

[Transcript] The News Agents / Who is the real Russell Brand? An interview with Gordon Smart

We're a week on. A week on from the night, that Friday, when the allegations about Russell Brand first emerged via Russell Brand himself, spiking the story from the Sunday Times and Channel 4 via his own YouTube channel. A week on and a Metropolitan Police investigation has started and more allegations have surfaced. The BBC reporting on Thursday that they had interviewed a woman who alleges that Brand had exposed himself to her and then laughed about it on his Radio 2 show. These allegations, like all the allegations, Brand denies. Someone like Brand is hard for most of us to ever know, to ever truly begin to understand what is beneath the mask. He has been so ubiquitous, lived his life so publicly and yet partly because, self-evidently, his character is confection, or rather, confection upon confection, onion-like. It is hard to have any sense of who he really is, what he's really like, what his mind might truly be. Few people have that insight, but if anyone does, it's Gordon Smart. He's a man who has spent nearly all his adult life in the world of tabloid journalism. One of Rupert Murdoch's proteges, he worked his way up with ink-stained fingers through Murdoch's stable of papers, a stint at the news of the world, editor of The Scottish Sun, deputy editor of The Sun, and before that a young showbiz editor of the paper, with the power to make or break celebrity careers. He was the one who awarded Brand that now infamous title of Shagger of the Year, three times before retiring it, saying no one could possibly match his record. In that job, Smart became embedded in that lustrous celebrity world. He became close to a whole suite of the famous faces who dominated our popular culture over the last 15 years, including Brand. It was, let's say, a fast-paced lifestyle. Smart seldom talks about it, but given the events of the last week, he came into the newsagents studio for a conversation with Emily and me about Brand, his time in tabloids, the Murdoch succession, and whether he wants or needs to atone for anything in those days, the things he wrote in that heady past. It's Lewis here. Welcome to the newsagents.

The newsagents.

It's Lewis.

It's Emily.

And we are in newsagents HQ, and Gordon Smart is with us. Welcome, Gordon.

Thanks for having me.

To our little bunker here. We should just start just in case people aren't familiar with you and your work as a journalist, just to give a little pressy of your career, because you're only what? You're 43.

43.

43, but you've had an amazing, extraordinary career, a long time, having a sort of ringside seat in the Murdoch Empire, news UK, news international empire that very few people would have.

So

just give people a bit of a summary of that.

Well, first of all, it's slightly painful coming in here for a year, walking past you every couple of times every week and not being recognized at all. But then the day I came in with Martin Compton, Emily, and John Soapwell, oh, hi, Martin. Hello. And I thought 15 years of newspapers, you know, over a thousand radio shows, twice a week.

I'm going to get this out really early. I have facial blindness.

Oh, right.

[Transcript] The News Agents / Who is the real Russell Brand? An interview with Gordon Smart

I promise you.

She barely recognizes me.

I don't know who that man opposite is. You know, the Queen walked past occasionally, and I was just like, I see you've got a crown on. No, I'm trying here. I haven't got a click.

She's not grand at all.

I'm really, I'm really facially blind.

So please don't take it.

This is Lewis.

This is Lewis.

It's just a fellow who just talked about Harold Wilson a lot.

He's shown real promise in journalism.

Yeah, it's been a crazy story, because I started my career in journalism in Dundee at DC Thompson's in 1998. I set up a school newspaper. Didn't realize I wanted to be a journalist until we revealed that my art teacher was in wet, wet, wet when he was younger. And then I suddenly found out I was a tabloid journalist by accident. And a local journalist heard about this, and I got a chance to work for The Courier and even in Telegraph in Dundee and thoroughly enjoyed it.

Moved down to London, thought the streets were paved with gold. Ended up working as a football coach. And then I got my big break in Edinburgh for an agency, a news agency called Deadline Scotland, where a couple of my friends from university were working. And I worked for every newspaper in Scotland. It was great. You know, you could sit on a shift for the Herald or the Scotsman or the Evening News or the Daily Record or the Mail or whatever it happened to be at the time. I managed to get some stories and I was offered a chance on Fleet Street by Victoria Newton, the now editor of The Sun.

What was it like working for a tabloid paper?

I was terrified when I first moved to London. You know, on my first day, the sat me next to a guy called Sean Hoare, who you might be familiar with. He was the whistleblower on phone hacking. And Sean on a Tuesday morning at 10 o'clock said, Golden Sun, do you want a drink? And I said, yeah, I'd love a drink. I think he'd make me a cup of tea and he pulled out a bottle of tea in Maria and poured me a full plastic cup of tea in Maria. And I said, are you joking? He went, no, no, no. On you go. And I said, you're all right, Sean. So he drank it, poured himself another one and drank it and said, right, we're going to the pub. So he took me to the pub on Tuesday morning, 10 o'clock. He was banging on the, it was called the Rose on the Highway in London and Whopping. And the landlord answered his dressing ground and said, God, Sean, you only left four hours ago. And he opened the pub up and I had a pint of Guinness and a whiskey before 11 o'clock on my first day on Fleet Street. And I thought, I don't know if I'm going to be able to survive this. And that was my introduction to Tablo journalism on Fleet Street and Whopping, working for Rupert Murdoch. And did that culture, I mean, because the culture has been very much under the spotlight, particularly this week, particularly with Russell Brand allegations, the way people are now looking back, probably a slightly later time, but the 2000s, the 2010s, that kind of time as being, you know, very kind of booze fueled, very reckless, very, very sort of in your face sexed up. I mean, do you think that was something that the tabloids brought to the

[Transcript] The News Agents / Who is the real Russell Brand? An interview with Gordon Smart

culture or do you think they took it away from the culture of the time?

It's an interesting way to look at it. I mean, I can only give you the experience I had when I started there as a 22, 23 year old. And you're right, it was boozed up. It was all about drinking when I started. You know, the first feature I was asked to write for the News of the World was hangover cures. So the back bench and the editors devised the most potent collection of drinks to give me the most aggressive hangover. And then I had to test hangover cures for a week. And I wanted to impress. I wanted to, you know, I was, I think I was earning £12,000 a year in Scotland.

They just got you drunk every day.

They just got me drunk every day.

How old were you?

22. And then I remember Neil Wallace, one of the editors of the paper, got me into conference on day three and said, right, we've got the jock here. How are you coping? It can't be a problem for you being a jock, can it? Well, I'm not feeling great, to be completely honest, but the hangover cures, I'm testing them, trying to give a sensible answer. But it was a bear put. It was an absolute bear put.

Did you say no to anything?

No, no, I didn't, because I was determined to get my foot in the ladder and make a career for myself. And I'm sure a lot of people did the same thing. You know, at the same time, there were people who were incredibly encouraging and I did learn some stuff. But I was only a few months and then moved to the sun. But it was the same culture again. You know, they used to keep a leaderboard for who could run from the news desk to the pub, have a pint and come back. And there was, you know, the quickest times. And it was a challenge to see if you could exist on it. But, you know, the pressure to deliver stories was absolutely massive as well. And the other thing that was quite interesting that people didn't often understand is that the culture of how much the sun in the news world hated each other. Because when I turned up, I just assumed there were bedfellows, same papers, would support each other.

Big mistake.

I remember saying it and everyone was like, what? But yeah, you just have to survive. And, you know, I was young and fortunately had an incredibly supportive wife. I was married incredibly young, got married at 23 and she supported me all the way. She worked in the West End and was in musical theatre. So she kind of understood that we were going to have an unsociable life. But, you know, an answer to your question, it was a bear pit. It was full of booze. I think at the time I started, David Blaine was doing his stunt in the box at Tower Bridge.

And there was a reporter living in a plastic box in the office because they thought they would test him and see how long he could survive. Sean Hoare, they put him in a box to see how long he'd last.

I know, I was very grateful it was, I mean, because I probably agreed to do it back then. I was going to say, go on, did you see stuff that you didn't like? And I mean that in a kind of more profound way than, oh, I don't like that. Like, you really didn't like that stuff.

[Transcript] The News Agents / Who is the real Russell Brand? An interview with Gordon Smart

Yeah, definitely. I mean, listen, I am on the record extensively in the Levison Inquiry and criminal inquiries with my views on what I did and didn't see. But culturally, yeah, I saw stuff that I thought was horrific, you know. But then my attitude was, I was a young person going into the workplace for the first time. I kind of assumed that's what it was like getting your way in the world.

The Wolf of Wall Street.

Yeah, just, you know, I heard horrific stories about things that were happening with my friends who worked in building sites and people who were working in the city or, you know, the culture and the medical profession was pretty brutal as well. Long hours, hard partying, wild lifestyles. So I just assumed that was part of growing up. It's only now with time to reflect and look back and you realise just how brutal it was and how hard it was. I'm very grateful that I've come out of it relatively unscathed and, you know, I think we all have to be very careful of it, you know, sitting on Mount Hindsight in 2023 looking back on it. I think I'm a very different person now, you know.

Well, talking about Mount Hindsight and about things that we've been talking about this week, obviously something you had a connection with when you were at the paper, which has really weirdly resurfaced this week as a result of brand and the brand allegations existing like Shagger of the Year. A lot of people are looking back at that now and thinking, what was all that about? How could that have been? What are your reflections on that now?

Well, I never thought I'd be sitting in a room with Emily Maitlis and you, Lewis, having a conversation about Shagger of the Year. You know, it's, depends on the day you catch me. Some days I feel quite belligerent about it and think, well, it was, you know, that was the sun, that was the culture at the time, that was part of the paper. It was the sun. Was it your idea?

No, it wasn't actually. I inherited it. It was, in fact, it was Victoria Newton who gave Russell Brand the first Shagger of the Year award, the now editor of the sun, female editor. You know, we used to have an annual awards ceremony that had stuff like Caner of the Year, Shagger of the Year, Best Album, all the rest of it. But that was the one that got the most interest. And, you know, I don't ever remember having a conversation. And I had a few by the way. There were some great people that took me aside and said, are you sure about this? And that was one that everybody seemed to laugh about at the time. And, you know, looking back at it now, of course I'm embarrassed about it. You know, I've got a 13-year-old son and a 10-year-old girl who asked me questions about working for that newspaper. And, you know, sometimes I feel my toes curling in my shoes. I feel embarrassed talking about it now. But then other times, I think, well, you can't rewrite history.

That's what happened. I was a 23-year-old bloke amidst lad culture off the back of grown up in the 90s, which, you know, I just felt like part of that firmament, that universe of fairly bad behaviour. But at the time, it felt like it was acceptable. It's not an excuse. I realise it sounds appalling. And I know a lot of your listeners will be really offended by it. And I'm actually quite sorry for a lot of the stuff that appeared. But there's nothing I can do about it now it's happened.

I'm guessing a lot of our listeners will be thinking there were worse things that happened at the time than Chagra of the Year, actually.

[Transcript] The News Agents / Who is the real Russell Brand? An interview with Gordon Smart

Yeah. Yeah, and there probably were.

Do you think that we over-intellectualise this stuff?

I think we tend to.

In a sense that, just to explain that, I mean, in a sense that maybe we're looking back and okay, Chagra of the Year, you know, you can argue about it, maybe it wasn't the best taste, but it was a sort of joke. But actually, it only looks like a bad joke now because of what we now know Brand was doing and what he was like.

I know, it does look even more appalled.

Allegedly.

Allegedly.

Crimes. But, you know, I'm really conflicted about a lot of stuff that happened and a lot of things I wrote in the paper. The language wasn't right, you know, the way I wrote about women I'm uncomfortable with now. But then you have to take that, and I know what you mean about over-intellectualising it, you have to look at the broader picture of everything else that was going on at the same time. You know, FHM, Nuts, Loaded Magazine, you know, the Radio On Breakfast show was pretty toxic at the time. If you listen back to some of the stuff that happened, if you watch chat shows...

Well, the Big Breakfast was in bed, wasn't it?

Breakfast, you know, Letterman, the way he was interviewing young women. There was a lot that was wrong with the world. And it takes time to analyse it and appreciate it and get your head around it. And I left seven years ago and I look back at a lot of that and think, oh, Gordon, God, what were you doing? But there is nothing I can do about it now. And, you know, I think as a man in my 20s, I was playing a load of football, hanging around with loads of lads, working for the Sun newspaper. I always felt like I played a bit of a character. I wasn't really the person I think I am.

You hung around a lot with Russell Brand. I mean, would you call him a mate? Yeah.

Well, this is a great question, again, because, you know, are people in the public eye when you work as a showbiz journalist truly your friend? And that's been quite a difficult thing for me to get my head around. Did I think I was friends with Russell? I think I did, yeah. But only... Did you like him?

I did, yeah. At the time, I thought he was a really entertaining, gregarious, effervescent character who was at the top of his game. This is the thing, you know, you've got the public persona of Russell Brand, you know, the backcomb hair, the Victorian chimney sweep. He had a beautiful vocabulary, didn't he? He would charm everybody he met, but then he would overstep the mark and you'd think, oh, God, Russell, that's about a line.

But then privately, and I think you've experienced this, when you have a conversation with him, he's really thoughtful. We used to call him snake eyes because he would look in your eyes and if I catch your glance and your glaze, I'd look in one eye, but he would do this thing where he would dart between your eyes and you'd feel quite hypnotised by it.

It was quite unnerving, but he was incredibly well-read, an intelligent guy. We had really long conversations about Amy Winehouse, for instance, and Focus 12 and Alcoholics Anonymous and NA, 12 Steps, all that kind of stuff because he was always trying to encourage me to give up drinking. But, you know, at the same time, I would be... I would normally be in his company

where there'd be a gig or an event or we'd been to see Oasis or No Gallic or he'd been doing a gig or we'd be at something together. It's not like I was going around to his house for Sunday lunch, as real friends would do. And, you know, you'd process that period of my life and, you know, it was a similar thing with... I went to James Corden's wedding and David Walliam's 40th and his wedding and... But then I was moved back to Scotland when I was 33 to be editor up there and suddenly a lot of people evaporate and, you know, it's that class.

Well, they can't quite make it to Scotland.

Yeah, and then I started getting Christmas cards from Ed Miliband who I'd never met. So, you know, the similarities between politics and showbiz are real. You know, you have the political party, the talent, the electorate. Showbiz is exactly the same thing. And it is equally brutal and ugly and unpleasant and it chews you up and spits you out. And you're very fortunate if you meet a few people in the middle of that who are genuine friends. And Russell, you know, we went through an awful lot at the same time. You know, it was quite a difficult job. You know, I had to hold it down, hold down a family at the same time or travel a lot. And then invariably with people like Russell, bad stories would come along and I'd have to make a phone call and say, look, what's the truth behind this? Like what? What sort of stories?

Well, there'd be countless kiss and tells. You know, again, to give the full picture of the Russell Brand situation, women were throwing themselves at Russell. You know, if you went to one of his gigs, people would queue up to meet him and want to go home with him and spend time with him and sleep with him. That was the culture of what was going on. And it's not just Russell, I think, gigs, music. There was quite a bad culture of that.

And not for a second, please make it absolutely clear defending him in any way, but the culture around that whole scene is disgusting.

So did you ask yourself, and I'm really conscious that, you know, hindsight is a wonderful thing and all the rest of it. So this is a genuine question. This is not me trying to, like, spear you. Did your mind kind of go, what the fuck is he up to with these young women or with this quantity of women? Or did you just kind of park that in a place of, like, he is shaggo of the year. But he's not potentially criminal. I don't know what you're sort of thinking at the time.

I don't think you can park it as clearly that in two camps. There'd be moments where you think, I don't think that's right. And I remember thinking that the things that were happening sounded really uncomfortable to me.

Like what?

I don't want to go into the details of it. It's really vulgar stuff, right?

And also bearing in mind Russell had written bookie work at this point. And in his book he talked about stuff that I thought was pretty true to psychopathic behaviour, right? His dog wasn't allowed upstairs. So Russell said in the book, I would then take my dog upstairs and say, you're not allowed here and then throw the dog down the stairs. I remember that being a moment where I thought, this guy, is this a horrible act? And I had to interview him about the book, right? So that happened. And then there was another story about his next door neighbour had planted beautiful flowers and he said, now Russell, don't trample anywhere

[Transcript] The News Agents / Who is the real Russell Brand? An interview with Gordon Smart

near my flowers. So Russell went and trampled on the flowers because he said that was his inner monologue. And at that point I thought this guy doesn't realise the narcissism, the ego, the badness in him. But then I met a lot of curious characters.

Good. Let me put it another way. I mean, when you heard the allegations this week, were you surprised?

I wasn't surprised, no, because I'd heard the investigation had been going on for a number of years. Whether or not that would lead to publication or a broadcast of a documentary, I wasn't entirely sure because the burden of proof is so heavy, isn't it? And to get, I mean, the incredible bravery of the women to speak up about that and work with journalists to prove the information that was in there is incredible. So it wasn't a surprise. I watched the documentary with my wife on Saturday night and she got very angry. I got really depressed, felt really sad about it all because I felt complicit in celebrating his behaviour. What was her anger?

A number of things. She was very angry about once again my relationships through the newspaper causing me to be upset and her to be upset. I'm mainly angry about what the women had suffered at his hands. We have these conversations so regularly at the moment. You know, there's a lot of stuff happening in relation to my work in tabloid newspapers that has been going on for over 10 years, you know, since Levison. And if you think about it, up until that point, I wasn't in a position where I was considering really the ethics of what I was doing. I was just so busy trying to deliver a newspaper on a seven-day basis, right? Let's not forget, at one point it was seven days a week. And then all of a sudden you're a little bit older, you've been asked to really consider the ethics of what you're doing, you've been asked to consider the implications of the people you're writing about, the cultures

changing, people are changing, social media is playing a big part in that, you feel incredibly accountable for what you're doing.

And scared, presumably, you think, well, they could come off to me, right?

Yeah, of course, of course. And I genuinely think I'm a decent, well-rounded human being. I was very fortunate to have been brought up very well by my parents. I had an incredible childhood. I think I know right from wrong and I think I know to call out bad behaviour when it's in front of me. But again, we're talking about hindsight. Did I ever tell us earlier that I was at a line? I'm pretty sure I've, on occasion, said, what are you up to? What are you doing? Is that right? And let's not think for a second that culture has changed too much. It's just hidden away a lot of it. Young men communicate inappropriately, I still think, on WhatsApp. It's just not done in the same way through TV and media because I think there's better regulation.

Do you think the power dynamics within celebrity have changed?

Well, I mean, there could be the same dynamics at play, potentially, today.

Yeah, I think that definitely still exists. I used to find it really quite upset and that people would be afraid of me. You know, listen, why would you be scared of me?

You've got no reason to be fearful.

Who would be afraid of me?

Celebrities. It happens all the time. Now I'm out of New UK and I'm out of the sun.

[Transcript] The News Agents / Who is the real Russell Brand? An interview with Gordon Smart

Because you carried their reputations in your hand.

Exactly.

And you could crush them. Let's be honest.

What could have done?

A bad picture or a bad bit of gossip could have destroyed someone.

Well, not so much a bad picture, but I think a bad story. But then my attitude would be if you've got nothing to fear, what's the issue? I don't really see why I should be feared.

I didn't turn up every day rubbing my hands together, looking to ruin people's lives.

And I know people might find that a bit unusual. I turned up thinking I'm going to get to do incredible stuff and meet incredible people as a result of having this huge amplifier and speaker that I'm plugged into.

Did you ever at any point say to Russell Brown when you knew him that you thought he was going too far

about something that he was doing?

I've asked that question a lot over the years.

Yeah, I probably have. I can't give you a specific example, but we've had really challenging conversations

over the years. I know for a fact, and this is a really, really important point to make, there are a lot of good people who are victims of Russell's as well in a different way because of his behaviour, his bullying, his manipulation.

And, you know, there are a lot of people suffering at the moment as a result of this because they're questioning their role and what happened.

And people called him out. People definitely called him out.

And then Russell is an incredibly charming man and would turn that back and say, how dare you question me or how can you say that?

And you'll see from, you know, his career history and the people he's worked with that they've fallen by the wayside as a result of that.

He would bully people.

You know, Russell is an incredibly intimidating person when he wants to be.

You know, not just with his command of language, he's a physically imposing character.

He's six foot three, right?

When you add the back comb hair and the makeup and everything, he is an intimidating man.

And often what you would find is very senior people wouldn't want to have difficult conversations.

So they would ask those people closer to him to deal with those difficult conversations.

Right, we're going to pick that up with Gordon just after this.

This is The News Agents.

And we're back and Gordon is still with us.

I guess the place we're in at the moment, Gordon, is that a lot of people will be going, oh, yeah, well, I knew about Russell Brand, you know, it was an open secret.

Oh, we all knew that.

But, you know, we couldn't say anything because there were no actual investigation.

And I don't want you to name names because our lawyers will be all over it.

But are you thinking now back to that period and thinking, yeah, I've got probably five more people

[Transcript] The News Agents / Who is the real Russell Brand? An interview with Gordon Smart

that I wouldn't be surprised could be the subject of exactly this kind of sexual assault investigation. Do you think you know and have worked closely with people now in public life, celebrities?

I have grave reservations, definitely.

And I'm sure if you asked any prominent person in the media who's held a position like mine or like yours,

we'd be in a position to say I've heard stories, but then that's a very different thing.

And I'm uncomfortable with the notion of the open secret because it is potentially libelous.

You know, if you're in possession of hard evidence that could lead to a criminal conviction, you're morally obligated, in my opinion, to go and do something about that.

Without the evidence, without the proof, you can't really do anything, can you?

I don't think, you know, there are things you can encourage.

You can encourage brilliant investigative journalists.

And I think that's why the press in this country is so important

because they can still hold those feet to the flames on inappropriate behavior.

But yes, I am gravely concerned about other stuff.

You were Victoria Newton's deputy.

I wonder what you made of the sunscoop at the beginning of the summer with Hugh Edwards.

Where it sounded like, I know you weren't part of this, you weren't working there, but you will know Victoria's work.

It sounded like they had spoken extensively to the parents of the person concerned, but they hadn't included the response of the person.

And I don't even know if they went to Hugh Edwards himself on that.

I mean, was that a badly flawed investigation?

It's interesting to see the prison you look at it through.

And also, bear in mind, I have no obligation.

I don't work for the company anymore. It's been seven years.

I do know Victoria very well.

But, you know, I also work for the BBC now, so I have to be careful what I say.

But, you know, both of you know very well as experienced journalists

that the burden of proof and the legal responsibility that exists

and corroborating a story or standing a story up is incredibly heavy.

The legal team and legal support of that paper is world-class.

This notion that there's a cavalier attitude towards people

or a cavalier attitude towards publication of information

is just not accurate at all.

You know, the loopholes that you have to jump through

and the work that has to be done to publish a story like that is incredibly rigorous.

But the story wasn't accurate, was it? I mean, I think at one stage they...

I don't know. I think only one person really, truly knows the answer to that question.

Maybe two or three.

Yeah, the question here is about the presentation of the story.

And I also feel uncomfortable about silhouette stories and anonymity

because it always felt to me like you're throwing everybody under the bus, right?

[Transcript] The News Agents / Who is the real Russell Brand? An interview with Gordon Smart

And you have to be incredibly careful about it.
You know, I think Jeremy Vine was successfully sued, didn't he?
For social media, somebody said that he was the person involved
and £1,000 was paid to charity as a result.
There's an awful lot at play here, right?
And I think if you think back, there was a brilliant cartoon in The Times
during the Levison Inquiry and there was Lord Levison sitting at his desk,
Big Mahogany desk, pilot papers.
The culture, standards, practices and ethics of newspapers.
And then the Twitter bird was flying above him
and it was doing its business on its head.
I think there were four or five pages for social media on the Levison Inquiry.
On the morning, I think one of the mornings I was going to give evidence
there was a murder on Oxford Street
and there was a body under a tarpaulin with a police cordon around it
which was respected by the evening standard.
You know, another terrible murder, young person, knife crime, London.
But on social media, there was a picture of the corpse
with the knife sticking out of the chest
with messages saying another soldier down in London, right?
So there's a strange thing where everybody in the world is a publisher now
and we all have to really think about what we say and we commit to the media
and I've read some horrendously libelous stuff on social media in the last couple of weeks.
But the sun is the sun.
Of course it is, yeah.
I mean, I'm talking about the broader picture here
but to give you the perspective on what the paper had to go through
to even publish that story in the first place.
Victoria is an excellent journalist.
She's an incredibly bright woman
and, you know, she would not make a decision like that
without considering it a great length.
And incidentally, you know, the nature of the way that business is set up,
you know, there are bigger questions that go higher up
before publication of a story like that happens.
It went to murder.
Well, I don't know if it went as far as him
but certainly, counselling New York, you know,
I think there's a bigger business at play, isn't there?
And huge stories like that have huge implications.
Need sign up.
Yeah, we'd always go up as far as they could possibly go.
Certainly, I can speak as somebody who's edited the paper.

[Transcript] The News Agents / Who is the real Russell Brand? An interview with Gordon Smart

I would want to make sure if a big decision like that was being made, everybody was completely aware of what was going on.

And, you know, Victoria is an incredibly meticulous, diligent, hard-working human being

and she would have done all that rigorous jennyking beforehand.

What's your relationship with Bran like now?

I haven't spoken to him since tooth and I checked my messages, 2021.

Yeah, just probably he was asking me about succession.

Oh, right.

What was he asking you?

All the same questions.

Which character were you?

Were you cousin Greg?

Were you?

Well, who were you?

No, I don't think I was ever important enough to be part of the thinking of that, although I could write another series, I'm sure.

But yeah, he was messaging me about that,

asking which character was which and who was based on.

And that was the last time I had any contact with him.

I mean, you know his mind well, you know him well.

What do you think he'll be thinking about?

I don't think I know his mind well.

Well, you know him well.

I know him.

Yeah, I know him.

I think you can see from, you know, I was talking about his eyes and the way they were dark looking at you.

I think he looked terrified in the clip he posted on Friday before publication.

But you know, Russell, I think, is a narcissist.

I think he's borderline psychopath, definitely a sociopath.

I think the way the arguments unfold and I find quite disgusting, really, because it's actually about alleged victims of sexual assault.

And for the conversation to be about demonetising him

feels to me like it'll play to his agenda of,

this is the establishment out to get me, which is wrong, because it's not about that.

It's about young women who were allegedly attacked.

You've said a couple of times now that you think he's a sociopath or potentially a psychopath.

I mean, that's amazing, really, in a sense that, again,

[Transcript] The News Agents / Who is the real Russell Brand? An interview with Gordon Smart

you know, you know, pretty well.

What does that say about us and our society, then?

Of course, a lot.

If you think he's right, that he's got this, you know, substantial mental problems, that we've put him up in lights and celebrated him for so many years and potentially ignored.

There's a long, long stage, isn't there?

We kind of have this conversation about talking about politics, can we?

You know, look at the people who get into power who are flawed individuals.

You know, we are, as humans, flawed people, and we're all driven by different things, some for the right reasons, some for the wrong reasons, and I think ultimately you will be found out if you do something that's inappropriate, and I think Russell will have to face justice.

Do you believe him when he's often said again talking about over intellectualising, he said that he's a sex addict?

I find that notion, I actually heard Emily talking about it, so I find that really uncomfortable, again, because it's a behaviour that you can say, no, I think.

I think you can stop yourself from doing that.

A medical addiction to a drug, I think, is a slightly different thing.

I'm sure somebody could argue very eloquently against that point of view, but I find it uncomfortable.

I find it uncomfortable.

Do you think that in the end, obviously depends what happens with the criminal inquiries and so on, but do you think in the end he's going to end up maintaining his fame, his prestige, partly because everybody can't stop talking about him?

Well, it depends entirely on what happens with a criminal investigation, doesn't it?

Depending on how that goes, the culture and the media platforms we have in the world now, you can live beyond something as damaging as this, I think.

It's very easy to look back and say that crazy time, the 2000s or the 2010s,

I don't suppose you'd say this couldn't happen again with somebody in this decade or the next decade.

[Transcript] The News Agents / Who is the real Russell Brand? An interview with Gordon Smart

I don't buy into that notion about the naughties being particularly bad.

I think the nineties were particularly bad.

I think the eighties were particularly bad.

I think the seventies were particularly bad.

I think we're in a time now that is very dangerous.

You know, I'm deeply concerned about my children growing up with their access to technology they have, who are really worried about pornography, really worried about what they'll be exposed to.

And I think, have we changed?

I think such a complicated thing, but I think accountability has changed as a result of social media and the way we handle news.

But I think behaviours will stay the same.

They just exist a little bit more under the radar.

You know the Murdoch Empire much better than most people.

How powerful do you think it is now?

Even by comparison to your heyday, when you know they're in your 20s and 30s and so on, how powerful do you think it is now?

Well, in very specific terms for the Sun newspaper, the circulation is about a third of what it was when I left, when I was 36.

So, you know, in terms of the paying readership, it's diminished in terms of audience, it's huge, but whether that's monetised well or not, I'm not party to those figures anymore, but there's still a huge audience for what they produce.

So, there's still clout, there's still power.

You only need to look at the Who Cares Wins Awards on Monday night.

Keir Starmer was there, Jess Phillips was there,

Rishi Sunak was there.

You know, I saw countless celebrities in the room that night.

I turned up, you know, I went along.

So, you know, there's still, I think, some political clout that comes with his empire in publishing.

But how the business exists beyond Rupert,

I'm not entirely sure.

Do you think newspapers have more power in this country than the politicians?

That's a brilliant question. It's a book, isn't it?

The answer to that.

No, I don't.

[Transcript] The News Agents / Who is the real Russell Brand? An interview with Gordon Smart

No?

No, I don't.

You don't think the newspapers tell the politicians what to do?

No, I don't.

You don't think Murdoch tells whoever's in power what they should be doing?

No, I don't. I think possibly in the past they would have had power and sway, but I still have faith and democracy in this country as politicians.

You know, I feel very fortunate to have grown up with incredible political leaders, you know.

Gordon Brown lives locally to me, and I think at some stage he was very close to the Murdoch Empire, but I don't think he's the kind of individual who would, you know, be told to do anything by anybody.

So, yeah, I have faith in, maybe it's blind faith, I don't know, but I do have faith in democracy and politics to come true. So, succession.

What was the bit that rings the truest?

Was it a world you recognised?

Some of us are slightly more obsessed than others.

Yeah, if I said to you that I had, you know, flown on the private jet in Scotland from one airport to another in double-quick time, you know, some of the stuff that happened around that kind of appeared.

You've worked closely with Robert Murdoch?

I have, yeah.

I was editor of the Scottish Sun during the referendum.

So, yeah, I had to deal very closely with him, because he, you know, he believes in Scotland, his grandfather was Scottish, so...

What does that mean, believe in Scotland?

Does he really want...?

Well, I think he's a huge advocate of our innovation and engineering and history and business and economics.

I think there's no secret of it that he said his favourite workforce was in Scotland, when Skye had call centres in Livingston and Dunfermline. He took a close interest in the referendum. He had a very, very close interest in Scotland.

[Transcript] The News Agents / Who is the real Russell Brand? An interview with Gordon Smart

He was very hands-on in the independence referendum.

Do you think he still takes a close interest?

Or was he happy with the result?

I was very happy with the way it played out for the paper, because I argued that we should sit in the fence.

You know, and in terms of Sun history, that's probably career suicide.

I might explain why I'm not working there anymore, but I felt like it was too...

It's quite rare.

It was too important a decision for us to tell, I think, to tell an audience or a readership what they should do.

You know, you potentially alienate half your readership in such a toxic time.

I'd never seen my parents and family argue over politics so much.

And then, you know, in a situation where I'm having these conversations with Rupert Murdoch and with the lieutenants and generals in London, you know, I couldn't stop and get petrol without somebody having to go at me about, we know you're backing yes, and we know you're a no-voter.

Everybody assumed nobody knows my politics.

I've never explained my politics to anybody, because it's the best piece of advice I got from my dad.

It's your own personal view. Don't talk about it, because it just leads to arguments and great podcasts.

Was it hard being an editor of The Scottish Sun sometimes?

Yeah, it was incredibly difficult, yeah.

I mean, in terms of being in Scotland.

I found it incredibly difficult.

It was one of the hardest spells of my life.

You know, I went on a Friday from being the showbiz guy, one of you in celebrities, to sitting down with Alex Salmond having a conversation about the constitution in the future of the country and how my children would grow up in it.

And the first thing he said to me is, they tell me something you used to work in music.

And I said, that's right, Alex.

And he said, yeah.

What do you make of that guy, Justin Timberhouse?

And I thought, oh, God, what have I done?

But in terms of how people responded to you.

Well, I had quite a good experience from a time in showbiz, right?

But then, when I suddenly received those Christmas cards from Ed Miliband and David Cameron,

[Transcript] The News Agents / Who is the real Russell Brand? An interview with Gordon Smart

I thought, I don't know you, I use enemy Christmas cards.
And then when I came back to London as deputy editor in 2016
for the European referendum, which was a barrel of laughs,
those Christmas cards stopped coming.
But then I'm sure if I had then become editor of the sun,
I would have been their best friend again.
So, you know, this made it absolutely clear that I was courted and encouraged.
You know, the best thing for me, right?
I used to obviously dress in a suit when I worked for the sun.
I used to say, you have to dress every day like you make the queen.
And I'd get on the same flight as Lorraine Kelly and Kay Adams
flying back and forth and forwards to Scotland.
And then suddenly I was working in music radio and back doing that.
So dressed casually.
And there were politicians who didn't recognise me at all
because they couldn't see the difference in this person.
But Gordon Brown could, and he's partially sighted.
And I thought that said an awful lot about him.
When I'd pass him on the plane, an economy might I add.
And he'd say, hello, Gordon, how you doing?
Great. Thank you for asking, Gordon. How are you?
And then, you know, I found it really difficult.
I'm not going to lie.
I was 32 when I was editor of the Scottish Sun until I was 35.
I was managing the pressure of Rupert Murdoch's interest in it.
You know, you're managing a declining circulation.
You've also got the HR issues of managing 150 complicated Glaswegians,
which was a test.
You've got to deal with the old firm, religious bigotry, sectarianism,
an incredibly busy crime patch.
I saw the helicopter crash within my first three weeks
and the clue that I was one of the witnesses.
So then you're part of a fatal accident inquiry.
Then the bin lorry tragedy happened.
Alexander Paktau was a brutal murderer who was convicted when I was there.
A young boy, Mikal Kuhler, was murdered by his mum,
which was a horrendous story.
And I had two children under three at the same time.
My wife had moved back from all of her friends to rural Scotland.
We were living in a very cold Scottish house that hadn't been renovated.
And, you know, at that stage of your life is a difficult time.
I was also processing everything that had just happened with the leveson stuff
and the criminal inquiries were ongoing.

[Transcript] The News Agents / Who is the real Russell Brand? An interview with Gordon Smart

There were civil cases ongoing.

And I suddenly thought, how have I ended up doing this?

I actually applied to work for the BBC and didn't get a job.

And I thought, maybe I could have been working at Pebble Mill.

Do you think anything changed after Leveson?

I certainly changed from the experience.

The papers changed, yes.

Yeah, I do. I do, actually.

I mean, a lot of people would probably laugh at me for that.

But I certainly think my behaviour changed.

And I analysed my role in show business and the public eye.

In fact, I know you can't talk about it much.

But in terms of Murdoch, does he still take an active interest in British politics?

Of course he does in terms of his political engagement.

I think he's fascinated by politics in this country.

But my appraisal and view of it is that Rupert isn't actually interested in the political party or the political movement.

He's interested in his empire and his business.

And whoever suits his interests, that's who you would support.

We can't actually have you in here, as the former showbiz editor of The Sun,

without asking about Dan Wooden,

because there is plenty, as you will know, of stuff circulating, allegations surrounding him circulating.

And you must have worked pretty closely with him.

You must understand what some of these allegations are about.

Yeah, Dan joined the paper from the news of the world,

and I think I was pretty open with a lot of people about it at the time, that I wasn't very happy about it.

There are active investigations happening,

and I wouldn't want to prejudice them in any way,

but at some stage I'll have something to say about it.

But yeah, in the context of the conversations we're having,

there are things I'm very unhappy about and uncomfortable with,

but I need to have those conversations appropriately,

and that's happening now.

Have you been surprised by the allegations of sexual impropriety,

among other things, that have emerged about Dan Wooden,

all of which we should say he vehemently denies?

Not at all.

And it's really important for me to finish by saying

the victims of the alleged sex crimes are the ones who count in this,

and I'm not in any way defending Russell.

Hopefully I've given a bit of a picture of the culture that existed around that at the time,

[Transcript] The News Agents / Who is the real Russell Brand? An interview with Gordon Smart

and maybe there's some more understanding,
because we all have to pay attention to our individual role in all of that at the time.
Gordon, thanks so much for coming in. It's so fascinating. Thank you.
My brother-in-law died suddenly,
and now my sister and her kids have to sell their home.
That's why I told my husband we could not put off getting life insurance any longer.
An agent offered us a 10-year \$500,000 policy for nearly \$50 a month.
Then we called SelectQuote.
SelectQuote found us identical coverage for only \$19 a month,
a savings of \$369 a year.
Whether you need a \$500,000 policy or a \$5 million policy,
SelectQuote could save you more than 50% on-term life insurance.
For your free quote, go to SelectQuote.com.
SelectQuote.com. That's SelectQuote.com.
SelectQuote. We shop. You save.
Full details on example policies at SelectQuote.com.
One final thing, there is some disagreement about the origin of the Jagger of the Year contest.
Gordon Smart told us that he didn't come up with the idea.
The Sun newspaper has told us that it was Gordon's idea,
very much not their current editor, Victoria Newton.
Make of that what you will.
Right, that is it from all of us for this week.
Remember, you can catch up on all our shows from this week on Global Player
and send us story tips and feedback to newsagentsaglobal.com.
Emily and I are off to North London to help John get rid of those seven recycling bins he'd bought.
He's absolutely fuming.
And now, thank God, we won't even have to carp all up there.
Thanks for our production team on the newsagents.
Gabriel Radis, Laura Fitzpatrick, Georgia Foxwell, Will Gibson-Smith, Alex Barnett and Rory Simon.
Our editor is Tom Hughes.
It's presented by John. Call me Steve Owen, so-called Emily.
Bye, mateless and me, Lewis Goodall.
We'll see you on Monday. Have a lovely weekend.