

She's been called an 'intellectual lap-dancer', 'the Edmund Hillary of social-climbing' and 'the most upwardly mobile Greek since Icarus'. Not that Arianna Huffington cares – for when she speaks, the world has learnt to listen.

Helena de Bertodano spends a day in the presence of the socialite and political pundit

She who must be obeyed

Photograph by Amanda Friedman

Arianna is running late,' I am told when I arrive at the New York offices of the Huffington Post, the influential current affairs website set up by the flamboyant Greek-born socialite Arianna Huffington. The minimalist offices are eerily silent: rows of earnest twentysomethings are hard at work at computer screens. No phones ring, no one speaks.

Suddenly the door swings open and in strides Arianna herself, statuesque in her black Valentino trouser-suit, Armani heels and Bulgari jewellery. Instantly the place is abuzz with activity. Everyone is out of their chairs, clustering around Huffington as she moves through the office waving, kissing and congratulating her staff. The website has just won Best Political Blog at the Webby Awards (which will be held that night) for its agenda-changing commentary.

What makes Huffington, 58, so powerful is her extraordinary connections. A few months ago, for example, she wrote about a private dinner party that she and John McCain, the Republican presidential candidate, attended just after George Bush won the 2000 election. At the dinner, wrote Huffington, McCain admitted that he did not vote for Bush. McCain dismissed the allegation as 'totally false' but Huffington's fellow diners backed

her up. Now she is being depicted as a one-woman campaign against him. 'I gladly accept that title,' she says. 'Right now the single most important thing for this country to avoid is the election of John McCain' (though, ironically, given Bush's rock-bottom ratings, she may have inadvertently boosted McCain's credibility).

But when the Huffington Post, or Huffpo as it is known, first went live in May 2005 it was widely derided as an online cocktail party for Huffington and her Hollywood friends. She herself was dismissed as a joke, 'the most upwardly mobile Greek since Icarus'. First a staunch Republican, then an independent candidate in the 2003 California gubernatorial election (which Arnold Schwarzenegger won), now a fervent Democrat, she has been described as 'an intellectual lap-dancer'.

But the calibre of the Huffington Post's bloggers – who have included the screenwriter and director Nora Ephron, Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, not to mention Huffington herself – quickly made it essential reading in liberal circles. She is a long-time supporter of Obama, and his ascendancy has made her opinions more relevant than ever.

Huffington apologises effusively for keeping me waiting as she sends someone off to Starbucks ('a venti light frappuccino – no syrup') and calls a staff meeting to help her decide on the

five-word 'speech' she is due to deliver at the awards that evening.

'Ohh-kehheh,' she says, speaking loudly in a heavily accented voice. 'We're down to three choices, so let's do a mahhh-jority vote: "Big Brother, *we're* watching you"; "President Obama, sounds good, right?"; and "No country for old media".'

The vote is split but most people want the last one. 'Not the President Obama one?' says Huffington, who clearly has a strong preference. 'No, way too earnest,' someone says, so they settle on 'No country for old media'.

That decision made, we go into a side office, where Huffington plugs her two BlackBerries into the wall and sits on a red chair, wires trailing around her. In fact, she has three BlackBerries but has left one at home. Every few seconds one of them rings, sometimes both do at the same time. At first she ignores them, then says she will switch them off, but finally can resist the urge no longer and answers one. 'Dahhhlling,' she purrs to the caller. By the time she gets round to focusing on me it is nearly time to leave for the awards ceremony. But her charm is such that you scarcely mind. 'Come to the dinner too,' she says. 'It will be fun.'

The Huffington Post is entirely unlike the traditional media, where full-time, professional reporters track and break news stories. The Huffpo's bloggers (there are more than 1,800) are unpaid and its stories originate elsewhere:



in newspapers, on television or, occasionally, from a 'citizen reporter'. For example, the 'bittergate' story – in which Obama said that working-class voters 'get bitter' and 'cling to guns or religion' – was broken on the Huffington Post by a blogger who heard the comments at an Obama supporters' event. The story dominated headlines and news programmes for days. (Although a supporter, Huffington claims not to have 'any Utopian sense about [Obama]. The ultimate goal is truth-telling.') The Huffpo is now, according to the internet-tracker Technorati, the most-linked-to blog on the internet, with more than 10 million unique users each month.

Huffington lives in a \$7 million mansion in Los Angeles, but jets between there and New York to oversee operations. 'I'm very lucky that I love what I'm doing,' she says. 'I've learnt not to stress about things, which I think is one of the great gifts of ageing. If you approach life with gratitude, instead of focusing on how crazy everything is, you get much less stressed. I do yoga, I meditate, I'm a fantastic catnapper – in fact, I'm obsessed with getting enough sleep. The important thing at night is to put the BlackBerries into a different room, otherwise I cannot sleep.'

Arianna Stassinopoulos grew up in Athens with her parents, Elli and Konstantinos, a journalist, and her younger sister, Agapi. In 1966 the three women moved to England so that Arianna could study economics at Cambridge University, where she was elected the first foreign-born president of the Cambridge Union. At the age of 23 she published her first book, *The Female Woman*, which condemned women's liberation for ignoring the longings of millions of women to have a family. By the time she was 30 she had published two more books and had been with the political columnist Bernard Levin for nine years. But, despite being more than two decades her senior, Levin refused to marry her. 'I was so in love with him,' she says. 'We could have spent all of our lives together but he didn't want children or

marriage. I didn't mind so much about marriage but I desperately wanted children. If he'd married me I would definitely have stayed in London.' Instead she moved to New York, where she established herself as a glamorous socialite with a sharp intellect.

She attributes her success in America to being a foreigner, 'because it is easier

THE HUFFINGTONS IN 1988, BEFORE THEIR DIVORCE
BELOW RUNNING FOR GOVERNOR OF CALIFORNIA IN 2003



My mother saw failures as stepping-stones, and that is the way I see them: I call them game-changing failures. I've had a few'

to challenge the conventional wisdom'. And also to her mother, who, she says, 'imbued a sense of fearlessness in her children. She saw failures as stepping-stones, and that is the way I see them: I call them game-changing failures and I've had a few of them.'

In 1986 she married the Texan oil magnate Michael Huffington and had two daughters, Cristina, 19, and Isabella, 17. In 1994 her husband, a Republican, spent \$30 million running unsuccessfully for the Senate. Arianna was widely caricatured as a pushy wife micromanaging her husband's campaign. I ask her if she minded the descriptions of her, which included being labelled the 'Sir Edmund Hillary of social climbing'. She laughs. 'It's just amusing. I would have to be very dysfunctional to still be affected by things like that. Even my children laugh at it.'

In 1997 the Huffingtons divorced and shortly afterwards Michael admitted that he was bisexual. Huffington claimed to be shocked but Michael insisted she had always known. Today she says they have agreed not to talk about it. 'Actually, we're very

close now. We're having our best time since we divorced. We have holidays together, celebrate the children's birthdays together.'

First and foremost, Huffington says, she is a mother. 'The minute there is any problem, everything else disappears. There is nothing you put ahead of a crisis with your child.' And she has dealt with a heart-wrenching crisis, in her younger daughter's long battle with anorexia. 'Now, touch wood, she's really well,' she says. 'But it was very hard for a time.'

In 2003 Huffington ran for governor of California; her campaign was, she says, 'a complete failure' but taught her 'so much about the power of the internet. If I hadn't attempted it I wouldn't be here now.'



She is running late for the awards dinner so we go downstairs to her chauffeur-driven car. Huffington settles back in her seat, pulling out a Maybelline powder compact.

'I love your shoes,' she says to me. 'My feet are too big for cute shoes.' We pull up at the Cipriani restaurant on Wall Street where television crews jostle to speak to her. Inside she is instantly surrounded by acolytes. Huffington greets everyone as if they were her oldest friend and makes introductions assiduously, always ensuring that I am included. She uses her fingers to pick at her starter, a goat's cheese and beetroot salad, and drinks water instead of wine. When the speeches start, she scrolls through messages on her BlackBerry until it is time for her own acceptance speech.

Then, from behind a curtain, she appears on the stage and walks over to the podium, elegant and assured. Lifting the trophy in the air, she declares: 'President Obama, sounds good, right?' At the table her staff exchange amused glances. Despite the office vote, Huffington has gone for the speech she liked the best.

'Isn't she amazing to be around,' says Roy Sekoff, a founding editor of the Huffington Post. 'You never know what's going to happen next!' ●