

Robert



Shrimmsley.

“Marching, protesting and being on Twitter feels like all you can do.”

Words by Colleen Considine

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London
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Financial Times political editor, Robert Shrimmsley discussing everything wrong with society today, comedy, opinion culture, climate change and of course, politics.

Robert Shrimmsley, if you don't know, is the political editor at The Financial Times. He graduated from the London School for Economics and Political science in 1985. Coming from a family of journalists, his dad, Bernard Shrimmsley, was editor of The News of The World, and deputy editor at The Sun. His uncle was the political editor of three newspapers, The Sunday Mirror, The Sun and the Daily Mail. Growing up encased by journalism, Robert Shrimmsley has kept it in the family. Having worked at the Financial Times for 20 years. Going from Chief Political Correspondent to UK News Editor, Columnist, News Editor, and now Editorial Director. With such a wide background in political journalism, Robert Shrimmsley knows exactly what he's talking about.

The office building, Bracken house is sat between St Paul's Cathedral and across from the Tate Modern. Outside, dark pink walls with blocky windows, a traditional building, contrasting the sleek and contemporary interior. A place you can only dream of working. His own personal office, grey walls and a desk painted with pages of work. An intriguing, level-headed figure, with an in-depth knowledge on several different subjects. Talking with assurance, a journalistic pro with an intangible work ethic. A political writer who has written a weekly satire column for the last 15 years. Looking to the whole picture and giving the reader the exact facts needed with a level of humour.

Last year we saw an upsurge in climate change activists, particularly among millennials and generation z. We are seeing more and more young people voice their opinion on social media. However, “the biggest obstacle to young people is the fact they can't be bothered to vote, voting rates for 18-29-year olds was below 40%.”. Young people have often questioned whether their view is respected or valid. Unless results show how can it be? As Robert explained, “I don't think naivety is the issue I don't think a valid point of view is the issue, not turning out is the single biggest issue.”

Looking at Extinction Rebellion, the voice of young people is being used as a way to create global action. A sense of commitment to a cause. At the start of Extinction Rebellion, “there's a massive upsurge of goodwill toward them”, however, “then over time people get more and more irritated with them for the reason they don't have specific goals you can grasp.” What can extinction rebellion lead to? “they raise consciousness and that's great for a bit but then at some point what are you actually doing apart from blocking my way to work?” People on Extinction Rebellion rallies are those, “who can afford to get arrested and spend a day in court, which I can't because I lose pay.”

Look at it from the eyes of the commuter, a regular person “struggling to make ends-meet week-in, week-out. Your immediate concerns are next week, not next year or next decade, or the future of the planet.” Until there are very real methods to help climate change, then how is raising awareness any better? It's brilliant to have young people care but, “Consciousness raising is not the same as direct target of an issue,” there has to be focus, “on one achievable goal”.

Social media filters conversations, woke culture is not woke, “Liberals, people who are essentially tolerant and open and progressive have somehow managed to turn woke into an insult.” Online has “reduced nuance in argument”, therefore making “filter bubbles to people to only want to hear views they agree with or they want to assail the people who they don't want to hear”. Due to this, if you don't want a piece of news, “there is a news outlet that will give you the facts that you prefer,” making this difficult as, “a fundamental piece of civic union is that we all agree on what is true, even if we don't like that it is true, we agree that it is”.

Take comedy, used as a way to make something much easier to process. However, today we are faced with the problem of the way in which a joke is told, “you have to be very brave as a comedian if you are going to deviate from any societal norm.” It is the job of the comedian to look at culture. Information in the form of humour. There is a sense of being “brave”, because “there are so many areas where people say you can't say things anymore. Can't be funny about, make

“The way to get attention is to be more outrageous, so the attention economy drives you to be more outrageous,”

jokes about.” That’s what’s missing from comedy, it seems as though it’s getting more and more unusual to see a comedian do their job. “A joke you could tell in a club, with an audience you’d been working with for 20 minutes, is completely different to throwing a joke on Twitter.”

Anyone who does deviate from this “societal norm” has to be, “very thick skinned and prepared to fight” because, “you’ve got to be very tough if you’re going to be interesting in any way.” Comedy is subjective, “people will say, you can’t make jokes about that, but the answer is often rather, depends on the joke doesn’t it?” Humour with the intention of, “submersing to a prejudice rather than pandering to it.” Having written columns talking about Nazis and faced backlash, “you can make jokes about Nazis, what you can’t make jokes about are Holocaust victims.” It’s about “punching up rather than down”.

The face of journalism is changing, the consumption of media. Also how journalism deals with advertising. There has been a “collapse of advertising” which means there are now different ways of monetizing a business through “clicks and subscriptions.” Now, in order to drive these clicks, “the attention economy drives you to be more outrageous, more outspoken because that is the way people will pay attention to you.” Take Katie Hopkins, “When Katie Hopkins was at her absolute peak, you used to go to The Huffington Post to say, ‘you’ll never believe what Katie Hopkins has done now!’ that’s quite alluring, oh what’s she done now!?” It draws you in, and “that’s the economy of it, and therefore you’re driven to more extreme positions until you topple over the edge and then someone else comes along to replace you.” You have to somehow stay relevant in this market. You have to be ferocious and different because readers will simply get bored. “This market rewards those who have strong positions.”

One name who jumps out time and time again is Piers Morgan. Someone who is very vocal in what he thinks and what he does. “Piers Morgan is somewhere between a journalist and an entertainer and public profile.” Whether you are open-minded enough to listen to him, he has done something particularly brilliant in changing the face of a journalist in the way news is consumed.

A Character model of himself as a way to bring in revenue. Using this model of the way he speaks “quite brilliantly, is that the more controversial he is, the more people want to read what he says.” So, whether you listen to him or not, Piers Morgan is doing what others are less willing to do. Put themselves on the line and it is paying off massively. The more controversial he is, even when you disagree with him, you are still paying his wages. Because it is that simple insignificant click everyone does which drives revenue over and over.

University is a debate brought up time and time again, “just being at university had meant I’d won, 8% of the population went to university. I was already in the winning stream, unless I’d totally screwed up just by being there.” Going to university now is common, everyone can do it, “I knew what jobs were going to be around for most of my life, that’s not true now, it’s very frightening. I wouldn’t swap places with you, even for the extra years of life.”

Labour, the party of the people, or so they are meant to be, they have “some very, very big questions to face.” A party that “it is not even close to being the natural party of government for this country, it is the party people turn to when the Conservatives seem exhausted, that’s not ideal.” And because of, “Labour has a major identity crisis.” Making it “increasingly a middle-class party, the party of the educated. The people who are more likely to vote labour are the people who have been to university, have often had better jobs.” Rather than being the party for the people, they are missing the point of being Labour. A working-class party. Meaning, more and more working-class people turn toward the Conservative party.

We are in quite a confusing time, it’s people like Robert Shrimpsley who offer a clear voice in a world surrounded by information. He has a satirical tone that is used in political journalism. Often giving a comedic sense of humour, making his articles easier to digest. It’s hard to say where politics is heading, but one thing is for sure, Labour needs to find out who they really are. Climate activists need more action and less talk. And living in a PC culture is difficult but it’s how you use your voice in a world confined to social media.

“Take nothing for granted.”

-Chris Henley

Chris Henley, A Luton-born photographer now living in Milton Keynes, capturing life on lockdown. Photography that captures a sense of loneliness and community spirit. You can read the full interview on Grafter magazine’s website.

Photography: Chris Henley

