



THE CAIRO REVIEW INTERVIEW

HUFFINGTON'S WORLD

Huffington Post Editor-in-Chief Arianna Huffington speaks on the Charlie Hebdo killings, the future of journalism, and taking HuffPost global

Surrounded by young assistants, [Arianna Huffington](#) runs the growing *Huffington Post* empire from a book-cluttered, glass-enclosed office looking out on a vast newsroom with row upon row of editors and reporters at computer terminals. The state-of-the-art digital media operation is a long way from her home in Brentwood, California, where just ten years ago she and a few colleagues dreamed up the news and blog site and sketched the future online powerhouse's first layout on a scrap of paper.

HuffPost has revolutionized journalism. Today, it employs more than 800 staffers and publishes the work of tens of thousands of unpaid bloggers. As of January 2015, *huffingtonpost.com* ranked 28th among all U.S. websites (and 4th among news sites) and 89th globally, according to the analytics firm Alexa. In 2011, *HuffPost* was sold for \$315 million to AOL, where Huffington's title is president and editor-in-chief of the Huffington Post Media Group. In the same year *HuffPost* started up its first international editions, in Canada and the United Kingdom. *HuffPost* won a Pulitzer Prize in 2012—becoming only the second digital publication to do so—for a series on wounded American military veterans.

Born Arianna Stassinopoulos, Huffington left her native Athens and studied economics at Cambridge University. She has authored fourteen books, including the recent No. 1 *New York Times* best-seller, *Thrive: The Third Metric to Redefining Success and Creating a Life of Well-Being, Wisdom, and Wonder*. She was married to (and later divorced from) California Republican congressman Michael Huffington. In 2003, Arianna Huffington herself stood briefly as an independent candidate for governor of California. A political activist and newspaper columnist, she became “addicted” to blogging in 2002. Her idea for a progressive-leaning website took hold after the re-election of President George W. Bush in 2004. *Cairo Review* Managing Editor [Scott MacLeod](#) spoke with Huffington in New York on January 12, 2015.

◁ [Arianna Huffington](#),
New York, March 28, 2011.
Michael Rubenstein/Redux

CAIRO REVIEW: *The attack on Charlie Hebdo magazine in Paris last week—what do you make of that?*

ARIANNA HUFFINGTON: The response has been overwhelming. And that rally [in Paris on January 11] was very significant. For me the most important thing is to keep making the distinction between the extremism and Islam. I think when we blur the lines between extremism and what Islam represents, that's when it becomes much harder to find long-term solutions.

CAIRO REVIEW: *In Syria, we have journalists being beheaded. Now we have an attack on a newspaper office in Paris.*

ARIANNA HUFFINGTON: Obviously it is an attack on free expression. It is an attack on allowing diversity of opinion and tolerance of all the principles fundamental not just for democracy but for humanity. Being able to accept opinions when you disagree is at the heart of building a civilization.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Did Charlie make a mistake by publishing those cartoons?*

ARIANNA HUFFINGTON: We actually published those cartoons after the terrorist attack to show solidarity. We decided to publish because we felt it was important at that moment to show solidarity with all the forces of tolerance and free expression. We have written so much about Islam, what a great culture it is and what a great religion it is. We have established our credentials here in terms of Islam. For us it was important to keep making that distinction which sometimes gets blurred even by very intelligent people, who want to say it's the religion itself that promotes violence, and it is not. It is the extremists who promote violence.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Is there a line we should not cross when it comes to respecting other religions and cultures, and the hurt that certain opinions or styles of delivering opinions may cause?*

ARIANNA HUFFINGTON: Look at what has been done to Christianity in the United States, the images of Jesus, including in modern art. For me this in no way diminishes my love of the heart of what Jesus Christ represents. So why is it so fragile that a satirical attack on a religious figure is seen in those terms? Satire always had more leeway, going back to Jonathan Swift, whose "Modest Proposal" about [poverty in] Ireland was eating the children. Satire is based on exaggeration. And comedy and exaggeration have always been given more leeway. If it is "where do you draw the line," everybody would draw the line differently; everybody's "offense line" would be drawn differently.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Is this a clash of civilizations?*

ARIANNA HUFFINGTON: No, I don't think so. This is about extremism. It is not about a particular culture or a particular civilization. It is about a minority that steps into an existential vacuum, for many young people who feel disconnected from any fundamental truths and gravitate to some absolute doctrine.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Is digital technology feeding tensions between cultures?*

ARIANNA HUFFINGTON: In my new book, *Thrive*, I wrote about what I called "the snake in the Garden of Eden." We all focus on the huge advantages in digital technology and how it has brought the world together. But there is that snake in the garden, which is the hyper-connectivity which disconnects us from ourselves and from our own wisdom and source of truth, which I believe is inside each human being whatever their religion or culture. We all have access to that center of peace and wisdom in us. I think often technology and the hyper-connectivity of technology can isolate us and disconnect us from that. That's a huge problem that can foster extremism. Also, of course, the fact that extreme ideas can travel faster—in the same way that good ideas can travel faster.

CAIRO REVIEW: *You've been there since the beginning of the digital revolution that has changed the landscape of journalism. Now where is it all going?*

ARIANNA HUFFINGTON: I see the future in this hybrid, which is a combination of great journalism, and a platform. That's how I see the *Huffington Post*, and frankly that's how I see the future of journalism generally. At *HuffPost* we have about 850 journalists, editors, reporters, engineers working together all over the world. But we also have a platform that has almost 100,000 bloggers, and which can be used by anyone who has something interesting to say to distribute their opinions. To me, that is what the golden age of journalism is going to be. Revering the best traditions of journalism, in terms of long-form investigative reporting, fairness, accuracy, fact checking. And at the same time, being able to provide a platform for people who otherwise may not have a means of distribution but have something interesting to say. This is not a free for all. It has to clear a quality bar. But also to have no hierarchy except quality. At *HuffPost* you can have a post by [French President] François Hollande but next week a post by a student who nobody has heard of but who has an interesting opinion. That is something that the new technologies have made possible.

CAIRO REVIEW: *What contribution has the Huffington Post made to journalism and society at large?*

ARIANNA HUFFINGTON: The *Huffington Post*, going back to our founding, which is almost ten years ago, created a platform which gave voice to many people who would not have had a voice otherwise. And elevated the stature of blogging. Because we have no hierarchy, and you can have a president next to a student, it meant that not only thousands of people who would not have a voice have a voice, but it was in the context of a very civilized conversation. Our comments were always pre-moderated, so the conversation was not taken over by trolls. We could start conversations about subjects and then stay on them, and bring in new voices. The second thing is that from the beginning, the *Huffington Post* believed that it was very important to put the spotlight on good things. Traditionally, journalists would say “if it bleeds, it leads.” You put on the front page the crises and the disasters. But we believe that—obviously you do that—but we also believe in putting the spotlight on good things, on examples of compassion and ingenuity. Most recently, for example, when violence erupted in Ferguson, we also at same time did a splash of the good things happening in Ferguson: people supporting their neighbors, the people going into schools to teach children when the schools were closed, et cetera, et cetera. We believe that the media have not done a good job of telling the full story. The full story is a mixture, of terrible things, beheadings, killings, and amazing things happening. But if you go to most papers or TV news reports, you wouldn’t know anything good is happening. So that is really part of another contribution the *HuffPost* has made. The global—we see ourselves as a global newsroom. Bringing together our coverage across the world, giving a platform to people across the world to communicate with each other. Breaking down barriers.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Institutionally what have you done in terms of rebuilding the media landscape? You started this on the back of a napkin in your home in Brentwood according to the legend. Now here you are in big offices here in New York City.*

ARIANNA HUFFINGTON: We were part of the shift, away from journalists seeing themselves as they once laid down the law, telling people how the world was from up the mountaintop, and we began to show the world of journalism as being a two-way street. So that at the core of what we’ve done institutionally is engagement. Engaging our readers. Listening to our readers. Having a two-way conversation with our readers, instead of bringing the truth down from the top of Mount Olympus.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Can everybody create a Huffington Post? What is the trick that enabled your success?*

ARIANNA HUFFINGTON: Part of it is timing. It is very hard now to create a major destination site. News travels more through social now. Through being shared. People receive the news through their feeds, friends on Facebook, tweets. The *HuffPost* is probably the last major site to be a destination site. People go to *HuffPost*. And, our social traffic has grown tremendously, too.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Let's talk about the media poobahs, as you once called them. You're becoming a poohbah yourself, I think.*

ARIANNA HUFFINGTON: Things have changed dramatically in the media world since we launched. There has been a real convergence now, between traditional media doing more and more online and new media like us doing more and more of what is seen as traditional journalism. Investigative journalism, long-form journalism. As you probably saw, we just hired these great editors from the *New Republic*. So there is not any more this distinction, this division. It is much more blended.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Former New York Times Executive Editor Bill Keller famously called you the "Queen of Aggregation," and talked about how the Huffington Post uses unpaid writers and aggregates what other journalists are doing.*

ARIANNA HUFFINGTON: He said that a long time ago. He would never say that now. This was some of the misconceptions that have now dramatically changed. The truth is that *Huffington Post* does a lot of different things. It does traditional journalism of the kind that won us a Pulitzer—which you don't win for aggregation. It does aggregation. We do aggregation proudly. We believe that there is so much good stuff on the web that we don't produce, and our job is to make everything that is the best of the web—this is a promise to our readers—to make it available. Whether we produce it, whether we aggregate it, or whether our bloggers write it. And now I think that everybody accepts that everybody uses blogs from people who are not on staff, who are not paid. It is the same principle as people who go on TV, and they are not paid, because they want a larger platform for their views.

CAIRO REVIEW: *How has the relationship with AOL changed the Huffington Post?*

ARIANNA HUFFINGTON: Our relationship with AOL has dramatically accelerated our growth. When we moved into these offices four years ago, we were in one country. We are now in thirteen countries, soon to be in more in 2015. When we moved here we had very little mobile. Now we have millions of readers on mobile. We had no video. Now we have an entire studio and eight hours of

live video a day. It was really a great opportunity for us to achieve what we want much faster.

CAIRO REVIEW: *One of the critiques of legacy media is that a few giants controlled all the media. Is being part of AOL a risk for the Huffington Post's brand of journalism?*

ARIANNA HUFFINGTON: What is great is that we have maintained our identity. We have been running the *Huffington Post* as stand-alone within AOL. All our international editions have maintained that *HuffPost* DNA.

CAIRO REVIEW: *How is your profitability?*

ARIANNA HUFFINGTON: We don't split up the *Huffington Post* in terms of P & L [profits and losses] because it is part of AOL. But we have done a lot of great things in the advertising front, with native advertising, with sponsored sections. There are a lot of innovative things.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Can the legacy media survive in the Digital Age? Did you read the New York Times internal innovation report? Can the New York Times survive?*

ARIANNA HUFFINGTON: Absolutely. Totally. It is just a matter of how much they innovate online. The *New York Times* has done some great things, including on the multimedia front, like the "Snow Fall" [project] that they did last year. I think there is still something in our human DNA that loves print. It is not just because of my age. Even my daughters who are millennials, they love buying magazines, they read books. So all these predictions that print is dead have been proven wrong. Every time something new is invented we think it will completely supplant the old. We thought television would supplant movies. It hasn't. We thought digital would supplant live events. Far from it. Live events are more popular than ever. In the same way, the web will not supplant print.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Give the New York Times some advice.*

ARIANNA HUFFINGTON: What they are doing is good: this convergence between what they are doing in print and doing more and more online. A lot of their writers now blog, they tweet, they use social media.

CAIRO REVIEW: *What are your plans for the Huffington Post?*

ARIANNA HUFFINGTON: We are launching *HuffPost* in Arabic in May. We are launching in Australia. We are looking at where we are going to be launching next. We will have fifteen international editions. The goal is to keep expanding.

CAIRO REVIEW: *What is the journalistic rationale and business rationale for that?*

ARIANNA HUFFINGTON: Journalistically, we are a global media company. So we want to be around the world. These editions also act as bureaus. Let's say when there is an election in the United Kingdom, our UK reporters take the lead in the coverage. When there is a World Cup in Brazil, our Brazilian reporters take the lead. There is more and more global collaboration. We have a very complex translation system, so stories are quickly translated. On the business front, these are all JVs [joint ventures], commercial partnerships, which makes it easier for us to move faster. They are all fifty-fifty partnerships with major media companies, whether it is *Le Monde* in France, or *El País* in Spain.

CAIRO REVIEW: *What is the aim of Huffington Post in Arabic?*

ARIANNA HUFFINGTON: It is a great opportunity both to tell the story of all the problems and the crises, but also to tell all the positive stories and good things in the Arab World, which so often are lost in the coverage of the violence and the crises.

CAIRO REVIEW: *I understand that you are going to operate out of London rather than an Arab capital. Is there a risk for contributors from the Arab World?*

ARIANNA HUFFINGTON: We don't think that way.

CAIRO REVIEW: *An advantage of the legacy media, publications such as the New York Times, is that readers can go there for a good grounding in what they need to know. In the digital era there is a cacophony of information and voices. How does the reader find the truth in all this?*

ARIANNA HUFFINGTON: Earning the trust of readers is key. At the *Huffington Post*, we pride ourselves in having a whole standards process, having our editors and reporters trained in fact checking and verification. We have earned our readers' trust. But that happens gradually. Obviously when you first emerge, the reader has to test you.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Does the cacophony of information and voices in the digital media world today leave the public confused and democracy diminished?*

ARIANNA HUFFINGTON: Quite the opposite. Our changing media world has the potential to inform the public more than ever before and also strengthen democracy. People are tired of being talked at. They want to be talked with. The online world is now a global conversation, with millions of new people pulling up a seat at the table every day—indeed, nearly three billion people will join the

Internet community by 2020. And new media and social technologies have created an explosion of ways for people to connect with the content they value. These connections have fueled revolutions, caused giant corporations to roll back policies, and brands to engage with consumers in totally new ways. People have gone from searching for information and data to searching for meaning, often by trying to make a difference in the lives of others. For all these reasons and more I believe we are living in a golden age of journalism for news consumers.

CAIRO REVIEW: *How do you evaluate the performance of the mainstream traditional media in the United States today?*

ARIANNA HUFFINGTON: The traditional media too often suffer from ADD [Attention Deficit Disorder]. They are far too quick to drop a story, even a good one, so eager are they to move on to the next big thing. Online journalists, meanwhile, tend to have OCD [Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder]—we chomp down on a story and stick with it, refusing to move on until we’ve gotten down to the marrow. But the larger point is that the never-very-useful division between “old media” and “new media” has become increasingly blurred. Digital and traditional media have a great deal to learn from each other—and the evidence is all around us that they are learning from each other. Increasingly, purely online news operations like the *Huffington Post* are engaging in investigative journalism. And mainstream traditional operations are adopting more and more of the digital tools that can bring in the community to make it part of the creation of journalism, through reports from the ground, through video, through Twitter feeds, through all the new media available to us. There will, of course, always be mistakes, or reporting that’s not skeptical enough of sources or the government. But now there are many more outlets and voices that will point that out and course-correct the story.

CAIRO REVIEW: *What are the prospects for better election coverage in the 2016 presidential election year? Is it political journalism that is broken, or politics itself?*

ARIANNA HUFFINGTON: Those who represent us—and those who want to represent us—are plagued by short-term thinking, and obsessed with fundraising. But the media bear plenty of responsibility for the diminished conversation. Especially during presidential campaigns, our media culture is locked in the “Perpetual Now,” constantly chasing ephemeral scoops that last only seconds and that most often don’t matter or have any impact in the first place, even for the brief moments that they’re “exclusive.” This was the jumping-off point for a great piece by *HuffPost*’s Michael Calderone about the effect that social media have had on 2012 campaign coverage. “In a media landscape replete with Twitter, Facebook,

personal blogs and a myriad of other digital, broadcast and print sources,” he wrote, “nothing is too inconsequential to be made consequential. Political junkies, political operatives and political reporters consume most of this dross, and in this accelerated, 24/7 news cycle, a day feels like a week, with the afternoon’s agreed-upon media narrative getting turned on its head by the evening’s debate. Candidates rise, fall, and rise again, all choreographed to the rat-a-tat background noise of endless minutiae.”

CAIRO REVIEW: *How do you size up your favorite new media start-ups: ProPublica, BuzzFeed, Vice, First Look Media, or others?*

ARIANNA HUFFINGTON: We really are living in a golden age of journalism for news consumers. And there’s no shortage of great journalism being done—including by all the outlets you name—and there’s no shortage of people hungering for it. And there are many different business models being tried to connect the former with the latter. The truth is that there are going to be more and more great digital media players, sites that create more engagement in ways that are good for all of us. So I welcome all of them.