

# Gordon Craigie

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

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

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

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

That chemistry between the two friends sets the tone

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

Eamonn O'Neill





## *An independent mind...*

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

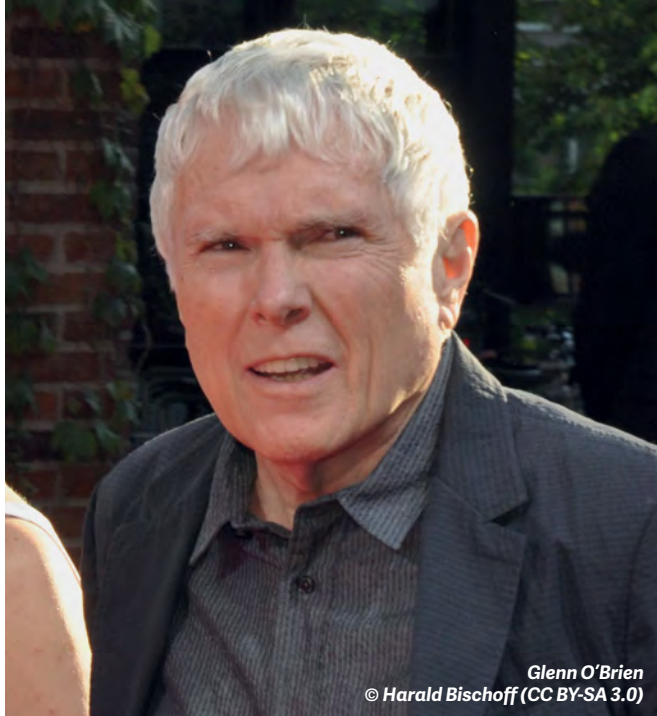
For me, one of the great things about *Talk Media* is that the guest contributors come from a range of backgrounds and are not at all the typical 'talking heads' that are traditionally relied on by the more mainstream organisations. Eamonn confirms that this is quite deliberate and is very much a theme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

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

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Ernest Hemingway



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

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

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



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

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

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

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

**SPECIAL INVESTIGATION**

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

A selection of Eamonn's investigative features



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

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

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

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

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

# TALK MEDIA



Stuart Cosgrove and Eamonn O'Neill, co-hosts of the Talk Media podcast  
© The Big Light

didn't sue me was that he thought we had a lot in common! He has never been convicted in Ireland of anything, though he remains the main suspect, but he has been convicted in *absentia* in a French court because their Napoleonic laws allow them to do that. It's a strange story."

Reading Eamonn's investigative work was an eye-opener for me. He's clearly an expert in the art of 'show not tell' and guides the reader to be questioning. But, as a matter of principle, he isn't keen to get involved in any political debate and laughs off my attempts to lure him in by saying, "some people will guess at my politics from things I say, and some of them may even be correct!" He is, however, fiercely protective of his profession, so I wondered what he thought about the current state of journalism in Scotland: "Scotland's in exactly the same predicament as most western democracies, which is that journalism is in good shape but the printed press is not. I see the next generation of journalists coming through and they're excellent. They're well informed and they have information at their fingertips that I could only have dreamt of when I was their age. What I'm trying to teach them is not only the traditional skills of journalism but also the new ones, like how to understand, evaluate and critique the sheer volume of information that's being chucked at them.

"There's always been the problem of English ownership and London-centric editors, and the Scottish press were historically pretty ill-served by many of their publishing companies. Journalists themselves, by and large, do a very good job, but the problem can be the editorial line or the fact that

*Nobody's trying to ban it and there's no international conspiracy to get rid of it, it's just that something else appeared on the scene that replaces it or delivers it better*

they're working for an industry which is at the mercy of technology. I ask my students, 'how many of you bought a newspaper this morning?', and not one hand will go up. Then I'll ask how many read the news online this morning and almost every hand will go up. Now, if you love paper and ink, and the traditions of the press, then that's a depressing scene. But if you love the fact that information is not exclusive to one platform or medium then you don't even think about it, you move on. There'll always be a niche for people who want to buy newspapers in the same way that somebody once said there'll always be a niche for people who like violin music – it's no longer the dominant music of our times but nobody's trying to ban it and there's no international conspiracy to get rid of it, it's just that something else appeared on the scene that replaces it or delivers it better.

"Everybody nowadays has a mobile phone, which contains the equivalent of a printing press, a studio, and a communications device that NASA could only have dreamt of a few decades ago! When 9/11 happened in 2001 the communications between Air Force One and the ground were less than the average teenager has on their phone right now – how could an industry not be absolutely brutalised in the face of that technology? You and I are using it right now to chat to each other so we're either hypocrites or we're people who are nostalgic for the golden era of the press – which, incidentally, was not the golden era if you were in a minority, disabled, a woman, or someone whose face didn't fit because of your religion. I genuinely think that the media in Scotland is in good shape and that journalism, critically, is too. But are there the jobs that there used to be? No there's not. Where are the jobs for the future? Go and create them. *Talk Media's* doing it, *The Big Light's* doing it..."

"Another problem is that the publishers were too busy polishing their fountain pens 20 years ago instead of fiddling about with the internet to see what was coming. If you want to see the reason why some newspapers have done well and others have died, go online and look at the *New York Times Innovation Report* from 2014. It's the equivalent of a flare being sent up from the Titanic as it starts to sink! They concluded, and I paraphrase, 'we're screwed, we are from another era, we need to change, and we need to change yesterday!' This was a top-secret team saying, basically, this is what we need for survival. And they did it, and now they're thriving through original, hard, investigative, relevant, robust, intelligent journalism. It's cheeky, engaging, entertaining but smart as a whip. They use technology as their slave not the other way round. But in Britain, in these big publishing groups, and many of the companies in Scotland, they were slow to react and didn't see it coming. They brought in guys like me to speak to them and just thought we were from another planet. Many are still training people in a way that's based on the old routine of an editorial meeting at 10 a.m. to set the runners and riders for the stories, and people wax lyrical about the nostalgia of that whole thing. Would you like to be operated on in a hospital based on best practice from 1971? I'm not being disrespectful about that traditional learning, of course I understand the line, but you want somebody who is bang on, cutting-edge, right now, even forward thinking and will take a chance on the new routine or whatever. Instead of that some journalists will say, 'this isnae as good as it used to be' – yeah, sure, OK, next!"

At the end of each *Talk Media* podcast Eamonn, Stuart and their guest each provide a recommendation to listeners for something to read, watch or listen to that they have personally enjoyed. Keeping in the spirit, I asked Eamonn if he could recommend anything to *iScot* readers: "I think that a lot of people don't understand the power they have at their fingertips these days with the press. I would

urge everybody to take out a subscription to a Scottish newspaper, and they should try a newspaper they disagree with – subscribe for a few months to a newspaper you don't like and see what you think, give it a chance. A good piece of journalism should have something for everybody, and a great piece of journalism should in its own wee way encapsulate something greater than the sum of its parts. And have a look carefully at smaller outlets, smaller podcasts, and smaller companies – the output of *The Big Light* is astonishing so I would recommend you go and find something you like, and subscribe, because the range of output is quite breathtaking, it really is just brilliant.

“And lastly, something totally left-field that I mentioned earlier is *AIR MAIL* – that's the opposite of being miserable about the media or thinking there's nothing interesting or flourishing out there, that there's nothing with a bit of flair to it. *AIR MAIL* is unashamedly swaggering, it often involves stories that are ridiculous about ridiculously wealthy people, and it's not a worthy recommendation in the slightest, but you'll find something you enjoy reading. Because I think one of the things that compels me to enjoy the media so much is enjoying people who I disagree with. I like reading people where I don't particularly agree with their point of view but I like their style, and if that's not being democratic then I don't know what is!”

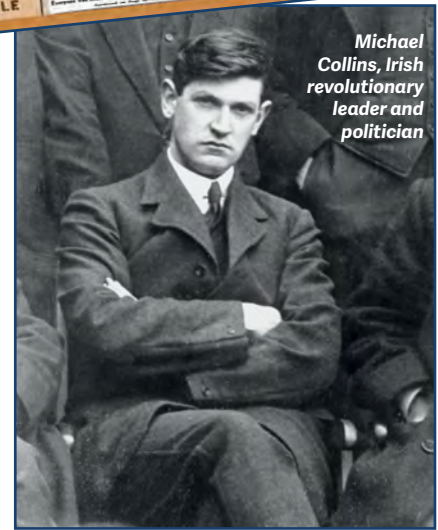
Apart from continuing his weekly jousts with Stuart Cosgrove on *Talk Media*, what will be occupying Eamonn's time over the following months? “I've been working for a couple of years on a big academic project about Ernest Hemingway. I was awarded a John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum research grant to work in the Hemingway archives in Boston, which I know fairly well, and getting access to the archives and being awarded the grant was great. But unfortunately, the pandemic intervened so I've had to change my entire approach to research to do a lot of the literature review first before I get to the archives. It's frustrating, because my wife's American and we're usually over there a lot – in fact, we literally fly past the archives and museum as we land in Boston! So I'm really keen to get out there once lockdown lifts and get my hands on the actual archives... and on the cheque! I've taught his work for years and I'm very passionate about it, so I'm really enjoying it. I'm looking at a period in his life when he was in Europe around 1944/5 – although he's very much regarded as an American icon he was massively influenced by Europe and the modernist movement. Alongside that I'm developing a book about the assassination of Michael Collins, the Irish revolutionary leader, and I'm also working on another journalism-related project, but that's something I'll keep under wraps until nearer the time it comes out – you've always got to be careful of somebody nicking the idea! And don't forget that I'm always working on academic peer-reviewed papers which your dear readers will never be troubled to read – Stuart thoroughly enjoys winding me up about that because he says I've got a few readers if I'm lucky, he's not wrong!”

Eamonn finished that last bit with a laugh, but his final serious thought was directed to our wee magazine: “I really like the *iScot Magazine* strapline, *For those of independent mind*. I was chatting to my wife about it, in fact, and I love that line about being of independent thought, a person of independent mind. It's a Burns' quote, isn't it? From, *A man's a man for a that*. That's exactly what we all would aspire for, to be of independent mind, which to me means I'm still learning, simple as that.”

At *iScot*, we always like to champion Scots who epitomise the whole “Work as if you live in the early days of a better



Boston Post headlines of Michael Collins' assassination in 1922



Michael Collins, Irish revolutionary leader and politician



*A good piece of journalism should have something for everybody, and a great piece of journalism should in its own wee way encapsulate something greater than the sum of its parts*

nation” quote, and who just get on and do things without waiting for permission – *The Big Light* network is a perfect illustration of just that. As admitted earlier, I'm a huge fan and listen regularly to *Talk Media* and *Old Firm Facts* – a brilliantly entertaining football podcast hosted by Adam Miller which, despite its title, does not focus on Celtic/Rangers nor get too bogged down with facts! There are others that are definitely on my list to try out when time allows.

Eamonn O'Neill's track record speaks for itself, and his commitment to good journalism and innovative media is inspiring. One of his quotes, that I've held back for last, really resonated with me: “Good media should reflect back to you the world you live in so that you understand it better and give you new perspectives on the things that you encounter on a day-to-day basis. Another aspect of it is to reveal things you never thought of and that you never suspected.” I truly hope that's what this column, and this magazine, achieves every month.

**You can hear Eamonn weekly on *Talk Media* at:**  
[www.thebiglight.com/talkmedia](http://www.thebiglight.com/talkmedia)  
 or via Apple, Spotify, and other podcast platforms