the world of New York magazine publishing is one of the hardest to crack anywhere. I really owe them. The other great influence on me was the investigative work of Dominick Dunne, who wrote for *Vanity Fair*. I was lucky enough to meet him at his country home and talk privately about his working methods and so on. We stayed in touch for years. He was something of a mentor and I was genuinely upset when he died in 2009.

"I also got to know about people like Glenn O'Brien, who wrote columns for the men's magazines. He was into fashion and cutting-edge music – I wasn't, but I enjoyed reading his

*There were all these incredible performers that would go on to big careers later on, but we got to see them in their early days on this bonkers television show at three in the morning!*



Graydon Carter  
© Mark Seliger  
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work. When *YouTube* came on the scene, I was able to reverse engineer his career which started with Public Access Television doing the kind of stuff that was on at three o'clock in the morning, in black and white! He'd have on people like Andy Warhol talking rubbish, or genius. Chris Stein, who ended up in Blondie, was his co-host and they had Deborah Harry on when she was just hanging about New York City. So there were all these incredible performers that would go on to big careers later on, but we got to see them in their early days on this bonkers television show at three in the morning! It was live, with probably only about five people watching, but I just thought this was a great place for them to start their talent, hone their talent, and either be kicked off or developed. I thought about that quite carefully and I thought that maybe the early stages of podcasting, and those kind of talent bases, are the updated version of that old Public Access Television.

"Another example would be someone like Graydon Carter, a great editor, who went on to do *Vanity Fair* and now he's doing *AIR MAIL* ([www.airmail.news](http://www.airmail.news)). If you go back through his career, he was just a guy who washed up from Canada and basically invented himself! He turned up in New York and ended up working in *Spy*, [a satirical magazine], and he created the *persona* of Graydon Carter – he's a brilliant guy, an amazing guy. But if you reverse engineer these people's careers, you see that they didn't all go to university, they didn't all get degrees in journalism, and they weren't all experts. They were just people that had something to say.

"And that's the vibe that I like from what we do on *Talk Media*. The people we speak to come from different mediums, like comedians, writers and lawyers who've featured in the media – the former solicitor general was on at one point. We've had artists – like Ricky Ross and Amy Macdonald, and Val McDermid's pretty much a regular – and we try and get people on that are not journalists. It's not meant to be a hermetically sealed bubble, it's just people that have something relevant to say about modern Scotland, modern UK, modern Scotland in modern UK, and modern Scotland globally. And maybe nothing about Scotland, maybe looking at Scotland from the outside. [Recently] we had Dorothy Byrne, the former editor of News and Current Affairs at Channel 4, who was born in Paisley but, as Stuart said to her, 'you were kidnapped at an early age and taken to Blackpool!' We don't just go to the usual list of talking heads and guests, and we've got different ideas for how we might develop it. I don't want to give too much away, but at some point I think we might end up doing something where we meet the public, not necessarily for broadcast but just live events in different places. We're still discussing these different ideas because we've had lots of people contact us to ask if we could do that, especially post-Covid. Don't forget when we launched this there was a pandemic going on!"

I've written before about deliberately seeking out more Scottish-orientated entertainment during the early days of lockdown last year, which is exactly how I found *Talk Media* in the first place, and I wondered if Eamonn felt that was an important factor in the podcast's success: "I would agree, I think we became people's friends and, although we had popped up on the BBC every so often, this actually allowed us a longer run. People have got used to us, got used to our voices, and got used to our daft habits and the things that we like and don't like. The nicest things people have said about us is that we're obviously open-minded, curious, sincere, and we're open to changing our minds as well. We try and bring to listeners, from our professional backgrounds, the things that influence us that we think they will enjoy as well. We don't always get it right – I've passed on some stuff that



**SPECIAL INVESTIGATION**

**THIS IS ANTANAS GECEVICIUS. DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR HE LED A FEARED PLATOON OF PARTISANS WHO KILLED THOUSANDS OF JEWS AS HITLER MARCHED ON RUSSIA. NINE YEARS AGO, HE WAS BRANDED A WAR CRIMINAL BY AN APPEAL COURT JUDGE. NOW HE'S LYING IN AN EDINBURGH HOSPITAL, TOO ILL TO STAND TRIAL. WHY DID THE AUTHORITIES NOT ACT SOONER? EAMONN O'NEILL UNCOVERS THE REAL REASON WHY ANTON GECAS WILL NEVER BE BROUGHT TO JUSTICE**

A selection of Eamonn's investigative features



I think nobody would be interested in – but I'm sincere and I'm open about it. We have no hidden agenda, we're genuine, what you hear is what you get.

"Arguably one of the failures of the media in Scotland is that it can sometimes be very Glasgow-centric, Edinburgh-centric, or central belt-centric, whatever way you want to put it. We'd probably like to speak to more people across Scotland, certainly from, say, the Highlands and Islands, because we're aware that there's a bigger audience [than just the central belt]. Stuart is obviously always very loyal to Perth and Dundee, and I'm native to Lanarkshire though I now live in the Scottish Borders, so I can understand why we want to reach all of the people from all of these areas, because Scotland is not homogeneous either. We want to reach people who are new to Scotland as well – one of our guests was the American opera singer Andrea Baker, who now lives in Glasgow, so she's new to the country but regards it very much as home. That's interesting, and you've got to have a media for people like that too, it's not just that what already exists will do. The media should be a constantly changing, evolving animal. It shouldn't stand still as a monolith – that way lies economic and cultural death because you just become irrelevant."

That phrase – constantly changing, evolving – is also a good description of the way Eamonn's career has progressed, encompassing investigative journalism and documentary-making alongside his writing and academic work. He has interviewed spies, murderers, terrorists and whistle-blowers and his work has featured in the top UK broadsheets and domestic and international broadcast networks, winning prestigious awards along the way. As a Scot with an Irish mother and an American wife, he clearly sees himself as a journalist who happens to be Scottish as opposed to a Scottish journalist, and his outward-looking back catalogue reflects that. Many of his major features can be read at [www.yumpu.com/user/eamonnoneill.com](http://www.yumpu.com/user/eamonnoneill.com) including: *The Avenger*, an investigation into mafia murders linked to the Vatican; *Hacking Goliath*, the story of the US military computer hack attributed to a young Scot, Gary McKinnon; and *Gecas*, an exposé of

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why a known Nazi war criminal never faced trial despite living and working in Scotland for more than 50 years. Fascinating stuff.

Another controversial investigation that Eamonn worked on was the murder of Sophie Toscan du Plantier in West Cork, Ireland, in 1996. This has some current relevance as it's the subject of two recently-released documentaries – *Murder at the Cottage: The Search for Justice for Sophie*, a five-part series on Sky, and the Netflix three-part series *Sophie: A Murder in West Cork*. In a recent *Talk Media* episode Eamonn explained how he was one of the first wave of journalists to investigate this case, and that the reason the documentaries had appeared at this time was because it was coming up to the 25th anniversary of the tragic event and "the press love anniversaries as a peg to hang a production or an article on!" Eamonn has reservations about both documentaries, for different reasons, but has very specific memories of the case itself: "The main suspect was a journalist who actually covered the murder case. His name is Ian Bailey, and he's quite open about the fact that he's the main suspect, he outed himself! I was one of a handful of journalists who interviewed him within 12 months of the crime actually happening and I'm led to believe by legal sources that I was possibly the only journalist who he did not sue for their representation of him in the media – [apparently] the reason he