

LAST NIGHT A STORY CHANGED MY LIFE

What do journalists do when reporting on an issue isn't enough? **Amy Houghton** talks to three writers about the assignments they couldn't leave behind

THE EYE DOCTOR

The story: Documentary on women in Afghanistan (Channel 4, 1988)

After noticing that the UK media was failing to cover the perspective of women in Afghanistan, Lucy Mathen – who had been the BBC's first female Asian reporter in 1976 – travelled to Kabul with an all-female crew.

"We found women fighting for the regime, against the regime, in factories, in underground schools and refugee camps," she says. However, during the trip Mathen became increasingly disillusioned with her ability as a journalist to really help the women they were encountering. It was on a visit to a government-sponsored clinic in Kabul that this view was solidified, in what Mathen describes as her 'light bulb moment'.

"[The clinic] was very showy," she recalls. "But there was a doctor scurrying in the background looking very unhappy. When our [government] minders were distracted, we found a little cupboard somewhere and interviewed him. That's when I thought: he's giving this interview because he thinks it will change something for him – and we knew it wouldn't. I remember saying to the rest of the crew 'I feel really bad.'"

The aftermath:

In that small cupboard, Mathen decided she was going to become a doctor. At the age of 36 she returned to education, sat her chemistry and biology A-Levels and was accepted into medical school. Then, following a surgical training trip to south India where she "saw lines and lines of blind people whose vision could be fixed with a five-minute operation," she chose to specialise in ophthalmology and, in 2000, founded Second Sight.

"I started Second Sight because everyone was ignoring the root of the problem which was the lack of eye doctors [in India]."

"Just as I would if I was an investigative journalist, I went to north India and I traipsed across the whole region and everyone said 'we need eye surgeons, we've got all this equipment, all these buildings but they're no good if we've got no one to do any surgery.'"

Since its founding, Second Sight has provided eye care to almost 500,000 patients. Mathen still finds time to write, having published two books and maintained a blog. "For the last 20 years I have not really stopped being a journalist. Humanitarian work is nothing but amazing stories."

"Humanitarian work is nothing but amazing stories"



Image credit: Jenny Matthews

THE FOOD CAMPAIGNER

The story: 'What women in UK prisons are eating' (Refinery29, 2016)



Image credit: Food Behind Bars

Working as a freelance journalist in 2016, Lucy Vincent, then aged 24, came across a report by the Inspector of Prisons covering the condition of food in UK institutions. Struck by the conclusion that poor nutrition was contributing to disorder and even jeopardising prisoner and staff safety, Vincent wanted to dig deeper: "There was a real lack of information," she says. "Apart from this report, all there was were these articles that came out every Christmas in local newspapers, which were really sensationalist about taxpayer money going towards three course meals."

Focusing on women's institutions, Vincent approached prisoner's rights charities, which

highlighted the psychological impact that poor nutrition can have on female prisoners, who are already five times more likely to have experienced mental health issues than those on the outside. On average, UK prisons spend £2 on meals per prisoner per day. As well as low funding, Vincent found that food was regularly being served cold, had low nutritional value and a number of those incarcerated were converting to a new religion simply in an effort to access better meals.

"What I do now feels like why I got into journalism"

The aftermath:

Soon after the Refinery29 article, Vincent published a piece in *The Guardian*, calling for the then justice secretary, Liz Truss, to "do for prisons what Jamie Oliver did for schools". This was the article, she says, that really changed everything. Soon she was invited to speak on TV panels and write about prison catering for a multitude of large publications.

"I came away with loads more questions. When I published that article I was very fired up about it. My friends said I should start campaigning."

In 2017, Vincent started Food Behind Bars, the only registered charity dedicated to improving food in UK prisons. Though Vincent is no longer a journalist, she says that her reporting skills still come in useful. She continues to work with prisons and government officials to uncover issues with catering and explore and provide solutions. "What I do now does feel like why I got into journalism. I feel like for the last five years I've been researching for a huge investigative piece, because in a sense I have."

THE YOUTH ADVOCATE

The story: 'A New Deal of the Mind' (The New Statesman, 2009)

For his final article before stepping down as political editor of *The New Statesman*, Martin Bright chose to respond to the UK's growing youth unemployment problem, following the economic crash of the previous year. Inspired by President Roosevelt's New Deal programme, Bright put forward his own proposals for ensuring employment opportunities in the arts.

Looking back "it was just another article", Bright says. "I would write pretty much every week telling the government what they should be doing, such as the arrogance of political editors. It struck me that it was possible to have a more imaginative approach and to use the strength of the creative industries in the UK to put people to work in jobs in the arts and media."

The aftermath:

"Pretty much immediately after I'd written the article, I was contacted by two government ministers: James Purnell and Andy Burnham, who was culture secretary at the time. They thought there was something in my article and they suggested a cross-party meeting of politicians and people from the creative industries."

The meeting took place with powerful names from across arts and media in attendance, including director-general of the BBC and art director of the South Bank Centre. All agreed that an organisation needed to be formed. All eyes fell on Bright, and the organisation *New Deal of the Mind* (now *Creative Society*) was born.

"From these quite grand beginnings I had to then go and set up



Image credit: Martin Bright

my own organisation which was quite a humbling experience. We were offered a desk and computer at the Southbank centre in an old prefab office, and we got to work."

Bright is still a working journalist and writes alongside his role as CEO of the *Creative Society*, opening up opportunities for young creatives and providing mentorship, workshops, and funding. "To watch people - who to a large extent have come from benefits - grow into successful careers has been extremely satisfying." ✕