

AOL buys Huffington Post for \$315 million: So much for America's "progressive" media

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The announcement that AOL (formerly America Online), the internet services and media company, is purchasing Huffington Post for some \$315 million in cash and stock is a commentary on the character of the "progressive" media in the US.

Under the agreement, liberal commentator Arianna Huffington will be named president and editor-in-chief of The Huffington Post Media Group, which will include all Huffington Post and AOL content. In their joint press release, AOL and Huffington claimed that the "new group will have a combined base of 117 million unique visitors a month in the United States and 270 million around the world."

The press release goes on: "Following the close of this transaction, AOL will accelerate its strategy to deliver a scaled and differentiated array of premium news, analysis, and entertainment produced by thousands of writers, editors, reporters, and videographers around the globe."

There is no reference in any of the statements emanating from the partners as to what the new entity will have to say to its audience. Instead, a good deal of space is devoted to breathless commentary about a "merger of visions" and the companies' "pioneering approach" and "innovating community building," and so on. One might be forgiven for thinking that what principally excites all the parties is the possibility of making bigger names for themselves, along with a great deal of money.

The Huffington Post was launched in May 2005 by Huffington and media executive Kenneth Lerer, as a liberal alternative to various right-wing blogs. Lerer is the General Partner of Lerer Media Ventures and a past Executive Vice President of media conglomerate AOL Time Warner (AOL became an independent company in December 2009). He and his wife are prominent fundraisers for the Democratic Party.

The Huffington Post has enjoyed success as a news web site and blog, with a variety of liberal and semi-liberal

commentators. Its index of contributors is for the most part a who's who of political, academic, entertainment industry and media figures in the Democrats' general orbit.

The web site boasts of the "prominent voices" who have written for it, including Barack Obama, Hillary and Bill Clinton, New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg, former secretary of state Madeleine Albright, Senators Russ Feingold, Al Franken and John Kerry, Representative Nancy Pelosi, Microsoft's Bill Gates, Obama administration fixtures Rahm Emanuel and Lawrence Summers, news anchors Diane Sawyer and Katie Couric, astronaut Buzz Aldrin, actors Robert Redford, Mia Farrow, Jamie Lee Curtis, Alec Baldwin, Sean Penn and George Clooney, singers Neil Young and Madonna, screenwriter Aaron Sorkin, television producer Norman Lear, talk show host Charlie Rose, and more.

The most striking feature about the Huffington-AOL merger is perhaps how unsurprising and even "organic" it is. It would occur to few, if any, of the contributors mentioned to object to the sale of this supposedly politically critical, occasionally "oppositional" web site to one of America's leading media giants. The Huffington Post is now a component part of a corporation with 2009 revenue of \$3.257 billion and total assets of \$3.963 billion. Should anyone expect anything but the tamest commentary and opinion?

Arianna Huffington is a singular figure. Born in Greece (her father was interned by the Nazis during World War II for his opposition to the German occupation) and educated at Cambridge in England, Huffington began her media career in London in the 1970s. She was involved personally for years with right-wing *Times* (of London) journalist Bernard Levin.

In 1980 Huffington moved to the US, and in 1986 married oil multi-millionaire Michael Huffington, a family friend of the Bushes. Ronald Reagan appointed her

husband Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Negotiations Policy that same year. He ran successfully for Congress in 1992 and two years later, despite spending \$28 million, lost to Diane Feinstein in a close race for the US Senate. The Huffingtons subsequently divorced, and Michael Huffington disclosed that he was bisexual.

Arianna Huffington espoused the same right-wing views as her husband in the early and mid-1990s, endorsing Newt Gingrich's "Republican Revolution" in 1994 and Republican Bob Dole for president in 1996. She supported the campaign for Bill Clinton's ouster in 1998 over the Monica Lewinsky affair, establishing the Resignation.com web site, before finally deciding that "we must put a swift end to the president's [impeachment] trial and move on" in January 1999.

Huffington asserts that her move toward the left (strengthened no doubt by her opposition to the US-led bombing of Serbia in March-June 1999) was driven by disillusionment with Gingrich and the Republicans over social issues. There is no reason to disbelieve her. Her columns from the late 1990s often focus on social inequality and the harsh situation for the poor in America. In 2003, she entered (and then quit) the campaign for California governor in the recall election as a self-styled "progressive populist."

In her book, *Right is Wrong: How the Lunatic Fringe Hijacked America, Shredded the Constitution, and Made Us All Less Safe*, published in 2008, Huffington explains that she departed the Republican Party a dozen years earlier: "I left the GOP just as the Right was tightening its grip on the soul of the party. But, I must admit, even as I left I didn't foresee just how suffocating its hold would become."

She claims to have been disabused in particular of the notion that "the private sector—especially conservative multibillionaires who wail about wanting less government involvement—would rise to the occasion and provide the funding needed to replicate social programs that work, sustain them and to bring them to market."

Huffington's disillusionment with the Republicans and their "free market" frenzy and global unilateralism evidently found a response within influential sections of the media and business, who increasingly viewed the Bush-Cheney administration as a disaster both in domestic and foreign policy. This response ultimately took the form of cash supplied by similarly-minded investors, leading to the establishment of the Huffington Post in 2005 (she had also reportedly received millions in

her divorce settlement).

Huffington was a staunch supporter of Barack Obama in 2008, authoring a piece headlined "Obama Wins: Why All Americans Have a Reason to Celebrate," after his victory in November. ("Tonight is a night to celebrate the victory of a candidate who seized his moment in history and reminded America of its youth and the optimism it longs to recapture. Let's savor it. The dark years of the Bush regression are almost done. It's time for another American breakthrough.") She considers Obama a personal friend, although she has expressed disappointment with some of his policies. Huffington appears regularly at events organized by the liberal left and Democratic Party, including the National Conference for Media Reform in 2008.

Through her various political permutations, Huffington has always managed to stay well-connected, and well-off. She recently blogged from the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, where she rubbed shoulders with CEOs, leading politicians and "the world's movers and shakers," in her own words.

Already rich, Huffington is now presumably fabulously rich. In that, however, she is not separated by very much from countless other figures on the American liberal left. Katrina vanden Heuvel of the *Nation*, for example, comes from wealth and her magazine includes among its writers more than its share of complacent, affluent individuals.

These are very prosperous people, whose tepid criticism of American society never touches upon the fundamentals, because their politics reflect their economic interests. They continue to defend the profit system and the Democratic Party against the interests of the vast majority of the population. The \$315 million sale of Huffington Post to AOL confirms this social and ideological reality.



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