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Lydia Polgreen

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Welcome to Media Masters, a series of one to one interviews with people at the top at the media game. Today I'm here in New York and joined by Lydia Polgreen, editor-in-chief of HuffPost. Appointed in 2016, she previously spent 15 years at the New York Times where she served as foreign correspondent in Africa and Asia. She received numerous awards for her work, including a George Polk award for her coverage of ethnic violence in Darfur in 2006. Lydia carried out a number of roles at the Times, most recently as editorial director of NYT global. She's also a board member at Columbia Journalism Review, and the Committee to Protect Journalists.

Lydia, thank you for joining me.

It's a pleasure to be here.

So Lydia, editor-in-chief of HuffPost, obviously an iconic brand with an amazing history. Where are you going to take it next?

Well, I think past is prologue and the future is unknown.

Oh, that's good. I like that already. We're starting off on the deeply profound. Continue!

Well, I think for media right now, it's a really fascinating moment of both rediscovery of our roots – and those roots really lie in what's at the core of journalism, which is exposing things that weren't meant to be known, or that people, important people especially, don't want to be known, and bringing them to light. So for us at HuffPost, that's really the core of our identity and who we are. Doing journalism that holds power to account. I think that's been true for much of its history. And certainly, when Arianna founded it, it had this kind of, this... it was a blog, but it was also very much

concerned with progressive politics. And over time it's evolved to win a Pulitzer prize and many other kinds of prizes. And so, we are not necessarily reinventing ourselves whole cloth, we're really thinking about what's great about our legacy, and how do we then take that into the future, and the 21st century and where we are today.

Do you feel quite a sense of responsibility, given that it is an iconic global media brand?

It's a huge responsibility. And when I was named to this post, it was a little bit terrifying to be honest.

Well, it shows respect, it shows some ambition.

Oh, absolutely. And I think that part of that is respect for what Arianna Huffington had built. This is the thing that carried her name and really had vaulted her to global fame. So, I felt a tremendous sense of responsibility to think about how can I take this iconic brand that is very much associated with its founder, as it should be, and give it a new life, a new expression that continues to pay homage to what Ariana built, but then also takes us into the future and into something that can be independent of her, because she had obviously moved on and started a new company. So, it is a tremendous responsibility. We serve, in a good month, 170 million users a month. People come to us from across the globe, and they rely on us to tell real stories centred on the lives of real people. And that is an enormous responsibility.

So, what's top of your to-do list at the moment?

Well, like most of the media landscape right now, in the United States at least, we're very, very focused on politics. We are right at the beginning of what seems to be a never-ending political cycle.

Because you've gone and elected a lunatic.

Those are your words, not mine! It's true, Donald Trump is president, and there's going to be a really, really fierce political battle to try and remove him through an election, rather than through impeachment or other means. Although that could happen as well. There's a very broad democratic slate right now. You have, I think, 20 candidates who've declared. There's a big battle for the soul of the Democratic Party and what it will represent, and our audience is deeply engaged in that story. So, that's incredibly important. But we're also tracking really major stories all around the world. Obviously, the incredible shambolic events happening in Westminster right

now in the UK. Our correspondent who works in the lobby, Paul Waugh, keeps us up to date, minute-by-minute, on the madness that's happening over Brexit.

He'll end up in an insane asylum soon I think. Because the whole thing is crazy, isn't it?

I think Paul quite enjoys the crazy, to be honest. Journalists, that's the way that we are. The more radically wild the situation is, the more fun we're having. But there are very serious things at stake obviously with Brexit, so it's not all fun and games. It's also about documenting the real harms that could come to the UK if Brexit is not done in the right way. And I think you're seeing a lot of fear about what a no-deal Brexit, or a hard Brexit, could mean for the economy, for people's lives. And that's been a really, really important story for us. And then, of course, there are elections. We have an edition in India, there are elections happening there this year. They are going to be really, really hard-fought and contested. There's been a tremendous amount of political violence in India, much of it fuelled by the big digital social platforms. That's a story that we've been tracking. So, really there's all kinds of things all across the globe that we're keeping a really close eye on.

Do you think there's too much news at the moment? I'm a little bit newsed out. There's so much stuff happening that sometimes almost get news fatigue. And do you see that, where a typical reader, a visitor to your site might say, decrease the frequency by which they visit your site. Not because of anything you're doing, but because they just need time off?

You would think that people would get tired of the news. But in fact, I think if anything, people's engagement and interest is increasing...

Because the stakes are higher.

The stakes are really high, and I think that we are in a moment where the political is personal and the personal is political. And for our audience in particular, which tends to be younger and progressive, there is a real sense of existential threat. And people do want to be informed about the things that are happening in their communities all around the world. So, we are not seeing a fatigue in that sense. I think people really want to know, not just what's happening, but how it's going to affect their lives, and what sort of action they can take to make things better.

So, does the demographic of your readership, is that a lot younger and a lot more diverse than say that of a traditional newspaper?

I think it is. It is quite young and quite diverse, but we also have a strong cohort in the US for example, of baby boomers. So, we have a real spread of very young, diverse, progressive millennials and even Gen Z, which is the generation that comes after millennials. But then we also have a really strong cohort of people who were my parents' age in their 60s and 70s who are deeply engaged. Those folks tend to be quite passionate about politics and really, really interested in in progressive issues. So, climate change, the questions around inequality, they're really, really driving in the passions for that audience. So, we like to think of our audiences being really across the board. We attract a really broad swathe of society across many different demographics.

So, how does that work in terms of the distinctiveness then? Because often, you with a magazine or a traditional newspaper, you might have a traditional reader in mind. A type of person. They might be a certain gender, or they might live in a certain location, or be a certain age. It sounds like you guys appeal to so many people that it'd be difficult to actually compartmentalise them.

The core thing that we know about our audience is that these are people who are really passionate about making the world a better and fairer place. And so, it's less about their age, it's less about their income. Although I'm happy to say we do have a fairly high income audience. And core demographics that are very attractive to advertisers. And I'm sure we'll talk about the business end of journalism at some point in this conversation. But I think that what really unites the HuffPost community is a desire to see the world become a better, more fair, more equal place.

So, a shared sense of values?

I think it's absolutely driven by values. And what's interesting is for journalism companies, I think that's a relatively new phenomenon. But it's something that you're seeing in lots of other companies as well. And companies that are seeking to market their products to the types of people who really care about values are finding that they themselves also have to take a stand. You look at a company like Nike for example. Nike has to serve a huge swath of the population. It's a major global brand. They took a huge risk by embracing Colin Kaepernick, a very controversial global figure for his stance on police brutality, and not wanting to... and kneeling during the national anthem. And people thought, "Oh my gosh, their customers are all going to run away." But in fact Nike's market cap went up by $6 or $7 billion after they released this campaign.

I loved it, when I saw it. But I thought, "I'm not the person that's going to have to have their minds changed."

Well, and in fact, I remember reading a story couple of months ago about a conservative sports store owner who actually had to shut down, because once he

stopped caring Nike Products in protest of the Colin Kaepernick decision, they lost a tremendous amount of business. So, I think what you're seeing is that people do want to consume brands that share their values. And HuffPost I think really tries to reflect the values of its audience.

Well, that brings me onto my next question, because you've put ordinary people and human stories at the heart of HuffPost journalism. How does that actually work in practice?

Well, for us, stories really begin with our audience, right? One of the things that we did not long after I started in 2017, is we got a bus and we put big HuffPost stickers all over it, and we drove it around the country to 26 cities. And our goal in doing that was really to try and talk to people and find out what's really on their minds.

You interviewed 2,000 people, didn't you?

Yes, interviewed close to 2,000 people, and we ended up doing a second tour in 2018 ahead of the midterms. And it was really fascinating, because what we heard from our audience was not, "Oh, we want you to really stick it to Donald Trump." They didn't say, "Oh, you need to tell us about every twist and turn of the Mueller investigation so we know when this guy is going to be brought down." People were deeply, deeply concerned about issues that affected their community. And even though each community is different, there were some very, very strong themes that came through. Housing as a major problem in America was definitely on my radar. But it was one of the very, very top things that people talked about, this crisis of affordable housing. And so...

We have it in the UK as well.

Absolutely. And this is a global problem. Anywhere where there's employment, there is a housing crisis. And often that employment is not sufficient to allow someone to afford decent housing in the place where they live. And this is something that's not just happening in cities like Los Angeles, or New York, it's something that's happening in places like Boise, Idaho. And so, we got a very clear signal this is a really important thing, so we put a reporter on it. People talk to us about inequality being a major source of concern for them. Healthcare. We have a crisis of healthcare in this country. We have two full time reporters devoted to covering healthcare. And just as important, there were the things that we decided we weren't going to do. And one of those things was not have a big team that was relentlessly focused on the endless investigations into Donald Trump. Because our audience told us that, "That's actually not our focus. Those aren't the issues that we care about the most." Now, other news organisations, of course, have devoted to tremendous amounts of resources to covering those things, which is all the more reason why we can say,

“You know what? And we’ll leave that to them and we’ll focus on the things that we know are absolutely vital to serving our audience.”

And makes you distinctive.

And makes us distinctive. And at the end of the day, I really like to think about us as doing service journalism. And we think of service journalism as being something in the women’s pages. Something that’s about how do you coordinate the right lipstick colour with your complexion? Or, what should I cook for dinner tonight? Thirty-two ways to do chicken. And I think that that’s a very dismissive way to think of service, because I think if you... the goal of that journalism is to help people make their lives better. But I think that the goal of all journalism should be to help people make their lives better. So, we really take that service mentality and apply it to all the journalism that we do.

How did you get into journalism? What’s your personal journey?

Well, my first big scoop happened when I was editor of the high school paper in Accra, Ghana. At the time my family was living in Ghana because of my father’s job. And the high school paper was called Vibes. And I had learned that Ziggy Marley, the son of Bob Marley, was in Accra giving a concert, and I was absolutely determined that I was going to get an exclusive interview. I mean...

We you editor of Vibes at this point?

I was editor of Vibes at this point.

I hope it’s on your LinkedIn profile list.

No, I don’t think it is. He was staying at this beach hotel, and so I would just hang around.

So, you already had the nose for the story back then?

Yes, I was absolutely convinced that I was going to get this scoop. And ultimately I did. And I’m sure it was an incredibly embarrassing interview. And thankfully there are no extant copies. But I’d always had this great interest in, and passion for, the news. I’d wanted to know what was going on before anybody else did, so that I could tell other people about it and feel really smart and important, which I think is

something that a lot of journalists share and maybe don't admit to, that... but I think that that's also part of what drives people to consume journalism.

That curiosity, sense of nosiness.

A sense of nosiness, but also I think a bit of a sense of wanting to know more than other people. Right? Having the inside scoop. But growing up in East and West Africa, I had the privilege of witnessing news, major events unfold before my eyes. I was six years old in Kenya in 1982 when there was a massive coup attempt that my family lived through. And in some ways it was terrifying, but in other ways it really set a pattern and a path for me of always wanting to be right where the action was. And then when I was in high school, Ghana was going through the transition from dictatorship to democracy, and that was incredibly exciting to witness. So, I think I knew deep down that I wanted to have a life that involved being a witness to extraordinary events, and telling people about them. And after high school, when I went to college I left that for a while. I got very into philosophy and I thought, "Oh, maybe I'll become a philosophy professor." Took a year off after college and worked in a law office and thought, "Oh, well this office life just isn't for me. I don't think this is what I meant to be doing." I'd find myself staring at the clock waiting for it to be five o'clock and thinking, "No, no, no. This is... I lived through a coup when I was six. This isn't how I should be living my life." And so I got internship at a magazine and just took off from there. And the minute I started actually doing journalism, I was like, "Oh yes, this is the thing." It combined my passion for writing with this great passion that I had for being at the middle in the centre of things, and being a witness. And I haven't given it up since.

And you've long since abandoned any desire to return to the realms of philosophy.

Long ago, long ago! I somewhere with all the dust bunnies in the back of my brain, there's some interesting thoughts about Hegel and Leibniz and things like that. But they would very...

I'm nodding, I've heard of their names, I don't know who they are.

They would be very hard for me to access at this point.

Luckily, I'm asking the questions, because if you said, "Who are they?" You'd have me as the fraud that I am on that. But they say that journalism is the first draft of history anyway, don't they? And whether you read HuffPost, whether you read the New York Times or whatever it might be, you're choosing the lens

through which you want to see the world reported to you. So, there is an element of applied philosophy in journalism in any event I would say.

Oh for sure. And I think particularly journalists like to see the world through multiple lenses, and I think most people do as well. They want to know the HuffPost perspective on the story, but they are also interested in what Fox News has to say. Or they're interested in what the Guardian might have to say. And I think one of the great things about this digital transformation that we've been through, and there are a lot of not so great things about it, is that ability to pull in so many different sources, and see the world from so many different perspectives. And for me, I think that's an incredibly enriching thing.

So, you were editor of Vibes, we abandoned the philosophy career, we decided he didn't want to work in a law office. When you started on that journalism path, what was the first big job that you had?

Well, I guess the first real reporting job that I had was at a newspaper up in Albany, where I covered three little towns. Albany, New York, which is the capital city of New York. Strangely enough, New York City is not the capital of New York.

It's odd, isn't it?

Which was fun. But I'd say I got my really big break when I got hired onto the metropolitan staff of the New York Times. And that was just a very lucky break on my part. I happened to meet, when I was at journalism school, the woman who ran the program that hired young journalists into the Times. They had a program where you'd come in as a trainee at a slightly lower pay scale, and you had two years rather than six...

It was a foot in the door.

It's a foot in the door, exactly. And that really changed my life. And the remarkable thing about that was when you work at the Times, you're just immediately plunged into the absolute big leagues of journalism. And so I thought, "Oh, it'll be months before I have a story in the paper, and it'll certainly... it could be years before I have a front page story." And three days after I started, I ended up being assigned to work with another much more senior reporter on a big breaking story. An investigation into something at the park service, and that reporter – a fellow named Ben Wiser, who still works at the New York Times, a legendary, legendary reporter – absolutely insisted that we should share a byline. And at that time, that was actually pretty rare. Double bylines were not super common. And I always felt that that was a great gesture on his part.

Was that the splash or a page lead? I mean...

No. It was on the front page. I don't think it led the page, but it might've been the...

Who cares. It was still on the front page, that's still awesome.

It was on the front page, and they have this...

Well, congratulations!

They have this great tradition at the New York Times where they give you your first front page byline, they actually give you the metal plate of that page, which is a great memento. I think my mother has it now, because every time I win a prize, or get a diploma or anything, I just send it to my mother, who's got a little a museum of sorts of all these things little children...

A shrine to your...

Not just mine, my brother's as well. But yes.

She sounds like a very humble, very proud, and very pleased for herself, mom, rightly so.

She is, she is, and so much of my success is really down to her. So, she has always really encouraged me to aim very, very high. So, I've been very fortunate in that regard. So yes, once you land up with the New York Times, even as a young reporter, it's just pure opportunity. And yes, I tried to make the most of it. I had my first solo front page byline when I did a story that noticed that... there's always been this big fight over public bathrooms in New York City, and New York City does not have enough public restrooms. This has been a crisis for many, many years. And I remember walking around Union Square and seeing that actually there were all these chain stores there, and all of these chain stores like the Barnes and Noble or the Starbucks, they all had bathrooms that the public could use. And so, I wrote a story that basically argued that big chain stores had become the de facto public bathroom of New York City, and this ended up delighting the front page editors. And they said, "Oh, this is a fun read. Let's put it on page one." Which is, I don't know, I just get a real kick out of those moments. When you come up with an idea that's your own and you say, "I think a bunch of people might be interested in this," and it ends up running on the front page, that's a real kick. But it was my dream to become a foreign correspondent. I was not going to be satisfied with being the restroom correspondent for the New York Times.

Although restrooms are the new battleground of gender politics these days.

This was long before they were a battleground. I'm sad to say, I did not see that one coming.

Can't anyone just use the restroom that they want to use, for goodness sake?

You would think.

It's quite simple.

It seems pretty simple, but it's taken us a long time to get even close to that, and we're not there yet.

Ally McBeal was like in the early '90s or something, for goodness sake. Did we learn nothing from that?

I personally feel like I learned a great deal from Ally McBeal.

Me too.

Yes. No, the dancing baby, that was a meme before there were memes.

Indeed. So 15 years at the Times. So we'd already got to your first front page splash on the restrooms issue then. But did the role of foreign correspondent come calling then?

Yes, it did. Again, some serendipity, the West Africa bureau chief needed to move to Baghdad because her husband had gotten a job there and she wanted to go and be there with him. They needed someone in Baghdad and she was a very talented correspondent, so the paper was very happy to oblige. They found themselves wanting somebody who was willing to move at very short notice to West Africa. At the time, that region was just on fire. There was the civil war in Ivory Coast. There was the civil war in Congo. The crisis in Darfur was going on. There was just a lot happening. And so, they needed somebody who could go lickety-split. I put my hand up, and on little other qualification than my own curiosity, and the fact that I'd spent most of my childhood living in Africa, they said, "Well, you seem promising, we'll send you." I was incredibly grateful that they did. I spent close to five years in the

West Africa bureau covering a whole range of thing. A lot of it was conflict, but also a lot of it was democracy building and development. I got to see some major transformations happen in that part of the world. The kinds of things that I really like to focus on, which is how human beings figure out how to live together and share space and share power, share resources. Those were the big themes that I cared about. I came by it honestly because my dad had worked in global development when I was a kid, which is why we lived in Africa. And so, I was very interested in natural resources and economic growth, and all those kinds of things. And so, those were the kinds of stories that I really gravitated to when I wasn't helicoptering into refugee camps in Darfur.

Do you think Western media gets the coverage and the temperament and the tone of their African coverage right? I've been to Africa many times with work and there's so many prosperous areas. I was in Tanzania recently, Dar es Salaam, and it has a thriving Central Business District, and yet there's this white saviour concept that we have with Comic Relief in the UK, where many people are saying that it's actually perpetuating borderline racist, certainly out to date stereotypes for fundraising. Showing us the dusty African villages with the starving child. One of my friends is a producer that shot something in Africa recently, and the client said, "Oh no, we can't use that because all the kids are wearing shoes. It doesn't look accurate. Can the kids take their shoes off and shoot it again?" And my friend did.

Oh, wow.

Because it increases the fundraising return you see.

It does, it does.

But it also perpetuates that damaging stereotype.

It absolutely perpetuates damaging stereotypes. I fall... and I'm not going to say in the middle, but at another spot in that spectrum. I think there are two tropes that I find, if not equally troubling, then both troubling. One is, hopeless basket case. Africa is not even a group of 50 countries, but it's just one big miasma of misery.

It's just Africa.

It's just Africa. All those dark people with no hope and just waiting for the latest...

Bag of grain.

... to drop out of the sky.

Yes.

That is absolutely and 100% false. There are clearly places where there is a great deal of strife and a great deal of poverty...

Well, there is in America. There is in Britain.

Yes. Sure, sure. But I think there's another form of... a very distorted view of Africa that comes from the McKinsey, Africa Rising perspective, which is that Africa actually, we shouldn't really focus on the bad parts, we should focus on the beautiful gleaming towers in Johannesburg, or how there's this great can-do entrepreneurial spirit in Nigeria. That it's somehow that these two things, that prosperity and poverty are not inextricably linked to one another. I think that the reality is that that strain of thinking about covering Africa, that it needs to be boosterish, sort of smacks to me of a racism as well.

A benevolent racism?

Yes. It's a kind of... I don't know, treating the continent as if it's a collection of slow children that need encouragement, rather than a collection of extraordinary societies, some of them quite ancient, that have accomplished great things in the past.

Human beings.

I think that the other piece of that narrative, the other piece that, that narrative erases is colonial history. I think, we don't really reckon with the extraordinary role that the West has played in creating the crises that do exist in Sub-Saharan Africa, and there are many. Nigeria or Sudan. Sudan was created as a country out of whole cloth for sensible reason at all other than the geopolitical convenience of the powers that were at the time. And so, no wonder the country has been plunged into civil war for almost its entire history. So I think that having a sense of where you've come from, what the deeper root causes are of the conflicts that you're covering, is absolutely essential. And neither this just deeply depressing, poor Africa business, nor this boosterish Africa Rising business really gets at what Africans deserve, which is a very real reckoning with their societies and their economies, and the political life that they're living with. And so, that was always the goal for me in my coverage was to really live in that zone where you're seeing things clearly and on a much grander scale than just this snapshot of the very moment.

Did you feel your journalism played a part in challenging those stereotypes? After that five-year period when you look back and reflect, how did you feel about your role in journalism?

I did my best. I think I'll leave it to readers to decide ultimately whether I struck the right note. But you know, I was always trying to challenge stereotypes. I did one story toward the end of my time, this is my second tour in Africa when I was based in South Africa, about tobacco farming in Zimbabwe. There's this belief that after Robert Mugabe, the dictator, the terrible, terrifying dictator of Zimbabwe, seized all the white-owned farms and redistributed them, that a) all of the farms went to his political cronies, and b) the entire tobacco farming industry had collapsed. No one had really gone to check up on that and say, "Is that really true?" It turned out that actually there were a bunch of researchers who'd been looking at the tobacco industry and found that for the first time in this year... I want to say I did this story maybe in 2008 or 2009, the size of the tobacco crop actually matched what it had been before the land seizures. The only difference was instead of let's say 1,200 white farmers splitting up the tobacco that was grown, you had 60,000 black farmers. So they were getting less money than each white farmer was, but it was being shared between many, many, many more people. I got a lot of pushback from that story because the stereotype is land redistribution in Zimbabwe just made everyone poor and it all went to cronies of the political powerful. It turned out when I went down to report it, that that actually just wasn't true. Now, that's not to say that horrific atrocities were not committed, but the reality is the situation as it existed before then was fundamentally unjust. You had a very small group of people who had a stranglehold on wealth creation. The end result, regardless of how the means that you got there had fundamentally made the society more equitable. One can critique the morals, and in my piece, I did of how that end was achieved. But those things need to be said. They need to be reported out, and those stories need to be told.

It's good that you checked though, because the story is in the reality of the situation, the old journalism anecdote isn't it, is that the job of the journalist is not to report that one person says, "It's sunny," and on the other hand someone else says, "It's raining", the job of the journalist is to look out the window and find out what the weather is actually like.

Yes. No, that's exactly right. In this case it meant, you know, tromping around tobacco farms in Zimbabwe and talking to farmers and trying to understand, "Wait, this is just a poor person from some other part of the country. They are not some rich crony of the political party in power." Doing that legwork where you're literally in tobacco warehouses looking at different grades of tobacco and talking to the farmers, and talking to their wives and their children, that's how you get those kinds of stories, and it's going there.

So what happened at the end of your second tour then, were you called back to base? How does that work?

Yes, yes. So West Africa, I was in India for three years and then South Africa. The last story I covered in South Africa was the funeral of Nelson Mandela.

Wow. So three tours then?

Yes.

Incredible.

Yes. That last one was sort of bittersweet, because the thing is when you're the South Africa correspondent for the New York Times ,or really any news organisation, before Nelson Mandela passed on, a key part of your brief is to be there when he dies. It was just a major global story. And so, it felt... I don't want to say it felt good. Of course it was very sad when he passed.

I know what you mean. The BBC has rehearsals all the time for when the Queen eventually dies.

Oh yes, there was that amazing piece in the Guardian that detailed all of the plans. Yes, but it's exactly the same sort of thing.

Every male news anchor in the BBC has to have a black tie with them whenever they go on air just in case the Queen dies.

Yes, that is remarkable.

Anyway, so you're hanging around Johannesburg, waiting for Nelson Mandela to die.

Yes.

He eventually does. Then what happened?

Then I got asked to come back to base to become an editor, which is the reward you get, I suppose, for being a good foreign correspondent is eventually they make you stop doing your favourite job and start doing something else.

Then them being like the taxi controller for the people that are doing the job you want to do?

Yes, exactly.

Enviously receiving their exciting entreaties.

Yes, that is unfortunately the way that it goes. But in truth, it felt to me like a real opportunity to give back. You do get tired, right? This always being on call, always hopping on a flight. One of the last things that I did that wasn't a sort of routine expected story is... this was before Nelson Mandela died, was the Mali crisis, when the northern half of the country was overrun. I just thought, "Oh I'm getting a little old for this. I'm heading towards 40, I maybe want a little bit of a different life." But anyway, so the call came from my then boss, Joe Kahn saying, "Hey, would you be interested in coming and being deputy foreign editor?" I said, "Well, this could be a good change for me." Also, I felt editors had done so much to create opportunities for me that I thought it would be really fun and very satisfying to be able to do that for other people, and just engage a different part of my brain in thinking about journalism. So I did, and came back and I did that for a while.

When you came back, how did the time doing your three tours, how did that change you as a person? Did you become more optimistic or more cynical? Or did it change you or were you the same person returning after those that you were when you started out on the first tour?

I think I was, if anything, just wiser. I felt like I knew a lot more about the world, a lot more about the extraordinary privilege, the privilege that we take for granted in our lives here in the United States. I knew a lot more about solving problems. So much of being a foreign correspondent is just being super wily, figuring out how to get into a country where the government doesn't want you in there. Figuring out how to get from point A to point B when a road is washed out. All that logistical stuff is actually a huge part of the job. It's really creative problem solving.

You don't need that here in midtown Manhattan, do you?

Well, it depends on what your aspirations are. No, but those kinds of skills actually do transfer to other things. Now that I'm running a big news organisation, I find that ability to be scrappy and to solve problems in unconventional ways comes in really

handy. So I definitely enjoy that. But the other way in which I think I had changed, and this I think turned out to be very useful for the New York Times, was I had essentially grown up as a foreign correspondent as the internet, and particularly the social web, became the sort of dominant means of distribution for stories. It was a time when I think the Times was really looking at its digital transformation and thinking, “How can we be better? How can we really harness these tools to enrich our journalism?” It’s not an accident that the people who have I think been at the forefront of the digital transformation of the Times are in many cases returned foreign correspondents because they spent a long time away without ever having access to the physical paper and used all of these tools, whether it’s the social web or Twitter and Facebook and just the internet in general.

Just any means necessary to connect.

Exactly. To connect. And so, I think I was pretty quickly drawn into some of these transformational projects, which was really fun, and I found that I enjoyed that. And so, when a project started to try and significantly increase the number of subscribers that the New York Times has around the world, I was asked to help lead that because the goal was... and they’d already put up this paywall, and it was clear that we’d gotten quite a lot of subscribers in the United States, but it was clear also that there is a cosmopolitan class around the world of people who speak English, who want to be informed, And for whom the New York Times is a really great product, and we needed to figure out how to make it better and more relevant.

And relevant. We’ve actually had Mark Thompson sitting in that chair and he said that, “As a citizen, it’s troublesome what Donald Trump is doing. But as a CEO of the New York Times, it’s the best thing that could ever happen, because every time he attacks the so-called failing New York Times, hundreds of thousands of people sign up to their $15 a month to say, ‘Right, well, independent, fair journalism is more needed now than ever.’”

This is something that I saw over and over again in my time as a foreign correspondent, but institutions, when put under stress, you really come to appreciate what they do for you as a society. I think that’s definitely happened with journalism. I’m on the board of the Committee to Protect Journalists. What a great moment when you have Meryl Streep get up and say at an award ceremony that’s televised live on TV, “Donate money to the Committee to Protect Journalists,” in the aftermath of Trump’s victory. And so, it’s been very gratifying to see a real rallying around journalism in this era. And so, seeing organisations like the New York Times really rise from the ashes. I think a lot of people forget how close the New York Times came to oblivion. Thanks to the fortitude of the Sulzberger family, which has protected this very precious institution for generations, but also the very, very smart business decisions by folks who said, “No, we’re going to put up a paywall and we’re going to figure out how to market this thing. How to create the best digital product that we possibly can.” I give huge amounts of credit to the current publisher, A.G. Sulzberger, to his father, Arthur Sulzberger, people like Mark Thompson and

Meredith Levien, and all the executives there who I think have just done a tremendous job of articulating the value of independent journalism in the world, and figuring out the formula to get people to pay for it, which I think is great.

That neatly sidesteps me onto the next question, of course, which is how you do turn a profit as a digital publisher? The New York Times charges me $15 a month or whatever, HuffPost is free. How do you convince advertisers that they need to support that news journalism? How come you get HuffPost to turn a profit?

Yes. I think that this is a really interesting question and really gets to the heart of why I stepped from the New York Times and took over at HuffPost. In part it was because the New York Times has an embarrassment of riches of talented people who can do editorial jobs there. And so, I knew that if I left that the place was going to be just fine. Obviously, you're just one person.

You could have kept their bank account login, and we could have hacked in and stolen the money. Diverted it to HuffPost. That's still an option.

No. No desire to do that. I think a thriving New York Times is absolutely essential to American democracy, so they can keep it. But I saw with the rise of Donald Trump that there had been a real failure in media, by which I don't mean that institutions like the New York Times had failed. I think they themselves would look back and say, "Yes, maybe we focused a little too much on Hillary Clinton's emails." But, but that aside, that wasn't the issue. To me, the big question was you have this massive stratification happening in society, right? We all hear about inequality and growing inequality, and how, the richer... the 1% and the 0.1% are doing so well, and all these other people are being left behind. That plays out in media as well. So you have a handful of really fantastic legacy news organisations that are pioneering business models that essentially involve the consumer paying for that product, and that's great. But ultimately there are a whole lot of people out there in the world who are never going to pay to subscribe to a news organisation. If they do pay, they pay their cable bill and they get a bundle as part of that, that they get CNN, but they probably got cable because they wanted to watch this TV program or see the sports games, or whatever it was. The news wasn't the thing that really drove them to subscribe. In an era where fake news and access to quality information, and all those kinds of things is such a big deal, it seemed to me that someone really needed to be thinking about journalism for people who are never going to pay for journalism, because let's be honest, the subscribers to The New York Times are some of the best educated, most affluent people, they are in some ways the people who need the information the least. So I was really moved by this challenge of figuring out how to create high quality, free to consumer journalism and it is, and I knew this going in, an enormous challenge.

To say the least.

We've seen the value of digital advertising under pressure from the big platforms like Google and Facebook just trend down, down, down, down, down. And yet I really felt that there was a tremendous opportunity here, and I think that feeling of opportunity has only grown as I've seen the incredibly negative role that these platforms have taken in our public life in general. Turning out conspiracy theories, pushing, radicalising people, things like that.

It's crazy.

That I think has led a significant number of companies to rethink their engagement with these tools and thinking are we really investing in the right things? And you'll often hear from advertisers, oh, well we don't want to be anywhere near the news. We don't want to be near terrorist attacks or plane crashes and things like that, and I can understand that. But at the same time, do they want to be on a platform where there are videos of beheadings or child pornography or all these horrible things that are, that have absolutely no editorial filter?

I've heard that a lot of the Facebook moderators need counselling because they're just so desensitised to constant bombardment with incredible imagery. I'm sure you can imagine what they would have to see and moderate on, that many of them suffer mental health problems.

No, I think that's right. And I think as we're all rethinking the roles that these platforms play in our lives, I think brands need to be rethinking that as well. And the other thing that I would say is that you're seeing companies, and we talked earlier about values. We're seeing companies that are spending a significant amount of money on things that, whether it's marketing money or corporate social responsibility money, on things that they think are important to make the world a better place. And so my pitch to CMO's and big brands is, do you want to live in a world where people are incredibly poorly informed and where access to journalism is restricted to basically only those who can afford it? Or do you want to live in a world where high quality news and information is freely available to just about everyone? And so I would urge them to think about spending their marketing dollars on journalism and digital platforms that are really dedicated to doing quality journalism as important as the money that they spend on issues like sustainability and other things that are important, not just because they're the right thing to do and they comport with the values that their consumers are demanding, but also comport with the idea that you're going to have a stable business operating environment. All of this instability we're experiencing in the world right now, whether it's Brexit or the Trump presidency or what's going on in India and what have you, so much of it could be solved or could be ameliorated if we could just turn the temperature down of our media and journalism environment. If we could get people back to understanding what's going on in their world, sharing, agreeing upon the set of facts. Think about what that would do for local journalism. Forget about HuffPost. Think about what that

would do for local journalism. And to me, that's where a lot of the solution lies that companies really do need to rethink this attitude that they have towards news and rethink the role that news plays as part of our overall information ecosystem and how important the stability of that ecosystem is to their profit margins.

But it's also in their commercial interest is it not? If you're, I'm trying to think of it like a mass market brand like say Walgreens or Ikea. You don't just want to advertise merely to New York Times readers. You want to be advertising your products to USA Today readers, HuffPost readers, because the more eyeballs you can get in front of with your new bedroom cabinet, the more likely that is you're going to have increased sales of it.

Sure. I think the challenge is that the primary way in which big companies have reached those consumers is through the big search and social platforms. I was recently looking for a piece of furniture and went on a site and looked at it and that piece of furniture has been following me around the internet for the past three months. Constantly, persistently popping up in every ad format. And I think that companies see that and they're like, "Well, that's pretty effective." We could just knock people over the head and eventually they'll hopefully buy it.

It's the old trick, isn't it now if you try to stitch your friends up now. You search for something embarrassing on their computer in Google and then cancel the search so for months they're being followed around by incontinence pads or something.

Exactly.

It's hilarious.

It's a funny prank that sadly says a lot about the state of journalism right now.

So do you think Arianna Huffington's founding liberal progressive values still apply to all of the global Huff sites? Do you, what about challenging those views?

Yes, it's a really interesting question. I think one of the things, and this is I think something that Arianna herself had thought about too. One of the things that has happened over the past few years is that the traditional political axes have just completely gotten scrambled, right? Ideas that were on the left, you now see on the right and ideas that are on the right, you now see on the left. Questions about, trade is a great example, right? You had the UK is completely torn asunder over this question of open borders and trade.

Brexit has a lot of left wing support because the Labour heartlands in the north all voted Brexit.

Yes, exactly, and the leader of the Labour Party is in favour of Brexit.

Although he lies and says he isn't.

Allegedly, but I mean...

He's my least favourite person in the world.

You're not the first person to tell me that.

I can't stand him. But I say that with the bitterness of someone who was a party member for 24 years, and worshipped Tony Blair. Won three elections in a row, changed the country for the better and now we're an electable shambles.

Right.

This is my pitch.

This is a frustration I hear a great deal about. But you know, I think that the traditional ideological polls have absolutely been scrambled, and so for me it's less about are you on the left, are you on the right, than what is your fundamental orientation towards power? And ultimately we see ourselves as being aligned with people who feel that they've been left out of the prevailing political and economic power arrangements. And on that side you'll find Remainers and you'll find Brexiteers. You'll find Trump voters and you'll find Bernie Sanders voters and you'll find Hillary voters. And I think for me that's really who we are, and that may mean that ultimately our editorial perspective is aligned with a lot of things that you'll hear from "progressive candidates" but the truth is those ideas are also embraced by solid, if not vast majority of Americans and with people in other parts of the country as well. So, I think it's a really interesting question, how you think about yourself, particularly in the American context in an era of extreme partisanship, but partisanship that doesn't actually represent ideas or values. It just represents a weird tribalism. And for us, I think we try to stand for ideas and values and that's true, I think across the board, and there are places where standing for those ideals and values actually does come at a cost and can even be dangerous. Obviously we have core beliefs around things like the fundamental dignity of all people.

Morality, democracy.

Exactly, and so there are countries where we work where for example, LGBTQ people are under considerable threat or even face laws that criminalise their lives and...

Any reporter in Thailand that even indirectly criticises the monarchy risks being thrown in prison for the rest of their life.

Exactly, so we stand for those values of free expression and egalitarianism and equality.

In doing my research on you, before we met for this podcast, I read that you've been described as the queer black woman changing journalism. How does that make you feel to be described as that?

Well, it's accurate, at least the queer black part and woman part, those are all correct. To the changing journalism part, I don't know.

It's flattering then.

It is flattering. Look, I think it's really important that people from all kinds of backgrounds, races, sexual orientations are represented in media, are represented in leadership in media. So I feel incredibly proud and I think that I carry all of those identities with me and they inform the work that I do, and I think enrich the work that I do. At the same time, I'm also a person who's spent most of my career as a journalist, as a foreign correspondent. So I'm very used to being in situations where I'm an outsider. That's in many ways been the story of my life. I spent most of my life living in countries that weren't my own. Being a woman in patriarchal societies, being a queer person in places where being queer was not tolerated. And so I make it my business to try and really understand difference and celebrate difference and be smart about difference. And I think that that's a really important thing for anyone in a leadership position to do, whether you're a queer black woman or a straight white man.

What annoys me about politics, is I'm a 43-year-old white, slightly chubby man. And you know, there's so many people in politics like me that say, well I've never suffered any discrimination, so it can't be out there. But I'm the person who's least likely to be discriminated against.

Yes, I think that's right. And I think that we need to create space for all kinds of people to emerge in all of the industries of power, right? You look at what's happening right now in the US Congress and this group of incredibly fiery young women who've just blown up and I think really speak for an emerging generation.

It's hugely inspiring.

Well, and they're saying, "We're just not going to do things the way that we used to," and that I think is...

Can you imagine if they said we've going to do, carry on things as the way they've always been done.

Well, they never would have gotten into office. You look at Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, and it takes a lot of guts to take on an incumbent, very powerful member of the House of Representatives who's part of the leadership, has been in office a very long time, on his home turf. That takes real guts. And I think...

I wanted her to be president within about 10 seconds of seeing her dancing on the news. I thought, "I like her. She should be president."

I think someone argued that you could not do much worse than where we are right now, so I think there are probably people who - unfortunately according to our constitution, she's not yet old enough.

I know, it's so annoying. But so do you think the media is opening up to a more diverse workforce? Are there opportunities still denied to people of colour or gender or sexuality on those grounds?

Absolutely, and I think on the one hand, I think there are tremendous good intentions to increase diversity. On the other hand, I think there are tremendous obstacles. Journalism remains a highly elite profession where people get jobs based on where they went to school or who they know, and those networks are incredibly important. If you're hiring for a job, the first place you go is your circle of friends and the people that you've worked with in the past, previous bosses, the alumni network of where you went to school. And that is of necessity, because of the history of this country is going to mean that that network is going to exclude huge numbers of people. So I think that there's a tremendous amount of work to be done in creating pathways for all kinds of people to come into this profession, and at the same time, it's a profession that's very much under stress. Young people asked me today, "Should I go into a career in journalism?" And I say it's the best thing that I've ever done, but I also know that I was probably the last generation that had the traditional career. I got

a job at a smaller newspaper and then at a bigger one, and then I moved up the management ranks and spent 15 whole years at a really great newspaper.

Expecting to have a job, and having a job.

Exactly, and I think that in this fragmentation, I think there's a tremendous, they're really tremendous questions about what opportunity there really is out there. So it's a huge and incredibly bedevilling challenge, but I think that it's one that we can solve if we just have the resolve to do it. And if people really and truly want these places to transform, then they need to be open to transformation and they have to be open to the idea that the voice of your institution will change because that voice is almost certainly the voice of a middle aged white man. And if you want your institution to be more diverse, if you want to attract talented people who come from different backgrounds, you have to hand the mic to them and say, "No, no, I want your voice. I'm not going to spend 10 years unlearning your voice and learning mine." You have to say, "I'm going to bring to the table things that I know that might be helpful to you, but I'm not going to try and tell you that your voice needs to sound like mine." And to me that sort of transformation still has yet to happen. We're still quite set in our ways.

I've been positively challenged myself as an employer of people is, someone said to me a couple of years ago that you shouldn't ask women their salary when you're hiring them because it actually perpetuates the systemic discrimination of women. Because if I ask a woman what her salary is and I'm about to hire her, she's likely to be paid much less than a man interviewing for the same role. And when I add 5% on to a woman's salary, it's going to be less than the 5% added to a man's.

No, I think that's exactly right and I think that I've come across this in my career where you're hiring a new person into a job that a man has left, and I've basically taken it as a policy that if the two of them have the same types of qualifications, regardless of what the person was making before, I bring them in at the salary that the person that left the job was in, or perhaps even more if their qualifications are better. And I just think that's good practice. We have so much accumulated debt to pay and that's the very least that we can do.

Now you mentioned the sense of isolation on the grounds of your gender, your ethnicity, your sexuality. Do you have a sense of isolation even now because of your seniority, the fact that you're the editor-in-chief? Is that a lonely job? What type of editor are you? I run a small business and I'm not lonely at all personally, but there is a sense, and I speak to a lot of leaders of businesses, of teams, that there is that sense of professional loneliness.

I don't think I would ever describe myself as lonely. I have a great team and it's a very egalitarian team. Obviously, as the editor-in-chief and the person in charge, I

have to take decisions. But we work in a really collaborative environment, so I never really feel lonely in that sense. The only thing I have is a bunch of peers, really great peers who do the same sort of job that I do, and they keep me great company. We commiserate, we have drinks and complain about various and sundry things and that keeps me from getting lonely.

Last question for you then, Lydia, what's next?

Oh, what's next?

Deliberately vague and open question.

Oh, I really love what I'm doing. Who can think about the future right now?

I just want to get through today without bursting into tears.

I'm so focused on being absolutely excellent at the job that I'm doing right now, and look, at some point, I'd like to go back to writing. I'm pretty sure I have a book or two in me and perhaps go back to reporting at some point, I don't know. We shall see.

Lydia, it's been a hugely interesting conversation. Inspirational. Thank you ever so much for your time.

It's such a pleasure.