Masthead Conversation with Franklin Foer on February 7, 2018

Caroline K.: Hey, everybody. I'm Caroline Kitchener, Associate Editor of The Masthead. We've got editor, Matt Peterson on the line calling in from New York. Hey, Matt.

Matt Peterson: Hello.

Caroline K.: Our guest, sitting here across from me in our studio is Franklin Foer. Frank is the National Correspondent for *The Atlantic*. He is the former editor of *The New Republic* and the reason that we are all here today. He is the author of our March cover story. It's all about Paul Manafort, “The Plot Against America.”

He's written a lot of other stuff too. Some of which, we'll be touching on today, media, big tech, soccer, the World Cup. We are so happy to have you here, Frank. Thank you for coming.

Franklin Foer: Pleasure.

Caroline K.: We are trying out something a little bit different for our Masthead interview this week. It's an experiment. We are talking to Frank now, but we are hoping that this conversation just would be the beginning of a much more extended conversation about Frank's work and the questions that come out of it. Over the next 10 days, we're going to be following up on a bunch of the questions that come out of this call. We're going to be consulting with experts.

We're going to be doing our own reporting to find some of these answers. Let me explain how this is going to work. We're going to ask you, Frank, a bunch of different questions, and I'll ask you to put each question in one of four categories. Frank, literally, has a sheet with these four categories right in front of him. The categories are as follows:

First, category one, pass. This is a question that just is not relevant to you, Frank, or one that you just don't really feel like answering. Category two, short answer.

Franklin Foer: If I pass on a question, it doesn't reflect on anybody.

Caroline K.: Yes. Okay. Good.

Franklin Foer: Right? Deal?

Caroline K.: Yeah, deal.

Franklin Foer: Okay.

Caroline K.: Good to know.

Matt Peterson: This is a game show though, and we are keeping score.

Caroline K.: Category two, this is what I anticipate most of the questions will fall into category two. This is short answer. This is your standard interview question when you don't have the option to opt out of things. This is a question that you feel like you can answer in the time that we have on this recording on this conversation.

Franklin Foer: I'm a journalist, and my capacity to turn even the things that I don't know into straightforward answers is pretty immense.

Caroline K.: Yeah. Excellent.

Franklin Foer: Okay.

Caroline K.: That leaves us well into category three, which is, “don’t know, but I'm interested.” This is a question that you can't really answer without doing a little bit more research, but you think that we can, and this is where ... Don't just say, “I don't know,” because we want your guidance. All of these things are things that you've touched on.

Franklin Foer: My ego doesn't really have space for “don't know.”

Caroline K.: For category three?

Franklin Foer: Yeah.

Caroline K.: Okay. Maybe we won't have very much to follow up on. We'll see.

Franklin Foer: It's a test of my humility.

Caroline K.: Okay. If category three is a test of your humility, what is category four, because category four is, “This is too big to answer?”

Franklin Foer: Yeah.

Caroline K.: Are we going to get a lot of those?

Franklin Foer: Is it the questions we kick over to the theologians and the philosophers?

Caroline K.: We have a philosopher actually on this call. Matt.

Matt Peterson: I am a fake philosopher. I was a practicing philosopher for a little while, and then I gave it up, but I'll say that we did a version of this game show with Ta-Nehisi Coates recently, and a lot of those questions went into category four. A surprising number.

Franklin Foer: Wow.

Caroline K.: We'll see.

Franklin Foer: Okay.

Caroline K.: To be determined.

Franklin Foer: All right.

Caroline K.: Does that all sound good, Frank? Any questions about the game show nature of this conversation?

Franklin Foer: No. I'm ready.

Caroline K.: Okay.

Franklin Foer: I'm braced. Bring it on.

Caroline K.: Excellent. All right. Let's dive in. We're going to start with the cover story before we get into any other topics that Frank has written about before. This cover story, many of you have read it.

Many of you have told us that you want to hear more about it. It's all about Paul Manafort, President Trump's former campaign manager, but it is, as you'll know, about a lot more than just one guy. Through the story of Paul Manafort, we learned about the ways in which our country is vulnerable to corruption. There's no one easy way to explain Paul Manafort's career. He jumps around lawyer, political consultant, lobbyist, campaign manager, making backroom deals, getting handed exorbitant amounts of money. We can learn a lot, I think, about our country through this story. I want to start though with one of the big terms that I think encapsulates a lot in this story, and that is double-breasted operation.

Franklin Foer: Pass. Okay.

Caroline K.: I think I read the paragraph that described double-breasted operation three times, trying to get a sense of how this actually works. That is my first question. First of all, what is a double-breasted operation and how does it work in practice?

Franklin Foer: Okay. Straightforward answer. Off to a good start. Paul Manafort came out ... In 1980, Paul Manafort came out of the Ronald Reagan campaign where he'd run the South and the general election, and he was a very much sought-after political consultant, and he opened a political consulting firm in Washington that got a lot of clients.

Soon thereafter, corporations started calling Paul Manafort, saying, "Hey, could you help us lobby Congress to get this piece of legislation passed?", and so Manafort and his firm had this genius idea that they would create an operation that had a political consulting arm that got politicians elected, and that had a lobbying arm that would turn around and lobby the very politicians that they'd help get elected. That's the double-breasted nature of it all, which poses an inherent conflict of interest, I think, that is apparent, but also, I mean, it's ... To be a political consultant's a very intimate thing. When you run a campaign, in order to do that effectively, you need to know all the vulnerabilities of your opponent.

Caroline K.: Yeah.

Franklin Foer: You get to know their family extremely well. You know all their weaknesses and strengths.

Caroline K.: Right, because you need to know what they'll dig up.

Franklin Foer: Yeah, which in turn makes you a pretty potent lobbyist when you go ask them for favors.

Caroline K.: Wow. That's very interesting. How explicit are these double-breasted operations about what they're doing, about the double-sided nature and the potential conflicts of interest?

Franklin Foer: That's just I think a straightforward answer as well, which is that in the case of Paul Manafort's firm, they technically set up two different firms, so they had the same principles, and they share an office space, yet legally, they were organized as two separate entities, and so I think people tend to know what the game is, but the game is not explicit.

Caroline K.: Okay. You think that going in ... These are little follow up questions. Don't feel like you ...

Franklin Foer: Okay.

Caroline K.: I'll let you know.

Franklin Foer: No, no, no. No.

Caroline K.: Going in, when a candidate hires a political consulting firm that is part of a double-breasted operation, you think that they know what to expect. They know that down the line, they'll probably be solicited for some kind of favors?

Franklin Foer: Yes. I mean, it's like I don't know, but I'm interested, but here you go. My hunch is, is that when you're running for political office, you're not thinking about what happens when you get elected, and so your instinct is to focus on the task at hand, which is winning an election.

Caroline K.: Yeah. Okay. Question two, what are the ... Paul Manafort has worked across so many different places. You write that his firm has worked in Nigeria, Kenya, Saudi Arabia.

We're talking about dictatorships, and we're wondering, what are the conditions in a country that make it right for Paul Manafort to come in and steer the politics? What is it that makes these countries value the experience of a guy like this?

Franklin Foer: Right. A straightforward answer, which is that if you're in one of these countries, odds are you're getting some foreign aid from the United States, which you know you need to have a lobbyist on the ground in Washington to help keep flowing.

Caroline K.: Okay.

Franklin Foer: Secondly, you probably are pretty vain, and so you want people ... You like having a good image, and so to have a consultant like Paul Manafort come in and spruce up your image and get you interviews with famous Western reporters and to get you a fawning profile in the “Washington Post,” that feels pretty good to you, and also, you have infinite resources to spend on somebody like Paul Manafort, and so if a consultant comes to you and says, “Hey, I can help you with X, Y and Z problem,” this is a drop in a bucket for you. It's no big deal. You don't have any sense of a democratic accountability if you're a dictator, so spend willy-nilly.

Caroline K.: Right.

Matt Peterson: Let me jump in and ask a follow up here. Is Paul Manafort really good at this personally, or is it really that the American system is amenable to this kind of gaming?

Franklin Foer: I think that he is both good at it and that I think that he knows how to ... He's not a hack, so what happens with a lot of political consultants who operate abroad is that they just parachute in, so somebody like James Carville for instance or Stan Greenberg. There are a lots of consultants who work abroad, and what happens is, is that the famous American political consultant will show up to pitch the client, and they touch the ground in the country for a day or two, a couple times, but then they assign junior people in the country to do the grunt work, to do the donkey work, and so I think in the Manafort instance, one thing that distinguished him was that he was very good in some instances at client maintenance.

Matt Peterson: Right.

Franklin Foer: If there was a big client like Ferdinand Marcos, who's the President in the Philippines, say, or certainly in Ukraine, he really devoted himself, but then, there were other clients of his that I came across where he never touched the ground in 10 years working with them, and it was just easy money that came and went. If he applied himself, he was good. He knew the country. He knew about the countries he was working in. He was paying for good polling that helped him understand the countries, and he certainly understood Washington.

Matt Peterson: As I recall from your story, sometimes, he would disappear from his firm and people wouldn't know where he was, which suggests he was doing all of that client maintenance himself directly. Right?

Franklin Foer: The reason that he was disappearing was that he was working with a shady Lebanese-born, Spanish-based arms dealer, called Abdul Rahman Al Assir, and they were doing deals that didn't necessarily involve his firm, even though arguably, those deals probably should have involved his firm.

Matt Peterson: Right.

Caroline K.: I'm really interested in this idea of making someone over, making a dictator over. You talk about how Manafort worked with Savimbi. Am I saying that name right?

Franklin Foer: Yup.

Caroline K.: He worked with him and he brought him to the Waldorf-Astoria, wearing a fancy suit, driving around in a fancy car. Who is that for? Is he doing all of those things and projecting that image, hoping that newspapers will cover it and the American public will think, “Oh, this guy. Good guy,” or is that more for politicians?

Franklin Foer: Jonas Savimbi was the leader of an Angolan insertion movement called “UNITA,” and he'd been trained by the Chinese. He was a Maoist in the early part of his career, and because of the shifting geopolitics in his country, he ended up aligning with the West, and so in order to be aligned with the West, he needed to do two things. One is that he needed to overcome that reputation as a Maoist, and so this was the height of the Cold War, so he needed to portray himself as being somebody who the West could count on, and so Manafort did a great job with that, where he found ways to get conservative think tanks to vouch for him. He taught Savimbi basically how to talk about free markets and about democracy so that he could portray himself as a latter-day Thomas Jefferson. Then, Savimbi, also has been guilty of some pretty terrible war crimes, and so I think that as he was coming through town, I think it was important to present him as somebody who had some polish, and so who just didn't fit the image of a war criminal, and so he worked with him to really style his presentation in such a way that screamed refinement, rather than the type of guy who would burn women and children alive.

Caroline K.: Yeah. Yeah. Do you think that refinement was picked up on by the American public or more by politicians though?

Franklin Foer: I mean, it created this vicious cycle where magazines and journalists, newspapers would refer to Savimbi “chic,” and they noted the ways in which conservatives had embraced him.

Caroline K.: Wow.

Franklin Foer: Ronald Reagan embraced him. There was an interview on “60 Minutes.” I mean, it actually, it was effective, and the best way that you can measure the effectiveness of the effort was that the aid kept coming and even increased, and even at a moment when the conflict in Angola probably could have been settled peacefully, and just ground on.

Caroline K.: Right. Right.

Matt Peterson: Frank, you mentioned that aspect in the story, that Bill Bradley reported that maybe the conflicts went on for much longer and killed maybe thousands of people or something like ... Some huge numbers. I'm curious, like what do you know about like the lasting circumstances of this involvement in Angola? I mean, the country is phenomenally at peace now, but is this a bigger historical story that Americans are just not paying attention to anymore in our involvement in Angola that Paul Manafort had something to do with?

Franklin Foer: Yeah. I'm going to say I don't know, but I'm interested, which is to say like I know what Bill Bradley says.

Caroline K.: Cool.

Franklin Foer: I know what other people say, that there was this moment the Soviet Union is falling, so the big sponsor of the government that he was rebelling against was collapsing. It was a moment that was ripe for peace talks, and yet, the conflict ended up grinding on, and so I found myself persuaded by Bill Bradley, who was the senator from New Jersey, a presidential candidate, who was committed to these issues and thought about them deeply, and by some of the other accounts that I've read of that era, but I do think it is something worth exploring further.

Caroline K.: Cool.

Franklin Foer: Yeah.

Caroline K.: He can do that.

Franklin Foer: Assigned.

Caroline K.: Awesome. This is another question that just came out of what you were just saying about Savimbi and the coverage that he got on, you said “60 Minutes.”

Franklin Foer: Yeah.

Caroline K.: Is Paul Manafort friends with a bunch of journalists? How does that connection work? I mean, it seems like he was really good at getting good articles to be published about his people.

Franklin Foer: Right. I'd also put that in the don't know, but I'm interested category, that I think that as a politician ... When you work on campaigns, you certainly develop a network of journalists that you work with, and one of the reasons why it's a hard question to really answer is that Manafort is kind of an off-the-record on-background type of guy. He was somebody who enjoyed standing outside of the spotlight, unlike his partner, Roger Stone, who's incredibly flamboyant and who just rushed to any bank of television cameras and enjoyed having profiles of himself written by it.

Caroline K.: He was the candidate. Right?

Franklin Foer: Ultimately. No. You're right. In the Young Republicans.

Caroline K.: In Young Republicans.

Franklin Foer: I think that Manafort, it's interesting, you go back and you look at all the articles that were written about his firm, he never was profiled, and he always kept himself away from the spotlight.

Caroline K.: Until now.

Franklin Foer: Until now. In the last, I bet he regrets it.

Caroline K.: Yeah. He does. Okay. We've got ... This is a pretty big question, not to sway you on any particular direction, but Putin is in the background of everything that's going on in Ukraine. Right? Was Manafort doing his dirty work?

Franklin Foer: I'm going to answer this in a straightforward way, but then maybe leave you a little bit of wiggle room to go on, which is that Ukraine is a country that is divided into two parts.

Caroline K.: Great.

Franklin Foer: There is a western part that is ethnically Ukrainian, speaks Ukrainian language, has strong sense of national identity, and then there's an eastern part of the country that identifies more with Russian language and Russian culture that the population was moved to in that part of the country, in the Soviet era as well, inward migration that Stalin especially encouraged to build up an industrial base there, and so Ukrainian politics was always going to polarize in these two directions. After Ukraine became an independent country, it was almost natural for some of the forces in the eastern part to just be aligned with Russia, and so Manafort steps into the equation in 2004, and there's a political candidate called 'Viktor Yanukovych' who comes from the east. When he runs for president initially before Manafort shows up on the scene, all of his political consultants came from Russia, and Russia and Putin, who was president at the time, reportedly funded his campaign to, in the hundreds of millions, and so Yanukovych and the eastern politicians then became very much tied up with Russia, the unnatural gas deals that they conceived over time, and Russia thought of Ukraine as its backyard and kind of a natural part of a political orbit, and so it was always trying to both commercially and politically win influence there. Manafort was working with politicians who were Russian-oriented in most sorts of ways, but it should be said that those politicians weren't besties with Putin and they've resented being dictated to by Putin, and there was always some tension.

You get to this really key moment in Ukraine in 2014 where Ukraine is about to join the European Union, and Manafort, I think, is sincerely pushing them to join the European Union, and then Putin steps in and basically bribes Ukraine and the politicians there to align with Russia. Then, people protest, and it seems like the Russians were advising the politicians to massacre the protestors, and so, which is a way of saying, yes. Putin and Manafort were working basically for the same team, and there were all these connections both financial, social, political, yet, I think it would be a little bit of a stretch to say that he was doing Putin's bidding in that sort of precise sort of way.

Caroline K.: Yeah. You worked on the story for six months, and I'm wondering, do you feel like you were able to unearth all of those connections or do you feel like in some ways, there's still a lot more there that you weren't able to totally get?

Franklin Foer: Yeah. That's ... Yeah. That's in the realm of between, “I don't know, but I'm interested,” and maybe “Too big to answer.”

Caroline K.: You'll never know.

Franklin Foer: Yeah.

Caroline K.: Yeah.

Franklin Foer: I mean, I came across things like flight manifests that showed Manafort going to Russia like a dozen times over the course of a number of years, and I assume he was going to meet with one of his clients, Oleg Deripaska, who was based in Moscow, and I knew for instance that when the Ukrainian politicians were meeting for a period of time, they had to do it in Moscow because it wasn't safe for them to do it in Kiev, and so Manafort was going there. There's a lot of murkiness, and a lot of things that are suggestive, and it's hard for me to know. I'm counting on Robert Mueller's good reporting to take us home on that.

Caroline K.: Yeah. Okay. We're going to switch gears a little bit here. I'm very interested in the ethics of reporting on the texts stolen and released by the recruitment of the Ukrainian hackers.

Franklin Foer: Yes.

Caroline K.: That is something that you've talked about before, that struggle, and I'm hoping you can talk a little bit more about that today. First question, so it would be great if you could first, before we actually get into questions, describe a little ... Tell us a little bit more about what these text messages are and why it's hard to decide what to do with them.

Franklin Foer: Yeah. I think we need a new category, the “It's complicated category.”

Caroline K.: Like relationships.

Franklin Foer: Yeah. Paul Manafort's daughter, Andrea, was an incessant text messager, and last February, her texts were ... Going back even further, during the campaign, it seems like her texts were hacked, and there was a report of a breach, and according to reporting that we have elsewhere, it was an activist collective that breached her cellphone and got her text messages, and they posted the messages on the dark web. Some of those messages were prepackaged in a way to try to convey a political point about Manafort's work in Ukraine to show that it'd been dirty, and to suggest that Manafort had been involved somehow in the massacre that I just described to you a couple minutes ago, and so that stuff was out there reported. Manafort didn't dispute the authenticity of those texts, but then there was this other chunk of text messages that were encrypted and sitting on the dark web, and a lot of reporters had them, and they used bits and pieces from them, but there was this hesitancy that most journalists had, and I share, about using purloined material that comes from somebody who really doesn't deserve to be in public view, and so I did wrestle with it.

I ultimate made the decision that I was writing a psychological profile of a very important man, and that if I judiciously use those text messages, I could help fill in gaps in the narrative, and I did my best to try to confirm that information elsewhere, but it's all ... We're in a moral gray zone with this material.

Caroline K.: How is this different from, say, the Pentagon Papers, classified information that is otherwise in the public interest?

Franklin Foer: The Pentagon Papers were produced for the government with the intention of benefiting the Department of Defense, so that's clearly, even if it wasn't intended to be made public, there was a clear public interest in those documents.

Caroline K.: Yeah.

Franklin Foer: This is a private citizen's private correspondence.

Caroline K.: Yeah.

Franklin Foer: To me, it's very different.

Caroline K.: Yeah. Okay. Official question. Should there be any rules for journalists surrounding this? I mean, do you think that we should create some kind of established rules and regulations for when it's okay to use information from the dark web, hacked information, in articles and stories?

Franklin Foer: Yeah. Don't know, but I'm interested. I mean, I feel like rules could be hard to impose because you're ultimately up against the subjective judgment about what's valuable for the public to know about a person's private life, and those are always, always murky decisions to have to make.

Caroline K.: Yeah. This is something that I ... I don't know if you've read, yesterday or the day before, Ed Yong wrote a great piece about the past two years that he has spent analyzing his sources and the gender of his sources, and keeping track of how many men he interviews, how many women he interviews. This is a very male story, but with the exception of the daughters, there are really no key players that are women, and I'm wondering, is that something that you think about? Is that something, would it ever cross your mind to, say, expand the scope of a story to include a more diverse range of characters?

Franklin Foer: I guess, maybe. I'll put that in the straightforward answer category, because I'm reporting on a world where it was all men, and in fact, there's a moment where I describe that Paul Manafort's firm in the 80s would have an annual party called “Boodles,” named after a brand of gin, where they would play golf, and they would behave in like a baudy, raucous, frat house sort of way.

Caroline K.: Yeah.

Franklin Foer: One of the women in his firm asked to be invited because the women weren't invited, and I quoted a guy basically saying, “You don't want to be invited,” but that was the world that I'm reporting on.

Caroline K.: Right. Right.

Franklin Foer: I actually ... The other thing that's, I think, necessary to state about this type of reporting is sometimes, it's hard to tell who I've talked to because there's a lot of reporting. I have a lot of on-the-record quotes in the story. I was pretty pleased with the number that I was able to get, but then, there's a lot of people that I talked to who don't want to be quoted for a variety of reasons, and so you don't actually know the gender balance of my sources.

Caroline K.: Yeah. This is true. This is true. I mean, is that something that you think about when you're doing a story? It's okay if not.

Franklin Foer: I would say that my primary ... It depends what type of story, but in this instance, my primary objective is getting the truth and getting the narrative, and that to me is the most important part about it, and I think that where the gender balance should come into play is when you're relying, especially when you're relying, on expert opinion where I think, especially in fields where there's entrenched gender ...

Caroline K.: Yeah. Yeah.

Franklin Foer: You can see that, like the man-splaining expert is the one you go to first, and that there's like a prestige, that's artificial, and that person may be a blowhard, when there are all sorts of people who are more qualified potentially, but just don't have the same sort of profile or the same sort of cheap, pithy quotes, and so I think that that's a place where it's much fairer to ask and much more imperative to ask that sort of question.

Caroline K.: Yeah. That's a great point. I was really interested in your brief discussion of the Young Republicans. You said, you wrote, "Control over the Young Republicans, a political and social network for professionals ages 18 to 40, was a genuine prize in those days."

This seems to imply that it's less influential now, and I'm wondering how and why has the group's influence waned since the late 70s, and how much political influence does it have now?

Franklin Foer: Yes. Don't know, but I'm interested. I think that what happened is, so the Young Republicans were a force in Republican politics starting in the 50s and 60s, and it was because politics was making this transition from being a backroom deal where you'd have the estate-wide conventions where local activists, and polls would get together, and they'd pick the delegates who would get sent to a national convention. You often had brokers at conventions, and Young Republicans were just a very effective force that Barry Goldwater, especially in 1964, was able to mobilize. The conservatives who were interested within this organization became his troops on the ground, and it did also become a bracket. It was the group that controlled. It was called the “Team,” and they were tied into direct male and other ...

There was a lot of money changing hands because it was so important, and jobs were changing hands. In fact, one of the reasons I was obsessed with that, I wrote about how that chapter is one of my favorite pieces—

Caroline K.: I love that chapter.

Franklin Foer: One of my favorite pieces to report that I ever did was about the College Republicans. I did this in the 2000s because Karl Rove, who was then President Bush's political Svengali, had come up from the College Republicans. There was a scandal in the 2000s with this guy Jack Abramoff, and Abramoff had come up from the College Republicans, and so I was really fascinated with this group that was the training ground for political operatives, and I went to a College Republican election, and it was a knock-out, drag-out fight. There were so many underhanded things that were happening with smears, and flyers appearing with innuendo, and there were grownups who were coming to participate in this College Republican convention.

Caroline K.: What grown? Like professors or—

Franklin Foer: Not just. Lobbyists, and political consultants, and these other people who were tapping into this direct male bracket were descending on it.

Caroline K.: Wow. That's so interesting.

Franklin Foer: It was just so tough and absurd given that it was college kids.

Caroline K.: Yeah. Is this—

Matt Peterson: Is this unique to ... Maybe you're probably going to ask the same question.

Caroline K.: Yeah, I am. I am. Go ahead.

Matt Peterson: Is it unique to the Republicans, or did the Democrats did this too, and why? Why do Young Republicans and College Republicans have this culture?

Franklin Foer: Democrats do it to a lesser extent, which is … there's always this asymmetry, it seems like, in politics, where it's like with the government shutdown, where like Republicans will go to the mat for government shutdown, and Democrats retreat after day two, and that there's, or with like negative advertising, it sometimes feels like there's this type of asymmetry, and it's true even in the way that they're trained at the youngest age, where Democrats have some tough elections, but there's just not the same ferocity, and it's not tied into the grownups in the same sort of way, and so why does this happen? Again, you can never underestimate the extent to which it's a money-making opportunity, and so if the Republican Party gives the College Republicans a million, a couple million dollars, to go do their thing, they're going to spend that money on vendors, and those vendors are going to want a piece of the action, and so they'll encourage things because it's good for their business, so there's some bad-actor grownups who help corrupt the young kids.

Caroline K.: Yeah. Darn.

Franklin Foer: There's an awesome story. Karl Rove, I think it was like 1973, fought this election. It was actually against Paul Manafort and Roger Stone, and a guy called Terry Dolan, and Lee Atwater, who was another great consultant, was aligned with Karl Rove, and it became such a nasty campaign that the chairman of the Republican Party had to intervene and stop it, and the chairman of the Republican Party at the time happened to be George H.W. Bush, and so it's just the stuff of myth and lore.

Caroline K.: I also wonder because generally speaking, there are more liberal college kids. The Young Republicans or the College Republicans can be more of a direct pipeline to leadership, maybe.

Franklin Foer: Yeah. I think that's not necessarily true. In a lot of institutions, it may be true kind of more in the Ivy League and certain prestige institutions, let's say, but that's not necessarily universally true, and also, I think that when it comes to politics that are to the left of center, you have this competition between kind of more leftist organizations, and young Democrat organizations, and young Democrats, College Democrats maybe just seem more dorky relative to the others, and so they don't attract the same numbers.

Caroline K.: Yeah. That's interesting. Matt, do you have other questions? We're running up against the clock a little bit.

Matt Peterson: I want to jump into the state of journalism for a second while I can before we go. This is a week in which you've seen a lot of the turmoil. *Newsweek* is in crisis, the *L.A. Times* has a new owner, and I'm curious about those ownership shifts because one of the themes of your book “World Without Mind” was that objective journalism as we know it is really, in some ways, just a kind of particular corporate culture that certain companies like the *New York Times*’ company, maybe the Jeff Bezos’ *Washington Post*, have adapted, and I think we all know what are the things that might incentivize an owner to drop that culture, but I'm curious if you have opinions on what incentivizes new owners to deepen the culture of objective fact-based journalism as we know.

Franklin Foer: That's too big to answer. No. I'll give it a go. I mean, some of it is driven by market forces and what's profitable, and so I think Jeff Bezos and the *Washington Post* understand that there was this big opportunity for somebody to challenge the *New York Times* to be a national newspaper, and he had the resources to be able to pull it off, and the chutzpah to be able to pull it off given everything else that he's invented over the course of his career. Something like *Newsweek* is just kind of an outdated institution. It's amazing that it survived as long as it has, and *Time Inc*.

That's the other story, it was sold in the last couple of weeks to Meredith, and so you have another institution that was really a pillar of American media over the course of the 20th century that seems to be in some state of flux, if not, decline. Then, the *Los Angeles Times* is just a sad, it's a very sad example of how even the second biggest city in the United States really can't sustain a local newspaper, and when we talk about the decline of journalism, I mean, it's not that journalism is in universal state of decline. I think we could look at, say, the newspaper war over reporting over the Trump administration and say, “Wow. In some ways, journalism has never been more alive,” but then, you do have these crumblings, these ruins that are left, and one of the most important of that is local media, and it just sounds earnest to reflect on, that some of the worst abuses of power in this country happened at the local level. Local bullies are the worst sort of bullies, and newspapers, not in every instance, but in some instances, were the one countervailing power that stood up to those local bullies, and now, they don't exist.

Matt Peterson: How bad is it, pulling back and looking at the big sweep of journals in history is as I know you've done ... How bad are we off right now relative to the 19th century when these norms were being developed? Is this ... I guess my take is that things have gone a little better in recent years maybe, through this, the competition that the *New York Times*, *Washington Post* have experienced, that *The Atlantic* is flourishing? How bad is this culture at the moment?

Franklin Foer: Maybe that is too big to answer as well, but here's what I would say, which is that journalism improved in quality immeasurably over the course of the 20th century when it became professionalized, when, if you go back 150 years, people didn't do interviews. The concept of interview was kind of a foreign concept. The idea of objectivity was a very strange concept, and so things are not in 19th century lens when it comes to the health of our media. We're much better off than we were back then, and still, there are good reasons to wring your hands in worry, which is that, while we can point to a handful of vibrant media outlets, and we can say that the internet means that those outlets are more accessible to a wider range of people, I do think that over the course of the last 15 years, we've seen a tremendous shrinkage in the number of people who are employed in the field of journalism. There's a lot of reportorial power that just evaporated, that even those institutions, which seemed to be flourishing, in certain ways are smaller in other ways in terms of the sweep of their coverage.

You could take something like the *Wall Street Journal*, which was like, in not so long ago, both home to excellent narrative journalism and also exquisite reporting on the regulatory state, and both of those things have disappeared from that paper. You could say, no big deal, like there's great narrative journalism in lots of other places, but there was like a special quirky type of narrative journalism that the Wall Street Journal specialized in, and that reporting on the regulatory state just doesn't exist in the same sort of way, and if it does, it's become so niche, so there's Politico Pro or maybe some of what Axios does that's picked that up, but you don't have a major American newspaper obsessively covering the FCC in the way that you're used to, so you've lost some countervailing power that comes with journalism. That's a small example, but I think an important one, and in some ways a reflective one. It's not to say that things haven't continued to improve, like I think that in a lot of ways, journalism has become much more diverse, and in some ways, more in touch with its readership, and more fun, but I think that there are costs.

Caroline K.: All right. We got to wrap this up, Frank, but before we do, just one more question for you, which is this. From your reporting, from your Manafort story reporting, is there a question three that you would like, a “Don't know, but I'm interested” that you would like us to follow up on in the next two weeks?

Franklin Foer: I don't suppose you're going to get to the bottom of this whole Russia meddling with the election, including with the Trump campaign conspiracy, are you?

Caroline K.: Probably not, but we can try.

Franklin Foer: You can try. No.

Caroline K.: We are here in D.C.

Franklin Foer: Yeah. Yeah. I like that you guys are interested in these broader questions about what's happened to lobbying, and so here's one question for you that I think is pretty interesting, that I’d like to see you guys take a whack at, which is that Manafort getting busted seems to be like a pretty big deal for Washington, that he was somebody who was representing a foreign government, and nobody ever gets busted for violations of the Foreign Agents Registration Act, except for Manafort, and so I'd be curious for you guys to look into what sort of impact the Manafort indictment has on the culture of Washington. Will anything actually change as a result of it?

Caroline K.: That's a great question. Okay. With that, we're going to wrap up. Thanks for participating in this experiment. I think it worked. You think it worked?

Franklin Foer: Yeah.

Caroline K.: I think it worked.

Matt Peterson: I think it worked.

Franklin Foer: Stunning success.

Caroline K.: Awesome. All right. Thank you very much, Frank, and we'll talk to you soon, members. Bye.