

The Assignment with Audie Cornish

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The Prince and the Press



Speakers

Audie Cornish, Oprah Clip, GMA Clip, Colbert Clip, Anderson Cooper 360 Clip, "Harry and Meghan" Clip, Mary McNamara, Jack Royston, Princess Diana Clip

00:00:00

Audie Cornish

Okay. Hear me out. What if the Harry and Meghan story is about power. But not the way you think? The soap opera style battle between the UK's royal family and Prince Harry, Duke of Sussex, is not that interesting to me. But the battle between the UK tabloids and Harry and Meghan, celebrity expats in Montecito, is because once the couple stepped down as senior members of the royal family in 2020 and launched their own production company, Archewell Productions, they effectively traded one media ecosystem for another. They traded in their broken relationship with the Rota, that's the press pool that covers the British royal family, for the celebrity industrial complex of the U.S. with its wide array of narrative tools. For instance, the gauzy sit down interview.

00:00:54

Oprah Clip

Nearly 2 billion people around the globe watch their wedding. From the outside, it look like something out of a fairy tale.

00:01:03

Audie Cornish

The memoir and its attached book tour.

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GMA Clip

Prince Harry in his own words. The truth needs to be there and it needs to come from me.

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Audie Cornish

Late night couch chats.

00:01:12

Colbert Clip

Also, what else is going on? Oh, in just a few minutes I'm gonna be sitting right over there interviewing Prince Harry, Duke of Sussex.

00:01:21

Audie Cornish

And network anchor deep dives.

00:01:23

Anderson Cooper 360 Clip

Prince Harry may have stepped back from his royal duties in 2020, but he and his wife, Meghan, the Duchess of Sussex, certainly haven't stepped away from the spotlight.

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Audie Cornish

And, of course, that glossy cousin to the Kardashian style reality show, the prestige docu series. In this case, a six part Netflix special co-produced by Archewell Productions.

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"Harry and Meghan" Clip

Doesn't it make more sense to hear our story from us?

00:01:46

Audie Cornish

As Prince Harry tells it, the British media's Rota system is a dragon that demands to be fed.

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"Harry and Meghan" Clip

All royal news goes through the filter of all the newspapers within the royal Rota, most of which, apart from the Telegraph, happens to be tabloids. It all comes down to control. It's like this family is ours to exploit. That trauma is our story and our narrative control.

00:02:10

Audie Cornish

But why has the second son of Princess Diana, once called the "Princess of Sales" for her value to the media, shredded the nerves of the British press? And is it any easier for celebrities to control the media here in the U.S.? Is there any end for those of us sick of hearing about it?

00:02:30

Mary McNamara

There is no end that I see. I mean, I get emails saying, you know, these- "we're so sick of these people. Why are you writing about it? I don't care. Blah, blah." And I'm going, Dude, you just took time to read the story and then email me.

00:02:43

Audie Cornish

I'm Audie Cornish. This is the Assignment. I'm not going to get into the he said-her Majesty said of the whole Harry and Meghan saga. What interests me most is their choice of U.S. celebrity machine over U.K. tabloid tradition. So we're going to turn to insiders from each media ecosystem. First, Jack Royston. He is chief royal correspondent for Newsweek and co-host of the Royal Report podcast. He spoke to us from London. I asked him to describe the U.K. press infrastructure around celebrity. Like, is it even okay to call the royals celebrities?

00:03:22

Jack Royston

So with royals, and I have absolutely no problem with you calling them celebrities, that's fine with me. But in terms of understanding where they fit into British society, they're kind of in a venn diagram between celebrity and politics. So what you've got to imagine is that, let's say, you know, a big celebrity, Kim Kardashian seems to be the name that everybody always wants to use as an example. Let's say Kim Kardashian had the White House press office working for her. That's what you've got to try and imagine. So these press officers are not your kind of Hollywood celebrity agents. They are much closer to the world- some of them are actually drawn from the world of charities, but a lot of them, and this is one of Harry's complaints and is in his book, "Spare," is that Prince William was bringing in staff from the world of politics.

00:04:06

Audie Cornish

As for the U.S., like I said earlier, ours is a hydra of tabloid glossies, prestige magazines, celebrity TV sit downs, streaming production deals, and, of course, socials.

00:04:18

Mary McNamara

It's a complicated system, but it works for us.

00:04:21

Audie Cornish

Mary McNamara is a Pulitzer Prize winning culture critic for the Los Angeles Times. She's got this theory that the Duke and Duchess of Sussex are trying to flood the zone. Basically spill so much tea, it makes people sick of them.

00:04:37

Mary McNamara

I don't have any notion what their end game is, but it was kind of like, you know, everybody's saying, "well, didn't they want privacy? Why are they doing all this? If they say they wanted privacy." And, you know, the answer to that is they weren't going to get privacy. That was not going to happen. And it didn't happen when they left. It didn't happen when they moved to Montecito. You know, Tyler Perry sheltered them in place and people crawled over the walls. So they're not going to get privacy. So it's like. So they're just like, "okay, here it all is."

00:05:05

Audie Cornish

Mary, I know you're making this theory in in jest but Jack is there something-

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Mary McNamara

Half in jest.

00:05:10

Audie Cornish

Yeah. Is there something to this? Right? Like the British press said, they want access. They got access. This is a lot. Is the problem that it's not on their terms?

00:05:21

Jack Royston

Yeah, exactly. I kind of love this theory, but also I don't think that it's true, but I wish it was because it's a great theory. I think, yeah, you're right. It's about on their terms. It's a there's two different ways of conceiving of the concept of privacy. So one is that privacy is about drawing a ring around an area of your life that you simply don't want to allow the public in on. And then the other way to frame privacy is that you draw a ring around an area of your life where you feel like you have the legitimate right to exert control over what you share and what you don't and when you share it. And Harry and Meghan fall into the latter camp. But needless to say, it is also absolutely true that some of the avalanche of very, very personal details, I think, could be framed as hypocritical on a couple of counts. One is that-

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Audie Cornish

Wait, wait, wait. Stop, stop, stop. I want to stop you for a second. The thing I'm asking is for the Royal Watchers industrial complex-

00:06:22

Jack Royston

Yeah.

00:06:22

Audie Cornish

Is the irritant and the annoyance that the press is not in control? Is that what is so mad? Because it's. You know what I mean? Like that people are mad because "wait a second. You're not playing our game."

00:06:35

Jack Royston

No. And in fact, actually, this is- so yeah, I understand why you say that. But my view is that that's not what's happening. And in fact, actually, a lot of the people who are exhibiting a lot of outrage are actually kind of having a field day. I don't actually think that they are necessarily as kind of livid and furious as they might appear. I think that what's actually happened with Harry and Meghan is that they've become a culture wars topic in Britain that divides the country based on identity. And so some of the people who are really angry, the place where it's coming from is partly about how they see themselves and how they see their relationship to society, particularly in a changing world. So, you know, there's the classic split, conservatives on one side and progressives on the other. Progressives obviously are much, much, much more likely to side with Harry and Meghan and conservatives and much, much, much more likely to side with William and Kate or the royal family. So the actual specific media outlets, I think, you know, are actually kind of filling their boots with all of the kind of drama and the soap opera. But they're positioning within the debate is that they take the anti-Harry and Meghan's side.

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Audie Cornish

And it's interesting, Mary, because what what Jack is suggesting fits neatly into the U.S. ecosystem around culture wars. Only maybe there is a cultural public persona of progressivism, right, that they sort of neatly fit into.

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Mary McNamara

Absolutely. And for a while, I mean, if we cast our mind back to when the engagement was announced, that was very much shared by the British press. I mean, in many ways she was seen- Meghan was seen as a as a way forward for the royal family, for, you know, the British sort of persona in the world, that here was a woman who looked more like members of the commonwealth, you know, that it could, you know, that she was young and kind of hip and she could bring like a new generation to to sort of support the monarchy.

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Audie Cornish

Right. And American celebrities were integrated into her world. Right? So you're seeing Serena Williams, you're seeing whoever.

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Mary McNamara

Absolutely.

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Audie Cornish

That those are the stars of the U.S. ecosystem.

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Mary McNamara

Yeah. That it was our very special relationship had reached a new cultural peak and then it all fell apart.

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Audie Cornish

So what do you see in their strategy of how they have wielded the U.S. media, kind of, levers?

00:08:59

Mary McNamara

Well, I mean, they've pulled all the big ones, like one right after another. Right? I mean, you know, Oprah doesn't do that many interviews anymore or she hadn't done very many when she did the Harry and Meghan- that I mean, that's the number one thing you can ask for is to have Oprah interview you. So that was like right out of the gate, the biggest one. Everybody watched it. Everybody wrote about it, including me. And, you know, and then you have a Netflix docu series. I mean, like, that's also insane. It's like, you know, that's a it's still a relatively new form of anything, a docu series. You know, that's just sort of an invention of the 21st century. You know, right now it's like our docu series are often true crime. There are high profile murder cases. You know, and so they sort of took that and like basically used it as an extended interview with, you know, in this case with the documentarian. But it was just sort of like it was brilliant.

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Audie Cornish

It's also extremely common for celebrities in the U.S., right? Whether you're Taylor Swift or Selena Gomez or Paris Hilton.

00:10:06

Mary McNamara

Right.

00:10:06

Audie Cornish

The idea that you can control your narrative in that space is pretty common. Like, they actually weren't doing anything all that unusual.

00:10:14

Mary McNamara

Right. I and I would also like to point out the names that you've just mentioned are all female. And I think that this is something that is very much about, you know, women who have you know, we've seen like this extraordinary reconsideration of a lot of women who have been trashed by the press, you know, in America and reclaiming their story one way or another, whether it's Marcia Clark or Taylor Swift, you know, it's like there's there's sort of like this new-

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Audie Cornish

Right.

00:10:39

Mary McNamara

-sort of let the women tell their own story. And I think that Meghan and by extension Harry, which is pretty hilarious, but it's that's also what's going on. Meghan absolutely- it is documented- it is undeniable that she was treated just horribly by the British press. And it's like, you know, so this is her chance to like sort of talk about what that was like. And then Harry came next because the docu series is very much like a Meghan vehicle, it felt like to me. It was very much about her story. And then the memoir comes out and it's his story.

00:11:14

Audie Cornish

Yeah. Jack Royston, I want to ask you something following up on something Mary said. It really does feel like Princess Diana is one of the original figures in that vein.

00:11:25

Jack Royston

Right.

00:11:26

Audie Cornish

And after her death, there was so much lamentation about how she was treated by the press. Is there some kind of rethinking now or are people just so deranged, frankly, like meaning Harry and Meghan, that there's no really consideration of that?

00:11:43

Jack Royston

So Harry and Meghan have become very unpopular in Britain. And every time that they do one of these big set piece media interventions, particularly ones that are critical of the royal family, the situation just seems to get worse and worse. The way they are right now is two thirds of Britain dislike them and they're very deep into negative numbers, somewhere in the kind of ballpark of -30, -40 in their approval ratings. So no is the kind of short answer. If anything, it's been there was a pendulum swing in that direction, but the pendulum is now going back the other way.

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Audie Cornish

But we know that it's not for lack of trying. Right? Even Princess Diana at one point stepped away for a year because she felt overwhelmed and she spoke publicly about that.

00:12:29

Princess Diana Clip

My debt of gratitude to you all is immense. I hope in some small way I have been of service in return, but I was not aware of how overwhelming that attention would become, nor the extent to which it would affect both my public duties and my personal life in a manner that's been hard to bear.

Audie Cornish 00:12:59
Is there a sense that this relationship is just too deeply intertwined to to change?

Jack Royston 00:13:06
One aspect of it that makes it very difficult is that the, so you're talking about the relationship being intertwined, and that aspect of it is one of the pieces of the puzzle that actually makes it slightly easier for the royal family to to make their case to the media. And if you were to say, well, Harry hated the Rota and part of the reason he hated the Rota so much is because he hated the news outlets that were on it. And that hatred, you know, he hated the flashbulbs, he hated being photographed, he hated having to be in the same room as the very news organizations that had been paying the paparazzi at the time that his mother died. But the I you know, I actually used to be some time ago a Rota journalist and I always thought that it actually helped the royal family much more than it helped the media. And a lot of the stories that come out of those Rota jobs are very sycophantic and they are almost always just quite kind of benign un-newsy puff pieces about how fabulous Kate or Meghan looked and how beautiful their dresses were. And then with a little kind of tack on of they were also helping some people.

Audie Cornish 00:14:19
I tried to Google the phrase in "defense of the paparazzi," and I got seven results.

Jack Royston 00:14:25
Yeah no one wants to defend paparazzi. But the paparazzi aren't part of the Rota. The Rota are photographers who work for organizations like Getty who might be taking photos of the member-members of the royal family one day, and they might be taking photos of the prime minister or the president the next. So the paparazzi is-

Audie Cornish 00:14:42
Do you think the public sees a difference? Like in the public imagination, it's all long lenses and people on the sidewalk.

Jack Royston 00:14:48
That is definitely true. Yeah, exactly. That is true. But there is a difference, a massive difference compared to, you know, like I, I seem to recall that Justin Bieber had been involved- had been involved an instance where he like somebody actually I think a paparazzi actually died because they were trying to run across a motorway in order to photograph him. Harry and Meghan did not routinely find themselves in those situations, which is not at all to say that they didn't have a terrible time for other reasons. They 100% did. But the Princess Diana situation was very much her being followed, her being chased, you know, packs and packs of photographers outside, you know, bars and clubs that she went to. And Harry had a little bit of that during his twenties. But by the time Meghan came along, he kind of wasn't going clubbing. He wasn't going to bars quite so much because he was older. And so they didn't have as much of that experience as probably actually a normal celebrity might have.

Audie Cornish 00:15:46
Mary, so one of the criticisms I've heard, which I mentioned earlier, is that what is clear is that Harry and Meghan are- seem to be more upset that they weren't able to wield influence over that press system. And so they moved to one where they could. And I wanted to know if you could talk about the limits of that. I mean, you work at the L.A. Times. Celebrities have a lot of power these days. There's- I can't think of any that have truly maintained a kind of hard control over their narrative. Maybe Beyonce.

Mary McNamara 00:16:20
No, I mean, that's such a tough question. I mean, obviously, what celebrities can control is access. They can control and they do control, you know, who's going to get the photo shoot, who's going to get the sit down. So it's like kind of their power was access. We, you know, as as sort of the press has moved towards many more points of view, more columnists, more essayists, then the access becomes less important because someone like me can write about Harry and Meghan without ever having met Harry and Meghan.

Audie Cornish 00:16:51
Right.

Mary McNamara 00:16:51
You know, I mean, I've read the books, I've seen all the stuff. I'm not like just sort of pulling it out of the air, but that that kind of like everybody having an opinion about, you know, what someone has done or what someone has said and being able to write about that, that is more prevalent now.

Audie Cornish 00:17:08
One of the things I always found interesting is that after President Barack Obama left office, he and the first lady got into media, right? Like their first move was a kind of big media deal. And I thought that that it really sort of said something about maybe at that tier of fame, what what is considered power. Like kind of, narrative is power.

Mary McNamara 00:17:32
Narrative is power. And the docu series and the documentary, that has changed so much on television. The idea that you can do it specifically for television, the idea that you can do a docu series, that you can work with a streamer where you don't have to worry about advertisers or anybody messing with you.

Audie Cornish 00:17:49
And you have final say and final cut.

Mary McNamara 00:17:51
Yeah if somebody- and you have final say, yes. You know, it's like you could make the argument and people have, is this true documentary if basically the creator is working so closely with the subject, you can have that argument. But that's an argument about the art form, not about the person. But it is it's a whole brand new way of putting your story out there because it's like I mean, I remember when it was huge when like Barbara Walters, who, bless her heart, just passed. It's like that Barbara Walters interview, that style, probably is like point A of this timeline, this idea of like trying to get to people personally to get them to like not just answer questions about policy or their project or whatever, to get them to answer questions about how does it feel to be you? She was probably the first person who really did that consistently. And now there's a whole industry about like, we just want to know what it feels like to be you.

Audie Cornish 00:18:45
I want to ask a question of both of you. If this is a clash of two media ecosystems, who's winning?
Mary?

Mary McNamara 00:18:52
Well, I mean, it depends on what the end game is. I mean, if the end game is Meghan and Harry regaining popularity in Britain, it doesn't seem like that is what's happening. But I don't think that's what they're trying to do. I think they're trying to establish themselves in the United States, in the world, as sort of like truth tellers to power. Whether or not that's legitimate, that is what they're trying to establish themselves as. And it's like you can say that they're- I'm sure the polls say that they're unpopular in Britain, but his book has, like broken all records. So how unpopular could he be? So I think, you know, I think it's too early to tell, actually. It's kind of like they this is like their salvo into, you know, "we're doing this. Here's everything. We're telling you everything." So, yeah, I mean, it's it's kind of early to tell, but right now, who's winning? They are. Everybody's talking about them.

Audie Cornish 00:19:45
Jack, in a clash of two systems, who's winning?

Jack Royston 00:19:48
It's difficult to say who's winning because there isn't a point of victory. Like in a game the point of victory is the moment that the final whistle goes. And that point doesn't exist in the relationship between these two ecosystems. But one thing that's quite interesting, I think, with the American media is that the atmosphere around Harry and Meghan, I think is very different now compared to the days and weeks after the Oprah interview. And Harry and Meghan, I think, are starting to be viewed perhaps very slightly differently in the sense that people feel much more able to kind of take a slightly more mocking approach to them, which seemed completely unthinkable in the aftermath of the Oprah interview. So it'll be really interesting to see where the American media goes next.

Audie Cornish 00:20:30
Oh, okay. So basically you're saying people are still going to keep telling me to watch "The Crown," which I will not.

Mary McNamara 00:20:36
Yes, you will- you will not.

Audie Cornish 00:20:40
I will not. But you're saying we're insatiable. There's there's no end to this.

00:20:46

Mary McNamara

There is no end that I see. It's like we stop caring about it when no one watches the docu series. We stop caring about it as a media when no one buys the book. Not- that is not what happened. So it's like he's hideously unpopular in Great Britain. Everyone is buying his book. It's like, you know, what, are they hate reading it? I don't know. Maybe. But does that matter to your bottom line? No, it's like it's people are interested. And I you know, I mean, I get emails even just from this column saying, you know, these- "we're so sick of these people. Why are you writing about it? I don't care, blah, blah." And I'm going, Dude, you just took time to read the story and then email me. You know, it's like, of course you care.

00:21:28

Audie Cornish

Right. Mary McNamara, thank you so much for speaking with me.

00:21:34

Mary McNamara

Sure. This was fun.

00:21:35

Audie Cornish

Jack Royston, thank you so much for speaking with us.

00:21:39

Jack Royston

Thank you very much.

00:21:41

Audie Cornish

Jack Royston is chief royal correspondent for Newsweek and co-host of the Royal Report podcast. Mary McNamara is a culture columnist and critic at the L.A. Times. We hope you had fun with this episode of The Assignment. New episodes drop every Thursday, so please listen and follow wherever you get your podcasts. And if you like the show, leave us a rating and a review. Yes, it matters. The assignment is a production of CNN Audio. Our producers are Madeleine Thompson, Jennifer Lai and Laurie Galaretta. Our associate producers are Isoke Samuel, Allison Park and Sonia Htoon. Our senior producers are Haley Thomas and Matt Martinez. Our editor is Rina Palta. Mixing and Sound Design by David Schulman. Dan Dzula is our technical director. Abbie Fentress Swanson is our executive producer and special thanks to Katie Hinman. I'm Audie Cornish. Thank you for listening.