

## **Anna Palmer**

**CEO & Founder, Punchbowl News**

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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 joined down the line from Washington DC by Anna Palmer, founder and CEO of Punchbowl News, the essential Washington DC news community, and host of the Daily Punch Podcast. Focused on Power, People and Politics in Washington, Punchbowl delivers daily newsletters analysing the politics of governing, and the exercise of power in DC. Anna has covered congressional leadership, the lobbying industry, presidential campaigns and the politics of governing for more than 15 years. The co-author of *The Hill to Die On: The Battle for Congress and the Future of Trump's America*, Anna was previously Washington correspondent for Politico and co-created its top-rated Politico Playbook newsletter franchise. Anna, thank you for joining me.**

Thanks so much for having me.

**I mean, it's been an absolutely fascinating time for Washington insiders, with Biden trying to win backing for his 'Build Back Better' bill. Do you think that these are the most interesting times you've covered or is it more that you're just grateful for the fact that Trump isn't there sort of causing a consternation on a near hourly basis?**

Oh, it's a fascinating time to be in Washington for sure. Anytime there's change there's power. There was an election in Virginia where a Republican Glenn Youngkin one over Terry McAuliffe, which is really going to upset the political dynamic here in Washington. It keeps us in business because people want to know what's happening.

**Tell us about the journey. When you launched Punchbowl, you were competing against the political franchise that you created, what motivated you to set up on your own?**

Yeah, it was an interesting time. I had been at Politico almost 10 years and we were coming to the end of the Trump administration. And if you look at Politico's rise, if you look at Axios' rise, they really started at the beginning of, for Politico it was the rise of the Obama administration, for Axios, it was really a Trump era publication. And we felt like a Biden administration was going to be this return to really legislative deal-making in Washington. And that's really where our background, our real skillset is, is what's

happening in the Capitol. What's that relationship like with the White House and the industries that they are trying to kind of influence them. The reason why we came up with Punchbowl News is that Punchbowl is the nickname for the secret service of the Capitol. And so we kind of live and report among members of Congress and those that are really trying to do the business of Washington.

**What was the unique proposition at the time? Obviously, the DC's covered by a plurality, a huge amount of media outlets. Did you have a vision for the way that you were going to go about doing it?**

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, I think you mentioned it in the intro, power, people, politics, that's really our north star. And so we focus on the leadership in Washington, the people that are really at the top of the triangle and that's the speaker, Nancy Pelosi, Senate majority leader, Chuck Schumer, Senate minority leader, Mitch McConnell, Kevin McCarthy and then their relationship with the president and their top aides. And so we really are trying to get a behind-the-scenes forecast of it in terms of what is actually going to happen, in terms of all the legislative deal-making, but really getting into the substance of it as well. There's a lot of people in Washington that are covering things from a partisan lens, whether that's Republican or liberal, and we really are wildly non-person, we are just focused on what's actually happening.

**I imagine that has many advantages. Of course, you're interviewing top political leaders from across the aisle, but is there a disadvantage that you get fewer opportunities to interview the partisans in a sense, because they know that they want people who are going to look at it through their lens and portray it from their point of view.**

I think from our perspective, we get the best kind of reporting because we can talk to the most conservative members of Congress and operatives and the most liberal members of Congress and operatives. And I would also say, because things are so partisan here and there's so little, kind of reaching across the aisle or even friendships right now between Republicans and Democrats, they actually read us. Because they want to know what the other side is thinking. And so we can kind of provide that lens and we really, the people who are reading us are very, very busy. So we have to come to them with insights and news that nobody else has. And that's been, I think, one of the real recipes for our success so far.

**I mean, tell us how the journey's gone along the way, what have been the ups and the downs?**

Yeah, it's been pretty wild. I will say we have been really gratified by how quickly we have been able to grow and how quickly the community has adopted us. You know, we were veteran reporters who have kind of lived among the hill for a really long time, but, you know, we sent our first email announcing what we were going to do on January 1st. We sent our first newsletters on January 3rd and then January 6th happened. And we had two of our co-founders in the Capitol when the insurrection happened, John Bresnahan and Jake Sherman. I mean, that was terrifying. You know we were trying to report on what was happening, make sure they were safe. But at the same time, as bad as it was for democracy in a real scar on this country's history, it also was a point in time

where the entire world wanted to know what was happening inside the Capitol. And so we really had an ability to kind of put out information, go on television, go on the airwaves and really get Punchbowl News' name out there beyond just kind of the Washington community. I think the other thing is, we've grown, we started with four of us, we're up to eight right now. And we've been able to do a lot of really interesting custom products and different things to really tell the story of what's happening here in Washington, in I think a very compelling way.

**I mean, you must like and get along with politicians from both sides, do you believe like I do that most of them are essentially trying to do their best and they regret just how poisonous the atmosphere is at the moment?**

I think that's right. I mean, I think one of the things that is really helpful for our reporting is, our reporters are in the Capitol every day, they live among the members of Congress and are not necessarily friends, but when you have to ask questions, you want to press them. You want to get information every single day, you have to go back to them. You do see the human side of it. And I think that shows through in our reporting and shows through in terms of our access and ability to really speak with everyone in a really beginning kind of daily basis to the speaker of the house, as well as the leader of the Senate Republicans, Mitch McConnell.

**Tell us about the power of newsletters. Cause I mean, you look at sub stack and, and all of these kinds of platforms. It seems to be that we're going back to the old way of doing regular emails. Is that the way for time-poor people to interact with news media these days?**

It's funny, what's old is new, right? When I came to Washington in 2004, I worked at a company focused on lobbying, money and politics, and we wrote a biweekly that's an every other week newsletter for that industry. And now I have started a company that does three newsletters a day. So I think that is emblematic of one, the fact that just the new cycle is so much faster than it once was. And number two, the reason why I think email works is because that's where people are particularly our readers in Washington and executives around the world who want to know what's happening in Washington. We've done a ton of surveys, do you want us to have apps? Where do you want us to reach you? And the vast majority are very comfortable with the concept of the newsletter. They liked its deliverability. We also do a daily podcast, which I think has also been very popular because people get up in the morning and they're super busy. And it's a way for us to kind of distill the top three things that we're thinking about every morning. But I think what's interesting about the subset trend is that some of these big behemoth news organisations are trying to figure out their way in the 21st century. And you have a lot of individuals who are much more entrepreneurial and want to go out on their own. We kind of look at ourselves as content creators plus. We aren't a sub stack that's just an individual doing a newsletter. We are a news community. We also do a lot of events. And so our case is our readers are our sources are people that are looking to interact and convene sometimes our sponsors. And there's that ecosystem that we want to foster.

**Do you have a typical reader in mind when you're writing your articles? I mean, you obviously said that you have a good level of dialogue with your readers. Do**

**they share lots of things in common, other than being interested in what's happening on the hill and in the White House?**

I just think of it as you know, I say this a lot, I'm from North Dakota. So I grew up on a farm and you know, my mom loves what we're doing and she's a premium subscriber. She gets three newsletters a day and that's wonderful. I love when my mom reads what we're doing, but what we really care about is does Mitch McConnell the Senate Republican minority leader, does Nancy Pelosi's chief of staff read us. And if those two things are true, people that have very different diametrically, political beliefs and interests, then it's kind of concentric circles out. So we started in Washington, really focused on those operatives, those members of Congress, the leaders in the white house and for the first 10 months that was our real key. And now we're thinking about how we grow if you're an industry or an individual who cares about what's happening in Washington. We want you to be our reader as well, but we have to make sure that our center, our core reader stays very, very engaged. And we're laser-focused on that.

**I mean, you're a Washington insider, many of your readers are. How do you think the administration is being regarded on the hill? I mean, you're on the record of saying that the political states for the president couldn't be higher.**

Yeah. I think what happened, when you look at the Trump administration compared to the Biden administration, the Trump administration wasn't from Washington, he didn't particularly like to engage with Congress necessarily on a lot of different issues. And when you look at the Biden administration, you have an administration that's filled with people that have been in Washington or have been staffers around this town for a really long time. He himself was obviously a very long-term member of the institution. And so you see him doing a lot more shuttle diplomacy, right? Even in this most recent iteration on the infrastructure package, as well as this reconciliation package they're having meetings all the time. Bringing members of Congress to the white house. His staff is up on the hill trying to actually really be in the legislative details. It's just a totally different relationship. And for us, that's really what we want to cover. We want to be in the mix of, who's where? What do they say? Where's the potential opportunities for deal making? What are the potential pitfalls? And making sure that we're bringing our readers along the way.

**I mean, yourself and Punchbowl co-founder Jake Sherman have made Congress the center of your journalistic world. It must've been scary to see Congress itself turn into a war zone on January 6th. I mean, calling your book, 'The Hill To Die On' that must've had an eerie resonance.**

It does. And I think it is. I think it's a place where we spend the vast majority of our careers. Oftentimes Capitol Hill is a stopping point for a lot of reporters and even a lot of members of Congress, right, whether they want to go to the white house, they want to come on national politics. The hill is really the destination for us. And it's our center of gravity. And to have it under attack, a place that typically has such reverence and is a place that oftentimes feels a little bit, it doesn't move with the times as fast, it's still a very buttoned up place. People dress up. There's a lot of formalities there and to see it come under attack, I think was, was horrifying, absolutely horrifying. And I think there's a lot of reporters who are still dealing with the trauma of your workplace being under assault.

**What do you think is going to happen next? I appreciate you don't have a crystal ball, but you know, given that we're in such unprecedented times, I'd appreciate where you think things are going to go for the next couple of years?**

Right now America's really divided, I think. And I think there's obviously a lot of pessimism and concern around COVID, around the economy. I think that we are watching things play out in real time in terms of what's going to happen with the midterm election. And what happens with disinformation, which is a massive issue right now here in this country. And so we're going to be there covering it all the way through. The big thing that we focus on is what's happening inside the Capitol Washington. And I think for us going into 2022, it's really going to be what happens in this kind of election, the midterms, everyone's gonna be really turned to focus on that once January 1st habits.

**I mean, your book about Trump's first two years really brought to life the deal-making, the backstabbing of the power struggle that rocked Congress. Is that kind of stuff still going on now within the Republican party and will Trump be back?**

Oh, if I had that answer, I'd probably not be in this business. I think clearly the former president wants to play a big role in the midterms. I think he's looking at his potential political future and what that looks like in terms of a run for reelection or not. I don't think any final decisions have been made. We talk to people all the time in the rooms around and with him trying to get a sense of what that looks like. I think he clearly is the leader of the Republican party. It's where the vast majority of the energy for Republicans still remains in terms of the base of where their voters are. But what we've really seen and I think we're going to continue to see on the democratic side, which is this kind of push pull of the progressive left and some of the more establishment Democrats, and who's going to win out on some of the issues. And what happens in terms of the election, you know, was Biden elected as this centrist kind of elder figure who was supposed to bring the country back, or was he elected to have this kind of massive mandate on legislative issues that are much more progressive than I think we're seeing that really bad fight happened in every single day right now.

**I'm a huge fan of America. I used to spend a lot of time there before we're all banned from all the travel and everything, but I'm fascinated with what goes on on the hill. And it just seems to me that sometimes the animosity that's there seems almost irrecoverable. I mean, it surely can't get any worse?**

I would hope not. I do think we've seen a different generation of politicians come in and some that have really been elected on division and being divisive. And I think that plays out on the floor in ways that we didn't see before. I think the fact that you have members of Congress spending a lot less time here means that they don't necessarily have dinner or coffee or drinks with somebody from the other party. And so they don't have that kind of underlying trust, which I do think was a hallmark of Washington for a long time where you would say, hey, we might come at things from very different angles. I'm never going to agree with you on issues, but I think you're a good person. And that 'I think you're a good person' is getting lost more and more.

**One of the things that troubles me is I hate this sort of almost cliché phrase now 'post-truth' that we don't even seem to be able to agree on facts, but Obama once famously said we can disagree without being disagreeable. And I hugely respect that, but there seems to be a presumption of bad faith on both sides of the aisle now. Do you think that that ultimately will change? Are you an optimist? Or do you think that things can get worse before they get better?**

I think what we try to cover is what's actually happening. I think there is a lot of noise and we want to kind of get to the signal. And I do think you're seeing sometimes when there are Republicans and Democrats working together on certain issues, we've seen it, whether they've been ultimately successful or not, on police reform, we've seen members of the Democrats coming together with members of the Republican party and really trying in a substantive proactive way to work together. So I think sometimes that gets lost because the division and the fighting can often drive more ratings. And if there's a bias by journalists, sometimes I think it is less of whether you're a progressive or you're a conservative, and it's a much more of a bias towards conflict because that's what people read about.

**I'd like to ask you about your role day-to-day. I mean, what does the founder and chief executive of a new media news organisation do? If that doesn't sound too rude, a question, like, for example, in these time management books, they say sort of put your working week into a pie chart, what would the segments be? Are you doing audience engagement? Is it reporting, editing? What are the segments and how big are they in relation to each other?**

What's interesting about being an entrepreneur is that every day is different, for sure. And that's what I find engaging. I still am very involved in the morning newsletter, in terms of reporting on it and making sure the tone and the content is what we want it to read and be about. I host the daily podcast with Jake. We also do a lot of editorial events where some are virtual, some are in person. And so everything from booking the individuals to making sure what questions we're going to ask and that we have a production team there, but I also am very focused on audience growth. I work with a really great team around that in terms of how we're thinking about growth, how we're thinking about engagement with our readers. It's publicly been announced, we will hit more than \$10 million in revenue. It's clearly obviously focused on making sure that our sales goals are being met. And so depending on the day, you have an entire day focused on reporting, or you could have an entire day focused on making sure that we're doing the meetings that need to be done so that this is a successful business that has the ability to continue to grow. And we're very ambitious, I think, that we've started with a three newsletter a day product. We do some custom products and events, and I think you'll see us grow in 2022 in hopefully ways that we find are going to be really exciting.

**What's the best part of your job or the best part of your day, which are the parts that you look forward to the most?**

Oh, I still love reporting. I love writing. I think that's kind of the root of being a journalist is being curious, right? And so I think that definitely is not lost on me. But I enjoy that we're building a business that is sustainable and that is successful. And there's a lot of journalism in the US has had a hard time figuring out a way to be interesting, be a must

read and also find revenue streams. And so I hope that we can be on the frontier of where other journalism entities can kind of take lessons learned that this can be a thriving business. And if there is a real future for journalism in this country.

**To the extent that Trump and others have poisoned the well of civic society of this whole fake news agenda, you must come under attack as never before as well.**

Sure. I think we tried to do the work. I would say this, our focus is on the Capitol, we started in a post-Trump era. So we focused on Trump only as much that he is the future of the party and how members of Congress and the white house are dealing with him and his legacy. But we are really focused on what happens in the Capitol. And I think that lets us not be chasing clicks or kind of drama around the former president. We really are focused on what is actually happening here in Washington. What's going to happen on the infrastructure package. What's going to happen with government funding, what's going to happen on the debt limit. And I think for our readers, they come to us because they want unique insights on those things, less about the existential question of civic society and those are important questions. And there are people that are doing very important work on it. It's just not our focus.

**When you launched Punchbowl, you were competing against the Politico franchise that you created, is it a case of a rising tide lifts all boats? And there's plenty of time out there, like I subscribe to HBO and Netflix, it's never a choice or do you have sort of direct competitors? Is it like that scene in Anchorman where the crews are in the car park and about to fight each other?**

Yeah, I'm super proud of what we were able to do at Politico. We took over a legacy franchise that had only had one person doing it. And I'm excited to see what they're doing in its next iteration. I think for us, we wanted to do something different. I think we're clearly competitive and we're competitors, but our focus is what makes us unique. And I think that legislative deal-making with relationships with the power players in Washington and how they're interacting with each other, we believe is a unique value proposition.

**I mean, clearly you personally have the Midas touch don't you? That Politico franchise doubled its revenue, tripled its readership under your leadership. How is Punchbowl doing on its metrics? How do you define that? Because I imagine that once you set the standards by which you want to be measured yourself, that's what you're then going to succeed at.**

Yeah, absolutely. I think we have very ambitious goals. We've publicly said we've accumulated more than a hundred thousand subscribers in the first 10 months of our broad morning newsletter. And we have a more than a million dollar business on paid subscribers. We are very bullish about where that is going to go between now and 2022. We are revitalizing our website and we're in the middle of that, which we're very excited about. I think we have set very big goals for ourselves, but I think we have blown past our own expectations in the first year. I mean, I don't think if you had asked me to write down on January 1st where our revenue would be at the end of the year I would have had a big smile on my face if it had reached \$10 million, which it did.

**Well, congratulations. Could you walk our listeners through your career? Did you always want to be a journalist? How did you start out? Because no one's career goes in a straight line, does it? I'm inspired by people's ups and downs and how they recover from setbacks and so on. It'd be interesting if you could walk us through where you got to, you were born at an early age now you're where you are, what happened in between?**

Yes, I'm from North Dakota. I grew up on a farm. My parents are not involved in politics. But I think I've wanted to be a reporter ever since I was a little kid watching Connie Chung and Katie Couric and a lot of women on television. And I like to ask questions and challenge authority, probably my mother would say. And so I have always wanted to do that. I went to school at a small liberal arts college, St. Olive college in Minnesota, and that didn't have a big journalism program, but I knew I wanted to do that. And so I kind of was doing internships a lot more aggressively than people were probably doing when I was in college. And so I lived in Cheyenne, Wyoming, and I did television, on-air reporting and I did production in Rochester, Minnesota at a TV station. And then I spent a semester instead of going abroad. I went to Washington and I did a semester here and stayed the summer. And I had interned at a newspaper that was kind of like Capitol hill newspaper at the time. And then did a couple of internships that summer and waitressed, and really moved out to DC with resumes and waitress shoes. I had no kind of idea of how I was going to get a job. And I started at a convention company called Influence and I kind of faked my way into the job. I didn't have a lot of reporting experience, but I basically said, I'll ask anybody anything, I'm happy to. And I covered coming out of the Bush administration. And so there were a bunch of people that were very powerful in Washington that were leaving the public sector and we're going to go to the private sector to become lobbyists or different kinds of operatives. And they had, you know, been interviewed by the highest level of Washington and then all of a sudden kind of weren't as interesting. And so I really got a great viewpoint of Washington as a reporter in a different way than most people. Most people come in as politics reporters or Capitol hill reporters. I really was a money and politics reporter. So thinking about how industry has tried to influence what happens in Washington, and it really gave me a great vantage point to kind of consider the entire ecosystem of power in Washington. And so after doing that, I went to another publication called Legal Times. And that's really when the Jack Abramoff lobbying scandal happened, it was kind of the biggest time where all of a sudden this cottage industry that not a lot of people paid attention to was on the front page.

**He got 3 years in prison didn't he and about 20 other people were convicted?**

Exactly, exactly. And so I did that and then I was able to go over and worked at Roll Call. I covered speaker Pelosi's first speakership. I wrote their gossip column for a little bit. I said a lot of different things I didn't quite know exactly what I wanted to do. And Jim Vandehei, who was head of Politico at that time, recruited me to come over to Politico to go and help them start their lobbying coverage. And I really was kind of done with it. I thought I was going to be a Capitol hill reporter. This is what I want to do. And he basically said if you kill the competition and really make a splash in this, you can do whatever you want to do here. And to his word he was right and Politico was really a wonderful place. It was a startup kind of environment, it was a couple hundred people if that, when I joined. And so I started covering lobbying, but then I was able to do a lot of

really interesting things. I covered Romney's presidential campaign for a little bit and traveled with him. I did a deep dive on military sex assault and kind of how Congress was grappling with how to deal with those rules. And then I was out on the campaign trail and covering the election for the presidency. And it was announced that Jim and Mike Allen, who was writing playbook at the time and had been the founding kind of author, were leaving to start their own company. And so Jake and I decided we were not the obvious choice. I will say this. I think now it's funny because people probably think we were, but at the time we were just kind of their reporters there. And we wrote memos and we convinced them that we were the people to take it over, that there was nobody better. And it was such a great learning lesson because you really became the steward of something that was bigger than coming up with stories and reporting them out and getting them written, which is a great career for a lot of people, but this is really becoming the leader of their flagship publication. And so if we try to revitalise it, we modernized, we worked on audience, and thinking through all that, it really laid the groundwork for us, I think, to do what we do now. So we did that for five years and wrote a book. And at the same time, I also took over Women Rule, which was their platform, which was about women's leadership and empowerment. I was able to grow that into an international platform at Davos. And we did day-long seminars and things like that. So it was a windy career. There's been ups and downs for sure. But it all kind of led to this, which if you'd asked me five years ago, do you think you'd have started your own news company? I would never have said that. I think one of the lessons I've learned is to take the opportunity and reach for the ring even if you don't necessarily have the qualifications on paper to do it.

**It's incredible because you're obviously very talented, very driven, very disciplined, but I wonder to what extent, luck plays a part in anyone's career because when I look back at sort of the setbacks of my career and the things that have been brilliant, some of it is just meeting the right person at the right time.**

I think that you can be good any day of the week, but being lucky and taking that opportunity, I think that is the thing that has been the game changer in my career and probably it is in most people's career, right? I mean, yes, you have to network, yes you have to work hard, yes you hopefully can make some smart decisions along the way. But I think being willing to take chances and kind of take that luck by the horns has really been a big player in my career. For sure.

**I mean, when you were at Politico, as you mentioned, you took the lead in Women Rule, the project focusing on expanding the leadership opportunities for women. If you could tell us a bit more about that, hosting the podcast, speaking at Davos, as you said. I suppose what I'm asking is, is Washington a bit of a throwback in terms of equal opportunities, or do you think that you managed to make great strides in addressing the issue?**

I think, so Women Rule started when there was a big women's class of members of Congress coming to Washington. And it was a real sense of optimism around women's leadership. And I was there when it started in the room, kind of thinking through all of it. And it went through a bunch of different iterations and I think has grown over time because the issues have changed. And I think Washington for sure, used to be a largely white male dominated industry. And I think there has been change here in Washington. I

think there probably remains a lot of challenges and things that need to be changed. I was interested in forcing some of those conversations, thinking about what the role women and diversity was playing in corporate America, certainly on Capitol hill. And I think there was a real thirst for that conversation among us, so we started a newsletter. I did the podcast, which was really popular and super interesting to hear stories of how women were able to kind of get to the top of their career, the challenges they faced that were more inspirational. And we did a full day Washington summit as well as we did in the LA summit. We were in Davos speaking on these issues. I mean, there have been strides, but I think there are still a lot of challenges and not being afraid to have those conversations and being a real convener on those issues was something that I found extremely gratifying. And it was something I remained personally very passionate about.

### **Do you think Washington itself takes these issues seriously?**

I do think that there's a reckoning, I think as this country in general is having a reckoning on race, on socioeconomic issues. I think that you have started to have a next generation of leadership that also takes this very seriously. As you just see generationally new people coming into very senior positions of power. And so I do think that it's taking it seriously. I can change takes time and change is hard. And those kinds of growth moments don't always come in headlines. I do think that we see that on Capitol hill where there's much more of a conversation about pipeline and the need for making sure that internships, for example, are no longer unpaid, because that means there's only a certain kind of demographic of people who could actually do those internships. Now they're all paid. Airbnb came in this last week, it was helping with housing for fellows. And so there's an interesting, also kind of public private sector working together that I think hopefully will develop even more.

**I mean, we have the same quote unquote debate in the UK about paid and unpaid internships. I think the only ethical choice is to pay your interns and people starting out. Otherwise it's only the children of reasonably affluent families that can afford to subsidise their children while they're working for nothing. And this should be paid if the job's worth doing it's worth being paid for.**

Absolutely. And I think even in journalism, we've had a huge reckoning in our industry in the US around this, because diversity is super important, because your vantage point for how you cover something and your life experience impacts that coverage. And so that's not just a partisan thing, but I think for myself growing up in a really rural place. And so I think that is really an important thing to foster. And so, fundamentally, I think pay and equal pay and pay that can be a living wage is something that journalism and also, I think people that are in government need to push for.

**When you're covering political issues in terms of the cut and thrust of what's happening in the island, and whether you think things might work or not, and so on and so forth, how do you sort of switch off for your own personal views? I've absolutely no doubt of your professionalism that you do do that, but do you often then sort of write it impartially and then when you're on the train or driving home, you then think, well, what do I think about this as a citizen?**

I've been doing this a long time. So I think honestly, if anything, you become more cynical about motives and things like that. I have very little, I don't spend a ton of my time thinking about how it impacts my life. I think we think a lot about what's the coverage, what's the impact for folks in general, we want to make sure that we also forecast a lot of things and that's not my opinion. I think people sometimes get irritated at us, but we're often right, because we think about people's motives, how it's gonna work, and we try to play that out down the line. So I think one of the things that is a hallmark of our careers, that we're very proud of. I think if you read our book, *The Hill To Die On*, it is a very honest telling of what happened and it's honest on all sides. And the thing that I found very gratifying about it is afterwards, everybody's still talked to us. So it wasn't the most positive portrayal, but I think people felt like we were honest about our assessment.

**I speak to friends and anecdotally they say they're jaded that they like to switch off from politics because they're de-motivated about how poisonous the thing is. But on the other hand, you look at record engagement in the last election. For example, it's almost become more ubiquitous. The more people seem annoyed with it.**

Yeah. I mean, I think the last election, the last presidential election in 2020 was an existential crisis. Whether you are a conservative or a liberal in this country, you know, you felt like the world was about to end. And you clearly saw that in terms of the record amount of issues that were being taken up. And I failed the time, the battlefield that was in the country. If people cared about the election, then they should really care about what's happening in the Capitol, because whether it's abortion rights or voting rights or police reform, or your taxes, the decisions actually get made here in Washington. And so you can't just shut off. And every four years voice what you think on things. So that to me is a real opportunity in terms of making sure that people do stay engaged in their communities. And whether it's because they were so frustrated or not, civic engagement in general is so important and voting and feeling like you have a purpose. No matter your political belief is something that I feel very strongly about.

**I mean, the old cliché joke was if you want a friend in Washington, get a dog, and I wondered what your relationship was like behind the scenes with politicians on both sides? Can you sort of relax and be yourself? Are they always guarded? Or if they tell you something off the record, do they know you can respect that and actually you can just talk to them? How does it actually work? The old Hollywood cliché again, is that the actors that played villains tend to be the nicest people in real life and vice versa, those that appear virtuous on screen tend to be rude to everyone. Is it a bit like that in Washington, too?**

I think that everybody's human. And I think that you spend a lot of time on the hill covering these people. So you get to know them as people. I don't spend a ton of my personal time hanging out with politicians. I think it's important to have other interests. And for me to have friends that are outside of this industry, kind of keeps you a little bit more honest. And I like to talk about things other than work. So I think that also helps you stay a little bit more human instead of just kind of being on a one track.

**Keeping it real, as the young people used to say back in the day! I was going to say, when you talk to these sort of real people, these non-politicals, your friends and family and so on, are they inquisitive that they want you to like what I'm trying to do now, i'm trying to get you to sort of reveal things behind the scenes. How does it really work, et cetera, et cetera.**

Of course. I mean, people are fascinated, right? Passing it by politics. I think there's a lot of opinions about journalism right now. And whether your enemy of the people or your fake news. And I think there's a natural curiosity particularly about what's happening in Washington at this time. I think it's good to talk about, and it's good to make sure that people can understand that whether you're a person of your opposite political beliefs is not your enemy. Right, I try to kind of reveal that, but I mean, as far as what people are necessarily like in person, I mean, I think we just try to do our job and make sure that we're doing it to the best of our ability. And I do think one of the hallmarks that Punchbowl News has been able to do is really be able to hold events that both very senior Republicans and very senior Democrats go to, which I think is an important convening space to be a part of that needs that we want to foster as much as possible

**Was politics always going to be all beat when you look back now, was it destiny? And what do you ever consider another beat? Who could you be the transport correspondent for USA today, maybe 10 years from now?**

Yes, I would love to be, yeah, I love to travel. If there's anybody who's hiring for a travel writer, let me know. No, I think that what I find on a mentally interesting about Washington is really charting power and the fact that there's new people and new dynamics and what happens in the midterms will up and potentially the entire Biden administration's agenda. On January 6th, not only did the insurrection happen, but you had Warnock win in Georgia and let that all of a sudden changed everything. And so to me, I think most reporters who were successful are inherently curious, and it's the changing dynamic that allows for someone like myself to spend as much time as I have covering one institution, as long as I have, and still find it really fundamentally interesting.

**Your book 'The Hill To Die On' was a New York Times bestseller. Do you have a sequel or a second book or something else in the pipeline?**

Not right now, I think a lot of people told us the first time that no one was going to buy a book about Congress and we proved them wrong on that. It was a really well-suited well-timed book, particularly given just the dynamics in Washington. Right now, we are super focused on what's happening with Punchbowl News, growing that readership. I never say never, but the book writing process is an interesting one and Jake and I are really great partners and the business partners and editorial partners. So if he comes to me in a week, we'll see, but I don't think at this point, we're not working on anything right now.

**What's top of your to-do list at the moment. And I don't mean to sort of take out the laundry. I mean, sort of in the medium term in terms of the direction of travel of where you want to take things and also are there any sorts of blockages or challenges that you're dealing with at the moment?**

Good question, I think that I'm very focused on 2022, trying to think about how we build out this business, in terms of other business lines and areas of coverage, where do we think we can make our Punchbowl News mark? As you mentioned earlier, it's a very crowded space, so whatever we do, we have to do it in a different compelling way that our readers are going to really feel like they're getting something that they aren't getting anywhere else. I think it's a huge challenge and an opportunity. And I think we're trying to really build out the team. That this is definitely a different role, hiring people, finding really good talented people that are as committed to what we are at our value sets and being a leader in that is something that I enjoy, but is extremely challenging. And you hope that you can kind of find people that are going to be the right fit. And so I spend a lot of time thinking strategically about how we are building and growing for the future. Being able to scale, all of those things are really big challenges.

**I mean, to what extent are you like a manager of a football or a soccer team where if you're reading good journalism in the Wall Street Journal or the New York Times or anything, you're straight away thinking, wow can we poach this journalist? How can we get him or her, is it a bit like that where you've got a beady eye on talent?**

I think that's part of it, one of the things we've tried to do is bring on people who aren't necessarily in our industry or, and I mean, it's much more prevalent on the business side and our growth side of things, I don't think you have to be in journalism and you have to work in a subscription business that has to do with editorial, to mean you can be successful there. And so it's a little bit more of thinking about the tools somebody needs. I want to be creative in that way. We're not looking to recreate what other companies are doing. And so that gives us an opportunity to look outside necessarily the typical lens of, okay, how many years of experience in journalism do they have? Certainly when it comes to our editorial talent we are going to look to people that have some experience and are going to grow that. And of course you want to look at your competitors and see who's doing what, and how you might be able to utilise them best. But we've had a lot of interest from people coming to us. We've been pretty careful. I think we want to make sure that we keep our voice, that we keep the consistency, that we have the ability to continue to have that trust with our reader. And to do that, you have to, I think particularly on the editorial side, grow very smartly.

**What advice would you give to someone listening to this podcast? That's perhaps taking the first steps along the way in their career in journalism that's inspired by your success. Do you have any do's and don'ts or any sort of painful lessons that you would share with someone over a whiskey in a bar late at night? Could you share them with our listeners now?**

I would say a couple of things. One, being underestimated isn't the worst thing. You know, I came into Washington with somebody who has no connections. I didn't go to the right school, journalism school or otherwise. And I had bleached blonde hair and a nose ring at that time. And I covered mostly older white men who had a ton more money and essentially more power than me, but they told me a lot of things because they didn't take me seriously. And I was able to really create a career on that basis. So I think sometimes it's very easy to think, hear me I'm here, but being underestimated really allows you to over-perform, whether you're a reporter. I think a lot of people underestimated what we were going to be able to do with Punchbowl News. And that's great because then you

can kind of exceed people's expectations of you. I think the second thing I would say, particularly, for women or for people that feel kind of as there are others in a newsroom or in a business is that asking for help is hard sometimes because you want to show that you don't need any help, but I think some of the best advice I've gotten and probably the true mentors, not somebody who necessarily has a title with them or a forced mentorship. People are good humans. And if you ask somebody else, how does this work, or what do I need to do? Or how would you approach it? You'd be surprised at how willing people are to help. I think those are two things. I think the other thing I said earlier, but I really do think is if you see an opportunity, don't wait for somebody to tell you, you should apply for it, or you should do this, or you're so qualified, right? You should do the job that you're not quite qualified for yet, or at least go for it because you might not get it the first time but you'll be surprised at how many times people haven't thought of you because they're busy with other parts of their jobs or their lives. And you can really set yourself up to succeed. I think, by going for the gig, even though you might not be the odds on favorite.

**If you don't mind me asking and you may well say this is none of my business, but do you have any sort of medium to long-term plans? Where will we see Punchbowl News 5, 10, 15 years from now?**

TBD? No, I think we are very much in the plan phase. We're not going to get too out in front of our skis. I think we are super excited about how far we've come this far. And I think we have ambitious plans that we're going to continue to roll out as they are finalized, as they're really thought out. I think we want to be very thoughtful about what we take on next to make sure that it can be executed upon as well as what we do as our core business. And also there's a business model behind it. I think that sometimes it's easy to talk about the future and have everybody get excited about it, but we try to be pretty thoughtful in terms of our planning process.

**15 years ago, the editor of the Spectator was a journalist, Boris Johnson, who in the United Kingdom now of course is our prime minister. So there is some precedent for journalists and editors to end up, I don't know where this poacher turned gamekeeper or the other way round, but will there ever be a Palmer Sherman ticket for DC for the white house?**

I don't think so. No. I think we are much more comfortable behind the scenes and writing about the folks that want to do that. I have absolutely no interest in politics. It's something that I find fascinating and to understand the motivation, but you really have to have a fire in the belly, particularly here in terms of how much you're going to get critiqued and how people dig into your background. And also just sounding a real viewpoint of what your politics are and what you think. To think that you're one of a hundred, if you're going to be a Senator you're 1 of 435, that that should be making the decisions for this country. That takes a lot of belief in that you have kind of the right, the right theories of the case. And then I'll stick with where I'm at now. I think I'm much better suited for this line of business.

**I would love to be prime minister, but unfortunately no one would vote for me, which means that I'll have to sort of just settle for having this podcast. Do you feel sorry for politicians these days, whichever side of the aisle you're on. For**

**example, you know, they'll deference to our political parties has gone, issues like the resurgence of Trump and Brexit in the UK seems to divide families. They cut across party lines and whatever you say, someone's going to have a go at you. I remember the Taylor Swift problem. For the past 10 years, people were saying, why don't you use your platform and say something political, it's not right that you would remain silent. And the minute she says anything, half the people say, well, what's it got to do with you? How dare you! Shut up and sing! That type of thing, you're damned if you do and you're damned if you don't.**

Yeah. I think politicians choose careers where they know that all of their opinions, everything they've done, it's going to be scrutinised. And I think sometimes that's difficult. Right? I think it means that some people who could be very qualified and who might be interested in saying, I'm going to take a pass. This seems not for me. But I think it is just a reality. And I think what you're seeing on the influencer space is very different today than what we saw 10 years ago, right. The kind of shut up and sing or play basketball doesn't work anymore. And people have massive platforms that they are able to use to promote their own positions and whether that's super political or other things. So I just think that that's a reality that is not going to go away anytime soon.

**Anna, that was a hugely interesting conversation. Thank you ever so much for your time and the best of luck with Punchbowl News.**

Thank you so much. I really enjoyed our conversation.