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Arianna Huffington

When Al Gore famously referred to Oprah Winfrey as a “one-woman media empire,” he could just as well have been talking about another prominent media personality: Arianna Huffington, the charismatic co-founder and Editor-in-Chief of the liberal *Huffington Post*, the number-one political blog in the world. *Forbes Magazine* has ranked Huffington one of the “Most Influential Women in Media,” and *The Observer* of England has named *The Huffington Post* the “Most Powerful Blog in the World.” The site has more than 30 million monthly readers and is the most linked-to blog on the Internet. In February, 2011, *The Huffington Post* was acquired by AOL for \$315 million, making Huffington President and Editor-in-Chief of the newly created *Huffington Post Media Group*.

Born in Athens, Greece and the former wife of Texas oil millionaire Michael Huffington, Huffington has had a storied career as a blogger, author, columnist, and political activist. The author of more than a dozen books, including two best-selling biographies of Maria Callas and Pablo Picasso, she’s a nationally syndicated columnist as well as co-host of *Left, Right & Center*, public radio’s popular political roundtable program. Huffington also heads The Detroit Project, a public interest group lobbying automakers to produce cars running on alternative fuels. She teamed up with New York University professor Jay Rosen to create a citizen-based online news organization called *OffTheBus*, which presents ordinary people with opportunities to report on presidential elections.

Together with Kenneth Lerer, a media executive, and Jonah Peretti, an Internet entrepreneur, Huffington founded *The Huffington Post* in May 2005. From its inception, with half a dozen site administrators and about 500 bloggers, *The Huffington Post* has become a major news operation with 70 site administrators and more than 3,000 bloggers. Since 2008, several local versions of the site have been launched, including *HuffPost Chicago*, *HuffPost Denver*, *HuffPost Los Angeles*, and *HuffPost New York*.

Besides featuring original news reporting and links to stories in the mainstream news media, much of the political content is written by Huffington herself, a core group of contributors, and thousands of other bloggers, including prominent politicians, celebrities, and journalists such as Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, Robert Redford, Alec Baldwin, Norman Mailer, and Michael Moore. More than one million comments are posted on the site each month.

The Huffington Post is much more than the largest aggregated political blog in the world. It is, as Huffington prefers to call it, a full-fledged “Internet newspaper” and a “one-stop shop” for news, commentary, and discussion. About a year and a half into the launch, she started to add various non-political sections to the site, including “business,” “entertainment,” “media,” “sports,” and “style.” Nevertheless, the goal remains the same: to provide a space for liberal political news reporting, commentary, and discussion. Huffington wants people to come to *The Huffington Post* through various means, whether it’s the entertainment section or the media section, and then, hopefully, also discover the excitement of politics.

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When did you start blogging?

I started blogging when I created a site called *AriannaOnline.com* where I’d write about my books and columns. I also used it to launch different crusades, like A Partnership for a Poll Free America, which was against the prevalence of polling in our culture, and The Detroit Project, which was about trying to lessen our dependence on foreign oil and getting Detroit to wake up before it was too late which, obviously, it was.

I fell in love with the online conversations that ensued, so one of the main reasons why I created *The Huffington Post* was that I felt an important conversation was moving online. Yet, I thought that some of the most important voices of our time weren’t online, and that they wouldn’t be online unless a platform was created that would make it easy for them.

The first person I invited to blog for me was the historian Arthur Schlesinger. I remember him saying, “What’s a blog?” He invited me to lunch in New York to explain it to him, and the bottom line was that he barely typed. So he’d actually fax me his postings. My point is that I wanted the voices out there however way I got them.

I also wanted to make it a one-stop shop, with the most important news and a very vibrant discussion. Creating community was always a big part of it. That’s why, from very early on, the comments were always moderated in real time.

Aside from Arthur Schlesinger, how many bloggers did you invite to join you in the very beginning?

I remember that we started with about 500 bloggers. Aside from my own writings, I invited all my friends as well as people — some known, some unknown — who I wanted to be part of the site. We'd a very small team of half a dozen administrators. We knew what we wanted to create, but we didn't really know how long it would take or whether we'd succeed.

What was the biggest challenge you faced when you first started out?

Moderating the comments was a big challenge, because we wanted to maintain a space where people could comment in real time. But, at the same time, we wanted to be careful to avoid the kind of vile attacks that tend to come when people hide behind their anonymity.

What do you do yourself on a typical day?

When I first started the site, I was blogging every day. After two years, I started blogging three times a week, sometimes four times a week. Part of the reason was that, as we were expanding, there was so much work to do with editing the site. So it's very hard for me to describe a typical day. Of course, there are some things I do on a regular basis, like the Monday call with our political editors and reporters where we establish the issues for the week.

Beyond that it's really just constant work. Even when I'm travelling, I'm on my BlackBerry or on my iPhone checking the site, talking to our editors. And I love it. It's been a great joy to see the site grow and also to never have the sense that *this* is *The Huffington Post*. *The Huffington Post* is always a work in progress.

Aside from hosting several hundred blogs each day, the site features news and opinion columns as well as coverage of various non-political topics. How do you view the site?

We see ourselves as an Internet newspaper. So it's a combination of news, opinion and community. And, about a year and a half after we launched, we started preparing for new sections that weren't political in nature. Right now more than half of our traffic doesn't come from politics.

Do you see *The Huffington Post* as an alternative to traditional news media?

For me, it's not about either/or. I never saw it that way. I've always seen *The Huffington Post* as co-existing with traditional media. I've always seen the future as a hybrid future.

By that I mean the best of the traditional media, in terms of accuracy, fairness, and transparency, and the best of the new media, in terms of immediacy, interactivity, and community. That has always been the goal. And we're increasingly seeing the traditional media doing a fantastic job online. Both the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* have great sites.

We launched *The Huffington Post's* investigative arm because we see the contraction in the newspaper business and the real need for more investigative journalism.

Who are you trying to reach with the site?

We talk about reaching as many people as possible rather than reaching any particular group. One of the reasons we've multiple sections, including non-political ones, is that we want to reach people whose primary passion in life might not be politics. We want people to come to *The Huffington Post* through various means, whether it's the entertainment section or the media section, and then, hopefully, also discover politics.

Why do you think you've been able to attract and retain so many readers?

Our readers tell us that they consider *The Huffington Post* essential. A lot of them use the term addiction, saying that it's addictive. Part of it, I think, is that we're broad and present the news with our own attitude. We've about 200 original blogs a day on top of all the reported pieces.

And, during the Iran uprising, we showed what we can do by covering a big news story using all the new media, including *Twitter* and *Facebook* and video cameras.

You mentioned earlier that you try to operate the site in terms of the guiding journalistic principles of accuracy, fairness, transparency, immediacy, and interactivity. What else is important to you?

It's important to me, in the stories we choose to feature, that facts are sacred and that we've a clear editorial stance. It's really a combination of both. For instance, in the health-care debate, we tracked from the very

beginning what was happening both behind the scenes and in Congress and the White House. We'd an exclusive in posting a memo between the White House and Pharma about their negotiations that led to Pharma's decision not to go against the legislation in exchange for them committing not to have Medicare negotiate for lower prices.

This is an example of how we've stayed with that topic. We'd our reporters write about the memo, which had been denied but leaked to us, in the context of the larger health-care debate. Similarly, we don't have any partisan allegiances, so we've written a lot of things that are critical of the Obama administration and we also welcome diverse voices from others who might not agree with us.

If you were to sum it up, why do you think *The Huffington Post* has been so successful? After all, it's the highest-ranked political blog in the world.

I think we've tapped into this particular moment in terms of how people like to consume their news. People can come to *The Huffington Post* and have everything available at their fingertips, including the nitty-gritty details of the bank bailout or the health care debate.

What advice do you have for people who want to give political blogging a try themselves?

A lot depends on how much time you've at your disposal. If you don't have a lot of time, it can be hard to populate it enough to keep people coming back. It's essential, online, that you've fresh content. Otherwise, people will stop coming. If you only have a little time, it'd be more advantageous to go to a platform like *The Huffington Post* which already has millions of users. That'll give you a very big platform right away.

If, on the other hand, you want to make blogging your living, it'd be good to identify your value-added. What is your unique contribution? And it's good to do some original reporting and developing the stories. Finally, you need to learn how to sustain it, which is done through advertising.

What is the most common mistake you've noticed that less experienced political bloggers tend to make?

One of the most common mistakes is to try to be all things at once, because the key to breaking through online is to have a distinct point of view, a distinct voice, and to offer something unique. And then to build on it. Once you're established, you can build on it and expand, which is what we did with *The Huffington Post*. We first developed our political brand and then kept expanding beyond it.

How, in your opinion, has the political blogosphere evolved over time?

I think the political blogosphere has become very rich. We've a great multiplicity of voices. To me, one of the most promising developments in the political blogosphere has been how Joshua Marshall used *Talking Point Memo's* community of citizen journalists to break stories like the attorney general story.

So the work of citizen journalists is becoming increasingly more important?

Exactly, and especially in the way news is broken and covered. One of the distinct features of online journalism is what I'd call the obsessive-compulsive nature of it, that you stay with a story and continuously develop it. That's something which is very different from print journalism where you very often have a big blogbasher story. But, then again, big blogbasher stories often die on the front pages of major newspapers.