

REALTIME FILE
AST-NYPL
LIVE FROM THE NYPL: JILL ABRAMSON WITH JANE MAYER
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>> Good evening and welcome to the New York Public Library. Tonight's program is about to begin. Remember, flash photography is not permitted. Now, please find your seats, silence your cell phones and enjoy tonight's program.

BILL KELLY: Good evening, my name is Bill Kelly. I'm the Andrew W Mellon director of the research libraries here at NYPL and it is my privilege and my pleasure to welcome you to live from NYPL, featuring tonight Jill Abramson discussing her new book *Merchants of Truth* in conversation with Jane Mayer. You're here to listen to Jill and to Jane, so rather than a time-consuming introduction of two remarkable writers who hardly need one, permit me to refer you to the bios contained inside your programs. I do want to note however that we host this conversation about the past and the future of journalism on a night when only a few minutes ago we announced the winner of this year's New York Public Library Helen Bernstein book award for excellence in journalism. This award established by Joseph Bernstein in 1987 in honor of Helen Bernstein Feeley honors journalists and their role in drawing attention to critical contemporary issues, events and policies. Jane Mayer, I am pleased to say is a two-time award, two-time winner of the Helen Bernstein award.

[Applause]

BILL KELLY: ... 30 minutes, if you could pass the cards down to the end of the aisle, that would help, and minimize the disruption for the conversation. After the program, the library shop will be selling copies of Jill's book, *Merchants of Truth* as well as Jane's *Dark Money*. Jill and Jane will both sign copies of the book, so please stick around for that. Now please join me in welcoming Jane Mayer and Jill Abramson.

[Applause]

JANE MAYER: Thanks so much, it's great to be here with you tonight and congratulations to the Bernstein prizewinner. That is wonderful news. It's a great book

that he wrote. And thanks to the Bernstein family for supporting one of the few programs that gives out a prize for nonfiction writing and journalism that's a book length. So it's a wonderful honor. It's also an honor for me to be here with JILL ABRAMSON and actually kind of a pleasure because Jill and I have known each other and been friends since middle school.

[Laughter]

JANE MAYER: So, and I don't usually get the chance to sort of grill her really.

JILL ABRAMSON: You better watch out.

JANE MAYER: And this is true, she's tough I know because we have written a book together and had all kinds of incredible hijinks and fun together. So it's great to be here with you tonight, and this book I have to say is wonderful. It's really well-written and of course because Jill did it, really well reported. So I highly recommend it. And so I wanted to start with some of the inside knowledge I have about Jill. which is that... I know that this library in particular holds a certain kind of significance for her. And there was a moment I believe when you needed to find some kind of an image of a place that was supposed to reduce the stress in your life just to think about it. Would you like to explain this? how the library fits in their?

Jil Abramson: this really dates to when I was both managing editor of the Times, which was 2003 to 2011 and then executive editor till 2014. And yeah, the Times new building you know, designed by Renzo piano, very beautiful, is on 40th St. and eighth. So not a long walk to get over here. And often I was just stressed to the max in those jobs and there was something I would walk east and walk to you know, the front of the library to the beautiful big staircase and of course look at patients in fortitude and think, you've got to get some of that, girl

JANE MAYER: those lions

JILL ABRAMSON: ... So I would walk over here pretty frequently, and really I think part of the calming effect of walking over here was that it also is a tie to my childhood because my mother was a huge reader and a remedial reading teacher. And instilled in me and my sister a reverence for books. But oddly, she didn't like to buy books and almost never bought a book. But what she loved to do was put a book on reserve at the library. And it was like, when the call came that her book was in she like quivered with excitement. And so getting a library card, our neighborhood branch was St. Agnes, was like a very big milestone for me. I remember my mom taking me to get my library card and then when I was in sixth grade, I was just beginning to be allowed to move around New York on my own and I came to what she always called the main branch. And I had to do a lot of research for a report on what was then called West Germany. And there are many categories that we had to research and write about and manufacturing was one of them. And I was at a loss. So I came here, I looked in the card catalog and of course there were many many cards, West Germany manufacturing and very specific,

you know and I was inspired by the cards to do a big report on the manufacturing of cuckoo clocks.

[Laughter]

JILL ABRAMSON: It was a really good report. I have to say.

JANE MAYER: So this is where the investigative career of reporting began.

JILL ABRAMSON: maybe so.

JANE MAYER: Your father was in the garment trade in New York City and your mom as you said was a huge volunteer in remedial reading, but so what made you decide to become a reporter? Was there some hero of yours that was doing it or something you were reading, or where did this come from?

JILL ABRAMSON: Well, partly it came from general nosiness. And then you know, Watergate was unfolding when I was in college and I remember studying for my spring exams with a transistor radio, listening to John Dean testify, and I would actually go to a newsstand in the middle of Harvard Square and buy like for day-old copies of the Washington Post for like six bucks. It was crazy. But you know, I was very just obsessed with the story and I wanted to see Woodward and Bernstein's stories for myself. There was of course no Internet then. No cell phones. No ATMs

JANE MAYER: Did you ever imagine or... That you would wind up being the executive editor of the New York Times?

JILL ABRAMSON: Never. I mean really never. You know, I can remember at, I was still in college and the New Hampshire Massachusetts primaries were happening the year I graduated, 1975 to 76. And you know, I remember being at the Sheraton Wayfair... You have been there, the hotel in Manchester and I had been given an insignificant assignment like covering the campaign I think of Sar Triver. I was working as a stringer for time magazine, and I remember looking at the ballot bar at the Sheraton Wayfair and there was Johnny Apple of the Times and LeMonde and with cobra. The only woman in the room was Mary McGrory and I remember I was standing in the back thinking these were the most important people that night, and that with a certainty that I would never get to be one of them.

JANE MAYER: well, you did write a book pretty early on about women who graduated from Harvard Law school, right? So was this issue of women and their opportunities at work very much on your mind early on?

JILL ABRAMSON: Yeah, it was because oddly when I had this job for time magazine, my boss, the bureau chief was a woman. But she, and she was a great boss. And inspirational. But she's the only woman I ever worked for in my career. And when I became Washington bureau chief of the Times as the first woman, she was working for Time in Hong Kong, and she sent me a telegram saying she could hear the glass shattering all the way to Hong Kong. And you know, I was conscious from the get-go

that women had to battle for equal treatment. My freshman year in college was the first year that women were allowed to live in Harvard Yard. And not all the men were happy about that. And you know, just you know, was very much still a young man's world and I don't think I had a single female professor. And that interested me. And it concerned me. And it made me mad. And I joined, like there was a feminist organization at Radcliffe and I joined immediately.

JANE MAYER: Well we will get your book in a sec, but one line and it, just to pull out in advance is, your description in the book about how you were fired at the Times four, as executive editor, and you say, I was, that you are not a stellar manager, but also that there was a double standard. And I guess I'm wondering, you know, is the double standard still exist as far as you are concerned both in the news world, and also I'm thinking in politics. With, we have now got a bumper crop of Democratic presidential contenders, several of whom are female. Is there a double standard still, do you think?

JILL ABRAMSON: I think there is. I was interested that when the Times did its first front-page story about Amy Klobuchar they focused so much on what a mean boss she was. And you know, there is this focus on style, the way women candidates speak, obviously still how they dress. It just you know, it is sort of a more personal set of criteria that comes up often. I think it is lessening, but not gone. And you know, I know when, you know I had been managing editor of the Times for eight years, so it isn't like people didn't know me. But you know, when you go after the top job and you get it and you are female, there are many studies showing that your likability goes drastically down and that you are seen as pushy and that B word and in the end that just isn't so. The same kind of behaviors are seen as leadership in men.

JANE MAYER: I take it the B word is not boss.

JILL ABRAMSON: No. It rhymes with Rich. I probably should say.

JANE MAYER: Okay so let's talk about this book. So, what got you going on it? why did you want to do it? And what surprised you in?

JILL ABRAMSON: Why I wanted to do it is I felt like as managing editor I had focused like a laser on trying to help the newsroom transition from a print focused culture to a digital culture because that was going to be, you know print advertising was falling off a cliff. Circulation was going down and you know, at that point people thought digital advertising would support our work, that hasn't happened. But shortly before I was fired, the current publisher, Arthur Greg Sulzberger wrote a document called the innovation report. And it concluded that the Times was very behind when compared especially to digital native news companies that we just were slogging and so I was kind of stunned by that. I wasn't sure that was true, but I was fascinated to try and find out was it true. And what did this digital transition that had started fullbore, you know obviously it began in the 90s, but really took off in 2007 when the iPhone was introduced. That's when twitter began. That's one Facebook started. The news feed. So I kind of love the idea of using the decade, 2007 to 2017, two try to make a narrative out of the transformation of

the industry that both of us have devoted our careers to. So you know, as a template, I had loved this book that David Halberstam wrote in 1979 called the powers that be, and he looked you know, at four, he wrote a narrative about four news organizations at a point where his thesis was that the press had become too powerful, more powerful than even the political class in Washington. And you know, I was obviously telling a very different story about you know, the struggle of most news companies to stay alive. And, but I liked the idea of picking four, and was encouraged to pick four by my great editor, Alice Mayhew. And you know, I struggled about which companies to write about, but I picked in the end for a 10 year narrative, to newspapers that I think are irreplaceable institutions in our country that were struggling to become digital, and find a business model that would support the newsgathering that they both do globally. And that was the New York Times and the Washington Post. And then I wanted to do a deep dive on two all-digital companies that have kind of come to news only recently, but in the Times's innovation report were written about with great kind of envy and admiration. So, those were BuzzFeed and Vice

JANE MAYER: When you started doing the research did you have a thesis about that the old news media was dead? At least dying, and that this is the future is the online upstarts, or some other thesis, and how did it all turn out?

JILL ABRAMSON: I started maybe not completely without thesis but something close to it. I mean, the Times shortly after my timeline, the Atlantic magazine was predicting it would go bankrupt and the leaders of the Times went hat in hand to a Mexican billionaire to get a \$250 million loan. And you know, times were tough. And at that same time the Grams, the Graham family was struggling to hold on to the Washington Post, and they were looking at like seven years of losses. You know, and had Don Graham and Catherine Waymack, his niece who succeeded him as publisher had no idea how to turn it around. Which is why in the end they decided to sell the family jewel to Jeff Bezos because they felt they didn't have the answers and maybe he would. So, times and Post at the beginning of the book are struggling and you know, vice and BuzzFeed are discovering new purely digital methods of spreading content and at BuzzFeed the founder Jonah Perretti was the Wizard of how to make information go viral. And Shane Smith at Vice got into video very early and the Times had struggled with how to get video and do it in a way that would attract an audience, and was failing. But Vice had all these YouTube channels that were attracting a huge audience of young people. Then both companies eventually like hired real reporters and started newsrooms and started in a very different style covering big news. And you know, it looked like they had audiences, both of them bigger than the Times and the Post. I mean, they used click Tr bubbles, where you know if you are a Trump supporter and a Republican you're only seeing Fox News and other like-minded publications. And you know, if you don't like Trump and you are sharing things about Beto or Mayor Pete you are getting, you are seeing only news on Facebook that conforms to your, that ideology. So it is a very unhealthy ecosystem for, like deeply reported authoritative news to appeal to a majority

of Americans. You know, lots of Americans feel like they are drowning in news and are not paying attention at all.

JANE MAYER: Well I know the kind of stuff that we have done together on, for instance in strange justice, our book about Clarence Thomas and Anita Hill, it took us three, two of us three years to do that book. It was so rigorously reported and we went into it with open minds and would have come out whichever way the facts led. That was kind of the orientation we had. We had been reporters at the Wall Street Journal. And I know that you, and I have talked about this, that you feel that there's a huge and urgent need for more slow news, for people to take their time and really get the story behind the story and connect all the dots, not just throw all these dots out there. So how are we going to do that?

JILL ABRAMSON: No. It can't be a world of push alerts.

JANE MAYER: And twitter.

JILL ABRAMSON: And twitter because twitter creates the expectation that you're going to know what happens the instant it happens, so whether the story is true or not, and things instantly go viral

JANE MAYER: Do you think reporters at the New York Times or anywhere else should be tweeting?

JILL ABRAMSON: Well, I think that they, for the most part, you know I'm okay with tweets that point a larger audience to good articles in the Times. But I don't think it's wise for reporters on twitter or on cable TV to be so opinionated. Because, not that you know, I am a very harsh critic of Pres. Trump's too, but it sort of confirms what he says about, you know, the Post, the Times, the networks, that you know, they are totally stacked against him and are lying about him.

JANE MAYER: And how do you feel about whether the Times and others should cover every tweet from him as well?

JILL ABRAMSON: No, I think the press in general is way too reactive to him. And you know, Donald Trump I mean, many of you who are New Yorkers know he has been a master manipulator of the news media and knows exactly how to get attention and dominate the news cycle. He's brilliant at it. You know, it has been amazing to me to see like as Mueller was finishing, he was constantly tweeting about you know, no collusion, no collusion. And so, he was able to like set a bar where everyone was going to be, think he was exonerated if no collusion was found.

JANE MAYER: He framed the issue in a way that he could win it. No matter what else was going on, that was no longer important, because he framed it on the one thing that he thought he could win on.

JILL ABRAMSON: and you know, with his tweets or with outrageous policies he announces, he knows exactly how to dominate the news cycle, morning afternoon, night.

JANE MAYER: So what should...

JILL ABRAMSON: I think the apprentice taught him some of that skill.

JANE MAYER: Well I mean, so what you think the Times under the really serious news organizations should do about, how do you keep yourself from being manipulated when you, you have to cover the president. I know I have been a White House reporter myself and I was surprised when I was there as the White House reporter for the Wall Street Journal, the threshold was so low for what you wrote about. Basically if the president burped you wrote about it, and

JILL ABRAMSON:...or choked on a pretzel.

JANE MAYER: Actually a lot of it was a deathwatch, truth be told. Pretzels included. You know, so what advice would you give, and I also I'm curious, how do you feel, I mean one of the changes to the Times has been that it has come out right since Trump has been elected and use the word life

JILL ABRAMSON:Not often, though, which is probably right

JANE MAYER: So, how would you, how what advice

JILL ABRAMSON: I would definitely say Lies not in every headline and every story... To say lie and that more news organization should do it. The Washington Post does it. And Marty Baron, the editor, you know, his mantra is we are at work, not at war. Which, in general I like because I think the only thing people in reporting look at you know, the Times yesterday when the Pulitzer for an 18 month investigation of how the Trumps inherited money from their father and evaded probably illegally, you know, millions and millions in gift taxes. You know, it's a great story.

JANE MAYER: it was a fantastic story, but people often, the sort of the scuttlebutt about it was that it didn't get read by that many people

JILL ABRAMSON:They republished it.

JANE MAYER: They republished it which I think is a great. I think and has off to the Times for doing that work. I think it's also incredibly important, and you know, I, anyway I think

JILL ABRAMSON:What's kind of disturbing is as good as that piece was and it involved like three full-time investigative reporters and a big team, I mean, there are very few news organizations left that have, that will spend the money for that kind of effort. And I'm sure all of you have been reading about the news desert and the loss, you know, over 500 local newspapers have gone out of business in the past, you know, seven

years. And you know, it is a terrible loss. Because in terms of public trust, the local paper is actually the most trusted source of news.

JANE MAYER: I think that is partly once having been a local reporter, because the community sees you at work. You are there at the meetings, your covering whatever is going on, and they know you and they know that you are not the enemy of the American people. But what I worry about is the corruption is really going to flourish in this country if there is no coverage of what's going on.

JILL ABRAMSON: for sure, I mean there are statehouses and city councils that go uncovered regularly.

JANE MAYER: so how does...

JILL ABRAMSON: it is truly an urgent problem. I mean

JANE MAYER: Well how is the new media that you write about doing on covering, how has BuzzFeed done, how has vice done, how do they stack up against the old media?

JILL ABRAMSON: Right. I don't think any of them have broken any really significant stories on the president or the administration. But they do do some work of high-quality and BuzzFeed was a finalist last year for the international Pulitzer Prize in international news for an investigation they did of you know, mysterious deaths of Russian oligarchs in London and they were able to prove that Putin ordered their murders. And it was garishly presented, you know on the website I think. The title of the investigation was from Russia with blood.

[Laughter]

JILL ABRAMSON: But you know, it was good solid reporting, and Vice had the good judgment to give one of its reporters the assignment of getting really up to speed on white nationalist groups and she had planned to be in Charlottesville like weeks before, and had arranged to meet up with some of the heinous leaders of the March, where you know, they were chanting Jews will not replace us, and they did a great, like half hour show where they just, they don't believe, vice doesn't believe like on 60 Minutes, you know they think they are 60 minutes of the streets and they don't believe in any voice of God correspondence, or you know, anchors, and they really just let the camera roll. It was a very powerful piece. So, they do some like good work, but what supports them is not, you know, journalism and news is a loss leader for them. And you know what supports them is listicles and quizzes, or

JANE MAYER: Cats?

JILL ABRAMSON: ...pets for BuzzFeed, you know definitely. Kittens wearing adorable glasses, and you know both of them do this kind of advertising that I hate because I think it confuses readers, called native ads you know and while BuzzFeed does these photo chains of adorable cats, they do these video ads and similar ads about, for Purina about, guess what? Adorable kittens who are eating Friskies. And you know, they have

different standards. You know, an incident in vice, the vice chapters, I have three chapters on each of the companies, where you know, I found that you know, one of the founders was doing a piece in Pakistan where you know, it was for a series and terrorism, and like a Junior producer found the parents of someone who joined, their son joined the jihad and was killed. And like, a very young assistant producer did the actual interview with them in Pakistan and then Vice flew the important founder to the same location where the actual interview had happened. And you know, they did something called reverse questioning, which the networks have banned for a long time, where you read, you re-ask the questions but you are talking to nobody. And so it is different. And the moneymaking is, you know, just more of the fluffy stuff, or for Vice, you know, the bro stuff about skateboarders or

JANE MAYER: and worse.

JILL ABRAMSON: and worse, you know they have a popular food show called... Really amusing, but their audience is much younger, the Post and the Times have aging audiences. You know, less true, as they go digital and make sure that their websites and apps have the best technology and, you know, cover

JANE MAYER: ... Readers were reading your story, because you could then write really boring but important things and never know how many people you had put to sleep.

[Laughter]

JANE MAYER: But Joe, you know one of the things

JILL ABRAMSON: Though in a way now at the Times everyone has access to the digital data, who is read And you know, it does influence what stories get the best play. And the stories that are getting the most clicks rise on the homepage.

JANE MAYER: One of the things that drives cliques more than anything else is the name Trump, so we are in this kind of cycle where you it's a vicious circle

JILL ABRAMSON: A column, a friend a friend of mine from the Times who I had lunch with several months ago said, he's very conscious that he writes a column and, a news column, weekly that when he isn't writing about Trump and Trump isn't in the headline, his readership goes down and he feels like a big loser. Even if he has written about something he feels is important. There are these, these implicit reward system for Trump

JANE MAYER: I suppose it raises the question of once the Trump bump is gone, what is going to happen, I mean how sanguine are you about the survival of the Times and Post?

JILL ABRAMSON: I'm pretty sanguine about both of them right now. But I don't know if you ask me 10 or 15 years out, I just, I don't know. I think it is a changing landscape. What I do know is that the work itself is urgent and couldn't be more important. Because, you know the First Amendment is first for a reason. And you know, the

founders gave special protections to the press because they wanted us to inform people and to hold power accountable. And you know, that is ever more important now. And that sounds very highfalutin, and you know, mostly this book is filled with just great stories and you know, characters

JANE MAYER: it really is.

JILL ABRAMSON:... That amazed me and surprised me it's a juicy book

JANE MAYER: It is a juicy book both about the Times on the characters we know. And some of the stories about places like vice and the characters there make me understand better why, maybe when your book came out, you, there was kind of, we all know that the press is very thin-skinned, and they took great umbrage and came right back roaring after you, and even accused you of plagiarism. How much do you think that was a result of the tough coverage you gave them and how much did it affect sort of the rollout of your book and distract from what is in it? And what were you able to do about it?

JILL ABRAMSON: Well, Vice at a point my book was published at the beginning of February was fighting for his life. As is BuzzFeed because Facebook and Google are gobbling up all the digital advertising. And they both have only advertising to sustain them. And Shane Smith who was a swaggering head founder of Vice and head of vice was out of a job as CEO, and they of course, they were embroiled in some very bad MeToo sexual misconduct cases, which they settled for big money and so of course they hired a woman to be the new CEO. And she was just settling in and hated the fact that the vice chapters like went over there early history where you know, basically Vice subsisted on sex, drugs and rock 'n roll. And hadn't changed entirely. And like they went nuts about those parts of the book. And used twitter in a very canny way. First claiming that, you know, this was right before publication date. You know first claiming that there were mistakes in the book, all of which were in the uncorrected galley that I had corrected on my own, so the book doesn't have these mistakes. Then you know, this one reporter there, this is his stock in trade is using plagiarism apps and trying to find examples of what he calls plagiarism. You know, in my case there are 834 source notes, citations, and he found six passages that are not making big points or stealing anyone's ideas, where I didn't footnote properly, and in two cases missed footnoting, and they were all from one early section about vice. I mean, [inaudible] and said I was sorry, and many interviews, because I don't want any imperfection in my work. But you know, this was not plagiarism. It was too delicious a story for anybody to pass up that Jill Abramson, the executive editor at the Times at almost 65 had suddenly decided to become a plagiarist. Too good to be true, but too good not to publish.

JANE MAYER: well it certainly seems that

JILL ABRAMSON: I was told three weeks before the book was published that vice was mounting an opo campaign against me in the book and I actually hired a woman to help

me out on how to respond to whatever this was going to be, who had worked for us on strange justice when Jane and I were savagely attacked by the right.

JANE MAYER: By the Clarence Thomas forces. But the world of fighting back has changed a lot. In trying to clear your name and show that you are accurate and fair. It is hard with the twitter mob, they come right at you from

JILL ABRAMSON: The thing that was kind of education about it for me is it some of the points I made in the book about how information takes off and becomes the hurricane. So quickly. But you know, maybe after four or five days of me as plagiarist trending on twitter, Jeff Bezos's affair, and... I have never been more grateful to a business leader than when that story suddenly you know, it blows up, and then it's gone. It's very weird.

JANE MAYER: So, we were joking at one point, Jill and I went for a drink and decided that the world has changed from the Andy Warhol model that everyone will have 15 minutes of fame to it is now we will all have 15 minutes of shame.

[laughter]

JANE MAYER: Anyway, you know, I hope that some of you have written questions. We are going to take questions from the audience. I've got one question about the, some you know, the work you have done in the past that bears on potentially the 20/20 presidential election, which is after the work that we did together about Clarence Thomas and Anita Hill and Joe Biden's performance as the chairman of the judiciary committee in the Senate, that held those hearings, and after then you went back at this subject recently for New York magazine

JILL ABRAMSON: Yeah, I did.

JANE MAYER: What would you tell people about what you learned about Biden from that and anything, is there anything that is relevant that people should know do you think?

JILL ABRAMSON: Yes. We were harsh in our judgment of Biden's performance in 1991 during the Thomas/Hill hearings. And justifiably so. And for, when the Kavanaugh hearings were happening, or, it was really just after Kavanaugh was nominated, you know, I was assigned by New York magazine to go back over basically the whole history of this including looking at Biden, including looking for any other episode since Justice Thomas has been on the court and indeed there was one and in fact, Jane came with me and we got on the porch and knocked on the door of a woman who knew about, who knew things about Clarence Thomas's behavior. And you know there was a woman who he had kind of groped at a dinner after he was a Justice. So anyway, there was lots to go over to report and what shocked me, and we had a lot of this in strange justice, was, Biden was just so outmaneuvered by the Republicans on the Judiciary committee. And remember, back then the Democrats were in control of the Senate. And Biden was chairman of the judiciary committee, but he like bowed to the Republicans and agreed to terms that basically made it impossible for Anita Hill to prove her case.

Jill Mayer will it does seem significant if he's going to be running for president or potentially a president if he can be easily outmaneuvered

JILL ABRAMSON: You and I have had a lot of conversations about politics where the Democrats are hung up on, they want to be perceived as being fair. The Republicans just want to win. And you know, Biden fell prey to that imbalance in interests. And whenever I see him he makes like a dirty face at me

Jane Mayer: Oh he does

JILL ABRAMSON: Because I did the interview with Auerbach.

JANE MAYER: He doesn't come over and rub noses with you?

JILL ABRAMSON: He's not kissing the back of my hair.

[Laughter]

Jane Mayer: Okay let's see, here are some questions. If you are both writing a book together on the Brett Kavanaugh confirmation hearings, what would be the book's main premise in terms of how far we've come or not, since the Clarence Thomas confirmation hearings, Jill?

JILL ABRAMSON: I write for the Guardian about politics and I wrote a lot of columns once Kavanaugh was nominated and then even more once he was accused by a credible accuser of you know, very bad sexual misconduct, even though he was young when this happened, but what fascinated me as you know, the judiciary committee now controlled by Republicans. They didn't want to hold a hearing. They didn't want to have an FBI investigation. But, you know, public opinion, people were outraged, so they said, you know, we will have an FBI investigation. It wasn't a thorough one. And we'll hold hearings. But they only had two witnesses. Kavanaugh and his female accuser, and it seemed to me, and I wrote this before the vote was taken, a foregone conclusion that was such an incomplete hearing. No corroborators. Of course Kavanaugh was going to be confirmed. And all the evidence wasn't going to be heard. So I don't think we've come that far. We now have you know, to justices accused of sexual misconduct sitting on the court.

JANE MAYER: And accused of lying under oath to get confirmed, which is sort of more appalling in a way because if either of them had come forward and said well, I misbehaved, I feel terrible about it, it was a long time ago and I've learned, I think the outcome might have been, you know at least many people would have been more sympathetic.

JILL ABRAMSON: I don't know. I'm thinking of like a great scene in strange justice where Anita Hill's statement is being faxed page by page to the judiciary committee. So there are two staffers, a Republican staffer and a Democratic staffer, one worked for Biden and one worked for Strom Thurmond and they haven't read the statement but they are just collecting the pages and the Biden aid turned to the Thurmond aid and

said, what do you think Justice Thomas's reaction is going to be to this? And without missing a beat, the female aid to Thurmond just said, categorical denial.

[Laughter]

JILL ABRAMSON: So I'm not sure. I'm not sure that even as credible as Christine Blasey Ford was, whether like admitting some kind of wrongdoing, I think his goose would have been cooked.

JANE MAYER: You do?

JILL ABRAMSON: I do.

JANE MAYER: Well certainly his advisors felt that. I mean it was so much just like the movie Groundhog Day to see him come roaring in just as Thomas have just outraged. And I had so much the same feeling that Jill had that if, that the hearings only look like they were looking for a process that was trying to get at the truth. They really were not. Neither was the FBI. I was in the middle of reporting on it and I kept talking to people who had important information to give that the FBI was not even calling back. They were calling the FBI themselves to try to get their information across and were not being called back. It was sort of a faux process really. And the other women who, again, which is the same thing that happened to Anita Hill. There were other women who had pertinent information and if they had testified, we would have seen a pattern of behavior. And that's what the public never got to see. And I think that would have changed

JILL ABRAMSON: As it might have been the case in Anita Hill.

JANE MAYER: It might've changed public opinion though. I have to say I was up at Wellesley doing a speech recently and I was talking to American history professor there and I asked her if she thought if other women who didn't get the chance to testify against Kavanaugh had had the chance, if he, if it would've made a difference and she said no. I don't really think so. Because I think it wasn't about the truth and people already knew he wasn't telling the truth. So it wouldn't matter how many other women came in to say

JILL ABRAMSON: That's depressing.

JANE MAYER: For a reporter that's really the end because you work so hard to get the truth and get the facts out there. And you think that it really will matter. And basically I do think it matters. But it's more of a fight than ever these days. So here's another question. In a world of push notifications, tweets and soundbites, where do you see opportunities for raising the level of discourse, challenging each other with differing opinions, all while maintaining civility and respect?

JILL ABRAMSON: Civility and respect are endangered species right now. I mean, all you have to do is watch you know, the panels on cable. Where, you know, cable news feeds off of conflict. And that doesn't have, hold much promise for civility or, you know, good

discourse, good level of discourse, and it's fed by Facebook. Because like people are no longer being exposed to information that doesn't conform with what they already believe. And that is such a difference. In our country.

JANE MAYER: I'm now seeing a sign that says conclude imminently or something like that.

[Laughter]

JANE MAYER: So I think it is the polite version of getting the hook. So I guess that unfortunately we aren't going to be able to get to all the rest of these questions, though, some good ones in here. I will give you one last one, which is very much about the times and it doesn't have to take a lot of time, but how do you feel about the times getting rid of the public editor?

JILL ABRAMSON: I was oddly not. The public editor began after the Jayson Blair scandal. In 2003. The Washington Post had long had an ombudsman, the times never did. And no executive editors wanted to have someone looking over their shoulders to critique the paper. But the publisher insisted on it in 2003 and Dan O Grant was the first public editor and he was great. It sort of depended on the quality of the person doing it. And you know, the last public editor was not someone who got much admiring notices. And she had been quite critical of the times and Dean Baquet, the now executive editor for being too timid on a particular story that was critical of Trump and could have been published before the election and wasn't. And it made him very angry and soon she was gone and the position was abolished. I thought Margaret Sullivan was great, and that she served a really good purpose of ventilating really interesting just issues in journalism you know, and she was not, she didn't have like the schooled tone. But I was on balance sorry to see them abandon it, because they have this reader forum, but you know, where can you ventilate now, I mean the times has come under quite a bit of criticism for, you know, the so-called collusion delusion. You know, that they had too many stories saying Trump Associates and campaign workers were sort of conspiring directly with weird Russians. And that would be an interesting thing, you know controversial for sure for a public editor to sort of interview people at the times about and write about, but I haven't seen that.

JANE MAYER: I suppose in this case we can end on a note of a different counterpoint because I was kind of glad to see the public editor's go because I feel the whole world is

JILL ABRAMSON:...Is criticizing

JANE MAYER: And when you started you didn't have the Internet and twitter coming down on you, now when you write you feel the critics coming down before you finish your first sentence.

JILL ABRAMSON: Either patience or fortitude is staring at us.

JANE MAYER: Time to go. Thank you all for being a wonderful audience.

JILL ABRAMSON: Oh, signing books.

JANE MAYER: and we will be...

[End of transmission]