

Kirsty Thomson

Executive Producer, 60 Minutes

Danielle Iacono, law graduate, Enero Group Limited, sits down with **Kirsty Thomson**, Executive Producer, 60 Minutes, to discuss Kirsty's esteemed career in the media industry, the value of storytelling, and her thoughts on International Women's Day.

Kirsty is the Executive Producer of 60 Minutes and has worked for the renowned Australian news program since 2008, where she also previously worked as an Associate Producer, Producer and then Chief of Staff. Before 60 Minutes, Kirsty took her journalistic endeavours abroad, covering ground-breaking stories at two of London's biggest newsrooms, ITN and Sky News, and began her career on Australian soil at Nine Network and 2KY Sports Radio.

DANIELLE IACONO: Kirsty, thank you for taking the time to chat with us today! With over 25 years of experience in the media industry, we'd love to hear about your career path, and how it led you to your current role as Executive Producer. Were you always interested in a career in media?

KIRSTY THOMSON: I didn't know initially that this is what I wanted to do. But after I completed an Honours degree in political science, I decided journalism could be what I was interested in. So I then did a master's degree in journalism in Bathurst. My first job in the industry was at 2KY Sports talk radio, where I read the Sunday morning news – not very well – but it was good fun, and I also helped on the fishing show. You have got to start somewhere! I convinced the News Director to let me go out during the week to cover police rounds and court stories. They didn't have on-the-road journalists at 2KY, but I convinced them they should let me try. I had a microphone and a tape recorder, and all the other journalists had the radio station identifier on their microphones, but I didn't, so I sticky-taped one on, which I'm sure made me stand out.

My next job was at Parliament House, Canberra, for the Nine Network. I was a researcher for a political reporter called Paul Lyneham, a role which I did for two years. It was fantastic experience working in the Parliamentary press gallery. I made some friends for life there. I then came back to Sydney and did two years at A Current Affair, where I learned all about daily TV current affairs, which I think was and still is one of the hardest jobs in journalism.

I moved to London in 2000 and worked in two of the biggest newsrooms, ITN and Sky News. I was the first female senior news editor at Sky News. I was there for 9/11 and the terror attacks that happened in London in 2005. It was an extraordinary time to be there. So much happened, and it's very competitive, the 24-hour news environment in London, because you've always got to get to the story before everybody else and start broadcasting live from the scene. The days were long, and you would just not stop for the entire day, because they have a news bulletin every hour. So it was relentless but amazing. I think you need to be in your twenties, or early thirties to work at that pace, but it's

pretty extraordinary, and in London, of course, you go into the newsroom at six in the morning in winter and you come out at six or seven at night, so you never see sun. So, after a while, you're like, 'I think I need to go back to Australia'.

When I returned to Australia, I worked as an Associate Producer at 60 Minutes and was promoted to Producer and then Chief of Staff and I've been the Executive Producer for eight years.

DANIELLE: 60 Minutes is such a special programme for so many Australians, and we've just passed its 45th birthday! What is the best part of your job, and conversely, what part is the most challenging?

KIRSTY: What's the most challenging? Look, it's always challenging because at 60 Minutes we put out an episode weekly. So we have time that most other journalists in Australia don't have. You have to use that wisely. You've got to ensure the program is always offering something different, something people haven't heard or seen before. 60 Minutes needs to be a program that breaks stories and makes news. The reporters and producers work hard to ensure our content is unique, exclusive, and always interesting and engaging. It's demanding but there is so much good stuff that comes with the job like when you get a phone call from a reporter or a producer to say, "That person I've been trying to get to talk to us for two years? Well, they finally said yes!" or "Hey I've got this great story that we can put to air in two weeks and it's going to be incredible!" Then you all work hard on getting it to air quickly and then you know every newspaper and news program will be talking about it on Monday morning. I mean, the highs are high, the lows can be pretty low. But you know, every time you have a bad day, there'll be an exciting day just around the corner and there always is. There always is.

DANIELLE: Reflecting on your career, has there been a specific story that you consider a defining moment for you personally or professionally?

KIRSTY: There are so many. I remember being in the newsroom in London the day 9/11 happened, and that was just the most extraordinary day because we were watching these images on screen, and



it was the first time in my life that I was watching something, but my mind couldn't process what my eyes were seeing. I don't think anyone went home for about three days. We just worked and worked. It was extraordinary. Back here, there's been lots of amazing stories that we've done at 60 Minutes. Our interview two years ago with President Zelensky, all our investigations into Jeffery Epstein (a lot of which were global scoops), and some of the more exciting and terrifying adventure stories we have worked on, including sending a crew to climb Mt Everest in 2015. More recently, the collaborations with the Sydney Morning Herald and The Age, some of those investigations into Crown Casino, War crimes, and going undercover in a neo-Nazi group in Melbourne. They're all career high points because they have all been such ambitious and difficult stories. The best time at 60 Minutes is when you get to watch the edits of the stories and see what the reporters, producers, crews and editors come up with and it's such a privilege to see people at their creative best, doing their best work. The producers and the reporters at 60 Minutes are so passionate about what they do, so caring about what they do. They just love what they do.

DANIELLE: Over the past few years, have you noticed a dramatic shift in the Australian media landscape and if so, how has it affected you and your team?

KIRSTY: A dramatic shift. I think everyone will say that there's never been more change in our industry in a short time than there has been, I guess, over the last five or ten years. That's mainly because audiences are so fragmented now. It's challenging but also exciting because it forces you to look for ways to find new audiences. Our audience now is some who watch on Sunday night, some who catch up on 9Now, people overseas who watch on our

YouTube channel and other platforms plus SMH and The Age readers. Because of the YouTube channel, we have a huge audience overseas, particularly in the US and the UK. Our producers and reporters say when they ring people up over there, they're like, "Oh, we know your show, we watch it!" which, you know, would never have been the case twenty years ago, when the program went to air on a Sunday night, and then you never heard of it again. We've also done three documentaries with Stan in the last two years which opens us up to another audience entirely and forces us to think about different ways to approach content and tell stories.

DANIELLE: What is the greatest risk you've taken as a professional and how did you manage the outcome?

KIRSTY: I think the greatest professional risk was probably taking the job at 60 Minutes. I had always dreamed that one day it might be possible, but it came along a lot earlier than I expected and I'm just really glad that when it was offered to me, I didn't sort of say "Oh no, I'm not ready". I had luckily just read something – thank god! – somewhere, that said if anyone ever offers you an opportunity, just say yes and worry about it later. So, I am so glad I did that. When I got the job I was the first woman to run the show in its 37-year history. But look, it was a bit of a disaster in the beginning; things went wrong, as they always do, and I think now looking back it was a really hard transition to go from being a part of the team to someone responsible for the team and the editorial direction of the program. I now realise how important it is to make mistakes while learning and have people who will let you do that. I was really lucky that the people who put me in the job always said, "It's going to take time". You know? And often I'd do silly things like lead with the wrong story, and they'd warn me. They'd say, "You shouldn't put that story first" and I'd say, "No, no, no, you watch, it will work". And it would be a disaster! But they would never say "I told you so". That support helped enormously. Sometimes we're not very forgiving about people who make mistakes early on. We don't give people enough of a chance to do that, but it's the only way you're going to learn. I think it was kind of a crucial period to go through to do the job properly now. It was sink or swim! And it's amazing, you learn so much about yourself, that you'll probably always, well most of the time, swim!

DANIELLE: What has been your 'best day' at work?

KIRSTY: I honestly can't think of a best day. Getting the show to air every week, sitting there on a Sunday night, and watching it is always a great day. My best day is when the team at 60 Minutes feels like they're doing their best work because that's why I'm here – to create an environment where they can do what they love and do it well. And I think when that's all working and when they feel like they're telling the best stories they can in the best possible way, they're always the best days. I'm lucky

because I get to work with people who love their jobs and take great pride in what they do. Even in the challenging times, you learn quickly at 60 Minutes that you have to make friends with chaos. Someone in London once told me "If you don't have a gut ache, it's probably not a very good story!" And I've kind of lived by that, in the sense that for it to be a successful show, we've all really got to put ourselves out there. We've got to take very calculated, well-managed storytelling risks sometimes and find a way to be okay with constant chaos and stress because you understand that that means everybody's doing their best work. If we all felt comfortable and it was easy, it would be a boring show!

DANIELLE: You once wrote that 60 Minutes stories "don't just entertain, but challenge, move and hopefully make our audience feel something". In your opinion, why is it important for media to be stimulating as well as entertaining? Is one more important than the other?

KIRSTY: The reason we all do what we do is because we want to connect with our audience and tell stories that matter. Any storytelling always has to, I think, for it to have an impact, make you feel something. Now it doesn't have to make you feel good, it can sometimes make you feel angry, or it can make you upset, or outraged. But you won't remember or connect with it if it doesn't make you feel something. But the other thing you've always got to do, for the program to work, is you can't just tell people things they've heard before. I know I don't want to watch something if I feel like I've heard it before. And that's the beauty of 60 Minutes. It was a lot easier in the 90s because reporters travelled to places that perhaps the audience couldn't go to. That's not quite the case now. So then you have to think about stories they haven't heard before, and that's where investigative journalism comes in and is such an important part of what we do.

DANIELLE: The 2024 International Women's Day campaign theme is 'Inspire Inclusion'. What does this mean to you and how would you like to see it applied in your industry?

KIRSTY: Inclusion should always be a big part of what we do. The key for us in the media is to ensure we always include varied points of view in our newsrooms and stories. To make sure we're not surrounding ourselves with people who have the same cultural background, upbringing, and socioeconomic status because we need to challenge each other. One of the most important things that we have to do in the media is listen to points of view that perhaps we don't agree with and to make sure that we're giving those voices prominence as well. I think that's never been more important than it is right now. So I think inclusion for me, means that. That we need to include lots of different perspectives and lots of different voices; not keep reaching for the same people to talk about the same things. Listening to and respecting the other side of the story is important.

DANIELLE: And finally, what advice would you give to the next generation of media professionals?

KIRSTY: Just love what you do. Be enthusiastic. There's nothing better than someone turning up to work who is happy in what they do and wants to be there. You've got to knock on many doors and offer to do whatever it takes to get into this industry (that has always been the case). Don't be afraid to send emails to people like me; story ideas or just talk to people in the industry. Everyone in this industry is approachable and happy to – I mean, they're often very busy – but they're usually happy to give people advice. But the most important thing is to just stick with it. Don't give up. Don't give up on the story, or the chase. That's the most important thing.

DANIELLE: Thank you, Kirsty, it has been a pleasure speaking with you and we sincerely appreciate you sharing your insights with us. Happy International Women's Day!