

# A YOUNG VULGARIAN

Network Magazine talks to University of Westminster graduate and critically acclaimed journalist **Marie Le Conte** about Twitter, breaking into the Westminster bubble and the joy of waking up when you want.



"Everyone has a very different story on how they got into journalism – so don't trust anyone who gives you advice 'that will definitely work', because they're lying to you."

Marie Le Conte is reflecting on her chosen trade.

"I think the main thing, is just making sure it is something you genuinely

love. Because – you know what – the pay isn't that great, the hours aren't that great, the editors will probably shout at you. Don't get me wrong, it's not an awful job, but it's not the easiest job and I think you have to be an obsessive."

We are sitting out in the sunshine at a café, a stone's throw away from

Westminster; her 'replacement office' when the weather is good. Marie tells me, once when she was working here, her pen rolled off the table and ended up falling into the Thames.

A *Forbes* '30 under 30' winner and self-professed 'feminist' and 'loudmouth', Marie has written about English and French politics for *Vice*, *The Guardian*,

*POLITICO*, *The Independent* and many more. She has been a guest on *Newsnight*, *BBC News*, *Daily Politics* and Radio 4's *Today* programme, and co-hosts podcasts, *Polling Politics* and *Changing Politics*. If your sole source of knowledge happens to be Twitter, you may have come across her online alter ego, @youngvulgarian, whose acerbic

wit, 'nerdy political stuff' and 'Londonsplaining' is followed by over 45,000 users. (Most people tell her she's "pretty much the same" in person, she says.) Marie finds her Twitter fame can be a double-edged sword.

"People will introduce me at parties as, 'She's the funny Tweets woman, that's what she does!' And I literally have never

been paid for Tweets. I make a living by writing about politics. That's what I do. And quite serious dull stuff as well."

As seems sadly inevitable these days, she has also had her fair share of trolling. On one occasion, she received a rape threat... sent from a university email address! Not from a University of Westminster one, she

hastens to add. She didn't bother reporting him, she says, as if she did report things like this, it would be all she ever did ("I think I just replied, 'You've used your university email, you dumbass!'").

"There's just the thing of being a reasonably high-profile woman on the internet – and knowing quite a lot of reasonably high-profile women on the internet –" she says. "We all know that's kind of part of the deal, and actually most of these threats are just men in their basements."

Despite its darker underbelly, Marie still feels Twitter is, "overall, probably a force for good".

"I think it's a tricky one, because I am absolutely certain that I would not be where I am today if it hadn't been for Twitter," she says. "Even tangentially, nearly every job I've had was from Twitter."

Though Marie is fast becoming a 360-degree media personality, writing is still her first love; one which predates her current day politics 'obsession'.

"When I was a kid I wanted to be a writer or a poet," she recalls. "But then my grandmother said – 'You can't make a living out of that, so be a journalist instead! That's words still.'"

She did a work placement at a local paper when she was 12 ("which is tragic," she jokes.) At 15, she started her own music website, and built up an international team which reviewed gigs and interviewed bands across France, Switzerland and Belgium.

As she wanted to do a journalism degree (in France, journalism is only really studied as a masters, she explains) and had always dreamed of living in London, Westminster was an obvious choice. She arrived in 2009, aged 17, to study Journalism at Harrow.

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"All the lecturers were really good," she says. "And I really enjoyed the fact that a lot of them were actually former journalists, who had worked in newsrooms and could actually tell us stuff."

Marie initially had little interest in politics. The turning point came on the night of the 2010 general election, when she ended up stranded at a house party, knowing no one, and started watching election coverage to pass the time. She was glued to the TV until 6am.

"There was a point when we found out there was definitely going to be a hung parliament," she recalls. "From then on, I guess, I kind of got into politics."

Marie is particularly thankful that Westminster "forced us to do work experience in the third year." In her last term, she did a two-week placement at the *New Statesman* – a paper she still writes for today, as a freelancer. The experience wholly reaffirmed her career choice.

"I learnt a lot in those two weeks – stuff no lecturer could ever teach you, no matter how good they are."

Soon after graduating in 2013, Marie started working for *The Telegraph's* picture desk. She was originally enlisted to do holiday cover, by someone she met through a journalist she was "briefly seeing" in her third year. (They met on Twitter!)

With virtually no Photoshop or newsroom experience, the first few days were a baptism of fire.

"I would have the News editor coming to my desk and screaming, 'I told you to get those pictures 20 minutes ago, where the f\*\*k are they?' And then he'd leave, and the Foreign editor would come and shout at me and it was like... 'Oh my

God.' But then, you know, it was really exhilarating."

Marie got a second part-time job with *The Mirror's* online section, 'Us vs Th3m', in early 2014, after she heard about the vacancy on Twitter.

"It was a stroke of luck, because I saw the Tweet as it was Tweeted!"

She started working for the *Evening Standard Diary* in January 2015. The job, she explains, involved going to parties to "find the stories". ("The diary rule is, you either need to get serious people to talk about silly stuff, or silly people to talk about serious stuff!")

"It was a really weird job, but I really enjoyed it, very quickly," Marie says.

She got talking to Philip Hammond – then Foreign Secretary – at one such party, two weeks before the EU referendum. Having previously stayed silent, he came out as a remainer and spoke out vehemently against Brexiteer-in-chief, Michael Gove.

"And so, I got this great story: 'Foreign Secretary attacks Justice Secretary over Brexit' in basically his first intervention," she says. "It didn't really get picked up afterwards, which was frustrating."

Nowadays, Marie is proud of the fact she hasn't written about Brexit once all year – an impressive feat for a political journalist.

"I hate Brexit. I deeply hate Brexit," she says. "It's made political journalism both hectic and stale, as it feels like some new disaster is unfolding every day, when barely anything has actually happened. It's just not something that's interesting to cover as a reporter."

While we are talking, she is invited to appear on a "dual show" about Brexit and *Love Island*. It is a definite, definite no.

In June 2016, Marie moved to *Buzzfeed* to focus purely on political journalism. ("I didn't really enjoy it for a bunch of reasons," she says. "But I still had some fun.") In 2017, four years after graduating, she took the plunge into freelancing.

"My issue is I don't like writing news," she says. "And I want to write about politics – and political features writer is not really a job that exists."

Is the freelance lifestyle every bit as great as it sounds?



"I don't think you can ever underestimate the joy of being able to wake when you want!"

The unpredictability is still tough though – even for an established writer.

"You do have to – like – constantly hustle," she says. "You need to be at the back of commissioning editors' heads at any given time. So that does mean Tweeting a lot, going to events, showing your face, talking to people, always being like – 'Hi, it's me! I exist!' If it's on a good week and you're in a good mood it's fine, but occasionally you do just want to stay in bed and watch Netflix."

Once again, Twitter is never far from the lips of a modern-day

journalist. Twitter, in Marie's view, is the great leveller when it comes to breaking into the 'closed-off trade' of journalism. This is particularly true when it comes to the Westminster bubble and so-called 'lobby journalism' – something Marie has spoken out about in her writing.

While Twitter may occasionally open a window, forcing your way in is still a challenge – particularly as a young woman.

"People are quite patronising and don't necessarily take you seriously," she says. "And yeah – there are the men who think you're hitting on them because you want to talk to them for a

story. Which is quite annoying!" So, has she had her own #MeToo moment?

"Ahh... no..." she stops and laughs. "I once got a drunken DM from an MP that was effectively a booty call at – like – 10pm on a Tuesday."

"I didn't feel threatened at all, because he was clearly a very drunk middle-aged man. We never spoke of it again."

**Marie is excited to be writing her first book, *Haven't you heard...?*, out in September 2019. It's about politics and gossip, and delves into the complex ecosystem of Parliament and how it shapes our society.**