

## **Stephanie Mehta**

### **Editor-in-Chief, Fast Company**

**Media Masters – February 7, 2019**

Listen to the podcast online, visit [www.mediamasters.fm](http://www.mediamasters.fm)

---

**Welcome to Media Masters, a series of one-to-one interviews with people at the top of the media game. Today I'm here in New York and joined by Stephanie Mehta, editor-in-chief of Fast Company. Her career began in the early 90s as a staff reporter for the Wall Street Journal. In 2013, she became deputy managing editor of Fortune, before moving on to Bloomberg, where she ran their Live Event series. She then spent two years at Vanity Fair where she was one of the magazine's deputy editors, and took on her current role in March 2018. Stephanie's since implemented a new editorial vision for the title, which has an online audience of eight million and a circulation of almost 750,000. She also oversees their flourishing live events business. She recently addressed audiences at the World Economic Forum in Davos, discussing the human side of digital transformation.**

**Stephanie, thank you for joining me.**

Thanks for having me, Paul.

**Stephanie, you'll have been at Fast Company a year in March, how's the journey gone so far?**

It's been an incredible journey. I tell people all the time that I was handed this incredible gift. My predecessors at Fast Company did an amazing job of really creating a publication that was ahead of its time. Fast Company was probably the first business magazine to recognise the importance of design to business and design as a business.

**It's stylish, isn't it? In every way.**

Well, it's physically stylish, but also design has become an important component of business today. Every company is interested in design thinking. McKinsey, of all companies, has a very large design consultancy inside of its larger practices, and so the business world has kind of caught up to where Fast Company was 25 years ago. It's incredible to be the steward of a brand that was so forward thinking. I think the same could be said of social impact, long before Larry Fink penned his famous letter saying that businesses need to be concerned about a broader ecosystem of constituents, not just shareholders. If Fast Company was writing about social impact,

we have a whole channel on our website that's just dedicated to impact. And so for me as an editor, it's really amazing to be atop a brand that has been on the cutting edge for almost its entire existence.

**I've been a long time reader. I remember you put Reese Witherspoon on the cover recently. Was that an attempt to broaden the definition of entrepreneur?**

I think the definition of entrepreneur has already been broadened. Reese Witherspoon is somebody who we feel really exemplifies a modern entrepreneur, not just because she is playing in a new media space and trying to leverage the power of her brand to try to bring in new authors, bring in new voices into the media landscape, but what's interesting is that she is very much at the forefront of this female empowerment movement that we're seeing in the media industry. She's going out of her way to try to bring female and underrepresented voices to big screens, to small screens, to publishing, and so this model of the celebrity entrepreneur is not particularly new. What attracted us to Reese Witherspoon's story is because she is really leveraging her power as a powerful woman in Hollywood to try to bring other less powerful female voices to the fold.

**One of the things that I like about Fast Company is it seems like the least kind of type A, alpha male, 80s business style magazine. It's much more modern in the proper sense of the word, and accessible. And I think for me, that means that you must have quite a broad reach.**

I think that we have done a very good job of attracting a younger reader, and perhaps a reader who would normally not pick up a business magazine. I have a colleague who likes to call it 'the MBA for creatives'. And so, if you are somebody that is a designer or a marketer, or somebody who works in a more creative part of the business world, and the Wall Street Journal seems a little intimidating, or the Financial Times seems a little daunting, Fast Company is a really great way to get your business insights without necessarily feeling like you're eating your spinach.

**And do you have a typical reader in mind?**

I don't think I have a typical reader in mind. I would like to think that our reader is a little bit younger, a little bit earlier in his or her career, but I also know that we've been blessed to have people who started reading Fast Company when they were coming out of college or coming out of business school...

**Like me!**

Exactly. And now, like you, they are in really interesting positions of authority and decision making, and they are in a position to either evangelise Fast Company to their employees, or to their social circles or to the people that they're mentoring. And so we have this nice virtuous circle where we're constantly, hopefully, refreshing the readership with new young people but we haven't lost our original fans. They've stayed with us.

**And typical of many media brands that are innovating, is you go beyond merely the magazine. I've attended the Fast Company Innovation Festival recently. I was... Jessica Alba was on stage as I recall, and was telling us about her journey, and it was incredibly interesting. You were recently at Davos, for example. Tell us about the ecosphere you're building.**

Well, I think that journalism, and you've probably heard this from a lot of your guests, is evolving, and we need to go where the audiences are – and they're not all absorbing us or consuming us in the print publication. And so we have a very robust website. The majority of my employees, actually my editorial employees, work on our digital products. We do much more video than we've probably ever done, and then as you made reference to, we're doing much more live journalism. I think that Fast Company, like a lot of media brands, has an ability to convene interesting audiences, and so a lot of our appeal to sponsors and to underwriters who want to affiliate with Fast Company, is that we bring together that sort of slightly younger, slightly hipper, business audience.

**Slightly cooler, might I say.**

Maybe slightly cooler. And then, I think a lot of brands like the pixie dust from being associated with Fast Company. There are a lot of corporations that are doing really innovative things, but because they're not Google, or Facebook, or Tesla, they struggle to show that they are innovative, or they struggle to communicate to a new generation of employees that this is a great place to work. "Come work for us because we're innovative." And so I think by aligning with Fast Company, they feel like that they can show that they do have this innovative side.

**Are you building partnerships now? Is that the future now? Because clearly there's adverts still in the magazine, but it seems to me that when I go to some of your events, or when I go on your website, that they want to have that more of a partnership-type approach.**

I think that that is definitely part of what we have in our toolkit. I think that there continues to be a really valuable place for the print product, for both readers and advertisers – and we can talk a little bit about what that looks like – and I do think digital is an important medium for us and for advertisers, but I do think that partnerships and alliances and these sort of places where sponsors can not only put their name up on the stage, or have some signage at an event, but really have an opportunity to integrate into the event through sponsorship integration, that's very much part of what we do. And for example, at the 2018 Innovation Festival, which we had here in New York, one of our sponsors did an escape room in Grand Central Terminal. For me, that was a win-win because it was an experience that a lot of our attendees enjoyed. They wanted something that was not just content, and going to hear great speakers on stage, but they wanted something more – to use an overused word – experiential.

**Immersive.**

Immersive, that's a good one. And then the sponsor got to be able to get its message in front of an audience of younger people, which is who this particular

sponsor was trying to reach, in a way which was fun and lively and unexpected. And so again this brand was able to present itself in a cool, hip way. I was perfectly happy to have my attendees have another option as part of the activities at the Innovation Festival, and I think that everybody felt really good about the execution. And we did it in Grand Central Terminal, which was terrific because we had a lot of brand exposure as Fast Company, in a place that literally thousands and thousands and thousands of people walk through every day.

**I saw it. I thought it was incredible. Do your readers have multiple touchpoints now, that they not only read the magazine, but is it that they're exclusively reading it on an app like me, with Readly or via the web, and attending events? How do you want your readers to engage with you?**

I think I want our readers to engage with us however they want to engage with us. That sounds like a little bit of a clichéd answer, but truly if somebody really only wants to consume Fast Company content via the app, we are perfectly happy to serve them a mobile-first strategy. We probably have people who only come to the Innovation Festival, and they may subscribe or they may think about subscribing, but they probably may not engage with the content 365 days a year, as much as I'd like that. But if someone really just is a fan of the Innovation Festival, and we do have fans, we have people who sign up the minute the tickets go on sale, that's fine too.

**Like me.**

Well, thank you for your business!

**My pleasure. Where you going to take the magazine? Where you going to take the brand for the next few years? What's on your agenda? You're new in post, you've got your feet under the table now, what is that hidden masterplan that you've got?**

I don't think there is a hidden masterplan, and I know that's not a terribly satisfying answer, but as I said at the outset I've been handed this incredible gift. I mean, Fast Company is not broken, Fast Company is not a publication that needs to be fixed or reinvented. I think that one thing I have said to our staff, and to our advertisers and to our broader community, is that I do think we have a broad sense of what a Fast Company story is. I think that I am willing to try a few new things, or maybe do some things that are a little bit surprising to our readers. So for example, in one of our early issues, shortly after I became editor, we did an oral history. And those are a lot of work, as you know, and it was an oral history of the Zagat Guides, which recently had been acquired by the Infatuation, and one of the plans of the new management team is to start printing those burgundy books. I'm ageing myself again, there's probably a lot of young readers who don't remember, but when I first moved to New York in 1994, Zagat Guide was my bible.

**It was essential.**

It was essential. And they subsequently branched out to other cities, but it was the first crowdsourced restaurant guide in the world where you were really sort of

counting on other foodies' perspectives on where you should eat, and they sorted it by neighbourhood, and they sorted it by different categories; good for families, good for night out, date night. This sort of journey that the Zagat Guides had gone on, from book to Google property, back to being a book, in this age of Yelp and insta-pundit reviews of restaurants, to me it just felt like there was something there. And I think that some of my editors wondered, well, we don't really look back, why are we doing a story about something that is old, that is new again...

**Because it's a great story.**

And for me it was partly because it's a great story, partly because I felt people would be drawn to the material, but the more we looked into it, again, some of the themes that I highlighted, this idea, that before there was Yelp, before there was Kickstarter, or before there was crowdsourcing, that's what Tim and Nina Zagat were doing; they were soliciting the opinions of the wisdom of crowds and putting it into this little compact guide that people used to carry around or have lined up on their desks.

**And they were constructive though, I remember the reviews. They weren't embittered like you see a lot of these on TripAdvisor.**

Right, no, no, no, it was definitely, and partly because it was such a... again, before there were 140 characters on Twitter, they really required you to be very spare and so as a result, you couldn't do these 25-paragraph diatribes about the hair in your soup. So that was one part of it, and then the other part was that it was this company that had been acquired by Google, had tried to enter into the 'go, go' era of the internet, and it didn't quite pan out, and so we explored that part of the company's history as well, and then had this news event that was sitting right in front of us on the other side. And so for me that was an example of a story that might not have appeared in an issue of Fast Company 12 or 15 years ago, but I think it gave us a chance to tell a story that was really interesting to a lot of people in a different way. We felt like it was a very successful endeavour.

**And not to reduce Fast Company to a kind of formula, but do you have an ideal issue in mind in terms of the proportions of light and shade, features, where you would focus geographically? Is there something in there where you're starting with a blank piece of paper, and you're putting an issue together, what are the priorities?**

We're very lucky because Fast Company is probably one of a handful of publications where you can still read a 5,000-word article, and I know that there's a robust debate in the media world about whether there's a place for that kind of long form. We love it, and I think that we just had a cover story on Masayoshi Son, who is the founder of the SoftBank Vision Fund, and the driving force behind a lot of investments we're seeing in Silicon Valley and beyond. And that piece was in excess of 5,000 words and I don't think we could have told the story in less than 5,000 words. I mean, this is a person whose ambitions matched the word count, and so that's an example of the kind of story that I would love to have in every issue. A piece that is, while that piece was not wholly exclusive to us, other people have written about him, we didn't get exclusive access to him, the thesis and the way we put it together and the depth and

breadth of it, I felt was unmatched by other stories that have tried to tackle this subject. So something that feels... we strive for every issue to have at least a couple of features where my feeling is the readers should read it and say, "I can only find this in Fast Company." That, to me, that's the bar.

### **That distinctiveness, that uniqueness.**

Exactly. And so, always want some sort of big cover-weight feature that feels in-depth, really deeply reported, beautifully written, carefully constructed, amazing graphics, amazing sidebars, and support pieces. And then one of the things that we've introduced in the magazine is an opening essay, or a big sort of curtain-raiser story that opens up the issue. Has a little bit more tone, has a little but more attitude, a little bit more of a thought leadership piece. They're written primarily by staff, but the idea there is to really open with something big and high impact. We just recently ran a piece by one of our design writers, Katherine Schwab, on open-floor office plans and why it's taking so long for them to die, in spite of the fact that all evidence shows they're not successful.

### **I work in one.**

Productivity is not as high as people expect it to be, employee satisfaction is very low, and there's a lot of research that shows this is not a successful way for people to work, and yet companies keep rolling them out. And so Katherine is somebody who's been writing about this for a really long time, and the piece really explored not only the history of these plans, which is a great question – How did these things come to be? How is it that they've come to proliferate? – but then really explored the challenges with getting rid of them, and why they are likely, for the unforeseeable future to be ingrained in every office, not only in America, but now, increasingly across the world. And to me again, that was the kind of piece that you'd only read in Fast Company, partly because we have somebody who is uniquely qualified to tell that story, but also because we're willing to take a stand on behalf of the worker a little bit, right? We're not here to just sort of talk about why it's so great for real estate and maximising the productivity per square foot. We're also really interested in the human side of things, and how is this affecting the employee, the worker, the person who's actually supposed to be sitting in these office plans?

**Ultimately, of course, to state the obvious, if it affects their motivation, if it demotivates them, that's going to affect productivity in the medium and long term, and it's ultimately counterproductive.**

Yes. So that was another fun example of something that I feel like really exemplifies what we're trying to do in Fast Company today.

**I remember the article, and you are right, because it's an important thing that we need to think about. That solution has to be design-led, that we have to get away from these sprawling, open-plan offices that, as you say, are terrible, but also we don't want people in individual rooms isolated just on their computer. There's got to be some way that we can intelligently have the best of both**

**worlds, that freedom to focus, which we don't get any more, but also that we can still be around people and the conversations that you'd have in any workplace.**

Yes. I've worked in both environments, and I can see the pros and cons of both. I think that there is this new generation of design thinkers, who really are putting a lot of time and energy into thinking about how we can create better work environments, and ultimately that's very positive.

**So we've talked about the ingredients of an issue, as it were. What's the actual production? How do you put one together? Could you talk us through the process?**

I can tell you about the process, but that's not terribly interesting.

**This is a media podcast. they're interested, I can assure you.**

Well, Fast Company comes out eight times a year, which is an interesting production schedule. And so, as a result, because the print publication comes out eight times a year, we really operate on very long lead times. As we sit here today on January 30, we are already in the process of looking at copy for our May issue. So we try to think as far in advance as we can about, I think, for me, my priorities are always, "What's the cover, and how does that cover fit into our overall issue cadence?" Because I think, in any given year, we know we're going to certainly do a couple of high-profile, non-traditional business covers, so a Reese Witherspoon, we had Janelle Monáe on the cover of our Most Productive People issue. We know we're going to do a couple of those. We know we're going to definitely want to have a couple of straight forward business stories like the Masayoshi Son story. Because he didn't cooperate on the story and sit for a photograph, we used pickup for that cover, which was something that we typically don't do. We typically like to photograph our subjects. One of the things that I'm thinking about a lot in collaboration with my creative director, Mike Schnaidt, is, "What is every cover going to look like?" How can we make sure that each issue has a slightly different look and feel to the covers, so that at the end of 2019, you're going to look at our wall of covers and feel like there was different texture, different feelings that were evoked, different emotions, different colours, different angles to the photographs of the people on the cover, and that every cover looks different but still feels like you're reading Fast Company. So a lot of what we think about is who is going to be on that cover and what does that cover going to look like? We spend a lot of time thinking about the variety of stories in the front of book. We have some templates. We always try to do some sort of illustrated deconstruction.

**I love those.**

Yes, they're really fun.

**And really, really helpful as well.**

We did Hudson Yards in our most recent issue, but we did the Tencent new office building in our November issue, and it was actually... they're always done as a spread, but this one was one that you had to sort of turn on its side in order to see the tower from top to bottom. So we're always thinking about, "What's that mix in the front of the book?" We have a great feature we do called Material World, where we really look at the materials that go into building something new and interesting. We did a deconstruction of a wool surfboard in a recent issue, which sounds like an oxymoron. How could you put a big thing of wool in the water? But it was fascinating. And so we like to have those moments of surprise. We think about what the cadence in the front of the book looks like. We think about the big meaningful features. Again, it's a mix of stories that we tell through portraiture versus stories that we tell through illustrations and graphics and sidebars. One of the things I'd like to see us try to do more of his photo essays. We did a great photo essay a couple of issues ago about the male cheerleaders of the Los Angeles Rams. This year was the first year that two NFL teams had male cheerleaders.

### **Why shouldn't there be male cheerleaders?**

Well, what was so interesting about that story is that we very much approached it as a workplace inclusion story.

### **Great approach.**

Coupled with the sort of joyfulness, and we wanted to have something that would work for our fall issue, you know, football season, but again, a very Fast Company take on things. Again, that was something that I felt was really successful, and we were trying to think about different ways of telling a story. We really let the visuals drive that particular story for us, because how could you not? It's cheerleading, it's football, it's the amazing green field that these performers get to step onto every game. For us it really is about the mix. It's about delighting our readers and our audiences, and I think the last thing I'd say is that I don't think of Fast Company as an explicitly service-driven magazine – we're owned by the same company that owns Inc. magazine, and I know that James Ledbetter has been on your programme, and James does an amazing job with Inc. every issue.

### **Jim's a great guy. I look at it as I can be a fan of both magazines. I love Entrepreneur Magazine, I read Harvard Business Review.**

Absolutely. No, I think it's a big tent, but what's interesting about Inc. is that if you read it, there is much more explicit service in Inc. magazine, because their time-starved reader really demands it. We don't do anything that feels like service, but if you read our stories carefully, especially a lot of the pieces in the front of the book, there are a lot of tips and tricks of the trade, and things that I know people circle and dog-ear.

### **I do that. I've stolen about 20 ideas in the last couple of years alone from Fast Company.**

And we're thankful to you for your support! And so I think that one of the things I look for when the copy comes in is, besides just being a great read, and entertaining, and interesting, and well-reported, are there nuggets of information that the reader can glean from this? Again, whether they are early career, a creative or a CEO who has been with us for 25 years, are they going to get content from this that's meaningful and useful for their lives?

**I like the idea of 'nuggets of information'. I once dealt with a consultant many years ago who the phrase 'packets of value', which is the same thing really. It's an insight. It's an eyebrow-raiser. It's something you can use in some way practically.**

Yes.

**Where do you get your ideas from for the features and the stories? I imagine, like me, you're inundated with inbound press releases and so on, but it's a big world out there. You've got to keep your eyes and your ears open for where the stories. How do you do that? What's the newsgathering and feature-gathering process?**

I'm very lucky because I have a great staff of senior editors and writers who don't need a lot of direction or guidance from me on what constitutes a Fast Company story. They are out in the field every day bringing us ideas, bringing their editors ideas of things that they should be writing about and things that they feel really will delight our readers, or, again, give them that insight or those nuggets of information that they can't get anywhere else.

**Through a Fast Company lens.**

Through a Fast Company lens, or hopefully more and more stories that people are bringing to us exclusively, or that we are exclusively reporting and discovering on our own, and bringing to our readers. So for our website, it's very fast paced. Our editors and writers are constantly on the lookout for stories that make sense for us or for the Fast Company angle of breaking news. Those are the kinds of stories where we have a very specific point of view, and I think we know what's a Fast Company story, and we know how to deliver those for our readers. In terms of my contribution to story ideas, and to figuring out what we should be putting in the magazine, a lot of it is going out and doing things like this. Meeting people, talking to people, trying to understand what the trends are. A lot of it is speaking with executives and CEOs who are willing to, in some cases on background, share a little bit of their insight and thinking about the direction the world is going, or where they're planning to take their companies. In other cases, it really is through brainstorming and consultation, again with the senior editors and the senior editorial team, to try to understand not only what's in the zeitgeist at the moment, but especially if you're planning an issue that's not going to come out for another three months, where is the world going to be in the summer? Where's the world going to be at the end of 2019? How should we be thinking about election coverage or talking to politicians? All of those things are ongoing daily conversations we're having.

**What an incredible privilege it must be to do such an interesting job, frankly, because the world is your oyster. You're talking to interesting chief executives, people in the world of arts and creativity, and able to cover that and give it your unique insight. I imagine that you personally have been on quite a learning journey as well through doing the job.**

Very much so. I think that, you know, you used the word privilege, and I was very lucky. I spent 14 years at Fortune Magazine and got to work with Carol Loomis, who is by all accounts, the sort of grande dame of business journalism, and she used to say on a regular basis that what we get to do is a privilege. She used that word specifically. I feel truly grateful every day that I get to do this for a living, because we get paid to tell stories, to meet interesting people, to advocate for causes, in some cases that aren't getting enough attention. As I said earlier, we really try to put the employee, or the worker, or the person who is actually executing inside an organisation, at front and centre, as we did with the story about open floor plans. It really is, as I said, truly an honour, and I feel lucky every day that I get to be the steward of this great brand.

**Yes. Because you mentioned your career, you came to Fast Company from Vanity Fair where you were a deputy editor. Given that they really are at the pulse of popular culture, was that a strain to leave?**

I loved every minute that I was at Vanity Fair, and I was very privileged to work for two years for Graydon Carter, who was the legendary editor of Vanity Fair for 25 years.

**I've been trying to get him on for three years. If you've got any pull...**

That said, I think that my heart has been in business journalism from the outset. I got my start in business journalism as a cub reporter at a local newspaper in Norfolk, Virginia in the early 90s. The opportunity to come back to a publication that is, at its core, a business publication was irresistible. In many ways, the journey that I've been on – Wall Street Journal, Fortune, Bloomberg, Vanity Fair – really did sort of set me up well for fast company, which probably covers pop culture, and creativity and the arts in a very specific way that is different from a lot of other business publications. So I think the time I spent at Vanity Fair, really understanding the way the media world works, the way that, quite honestly, Hollywood and the music world work, it was very useful to have that skill. And that credibility in those communities, when I came into this job.

**Did you always want to be a journalist? Did you always want to be an editor? What were your ambitions at the beginning of your career?**

I did set out professionally to be a journalist. When I first started at university, I really thought I was going to... I was an English major. I figured I would go into book publishing. That was something that felt very appealing to me. My first or second week at school, the young woman who lived across the hall from me came back, and she had a copy of the school newspaper, the Daily Northwestern, with a front page story that she had written in the paper. She had gone in the day before without an assignment, and had come back the next day with a front page story.

### **With a splash! Well done.**

As a freshman. To me it was just, it was a miracle that you could... as opposed to a term paper that was going to take you months to write, or these long essays that you'd have to belabour with research and hours and hours in the library, the idea that you could get an assignment at four o'clock in the afternoon and turn in a story at eight in the evening, and then have it on the front page of your school paper the next day was just, it felt like magic to me. So I sort of sheepishly followed her into the paper the next day and asked for an assignment, and haven't looked back.

### **What type of reporter did you want to be back then? What type of journalist? As you said, when you kind of sheepishly sneaked in, where did you think that journey would take you? Or did you not have any idea at that point?**

I didn't really have any idea at that point, but as it turned out, because I was so late to the game, I was an English major at Northwestern University, which has a great journalism programme, and most of the young people who were working at the paper were in the journalism school, and had shown up the day before classes started and had gotten their assignments. I was basically left with whatever was left, and whatever was left was covering business in Evanston, the town that the school is based in. So I was handed the business beat.

### **It was fate.**

It was fate. And I found I was drawn to the material. I liked the fact that I was doing something that was a little bit different than the mainstream. Getting out there and talking to, at the time Northwestern had in a very nascent business incubator, so talking with them about sort of tech transfer of ideas from the school into the business world. It was something that none of my peers were really particularly interested in, so it was a wide open field for me, and I had a ball.

### **What was the first big job then that you got in journalism?**

After I graduated from the Master's programme there, I got a job as a business reporter for the Virginian Pilot in Norfolk, Virginia. I was there from '92 to '94. I was covering the real estate beat, which was another sort of backwater beat no one wanted. It was the kind of thing that you give the person who's the new kid, lowest rung on the totem pole. But for me it was great because again, it was a pretty small staff. I think it was six writers and three editors, but we had to fill the Sunday business section every week. Every six weeks I had to write a 2,000-, 3,000-word article, and I also had to fill the real estate section. So every Monday, and again, this was back in the 90s when there was a lot of real estate advertising in local papers.

### **We dream of the 90s now, don't we?**

Back in those days, before the Internet, I had to fill the real estate section. Every week I was writing at least a 1,000-1,500 word article for this sort of real estate

feature section, and then every six weeks I was writing a big business feature. I was just working all the time and writing all the time, and I can't think of a better training.

**But you started in the early 90s at the Wall Street Journal. You started with our mutual friend Matt Murray, who's now editor-in-chief.**

Yes.

**Tell us how that started.**

After, while I was in Virginia. I was sending my clips to every major market paper in the country. My feeling was that, you know, I would probably go from a market like Virginia, from North Virginia, to a slightly larger market, like a Philadelphia or a Dallas.

**Although the Journal is a slightly larger paper.**

Well, so again, you know, I got very lucky. I had been sending my materials to the Wall Street Journal, and managed to catch the eye of the people who were doing the recruiting, and they spotted an opening, very entry level, covering small business for the Journal.

**Foot in the door.**

Foot in the door, and in New York.

**Wow.**

So I moved to New York in May of '94, and the week I started there was a newsletter that went around to all the employees introducing the new employees to the rest of the staff. The week I started, Raju Narisetti, who's now running the Knight-Bagehot Program at Columbia University, and Matt Murray, who's now the editor of the Wall Street Journal, the three of us started the same week. So I have very fond memories, and Matt of course, his career has skyrocketed and has left me in the dust! But I'm proud to call him a friend.

**He speaks very highly of you, he was in that chair recently, so he was on the podcast and we really enjoyed talking to him. How long were you at the Journal for?**

I was at the Journal for six years.

**So a long time then. Tell us about your journey within that six years.**

So, the first three years I was writing primarily small business stories, which at the Journal, they're the amuse-bouche of the Journal. They were again for me, it was a great opportunity because all the stories were features. You weren't breaking news

on the small business beat. You were really writing about, you know, frankly, a lot of what we do here at Fast Company now, which is the...

**Small business is the backbone of America, don't forget.**

And small businesses will never let you forget it, by the way.

**Yes.**

But it was really about sort of the stories of people who were trying to find new ways to solve problems, or the struggle of putting your payroll on your credit card and trying to figure out how to make ends meet. So very human, very feature-oriented stories. And again, really kind of learned how to become a feature writer by doing these sort of more human interest-type pieces. But it became very clear that I wasn't going to be able to build a long-term career at the Journal just covering small business, because it is so news driven, and it's so driven by the sort of corporate beats. So, after about three years doing small business, there was an opening on the tech team covering telecommunications. Again, this was sort of 1996, which was the time when the telecom industry was...

**In huge flux, big change.**

Yes, huge change. New Telecommunications Act of 1996 was passed, which was meant to really introduce a lot of competition into the US telecommunications market. Wireless was just becoming mainstream. And so, it was a hot beat. And so again, when there was an opportunity to join that team, I did that, and so I covered telecom for three years for the Journal. And you know, again, loved it, and really learned how to be a business reporter. I mean the chops that you develop working a beat at The Journal are unlike anything that... I can't recommend it highly enough to a starting journalist. But was eager to really stretch a little bit and to become more of a traditional feature writer. And you know, at a place like the Journal, those roles are really reserved for people who sort of have paid their dues and have shown and demonstrated a real ability to sit down and pound out 2,000 beautiful words in one sitting.

**And have done that for decades.**

And really know how to do it. I knew I wasn't going to get there anytime soon, and I needed to sort of figure out a way to sort of learn those skills. And so again, there was an opening at Fortune magazine, they were looking for a tech writer. A friend who was there suggested I check it out, and so I joined Fortune in April of 2000, and was there for 14 years.

**A long time.**

Yes.

**And when you joined, John Huey was editor then, wasn't he?**

Yes, and John also came from the Wall Street Journal, although he had made the transition to magazines many years before I joined. John was just legendary, he used to talk about making Fortune the best magazine in the world that just happens to be about business. And you know, really turned Fortune from, I think a magazine that felt very dutiful and very sort of corporate, to one that was lively, and fresh, and unexpected, and funny. John is a very funny guy, so there was a lot of humour, and a lot of variety to the stories. You know, the timing helps too. You know, the late '90s, early 2000s, Silicon Valley was on the rise, technology was the story of the day. You know, you couldn't help but tell the story of business in a very different way.

**And 14 years, to say the least, is an incredibly long time. You must have really enjoyed working there, otherwise you'd have left a lot sooner.**

Well, I loved it, and you know I can say this now, because I don't work there any more, but I would've paid them for the opportunity to work at Fortune. I mean, as I said in one of my earlier comments, I got to work with people like Carol Loomis. It was an education. Every meeting I sat in with Carol, just listening to the way she asked questions, or framed a conversation, or an argument. And I still tell young writers to this day that, if you just read the collected works of Carol Loomis, you will get an education in how to report and craft a business story, because Carol is one of those incredible writers who actually shows you her process as you read the story. So you can actually see how the reporting unfolds through the course of the story. And so for me, it was like the best journalism school I could go to. Terrific people, really amazing depth and breadth of storytelling. And it was really where I learned the power of live journalism. Fortune's live journalism platform is second to none. The title has an amazing ability to convene people from across a lot of different industries. They do a really good job internationally. And so, again, getting to be part of that aspect of Fortune's journalism and storytelling I think set me up to do a lot of the things that I'm trying to do at Fast Company today.

**And is that one of the reasons why ultimately, when you chose to move on, you went to Bloomberg, because you were responsible for their live event series when you were there, were you not?**

I was, and for me, the opportunity of Bloomberg was particularly appealing because of the global reach of Bloomberg. You know, as global as Fortune and a lot of its competitive set are – including Time, and Fortune and Time used to collaborate a lot on international projects – Bloomberg has 14 bureaus in Africa alone. I mean, there are very few media organisations that can compete with Bloomberg when it comes to global feet on the ground. And so for me, the opportunity to build something that was really global was particularly exciting. I think the lesson for me, going to Bloomberg, and I, again, loved every minute there and the people at Bloomberg are amazing. It's hard to be a business journalist for any period of time without running into half a dozen friends, just in the elevator at Bloomberg. Like there's just a truly amazing collection of journalists who've come from all walks of life. But ultimately, I think, for me, the opportunity to be in a traditional media organisation was very appealing, particularly when it was Vanity Fair and Graydon Carter. So when Graydon called, it was easy for me to say yes.

**You've also talked about the need for more regulatory scrutiny on big tech and businesses that you've said are not necessarily living up to their social responsibilities.**

Well, I think one of the things that Fast Company was early to identify is that business really has a place in society, as well as obligations to its shareholders and to its employees. It really does have obligations to its communities. I feel that the technology world in particular is now starting to open its eyes to the obligations that go beyond the shareholder, the user, the consumer, and to really think about the communities they serve. As we sit here in New York today, Amazon is the subject of a city council hearing about their new headquarters in Queens. I think that that's an interesting case study in how company and a community are going to have to come to terms with one another.

**So, last couple of questions then. Let's look back and then look forward. First, so just looking back, what do you consider to have been the highlights and the major learning opportunities that you've had in your career?**

You know, it's hard to pinpoint specific moments in one's career. I think that one of the things that has been a hallmark of my career and that I sometimes share with young people, is that I've not been afraid to make lateral moves in my career if I thought that I would get the right experience and the right learnings from them. When I was at the Wall Street Journal, I was a deputy editor, doing a lot of editing for the small business group that I was part of, and as a result of that position, I occasionally had a seat at the table with the big boys. You know, if my boss was out of town, I would go to the morning meeting. I was in a position of some small authority, but nonetheless, it was an editor's job. But I realised that I would be much better served by going back to being a beat reporter in the telecom area, because that was an area that was hot at the time, I knew I would learn a lot, I would be working with a bunch of editors that were very aggressive and really knew how to break news. And so, while professionally, that might have looked like a lateral move or even a step down, for me, as a career trajectory move, I felt like I couldn't lose by doing it. And similarly, when I left the Wall Street Journal, when I joined Fortune, they offered me a writer position. You know, I sort of thought, "Well, given my experience in the industry, I probably should be a senior writer." And they said, "You know, just come, start out as a writer. It'll figure itself out." And I said, "Okay, I'm going to trust that this is the right move and that if I do the work that I think I can do, you guys will take care of me." And I got a promotion ten months later.

**Still brave at the time though, because it could've gone wrong. All these bold moves have genuine risk in them, don't they?**

Well, I think they have risk if you're hung up on the title. And at the end of the day – I have to think back, I don't think I took any pay cuts as a result of those lateral moves – but I think, you know, by not letting my ego get in the way essentially, by just saying, "You know, this is a good job. This is a job I like and want to do," I think that it served me well in my career. And so that's something that I look back on, and when I talk to writers... and I know it's hard in this day and age because the media industry is contracting and people really are sort of fighting and clawing for their positions inside some media organisations. But for me, I think the bigger message of

sort of putting my ego aside a little bit and really just thinking about, "Is this a place I'm going to learn, and grow, and blossom as a journalist," has really just held me in good stead.

**Do you enjoy the job of being editor? Because I speak to quite a lot of editors on this podcast, and some of them really love it, but others do reminisce fondly of when they used to do the actual writing, because it is a different job to all the others. There's a lot more responsibility, a lot more things to consider. There's the managerial and the strategic, and you've got to deal with HR and all the strategy on the commercial side. Do you like that mix? Do you like being... the actual day-to-day, as the job of editor?**

I do like the job of editor. I like that every day is different. I like that I'm learning every day, I mean I think that's a theme with me. I really like to be in jobs where I'm learning something different. And as a writer, you are absolutely learning every day. You're going out there and you're meeting people, and gaining new insights. But I will be the first to admit that I find that blank screen so daunting now. You know, as somebody who used to write sometimes a 1,000 or 1,500 words in any given day because of blog posts, or web stories, or you know... I have not used that muscle in a really long time, and so when I have to sit down and write my Editor's Note every issue, the blank screen does... it's a little daunting.

**It would kill me. I have a team of writers on my staff, and I used to write my own columns for various online journals and so on, and I gave that up two or three years ago. I now do what I call a monologue, for five or six minutes, sometimes over the phone, but often in just a recording, and then that will be turned into an article, and it's great because I couldn't actually do it any more.**

It's hard. It's hard. That's why I have... I think it has given me a healthy respect for all of my writers and my editors, because the woman, Gill Bernstein, who has to edit my Editor's Note every issue does a really good job of making me look smart.

**And I mean that's one of the kind of cheeky questions I wanted to ask is, what have been the toughest aspects? I mean, it's a great learning curve, but no job is perfect. What is the bit that you found the most challenging?**

You know I think that it's fair to say that publications just don't have the resources that they used to.

**So doing more with less.**

Doing more with less, and I think that for me, a lot of it is trying to keep people motivated in an environment where they're being asked to do more with less, and trying to find ways to keep the culture positive and to keep people feeling optimistic. Obviously, I wouldn't be here if I didn't think that Fast Company had a bright future. We're turning 25 years old in November. I try to remind, especially some of our younger writers, that Fast Company started at the same time as Business 2.0, Red Herring, Industry Standard, e-Company Now, and Wired. And Fast Company and Wired are the ones still standing.

**I remember Business 2.0. I remember being excited to read it back in the day.**

Well, I remember that they had so much advertising. I can't remember if it was Red Herring or Business 2.0, but one of the new economy magazines had so much advertising and not enough writers, that they were re-running old stories and labelling them 'From the archives' or 'Best of Red Herring' just that they would have pages to support the ad dollars. And you know, there's a reason Fast Company has survived, and I think there's a reason why someone will be sitting in this seat, 25 years from now, talking about the long and rich history of Fast Company. I think we're here for the long run.

**And actually, to that end, that's my final question is, we have a lot of media students, aspiring journalists, and people that are studying at the moment. There might be someone listening to this that has been really inspired by what you've said and thinks, "Well, 25 years from now, I want to be the editor of Fast Company." What advice would you give him or her listening to this right now? What have they got to do for the next 25 years to then take your job?**

I think that journalism today is really multi-platform, and I think every young writer, young journalist, young producer really needs to be able to do a multitude of things. So it's being able to write well, being able to appear on television, being able to do a pod or host a podcast, being able to programme a panel or a live event, being able to write for digital and to be able to really understand how to write a headline, and how to grab readers' attention for digital platforms. It's going to be very hard for the journalist and the editor of the future to be able to do just one thing. So I would say, learn it all. Don't just focus on one piece of the storytelling; be able to tell the story on many platforms.

**Stephanie, it's been a hugely enjoyable conversation. Thank you ever so much for your time.**

Thank you, Paul.