



Baroness Martha Lane-Fox

Interviewed by

Richard Sharpe

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Welcome to the Archives of Information Technology where we capture the past and inspire the future. It's Wednesday, 10th October 2018. I'm Richard Sharpe and I've been covering the IT sector since the 1970s. We're in the central London home of Martha Lane Fox. Now pipes and routers and protocols and all the rest of it for the internet are okay, but we need services. And Martha Lane Fox is one of the few early people, a real pioneer, who put together a service over the internet for people who wanted to do things at the last minute.

You were quite an innovator as a young person, weren't you?

[laughs] I'm not sure. I think my only two innovations were setting up a dating agency when I was at school, which was profoundly unsuccessful because my secret strategy had been to try and work out who everybody liked at school, but actually, no one fell for that particular trick. I think the key innovation I managed to achieve in my later school was to change the way that the monitors, the school kind of prefect system was voted for and elected, which now, sitting in the House of Lords, is profoundly ironic, but never mind.

Did you like school?

I did like bits of it. I came to school in London when I was 16, and I loved that and felt challenged and excited by learning in a way that I'd become a bit, I don't know...

What did your parents do?

My mother was an entrepreneur with her best friend, they started a publishing business together and then they started a lecture business together, which now looks very forward thinking, because this was back in the 1980s. My father is an academic, a gardener, a writer and an entrepreneur as well, he used to publish his own books. So I come from a family of varying different business and intellectual interests. So the bar was set quite high.

[0:02:12]

What did they give you, apart from that high standards and that push to entrepreneurship?

I think complete and total love, but not without expectation. So I don't mean it wasn't, er, totally comforting and confident building love at all, there's nothing complex about our family really, even though my parents eventually got divorced, but they, by example, showed how to be in the world and to strive to both work hard for yourself, but also to try and improve things or move the dial on whatever interested you. And I think it was those things working in parallel that really was hard-wired into me. My mum, when I was six or seven, set up a helpline for women who were battering their children. It was called Parents Anonymous, and I remember sitting when I was very small, not clearly hearing the calls, but seeing the women that she'd amassed to help build this volunteer network. So there was always a drive to be kind and work hard.

And this was inculcated into you and you took out into the world?

I hope so. I hope so. Work in progress.

Right. Did you resist?

I don't think so. I was never pushed to do a particular thing, but there was a push to try hard and to, you know, not let anyone else down, but not let yourself down. And I think that that's the thing that everybody in our family watched my father and my mother work hard and do interesting things. So it was less by being told what to do, but more by example of how to be.

Do you get bored easily?

I don't think I get bored, but I get restless. So I don't really think you can get bored if you can read, because there's always something to read. I get bored if I don't have a book or I don't have something to read. I get bored of things and they are, feel like they're a bad use of time, so I'm increasingly bored in meetings that go on too long or

are unfocussed. I get bored if I think that people are banging on or being narcissistic or, you know, self-gratifying or whatever the thing might be. So things make me bored, but I'm quite good at occupying myself.

[0:04:48]

And do you tend to cut people off if you find them banging on or wasting your time?

I hope I wouldn't do it rudely, but I would use my velvet glove.

And when you actually are managing meetings, do you have some ideas that you'd like to share with other people about how to manage meetings?

I mean I think my starting point increasingly is why do we need to have a meeting. And I think so often people just default to thinking we should have a meeting about this, and sometimes that's really valuable and I don't for one minute think that the world should be just communicated by email or by telephone calls, whatever. Face-to-face communication is essential, but I think having a really clear focus for what you're trying to achieve, knowing that the outcome that you're trying to get to, really thinking about the people you need in the room and being brutal about timekeeping all help. So to my mind, setting at the beginning of a meeting what you're trying to get to at the end of it is pretty important. You know, I sit on a number of boards and too often boards both don't allow enough time to talk about the things that matter, or allow too long to talk about the things that don't matter. So I think it's just about being very, very clear about your objectives and creating the space to have a debate when it's appropriate, but not creating the space for endless chat when it's not.

So don't be late for a meeting with you.

Don't like being late, no. Being late is one of the things that makes me really stressed. I hate it.

Really? You being late or other people being late?

Other people, a bit less so, but me being late, I really hate.

Because time is the only...

I don't know why. It must be something from deep back- we could do a bit of psychological something on me, I just really...

I think time's the only commodity we really have, isn't it?

Yeah. And I just think it's a rude, it's the rudeness to it.

[0:06:35]

Right, okay. You went to university?

I did.

And you studied?

Ancient and modern history.

Good?

Quite. And now I look back on it, my father is a Classics professor at Oxford, I went to Oxford to study ancient and modern history, it's about as imaginative as, I don't know, the least imaginative thing you can imagine. So now I look back on it I kind of wish I'd gone to university in America and done more of a foundational course and things, because that's what I really love. I'm interested in science, but I also love history. And I can't code but I wish I had more of a foundation in more technical subjects as well as the arts and humanities, and I think a US university might have suited me better, now on reflection.

And what judgement would you give to people, what advice would you give to people who are facing that type of dilemma now?

Well, if you have the luxury of being able to think about where you go to university, as in what country, then I think you just need to be led by what interests you have and what will give you the broadest canvas for the world. I sort of increasingly reject this notion that you have to specialise, specialise, specialise, specialise. Of course, if you are a brilliant physicist and you know you want to go on to be an astrophysicist, you probably need to study physics, but I think in the world of the future the generalists are going to be very much in demand, because I think an ability to be curious, to put things in context, understand about evidence or sources or, you know, how you assess different priorities and information are going to be the important things, so I think it's very important to keep that broad expanse of learning for as long as you can.

What do you learn at university that you brought into your later life?

Ha ha, I learn about, I learnt about how to manage old crusty men in a nearly dead establishment. I'm not sure if I, you know, ancient and modern history is an extraordinary subject in that it enables you to jump from Ancient Greece to modern India, from medieval Byzantine Church to something contemporary in the Islamic world, so that is a real privilege because you do see patterns, you begin to build up ways of thinking about the expanse of time. And I know in myself that I'm, I think I'm effective at putting things into a thousand year view, not just a ten year view, and that can be helpful for all of us, I think. So I definitely took that. And I took some things that I worked out I didn't want to be, because I think that particularly at Oxford, there was a snobbism to the university, or maybe just bits of it. There is, there was an undercurrent of sexism in the late eighties and early nineties when I was there, and I knew that I didn't want to be in an environment that felt like a lot of the things that I experienced in that university.

MIT did a piece of analysis of brilliant people at MIT and MIT Labs and they found out the really brilliant ones had what they called 'helicopter vision'. They could see down and see how things fitted together, rather than just in their little silo, in their little slot. So that's what you have, helicopter vision.

No, well I think that's what history gives you. So I think, you know, some people would argue I've got far too much helicopter vision and not enough granular detailed

vision and that I'm dementing for my teams if I'm working with them, because I'm like, right, we can all go in this enormous canvas of a direction, and in fact, you know, you need sometimes to be specific and detailed. So I think it's about knowing when to have that helicopter vision and knowing when you need to be in the specificity and more of the micro.

[0:10:20]

So something specific or lastminute.com came into your life in the sense that you helped to create it, you led the team that created it. Can you just take us through the high points of that creation?

Well, it was Brent's idea – very important – my co-founder, who was my boss in my first job. He's a bit older than me and he'd come up with the idea of lastminute.com and then very generously asked me to come and co-found it with him. I was twenty-five and, you know, it was twenty years ago this year that we turned the website on and I was reflecting recently that, you know, the battle at that point wasn't to build a case for why lastminute.com would be successful – no one thought lastminute.com would be successful – it was actually about showing the world that the internet was going to survive, it was going to be important, and that people put their credit card details into a website. That was the battle we were fighting. Nobody, nobody was interested in whether our business model was going to be successful because everyone thought that was completely unlikely, they were much more worried about the fundamentals of the technology. You think, it's only twenty years, it's nothing, to have just gone like that in all of our lives.

[0:11:27]

You had to write a paper for BT, didn't you?

No, that was my first job. That had nothing to do with lastminute.com. That was my first job out of university, it was complete serendipity, to a connection of a connection of a connection, and I was at a media and telecoms consulting company called Spectrum, and my first job for BT was a paper called 'What is the Internet?' And so that really introduced me to technology and the world of, the rapidly changing world of media and telecoms.

When did you write that report?

1991.

1991. Did you meet a man called Bruce Bond?

Prob...

Afro-American, at BT?

I can't remember. Maybe. I was the most junior person, obviously, on the team, aged twenty-one. My boss, I don't even know if I went into the room with BT, I was just doing all the grunt work. But it definitely changed my perspective on the way the world was going, very dramatically, as you can imagine.

Some penny dropped, did it?

Well, I mean it dropped, yes, but also I met people who were experts in what they were doing. I met Brent, I'd never been in business, this was all I was learning and doing and knowing, so of course you get framed by those experiences, so it was fundamental.

[0:12:37]

And it was eventually a success. But you did have to...

Oh well yeah, Spectrum was, but then lastminute.com, absolutely later, yes. So I was at Spectrum for three years, then I worked in a television company and then we started lastminute.com end of '97, beginning of '98.

You did have to do some rather dodgy things to get it going, you have said in public.

To get lastminute.com going?

Yes.

Well, not dodgy things, but you know, as with everything, when you're hustling, you know, we had to pretend we had much bigger offices than we had, we had to, you know, hire anybody we could, mainly my brother and our associated friends. And when I was writing the original copy for the website I made up stuff that my friends had done and put their names on the website to give people confidence that we had the actual products and services. I don't think you'd get away with that now, I don't think I would even think about doing it now. I don't think they were dodgy, but I think we were definitely doing a big sell on the likely success of this business.

Would it be one of your rules of thumb, look bigger than you are?

No. I think that would be one of my 'not rules of thumb'. I think that it's all about the sales that you are doing at that early stage and I think any entrepreneur is 90% showman to a degree. You have to be, you have to keep the confidence of your team, you have to set a clear direction, you have to show investors that you're excited about what you're doing, and you have to be – I don't think you have to be *da-dah* - but you have to be kind of sales mode a lot of the time. So I think it's more about thinking about what that means and how to give people confidence that you are being able to deliver what you say you can deliver.

Where do you get your confidence from?

Me personally? Well, definitely, as I said to you, my unrestricted love at home and the challenge that my parents always gave me to strive high and not be, not ever think that things were out of your reach, or ideas were out of your reach or, you know, that you couldn't be in the room. Which I realise now as a woman was a phenomenal gift to have given me.

[0:14:45]

Where did you get the money from to launch it?

We raised it from venture capital company, a combination of investors, and it was hard because there weren't very many people even putting money into internet businesses at that time, so a combination of different investors. One company called NewMedia Spark, a key investor called Tom Teichman, took a very early punt and everything else sort of followed through, and some private individuals as well.

What is your advice for approaching venture capital companies and getting venture capital?

Well, it's so different. You know, I do feel as though the landscape is so nearly unrecognisable from lastminute.com days that advice that you get from me, a real dot.com dinosaur, should be taken with a massive pinch of salt. But I think there is really no better way of approaching it than being absolutely excellent at what you do. Just know the detail, don't be fly, get into the workings and the process of your business, show that you're on all of it, that you have got every single scenario modelled out in your cash flow, that you have talked to all the suppliers, that you understand your customers, that you are really working hard to make it a success. And I don't mean that I'm a paid-up member of the got to be working twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, I actually think that's a terrible way of promoting entrepreneurship. But I do think, work hard and know the detail and be really good at what you do.

And presumably a good presenter?

And a good presenter as well, but I think that that comes through if you are clearly on top of what you're doing.

[0:16:28]

You got the money and here was something new. People could put their credit card details in and they could get theatre tickets, or they could get plane tickets.

Yeah.

How did you persuade really big suppliers – aeroplane companies, for example?

Well, it was a huge, enormous challenge, because we were very young, we had no track record, we weren't in the travel industry. All of the things you can imagine, the blockers, they were nervous, all this stuff. So we did a couple of things, firstly we built a board of people who were from the travel industry so we had some better credibility, got a chairman who used to be the chairman, CEO of KLM. And otherwise, we just went on at them. I think Brent must have called the poor woman from Alitalia about twenty-five times on her mobile. I think I hassled the key guy from Iceland Air about 85 times and took him out to lunch. And in the end I think our kind of tenacity, enthusiasm, the fact that all we were saying was, can we take your empty seats and sell them unbranded at a discount. So really the net risk to them was quite low. They just tested us and when things worked we got more supply, so then you're in that brilliant cycle of actually, this is working. But it was hard. It was really hard.

Because the one extra passenger is almost pure profit.

Exactly. Exactly.

All you need is the aviation fuel to take them.

Exactly.

Okay. But then there are people involved in handling and so on. But anyway, the costs are very low.

Yes, well there was a price at which it was worth them to fill that seat rather than have it empty.

They found that price and you were happy with it, and so were your customers.

Yes.

[0:18:00]

And so the offers came in.

Yes. And actually it was hotels that also were so key and so easy, because you're right, you know, in airlines there is still an associated cost to each extra passenger, and it's a marginal one in a hotel. But you think a hotel room sits empty, Sunday nights, for example, hotels are booked, they're lucky if they're reaching 40, 50% occupancy. So the fact that we could go to five-star hotels round London and get astonishingly good deals for a Sunday night, and we took their brand off and we'd just say five-star hotel in blah, and show some pictures, and we really created a trend of people thinking, well screw it, you know, for £100 they'll stay in a room that might be £800 normally, this looks fun. So we tried to build it all the time on what would be appealing to customers and what was fun and what was, you know, I wrote the copy for the tagline, you know, trying to encourage spontaneous and romantic behaviour in our customers. We wanted to make this feel like this was something that could help you have just even more of an excellent time in the short amount of time that you're not at work.

Did you ever feel this is not going to work?

I think I probably felt – I can't really remember, to be honest, it feels, there's been so much stuff in between, especially a lot of morphine. So I'm sure I did. I think I probably more often felt, I don't know if I can do it, as opposed to whether lastminute.com would work. Because, you know, I was only one of a team, clearly, and I was young and I had really relatively no experience in anything like this. And when the media was great, it was great, and when the media was vicious, it was awful. And then when the share price collapsed after we went public, that was hard. So I think I probably had much more self-doubt than I did about the business. I don't think I ever remember thinking the business was going to be a complete disaster. I think I was worried we wouldn't live up to the expectation, but that's different.

[0:19:56]

What would your advice be on team leadership?

I think that it's surprisingly, people over-complicate it, in my opinion. You'll have to ask the people that have worked with me. You know, I think that leadership is about setting an incredibly clear direction with a real purpose to it. So, you know, I'd never really wanted to work in an organisation that didn't feel like it had a mission beyond just, we've got to make money, or we've got to supply the best CRM software or, you know, whatever. I'm not even talking about the product, I think every company can have grounding purpose and unifying purpose. I think you've got to set that and then you've got to hire the best people and you've got to let them get on with it. So, you know, I'm not a micro-manager, I believe in massive delegation and I think the key thing is if you have that unifying purpose and mission and you are clear about it and you hire the best people and you don't ask them to do stuff you wouldn't do yourself, but you do delegate, then I think that's a good start.

[0:20:55]

And you were successful in launching IPO, Initial Public Offering. You had to, you and others had to schlep round the City and engage people and talk to them and talk their type of talk – numbers, again – and the original investors wanted, as well, some degree of return. And it was a very successful float, and a couple of months later something happened, did it not?

Not a couple of months, couple of weeks. A couple of weeks later the dot.com crash happened, so we did pretty much the last IPO scale before the markets collapsed. And that was really hard, because we'd raised 100 million and worked incredibly hard, been all over the US, all over Europe, it was full on taking the company public, and especially one that was such high profile. And then we had to manage through a rapidly declining share price. All of the employees' stock, for which they had been working so hard, was pretty much becoming worthless. We were getting a lot of crap thrown at us in the press, and it was really tough. But, you just had to carry on doing a good job for customers, because we knew that that would make the business strong.

And that was the thing that pulled you through you think?

Yeah, I mean I think focussing, making everybody able to focus internally and on the successes and on the momentum that was building, and on the acquisitions that we

were able to do with our paper, as in share price, and kind of trying to cancel out the external noise too much.

[0:22:22]

And were you able to turn the attention round, so that the attention became positive, ultimately?

Not for a long time. Not for a long time.

And was that a failing of the investors?

No, I think it was not a failing of anybody, I think it's the brutal reality of our media cycle, to a degree. You know, we've been the darlings, we've been this whole brave new world of dot.com, success, excitement... and then any opportunity to then whack us because we got too big for our boots, we got too rich, we were too young, and all of that stuff. So perhaps it was just inevitability of too much exposure. I don't know.

From dot.com to dot.con.

[laughs] We did have that put on us quite a lot, but that wasn't the reality, because the business was growing in strength. We didn't go bankrupt, we had more and more customers, we were buying businesses of scale and we were actually thriving.

[0:23:19]

The acquisition process is a significantly different one from starting and growing a business.

Yes.

Could you talk about that please?

Yeah, well we definitely realised that one of the huge benefits to being public was being able to buy companies with speed and of scale. We bought a huge French travel business called Degriptour, and we bought a bunch of smaller travel websites. I think

we did about thirteen acquisitions in about four months, five months, which is extremely time-consuming, and we definitely didn't integrate them effectively enough into our business. But I mean, initially, sorry, we weren't well planned enough. But we, it gave us scale, and that's what you need in travel, and it made us much more resilient, so it was a huge benefit to going public.

[0:24:08]

Right. But then you had to integrate these companies.

Yeah.

Did you take them into your brand or let them continue with their own brand?

We did both. So Holiday Autos, car rental site we bought, had its own brand. Degriktour had its own brand for a bit, then became lastminute.com. So we just, we picked a strategy for each of the ones we bought, but again, we didn't do it as well as I think we could have done, or as well as we probably would do it now, being older and wiser and uglier.

What could you have done?

Just planned, I mean integration is a whole process in itself and I think it, I think we just were moving too fast, really.

With this ton of paper that you had, that you could buy people, a lot of people must have come to you.

I can't really remember the volume, but it was dramatic, it was kind of twenty-seven different companies, I think at one point, we had on our books, all over the place.

They saw an opportunity and they wanted some of... what you had. The money.

Well, they wanted our paper. We didn't give them cash. So they wanted part of the stock price and I think a lot of the companies, post dot.com boom, they didn't have

any other opportunity for exit, really, so we were able to become a hub for all those travel businesses.

[0:25:26]

Now you've moved on, to an extent, in the sense that you have become much more diverse in your activities.

Yep.

You have been a member of the House of Lords, you've been speaking very eloquently in the House of Lords.

Thank you.

You helped to found doteveryone.org. What's the background to that?

Well I left lastminute.com in 2004 and I had a very serious car accident, I was in hospital for two years. I broke pretty much every bone you can break in your body. I had a stroke and my life had to change in how it was constructed, so had to become a kind of portfolio life, aged 35, not 65, which was depressing for a period of time but is now, feels interesting because I get such an expanse of different things to be involved in. And I started a business called Lucky Voice, a karaoke business, when I left hospital. And then I became the UK's digital champion for Gordon Brown in 2009, and then David Cameron in 2010. And I thought about technology from a different angle to the start-up commercial angle. I was asked to look at how to make sure everybody in the UK had access to the internet, and then I got involved in setting up the government digital service and gov.uk and created that in central government. So much more focussed on the kind of social aspects of tech. Set up a charity called Go ON UK, helping people get basic digital skills. And then on the back of all of that, applied to be a member of the House of Lords, so realised I liked being in public policy and trying to influence the public debate around some of these issues, and had felt very lucky to be working at such an interesting level and on so many interesting areas. Stopped doing my UK digital champion role, and then was offered the chance to make the Dibleby Lecture on the BBC, which I, again, is quite a scary thing

because you have to deliver 45 minutes of television, free of charge for the BBC, with no help. And I thought that I would use it as an opportunity to clarify how I felt the UK tech landscape was after being in it for twenty, twenty-five years. And it was out of that that dot everyone emerged. So I'd kind of done all this work, public policy, basic digital skills, I'd done the stuff in government, but it felt like the next frontier was going to be around how we actually helped society with technology as opposed to helped ourselves with technology. So I talked quite a lot about what it felt – at that point, that was 2015 – some of the big gaps in the tech landscape. Done quite a lot about tech start-ups now in this country but we still haven't really thought about how to help people who are in the most vulnerable situations using smart technology. Or we have done quite a lot about regional investment, but we've done very little about diversity and access to much more wide talent pool. We certainly haven't done very much about regulation of the internet or effectively thinking about the dynamics around all of the complexity of that. So, dot everyone was born, because I suggested it in my lecture and then I thought I might as well start it. Took a bit of time to work out where we should focus, because that's a big broad set of issues, but now we are focussed on responsible technology, so that's technology that works for everyone, not just for the few. And we're doing a bunch of things around influencing and shaping both individual understanding of technology, but also policy leaders' understanding of technology, because I believe very deeply that people running schools or people running hospitals, or people in the legislature or people in government need to have a deeper understanding of some of the technologies that we have around us in order to make good decisions for our citizens. So, it's a big ambitious task, but we want to make the UK the most responsible technology market in the world.

[0:29:33]

You have been successful as a result of the innovation with the internet, you have seen it grow as a nascent operation in your twenties and thirties. When I came to it I was in my forties and fifties and yet there was about it something tremendously exciting and potentially liberating. And the words freedom and liberty were being discussed an awful lot. But here we are in 2018 and we have these huge monopolies who just bstride the internet and which would not be allowed in any other industry. Wouldn't be allowed in the car industry, aircraft or anywhere else. Banking or anything. And yet there they are, almost untouched. What caused that?

Well, I challenge you a little bit that it wouldn't be allowed in any other industry. I think that banking is a good example actually, where it was allowed for a long time and then people sorted it out. Same, I would say, in oil industries, infrastructure of some kinds. And if you just put it back in the context of actually, these internet businesses are only, some of them, ten years old, fifteen years old, I think we're only now really beginning to wrestle with what that means and how do we work out what the right level of regulation is. And I think it's two or three different facts, isn't it, about why this has happened. I mean firstly, because of the network effects of the technology itself. And secondly, because of the extraordinary sudden reach of a very small handful of companies born from a very small bit of the world. You know, when we started lastminute.com there was no Google, there was no Facebook. Amazon was just beginning in the UK. No Netflix. Obviously Microsoft, but that feels so different. So I think the particular dynamics of these businesses, which are so compounded by network effects, is the explanatory factor. I think personally, that we in the West tend to look too West and that actually it's pretty important to consider what's happening in the East as well, because you look at some of the Chinese businesses – different dynamics, clearly – but just as large and ultimately I think are going to be as important for us in the UK as some of those west coast businesses have been in the past. So I think it's not surprising to me that we haven't got to grips with this stuff yet, because it's still so new.

[0:32:20]

Is there something as well about the ideology of the founders of these big companies, because they have this ultra-libertarian approach, that regulation is entirely bad for them?

I'm not sure I think that's right. I think that that's what the caricature of Silicon Valley tech entrepreneurs is. I sit on the board of Twitter and, you know, Jack, founder of Twitter and Ev, two serious Silicon Valley titans, although Twitter is a relative minnow to any of the others I've just mentioned, I don't think that I would characterise them as libertarian, I think that sensible regulation is absolutely what they would agree is necessary and I think that there are good entrepreneurs and there are less good entrepreneurs, as in morally, and I think that some companies have a

different attitude to regulation to other companies. But I think it's actually all irrelevant because it's more about the governments of markets not getting a grip of this stuff as opposed to the entrepreneurs. And I don't know of any entrepreneur who would say, regulate me and construct the regulation. The failure here seems to be much more on the other side, which is of policymakers and governments to have understood and stepped into what and how this could be reimagined.

[0:33:35]

You're now on the board of Netflix... not on the board of Netflix...

No, Twitter.

You're now on the board of Twitter, as you say.

Wouldn't want to be on the board of Netflix.

You're a bit of a lightning rod, aren't you, for issues? Because they say, ah, now, she was meant to be this person, but now she's joined the other side.

No, not at all. I find it – well, maybe I am, maybe I'm not being very self-aware – I think Twitter, I was absolutely delighted to join the board of Twitter because I love the service. You know, I don't use Facebook very much, I like the open nature of what Twitter does versus the closed nature of what Facebook is aiming to do. It seems to me that Twitter has much more of a deep social mission than perhaps Facebook perhaps does, and although Facebook – Twitter, sorry – has hundreds of millions of users, we've only really just made a profit. It's interesting how to make that business sustainable and important over the long term. So I hope that I can learn a lot by being there and that if I can in some small way contribute some different values to the values of the other people round the table, then that would be awesome.

[0:34:47]

Is there something inherent in the technology particularly of Twitter, but also to an extent Facebook, that does lead it to significant amounts of bullying, for example?

I'm not sure I think it is quite like that. I think that it is a huge number of factors, you know. These companies are, and have been developed by a very un-diverse set of people, you know, mainly brilliant young white male coders, and they have not often faced some of the issues in the world of mainly women and other, you know, ethnic groups and minorities and so on, and I think that part of the reason that some of these gaps appeared in the technology is not because they're bad people, but because they just didn't code for things they hadn't experienced in their life. You know, any woman who walks down the street at night knows what it feels like to feel vulnerable, and if you're in an open market square, you might – as Twitter has tried to create – you might be thinking about that, but I don't think you do if you're a confident young white man. So I think that's part of it. But I also think that all of us as individuals have not necessarily been our best selves on some of these platforms, and that isn't just about the code, that's about how we are using it, and I think that is the bit that we all need to think about and reflect on.

Fundamentally you think that these are neutral platforms, therefore, I'm suggesting to you, and that there is not anything inherent in their technology which leads them to be used in particular ways?

I'm not saying they're neutral platforms, because I don't really buy the argument that tech is just tech and it's neutral. I'm suggesting that some of the, as Twitter have said themselves, some of the holes, some of the things that have been allowed to spiral that they would never- unintended consequences were gaps in the code in the way that the service was constructed. You know Jack was saying the other day, why on earth do we show how many followers people have? Why is that a metric that we care about? That just leads to vanity, that just leads to it being a signal on the platform that that's what we value. We don't value that, we value sustaining conversation and interesting viewpoints and, you know, enabling people to meet people that they would not normally meet. But that's not necessarily how you would construct it, so no technology's neutral, but all I'm suggesting is that it's not as simple as just saying, well, we fix those gaps, it's also about how we use it and how we get it reflected back into society. I'm constantly struck about how, everyone says to me, oh just chuck Trump off Twitter, and I'm like, well, don't you think the best thing would be is if the TV, the newspaper and all the radio stations stopped just reading out Trump's tweets.

You know, the amplification of Trump from beyond just that one platform is quite extraordinary by the offline media, so it's more complicated, it's a whole eco-system of stuff.

[0:37:47]

Does everyone has come up recently with a very interesting paper, 'The Social Harms of Technology', and you list twenty-one of them.

Yes.

It is a frightening list.

Yeah, it is.

How have we got to this point?

Well, I think we list about 121 of them, let me look at the one you're looking at. We, this is a document that is meant to inform the work we've been doing thinking about regulation of the internet and we've been amassing a huge number of different experts and getting opinions about what, if there was some kind of internet regulation – not regulation, sorry – body that was overseeing what regulation of the internet might be, so not a new regulator but actually trying to monitor what social harms might be, how would you go about that. So we're not suggesting actually set up a regulator, we're saying that you should set up an organisation that would help the regulators regulate better in whatever sphere they're in, and also would show, you know, particular effects, both sometimes intended, but often unintended of the technology we're using such as the harm to children that we're now seeing with mental health. So this was a kind of crowd source way of looking at how you might measure social harms. It's a long list and I think we feel like it's work in progress. I'm trying to look at the one that I was particularly interested by... [sound of pages turning] hold on. And I think people are understanding of some of the things that we talk about. There's some quite interesting... so, beyond all of the obvious things that you might imagine, I think that some of the things that people haven't yet quite got a grip on is things around your own financial uncertainty or fraud and how, you know, algorithms can show you one

price and someone else another price, and vulnerable people can be double screwed over because they might be getting dynamic pricing that's really not helpful for them. So I think some of those harms are quite hard to see and touch, but it's really important to start mapping them out and reflecting on them and we hope that's going to be the start of a conversation.

[0:40:01]

What three things would you like to have done almost immediately to improve matters to try and mitigate, if not destroy some of these social harms with technology?

Well, I think again, you can't do this in the micro. I think it's more about thinking about what's the institutional reform you need to make sure that we address this as a society. So I think we would like to see another body created, or if not a new one, something as an important part of another existing body, but I think probably a new one, that has a bunch of responsibilities. The first would be a place where you as an individual can go to get recourse from some of the rights that you now have on the internet, you know. The ICO, the Information Commissioner's Office, wildly under-resourced, people don't know it exists. We know from our own research that people don't know where to go if they've got problems. That's the first thing. Second thing is we want it to be an organisation that helps the regulators to have more of a level of understanding. So that could be from the Competition Markets Authority, it could be Advertising Standards Authority, it could be a whole bunch of different places. You can't regulate the internet because it's everywhere, so you need to use the regulators that exist in various sectors to get better digital understanding. So that's the second thing it would do, that's essential. And then the final thing is to track, begin to track and try to measure what these social harms are, and people's attitudes to them. So to be a good place to find what the right things are to focus on, both as a company, but also potentially as governments. So that feels like quite a coherent set of issues that one body could look after and that's what I think we should be instantly creating.

[0:41:41]

If you were back now, in age, but in 2018, and what would be your big idea as lastminute.com was the big idea then?

Well, I think that is, I mean I've got...

I meant an entrepreneurial idea.

Oh, sorry, you mean a business idea?

Yeah.

I really feel so far removed from having business ideas any more, I think that for me, aligning social purpose and a profit is what's essential. So I'm always trying to think of things that can help communities, but also deliver profit. I'm very interested in the way we die and how we haven't really used the internet to help either planning of funerals, building, you know, products and services that make that moment in people's lives both as the person who's died, but also the person around the person who's dying much easier. I think there are a whole bunch of bits of our lives that are not necessarily the most commercially exciting for people that we can still unpick and help to make less unpleasant using clever technology. And so I've just always been fascinated, maybe from being in hospital for so long, with how we can make some of those bits of, the most stressful bits of life better. Not necessarily the big money-spinning ideas, but those are the bits I think that we need to use technology to help people unpick.

[0:43:10]

What are the biggest mistakes you've made in your life?

Oh my god, so many. Erm... I think they happen daily [laughs], I think, you know, I've been unprepared for things, I've hired bad people, you know, companies we bought at lastminute.com did not go well, made mistakes in marketing budgets, you know, probably was way too over-exposed as one of the co-founders. So all those kind of more solipsistic failures. And I didn't wear my seatbelt and I fell out of a car and I nearly died, that was a pretty big one. And I set an ambition when I became digital champion, that the whole of the UK would be online by 2012, because I thought the Olympics would be a good moment. But we didn't get close to that, so that was a huge failure, and I look back on everything that I did and how I could have

done it better. And I thought that setting a big ambition was right, because it was motivating. I'm not sure it was right, I think I was just setting us up all to fail, so that wasn't very successful. You know, in creating the government digital service with the team, I think that we did a good job at inspiring a bunch of people to come and work for us, I think we did a bad job at embedding enough of that excitement in the wider civil service that they didn't feel threatened about what was happening with gov.uk. So I think progress kind of goes in fits and starts. And I think that now, with everyone, you know, failure's too strong a word, but as chairman and founder, I see it as my job to make sure it becomes sustainable and has impact and so I need to make sure that I get it well funded for a good five years to come, and so I need to keep focussed on that.

*And you have your event coming up pretty soon, don't you? Got a big event?
Number of events.*

A number of events. What, are you thinking about the opening of...

You're going to be on a panel interviewing somebody, from the BBC?

Oh, Mishal?

Yes.

Oh yes.

Yes, I read your tweet, you see, and you said, what do I ask...

The interview, yes.

... something interview, what did you describe that...

The ultimate interview, I think.

The ultimate interview. I read that, I thought, she's read my CV, how kind of her. But no, it wasn't me. You were referring...

Yes, that is an exciting event. Sorry, I had a moment because I feel like I have an event every week, and that's a nice one, that's an easy one. We have a bunch of dot everyone events coming up. We're doing a big responsible technology summit next year, I'm Chancellor of the OU, and so we have our fiftieth birthday next year, that'll be very exciting, and a nice light one is Mishal and I, Mishal Husain, who's done a book about skills, especially for young women. We're going to do a double act on career and life and I will be interviewing her about her book. So the pressure's on me, because she's clearly one of the supremely effective interviewers on the planet, and I am not, so I'm going to have to up my game.

[0:46:01]

Okay, you've got to up your game for that. Forty years ago I was banging on about, as we were, I was the editor of 'Computing', as the women who were working on 'Computing' were also banging on about, women in IT. Forty years on, what has moved?

Nothing. Nothing.

Why not?

I think part of the problem is, as you describe it, IT. You know, I've never worked in IT, I don't understand why people who are working in technology get lumped into this what feels to me like a different industry, which is about building hardware and databases and legacy systems and big corporate infrastructures, and I think that's part of the problem, that it still has an image problem, you can't be what you can't see, and we're in trouble if I'm still heralded as a symbol for the internet, because there are so many amazing women doing incredible things. So I think it's partly that it has a branding challenge, if you like. We've shown again and again, scientific studies have shown that if you write job specs and you say that you need Python, Java and a whole bunch of skills, no one will apply. If you write job specs saying, we are trying to solve a problem and this is the problem, then you up the number of women that apply

immediately. So, that is all part of the same thing about how we as an industry are reflecting ourselves outwards and what we're looking for. So that's one of the first things. I think the second thing is, partly because of those incredibly fast growing scale network businesses, which came from such a small and un-diverse bit of the world, that promoted a particular culture and I think you have to be very, very self-conscious to break that culture and to move it on. So, you know, I feel optimistic and pessimistic in equal measure. It's pretty dire. You know, the numbers are not moving, in fact they're getting worse from many metrics. You hear every day of terrible stories of either just absolute overt sexism, latent sexism, sometimes aggression, nasty stuff happening. But, there is definitely more noise and chat than there ever has been before, so hopefully that will lead to more action and it will lead to more people going into the industry, women and girls choosing the subjects and, you know, we can make sure that this is, you know, the future is not just hideously reminiscent of a hundred years ago.

That's to inspire the future, isn't it?

Mm.

That's one of the things we've done today, we've captured the past and inspired the future. Thank you very much for your contribution, Martha Lane Fox.

My pleasure. Thanks for having...

[recording ends at 0:48:23]