Andrew Marr: What does Donald Trump think about that famous American newspaper, the New York Times? Failing! A dying newspaper! They write total fiction! These people are sick! They are the enemy of the American people – and that’s on the mornings when he wakes up feeling chirpy. Mark Thompson was Director General of the BBC and is now CEO of this terrible institution. Mark, sad.

MT: So he came to lunch with us just after the election and before Christmas and that morning it was the ‘failing NY Times’ several times and he said he wasn't going to turn up. Then he turned up and by the time he’d left he told the world’s media who had gathered in our lobby that we were a jewel for America and the world. So sometimes, I mean deep down maybe he loves us.

AM: It’s a very strange relationship though and I wonder why the New York Times has been so much in the crosshairs of his bile or his anger. Is it because he is a New Yorker and he feels very hurt that New York’s paper doesn’t love him back?

MT: I mean in the end you’re going to have to ask him.

AM: I hope I get the chance.

MT: When you get the chance. Two things have come together. I think the boy from Queens very, very eager to be accepted by the New York establishment and the New York Times as this kind of citadel in Manhattan, that’s part of it. But also I think, you know, there is a systematic – I mean Steve Manners talked about the true opposition being the media and I think the New York Times is regarded as kind of the commanding height of establishment
media as well and the ideological push and the kind of personal kind of biographical push I think have come together.

AM: But in a sense you speak to the liberal financial elites of the east coast seaboard.

MT: Well that of course. The physical newspaper has always done that. I mean nowadays we’re reaching, you know, 150 million people a month. Many, many tens of millions of Americans who wouldn’t regard themselves as part of that elite also read the Times.

AM: Is there a little bit of tooth sucking and reflection inside the New York Times however by the fact that, you know, all these Americans, 60 million Americans voted for Trump and your newspaper and similar newspapers never thought it was going to happen, ridiculed him all the way through and now he is President.

MT: Well, I mean first the enormous discontinuity of Donald Trump becoming President is a good example of a kind of utter break point in politics which is very hard to predict. The New York Times did not predict the Trump victory, virtually no one did, indeed most Republicans, it is believed that Mr Trump and his immediate circle believed they were going to lose. Rather like Brexit in this country, the result came as much of a surprise to those who’d won and those who lost. I mean The Times – what I want to say is, over the course of 2016 and now in 2017, we’re growing our audience and we’re growing the number of people who are deeply engaging with us so the idea as it were that we’re cut off from the whole of a country I think is really undermined by the facts.

AM: Are you trying to listen a bit more acutely to West Virginia for instance?
MT: We’ve got reporters across the country and of course I think trying to understand the underlying causes for what’s happening and trying to understand the world view of you know, people who do not live on the two coasts of America and also trying to explain what’s happening in America to the rest of the world, because we’re seeing a real spike in international audiences, partly because so many people from other countries are so intrigued and in many cases anxious about what’s happening in America.

AM: Do you wake up every morning, like the rest of us and look at your phone to see what he’s tweeted overnight?

MT: Well it’s bright and early. I mean he seems to be a reader of the physical paper and half past six in the morning is the kind of witching hour for the first word – and of course now there are so many that – I mean the first time a President-elect directs a tweet which is a direct attack not just on the editorial but on the business of the New York Times, ‘your subscribers are collapsing’, not true, they’re increasing. ‘Your audiences are collapsing’, not true, it’s growing. The first time it was a big event. Now it’s becoming rather routine.

AM: Can I ask about – I mean you’ve written a lot about fake news and political language and so forth. Two things. First of all, isn’t it actually the case that Trump is a very, very cute political communicator? He uses those tweets, short sentences, absolutely to the point, gets his message across and is very good at pushing news he doesn’t like to one side.

MT: Yeah, yeah. Well as you know I wrote a book last year specifically about political language and about the way you know, high impact, incredibly short, very compelling language was winning out over the language of explanation and depth. And Donald Trump turned up essentially after I’d written the thing, but
he epitomises this. These very, very powerful, very informal, spontaneous tweets. They’re emotionally pitch perfect, but they don’t tell you much about policy, either his or anyone else’s.

AM: When it comes to the last story, GCHQ accused of being part of the attempt to eavesdrop on Trump under the Obama administration, he’s not really apologised for any of that. Do you think he’s a liar?

MT: Not just not apologised, but not retracted despite an absolutely categorical denial by the British. I think the key thing is Donald Trump seems to have a view that he can make things true by saying them and if he says them in a sense they have a validity and he doesn’t really accept as it were that there’s a common reality with common facts which we’re all bound by. Most conventional politicians would –

AM: - think there’s a fact and you deal with or you don’t.

MT: and if there’s a categorical denial by somebody at GCHQ and the British government they would somehow alter their stance. He simply presses on.

AM: So you think he is more a fantasist than a liar?

MT: I think he’s got a view and he’s a man obviously of immense willpower that as I say he can make things true and in a way if they’re not true today he can make them true tomorrow. So I think it’s a demonstration of his immense will and also I have to say a kind of self-obsession which is also very clear when you meet him.

AM: Now you went from one kind of journalism to newspapers. What’s your advice for George Osborne?
MT: It’s a perfect moment to join the newspaper industry. Well I’ve been an editor, admittedly in television rather than in the print media. My experience is, you know, done properly it’s really quite energetic and quite time consuming, but -

AM: It might be tricky to be an MP and a full time editor at the same time?

MT: You would have thought so, but he’s a man of many gifts, so let’s see.

AM: Mark Thompson, thanks very much indeed.