

## **Batya Ungar-Sargon**

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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 by Batya Ungar-Sargon, deputy opinion editor of Newsweek and author of a provocative new book arguing that "wokeness" in the media is harming democracy. Before her Newsweek role, Batya was the opinion editor of The Forward, the largest Jewish media outlet in America. She has written for the New York Times, the Washington Post, Foreign Policy and the New York Review of Books Daily, and appeared numerous times on MSNBC, CNN and other media TV outlets. She holds a PhD from the University of California, Berkeley. Her new book, Bad News: How Woke Media Is Undermining Democracy has been called "a flash of lightning, giving illumination to our current cultural dysfunction." Batya, thank you for joining me.**

Thank you so much for having me. I'm really honoured to be here.

**I think the book is absolutely fascinating. I mean, congratulations on it. To understate the matter significantly it's provoked quite a lot of debates. Are you pleased with the reaction that it's got?**

Oh, that's so kind of you. I'm so pleased with the reaction that it's gotten and I'll tell you one of the things that I'm most pleased about is that it was not siloed as a right wing conservative critique. Now I don't think it's an insult to be called conservative, but the book is really a left wing critique of the left today and I'm really, really grateful that it's being perceived that way. Of course, there's a lot of interest on the right whenever you criticise the left, but I've just been super honoured and humbled by the interest across the spectrum, which is really how I intended it. So yeah, I am pleased.

**Your thesis is that journalism has been transformed from a blue collar trade to an increasingly an elite liberal profession losing touch with working class readers, you say.**

Yeah, absolutely. And actually this is even more extreme in the UK. I think something like over 90% of journalists in the UK come from really the elites. In America now

92% of American journalists have a college degree and most of them have a graduate degree. And they're really in the top 10% of Americans in terms of earning potential throughout their careers. And this is a huge departure from journalism historically, which really was a blue collar trade throughout the 20th century. Back in 1937, there was a study of the elite journalists, the Washington cohort, that found that less than half of them had a college degree. So you compare that to today and you see that real status revolution among journalists. And as they ascended to the ranks of the American elites, they really abandoned the working class that they used to belong to both in terms of subject matter and in terms of readers. And this was really amplified recently by digital media because the digital media business model's very much built on catering to a niche audience. And so for the vast majority of publications on the left or left of centre, they're now all catering to the same six, seven, 8 million Americans who are highly educated elites and consider themselves progressives. And they've really abandoned everybody else.

**It's a problem, isn't it? I just spoke with a gentleman called Linton Crosby here in the UK. He was the advisor to David Cameron when he was prime minister, when he won the election. And he said, the problem with a lot of journalists and communications professionals is they won't go out into the regions. They don't go out and meet real people. They're in an echo chamber. It's the same people on Twitter and reading the comment pages of The Wall Street Journal and so on, there's left of centre, progressive, but they're all talking to each other and agreeing with each other. And that's why Brexit happened, that's why Trump got in because these so-called communications professionals actually aren't doing their job, which is to win real people over.**

Yeah. When you only live in a neighborhood where everybody is exactly like you and thinks what you think it's much easier to then smear everybody who disagrees with you as racist or xenophobic. And that's exactly what happened with Brexit and exactly what happened with Trump and what the liberal media really missed was that a lot of this stuff that they called right wing fanaticism, racism, xenophobia was actually class based, it was actually about economics and economic anxiety because they both didn't know anybody who was voting for Trump and don't know anybody who's experiencing economic anxiety. Because journalists now are affluent. And so they live among other affluent liberals and they live on the coast and exactly like you said, they don't go out into the region and when they go out into the heartlands, into the middle America and they meet Trump voters, they invariably find some excuse to smear them as racist. And so I totally agree with you. It really stems from the great sequestering of highly educated liberals who are affluent and now live amongst each other and write for each other and speak to each other and they do so on Twitter as you say, and sadly, our politicians are increasingly taking their cues from Twitter instead of going out and talking to the American people. And what you do when you do that is you find that people are a lot less divided than we think, they're a lot less divided than our politicians in class want us to believe. Of course they want us to believe everyone's divided because they make a lot of money off of that. But you talk to people who are working class in America and they just couldn't care less who their friends and coworkers voted for, they never talk about it, it doesn't come up. It's just

so not important to them in the way that it has become the lifeblood of the upper crust in America.

**There doesn't seem to be any self-reflection that Trump won, these people lost, Brexit happened, if we don't want it to happen again, surely we need to heed your call that we do need journalism to start to look like the society it reports on and to.**

So why do you think that they're not self reflecting? Like what's your thesis about why they're not doing the obvious thing which is realising what a mess they've made and course correcting.

**For me, it seems to be the easy thing to do. Isn't it? They can say, well, it's our job to ask the questions as if that somehow exonerate them as if that's it, you've got to ask the right questions of the right people. I mean, I still find it fascinating that CNN ran two hours of Trump's rallies day after day when he was the candidate seeking the nomination and they wonder why he won.**

Right. You can't buy the kind of publicity that he got for free. It's absolutely true. There was this real symbiotic relationship between Trump and the mainstream media who would sort of put on this big show of being in this adversarial relationship with him, but they were totally addicted to him and they remain totally addicted to him. They can't stop talking about January 6th, even though the country has totally moved on from that. I completely agree with you. It's so baked into the business model and it ends up reproducing the worst parts of it instead of actually incentivising people to produce a better product.

**Do you think it's human nature though? That it's the negative stories, the angry clickers that are most likely to click it's the confrontation. If you are at a pleasant cocktail party and everyone's having a nice conversation and someone's walks in and starts shouting, it's just human nature that they command the attention of the room. It seems to be that social media and today's modern media landscape reward poor behaviour. The shouters, the divisive people.**

It's so funny because when you think about it from a class point of view, you would think that like the factory floor or the cop bar, or any one of these places that caters class people, or as full of working class people would be a place where there's aggressiveness and rage and fighting over politics and stuff like that. And that in the elite circles, there's this sort of more cultivated civil approach to things. And it's the exact opposite. And I'm curious if this is true in Britain as well, I just don't know. But in America, it's the exact opposite: unions and working class workplaces are full of people who disagree about things and never would dream of fighting about it. You know, it's this person's pro-life, this person's pro-choice and that's completely fine.

That's between you and your God, right. We're here to work and to focus on what unites us, not what divides us. And it's the political elites and the journalistic elites who are in a rage, like a state of constant road rage over the fact that people disagree with them. Like people just don't agree with them about abortion, right. And they cannot stand it and they cannot stand how little influence they have to change the minds of average Americans who don't live the way that they do. And I think to a certain extent, it seems to me like it's not human nature because this is something that exists only in people who are wealthy. I think it's a function of what happens when you no longer feel the pinch of economic anxiety? Well, the thing that happened in America is they made it now a dog whistle to even bring up the fact that some people have economic anxiety, right? Like that's sort of the new thing. If you talk about Trump voters as having economic anxiety that's racist. I would dispute that this is sort of about human nature and I think that the reason you see the leaning into outrage is because that's what elites want. So the New York Times, for example, has always catered to the elites. It's always been a reflection of the sort of ruling class norms and for much of its history, the 20th century, what the ruling class wanted was they pretty much saw themselves as above partisanship. There was this sense that they wanted the news reported straight. They wanted to be able to read a Republican alongside a Democrat in the New York Times opinion pages. That was sort of what it meant to be an upper crust American. Today's opposite, the New York Times is essentially sensationalism for the rich. They want to read things that make them extremely angry. And those things are Donald Trump and white supremacy. And so you'll see those words over and over and over in the New York Times, because they make the highly educated affluent readership that they're after, the white readership that they're after click. And so what you saw is a business model in journalism that went from trying to get the broadest swath of readers to now really zeroing in on the people who are most likely to engage, who like you say, are the most angry and the most extreme and the most enraged. But it's not the nation, it's the elites.

**It seems to me journalism is under serious trouble in terms of lack of resources. For example, I'm from York and our local newspaper, The Yorkshire Evening Press used to have a newsroom with like 50 journalists in it. Now it has three and they're competing against every other tile on your phone, Netflix, Audible, everything else. And so no one's buying newspapers anymore and good journalism needs to be paid for. So even though I don't condone what's happening, because I agree with you, I can see why they're doing it because it's the clicks that drive the revenue, ultimately.**

Yes, it's true. There is a kind of just capitalistic explanation for this, although that wouldn't explain why NPR, which gets funding from the government and is sort of going down this road or why the BBC would be getting woke. Actually I don't know to the extent that that's true, but I would say that a place like the New York Times is supposed to have a higher calling than just being a profit driven institution. And while a lot of local papers have closed because they literally were no longer able to keep the doors open, they were just no longer viable from a purely economic point of view. What we've really seen is corporations chasing profit through outrage to a degree that I think undermines just the business they're in. Like if you're just gonna be in it for profit, go produce reality TV, which is great. We need reality TV. It's amazing. I

love it. But don't tell me that you're producing the news when what you're actually doing is catering to the desires of rich people under the guise of social justice. That's the thing that I think is really problematic about it is that so much of this that's happening on the left is done with this veneer of 'we're the good guys we're on the right side of history, you guys are all racist, you guys are all evil' and what they're doing is chasing a profit. And in terms of just the viability of local news, it is tragic. It is tragic that it's no longer viable, at the same time I do feel that we are all consuming too much news. Like I think that we've replaced community and spirituality with information and knowledge and what that's done is create an economy that works really well for people who have these fancy degrees and really poorly for people who don't, who are actually the working class, the lower middle class, the lifeblood of this country that makes everything and makes everything work and does everything. And I think that we all need to just disengage a little bit. There's nothing that you can learn from the New York Times or CNN that you can't learn from just walking down to the bodega and talking to the people who work there. So in a way it's terrible that the death of local news is very bad. It's gonna be very bad in terms of local government, because there's not gonna be as much accountability. But I think even worse than that is the way that the national media has sort of chased the profit by trying to polarise us, thankfully, most Americans are too smart for that.

**It's bizarre, isn't it? Because I unfortunately fell out with a friend of mine a year or so ago because he'd started to read a lot of the misinformation on COVID, he'd fallen down the rabbit hole on YouTube. And of course you watch one conspiracy video and then the algorithm helpfully says, well, now you've watched that insane conspiracy theory, here's another 11 for you to watch. And what struck me when we had a conversation was that he wasn't an aggressive person before, but he started the conversation with "Paul. You need to wake up." And I said to my friend, Kevin, I said, why can't we disagree without being disagreeable? If you're trying to win me over to your point of view, why tell me to "wake up" in an aggressive way? That's not going to win me over. It just seems that courtesy seems to be lost as well.**

So what happened? You guys are no longer friends?

**Well, we've not officially fallen out, but we don't ring each other now, because we're such polar opposites. He would say the pictures of the hospitals being overwhelmed are fake. That this is a Chinese conspiracy. And that COVID is deliberate because some dark overlords are trying to ruin the economy for their own purposes. I mean, this is one of the problems, of course, if you ask people to clarify who are the bad actors and what they want that's deliberately left very vague.**

Okay. So without defending conspiracy theories, I'm gonna defend Kevin a little bit. I'm not defending the conspiracy theories. I believe that COVID is happening. The pandemic is real, and that the images from hospitals are real. Everyone should get vaccinated. At the same time, this is a little bit I think like when you think about, for example, Pizzagate. The conspiracy theory about how Hilary Clinton was a

paedophile mastermind operating out of some basement or QAnon, which is about how Donald Trump is this saviour against a ring of paedophiles, democratic leaders are paedophiles and Trump is gonna win the day against them. These are conspiracy theories that are made up and invented and have no basis in reality, at the same time, you have a story like Jeffrey Epstein and Ghislaine Maxwell who were friends with the highest echelons of people in democratic leadership, including the Royal family in England, they were paedophiles. They were corralling all these young girls, vulnerable girls, forcing them into prostitution, sex slavery, human trafficking situation and at the same time using the immense wealth and power that they got from their connections with elected officials, people in power. So of course that's not a conspiracy theory. That's true. And I think a lot of the conspiracy theories that we're seeing are obviously wrong and evil, and some of them have really, really dangerous elements to them. But the idea that there is an elite that has taken power away from the people, that does not believe that the working class deserves a voice or a vote that spread misinformation about COVID, misinformation that very much benefited a few tiny corporations at the top that saw their profit margins increase the tune of billions. We oversaw, over the last two years in America, at least, the greatest wealth transfer from the lower and middle classes to the 1% in American history, but that's all true. And so I think that people who are not educated, even people who are educated, it's very hard for everybody, it's hard to question our biases, right. But us in the educated class, we're supposed to have gotten years and years of training and how to question our biases and we're terrible at it. And I think that the lower classes people are less educated who fall for these conspiracy theories. The conspiracy theories are wrong and evil, but at the same time, something really awful is happening. And sometimes it does have echoes of those conspiracy theories and there's another great example of this from the eighties, in America, we had this moral panic, the Satanic Ritual Panic, Americans became totally convinced that these sort of loser kids in their mom's basements playing Dungeons and Dragons were actually part of the Satanic Ritual and that they were doing these santanic stuff and that they were raping children, et cetera, et cetera, all of this nonsense, but somebody was actually raping children. And it was the Catholic priests in their neighbourhoods, in their towns. And it was being covered up by the Catholic church. So something was happening. They were wrong about what it was or where it was coming from. And so I would say about Kevin, I don't know his circumstances. I don't know where he's from. But something really dark happened, which is that China allowed something terrible to happen on purpose. They protected China from getting the virus. They protected the spread within China, but they allowed people from Wuhan to leave China and to travel. And so that was a conscious decision. And then the US did cover that up. The people in charge covered it up. They called Trump racist when he tried to blame China for it, he did it in a gross way. Obviously he does everything in a gross way. They called the lab like theory racist. So, something did happen, that's what I would say. I don't know. What do you think about that?

**I think you're right because the lab leak hypothesis was snared at, at the time everyone said, no, it definitely came from a Wuhan wet market. There is no evidence where it came from. So it could easily have, I mean obviously where both evidence led, but there's no evidence to say it came from a Wuhan wet market. We also have the virus lab that China runs nationally is based in**

**Wuhan and it could quite easily have escaped inadvertently there. We've got a regime that is obviously oppressive, that covers up the truth and doesn't cooperate. I mean, it's not ridiculous to suggest that it might have emerged from the lab. And yet I remember in the early months of the coverage, a lot of the traditional media would say that even floating that possibility was somehow racist.**

Exactly, exactly. And so we know now that for the first, let's say year of the pandemic, if you floated the theory, that is probably the truth, you were silenced and called racist by people in the media whose job it is to tell us what is true. Now, of course they're changing their tune, but at that moment, any person who was speaking the truth was silenced. So how big of a leap is it to say, well, I don't trust anything that they're saying and whose responsibility is it to make sure that people don't have an excuse to say that, right? Or the CDC, for example, in America, it has just completely beclowned itself, day in and day out, telling everybody to stay home, destroying all these businesses, then telling people that they can all go to protest because when you're protesting against racism, the virus clearly doesn't spread. So they completely made themselves partisan in that sense. Now what we're going through is you're seeing the spread of omicron. So first, the CDC said 10 days of quarantine, if you test positive, then the CEO of Delta said, that's too much. They said, okay, fine. They reduced it to five days. Then Twitter went crazy and got very angry. Then they said, okay, five days and a negative test. So whose fault is it that people no longer trust these institutions? Now again, I wanna be a hundred percent clear. Obviously I don't think that the pictures coming out of hospitals are fake. You know, I've spoken to people, I've been to hospitals, I've seen it firsthand, but whose fault is it that the thing that was true, we call the conspiracy theory. And now people who are like, they're looking at the thing we're saying no, but this thing is really true and we're calling them conspiracy theorists for saying, no, it's not. I mean, I think to some degree the institutions created that pattern.

**It's a bit like the Wizard of Oz, isn't it? I worked in politics for well over a decade in the UK and it always cockups, it's never conspiracy. We couldn't even get seven or eight people in the same room within two or three days notice so I don't believe in conspiracies, but I do believe in cockups and incompetence. And that's the problem, isn't it? The prevailing narrative and what I hear from you there saying what the CDC there is actually, it's just incompetence, isn't it, they're just flailing around, just pushed from pillar to post. I'm not defending them, but there doesn't seem to be any scientific rationale for that flip flopping. How can it be ten days on Wednesday and then five days on Thursday? I understand the scientific method involves testing hypotheses against the evidence. And therefore the evidence might have changed, but let's be honest. There was some flip flopping there behind the scenes wasn't there.**

Yeah and the scientific method doesn't magically always fall on the side of the democrats. And I think that's the thing that people are noticing. Now that all the liberals spent the last two years turning COVID into a morality play, Anybody who got

it was considered dirty and besmirched and not doing enough, why can't these people just care about the collective. And now that all the people who are vaccinated are getting the Omicron variant suddenly they're saying all the things that conservatives have been saying for the last two years, they're saying things like, well, we can't put society on a hold. It was like, where were you when one in five American businesses was going under, where were you when we were sitting at home forcing essential workers, the people at the bottom of the economic totem pole to go out into the danger and bring us our groceries. I think that a lot of that hypocrisy is wearing thin and it's made people very resistant to anything that these people who claim to represent science are saying. Fauci himself actually came out and said, if you criticise me, you are criticising science because I represent science. And I think that there's just a lot of that going on across American institutions, which is that highly educated, affluent elites take their own interests, their own economic interests and they class them, they dress them up as some sort of virtue, some sort of objective, factual, social justice, virtue. And I think that a lot of people are starting to see through that. And some people like your friend, Kevin, just don't know when to stop. and they don't know how to say like, okay, look, that's BS, that's BS, that's BS. But Like, this is probably true. I should probably protect myself and get this vaccine. But I think it's really tragic.

**I think there's a sharing of responsibilities, is there not because you're right to say that the liberal elite, the Western mainstream journalism would say, oh, my friend, Kevin's just a nutter, and his lunatic without actually saying, well, he was certainly started on this journey of distrust by traditional media. Yes, he's taken it to a nonsensical extreme, but the first three or four steps in that direction were done with his handheld by the mainstream media.**

So Paul, how come you can see through it, like so many people in our class really can't, what is it about you that you are able to see through this stuff?

**Well, I would say it's naturally because I'm handsome, charismatic and extremely intelligent, but my wife would disagree because she often says that I'm an idiot. I present a media podcast every week when I'm talking with very interested people. So I tend to get a perspective on this and give it a lot of thought, but I was actually gonna ask you, you're criticising your journalist colleagues a lot and rightly so, but you are also a journalist. How would you describe yourself within journalism? Are you a critical friend? You're basically saving journalism from itself. Are you not?**

I would like journalism to save itself. I don't think I'm gonna be able to save it. I am completely of the class that I criticise. I'm totally overeducated. I have a PhD, which is a ridiculous thing to have as a journalist, you can't even teach journalism, my PhD is just in English literature. It's just ridiculous. We're all like this, we're totally overeducated. We have these vanity degrees that don't actually make us better at our jobs, they make us worse at our jobs because the number one thing you learn at American colleges right now is to have contempt for people who don't have a college

degree. That's the thing that they're producing there in addition to a lot of things like critical race theory and other forms of nonsense.

**I'm an equal opportunity hater. I've never understood people who segment a specific group of people out for hatred. I just hate everyone, especially someone who's ahead of me in the line at Starbucks. Cause you know, my coffee's taking slightly longer. Actually, on a serious note, I'm trying to think of an articulate way of basically saying why you like this. And I mean that as a compliment, clearly you've put a lot of thought into this. You're provocative in the proper sense of the word. Where's this come from? How did you start out on this journey?**

I don't like bullies. I think that's probably what it is. I really don't like bullies. And I mean we all hate hypocrisy, but Hannah Arendt, the German Jewish philosopher warned against getting too caught up in criticising hypocrisy because as she pointed out, we're all hypocrites. So you have to oppose injustice, the minute you start being a person who only opposes hypocrisy you're not gonna get anywhere because that's just human nature. What about you? Did you predict that Brexit was gonna happen? I fell for a lot of the woke stuff. Did you initially think that people who voted for Brexit were xenophobic? How did you see that? And did you change your mind at all about it?

**No, I didn't change my mind and no one changed their mind in the UK. The whole thing was a colossal waste of time. I have friends and family that were always going to vote Brexit. They're not racist. They might be wrong on economics. They might be right. But no one had a sensible debate about anything. Everyone just shouted at each other and no one changed their mind. And it wasted two years of everyone's lives and more worryingly talking about contempt for democracy, the remaining side that lost actually then tried to undermine the results. I didn't agree with the result, but ultimately there was a free and fair referendum where the populist was asked an in principle question, do you want to leave or remain within the European union? And a majority of people that voted in a perfectly well run and proper referendum voted to leave. And for it's the old adage, isn't it from the politicians that's lost to this stands up and say, the electorate has spoken, the bastards. And part of democracy and part of free speech is respecting those that disagree with you and having to respect decisions that you don't particularly like and that to me is ultimately being a Democrat. We've had two general elections since then, Nigel Farage created a Brexit party out of nothing that then won almost every seat there was. You couldn't argue that the electorate didn't want to leave the European Union cause they did, but boy, was there an establishment pushback as it were.**

Yeah. I think that that is so interesting. When in the name of democracy, people start under anti-democratic positions.

**I'm like you though, I don't like bullies and, and it is odd isn't it that there's this wokeness that is even weaponised now because of course we want to call out people who are doing criminal wrongdoing, the Harvey Weinstein and all of these people that should face justice, but there's a lot of people now whose lives are being cancelled. And I feel deeply uncomfortable with that. So I watch the Equaliser on CBS and Chris Noth is the actor, he played Big on Sex In The City and he's in Equalizer. Now three or four women have come forward alleging some terrible behaviour on his part. They went to a media outlet. They didn't go to the police. I feel really uncomfortable with that because first of all, if he's guilty, then of course he deserves to go to prison and have the book thrown at him. But if he's innocent and these three or four people are falsely accusing him, and all they did was go to a newspaper, then his life is ruined now forever on the basis of one newspaper article. And no one seems to share my sense of disquiet at that, that he hasn't been afforded due process.**

I agree with you in principle, I haven't followed the accusations very closely, but there does also seem to be this thing where when somebody starts to rise in prominence or gets too much attention or seems to be succeeding, that's when sort of it comes out of the woodwork. Like, these accusations are all quite old and there's this sense of, well, why now? Right. And there is a kind of resentment almost at play, I don't know, one way or the other. I really didn't follow very closely what he was accused of, but a lot of these things, let me put it this way, the world before the me too movement and the world after the me too movement for women, especially for white collar women, women in the professions, women with any kind of social capital. It's just a really different world. And it's just bizarre that so many people are acting like it's not, like nothing changed.

**It's bizarre. Because we often think of ourselves as the 51st state. One of the things that we admire about America is that it can sort of do a wild west sort of pioneer mentality where you can sort of pick yourself up by your own bootstraps and get ahead. But I wonder whether America's getting tall poppy syndrome, as we would call it here, that it's starting to resent success because we do need people that are going to try and take risks and are they going to take these risks anymore, this is the very deep problem that we have in the long term.**

It's such a great point. And you talk now to actors or writers, people who are not with the woke program and they're terrified they are not producing good work. I mean, everything now goes through the woke machine because the cultural arbiter who gets to decide what kind of culture is produced, they have a strangle hold on this and they are all very much and increasingly slaves to this worldview and you see it in the movies, you see it in the TV shows, you see it in the books that are coming out. They're just not good because they're being produced by people who are terrified. And we're in a moment of monoculture, but I believe that we're already seeing the backlash to this. Aren't you starting to feel a little bit like people are sick of it and they want good movies to watch again.

**I agree with you because you've got the fact that you can whip up a campaign within seconds on social media on the one hand. And I think you combine that with frankly, the cowardice of governing bodies of either universities or corporations or broadcasters, where they want to be seen to be quote unquote acting quickly. So they do what I would consider to be the cowardly thing and just abandon someone and say as soon as we found out about these allegations, we dropped this person. And that to me is a very toxic combination.**

The only reason I'm hesitating to be more forth-throated in my agreement is the people who end up getting "cancelled," they all seem to land on their feet at the end of the day. And like Chris Note is rich and it's very hard for me to sort of get worked up over sort of rich people who are gonna continue to be rich, nobody's guaranteed a great career. And so like when there's a reshuffling of the chairs on the, on the Titanic, elites policing certain elites out of elite, them who are still gonna be rich. I find it hard to get really worked up about that because to me the inequality that we're seeing is still in place. And to me all of this is sort of a distraction in a way.

**The very poorest people in society object to the rich paying high taxes, because they're aspirational. They think one day they'll be rich and therefore they don't want the high taxes when they eventually join the millionaires club. And that's what we're striving for. Isn't it? This capitalist societal model where we're supposed to be chasing the dime all the time. I've got two nice cars. What would make me happier? A third.**

Really? You really want a third car?

**No, but I was trying to be rhetorical.**

Oh, I see.

**I kind of would want a third guy if I'm honest. What happens if the other two didn't look nice in the morning light? No, I'm sort of joking. I don't wanna get bogged down in semantics or definitions, but how would you define the word "woke" for the book's purposes? Because people can't even agree what that is. It's a very contested word.**

Yeah. So the word woke started as black slang to refer to something that I think is extremely important, which is being aware of state sponsored racism, let's call it. And there are still I would say four areas where that exists. Police brutality is a real problem. Not police killings. Police actually don't kill black people disproportionately when you control for income, they kill poor people disproportionately, but they lay hands on black people more, they insult them more, they throw them up against cars, more, they put them in handcuffs more, they beat them up more and they arrest them more and they pull them over more. So that's an area of state sponsored racism that

desperately needs attention. We still suffer from mass incarceration. That's a really difficult problem to solve. President Trump started, he released 5,000 black men from prison, but now with this crime wave it's really difficult to figure out how to fix the American criminal justice system. But for now it is plagued with issues of racism that urgently require our attention. I would also say that intergenerational poverty among about 20 to 30% of the American descendants of slave is still a problem. And also our public school system is segregated racially, and that is just absolutely deplorable. And it's the worst in liberal places. So New York City's public schools are more segregated than Alabama's. So those four areas of state sponsored racism are extremely important to pay attention to. And I don't call it woke to care about those things, even though that is sort of how the word woke started. And the reason I don't call it woke is because Republicans now are very focused on these issues as well. They're equally focused on these issues. So Republicans for the last ten years have been at the forefront of criminal justice reform. Republican red states have been quietly releasing thousands and thousands of prisoners due to a combination of Christian and fiscal justifications. They are very, very invested in the school question, albeit from a different point of view from liberals and they are now increasingly talking about police reform. So these are not wedge issues anymore. What are wedge issues are the things that a tiny, tiny elite of white progressives care about, which is things like defund the police instead of police reform, things like calling standardised testing, white supremacy, instead of desegregating public schools, things like making sure that there are people of colour on the board of elite institutions like the opera, that's wokeness. I use the word the way sociologists do to refer to a phenomenon that happened in 2015, which is when white liberals started expressing views on race that were more extreme than the views of blacks and Latinos, they could call it 'the great awakening.' So that's how I use the word woke. And it's that kind of patronising view that many white liberals have that casts people of colour as inherently disempowered and having no agency and requiring their beneficence and their generosity and their help. That's how I use woke that, that thing that was exposed in a 2018 Yale study that found that when white liberals talk to people of colour, they dumb down their vocabulary and white conservatives don't do this. That thing that makes you dumb down your language when you see a black person out of the desire to help them as a liberal, like that's wokeness to me, it's not like caring about police brutality, which we should all care about.

**Well, you very eloquently argue that progressives privilege issues of race instead of class, but you yourself have also witnessed a rise in antisemitism on the left as well as the right at the forward.**

Yeah. It's funny because I try very hard to make sure not to talk about antisemitism and what would be considered like a woke way for Jews. Because it is really important to point out that we are the safest Jews to ever walk planet earth. Not so in Europe, unfortunately, it's dangerous to be a Jew in Europe. Jews in Europe actually have to wear hats over their yamakas or they can be certain of getting beaten up. But in America, in Israel, no Jews have walked planet earth who have been as safe as we are. And I think it's extremely important to point that out. We are seeing a rise in antisemitism on both the left and the right, I've experienced it, many Jews have experienced it. But despite that rise, I wouldn't even say this is the number one issue

facing American Jews. I think the number one issue facing American Jews is the threat to the cohesion of the American body politic. And I think the rising antisemitism on the left and on the right is a sign of that, but it's certainly not the most important or the most outrageous thing that's happening in America. The most outrageous thing is the abandonment of the working class. And so I think it's really important to contextualise that, although yes, it is rising and it is deplorable and it's rising among the elites on the left, which is even worse, people who are supposed to have an education.

**Are you an optimist? We've obviously discussed some very, very troubling, very deeply problematic issues, but will there be a bottom and then things will start to get better. Does this keep you up at night? Do you think things are gonna get worse before they get better? Or will it not get better at all?**

None of this keeps me up at night because the things that keep me up at night are the economic travesty of what's happened to America and gross inequality and the fact that we've abandoned so many people to live lives that are so desperate that they're killing themselves. That's what keeps me up at night. I don't really care about journalism, if it makes it or doesn't make it. I really think that this is just elites policing themselves. Like I said deck chairs on the Titanic. I don't feel the way so many people feel like, we have a free press, we're never not gonna have a free press. This is not the Chinese culture revolution. Nobody's standing with a gun to Joy Reid's head and telling her to say horrible racist things. Like she's doing it because there's money in it. And it's like, who cares? I feel like Americans are too good for their press right now. And I do think that there is going to be a subtle shift because there's just a mass consumer boycott going on right now when it comes to the media, Americans are just tuning out because it's so terrible. Think that's great and I think that's great. I have trouble getting worked up about anything that happens like within the elites, because they're so financially secure. And so many Americans are living lives of precarity. And that's what I'm really worried about. That's what really keeps me up at night. The downward mobility of our great middle class. What about you? Are you an optimist?

**Yeah. I mean, it depends what day you ask me frankly, and what's on the news. I agree with you that the news is just depressing all the time. And as a conscientious citizen I need to engage and at least know what's happening, but that whole kind of CNN, Sky News, Fox news rolling news thing where it's just their constant outrage and people disagreeing. I can't be bothered with that anymore. I try to read a Sunday digest. I read the magazine The Week and that sort of sets it in context, but it is profoundly depressing. But I agree with you, the economic injustice, particularly in America, is very striking. Before the pandemic, I used to travel to San Francisco quite a lot. And you guys there have a very large homelessness problem, 50, 60 times stronger than what we have in the UK. And one of my clients said, the problem is basically healthy insurance. If you suffer a mental health episode in England, the national health service will provide mental healthcare free at the point of use and will help you to and remain in work because it's your taxes that are paid for it. Whereas, if you have a mental health episode in America, the first thing that usually**

**happens is that you get fired and therefore you lose your health insurance, and therefore you don't get the mental health treatment that could have stopped things from getting worse. And then it then gets progressively worse and ends up in homelessness and death. And it just seems to be a systemically miserable going on.**

So, that to me is a very woke liberal narrative or explanation for it and doesn't account for why so many cities in America are seeing their homeless population go down. You should have Michael Shellenberger on.

**I'm not going to debate, I am right on this and you're wrong! How dare you come at me with facts!**

No, I remember being at a dinner party in England a couple years ago. It was 2019. And I think Trump had just repealed NAFTA. And I was talking about how so many of his economic policies Bernie Sanders was essentially advocating for in 2015 and he's like a real protectionist. And I call myself a socialist, but that's what I mean is just having this America first perspective, caring a lot about the working class, about farmers waging, a trade war with China, tariffs on any imports, getting rid of NAFTA, trade deals are terrible. All this stuff that I love. And this progressive British person started lecturing me and I just looked at him and I was like "I'm actually not very interested in hearing from you, the party line view that I can get from any progressive in America."

**This is why I asked the questions. You've been turning the questions on me you see. And that's why I don't like guests who do that because it reveals that I don't have a clue what I'm talking about.**

No, no. Not at all. Not at all. I was just laughing because it was such a funny moment where I was like if somebody had come here and started trying to explain to me why my views of Brexit were all wrong, I would've eaten that up. I would've been exactly like you, explain to me why I'm wrong. So I love that you did that. I think that's really cool.

**I'll tell you what's fascinating. I stood for parliament in 2005.**

Oh, no kidding.

**Yeah. I am massively Blair right, still am in fact. And I wanted to sort of stand for the labour party and the party make you stand in an unwinnable seat. So the seat was a very strongly Tory one, but because it was never going to go to Labour, you're left to sort of get on with it and sort of form your policies locally. And there was a big debate in the area that I was standing in as to whether to widen this road. So there's a road going through it called the A64. A lot of the road was single carriageway. And so the businesses at the end of that road**

were saying we're suffering because that road needs to be widened. It needs to become the equivalent of a freeway so that we get a lot more customers there and we can start to create jobs and all of that kind of thing. So I did what you just did, that sort of patronising thing of 'I want the best for the region so let's look into this.' So you listen to the first set of arguments that say, of course the road needs widening, it'll create jobs and blah, blah, blah. And then you think that's obviously a case. Then you look at the other side, the environmentalist, they talk about the paradox of efficiency that an increase in supply side of road will actually only solve the problem for a year and a half because there there'll be increased traffic, then you'll have gridlock a year and a half later, it won't solve the problem. It'll be a ginormous waste of time. The jobs that were created will be lost. And therefore you'd be better off putting that money into public transport, trains and buses. And you think, oh, well, that's a compelling argument. And then you go back and within seven or eight sort of backwards and forwards on either side of the argument. I went through the blue screen of death. Do you remember the Windows 3.1 blue screen? And in the end I just went with my gut. I had all the arguments and this analysis paralysis.

Yeah. So many issues that when you hear one side, for sure, that's the right side. But if you really actually hear out the other side, you're like, he's also right. You know what I mean? And I think that so much of what happens is people just literally will not ever give the other side of hearing because they're very worried that like, well, what if they actually have a point? And then I'm gonna lose all my friends.

**Some issues really trouble me like the legalisation of all drugs. Part of me thinks, put the drug dealers out of business, people are taking drugs anyway so we might as well legalise it. We can regulate it, make it safer and acknowledge the reality of it. And that to me seems a compelling argument. Then you actually look at the other side that says, well look at all the increased death and all kinds of problems, look how we're addicted to sugar and all of the kinds of things where you can have companies pushing drugs, mind altering drugs. And so I'm not making the other side's argument very compellingly, sadly. But that worries me is that there's clearly not a right or a wrong answer maybe, and yet something needs to be done.**

But that's so amazing. I mean like that's what democracy is all about is the proliferation of different sides to every issue. And we try this and we try that. Something people say to me a lot is, well, you're always talking about giving the working class a voice and letting them choose and whatever, what if they choose something that's bad for them. And I was like, that's literally the entire point of a democracy is like giving people the dignity and the right to choose. Even if that is not what's right. I happen to think that that's a ridiculous thing to say, like people know what's right for them.

**It's patronising, it's Brexit all over again. We're the upper middle class and we've got PhDs and therefore you poor people unfortunately have chosen the wrong choice, and therefore we know better for you. There there. Is there**

**gonna be an uprising then, come the revolution. What's your role going to be in it?**

I think that the working class is too demoralised. I mean, we look at places like Amazon that are struggling to unionise, and a lot of it is people just don't have the luxury of being in an adversarial relationship with their bosses. And so you have these like progressive showing up and being like, let's make a union and nobody voting for it because they're like I just don't have that luxury. And even though the union is of course the thing that would protect them and give them better wages, et cetera. So I feel like people are so demoralised, but within existing unions, you're seeing a lot of labour activism, a lot of strikes, a lot of major gains because of the COVID labour market, which has been one of the massive silver linings here. So we are seeing some of that. That's really exciting. And the other thing that gives me all hope is I'm on the left, but the people who are really talking about labour in an interesting and empowering way are the kind of few people on the right who learn the right lesson from the Trump era is what I would say. A lot of people have learned the wrong lesson. They think that the lesson of the Trump era is that people want them to be out there brawling on Twitter, which is not the case. Trump's support was very much tied to the hunger for economic populism on the right, among the working class, among working class conservatives. And there are a few Republican senators who have really learned that lesson and are pushing some really good stuff so that I get hope from that too.

**I mean, your book is literally a big kind of codified manifestation of your views to be literal. How is it going? People are reading it. What kind of feedback are you getting? Do you feel that you are making some traction and making an impact with it? I mean, it's the whole adage, isn't it? The only thing that's worse than being talked about is not being talked about. You wanted to make an impact.**

Yeah. I frequently now will turn on Fox's news and hear someone saying people are talking about this like it's about race, but it's actually about class and you'll frequently see black people saying that. And I don't know if I don't think they read my book or anything, but the idea that that's now in the ether is really heartening to me, the idea that I said in the beginning that I didn't get siloed into the right is very heartening. I think that the gig is kind of up for wokeness. I mean, there are so many of the black voices that were anti-woke that were non woke that were initially siloed or finding a voice, many of them in the pages of Newsweek. I think that that's having a massive impact because of course wokeness is to the black community, like Latinx is to the Latino community. It's something that a tiny elite cares about and supports and the rest find very alienating. So yeah, from that point of view, I feel pretty hopeful. I don't think that America's best days are behind us. I don't buy any of that.

**I like it. It's infectious. I shouldn't have used the word infectious your optimism, but it is. Actually your book and stance is so interesting that it kind of pulled focus away from me asking you about Newsweek. And it feels almost like an afterthought in the final few minutes to say, oh, tell us about your day job. But**

**tell us about Newsweek, obviously, it has a famous history. How do you think it fits in the new media landscape? As we've discussed, it's a daily battle for clicks and attention.**

So I can only speak to the opinion section because I was hired during the pandemic. And I've literally never been into the Newsweek building. I'm not very familiar with the news operation, but I can tell you from the opinion side of things from day one, I was told that Newsweek's mission is to oppose cancel culture. That's the only thing that Newsweek's owner cares about. That's our mission statement. And I think quite literally, it's in our mission statement to reflect all points of view. My boss, the opinion editor, Josh Hamer is a staunch conservative. I mean, he's the guy to the right, and the people on the right are worried is gonna come after them. I'm on the left. We have a bunch of other people in between and really the mandate they gave us was to create debate, we wanna see opinions from across the spectrum. So I am very, very, very, very lucky that Newsweek is doing that. I also see it as my personal mandate to publish as many working class voices as I can, because they've been sort of totally de-platformed and erased from the American public sphere. And so I publish a lot of working class people just talking about the issues that matter to them and their point of view, their perspective on the big questions of the day. I'm really, really lucky Newsweek is really doing important things. There's a podcast that I used to co-host, I don't anymore, but it's still wonderful, where Josh and another liberal have a liberal and a conservative every week to debate an issue. So Newsweek is walking the walk.

**Last question then in two parts, if I may. What advice would you give to a person starting their career in journalism that admires your success and wants to follow in your footsteps, what are the dos and don'ts? And final final question. And it may not be my business, but what's next for you? Where will you be in ten, 15, 20 years from now, assuming there is a planet and an America?**

Oh, wow. These are great questions. The advice I would give is, I guess I would say fight the urge to use your platform to punish anybody. Don't have any enemies. Don't take anything personally. Go to church, go to synagogue, volunteer, find ways to meet people who you disagree with. I would say, make sure to never feel contempt for your subject or anybody else, be on the lookout for things that prove you wrong, never, ever, ever be afraid of changing your mind. And I would say the most important thing is treat every person with dignity, every human being and you'll do great. And in terms of what's next for me, part of the story of how I ended up writing this book is that I tried to write another book and I couldn't sell it because I was told by editor after editor that there's no market for this book, that book was called A More Perfect Union. And it was about how Americans are a lot less polarised than we think, that polarisation is an elite phenomenon and when you get out into America, people are much more United around the values that this great nation was founded on than we think. So hopefully maybe now I'll be able to write that book. That's really my dream.

**Batya, that was a hugely interesting conversation. Thank you ever so much for your time.**

Thank you so much for having me, Paul. I really enjoyed it.