

## **Tina Brown**

### **Journalist and Editor**

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**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 award-winning editor, journalist and author Tina Brown. As the editor of the newly resurrected Vanity Fair in 1984, by the end of her tenure she'd taken its circulation from 200,000 to 1.2 million. In 1992 she became the first female editor of The New Yorker, transforming the title and increasing newsstand sales by 145%. Her books include The Diana Chronicles, a biography of the late Princess of Wales and the Vanity Fair Diaries, which detailed her years editing the legendary magazine. She's also a founder of the Women in the World Summit and The Daily Beast, and presenter of TBD with Tina Brown, a podcast which promises listeners to stay smart in today's fast-moving times.**

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

Good to see you, Paul.

**I've been hugely looking forward to this. We've been bumping into each other for a while because you record TBD with Tina Brown in this studio and I often see you.**

I know. You meet all the best people in this studio.

**Well, I certainly do. What's it like to sit in that chair? Because normally you sit in the chair I'm in.**

I'm feeling very much on the spot in this chair. I've got quite used to my nice chair over the other side, and talking to people. I just had Preet Bharara, the great prosecutor, in this morning and it was just wonderful to talk to him, I must say. That's coming very soon.

**Well, there's so much to talk about. But let's start with the tenth Women in the World summit in New York in April. Did you imagine the event would spearhead a great awakening in the global women's movement?**

Well, it's very exciting actually because we started this nearly 10 years ago when there was hardly anything going really on in this space as the word goes, and I really just saw the burgeonings of what I saw as a sort of global women's movement all over the world, where extraordinary women from Africa, India and the Middle East were really fighting for freedom and for equality in such a moving and powerful way, that I started this summit in which I could showcase their voices. But in the course of it I also began to see that American feminism was in a rather torpid condition compared to the exciting, fiery women that I was seeing all over the world. And I felt it was time to start addressing American women really about why they weren't more agitated about their own rights compared to the women that we were featuring from overseas. And now of course, ten years later, the mission has met the moment. We were talking about rape as a weapon of war, and sexual harassment in the workplace, and all these issues which of course have become Topic A now since #MeToo and Trump. And we've seen really a second renaissance of feminism. Young girls who, when we started, thought feminism was an uncool thing to be interested in. Now, the cool thing to be is a feminist. It's exciting.

### **How on earth can feminism be seen to be uncool?**

Well, there you are. I know. I was asked the other day, "Well, what do you say to young women who say feminism is not relevant?" I say, "They must be both lucky and lazy." Because if you're not taking advantage or supporting the rights that are going to help yourself, then I've no time for you, in a sense.

### **The summit is an amazing gathering of the next generation of female leaders and activists. Who are you excited about hearing from on this year's agenda?**

Well, Women in the World this year has got an epic line-up. We have Oprah on opening night.

### **I've heard of her!**

Yes, you have heard of her! The theme is actually, for the 10th anniversary, is 'Can Women Save the World?' Because frankly implicit in that is that men have had many, many thousands of years to get it right, and look at the predicament that we're in.

### **Oh, we've made a mess of it. I apologise on the behalf of all men.**

It is a giant bloody mess. And we have the rise of strong men all over the world, we have Trump in the White House...

### **It's like we're on another planet, isn't it? It all seems to have gone back.**

It's such bad scene that I don't see how women could make more of a mess of it, quite honestly. So I think it's exciting time to ask that question. Let's hear from women in all the areas that they can improve the world. We've asked Oprah to address that question as the sort of climax of the opening night, and we have discussions about can women save the planet, and we have Christiana Figueres,

who's this great Earth campaigner. We have a great discussion about disinformation and fake news, and women who are fighting against that like Carole Cadwalladr in the Guardian, who of course exposed the Cambridge Analytica case. And Maria Ressa, the great Filipino journalist who has Rappler, which is the investigative news organization in the Philippines, where she has been arrested, and she's faced down Duterte. So we have extraordinary women like that. And then we also have women such as Anna Wintour, Priyanka Chopra, Stacey Abrams, Susan Rice, Brie Larson – who's now Captain Marvel, so she's definitely saving the world – so it's a very exciting line-up, actually.

**You're right, the line-up is incredible. And what do you think the outcomes will be? What's the fundamental purpose of it?**

The fundamental purpose is to really focus in a really high-level way about the solutions that women can bring to the table. So in all of our discussions, and we have always done this actually, one of the underlines was stories and solutions that Women in the World can actually...

**To actually mobilise.**

Can mobilise. We don't do the bloviations about 'lean-in' and how to get to the corner office and what I call 'empowerment venting'. Not interested in empowerment venting. What I'm interested in is hearing from women who have genuinely done extraordinary things and have a hit list of stuff to share about how others can emulate them. And I think that's why people find the summit so energising, because actually, person after person leaves that summit and either gives money to a cause, becomes mobilised personally to engage with a cause, or has their mind opened to what's happening in the world. One of the great missions of Women in the World has been really to see the world through the eyes of women. For me, the most heartening thing when I go out in the corridors of the summit is to hear people saying, "I never knew this was happening in India. I never knew this was happening in Somalia." Or wherever it is. Because they haven't really paid attention to that. It's not something they're reading or hearing about because foreign news gets very little attention. And then bringing it home is really about, "If they're doing this, what am I doing here?" And I think it's also really important to understand how tough it is in other places compared to the freedoms we take for granted. We have two incredible women this year from Uganda who are gay, and they've been in love for many years, and homosexuality is illegal in Uganda. It's outlawed. It's not just illegal, it's actually shamed. And these women are really living their life in hiding. And they have done for many years.

**Disgraceful that they should have to do that.**

It's disgraceful. But women are evicted if they're found to be gay. They're fired if they're found to be gay. They're shamed, harassed, persecuted. So to have these two women to come and tell us... we are very mobilised in the US obviously, and rightly so, about LGBTQ rights. But just think about being in Uganda, being a woman who's not allowed to choose the person you love, and not just that, harassed and outlawed for it, it's really an interesting thing to know about and to get behind.

**And frankly, this is an incredibly important aspect of straight awareness-raising. Because if they're not speaking at your conference, then fewer people are going to hear about this, and then have a chance frankly, to do something about it.**

Exactly. And we've had so many incredible outcomes. In Toronto, for instance, we took an amazing woman, a Bangladeshi doctor who's actually Canadian and works in Calgary. And she works with the Rohingya Muslims, who are persecuted. She's just come back from camps where she saw the appalling things that were happening. And at the Summit was also Justin Trudeau, who's been very supportive of Women In the World, and she said to me, "Do you think you can arrange for me to talk to him?" And I said, "Of course, he'll be in the Green Room." And then I put them together in the Green Room. And she asked him if there was any way that Canada could condemn the genocide, and call it a genocide, of the Rohingya, and two weeks later he did. And that kind of thing happens at Women in the World constantly. And being able to bring together women who have extraordinary experiences, extraordinary passions, extraordinary missions, and put them together with very high-profile people they would never meet otherwise who can actually affect their lives.

**And this is the 10th year. What are your strongest memories of the previous summits? What have been the abiding memories of the previous nine? There must be a litany of successes.**

Yes, there have been actually. It's been really incredible.

**It's very, very inspiring.**

It is. And Hillary Clinton has been every year except the year she was running. We've had so many moments with Hillary. The great moment when she and Christina grasped hands and did a great power hand clasp together, which went all over the world. It was inspiring.

**I remember the image. It was iconic.**

Yes, it was an iconic picture. We've many, many iconic pictures like that. We've had, as I say, Justin Trudeau who came, and of course brought the house down. We've had the Indian movie star Aamir Khan, who was another unexpected guest, but he's a huge feminist, and he was another unexpected enormous hit. Scarlett Johansson chastising Ivanka Trump from the stage, which kind of went everywhere. It's been a really remarkable nine, ten years and we're very excited about... this year it's going to be just a culmination of that excitement.

**And I don't want to bore our listeners with the logistics of putting the event on, but it must knacker you. Because there's so many things that you have to coordinate.**

I think it's 52 women coming from 12 countries. It's unbelievable. And the visa problems, the ego problems at times, the question of the Rubik's Cube about, you know, "This person can only come on the Wednesday. This person only on the Tuesday. They're supposed to be talking to each other. How are we going to fuse those two things?" It's amazing, and it goes on until the bitter last moment with people changing, but it always seems to come together with a wonderful magic at the end. And what we do is not a conference, it's really a show. And actually, what I have done I think is to do something different. I called it 'live journalism' from the beginning, never a conference. Always live journalism. And I'm interested to see that term has now been taken up in many other places. I was slightly mocked for it the first time I used it, and now I notice that the Washington Post is calling it live journalism. It's very much got a news edge, you know? We did the sexual harassment of a female firefighter a year before anything happened with #MeToo. We did the rise of white supremacy two years before Charlottesville. Saudi has been a very big passion of ours. This year actually, we're going to have a major discussion about what's happening to persecuted dissenters in Saudi in the face of all the ridiculous PR that MBS put out before he ended up slicing up Jamal Khashoggi. So we do think we have a very much got a news edge. And it is live journalism. I've paced it very much like I did an issue of Vanity Fair. We start always with something that's very journalistic, very much a topic of our times – where actually one of our great discussions this year is going to be whether anything much has been achieved in the last two years by this huge upsurge. We have the prosecutor in the R. Kelly case joining the stage, along with Ashley Judd who was the first voice, of course, against Harvey Weinstein. And a transgender rights activist is joining that discussion, as well as Rebecca Traister, who is of course the writer, and it's a great panel moderated by Katie Couric. And then we'll go to something that has a lot of heartstrings to it. A Uighur woman, a Chinese woman, whose relatives who have all been arrested or herded up by the Chinese regime. And then we'll go to a movie star. We'll have Brie Larson talking about being Captain Marvel. So it's actually very much like I would do an issue of Vanity Fair with the grit, the heartstrings story, the narrative, personal narrative, a great movie star to just bring you that relief and sense and sort of fun. And I think that's really why people find it very compelling, because it's that mix. People don't want to have all serious earnest content nor do they want to have fluff, fluff, fluff, fluff. But they do want to have a mix.

### **Light and shade.**

Light and shade.

### **So how do people get tickets then because I gather some are still available?**

It's April 10th to the 12th. It's at Lincoln Center. There's still a few tickets left. If you want to go on the Lincoln Center David Koch Theater website you will see tickets for Women in the World. Or go to [womenintheworld.com](http://womenintheworld.com). End of plug.

### **Tell us about the podcast? You've had much bigger, more impressive names than me. I'm incredibly jealous.**

I love doing the podcast.

### **It's great, isn't it?**

Yes I love it. It's so much fun. It's the most low stress thing of all the editing or broadcasting I've done. The most fun. I just had a hunger just to talk to just really smart people for as long as it took. And I still feel that the gap in the market is still intelligence. And there are some great things out there. But the joy of just being able to let smart people develop their ideas without being harassed by trying to cram it into a New York minute as it were, is very, very appealing. And I have also very much my own sort of blue stocking side as well. So I love to be able to talk for instance to Professor Stephen Greenblatt, the great Shakespeare scholar who wrote his wonderful book 'Tyrant' about Shakespeare's tyrants, and have him talk about how a nation can be ceded for the advent of a tyrant. And the most wonderful thing about talking to him was he's so interesting about all this. And he's never talking about Trump, except he is talking about Trump, all the way through it. The book is just completely riveting. So I loved talking to him. And then I love talking to someone like Michael Douglas, who's just like a great showboat who's just got amazing stories. Or Preet Bharara, who's such a fascinating guy. We had a wonderful woman as well, some of my Women in the World women I get to talk about, to talk with at greater length, I had on as a guest, Topeka Sam, who's a wonderful, wonderful woman who was on our stage last year. She is a formerly incarcerated woman. She was incarcerated for dealing drugs, and while she was in prison she realised just how bad it is for women in prison and how, when she got out, she was going to create a halfway house that was much more than that, that was actually a place where women could come and just be able to live after prison in a clean, welcoming environment where they could get themselves on their feet and look for a job and be helped in the next stage of their lives, called Hope House. And she's just a wonderful mission and an amazing woman. I went to see Hope House, which is in Queens, and I was just so touched by this entire organisation, and feel that she has this extraordinary mission to proliferate it all over the US, and I'm right behind her. So, it was wonderful to be able to have her on the show and let her develop those thoughts. And yet we also had Hillary Clinton, who was able to ruminate about why it is that women have to be likable when they run for office. She was great on all that. So it's great. I'm loving it. I'm really enjoying it.

### **And what kind of feedback have you got from the listeners? They must be enjoying it too.**

They're enjoying it. It has got a great reception actually. It's listed in various 'best of' lists, and I think people are discovering it. I deliberately didn't go out with a big song and dance about the fact that I was doing it. I feel a little gun shy about doing that. I thought I'll just put it up one day and let people find it. And we've got a big following in England it seems, which is interesting. I love being able to see where people are listening. For some reason I have whole bunch of people listening in Iran – I don't know why that is, it's a bit sinister – but I love seeing where they're listening.

### **A listener's a listener.**

A listener's a listener.

**That's what I've always thought.**

You know I used to love that about the Daily Beast, too. When I was editing the Daily Beast there was this marvellous mapping thing that was in the lobby which showed where your readers, where your users were all over the world. And you'd suddenly put up a story about Paul Blanchard and see that 25 people in Bulgaria had logged on. You just kept thinking, "Who are these Bulgarians who are interesting in Paul Blanchard?" But this is what life is today. It's quite wonderful the way you can just find your audience. Doesn't matter where they are.

**But also some of the metrics can be heart-breaking. Google's analytics have this bounce rate which is people that decide they're not interested in under a second. Our hosting company can give us metrics on when people give up. Out of the 700 people that didn't listen to episode 32 they all gave up at minute 36. And you think, "What is it about minute 36 that made them give up?"**

It's impossible not to get a bit obsessed about that, I'm afraid. It's always in the end about, could you keep your audience. But that also keeps you engaged with the world too. And sometimes they're fascinated by something you never expected, you know? They really are. I didn't expect Stephen Greenblatt, the Shakespeare professor, frankly to get any audience, but he was one of the best ones. People will just... I guess, it was January, it was right after Christmas and people were in a Shakespeare mood.

**I've had that before. Because I've tried to cover lots of different topics and areas... I had a gentleman on recently called Ken Hertz. He's a Hollywood deal-maker and a lawyer. And I thought it'd be quite interesting about the mechanics of how films were put together.**

Fascinating.

**But actually it was much more deeper than that. He was talking about fame itself, and about the journey where people move to Los Angeles to try and make it in Hollywood, and lots of people are still waiting tables 30 years later. And how random it is, and the profound psychological consequences of either making it in Hollywood or not. It was fascinating.**

Well, that's great. And I'd seen you'd done that actually, I've got it queued up waiting to listen to because I actually did think it sounded really quite fascinating, and I thought to myself, well, you're very smart getting into that community too because you never actually hear from those kind of people much. We hear all about the sort of front of house people, the stars, and even producers and directors, but actually there are a lot of really smart people in entertainment. *Hugely* smart. Obviously it's the most powerful industry in a way, and there's a lot of great minds in it. And I used to love it, when I was at Vanity Fair, I used to spend a lot of my time with those kind of people, Hollywood lawyers and agents...

### **The deal-makers.**

The deal-makers. And the... just the people who you never read about really.

**But you've actually said recently that the zeitgeist right now isn't about celebrities. It's actually news. Is everything coming back in politics to frankly, to Trump's America now?**

It is.

### **It's unavoidable.**

It is unavoidable. And it's very funny because sometimes on my podcast I'll have an advertiser who says they don't want anything political, to which I say, "Well, get over it." Because you can interview, frankly, a soccer player, and the next thing is they're talking about Trump or some aspect of whatever political horror's just gone down. They want to talk about it.

### **Here in America, is it about taking a knee?**

Exactly right. There's not a subject really that hasn't been politicised. And so everything is now about politics. Everything really is driven by the news. And the main problem is just keeping up with any of it. And somehow kind of making cogent sense of it. There are certain stories that I get really obsessed with. If I had a magazine right now, I would be all over it. This college testing scam story to me is just massive. Because it's one of those stories that people are just so angry about it, which is great, so it has all that breakthrough-ness of the real cultural zeitgeist definer, and I think it's going to be seen as that. And secondly because it seems to link to so many other things like it. The Fyre Festival scam. The Theranos scam with Elizabeth Holmes.

### **I'm obsessed with the Frye Festival and the Theranos scandal...**

Yes. Because it's the same story really, right? Because it's the obsession with the shiny objects. The obsession with status but with no work behind it.

### **A combination of fraud, laziness and deep recklessness.**

That's exactly right.

**And an inevitability. Because they ought to have known even at the inception that it was going to fail. And yet they seemed to be deluding themselves.**

They deluded themselves. And it's grown in the sense with the obsession with the shiny surfaces of Instagram and all the rest where we're all pretending everything's so fabulous and cool and everything is about lifestyle and about influencers and all of this nonsense.



### **I'm guilty.**

It's just words, and in the end there's no rigour behind it. And yet anybody successful will tell you, and whether it's a Bruce Springsteen or a Maria Callas or a Preet Bharara, it's like, everything about their success has been about rigour, rigour, rigour. Work, work, work.

### **Graft.**

Graft. Total graft. And they just don't get there without that. And that is never really the subject of people's interest.

**And you mentioned about attention deficit. I spend a lot of time when I'm in airports on social media. And, my Instagram, for example, I don't use filters. What I put up there is true but of course, but it's not the whole truth. Because the reality is that I spend 90% of my working life is at a computer sending emails, dealing with phone calls. No one wants to Instagram that. So it is misleading.**

It's completely misleading. And it allows, I think, as well, the sort of millennial and younger generation to think that it is all just about that. I was fascinated that one of the daughters of the college scam parents, once she'd got in – completely wrongly by her parents, because her scores were absolutely zero to do with success – she gets into college, one of these elite colleges, and she doesn't go to any classes either. And so she becomes this two-million-followed Instagram influencer, and so many of her posts are about, "Colleges, who cares? I missed a class today, tee-hee." There's not any interest at all in actually doing anything at college once they're in. And so you just sort of think, this is probably the definition of completely sort of decadent values. And of course the apotheosis of that is sort of Trump in the White House. His emphasis on the fact that nothing you say matters is probably one of the most corrosive things. I get extremely agitated when a Trump-based kind of person says to me... what he said about Otto Warmbier, the kid who came back from North Korea completely brain dead and he sort of just made as if that wasn't important. And they will reply, "It's just words." And you think, "Wait a minute, how can you say that about an utter..."

### **What?!**

Yes, exactly. What does, "It's just words" mean? It's this new mantra. "It's just words." It's horrendous.

### **It is.**

When did absolute lying just become, "Oh well, it's just words"? That to me is the beginning of some of the stuff that we're talking about.

**There's been hundreds of instances where any other politician, certain revelations or something he's said would be an immediate resigning matter...**

I know.

**And he seems to be above the laws of physics. No one – everyone, unfortunately – is becoming complicit. I remember The New York Times did a huge, incredible piece of journalism about his father’s accounts and his tax evasion...**

Oh god, that was great piece.

**Yes, and they nailed the President. They said, “Here’s the evidence that he’s doing it as well.” It didn’t even last a full news cycle.**

Not even. Not even.

**Because he called someone a name.**

I think that you and I are the only two people who read it anyway. You know what I mean? Because it was a hugely long, brilliant piece of investigative journalism but I doubt it... it just didn’t penetrate. And that is the scary part.

**Does it trouble you as a journalist that almost his supporters don’t care any more? If you look at say Brexit, both sides of the argument haven’t used the facts to try and reconcile and come together in the middle, they have become ever more entrenched in not listening to each other and almost the facts are irrelevant. People seem to be making these decisions now on feelings alone.**

It’s absolutely horrific. And also of course the original Brexit referendum votes for Brexit were based on lies anyway, because they were being told there was all this money going to come from Europe to the National Health Service, and that there were all of these Turks who were going to arrive in London from the EU. And all kinds of crazy lies that I heard parroted back. People I knew were saying to me, “Well, I’m going to vote for Brexit because of all the money coming to the National Health.” It was kind of made up out of whole cloth. But it just got pervade by disinformation campaigns both from the Murdoch Press, The Daily Mail and of course, god knows how many Russian bots. But it was everywhere. And so now it’s like it’s forced these tribes, isn’t it? Where it’s about your identity not about what you really think. It’s like you identify as a Brexit person or you identify as a remain person.

**We could do this podcast for seven hours. I’m certain of it. But I have to... this is the only bit where I need some discipline to move things forward.**

It’s fine, of course.

**Let’s go back to that time when you were asked to come to New York and reinvent Vanity Fair. That must have been thrilling and scary at the same time?**

It was so exciting but it's what I wanted more than anything in the world. I had a great longing, in a sense, to come and work in New York. I had a great sort of romantic passion for what I saw as sort of American letters and American magazines, having edited Tatler in the UK and made a success of it. It was my first young editorship when I was 25. I always loved the Algonquin Round Table and looking at the pictures of the old Vanity Fair in the 20's. Photographs by Hong Jang Hyun and Edward Steichen, and the pieces by Mencken and Dorothy Parker, and all these great writers and so on. And so I had a real romance for the name and title of Vanity Fair. So when I heard that Condé Nast was going to try and bring back Vanity fair from the dead I was tremendously interested in seeing what would happen. And then of course, we saw that the first Vanity Fair in 1983 when it came back was a complete turkey. It's the truth. And I looked at it and I thought, "What a disaster." They spent all this money on this total turkey of a thing. And I didn't think much more about it until of course, as I describe in my book, a series of events that happens that ends up them coming back and offering it to me. And I didn't think for one second that I shouldn't do it. It was my romantic dream to do it.

**Did that precious failure though give you a bit more leverage and a bit more freedom to do it your way?**

It did. And I'd also been a consultant with them in the summer. Which made me... it was a bit like summer camp before school. I was able to look around and think "Hmm, who's good here and who isn't? What would I do if I was in here?" And so, yes, it was... there was nothing to lose let's put it that way. And I was so young there was nothing to lose. My thing was I thought, "Well I'll come to America for two or three years and I'll do Vanity Fair. It will work or it won't work. And then I'll come back to London." And I never really thought beyond that, I thought it was just a hell of a great gig. And that's what I wanted. And so I leapt over to America. I actually was offered the job in December when my husband and I were on vacation in Barbados. I was asked to come in for an interview, and of course I didn't even say where I was. I think they assumed I was in the US, but of course I wasn't. I was actually still living in London, I was just on holiday. But I came in for the interview over Christmas and they offered me the job. And they said, "We need you to start January 5th." So I went to Barbados to see Harry and I said, "We're moving to the US." And, being Harry, he just said, "Great. Better the house packed up." And he went off to London, packed up the house, got himself a teaching job at Duke while he thought about what to do.

**Your husband is A, one of my heroes but B, becoming a bit of a friend now, and I'm so privileged to know him. He's a genuine legend.**

Oh, he's amazing. He's such a great editor himself, and he was completely supportive of me doing this. I think a lot of husbands would have said, "What do you mean? What about the living in London and the house?" But he never said any of those things. He just said, "You've got to do it. It's fantastic. We'll figure it out." And he went back and got the house packed up and rented. And came back, got a teaching job until he had Random House lined up in New York. And I took over Vanity Fair living out of the Algonquin Hotel, where my sense of that legend quickly dissipated. I realised it was only Japanese tourists in the evening or Iranian hookers

and things at night. So I had swiftly moved out of there into my own place. But yes, it was very, very exciting moving into that assignment aged just turned 30.

**Incredible. I feel a right loser listening to this.**

It was amazing. And the staff... it was in crisis actually. And I love that. I love a sense of, "There's a crisis, I've got to come in and turn it round."

**Roll your sleeves up and get in on with it.**

"Up against the clock. How do we get this done?" The first weekend I was there I just came in with the art department, who were actually very good. It's just that they hadn't been led in any way. It was a horrible looking mess, visually. And I just sort of redesigned the magazine soup to nuts. I gave it clean, strong, plain layouts where the pictures would breathe, and strong, clean headlines. I'm a great believer in legible layouts in which the pictures are the star of the layout and the headlines all really pop. I redid the contents page, which is one of my great passions. The contents pages are always underestimated. They've got to grab people from the beginning.

**I go to them because I want to know what's in the magazine.**

Yes. And it has to be written in such a way as to sell, sell, sell. So I redid all of it with them over the weekend. And that redesign it stayed there for the next 30 years! It's only just changed actually. It really stayed all the way through the Graydon Carter regime. So it created a prototype that lasted an awful long time. And in fact, only really has begun to change more now under the editorship of Radhika Jones, who took over it a year ago now.

**And how do you edit? What are the qualities that you bring to the role as editor? That's made you so successful? Is it that relentless drive? That sense of ambition? Is it attention to detail?**

It's all of it.

**I knew you'd say that.**

Well, but it's actually... first of all it's a passion for stories.

**Yes.**

Right. It's a passion for stories.

**And you've either got that or you haven't.**

Yes. It's a passion for stories, things that get me really juiced up. As I said, if I had Vanity Fair now I would be so all over that Theranos story. So all over the murder of Jamal Khashoggi in Saudi. And there are certain stories that are just my kind of

passion... and that's what I would be doing now. That's what I brought to the magazine. And one thing I can do very well, I have to say this, I know which writer to give that story to. You know? I think I'm good at finding talent. I found a lot in my career. But I also know what they should be writing. Which is something different. Many times, writers have not got good ideas for themselves. Sometimes I meet writers who think they should be doing one cover story and I can immediately tell just from talking to them where I should guide them to do... what they should be guided in to do. So I was always very good at matching the story to the writer. And I did that a lot. And also getting that mix right. I often talk about the mix in a magazine, but it has to start with the cover. You want that really show-stopping cover that's glamorous, that's connective, that's newsy. And then you want to have this glorious mix inside of the gritty news story, the beautiful looking thing, the sort of heartstrings things, the unexpected scandal things. It's that whole wonderful melee of things that makes a great magazine. In a way, a magazine is... I often say to people, "A magazine is not just a collection of good articles." You can have an issue with 10 amazing articles that makes a bad magazine. It's the combination of things that makes a great magazine.

### **That experience.**

Yes, the whole experience has to be holistically gratifying. And sometimes people think that a magazine is just articles with a staple through. Put them all in and they're good. You could have great writers and it will prosper, but that isn't so. It's about the mix and how they play off each other that is what makes an exciting magazine. It is the ultimate bundle in a sense, right? It's the bundling philosophy. I think one of the difficulties of the disaggregation of articles is that the bundle is lost. People say, "Oh well, they won't read it. They'll get no traffic for a foreign story or they won't get any traffic for an investigative story." That's right. Unless it's bundled and marketed with a story that plays off it, that is the reverse, or has some other flavour to it. Then you might get them to read it. We might have lured a writer in with a glorious new Madonna cover. But then inside there would be this great investigative piece about the fall of Bokassa, the great African dictator or some juicy... we did lots of stories about Haiti at the time which was a big news story. But you know, it was combination of those things. It was the Madonna with the other thing, that was really a big serious story by a writer who was a terrific literary writer. We had an amazing essay about depression by William Styron which he turned into his book, *Darkness Visible*. But that kind of piece had to co-exist with the other stuff, and that's what made *Vanity Fair* very compelling. And I had the same philosophy at *The New Yorker*. It was done differently and in different ways, but when I hired people such as Jeffrey Toobin or Jim Stewart or Malcolm Gladwell, they were writing stories that had absolute sort of relevance of now, and then you would run something elsewhere in the book that would be a completely escapist piece which could have run at any time in the last sort of two years. And the combination of those pacings was the compelling thing of, "I have to read this now." My great philosophy was always, if people say, "Oh, I love *The New Yorker*, I keep it in a log basket by my bed," I think, "Uh-oh, bad, bad, bad." I don't want it piling up by the bed. I want them to read it this week. I want them to read it now.

### **Good journalism has to be read.**

Absolutely.

**The single most important thing about it.**

And read in a white hot fury.

**But you are right, it's that curated experience. I still like good old fashioned newspapers because I want to be presented with things that I wouldn't click on. But actually when I can just skim it and see the totality of it, I do want to... I want the editor to draw me in rather than just rely on me to click on certain articles like a cafeteria experience.**

I agree. And I also like the emotional hierarchy, you see. I loved doing The Daily Beast but I had to really get over the fact that it looked the same every day except for a change of picture. You can't change the layout. It's a very intransigent medium. Whereas an issue of The New York Post, it can be a huge front page with a picture in your face, headline whatever, and the next day a completely different look. And that's the hierarchy of the news and how... is it a big story or not? Are you going to get excited or not? How you play the headline, all those things. And you can't do that digitally. It's a very unemotional medium, actually. And I really don't like that about it.

**Do you edit by gut feeling when you make the decisions? Because if, for example, you take BuzzFeed's content management system, they will have an article with eight different headlines and give it to a million people and then within an hour they will know which is the most clickworthy headline that's driving the most clicks and then they'll just delete the other ones and just go with that. But obviously in a print-based medium you can't do that. How did you go about doing that?**

I kind of felt that I was the algorithm. You know?

**You're a human algorithm. I like that.**

Frankly my goal was to have the headline that worked right off, that it was an emotionally connective headline. And even if a piece was quite intellectually dry, you'd want to sell it in such a way as to get that immediate emotional connect. I don't feel it's necessary to keep changing the headline to know what that headline is. It's just lazy, frankly, to be doing that. All that sort of writing 20 headlines to see which one works. If you need to write 20 to see what one works you should just go into another profession.

**I read The Week religiously now. I have done for many years.**

I love The Week. The Week is wonderful.

**And they have section that's called 'Boring But Important.'**

I love it! I love the headline.

**And I genuinely make myself read it.**

I love it you see because that has got the wit to make you read it.

**And in The Vanity Fair Diaries you really capture that glitzy mid 80's period brilliant. But one socialite features quite heavily, which is Donald Trump. Were you onto him at an early stage and were you even more flabbergasted then when he became President?**

I really was onto him actually. When he submitted to us to read his book, The Art of the Deal, they wanted us to extract it. And my staff actually rejected it. And I just thought, "Well I'd quite like to take it home and read it and see what it's like. So I took it home for the weekend to my house at the beach in Quogue. And I read it. And I wrote in my diary that I like his voice. I said, "It's bullshit, but it's authentic bullshit." And I said, "I think American readers will like nothing better." So I saw the appeal actually, and I think all the entries that I have about Trump that are on that theme... although he gets to be much darker as the diary goes on. My last encounters with Trump are when he's in a rage with us because we've published piece that goes into his bankruptcies and really starts to take him apart. And he didn't like that. At all. And Marie Brenner, who wrote the really fantastic piece about Trump in the 90's when she felt he was a total charlatan...

**Well he is. He's a wrong'un, as my Nana would have said. He's a throwback.**

And she was at a benefit for an opening of a movie. And she's sitting there having dinner, and as she sits having dinner she suddenly feels something cold and wet down her back. And she looks up thinking the waiter has spilled something...

**And he'd poured it on...**

And it's Donald J. Trump who's actually emptied a glass of wine down her back and then sped off across the room to avoid her catching him out. That was an example...

**Sort of aggressive bullying and cowardice.**

Yes. Aggression, bullying, cowardice and also a long memory for grievance, because this was eight months after the piece came out. So he was still steaming about it.

**After Vanity Fair, all those years there, your great success at The New Yorker, boosting circulation, cutting its losses. How was that coming into that? Did people resent a Brit coming in and making all those big changes?**

Well The New Yorker was a whole other fabulous challenge which required all kinds of different things of me than Vanity Fair. I had really wanted to do it in the end because I felt I was getting tired of the celebrity culture and I was thinking, "I can't keep doing covers with Tom Cruise and Madonna and stuff. I've just got to go back to my own literary loves." I was beginning to feel a hunger for more depth if you like,

in what I was doing. And The New Yorker, of course, didn't see me in that way. Because I had just done the cover with Demi Moore, naked and pregnant, about six months before I got The New Yorker. And so of course everyone at The New Yorker thought, "Oh god, here comes the Demi Moore editor who's going to come into the New Yorker and bring all this terrible celebrity vulgarity and we're going to have a magazine that's totally decimated by Attila the Hun and we don't want her." And there was all sorts of tremendous angst about it. So I come in, and my first meeting... I look round the room... they all assembled in this room upstairs at The New Yorker. I'll never forget it, because I looked round the room and it just seemed like it was all men, right? And they were all wearing these coke-bottle glasses and they looked at me and they just stared at me. And there were so many sort of hostile faces as I talked to them about what my vision of the magazine was, how I wasn't coming to destroy what they loved. I regarded it as a literary jewel. I simply wanted to bring new talent and all the rest of it.

### **Did that make things worse?**

Yes. And they were just sitting... it was just silence, there was silence. And then I looked at the back of the room and there was this guy standing there who looked like Frank Zappa with this long hair and his arms folded, and he just sort of looked at me and he said, "You're going to kill off the cartoons, aren't you?" And that was Bob Mankoff, the great cartoonist who I then turned around and made cartoon editor. So far from killing off the cartoons...

### **Still doing it now isn't he?**

Well, he became very well-known after some time at The New Yorker. Together we started the Cartoon Bank, which was for all the cartoons that hadn't been used, which allowed them to sort of syndicate their cartoons elsewhere. I started the Cartoon Issue...

### **I love cartoons.**

The cartoonists made out like bandits, frankly, under my editorship because I loved them. So it was the actual opposite of what he expected and feared. But yes, it was a very difficult first couple of years, because I had a lot of opposition. But I also found that some of the old guard were very welcoming. Like John Updike was wonderful to me. Roger Angell. Janet Malcolm. There were people who were legendary names who actually did support me because they had realised that The New Yorker was actually dying. The readership had got so old. The advertising was falling away. And it needed a shot in the arm. And what I was able to do was to... I actually let go of 70 people at The New Yorker but I hired 40 people who were I think every bit as talented... I know they were every bit as talented as the ones that everybody sort of lionised. I brought David Remnick of course, who succeeded me as editor. I have done my podcast, TBD, with Remnick. We had a wonderful time together. I brought Jane Mayer. I brought Malcolm Gladwell. Jeffrey Toobins. Skip Gates.

### **These are iconic names now, but back then...**



They are.

### **How do you find them then?**

They were all young writers doing certain things. Jeffrey Toobin was working as an assistant DA and I... I'm very impulsive when I hire people actually. I pick something instantly and I decide I like it. I can tell very quickly whether somebody can write. So if I read something and I think, "Mm-hmm, there's a voice here. There's instincts here. There's something here. We can do something with this guy, even if he hasn't written a great deal." So, if, in the case of Toobin, he hadn't written a great deal but he... I could see that he could really be something because his ideas were so good. He has tremendously good ideas. Jeffrey Toobin could have easily been The New Yorker editor actually because he has terrific ideas. Some writers don't have ideas, as I said, but he has great ideas. Malcolm Gladwell was a book reviewer. Just a very interesting mind. And of course, I think his second piece for us... or it might have even been his first piece, was The Tipping Point actually. Which of course is still in the bestsellers charts. I had a lot of terrific editors as well as writers. Henry Finder came from a very small magazine, highly recommended by Skip Gates, and he has turned out to be a complete treasure, he has been there for the last 25 years. Dorothy Wickenden. I could go on. They're an extraordinary crowd and they're all still there. That's what's so great in a way. That I do feel that a mark of success in life is not only did you do something that worked, but what have you left behind you? Who have you brought up? Who have you mentored? Who have you trained? Who have you encouraged? Who have you allowed to flower so that when you go it's all going to be stronger and stronger. And that is what happened both at Vanity Fair and at The New Yorker. I was able to leave staff, writers, editors, photographers. Everyone there who were a stellar, stellar group. And once you've done that, the pedigree of hiring becomes so good. Because if you hire an amazing staff, the chances are that when they start to tap out and leave, they're going to bring in the other incredible person. It really is about creating culture and about creating DNA that lasts. Can last a really long time until someone comes in and screws it up.

**So what I'm hearing there is that 90% of the job done well is actually in the hiring and firing. It really is. And creating that culture.**

It absolutely is.

**Because without good people you're screwed.**

You're completely screwed without a team that complements each other. I've always hired as much on... well, two or three things. For writers it was about voice. Do they have original thinking? You don't just hire someone for how they write, but how they think. And it's also in the case of editors, and then the staff who are supporting the writers. It's temperament too. I would be very careful to cast this sort of sensitive writer with this editor who I know who has very good people skills, or whatever. This tougher-minded writer with the editor who is really more of a journeyman editor. You have to really be... to keep your talent you have to be very much alert to what they need. And you also have to really encourage. The other thing I feel very strongly about is an editor has to really respond quickly and fully to talent. When people write

things they don't want to wait and wait and wait and wait for a response. Because writers are very insecure. I know when I write something now and the tables are turned, I'm every bit as much of a sort of whining pathetic...

### **Because you put everything into it.**

You put everything into it. And you sit there miserable and fantasising, "He hates it, it's no good."

### **And the reality is he's probably just not got round to reading it because he's got another 40 emails to get to before...**

That's right. And somehow it's just really hurtful if you then get... it's bad enough when you then don't hear anything and they don't like it. But then you... or you just find that they posted it, it went up online and didn't even tell you. And it's like, "This is our interface? You can't even send me an email saying: 'I did like it, I didn't like it?'" And there's a lack of response I think which really can be very corrosive to writers. And you get some very discouraged very quickly.

### **Now just before we talk about The Daily Beast briefly I just wanted to touch on magazines. Because I was doing some research for this and I found a quote where you said that magazines don't even know who to put on covers these days, and that they're becoming almost irrelevant.**

Well I think it's a huge problem. Not because the editors are at fault, because there's plenty of great, talented editors around. But the culture is just so fast-moving and so over-subscribed with nobodies, and of course the star culture has died because the only movies that really get made are the huge Captain Marvel kind of movies. The rest don't really have any commercial impact. So the manufacturing and the minting of stars that were cover star calibre has really been reduced. The biggest stars today really are music stars. Like Lady Gaga, like Beyoncé, like Rihanna. They remain stars because they're sort of big showmen with huge audiences. Movies just don't have those kind of audiences really any more. And the TV streaming stars are niche, if you like. And, so, actually trying to find a star who's going to have an impact is in itself difficult. Secondly, because of the digital component, there isn't any surprise or traction anyway from being on a newsstand. It gets thrown up online a week before it's even available. By the time people see it on the newsstand or get it in the mail it's just old potatoes, and so there's a slight disappointment. It's not like the excitement of unveiling your cover and it's on the newsstand and people are interested to see what it looks like inside. That's all gone because it's already been just thrown out for free, feasted upon, as we said by digital, audiences. Unpaid for. So it's a lot of issues now about what should be on the cover. And also thirdly, as I said before, news is the zeitgeist. I think that Vanity Fair did the right thing putting Beto O'Rourke on the cover because actually they've made a lot of news with that cover story because they got the news that he's going to run, probably would run, and now he is running, and it was the right cover at the right time. And probably won't lift newsstands, because I think newsstand has gone, as I said. But it does at least make the magazine feel as though it's right in the crucible of conversation this month. Which it hasn't been in sort of some of the other covers.

**When Newsweek went back into print, Jim Impoco, who was the then editor, did this podcast and he said that he viewed the magazine, the physical magazine, on the newsstand as a paper-based banner advert for the website. Which I thought was a very interesting insight. But just building on what you said there though, I think the news and the relentlessness of it is actually presenting a problem for the news.**

It is.

**We had Paul Royall in recently, he's the editor of the BBC's Ten O'Clock News and his problem as editor of that main flagship BBC News programme is that he knows all of his viewers already know the news before this bulletin has started. Because they're on social media. They know everything that Huw Edwards is going to say for the first 20 minutes.**

Right.

**So they don't want to be told what's happening. They already want insight.**

They do. It's absolutely right. And it puts the burden on the interpretive scoop, as I used to call it at The New Yorker. I would always be asking for that. The interpretive scoop. The new angle on something we knew had happened. Or frankly, breaking news that nobody has yet. And that's the only other thing you must do in a publication or on the news on television, is bringing news that people haven't heard before. Now the interesting thing about TV news is it very rarely does that actually. I remember Roger Ailes startled me once by saying to me, "Everything on television is old." And I said to him, "What do you mean?" And he said, "You have to understand" he said, "TV follows." You know, it never breaks news. I'm not quite sure why that is. But it's almost as if the TV culture was started by people who felt it was a subsidiary form to print. That print was really the integrity form. The serious form. And they didn't want to put anything on television until it had been covered somewhere else. It's a different philosophy entirely to print, which wants to be first. Television doesn't feel confident to do something until someone else has said it. Which is interesting. But of course that means that it feels pretty stale most of the time. Half the time with cable you're just watching things you didn't know, as you quite rightly said.

**And also I don't trust the breaking news tickers now on these rolling news channels. Because it's not...**

Not breaking news.

**It's not, unfortunately. And that's the thing. And if the ticker on Sky News turns yellow, maybe 10 years ago that would have brought my attention to it, thinking, "Wow, something's happened."**

There should people breaking old news.

**Yes. Like breaking, breaking news. You mentioned The Daily Beast a couple of times now. I just wanted to touch on it before we moved on. Because everyone's still trying to make digital news profitable. This... the challenges that you faced then are as relevant now. You came closer than most though, didn't you?**

We got sort of close. But it wasn't enough. And when I left it was losing money. And it's still losing money. Five years later or whatever it is, it is still losing money. And they've actually been through many publishers. Many business people. And, Barry said to me the other day, "It's losing money. It's still losing money." And I just said, "Well, you know, maybe you've just got to live with it." Because no one has yet really found a model to make news a profit centre. Because advertisers don't want to be anywhere near stories about Jamal Khashoggi being chopped into pieces or a Boeing falling out of the sky. They don't want to be near that. And, so, therefore it's all about paying for it, which is what people used to do. And we now have the subscriber model which is doing very well for the Times and the Washington Post and others. But it's not ever going to really be a useful model for much less prestigious newspapers where people just won't pay for it in the same way. So that is the huge problem. And I think... I was talking to someone the other night who was saying that the things that rescue an industry really come from inside. It's like music got rescued by Daniel Ek at Spotify, or that it's outside our industry that this will be fixed. I don't think that any publication is going to fix the business model for journalism. It's something about our profession that doesn't allow it to fix this problem. It's going to need to be invented by some sort of technician in Albuquerque or something, who looks at the whole business from a completely different point of view. It's like the whole Netflix model was an engineer's concept. I think we get too close to it or something. Or we're looking at it the wrong way. But we have not... great minds have looked at this issue. And still haven't fixed it.

**So could you tell us about a typical week now? I know there probably isn't such a thing as a typical week but you've got lots of projects and responsibilities to coordinate. How do you cram it all in?**

Well, I do a lot. My company, Tina Brown Media, is engaged fully on the Women in the World Summit and on other smaller salons throughout the year. We do Toronto and Washington and LA and do these smaller events, and also some custom events. So that's going on. I have a staff of about 15-16 people, and they're always in there... so I always go into the office and, where we have a WeWork Space like everybody these days. And I spend, I might spend a morning dealing with all of that. And then I'm sort of getting ready for my podcast. I always read everything for my podcast. I'm not... I don't like skipping the book if I have an author. So I'll sit and read it. Work on the questions with my wonderful producer, Karen Compton. I spend a lot of time strategising on how to get guests either for the summits or for the podcast. I'm thinking about doing a new book, so if I'm really engaged in writing I'll get up really early. It's a lot to cram in but it's a very, it's a great... I'm having a great time actually. It's been a very happy period for me. And recently moved out of my house on 57th Street where I was for 30 years, and that was a big thing to do, to move to our apartment now, smaller apartment at Beaton Place. But the kids have left home and so on. And Harry and I are very cosy. We were saying the other night that we're very happy right now. Our life and companionship and... you know, Harry is such a

wonderful, fun person to live with, quite honestly. Thirty-five years later he's still my favourite dinner partner.

**He's a great guy.**

He's such fun.

**I had lunch with him a couple of weeks ago at his club, and I think you only live about two blocks away from it.**

We do.

**Because I gave him a lift, and because I had another appointment to go to I thought, "Is this going to delay me? But it didn't.**

We joined the River Club, which is this hugely sort of posh club but it's got a wonderful swimming pool.

**It has, yes.**

And he loves it. He goes there every day and does his swim, he does his 30 or 40 lengths. It's incredible. He's 90 years old and he gets up, he comes out for breakfast with me – because I have to go out for breakfast with my news buffet of newspapers or an iPad – and we sit there and we devour it all together, and it's our time together. And then he'll come back and he writes his book review for The New York Times. Then he goes off and he swims his 40 lengths. Then he has a nap and we go off for a dinner. And he's just unchanged. It's absolutely amazing.

**He's living the dream.**

He's living the dream.

**That sounds ideal to me. And what is it like, two journalists living in the same house? Is it like a friendly competition or is there Chinese walls where you don't...**

Well no, the only time we have any conflict is when he is obsessed with the story and I'm reading another one, so he'll go, "This freaking editorial in The New York Times about Michael Cohen," or whatever, "What do you think, what do you think?" And I go, "Well I'm actually reading this piece about Saudi at the moment, I'll get to it." "But I want to know what you think about this, so just look at this. Look at this, look at this." And he starts reading it to me. And I go like, "Harry, I'm doing Saudi right now. You do your Michael Cohen, I'll do my Saudi. Then we'll switch. But I cannot read alongside you."

**I like that. My wife and I bicker a lot, but I see that as a good thing, and you're very politically aligned. I would say both equally passionate about trying to change the world for the better, frankly.**

Yes, well Harry gets sort of outraged. We get outraged about similar things. He gets extremely outraged when he feels that journalism is not persistent enough in getting to the stories. One of his great bugbears, and I think he's right actually, is in England, journalism does profiles really well. There are profiles that are packaged in ways that are very sort of reader-friendly about anybody new and important in the public eye. And for some reason, American journalism doesn't really do that in the newspapers. They don't have a really great profile of in the paper. They do sometimes in the magazine, of Mitch McConnell or Adam Schiff or... you constantly find that you don't know who these people really are. And then something happens and their life story comes out and you think, "My god, I never knew that about him. I never knew that he was a vet whose brother was shot in Vietnam." Or whatever the whole thing it was. And you just wish that you knew more about people in a sort of really deep way. And I think American journalism isn't really very good at that. I don't think it's a tradition of newspapers at any rate. Or of sort of the daily news cycle. Magazines do it, but the magazines are now thin on ground. So you don't get nearly enough of learning who people are in a very deep way. At the end of the day, who is Ilhan Omar, actually? You just read constantly about a person. Constantly. But you really don't have it all put together in a way that makes you know who they are. And so he gets quite exercised about that sometimes.

**I think rightly so actually. What are you going to do over the next sort of 10-15 years? What you've done is incredible already. Are you going to scale things up, carry on, move into different directions? I'm interested in what is next?**

I really want to do another two or three books now. I feel the faster and crazier the world gets, the more I feel I'm entering slightly into my hermit phase, let's put it that way. I sometimes dream about living, stomping around in old shoes and living in the country. Going back to England, writing my books, living in Cotswolds. I have still got a little bit of a yen for that. I get very homesick and sometimes these days, which I didn't used to do from before. So I still think of England as my real spiritual base. We do talk about that. And then other times I just think, you know, I love New York so much. Love my whole life and world. I would miss it tremendously, because it's the centre still of... I have so many amazing friends that I know here, and so many worlds that I can move between. Actually having the podcast, it's really fun, just sort of reanimate my passion for books and people that I wouldn't necessarily be coming across in my work with the live work I'm doing. So, this is quite a contented phase. And my kids are my best friends, and it's all very nice.

**And last question then if I may is, what advice would you give to someone starting out their career in journalism, if you had a young niece or a friend and that was just starting out and they asked you for advice. What would it be?**

Yes. I would say go somewhere really small that needs you. Don't get seduced by some big brand. Don't go and work for BuzzFeed or something. Go and work for some small publication or some... first of all, with somebody who can teach you something. Who will be your teacher in that place? You want to work with someone

who's got a lot of quality and rigour, and you can be around them, something where you have to do a lot because there's nobody else. If there's four of you putting out some little magazine or something or some small start-up whatever, you are going to learn so much more than if you are working, I don't know, at The New York Times getting somebody's coffee for years and doing their schedule. It's great. And the third thing is just the rigour of work. Just don't expect it to come without that. And that's my three big maxims of the day, Paul.

**Tina. It's been an incredibly enjoyable conversation. Thank you for being a guest on the Second Best Podcast in the World after TBD with Tina Brown.**

Oh, you are very sweet.

**But thank you. It's been hugely enjoyable.**

Thank you so much.