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MBS ([00:00](#)):

I had a few nicknames growing up. It started in primary school. I think second grade. We were read a book called Flat Stanley and it told the story of a boy who, lying in bed, had his pinball fall down on him. No real harm was done other than he was squashed completely flat, two dimensional, not three dimensional. It allowed for all sorts of grand adventures from being able to slip through cracks and grates, rescue keys that had been dropped through a grate, to being rolled up and mailed to exotic destinations.

MBS ([00:32](#)):

My surname then was Stanier so I became Flat Stanier. That's obviously too long, so then Flat Stan, also too long, so eventually just Stan. And really until I left Australia in my mid twenties, pretty much everyone knew me as Stan. Now of course, there were variations. At one stage I was called Calamity Stan,



because I was growing fast as a teenager, a bit clumsy. Pretzel Legs, also not very flattering. The ABC logo. I have ears that stick out and if you Google Australia's ABC, which is the national broadcaster, you'll totally get the joke. But in the end, it came down to Stan.

MBS ([01:11](#)):

One of my best friends through high school and university was also a Michael. One of his early nicknames was Davros, a villain from Dr. Who, because he had a complicated braces set up for his teeth. But in the end, Michael Bachelard just became, Bach. We've got some great shared adventures. We shared a house with a couple of other guys for three or four years in university and that led to such things as winning a dress up competition in the local 10 kilometer run. He was Robin hood, I was a sugar plum fairy. Some intense games of backyard soccer and the launch of our naked calendar. Something that defined the year 1919 a way that we can only now regret.

MBS ([01:55](#)):

Welcome to two pages with MBS. This is the podcast where brilliant people read the best two pages from a favorite book. A book that it has moved them. A book that has shaped them. So Michael Bachelard this new 2021 version of him is now an award-winning author and journalist. He's a Deputy Editor and Investigations Editor at The Age in Australia. One of the countries top three newspapers. And like me, I guess, he's come a long way. But for him, that was always the plan.

Michael ([02:26](#)):

It's interesting because I think my story's somewhat atypical, even though it's the kind of story that we often see in fiction. Which is knowing from a quite a young age that this is what I wanted to do.



MBS ([02:38](#)):

That would've been about 14 years old. So first or second year of high school, when I first met him. When he really decided to become a writer, but pretty quickly his pragmatic side took over.

Michael ([02:49](#)):

Almost instantly after I had that thought was, yeah, but writers are poor and you can't rely on the income. And so a broad, pragmatic streak switched in and I thought, well, gee, how can I be a writer and make money? And the word journalist. I remember it. I was out in the country somewhere at a barbecue with my parents. I don't know what was going on, but, and I was standing on the tennis court, the empty tennis court and the word journalist popped into my head. And I thought, oh, that's what I'll do. And I went and announced it to my family and thereafter, basically, I worked towards that.

MBS ([03:25](#)):

Early in his career. He figured out the price you would need to pay to be committed to a career in journalism. It's a pretty stark realization actually, but it's been a north star for him.

Michael ([03:36](#)):

Relatively early in my career some journalistic legend, the editor of this and the managing editor of that and, broke this and that story, died. And about four people who were all 80 plus, remembered him and mourned him for his reputation. I worked out that you don't go down in the annals of history as a journalist. It's all about what you produce and your duty, my duty, is to the audience and to story and the idea of exposing corrupt things or things that are going wrong or whatever. So, that's the ethos which I approach it with.



MBS ([04:13](#)):

And this is an ethos that's won him multiple awards and really to claim mastery in his profession. But mastery doesn't mean you're necessarily appreciated or beloved.

Michael ([04:23](#)):

I think people in large part, regard us journalists as on the scale of global ethics, somewhere between real estate agents and used car salesmen. In that zone anyway.

MBS ([04:38](#)):

Right.

Michael ([04:38](#)):

So we're not widely respected, I think. And that's partly because there are some terrible practitioners of my craft and there are people who work in bad faith and who don't stand for the kind of ethical and professional obligations that I think we should uphold. And that's very frustrating for those of us who turn ourselves inside out to check facts, to fairly apportion blame or credit for actions, who exhaustively try to make sense of things in a world that's almost always got mushy edges. Where people have their own agendas and where there's no two witnesses give the same account of the same events. So we're trying to straighten all that out, give a credible and honest account and then weather the criticisms, whether they be in defamation courts or nasty letters or whatever. And those of us who take it seriously and take the duty of it seriously, and I guess the higher aspects of it seriously, find it very frustrating that there are bad actors out there and that we do have a bad reputation. But I think that's the reality of it.



MBS ([06:02](#)):

Yeah, that's interesting. I would've said there were just two different types of journalists and one type of journalist has a reputation down there, but there's also a longing for the quality of journalism in these media bubbles that we all live in and the echo chambers that we all live in terms of helping to see beyond that as well.

Michael ([06:22](#)):

Yeah. Look, I think that's absolutely true. And one of the things that, having said all that, that I just said, there is a higher duty, I think, in it. It sounds a bit pretentious to say, but I think there is a real public duty and public interest in finding those things out and telling them and telling them as honestly as you can, and hoping that the truth does filter out despite the echo chambers and the rabbit holes and all that sort of dishonest opinion that we're exposed to.

MBS ([07:00](#)):

You're a little modest when you introduce yourself as a journalist, because you are now a senior editor for one of the biggest papers in Australia. You're the Deputy Editor at The Age. When you see a younger generation of journalists coming in and reporting to you and being guided by you, how do you coach and mentor them? How do you help them think about what it means to be a journalist in 2021?

Michael ([07:30](#)):

Wow. Well, the younger generation scares me shitless because they're so talented and smart. And the young generation have grown up with the tools that, just incredibly useful for finding stuff out and accounting for it in a way that I'm not native to. So they're teaching me, at least, as much as I'm teaching them. I guess for my idea of myself as a writer has never entirely left me.



MBS ([08:00](#)):

Yeah.

Michael ([08:00](#)):

I see journalism as having the research side, which is the obviously crucial, which I kind of almost surprised myself by enjoying as much as I did. And I became an investigative journalist and then a foreign correspondent. So I've gone very deep into the researching side of things. But at the end, the bit that really often gives me the most joy is the putting it all together. And I suppose some young journalists don't necessarily appreciate that or don't have the skills to do that in the way. And it's not just aimless [writerliness 00:08:34]. It's actually-

MBS ([08:35](#)):

Right.

Michael ([08:36](#)):

... Conveying information in a way that people can truly understand the nuance of it. And the English language is a horrendously complicated and beautifully-

MBS ([08:45](#)):

It is.

Michael ([08:47](#)):

... Formed thing. You can express incredibly fine nuances of detail and of meaning and trying and have, coach people in expressing it. Because you can have all the knowledge and all the ideas and all the facts in the world, but if you can't convey it, then you're missing a really crucial part of what journalism does.

MBS ([09:08](#)):

If people don't read the next sentence then you've failed.



Michael ([09:11](#)):

That's right. Some people, "Oh, don't dumb it down." No, no. I'm making it readable. I'm making it legible for people and compelling.

MBS ([09:19](#)):

Yeah. Tell me about the book you've chosen for us, Bach.

Michael ([09:23](#)):

Well, Stan, this is one of my early literary wow moments, reading this book.

MBS ([09:32](#)):

Yeah.

Michael ([09:33](#)):

So I came to it because I was browsing in a secondhand bookshop outside my local shopping center when I was, I don't know, 16 or 17 or something and had some pocket money in my pocket and starting to [crosstalk 00:09:48].

MBS ([09:47](#)):

Oh, secondhand books smells. I remember those. Yeah.

Michael ([09:51](#)):

Starting to form my own opinions. And I picked up this book and, it wasn't this book actually. It was a book of short stories by the same author. His name is Peter Carey and he's now won two Booker Prizes. But back then he was just a young Australian author. And I picked up this book of short stories and I flicked through it, it looked intriguing and I bought it, \$4 or something and read it. It blew my tiny provincial mind. It was sexy and violent and it was bristling with ideas and...



MBS ([10:23](#)):

Yeah.

Michael ([10:24](#)):

It was surrealists in some way. It was the first piece of magic realist fiction I'd ever encountered. Turns out there was two books of short stories and a novel. So I devoured the other book of short stories and then I went and bought the novel. And the novel, in some ways, is like a really long magic realist, short story.

MBS ([10:45](#)):

Yeah. Yeah.

Michael ([10:46](#)):

And I love it. I reread it recently when I was trying to get even further back to my writerly roots and write a novel of my own just to try and feel the rhythm and...

MBS ([10:57](#)):

Yeah.

Michael ([10:58](#)):

What had originally intrigued me about this kind of writing and I reread it and loved it again.

MBS ([11:03](#)):

And what had shocked you about it? You and I did English together in high school and in university as well. What was such a jolt to you in terms of Carey's approach to writing? Because he's a legend in Australian writing now.

Michael ([11:19](#)):

He is, yeah. Well, I guess we read a lot of classics. We read a lot of Shakespeare at school.





MBS ([11:24](#)):

Yeah.

Michael ([11:25](#)):

And we probably read the canon as it was then, the sort of modernist canon, Jane Austen. And they're all absolutely terrific pieces of literature, but this was a piece of literature and it was clearly literary, it wasn't a throwaway novel or an airport fiction. It was clearly a piece of literature that was about modern Australia, describing modern concerns and it spoke to me. But more than that, it intrigued me and I read it and I knew there was some deeper meaning there. I couldn't work out what it was and it niggled me and annoyed me and so much of his stuff at that point did. That...

MBS ([12:04](#)):

Yeah.

Michael ([12:06](#)):

There's something going on here, what is it? And I found it compelling.

MBS ([12:13](#)):

Yeah.

Michael ([12:13](#)):

But also, just the writing, that's so lyrical. The combination of detail and lyricism is still sensational today, I think. And it's still some of the concepts in it and what have you, truly shocking and really jolt you out of yourself.

MBS ([12:34](#)):

Beautiful. You've set this up for us so well. Why don't you take us to the two pages that you're going to read for us?



Michael ([12:40](#)):

Well, I'm actually going to read the first two pages-

MBS ([12:43](#)):

Okay.

Michael ([12:43](#)):

... Of the book because they set it up beautifully.

MBS ([12:46](#)):

[crosstalk 00:12:46] start.

Michael ([12:46](#)):

Yeah.

MBS ([12:46](#)):

Yeah.

Michael ([12:47](#)):

Indeed. All right. So, part one: knocking at the hell gate. Harry Joy was to die three times, but it was his first death, which was to have the greatest effect on him. And it is this first death which we shall now witness. There is Harry Joy lying in the middle of that green suburban lawn beneath that tatted banana tree, partly obscured by the frangipani, which even now drops a single sweet flower beside his slightly gray face. As usual, Harry is wearing a grubby white suit. And as he lies there quite dead, his blue braces are visible to all the world. And anyone can see that he has sewn on one of those buttons himself rather than ask his wife. He has a thin face and at the moment it looks peaceful enough. It is only the acute angles struck by his long gangling limbs, which announce the suddenness of his departure.



Michael ([13:48](#)):

His cheeks are slightly sunken and his large mustache, a mustache far too big for that thin face, covers his mouth and leaves its expression as enigmatic as ever. His straight gray hair, the color of an empty ashtray, hangs over one eye. And although no one seems to have noticed it, a cigarette still burns between two yellowed fingers, like some practical joke known to raise the dead. Yet when the two fingers are burned, he does not move. His little pot belly remains quite still. It does not twitch even his little finger. And the people huddled around his wife on the veranda 20 yards away have no justification for the optimistic opinions they shower on her so eagerly.

Michael ([14:34](#)):

Harry Joy saw all of this in a calm, curious, very detached way. From a certain height above the lawn, he saw the cigarette burning in his hand but at the same time, he had not immediately recognized the hand as his. He only really knew himself by the button on his trousers. The lawn was very, very green, composed of broad leafed tropical grasses, each blade thrillingly clear and he wondered why everyone else had forsaken it for the shade of the veranda. Weeping came to him, but distantly, like short wave signals without special significance. He felt perfectly calm and as he rose higher and higher, he caught a fleeting glimpse of the doctor entering the front gate.

Michael ([15:21](#)):

But it was not a scene that could hold his interest in competition with the sight of the blue jeweled bay eating into what once had been a coastal swamp. The long meandering brown river, the quiet streets and long boulevards planted with mangoes, palms, flame trees, jacarandas and bordered by antiquated villas in their own grounds, nobly proportioned mansions erected by ship owners, sea captains and vice governors and the decaying stucco'ed houses of shopkeepers. Around the base of the granite monolith, which dominated the town, the



houses became meaner, the vegetation sparser and the dust rose from gravel roads and whirled in small eddies in the Sunday evening air. Ecstasy touched him.

Michael ([16:08](#)):

He found he could slide between the spaces in the air itself. He was stroked by something akin to trees, cool, green leafy. His nostrils were sailed with the smell of things growing and dying. A sweet [inaudible 00:16:23] spell like the valleys of rain forests. It occurred to him that he had died and should therefore be frightened. It was only later that he felt any wish to return to his body when he discovered that there were many different worlds, layer upon layer, as thin as phyllo pastry. And that if he might taste bliss, he would not be immune to terror. He touched walls like membranes, which shivered with pain and a sound as insistent as a pneumatic drill promised meaningless tortures as terrible as the Christian stories of his youth. He recognized the worlds of pleasure and worlds of pain, bliss and punishment, heaven and hell. He did not wish to die.

Michael ([17:09](#)):

For a moment, panic assailed him and he crashed around like a bird surrounded by panes of glass. Yet he had more reserves than he might have suspected. And in a calm, clear space he found his way back, willed his way to a path beside a house where men carried a stretcher towards an ambulance. He watched with detachment while the doctor thumped the man on the chest. The man was thin with a grubby white suit. He watched as they removed the suit coat and connected wires to the thin, white chest. My God, he thought, that can't be me. The electric shock lifted his body nine to 10 inches off the table. And at that moment his heart started and he lost all consciousness. He'd been dead for nine minutes.

MBS ([17:58](#)):

Oh, what a good set up.



Michael ([18:00](#)):

It's a great start, isn't it?

MBS ([18:01](#)):

It thrills up my spin up. As they, of that moment. What was it about that, Bach, that grabs you and pulls you in, do you think?

Michael ([18:11](#)):

Ah, well, the writing. The heaven held, the bliss, the ecstasy, the pain, the torment, the layers of reality, I suppose.

MBS ([18:21](#)):

Yeah.

Michael ([18:22](#)):

I'm immediately intrigued by the world. And the world, clearly it's Queensland. He's talking about Brisbane. So he paints the world beautifully and really. And in the midst of all that floating and existential stuff, there's physical descriptions of the houses and the people who used to occupy them and the shape of the leaves of the trees. So the detail in it and then there's the magic in it. Carey said once in an interview, that if you're going to introduce a ghost into a room, just make sure you make the room as credible as you possibly can. So, that when the ghost arrives you believe the ghost. And that's what he's doing. And I find it compelling, but really, I guess, it's a little bit like the opening line of *A Hundred Years of Solitude*.

MBS ([19:08](#)):

Right.



Michael ([19:09](#)):

The first sentence. Harry Joy was to die three times. It's that future perfect tense where you think-

MBS ([19:16](#)):

Yeah, yeah.

Michael ([19:17](#)):

... We're throwing forward but we're also pulling back. I love that ambiguity.

MBS ([19:23](#)):

I'm just trying to remember the first line of García Márquez's, *Hundred Years of Solitude*. It's like when Colonel Aureliano Buendía's was in front of the firing squad, he thought back to something, something, something. I can't quite remember how it goes-

Michael ([19:44](#)):

That's right.

MBS ([19:44](#)):

... But something like that.

Michael ([19:44](#)):

So you're seeing the future.

MBS ([19:44](#)):

Yeah.

Michael ([19:44](#)):

But you're very much rooted in the present.



MBS ([19:47](#)):

Yeah.

Michael ([19:47](#)):

You know you'll get there and that's setting up what happens through the book. The final pages of the book is when Harry Joy dies for his final time.

MBS ([19:58](#)):

His final time.

Michael ([19:59](#)):

But also, you realize that all of the themes of the book are set up really in that first two pages. That the heaven and hell. So, just briefly what happens is he comes back to life, but he doesn't quite believe it anymore. And his old life he's not quite sure it's real. And we're not quite sure as the reader whether it's real or not.

MBS ([20:21](#)):

Yeah.

Michael ([20:23](#)):

And we're seeing things, he's seeing things for the first time. So Harry Joy is, in very Australian vernacular, he's a good bloke. He's just sailing through life and he's missing all this stuff because it's inconvenient to see the nasty things that are happening around him. But suddenly he can't ignore that stuff anymore. And so the book is his trying to work out, is he actually, he thinks sincerely for a long time that he's in hell, but...

MBS ([20:55](#)):

Right.



Michael ([20:56](#)):

We can really see, ultimately, that this is just a modern life. It's hell. And so it's a really powerful trope, I think. All set up by that first death.

MBS ([21:09](#)):

Yeah. Those opening pages. But how do you come to the world with fresh eyes? You used phrase, intrigued by the world. That's part of the job of a journalist, but also part of the job, perhaps of being a human, fully present in the world. I'm curious to know how you think about that.

Michael ([21:32](#)):

It's a great question, Stan. Perhaps I'll answer it as a journalist initially. I feel like the worst journalists are the ones who've become cynics because at that point you stop recognizing that the things make the world tick. You have to be worldly as a journalist. You can't expect, you can't be naive and you can't be the terrible things that go on or the poor motives that people have. But I truly believe that if you ascribe poor motives to everyone or believe that everything in the world is corrupt or whatever, that you are equally ineffective as a journalist, because you're unable to discern-

MBS ([22:13](#)):

Right.

Michael ([22:14](#)):

... What's what. And...

MBS ([22:16](#)):

Yeah.





Michael ([22:17](#)):

You lose the passion, I suppose, for believing that justice can be done or that transparency can work. I've heard journalists say, and I think it's true of me as well, that you're fueled by righteous anger. And if you're not angry, you're not looking. And if you're not righteous, you're not hoping-

MBS ([22:39](#)):

Oh, that's nice.

Michael ([22:40](#)):

... That you can somehow do something about it.

MBS ([22:43](#)):

Yeah.

Michael ([22:44](#)):

To me, that sense of, it's not innocence. Innocence is the wrong word. The sense of getting up every day and looking at the world and trying to approach it with discernment. I'm not sure that I'm making much sense, but I think that's what keeps me fresh.

MBS ([23:01](#)):

How do you keep an open heart? I've got a friend who's a criminal lawyer and very passionate about his role as supporting the defending people. So the criminals, basically. He's a champion for them feeling, being underrepresented, but his heart has hardened over the last 10 years as he's done that work. He has a much darker view of life than he did when he began that profession. And in the times I spend hanging out with you, I don't feel that shadow. I'm just wondering how you stay open to the world or whether that's just a lack of wiring.



Michael ([23:48](#)):

I think it's partly wiring. I have and have always been quite hopeful and glass half full.

MBS ([23:56](#)):

Yeah.

Michael ([23:57](#)):

I tend to see the best in people, which is oddly for an investigative journalist. Very often you're trying to find the details that will confirm the fact that, actually this person is somebody you should see the worst in.

MBS ([24:13](#)):

Yeah.

Michael ([24:15](#)):

Look, as a foreign correspondent I was based, for three years, in Indonesia and I was based there while Australia was going through the political conniptions about immigration that many other Western countries have been through since. Europe and what happens on the southern border of the U S and very often a large wave of immigration leads to a conservative political backlash because people don't like irregular migration. Voters don't like it and conservative governments and politicians can exploit that. And this was precisely the thing that was happening in Australia. And in 2013, among some of these policy conniptions, a lot of boats, something like 30,000 people arrived by boat from Indonesia into Australia in a six month period or thereabout. And I was in Indonesia and in Australia, the government was stopping all information coming out. So really I was the only conduit to my audience about who these people were.



Michael ([25:26](#)):

And a lot of people died. The boat sank and they died. And I was dealing every day with family members, with hopeful people who still wanted to get on a boat, but knowing how dangerous it was or people who'd lost friends or had decided not to go on a boat and were going to try and get there through regular means. And also with people smugglers, the people who were organizing these trips and in some cases, people were killing people. And I guess, to me it could have been quite dark. There was a lot of really, really, really depressing stories I told there. But I felt like there was this, a sense of mission, really, about informing Australians with wide-eyed honesty. There were a lot of people on both sides who weren't angels. What was really going on and how our policies affected people and how our attitudes affected people.

Michael ([26:29](#)):

And I had views, but my views probably changed a bit with the facts on the ground. But mostly it was just me saying this happened because of, partly because of us or because of a combination between what's going on in Afghanistan and what's going on here and what's going on in Indonesia and the policy that we are enforcing and we need to know this. And so, again, it sounds pretentious, but it's that sense of mission of the beauty and honor, really, of being the guy who's there in Indonesia, who's got the permission and the funding to live my life finding things out. To then inform people and it's an honor. And I've heard it said of people who are in dangerous, suffering from post traumatic stress and things like that, that the ones who are most proof to that, I suppose, are the ones who feel that what they're doing is in fact worthwhile-



MBS ([27:30](#)):

And honorable in some ways.

Michael ([27:31](#)):

... And honorable. And it's the ones who fall short of that or for, or whose mission seems to be futile or worse who are most susceptible to that to falling into that traumatized state. And journalists are as at danger of that as many other professions. But I've always felt like, well, this is a duty and an honor, and to be able to be that guy. And so I guess, I feel it's like a shield against cynicism and against trauma.

MBS ([28:15](#)):

What a gift to have had a sense of that for 40 years now. From being 14 to going, there's a nobility to the profession that you can continue to draw upon.

Michael ([28:30](#)):

Yeah. Well look, it is. I feel very, very, very lucky that I found something and happened to be good at something that gave me that sense of mission and purpose. I remember actually, relatively early on in my career, you get tied up in the technical side of it and the career advancement and all that other stuff.

MBS ([28:52](#)):

Yeah.

Michael ([28:52](#)):

And of just having a moment of revelation in the car park. Hang on and feeling bogged down by it all. And then just having a moment of, hang on. I used to think it wasn't about all that, it was about this. And I said, I told myself, remember that.



MBS ([29:08](#)):

Get back to the source. [crosstalk 00:29:09].

Michael ([29:10](#)):

Rely on that. Get back to what made you want to do this.

MBS ([29:12](#)):

Yeah.

Michael ([29:13](#)):

And it's stayed with me.

MBS ([29:18](#)):

Your roles evolved from being a journalist whose job is to find the stories and write the stories to now being an editor. Which I think, I don't really know, but I think it means basically putting the paper together. So you're like, how do all the bits fit together? How do we answer the needs of our diverse readers? How do you figure that out on a daily basis around, it feels like you're given a 25,000 piece jigsaw puzzle every day to put together.

Michael ([29:45](#)):

It is a bit like that. But it's been described as a daily miracle and it really is, essentially, publishing a novel in 24 hours, every day, seven days a week. And it's become more complicated with the 24/7 news cycle. The, obviously, the websites are at least as important as the thing we throw on people's lawns and in the morning. Look, it's a daily challenge, but it's also, there's a big team.

MBS ([30:17](#)):

Yeah.



Michael ([30:17](#)):

And a highly talented team. And it's a, because you to do it every single day, it's a pretty well-oiled machine. So, and there's got to be-

MBS ([30:29](#)):

What principles do you use to make decisions? How do you decide this, not that.

Michael ([30:36](#)):

... Well, it's been disparagingly described as the tummy compass at times. Just how's it feel? Does that feel good? Does that feel right? Yeah.

MBS ([30:46](#)):

Yeah.

Michael ([30:46](#)):

Let's do that.

MBS ([30:48](#)):

Right.

Michael ([30:50](#)):

Look, it's called news sense, news sense.

MBS ([30:53](#)):

Yeah.

Michael ([30:53](#)):

And it's really the kind of collective agreement that's a good story.



MBS ([30:59](#)):

Yeah.

Michael ([31:00](#)):

It's some sort of combination of new lively important and interesting and the news sense with different media organizations obviously differs. Our celebrity radar's lot lower than our politics radar.

MBS ([31:15](#)):

Right.

Michael ([31:16](#)):

Which doesn't mean we never have celebrity on the front page, but that our judgements are made according to our perceptions of our audience.

MBS ([31:23](#)):

Yeah, yeah.

Michael ([31:25](#)):

Yeah. Editing a paper is part of it, but also leading and pastoral care of a couple a hundred staff. All of that. That's part of it as well.

MBS ([31:35](#)):

And how, as a organization, but particularly you as one of the senior leaders of that organization, do you know that you're staying the course of the overall mission of the paper? Because, my guess is that you can get so engaged in the day-to-day stuff and the challenges, as you say, publishing a novel every day, that it can be easy just to drift offline from a bigger picture that the paper has. But maybe I'm assuming there is a bigger, a bigger mission or a bigger goal that the paper users to navigate by. Is that right?



Michael ([32:15](#)):

There is. And there's a couple of ways to answer that, I suppose. One is, we're a commercial organization. We're funded by whatever we can get out of either readers or advertisers. And so, we have to be selling.

MBS ([32:34](#)):

Yeah.

Michael ([32:34](#)):

But within that, there's really a massive sea change in the way that media organizations had to interact with the world. In the old days, you could put any old crap out, really. This is possibly an exaggeration stand, but bare with me, because you are in the printing race. And so anybody who wanted to advertise to a mass audience they had to come to you. And we deluded us [crosstalk 00:32:58]-

MBS ([32:58](#)):

You can have any color car you want long as it's black. You can have any news you want long as it's mine.

Michael ([33:03](#)):

... That's right. And so, of course we aim for a niche. So the New York Times was aiming for a different niche than the New York Post. And The Age in Melbourne was aiming for a different niche. The Herald Sun, which is a tabloid, ultimately all the work that we poured into our Saturday journalism, you'd watch people and they'd turn up and their droves to buy the paper and they'd throw out all that stuff because they wanted to buy a car. That's the section they were





interested in and people had to go there because there was no choice. Well, all of that now is stripped away from us. You buy a car you go to the website.

MBS ([33:37](#)):

Buyacar.com. Yeah.

Michael ([33:38](#)):

Buyacar.com. You want a house, you go to buyahouse.com. You don't come to us anymore. So we've gone through various iterations of how to respond to that. And one of them which has been to go down market and on our websites to just try and attract as many people as we can. So that we can, those little ads that appear on the website, we get traffic through them. But Google owns those and we get a tiny proportion of the revenue.

MBS ([34:03](#)):

Yeah.

Michael ([34:04](#)):

We were ruining our brands and chasing our tails. And the New York Times probably led this. But a lot of the rest of the kind of quality media is trying to pick up. And now we've got this, we're trying to attract subscribers and subscribers, our subscribers want quality, high quality. So it becomes a virtual cycle where the better journalism you can produce, the more likely you are to attract people to pay for it. So you asked about our missions. Our very long way of telling you, but that commercial mission actually, and the ethical or the high brow mission that I'm talking about have come back into sync again in the past couple of years. In a way that I think is very gratifying for those of us who care about what we do and what we produce. [crosstalk 00:34:47].

MBS ([34:47](#)):

Yeah.



Michael ([34:47](#)):

Yeah, and of course there's a million different metrics and figures and ways to carve the information we get through our websites to be able to tell us that. So the thing at the moment is just tell people what they need to know in the most compelling and honest and transparent way that we can. So it's, in some ways, towards the end of my career, it's all come together a bit.

MBS ([35:13](#)):

Perfect. Nice culminating moment. Speaking of culminating moments, we're almost at the end of the conversation here, but a final question. What needs to be said that hasn't yet been said in this conversation between you and me Bach?

Michael ([35:30](#)):

What your latest, what you're saying about doing something that feels hard... What's the phrase? Hard, important and....

MBS ([35:39](#)):

Thrilling, important and daunting.

Michael ([35:39](#)):

Thrilling, important, and daunting. And that resonates, so it's like a bell for me.

MBS ([35:46](#)):

Thanks.

Michael ([35:47](#)):

Just has the ring of truth. To me, that, this is not a paid ad by the way, listeners. This is an honest opinion. I feel like, that's how I've viewed my career. And at times when I've flagged, it's encouraged me that what I'm doing is thrilling,



daunting and important and crucial. And it's taken me through some quite difficult moments. I've seen some pretty awful things.

MBS ([36:15](#)):

Yeah.

Michael ([36:15](#)):

But it's always felt crucial. And to me, that's the thing that drives me along.

MBS ([36:31](#)):

I admire many things about Bach and I really just appreciate his friendship over the years. But a significant part of what I think makes him a great guy is that he's not cynical and that he looks at the world still with fresh eyes and an open heart. I don't think that means he's soft or naive. When you've seen what I think he's seen, through the work that he's done, I just don't think you can be. But in fact that's what makes it so impressive in my mind. When you've seen so much of the underbelly of what's there when the thin veneer of civilization is scraped away, it must be very easy to get hard, a little bitter, a little hardhearted. But with Bach, I feel there's just this deep commitment to the beauty of life and doing the work to give more to the world.

MBS ([37:19](#)):

And I wish that spirit for him to continue, but also for me and perhaps for you as well. If you enjoyed my conversation with Bach, a couple of interviews you might want to check out. Sandra Sacha, she's a professor at Harvard and that interview is called How to be a Moral Leader. And she reads from wonderful book, Story of the Atom Bomb. And that was really quite a profound conversation around what it actually means to face some of the hardest decisions around leadership. And the second interview I would suggest is Swati Mylavarapu. And that interview is called, How to be World Positive. She's a Rhodes Scholar, but doing very interesting things at venture capital in Silicon



Valley. Really funding world changing organizations and that was also a deep and profound conversation. Thanks for listening to the podcast, of course. Thank you for giving it a rating. Thank you for passing the word on.

MBS ([38:17](#)):

Maybe there's somebody in your life who has a great nickname and you're like, you should just hear the opening lines of this podcast, because it'll make you laugh. If you want more, there's The Duke Humfrey's, our free membership site. You can find that at [MBS.works](#) on the podcast tab. And in any case, thank you. You're awesome and you're doing great.